



LONELY
COLLEGE
BOY

J. ALLEN GRADY

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LonelyCollegeBoy

Boys of Simson U.

Book 1

J. Allen Grady

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To those who have decided not to stand in the way of their own happiness.

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CHAPTER 1

THOMAS

God, what a shitty morning, I thought as I pushed through the door of the Sunrise Cafe, a popular hangout just two blocks down from my office. It had been open for six months, but I'd never been, even for coffee. Usually, if I go out for lunch when I'm in the office, it's for business, requiring a venue to impress a client. Otherwise, I bring a little food from home to hold me through the day. Boring, I know.

It seemed like I had *just* beat the lunch rush, and I was able to grab an empty bistro table right away. As I browsed the menu, I also took in my surroundings, which were bright and clean. It seemed like a pleasant sort of place for a leisurely lunch or coffee date. But a leisurely lunch wasn't in my cards, and the day's worries nudged their way back into my thoughts.

I really should quit my job. Which I say every week, but Monday's a little early to be obsessing over it...

I knew it was time to either find a place that values my work more or to set out on my own path. *But when are you gonna grow the balls? It's gonna be a long fucking week!*

"Can I get you something to drink, sir?" a young man asked, drawing my mind back to the present.

"Water, please," I said.

Maybe my crabbiness was more obvious than I suspected. "Long day already?" he asked, smiling politely.

Not politely... He's a ray of damn sunshine.

Something about his cheeriness, his positivity, set me on edge, and I grimaced. “The worst.” Before he could follow up, giving me some useless aphorism, or worst of all a pep talk, I added, “I’m in a hurry, so go ahead and put in a roast beef on rye and fries for me.”

He stared at me hesitantly, his smile wavering ever so slightly. “Of course,” he murmured before hurrying off.

When he returned a minute later with my water, he looked tentative. “I’m sorry, sir. I, uhm ... I forgot to ask—”

“Lettuce, tomato, onion, horseradish sauce, no mayo, no pickles,” I said, ordering efficiently. “Provolone. And I really am in a hurry so...”

“Yes, sir,” he said softly and hurried off again.

He’s gonna get it wrong...

Billy

This douche isn’t my first angry, impatient lunch-rush businessman. And he’s sure as hell not the first intimidatingly hot daddy in a suit to snap at me.

So why are my hands shaking as if I’m giving my best friend Last Rites after an encounter with a demon-possessed tween makes said best friend jump out of a window and down a flight of—

Yeah, I’ve always been a horror fan. Sue me.

FOCUS! my rational brain barked. *You should have written that order down!*

As if I could have even caught it, the way he was snapping at me, tossing it out on rapid fire. You would have thought I had keyed his Mercedes the way he looked at me—with those dark, piercing eyes, and that handsome, impassive face. The way he was speaking to me, I kept expecting a sneer to mar his good looks, but it never came. Instead, he just held my attention with this unsettling intensity—the kind a child gets from a disappointed parent.

One word kept coming to mind. *Daddy*. And I wasn't sure which had my hands shaking more: the anxiety his attitude produced, the strangely pleasant tension I felt at the way he'd looked at me, or the mild arousal caused just by the emotion this hot *daddy* conveyed with a glance.

All of the above. Definitely all of the—

Fuck, what did he want on that damn sandwich?! I'm going to have to just go back over there... That's what I should do. What I was about to do instead would end badly—I can feel it! It's better than going back to that table, though. That risked having this suit-armored grumpy daddy level me emotionally, and probably cause me to pop a boner while I stammered incoherently.

I just needed to remember.

Lettuce, tomato, onion? Yes, he wanted the normal stuff. Mayo and pickles? He mentioned them, but did he want them or not. I'll hedge my bets: mayo and pickle on the side. Guess we'll see.

“Okay,” I muttered as his order entered the queue. “Butt covered.”

I went to check on my other tables, turning on my best smile for my best tables. I could recognize good and bad tippers a mile away. You can probably guess who got the bulk of my attention. As I moved around the room, though, I couldn't help but keep glancing over at the brooding, angry man.

Grumpy daddy...

No! Don't give him a nickname. It's like animals—if they aren't your pets, don't name them!

Sometimes he'd be staring into the distance, his face a storm cloud; others he would be staring at his watch, counting the minutes. Finally, though, my luck ran out, and our eyes met. He didn't immediately look away, and that intensity again shook me. Then he looked down at his watch again.

See, that look isn't for you. It's just that expectant, impatient “summon the server” look.

“I have to be leaving in about ten minutes,” he said immediately when I walked over, his voice cold but not as angry as I expected. Like his look, his tone didn’t cross over into disdain. “What are the chances I’ll get to eat a bite before I have to pack it up and eat the rest in my office while I listen to morons and geeks try to talk over each other about tech shit?”

I bit my bottom lip, struggling both to remind myself that his feelings overflowing were not a personal attack but also to keep from smiling or, worse, laughing. He had such a funny way of expressing his frustrations. If he wasn’t in such a bad mood, he seemed like the kind of man I could listen to for hours.

Nope, nope, nope, nope, nope!

“Let me go check with the kitchen, sir,” I said, averting my eyes. “I’m sorry for the wait. We’ve been very—”

But he was pulling out his phone, dismissing me without another word.

Thomas

I’m betting my food is sitting under a heat lamp drying out. Despite my annoyance, I couldn’t help stare at the waiter’s behind as he walked away.

Watching him laugh and flirt his way through the restaurant annoyed me more than it should have. And then there was the surge of guilt I felt at the way his smile had faded when our eyes met.

When he approached, I hadn’t been sure which emotion would surface first. Unfortunately, it was the anger, so I decided to keep our interaction short and sweet. I even tried to be funny, but he didn’t seem to find it amusing, so I ended our interaction before it could go *terribly* wrong.

It’s for the best. Worst case scenario, you lose your shit on that poor young man... Almost as bad was the possibility that I

would be drawn in by the smile that made his eyes twinkle.
Stop! He's probably younger than your daughter!

But as he nervously walked off toward the kitchen and glanced back over his shoulder timidly, my stomach lurched. He was *such* a pretty boy—a short, slender, pale blond. Not my normal type *at all*.

I had mostly given up on dating at this point, but the last three guys I had hooked up with were each over six feet of brawn. Two of them were older than me. Tall, dark, and handsome—that's my type. I wasn't exclusively attracted to this type, but it is the type most likely to click with me in the bedroom, since I didn't fit the classic stereotypes associated with "muscle daddies" like me.

But his ass is nice. So nice—

Why am I even noticing that? Since I only top when I absolutely have to, I couldn't remember the last time a hot behind was the thing that draws my attention. I shook my head as if to get this sunshine prince out of my head.

"Here you go, sir," the young man said, putting a plate down in front of me. His smile felt forced, unlike the one he seemed to give everyone else. But I *had* asked for that, hadn't I? Then he added, "I brought you a takeout container and your check, since I know you'll be in a hurry..."

My heart caught in my throat. I'd been very rude to the kid, and he'd been so attentive and thoughtful. I pulled a debit card out of my wallet and handed it to him along with the ticket.

"Do you need anything else?" he asked shyly.

"No, thank you ... uhm, what did you say your name was?" I asked.

"I forgot to say," he said, blushing a little. "It's Billy, sir."

God, that's so cute. Then I too was blushing.

I looked at my plate after he'd dragged that gorgeous butt out of sight.

*Ugh... I hope that pickle juice didn't soak into the bread.
But at least that disgusting mayo is on the side!*

I took a bite of the dry, tasteless sandwich.

*No horseradish sauce, I guessed, lifting the bread to check.
Completely dry! No wonder I could barely choke it down!
Fuck!*

I knew, in the grand scheme of things, it wasn't important—certainly nothing to get angry over. But I already felt bad as I saw the boy walking back over, proud to have redeemed himself and wearing that sunny grin again.

No sooner had I recovered a little in his eyes did my big mouth popped off. "I guess they don't have any horseradish sauce in the kitchen? Or did the chef just forget the most important part of the sandwich?" I asked, my tone far too stern. "You really should have let me know, if you're out. This thing is so tasteless I could barely—"

"I'm sorry, sir," he stammered. "I can check and see if—"

Billy

"Just get me three packs of mustard so I can get the hell out of here and back to my office!" he snapped. He didn't yell or scream, but I jumped at the bite of his criticism.

"Yes, sir," I mumbled and hurried off to grab a few packets of mustard. I didn't dare tell him the problem wasn't in the kitchen.

I returned just as he finished signing the receipt. He snatched the mustard from my hand, not even looking up, then barged over to the door, never looking back.

"You are *so* not getting a tip from that guy, Billy," a barista named Molly said with a hushed laugh as she put a hand on my arm. "You really let him get you worked up..."

I looked to where her hand touched my trembling arm. "I knew he was in a bad mood, and it flustered me..." I

explained. “I got his order a little wrong, and I guess it set him off...”

I reached for the signed receipt, ready to slip it into my pocket. Surprisingly, Mister Thomas Gregory—yeah, I had made a point to remember his name from his card, and no I don’t usually do that—had left a fairly generous tip. I showed Molly.

She arched her eyebrows. “Huh! I wouldn’t have guessed. Seemed like the kind of Karen looking for an excuse to leave you a Bible verse where the tip should go...”

Now that he was gone, all I could think of was his sharp jawline covered in stubble, his dark, wavy hair barely peppered with the first few grays. He was so tall and broad shouldered. I wished he had been wearing something more revealing than a suit, but he made it look so good...

He must be insanely handsome when he smiles. If he ever smiles.

I tried not to linger long. I had plenty of tables left to charm.

Next semester’s tuition is not going to pay itself!

CHAPTER 2

THOMAS

I sat staring at the blinking cursor. Since lunch, I had barely managed to eek out two paragraphs of a complicated proposal for one of our most lucrative clients. This lack of productivity, I lied to myself, was mostly due to my frustration over the endless back-and-forth between the team of nerds who develop our products and the executives who can't live without them but would love to try.

Normally, I make it a point to step in and translate the cerebral talk of the programmers to the act-according-to-their-guts executives. This helps to keep things from going too off the rails. Today, though, I had been too distracted by my regret over my little display at the cafe to pay close attention to the arguments in our meeting. I missed a couple of exchanges that got nasty before I could step in.

Add hangry to the list of distractions...

Try though I might, when I got back to the office, I could not eat that disgusting sandwich. The smell of pickle juice that had in fact soaked into the bread turned my stomach.

“Knock, knock!” Jack Montgomery, one of the firm’s senior partners, said with a smile as he crossed his arms and leaned against my door frame.

“Hey, Jack,” I said with a sigh, not bothering to pretend to smile.

“Something on your mind, Thomas?” Jack asked, letting his own smile drop as he stepped into my office, closing the door,

“Nothing new,” I said, lying. Hurting the feelings of a beautiful boy because my work stress boiled over far enough to make me lose my shit over a sandwich was at the very top of my list of distractions. But it wasn’t on the list of concerns I would ever mention to my boss, even if it was the thing distracting me most right this minute.

No, the old, nagging worries that kept me on the edge of snapping were most relevant to him. I knew I should bring them to his attention.

But do you have the guts?

“I hear the strategy meeting for Boynton Group got out of hand today,” Jack said, letting it trail off.

“It did,” I said.

“Normally, you keep everyone in their own corners pretty well,” he said.

“Not my responsibility,” I said, not because I found the nerve but because my filters were fraying beyond my ability to hide them. “I’m not in charge of those meetings.”

“But we rely on you to—”

“I know you do,” I said irritably. “But it’s not something anyone around here seems to appreciate until I’m not doing it! Babysitting nerds and executives with the emotional capacity of— Well, it is above my pay grade!”

“Calm down,” Jack said with a smile. “What do you need? What can I do?”

A promotion and significant raise, maybe. Stop passing me over, stop having me working for people who should be answering to me, based on experience, knowledge, and seniority!

“Nothing,” I said with a sigh, regaining control and losing any hope of growing a pair in the moment. “I’m just frustrated... When I finish a few of these projects, I’ll be back on my game...”

“We need you back faster,” he chuckled, “so if you need anything at all, reach out! Okay?”

“Sure, Jack,” I said softly.

Fuck! You wussed out again, you pushover! It was the perfect moment, but you let it pass.

Jack nodded, then smiled. “Bringing anyone to the holiday party this year?”

“I’m not seeing anyone... I’ll try to beg BJ to come, but I’m sure she’ll be busy with her friends and—” At that, my cell began to buzz. “Speak of the devil...”

Jack laughed and waved as I accepted the call. “Hey, BJ. What’s up?”

“It’s about winter break,” my daughter said hesitantly.

BJ was moving back to the house for break after finals.

Or she had better be... She had not seemed particularly excited to be back in her dad’s house for three weeks, but Simson University’s dorms closed for the winter break. Even international students had to vacate, unlike at larger universities.

“You are still coming home, right?” I asked.

“About that—”

“Barbara Jean!” I complained. “I have barely seen you this semester, which is crazy since you’re only twenty minutes from my office.”

“You know I hate when you call me *that*, dad!” she complained. “And I’ve been busy this semester!”

“Well, I hated when you decided to go by your initials and I couldn’t explain why it wouldn’t be so cute when you hit middle school!” I said, trying not to laugh. “So, Christmas?”

“I am coming home! I just ... need a favor,” BJ said, softening her tone.

“Oh,” I said with a sigh. I really wanted to see my little girl, so a favor I could probably handle. “What is it?”

“I have this friend, Ender Welles, and he has nowhere to go over break so...” she said hesitantly.

“You really want to bring your boyfriend home for the holidays and shack up in—”

“Dad! For fucks sake, step off the ledge!” BJ snapped. “What crawled up your ass and died?”

“Language!” I said, though it was hard not to smile. I had never encouraged lady-like language, so this was kind of our thing.

”Really, dad?”

“Sorry, it’s been a hard day at work. Continue?”

“He’s just a friend,” she said. “But he has nowhere to go... He could get a hotel, but he’d spend all his money. He’s not getting much help with school. It just doesn’t feel right for him to do that—and spend Christmas alone—when we’ve got—”

“Why doesn’t he have anywhere to go?” I interrupted.

“It’s not my place to say, dad,” BJ said. My heart swelled at her loyalty, even as my annoyance reared its ugly head. Again. And suddenly Billy was back in my head, living rent free. Just like BJ’s friend was about to be living rent free in my house, it seemed.

“He doesn’t have any *male* friends he could stay with?” I asked with a sigh.

“Not who live in town,” she said. “He has a job, and he can’t take off. He really needs the money for school and—”

I could ask if he couldn’t stay with coworkers, but I bet she’ll have an answer for that too, so why bother?

“He has to stay in the guest room,” I grumbled.

“When did you get to be such a prude, dad?” she teased. “Definitely not a problem. We’ll never be a thing!”

“Alright,” I said, huffing. “How are things? Getting ready for finals?”

“All A’s before papers and exams,” she said. “I’m pretty sure I’ll do well...”

“I’m sure.” I said. “Am I still helping you move your stuff home?”

“I’ll be okay on my own. I’m not bringing much besides my computer and clothes,” she said. “Is there any way you can bring the SUV over in a few weeks to help Ender move out?”

“You’ll meet me there?” I asked

“My last exam is his move-out day,” she said. “I can try.”

“Alright,” I said, sighing again. “Just send me his info and remind me, okay?”

“You’re the best, dad!” BJ said cheerily.

Ender

“Your family is the worst, Ender!” BJ declared again.

My extended family had always been terrible, but my parents cemented that status for themselves over Fall Break by disowning me completely.

Partially your fault, since you knew that coming out was a risk, I chided myself. You know your mother...

“At least being disowned meant I didn’t have to deal with their shit over Thanksgiving!” I mused. “No more listening to Uncle Phil rehash some QANON conspiracy theory that would make me want to fight—or at least puke. No more being harassed by my mom about girls, or faking an interest in sports so I didn’t get teased by my cousins for being a *sissy*...”

“Jesus,” BJ said with a heavy sigh. “I guess there are some perks...” Then it occurred to her. “Wait, what *did* you do for Thanksgiving?”

I just stared at her for a second, then looked away. “I picked up extra shifts. Made a shit ton of money.”

“But Thanksgiving Day?” she demanded.

“I watched movies and ordered some takeout,” I said. “Like I said, it was actually one of the nicer Thanksgivings I’ve—”

“I’m such a terrible friend!” BJ declared theatrically, leaning over for a half-hug.

“You’re not a terrible—”

“Of course I am!” she declared. “You’re one of my best friends, my very best guy friend in the history of guy friends, and I let you sit here all alone over break when you could have joined—!”

I shook my head. “You don’t have to take care of me, BJ. I’ll be fine, I just need to get things sorted and—”

“That reminds me,” she said. “Dad heard you were staying in town and *insists* you stay with us over break!”

“BJ, I told you, I’ll figure something out!” I said.

“Well, now you have,” she said. “You’re staying with us! Seriously, dad *would not hear* of you being by yourself over the break. He’s even going to come help you get your stuff to our place on move-out day!”

“Why does he even care?” I asked.

She shrugged and looked down at her book. “It’s just the kind of guy he is...”

“Did you tell him *why* I need a place to stay?” I asked.

“Only that you needed to work,” she said. “Dad gets that. He’s been there, done that...”

“But you didn’t tell him the *real* reason?” I asked with a sigh.

“Nope,” she said. “That’s on you, if you want to talk...”

“So all I need to do is stay in my closet and—”

“What the fuck?” she asked, taking a tone.

“Well, I mean, even my own parents didn’t want me when I—”

“Oh, Endy-poo,” she said, trying to hug me again.

I hit her with a pillow. “Call me that again, skank!”

She laughed. “My dad is cool. I’ve never seen him judge anyone for who they— Wait, you aren’t a Log Cabin—”

I hit her with a pillow again. “You’re feeling frisky tonight!”

“Be yourself with my dad,” BJ said. “I know he’s gonna love you!”

“Too bad mine don’t feel the same...” Putting on a brave face, I added, “I’ll do my best to find a place quickly so he won’t have to put up with me the whole break...”

“Don’t stress over it!” BJ said with a shake of her head. “Honestly, I think dad could use some company.”

I didn’t know if BJ was trying to get me to dig. I didn’t know too much about her family other than she lost her mom when she was in elementary school.

“You and your dad ... you’re close,” I observed, leaving it hanging in case she did want to talk.

“He’s the best,” she said. “He and I kept each other going... The closer I get to moving out on my own permanently, the more I worry about him.”

“Worry?” I asked.

“Yeah, I mean, for a while, dad *tried* to date and stuff, but he just kinda gave up after a while,” she said. “He’s still working for the same company he started at when he and mom got married, even though he kinda hates it. And even though he always seems to get passed over for all the bigger opportunities. It’s like he’s stuck, running in place, you know?”

I nodded. “What do you think could help?”

“I’m hoping maybe he’ll meet someone kinda different, someone who can give him a confidence boost or a shock to the system. Maybe it’ll knock something loose?” she said.

“Sounds kinda unlikely if he’s not dating—”

“I’m gonna try to be a little more aggressive in encouraging him to try something different while I’m home,”

BJ said, nodding.

“Won’t that get weird?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Nah, we’ve always been pretty open with each other about most things...”

“Well, I’m not gonna pry,” I said. “Just leave me out of any harebrained schemes?”

“No guarantees,” she said. Her weird plans were a thing of legend, and I’d gotten caught up in one or two of them in the past. “But I am gonna pry. You’ve been seeming a little more down.”

“I mean my life is in complete chaos,” I said. “What do you expect?”

“I thought things might get easier as the shock wore off,” she said. “You need a distraction too! How’s your dating life? Is it as boring as my dad’s? Do I need to launch project ‘Get Endy-poo a Boo’?”

“Seriously, you’re risking pillow-related whiplash if you keep on!” I said with a laugh. “As for my love life, it probably *is* even more boring than your dad’s, but stay out of it if you please!”

“Oh, come on, I was teasing!” she said. “There’s no way your love life is worse than that of a widower in his 40s!”

“If it weren’t for a few hookups freshman year, I’d be pretty much a total virgin... I almost kinda got close to one guy and ended up getting disowned. And he didn’t even stick around! Since then? Working enough to keep my head above water and to avoid failing out of school is all I have time for,” I said in one long breath.

“Well, that’s not *boring*,” she said, giving me a hesitant chuckle. “I mean, I guess the love story angle is pretty lacking, so from that perspective—”

“Thanks for reminding me,” I grumbled. “Can we get back to the important things?”

“Have you been hooking up at least or is it really all on hold—?”

“It’s blue balls all the way down!” I said. “But that’s *not* the important stuff! I meant studying!”

“It’s the interesting stuff,” she grumbled, grabbing her book and putting it in her lap.

“How’s *your* sex life, ya nympho?” I asked.

She grinned and said, “If you want to have any time to study and sleep, we’d best not go down that road. Once we’re at my dad’s, we can have a pajama party and talk all about it!”

“I only need the headlines,” I said, laughing. “We only have three weeks of break to cover it!”

BJ finally hit me with a pillow.

CHAPTER 3

BILLY

“Looks like you’ve got a visitor,” Molly said, her tone teasing. I was putting away some freshly washed dishes so I had my back to the door.

“Who?” I asked, distracted as I looked for a spot under the counter for the last two glasses.

She laughed and said, “Your rude businessman from the other day just walked through the door!”

I looked over my shoulder and froze like a deer in headlights. “I, uhm ... will you take care of him?”

“My turn to suffer?” Molly asked.

“Uh huh,” I mumbled, then hurried to the back. “I’ll ... I’ll do the rest of the dishes!”

“Deal,” she called after me.

My mind was all a jumble as I went about performing the promised chore.

He’s not actually here for me. The need to reassure myself of this was not in fact reassuring at all. Do I want him to be coming back for me? But if he is back for me, it can’t be for any good reason, right? Maybe he’s decided he does want to complain after all...

Still, I’ve had customers—but not many—come back and complain. Why do I feel the need to escape?

After an uncomfortable exchange with a friend, I had come to work already feeling some stirred-up insecurities, old and

new, about being judged and rejected. Frankly, I was worried a cross look from the man could reduce me to rubble, for one.

Never mind that his good looks would probably render me mute if I had to talk to him right now!

Thank goodness Molly is willing to—

“It’s all good, Billy,” Molly said, walking up behind me.

“He’s gone already?” I asked, surprised but relieved.

“Yeah, he wasn’t staying,” she said. “He got a coffee to go...”

“I’m surprised he came back,” I said. “After he made such a fuss Monday, I figured we’d never see him again.”

“I did get the feeling he was here for more than a coffee but—”

“Did he take a comment card?” I asked. “Maybe he wants to complain about me, and I’ll get fired, and I need this job to —!”

Molly just laughed and shook her head. “He did not take a card... And I *really* don’t think he was here to complain!”

“No?” I asked, forcing myself to calm a bit.

“No,” she said. “He ... asked about you.”

“Me? Why?” I was flabbergasted.

“He didn’t say,” she said, but her smile was too sly. “He just asked if you were around and said he had hoped he would see you...”

“Hoped he would...” I shook my head. “I can’t imagine why he would want to—”

“*Really?*” she asked, eyebrows arched. “You *really* can’t imagine any reason why a salt-and-pepper fox would come back hoping to see the pretty boy who wrecked his lunch?”

I stared dumbly until she turned and walked off making bow-chicka-wow-wow noises. My face turned bright red as I called out, “No way! He *hates* me!”

“Hates how irresistible you are, maybe!” she replied as she exited the kitchen to the dining area. “Hates he can’t not keep coming back for more...”

No way does that man have any interest in me. He’s too hot for all this scrawny paleness. Plus, I’m just a nobody server in a cafe near his fancy office...

Thomas

Well, that was stupid! I felt silly for popping into the cafe hoping to apologize. I tried, though, so I’ve done my duty... I don’t have to go back again.

But I would. I knew I would, even as I tried to reassure myself. Sure, I had behaved badly, but I was just one customer. He probably didn’t even remember me.

Why do I feel compelled to go to this degree to apologize to him though? I wondered. But I wasn’t fooling myself. You’re acting like you’ve got a silly schoolboy crush.

It wasn’t the fact that I was perhaps slightly infatuated with a man who was throwing off my equilibrium, though it was a new feeling. I’ve known I wasn’t straight since I was old enough to notice that feeling in my gut that pulled me toward a person. Sometimes that person was a girl, but most often it was not. It’s just, since I’d allowed myself to explore it, I’d never met a guy who made me feel anything but that basic desire.

My wife Annie was the first and only person who is—was—actively part of my life that I’ve ever told, though. While Annie was alive, it wasn’t information anyone but she needed to know. Afterwards? It’s no one’s business unless I meet a man I want to bring into my life more fully.

Though maybe it’s time to tell BJ? I considered. She shouldn’t find out suddenly if I ever do find a boyfriend... Maybe? She’s grown into quite a young woman. She’ll be understanding.

Still, it would feel strange to discuss my attractions with my little girl. *Not so little anymore...*

“Shit,” I muttered, as a comment from one of our techs penetrated my brain fog. “Did that ass just insult our client?”

I quickly unmuted my microphone and was about to deescalate the confrontation, but the words died on my lips. I muted myself and let it play out. The client’s customer experience manager was a junior partner named Phil, a younger man who had leapfrogged me to get that promotion.

If Phil wants to smooth it over, let him. It’s the job he’s entrusted with. A job for which I had been passed over.

The tone in the customer’s voice let me know he read the man’s words as I had—as an insult. In return, the customer snarled a few demands, which were in turn deconstructed by the know-it-all coder, who seemed to enjoy talking down to the man. The two continued sniping back and forth for the next few minutes, and I let it play out.

As soon as the meeting was over, Phil messaged me.

Phil: I could have used some support in there.

Me: I’m the project manager. My role is to set goals and metrics and keep the project on target. Yours involves managing client interactions.

My words were calculated and coldly precise.

Phil: I need you to rein in your people!

Me: They don’t work for me. I’m not their boss. I’m just the guy who makes sure tasks get completed in order to meet deadlines.

Phil: But you could have done something!

Me: So could you. But you didn’t do anything to mediate that conversation. You watched it dissolve.

Phil: I’ll be talking to Jack about this...

Me: Good. I’m sure he can give you some pointers about handling your clients.

After that angry response, I logged off the chat, then checked my calendar. I saw that the rest of my afternoon was free, so I decided to take my lunch hour to drive home. I could finish my day there. Today wasn’t even one of my normal office days.

I had just come in to grab that coffee. And for *some reason* that thought stoked my horniness.

I could definitely use some release.

I opened CockyUnicorns, one of the *dating* apps on my phone and scrolled through the nearby options. Maybe if I played my cards right I could find someone interested in meeting up later that night.

I scrolled and scrolled. Between the blank profiles, or those with stats but no pics, and the endless stream of muscled torsos, not much drew my attention. This was always my problem when I went on the LGBTQ+ apps like CockyUnicorns. Physical attraction isn't enough to captivate my imagination, and I'm not going to try to excavate a conversation from a guy who's net fishing for dick.

Straight apps posed their own problems. Truth be told, I hadn't dealt well at all with Annie's death. I wasn't over her, I guess you could say. So dating women was hard. I felt—and I knew it was silly—as though I was cheating whenever I so much as flirted with a woman.

Add to that the fact that finding a woman I *wanted* to flirt with was extra hard to begin with. If you'd told teenage me that I would end up madly in love with and married to a woman, he would have laughed his ass off. My interests had always leaned strongly toward same sex attraction.

So here I was, not finding much to work with among the men, and not feeling much interest in looking for women.

“You need to get out and meet people!” BJ had pronounced judgment the last time we had dinner together.

And I, in turn, had explained to her that I didn't have time for that nonsense.

To which she had replied with utter simplicity, “Bullshit, dad.”

We'd had a friendly little argument over it, but she was right. It was bullshit. I just wasn't ready to put myself out there, to go through all the motions and the hassle, just to end up disappointed. Again.

Time to head home. I grunted bitterly. Maybe the man of my dreams has just logged onto the app in my neighborhood!

CHAPTER 4

ENDER

Just a couple of weeks left in the dorm... Too bad I hadn't met BJ's dad, or I might see if I could move in early. I laughed at that thought. It wouldn't be weird at all to hint to a guy you've never met—or even seen—that you're extra eager to move in with him, would it?

I wondered what kind of guy Mr. Gregory was. Standard standoffish dad? Stern and gruff? The way BJ talked about her relationship with him, he sounded cool—not the kind who wants to be his kid's friend, but the kind who you could legitimately talk to about anything and be safe with.

Someone is projecting his dream dad, I thought. And it was no surprise, given what had happened. I had known my parents wouldn't be thrilled that I wanted to start dating a guy. They had suspected I was gay, but as long as it was theoretical and I was celibate, they dealt with it. When I told them I had been out with a guy and wanted to start seeing him, though, my mom flipped out. Full psycho. And my dad just sat there looking disappointed.

It had all ended in an ultimatum: live the straight life, or they'd stop supporting me in school, and I was out of the house. The thing that mom had said that stung the most, though, was, "We can't have you corrupting your little brother, can we?" And as gross as that was, she made it worse by using a tone that suggested sinister implications.

Shaking my head, I returned to my present difficulties. I knew I shouldn't be so excited to get out of the dorm, especially since I had no idea where I'd be living after break.

Or whether I'd be able to swing enough financial aid even to stay in school at all after next semester. But damn it if I wasn't itching to get out of this dorm.

Part of it was the fact that my room was in the oldest and crappiest dorm on campus. But the main reason was that my roommate was a fucking douche of the first order—toxic masculinity on a stick. If your standard frat dick was a douche canoe, my roommate was a douche aircraft carrier. Within the first week of the semester, he was sneering at me as he called me princess. Now, four months later, with all the creatively feminizing name-calling, I'm not even sure he knows my name at all—either of them.

The worst of it, the shameful part, is that he would be one of my types if he wasn't such an ass—and if he was gay of course. I don't pine after straight boys. Not that I can guarantee he isn't gay, but if he is it's so mired in self-hate... The last thing I need is another project. My first almost-boyfriend had become a project, and as soon as things soured with my family, that project had ran for the hills.

But enough about roomie—he was a few days from being an object receding in life's rear-view mirror. And today, he wouldn't be back in our room for a few hours. And I didn't have anything pressing on my to-do list. In my pants? That was starting to feel pressing, since I hadn't had any action since the project ended.

I fired up CockyUnicorns and my eyes immediately locked on one profile that really made my cock stiffen. The profile screen name was ... "Thomas." And his thumbnail was too familiar.

It can't be Grumpy Daddy? I thought. I hesitated to open his profile, then reasoned that he would see I looked but my profile has no photos.

Opening his profile confirmed two things: he was the guy I was thinking about, and he was the perfect daddy.

Fuck, he's hot, I thought. *I would have figured he was straight but...*

I looked at all his pictures. For a hookup app, they presented a dour, gloomy picture of a man—except for the last, which featured him smiling off into the distance. And it was glorious.

What would it be like to have that smile directed at me?
The thought made me shudder. He was the kind of man I'd fawn over but would probably never approach in real life. Maybe in a club, if I'd had something to loosen me up.

But this wasn't real life.

This is CockyUnicorns, so what do I have to lose? Especially with a user name as lame as LonelyCollegeBoy! If I can't manage to talk to Grumpy Daddy here, where can I?

Me: Hey there, handsome! What brings you on here?

Bland and stupid, I thought as soon as I sent it. My finger hovered over the block button. Yes, block him before you embarrass yourself worse than—

Thomas: Hi there, LonelyCollegeBoy! I don't know? I guess I'm open to pretty much anything, but I generally prefer a connection. You?

I immediately forgot the block button.

Me: Definitely a connection... NSA isn't my jam, if I get my preference.

Thomas: No?

Me: Not really... Not to say I wouldn't consider it for a guy I was attracted to enough.

Thomas: That would be a lucky guy!

I guess I was feeling way more flirty than usual.

Me: Don't go getting cocky on me now, handsome!

Thomas: It is called CockyUnicorns, though!

Then, in an abrupt shift, he cut off the playful banter.

Thomas: So I don't normally talk with blank profiles...

Me: I'm sorry... I really don't share my face pic...

Thomas: Anything?

I knew if I said no, he'd probably give up on me. So I sent him a body pic: it was me in a pair of short shorts, so nothing scandalous. And nothing special. I'm a soft boy in many ways,

except for my ripped abs. I'm slender in most places but soft and curvy where it counts. I've got that bubble butt and nice thighs that many men seem to love. And I'm mostly smooth.

Thomas: I wont talk to a torso forever. But I'll definitely give it time... Damn, boy!

Me: Thanks ... sir?

Thomas: Is that really what you want to call me?

Me: I'd love to call you daddy, but some guys don't like that.

Thomas: It's not my "thing" exactly, but I can appreciate it from a boy as sexy as you.

For some reason I sighed in relief.

Me: Thank you, daddy!

Thomas: Of course!

I felt almost surprised that this handsome man was attracted to me—at least the part he's seen... I had a spark of hope that if we ever met, he'd like what he saw in real life too.

A few minutes later, he continued the conversation.

Thomas: So, assuming this isn't one of those times you're looking to skip to NSA, what are you looking for?

Me: Honestly, I guess a boyfriend.

For some reason it was easier admitting that in the first conversation online than it would be chatting in person.

Thomas: I guess that rules me out!

Me: Why? Not the relationship type? I thought you might be since you mentioned connection...

Thomas: I mean, I'm definitely open to a relationship with someone. But there's the age difference for one...

Me: Well, it doesn't bother me. The opposite, actually. It would be nice to have a boyfriend who wasn't a literal boy!

Thomas: Oh?

Me: I mean, you know, somebody mature or somebody I can rely on, not just some fuck boy!

Thomas: Had a lot of experience with fuck boys, have you?

Me: LOL not all that much, but any is too much!

Thomas: LOL!

Thomas: So, why is it you don't share face pics? Because I mean you seem too good to be true.

Thomas: Are you a catfish?

Me: If I was I'd probably lie...

Me: Seriously though, maybe I'm just hoping that if you get to know me you'll overlook my plain looks?"

I was only half kidding. I did hope that he'd like me enough to overlook the fact that I wasn't hot enough for him.

Thomas: I don't know! Something tells me you're at least above average...

Me: See, I need to keep expectations reasonable!

Thomas: Lol okay! But seriously?

Me: I've been burned before. Recently. My family.

Thomas: I see.

Thomas: Like I said I can only talk to a hot torso for so long. But if you won't share a pic maybe we can talk a while and then get together or something. Meet for a drink?'

Me: Or maybe a coffee?

Thomas: Oh fuck, you aren't 21?

Me: LOL sorry, no...

Thomas: You're not under 18?

Me: God, no! I'm 20!

Thomas: How about an eighteen-and-up bar? Talking to cute guys gets my anxiety going sometimes...

Me: Sounds okay to me!

Thomas: When?

Very forward. Not playing hard to get, I thought. I like it.

I hoped that, when he saw me for who I really was, it wouldn't ruin my chances for at least one fun night together.

Me: I'm moving soon, so maybe right after that, once I'm settled?

Thomas. Sounds good. I've got a lot going on the next few days too.

Me: Perfect!

Me: You don't want to show me a little more of you, do you?

Thomas: Asked the man with no face ;P!

Me: I know, I know! But maybe I want to go to bed thinking about you tonight.

I was teasing, but I meant every word!

Thomas: My face pics aren't hot enough to keep your engines running?

Me: Oh, they are, but ... you know!'

A few minutes later Thomas unlocked his private gallery for me. There were no nudes, but fuck! He had some hot shirtless pics and shots in just his underwear that left me drooling. I imagined running my fingers through the soft hair on his chest, down the trail leading across his firm stomach and beneath the waistband of his briefs. I wanted to trace his vee cut with my tongue.

Fuck, I am horny, I thought. More than horny for this particular man!

Me: Fuck, daddy! You're so hot!

Thomas: Do you have any more for me?

I unlocked for him too. There were a couple of over-the-shoulder pics of me in underwear, including one in a scarlet designer jockstrap, and one pic of me with my dick in my hand.

Thomas: Damn, these make me wish we were on our way to meet each other right now, cutie!

Me: Really?!

Thomas: Did you have any questions?

Me: I mean, not everybody is into my body type!

Thomas: I guess, but I don't know how... You're killing me here!

Me: Maybe getting to know each other will lead to something fun too?

Thomas: I hope so!

Thomas: I have to run but hopefully we can talk soon.

Me: We better! I'm looking forward to getting that invitation this weekend!

Thomas: I'll make sure you get it then ☺!

CHAPTER 5

THOMAS

Fuck, what am I doing flirting like this with a 20 year old? I wondered silently as I exchanged flirty chats with LonelyCollegeBoy for the fifth day in a row. Especially one so outside my normal physical type. Am I developing a new thing for twinks and college boys?

First, there had been the anomaly of Billy at Sunrise Cafe, and now there was this guy! I had reminded him every so often that I wouldn't be strung along by some hot body pics, but I knew I'd give him longer than I normally would. He charmed me and somehow kept me hornier than most men could if they were with me in my bedroom.

I picked the phone up to scroll through the app again, telling myself that I wasn't making myself available online for LonelyCollegeBoy. I might find someone available for a last minute quickie. But as usual no one struck my fancy, so I forced myself to put my phone down on my desk and to try to get back to work on a series of reports due to clients the following afternoon.

I was struggling to focus, so I put the phone on the charger in my bedroom so checking it was less of a temptation. With that done, work got easier, and I finally began to make some progress. Back in my rhythm, I lost track of time, and the next thing I knew it was dark outside.

"Hell," I muttered, noticing the time.

I quickly saved my work and got up to stretch. It was already after five, and I was supposed to meet my friend Alex

for dinner at six-thirty. Alex was dragging me to the opening of a new French fusion concept from some celebrity chef from New York, so I donned an expensive new royal blue suit with a white button-up. I drew the line at a tie, though.

I examined myself in the mirror from all angles to make sure the suit fit as well as it had seemed to in the store. The pants hugged my ass and thighs snugly, and the coat showed off my broad chest well.

On a whim, I took out my phone and snapped a couple of photos, then sent them to LonelyCollegeBoy on CockyUnicorns.

Me: Like my new suit?

By the time I had laced up my shoes, he had responded.

LCB: Woof, daddy!

Me: Thanks cutie!

LCB: Hot date?

Me: Old friend of my wife's from college. We try to get together every month or two.

LCB: Wife?

It took me a long time to decide how to reply and before I could he sent another message.

LCB: No spark there with the friend?

I smiled to myself and teased him a little.

Me: Jealous?

LCB: Not in the least...

Me: There isn't any chemistry. Not because she isn't hot, because she is. But she was my wife's best friend, and we all had some great times together. Too much history.

LCB: Makes sense.

LCB: And yeah, I guess I am a little jealous that I have to wait to get my hands on you!

LCB: You and your ex are on good terms then?

I sighed. I shouldn't have given him so many details. Then I wouldn't have to get into depressing territory so quickly.

Me: She passed away, so ... I didn't lose her friends in a divorce.

Before he could chime in with sympathy, I decided to lighten things up.

Me: And look who's cocky now, assuming you'll lay more than eyes on me!

There was a long pause, during which I wondered how he'd deal with the revelation.

LCB: I'm practicing my puppy dog eyes in the mirror, in case you can resist my other charms!

I sighed, relaxing, thankful he had let the heavy part pass without comment.

Me: If your face is as cute as your body is hot, I'm a lost cause.

LCB: You have me blushing again...

Me: I'm sure that's adorable :)

LCB: STOP!

LCB: But not seriously ;p though! This is a real ego boost!

Me: Is it a full body blush, because that would transform cute into sexy as hell.

LCB: Wouldn't you like to know?!

Me: I seriously would!

Me: But I should run now, or I'll be late. Chat soon?

LCB: ASAP!

I smiled. But then my phone buzzed one last time. I checked the message and was immediately thankful I hadn't waited until I had arrived to do so. Apparently LonelyCollegeBoy had decided to show me that full body blush. The over-the-shoulder mirror selfie featured him standing in his dorm room in a pair of tiny briefs and nothing else. His shoulders were leanly muscled, his back tapered down to a slender waist, and his briefs hugged his amazing ass like gift wrap. And all down his back, the pale skin was tinged bright pink.

LCB: I guess it's pretty much full body...

The smile that put on my face stuck with me all the way to Château Noir.

“Good to see you smiling, Thomas!” Alex said as she kissed me on the cheek. “To whom do I owe the pleasure?”

I returned the kiss and said, “I'm sure I don't know what you are talking about! I smile plenty!”

“Not nearly enough!” Alex said. Then she stepped back, her hands squeezing my shoulders and trailing down my triceps. “Someone’s been working out, too?”

“You know I never stopped,” I said. “I’ve had a lot of anxiety to burn.”

“Work?” she asked, taking my arm and guiding me to the bar. “Let’s have a cocktail while we wait for our table!”

“Yeah, it’s work... They expect me to deliver more than the junior partners but—”

“But they still don’t think they need to give you the job?” she asked. Alex had heard my complaints before. “Have you had a frank conversation with them? You know you have to advocate for—”

“I know, Alex,” I said with a sigh. “I almost let loose but... I’m just afraid that once I lay my cards down they’ll say, ‘Sorry you feel that way; feel free to move along.’ Then where will I be?”

“Free?” Alex asked.

“Easy for you to say,” I said. “You’re independently wealthy!”

She arched an eyebrow. “And how long could you be out of work without having to worry about money?”

“With an effort?” I said. “I could retire now... But—”

“No buts, Thomas!” she said. “You’re letting fear of change guide your decisions, when you are in the enviable position of being able to set your own course for the rest of your life!”

I stared at her for a moment, then ordered our drinks. “I know you’re right... Change is so hard, though!”

“Not as hard as stagnation,” she said. “It just *seems* harder in the moment.”

I shook my head. “I guess.”

“Speaking of stagnation ... how’s your dating life?” Alex asked, smirking over the lip of her glass.

“Change is hard,” I repeated, shaking my head and rolling my eyes.

“BJ said she told you you needed to—”

“You and my daughter need to stop gossiping about my love life,” I said.

“She says you haven’t dated more than one or two women since Annie passed,” Alex said, looking concerned. “And none in years.”

“It was too hard at the time,” I said. “No one’s sparked any interest lately!”

“No one at all?” she asked. “I was serious when I asked who put that smile on your face... It’s rarer than you think. If you doubt it, I’m sure BJ would back me up.”

“I’m sure she would,” I frowned. “You two need to mind your own business.” Alex just stared at me until I sighed. “Okay, fine... This week has been weird. I’ve talked to a couple of people who have me feeling a certain kind of way.”

“A couple?” she asked, wagging her eyebrows. “As in like a couple or two different people?”

“Two different people,” I said.

“Well, that’s more boring but... Do they know about each other?” she asked.

“One is just someone I met in a cafe,” I said. “There’s nothing there. Even if I wanted there to be, I made an ass of myself, lost my temper, and was generally an asshole.”

“That doesn’t sound like you,” she said. “Sure you can be a grumpy shit, but you don’t normally take it out on others.”

“Thanks, I think,” I said with a frown. “Work stress boiled over when they messed up my lunch...”

“What did they do, put glass in your soup?” she teased.

“Forgot the horseradish,” I said. When she stifled a laugh, I added, “I said no pickle, but they put it on the side. It soaked the bread.”

“You’re right,” she said. “Totally justified.” When I rolled my eyes, she added, “Well, I do know how you hate your pickles...”

“It was totally inappropriate,” I said. “I’ve been back to apologize, but our paths didn’t cross.”

“But you’ll try again?”

She knew me too well for me to lie. “Probably.”

“So the other woman is more of a date potential?” she asked.

I hesitated for a moment, then said, “We’re meeting up soon... Hopefully after I get BJ and her friend moved into the house for the break.”

“Why wait?” she asked.

“We just started chatting recently,” I said.

“What’s she look like?” Alex asked.

“Slender, petite, blond,” I said, hedging. “Nice body...”

“How old?” she asked.

I blushed and shook my head.

“Oooh!” Alex squealed quietly. “Well, this is different! Cradle robbing or dating an older woman?”

“Cradle robbing,” I said, blushing. “Twenty...”

“Thomas!” she said, teasing. “Well maybe that is different enough to shake your stagnation loose!”

“I don’t know about that,” I said. “What the fuck do I have in common with a twenty year old?”

“Maybe more than you think,” she said with an exaggerated shrug.

“Like?”

“Well, there’s the need for some emotional support,” she mused. “And, like you, he probably doesn’t know what he really wants to be when he grows up—” Alex suddenly

stopped, eyes widening as she realized what she had said.
“She... I meant she.”

I was silent for a long moment, staring into my drink. “No you didn’t...”

She sighed. “No, I didn’t.”

I stared at her with narrowed eyes. “Explain.”

“Thomas,” she said, putting a hand on my arm.

“Did BJ figure it out?” I asked. “Have you two been—”

“No!” Alex said. “Well, I mean... Yes, she did figure it out, and we have talked about it.”

“But you already knew?” I asked, giving her a hard look.

Alex sighed. “Thomas, you have to understand... Things were different when you came out to Annie! LGBTQ+ issues weren’t on everybody’s mind. A lot of people viewed bisexuality as a kind of stop on the way to coming out as gay and—”

“I’m well aware,” I said, my head reeling.

Annie outed me to Alex over twenty years ago? I thought. And neither of them ever told me?

I felt a fury rising inside me, a feeling of betrayal I never thought I’d associate with my wife. And one of my best friends had been a part of it.

“Thomas, Annie *always* loved you,” Alex said as if she could read my mind. “She was just ... confused.”

I shook my head but couldn’t think of anything to say.

“Once she got her head around it, there were never any doubts,” Alex said tentatively.

“As far as I knew, there were never any doubts, *period*,” I said, my face stony.

“Surely you can understand,” Alex said. “To hear from the man you’ve fallen for that he’s into men—”

“Also into men,” I snapped. “If I wasn’t going to cheat on her with a woman, I wasn’t going to cheat on her with a man!”

“But what if it was really *only* men you were interested in,” she said. “And what if she fell for you and then you decided to move on?”

I shook my head again. It was all starting to feel like too much.

“She just needed to talk it through with someone who wasn’t you,” Alex said. “And she picked someone she could trust, someone who liked you, to get advice from. She wanted to think the best of you, Thomas!”

“She should have told me,” I said. “She had no right to—!”

“Would you have preferred she had no counsel?” Alex asked. “What if she had come to the wrong conclusion and determined that you shouldn’t be together?”

“She should have talked to me!”

“Probably!” Alex said. “But she did talk to me, and everything worked out for the best! For both of you! You loved each other for the rest of her life! To the exclusion of all others. You got BJ! Think about the price of screwing that up!”

“She should have told me you knew,” I said. “You should have told me you knew, at the very least. Especially after she was gone...”

“I’m sorry, Thomas,” Alex said. “No good would have come from her telling you, but I should have. You’re right. Especially when you were trying to pick up the pieces. You should have known there was someone you could—”

I shook my head and sat down my glass. “I think I’m going to go home... I need to think.”

“Stay!” she said. “Please?”

I sighed, thinking of how bad I felt after losing my temper with Billy. I had more right to be angry with Alex, but it wasn’t worth it. I held up my now-empty glass to get the bartender’s attention and saw him nod.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“So BJ knows too?” I asked.

“She came to me with her suspicions,” Alex said, nodding.

“And you confirmed?”

Alex nodded again.

“She’s never said a word to me,” I said. “Why didn’t she come to me?”

“She didn’t want to embarrass you,” Alex said. “I told her you’d talk to her if it ever became an issue...”

I nodded. “Shit...”

“Have you ever dated a man and hid it from her?” Alex asked.

“Nothing ever got serious enough that I felt the need to disclose,” I said.

“So both of these new interests are...?”

“Both are guys, yes,” I said. “Annie was the surprise... I’m bisexual, but connecting with women is much harder...”

Alex nodded thoughtfully. “Well, neither of them is far enough along that you need to—”

“I was thinking about telling her anyway,” I mused. “She’ll understand... I think. Right?”

“She just wants you to be happy, Thomas,” Alex said. “She doesn’t want you to stand in your own way. Especially when there’s no real reason.”

We both sipped on our drinks for a while in silence.

“I didn’t realize you two talked so much,” I said.

“She needed a woman to talk to,” Alex said. “And of all her mother’s friends...”

“You were the only one who really stayed in our lives,” I said, nodding. “So ... do you know about this friend she’s bringing home for the holidays?”

“I don’t know if I should—”

“That’s rich!” I said. “Annie outed you to me, and you shared that fact with my daughter!”

“That’s not fair!” Alex said.

“Agreed!” I said. “It’s not fair that I wasn’t the one who got to decide—”

“Thomas!” Alex complained. “Do you want me to violate your daughter’s trust like Annie violated yours?”

I grimaced. *Fuck!* I thought.

As much as it pissed me off, could I ask her to do the same to my little girl?

“Is there anything I need to be worried about?” I asked. “You owe me that much!”

Before Alex could respond, though, the host approached and said, “Your table is ready!”

After we were settled in and our waiter confirmed we were doing the tasting menu, I demanded, “Well?”

“I hoped you’d be distracted,” she said with a laugh.

“Not likely,” I said.

Alex looked away and said, “I really think it’s his story to tell you...”

“But there’s really nothing between him and BJ?” I asked.

“When did you get to be such a papa bear?” she asked.

“Jesus!” I exclaimed. “You are two peas in a pod!” Seeing her surprise, I explained, “BJ asked me when I got to be such a prude when I asked her. Now you’re being all cagey about it...”

“She and Ender—”

“You know his name?” I demanded.

“She’s worried about him,” Alex said. “It’s been on her mind a lot... But I can tell you she is just worried about him. There’s nothing between them.”

I shrugged. *Curiouser and curiouser.*

“So, any new men in your life?” I asked finally, letting the matter drop.

“No, but there’s a librarian at the university I’ve been seeing for a bit,” Alex said. “She’s not as mousy in the bedroom as she is in public...”

I arched my eyebrows.

“I told you Annie wanted to think the best of you,” Alex said with a shrug. “There’s a reason she came to me and not one of those other bitches!”

CHAPTER 6

ENDER

I checked my messages on the app for the tenth time. I had a bunch of messages, most of which were from nearly-blank profiles saying ‘Hi’ or ‘Hey.’ More than a few opened with nothing more than dick pics. But none were from “Thomas,” whose messages were the only ones I cared about at the moment. Now that I was talking to my mysterious Grumpy Daddy from the cafe, nothing else seemed able to draw my interest.

Before I could close the app, though, I got a new message from someone very close by.

TopJock69: You on campus?

Me: Yeah.

TopJock69: Pics?

I rolled my eyes and groaned. So eloquent.

Me: You first.

I expected that to be the end of it. It didn’t particularly bother me, either.

What can some asshole frat jock offer that could distract me from—

Three photos came in quick succession: a dick pic that was more than likely very deceptively angled, followed by a headless body pic showing a built torso, and a mirror pic of an ass of steel.

Not too bad, I thought. No Grumpy Daddy, but definitely a fit AF college boy...

I shared my private gallery.

TopJock69: Sexy twink. Looking tonight?

Me: Can't host. My roommate is gonna be back soon.

Sure, TopJock69 would probably be a good time in bed. Normally, if I was on the prowl like this, I would have asked him right away if he could host. Especially when I could really use a good roll in the hay to take the edge off. Now, weirdly, I pretty much hoped he'd bow out, unable to host.

TopJock69: I have a single. Come over?

Me: What are you into?

He's probably a total top—one of those jocks who won't even suck a dick in reciprocation, I thought. Still, why am I TRYING to sabotage this gift from the gods? THAT BODY! Not so deep down, I knew why, of course.

TopJock69: Vers bottom. I like to get my ass eaten, swap oral. Prefer to bottom, but can flip if that's what it takes to get you over here. You?

“Well, fuck me!” I murmured to myself, trying to decide how to respond. On the one hand, I was horny as hell. Thanks to Grumpy Daddy. And I was a few days from meeting the man who had left me on the edge from the moment we had met.

Me: LOL ... isn't that false advertising?

TopJock69: Huh?

Oh, a brainiac, I thought. Don't be mean...

Me: Uhm ... Top ... Jock?

TopJock69: LOL oh yeah

TopJock69: I guess I didn't think of that. I don't do this much. When I made the profile I was thinking like, you know, the best of the best?

Me: He's so humble lol.

TopJock69: Is me being vers bttm a problem?

Me: No, the opposite actually!

Damn it.

Me: I'm actually vers top but people always EXPECT me to bottom because ... I guess that's what twinks are supposed to be?

TopJock69: I get it. I mean ... bisexual varsity jock who likes it in the ass here...

Okay, why does he have to end up being an okay guy and compatible—and at the complete wrong time?!

I sat thinking for a long time, but before I could decide how I was going to reply, the door to my dorm room opened and my roommate Greg said, “Sup, fag?”

“Fuck off,” I muttered.

“In your dreams,” he said, sexualizing my angry response.

“Projection,” I said without looking up. “You should talk to your therapist about me...”

“Whatever,” Greg snorted and tossed his bag on his bed. “I need the room.”

“I don’t care,” I said.

“This chick will be here in ten minutes,” he said. “We’re fucking.”

“I’m not leaving,” I said.

“We’re still fucking,” he said. “I was just trying to be polite, offering you the chance to clear out.”

“You’re such a romantic,” I snarled.

“Hell, stay for all I care,” he said. “I’m sure you’ll enjoy my part of the show... And she doesn’t mind an audience. Maybe it’ll convert you?”

Fuck! I thought. Then I messaged TopJock69.

Me: Location?

“I’m leaving,” I told Greg. “What do you need—ten minutes?”

Greg snorted. “She should be gone by one.”

“Three hours? Whatever!”

“This chick will want to go at least twice!” he bragged.

“Whatever,” I said, shaking my head. “Can you fucking text me when she’s gone?”

“If I remember,” he said. “But seriously, feel free to stay and watch!”

“Whatever,” I said, sliding my laptop into my backpack and standing to go.

TopJock69: Flannery Hall 312

Me: On my way

TopJock69: Sweet!

With that, I stormed out of the room, slinging my backpack over my shoulder. As I walked across campus, my mind was all over the place. On the one hand, I was still resisting the idea of this hookup. On the other hand, I wanted to be away from my room—and my roommate—on what I hoped would be my last night in the dorms.

Why am I so obsessed with Grumpy Daddy? I wondered. When I met him in person, he wasn't nice and he wasn't interested in me. Talking to him now, that seems like it was a fluke, but I certainly didn't see it going anywhere... *So why does this feel like cheating?*

“Get ahold of yourself,” I mumbled as my feet carried me mindlessly toward Flannery Hall.

As I walked, I messaged Thomas, aka Grumpy Daddy.

Me: How was your date last night?

Thomas/GD: Not a date... Wild though!

Me: Wild how?

Thomas/GD: It's complicated. Tell you later?

Me: Sure ☐!

Thomas/GD: How's your night?

I hesitated before answering.

Me: Complicated.

Thomas/GD: Complicated how?

Me: Well, my roommate is a complete asshole, so I'm going to hang out with someone.

Thomas/GD: A date?

I decided to tease him and throw throw his own line back at him.

Me: Why? Jealous?

Thomas/GD: A little... Wish you were coming to hang out with me!

My stomach churned.

Me: Me too tbh. But I need the escape. And the release.

Thomas/GD: Release?

Fuck! Why did I say that?

Me: You left me with blue balls!

Just when I thought Thomas was going to leave me on read and not reply to my message, even though the app indicated he had seen it, he finally responded.

Thomas/GD: Wish I was the one helping you with that.

Me: Buy a girl a drink first!

Thomas/GD: Soft drink, baby boy...

My stomach quaked.

Thomas/GD: Is super stud buying you a drink first?

Me: You ARE jealous!

Again there was a long pause before he responded.

Thomas/GD: Well, yeah!

Me: I can skip it?

Really? The question was directed both at him and at me.

Thomas/GD: I couldn't ask that. After all, I'm the one leaving you with blue balls...

I laughed and shook my head.

Me: I'll wait if you will...

Thomas/GD: Really. Go for it.

Me: Are you sure? It's been a while for me too.

Do I want him to tell me to wait? Or do I just want him to let me off the hook?

Thomas/GD: Seriously. LOL let's at least meet before I start making unreasonable demands!

Me: Are you sure, daddy? I want to be a good boy...

Thomas/GD: Fuuuck!

Thomas/GD: But yeah, I'm sure!

Me: Okay ttyl!

Fuck!

Now it was all up to me. And I was at Flannery Hall, swiping my ID card to get into the front door. I walked up two flights of stairs and found his room just by the stairwell.

A single with only one next-door neighbor to hear you moan? This guy must be the luckiest SOB!

I knocked and heard heavy footsteps inside. When the door open, I almost gasped. The young man standing in front of me was tall—at least six-two—and a wall of lean muscle. There was no doubt about that because on his frame, the four inch inseams of his running shorts left little to the imagination, and they were the *only* thing he was wearing.

I expected him to smirk cockily down at me and my skinny ass, but instead he smiled almost shyly. “I guess you’re ... uhm, LonelyCollegeBoy?”

I blushed and nodded, and he quickly ushered me inside. “Is there something less awkward I can call you than TopJock69?”

He laughed and said, “I could try to come up with a fake name to try to stay anonymous, but ... that’s kinda difficult, I guess?”

I almost asked him why that was, but then my brain kicked in as some of the blood returned from my dick. I looked at the framed basketball jersey on the wall—Malone #69. “I thought the 69 was a sex joke... You’re Todd Malone?”

“You follow basketball?” he asked, eyes arched in surprise.

“No, but even I know enough to know that that’s a basketball jersey, and I’ve heard your name around,” I said.

He looked almost humble on hearing that I recognized his name. “It ... uhm, is a sex joke! You don’t follow sports enough to know that’s not my number... Some of the guys on my team in high school pranked me, used tape to change my number before a game. I didn’t notice and almost got ejected for it, but—“

“You didn’t get mad?” I asked, smiling despite myself.

“Nah!” he said. “I was confused at first, then ... well I got it framed and just got a new jersey!”

He had gradually relaxed while we chatted and sat on his bed. I stood by awkwardly until he patted the mattress next to

him.

“So, you’re discreet,” he said. “No pics or anything. Are you ... closeted?”

I shook my head. “But only a few friends know for sure. I wouldn’t mind being out, but ... I had a bad experience.”

“What happened?” he asked.

“Parents disowned me,” I said. “I don’t really know yet what I’m going to do but... You know what, I didn’t come here to get us both down...”

“No,” he said with a cheeky grin. “You got me up for sure...”

“Really?” I asked, blushing. Looking down at those tiny shorts, I could see a large hardening cock gradually snaking down his right leg. Seeing me looking must have excited him because the process sped up and a few inches of dick were now in plain view. “Damn... Nice!”

“Besides my build, I’d say that’s the number one reason no one gives me the chance to bottom,” he said. “Hope *you* aren’t changing your mind?”

“If you want to flip, we can,” I said, “but I’m pretty excited to get to top an alpha jock like you!”

He looked over at me almost like he thought I was making fun of him, then smiled and blushed.

“So ... how does this work?” I asked.

“Uhm, well ... why don’t you call the shots?” he suggested tentatively.

“You’ll do what I tell you?” I asked with a smirk. When he nodded, my cock throbbled to the point of soreness. “You want me to take control?”

He nodded again. “Yes.”

I stood and lifted my shirt over my head, looking at him to see how he’d respond. His eyes seemed to drink me in, which made my head swim.

I must have looked surprised because he said, “I’m not generally into the twinning thing...”

“Twinning?” I asked, confused.

“You know, like ... guys who look just like me,” he said. “I like guys who are different from me...” He reached out and touched my torso gently with the tips of three fingers.

“Why don’t you undress me, then?” I said, keeping my tone light and teasing.

Rather than standing, Todd slipped off the bed onto his knees and began working on unbuttoning my pants. He had difficulty at first because his hands were shaking, but finally he got the snap undone and dragged my pants and underwear down together.

I put my hand on his shoulder as I stepped out of my pants and kicked them out of the way, intentionally smacking him in the face with my cock.

“Fuck,” he whispered. “I figured it just *looked* this big because of how small you are...”

“Hope it’s not bigger than you like?” I asked.

He looked up into my eyes and shook his head, blushing brightly.. “I like to feel it in the morning...” Then he focused his gaze on the dick just a few inches from his face. He glanced up at me one more time, and I nodded.

Todd had seemed shy, almost intimidated, but he was no noob. Seeing that he had my permission, he leaned in and took my cock all the way to the back of his throat and began working the base with his big hand while he sucked me.

I put my hand on the back of his head and urged him to take more. I felt the tip of my dick beginning to slide into his throat, then he gagged a little. He pulled off to catch his breath and relax, then I pulled him back in more forcefully. This caused him to lean forward and tilt his head just right, and with firm, even pressure I slid into his throat.

I threw my head back and moaned, beginning to fuck his throat for about fifteen seconds before he began to panic and

had to come up for air.

“That’s a good boy,” I said with a smirk down at him. Something about seeing this hulking jock on his knees with my dick in his mouth, looking up at me hungry for my approval, filled me with a sudden feeling of confidence. “You want more of my dick?”

He gently suckled the head of my cock and nodded. “I don’t know if you deserve it yet...”

“Please?” he asked, begging very convincingly.

“Get on the bed on your hands and knees,” I said, seeing whether he’d take my commands without question. There was some hesitation, and I could see he wanted to ask. “I want to see what I’m working with...”

He climbed up onto the bed and got into the position for me.

“Shoulders on the bed,” I said. “Reach back and spread your cheeks for me...” When he had done as he was told, I asked, “What would you like me to do to get you ready to take this big dick?”

“Eat my ass?”

“Eat my ass, what?”

“Sir? Eat my ass, sir?” he said. It was no longer the shy hesitance but real uncertainty. I thought I had pushed him about as far as I could, but I said, “I’d like to spank you. Is that okay?”

“Do ... do we have to?” he asked. I knew he’d let me if it was the only way to get my dick, but that took all the fun out of it. I had hoped he’d be into it.

Que sera sera. He was more fun to play with than anyone I’d been with yet. But we weren’t on the same page enough for me to think of him as more than a hot, fun guy. Maybe a friend?

I was still into him, and he was hot as fuck. And I had never topped a jock before, so there was still that. When I

leaned in and lapped my tongue across his hole, he groaned and whimpered, “Yes, sir... Thank you, sir!”

Okay, well that’s still fun...

“You like that, jock boy?” I asked.

“Oh yeah stud,” he said. “Eat me out, then wreck my hole...”

“I guess I can do that,” I said as if it was a chore, then laughed and sank my tongue as deep into his hole as I could. He still held his cheeks open for me, but I pushed his hands off, giving myself an opportunity to at least squeeze and stroke his smooth, hard-muscled ass.

As soon as I removed my hands, he reached back again—anything to make sure I didn’t stop. With my right hand I began to slowly stroke his thick rod, while I encircled his scrotum with my left and began to tug gently but firmly on his balls. I heard him gasp then bury his face in the mattress and cry out.

“Do you want me to stop?” I asked.

He turned his head just enough to demand, “NO!” I tugged harder and he bit the comforter.

“Condoms and lube, now!” I said finally. I could feel a fluttering in my abdomen that told me that just the act of stimulating him and delivering that ecstatic pain was pushing me toward the edge.

He pointed to the nightstand where they were already set out for me. “Do you want to sit on it to make it easier for you?” I asked as I reached for the condom and rolled it on.

“No,” he said. “Lube me up and take me rough...”

“Are you sure?” I asked. “I’m very—“

“Shove it in,” he said. “I’m relaxed enough... Make it hard...”

“Okay,” I said. “Tell me if—“

“I will,” he said as I rubbed lube into his hole, which was quite relaxed from my tongue. “But you won’t...”

I got up on the bed behind him on my knees and tried to line my cock up with his hole. I pressed down on his lower back until he got down far enough for me. I put my right hand on the back of his neck and pressed his shoulders down into the mattress hard, shoving my cock into his hole. After some initial resistance, I slipped in half way quickly. He groaned loudly into the mattress and squirmed beneath me but didn't complain.

I moved so my knees were outside him and pushed his whole body down against the mattress, closing his legs as I slammed into him and buried the rest of my cock in to the hilt.

“Agh,” he gasped; and my cock throbbed, thickening still more. “Fuck that's gonna be sore tomorrow!” As if sensing my worry, he quickly added, “Just like I like!”

“Are you ready for me to wreck you?” I asked.

“You haven't already?” he asked with a weak laugh.

My answer was to jackhammer his ass hard as long as I could manage until I couldn't take it any more and came into the condom, buried deep inside the big jock.

“Fuck,” I whispered as I settled onto his back and waited for my cock to deflate. “I wanted to last longer...”

“If it's any consolation, I couldn't have taken it much longer ... this time,” he said.

When I slid out of him, I rolled off his back and onto my side, facing him. He lay on his stomach, head laying on his crossed arms as he looked at me with a contented smile.

“Can I take care of you?” I asked.

He shook his head.

“But I'd like to—“

“You pumped the cum out of me,” he said. “My comforter's soaked it up!”

I laughed, running my hand down the smooth olive skin of his muscular back. “I never did get the chance to ask you if you're in the closet or what?”

He shook his head. “No, kinda like you, I just don’t talk about it. And I rarely do anything with guys anymore so it really doesn’t come up...”

“So you’re bi?”

He nodded.

“Do you prefer one over the other?” I asked.

“Sometimes I get into a ... mood, I guess?” he said with a dreamy smile and kind of shrugged.

“Right now it’s girls?”

He nodded again. “But I imagine if I was able to get railed like that more regularly, it might even things back out,” he said with a deeply satisfied grin, wagging his eyebrows playfully.

We chatted for a bit longer before I said, “I should probably get back to my room...”

“You could stay if you wanted?” he suggested.

I thought about the offer. It was appealing. He seemed like a good cuddler. On the other hand, while I wasn’t feeling guilty, I also wasn’t feeling Todd as anything more than a friend with benefits, and I wanted to avoid confusing things right now. I left the why unacknowledged but it was right below the surface: I wanted to see if anything more significant could happen with Thomas.

“I really do need to get back,” I said finally. “But I can stay a little while if you want to go again...”

“A little gentler this time?” he asked. “I don’t know if I could take you again like that tonight...”

“This time,” I said with a smirk, winking at him. “But only if you promise to send me home with a load of yours...”

“Deal!” he said with a grin.

CHAPTER 7

THOMAS

Days had flown by, and it was finally time for me to pick up this stranger I was moving into my house. I looked at my phone again to check the directions BJ had given me. I was at the right place. McGill Hall was just a few hundred feet from where I had parked. I had hoped she'd message me that she was on her way before I got here, but so far it didn't look like she was going to get out of her exam in time.

Me: BJ, I just got to Ender's dorm. You don't happen to be on your way?

While I waited on her to respond, I quickly logged onto CockyUnicorns to see if LonelyCollegeBoy had messaged me back. According to the app, he hadn't been online in nearly twenty-four hours, but his last known location was under a thousand feet away. I'd wondered which of the colleges in town he attended.

I guess that mystery is solved.

You should have told him you didn't want him to go through with that hookup the other night... That thought slipped right in and surprised me. I had absolutely no right to ask any such thing. But I was a little shaken by just how strong the feeling behind the impulse had been.

Stupid! You enjoy talking to him, so you're putting the cart before the horse!

I decided to message him, then decided I had better not. I still had no response from BJ, so I bit the bullet and messaged this Ender kid's number.

Me: Hi, it's BJ's dad. I'm parked just across from the dorm in the 12th Avenue lot. I'm walking up toward the front door if you want to come meet me.

Ender: Hey, thanks sir. I'll be right down to let you in!

With a sigh, I got out of my car and headed over to his dorm. I stood leaning against the wall by the heavy double doors and scrolled through my notifications while I waited.

When the door finally opened, I didn't hear it at first. I kept reading until a young man walked past me without noticing me.

"Ender?" I called to get his attention, just as I noticed what a fine ass the guy had.

That ass, along with his build and hair, reminds me of—

"Grumpy—" he stammered. "I, uhm... Hi, sir... What are you doing here?"

I snorted. "Is Grumpy my nickname, Billy? I know I made a terrible first impression but..."

Billy blushed brightly, making the butterflies in my stomach go wild.

"I ... I mean... Sorry, I was just expecting someone else," he said, looking around. "Are you here for someone—?"

"If I'm not mistaken, I'm here for you," I said, watching his face as confusion was replaced by understanding and then shock. "You're Ender?"

"You're ... BJ's dad? Mr. Gregory?" he asked as his face went pale.

Way to make a guy feel appreciated. This kid must really hate me...

Trying to keep my expression neutral, I nodded. And for a long time we just stood there staring at each other.

Ender

I was shocked to the point of being paralyzed. Mr. Gregory looked as though he was already reconsidering his offer, which

would totally suck since I didn't have anywhere else to go on short notice.

“It'll be awkward for you to keep calling me BJ's dad, though,” he finally said without much humor. “And Mr. Gregory is what my secretary calls me. My friends call me Thomas.”

Well, there goes the last shred of a doubt! As if there had still been any *real* room for this to be just a massive misunderstanding. All the puzzle pieces slid into place, and my new mantra was, *Fuck, fuck, fuck!*

I had flirted with the guy from Sunrise Cafe, Codename Grumpy Daddy—whom I now knew as Thomas—online. I had hoped to meet him for a date soon. And now in a massive mind fuck it turns out he's my best friend's fucking dad. Her fucking smoking hot dad. And my emergency save-my-ass housing opportunity for break, my lifeline. My three personas, Billy, Ender, and LonelyCollegeBoy, just got into a freaking train wreck!

“Well, that doesn't answer the question of what should *I* call you?” I finally asked, my mouth dry.

“Why don't we start with Thomas,” he suggested, forcing his lips into a pinched smile. “But not Tom or Tommy, please.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, averting my eyes and blushing again.

More importantly, not Grumpy Daddy or daddy! A slip like that would reduce me to rubble!

Thomas sighed deeply and his face softened. “I know I wasn't the nicest when we first met... I tried to come back and apologize, but you weren't available. I was going to try again but—”

Jesus, he still feels bad about that? I wondered, a tad touched. *Thank God he thinks that is our problem!*

“It's fine,” I said, embarrassed. “Everyone has bad days...”

He did come back for me. In a good way. Maybe—No, stop! You need his help, not anything silly like a flirtation with a steaming hot cup of—!

“I hope that doesn’t make staying with us too awkward for you,” he said softly. “You look very uncomfortable with the idea and—”

“I don’t mean to seem ungrateful. I’m just ... it’s kind of awkward to be crashing with a stranger I’m just meeting,” he said. “But I really appreciate your offer.”

“Well, on the bright side, I’m not *exactly* a stranger,” he said. “First of all, we have met, even if that’s not a great credit to me... Second, you’re my daughter’s friend, and she’ll be there with you. Mostly.”

I sighed and nodded, giving him a weak smile. “Thank you...”

“Now, let’s get your stuff into the SUV,” he said with a resolute nod.

I walked over to the door and unlocked it, motioning for him to follow. As we walked upstairs, I explained, “My roommate is here, so I apologize...”

“He’s your roommate, not your pet,” Thomas teased a little. “You have nothing to apologize for...”

“See how you feel after you meet him,” I said with a bitter snort.

No sooner had I opened the door than Greg called out, “When’s your boyfriend coming to pick up your stuff, princess?”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” I said, wishing Greg was right but also wishing Thomas wasn’t standing in the door. “He’s BJ’s dad. You know that, asshole.”

“Fuck you, you little queer,” Greg said, never turning around from his desk, where he sat working on his last paper.

“Watch your mouth!” Thomas barked.

At the loud, deep command, Greg jumped a little and turned.

“I didn’t realize he was already here,” Greg said, glaring at me.

I pointed to my bed, which had been stripped. Three boxes sat on the mattress, and two rolling bags were by the door. All my worldly possessions were packed up in this room.

Thomas grabbed two of the boxes easily, while I struggled with the other. Greg smirked at me as Thomas held the door open with his foot.

“Don’t let him get to you,” Thomas said quietly, his low voice soothing.

I nodded but couldn’t manage even a weak smile. I could feel my lip trembling and my eyes begin to water.

Don’t you dare cry in front of this man you’ve barely met! I chided myself.

By the time we reached his car, I was breathing heavily and sat the box on the ground. Thomas sat his boxes next to mine and opened the hatch, laying the seats down flat.

As he began to load the boxes, waving off my help, he asked, “So you’re not coming back in the spring?”

I shook my head. “Not to the dorms... Living off campus is cheaper, and even if it wasn’t I can’t imagine living with that asshole for another semester!”

“Is he like that all the time?” he asked.

“Worse, usually,” I said. “But one more night, and it’s over... Then I can focus on getting my own place...”

After he loaded the last box, Thomas locked the car.

“Why not no more nights? Just come home with me and stay,” he said. “BJ will be home tomorrow. Surely one night at the house without her won’t be weird enough to justify staying in the room with that jerk?”

“I really couldn’t ask you to do that,” I said.

Come home with me. I shivered. *Out of context! Don’t fixate on that and get your butterflies fluttering!*

“You didn’t ask,” he said simply.

“I can live through one more night,” I said, shaking my head.

“I suppose you could, but your sheets and pillows are locked in my car,” he said with a slight smirk over at me. “Would be kind of silly to go to all the trouble of going back in and remaking the bed to stay in a room with a guy you hate to avoid going home with an only mildly rude guy like me...”

I snorted and blushed. “You’re not rude. You’re just ... prone to bouts of grumpiness.”

He laughed and smiled over at me, and I thought my heart would stop. It was the first time I’d seen a true smile on his face, and it warmed me to my core.

“Bouts of grumpiness, eh?” he said wryly, his eyes bright and mischievous. “What’s the treatment for that?”

“Relaxation and fun!” I said easily.

“I don’t know if I’m familiar with those drugs,” he teased. “Are those brand name medications or generics?”

I rolled my eyes. “I guess I will have to come home with you to give you a demonstration!”

He arched his eyebrows and gave me a serious stare, but another smile began to spread across his face. “Then we’ll both benefit!”

Back in my room, Thomas directed me to the smaller of the two rolling suitcases, then asked, “You have everything?”

“I think so,” I said, nodding.

“All right, time to hit the road,” he said.

Greg held up a hand and extended his middle finger. “Hope I don’t see you around, rump ranger...”

“Head on down,” Thomas said. “I’ll take one last look around. No need for you to take any more abuse from this little prick.”

“Fuck you,” Greg mumbled. “I’ll show you a little prick!”

“I’m sure you’ve got a great example,” Thomas retorted coldly, without a hint of a smile. Then he nodded for me to go on.

I hurried downstairs and waited for him outside the double doors. As anxious as I was about what was going on upstairs and about going home with a man who was a stranger and a work crush, as well as an internet flirtation, I couldn’t help feeling an intense sense of relief. It felt like I was finally getting back a real handle on my life.

A few minutes later, Thomas pushed through the door carrying my last bag and wearing an easy smile on his face.

“Everything ... okay?” I asked hesitantly.

“Couldn’t be better!” he said, winking and motioning for me to follow.

“What—?” I began to ask “Did he say anything else?”

Thomas shrugged. “We both had a few things to say. I don’t think you’ll have any more problems with Greg.”

“What did you do?” I asked, trying to repress a smile.

“Oh, we just had a chat...”

Thomas

My blood had boiled when that little son of a bitch had called Ender—Billy, I guess—a little queer. No wonder the poor guy wanted out of the dorms... It made me wonder what else was going on with the kid—

The sexy young twink who has dominated your thoughts the last few days, I corrected. Fuck, this just got complicated!

But I had also gotten an undeserved boost from the idea that his asshole roommate would assume I was his boyfriend. Well, sugar daddy, I’m sure... A cutie like Billy would never need to settle for a guy like me. But still, a guy could easily get his hopes up around assumptions like that.

When Greg had doubled down on his bullying, I had seen red. I was glad Billy hadn't questioned me when I told him to go ahead and let me do the last check through the room.

"So what's your deal with Billy?" I asked Greg after I gave Billy time to clear out.

"Nunya," Greg said, keeping his back to me.

"Bullshit," I growled, smiling as I watched Greg's back stiffen. "You into him? This some middle school shit?"

"You're not his boyfriend," Greg said. "And you're not his dad. So back the fuck off, dude!"

"Maybe not," I said. "But he's a nice guy, and he doesn't deserve some piece of shit prick like you making his life even harder than it needs to be!"

"Guys like him—"

"Did he ever hit on you?" I asked. "Did you ever catch him creeping on you?" Greg sat very still. "I didn't think so... Because you aren't worth a minute of his time. If bad luck didn't put you two together, he would never have given you a second look. You wouldn't have been a blip on his radar... You're the one who decided to make him your target. And I can only ask myself why..."

"I don't care what the little faggot does in his free time," Greg said. "But it was his choice to flaunt—"

"You're the one flaunting your ignorance," I snapped. "And to be frank, your self-hating homophobia wouldn't have been cute in the '90s, much less now... I don't care that you are hiding in the closet, but you have no right to take it out on that sweet young man, do you hear me?"

"Fuck you," Greg said.

"No, asshole," I snarled. "Fuck you! You leave him alone, you understand? And if I ever hear you've kept this ... whatever it is going, I'll make it my business to make sure it haunts you, do you understand me?"

Finally, Greg turned to glare at me, but he said nothing.

“Do we understand each other?” I asked. “I may not be the richest guy with a kid here, but I will make it my business to stay in your business for the rest of—”

“I get it,” Greg snapped. “As long as I don’t have to deal with his faggotry anymore, he won’t have to—”

“You really need to ask yourself where all this comes from, if you really don’t know,” I said, shaking my head. “But I don’t care what you decide. Just leave him alone! Understand me?”

“Whatever,” Greg said, turning back to whatever he was working on.

I grabbed Billy’s last bag and stormed out of the room. All I could think of now was keeping Billy away from this asshole and guys like him. I was glad I could provide that sanctuary for someone like Billy. I couldn’t screw that up by putting my own needs first though. I’d have to work hard to keep my own feelings at bay, so I could make sure Billy was taken care of from here on out.

CHAPTER 8

THOMAS

Once I had put his last two bags in the back of my SUV, I asked Billy, “Are you hungry? I haven’t had dinner..”

“I don’t want to be any trouble,” he said. “I can run to the store and get some sandwich stuff after I get my stuff—”

“That isn’t what I asked,” I said with a laugh. “I am ready to eat, and I’m inviting you to join me!”

“I just don’t want to wear out my welcome before I even get my stuff out of your car,” he said with a shy smile.

“I can’t imagine you wearing out your welcome,” I said. “Do you like Chinese? I can order in... If not, there’s an okay Italian place near my house we could run to...”

“Chinese is okay,” he began.

“But Italian is preferable?” I asked.

“Tonight it is, if you don’t have a preference?” he said shyly.

“Let’s get your stuff into the house,” I said. “Then we can run over and get some food.”

“If you’re sure it’s not a—”

“I won’t offer if I don’t want to,” I said. “Trust me?”

“I don’t know about trust,” Billy said with a sad smile. “But if you insist...”

“I insist,” I said. “Unless you just don’t want to?”

I looked over at him with a smile, trying to look self-confident as I did, and he smiled at me, leaving my insides feeling squishy,

“As long as you don’t feel like you have to,” he said.

“Then it’s settled,” I said.

The ride to my house was silent after that. Billy was texting, leaving me wondering who he was talking with and what it was all about. But my curiosity was sated when I got home and saw that BJ had messaged me.

BJ: How’s Billy?

Me: He seems anxious.

BJ: He says you’re being nice, but weird.

Me: I am just trying to make him feel comfortable.

After I clicked send, though, I realized how odd that must sound to my daughter, who knew I was not a people person in my private life. BJ was also smart enough to wonder why I felt the need to explain.

BJ: Good. You two should get to know each other.

Me: Did you know what’s going on with his roommate?

BJ: That he’s a homophobic douche canoe? I knew. That’s one of the reasons I hoped he could get out of the dorms.

Me: What else is going on with him? Why isn’t he going home?

BJ: That’s his to tell.

BJ: Be nice to him, dad...

Me: Of course I will. But it would help to know what I’m dancing around, though!

BJ: Well, get him to tell you, then! Gently...

Me: Join us at the house tonight?

BJ: Tomorrow, when I’m done.

Well, fuck. This isn’t going to be easy...

If BJ was refusing to tell me what was going on, it was something serious, I knew. It made me wonder if I would be able to get the information out of him before I got it out of BJ.

Suddenly I was aware of Billy watching me carefully.
“Let’s get your things inside! I’m starving!”

“Sure,” he said, as if startled.

We both got out of the car, and I clicked the button to open the back hatch. I grabbed the two bags, while Billy took the first box. I struggled with the garage door, finally getting it unlocked and holding it open with my foot for him. Then I led him to the guest room.

“There should be plenty of room,” I said apologetically as I put the bags inside the door. “I have plenty of storage if there are things you need to get out of the way, though...”

“It’s great,” he said shyly. “This is bigger than the room I shared with Greg...”

“Just let me know if you need anything,” I said. “The guest bathroom is all yours... For tonight, at least. You and BJ will be sharing it as of tomorrow...”

“BJ will be a better roomie than Greg,” he teased.

“I can imagine,” I said with a little chuckle. “I’m going to go get the rest of your stuff if you want to get settled in...”

“Thanks,” he said. “You don’t have to—”

“Billy,” I said softly. “I wouldn’t offer if I didn’t want to...”

He seemed to think it over for a moment before nodding with an embarrassed look. I made quick work of unloading the last few boxes, setting each just inside the door of the guest room Billy would be occupying.

“Thanks,” he said with a heavy sigh as I brought the last box in.

I leaned against the door. “What’s up?”

“What do you mean?” he asked, looking up at me with a bit of apprehension.

“Well, you seem ... down? Overwhelmed? I don’t know,” I said.

“It’s nothing,” he said. “Not your problem. You’ve already done more than—”

“*Maybe* it’s not my problem,” I said. “But I care. And you can talk to me.”

He met my gaze for what felt like a long time and then said, “Grumpy daddy has a soft side?”

“Grumpy what?” I asked, snorting but trying not to overreact.

Billy’s eyes grew wide and his face pale. “I.. Uhm, I mean...”

“Don’t freak out,” I said with a chuckle.

Billy blushed bright red. “It’s just ... well, you were pretty grumpy when you came in, but also strong with the daddy energy, so ... we kinda nicknamed you Grumpy Daddy...”

I laughed loudly.

Billy looked at me cautiously. “You’re not mad?”

“I mean, it’s true,” I said, trying for a nonchalant shrug, though inside I felt pretty squishy again. “I am a dad, and I was pretty grumpy...”

With a relieved look, Billy said, “It wasn’t an insult...”

“I know,” I said, chuckling. “It’s ... kinda cute.”

His eyes widened again, but he said nothing.

“Are you ready for dinner or—?”

“Do you mind if I change?” he asked.

I looked him over appreciatively before saying, “Sure, but ... does that mean I need to change? I don’t want you showing up all dressed up with me in jeans and a flannel!”

Again Billy blushed bright. “I’m not doing anything special... These clothes just don’t feel right for going out.”

I smiled and said, “I’ll meet you by the door in ten?”

“Perfect,” he said.

I stepped out, and when he closed the door behind me, I hurried into my room to change into nicer clothes. And boy was I glad I did when I caught sight of Billy waiting for me by the door looking like something Santa would deliver if he read my emails and decided I’d been good this year.

Ender

Why are you acting like this is a date? I wondered. Probably because Grumpy Daddy had promised me a date—once he got what was keeping him busy settled. Now, I knew exactly what had delayed our date: him needing to move his daughter’s pathetic friend out of the dorms.

Well, he also has BJ to worry about tomorrow. You can’t go on a fucking date him now! Best not to treat this like anything but going to get food with your friend’s dad. Your friend’s hot dad. Who you like. And who probably likes you back. Well, at least he likes your body. A lot.

“Fuck!” I muttered, opening my bags and pulling out a nicer shirt and sweater to replace my t-shirt and hoodie. “Nothing too fancy. Don’t make it weird.”

But fuck me if I don’t want to look good for him! This man is everything that drives me wild. And I had only been a few days away from getting him right where—and hopefully how—I wanted.

And now? Now I have to restrain every impulse so I don’t screw myself out of house and home before I find an alternative.

Jesus why does everything always have to be so freakin’ hard?

I quickly changed. Then I checked myself in the mirror.

Not too dressy. But nice. I wonder if he’ll like—

I cut that thought off and walked downstairs to the entryway and looked around. When we had arrived at the house, he had led me straight to the guest room since we were carrying my things in, and I hadn’t gotten a tour yet. I really wanted to snoop, but I was expecting Grumpy Daddy any moment and didn’t want him to think I was invading his privacy.

Thomas! His name is Thomas! Stop thinking of him as Grumpy Daddy, or you’ll say it again and embarrass the fuck

out of both of you!

The sound of his door closing caught my attention, and I looked up just in time to see him standing at the top of the stairs looking freaking gorgeous in his button up and sweater. I made the conscious effort to force my mouth closed so I'd look less like a gape-mouthed weirdo.

“Wow,” he said with a smile—making me feel silly for having wondered if he ever smiled. “You said you weren't doing anything special! I feel like I need to go change again!”

I laughed, blushing, and shook my head. “This old thing?” I said, teasing. Subconsciously I may have overdone it, though, I knew. “You look gr—” Awkwardly I cut myself off. I didn't want to fawn over him and make myself look silly or him feel self-conscious.

“Grumpy?” he asked with a teasing wink. “I get told that I look grumpy sometimes by snarky boys...”

“Not just look, I bet,” I said, playing along. “You look great...”

“You think?” he asked, sounding surprised.

I nodded shyly and said, “Definitely.”

He cleared his throat and asked, “Uhm, are you ready to go grab dinner?”

Averting my eyes, I said, “Yeah!”

He must have thought I was looking around, as I had been earlier. “Shit, I forgot to show you around! I was so focused on getting your stuff in and getting to dinner I... Want the tour before we go?”

“It can wait,” I said. “You've got me hungry now with all that talk about food.”

And looking fine as hell hasn't helped that other hunger...

He laughed, casually putting a hand on my shoulder to urge me toward the door. I hoped he didn't feel the shiver that raced through my body.

Fuck, why can't this man even touch me innocently without turning me into a trembling mess?!

CHAPTER 9

ENDER

I looked out the window and cleared my head as Thomas drove. He probably thought something was wrong, but he would probably never guess what was really going on in my brain—that I just needed to clear him out of my head for a minute before our total not-date.

As we rode along, BJ texted.

BJ: All settled in at home?

Me: All my stuff is unloaded into the guest room.

BJ: What're you doing now? Not hiding in your room?

Me: GUEST ROOM.

Me: Uhm, no. Actually I'm on my way to dinner.

BJ: Ubering?

Me: No, your dad is taking me to eat.

BJ: Did things go that badly at the dorm?

Me: How did you know?

BJ: Also, dad asked me if I knew how bad your roomie was...

Me: I don't know what he said to him, but he said I wouldn't have problems with Greg again.

BJ: Uhm, okay... That's weird.

Me: And I think he's trying to make me feel better.

BJ: Has he talked to you a lot?

Me: A lot for a friend's dad.

BJ: Then he's trying to make you feel better. Dad's not known for his outgoing nature!

Me: Oh, I am WELL AWARE!!

BJ: Wait, you WHAT?!

Me: Why the overreaction? He came into the cafe the other day and was kind of an a-hole...

BJ: Sorry... What happened?

Me: Can we just talk about it tomorrow? It's a lot to type.

BJ: Sure.

BJ: Also be prepared for questions, since I refused to give him any details about your situation. If you push back, he'll let it go for the moment, if you don't want to talk about it.

Me: Should I talk about it?

**BJ: Dad's a good person to talk to. Just a little intense sometimes.
TTYL**

Me: TTYL

Then I stuck my phone in my pocket.

“Boyfriend?” Thomas asked, making me jump as he broke the long silence.

“Uhm, no ... what?” I said, blushing at my lack of eloquence.

Thomas laughed again and shot me a quick smile. “You were burning up your phone texting! When BJ does that, it's usually some boy...”

“It was actually BJ, not *some boy*,” I said, shaking my head. “Most of my life I've been boyless...”

“I figured you'd have your pick,” he said, then looked embarrassed, reminding me that the comment was likely innocent but not entirely innocent. I knew this man *could* entertain less-than-innocent thoughts about me. Or guys *like* me who *are* me but he doesn't know are me, anyway.

I shifted in my seat to try to hide the effect that thought had on me. “Yeah, right! As if...”

Before he could say anything else, I hopped out of the car, which he had just parked, and hurried for the door, kicking myself.

Are you trying to get him to argue the point with you? Twisting his arm into complimenting you is such a bitch move!

I just really have never been that confident. Sure I get an okay response on the dating and hookup apps, but not the kind of response I want. I want guys who're into me on more than

one level, and who are maybe game for something ongoing. What I usually get are mostly what I call “ass collectors”—guys who are out to bang as many young guys as possible to add to their head (ass) count.

I knew Thomas was different, though I felt guilty for how I knew it, and there was a big part of me that wanted to draw as much of his attention to myself as possible, though I knew it was a terrible idea.

Inside, Thomas had either lost the train of the previous conversation or simply didn’t rise to my compliment bait.

“So what’s your major?” he asked after the waitress, a handsome blond a few years older than me, took our drink order. “I assume it’s not culinary?”

“Why is that?” I asked, confused for a moment. Then, feeling like a total ditz as he broke out into a big smile, I hurriedly answered, “I’m actually a sandwichology major...”

He snorted. “You must have failed condiments?”

“I didn’t actually make that sandwich, you know,” I said. “I just panicked when I forgot to write your order down!”

He laughed. “Panicked? Sure, I know it’s embarrassing to have to go back to your customer again, but—”

“You have to admit, your attitude was pretty shitty that day!” I said with arched eyebrows. “Would *you* have wanted to come back to ask about your order yet again?”

“I wasn’t really that bad, was I?” he asked.

“Bad enough that when you came back I hid in the kitchen,” I said, the words escaping before I could stop myself.

“Really?” he asked, sounding sobered. When he put his hand on my arm softly, I stiffened. He quickly withdrew his hand and said, “Sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“No, it’s not,” I began, considering whether to put my hand on his apologetically. I decided not to, but added, “I don’t mind... I was just surprised.”

He nodded, averting his eyes. “I’m really sorry Billy—Ender... Sorry, what do you prefer to be called?”

“Most of my friends call me Ender,” I said. “Billy I still use at work but it’s more of— Well, I’d prefer Ender...”

“Ender,” Thomas nodded, seeming to turn the word around in his head. “Ender, I really am sorry for how I behaved. I was kind of at the end of my rope that day and—”

“It’s okay,” I said. “Really! You don’t go around doing that all the time, right?”

“No!” he said. “At least I don’t think I do... I guess I could be a total asshole and not realize it...”

“I think BJ would have warned me about that if you were,” I said with a laugh.

“I guess so,” he said. “But she could have a blind spot for me...”

“You seem to feel bad about it,” I said. “You definitely seem as if you might have more of a grumpy streak than you realize, but you don’t seem to be a jerk...”

He laughed a little bitterly. “Thanks, I think...”

“Social work,” I said, after an awkward silence descended over our table.

“Hmm?” he asked, as if his mind had drifted far away.

“My major... Social work,” I said. “There’s a special five-year program at the school—you graduate with a BSW and a MSW. I had been planning—”

“Had been?” he asked.

Damn, he’s perceptive... I need to be more careful around him.

“I’m keeping my options open now,” I said softly.

“In case sandwichology works out for you?” he asked, shooting me a teasing look.

I was thankful he was letting me off the hook. “You never know... I do make good tips!”

“I imagine you do,” he said.

Am I imagining things? I wondered. Or did that sound a little suggestive?

I decided it was wishful thinking. “But seriously, I may need to take a year or two off to save money before I can afford the MSW...”

“If you don’t do this program, how long is the regular MSW?” he asked.

“Two years,” I said.

“So the MSW would end up costing you twice as much,” I said.

“Yeah,” I said, nodding. “But now I don’t have the money... I’ll be strapped to pay for next semester and senior year... I could maybe get some extra financial aid for next year, but next semester there’s not much left on the table, even if I apply...”

“Well, I know you’re not asking for my opinion,” he began.

“But you’re going to give it to me anyway?” I asked, snapping a little.

“Not if you don’t want to hear it,” he said stiffening.

I sat silent for a long time, then sighed. “Sorry, I’m just used to being told what to do and— Well, what’s your thought?”

Thomas looked at me for a moment. “I think you should take out as many loans as you can and get it done with... You’ll pay less in the long run. And I think it’s better to pay it back than to save and save and put off your dream while you chase your tail. I’ve known too many people who never did what they really wanted in life because they spent their whole life preparing to do what they wanted...”

Again I spoke without thinking. “Are you doing what you really want?”

Fuck, why did you say that?! I chided myself. Sure, BJ told you her dad seemed stuck but—

When he didn't say anything for a long time, I apologized. "Sorry, that was personal and—"

He laughed bitterly. "Well, I was giving you advice about something very personal, so it's a legitimate question..."

I waited for him to continue, but he didn't.

"So ... are you?" I asked.

When he laughed this time, it was in much better humor. "I'm even worse—one of the people who's spent so much of his life preparing so hard for a time when he could live out his dreams that he forgot what those dreams even were..."

"I'm sorry," I said softly.

"Don't be!" he said, seeming by force of will to bring his good humor back to life. "No use regretting it... All I can do now is do the best I can with the decisions I've made."

"I don't think that's all you can do," I said hesitantly.

He gave me a wry smile and asked, "So what else is there?"

"Take time to make new dreams and ... do whatever you want?" I said. "For one, you're not that old," I added. He laughed as I hoped he would. "And I could be wrong, but I'm guessing you've got a safety net..."

"A safety net?" he asked, looking amused.

"You don't seem the kind of guy who doesn't prepare for a rainy day," I said. "You've got a nice place, but I'm betting you've been very ... responsible."

He smirked at me.

"What? Am I wrong?"

He laughed and shook his head, giving me a funny look. My eyes met his, and I felt this irrational but compelling desire to reach over the table and take his hand, to lean across and

kiss this man I'd just met—or at least was just getting to know in real life for the first time.

“You're not wrong,” he said with a sigh. “It's something I've considered but...”

I nodded, still in a daze. Before I could say or do something stupid, though, my stomach growled and he laughed again.

“You ready to order when he gets back?” he asked.

“I guess I should look at the menu,” I replied with a blush. I opened the menu, and felt my gut churn. “It's expensive.”

“I'm buying,” he said without looking up from browsing the pages. “Get whatever you want...”

I didn't know what to say. I felt like I shouldn't accept the offer, but the food smelled great and I was hungry. But no way could I afford anything on this menu.

“I'm going to run to the restroom,” I said.

“Want me to order for you if the waiter comes while you're gone?” he asked, glancing up.

“Maybe just a caesar salad,” I said with a shy smile, then hurried off before he could argue.

As I turned down the hallway toward the men's room, I texted BJ.

Me: BJ?! This place is expensive. I can't let your dad buy me dinner here!

BJ: Sure you can! Dad likes his nice restaurants. He dragged you there. So he can pay! And you don't even have to worry about putting out later!

My breath caught in my throat for a moment, and I almost responded, ‘What if I *want* to put out later?’ But I decided that might be a step too far, even if she took it as a joke.

When I didn't respond, she piled on.

BJ: Is he just trying to make you feel better or making up for something he did?

Me: Both? Tell you tomorrow about the something else.

BJ: Get what you want. He doesn't care...

I laughed to myself, thinking, You definitely don't want me to get what I want. I'm pretty sure that needs to be taken off the menu at least temporarily. Probably permanently. Definitely permanently. Probably. Fuck!

Me: I'll just get a salad.

BJ: Good luck with that LOL! TTYL

"Fuck my life," I whispered.

CHAPTER 10

THOMAS

Ender didn't look directly at me when he returned. But as he took his seat, he looked for the menu, which the waiter had taken away.

I slid a basket of bread across to him and said, "The waiter came... This should hold you over."

"Thanks," he said quietly, then reached for the bread, which he dipped in olive oil. After taking a bite, he looked up at me, eyes brighter. "This is really good!"

"I try to only go to places with really good food," I said. "I'm particular..."

"I remember," he said with a little smirk, taking another bite.

I snorted. "You're really not going to let it go?"

"Maybe I'll get it out of my system," he said, warming up again.

"Glad to see the bread is taking the edge off your hangriness!"

"I wasn't hangry!" he protested, rolling his eyes.

"You seemed a little hangry when you came back from the restroom," I pressed.

He rolled his eyes yet again. "I was a little ... annoyed. I don't want to be a burden, but here you are spending all this —"

“I had to eat,” I said. “Thanks to you, I don’t have to eat alone, which I’ve been doing way too much of lately... So you’re the one doing me the favor.”

“If you say so,” he said, looking at me dubiously.

“And I do,” I said, cocking an eyebrow at him.

“I just ... I already feel like I owe you so much, and I won’t ever be able to—”

“Please don’t think about it like that,” I said with a sigh. “We aren’t keeping score. And it’s nothing I wouldn’t do for any friend of BJs, so if anyone owes me, it’s her. Can we just blame her and let it go?”

For a moment, a strange look passed over his face. *Is that disappointment?* I wondered. But then it was gone, replaced by a shy smile.

“Blame BJ, huh?” he asked.

I nodded. “She’s the one who got you into this awkward situation with a grump like me... And it was a favor to her, so it is all on her!”

“I ... can live with that,” he said, repressing a full-on grin.

“I hope you like lasagna,” I added. “Theirs is really good, and since I didn’t know what you wanted...”

“I said caesar salad,” he said, looking confused.

“I got you one of those too,” I said with a shrug. “But I didn’t think that would be enough so— Wait, you’re not a vegetarian?”

“No, I’m not, but you didn’t have to—” Ender began, but the look I gave him must have made him rethink it. “Thanks. I love lasagna.”

I repressed the urge to tell him I knew that, because then I would have had to have explained that I had texted BJ while he was gone to ask what I should order for him. Which I’m sure wouldn’t seem weird at all.

“Good,” I said.

Soon dinner began to arrive, and we ate in companionable silence. There was so much I wanted to ask him—why he was unexpectedly without financial support for school, for instance. Never mind the other things which I could never ask him now, since he was a friend of my daughter and would be living in my house for a few weeks. Things like, “Are you into daddies? And would you mind terribly if I kissed you?”

His lips are so fucking kissable, almost cherry red and pouty. Every time they part for a bite of food, I wonder what it would feel like to slip my tongue between them, to grasp him by the back of the neck and hold him tight, drawing his body into mine with my other arm.

I did my best to force myself not to stare at him but failed often. Once or twice, I thought I caught him tearing his own gaze away from me, but that was wishful thinking I assured myself.

You're on a dangerous path, buddy. You need a distraction!

And suddenly it occurred to me exactly what I needed to do. Yes, I also needed to talk to someone about this fucked up situation, but there was only one person I could talk to about this. I had already talked with Alex, my wife's old friend, about my dilemma, but it was still going to be embarrassing as hell.

Well, maybe there are two people I can talk to—if this boy wasn't one of my daughter's best friends, and if I could just man up and come out to her.

But the thing I needed to do most immediately was to distract myself from Ender. And the best candidate for that was a young man I knew only as LonelyCollegeBoy.

When I get home, I'll message him and try to set something up ASAP! I decided it, then and there.

That'll solve this problem. I hope. But Billy—Ender, fuck—is just so...

“Thomas?” he asked again.

“Sorry, my mind wandered.” I said, shaking my head with an embarrassed grin. “What were you—?”

“I was asking about the bus,” he said. “I have to work tomorrow, and unlike the dorms it’s not exactly walkable or bikeable...”

“And you don’t have your own bike anyway, I assume?” I asked.

“Right,” he said. “So ... buses?”

“Nothing convenient,” I said. “Uhm ... what time do you need to be there?”

“Early,” he said. “And I’m definitely not going to ask you to—!”

“You’re not asking,” I said again. “What time?”

“Six,” he said. “Preferably a few minutes before. But—”

“I’ll drive you,” I said. “I can work from the office tomorrow. It’s no big deal at all!”

“But that’s so early!” he argued. “You shouldn’t have to work an extra long day just because—”

“I have no intention of doing so, either,” I said with a laugh. “I don’t have any meetings scheduled for the afternoon, so I’ll head home after lunch. Get an early start on the weekend... What time do you get off?”

“Three,” he said. “As long as I don’t get kept late. But you don’t need to—”

“Ender!” I said, stopping him. “I wasn’t going to offer to stay! I told you I wasn’t going to offer anything that I didn’t want to!”

“Oh,” he said, deflating. Then he looked worried.

Before he could start to spiral over how he was getting home, I interjected, “I’m going to tell BJ she can pick you up... She’s finishing up about then.”

“Oh,” he said again. “Yeah. Yeah, that works.”

“I know,” I said with an amused smile. “Do you work this weekend?”

“Saturday,” he said. “Then I’m off Sunday and Monday...”

“I’ll take you in on Saturday, and we’ll make sure you have a ride home,” I said. Before he could argue, I added, “That gives us til Tuesday to research your other options!”

He heaved a sigh and nodded. “Uhm, okay... Yeah.”

“Anything else worrying you that we need to take care of,” I asked.

He looked like a deer in headlights for a moment.

“Nothing that I don’t have to deal with on my own,” he said.

“Ender,” I began to plead. But I could see from the look on his face that this wasn’t the time or the place. “Dessert?”

His shoulders, which had been tense, collapsed in relief.

“No, I couldn’t! I’m stuffed!”

“Then why don’t we head home?” I asked. “I’ll show you around, then you can ... just relax. Make yourself at home...”

He nodded, smiling shyly, and suddenly the waiter appeared.

“Anything else, gentlemen?” he asked, giving Ender a quick glance before settling his gaze on me. “Anything *at all*?”

Ender’s eyes narrowed for just a second, but I caught it. I looked back to our waiter, and when our eyes met I could feel his piercing gaze.

“I ... uhm, I think we’re all done, but could I get two orders of tiramisu to go and a check?”

“Of course, sir,” the young man said, with a polite bow of the head and a smoldering smile. As he turned to walk away, I couldn’t help but notice how his pants clung to his thick thighs and athletic ass.

There you go with the asses again! Are you having a midlife crisis and converting from bottom to top?

I snorted at the thought, and Ender gave me a wry smile. With an arched eyebrow, he asked, “Something funny?”

“Just having silly thoughts,” I said. To myself I added, *Vers bottom is a weak maybe...*

“Well, if the thought you were having was ‘The waiter is hitting on me,’” Ender said, his tone oddly flat. “It’s not funny, it’s accurate!”

“He is not!” I said, snorting again. But I blushed and couldn’t quite look him in the eye.

“Well, you may be oblivious, but I’m not!” Ender said.

“Don’t be jealous,” I teased.

“What?” he sputtered. “I’m not... I just... For all he knows, you’re here with me!”

“I am here with—”

“On a date,” he said with an annoyed eye roll. “I know you’re not, but it’s the principle of the thing—like he thinks it’s not possible you would be here with me!”

“I meant don’t be jealous that he’s hitting on me and not you,” I said, trying to keep my face neutral. “Besides, he probably thinks you’re my son and flirting with my son in front of me is not the key to tips...”

“Bold to hit on you in front of your son unless he thinks you’re receptive,” Ender said, turning the tables. “He must really be into you, not tips, because that play could cost him big.” When I didn’t answer immediately, he added, “Server here, remember?”

“I’m sure he’s just being friendly,” I said, blushing now.

“Wanna bet?” he asked, cocking an eyebrow and giving me a playful smirk.

My blush deepened and my stomach churned. “What do you mean?”

“Wanna make a bet on whether or not he’s hitting on you?” he asked.

“Not that we could prove it one way or another, but what’s the bet?” I asked.

Now he blushed. “I was thinking of watching a movie tonight. If I’m right, you have to watch it with me...”

“And if I’m right?” I asked, trying not to smile too hard. *Sounds like I win if I lose.*

This thought was quickly followed by, *You’re supposed to be avoiding him and distracting yourself from his presence, not having a slumber party.*

He shrugged nonchalantly. “Uhm ... you get to pick the movie?”

I shrugged in return, smiling, and said, “Like I said, it’s not like we can settle it. If you want to watch a movie, though, all you have to do is ask and—”

“Hey, quick question!” Ender said with a wicked smile as the waiter appeared at my elbow with a check and two to-go boxes.

“Sure!” the young man said with a kind of plastic smile.

Shit, Ender’s right... This guy’s definitely not into him!

“Were you flirting with my dad?” Ender asked.

I coughed, putting my hand over my mouth, thankful I hadn’t just taken a drink of anything. I looked over at the server, whose face was beet red.

“I, uhm,” the server sputtered. “I was just—”

I reached out and put my hand on the young man’s forearm. Then with a stern look at Ender I said, “Forgive my son... He sometimes lets his mouth get ahead of his brain.”

“Oh, come on *dad!*” Ender said, sounding scarily innocent. “I didn’t mean anything by it. He seems nice, and you’re single...”

“I, uhm,” the server said, trying and failing again to speak. Then he sat the boxes down, held out the check, and hurried off.

I frowned at Ender. “Well, you didn’t get an answer, *and* you managed to mortify the poor guy!”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to—”

“You’ve been in his shoes,” I said. “You’re going to be in his shoes tomorrow. How would you feel if someone—?”

“I’m sorry!” he said more softly. “I guess ... now you’ve seen me be an ass to a server, now.”

“I just don’t get why you did that,” I said, my expression softening.

He shrugged, lowering his eyes and seeming ashamed. “I don’t know... Like, I definitely get ... someone being attracted to you and not me—”

“Oh, don’t be silly,” I began.

He held up a hand. “It’s just, we are two very different types, so if he’s into you I wouldn’t automatically expect...”

“Oh, sorry,” I said. “I understand that now...”

He nodded. “But I don’t know ... it’s just that thought that I’m not good enough for you to be here with me? Like ... this has to be innocent because you’d never be here with me?”

I gave one bitter, choking laugh, leaned in, and said, “Or ... he thinks you’re way too cute to be here as *my date*, so you must have been a client or my son or something...”

“Well, he definitely assumes I’m your son now,” Ender said, eyes still averted but fighting a shy smile.

His smile faded instantly though, and I looked over my shoulder to see our waiter approaching hesitantly. I gave him an encouraging smile which seemed to help.

I handed the waiter the check and my card and said, “Sorry about before...”

“No worries,” he said, giving me a weak smile and shooting Ender a hesitant look.

“My dad’s right,” Ender said, an apologetic expression on his face. “That was rude. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything bad by it.” The server nodded at him and smiled just a little. Then Ender gave him a conspiratorial look and added, “And it’s not like it would have been a bad thing if I was right. That shit happens all the damn time with my dad...”

The server snorted, looked at me and then back to Ender, and without thinking said, “I can see how that could happen...” Then, realizing what he had said, he turned bright red and again rushed off.

“Guess I get to pick the movie,” Ender said with a sly smirk.

“That’s not definitive,” I grumbled. “He was just teasing you...”

“That was definitely a spontaneous declaration,” he complained.

“You’ve been watching too much *Law & Order*,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“But that’s a real lawyer thing, right?” he insisted. “Hearsay is admissible when—”

“I guess it’s a real thing,” I allowed. “But this is not a court, and that’s not enough evidence for me!”

“You’re no fun!” he said, pouting.

“I know,” I said, shaking my head. “I hear that all the time...”

“But you’re supposed to let me teach you how to have fun!” he said. “Remember? To treat your bouts of grumpiness!”

I couldn’t help but laugh and smile. “Right... I forgot. I guess you see now how hard that job’s gonna be!”

“I guess so,” he said with a falsely somber expression.

The waiter returned, giving us both hesitant looks before hurrying off again. I signed the check, grabbed my card and the boxes of tiramisu, and then we left.

As we buckled in, Ender said, “So I get to pick the movie...”

“If you want to watch a movie, you’re free to—”

“Nope,” he said with a satisfied smirk. “I won the bet... You have to let me pick, and you have to watch it with me!”

“I told you, that wasn’t enough—”

Ender held out a long piece of white paper. “You didn’t look at the bill, did you?”

“Not the one he brought out with the check, no,” I said, taking it from him.

Well, shit!

I read the note on the itemized receipt: ‘I hope I’m not out of line but your son seemed to be hinting it was okay. If you want, you can text me. Kyle.’

“Are you going to message him?” Ender asked softly.

“No!” I said emphatically. “I’m not into that...” I let the thought trail off to imply that I wasn’t into guys and that I’d just been playing along. Then, changing the subject, I asked, “What kind of movies do you like? A deal’s a deal!”

“*Texas Chainsaw Massacre*,” he said. “I already picked...”

“1974 or 2003?” I asked.

“Do you have to ask?”

I snorted and shook my head. “Only a real horror fan—and big fan of the original—would answer like that...”

“You ... uhm,” he said, almost nervous. “You know horror?”

“You have no idea,” I said with a sly smile and a wink.

The look he gave me filled my stomach with butterflies.

Crap! And then I slipped the note into my pocket as surreptitiously as possible.

CHAPTER 11

ENDER

What are you doing?! my brain screamed as I changed into a pair of soft pajama shorts and a t-shirt. First you act like a jealous freak, then like a total brat, at dinner. And then you turn it into horror movie night with a daddy you barely know?

“Well, when you put it like that,” I whispered to myself. “But it’s not like I asked him to Netflix and chill or something...”

But it’s exactly what you always suggest to potential hookups... Except for that jock, anyway...

I knew I had to be good, and now I had put myself in this situation? What was I thinking? And the first person I would normally ask for advice was not a viable option. I picked up my phone and texted Peter Maguire, my only other close friend at school.

Me: Got a minute?

Peter: Sure, what’s up?

Me: Guy trouble...

Peter: You should ask BJ. You know I’m no good at shit like that!

Me: LOL I know!

Peter: Hey!

Peter: I mean if you want to make guy trouble, I guess I am the expert...

Me: LOL I’m trying to avoid it... But BJ’s not available.

Peter: Way to make a guy feel important!

Me: Shut up!

Peter: So what’s the problem? I just got home for break, and I’m about to try to stir up some guy trouble...

Me: So there's this guy...

Peter: Yeah, I figured!

Me: Sorry, this is just so weird. Anyway, I'm trying to keep us in the friend zone, but he's just so damn hot and sweet and perfect...

Peter: And you're trying to keep him in the friend zone rather than locking that shit down because...

Me: It's complicated... I need him as a friend because of my situation.

Peter: Couldn't he be just as helpful as a guy who likes you?

Me: But if I screw shit up, I lose him... And I can't really afford to.

Fuck, I feel like a douche... That makes it sound like I'm just trying to use him...

Me: I don't want him to feel like I'm trying to obligate him to help me by ... you know?

Peter: Maybe ... tell him how you feel and why you're scared and ... I don't know, communicate?

Me: Well ... that's very NOT YOU advice...

Peter: Yeah, I'd never pull that shit but ... I think it's good advice for you.

Me: Maybe. Thanks Peter.

Peter: Any time... How you doing?

Me: Trying not to think about it. It's all too much. When do you get back?

Peter: January 2. I need to get some research done for my project before class starts back. Hang out when I get in?

Me: Yes please...

Peter: Tell BJ to take it easy over break and leave some boys for the rest of us to come back to!

Me: Gross...

But I couldn't help but laugh. BJ was a modern woman and certainly had her share of dalliances. Truth be told, she had left a trail of more broken hearts than anyone else I knew. But she was always up front with her guys that whatever they had wasn't serious. She didn't lead them on. She was just easy to fall for, it seemed. I guess the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

I looked at myself in the mirror on the back of the guest room door and considered changing into something less comfortable but also less revealing.

Fuck it... If he liked what he saw and things started to get messy, maybe I would take Peter's advice.

As I walked downstairs, I heard Thomas call from the kitchen, "Popcorn?!"

"If you're making some anyway," I called as I walked that way, padding along in my bare feet.

As I entered the kitchen, I found Thomas putting a bag in the microwave, his back to me. His smooth, bare, muscled back...

Fuck me... He's shirtless... And those sweats hug his ass like they were painted on...

He turned and smiled. "It'll just take a minute! I checked and the movie is available to stream on—" He paused for a moment, his smile slipping and replaced with a concerned look. "Is ... everything okay?"

I gawked a little longer, then shook my head. "Sorry, I... Uhm..."

"Is something the matter?" he asked, walking over and putting a hand on my shoulder.

Only then did I truly snap out of it. "Uhm, yeah... Sorry, I just spaced out I guess."

If I thought his back was sexy, these pecs, that bulge, the handsome face, the warm hand on my shoulder were over the top.

Don't get hard, don't get hard, don't— Fuck, don't get any harder, anyway!

I laughed nervously then and said, "I can be such a space cadet sometimes!"

"Happens to the best of us," he said. His concern assuaged, he squeezed my shoulder and then almost reluctantly stepped back. Just before he turned and walked back over to the microwave, Thomas blushed, and I thought it *might be* because of the quick looking over he had given me.

Does he like what he's seeing? Or did I just embarrass him with my skimpy shorts? Or maybe with the 3/4 boner I'm sporting?

I don't have any idea why I was so insecure about it. He'd seen way more of me than this already and had loved it. But standing in front of him now, I worried that the same body might be a turnoff since it belonged to his daughter's best friend.

If he's not into you, would that be the worst thing? You need to keep your hands off this man anyway and— Shit, yes it would be the worst thing! I want him to want me as badly as I want him, even if it's impossible.

I knew how stupid that sounded, even as I thought it.

I've been struck stupid by this gorgeous man.

"I've got popcorn salt," he said. "If you don't like it, I'll leave it off," he added with a glance over his shoulder.

"Love it," I said.

"Grab yourself a drink, then!" he said with a smile. "It's almost movie time!"

"What're you having?" I asked.

He held up a bottle. "Hard cider."

"Do you mind if I—?"

With a serious look, he said, "I don't care... Feel free to help yourself to anything you like, as long as you're not going to be driving."

"No car," I said with a laugh. "So no worries!"

He smiled and nodded.

I grabbed a bottle from the refrigerator, then made my way to the living room to wait for him. I sat on the couch and pulled out my phone to find a message from BJ.

BJ: How's it going?

Me: Good.

BJ: Are you sure?

Me: Yes.

BJ: Tell me or I'm calling!

Me: Chill, I'm just about to watch a movie. Your dad's got a nice setup here!

BJ: Yeah, he does enjoy his movies.

Me: You didn't tell me he's a horror fan...

BJ: LOL the biggest. Even more than you!

Me: I doubt that.

BJ: You'll see.

Me: Whatever!

BJ: He in bed?

Me: Making popcorn. Oops, we are about to start the movie, TTYL!

BJ: Wait, we?!

I smiled to myself as I put the phone away, just as Thomas came in with a big bowl of popcorn. He sat it on the coffee table in front of me and grabbed the remote, then started the movie.

“Damn,” he said. “I didn't think... I should have gotten two bowls.”

“We can share,” I said. “There's plenty of room on the couch if you want to—”

“Sure,” he said, seeming uncertain. Then, before he moved to sit, he asked, “Lights off or on?”

“Off, of course!” I said, scoffing.

Laughing, he walked over to the switch and plunged the room into darkness, except for the glow of the television. Then he walked around the couch and sat down.

I had positioned myself in the middle, but it was a large couch, with plenty of room on either side of me. I had expected him to sit at one end, but instead he settled in next to me, not so close that our thighs touched but close enough I could definitely feel the heat emanating off of him.

We'd both seen the movie multiple times, and it had a relatively slow start, though there were a couple of early moments worthy of a jump. And jump I did. And when I settled back into my seat, my arm now pressed against his.

“So I don’t know much about you or why you’re here,” Thomas said out of nowhere, startling me. He must have felt me stiffen against him, because I felt a big, warm hand settle gently on my forearm. “You don’t *have* to tell me until you’re ready, Ender... But I do *want* to know. I do care...”

“I already made the mistake of trusting people,” I said. “That’s how I ended up here...”

“I know it’s pointless to insist you can trust me,” Thomas said with a sigh. “I’m sure you thought you could trust them too... But, for what it’s worth, I already know you’re gay, and that’s not a problem for me...”

“Yeah,” I said, tensing up further. He squeezed my arm again.

Fuck, he’s paying close attention to my tiniest reaction—

“Long story short? I thought my parents would love me no matter what,” I said. I hadn’t planned to tell him tonight. It just spilled out. “Turns out their love was pretty contingent on me being a normal, cis-het male, the perfect son... I can’t even visit home, much less stay there. They won’t let me see or talk to my brother. And they stopped supporting me completely. I’m on my own. All alone.”

“Billy,” he said, the word almost a whisper on his lips.

“Ender,” I said.

“Ender,” he began again. When he released my arm, the spot where his hand had been felt cold. I longed to have it back. And then his arm wrapped around my shoulder and squeezed me tight. “You are not alone.”

Suddenly all the tension in my body drained away, and I melted into him. Before I realized what was happening, the movie was paused, and his other hand was on my chest, rubbing me gently.

Why is he rubbing my chest? But even as the thought occurred to me, I realized I was crying—weeping was probably more accurate. And I had begun to shake.

“How am I supposed to do all this?” I sobbed. “I work, and I get good grades, but it’s never going to be enough! Not enough to support myself and keep me in school and—”

The soft press of Thomas’ lips against my temple silenced my panicked outburst. And his hand never stopped rubbing circles on my chest.

“Shhh,” he said. “Just breathe...”

“I can’t—”

“Ender,” he whispered my name softly, his warm breath against the side of my face making the moment feel so intimate. “You have friends who care, friends like my daughter. And you have people like me who will help you figure things out, if you’ll let them... Okay?”

“I can’t ask—”

“You can ask,” he corrected gently. “But you don’t have to... I’m telling you, I will help you if you’ll just let me. I’ll help you figure this out, okay?”

“Okay,” I said, leaning into him and continuing to cry softly for a few more minutes.

Finally, though, I wiped my eyes with my arm and looked up at him, embarrassed. “I’m sorry, I just...”

“Don’t be,” he whispered with the kindest smile. “Thank you.”

“For what?” I asked weakly.

“For trusting me with all that,” he said. “I know it’s not easy to be vulnerable with ... basically a stranger...”

“I guess that means you’re not a stranger anymore,” I replied.

Then, I turned in his arms and hugged him tightly, burying my face in his neck. Both of his strong arms tightened around me, and all I could feel was relief. I felt protected and cared for and understood.

“Want to finish that movie?” he asked when the hug had gone on for too long and not yet nearly long enough.

“Yeah,” I said with a soft laugh.

I turned around to face the screen again but didn't move out of his embrace. I waited to see what he would do. He only released me long enough to hit play, then he wrapped his arm back around me. I laid my head back against his shoulder and wiggled until I was comfortably snuggled against him. And as his hand continued to slowly stroke my chest, I got lost in the movie.

CHAPTER 12

THOMAS

Shit... It's barely nine, and I am ready for a nap! Even my inner voice sounded grumpy—even to me! It wasn't the early rising, or even the movie. Hell, even with the break for our little talk we had been done by eleven. I regularly go on less than six hours of sleep.

No, the problem was the fact that, once I got myself in bed, I had tossed and turned for half the remaining night, Ender's words turning over and over in my head. Especially, 'All alone.'

If I had known how to contact his parents last night, it would have gotten ugly. Like drunk amateur drag queens snatching wigs in a Piggly Wiggly parking lot ugly.

Then there was all the second-guessing about how I had handled the situation. How had I gone from the solid 'let's hook up with the hot twink from the internet' plan I had made at the restaurant to horror and cuddle with my daughter's beautiful-as-fuck, off-limits friend currently residing in my guest room?

Hell, once he opened up, I knew now more than ever he needed my support way more than he needed my unwholesome attention, and still somehow I had ended the night holding him as though he was my prized possession. Because the more he opened up, the more I felt drawn to him. And I did want him to feel prized by someone. I just didn't want him to get hurt.

Who the fuck are you kidding? You know it's not his feelings that are going to get hurt. It's your feelings on the line!

Right... I need coffee, stat!

I walked out of my office and down to the break area, where the coffee pot was still half full. I poured myself a cup and tasted it.

Damn, this shit is bitter! I walked back to my office.

I knew I still needed to make Ender feel welcome—maybe even special—but I also needed to put the breaks on the snowballing feelings I was developing. Maintaining what distance was left between us was the only way I could do what was best for him. So I decided to stick to the plan and finally messaged LonelyCollegeBoy on the app.

Me: What's up, sexy?

There was no way of knowing whether he was busy, so I put the phone aside and took another sip of the rancid coffee. I sneered into my cup just as his reply came.

LCB: Just working, daddy! How about you?

Me: Same! Was just thinking about you this morning.

His reply was a long time coming.

LCB: That's sweet. I've been thinking about you a lot lately...

Me: Really? I thought your hookup the other night might have given you something else to focus on...

Shit, why did I bring that up? I wondered, when his reply was slow.

LCB: Nice guy, but didn't click like that, I guess? Something to pass the time while my roommate had a girl over.

Me: So you didn't do anything?

LCB: I didn't say that. I just wasn't as into it as I get the sense I would be with a guy like you.

LCB: With you, I guess I mean.

My mouth was suddenly dry and my stomach had gone from sick to filled with a fluttering feeling. But I couldn't get Ender off my mind for some reason. And it was as though he could read my mind.

LCB: But surely you haven't been just sitting home alone either?

Me: I've been taking care of some personal business.

LCB: Sexy personal business or something else?

Me: I won't deny there's a hot guy involved. But he needs a friend more than he needs a guy chasing him.

LCB: You're a good guy.

Me: I don't know about that... Lusting after someone who's in a tight spot, who really needs your help—it doesn't make me feel like a good guy. You know?

LCB: I get that. But maybe he'd like you to fill more than one ... role?

Me: Maybe. I just ... I don't know what he's comfortable with, you know? I don't want to do anything that makes him feel like my help is dependent on how he responds. I want him to feel...

Me: Well, shit, why am I telling you this? You're sexy as hell, and I know you're into me.

LCB: I bet he is too... And he's already in your life. Maybe you should try to see where things stand before we try to get together.

Me: Fuck. You think?

LCB: If we're being honest, are you more into me or him?

Me: I'm really into how forward and open you are. And your body is amazing.

LCB: But?

Me: There's something about him. And he's also beautiful and sweet. And he will show me his face.

LCB: LOL you just won't let that go, huh?

Me: Haha no... But seriously. You don't think we should hang out?

I had been so into him, but after talking with him about how I felt about Ender, I was suddenly not so anxious. LonelyCollegeBoy would say we shouldn't. In fact, I wondered if I didn't want him to push me away.

LCB: To be honest, I think you should see how things go with the guy... Maybe just talk to him a little? I'm always here if things don't go how you hoped, but it sounds like y'all might have a connection, and I don't want to get attached if you do.

That answers that. I sighed in relief. I wanted him to let me off the hook and throw me back into the little pond I was sharing with Ender. *Fuck my life.*

Me: I think you're right.

LCB: What's he like? ☐

Me: Amazing. Beautiful. Strong as hell. I can't believe how well he's holding up with all he's going through. And still usually so sunny.

LCB: Sunny?

Me: He just has this bright smile that makes me want to ... do better, be happier. Just seeing him lifts my spirits, you know?

LCB: And you needed me to tell you you ought to be talking to him instead of meeting me lol?

Me: It's complicated. He's ... my daughter's friend. And he needs me to be there for him right now. Those two things combined are a big obstacle.

LCB: Between the two of you, I bet you can figure it out...

Me: Thanks... I needed to hear that.

LCB: I'm around if you want to talk—as friends.

Me: Thanks for understanding and for helping me understand...

LCB: No problem ☐

I smiled as I put my phone down. Then I frowned as I took another sip of coffee. I had over an hour until my next meeting, so I got up and put on my coat.

CHAPTER 13

ENDER

Fuck, I'm such an asshole! I put my phone in my pocket. Impersonating not-myself to secretly guide the man I liked back to me and away from not-myself. How convoluted and manipulative can you get? Plus, I was basically pumping the man for information about how he feels about me under the guise of a caring stranger... I'm human trash!

“You look like someone just kicked your puppy!” my coworker Molly said as she handed me the two lattes my table had ordered.

Fuck, I hope my customers aren't noticing too!

“I ... uhm,” I stammered. “Let me drop these off.” And then I rushed off as though my life depended on it.

Before I reached my table though, I tripled the wattage in the forced smile I'd been wearing all morning.

“Here you go, ladies!” I said as I sat their coffees down in front of them. “Can I get you anything, or is it just a coffee kind of morning?”

The younger of the women was very flirty and asked about my favorites from the menu, then about college under the guise of giving her companion time to peruse the menu. If I wasn't working for a nice tip, I'd have had to tell her ‘my eyes are up here’ more than once, too.

After I took their order, I keyed it in and checked on my other tables, refilled some drinks and fluttered about. I hoped

that if I avoided Molly long enough, she'd drop the issue of my mood.

But when my table's food was ready, I had no choice. As I fetched the plate, she walked up and whispered, "Cougar town as been eye fucking you since you took their order. You must have flirted hard!"

"Everything but fluffing myself," I said, snorting.

"Think she'll leave you her number?"

My stomach roiled as I remembered dinner the night before, the jackassy scene I'd made, and how the embarrassed young man had persisted in giving Thomas his number anyway.

And my dumb ass handed it to him. At least that had led to last night on the couch... But did Thomas keep his number?

"If she does, I hope there's a good tip along with it," I said, then went to drop off the plates.

When I turned to head back to the counter, though, I saw Molly had the strangest look on her face. Then she nodded toward the door. The door Thomas was just opening.

She smirked at me. *She's expecting me to run and hide in the kitchen again, I bet.*

So the look on her face was priceless when Thomas raised a hand to give me a little wave and smiled. Her jaw was hanging about to the floor when he called, "Hey Ender! How're you holding up this morning?"

Molly's eyes kept darting back and forth between us, radiating pure shock, as I walked over to him wearing a shy smile and said, "I'm tired, but it's been busy enough to keep me awake at least!"

"That's good!" he said, smiling at me awkwardly.

"What's up?" I asked.

He shook his head, then said, "I tried to drink the office coffee this morning, and it was horrible. So, I decided to come see you and get something better..."

Why are you blushing, you idiot? I mentally smacked myself. *He said "Come see you"!*

I could have tried to pretend he didn't really mean he had come to see me—that it had been all about the coffee—but the ship had sailed on telling myself that kind of lie. I knew on some level he probably did want to see me. And with that knowledge came another wave of the guilt that had been plaguing me.

"What's wrong?" Thomas asked, gentle concern on his face as he reached out and put a hand on my shoulder.

"Nothing," I said, forcing a smile back to my face. "Intrusive thoughts..."

"Anything you need to talk about?" he asked, searching my eyes.

I shook my head. "Thank you, though... Let's get you that coffee?"

"Sure," he said with a smile and walked over to the counter, where I keyed in his order while Molly continued to watch me like a hawk.

After I took his order, though, I saw that a couple of tables needed my attention, so I excused myself. While Thomas went to sit on a bar stool to wait, I hurried over to the table Molly had nicknamed 'Cougartown.'

"Is that your dad?" the older woman asked.

Why is everything giving me flashbacks to last night?

"Yeah," I said, not even knowing why I was lying about it.

I saw her arch her eyebrows at the woman who had been flirting with me most and was suddenly quite curious about what they'd been discussing.

"I take after my mom," I volunteered, hoping they'd share a little more.

"She must be beautiful," the younger one said, again letting her eyes sweep up and down my body shamelessly.

“Is your dad seeing anyone?” the older of the two asked. She must have seen my reaction because she added, “No wedding ring...”

“You ladies sure are observant!” I said with a quick wink. “Dad’s got a pretty serious girlfriend, unfortunately!”

“A girl’s gotta try,” she said with a smile at me and a shrug at her companion.

“Another coffee?” I asked.

“I think we’re ready for our check,” the younger answered. “Just one check, please...”

“Oh, Karen, you don’t have to do that!” her friend protested.

With a wave, Karen said, “It’s my turn, Jane!”

I smiled and nodded, hurrying off, flustered by the turn that conversation had taken. But I grew exponentially more flustered as I walked toward the register and noticed that Molly had struck up a conversation with Thomas as she was making a couple of cappuccinos.

After I had refilled a few drinks and run Karen’s card, however, I decided to just face the music. I walked over and leaned on the counter near Thomas. Looking around to make sure no one was too nearby, I lowered my voice and said, “Before you got here, Miss Molly was teasing me about flirting with the cougars to boost my tips. Now she’s shamelessly flirting with Grumpy Daddy!”

Molly coughed, as her eyes went wide and she turned beet red.

“Ender!” she hissed. Then she narrowed her eyes and asked, “He *knows* about that?”

I nodded with a playful smirk.

“I’m not that grumpy!” Thomas said, rolling his eyes in good humor.

“That day you were,” Molly corrected.

“It was *one day!*” he protested.

“I bet gloomy is your factory default, though,” I teased.

“I update my settings regularly,” he replied, letting his eyes linger on me long enough that I began to blush too.

To escape his scrutiny, I headed back to Cougartown to collect the check as the ladies pulled on their coats. I could tell something was up because they seemed eager to get away before I could talk with them.

“You ladies have a nice day, and happy holidays!” I called as they made for the door.

When I got back to the counter, Molly said, “That was weird... Did they stiff you or something else?”

I looked at the signed check and snorted. “Something else...”

Thomas looked as interested as Molly was, so I said, “There’s a little note... ‘Have a Merry Christmas, cutie.’ And she left her number.”

“Called it!” Molly said with a little fist pump.

“And a hundred dollar tip,” I added. “Flirting is an art, Molly.” When she snorted, I added, “Take this man here... It only pays to flirt before they pay, not after!”

She arched her eyebrows and doubled down. “Unless he leaves me his number on his way out... I like way more than just the tip...”

Thomas laughed, but he did examine her a little more closely than I liked. “I’ll keep that in mind... But now that you two have totally embarrassed me, I think it’s time to get back to the office.”

Part of me wondered whether he might actually give her his number. But then he turned the tables on both of us and stood, adding, “I’ll see you at home tonight!”

He gave me the tiniest flicker of a wink, then walked out. When I looked back at Molly, her mouth was wide open in shock again.

“He’ll see you where now?” Molly asked.

“Uhm ... at home?” I said sheepishly.

“Not long ago you were hiding in the kitchen to avoid the man,” Molly whispered loudly. “Now you’re going home with him!? What the hell, Ender!? What happened!?”

I laughed and said, “Calm down...”

“Don’t tell me to calm down!” she said, but a smile was already breaking out. “Deets on what’s happened between you and that DILF in the last few days!”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” I said, rolling my eyes.

He is a total DILF though.

“It’s just a ... series of strange coincidences. Remember how my friend BJ invited me to stay with her and her dad over break?”

“Yeah,” Molly said, sounding confused. “So did that not work out?”

“Or it worked out way better than I thought it would,” I said, my smile growing into a stupid grin. “Uhm, well... Grumpy Daddy, Thomas, is BJ’s dad, it turns out!”

“Holy freaking balls!” Molly said, beginning to hop and clap like a teen girl at a sleepover who’s gotten way too excited. “This is perfect!”

“Perfectly awkward!” I said. “I was totally hot for him, but now I have to live with him for three weeks and shouldn’t do anything—”

“Because he’s your best friend’s dad,” Molly mused, nodding.

“And with my situation,” I began.

“It’s complicated,” Molly said.

“So, I really should just play it cool and not do anything stupid, right?” I asked.

Molly laughed in my face. “Fuck that! That man is seriously hot and just your type, unless I’m completely off base...”

“You’re not, but—“

“I say go for it,” she said. “BJ might be weirded out, but she’ll get over it. She seems cool as hell...”

“She is, but—“

“Just stop looking for complications and worries and live a little!” Molly said. “You deserve to have some fun, and he seems really... Well, he’s a lot nicer than I expected...”

“You don’t know the half of it,” I said. During slow periods, I filled Molly in on what had gone down at the dorm, and over dinner, and after dinner back at his place.

“Fuck,” she said as I finished. I had just clocked out and was waiting for BJ to pick me up. “Sounds like he’s pretty into you too...”

“I think he is,” I said. The one thing I hadn’t divulged was our interaction on CockyUnicorns.

“He is!” she declared confidently. “And you need to take that bull by the horn!”

“Eww!” I said with a laugh.

“Seriously, boy,” she said with a shake of her head. “That one’s yours for the taking. Just turn on the charm.”

“Maybe I need to talk to BJ first?” I said hesitantly.

“Maybe,” Molly said. “But better to ask forgiveness than give her the chance to cock block you!”

“You have such a way with words,” I said, just as my phone buzzed.

BJ: Pulling up out front in 60 seconds!

Me: Be right out!

“Gotta go!”

“Remember, take him by the horn!” Molly called after me as I hurried for the door.

CHAPTER 14

THOMAS

I was sitting on the couch in the living room working on my laptop when I heard the door open.

“Dad?” BJ called as she marched inside.

“Living room!” I replied.

I laughed to myself as my daughter stormed into the living room carrying a large box, Ender following in her wake pulling a large suitcase.

BJ dropped the box into the nearest chair and with great exasperation demanded, “Dad, how *could* you?!”

“I don’t know,” I said with a wry smile that said I probably did know. “I’d have to know what you’re talking about in order to know how I managed it...”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about,” BJ said, as Ender stood behind her, wincing.

I couldn’t help but smile as BJ put her hand on her hip and glared at me.

“Don’t smile at me like it’s nothing, dad!”

“I’m not dear,” I said. “You just remind me so much of your mother sometimes...”

“Well,” BJ said, choking up. Then she coughed it off and said, “You aren’t getting out of it that easy... Way to make a great first impression on my best friend!”

“Ah,” I said, setting the computer on the side table and crossing my arms. With a sly look at him I added, “It’s not like

I knew who your friend was, is it?"

She glared at me but said nothing, so I added, "Ender told you about my 'bout of grumpiness,' did he?"

"Your what?" BJ asked, unable to maintain her angry face any longer. Turning to her friend, she said, "That sounds like some BS you'd come up with!"

"It's his phrasing," I confirmed. "Ender, have I not apologized enough yet?"

"Yes, sir," Ender murmured with a hesitant glance at BJ. He seemed to be trying to figure out whether whatever she was up to was over.

"None of that sir, shit," I said with a laugh. Looking at BJ I added, "And you know I've bent over backwards to make it up to him as best I can... Besides, I'm not the only one with a guilty secret here!"

Ender's eyes went wide as BJ smirked and said, "Oh? Do tell!"

"Well, I'm sure he filled you in on what happened last night?" I asked.

"What happened last night?" BJ demanded, looking back and forth between me and Ender as if scandal was in the air.

At the same time, Ender panicked and asked, "Why would I tell her about what happened during the movie?"

"What happened during the movie?" BJ again demanded.

"I wasn't talking about the movie," I said, facepalming and shaking my head. My face was blood red, but I couldn't help laughing. "I was talking about at dinner!"

"Ok," BJ said, holding up a hand. She turned her piercing gaze on her best friend. "It sounds like a *hell of a lot* has happened that I don't know about! But first of all, what happened during the movie?"

But before Ender could get flustered and say exactly the wrong thing, I stepped in and saved him. "He told me about what happened. We talked about why he can't go home."

“Oh,” BJ said with a deep sigh, the wind going out of her sails. “I’m surprised, but I’m glad that air is cleared...” It didn’t take her long to get back on the offensive. “Now, the restaurant?”

“Your friend here was trying to make a point, so he asked the waiter a pointed question in a very embarrassing way,” I said with a smirk. Before BJ could ask, I added, “He thought the waiter was hitting on me, and I didn’t think he was so—“

“Well, I was right!” Ender hopped in. “And I proved it!”

“Yeah, by calling the poor guy out in the middle of the restaurant for—and I quote—‘hitting on my dad’,” I said.

“It’s not funny!” Ender demanded as both BJ and I began to roar with laughter. “I don’t know why I did that. You were right, I was mean to embarrass him!”

“I can’t believe you did that!” BJ said, slapping him on the back. “That’s epic!” She quieted her laughter and said, “Yeah, it was kinda douchy too, but epic!”

“Well, alls well that ends well,” Ender said. “He gave your dad his number, so...”

BJ looked over at me now with a searching look. “Are you going to call him?”

“BJ!” I demanded, my laughter failing. “Why would I? I’m not—“ But the words died in my mouth. and I grabbed my laptop and stormed off to my home office.

I sat my computer down, then sank into my chair and propped my elbows on the desk. “Well, that was a massive overreaction to ... a whole lot of nothing,” I muttered to myself. I knew it was true, but I couldn’t dismiss the huge ball of anger welling up inside me.

I also know I hadn’t dealt adequately with the feelings of betrayal I felt for Annie, with whom I would never have the opportunity to reconcile, as well as Alex and, to a lesser extent, BJ herself. The way she had just subtly called me out about it infuriated me way more than it normally would because she had done it in front of an audience.

I could hear footsteps in the hall as Ender helped BJ move her things into her room, so I grabbed my phone and texted Alex.

Me: Have you told BJ you came clean to me?

Alex: Why?

Me: Yes or no?

Alex: No. Why?

Me: She just basically called me out on it.

Alex: Well, this could be a good opening. You said you were thinking of telling her.

Me: She did it in front of someone else.

Alex: Shit. Who?

Me: Ender.

Alex: Thomas, go easy on her. You know she loves you and just wants the best for you.

Well, that's fucking weird.

Me: No promises.

Soon, a door closed at the end of the hall, and someone walked to my door and knocked.

"Who is it?" I asked a bit too harshly.

"It's me dad," BJ said softly. "Can I come in?"

I sat quietly for a moment, thinking it over. On the one hand, I wasn't sure of myself. Taking some time to cool off might be for the best. On the other hand, I didn't want Alex to get to her and prepare her for the conversation.

"Come in," I said gruffly.

She stuck her head in the door and asked, "Is this a bout of grumpiness?"

"This is an episode of raw anger," I said sharply. "Come in and sit down." Cautiously, she took a seat across from me and sat with her hands in her lap. "How can I help you?"

"Jeeze, dad," BJ said with a guilty smile. "No need to be a dick!"

"Watch your words, young lady," I said, wiping the last vestiges of a smile from her face. "What the hell was that

downstairs?”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Don’t play dumb with me,” I snapped. “You just insinuated that I was at least bisexual in front of your friend.”

“I didn’t,” she began. “That wasn’t what I— Well, surely he must be wondering, since you played along last night well enough that the guy gave you his number.”

“At Ender’s heavy urging!” I said.

“And after his sharing session on the couch last night,” she added even more cautiously.

“Did you ever think that maybe your vulnerable gay friend doesn’t need to be encouraged to wonder whether I’m gay?” I said. “Because it doesn’t matter! Because he needs someone in his corner more than he needs to have someone chasing him where he’s living! He needs somewhere safe!”

“Jesus, dad!” she exclaimed, exasperated. “He’s not a fragile flower! And you’re not some kind of predator. And in any case he’s old enough to decide what he wants.”

“This isn’t just about him,” I said. “Even if you knew I was bisexual, you have *no right* to share that information with anyone else. That would be a *huge* betrayal of someone’s trust!”

“I do know you’re bisexual,” she said at last. “I had been suspicious for a long time and—“

“I fucking know you know!” I yelled. Then I took a deep breath and said, “I’m sorry I’m losing my temper, but my feelings are raw as hell, BJ!”

My daughter’s eyes were wide with fear and concern. “I’m sorry, dad...”

“It’s not your fault,” I said, shaking my head. “You were curious. And you’re old enough. I was just the other day thinking about telling you. And then I found out that you knew because I had been betrayed by the two people closest to me.”

“Dad, I—“

“No!” I said firmly. “Your mother had *no right* to break my confidence and talk to Alex... And Alex kept *that* a secret for twenty years, but she also failed to keep my secret! She could have told you to come to me and talk about it... I would have told you if you had. But she took it on herself to—“

“Dad, please don’t blame Alex or mom—“

“I do blame them, baby,” I said. “And I haven’t had time to process what that means for me but—“ I shut my eyes and took a deep breath. “I honestly don’t know whether I’ll ever forgive them.”

BJ’s eyes sparkled with tears on the verge of overflowing.

“Dad, I—“ she began, then stopped. “Dad, I was just trying to spark the conversation where you’d tell me the truth... I didn’t mean to trigger you like this!”

“I said I blame them,” I said softly. “And I do. It’s true. But I don’t blame you. You are forgiven.”

“Dad,” BJ said hesitantly. “Will it make you feel any better about any of this to hold a grudge against the love of your life and your best friend?”

“Maybe not,” I admitted. “But I don’t know how to get over it!”

“Well, maybe you should talk to Dr. Reece?” she suggested meekly. He was the therapist I had seen the first couple of years after Annie died.

“Maybe I’ll call him,” I said. “First I need to think...”

BJ nodded. “Are we really okay, dad?”

I nodded.

“Could you just ... say it?” she asked. “Tell me, in your own words, I mean?”

I stared at her for a long moment. “Your old man is bisexual... I’m mostly into men, actually, but your mom was the person I clicked most with in life so far and— No matter how betrayed I’m feeling right now, I can’t love her any less...”

“Thank you, dad,” she whispered. “And, uhm ... Ender?”

“You can share anything we talked about with him,” I said. “I’d rather not have that conversation right now...”

“Okay. If you’re sure?” she asked. I nodded. “Okay... But that’s not what I meant.”

“What did you mean?” I asked with a pointed look.

“Are you ... uhm, never mind,” she said.

“Spill it,” I said with a bitter chuckle.

“Are you going to call the hot waiter guy?” she asked.

“I never said he was hot,” I said with a steely smile.

“Ender did,” she said. “He told me he asked you the same thing last night, but that you reacted totally differently—which I get now...”

“I’m not going to call him,” I said. “I probably should. He’s the best offer I’ve had in a long time...”

BJ shrugged and said, “I don’t know... I bet it could be beat pretty easily. Especially if ... you know, you just let your freak flag fly a little.”

“My flag is the bi pride flag,” I said with a straight face. “Not the freak flag...”

When her face grew pale at this pronouncement, I laughed and said, “I’m just getting a little payback, kiddo...”

BJ sighed in relief. “I’m just saying ... if you put yourself out there, you might realize a lot of people are interested.”

“It’s unsavory to be so invested in your dad’s love life,” I teased.

“I just want to see you happy again,” she said sadly.

I stood and walked over to my daughter, then wrapped my arms around her. “I’m very happy, baby... You’ve given my life so much meaning...”

“But I’m graduating soon and who knows what happens then?” she said. “I want you to be happy with your life, your job, your—“

“I’ll try to open up, BJ,” I said. “It doesn’t come natural...”

“Well, maybe having Ender around is a good opportunity to practice just ... being open about who you are with someone who’s not family?” she suggested.

I clasped her shoulders and held her at arms length. “He told you more about last night’s share session, didn’t he?”

She looked guilty. “I dragged it out of him... You know how I can be! Don’t blame him. He’s very insecure in his place here and—“

“Chill,” I said. “Nothing happened I’m ashamed of or that he should feel like he needs to hide...”

“But you *held* him,” she said.

“He was hurting,” I said.

“But you ... *kept holding* him,” she said.

“Because that’s what he needed,” I said.

“But it might also be confusing,” she said. “You don’t think you might want—?”

“BJ?” I said, giving her a stern look. “We are *not* talking about this right now...”

“Right now?” she asked with a smirk.

“You’re really fucking pushing it right now!” I said, spinning my chair so my back was to her.

Am I misunderstanding her, or is BJ actually suggesting I consider Ender an option!? If that was true, it would certainly make things easier if I ever got the guts. But I still wasn’t a hundred percent sure how I felt about making that move.

“Why don’t *you* take Ender out for some food and do something fun?” I suggested. “Maybe that vintage arcade games place or the movies or—“

“Are you paying?” she asked.

“Of course,” I said.

“For both of us, or *just* for Ender?” she asked with a tone that said she found herself very funny.

“Both,” I said. “But the whole thing is coming out of your Christmas gift, so I guess actually you’re paying!”

“Okay, you’re a *real* hard ass, dad!” she said playfully and snorted. “Or should I say Grumpy Daddy?”

She was gone before I could reply, and I couldn’t help but laugh. But there was this lump of anxiety in my chest, too, and I couldn’t seem to shake it.

CHAPTER 15

ENDER

BJ and I were sitting in a booth at d'Antonio's Pizza near campus waiting for our order as we had half a dozen times before, but this time we were both quiet. We had been since BJ told me we were going out. And it was starting to get awkward.

"Are you okay?" I finally asked.

"Yeah," she said. "No, I'm fine... Just distracted."

"Are you sure?" I asked. Before she could protest, I hurried on and said, "Things sounded kinda ... intense before we left."

"They were," she admitted with a sigh, propping her elbows on the table and putting her head in her hands. "Dad *really* had it out with me and—"

"Did I get you in trouble?" I said. Trying to appear as if I was joking, but really trembling inside, I asked, "Do I need to be looking for a new place to stay?"

"No, but I was beginning to think *I* might," she said with a groan. Apparently I didn't do a good job of keeping my game face on because she reached across and squeezed my forearm. "Sorry, that was a bad joke. I should have thought..."

I nodded, feeling embarrassed for letting my vulnerability show by accident.

"Ender, my dad is a teddy bear—" she began.

"Whose idea was it to design a bear with its teeth showing?" I teased, rolling my eyes.

“He definitely has some sharper edges, but he’s the sweetest, most generous—“ she said, eyes staring off into space as she searched for some words. “My dad doesn’t hide his feelings well. He’s maybe worse than you. Since my mom died, he ... he just hasn’t been as happy. And sometimes it shows.”

I nodded, my eyes watering a little. “I get that...”

“There’s nothing I could do that would make him turn his back on me, no matter how disappointed or angry he might be,” she said. “I’m not bragging. But your parents suck, and he’s nothing like them.”

“Yeah, well,” I said, not sure I was seeing the relevance. It sure felt like she was rubbing it in my face that she had a better dad. “Lucky you, I guess.”

She squeezed my arm tighter. “And lucky you! Because you’re on his radar now and—“

“I’m just some guy who—“

“Not to my dad, you aren’t,” she said, shaking her head. Looking as if she was unsure whether to say what was about to come out of her mouth, she added, “You aren’t even just my friend he needs to help, I don’t think...”

Is she saying what I think she’s saying?

“What did you guys argue about?” I asked, my throat dry and my voice scratchy.

“We didn’t so much argue as dad set me straight, so to speak,” she said. “I wouldn’t tell you this, but dad told me I could...” And with that, she laid out her whole conversation with her father about his sexual orientation identity and how betrayed he felt. “So ... that’s why when you asked he was totally chill but—“

“Totally chill is an overstatement,” I interrupted.

“Yeah but he didn’t lose his shit on you,” she said. “So, relatively totally chill with you, no chill at all with me.”

I nodded. “Wow, so... Wow.”

“Wow?” she asked.

“I mean, I guess you already knew, but ... he finally told you he’s gay?” I asked. “That’s a big deal...”

“Bisexual,” she corrected.

“But *mostly* guys,” I pointed out. “Sounds more homoflexible than actually bi.”

“Well, he identifies as bi, so I think bi is probably the way to go,” she said with a shrug. “You don’t ... sound surprised.”

My face turned pink. “I had my suspicions... I mean, he went along with my lie way too easily. And the thing that bothered him wasn’t that I was suggesting to the waiter that Thomas was bi—it was that I was embarrassing the guy. He also was weirdly unbothered by my insecurity about the guy assuming we weren’t together...”

“Pretty circumstantial,” she said.

“Did you have more concrete evidence when you went to your aunt?” I asked with a cocked eyebrow.

“No,” she said, laughing. “I just thought I caught him checking out guys one too many times...”

We stopped talking as the pizza and salad were delivered, but the mood was much lighter. Until what I had really done struck me, and all the happiness seemed to leak out of me.

“What’s wrong?” BJ asked with concern as soon as the waiter was out of earshot.

“I’ve really fucked up,” I said. “Big time. And at the worst possible time.”

BJ grabbed my arm, this time with both hands, and said, “It’s nothing we can’t figure out together, bestie!”

I shook my head, the tears rising back to my eyes. “Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

“What’s going on?” BJ asked, her voice a whisper now.

“I can’t,” I said, shaking my head. “I just can’t...”

“Talk to me!”

“You’re the one person in the world I couldn’t possibly—“ I said, then fell silent as her eyes went wide.

Fuck! Why does she have to get me so well?

“You have a crush on my dad,” she said softly, a hint of a smile teasing the corner of her lips up.

“Shut up!” I said, snorting a laugh through my tears. “I do not!”

“You do!” she said, eyes lighting up with mischief. “You really do!”

“Why the fuck do you sound so amused?” I asked miserably. “You should be grossed out, telling me to keep my grubby eyes off your dad and—“

Now she looked worried, and I shook my head in disbelief.

“You didn’t?” I asked, my stomach lurching. “BJ, please tell me you didn’t?”

“I ... what are you talking about?” she asked cagily.

“You know what type of guys I’m into,” I said. “And you talked me into staying with you, knowing I’d never seen him but that he—“

“You needed a place to stay, a place where you could keep working and not throw all the money you make into short term rent,” she said reasonably. “And I knew my dad would gladly help...”

But there was something in her eyes as she said it.

“Yeah, I believe that too,” I said. “Why aren’t you more upset that your bestie is crushing on your dad? That should be a shock!”

“Why? My dad’s exactly your type, and he’s nice and caring and lonely,” she said. “Why would I be shocked you’d get a crush?”

“And you don’t mind?” I asked, arching an eyebrow.

“I mean, like I said, it’s no surprise...”

“You expected it,” I said, nodding. “BJ, were you *trying* to set me up with your dad?”

“No!” she said with such sincerity I absolutely believed her. Until she added, “Not *set up*, per se...”

“BJ!” I growled. “I thought I was the worst friend ever and that you’d hate me! How could you pull that shit?”

“Well, I thought you’d never agree if I said, ‘Come stay with us, you’ll think my dad’s a total DILF, and who knows, maybe a younger guy is just what he needs to shock him out of his rut, so it’s a win-win.’ I mean, it’s all really reasonable, but it just sounds weird when I say it, so...”

I just sat staring at her, gape-mouthed.

“Ender?” she said, finally. “I ... are we okay? Did I ... do the betrayal thing again?”

“No,” I said with a sigh. “Just the sneaky, underhanded, getting-in-your-friend’s business thing... I’m not sure your dad won’t think it’s a little bit of a betrayal though...”

“Shit!” she said. “I’m just ... trying to help!”

“Well, maybe just ... talk to people? Communicate? You know, like an adult,” I said, rolling my eyes. “And less like a kids fixing up the parents comedy.”

“That’s no fun,” she said. “And my dad ... he won’t listen. He needs a jolt. I hoped you might like to be that jolt. Sorry I assumed...”

I blushed furiously. “Why do you put me in these positions, BJ?” I asked. Then I exhaled and admitted, “I ... hell, I *would* like to be that jolt. But there are so many problems...”

“None that can’t be solved,” she said earnestly.

Oh, if you only knew! Now I was remembering that I had also betrayed her father’s trust already.

“Well, at least I don’t have to worry about how you feel about me hooking up with your dad last night...”

“Feel about you *what!*?” she asked, nearly yelling. Then she looked around to see if anyone was listening and asked again more softly, “You what!?”

“Oh we just watched a movie, and I already told you everything,” I said, smirking. “But you don’t sound as comfortable with the whole thing as you thought you were when you pushed, do you?”

“Well, I—?” she said, then stopped.

“You didn’t quite think about what me being the jolt would mean, did you?” I asked. “Like me and your dad—“

“Okay, okay,” she said, holding up a hand. “I didn’t think about how I would feel about *everything* if it became a real possibility, I guess.” After a thoughtful pause, she added, “It doesn’t bother me. I know y’all would be good to each other. But you’re right, I won’t be comfortable hearing about it... Not completely anyway.”

“But you’re my best friend,” I said. “Who *else* am I supposed to talk to about things? Like when we argue? Or when he figures out this thing he likes when I—”

“Peter? Peter loves to talk about the nasty,” BJ suggested.

I snorted. “And what if I’m the jolt to end all jolts? Are you ready to call me dad?”

Her eyes went wide. “I guess ... I really hadn’t thought it through completely, but— I mean, what are the chances? Most relationships are just for a time and then... Well, that doesn’t mean it couldn’t be good for now...”

“And when your best friend is your father’s ex?” I asked, giving her my best real-talk look.

“How do you feel about me calling you pop?” she asked. “I can’t call you both dad, it’ll get confusing...” I looked at her like she was crazy. Then she got a wicked grin and said, “No, I’ll call him Grumpy, and I’ll call you Daddy! It’s perfect!”

“So, I guess we’re not going to adult about the likely outcome of things not ending well between your bestie and

your dad?" I asked, sternly.

"Do we have to, daddy?" she asked, batting her eyes.
"Adulthood is so not as fun as fantasizing!"

I rolled my eyes.

"So, have we worked out all the problems?" she asked.
"Because the pizza's getting cold!"

All the problems that aren't the big one, anyway.

"I'm sure I'll think of more reasons to keep me from doing anything but pining from a distance," I said.

"Keeping a distance isn't so easy under one roof," she said.

"Don't underestimate the size of your house," I said, reaching for a slice.

We didn't stay out late, because I had to work the next morning. When we were locking the door behind us, though, it suddenly occurred to me that Thomas had said he'd give me a ride to work the next morning, but we hadn't discussed it again.

"Can you give me a ride to work tomorrow?" I asked. "I haven't had a chance to look at bus routes or—"

"What time do you need to be there?" she asked.

"5:45, ideally," I said.

"No problem," she said without a second thought.

"I meant in the morning," I muttered.

"Damn, that's early," she said. Then she called, "Grumpy!"

"Stop that!" I whispered loudly, putting a hand over my mouth to stop the laughter from bubbling up.

"In the living room, menace!" Thomas called.

When we entered, we found him sitting with his feet up watching the news. In a pair of tight lounge shorts and a mostly open robe.

"Down, boy," BJ whispered from behind me.

“What’s up?” he asked with a smile. “Have a good time?”

“It was fun to relax,” BJ nodded. “What time are you getting up in the morning?”

Thomas looked at me and said, “I didn’t forget, Ender. We’ll leave here at 5:30. I don’t think there’ll be any traffic.”

“I hate that you have to—“ I began, my face pink.

“I usually hit the gym either late nights or very early mornings, so I’m just shifting my days,” he said as if was the least thing in the world. “I’ve looked at the bus routes, and I must say ... the public transportation option is not looking great, but we’ll figure something out.”

“I, uhm,” I stammered. “Thanks. Thanks a lot.”

“Smooth,” BJ whispered, and her dad seemed not to hear.

“I’m gonna go get ready for bed,” I said nervously.

As I stood in the shower five minutes later, my mind was aflame with thoughts about BJ’s many revelations. And with desire for something that suddenly didn’t seem quite so impossible. And with the guilt over continuing to chat with him on CockyUnicorns after I realized who he was and the fear that it would come back to haunt me if I did decide to pursue something.

CHAPTER 16

THOMAS

“Can you pick Ender up from work later?” I asked. “I’m thinking about going for a hike and—”

“I can,” BJ said. “But I think you should...”

“And why is that, young lady?” I asked, crossing my arms across my chest as I leaned back against the kitchen counter.

“I just ... I think you doing little things for him makes him feel more secure with—“ she began.

“BJ, I’m not interested in—“

“Oh, bullshit, dad!” BJ snapped, though her tone was humorous. “I can see you’re interested in him!”

“As I was saying, I’m not interested in pursuing anything with him,” I said. “Yes, I do care about his well-being, and I don’t want to muddy the waters... I don’t want anything muddled by confusing power imbalances.”

“Well, he’s into daddies,” she said. Then she smirked and said, “Like the sound of that?”

“BJ—“ I began to caution her to tread carefully.

“In the interest of transparency,” she said, her tone gently mocking. “I should probably come clean...”

“What did you—?”

She held up a hand and said, “Don’t interrupt? Just let me get through this before you bite my head off?”

I glared at my daughter but nodded.

“I talked to Ender last night,” she said. “I talked to him about what you and I discussed and confronted him about his crush on you—“

“He doesn’t have a—“

“Yeah, dad, he does!” she said. “He admitted that. And he knows there are some... difficulties, but they’re not enough that they *need* to get in the way, unless you insist...”

I was flummoxed, but I took a moment to collect myself and was about to speak when she picked up again.

“But the part I need to come clean about is ... well, I knew he’d get hearts in his eyes as soon as he saw you before I invited him to stay,” she said.

“You’re friends, so you know his type and—“

“No interrupting,” she said, holding up her hand. I nodded again. “And for me that was a perk. It’s why I sold him so hard on this, and why I pushed so hard for you to accept it. And it’s why I made sure he moved in a week before I did and—“

“A week?” I asked. “It was one day!”

“I’m going back to campus tomorrow night, dad,” she said. “I’ve got finals all week, and I only brought home the things I didn’t need... Ender only has final papers left so he didn’t need to stay with that douchebag any longer than necessary.”

“You’re right about that,” I nodded.

“You get what I’m saying, right?” BJ asked, trying to read my face.

“I guess not,” I said.

“Ender’s way smarter than you about these things then,” she said. “I didn’t let on anything, really, and he called me out on it last night. He accused me of trying to set the two of you up, and while I don’t like that way of putting it...”

Damn, you’re stupid, I told myself. I had been so sure that Ender was off limits because of BJ, it never occurred to me that BJ was engineering this whole damn mess!

“I should never have let you watch *The Parent Trap* as a kid!” I said, rolling my eyes. “Jesus, BJ, I don’t even know what to—“

But she was laughing so hard I knew she wasn’t even hearing me.

“Stop that!” I said. “What’s so damn funny?”

“Last night Ender said I should communicate better and act ‘less like a kids fixing up the parents comedy’!” she said, laughing so hard she held her sides. “You two are so much alike! You really have to—“

“Have you really thought this through?” I demanded. “Like what it could mean for you two if I—“

I thought she was going to pass out from laughing so hard, so again I stopped and stared at her, waiting for the punchline.

When she finally recovered, she sighed, shook her head, and said, “That’s what he said!”

Fuck my life!

“Dad, I just ... I hoped at the very least a little something different might help get you out of this rut you’ve been in,” she said. “And I’m not just talking about love life... You hate your job most days, you—“

“I don’t hate my job,” I said stubbornly.

“So, you like your work and you’re exactly where you want to be?”

I stood, stunned to silence. “No. No to both.”

“Right,” she said.

“Get me out of my rut, huh?” I said, eyes narrowing. “Are you sure you don’t mean ‘shake my stagnation loose’ or something?”

“That sounds more like Aunt Alex than me,” she said, eyes glimmering with mischief.

“Fuck my life,” I said, giving voice to my earlier thought. “It wasn’t just you setting me up... You two *conspired* over

this!”

“We both just want to see you happy, dad! Don’t blame Aunt Alex,” she said. “I just ran some thoughts by her...”

“And she, being an adult with more experience, should have tried to talk you out of this cockamamie idea!” I said.

“Way to sound like a Victorian dandy dad!” she teased. “I’m really glad you’re fully embracing your gayness, but can you talk normal?”

“How’s ‘stupid as shit’ for normal talk?” I snapped.

Damn, that feeling of betrayal really does turn me into a total a-hole...

“I know you are but what am I?” she replied with a perfectly straight face. After a moment of silence, we were both laughing.

“Dad, I just—“ she began, then stopped to think. “Will you do one thing for me?”

“Maybe,” I said hesitantly. “What?”

“For me, your little girl? Your princess? Your—“

“Okay!” I said, laughing again. “What?”

“Give it a try?” she asked. “I’m gonna go back to the dorm tonight. I won’t be back until Friday. Between now and then, just... I don’t know, put aside all your ... you, and live a little?”

“What does that entail?” I asked.

“Tell him it’s a trial run, if he wants to do it,” she said. “No promises, no guarantees... Just a trial run...”

“A trial run of what?” I asked.

“Dating,” she said. “Act like you’re boyfriends and see how it feels...”

I thought for a moment. On the one hand, she was hand-feeding me an easy pass around a lot of the shit I was so worried about straight to something I really wanted to at least try... On the other hand—

“I don’t want him to get hurt and—“

“Then don’t hurt him,” she said simply.

“It’s not that easy,” I said. “He’s got a lot of things going on and—“

“And he *wants you*, dad,” she said. “And if it doesn’t work ... at least you both get to have a nice time together and maybe see a way forward to something else?”

“No,” I said.

“You said you’d do it for me,” she said. “I’ve never known you to go back on a promise but—”

“Fuck, BJ,” I said softly, shaking my head. “Are you *really* asking me to do this? Be fake boyfriends with your best friend?”

“No,” she said, and I almost breathed a premature sigh of relief. “I’m asking you to treat him like he’s your real boyfriend for a week to see if that might work for you...”

“I honestly don’t see the difference,” I said.

“Well, fake boyfriends means ‘it’s not real’ is always in the back of your mind,” she explained. “Treating him like your real boyfriend involves always thinking ‘this is what it would be like if we make this a thing’ and acting accordingly...”

“That sounds like a really, really stupid thing for me to do, BJ,” I said. “I’m worried *I’ll* get hurt...”

“Maybe,” she said. “That’s life... Avoiding hurt is avoiding life.”

“And you’re really asking me to do that for you?” I asked. “You’re *sure*?”

She nodded.

I rolled my eyes and shook my head. “Pack your shit and get out before five, then...”

She smiled widely and asked, “Really?”

“Yes,” I said.

She started bouncing on the balls of her feet. “What are you going to do?”

“Talk to him,” I said.

“I mean what are you going to do with him?” she asked, exasperated.

“He might say no,” I objected.

She just snorted like I had said the most idiotic thing she’d ever heard.

“I was thinking we could go to a bathhouse and have a huge orgy, and then we could go to a strip club and—“

“Dad! Be serious!” she said.

“Assuming that he’s not smarter than the two of us, and he does agree to this madness?” I said with a pointed glare. “I guess I’ll start by inviting him to go with me on a hike tomorrow, since you derailed my plans today...”

“He’ll love that!” she said. “Be sure to take a picnic and —“

“I know how to do a date, BJ,” I said.

“Hella rusty though,” she said.

She’s not wrong.

“Maybe send me some ideas of things he likes to do?” I asked. “I’ll take it from there...”

“Okay!” she said, sounding extremely excited and clapping her hands together.

“And besides that, butt the hell out!” I said.

“I’ll do my best,” she said with a devious smile.

I was so nervous that I didn’t wait until Ender texted he was through to go pick him up. I drove out to the cafe and went inside for a coffee a few minutes before his shift was supposed to end.

When I walked inside, I couldn't help but look for him. When our eyes met, he looked really confused, but I couldn't help but notice how his expression morphed into his sunniest smile.

As I walked up to the counter, he came over and said, "I wasn't expecting *you*... I don't get off for a little bit."

"You're stuck with me," I said with a shy smile. "BJ needed to head back to campus to get back to work on her finals and stuff, so she asked me to come..."

He blushed and averted his eyes. "She's back in the dorm?"

"Yeah, she'll be back Friday to spend the rest of break, though," I said.

"She said she'd be at your place this week," he said. "I wonder what—"

I could see the awareness dawn on him as he fell silent. But he didn't betray his suspicion, since he must have no idea what had transpired between BJ and I.

"I'm sure she just thinks she'll have fewer distractions," I said. I'd tell him the whole story, but not here. "Hope you don't mind?"

"No, I'm just surprised," he said, smiling shyly. "Don't feel like you have to entertain me or anything... I know we don't really—"

"Honestly, I'm kinda glad," I said, giving him a smile I reserved for a very few people.

Jesus, he's really gotten under my skin already...

Seeing his confusion, I explained, "It'll be easier for us to get to know each other a little better..."

"You want to get—" he began. "I'd ... I'd like that..."

"Good!" I said, grinning. "I'll just grab a coffee and wait for you, if you don't mind?"

"Yeah, of course," he said. "What can I get for you?"

“Just a black coffee,” I said. “Small...”

Once I settled into a comfortable reading chair in the far corner, I started reading on my phone, trying not to watch him too much. I didn't want to be a creeper. But I couldn't help notice that Ender was having an animated conversation with the young woman who had flirted with me so hard last time. She was all excitement, while he was blushing and shaking his head, but shyly smiling.

I smiled to myself and muttered, “Damn... What are you doing, old man?”

CHAPTER 17

ENDER

I can't believe BJ is pushing things this hard! I thought when Thomas told me she was going back to campus. Even after being called out for her scheme, she was letting it play. *I thought we were friends!*

But in truth I wanted what she was serving up on a silver platter. I wanted it so bad it hurt. And it scared the shit out of me. It could ruin everything—not just my path for maybe surviving the school year but also my relationship with BJ. She didn't seem to be very worried about it, but I couldn't help it.

Molly helped distract me by giving me shit, of course.

“Well, I don't think he's here for me,” she said. “So, he must have a crush on you...”

“You think?” I asked too excitedly.

“You *want* him to have a crush on you!” she teased. I blushed and her eyes widened. “You do!”

I nodded, and she lost it like a total girl.

“Stop!” I begged. “He's watching!”

She glanced over and then looked back at me, gushing, “He totally *is*! It's like a gay *Lifetime* thing!”

“Let's go Hallmark,” I said with a groan. “Doesn't somebody usually get killed or kidnapped in Lifetime movies?”

“We’re so beyond that,” she said. “But the way he’s looking at you is hot and wholesome, so I guess Hallmark is closer...”

“He’s really ... uhm, looking at me?” I asked, blushing.

She glanced his way again. “Every time I look that way, it seems...”

“No...”

“Oh yeah!” she said, bouncing with excitement. “So are you going to go for it?”

“BJ thinks I should...”

“Damn! I’m behind on this! Spill!” Molly demanded.

“It’s kinda a lot,” I said. “Can I call you later?”

“You’d better,” she said, “Otherwise I’m gonna get it out of you next time we work together!”

“I’ll call you. I’m off the next couple of days without much to do,” I said. “And on that note...”

“Clock out and grab your man!” Molly said.

“In my dreams,” I said with an eye roll.

The ride home had been quiet. Neither of us seemed to know what to say. But I did pay close attention to Thomas and thought that I did catch him looking my way when he thought I wouldn’t notice.

Why does he affect me like this? I wondered, bemoaning my reality.

When we got back to his place, I announced, “I stink! I’m going to take a shower and lay down...”

He surprised me by countering, “Why don’t you shower and get changed and join me in the living room. We can figure out dinner and maybe watch another movie?” Putting his uncertainty on display, he added, “Unless you’d rather chill by yourself?”

“No,” I said. “That sounds nice...”

I wandered upstairs and hopped in the shower. As the water cascaded down over my pale, skinny body, I shivered in anticipation.

That's normal, right? I asked myself. BJ said he was probably lonely, and we like the same kind of movies... And he probably wants to make me feel welcome.

But my fantasies got the better of me, and my dick started to rise. The thought of him holding me like he had last time overwhelmed my rationalizations.

I closed my eyes, reached down, and wrapped my fingers around my hard cock. In my imagination, it wasn't my fingers though. It was Thomas' hand bringing me pleasure, working me toward the bliss I knew he could bring me.

“Fuck, Thomas,” I moaned as quietly as I could manage. “You feel so good... Take what you want, daddy...”

I imagined what he would look like in the shower with me, hand stroking me leisurely—then what he'd look like falling to his knees in front of me, looking up into my eyes as if waiting for my permission to take my dick into his mouth. Now my hand was his mouth, taking me in all the way to—

“Oh daddy!” I groaned as I began to shoot thick ropes of cum against the wall of the shower in front of me.

Christ, I've never cum so hard jerking off... This man has destroyed me, and I don't even know if he'll—

I vowed to get ahold of myself before my imagination ran away with me. But I also promised myself that I would at least put myself out there, make myself available, and see what happened. Consequences be damned.

My insides were quaking as I descended the stairs. I had put on my softest shorts and a revealing tank top—an outfit I could believably describe as pajamas but which I hoped would draw every ounce of Thomas' attention. But as I walked into the living room, my breath caught in my chest.

The man of my dreams sat on the couch in a pair of gray cotton lounge shorts and nothing more. I love a dad bod, but he was way too fit for that description to be anything but a stretch.

Thomas's upper body was on full display. He wasn't ripped, and he didn't have a six pack. But his pecs were perfectly built and curvy, and his stomach was firm and furry. You could see just by looking that just beneath a comfortable layer of padding were the ridges of hard muscle that even a much younger, athletic man would work hard to achieve.

"I, uhm," I began, drawing his attention my way. "Sorry that took so long, but I was feeling really icky..."

"No problem," he said with a big smile and patted the couch right next to him. "It gave me time to change and get everything ready..."

"Ready for what?" I asked as I started his way.

"I pulled up a couple of menus to show you and get a movie lined up," he said, again patting the couch, making it clear he wanted me by his side. Holding up his phone he said, "Let's get our order in so we can get comfortable..."

Comfortable? I wondered. *I had come down, thinking I had prepared to try to make myself available... But here he was...* All of my confidence drained out of me at this unexpected development, but I sat down where he indicated. His hairy thighs tickled my smooth legs as I leaned over to look at his screen.

"So I've got my favorite Mexican place pulled up, but I've also got the Chinese place I was thinking about before..."

"I, uhm," I stammered. "I'd be happy with either... You choose?"

"Do you have a preference?" he asked eagerly.

"Not really," I said. "But I do like Chinese a lot..."

"Chinese it is," he said, closing the tab and switching to a place called Number 2 Chinese. He started to tap away at the

screen, saying, “We can share everything... I’m going to order dumplings and crab rangoon, and General Tso’s chicken.”

Then he handed me his phone and said, “Get whatever you want, too... Leftovers are the best!”

“Uhm, okay,” I said, adding some chicken lo mein.

“That’s it?” he asked with a laugh.

“I like it,” I said shyly. “I didn’t want to just spend your money...”

Thomas laughed, taking his phone, and asked, “What’s your favorite beef dish?”

“Uhm, I guess orange beef?”

“You guess?” he asked, but I watched him add it. “How about soup? Do you like hot and sour?” I nodded, and he added a quart. “Anything else?”

“This is enough to feed an army!” I said.

“So?” he asked.

“Spring rolls?” I suggested hesitantly.

He added two orders and checked out. “There!”

Then he put the phone on the table and casually put his arm around my shoulder. I stiffened and he asked, “Is that okay?”

“Uhm, yeah,” I said shyly. “You just surprised me...” He started to remove his arm, but on instinct I grabbed his wrist. “It ... uhm, it feels good...”

Thomas smiled at me and nodded, squeezing me a little.

After an awkward silence, I asked, “What movie did you want to watch?”

“I don’t mean to impose,” he said. “If you have something else you need or want to do...”

“I’d love to,” I said. “I would just lay in bed and browse the internet otherwise...”

“I thought we could watch Poltergeist 1 & 2 if you’re game?” he asked, giving me a hopeful look.

“I haven’t seen the first one in forever, but I loved it,” I said, unable to restrain my enthusiasm. “I never saw the sequel so...”

“Awesome!” he said, squeezing me again more firmly, as if trying to draw me flush to his side.

“Thomas?” I asked, my voice an embarrassing squeak.

“Yeah?” he asked, turning to look deep into my eyes.

“What’s going on?” I managed before embarrassment rendered me mute.

He looked unsure of what he wanted to say, all his confidence joining mine wherever it went to take a timeout. “Well, I know this is something we share, and like I said I want to get to know you, for us to spend a little time—“

Something about the hesitance in his voice and the earnestness in his eyes took my breath away and short-circuited my brain.

“I, uhm,” I began to ramble. “I know you’re BJ’s dad and all—and that’s weird I guess since I like you. Like ... like like you, and I just didn’t want to make a fool of myself. I wasn’t trying to put you on the spot or anything and— Shit, I hope me saying this doesn’t make this weird for you or something but if ... if you think you might be open to ... I don’t know—“

Thomas put me out of my misery with a brilliant smile. I fell silent and before I could start rambling again he leaned in and planted his lips against mine.

“You’re so fucking cute when you’re nervous,” he whispered. “All the time, but especially when you’re nervous...”

My confidence returned from its time out suddenly, and I leaned in to kiss him more aggressively. His kiss had been tentative and careful, barely more than a quick peck on the lips. As my lips crashed against his, Thomas groaned, spurring me to slip my tongue into his mouth.

Thomas began to suck on my tongue softly as his strong arms urged me to turn to face him. I slipped my leg over his and straddled his waist, feeling his hands begin to explore my back as I continued to explore his mouth with my tongue.

When we broke the kiss, both out of breath, I smiled down at him where he sat beneath me and shook my head.

“Well, that wasn’t where I expected us to be in the first two minutes,” he said, breathless, and laughed.

“But you did expect us to get here?” I teased.

“I hoped,” he said. “If things played out like I wanted...”

“Let me guess,” I said. “*Someone* stuck their nose in your business again?”

He nodded. “She read me the riot act, and then pulled a daddy’s little girl number on me... Made me make a promise...”

“Oh,” I said. With a teasing smirk I added, “I’m not sure how I feel about you kissing me as a favor to my best friend—and your daughter...”

“It’s not like that, and you know it!” he said, his voice gravelly as his hands ran down my back and grabbed my hips. “I’m guessing she put some pressure on you too?”

I nodded shyly. “So what *was* the promise she got you to make?”

“Another kiss first,” he demanded.

I happily complied with this demand.

“Now, spill!” I said firmly when I drew away.

It wasn’t easy to force myself to keep him on task as I felt his hard cock rubbing against my ass. For his part, he seemed equally distracted by my erection, which was pressing uncomfortably against his stomach.

“You’ve gotta be shitting me!” I murmured as Thomas finished detailing what had happened between him and BJ.

“Maybe we should just ... remain platonic to teach her a lesson?” Thomas mused as his hands massaged the globes of my ass.

“You’d better be kidding me,” I said, reaching back to grope his cock through his shorts. “Because he feels like he might revolt if you aren’t.”

“He has a long history of having a mind of his own,” Thomas said with a smirk.

“Seriously, Thomas,” I said, putting a hand on each side of his face. “I ... really hope you’re not—“

“Ender,” he said with a look I couldn’t quite read, “I couldn’t turn back now to save my life...”

I sighed and shook my head. “Thank God... Ever since I saw you in the cafe for the first time—“

“When I was an a-hole?”

“Even when you were an a-hole,” I said.

“Hey, what happened to bouts of grumpiness?” he asked, smiling playfully.

“Well, that bout was full a-hole!” I said. “But *even then* I couldn’t stop myself from thinking...”

“Same,” he whispered, then drew me in for another deep, long kiss.

CHAPTER 18

THOMAS

Ender was still straddling my lap, making out with me as I thrust my hips slowly up into him, when the doorbell rang. He jumped and bent my cock back uncomfortably.

“Ow, shit!” I cried out.

“Sorry daddy!” he said as he carefully hopped off my lap, looking embarrassed as he realized what he had said.

I laughed and put a hand over my mouth, then hurried to the door to find a young man holding two bags of Chinese food.

“Delivery for—“ he began, then blushed. Only at that point did I remember I was shirtless and was at least ninety percent hard in my form-fitting shorts.

“Uhm, thanks,” I said, reaching for the bags. “I put the tip on the card...” Then I shut the door.

When I turned, it was Ender who was laughing now. “You gave him something to think about!”

I ran my hand over my face and shook my head. “Jesus, how has my life come to this!?”

“Well, I just accidentally called you daddy,” he said. “So, I think I win the gold for embarrassment tonight!”

I walked over to him so we were chest to chest, looked down into his searching eyes, and said, “Don’t be embarrassed... It was kinda hot.”

“Yeah?” he asked timidly.

“Fuck,” he whispered. “The things you can do to me with a look...”

He pressed in closer and said, “I think I detect at least one of the things I do to you...”

“Where did this version of you come from?” I asked.

“He just needed permission to be a fiend,” Ender said with a sultry grin. He wrapped both arms around my waist and said, “And as much as I would like to tease you further, now that I smell that food, I’m freaking starving!”

I laughed and said, “To the kitchen!” Then I stepped back and led the way to the spacious island, where I unpacked the two bags, and we each made a plate.

As we stood eating right by the open containers, we laughed and talked a little more.

“So, I was planning on going on a hike this afternoon before BJ hijacked my love life and sicced me on this twink —“

“Gross!” he said. “If she had any taste, she would have found a hot daddy...”

“It takes all kinds,” I said with a shrug. “So, I was thinking I’d go tomorrow for a longer hike, since who knows when we’ll get another warm spell like this... Maybe leave in the morning and stay out most of the day. I’m thinking of asking the twink to go along, but he might think it’s a lame date... What do you think?”

“I think it sounds cool,” he said. “It might be a little outdoorsy for his taste. He seemed a little prissy. But if you saved his note, you could just call and ask him...”

I reached over and grabbed a kitchen towel and tossed it in his face. “You’d better watch out! I actually did hold onto that note. I bet he’d be nicer to me than you are!”

“He might *act* nicer,” Ender said with a coy grin as he shoveled a forkful of noodles into his mouth. “But I can guarantee he wouldn’t treat you as well as I’m going to...”

“Kids say the darnedest things!” I said with a playful eye roll.

“I’m all grown up,” he said, blushing a little.

I eyed fucked him for a minute then nodded. “No doubt about that...”

“So, you’re asking me on our first date?” he asked shyly.

“A promise is a promise,” I said with a smirk. “Luckily this is a promise I *really* want to keep...” He smiled down at the floor, and I asked, “So, what do you say? Will you trial-run go out with me?”

“You’re such a romantic,” he said. “Of course I will!”

“Still want to watch those movies with me?” I asked.

“Sure,” he said timidly. “Or ... uhm, I mean ... we could just trial run up to your room and...”

I must have looked very serious then, because he looked like he was about to start stammering again. “Ender... I’m no prude, and I’m very sex positive. I’ve done hookups, and it can be fun to hop right in the sack—“

“But?” he asked, looking both embarrassed and disappointed.

“But this feels like a take it a little slower opportunity,” I said. “We’ve got all week and—“

“Sure,” he said, looking away. “All week.”

I set my plate down and walked around the island, lifting his chin with my finger. Looking into his eyes, I added, “And maybe longer... I feel like we might have a better chance at ‘maybe longer’ if we take things one step at a time. Does that make sense?”

“So you don’t want to hook up with me ... because you like me?” he said with a bewildered smile.

“That’s one way of putting it,” I said with a chuckle.

“Can we cuddle while we watch the movies?”

“Of course,” I said, smiling.

“And we can kiss?”

“I practically insist!” I said.

Now he was smiling again. “And while we cuddle you will rub your dick against my ass and make yourself miserable with regret for having turned me down?”

I rolled my eyes and smiled at him. “Only the first half... I didn’t turn you down, I just ... postponed the inevitable.”

“Inevitable?” he asked.

“You *really* think I could resist you for a whole week of whatever we want to call this?”

“Maybe,” he said. “But I hope not daddy... I’m a good boy, and I deserve a reward.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” I said with a wink. “Now, let’s finish this up and get this little movie marathon started...”

“Okay, daddy,” he said, smiling brightly.

My phone buzzed on the counter, and I picked it up.

“What a menace!” I said as I read the message.

“What are you—?” he began, so I turned the phone so he could see the screen.

BJ: So are you keeping your promise?

“What should I say?” I asked him.

“I don’t know,” he said, mulling it over.

“I got it!” I said.

Me: I’m trying but this nosy chick keeps cock blocking Ender.

BJ: Dad? Or is this Ender? Did you steal dad’s phone?

Me: Give us some peace, daughter!

BJ: Did you talk to him? Did he agree? Or are you just teasing me?

Ender rolled his eyes and took the phone. Then he stepped in, pressing himself against my chest and held up the phone to snap a pic. And just before he took the photo, he kissed me.

“That good?” he asked, showing me the picture.

“That’s kinda cute as hell,” I said.

“You sound surprised!” he said. “I should be offended!”
Then he clicked send.

“It’s not the you part that makes that surprising!” I protested.

“So, you’re just insulting my taste in men, then?” he challenged.

“No,” I began. “I mean yes...”

“You’re one of the hottest men I’ve ever met,” he purred as he melded his body into mine again. “And far and away the hottest man I’ve ever kissed!”

I was about to give him a repeat performance when BJ texted back.

BJ: OMGGGGG!

Me: Now can we get back to our evening?

BJ: YAAAAAS!

“Damn, she’s more annoying than I ever even realized,” Ender muttered, taking my phone and putting it on the counter.

“That’s staying in here while we watch the movies!”

“If mine is, yours is too!”

“No problem,” he said, putting his own down next to mine. After that, we hurried and finished our dinner without much more conversation, then retired to the living room. This time I sat and Ender immediately curled up into me, laying his head on my shoulder as the movie began. Absentmindedly, he stroked the hair on my chest and stomach, exploring every inch of bare skin he could get to, while I rubbed his back.

The sexual tension was thick, and I at least was hard as stone again, but I was enjoying this moment. Watching a movie with a handsome young man snuggling with me, knowing I could kiss him whenever I wanted, but with no set agenda was so liberating.

I wish this would never end... The sentiment jarred me. I told myself I just meant I wished this night could last forever, and then I was angry at myself for offering up such a weak self-deception.

“Can we stretch out?” Ender asked dreamily about halfway through the first movie. “You be big spoon?”

“Sure,” I agreed with a chuckle. Then I rearranged pillows and lay down against the back of the couch. Ender settled in right in front of me, my arm behind his neck, and wiggled back against me to get as close as he could. Then he grabbed the wrist of my arm that snaked beneath his neck and positioned my hand so it was on his lean, hard abdomen. Even through the soft shirt, I could feel the ridges of muscle there, slight but shredded.

He kept moving, trying to get comfortable, I thought. Then I realized he had lifted his shirt, and he moved my hand again so it was now on bare skin.

Ender must have felt my cock throb, because he whispered, “I like the feeling of your hand on me...”

My free hand was resting on his hip and I gripped it tightly, then rubbed my dick against him with a long, hard, slow thrust. Ender groaned with pleasure.

I whispered in his ear, “I can’t wait to touch you everywhere...”

“Then why wait?” he asked.

“I already answered that,” I said with a chuckle.

“But—“

“No butts, baby boy,” I whispered, then kissed his neck. Then I traced along its curve with my tongue. His skin tasted fresh, only the slightest bit salty.

“Daddy!” he gasped.

“I can stop,” I whispered before sucking on his ear lobe.

He reached back, grasping at my hip to hold me close. “We need to stop, unless you want to keep going,” he said finally.

I kissed the nape of his neck softly and wrapped my arms around him tightly. “Let’s cool down a bit and finish this movie... See how we feel?”

“Like ... how we feel about keeping going?” he asked.

“About whether we feel like the second movie, or whether we get some sleep for tomorrow’s hike,” I whispered.

He nodded, but he was quiet. Gradually, our breathing fell into sync, and I wondered whether he had fallen asleep.

“Still conscious?” I whispered.

He nodded again.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

He started to nod, but before I could press him further, he said, “Our ‘trial run’ is only through Friday afternoon...”

“Yeah?” I asked.

“I just ... that’s not long and if you don’t want to continue — I just feel like maybe we could take advantage of the time we do have,” he admitted.

“Oh,” I whispered. Then I kissed his neck and said, “I’m sorry...”

“It’s okay, I understand,” he said. “I don’t mean to pressure you. I just wanted you to know where my head was...”

“I’m sorry that you feel like there is a ticking clock hanging over us,” I said. “That was just ... BJ’s way of trying to explain what we’re doing here in a way that she thought would make me take her bait.”

“What?” he asked.

“Turn around so I can see you, please,” I said. When he rolled to face me, I gave him a simple kiss on the lips and said, “We are trying things out, but I have no intention of having a probationary period review at the end of five days!”

He looked into my eyes and asked, “So it’s not like Friday is a likely end to everything?”

“Not unless something totally unforeseen goes horribly wrong,” I said. “But if that happened, I wouldn’t wait until Friday either! Either it’s a big enough deal, or it isn’t...”

He nodded.

“Do you feel a little better?” I asked.

“A little,” he admitted.

“Would it really make you feel better if we kept going a *little* further?” I asked.

He looked up into my eyes and said, “I don’t want to pressure you... But I’m also ready to try whatever I can with you. I’m not always like this with guys... It’s just like you flip this switch inside me, and it makes everything feel right, I guess?”

“We can finish this movie another time,” I said softly, turning off the television. Then I drew him in for a passionate kiss that lingered for what felt like forever. When we finally broke apart, we laughed at each other.

I was on my back, and he was straddling me. I didn’t even remember us getting into this position. But when I looked up into his intense eyes staring back down at me, it took my breath away.

“God, you’re so beautiful,” I whispered.

“So are you,” he replied. And it wasn’t just a throwaway line. I could see in his eyes that he meant it wholeheartedly.

“Maybe we *should* take this up to my bed?” I suggested.

“Are you going to make me go back to my room to sleep?” he asked, quirking his eyebrow at me.

“If you don’t want to go, I’m certainly not going to make you,” I said.

CHAPTER 19

ENDER

I stood and held out a hand to Thomas, helping him up off the couch—or at least lending what little help I could to this much bigger, stronger man. I don't know which one of us started sprinting for the stairs, but it wasn't many seconds before we were collapsing onto his bed, both laughing again. When we caught our breath, I rolled onto my side and let my eyes roam over his body appreciatively for a moment.

God, he's everything I imagined and more! Yes, I'd seen the pictures, but they hadn't done him justice.

Then I asked, “So what *are* we doing here?”

He looked like he might continue to fight his obvious desire, but then he sighed and said, “I'm tired of resisting for resistance's sake.”

Rather than explain his answer, he hooked his thumbs under the waistband of his shorts and smoothly slipped out of them, arching his back only briefly to slide them over his round, muscular ass.

I was on autopilot, my brain shorting out. I stripped out of clothes so quickly that I was naked with him before I realized I had decided to undress. And then I was on top of him, straddling his waist again. I leaned in as though I was going to kiss him, but I pressed my palms against his muscular shoulders and propped myself up, the weight of my upper body at that angle pinning him down. Or he allowed himself to be pinned down, anyway.

I could feel his hard cock slipping up and down the crack of my ass. I pressed down harder against his shoulders to arch my back, positioning myself so that on it's next pass, the head of his dick caught on the tight ring of my hole. And then I rocked away so that it continued sliding up and down.

“What do you want, *daddy*?” I whispered, emphasizing the word by again teasing him with my tight hole, just enough to remind him he was one ask away from being buried inside me.

“Tonight, can we just—“ he began, then stopped, looking embarrassed.

“What, daddy?” I asked. “*Please* tell me what you want?”

“I want to suck your dick,” he said, though it came out as more of an urgent grunt. “Is that enough?”

“Can I return the favor?” I asked hungrily.

He nodded.

“More than enough, then,” I said.

“But I want to take care of you first,” he demanded.

“It's your show, daddy,” I said, moaning as he grabbed my hips and rolled me onto my back.

At first, he settled his weight onto me. Now *this* was what it meant to be pinned down. I could barely move, except for my hands which explored any skin I could reach. He stared into my eyes and casually brushed some hair out of my eyes.

I humped up into him, but our bodies were pressed so tightly I barely got any friction. “Daddy!” I complained.

“We've got all night if we want,” he whispered, wearing a cocky smile.

“Not if you want to go hiking in the morning,” I countered.

“We are going hiking in the morning,” he said. “But that doesn't mean we're going to rush this... That's why we cut the movies short and—“

“Daddy,” I said hoarsely, blushing harder. “*I need you...*”

He slipped his knee between my legs to part them, and I wrapped slender legs around his waist needily. I felt his hand on the back of my neck, a firm but gentle grip drawing me in for a possessive kiss.

“You’ve got me,” he whispered, slipping from the grip my strong thighs had on him, and began kissing his way down my neck and collarbone.

When his tongue flicked my nipple, though, I cried out in ecstatic surprise. I’d had experience, but very little. And none of it involved the kind of time and exploration Thomas seemed to thrive on. No one had ever paid attention to my nipples before, and when I had played with them, I got very little out of it.

Thomas grinned up at me and nipped at my nipple lightly with his front teeth. My legs wrapped around him again, mid-chest now, and attempted to lock him in place, even as my hand went to the back of his head to encourage him to continue. He repeated the action, as if testing whether I would respond so strongly again. If anything, it was worse—in the best possible way—this time.

Combing my hand through his hair, I groaned, “Harder!”

“Are you sure, Ender?” he asked, flicking his tongue at my hard, throbbing little nipple again.

“Please, daddy?” I begged. “Harder!”

He didn’t say anything, but his smile was sultry, smoky with desire. And then his teeth touched my nipple and bit harder and harder. My fingers tightened as I pulled his hair, not pulling him away but holding him in place as I moaned in pleasure. I threw back my head, and it was like fireworks behind my eyelids.

Then the teeth were gone, replaced with lips gently sucking. “Not too too hard your first time, baby boy,” he whispered.

“But why?” I whined, not in control of my own mouth.

“You’ll see tomorrow...”

“It’s not my first time,” I complained. “I’ve had sex before and—“

“It was your first time doing that,” he said softly.

“How do you know?” I pouted.

“I can just tell,” he said.

“You can feel how little I know about—“

“I can feel it in your body,” he said. “The way you react to me...”

“I’m sorry if I’m not as good as—“

“Hush!” he demanded, putting a finger on my lips. My mouth opened automatically and his fingertip slipped inside, and I began to suck. “Nothing about what I’m feeling is anything less than the hottest thing I’ve felt with a man...”

I wanted to ask, “Really?” But the way he looked at me silenced that. Well, that look and the finger aggressively fucking my mouth.

He began kissing my stomach, working his way down the ridges of my abs. My muscles weren’t bulky like a football player or built like a gymnast. I have always been lean and lithe, with strong but willowy limbs and a bubble butt for days. But it was my abs guys seem to notice—guys who are into that anyway. They’re small but shredded as fuck.

When Thomas reached my vee cut, his finger slipped from my mouth and his hands grasped my hips tightly. He held me down as I began to buck when his tongue, featherlight, traced down my cum gutters toward my trimmed bush.

His eyes were like fires as he looked up at me once more, before inhaling deeply. I wondered for just a second if he intended to tease me until I died of anticipation, but he quickly answered me by running the tip of his tongue down the underside of my cock to my heavy balls.

Yes, yes he does, but I can’t think of a better way to die...

He sucked first one ball, then the other, into his mouth, applying just enough suction to send a lance of pleasure-pain

through my core. And then both were in his mouth together. I lost track of time and space and ... then his mouth was gone. His tongue traced my perineum now, and my body trembled with anticipation.

Is he going to give me that? I wondered. *Can we skip straight to—*

No, he reversed course and licked his way back up. In a quick but smooth motion, he took the base of my dick in his hand and sucked the rest of me into his hot, wet mouth.

I watched his head bob slowly up and down, my thick hard rod splitting his beautiful lips. And then he looked up at me and smiled around my dick and winked.

I hadn't even realized I was near the brink, but in that moment my cock throbbed, and before I could get a warning out I was shooting my load into his hungry mouth. He didn't even try to pull away until my cock got uncomfortably sensitive and I weakly but playfully pushed him away.

Crawling up my body and cuddling in beside me, Thomas whispered, "Was it okay? It's been a while since I ... did much of anything, but a lot longer since I gave it everything..."

"Fantastic," I murmured, my brain still fuzzy with post-orgasmic bliss.

I shivered as he stroked my face with his forefinger. "Was it ... did *you* like it? I know I'm nothing special down there but—"

"You'll give me a complex," he replied. "Your cock is definitely bigger than mine! Maybe on the thick side of preferable, even! Which is to say, perfect in every way, in my eyes at least."

I laughed weakly and said, "Sorry... And sorry for not warning you so you could—"

"You worry too much," he teased. "I was *always* going to swallow... I had to taste you."

And when he kissed me I could taste the salty bitterness of my own cum coating his tongue. It was so out of this world

that I slipped back into that blissed-out head space that usually didn't stay with me long after orgasm.

When I came to my senses, Thomas' head was on my shoulder, and he was rubbing my stomach gently. "Are you sure you're okay?" he asked.

"Never better," I said dreamily. "Really... It was *too* perfect almost. It's hard to come down from..."

"Here," he said. "Crawl under the covers, and let's get some sleep..."

"No!" I complained. "I want to take you too!"

"I don't want you to feel like you have to, just because you said you—"

"Are you trying to take this away from me?" I asked with a mock-severe tone.

"No," he said with a shy smile. "Just want you to know you never have to—"

"I know," I said. "Now roll onto your back... I'm not letting you escape!"

Thomas instantly did as he was instructed. I looked up into his eyes and said, "As much as I would like to torture you as well as you did me, I'm just dying to get you in my mouth..."

"Go for it, baby boy," he said with a satisfied smile.

Kneeling over him, I tentatively sucked his head into my mouth. I'd only sucked a few dicks, and none had been as big as his. And I hadn't wanted any of them nearly as badly as I wanted his.

I wrapped a hand around his cock and began to pump it as I sucked, gradually taking as much of him as I could into my mouth until my gag reflex got to be too strong. When he had said my dick might be bigger than his, he was definitely exaggerating, except mine was much thicker and so definitely *felt* bigger in some ways. His cock was average thickness, but easily a couple of inches longer. So it should have been fairly straightforward to deep throat.

Thomas could tell I was trying and frustrated by my failure, I guess, because he said, “You don’t have to, but if you’re trying to deep throat me, my dick has quite a curve... Why don’t you straddle my chest like we were 69ing and try?”

I pulled off his cock, holding it in my hand, and looked. He was right of course. I had been so eager, I hadn’t even noticed it had more curve than your average banana—whether it be a literal and metaphorical banana.

I flipped around and threw one leg across his chest and scooted back, giving myself the perfect angle. But before I could go back down on his cock, I felt him grab my hips and draw me back a little further. Then I felt the earth move as his thick tongue swiped across my tight hole unexpectedly. I arched my back and nearly sat on his face, which he didn’t seem to mind because he groaned, tightened his grip and began rimming me with an enthusiasm I wouldn’t have believed.

Once I was collected enough that I wasn’t worried being able to control my mouth, I leaned forward and took half his cock into my mouth at once. It only took a minute for me to reacclimate to having his dick pressing against the back of my throat. I took a deep breath and relaxed, letting his cock head slip into my throat. It was a tight fit, but I fought the panic long enough for my throat to relax around him. I took him all the way, and he began fucking my face with shallow thrusts. Every so often, I’d pull off of him, breath and then dive deep again.

I felt his body tense a little, and he withdrew his face from my ass long enough to warn, “I’m about to cum...”

I pulled off of him, keeping the head in my mouth, and began to pump fiercely with my hand. About three good strokes was all it took for me to finish him off.

Fuck, he cums a lot!

My mouth began to fill. I had to swallow to keep from spilling his load on the bed. And then I kept swallowing.

When his soft cock slipped from my mouth, I looked over my shoulder at Thomas and said, “Tastes better than mine...”

“Nothing tastes better than your ass,” he replied with a happy, sleepy, contented smile.

I smirked in satisfaction. “I wasn’t expecting that...”

His expression clouded. “I hope it was okay for me to—“

“More than okay,” I said as I lifted my leg so I could flip around and curl up into his side. I sighed and said, “You know I’d have been happy with a lot more...”

“Soon,” he said sounding unguarded and happy.

“Yeah?” I asked, pleased but surprised.

“Yeah,” he said. “I was definitely trying to play it careful, smart... But sometimes you can be too smart for your own good... Smart can be stupid.”

“That’s actually my personal motto,” I said, teasing. “I’m gonna have a new family crest designed with that emblazoned —“

“Alright, wise ass,” he said, chuckling, and gave me a quick, sharp smack to the ass.

“Ah!” I squealed, wriggling against him in pleasure. “Was that because I’m a good boy or a bad boy? It feels the same no matter which...”

“God, what are you doing to me?” he asked with a look so full of affection it startled me. And in that moment, I remembered again why I knew so much more about what he liked and wanted than he did about me.

*But I can’t tell him now... Things are going too well, and—
Fuck!*

He seemed to feel the change in me. “Is something the matter?”

Fuck, why does he have to be so damned attuned to me?

“Just ... kinda hard for me to believe this is actually happening,” I said, forcing a smile to my face before I looked

up into his eyes. “It’s just so ... exactly what I was hoping for...”

I expected him to warn me about getting ahead of myself, but instead he hugged me tight and began rubbing my back. I reached down and pulled the covers up over us, letting his hands and his warmth and the rhythmic thrumming of his heartbeat lull me into the most perfect sleep I’d enjoyed since at least before my life had fallen apart.

CHAPTER 20

THOMAS

I glanced over my shoulder as Ender navigated over a rocky place in the barely-there path we were taking down to the lake. I watched him for a moment, studying his face intently without being noticed, as all his intense concentration was directed toward avoiding tripping.

We had left the main hiking trail about two hundred yards behind us, so that I could show him one of my favorite spots in the park. The trail winded around the south side of a large man-made lake, but it took a fairly regular, elliptical path, rather than following the lake's edge. Just north of us, a large peninsula jutted out into the water. Here the water didn't gradually deepen as you moved away from shore. A couple of dozen yards from waters edge, the lake bed plunged a few dozen feet.

It was a popular area to swim in the summer, but for the most part that had died down by mid-October. Even in the unpredictable Southeastern when the temperature spiked like it had in the past week, the water would still be freezing cold, so this secret swim spot was an extremely private place to come relax.

"I hope this place is worth it," Ender huffed, though I could tell he was smiling without looking again.

"It is," I said confidently. "And lunch should make up for the slightly more difficult walking..."

"We could have had lunch anywhere," he countered.

"But it'll be prettier there!" I said.

“If you say so,” he said, laughing.

A few minutes later, though, I walked out of the woods and stood just feet from the shore. Then he stepped up beside me and immediately took my hand, squeezing.

“That’s why you complained about the side trek,” I teased. “You had to let go of my hand!”

“Sue me!” Ender replied, bumping his shoulder against me with a sweet smile.

I pointed to the peninsula a hundred yards up the coast. It opened with a very narrow land bridge that widened and rose up out of the water higher and higher the further into the water it pressed. During the summer, when there were leaves on the trees, you wouldn’t be able to see anyone who was more than a few feet from the edges of the cliffs that formed all of its sides.

“That’s where we’re going,” I said. Still holding his hand, I led him over to the little lightly-worn path that was the only sign anyone ever came here. Once the protrusion widened, brush and vine gave way to small but thickly clustered trees. We walked all the way to the end. The last few yards were free of trees and the ground was well worn.

“The water’s very deep around these cliffs,” I said. “Private boats drop anchor around here... It’s a popular spot to party and swim, especially since random hikers rarely just stumble on this spot... The more adventurous climb up here and cannonball into the water. I understand it’s quite a rush!”

“You’ve never done it?” Ender asked, looking up at me with bright eyes and smiling.

“I strike you as adventurous?” I asked with a chuckle.

“Not in the least,” he said. “But only because you’ve bottled yourself up so much... Like we talked about the other night, I—“

When he trailed off, looking worried that he had overstepped, I smiled and encouraged him. “Go on...”

“Well, I think you could do with some freedom,” he said. “More of what Thomas wants, less of what everyone else expects... Dream a little bigger, take some risks, be yourself...”

I nodded, thinking about how twisted into knots I had been at work, how I was never rewarded as well as everyone else for doing more than anyone else. And if that wasn't bad enough, if I was being honest, I just hated my job...

“Did I say too much?” he asked, squeezing my hand.

“No!” I said, smiling. “Just a wave of sudden reevaluation about the things that are going on in my life. Things I need to think about changing.”

“Was I on the list?” he asked, trying to seem like he was teasing but failing.

“No, but now you mention it... It won't be warm enough to swim here until ... May at least?” I said. Ender looked confused. “Does jumping off this cliff sound fun to you?”

“Hell, yeah!” he said, smiling, but still obviously confused about where this was going.

“Hmm,” I said. “There might be an old spark of adventure left inside me, but it'll need encouragement... Maybe you can drag me out here and ... be a bad influence?”

Ender's cheeks turned pink, but his smile was radiant as he squeezed my hand and said, “We'll see... Might be a good way to unwind after finals. May might be busy, but June should be pretty open,” he added, looking deep into my eyes as he continued to grin.

What wouldn't I do to see that smile aimed at me?

“What?” he asked.

I shook my head. Then I told the truth. “When you smile at me, it makes me feel—“

“Weird? Creeped out? Unnerved?” he filled the silence, elbowing me.

“Like I’m important,” I whispered. His smile evaporated immediately, leaving a serious look in its wake. Before he could say anything more, I stroked his cheek and kissed him softly.

“Damn, Thomas,” he said when I leaned back.

“Too much?” I asked, vulnerable.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “It’s silly but ... when I first saw you I wondered if you ever smiled... Then when I saw you smile, I thought it must be something to be the cause of those smiles. And when you smile for me, it’s ... like you said.”

I sat my bag down and wrapped my arms around him, drawing him in close. “I can’t remember a time in the last decade when I’ve smiled as much as I have with you in the last few days...”

Ender swallowed sharply and looked up into my eyes. “Really?”

“Really,” I said. “I don’t know how you do it, but it’s kinda addictive...”

“I’m happy to be your pusher,” he said, flushing with color again. I shook my head and laughed, then kissed him again, longer this time.

Then I heard his stomach growl. “Lunch?”

He nodded, smiling, and I reached into the bag to pull out a blanket to spread out on the clearing. Then I began pulling out food: a selection of meats and cheeses I had already had, since I hadn’t had time to go to the grocery store, some salad, and a few other odds and ends. Then I pulled out a bottle of wine and opened it, pouring us each a glass. I stretched out on my side facing Ender and began to pick at the food.

“This is—“ he began.

“I know it’s not the best, but I didn’t have much time to pull it all together yesterday before I came to pick you up,” I said, lowering my eyes and popping a piece of cheese into my mouth to avoid saying more.

“This is one of the sweetest things anyone’s ever done for me,” he said, reaching out and stroking my neck with a few of his fingers. “I don’t know how you’ve managed to stay single...”

“I don’t see myself as a high demand item,” I said, chuckling. “But to be fair, I’ve never really tried. Guess it’s easier to live with what you’re missing if you keep it at arms length...”

“Don’t keep me at arms length,” he said, his voice dying to a whisper.

I nodded. “I’m really trying.”

He smiled, almost sadly. “You know, when my parents told me that I couldn’t come back unless I changed, there was a little time there when I thought maybe there was something *wrong* with me— Not the gay thing, but the ... whatever it is in a kid that makes a parent love them no matter what, you know? Maybe I was unlovable?”

I closed my eyes and shook my head. “Of course you were wrong...”

“I guess,” he said. “Sometimes it still comes in waves, and I do my best to fight it back... Sometimes I manage.”

I took a sip of wine as I struggled to compose my thoughts, but my confusion must have been written on my face because he smiled at me again. “I’m just sharing... I don’t need you to say anything or try to make it better or—“

“Nothing I could say could,” I said, shaking my head. “You were betrayed at the deepest level by the people who should have...”

He went pale and still when I said the word “betrayed,” and I thought I had offended him. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have —“

“It’s not that,” he said. “It’s just hard to talk about...”

“I understand,” I said, taking his hand and squeezing it. Then I raised it to my lips and kissed it.

For a while, we ate in silence, staring out over the quiet lake. It wasn't an awkward silence, even though I suspected neither of us knew what to say now.

"That was delicious," he finally said, signalling that he was finished. "Thank you..."

"You're very welcome, but ... we're not quite done," I said, reaching into the basket for one final thing. I pulled out a little bowl of dessert and handed him a spoon as I sat it between us.

"What is this?" he asked, but I could tell by the rising excitement in his voice that he suspected.

"My sources tell me that you may have a slight addiction to banana pudding," I said.

"I do!" he said excitedly. Tamping down his expectations, he said, "Of course, boxed is good—"

"But homemade vanilla pudding with fresh bananas and cookies and fresh whipped cream sounded better, so I hope you're not too disappointed," I said with a wry smile.

"You went and got my favorite dessert?" he asked, practically gushing.

"No," I said, leaving him looking confused. "I went and *made* your favorite dessert for you..."

He was radiant as he said, "Thank you so much..." For a second I thought his glistening eyes might overflow, and my heart along with them. Then with mischief he smiled and said, "But that means there's an entire banana pudding back at your place?"

"There was, but I gave it away," I said, trying not to laugh as his face fell. "I'm kidding! This one is just for you!"

He smacked my shoulder, the grin returning to his face. "You can have a little too..."

"Don't mind if I do," I said, going in with my spoon, which he parried away with his own. Chuckling I added, "After you..."

“Thank you, kind sir,” he replied, batting his eyelashes.

The playful spirit having returned, we played around and kidded each other as we picked up and packed our things back into the bag. Then he wrapped his coat tighter around him and said, “It’s gotten a little colder...”

“Closer to the lake, it does get a little chilly,” I said.

He pulled out his phone and said, “I know, no phones... Not checking messages, just the weather!”

“So—?”

“It’s not just the water,” he said. “It’s like fifteen degrees colder than when we left the house...”

“Are they calling for snow?” I asked, with what must have been obvious disgust.

“Okay, I see you, party pooper!” He teased. “No just an arctic blast...”

“Damn,” I said. “Another one? Last week it was three degrees, yesterday it was seventy...”

“Yeah, looks like arctic freeze round two,” he said, grabbing my arm and cuddling into me. “Hey, daddy?”

I laughed and asked, “Yes, Ender?” He pouted a little so I corrected, “Yes, baby boy?”

“Maybe we could just head back home and make hot chocolate and build a fire and watch movies?” he asked, again smiling and batting his eyes.

“For you,” I said with a heavy sigh, playing disappointed even though as soon as he had told me about the weather I had decided to do something pretty similar.

“Thank you,” he said, rising on the balls of his feet and kissing my cheek. “And once we get back on the trail, I need you to keep me warm...”

“It’s a burden that I’ll bear with dignity,” I said, groaning, before smiling and winking at him. “Let’s go... It *is* getting cold!”

CHAPTER 21

ENDER

I stretched and groaned as I woke Monday morning and realized I was alone. It was my day off, and damn it, I wanted to wake up in bed with my boyfriend! Well, my guy who's acting like we're boyfriends as a trial run to see how we get along because we're so different and—

Fuck. My. Life. I should be ecstatic over an opportunity I had wanted and never thought I'd get close to, but every time I let go and sink into it, there is another stunning reminder of how fragile everything is. And how I gave him all the ammunition he'd need to blow the whole thing up and be perfectly justified in doing so!

I shook my head.

Just stop! Enjoy it while you have it!

I needed to start looking for an apartment so that I'd have somewhere to go when this all fell apart. Like everything in my life always does.

Blairily, cycling between despair and panic—when I should have been cuddling in bed with Thomas—I reached for my phone with a sigh. And I couldn't help but smile.

Thomas: Morning! I'm working from home today, but ran to the gym. If you come by my office later, make sure you're dressed. I may have meetings with my camera on.

Me: What if I want to play Russian Roulette with your web cam and my cock?

Thomas: There are worse ways to die, I guess.

Me: LOL I'll put clothes on, daddy. Promise!

Thomas: That's a good boy :*

Me: For you, always!

Me: Unless you want me to be bad!

Thomas: No more of that. I'm at the gym and these shorts are kind of tight even when I'm not hard.

Me: Sounds sexy.

Thomas: Well, if you want me to advertise in front of all these men at the gym without their significant other's around to keep them in line, keep talking!

Me: Sorry, daddy. No, think unsexy thoughts. Like lunch lady panties.

Thomas: Problem solved! TTYL baby boy.

While my brain was still swirling with fears and anxieties, my mood had lightened significantly.

Then I noticed I had about twelve other missed texts, one from Molly and ... eleven from BJ.

BJ: Hey

BJ: What's up?

BJ: How are things going with dad?

BJ: Why won't you talk to me?

BJ: You and dad are mean!

BJ: Come up for air and message me. God you guys are the worst!

BJ: Listen here, home wrecker! Dad's not answering me either!

BJ: Are you mad at me?

BJ: Did you and Grumpy fight and murder-suicide each other?

BJ: I have a new best friend. He talks to me.

BJ: Daddy ... I'm dying!

I rolled my eyes. I was pretty sure she was being dramatic and joking, but maybe at some point that *had* morphed into real anxiety. Either way, she needed to cool her heels. Only one of us could have crippling anxiety over my relationship with Thomas—and I was claiming the right, for now anyway.

Me: For fuck's sake, BJ ... have you always been this annoying?

BJ: Yes, but you always feed me enough attention that I don't show it... Why aren't you talking to me? Did I do something?

Me: Besides being annoying?

BJ: Yes, besides that?

Me: Uhm ... you gave me your dad to play with for a week...

BJ: Gross... It was supposed to be a platonic fake boyfriends arrangement!

Me: Should have specified... No longer in the cards. Your dad is a beast in the sack!

BJ: Truce?

Me: Terms?

BJ: I will control my annoyingness and be less attention-seeking, and you will never mention my dad and sack related activities in the same conversation.

Me: What about sac related activities?

BJ: What's a sac?

Me: "A hollow, flexible structure resembling a bag or pouch"—like an ink sac or a ... you know...

BJ: Right, no sac related activities either.

Me: Truce. But if you were that big of a dork to your dad, you'll have to negotiate separate terms with him.

BJ: Shit. Okay.

Me: LOL do you have anything going on today or tomorrow?

BJ: I have an exam first thing in the morning that I need to study for.

Me: I only have a paper due later this week. Wanna meet for breakfast tomorrow after your exam? I have a closing shift at the cafe...

BJ: And you'll give me the PG version of how it's going?

Me: You're paying?

BJ: Sure. It's dad's card.

Me: I'll pay him back later.

BJ: The TRUCE!

Me: Get your mind out of the gutter.

BJ: Okay daddy. See you noon tomorrow?

Me: Perfect!

Well, if my mood had improved before, now I was chuckling to myself. I had the energy and motivation to get up and get ready for the day. I thought about the comfortable evening Thomas and I had spent bundled up and warm on his couch the night before and felt my cock stir.

We had done exactly what I'd asked, spending the evening cuddling on the couch and bundled up against the cold. I'd hoped we'd get a chance to go a little further with our exploration, but I had been exhausted. When he'd taken me to his bed and held me, I fell asleep before I realized what was happening. I'd woken up once overheated, my back pressed flush against his chest, and had to pull back the covers to cool

off before I could go back to sleep. In the meantime, however, I had enjoyed the comfort of him, the warmth, the blend of the hardness of his body with the soft padding and fur, the press of his thick, hard cock against my ass. Before I'd gone back to sleep, though, I had rolled over and urged him onto his back so I could wrap my arm across his chest and rest my cheek on his shoulder.

"Fuck, Ender," Thomas' deep voice rumbled from the doorway, startling me.

I jumped and turned toward him, blushing as I realized I had been lost in memories, standing at the foot of the bed leisurely stroking my hard cock.

"You snuck up on me!" I said, embarrassed.

"Well, I wasn't exactly quiet, and this is *my* room!" he said with a smug smile. "You looked like you were thinking of something pleasant..."

I blushed again. "A little..."

"What was on your mind?"

"Thinking about how good it felt to wake up cuddled against you last night," I admitted. "Wishing you'd still been here when I woke up..."

"I'm here now," he said, walking over and wrapping an arm around my waist and drawing my body into his.

"But you're dressed, and I'm naked," I said poutily.

"I have to work," he said with a smirk.

"Now?" I asked.

"Soon," he said.

"Do you have time for a shower?" I asked.

"I took one at the gym," he said with a knowing smile.

"But I wasn't in the shower with you there," I said, running my knee up his inner thigh.

"Fifteen minutes," he said. "You get fifteen minutes..."

“It’ll do,” I said, grabbing his hand and dragging him to the bathroom.

I immediately lifted his t-shirt over his head and then dragged his sweatpants down, dropping to my knee to slip them off. He steadied himself with a hand to the back of my head and smiled down at me.

“Did you have anything in mind besides washing each other’s backs?” he asked.

“I was thinking about washing your front,” I said. “From behind...”

“Oh?” he asked, intrigued.

I turned the water on hot and as we waited for it to warm up, I slipped in behind him and whispered, “Like this...”

My cock was wedged between his thighs while I wrapped my arms around him, drawing his body back against mine and scraping my nails down his chest and across his abs.

“I ... like how your cock feels,” he said. “But it would be better wedged between my ass cheeks, rubbing against my hole...”

“Just rubbing against it?” I asked.

“You could ... I mean if you’re into it,” he said, suddenly sounding shy and a little nervous.

“I could what, daddy?” I asked. “I want to be a good boy for you...”

“You could fuck me if you wanted,” he said softly, practically whispering.

“Would you like that, daddy?” I asked, stepping around him so we were facing and again raking my fingers down his abs to his cock, which I took in my fist.

He nodded and leaned in so our foreheads touched.

“Do you want me to be gentle?” I asked.

“I’ve used toys recently,” he said. “You don’t have to be super gentle, but you *do* have a big dick, baby boy...”

“Let me know if it’s too much?” I asked.

He nodded again, and I dragged him into the now steaming shower. The water wasn’t uncomfortably hot—the air was just cool and dry. We were able to stand right in the spray and began to kiss immediately.

“I know you’re in a hurry, daddy—” I began.

“Not *that* big a hurry,” he said, drawing me into another kiss. “More like ... I can barely wait for you to force your way inside me.”

I trembled. I couldn’t help but be reminded of TopJock69. Both of them were big, muscular bottoms who liked it a little rough. But Thomas seemed much more comfortable in his skin about it.

But he was insecure about how I would respond to that apparently. “Too much?” he asked vulnerably.

I shook my head. “How perfect is a bottom daddy?”

“Really?” he asked.

I nodded. “Turn around and put your hands against the wall.”

“I said I couldn’t wait,” he said anxiously. “But I could probably use a little prep—“

“Just do it and trust me!” I growled hungrily. Unlike TopJock69, there was no hesitation, no unspoken desire for explanation. He immediately did as he was told, and I lowered myself to my knees, parting his muscular ass cheeks with my hands and burying my face between them, probing his hole aggressively with my tongue.

“God!” he called, throwing back his head in ecstasy. “That feels so good...” Then he groaned again and reached back behind him, grabbing a handful of my hair and holding my head in place so my tongue wouldn’t leave his hole again.

I smacked his ass sharply upon his attempt to take control.

“Fuck,” he called out in pure ecstasy.

“I’m in charge,” I said.

“You’re in charge,” he agreed.

As I knelt there eating his hole and enjoying the hot water rolling down my body, I lost track of time until Thomas released my hair and whined, “Now, please?” There was no self-consciousness about his begging. “I need you now, baby...”

I stood, grabbing the wall for support as my knees wobbled, and asked, “Do you have condoms and lube?”

He nodded and said, “Top drawer to the left of the sink... But I’m on PrEP and haven’t had sex with anyone since last year...”

“Sorry, daddy... I need to get tested before we—“ I began hesitantly.

He turned and drew me in for a passionate kiss. “Don’t apologize for being responsible... I’m just feeling a little eager!”

“Soon, daddy,” I said. With a smirk, I smacked his ass and added, “As long as you want to keep me around long enough after the trial period...”

He gave me a pouty look and said, “Don’t be cheeky!”

“Ugh, punny dad jokes as foreplay?” I said with a teasing roll of my eyes, slipping away to grab supplies and return as quickly as I could.

“Hands back on the wall,” I said firmly.

“Mmm,” daddy said, doing as he was told. “Someone likes to be in control?”

“Sometimes,” I said, blushing as I stepped up behind him and put my hand on his lower back. “Do you like it? Do you like someone to dominate you, daddy?”

“Not usually,” he said. “But with you it feels good...”

He lowered his ass to a position better suited to my height and arched his back, accentuating the muscular round curve of his ass. I squeezed some lube into my hand and worked

enough into his hole that I felt comfortable that I wouldn't do any damage even while it hurt just the way he wanted.

“Are you ready?” I asked in a low, expectant voice as I rolled the condom onto my painfully hard cock. Then I lined the tip of my cock up against his well-lubed hole .

“God, yes,” he groaned.

I felt him arch his back just a little more and push back gently, so I moved forward to meet him in his eagerness. My head quickly slipped past the tight ring, and I heard him gasp.

“Are you okay, daddy? Did that—?”

“It's perfect,” he groaned. “I never expected that to go so easily... Just give me a minute to loosen up, and we're good...”

“Of course,” I said, rubbing his lower back gently to sooth him. “Let me know when you're ready for more.”

I stood as still as I could until he gave me the go ahead, and then I began to slide further into him, very slowly at first. Soon, though, I could feel the thickest part of my cock passing through his hole and then it became much easier. I grabbed his hips tighter and with more force pulled him back into me until my balls smacked against his.

“Fuck,” he gasped. “Is that ... all of it?”

“Disappointed?” I asked with a chuckle. “Expecting more...”

“No, relieved that it's not a bit bigger!” he said with a sigh, as I rubbed his upper back and shoulders. “It's just ... a lot to take in...”

I laughed and said, “Don't make bad dad jokes to the guy buried to the hilt in your hole!” To punctuate my words, I wrapped my fingers over his shoulders, then pulled out half way and then pounded back into him.

“Don't threaten me with a good time, boy,” he grunted, smirking over his shoulder at me.

“I’m going to wipe that look off your face,” I said with a cocky little smile.

“Yes, please,” he said, shifting a little to better support himself against the wall.

As soon as I saw he was really ready, I started fucking him with long, hard, slow strokes, as he reached down to play with his own cock. I wanted to tell him to leave that to me, but I couldn’t get into a good position that would allow me to provide that service.

“God, Ender, you feel so fucking good,” he moaned. “But you can go harder. Treat that ass like you own it. Do it how you want!”

Can he sense that inside this little twink son there is a slightly—or more than slightly—dominant top?

It was a side of me almost no one ever saw. Only the jock in the dorms had really ever gotten a glimpse of it. All of the other older guys I had messed around with just assumed I was a bottom and submissive, and I kinda went with it. I’m versatile enough that I can work with what comes my way on the rare occasions I was actually in the mood. But Thomas seemed to be able to feel in me what *I wanted*.

I slapped his ass hard as I pulled all the way out and slammed my cock back into his loosening hole.

He cried out but added a loud, “Yes!”

I knew I wouldn’t last long this way, but it was so brutally intense and I was lost in it. A kept at it like that for nearly a minute until I could feel that tingling in my guts.

“I’m about to cum, daddy,” I said. “How do you want it?”

He leaned forward before I could pump into him again and turned, dropping to his knees and ripping the condom off of me. He took me in his mouth and looked up into my eyes with a fiery intensity.

I barely got a good grip on his hair before I unloaded into his mouth. Before I even stopped shooting, with my cock still hard in his mouth, I felt Thomas shoot his load on my foot.

I immediately turned off the water and stood looking down at him. His lips had still not released my cock when I said, “I want you to clean your cum off my foot.”

When he reached for a washcloth, I shook my head with a smile and said, “With your mouth...” I tried to look confident as I said it but my stomach was churning, wondering how he would respond.

Did I just take it too far? What if he's not into that? What if he likes to bottom but isn't as submissive—

His tongue scooping his own cum off the top of my foot silenced that regret spiral. And when he stood and kissed me, passing some of himself to me, the whole world slipped away and left us alone.

With JockBoy69 I had gotten a bare taste of the empowerment that comes with being in charge. With Thomas, I had just enjoyed an eight-course meal.

CHAPTER 22

THOMAS

I sat working on a report for a client, updating them on the progress of the new application we were putting together for them, but I couldn't keep my mind fully on task. Not that it mattered. I stayed on top of my work, and I'd been doing this long enough that it came easy when it had to. I wasn't worried that my work would suffer.

No, I couldn't get my mind off of Ender. Specifically how different he had felt when I asked him to top me. His energy didn't so much change as blossom. That confidence, that awareness of my body and my needs, and that dominant streak. It had been there just beneath the surface, and all he had needed was permission to let go. He'd given me the most deliciously punishing railing of my life, and my ass cheeks were almost as much of a glowing reminder of the event as my tender hole.

But how had I found myself licking his feet? Though it had never been something I'd fantasized about, Ender had told me what to do, and I hadn't hesitated for a second. I had always leaned bottom—power bottom when I can—which is why I had always leaned toward mature, bigger guys. But none of them had ever put me in touch with an ounce of desire to submit in that way. Bottom yes, hand over control? Not so much.

What's going on in my head? Why now? Why Ender?

He was young and twinkly, sometimes confident, sometimes pensive, but often a sunshine child—at least that's what he directed to others. But he had a serious side that had

been stoked by his rejection and the troubles that had come in its wake. It had shaken him and left him in serious doubt.

“God, I wish I had someone I could bounce all of this off of,” I murmured to myself, wincing as I cycled through my options.

I checked my calendar for meetings and saw I was free until the afternoon, and I knew I wouldn’t make good progress on my report until I cleared my head. So I reached for my phone, hesitated, and dialed.

“Part of me wondered if I’d ever hear from you again,” Alex said, her voice light and conversational, though Thomas recognized a hint of relief there.

“I didn’t know if I would call you any time soon,” I said. “Especially when I found out that you were aware of BJ’s plan to set me up with her college friend, Ender...”

“I, well, I,” she began. “I don’t know what to say to that...”

“Ender figured it out before I did, and BJ had to come clean with him,” I said. “I was late to the party...”

“I’m sorry,” Alex said. “I truly did agree that you were in a funk that you couldn’t see, and BJ presented me with what sounded like a risky but potentially disruptive idea...”

“Disruptive?” I asked, more amused than upset at this point.

I had wanted to hold Alex over the fire, but what would that accomplish? And in the meantime I really had to consider—years ago she *had* potentially saved my relationship with the love of my life. For better or worse, she had also played a part in bringing Ender into my life.

“In the positive way,” she said. “You know, like when they talk about innovation disrupting the market...”

“Well, I can’t figure out any possible self-serving motives you could have to play a part in this,” I said, trying to sound stern. “And BJ’s ‘selfish motive’ is worrying how I’ll cope when she’s around even less...”

“Mine’s not so different, Thomas,” Alex said. “I remember what you were like when you were happy, and I’d like to see you happy again... I knew Ender probably wasn’t the ultimate answer, but I hoped he or someone like him—the boy from the cafe or the one from the app, for instance—would help you find a path...”

“You’re a librarian, not a self-help guru, Alex,” I said gruffly. “Promise me one thing?”

“I’ll hear you out,” she said.

“Next time you want to meddle in my life, just come right out and do it in front of me?” I asked.

“Deal,” she said easily. “I honestly just didn’t think you’d listen and—“

“First of all, it’s my right to decide whether I want to listen,” I said. “Second, when the advice comes from you, I always give it serious consideration...”

“I’m sorry, Thomas,” she said. “You’re right... And besides, I can be the rational voice... BJ can beat you over the head with it... Full aggressive interference. It’s more my style anyway.”

“Damn it,” I muttered, though I was smiling, and I knew she could hear it.

“Well, I’m glad we’re having this conversation,” she said. “It’s too bad things didn’t work out with Ender... Are the other two still options?”

“The guy from the app said I should explore things with Ender before we got together,” I said, trying not to laugh.

“Ouch,” she said. “Did you ever get to apologize to the poor guy at the cafe, at least?”

“I did,” I said. “I ran into him when I went to pick Ender up at his dorm?”

“Oh, he’s a student at—“

“I’m surprised BJ hasn’t updated you,” I said, chuckling. “Ender *is* the boy from the cafe...”

“What?!” she asked, stunned. “Well, that sounds almost like fate threw in with BJ and I...”

“It does have that ring... And I never said things didn’t work out with Ender—just that you shouldn’t interfere behind my back,” I said.

“What?!” she asked. “BJ really *has* been doing a terrible job of communicating with her co-conspirator!”

I quickly explained the agreement I had made with BJ, and how things had been going with Ender. I was careful to avoid the graphic details at first. But I couldn’t exactly ask her what I wanted to ask without sharing quite a lot.

“So Alex, the real reason I got in touch so quickly, rather than letting you stew—“

“I should have known something had come up that would speed up our reconciliation process!” she said triumphantly.

“Anyway,” I said gruffly. “I need some advice—“

“Love life advice?” she asked, her tone teasing.

“Sex life advice,” I corrected. “But I’d need to over share so you could understand what I was asking about, so I understand if you don’t—”

“Go for it,” she said happily. “I love reading trashy gay erotic romance!”

“Okay,” I said, hesitating for a moment. “Well, despite me trying to slow roll everything ... I caved and we’ve been experimenting. We’ve ... done a lot, and it’s gone pretty well...” Then I just gave her a rundown of what had happened that morning in the shower with Ender.

“Okay, well, uhm,” she said, clearly struggling not to tease me. “That sounds really hot, and I don’t know what is confusing about— You’re a bottom? Really!?”

“Bottom-shaming at this time of the morning, Alex? Really?” I asked.

“Not at all!” she said. “I guess I shouldn’t stereotype, but you really don’t seem—“

“You should have stopped at ‘shouldn’t stereotype,’” I said. “Then you could have avoided even more foot in your mouth...”

She snorted and said, “Seems like I’m the only one in this conversation trying to avoid foot in my mouth...”

“That’s *actually* closer to my problem,” I said. “I’ve never even thought of that before... Even now, thinking about it generally, it doesn’t really turn me on. Hell, the thought of submission has *never* turned me on—”

“Feet still don’t,” she observed, “but submission never has ... until now?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” I said with a sigh. “And he definitely seemed to be into the dominance but ... I just don’t get where this is coming from. I don’t know what he gets out of it. I don’t even really have a clue what I get out of it!”

“That’s probably too much to unpack in one conversation,” she said. “Especially since I’ve never met the young man in question. Yet...”

“If this ‘trial run’ works out, you probably will,” I said.

There was a long silence on the line.

“Alex?” I asked.

“Maybe I was more skeptical of BJ’s plan than I realized?” she answered. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m loving this for you. But ... be careful?”

“Of what?” I asked.

“Your feelings,” she said. “He’s young, and he’s in a tough spot in life right now...”

“I know,” I said. “I’m trying. But I’m also trying to give it a real chance to ... I don’t know what! But back to the question...”

“Well, for him, this might be a way of being himself, or it might just be that right now he needs a space where he can feel control and power, just as much as you need a space where you can be—forgive the pun—not such a tight ass and—”

“Believe me, for a while I’ll be anything but a tight ass!” I joked.

“Be serious for a moment, Thomas!” she said.

“Sorry,” I grumbled.

“As I was saying... not be such a tight ass and give up control,” she said. “You have a plan for your life that doesn’t give you any freedom. You are a corporate slave—a high level corporate slave, yes—and you fucking plan professionally. Your life and job are so tightly ... *controlled*. I really think you should ... well, do you even want my advice?”

“I called you, Alex!”

“I think you should explore what it would be like to give up the plan and just live a little,” she said. “Ender is a good start... And keep exploring that with him as long as you both want to. He seems as though he might be the kind of spark I hoped you’d find. But you have to embrace that feeling and really live into it! What would it look like to take a year off, or if not off, do things that don’t consume your life? Explore passions? Study something, even? And, if the thing with Ender works out, maybe keep giving him some power in the bedroom—and maybe out of the bedroom too...”

“I’ll take it under advisement,” I said, feeling as if my stomach was about to revolt.

The very idea of what she was suggested set me on edge. But thanks to the little taste I had gotten through Ender there was the tiniest core of excitement too.

“I only want you to be happy,” she said.

“And this thing with Ender that’s happening right now is almost enough to make me forget how you and the other women in my life consistently go behind my back to accomplish it!”

“Almost?” she asked, with what I thought was a note of good humor.

“It’s a work in progress,” I said. “Like myself...”

“But we are forgiven?” she asked.

“Annie’s the hardest because I can’t talk to her,” I said.
“But yeah...”

“She loved you so much, Thomas,” Alex said.

“I wonder what she’d think about this,” I said.

“I don’t know if she’d ever have gotten to the point where sharing you would have been okay,” Alex said truthfully. “But she would want you to *live*, Thomas. Really live! And she would love it that someone is putting your old smile back on your face...”

“Thanks Alex,” I said softly.

“Any time, Thomas,” she said. “Are we still doing Christmas Eve at your place?”

“I think so,” I said. “See you there?”

“Let’s talk soon to plan,” she said, making kiss-kiss noises.

After I set the phone down on my desk, I found that my mind wasn’t spiraling anymore. And I put that newfound focus to good use, finishing my report in time to plan the evening’s “date” with Ender. I knew we didn’t have to do something every night, that we could just hang out and cuddle. But it also felt good to arrange at least a little something for him, something I could do to put a smile on his face as well.

You’re moving too fast... Alex is right, you need to be careful your feelings don’t get hurt. But BJ’s plan had led to me skipping a lot of steps, and the trial boyfriend thing was making it far too easy to feel things I couldn’t possibly be feeling this quickly.

And the freer I felt at home, the harder it was becoming to stay chained to a desk I despised.

CHAPTER 23

ENDER

“So, then yesterday, after he got off work, Thomas took me to this cooking class that he found online. We got to cook together and eat the meal we made together,” I said, nearly bouncing in my seat.

BJ just stared at me and shook her head.

“What?” I asked. “Why are you looking at me like that? Do I have something on my—“ I began to feel around my face to see if I had gotten something on me.

She laughed and said, “I just ... haven’t seen you this happy since before,” she said, eyes sparkling. “And I can’t believe dad is really putting a *lot* of energy into it. But I’ve also never really seen him date. Maybe it’s just how he is. But it definitely seems like he’s doing more than just going through the motions—“

“I hope he is, because ... I am.”

BJ leaned in and put a hand on my arm. “What do you mean?”

“Well, at first, I mean thinking about it as a trial was okay because it made it feel less risky,” I said. “And attraction is one thing, but I didn’t know how we would click, you know?”

She nodded. “And you click?”

“I’ve never experienced anything close, BJ,” I said shaking my head. “It’s crazy and exciting, and I’m so happy I could cry and scream and all the things!”

“But?” she asked.

“It’s scary as hell!” I said.

“Because of how strong the feelings are?”

I nodded. “I think I’m falling for him. It’s too soon, it’s too fast, it’s too stupid... When things fall apart, I don’t know what I’ll—“

“If things fall apart,” BJ corrected. “And things not working out doesn’t mean things falling apart. If my dad wasn’t the type who will always have your back, I never would have tried to push y’all together. I love you, and I wouldn’t risk you getting hurt like that again. Not even for my dad...”

I reached over with my other hand and squeezed hers.

“Things ... never really work out for me,” I said sadly. “And this’ll hurt so much worse because ... I just like him so much!”

“Why are you so sure things won’t work?” she asked. “Is it *just* what happened with your parents or—”

“And the guy I thought I liked,” I said. “He ghosted me too. And ... I mean, other stuff.”

She nodded.

“I just,” I stammered.

BJ whispered. “You don’t need to talk about this now... Sometime when you’re feeling up to it.”

I nodded. “And BJ? I did something. Something I don’t think your dad—I mean Thomas—will forgive me for...”

BJ’s eyes narrowed and her face became neutral. She withdrew her hand and sat back. “Is this going to piss me off? Because if you hurt my dad—”

I shook my head energetically. “I didn’t mean to— Hurting him was the last thing on my mind! And I had no idea how badly he would take it, what it would mean to him, until I heard all that betrayal stuff...”

“Ender,” BJ said, leaning into touch my arm again. “I think I need to hear what’s going on before I can...”

“So after I had that first terrible encounter with the guy I had nicknamed ‘Grumpy Daddy’—”

“Who turned out to be my dad,” she said, nodding.

“Yeah, well, so ... later I was on a gay app and found his profile,” I said. “I started talking to him and really, really liked him. So I figured maybe I could get to know him and when we finally, actually met, it would have been enough for him to think of me as more than the terrible waiter who...”

“I get that,” BJ said. Then the lights went on. “Then, when he came to get you, you realized that he was my dad too, the guy you were going to be living with... And you didn’t tell him?”

I shook my head.

“But you didn’t keep talking to him?” she asked.

I stared at her, my eyes wide.

“I basically tried to kill the profile,” I said. “I suggested we shouldn’t still meet. But I also suggested he try things out with the guy he was having guilty feelings over.”

“So your app persona pushed the guy you liked ... toward you?” BJ asked. “Kinda like app personas do all the time?”

“But he was up in the air and I acted more as an objective third party who gave him advice—knowing all about what was going on with him and all that,” I said. “Plus, he told me things I wouldn’t otherwise know and...”

“Okay,” she said. “I get how that might be an uncomfortable conversation, but I think my dad could forgive —“

“Think about it! I got the back-end info on his feelings and whatnot. I even used to my advantage. Now, knowing how he’s feeling super betrayed by about everyone in his life? I just feel like a piece of shit when I remember what I did, but I don’t think I can tell him...”

“But you’re not trying to manipulate him,” she said. “Hell, he was already doing all this stuff for you just because I asked...”

“Yeah, he said we should blame it all on you, since you are the one who—”

“So ... maybe don't tell him? Sure it was a little uncool, but you really actually liked him and it was all unexpected,” BJ said. “You aren't still using the account?”

I shook my head. “No, but I just feel so guilty...”

“So tell him,” she said. “Beg for forgiveness... There's a good chance he'll think you're being too hard on yourself—”

“My dad isn't going to just call it quits unless—”

“Unless I give him a good reason,” I said, nodding. “Which is what I'd be doing...”

“Shit,” BJ muttered, half to herself. “I don't know. If you feel like you have to tell him—“

“I think I do,” I said, my stomach roiling.

“Then maybe tell him soon,” she said.

I nodded.

“Warn me before you do?” she asked.

“Yeah, I will,” I said. “I'll feel better having you on standby,” I added with a weak chuckle.

My whole shift had gone by in a blur. My body was on autopilot, shining a fake smile on every customer and spouting off throwaway lines. The tips were great all day.

Only Molly seemed to notice that my charm was completely faked though. The one time Molly tried to ask what was wrong, my face *must* have communicated my discomfort, because she never brought the issue back up other than to tell me I could call her if I needed to talk.

On our way out, though, she asked, “He hasn't done something?”

I shook my head with a pained smile. “Besides being absolutely too perfect for words?”

She laughed. “Sounds sus to me... Call me if you need anything!”

“I will,” I said. “Thanks!”

“Looks like your ride is here,” she said, giving me a little wave as I walked over to Thomas’ car and tapped on the window.

He smiled up at me from whatever he was reading on his phone and unlocked the door. “Hey there, hot stuff...”

“Gag me,” I said with a mock groan.

“Wait until we’re in bed for that,” he retorted with a grin, then took my hand. Giving it a quick squeeze, he added, “I know I’m sad, but I missed you when I got off work and had to wait to see you...”

“Someone’s spoiled by having me at their beck and call!” I said, laughing.

Thomas nodded. “If anyone is at anyone’s beck and call, it’s me... Sir.”

“Well,” I said softly. “It’s not like you don’t like it...”

“In the bedroom more than other places,” he said, glancing over to see how I’d respond.

I was glad it was dark so he couldn’t see me blush. I thought of the couple of times when we found ourselves all alone, and I had taken the reins. Those moments where he immediately ceded control to me and I ... felt exhilarated and free and powerful.

For a few minutes we drove along in silence, then he squeezed my hand and said, “Something’s wrong...”

“What?” I asked. “What’s going on?”

“With you,” he said. “Something’s bothering you.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I just— Well, tomorrow’s Thursday. BJ will be home Friday, and we’re gonna ... go back to the way things were?”

“I told you that’s not how it’s going to happen,” he said, shaking his head. “That was our safety net, but I just ... don’t see that as a possibility now.”

“Why not?” I asked, gulping.

“I like you too much,” he said.

I gasped, and he laughed. “I mean ... I’m glad, because I don’t want to go back to you being my Christmas host while I look for a place... Though I am looking for a place. But—”

“No luck?” he asked, misunderstanding.

“No,” I said. “I mean, yes, but ... that wasn’t what the ‘but’ was for! I meant, *but* if we aren’t going back to whatever, what *are* we going to be?” I asked.

“Can we talk about it when we get home?” he asked with a quick glance over at me.

“Ugh,” I groaned. But seeing that there was a glimmer of a smile on his face, I added, “Keep me in suspense!” He squeezed my hand and drove.

As soon as the door closed behind us though, I asked, “So?”

“Would you like something to eat or drink?” he asked with a smile.

I grabbed his arm.

“Well, big boy,” he said. “I guess you want to talk?”

“Yes, daddy!” I groaned.

“What do *you* want us to be after tomorrow?” he asked.

“I ... I haven’t really let myself think that much about it!” I complained. “It’s been too hard worrying about what happens when it’s all over! When you’re done with me and—”

“I hope I haven’t given you any reason to think—”

“No!” I said. “It’s just me over thinking things and worrying...”

Thomas stepped toward me, until we were chest to chest. “I know a thing or two about over thinking and worrying. And

I know all of this is just ... crazy. It's too fast. I just ... I keep telling myself we skipped too many steps and got in too deep before—”

“Are you breaking up with me?” I asked, suddenly scared.

“Fuck, no, Ender!” he said, wrapping his arms around me. “As much as it seems crazy, it feels right... Doesn't it?”

“It does to me,” I said, my voice a raspy mess.

“So I guess I was thinking that maybe the trial period is *already over*,” Thomas said. “Maybe we're already just kinda plain old boyfriends, no trial... If that sounds good—”

“I can't!” I blurted out, my promise to warn BJ flying out the window at this unexpected turn. “I pretended to be something I wasn't, and I betrayed your trust, so I can't let you —”

CHAPTER 24

THOMAS

Betrayed? What is he talking about?

I stepped back. “What?”

He was already crying. “I never meant for any of it to happen! After I saw you in the cafe a couple of times, I got on CockyUnicorns and was looking for a hookup... I was so worked up by you, and I never thought we’d get together. And we seemed to click a little, so I kept flirting. And I only realized that you, the guy from the cafe and the app were also BJ’s dad when you showed up to pick me up. And I know that I never should have kept talking to you after that, and I *really* shouldn’t have told you to try things out with the *other guy*, me. I’m just so sorry, Thomas—”

“You’re ... LonelyCollegeBoy?” I asked, barely a whisper.

“I can’t believe something so random led to something so *stupid*... And then it was too late. But then I did something really stupid and—”

“I ... don’t know what to say,” I said. “I just ... it’s all so random. I was crushing on *both* versions of you. And you didn’t make the connection... But after you found out, I just can’t believe you *manipulated* me like that—”

“I know,” he said, sobbing. “I was just planning to kinda kill that account and then you messaged me to meet up. And it’s not like we could ever meet at that point... I just— Fuck, leave it to me to wreck the one good thing in my life right now...”

“Ender,” I said, my voice catching unexpectedly as tears rose. “I ... need to think.”

“I understand,” he said, averting his eyes and continuing to cry. “I ... I wish there was something I could say or do to—”

Numbly, I turned and walked over to the stairs. With a quick glance back, I headed straight to my office and collapse into the chair behind my desk.

How could I be so stupid? I wondered. Who knows what else he's lied about? What else he's done to get in your good graces?

My chest tightened. It felt unfair. He'd never encouraged me to spend money or help with his situation beyond advice. BJ had been the one to ask the favor for him to move in for a few weeks.

But he did knowingly manipulate you...

But I was twisting that, wasn't I?

He "manipulated you" toward the same end as your daughter and best friend. If there was a selfish motive, it was that he liked you and wanted to get a chance to—

There was a knock on my office door frame, and I looked up to find Ender standing there.

Softly, he said, “I ... called for a ride. I'll give you some space and come back and get my things when I've got something figured out... Uhm ... thanks for being nice to me and showing me how good things can be with—”

“What are you doing?” I asked as tears rose to my eyes again.

“I just ... it's too hard for me to be here, and I know it's hard on you for me to be—”

I wanted to punish him. But his heart was breaking, and that was breaking my heart.

That should tell you something, shouldn't it?

“Don't ... don't go,” I said.

Ender looked up at me in surprise. “I should.”

“Maybe,” I said honestly. “But ... I don’t want you to.”

“I don’t understand,” he said.

“I’m *not* turning my back on you, Ender!” I said, injecting far too much energy into my voice. “No matter what, I’m still here for you and—”

“You just don’t *want* me anymore,” he said dejectedly.

“To be honest, I’m struggling!” I said. “I just need some time to think things through. Can you give me that?”

“I don’t have any choice, do I?” he asked.

“You can run, if you want,” I said. “Just know that, if you do, I’ll still be here if you need me...”

He rubbed the tears from his eyes and shook his head. “I guess I’ll see you tomorrow, then. I have to work in the morning and—”

“Do you need a ride?” I asked.

“I’ll call for a ride,” he said shaking his head.

“Don’t be like that,” I said. “I *am* still here for you.”

“I can’t ask—”

I couldn’t help but laugh, though it may have sounded a tad bitter. “You’re not asking... I’m offering.”

“Okay,” he said. “I need to—”

“Be there by 5:45?” I asked with a wry smile.

“Yeah,” he said, blushing. “I ... I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Try to get a good night’s sleep,” I said, then turned to stare toward the window.

“Thomas?”

“We’ll talk more, Ender,” I said, looking back over at him. “Just ... it’s better if it’s not right now.”

He nodded and then stepped back toward the guest room he had not really used the last few days.

The next day felt as if it would never end. I'd gotten next to no sleep last night and had gone to the gym early this morning after dropping Ender off at Sunrise Cafe. Then I'd had another meeting with that asshole, Phil. Again, he'd failed to manage the meeting, and again things had gone off the rails. Afterwards, he'd been on my case again.

By the time Jack Montgomery stopped by my office just before lunch, I was ready to scream.

"You look like you're having a rough day," Jack said, waiting at the door for me to acknowledge him.

"You could say that, Jack," I said with a sigh, motioning for him to come on in.

"It's affecting your work," Jack said as he took a seat across from me.

"No, it's not," I said.

"Phil says—"

"Phil who got promoted to a position I should have been awarded years ago?" I snapped. "Phil whose actual job it is to handle issues like the ones we've been having—"

"Things you used to handle," Jack said, holding up a hand.

"Things that weren't my responsibility, things I'm not paid to handle," I said, losing my temper.

"We depend on you to—"

"Maybe you should depend on the people you trust with that level of responsibility!" I declared.

"Thomas, I don't know what this is all about but—"

"I'm going to be frank, Jack," I said, cutting him off. He nodded. "You and the senior partners had come to rely on me to handle the monkeys, but you don't value me enough put me in charge of the monkeys, much less the whole circus."

Jack looked surprised by my directness. He nodded once, then looked off, thinking very hard. “You’ve been thinking about this a lot?”

“I’ve worked here a long time,” I said. “I do more than a lot of people who have gotten much further ahead than I have. Like that ass, Phil.”

“Fair enough,” Jack said, pushing up out of the chair.

I rose involuntarily with him. “So?”

“So, what?” he asked. “Your point is valid. The things we expect of you are not really your job, but you do them well... I’ll see what I can do, Thomas. I’ll talk to the other partners and try.”

“I understand,” I said. Then, without much emotion I added, “Maybe people will see the added value I have been bringing to the table...” What was unsaid but seemed to be understood was ... *now that I’m staying in my lane, so y’all need to look out for yourselves.*

“You aren’t *really* thinking of leaving us, are you?” Jack asked.

I sat back down in my chair and said, “I’m not planning to leave.” He seemed relieved for a moment, until I added, “But I’m open to preparing for that.”

Fuck, what am I doing? I should have a plan before I start making even veiled threats like this...

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he said. “I’ll see what I can do...”

“Thanks, Jack,” I said. “It’s nothing personal. But when you think about where I ought to be by now—“

He nodded grimly and gave me a quick wave over his shoulder as he walked out. A big part of me was terrified. But more than a small part of me hoped they wouldn’t even try, that they’d devalue me yet again and give me the last motivation I needed to just move on.

And where is that coming from? Intellectually, I’m still not sure I’m ready to make the leap. But I’m feeling closer to ready than I ever have...

CHAPTER 25

ENDER

I had been drifting through my shifts on autopilot since I had confessed to Thomas. BJ had been burning up my phone with hundreds of intrusive questions like, “Why does dad want me home early?” or “You seem down, and you’ve been so happy—what’s going on?” Avoiding the truth with BJ and being avoided by Thomas was leaving me feeling torn apart today.

I was so out of it, I didn’t notice my phone was ringing. No one ever calls me, so I stepped into the kitchen and pulled it out, even though I was in the middle of my shift. I looked down at the Caller ID. It read “Mother”—and I flinched.

My finger hovered over the red button. I could hang up on her now, but chances were if she had decided to call, that would not deter her.

“Hello?” I answered.

“It’s your mother,” she said sternly.

“I’m in the middle of my shift. I can’t talk—“

“This won’t take long,” she said. “When do you clock out?”

“Four,” I said. “Why?”

“Your father, brother, and I are in town shopping,” she said. “We are having dinner at Clint’s at six. We want you there.”

I gasped. *Am I hearing that right? They want to see me? Is it possible we could get through this and put it all behind us?*

I almost agreed instantly, but instead I asked, “What’s going on?”

“Just some last minute Christmas shopping,” she said. “Since you aren’t coming home for Christmas, we thought we should see you while we have the chance...”

So we’re acting like nothing ever happened? Or are we just acting like I fucking decided not to come home, rather than like I was given an ultimatum to shape up or stay away?

“I don’t have gifts for anyone, since I hadn’t been planning on seeing you,” I said.

“No worries,” she said. “I don’t think anyone expects anything. We’d like to see you. I know your brother certainly would...”

I rolled my eyes. *You always know how to pull my strings.*

“Okay, I’ll try,” I grumbled.

“Don’t try,” she said. “Be there.”

I hung up, my mind in a total uproar. I wanted to hope. I wanted to scream and throw my phone. I wanted to cry. And most of all I wanted to call Thomas.

I wiped my misty eyes and texted BJ.

Me: I need backup. My family is in town and want me to meet them for dinner at Clint’s at six.

For a long time the three dots indicated BJ was typing. Then they stopped. Then they started again. I had returned to work before the answer came.

BJ: Ask your boyfriend.

Fuck you for testing me like this! But I can’t tell her. What if we end up patching things up? God, if only...

Me: Take my trial DILF of a boyfriend to a dinner that might be a first step to reconciliation with my homophobic parents? Smart move that would be!

Me: Stop trying to interfere in this thing between me and Thomas and just be my friend!

BJ: I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s going on, but you’re right. It doesn’t matter. But I have a final exam at seven, Ender...

Fuck, I totally forgot. Which should be impossible since that's why this whole fake-dating thing had a Friday expiration date anyway.

Me: Okay, I'll face them on my own.

BJ: I'll be home afterwards if you need to decompress. I'm coming home early.

Me: Don't bother.

Don't be a bitch to her! She was only trying to—

Me: I'll be fine!

BJ: My dad will be there for you, too, you know...

Me: I'll be fine... Stop digging.

BJ: I'm not digging. I just know, hell or high water, he'll be there for you.

Fuck, I wish that could be true, but how can it?

Me: I know you're just trying to help, but stop!

Me: Love you...

BJ: Love you too. See you soon.

"What am I going to do?" I asked myself, staring off into space until a customer's waving hand broke my trance.

I put on a plastic smile and headed over to turn up the charm.

Later, Molly pulled me aside and whispered, "Okay, spill... You're barely managing to convince people you're in the room, much less that you're your normal bubbly self..."

"It's a long story," I said, looking around.

"It's slow," she said.

I hesitated, then told her everything—or at least the quickest version of everything I could imagine, from my big mistake to my mom's call.

"Holy fucking fuck, man," she said, shaking her head. "That's a hell of a lot..."

"I know," I said. "First I lost him, now this?"

"Well, unless you left something out, he never *actually* broke up with you," she said, shaking her head. "Isn't it a good

sign, or at least the best sign you could hope for, that he's struggling with it so much?"

"I guess a small part of me hoped he'd just ... let it go?" I said miserably. "I know that's not reasonable, especially with his own issues getting swirled around right before, but..."

Molly put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed. "BJ can't come with you to dinner, and you won't ask Thomas?"

I shook my head.

"I know I'm no BJ, but I make a fair wingman ... or whatever that is for situations like this?"

I cocked my head and asked, "Really? You'd do that?"

"Of course!" she said, surprised. "First of all, we *are* friends. Second, a free meal on your asshole parents?"

I laughed.

"So when we leave here, we can quickly head by your place for you to get changed, then swing by my place on the way to Clint's... That work?" she asked.

"Yes!" I said, throwing my arm around her as the first authentic smile in the last couple of days crossed my lips. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

"You don't have to dress up," I said to Molly as she modeled the outfit she'd picked. "Not like you need to impress my ... 'asshole parents' anyway..."

"Clint's is a nice place, and it never hurts to draw some attention," she countered.

"Well, on the off chance my parents want to reconcile, confusing the issue with my mom's ideal girlfriend might not be a great idea," I said.

"Oh no, I'm totally your friend from work," she said. "Let them think I have an unrequited crush on you or something..."

"Whatever," I scoffed. "I guess we should head on..."

She came over and sat by me, putting her hand on my arm. “You don’t need to be nervous...”

“Of course I do!” I said. “I have no idea what this meeting is about or what they want from me or—”

“Ender, calm down,” she said. “They’ve already done the worst thing they have in their power to do to their grown son. They can’t hurt you more, they can only hurt you again. And you’re stronger now than you’ve ever been...”

“I just wish—” I began.

She grabbed my phone off the couch where it sat beside me and handed it to me. “So text him!”

“How did you know that’s what I was thinking?” I asked with a sad smile.

“It’s what I’d be thinking if I had a man as hot as that in my corner,” she said with a smirk.

“He’s not in my corner anymore,” I said, dejected.

“BJ says he is,” Molly said. “And if anyone would know...”

I shook my head and slipped my phone into my pocket. “I can’t let it seem like I’m using this to draw him back—”

“You really think he thinks *that* badly of you?” she asked. “If he does, he’s as big an idiot as—and a bigger jackass than—I used to think!”

“No, Molly!” I said. “I don’t need that kind of ride-or-die right now... I gave him every reason to doubt me and what I’d do to get my way.”

“But it wasn’t like that,” she murmured.

“I hope he’ll see that eventually,” I said, nodding. “Let’s go face the music.”

By the time we arrived at the restaurant, though, all the good cheer that humor had built up had evaporated completely. It felt like a pool of eels lived in my stomach, and all I could think of was the look on my mother’s face when she had passed sentence on me over fall break.

“Come on,” Molly said, reaching across the center console and squeezing my hand. “I got your back! And you don’t have to take any crap from these people. You don’t owe them shit...”

“Molly,” I began hesitantly. “All the things I told you about what happened... They were the easy version.”

“Why are we here?” she asked, eyes wide.

“I’m still holding out a little hope, I guess,” I said with a shrug.

She nodded. “Then let’s go...”

As soon as I pushed through the door, my eyes locked with my mother’s, and I froze inside. It all came rushing back, and whatever I had hoped to accomplish escaped me.

It was my little brother’s cry of “Ender!” that shook me out of my shocked state. Molly patted me on the shoulder, and I led the way to where my family stood waiting for our table.

“His name is Billy,” my mother said to my brother. Her voice was soft but stern. “I didn’t realize you’d be bringing a guest,” she added, eyeing Molly curiously with a sudden hopeful gaze.

“Well, we didn’t exactly have much time to talk or plan,” I said softly. “This is my friend Molly,” I added. “Molly, this is my mother Marcia and my father William, and of course my little bro Aaron!”

“Pleased to meet you, young lady,” my father said, then turned to me and explained, “It was a last minute thing. You know I hate coming into the city, but your mother insisted we all come...”

“I said we had to visit you,” Aaron said brightly.

Aaron seemed mostly unaware of the tension. It warmed my heart that the only thing I could detect from him was his eagerness to see me. That meant our parents hadn’t been actively trying to poison him against me.

One small favor, at least.

“She’s pretty,” Aaron said with a sweet smile. “Is she your girlfriend?”

I saw my mother stiffen and give me a stern look. In my head, I could hear her saying, ‘Don’t you dare say a word!’

“She is pretty, isn’t she?” I replied. “But we’re just friends from work... Molly has been giving me rides, so I invited her to come along!”

For moral support, I didn’t add. Not that my brother would likely understand. He was brilliant in most ways, but he had difficulty interpreting the subtext of social interactions—and pretty much any form of representation, like art or literary devices. Watching how hard it was to get the schools and other resources to accommodate both his particular needs and his brilliance was one of the major reasons I chose social work.

“Why aren’t you coming home for Christmas?” Aaron asked.

“Your brother isn’t—” my mother began.

“I’m not able to get off work, and I need to make some money so I can pay for school and stuff,” I said, cutting my mother off with a stern look of my own.

“But mom and dad can help,” Aaron said, pouting a little. “Then you could play my new games with me. You know mom doesn’t like them, and dad isn’t very good!”

“Hey, now!” our father said with a chuckle. “I’m just as good as anybody else who’s not a genius!”

Aaron laughed and nodded. “I guess... But—“

“Sorry, buddy,” I said, ruffling his hair. “I promise next time I visit we can play as many games as we have time for!”

He smoothed his hair down, giving me a scolding look, then smiled and said, “Okay!”

Shortly, a waiter was escorting us to our table. I noticed Molly giving me a strange smile, but I was so focused on just getting through the next hour that I didn’t think too much about it.

CHAPTER 26

THOMAS

I sat at the bar sipping a French 75 and wondering about how things had come to this. I had had the most exciting week-long love affair with a college kid, instigated by my daughter; I had been struggling to process a series of perceived betrayals; and I felt myself pushed to the edge of making changes in my life I had been avoiding so long but now longed to do. Ender was the key to it all.

Ender, that precious, sweet—

I looked at my glass, which was unfortunately nearly empty. Again.

Your inhibitions are low and you've got hearts in your eyes, so you aren't seeing clearly. You wanted to forget, so that's what you've done.

And it's true. I had wanted to forget. But as I neared the bottom of my third French 75, I knew that I had made the right decision when BJ had called me earlier. I had seen clearly how I was overreacting.

I just need to talk to him and tell him how I feel, to tell him how I had felt betrayed but that I understand how insecurity and then fear took over—that I expect him to be entirely forthright if we were to keep trying. But first I just need to be here for him!

Thank God BJ had called me earlier in the afternoon. She had interrogated me, tried to get me to spill the details, but I wasn't ready yet. Obviously Ender wasn't either, or she would have come straight for the jugular.

When I didn't give her anything, she said, "Well, then, I assume you're there to support him tonight. I can't be there because of exams..."

Fuck, what is she talking about? And I had to know. The idea of him needing me and me not being there was too much.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said.

"If he didn't share it with you, that means you guys aren't talking," she said. "Quid pro quo..."

"Don't quote *Silence of the Lambs* at me, daughter!" I said, unable to quell the burst of pride.

"Would you feel better if I said it was some legal Latin I picked up in an opium den?" she asked. "Spill, old man..."

"He told me about the messages he sent me on the app," I said.

"Fuck, dad," she said. "He just thought you wouldn't give him the time of day, so he gave you a nudge before killing off his NPC..."

"NPC?" I asked.

"Non-Player Character, dad," she said. "I know you know ___"

"Are you secretly dating a nerd?" I asked. "Some hot frat boy who used to play Dungeons & Dragons until his acne cleared up and—"

"Don't try to distract me, dad!" she said. "And don't be stupid! You know he's good for you and—"

"And he betrayed me!" I said.

"You like that word, you old drama queen!" she said. "And so did I. And so did Alex. And so did mom. And so does your company *every fucking day*... Ender did it because of how much he likes you, shame on him, and he's the *only one* of us you can't forgive?"

"I just ... what's going on with him?" I demanded. "Quid pro quo..."

“Jesus Christ, dad, don’t be so inflexible! You have to understand where he’s coming from,” she said. “And remember ... he thinks *everyone* is going to *throw him away*... That it’s just a matter of time. So if you’re letting him stew until he’s learned his lesson, like you planned on with Alex, just don’t... Go back to being pissed at me if you can only forgive two people. I swear I’ll do it again if I have to help you justify it!”

“What’s going on with Ender, BJ!?” I demanded.

“His parents have summoned him to a dinner at Clint’s this evening at six,” she said. “He seems to have some screwy hope that they might have had a change of heart...”

“But you don’t?” I asked.

“Look at what they did to him already,” she said.

“Right,” I said. “Okay, I’ll talk to you later, BJ...”

“Wait, what are you going to do?” she asked.

“It’s not really my place to do—”

“Oh, don’t give me that crap, dad!” she said. But I just hung up.

Let her stew!

And that’s how I found myself ordering my fourth drink at the bar at Clint’s. I had tipped the host handsomely to ensure Ender’s family was seated just across me on the other side of a hedge row of potted plants. I could hear, without Ender seeing me, most of what was being said, but only because I was listening in. The girl from Sunrise Cafe he brought with him, though—I was pretty sure she had clocked me as they were being seated. I was sure of it when I glanced over and caught her staring my way.

For the first half hour, it was all menu browsing and ordering, followed by some very awkward catching up. Ender gave them a rundown of how he thought he’d done. And he asked about his brother Aaron’s progress at school. From what I could tell, it sounded as if the boy went to a private school, which he seemed to be enjoying. When he talked about

academics, he sounded way more advanced than the fourteen I'd have guessed him to be.

Just when I thought BJ had been overreacting and that I had no business being here snooping, things began to go wrong. And no surprise, based on what I had heard, it began with his mother, Marcia.

"You know you *can* come home for Christmas, if you want," Marcia said. "Even just for a couple of days..."

"I would," Ender replied, "if I could get off work *and* there were no conditions... Have you thought more about that?"

There was an edge to his mother's voice when she answered him. "I have... And the conditions remain the same. I just thought *you* might have reconsidered, now that you've had time to think over your options. Especially since you brought a young lady to dinner..."

"That wasn't a signal, mother," Ender said. "Molly came to support me... She knows all about me and my issues..."

"Issues?" Aaron asked, confused. "Are you seeing Doctor Katz too?"

"No, buddy," Ender said. "And you don't have *issues* either. Doctor Katz is just helping you learn how to process things in new ways."

"Right," Aaron said. "He always says there's nothing wrong with me. Other people just have trouble understanding, and he's teaching me ways to help them..."

"I always did like Doctor Katz," Ender said, and somehow, just by the tone of his voice, I could tell he was giving Marcia a sharp look.

I couldn't hear what happened next, but then I heard Ender take in a sharp breath. Every muscle in my body tensed as I heard him exclaim, "What the *fuck* is this?"

"Language!" Marcia scolded.

Simultaneously, Aaron said, "That's a *bad* word!"

“Words are never bad when they’re appropriate,” Ender said to Aaron with an understanding tone.

“It’s a place where they help people like you overcome the difficulties they face when—“

“The only difficulties I face are the ones created by you and dad abandoning me because of who I want to date!” Ender said. “There is nothing wrong with me!”

“The hell there isn’t!” Marcia said.

“Mom!” Aaron complained. “*Bad word!*”

“I’m sorry, son,” she said. “But your brother—”

“I thought we agreed we wouldn’t get into this in front of Aaron?” her husband, William, finally interjected.

“The whole reason we are here is to—” Marcia began

“Is to make sure our son gets to see his big brother for Christmas,” William said.

“And to show Billy that he does have an option,” Marcia said. “To relieve the burden of going through life alone, unloved, never able to have a normal relationship, and of having to fight for everything he has... And to relieve the burden of sin and evil that his choices...”

“Marcia!” William scolded his wife, but softly.

“Yeah, Marcia,” Molly piped in. “That’s your son you’re feeding that load of horse—” After a quick glance at Aaron, she finished, “Manure...”

“Young lady, this is none of your concern,” Marcia snapped. “And if you can support this kind of—”

“This kind of normal, everyday life that people in his community live?” Molly asked indignantly.

“Why are you mad at Ender, mom?” Aaron asked, beginning to sound afraid.

“His name is *Billy!*” Marcia snapped shrilly at Aaron.

“Don’t talk to him like that, mother!” Ender said, his voice low and dark. “I don’t care how you talk to me but you won’t

—“

“He may not care how you talk to him, Marcia, but I do!” I said as I rounded the corner and stood hulking over Ender, placing a protective hand on his shoulder.

When he looked up at me, I saw he had tears in his eyes. Whether they were over his mother’s words or my appearance, I had no idea. I moved my hand to the back of his neck and stroked it gently with my thumb.

“Who the—?” Marcia started indignantly.

“Watch your tone around the boy!” I interrupted as calmly as I could manage. “I came out this evening because I was worried something like this would happen—that you couldn’t just destroy your son’s confidence and throw his life in disarray...” Snatching the pamphlet from Ender’s hand, I looked at it and nearly dropped it like a snake. “A *conversion camp!*?”

“They help wayward youth find their way back to Christ —” Marcia began.

“If Christ wants his children tortured to get them on his path, his path is the road to hell,” I said. “There is *nothing* wrong with this young man. He’s the bravest, kindest, most loyal...”

That’s when I noticed his gaze hadn’t slipped an inch, he was still just staring up at me, tears in his eyes.

“You came?” he whispered and then began to cry. “You came...”

“Of course I came,” I whispered. I gave the back of his neck a gentle squeeze, then slipped it beneath his arm. “Come on, Ender. Let’s get you home...”

“Who is this man?” Marcia demanded. “Is he the one who made you this way? Did he hurt you?”

“He’s the one who saved me when you threw me away like garbage,” Ender said through a wracking sob as he stood and leaned into my side for support. “He’s the one who showed me I was still worth something after—”

“I’m sorry, Aaron,” Ender said through his tears, turning to his little brother. He seemed to recognize it might be the last time he’d get the chance to speak to him. “I hope I get to see you soon, but I just can’t do what they want me to do. It would kill me to have to...”

“What’s wrong with Ender?” Aaron asked, then flinched and corrected himself. With each passing word he seemed to careen toward a panic attack. “Billy, I mean... Why do you want them to torture him? Why would you do something that could kill him? Why did you—?”

“Calm down, Aaron,” Ender began softly through his tears. “Everything will be—”

“You can call your brother Ender all you want, Aaron,” William said, his voice booming, causing heads at at least four tables to turn their way. “This ... has gone on long enough!”

“Dad, I don’t mean to—” Ender began to apologize, but I gripped his arm, trying to signal him to wait.

“Ender,” William said. “I’m ... I don’t *understand* the way you are, but you’re my son. And you’re a good boy. And, well, I don’t *understand* the way God is either, but I do guess I understand you better than Him...”

“What?” Ender asked, a soft chuckle through his tears.

“I know enough to know that you’re what God wanted, the way God wanted, ‘cause you’re good... And if that ain’t the way it is, He’s got a problem with me, too!”

“You’re gay?” the man’s wife asked, horror and hatred in her voice.

“No, you—” With a lot of care the man held his tongue, sighed, and thought for a moment, before adding. “I’m not gay. I’m a father who loves his son more than enough to ignore what your whore-chasing, three-divorce-getting ‘pastor’ thinks a book he ain’t even really read says!”

I snorted and put my hand over my mouth. With a hint of a smile, the man looked at me and asked, “You been takin’ care of my boy?”

“I’ve been trying,” I said. “I haven’t been doing a very good job the last couple of days but—”

I felt thin but strong arms wrap around me like they were trying to crush me. “Don’t say that! Even after what I did, you still let me stay and took care of me and made sure I had rides and—”

“Sounds like you’re doing a hell of a lot better than me,” William said. “Why don’t you go on home with your ... friend, here? Your momma and I need to talk and work some things out.” With a sharp glance at Marcia, he added, “In the way the Bible says, *with fear and trembling...*”

Ender nodded.

“Are you sure,” I began to address William. “Sorry it’s not my place to—”

“Damn right it’s not—!” Marcia sniped.

“What’re you thinking?” William asked me as if his wife hadn’t even spoken.

“Your son, he’s very upset and—” I began.

“That’s why I’m telling him to go home with you,” the man said, looking confused.

“Aaron, sir,” I said more softly. “He’s anxious, upset... Are you sure hashing this out between you with him around is a good idea?”

The man looked from me, to a cowering Aaron, to Ender, then glared at his wife. Then his eyes met mine again, and I nodded, thinking we understood each other.

“Aaron, I know you like to be home at night for bed,” his father said gently. “But how would you feel about having a sleepover?”

“With who?” Aaron asked, as suspicious look in his eye.

“With your big brother, of course!” the man said, patting his youngest on the shoulder.

“I will not have—” Marcia interjected.

“He’ll be perfectly safe with Ender—” William insisted.

“Billy!” the woman said shrilly. “His name is Billy, damn it! And ... and you don’t even know this queer—”

“He’ll be perfectly safe with Ender!” his father said. “Always has been, always will be. I don’t *need* to know this man, because I know my son...”

“I won’t have—” Marcia began.

“You will!” her husband said sharply, truly losing his temper for the first time. “Or we won’t have anything to discuss!”

“Are you really okay with this? I couldn’t ask you to—” Ender began to whisper to me, then fell silent and smiled, as if knowing what I was about to say.

“You didn’t ask,” I said, smiling back at him. “It was my idea.”

CHAPTER 27

ENDER

“Can we play Trivial Pursuit again?” Aaron begged, a note of whining in his voice.

“We don’t have time, buddy!” I said to my little brother.

“I was asking *Thomas!*” he said, whining.

I looked over at my boyfriend with a bemused look and saw the conflicted look on the man’s face.

What a fucking pushover! I smiled with a burst of affection, snorting as I watched Thomas turn it over in his head. As if he was seriously calculating whether we had time for another game.

“Your brother is right, Aaron,” Thomas said with a glance my way. “If we’re going to make it to my office party, we need to get ready and head out.”

“Do you *have* to go?” Aaron asked Thomas, not even pretending to ask me.

Thomas looked my way, but I shook my head. “Oh, no! This one’s all you!”

“Yeah, we have to go,” Thomas said with a smile at my brother that made my heart skip a beat. “But how about we get up and have an early breakfast in the morning, then we can play until your dad gets here to pick you up?”

“Really?” Aaron asked, excited.

“You two can!” I said, teasing. “I’m sleeping in...”

“I’ll join you too,” BJ said as she came down dressed for the party.

“Traitor!” I said with a big smile.

I had expected my parents—well, my dad anyway—to come pick up Aaron on Friday. But whatever was going on wasn’t as quickly handled as I had expected. Dad had called to talk to Aaron Friday morning. Then he and I had talked, and finally I asked Thomas to join the conversation. Without a thought he had told my dad Aaron could stay with him—with us—as long as he needed.

It didn’t surprise me, certainly not after how he showed up for me Thursday at the restaurant. Not after the way he had brought my brother home and helped me settle him in, and then had taken me to his bed to hold me until I had to excuse myself. I had told him my brother shouldn’t wake up alone in a strange house, and he had understood completely.

But before he let me go, he said, “I’m sorry it took me so long to—“

“Thomas, don’t say something stupid now,” I said, laughing. “You had every right to sit with it for a lot longer than you did. As soon as you heard I was in trouble, you skipped about ten steps of processing...”

“Somehow I’m always skipping steps whenever you’re around,” he had teased, running his hand down his stomach and beneath the waistband of his sweats, making it ever so hard to walk away.

“You mean somehow you’re always managing to get over yourself and make the right decision under my inspiration?” I asked.

“Sounds about right,” he said, then reached out and drew me toward him.

Thomas worked from home Friday, but more importantly, BJ was home. By the time I had to go in for my shift, Aaron had been entranced by her, so he barely even whined when I told him he was staying home without me. And when Molly

had dropped me off in the evening, I found my brother in the living room watching a movie with Thomas.

BJ provided a welcome distraction now, as well, occupying Aaron while Thomas and I got ready.

“Do you think he’ll be okay with all of us out tonight?” Thomas asked, sounding worried.

“It’s not like he’ll be on his own!” I said with a laugh.

“But I’m responsible if anything were to—”

“We’re responsible,” I said. “And we’ll be fine... It’s not like he needs supervision. He just needs someone here to help him out, and he’ll have that...”

“I’m just—”

“Stop trying to get out of this party, daddy!” I said, straightening his tie playfully. “He’ll be very good for Molly... Did you not notice how he looked at her last night?”

“I noticed,” Thomas said, chuckling. “I don’t know why you are so keen on this party... It’s terrible.”

“BJ and I get to drink and eat expensive hors d’oeuvres and watch you across the room and make fun of how miserable you are!” I teased. “What’s not to love? I’ll have flashbacks to the grumpy daddy I knew and loved...”

“Think you can handle this new and improved, happy daddy with hearts in his eyes?” he asked.

I laughed. “That’s a stretch... Except when we’re in bed.”

“Not just in bed,” he protested.

“Not just in bed,” I agreed. “But your grumpiness still shines through occasionally too... Job security. I’ve got to stick around and keep teaching you that fun and relaxation trick...”

“I’m counting on it,” he said, kissing me. “But tonight might have some fun in store after all... Even for me!”

“Well, that grin is weirdly scary,” I said, laughing.

“I’m just saying,” he said shrugging. “I’m going to try to be less predictable. It might be fun!”

“So, who are those guys?” I asked BJ as I watched Thomas talking to a group of men younger than him.

“Probably new associates with the firm,” she said, shrugging. “See how they pick his brain and act like he has something important to say?”

I nodded.

“Not like those guys,” she said, nodding toward a group of people around Thomas’ age. “I grew up watching those guys start off as his friends, use what he taught them to advance past him, then act like he was beneath them... Fucking assholes...”

“Sounds like it,” I said with a grunt.

“Well if it isn’t little BJ!” an older man said, approaching us from behind.

BJ turned slowly, smiling. “You didn’t happen to overhear that, did you, Mr. Montgomery?”

“The part about our junior partners being assholes who disrespect your father?” the man asked. “I can’t recall...”

BJ laughed and accepted a polite hug from the man. “Ender, this is Mr. Montgomery—one of the senior partners... Mr. Montgomery, Ender is my best friend from college...”

“Jack,” the man said, extending a hand my way. As I shook it, he said, “Ender’s a peculiar name...”

I snorted. “It’s a nickname... I prefer to go by that now...”

“From the sci-fi novels or the computer game?” Jack asked. My eyes must have widened in shock, as he chuckled and said, “I’ve got children and grandchildren!”

“Uhm, well ... I think everyone assumes it’s from the books,” I said, blushing. “But I was obsessed with Minecraft as a kid. It helped me escape...”

Jack considered me carefully, then nodded. “So how did you get roped into this snooze fest? I know why BJ has to suffer but you?”

“He’s my—” BJ began.

“That’s what friends are for,” I said, shooting a glance towards Thomas. I wasn’t sure what BJ had been about to say or how Thomas would want me introduced.

“Oh, BJ’s a big girl,” Jack said. “She’s known most of us her whole life... She knows the behind-the-scenes drama, where all the bodies are buried. She doesn’t need the moral support!”

“No, I don’t,” BJ said with an amused tone. Then I followed Jack’s gaze back in Thomas’ direction to find him at my shoulder.

Putting a hand on my back, Thomas said, sounding very pleased with himself, “It’s not BJ who needs the moral support, Jack. It’s me. I asked Ender to join me tonight. BJ’s actually here to support him, not the other way around...”

Jack’s eyes flitted from Thomas’ face to mine, then to BJ. “Well, that sounds complicated!”

“Not really,” Thomas said. “Ender is my boyfriend—”

“I know, it sounds kinda strange,” BJ said. “But I kinda set them up without them knowing it... So I guess it’s my fault?”

“Hmm,” Jack said.

“What, Jack?” Thomas asked.

“You know me, Thomas,” Jack said. “I don’t care who you’re dating... Hell, I’m just glad to see you looking happy —”

“But?” Thomas asked.

I considered Thomas’ face closely, looking for anger or fear or worry. All I saw was a knowing smirk.

“Well, not everyone is as open-minded,” Jack said. “I was going to tell you tonight that I’d talked to the senior partners

and they've agreed to make you a junior partner. But I'm not sure how they'll feel..."

"Well, what do you recommend?" Thomas asked, that calm, bemused expression remaining.

"Don't suppose you'd like to keep this quiet for a while?" Jack asked.

When Thomas snorted, I raised my hand and shook my head. "We can do that... We can..."

BJ popped off at that point. "No you can't. You deserve better. My dad deserves better. All this time he's been holding himself back. This company's been holding him back. And now they're asking him to—"

"No one's asking him to anything," Jack said. "Your father asked a question, and I gave him an honest answer... No one's going to push him out or treat him badly, but—"

"Well, it's all irrelevant," Thomas said. "I've been telling everyone about my new boyfriend all night and—"

"You what?!" I asked, surprised but overjoyed too.

Thomas smiled and turned me to face him, looked down into my eyes, and said, "I can't *imagine* denying you... I knew it would cause problems, but I didn't care because—"

"But you don't need to do that for me! I—"

"I'm not doing it for you," he said. "Though I love how happy it obviously made you! I'm doing it for me, because what the hell is the point of being happy if you have to hide it under a rock?"

"But you were finally about to get what you deserve!" I argued.

"When it comes to work, I actually *am* about to get what I deserve," Thomas said.

"What does that mean?" BJ asked.

Thomas said, "It mean's I'm resigning... I had planned to tell you after Christmas, Jack, but now's as good a time as any."

“It doesn’t have to come down to *that*,” Jack insisted.

“Of course it does!” Thomas said. “I don’t love what I’m doing for a living, and I’m doing it for people who don’t value me... Sure I have a few friends like you, but for the most part I’m an expensive cog in your machine. And I’m not going to keep denying myself just because I can’t imagine taking the risk of doing anything else...”

“I can’t talk you out of this?” Jack asked. “If the partners know you’re serious, I can probably convince—”

“Life’s too short to have to twist your arms to do what’s right just because I’m finally being myself,” Thomas said. “So I’m going to figure out what I really want to do when I grow up, so I can *finally* spend my time doing something valuable to me, not just to your ... partners...”

Jack nodded and held out a hand. “I understand, Thomas... Wish it didn’t have to be that way, but—”

Thomas shook it Jack’s hand. “Long past time.” Then he turned back to me. “As for my personal life, it’s time to work on being worthy of deserving what’s come into my life...”

Still with that smirk! but I was laughing now. And before I realized what I was doing, I had my arms wrapped around him, holding him tight and drawing him in for some highly work-inappropriate kisses. I swore I heard the volume of the noise in the room decrease.

“Seems a little fast doesn’t it?” I whispered.

“I think we can count skipped steps in place of time served. Plus, we can add a few weeks of LonelyCollegeBoy to our time,” he teased. “Let’s get out of here...”

“Good idea,” BJ said. “You guys are embarrassing me—”

“Can’t have that, can we?” Thomas replied, smiling at me. “Jack, thanks for everything... Feel free to tell anyone you like. My letter will be in the senior partners’ inboxes in the morning.”

“Don’t suppose you’d like to give a month’s notice?” Jack asked.

“If you’d like, I will,” he said. “Let me know what you decide...”

“I wish you would, but it’s not my call,” he said. “I’ll be in touch...”

And with that, Thomas took my hand and we all left to head home.

“Aaron’s gonna want to play another game when we get home early,” I said, smiling at Thomas.

“Then we’ll play,” he said.

“Later?” I asked.

“I was thinking about a *shower*, but whatever you say is what I’ll do,” he said, giving me a knowing look that made me hard.

“That’s code for something, isn’t it?” BJ asked, sounding annoyed.

“Don’t ask questions you don’t want to know the answers to,” I said.

CHAPTER 28

THREE WEEKS LATER

Thomas

“Do you have to work tomorrow?” I asked Ender as I lay propped up on my elbow. He was laying face down next to me, that smooth bubble butt on full display. He liked to show it off to me and joke that it was the ass that had converted me from bottom to vers bottom.

“I took the day off,” he said with a sleepy smile at me. The last couple of days, whenever Ender wasn’t at work, we’d been out together making the most of our shared free time—that or wearing each other out in the bedroom, as we just had done.

“Any particular reason?” I asked with a smile.

“Class starts soon, and I’ll be a lot busier,” he said.

“Well, I’ll be a man of leisure for a while yet, so—“

“Still,” he said, rolling onto his side and snaking an arm around me. “I’ve gotten used to having you pretty much whenever I want. Which, all in all, is a lot more than I’m used to...”

“What can I say?” I teased. “I’m an addictive substance...”

“Yeah, that’s it,” he said with a cocky smile. Then he rolled onto his back and said, “If you’re going to get cute with me, you’re going to get punished...”

“Oh, I’m so afraid, big boy,” I prodded.

“You really can be an ass,” he said. “Roll over... On your stomach.”

I did as I was told, then felt him straddle my thighs. “There is no way you’re horny again!”

“Sometimes you gotta do what you gotta do,” he said. “And someone needs a lesson in respecting his top!”

Ender and I had had some frank discussions about BDSM, what we were comfortable with, and what our limits were currently. We both had needs, and articulating those needs to each other had helped us start to come to terms with parts of ourselves we had buried.

Ender leaned forward and opened the drawer of the nightstand, pulling out a light paddle.

“Oh, come on,” I complained. “I’m too tired to get into something like this...”

“Are you saying no, daddy?” Ender asked, his tone serious.

I shook my head. “No...”

“No?” he demanded.

“No, sir,” I said. And the paddle came down. It wasn’t the punishing wallop we had practiced working our way up to. But it delivered a definite sting. “Ouch! What was that for? I said sir!”

“Your tone,” he said, barely repressing a smile, and it made my heart leap. Then another strike of the paddle made my cock leap, too. Three weeks of practice and that *still* surprised me. As did my ability to give this gorgeous young twink the reins with almost no resistance—it was a first, and maybe an only.

I felt his firm grip on the back of my neck as he carefully delivered one last blow, then lowered himself onto my back. I felt his breath against my cheek just before he sucked on my ear lobe.

Three weeks. It had been three weeks now since I had quit my job. The partners, God bless them, had decided they did not want me working with clients on my way out, so they paid

me but did not have me come to the office. This meant Ender and I had been able to spend as much time together as we liked. A lot of it was spent on little dates or watching movies together, talking over dinner, and making up for all the skipped steps that we'd missed on our way here. And a lot of the rest of our time had been spent exploring in the bedroom.

But he surprised me when he whispered, "I want to explore something new, daddy."

I moaned. "I can't imagine what new we still have to—"

"Like a zillion kinks," he said. "But you really can't think of *anything*?"

I shook my head.

"Fuck, you really love to bottom," he said with a chuckle.

"You know I do, but what—" I began. "Oh... Right..."

"Is that a no?" he asked, biting my earlobe.

"No!" I said. "I'm just surprised I didn't think of it... I forget you're not a *total top* sometimes."

"That's a real change for me," he said with a laugh. "Out there, I'm assumed to be a total bottom!"

"Well, you're a true master!" I said. "But I'd love to top for you occasionally. Your ass was actually one of the first things about you I couldn't stop thinking about. And that's saying something coming from me!"

He laughed. "So it won't be a chore when I tell you you're going to be eating my ass 'til your jaw is sore, or I'll wear you out with that paddle?"

"No sir!" I said with a chuckle. "Though when I'm holding you down on this bed, you might regret—"

"Oh, it's cute you think you topping means the tables get turned," he said, giving me a light smack to my cheek.

"Oh?" he replied.

"Just fucking eat my ass, and you'll see what's coming!"

A few minutes before, I had been too tired to think about sex. Now my cock was painfully hard.

He rolled off my back and got onto his hands and knees in the perfect position, his back arched gracefully, his ass presented in all its glory. I grabbed the globes of his ass and parted them as far as I could, eagerly digging into his hole with my tongue. His moans spurred me on, as did his dirty talk.

“Eat that fucking ass,” he growled insistently.

Fuck, it drives me wild how confident he’s become with me.

“Yes sir,” I said, before swirling my tongue around his hole and spearing it again with my tongue.

Truth be told, I was so mesmerized by his moaning, I actually continued eating his ass long after my jaw was fatigued from the effort. Finally I couldn’t anymore, though.

“On your back!” he ordered, and I rolled over, exhausted but so horny I felt as if I’d die before I could get a condom on, much less work my way inside him.

And then he had straddled me and had my bare cock in his hand, jerking it slowly with a firm grip. I felt him angle the bare head of my cock so it pressed against his spit-slick hole. He sat back and I slid in a few inches, the heat of him soothing some of the pain of my erection but driving me wild too.

I grabbed his hips and groaned, “But don’t you need a—”

“No daddy,” he said. “It’s just you and me, right?”

I nodded.

“My tests are back, and I’m all clear,” he said. “And it’s only been us since you were tested, so...”

I closed my eyes and sighed. With that assurance, I had given myself over completely to the pleasure. He leaned forward and wrapped his fingers around my throat to prop himself up and began to rock slowly. Each time he moved forward, it increased the pressure on my neck, and when he backed up on my cock again, it relieved some of the pressure.

Once he had worked my whole cock into his hole, though, he tightened his hold on my throat and began to ride me hard. Again I surprised myself by throwing my head back and putting my hand on his, not to pull his hand away but to indicate he should keep doing what he was doing without worry.

Then I looked up and our eyes met. He flashed me a smile and a nod, then I removed my hand.

He smacked my cheek again and said, “That’s right, I’m in charge...”

I nodded, pushing forward into his grip just a little to let him know he could go harder.

“You may be inside me, but I’m the one calling the shots!”

I groaned as he started riding me faster, choking me a little harder still. And then, almost as if he could sense that I was nearing my limit, he began stroking himself with his free hand. I was so lost to this world my first sign that he was coming was the viselike grip his ass suddenly had on my cock. He wasn’t riding me as hard but his ass began milking me, and just about the time his orgasm began to subside, I started pumping a hot load deep into his guts.

“Fuck, I can feel it shooting inside me,” he whispered almost in awe. “I can’t wait to fill you up next time...”

“Any time you want, baby,” I said, melting into the bed.

His hole tightened around me again as he slipped off me. When my cock popped out, he collapsed onto bed beside me face down. Lazily, I rubbed his back.

“So I’ve been thinking about that,” he said.

“Oh?” I asked.

“You say any time, but when I move into my own place, it’ll be a little more difficult to—“

We had argued about very little when working through things, but we had argued about whether he should get a place for himself. He was worried it was too soon for us to live together, that it might put a strain on things. I thought my

place was big enough for him to have some privacy when he wanted but would allow us to continue enjoying more time with each other.

“You’re not suggesting an open relationship or something?” I asked. “Not after you introduced the hot fucking twist of bareback into our sex life!”

“No,” he said with a laugh. “I told BJ she’d have a spare room in the place we found. Assuming you don’t mind paying the full rent for her, I decided that you were right. I was being silly.”

“Say that again,” I said with a bright smile.

“I was being silly,” he said hesitantly.

“The part before that,” I said.

“I told BJ she’d have a spare room,” he said, rolling his eyes as he got it.

“I was talking about the ‘I decided you were right’ part!” I said.

“I know, you ass!” he said with a grin.

“What changed your mind?” I asked.

“Besides how much more I enjoy life with immediate access to your ass?” he asked.

“Yeah, besides that,” I said.

“I’m gonna be busy with school, and you’re going to be taking classes,” he said. “I want to be able to spend the time I do have with you when I can. Especially at bedtime... It seems silly to pay rent for an apartment I’ll never be at and buy a bed I’ll never sleep in, doesn’t it?”

“That’s what I’ve been saying,” I said with a smile.

He rolled his eyes at me again playfully.

“I’m really glad,” I said. “If you want we can convert the guest room into a place for you to go work without distractions and—“

“Maybe just put a desk in the corner,” he said. “Converting is unnecessary... Plus, keeping it a bedroom means my brother has a place to sleep he’s familiar with when he comes to visit.”

When he blushed as if worried he’d overstepped, I said, “You know Aaron is welcome here any time!”

“I think he might take you up on that,” he said. “He can sense a pushover from a hundred yards!”

I shrugged. “I am what I am...”

“And I love you for it!” he said. This time he looked paralyzed for a moment before he began to stammer, “Sorry, I didn’t mean to say, uhm...”

“So you don’t love me?” I teased, putting a hand on his shoulder. Before he could speak, I said, “I do love you, though, so that’s pretty damn awkward for me...”

“You ... you, uhm... You do?” he asked.

“I think that’s the only reason that I can let go with you the way I do...”

“But you’ve been doing that since the shower,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said. “You’re right, I wasn’t *quite* there yet, but you caught me by surprise, and I *was* close to being in love even then...”

Before I realized it he was wrapped around me, having pushed me flat onto the bed and collapsed on top of me. “I do love you... Of course I do...”

“How could you not?” I teased with a wink.

EPILOGUE - THREE YEARS LATER

ENDER

“Daddy, we’re going to be late!” I called upstairs from where I stood in the entryway, my robe and regalia draped over my shoulder.

“We are not!” he called back. “You only have to be there an hour early to line up before commencement!”

“Exactly!” I answered.

“We’ve got an hour until then!” he said, appearing on the second floor landing.

I didn’t respond right away, because he took my breath away, just as he had that first night when he’d appeared there and descended to take me to dinner.

Three years together and the man still strikes me dumb. Especially when he gets all dressed up in those perfectly form-fitting suits of his...

“You’re right though, we don’t have time for *that!*” he said, smirking as he walked up to me and straightened my tie with a loving look in his eyes.

“How did you know I was thinking about sex?” I asked.

“It’s a good bet most any time,” he said. “But based on observation I’m beginning to think you might have a suit fetish...”

“Yeah... Looking like that, you make skipping graduation seem almost worth it,” I said, laying my head against his chest.

“Something you’ve done how many times, and will do how many more, is not worth it,” he said.

“I said *almost*,” I said, smiling up at him.

“You only get your first masters degree once,” he said, putting a hand on each of my shoulders. “I’m so fucking proud of you, Ender...”

“Don’t remind me it’s only my first,” I said with a playful groan. I would be attending an evening program starting in the fall in counseling psychology, so that I could add therapist to my bag of tricks.

“You can’t wait,” he said. “You can’t fool me!”

Simson University’s main quad was littered with mortarboards and graduating seniors and graduate students were hugging their friends and looking around for family, now that the ceremony was complete. It was the happiest kind of pandemonium.

I got a text from Thomas.

Thomas: Meet us by the oak at the back left of the quad.

Me: The one by the library?

Thomas: Yes!

I slipped through the crowds as best I could, but it took me a few minutes. But when I got close enough to see through the clumps of people, my heart swelled at a sight that would never stop making me smile like an idiot: Thomas stood with his arm draped casually over Aaron’s shoulder, while my dad stood on Aaron’s other side.

“Look who I found!” Thomas called.

Aaron saw me and ran over throwing his arms around my neck. He was now *much* taller than me, I observed not for the first time. He’d been so much more a part of my life since I moved in with Thomas. My dad trusted us with Aaron’s care, and it gave him a chance to date and enjoy life as he and my mother split up. Dad even joined us for dinner some weeks. For the first time, it felt as though I truly had a family. And all

it took was finding a man to love and having my dad really see what my mother had done to our family, finally.

“Congratulations, son,” dad said with a smile as he joined Aaron and me in a group hug. “Get over here, Thomas!”

Thomas smiled and walked over, standing behind me and dad and hugging all three of us. “Thought you’d never ask, daddy,” Thomas said with a cheeky grin.

Ever since I had first slipped up and called Thomas ‘daddy’ in front of my father, seeing how uncomfortable it had made my father but how chill he had tried to be about it, this had been a private joke between him and me. But it was the first time he’d ever teased my father about it directly.

My father’s blush was bright, but he put his hand in front of his mouth to stifle a laugh. That uncomfortable day was already two years in the past, and dad had done a lot of growing since mom had gone home to Indiana.

“Thomas, you’re like the older brother I never wanted,” dad said with a grin.

Thomas squeezed dad’s shoulder and said, “Don’t be like that, William... It’s unbecoming a man your age! I hope when I get there I’m a bit more graceful about things...”

Dad laughed and was about to make a retort of his own, when I rolled my eyes and said, “Enough, children!”

With a glint of humor in his eyes, Thomas, acting very much like the scolded child, said, “Yes sir...”

As we walked to the car, dad said, “Marjorie texted me to ask me to congratulate you... She couldn’t find anyone to take her shift at the hospital.”

“Tell her thanks!” I said with a smile. Dad had been dating Marjorie, a nurse, for a year, and both Aaron and I loved her. She was cool, calm, and collected, never mind smart and liberal-minded. She had two older children, and though Aaron and I hadn’t spent much time around them, we all seemed to meld well. I fully expected dad to ask Marjorie to marry him sooner rather than later.

We had reservations for lunch at a little place outside of town. Everywhere closer in would be packed with families like ours celebrating the day.

As we sat waiting for our food, dad asked, “So when do you start that new job with social services?”

“July 1,” I said with a smile. “Thomas and I are going on a month-long trip to Europe to relax first!”

“Aaron mentioned,” dad said. “Sounds like quite a trip! But I guess he’s a little sulky y’all will be gone so long.”

We all laughed, except for Aaron, who looked like he wasn’t listening.. Dad and Thomas talked about the trip for a bit, while I watched Aaron, who had been quiet since giving me a hug. He had a thoughtful look on his face.

“What’s wrong, little bro?” I asked.

“Now that you’re graduating, does that mean I won’t get to spend as much time with you?” he asked.

“Of course not!” I said. “Why would you think that?”

“You’ll be back in school, and working, and—”

“You might have to watch me study more when you come over,” I teased. “But Thomas will be around to keep you company...”

“I’ll *let* you beat me at Trivial Pursuit when you get bored,” Thomas agreed.

“You don’t let me win,” Aaron said with a deep sigh and eye roll. It was an old joke between them. “I let you last long enough to feel okay about losing...”

Thomas laughed.

Aaron still looked conflicted, and I realized something else had been on his mind.

“Thomas?” he asked.

“Yeah, buddy?” Thomas replied.

“Are you and dad dating?” Aaron asked.

Dad, who was drinking some water, began to cough uncontrollably, while a very confused Thomas asked, “Why would you ask that, Aaron?”

I snorted because I had already figured this out.

A very earnest-looking Aaron said to Thomas, “You called dad ‘daddy’... That’s what Ender calls you...”

“It was a joke because I know hearing Ender call me that makes William squirm,” Thomas said with a wink at my dad. “And it might not be a joke for long...”

I looked at him with confusion as my dad began to smile.

“What?” Aaron and I asked with confusion.

Dad just shook his head.

“Well, I wasn’t sure whether I was going to do this today or in London,” Thomas said, turning to face me as he reached into his pocket. “Ender, I’m told by everyone who knows me that I didn’t really smile for ten years, and for the last three I haven’t stopped smiling...”

When he opened the box, I saw a delicate but still masculine platinum ring with a large sapphire in the middle surrounded by accent diamonds. “Marry me?”

I was paralyzed, eyes beginning to tear up. Apparently I was silent for too long, because with a cheeky grin Thomas added, “Please sir?”

“Shut up!” I said, throwing my arms around his neck and beginning to ugly cry. “Of course I will you big dummy— I mean daddy!”

“So I guess I *am* going to be Thomas’ father-in-law,” dad said to Aaron.

Aaron thought about it for a long time, then got a mischievous smile on his face. “No. Well, yes, but no...”

“What do you mean?” I asked, smiling at my brother, now confused again.

Aaron said, “Actually... Dad is going to be your grandpa-in-law!”

“What?” dad and I asked.

“Your son-in-law is Ender’s daddy!” Aaron said. “So you’re Ender’s dad but also his granddaddy!”

“Oh my God!” dad groaned. “You guys are killing me...”

“I have to agree with you on this one, William,” Thomas said.

“I’m *never* letting this go,” I said with a big smile as I shared the best day of my life with all of the men I loved.

STAY IN TOUCH

THANK YOU FOR reading LonelyCollegeBoy. If you enjoyed it and want to stay up-to-date on new releases from J. Allen Grady, get access to preview chapters of upcoming books, and read some *even steamier* scenes, join his mailing list at bit.ly/jallengrady or scan the QR code below.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J. ALLEN GRADY is a former magazine editor and journalist who has turned to fiction. While he loves writing literary fiction and horror, he has always loved reading steamy LGBTQ+ and straight romance. This is his debut steamy romance novel.

He lives in Nashville with his husband, son, and three dogs.

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COMING SOON

LOOK FOR *MEGAEVOLVEDJOCK*, Book 2 in the Boys of Simson U. series, in mid-April. In Book 1, while Ender was figuring things out, he did some hot exploring with privately bisexual basketball star Todd Malone. When Ender met Todd, a hot jock bottom, Todd was on CockyUnicorns as misnomer TopJock69. While Ender ultimately ended up with his dream daddy, he left TopJock wanting more.

Soon Todd finds himself dating a girl and life proceeded as normal. But when things fall apart with her, Todd finds himself on the receiving end of a nasty revenge plot. As Todd works to put things back together, he returns to CockyUnicorns with a new screen name and a new goal. As MegaEvolvedJock, Todd is determined to find the top twink who can fill the hole ... in his heart.

Adrian Phelps is a brainy undergraduate who needs his campus job to pay his way through school and secure a self-sufficient future. The problem? He's assigned as a special tutor for the athletic program, which might seem like a dream job for a gay guy who has a thing for bigger, beefier boys. And it would be except Adrian does *not* like jocks. He may drool over them, but he's got a history he can't see past.

Can a MegaEvolvedJock help him heal some of those old wounds? And can the brainy tutor teach this tall stud a lesson in being himself unapologetically?

COMING APRIL 2023!

In the meantime, head over to Amazon and check out DarkLights Publishing's other author, Jay Gordon. Jay writes erotic romantic shorts and modern urban fantasy with large LGBTQ+ casts.

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