



Let me
LOVE
you

GIANNI HOLMES

LET ME LOVE YOU

**Formerly Falling for Mr. Corporate & My Dear Mr.
Corporate**

GIANNI HOLMES

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Gianni
HOLMES
A U T H O R

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WARNING

This book contains material that is intended for a mature adult audience. It contains graphic language and sexual content that is not suitable for anyone below the age of 18. Trigger content includes the death of a spouse and child and subsequent grief.

BLURB

What happens when a guy who constantly needs rescuing meets his Prince not-so-Charming?

After bailing on his corporate kingdom due to a very public outing, the last thing Tate expects is to bump into temptation in the woods. A five-feet-four, one-hundred-and-twenty-pound guy who resembles a damsel in distress. In other words, Tate's kryptonite.

When a sprained ankle leaves him trapped in the woods, Bryan has no option but to accept help from the only man within miles. But there's just so much to do in a cabin before boredom kicks in. With only one bed, one brooding, inexperienced hunk, and a few days for his injury to heal, would it be so bad to try for a little entertainment?

Just when Tate starts opening up to Bryan, an unexpected turn of events throws Bryan in the face of danger. To rescue him this time, Tate must leave his fortress to return to society. Will their brief encounter in the woods be enough for them to survive what lurks in the city?

Full of playful banter, lingerie, high heels, a slight age gap, devious friends, stubborn exes, mystery and intrigue, this book will give you a thrilling, swoony experience.

Please note, this approximately 100k word book was previously published as *Falling for Mr. Corporate* and *My Dear Mr. Corporate*. Over 20k words were added to the story for a dual POV of the section that was formerly *Falling for Mr. Corporate*.

LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

Sometimes when we start a journey, we have no idea where we are really going and how we will get there. This was my experience when I started writing and publishing M/M romance. I was just writing something I enjoyed, and I had fun, but then as I progressed on my journey, I realized there was so much more. That I was taking people on the journey with me, and I needed to do more to have those people enjoy the ride as well.

Therefore, I've revamped this series to give them the polish they truly deserve. Formerly published under the titles *Falling for Mr. Corporate* and *My Dear Mr. Corporate*, these books are now combined with a second POV added for the first thirty percent of the book. Previously, the first 20k words was a novella, a prequel to *My Dear Mr. Corporate*. Now the prequel will be a part of the novel for a more enriching experience.

What was previously *Corporate Bondage* and the third book will now be known as *Let Me Hate You*. Additionally, a new third book will be added to the series, which will be released shortly.

If you've read these books, I hope you'll enjoy them more the second time around. And if you haven't, then you're about to experience the usual Gianni effect—age gap, intense passion, and surprises thrown your way.

Enjoy

Gianni Holmes

LET ME LOVE YOU

PART 1

I'd had an unsteady feeling in my gut all day, and by the time I stepped out onto my porch after dinner, I was convinced something was off. A flock of birds rose from the trees, not flying leisurely as they normally would. These were frightened off, scattering in the distance to find another clump of trees to settle down before night fell.

I frowned and tongued the toothpick in my mouth out of habit. When a man was alone for most of the three hundred and sixty-five days that made a year, he took pleasure in odd things. In my case, the familiar prick of the toothpick against my tongue reminded me I was alive.

Whatever had startled the birds seemed too close to me for comfort. I cocked my ears, but only the familiar sounds of nature—rustling leaves, twittering birds, and some scurrying, a squirrel probably—reached me. While I couldn't hear anything specific, I could tell they were alone, and they weren't too far away.

Had they successfully found me this time? I'd been careful the last time I drove to the city to stock up on groceries. Surely, they hadn't followed me here. That was the last thing I wanted—the only place where I had any peace of mind to become desecrated.

I returned inside and found my boots, irritated that the unexpected had upset my routine. People hiked up the trail, but none had ever been this close to my cabin, and it made me nervous. This area wasn't popular as it bordered private territory. Mine. Not to mention the trees were way thicker than

elsewhere in the woods, and one could easily become lost here.

So far, I hadn't had to play rescuer yet, and I preferred it that way. The fewer people who knew where I was, the better.

Before I went outside, I grabbed my shotgun and checked the chamber to ensure it was loaded and ready. A man alone in the woods couldn't be careful of the animals that roamed around these parts. Both of the four-legged and two-legged variety.

I left the clearing where the cabin was located and trotted toward the trees from where the birds had taken flight. My aim wasn't to run into anyone to exchange a hello. I just needed to get close enough to check whoever was disturbing the natural order of things wasn't a potential threat to me or my environment. The last thing I needed was a forest fire.

I couldn't lose this cabin too.

My progress was slow as I paused regularly to listen for any odd sounds. The foliage and trees made it simple enough to keep out of sight. It wasn't long until loud and raucous voices drifted in the air. Three tall, broad guys trampled through the trees in my direction. I quickly crouched behind a huge tree trunk, and they passed a few feet from me without seeing me. One guy dug out an energy bar and threw the wrapper onto the ground.

Whoever they were, I didn't like this at all. I hoped like hell they were just passing through and would be heading back down soon. I was boiling with rage and struggled not to shout at them. How can they be so disrespectful to the environment? They had barely gotten here, and already they were littering the forest. Did they think garbage trucks stopped by to pick up after them?

"You're such a fucking pig." One guy laughed. "Fucking your brother's widow like that. He's not even cold in the ground yet."

"We buried the fucker," the guy munching on the energy bar said with his mouth full. "Plus, he knew I wanted her when

he married her. Now she's fair game."

"Was it at least good pussy?"

"Meh. A little sloppy but she has a sweet little ass."

The other two men laughed, the one closest to him saying something I didn't catch. I started moving from the trunk, but then a fourth man came into view, huffing and puffing.

"You're walking too fast!" he protested. "Slow down. My legs aren't—eek! Something moved in the bushes!"

Shit.

I ducked back behind the trunk, shifting to the left so they wouldn't spot me. I peered out. Two slender legs in ridiculous pink-checked socks scrambled by to reach the other men. The young man was overdressed in a pair of white golf shorts and a hot pink polo shirt tucked into the waistband like he was a goddamn prep kid.

"I swear I saw something move." His voice was strained as he caught up to the other men.

"You've got an overactive imagination there, Bree Bree," the man who'd been bragging about nailing his brother's widow said.

"My name's Bryan."

"But I think Bree Bree suits you much better. Whad'ya say, fellas?"

More laughing ensued, this time obviously at the younger man's expense. He glanced over his shoulder, then trailed after the others as if he'd rather be anywhere but here with them.

From their hiking backpacks, they weren't exactly heading back down the trail anytime soon. As I followed them, I found two more food wrappers. I cursed beneath my breath. Of course, karma hadn't sent responsible campers my way this time. That would be too easy, and my life had to be a constant test.

I allowed them to get a good distance ahead of me, especially since the youngest man kept checking over his

shoulder like he expected something to spring out at him. I could almost smell his fear, and if I could sense it, the other predators in the forest would too.

He was prime prey.

After a few minutes, I came to a sudden stop. They'd cornered some animal hiding in a fallen and rotten tree trunk, and they were having fun at the animal's expense. One man had found a stick and kept poking it inside.

Judging by the panicked cry, it must have been a rabbit. I was about to surge forward when the younger man suddenly grabbed the stick.

"Stop that! That's just mean."

Mr. Boast-About-Fucking-His-Brother's-Widow turned his attention to the younger man. The tension between them was palpable. He was so much bigger I expected the smaller man to back down, but in an amazing show of bravado, he stood his ground. The biggest of the three men stomped over and stopped beside prep kid.

"Let go, Bryan."

"No, tell him he's being mean." The young man's voice was well modulated and clear. Somehow it matched his selfless act of standing up for an animal.

"We're not actually hurting him," the man said.

"You're traumatizing it," Bryan said and yanked on the stick. "It's going to be night soon. Shouldn't we be making camp?"

The man dropped the stick but glared at the younger man. "Are you going to fuck up every fun thing we plan to do? Because that won't make me happy."

"N-no, of course n-not."

Instead of responding to the guy they called Bree Bree, the man frowned at the one who'd intervened. "You need to put a leash on your employee, Keith. I'm here to have fun."

“Everybody’s going to have fun. Let’s just find a decent spot and set up camp.”

They trudged on, and as soon as they were a few feet away, a baby black-tailed jack rabbit hopped from the rotten branch and darted into some thick foliage. At least one man seemed to have some conscience, but he didn’t have much support.

They arrived at a clearing that seemed to have been used repeatedly for a camping spot. From a distance, I watched the younger man as he dropped his backpack away from the others. While they laughed and chatted, he kept to himself, looking lonely. Utterly miserable.

I frowned. It didn’t make sense. The forest didn’t seem like his kind of environment, and these men obviously didn’t want him around. Why had he come with them?

As I observed him, the other men remained at the periphery of my mind. This Bryan guy reminded me of some men I’d known in a former life. He looked smart and dainty. From the way he dusted at his shorts, he didn’t find the dirt particularly humorous either.

The shorts he had on might not have been practical for camping, but they made his smooth legs look good. Plus, they were a bit snug, and when he moved, the fabric stretched over his butt. It wasn’t an unpleasant sight, even if I felt a little pervy watching him like this.

“How do you make this stupid thing work?” he cried out in frustration.

“Having some trouble, Bree Bree?”

Bryan’s shoulders stiffened. Clearly, he didn’t like the nickname. How had he ended up with these dicks? He was... different.

“I’ll manage,” he said through gritted teeth.

He didn’t. As soon as he straightened up, the tent collapsed. Then the guy, Keith, sidled over to him while the other two men drank beer and were talking loudly. They either

didn't notice or didn't care what was happening on the other side of the clearing. Probably the latter.

“Are you kidding me, Bryan? You can't put up a simple tent?”

“You told me you'd help me. I already said I couldn't do any of this.”

“I thought you were kidding. You know, just wanted me to act the hero and shit. Is that what this is about because I know you love to get attention.”

“I really need help with the tent, Keith.”

“All right, I'll help, but for god's sake, Bryan. Can you be a little less...”

“A little less, what?”

“You know, you.”

Bryan crossed his arms across his chest, two bright spots appearing on his cheeks. “What's that supposed to mean?”

“It can't kill you to man up for three days, can it?” The younger man gasped. “Or if you can't do that, try not to get in the way.”

“I wish you'd never asked me to come,” he hissed.

The man checked over his shoulder, but the other two men didn't pay them any mind.

“Because I may need your oral skills while I'm here.”

Gay. Now it made sense. The smaller guy was obviously Keith's boyfriend, and Keith had taken him with him on their camping trip. And from what I could see, it was the first time. He didn't fit in. His boyfriend should have helped him to adjust, but all he seemed to have done was join in his friends' hilarity.

“Keith—”

“Don't be a buzzkill, Bry. I was just joking.”

But from the looks of his boyfriend's face, he wasn't convinced. Neither was I. I crept back slowly, then stood up

and returned to my cabin, but I'd be back later to ensure these men had extinguished their campfire before they holed up for the night in their tents. I didn't trust the assholes to do it themselves.

BRYAN

Anger and disappointment coursed through me at the three men who had no qualms about laughing at me right to my face. I was the only person in the group who didn't find their jokes funny. If they expected me to laugh along just to fit in, they were in for a rude awakening.

I couldn't believe these were grown-ass men and not five-year-olds. I could shrug off their childish jokes, including labeling me a sissy at every opportunity. I'd endured enough name-calling through my high school years. College had been better, and I had grown out of the teasing. But even then, sometimes those lame jokes would annoy the shit out of me. As they did today.

Apparently, me squealing because my hand touched some unidentified slimy insect was Dave Chapelle hilarious. They didn't mock me because I was gay. They mocked because I dared to be gay *and* effeminate.

"I can't believe you right now," I snarled at my supposed-to-be boyfriend and my boss, Keith Eardley, who should have had my back. When he first asked me, I'd turned down the offer of going backpacking through the woods with his college friends, but he'd guilt-tripped me into changing my mind.

Usually, Keith made this yearly trip with his three best friends, but one of them had fallen ill. I was a hasty addition to the group because Keith had insisted there should be four of us to keep with tradition. More likely that the possessive bastard didn't want to leave me at home, where he couldn't keep me under lockdown. Yeah, his idea of a joke.

At least I'd thought it was a joke, but now I was having second thoughts.

I was hopeless with these adventure-type activities. Hiking was not my thing. Neither was playing sports. *They* didn't consider tennis to be a sport. They were all into football, which I didn't understand—a bunch of men jumping onto each other when sex wasn't involved. Every time Keith had cajoled me, I had cringed until I'd caved in and watched a game with him. I still didn't get it.

“Come on, Bryan, it was just a joke,” Keith said, still wearing that stupid grin on his face.

I glared at him. He was the one who had insisted I hiked with them. Him treating me this way was unacceptable. A lot of things he had been doing lately was unacceptable. Like when he hired me to be his personal assistant at work. I'd thought he had promoted me because he saw my potential and drive. He'd promoted me all right, right into his bed.

No one knew he was gay. He had this decent cover-up going on. When he'd started hitting on me, brushing my ass, and touching me inappropriately, I had been surprised. And I could usually spot a gay man a mile away. To have him join in the gay jokes with his buddies was just cruel when he was as into men as I was. But because he was bigger, thicker, and could hunt, shoot, and drink several cans of beer and still walk straight, he could fit in with the big boys.

Keith didn't like being called out, and I should have taken that as a warning, but I'd been stupidly infatuated by the boss taking an interest in me. Although we were into a six-month-old relationship, he still didn't consider himself gay because only bottoms were truly gay. His words.

Any healthy man would be up for sticking their dick in this sweet ass. That was his usual joke while he slapped my cheeks. At first, I'd found it cute, certain he was just playing around. This was what I got for not taking him seriously.

I was in a relationship with an inconsiderate asshole, but this...*this* was the last straw. I had feelings too. I wasn't just a asshole for him to fuck.

Without a word to him, I stalked off toward my tent, the same tent Keith had slipped into last night. As soon as his friends were sleeping, he had hauled me out of the tent and insisted for me to blow him, jizzing all over my face before he returned to his tent without even so much as giving me a hand with my erection.

I didn't take down nor pack up the tent. I wouldn't have any use for it anyway. No, I simply retrieved my backpack and crawled out.

“Come on, Bree Bree,” Lance jeered at me. He sat on a huge branch—big enough to hold what looked like three hundred pounds of solid muscle—his face flushed from laughing. He gasped, shoulders shaking. “Can't you take a joke? We just want to make a proper man out of you.”

“I am a proper man, you fucking asshole,” I threw at him. “I'm confident enough in that not to have to overcompensate like you jerks. Fuck you.”

I was pissed that grown men were acting in such a disgusting and childish manner. Kids could be excused for their cruelty out of ignorance, but these bigoted jerks should know better.

His laugh dried up immediately, and narrowing his eyes, he surged to his feet and marched toward me. My heart galloped in my chest. He was almost twice my height of five foot four inches. He could knock me out with those giant fists of his, but I stood my ground despite my trembling knees.

“What did you say to me?” he growled.

I took a step back, and Keith finally stopped laughing. He inserted his equally tall frame between me and his buddy. His help came just a little too late. This situation could have been helped had he told his lapdogs to quit fucking with me.

“Come on, Lance, he didn't mean it,” Keith said, frowning at me. “He's just upset. Let him cool off, and then he'll apologize.”

Shaking my head in disbelief, I stalked off blindly, angry tears welling in my eyes. I didn't care it was my first time in

the woods, and I could get lost. All I wanted was to be as far away from these men as possible.

As soon as I was down the mountain and arrived at Keith's house, I would clear out all my belongings. I bet his friends didn't know I'd been living with Keith for two weeks now. He'd persuaded me to move in with him when my lease was up. We went to work in two separate cars. All the warning signs had been there. So stupid.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

The only time I ever ended up in Keith's arms was when we were alone. I'd thought to give him some time to acknowledge us, but now I refused to be his dirty little secret anymore.

He also could get abusive, although he'd never lashed out at me with anything more than words. But I'd sensed the anger in him before if he thought another man was flirting with me. I usually laughed it off, but this time, he'd gone too far. If he didn't want to lose me, he should be treating me differently.

I'd never felt such a mix-up of emotions in my life since I left high school. I never thought that at twenty-two, I would be in a toxic relationship with a man who was so deep in the closet he wouldn't have trouble finding Narnia. I hadn't been straight since Louise Peltman tried to shove her tongue down my mouth at our school dance our last year at middle school. When I'd hurled that night's dinner on her dress, I'd never felt so free. To finally accept the truth that I was a happy gay dude just looking for love.

Always finding it in the wrong damn place.

“Bryan, wait! Bryan!”

At the sound of Keith's voice, I trudged on faster, already a little out of breath. Would I even make it off this damn mountain? The people on TV always made hiking seem so easy.

Nature's so cool. Be one with the trees. Bullshit.

“Jesus Christ, Bryan, will you slow down!” Keith had reached me and tugged at my arm.

I yanked my arm out of his hand and came to a violent stop. “Leave. Me. Alone.”

“You’re sulking. And usually I’d find it attractive, but not here. Why are you mad? They’re just messing with you.”

“You brought me here under false pretenses!” I snapped.

“How’d you figure that?”

“You never told me you were bringing me on this little hike of yours so you could all make me the butt of your jokes!”

“You are not the butt of all our jokes.”

“Oh yes, that’s right.” I rolled my eyes. “Only like ninety percent of it. What happened to you telling me it didn’t matter if I didn’t know the first thing about being in the woods, that you’d be there for me?”

“I am here for you. I came after you, didn’t I?”

He grabbed me by the front of my shirt and pulled me into him, clamping his mouth onto mine. Suckered for a minute, I kissed him back, moaning as his hands ran over the front of my jeans. Then my common sense returned, and I jerked away, fending off his touch.

“I can’t do this anymore.” I blinked at the tears gathering in my eyes. Tears for yet another failed relationship. For crumbling dreams of finding the right man. “I won’t be the person you get to use as you see fit. I’ll be packing up my stuff as soon as I get out of this hellhole and back to your condo.”

“Come on, Bryan, don’t do this.”

“It’s over between us, Keith.” I marched off again, pushing him and this experience behind me.

Oh god, will this impact my job?

“Like hell it is,” he spat and grabbed me by the arm again; this time so hard it hurt. “This isn’t over until I say so. Get your ass back up at the camp.”

“Go to hell!” I shoved against him with every ounce of strength I could summon. I must’ve caught him by surprise

because he let go, or maybe he just indulged me to prove that I wasn't going anywhere. What did I care? I ran.

“You'll never make it off this mountain without me,” he shouted after me. “I'll give you until nightfall to find your ass back to camp.”

BRYAN

I was hopelessly lost. I'd been walking for over an hour, and the thickness of the trees hadn't become any less dense. And my new, very expensive phone was no use at all. I hadn't had a signal for miles. My heart was beating furiously in my chest, and I was fighting hard to keep frustrated tears at bay. The straps of my backpack cut into my shoulders, and my feet were killing me. My shoes looked great, but they are useless for hiking. Who knew?

I felt like I was in Jumanji, one die throw away from the release of the rhinos.

At one point, I'd tried making my way back to Keith and the camp, but that had proven futile too. All around me were rocks and trees and more trees. Each step I took reminded me how much I hated nature. Dumb, I knew, but I was miserable and sweaty. Occasionally I'd spotted a deer and furry creatures scurrying into the groves of bushes, but not one living soul.

I refused to get hysterical about the prospect of running into a bear or a wolf or a coyote. Were there coyotes here? Maybe I should've brought a gun, but I hated guns. Anyway, it was too late now.

I continued carefully, trying to make sense of the trees, but they all looked alike. Just as I was about to give up and slumped on a tree trunk, admitting defeat, I spotted a track, like someone traveled there often and had left their mark. Feeling more energized, although I was sweaty and needed a bath, I followed the dirt track.

Something had to be up ahead for this path to be so used.

Oh god, please don't let it be the hideout for Jack the Ripper.

When I cleared the trees, I found a sprawling log cabin. I was so overjoyed I could cry. My legs were killing me, and my throat was parched. All I wanted was a drink of water and directions to the main road. Once there, I should get a signal, and I could call a cab company to pick me up.

I was almost at the steps of the porch when I heard the unmistakable cock of a gun.

“What the hell are you doing on my property?”

I turned around slowly with my hands in the air, my heart pounding in my chest. I prayed that whoever it was would listen first and shoot after. Or none at all. Preferably the latter.

“Please don't shoot.”

I stared at the man standing in front of me. The menacing-looking hulk was tall, a couple of inches over six feet. His skin was bronze as if it had been kissed by the sun. His long, lustrous, black hair extended past his shoulders, and a full growth of beard covered his face.

Something about the man hit me straight in the gut, which it shouldn't. He looked like he was in the same league as Keith and his friends. With his black jeans, black boots, tight black T-shirt, and black hieroglyphic tattoos circling his bulging biceps, he looked earthy and raw, fitting right in with his surroundings.

I did not.

“Don't shoot,” I croaked. How can I admire a man holding a gun against me, instead of pleading for my life? “I-I didn't mean to trespass. I got lost, and I'm trying to find my way back to the main road.”

He didn't acknowledge me but shifted his gun. I clenched my eyes shut. *Please, please, don't shoot.*

BANG.

Then a shriek. But not from me. I opened my eyes. The man wasn't looking at me but at something behind me. I spun around. I had been right. There were coyotes here, although now one less.

What the hell is this place? I needed to get out of here before nightfall.

“Jesus!” I cried and stumbled backward. “Thanks.”

“I didn't do it for you,” the bearded man said, his voice gruff and unwelcoming. “Just figured it would be less of a mess burying an animal than a human.”

I flinched at the viciousness in his words. This was exactly what I'd been avoiding. Best not to get entangled with a man like this at all.

“I'm just trying to get to the main road.” I wiped my sweaty forehead with the back of my hand. “Can you point me in the right direction?”

He didn't respond but pinned me with a glare and gave me such a thorough once-over I blushed like the night I'd lost my virginity. His gaze swept over me from my hair, over my black shirt neatly tucked in burgundy Royal Robbins hiking shorts, to my shoes. I knew what he saw, and it rarely bothered me, but now I felt myself becoming defensive as I prepared for a sexist comment. But it didn't come. Instead, I picked up a strange vibe from him. Was that interest in his eyes? Before I could get a good read on him, he schooled his features.

“It's going to rain,” he said. “You'll never beat it down the mountain.”

I glanced up at the clear sky, then back at him dubiously. “I'll take my chances. Just want to get out of this hellhole.”

“If that's how you felt, what the hell are you doing here in the first place?” he snapped.

I flushed at his angry tone. “Look, I didn't mean to insult your home. I'm very progressive and supportive of people's different life choices. Just not all of us wish to live like cavemen. Can you just tell me how to reach the main road? And I'll get out of your hair.”

His long black gorgeous hair. I imagined plunging my fingers into the thick mass while he was kissing me. How would his beard feel against my smooth skin?

Shit, I really need to get my head examined. No way am I going to dump Keith for his alpha bullshit and run into the arms of the most macho man I've ever seen.

“Fine.” He sighed. I missed half of what he said because I was too busy looking at him.

“I’d advise against it, though. As I said, it’s going to rain soon, and it gets pretty bad fast.”

“Thanks,” I told him and hurried in the direction he had pointed out. Forget my aching feet, my sweaty body, and my parched throat. I had to get away from him, from this mountain, and back to my regular corporate lifestyle.

He was even more gorgeous up close. My first glimpses of him hadn't done him justice, and even though I'd been clued in then that he was above average in appearance, I was still struck by the beautiful face that radiated fear, irritation, and exhaustion.

Given the way he'd defended that jack rabbit, I had every intention of returning his kindness until...

"Just want to get out of this hellhole."

This hellhole was my home, so it was only natural for his words to rub me the wrong way. Plus, I couldn't get the image out of my mind of him allowing that Keith guy to use him like the way he had last night. I'd just gotten to the camp thinking they were asleep when I saw them sneaking off.

They'd been so close to me, Bryan dropping to his knees and accepting that douchebag's cock into his mouth like he was dying for it. The act had angered me, although I'd told myself it was mere disappointment that the same boy who'd stood up for a defenseless jackrabbit actually liked that man.

He was just as bad as them. Or maybe a little better, but not much for me to feel bad for him and how miserable he was right now.

He should have better taste in men.

Well, you're no catch either, Prince Not-so-Charming.

"If that's how you felt, what the hell are you doing here in the first place?" I growled the words at him.

His face turned red, and he shifted nervously, putting his weight on his other foot. His hand came up to brush his hair with slender fingers.

What the hell did he do? Bring a bottle of mousse with him? There was no way hair fell so perfectly without some help.

Seeing him in what I considered my environment only reminded me of my own unkempt appearance. My overgrown hair falling down my shoulders and my beard, which badly needed a shave. I hadn't bothered, as they were a great way to disguise myself when I went into the city. Although I made the trip just once a month, it was a nuisance.

"Look, I didn't mean to insult your home." He cringed, his shoulders drooping a bit. "I'm very progressive and supportive of everyone's life choices. Just not all of us wish to live like cavemen. Can you just tell me how to reach the main road? And I'll get out of your hair."

Just when I'd started feeling sorry for him again. I had the strong urge to turn him over my knees, pull his pants down, and spank his ass. That startled me, but the arousal that had flamed in my stomach died when I saw the way he stared at my hair.

Was he turning up his nose at me in that pretty head of his?

Fine, if he wanted off this mountain, then I'd get him off. I quickly laid out the direction for him, mentally shaking my head at his lost look. Was he even hearing anything I said?

"I'd advise against it, though," I added as a note of caution. "As I said, it's going to rain soon, and it gets pretty bad fast."

I hadn't been able to go out much because of the inclement weather. The days were fair at first and then the rain clouds gathered fast. As much as I hated the idea of having him around, I couldn't in good faith send him prancing down the mountain in those ridiculous shorts. Had they always been that tiny, or was my mind shrinking them, hoping for a glimpse of his ass?

“Thanks.” His tone was curt and dismissive as he turned his back to me and took the path I’d mentioned.

He must have been listening, then.

I watched him go, debating whether I should try harder to convince him to stay. Since I had this log cabin built and came to live here, no one else had been there. That was the way I wanted it, far away from the world with its judgments and condemnations.

He disappeared into the trees, and I shrugged. At least I tried to warn him. I’d done enough. I turned around to the dead animal I now had the pleasure of burying.

Fuck.

He didn’t have anything to protect him against a damn coyote. What if he encountered something else along the way? If only I were the heartless bastard everyone thought I was.

I got the shovel from inside and, as quickly as I could, dug a hole deep enough to bury the animal. The last thing I needed was for other predators to smell the stench of death and track it to the log cabin. I would deal with animals if I came upon them, but I didn’t relish them being close by.

By the time I finished, the city boy would have almost half an hour head start on me. Given his inappropriate footgear and the dainty way he’d picked his way through the woods, I suspected I would still have time to catch up with him.

If he hadn’t wandered off the path, I’d told him to take.

The clouds had begun to gather, just as I had predicted, and I cursed as I trudged down the path to ensure he wasn’t some lucky animal’s food for the day. I should have taken my own advice and at least pulled on my heavy outdoor cloak, but I’d been too worried about catching up to him.

It wasn’t too long when I spotted him. He’d made even less progress than I’d thought. I quickened my pace, and just when I wanted to call out to him to head back to the cabin, the first big drop of rain plopped onto my shoulder. It was quickly followed by another and then another. The clouds were rolling in rapidly now.

Up ahead, Bryan came running back, heading for the clump of bushes that should shield him somewhat from the rain. I'd lived on the mountain long enough for the rain not to bother me. He'd almost reached the bushes when he cried out, sprawling onto the ground with a thud.

He scrambled to his feet. I winced, sensing his pain. From the way he hobbled, he likely had a sprain. Just great. He dropped to his knees and crawled the rest of the way.

I couldn't take it anymore, thinking of the damage he was doing to his bare knees. With a curse, I ran over to him and grasped his lithe frame off the ground.

This was possibly the dumbest mistake I could have made. And I had a string of really bad ones, including the reason I was stuck on this mountain, living the life of a hermit.

BRYAN

“**W**hat the hell!” I exclaimed as the first drop of rain landed on my nose. Where had that come from? Remembering mountain man’s words that it was going to rain, I paused uncertainly and stared up at the sky. The clouds were moving fast. I’d been walking some twenty, thirty minutes, but the main road was still nowhere in sight. As the heavens opened and torrents poured, I wasn’t sure which direction to head anymore.

At my right was a copse of bushes, looking thick enough to shelter me from the rain, and I made a mad dash for it.

“Argh!” I cried out in pain as I tripped over a vine camouflaged by the fallen leaves. I hit the ground hard, stunned by having the wind knocked out of me and the pain shooting up my ankle.

“Dammit!” I tried to get up but couldn’t stand on my right foot, and I dropped back down with a groan. I crawled on my knees toward the clump of bushes, but it was farther away than I’d thought. The uneven ground dug into the soft flesh of my knees, and I shivered from the icy tentacles pummeling my skin.

Strong arms wrapped around me and lifted me as though I weighed no more than a baby. For a second, I froze, but then I knew it was him. Although the rain made it hard to see my savior, the strength radiating from his body and the clean earthy scent of him were a dead giveaway.

How had he found me, and why was he here? He was a long way from his cabin.

He carried me toward the bushes I had been heading for and dumped me on my ass in the thickets. Then he crawled in next to me. The bushes were tightly packed together and provided proper shelter from the brutal rainfall, but I found myself too near to mountain man with no means to escape the effect he had on me. Sitting so close to him just made me realize how big he was.

Instead of it alarming me, it was a little comforting.

“How’d you find me?” I asked.

Our arms and thighs brushed. His was thick and corded with muscles, and my cock jerked. Shit, why was I always instantly turned on by the wrong guys? Why couldn’t I be attracted to a man’s intellect, talking to him and getting to know him, forming a bond? Although I didn’t think mountain man was the type of guy anyone bonded with. Unless you spoke the ancient language of grunt.

“You were never lost,” he barked at me. “I followed you.”

“You followed me? Why?”

“You were walking down the mountain alone, without anything for defense, and I’d just shot a coyote. If you didn’t end up being lost again, you might have turned into fodder for some animal.”

I shivered against him, both from the cold and the bluntness of his words. “I’m not your responsibility,” I argued. I didn’t like the way he made me sound so hopeless. Like I didn’t have a chance of making it off this mountain alone, which was probably true, but he didn’t have to be so rude as to point it out.

“Well, you ought to be somebody’s,” he quipped, “because you’re damn sure trying to get yourself killed. But do it when you get back to the city, pretty boy. Not in my backyard because I sure as hell don’t want to have the authorities crawling up my mountain.”

“Don’t call me that,” I hissed.

“What?”

“Don’t call me pretty boy.”

“It’s a compliment, isn’t it?”

Was he being sincere or goading me? If he was being sincere, then it would fit in with the vibe I was getting from him that he was gay. At the least bi-curious. If he wasn’t, then he was just like Keith and his friends.

“How old are you anyway?” he asked.

“Twenty-two.” I peeked up at him. “And you?”

“Thirty-two.”

“Oh.”

I quickly did the math in my head, but turned my face away from him so he wouldn’t see my flushed cheeks. Why was I calculating our age difference? It wasn’t like anything was going to happen between us, but if it did, ten years was hardly robbing the cradle.

“We’ll have to wait out the worst of this rain,” he said. “It can be over in a few minutes, but sometimes it lasts for hours.”

I shifted and gasped at the pain in my ankle. “I should never have come up here,” I grumbled. “This has got to be the worst experience of my life. And I’ve had to come out of the closet.”

The latter wasn’t necessary. Why had I given him that tidbit of information? Perhaps hoping he’d share the same with me? Just two gay dudes, huddling in the bushes, waiting out the rain. What better way to bond?

“It’s obvious you’re not the hiking type,” he said, disappointing me by not confirming my suspicion of his sexual preference.

“No, I’m not,” I agreed with a sigh. No use denying it, given my current predicament.

“Hmm.”

He grunted, and we settled in silence. With every passing minute, I became more conscious of him and the raw masculine energy flowing from his very pores. I couldn't wait for the rain to cease so we could get out of this confined space. Being so close to him, feeling the muscles in his body, was messing with my head. And the last thing I needed was a rebound with a man like him.

“I'm Bryan.”

“Tate.” Short and succinct, but it told me all I needed to know. He didn't want to talk. I wanted to stay away from him, but I was soaked and cold and had no room to scoot away. His body heat drew me in more ways than one.

It seemed my body had a mind of its own, as it leaned even closer toward him.

Our little spot wasn't exactly the perfect shelter from the torrential downpour. All I could do was sit huddled over while hoping like hell it would all be over soon. How long could we last being pelted by icy rain like this?

Silence lapsed between Bryan and me, the only sounds coming from the pouring rain and the occasional rumbling of thunder. The droplets on the ground woke up the earth, and the natural scent of the forest permeated the air around us.

A loud bang sounded, and Bryan squealed. He inched closer to me, grabbing my thigh. His grip was tight, his well-manicured nails digging into the soft material of my jeans.

"Oh my god," he murmured, closing his eyes. He chewed on his bottom lip so hard it filled red with blood from his assault. I wanted to pop my finger between his teeth and pry them apart.

He looked so small and scared.

"What are you doing here in the woods anyway?" I asked him. If he was going to last through this thunderstorm, I had to distract him. I was afraid that if the thunder continued, he would end up in my lap, and I wasn't ready for such a test right now.

I'd seen too much. I knew too much of how sinful that mouth of his was. Of how his hand had wrapped around the base of that man's cock while he'd deep throated him.

I shifted as the front of my jeans became impossibly tight.

“Being stupid, that’s what,” he muttered under his breath.

“All alone?”

“I was with friends.”

“What happened to them?” He’d been so upset earlier when we ran into each other that I could only surmise that he’d been teased one time too many by his companions.

Maybe there was hope for him yet.

“Maybe ‘friends’ is a bit of exaggeration.” He jolted at the loud clap, but he didn’t seem to dwell on it too much. “I just came along because my—someone asked me to.”

“You shouldn’t have come if you didn’t want to.”

“No shit. This is the worst experience in my life. Huddling from the rain with a man who’s probably Jack the Ripper. They never did find him, you know.”

My lips twitched in one of the rare smiles I found these days. “Pretty sure I would be long dead.”

“Well, the equivalent to him, then.” He wiggled his ass closer to me until he was practically plastered to my side. I automatically twisted my body to shield him better from the rain.

“Want to know something?” He glanced up at me.

“What?”

“Even if you’re Jack the Ripper incarnate, I’d still rather be here with you than with those other assholes.”

How did he expect me to respond to that? I didn’t, but he must have picked up on my distraction technique because he continued talking.

“So, you like living here?”

I grunted.

“Is that a yes or no? I’m afraid I don’t speak that language yet.”

I had to stifle my laugh, but the effort bothered me. I shouldn’t find this stranger so endearing. He didn’t fit here in

my neck of the woods. I couldn't wait for him to go, and yet my heart skipped a beat at the thought of him disappearing.

Of never seeing him again.

"Doesn't it get lonely up here?" he asked as if I had answered him or he'd decided it wasn't worth waiting for a response. "Or maybe you have a wife and kids in that cabin with you? I didn't even think of that."

His mention of wife and kids did it. All the tenderness disappeared, and I peeled his hand away from my thigh, ignoring the questioning look he gave me.

"Uff, sorry. I'm just a little nervous about the lightning."

Nervous was an understatement, but he had to find his comfort elsewhere.

"You should stop talking," I said gruffly. "Save your energy for when we have to go back to the cabin."

"Go back? I'm not going back. I'm heading home as soon as the rain lets up."

I traced his delicate ankle in his sneakers—sneakers instead of hiking boots—and applied the slightest pressure.

He hissed and pulled back his leg. "Ow! That hurts."

"Exactly. You're not going anywhere until your foot feels better, so I suggest you shut it for now."

That did the trick. He stiffened and shuffled away a little from me. It immediately left a cold air in its wake, and I wanted to pull him back to me. He was shivering, but I was so afraid. Afraid of the things he made me feel.

For fuck's sake, I'd only met this guy. Was I really this desperate to get my dick wet?

Thankfully, the rain eased up. *It's about time.* I managed the words in my head but didn't dare to say them aloud. He already seemed hurt over me telling him to save his energy. I hated the idea of taking him back to the cabin, but what else could I do?

When the rain had nearly stopped, I pushed my way through the thicket of bush, then reached out a hand to help him. He hesitated as if he didn't want me to touch him, but when he tried standing on his own, his face turned even paler than it was before. He let out a tiny moan and bit into his bottom lip.

“Don't be stubborn. You injured your ankle.”

He grudgingly took my arm, and I pulled him upright with little effort. A gasp tore from his throat at the first step he took, and his body crumpled. I caught him around the waist and hauled him up against my body for support.

“I'm so sorry,” he said. “My ankle hurts worse than I thought.”

But I wasn't paying attention to his apology. His musky scent flew straight to my head. And I inwardly groaned at the way he felt pressed up against me as if he belonged there. If I lowered my hand, I could cup his round ass.

Don't you fucking dare.

“Did I hurt you?” He had to tilt his head back to look up at me, so much smaller was he.

I peered into his too devilishly handsome face, and I couldn't come up with a response. Tension rippled around us. His body radiated with nervous energy. Nervous sexual energy. And when he bit down on that already abused bottom lip, I swore beneath my breath and glanced away.

“Lean on me,” I instructed him. “Wrap your arm around my waist, and we'll go slowly. Put most of your pressure on your good foot, and if you need to, use me.”

His eyes widened. Shit. I probably could have worded that better. If his head had gone to the same place as mine—and I was pretty sure of it

—then I'd be in big trouble having him with me.

He was too much of everything. Too young. Too sexy. Too smart-mouthed. And judging from last night's accidental

peepshow, he gave a hell of a blow job. Did he do other things just as well?

I shook my head, ignoring the touch of his hand on my arm or the breathy sounds he let out when he hobbled beside me.

This was going to be one long trek back to the cabin.

BRYAN

“Take off your clothes.”

Well, that was fast. I stared at Tate in surprise. I’d suspected the chemistry between us at first, but then he’d told me to shut up. If that hadn’t been bad enough, during our slow trek back to his cabin, he’d been aloof. He’d acted like he loathed touching me when he had to carry me a part of the way.

“Excuse me?” I gaped at him as he dragged his sodden shirt over his head. Next, he undid the button on his jeans and pulled down the zipper.

“Get out of your wet clothes, or you may get sick,” he said. “What did you think I was talking about?”

Blushing, I didn’t comment but yanked off my shirt. By its own volition, my gaze trailed back to Tate. Damn, he was hot. And huge, with arms like limbs and thighs like trunks. He fit right in here in the woods. I stifled a groan. Why was I always interested in men who were physically more powerful than me?

Why did I get off on that power and how ridiculously small men like that made me feel?

He’d stripped down to his underwear, sensible gray—and wet. The material clung to his muscled ass, and I tracked him with my eyes until he disappeared through a connecting door.

“Don’t even think about getting happy,” I growled at my excited dick. There was little more we both enjoyed than men

who were strong enough to hold us down and fuck us into oblivion.

“Which is definitely not going to happen,” I mumbled. “Nope. I’ve had it with these Neanderthals.”

The next man I hooked up with would be different. He would be someone intellectual who spent time reading rather than working out or hiking up godforsaken mountain trails.

With Tate gone, I quickly stripped off my soaked shorts. My hard cock pressed against the cotton, now almost transparent. Who the hell wore white briefs on a hike? But Keith had insisted I bring them, as he liked seeing my ass in the tighty-whities.

Would it have the same effect on Tate? He’d undressed so casually in front of me I doubted it.

I shivered in my wet briefs, but I didn’t want to offend my host and appear in front of him naked, so I waited for him to return and tell me what to do. Tate came back into the bedroom, which was nicer than I’d thought a log cabin would have. The beautifully carved queen-sized bed looked inviting with the fluffy pillows. Under the window stood a chest of drawers, and a dresser with a mirror next to it. “

Here you go.” Tate handed me a soft towel, and I rubbed down my arms eagerly. There was something odd about this man. Who lived in the mountains and had towels of the finest quality and a gorgeous bed that wouldn’t be out of place in a movie star’s house?

I tried to act as if I hadn’t noticed him watching me while he stood there, still bare-chested. He was probably naked beneath the towel he had draped around his waist. I’d never wanted a towel to slip so badly in all my life.

“You’d better sit on the bed so I can check your ankle,” he said.

The words hadn’t left his mouth when he scooped me up and placed me on the bed. Our seminude bodies so close to each other wreaked havoc on my senses. I closed my eyes. *Please don’t see my erection.*

Good lord, I had to push the image from my mind of him pressing me into the mattress.

He took my right foot in his hand, and my eyes flew open. His touch was gentle, but his calloused palms caused enough friction on my skin that I was no longer shivering from the cold. Heat coursed through my veins. I followed his gaze to the ghastly purplish bruise on my ankle, which was swollen and hurt when he poked it. I tried to concentrate on the pain in my foot instead of the ache in my groin.

“I think it’s just a sprain.” He carefully placed my foot back on the bed and ran his hand up my leg, seemingly without thought. A moan slipped from my mouth before I could hold it in. He jerked his hand away. “I need to get you an ice pack.” He rose to his feet, but I grasped his biceps to stop him.

The gesture surprised me as much as it did him. He froze but didn’t move away. My heart was pounding in my chest at the muscles tensing under my hand. I didn’t have the faintest idea if I was doing the right thing. I just knew I was wound so tight, and my damn cock hadn’t eased since I met him. Here he was, and I was a free man. I assumed he was unattached as well—nothing indicated another presence in the cabin—so what did it matter if I engaged in a little flirtation with him?

Before I met Keith, I’d been a flirt. Never pursuing a man outright, but if I was interested, I found ways to drop hints. I had been throwing them at Tate since we hid from the rain in the bushes together, but he hadn’t picked them up. I couldn’t get that look between us out of my mind, though.

I’d had every intention to just let it go, but the moment he had rubbed his hand up my leg, I knew I couldn’t.

“Thanks for everything, Tate.” I squeezed his arm. “You’re right. I probably wouldn’t have made it down the mountain alone. Thanks for following me.”

“It’s nothing.” The words came out casually, but his voice had deepened.

“Is it, though?” I said softly, then added in encouragement. “It’s okay.”

The words were hardly out of my mouth when he gripped the back of my neck and pulled me into him.

“I was trying not to do this,” he whispered, his lips just a hairbreadth away from mine. “I wanted to leave you alone, but your eyes have been begging me for this. You’ve no idea what you’re inviting, Bryan.”

Instead of backing away, I inclined my head, so our lips met. If I’d thought for one second that I would be taking over the kiss, I was mistaken. Tate held me tight against him while he plundered my lips like a man who had been without water for days. He flooded my mouth with his tongue, and I sucked it into my mouth, running my hands over his biceps.

God, he felt good, his muscles rippling beneath my caress. *This* was the reason I always chose these bigger men. They just felt damn good to rub against.

We kissed for a long time, hands roaming each other’s bodies. He trailed his hands over my shoulders and down my slender back. He slanted his lips over mine and sucked my tongue into his mouth, pressing me back onto the bed and climbing over me.

“Shit,” I murmured as he kissed across my cheekbone. His heavy cock nudged my thigh.

“You want this, don’t you?” he groaned. “Fuck knows I shouldn’t.”

“Yes,” I gasped as he licked my nipples, then sucked one into his mouth. Wiggling beneath him, I tugged the towel off his body, then snaked my hand between our bodies and grasped his cock. He was as thick as he was long, and it excited me to stroke him up and down.

“That feels so fucking good,” he grunted. “Fuck yeah, don’t stop now.”

He didn’t have to ask me twice. I jerked on his cock while he kissed me again and thrust into my fist.

The raw hunger between us was something I had never felt before, and I was shocked. I didn't even know him. I'd slept with strangers before and enjoyed it, so that wasn't the problem. It was the way I reacted to him, not just my body but all of me. I trembled at the callouses of his fingers tracing over my skin; my heart softened at how rough he had been outside yet so gentle with my injured foot.

With each stroke of his tongue against mine, more heat engulfed me. I didn't know my skin was combustible before then. I couldn't remember feeling this explosive heat with any of my lovers or with Keith, for that matter. The sex had been good, but this, what Tate and I were doing, reeked of pure sexual chemistry. Attraction rolled into attraction.

"It's been too long," Tate growled and licked the shell of my ear. "Too long since I've felt this. Tell me I don't have to wait."

"You don't have to wait," I gasped out, and that was all the encouragement he needed. I released his cock, and he moved over to the bedside table. He rifled through the drawer.

"Put it on me." He tossed a small tube of lube and a condom at me. I ripped it open, my excitement drowning out the rational thought that this was too damn soon.

I didn't know the man except that he had possibly saved my life. Fuck, people slept with others for less reason. I had barely smoothed the condom over his cock before he had me flat on my back again.

He pushed my legs apart and knelt between my thighs. He gripped the base of my dick in his hand and settled his mouth over the bulbous head. My cock wasn't as big as his, just average, but he treated me like I was a damn stallion. He sucked my cock, licked the tip, then took it in deep again, bobbing his head.

"Oh, fuck, Tate!" I cried out and sank my fingers into his long hair. His name felt so familiar on my tongue.

He kissed down my shaft to my balls, his beard tickling my skin. When he'd worked me up to a frenzy, he rocked back

on his heels and dribbled lube over my puckered entrance.

With a hum of pleasure deep inside his chest, he leaned forward and sucked my cock into his mouth once more while his fingers massaged the lube into my hole. He pushed one finger through the tight ring of muscles, wiggling his finger in a clockwise motion as he plunged deeper.

“Oh god!” I cried out, my head digging into the bed, my torso rising in the air. Another finger joined the first, and he prepared me for his entry with deep, slow strokes. On the next thrust, he crooked his finger, hitting the right spot, and I almost jumped out of my skin. I whimpered in my throat, the sound trapped between a gasp and a cry.

“Perfect,” he groaned. Kneeling, he grasped his shaft, coated it with a generous amount of lube, and guided the head to my hole. He pressed, and I relaxed, breathing hard through my mouth from the desire twisting in my gut.

“Uh!” I grunted as he got the head inside and filled me with his shaft. When he had fed me half his cock, he paused and peered down into my face. He leaned over and kissed me, muffling my moan as he pressed his full length inside me. I gasped at the girth of him stretching me open.

“Good?” he asked, withdrawing and plunging hard inside me.

“Fuck yeah!” I grasped my cock with my right hand and pumped in the same rhythm as he pumped inside my hole. He hissed between his teeth each time he hammered into my ass. He ran his hands over my abs, pressing into my chest as he leveraged himself and thrust even harder.

He pulled out and motioned for me to lie on my side. I would’ve done anything he wanted just for him to put his joystick back into drive. He crowded behind me and raised my left leg.

“Don’t want to hurt your ankle,” he whispered and sucked my earlobe into his mouth.

Until he mentioned it, I hadn’t even remembered my foot. A warm feeling rippled through me at his consideration. I

leaned my head back and pulled his head down to mine for a kiss as he filled my ass with his cock once more. He worked his hips slowly but steadily, hooking my left leg in the air. In this position, my right leg lay undisturbed on the bed to prevent jostling my ankle.

“God, your ass feels so good.” Tate grasped my cock and stroked me while thrusting more insistently. I moaned, arching my back into him. My eyes closed as my breathing became ragged. He kissed my neck, nipping my flesh with his teeth. Every touch from him sent electrifying waves down into my back and flooded my gut before reaching my cock. I shifted my ass backward, meeting each of his thrusts, begging him silently for more.

“Oh god!” I gasped when I shot my cum onto my thigh and the bed. My ass clenched at the intensity of it all as I catapulted into a swirl of endless pleasure.

When I’d settled down, Tate rolled me onto my front, being careful of my ankle, and straddled the backs of my thighs. I liked that. The way he’d patiently allowed my climax to build before seeking his.

Grunting, he pried my ass cheeks apart and plunged back in. I reached behind me and caressed his leg as he continued pumping, his movements becoming more frantic.

“Fuck,” he groaned. “Needed this. Needed you.”

Wrapping an arm under my body to pull me even snuggler against him, he shoved his cock inside me, hard and deep, then stiffened. He sank his teeth into my shoulder, leaving his mark as he exploded.

Of course the sexy twink with the sassy mouth had to be a good first lay for me. I lay beside him, staring up at the ceiling, and my mind was completely blown. Man, talk about postcoital bliss. I hummed from the roots of my hair to the tips of my toes. It felt like my orgasm had its own orgasm. That was how much the experience affected me.

For years I'd denied this part of me. I knew I had the feelings, but I'd ignored them. I'd known my late wife for so long that I never had the chance to experiment with anyone. Then after she died, I couldn't summon the thought of sleeping with anyone else, let alone another man. Not after what had happened.

Beside me, Bryan sighed, in his own world of bliss. I shifted my head slightly and stared at him. Had it been as good for him as it had been for me? I wasn't completely ignorant. I knew what to do. I'd just never been with another guy before.

Bryan had a silly little lopsided grin on his face. He looked thoroughly fucked, and he had been. I'd fucked him so good my dick felt like he was still on it. I still wanted him on it, perhaps this time on top of me, his back opposite me so I could watch his dick move up and down with every stroke.

He was so fucking beautiful.

"Wow," he said, his tone full of awe. "That was so fucking great."

He didn't seem bothered at all that we were strangers. He seemed so comfortable with what we'd exchanged that I

envied him. His relaxed posture showed he was at ease with himself, while I was still dumbstruck, coming to terms with what I'd just discovered.

I loved fucking him. Loved shoving every inch of me inside his body and watching the muscles beneath me flex with each movement. He might not have been built like me, but he definitely had muscles.

“Please tell me that was good for you too.” He flopped over onto his stomach, propped his hands under his chin, and peered at me.

I closed my eyes. Oh fuck, he was a talker. He inched closer and closer to me until his head was practically resting on my shoulder. And apparently a cuddler. Was he this starved for attention that he would cuddle with a stranger? The sex was one thing. People fucked around all the time to let off some steam, but the intimacy was usually lacking.

Not for Bryan.

“You okay there, big guy?” he asked, walking two fingers over my chest and tugging at my nipple closest to him.

My cock flexed, and I hissed. Unbelievable. I grasped his hand, holding it tightly into mine, then pushed it off my chest.

“Yeah” was the only word I could manage to say.

“Is that a ‘yeah, I blew your breath away’ like you just did mine?” He took a deep lungful of breath as though to prove it and chuckled. “Or is it ‘yeah, you’re fine’?”

I shrugged. I was not fine. I'd just had my first sexual encounter with another man, and the tightness in my chest was crippling. How could he be okay with what we just did? Could I ever be this nonchalant about it?

“Tate,” he said my name hesitantly. “It’s okay if you regret doing it. We don’t have to do it again.”

Did I regret doing it? His words made me frown. Like hell I would regret this. It'd been amazing. With that acknowledgment, the worry eased away. I was living in the mountains, away from the world. Here we could do anything

we wanted. I could be anything I wanted. Wasn't that the reason I'd left the city behind?

"I don't regret anything." I pushed up to a sitting position on the bed. "I just need to clean up."

Just because I'd enjoyed the sex and didn't regret it didn't mean I wanted to engage in pillow talk.

"Do you want to wash up first?" I asked. It was his ass that had taken a hard pounding after all.

"You can go first. It'll give my body the chance to recover from being a puddle of Jell-O. Plus, I'm way too comfortable right now to move."

He did look sated, his lips curved in a smile and his eyes closed. I rolled off the bed and looked down at him. My fingers had left impressions on his ass where I must have gripped him hard while I fucked him. His legs were slightly apart, and my eyes were instantly drawn to his firm round ass.

My cock stirred. Unbelievable.

"Oh my."

He'd opened his eyes, and he was staring right at my cock, which had jerked up to semihard. Heat rose in my cheeks as I spun around and headed for the bathroom. I needed to clear my head, and apparently being around him didn't help at all.

Once in the bathroom, I gripped the sink and stared in the mirror. I didn't know what I expected, but the same old Tate stared back at me. Nothing had changed. Then why did I feel like something groundbreaking had just happened to me? Like if I had a world of Tate, everyone would be reading my headline.

Tate Rosenbaum Enjoys His First Sexual Encounter Topping a Sexy Twink

"You're insane," I mumbled at my image.

I threw the condom—the evidence of what I'd just done—into the trash and turned on the shower. The bathroom wasn't as luxurious as the one I had back home, but it was more than enough.

When the water was hot enough, I stepped into the cubicle and let the water pound down on me for a minute, then picked up the shower gel. I was just rinsing off when the glass door slid back. I wiped the water out of my eyes. Bryan was leaning heavily against the door, with his injured leg half-bent.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

He smiled at me, his eyes still mellow from sex. “I changed my mind about the shower. Plus, I could use some help washing my back, you know. This ankle makes it difficult to manage things.”

I wanted to call his bluff. His ankle was injured, for fuck’s sake, not his hands, but when he stepped inside the shower, I grabbed his hand to help him. His smile widened. Damn, he’d come, but he had been prepared for me to send him away.

“I’m basically done.”

“Perfect timing, then. Would you do the honors?”

I shouldn’t. A naked man in my bed was one thing. One in my shower asking for me to wash him was another. This was something lovers did. I didn’t know him. I didn’t have any feelings toward him but desire. And a bit of compassion for the way those men had treated him.

Yet I took a new washcloth and squirted some shower gel onto it. He braced against the wall to rest his ankle while I took my time washing his body, conditioning my mind to see him as a patient. Someone I had to take care of because he’d hurt himself. Nothing more. It might have worked hadn’t I slept with him, but when I passed the washcloth between his ass cheeks and he groaned, I could no longer pretend he hadn’t given me something special.

“Thank you,” I said gruffly.

His eyes widened as he peered up at me. “For what?”

I shook my head, unable to voice the words. How could someone so open sexually even understood what I was thanking him for?

BRYAN

I woke up with a groan, my butt smarting from Tate's fucking last night. He hadn't been lying when he'd said it had been too long for him. After the first time we'd made love, we'd eaten dinner afterward, avoiding the subject and not talking much.

I sensed he was a troubled man. After all, he was living in the mountains alone, separating himself from people. Someone didn't make that kind of decision lightly.

When I'd gone to bed, he hadn't joined me but must have waited until I had fallen asleep to crawl next to me. I'd woken up with his hands wrapped around my cock, caressing me. It hadn't taken long for me to get a hard-on. The sex had been even more intense than the first time.

I stretched. My ass wasn't the only part of me that throbbed. So did my ankle. Pulling myself up to a sitting position, I tugged the sheet off my naked body and examined the injury. Yesterday I'd iced my foot, as Tate had advised, and it didn't look as swollen as before.

With the inability to walk properly, I wouldn't be getting off this mountain anytime soon. The thought of Keith returning to his condo and getting furious when he wouldn't find me there popped into my mind, but I shoved it away. He couldn't really believe I'd still want a relationship with him after his behavior this past weekend. To be honest, our relationship would never have worked. I didn't do well being in the closet. It was suffocating.

I fretted that I was jumping out of the frying pan and straight into the cauldrons of hell. Tate was the definition of the kind of man that was bad for me. I didn't do this hiking shit, and if Keith hadn't convinced me to go with him on his trip, we wouldn't have even met.

All this could be were a few days of sex at best. Amazing sex. I moaned at the memory of his solid girth filling me. Good sex alone wouldn't get me dawdling in these woods, though. As soon as my ankle had healed well enough, I would be leaving.

The thought of going back to my life and acting as though Tate didn't exist was...unsettling. It was way too soon to be catching feelings for the man, but I was curious about the man behind the gruffy exterior.

I snorted. Something I probably should have thought about before allowing him to bang me into next week.

"There's nothing wrong with gratuitous sex," I muttered. "It's been a hellish few days, so cut me some slack."

I shuffled to the edge of the bed, needing to take a leak and a shower. Which I'd never expected at all. Indoor plumbing in a log cabin all the way up here. He had explained he'd done the plumbing himself and sourced from the river nearby. I was impressed that he was so handy, although it was obvious, just by looking at him, he was the kind of guy you'd want hanging around in dire situations.

I frowned. Why did I fixate on guys who were physically more powerful than me? Although Keith was very much corporate, he still had that macho, larger-than-life personality that had attracted me to him.

Now Tate.

"Shit," I grumbled when I tried to stand. My foot still hurt too much to put pressure on it. Where were the clothes Tate had loaned me? Everything in my bag had been soaked. I found the T-shirt and tugged it over my head, then hopped to the door.

Without warning, the door flew open, stubbing the toe of my left foot.

“Fuck!” I staggered back, but Tate caught me before I could fall.

“Shit, sorry,” he said. “I had no idea you were out of bed.”

My toes forgotten, I stared up at Tate, clinging to his biceps. Holy hell, I didn’t know he was so handsome. He was now clean-shaven, his hair tied back. With the lack of facial hair, I could clearly make out his strong jawline and the sensuous lips I’d kissed over and over last night. His piercing green eyes stared back at me.

Had he cleaned up for me? My stomach fluttered. My brain was sending all kinds of distressed signals. *Danger! Alert! Step away from the gorgeous man.*

I was never any good at heeding warning signs. I would have never been with Keith this long if I had.

“What?” he barked out at me in that gruff way of his.

“Uh, nothing.” I lowered my gaze. “Put me down, will you? I was going to take a shower.”

“Hang on.”

Tate swooped me up in his arms. Why did I love it when he did that? All those muscles seemed generated just for me. I loved the way he made me feel protected.

Danger. Critical error.

“You don’t have to act so macho, you know,” I told him when he walked into the bathroom and lowered me to my feet.

“No? Because I think this macho shit turns you on.” He smirked.

I blinked several times. Was he teasing me? The slight flush to his cheeks said yes. Before I could comment, the shutters came down, and he frowned.

“Call me when you’re through,” he said and rushed out the bathroom.

Frowning, I watched him go. All the teasing and warmth were gone. What had happened to the man who'd washed me in the shower last night? He didn't seem inclined to extend much kindness to me anymore.

Serves me right for putting out with someone I don't know.

Disappointed, I set about getting to my morning routine. This was all for the best anyway. I had to quickly shut down any stupidly infatuated thoughts about the man because he'd swept in and saved me. Then pleased me.

BRYAN

“Is there anything you can’t do?” I asked Tate as he laid out breakfast. He had been cooking while I was in the shower, and my mouth watered at the scrumptious meal of eggs, bacon, and grits with biscuits. I felt better, having showered and wearing my own clothes since he had hung them to dry overnight. My right leg was propped up on a chair, and a hearty meal was spread before me.

This was as good as it was going to get away from civilization.

“I’m sure there’s a thing or two,” he answered and dug into his breakfast.

I followed suit but watched him from beneath my lashes. The way his lips tugged on the tines of the fork reminded me of how those same lips had been wrapped around my cock yesterday. I squirmed in my chair, my shorts getting a little too snug, and lowered my gaze to my food. I groaned mentally. I couldn’t walk around with a perpetual hard-on, and my ass needed time to recover anyway.

“How’s your ankle?” Tate asked.

“It doesn’t look as bad anymore and doesn’t hurt as much.” Maybe if I opened up a little, I could get him to talk to me and tell me why he was in these god-forsaken woods all by himself. Not that I wasn’t grateful he’d saved me. I’d have likely been eaten by a coyote if he hadn’t followed me.

“You’ll need to stay off it for at least a couple of days.” He pinned me with a sober glare. “The last thing you want is to

aggravate it, or you just might end up in a hospital.”

“I’ve to get back to work on Monday.” If I still had a job. I couldn’t imagine still working for Keith after breaking up with him. He was the vindictive sort.

He frowned. “It’s the middle of the week. Why aren’t you at work in the first place?”

I got the feeling he just narrowly stopped himself from saying “where you belong.”

“I took a few days of vacation time.” No need to tell him Keith had bribed me with the paid time off to go trekking through the woods with him.

“Let me guess,” he said. “You work in a bank or something? You look a bit straitlaced.”

I laughed. “That’s the first time I’m hearing a gay man being described as straitlaced.”

“I’m talking about other things.” He scowled. “You look like the type who wouldn’t leave work a minute before the workday ends. Am I wrong?”

I refused to answer the question. “And you? What are you doing in these mountains, pretending the real world doesn’t exist?”

Anger flashed in his eyes. Damn, I had pushed too far. But much more emotion was going on in the green depths staring back at me—hurt, sadness, grief. He opened his mouth, then closed it without speaking.

“Tate, I’m sorry,” I said, but he stomped to the counter, where he dumped the remains of his breakfast into the trash.

“Tate.” I tried again, but he had already stalked out of the kitchen.

“Shit,” I mumbled. Why had I made him so upset when he had been nothing but kind to me? He had followed me down the mountain to ensure I didn’t run into any harm, and that was even before we had been intimate. He had welcomed me into his home without complaint. He could have insisted I sleep on the floor or the sofa in the living room, but he let me in his

bed. He'd made me breakfast and thought nothing of it, and I'd gone and acted insensitively.

I hobbled over to the kitchen sink and took a few minutes to figure out how to get the old-fashioned pump to work. I managed to wash up the dishes without making too much of a mess and wiped down the counters. When I packed away the silverware and the dishes I'd dried, Tate still hadn't returned home.

I hobbled to the living room, but there wasn't much to do. He had a generator and a television, but I didn't want to waste his electricity on something so unnecessary. On the coffee table, I found a stack of magazines of varying interests, including finance and sports. I was surprised they were current too. I was reaching for the latest edition of *Fortune Magazine* when I spotted a copy of James Shelton's novel *Redseye* and grabbed that instead.

I settled on the sofa, reclining with my leg perched on the armrest. When I turned the first page, a photograph fell out. My heart galloped in my chest as I picked it up. The picture showed a smiling Tate, but a Tate who looked different. In the picture, his hair was cut short. He was wearing a jacket suit and looked professional. He had his arm around the shoulder of a beautiful redhead who gazed at him, her eyes full of love. The look on her face said she had it all. Between them stood a little girl who could be no more than three.

I turned over the picture. On the back, it said

My darling, Tate. Love you forever, Rachel and Kathleen.

"I don't recall giving you permission to snoop through my things."

At Tate's gruff voice, I almost dropped the picture. I stuffed it back into the book, trying not to look guilty. Holy hell, he was married? I'd slept with a married man?

"I-I wasn't snooping," I stammered. "I was just trying to find something to do. I love James Shelton and haven't read this one yet."

"Don't touch my stuff without asking."

I blanched at the vehemence in his tone. “Sure, sorry.” I swung my leg down and pushed myself up into a sitting position, then struggled to my feet and hobbled past him. I was reeling from the shock of the photo.

“Sit,” he instructed me, taking hold of my arm, restraining me.

“I’m just getting out of your way.” I tried to shrug him off, but his fingers were like a vise.

“I never said I wanted you out of my way, Bry.”

The nickname must have been a slip of the tongue. His complexion had gone red as if he was embarrassed.

“Then what do you want, Tate?” I asked softly.

I already knew the answer by the look in his eyes.

“You.”

He pulled me up against him and kissed me. I hesitated at first, a little confused by the turbulence of what was happening between us, especially with that photo at the back of my mind. One second he was mad at me, and the next he wanted me. One minute he was walking out on me, and the next, he was pulling me toward him.

All thoughts fled from my mind when his tongue met mine, and I couldn’t resist this contradictory man who in some ways was even worse in mannerism than Keith. He possibly had me committing adultery with him, but I couldn’t believe it. There had to be a mistake.

He wrapped his arms around me and grabbed my ass, lifting me so he could press our fronts together. I gasped for air between our passionate kisses as he gyrated against me, his hard cock rubbing over mine through our clothes.

“Tate.” I ran my hands over his muscles I loved to feel so much.

“Hmm.” He bit my bottom lip, then devoured my mouth again, almost making me forget what I wanted to say.

“We should stop,” I whispered against his lips, a bit of common sense returning.

“Why?” His hands were already loosening the button and pulling down the zipper.

“We’re so different.” Even though I was the one complaining about the difference and wanting to stop, I hooked my arm behind his head and kissed him again. He slid his hand into the front of my shorts and took out my cock. I moaned into his mouth.

“Right now, I don’t give a fuck about our differences,” he growled. “Does it matter, Bryan? Or does this? What I do to you. You want me to fuck that sweet ass again, don’t you? I love the way you moan for me.”

I wasn’t shocked at his crude words. In fact, dirty talk turned me on. I unzipped his jeans and pushed them off his hips. When they were down his thighs, far enough for me to grasp him—going commando certainly had its perks—I jerked him in my fist. He did the same to my cock as we continued sucking on each other’s tongue and kissing deeply. In all my life, this was hands down the best kissing I’d ever enjoyed with a man. And I’d had quite a number too.

I tore my mouth off his but kept my hand working furiously on him.

“Are you married?” I gasped. “Please, I need to know.”

Our cocks bumped as we frothed against each other.

“No.” His word was clipped, and he didn’t offer any further explanation. I had to be crazy to accept that one-word answer, but I believed him. I cupped his balls and stroked over his taint and got a hard hiss in response. He released my cock, gripped my ass, and squeezed. He dipped a finger down my crack and rubbed against my hole.

“Oh god, Tate,” I moaned, increasing the movement of my hand on his thick length. My mouth watered to have a taste of him.

Changing course, Tate pushed me to sit on the sofa, then pulled my shorts lower around my ankles. He didn’t afford me

time to take them off but knelt before me, grasping my shaft. He leaned forward to lick my lips, then dipped his head and took the head of my cock into his mouth.

I carded my fingers through his hair and loosened the hairband that had held his hair back in a ponytail. I preferred his hair untamed, hanging around his face. I lost all thought as he sucked in my cock down to the base.

“Oh yes!” I groaned in approval as his tongue stroked while he sucked. A popping sound punctuated the room each time he released my cock. His head bobbed up and down as he sucked harder, pressing his hand below to massage and caress my taint.

“Holy shit!” I cried out, my hips jerking when I released into his mouth. I stiffened at the intensity of the climax that racked my body.

Tate sucked my cock into his mouth one final time, cleaning away the evidence of my orgasm as though it never happened. He released my still hard cock and licked his lips. Then he moved up my body and kissed me, letting me taste my essence on his tongue. With a groan, I grasped his cock to give him the same pleasure he had given me.

He shook his head, smiling against my mouth, and pulled my hand off his length. “That was for you,” he said softly. “An apology, which I’m not too good at. I didn’t mean to snap at you earlier, then storm out the way I did.”

I swallowed and nodded, and my heart squeezed painfully in my chest. Oh god, I was in deep trouble with Tate. I was beginning to like this guy way too much, and we were unsuited. I belonged to the corporate world; he belonged here on his mountain.

Although that photograph suggested otherwise.

TATE

He was a grown man, not needing me to babysit him, but that didn't stop me from poking my head through the open front door to check up on Bryan. Most times I didn't have a reason to, but I made up one. Like checking if it was going to rain.

I felt guilty about snapping at him for going through my stuff. I'd overreacted. It was not as if I had caught him going through my wallet or my drawers. He was just reading a book. The wrong book.

A part of me expected him to bring up the photograph all day. He must be curious, but he didn't say a thing. And I liked that. It was as if he was waiting until I was ready to explain, but could I ever be? I never talked about Rachel and Kathleen. Telling what happened still hurt. Everything could have been avoided if...If what? I hadn't been honest with her?

I'd thought she could handle the truth.

As if he calculated every time I passed the door, Bryan gave a forlorn sigh. I'd brought the chair out on the porch with an ottoman for him to prop up his foot on. He was supposed to relax and stay off his foot. All the sooner he'd get well and back where he belonged.

I wasn't about to kid myself that I'd found something special with Bryan. But I had no interest in returning to civilization, and he would never be comfortable being away from the city. I knew little about it, but I could guess he loved

the spotlight. I could see him going to clubs and fancy restaurants, hitting the town for a night of dancing and movies.

When he sighed one time too many, I went back inside the house for the book he'd taken up earlier. I'd replaced the photograph. Rachel had bought that book for me, knowing I was a huge fan of the author, and she'd slipped the photo inside. It was the last gift she'd given me. I hadn't read the book yet. Didn't plan to either. The longer I put it off, the longer I would have this last gift to look forward to.

I held the book in my hands for a few seconds. After taking a deep breath, I slid the photograph out and stared at the two smiling images. My wife and daughter. They'd both meant the world to me.

Instead of the strangling grief that usually overcame me when I thought about them, a sad ache settled in my chest.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered. The same apology since they died. When would it have meaning enough for me to feel I didn't have to say it anymore?

I took the photograph to my bedroom and put it in the drawer of the nightstand. Somehow, closing the drawer felt significant. Stranger still as I returned to Bryan. I hated how these monumental events involved him. How was I supposed to get him out of my head when he left? And he would leave eventually.

Sex wasn't a staple.

As I walked out onto the porch, Bryan heaved another sigh, and I forced down mine. He was so obvious. Trying to get my attention because I hadn't been reacting to his attempt at a conversation. Maybe we could make some peace and enjoy the time he had here. At least, he'd brought me something new, so I could make the experience more than tolerable for him.

"Are you done sighing now?" I asked.

He glanced up at me, his cheeks tinged a pinkish hue. "Took you long enough to comment on it. Or were you hoping I'd run out of breath?"

A chuckle startled out of me, but this time I didn't try to contain it. I handed him the book.

"I'm here to rescue you from boredom."

He hesitated, darting his eyes from the book to me. "Are you sure?"

I shrugged. "Yeah. You might as well read it. I haven't yet."

"No?" His eyebrows shot up. "I've been wanting to read it for a while but never quite found the time."

"Well, no time like the present."

Before I could return inside the house, he removed his feet carefully from the ottoman.

"Go on, sit. I'll read aloud so we can both enjoy the experience."

"That's not necessary."

"Come on. Please."

He pouted, and I laughed. "That's not going to work on me, brat."

"Ugh, can it please work? I'm too comfortable to seduce you into doing what I want."

"Are you always this manipulative?"

He gasped. "Me? Manipulative. You wound me."

I just smiled as I took the vacated seat. It wouldn't hurt to keep him company for a few minutes before I had to go make us something to eat. I'd tried to finish the Financial Times, but knowing he was out here by himself was too distracting for me to focus on the state of the economy. I already knew that my uncle had a firm grip on Rosenbaum Holdings.

"Now this is much better." Bryan lifted his feet and plopped them into my lap, eyeing me over the open book he had in his hand. "Maybe we can exchange favors. You massage my feet, and I read to you."

“Should have told me this was the arrangement before I went along with this,” I grumbled.

“Thank you.”

Once again, he left me with no choice but to let him have his way. What would it be like having a relationship with such a man? Things would be livelier for sure and a lot more heated. Bryan was insatiable. He talked a lot too and didn't mind that most times he had to carry the conversation.

He was persistent. That much I was sure of.

“You don't mind me reading the prologue, do you?” he asked.

“Of course not. Why? Isn't it a part of the book?”

“My, umm, ex usually goes straight into chapter one.”

“I read from cover to cover.”

He skipped a page back. “Then I'll read the dedication.”

I nodded, reaching for his foot to fulfill my part of the bargain. His voice was lovely, steady, and expressive while he read. I'd been partly afraid he would somehow turn this into another erotic encounter between us, but he was engrossed in reading the novel to me.

My mouth quirked up in a smile at how he became all excited and made all sorts of sounds in his throat as he read. He gasped, he laughed, and he got angry, at one point threatening to throw the book into the nearby lake.

“Well, it's not really your book to throw away,” I reminded him.

He grumbled under his breath and went back to reading, his mood picking up again when, according to his side narration, the main character stopped acting like an ass. With great reluctance, I laid my hand on his arm when he came to the end of the chapter.

He glanced up at me. “Are we stopping?”

“For now. I need to get a move on dinner if we want to eat.”

“Who needs food when we’re in the middle of this awesome book?”

“We’re only a third in. We need food before we continue.”

He folded over the edge of the page, and I winced but didn’t bother to correct him.

“You don’t have to stop reading, by the way.”

“I’m tired of being the lazybones. I’ll help you with dinner.”

“But your ankle—”

“I’m sure you can find something for me to do that doesn’t involve me standing.”

The two of us together in the small kitchen should have felt stifling and uncomfortable like the first couple of times we’d eaten together, but not this time. Mostly because Bryan didn’t allow for any awkward silence. He filled every moment with chatter about his life back in San Diego, his work as a personal assistant, and the friends he had.

I learned so much about him. Enough to conclude that my initial judgment of him had been right. He loved the glamor of city life.

After dinner, he insisted on washing the dishes. Working together felt so domestic, and with the two of us, the task was quickly done. When we were finished, we took a shower together, then strolled to the living room.

I took the far end of the sofa, giving him enough space to sit comfortably. He didn’t even bat an eye. A blanket he’d taken out of the supplies closet armed in hand, he lay on the sofa, with his head in my lap, and resumed his reading.

I jolted awake and blinked my eyes open. Somehow, I must have fallen asleep sitting up. At one point, he must have made a trip to the bedroom because he was now lying on a pillow in my lap, snoring softly.

It took a while for the reality of what we were doing to sink in. I couldn’t stop staring at him, the steady rise and fall of his chest. He was even lovelier asleep. How could the man

he'd been involved in not cherish him? He was so vibrant. My little chatterbox.

My neck felt strained, where it must have been wobbling while I slept. I shifted, carefully getting up from the sofa, then lifted Bryan in my arms. His eyes fluttered open in panic until he saw me. The unfocused look in his eyes cleared, and he smiled, resting his head on my shoulder.

“Tate.”

And I loved the way he said my name, just because. I didn't want to fight this attraction anymore.

BRYAN

I smiled to myself at the feel of a hand lightly draped over my hip. Tate. I opened my eyes. Yesterday, after the breakfast episode and the best apology I'd ever had, we had gone through the day without any more fussing.

It'd been nice spending the day with him. There'd been none of that inappropriate macho bullshit I got from Keith. Tate didn't deride me for wanting to read a book from cover to cover, while Keith would always snap that I was wasting time. Helping Tate in the kitchen had been nice too, and then spending the evening reading to him had been great. Peaceful and happy.

I observed Tate as he slept, trying to figure him out. He was a caring guy; I didn't doubt that for a moment. Not after the way he just assumed responsibility for me, without me even asking. But he had secrets too. Now, as he slept, his face was relaxed, with even a ghost of a smile on his lips. He'd smiled and laughed more since that day we huddled in the bushes to shelter from the rain. That made me feel purposeful and not that I was a bother to him.

I couldn't get the photograph I'd found from my mind, but I refrained from prying. He'd said he wasn't married. Was that the truth? He had looked so happy in that picture. What went wrong to push him to live in the mountains alone? I'd spent two days with him already, but it was enough to know that Tate would never have abandoned his family. Not after the way he had taken care of me.

It didn't make any sense.

I wanted to know what was behind that story, but he was a private man. He would tell me if he wanted to, but if he was dead set against it, no powers on earth would get him to talk.

A smile tugging on my lips, I removed his hand from my hip. He turned onto his back. Even better for me. I still had no idea what he tasted like. Time to remedy that.

Without using my hands, I covered the head of his cock with my lips. I couldn't help the moan that reverberated in my throat at the silky feel of him sliding between my lips. I teased him, washing my tongue over the tip.

Tate woke up slowly. First his body stiffened, then relaxed. Groaning, he yanked the sheet from over my head. "What are you—? Never mind. Keep going." He threw his head back against his pillow and made a guttural sound, his heels digging into the mattress.

I cupped his balls and caressed them with enough grip for it to aid me in pleasuring him. Soon, he was rocking upward into my mouth. He was too huge for me to take all of him, but I damn well sure tried. I gagged, pulling away when his last thrust pushed his tip past my tonsils. Saliva dripped onto his cock, and I rubbed the mess over his shaft and up to the head.

I pushed his legs apart and popped his balls into my mouth, licking and sucking, then continued down to his taint. I pressed my mouth to the sensitive area, skating my tongue over the region. Since he made no effort to stop me, I figured he was okay with me rimming him. I could tell from the undisturbed view of his pucker that he didn't bottom, at least not often.

It didn't bother me that he didn't bottom; I preferred to be in that position anyway. I loved being penetrated and drilled, knowing I was the cause of all that pleasure.

Tate held my head firmly as he hoisted up his legs so I could reach his pucker more easily. I licked the outer ridges first, dripping saliva into his pucker, then sliding my tongue inside. I didn't do this for every guy, but something about Tate made me want to give him a rim job.

“Enough!” Tate growled at me and pushed his hands under my arms to pull me up his body. “Ride me, Bry,” he murmured, running his hands up my chest as I straddled him. Condom and lube were passed to me, and I sheathed his cock as fast as I dared without ripping it. I didn’t know how much of the precious commodity he still had, and I was nowhere near being fully sated by him yet. I’d rather not waste the condoms.

I dripped the lubricant over his cock, then sat on my haunches, careful not to irritate my ankle, then slowly lowered myself onto his swollen member, my heart pounding at how snugly he fit inside me. I bit my bottom lip and moved on top of him. I rose, then sank back down, taking more and more of him into my ass until he was fully embedded in my hole.

“Feels so fucking good, Bry.” Tate grabbed the globes of my ass. He tilted me forward to kiss him as he placed his feet flat on the bed and pushed inside me. With his hands holding me still, he thrust in and out of my body, his cock sliding through my passage. I moaned into his mouth and clung to his neck, hanging on for the ride as his movements intensified.

“Arrggh!” I cried out as I moved along with him. He fucked me hard, penetrating me deep and fast. “Oh god, Tate, yes! Yes! Fuck me! Fuck me, Tate!”

At my insistent cries, Tate took the challenge, flipped me over onto my tummy, and hauled me to my knees. I reached beneath my body to stroke my dick as he rose over me with his feet placed firmly on the bed. With his legs on either side of my hips, he lunged into me hard.

“Fuck!” I shouted and jerked.

He chuckled and pulled me back up into the kneeling position. “You said you want me to fuck you, Bry. Now show me how well you can take it.”

I clutched at the sheet, no longer needing to jerk my cock for the impending climax. Tate felt immense as he drove hard into my ae over and over. He clutched my shoulders to anchor him, which only made his thrusts more powerful. I cried out

from the intensity of his passion for me, amazed at the emotions washing over me.

We climaxed together. The stiffening in his body mirrored mine as I emptied my seed onto the bed beneath me, and he did the same in the condom. I collapsed onto the bed with him heavy on top of me.

While I was still catching my breath, he pulled out of me and walked through the door leading to his bathroom and returned with a wet towel. I lay back and allowed him to clean me up. My legs were too weak for me to move anyway.

After throwing the towel onto the bathroom floor, he climbed back into bed and pulled me against him, making me the little spoon. He rubbed his hand over my chest, caressing and tweaking my nipples while he kissed my neck and shoulder.

“That was amazing,” he whispered and licked the shell of my ear.

“Yes,” I said with a lazy smile. I nestled more snugly against him, while he continued stroking over my chest and kissing my shoulder. The way he kissed me told me a lot about him. Although he tried to hide it, he was affectionate by nature, and I liked that.

“Bryan, can I ask you something?” Tate asked hesitantly.

“Sure.” I leaned back my head so he could kiss me, which he did.

“Why did you really come up here in the mountains? You told me you were with friends, but why then did you come to my cabin alone?”

I sighed and resigned myself to the fact that I would have to explain the situation.

“My boss persuaded me into going hiking with him,” I said, then paused. Okay, time to come clean about it all. “My boss *and* boyfriend. It’s an annual thing he does with his buddies. All four of them go hiking and relive the glory days, but one of them fell ill, and Keith asked me to come with them.”

He stiffened behind me. “So, you do have a boyfriend?” he asked, his tone sharp.

“No, I broke things off.” I turned in his arms to face him. “That’s why I was heading down the mountain alone.”

He was silent for a few seconds. “Do you love him?” I bit my bottom lip to prevent my smile. He sounded jealous.

“I never loved him,” I answered honestly. “He doesn’t love me either. I think one thing just led to another. We work on the same floor. In fact, I’m his personal assistant, and well, things just happened. I need to find a new apartment as soon as I get back to San Diego.”

“You live with him but don’t love him?” Tate exploded in disbelief.

“Keith can be persuasive.”

“Or maybe you’re just too easily persuaded.”

“You just don’t understand.”

“Look, it doesn’t matter. Forget I said anything.”

I stared in shock at his naked ass and broad back as he strode out of the bedroom. What the hell was this? A lovers’ tiff? Why was it about Keith? Tate couldn’t be jealous of the other man, could he? But I didn’t know how else to view his overreaction to me living with Keith.

His reaction made me uneasy. We hadn’t talked about feelings in all this time. We coexisted in his little cabin together, succumbing to our mutual attraction. After all, why the hell not? But even though I wanted him, he had to know this was just a temporary situation.

We lived in two different worlds. He was perfectly happy, staying up here, away from civilization. As soon as my ankle was better, I would be on my way back to the city. I’d love to date him, see where this powerful attraction could lead, but it wasn’t as if he would be a ten-minute drive away.

TATE

Embarrassed at my jealousy earlier at the thought of Bryan living with that asshole I'd seen him with, I made sure to avoid him. I used the excuse that I had to hunt for game for our dinner. I didn't need to. My refrigerator was stocked, but hopefully, he wouldn't think too much about it.

A few days with the guy and I was laying claim to him like he'd committed himself to me. He'd done no such thing, and I needed to get with the program. Him sharing his body with me didn't mean I was entitled to anything else from him.

I desperately needed to remember that we were from two different worlds. I'd always been the type to commit to someone, as I had been to Rachel for the longest time. I wasn't used to sleeping around and acting on attraction alone.

After spending way more time contemplating than actually hunting anything, I caught a small deer and hauled it back to the cabin. Bryan must have heard me arrive because he came out to the porch to watch me.

"Uh, what are you going to do with that?" he asked.

"Deer meat for dinner," I replied.

"Are you sure that's edible?"

"Pretty sure."

"O-okay." A few more minutes passed in which he watched me. Then he asked, "Are you, like, a hundred percent sure?"

"Yes, a hundred percent sure."

“And have you eaten it before?”

“Yup. Several times.”

“What does it taste like?”

“But that will ruin the surprise, won’t it?”

He gave a nervous chuckle. “Who says I like surprises?”

I paused and glanced up at him. He had his arms around one of the porch posts. It reminded me of the way he was wrapped around me when we were in bed.

I shook off the thought. “I think you do like surprises.”

“Not when it comes to what’s going into my mouth.”

His comment was innocent enough, but I had to bite back my retort that he hadn’t minded putting my cock into his mouth, knowing me only a couple of days.

“That doesn’t count,” he hissed as if reading my thoughts.

I burst out laughing, and just like that the ice was broken between us. We didn’t mention the argument we had this morning. It didn’t matter anyway. He was leaving soon. Whatever little time I had to explore my attraction to a man, I couldn’t afford to waste on petty jealousy.

I should be grateful that he allowed me to touch him at all. And after I’d treated him so shabbily at first too.

Dinner turned out okay, and I carried it to the living room. Bryan had spread out a blanket on the floor so we could eat in front of the TV. As an afterthought, I walked back to the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of wine and two glasses.

Pretentious bastard. As I stared at the glasses in my hand, it hit me. Did I really want to be totally cut off from the world when I’d brought these worldly pleasures with me for comfort? Or was I just running away like a little boy, too scared to own up to what I’d done?

“Ooh, is that wine?” Bryan asked, whisking into the kitchen. He was walking better on his ankle, and maybe I should have pointed that out to him, but I believed we were

both latching on to the ankle excuse for him to still be at the cabin with me.

“Yeah, I keep a bottle.”

His eyebrow rose when he checked out the label. “Expensive. Do you entertain up here?”

“No. You’re the first.”

His brown eyes lit up, and his lips stretched into a smile that I returned without thought. He had so much energy that I couldn’t help being pulled into him. He was an enigma. It was way more than what we did in bed too. He made me smile, made me wish that...

No time for that nonsense.

He’ll be gone in a couple of days.

And I needed to remember that.

“Well, don’t just stand there with it.” He rescued the wine from my hand and headed back to the living room. He flashed me a smirk over his shoulder. “You don’t have any plans tomorrow, right? Because suddenly getting drunk sounds really appealing right now.”

“No, no plans.”

“Good because I get a little slutty when I’m tipsy so I don’t usually drink. No telling what I’ll allow you to get away with.”

Damn boy was a tease. He exaggerated the sway of his hips as he sauntered out. I expelled a needful groan and pressed a hand down on my cock to ease some of the pressure building there.

I followed him into the living room and sat beside him on the floor. This—what I was doing with him was so different from anything I’d ever done. I was the CEO of a billion-dollar company. In my previous life, Rachel and I had entertained a lot, but it’d been rarely for pleasure. Most parties we’d held had been business dinners and soirees.

“Want me to choose the movie?” Bryan asked, oblivious to my internal conflict, which I was careful not to show on my face.

“It’s bad habit to eat and watch TV,” I said.

“Boooo!” He crawled over to the shelf with DVDs. “Someone’s trying to murder the mood. It’s up to me to save our date.”

“Date?”

Bryan paused. It was only for a few seconds, and then he laughed, but it was long enough for me to catch.

“Humor me, will you?” he said. “It’s no fun being stuck in a cabin if you can’t engage in a little make-belief.”

“You’d want to date me?” I asked him softly.

He shrugged. “I don’t know you well enough to say.”

“So you don’t know me well enough to date me but enough for us to have sex?”

He groaned, then exclaimed loudly, “Hey, you have the entire original Kill Bill series. Let’s watch them all.”

I cocked my head to one side and waited. He heaved a sigh and strolled over to the DVD player.

“Sex is easy, okay? I’ve been doing it for a long time. Relationships are different, and I’m not sure I’m any good at it.”

I allowed him to get the movie all set up, and when he sat back down beside me, avoiding my eyes, I handed him a glass of wine.

“Thanks for sharing that with me.”

He nodded but didn’t reply. I felt like I should do something...say something at least, but I didn’t know what, so I settled with my back against the sofa and watched the movie. Eventually, he got immersed in the movie, and the tension eased out of him.

The only time I disturbed him was to bump his shoulder and point to his almost untouched plate.

“You’re not eating. You keep drinking that wine, and it’ll go straight to your head.”

He leaned over and whispered in my ear, “Maybe I want it to get to my head.”

It was tempting to see what he was like drunk. He was already being so flirtatious. But I had to be the responsible one.

“Eat up, Bryan.”

“Fine, Dad.”

I scowled at him. “I’m not your Dad.”

He giggled. “Would you like to be tonight? You can spank my bottom for being a naughty boy and not eating my dinner.”

I struggled on the words I wanted to say for him to eat his dinner and shut up. I couldn’t get the image out of my head of Bryan over my lap, his ass in the air as he eagerly waited for my hand to collide with his flesh.

“Only good boys get spankings,” I said softly, not sure where the words came from, but they seemed fitting.

I must not have bungled that up because he reached for his plate and dug in.

BRYAN

“Hey, feel up to fishing?” Tate asked as he walked into the cabin. As always, when I saw him, warmth roiled around in my belly. He looked gorgeous, dressed in snug-fitting faded blue jeans and a T-shirt with the arms ripped out.

“I’m not sure,” I answered reluctantly. In truth, I was dying to get out of the cabin, but the last thing I wanted was him experiencing me in nature.

“Come on, it’ll be fun,” he insisted. “I can see you’re bored.”

He was right about that. I didn’t understand how he could choose the mountains over the beauty of the city. I could see it as a retreat every now and again, but to live permanently up here was not my idea of fun. There was nothing to do, and I was already all movied out.

“I really don’t know anything about fishing,” I warned, although I felt myself capitulating.

“Don’t worry. I’m a good teacher.”

He winked. When he was playful like this, which was rare, he was irresistible.

So I ended up walking beside him toward the river. We went slowly so I didn’t have to put too much pressure on my ankle, although it barely hurt today.

I’d be leaving soon. In two days, I’d have to get off this mountain, back to a job I wasn’t sure I still had. I already could imagine what was going to happen. Keith would try to

win me over, to manipulate me. Maybe when he realized I truly meant we were over, he wouldn't want me working for him anymore. If that didn't happen, I could always sue him for sexual harassment in the workplace, but I didn't believe in stirring up drama, so I'd probably leave and just find a new start.

A pity Tate wouldn't be around.

"Don't you ever get bored up here on your own?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I like my own company."

"Is that so?" I side-eyed him. "You don't seem to mind having me around."

"Well, most times you're not as annoying as some," he grumbled, then changed the subject. "You going back to your job when you leave?"

"I have to. It's my job. Whether I still have it is another question."

"You know he can't just fire you because you refuse to sleep with him, right?"

"Yeah, but he can make my life a living nightmare."

"Yeah? Guy sounds like a douchebag."

"He is." I cringed. It was true. He was a douchebag. Why hadn't I seen that before? "Do you ever spend time back in the real world?"

He laughed. "And this isn't the real world? This is more real than the city you live in. Here there is no pretense. Nature is what you see around you, stripped bare and exposed. In the city, people keep secrets, make judgments, and discriminate."

It was the most intense speech I'd heard from him since I arrived on his doorstep. It also gave me much insight into the man that was Tate. Whatever he had faced in the city had left him broken, and he still hurt because of it. I wished I was brave enough to ask him outright what had happened to the woman and girl in the picture, but I had only two more days with him. I didn't want to argue with him. Not when I was

trying to find a way to suggest he look me up if he ever did come to the city.

“This is a good spot.” He pointed and dropped his sack and the tackle box he’d brought along.

“I’ll just watch,” I said as he set up his fishing rod.

He glanced up. “I told you I’ll teach you. I promise it’s not as hard as it looks. I’ll put the bait on the hook for you.”

I really wanted to get it right, so I paid attention to every single thing he did. I was grossed out a bit that he chose to use live bait, but I should have known Tate wouldn’t be a plastic worm kind of guy. While he added the line, he told and showed me what to do.

He made it look as easy as he’d said it was when he caught his first two fish and then passed me the rod. I didn’t really want to, but something inside me wanted his approval. He moved me in front of him and couldn’t resist copping a feel of my ass. I gave him a mock glare, but inside, I was pleased he found me to be so irresistible.

He chuckled. “It’s just fishing, Bry. Don’t be so tense about it.”

After a few casting errors, I finally landed the bait.

“Now what?” I asked.

“Now watch the bobbers. If the bobber sinks, a fish has taken the bait, and you should get ready to reel it in.”

My tongue peeked out the corner of my mouth as I concentrated and relaxed. This didn’t seem so bad after all.

“Do you ever get into the city?” I asked Tate as I watched the handmade cork bobber religiously.

“From time to time. I’ve business in the city.”

Ah, that explained the financial magazines in the living room. I inclined my head toward him. “Really? What business?”

“Just business,” he replied with no further explanation.

“And how do you get into the city?” I prodded.

“A spaceship,” he said sarcastically. “Of course, a car. What do you expect?”

I frowned at his waspish tone. Why did he always get so abrasive sometimes when the questions became personal? I decided to push him, get him out of his comfort zone.

“If you own a car, how come you didn’t just drop me off instead of making me wait for my ankle to heal?”

“There’s still the little thing of making it down the mountains first. I couldn’t drive this far up the trail, not even with a four-wheel drive.”

“Oh.” I tried not to show my disappointment. I’d hoped that he simply wanted me around for as long as possible.

“Your bobber’s sinking,” he said, pulling me from my thoughts.

He was right. The other end of the line tugged in small jerking motions. I reeled in the fish as I’d watched Tate do, but when the fish broke the surface and I saw how big it was, not to mention its squirming, I promptly dropped the fishing rod.

“Shit,” I muttered, my heart pounding. I didn’t like the way the fish was struggling to stay alive.

Guffawing loudly, Tate came to my rescue, grabbing the fishing rod and reeling in the fish the rest of the way. With expert ease, he unhooked the fish and threw it into the igloo cooler with the others.

I was hurt at him laughing at me, the situation too familiar with what had happened with Keith and his friends. Hadn’t they laughed too and mocked how inept I was at this “manly” stuff? Wasn’t that what I had been running from when I ran into Tate? Deep down, I knew he didn’t mean any harm, but I just kept hearing Keith and his friends jeering, making fun of me, and pushing me to my limit.

“Fuck you!” I grumbled and stalked away.

“What? Bryan, where are you going?” he called after me, but I didn’t respond. Neither did I look back. I should never

have gone along with him, knowing this would happen.

“WILL YOU WAIT UP!” Tate hollered, and his footsteps pounded after me. He grabbed me by the arm. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Nothing’s wrong with me!” I snapped and tugged my arm out of his grasp. “Just because someone isn’t nearly an expert at this hiking and living in the wilderness shit as you are doesn’t mean anything is wrong with them.”

He furrowed his brows. “You’re acting childish. We were having fun.”

“No”—I poked him in the chest—“you were having fun! At my expense. Isn’t that what all you macho men always do? Can’t miss the opportunity to make fun of other men who aren’t like you.”

“It’s not that big a deal. So I laughed. Maybe I shouldn’t have, but you need to lighten up.”

“Don’t tell me what to do.”

He pulled me into him, his hands on my hips. “Chill. Out.” He punctuated the words. “I swear, sometimes you’re even more wound up than I am. I apologize, okay? I didn’t mean to offend you. I’ve no idea what the hell your ex did, but I’m not him. Understand?”

That he apologized only made me feel I had overreacted. I felt a little embarrassed that I had compared him to Keith, who had never apologized to me for anything. Even if the evidence had slapped into his face that he was wrong. So, Tate laughed. He’d found the situation funny. At least he hadn’t ridiculed me. There was joking, and then there was derision. Keith’s friends had treated me to the latter.

“Fine,” I mumbled.

“Doesn’t sound fine,” he said, and his hands slipped around my waist and cupped my backside. “But I can make it fine.”

And boy did he. He started with pressing his lips against mine, but by the time he was finished with me, I'd forgotten what I was mad about.

BRYAN

Tate sank his teeth into my shoulder, nipping me gently, and I let out a sigh. It was so nice just to lie like this, spooned against each other after some intense minutes of kissing that didn't lead to anything else but a cuddle. I wasn't in the mood for sex tonight anyway, as I had too much on my mind.

I still couldn't get over how I had overreacted today because Tate had laughed when I dropped the fishing rod. It was all Keith's treatment, not to mention his friends' behavior, that had made me so sensitive. I could never date a guy like Keith again, but Tate wasn't like him at all. Sure, he had laughed, and thinking about it now, it might have been funny. What he hadn't done, though, was mock me.

"You're thinking," he said softly as we lay in the semidarkness of the room. He kissed my neck, his soft lips sending shivers down my spine. Maybe I did want sex after all.

"Hmm."

"You're not still mad at me, are you, Bry?"

"No," I answered honestly and turned in his arms, laying my head onto his arm. "Truth is, I might not have even been mad at you."

"Really? Because I'd say you were pretty upset."

"Keith would say that I acted like a diva sometimes."

He peered at me. “I guess I shouldn’t agree with that? Or can I agree to a certain—uff!”

I elbowed him in his stomach hard enough to startle him, but not to actually hurt him. “I wasn’t mad at you. I didn’t fully explain why I left the other guys and struck out on my own. After Keith convinced me to tag along, I thought it might be fun. It was more fun for them than for me, though. By now, you know I’m not the type who does this man-in-the-wild kind of thing. They derided me because of it, constantly taking jabs at me.”

“And that douchebag didn’t stick up for you?”

“Nope, he didn’t. So I broke things off with him and left.”

“So, uh, you had a lovers’ spat?” he asked. “Maybe when you get back to the city, he’ll convince you to forgive him.”

I shook my head, then stretched my neck and rubbed my lips against his. “Not going to happen. Not now I met you.”

His breath hitched, and he captured my lips into one of his passionately, arousing kisses. Just when I thought it would lead to more, he released my lips.

“I had a wife,” he blurted out. “I could barely breathe for fear of interrupting him. “And a daughter. Rachel and Kathleen. They were in the picture you saw.”

I stroked his arm comfortingly, hearing the pain in his voice and the effort it took him to say the words.

“You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.” If it was going to hurt him, I didn’t want to know. It hardly mattered what he had done in his past. The man who he was now, standing before me, was all that mattered.

“I want to tell you,” he said. “Maybe then you’ll understand. I wasn’t always like this. I had what you’d call a normal life. You’ve heard of Rosenbaum Holdings?”

“Yes.” Where was he going with this? Rosenbaum was a successful multimillion-dollar company that dabbled in everything real estate. They specialized in hotels, condos, golf clubs, and townhomes.

“I’m that Tate Rosenbaum,” he said.

“No way!” I gaped at him. “You’re the CEO of Rosenbaum Holdings?”

“Yes, I took over the major share in the company when my father died. Anyway, long story short is that I seemed to have it all—money, a beautiful wife, and a lovely daughter. I loved them both, don’t get me wrong. Rachel and I grew up as friends, our families were close, and everyone expected us to be together. I did the predictable. I asked her to marry me, but the truth is that I wasn’t totally satisfied.”

Tate was quiet for a long moment. I caressed his arm, gently rubbing, giving him time to gather his thoughts.

“My father was a traditional man who talked so much about family and legacy that I felt I would be a disappointment to him if he found out I liked not only women but also men. Although I am bisexual, I lean more toward men. It seemed easier at the time to just be with a woman and then everyone would be happy. I tried to settle into a normal life, and I succeeded.”

“Go on,” I whispered, my heart aching for him.

“Shortly after Dad died, I told Rachel that I’m bisexual. I just told her because I thought she deserved to know the truth. I didn’t tell her to leave her or even have an affair, but that’s how she took it. I couldn’t have imagined she would be so upset. We’ve always been good friends, and that was the only part of my life she didn’t yet know about. I was hoping she would be supportive and it was something we could talk about, but she got mad at me. She was disappointed and hurt, accusing me of lying to her. She left me the following day, taking Kathleen with her. I begged her not to go, that it didn’t mean anything, that it wouldn’t change us.” His voice cracked, and his face was ashen. “That was the last time I saw both of them. They were hit by a truck and died on the spot.”

“God, Tate, I’m so sorry.” I wrapped my arms around him tightly.

“I keep thinking if I hadn’t said anything, they would both still be alive.” He shuddered, and his tears wet my skin, where he had buried his head into the crook of my neck.

“No, it’s not your fault,” I soothed him, kneading his back. “You have a right to be who you are. It’s tragic what happened, but you can’t look back on it and think it’s your fault.”

He sniffled. “She’d been on the phone telling her sister about it when she ran the stoplight. Her sister blamed me and didn’t give me a choice to come out to the public. Suddenly I was the bad guy in all this, being bombarded by journalists. I couldn’t even grieve properly, so I eventually put my uncle in charge of the company and secluded myself from everyone.”

“I understand.” I ran my fingers through his hair. “It’s understandable that you’d want to get away. But at some point, you’ll have to face it. You can’t hide forever.”

“Maybe not but I’ll hide for as long as I can.”

I held him against me, my arms wrapped around him, while he cried silently. I rubbed his back until he fell asleep, but it took me a while to find the same solace he had. When I eventually drifted into sleep, it was to be haunted by dreams of Tate and Keith metamorphosing, one into the other, until I couldn’t tell them apart.

I woke up sweating, my heart pounding in my chest. Tate was still fast asleep in his favorite position, on his stomach. He still had his arm around me, though, as if he needed that connection, even in his sleep. My heart clenched with affection for this man I barely knew, and panic crashed through me. I removed his hand from my waist and slid from the bed without waking him.

Wearing only a pair of shorts, I walked in the dark to the bathroom and relieved myself, but I didn’t go back to bed. I trudged through the living room and to the front door. I stepped out onto the porch, slung my arms round a post, and stared out into the night. I was terrified that I could fall for a man who wouldn’t be suitable for me. I didn’t want to leave him. I couldn’t remember a time when I’d felt this comfortable

around a man, but the truth was that we were as different as night and day.

I had no idea how long I'd stood there when hands slipped around my waist. Although I hadn't heard him approach I relaxed, knowing it was Tate. Only then did I notice the cool night breeze skating goosebumps over my bare upper body. I leaned back, and he rested his chin on my head.

He sighed, his warm breath ruffling my hair, and I knew he understood the turmoil I was going through because he was going through it too.

TATE

“How’s that?”

A moan startled me, and my head shot upright. Bryan looked way too relaxed on my sofa while I felt him up. Well, technically, I was feeling his ankle, checking for any lingering damage. So far, he hadn’t made a sound of pain, which meant he was all healed. All good to return to his life in the city.

My eyes dropped to his shorts, where his hard dick poked at the front. I’d rather dwell on this than his impending departure. We knew this day was coming, and when he left, things would go back to the way they had been.

No smiles. No laughter. No warm body to snuggle up with.

“Pervert,” I teased.

“You’re the one who can’t keep his happy stick out of my no-no.”

“Happy stick?” I burst out laughing. “Your no-no? What are you, six?”

Bryan giggled. “I was trying to go for cute.”

“Well, epic failure. Why don’t you continue with the next chapter of the book?”

“Great idea.”

He picked up the book lying on his chest and turned the page to the next chapter. He made a show of clearing his throat, and I rolled my eyes. In answer, he stuck his tongue

out. I was about to take that tongue into my mouth when he started reading.

That simple exchange basically summed up our routine in the past few days. I'd let my guard down more, allowing him to fill my days with the laughter that had been missing. I'd thought I was comfortable living here all alone in the woods, but he'd made me question my decision.

I kept massaging his ankle, then switched to his toes. Was it possible that we would make a good pair? He craved attention, and I liked giving it to him. I liked his strength, liked that he didn't apologize or allow me to think badly of him for sleeping with me within a few hours of meeting me. He was confident in himself, but he'd shown signs of vulnerability too that made me want to keep him.

But how could I? And what if I broke him like I'd broken the two most precious people in my life, the ones who'd been depending on me?

A nudge from Bryan's foot snagged my attention, and I glanced up at him.

"You zoned out." He closed the book. "I think that's enough reading for one day."

"Sorry. Just thinking. You can continue reading if you want."

He shook his head. "We're reading it together, remember?"

I eyed the book we'd been making good progress on. If I found a way to delay him reading to me, would that do the trick and get him to stay until he finished it? The book could conveniently go missing.

"My wife bought me that book." The admission startled even me. I didn't talk about Rachel. It hurt too damn much, but I had this sudden compulsion to talk about her. Not just to anyone but to Bryan, but perhaps he felt weird about it?

"Sorry, I didn't mean to bring her up," I said quickly and rose to my feet.

His hand came down onto my arm. “No, stay. Please. I want to hear about them. Your wife and daughter. You must have loved them very much.”

I hung my head. “I did. They meant the world to me. I felt guilty for so long that I was still attracted to men.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. If I was truly satisfied, would I still find other men attractive?”

“That doesn’t even make sense,” he said bluntly. “I’m pretty sure if you were heterosexual you wouldn’t be thinking this way.”

I frowned. “Meaning?”

“Meaning heterosexuals don’t just stop feeling attracted to the opposite sex when they’re married or in a relationship.”

“I suppose.”

“You know I’m right, and both you and your wife were unrealistic to believe you shouldn’t find men attractive anymore because you were married.”

“You think?”

“I know so. You think when I get married, I’m suddenly not going to find other guys hot anymore?” He whistled suggestively. “Fuck, no. I can still appreciate man candy.”

I chuckled softly. “You want to get married?”

“Some day. If I find a guy who won’t think I’m too effeminate for his taste.”

“Oh, that’s not why I find you unsuitable at all.” I kept my expression blank. “That’d be because you talk a lot.”

I chuckled when two red spots appeared on his cheeks.

“Well, if somebody filled in for their half of the conversation, I wouldn’t have to do my share of the talking as well as yours.”

“Sometimes talking’s not necessary.” When he opened his mouth, I held up my hand. “And I don’t mean during sex.”

“Boohoo.”

“The silence can actually be reassuring. Want to try it?”

He shook his head and whispered, “I’m too scared.”

“Of what? Silence?”

“Yeah, then you’ll have to really reflect on what’s going on in your mind. I don’t want to do that.”

“Why? Afraid of your thoughts?”

“Exactly. Maybe tell me about your daughter. What was she like?”

I found myself smiling at the memory of Kathleen. Before, the mere mention of her usually had me incapacitated with grief. That was one of the reasons I had to leave San Diego. All the articles, the news outlets talking about the tragedy, I hadn’t been able to bear it.

“She was beautiful like her mom.” I rested back against the sofa. “Loved swimming and the outdoors. Rachel didn’t, so it was our special thing. I tried to do things with Kathleen when I wasn’t at the office. Looking back, I regret spending so much time there and not with her. But one of the things we used to do was to make a tent in the backyard and camping out there in the night. She loved it. Rachel would bring us cookies and milk. She’d stay for the customary bedtime story, but then she’d return to the house because she wasn’t sleeping in the yard with all the bugs and rodents.”

I chuckled sadly at the memory of trying in vain to get her to stay with us one night. I’d even roped in Kathleen to plead with me, but Rachel hadn’t budged.

“We’re alike when it comes to that, then,” Bryan said. “I’m not very good at this nature stuff either.”

“Yeah, but you at least try. You went fishing with me. She would never have made it that far.”

“Only because I was turning into a sex addict being here in the cabin all day, going at it like we’re a couple of rabbits.”

“How did that work out?”

“As if you don’t know.” He grabbed one of the cushions behind his back and threw it at my face. I caught it and, bending forward, knelt between his legs and pretended to smother him with the pillow.

He yanked the pillow from his face and flung it across the room. Bryan grabbed fistfuls of my shirt and tugged me down on top of him, then wrapped his legs around my waist and locked them, trapping me.

“I know this is just for now,” he said softly. “But I’m glad I met you, Tate. For however long we have. I’ll never regret sleeping with you.”

What about everything else we shared besides the sex? The words were on the tip of my tongue, but I didn’t say them. Maybe he wanted to keep this as light as possible while still voicing what these last few days meant to him. They meant a hell of a lot for me.

“You’re my first,” I confessed.

“Your first what?”

I lowered my eyes to his lips. Why had I mentioned it? “You know, my first...”

“Your first time with a guy?”

“Yeah.”

“Holy shit. You’re good at this.” He expelled a loud huff. “That pisses me off. I was a disaster my first few times. I had to work at being this good, and you got it all right in one go?”

I pecked his lips. “Maybe you didn’t have a good leading man the way I did. Maybe that made the difference?”

“Definitely did.” He cupped the back of my head and pulled me down for a kiss. It was slow and soulful. Damn, a man had no business kissing another man this way when he would be leaving soon.

Ask him to stay.

“Are we going to be like a couple of rabbits again?” he asked me breathlessly.

I pressed my forehead to his. “Maybe later. Right now, let’s just lie like this in silence. Savor the moment for what it is.”

I expected him to put up an argument, but he only nodded. I shifted us so I was lying on the sofa with him sprawled on top of me. Bryan pressed his face into my neck and nuzzled me.

It wasn’t long before his breathing evened out and he fell asleep. I lay there awake, my arms around him as the silence revealed things to me I never wanted to see before.

BRYAN

“**M**aybe we should do this another day.” I stared at the row of cans Tate had lined up for target practice. He had taken it in his head to teach me how to defend myself by using a weapon. I still wasn’t convinced I needed to know, and I’d told him I hated guns, but somehow here I was with a shotgun in my hand.

“You’re ready,” he said with a supportive smile. “Of course, if you don’t want to, we can find something else to do.”

He was being considerate, but I could see that it meant a lot to him that I was willing to learn something he deemed important. So I nodded I was ready and smiled back at him. He squeezed my shoulder affectionately, and I relaxed.

Ever since he’d told me about his wife and daughter, our relationship, if it could be considered that, was full of affectionate gestures, and I’d never been happier. Who would have thought I’d find this amount of happiness in these woods I hated?

The company made all the difference.

“Okay, here goes.”

I missed the first round of shots entirely, and I turned to Tate in embarrassment.

“We’re just wasting bullets.”

“That’s fine. I’ve plenty,” he assured me. “I don’t expect you to get it the first time, Bry. Just try again.”

His encouragement made me want to get it right. So I reloaded the gun—at least I got that part right—tried again.

“Yes!” I crowed in delight when I hit one of the seven beer cans.

Tate laughed. “Now only six more to go. Celebration after. Get your ass moving.”

Man, I loved seeing him this way—his laugh lines becoming pronounced and his green eyes sparkling. I smirked over my shoulder, wiggling my ass for his benefit when I caught his lustful stare.

I chuckled. “Focus, Tate.”

“That’s what I’m trying to do if someone would stop flirting.”

I fixed the gun on the next target. “I don’t flirt.”

He scoffed aloud. “Yeah, right. I don’t think you can help it. Do you flirt with all the guys in the city?”

I pumped my fist in the air when I got my second beer can. “What guys in the city?”

“Okay, don’t tell me.”

“There’s nothing to tell,” I said and missed the next couple of shots. “You probably think the worst of me because I let you fuck me the first night I was here, but I’m not going to apologize for it.”

“Good to know. But you can still be a flirt without the sex.”

“Then there’s no problem, is there?” I faced him with a raised brow. “Unless you’re jealous at the idea of me making pouty face at another guy.”

He scowled. “I’m not jealous.”

“Hmm, I think you are.”

“Just shoot the damn cans!” he growled, and I laughed. I was *so* right.

I concentrated on the other beer cans but only got one, and I gave up.

“What are you doing?” Tate cried when I strolled toward the targets. In response, I engaged the safety, swept the butt of the gun over the remaining cans, toppling them to the ground, then walked back to him and handed him his gun.

“There! All done!”

“Cheater,” he said, but his eyes sparkled, and with the hand not holding the gun, he grabbed me by the front of my shirt and tugged me toward him.

I knew what was coming and eagerly raised my head to receive his kiss. The last two days, we hadn’t had sex. Instead, we’d done a lot of cuddling and kissing and talking. All the good stuff that made a relationship last. If only this would last. For now, I’d take what I could get.

I moaned into his mouth, clutching his shoulder as I went weak in the knees. He reached between our bodies and stroked my hardening dick.

“Bryan!”

I tensed in Tate’s arms, then took a step back and spun around. Shit, what was he doing here? Keith was storming toward us, and by the looks of him, he was pissed off. I braced myself for whatever Keith would do.

“Goddamn it,” Tate said softly. “I was just getting ready to have some fun.”

“How did he find me?”

Keith looked fit to kill. He glared at me and sized up Tate, then returned his attention to me, dismissing Tate as if he were a servant.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” Keith demanded, his hands forming fists at his side.

I hated the confrontation, hated that Tate was witnessing the way Keith treated me.

“You’re on my property,” Tate said, his voice as cold as it used to be. “Be careful how you speak to Bryan.”

“I’m talking to my boyfriend here!” Keith snapped. I drew in a deep breath.

“Ex-boyfriend,” I reminded him. “We’re no longer in a relationship.”

“We had a fight. That doesn’t mean we’re not in a relationship. We live together, or have you forgotten?”

“I agree lovers have fights.” I didn’t back down, even though the anger emanating from him was alarming. “And it’s not so much the fight either, but I’m not going to be the guy you fuck, then make fun of.”

He eyed me in disbelief. “That’s what this is about?”

“Of course, it’s what this is about,” I said as I clenched my fists. How could he pretend the way he’d treated me was okay? “This thing between us, it’s not going to work. I told you that the last time I saw you. You don’t treat me right.”

“I fucking combed this mountain, trying to find you!” he shouted. “And you want to tell me this is over because you’ve met somebody else? A fucking hilly-billy wannabe?”

“I told you it was over before I met Tate.” I took a step back. “This has nothing to do with him. We aren’t suitable for each other, Keith. You know that. I just wish I’d acknowledged that before I allowed it to get this far.”

“So you run from my bed and find yourself another man?” He closed the distance again, and my knees trembled. “I suppose you think he can give you what I can? He lives in the fucking woods. Have you forgotten how much you hate it here? I’ll make the offer once for you to leave right now with me. If you do, we’ll forget this whole thing happened.”

I shook my head. “I’m sorry, Keith, but after everything, I don’t want to be your boyfriend. Ever.”

“I think you’ve heard enough.” Tate stepped between me and Keith. “You need to go now. You’ve heard what Bry said. It’s over.”

“Bry?” Keith gaped at me. “You let him call you Bry? You told me you hated it. You listen to me good, Bryan. We’re leaving our camp tomorrow to head back to the city. I give you until tonight to find your ass back where it belongs, you fucking slut. Otherwise, don’t bother showing up for work.”

“Get the fuck off my land,” Tate commanded, his voice brooking no argument.

My heart galloped in my chest as I thought of the two men coming to blows because of me. Why did movies make it seem so glorified? It was not. It was scary how they glowered at each other.

Keith looked Tate up and down. “I can take you on my own. You think I’m just going to let you steal what’s mine?”

“I’m not yours.” And that was the problem, wasn’t it? I’d allowed him to push me into this role. To be his possession for him to fuck and treat me any way he wanted with little consideration for my feelings.

Tate cocked his gun, and my blood ran cold. Fuck, this was getting out of hand fast.

“You have until the count of five to get the hell out of my face and as far away from us as you can.”

“You’ll regret this,” Keith threatened me as he walked backward. “You won’t have him around to protect you all the time. In fact, I’ll be seeing you back at my condo, where your things are stashed. Or had you forgotten that?”

He stalked off, and I ran fingers through my hair as he disappeared into the trees where he had materialized from.

“Bryan, you okay?” Tate asked me.

No, I wasn’t okay. I felt like I’d just landed in the middle of a Regency romance novel with dueling men going at each other over my honor. Keith was right. Tate wouldn’t always be there, and I would be heading back to the city tomorrow. The look in Keith’s eyes had scared me, and I hoped he had the sense not to do anything stupid.

“Fuck!” I muttered and strode to the cabin.

“Bry!” Tate called after me, but I kept walking. I needed some time to figure this shit out.

BRYAN

“Stay with me,” Tate begged me as we lay in bed that last night together. For the first time, we were lying on opposite sides of the bed and didn’t touch at all. I hated the space we had created between us, but what was the sense of bridging the gap when it was only going to get wider tomorrow after I left?

“You know I can’t,” I said, keeping my back to him.

“Why the hell not?” he cried in frustration. “You know I make you happy. You won’t have to work. Just us both up here, away from the jerks of this world.”

“Not everyone is a jerk. I can’t stay here with you, Tate. I mean, it’s fun for a while, but I’m a city boy. I would go crazy living here.”

“I’ll give you something to take your mind off the city.”

“The sex is great, but it can’t be all there is.”

“Is it all there is for you?”

When I didn’t respond, he shuffled over to my side of the bed, grasped my shoulder, and turned me over onto my back.

“Is sex all there is?” he repeated, looking down at me, and I stared right back.

“You tell me. Is it all there is?”

Disappointment flashed in his eyes. I knew it wasn’t what he wanted to hear, but I was tired of being the one to talk about my feelings all the time. I’d like to hear it for once. I

wanted him to tell me I made him happy and that he would move to the city to be with me. Why should he expect me to move up here in the woods when he'd decided to cut himself off from other people?

“Since that’s all there is,” he growled, “then it would be remiss of me not to get one last fuck in, right?”

I didn’t stop him; I wanted him one last time too. But I didn’t want our normal sweet lovemaking, which would surely make me all teary-eyed and heartbroken at the thought of leaving him. So when he kissed me hard, his teeth nipping at my lips, I dug my fingers into his arms.

He bit my lip hard enough to draw blood, and my heart beat wildly. He tilted my head back and kissed my neck, then trailed down my body to my nipples. He bit and sucked them hard, his hand plunging into my boxers and fisting my turgid cock, which ached with need.

He gave me a few fast pumps, then grasped the waistband of my briefs and pulled them down my legs. He stripped out of his underwear and slid off the bed to one side. Grabbing me by the legs, he pulled me toward him, his desperate actions turning me on more than I had ever been in a very long time.

“Kneel,” he instructed. I scrambled to get down on all fours at the edge of the bed and laid my torso flat on the bed. When he clutched my ass, his blunt fingernails digging into my backside, I moaned in encouragement.

He slapped his hand hard against my ass cheeks, first one, then the other, and I gasped at the sting. He lowered his head and swiveled his tongue over my entrance, which he had become so familiar with over the past few days. Groaning, I gyrated my ass over his face as he plunged his hand beneath my body, circled my cock, and jerked me off, at the same time, rimming me with his tongue.

“Fuck,” he muttered. “Hold your cheeks apart for me, Bry.”

I did exactly as he asked, grabbing my cheeks and holding them apart for him. He retrieved a condom and lube and got

both of us ready. I would've loved for him to someday go bareback, but for now, I was playing it safe.

“Ooooooooooh,” I moaned as the bulbous head forged through the tight ring of muscles.

“Fuuuuuuuuck.” Tate gripped my shoulders hard, retreated, then slammed his cock back into my ass. I cried out from the sheer intensity of it.

Kneading my shoulders, he continued rocking hard into my body. When he hissed, I glanced over my shoulder. He was staring down in fascination at my hole, where his cock penetrated my ass. He would pull out fully, paused, then surged back in. But soon, his teasing ended, and he drilled my ass with powerful thrusts.

He snaked his hands under my torso and guided me into an upright position, so my back was in alignment with his chest. He wrapped an arm around my neck, caressing and squeezing slightly as he rode my ass hard and fast. My cries mixed with his groans, and the slapping of his pelvis against my cheeks drove me mad with passion. I shifted my ass to meet his thrusts as I angled my head for him to kiss me. I hooked an arm behind his neck and brought his head forward, and our lips met, our dueling tongues matching the rhythm of his penetrations.

“Oh god, Tate!” I cried out his name as my climax approached. He moved even more frantically against me, desperately seeking his release. I leaned heavily back against him as my balls tingled, my ass clenching and my cock tightening. I jerked my cock once, my mouth falling open in wonder as I sprayed the bedsheets with my cum.

“Fuck, Bry!” Tate shouted and climaxed, shuddering behind me. I dropped onto the bed on my stomach, and he collapsed on top of me, pumping his hips a little as he slowly got over the lingering effects of his orgasm.

“Hmm.”

Tate sucked on my earlobe. “That good enough for you?” he asked, and I stiffened beneath him. I tried not to take

offense at his callous words. I knew he was feeling the same way I was—a dreaded sense of loneliness at the thought of never being together like this again.

TATE

It was unfair of me to ask Bryan to stay with me. We'd spent not even a week with each other, and that was hardly enough time to make such a huge decision. On top of that, his last relationship hadn't exactly played out well either. Leaving one bad breakup to enter a new relationship so soon couldn't be decided overnight.

Still, I was disappointed in his response. He could have at least explained he needed more time or something, but instead he equated what we'd shared to sex. Meaningless sex. I'd have been willing to admit that if it were true, but it wasn't.

In part, I was more upset with myself than with him. I expected him to adjust without even thinking of the changes I could make for us to have a shot at this. And I wanted a shot. He was different from anyone I'd ever known. He soothed the ache in my chest, put back the smile on my face, heated me up in ways I never thought possible. I'd never believed I would feel such fire ever again.

Last night sex had held such desperation for both of us. The three times we'd done it. As if we were trying to get each other out of our systems before the grand departure.

In all my life, I'd never had sex so many times in such a short time. I should be all tired out, but it only made me want him more. Have him with me all the time. The sex wasn't just about the physical need. We connected in a way we both could understand and appreciate. It made what had happened more logical than to think I could have fallen for someone in just a few days.

That was preposterous and not worth thinking about.

Unlike me, Bryan had been out cold after we had sex the last time. He didn't seem to have moved much either. He lay sprawled on his stomach, his head turned away from me, his snores filling the bedroom. I hadn't bothered to pull the bed linens over us after he'd fallen asleep; the room had gotten warm.

I rolled out of bed and rubbed at my eyes, which were gritty from lack of sleep. I felt every one of my thirty-two years. When my sight cleared, I drank him in again, enjoying him for the limited time I had left with him.

His complexion was just a bit darker than when we'd just met. All those times we'd spent outdoors had given him a nice tan. How long would it take him being in the city for his natural paleness to return?

I could make out markings on his body where I'd sucked and nipped him. Most of it was concentrated around his hips and ass, where I'd grabbed him while we fucked. He should also have a red mark on his right shoulder where I'd marked him. He'd see it for a few days and possibly remember me before I was completely gone from his memory.

I couldn't imagine that a guy like Bryan would remain single for long. He was too personable, too funny, too good. Hopefully, he chose better this time and not run back to that asshole of an ex of his.

The man rubbed me the wrong way and not because I had a mental picture of Bryan sucking him off. I didn't like the way he talked down to Bryan. And he had a threatening air to him that didn't sit well with me either.

Had he ever gotten physical with Bryan?

With a sigh, I strolled to the bathroom and washed. I was back in the bedroom, pulling a shirt over my head, when Bryan stirred. I silently prayed for him to go back to sleep, but he patted the mattress next to him. Frowning, he raised his head.

“Tate?”

“Yes,” I said gruffly.

He sat up, his face worried, but I quickly stalked over to the bed to reassure him. I didn’t want us to leave this way. Him leaving shouldn’t spoil what we’d experienced together.

“Is it time?” he asked, his voice sounding small. His eyes looked sad, sadder than I’d seen them since we’d met. He was always happy and at times angry, but never sad.

“No, I’m just going for a walk.” I pressed him onto his back. He had to be worn down from last night. I kissed his forehead. “Sleep for a bit more. I’ll wake you up when I get back.”

He let out a sigh. “Can we talk about last night? Please.”

“Sure. When I get back. Just sleep.”

He nodded and nestled his face back into the pillow. I kissed the top of his head, a lump forming in my throat. Was I really ready to let him go? What if this was my last chance at finding happiness? Happiness that I didn’t even deserve.

I grabbed my phone on the way out and took a familiar path at the back of the cabin. Phones didn’t work so far up in the woods, but I knew the exact location on higher ground to get a signal. It was one of the things I’d first scouted for when I settled down at the cabin. As much as I wanted my privacy, I wasn’t completely stupid. Living up here, I needed to be able to call 911 if something went wrong.

There was nothing worse than being stuck in the woods without any means of getting down or contacting anyone. It was already risky enough that I had to go so far out to get a signal.

I finally came to a stop on the high rock I’d discovered a week after coming here. I didn’t immediately take out my phone. I just stood there and watched the sun rise, serene and at peace. The yellow and orange streaks of lights seemed to be playing with the green of the leaves. I was enthralled by how the darkness slowly became consumed with the light, giving the most beautiful scenery.

That was exactly what Bryan's presence had brought into my life. He was the sun that radiated energy and exposed the little beauty that was left in my life.

Comforted in that knowledge, I punched in the only number I had saved into my phone. The phone rang a few times. Then the sleepy voice of my best friend came on.

"Hello?"

"Sorry to call you so early, man."

"Tate?" Sheets rustled, and a voice murmured in the background. "Hang on. Let me get out of bed."

"No, you don't have to."

"Shut up. I haven't heard from you in forever. Is something wrong?"

"No, I'm good."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

There were a few seconds of silence. Then he groaned. "You sure you're good? Like I said, unexpected phone call."

I laughed. "Well, you did say that I should call more often, right?"

"And you always ignored that." A slight echo came through the line as well as running water.

"Are you taking a piss while you're on the line with me?"

"So what? I'm not complaining that you're waking me up at this godforsaken hour."

"Point taken."

"Hold on." More running water and some splashing. Then he was back. "So cut the bullshit. What's going on?"

"Thinking of coming into the city."

"When? Today? I could get someone else to cover for me at the restaurant."

“No, I’ll deal with it. If I decide to come. There are still some things to talk about.”

“Like what? Maybe I can help you decide.”

“Not really.”

While Gio was my best friend, I didn’t want to talk to him about Bryan just yet. He was way too protective of me, even more so after the accident. I needed to talk to Bryan first and know where we stood before I talked about our relationship.

“Well, when you know for sure, call me, and I’ll be there.”

“Gio?”

“Yeah, man?”

“I don’t know if I told you this lately, but thank you for being there for me throughout everything.”

“You can thank me by getting your ass back in the city for good. Seriously miss you, man.”

The rawness in Gio’s voice surprised me. We’d always been close but not the type who expressed our emotions like this. Maybe that was what was wrong with this picture. Bottling things up inside us instead of letting the people we care about know how we felt.

“I know. I miss you too.”

BRYAN

I slept restlessly when Tate left early in the morning. I sensed his turmoil even then, but I was exhausted from last night, and an extra hour of sleep seemed like bliss. Besides, he'd promised we could talk when he returned.

When I woke up, I turned over onto my back and stared up at the ceiling. Tate's scent still teased my nostrils. Was it worth it? Could I stay here with Tate and not miss the city and all it had to offer? What about when I wanted a night of relaxation at a restaurant or a club? Just to get away. This was already as "get away" as it could get up here in the woods.

Yet I wanted to be with Tate if he was serious about asking me to stay last night. I'd never met another man who understood my emotional needs as well as he did. He'd shown patience in teaching me how to fish and to shoot. He never once criticized my manhood.

The more I thought about it, the more my heart was pushing me to stay, but my heart was at war with my head. My head reminded me that I knew this man for just under a week. Could it be possible to feel as strongly about Tate as I thought I did in such a short time?

The other guys I'd dated didn't measure up to Tate. My first boyfriend, Roger, unlike Keith, had been openly gay, but I'd been nothing more than arm candy for him. He would get overly affectionate in public to show what a cute couple we made, but in private, our relationship had been all about him and what he wanted.

Tate was down to earth and didn't pretend to be someone he was not. Being with him out here in the natural elements had shown me this man held a depth I'd seen in only a few. Wasn't that worth it trying to find out if we could work?

I wouldn't have a job working for Keith anymore anyway. Maybe I could give it a try and see what it would be like. And maybe I could broach the subject to him about splitting our time between the city and his cabin.

That I was sure I could handle.

Excited that I had come up with some form of solution for us to continue seeing each other, I got out of bed. If Tate didn't agree with both of us sacrificing a part of what we wanted—for us to be together—then the relationship didn't stand a chance. I wanted balance and reciprocity in our relationship. Equal sacrifice—if there was such a thing.

A quick check of the cabin revealed Tate wasn't back yet. I didn't worry much, though, as he sometimes hiked for hours. After last night, he would need to do some thinking as well.

I took a shower, humming to myself and feeling lighthearted. After drying off, I returned to the bedroom to get dressed, my mind already working on the solution I'd found. First, I'd need to get my stuff from Keith's condo. I had a key and could stop at his place when he was at work to avoid a confrontation.

I was combing my hair when the front door to the cabin opened. I dropped the comb onto the dresser and hurried out of the bedroom.

"Tate, I think I have a solution."

I stopped short. What the hell? Keith stood just inside the cabin, a spiteful smile on his lips.

"Keith, what are you doing here?" My voice rose in alarm. If Tate came back and found him here, I feared he would beat the crap out of Keith.

"I've come to take you home," he said. "Come with me willingly, Bryan, and I'll forget you ever let him touch you."

“You need to let this go, Keith. I never loved you, and you never loved me, so we don’t have to pretend we had an emotional connection in our relationship.”

“Of course, I love you!” He took a few steps toward me.

“Really, Keith?” I scoffed. “You have a funny way of showing it.”

He frowned. “What the hell does it matter if I love you? We’re in a relationship. We are together, and that’s the way I like it.”

“I couldn’t even let anyone know we were in a relationship. Are you ready to change that?”

“I’ll come out when I feel ready.”

“And that’s fine. Just don’t expect me to be there when you do. We are over.”

“You ungrateful little bitch. You should be glad I still want your ass after you slept with him. Get your shit, and let’s go.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you. And trust me, you’d better get out of here before Tate gets back.”

“I’ve my boys scouting the area for him.” He smirked. “What? You think you’re in love with him or something? That he’ll come running to your rescue?”

“I don’t believe you about your friends. You would never tell them you were gay, and if you did, they wouldn’t be here with you.”

“They would if I’ve convinced them you were nothing but my little bitch. We’re blood brothers. You think they cared I was smashing the fuck out of you? Now if our roles were reversed, then they’d have a problem with it.”

What a prick. I couldn’t believe I’d lived with this guy for even a day.

“I’m staying with Tate.”

Heat suffused his face, and he closed the distance between us. Before I could step back, he punched me in the gut.

“Fuck!” I cried out, doubling over in pain. I could hardly breathe.

“Don’t make me get mad at you, Bryan.” He grabbed my shirt front and slammed me into the wall. “Did you think I was joking that your ass was mine and you’re not staying here?” His breath blew in my face. “You let him touch you. You think I was going to let that slide? I’ll drag you down this mountain if that’s what it takes, boy.”

“Then drag me because I’m not leaving Tate.”

TATE

When I found the cabin door open, I knew something was wrong. Bryan was too scared of animals getting into the house for him to be that careless. The chairs on the porch where we'd sat so many evenings while he read to me had been shoved aside.

Something wasn't right.

I entered the cabin, moving cautiously in case whatever had been here with him was still inside. The rug just inside the door lay in a twisted mess. What was that? My heart skipped a beat. Specks of blood dotted the floor.

Jesus.

"Bryan!" I stepped farther inside, then came to a halt. What the hell had happened? The coffee table stood on its side, the magazines in a heap next to it. The pillows on the long sofa were scattered on the floor as if someone had thrown them, and on the carpet lay a piece of torn fabric. It resembled a shirt of mine that Bryan had taken to wear, since he didn't have as many clothes with him.

"Bryan." Even as I called his name, I knew he was no longer here. The cabin was way too quiet, just as it had been before he had come. He was gone. But why?

I rushed to the bedroom and yanked open the drawers. His ridiculous white shorts lay on top of his pink shirt. Spinning, I scanned around the room. Bryan's phone was on the bedside table, with our book next to it. All his belongings were still

lying around. He wouldn't willingly leave his stuff behind. The pieces of the puzzle slotted perfectly together.

"That son of a bitch."

His ex had to be behind his disappearance. If he so much as harmed a hair on Bryan's head, I was going to skin him alive. He'd been so furious when he found Bryan with me, and the way he'd spoken possessively over the younger man hadn't promised roses and chocolates.

And the blood on the floor.

I quickly packed my backpack with everything I would need. How long had I been gone? About three hours? I didn't know when Keith had come, but I figured they would have quite a head start on me. If they made it out of the woods before me, it could take a long time before I discovered where he'd taken Bryan. I had Bryan's full name, but Cummings wasn't exactly a unique last name.

Regardless, I would find him.

I grabbed my wallet, my phone and Bryan's, and my handgun. Not that I was hoping I'd have to use it, but I wanted to be prepared for anything. I locked up the cabin, then set off at a fast pace, running some of the way. A few times I stopped to observe what looked like scuff marks on the ground. Another torn piece of his shirt on a bush, blood marks leaving an easy trail to follow.

Bryan was hurt. I just knew he was. From the bootprints, Keith hadn't been working alone; his buddies must have been with him. Just putting up a fight against Keith would have been intimidating enough for Bryan. But to go against his so-called friends? The way they'd bullied Bryan didn't bode well. They wouldn't have objected to Keith treating Bryan badly.

"I'm coming, Bry," I whispered.

But I was too late. When I got to the clearing, they were already gone. I raced to the park entrance, where hikers could park their vehicles. My Ford Explorer remained there permanently unless I had to drive into the city. I paid good

money for them to be discreet, since I didn't want outsiders to know who I was.

The attendant looked surprised when she saw me.

“Mr. Rosenbaum, I wasn't expecting you for another few weeks.”

She would've known my schedule by now. I was predictable in going to the city at the end of every month for my groceries. Once I'd met my uncle to find out how the company was doing.

“I'm hoping you can help me.”

“Sure thing.”

“Three big guys and a smaller one with blond hair.”

Her smile dimmed. I could tell she knew exactly to whom I was referring.

“A lot of people come and go, Mr. Rosenbaum, but I can't tell you anything. I'm sure you understand that.”

“You don't understand. This is a serious matter that involves physical harm.”

“Then maybe I should call the police.”

I shook my head. The last thing I wanted was to have my name ending up in another newspaper in connection to Bryan. Wouldn't the media have a field day with the news that I was embroiled in another scandal?

“It's just a big misunderstanding. I can handle it myself, but what I need from you is the name of the man who owns the vehicle they drove.”

“Oh, Mr. Rosenbaum, I can't divulge that private information.”

“I wouldn't be asking if it's not a matter of life and death.”

It took a bit of persuading, with lots of promises not to tell anybody, but eventually she gave me a name. To my disappointment, the vehicle wasn't registered to Bryan's ex. Lance Butterfield had to be one of his friends. Not the name I

was looking for, but it was good enough for me to find out who Keith was and where I could find him.

And god help him when I do.

BRYAN

A day after Keith and his friends had dragged me through the woods, I grabbed two suitcases from the closet and started packing. Each movement hurt, especially my ribs, where Keith had punched me. Only one thing had stopped me from leaving the condo yesterday evening when I'd arrived. I'd been in too much pain. He'd made sure they were mostly superficial wounds—although my black eye was another matter—, and they would heal with time, but they didn't hurt any less.

I'd tried defending myself, of course, throwing in a couple of punches too, but I had been no match for Keith and his friends. And all the time, I could only think that Tate was going to believe I'd left him to go back to Keith.

I'd done my best to mark the spot where the log cabin was, but I didn't even know if I could find it on my own. I'd try, though, because Tate had lost so much already. The last thing I wanted him to think was that he had lost me too.

I was zipping up the last of the two suitcases when the front door opened. This time, I knew exactly who had entered the house. I glanced at the clock. He was home already, and it wasn't even noon yet. Although he couldn't get me to change my mind, not even with another beating, I had hoped to get out before he returned.

He walked into the bedroom. Dressed as he was in a charcoal jacket suit, his black shoes shiny and his face freshly shaved, very little of the monster he was showed. Except for the angry look in his eyes.

“You still trying to leave me, Bryan?” he asked softly.

“I told you there’s nothing left between us. You killed it all, and yesterday was the final straw.”

He ran his fingers through his hair. “Would it help if I say I’m sorry? I was angry and didn’t want to lose you, so I lashed out at you.”

“Whether I leave you or stay with you was never a choice for you to make, Keith. It was always mine, and what you did is unforgivable. Nobody deserves to be treated like that, and it certainly wasn’t done out of love. You don’t know what love is.”

“You were going to throw your fucking life away for a man who lives in the mountain!” he shouted. “You think he can give you anything?”

“He’s given me more in these few days than I’ve ever received from you. It’s simple, Keith. I’m leaving, and whether or not you want to beat me to a bloody pulp, I don’t care. I’ll always want to leave, and I’ll do so the first chance I get. You fucked up, okay? I gave you a chance, and you blew it. Now leave me alone so I can give another man the same chance, a man who deserves it.”

“We’re not done yet,” Keith said stubbornly. “We can try again. See, my friends all know now that I am gay and that you’re the man I want.”

Before I could respond, the doorbell rang. “You should get that.” I grabbed the two suitcases and stepped past him. He placed a hand on my chest and pushed me back into the bedroom.

I glowered. “Don’t do this, Keith,” I warned him.

“You stay there!” he barked and stormed from the bedroom to get the door. I didn’t stay as he ordered but carried the suitcases down the stairs.

“Where the fuck is he, you bastard?”

My heart skipped a beat at the unexpected sight of Tate pushing past a protesting Keith into the house.

“Tate!” I cried out. “What are you doing here?”

“I followed you.” He eyed me up the stairs. “You had to have known I would.”

“You’re not welcome in my house,” Keith spat. “Get out.”

Tate ignored him and stalked over to me. He snatched the suitcases out of my hands and carried them the rest of the way down as if they weighed nothing. Tears welled in my eyes, but I blinked them away.

“I didn’t leave with him of my own free will,” I said. “They forced me to go with them.”

Tate cupped my face in his hands, frowning at my black eye. “He did this?”

“It doesn’t matter anymore. I was just leaving.”

“It sure as hell does matter!” Tate turned to Keith, his body tense. “You wanna pick on someone your own size?” he snapped, collaring the other man and shoving him up hard against the wall.

“Tate, don’t!” I hurried over to him and placed a hand on his arm. “You’re better than this. We both are. We don’t need this violence. Let’s just go already.”

“You should be glad he’s a better man than both of us combined,” Tate growled at Keith. “Or you’d be flat out by now.”

I sighed with relief when he let go of Keith and took one of the suitcases. His hand on my back protectively, he guided me out of the condo. As soon as we were in the elevator, he hauled me up against him, squeezing me tightly.

“I can’t believe you’re here.” I buried my face into his chest. “I was so worried you would think I left you. I was packing to come back to you, but I wasn’t sure if I could find the cabin on my own.”

“I never believed for a second you left me.”

I smiled, comforted that he was on the same page as me, but after the way Keith had treated me, I was feeling way too

vulnerable. There was so much to do. I needed to figure out my life and where to go from here. I lost my apartment, my job.

I'd been wrong to run from one man to another. I needed to rely on myself more. Take some of the power back.

He grinned at me, then sobered. "You should have let me hit that fucker, Bry. It would've made me feel a whole lot better about what he did to you."

I wrapped my arms around his neck and licked his bottom lip. "It doesn't matter now. How did you even find me?"

"I found one of Keith's friends, but it took me all of yesterday to track him down, or I would've been here sooner. Through the friend, I got Keith's last name, and thankfully he's listed. And here I am."

He lowered his head, and I pushed up on my toes to kiss him. We parted when the elevator dinged.

"Tate, I think I should be getting my own apartment," I said as we walked out. He stopped. I could slap myself. Of course he had taken it the wrong way. I hurried to set him straight. "What I meant is that I want us to date properly but not living together like we did in the cabin."

He frowned. "Why not? You having second thoughts about him?"

"Of course not! Whatever I had with Keith is history." I took his hands in mine. *Please let him understand.* "It's just that I miss having a place of my own and being the boss of me. For the past six months, I let Keith dictate my life, and I want my independence back. I also have to find a job. I need to get back on my feet."

"I can help you with all that," he said.

I shook my head. "Having someone take charge and get me out of messes landed me into this situation with Keith. I'm doing things different between us, Tate. I want to know our relationship is about us rather than what you can do for me. Do you understand?"

“Will I have to like it?”

I chuckled. “You don’t have to like it, but you’ll have to grin and bear it.”

“You’ll need some time to find an apartment,” he pointed out. “Although I could get you one in no time if you say the word.”

“No.” I slipped my arms around his waist. “I can’t accept that, but I can accept staying at your place for one night. I’ll go apartment hunting tomorrow.”

He smiled. “Okay. I can live with that.”

He took my hand, and we left the apartment building. “And no hanky-panky. I slept with you way too fast the last time.”

“Can’t blame you. You’ve suddenly grown good taste in men.”

I tried glaring at him, but it didn’t work. Instead, I smiled. “Don’t worry. I’ll have you falling in love with me in no time.”

I’d expected him to shy away from those words, but he returned my smile with a twinkle in his eyes. “Bring it on.”

PART 2

BRYAN

I *'m right back at square one*. The thought popped into my mind as the automatic gates glided apart, exposing the long driveway leading to Tate's estate. I sucked in a deep breath and, for the life of me, couldn't let it out just then. Tate's house was magnificent. I stared, my mind blank, until reality hit me—Tate wasn't just an average guy. He was a Rosenbaum. He had money. A lot.

Back at his cabin, he'd told me who he was, and I had recognized his name, but nothing could have prepared me for the grandeur of his house. In the woods, we had simply been Tate and Bryan. The natural environment away from people had allowed us to just be. How ridiculous I had been to think everything would be the same.

The giant estate was none like I had ever seen. The water features and artificial lake complemented the layout of the land and the beautiful open space setting. The house was mounted just atop a rise, so the property overlooked the mountains and valley. The two-story wall of glass made everything even more sophisticated and iconic.

"No way! This is your house?" I asked Tate because I just had to hear him confirm it.

He glanced at me and frowned. He tapped his index finger against the steering wheel, and the garage door slid open.

"Yeah, it is," he answered and said nothing else.

When he drove us inside the garage and killed the switch, I couldn't even unbuckle my seat belt. His garage was bigger

than my old apartment. This wasn't what I signed up for at all. Keith had been one wealthy son of a bitch, and he had thought he could use his money to control me. While I blamed him for the way he'd treated me, I had played a role in letting him get away with it. I'd become too comfortable with what he had to offer me until he could use that against me.

I had been too ashamed to leave him because I'd taken so much from him, although I'd never meant to be the kind of guy who just took. I had protested at first, but after he got through to me the first time, I'd become lax, allowing him to give me whatever he wanted. Not used to so much attention being focused on me, I had accepted his gifts, told him thanks, and then he would have me on my knees.

It was as though a lightbulb went off in my head. Why hadn't I seen this before? I'd been too gullible to understand what Keith had been doing. Those gifts he'd bought me might have been expensive, but they'd hardly dented his pockets. He'd only been too glad to shower me with presents as long as I acted like his little slut. The more I thought about it, the more I felt sick to my stomach for putting up with our relationship for so long.

I had been his kept boy. No wonder he thought he owned me and I had to do his bidding.

Fear gripped me. What if I was doing this all wrong? Again. My relationship with Keith had started well, then spiraled down the rabbit hole faster than Alice had tumbled. I barely knew Tate. We had met less than a week ago, and here I was about to make the same mistake. I was shacking up with another wealthy man while I had very little to add to our relationship.

"Come on, let's get your cases inside," he said.

Tate's words startled me, but I was still too stunned to move as I racked my brain for a way out of this mess. We were moving at lightning speed. The world was shifting beneath my feet, and I didn't have anything to hold on to. I shook my head as if I could get rid of these confusing feelings, then reached

for the lock so he didn't think I was pulling a diva stunt on him.

Too late. Tate had already grasped the handle and opened the door for me. His brows knitted in a frown, and a flicker of worry flashed in his eyes. Was he having second thoughts about inviting me to stay with him? While he might still want to sleep with me, it didn't mean he wanted to live with me. To be honest, I didn't know if I wanted to live with him either, but I had nowhere else to stay. I would need at least a couple of days to find somewhere affordable.

"Bryan, is something wrong?" Tate asked, his frown deepening. "Are you hurting? I could carry you inside."

My cheeks burned as I remembered the way he had carried me when I'd sprained my ankle. I shook my head. "I'm fine. I was just thinking I shouldn't intrude on you like this."

"You're not intruding."

Despite him saying the words, I wasn't convinced. It was hard to tell with Tate. He was always tight-lipped and wasn't one to delve into an excess of words to explain himself.

"No, really." I stuck to my decision. "I'm sorry you had to drive all this way, but I can stay at a motel until I get a job and find an apartment. Or maybe I should call a cab, since you're already home. I would've driven myself, but..." I hated the way I sounded so damn pathetic. I would have driven myself, but I'd left the car Keith had bought me back at his place. It hadn't felt right to keep it, given our relationship had ended.

Tate reached inside the car and gripped my chin gently with a shaking hand. He stroked the skin above my eye where Keith had hit me. Then he pulled away. "Hey, I said you could stay here. I mean it."

I chewed on my bottom lip. I'd rather stay with him than in a cheap motel, but I didn't want to be an inconvenience.

"Are you sure?" I asked again, but all he did was raise an eyebrow. "All right, but this is just until I find another job and a place of my own."

“You can stay as long as you want.” He took my hand and helped me out of the car.

“But you don’t even know me.” He stood so close his scent tickled my nostrils. I inhaled deeply. Big mistake. The smells that were all Tate—his citrusy shower gel and the musk of his cologne—hit me and formed a dangerous cocktail of desire, which now streamed through my blood. The corner of his lips tilted upward ever so slightly in a knowing manner. I hated that he already knew me so well he could decipher what I was thinking at that moment. Although I was determined to slow things down with Tate, I still wanted him.

“I know enough.” He squeezed both my arms, then let go. “Stop worrying so much. Things will work out. You’ll see.”

He closed the door, then lifted my suitcases from the trunk. I didn’t just want things to work out by themselves. I wanted to make things work myself. I wanted to be self-sufficient and to feel like I had value. How was I to do that if someone was always there to give me a hand instead of allowing me to get up on my own?

I stared from my two pitiful suitcases at his feet to the two other cars parked in his garage. One of them, a Jaguar, was a testament to his wealth. The differences between us were everywhere. How could he not see that as plainly as I did?

“Come on. This way.”

He surged ahead, and I had to hurry to catch up with him. I scowled at his back but didn’t ask him to slow down. He unlocked a side door and disabled the alarm system on the wall.

“We’ll leave your luggage here for the moment.” Tate placed the suitcases against one wall and walked through a door at the end of the utility room. “I’ll show you to our room later if you don’t mind. I’ll also give you the grand tour, but right now, I need to have some carbs.”

My heart skipped a beat at his easy mention of “our” room. He hadn’t even asked me if I wanted to share his bedroom. I followed Tate, then came to a sudden stop. Wow. This was the

most beautiful kitchen I'd ever seen. The dark wood floor complemented the gold accents which matched the pendant lights hanging just above the island.

“Bryan!”

I snapped out of my trance and turned toward Tate who stood next to the island sipping a beer. I hadn't even heard him move toward the massive fridge.

“Your kitchen looks lovely.” Stupid maybe, but I didn't know what else to say.

“Thanks, I haven't spent much time here.” He gestured to the bread and cheese on the counter. “Are you hungry? We'll go out later for dinner, but I missed breakfast this morning because I was hell-bent on finding you.”

“And you found me,” I said. *Now what are you going to do to me?* “I'm not hungry.” And I wasn't, although I hadn't eaten anything at Keith's yesterday. I'd been in too much pain to join him for dinner. Instead, I'd locked myself in the guestroom. When I'd refused to accept his apology and let him in, he'd left me alone. Now my stomach twisted with nerves.

“I've beer in the fridge if you'd rather something to drink.”

I shook my head. “I don't really like beer.”

“No? Well, sit. No need to look so uncomfortable. You've been living with me for almost a week. What do you think is going to change?”

It wasn't necessarily what I thought was going to change but what I felt was about to develop. I already had so many feelings for this man who I knew so little about. How could I fall in love with him when I didn't even give myself time to get over Keith? He might have been a dick, but we had been in a relationship.

I took a seat at the island as he indicated and gripped my fingers together tightly. I didn't say anything but merely watched as he made himself a ham and cheese sandwich stuffed with lettuce and tomato. He cleared the counter, then grabbed another beer from the fridge and sat across from me. I

lowered my eyes so I wouldn't make him uncomfortable watching him eat.

"How big is this place anyway?" I asked him to break the uncomfortable silence.

He swallowed, then answered "There are six bedrooms here in the main house and eight bathrooms. Out back, there's also a two-bedroom guesthouse next to the pool and tennis court."

If he had a guest room I could stay there instead of the main house. Then I wouldn't get in his way. Perfect.

"Don't even think about it. You're not staying in the guesthouse."

I flushed at his words. How had he guessed what I was thinking? "Wouldn't it make for a better arrangement? You'd have your privacy."

"If I were concerned about my privacy, I wouldn't have brought you here. I don't like the idea of you being so far away in the guesthouse. There's plenty of space here."

"But aren't you used to being alone and having your own space?"

"No. I'm not."

I glanced up at him then. Pain flashed over his face. Then he schooled his features. His wife and daughter. He still harbored guilt about them.

"Have you always lived here?" I asked.

"No."

That was all. I waited a while, but he didn't seem inclined to elaborate. "All right, I'll stay here in the main house, but I want my own bedroom."

Tate eased back in his seat, scowling. "Why? I've seen you naked. We slept together in the same bed, and we just spent the last few days fucking on every surface in my cabin. Now, all of a sudden, you want us to pretend that we're what? Friends? I thought you were joking about the no-sex thing."

“I’m not joking. I’m not saying we have to be friends only, but we don’t have to have sex with each other. I’m trying to get a grip on my life, Tate. The last few days might have been great, but they happened way too fast.”

His scowl turned into a frown. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that I don’t know what this is.” I gestured wildly between us, pretty sure I must have looked like a crazy person. “Are we just fuck buddies? Because at every turn, we wind up in bed. I’ll gladly stay in your bed if that’s all there is, but if I’m right, and you believe we can have so much more, let me get to know you. Let us get to know each other.”

“Thank you.” I nodded politely and smiled at the waitress who handed us the menus.

“We didn’t have to eat out tonight,” Bryan murmured when the hostess sauntered away after wishing us a pleasant evening. I darted my eyes to the man who had me more worked up than I’d been in a long while. I was trying to be patient with him. I really was, but I couldn’t help thinking that things between us had shifted. We were no longer in the cabin by ourselves. Our synchrony, which had been explosive in the cabin, was off, and it had everything to do with Bryan. He had become aloof and quiet, his eyes full of trepidation, and I hated it.

I wanted his smile back.

“I know, but we are.” Sometimes, like now, I sounded sharper than I’d intended. He questioned me about everything as if he thought I would do anything to harm him. I didn’t appreciate it, especially when I was doing everything I could to ensure we became the sort of couple I had sensed back in the cabin.

I’d never been in a relationship with a man before, and I’d been pleased with how smoothly we had started, but with every step forward, we made two steps back. All because Bryan felt we were moving too fast. I had to respect his decisions, of course, but it didn’t mean I had to like them. I didn’t like them one bit. And that part about sleeping in separate rooms...total bullshit.

It was hard being cut off after he made me addicted to the sex, but I respected his wishes. His ex had gotten physical with him, and he needed time to recuperate emotionally. I'd be patient for as long as he needed me to be.

"People are staring at my face," he said.

I grimaced. The cuts above his eye and to his lip were clear. I'd been so intent on spending the evening with him and reclaiming some of what we had in the cabin that I hadn't thought about how he would feel being in public. Whenever I remembered what Keith had done to Bryan, I wanted to return to his condo and beat the shit out of him.

"They probably think you did it," he said. My mouth dropped open. Then he chuckled and touched the cut above his right eye. "I'm kidding. Well, maybe some probably think that, but it doesn't matter."

"Do you want to go? We haven't ordered yet. We can pick up a pizza or anything you like on the way home."

Home. The word echoed in my head. Except for the cabin, I hadn't thought of anywhere in the city as home in two years. Not since the sudden deaths of my wife and daughter.

I owned the house, but I'd never referred to it as home. After Rachel's and Kathleen's death, I hadn't been able to set foot in our house without being struck by grief. I had sold the house on impulse and left it up to Giovanni to find me a new house, while I beat a hasty retreat to the woods to mourn and lick my wounds.

"We're already here," Bryan said, and I forced away the black memories to focus on him. "It doesn't really make sense for us to leave, just to order somewhere else."

"Fine, we'll stay, then."

We spent some time poring over the menu. I already knew what I wanted to eat, and as I waited for Bryan to decide, I glanced around the restaurant to catch a sign of Gio. Perhaps I should have warned Bryan that the owner of the restaurant was my best friend. We had met in college, where we had completed our degree in Business Management. However, his

business degree had been just to appease his father. Right after, he'd taken the steps to get into culinary school where his passion really was. It'd taken him a while to get there, but he'd been determined, and he'd had my support.

"Hello, I'm Cassie," a young woman in her late teens said as she stood by our table. "I'll be your waitress for this evening. What are you gentlemen having to drink?"

"You ready to order?" I asked Bryan. He'd been so quiet. Maybe he needed some more time. He was so skittish already that the last thing I wanted was to rush him.

"Yes, I am."

The waitress took our orders, but before she could go, I stopped her. "Is your boss here tonight? Giovanni Arcuri?"

She darted her eyes between me and Bryan. "Yes, he's overseeing things in the kitchen."

Yup, that was Gio. Although he was the boss, he usually was up to his elbows in dough. "Please, will you inform him that Tate Rosenbaum is here?"

"Of course, I'll let him know, but he's extremely busy tonight."

"Just deliver the message."

She nodded and left. I turned to Bryan, who watched me with a frown. "Why do I have a feeling this is more than just a dinner date?"

I shrugged. "It's just a dinner date. No hidden motives."

"And the guy you just asked after?"

"A friend who'll be happy to know I'm back in town."

Bryan's nostrils flared, and he narrowed his eyes. He lowered his gaze, but I'd spotted the flicker of jealousy in his eyes. After the way he had left me high and dry in the sack by insisting we got to know each other first before getting down and dirty again, seeing his jealousy rubbed a bit off my annoyance.

"Gio and I are just friends," I assured him. "He's not gay."

He snorted. “If I had a penny for every man who claims he’s not gay but turns out to be, I’d be a rich man.”

“Well, it’s not like that with Gio and me. We went to college together, and we’ve——”

“Tate! I know you mentioned thinking about coming back, but you never told me when. Why didn’t you call me? I’d have taken the night off.”

Chuckling, I stood and hugged my best friend as he pounded my back. Damn, it was good to see him.

“I couldn’t imagine taking you away from the one thing you love more than anything. This place.”

“I would’ve survived.”

He released me, and we sized each other up. The last time I’d seen him was two months ago. I hadn’t reached out, but we’d run into him outside the supermarket where I stocked up on supplies. It had been an awkward moment at first, but then he’d smiled, and I knew he had forgiven me for being such a pain in the ass and severing all contact between us. That was the thing about best friends. They understood when you just needed to fuck off for a while, and they didn’t hold grudges.

“How long are you in town for this time?” he asked me.

“For good.” It took saying it for me to really believe that I was done hiding away from the world, thanks to Bryan. He’d tumbled into my life and reminded me what living was all about.

“Thank god. It’s about time. I’m glad being away helped.” He then spotted Bryan pretending as though he wasn’t listening to our conversation. Gio returned his questioning gaze to me. “Or is it something else completely?”

“This is Bryan,” I introduced, and Bryan promptly got to his feet and held out his hand. “Bryan, this is my best buddy, Gio. He owns the restaurant, so we can order anything on the menu, then leave without paying.”

Gio chuckled as he shook Bryan’s hand. “Nice to meet you. Don’t listen to Tate here. I don’t care who he is. You all

get kitchen duty if you try to skip out on your tab.”

Bryan’s smile didn’t quite meet his eyes. He looked rather stressed. “Nice to meet you too, Gio.”

“Perhaps we can hang out sometime,” Gio said, then turned his attention back to me. “I’d love to stay and chat some more, but I have a date with a duck, and she’s protesting all the way.”

I grinned. “You’ve never had a way with the ladies.”

“Unlike you.” His words sobered both of us, and he flushed, shooting a sideways glance at Bryan. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“It’s okay,” I assured him. While he accepted me as his best friend, there were still moments when he thought something he said would upset me.

“Call me, and we’ll meet up for tennis or something.” He nodded at Bryan. “See you around.”

As though she had been timing her boss’s departure, the waitress returned with a tray laden with our meal and placed the plates carefully on the table. I was ravenous and dug into my meal, but Bryan just picked at his food.

“What’s on your mind?” I asked and took a sip of my Merlot.

He glanced up from his fork. “I’m just thinking.”

“About moving into my bed when we get home?”

His lips twitched a little, but he schooled his features into a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. Something was going on there. If his mouth were to be believed, he didn’t want us having sex again so soon, but his eyes told a different story. He wanted me as much as I wanted him, but he had some crazy notion in his head that was holding him back. The sooner I’d figured out what it was, the sooner I could fix it and make it all go away.

He snorted. “Hardly. I told you, Tate, we need to get to know each other first.”

“What’s there to know? Talking can be overrated.” His eyes blazed, and I hastened to add, “Not that I’m telling you to be quiet or anything.”

He didn’t respond but returned his attention to his food. He shoved a forkful of sautéed vegetables into his mouth, and I figured he only ate now so he had an excuse to ignore me.

I sighed and slowed down my eating, having lost my appetite. I had to get to the bottom of what was going on with Bryan. It wasn’t just the sex, but I’d enjoyed having him sleeping in my arms. In my cabin, I had been at peace each morning I woke up with him tucked against me. I craved the intimacy, which had been lacking in my life for too long. He had brought back that intense feeling of desire inside me, and it felt so good that I didn’t want to lose it.

I wasn’t quite certain who ruined dinner, but ruined it was. Bryan and I barely talked during dessert, and when I suggested leaving, he was only too quick to ask the waitress to box his apple crumble. While I waited for the waitress to return my card and receipt, Bryan excused himself to use the bathroom. No sooner had he left than Gio slid across from me into Bryan’s chair, his light brown eyes filled with worry. A lock of his curly black hair had escaped from his hat and threatened to fall into his left eye.

“Are you really staying this time?” he asked.

I nodded. “I enjoyed living in the cabin, and I needed that time to find myself again, but cutting myself off from the world won’t help me to heal completely.”

He frowned. “I’ve been telling you that for a while. Why are you listening now? It wouldn’t have anything to do with that young man you brought here, would it?”

I didn’t want to lie to Gio. “Maybe. I-I care about him.”

“Hmm. And he seems to care about you too, so what’s the cause of all the tension I sense between you two?”

I shook my head, not too keen on the idea of discussing my budding romance with Bryan, not even with my best friend. Maybe if we had left the woods before Keith had forced Bryan

to leave with him, then I would've declared him to be my boyfriend. Now, with him retreating, I had no idea what to label us.

Then again, maybe labels weren't necessary between us.

"I'll drop by your house sometime, and we can talk more," I said to Gio but kept my eyes on the hallway to the bathroom. Bryan rounded the corner, glanced around as if he was trying to remember where we were seated, then walked over to our table. He slowed when he spotted Gio. "We'll be on our way now."

As soon as Bryan reached us, I stood. "Ready?"

"Yeah, let's go." He nodded at Gio but didn't say anything to my friend.

"Have a good night and come back again," Gio said.

I rested a hand on Bryan's lower back to guide him around an empty table in the restaurant. His spine stiffened beneath my touch. I really needed to find out what was going on in that head of his and fast.

We didn't speak on the way home. Bryan brooded in silence beside me, his head turned to the window, and he stayed in the same position for the entire ride. Relieved, the trip was short, I drove up the driveway to the house. I parked in the garage but didn't get out. Instead, I switched on the ceiling light in the car and turned to Bryan. He still refused to look at me.

"Will you talk to me?" I pleaded. "Please."

He sighed and relaxed against the car seat but still didn't look at me. "I don't know who I am anymore."

"Bryan."

"No, don't say anything. I don't think you can make it better. It's something I have to work out on my own."

"Because of Keith?" I asked. "I fucking swear I'll go back and gut the bastard."

He turned his head then and gave me a small smile. At least that was a start. Now if I only could get those brown eyes of his eyes to light up again.

“Partly, yes.” He sighed. “Maybe I’ll feel better when I have a job again. Then I won’t feel like such a burden.”

“Hey.” I couldn’t resist pulling him into my arms then. “You’re not a burden. For fuck’s sake, Bryan, I don’t know what to do with you when you’re like this. You’re turning into grumpy Tate, and I can’t handle grumpy Tate. I am grumpy Tate. Only you know how to handle him.”

His shoulders shook with his silent laughter, which erupted in a little giggle. Maybe all was not lost, then. Now all he had to do was stop thinking about that godawful ex of his.

“Maybe you rubbed off on me,” Bryan said.

I pulled back a little so I could see his face. Then I leaned forward and kissed him. I kept it light because I didn’t want him to think I was trying to change his mind about the sex. Yes, I wanted him to reconsider his no-sex rule, but on his own, not because I had coerced him into it.

“You’re supposed to rub off on me. You’re supposed to be the sunshine on my cloudy day.” I launched into my modified version of the song, “You’re my sunshine on a cloudy day,” not caring I sounded silly.

That had him cracking up, and I felt better about making an ass out of myself. I was willing to do it again to make him happy. If he only knew how much I felt for him, maybe he would be more comfortable being with me, but I was never good at expressing my feelings to anyone. That side of me had only come easy with my daughter.

“All right.” Bryan chuckled. “You win. Just don’t do any more covers, please.”

“Good. Does that mean I get you in my bed tonight?” Damn. I hadn’t meant to ask.

“Hmm.” He gave me a swift kiss and pulled away from me. “I’ll sleep in your bed, but the no-sex rule still holds.”

I stifled my groan and tried to look like that was enough. In less than twenty-four hours I had him from the guestroom and in my bed. I'd take it even without the sex. Come tomorrow who knew which way the wind would blow his mind? Hopefully, wherever it blew, it would take the no-sex policy with it too.

BRYAN

“**B**ry, don’t look now, but where are your shoes?”

I blinked at Tate, temporarily distracted by the sight of him leaning casually against his car, dressed in a sharp charcoal business suit. All I could think of was that my plan was backfiring and was about to blow up in my face.

After a week and a half of living with him and sleeping in his bed, but no sex, I wanted sex. I was only torturing myself every morning I woke up to his hard-on poking me. Only one thing had stopped me yesterday from sliding beneath the sheets and sucking him into my mouth like I had done back in the cabin. Since I had made a big deal about us getting to know each other without the sex, I should at least try to live by that code. I didn’t want to look stupid and fickle in front of him.

“Umm, what do you mean where are my shoes?” I asked with a frown, his question finally getting through to me. “They are right here on my...feet.” I stared in shock at my diamond-printed socks. My shoes were not, in fact, on my feet. Here I stood on the top step, ready to go, dressed, messenger bag on my shoulder, but somehow, I had forgotten my shoes.

“Oh my god, I’m going to fail this interview!” I wailed because if I had forgotten my shoes, I couldn’t imagine what else had escaped me.

“You are not going to fail.” Tate threw the house key at me. “Go grab your shoes, and let’s get you to your interview on time.”

I grasped the key out of midair and rushed back inside. When I had been called three days ago to interview with a company as a personal assistant, I had been ecstatic. Tate had been kind enough to help me prepare. I'd thought I was ready, but now this. Being interviewed by Tate the boss had been hot. Maybe it had been more of a distraction than if I'd prepared by myself.

I found my shoes in the bedroom and dropped onto the bed to put them on. I stubbed my toes in the right shoe and upended it onto the bed. I stared at the set of keys and credit card—with my name on it.

Tate.

How many times did I have to tell the stubborn man that even though I didn't have a place to stay, I wasn't exactly poverty-stricken yet? I had my savings, which would last me for a while, though it wasn't a lot. Not only had I paid for my tuition mostly out of pocket, but I had only been working for six months before Keith fired me.

Shoes firmly on my feet this time, I brought the keys and credit card with me. The keys I would keep as they would get me into the house after I finished the interview. The credit card I would return to him.

Tate was already in the car, with the engine running, when I locked up again, ensuring that I enabled the alarm system. It had taken me a while to get used to set the alarm each time I left the house.

"I think you forgot something." I slid into the passenger's seat.

"Nope." He ignored me as he headed down the driveway.

"I'm talking about this credit card I found in my shoe, Tate, you sneaky devil."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," he quipped. "Is my name on it?"

"No, but—"

"Is your name on it?"

“Yes, but—”

“Then case closed. You’ve discovered the owner.”

I scowled at him. “Tate, I told you I don’t need your money.”

“I know you don’t.”

“Then why did you get me a credit card?” If he was using this as some kind of strategy for me not to be nervous anymore about the interview, it worked.

“Because I know you won’t ask me for money, even if you need it.” He sighed. “You don’t have to worry about paying back the credit card company. It’s on my account anyway, so I’ll get the bill, and I’ll pay for it.”

“You should have talked to me first before you slapped my name on a credit card, Tate.”

“Would you have allowed me to do it if I had spoken to you about it first?”

“Of course not.”

“Then you have your answer.” He glanced at me then. “It’s not a big deal, Bryan. Your interview is. Focus on that. Use the credit card or don’t use it. That’s up to you. I just like knowing you have it if you need it. I don’t want you to ever be at the mercy of assholes like your ex.”

“So you have no expectations?” I asked him calmly, even though I knew I would never use this card.

“Nope. Not one.”

“Not even for us to have sex again?”

He went silent, and I didn’t know whether to be disappointed or grateful for his honesty.

“Answer the question, Tate.”

“All right, fine!” he growled in his usual surly way. “I do want to have sex with you. Nothing new. I like having you beneath me. Everything seems fucking perfect with the world when I’m inside you. But no, I don’t expect you to sleep with

me just because I gave you a credit card. I think of you more highly than that.” He paused, and I thought he was finished, but then he added, “It would be nice, though, to have you again, especially since we did that checkup together last week. I want you. Bareback.”

I scowled, but my cock stirred to life at his words. “That’s it. Please take back this card.”

“What do you want me to do? Lie?” Tate eased to a pause at the stoplight. “I am being honest with you about how I feel. It’s not new I want to sleep with you. You already know that. Why is it suddenly an issue because I gave you the means to be independent?”

Except it was a false sense of independence. If I weren’t paying the bill on the credit card, then I was far from independent. I would be just as dependent on Tate as I had been on Keith. My whole goal was not to repeat that story.

“You won’t take back the credit card, will you?” I asked.

“Nope. I can’t use it with your name on it.”

I bristled. “How did you get my name on it anyway? Don’t you need my signature for things like this?”

“I have my ways.”

Right. Because he was rich, he could bend some rules, apparently.

“I’m not going to use it,” I told him firmly.

“Great. As I said, it’s your decision. I’ll stay out of it.”

Prolonging the conversation was unlikely to change Tate’s mind. Or mine. With a heavy sigh, I slipped the credit card into my bag, where it would remain untouched. Ignoring him, I flipped open a small notepad where I had jotted down some details about the company.

Ingram Smart Technology Solutions was a technology and consulting firm looking for administrative support, given their recent expansion in San Diego. When they had called me for an interview, I was sure things would be changing for the better. Once I had this job, I would feel more like an equal in

my relationship with Tate, not the one only taking while giving him so little in return.

Half an hour later, Tate pulled in front of the office building and plucked the notepad from my hand. “Relax. We’ve been through this. Didn’t I walk you through the scenarios last night?”

Oh yes, he had, and while he had played the difficult boss to impress, I had felt the urge to impress him in a different way. Tate playing a grumpy boss had been hot as hell. I had wanted to wipe the frown from his face and known exactly what to do to get rid of it, but I’d been bound by my own no-sex rule.

“Yes, you did.” I smiled gratefully at him. I was a worrier. Tate was calmer and settled me effortlessly. If we ended up together, would our roles always be like this?

“Good. Now go ace that interview.”

His confidence in me was refreshing, and I couldn’t resist leaning sideways. He understood my body language well and met me halfway. Our lips found each other’s, and I rested a hand on his muscled shoulder, which his jacket couldn’t hide. He deepened the kiss, and I allowed him. We were out in the open, and he couldn’t drag me off to bed, where I would be too weak to say no.

“Fuck, I wish I had you at home,” he mumbled against my lips. “You’re a tease, Bryan Cummings. Why don’t you kiss me like this when we are home alone?”

I meant to apologize to him, but without warning, he parted my jacket and ran his hands up my chest. He found my nipples and pinched them with the right amount of pressure—hard enough for a little hurt to mingle with the pleasure.

Before I could chastise him—or encourage him—a horn honked from somewhere behind us. Tate released my nipples, but not without giving them an extra twist.

“You should go”—he motioned toward the entrance of the building—“before that idiot behind us gets out of his car. I hardly want to face him with a hard-on.”

I didn't bother to point out we were in the wrong. I got out of the car and gave Tate a light wave. My throat still felt too constricted for me to say good-bye. With shaky legs and uncomfortably tight pants, which were not this close fitting this morning when I stepped into them, I climbed the wide steps and entered the building.

At the front desk, I introduced myself and stated my purpose, then was given a visitor's pass and asked to take a seat. A quick check of my watch told me I had fifteen minutes until the interview would begin. I'd planned to go over some of the information I had stored in my head, preparing for the inquisition, but instead, thoughts of Tate consumed me. I tried to think of a specific question Tate had asked me last night, but then I remembered his lips pressed against mine. How much longer would I be able to keep up our relationship without indulging in the sexual fantasies I had of him?

No sex seemed to have heightened my awareness of Tate's sexuality, and I found that odd things he did every day turned me on. I groaned in dismay. This was hardly the time to ruminate on Tate and sex.

"Mr. Cummings, please come this way."

Jerked from my thoughts, I tried not to show how far away I had been when the receptionist called me. I followed her across the lobby, around a corner, into a long hallway where she stopped at the door at the end and knocked.

"Mr. Ingram is inside waiting for you." She pushed the door open, then left.

I stepped into the office, nerves crashing over me. All thoughts of Tate and the company fled from my mind.

"Mr. Cummings? Come in and shut the door. We're eager to interview you."

Three people sat behind a large table, leaving the seat across from them for me. Yup, they were definitely going to make this an inquisition. Thank god Tate had prepared me for this. Although I had worked in several restaurants when I was a teenager, my first real job after college had been working for

Keith, and he had hired me for different reasons. I had no idea if I had gotten that job fair and square.

Introduced to the members of the panel, I took my seat. Apart from Mr. Ingram, who was in his early fifties, there was another younger man, no older than thirty and the human resource director who was a female, a little older than the second man.

“Mr. Cummings, thank you for joining us,” Mr. Ingram said. “We’ve read your résumé, so we won’t bother you with asking about your qualifications. So let’s get to the heart of the matter. Why should we hire you?”

Okay. No warm-up questions first, then. Thank god, Tate had warned me about this tactic. We also had practiced this question, so I was seamless in my response, matching my answer with the company’s vision statement and goals. The questions that followed were of the same ilk, but I held my own against the three at the other side of the table. At times, it felt as if they were ganging up on me, but then I remembered Tate’s advice not to take it personally.

“They’ll do that to see how well you handle yourself under pressure.”

After thirty minutes, they asked if I had any questions. I couldn’t read much off their faces, but I was confident I had done well. I asked about the company’s policy on staff welfare for their employees, just to be polite, since I already knew the programs they offered as incentives.

Mr. Ingram rose to his feet and walked me to the door.

“You did a splendid job.” He shook my hand. “Rarely do I see someone this young keep his poise the way you did.”

“Thank you.” I smiled politely at him when what I really wanted to do was whoop in delight.

“Really. You’re the last one we interviewed, and you’ve outshone everyone. Be prepared for us to call you to inform you when to start.”

“Are you saying the job is mine?”

He winked at me. “I’m telling you my team has to consult and make the final decision, but don’t miss that call.”

We stood staring at the wall of pictures of members of the Rosenbaum family. I didn't know any of the faces, but they seemed important to Dad for some reason, so I tried to pay attention as he spoke. I didn't want him to accuse me of not listening, as my teacher did, even when I was.

"Son, do you know what all these pictures represent?"

I shook my head. "No, Dad. Do you know them?"

"I've only known two. My father and his father. But all these people helped build the company. You know what that's called, son? Legacy."

"Le-gacy," I repeated the word, trying to mimic my father's pronunciation. My father was different. I had always known that much. He was away a lot, and he didn't come to my school recitals often. I wanted to understand why these unfamiliar people were more important than me.

"That's right, son. This is your legacy. It's what I've worked so hard to protect so neither you nor your kids will know poverty like our forefathers. One day you will run this place like I do now, and you'll do a splendid job."

"Why? What if I don't want to be a businessman like you?"

Dad chuckled and placed a heavy hand on my shoulder. "You will, son. You're a Rosenbaum. It's what we do. Never forget that. You're a Rosenbaum."

As I stood there, the company's name in gold lettering above my head, a wave of nostalgia hit me harder than I had expected. I had known coming back to this place would bring back memories. How could it not? This had been my second home since that first time Dad had brought me here. I had felt overwhelmed by his expectations for me, mostly because I had been conflicted about whether I was joining the company for love or because he insisted. When I had accepted that I loved this company as much as he had said I would, my life had been much happier.

I parked my Explorer in the vacant spot to the left of the designated CEO parking, already occupied with another car. It seemed my uncle had traded up. I felt good about this. It meant he had the business under control. When Uncle Simon had seen how much I was struggling with running the company after the death of Rachel and Kathleen, he had suggested I take time off to grieve. I had accepted his offer gratefully and hadn't even cleared my desk before I left.

Two years had elapsed since I left, and not once had he called me to demand I return to the job. I was grateful for the time he had given me to heal. He could have shut me out after my father had handed me the reins of the company instead of him.

I entered the building, eager to be inside and catch up on what was happening at the company. I hadn't called my uncle to let him know I was coming because I wanted to surprise him.

Once I stepped into the lobby, it was like being catapulted into the past. The area had always been buzzing with a steady stream of people coming and going, and nothing had changed. Rosenbaum not only provided luxury homes for the rich and famous, but while I had held the CEO office, I had also worked hard to give back to the community by offsetting costs to help those in need. Rachel had worked with the charity foundation, which had the sole purpose of providing more affordable homes to people who were down on their luck. Uncle Simon had assured me the foundation would be taken care of as well while I was away.

Glancing at the wall that boasted the Rosenbaum legacy, I stopped midstride.

What in the world?

At the top was a portrait of Uncle Simon exactly where my father's photo had been the day I left. It was tradition that the latest deceased member of the family who ran the company had their portrait in that position. The first day my father had brought me here, my grandfather's picture had been at the top. To the best of my knowledge, Uncle Simon was very much still alive.

"Excuse me, sir. May I see your visitor's pass, please?"

I tore my gaze away from the wall and turned to the security guard walking toward me. I didn't know him, which meant he was new. After working here for over five years, I knew even the janitors by name. I'd always taken an active interest in the people who worked for me.

"I don't have one."

"Then you'll have to ask the front desk for one. Without a visitor's pass, you're not allowed into the offices."

Impatiently I dug into my breast pocket for my wallet, then showed him my ID. He glanced from the photo to me and smiled.

"My apologies, Mr. Rosenbaum." He seemed unsure, as if he had never heard of me before.

"Is Simon Rosenbaum in?" I asked, pocketing my wallet.

"Yes, sir. He came in half an hour ago."

I nodded my thanks and proceeded to the elevator. Should I have told my uncle I was coming after all? I'd planned to visit last week, but with Bryan moving in, I had wanted to spend some time with him, making him feel at home.

I rode the elevator to the top floor, which had been altered as well. My uncle had been busy renovating. New carpet, new furniture, even the old oak desk that had always stood outside the office had been replaced. The new desk, an impersonal

piece of furniture of chrome and glass, was empty. Where was Marge? My PA should have been here at this time.

Frowning, I approached the closed door with Uncle Simon's name in gold lettering and the title CEO. Seeing it felt strange. Not that I could blame him. He had served in the position for two years after all. However, I couldn't help the queasy feeling in my stomach.

Why hadn't Dad wanted him to take over the company?

I knocked twice and, when I didn't get a response, tried the doorknob. It wasn't locked, so I pushed it open and peeked inside.

"Uncle Simon?" His name croaked from my lips as I stared in confusion at the sight in front of me. Uncle Simon stood behind his desk, his face pale and his mouth open in shock. I knew he hadn't expected me, but the look of panic that crossed his face was alarming. Until I understood exactly what was wrong with this picture. The tail of his shirt trailed through his unopened zipper, as if he had hastily shoved in his shirt and hadn't had enough time to fix himself. I took in the other telltale signs: the crushed shirt, the upturned collar, and the disheveled hair. Was that pink lipstick he was wearing?

His eyes dropped to the desk, and mine followed. He had someone under there. I didn't know whether to leave and come back later or go along with his charade that nothing was amiss. For now, I'd play his game until I could put the puzzle pieces back together and find out what the hell was going on here. I was pretty sure it wasn't Aunt Susan under that table.

"My god, Tate, when did you get here?" He placed both hands on top of the desk.

"Back in San Diego or here at the office?" I stepped farther into the office and closed the door.

He raised his eyebrows. "In San Diego." He sat and took me in from head to toe. "How long are you staying?"

"I've been here since last week." I deliberately refrained from answering the latter question.

“Why didn’t you let me know? I would’ve been better prepared for your arrival. I hope the security guards didn’t give you a hard time.”

“Not in the least. The Rosenbaum name always had clout. I merely showed him my ID.”

“I can’t believe you’re back.”

And I couldn’t believe he didn’t even give me a hug or say he was glad I was back. I hadn’t left on a bad note between us, but now I had the impression he would’ve liked it better if I hadn’t resurfaced.

“I can’t completely move on with my life if I’m ignoring this aspect of it,” I replied and claimed a seat across from him. “The time away, however, has been good. How have you been?”

“Good. Everything’s good.”

“And Aunt Susan?”

A flush spread across his cheeks. “Hmm. It’s complicated between us at the moment. We’re separated, and she’s filing for a divorce.”

Now that explained the woman I was sure was hiding under that desk. “Too bad. I liked her. She always treated me like a son.”

“Sometimes people change and outgrow each other.”

I smiled. “And how much have you changed, Uncle? How’s everything here at the office? I noticed new carpet and furniture. And before I forget, where’s Marge?”

“As well as can be expected and still swimming in profits. The board thought it was time to do a little revamping. And about Marge, well, uh, she decided it was time to go, but don’t worry, she had the lovely send off we knew you would want for her.”

I was a little sad and taken aback by Marge leaving Rosenbaum’s. “I can’t picture Marge not working here. And to have missed her sendoff...” I shook my head. “I knew the

company would be in good hands. I'm indebted to you for taking over when I needed you."

"And now you're here, I imagine you're all ready to take back the reins."

There was an edge to his tone, but I thought I must have imagined it as he smiled at me.

"No rush. I'm sure you've made changes I'll have to get used to. It may take weeks, maybe months, for me to catch up with all the developments. I want the transition to be smooth."

"Sounds fair enough." He rose to his feet then, and this time his zipper was up. He must have done it while sitting down. "I'll assign one of our employees to you who can prepare a progress report and go over the new accounts with you. I know just the person. He'll be able to get you up to date with everything."

I nodded and felt better already at how cooperative he was. What he was doing with the person beneath his desk didn't matter to me as long as it didn't harm the company's reputation. So far, I hadn't noticed any indication he had done a poor job, although I'd need to check company data to be certain. There was just one thing that bothered me.

"Uncle Simon, about the picture in the lobby," I said.

His face flushed, and he glanced away, his Adam's apple bobbing. "Yes, right. Please forgive me. I might have gotten a little ahead of myself. I thought we could start a new tradition where the present CEO's picture stands at the helm. After all, people would know right away who's in charge of the company."

Even before he was finished, I shook my head. "The tradition stays, Uncle Simon."

He nodded sharply. "Of course. I'll have the photo removed immediately and make sure your father's picture will be hung back."

The tension released from my shoulders, and I got to my feet. "Great. Now that's out of the way, how about we have an

early lunch and play a little catch-up? You still favor that Italian restaurant down the street?"

"Yes, of course. Sounds good. Why don't you go on ahead, and I'll meet you in the lobby?" His gaze strayed to the desk. "I'll meet you in five. There's something I have to take care of."

"Sure, but make it fifteen. I want to stop by some employees and say hello."

I walked toward the door, and when he cleared his throat, I turned around. I was being gracious enough to give him the time to finish what he had been doing before we went to lunch.

"Tate, it's good to see you," he said. "It's been way too long. Welcome back."

Tears threatened to fill my eyes, but I forced them back. I felt a little guilty that I'd suspected him of trying to replace my father's memory. Of course he wouldn't do that. To lighten the mood, I grinned and gestured at his lips.

"You might want to get rid of the lipstick before coming down to the lobby. That shade of pink doesn't exactly work for you."

Chuckling at his embarrassed look, I closed the door behind me.

BRYAN

“**W**hat the hell, Tate!” I cried when he plucked me from the sofa as though I weighed nothing more than a baby and settled me onto his lap. Ignoring my sound of protest, he dipped his hand into the bowl and stuffed buttery popcorn into my mouth before I could chastise him. In order not to choke, I chewed mechanically and glared at him while he laughed. *God help him if he ruined another movie night for us!*

“I was being concerned about your well-being,” he said. “I thought you’d be much more comfortable sitting on my lap.”

I swallowed the last bit of the popcorn and snorted. “With that thing poking me in the ass? Hardly.”

“You mean my happy stick?” He chuckled, nudging his hips to grind against my ass. “I still blame you for getting me addicted to your no-no.”

Every time he flirted with me like this, I was one step closer to throwing in the towel and ripping my clothes off. Tonight, I really wanted to watch this movie, though. The first time we had tried to watch it together we had to cut it short because a horny Tate hadn’t been able to leave me alone. I had run away and locked myself in the guest bedroom for fear I would’ve given in to him.

At first, the no-sex policy had been to get to know him without the intimacy, but now, it had become more. It seemed the more we went without, the more we wanted each other. I was willing to hold out for as long as possible.

“Get your horny mind on something else,” I said. “Nothing’s changed. No sucking. No fucking.”

He captured the lobe of my ear between his teeth and nibbled, then released it. He blew into my ear, and I suppressed the urge to giggle. “You’re a mean, mean boy.” The husky tone with which he spoke into my ear chased away that urge. Good old-fashioned lust reared its unwanted head instead.

“Tate.” His name came out as a moan, a benediction. When I found myself melting against him, I jerked up and climbed off his hard thighs. He chuckled, looking smug that he had successfully gotten a rise out of me. I avoided looking at his erection. I longed for more than the buttery popcorn; I wanted the taste of his cum on my tongue.

He smirked. “You know, I’m having fun with this. Sometimes I wonder who’s feeling the torture more. You or me?”

“Definitely you,” I bluffed. “But what do you expect? It’s all you talk about.”

“Not true. We talked about your first day of work tomorrow.”

I pulled a face. “You gave me a new suit to wear and then threatened to gag me and fuck me if I complained about you spending your money on me.”

He winked. “Worked like a charm, didn’t it?”

I rolled my eyes, trying not to show my smile. He was incorrigible. In some ways, my big mountain man had changed and relaxed a little, but in others, he would always be my bossy grump. Each day I spent with him, I fell more in love with him, although I hadn’t told him yet. I had to be sure, especially about how he felt about me. This time I wouldn’t rush.

“If you don’t behave, I’m going to bed,” I threatened.

“You’re aware of how much I’d like that, right?”

“I meant alone! Seriously, Tate, can you be any hornier tonight?”

“Do *you* seriously want the answer to that question?”

No, I didn't. If he pushed any harder tonight, I was positive I didn't have the power or will to resist him. Everything was going too well right now. Three days ago, Mr. Ingram's secretary had called I had the job, and Tate was busy wading his way back into work. We got along tremendously, and he treated me like his equal. Life could never have been better. Without sex. Life could never have been better without the sex.

“You need to cool off.” I placed the popcorn bowl on the coffee table. I stuck one finger, then another into my mouth to suck off the butter, his eyes following my gesture hungrily. Served him right. I didn't stop until all fingers were butter-free. Then I gave him my best wide-eyed innocent expression.

“Race you to the pool.”

“Come here,” he growled, but I was already off. I grabbed the hem of my shirt and pulled it over my head, then dropped it onto the floor. I could always pick it up later.

By the time I reached the glass sliding door, I had my shorts unbuttoned. I was kicking them off my feet when I was plucked from the ground and thrown over Tate's shoulder like a rag doll. The outside lights automatically came on, illuminating us like two actors on the center stage of our lives.

“Put me down!” I squealed, erupting into laughter until I saw where he was heading. I pawed at his shoulder. “Tate, don't you—” I shouted as I sailed in the air, then hit the water hard.

I closed my mouth just before I sank. Behind me, the water splashed. Flicking beneath the surface, I swam away, but the need for air forced me to break the surface. Tate was bigger and swam with powerful strokes, but I tried to get out of his reach regardless. I was no match for him, though, especially laughing as hard as I was. He easily wrapped his arms around me and hauled me up to his body.

Underwater, our legs tangled. I didn't bother to resist him this time, knowing how useless it was, but to be honest, I didn't want to.

"I can stop now if you want," he said, his voice hoarse with need. "I know how important it is for you that we wait but—"

I kissed the words from his mouth. With a groan, he pulled me even closer to him, and I wrapped my legs around his waist. Slipping my hands behind his head, I kissed him back, over and over, as he devoured my lips. It had been so long that I'd wanted him this way. It might not have been as long as I'd planned, but it had been enough. We trembled with need for each other, our eagerness making our motions a frantic and imperfect synchrony.

"Bryan," he moaned and hefted me up a little so he could kiss my neck. "Fuck, Bryan. I want you so much."

"Yes." I pressed my lower half against him so he could feel how hard I was in my tighty-whities.

Tate waded with me out of the water, which seemed to take ages. The pool was huge, but I was impatient. I wanted him to pound me. He lifted me onto the edge to sit and hoisted himself out of the pool. I struggled to my feet, my legs trembling. But he picked me up again and kissed me hard as he walked over to the cream-colored lounge. He placed me on my feet once more, then grasped my cock and kneaded. I bucked in his arms, clinging to his shoulders.

"Bryan, I'm not going to let you do this," he said, and my eyes flicked open.

"Huh?" My brain was too scrambled to comprehend what he was saying.

"I can't let you go all the way. Not after your determination to build a strong foundation for us. I know I've been ragging you about it, but I respect what you want to sacrifice for us. I'd give up a fleeting moment of passion for spending an eternity with you."

I swallowed hard and looked up at Tate. I knew how much it had cost him to say this. He was so damn hard against my leg, but here he was, being a gentleman and showing me he was more than just a mountain man fucking the first boy he came across in the woods. Nothing else could have convinced me then that Tate wanted me and cared for me as much as I cared for him.

The doorbell chose that moment to ring, the sound carrying to the pool through the sound system Tate had installed all over the house.

“That’s the distraction we both need right now,” he said with a painful smile. He squeezed my buns hard. “God, I’m gonna love fucking you when the time is right. Go get us some towels. I’ll see who it is and send them on their way.”

I nodded and hurried away to do his bidding or else no telling where we would end up. I picked up my clothes on the way upstairs, taking the elevator because my legs were too wobbly to climb the winding stairs. Once in our bedroom, I walked through to the bathroom and took out fresh towels from the cupboard under the sink.

After making short work of drying off and pulling on a pair of gray sweats and a T-shirt, I left the bathroom with a towel for Tate. I frowned when I walked down the stairs and heard him talking. I’d thought he would’ve gotten rid of whoever was at the door. His state of dress wasn’t fit for company.

Tate stood in the hallway with his friend from the restaurant. I couldn’t remember his name, but his gaze flickered to me in surprise. Clearly, he had no idea he would find me here.

Hadn’t Tate wanted him to know we were living together? I didn’t know what to think. Then Tate turned, and a flush of crimson flooded his cheeks. Tate never blushed, and it bothered me he did now.

“Bry, you remember Gio from the restaurant.” He waved me over. I approached and handed him the towel, which he quickly wrapped around his waist.

“Yeah.” I smiled at the other man. “How are you?”

“Fine. Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt you guys. I didn’t know you had company, Tate.”

“Bryan’s living here until he finds a place.” Tate’s answer stung a little. I knew it was how it started. I had wanted to find my own place—still did—but hearing him say it didn’t sit well with me. It sounded like he was just providing hospitality until his service was no longer needed. This was the opposite of the vibe he had given me a few minutes ago when he had stalled having sex with me because he wanted to respect my wishes. “I’m gonna change, and I’ll be right back. Gio, you know where everything is. Help yourself to a drink.”

“Don’t mind if I do.” We both watched Tate go, and when he was out of earshot, Gio gestured to me. “Wanna join me for a drink?”

I shrugged. “I’m not much of a drinker, but sure.”

He raised his eyebrows but refrained from commenting.

How had he gotten through the gates? Tate’s property was pretty much sealed off, and it wasn’t easy to get to the front door without being familiar with the security system. He must’ve known the key code.

That in itself, I could understand. Gio was Tate’s best friend, but something about how at ease Gio was here bothered me, although I guessed it should be normal if they were as close as I thought they were. He didn’t need to be told where anything was but helped himself to the wet bar and produced two shot glasses.

“So, how do you like it here?” he asked as he poured tequila into the glasses and handing me one.

I shrugged. “It’s okay. Not exactly what I had expected, but you adapt to situations.”

“Hmm, how long have you known Tate?”

I tried not to be defensive, but questions and mistrust lurked behind his eyes. He thought I had some hidden agenda toward Tate.

“Not very long. Almost a month.”

“Shit. That’s a short time to be living together.”

He made me almost want to tell him Tate and I weren’t fucking, although we lived together, but I didn’t owe him any information. Tate could tell him what he wanted to know. I took a sip of the tequila instead and tried not to make a face. I really hated drinking other than the occasional wine.

“How long have *you* and Tate known each other?” I asked him.

He gulped down his tequila in one shot and poured more into the glass. “Tate and I met back in college, so roughly ten years. We became friends quickly. He’s a good guy, a little surly, but not as tough as he acts. He lets people in way too easily.”

“And of course, you’re referring to me.”

He swallowed the next shot and slammed the glass down onto the table. His curly black hair swayed a little from the force of his movement, and his eyes narrowed. “Let’s cut the bullshit here. Tate’s vulnerable right now. I know he’s not over what happened. Perfect opportunity for you to come along and comfort him a little, work your way into his bed and into his heart under false pretenses. You don’t fool me with those big brown eyes and pouty lips of yours. Yeah, you can get all heated and angry, but it doesn’t change the fact of what I just said. I’ll be damned before I let you or anyone else hurt him.”

“I’d never hurt him,” I snapped, pushing away from the island. I frowned, puzzled. Looking out for a friend, I got, but this...this felt like so much more. Did Gio want Tate?

“You see that you don’t, or I’ll give you the eviction notice myself. You might get it either way.”

I didn't regret having listened to the conversation between Bryan and Gio. I'd been torn about leaving the two of them alone for a few minutes and allowing them to feel each other out. They were both important people in my life and would eventually have to learn to get along. Gio was the brother I never had, and Bryan was the lover I always wanted.

The threat Gio made to Bryan was on the dramatic side, but it was touching to know he still had my back. He had taken my coming out better than I'd expected. He never judged, never asked me any questions. I couldn't have asked for a better friend, but I didn't want him to scare the shit out of Bryan. He might spend most of his time in the kitchen but there was nothing soft about him. While he wasn't quite as large as me, he was still all solid muscles. Having him against Bryan would just be cruel.

"Hey, where's my drink?" I asked as I strolled into the kitchen. The tension was heavy in the air.

Gio grinned. "Your boy's still on his first glass, so you're on time."

I glanced at Bryan. I liked the sound of Gio calling him my boy, but from Bryan's sour expression, he didn't share my feelings. I slung an arm around his shoulder and gave him a reassuring squeeze while Gio fetched another glass. I didn't wait for him to fill it but confiscated Bryan's and downed it in one gulp. He didn't like the stuff anyway.

“Here, let me fill that back up for you, Bryan.” Gio handed me the glass, then claimed Bryan’s.

“No, thanks,” Bryan said and got to his feet. “I think I’ll call it a night. I’ll have to be up early for work.”

“Oh, you got a job?” Gio asked. His question might seem innocent, but I knew my best friend and didn’t like the glint in his eyes. I scowled at him, but he ignored me. “Let me guess. You’re going to be a go-go dancer. You have the looks for it.”

I slammed my glass down on the island. How dare Gio say such a thing? He had gone too far, and the fire burning in Bryan’s eyes said he didn’t take too kindly to it either. Why the hell was Gio trying to rile him up?

“Knock it off,” I snapped at my best friend. I couldn’t remember the last time I had snapped at him. “He has an associate’s degree in business administration. He’s starting a new job at Ingram’s.”

“Nice. Congrats.” My frown deepened. That sounded way too sarcastic.

“Thanks.” Bryan’s response was dry as hell. Fuck. They were not getting along as I’d hoped. “It was nice meeting you again, Gio. Good night.”

Before Bryan could walk away, I tugged him toward me and captured his lips in a hard, short kiss. “I’ll be up in a bit.”

He nodded and left. The second he was gone, I glared at Gio. “What the hell was that about?”

He flung back his drink and poured another glass. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You’re picking on him. You need to stop. Now.”

Gio rolled his eyes. “I’m picking on him? What is this? Third grade?”

“Why don’t you tell me? You’re the one aiming shots at him for no reason.”

His eyes widened in disbelief. “No reason? I’m only doing what I can to protect you. You’re not over losing Kathleen and

Rachel. You're only using him as your little project to get over your guilt. Admit it. He makes you feel good. You're even doing a good deed by letting him stay here. But trust me, Tate, he's going to use this opportunity to get as much out of you as he can. You can tell by looking at him, the sort of guy he is!"

"You're wrong." I accepted the next shot he poured. "You don't know anything about Bryan, and you need to stop making wild accusations when you don't know shit."

"Do you think you're the first guy he's done this to?" He shook his head. "Come on, Tate. You graduated summa cum laude from MIT. I know you're not that thick."

I frowned as the image of Keith popped in my head. I had been too focused on getting Bryan that day I dropped in at his condo to take everything in. From what I remembered, the guy was loaded, even though his wealth couldn't be compared to mine. He had also been in charge of the company Bryan had worked for, so I knew he had money.

"You know of someone he's done it to before, don't you?" Gio watched me carefully.

"It's not like that with us," I answered.

"I get it that he makes you feel special, Tate, but you don't want that from just anyone. You want that kind of feeling from someone who genuinely cares about you."

"And he cares. If you must know, I gave him a credit card, and he hasn't even used it. He didn't even want to stay here, but I insisted. That's not the action of someone who just wants to take and never give anything back."

"Oh, I'm sure he's giving you plenty, all right. It's just a pretense for you—"

"Gio, drop it!" I grounded out between clenched teeth. "Bryan's different. Leave it at that. It's my relationship, and I love you like a brother, man, but you've got to back off. I want you two to get along, but if I have to keep you apart, I will. I don't want him hurt. Not by anyone and certainly not by you."

"You'd choose him over me? I've known you for ten years. I know you better than anyone else."

“Then you should know that I’m old enough to pick out my own boyfriend. I don’t want to choose between the two most important people in the world. Be his friend, Gio. For my sake.”

He seemed ready to argue, the look in his eyes conflicted. Then he sighed and raised his glass to me. “Fine. I’ll back off. I didn’t mean to make your boy toy uncomfortable.”

“Gio.”

“Sorry. It’ll take some getting used to seeing you with him.”

“You’ll get used to it. He’s not going anywhere if I have anything to say about it.”

“You love him?”

If anyone else had asked me this question, I would’ve said no, but this was Gio, and I couldn’t lie to him. In all the time we had known each other, the only lie I had told him was one of omission. I hadn’t told him I was bisexual because I didn’t know how he would react to it.

“I think so.” I clutched the small shot glass. “It’s different, these feelings I have for him. You probably think I’m a fool, since it hasn’t been long. Truth is, we aren’t even having sex right now. We are reclaimed celibates getting to know each other. Yeah, laugh all you want, but it’s true. We’re both trying hard for this relationship to work, and for that reason, I don’t want you to add to the complications. It’s already hard enough with Bryan declaring his independence and not wanting to accept my help.”

“Fine.” He knocked back another shot of tequila, and I frowned.

“How many of those have you had?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Why? I haven’t been counting.”

“Because I think you’ve had too many to drive home tonight. I’ll either have to drive you home or let you crash here the night.”

“You’ve had the same number as me,” he pointed out.

That was true. “I guess you’re staying in the guest room, then.”

“Don’t think your boyfriend would appreciate that. He doesn’t seem to like me.”

“If I were him, I wouldn’t like you too. You were rude to him. Which reminds me, you owe him an apology tomorrow about that smartass comment.”

“Ugh. Which one again?”

I glared at him. Jesus Christ. He was really going to make this difficult, wasn’t he? “The go-go dancer comment. He’s a smart guy, and he didn’t deserve that.”

He burst out laughing. “I was just kidding. I’m sure he didn’t take me seriously. But be honest, he does have the pretty boy look for it. Don’t tell me you didn’t notice.”

He seemed upset to me, and I wasn’t taking any chances. “Just do it, please. For my sake. I really think you’d like him if you tried to get to know him a little.”

“Truth is, I don’t want to get to know him.” He sounded like a petulant child who didn’t want to share his best friend with anyone else. “But for your sake, I’ll try.”

“Good. Now let me show you to your room.”

“Not yet. Since I won’t be driving home tonight, why don’t we finish this bottle of tequila? For old times’ sake.”

I glanced at the doorway as if Bryan would walk in and ask me when I was coming up to bed. I turned back to Gio. “Bryan’s waiting for me.”

“Come on, Tate. You’ll have the guy for your entire life. I missed out on two years of our friendship. You owe me. In case it escaped you, I don’t have that many friends around either, and I missed you, man. Plus, today was just a fucking awful day for me.”

“What happened?”

He shook his head. “I don’t want to talk about it. I’m too late anyway. There’s nothing else I can do about it now but

wait.”

“Now you’re keeping secrets from me?”

He gave me a sad smile. “Some secrets are worth keeping until the right time. *If* there’s a right time. So, what do you say? You’ll help me finish this drink while we reminisce about old times?”

I did want to go to bed with Bryan and have him cuddle against my back or my front as we exchanged positions during the night. At the same time, I felt some guilt for not having been there for Gio lately. He had done so much for me, organizing the funeral to bury my wife and daughter. He had sold my house and bought this one. He had done it all without me even having to lift a finger.

“Fine.” Bryan was a sensitive guy, and he would understand. Plus, he was probably asleep already anyway. I’d never seen anyone fall asleep so quickly once their head hit the pillow. I wouldn’t be gone long. We were already halfway through the tequila bottle.

BRYAN

Arms snaked around my waist and tugged me into a warm embrace, waking me from sleep. I smiled and shifted closer to Tate's hard body, but the stench of liquor emanating from him was strong enough to make me gag. I pulled away from him and made a face. Just how much had he drunk with his friend? After I had lain awake for almost an hour expecting him, I'd given up waiting on him to slip into bed with me.

"Bry, what's wrong?" he asked and reached for me again.

"It's probably best not to cuddle tonight. I may get drunk just lying next to you. How much did you drink anyway?"

He chuckled. "Not sure. I'm not drunk. Just a little tipsy maybe but not drunk."

I snorted and remained on the other side of the bed. "Good for you. Did your friend finally leave?"

"Uh, not really. He's sleeping in one of the guestrooms. I couldn't let him drive after we drank so much."

"How generous of you."

He leaned forward and kissed my cheek, and I damned near had to hold my breath. He did smell that bad from the alcohol.

"I'll take a quick shower, then." He rolled off the bed. "Stay up till I get back, will you?"

"Hmm." I gave a noncommittal response. I didn't want to wait up for him, but it was hopeless. There was no way I was

falling back asleep so quickly.

I turned on the lamp on my side of the bed and grabbed my phone. Well past midnight. I had less than four hours left to sleep before I had to get up for my first day of work. I didn't intend to show up with red-rimmed eyes.

A few minutes later, Tate walked out of the shower, smelling clean and fresh. He padded naked to his walk-in closet, and my cock stirred at the sight of his hard buns. His body was the envy of a second-century Roman soldier, displaying strength and muscles. When he stepped out of the closet, he was wearing only a pair of tight boxers. He slipped into bed behind me, and I turned out the light. This time when he reached for me, I had no excuse not to give in.

"Hmm, you feel so good," he murmured.

"I was expecting you in bed hours ago." I hated the little whine in my voice, but I couldn't help myself. I was uneasy about this guy who wanted to wheedle his way between us. Tate didn't even notice.

"Sorry, we got a little carried away."

"With?" I wedged my leg between his.

"Just talking about old times. We share a lot of memories."

"Hmm."

I remained silent and tried not to think of what exactly his memories with Gio consisted of. I squashed the urge to ask if they had ever done anything intimately together.

"Bry?"

"Yeah?"

"I know he said some pretty awful shit to you. It won't happen again."

All the tension I hadn't even known was there eased from my body. I turned in his arms and planted my lips onto his. He kissed me back briefly, then released my lips.

"Go to sleep. You have an early day tomorrow."

He didn't have to tell me twice. With him snuggled against me, exactly where he belonged, I soon fell asleep once more. The next time I woke up, he was lying on his belly, snoring lightly. I wished I could stay with him, but I had to get to work, so I carefully got out of bed and headed for the bathroom.

I showered, then dressed, and he still slept. He had promised to drop me off at work, but given the time he had climbed into bed last night, I figured he wouldn't be surfacing anytime soon. He was still catching up on everything that had happened in the company during his absence, and he hadn't resumed regular working hours yet, so I left him to sleep, called a cab, and went downstairs.

Before I was even in the kitchen, the delicious aroma of breakfast wafted to me. Gio. How could I've forgotten he was here? I entered cautiously, bracing myself for what Gio might have up his sleeve. I had never been in a relationship with someone else wanting me out of the picture, but it felt good to know Tate had spoken to him about his behavior last night. I didn't begrudge him his friendship with Tate, nor did I want to come between them, but I doubted he shared the same opinion.

"Good morning," I greeted him. I didn't comment on the spread of breakfast he had made. He sipped from a steaming cup of coffee.

"Hey, hope I didn't disturb you," he said with a lazy smile. "I thought I would make up for my rudeness yesterday by preparing breakfast."

"Geez, thanks. I'm not really sure how much time I have to enjoy breakfast, though."

He pulled out a chair and patted the seat. "Come on. Just a bit to show no hard feelings. I might have gotten carried away last night, but can you blame me? Tate has been through a lot, and what kind of friend would I be if I didn't have his back?"

I reluctantly sat where he'd indicated. He poured me a cup of coffee and placed it in front of me. "I can appreciate you looking out for his best interests. He's lucky to have a friend like you."

“And now he has you.”

“Yes, he does,” I affirmed.

I ended up nibbling on a piece of dried toast, forgoing the eggs and bacon. If he was offering the olive branch, I would take it. Everything would be easier for Tate if Gio and I got along.

“Hey, I thought you already left.” Tate walked into the kitchen, wearing only a pair of shorts. From his expression, either he had forgotten Gio had slept over, or he had thought his friend would have already left. “Who made breakfast?” He glanced from me to Gio.

“I made everyone breakfast,” his friend said. “Sorry I crashed your night, but I didn’t know you had company.”

Tate nodded, then turned to me. “I know I promised to take you to the office, but if you wait on me to get dressed, you’re going to be late.”

“It’s fine. I called a cab.”

Before I could finish speaking, he took my right hand and placed a set of keys into my palm. “Take the Jag. I’ve had it serviced, and it’s long overdue for regular driving.”

I shook my head, aware of Gio watching us. “I’ll be fine taking a cab, Tate. Besides, the Jaguar is way out of my league. What if I crash it?”

“It’s just a car, and you can drive, can’t you? So why would you crash it? Just take the damn car, or I’m going to have to drive you. And you don’t want to make me late for my meeting because I have to drop you have, do you?”

I scowled at him. “That’s blackmail.”

“No, it’s called options. The Jag or me?”

It would serve him right if I took up the second offer and let him be late for work, but I would feel guilty. I’d better cancel the cab. With great reluctance, I took the keys from him.

“Smart choice.” He tilted my chin and kissed me, then grabbed a plate to help himself to breakfast.



TWENTY MINUTES LATER, I parked Tate’s outrageously expensive car in an empty spot. Thankfully, no accidents had occurred. I was so excited about my job and starting this new chapter in my life. Everything was working out despite Keith’s prophecy that I was good for nothing else but be his fuck toy. I was proving him wrong. I forced myself not to worry about leaving Tate at home with Gio. Besides, Gio had apologized, so I had pushed last night’s episode behind me.

Although I had told Tate I would be fine, he had insisted I let him know when I arrived at Ingram’s. Rather than risk him calling me in the middle of work, I complied and sent him a quick message.

I approached the front desk and gave my name to the receptionist.

“Mr. Cummings, why don’t you take a seat for a minute?” The receptionist gave me an awkward smile. “I just need to make a quick phone call.”

“Sure.”

I took a seat and relaxed, checking out the different people who entered the building and headed straight for the elevator. As from today, I would be one of them, be a part of a team, getting things done. I would have a purpose and maybe could make a difference. While I would probably never earn as much money as Tate had, at least I would be making a living.

“Mr. Ingram’s secretary called I should start today as the new personal assistant.”

The comment snapped me out of my musings, and frowning, I turned my attention to the front desk, where a young woman a few years older than me stood dressed in a skirt that was a few inches above her knees and a matching jacket, she drew the attention of every man who entered the

building. It didn't help that she was wearing these killer stilettos that made her seem to have legs for days. Although I was gay, I could appreciate she was a beautiful woman, but that was the least of my concerns.

Did she just say she is here for the PA position? I had no idea they had been looking for more than one PA.

"May I have your name please?" the receptionist asked. She flickered a nervous glance toward me, then turned away just as quickly.

"Patricia Williamson."

The receptionist lowered her voice, so I didn't hear what she said to the woman. After another minute of whispered conversation, the woman sauntered toward the elevator.

Alarm bells went off in my head. Something wasn't right. Why did I have to wait while Patricia headed for the elevator? As soon as she was gone, the receptionist beckoned to me. "Mr. Cummings?"

Relieved, I rose to my feet, smoothing my hands down the front of the jacket Tate had bought me. He had been so proud of me getting this job that he had wanted to give me a suit for the first day. I'd protested at first, but now, seeing the quality of dress of the employees who passed me, I was grateful for his thoughtful gesture.

"Mr. Cummings, there seems to have been a grave mistake on our part," the receptionist started. She looked everywhere but at me. "Mr. Ingram's secretary might have called you in error. The position was already filled by someone else."

The blood drained from my face, and my heart beat faster. Surely, she had to be joking. This sort of thing didn't happen to anyone. How did a secretary end up calling the wrong person for a job? Why hadn't they called to inform me before I arrived here dressed to the nines and full of anticipation for a job I didn't even have?

"I don't understand." I thought back to the day of my interview. Mr. Ingram had assured me this job was mine. "Are you saying I didn't get the job?"

“I’m so sorry, sir.” The receptionist looked miserable, delivering the news, but it wasn’t her fault. She was just the messenger. Who the hell invited someone for a job, then told them they were no longer wanted? “If it’s any consolation, we are prepared to reimburse you for the trip here.”

A laugh bubbled up from my throat. Reimbursement for my trip here? Who would reimburse me for my dignity, which was crushed today, and my humiliation? I didn’t even have any recourse because I would have signed my contract with them today, so technically I had nothing in writing to prove I had even been hired for the job.

My god, how would I even tell Tate about this? He had been so proud of me. The suit, the car, all of it had been for nothing. I would only let him down and show myself to be exactly what Keith had thought of me: I was nothing without him. Nothing without Tate.

“If you take a seat, I’ll ask the accounts department to draft you a check for your travel expenses.”

Without a word, I walked out of the office building, barely holding on to what little was left of my dignity.

Distracted from the company reports, I checked my phone to see if Bryan had sent me a message. Still nothing since he had texted me this morning. I scowled at my reflection in the blank computer screen before me. I had been staring into space for so long that the screen had timed out on me.

I shouldn't be so preoccupied with Bryan when I had two years of information to soak in. Bryan was a grown man and could take care of himself, but I saw the vulnerabilities in him sometimes. It made me worry and want to protect him from all the Keiths in the world. I would never forget how he had looked that day I had picked him up from his ex—bruised, beaten, defeated.

I wanted him to trust me wholeheartedly, but sometimes he looked so skittish as if he hadn't made up his mind about me. This was the real reason I hadn't fucked him last night, although I had wanted him something awful. It would've been easy enough, but afterward, he would've regretted it, and I didn't want regrets between us. The next time I was inside him it had to be because he was a hundred percent sure he wanted me as much as I wanted him.

For some reason, he was holding himself back from me. He didn't think I noticed, but I did. I might have been a demanding boar at times, but I wasn't as dense as he thought I was. I saw the worry in his eyes, worry that I would kick him out or that he was taking too much from me and not giving anything back.

I didn't know how to convince him that he brought so much to my life, just by being there with me when I woke up in the mornings. I could never vocalize these feelings to him either, so until then, I had to hope my actions were enough for him to see how much he meant to me.

A knock sounded on the door. "Come in."

The door opened, and a young man I had never seen before stepped into the office. I blinked at him in surprise. Tall and athletic, he had short brown hair and gray eyes, a self-assured smile tilting the corner of his lips. I couldn't determine his age but would have guessed him to be in his late twenties. He closed the door behind him.

"Mr. Rosenbaum, I'm Vaughn Parker," he introduced himself and extended a hand toward me. I rose to my feet and shook it. "Mr. Rosenbaum assigned me to work with you in answering any questions you may have about the company during the last two years."

Frowning, I pulled my hand away from his when he seemed to have forgotten it wasn't an extension of his. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Parker."

"Please, sir, call me Vaughn."

I nodded. "Call me, Tate. I can't abide formalities." I waved him to sit and resumed my seat. "What do you do here at Rosenbaums, Vaughn?"

"My official title is project manager."

"And you've been here how long?"

"Sixteen months. Mr. Rosenbaum hired me shortly after he became CEO."

"I see."

"I'm to help you to get up to date with all that we have been doing, Tate. You'll find that the company has been doing quite well in your absence."

"I agree. I've been looking at the financial reports, and they're amazing. Even better than when I took over the company from my father."

“Great. Where do you want to start? I’d suggest the Holland-Berry project.”

For the rest of the morning, I pored over reports, astounded by what Uncle Simon had accomplished in such a short amount of time. At noon, I called Bryan, but his voicemail picked up, so I left a message. Instead, I invited Vaughn for lunch, and he was all too eager to accept and kept filling me in. I didn’t mind. The quicker I was up to speed, the quicker I could resume my previous activities.

After lunch, I allowed Vaughn to get back to work, mainly because I’d lost focus. Why wasn’t Bryan calling me back? He had a right to a lunchbreak as well. Then again, a first day at a job was always hectic. All afternoon, I went from worrying to shrugging it off and chiding myself for behaving as though Bryan was a child. He could take care of himself.

I still knew so little about him, though. He never mentioned his family, not once. He at least knew a little about mine. The only person we hadn’t talked about in detail was my mother, which reminded me that I needed to call her soon to let her know I was back in town. More than likely, Uncle Simon would’ve already told her. Aunt Susan and my mother were close friends.

I finally gave up the pretense of working and thought about what I could do for Bryan that night. My first idea was to take him out, but he appreciated a quiet evening alone more than fancy restaurants. Maybe I could arrange a nice dinner for just us. With that plan firmly in place, I called Gio.

“Tate, to what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Hi, can you make me a gourmet dinner for two? I’ll pick it up on my way home from work.”

“For god’s sake, Tate, are you trying to buy his love or what?”

“Save the comments, Gio. I thought we agreed you wouldn’t give me any grief about this.”

“Yeah, but first the car this morning and now this.”

“It’s just dinner. Plus, the car was sitting there. I can only drive one at a time. Will you have everything ready or not?”

“Pick it up at four.”

“Make it five. He gets off work at six. That should be plenty of time to arrange everything.”

“Fine, five it is.”

At four forty-five, I powered down my computer and shrugged into my jacket. A knock sounded. Then the door opened, and Vaughn poked his around.

“You’re leaving already?” he asked, sounding disappointed. “I thought we could go over more of those projects together. I don’t mind staying behind. We could even order in and get some serious work done.”

I frowned a little as I hung my tie loosely around my neck without bothering to knot it. “I can’t. I’ve a little surprise for my boyfriend. It’s his first day on the job.” Normally, I wouldn’t give an employee so many details, but with the little vibes I kept getting from him, I’d rather be safe than sorry. If he was as gay as I thought he was, it was best he knew to slow his roll before he made working here awkward for the both of us.

“Oh, okay. I guess I’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

He disappeared as quickly as he’d arrived, and I left the office without giving him another thought. Since Bryan had come into my life, no other man held my interest. I wasn’t blind, and I could appreciate a good-looking man but looks alone didn’t do it for me. Not when I was so in love with Bryan.

Holy shit, it felt good to admit it to myself. I was grinning from ear to ear when I stopped at Gio’s to collect our meal. The restaurant was already busy, so we didn’t get to speak, which was just as well. If he told me once more that I was doing too much for Bryan, I was sure I’d lose my patience and we would end up arguing.

Once at the house, I parked in the driveway instead of the garage, too eager to get inside to wait for the doors to open. I

quickly transferred everything from the car to the kitchen.

“What’s all this?”

At the sound of Bryan’s voice, I almost jumped out of my skin. What was he doing home? I spun around. He stood in the doorway, gesturing to the dishes on the kitchen counter. He was wearing a T-shirt and sweats that hung low on his hips. His face was pale, and his eyes were hooded, hiding his feelings from me. I hated when he did that.

“Bryan, what are you doing home already?” It didn’t make sense for me to hide the evidence of what I was up to. I was busted.

“You first,” he replied. “What did you do?”

My cheeks burned. Had I made a mistake by making a big deal about this? Gio had warned me I was doing too much. Was he right? But it was Bryan’s first day on the job. Surely, that called for a celebration.

“Um, I thought we could have a nice dinner home just the two of us.” I shrugged as if it was no big deal. “You know, just to celebrate your new job and all.”

If it were possible, his face paled even more. “You shouldn’t have bothered.”

“It was no bother at all. I picked up the meal from Gio’s.”

“You don’t have to keep making grand gestures, Tate. I’d have preferred if you hadn’t gone to all this fuss.”

Disappointment coursed through me. No more than that. His reaction hurt. “I thought you would appreciate it, but no worries, I can easily throw it out.”

His eyes widened. “Tate, I’m sorry. Shit. I didn’t mean—” He swallowed hard, his eyes dropping to the floor. “I didn’t mean to sound ungrateful. It’s just...I didn’t get the job.”

I frowned. Did he mean he got fired on the first day? “What?”

“It’s exactly what I said.” He strolled over to the wet bar and poured a glass of scotch of all things. If Bryan was driven

to drink this had to be bad. I stood still, waiting for him to explain. “Can you believe the damnedest of things happened to me today?” He took a swig of the drink and winced. Then he coughed.

I couldn't watch him fall apart like this anymore. I walked around to him and took the drink from his hand.

“What happened?” I asked, pulling him against me. He tried to resist, but I wasn't about to let him go. “Tell me what happened, Bry.”

He gave a mocking laugh. “Today, when I arrived at Ingram's, they told me they had made a mistake. They didn't even have the guts to tell me to my face but let the poor receptionist do it. Somebody else got the job, and I was called in error. At least, they offered to reimburse me for my travel expenses. Fucking great.”

“Oh shit.” I couldn't imagine how he felt having that happening to him. “How the hell did they make a mistake like that?”

I hadn't said anything to Bryan before because he had been so enthusiastic about the job, but what if Ingram had found out the link Bryan had to me? What if that was the reason he had rescinded the job offer? But would he have held a grudge for so long?

When Ingram first started, I'd beaten him to getting a commercial property he had wanted. Maybe I should have told Bryan about this earlier so he didn't get his hopes up, but how could I have known Ingram would remember that? If that even was the reason. For all I knew, it was exactly as Bryan had claimed, and Ingram really had made a mistake. I just found it hard to buy that a man as experienced as Ingram would make such a blunder.

Bryan shrugged. “I don't know, but anyway it's back to job hunting. Sorry you went through all this trouble for nothing and that I let you down.”

He pulled away, but I tucked him into my arms. He shuddered against me, and I knew this had affected him far

more than he was willing to admit.

“I’m not disappointed in you.”

“You were happy about me getting that job.”

“Of course I was. Because you wanted it. I was happy *for* you. That son of a bitch Ingram needs to explain what the fuck went wrong. In fact, I’m going to find out what the hell happened.”

He gripped the front of my shirt. “That’s not necessary. I don’t want you to try to solve it for me. I’d rather put the whole bad experience behind me. I’ve already sent out some résumés today.”

Even though his eyes were sad, he smiled, and this was what I fucking loved about him. He tried to make the best of any situation. He never whined, never complained. It must have been devastating, showing up for a job and then being told it wasn’t his, but he was not letting it get him down.

I cupped his face and kissed him. He clung to me, kissing me back almost desperately. I gave him the comfort he sought, nursing the hurt he was feeling. “I swear I’m not disappointed in you.” I needed him to know. “You did a good job in that interview. I know you did. Ingram is a fool for letting you go, and I’d hire you to be my PA in a heartbeat.”

He nipped my bottom lip with his teeth. “I can’t let you do that. I won’t know if you hired me for my skills in the business or the bedroom.”

I chuckled. “Or maybe it’s both that make you such a valuable asset.” I sobered and stared him square in the eyes. “I mean it, Bryan. If you get tired of sending out those résumés or doing the interviews, I’ll hire you.”

BRYAN

Dread. That was the feeling that filled me each day I powered up my laptop to check my email. I had lost count of the number of applications I had sent out and only a handful had responded. Those had been rejection letters.

Sorry, but we don't believe you have the experience we're seeking at this time. Please try again sometime in the future.

I had only experience working at Keith's company, but I had demonstrated my competency there. I also had the relevant qualifications, so why wasn't I being hired? I hadn't even been able to score an interview since the one at Ingram's.

I almost believed Keith had something to do with this. Maybe the potential employers had called him for references, and he kept giving them malicious information because I'd broken up with him.

I didn't put it past my despicable ex.

With a sigh, I plunged into the inevitable and signed into my email. I had two letters from two companies I had applied to—one a legal firm, the other an energy-efficient company. I held my breath as I checked the first email, then the other. Two more letters of rejection. I didn't know companies even sent them out before the interview stage. Most companies advertised that they only responded to those who were invited for an interview.

After reading the two emails, I felt even more despondent. I tried to keep a smile on my face when Tate was around, but when he was at work, I could fret that I'd never find a job.

Each rejection letter left me feeling a little less worthy. What if Gio had been right that what I was good for was being a go-go dancer?

On a whim, I grabbed my phone and punched in the numbers that were etched into my head. The phone rang three times before the man I would sooner forget answered.

“Well, well, well, to what do I owe this pleasure?”

“Are you messing with me, Keith?” I got straight to the heart of the matter.

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about. Why don’t you meet me somewhere for lunch, and we can discuss it?”

“I’m not meeting you anywhere. I just want to know if you’re somehow fucking up every job opportunity I try for?”

“Now why on earth would I do that?” he sneered. “You honestly think I care that much?”

“Yes. You’ve been calling me, leaving me texts. I know you want me back and would do anything to sabotage what I have with Tate.”

He laughed in my ear. “Sure, it was good having you around. You were always willing to let me try out my fetishes on you. Always a ready, eager fuck. I broke you in, but the day you walked out of my house with Rosenbaum, you became his baggage.”

His words hurt and even made me feel a little humiliated. He was right. I had been so eager to please him that I’d let him do all sorts of things to me, never truly believing that I was enough. I grappled to take back control of the conversation.

“Then why did you suggest we meet just now, and why call me?”

“Hey, I’m a man. I won’t turn down a free fuck if you’re offering. This time it might even be less expensive, since Rosenbaum is taking care of you now, isn’t he?”

“Fuck you, Keith.”

“I think you have that a little twisted. I did all the fucking in our relationship. That’s the way you like it, don’t you, you little bitch?”

I hung up on him and cursed beneath my breath. Stupid. I shouldn’t have called him. I should have known how he would get. I’d called him to get answers that would make me feel better but ended up only feeling worse. Talking to Keith had only reminded me where I came from and that I never seemed to be able to outrun my past. I was always reaching for that point where I felt wanted and worthy, but something always stood in my way.

So far, Tate hadn’t pried, and I hadn’t volunteered any information about my past. It wasn’t something I liked to talk about, and I hadn’t looked back since I left state care. It was a part of my life I preferred to pretend didn’t exist, but sooner or later, Tate was going to ask questions, and I’d have to relive my childhood.

My cell phone rang, and I wanted to ignore it, but the caller ID showed it was Tate. If I didn’t answer, he would only call again. I cleared my throat, then swiped to answer the phone.

“Hi, what’s up?” I got to my feet and walked toward the sliding doors. I pressed the combination of keys on the wall, and the doors slid to the left. Outside was a cool day, and the light fluttering of the breeze tousled my hair.

“I was calling your phone just now, and it said you were on another call,” Tate said.

I didn’t like lying to Tate, but I didn’t want him to know I had called Keith either. I didn’t want to plant the idea in his head that I suspected my ex was somehow sabotaging every job opportunity I applied for. Not only didn’t I have any proof of that, but it also sounded like a crazy excuse on my part to justify why no one wanted to hire me. An excuse for being a failure and not good enough. Never good enough.

“It was something about a job,” I replied, not completely lying. “I was checking up on a lead, but it led to a dead end.”

“Still no luck, huh?”

“Still nothing. I guess it’s probably time to reassess and see what I’m doing wrong.”

“Don’t stress about it. I’ve got you. Why don’t you quit job hunting for a while and meet me for lunch?”

I could use the distraction, and Tate was offering. “Okay. Where do I meet you?”

“Drop by the office. It’s in the heart of the Gaslamp Quarter. You can’t miss it. My name’s on the building. I’ll leave word at the front desk to send you up when you get there.”

“I can meet you in the lobby,” I suggested.

“No, I want you to come up. Sit on Big Daddy’s lap and let me show you around my office.”

I laughed out loud, which I was sure Tate had intended. He always knew how to cheer me up. My god, he had come a far way from the surly cabin man. It was like being back in civilization had sanded him down. He still had a bit of the mountain man in him, but I didn’t mind at all. It was a huge turn-on.

“Will you be wearing pants when I sit on your lap?” I teased him.

“You really want to tempt me, Bry? I can get rid of the pants if you like, but you’d have to bring lube. I don’t keep that stuff at the office. No reason for it.”

I smiled. “Good to know, or I’d think you’re banging your assistant. That seems to be the rage these days.”

“You’re the only guy I want to bang,” he growled through the phone. “Do us both a favor and get the lube.” He clicked his tongue. “On second thought, don’t bring the lube. I’ve been holding all this in for so long. When I finally do fuck you, we need the privacy of my house where no one will hear your screams.”

His words sent heat simmering through me. “All right. No lube. Do you want me to go there now?”

“Yeah. Now’s good. As soon as you get here, I’ll stop working. I’ve been over these ledgers for a while, and they’re not making sense. I think I need to quit them for now.”

“Okay, I can be that distraction. See you in thirty.”

“Get here in twenty, and I won’t spank your ass the next time we have sex.”

Holy shit. A memory flashed through my mind of Tate slapping my ass as he fucked me back in the cabin. “Just to be safe then, I’ll see you in thirty-five,” I said.

He chuckled, the sound warming me. “Just get here already.”

“Okay, Daddy,” I purred and hung up the phone. Keith and I had played a lot of things, but daddy role play had never been one, so I felt comfortable teasing Tate that way without the memory of my ex muddying everything.

Twenty-five minutes later, I entered Tate’s office. I wasted ten minutes sitting in the parking lot and staring up at the sign with his name on it. That name reminded me he was not just the man I was in love with. Tate was important and had clout in this city. Once, I had Googled his name. The results shouldn’t have surprised me, but they had. I had skipped articles about his wife and daughter’s deaths, not wanting to learn about that tough time in his life through the eyes of a stranger. He had explained the brunt of it at the cabin. When he was ready, he would tell me more. It was so sad she couldn’t accept his bisexuality, and the way she had died in that car crash with their daughter was just awful. They had never gotten closure.

Other than the online news archives bringing up information about his wife’s death, I had discovered he was a man who gave back to the community. He presides over a foundation that built homes for homeless and disadvantaged people all around San Diego. He had even spearheaded a project abroad to provide homes to dozens of people. What I had liked about that particular story was that he hadn’t just sent money and had other people do the work for him. He had overseen the project and even dug in the dirt and hammered

the frames. It was heartbreaking to notice the absence of his wife and daughter on that mission.

When I had made sure I would be spanked the next time we had sex, I entered the office building. The pictures on one wall took me by surprise. I wasn't able to resist going over and staring at the generations of Rosenbaums who had passed down this company from one person to another. The portrait at the top was of a man who must be Tate's father. He looked like his son, especially the eyes. The name confirmed it: Victor Rosenbaum.

"Fascinating, isn't it?" a man beside me asked.

I glanced sideways. He was an older man—in his fifties, I guessed—attractive, with dark hair, and he filled out his expensive suit well.

"I can't imagine what it's like to be able to trace one's family back all those generations," I said. "I don't even know who my father is. It must be great to have such legacy, to know where you belong."

"Every Rosenbaum on this wall has run this company at the time of death or retirement," the older man said, his tone whimsical. "You mark my words, one day, my portrait will hang on this very wall, and no one and nothing will stop me. Nothing."

Frowning, I studied the man. As though just hearing the words coming from his mouth, he smiled as if that would erase his statement, then hurried away to the elevator. I shook my head at the odd man and proceeded to the front desk.

The receptionist told me how to find Tate's office. I took the elevator to the top floor, and once I got off, turned left, and counted the doors. The receptionist had told me that the door wasn't marked, but that it was the second one on the right.

I passed a door with the name Simon Rosenbaum, CEO. *That must be a relative of Tate's.* I'd never expected running into any of Tate's relatives while here. Maybe the odd man I had run into downstairs was this Simon. It would make sense to think that if he had the title of CEO. Except I'd thought Tate

was the CEO. With all my own crises, I hadn't listened much to Tate's explanations of what he was doing, although I was aware he was checking the company's accounts and trying to catch up to his two missing years.

I found the unmarked door right next to the CEO's. I knocked, prepared to ask for more directions if I had the wrong office. But then Tate barked, "Enter."

I poked my head around the door. "You seem in the mood to play boss and employee," I said as I entered the office. I stopped short, my eyes wide open in horror. Fuck, Tate wasn't alone. The man from the lobby sat opposite Tate. He looked as shocked as I was to see him. My cheeks heated, and I turned apologetic eyes to Tate but found his eyes were full of laughter. I glared at him. How could he be laughing when I had just embarrassed myself?

"Sorry, I didn't know you had company." I was ready to flee. "I can wait for you outside."

Tate shook his head and stood. "Nonsense. Come on in. Meet Uncle Simon. He took care of the company as though it was his own when I on leave. Uncle Simon, this is my partner, Bryan. I'm trying to convince him to work for us, but he doesn't want to hear of it."

"Hi, how are you?" his uncle greeted me with his hand outstretched as though we hadn't just met in the lobby. "I don't blame you. Families rarely make the best business partners."

"I'm fine, thanks." I shook his hand. "That's what I've been telling, Tate, but he's too stubborn to listen."

"I didn't know you had a partner," Mr. Rosenbaum said to Tate. "Is it serious?"

Tate glanced at me, and I held my breath, waiting for his answer. "Yes, it is. Bryan and I live together."

"Live together, eh? Does Marilyn know about this?"

I had no idea who Marilyn was but was dying to find out why it was important for her to know about Tate and me.

“I’ve not spoken to Mom in a while, Uncle,” Tate replied with a grimace. “I’ve been meaning to, but something always comes up. You know Mom is not a person you just call up out of the blue.”

“Well, her birthday is coming up, and she’s having a party. I’m sure she’d like for you to be there.”

“I’ll call her.”

Mr. Rosenbaum nodded and walked toward the door. “Well, I should go. You two seem to have plans. It was nice meeting you, Bryan.”

Before I could respond, he was gone, and the door shut behind him. I turned to Tate, puzzled by all that had just happened.

TATE

Bryan's eyes were full of questions, none of which I wanted to answer right now. Seeing him looking so sexy with the top buttons of his shirt undone, revealing the pale skin just below his collarbone, and the way he sucked his bottom lip between his teeth, the last thing I wanted was to answer questions. No, I didn't want to explain why I hadn't called my mother, even though it had been a month since we were back in the city. I didn't want to explain why I couldn't just call my mother for a casual chat. I had no idea what his relationship with his mother was like, but I doubted it could get any worse than I had with mine.

"Don't ask questions," I said, pushing my chair out from my desk. "Come here and sit on my lap just like I asked you to over the phone. Besides, you're late, and you know what that means."

Bryan's smile was teasing as he walked around the desk. As dainty as you pleased, he perched his round ass on my thighs with his back straight and no other part of him touching me.

"Is this what you wanted?" he asked.

I smirked and leaned back in the chair abruptly. He startled and almost fell, but he didn't have to worry. I had him. He crashed right into my chest. I didn't wait for him to recover but clutched his head and crushed my lips to his. It was good to see I wasn't the only one sexually frustrated by the lack of sex. He moaned into my mouth, his hand slipping into the hair at my nape. Since we were back, I'd cut it, and now it was just

a bit longer than it was before I fled the city. I held his face with both my hands and kissed him thoroughly, sweeping my tongue into his mouth.

More. I wanted more of him, but that wasn't possible in the chair. Holding him tight, I rose to my feet and dumped him onto the top of my desk. To be honest, I had fantasized about this moment, which was the reason I had invited him up. We were both close to throwing in the towel and fucking each other's brains out, and I wanted a good teasing session to whet our appetites.

With the computer already safely tucked away to the side—it paid to be prepared—I stepped between Bryan's thighs and captured his lips once more. I reached for his shirt and tugged the hem out of the waistband of his pants, then pushed my hands up beneath the material and connected with a well-defined but slender chest.

“Oh god, Tate,” he moaned and shifted restlessly on top of the desk as he pulled me closer to him.

“Shh.” We were in my office and anyone could walk by and hear us if we were too loud. The door was closed, but not locked. Although protocol demanded that I give verbal consent for entry into my office, people messed up all the time. The last thing I needed was for anyone from the office to see Bryan's perfectly lush white ass being pounded by my starved cock.

He whimpered in his throat when I nipped the side of his neck. I trailed my hands down to his nipples, my lips following, and pinched them. Shudders rippled through him, and he could barely stifle his strangled sound. I ran my hands farther down his torso to his pants. I had the buckle off and the button undone in record time. Another tremor. Another moan. I gripped the waistband of his underwear and tugged down just a little, and his cock popped out. Long and hard, the veins stood out as though begging for attention.

I wrapped one hand around his erection, and this time the curse that left his lips wasn't muffled. Somewhere over the

rapid beating of my heart, the creaking of the door being opened registered.

Who the hell dared open my door without being invited in and ruined my make-out session with Bryan? Vaughn stood just inside with a file in his hand, his other hand over his mouth, his face fiery red. Bryan still had his eyes closed and didn't seem to have any idea we had an unexpected visitor. He must have sensed the shift in my mood, however, because he frowned. "What's wrong?" He blinked. "Why are we stopping?" He trailed his fingers down my neck.

"Mr. Rosenbaum, I'm so sorry!" Vaughn blurted out, but I didn't miss the way his eyes fixed on Bryan. "Accounts and Payables asked me to drop off this file you requested."

Bryan stiffened beneath me and blushed. "Oh my god, look what you did."

His reaction was comical, but I had a hard-on that hurt like hell, and I couldn't summon up a smile. In fact, I scowled at Vaughn for his intrusion. "Why don't you find your way back on the other side of that door, knock, and wait like you're supposed to?"

Bryan's gasp filled the office, but I ignored him. There was no excuse for Vaughn to have barged into my office without permission. A few minutes later and I would've been sucking on Bryan's dick.

"Yes, sir." Vaughn hurried out of the office and closed the door. He knocked again, but I didn't answer.

"Tate, that's cruel!" Bryan whispered and hit my arm.

"What's cruel is you not giving me any for the past forty-two days."

Bryan's mouth fell open in shock. "You're counting?"

"Of course, I'm counting. You don't think I'm going to find a way to make you pay for stringing me along." I winked at him to let him know I was only half joking. "Fix your clothes while I get this file."

"You should apologize to him."

“Don’t push it.”

“And the mountain man’s back.”

I threw him a mock salute, glad to find him grinning. “He never really left the building, sweetheart.”

He blushed at me calling him sweetheart, which just fell from my tongue and felt natural. I opened the door. Vaughn was still patiently waiting.

“Thanks for bringing the file.”

“I’m so sorry about—”

“It’s fine. Just wait to be acknowledged next time.”

“Um, yeah, of course. I should get going.”

I nodded and turned back to Bryan, who had straightened his clothes. He still looked like he had just thoroughly been kissed and on the edge of being fucked, though. If we didn’t get out of the office right now, we would be right back at square one.

“Christ, Tate. Stop looking at me like that.” He swallowed hard and ran his fingers through his hair, trying to comb it back into some semblance of order. I didn’t bother to point out he was only making it worse. I liked his hair messed up like that, especially when I was the cause of it.

“Then let’s go get lunch.”

We left the office, and I drove us to Seastruck on Sixth Avenue. I wasn’t much of a fan of seafood, but Bryan enjoyed it. It was just our luck I snagged a parking spot as a car was pulling out. The restaurant was designed in a rustic theme with white walls adorned with abstract art and ropes hanging from the ceiling. We ignored the tables on the patios to eat inside and were promptly shown to a table for two, next to a wall with a huge painting that I couldn’t figure out.

After going through the menu and discarding options, we ordered, then made small talk until our meal appeared. I had initially called Bryan for this lunch date because I wanted to cheer him up. He tried not to show how bummed he was about not getting a job, but he wasn’t very good at hiding his

emotions. I just let him think he was. Now that we were together, though, I realized how much I had needed this quiet moment in a different place, not alone but still feeling like only the two of us existed in our world.

“I really needed this today.” I took a long drink from my Grey Goose vodka mix.

“Vodka?” he asked. “Don’t you have enough at home?”

“I’m talking about you. Spending some time with you.”

He pulled a face. “As if I’m not already a pain in the ass to have at home.”

“Not the kind of pain in the ass I want you to be.”

He snickered into his drink. “You sound stressed. What’s wrong?”

I thought of making a sexual joke again but pushed it aside to discuss more serious matters. “I didn’t expect it to be so stressful to check on our audit reports and catch up on the projects.”

“Do you need to? You said the company has been turning profits.”

“But at what expense?” I frowned. “So far, I’ve seen all the numbers. It’s all Vaughn talks about so—”

“Vaughn?”

“The guy who walked in on us,” I answered, then grinned at his narrowed eyes. “Remember that time in the cabin when you accused me of me being jealous? How does it feel to be wearing the same shoes?”

“I’m not jealous.” He stabbed at a piece of avocado. “I trust you.”

“Good. You’ve no reason not to.”

He pointed his fork at me. “You were saying about the company?”

“I couldn’t find any records about our community development projects nor the foundation.”

This had been bothering me, and I hoped it was merely an oversight on my uncle's part. I'd requested the file Vaughn had brought me to personally check out what had been happening to the charities we supported. After all the hard work my uncle had done to keep the company running, I could hardly be ungrateful if he had forgotten the foundation. We would just need to catch up on some community development projects, and soon. Community development had been Rachel's baby, and she had been the organizer behind the fundraising events.

Then inspiration hit me, and I glanced at Bryan. Would he be willing to take over that project?

"I'm not sure I like the way you're looking at me," he said.

"It could be the answer to your problems."

He groaned. "Don't offer me a job, Tate. I already told you I can't work for your company. It just feels wrong."

I put down my fork. "First of all, there are many businesses where immediate family work together from children to spouses. Should you come to work for me, we're not breaking any law. Besides, you wouldn't be working for me, I was thinking you could take over the company's charity foundation, help us pinpoint projects we could undertake, come up with fundraising ideas, and make them happen."

He chewed slowly, a frown marring his forehead, just like it always did when he was thinking hard. Rachel had run the foundation without payment, but she'd had the company's credit card at her disposal. I could work out a form of salary for Bryan, and even if he didn't expect to be paid, I'd be happy to take care of him for the rest of our lives.

"I don't think I can."

Even though I'd expected his refusal, disappointment coursed through me, but I was not about to give up so soon. "Don't give me a definite answer yet. It'll probably take some time for me to figure out what's been happening with our foundation. In the meantime, think about it. Just promise me you'll consider it."

"Fine. I'll consider it, but that doesn't mean I'll accept."

A movement to my right caught my eye, and I turned my head. At first, Keith didn't see us. The instant he did, a big grin formed on his lips, and I knew trouble was coming.

BRYAN

The sudden shift in Tate puzzled me. I had at least agreed to think about his offer, which was his suggestion, so the fire burning in his eyes, and the anger that caused lines to appear between his brows was shocking. I had only seen him this angry when he had met Keith for the first time and when he'd collected me from Keith's apartment.

"Tate, I said I'll think about it," I repeated, but it seemed he didn't hear me. I finally noted that his attention was not on me but on something behind me. Before I could turn around to see what or who it was, I heard the voice from this morning, the last person I wanted to run into.

But fate continued to be cruel to me.

"Twice in a day, Bryan!" Keith exclaimed, stopping by our table. "Hmm, what does this mean? Think it's fate's little way of telling us something?"

"Go away, Keith," I urged him. A vein throbbed in Tate's forehead, and I was sure that any minute now, he was going to let out all that anger festering in his system. Keith was like a bad sore that wouldn't go away.

"That's not what I remember you saying when you called me this morning," he said. "Don't worry. As I said over the phone, I traded up."

I hadn't even noticed the guy by his side until he spoke. I darted my eyes from Keith to the kid who didn't look a day older than eighteen. Other than his blond hair and blue eyes, the kid could have passed for a younger brother of mine. His

eyes looked dazed as though he was on drugs or something. I wasn't surprised. It was one of Keith's fetishes I had disagreed to.

"Is there something you want?" Tate finally spoke, the calm in his voice not betraying how upset he was. "If not, I'd suggest you move along. I refrained from mopping the floor with you the last time, but don't believe I won't do it now because we're in public."

Keith chuckled. "My, my. You're so eager to defend your little overused plaything." He clicked his tongue. "You're entertaining my used goods, Rosenbaum. I'd be testy too if I were you."

"I'll give you five seconds to get the hell away from our table."

I glanced around. We had drawn attention from guests who sat at nearby tables. "For god's sake, Keith. Just fucking leave already."

"Fine, I'll go!" He made to leave, but then turned to Tate and stage-whispered, "Don't let him fool you. He looks like a nice sweet boy, but he takes dick like a pro. Whips, plugs, restraints—you name it, he's never able to say no." He placed a hand on Tate's shoulder and squeezed. "You're welcome."

Nauseous, I had to swallow to keep the food I'd just eaten down. Tate jumped to his feet, eyes flashing. I dreaded what he was going to do. If he got his hands on Keith, there was no way he was going to stop until he had Keith fucked over good. While he deserved it for speaking about me like I was nothing but a thing to be used, I couldn't have Tate's name linked with a brawl and possible assault. He had just returned to the city after a scandal had driven him away in the first place.

I reached across the table and grabbed his hand. Keith laughed as he walked away, motioning with his hand at his ear for me to call him. I ignored him and focused on Tate. "It's not worth it. Let him go."

His hand beneath mine was taut and strained. Eventually, he sat back down and pulled his hand away from mine, picked

up his drink, and downed the rest of it.

I placed my hands into my lap and willed myself not to let the wave of shame drown me. When I'd told Tate in his cabin that I wasn't ashamed of my sexual exploits, I'd told him the truth. I hadn't slept around much, but I'd had quite a few lovers since high school. I'd been with the same guy who popped my cherry until we both graduated.

The minute he struck greener pastures, he had forgotten all about me. There had been two lovers throughout college, but Keith had been the one to break me into his kind of lifestyle. The whips and chains and everything else he had mentioned to Tate had been his idea. Some I would admit to liking, but others I'd only succumbed to because I wanted to please Keith.

"You lied to me, didn't you?" Tate put down his glass with more force than was necessary. "When I called, you were talking to that asshole. Weren't you, Bryan?"

"It's not what you think."

"Care to explain? I'm really trying to give you the benefit of the doubt right now."

Well, that was something at least. "Thank you for giving me a chance to explain. I did call him this morning, but it was about work. I thought he was interfering with job opportunities. I know it sounds bizarre, but Keith has his ways. Anyway, I later realized how ridiculous it was. Even if he had a connection to these businesses, he wouldn't know which ones I'd applied to. That's the reason I called him. Not for what he's insinuating."

"You didn't need to lie about it."

"I didn't exactly lie. I just didn't want to talk about Keith. I was already having a tough morning being turned down for two more jobs. The last thing I wanted to do was to show how paranoid I was getting about being unable to find a job."

"But still—"

"I should have told you. I know."

He didn't say anything, and I watched him nervously. What was going through his mind? Had Keith's tirade placed a wedge between us? Did he now believe I had been passed around the block like a joint at a frat party? Even if I had, it shouldn't matter now.

"Tate, what he said about us," I said, but he shook his head.

"I don't want to know about it. I already know too damn much as it is. Whatever happened between you two is none of my concern. I'm more interested in our relationship."

Did he really mean it, or was it his mechanism to deal with what Keith had mentioned?

"I've just one question," he said, and I could see him struggling to form his words. "Are you really into those things? Not that I'm saying there's anything against them. To each his own, but is that what you prefer?"

How to respond and be completely honest? For all his assholery, Keith knew what he was doing when it came to sex.

"It's not the be-all and end-all for me," I answered. "I don't necessarily want to incorporate toys in the bedroom. That was mostly what Keith wanted. I'm not saying I didn't enjoy it. I did, to some extent, but if I never use any of that stuff again, it won't make me any less happy. In fact, I'm already happier with you than I've ever been with Keith."

"I see."

But did he really? I sighed. There was really nothing I could say to him right now to drag him out of the mood he was in. Unless...

I reached across the table for his hands and squeezed them until he was looking at me. He looked sullen, contemplative, and moody, all thanks to Keith. Now it was up to me to fix things.

"When I walked into your building today, do you know the first thing I felt?"

He frowned, but at least I had his attention now. “What are you talking about?”

“I looked at that wall of Rosenbaums, and I saw history. I saw the place where you were taught you belonged, and someday you’ll be on that wall, and everyone will remember you as a Rosenbaum.”

“What are you getting at, Bry?”

He had called me Bry. I smiled, relieved he didn’t hate me. Not all was lost, then. I pushed ahead and, for the first time, delved into my past. “I don’t have any of that, Tate. I have no idea where I’m from. I never knew my dad. My mom tried as best she could, but one day she just left me on the steps of a police station. I was six years old. She told me to stay put and that she would return soon. I grew up in the system, group homes, foster homes, changing homes so often I’ve lost count of how many there were.”

His eyes reflected surprise. “I didn’t know. Why didn’t you tell me?”

I shrugged. “It’s not something I ever talk about. I’ve never told Keith any of this. It doesn’t make for pleasant conversation, and most times I just want to pretend I come from a normal background. But there are times I hurt so much here—” I tapped my chest. “—and I get that feeling that reminds me I came from nothing.

“Do you know why I’m pushing so hard to find a job? Don’t you think I want to take that job you offered? But I can’t because it will leave me wondering, still feeling like I’m a nothing that you had to rescue. I’d feel like I have no value besides you.” I paused, a chill running through my body as I bared my soul before him. “And what if—what if I place all my trust in you and one day you no longer want me? What if one day you look at me and decide you want to trade me for a new man? Where would that leave me? And you know why that would be more devastating than what I went through with Keith? Because I’ve fallen in love with you.”

Even though my feelings for him must have been apparent at some point, he looked shocked at my confession. He didn’t

speak, just stared at me while holding my hands tightly in his. Before Keith had interfered, I'd have been certain he would've repeated those words to me. Now he said nothing. I tugged my hands from his and rose to my feet so quickly my chair toppled over. I grabbed it before it crashed to the floor.

"I-I need to use the restroom," I strangled out and fled from our table. I'd never told anyone that I loved them. Not even my first boyfriend, Roger and I had loved him as much as any teenager could love. In some ways I felt relieved I had finally gotten it off my chest, but at the same time, I was terrified about his reaction. What if he had changed his mind about me. What if he didn't want me anymore? How could I blame him and expect him to see what I didn't even see in myself?

Once in the bathroom, I leaned on the sink, my stomach in knots. If I didn't calm down, I'd bring back up every morsel of food I'd just eaten. I splashed some cold water onto my face, then dried my skin with some paper towels.

The door opened, and Tate entered. He looked so damn serious. How I wished he would run one of his jokes laced with sexual innuendo. I wished I had the guts to make one of those jokes myself, but it wouldn't distract him. Not this time. I stood still as he stalked over to me. Our eyes met and held in the mirror, and my heart lurched. His eyes shone with love. At least, I dared to believe it was love.

"You didn't wait to hear what I had to say."

I hung my head. "Maybe because it's easier sometimes not to hear the truth. Then we can pretend the unspoken is what we want to hear."

"Wouldn't you rather hear the truth? That I love you."

Now I understood his reaction when I had confessed to him I loved him. I couldn't move. Never would I have thought I'd hear a declaration of love in a public bathroom, but there it was. Tate had said it. He loved me. I wasn't sure who moved first, but I ended up in his arms, kissing him.

“Ahem, as much I’m enjoying the show, guys, you might wanna take this home,” a man had entered the restroom and commented loud enough to be heard over the lust pounding through my veins.

I smiled against Tate’s lips. “Let’s do it.”

BRYAN

“Are you going straight home?” Tate asked as he walked me to my car. We had just arrived back at his office and were about to separate with the anticipation of later. He had business to attend to, and he couldn’t just leave work for sex. Well, technically, he could, but we had come this far without having sex. What were a few more hours? I might have been on the verge of explosion, but I could keep it together until later.

“I’m thinking of hand-delivering a few applications, and I may wander around the Gaslamp Quarter a bit before going back home.” He didn’t need to know what I was planning for tonight.

“All right, then. I’ll see you later. I won’t be staying a minute after five.”

“Okay.”

He took the car keys and opened the door for me. I opened my mouth to remind him I could get my own door, but he kissed me, just a hard press of his lips against mine, effectively shutting me up.

He winked. “Don’t argue. See you later.”

He walked back into the office building, and instead of driving away, I watched his powerful frame. A shiver ran through my body, lust hitting me straight in the gut, tightening my balls. I couldn’t wait to have him inside me later tonight. Just remembering the sex between us back in the cabin sent excited nerves soaring through me. He had been so dominant

in the bedroom, and I'd loved it. He didn't need the toys Keith had wanted to assert his dominance.

When he'd disappeared out of sight, I pulled out of the parking lot and drove to my first destination. I had printed copies of my résumé and a cover letter. I hoped that going the extra mile of dropping off the letters by hand would work in my favor.

After I had delivered my last letter, I returned to the Gaslamp Quarter and strolled along Fifth Avenue, amazed by the variety of restaurants. Just as I was about to cross the street, a sign "Help Wanted" in the window caught my attention, something I wouldn't have expected from a restaurant of this caliber. Hmm, maybe this was the answer to my problems. At least, for now. I pushed open the door and stepped in.

"Welcome to Gizmo's. Table for one?"

"No, actually, I came in for the position of server. Is it still available?"

The hostess kindly explained they were desperate, which was why they had placed the ad. I didn't have any real desire to be a server again—been there, done that—but I had to earn money somehow. Eventually, I signed the application form, not getting my hopes up. At the rate of my luck these days, I might not even be considered suitable for working in a restaurant.

She seemed relieved when I handed in the application. I bid her farewell after she'd assured me they should get in touch with me in a couple of days. I didn't hold my breath. I had heard that before, and it hadn't ever amounted to anything. I was slowly resigning myself to the fact that I might have no other choice but to accept Tate's offer for the position in the company's foundation. I was hesitant because I had never worked with a foundation before and didn't want him to find me lacking like every other employer seemed to do.

On the way back to my car, I spotted a lingerie shop with a few male mannequins in the shop window, displaying lacy

underwear. I took a closer look, and before I knew it, I'd pushed the door open. A little bell chimed above my head.

The shop seemed to specialize in sexy lingerie for men, and the wide variety of stock was astounding. I was used to wearing cotton boxer shorts, but my interest was piqued. Nobody else was in the shop, and I approached a mannequin dressed in red and black lace and velvet. The little thong looked hot between the hard male buns. A chuckle escaped me as I admired the lace trim.

"I thought I heard the bell ring."

I jerked away from the mannequin guiltily and, with pink cheeks, turned to the man who'd appeared out of nowhere. Medium height and slender, he sported a fashionable platinum hairstyle with the left cut low and the right falling over his eye. He wore dark eyeliner, which looked amazing on him. It accentuated the clearest blue eyes I had ever seen. They had to be contact lenses. He was fashionably dressed in a pair of black jeans so tight I winced just thinking about him getting into them, a tight neon green shirt and darker blue blazer.

"I was just browsing," I said.

"That's okay. You can look around all you want." I tried not to stare at his double tongue piercing when he spoke. He had a certain flair about him, his smile and look in his eyes warm and inviting. "In fact, why don't you tell me what you think of Itsy Bits? Your genuine impression."

"Umm." I scanned around, taking everything in. "I like it. I even think my partner would like it, and he's quite the, umm..." I felt traitorous for discussing him with someone I didn't know from Adam.

The guy chuckled and rolled his eyes. "You have one of those too, huh? Mine appreciates it but would never be caught dead in any of these outfit. He just ran out of here after telling me he would be late for my opening party tonight."

"You mean you're not opened, and I barged in?" I clamped my hand on my mouth. "I'm so sorry."

He waved a hand. "That's fine. I'm Jeremy, by the way."

“Bryan. I guess since you’re not open, I should go.”

He took hold of my arm and steered me across the room. “You can’t go so soon. Besides, you’re my first customer. You see anything you like, and it’s yours without paying. The only catch? Bring your partner back here tonight with you at ten and help us celebrate the opening of my store.”

“Hmm.” I chewed on my bottom lip and thought about Tate’s and my plans for tonight. I was already working out the hows of it. My intention was to make love, thorough and long, but maybe we could finish a bit sooner and lend our support to a fellow member of our LGBTQ community.

“How about this? Think your boyfriend would love it?” He pointed at a red garter and thong set, then turned me around. “Nice. Your butt has a nice full shape. I think it’s perfect.”

I nearly choked at his words. “I don’t know. I’ve never tried anything like this before.” Keith and I had tried all sorts of toys, but not sexy lingerie. I protested, but at the same time, I was excited by the idea of Tate and me finding our thing. This could be totally ours, but what if he didn’t like it? “I don’t know if it’s something my partner will like.”

“Honey, you’re gay. More than likely, the man wants your ass. And he won’t be able to resist you in this thong. If he doesn’t want you even more when you wear this, my store will be bankrupt in a week. That’s how much confidence I have that you will rock this for him.”

His enthusiasm sold me on the idea, especially since I didn’t have to pay for it. The outfits weren’t exactly cheap. Besides, if I chickened out, then I could always stuff it as far away from Tate’s reach as possible, so he would never know of this moment when I lost my head a little.

“Okay, it won’t hurt to try something new.”

“No, it doesn’t. In fact, it can really spice things up.”

“Except I have no idea how to work that garter thingy.”

He chuckled. “Don’t worry. I’ll show you.”

Jeremy closed the shop, so we didn't get any new visitors. He then demonstrated with a mannequin how to put on the garters and suspenders. After going through it twice, he handed me the materials to try.

"You're so good at this," I said as I struggled to fasten the garter. "Are you the type who sells but would never use their own goods?"

"I'm the guy who owns one of everything in this store. I enjoy wearing sexy lingerie, always have. It's been my thing since high school, so it felt natural to open this place when my partner decided to fund my business idea."

"And your partner finds it okay?"

He chuckled. "Okay? He freaking loves it. He has a thing for seeing me in red lace. I hope that's not too much information."

"Just a little."

"All right. I'll stop embarrassing you. Let me get you a bag for these. Please, please, show up tonight. I'm always looking to meet new friends."

I smiled. I genuinely liked the guy. Although he seemed a few years older than me, he had an interesting personality and an attitude that screams he was a self-confident gay man in his skin, and he didn't give a fuck what anyone else thought. I liked that vibe from him and really hoped Tate would be in the mood to stop by the party later tonight.

"Thanks a lot," I said as he walked me to the exit. "I'll see if my boyfriend is in a mood to go out later, or maybe I'll show up alone."

Jeremy grinned. "Make him come. And the pun is deliberate. It's going to be a little naughty sexy party with many of my gay friends, so you don't want to come alone. You're way too fine for your man to let you run around with a bunch of single, horny men."

Despite the way he spoke, I didn't get the impression he was hitting on me. He spoke his mind and moved on. I was curious about the man who had captured Jeremy's wild heart.

From his smiles, happiness, and bubbly personality, he was deeply in love with his guy. I liked seeing someone else as happy as Tate and I were.

“It was nice meeting you,” I said. His hug took me by surprise.

“Sorry. I’m a hugger by nature. Didn’t mean to startle you.” He released me almost as quickly as he had embraced me.

I nodded. “It’s fine. Thanks again, and I’ll see you later.”

“Great. Bring back a story to tell.”

I couldn’t help it. This time I grinned at him, and he winked at me, then disappeared back into his shop.

TATE

Later that night, I walked into our bedroom, where Bryan already lay in bed, reading. After a tense dinner, which I might have contributed to with talks of discrepancies in the accounts, Bryan had decided to go upstairs before me to take a shower. I probably shouldn't have brought up such an unpleasant topic, but I hadn't been able to hold back. Given what I was uncovering, I had nobody else besides Bryan who I could trust with the information. I'd been able to let off steam, and now I was ready to forget everything that didn't include having Bryan beneath me tonight.

Knowing if I followed, I would only end up taking him against the bathroom wall, I had waited, giving him enough time to prep himself. Tonight, I wanted it all.

And I started with replacing the book with my face. Instead of protesting, he dropped the book in his lap and looped his hands around my neck. His eagerness almost had me stripping and fucking him right there, but that wasn't what I'd had in mind for tonight. I didn't want it to be over in five minutes, which might happen if I didn't get a grip on my cock. Literally.

I released his lips, but his chased mine, wanting more. I indulged him, excited at the hunger in him, but when he slid his hands over my chest to the top button of my shirt, I pulled away.

"I'm gonna take a shower. Then I'll be right back." I gave him a quick kiss on his forehead. "Don't move a muscle."

Before I could straighten and head for the bathroom, he asked, “Do you think we could go to a party later?”

I frowned. “Later? What kind of party?”

“It’s for the opening of a store. I stumbled upon it by accident today, and I think you’ll like it. I do want to go, but not on my own. Too many single gay men.”

That got my attention. “Why don’t we discuss this *after*? Who knows if you’ll have the energy to move anywhere but the shower once I’m through with you?”

He swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing, but I didn’t wait for his reply. Once in the bathroom, I washed up, getting as clean as I could. In the shower, I powered on the faucet, and while the water poured down my body, I grasped my thick cock and fantasized about what I was about to do to Bryan, sliding my thick cock into his tight body.

On his back, that was how I wanted him, his legs over my shoulders as I stared into his eyes while I pounded his body. I only had the memories of the times I had fucked him in the cabin, but they were enough. Good god, were they enough! My body stiffened, and I groaned as I exploded all over the wall. Shit! I’d needed to get that out of my system before I touched Bryan. I wanted tonight to last with him, and I’d been too wound up for that. If I’d touched him in the state I’d been, it would’ve been over before I had begun.

Slightly damp, I returned to the bedroom, my mind made up to tell Bryan we could go to that party afterward if he really wanted. I didn’t want to go, but I wouldn’t let him go alone. Not over my dead body was I going to release him into a sea of piranhas.

My jaw hit the floor, and I stumbled over my own feet. Where the hell had Bryan gotten this getup? I caught him red-handed, standing at the edge of the bed.

“Don’t move,” I ordered, and he froze.

He faced away from me, which meant I had a direct view of his ass in what he was wearing: a thong of sheer black lace with red frills, the string digging into his perfect backside. His

ass clenched, but I couldn't look away even when the flush crept up his body. If the thong was hot, the mix with the garter and stockings he was wearing was the icing on the cake.

“Holy fuck, Bryan, where did you get this?” I blurted out.

He shot me a bashful look over his shoulder, biting his lip, and my cock jerked. *Yeah, that's right. You see what you want, don't you?*

“At that shop I told you was having its opening party tonight.”

“Then hell yeah, we're going for me to shake the hand of the owner.”

I dropped the towel around my hips and pounced. My chest up against his back, I wound my arms around his waist and kissed him, leaving a wet trail across his shoulders. With my erection pressing to his back, I pushed my hands up his body and caressed the ridges of his chest, reaching my destination. I rolled his nipples between my thumb and index finger, stringing out his moans with each tug and squeeze.

Bryan tilted his head back. As I planted soft kisses on the side of his neck, I tapped his leg to indicate that he should mount the bed. I was right behind him, bracing myself on my hands, mindful of my weight. He didn't seem to care in the least, as he pulled me fully on top of him. His slender legs wrapped around my waist, and he tugged my head down to kiss him.

The stockings and garter grated against my legs with a friction that caused my balls to tighten. Lips clinging desperately to each other, I rolled us so he was now on top. I cupped the back of his head and rested my hands on his back, caressing his skin.

“Hmm,” Bryan moaned, then tore his lips from mine with a gasp. In less than a second, his lips returned to mine. I groaned at the sweetness of his kisses. This was more than lust, more than being crammed inside him. It was connecting and sealing him as an extension of my existence. He moved, easing up a little so he could grind his lower body into mine. I

grabbed his naked ass cheeks, squeezing and shaping them with my hands.

He slid up and down my body, circling his hips and pressing his pelvis into mine. My cock swelled even more between us and rubbed against his through the thong. His legs on either side of me, he moved harder and faster, his hips demanding what he wanted me to give him.

“Tate,” he moaned, his hands curving around my neck as he continued to kiss me. “Oh shit, I feel like I’m going to explode. I’m so fucking hard.”

Yeah, his thick length rubbed against my own. As I slipped the fingers of my right hand to his crack, he dropped his hands and clutched the pillow under my head. I rubbed two fingers over his hole, pressing the lace against his skin. The feeling of the material under my fingertips was so erotic it threatened to give me an early climax despite me having jacked off in the bathroom earlier.

I sat up in the middle of the bed with him straddling me. I never once released his lips. He continued gyrating to bring our cocks into contact, grinding against me until I couldn’t take any more. As though sensing the debilitating effect he had on me, he pushed me back to lie on the bed and followed, kissing my neck.

His kisses were eager and frantic with need. He trailed kisses with a bit of teeth bites over my chest and my sensitive nipples. He swirled the buds one by one in his mouth, flicking his tongue hard and fast like quivering butterfly wings. By the time he kissed down my naked body, I had to press my fingers against my nipples. They ached from all the attention.

He didn’t aim for my cock. That would’ve been too easy. After more than a month of craving what we’d denied ourselves, I would’ve expected him to get straight to it, but he must have the same thought I did. This wasn’t just about me or him; it was about us. Even with the need burning in my veins, I intended to bank the fire to give him the pleasure we had been skirting around.

Bryan kissed my upper thighs and across to my lower abdomen. He kissed down one thigh and back up the other, nuzzling my cock out of the way so he could suck on my balls. After thoroughly licking the area, he trailed his tongue along the underside of my cock and finally captured the head of my dick into his mouth.

“Oh fuck!” I groaned as his wet lips slid down my shaft and to the base of my cock. I shuddered against him as his warm mouth engulfed my dick. Kneeling between my legs, he cupped my sacs as he sucked me. Up and down, his head bobbed as he removed his hand from my balls and massaged my cock. His hands spun in a clockwise motion, rubbing up and down my cock in tandem to the rhythm of his mouth.

“That’s enough.” I gripped him by the hair, and he released my cock with a wet plop. I pulled him up to me and kissed him, rolling him over so he lay on his back. I tugged on the thong, not removing it completely but enough for his straining cock to pop out. Without hesitation, I sucked the tip into my mouth, and he hissed, his hips rising.

“Oh god, yes!” He fisted the sheets at his side while his hips bucked wildly. I kept the grip of my lips on his cock and sucked him the same way he had done mine. With a frantic move, Bryan clutched the back of my head and thrust upward, over and over, fucking my mouth. I took him whole, deep inside my throat.

He withdrew and thrust again. This time I gazed into his face, our eyes holding as I pleased him. His raised head slammed back into the pillow, and I knew he was losing it. He pulled back, blowing hard, trying to catch his breath.

“Hey, come back here,” I growled and tugged him back in my reach. Then I pushed his stockinged legs forward, keeping my hands at the back of his thighs so his ass canted. I hooked the string of the thong and pushed it aside, then licked his taint before sliding my tongue over his pucker. He shook beneath me, and his stomach quivered. His moans grew louder, transforming into loud pants and gasps.

“Oh yes, right there.” He rocked his hips as I licked around the ribbed edges of his entrance. Planting my nose firmly against his taint, I stuck my tongue into his hole and lapped at his opening. Gasping for air, I drew back and scrabbled for the bottle of lube he had placed on the bedside table. When I returned to kneel between his legs, he had both feet in the air, his arms holding his thighs against his chest. I kissed his legs through the stockings, nipping him a little.

I coated my fingers with lube and squeezed a generous amount over his hole. It had been a while for both of us. I dropped the lube onto the bed and placed two fingers against his opening, then pressed inside. He exhaled, relaxing his muscles and allowing me in. It took some wiggling and twisting, but I could finally press both fingers inside up to my knuckles to the sound of his loud groan.

I kissed the back of his thigh. “Feels good?”

“Yes. Don’t...don’t stop.”

I had no intention of stopping. After a few experimental thrusts, I drove my fingers as deep inside his ass as they could go. Keeping my fingers all the way in, I scissored them, and his body jerked with the motions.

“Fuck!” he grunted, his stomach quivering even harder. “Oh god, Tate!”

I pulled my fingers out and held back; I didn’t want him to reach his climax just yet. With gentle hands, I helped him to turn over onto his stomach, then made quick work of lubing my cock.

I slapped his ass, groaning at the red imprint of my fingers, which now marred his perfect milky skin. “On your knees.”

Although I had promised him a spanking, it would have to wait for another time. I doubted he could take a few slaps at this moment before exploding, and I wanted to feel his ass clenching around my cock when he came.

The sight of him on his knees was overwhelming, and a wave of protection surged through me. I ran my hands up his back, reassuring him of my love, then withdrew and clutched

his cheeks. I spread them, holding the thong to the left side, and guided my cock to his puckered entrance. I held my breath and stared at the sight of my cock slowly piercing through his hole, fascinated as his resisting flesh subdued itself to me. His body arched as he received my length an inch at a time.

I was only able to breathe when I had managed to maneuver my girth fully inside him without hurting him. At least not by much. Still, I caressed his cheeks and asked, “You okay?”

“Yes. Don’t stop. Feels so fucking good. The next time I try to put a hold on this, tell me how crazy I am.”

I chuckled. “Deal.”

Assured that even if he hurt, it was nothing compared to the pleasure he received, I pulled out and thrust back inside. He moaned into the pillow, but he pushed back his ass, requesting more. I held him by the waist and set a rhythm I felt was comfortable for both of us. Sliding into his body, stroke by stroke, I claimed what he generously gave. I picked up tempo, and he was right there with me, slamming his ass back into my pelvis, his torso pressed into the mattress, and his hands grappling at the sheets.

Sensing we were both ready to tumble over into an abyss of our making, I raised his ass and planted my feet firmly onto the bed to crouch over him. With my legs on either side of his thighs, I was on top of him, battering harder and deeper inside him. His body stretched to accommodate me as I surged into him.

“Fuck!” he cried out. The bed rocked beneath us, and the headboard slammed into the wall, mingling with his grunts of pleasure and my harsh breathing. I fucked him even harder and faster, my balls crushing into his ass with each thrust. His feet shook and his groans became full-blown cries of him begging me for more. Sweat coated my back, dripped down my face, but my focus was on making him come before I could let go.

I was so deep inside him, and from his body’s reaction alone, I could tell I was hitting his prostate. He thrashed beneath me, whimpering and gasping. My hands pressed into

his lower back, I continued thrusting hard. He reached beneath his body for his cock, but it was hardly needed. He had barely wrapped his hand around his dick when he jerked.

“Fuck! Tate!” he shouted, his body stiffening beneath me.

His hole tightened as I made another deep lunge. There was no avoiding the climax that rushed through me. It slammed into my back and wound its way into my groin. I pulled out and fisted my cock, squeezing the base as I gushed cum over his round ass.

“Holy fuck!” I growled, sliding my hands down the slope of his slender back. I had nothing else to say. Bryan had thoroughly ruined me for any other man.

BRYAN

Having my boyfriend stare at the naked ass of a man wearing a thong, just an hour after we just had sex, was not exactly how I saw myself spending the rest of the night. However, in my defense, I had promised Jeremy I would show up, and even though I didn't know the guy, I owed him one for this amazing night. Tate had loved the outfit, and I believed we had found our thing. I also wanted to grab a few more of the racy lingerie I had seen on display earlier, and Jeremy had seemed like he could use the support.

But I had been mistaken; he didn't need our support. People were milling around and inside the store. As soon as we entered, a slender guy dressed like a sexy schoolboy, in a bowtie and bikini shorts with suspenders, complemented with black fishnet stockings and red heels, appeared in front of us. One glance around the store revealed other guys in the same costume, carrying trays of cocktails.

Tate tightened his hold on my waist as we politely took cocktails, and the server sashayed to the next customer, giving us a healthy view of his ass. Tate leaned close so anyone watching us would think he was nibbling on my ear, and damn right they were looking. We were two of the few not wearing sexy lingerie.

“What in the world did you bring me into?” Tate whispered in my ear. “You didn't tell me this was a dress-up party. I've never seen so many half-naked men in my life.”

“Just remember you came here with me,” I teased him. “And you're leaving here with none other than me.”

He slid a hand down to my ass and squeezed. “After tonight? I doubt I’d forget that.”

Then he nibbled on my ear, and I smiled, even as my cheeks turned red.

“Enough, big guy. Let’s mix and mingle.”

I exchanged his empty glass for my still full-of-cocktail one.

“You sure you don’t want it?” he asked. “It’s different. A tropical flavor laced with rum, but not too overpowering.”

I shook my head. “Once it has alcohol in it, I’ll pass. Plus, someone needs to be the responsible driver. It clearly won’t be you.”

“Why don’t you like to drink anyway?” he asked me. “I can only remember you drinking that one night at the cabin.”

I bumped into a mannequin that was too warm to be an inanimate object. The mannequin, wearing a short skirt and bralette, winked at me.

“Oh my god, I’m so sorry.” The guy gave me a small smile but maintained his posture. Only then did I realize all the store mannequins had been replaced by live ones. Holy crap, Jeremy had gone all out for the night.

Tate had a scowl on his face as he pulled me away from the live mannequin, who gave me an appreciative once-over. “How long do we have to stay here?” he asked. “I’m not sure I’m keen on the idea of you bumping into the half-dressed guys around here.”

“Maybe half an hour?”

“We’ll see. You were saying why you don’t usually drink.”

“When I was a teen, one of my foster moms was constantly drunk. She was usually nice, except when she was inebriated, which was most of the time.”

“I see.”

I wasn’t certain he did. My reaction to my foster mother might be a tad extreme, but I remembered how violent Mrs.

Mathers would get when drunk. I'd been too smart to be around her when that had happened, but not all the foster kids had been that lucky. After she'd broken the arm of one of the other boys, we'd been all taken away.

“Oh, how fabulous darling, you showed up!”

I turned to acknowledge the voice and winded up in Jeremy's embrace. Shit, Tate tensed up next to me. I carefully eased away from Jeremy, hoping Tate would be calm about it. I couldn't always tell when the mountain man would surface.

I smiled. “I promised you I would.” I tried not to stare too hard at Jeremy's outfit for the night.

He had an amazing body, and he was showing it off to its advantage tonight. Dressed in an adorable pink fluffy faux ostrich feather-trimmed bra, with matching transparent thigh-high wrap and thong, he looked as if he belonged on the cover of a magazine. He completed the look with the highest pair of strappy studded heels I had ever seen on anyone. I was impressed he appeared so comfortable in them. A single strand of pearls was looped around his neck. His platinum blond hair glistened like the glitter makeup he had over his eyes and his pouty pink lips. With the false lashes and dramatic makeup, I barely recognized him from earlier.

“This must be your partner!” Jeremy extended one hand daintily toward a confused Tate.

“Tate, this is Jeremy I told you about,” I said quickly, and that prompted him to take the man's hand. I couldn't resist adding, “You wanted to stop by to tell him thanks for earlier.”

Jeremy giggled while Tate's face turned red. He'd probably tan my ass later, but that was something I could look forward to. “No thank-you necessary, darling!” He patted Tate's cheek, and I held my breath. Jeremy had been right earlier. He was a toucher and a hugger, but Tate wasn't the touching type. This didn't seem to matter to the shop owner one bit. “That's what I'm here for, to bring satisfaction to our men.” He pressed his fingers to his mouth, his eyes wide. “Oops, I think that came out wrong.”

Laughter bubbled out of me, and beside me, Tate chuckled. Good, he was warming up.

“What the hell is he doing here?” Tate cried in astonishment. I followed his line of sight and stiffened at the sight of Gio talking to a few guys who were in all states of undress.

I knew I had been right about him! After this, Tate had to put everything together. Gio wasn't as straight as he was letting on.

“You had no idea he would be here?” I asked Tate.

“Of course not. Will you excuse me?” He dragged his eyes away from his friend for a second to turn his attention back to Jeremy and me. “Don't go anywhere,” he told me, then leveled his gaze on Jeremy. “Don't leave him alone. If anyone so much as looks at him twice, I'll make sure this is your last and only night of success.”

Tate barged off toward his friend before I could tell him how inappropriate it was for him to threaten our host. He left me with an apology to deal with, and I couldn't blame Jeremy if he kicked us out.

“I'm so sorry about that,” I said. “Tate can go a little overboard. Comes with the territory of being a Rosenbaum, but he won't actually do anything.”

“I'm not so sure about that,” Jeremy disagreed. “I better keep you next to me, just in case. Did you say a Rosenbaum?”

I nodded. “Yeah, he's the CEO, or rather, recovering his position as CEO.”

“Damn, you've got one of them too!” Jeremy didn't look too happy about it. “My partner and I have a secret relationship because he's not out yet. He's also high profile, and I hate every minute of it. All I want is for him to come out already, you know. Instead, sometimes I feel like he's ashamed of all this.” He made a sweeping gesture to himself.

“Are you kidding me? You look amazing. I wish I had your confidence to pull off something like this.”

“*You* would look absolutely gorgeous.”

I smiled at him. “Not as beautiful as you.” I tried not to glance too overtly at Tate, who seemed to be arguing with his friend. “Is your partner here?” I asked Jeremy, turning my back to the two men.

A shadow fell over his features, and I wished I hadn’t asked. Behind his glittering eyes and bright smile was a hint of sadness. “Business came up. He may still pop in later, but I’m not really counting on it.”

Except that by the way he darted his eyes to the door every time it opened, he was still hoping. I felt bad for him. The poor guy was so madly in love with this man who was taking him for granted.

I frowned, then peered back at Tate and Gio. They had moved from the small group and now stood together in a corner. Their conversation seemed to have grown even more intense.

“You don’t have to worry about that one,” Jeremy said. “I’ve seen him around the gay bars, and I’m sure he isn’t your boyfriend’s type. I see the way your man looks at you.”

I shifted my gaze back to Jeremy. “You mean you know him?”

“Sure. We frequent the same gay bars. I love the nightlife, and he’s almost always on the scene. He favors a little redhead with freckles and a penchant for leather. He should be around too, but perhaps later when he gets off shift.”

“I fucking knew he was gay!” I cried out, fist-pumping in triumph.

“You mean he’s not out?” Jeremy paled.

I shook my head. “Not that I know of. Tate is his best friend, so I’m sure he would’ve told him.”

“You can’t say anything. I just assumed he was out. He’s always at these gay functions. I wouldn’t want to be accused of letting anyone’s secret out.”

I shrugged. “Don’t worry. I’m sure Tate has figured it out by now.”

Before Jeremy could reply, a bear approached us and made his interest known by the way he grinned at me lasciviously. “Hey there, sweetie. What’s your name?”

“He’s already taken, Jackson,” Jeremy answered for me. “See that gorgeous man over there glaring at you?” He pointed his chin to Tate, who was indeed staring daggers at him. “By my estimate, you have five seconds to get away before he—oh snap. Too late.”

My heart lurched in my chest as Tate’s long legs ate up the distance between us, and he was by my side in a heartbeat. “Something I can help you with?” Tate snapped at the bear.

The man held up his hands. “No, not at all. I was just going.”

The man hurried away. I smiled at Tate. I loved it when his mountain man surfaced. I sensed someone looking at us and wasn’t surprised that it was Gio. If looks could kill, I would already be six feet under. On a whim, I slipped a hand behind Tate’s head to pull him down and kiss him. He tensed a bit, but then he relaxed, returning the kiss.

He planted his hands firmly on my hips and deepened the kiss. I didn’t care one bit if it was petty as hell. If Tate could act possessive of me, why couldn’t I also stake my claim? Gio was more of a threat to our relationship than that nameless bear. Gio and Tate had a history that could easily become something more. The thought was chilling.

“I’ll give you pair some privacy and check on my other guests,” Jeremy said behind my back. I released Tate’s lips to bid him farewell with a promise to grab a few things before we left.

“What did Gio want to talk about?” I asked Tate. “What’s he doing here anyway? This is not a place I expect to see a lot of straight guys.”

He frowned. “Let’s get the stuff you want and get out of here.”

It didn't escape my attention that he deliberately ignored my question, and alarm bells went off. Just what the hell had he and Gio been talking about?

TATE

W *hat a nightmare.* I sat up in bed, and breathing hard, I rubbed at my face. Why the hell was I dreaming about Gio? Damn him for putting foolish thoughts into my head. I didn't even see him that way. He had always been like a brother to me, and that hadn't changed because he had confessed to me last night that he was gay.

I wouldn't have been so shaken up if that had been all he had said, though. When he had taken it further and confessed to loving me all this time, my mind had been blown away. His confession had ruined years of friendship. I wished he hadn't said anything because now I was confused about what all this meant.

Moonlight spilled into the bedroom through the open blinds, casting shadows over Bryan, who was sleeping next to me. He had been suspicious, but after I had ignored his initial inquiry about what Gio was doing at the party, he hadn't asked me again. The way he looked at me had changed, though, but how did I tell him my best friend was fucking in love with me? I found it hard to believe myself.

Bryan looked peaceful in sleep, curled up on his side. I loved him. I couldn't love Gio, not in that way, but how could I convince him of that and not hurt him? I had demanded that he not say a word of what he had said to me to Bryan. Maybe, somehow, we could deal with this mess and move on without Bryan knowing. Maybe Gio would take back his confession and realize he was confusing love for brotherly affection.

Whatever it was, I just wanted it to go away. I didn't want this complication when I was so happy with Bryan. I already was over my head buried in paperwork, trying to figure out what Uncle Simon had done wrong. All the evidence pointed to the charities, and I needed them thoroughly checked out to find the full extent of the discrepancies.

I also had to visit Kathleen and Rachel. I had been avoiding it because I hadn't been able to visit before. Every time I had tried to go to their graves, pain and grief had crippled me. While I was not sure the pain would ever totally go away, I felt stronger now, braver, to ask their forgiveness one more time before I could fully move on with Bryan. If I hadn't told Rachel I was bisexual, she wouldn't have rushed off and met her untimely demise in that car crash.

I leaned over Bryan and kissed his shoulder lightly so it didn't wake him. I just had to touch him, to reassure myself he was here, and he was mine. Fuck, I couldn't have Gio come between us, but I wasn't ready to let my friend go either. What a fucking mess!

I eased out of bed—I wouldn't be getting any more sleep in the state I was in—and padded out of the bedroom barefooted and down the stairs. I slipped to the pool area, the serenity of the night a mockery of the turmoil inside me. The best way for me to lose the tension would have been to play some tennis, but I couldn't play alone, and I didn't want to wake up Bryan. So the next best activity it was.

After I stripped, I plunged into the pool and tried to lose myself in the rhythm of the strenuous activity, but the memory of my earlier conversation with Gio would not leave me alone.

“Gio, what the hell are you doing here?”

He paled when he saw me, his eyes registering surprise. He clearly hadn't been expecting me.

“Tate? What are you doing here?”

I was well aware that he avoided the question, but I answered anyway. “I came here with Bryan. He knows the owner and wanted us to stop by for a few. And you?”

“Um, I-I dropped off a friend,” he said but didn’t meet my eyes. He was lying, and it was as if he had slapped me in the face. I had known him so long, and he had never lied to me.

And then it hit me. “Gio, are you gay?”

His lack of response was all the answer I needed. He stuffed his hands into his pockets and looked away. At least he wasn’t wearing some of the merchandise because I wouldn’t have been able to reconcile seeing him like that with the man I had known for ten years.

I thought of the girls he had dated back in college, but he’d never really had a girlfriend. I had always assumed he was just a playboy, ready to screw ‘em and leave ‘em, but what if he hadn’t been much different from me after all? Had he been covering up all this time? His parents were strict and religious. They wouldn’t have condoned his alternative lifestyle.

“Does it even matter?” he asked.

“What do you mean if it fucking matters?” I spat. “Of course, it does. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Just as you told me you were bi? I had to find out the same way everyone else did.”

“But shouldn’t that have made it easier for you to come out to me?”

He ran his fingers through his hair and snagged a glass from the tray of one of the servers. “It wasn’t the right time.”

I frowned. “And how long did you know?”

He shrugged. “I knew for sure in college.”

“In college? Before we met?” I was trying to work out the time frame.

He hesitated, then drained the cocktail and looked me square in the eyes. “When we met.”

“When we met? You mean you...” I trailed off as his meaning became clear. The chattering around us and the soft sexy music playing in the background faded.

“That’s right, Tate.” He reached for my hand, but I kept it down my side. “I always suspected in high school. You know the locker room situation and finding myself checking out other guy’s junk and other assets. But other than a few kisses and hand jobs, I just chalked it down to experimenting. Then I met you in college, and I fell in love, man. I just didn’t know how to tell you and face your rejection.”

I tried to laugh it off as a joke because this couldn’t be real. It wasn’t possible he was in love with me for as long as he had said, and I hadn’t known. I would’ve seen some signs. We’d lived like brothers, and nothing in what he had done for me would I have misconstrued as anything else.

“You’re joking, right?” Even though I didn’t think he was, I wanted to give him an excuse so we wouldn’t have to talk about it again. We could pretend this conversation never happened. I was all for doing that if he was.

“I wish.” He sounded miserable. “I tried helping after Kathleen and Rachel passed away. I never wished them any harm, Tate, and you, of all people, know how much I loved them like they were my family. They were my family. But when they died, I thought that maybe I would be able to be with you. But nothing worked as I’d planned.”

I expelled a harsh breath, so affected by his words that my breathing came out in shallow pants. “Goddammit, Gio. Why tell me now? Why?”

He shrugged. “I didn’t plan to, but you caught me here, so if I’m going to tell you some of it, I might as well tell you all. I fucking love you, man, and it hurts seeing you with that guy you have living at your place. Why him? Why not me?”

“Because you’re like a freaking brother to me. I love you, but not in the way you want.”

“But you could,” he insisted and pointed at Bryan, who was chatting to Jeremy still. Behind the two, a large man with a beer gut was watching Bryan, the interest clear in his eyes.

“I can’t just turn off my feelings for him and turn them on for you,” I told Gio. “Maybe if you had told me before—hell, I

don't know. Maybe not even then, but you cannot do this to me now. I love him."

"You barely know him!" he snapped and grabbed my upper arm, stepping closer to me. "You don't know the guy, Tate. You've known me for years. You know I won't let you down. I did everything for you, looked after the funeral, took care of the house while you were away, and I waited for you. I waited for you to come back, and you had to do so with that smug piece of shit who's just using you!"

"Don't talk about him like that!" I peeled his hand away from my arm. "Why the fuck would you do this now? I can't deal with this, Gio."

"Think about it," he said as I walked away. "If you do, you'll see it makes sense. You and I make sense. You and him? That's not going to last. He can't even get a fucking job. In the meantime, I'll be here waiting on you, waiting to pick up your pieces again when you get fucked over."

While the thoughts kept tumbling around in my head, I kept swimming power lap after power lap until I could hardly lift my arms anymore. At one end of the pool, I hoisted myself out and sat on the edge. A thick towel draped over my shoulders, and surprised, I glanced up. Bryan stood behind me, then with a small smile, sat beside me, kicking his feet in the water but not saying anything.

"Sorry for waking you up," I said. "I just couldn't sleep."

"It's fine. I could tell you had a lot on your mind on the drive home. Want to talk about it?" He twisted sideways and placed a kiss on the side of my neck.

"There is something I wanted to ask you." I chose the safer topic to talk about. "I want to visit the cemetery where my wife and daughter are. I've not been there since the funeral, and I know it's bad, but I couldn't."

He reached across my lap and gripped my hand. "I understand. I won't condemn you for it. You did what you had to to survive after they passed."

I squeezed his hand, thanking him for understanding. “I want you to go with me this weekend. I feel like I need to speak to her again, to tell her sorry for not being truthful with her from the start. I think I need her blessings because I’m serious about you, Bryan. I’m serious about us, and I don’t want to feel guilty anymore of their deaths.”

“Sounds like a fine idea. I admire you for it.” Silence reigned between us for a while, the tranquility only broken by his feet splashing the water. “Tate.”

“Yeah?”

“Will you tell me what Gio and you talked about?”

I swallowed hard, afraid to voice the thought. What if he wanted me to give up talking to my best friend to avoid the problems that were sure to follow tonight’s events? I couldn’t blame him if he’d feel that way either, but still, I didn’t want to be so quick to give up on years of friendship. There must be something we could do to untangle this mess.

“I’ll tell you soon.” I knew it was a cop-out, asking him for a lot, to trust me in my silence, but I wanted the time to figure out what to do without him influencing that decision. I needed to find a way to keep both men in my life. I didn’t want to give up either.

“You’re asking me to trust you without knowing what’s going on?”

“I’m asking you to trust me and my love for you.” He sighed, and I wrapped an arm around his shoulder and pulled him into me, kissing his head. “I swear, it won’t come between us. I’d give up everything before losing you.”

I meant it too. I had already lost two important people in my life. People mattered more than anything else in the world. If I lost all my money, I could regain it, but losing someone for good was devastating. I would never get them back. I couldn’t lose Bryan, and if I didn’t have to lose Gio either that would be a bonus. If I had to choose between the two, though, there was no doubt who would be missing from my life.

BRYAN

I glanced at my watch and sighed with relief. My shift was over. This had to be the longest day of my life. When the manager of Gizmo's had called me yesterday and asked me to report for work today, it had been surreal. I had even forgotten about applying. For a while, I had thought of turning down the offer, and Tate hadn't been any help for me to make up my mind either. He had insisted the choice was mine, then casually added that I didn't have to work if I didn't want to.

It was that last remark of his that had me saying yes to the job. I still hadn't used the credit card he had given me, and I was dangerously close to depleting my life savings—not that I had much in the first place. Between paying for two-year college out of pocket and having worked for Keith for only six months before he fired me, I had little saved up. Living with Tate meant I didn't have to pay for groceries or the utility bill, but I did need some personal items from time to time. No way in hell would I ask him to buy me those too. Giving me the car was enough too, so I took care of the gas on my own.

As I was already familiar with the setting of a restaurant and what was required of me, they immediately had put me on the floor. The morning had been easy enough, but during lunch hour, the restaurant had been at full capacity. I hadn't been able to rest for a minute.

But the tips had been great. Wiping the table, I pocketed the cash the last diners had left me and stacked the dishes and silverware. At least I could purchase some flowers to take with me to the cemetery where Tate's wife and daughter had been

buried. A flash of a smile here, a compliment there and the guests would leave a generous tip. Of course there were also the men looking for more than decent service with their meals. I had given none the opportunity to proposition me like I had seen coming. After working in the restaurant industry since I was fifteen, I had become pretty good at reading customers and weeding out the gropers, the stingy, and the generous.

Back in the kitchen, I deposited the dishes to be washed and turned to go.

“Where do you think you’re going, Cummings?” my shift manager, Rhoda Graham, asked before I could escape the kitchen.

“My shift’s up. I’m heading out.”

“That’s not how it works here, bub.” She handed me back the notepad for orders. “Everyone stays on shift until they’re relieved. Do you see that crowd out there? Until Samantha shows up, you’re still on the floor.”

“But I can’t,” I protested. “I have plans I can’t break.” How could I bail on Tate? I’d promised him I would go to the cemetery with him.

“Then cancel or postpone them,” Rhoda said. “Besides, she might just be running late for a few. Take five and then get back out there.”

With my hands tied, I used the five-minute break to use the bathroom and call Tate. He didn’t pick up, so I left him a voicemail.

“Tate, I got caught up at work. A waitress is late, and I’ve to stay until she gets here, but as soon as she arrives, I’ll be on my way.”

I hung up and returned to work. Samantha didn’t arrive in a few minutes. She didn’t arrive at all, and I had to work my ass off for another two hours. When the after-lunch crowd had left, Rhoda told me I could leave. Finally, I had earned a lot in tips in the two hours, but they couldn’t make up for standing up Tate. He’d never returned my call, so I didn’t even know if

he'd gone by himself or wanted to wait until we could go together.

Should I still head for the cemetery or go home? Once I got into the car, I checked my phone again. He'd texted me after all, but somehow I'd missed it. He understood and would be waiting for me at the cemetery. Hoping he was still there, I ran into a flower shop to pick out flowers. After the florist had given me the meaning behind each type of flower, I thought it was only fitting to select two small bouquets of peonies—for healing.

I drove as quickly as I could below the speed limit, but it still took me close to twenty minutes in the horrible traffic to Hilltop Drive where Holy Cross Cemetery and Mausoleum was located. I parked the car and strolled through the open gates.

I'd never been to a cemetery before, and it was just as quiet as I had imagined. The spookiness I'd thought I would feel was absent, though. If anything, the place was serene, even beautiful. The lawn was neatly manicured, with lush trees dotting the landscape. Most of the grave markers were flat, but sections also contained standing ones. I'd never thought before that such beauty and peace could exist in death.

Guilt coursed through me. The only time Tate had been counting on me, and I let him down. I crossed every path of the cemetery but didn't find him. Something died a little inside me. It had been my first day on the job. If I had been unwilling to work the extra hours, they would've possibly fired me. *But you didn't need the job. Tate needed you more.*

I turned back to the entrance. I had no idea where his daughter and wife were buried. All I knew they were side to side, but there were so many grave markers beside each other. It was hopeless. Then I glimpsed a solitary figure ahead, and my heart skipped a beat. I ran toward the figure and shouted, "Tate! I'm here! I made it!"

My voice disturbed the peaceful place, and I winced. I hurried to him, but when I got closer, it became clear the man wasn't Tate. But he was someone I knew. What the hell was he

doing here? I marched forward, the flowers swinging by my side. Tate still hadn't told me what they had talked about, and I knew he was trying to protect the other man.

"You're too late," he said before I could speak. He didn't even turn to me. He was standing over two graves with standing markers. I didn't have to look to know who they belonged to.

"Where's Tate?" I asked, my blood boiling. I disliked him. In fact, I loathed him, and nothing Tate could say would cause me to feel otherwise. This man was an opportunist, and I knew he was watching and waiting for a chance to wedge himself between Tate and me.

"Why would I know?" He turned to me then. "You're the one he's fucking. You should at least make it a point to know these things. Hmm, I wonder what else you don't know about the man you supposedly love."

"What are you implying?" My brain told me to walk away and not entertain him, but I had a feeling if we didn't have the confrontation now, it would bite me in the ass later.

"I'm talking about you letting him down on a day that mattered. He expected you to be here. He wanted your support, not mine."

My hands clenched in fists at my side, clutching the bouquets. He was a bigger man, and it seemed he was spoiling for a fight, and the way I felt, I wasn't beyond throwing the first punch. One thing held me back. I wouldn't desecrate the place where Tate's wife and child had been laid to rest. Too much had already happened to the two.

"I would've been here earlier if I hadn't had to work."

"So he said, but he waited and waited." He raised his hand and ticked off. "You stood him up. You don't even know what day is today. Why the hell would he choose you over me? At least I stopped by to pick up the pieces you left behind."

Worry gnawed at my gut. "I get it. You've known him longer than me, so you might as well tell me. What am I missing?"

“Perhaps ask him when you see him,” he said, looking so damn smug. “He had all the time in the world to visit, but he chose this day. Ask yourself why. You and I know he is a private man, and that he invited you here shows this meant a lot to him. Thank you for blowing it. You’ve just made it easier for Tate to see what I’ve been telling him all along. You’re unsuitable for him.”

He walked away, but I grabbed his arm and jerked him to a stop. I was too angry not to react. “You stay the hell away from Tate!” I said through clenched teeth. “You’ve known him for what? Over ten years? Not once has he looked at you the way he looks at me. That’s what bothers you, isn’t it? Tate will never love you the way he loves me.”

His eyes blazed with anger, and he pulled his arm away and grabbed me by my shirt front, hauling me up against him. “Make no mistake, dishwasher boy. Tate’s a businessman. You really think a guy who can only earn a living washing dishes will be enough for him? You’ll be an embarrassment for him to introduce to his associates. I don’t mind that he’s fucking you now. What matters is who he will ultimately choose. *I* plan to be that guy.”

He shoved me away from him, and I stumbled back, trying not to lose my footing. He walked away without looking back. The cocky bastard was so sure of himself, and it drove me insane.

Tate loved me. He truly did. As much as I kept telling myself that, old insecurities I was worth nothing resurfaced. The CEO and the waiter. Christ, what would people think about that combination? Even in my head, it sounded wrong when it shouldn’t. Gio had planted the seed of doubt, and it was taking root.

“I never really liked him.”

Startled, I jerked my head up, my heart pounding in my chest. For a minute, I imagined Tate’s dead wife had spoken, but then a woman stepped from behind a tree nearby. She had obviously been listening to the conversation between Gio and me. Was she real, or was my mind messing with me? She

looked real, her red hair and tired eyes too alive with misery for her to be dead.

“Excuse me?” I asked, waiting for her to say something else. Instead, her eyes widened in fright as though she’d just realized she had shown herself. She turned and ran. My first instinct was to chase after her. I found the whole thing to be so bizarre. She was probably a homeless woman who slept in the cemetery.

I stepped away, and something crunched under my foot. The flowers I had been so happy with now lay in a sad, tangled mess on the ground. I crouched and picked them up. When I straightened, I really looked at the headstones. One was a beautiful white marble one of about thirty inches, with an angel on top.

In loving memory of my wife, Rachel.

May your soul rest in peace.

Next to it stood a smaller white headstone with pink hearts and a smaller angel. It looked more like a cherub with a harp. My chest constricted as it really sank that he had lost his daughter when she was so young. She never had a chance to experience life.

In loving memory of my daughter, Kathleen.

Rest in peace, little one.

Daddy loves you always.

THEN MY EYE caught the dates that came right after the tribute, and I sucked in a deep breath. Oh fuck. I had screwed up. Of course. Gio had been right. He hadn’t just been blowing hot air but knew why this day was important to Tate. Today was the day he had lost both his wife and daughter in the crash. I wished he had been completely open about why he chose to visit today. I couldn’t have known, but if I had, I would’ve dropped everything to be with him today.

He had confessed he hadn’t been back here since he buried them. I couldn’t imagine the heartache he must have gone

through when he came. He had wanted me to be here with him, and instead, I had put my needs before his. My need to earn money, to be independent. And for what? I should have been the one to comfort him. I was the one he had asked to come with him.

“Oh god, I hope he forgives me,” I groaned, staring down at the twin graves. “I’m so sorry I couldn’t be here with him earlier to help ease some of his pain.” I hadn’t known his wife, and I wasn’t even sure if I believed in an afterlife, but I felt compelled to say something just in case they could hear me. “He still hurts about the accident and blames himself. It wasn’t his fault, but he blamed himself for it. I don’t know how, but you need to give him a sign that you forgive him and that he’s not responsible. I don’t think he will truly be happy until he feels somehow you have forgiven him.”

I wiped my tears away with angry movements.

“I know you both love him, and so do I. I may not get everything right, but I will take care of him. Just in case you’re listening, I wanted you to know that. Deep down, I believe you would’ve wanted him to be happy.”

I tried to salvage the destroyed flowers and lay them carefully before each headstone. Only then did I hurry back to my car to repair any possible damage I might have done by not being there for Tate today.

TATE

I was on my third glass of whiskey when the front doors opened. I closed my eyes and drew in steady breaths, disappointment once again washing over me. Not only had Bryan failed to show up when I needed him, but today of all days my mother had called, inviting me over to her birthday party next weekend. How could she have forgotten what day it was? But I hadn't gotten a chance to tell her. She kept on jabbering, and after almost an hour on the phone with her, I was surprised I had any hair left.

When I was already at the cemetery, I had received Bry's voicemail explaining he was held up at work. Pain had stabbed me, but I'd tried to stand in his shoes. I'd understand he'd had to do his job, the only one he had been able to get. But what about me? I'd needed him with me. I'd never asked for anything, and this had meant a lot to me. Visiting the cemetery had been such a pivotal point in my life that I'd expected him to have walked out of that job for me.

It might seem a bit extreme of me to expect that much of him, but for fuck's sake, it wasn't like he needed to work. I understood that it would make him feel better if he had something to do. That was why I'd offered him the position with the foundation, but he had turned it down. I had tried to help him, suggesting other solutions, but what had he done? He had accepted a job as a waiter—a job that, as honest as it was, wouldn't give him the chance to live up to his full potential.

If not for Gio, I would've fallen apart at the cemetery. Everything had come rushing back: the news about the accident, the rush to the hospital, the accusations, the media. And Gio had shown up, knowing I would need him. Although he must have felt hurt that I chose Bryan over him, he had pushed aside his feelings to continue being a friend. And I'd welcomed him. I had needed someone. Anyone.

Bryan's footsteps entered the kitchen, and he stopped just inside. "Tate." He sighed. "I'm so sorry."

I glanced up at him, then shifted my gaze. I wasn't ready to forgive him just yet. Holding on to my anger meant I didn't have to assess how I felt after visiting my wife and child, whose accident I still felt responsible for. I needed to cling to my anger and disappointment in him to keep it together.

"You chose your job over me," I said as calmly as I could, but I clutched the glass between my hands, interlocking my fingers to keep them steady.

"It wasn't like that at all." He took a few steps to the island where I was sitting. "I thought Samantha was just running late. I had every intention of getting out of there the minute she stepped in, but she never showed up."

"Not to worry." I saluted him with my drink in a mock gesture, then downed it and poured another.

"How much have you had?" He grabbed the bottle and placed it on the counter.

"This is my fourth. I think."

"Don't drink it, Tate," he pleaded. "I know I should have been there for you, and I would have if you had explained fully to me. Only when I saw the dates on their headstones did I know how important this day was to you. Why didn't you just tell me this was the day they passed away?"

"Does it matter?" I growled, trying to contain my anger, hurt, and disappointment. "I asked you to be there. That would have been enough to know it was important. Even Gio showed up despite everything. How many times have I asked you for anything, Bryan? How many?"

He pushed his fingers through his hair, his face tight. “Never. You’ve never asked.”

“Exactly.”

“But my job—”

“I don’t give a fuck about your stupid job!” I snapped. The words tumbled out of my mouth, even though I knew they were not the right things to say. “You don’t need that job. I give you everything you want and more! Yet you chose that job over me.”

“I get it,” he said, his voice calm, though the hand he placed on my shoulder was shaking. “You’re upset, but don’t belittle what I do. I may not be the CEO of some company, but I’m working, providing for myself, and being independent.”

“Why are you so preoccupied with being independent?” I flung at him. “Is being dependent on me such a bad thing? Have I ever let you down? Failed to meet your needs?”

He pushed back from the island and stared at me in frustration. “Tate, you don’t get it. I’ve barely had anything in my life. The one time I thought I had something, Keith yanked it away from me and left me in a vulnerable place, one in which I had very little choice but to move in with you. I don’t want to ever be in that situation again where I’m that fully dependent on anyone.”

I frowned. “Are you saying you would never have moved in with me if you hadn’t needed somewhere to stay?”

“The truth is that I probably wouldn’t have, but it wouldn’t have changed the way I feel about you. Would you love me any less simply because I wasn’t living with you?”

I stared into the amber liquid of my scotch and let his words sink in. “It doesn’t matter. I got over the day. No big deal.”

He sat beside me and placed a hand on my thigh. “Except it was a big deal for you, and I’m sorry I didn’t get to be there for you.” He paused, gnawing at his bottom lip, then expelling a loud breath. “Did you call him?”

I didn't pretend not to know who he was talking about.
"No, I didn't."

"So he just showed up?"

"Pretty much. Gio always could read me. He knew I would be feeling like shit today."

He squeezed my thigh, his expression sad. "How can I win with him in the picture, Tate? He knows so much about you already, and you barely talk to me about what's going on with you. How can I catch up? You're giving him all the ammunition to use against me, and what am I supposed to fight back with?"

"I love you. When you believe that without a doubt, you'll see the battle is already won." He spun the stool I was sitting on so I was facing him and cupped my face in his hands.

"I'm sorry I was not there for you today when you needed me," he said softly. "I'm not perfect. I have huge hangups about being dependent again, and you'll have to bear with me about that. For what it's worth, I love you too, big guy. I wish you would say it more often, but I accept you for who you are just as I hope you can accept me with my flaws. Forgive me?"

He looked too damn cute standing there, with his pouty bottom lip and his eyes like a goddamn puppy. How could I stay mad at him? He placed my hands on his hips, and I pulled him to rest between my thighs. He leaned into me.

I kissed his nose. "Maybe." The tension drained from me. The time I had spent at the cemetery had been healing, although it would probably take years for me to completely feel at ease about the accident. "Or maybe I'll make you work for it."

His lips twitched. "I've been on my feet all day and would like a shower first. Why don't you join me?"

I didn't hesitate and followed him to the master bathroom. We both washed up, and then with the water pressure on low, Bryan crouched before me and took my cock into his mouth. He sucked me hard, the stress from our argument making us both a little aggressive in our caresses.

I gripped his damp head between my hands and rocked my hips, thrusting deep in and out of his mouth. Understanding my need to let go of the frustration I still felt, he took everything I gave him without complaint, moaning and running his hands over my thighs and legs.

When I'd had enough, I grasped him by the shoulders and raised him. I kissed him hard, then spun him, pinning him to the glass wall.

“Spread them,” I instructed him.

He clutched both his cheeks and spread them so I could stake my claim. I caressed him, loving the feel of his hardness under my palms. I kissed the length of his spine from his nape to his lower back and licked the dimples just above the swell of his ass.

Bryan moaned and pushed his ass back impatiently. I loved his eagerness. Since we resumed our sex life, he had never turned down the opportunity for some good loving. All I needed to do was reach across the bed for him, and he would shift his legs apart, even when still half-asleep to accommodate me. He was never asleep for long.

I kissed his ass cheeks and sucked bits and bits of flesh into my mouth. Damn if I didn't get a kick out of marking him. I found his cock with my right hand and massaged it with twisting motions while I laved his crack with my tongue.

“Oh fuck, that feels good,” he moaned, curving his back some more so I had even better access to his ass. Hissing air between my teeth, I slipped my forefinger into his asshole and pushed. He mewled like a kitten in heat, gyrating his ass onto my finger, moving up and down. His movements and breathy pants and groans had made me so fucking hard.

“God, Bryan! I need you so much!” I stepped out of the shower, snagged the bottle of lube out of the bathroom cabinet, and returned to him.

After getting both of us suitably lubed, I wrapped my arms around his torso and pulled him back into me. With his back to my chest and my lips fastened on his neck, marking him as

mine, I slipped my cock between his cheeks and pressed into his ass. My cock popped inside, but instead of claiming him inch by inch, I pulled out. Then, with one fluid motion, I rammed my cock deep inside his hole.

“Fuck!” he yelled and reared back from the intrusion. “Tate!” My name was a whimper of pleasure mingled with an edge of pain.

I pulled out and repeated the motion, my pelvis slapping against his round ass. Water streamed over us and made it slippery to hold on to him, but I didn’t lose my grip on him. He wasn’t going anywhere. Not now. Not ever. His cries filled the bathroom, bouncing off the tiles as I fucked him hard, allowing us both to let go of the edge of our raw emotions from earlier.

With little time to recover between my thrusts, I fed him my length, filling his tight hole.

“Fuck, Bryan, I needed you today,” I growled and bit his shoulder, then stopped my thrusts. I stood against him, unmoving, as some of my emotions from earlier washed over me once more. “I wanted you there. It was so fucking hard to see them without you.”

He reached behind him to grab my ass and press me harder to him. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” he sobbed as he rocked his ass back into my pelvis. I hissed, my hands hovering over his hips as I refrained myself from the temptation of fucking him into oblivion. I loved the sight of his ass moving up and down the length of my cock as he took what I withheld from him.

“Tate, please,” he begged me, and before he’d finished the last word, I thrust into him. A strangled cry erupted from his throat.

“You like that, baby?” I groaned. His ass felt like I was hitting the Holy Grail. The tight hold he had on my cock deep inside his body was nothing short of torture in the best kind of way possible.

“Oh god yes!” He backed his ass up on my cock. “More. Fuck me harder, Tate! Oh god! Yes! Like that! Like that!”

I hooked an arm around his neck and shoulder to hold him in place and placed the other around his stomach. With each penetration, his hole adjusted to my girth and swallowed what I gave it.

Fucking him with such open abandon, knowing it was what we both craved left a satisfyingly animalistic form of pleasure. I loved hearing his grunts and the way he panted, puffing between his lips. Every so often, a high-pitched keening moan would leave his throat, and that sound drove me wild.

I lost control, vaguely hearing his swears and his palm slapping against the bathroom wall as he took my pounding. Scorching heat pooled into the lower half of my body, mingling from my spine to my pelvis. My cock jerked as I embedded myself as deeply as possible into Bryan's ass. I pumped my hips vigorously, and he sucked in a deep breath, squeezing me with his inner muscles, which milked me as I shattered inside him.

I slumped against him. To say my legs were weak was an understatement. I felt like I had just given him everything I had in me, but I was determined to get him off as well. With effort, I turned him around, lifted him in my arms, and pushed back the glass door. The water still cascaded, but I ignored it as I padded to the vanity. I set him down on the countertop because my arms and legs felt like Jell-O. With the perfect height, I dipped my head and captured his cock between my lips.

"Ooo," he moaned and tilted his head back. I twisted my lips up and down his cock, alternating between hitting the base with my lips and concentrating on just the tip. Clutching both his legs, I shifted them so his asshole was at eye level. I dipped again and licked the edges. Freshly fucked, his pucker was lax, and I sucked the barely there rosebud into my mouth. Over and over, I drew the puckered pink treat into my mouth, sucking it until my cum oozed out of him and into my throat.

Rising above him, I kissed him, feeding him the taste of our bodies combined. He sucked on my tongue eagerly. As much as I loved kissing him, I'd promised myself to give him

the same pleasure he had given me. With a gasp, I pulled back from his lips and, inserting two fingers inside his asshole, returned to sucking his cock. He hissed and moaned as I scissored my fingers inside him. I pressed harder and deeper, crooking my finger to massage his prostate. His balls clenched, and his cock pulsed in my mouth.

“Oh fuck!” The words tore from him just as he exploded his release into my mouth. I applied pressure with my lips, sucking him harder as I milked his prostate with my fingers. I licked up every drop and ran my lips down his cock again just for good measure.

“Oh my god.” He slumped against the mirror at his back, spent, sweat beading his forehead. His eyes looked dazed, and a small smile tilted his lips. We were both panting hard, catching our breaths. I couldn’t be mad at him when he’d bared himself so completely.

I leaned forward and lightly kissed his lips.

BRYAN

“**M**aybe I should have stayed home,” I murmured. Then I was too busy staring in astonishment as Tate maneuvered his car along the driveway that led to his childhood home.

And I had thought Tate’s house was grand!

His parents’ sprawling mansion was brightly lit for the festivities of his mother’s sixtieth birthday party. The starry sky provided the perfect backdrop for what was sure to be a night I would remember. It didn’t go over my head that this would be Tate’s formal introduction of me to his world. The idea excited me, but wrecked my nerves as well. I had been Keith’s dirty little secret, so he hadn’t introduced me to anyone. I hadn’t even known anything about his family.

“I wouldn’t have come without you,” Tate said, his face tight. He appeared as nervous as I was. He didn’t seem to have the best relationship with his mother, which was too bad. I wished I even had a mother. “Plus, I have the power to persuade you.”

With one hand, he reached across my lap and cupped my cock. “Geez, Tate. I doubt your mother wants to see that when we first meet. Stop that!”

He chuckled but complied. “She’s not completely horrid, just on the cold side. As I was growing up, she scared the crap out of me. I would see other kids with mothers who smiled at them and encouraged them. Mine only scowled and glared. I don’t think she was very happy with my father.”

“They never divorced, did they?”

“Nope. It was too convenient for them to remain married. My father needed her for entertainment, and my mother needed him for his money. They both agreed and got along fine.”

“Is that why you’re so casual about giving me money and not expecting anything?” I asked. “Because of the relationship between your parents?”

“I don’t think so. The simple truth is that I like taking care of you. I like taking care of your needs and wants. Too bad you make it so difficult for me. Don’t think I haven’t noticed the zero balance statements from the credit card company.”

He drove between two cherubim fountains giving off different shades of blue light. Beyond the fountains, a formally dressed man was waiting, then as Tate parked, opened the door.

Who the hell had their own private valet?

Tate got out and passed the key to the man. Then he rounded the car, opened my door, and held out his hand, and without thinking, I took it. With our fingers interlocking, we strolled to the entrance. We didn’t speak again until we were inside a beautiful long hall. The walls were adorned with family portraits, just like at the office. However, this family tree was bigger and showed the women in the family as well. I smiled at a picture of a gap-toothed Tate when he was around nine years old.

Tate scowled. “That’s a horrible picture.”

“No, it’s sweet. Do you know who everyone is?”

“Yes,” he said, his voice full of pride. “My dad used to make a game of it, so I’d have to identify everyone.”

“Tell me who they are.”

Tate did as I’d asked him and pointed out everyone and his relationship to them. I was impressed. It had to be a confident feeling to have come from a line as great as the Rosenbaums.

How could he even love someone like me, someone who didn't know who his ancestors were?

From the hall, Tate led me to a large ballroom. He explained that it was usually kept closed unless his mother threw one of her famous parties. She had worked with his wife on the charities, and many events, like auctions and fundraising parties, were held in the home.

People milled around us, chatter and laughter greeting us. The extravagance was staggering. The combined cost of the cocktail dresses and the men's expensive dinner suits, in addition to flashing diamond jewelry, could have fed a state home for an entire year.

Although I was used to being around business people while working with Keith, he had never taken me to any of his social activities. To bump shoulders with the rich in a casual setting left me feeling like an impostor. I would've stuck out like a sore thumb if Tate hadn't insisted on buying me a suit for the event.

The little confidence I'd gained from wearing matching black suits flew right out the window, and my palms grew clammy. Since my hand was still in Tate's, he must have felt it.

"That's my mother." He squeezed my hand and tilted his head a little.

I was about to ask who, since so many women were present, but the next instant I knew. I'd thought Tate resembled his father, but that was before I caught sight of his mother. He was a masculine version of her, only with stronger cheekbones.

Slender and in great shape, she could have been mistaken for someone at least ten years younger than her age. Her salt-and-pepper hair was piled on top of her head in an intriguing knot. She acknowledged us with a small nod, but her facial expression didn't betray what she felt. Was she happy to see her son again? After all, they hadn't seen each other in a while.

She excused herself from her circle of friends and walked over to us. Her eyes shifted from Tate to me and back, then

focused on me. She dropped her gaze to our clasped hands, and I had to suppress the urge to release Tate. He gripped my hand tightly, though, and refused to let go.

“Tate, darling!” She placed her hands on his cheeks, patting gently. “When did you arrive?”

“Happy birthday to you, Mother,” he said and leaned forward to kiss her cheek. “About fifteen minutes ago, but I was getting Bryan acquainted with the family.”

She turned to me then, and I forced down a blush. Her eyes were sharp and direct. She made me feel like ten years old again, and I didn’t like it at all. Had Tate inherited his dominance from her or his father? Perhaps both, which would explain his bossy attitude.

“This is my partner, Bryan,” Tate continued. “Bry, this is my mother, Marilyn Rosenbaum.”

She extended a hand, and Tate released mine so I could shake hers. “Nice to meet you, Mrs. Rosenbaum. I trust you had a wonderful birthday.”

“Thank you, dear. It’s a pleasure to meet you as well. Are you from around here?”

“Yes, I’ve always lived in San Diego,” I answered, wishing I could grab Tate’s hand again, but it would look too obvious I was uncomfortable.

“Would I know your family?”

“Uh, I—” I didn’t know quite what to say. I didn’t feel comfortable talking to a stranger about my family, or rather lack thereof, even if that person was Tate’s mother.

“San Diego is quite huge, mother.” Tate came to my rescue. “You can’t possibly know everyone around.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m acquainted with everyone of importance.” She turned to me with a false sense of innocence. “No offense meant, dear. I’m making an effort to know more about you, as you’re the first boyfriend my son has ever introduced me to.”

“He’s the first boyfriend I’ve ever had, Mother.” Tate’s tone was barely tolerant. He was becoming annoyed by her, and I didn’t know her well enough to divert the clash I could sense coming. How I wished I could be anywhere but there. However, I was stuck in the middle.

A shadow fell over our group as someone stopped by us, and I was relieved for the interruption. The relief turned to disgust when Gio joined us. I didn’t miss the way he attached himself at Tate’s other side. Inside, I seethed with loathing for the guy.

“Mrs. Rosenbaum, is it just me, or do you get younger with every birthday?” he complimented Tate’s mother. Ugh, slimeball.

The woman preened, her eyes lighting up in a way they hadn’t even done when she had seen Tate. “Giovanni, darling. You always say the nicest things.” She tilted her right cheek, which he promptly kissed. And she’d only offered me her hand. I tried to ignore the stab in my heart. Well, she’d known him for a long time. Still, it stung.

“Just speaking the truth, ma’am.”

“I’m delighted you showed up.” She waved a hand between Tate and Gio. “When Tate introduced me to his boyfriend, I wasn’t certain if you would still make it, although you had promised you would be here.”

Tate frowned. “Why would you even think that?”

She laughed and fanned herself. “Well, to be honest, Tate, when I first learned you were bisexual, I thought you would end up with Gio. I know it’s silly, but you were always so close, and well, just look at you. You two are so handsome together. You both run your own businesses. You have so much in common.”

Right after Tate had introduced me to his mother, I’d had a feeling she didn’t take a liking to me, but her direct snub, pairing off Tate and Gio before me, was just of poor taste. She was no fool and knew exactly what she was doing. It was plain as her fake nose that she was deliberately being rude.

“Mother,” Tate warned.

Gio placed a hand on Tate’s shoulder. “She doesn’t mean any harm by it, do you, Mrs. Rosenbaum? Besides, I’m sure Bryan knows we’re all just joking. What does it matter if he’s a dishwasher at a restaurant? All that matters is love.”

Mrs. Rosenbaum turned shocked eyes to me. “You’re a dishwasher?”

How did I even begin to give her a dignified response when her tone was full of such disdain? Correcting her that I was a waiter and not a dishwasher would hardly be an upgrade in her eyes.

“Like Gio said”—Tate shrugged off his friend’s hand—“it doesn’t matter, does it? I don’t care what Bryan does for a living. We’re happy together, and that’s good enough for me. It doesn’t get better than that.”

I fell a little more in love with Tate at his words, and the way he gazed down at me reminded me he was right. It didn’t matter what his mother thought, although it sucked she didn’t like me. The only important thing was that Tate loved me.

“If you’ll excuse me, I want to show Bryan around.” Tate reclaimed my hand. “We’ll be back shortly.”

I smirked at Gio. He did deserve it after all. But noticing the look of hurt in his eyes, I schooled my features. I couldn’t go through with my gloating that Tate continued to choose me. I felt pity for him, and for the first time, I tried to understand his emotions. It couldn’t be easy seeing the man you love with someone else.

TATE

“Oh my god, is that cum?” Bryan groaned in dismay as he tried to push me off his frame.

“Only one way to find out,” I said and wiped at the white stain on his jacket. I sucked my finger into my mouth to his disbelief. “Definitely cum.”

“I can’t believe I let you walk me right into that trap,” he mumbled and scampered off my bed. He had been all innocence when I’d led him from the ballroom and given him a tour of the house, which so conveniently ended in my old room. No sooner had I had him inside than I threw him onto the bed. I’d sucked him until he’d exploded into my mouth, his legs shaking hard.

With my hands behind my head, I smiled at him lazily as he tucked his shirt back into his pants. I hadn’t given him the chance to undress but had only stripped him of his pants, belt, and buckle. He hadn’t even been able to shrug out of his jacket.

“We both needed that after confronting my mother,” I reminded him.

“And your friend,” he added, sneaking a look at me. “I hope you admit now that he doesn’t like me one bit and wants you all to himself. There’s no sense in denying it.”

“He’s just confused.” I still chose to believe that. “I really don’t think he loves me in that way. It’ll all blow over soon. You’ll see.”

He snorted, his eyes full of disbelief. “I’ll try not to say ‘I told you so’ when the time comes.”

I sat up in the bed, grabbed him by his narrow hips, and pulled him to me. Sensing what I wanted, he lowered his head and kissed me. I was still rock hard but didn’t want him to take care of it here. I could wait until we returned home in our own little world. There it wouldn’t matter if he screamed and cursed all he wanted.

“Let’s not talk about Gio or my mom for the rest of the night,” I said, releasing his lips. “I don’t want to be here any more than you do, but it’s her birthday, so let’s make the best of it.”

A few minutes later, we returned to the ballroom, pretending not to notice the curious stares. While Bryan had been able to brush his hair back into place, there was little we could have done about the creases in his shirt and jacket. The front of his pants was also wrinkled, making it clear that part of his clothes had been handled and not gently either. I didn’t give two fucks about it.

I steered him clear of my mother and Gio, which was too bad. What was the sense of celebrating my mother’s birthday if I had to do it several feet away from her? I tried to make the most of the night, though. We chatted with a few of my parents’ friends I knew since my youth. At first, Bryan was shy, but he got more comfortable, which put me at ease.

I had no idea how Bryan got me to agree to dance, but he did, and it wasn’t as bad as I’d thought it would be. It felt good to have him in my arms without sex involved. The single dance I had agreed to turned into another and then another. On our way to get some refreshments, I bumped into Aunt Susan. I wasn’t surprised to see her. Even though she and Uncle Simon had separated, she had remained good friends with my mom. They were two peas in a pod, although Aunt Susan was more openly affectionate.

“Tate, how are you?” She enveloped me into a warm hug, and I genuinely smiled. Finally, someone I could be myself with.

“I’m good. And you? You look happy.”

She shook her head. “I guess you heard about the separation. It was long overdue. I put up with too much from your uncle while we were together. Not that I wouldn’t mind reconciling with him, but not in present circumstances.”

“I’m so sorry about that.” But I couldn’t blame her. After all, I had caught him in the office with another woman. I wouldn’t advise any woman, or anyone for that matter, to remain in a faithless relationship.

“The world goes on, dear. We love, and we lose, and hopefully, we’ll love again.” She glanced at Bryan then. “How rude of me to babble on. Won’t you introduce me to your friend?”

“This is my partner, Bryan,” I said and pressed a hand to Bryan’s back. “You already met Uncle Simon. This is my Aunt Susan.”

They both shook hands and exchanged pleasantries. I wasn’t surprised that Bryan responded differently to her than to my mother. Aunt Susan had a smiling and inviting personality.

“If you both don’t mind, I need to use the restroom,” Bryan said, and I pointed him toward the nearest one. It bothered me still that he would have to leave the room and my line of vision. I checked the ballroom, trying to locate Gio to ensure he didn’t make trouble by following Bryan, but he was nowhere to be seen. Hopefully, he had left.

“He’s such a handsome man,” Aunt Susan said, watching Bryan go. “Nice posture and young too. It’s really good to see you happy again, Tate. You deserve it, and by the way he looks at you, he’s so in love with you.”

“Thank you.” The smile I gave her was genuine. “I needed to hear that from a third party.”

“Never mind your mother, dear. Behind her cool facade, she really does care. She’s just never learned to show it. She cares far more than you think. We talk, you know.”

“I honestly don’t know what to make of mother, so I try not to think of her too often.”

“She was worried about you when you were gone for so long. Didn’t you realize that she’s lost weight?”

I had, but knowing mother, I had just assumed weight loss was her next fad. She had them so frequently I could barely keep up. This week a nose job, the other week a boob job. The cycle never ended for her, and those were details I wished not to know about her.

“And how are you truly holding up?” I asked Aunt Susan. Despite her nonchalant attitude about her separation, she had loved my uncle, and they had been together since they were in high school. That kind of love wasn’t easy to let go of. I knew that well enough. Rachel and I had been high school sweethearts, and I’d been devastated when I lost her.

“To be honest, I’m angry,” she answered. “But what can I do? Given the road he’s taking, I couldn’t allow him to carry us both into bankruptcy.”

I frowned. “What?”

“Your uncle has always been a gambler, Tate. Often, he would fly into Vegas to spend the weekend. It’s only gotten worse over the past year.”

“It can’t be that bad,” I said with a nervous chuckle. “He and Dad used to go once in a while. Plus, it would take a lot to blow through his millions.”

“The difference is that your father did it for fun, and he always knew when to fold. Your uncle knows no such thing. He’s barely been able to keep afloat because he was earning enough as a CEO and still, sometimes I wonder...” She glanced away. “Is everything okay at the company?”

I nodded. “I think so. Why?”

She shook her head and gave me a forced smile. “You should talk to him, really talk to him. We were standing over there talking just now, but he didn’t want to meet your boyfriend, so he left.”

“He probably didn’t come over because they already met.” I would give him the benefit of the doubt. I didn’t get the impression from the last time they’d met that my uncle was homophobic. We got along quite fine.

A loud explosion erupted, and the room fell silent. “Oh my god, what was that?” Aunt Susan gasped.

I’d immediately known what it was. Living in the woods, I’d fired a gun too many times not to recognize a gunshot. My first thought was of Bryan, who still hadn’t returned. The situation seemed ridiculous. This was a birthday party for a sixty-year-old woman. Why would anyone pull a gun?

“I’m going to go check on Bryan,” I told Aunt Susan. “Call 9-1-1 and stay alert. I don’t know what the hell that meant, but it was definitely a gunshot.”

I ran to the door, elbowing past the confused people who were running in the other direction in a panic. My only goal was to get to Bryan. Fast. Only one shot had been fired, which eased my mind a bit. It might have been accidental, but then again, who the hell would carry a gun at a party?

I stopped in the doorway and peeked around the door. The hall was empty except for a confused serving girl who gasped when she saw me

I ran past her to the nearest bathroom, where I had directed Bryan, and tried the door. Locked from the inside. My heart skipped a beat. I pounded on the door.

“Bry!” No sound. I banged some more. “Bry, if you’re in there, open up.”

I was about to shoulder the door when it opened from the inside, and an ashen-faced Bryan appeared.

“Shut the door. He might still be out there.” He grabbed me by the shirt front and pulled me into the bathroom, then slammed the door shut. He was shaking like a leaf, so I hauled him against me, my hand pressing his head against my chest.

“What the hell is going on?” I asked. “We all heard an explosion.”

He took in a deep breath that rippled through his body. “I don’t know. I don’t know.”

“Come on.” I rubbed his back. “I know you’re upset, but if you’ve seen or heard something, I need to know.”

“I-I was about to leave the bathroom,” he groaned a little. “My lapel pin fell off, and I bent to retrieve it. At-at the same moment, a shot fired. Talk about luck. If I hadn’t stopped to pick up the pin, Tate...”

My blood ran cold, and I squeezed him even tighter to me. “This doesn’t make any fucking sense. Why would someone shoot at you?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“And you didn’t see who?”

“No. I was so scared, and I toppled sideways and fell flat on my ass. Then I heard footsteps, and when I looked up, a man was running away from me. When he rounded the corner, I lost sight of him.”

It just didn’t add up, but the hole in the wall where the bullet had penetrated was clear enough. My heart lurched in my chest. Fuck, I could have lost Bryan.

I held his head between my hands as I kissed him hard. “If I’d lost you tonight, Bry, I don’t think I could have survived that.”

“I’m okay. Just a little shaken. It was so unexpected. Maybe somebody mistook me for someone else?”

He sounded so hopeful, and while I thought that was the case, I wasn’t going to take it for granted.

“Maybe, but we don’t know. We don’t know, and that’s the scary part.”

“What do we do now?”

“We wait for the police to get here,” I answered. “For what it’s worth, I think the shooter already left, but just to be on the safe side, we’ll stay here. Aunt Susan called the cops, and they should be here soon.”

BRYAN

“I don’t think your mom can hate me any more,” I made a halfhearted attempt to joke on the way back to Tate’s home. As though it was my fault for getting shot at in her home and then the police crashing her party, Mrs. Rosenbaum had looked at me like I belonged at the bottom of her shoes. At least no one would forget the stressful long night.

After the police had arrived, no one had been allowed to leave until they had questioned us all, me more rigorously than the others. By the time the officers had finished with me, I didn’t know if I was defending myself for being shot at or reporting the incident. We had been held back for hours while they cross-checked the guest list, determining who had left prematurely. They hadn’t shared their findings with us.

“It’s not your fault you were shot at,” Tate said, still tense. He wasn’t the only one. For a second, when that bullet had hit the wall, it wasn’t my life that had flashed before my eyes. It was the promise of a future with Tate that I wouldn’t get to live to see fulfilled. I’d never wanted to be more alive than in that moment.

A part of me still hadn’t registered all that had happened. I was still in a state of shock and couldn’t think clearly. When the police had asked me who would want to kill me, I’d drawn a blank and told them I didn’t have any altercations with anyone. Then I’d remembered my arguments with Keith and Gio and filled them in about the exchanges between Gio and me. They had noted his absence and informed me they would keep in touch.

I gnawed on my bottom lip. Should I bring it up to Tate what I'd told the police about Gio. He was so tense already that I didn't want to get him more upset. Besides, it probably wasn't related to the incident. The police were leaning toward a mistaken identity, but they hadn't officially made that conclusion. In any case, they still had to find out who that bullet was meant for and who had pulled the trigger.

Sensing how troubled he was, I rubbed his thigh. His muscles were tight with tension, and I hated seeing him this way.

"The police seem to think it was a mistake," I said to reassure him. "I'm sure I'm not in danger or anything."

"But we can't be certain." He put his hand on mine. "I'll be worried about you until the man responsible is caught."

"They may never find out who it is," I said gently, soothing myself as much as I was soothing him. "We just have to continue with life and hope for the best."

Even as I said it, my stomach knotted in fear. What if it wasn't a mistake and the bullet had been meant for me? What if it hadn't meant to scare me but to kill me? I sifted through my memories and tried to remember if I had pissed off anyone lately.

I wasn't the type to tick off people, and only Keith and Gio still came to mind. There was no way in hell Keith could have gotten onto the Rosenbaum's gated property. He was also not a cold-blooded killer. Yes, he was a sadist, and he wouldn't mind beating the shit out of me if it got what he wanted, but shooting at me was too much, even for him.

I didn't know Gio well enough to be familiar with what he would or wouldn't do. Love did make people do crazy things, and he was clearly in love with Tate. Would he try to scare me off by shooting at me? As much as I tried, I couldn't remember his pants or the type of shoes he had been wearing at the party. Then I would know for certain if he was the culprit.

During the ride home, I ruminated on whether I should say anything to Tate about my suspicions. I didn't want to wrongfully accuse anyone, but this was my fucking life, and the guy had access to me through Tate. By the time he pulled into his garage and parked the car, I'd decided to tell him.

Tate cut the ignition switch, and the powerful purring of the vehicle stopped. He sighed like the world was on his shoulders. He made no attempt to get out of the car.

"Hey." I turned on the light in the car and unbuckled my seat belt so I could move closer to him. "It's going to be fine."

"I'm scared as hell this is going to happen again." He dragged his hands over his face. "And I don't know what to do about it. I feel so fucking useless."

"We can't think that way. We'll never have any peace of mind if we do."

He released his own seat belt and leaned over the console. I met him in the center, our lips crashing together. I clung to him like a desperate man who had just lost his shining light, chasing after the sun. Our breaths came out harsh as we panted against each other.

He cupped the back of my head and kissed me like he was providing me with oxygen. I moaned and pressed my hands to his chest. His heart was pounding under my fingers. He had really been scared about losing me tonight.

I tore my lips away from his and gasped for air that my starved lungs needed. I clasped his nape, just as he had mine, and rested my forehead against his. Words were unnecessary. Words couldn't bind us, couldn't convey the emotions rolling between us. "Let's go inside." He turned his head and kissed my hand.

We entered the house together, and he set the alarm code. "I need a drink. I'll be up in a minute."

I was too drained to take the stairs to the bedroom, so I took the elevator, swearing. How should I go about telling him my suspicion? Once in our bedroom, I changed into a pair of shorts and a tank top. Tate entered, a glass in his hand, but I

wasn't afraid. He was different from my foster mother, who always drank herself into a stupor. He did enjoy his drink, but I had never seen him wasted, not even when he was home.

He placed the glass onto the dresser and reached for his jacket to undress.

"Let me help you with that," I said.

He didn't resist, and I stripped him out of his shirt as well. I pushed him to sit on the bed and took off his shoes, then his socks. I finished undressing him until he wore nothing but his navy-blue boxers. When I moved by him to put away his clothes, he wrapped his arms around me and pulled me to him. With a shuddering sob, he pressed his face to my abdomen. I closed my eyes and caressed him, rubbing small circles on his shoulders. We stayed like that for a long time, our breaths the only sound in the room.

"Tate," I said his name hesitantly. Deciding to share my concern with him was one thing, doing so a different thing altogether. My stomach roiled with nerves.

"Hmm? Ready to go to bed?"

"Just a minute." I continued to stroke his shoulders. "How well do you know Gio?"

He stiffened against me. "What?"

"I know you've known him for a long time, but would he hide things from you? Is he violent?"

He released his hold on me and looked up at me with a frown. "I'm not sure I follow. What are you saying?"

"I'm saying he conveniently disappeared tonight."

The minute he grasped what I was saying, his eyes bulged. "Jesus, Bryan. Gio's not a killer. Why would you even think that?"

"It came to me when the police officer asked me who I've had altercations with lately," I explained. "At first, I thought no one, but then I remembered Gio. He doesn't like me, Tate."

“Not liking you is a far cry from hating you enough to shoot at you!” He rose to his feet and paced across the room. “This is a crazy thought, Bryan. I know you don’t like him either, but he’s my best friend.”

“One who confessed he loves you,” I reminded him. “I’ve had a confrontation with him about you twice before tonight. I can’t just let this slide like it’s the norm.”

“Twice?” He spun around. “You spoke to him after meeting here?”

“The day I was supposed to meet you at the cemetery,” I explained. I hadn’t told him about our run-in at the gravesite, but now he needed to know. “I ran into him there. We exchanged words. There might have been some shoving on his part. Tate, all I’m saying, is that I don’t trust him, and I don’t know him enough to say what he’s capable of.”

“Why the hell didn’t you tell me sooner?” He carded his fingers through his hair. “Had I known, I would’ve confronted him about it, especially tonight. I warned him to stay away from you.”

“Judging by his attitude tonight, so much for your warning,” I said drily. “All I’m saying is that the guy doesn’t like that I’m in your life. People have killed for a far lesser reason than that.”

He shook his head. “No, I can’t believe that. Not Gio. Fuck, Bry, do you even know what you’re accusing him of? He would never do something like that. Not after I already lost Kathleen and Rachel.”

“Then who the fuck wants to kill me and why?” I balled my fists. Why didn’t he even consider the possibility? Was Gio so important to him he would trust the man blindly?

He pointed a finger at me. “Maybe it’s your crazy fucked-up ex. He seems more of a psychopath than Gio.”

“I already thought of that!” I snapped. “You see, that’s the difference between us. I already thought that maybe, just maybe, Keith had found a way to appear on your mother’s guest list and tried to pop me off. But I dismissed it because as

it turned out, he wasn't on the guest list. Now, why can't you do the same and think that this might be Gio's doing? He has the motive. At least consider the idea before you cast it aside."

Tate gripped me by the shoulders and shook me a little. "Gio didn't try to kill you. He's not perfect, but he wouldn't do something like that. Not when he knows how important you are to me."

I pulled myself away from him and stared at him in disbelief. "He wants you for himself! What does he care how you feel about me? Good god, Tate! Why are you trying to defend him?"

"I've known him for ten years, Bryan! You're accusing him of a heinous crime, and I can't accept that."

"I'm not accusing him! All I'm saying is that he may be a prime suspect. Why won't you even consider that?"

"I-I can't."

Was it possible that he'd loved Gio more than a friend after all? I backed away from him and the bed, swiping my phone from the dresser.

"Where are you going?" he asked, his face so sad I almost felt bad for him.

"I can't be here with you right now. I'll go sleep in the guest room across the hall. I need some time to think."

"For god's sake, Bryan, don't walk out on me."

I stopped at the door and glanced back at him. "I'm not walking out on you. I don't even know if I'd have the strength to do that anyway. I have a habit of staying with men who fuck me over."

"That's not fair to me, Bry."

Without a word, I closed the door behind me. Then something hit the door and shattered. The glass. My first instinct was to return to him and work this out, but I did need time to think. Was he right and I wrong for thinking Gio was capable of trying to kill me?

The guest room felt strange. I hadn't slept anywhere but in Tate's bed since the first day I came here. I couldn't believe so much time had elapsed. Maybe I had overstayed my welcome? I slipped beneath the cold sheets. My plan had been to find a job and then an apartment. I had a job. Now I only had to find a cheap place somewhere that I could afford, if necessary with a roommate. Restaurants always wanted their waiters to work extra shifts too, so I could capitalize on that.

My heart ached at the thought of leaving Tate. As much as I tried to convince myself that we could still have a relationship if I moved out, it wouldn't be the same. Not after all we had shared beneath this roof.

I yawned, exhausted by the night's turn of events. Before attending his mother's party, the worst I had expected was for her not to like me. Now the only thought that kept churning in my head was that someone out there wanted to make me disappear.

As exhausted as I was, sleep didn't come. I turned and rolled over in different positions, trying to get comfortable but not succeeding. Something, no, someone was missing. I had always fallen asleep in Tate's arms. Tonight, I was as alone in the world as I never wanted to be. I longed for his contact, his arms sliding around me, cherishing me, making me feel like I belonged.

With a frustrated growl, I hit the pillow, then stilled when the bedroom door opened. Silently, Tate entered the room and closed the door behind him. In the darkness, he walked to the other side of the bed and slipped under the covers with me. That he would come after me meant the world to me. Deep in my heart, I had known he would do that.

When he reached for me, I didn't resist. I could never resist him. I hadn't been kidding when I told him everyone I had loved had fucked me over. From the moment my mother had left me at the police station, bad luck seemed to have followed me. Love had broken me, made me stay when I shouldn't have. Now I craved him despite our arguments.

He turned me over to lie flat on my back and straddled my thighs. My heart thudded in my chest, and my breathing, harsh with expectancy, filled the room. My cock stirred, and I wished it wouldn't, but it was all futile. Tate was my weakness.

Leaning forward to align his lips with mine, I lifted my head to meet him halfway. He halted a hairbreadth away, his breath warm on my face, caressing my lips. Mine parted, and my tongue peeked out as I hoped he understood the message. Our differences aside, I wanted him something awful.

"I don't care what fight we have," he said, his voice soft. "We won't sleep in separate beds. Ever."

Before I could respond, his mouth found mine. I expected him to kiss me hard and fast, but when his lips landed on mine, they were soft and clinging. He moved his lips over mine with tender care, taking his time to study the shape of my lips with his own. His kiss was more devastating than anything else we had ever done together. Tears of desperation oozed from beneath my eyelids. I feared losing him, either because someone managed to finally remove me permanently from his life or because he'd leave me for someone else.

"Shhh," he murmured and kissed my cheek. "I swear I won't let anyone hurt you. I don't care who it is. I'll find out who is responsible."

He got off my thighs and knelt between my legs. I raised my hips when he reached for the waistband of my shorts. I was bare beneath it.

"Tate," I moaned when his hand closed over my cock.

"Don't give up on us," he whispered in the dark. "Please don't give up on us, Bryan."

"I won't!" I cried as his lips settled over my semi-erect cock. His lips brought me fully to life. I was so hard it hurt. He sucked me between his lips, the wetness of his mouth slippery and sliding up and down my length, pulling me out of my funk. I forgot Gio and what he had or hadn't done. All that

mattered was the man kneeling between my legs, making love to me in the most beautiful way.

He caressed my balls, gently cupping and squeezing them with just the right amount of pressure.

“I forgot the lube,” he murmured. “Be right back...Better yet.” He rolled off the bed and scooped me up into his arms. I clung to his neck and kissed him as he walked us back to our bedroom, where I belonged in the first place.

I broke our kiss. “I’m sorry for walking out on you.”

“Just don’t do it again. Whatever the problem is, we can talk about it.”

At the back of my mind, the issue with Gio still niggled, but I ignored it. He placed me on the bed and searched the drawer of the bedside table for the lube. He lathered himself with it, then kneeled between my legs. I raised them for him and swung my arms beneath them to keep them steady as he worked the lube into my opening. I studied his face and the level of concentration he took in getting me prepared for him. When he glanced up and caught me watching him, I blushed and looked away. For the first time I felt bare before him, like he could see into my very soul.

“Hey, don’t look away from me.” With his free hand, he turned my face back to him. “In fact, tonight I want you on top so I can see your face.”

He lay back onto the bed and pulled me onto him. Straddling his waist, I leaned forward to kiss him while rotating my ass into his groin. I eased up from his chest, reached behind me for his cock, and holding it steady, sank down onto the tip. The curved head pressed into my hole, and I slowly inched down until I was sitting on his lap, my ass fixed into his pelvis.

“Fuck!” Tate exploded, and I stared down into his face, which was contorted with pleasure. He panted beneath me, his chest expanding and contracting from the emotions roiling in his system. I rode him carefully, taking my time to study him. Watching him lose himself under my power was a powerful

feeling. Soon he was grasping at my ass cheeks, caressing and helping himself by thrusting upward.

Tilting me so I lay on his chest, Tate anchored the heel of his feet onto the bed and thrust. I cried out into his chest as his cock ripped through me. He continued driving hard, his hands pushing my ass downward to collide with his penetrations. I clutched his shoulders and hung on for the ride. My cock was leaking copious amounts of precum. The urge to snake my hand between our bodies and fist my hard-on to reach my climax was overwhelming, but I couldn't have moved if I'd wanted to.

Tate stifled my cries with his lips crushed onto mine. His hands roamed my body desperately as he sought his release in the frantic rhythm of his hips. My ass bounced in decadence with each connection with his pelvis, the slapping sound of our flesh greeting each other inflaming me. Still, he thrust even harder and so deep I tumbled in disbelief under a powerful climax that hadn't been aided by my hand.

"I love you so fucking much!" Tate grunted on his last thrust that welded us together, glued by the evidence of his desire for me filling my hole. I collapsed against his chest, embarrassed at how much I was struggling to breathe, but he didn't fare any better. His legs trembled beneath me.

"I. Love. You. Too." I gasped for air and fanned my hot face.

Tate chuckled. "Fuck. We're going to need more than a few minutes after that."

I groaned because he was right. "We're a sticky mess."

"Just give me a few, sweetheart, and I'll transport us to the shower."

I laid my head against his chest and listened to his wild heartbeat. He stroked my damp back with his hand, drawing lazy circles on my skin.

M-A- Subconsciously I was focusing on each letter he wrote until he was complete. I stiffened. Was it my overactive imagination at work, or had he really written "Marry Me" on

my skin? My heart hammering, I nestled closer to him and smiled. *Yes, yes, I'll marry you.* As much as I wanted to shout it out loud, I had to wait for him to ask.

TATE

I stared at the newspaper, but the words appeared all jumbled, making reading impossible. That was fine, though. I was only pretending to read so Bryan wouldn't pick up on my mood. Although he was back in my bed, and the sex between us was even hotter than usual, I didn't take it for granted that we were fine.

We weren't.

I had hurt his feelings by not being willing to listen to him about suspecting Gio of foul play. He didn't know Gio as well as I did. My best friend wouldn't do that to me. He might have fucked up our relationship, but falling in love with your best friend was a far cry from killing someone.

To make matters worse, I couldn't even focus right now. I worried about Bryan when he went to work. I had insisted he call or send me a message when he arrived and when he left, but I still worried about him. At the same time, the big mess I had uncovered at work was taking up so much of my time.

Aunt Susan had been right. Not only was my uncle close to bankrupting himself because of his gambling habits, but he had also syphoned money from the company to pay for his addiction. Now I understood why Dad had never placed his brother at the helm of the company just before he died. Dad must have known he had a gambling problem. And if I had known, I would never have passed the company on to him. No wonder he had been so eager to have me stay away for as long as I needed. He had had easy access to unlimited funds to carry on with his gambling.

The newspaper was pulled from my hands. Startled, I glanced up and found Bryan frowning at me. He folded the newspaper and leaned against the counter. He was still dressed in a pair of sweats and bare-chested, as he was on the evening shift.

“You’re making me nervous with all that heavy sighing,” he said. “Why don’t you tell me what’s going on?”

“Just business.” I didn’t go into details. He had his own problems and didn’t need to hear about mine.

Instead of accepting that answer, he sat on the chair across from me at the island and gave me a pointed look. “So, tell me about it. You hardly talk about what’s going on with you.”

“I do. I tell you I love you and that I am proud of you.”

“I know, and I love you too. But that’s not what I meant. You never talk about your family or the business.”

God, if he only knew half of it. My boyfriend, who for all he was trying, couldn’t hide his disappointment in me; the only people who ever really loved me were dead; my mother hadn’t spoken to me since the incident at her house, and now my uncle had robbed the charities the company had started.

“You wouldn’t be interested in the issues going on at the company,” I said.

“Well, you listen to me whine about that slave mistress I have at work, so talk to me about your job too.” He reached across the island and took my hands. “Please. Don’t be that guy who won’t let me be there for him too. I’m your boyfriend. I want to know when something is troubling you.”

His expression was serious, his eyes pleading for me to open up to him. He was right. He knew so little about me because I never really spoke to him, not about things that mattered. I had bottled up everything inside for so long that I had forgotten how to share and let people in.

“My uncle has been embezzling money from our company.”

His eyes widened, and he dropped my hands. “Whoa, are you serious? But he’s your uncle. He wouldn’t do something like that, would he? You’ve known him your entire life.”

Those words hit. Had he said them to remind me of our argument a couple of nights ago? I hadn’t believed Gio could be the perpetrator because I knew him too well. Thinking about my uncle, I now saw Bryan’s point. Shit. No wonder he’d been upset. I hadn’t even been willing to listen to his reason for thinking of Gio as responsible.

“It’s a big mess.” I stared into my coffee cup as if the murky liquid held the solution for all my problems. “No one noticed because he was doing it from the foundation accounts. On the books, the foundation and charities were benefiting from funds routinely sent to cover projects. The truth is that he’s been pocketing those moneys. I told you that Rachel spearheaded the foundation. He was supposed to find someone to replace her, but he never did.”

“That’s just horrible to steal from charities. Who would do such a thing? Aren’t all Rosenbaums supposed to be rich?”

“Years as a gambling addict,” I explained. “That’s why he and Aunt Susan are on the verge of getting divorced. She won’t take him back unless he joins an intervention program.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I have no choice. I have to fire him.”

Half an hour later, after kissing Bryan and reminding him to text me, I left for work, my heart heavy. I didn’t look forward to confronting Uncle Simon, but what he had done was despicable. The funds put aside for the charities had been to build a children’s home and a few houses for families who had lost theirs in a fire in Lemon Grove. None of the projects had been started.

The company’s finances had only looked so great because Uncle Simon had cut back on the charity programs. Businesswise, they might have been sensible decisions, but at the heart of Rosenbaum was family and community service. I

was appalled that we had declined so much because I had abandoned the company and appointed an unfit CEO.

When I entered the office building, I stopped in front of our family tree, drawing strength from all the pictures of family members who had run this company. They were depending on me to do the right thing, and if that meant ousting Uncle Simon from the company, then that was exactly what I would do.

Having a renewed focus, I stopped by my office to put my briefcase away, then headed for my uncle's office.

"Good morning, Mr. Rosenbaum," the secretary greeted me. "Are you looking for your uncle? He's not in his office at the moment."

I frowned. I was certain I had seen Uncle Simon's car parked in its usual spot. "Do you mean he's left the building?"

"He's in a meeting."

"What meeting?"

"I think it's a board meeting." She shrugged. Didn't she know, or didn't she care? Uncle Simon surely hadn't hired her for her intelligence and what she could do behind a desk. Probably more because of what she could do under a desk. Corrupt practices like these were the reason qualified people like Bryan were being denied jobs.

I stalked toward the conference room, where we always held our board meetings. What the hell was he thinking, calling a meeting without inviting me? Without knocking first, I pushed the door open so hard it slammed against the wall. The room had gone deadly silent as seven faces peered at me.

"I wasn't aware that we were having a board meeting." I forced myself to keep my voice calm and not show how livid I was. And to be honest, nervous too. While I held the greatest shares in the company, the others combined could overrule my decisions.

Uncle Simon gaped at me. "Tate. I-I thought you were coming in later today." Then just as quickly, he schooled his

features. “I was hoping to have this done before you got in, and we would’ve already voted.”

“Voted on what exactly?” I had a bad feeling I wouldn’t like this at all.

“The members of the board feel that you’re not suited to be our CEO. You’ve abandoned the company for two whole years. What reassurance do we have that you won’t leave again overnight, without even informing the board of your decision?”

I frowned and scanned around the five men and one woman sitting at the table. “Nice try, Uncle, but that’s not the real reason you don’t want to give up the company, is it?”

The confidence he had oozed only a minute ago dropped, and worry entered his eyes. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I came here in good faith to talk to you face-to-face.” I deliberately kept it vague so the others wouldn’t understand what I meant. “I know. I know everything, and if you continue with this farce, I’ll go into full details of exactly what you’ve been doing. I’m giving you the opportunity to resign. It’s either that, or I’ll make sure you’re physically removed from the company.”

“What is the meaning of this?” Donald, one of the board members, asked. “Simon said this was an important meeting to discuss the future of the company, but it seems the issue is a family one. Couldn’t you have settled this without dragging us into it? I’m a silent partner in this company solely to remain silent while enjoying the profits, and I’m sure the others agree with me.”

There were grunts of agreement, but I didn’t divert my gaze from Uncle Simon. “Your call. I have all the evidence I need.”

A panicky look entered his eyes. Without a word, he grasped his folder from the table and stalked from the conference room, slamming the door behind him. Disappointment speared through me. I knew he was guilty, but

the frustration stemmed from the part of me that didn't want to accept that the uncle I knew could have done the things I had uncovered.

“Can we go now?” Donald asked, already lifting his two-hundred-plus frame from his chair.

I held up my hand. “Before you go, I'd like to apologize. I apologize for the way I left the company. As you all know, my wife and daughter had passed away, and I needed the time to do some healing. The responsible thing should have been to call a board meeting, but I was on the verge of a breakdown. However, I am back and will do everything in my power to ensure the Rosenbaum legacy continues in this company.”

After my little speech, they left, some stopping to shake my hand and welcome me back, while others made a beeline for the door. When the final member had left, I closed the door and made my way to my uncle's office. I wasn't surprised he wasn't there. Nor was the secretary, which was a relief. At least I wouldn't have to find a reason to fire her.

With a sigh, I strolled back to my office. I should have felt elated I had uncovered the embezzling, but it was devastating to know it was my uncle's doing. No one had even suspected a thing. If I hadn't decided to catch up with what had been happening with the company, I doubt anyone would have found out. I hadn't meant to scratch beneath the surface of the company, but I had, and it had revealed unpleasant surprises.

I got back to work, or at least I tried to. The memory of Bryan's pale face after he had been shot at embedded itself in my mind. Was Gio really responsible for the incident? He hadn't called me since that night. Was his lack of contact out of guilt?

The police officers handling the case had only been in contact with us once to inform us they still had no clue who was responsible. After my uncle's deception, I couldn't help feeling that maybe Bryan was right and Gio had something to do with the shooting. I hoped to God I was wrong.

BRYAN

The shop bell tinkled overhead, startling me as I entered. I hadn't been by Itsy Bits since opening night and had completely forgotten about the bell. Jeremy, who stood at the cashier's desk ringing up a sale, looked up. His face brightened, and I smiled back at him. It was refreshing to see a friendly face, and I felt guilty I hadn't been back earlier.

He gestured me over, then handed the customer a bag. "Thank you. I'm sure your boyfriend will love your new underwear." The man blushed and hurried past me out of the shop.

"Hello, darling. I have been hoping I'd see you again."

"Hey, Jeremy. Things have been pretty hectic lately. How is the business going?"

"Fabulous. It's better than I'd hoped. I'm now thinking of setting up a website to complement the store."

"Wow. You've got it all figured out, haven't you?" I couldn't help feeling a little envious. He was living his dream, had everything figured out, and seemed to be enjoying it. Whereas I was still trying to settle into a job. If I had learned anything in the last week and a half that I had worked at Gizmo's it was that I hated it. I couldn't quit fast enough, but things between Tate and me were still tense and awkward, and I needed to keep this job, just in case.

"This has been my dream since as far back as I can remember," he said and walked from behind the counter. Today he was dressed in a midhigh pleated plaid skirt, which

made his legs look great in his lace-up high-heeled boots. Knee-high socks and a three-quarter-sleeve dark blue sweater top completed his look. It never ceased to amaze me how comfortable he was expressing himself. The first day we had met, he had worn masculine's clothes, but these last two times he preferred a more feminine look, and he killed it.

I grimaced. "My dream had been to make it out of the foster system."

He turned the sign at the door to closed. "With my parents, I might as well have been in foster care. Thank god I had Clay." He gave a sad laugh and brushed his hair to one side. "Enough of all the sad talk. Did you have something in mind for that gorgeous boyfriend of yours?"

"I do hope I find something. I'm not sure exactly what, though."

"Any special occasion?" he asked, giving me a salacious wink.

Heat crept up my neck. "Something that says 'I want to get back to the way things were between us.'"

He sighed heavily. "Honey, don't I know exactly what you mean. Lucky for you, I think I have just the thing for a novice like you. Would you like to join me for lunch afterward? We can moan about our sucky love life."

I glanced at my watch. "Sure, but I'm on my lunch break. We'll have forty minutes before I have to return to Gizmo's."

The lace lingerie set he picked out for me was perfect, and I couldn't wait to parade it for Tate later. I had to bridge the gap that had cracked between us before it widened. He also needed some cheering up after he'd fired his uncle yesterday. Hopefully, the bit of lace would not be a waste.

The more I was around Jeremy, the more I grew to like him. I wished I'd had a friend like him growing up, but I'd been wary of getting too close to people. Bouncing around foster homes could do that to kids. I was always easygoing and formed friends fast, but they were never the kind to stick around.

Jeremy was a class act with a sweet and vibrant personality. He had me so relaxed and laughing by the time we arrived at a restaurant for lunch that I didn't hesitate when he asked for my number.

"Strictly friends," he added. "I've seen that hunk of yours, and no way would I think of stepping on his toes. He'd probably snap me in half."

I laughed, wiping the tears from my eyes as I gave him my number. "He's not as bad as he looks." I paused. "Okay, he can be as bad as he looks, but I love him the way he is."

"I know, sweetie."

"It's amazing, really," I said. "My ex was possessive as well but in a totally different way. He was bordering on creepy. No, he *was* creepy. He didn't love me. He just wanted to control me, to own me. Tate loves me and only thinks of protecting me."

"I wish Clay would be like that." He rolled his eyes and fiddled with his salad. "We broke up."

My smile fell. "Oh no. Are you okay?"

"Not really." He dropped the facade then, and tears gathered in his eyes. He was truly miserable. "I love that big oaf, always have, but he clearly doesn't love me enough. We broke up on opening night."

"Fuck. I'm sorry to hear that."

"Thanks." He gave me a sad little smile. "The worst part is that he's still very much a part of my life. He's the capital behind my shop. I bounced around for pretty much all my life, trying to find a job that suits me, but nothing quite clicked. I asked him to look at my business plan to present to the bank where I had requested a loan. I never made it to the bank. He footed the entire capital."

"Sounds like something Tate would do for me," I said, then smiled at him. "Hey, a guy doesn't just do that for anyone. Tate would do it for me because he loves me. I would bet you that Clay loves you just as much."

“Sometimes I think so too, but is it enough to come out for me? I don’t even want him to come out for me. I want him to do it for himself.”

We fell into silence then and finished our lunch. I was grateful that Tate was out and we didn’t have the problem of dealing with that aspect of a relationship. It couldn’t be easy being as fem as Jeremy was and being in a relationship with a closeted gay man.

“Well, dang, those are some fine-looking men!”

At Jeremy’s outburst, I checked over my shoulder to see what had him drooling. I nearly choked on my avocado at the sight of Keith. He wasn’t alone, though. Gio stood next to him.

They took a seat a few tables away from us. Almost immediately they delved into a discussion that looked deep. Seeing them together didn’t sit well with me at all. How did both men know each other? This was too much of a coincidence.

“You look ill.” Jeremy put a hand on my arm. “Are you okay?”

“Something’s not right,” I answered in a strangled voice. “I never realized they knew each other. They are up to something, and it can’t be any good.”

“Do you know them? Oh, the dark-haired one is the one we discussed opening night, right? The one your boyfriend is friends with?”

“Yeah,” I growled, clenching my fists. “The one with the straight dark hair is my abusive ex I just told you about. He’s also in the closet. The other guy is Tate’s best friend who just confessed to being in love with him.”

“What?” Jeremy gasped. “Do you think they are working together to break up your relationship?”

“I’m positive of it,” I replied. “Keith has tried to interfere in our relationship before, and Gio, well, I’ve my suspicions about him, and if they are right, he’s dangerous.”

“He doesn’t look dangerous.”

“What exactly does danger look like?”

He nodded. “Good point. Lurking danger that’s not easily perceptible is the deadliest kind. What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to confront them. What do you think?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Jeremy grabbed my arm. “Oh shit, they just saw us.”

“Then there’s no sense in hiding.”

I got up from our table and strode to the two men, who abruptly stopped their conversation.

“Let me guess,” I said. “This is a break-up Tate and Bryan meeting. How come I wasn’t invited?”

Keith smirked. “Don’t flatter yourself. I already told you I was over you.”

“Right. So, I’m supposed to think you two being here together is a coincidence?” I lifted my chin in Gio’s direction. He was unusually quiet for someone who had always been mouthy around me. His face was red, and he wouldn’t meet my eyes. “I’ll believe that when Gio there gets over his obsession with Tate.”

Keith’s features turned stony, his eyes cold, as they’d always been when he was about to smack me. “Don’t let me get my hands on you, Bryan. Or is that what you want? Are you missing the way I used to fuck you hard enough to make you scream? Now I’m inclined to think your new partner ain’t doing the job right. You know where to find me if you’re unsatisfied.”

Jeremy tapped me on the shoulder. “We should go, Bryan, or you’ll be late for work.”

Keith wolf-whistled at Jeremy, stripping him with his eyes while he assessed the slender man from head to toe. “Who’s your new friend, Bryan?” he asked. “Why don’t you bring him along with you? I wouldn’t mind breaking him in. You’re already quite trained, aren’t you, honey?”

Jeremy batted his fake lashes at Keith and gave him a sweet smile. “Darling, you should be so lucky.” He tugged on

my arm. "Let's go."

My attention focused on Gio, I couldn't resist getting one last jab at them. "I know you two are up to something. You might have fooled Tate, but not me. I'd stay away if I were you."

The day was officially ruined. We returned to our table but just to pay our bill so we could go.

"Don't let them get to you," Jeremy said. "They are just distractions for you. Focus on Tate and bridging that gap you told me about."

I thanked him and wished I could offer him advice on his relationship with his boyfriend, but I was too upset to think straight. I hurried along the streets, almost running at times to get back to the restaurant on time. I arrived with five minutes to spare, and as I pushed open the door, I ran into a woman who was just leaving.

"I'm so sorry," I apologized.

"That's fine."

The voice sounded distantly familiar, but the woman was already walking away before I could get a good look at her. I didn't move from the door but watched her, trying like hell to remember where I knew her from. But my mind was already so messed up from my encounter with Gio and Keith that I had a hard time focusing. Then she turned, and it hit me.

She was the same woman from the cemetery. The menacing look in her eyes settled uneasily in my stomach. Too many coincidences. What the hell was going on, and what had she been doing here at the restaurant? I was tempted to go after her and demand an explanation, but she was nowhere to be seen. Besides, I was almost late getting back on shift. I didn't want to deal with a disgruntled Rhoda on top of everything else.

TATE

My cell phone rang for the third time, but I ignored it, again, as I went through the different tenders for the shelter the company should have had built at least a year ago. Having no one to run the foundation yet, I was swamped with work. While I tried to redeem our company's reputation, I also juggled to fit in our charity projects.

Uncle Simon hadn't been the only one who had left. I hadn't been surprised when two employees from accounts, including the CFO, handed in their resignations overnight. Without a prior word from either, I had arrived at work this morning with their letters on my desk and their own desks cleared.

Swamped didn't begin to describe the state I was in. All morning I had worked with HR on job announcements on our website and in the local paper so we could fill the vacancies. I badly needed a secretary to take some of the pressure off. I'd already called a temp agency, and they'd promised to send over someone tomorrow. In the meantime, I was on my own, working through the piles on my desk.

The phone on my desk rang, and I reached for it while I jotted down some numbers. I was expecting a phone call from one of the independent contractors I had worked with before on our community projects.

"Tate Rosenbaum," I barked into the phone a little more sharply than I'd intended.

"Tate, it's me," came the small uncertain voice.

“Bry?” What was he doing calling the office number?

“Sorry for calling this number. I tried your cell several times, but you didn’t answer.”

“I got caught up with work,” I said.

“Oh, I’ll let you get back to it, then.”

I closed my eyes. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be mad at you. Why did you call, Bryan?”

“Nothing really. Just wanted you to know I may be late getting home tonight. One of our waitresses called in sick, and if we have a crowd, I may have to work overtime.”

I frowned. I really hated that fucking job of his. After a long day here at the office, I wanted him home when I got there. To say that out loud would probably not go over well, though. He was still annoyed with me over the whole Gio affair, so I kept my mouth shut.

“All right. Call me when you leave, as usual.”

“Okay. Try not to bring work home, okay? I’ve something special planned for you.” He gave a nervous laugh. “I even stopped by Itsy Bits and got something new for tonight. I think you’ll like it.”

My crotch tightened as an image of fucking Bryan with his thong to the side while he wore stockings and heels popped into my mind. Ever since attending that party and seeing those live mannequins, I had the urge to see Bryan in different sexy lingerie. I was delighted he wasn’t put off by my developing fetish.

“If it’s anything like last time, I know I’ll like it,” I said. “I like seeing your ass in a thong. Do you think you could wear heels?”

He chuckled. “That would take some getting used to, but I’m pretty sure I know the perfect person to show me. I had lunch with Jeremy from the store today.”

I knew for certain Bryan loved me. Otherwise, I would’ve been jealous of him hanging around the other man. Jeremy wasn’t Bryan’s type, though. They were too much alike and

more likely to be just friends. Bryan needed a dominant top who was still sensitive to his needs. And I'd like to think I fit that description to a T.

"Doesn't have to be tonight. Some other time. You know what else I'd love seeing you in?"

"Hmm. Tell me."

"Those tiny booty shorts." The mental picture was enough to make me hard. Bryan had a nice round ass that was damn near perfect.

"Ooh, that can be arranged." He sounded positively gleeful. "Why don't we go together to Itsy Bits. Then you can pick out whatever you like."

"Sounds fun."

"Okay, great." He fell silent, but I sensed he wasn't done yet.

"Is something wrong?"

"I don't know. It's probably nothing, but I ran into a woman today. I'm almost sure it was the same woman I saw at the cemetery when I had that confrontation with Gio. She didn't seem to like him."

I frowned. "I'm sure it's nothing, but all the same, call me tonight when you leave work. I'll be waiting up for you."

"Um...there's something else, but it can wait till tonight. Hold on." Muffled talking filtered through the line. Then he returned. "I've got to go, Tate."

"All right. Should I pick up dinner?"

"Nah, I'll eat here on my break. See you later." Another pause. Then he added, "I love you."

Just like that, those three little words were the glue that mended the crack between us. I felt lighter than I had all week. It no longer mattered that I had a mountain of work to go through. His confession of love was the boost I didn't know I needed.

"I love you too, Bry."

He hung up, and I returned to work with renewed vigor. No task seemed too great after that. I couldn't wait for the end of the day, but given Bryan would get home late, I stayed another hour.

Before I left the office, I called Gio and asked him if I could stop by so we could talk. I wanted to get the idea of a possible relationship between Gio and me out of his head once and for all. It just wouldn't happen, and he needed to know that. Me avoiding the elephant wouldn't make it go away. If he chose to end our friendship because of my decision, I would be sad, but I hoped it wouldn't come to that.

At Ristorante da Gio I ordered dinner to go, and while it was being prepared, I followed Gio to his office. He was a nervous ball of energy, even more so than when he had dropped his bombshell on me at Jeremy's shop. I'd figured he'd had some liquid courage in him that night, which would've made it easier for him to tell me how he felt. He pulled off his chef's hat and gestured for me to sit.

"Do you want something to drink?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I don't. I just wanted to have a quick chat. There are some things I want to get done before Bryan gets home from work."

He sighed. "I guess it was too much for him not to tell you about earlier today. I swear the meeting was innocent."

I frowned. "What are you talking about? What meeting? Did you try to confront him again? For fuck's sake, Gio, this has to stop."

"He didn't tell you?"

"No, he didn't say anything. What should he have told me?"

He shrugged. "Nothing. It's nothing. We just ran into each other at a restaurant. It was hardly planned."

I glared, my hackles rising. "I'm not even sure I believe that. I barely know you anymore."

“Hey, I might have messed with him a little in the past, but I mean it. Today’s meeting was purely coincidental.”

I stared at him, trying to figure him out. He wasn’t being completely honest with me, but what was he hiding this time? “Would you lie to me?”

“Maybe.” He shrugged. “If I thought it would prevent you from being hurt.”

“So, it’s futile for me to ask you if you were the one who shot at Bryan at my mother’s party?”

His mouth fell open, and he made a strangled sound. “Oh my god. What the fuck, Tate? How could you ask me such a question? You think I would murder him just to get you?”

“Hey.” I shrugged, pretending a nonchalance I didn’t feel. “I’m just asking. I know your family history, Gio.”

“Then you don’t know me as well as I thought you did.” He turned away from me. “I was hoping we could get past this, but now I realize how ridiculous that is. I made a mistake, okay? I was confused and didn’t want to lose you. It’s always been just us, and suddenly Bryan came along, and he’s taken all the attention. I do love you, but just as a jealous friend. Nothing more.”

“You’re just so fucking confused!” I snapped. “One minute you love me, the next you don’t. Do you even know what the fuck you want, Gio? You need to get your head on straight before you do something foolish. If you can’t appreciate the fact that Bryan makes me happy, then maybe it’s best for you to stay away for a while. I love him. That’s not going to change.”

“I know.” His words came out as a whispered sigh.

“Good. I pray to God you had nothing to do with that incident at my mother’s house because if you were behind it, Gio, you’d be dead to me. For now, I’ll believe someone shot at him by mistake, but if I find out otherwise, it’s going to boil down to you and me, and you’ll be sorry.”

Staring into the familiar face while I leveled a threat wasn’t easy, but it had to be done. While I was grateful for

everything Gio had done for me over the years, he needed to understand boundaries. I didn't want to lose him as a friend, but he needed to respect my partner.

At home, I cleaned up, just to keep me occupied until Bryan got home. I changed the bedsheets, took a shower, then lay naked on the bed to rest. I never intended to fall asleep, but the ringing of my phone woke me up. Blinking the sleep from my eyes, I scrambled for the phone. It was nine thirty.

“Hey, Bry.”

“I just got off work, and I'm driving home now, so I'll see you in about twenty. Can you run me a bath, please?”

“Okay. Bath it is.”

“Then I'll be revived for after.” He chuckled. “I'm off tomorrow, and I even said no to overtime, so we have all night.”

“Don't tempt me. *I* have work tomorrow.”

“I'll go easy on you, then.”

I growled in his ear. “Please don't.”

“Perhaps you want—what the fuck!”

Bryan shouted, then the screech of car tires.

“Bryan!” I yelled into the phone, fear gripping me.

“Fucking asshole! He almost ran me off the road.”

“Who?” I demanded.

“I don't know. A black SUV. The windows are tinted. Holy shit, he's coming back. I don't think this was an accident, Tate.”

The flash of memory of the loud gunshot I'd heard exploding at my mother's house had my heart galloping in my chest. Now I was sure that hadn't been an accident.

“Bryan! Get the hell out of there!” I shouted. The phone went dead. “Bryan!”

I dressed as quickly as I could, and with the phone clutched in my hand, I swiped my car keys from the dresser

and pounded down the stairs to the garage. While I drove like a mad man, I kept calling him back, but he didn't pick up. I had no idea which route he had taken, but I bet on him choosing the shorter one . It would mean leaving the main road, but it would save him minutes. When I still couldn't get through to him, I did the next best thing and called the police. After explaining and throwing in the Rosenbaum name, I was assured they would send a patrol car to the area.

I tried not to think of the worst. He would be okay. He had to be okay. I had almost made myself believe it when I turned into Dickens Street.

Up ahead, blue lights flashed. My heart hammering, I picked up speed, then came to a screeching halt in front of a roadblock. Cars were parked to the side of the street, a few people milling around. Police officers were directing the traffic.

Pain lanced my heart, squeezed, and refused to let go as I identified the Jag smashed against a tree, the hood crumpled, the windshield shattered. Nooooooo! Not again! I couldn't lose him too. I threw the Explorer in Park, jumped out, and ran toward the crash site. But before I could reach it, a cop stepped in my way.

"This is a crime scene, sir, and you're not allowed to go any further."

"I was the one who made the report," I told the officer, still forging ahead. "Where is he?"

The policeman eyed me in suspicion. "How did you know what was happening? What relationship do you have with the alleged victim?"

"I was on the phone talking to Bryan when he got hit." I barely hung on to my temper, reminding myself he was just doing his job. "The line went dead, and he wouldn't pick up again, so I called 9-1-1."

"Can you state your name and the relationship to the driver of the vehicle?"

My heart sank. Why didn't they give me any information? They had done the same thing with Kathleen and Rachel. They had gone round and round in circles before they told me both had died on impact. I dug into my pockets for my wallet and showed him my ID.

"Tate Rosenbaum." My voice boomed with an authority I didn't feel. "The driver, Bryan Cummings, is my boyfriend, and that's my car. Now where the hell is he? Was he already taken to the hospital?"

"Mr. Rosenbaum?" The officer's eyes widened. He obviously recognized the name. *Yes, that's right. We fund the yearly retreat for police officers.* "I'm so sorry, sir, but we don't know where he is."

"What the hell do you mean you don't know where he is?" I snapped. The man didn't make any sense at all.

"This wasn't just a random accident. It seems that this was an intended abduction. We have a witness who saw a man yanking open the car door, dragging the driver, allegedly your partner, out of his car, and pushing him into the trunk of his own car. We have no idea the condition Mr. Cummings is in, but the witness confirmed he didn't struggle but that he was limping and touching his head."

The cop's words were right out of a movie. This couldn't have happened to Bryan.

"Find him!" I shouted, more out of fear than out of being rude. "I don't care how. Put a reward out if you must. I'll pay. I want him back before the night is over."

TATE

TWO MILLION DOLLAR REWARD FOR THE RETURN OF BRYAN CUMMINGS

Billionaire businessman and CEO of Rosenbaum Holdings, Tate Rosenbaum, offers a two-million-dollar reward for any information leading to the whereabouts of his partner, twenty-two-year-old Bryan Cummings. Mr. Cummings was last seen two days ago, forced from his vehicle on Dickens Street.

Call 555-3686 or the nearest police station.

In disgust, I threw the newspaper across the room and pounded my fist on the desk. Nothing. Although the ad had been placed on the front cover of every newspaper in San Diego yesterday, no one had called to give any information. The police had been contacted, but all the callers had been scams, just to collect the reward without giving any useful information. I had been so sure the money would be tempting enough for someone who had seen something to speak out. Someone had to know where Bryan was.

My eyes burned from a lack of sleep. I'd fallen asleep from sheer exhaustion last night, only to wake up with nightmares of finding Bryan's body. I had rushed to the bathroom to spill my guts. I wouldn't give up hope. I refused to believe he was dead. I racked my brain, trying to figure out what this was about. No matter what I came up with, it all linked back to me. It had to be. Bryan didn't have anyone in

his life who would've wanted to hurt him. As far as I knew Keith hadn't bothered him.

My thoughts kept drifting to Gio. I didn't want to think him capable but who else was there? Could he have been triggered by my visit that night? I hadn't spoken to him since Bryan's abduction. I'd ignored his calls all day until he stopped calling. It was better that way. I couldn't be sure I wouldn't accuse him without evidence.

At this point, I didn't even care if they caught the criminal. It could be the perpetrator himself returning Bryan to collect the reward. I just wanted him back for good. I kept seeing him as he had been that morning, reliving our kiss, our conversation.

I wasn't ready to lose him. I would never be ready to lose him, but this was way too soon. We had barely been given the opportunity to explore our relationship. There was still so much I hadn't said to him, so much I hadn't shown him. I wasn't a very religious man, but I prayed like hell for Bryan's return. Hell, if I knew how to get through to Buddha, I would've done that too. I was just so desperate for him to come home.

I tried to delve into work, my phone always beside me. I would've preferred to stay home so I would be there when Bryan returned, but the police had advised me to continue with my daily routine. If a ransom was being demanded, the abductor would likely contact me at work, since the security at my estate was so tight. That was the only reason I was here in my office.

Once again, the media was having a frenzy with my name. I hated that they'd turned the attention from Bryan, who was missing, to Kathleen and Rachel, digging up dirt from ages ago. This morning I had even read an article that insinuated, without exactly spelling it out, that it was suspicious for me to have two partners in car crashes. It was all a distraction, and I couldn't be distracted from what really mattered.

The phone on my desk buzzed, and I grabbed it before the end of the first ring.

“Yes?” I snapped.

“Mr. Rosenbaum, I’ve someone here to see you,” the young temp acting as my secretary announced. “Should I send him in?”

“Who is it? If it has nothing to do with Bryan, I don’t want to see him.”

She didn’t respond, but I heard mumbling. Then a male voice came over the phone. “Mr. Rosenbaum, this is Jeremy. You met me at my lingerie shop some weeks ago. I have some information that may or may not help you regarding Bryan’s disappearance.”

Finally! Someone who knew something. I hadn’t even thought of contacting him, but now I remembered Bryan had had lunch with Jeremy the day he was kidnapped. Maybe something had happened, or Bryan had said something to Jeremy for him to have some clue where Bryan was.

“Come in,” I said and hung up.

When he entered the room, I stood. He was dressed differently today. Wearing skinny jeans and a graphic T-shirt, he looked like a young punk high school teen, although he had to be in his late twenties.

“Jeremy, thanks for getting in touch,” I said in greeting. “Please, have a seat.”

He waved a hand, and bangles tingled around his wrist. “I’ll be fine standing. I do have to get back to the shop soon.”

“You said you have information about Bryan?”

“Yeah. I saw the reward in the paper, and that’s how I knew he was missing. Not that I am here for the reward. I just want him to be found. The few times we’ve talked, we clicked. He’s a good guy who doesn’t deserve for this to happen to him.”

“Thanks. You had lunch with him that afternoon?”

He nodded and slipped his thumbs into the front pockets of his skinny jeans. “Something strange happened when we were in the restaurant. Not that I found anything wrong, but he

thought it strange. His ex and I think he said your best friend were having lunch together. Bryan feared they were up to something.”

The feeling of betrayal that coursed through me mounted into rage. Gio was responsible for this? Didn't he take me seriously when I'd warned him if he came near Bryan, he would regret this?

“I don't know if that information helps,” Jeremy continued. “I hope so.”

“Thank you. I think this will help. If your lead gets him back, the reward is yours.”

He shook his head. “I don't want your money. I just want to know he's okay.”

I thanked him again, and he left. As soon as he was gone, I punched in the number for Gio's restaurant. I would've called his phone, but I didn't want him to know I was on to him. The person who picked up the phone confirmed he wasn't at the restaurant and not coming in until later that night. I hung up and grabbed my car keys. Knowing Gio's habits, if he wasn't at the restaurant during the day, he would be spending it at home in bed so he could be refreshed for the restaurant later.

After briefing the temp on how to answer important calls, I rode the elevator to the ground floor, then rushed straight for my car.

“Ahem,” a voice behind me said.

Startled, I spun around and stared in shock at Rachel's sister. She looked more haggard than I remembered, her hair as flat and dull as her eyes.

“Kristen?” I cried in disbelief. What had happened to her? Compassion bloomed where I had once hated her for the uproar she had caused, blaming me for Rachel and Kathleen's deaths.

“Hello, Tate,” she greeted me, pushing a strand of long red hair from her face. Her hand shook badly.

“I can’t do this right now,” I murmured. I couldn’t take her vitriol when I was so worried about Bryan. I could do very little about getting back our loved ones, but there was still a chance for Bryan.

“It will just take a few minutes. Rachel would’ve wanted that.”

I closed my eyes and clenched my teeth. She always used Rachel as a noose to tighten around my neck.

“Look, Kristen, I’m sorry for what happened between Rachel and me.” I ran my fingers through my hair in frustration. “It was never my intention for her to leave or for our family life to be ruined. I loved her and Kathy so goddamn much. I wish things had played out differently after telling her about my sexuality, but it can’t be changed. I have to move on, and you should too, or all this hatred and bitterness will drive you mad.”

She laughed, startling me. The laugh ended on a sob, and tears filled her eyes, then spilled over her cheeks. “You-you are right.” She sniffed. “That’s why I’m here. I came to apologize for all I did wrong, trying to exonerate myself from the accident being my fault by blaming you.”

I frowned. “What are you talking about?”

She smiled through her tears. “I met him. Did he tell you that? I saw him at the cemetery for the first time. I hated him at first, but that was old Kristen, once again blaming someone and hating them for nothing they did wrong.”

My blood ran cold at the way she was speaking of herself. I remembered Bryan telling me about the woman he had run into at the cemetery, then again at the restaurant. He’d always said he didn’t believe in coincidences. I was starting to agree with him.

“You were stalking him?” I grounded out. Dear god, was she responsible for Bryan’s disappearance, and with her skewered reasoning, was he even still alive? She had always struck me as someone sane and understanding, but that was

before the accident. After, she'd turned into a woman who had seemed to have lost a few marbles.

She cringed, her face turning red. "I wouldn't call it stalking. I just wanted to see the man who was taking my sister's place."

"If this isn't going anywhere, I have to go," I said and opened my car door.

"Please, let me finish." She grabbed my arm. "It's been killing me with guilt, and I need to tell you. It was wrong of me to attack you when they died. It wasn't your fault, yet I blamed you and made it harder for you to deal with their deaths. There is no excuse for what I did, except that I was grieving my sister and niece, and I was responsible."

"What do you mean you were responsible?" The more she said, the more befuddled I became.

"My last moments with Rachel on the phone," she answered. "When she called me, she was hysterical about what you'd told her, that you were bisexual, but as we talked, she calmed down and thought about returning. She insisted that she overreacted and was going to go back home. I-I didn't understand it. I told her she was a fool for still being with you after what you told her. We got in an argument." I stared at her in shock as tears flowed down her face, but her eyes were unfocused as though reliving the conversation with Rachel. "I could hear Kathleen in the background asking for you. I was still arguing with her when I heard the tires screech and her scream. Her scream haunts me, Tate."

I had to cling to the car door to support myself. For years I had blamed myself, believing her accusations that if I hadn't made Rachel mad, she wouldn't have driven off in a fit of rage, which caused her to drive recklessly. All this time, Kristen had known what she had done, and she'd never tried to make it right until now.

"Why?" I asked her. "Why did you drag my name in the mud with every reporter you spoke to? I was grieving them too, and you took that away from me by thrusting me in a web of lies and accusations!"

She placed a hand over her mouth, and her next words came out muffled. “I know, and I’m sorry. I couldn’t live with it anymore, and when I glimpsed you that day at the cemetery, hearing the things you said to Rachel about being sorry, I had to talk to you. I hope someday you can find it in your heart to forgive me for all the pain I caused you.”

Bryan. My thoughts returned to Bryan. He had to be my focus right now. It no longer mattered what had happened two years ago. I had to focus on finding Bryan and bringing him home.

“I need to go.” I yanked my arm free and got into my car, slamming the door shut. I started the ignition, and she knocked on the window. I rolled it down. “Kristen, go home.”

“She gave me a message for you before she died.” She sobbed, then sniffed. “Sh-she was crying, but somehow she hadn’t let go of the phone in the crash. She told me Kathy was gone and that I should tell you she loves you so much. She said she was sorry for being mad at you for not telling her earlier, but she would’ve come back to you.”

I drove away before she could say anything else. If she had told me all this right after the accident, it would have made things so much better. I wasn’t even aware I was crying until I reached the first stoplight. I wiped my eyes and focused on the road, but I felt like a massive weight had been removed from my shoulders.

Rachel hadn’t blamed me. She had wanted to come back. Now all I had to do was to find Bryan before it was too late. I’d almost asked him to marry me the night we’d made love after he had slept in the guest room.

I drove the short distance to Gio’s house, putting Kristen’s words to the back of my mind for now. I had to find out if what Jeremy had said to me would lead me to Bryan’s rescue. If Gio and Keith were behind his disappearance, there would be hell to pay.

Where had I gone wrong with Gio? Could I have done anything differently between us that would’ve brought a different outcome?

On one hand, I didn't want the information to check out, so he could be in the clear. On the other hand, I would be relieved if the trail ended here and Bryan was found. Each day he went missing lessened our chances of finding him, and I intended to find him alive.

Once I was at his house, I left the car parked out front and ignored the doorbell to pound on the door. It worked better for me, given the frustration I was feeling. Gio had lied to me. Now I knew why he had looked so freaked out when I had stopped by his restaurant yesterday. He'd thought Bryan had mentioned his meeting with Keith. I wished Bryan had told me, but I couldn't blame him for keeping it to himself. I blew off his suspicions of Gio. No wonder he would be hesitant to inform me of seeing Keith and Gio together.

The door opened, and Gio stood before me, wearing nothing but a silk robe knotted at the waist. His face registered surprise. I grasped the collar of the robe and pushed him back while I stepped forward, then kicked the door shut behind me.

"Where the hell is he?" I shouted. "If you hurt him, Gio, I will fucking kill you. You hear me? I'm not kidding. I'll fucking make sure that this, right here, is the last breath you take, so think twice before you lie to me."

"I don't know where he is." He darted his eyes away nervously. "I swear he's not here. I was just as shocked when I saw the news."

"I don't believe you!" I slammed him into the wall behind him. "I know you met with that son of a bitch, and you two planned something to get him out of the picture. Didn't you?" I shook him hard enough to rattle his teeth. "Didn't you?"

"What the hell is going on?" came an unexpected voice.

No, that couldn't be true. I spun around. Behind me, a smug-looking Keith had entered the hall. If it weren't such a tense and awkward situation, I would've laughed at his appearance. Apparently he'd pulled his boxers on in such haste they were the wrong side out. I didn't miss the bulge of his erection nor the red marks covering his chest.

“You’re fucking him?” I spat at Gio incredulously. “You figured because I couldn’t love you the way you wanted, that you’d just sleep with the enemy and plot against me?”

“I swear we had nothing to do with Bryan’s disappearance,” he said.

“And I’m supposed to believe the two of you together is coincidental?”

“What business is it of yours who he chooses to fuck?” Keith demanded. “You get Bryan, and I get Giovanni. Seems like a fair trade.”

A flash of rage overwhelmed me. I shoved Gio from me and threw my fist at Keith, hitting him in the face. He stumbled backward, and I went after him again, this time knocking him to the floor. I quickly straddled him, ready to punch him again.

“That was for all the times you knocked him around!” I growled at him, pulling my fist back. “This is for kidnapping him.”

Gio grabbed my fist before it landed. “Tate, I promise you, we didn’t take Bryan. Would we be here having sex if we had?”

I yanked my hand out of his. “Then what the hell is going on here?”

“Let him up, and I’ll explain,” Gio said.

“I’ll stay put right where I am, and you”—I pointed a finger at him—“explain yourself.”

“It’s true that our meeting wasn’t coincidental.” He talked fast as if he was glad it was now in the open. “You told me about Bryan’s ex and how he wanted him back. I thought we could scratch each other’s backs. If I helped him to get back Bryan, then you would be free for the taking. But then we ended up in bed once while coming up with a plan. We haven’t thought of you or Bryan since.”

“Now will you get off my lungs,” Keith gasped. “You’re cutting off my fucking air supply.”

“Why should I believe you two?” I got off Keith and watched Gio try to help him up, but Keith brushed him aside.

“Look, man, I admit to playing mind games with Bryan at first,” Keith said. “He never changed his email password, and I saw all his application letters. It was so easy to inform these companies that he was a bad employee.”

Was he for real? Fucking insane, that was what he was. The lengths he had gone to win back Bryan showed how unstable he was. I turned my attention to Gio. “Can’t you see he’s a twisted fuck? Is that what you really want?”

“If I can’t have you, then why not?” Gio sounded like a petulant child. “For the last time, we have no idea where Bryan is or who snatched him but...”

“But what? If you know something, say it.”

“Oh my god, now I remember. At your mother’s party...” He clapped a hand over his mouth. “I had followed you two up the stairs when you left the ballroom. I could—I could hear you both fucking. I was angry and left. I bumped into your uncle on the stairs, and he dropped something. It was a gun. He laughed it off and said he had left it there on one of his visits and was taking it home. An old man can’t be too careful these days.”

I frowned at him, searching his face to find even the slightest hint that he was lying.

“You never told me that.” Keith nudged Gio in the side. “I thought you told me everything.”

“I didn’t know how significant it was,” Gio said, his face turning crimson.

Keith scowled at him. “Of course, you knew. You knew someone shot at him because you told me the police questioned you about it. I even asked if it was you, and you said no. We agreed if we were working together, we couldn’t lie to each other. You just hoped the old man would get rid of him so you could get a chance with Rosenbaum. How sick are you?”

In a way it was hilarious that *he* was accusing Gio, but I couldn't laugh. It just kept getting worse. If Gio was to be believed, my uncle might have been the one who had shot at Bryan. And he had been gone when the police had arrived. With me exposing what he had done to the company and taking away easy access to funding his gambling addiction, he had a strong motive to do this.

But Uncle Simon? I didn't want to believe it.

"On a scale from one to ten, I'd say you two were perfect for each other," I threw at them, then stalked out of the house.

As of today, Gio was dead to me.

I had barely strapped on the seat belt in my car when my phone buzzed. I dug it out of my pocket. Shit. My heart skipped a beat. The detective who was handling Bryan's case. Fear gripped me that we were too late. What if Uncle Simon didn't want money but revenge for taking away the company from him?

BRYAN

I jerked awake, my heart galloping as I fought between reality and memory. With a groan, I opened my eyes, my shoulders screaming with pain. What the hell had happened? I tried to move my arms, but they didn't budge. Of course not. I was tied to a post. How could I've forgotten? Slowly, pieces came back. The black SUV. Me trying to outrun it, but the driver picking up speed as well. Then the bump against my fender. And again. I had felt like a rag doll being jolted and flipped around in my seat, then crashing into the windshield. For god's sake, why hadn't I worn a seat belt? A blinding pain had pierced my skull, then nothing.

I swallowed. Fuck, that hurt, as if I'd eaten sand. Just then my stomach growled, reminding me I hadn't eaten anything since I was hauled in here. Nor drunk, for that matter. I tried to spit out the gag in my mouth, but it was no use. My throat was parched, and my tongue felt like it had doubled in size. How long could one survive without water?

When I'd come to the first time, I'd found myself in an unfamiliar place, with my back to that damn post and no idea how I'd ended up there. I still didn't. I had been floating in and out of consciousness, but now my head was clear. Well, as clear as possible after having it smashed against a windshield. A few memories popped up. I'd been dragged out of the Jaguar to another car and shoved into the trunk, my head hurting like a bitch. But after that, it was still one black hole. Who the hell was responsible? How long had I been here? Wherever here was.

A sliver of light fell through a window high in the wall. Was it evening, or did the window have blinds? I let my eyes adjust to the darkness, and slowly I could see a few shapes. I was trying to make out anything that would give me an idea of where I was. It seemed to be a basement. Boxes pushed against the walls, a broken chair, stairs in the corner and what seemed a trapdoor, but that was all.

I shifted, trying to get more comfortable, but it only resulted in more pain in my shoulders and wrists. I carefully touched the opposite hand with my fingertips. They felt raw and bloody. My breath hitched.

I am going to die.

Tears of fear and frustration gathered in my eyes and spilled down my cheeks. I couldn't stop them, even if I had wanted to. I simply lacked the energy.

After a while, the tears stopped, but my headache had returned. I was so tired. And angry and afraid. For Tate. Would Tate be mad? Would he think I'd abandoned him? No, he knew I loved him, that I'd never leave him. But he would be out of his mind with worry. How could he not, after having lost his wife and daughter? Maybe the man who had grabbed me would have an attack of conscience and would release me. But from the way he had left me in the basement, without water or food, I doubted he had any. But Tate would find me. I clung to that thought with all my might. I refused to give up hope.

I must have dozed off because I woke up to the sound of a car driving away. The basement was shrouded in darkness again, only a little moonlight seeping in through the single window, but nothing that allowed me to see much. I waited for my eyes to adjust to the dark.

What was that? Something scurried along the walls. I shivered. I would never watch another horror movie when I got out of this basement. In fact, I wasn't sure I could ever enter another basement after this horrifying experience.

I'd racked my brain, but I still hadn't come any closer to figuring out who'd kidnapped me. And why. The only people I

saw capable of pulling a stunt like this were Keith and Gio. This must have been what the two had been planning. Why hadn't I told Tate that I had seen them together in the restaurant? I had wanted to tell him, but he had sounded so exhausted on the line that I had swallowed my words.

My stomach growled again, and I grimaced. Maybe it would scare away any creatures that might be in this basement with me. I nodded off, my head full of images of Tate holding me, kissing me. The crunch of car tires woke me, and I jerked up. Ouch. Goddamn ties. If only there was a way I could signal to whoever had just approached that I was down here. I shoved that idea away immediately. The new arrival could very well be my abductor.

I grunted in frustration. What a stupid thing to do—kidnapping me, only to leave me here to starve. What would that accomplish? Didn't they realize that when I eventually died from hunger and lack of water that my body would begin to smell? I shuddered at the gruesome thought, my heart feeling empty.

Tate, where are you? I need you.

Praying wasn't something I had indulged in since I was an adult. When I was younger, though, I used to live with a religious couple who took me to church with them every Sunday. When they had caught me kissing their son, they had dropped me back at the social worker's office. I prayed now to whatever being would listen to keep me alive until someone found me. I didn't want to leave Tate yet.

I started listing all the things I would do after I was freed. Life was too short to continue working a job I didn't like. I would swallow my pride, accept Tate's offer to work with the foundation. I would trust Tate that he knew I could handle it, and with his guidance, I'd work my hardest to make him proud.

And we would get married. I was sure of it. Not only would we marry, but we would find a surrogate to bear our children, so we could continue the Rosenbaum legacy. I would have a home and a family with three or four kids. We would be

there for them as they figured out how the world worked, and we would teach them how to love.

The tears fell again. I was trying to be strong, but the thoughts of a future I might never get to live filled me with despair.

Squeak. I jerked up, startled, and I peered to the stairs. The trapdoor leading to the basement was pulled back, and a glimmer of light shone on the steps.

Step by step, two legs—with men's shoes—materialized and made their way down the stairs. Whoever it was held the beam of the flashlight down so I couldn't see his face. Once he was down to the final steps, he shined the light right at me. I closed my eyes, the light hurting my pupils at the sudden exposure.

He stomped toward me. Gravel crunched. A car. No, more than one, by the sound of it. He stopped and swept the beam to the side. I blinked open one eye. He took another step to me, paused, then swiveled around and rushed up the stairs. I screamed, but all that came out were muffled grunts behind the gag. As soon as he was at the top step, he slammed the trapdoor shut, and a bolt slid in place.

My stomach lurched as I waited. What was happening? Who had come? Oh god, let it be Tate. Would he even remember to return after they had been gone?

The doorbell rang, and every now and then, footsteps and muffled voices carried down to me. Whoever the visitors were, they trampled around the house, even coming close to the basement door. I held my breath, my heart hammering. Then the footsteps faded, a door banged, and the cars drove away.

The air wooshed out of me and, with it, my last hope.

TATE

“Where the hell is he?” I grabbed my uncle by the shirt. Detective Marks placed a hand on my arm, but I shrugged him off. I stared into the face that I had known for so long. How could he have done this to me?

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Uncle Simon darted his gaze from me to the detective. “Is there something I can help you with?”

“Mr. Rosenbaum,” Detective Marks said, prying my hands away from my uncle. “Let us handle the investigation. You stay here while my colleague investigates the house.”

Panic flared in my uncle’s eyes. God, it was true.

Gio’s statement had pointed to my uncle, but I couldn’t believe it. Had Gio told the truth? He’d been lying left and right lately, and maybe the real culprits were he and his deranged fuck buddy.

Then I’d gotten a call from an unknown number, requesting four million dollars in cash for Bryan’s return. He’d given me six hours to retrieve it and an address where to drop it off. The voice had been muffled, so I hadn’t been able to recognize it. When I’d asked if Bryan was still alive, the person had ended the call.

The money was no problem. Hell, I would pay ten million dollars if that would get me Bryan back safely.

I had immediately informed Detective Marks. He’d thought it too much of a coincidence and decided to follow Uncle Simon in the hopes he would lead the police to Bryan.

I'd wanted so badly to race to Uncle Simon and ask what the hell he had been thinking, but Detective Marks had warned me against it. The police had no hard evidence linking Uncle Simon to the abduction. If they acted prematurely, they would only tip him off. And if he was involved, the worst-case scenario was that he might kill Bryan.

An hour after I'd contacted Detective Marks, he'd dropped by and told me Uncle Simon was on the move. I'd begged him to come with him, and in the end, he'd allowed me to follow them in my own car. Of course, it wasn't police procedure, but the Rosenbaum name held much weight, and I had been desperate enough to use it.

Uncle Simon had stopped at the side of the road and made a phone call—we'd had a clear view through the passenger side window—then had driven away. I had thought Uncle Simon would lead us to his house. It was where I would've gone in the first place to see if he was hiding Bryan there. Instead, he'd stopped at an unfamiliar modest two-story house. The detectives had confirmed this was where his wife lived alone.

"Mr. Rosenbaum, we just have a few questions for you," Detective Marks said while gesturing at the other cop to start searching.

"Hey, you can't do that!" Uncle Simon argued. "This is private property, and I didn't see a warrant."

"Are you the owner of this house?" Detective Marks flipped open a small notepad.

"I didn't say that," Uncle Simon said. He glared at me. "What do you think you are doing? Don't you have any respect? This is Susan's home."

"Then what are you doing here?" I snapped at him. "Does she know you are here?"

"Of course, she knows. We may be separated, but she's still my wife. I still come around as we try to work on our marriage."

“Hmm, maybe I’d better confirm that bit of information.” I pulled my phone out of my pocket.

“All right then. It was a surprise visit!” he blurted out. “I was planning to ask her to move back home so we can work on our marriage. Is that hard to believe?”

“Given what I saw at work between you and your secretary, yes, I find that hard to believe.”

Color flooded his face, and he turned to the detective. “Officer, what is he even doing here? Isn’t he a civilian? Whatever questions you have to ask me can be done without his presence. In fact, why don’t we go to a police station where we can sit and talk about whatever ridiculous notion brought you here.”

“We will go to the police station in a minute to talk to you,” Detective Marks answered. “Still, we have to check the property. We are looking for Mr. Rosenbaum’s partner, Mr. Bryan Cummings. You haven’t seen him, have you?”

I was sure I hadn’t been the only one who’d seen the guilt in my uncle’s eyes. “Why would I know where he is? Why don’t you ask my nephew where he is?”

“We’ve already questioned Mr. Rosenbaum.”

“I still have no idea what all this has to do with me.”

I snapped then. “You can cut the act, Uncle. Someone saw you at mom’s birthday party with a gun. I think the police are interested in that weapon so they can run ballistic tests on the bullet they removed out of the bathroom wall.”

When he’d flushed just a minute ago, his face now looked downright ashen. He was cornered, and he knew it.

“Now is the time to come clean and tell us all you know,” Detective Marks said. “We may consider giving you a lighter sentence. We know that sometimes people make rash decisions in the moment and it gets out of hand. Let’s not allow it to get any more out of control. Tell us what you did with Bryan Cummings. I promise you that if you don’t cooperate, we will still find Mr. Cummings, and when we do, you’ll be punished to the fullest extent of the law.”

Uncle Simon went silent for a minute. Then he glowered at me. The hatred in his eyes took me aback. I had never seen this look before. “Then good luck in finding him.” He smirked. “The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree after all. You should never have been made CEO.”

He stomped his chest. “I was the most senior member of the family. I had been working at the company for far longer than you, but your father had convinced the board members, singing your praises about what you could do for the company. With all your talk about legacy, none of you realized you were robbing me of *my* legacy! You should never have come back! You should have stayed in the mountains where you belonged. Then maybe you would still have that sorry excuse for a man!”

My hands balled into fists at my sides. I was trembling, barely containing myself, and I took a step forward. But it was as if Detective Marks sensed my anger because he situated himself between us.

“Where is he, Uncle Simon?” I asked through clenched teeth. “Please, tell me what you did to him. Is he a-alive?”

“How would I know?” He shot me a twisted smile. “Is he?”

“Mr. Rosenbaum, no!” Detective Marks grabbed my arms. A good thing too or else I would’ve squeezed the answer out of him. “We’ll get the answers,” he assured me. “We’ll take him down to the station and question him.”

Just then, the other cop returned and shook his head. “Nothing. I’ve checked all the rooms.”

I growled. “No, Bryan has to be here! My uncle came here. He could have gone anywhere else, but he came here on a night when Aunt Susan was away.”

“We shouldn’t even be searching without a warrant,” Detective Marks told me. “You can have a look around, since you’re family and especially if you know she won’t file a complaint for breaking and entering. We’ll see what we can get out of your uncle in the meantime while we work on

getting a warrant so we can tear up the place properly in case...”

Although he didn't finish his sentence, I understood only too well. They may need to look further for a body. I couldn't afford to think about that, or I'd go mad. But that didn't make sense. If he had already killed Bryan, why would he have called and demanded the ransom? And if Bryan was already dead and buried, why would he need to come here?

“I'll call my aunt and find out if there's anything more to the house that I should take a look at,” I told Detective Marks. “I'll come to the station in a bit.”

“All right. Good luck.”

Uncle Simon went with the cops without another word. I closed the door on Detective Marks reading him his Miranda rights. I leaned against the closed door, my stomach in knots. This was our last clue. If we didn't find Bryan here, I wouldn't know where else to look.

I punched in my aunt's number as I began my search, starting on the second floor. Her phone rang to voicemail, and I left her a message to call me as soon as possible. At least she had called me once about Bryan's disappearance and expressed genuine concern.

That was more than I could say for my mother. She had complained of being tired of my scandals attaching itself to the Rosenbaum name. I had almost reminded her she wasn't a true Rosenbaum but had married into the family. She would never have forgiven me for that. Then again, I didn't care anymore. If she could only whine after the man I loved went missing, I was through with her.

Without Aunt Susan's help, I had to search the house on my own. Thank god the house wasn't huge. I hated entering her bedroom, violating her privacy, but I had to do it. I had to find Bryan.

I checked even in impractical places, but I was desperate. When I came up empty on the second floor, I trudged down the stairs. I searched every nook and cranny, my heart in my

throat, scared of what I would find. Could one place be so silent if there was a live person in it?

My hope plunged with every area I checked. I slammed the cabinet under the sink closed and braced my hands on the counter as grief washed over me. I didn't know where else to look. Had I lost him forever? I had no other choice but to leave and visit the police station. I would make Uncle Simon talk if it was the last thing I did.

I had just stepped onto the porch when a car pulled up into the yard. I waited, my hands in my back pockets, as Aunt Susan got out of the vehicle, a surprised look on her face.

"Tate, what are you doing here, sweetie? How did you know where I lived?" she asked as she climbed the steps of the porch. "Oh my god, it's not your boyfriend, is it? Did you find him?"

I shook my head, but before I could utter a word, she'd wrapped her arms around me in a motherly hug, and I just broke. I shuddered against her, allowing the tears of frustration and desperation to fall.

I sniffled, then pulled away. "We thought we had him. I know it sounds strange, but that's why I'm here. We trailed Uncle Simon here."

"Simon? Why would he come here? He called me to meet him at a diner, and I waited an hour for him to get there. When it was evident he was standing me up, I left."

Alarm bells rang again. "Does he come here a lot?"

"No, he rarely stops by, though he did come a few days ago. He was being really sweet and offered to help me clean up the basement. I've been meaning to since I moved here, but basements are so spooky that I try to avoid them. Of all the years your uncle and I have been married, I never once went into our basement."

In everything she said, only one thing registered. "There's a basement?"

She nodded. "Yes, after cleaning up, he told me I'd do better not to go down there. The previous owners apparently

left a lot of junk inside. He's coming back to clean it out for me. I think he's trying to work on our marriage. At least I thought so before he stood me up—”

I grabbed her hands. “Where’s the basement?” My heart raced, excitement rushing through my veins.

“Behind the stairs. It operates like a trapdoor. Why?”

“Tell you in a minute,” I called to her and raced back inside the house. Of course, she was right! Because the door was behind the stairs and into the floor, we had completely missed it. I raised the door, revealing steps that disappeared into darkness. Oh god, please let him be here. Please let him be here.

If Bryan wasn't here, I would be devastated, my soul crushed, my heart shattered.

“Aunt Susan, do you have a flashlight?”

BRYAN

The trapdoor opened again for the second time that evening. This time I didn't have the energy to hope. I just waited for my tormenter to make himself known and find out what he wanted. Maybe he was coming right now to finish me off.

Pain stabbed my heart when I thought about Tate. He would manage to live without me. He was strong and would find someone to love again. With me out of the picture, Gio might have the chance to be with him, and maybe everyone's prediction that they made a lovely couple would come true. His mother would be delighted when Tate didn't have an inferior boyfriend in his life.

But I wasn't inferior to him, dammit! We belonged together. We did. I pledged to myself then that I would fight. With the last breath in me, I would fight to live. Not just for me but also for Tate.

I raised my head and waited for my kidnapper. Feet appeared on the top steps but stopped.

"Aunt Susan, do you have a flashlight?"

A sob tore from me. If this was a dream, then I didn't want to wake up from it. Tate had found me. I didn't even care the why and how of it. He had found me.

My body jolted painfully from my sobs, and I coughed.

"Bry, is that you?"

Yes! Yes! The words came out as a mumble against the gag. My body spasmed again in a reflex motion of wanting to run to him. Even if I weren't tied to the post, I wasn't sure if I could even walk. My legs were dead from sitting on the cold concrete for so long. I tried to wiggle my toes but nothing.

A flashlight beam shone into the basement, but this time, the person holding it didn't hide. Tate appeared at the foot of the stairs and swept the solitary beam across the room. The light traveled past me, then jerked back to me. He ran toward me and dropped to his knees. He took my face between his hands and kissed the tears from my cheeks, my chin, my eyes.

"Oh, thank god! Thank god, Bryan! I looked everywhere for you. I thought I'd never find you, my love."

At my muffle, he reached behind my head and removed the gag. I tried to speak, but the only sound I managed was a croak.

"Shh, it's okay. Don't speak." He gave me a soft kiss on my mouth, then crouched behind me. With his hands shaking, it took a while to untie the ropes. When I was free, I cried out from the pain of the feeling returning to my hands, and I toppled over, too weak to hold my own weight.

"Bryan!" He caught me before I slid to the floor. He pulled me into his arms and rocked me. "I love you. I love you. Thank god I found you."

As much as his words were wonderful to hear, my body needed nourishment his words wouldn't provide. I clung to the front of his shirt. "Wa-wa-ter."

"You need water?"

I nodded, and my stomach growled in protest.

"And food?"

I nodded again.

"Son of a bitch. He had you here for three days without any food or water?"

I nodded.

“Let’s get you out of here.”

He swung me up into his arms, reminding me of the day we had met. From that moment, my soul had belonged to him. I buried my face in his chest and drew comfort from him. I was safe now.

He trudged up the steps with me in his arms, and I sighed. A woman stood at the top of the stairs, her eyes wide in concern. I recognized his aunt from his mother’s party. I guessed this was her home, but she seemed just as confused as me how I ended up here. Wasn’t Gio responsible for this after all? If not him, then who?

“Oh my god!” The woman covered her mouth with her hands. “How long has he been there? I swear, Tate, I had no idea.”

“I know you had nothing to do with this, Aunt Susan,” Tate answered. “I’ll explain later. Right now, we need to get some food into him and liquid. He hasn’t eaten in days.”

“This way.” She led us to the kitchen and filled a glass with water. Tate sat at the kitchen table with me on his lap and held the glass to my cracked and split lips.

“Small sips at first,” he encouraged me.

I tried, but I was so thirsty, and the water going down my parched throat felt so wonderful. I drank too fast, and water dribbled down my chin onto his shirt.

“Sor-ry,” I stammered.

“It’s okay. Sip some more.”

He was patient, treating me with the same care he had taken when I had sprained my ankle. He withdrew the glass from my lips, and I mewled in protest.

“I’ll give you more in a bit,” he said. “Your body needs to get used to what it’s been deprived of. Too much too soon, and it will make you sick.”

Trusting Tate, I leaned against his chest and listened in shock as he explained quietly to his aunt how I had ended up in her basement. I was stunned to find out his uncle was the

one responsible. That odd man. I'd known something was off about him when he'd made that comment in the lobby about taking over the company.

"I am so ashamed." She cried as she placed a small bowl of soup and crackers on the table before me. "I could never have imagined he would ever do something like this. To his own family. What was he thinking?"

"He must've been desperate. Maybe he owed some people money." Tate dipped the spoon into the soup and fed me another mouthful. "It probably didn't help that I'd forced him to resign because of him embezzling funds to support his addiction."

Before he could say anything else, his phone rang. He glanced at the screen. "Think you can manage on your own if I take this call?" he asked.

I nodded, and he placed me on the chair and left the room. The feeling in my limbs was slowly coming back, tingling and hurting, but I tried to ignore it. I fumbled with the spoon but managed to get it to my mouth.

"It-it's not your fault," I croaked hoarsely at Susan. She sat quietly at the table, her face streaked with tears. "You didn't know what he was up to."

She sniffed. "I should have known something was wrong. I hadn't seen him for months, and suddenly he appears and offers to clean out my basement. I could have prevented this."

I shook my head and reached across the table to squeeze her hand. "If you hadn't let him in, he would've brought me somewhere else. Probably somewhere Tate would never have found me."

While she let that thought to sink in, I ate the soup. I was already feeling better, my stomach no longer growling. I put down the spoon and took a cracker as Tate came back into the kitchen. The frown on his face told me the news he had was bad.

"That was Detective Marks," he said and plucked me from the seat, then sat once more with me in his lap. "Uncle Simon

confessed to everything. It's just as we suspected. He has a huge gambling debt hanging over his head. Your house is on the verge of being claimed by the bank. He targeted Bryan because Bryan had overheard something, something he thought you had told me." He lifted his brow.

"It was that day he met me," I said. "He didn't know who I was yet, and he was making some statements about the pictures on the wall. Basically, he was saying he would take over the company, no matter what. How could I've known he meant it? I dismissed it as just wishful thinking. And then it slipped my mind."

Tate stared at the woman across the table, his expression serene. "I'm sorry, Aunt Susan, but we're not going to let this slide. He's done too much. He could have asked for help, but he didn't. He chose to go as far as to kidnap Bryan, and I don't take that lightly. He made it personal, trying to use Bry to hurt me."

She nodded, her face crestfallen. "I understand."

"Are you finished?" he asked me. "I need to get you to the hospital to have you examined."

I groaned. "I'm fine. Do I have to?"

"We'll let the doctor decide how fine you are."

After everything I had been through, *we* had been through, I gave him a mock scowl. "You mean after three days, *you* can't decide if I'm fine anymore?"

He had been so serious since he found me, like the grumpy bear the first day we met, that I was relieved to see the crack of a smile. "After we put back a few pounds on you, I'll answer that."

My scowl this time was real. He leaned forward and dropped a kiss on my lips. "Just kidding. Even when you're all skin and bones, you'll still be fine to me because I love you."

I placed an arm around his neck and hugged him. "Thank you for loving me enough not to give up on searching for me. I prayed you would find me."

“I’ll always find you. No matter how long it takes.”

The conviction in his voice made it hard not to believe him. I hoped we would never have cause again to test that theory.

“Aunt Susan, perhaps you should call Mother and stay with her tonight,” Tate suggested.

She shook her head. “No, this is my home now. I’ll be fine. You two should go to the hospital. Please keep me updated.”

Tate carried me to his car, and she walked us out, standing on the porch. I couldn’t help but notice her sadness.

“Will she be okay?” I asked Tate.

“Maybe not at first, but she’s a strong woman. She’ll overcome this.”

He started the ignition but didn’t put the car in Drive. He took my left hand in his and squeezed. Then he pulled me toward him and tucked me into his arms, his chin on my head.

“Do-Don’t ever scare me like that again.” His voice broke. “I’ve never been that scared in all my life.”

“At times, I wanted to give up,” I confessed. “The thought of starving to death down in that basement nearly drove me mad, but thinking about you kept me sane. Want to know what I was thinking about?”

“Tell me.”

When I told him, holding nothing back, he crushed me even tighter against him. “Yes. I say yes to all of that and more. So much more.”

And I believed him. This was only the beginning.

BRYAN

THREE YEARS LATER

“Isaac, honey, don’t kick Daddy’s seat,” I reprimanded. He lowered his legs and gave me his biggest innocent blue eyes as though he hadn’t been doing anything wrong.

“Sorry, Pappa. Are we there yet?”

“Almost.” Tate glanced at him in the rearview mirror. “Are you excited?”

“Not really.”

Tate and I shared a smile. Of the three of us, Isaac was probably the most excited about the birth of our twin girls. That said a lot because Tate and I were pretty stoked for this moment.

When we had held our babies for the first time yesterday, we had been a blubbering mess. They were perfection we would always cherish, just as much as we loved our little boy, who came to us a scrawny and shy three-year-old. Now he was four, healthy and full of mischief. We were close to our goal of four kids, although Tate had barked that we were capping it at three. I knew exactly how to get him to change his mind, though.

“I thought you were looking forward to being a protective older brother,” I said. “You don’t want to be a big brother anymore?”

Isaac shrugged. “Maybe. Can I tell them what to do, just like Daddy tells you what to do?”

Beside me, Tate choked on laughter, and I scowled at him. “Daddy doesn’t tell me what to do.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Uh-huh,” I disagreed.

I reached across to the backseat and tickled him until he erupted in laughter, his little legs kicking.

“We’re here,” Tate announced, pulling into a parking spot at the hospital.

“Fi-nal-ly!” Isaac exclaimed in a voice that showed how exhausted he was from all the wait.

“All right, everybody, bail out. Let’s go fetch our princesses.”

“Does that make me a prince?” Isaac asked Tate, who helped unbuckle him from his booster seat.

“Yes, that makes you our little prince,” Tate said, and I smiled, listening to their conversation. That big lug of a mountain man had been through so many changes, but to be honest, I as well. I was now in charge of the foundation, whereas Tate was still the CEO of Rosenbaum Holdings. We had turned into San Diego’s perfect corporate couple. At least, according to the press. Today’s newspaper headline had read:

Our Own Mr. Corporates welcome twin baby girls to their already perfect family.

Our family was anything but perfect. Tate and I still argued, and we were still figuring out parenting. It helped that Tate’s mother had done a one-eighty after our marriage almost three years ago. It was as though she’d realized that it was useless fighting me being in her son’s life. She had welcomed Isaac into our family with open arms.

We had grown close to Aunt Susan. She always volunteered to keep Isaac for a night whenever Tate and I had functions to attend or just needed some alone time. We were happy to have her around. She never quite got over what her husband had done. Less than a year in prison and he had been knifed and had died later in the hospital.

At the time we had adopted Isaac from the children’s home, which had been my first project with the foundation, we had been trying with a surrogate but with no luck. The same day the adoption of Isaac was finalized, our surrogate had called to break the good news that she was pregnant. In fact, she had called us while we were at the adoption agency. When the agent had asked us if we wanted to cancel the adoption, we

didn't doubt for a second what we wanted to do. From the moment we had seen Isaac, we knew we wanted to raise him as our son.

Isaac walked between us, swinging on both our hands. "I can't be a prince!" he exclaimed.

"Why not?" I asked him.

"Because that makes you a king and a"—he scrunched up his face as he examined me—"queen?"

The only reason I didn't erupt into laughter was that we walked in a silent zone in the hospital. It didn't stop me from snickering, though. Tate was grinning from ear to ear.

"Try again, little buddy," I told him.

"A king and a king?" he asked, looking hopeful this time he had it right.

"Exactly."

Tate leaned sideways and kissed me briefly to prove his point.

"That's so cool!" Isaac grinned up at us. "Can I get a kiss too?"

"Sure, buddy." I swung him up, and Tate smashed a kiss to his cheek.

A nurse walking by us smiled. "What a cute family you make."

"Thanks," Tate and I chorused.

We located the nursery where our daughters were ready to be discharged. A nurse brought them out and handed one to Tate and the other to me. Staring at the pink faces, I knew the gravity of the commitment we had made to be parents to our three kids. We had both contributed our sperm to be used with the surrogate, so we had no idea which of us was the biological father, and we didn't care either.

As I sat with the babies in my arms, Isaac beside me, looking on with great interest, Tate signed the release papers.

He returned to rescue one of the little infants from me. “Ready to go home?”

Isaac nodded, his expression serious. “I’m ready.” His little chest puffed out. “I’m ready to be a big brother.”

Tate squeezed his shoulder. “I appreciate that, bud, because we are going to need all hands on deck. Let’s go.”

We walked side by side, and I smiled at them, my family, my legacy. The feeling of not knowing where I belonged had disappeared. Now I was a husband, a father, and a friend.

Tate caught my eye. “What’s going through your head now? I hope not baby number four.”

I grinned. “I’ll give you at least two years gap. I was just thinking I’m so happy you let me love you.”

“Not like I had much of a choice. I was a goner from the first moment I met you.”

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ABOUT GIANNI HOLMES

Gianni Holmes is a high school teacher who moonlights as an author when she gets the time away from marking scripts and writing lesson plans.

Hailing from the Caribbean, she's a fan of the sunshine but not so much the beach. She has a fear of large bodies of water. She loves reading and watching romantic comedies.

Her mission is to write compelling stories readers will love with the two h's...heat and heart.