



FROM
THE

UNIVERSE

To

ME

SCOTT E. GARRISON



A NineStar Press Publication

www.ninestarpres.com

From the Universe to Me

ISBN: 978-1-64890-638-1

© 2023 Scott E. Garrison

Cover Art © 2023 Jaycee DeLorenzo

Published in April 2023 by NineStar Press, New Mexico, USA.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any material form, whether by printing, photocopying, scanning or otherwise without the written permission of the publisher. To request permission and all other inquiries, contact NineStar Press at Contact@ninestarpres.com.

Also available in Print, ISBN: 978-1-64890-639-8

CONTENT WARNING:

This book contains sexually explicit content, which may only be suitable for mature readers. Depictions and/or mentions of depression, power imbalance, harassment, self-harm, sexual assault, suicidal ideation, and trauma.

From the Universe to Me

Scott E. Garrison

Table of Contents

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty.](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[About the Author](#)

*To my husband, Josh. Thank you for always believing in me
even when I didn't believe in myself.*

Chapter One

I ONLY GRADUATED high school two months ago, and I'm already excited to start Ashelford University as a history major.

I'm a huge nerd and love to learn, so college has been a goal of mine and of my parents since I could form sentences. When my parents and I sat down to discuss which university would be the best fit for me, I knew that the hometown university would be a no-brainer due to funds and the proximity.

I've spent countless hours on campus exploring every building and classroom, including the school's black-box theater where I performed as a chorus member in the production of *Once on This Island*. I pretend I'm an explorer on a new adventure every time I visit. I like to think I'm a stealthy spy, looking for a secret passage that will lead to an exciting new discovery, which I'm sure makes me seem even more nerdy, but the cherry on top of my nerdiness sundae has to be the fact I showed up for my enrollment meeting with my advisor, Dr. Helena Richards, for my freshman year a few hours early.

With my adventures for the day complete, I make my way toward the Liberal Arts Building, which towers over me like a giant about to devour its prey. As I stand on the sidewalk, my eyes climb the red-bricked exterior that seems to grow infinitely the more I stare. I feel small in its shadow. I straighten my back and confidently make my way up the front entry stairs.

My mission—should I choose to accept it—is to put together a list of classes I want to take prior to my meeting, which rests clenched in my sweaty right hand. I've heard so many great things about Dr. Richards, but I'm still extremely nervous to meet her in person. We have emailed since I got accepted into the university, but I still worry she might not like me because I'm an immature freshman.

As I enter the main lobby, everything looks as I remember. Everything seems to have a purpose; a reason for being placed in its seemingly permanent location. I take a deep, calming breath. This is where I will learn new, exciting life lessons that will leave me a more educated student ready for graduate school; one step closer to becoming a professor.

I'm ready to make my dreams a reality, something my parents have always encouraged.

They have such high hopes for me. My parents have always told me I could never disappoint them, but there is still that hesitation I'm sure every child has when faced with big life decisions. In the back of my mind, I wonder where those limits end. I know deep down my mother and my father are my biggest fans, but my anxiety makes me overthink every decision before acting.

Over the years, I've struggled to be myself around my parents, never revealing too much of myself, hiding behind masks I've created. I know I'm attracted to men, but I do my best to convince myself that I'm straight. I fear being different and being rejected by the people in my life. These fears feed the energy-sucking parasite formerly known as my depression. I've had many opportunities to reveal myself to my loved

ones, but as I have done many times before, I remain silent because my fears always win.

I walk up to the front desk in the history wing where a tired-looking girl with blonde hair, wearing a white and green Ashelford University T-shirt and a black skirt, sits staring at the computer. I might think she was dead if I didn't hear the clicking noise made by the mouse in her hand.

She has a name tag that reads Anna Pasley pinned to her shirt. She doesn't look up at me as I approach.

"Can I help you?" she says, forcing the words out with all her strength. She looks like she hasn't slept in weeks. God, I know college is difficult, but do they force all students to stay up for hours studying and testing their academic prowess? Like the *Hunger Games* but centered on academia.

"Excuse me. My name is Tobias Gavin. I have an appointment with Dr. Richards to discuss my schedule for my first semester." Anna flinches in her chair when she hears me speak.

Anna looks at me with bloodshot eyes. She looks like she has accomplished the horrifying skill of sleeping with her eyes open. She has tons of books open in front of her, but I can see the game of Solitaire open on the computer screen, which explains the mouse clicking away as I walked up to the desk.

"Do you have an appointment with Dr. Richards?" she asks.

"Um, yes, I have an appointment. She asked me to be here at 2:00 PM to discuss my schedule for my first semester." I am baffled by her inability to register my previous statement.

“You realize it’s 1:15, right?” Her questioning expression makes me feel like I’m a small, insignificant freshman starting high school all over again.

I chuckle and sport a half-assed grin, so she doesn’t realize I’m embarrassed for arriving forty-five minutes early. This isn’t how cool college kids behave. They arrive fashionably late, acting like they have zero cares in the world. This isn’t me, so I blush in response.

I’m annoyingly early to *everything*. My family and friends hate and love me for this quality. My friends like the fact I will always arrive early to help set up parties but hate when I’m adamant about getting to the movies an hour early to find the best seats, which you select when you buy the tickets. I’m smart, but my anxiety runs my life more than my common sense.

I glance at the screen. “You can move the Queen of Hearts to the King of Clubs to free up another space.” Who knows, maybe we will become good friends?

“She is with another student so you will have to wait,” she responds, ignoring my tip. “She won’t finish with this student for another forty-five minutes. You can wait over there on those couches.” She says turning her attention to the Solitaire game. She waves her hand with a small amount of effort in a random direction. Her lack of acknowledgement of my statement assures this is where our relationship ends and dies.

I notice red couches in the room’s corner, so I shuffle over to them and sit down. I glance around the room, wondering how many people have sat on this same couch. Where are they now? Did they attain their goals or fail miserably?

Failure isn't an option for me. I have too many dreams I want to accomplish. I want to become a history professor. Personally, I don't care what college I end up teaching at as long as I can fill the minds of my students with illustrious, educational information about our world's history.

I would never admit this in public, but I have secretly aspired to be like some of the teachers that have encouraged my goals of becoming a professor.

I have been in this building many times before today but sitting here with the excitement of attending college makes me want to scream. I don't because that would be very embarrassing. I'm sure Anna would fall out of her chair and give me that same "stupid freshman" side-eye from before. Maybe I should, to give her the adrenaline boost she needs to wake up. Instead, I bounce my leg in anticipation.

My phone buzzes. I pull my phone out of my jeans pocket and notice my mom's picture on the screen.

***Mom:** Good luck today, honey! I hope you can enroll in the classes you picked out. They sound very fun.*

I send her a quick text back.

***Me:** Thanks, Mom!*

She is the mother who would text back over and over, asking if I got her previous text and the one before that and the one before that—a never-ending cycle. She isn't a helicopter parent. She is not the most confident person when it comes to technology.

I love my mom for this. She makes me laugh all time, and I don't mind showing her how to work various devices and helping her navigate the social media world even though she

always places “The” before everything, like “The Facebook” or “The Twitter” or “The Snapchat.”

She must get the oldie speech from her parents because they do the same thing.

My grandparents are the stereotypical old-school traditionalists who talk about walking everywhere as children in five feet of snow to get to school, work, etc. They tell me this story all the time, which makes me think they lived in Antarctica because walking through five feet of snow plays a role in all their stories.

Luckily, my dad uses computers daily at the grocery store he manages, so I don't have to help him with technology; however, he has zero interest in learning about social media. He thinks people should stay in contact by having a conversation over the phone or in person and not online because it is too impersonal.

I'm startled out of my thoughts when I hear doors open, but to avoid any more agonizing contact with Anna, I don't glance over until I hear the deep voice of a man talking to Anna.

I glimpse Anna out of the corner of my eye and notice her entire personality has changed. She appears more alive and filled with energy. She twirls her hair between her pointer and middle fingers, flirting with the man, which goes unnoticed by him. He is standing there exchanging pleasantries with her. When he turns to look in my direction, my heart literally skips a beat.

He is beautiful.

Wow. Drop-dead gorgeous isn't even the best phrase to describe the man standing before me. The stylish brown hair rising in waves from the top of his head looks natural and void of any hair products, like he rolls out of bed looking like McDreamy from *Grey's Anatomy* on a daily basis. His light brown skin and dark brown eyes shimmer, reminding me of silky, smooth milk chocolate. Everything with me always goes back to chocolate, which is why I can't stop looking at him as he stands next to the receptionist's desk talking to Anna.

He isn't ridiculously muscular, but his biceps look statuesque underneath his tight plaid button-down shirt. Dark Levi's accentuate every muscle and curve his lower body has to offer. My mind immediately drifts to what his legs would look like if he set them free with short shorts or even his underwear. What is wrong with me?

Without even moving, he exudes confidence I only wish I could have. My mediocre body isn't nearly as memorable as the physique standing before me. Anyone would want to talk to him, to be near his gorgeous face...touch his toned body. This man hit the gene-pool lottery when whatever higher being or the masters of the universe made him.

"Hello... Hey.... Is somebody in there?" he asks, waving his hand near my face.

My eyes adjust to his waving hand, and I realize I have been staring at him with an open mouth, looking like a brainless buffoon.

"Uuhhhh...what?!" I say like a blubbering fool.

"I asked if you are here to meet with me," he responds with the sweetest expression, ignoring my inability to carry a

conversation, which makes my cheeks burn red.

“Hahaha... I wish.” I freeze... What the fuck did I say? Oh my god, I could die. I should run out the door and lay down in the street, praying someone will take pity on me and end my suffering. I’m positive I have turned as red as the couches I’m sitting on.

He chuckles and gives me a bright and warm grin, revealing his perfectly whitened teeth. He towers over me, holding out his hand. “My name is Gareth David. I’m Dr. Richard’s teaching assistant. Who are you?”

Suddenly, an overwhelming urge to jump into his arms and put my hand through his radiantly manicured hair skips jauntily through my mind. That is perfectly acceptable for people to do, right?

I grab his hand, applying enough pressure to give an adequate handshake, so I look less like a dope.

When our hands meet, a rush of warmth spreads throughout my entire body. He glances at our hands and back into my eyes, giving me that perfect grin again. I can’t help but wonder if he observed the same jolt of energy when our hands met. The way he is looking at me makes me feel something I can’t put my finger on, but I don’t want the erotic energy to end.

After gaining my composure, I respond, “My name is Tobias Gavin. I’m here to meet with Dr. Richards about setting up my schedule for the fall semester.”

An Adonis-like smile spreads across his face, and I melt again. “Are you a freshman? I haven’t seen you around or in

any of my classes.”

I look at him confused. “Didn’t you say you’re her assistant?”

He chuckles. “Teaching assistant. However, I teach my own classes and cover her classes when she is away. I know it seems weird, but Dr. Richards has taught me well. Besides, I’m almost finished with my graduate degree. I turned in my thesis a few weeks ago.”

His voice exhibits pure kindness that sends warmth through my body, helping me relax.

“May I have my hand back?” He laughs.

Shit.

My body going tense again, I realize I’m still holding his hand. I hesitate for a millisecond—my body wanting our embrace to continue—before letting go of his hand.

“I’m so sorry. I was listening to you talk and forgot to let go.” *Kill me. Someone, please hire a ninja assassin to come kill me now.*

“No problem. I didn’t mind. Your hand is nice and warm,” he says with a quick wink.

Is he flirting with me? Holy fuck! I think he’s flirting with me. No. There’s no way. He is being nice. Trying to make me feel welcome and less stupid for blubbering and for holding his hand for much too long. There is no way this sophisticated graduate student—soon to be professor—would flirt with me, an undergraduate freshman.

I'm a small nothing in the sea of eligible fish he must have swimming at his feet. I bet he has no issues finding a significant other, unlike me. I have never had a girlfriend or had any romantic adventures—small or big. Not that I have never wanted to be in a relationship. I've always told myself my lack of relationship game is because I'm so awkward, but deep down, I know the real reason I haven't found a girlfriend is because I'm gay.

Besides, I'm positive he is 100 percent straight and being nice to help me feel less awkward for my behavior. Even if he was gay, he would be out of my league.

He is looking at me oddly, as if pondering what he should say next, so I blurt out, "What is it like working with Dr. Richards?" *There I go. I found my voice again. Good job, Tobias!*

He sits on the couch beside me. "She is an absolute gem in the history department. She is a genius, and I could not ask for a better mentor. She has been my rock and biggest supporter since I came to Ashelford. I owe her everything. She has been there for me and has helped me so much."

He loses his train of thought, glancing down at his hands; emotion cascading across his face, showcasing the first crack in his demeanor since he approached me, which makes my heart flutter.

"Anyway, you are very lucky to have her as your advisor," he continues. "She is fantastic. My best advice is to work hard and show up to class. She will be your biggest supporter and will help you succeed, as long as you put forth an effort. She believes in all her students, but she doesn't waste her time

with people who waste her time. She wants everyone to succeed, but you can only succeed if you do the work and show up to class, obviously.”

As he talks, I get lost in his eyes. I hear and register everything he is saying, but I can't help but lose myself in the pool of chocolate. No one has ever caught my attention as much as Gareth. I want to learn more about him. I want to spend some one-on-one time with him and see what makes him happy, cry, dream, whatever. I want to know him and have him know me.

Suddenly, I register the thoughts swirling inside my mind, sending a wrecking ball swinging toward my heart. This isn't who I am. I'm not gay. I'm straight and I like girls.

My sexuality has been a constant struggle in my life since puberty. I internally understood that I was different from my peers, but when I hit puberty, I learned what exactly made me different.

I remember my thirteen-year-old self looking at my mom's lingerie magazines and getting slightly too aroused seeing the half-naked men posing in their underwear. Once I recognized what this moment of arousal meant, I tried to force myself to have normal, heterosexual thoughts. I don't know how my family would react, but society has shown me being gay isn't always accepted. I feel myself losing this battle each time I see a handsome man, especially right now with Gareth sitting beside me. I know I'm not looking for a princess to call my queen. I'm looking for a prince to rescue me and awaken me from my eternal slumber.

He must notice the change in my demeanor because he straightens and looks over at Anna, who is still staring at her computer screen as her eyelids fall.

When his head turns toward me, his gentle smile is replaced with a stern, emotionless face. In a more authoritative voice, he asks, “I assume you are studying history since Dr. Richards is your advisor. What do you want to do after you finish your degree?”

Sadness grips ahold of me like a snake coiling around its victim, but I push past it. “I want to be a professor. I don’t know where yet, but I still have time to decide. I want to teach world history and write books about World War II. I have always found this era to be interesting and haunting.”

His face softens again, and there is a slight twinkle in his eye. “A man after my heart. I wrote my thesis on political propaganda during World War II. In many regions, propaganda influenced people to encourage war. I researched which propaganda succeeded and which failed. World War II is my favorite topic. I can’t get enough of it.”

I swoon again. If I let myself feel what comes naturally, I would not be struggling so much and fall deeper and deeper into my depression. This battle is exhausting.

As I talk with Gareth, I think about what my life would be like if I let myself kiss him or any man. Would that feel right? If fireworks appeared, would I relax and let myself be gay? I don’t know, and a part of me feels like I’ll never know the answer to my questions.

“It sounds like you really enjoy history, and that sounds like an excellent topic,” I respond, relaxing into the couch. I

feel my walls falling again. I want to know this man and for him to know me. As I ponder this final thought, he stands.

“Well, I should probably get to my office. I have syllabi to finish.” As he says this, a brief moment of hesitation flickers across his face, which only intensifies my desire for him to stay.

“Do you have any other advice for a simple freshman?”

He sits down, looks into my eyes, and says, “I’ve only just met you, but I know you are anything but simple.”

I blush.

After a pause, he continues, “I think the best advice I can give is to not lose focus or lose yourself. Stay true to who you are. You seem like a smart guy with a good head on his shoulders. Don’t forget to get involved, but don’t lose sight of your goals. You have a dream. Dreams can change and don’t be afraid if your dreams change. Accept it. Don’t be frightened of it. Change is inevitable, so embrace it. You may go to sleep as one person and wake up a different person. You should always let your true self be your real self. College is the time in your life to meet people that will change you. I believe the universe brings people into our lives for a reason. I believe fate brings people together. I don’t believe in love at first sight or anything like that; I’m not that kind of romantic, but I believe the universe puts people in our paths for a reason. Those people may not always affect our lives positively, but they will always help shape us. Don’t change for anyone. No one is ever worth losing yourself.”

He takes a breath and looks at me. His intense gaze digs deep inside me, and I wonder if he feels what I’m feeling right

now. Even though I barely know him, I kind of wish he would kiss me, but when he continues, I push away my thoughts. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to ramble. I wish someone would have given me this advice when I was a freshman. I think it would have helped me during my undergraduate years.”

In that moment, I feel an overwhelming urge for Gareth to wrap me in a tight, passionate hug.

His gaze glitters with anticipation.

“Thank you. That was beautiful,” I reply.

He responds, “You’re welcome, Tobias. Good luck! I truly hope to see more of you in the fall. Don’t be a stranger.”

With this, he beams, stands, and walks away. Deep down, I don’t want him to go. I want him to stay and talk to me. I want to hear more about his life. There is something about him that makes me want to open myself up to him and bask in his wisdom. I have been so afraid to tell people my secret, but Gareth made me want to do that in mere seconds, which makes me feel strange...almost happy.

“Dr. Richards is ready for you.” Anna snaps me back to reality.

As I walk toward her, I look in the direction Gareth went—seeing the empty space he once occupied.

I hope I see more of you too.

Chapter Two

MY HEAD IS still reeling as I enter Dr. Richards's office, but distraction pulls my brain in a different direction.

Dr. Richards sits at her desk in the office's corner. She stands and greets me. She has short, gray hair and is wearing a powerful looking business suit that fits comfortably against her body, but she looks younger than I know she is, which I only know after reading her bio on the university's webpage when I found out she would be my advisor.

She is sixty-two. She received her master's degree and doctorate from New York University before starting her teaching career here at Ashelford. She received tenure a few years later and received a promotion to the head of the history department shortly after.

"Tobias Gavin, I presume. How are you doing? I have read great things about you in your letters of recommendation, and I see you are quite the intelligent student, based off your transcript." She states warmly while extending her hand.

She already seems like a remarkable woman. The way she presents herself is spectacular. "Your grades are impeccable, and the essay you submitted to the admissions office was a wonderful read."

I shake her hand, attempting to apply enough pressure to seem professional, which I practiced a few thousand times with my dad. "Thank you, Dr. Richards. I..."

"Please call me Helena. Dr. Richards is very formal. We won't see a lot of each other until you begin your higher-level

courses, but I want you to know that if you need anything at all or have any trouble, I'm here to help. I'm your advisor but think of me as your guide at Ashelford; although, I also hope we will get to know each other over the next four years."

"Okay! Dr. Rich— Sorry, Helena. I'm very ecstatic about starting at Ashelford University. I have heard and read marvelous things about the university and the history department. Honestly, I have been wanting to come to this university for a very long time."

With a slight twinkle in her eye, she promptly responds, "Well, we are excited to have you. Now shall we begin? We have a lot of work to do to get you ready for your next adventure."

*

I'M GIDDY AS I leave Dr. Richards's office... I mean Helena's office. I will never get used to that. My teachers until now have always encouraged us to speak formally to them. It has always been Mr. or Ms. or Mrs. Blah Blah.

I look at my phone to see if my mom will be off work yet. I can't wait to tell her I can get enrolled in all the classes I selected prior to my enrollment meeting. Unfortunately, it is only 3:00 PM, so she will not be off work yet. Instead, I call one of my best friends, Cydney Williams. She will be happy to know we will have the same English Composition class together.

"What's up, C-dog?"

"Tobi, how many times have I told you not to call me C-dog? It sounds like it is short for the C-word or bitch," she

scolds me, but I can hear the smile in her voice and know she gave a dramatic eye roll.

“Never mind that, Cyd. I have some awesome news. I got enrolled for my first semester and pause for dramatic effect... I will be in your English Comp class!”

She laughs, “Only you would get excited about enrolling for college, but yes, to support your nerdiness, I’m so happy you could get enrolled in that class. What else are you taking?”

“Well, I’m taking the freshman History class, choir, a theater course, college algebra, English Comp, and general biology. I hear they are doing Little Women the Musical, and I plan on auditioning for Professor Baer. You know I was born to play that role.”

“Well, duh! Everyone who’s anyone knows you are a meant to be Professor Nerd, the most dramatic historian in all Nerdsville. I hear Nerdsville is having a slow tourist season this year. Care to comment?” She loves giving me shit about my love for school, even though she is as studious as I am.

“Ha-ha, hilarious,” I say sarcastically.

“So, dude. Did you meet any cute girls while you explored campus?”

This question haunts me in any social situation. My parents ask me this any time I go on a school trip. I know they are making conversation and taking an interest in my love life, but my responses are rehearsed. I feel like I’m lying to everyone in my life about who I am.

The fact people still struggle with coming out to their friends and family is fucking ridiculous. Life should not be this difficult, and I wish the closet didn't exist; however, I know deep down I'm comfortable with its existence because the closet has kept me safe for so long as I attempt to find myself.

I do my best to mask my obligatory lie with humor like I always do. "You know me. I'm a young Chris Evans." Sometimes, I feel like a horrible friend and son because I'm not honest with my loved ones. I can't accept this part of myself, so why should they? I feel exposed when I'm asked about girls, so I do my best to guide the conversation in a different direction.

Gareth enters my mind. I'm fully shaken by his ability to make me feel normal. I felt free for a moment. I didn't feel like hiding behind a wall or mask. I felt like I could be myself around him, which is something I'm not used to feeling.

"You wish you were a young Chris." She scoffs. "You are too shy. You need to put yourself out there. You don't want to become Steve Carrell's character in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*."

A half-hearted snicker escapes my lips. "Anyway, I wanted to tell you the good news. I've got to go to work. Have a wonderful afternoon. See you tonight."

I hang up on her before she mentions my lack of game again. She is one of my best friends, but she gives me a lot of sarcasm. I think that is why we get along so well. We are extremely sarcastic people.

I drive to our ranch-style one-level home that looks similar to the other houses in our neighborhood. No originality in our

town. As I get ready for my glamorous job as grocery store bag boy at the Food Emporium my dad manages, my mind wanders to Gareth again. Could he be flirting with me, or is that all in my head? Do I even care if he was flirting?

I'm straight, I yell internally a few hundred times as I get dressed for work.

I can't help thinking about Gareth and his plump lips. I picture myself leaning in to kiss him, but I don't let myself finish the scenario. I lie down on the bed as I look at the ceiling, wondering what all of these thoughts mean.

I'm not gay. I'm straight, I repeat to myself for the thousandth time. It has become my personal mantra over the years.

But... Gareth is something so spectacular. I can't stop thinking about him. He is such a gorgeous man, but me recognizing that doesn't make me gay, right? Straight men can call other guys handsome and keep their "straightness."

I need to forget about Gareth. I might see him in passing at school, but I never have to worry about being in his class. He is a graduate student, and even once he graduates, they would not let him teach upper-level classes at first. I will not even have to worry about him. He will never be my teacher, and I will never be his student. I head out to my car to go to work, and as I back out of the driveway, I think to myself again. He will never be my professor, and I will never be his student, which means I have nothing to worry about.

Chapter Three

I'M SITTING IN my room the night before classes begin, and all I can do is look at my clock with anticipation. Sleep eludes me, which only means I will be dead to the world if I don't get some sleep. This isn't good. My brain is fluttering in so many different directions due to the excitement for tomorrow.

Question after question reels through my mind like the opening credits of any Star Wars movie.

The biggest question is whether I will make any new friends. I mean, Cydney will already be there and so will Matt Stevens, my other best friend. I'm lucky I get to go to the same college as my best friends.

I got into the college with a great history program. I will work on the degree that has been my dream for years, and I have an exceptional advisor to help guide me throughout my collegiate career. We will each be in different departments, but we promised each other we would make time for each other all the time.

Cydney plans on studying theater because she wants to be on Broadway, and Matt will be working on his English degree. He wants to become a writer. All three of us even plan on joining the university's Student Senate, which will allow us to spend more time together. Cydney and I plan on auditioning for shows, which will give us more time together. Matt even talked about joining the History Club. They attend a fun pop culture conference every year.

I glance at the clock again, thinking an hour has passed, but unfortunately, it has only been ten minutes. Man, I will regret this in the morning.

I play a game of Solitaire on my phone to distract myself and help my brain tire out and because I'm an old man in an eighteen-year-old's body.

After winning one game after the other, I get bored, so I scroll through Ashelford's website.

Sometimes, I feel like I'm the only person on the planet that enjoys school and is passionate about being able to attend school for many more years. I'm the king of the nerds. I know it, and my friends know it. All my fellow nerds will bow down to my supreme awesomeness.

I do occasionally get self-conscious when my nerd flag flies too high because the spotlight tends to shine on eccentric people. If people focus on me, they may notice the outline of the mask I hide behind.

As my thoughts ramble on, I get lost on the website, drifting off into la-la land while looking at the campus directory when I see him—Gareth. There is that smile and those milk chocolate eyes that stare into your soul. His perfect physique that would make any man, including myself, jealous. He is the perfect man in every way.

I enlarge the photo, so I can see his face, and I remember how he smiled at me the day we met. I feel like the universe saved his grin for me and only me.

I remember the twinkle in his eye and how he hesitated, almost like he didn't want our conversation to end.

I wonder if the universe wanted us to meet. Wanted us to talk. Wanted us to become...something. Even though I don't know what that something is. His eyes glistened with emotion, and his demeanor seemed so inviting and accepting.

I can't help but imagine how my body would feel if I could hug him and hold him and kiss him and touch him...

I close my eyes, getting lost in my thoughts.

I think about him running his hand up my arm until he reaches my cheek, sending a thrilling chill through my entire body. He cups my face with his strong, muscular hands and pulls me in for my first kiss as I release a soft moan that has been building inside me for years. I deliberately straddle his lap as we hold each other tightly, not wanting to let the other go. Warmth cascades through my entire body as we embrace. My body shivers at the closeness of our torsos. I want this. I need this. I want him fully.

I've never fantasized like this about a real person I know. I feel naughty for thinking about Gareth this way. With underwear models, you never have to look them in the eye or see them again unless you memorize their photos for your spank bank. I start to wonder if I should stop because I may have to see Gareth again at school, but when his face enters my mind again, I only get hornier.

I feel myself start to stiffen, which sends chills down my spine. I slip my right hand under the seam of my shorts, but I'm forced back to reality my phone buzzes in my left hand.

Fuck!

I adjust myself before opening a text from Matt, shaking my head to escape my horniness.

Matti: Dude, what the fuck?!?! Have you seen the GIF of Dakota Johnson getting naked? She is a fucking masterpiece! Man, I want her so bad.

A few seconds later, I receive the GIF of Dakota Johnson undressing in *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Matt loved this movie because of all the naked breasts. I don't think he watched the movie. I'm positive he fast-forwards to the raunchy sex scenes. As I look at her, I can't help but notice her robe, which makes me think of a beautiful geisha modestly dancing for her dinner guests. She truly is stunning.

Me: DAMN!!! She is a bombshell. Look at that robe! That is gorgeous!!

Matti: Dude, her robe? That's gay! Look at her smoking body! She will be my wife someday and every guy on the fucking planet will be jealous!!!

I hate the "that's gay" comments that guys say when another guy shows any kind of emotion or femininity. Society shows boys at a young age, emotions aren't okay if we want to be men. We should suck up our feelings and rub some dirt in our wounds, but I'm at fault for slipping...again.

I find my inner homo slipping more and more these days. I have grown comfortable with the identity I have created for my friends and family. Maybe too comfortable. I am letting my actual colors shine. If I'm not more careful, my loved ones will see behind the mask and notice I'm oozing the rainbow.

I swallow my distaste before responding.

Me: You are right...all our wives/girlfriends will not be worthy of her goddess-like body and looks.

Matti: Damn straight! What are you up to, bro? Have you been looking at your class schedule and the school's website all night?

God! My friends know me so well.

Me: No!

Matti: Liar! I know you too well, bro. You probably will not get any sleep because you are too excited for classes, right?!?!

I send him the middle finger emoji, and he responds with the same. We have the best relationship.

Matti: So, Tobi... Do you think I'll meet a hot teacher and have sex with her?!?! That is like the biggest fantasy of mine.

Me: Matti, someone is hot for teacher and living in fantasyland. Dude, no teacher will have sex with their student. Isn't that like unethical and shit?

Matti: Tobi, they don't care about that stuff. Professors are all fair game!!!

Me: That isn't accurate but good luck, my friend. You will need the luck if you think you will do the nasty with one of your professors. Band nerd maybe, but a professor. You are definitely living in La-La Land.

He sends me the middle finger emoji, with the kiss-face emoji.

Matti: Bro, you are raining on my parade!

Me: Sorry, man! I don't want you disappointed when you don't boom-boom with a professor. You need to set your goals lower.

I know he isn't serious. He wants his fantasies to exist in his authentic life because let's all be honest, who wouldn't want their fantasies to seep into their reality. I know I would.

Matti: Fuck that! Our teachers and principals and parents have always said the sky's the limit.

I burst out laughing.

Me: I guess! But don't float out in space without a spacesuit, dude!

Matti: Okay, okay! I guess I'll have to keep this dream in my wet dreams "wink, wink." But if it happens, I'm going full throttle and letting teacher do whatever she wants to do to me!

Me: You are so weird, dude!

Matti: You know you love me!

Me: To infinity and beyond, dork!

Matti: Well, I'm going to head to bed, dude. Goodnight, Woody.

He also sends the smiley face emoji and a rocket ship.

Me: Goodnight, Buzz.

When we were kids, we watched *Toy Story* over and over and over, driving our parents crazy. They called us Woody and Buzz because at first, we didn't like each other and after about a week of Pre-K, we were inseparable. The nicknames stuck. I'm sure we will call each other Woody and Buzz until we are old men.

We met Cydney in junior high school, so we nicknamed her Jessie, who shows up in the sequel, but she didn't like the nickname, so we started calling her Cyd. We were instant friends. Our friendship means everything to me, which is the primary reason I don't tell them I have feelings for guys. I don't want to lose them, and I'm afraid this could be the one thing that breaks us forever.

When I go back to my internet app, I see Gareth's photo again. I throw my phone down on the bed.

Dammit, Tobias! You aren't fucking gay!

I slap myself, which usually helps snap me back to reality when I have these thoughts. I used to force my thoughts out of my brain, but eventually, that stopped working. Now, all I can do is slap myself to snap me out of my thoughts.

You are a straight man, and you have made plans to meet a wonderful WOMAN. Stop these thoughts, you are straight... you are straight... you are straight.... you are straight....

Why am I constantly fighting myself? I don't understand why I have all these thoughts. They can't be normal, right? Matti always talks about girls, and I have to pretend I'm as interested in their bodies because I don't want him to know my secret. Same with Cydney when she asks when I will get a girlfriend.

I keep myself hidden from everyone in my life because there are people in our society telling me a man loving another man isn't morally right. Except being gay feels right sometimes. When our hands touched, a surge of arousing energy spread through my entire body, which feels like the epitome of right. When I think about kissing him, I only imagine perfection.

I'm so confused about who I am and where I fit in the world. Am I this suppressed heterosexual that only needs to get laid, or am I a homosexual trapped in the unknown's fear?

Exhausted, I roll over onto my side and fall into a restless sleep.

Chapter Four

I WAKE UP full of energy and can't wait to start the day, even though I slept very little throughout the night. My first class begins at eight in the morning, and I could not be more thrilled.

I'm extremely lucky I get to commute and not live in the dorms, which also means I don't have to share a bathroom. I get to shower and pee in the comfort of my home without worrying about people seeing my half-naked body, which haunts my nightmares.

I glance at myself in the mirror before I pop in the shower. I stand at five feet, ten inches and weigh around 175 pounds. Messy, short, brown hair rests atop my head and bright blue eyes reflect at me. Cyd tells me I'm a catch, and any girl would be lucky to have me, but I still can't bring myself to take off my shirt in front of other people.

As a kid, I always volunteered to be a shirt instead of a skin during PE because I was too embarrassed to let the other kids see my bare torso. To this day, I still swim with a shirt on because I'm afraid people will make fun of me. I especially dislike the fact I'm pale as fuck. I'm so white and burn so easily. I have to make sure I always put on sunscreen, or I'll end up looking like Rudolph's nose. Santa will need me to light his way as he delivers all the toys around the world.

I jump in the shower and stand in the water for a second thinking about the day. Former classmates have mentioned most professors will go over the syllabus the first day and start their lectures by the second class. Because I'm me, I would not

mind learning something on the first day. I'm very eager for my history class. I have Dr. Fiona Lee, who is somewhat of a revered legend at Ashelford.

I also have my 8:00 AM English class to look forward to on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. I always figured English would be my go-to degree if history didn't work out for me. Matt tried to convince me, so we could be in the same classes together, but he knew he would waste his pleading on me because my heart bleeds for history.

I finish showering and move into my bedroom to get dressed after drying my body with my towel. I glance at my phone and see I have a text from Cydney.

Cyd: Tobi, I'm totally freaking out about school. What if everyone hates me?!?!

I love Cydney even though she can be a drama queen, which is perfect for her because she will be a theater major. I hope we will both get cast in the theater productions. I know she will because she is so freaking talented, but I will keep my fingers crossed for myself. She tells me I have a magnificent voice and can act, but I feel inadequate compared to her abilities.

Me: Cyd, don't worry about it. Everyone will love you. Besides, you will have me in one class, and we will totally hang out when we can throughout the day. What time do you think you might go to lunch?

Cyd: I'll get lunch at 12:30ish, which is when I get out of class.

Me: Perfect! That is the time I will get out of class. So it's a date.

Cyd: Thank you, Tobi!! I couldn't do this without you. You are a genuine friend. I'm so nervous about college.

I mean I know I'm smart enough and talented enough, but there are so many unknowns. What-ifs that keep giving me anxiety. How are you holding up?!? I'm sure you aren't nervous at all. A ball of excitement and positive energy.

Me: I understand your anxiety. I'm anxious too! I'm happy we will have each other to lean on. The Three Amigos are together for another four years... at least.

Cyd: You're the best, Tobi! Are you excited for your history class? That's probably a stupid question since you are a history major lol.

Me: Nope! I'm not excited at all. History yuck.

I send her the vomiting emoji to make my response even more dramatic.

Cyd: Okay, okay. You are such a nerd, but I love you!

Me: Love you too, friend

Cyd: Okay! I should finish getting ready. I don't want to be late on my first day. See you soon!

Me: See you soon, Cyd!

I love her like a sister, which makes life difficult sometimes because so many people expect us to get together... even our parents. People are always asking how long we have been together or when are you going to get together, but our bond remains a platonic love relationship and nothing more.

I have tried for years to force those feelings. Telling myself she is the perfect girl for me. That the universe brought her into my life for this purpose. We should fall in love now, so when we graduate college, we can marry and have two-and-a-half kids with the white picket fence, a dog, a cat, blah, blah, blah, barf.

The spark isn't there for me. I know why, but that can't be what I'm feeling because I should like girls. Society tells me to like girls.

I keep hoping the homo-erotic thoughts will go away, but they have not yet. I hope it happens soon because I'm so tired of this inner struggle with myself, but I feel like my heart and mind are at war with each other, forcing my mental stability in the middle to suffer the chaos of war. I physically hurt feeling this way, but I'm doing my best to defeat these demons. I hope I don't lose myself.

Each day I feel myself drifting further and further into my depression. I'm sure the weights holding me down would evaporate if I exposed my secrets to the world, but I'm too afraid.

"Tobias! Breakfast is ready. Hurry, killer," my dad yells from the kitchen.

"On my way, Pops!"

I finish getting dressed, put my shoes on, and run down the hall. I'm stoked for breakfast because my dad promised to make his fucking delicious pancakes for breakfast because I'm about to start my first day of college. He even told the store he would be late today because he wanted to see me off on my "special day." His words.

When I enter the kitchen, I see my dad, Samuel Gavin, placing pancakes onto a plate for me. We have always been told we look exactly alike—same height, same shaggy brown hair, same pale white skin that could illuminate the darkest cave on earth—so I guess I know what I will look like when

I'm forty. I'm happy he has all his hair. It would be a total nightmare to go bald!

"What's up, Pops. Whatcha got cooking?"

"Well, I'm whipping up some croque-en-bouche and some passion fruit tarts. I figured we should eat like kings since it is a special day."

He has been watching too many episodes of *The Great British Baking Show* on Netflix. Mom and I need to cut this addict off—pronto.

I love my dad. He and I have the same humor, so we can be sarcastic with each other. One year, we convinced my granddad that Dad would be joining an FBI task force because they needed an inside man to catch a serial burglar who had been robbing grocery stores across the county. Dad ruined our scheme, though, because he could not keep a straight face and he busted a gut, howling with laughter.

"Dad, it's not like I'm receiving the Medal of Honor. I'm starting college."

"I know, but I'm so proud of you. I didn't go to college, so I'm so happy you will make something of yourself."

"Seriously, it's not like you work a mediocre job. You are the manager of the Food Emporium, and you have been the manager since you were thirty. You started at the bottom and worked your way up to the top. You are exceptional, Pops!"

I mean every word. I truly admire my parents for everything they have accomplished. They have shown me what hard work and dedication can create. Nothing in life is free, and no one deserves something they didn't earn. Life

didn't provide them with handouts. They had to fight tooth and nail to achieve everything they have, which has made me a harder worker and taught me the importance of following my dreams.

"Thanks, son. I'm so proud you are getting a college education."

"Me too, Pops. Now, who do I have to kill 'round here to get some damn grub?"

"Well, cowboy." He pretends to spit into the cup beside him. "I reckon you will need to meet me at sundown for a pistol duel. Last man standin' gets a freshly cooked batch of pancakes."

I snort and reply, "You're so weird, Pops. Thanks for breakfast!"

"You're welcome, kiddo. Now, eat up. You will need your energy for the day ahead."

"Good morning to my two favorite guys," my mom says, entering the kitchen, clipping an earring to her left ear. I take after my dad in the looks department. My mom is shorter with dirty blonde hair and green eyes, and her skin tans, no matter how long she is out in the sun, which makes me so envious.

She walks into the kitchen with so much confidence. Elizabeth Gavin is one of the top selling realtors at the brokerage. She has taught me hard work is necessary to earn your way in life, something I hope to teach my own children someday. She is wearing her lucky suit, which must mean she has a deal she wants to close today.

“Morning, Mom! Dad has been watching the baking show again. I think we should push up our intervention.”

“Honey, what have we told you about that show?” she asks, kissing him on the cheek. “You can watch, but that doesn’t make you a baker or Paul Hollywood. You almost burnt the house down attempting to make those lavender and rose macarons.”

She loves giving him a hard time for his lack of baking skills. He tries so hard. He thinks he is Gordon Ramsay or Paul Hollywood every time he watches a cooking show, but he ends up burning or under baking his creations. The Food Emporium’s kitchen staff will not let him anywhere near the kitchen because they know the cooking stories from my mother and me.

“Hey, I referred to making fancy desserts, but I only made my famous pancakes. I never burn these, do I?”

My mom brushes his nose with her nose with a big, warm grin. “We love to give you a hard time. Your pancakes are known world-wide... Well, at least in your mind they are,” she says. He winks at me before going back to flipping the pancakes.

As I watch my parents being so loving toward each other, I can’t help but feel guilty for not being honest with them. They love me and each other so much. They are normal parents, and we are so close. I should be able to tell them who I am. Talking to them should be easy. I should spit it out. They could help me.

Every time I get up the courage to expose myself, something always stops me. I think about the times my father

changes the channel when a gay couple features on a movie or television show, and how my mother always refers to her friend and co-worker, Roger Devlin, as her “gay” friend. She has never expressed an issue with him being gay, but she brings so much attention to the fact he is gay, so is that the only way she sees him? Not as her friend and co-worker, but as the gay friend and gay co-worker. Neither of my parents have ever stated or expressed an issue with homosexuality, but I can’t help but feel the fear that deep down they will hate me. Therefore, I stay hidden and only show them the puppet and not the puppeteer.

I finish eating breakfast and say bye to my dad and mom as I grab my backpack and head to my car.

As I’m driving to school, I play my Workout Playlist, which has become my everything playlist. I’m listening to “The Story” by Brandi Carlile—one of my favorite songs; a song that bleeds romance I wish I had—but my mind wanders to school and what lies ahead. I hope everything goes well.

Like I told Cydney, I’m anxious about college. I love school, but I’m still nervous because college differs from high school. Collegiate education is a beast compared to secondary education. I want everything to go as planned. I want to focus on my classes and homework and not get distracted by anything. This is a big step toward my future and my career, and I can’t afford to get distracted or lose focus.

I shake off this thought and tell myself I will stay focused on my classes, and I promise myself I will let nothing, or anyone, distract me.

Chapter Five

MY ENGLISH COMPOSITION class felt like an undeniable success. Cydney and I were able to sit together. Our professor, Dr. Cynthia Redgrave, was a delight. We went over the syllabus and discussed projects and assignments we will complete over the course of the semester. I'm pumped to learn more grammar skills to assist with my writing. Once again, I'm such a fucking nerd. The class doesn't seem too difficult. I loved English in high school, so I think I will do an okay job in this college course.

The class lets out early, so Cydney and I sit on a bench in the quad under the giant clock tower, watching the other students make their way from building to building, presumably on their way to class or finishing with their first class.

I love being able to take a break between classes, making me feel more relaxed and freer than I did in high school. When you are in high school, you have a limited amount of time to get from one class to the other, and you must attend every one of your classes each day. In college, you only have certain classes on certain days, which makes it feel less chaotic and stressful.

Cydney and I are leaning against each other's backs. She is texting her mom, and I'm admiring the quad.

The quad is the central point of all the excitement today as students mosey their way to classes, looking lost or determined.

The clock tower is a beautiful site, with ornamental mermaid statues that sit around the tower in the fountain. When the clock tower chimes unrecognizable elevator music on the hour every hour, water spurts from the mouths of the mermaids into the pool filled with coins people tossed in, hoping their inner wishes would come true.

I dig a penny out of my pocket and toss it into the water and internally wish the universe will help me with my exhausting dilemma, and since I'm now in college, I feel like I don't need the added stress and pressure. Everything would be easier if the person I'm hiding deep inside could evaporate into the air...or maybe I could accept myself for who I am.

Eclipsing the fountain is a circular copse of trees and intentionally placed benches, empty except for Cydney and me.

Various buildings enclose the perfectly manicured lawn. The main courtyard in front of me features a group of guys playing football. Two of them don't have shirts and are showing off their abs. The sweat dripping down their backs makes their skin glisten in the light, making them seem almost angelic as they run around the lawn. I'm entranced watching them run and seeing their muscles flex as they exert themselves. This sport is very homoerotic. My heart rate quickens when a guy slaps his buddy's ass for diverting the defense.

Cydney says my name and I'm startled back to reality.

"Tobi, can you believe we are in college? I felt like this day would never come. Our senior year, especially the last couple of months, moved at a snail's pace. I felt like our

teachers were manipulating time to make it go slower and feel never ending.”

I chuckle at her joke and reply, “I know, right? It was like when you keep looking at the clock, which makes it feel like time slows down. Anyway, I haven’t been this excited about anything before in my life. It’s a new chapter we get to experience together.”

“Don’t forget about me, losers.” When we both hear Matt, we beam.

“We could never forget about you, Buzz!” I reply while giving him a fist bump. “How was your first class, dork?”

“Ha! I skipped my first class because I wanted to sleep in.”

I give him the death stare and hope he is joking. Who would skip the first day?

“Damn, Woody! If looks could kill, I would die, resurrect, and die again. I’m kidding. I went to class. I’m not fucking stupid. You have to at least attend the class once to get an idea if you can skip the class throughout the semester or not.” He gives me a wink.

“Matt, be careful. Some professors will drop you a whole letter grade if you miss too many classes,” Cydney retorts.

“Don’t worry, Mother! I promise I won’t miss any classes unless I’m on my deathbed. No, I’ll still attend. I’ll drag myself with my IV taped to my arm and my breathing machine in hand to class so I’ll never disappoint my dear old mommy dearest.”

I’m cackling, but Cydney doesn’t seem as amused with Matt’s joke. She gives him a punch to the arm, which is

something we all do to each other to show affection. A family who hits each other, bruises together is our motto.

“Anyway, nerds,” Matt snickers and changes the subject, “I heard about a party this Friday we need to go to. It’s at some guy’s house that his parents rent for him and two of his buddies. It’s a welcome back-to-school party. There will be alcohol. Now, wait! I know you two goodie-goodies would never drink alcohol but hear me out. Drinking alcohol at least once is like a rite of passage for a college student, and so is attending a college party. One drink, I promise.” I give him a look that says I’m not buying his one drink policy. He sees that I’m seeing through his lie, so he gives me a wink and continues, “Fine, four to five tops.”

“I’m in!” Cydney replies with a ton of surprising excitement.

“What?” I glare at her, feeling slightly betrayed. “You want to go to a college party where there will be alcohol. Did hell freeze over? I never thought I would see the day Cydney Williams would want to go to a party.”

“Well, I do declare, sir,” she says in a horrible Southern Belle accent. “Whatever could you mean.” Seeing the error of her ways, she drops her accent and continues, “I feel we should experience our first college party early. Hell, if we don’t like it, we never have to go to another party ever again. Are you in?”

They both look at me with puppy dog eyes and pouting, which they know I fall for every time. I can’t say no to my best friends, and they know it. I punch both of them in the arm and respond, “Fine, but I’m not promising I’ll drink.”

“Sold,” Matt responds in an auctioneer voice.

“Woo-hoo,” Cydney says as she jumps up and down.

“Okay, lady and gent. I have to get to my next class, which is history. Raise the roof,” I joke.

“You are such a nerd, Woody.”

“I know, which is why we are friends. See you later guys,” I say, walking in the direction of the Liberal Arts building.

“Bye,” Cydney and Matt say in unison.

I leave them talking with each other. I hear Matt snort at something Cydney said but can't make out what she said. I'm so happy they are here with me. I don't think I could do this all on my own. College is stressful whether or not I admit it out loud. The unknowns are never ending. One thing I can always rely on, though, is my friends. The universe has destined us to be friends forever.

As I walk into the building, I can't help but beam. I'm a college student now, and my entire world is about to change. Bring it on, universe!

*

I FIND A seat toward the front of the classroom, which is where I typically sit because I want to be front and center for all the action. God, I'm so ecstatic for this class and to get to know Dr. Fiona Lee.

The classroom looks like any other classroom. There are desks in the center of the room facing the whiteboard and teacher's desk and podium. There is nothing special about the classroom, but to me, there is. I see my future. I have a feeling

I will spend many days and nights on this campus and maybe even in this classroom. I'm ready to learn and to show Dr. Lee how invested I am in history.

I can see other students making their way into the classroom, but the room is still fairly empty. I find this odd. Looking at my phone, I notice class begins in ten minutes. Who doesn't go to class early? If you go early, you ensure you get the best seat in the front middle section, so you have an unobstructed view of the board and the teacher. I guess that is the punctual nerd in me.

A group of students file into the classroom and find their seats. Most of the other students have tired eyes and slouch in their seats, scrolling through something on their phones. I glance at my phone to look at the time and see class should begin in about one minute. I wonder where Dr. Lee is. I feel like she should already be here.

I hear the door open and turn around to see if Dr. Lee is entering the classroom, but I don't see her. I see Gareth walking through the doorway. He is walking in wearing a vest and tie with jeans with a shoulder bag strapped over him, looking as handsome as ever.

"Good morning, class," he says, setting his stuff down on the desk. "Dr. Lee is about to have her baby, and she is going on maternity leave, so I will be your teacher for this semester. My name is Gareth David. I'm about to finish up my graduate degree here at Ashelford, and I'm Dr. Helena Richards's TA. I also teach a few other classes in the history department."

He looks up from his bag, sees me, and there is that gorgeous, body-melting grin. He looks thrilled to see me.

All I can do is blush and melt into my seat.

Chapter Six

I'M IN COMPLETE shock, and I can feel a panic attack coming on. At least, I think I'm having one. I've never had a full-on panic attack. My heart is racing, and I think I may have stopped breathing for a quick second.

What the hell, universe? Why are you doing this to me? I can't have Gareth as my teacher, not when I'm having these feelings for him. Or what am I feeling? An attraction? A crush? Lust? Platonic admiration? I don't even know what *it* is. I know there is something bubbling in my mind and heart, but they aren't syncing up. How am I going to survive an entire semester like this with him as my teacher?

I expected to see him around campus, and we would casually exchange pleasantries. I didn't realize I would have to sit in his class for an hour, three times per week for sixteen weeks. I don't know what the universe is doing to me, but I'm not a big fan. However, a thought manifests in my head. Why am I so flustered? Maybe I'm a fan of him being my teacher.

Why would I get so bent out of shape if I didn't feel something brewing beneath the surface? Maybe the universe is throwing him in my path for a reason. Maybe we will meet up again. Maybe he will become my mentor and help me achieve all my dreams and goals. He will be the educational rock I can always lean on for emotional and professional support. However, I can't help but feel something else I can't put into words. Maybe the universe has a unique plan for us.

He is still standing there smiling at the class when I realize I have been staring at him for what must have been a lifetime.

That smile is so intoxicating, and I could get lost in his eyes. I have this sudden urge to touch his cheek to make sure he is there when the classmate next to me touches my arm.

Catching my attention, the guy next to me mutters, “Yo, dude. The teach is asking you a question.”

“Oh, shit... sorry, I mean... what was the question again?” God, I fucking hate how he makes me fumble my words.

He beams even more at my accidental curse. “I was calling attendance, and I got to your name. Are you with us today?”

I bet my face is bright fucking red right now. “Um... yes, I’m here today.”

With a sly expression, he responds, “Good! I’m happy to hear that. Okay, class. Today, we have a lot to go over to make sure everyone understands and knows what I expect from all of you. We will go over the syllabus first, and I will open it up to you for questions and concerns. Let us begin.”

He hands me the syllabus, and our hands briefly touch. I feel electricity running through my body, and by the look in his eyes, he felt it too.

Fuck, I’m in trouble.

*

BY THE END of the class, I can barely hold myself together. My mind is racing. I can’t even remember everything from our syllabus discussion. He is so confident and kind. He looks directly into the eyes of every student when they are talking, which I admire. I feel seen and not like a body filling a seat in the classroom.

He doesn't respond with snark or sarcasm, even if someone already asked or if the question may seem dumb to the rest of the class. This makes me like him even more. He seems perfect. Maybe it will not be so bad to be in his class this semester. I'm nervous around him because I feel inferior, and because he is so down to earth, I will naturally become more comfortable around him the more I spend time in his class.

It isn't like I have to spend time with him outside of class or have any other classes with him. This will not be as hard as I'm making it out to be. I can be the student, and he can be the teacher. That is what our relationship will be. Nothing more and nothing less.

"Okay, class. Get ready to start our lecture on Wednesday. Please prepare to take notes. You can use pencil or pen with paper or use your laptop. No phones because they aren't adequate devices for note taking. If there aren't questions, class is dismissed."

Everyone packs up their items and stuffs them into their bags. I sit there watching Gareth, and he must sense my gaze because he looks at me.

"Hey, Tobias. Do you have a second? I would like to talk to you about something. Would you mind meeting me at my office? I need to pack up my stuff, and I'll be right there. It's room 301 in this building."

"Um, sure. I'll head that way." Fucking fuck. I can't believe I'm already being sent to the office. What did I do? Is he going to ask me to drop his class because he finds my staring at him inappropriate?

I hope he hasn't caught onto my awkwardness toward him or me staring at him. I tried so hard to keep my eyes from wandering over to him, but every time his eyes met mine his grin grew two sizes, and his eyes twinkled with excitement and wonder.

Maybe that is his personality, and I'm reading too much into the exchange. I need to relax and calm down. Nothing is wrong, and nothing will happen. He is asking me to meet him in his office to finish our discussion from the other day. He might want to discuss my future in the history department. I'm worrying for nothing.

*

I STAND AT his office door waiting for him when I see him making his way down the hall. He walks with such strength and confidence. I can't take my eyes off him.

He notices me and gives me an energetic wave that makes me blush. "Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. I'm sure you are busy and stressed out with it being the first day of classes and all. I had something I wanted to discuss with you."

"No problem, Mr. David," I say nervously.

"Please, don't call me Mr. David. Call me Gareth. Mr. David sounds like I'm an old history scholar time has forgotten."

"Okay, Gareth," I respond nervously.

Why do I lose control around him? He is like a magnetic force, and my inner self is being magnetically pulled to the surface, being drawn to this man standing before me.

He opens the door and walks in, setting his bag down on the chair beside the door, which only leaves the chair closest to his desk available. “Please take a seat.”

I hesitate for a brief second, and sit down in the chair, but I make a point of scooting the chair back.

“I promise I don’t bite.”

“Oh, no... I....”

“I’m just kidding. I promise you aren’t in trouble or anything.”

“Okay,” I say, relaxing into the chair.

“Tobias, I have a proposition I would like you to consider.”

I swallow hard. “What is the proposition?”

“Well, we have a special program in the history department that lets us select one academic elite freshman as a student assistant. It gives freshmen the opportunity to gain usable knowledge for future academic jobs, while earning more than minimum wage. The selected student is not allowed to cover classes, which is reserved for upperclassman assistants, but they are able to grade assignments. Helena, Dr. Richards, mentioned you, by name, as a viable candidate, so I was wondering if you would be interested in being my student assistant.”

I’m speechless. It is like my brain had an aneurism, and I’m brain dead because I can’t even think of a response.

“Are you okay, Tobias? If you feel you can’t handle it because of your course load and since this is your first semester, you don’t have to say yes. You are my first pick. I

kind of felt like we connected when we met.” I notice him blush as he says this, almost like he may regret the word choice, but he continues. “I mean. I think you and I could get along with each other. It is also a great opportunity for you to get some experience since you want to become a professor someday.”

This would be an amazing opportunity for me. I would get some much-needed experience that could help me. There is no way I can turn this down, but I need to keep my thoughts clean and stop over analyzing everything I do and say around him.

“I would love to be your assistant. I can’t believe you would even consider me for something like this. Thank you. I really appreciate it,” I say, beaming.

“I believe you are something special, and I firmly believe I can teach you a lot. I think you and I will fit great together.”

I thank him again, stand, and say goodbye. As I’m walking away, I can feel his eyes on me, so I turn to glance at him. He awkwardly acts like he was not staring at me, swiftly turning his gaze toward his computer screen.

I turn around and head for the door leading to the stairwell. I jump into a high kick before making my way down the stairs.

*

I THINK THE universe may be out to get me. I run into him as I turn the corner outside of the bookstore on Tuesday. I jump so high I almost trip over myself. He manages to grab hold of my arms to steady me.

“You okay there? I didn’t mean to startle you.”

He is still holding onto me, and I feel like I will melt into his arms. What is wrong with me?

“Yes. I’m okay,” I respond too loudly.

“Good.” He must realize he’s still holding on to me because he lets go of me and takes a few steps back. “Are we still on for this afternoon?”

“What am I on for?” I ask and immediately regret my words. “I mean. Yes. I’ll head to your office around 2:30 when I get out of class.”

“Good, I can’t wait!” he says with too much excitement. This is a very awkward conversation. “I’m happy to get started.” He blushes slightly.

“See you soon,” I say and head down the hall. I turn to see if he is watching me again. He is standing in the same position, shaking his head, which confuses me even more.

*

NOW, I KNOW the universe wants me to embarrass myself in front of Gareth. I fall into his lap on Wednesday afternoon.

I’m walking some papers over to his desk, trip over my two left feet, and fall into his lap. He catches me. I stay there gazing into his eyes. His eyes stare into my soul as his grip tightens around my arms, which makes me realize I’m still in his lap, so I jump up pretending like the fall startled me. We share a friendly but awkward laugh about it, but I can feel his eyes on me after I turn to sit down at my desk in his office.

There is a deafening silence in the room for what feels like hours until Gareth breaks the awkward tension by asking, “So, what do you do in your spare time?”

This is the first time he has ever asked me about my personal life. Until now, we have only talked about school-related topics.

“Well, I do a lot of reading, watching movies and TV, and singing. What about you?” I ask.

He smiles at me, which makes me feel a bit uneasy. I don’t understand what this man does to me, but I’m enjoying the way he makes me feel. The way he peers into my eyes sends a wave of excitement down my spine. I wish I knew what all this means, but until I figure it out, I will enjoy our time and get to know this wonderful human being.

“I read all the time. I watch a lot of movies, but I like to read more. I have been reading this book by Garrard Conley called *Boy Erased*. It’s about this guy whose parents made him attend conversion therapy because he is gay. Have you read it?” The way he asks makes it feel like a test. Almost like he is asking if I’m okay with homosexuality.

This is a very revealing question. A part of me wants to run because I’m nervous about where the conversation will lead us, but I know I can’t leave him feeling all exposed.

“I have read it. It was very heartbreaking. Sometimes, I wish we lived in a different world.” I hesitate for a second, trying to find the right words. How can I prove to him I understand the same struggle when I can’t even admit my sexuality to myself? I take a deep breath and continue, “It is hard being a teenager.”

He looks up and into my eyes, which creates this urge inside me to touch his hand. I even move my hand, but I stop

myself, placing my hand on my leg. He stares at my hand and catches my gaze again.

He smiles at me, and we sit there looking at each other. Each of us not sure what to say. Breaking the silence, he says, "I understand what it is like to feel different from my peers." There is another pause before he stands, glancing at the clock. "I would like to continue our conversation, but I need to get to class."

He gathers his items and places them into his bag. I watch him, admiring his confidence. He isn't hiding behind masks like I am. He isn't afraid to be himself, which makes me feel like I could be okay with who I am and like I don't have to hide anymore. His confidence and stature make me feel like I'm normal.

"I'll walk out with you," I say, standing and grabbing my backpack. I turn around and bump into him. Our hands touch, and I feel that same wave of excitement crash into my heart, making it beat rapidly. I can feel his warm breath escaping his mouth and his body heat pressing into my torso.

We stand there looking at each other without speaking. I'm not sure what to do. I want to keep touching him. I want to feel his hand on mine. I want him to touch my cheek and pull me into a hug.

I feel frozen in time, and I don't want the clock to start up again. I want this moment to continue forever.

Breathing hard, he whispers, "Uh... I should go."

I take a step back. "Me too," I say mimicking his heavy breathing whisper.

He motions for me to go first. I inch past him and start walking toward the door. I can feel his eyes on my back, watching me leave.

“I hope you have a great evening, Tobi,” he says, closing his office door.

I face him. “I hope you do too, Gareth.”

He winks at me. We walk toward the staircase in silence. When we arrive at the second floor. He waves goodbye and heads toward his classroom.

I stand there in the stairwell. I can't help but feel like something is forming between us. I feel myself wanting to be near him and talk to him. Each day I see him, I feel more comfortable in my skin.

Chapter Seven

Me: Today has been one crazy day!

I have been texting Cydney and Matt since I got home today. We have been discussing our first week and my job with Gareth. They still can't believe I could get a job as a teaching assistant on my first day of college. I can't believe it either. Dad emotionally gave his blessing for me to quit my job at the Food Emporium.

I always wanted to become a student assistant as an upperclassman. I didn't know about the freshman student assistant program. I feel super lucky I was even selected, and that Gareth chose me to be his assistant, no matter how confused I get every time I see him.

I can't shake the way he makes me feel. Each time I see him, my heart races, and I feel happiness spread through my entire body. He makes me feel so comfortable. I don't feel like I have to hide myself from him, which scares me.

I don't know what that means because I don't know how to be gay because I have been repressing this side of me for so long.

I sense these feelings bubbling inside me, but I don't know how to label them. Are they real or imagined? Is this attraction toward him romantic or platonic? I'm so confused, but I feel myself relaxing around him every time we talk.

Matti: Dude, you are so lucky! You will have access to all the sexy lady teachers now. Maybe you are the one who will have sex with a teacher and not me. Lucky dog!

Matt is relentless. He is a stereotypical male teenager that always thinks about sex. I can't fault him because my mind wanders to sex frequently. My thoughts are more confusing. I want to think about women. I even try to force myself to picture a naked woman, but I don't feel the rush of excitement I need to feel any heterosexual attraction. When I see a naked man or an underwear model, I feel instantly aroused, only adding to my hormonal teen confusion.

Me: Matt, you are ridiculous. There is no way I will have sex with a teacher.

Even after I send the text, I feel these butterflies in my stomach. I can't help but smile. My mind wanders to Gareth. What is he doing right now? Is he thinking of me too? I hope he is or has at least thought about me. When our hands brushed in class, when I bumped into him in the hall, when I fell into his lap, and when we shared that moment in his office, my entire body yearned for his, and I think I see this same excitement pass over his face. Like he enjoyed the way my hand gently brushed his as much as I did.

I'm brought back to reality when my phone screams "Bodies" by Drowning Pool. I'm not into heavy metal music, but every time this song comes on, all three of us scream the words at the top of our lungs, pretending we are rock stars.

Cyd: Are you two ready for tonight? I'll be picking you up in like 30 minutes, right?

Matti: I'm so ready!!!! Tonight will be lit!!!

Me: I finished getting dressed. I'll be waiting outside.

I finish getting my shoes on and head down to the living room to tell Mom I will head out with Cydney and Matt.

I see my mom, who's sitting on the couch as the television makes quiet, unintelligible noises. She looks like she might be asleep, so I quietly say, "Hey, Mom. Are you awake?"

"Uh, yeah, honey. Sorry, I must have dozed off. What's up?" My mom looks exhausted. She works for a real estate company, and she is one of their top grossing brokers. She is always working to provide for our family. She rarely takes a moment to sit and relax.

My mom and dad have taught me the importance of hard work, which is why I have always held some kind of job. I get worried that if what has been circling in my thoughts gets out it would change the way my parents think of me or they would disown me or worse, which is why I'm forcing myself to be straight and yelling at myself and sometimes hitting myself when gay thoughts arise in my brain. I can't lose the relationship I have with my parents. Our relationship is too special to me. I also don't want them disappointed in me or hate me.

"Mom, I'm headed to a welcome back to school get together with Cyd and Matti. Is that okay with you?"

"Sure, son. Just don't drink. Okay?" She looks at me with concern in her eyes. "However, I'm not stupid. I was young once. If you drink, please drink responsibly. Don't drive!" She says this last bit in her motherly voice, which always sends a shiver down my spine. When she adopts this tone, she means business, and I know I should not disobey her.

"Don't worry, Mom. I don't plan on drinking." This is a half lie because I keep telling myself I will not have a drink, but a part of me wants to see what all the fuss is about. I have

to at least try one drink. I have tried a sip of beer before, and I wanted to vomit because of its disgusting taste, but I hope liquor will taste better.

“Is Cydney picking you up?”

I don't know why she even asks, but she asks every time. Cydney drives Matt and me around everywhere. Well, sometimes Matt or I drive her car, but we typically take her car everywhere. I feel like Mom should know by now, it's common knowledge in our circle that Cydney is the chauffeur. She is the Hoke Colburn to our Miss Daisy.

“Yep! Like usual. She and Matti should be here any minute, so I will wait outside. I'll be home around eleven, right?” I ask with my puppy dog eyes, hoping she will extend the curfew. I know that I'm living under my parents' roof for free, but I'm in college now. I should not have a curfew anymore.

“You know what, make it twelve. You're in college now. I feel like that means you can stay out an extra hour.”

I give her my best puppy-dog face, so she can see my disappointment. “Wow, a whole hour. Whatever will I do with that extra time. Maybe we will rob a bank and go on the run like Thelma and Louise.”

“Just don't drive off any cliffs,” she responds. I release a heavy, dramatic sigh, which makes her shriek with laughter. I love the way we can riff on each other.

She gives me a look like she is contemplating something. She says, “Personally, I don't think you need a curfew. You are old enough, so if you want to stay out later that's fine. Please

be as quiet as you can when you get in. I have a big day in the morning.”

“Thanks, Mom. I’ll be as quiet as Santa Claus when he breaks into people’s houses, which is socially accepted by everyone.”

“Ha-ha. You are such a comedian. Have a good night and be careful, son.”

“Thanks, Mom. You too.”

She goes back to her television show as I head out the door. Cydney is pulling into the driveway when I close the front door.

“You ready, nerd?” Matt yells from the back seat. Cydney hates when he sits in the back seat when the front seat is empty.

“Heck, yes, I’m ready,” I yell.

“Well, get in, loser. We’re going shopping,” Cydney jokes from the driver’s seat.

As we head in the party’s direction, I can’t help but get overjoyed. It feels so surreal to be in college and have this freedom. I feel like I’m on top of the world.

Chapter Eight

DESPITE MY PROTESTS, we show up fashionably late to the party. People are already throwing up in the bushes and stumbling around screaming like idiots, making me think of the Alecia Cara song, “Here.” *I’ll be over here away from you vomiting, stumbling idiots.*

When we enter through the front door, the music practically blows my eardrums, sending vibrations through my body with each thump of the bass, but the people dancing seem to enjoy themselves. A musty smell of sweat and beer fill my nostrils as soon as I enter the house almost making me want to join my disgusting peers outside in the bushes. I’m a party-pooper. This is all new to me. I need to let myself loose. Have some fun. This is what college is all about.

Someone tries to hand Cydney a drink, but she mouths something that could be “No, thanks” or “Fuck off.” I laugh, because she is already making good friends.

Matt turns and faces me. “Tobi, do you see those girls making out? God, I love college.”

“Oh yeah. Hot,” I say sarcastically. “What should we do?”

“We should grab some drinks,” Matt responds as he pushes his fist in the air like he is in the *Breakfast Club* or something.

“Don’t do that,” Cydney says, rolling her eyes. She is in determined mode.

We make our way toward the kitchen, pushing through throngs of our gyrating peers. The kitchen is filled with a limited variety of alcoholic beverages ranging from beer to

hard liquor along with a few soda selections. Matt pours himself a whiskey and Coke, Cydney gets a Smirnoff Ice from a cooler, and I decide on a rum and Coke. I told myself I would try a drink, and here I am trying a drink that may or may not get me wasted. It tastes delicious, so I down the drink, thinking I can't taste the alcohol at all. I press my luck again by trying a spiced rum and Coke this time, which is even better. *Two drink limit*, I tell myself, which doesn't last very long, because Matt hands us shots of vodka. At first, the alcohol feels like lava spilling down my throat, but I don't cringe at the taste. Vodka may be my drink of choice.

I'm feeling cloudy and more relaxed. I guess getting buzzed feels like this. I kind of like the blurred feeling.

I notice Matti dancing with some girl who looks like she has already had too many drinks. Her eyes are barely open, and she is clumsily grinding her ass into him. Cydney makes her way over to the couch and sits there with some girl from our composition class.

I'm headed her way when I run into some guy. I'm about to turn around and apologize when I notice I ran into Gareth.

"Fuck...uh...sorry," I say like a blubbering dumbass.

"Totally my fault, dude...oh, Tobi! How are you? Just the guy I wanted to see."

"Who, me?" He seems intoxicated, maybe not drunk, but I can smell the alcohol wafting off his breath.

"Yes, you. Did I tell you how delighted I am you're in my class and working for me? I was hoping I would see you this

weekend. I have enjoyed our conversations. I haven't stopped thinking about you."

I'm stunned. He hasn't stopped thinking about me. *Me?* I don't even know how to respond. I know my heart skipped a beat, and the damn butterflies are back. "Umm. Thanks?" I say.

"Hey, would you like to go outside with me? It is fucking hot in here."

"Sure. You lead the way."

"Follow me. I want to show you the gazebo outside. Here, so I don't lose you in here." He holds out his hand. I hesitate, looking around to see if anyone is watching. I can see everyone else is more interested in their own conversations and lives to even care about what we are doing, so I grab hold and he gives my hand a gentle squeeze that spreads warmth throughout my body. I look into his eyes, and he winks at me. Maybe I'm not crazy. Maybe there is something developing between us, which makes my heart race because I'm feeling like maybe I can let myself be open, and it's all because of him.

Besides it being quiet outdoors, I can still hear a mixture of muffled voices and a gentle vibration of the music as we make our way to the gazebo sitting at the end of a cement walkway. Nobody is around; everyone is pretty much inside. He sits down on the bench and pats the section next to him. I sit and glance awkwardly around. I don't know what is happening, but these damn butterflies won't go away. I feel this excitement bubbling inside me.

I like this man in a non-platonic way, I admit to myself. Some people might call these feelings romance. Maybe it is the alcohol talking, but me realizing this has lifted some weights off my shoulders. I feel free. This feeling helps me relax. I drop my hand to my side, which lands on his hand. He looks at me with those warm chocolate eyes that make me melt inside. I feel this rush of emotion. What is happening? Is he going to kiss me? Should I kiss him?

I must have an out-of-body experience, or an alien has taken over my body because I kiss him. Right on the mouth. I've kissed no one before. When our lips touch, the entire world fades away. It is only us. No other people exist.

My entire body feels weightless. My heart is rushing a mile a minute. He grabs my face with his hands, moving closer to me. I can feel the warmth of his body against mine as a soft moan escapes my throat. This is everything. I kiss him harder and move my arms to his back and feel his muscles reacting to my touch. Damn, he feels so good in my arms. I never want this to end.

Reality strikes when a group of people loudly exit the house and head in our direction, so we push off each other. He looks different when I see his face. He looks scared or ashamed. I can't get a read off him. There is nothing behind his eyes, which makes me aware of what we did. What the fuck is wrong with me? I can't believe I kissed my teacher. I can't believe I kissed a man. I'm not gay. *What is wrong with me? I'm never drinking again.* He must see the confusion and worry on my face because he lets his face relax.

"Come with me," he says. "I need to talk to you."

I follow him farther into the back yard toward a rocking bench hanging from a giant branch attached to an enormous tree that casts a shadow around us, making me feel invisible from the rest of the world.

We sit, but I make sure to sit as far from him as I can. I'm so fucked right now. He will turn me in to the dean or the president of the university, and they will kick me out of school for kissing my professor. I can't believe I did that. All of this is very sobering, and I shake with embarrassment and fear.

"Tobi, it's okay. You look terrified. Please look at me," he says, cutting the silence like a knife.

I look up at him, wince, and blurt out, "I'm so sorry. I've been drinking. I'm not in my right mind. Please don't turn me in to the dean. I like it here and I don't want to get in any trouble."

He looks in my eyes before he says, "To be honest, I would probably be the one who gets in trouble, not you. I shouldn't have come tonight. My buddy asked me to come hang out since I'm finished with school, so I thought I would come have one drink, which turned into five. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have brought you out into the back yard. I knew it was wrong. I knew I wouldn't be able to control myself around you. I should have said hello and let you have fun with your friends."

"What do you mean, *control yourself*?"

He looks at me with very intense eyes that are testing me, urging me to realize what he is saying without him having to say the words.

“Tobi, I have liked you since I first saw you. I know you are eighteen and I’m twenty-five, but there was something about you that day that planted a seed in my head. There still is, and every time I see you, it grows... Into what, I don’t know yet, but I can’t get you out of my head. Fuck, I shouldn’t be saying any of this. You are my student and my assistant. I’m so sorry. This is all my fault. Please don’t feel bad for what happened. I promise it will never happen again. I will go. I hope this changes nothing. I would be happy to sign a withdrawal form if you would like to switch classes. I...”

I grab hold of his face and pull his lips toward mine. The passion is even bigger than before. I feel us both push into the kiss, wanting the embrace to continue, wanting the kiss to never end. I put my hand on his rock-hard chest and casually feel my way toward his muscular stomach. I want to move closer to him, so I try to move my hand to his back, but because my lips are fused to his, I misjudge and aim too low. I feel his erection through his jeans, which makes me keenly aware of how hard I am. I push away from him and jump up, which I’m now regretting because my crotch is in his face.

I cover my crotch with my hands, feeling embarrassed. His eyes get big, and he looks up into my eyes with a mischievous smirk on his face. It’s like he can see how scared I am because his face softens as he moves to one side of the bench and motions for me to sit on the other side.

“Are you gay, Tobi?”

I look at him with harsh eyes. “Call me Tobias.”

He looks hurt by my harsh tone. “I’m sorry. I meant nothing. I’m very sorry.”

I feel bad for my reaction. I'm the one who kissed him... both times. Why is he apologizing?

"You shouldn't be apologizing. I'm the one who kissed you...twice! There is nothing you should apologize for. It's all on me. I'm sorry."

"There is nothing you need to apologize for. I wanted it to happen as much as I thought you did. I feel guilty because you look conflicted with yourself and with what happened."

"FUCK!" I scream, which makes the people in the gazebo look at me and snicker. They turn around and continue whatever they are doing.

"Are you okay?" he asks with concern enveloping his voice.

"I'm not gay...or at least I don't want to be. It's just I'm having strange feelings for you, and I don't know what they mean. I think about you all the time, and I think about kissing you and touching you. I don't know what is wrong with me."

I look into his eyes, pleading for an answer. When he smiles at me, I have my answer. I like him. I'm gay, and I like my gorgeous male professor.

"There is nothing wrong with being gay and there is nothing wrong with being conflicted with yourself. It took me a few years to accept I'm gay. It's hard, and I understand the internal struggle. Believe me, you aren't alone. You are truly something. You know that? I like you, Tobias. I don't know what that means or if that upsets you. I hope it doesn't, but I will understand if it does and if you don't want to talk to me or see me anymore."

“No! That’s the problem. The only thing I want is to be near you and feel your arms around me. It feels so right, even though it is wrong. That was my first kiss, and it was the best thing I have ever experienced. I felt that kiss with every fiber of my being. It lifted the weights that have been pushing me further and further into the ground. That kiss freed me from my eternal sleep. I want it...”

His lips interrupt my next thought, which is okay with me because the fireworks in my head explode. I feel like my dreams, ones I never dreamed existed, are coming true, and I never want to wake up.

Chapter Nine

LYING IN BED, I feel like I dreamt the evening's events. In reality, I have been in bed asleep all night and now waking up from the best dream I have ever had in my life. I can't believe what transpired at the party happened. With that final surprise kiss, my mind awakened to a brighter future; one without weights weighing on my heart.

I have been forcing myself to be something I'm not, putting my mental stability at stake. I feel good. I still have this gnawing feeling in the pit of my stomach of how I will learn to accept this part of myself, but there is nothing I can do about my feelings now. I have to take this acceptance of myself one day at a time. I can't let my fears stand in the way of my happiness. One thought shadows over me like a gruesome giant.

How will I be able to confess this dark secret to my parents and come out unscathed? How will my friends accept me? Will Matt worry I have feelings for him, which I don't. How will Cydney take the news? There are so many unknowns associated with this secret.

I'm afraid I won't be able to handle defeat or rejection. I feel like I would quietly die inside and lose myself.

The what-ifs associated with coming out are so vast and daunting. My world would collapse on itself if my family and friends reject my true self. I fear I would never recover, and my family and friends would never recover. My parents could kick me out of the house or disown me. My biggest fear, through all of this, is my family and friends may no longer

love me. They may see this defective alien that has inhabited their son's/friend's body. These thoughts gradually stack heavy weights on my heart, one brick at a time.

A tear falls down my face onto my pillow as I gently drift off to sleep with a heavy heart.

*

I WALK INTO history class Monday morning feeling so conflicted with the events that occurred at the party on Friday. I attended campus orientation over the weekend, and I didn't run into Gareth at all, which was a godsend because I don't know how I'm feeling about our make out session at the party and my bubbling feelings. Do I continue living my true self and risk my entire world falling apart, or do I dig a new hole inside myself to bury my secret? I fear the latter because I could sacrifice happiness for the rest of my life.

Gareth texted me Saturday morning, but I couldn't bring myself to text him. After our make out and slight groping session, we had a great conversation, diving into his own coming out story.

He knew he was gay from a young age, but he could not bring himself to accept it because he came from a very Catholic family. He had a secret relationship with one of his brother's friends for almost two years. The guy broke his heart and outed him to his entire family. His father kicked him out of the house, and his mother would not look at him or talk to him for almost a year.

One day, his mother called him out of the blue and asked him to have dinner with her and his father. He reluctantly attended the dinner still unsure if his parents' views on his

sexuality had changed. His father received a fatal liver diagnosis, sentencing him to a few months left to live. He and his father were able to reconcile before his father died about three months later.

After everything he told me, I feel bad for not returning his texts, but he told me to take time to figure out myself and my feelings because he knows how strong and difficult that inner battle can be.

I left the party feeling as light as air, but once left alone with my thoughts, I built up a temporary version of the wall that had exploded when he kissed me. Something to keep me comfortable as I sorted out my feelings and emotions.

Life is so fucking hard. I wish life came with a guide or map that could show me which direction I'm supposed to take and if that path leads to Gareth or away from him. I believe the universe fates people to meet for reasons unknown, but is Gareth a test of my strength and courage to remain straight or is he my white knight who will rescue me from the dark dungeon that has enslaved in for many years? Whatever the universe has in store for us, I hope no one gets hurt.

Class goes well, even with everything that is going on in my head and heart. I do my best to avoid his gaze every time his eyes land on me, but I still see the worried look plastered on his face. The bags under his eyes give away his lack of sleep, but he still gives one hell of a lecture on the American Revolution.

He is an exceptional teacher. I admire him. I'm attracted to his physical appearance, but his intellect attracts me. I feel a magnetism pulsing between our bodies, urging our hands to

touch the other's skin. I feel weak from lack of sleep, but when I catch his glance and see the worry swirling like a whirlpool in his brown eyes, I feel alive. I feel a never-ending need to comfort him and take his pain away.

When class ends, he releases the class and asks me to head to his office to discuss my work schedule. I make my way to his office door, feeling nervous about where this conversation will go and what I will say and where my head and heart are leaning.

I see him heading down the hall. He stops a few feet away from me. His tired eyes lock with mine. That's when I know exactly where my heart is leading and which direction I want to take because there is a reason the universe put Gareth on my path.

There is a reason, and he must be my saving grace sent to rescue me from myself. He is what I want and what I desire. I don't want to live a life filled with regrets. I don't want to sit on my deathbed, wishing I had lived an authentic life and not some sham I forced myself to live because I feared being gay. What kind of life would that be? Who knows even if I would make it to old age? Currently, I'm the poster child for depression and anxiety. I can't allow myself to get lost in my inner struggle, and I can't let fear decide my fate. It's about time I take fate into my own hands.

"Can you please open your door? I really want to hold you," I say with tears running down my face.

He opens his door and we walk in. I close the door and rush to him with open arms. As we embrace, I feel the same

feelings and excitement that appeared the night of the party. This is the path I need to go down. I know that now.

He gently leans out of our embrace and asks, “Are you sure?”

“Please, shut up and kiss me. I have never been more sure about anything in my life.”

As we kiss, my entire universe explodes into happiness. I feel the invisible weights lighten their hold on my shoulders. This is what happiness is like. This is what my heart has been trying to show me. This happens when you don't let fear control your life. This is everything, and I never want to lose this feeling and I never want to lose him because he has planted a seed in my heart, and I already feel our connection blossoming.

Chapter Ten

WE HAVE BEEN secretly dating for about three weeks now, and life is fantastic. We can't be affectionate around school or in public, but we have created a system and plan that works for us. When he isn't in class and doesn't have office hours, we have some make-out sessions and intimate conversations in his office, obviously with the door shut. This isn't ideal because we risk getting caught, but it allows us time with each other during the day.

Since I'm a virgin in every sense of the word, I manage to stop myself before the situation escalates to a point I'm not sure I'm ready to go. I have no idea how I stop myself from giving everything to him. As a sex-crazed college student, I feel like I have the courage of Captain America when all I want to be is the fucking Hulk.

We go out to eat during lunch and sometimes dinner throughout the week, but we always make sure we aren't too close to each other or talk about anything else in public except topics that seem appropriate for a teacher and his student. I have to remain cognizant of my gaze in class, so no one notices if my eyes focus too intently on his manly physique. This all may seem inappropriate to other people, but we can't help these powerful feelings we have for each other. When I'm near him, I feel electric and alive. Not to seem much like a cliché, but the heart wants what the heart wants.

As soon as we started dating, I felt this overwhelming urge to be intimate with him, but I've been too nervous to act on my feelings except in my own bedroom. He has been nothing

but supportive. He tells me he is in no rush to jump into bed with me because he wants to get to know me and wants me to get to know him. He says this is where he has failed in the past because he rushed into bed too rapidly, which caused issues. They would hit a point and realize they didn't know each other at all.

My reticence comes from my inexperience with dating and with sex. I'm a Virgin with a capital V. It's not like I didn't want to have sex with anyone or never had feelings for someone. I tried to force feelings for girls in my life. I never had the courage to pull the trigger on any relationship or romantic rendezvous.

Therefore, I have not ventured to his apartment. Never feeling comfortable enough, worrying I would rush into bed with him before I'm ready to dive deeply into the next phase. I have felt this hesitation for a while now, but when I wake up this morning, the reticence doesn't exist. I feel comfortable with him, and I know now I want us to be intimate together, so I text him.

Me: I think I'm ready.

Gareth: Ready for what?!

Me: Of course, you will make me say it. I think I'm ready to have sex... tonight... before I talk myself out of it.

Gareth: Tobi, are you sure? This is a big step for you and for me. I don't want you to feel rushed or obligated. I'm in no hurry! I promise I'm perfectly content with our relationship. I want you to be comfortable.

Me: I'm comfortable! I have never been more comfortable with any decision. I'm ready to take this

next step in our relationship. You mean everything to me and I'm ready to jump in!

Gareth: *Okay, but only if you are sure. How about we have dinner at my apartment tonight? We can see how you are feeling after dinner. If you change your mind, please don't think you will hurt my feelings. I'm not here to rush you. Also, you mean everything to me too.*

Me: *It's a date! I can't wait!*

Gareth: *It's a date!*

He responds with a heart emoji.

*

I KNOCK ON his door with a shaky fist because I'm nervous. I'm not scared, and I haven't changed my mind. I'm nervous because this is my first time, and I don't know what to do.

He opens the door before my hand even makes it back to my side, which makes me think he has been nervously standing by the door and looking through the window waiting for me to arrive.

“Hi!” he says loudly. “Sorry, hello,” he attempts again, blushing.

I chuckle and step into his apartment. “Hello. How are you doing?”

He closes the door and I lean in to kiss him. He kisses me, and I can feel him shaking.

“I'm nervous too,” I say, trying to make him feel better.

“It's just I haven't felt this way about someone in a very long time, so I want tonight to go well.”

“I know what you mean, and you are so sweet. I’m ready for this. Are you?” I ask with a big grin painted on my face.

“I am, but only if you are.” He responds with a slight emphasis on his statement, almost phrasing the statement like a question.

“Good, it’s decided then. Now, where is my turkey pot pie?” I joke, attempting to break the awkwardness.

He snorts, relaxing. “Well, I hope you aren’t disappointed, but I made chicken pad Thai noodles and some chocolate chip cookies. I hope that is okay.”

“Yum. Sounds delicious,” I answer while balancing on the balls of my feet.

As we walk to the kitchen, I notice a photo of him and his dad hanging on the wall near the kitchen entrance. They are hugging each other in an embrace that screams love. I can see how much they loved each other in that moment. I touch his shoulder and squeeze as he leads me into the kitchen.

A mischievous smirk spreads across his face. “Okay, I know you aren’t twenty-one yet, but if you want a glass of wine, you can have one.”

“Sure! I’ll try it.”

He pours me a glass, and I take a small sip. My taste buds explode. “Not bad. What is this wine called?”

“It’s a Malbec. It’s one of my favorites. I figured I should open a wine that isn’t too sweet and not too dry. Are you sure you like it? I can open a fresh bottle, if you don’t.” He looks at me quizzically, trying to decipher my reaction.

“I really do,” I respond with glee to reassure him.

“Fantastic. Now, shall we eat? I’m starving.”

“Me too. Let’s do this.”

He hands me a plate and with a horrible Julia Child accent says, “Bon appétit.”

*

“DAMN, YOU ARE a skilled cook, Gareth. You never told me you knew how to cook like this,” I state, patting my full stomach.

He chortles. “Thank you. I ordered it from the Thai restaurant down the road,” he jokes, giving me a wink. “No, I taught myself how to cook, so I didn’t have to survive on takeout or mac-n-cheese. I never wanted to be one of those bachelors who couldn’t fend for himself.”

“I guess practice makes perfect.”

He beams at me. “I guess it does.” He pauses, looking distracted before continuing, “Would you like to move into the living room and watch a movie?”

“Sure. What do you have in mind?”

“I thought about *Practical Magic*. I love Sandra Bullock in pretty much everything. Have you seen it?” he asks, gripping my hand and gently squeezing.

“Shut the front door! That is one of my favorite movies. I have seen it literally a million times. And I mean literally. It is such a good movie,” I say, returning the squeeze.

We head to the living room, and he gets the movie started and sits nervously beside me. I glance around the room, trying

to learn more about him without having to interrupt the evening. His living room is bare except for an entertainment center with a giant television, a couch with two side tables on each end, and two bookshelves filled with books and movies.

His apartment is impeccable, which makes me think he heavily organized and cleaned to prepare for this evening, or he likes a controlled, tidy environment. When the movie starts, I get the courage to lean into him, and he puts his arm around me, and I shiver.

“Are you cold? Do you need a blanket?” He pulls me closer.

“Um... no, I’m not cold.”

“If you change your mind, let me know.”

I’m nervous, but I’m enjoying this so much. I feel so comfortable in his arms. I’m ready to take the next step, but I don’t want to seem too pushy or eager.

As I watch Sandra Bullock and Nicole Kidman interact on the screen, I nervously think about how to make a move.

“Can we move to the bedroom?” My voice quivers when I ask, and I can feel my arms shaking from nerves.

“Um... sure. Are you sure you are ready?”

“I’m sure,” I respond with a flirtatious wink.

He grabs my hand and leads me to his bedroom. He sits on the edge of his king-size bed that fills most of the room. In the room’s corner rests a pile of books atop his wooden dresser. He pats the space beside him, so I sit down next to him.

“I’m not sure what happens next,” I say nervously. “I’ve never been with anyone before. I understand the logistics, but I don’t know how to proceed.”

“Nothing has to happen unless you want it to,” he responds, giving me a sympathetic smile.

“I do, Gareth. I promise you I’m ready for this.”

I slide closer to him and kiss his warm lips. He kisses me and seems to relax into my touch. I creep my hands down his back and find the edges of his shirt, lifting it over his head. He looks fantastic without a shirt. I can tell he works out because he has a developing six pack that makes me self-conscious of my inferior body.

He makes a move to remove my shirt, and I flinch.

“Are you okay?” he asks with concern in his voice.

“Yes.” I hesitate. “I don’t look like you do without a shirt.”

“I don’t want you to look like me,” he responds with a smile as big as the moon. “I also don’t care if you had three nipples and a tail. I think you’re beautiful, and I love you.”

I look at him, startled to hear those three life-changing words. “You love me?” I ask him shyly.

“I hope that doesn’t scare you. I have been feeling this way for a while now. Don’t feel like you have to say it. I’ve been ready to say it because it’s how I feel, and I like to tell people how I feel as soon as I know it.”

I look into his eyes and know with all my heart what I feel for this man. “I love you too, Gareth.”

He kisses me passionately again. He moves to take my shirt off, and I don't flinch this time.

Like I have dreamt for days leading up to this moment, I straddle him, which makes him throb underneath me. We slide further onto the bed. He flips me onto my back, taking control, which only arouses me more. His eyes passively graze my body, taking me in one inch at a time. When his eyes land on the bulge in my pants, he diligently catches my gaze with a cunning look in his eyes.

He leans forward, his lips firmly on mine. He must be a magician because his hands move, and before I know it, my pants and underwear are flying across the room. He removes his own pants and boxers, exposing himself, which makes my mouth water.

I feel laid bare to the world now, but I'm okay with my nakedness because the look on Gareth's face as he takes in my body makes me feel comfortable and safe. He kisses me gently. His lips make their way to my chest, lingering on my nipples, making my body tingle with pleasure, before traveling to my navel, and then... When his mouth surrounds me, I feel excitement like I've never experienced. I push myself deeper into his embrace, not wanting him to stop.

He makes his way back up my body one inch at a time, and I'm already breathless even though only a minute has passed. He kisses me again, and I can taste myself on his tongue, which makes me throb under his body. He leans forward, bringing his lips near my ear.

“Are you sure you are ready?”

I nod.

In response, he grabs a condom from the drawer of his nightstand.

I feel clumsy and unsure what to do. I start to squirm because I'm nervous. He grabs me tightly and whispers, "Don't move. I'll take the lead."

In a few brief movements, we are two humans morphed into one. I first feel a slight pain, which instantaneously transforms into euphoria.

I know now that if I had ever tried to be with a woman, the exchange would have always felt wrong. This is who I am, and this is who I love. We continue kissing, our hands pulling the other closer. I can feel his warm, sweaty body against mine, and I have never felt more alive.

God, please let this go on forever.

*

"SEX IS FUN," I say, full of exhaustion.

He guffaws, sweat glistening on his chest. "It is, especially when it is with someone you love."

I move closer into him, feeling safe and warm next to his body. I feel on top of the world. My eyes are now open to the life I'm meant to live. To who I am. I have never felt like this before. I have never felt so alive.

"How are you feeling with everything? Are you okay?" he asks, squeezing me tightly.

I can sense the apprehension in his voice. Like he might be worried I'm regretting what happened.

“I will tell you this once and only once. I will never regret what happened, and I hope you don’t either,” I respond sternly.

“I regret nothing,” he replies with the biggest smile, showing all his perfectly white teeth.

“Good,” I say pulling his arm around me.

I hesitate before I ask my question because I feel like I already know the answer. “I have plans with my friends tomorrow night. We are going to the movies. Would you like to come?”

He pauses and takes a deep breath. “That isn’t a good idea, Tobi. I think that will look suspicious.”

“But as far as everyone else is concerned, we are close friends,” I retort.

“I get that, but I don’t think people will see it that way if we go to the movies and on dinner dates regularly.” He gives me a worried look. “Besides, wouldn’t you rather spend your day and evening with me in bed? It will be fun.” He winks. “Ditch your friends and hang out with me instead. I’ll make it worth your time. I promise,” he says with a mischievous smirk.

I dislike ditching my friends. I have barely seen them in the last three weeks, but I’ve been busy with Gareth. We don’t get to see each other much throughout the day, and when we do, our schedules cut our time short. I have had limited encounters with my friends and my parents. I have been spending most of my time with Gareth when I’m not in class. I get home after my parents have already gone to sleep. I have

only seen them in the morning before I rush to school, and they head off to work.

I don't even remember the last time I hung out with Matt and Cydney outside of class. I feel like I owe my friends, but maybe this is what it is like being in a relationship. Maybe I'm supposed to spend more time with my boyfriend than my friends. I don't know how relationships work. It doesn't help that our relationship is different. Because this is a secret relationship, I can't tell my friends about him, and we can't go on a proper date in public. I'm so conflicted, but he gives me a puppy dog pout, and I'm sold.

"Okay, I'll hang out with you instead. I'm sure my friends won't mind." I can't help but feel guilty for ditching them, though.

"Wonderful. I'm so happy to have you all to myself. Now, would you like to sleep here tonight? I don't think I could handle you leaving my bed."

"Nothing would make me happier." And I know with every fiber of my being that this is true. This man makes me so happy.

"I love you," I say, meaning every word.

"I love you too," he says as he pulls me closer to him.

I'm in heaven.

Chapter Eleven

OUR RELATIONSHIP HAS gotten even stronger since we confessed our love for each other, which makes life so much better. It has been a long time since I have been this happy. I never believed happiness could be achieved. I always felt some part of me could never attain happiness because there would always be something weighing me down. I guess the struggle of one's own inner anxiety and depression is real and can hinder anyone finding happiness. But I feel like I have found happiness.

We have been dating for almost three months now, and I don't think the honeymoon phase is ever going away. Maybe I'm being naïve, but we couldn't be more in tune with each other. We make a point to always text each other good morning and check-in with each other throughout the day.

Since I work for him, we always see each other at least once during the day. We even have had intimate moments in his office in the evening. I don't think life could be any better or brighter. I keep some clothes and an extra toothbrush at his apartment in case I want to stay the night, which has been happening more and more lately. We lose track of time, so staying at his place makes the most sense since he lives closer to the school.

I have kept my grades up. Gareth encourages me to do homework when I'm at his apartment. He quizzes me when I'm studying for a test and lends me his laptop and printer to research. He grades essays while I write essays and study.

School has never been an issue for me. I'm finding my time with my friends and family more difficult to manage.

My only concern lately is that I have alienated myself from my friends and family. I have been so wrapped up in this blossoming romance I have failed to make myself available to my friends and my parents. I rush out of the house, barely sharing a hello or goodbye with my parents. My parents will send a quick text that always starts with "I know you're busy." Most of our conversations exist through texts these days, which sucks because I have always felt close to my parents. I worry they might start asking questions about what I'm doing out so late.

My parents have always encouraged me to talk to them, but I have always shown them what I think they want to see. Even if they were okay with me being gay, I could never tell them about my romantic and sexual relationship with my professor. They would never approve. It is easier to distance myself from them. Make them think college is keeping me busy and out of the house. This works for me. I converse with them through texts, so they don't worry, asking more questions about my life.

With Cydney and Matt, I always make an excuse to not attend a party, blaming homework and stress for my flakiness. The few times we have made plans, I text at the last minute to let them know something came up.

It has gotten to where Cydney and Matt have stopped inviting me to anything. This hurts, but I have myself to blame. I can't bring myself to confess I'm gay because I feel like they won't accept me. It might be easier to keep them at

arm's length than to show them who I am. It ensures no one gets hurt. Maybe I'm being selfish because I don't want to create confrontation. I don't want to lose them, but I don't see any other way than to push them away. I tell myself this is better for them and better for me. If they never find out I'm gay, there will be no awkwardness between us.

When I have made plans with either my parents or my friends, I typically cancel because Gareth asks me to spend the evening at his apartment or to go on a quick trip to the city. I can't tell them I'm dating Gareth since he works for the university. No one can find out about our relationship, or he could lose his job and I could get kicked out of school. I tell myself it is better to keep my other life at a distance. I worry my friends will cut ties with me if I keep flaking on them. I know my parents think I'm busy, but I feel guilty for not making time for them. I'm scared I might wake up one day and find out I'm stranded and alone with no one left to turn to, but I keep telling myself that at least I'll have Gareth. Nothing will take him away from me. I keep hoping I can bring my friends into my life without telling them all my secrets, which only gets harder and harder every day.

It is almost the end of the semester, and I'm getting nervous about finals. I'm prepared, but my anxiety never gives me a break. I have been studying day and night at Gareth's apartment, hoping I can keep my 4.0 GPA by the end of the semester. I know I have nothing to worry about. It's who I am. I'm a big worrier. If worrying were a superpower, I would be Captain Worry-pants, and my powers would be panic attacks and hyperventilating. Someone should turn this into a comic

series and movie franchise. It would attract all the people who suffer from anxiety.

I feel nervous about disappointing Gareth in class. Since he is my teacher and my boyfriend, I have this odd feeling every time I receive a graded assignment from him. Did I earn the grade? I shake this feeling off because I know he has and will always keep things professional in school. He would never give me a grade I didn't deserve. I know I'm earning my grades in his class. He would never jeopardize his teaching career, and I would never ask him to do that.

I'm in my bedroom at my parents' house studying. My parents are at work, so I have the house to myself to study. I told Gareth I would spend the week before finals at my parents', so I wouldn't get distracted, which he confirmed would be best for both of us. My parents have enjoyed having me back. They showered me with "we missed you" and "how have you been a stranger." I joked and told them college is crazy and has kept me busy. I told them we could catch up after finals, which seems to appease their curiosity.

I'm giving myself a break from studying when my phone buzzes with a text from Gareth, and judging by all the exclamation points, something is bothering him.

Gareth: SHIT!!!!!!!!!!!! I have a meeting with Dr. Richards in a few minutes. She sent me an email asking to meet with me to discuss some rumors she has been hearing around campus. We have been nothing but careful!!! We always keep things professional when in public. We never touch each other in public. FUCK, Tobias!

Fuck is right. What the hell. I'm freaking out now. What if she has found out about our secret relationship? I don't even know how to process this information. We have been so discreet. We keep things professional when in public. I've never run into anyone from school at his apartment complex. I think about all our interactions at school, but there are too many to consider.

Me: It's okay. It could be about something else. There is no need to panic. Go to the meeting. If she has heard rumors about us, there is nothing we can do. You just have to deny it. We can be more discreet. If I have to, I can stop working for you. We can still see each other in the evenings and on the weekends. There is nothing to worry about.

A few minutes pass before I receive his next text. I keep pacing around my room, watching the three dots appear and disappear and reappear again. I'm a ball of nerves.

Gareth: Okay. I've got to go. I need to head to her office.

Me: Good luck! Keep me updated. I love you, Gareth.

Gareth: Ok you too.

He doesn't say "I love you too." He only says "you too." I can't help but wonder what that means. Is he having second thoughts about us? Maybe I'm reading too much into everything. He is distracted and worried and stressed. He loves me. I know he does, but I can't shake this sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach.

*

I WAIT ALL afternoon, and well into the evening, but I still haven't heard anything from Gareth. I'm worried maybe he

got fired, and he doesn't want to see or speak to me again. If he gets fired, he will hate me. I know it. I think about going to his apartment, but I'm scared he won't want to see me if he got fired.

I couldn't stop checking my phone while eating dinner with my parents. They didn't seem to notice. My dad kept talking about a little kid who tried to shoplift a pack of gum at the grocery store, and how the kid's mom blamed the store for placing the gum in a location so accessible to kids. I'm barely listening because I'm so worried about the meeting between Gareth and Dr. Richards.

It's after ten o'clock before I receive any communication from him.

Gareth: *Hey. The meeting didn't go to well. Someone emailed Dr. Richards I have been dating a student.*

My heart falls. I can't believe this is happening.

Me: *Did she have any idea who may have emailed? What did Dr. Richards say? You didn't get fired, right?!?!*

Gareth: *She wouldn't tell me who emailed. I didn't get fired. She told me if the rumor is true, then I need to end whatever relationship I may have because it could jeopardize my future as a professor at the university.*

I'm reluctant to send my next text message because I'm worried about how he might answer the question.

Me: *What did you tell her?*

Gareth: *I denied that I'm dating a student. I couldn't tell her the truth, but I don't think she believed me. I feel royally fucked, Tobias.*

I can tell he is nervous and scared, but I have to show him I'm supportive. We can't let our emotions get the best of us.

Me: I know but we can't lose our cool. We have to be more careful. Make sure no one sees us together. If we have to, we can stay away from each other altogether at school. I can come over to your apartment on weekends or we can meet up out of town. We can do this. We have to be more careful, right?

Only five minutes pass before he replies, but it feels like an eternity.

Gareth: You're right.

Me: Is everything okay? You don't want to end things, do you?

Gareth: Yes, everything is okay. No.

His brief answers give me pause. He is saying he doesn't want to end our relationship, but I can't help but wonder if he means it. I feel this dread in the pit of my stomach, and I can't help but worry that like the semester, our romance is ending.

Chapter Twelve

GARETH AND I have agreed to limit our interactions, which have basically only occurred during class because I obviously can't miss class.

He told me a few weeks ago I didn't need to work during finals week. We must act like everything is normal, so no one gets suspicious of us. I would feel okay about all of this, but we haven't talked much since his meeting with Dr. Richards. The only time he ever texts me or talks to me now is if I text or call him first. I can't help but feel he is distancing himself from me to break up with me because he can't bring himself to end our relationship in person like a decent person.

I'm devastated, but I keep telling myself our end is all in my head and he loves me. He wouldn't drop me like that without an explanation. He has told me over and over he loves me too much to lose me. We have been so happy together, so why would that change because of this. The man I fell in love with, the man I put my universal faith in would and could not abandon me, could he? I gave up everything for him. I accepted my homosexuality because of him. I could open my life to happiness and love because he showed me the light at the end of my depression. The gates have been blocking my inner desires flooded open the moment his lips met mine. I don't think I could survive a break-up. He isn't the first man I have ever loved; he is the first person who I have ever allowed myself to love. Devastation doesn't even begin describing what I would feel if our relationship is over.

I try not to rush through my final in his class, so I'm the last person left in the classroom. He is fidgeting in his chair, not allowing himself to look at me. When passing out the test, he refused to catch my gaze. I kept willing him to see me, but he couldn't or wouldn't. He made a point to hand the tests to the person farthest from my desk.

Since the first day of classes, he made a point to start any stack of papers with me. How can the man I love and who supposedly loves me go from unequivocal love to a full lack of acknowledgement or sympathy? The man before me isn't the same man I met before school started. He isn't the man I kissed at the party. He isn't the man I gave my heart to. Who is this man? I don't recognize him no matter how many times I tell myself this is Gareth. I'm realizing this isn't my Gareth. This is a doppelgänger who has morphed into the husk of the Gareth I know and love.

After everyone else has already left, I finish my test before making my way up to the front of the classroom to hand the stack of papers to him. I fear what will transpire when I see him. Will he take me in his arms, or will he destroy my faith in our love? I don't know what I even want to say. I haven't been able to form a script or list of questions. I'm here on blind faith, hoping we can land on common ground. I hope I can find the words my heart needs to speak.

He can't even look me in the eyes as he grabs my test from my trembling hand, which sends a powerful jab of anger through me.

"Are you ending this?" I blurt out shocking even myself.

Without even bothering to look me in the eyes, he responds, “We can’t talk about this here, Tobias. I’ll text you later.”

He sounds like a robot void of emotions. I find my anger rising like a fiery inferno. Who would treat their loved ones like this?

“No, you won’t. The only time you ever text me is when I text you first and it is only brief responses, so I need to know if you are ending this. Please.” Pleading with him.

I need answers from this stranger standing before me. I need this shapeshifter to find his heart and explain what all of this means. I have never been through a break-up. I don’t understand what is going on or how I’m supposed to react. I know my heart is hurting and only he has the medicine I need to relieve my pain.

“Tobias, I need you to understand this is difficult for me. I care for you, but this relationship is jeopardizing both of our futures. Do you understand?” His voice trembles, but he still can’t muster the courage to look at my face.

“I understand it, but you aren’t answering my question,” I say forcefully.

He sighs dramatically before he continues. “Don’t you think you would be happier dating someone your own age and out in public?”

I’m shook by his statement. The idea of dating someone my age never crossed my mind while with him. Since we became official, I never believed our age difference would

cause a tear in our relationship. He has shown zero hesitation regarding our difference in age until now.

“No, because I love you. And you know I can’t date in public because I haven’t told anyone I’m gay.” Tears run down my face.

He still can’t even look at me, but I can see he is trying to fight back the tears forming in his eyes. “You have your entire life ahead of you, and you have your friends. You need to give up the charade and tell everyone. We all have to grow up, eventually. You can’t live your entire life inside one giant secret.” He seems enraged when he spits out the word secret.

“What does that fucking mean? Please, be honest with me and stop being an asshole. Are you ending this?” I ask fighting back tears.

“Tobias, I don’t know what you want from me. You need to grow up. Life isn’t all black and white. There is a lot of gray in the world. You are still a child. A naïve child. You don’t understand how the world even works. You live in this world like the universe is going to work everything out for you and where bad things don’t happen. You need to grow the fuck up.”

His words pierce my heart creating an explosion of emotions. Anger and sadness force their way to the top, boiling over and feeding the burning fire inside me.

“Fuck you, Gareth.” I fill my words with vitriol. I want him to feel the pain he is causing me. “You know nothing about me. I’m not some fucking child. I love you. I want to be with you, and I know you want to be with me. You love me too. You said you did.” I pause, thinking about what I should

do next. “What if we got married? Then, there is nothing they can say or do to us. What do you say? Will you marry me?”

This feels like my last-ditch effort. The last drop of hope escaping the pool of my emotions.

I get down on one knee and ask him the question again. “Will you marry me?”

He shoots his gaze to mine, with eyes filled with so much anger.

“Get off the goddamn floor. You’re acting like a fucking child. We could never work. You are naïve, and you have too much to learn about the world. You live in this fantasy world. Grow up, Tobias. The world isn’t a romantic comedy, so stop pretending it is. The universe didn’t bring us together. We happened to both be lonely and horny. That’s it. You need to find someone else who can give you what you want. You are looking for something I can’t give you. Stop wasting my time, and I’ll stop wasting yours. You are a child, and I’m an adult. I know how the world works. You don’t understand. You think I’m your white knight, which is pathetic and childish. Grow up! You’ll thank me someday for this.”

I stare at him.

“No, I won’t. You’re a fucking coward,” I say feeling defeated.

My breath catches. I feel the panic rise, and I need to get out of here. I get up and run out of the classroom and head to my car. I drive and drive. I don’t even know where I’m going. I have zero sense of direction. I know I need to get out of town.

Tears are flowing down my face like a waterfall. My hands are as white as a ghost, gripping the steering wheel with abnormal strength. My entire body is shaking as I do my best to stay between the dividing lines on the road.

I want the world to end. I plead for the universe to enact apocalyptic measures, so I don't have to face my inevitable torment. I need the pain to stop. What the fuck am I even doing? If I don't have him, what do I have? I have pushed everyone away for him. I devoted all my time and energy to our relationship. I let myself believe my world revolved around him being in my life. Now, I feel broken. I invented a clever facade, allowing myself to believe he made me whole.

I'm still driving, and the pain is getting to be too much. Why can't the world end? Why do I have to feel these things? Why did the universe bring him into my life to rip him away? My soul and my heart feel empty, and the universe chose to temporarily glue me back together only to turn around and break me into a thousand pieces, using a hammer to forcefully hit the nail deep into my chest, puncturing my heart. I can't do this anymore. I can't keep doing this to myself. I'm nothing and deserve nothing. I believed he saved me, but instead, he solidified my belief of happiness not being in the cards for me. Heartbreak doesn't even define what I'm feeling. I feel like someone ripped my heart out, feeding it to wolves as I lay there watching, feeling every sharp tooth rip into my heart muscle.

I can't keep on living this life. I'm exhausted and tired of the heartache. I can't keep on living. Period. My world is crumbling around me, and I have nothing to help me from falling into the nothingness. I'm forever broken because I let

myself believe I deserved happiness. I don't deserve happiness. I deserve pain and heartache.

I turn down a dirt road and stop the car in the middle of nowhere. I bang my hands on the steering wheel, screaming at the universe to end my misery. My eyes burn as tears escape their ducts, blurring my vision.

"Please, stop the pain," I yell. "I can't live like this. He was my world. My everything and you took him from me. Why? Why are you taking him from me? I can't do this anymore. I need it to stop."

I get out of the car and run into the field. An inhuman scream escapes my lips. I can feel the endless wash of tears flooding down my cheeks, but all I can do is plead for the universe to end this overwhelming agony.

I urge the pain to stop. "Why won't it stop?" I cry.

I don't know what will happen next, but I know I'm not sure if I want to be around to find out.

Chapter Thirteen

I GET THROUGH most of Christmas break, faking happiness when I'm around my parents. I have gotten good at putting on masks that make everyone believe I'm not broken and depressed. I worried my parents could see my devastation, but when they are around, I paint a smile on my face and pretend to be happy. I'm happy they are my parents. They are amazing parents. I feel empty and void of hope since Gareth dumped me. I felt personally attacked by our breakup.

Gareth turned into something I didn't recognize, something inhuman and unfeeling. He shattered me, and I don't know how I will pick-up the pieces.

My parents are overjoyed to have me around the house again. They have been showering me with hugs and asking detailed questions about my first semester. I leave out the part about me dating my teacher, but I give them skimpy details about school. My mom and dad urge me to talk about romantic relationships, asking if I have found a girlfriend yet, but I do my best to maneuver and dodge those questions with short responses. I know they missed me and want to know what their son has been doing with his life, but I have a difficult time faking happiness around them.

We are about to dive into the Gavin's Christmas Tradition of pizza, ice cream sundaes, and a viewing of *The Holiday*, which is one of our favorite holiday movies. We dress in our onesies. My mom dresses as a penguin, my dad dresses like Chewbacca, and I'm in a Doctor Who themed onesie.

I love this tradition and look forward to this time every year, but this year, I have zero energy. I do my best to converse with my parents, but I don't feel like my usual self.

“Are you ready for the Gavin Holiday Bonanza?” my dad asks, raising the roof.

“Dad, please don't do that,” I say, rolling my eyes.

“Why are you being such a sourpuss?” my mom asks, bringing the delivered pizza into the kitchen.

“I'm not being a sourpuss,” I say. “I want to make sure Dad remains cool and doesn't fall ill with Dad-Joke Syndrome. It can be deadly to a dad's comedic abilities.”

My dad guffaws and almost drops the ranch dressing container he pulled from the refrigerator. “There you are. I was wondering where my son the comedian had gone to. You have been solemn the past few weeks. Is there anything you need to talk about?” he asks with fatherly concern beaming from his face.

I pause and consider telling them my secret. I could blurt out I'm gay. Throw my gayness in their faces and run, not waiting for their reaction. I know this would brand me a coward and no better than Gareth.

The words are forming on the tip of my tongue, but I stop myself. I'm too afraid to let the words escape my lips. That three-letter word could end my great relationship with my parents, and I'm not ready for another heartbreak.

“I'm fine. I haven't been sleeping well. I also haven't been able to connect with Cyd and Matti. I think I'm missing them.” I evade my dad's question, but I'm not lying. I miss Cydney

and Matt, and I haven't been sleeping well since Gareth dumped me.

“Why don't you spend the day with them tomorrow?” my mom says, beaming. “Invite them over for a movie night or something. I know your dad and I enjoy having you crazy kids around.”

I smile warmly at my mom and give her a big hug. “I might do that. Thanks.”

We settle onto the couch with our pizza and sodas to watch the movie. I shoot a quick text to Cydney and Matt. I don't know what to say, so I start with hello. As the opening credits roll, I send a quick wish out into the universe, asking for my friends to forgive me.

I can't sleep at night. I have nightmares about Gareth.

*

I HIT A tipping point the next evening. I wake up hyperventilating with tears flowing down my face. I can't catch my breath. I desperately want this moment to end. That is when a thought escapes into reality. I can't do this anymore.

I grab my phone and make my way to the bathroom, being careful not to make any noise, so I don't wake up my parents. I place my phone on the counter and open the medicine cabinet, examining its contents. I locate my mother's sleeping pills and pour the contents of the bottle into my hand.

I sit on the toilet seat, staring at the pills. As silent tears drip down my face, I bring the pills toward my lips, but then, my phone buzzes and lights up. I glance from my palm to my phone to see a text from Matti.

Matti: I miss you...

Those three words shine up at me, providing me a glimmer of hope. I'm not ready to give up. I can't do that to my family and my friends.

I grab my phone and text Cydney and Matt, asking to meet up.

*

CYDNEY, MATT, AND I make plans for later that morning at our spot. I feel like I owe them an explanation. I may feel empty inside, but I don't want to be cruel and make them think I threw them away like Gareth did to me. They deserve better. I treated them like mere acquaintances and not like my best friends.

We made plans to tackle college together, and I abandoned them for a guy I believed I would spend the rest of my life with. I guess Gareth had one thing right about me. I'm naïve. I should have known nothing lasts forever.

As I get ready to meet them at our spot, I think about the fork in the road I almost traveled, and I cringe with guilt. I may hurt, but I never want to travel to that dark place again. I have been replaying Gareth's words over and over in my head, which has only dragged me deeper and deeper into my depressive state. The universe made me believe happiness could be attained, but it pulled the rug out from underneath me, turning me into one big joke. However, I know I want to live. I know I have to at least try to live even if happiness isn't an option for me.

I meet up with Cydney and Matt at the park by my parents' house. We chose this location because this is the park Matt and I used to play in when we were kids. As we got older, we would still venture to this park, eventually bringing Cydney with us for picnics or for something to do.

I pull into the parking lot and see both are sitting at our picnic table across the park beside the rundown tennis courts. I get out of the car and start walking toward them, wanting to turn around, get back in my car, and leave. Start a new life on the road so I don't have to face anyone. This would be easier and less emotional, but I owe them an explanation. I owe them something. I don't know if I have the guts to open myself up to more heartache.

As I walk pass the play set affixed with the slides, monkey bars, and swings Matt and I used to play on as children, I notice they are deep in conversation discussing their plan of attack or my intervention. They stop talking when they see me.

"Hi," I say weakly, not able to look them in the eyes.

"Hey," they both say at the same time.

We stand there silently for a few seconds. All I can hear is the cold air blowing through the trees. I have this dreadful feeling they may break up with me like Gareth did. I don't think I can handle another blow like that, but I deserve their rejection after how I have treated them.

Matt breaks the silence. "I've missed you, Woody."

I look at him and start crying uncontrollably. My body shakes as tears stream down my cheeks. I'm overwhelmed with emotion. This isn't what I expected to happen. I have

become an expert at hiding behind a mask. I figured I could do the same thing with Cydney and Matt, but they proved me wrong. Cydney rushes over to me and hugs me. Matt does the same. We stand like that for a good long while. The warmth from their bodies comforts me as I get my emotions under control. They let me go and move to the picnic table.

“What’s wrong, Tobi?” Cydney asks with concern in her voice.

“Everything has gotten so fucked up,” I blurt out. “I’m lost, and I don’t know how to find my way back. I’ve been so confused and depressed. I’m really struggling to keep myself afloat. I want to give up and sink until the pain stops.”

Matt has this stern look on his face. It almost looks like he might punch me. “Stop it, Tobias. Enough. Stop speaking in code. We don’t know what has led you to this place. Be fucking honest with us. We are your best friends. There is nothing you could say that would ever stop us from loving you and caring about you. We are more than family. We tell each other everything, and you abandoned us, and I demand to know why.”

His face relaxes some, but I can see the frustration spreading across his face. I guess this is it. I guess I have no other option. I can tell them my secret, or I can run away and lose my friends forever.

“I’m gay!” I yell at them. “I’m gay. I like guys.”

They both look at me with confusion on their faces.

Cydney is the first to speak. “Wait, this is why you have stopped hanging out with us and this is the reason for all the

radio silence? If that is it, I'm going to fucking punch you in the face."

Matt looks into my eyes. He must sense my heartache because he says, "No, that's not the only reason, is it? It's about time you tell us everything. I love you, brother, and there is nothing you could ever say that would stop me from feeling that. I don't care if you are gay, straight, or a fucking leprechaun. You are my brother, so what's going on?"

I tell them everything. I tell them about me meeting Gareth before classes started and how I felt about the connection with him. I tell them about my growing feelings for him, the complications that transpired when he became my teacher, and our encounter at the welcome back party. I tell them about our secret relationship for the past five and a half months, and I tell them about how Dr. Richards found out about our relationship, and how Gareth abandoned me when I needed him the most. I recite the exact words he said to me, which isn't difficult since the words have been playing non-stop in my head since the dreadful day. I explain what I wanted to do last night before receiving Matt's text. They listen to me without interrupting until I'm finished. We sit in silence for what feels like forever. As the cold wind slices through my coat, making me shiver, I wonder what they are thinking. Is this too much for them to handle?

"That fucking asshole," Matt says, killing the deafening silence. He spits it out with venomous teeth. "I will kick his ass for hurting you. Who does that to someone they love? He is a fucking coward, and he doesn't deserve you. You deserve better than him, Tobi."

Cydney grabs my hand and squeezes. “I didn’t know this was happening. I wish you would have come to either of us. We are always here for you. I’m sorry you have felt so alone and have been struggling so much.”

“No, I’m sorry, guys.” I feel my emotions rising again and tears fill my eyes. “I abandoned you because I was afraid of telling you I was gay, and I got so wrapped up in myself and Gareth, that I felt like there was no going back. You both deserve better. I’m sorry.”

Cydney pulls me into a hug. “It’s okay. We don’t care about any of that. We wish we’d known sooner, so you didn’t have to feel so alone.”

Matt chimes in, “Woody, you are our best friend. There is nothing that could ever change that. Our friendship is indestructible. Never forget that... again. Now, I have one question for you.”

“What?” I ask, looking at him with questioning eyes.

“Am I attractive? Because I have been striking out with the ladies.”

Cydney and I both lose our composure. Tears are rolling down our faces because we are cackling so hard.

“You’re not my type, Buzz. Maybe they can’t stand your lack of personality,” I joke, patting him on the shoulder.

“Ha-ha. You’re such a comedian,” he says.

We continue talking well into the evening, which turns into a sleepover at Cydney’s house to commemorate our reconciliation and for nostalgia’s sake. We watch horror movies and eat ice cream and joke around with each other

until around three in the morning. We are watching the original *Nightmare on Elm Street* creepy Robert Englund as Freddy Krueger when both Cydney and Matt fall asleep. As I lay on the couch, I think to myself maybe there is a way out of the darkness with my friends' help.

Maybe I can be happy again is my last thought as I drift off into a dreamless sleep.

Chapter Fourteen

WINTER BREAK HAS gotten so much better since I came out to my friends. Cydney, Matt, and I have hung out practically every day since the day at the park. They have been supportive, and nothing has changed between us. I feared the entire coming out process. I worried my friends would hate me or look at me differently. It scared me Matt would second guess any time I gave him a hug, thinking I wanted to get with him sexually. Nothing has changed.

Cydney and Matt showed me what genuine friendship is by accepting me and treating me like being gay doesn't make me a different person. I'm still the same Tobias. A rainbow flag waving ghost hasn't possessed me. I'm still their best friend and being gay doesn't define who I am to them or who I am to the world. Their reaction to my coming out makes me feel like maybe I can come out to my parents. I'm not ready to open that wound yet. I know I'll tell them, eventually. I need to know in my heart I'm ready to expose my parents to who their son truly is. I worry they will no longer view me as their son. I'll be some creature that has inhabited their son's body and sent to destroy the world they love and cherish.

For now, I'm happy my friends love me for who I am.

We have done so much and so little throughout the break. We have busied ourselves, giving me very little time to think about Gareth and our break-up. I'm still sad and depressed. I mean, depression never goes away. I'm finding more ways to cope with my grief. The more I spend time with my friends, the more I feel my spirits lifted. I don't feel as dark and twisty,

and I have Cydney and Matt to thank for this transition. They have been my rock and my support system for so long. I'm so lucky they forgave me, and we have been able to move past my abandoning them for a guy.

We are on our way to the city to go to the mall and maybe to the movies. I'm driving Cydney's car, while she controls the music, which has been mostly musical soundtracks. Matt is pretending not to know the words, but occasionally, I hear him singing over the blaring musical ballads filling the car.

"Woody, turn the music down for a second. I have an idea for our trip," Matt screams over Ben Platt belting "Waving through the Window" from the *Dear Evan Hansen* musical.

"What's your idea?" I ask as I lower the volume, secretly cursing Matt for interrupting the best part of the song.

I glance at him through the rearview mirror, and I can see mischief in his eyes.

"I think we should go to a gay club," he says with so much confidence.

I'm speechless for a minute or two. I look at Cydney, who has a grin forming on her face. "You want to go to a gay club?" I ask with furrowed brows.

He touches my shoulder before saying, "I want you to see how normal this is for Cydney and me. We don't care you are gay. You are our Tobi. Nothing more and nothing less. I don't want to see any exposed dicks, but I want you to experience a gay club."

I smile at him. "You know there is the gay karaoke bar near campus, right?"

“Yes, but this will be a trial run. You won’t have to worry about anyone you know seeing you, which I know you would worry about. You can let your hair down and enjoy yourself. Besides, I’m sure we can find a dancing club. I have to show you suckers my outstanding dance moves.”

Cydney and I burst out laughing.

“Well, I guess we have no other choice. We have to go, so we can see your lack of rhythm,” Cydney spits out between fits of laughter.

“You don’t understand. My dance moves will blow your minds,” he says as he makes an explosion with his hands, ending with a dramatic middle finger surprise.

*

AFTER A FEW Google searches, we find a gay club, called The Train Station, that will allow people eighteen and older.

The club bouncer, who is going for his best Terminator impersonation, standing with his arms crossed like a robot and not speaking, puts a giant black X on the back of our hands to show our underage affliction.

When we walk in, Matt’s eyes get huge. I’m surprised they don’t pop out. I follow his gaze to three half naked male dancers dressed in tight thongs and dancing inside cages. My eyes widen as I glance fleetingly away. I occasionally give the dancers the side-eye. I’m embarrassed for them, but they are fucking attractive.

Cydney rolls her eyes at us and marches onto the dance floor and motions us to join her. To be honest, I’m too stunned to move. I’ve experienced nothing like this before. Since I’ve

accepted I'm gay, I have dared myself to look at videos and photos online, but seeing half-naked men in public is one hundred percent different than seeing them online. Seeing them out in the wild makes them more real. I must pull on my big-boy britches and jump in. I don't care for labels, but I admit to myself these are my people. I have to experience a gay club at least once.

I give Matt a thumbs up, and we waltz over to Cydney and start dancing to the almost unrecognizable techno music, but we do our best to dance to the beat. We forget about the other people, including the half-naked men bumping and grinding beside us.

As we move to the rhythm of the beat, I feel my worries and sadness consciously drain away. I allow myself to enjoy the present. So much awful shit has happened to me in the past, but I can see a new beginning for myself. This time my friends will be by my side. We will support each other like we always have.

I'm feeling alive again as my sweat drips onto the dance floor. I look up and meet the gaze of a gorgeous older guy. Probably in his late twenties. He has short black hair and dark piercing eyes. He looks mildly dangerous in his tight-fitting, white T-shirt and dark blue jeans that leave nothing to the imagination. I scan him from top to bottom, moving my eyes toward his sweaty T-shirt, where I can see his toned pecks and chiseled abs through the drenched shirt.

I return my gaze to his face, and our eyes connect. He says something to a blond-haired guy beside him, who must be his friend. The blond-haired guy gives me a look and spansks his

friend's ass as the dark-haired, dark-eyed man languidly makes his way toward me.

“Would you like to dance?” he asks with an intoxicating and devilish smirk.

I should say no because I don't know him, but I want to enjoy myself. I want to embrace my gayness.

“Sure!” I say with a big grin on my face.

Matt and Cydney give me a thumbs up as they make their way to a different section of the dance floor.

“You're an excellent dancer,” he yells over the music.

“Thanks. You too,” I say awkwardly.

“You can really move your hips,” he says with a wink, making me feel wanted.

The guy seems intoxicated. I can smell the alcohol on his breath. He smells like sweat, beer, and a sweet cologne. I find the smell oddly comforting, even though I'm dancing with a stranger.

We dance our way into another song. Cydney and Matt are sitting at a table talking now. They occasionally glance my way, throwing air fives in my direction.

I'm enjoying myself. Moving to the music and the beat. I get into the music more.

He pulls me closer. I can feel his erection against my leg, causing me to feel uncomfortable and move slightly away from his body. I think he might have an ulterior motive other than coming to dance with me.

He pulls me toward him, grinding his erection into my thigh. He pulls my head into a rough kiss.

“Please don’t do that,” I hiss, pushing him away and catching him off guard.

He moves closer to me and pulls me roughly toward him. “Come on, baby. Don’t be a cock tease.” He grabs my crotch and I try to push him away, but he is stronger than I am. He is forcing me to kiss him, and I’m struggling to get away, but I can’t. I can feel bile forming in my stomach. This man’s fragrance is no longer comforting. It is making me sick. I want to get away from him.

He firmly cups my crotch and whispers something in my ear, but I can’t hear him. I give up. I’ve removed myself from my body because I can’t deal with him forcing himself on me. I feel weak and pathetic.

Matt comes out of nowhere and pushes the guy off me. The guy falls to the floor cackling.

“Don’t you fucking touch my brother again!” Matt spits at him.

“Whatever. Your friend is a fucking cock tease and a slut,” he says drunkenly getting to his feet.

Matt moves toward him with a clenched fist. Cydney and I grab his shoulders, stopping his pursuit. I feel the gaze of the other people in the room, which has gone silent.

“Let’s get out of here,” Cydney says, pulling Matt and me toward the club’s entrance.

We run out of the club and leave the parking lot as swiftly as we can.

“Thank you, Matti,” I say, shaking.

“You don’t need to thank me. That dude was an asshole,” he retorts.

“Damn straight. Who does that to someone?” Cydney asks.

“I don’t know. He was drunk,” I say, weakly.

“Don’t justify his actions, Woody. He was a douche. Forget about him, okay?” he responds, grabbing my hand.

“Okay, I will.”

There is an awkward silence for a good ten minutes when Matt chimes in, “Guys, I’m not gay but I have to say this. Did you see the package on that go-go dancer in the blue thong? I mean, that thing must be the size of my arm.”

Cydney and I bust out laughing.

“Dude, you are so gay. I didn’t even notice his package,” I lie. The universe blessed him with a horse penis.

“Shut up! I know you noticed. You and Cyd both turned as red as a cherry.”

“No, I didn’t,” Cydney stammers.

“Yes, you did,” I retort.

“Okay, okay. It scared me a little.”

This makes Matt and me chuckle even harder.

“Well, what do we do now?” I ask my two best friends.

“That club was a bust. Should we try another one?” Cydney asks.

“I don’t think I’m really in the club mood anymore,” I say.

“Me neither,” Matt says. “I’m shook by the monster penis and don’t think I could handle seeing another one.”

I snort.

“What about a movie?” Cydney asks while giggling and merging onto the interstate.

“Movie it is,” Matt and I both say at the same time.

*

WE HEAD TOWARD the movie theater. We buy tickets for the new Marvel movie, but I can’t focus on the movie, though, because my thoughts keep traveling to the douche and the club. If Gareth hadn’t dumped me, I never would have been in this situation. I would be in bed with him, feeling safe and warm, comfortable in his arms. This is his fault. He left me. I felt safe with him. Why did he have to screw us up?

I don’t know what I did. I thought he loved me. I thought I loved him. No, I love him, or I did. I don’t know anymore. I thought my life couldn’t go on without him, but the more time that goes by, the more I feel conflicted. Maybe he never loved me at all, and maybe I don’t know what love is or feels like. Maybe I confused our relationship with something more lustfully driven. The spark between us felt intriguing and fascinating, so maybe I put all my focus on that instead of forming an actual relationship with him, which made me blind to who he is. I don’t know what went wrong. All of this could be my fault. Maybe I’m too childish and too clingy.

His last words clarified I needed to grow up and move onto someone more age appropriate. Obviously, I didn’t get the memo soon enough. I don’t know why I danced with that

douche tonight. He was drunk, but I wanted to do something out of the ordinary for me. I guess I chose wrong, which has been happening to me a lot lately.

I shake off these thoughts because if Gareth hadn't ended things with me, I'm sure I would have lost my friends, and they would not know my secret. I would have still been in the dark and scared to tell them. Maybe all of this happened for a reason, so I could find the courage to come out to my best friends. I glance at them watching the movie. I'm lucky I have them in my lives, and I almost lost them because of fear and my stupidity. I don't know what the future has in store for me, but I know I will never take them for granted again. They are my family, and I won't risk our friendship again. They will always be there for me, and I will always be there for them.

I let myself relax to enjoy the movie with my two best friends who would travel to the ends of the earth with me. Gareth was wrong. I know what love is because I love them more than anything in the world. Gareth made a mistake. It's his loss.

Chapter Fifteen

WINTER BREAK IS ending, and I'm not very enthused. I have enjoyed my time away from school and not having to see Gareth. But most of all, I have enjoyed reconnecting with my friends. They are the people that complete me. They are my world, and I'm horrified to think about how I almost gave them up for a guy.

Yes, I may have loved Gareth, but the love I share with Cydney and Matt is different. It is stronger and more developed. They proved to me fear isn't worth hiding behind. They are the epitome of loyal friends. Our friendship has shown me what I felt for Gareth was in fact love and not some lustful crush or infatuation. This makes the break-up hurt more because I know I truly loved him. I owe them everything. So lucky to have them by my side, which is where they are when I tell my parents I'm gay.

"I'm going to tell my parents I'm gay," I say as we are playing Mario Kart in Matt's bedroom. "Tonight."

Cydney claps because she has been dropping hints that I need to rip off the bandage with my parents. She has mentioned over and over my parents will love me no matter what because I'm their son, but I still have this fear coming out will not go over as well with my parents as it did with Cydney and Matt.

"I know you are nervous but don't be. I know they will love you no matter what, Tobi. You are their son, and you have an amazing relationship with your parents some kids would kill for," she responds with an unwavering smile.

“I know I’m their son, but my dad typically turns the channel when a gay couple comes on TV, and my mom labels her coworker as her ‘gay’ coworker. What if that is because they find their relationships or lifestyles disgusting and deplorable?” I lower my head, feeling defeated. “I don’t think I can live in a world where my mom and dad aren’t in my life or don’t love me for me. I have read stories online and seen television shows and movies where parents kick their children out of the house for being gay. Garrard Conley’s parents sent him to conversion therapy because they believed their son had lost his faith. I know my parents aren’t religious, but I don’t want to end up in a homo-no-mo’ camp. I didn’t choose this life. Being gay is who I am.”

“Dude, everything will be okay. Do you want to know why?” Matt asks.

“Why?” I ask him, catching his powerful gaze.

Patting my shoulder, he responds, “Because Cydney and I will be there when you tell them.”

I’m stunned. “Guys, are you sure you want to be there? What if it all goes wrong?”

“That’s exactly why we will be there. For emotional support. If it doesn’t go well, which I believe it will, Matti and I will be there for you. We are the three amigos. We have to stick together. All for one!” she shouts.

“And one for all,” Matt and I say in unison.

“So how are you going to tell them?” Matt asks with a more serious tone.

I've been thinking about this for years. How can I tell my parents? Over the years, I have almost blurted the truth out so many times, but I always chicken out. I have allowed the fear of the unknown to keep myself distant from my parents. I know we are close, but without them knowing my truth, I'm keeping them from knowing their son. I know I can't tell them about my secret relationship with Gareth, but I can at least see how they will react to me being gay. If they won't accept me for me, I'll have my friends there for support.

All I know is that I must do this. I can't keep living a secret life and expect my relationship with my parents to stay strong. More and more lies could eventually create issues, and I think that losing our close, loving relationship because I'm too scared to tell them who I am is worse than telling them I'm gay.

"I'm just going to rip off the bandage like Cydney has told me to do," I respond with confidence. "They deserve to know, and I'm tired of hiding this part of myself from them. I'm hoping it won't hurt our relationship but make it even stronger. I was too scared to tell you two and look where it almost got me. A life without my two best friends. I don't want to wake up one day and realize I don't have an authentic relationship with my parents. They need to know who I am. I have been hiding from them because I'm scared, but I can't let fear dictate which paths I take in life. I know I'll end up full of regrets if I don't let my parents know the real me."

They both hug me. We sit there for a while and then Matt farts, which makes Cydney and I crack up laughing.

“Way to ruin the moment.” Cydney giggles, plugging her nose.

“I’m sorry,” he says through spits of laughter. “I have been holding it in this entire time. It just escaped.”

Cydney and I are cackling so hard we have tears forming in our eyes. I snort, which makes all three of us guffaw even harder as we roll around on the floor.

I seriously have the best friends anyone could have. I’m still nervous about how this will go, but with my friends by my side, I know I’ll feel stronger and more confident. Although, I’m still nervous to talk to my parents. We have never discussed homosexuality, so I don’t know how they truly feel. I have noticed certain quirks have made me fear their reactions, and society doesn’t help any. I have to pull the trigger. I can’t expect my parents to be perfect because no one is perfect. I’ll tell them I’m gay and hope for the best.

I glance at my two friends, who are still laughing. If I hadn’t told them my secret, I don’t think I would ever have the courage to come out to my parents. I hope they handle the news like my friends. Cydney and Matt didn’t even bat an eyelash. They love me for me and didn’t ask for an explanation or curse me for being me.

I hope my parents react the same way. Fingers crossed.

Chapter Sixteen

I TEXTED MY parents earlier after I talked to Cydney and Matt that I wanted to have a conversation with them that night. They both instantly replied they would cook dinner, so we could make the whole evening a formal affair. I let them know Cydney and Matt would be there, and like always, they replied with the more the merrier.

They love Cydney and Matt, so I'm hoping having them at the dinner will soften the blow. Maybe I'm taking the simple way out by letting my friends be there, but I haven't been able to tell my parents on my own. With my friends there, I think I'll be able to speak my truth without chickening out.

My friends agreed to let my parents and me talk. They won't interject unless they feel like they need to.

We sit down to eat, and my parents are looking like nothing is different because they don't know their son is about to drop a bombshell. They don't realize their little boy is about to tell them he likes guys. I told Matt and Cydney I would wait until after dinner to talk to them, which I'm kind of regretting because I'm so fucking nervous and barely talking throughout dinner. I'm also shaking and sweating profusely. I'm surprised my parents don't think I'm a drug addict who is going through withdrawals.

My mom made enchiladas, which is my favorite, but I'm barely eating because of the butterflies fluttering inside my stomach. Occasionally, Matt looks at me and winks, and Cydney will put her hand on my bouncing knee to help me relax. It helps, but I'm still a ball of nerves. I keep looking

from my dad to my mom, hoping they can see I'm gay, so I won't have to tell them. My life would be so much easier if they already knew I'm a flaming homosexual.

Life would be so much easier for so many boys and girls all over the world if a doctor could look at the baby they deliver and say, "Well, this one's a gay boy. Congratulations!" Or if we could have been born with glitter and rainbow make-up all over our bodies singing "Believe" by Cher. This would have made my life so much easier. This would make so many kids' lives easier if they didn't have to torture themselves by coming out to parents, to friends, to family, and to strangers. That's what makes this so hard.

Queer people have to come out all the time to relatives, coworkers, acquaintances, and even strangers. How will the person I meet on the street or my coworker or my aunt react to me telling them I'm gay and date guys? My life would be so much easier if my parents already knew I'm friends with Dorothy and a flaming homosexual.

"Matt and Cydney, how are you enjoying college?" my dad asks, setting his fork on his plate. We have been friends for so long they see them as their other kids, so when he asks, I know he truly wants to know.

"I'm loving school, Mr. G," Matt says. "I'm really enjoying classes. I'm still a B student, but I'm working hard, so I don't get too far behind. It helps that Cyd here calls me every morning to make sure I'm awake and don't miss class."

"Well, aren't you a good friend?" my mom says grinning. "It must be nice you have a friend who acts like your personal alarm clock. Why don't you use an alarm, Matti?"

“None of the alarm clock sounds wake me up. But when you have Cyd squealing in your ear, you can’t unhear that. Her squeal could wake up the dead,” he says chuckling.

“Ha-ha. You are so funny, Matt,” Cydney retorts, rolling her eyes.

We all have a pleasant giggle at Matt’s joke, which relaxes me a bit. I needed it. I’m so nervous and sweaty that I can barely hold on to my fork.

“Cydney, what about you? How are classes going?” my mom asks.

“Classes are a lot harder than I thought they would be. I was kind of expecting it to be like high school, but I’ve had to study and work a lot harder,” she responds, frowning.

I’m surprised by her response. I always believed studying and good grades came so easily for Cydney. It’s like I see her now. I can see the stress on her face. I guess I have been so wrapped up in myself that I haven’t taken the time to check-in with my friends. They have lives outside of me and our friendship, but I’ve been so selfish and a rotten friend. I need to check-in with them more often. Talk to them more.

I must have been so lost in my thoughts because Cydney shakes me.

“Huh, what?” I say, looking confused.

My dad looks at me concerned. “I asked if you were enjoying college. I feel like we haven’t had any chance to talk about your first semester because you have been so busy and spending most of your time at school.”

I stare at my dad. Not able to move or respond. I feel weak and somewhere else. I don't know what I should say. Should I tell them now or answer his question? My dad is giving me an opening. If I don't tell them now, I don't know if I'll have the strength to do spill my guts later. This entire process is much harder than I envisioned. I should run away. Send them a letter revealing my secrets to them. Let them read it when I'm not there, so I don't have to witness their reactions. I can't do that though.

This is it. This is the moment. I need to rip the bandage off. I can't stall anymore. I need to tell my parents the truth. I'm still their son even if I'm their gay son. I need them to still love me after I drop this in their laps.

Cydney and Matt both give me reassuring looks. I stare right at my parents looking from my dad to my mom and let them have it.

“Mom. Dad. I'm gay,” I blurt out.

Chapter Seventeen

I FEEL LIKE I'm in the eye of a storm where everything is quiet. I know there is a monster of a storm spiraling around me, but where I am, where the storm rests, there is only a deafening silence. Time has stopped, and I'm the only one not frozen in place. The moment of silence goes on for eternity.

As I sit there waiting for my parents to respond to my life-changing news, I think about this time when my grandma died. My grandmother and I were close. She struggled with diabetes for many years. I remember going with her to doctor appointments and dialysis appointments, sitting for hours and watching her get weaker and weaker. When she died, my dad pulled me aside and told everything would be okay. He told me God has a reason for everything. It surprised me because my dad rarely mentioned God. I couldn't understand why God would rob me of my grandmother. I explained to my dad how angry I felt, and I couldn't understand why God took her away from me. I cried and cried, but my dad didn't leave me or tell me to stop crying. He held me and let me cry. When I stopped crying, his eyes met mine, and he told me it is very important for family to always be there for one another. He told me no matter what happens in life he will always be my dad and I will always be his son and there is nothing that will ever change that. Love is stronger than anything in the world and can conquer anything as long as we believe and trust in each other.

I sit here now hoping what my dad told me years ago is true. I hope even with this news, my parents will love me and

accept me for who I am. I don't want to lose them because of being gay. This isn't my choice. Why would anyone choose this life? Who would make the choice to be gay? It makes life more difficult. It made me afraid and fear my family and friends would stop loving me. It made me feel like I would never find love because of how much I shamed myself. It made me angry and depressed because I hated myself. It made me keep secrets from the people I loved. I almost lost my friends because I feared coming out of the closet. No one chooses this for themselves because no one would ever choose a life filled with struggle and hardship. Life is already difficult, so why would anyone add more fuel to the fire to watch their world implode and burn to ashes? I hope my parents will understand and see that I'm struggling and I'm tired of living a lie. I'm so tired.

My dad is the first to break the silence. "What did you say?"

I look at him confused. Maybe he didn't hear me. Maybe I can take this entire admission back. They didn't hear what I said, so I can act like I had a fit and brush it off. We can go on with dinner and enjoy each other's company. I can go on living a lie, but I know I can't. My truth is out there. Free to roam around the room, and I can't bottle anything back up. I don't even think I would want to take the truth back. I'm so tired of all the secrets. I can't keep living this way. If I do, I think the depression might kill me or at least drive me insane. I have to be open and speak my truth no matter what happens. Even if my parents erase me from their lives, at least I honestly expressed my truth.

“I said I’m gay.” Cydney grabs my hand and Matt gives me a reassuring smile.

“That’s what I thought you said. Are you sure?” my dad asks. Sadness consumes his face, tears forming in his eyes. I’ve never seen my dad cry.

I want to comfort him. This powerful man has always been my rock. He jokes around with me, but he has never cried in front of me. I have always viewed him as a pillar of strength that is unshakeable, and I broke him with a few simple words. I’m kidding myself to think these words are simple. There is nothing simple about telling your loved ones you are a homosexual. This entire process is terrifying and heart wrenching because once the cat is out of the bag, you must live with the reactions.

“I’m sure,” I respond weakly. “I have struggled with this truth for a very long time. I have tried over and over to force myself to be straight, but I can’t be someone I’m not.”

I can feel myself shaking in my chair. I don’t know what will happen next, but I have to let them talk and ask questions. I have to force myself to respond kindly. I’m the one who is changing their lives, so I need to respect their concerns and even frustrations.

“What does this mean, Tobi?” my mom asks with tears running down her rosy cheeks.

“It means I like guys. I’m gay. I don’t like girls,” I respond with more confidence. “I’m not attracted to girls, and I never have been. I have always been and will always be attracted to guys. I’m sorry if you are disappointed or mad, but I can’t keep living a lie. It’s too hard and I’m too tired. I have been so

depressed for a very long time because I was scared how you would react if I told you. I have been struggling and fighting myself for years, and I'm so tired of the fight. I can't keep doing this to myself, even if that means you don't love me anymore." My entire body is shaking as my words explode from my lips.

I have been in hiding for so long. I have bottled up my inner turmoil, and now, there is nothing I can do to stop my words from escaping.

"Stop!" my dad semi-yells with anger in his voice. "Enough," he says more calmly, realizing how stern he sounded before.

I look at him confused. This is it. This must be when my dad tells me to get out of his house. No son of his will be gay. Not under his roof. I brace myself, preparing for what I feel is the inevitable.

My dad stares at me, tears escaping his eyes and falling to the table. "Just stop. I'm not disappointed or mad. I'm taken aback. I'm not sure what to say. I know I don't want this life for you. I see how the world has changed and being gay has become more accepted, but I can also see the negatives. I see how people struggle with being gay. I see news reports about gay people being shot in their own clubs. I see people attacked because they kiss their significant other in public because they want to be and feel like all the straight couples, and why shouldn't they want that. I have heard stories about diseases spreading through the gay community and that scares me, but STDs have become more mainstream; everyone can get exposed to a sexually transmitted disease no matter their

sexual orientation. I don't want this life for you, son. Life is already a shit show. I don't want you to have to experience extra hardships. You are too precious. Just yesterday, you were my little boy, and now, you sit in front of me a man. Where did time go?" He trails off.

"Honey, I don't think you understand how difficult this will be for you. You will have a hard life, so I want you to think harder. Are you sure you are gay?" My mom looks very concerned but not angry.

"Mom, I've never been more sure about anything in my life. I have been lying to myself for many years. I have been struggling with this because I was too afraid to tell you. I was scared you would disown me or not love me anymore. I don't think I could live in a world where you hated me or didn't love me because of this."

My dad pushes his chair back hurriedly and comes over to me. At first, I think he might hit me, but he pulls me up and hugs me forcefully. "We could never disown you or hate you because you are being yourself. You are our son, and we will always love you. Never be afraid to come to us. Yes, this is shocking, but this doesn't make us love you any less. I love you, son. Please never forget that."

My mom comes over to us and embraces us. "We will always love you, son. This doesn't change that. You will have a hard life ahead, but we will always be there by your side and rooting you on."

"Thank you, guys. I love you too." I burst into tears because what I have been fearing for many years didn't come true. My parents haven't stopped loving me. They have

embraced me with encouragement and love. This is the outcome I prayed for.

Maybe the universe isn't out to get me.

Chapter Eighteen

I WAKE UP in the morning feeling refreshed and more energized than ever. Revealing my secret to my parents helped lift the weight off my shoulders. I no longer feel like I'm hiding or living a lie, which makes me feel blessed. I'm very lucky my parents reacted well to me being gay.

Not everyone gets that when they come out. I have read stories about kids being beaten by their dads or kicked out of their houses because of who they are. Kids have killed themselves because they were so afraid of who they are. They let their depression consume them until they believed they were too far gone without a way out. I headed down that same path. If I could not accept myself, I don't know how I would have been able to handle the buildup of shame and fear. I feel for those kids. I wish their parents were different and could love them unconditionally. They throw religion and beliefs at their kids like sharp knives.

My family isn't very religious, but I understand religion should not be weaponized to demoralize or harm other people. Parents should love their children no matter who their kids are and without conditions. I feel lucky and blessed my parents love me unconditionally. I know they will need time to adjust to this new life of mine, but at least they love me and will support me.

I'm having trouble getting out of bed because my parents and I were up late talking. Cydney and Matt left around eleven. My parents and I talked about how I knew I was gay and what that meant to them. My dad even embarrassed me by

trying to have the sex talk. Luckily, I could stop him before he got into any unwanted details. We headed to bed about three in the morning.

They kept telling me over and over how much they loved me, which showed me I made the right choice by coming out to them.

I force myself to get out of bed and get ready for classes. Today is the first day of my second semester, and I'm feeling very conflicted. I'm elated to start my second semester, but I'm dreading seeing Gareth. I unfortunately have a class with him this semester. I enrolled in the class because the course is a requirement for my degree, but I also enrolled in the class before he broke up with me. However, I don't know if broke up is the best terminology. It is more like he ripped out my heart.

As I look back on the incident now, I see how cruelly he handled our breakup. He could have handled the situation so much better. He is the mature older guy. He blamed me for what transpired. I shouldn't have fallen in love with my teacher, but it takes two to tango. He is as much at fault as I am.

As for my job, I don't know where we stand. I never quit, and he never fired me. I wonder if he will still want me to work for him. I don't know if I still want to work for him. Therefore, I'm conflicted. I hope I can make it through the day.

*

CLASS WITH GARETH is awkward. He looks at every student's face except for mine. He won't even meet my gaze.

It seems intentional, like he wants me to know he can't look me in the eyes. Maybe he is ashamed of the way he treated me and can't bring himself to look at me, or maybe he hates my guts. This infuriates me. I don't understand what I did to deserve this treatment. He is acting like a child which is what he called me. I feel more mature. I feel stronger than I have in a long time. I know I don't deserve the way he is treating me. I think it's time we have a discussion. This has gone on for too long, and I'm sick and tired of his attitude.

I decide I will force him to look at me and talk to me. He doesn't get to ignore me after how he treated me. He doesn't get to act like nothing happened between us. He needs to own up to the hurt he caused me. He needs to see the hell he put me through. I deserve an explanation. He owes me at least that.

After class, I head to his office. He snuck out hastily, most likely hoping to avoid me. I will not give him the satisfaction. I will march up to him and demand an explanation.

He is sitting at his desk when I walk in and close the door.

"Please don't close the door," he says.

I think he truly hates me. I don't know what I did to cause so much hatred in him, but I don't deserve this. I have to know. I can't keep assuming without answers. It will drive me crazy. I need to know why our relationship ended so abruptly and why he is so angry.

"I need you to talk to me. I deserve to know why you treated me the way you did. You owe me that."

He looks at me. His face is red, and I can tell he is angry. Who is this man? I believed he was a decent man, but he

turned into a Mr. Hyde, filled with rage and void of compassion. I wish I would have seen this sooner, but maybe I was blind to this side of him.

“I don’t owe you anything. You are a child and right now you are acting like a child.” He spits the words at me, and I feel them penetrate my skin.

My anger rises like a volcano. I’m finished with this shit. He is treating me like I broke his heart when he chose to end things between us. He broke me, and I feel entitled to know why.

“And you’re a dick,” I spit out. “I want to know what happened. I thought you loved me. Didn’t you love me? I loved you. I think I might even still love you, even though I shouldn’t after the way you have treated me.”

“Just stop this. Please open the door. You can leave or you can stay and work, but I will not reward this childish behavior.” He stares at his computer without moving.

He is being so cold. It is almost like we never existed to him. Like every stolen kiss and passionate love session were a dream, and I awoke to a living nightmare. I don’t understand why he is behaving like this.

“Please, I need to know what I did wrong,” I plead. “I thought we loved each other. I thought we were meant for each other. I thought the universe brought you into my life for a reason. I need to know, so I can move on. I love you, Gareth, but I can’t keep pining for you if you don’t care for me. You are being so cold, and I never thought you could ever be this malicious toward anyone. I always loved how kind you were. I never realized you could be this hurtful.”

“Enough!” he yells, slamming his fists onto his desk. “I’m done. This is over. Not that I owe you anything, but I’m seeing someone. We have been seeing each other for a few weeks now. You need to move on. What happened between us means nothing and meant nothing. You need to grow up and move on. It was lust, and now, you know how I feel. You need to move on, Mr. Gavin.”

I stare at him with tears building in my eyes. He moved on to someone else shortly after ending things with me. I guess he is showing his true colors. “You never deserved my love. You are a coward, and I can’t believe I allowed myself to fall in love with you. You never deserved me. You hurt me and you still feel the need to kick me while I’m down. I didn’t come here to win you back. I came here looking for answers, and I guess I have them now.”

I stand up and head out the door. As I walk away, I think I hear him say, “I’m so sorry, Tobi.” But I can’t be sure, and I don’t care.

Chapter Nineteen

CYDNEY, MATT, AND I are sitting around Matt's basement playing Uno and drinking rum and Coke. I tell them all about my encounter with Gareth, and they both agree he is an asshole, showing he is a wolf disguised in sheep's clothing. They tell me I shouldn't waste my time with him, but I should take his advice about moving on. I don't think I'm ready.

Yesterday, I loved Gareth, and before the end of last semester, I believed we would spend the rest of our lives together. I guess Gareth may be right about me being too caught up in the romance. Maybe I live in a romantic fantasy. Life isn't all rainbows and unicorns, even if I am gay. It is more complex. Relationships take time and energy and commitment and honesty. Gareth and I couldn't put in the work needed to solidify our relationship.

I can't believe he moved on so rapidly. I don't understand how someone can say they love you one day and the next day they don't and are dating someone new. He isn't the man I believed him to be. I believed he exemplified warmth and kindness and honesty, but he isn't any of that. He is cold and cruel. Maybe I should take his advice and move on. He has. Why should I wait for him or let him take up any more of my time? I guess he isn't worth my time.

"What if you went on a date with someone?" Cydney asks out of nowhere.

I'm stunned by the question. I haven't thought much about dating someone else. I accepted Gareth would be my white knight. I believed the universe destined us for each other, a

façade I fed myself. Maybe I should go on a date and see where it leads. The entire evening could be a disaster or eye-opening. I'll never know if I don't at least try.

I look at her questioningly. "Do you have someone in mind?"

Her face brightens and forms a big grin, revealing her white teeth. "I do. His name is Alex Wolfe. I met him during *Little Women*. He played Professor Bhaer, which is the role you would have played if you had auditioned."

I had planned on auditioning, but I got so caught up in my budding relationship with Gareth. I kind of regret this now. I closed myself off to all my plans for college. I didn't join the clubs I wanted to, and I didn't audition for the musical, which was something I couldn't wait to do. By focusing so much on Gareth and our relationship, I failed to live my life.

"I think it's a great idea," Matt chimes in, giving me a wink.

My interest is peaked, but I'm still slightly hesitant about moving on. "Tell me about him." I relent, and Cydney jumps with excitement.

"I think he is the guy for you. He is nineteen, a few months older than you. He is a huge romantic, like you. We became fantastic friends during rehearsals. We talked about relationships, and how he is looking for a boyfriend and not a onetime booty call. He doesn't like the whole idea of sleeping around. He enjoys being in a relationship and sharing his life with someone. I told him all about you, and he can't wait to meet you."

He sounds great, but he also sounds like a dream, which is the same thing I concluded about Gareth.

I think Cydney sees the hesitation building inside me. She grabs her phone, enthusiastically scrolling through her photos before handing her phone to me. On the screen is a picture of a guy I assume is Alex.

He is gorgeous. He has light brown hair with dark green eyes that remind me of emeralds, and a face that looks like the universe saved all the boy next-door genes for him.

“You’re blushing,” Cydney says, giggling.

“No, I’m not,” I respond, turning even redder.

Matt gives me a thumbs up. “Dude, he is a good-looking guy, and he sounds great. What do you have to lose? I think you should at least try it. Just go on one date.”

Matt is right. Alex is a catch. He seems like a good guy. I’m scared, but then I think about Gareth already moving on. I should at least go on a date. At least that will let me know if I’m ready to move on or not.

“Okay, okay. I’ll go on one date with him.”

Cydney’s face fills with joy. “Outstanding! Give me your phone. I’ll program his number in your phone. He is expecting your call.”

“I think you pimped me out to some random guy,” I joke, even though I feel giddy.

“I want you to be happy, Tobi,” she replies, her tone growing more serious. “I don’t like how Gareth treated you. That isn’t what love is, and I don’t want you to think love isn’t

worth it. I don't know if Alex will end up being your boyfriend or your soul mate, but you need to at least try. You can't live your life in fear of love because your first love broke your heart." Tears are forming in her eyes.

"Cyd is right, Woody," Matt says, putting his arm around her. "You need to at least try. Maybe he isn't the guy for you, but what if he is? What if he is the guy that can help put your faith back in the universe and love? You'll never know unless you try."

I nod in agreement. "You both are right. Thank you."

They hug me, and we go back to our game.

I want to at least give dating a shot because I've never dated before. I'm not sure if I'm ready, but I tell myself it is only one date. I can be upfront with him about where I am in my life. I don't want him to get his hopes up. I want to take things slow because of my recently broken heart.

What have I got to lose?

*

I'M SITTING IN the coffee shop on campus, waiting nervously for Alex to arrive. This is weird that I'm about to go on a date with another guy so soon. I keep telling myself I'm ready. Gareth moved on already, so I need to move on too. Why should I sit around and become a spinster? That's not me. I will go on this date, and even if Alex turns out to be a dud, at least I tried. I will prove to myself I can move on from Gareth. I don't have to live my life forever in love with the first guy I ever loved. I won't let him control my life like that, so I'm moving on... maybe not with Alex, but with someone.

Alex walks in looking very handsome, like his photo. He has dark blue jeans on with a white T-shirt and a black cardigan with glasses that fit perfectly on his face. He looks like a sexy young librarian. He sees me and heads to where I'm sitting. I'm surprised by his smile, which is the epitome of kindness.

"Hi," Alex says. "I hope you haven't been waiting long. I got out of class later than expected."

"Hey. No worries. I got here a few minutes ago," which is a lie because I've been here for at least twenty minutes. The curse of being OCD and having to arrive anywhere fifteen minutes early.

He sits down across from me. "Cydney tells me you are a history major. How do you like that?"

"I enjoy it. I enjoy learning about our history and seeing how far our world has come. We can learn so many lessons from our past." His eyes light up, and I can't help but notice how beautiful he is. "She tells me you are a theater major. What is your favorite musical or play?"

"Hmmm... I prefer musicals because singing and music makes everything more enjoyable. I think my favorite musical would have to be *The Last Five Years*. Have you ever heard of it?"

A grin spreads across my face. "I have heard of it. It is my favorite musical too. The music is just so emotional and raw. It is a story of love, but in the real world. It isn't fluffed up to satisfy the masses. It shows how messy love can be."

"Wow. A man after my heart," he replies shyly.

I laugh at this, and I can feel myself relaxing. Maybe dating is like riding a bike. I don't know if Alex is the guy for me, but at least, I know Gareth wasn't the only guy for me. This dating thing won't kill me.

There is an awkward silence as we gaze into each other's eyes. Alex breaks his gaze, blushing slightly.

"What do you like to do for fun?" he asks with confidence.

"I love to read, watch movies, listen to music, sing, and dance," I reply, grinning because his eyes light up when I say sing and dance. "What do you like to do? I mean, I'm sure being a theater major means you like to sing."

Without missing a beat, he says, "I hate singing" before releasing a cute, breathy chuckle. "No, I love to sing. My mom usually has to tell me to be quiet when we are in public because I randomly start singing. I get a song in my head, and I lose control."

A rush of admiration crosses my mind. "I do the same thing. I love to sing. I think I have a decent voice, but it's not Broadway worthy or anything. However, that doesn't stop me from singing everywhere."

"Do you sing in the shower?" His face goes white and turns bright red. "Sorry, that is probably a personal question."

I giggle at his shyness. "It's okay, Alex. Everyone showers. Well, I hope everyone showers. To answer your question, yes, I sing in the shower. I like to pretend my shampoo bottle is a microphone."

His eyes twinkle. "Thanks for rolling with my blunt shower talk. I'm nervous. It has been a while since I have been

on a date. Plus, you are cute, and that makes me nervous.”

It’s my turn to blush. Alex is wonderful. He seems like the opposite of Gareth. He isn’t confident, but I can tell he is genuine.

“I’m nervous, too,” I respond warmly. “I had a guy break-up with me recently. I thought he was a nice guy, but he turned out to not be a good guy. Cydney encouraged me to go on a date, so I don’t give up on romance.” I pause and watch him contemplate my words. I can’t help but wonder what he is thinking. “I’m glad I came though. You seem nice, and I think you are cute too.”

This brings a grin to his face. “Let’s take it slow. I’m not in any rush. I want to get to know you. If you find it is too difficult, I’ll understand. I know what heartbreak feels like, and I’d never want to push anyone if they weren’t ready.”

“Thank you,” I reply.

We talk for what only seems like an hour, but when the waitress comes to our table to tell us they are closing, we realize we have been there for almost five hours. We laugh and make jokes about how time got away from us and how time flies when you’re having fun. And to be honest, I had a great time. Alex is a great guy. I like him so much I ask him on a second date.

Maybe he is what I need. Maybe the universe is giving me a re-do. To be honest, I didn’t think about Gareth, and as I head home, the only guy on my mind is Alex and how much he made me laugh. Maybe the universe has a reason for everything. I have to see where this road leads.

Chapter Twenty

I MADE PLANS to see Alex again this weekend, and I'm elated. We have already been on lunch and dinner dates throughout the week. I'll be meeting him in about an hour at the movies to watch a special showing of the original *West Side Story*.

I feel more relaxed around him than I did with Gareth. I feel like I can be myself, and I don't have to act more sophisticated. Perhaps Gareth breaking up with me is a good thing. I won't have to hide my relationship with Alex because I'm out to my parents and friends, and he isn't my teacher. I think that already puts two check marks in his "pro" boxes.

Alex and I enjoyed getting to know each other and couldn't wait for date number two.

He told me he had an ex-boyfriend back home that broke up with him right before his senior prom because he didn't want to put off their inevitable breakup since they would go to different colleges. Over the summer break, he found out the ex-boyfriend had already started seeing someone he met at a college visit before he broke up with Alex. He felt devastated, but he also relieved because he didn't need to waste too many emotions on someone who didn't care for him the way he did. I told him more about my ex-boyfriend, leaving out the professor details, but giving him a few details of what he put me through and how he moved on a week after we broke up. Alex and I connected over the fact we both are romantics and had two boys who were not worth our time.

I arrive at the theater significantly early, and Alex is patiently waiting outside for me with a small box in his hands. He probably wanted to beat me to the theater because I always arrive early to everything.

“What’s in the box?” I ask, glancing at his hands.

He hands me the box with a mischievous smirk. I hesitantly open the box and inside is an arrowhead. With tears forming in my eyes. I look up at him and back at the meaningful totem in my hands.

On our first date, I told him about my grandmother, and the story she told me about when she first met my grandfather. They were on a school field trip their senior year of high school. My grandfather may have been new to the school, but he had caught my grandmother’s eye. They were exploring a geological dig to see if they could locate various rocks; they were studying in their science class. She noticed a rock on the ground. She bent over to pick up the rock, but as she did, her head bumped my grandfather’s head. She held the rock, shaped like an arrow with the tip pointing toward my grandfather, in her hand. He told her the arrowhead tip’s direction determines your soulmate. She knew he was using the cheesiest pickup line, but his eyes were so kind that she said she fell instantly.

When I glance at the arrowhead in the box, the tip is pointing toward Alex. I peer into his face and see nothing but kindness in his eyes, and I melt.

“Thank you.” Tears fill my eyes. “No one has ever done something this thoughtful for me before.”

He holds out his hand for me. I grab hold of his but stand there. I decide. I can't let fear stop me from living my life. Even if Alex breaks my heart, I break his heart, or we end things amicably, I can't be too scared to experience life and everything the universe places on my path. I pull him closer to me and kiss him lightly, but enough he knows how much I appreciate his gift.

"Our first kiss," he says with a smile. "That was perfect."

"Yes, it was." I squeeze his hand, and we make our way into the theater. I like this guy. He makes me feel different than I have ever felt before. I feel like he sees me. I like that feeling. I can't wait to see where this leads.

*

ALEX AND I are sitting at the ice cream parlor enjoying a shared brownie hot fudge sundae. And life couldn't be better. I'm relaxed around him, and my mind hasn't wandered to Gareth the entire evening, which is an improvement. During our date, I'm only thinking about Alex and how much he makes me laugh.

"Okay, please tell me you have seen *Wicked*. Or at least heard the music," he says with questioning eyes.

"I have. It is probably my second favorite musical of all time. "Defying Gravity" is like my anthem," I reply.

"Same. All the music is so emotional and strong. I know there are thousands of other brilliant shows out there, but I can't get enough of *Wicked*."

I chuckle and give him an exaggerated wink.

Our date has been going great. We had originally only planned for the movie, which led to dinner, which led to ice cream. I love being able to go on a public date with a guy, and not have to meet secretly in a classroom, apartment, closet, elevator, whatever. I feel so open, and Alex is making me happy.

“What is your favorite kind of ice cream?” he asks, eating a spoonful of ice cream and brownie.

“I think mint chocolate chip or rocky road,” I respond.

He swallows before responding. “Good choices. I probably would say this is my favorite ice cream.” He chuckles.

His laugh is intoxicating. I love the way his entire face moves with laughter and his body jumps with each spurt of laughter. He is very cute, and I like him a lot.

I want to continue our date so I ask, “I was thinking we should continue our date even later. What do you think?”

A grin forms on his face, spreading wide and revealing his pearly whites. “I would love to continue our date. I’m not ready to go home yet.”

“Good. I’m not ready to end it yet either. I’m happy you agree.” I place my hand on his hand. He wraps his hand around mine and gently squeezes.

“What would you like to do?” he asks enthusiastically.

“I was thinking about heading to the park. Maybe we could walk around the lake. I love it out there at night. It is so quiet, and I think it will be romantic since you will be there with me.”

This makes his cheeks turn bright red, which makes me giggle.

Alex is such a wonderful guy. I feel so comfortable with him. I don't feel like I have to be someone I'm not. I can be Tobias Gavin, and he likes me for me. It doesn't take any work. I don't have to hide with him. I want to take the next step. Maybe enter into boyfriend status. I don't think about Gareth as much anymore. When I go home, I think about Alex as I drift into slumber land. He makes me feel needed and important. Something I haven't felt since Gareth ended our relationship. I never expected I would get here, especially so eagerly.

"I like you, Alex. I think you and I should...." I pause, losing my train of thought when I hear the door to the ice cream parlor open. I glance up out of habit, and my heart stops.

I must look like I see a ghost because Alex gives me a worried look.

"Are you okay?" he asks with genuine concern.

My eyes meet Gareth's gaze as he walks in through the door with a guy who must be his new boyfriend. He stops for a second, leans into the unknown man, whispers something and snickers. I can't breathe. I want to crawl in a hole and never come out.

They make their way to a table right behind us, which I think is a dick move on his part because Alex and I are the only people here, so he is intentionally sitting behind us to mess with me. Gareth is being very affectionate with this guy

—too affectionate, which makes me think he is performing to get a rise out of me.

Alex turns and sees Gareth, and when he turns to face me, I can see he has discovered my secret. He doesn't get upset or awkward. He grabs my hand, looks me in the eyes, and gently says, "Let's get out of here. This place has gotten very crowded."

"Umm. Yes, sounds good," I reply weakly.

As we stand up to leave, I hear Gareth's say, "Oh, Tobias, I didn't see you there. How are you doing?"

I freeze. Unsure of what I should do. I turn haltingly and practically whisper my response because my strength has leaked from my body. "I'm fine, and how are you?"

I feel exposed. Seeing Gareth has thrown me, and I'm not sure how to proceed with this situation. I don't want to be here anymore. Why is he even bothering me now? He didn't show any signs of wanting to talk to me until he noticed Alex when we were leaving.

"And who is this with you?" Gareth asks, firmly.

Alex doesn't even hesitate. He holds out his hand. "I'm Alex. And you are Professor David, right?"

Gareth looks surprised. "Um, yes, that's me. What are you two doing this evening?"

I can't seem to form words, but Alex is covering for me because he can see how uncomfortable I am. "We were out on a date, and we thought we would get some ice cream."

A flash of anger goes over Gareth's face. He says with anger in his voice, "Ah, isn't that sweet, but I was asking Tobias, not you."

That's when I get my courage back. No one will treat Alex like that. "Well, Mr. David. I was thinking about what we would do next on our date. I'm not sure what drove a stick up your ass, but I think a teacher should know not to talk to a student like that. Now, if you'll excuse us, my boyfriend and I have other plans. Have a good night."

At the word boyfriend, Gareth flinches, and I can see the sadness in his eyes. But after the way he treated Alex, I couldn't care less. Alex and I turn to leave.

When we are outside, Alex stops and stands there looking at me.

"I need to ask you something before tonight continues," he says hesitantly. "Is Professor David your ex-boyfriend?"

I'm worried about how he will react, but I want to be honest with him. "Yes, but I hope that won't affect our relationship."

"Before I answer that, I have another question for you." He looks at me intensely. "Did you mean to call me your boyfriend or did you say that to hurt him? I'll understand if it's the latter, but I can't have someone use me like that."

I give him a big smile because I know I'm saying this honestly and with all my heart. "I said it because I would like us to be boyfriends. I hope that is how you feel too, and I hope I didn't jump the gun."

He leans in and kisses me.

We head toward the movie theater to get our cars. I take his hand in mine as we walk. And I couldn't be happier.

Chapter Twenty-One

AS WE DRIVE to the park, I'm filled with so much joy and excitement. I have a boyfriend—a public boyfriend. I'll be able to go on dates with him in public. I can kiss him or hold his hand without any issues. I'm so happy I met Alex. I can't believe I hesitated when Cydney told me about him. All of that seems like forever ago.

Alex is following me as I drive toward the park. I pull into a parking spot near the playground area of the park which is the closest to the lake. It is 10:35 PM, so there is hardly anyone at the park. It almost feels like we have the entire lake to ourselves.

I get out of my car and open Alex's door, extending my hand to him, which I know is cheesy, but I can't help myself. He grabs hold of my hand, and we hold hands as we head toward the walking path.

We walk in silence for a good while, breathing in the cool night air. There is a slight breeze that gently ruffles Alex's hair. I move closer to him. My hand is getting very sweaty, but I don't want to stop touching him. I adjust my hand, interlocking our pinkies.

“Would you like to play a game?” I ask nervously.

“Um, sure. What kind of game?”

“Well, I thought we could strip to our birthday suits and run through the park.” I pause and see him blush. “I'm kidding. I play this game with people I want to learn more about. It is simple. I call it the question game. You ask a

question and I ask a question. We go back and forth until we tire of playing or we learn every deep, dark secret about the other person.”

“Well, you almost got to see me naked, but you decided to play a silly question game. Your loss,” he says with a wink and it’s my turn to blush. “Okay, I’ll start. Hm. What is your favorite color?”

“Starting things slow. I like it. My favorite color is blue. I forgot to mention you have to think of your own question. You can’t piggyback on someone’s question. Okay, who is your favorite band or singer?”

“I would probably have to go with Panic at the Disco! or P!nk,” he responds, gently squeezing my pinkie.

“Nice! I like both,” I say, returning the squeeze.

“What is your biggest fear?” he asks confidently.

We walk in silence for a second as I contemplate my answer. “Well, I despise spiders, but I think I fear the unknown. I get in my head a lot and my anxiety makes me worry about all the what ifs that exist in the world. Sometimes, it can be overwhelming.”

He pulls me into him as we walk, our hips gently bumping. “I understand that. Life is screwy sometimes. However, I think it is important to have people in your life you can lean on when life gets to be too much. I have struggled with anxiety, but I get through the tough times by talking to people.” He pauses, taking a breath before continuing. “I hope I can be that person for you. I feel you are becoming that person for me.”

I stop, pulling him into a warm embrace. “Thank you, Alex. I think you could be that person for me.”

“I’m happy to hear that,” he mumbles.

“My turn,” I say as we start walking again. “Where do you see yourself in five years?”

“Well, I would eventually like to end up on Broadway, but I know every theater major wants to perform on Broadway. I’m realistic. If I make it, I make it. I want to perform. I don’t care where I end up as long as I get to perform on a theater stage. I’m thinking about going after my master’s degree before pursuing a theater role. If I get my master’s degree, I could become a teacher and perform in community theaters. I would be content with that.”

I am in awe of him. He is so humble and ambitious. He doesn’t have one plan he has to stick to. He’s prepared for the curve balls the universe might throw his direction. I admire him.

“What is your favorite book?” he asks as we stroll under a bridge.

“That’s hard,” I reply. “I think it changes. I read all the time. I like to escape. I enjoy Neil Gaiman. *Neverwhere* and *The Graveyard Book* are fantastic reads. I recently read *We Are the Ants* and *The Five Stages of Andrew Brawley* by Shaun David Hutchinson. I have read nothing so real and emotional. He writes such complex characters that are so realistic. I can’t put his stuff down. I also recently read *Call Me by Your Name*. That book was lovely and heartbreaking. I also read *The House in the Cerulean Sea* and *Under the Whispering Door* by T.J. Klune. Both are works of art. I’ve become the biggest fan

of Klune.” I stop myself because I could keep going. “Sorry. I could talk about books all night.”

He laughs. “I like it. You have given me some books to add to my Goodreads list.”

“You have a Goodreads account?” I ask getting out my phone. “I will follow you right now.”

This makes him chuckle again.

“Okay, I’ve added you, but I’ll stalk your reading list later,” I say grinning. “I think it’s my turn. Hmm. How did your coming out go?”

“It went well. My mom told me she already knew I was gay, so she had already come to terms with it. It took my dad a while, but he came around. He could see how happy I was after I told them. He realized how much stress it had caused me before coming out. They have been supportive and accepting. They occasionally go to PFLAG meetings. I was very lucky.” He beams, and I can tell how happy he is.

“I was lucky too. My parents didn’t react the way I feared they would. They embraced me, and I feel like it has improved our relationship because I’m not hiding anymore.”

I know other kids aren’t as lucky as Alex and I were. I have to be thankful my parents and his parents accept us for who we are.

“My turn. What is the craziest thing you have ever done?” he asks with a mischievous smirk.

“Wow! You’re getting ballsy, aren’t you? When my friends and I were in high school, we filmed ourselves doing stupid shit around town. One time, we came to the park and tipped a

porta-potty over. I'm sure there is still a video of us, which I hope never gets out because I'm sure there is a big fine for doing something like that."

"That's crazy. It would have sucked if someone was in there when you did it." He chortles.

I snort and blush. He smiles at me like I did the cutest thing on the planet.

"How many guys have you dated?" I ask him.

"Two. Not counting you. I dated this boy at church camp for like two weeks, so that probably doesn't really count, and I dated my ex, Aaron... My turn. How many guys have you dated?"

"No piggy backing, mister," I say jokingly. "But I'll let it slide. One guy besides you."

"Professor David?" he asks hesitantly.

"Yes," I say weakly.

"Do you mind if I ask about that? You totally don't have to talk about it if you don't want to and don't worry because I won't say anything."

"I know you won't. I trust you." He leans into me and grips my hand again, giving it an affectionate squeeze. "What would you like to know?"

"How long were you in a relationship?" He questions.

"Almost four months. He dumped me during finals week."

"I'm sorry. Are you still in love with him? You don't have to answer if you don't want to."

I stop walking, and our hands slip from each other. He turns around and looks at me sadly. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked that. I have no right."

I look into his eyes and gently say, "You have every right to know the answer to that question." I look down at my feet as if my feet will give me the answer I need. I could lie to him and tell him I have never thought about that before, but I can't do that. I don't want to lie to him. He deserves an answer. I can be honest with him about everything.

"I have thought about this for a long time, especially after he dumped me. I existed in a dark place, and I considered killing myself. Not because of him. I had this weight on my shoulders, weighted down by my fear of being gay and being isolated from my family. It depressed me for so many years because I couldn't accept the fact that I'm gay. When he broke up with me, it was like the cherry on top. He cruelly eradicated our relationship; the complete opposite of when we first met. He called me naïve and immature because I wanted to save our love and relationship. He made me feel like a piece of ass he fucked to see if he could. Like our relationship meant nothing. Like he didn't tell me he loved me every day, and I guess he started dating someone new a week after he dumped me. When I confronted him after break because I felt like I deserved an answer and closure, he heartlessly blew me off. It's almost like he morphed into a monster overnight."

I take a breath. I feel like I had been holding my breath this entire time and I continue, "To answer your question and to be honest with you because I want you to trust me, I think a part of me loves him and will always love him because he is my first love. He will always be my first everything. First kiss,

first boyfriend, first love, first sexual experience, but I can honestly say I'm not in love with him. He lost the privilege because of the way he treated me. His true colors are ugly, and I never want to experience that again." We are silent for what seems like a lifetime, so I break the silence. "I'll understand if you decide I have too much baggage. I won't hold it against you."

"I don't think you have too much baggage. What kind of person would I be if I dumped you because you have a past, and your ex-boyfriend broke your heart? That would be shitty of me. I'm so sorry he put you through all of that. I can't imagine what you went through. He should know better than to treat someone like that. He is an asshole, and he never deserved your kindness or your love. He lost that right when he stomped on your heart and left you to pick up the pieces. You are kind and caring. You are smart and witty. Your sarcasm is on point." He chuckles before adding, "You are fucking gorgeous, and he is the stupidest man on the fucking planet for letting you go. I have to say I may be selfish because a part of me is happy he did, not because of what you went through, but because it led you to me."

His words fill me with so much warmth and comfort. I rush toward him and give him a bear hug. I lift my head until we are face to face, and I kiss his big, beautiful lips. He kisses me with so much passion I feel my body explode with exhilaration. He is more than I ever expected he would be. I never expected to find someone like him. I didn't even believe that I deserved someone like him after what Gareth said about me. I felt like I would never find happiness because I didn't deserve to be happy. Alex proved all that wrong. I can see a

whole new me on the horizon. And he did that. He makes me feel like I'm worthy of love and happiness. I think to myself, *thank you universe, for bringing me Alex.*

Chapter Twenty-Two

“WHAT ARE YOU so happy about lately, Tobi?” my dad asks as we eat breakfast the next morning.

I got home late, and my parents were fast asleep. I tossed and turned all night because of all my giddy energy. As I sit here with my parents, eating eggs and bacon, I can't keep the smile from my face even though I only got about two hours of sleep.

“I don't know what you're talking about.” Another grin spreads across my face. I can't stop. Alex has me all aflutter and ecstatic. I feel alive again.

“There it is again.” My dad responds by pointing at my smiling face. “I have noticed you smiling more and more the past week, and you were out late last night. Have you met someone?”

My mom looks up from the Realtor magazine she is reading to chime in. “Oh, did you have a date last night, son?”

I don't know how I feel about talking to my parents about my love life, but I promised I would be more open and honest with them.

“Okay, if I talk to you about this, I don't want you to say anything embarrassing. Do you agree to that?” They both nod in agreement. “His name is Alex. I met him through Cyd. They were in *Little Women* together. We have only been dating for a little over a week, but we made it official last night.”

The color in my parent's faces vanishes. My dad hesitates before asking, “By official, do you mean you two had sex?”

I've never been more embarrassed in my life. I'm sure my face looks like a fucking cherry. "Dad, no!! Oh my god! Why would I tell you if we had sex! I meant we made our relationship official. We discussed it, and we are boyfriends."

The color returns to my parents' faces, but now, the air is thick with awkwardness.

"Sorry, son. I don't know the lingo nowadays. I mean, I know you are old enough, but I hope you wait until you're ready. I don't know details about sex between two guys. But I've been doing some research..."

"DAD!" I interrupt. "Please stop! I can't talk to you both about sex. How about we change the subject?"

We sit in silence for a while, and then my mom snorts. "Well, this got awkward fast."

I look from my mom to my dad, who are chuckling quietly. "Can we agree to not discuss this anymore? I'll talk to you about Alex, but I don't want to talk to you about S-E-X."

"Agreed," my parents respond in unison.

"Well, I feel like we need to meet Alex, don't you think so, honey?" my mom asks my dad with a grin.

"I think so too," my dad says nodding. Turning to me, he says, "I promise we won't embarrass you too much, but we are both happy to meet him."

Of course, they do. I already had to go through the awkwardness of coming out, but now, I have to go through the awkwardness of my boyfriend meeting my parents. I feel nervous because I'm sure they will embarrass me, but a part of me is joyous my parents are willing and comfortable enough

to meet my boyfriend. I never believed I would ever be in this situation with my parents, and even if I did, I never would have been able to have a dinner date with Gareth and my parents. Dating Alex is making me feel freer, and I'm ecstatic my parents are encouraging our relationship.

"Okay, I'll ask him," I say.

"How about tonight?" my dad chimes in with a grin.

"I'll ask," I respond

My dad stares at me. "Well, are you going to ask him now, or what?"

"Okay, okay. Sorry." I get out my phone and send him a quick text.

Me: My parents want to have you over for dinner tonight. Would you like to? Don't feel you have to. I said I would ask.

My parents look like they are on the edge of their seats. Little children eager for a carnival ride. I never expected my parents to be this elated about meeting my boyfriend. It proves how great my parents are. They are encouraging me to invite my *boyfriend* to our house for dinner. I think my mom and dad are more hyped than I am about this dinner date.

"I texted him, but I don't know if he will respond right away," I explain to my eager parental units.

My phone buzzes and lights up with Alex's response immediately.

Alex: I would love to! Tell them thank you! What time?

Me: Does 6:00 PM work for you?

Alex: Perfect!

He replies with a smiley emoji.

“Okay, he will be here at 6:00 PM,” I tell my parents.

“Goody,” my mom says.

“Wonderful,” my dad replies, clapping his hands together. “We need to go to the grocery store, but first, we need to plan our meal. How about chicken fried steak, mashed potatoes, and salad? Honey, would you be willing to make some kind of dessert?” he asks, glancing over at my mom.

“Hmm. I think I have a perfect idea. What about homemade apple pie and vanilla ice cream? This is a special affair. We need to pull out all the stops and impress our dinner guest,” she explains, winking.

“You both are crazy. Please don’t embarrass me,” I plead, even though I’m secretly enjoying their excitement, smiling on the inside. I know they will most likely embarrass me, but a few months ago, I never dreamed I would introduce my boyfriend to my parents. This is truly a dream come true.

*

I’M STANDING IN my room attempting to find the right outfit to wear to a dinner date with my parents and my boyfriend. I have been looking at my closet for over thirty minutes trying to find the perfect outfit. I’ve never been so nervous in my life. I shouldn’t be nervous because we are only having dinner, but I want my parents to like Alex. I like him, and I want to invite him to future family outings. My parents seem happy now, but I would be devastated if they didn’t like Alex.

I also want Alex to like my parents. I want him to feel welcomed. I'm close with my parents, and since I came out to them, that relationship has grown even stronger because they have been super supportive of my homosexuality. I wouldn't want anything to affect our budding relationship if Alex doesn't enjoy this evening. We are only in the beginning stages of our relationship, and I want nothing to hinder us. I'm sure I'm being silly, but this is important to me.

I decide on a dark pair of blue jeans and a light blue polo. I navigate toward the color blue because I find the color comforting, and I need all the help I can get because I'm a huge ball of nerves.

I glance at the clock beside my bed. It's 5:45 PM, so Alex should be here any minute. Like clockwork, I hear the doorbell. I love that he is as punctual as I am. He has told me that when he is nervous, he will show up too early because he can't sit around his house being antsy, which is something I do.

I run down the hall toward the front door, barely cutting off my dad before he reaches the door.

I turn to my dad, whose face is rosy with excitement. "Dad, please don't embarrass me. This is new for Alex and me, and I don't want to jinx it or prevent the relationship from going anywhere."

My dad gently puts his hand on my shoulder and gives me a kind look. "Son, please don't worry. We won't ruin this for you. It thrills us you found someone, and we know how nervous you are. We will do our best not to say anything too embarrassing. Now, buck up, private."

I gently punch his forearm. “Thanks, Dad. Okay, let’s do this.”

I turn toward the front door and open it, beaming at Alex, who looks nervous in his khaki dress pants and a red striped button-down shirt. He looks so adorable with his glasses on, and a shy smile painted across his face. He has something in his hands, but I’m too busy looking at his pretty face to pay attention to what he is holding.

“Hi, Alex,” I say greeting him, attempting to give him my best reassuring expression.

“Hey, Tobi. I’m sorry I’m so early. You know how I am when I’m nervous,” he says meekly.

My dad comes up behind me and extends his hands toward Alex. “Hello, Alex. It is great to meet you. My wife and I are very delighted you could join us this evening.”

“Thank you for having me, Mr. Gavin,” Alex replies, shaking my dad’s hand.

“Please, call me Samuel. No need to be formal with us. Now, Tobi, bring our guest into the house. I don’t think he wants to eat on the porch like an animal.” My dad chuckles at his own joke and motions for Alex to come inside.

“You have a lovely home, Mr. Gav— I mean Samuel.” Alex is trembling, so I grab his hand and squeeze, which makes him relax.

“Thank you, Alex,” my mom says making her way from the kitchen into the living room. She embraces Alex in a welcoming hug that sends a bolt of shock to his face. “I’m

Elizabeth, Tobi's mother, and I'm a hugger. I hope that's okay."

"That's fine with me," he replies, beaming. "My mom is a huge hugger too, so I'm used to it. This is for you and Samuel. I didn't want to arrive empty-handed, and I feel like everyone enjoys chocolate." Alex hands my dad a box of assorted chocolates.

"Thank you!" my dad says placing the chocolates on the table beside the couch. "In this house, we are chocolate addicts. We can't get enough. I'm sure they won't make it through dinner. Speaking of dinner, let's eat. I'm starving."

I lead Alex toward the kitchen table, which I helped set up earlier with my mom. I arranged the seating so Alex and I could sit across from my parents.

I pull out Alex's chair, and he sits. I glance at my dad. He catches my gaze and winks at me.

"So, Alex. Tobi says you are a theater major," my mom says placing the food on the table. "What do you want to do when you graduate school?"

"I plan on attending graduate school for theater. I want to perform, but I want to have other options in case I don't make it on Broadway or have any problems finding gigs. I figured if I went to graduate school, I could eventually find a teaching job somewhere," he replies as he grabs the plate of chicken-fried steaks my father is handing him.

I squeeze his leg under the table, which brings a rosy tint to his cheeks. "I haven't seen Alex perform yet, but I've heard

him sing in the car, and he is talented.” This makes his cheeks get warm and red.

“I promise we won’t make you be our show during our meal, Alex, but I hope to hear you sing,” my dad responds, giving him a nod.

“I look forward to that. Thank you for not making me sing tonight. I think I would be too nervous to perform,” Alex replies.

My parents ask question after question, ranging from what his parents do to who his thespian heroes are. Alex is sitting straighter, and he looks more relaxed as my parents throw more questions in his direction. He has zero issues responding. He catches each question and rolls a response right back at my parents. I glance at him and move my gaze to my parents who look so happy, which fills me with so much joy. This has become our new normal. They aren’t acting strange. They are conversing with Alex with so much ease, like he is already part of the family.

As the evening progresses, I know I will leave the evening unscathed. My parents mostly prod Alex with questions. I almost feel ignored the entire evening.

As we sit around the kitchen table after devouring my mom’s homemade apple pie, I can’t help but feel grateful. I have an almost perfect boyfriend and parents, who seem to get along very well. This evening has been an enormous success.

Alex glances at the clock which shows 10:40 PM. “Man, I should get going. I have an 8:00 AM class in the morning. Thank you both for a wonderful evening. I really appreciate you inviting me over for dinner.”

“You are welcome, my boy,” my dad replies, standing up from the table.

My mom gets up and moves around the table, giving Alex another warm hug. “You are welcome in our home any time, and we mean that.”

“Thank you,” Alex says separating from the hug.

My dad moves toward him. I think he will extend his hand again, but he pulls Alex into a powerful hug, which makes me melt. This means everything to me, seeing my dad embrace my boyfriend with a full hug. I never expected to live to see this day.

“I’ll walk you out,” I say, grabbing Alex’s hand and leading him toward the front door.

When we get to his car, I pull him into a tight bear hug, and kiss his warm, wet lips. He returns my kiss, pressing his lips into mine. As we release our embracing lips, I hear him give a slight moan.

“I like you, Alex,” I say tenderly.

He squeezes my arm before replying, “I like you too. Thank you for tonight.”

“Thank you,” I say.

“I’ll see you tomorrow for lunch, right?” he asks as he gets into the driver seat of his car.

“Sure thing, boyfriend!” I respond.

His white teeth shine in the moonlight. “Goodnight, boyfriend.”

“Goodnight,” I reply, kissing him gently on the lips before shutting his door. I move toward my front porch but turn around to wave as he drives off in the night.

Chapter Twenty-Three

I HAVE ALEX on the brain, all day, every day, and I couldn't be happier. What did I do to deserve such a beautiful soul? He makes me want to get up in the morning. I want to shout my happiness from the rooftops. I don't think I'm in the love phase yet. We have only been dating for about four weeks now. Besides, I don't know when I'll be ready to drop the L word with anyone soon, but I know I'm infatuated with him.

We agreed to take things slow, but we have been having fantastic make-out sessions for the past four weeks. He hasn't pushed me, and I haven't pushed him to go beyond kissing; however, I have managed to move my hands further south during each kissing session. I have asked him how he feels about taking the next step. I know his ex-boyfriend hurt him badly by cheating, and he has some trust issues, which is why he needed to ask about my relationship with Gareth after the confrontation we had at the ice cream parlor. I know he wants to make sure we are both ready to take that next step, and I know I do. He makes me happy, and I believe I make him happy. At least, that is what he tells me on the daily. I think we are both ready.

I'm sitting in Gareth's class, but I have moved toward the back these past few weeks because I have grown tired of him looking everywhere but me. With more people between us, it is easier to avoid the awkward glances. We are watching a video, so I don't feel the need to pay too close attention. I'm sitting here mulling over what I should text, I should send Alex.

I type, *Let's do it*. But I delete the text.

I type out kissy-face emojis with the two guys holding hands and the emoji with the O face, but I immediately delete the message because that's too confusing and could lead to more questions.

Hey, sexy, do you want to screw? Which almost makes me barf because I sound like a hooker or like the strippers from Sweet Charity. "Hey, mister, it takes two to tango." I know he would get the reference, but I want the text to be more real and less gimmicky.

I decide on something more direct.

Me: I think we should take our relationship to the next level. I'm ready. I like you, and you like me. If you are ready, I'm ready.

I hit send and I sense someone standing over me. I look up and meet Gareth's eyes.

"Mr. Gavin. What on earth is so important you can't pay attention to the video we are watching? You know the policy on cellphones. They are not allowed in the classroom. Hand me your phone, and you can pick it up in my office after class."

I want to crawl under my desk. He never calls out a student for using a cell phone in class. He usually taps them on the shoulder and points to the phone. He is being a complete ass in front of the entire class, which is so unfair. I don't want to give him the satisfaction of defeat, so I decide on verbally slapping him across the face like he is doing to me.

I stand handing him my cellphone and say, "Okay, sorry. I was just texting my boyfriend."

He looks like I killed his cat. “I think that is enough. We don’t need any more distractions from you in *my* classroom.”

There are a bunch of “busted” comments and snickers from my classmates, but I ignore them. I wish Gareth and I could move past this. Even if that means we only have a teacher and student relationship. I would like us to be friends or at least friendly, but I don’t think that is in the cards for us.

I sit and stare at the television and don’t move for the rest of class because I don’t want to draw any more attention to myself. When class is over, I head to his office and sit down in the chair farthest from him.

“Will you please shut the door?” he asks.

I hesitate, not sure if I should shut the door, but decide I should in case our conversation gets heated. “You wanted to see me.”

“That was very disrespectful what you did in class. You should not have done that.”

“I’m sorry, but what about the way you treated me in class? You put me on the chopping block in front of the entire class because you are pissed at me. I’m the one who should be pissed at you after the way you treated me.”

“Don’t be so dramatic.”

“I’m not being dramatic. I’m being realistic. I’m not sure why you are so pissed at me, but I don’t want it affecting my future at this school or the way I’m viewed by my peers. You can’t attack me in class. That’s entirely inappropriate. Don’t you think it brings more attention to our rumored past than anything else. The only thing that would be more revealing of

our secret affair would be if we got caught with our pants down.”

“You are so childish. I wish you would act like an adult and move on. Life is...”

I furiously interrupt him, “Enough of this shit. The moment you act like an adult is the moment I will. I will defend myself, and the people I care about, when attacked or provoked. I’m not someone you can push around. That’s not who I am. You are the educator, so act like it.”

He looks like I slapped him across the face, which I guess I did verbally. He stares at me. I see anger and sadness and frustration and heartbreak flash in his eyes. He is struggling with this, but he is choosing to take his frustrations out on me.

“I’m sorry...” he says so quietly I can barely hear him.

“I’m sorry for what I did in class. I shouldn’t have done that, but I felt attacked.”

“I understand. I shouldn’t have done that to you. You don’t deserve the way I’ve been treating you.”

“It’s okay.” I don’t know if I mean it, but it feels like something you say in these situations.

“Do you think we can ever get past this and be friends?”

I peer at him with confusion on my face. How did we get from our former conversation or argument to this question? It’s like he is skipping so many steps.

“I don’t know, Gareth. I don’t know how.”

“I understand, but what if we start with you working for me again?”

“I don’t know if that is a good idea.”

“Well, consider it. If you want to, you can start on Monday. Take the weekend and think about it.”

“Okay.” I get up and leave because I don’t want to be there any longer. I’m so confused. How did he go from one hundred to zero so rapidly? I don’t know what I should do. I feel like it might be a bad idea for me to work for him, but I need the experience and a job. I haven’t been able to find anything on campus, which works better for me since I’m on campus so much. I decide I will run this by Cydney and Matt. Hopefully, they’ll be able to help me figure out what to do.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“WHAT DO YOU mean you are thinking about going to work for him again? He has been a complete ass to you. Look what he did in class. He is obviously unstable and a loose cannon. You shouldn’t even consider working for him again.”

It upset Cydney the moment I mentioned Gareth’s name. She hasn’t been a fan of his since I told them about our relationship. If this were prior to my coming out, I would think her jealous of me, but she has been very protective of me since I came out.

She is dating an art major named Jeff Donovan. I’m so happy for her and want her to be happy, but her reaction is a little dramatic.

“You are happy with Alex now. Why would you put yourself in any kind of uncomfortable situation? What if he hits on you or tries to make a move? How do you think Alex will feel? Don’t be stupid, Tobias.”

I hate the way she says my name, like I’m a child getting in trouble with his mother for doing something bad.

“I’m not a child, Cydney. I don’t need you to mother me. I have thought about Alex’s feelings, which is why I will talk to him about the situation before I even give Gareth my answer. Besides, I haven’t been able to find a job. I want to be a professor. This job will look good on my resume.”

She took offense to my mother comment, but I don’t appreciate her tone nor her response. “I’m not trying to mother you. I’m trying to make you see what is going on here.”

“Tell me. Tell me what is going on.”

“Tobi, he wants to get in your pants. He can see you are happy with Alex, and he doesn’t like it. He wants to create a wedge between you and Alex, so he can move his way back into your life. You are being naïve. He isn’t a good person. He wants to segregate you from your friends again, so he can have you for himself. Don’t be so oblivious of his actions. He will wiggle his way back into your heart, and he will chew you up and spit you out again, and don’t expect me to pick up the pieces again. Live with your actions.”

“Live with my actions. What does that even mean? I will not fall into bed with him again. I’m happy with Alex. I will let Gareth know this will be a platonic, teacher-student relationship. I will not ruin my future with Alex for the guy who broke my heart. I’m not being naïve. I’m being realistic. I need this kind of experience.”

“You have clearly decided. I think you are stupid for doing this. Maybe you are as childish as he said you are.”

“Screw you, Cydney. You are being ridiculous. I’m through with this conversation. I will not sit here while you insult me. You are jealous I have an opportunity like this, and you don’t.” I regret the words as soon as they leave my mouth. I’m so upset. I wanted to hurt her with words the way she hurt me. She looks beaten, and I did that, but I can’t take it back. The words are out there, and she can’t take her comments back either. We stand there, not able to meet each other’s eyes.

“Okay, this has gone way too far,” Matt says, trying to break the tension. “You both are upset and have said things you both don’t mean. Why don’t we take a breath and

apologize and move on? We are best friends. We are supposed to have each other's backs."

"Shut up, Matt," Cydney and I both say in unison.

"Don't bring me into your fight. I'll be happy to lay it out if you want me to."

"Please, be quiet, this isn't your fight," I say, giving each word venom.

"Hey, you don't talk to me like that. You and I are bros. You want me in this fight. Fine! I'm in it. You both are being stupid. Tobi, you are being a little naïve, but I understand why you want to do this. You aren't articulating the words very well, so let me break it down for you. You want closure with Gareth. You want to work for him again because he is the first guy you ever loved. A part of you wants the relationship back, even if you can't admit it to yourself. I don't think you would hurt Alex, but you are walking on thin ice, so you need to tread carefully if you move forward with this. I know you aren't in love with Gareth anymore, but he is still special to you even though he treated you like trash. Maybe you will create a friendship out of this mess. But there might be too much water under the bridge. Don't alienate yourself from your friends. You have already made your decision, and you need to live with it and the consequences, but that doesn't mean we won't be here for you if it blows up in your face. That's what friends are for."

Damn, he is good. Before I respond, he continues, "And as for you, Cydney. You can't mother him. He is your friend, and you need to let him learn from his mistakes and triumphs. You don't know for sure if this will end badly or not. You think it

will because I think a part of you wants it to end badly. You want to tell Tobi, 'I told you so' even though you aren't trying to be an ass. You want him to be smart, and you think he is about to walk into a field of landmines, so you want to protect him. You can't protect him from everything. He has to walk on his own."

Cydney is crying now. I go to her and hug her. I hate when she cries, and I hate that we fought. "I'm sorry, Tobi. I don't want you to get hurt again. You were so fragile after the breakup. You were on the brink of harming yourself, and that scares the shit out of me. I want you to be smart and careful. I'll be here if something bad happens, and you aren't being childish. I didn't mean that at all."

"I know you didn't mean it. I didn't mean the things I said. I was so upset. You guys, I've grown from this situation. I have learned what kind of guy Gareth is. I know it seems like I'm about to dive into shark-infested waters without a cage, but I'm prepared. I'm not going into this hoping we can rebuild our relationship. I want to gain some experience, so I'm more prepared for my future career."

"I understand what you're saying." Cydney smiles at me. "We're here if you need us. Please be careful. I don't trust him, and you shouldn't either."

"I don't trust him. I think he is a little unstable, but at least this way, I won't have to worry about outbursts in class again. I'll be able to diffuse the situation from the inside." I laugh, half-joking. "If I'm working for Gareth, we can discuss our issues in private instead of in front of the entire class or school."

“Are you going to talk to Alex about it?” Matt asks with concern in his eyes.

“Tonight. I told him I’m ready to take the next step in our relationship. He texted me earlier and said he is too. I’m hoping he will handle this well because I truly am eager to take this next step. I care for him deeply. I don’t want to lose him, and I’m hoping he can see that.”

“Good luck, buddy.”

“Thanks, Matti.”

We hug and say our goodbyes. They leave my house, so I can get ready for my date with Alex. I will sit him down and explain everything. I hope he will understand my decision and see how much I care for him, and how I would do nothing to jeopardize our relationship. I’m so nervous though and have a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Chapter Twenty-Five

MY PARENTS ARE out of town all weekend, which makes my house the best place for our date. I've cooked him dinner, making him homemade meatballs, garlic bread, salad, and crème brûlée. I want tonight to be magical and romantic. I planned on talking to him about the work situation before the evening begins because I don't want him to think I'm putting it off. I don't want him to think there is something there when there isn't anything. I think he will understand and support my decision, but I'm still nervous. I keep pacing around the house, glancing at the clock on the wall, waiting for him to get here. I want tonight to be special because Alex is special, and I'm realizing what I have with him is special. He is a good guy, and he deserves an honest guy, which is why I must be upfront with him.

The doorbell rings and I practically jump out of my skin. I open the door, and he looks so handsome in his jeans and button-down shirt. I pull him toward me and give him a big, sloppy kiss.

"I thought you would never arrive," I say, pulling away from our embrace. "I have been slaving over a hot stove for hours, and you have the audacity to show up two minutes late. How dare you, sir," I say sarcastically.

"What do you expect from me? You sit around the house while I bring home the bacon," he says jokingly.

I bring him in for another kiss and pull him inside, closing the door behind him.

I don't want this moment to end. We are both so happy and nervous about tonight, and I don't want to ruin it, but I promised myself I would get this conversation over with when he first arrived.

"So, I need to talk to you about something before our evening starts. I'm hoping it won't ruin our evening, but I promised you I would always be honest with you," I say, glancing into his eyes.

"Uh-oh. This doesn't sound good."

"No, it's not bad. Well, I don't think it is, but I have to ask this first. Do you trust me?" I ask.

"I do, but you are making me a little nervous," he responds.

I tell him about my confrontation with Gareth in class, and our argument in his office, and how he offered me my old job. He observes me, but I can't get a read on what he is thinking.

"I hope you know I'm not wanting to do this to get him back or hoping we can rekindle our relationship because that's not what I want. I want you. You are my boyfriend, and I care for you deeply. This is a great opportunity for me, even though I'll be working with my ex-boyfriend. However, if you don't want me to do it, I won't. I'll try to find another job at the school."

He is silent for a while, rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet. "I don't want to stand in your way. I know becoming a professor is your passion, and this is a significant experience for you. I will be honest I'm nervous about you working for him, but I one hundred percent trust you. I don't

trust him, but I trust you. I'll support this, but only if you promise you will be careful and be open with me. I need to know if he tries anything, you will tell me."

"I will. You have nothing to worry about. I'm your guy, mister, and you don't have to worry about that as long as you'll have me."

"Good. Now, where is my dinner? I believe you promised me a five-star meal," he states.

I snort and lead him into the dining room. That went much better than I anticipated. I'm such a lucky guy.

*

"DINNER AND DESSERT were amazing! I feel like I need to unbutton my pants because I'm so full."

"How about I do that later," I say with a dramatized wink.

He grabs my hand. "I like you, Tobi. I hope you know that."

"I do, and I like you. I hope you know that."

"I do." He looks like he wants to say something else, but he looks away with nervous eyes.

"What should we do next?" he asks, looking into my eyes.

"I have a few ideas." I lean forward and kiss him. I pull him toward me until he is straddling my legs. My hands are on his back, and I can feel his heartbeat racing. I can feel how hard he is on my stomach, and I know he can feel me because he begins grinding his ass into me erection. I have wanted no one more than I want him. I push him away from my face and

take a deep breath. “I hope you brought your overnight bag because I’m not letting you leave tonight.”

“You know I di—” I interrupt him by pushing my lips against his, and he lets out a soft moan.

I lead him into my bedroom. I’m about to sit on my bed when he pulls me into his body. Kissing me hard.

I feel him throbbing against my leg, which makes me grind my crotch into his body. He releases a moan that vibrates my tongue as it parts his lips.

I guide my hands toward his jeans and swiftly unbutton his pants. We take less than five seconds to get our clothes off and get onto the bed.

He straddles my naked body, smoothing his rough hands across my prickly chest. His fingers gently swirl the points of my nipples. He gently pinches them, making my excitement grow and my body shiver. He leans down as I rush my lips to his. His tongue purses my lips and embraces my own.

He grabs my hands and pushes them into the bed, making me wiggle with excitement. Our lips release when he shifts his body, lowering himself toward the foot of the bed.

I groan with pleasure when his lips embrace me. He continues this motion as I squeeze the pillow in my hands. I let him keep up the rhythm until I can’t take it anymore, so I grab his hair and gently pull.

“Are you okay?” he asks with saliva dripping from his bottom lip.

“I’m fantastic,” I respond passionately.

I stare into his eyes as he hungrily licks his lips while glancing at my erection. Our eyes meet again, and I have the courage to ask my question.

“Do you want to have sex?” I ask nervously.

A sensual giggle escapes his mouth before he says, “Please.”

I lean over the edge of the bed, grasping my jeans. I retrieve a condom from my pocket. I use my teeth to open the packaging. His hands softly caress my wrists before I can put the condom on.

He takes the condom from my hands. He gently rolls the rubber down my erection, which makes my whole body tingle with pleasure. He inches up straddling my torso.

“What are you doing?” I ask confused.

“Shh,” he says, putting a finger to his lips.

He grabs hold of me, fusing our bodies together. I feel this rush of electricity cascade through our bodies.

I love the feeling of his body in my hands. We move like this isn't our first time with each other. It's like we are pros and know every inch of the other's body. No one is taking the lead. We are learning the others body as we move through the motions. This is what a relationship should be like. This is something real, and I never want to lose this.

Life is perfect in this moment.

*

“FUCK. THAT WAS amazing,” Alex says as we hold each other under the covers.

“You weren’t so bad yourself,” I jokingly say. He pushes me gently and tickles me. “Hey, none of that shit,” I say through spurts of laughter. “No, tickles.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll stop.”

“So, what do we do now? Do you want to watch some TV or a movie? I’m down for anything.”

He looks at me, and I can tell something is bothering him. “Please don’t hurt me. I trust you, but I just need to say that. I like you too much, and I don’t know if I would ever recover if you hurt me.”

I grab his head with my hands and pull him in for another kiss. “Please don’t worry. I wouldn’t do anything to hurt you. You mean too much to me.”

He smiles at me, and I can see his confidence coming back.

“What would you like to do?” I ask.

He gives me a mischievous smirk. “I can think of something.” As he pulls me toward him, kissing me again. Our sweaty bodies join together, and as we find our rhythm, I think to myself I’m so happy he came into my life because he has given me a reason to live. To wake up in the morning. He is beautiful, and the best man I have ever known.

Chapter Twenty-Six

ALEX AND I spent the entire weekend together. We ventured out into the world occasionally, but we mostly binged on Netflix and chilled. We played board games, video games, and watched tons of movies. I kicked his ass on Mario Kart on the Nintendo Switch; however, he kept kicking my ass on Mario Party. I exposed him to the magic of the original *Eulogy* film, and he cackled hysterically throughout most of the film. He introduced me to the music from the musical *Waitress*. I had not heard the music before, but I'm a strong convert. Jessie Mueller's voice is spectacular.

Our weekend contained a million laughs, tons of romance and sex, cuddles, and competition. The entire weekend felt like our perfect romantic getaway that brought us closer together. I have zero regrets, and Alex has no regrets. I had a magical weekend and a much-needed vacation from the chaos of reality. We existed on our own private island for two days, turning ourselves off, so the world could not get to us. Perfection is the best word to describe the weekend, but unfortunately, all good things must end.

Our school lives starting again tomorrow morning force us back to reality. It is Sunday morning, 11:00 AM, and I can't bring myself to let Alex leave my house. I know my parents will be home soon, and I also know even though they are cool with me dating a guy, I doubt they would appreciate me having a sexy sleepover with a guy.

"I don't want you to go," I whine.

We are cuddling on the couch. We finished watching the season finale of *Grey's Anatomy* Season 14, which is a complete rollercoaster ride.

He squeezes me tight. "I don't want to leave either, but I have tons of homework to do. I spent the entire weekend being a shut-in with my hunky-hunky boyfriend."

I maneuver myself on the couch, so I'm straddling him. I lean into a long, sensual kiss that makes me slightly moan.

He nuzzles me away. "We have to stop. I won't want to leave, and personally, I don't want your parents to walk in on us."

"Okay, okay." I relent, standing up and pulling Alex to his feet. "Will you text or call me later tonight after you finish homework? I don't have any homework to do, but I'll be cleaning up the house before my parents get here. I guess locking yourself up with your boyfriend has pros and cons. My mom would kill me if I left all those dishes in the sink."

He kisses me on the cheek. "Are you sure you don't want me to stay and help clean up? I can spare some time. Besides, I helped make the mess."

I grin, squinting my eyes at him. "No, homework is more important." I bring my arms up to his armpits in a surprise tickle attack he must have sensed coming because he successfully thwarted my assault.

"Don't even try it, mister." He chuckles. "I'll tickle you right back."

I pull him toward me and plant another kiss on his lips. "Now, begone, prince. Your homework waits for no man."

He pulls me into another hug and softly whispers, “Until we meet again, sweet prince.”

I open the door for him as he grabs his backpack.

He kisses me and steps outside. “I’ll talk to you later.... I lo...” He pauses, looking worried. “I had a great time this weekend.”

I smile nervously unsure of what he tried to say. Did he slip or was he about to say something else?

“I had a great time. We will have to do it again,” I swiftly reply.

“Promise?” he says with a glint in his eyes.

“I promise,” I say breathlessly, attempting my best Marilyn Monroe impression, which fails.

As he turns away laughing, I watch him descend to his car. Before he gets inside, he waves at me with an enormous grin. I wave, step back inside, and close the door.

Did Alex almost say “I love you?” I’m not sure what I’m feeling in this moment. I care deeply for him, but we have only been together a little over a month. Are we ready for the “I Love You” stage of our relationship? We did have sex this weekend, which is a big step forward, but I feel conflicted. I know I like him, but I’m not sure if I’m ready to say “I love you” to him.

I need to enjoy the ride, and not overthink this, which would only drive me crazy. I know I’m headed in that direction, and I think Alex is. We will arrive at the station when we both are ready because we both understand the other’s past heartache. I know I don’t want to say before I’m

ready, but when I'm ready, I will shout my love for him from every rooftop, so everyone will know.

I turn on my Workout Playlist on our Apple TV, clicking on "The Story" by Brandi Carlile before I clean. I made Alex listen to this song because I think of him every time I hear it. Carlile sings about a lover the universe made specifically for her, someone who knows her better than she knows herself. When I hear this song now, I immediately think of Alex. I feel like the universe gave me a redo when it brought me Alex. I know I allowed myself to date him, but I feel like something fated us to meet. The universe brought us into each other's lives, but Alex and I did the rest. I'm so happy we took what the universe gave us and ran with it.

After replaying the song a few hundred times, I let the playlist shuffle through some of my favorite songs as I finish putting clean dishes in their proper place, which I know will make my mom happy.

I hear the garage door open, and I glance at the clock, 1:30 PM. My parents are earlier than I expected them. I'm glad Alex left when he did.

The door in the kitchen leading to our garage opens, and my dad enters carrying two suitcases.

"Hey, kiddo," he says, grinning. "How was your weekend?"

"My weekend was exceptional," I reply, beaming. "How was yours?"

I purposefully moved onto his weekend because I didn't want him to ask too many questions. I obviously can't tell my

dad my boyfriend and I had a romantic weekend. I'm sure it would be ages before he would let me be alone with Alex again. Besides, what teenager wants to discuss sex with their parents? I know I sure don't. I'll avoid it like the plague.

"I'm glad you had an enjoyable weekend. Your mom and I had a great time. We could relax some when she didn't have a conference session to attend. I spent most of my time chilling at the hotel, waiting for her sessions to be over. I needed relaxation time. It was fantastic." He grins up at me. "Your mom had to go to the office to work a little. I dropped her off. When I pick her up, we will pick up a pizza for dinner. So..." He pauses.

He looks like he is about to ask more questions about my weekend, so I hastily insert, "Well, dad, I have some homework to do. I'll head to my room to get that done. Pizza sounds great."

"Okay, buddy," he replies meekly.

I lied to him to avoid an awkward conversation. I'm sure he knows Alex spent some time here this weekend.

When I get to my room, I hear my phone buzz. I rush over to my nightstand hoping for a text from Alex, only to see Matt's name light up my screen.

***Matt:** Dude! Are you alive?! I haven't heard from you all weekend.*

***Me:** Ha-ha! Sorry! I was a little busy this weekend
wink, wink lol*

I send an additional wink, using the dramatic winking face emoji.

Matt: Gross, dude! I'm happy for you both, though. How did he take the job conversation?

Matt got right to the point with his text. He must have worried all weekend about how Alex would take the news.

Me: He took it really well! He trusts me and trusts I wouldn't do anything to harm our relationship or hurt him.

Matt: Good, I'm glad. Now, I don't want any gory details, but how was the first time?

I cackle at his text fervently responding

Me: LMAO! The sex was super-hot!

Matt: GROSS! Ha-ha! No, I'm so happy for you and Alex. He is an outstanding guy, and I can see how happy he makes you.

I can honestly say these words couldn't be closer to the truth. I never felt this way with Gareth. I know I loved Gareth, but something feels different with Alex. My relationship with Gareth become more of a hassle because we had to be so secretive. We couldn't be an actual couple in the actual world. We forced ourselves into Gareth and Tobias land, which existed on an island outside of reality. Looking back, I think this might have contributed to our downfall. That maybe our relationship would fail because we lived in a lie. We couldn't be honest about our relationship because of the consequences. Our entire relationship represented a plant stuck in a box that had no room or sunlight to help it grow and bloom. No relationship can survive in secret. We were living on borrowed time that would eventually end.

I force myself out of my own thoughts to respond to Matt.

Me: How was your weekend?

***Matt:** My weekend was great! I had a third date with Catrina. I think there is something there, man. She is so sweet and hot! I'm hoping we work out.*

I forgot he planned to go on another date with Catrina Phillips. As I text him, I'm all smiles.

***Me:** I'm happy for you, bro. Look at all three of us. We all have special people in our lives. We need to plan something for all of us to get together.*

His response is quick.

***Matt:** Heck yes, we do! What about karaoke? That would be fun for everyone!*

***Me:** That sounds great! Do you want to text Cyd? I could, but I'm not exactly sure where we stand after our fight.*

***Matt:** I think you should. Have you talked to her yet?*

Matt hit the nail right on the head. I need to talk to Cydney.

***Me:** Not yet. Have you?*

He is slow with his response.

***Matt:** Yes, she feels super bad about the fight.*

I tell Matt I'm going to FaceTime her.

She answers the call with a big smile on her face.

"How was this weekend? Tell me everything except for all the sex stuff," she says giggling.

I laugh at her childish chuckle.

"The weekend was amazing! I like him so much, Cyd! He makes me so happy."

"Are you falling in love with him?"

I'm sure my face gets super red. Am I in love with Alex? I think I am, but I don't want to say I am because we have only been dating a little over a month, but I can feel myself falling hard. He is such a good guy. How could I not fall in love with him?

"I don't know the answer to that question, but I know I like him a lot," I respond.

"Okay, but you have to let me know as soon as you know, okay?"

"You and Matti will be the first to know. I promise." I pause. "Well, Alex might be the first to know, but then you and Matti."

She chuckles.

"Good." She pauses, and I can tell she wants to say something but is having a hard time getting the words out.

"I'm sorry for our fight," I say beating her to the punch. "I'm sorry for how I behaved. I hated fighting with you. I know you want what's best for me."

"I'm sorry too, Tobi. I love you so much, and I don't want to see you get hurt," she blurts out.

"I love you too, Cyd!" I reply, meaning every word.

We continue talking for most of the afternoon until my dad yells that pizza has arrived. I head down the hall toward the dining room, and I can't help but smile. I have amazing parents, amazing friends, and an amazing boyfriend. How did I get so lucky? I'm elated about the way my life is going. A few months ago, my depression had control over my entire life. But now, look at me. Life is going well.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

AFTER MY WONDERFUL weekend, I want nothing to ruin my buzz. I tackled my morning classes and even a test, and I still have energy coursing through my body. As the day shifts into the afternoon, I'm happy I don't have to worry about any more classes; however, I have to report to Gareth's office to work. I'm dreading this, but I told myself when I woke up this morning, I would let nothing ruin my day. I'm so happy, and even if Gareth is an ass, he won't be able to take that away from me. Besides, if he is a dick, I'll say sayonara and find a different job. Something will open up eventually.

I'm standing outside his office door where he can't see me because I'm nervous about starting this job and working for the ex-boyfriend who has been a Dick with a capital D to me since the break-up. I take a deep breath and step into his eye line without entering the office. He looks at me for a second. Looking me up and down as if I'm a stranger he wants to analyze before allowing entrance into his sacred realm.

"You're few minutes late," he says, seeming perturbed.

I ignore his frustration. "Class ran a little late, and I needed to eat something before I turned to cannibalism."

"No problem. We need to talk about your schedule and how this will work."

I sit down and look around the room. He doesn't like change. I know this from the four months we were together, so I'm not surprised that nothing has moved from its original

place. I didn't notice his office during our argument on Friday. I couldn't wait to get out of here.

“Okay, boss. What would you like to discuss?” I want to make some kind of joke to break the tension, but Gareth doesn't look like he is in the mood for humor of any kind.

“If this will work, I need you to be available and not distracted. I know you have a life outside of this job, but I need your complete focus and attention. The university has bumped me up to an associate professor position, so my workload will increase, so I need to know you will give this position one hundred percent when you are here working. I may need you to work some nights and weekends if grading starts piling up. Are you okay with that and do you think you can handle this?”

I'm surprised by his lack of emotion. It's like he is the Terminator, and his only mission is to relay my instructions from the future. He barely looks at me as he talks, and I need to end this now otherwise this will never work.

“Before I answer this, I need to say something.” He flinches but looks up at me. It looks like he just noticed me. “I'm thrilled for you and your promotion, but not to use your own words against you. If this will work, I need to know you won't lose it on me again. I will not stand for it. I will find a job elsewhere the moment you are rude or insult me like you did last week. I'm your employee, and you need to treat me as such. I will not be your verbal punching bag. Are you okay with that?”

“Yes. I'm okay with that. I'm sorry for the way I treated you. I have been an ass, and I know you don't deserve it. You

have my word that I will not lose it on you again.”

“Good. Now, what would you like me to do first?”

He hands me some assignments to grade. I graded these same assignments last semester, so I know exactly what I’m looking for as I read over each student’s answers. We sit in silence for over an hour. He is reading over essays, and I finish grading the last student’s assignment. I sit there staring at the last paper, feeling like I need to say something to break the tension.

“That student keeps saying there when he meant their or they’re. It’s like he doesn’t know the other two words exist.”

Gareth snorts. So, he can laugh. “Is that Michael Young?”

“Yes,” I respond.

He sighs. “Not to be mean, but he isn’t the brightest crayon in the box. On every assignment since the semester started, I have been writing that in my notes to him, but he must not be reading my advice, or he is ignoring it. Who knows.” I chuckle. “I needed that,” he says, looking more relaxed now than when I got here. “I’ve missed you. I hope you know that.”

I’m not sure how to respond to the ‘missed you’ comment, but I don’t want him to retreat into his shell, so I grin and say, “It’s good to see you laugh around me. I never thought I would see that smile again.”

We spend the day joking around while getting work done. He has been falling behind on grading assignments because he scheduled due dates for essays on the same week in every class. He won’t make that mistake again next year. We are falling into a pleasant rhythm now. Almost like no time has

passed and like all our awkward exchanges never happened. This feels good. I'm happy to see him smiling and giggling, and I can think without feeling uneasy because I know in my heart a romantic relationship isn't for us. Maybe the universe put him in my path to be a friend, and we mucked it up at first by lusting after each other and we are now getting things back on track. I don't know but talking to him again feels good and right.

“So, I need to ask. How are things with you and Allen?”

“Um. It's Alex. And things are going well. How about you and your fella?” I'm uncomfortable. I feel like we are about to sink back into old habits if we continue this conversation, but I don't want him feeling embarrassed for asking me about my life.

“I'm happy to hear that. Glad you found someone you like. My guy and I are okay. I don't know if it's meant for a happily ever after, but we are having fun.”

“Good. I'm glad you are happy, and you two are having fun.”

He pauses and looks into my eyes. I think he is about to dive into deep waters with a more emotional conversation, but he stands and says, “Well, I think we should call it an evening. I know I'm exhausted, and I'm sure you have plans with your guy or your friends or you might have homework.”

“I don't have any plans tonight. Alex is in rehearsals, but I have some homework I need to work on.”

“Have a good night, Tobias.”

“Call me, Tobi. If you want to. Tobias sounds too formal coming from your mouth. I hope you have a good night.”

I leave his office and say goodbye again as I turn the corner, heading for the elevator and feeling like that entire exchange went well. Maybe this will all work out and maybe I’ll gain another friend.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

TONIGHT IS OPENING night for *Rent*, and my boyfriend—damn, I enjoy saying that—is playing Roger. I’m so giddy, but he is nervous. He has this pre-show ritual to calm his nerves where he leaves his phone at home and doesn’t talk to anyone, which I will support; however, I had a rose delivered to his dressing room, so he knows I care. I’m not a savage. I can’t go one day without showering some attention on the fella. He has such an amazing passion for theater, and I admire his ability to focus and not let any outside distractions influence his thespian process.

The week has gone extremely well. Gareth and I have been working well together. Everything seems to be falling into place. I’m so happy we could move past all the shit between us and perhaps start a friendship. We can joke around with each other, which makes me happy. I don’t dread seeing him anymore. I enjoy my time with him. Now, I want to encourage our friendship as long as he doesn’t become too controlling of my time. I want us to grow as individuals, so hopefully we can attain pivotal friends’ status. I hope a relatively strong friendship is in the cards for us, but only time will tell.

I’m meeting Cydney, Jeff, Matt, and Catrina at The Burger Joint for a pre-show burger. I plan on taking Alex for ice cream after the show before we head to the after party. Cydney, Matt, and I confronted our significant others, well their significant others, about a six-person karaoke date. I already talked to my man, but I knew he would be on board before I even asked him. He mentioned we would have to wait

until after *Rent* ends, which is about two weeks away and is the beginning of spring break, which gives us plenty of time to coordinate with everybody's schedules.

"What do you mean you don't sing?" Matt asks Jeff with a mouthful of French fries.

"I just don't sing. I'm down for us all getting together, but do we have to do karaoke? I sound like a dying horse when I even try to sing, which is why I don't do it in front of people." He has a disgusted look on his face that makes Matt chuckle in his seat.

"Come on, babe," Cydney says with a smile on her face. I enjoy seeing her happy like this but hearing her call someone babe is silly but adorable. "Matt can't sing either, but he is on board."

"Hey, now! I can sing," Matt interjects with a scowl.

Cydney and I both look at each other and break into laughter. "You can't sing, Buzz, but it's okay. We still love you."

"Whatever! You think I can sing, don't you, Cat?" Matt turns to look at his girlfriend, Catrina.

"Um. Do you want the truth or a lie?"

"All of you suck." Matt flips us all off.

Even though I know he isn't upset with our comments, I still try to console him. "It's okay, Matti. What if you and I do a duet? Will that make you feel better?"

He looks up with a big grin on his face. "Oh, honey-bear, I thought you would never ask. My knight in shining armor has

come to my rescue.” Cydney, Matt, and I burst into laughter.

Catrina and Jeff glance at each other. I guess they don’t understand our group’s humor and closeness yet. They’ll get used to our relationship. We are a very close group and are comfortable saying anything to each other.

“I have an idea,” Cydney pipes in. “What if we pre-game some alcohol before going to sing karaoke? Will that help you relax, babe?”

Jeff considers this for a minute. “I guess. Everyone seems like they really want to do it, so I’m not going poo-poo it. Let’s do it.”

We all respond with hoots and hollers and woo-hoos.

“What bar should we sing karaoke at?” Katrina asks as she sneaks a fry from Matt’s plate.

I jump to answer her question. “I thought we could go to The Rising. It’s a gay karaoke bar. I know we have two straight guys attending the festivities, but The Rising has a good list of musical numbers, which I know would appease Cydney and Alex...and me,” I add grinning. “Is that okay with everyone?”

Cydney is the first to respond. “I’m in. What about you, Jeff? Are you okay with going to a gay bar?”

He hesitates for a brief second, his pointer finger tapping the table. “I’m okay with going to the gay bar. I know you would love to belt out a few musical songs, and I love hearing you sing.”

Cydney and Jeff are adorable together. When Jeff looks at her, I can see how much he cares for her. He gets this twinkle

in his eyes, and when he first spots her from across a room, his face brightens. Cydney is the same way. I'm so happy they found each other. He isn't the guy I would expect Cydney to have an attraction toward. He is on the university's basketball team and is the epitome of a jock. He has short blond hair and blue ocean wave eyes. I think he is attractive, but I always pictured her with a music major or a theater major or an artist; however, when I see them together, I get it. It seems like they are a good match.

I've always wanted Cydney and Matt to be happy, and they both seem content. Matt and Catrina are a wonderful couple. I might have a biased position, but I think we are lucky we found wonderful people to date. Catrina is a fantastic person who makes Matt even better. She encourages him, and he applauds her talents. She is gorgeous with her long brown hair and brown eyes. He likes that she is smarter than he is. He likes her sense of humor. He loves her ability to bring out the best in people. Plus, we are creating new, great friendships.

Jeff and Catrina crack jokes with the three of us as the night progresses. Even after we have finished our food, we entertain ourselves, talking about school, work, life, and a bunch of random shit. I love the original three amigos have grown into the six amigos. I've read college is where you make lifelong friends, and I'm seeing that now. I always assumed it would be Matt, Cydney, and me taking on the world, but I never thought about adding significant others into our group. I'm glad we have each found someone, and we all get along. I don't know what the future holds for our growing group, but for now, I believe they are a fantastic support system.

We head to the theater and find our seats. I made sure we were close to the front and center stage because I wanted to get the best view of my boy in action. I'm nervous, which is silly because I'm not performing on the stage. I haven't seen Alex in his element. I know he can sing, but singing in the car differs from seeing him perform.

As the lights flash the five-minute warning, a smile spreads across my face because I feel like my life is finding a sense of normalcy.

*

ALEX DID AN amazing job, and I can't wait to kiss him. He outshone everyone, but I'm biased.

After the show, we wait in the lobby for the actors to come out and greet the audience. I'm standing anxiously waiting for Alex to turn the corner. I can't wait to see him up close. He looked so good on stage singing and dancing. I'm impressed with his ability to hold character even when the girl playing Mimi tripped and fell on her ass. Everybody in the show pretended the fall happened on purpose. Everyone did a superb job, but I'm here for one person, and that is my fella.

I see Alex turn the corner. I run over to him, pick him up and spin him in a circle. When I put him down, I kiss his luscious lips, which he returns with a giant grin on his face.

"You did an outstanding job!" I say jumping up and down. "You are so fucking talented! You wouldn't practice in front of me, so I wasn't sure what would happen. You have a beautiful voice, and it is very intoxicating. Roger is a perfect role for you. I mean Adam Pascal, who?"

He laughs at me, but he loves the attention. “Thank you!” he says, bowing. “I’m so happy you enjoyed the show.” He looks at our group of friends behind me. “Did you all enjoy the show?”

Matt lifts Alex up like I did and moves in for a kiss before putting his thumbs in between their lips. “You were magnificent! Broadway will be lucky to have you one day, sweetie.”

“Watch it, punk. That’s my boyfriend,” I say, playfully punching Matt on the arm.

“Don’t worry. I’ve got my boyfriend,” Matt says as he kisses Catrina’s hand.

We all laugh, especially when Catrina responds, “That’s right. You know who wears the pants in this relationship.”

I kiss Alex again and give him a big hug. I close my eyes, and I rock him gently to the music in my head. He is so special.

When we separate, I notice Gareth stationed by the side exit behind Alex. He is staring at Alex and me from across the room. I think about heading over to say hello, but I don’t like the look on his face. He doesn’t look happy. He seems furiously pissed off. When he notices me looking at him, he turns and exits through the door beside him.

I wonder what that is all about.

Alex pulls me into another kiss, bringing me back to reality. In that moment, I forget about Gareth’s reaction to Alex and me. My boyfriend is one talented human being, and that’s all I care about right now.

“Thank you for coming, Tobi.” He pulls me closer. “It means so much to me you were here for opening night.”

I grin at him. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world. You were so amazing.” I pinch his butt cheek. “Now, go get changed. I owe my talented guy some ice cream.”

He turns to head backstage and I yell, “Leave the guy-liner on. It’s hot.”

I hear him chuckling as he turns the corner.

When he gets back, I grab his hand, and we walk to my car and make our way to the ice cream parlor to meet the entire gang.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

IT HAS BEEN two weeks since Gareth reacted negatively to my kiss with Alex, and he has been standoffish every time I see him. He occasionally snickers, but it's so weak I can tell his heart isn't in it and something is bothering him.

It's the Friday of spring break, and I have plans to meet up with Alex and the rest of our peeps to drink outside of the karaoke bar. However, before I leave, I feel like I need to approach Gareth to make sure everything is okay. I don't want things to be awkward between us. I'm dating someone and he is too, so he will have to get over the awkwardness. I feel like time will help us get through this as long as we communicate our feelings.

"So, I have plans to meet up with my friends for a karaoke night at The Rising, but I need to talk to you before I go," I say hesitantly.

He looks up from his computer. "Shit."

"Is everything okay?" I ask, feeling concerned. "I feel like we were hitting our stride, but for the last two weeks it seems like something is bothering you."

"I'm fine. Promise," he replies looking at his computer.

I know this is a complete lie. I can see the lie written all over his face and the way he is avoiding my concerns. Maybe he didn't enjoy seeing Alex and me together, but he will have to get over that. I won't hide my relationship because it makes him uncomfortable. I'm not willing to move back into those kinds of old habits. They aren't healthy, and it wouldn't be fair

to anyone if he asked me to do that. It's not like I'll be all over Alex in front of him. I didn't even know he planned to attend the show. I only wanted to affectionately congratulate my boyfriend. I had no intention of rubbing our relationship in his face, so I don't know why he looked upset.

"I know you are lying, Gareth," I blurt out. "I need you to be honest with me. Something is bothering you. You agreed to communicate with me and not dive back into old habits. Please."

He looks at me for a second and goes back to his computer. "It's really nothing at all. It felt weird seeing you kiss Alex. But you looked thrilled, so I need to let it go."

He is beating around the bush because he doesn't want things to get awkward. I don't understand though. He has already moved on with his guy. I don't know why seeing me with my guy would even cause him any stress. I think about letting it slide, but I don't want his emotions keep building and building and have him explode on me again. That wasn't fun for anyone, especially me. I don't want to go through any of that again. So, I push forward.

"I know you aren't telling me everything that is bothering you. Please, tell me what is going through your head," I plead with him.

He stops typing and looks down at his hands. He breathes deeply and sighs. "I miss you and I love you," he says turning to face me.

I'm speechless by this revelation.

“I don’t...” but I don’t get the rest of my thought out before he interrupts.

“You belong with me. I know that in my heart. You don’t belong with Alex. I’m supposed to be your boyfriend. You love me, not him. You need to dump him and be with me again. You are my soulmate. You are wasting your time with him.” He takes another exaggerated breath before continuing. “You told me over and over the universe put us in each other’s lives for a reason, and I feel you ignoring that. Forcing yourself to be with this other guy, who you don’t even like. I know you love me. You belong to me. I love you, and I miss you. I can’t share you with anyone else. We need to stop kidding ourselves. There is a reason we keep finding our way back to each other, so we need to stop fighting the inevitable.”

I’m staring at him, wondering what the fuck is happening. He dumped me and broke my heart. He blamed me for everything. He made me feel worthless and unlovable. He berated me. He drove me to consider harming myself. Yes, he didn’t hold a gun to my head, but his words burrowed deep inside my heart, creating a wave of darkness that contaminated my mind with malicious thoughts. He has a lot of gall to say I don’t care for Alex, and I belong with him. How dare he say any of this.

He tries to interject, but I hold up my hand, cutting him off. “Enough. Please stop. I don’t know what makes you feel you can say any of this to me. You don’t know me at all. You don’t know who I love and who I don’t. You know nothing about my relationship with Alex. You are—”

He screams ferociously at me, interrupting me and making me freeze. “Stop saying his name. He’s nothing.” His face is red with anger; the vein in his forehead is popping out. “He is a blip on your radar. It won’t last. You two don’t have what we have. We have something real—something for the history books. You should recognize the fact he is a minuscule person in your life. He can’t give you what I can. He is an ignorant child, blind to our love. A love that defines logic. You are mine.”

His anger scares me, and I feel this primal urge to get out of here. I grab my bag and turn to him. “I’m done, Gareth. This conversation is over. I knew I shouldn’t have pushed this. You are delusional. I’m sorry, but I don’t love you anymore. I love Alex.” I stop, realizing what I said. I love Alex. I don’t love Gareth. I don’t want to be with Gareth. I want to be with Alex, and I love him.

“Why are you so fucking blind? He is NOTHING!” he screams, making me jump. “Stop saying you love that *person*. You don’t love him. You love me. You and I are fated for each other. I will not share you with that man.”

He stomps toward me, and I’m frozen in fear by his temper. He glares at me. I can feel his warm breath escaping his nose, hitting my face. I know I need to get out of here. I’m frightened, but I can’t push my legs to move. They feel wobbly and immobile. He grabs my face with his two firm hands and pulls me into a kiss. I push him away.

I’m startled by his abruptness. I didn’t ask him to kiss me. I don’t want him to kiss me. All I want is to leave and never

look back. I don't want to see his face ever again. I'm frightened of this monster.

I find the courage and my words. "What do you think you're doing? Don't ki—"

He cuts me off, forcing me into another kiss, pushing me hard against the wall. I feel the air escape my lungs. I'm dizzy from the sudden blow when my back hits the wall. He is stronger than I am. I can't seem to find the strength to get him off of me, even though I attempt to twist and squirm out of his grip. He mashes his face to mine. I smell the stink of his breath, which makes me nauseated. The smell permeating from his body disgusts me. His cologne makes me want to barf.

I feel him harden against my leg. I attempt to say something, but his mouth prohibits the words from escaping. He attempts to force his tongue into my mouth, but I clench my jaw in protest. His hands grip my arms too tightly, making me release a muffled scream against his lips.

He forces his tongue into my mouth. I lash out, biting the tip of his tongue, which only pisses him off even more. He pushes me against the wall even harder. My head bounces against the hard wall. I feel my world spin and my vision blackens for a brief second, but during that moment, I hope all of this is a nightmare. I hope when my eyes refocus I'll be in my bed waking up from a horrible nightmare.

My mind escapes to the incident at the gay club in the city when that guy tried to force himself on me, making me think about how Matt saved me at the club. He would have protected me again tonight. All I can think about is Cydney,

Matt, and Alex being right about Gareth. I never believed Gareth would ever be capable of hurting someone, especially someone he loves.

When my vision clears, my heart sinks as I realize I'm not imagining everything. Tears escape my eyes. My breath becomes erratic, and I feel smothered. I can feel myself shaking against the pressure of his body. I feel defeated, and my body slackens in response. I feel the energy escape my body, evaporating into the air. I never expected I would ever be in this kind of situation again. I want to call out to someone—anyone, but I can't find my voice. I feel weak.

I can feel his erection as he grinds into my leg. He must feel me go limp because he loosens his grip on me. He slides his hand to my ass, roughly squeezing. A moan escapes his lips as a tear drops to my cheek. I want this to stop. I need it to stop. No one is coming to save me, so I have to save myself. I have to take a stand against this monster.

I wait for my moment, forcing myself to relax in his grip. His hold on me loosens, so I seize my opportunity to end this. I don't know where I find the strength, but I slowly bring my arms to his chest and push him forcefully off me. He falls backward, landing against his desk, which sends a loud, metallic thump into the deafening silence.

I fling the door open and as I'm sprinting down the hall, I yell, "I never want to see you again!"

Chapter Thirty

I'M A MESS as I drive. I know I have to meet Alex and my friends at the bar, but I'm a complete wreck. My whole body aches, and I can't stop crying and shaking as I do my best to steer my car. I don't know what to do. I feel violated, but I feel like it's my fault. I shouldn't have pushed him to talk. I shouldn't have even asked. I should have said goodnight and left to meet my friends and my boyfriend. I shouldn't have accepted the position again. I should have distanced myself from Gareth, like Cydney told me to do. I should have listened to my friends. I blindly ventured into the lion's den.

I wail and more tears fall from my eyes. I see through blurred tears I'm over the line and in the other lane of traffic. I steady my car and steer into the correct lane. It takes all the strength I can muster to not let go of the wheel and let my car fly. I could speed up and release my grip on the steering wheel. That would make the pain end.

"I can't believe I trusted him," I scream, slamming my hand against the steering wheel, expecting some kind of response from the universe, but all I receive is shocking silence.

In this moment, I feel exposed and violated. I put myself in this situation, and I alone have to deal with the consequences of my actions. He wins. He has built me up, destroyed me, put all the pieces back together, and demolished me yet again. He has successfully made me feel like I'm at fault for my sadness. I'm the reason for my shame. He took the light from me. It shone so brightly, but now, I feel only icy coldness. I want that

fire back. I want to feel the warmth again. I need help because I'm drowning.

A loud car horn startles me out of my thoughts. I swerve into my lane, barely missing a car in the opposite lane. The driver flips me off as he passes by.

I'm depressed and shaken, but I'm not ready to die or worse, kill someone else. I can't be driving right now. I'm too emotional. I'm running on pure adrenaline, but now, my fear and emotions are taking over.

Tears are rolling down my face. I pull over into an abandoned parking lot. Once more, a primal animal scream forces itself out of my body like a tiger ripping through my throat. I can't breathe. I feel the panic rising, and I need someone to hold me. I need someone to lift me up and take me away from my fucked up life. I want Alex because I know he would protect me and make me feel loved, but I can't bring myself to call him because I don't want him to see me like this. I don't want him to witness this chaotic downward spiral. I need someone. I can't do this on my own. I've been trying for so long to fix myself. I kept myself hidden from the world, but now, I live openly. My friends know my secret, and I need their help if I want to find my footing again.

I grab my phone from my cupholder and text Cydney and Matt because I don't feel like I could even form the words or speak to them over the phone. My fingers fumble with the tiny text boxes because my hands are shaking uncontrollably.

I text a brief response in a group message.

Me: SOS, I need help.

I finish the message with sending my location, so they can locate me. In my state of shock, I lost all sense of direction. I look around to see if I can provide any identifiable landmarks to my friends. I recognize the neon roost sign directly behind me, which belongs to The Highwayman—a local bar and grill frequented by Ashleford residents. I send a quick photo of the rooster to the group chat.

My phone buzzes a few seconds later.

Matt: Hang on. We'll be right there.

I sit in my car, frozen in fear and anguish, waiting for my friends to get here.

I hear them pull up, but I can't bring myself to open the door and step out of the car. Matt pulls my door open. I feel his muscular hands and arms wrap around my body and pull me out of the car. He holds me as I stand there shaking and crying. Cydney embraces both of us. I feel her warmth and heartbeat on my back.

As we stand there in silence, I feel myself calming as if their embrace is the medicine my body needs to relax. Matt and Cydney both squeeze me, their heartbeats and warmth sending waves through me that help calm my nerves. I can feel myself taking control of my emotions.

My tears have stopped flowing, and my breathing has slowed to a steady pace. I feel calmer. This is what I needed. I needed my support system. Had I continued a relationship with Gareth, I don't think I would have had this. I would most likely be living a secret life from everyone I love. I see now that even though I experienced so much heartache this past year, which gave me the courage to reveal myself to my

friends and parents, solidifying our relationship. I pull away from my friends as I feel myself relax, but Matt won't let me go.

“What happened?” Matt asks as he holds me at arm's length.

I steady myself and retell the events that transpired minutes before. They watch me and listen to every word. Cydney rubs my back, and Matt doesn't lose my gaze. They are loyal friends that will always and forever be there for me. I know this and feel it as they pull me into another group hug when I finish my story. I kept my emotions in check as I recounted the events, which surprises me. I feel my strength and courage returning. It is like my friends are sharing their strength.

“We should report this,” Cydney says, but I shake my head no.

“I put myself in this situation. I knew he was unstable, but I still pushed him and pushed myself back into his bubble. I don't want to report this, not because I'm scared of the repercussions, but because I don't want to give that man any more power.” I take a deep breath, filling my lungs. “He no longer exists for me. He's nothing, and I can't let him control my actions anymore.”

“Woody, I think this is something the university should know about. He is supposed to be the more mature adult in this situation. He is the person who should know better.” He pauses before continuing. “This isn't your fault. You aren't at fault for his actions. He is the only person responsible. We should hold him accountable for *his* actions.” He puts a lot of

emphasis on HIS, and I can tell his anger is rising. Not toward me or my statements, but at Gareth. I know if given the chance, Matt would punch Gareth even though Matt has never even harmed a fly.

“Matti is right, Tobi. This isn’t your fault. He did this to you. You didn’t make him force himself on you.” I can hear her pushing back tears, so I pull her closer to me.

“I understand what you guys are saying. I blamed myself after it happened. I let myself sit in my car feeling defeated, but I realize now I’m not weak. I found the strength I needed to push him off of me. Even though I don’t think he would have taken it much further, he still scared me. I think in his mind he feels like we belong together. I can’t allow him to think he still has a place in my life, even if that place is as a villain. He would still be in my life if I reported him. I can’t give him the satisfaction. I can’t let him win anymore. He keeps finding his way back in, so I don’t want him to find another weak spot in my defenses.” I finish talking, and realize I have stopped shaking, and I now have my emotions under control.

Matt hugs me again and then pulls away. “Okay, we will both respect your decision, but he is very lucky he’s not here right now.”

“I know, Matti,” I reply, pulling him into another hug. “Thank you both for coming here. I don’t know what I would have done to myself if you hadn’t.”

“Of course. We will always come,” Cydney says, giving me a big warm grin. “Are you going to tell Alex about this?”

“Yes. I’ll tell him tonight after karaoke.” I promised Alex I would keep nothing from him, so I will not lie to him now.

“We can cancel tonight, bro. Are you sure you feel up to it still?” Matt asks with concern in his voice.

I contemplate his question for a brief second. I feel stronger now that my friends are here. I need to be around people, and I want to see my boyfriend sing again.

I respond with gumption. “I am. I need to be around my friends. I don’t want to be alone, and I think it will be an excellent distraction.”

“Okay, but if you want to bail, Cyd and I will take you home and camp out in your room all night.” Matt gives me a thumbs up, which feeds me confidence.

“Thank you, guys. I love you both,” I say.

“Love you too,” they respond in unison.

Chapter Thirty-One

WE DROP MY car off at my house, and I ride with Cydney and Matt to the karaoke bar. They will not let me out of their sights until we are all together. I'm feeling better, and I'm feeling stronger. I no longer feel like I'm at fault for what happened. I let my fear take control and drag me deeper into the darkness. I dug myself out of that place before, and I'll do it again. I can't let that horrible man win. He can't be part of my story anymore. I might still have to endure his class, but he won't have a personal seat by my side like the people I love. They are my support and my foundation. He's nothing to me anymore.

As I sit in the backseat of Cydney's car, I can't help but feel blessed and lucky to have such wonderful people in my life. I have come so far since I let my loved ones know the real me. That has been the dominant force weighing me down and keeping me in the darkened forest of depression. I let Gareth know the real me, and he showed me cruelty in return. He wanted to possess my spirit and my brightness. I found a flicker of hope when I confessed my troubles to my friends and my family. I experienced hope and love when I opened my heart to Alex. Gareth attempted to snuff my light out again tonight. He isn't a good person, and I can see that now. He showed me what he is capable of, and it is scary. I felt obliterated and vulnerable when I left his office, but with the help of Cydney and Matt, I pulled myself back up again.

Tonight has been cruel, but I'm a firm believer that what doesn't kill us can only make us stronger.

We pull up to the bar, finding a parking spot near Alex, who is waiting outside of his car with Catrina and Jeff. I get out of the car and notice a flask in Jeff's hand. I quickly approach him. He offers me the refreshment, and I take a big swig. I feel Alex's eyes on me, so I turn to face my boyfriend. He's dressed in tight blue shorts with red anchors sewn on them that compliment his legs and butt and a red polo revealing his sexy arms. Alex smiles at me but must sense something is different or wrong with me because it quickly fades.

"Are you okay? Did something happen?" he asks with concern oozing off of him.

"I'm okay now because you are here," I answer. "We will talk after we sing our hearts out, okay? I don't want to ruin tonight for everyone. Tonight is all about music and bonding."

I take another sip of Jeff's flask. The liquid burns my throat as I swallow, but I remember why everyone calls alcohol liquid courage because my body feels like it's on fire.

"Okay," he says nervously, glancing at Cydney and Matt, who shoot him reassuring glances. They promised to let me tell Alex about what happened with Gareth tonight.

I look over at Jeff, handing him the flask back. "Thank you," I say. "I needed that tonight."

Jeff nods at me. "You're welcome, Tobi." He hands the flask to Matt, who takes a swig before passing the flask to Catrina.

Jeff slinks over to Cydney and gives her a sloppy kiss. After Catrina takes a sip, she gives Alex the flask. He

hesitates, staring at me with worry written all over his face.

I send him a cheery grin that must send positive vibes because he relaxes and drinks a swig from the flask. When he swallows, he coughs. I rush toward him, hugging him.

I look into his eyes. “I’m so happy I’m here with you, babe.”

He grins before planting a kiss on my lips. “I’m happy I’m here with you too.”

We all take a few sips from Jeff’s flask to help gain some courage to get up in front of an entire gay bar filled with people and sing.

We make our way toward the bar entrance. I feel relaxed as we walk up to the bar and order sodas. This bar is notorious for carding people because we are so close to campus, so we don’t even try to order alcohol, which is why we pre-gamed with the flask.

We find a table that seats six people as a guy sings an awful rendition of Whitney Houston’s “I Will Always Love You.” He sounds like it hurts him to sing, but who am I to judge? He is singing to some guy who might be his husband, and it is ridiculously sweet. Every person in here wants to have fun and let loose. It doesn’t matter if you sing well or not as long as you have a good time like we are about to do.

We make our way in groups of two to the DJ to pick our song choices. I pick “Defying Gravity” from Wicked because I love musicals, and it feels like the perfect song for me right now. Alex won’t tell me what he selected because it’s a surprise.

The DJ calls Matt's name. He swaggers up to the stage with tons of confidence. He chose "Too Good at Goodbyes" by Sam Smith, and to be honest, he doesn't do half bad. It may be the alcohol on an empty stomach talking, but at least he had the courage to get up there and sing his heart out. When the song ends, he gives a dramatic bow as our group serenades him with rounds of applause.

The DJ calls Cydney next. When the music begins, I cheer because she selected "What I Did for Love" from *A Chorus Line*, which is one of my favorite songs. She blows the house down. She fills every note with pure emotion and raw talent. Her voice could lift any spirit in need of encouragement. I glance over at Jeff, who can't keep his eyes off of her. He is falling for her. And I couldn't be more ecstatic for them. Cydney finishes, belting the last note with so much confidence. She struts toward our table, where Jeff pulls her into a firm embrace. I can see his water-soaked eyes glisten in the bar's dim lighting. He is such a softy, and I couldn't love him more.

Jeff is next, and he goes for "Friends in Low Places" by Garth Brooks, another fantastic selection from our group. We are on a roll with our song choices. His raspy country twang comes out as he sings. He is doing a magnificent job for someone who says he doesn't like to sing. I mean, he will not win *The Voice* or *American Idol*, but he is bringing it with this country track.

When he finishes, Cydney rushes toward him before he leaves the stage. She gives him a big encouraging hug. He grabs her hand and heads back to our table. We give him more claps, showing him a job well done.

The DJ soon calls Catrina's name. She chooses "Beautiful Trauma" by P!nk, which is another great pick, especially for her. Her voice has a slight rasp to it that gives her the P!nk edginess needed to pull off that song. She adds a few dance moves to her rendition making her look like the star she is.

Matt keeps throwing hoots and hollers in her direction. His eyes don't leave her performance. He is falling for her, which brings tears to my eyes. I'm so happy my dearest friend has found someone that brings him so much joy. Catrina finishes and swaggers over to our table, sitting on Matt's lap.

"You were amazing." I hear Matt whisper in her ear. Her face lights up.

I'm called up to the stage, and I feel nervous. I stand there with the microphone in my hand as "Defying Gravity" from the musical, *Wicked*, plays. I start off quiet, feeling less confident than when I entered the bar. I have an okay voice, but it's nothing compared to Cydney's and Alex's voices.

I glance over at Alex, who has his hands clasped together and the biggest smile I have never seen him wear. His affectionate face fuels a fire inside me. I feel the confidence rise from the ashes. I go for it and give it my all. I'm through with being weak. I'm through with letting dipshits cause me pain. I belt the portion of the song that speaks of letting no one bring us down, especially a lying wizard, or in my case, a cruel ex-boyfriend.

I fill each word with so much emotion, letting myself feel like I'm conquering all of my fears and defying gravity. When I finish, my friends stand up clapping, and Cydney has tears in her eyes.

As I head toward my friends, I feel more alive than I have ever felt. I feel weightless, like nothing is holding me down anymore. It is truly an amazing feeling to let go of all the hurt and cruelty.

Alex's name gets called. As he stands, he squeezes my shoulder and kisses me. When he gets on stage, he holds the microphone in his hand, and I see the DJ give him a thumbs up. He has something planned. He opens his mouth, and I think he is about to sing, but there isn't any music.

"I want to dedicate this song to a very special guy in my life. Tobi, this song is for you, and I hope it shows you how much you mean to me."

The music begins, and I recognize the melody right away. It is "The Story" by Brandi Carlile, which is one of my favorite songs. When he sings, the entire world around us fades away, leaving only him and me in the bar. He looks at me with love in his eyes, and I feel a tingle run through my body.

The song is pure poetry that sings about genuine love, blessed by the stars. A love that transcends time. It reflects on how there are people in our lives that don't allow us to see who we truly are, but there is always one person who can see all of our scars. They don't run from us because of the hideous scars from our past. They embrace our faults and our struggles. The universe made these people to love us.

As I sit listening to my boyfriend serenade me with my favorite love song, I'm filled with so many emotions. His voice is so beautiful. I heard him sing in the show, but not like this. This is so much more. This is his anthem to our

relationship. This is him singing to me he loves me with all of his heart, and I feel every word and every note. I realized early tonight I love him, but his song makes me fall in love with him all over again. He is the man of my dreams, and I love him with all of heart and with every fiber of my being.

He sings the last part with so much emotion, choking back tears. I realize I'm crying too. My friends are looking from Alex to me. Matt gives me a wink and mouths, "He loves you, Woody," which makes me grin.

When the song ends, Alex stands there and says, "I love you, Tobi."

He walks toward me, and we embrace and kiss and I say "I love you too" as the entire bar erupts into claps and cheers.

I see Cydney's face drain to a ghostly white out of the corner of my eyes. As I give her a concerned look, I feel someone grab my shoulder.

I turn to face Gareth, and my world spins like I'm on a carnival ride that is going in circles too rapidly. I feel like I have no control. I'm standing in a permanent nightmare where Gareth is my Freddy Krueger. I'm frozen and can't seem to move. I realize I'm holding my breath, so I let the air escape my lungs as I urge my body to keep me breathing even though I feel helpless in this moment.

Gareth's hand squeezes my shoulder. "Tobias, I want to apologize for kissing you earlier. I felt something between us, and I needed to act on it. I couldn't ignore our chemistry any longer. You and I both know our love is forever." His voice rings throughout the entire bar.

He says it loud enough so Alex can hear. Alex lets go of my hand. I look at him, pleading, but he puts his hand up, stopping the words in my throat.

“Stop. Just stop.” He runs out of the bar.

I turn to Gareth. Finding my voice again, I say with so much anger, “You did that on purpose, you fucking asshole. You can’t see me happy. You force yourself on someone and violate them until they feel like they deserved it. I never gave you the okay. My actions didn’t say ‘Come and get it.’ Everything from my words to my body language said ‘NO,’ but you wouldn’t take no for an answer. You are pathetic, and I hate you with all of my being.” I take a breath and continue, “You disgust me. Last fall, I thought you were the man of my dreams, but you broke me. You made me believe you loved me, and you made me fall for you. Then you destroyed me, and you were okay with playing with my emotions. You made me believe I’m the only reason for our issues. I’m the reason we broke up, I’m the reason you treated me like trash. I’m the reason you forced yourself on me. I need you to leave. I need you to leave and never talk to me ever again. The smell of you makes me sick. Please go. I can’t be near you anymore.”

I realize I’m yelling, and the entire bar is watching us. I look up and see Alex standing in the doorway with tears in his eyes. He walks over to me before turning toward Gareth, giving him a death stare. Gareth reaches for me again. I feel my fingers tighten into a fist and before I know it, my fist connects with Gareth’s chin. Pain shoots through my right hand and arm, but the look of shock on Gareth’s face makes the pain worth it.

Matt fills the gap between Gareth and me. “Don’t you ever come near my brother again. Do you hear me? I will end you.” He spits at the ground near Gareth.

Gareth holds the right side of his face, gets up, and swiftly exits the bar. Everyone else in the bar looks at us, not sure what happened before going back to their nights with some lady singing “Fancy” by Reba McIntire, but Alex, Cydney, and Matt pull me into a hug. Jeff and Catrina get up and come over to us and join our embrace.

We all let go of each other. Alex holds my gaze. “I’m sorry I ran out before you gave your side of the story, which is why I came back. I had a flashback of my last breakup. I thought it was all happening again, but when I got outside, I remembered you aren’t Aaron. You are Tobi, and you would never screw me over like that. I came back to hear your side when I heard you explode on Gareth. Are you sure you’re okay?”

I grab hold of his hand. “I’m so sorry you had to hear that from someone else and not me. I didn’t want to ruin our night, so I thought we could talk about it after karaoke. I didn’t mean for you to find out like this. I wanted to be the one to tell you. I love you more than anything, Alex. I hope you know that.” I take a breath. “Gareth means nothing to me. You are the man I love.”

Alex kisses me. “I know, and I love you too, Tobi.”

We hug, and when we exit our warm embrace, I look at the others in our group. “Okay, we can’t let this ruin our evenings. Let’s get tonight back on track,” I say sitting down at our table and wiping tears from my face. Alex sits down beside me and squeezes my hand.

“Woody, you and I will sing ‘Goodbye, Earl,’ right?” Matt asks.

“Hell, yes, we will!” I say with lots of excitement.

We all laugh and make our way up to the DJ to select our other songs. As I sit, waiting for the DJ to call our names, I think to myself this is where I belong. These are my people. They fill my heart with so much joy and give me a reason to keep marching through life. I truly am blessed to be here in this world. I never thought I would be here a year ago. My fears made me feel like I would be in the closet forever. It took courage and trust to find my way out of that darkness.

I send a silent thank you to the universe for teaching me so many important lessons and gifting me the people in my life. I know that life will never be perfect, and it will be chaotic and stressful, but because of everything I have been through this year, I’m more prepared and better equipped to take on whatever the universe puts in my path.

Acknowledgements

From the Universe to Me is a very personal story for me, which made it difficult to write. It made me revisit personal heartbreaks and traumas that I've experienced in my own life. Writing this story allowed me the opportunity to look back on my life and the experiences that have shaped who I am. I wouldn't say putting this story into words helped me heal, but it made me feel more hopeful about the future. I came out as gay in my midtwenties. Coming out is never an easy process, which is why I wanted to explore a story about a boy just starting college who is just now taking the time to really listen to his heart, learning to embrace every part of himself, and overcome trauma with the help of his family and friends. Not every person who comes out as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, nonbinary, etc. has a pleasant experience when they speak their truths aloud, which is why I think stories like Tobias's story are important.

This book would not have happened if I didn't have the support of some very important people.

I would like to thank my two beta readers, David and Katy. Your friendships mean the world to me.

David, thank you for sticking by me since preschool. I love being able to share our creativity with each other without fear of judgment. You are the most creative person I know. You inspired me to pursue my dream of writing.

Katy, thank you for being the best twin in the world. You are my soundboard, support system, mental health buddy, reading

buddy, and my platonic soulmate. Thank you for always being there!

About Scott E. Garrison

Scott E. Garrison is a debut author, who wants to share new, queer stories with the world. He currently lives in the Oklahoma City, OK area.

Alongside writing, he has a Masters in Library and Information Studies and works as a Librarian Manager for an Oklahoma-based library system. He spends his free time reading, baking, watching movies and TV shows with his husband, and cuddling with his dogs, Jarvis and F.R.I.D.A.Y.

Email

segarrisonauthor@gmail.com

Twitter

[@scott_thenerd](https://twitter.com/scott_thenerd)

Website

www.scottgarrison.com

Instagram

www.instagram.com/scott_the librarian



Connect with NineStar Press

Website: NineStarPress.com

Facebook: [NineStarPress](https://www.facebook.com/NineStarPress)

Facebook Reader Group: [NineStarNiche](https://www.facebook.com/groups/NineStarNiche)

Twitter: [@ninestarpres](https://twitter.com/ninestarpres)

Instagram: [NineStarPress](https://www.instagram.com/NineStarPress)