



ON A

DIFFERENT

MISSION

CHRISTIE GORDON

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ALSO BY CHRISTIE GORDON

The First Full Moon - Paranormal, Historical

The Obsession - Contemporary College

Secrets - Contemporary New Adult

Say the Words - Contemporary New Adult

In Life and Blood Series – Vampire

Hanging in the Balance

Holding on to the Past

The Bonds of Family

Not Alone - Contemporary Rock Star

The Haunting Crush - Paranormal, New Adult

Find Me in July - Vintage College

Breaking His Serve – College Sports

A Summer Without Rain – Historical, New Adult

Mesa Boys Series – Contemporary New Adult

Catching His Fall

Catching His Heart

Catching His Eye

Catching His Name

Rock U Series – Contemporary New Adult/College

Get Closer to Me

Never Let It End

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Rock U Book 1: On a Different Mission

Cover art by Christie Gordon

Editing and Proofing by Catherine Chisnall

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DEDICATION

To all the readers who've enjoyed the Mesa Boys series and are willing to take a chance on something new. Thank you for embarking on this journey with me!

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Trigger Warning: This book contains a prejudiced parent and a character who is struggling to come to terms with the teachings of the Mormon religion with regard to sexual and gender identity.

CHAPTER ONE

Devin



I strolled along the brick sidewalk in downtown Tempe, taking in the bright lights of the shops lining each side of the street and the inky sky above me. “I’m so glad they hired me at that bakery. Those guys, the owners are really cool.” I hung my head, then shifted my gaze to Olivia, her long brown hair falling over her leather jacket, a blue mini skirt hugging her narrow hips.

“I told you, it’s about time you figured yourself out. What better place than a queer bakery?” She touched my arm, a grin growing across her lips. “You will sing tonight, right?” She stopped at a set of glass doors inside a brick building, her brown eyes taking me in from head to toe. “You look good tonight. I love those jeans with all the zippers you found at the secondhand store, and pairing them with the long white shirt all buttoned to the top? You might have found your style.” She chuckled. “I mean, it’s about time, senior year and all.”

Heat flushed my face and I glanced at my reflection in the door, my, chin-length, brown bangs falling over one of my light-blue eyes and to the side. She’d talked me into growing out my bangs. I liked it. “Yeah, I think I’ll sing.” I pressed my lips together. How different could it be from soloing in the church choir back home?

“Well, if it’s as good as I’ve heard you sing in the car to the radio, you’re going to have the attention of every guy and girl in the bar. Let’s see who you choose.” With a giggle, she sprang the door open and stepped inside.

I glanced at the sign in red hovering over the door. *Monkey Pants Bar and Grill*, what a weird name for a bar. *Whatever, here goes nothing*. With a quick inhale, I stepped inside and

perused the place. A long wooden bar centered the room in a U-shape with red vinyl chairs surrounding it and red-painted walls. Almost all the chairs were full with what looked like students. No wonder, we were practically still on campus. “Hey, let’s find some seats at the bar if there are any.” I pointed toward it.

“Sure.” Olivia made her way through young adults, some preppy and some more creatively dressed, then found two seats at the bar. She slid into one, then patted the seat of the other. “Come on.”

I climbed into the seat, then rested my elbows on the bar and my chin in my hand, my gaze roaming the room. “How many times have you been here?”

“Too many to count.” She waved at the bartender. “You want a beer, right?”

“Yeah.” My gaze snagged a younger looking man. “Some of these kids must have fake IDs. There is no way that guy over there is twenty-one.” I ticked my head across the bar.

She ordered our beer. “Well, why not? I had one, remember?” She swiveled her stool to face me. “You were too straightlaced to even think about it.”

“And Mormon.” I chuckled. “Don’t forget that. I’d never even had a beer before I came down here.” I was so done with that church. There was no way for me to fit in there anymore. I knew that for certain now. My chest tightened.

Furrowing her brows, Olivia said, “Devin. How are you going to deal with going back to Page and facing your family over spring break? I mean, the new job got you out of it over the holidays, but...”

“I’m not.” I watched a male bartender dressed in black set our beers down. I wrapped my fingers around the cool glass, focusing on it. “I have a month to figure it out. Maybe I can blame it on our senior project this time.”

A young woman stood up from the crowd and stepped up to a microphone on a stand.

“Let’s welcome Trisha to the mic,” said a young man seated behind a karaoke desk, and a ballad started up.

“Yeah, guess so.” Olivia worried her lower lip. “But I don’t think you can avoid them forever.” She wrapped an arm around my shoulders and side-hugged me, dipping her head to my shoulder for a second. “If you want, I’ll go with you. You know I’ve got your back.”

I leaned into her touch. “Thanks.” I patted her hand on my shoulder. “Ever since freshman year when you found me trying on that lipstick in my dorm room.” I chuckled. I’d almost jumped out of my skin, but her reaction to it had put me immediately at ease. She’d told me all about Jonathan from the show *Queer Eye* and how I might be like him. It had opened my eyes to so much. The start of a beautiful friendship.

She scoffed, straightening in her chair. “I can’t believe you’re still in the dorm.” Rolling her eyes, she sipped her beer.

“It’s just easier with my scholarship. It’s paid for.” I tossed her a look. “If I hadn’t worked my ass off and gotten that damned scholarship, I would have been forced by my mother to volunteer for a mission and be at Brigham Young right now and still be hiding myself.” A shiver worked up my spine. How different my life would be.

She fingered her beer glass. “How did you even know you needed to get out of that life and work toward coming to Arizona State?” She peered at me.

I pursed my lips. “I kissed a guy in high school.”

“You what?” She twisted on her stool, staring at me, mouth open. “How the hell have you never told me that?”

With a shrug of a shoulder, I said, “It was uh, it was sort of humiliating, really.” A familiar ache wrapped around my heart. “Guess I didn’t want anyone to know.” Though it had changed the trajectory of my life, for sure.

“Even me? Your best, most open-minded friend ever?” She tsked. “Tell me what happened.” She drank some beer.

With a long exhale, I glanced at her, then took a sip of my beer, letting the ache lessen in my chest. “There was this guy

friend of mine that I started crushing on in like tenth grade and I tried kissing him at a sleepover party, but he got pissed off and clocked me one. Got a black eye for my trouble.” I sighed. A black eye and a broken heart. I’d never tried anything with a guy since. And I was still a damn virgin. So not cool.

“So, have you even kissed before?” She lifted her chin, a grin working over her mouth. “’Cause I know you don’t hardly date.”

“Of course I have.” I shifted in my chair. “I’ve kissed girls. I do like both you know, but I just...” What was I anyways? How was I still trying to figure this thing out at twenty-two? “I just don’t have the same emotional feelings with girls that I do with guys, I guess.”

“You are so complicated.” She huffed out a laugh, then pointed at the karaoke table. “Go put your name in.”

“Yep.” I slid off my chair, my sights on the karaoke table in the side of the room, under a string of colorful lights.

She snagged my arm. “Wait, what are you going to sing?”

“I think I’ll do something by *My Chemical Romance*.” I flashed my eyes at her. When I’d heard them for the first time in the dorm, I knew they understood how I felt. “I’m going to do that song, *I’m Not Okay*.”

With a snicker, she said, “That is so you.”

A half-hour later, the karaoke announcer said, “And now we have uh, Devin. Come on up to the mic.”

“Oh my God, this is it.” Olivia tagged my shoulder. “Go get ‘em.”

My pulse quickened as I climbed off my barstool, then swiped my bangs to the side of my face. “Yeah, I’ll do my best.” Why had I let her talk me into this? Because it was time for me to be me. I was done hiding. I straightened my shoulders, then strode through the people to the mic and tipped my head at the karaoke man.

“Ready?” The karaoke man lifted his brows.

I nodded, then snatched the mic off the stand and held it to my mouth, my gaze cutting to a television screen hanging on the wall across from me, people milling underneath it, chatting and sending absent glances my way. My heart thrummed in my chest. Was I really doing this?

The harsh, rhythmic guitars started up for the song.

The screen showed little dots, followed by the first verse of lyrics.

Yep, doing this. I inhaled deeply, my hands trembling. As my voice hit the notes perfectly, the angst of the song building inside me, the memories of my high school days flooded into me, giving me courage. As I sang, I focused on the mic, bending over it, shaking my body to the beat of the music. My voice became stronger, drowning out the bar.

People turned my way, staring. Some girls flashed coy smiles at me, and others started dancing, jumping up and down.

I filled my lungs with air, then continued on, pumping out the song, the music flowing electric in my veins. As the song ended, I stood with the mic, panting, my head hanging forward, my face veiled under my long bangs.

A moment of silence enveloped the bar, then shouts and whoops filled the space.

Holy shit, holy shit, holy shit. I did it. I lifted my head, gazing out across the bar and the now clapping people.

“Wow, that was Devin everyone. Devin.” The karaoke man held out a hand to me, then pointed at me. “You be sure to sing a few more songs, okay?”

“Uh, maybe.” I slipped the microphone into the stand and stepped away from it, toward Olivia.

A young man strolled toward me, his dyed black hair parted at the side and reaching to his chin, framing his face. The back of his hair was gelled up and a hoop earring pierced his brow, glinting off the flashing lights of the bar. “Hey.” He lifted a hand. His tight black t-shirt showed off a slender, but muscled chest and tattoos scattered across his arms.

“Uh, hey.” I glanced at him, then stuffed my hands into the front pockets of my jeans. This guy looked way too cool to be wanting anything from me.

“Devin, was it?” He held out his hand, his deep-blue gaze raking over me. “I’m Axel.”

Shaking his hand, I said, “Like the singer for *Guns and Roses*?” The dude even had a cool name. Damn.

With a quick chuckle, Axel nodded his head. “Yeah, sort of like that. But I’m not a singer, I play guitar in this cover band. We play around town here.” He placed his hands on his hips. “Our bass player has been singing, but he’s not really all that great and it limits what we can play.” He glanced at a woman now singing at the microphone. “I want to play stuff like what you just sang and maybe some Soundgarden, you know? But we need a guy with some good pipes for that.”

“O-kay.” I arched a brow. Where was this guy going with this?

“You, my man, have the pipes.” He poked me in the chest. “You must have sung in a band before, right?”

I widened my eyes. “What? No, just a, a church choir. That’s all.” Holy hell, was this guy asking me to sing in his band? What would that be like? Did I even have time for that with my new job *and* school?

Olivia sauntered to us and held out a new beer to me, holding her own close to her chest. “Here.” Her gaze dragged to Axel. “Who’s this?” She gave him the once over.

“Uh, this is Axel. He’s in a band.” I brushed my hand down the back of my hair, then sipped the beer.

“Oh, I’m Olivia. Nice to meet you.” She held out her hand.

He gave her hand a quick shake. “Nice to meet you. Are you his girlfriend or something?” He winced, then twisted his lips.

She dipped at the knees, then straightened, cocking her head with a smile. “Oh no, he’s not...he doesn’t like uh...” She peeked at me.

“I’m not straight.” I puffed my chest out. There, that would probably put an end to this conversation. Certainly, the guy was not looking for a queer lead singer.

“Oh, really.” A sly smile spread over his ample lips, and he ran his gaze over me once again. “Good. You’re perfect. All of us in the band are gay or bi or whatever.” He fished his cell phone out of the front pocket of his black, ripped jeans. “Give me your number.”

“I...what?” I raised my brows. Was he hitting on me maybe? “What do you want my number for?”

He leaned in close. “So I can schedule an audition with the band. What did you think I wanted it for?”

“Oh.” Heat flooded my cheeks. *You idiot, he isn’t into you.* “N-nothing. B-but I don’t know if I’d have time for—”

“Devin, you have to do this. You need to sing.” Olivia tugged my arm, turning me toward her. “Did you see the reaction this place had to you singing that song? Oh my God, it was great.” She beamed at me.

“But what about school and the bakery job?” I chewed my lower lip. What was I getting myself into here? Singing for people up on a stage was not the same as karaoke, was it? Oh, but it had felt so good.

Waving a hand, he said, “Don’t worry, dude. We’re all in school and have jobs, too.” He offered a quick laugh. “Well, except for Gabe, our drummer, but he does marching band in the fall, so it’s sort of like a job. Plus, he’s studying pre-law and it’s pretty hard.”

I lowered my brows. “I-I don’t know.” Could I really pull this off?

He let out a puff of breath through his nose. “Dude, just come audition first and if everyone agrees you’re a good fit, then we can talk logistics. Okay?” He held his phone up to his face. “Give me your number.”

With a glance at Olivia’s still beaming face, I gave him my number. What could it really hurt? It probably wouldn’t go anywhere.

“Are you here with anyone else from the band?” Olivia’s gaze searched the bar.

“Naw, we split up sometimes to check out different places with karaoke.” Axel narrowed his eyes at me. “We’ve been looking for a singer like you for a few months now. I’m getting really tired of karaoke.” He snickered, then tapped me on the chest. “Anyways, I’ll be in touch.” He turned on his heels and walked off.

Scratching the back of my head, I focused on Olivia. “I can’t believe that just happened.” And I would be in a band with a bunch of men like me?

“Well, I can believe it. It’s about time you got out of that shell. Maybe you’ll get lucky with this band and get laid.” She snorted.

“Stop.” Hanging my head, I curled my lips into a soft smile. Axel would probably have one hell of a laugh if he knew I was still a virgin. I grabbed Olivia’s arm and led her to the bar, leaning into her ear. “Listen, if you see that guy again, or any of his band guys, don’t tell them I’m a virgin, okay?”

“Yeah, sure.” She stopped, placing her hand on my cheek. “Devin, I would never do something like that. I wasn’t even sure about outing you to that guy.”

“Yeah, I know. I just have a feeling all these guys are really cool and I’m just...not.” Pursing my lips, I dipped my head.

“You *are* cool. I mean, look at you.” She released me and stepped back, waving her hands over my sides. “You look hot tonight. That guy’s an idiot if he doesn’t ask you out now that he has your number.”

I flicked my gaze to meet with hers. “I don’t think he’s into me.” I pressed my lips together. “Besides, I don’t know if I’m into him, either.” Because Axel was way out of my league.

She blinked. “But he was *hot*.” Shaking her head, she said, “What is wrong with you?” She grabbed my arm and led me back to the bar.

“I don’t know.” I huffed. What *was* wrong with me?

The next day, I strolled down the sidewalk, watching the sun peeking over glass high rise buildings in downtown Tempe. I loved this new job, and I did *not* want to be late. This new bakery was the talk of the campus, with its unique décor and amazing treats. I stopped at the entrance and looked up at a wooden sign in a rainbow of colors, saying *Queer Confections*. I peeked inside, then opened the door and strolled across the wooden floor, past velvet couches and chairs in a variety of colors surrounded by wooden tables. As I walked, my gaze roamed the skateboards and skateboard art on the walls, and I smiled. Dana and Nate, the owners, liked to skateboard.

A couple sat against a wall, eating treats.

As I stepped around the corner of the glass display filled with vibrant cakes and pastries, my gaze caught on Dana, his dirty-blond hair pulled into a short ponytail under his baker's cap.

Dana bent over a table with trays of fluffy pastries, appearing to inject filling into them.

“Hi, I'm here for work.” I stopped at the table and perused the desserts lined up on trays, my mouth watering.

Dana straightened. “Oh, good.” He glanced toward an open doorway to the office. “Nate, Devin is here.” His attention shifted to me. “Here, I want you to try this and tell me what you think.” He held up one of the pastries he'd been working on.

“Okay, what is it?” I took the offered pastry and turned it in my hand. For all I knew it was some sort of Danish.

“I don't know what to call it yet, but it's infused with Grand Marnier, and I added an orange compote to bring out the flavor of the liquor.” Dana set his hands on his hips. “Nate says it's really good, but”—he glanced toward the office door—“he always says that.”

Nate strolled out of the office, his wavy dark hair falling to his shoulders, his gray eyes focused on Dana. “That's because

it is. I'd tell you if it sucked."

With a quick snigger, Dana said, "The only thing I want sucked is—"

"Dana, watch it. Devin is an employee." Nate shook his head, a grin spreading over his lips.

"Oh, come on, I don't care." I waved a hand at Nate. "It's only us anyways." I smiled at Dana. "And I like his humor."

"There. See?" Dana tugged on Nate's arm, bringing him close, then planted a swift kiss on his cheek.

"Yeah, yeah." Nate smoothed his hands down the front of his graphic t-shirt and focused on me. "So, how's the rest of the senior year looking? What have you picked for your final project?"

"Well, I like the finance side of business, so I was looking to do some sort of financial analysis on a small business." I glanced at the pastry still in my hand, then bit into it. An explosion of orange, butter, egg and not too much sugar melted in my mouth. "Oh my God, that's good." I ate another bite and chewed, letting out a soft moan.

"See? I told you it was good." Nate squeezed Dana's hand, then ticked his head at me. "Hey, want to do a financial analysis of *our* business? Sort of get your hands dirty in the real world?"

My gaze flashed to Nate. I covered my mouth while I chewed and said, "Are you kidding me? That would be great." Nate might be turning into my idol. Especially since he'd already graduated with a business degree and had used it to start up this bakery with Dana, obviously the love of his life. If only I could get so lucky.

"I kid you not." Nate arched a brow at Dana. "Then you can see if I missed anything when I did my business plan for this place."

"I'm sure you didn't." I took another bite of pastry. God this was good.

“Okay, you two. Let’s get started on the real work. There’s a customer at the counter.” Dana pointed toward the front of the store.

“I got it.” I set the pastry down on the table by Dana, then rushed to the counter, pulled my frilly pink apron off a hook on the wall and faced a young man with dark, curly hair falling around his face and smokey, dark eyes. He had just the right amount of stubble powdering his strong jaw and above his mouth. My heart skipped a beat, then I took in his black fleece stretching across wide shoulders. “C-can I help you?”

The young man stared at me a moment, then shook his head and snagged his lower lip in his teeth. When his gaze found mine again, he gave me a coy smile, his thick lips lifting a tad higher on one side. “Yeah, uh, what do you think is good here?” He set his forearms on the glass counter. As he leaned in, his eyes lightened in color to a deep umber.

“Um, uh, I-I think everything is good here. There is nothing that is bad.” I freed a stuttered chuckle. I sounded like an idiot. What was happening to me? I clutched the apron over my chest, attempting to slow the pounding of my heart.

The young man tilted his head, his gaze roaming over me. “Nice uh, nice apron.” His smile widened.

My heart jolted and I looked down. Was this guy making fun of my apron? What was he doing in here if he’d joke about shit like that? “It, it was—”

“Dude, I got him that apron. You got a problem with that?” Dana stood beside me and flung a white towel over his shoulder, glaring at the customer.

The young man dropped his smile and stepped back, holding his palms up. “N-no, God no. I-I actually think it looks uh, cute on him.” He worried his lower lip. “Look, I’m sorry. I seriously didn’t mean anything bad by that.” He hung his head and puffed out a breath. “I’m so not good at this.”

“Not good at what?” Dana flashed his eyes at me, then set his hands on the counter.

“Nothing.” The young man scrubbed his face, then in a soft voice, said, “Can I get one of those rainbow cupcakes over there?” He pointed toward the end of the counter, staring at the floor.

“Sure.” I squeezed Dana’s forearm as I passed him. Under my breath, I said, “It’s okay, go make more of those yummy whatever those were.” I strolled to the end of the counter, slid the back open and grabbed a rainbow-colored cupcake with sprinkles.

Dana huffed, then strode to the back of the store.

“Here.” I set the cupcake on the counter. “Do you need a box?”

The young man stole a glance at me, his gaze locking on mine for a moment, his brows wrinkling. “No, I’m going to eat it here. I’m, I’m meeting a friend.”

“Did you want some coffee to go with it? Maybe a French roast? We get the same beans they have in the sidewalk cafés in Paris. The owner makes sure they’re the best.” I gave him my warmest smile. This guy had looked so confident when he’d come in here. Why did he look so deflated now? I pulled a white plate out from under the counter and set the cupcake on top of it.

“Sure, I’ll take a coffee. Uh, make that two.” The young man tugged his wallet out of the back pocket of his jeans.

I rung up the order. “I’ll make the coffee and call your name when it’s ready if I’m busy, otherwise I’ll bring it to you.” I pursed my lips. “Uh, what’s your name?”

“Brandon.” He shifted his gaze to the register, then set some money on the counter. “Keep the change.” He lifted the cupcake off the counter, then turned and walked to the closest couch, in red, and dropped into the end of it, facing the bakery counter and me.

CHAPTER TWO

Brandon



What a fucking fool I am. I stared at the cupcake centering the oval, wooden coffee table in front of me, setting my hands on my knees. That was an epic fail. I couldn't pick up on guys. I had no idea how. But God, Devin *was* cute in that apron. Everything about him was just so adorable.

"Hey."

I looked up at Layla, her straight blonde hair cut in a bob at her shoulders, her blue-eyed gaze taking me in. "You don't look so good. What happened?" She sat next to me and placed her hand over mine.

"I'm an idiot, that's what happened." I scowled. "I don't know what I'm doing. I *know* I like him. I seriously know that now."

"Oh, come on." She patted my hand, then sank into the couch. "Where's my cupcake, by the way?"

"I thought you were doing keto?" I glanced at her slender figure, covered in a thin gray sweater that showed off her ample bosom, and skinny jeans. Why she was trying fad diets, I hadn't a clue.

"I am, doesn't mean I can't cheat." She giggled, leaned in, and snatched up the cupcake, then took a bite. "Oh, holy cow, this is delicious." She set it down.

"I know." I glanced at Devin, back turned to us while he stood at the coffee machine behind the register.

"So, he *is* cute. I can see how he turned you gay. He might even turn me straight." She snorted.

“Stop it.” A quick chuckle sprang from my throat. She could make me laugh no matter what happened. “I got us both coffee. Hopefully he brings them to us.”

“And you’re going to try your skills on him all over again? This I gotta see.” She smirked at me.

I huffed out a laugh. “Yeah, maybe this time around he won’t think I’m making fun of him.” Next time, I should tell him how pretty his eyes were or something.

“What the hell did you do?” She faced me with a faint grin playing on her lips.

“I made a comment about the apron, and he took it wrong. The owner even came out to defend him.” I shook my head. “Shit.” How was I going to recover from this? There had to be a way.

She blew out a breath. “Oh boy...Change of subject. How’d you do on that test in the communication disorders class?” She pursed her lips. “Cause I think I didn’t do so hot.”

“Yeah? I think I did all right.” I nodded slowly, keeping my gaze affixed to Devin. Graduation couldn’t come fast enough. I was so ready to be out in the schools, helping kids with speech problems. I never wanted another kid to be teased for how they spoke, not like I was.

She sighed. “I don’t even know why I ask. You always do good on everything. It’s like you’re on a mission.”

“I am.” I gave her a wide smile. “You know that.” I shifted my attention to Devin, now walking to our table with a tray in his hands, two steaming cups of coffee on top. “Here he comes. Save me if I say something stupid again.”

“Sure.” She straightened in her seat.

“Here are your coffees.” He bent over the table, setting the coffees in front of us, a sugar bowl with a small, silver spoon inside it and a ceramic creamer. He stood up. “Can I get you anything else?”

“Um...” I peeked at Layla, who was giving me a mischievous grin, then focused on him. “Hey, I want you to

know that I'm really sorry about that comment. I...really do like the apron."

Shifting his weight, he held the platter to his chest. "Yeah, all right." He glanced at Layla. "I hope you and your girlfriend enjoy the coffees." He flipped his long bangs to the side, then stomped off.

I stared at Layla. "What the hell? Am I cursed?"

"Dude, I don't know, but you need to straighten that shit out. I am *not* your girlfriend, and I will not have my reputation in the lavender pages messenger boards ruined by any rumors that I am." She tutted, then grabbed up the cupcake and took another bite. "Damn, that's good."

"I'll go and get you another one. How about that? Then maybe I can..." My gaze snagged on a young woman with long, brown hair falling over a fluffy pink sweater. I leaned over to Layla, cupping my mouth. "Maybe you could hit on *her*, and Devin would know you're not *with* me." I ticked my brows at her, then watched the exchange at the bakery counter.

"Hey, Devin. Did you hear from Axel?" The brown-haired girl asked.

"Hey, Olivia." Devin wiped the top of the counter with a rag. "No, not yet."

"Do you think he's going to ask you out?" Olivia lifted the edge of her mouth and arched a brow. "He sure was hot."

Heat sliced through my chest and my ears pricked up. "Shit." I whispered to Layla, "Did you hear that? He met a guy." Maybe I was too late. I shouldn't have spent so long trying to figure out why being around Devin made me feel those tingly things I usually only felt around girls.

Layla sipped her coffee. "That don't mean nothing. They're not boyfriends yet."

I fixated on the conversation.

"He hasn't asked me out, jeez. I bet he's not even awake yet. I'm sure he was out partying with his band." Devin

pressed his lips together, glancing at me then returning his gaze to Olivia. “Did you want to order something?”

“Yeah, get me one of those pastries with the Kalua in the middle and a coffee.” She clapped her hands over her chest and snuck her lower lip between her teeth. “Tell me when Axel texts you, okay?”

“Yeah, whatever,” he said.

She let her gaze roam the store, stopping at me a moment, then shifted her attention to Devin. “I’m going to go sit by the window. Can you bring it to me when the coffee is ready?”

“Yeah, sure.” He set a pastry on a plate, then worked on the coffee at the machine. A ding rang out.

“Oh, your phone.” Olivia pointed at his back pocket. “I bet it’s him.” She giggled.

Maybe I could intercept this text message somehow. With my heart quickening, I stood up and stepped to the counter next to Olivia.

He fished his phone out of his back pocket, then held it to his face. “Damn, you’re right.”

“So, what did he say?” She jumped on her toes.

“He wants to know if I’m free on Monday night for an audition.” His gaze lifted to meet with mine, and he parted his lips.

“Audition, huh? For what? Theater?” I gave him my best smile. Maybe this was my chance.

She twisted and gave me the once over, arching a brow. “No, for a band. Devin’s going to be a singer in a rock band. He’s got a great voice.” She curled the edge of her mouth.

“Really?” I snuck a peek at Layla, giving me a smirk and shaking her head. “Well, what band is it? I uh, I go see bands all the time.” Maybe I’d go to their show and hit on him there.

“I-I don’t know, the guy didn’t say.” He chewed his lower lip and stared at his phone, then shrugged. “I’m free on

Monday, so I'll just tell him that and go." His fingers flew over the display, making little ticking sounds.

"Ask him if he wants to meet up for dinner first or something." Olivia waggled her brows at him. "I mean, then you can show him maybe you're open to something more." She held her hands together and swayed.

He flashed his eyes at me and said, "No, I'm not doing that." He turned his back to us, a flush creeping up his neck.

With my shoulders sagging, I tapped my fingers on the counter. How about if we met up for dinner on Monday night? My mouth opened. Ask it, fucking ask it. Now. My chest squeezed and my heart pounded in my ears. Come on... "How —"

"Did you want another cupcake?" He faced me, his brows lifting.

"Um, uh...yes, please." I huffed out a breath. Fuck, I was such a coward. I'd hit on girls all the time. Why was this so hard?

He handed me another cupcake on a plate. "Here you go. That'll be six dollars." He rang me up.

"Sure." After pulling out my wallet, I paid him, then meandered to the couch and dropped down, setting the plate in front of Layla. "Don't even say it."

In a low voice, she said, "What, that you're lame? What the hell is wrong with you?" She pursed her lips.

"I don't know." I blew out a quick breath, then grabbed up my cupcake and ate a bite. How was I going to get close to him? I couldn't keep stalking the bakery, could I? I had to find out the name of that band somehow.

Layla leaned in close, whispering in my ear, "Maybe your brother can give you some pointers." As she sat back, she snickered.

I choked out a laugh, then picked up my coffee. "Yeah, except he doesn't date guys anymore." I raised the corner of my mouth. "Or so he says. I think that's bull." My older

brother had been fighting the good fight, but there was that guy he had a bathroom encounter with recently. “You know, I haven’t even told him about this yet.” I watched Olivia leave the bakery counter with her pastry and coffee, then take up a tufted chair by the window.

“Why on Earth haven’t you told him? I’m sure he’d understand.” She tsked. “You and Kaiden need to come all the way out of your closets.”

“Yeah, I know my parents would be understanding, too. I just...” I glanced at Devin, wiping down the coffee maker. “I want to be sure before I say anything, you know? Like I want to have an actual boyfriend first.” I pursed my lips. “I’ve never even kissed a guy before.”

“I know. You’re a late bloomer.” With a pat on my arm, she chuckled. “So, what are your plans for getting that boyfriend?” She slanted her head toward Devin and lifted her brows.

“I think I’ll just have to keep coming in here and trying to talk to the guy.” I peeked at Olivia, tapping on her phone, and sipping her coffee. Maybe I could invite her over to our table. Then I might get somewhere. She probably didn’t want to sit alone, anyways. “Hey, I’m going to see if she’ll sit with us.” I rose from the table.

“Okay...” Layla gave me a grin. “This should be easy for you.”

“Yeah, right.” I strolled to Olivia’s chair, then rubbed my hands together. I didn’t want it to look like I was hitting on her, but it might help. “Hey, how about joining me and my friend over there so you don’t have to sit alone.”

Lowering her brows, Olivia straightened, then peered toward our couch.

Layla turned and waved with a bright smile on her face.

“Yeah, okay.” She tucked her phone into her small, black purse, then picked up her pastry plate.

“I got your coffee.” I lifted the cup from the table. “Come on.” I waved her on and walked with her to our couch, then set the cup down and sat in the corner of it.

Olivia took a seat in the center, between me and Layla. “Well, isn’t this cozy.” She held out her hand to Layla. “I’m Olivia. And you are?”

“I’m Layla.” She shook her hand.

“I’m Brandon.” I shook Olivia’s hand. “Nice to meet you.”

Olivia gave me a coy smile. “Very nice to meet *you*.” She waved her hand between us. “So, I take it you two are not together?”

“Oh no, honey, men are not my thing.” Layla arched a brow at her.

“Oh.” Olivia edged closer to me. “Well, they *are* my thing.” She snatched up her pastry and bit into it. “Have you tried this? It’s amazing. It has Kalua in it, but not enough to give you a buzz.” She held it out to me.

Catching my gaze on Devin’s, I bit into the pastry, the perfect mixture of chocolate, coffee and sugar flooding my mouth. I groaned. “Damn that *is* good.”

He stared at me, his brows furrowing, his hands wringing the rag.

“So, tell me, what’s the story with you two. How’d you meet and all that.” Olivia ate a bite of pastry.

“I met Layla here in one of our first-year classes. Math, was it?” I kept an eye on him, peering at us while he worked. Was I making him jealous somehow? God, I hoped so. That would mean maybe I had a chance. Of course, it was also probable that he just wanted to be sure Olivia was safe with us.

“Yep, math.” Layla drank some coffee. “Turns out, me and Brandon are both graduating with our Bachelors in speech pathology in May.” She made a point of flicking her gaze to Devin.

He dropped his focus to the counter he was wiping, over and over.

“Oh, that’s cool. Me and Devin”—Olivia pointed to him—“are both graduating with our Bachelors in business this

May. We'll all be graduating together." With a wide smile, she glanced at him. "Aren't we, Dev."

Straightening from the counter, a grin flickered over his lips. "Yep." His gaze snagged on mine and lingered a moment.

My heart fluttered. Finally, he seemed to be noticing me. "Hey, when you get a break, you want to join us?" Holy shit, how had that blurted out of my mouth?

"I-I don't get a break for a while. I just started." His attention drew to the front of the store, where a group of young men came strolling in through the doors. A broad grin swept over his mouth, and he set his rag behind the counter. "Can I help you?"

Three young men walked to the counter, two holding hands and obviously together. The third came forward and pushed his brown bangs to the side of his forehead, then perused the baked goods behind the glass of the display. "Wow, everything looks delicious in here. Everything." He flicked his gaze up, arching a brow.

My attention fixated on the scene at the counter, the voices of Olivia and Layla chatting becoming background noise. I inched forward and sipped my coffee.

"Well, everything in here is made with special recipes the owner came up with himself. He uses the best ingredients." Devin offered a warm smile.

The young man bent over the counter, propping himself on his forearms, while his friends stepped down the counter, pointing at the various confections and whispering to each other. "Has anyone ever told you, you have the prettiest blue eyes?" The young man cocked his head.

My chest heated. That fucker. I jiggled my leg and pinched my lips together. Should I go up there and interrupt them? Devin didn't look comfortable at all with what this guy was doing.

"Uh, what?" Devin's face reddened and he dipped his head, sneaking his lower lip under his teeth.

“Yeah, you do. That cute little apron really shows off how blue they are.” The young man straightened.

Devin fingered a ruffle on the apron. “Yeah, I-I got it, so...” He threw a quick glare at me, then puffed his chest out. “I got it because here, I can be who I want and sometimes, I like things like this.”

“I hear ya. It’s all good. Why should we conform to society’s view of gender, right? You should be able to wear whatever makes you comfortable. Whatever reflects you.” The young man flicked his tongue over his lips, his gaze drifting over Devin. “Now tell me, what is it you like best in here?”

“I...” Devin glanced behind the young man to me. “The rainbow cupcakes are really good.”

My heart flickered. Had he said that because that was what I’d ordered? Was that supposed to be some sort of sign that he was interested? I sat back into the corner of the couch and crossed my arms over my chest.

“Brandon.” Layla, reaching across Olivia, slapped at my arm. “Do you want to go to a house party tomorrow night?”

“What?” I stared at Layla. “House party? On a Sunday?” I hadn’t gone to one of those since sophomore year.

“Yeah, Olivia says there’s some big, off-campus party tomorrow night at this mansion in Tempe. Let’s go.” Layla gave me a wide grin. “She says there’ll be cool people there.”

Grabbing my arm, Olivia said, “Come on, it’ll be fun. I heard these guys hired a DJ and everything.”

“Oh, I don’t know...” I peeked at my coffee cup, tilting it on the table. Those parties could get pretty crazy. And it was on a Sunday. I glanced at her. What had she meant by *cool people*?

“We don’t have class until the afternoon on Monday.” Layla wagged her brows at me. “Plus, Devin is going.”

With my heart skipping a beat, I said, “Okay.” Was that too eager? I stole a peek at Olivia.

“Good. This will be fun.” She squeezed my arm and released it, then ate a bite of pastry.

I finished off my cupcake, then glanced toward the bakery counter, Devin now ringing up the three young men. I’d have a chance at him tomorrow night. There wasn’t a reason to hang around here anymore. “Hey, Layla, eat up and let’s go.”

“Sure, just let me get your number, Olivia.” Layla fished her phone out of her back pocket.

The next night, I thanked the Uber driver, then climbed out of the red Toyota Camry and waited for Layla to step around the car, tugging my tight black jeans down my thighs. I looked out over a rounded drive and a large, Tuscan-style house in beige stucco and clay-colored roof tiles, a grand entrance with tall, thin trees centering it all. Warm light spilled out of the long windows on either side of the entrance while the thumping of electronic music filtered out on the air.

“So?” Layla held her phone to her face. “Olivia and Devin should be here any minute.”

Another sedan pulled up and stopped. Devin and Olivia stepped out of either side of the back seats and walked to us.

Holy shit, he looked different, but in a good way. As my heart fluttered, I cleared my throat. “Hi, uh, Devin.”

His gaze caught mine, his light blue eyes outlined in black eyeliner and his lips too pink to be natural. He peeked at me, then hung his head, stuffing his hands into the front pockets of a pair of pleather pants, his jean jacket hugging tightly to his shoulders. “Hi. Um, Brandon, was it?” He snuck another look at me.

“Yeah.” At least he remembered my name. I stepped to him and held out my hand. “We haven’t been uh, properly introduced. I’m Brandon Visser.”

He grabbed my hand and held it, then gazed into my eyes. “Devin Taylor.”

With my heart beating out of control, I held tighter to his hand. I did not want to let it go. I'd been passing by that damned bakery for weeks, working up the nerve to go inside and now, here I was, holding his hand.

“Uh...” He wrinkled his brows, dropping his gaze to our hands. “Can I have my hand back?”

Choking out a laugh, I freed him and brushed my hand over the back of my hair. “Yeah, sorry. Guess I zoned out there a minute.” I peeked at Layla.

A smirk played over Layla's lips. “I see how this is going to go.” With a chuckle, she shook her head. “Come on.”

As we all strolled to the door, Olivia edged in-between me and Devin. “So, you look nice, Brandon. That blue shirt looks good on you.” She fluttered her eyes at me.

“Thanks.” Shit, she was going after me. I'd have to find a way to shake her off. I stopped at a set of large, rustic wooden doors and opened them.

Lights flashed from a far away, open room, showing a group of people dancing while those on the edges milled about, laughing, and drinking from Solo cups. The entryway was sparse and dark as we made our way through it.

When we came into the main room, I looked around, taking in a large, sleek, modern kitchen to one side with white cabinets and high-end appliances. The room itself held modern furnishings in white and gray with wooden accents and coffee tables. Somebody was going to have one hell of a time cleaning this place up. I lifted a corner of my mouth.

“Let's get some beer.” Olivia's hand brushed mine as she passed me by.

“Sure.” I turned to check on Devin. Looking the way he did, was he going to catch any shit from these people? I stepped in beside him, weaving our way to the kitchen. “Hey, you look good. I like the uh...”

He stopped, his gaze searching the main room, then focusing on me. “You like the what?”

I like you. Fuck, I couldn't say that. "What you did with your...the makeup. I like it." I ran my finger over the side of his hip. "Those pants are hot." I touched his fucking pants! All the lights and music must be messing with my head. My cock woke. Oh damn, *now* I was going to get a hard on? From touching his pants?

He shifted his stance. "Look, you don't have to make up for the comment about my apron, all right? It's cool. We're cool." He frowned. "Olivia and Layla are already at the keg. We should get over there." He stomped off.

"B-but—" I growled. How the hell was I going to get through to this guy?

CHAPTER THREE

Devin



With a huff, I stopped at the keg, snatched a cup from the dark, granite counter next to it and poured beer into it from the tap. Why was I getting so flustered being around Brandon? It was like I craved attention from him, but it unnerved me at the same time. I wanted to be close to him, but being close made me want to run away. God, I was such a mess. I had to get my head straight. Besides, Olivia liked Brandon. I drew my attention to her, chatting with Layla by the counter on the other side of the keg. Those two really hit it off. Didn't Olivia say that Layla was into girls?

Brandon joined me at the keg.

With the heat of his body tingling up my side, I handed him the beer I'd poured. "Here." At least I could be friendly, right?

"Thanks." He gulped down some beer.

I nodded and started pouring another beer. "Sure." Wait, if Layla was into girls, then she must have dragged him to the bakery. He probably wasn't into guys, right? All this time, I'd been thinking maybe he wasn't straight. I twisted my lips. But Olivia had never clarified it with me, so... Why was my brain doing this to me? I sipped some beer, focusing on him. "So, I guess Layla must have dragged you into the bakery today, huh?" I forced a chuckle.

"What? No, it was my idea." His eyes grew wide. "I-I've walked by it so many times, I wanted to see inside." He coughed into his hand. "Fuck."

Cocking my head, I looked him over. Why did he seem so nervous? "Okay."

“Brandon.” Olivia sauntered over to him, then snatched up his hand. “Let’s dance, okay?” She pulled on his hand.

“No, not yet. I need a few beers in me before I do that.” He wriggled his hand out of hers, his lips pressing together. “Do you, uh, dance?” He flicked his gaze to meet with mine.

Narrowing my eyes, I said, “Sure, I dance.” The last time might have been at the gay bar down the street, but I wasn’t going to tell him that. It had been my first and only time in a place like that and I hadn’t stayed long. It had been a little too much for me at the time.

“How many beers do you need?” Olivia sipped her beer, giving him a coy look from over her cup.

“I don’t know, at least two though.” He reached out and pulled Layla beside him, then whispered into her ear.

Layla raised her brows, then glanced from Olivia to me. “Hey, come with me. I have something you have to see.” She grabbed up Olivia’s hand, then led her away.

Twisting to look back at Brandon, Olivia wrinkled her forehead.

With a sigh, he relaxed his shoulders.

What was going on here? I chewed the edge of my cup, my pulse speeding up, then stepped aside as a young man came up beside me to pour himself a beer. Maybe Brandon wasn’t into Olivia? “So, what do you think about my friend?” Why was being left alone with him making my heart race?

“Who, Olivia?” He glanced in the direction they left in, then shrugged a shoulder. “She’s all right.”

“All right, huh?” I furrowed my brows. That did not bode well for her tonight. “So, what’s the matter? Is she not your type?”

With a quick twist of his lips, he said, “It’s not that, it’s just...” He ran his gaze up and down my body. “There’s someone else who’s maybe more my type.”

Way to be cryptic. I gave him a slow nod of my head. “Yeah, okay.” I perused the room, taking in the flashing lights

and people dancing. Maybe I should try and mingle before things got too awkward here. I needed to get my heart to stop beating so fast anyways. “So, I’m going—”

“No, stop.” Snatching my arm, he locked his gaze on me, then dropped his arm and dipped his head. “Can we...can we go talk somewhere? Away from the keg and maybe a little quieter?”

Taking a hard swallow, I stared at him. Why did he want to talk to me? I drew a deep breath, then said, “I guess so.”

“Good.” He offered a shaky smile. “Come on.” Snatching my hand, he led me through the crowd, then down a dark hallway and into a room with double doors.

I gazed down at our entwined hands. He was holding my hand again. I slipped my lower lip under my teeth and watched him close the doors behind us, then looked around the room, all encased in warm wood paneling and bookshelves. A globed lamp resting on the corner of a modern desk in wood and iron gave off a soft glow. Okay, this wasn’t weird.

Turning to me, he freed my hand and raised the edge of his mouth. “So, this is quieter, right?”

“Yeah.” I side-eyed him. What was he up to? “H-how did you know this room was back here? Have you been to this house before?”

“No, I had no idea what was back here. I just figured it would be quieter, you know?” He sipped his beer then examined the room. “This must be a home office.”

“You think?” I smirked. “What gave it away? The bookshelves or the desk?” This was stupid. I should go back out and find Olivia. Maybe coming out to the party with these two was a bad idea.

He huffed a laugh, then brushed his hand over the back of his head. “Yeah, you got me.” He worried his lower lip, then rested his ass against the edge of the desk and drank more beer. “So, tell me about yourself. Where are you from?”

Blinking a few times, I said, “I uh, I’m from Page, you know, up by Lake Powell and all that.” So now we were going

to shoot the shit? I rubbed my palm over my chest. If only my heart would slow the hell down.

“Oh, wow, *way* up North.” A stuttered chuckle erupted from his mouth. “There are a lot of Mormons up there, right?”

“Yeah. I am...was...one of them.” I stepped to his side and leaned my ass against the desk, then sipped some beer.

“Was? So, are you excommunicated or something?” He creased his brows.

“No, not yet anyways.” My chest tightened. If I continued on the path I was on, I would be, and it would break Mom’s heart. I stared at the geometric pattern of the rug covering the tile floor. “Do you know much about Mormonism?”

“I know a little. I’ve had some acquaintances in high school who were. I know you can’t be, uh, queer and stay in the church.” He inched closer into my side.

The heat from his body sent shivers up my spine. I stole a peek at his lips, the bottom one plumper than the top. My breath caught. I had to get out of there before I did something stupid. But I didn’t want to. I shut my eyes a moment, struggling to get control of myself. Olivia was interested in this guy.

“Devin.” He tilted his head, a faint smile gracing his lips.

“What?” I drank the rest of my beer down. Now I had a reason to leave. I needed more beer.

“What are you? I mean, you’re queer, right? If you weren’t, you wouldn’t be working in that bakery. But are you gay, or bi, or what?” He stepped away from the desk, facing me, studying me.

“I-I don’t exactly know what I am yet. I’m trying to figure that out. I suppose bisexual would cover it, but maybe nonbinary or pansexual. I don’t exactly know.” I forced myself to look at him. Why was I telling him all this? Why was he even asking?

With a warm smile, he said, “Guess that makes two of us.”

A phone buzzed.

“Oh, shit.” He slipped his cell phone out of the back pocket of his jeans, then answered it. “Hey, Layla.” He stepped away. “I’m in a room down the hallway. With Devin.”

Taking deep breaths, I darted my gaze over the room. What the hell did that mean, it *makes two of us*? He was questioning his sexuality? Maybe even his gender? That must be why he wanted to talk to me alone. He probably thought talking to someone who was queer would help him figure it out. Problem was, I didn’t even have it figured out.

“No, I’m not getting lucky.” He gave me a coy smile. “Okay, sort of lucky, but not like you’re insinuating.” He chuckled.

The doors popped open. “There you are.” Olivia sauntered into the room with Layla close behind, dropping her cell from her ear.

“We’ve been looking all over for you two.” Olivia strolled to Brandon and wrapped her fingers around his bicep. “Have you had enough beer to dance now?”

He looked to me and pursed his lips. “I-I don’t—”

“Sure, we’re ready to dance.” I threw a smirk at him and held up my empty cup. “I could use a new beer, too.” Now maybe I could let Olivia do her thing and I could try to forget about all these new and confusing feelings. An ache filtered through my chest. But did I really want that?

“Come on.” Olivia pulled Brandon from the room.

“So, what were you two doing in here?” Layla arched a brow and held her beer to her chest.

“Nothing, just talking.” I started toward the door, then stopped and twisted around. Maybe I could get some answers from her. “Can I talk to you for a second?”

“About Brandon?” As a sly smile worked over her mouth, she walked closer. “Sure, what do you want to know?” Her brows ticked up.

Pressing my lips together, I toyed with my beer cup. “What’s his deal? Is he questioning his sexuality?” Was that

too direct?

“Yes. Well, I think he started questioning it for real the first time he saw you.” She tapped my chest.

“What? Why me?” I focused on her. Maybe he saw something in me that he recognized in himself.

With a snicker, she shook her head. “Oh, you boys. I can’t believe how dense you can be.” She drew a deep inhale. “He’s a good guy,” she said. “But I’m going to let you two work this out yourselves. I’m sure he wouldn’t want me to let the cat out of the bag before he’s ready.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” I huffed, dropping my mouth open. This was turning into a very confusing night.

As she stepped toward the door, she said, “You’ll see.” She waved her hand. “Let’s get some more beer and go dance.”

Raking my fingers through my hair, I followed her through the hallway and into the main room. As I searched the room, my gaze landed on Brandon, dancing with Olivia, both holding their cups in their hands.

Olivia wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him in close, then spoke in his ear.

He laughed, nodding his head.

Well, that was it then. She had him. The ache started deep in my chest. Why was this hurting? I’d just met the guy and yeah, I felt something around him. But it wasn’t really anything, was it? I worked my way through people to the keg and poured myself a new beer.

“Pour one for me?” Layla held her cup out to me.

“Sure.” I set my filled cup on the counter, then grabbed hers and filled it, watching the amber bubbles. “Olivia really likes your friend.”

“Does she?” Layla glanced toward the mess of dancers. “How about you? Any interest?”

As my heart jolted, beer spilled over the side of the cup. I righted it and blinked at her. “Uh, no. I mean, I don’t know. What do you mean?” I handed her the cup, then picked up my own. Even if I was interested, Olivia already *claimed* him that day in the bakery. It wouldn’t be cool to—

“Cause I don’t think he’s all that into her.” She narrowed her eyes.

“How can you say that? Look at them.” I pointed toward them, now dancing with her back to his front, bending over each other, shimmying their shoulders, laughing. “They look like they’re getting on pretty well to me.” I pursed my lips. Maybe I should just go home. This wasn’t all that much fun anymore.

“Come on.” She caught my hand in hers and hauled me into the throw of dancing people, then pushed me toward Brandon and bounced and swayed to the beat next to him. “Hey, Brandon.” She ticked her chin up at him.

“Hey.” As his gaze snagged on mine, his eyes grew wide. “Hey.” He shifted to face me, continuing to dance. “Come on, I thought you could dance.” He snickered.

“I-I can.” My pulse sped up a notch and I worked my hips to the music, swaying my free arm around me, then tipped my head back, letting the melody, the beat and the lights fill my mind. I could lose myself in the music and forget about everyone and their confusing comments and questions. I could pretend not to see my best friend getting the guy that I... *That I what?* I lowered my head, fixating on him.

He locked our gazes and came closer, then parted his mouth and snuck his tongue out to flick over his generous lips. “You uh, you dance pretty well.” He swayed with the music and arched his arm around my side.

A thump hit me in the back, launching me at him. I gasped, widening my eyes, losing my balance.

Hooking his arms around me, he caught me, holding on tightly. “Hey, you okay? I got you.”

I nodded against his chest, then righted myself. “Yeah, I’m okay. Someone must have knocked into me.” He was hugging me, holy shit! I cleared my throat. Damn, it felt good.

“You sure?” He brought his face close, our noses almost touching, his arms wrapped around my shoulders. “Maybe um, maybe we should dance a little closer. Then you won’t get bumped. There’s a lot of people in here now.” His breath whispered over my cheek.

Turning my head, my lips brushed over his and my cock stirred. Shit, no good. I pushed on his chest, taking a step back. I should get away. Olivia... “Uh, yeah, okay.” I straightened myself, heat rushing down my spine. Hot, too hot. I unbuttoned the jacket, exposing my bare chest.

His gaze dipped, then came back up, his hand hovering over the center of my chest. “You didn’t wear a shirt under the jacket? Nothing?”

“No, why? Do I have to?” I furrowed my brows. Why was this guy always so interested in everything I was wearing?

“Hey, you two, everyone all right?” Olivia pressed against Brandon’s side, snaking her hand around his arm.

“Yeah, fine.” I shrugged out of his hold, then held up my beer. “Didn’t even spill my beer.” I offered him a smug grin.

“Well, mine is all over the floor. Don’t think anyone will even notice.” With a glance at Olivia, he turned his lips down.

Layla danced up from the opposite side of Olivia. “Come on, keep dancing.” She held one arm above her head, waving her hand to the music, and sipped her beer.

“Sure.” With her eyes twinkling, Olivia bounced next to Brandon.

Pulling his arm away from her, Brandon’s attention focused on me, and he leaned in. “Give me some of your beer.”

“Why?” I swayed in front of him and sipped my drink.

“Because I sacrificed mine to save you from falling on your face.” He stepped so close, our chests touched, and he mirrored my movements.

With my breath quickening, heat rushed my groin. Being this close to him was turning me on. I should stop, maybe go get him a new beer and regroup. But again, I didn't want to. I held my cup to his lips and stood still.

With a sly smile, he looked deeply into my eyes and sipped from the cup. "I think your beer tastes better than mine did." He held my gaze, then snuck his lower lip between his teeth. "You have such pretty eyes."

My breath snagged in my throat. Does he mean that or is he saying that because the guy at the bakery said that?

"Brandon, come on, let's get you another beer." Olivia tugged on his arm.

"No, um. I'm okay. I think I've had enough anyways." As his throat dipped with a hard swallow, he tapped on Layla's arm. "Let's go."

"What? Why? Things are just starting to get interesting." She scoffed.

He thinned his lips. "Just, come on." He grabbed Layla's arm and guided her to a corner of the room.

"He likes you." Olivia sighed and stomped her foot.

My heart fluttered. "No, he doesn't. I think he's just, I don't know, trying to figure some things out about himself by hanging out with me." I slumped my shoulders. Dancing wasn't going to be the same without him here. "Let's go say goodbye to them."

"Yeah, okay." Olivia followed me to the corner, where Layla and Brandon were talking.

"Hey, are you taking off?" I stood next to him.

"Yeah, I didn't want to be out too late and it's getting late." He scanned the room a moment. "Are you two staying?"

I glanced at Olivia. "You almost ready? I just need to finish my beer."

"Yeah, I'm ready." She yawned. "I'm getting tired anyways."

“Okay, you two. Well, it was fun. We need to do this again sometime.” Layla smiled at her, then patted her on the back. “You’ve got my number.” She glanced at Brandon, frowned, then waved her hand. “Come on, Uber’s almost here.”

“See you, Olivia.” He offered her a quick smile, then leaned in close to my ear, whispering, “I’ll come visit you at the bakery. Is that all right?” He wrinkled his brows.

With my pulse catching, I said, “Yeah, that works.”

“Okay.” He squeezed my hand, then walked toward the entry with Layla.

“He likes you. I can see it.” Olivia gazed at her nails, then pouted. “That’s okay, I don’t think he’s my type after all.” She lifted one side of her mouth. “But that guy over there might be.” She pointed across the room at a tall young man with wavy brown hair.

“Oh boy. Here we go.” I gulped my beer down. “When I finish this beer, we’re leaving.” I gave her a stern look.

“Yeah, yeah.” She sauntered off through the crowd.

The next evening, I sat in my blue Toyota Corolla, parked on the side of the street, and looked into my phone, then up at the house. This was the place. My gaze roamed over a sprawling bungalow in white with a lawn and large tree hanging a wide canopy over the front yard. It was funny how some of the older housing developments of Tempe didn’t look like the desert at all, sort of like people from other parts of the country had come here and tried to recreate what they’d left behind. Why would they do that? Why not just embrace something new? With a sharp chuckle, I shook my head. I wouldn’t be one of them. I was moving on and trying something new.

I climbed out of my car and strolled to the front door. Hopefully Axel wasn’t expecting me to be bringing any equipment, like a microphone or something. It wasn’t like I’d ever done this before, and I’d told him that.

As I stopped at the front door, it opened.

“Devin, my man, come on in.” Axel stood in a tiled entryway, his black hair falling around his face, his deep-blue eyes warm and inviting. He waved me in. “The guys are all in the practice room.”

As I stepped inside the house, I scanned the main room, a puffy, leather, sectional sofa surrounded a square, black coffee table facing a television resting on a stand against the far wall. The furniture looked pretty beat up. “You live here with your parents?” The sound of snare drums filtered out of a back room, following by the deep tones of a bass guitar.

After a sharp laugh, he said, “No, I live here with two of the guys in the band. We rent the place.” He led me into an open kitchen with wooden cabinets and white appliances. “The place isn’t updated or anything, so the rent isn’t too bad.” He opened the refrigerator. “You want anything? Water or a beer maybe?”

“How about a beer?” I offered him a quick grin. Maybe a beer would help loosen me up a little and keep me from getting too nervous. As he bent into the refrigerator, I let my gaze roam over his slender body in a black graphic t-shirt and ripped skinny jeans, the tattoos on his exposed arms. If only I could look that cool. I peeked at my own white shirt and jeans. Someday maybe. Last night had been an experiment, but it had seemed to catch Brandon’s attention.

Shutting the door on the refrigerator, he handed an opened beer can to me, then snicked one open for himself. “So, the guys are all queer, as I told you the other night.” He sipped some beer, then snickered. “Well, except for Silas. He has a very annoying girlfriend, but I’m not sure how long that’s going to last.” He quirked the corner of his mouth. “He’s been with guys before, too.”

“Okay.” I drank down some beer, my gaze landing on an oval farmhouse table resting in front of a pair of sliding glass doors and a covered patio beyond. If it were all college guys living here, the furniture must be all hand-me-downs and it showed.

“Where are you living? You got any roommates?” He stepped toward a hallway.

“No, I’m in the dorm. Manzanita. Got my own room this year.” I followed him down the hallway, peeking into each of the bedrooms as I passed them. They didn’t look too different from what I had in the dorm. I wasn’t missing out on anything being there.

“Dorm, huh? We all got out of there after freshman year.” He stopped at a doorway, then turned to face me. “Why are you still there?”

“I’m on a full-ride scholarship, so it’s paid for.” I sipped more beer, then stole a glance beyond him into the room. Two young men were standing with guitars hanging from their shoulders, one was behind a drum kit, and another was standing behind a keyboard.

With a smirk, Axel nodded once. “Nice. So, you’re a brain, like Gabe. He’s our drummer and majoring in pre-law.” He stepped into the room.

“I-I don’t know if I’d call myself a brain.” I strolled in behind him. Great, I was already branded as being a nerd. That was exactly the sort of thing I was trying to break out of.

“Guys, meet Devin.” Axel held his palm up to me.

Everyone greeted me and smiled.

“So, let’s go around the room and tell him a little bit about yourself, just like the first day of class.” Axel chuckled, then picked up a blue, sparkly guitar from a stand and slung the strap over his shoulder.

The young man behind the keyboard waved at me, his brown, wavy hair cut to frame his face, his green eyes beaming at me. “Hi, I’m Milo. I’m going to school for graphic design and I uh...” He ran his fingers over the keyboard. “I play this thing.”

“He thinks he’s Elton John or something. You should see him when we get onstage, all glittery and everything.” The young man behind the drum kit snorted. “Anyways, I’m Gabe. They all think I’m a nerd because I play in the marching band.

Really, it's just so I can watch the football players in those tight pants."

"No, it's because you're too damn smart for your own good." A young man with a tan bass hanging off his shoulder rolled his eyes, then stepped to me with his hand out. "Hi, Devin, I'm Caleb. I grew up with Axel here and we started this band. I'm majoring in IT."

"Nice to meet you." As I shook his hand, I let my gaze meet with his hazel eyes, framed by dark, brown hair. Funny, he had a similar haircut to Axel's, just a tad shorter. Didn't couples start looking like each other at some point? Were they a couple? "S-so are you two, uh..." I pointed between them.

Axel and Caleb looked at each other, then burst out laughing. Caleb said, "No, definitely not. Axel here has had a huge crush on his older brother's best friend for like, forever." He tagged Axel in the shoulder. "Don't you? You poor, pining boy."

"Stop it. I'm not pining." With a smirk, Axel shook his head. "The guy is straight. Hot, but very straight." He combed his fingers through his black bangs. "I've tried getting him to notice me, believe me." He cut his gaze to mine.

So, Axel was definitely off limits. Brandon's stunning face flickered through my mind, then the tingling warmth of his body when I'd fallen into him. As heat rushed down my spine to lodge in my balls, I cleared my throat. Why was I thinking about Brandon like that? If I didn't start stopping myself, I might end up like Axel, pining for someone I could never have. I did not want that.

"Silas, your turn. Say hello to Devin." Axel focused on Silas, his dirty blond hair cut chin-length, his dark eyes peering at me.

Silas chewed the side of his lip, sizing me up. "Hi."

"Hi." I gave him my best smile. This guy was kind of scary in a way. He was too quiet compared to the rest of them. I pointed at the black guitar hanging over his hips. "You play

guitar, too. Are you lead or rhythm?” For some reason, I felt like I had to win Silas over to be in this band.

“I’m rhythm.” Silas tilted his head. “I’m in school for accounting.” He dropped his gaze to his guitar, then set his hands on the strings, one on the frets and the other at the pick ups. “Are we doing this, or what?”

“Jesus, dude, just chill.” Axel shifted his attention to me. “You ready? We’ll play the song you sang at karaoke the other night. Does that work?”

“Uh, yeah. I don’t know if I know all the lyrics though.” My pulse quickened. I hadn’t even thought of memorizing them.

“No worries, just pull them up on your phone.” Gabe thumped the bass drum a few times.

“You can use my mic.” Caleb set the mic up in the center of the room, then faced Axel. “Since Axel thinks I don’t have enough range.”

“You don’t. You’d never be able to sing this song.” Axel huffed. “We all agreed we wanted to do this punk-pop cover thing, so we have to be able to do this song.”

I stared at the mic, willing my heart to slow, my chest to relax. I drew deep breaths. I’d been fine once I’d started singing at the bar and I’d be okay now. I held up my phone, Googled the lyrics, then said, “Start playing.” If I thought about it too much, I might panic.

Axel strummed quickly on his guitar, the harsh sound filling the room. He was followed by Silas and Caleb, then Gabe started in on the drums.

Tapping my foot to the beat, I heard the guitars rise in pitch. It was time. I snatched the mic, then bent over it, belting out the song. The angst built within me, and the switch flipped. I jerked my body to the music, my voice becoming stronger, louder. I shook my head, my bangs flopping over my face.

As Axel and Silas joined me with backing vocals through the chorus, I stepped to Axel and pressed against his side, singing with him.

Axel strummed harder, his fingers flying over the frets, his head bouncing. He threw me a wicked smile and we both screamed the chorus, the song picking up speed, Gabe pounding out the beat.

As the song ended, I panted and hung my head, the mic stand still tipped in my hand.

“Holy shit, that was fantastic.” Milo clapped his hands over his chest.

With a broad smile, Axel faced Silas and Caleb. “Well? I told ya.”

“Yep, he’s hired.” Caleb patted me on the back. “Good job, man.”

“Guys, it was just one song. Let’s at least do a few more before we make a decision.” Silas tensed the edge of his mouth, arching a brow at me.

“Silas, you are such a fuss budget. Get over yourself. He was great.” Gabe blew out a breath.

“Fuss budget? That’s a word only you would use.” Silas shook his head. “What else do you know?” He lifted his chin at me.

I held up my phone, then thumbed through the songs on the music app, stopping on one of my favorites. “H-how about *My Own Worst Enemy* by Lit? Do you guys know that?”

Lifting a corner of his mouth, Axel strummed the beginning chords to the song. “Of course.”

“Okay, let’s do that one next.” I let my gaze roam around the room. Each of the guys gave me encouraging smiles, except for Silas.

The band started the song, and I sang, giving it all I had.

The corners of Silas’ lips twitched up.

I’d gotten to him. I had this.

CHAPTER FOUR

Brandon



I watched the professor, droning on at the front of the class, under the harsh lights glaring off the too-white walls. When would this be over? As I bounced my leg, I checked my phone, resting over the gray desktop. Five minutes. I had five more minutes to sit through before I'd be free. I glanced at Layla, sitting beside me, then leaned into her, whispering, "Olivia said Devin works today, right?"

"Yes, for the thousandth time, he had morning classes today and he's working like right now." She gave me a faint scowl. "Would you focus on what the professor is saying? Did you catch that we have a paper to write on diagnostic tools?"

"What?" I leaned back in my chair. "No. You'll help me, right?" I hated writing papers or writing in general. It was so tedious, just give me a test already to check what I knew.

"I hope this thing with Devin doesn't turn your brain to jelly." She lowered her brows. "You were supposed to be helping *me* out, remember?" She tapped my head with the end of her mechanical pencil.

"Okay everyone, that's it for today," the professor said.

"Thank God." I folded up my laptop and notebook, then bent to the side to stuff them into my black backpack. "I have to see what happened yesterday with that band guy."

"What band guy?" Layla zipped her lavender backpack, then stood up and slung it over her shoulder.

"There was some guy named Axel that Devin was supposed to meet up with yesterday for a band audition." My chest tightened. Olivia was trying to get Devin to ask him out for

dinner. Wonder if he did that? Were they already dating now? I might have lost my chance.

“And what, you’re jealous?” Layla shook her head, lifting the corners of her mouth. “It was obvious on Sunday night that he likes you.”

“Really? How could you tell?” Picking up my backpack, I flung it over my shoulder. I’d run over that night in my head so many times already. I’d *tried* to get him to see I was interested in him, but I didn’t think it had worked. “Because I think Olivia cock blocked me.”

With a sharp chuckle, Layla covered her mouth with her hand. “That’s one way to put it. She was all over you.”

“Let’s get started.” I walked down the aisle, then out a heavy, metal doorway and into the waiting sunshine. Palm trees lined the walkways and clay-colored buildings rose up in the near distance.

“Are you going straight to the bakery?” Layla faced me as I stopped while other students passed us by.

“I am.” He had told me it was okay to come see him there. Maybe it wouldn’t be too busy.

“Do you want me to go with you for moral support?” She shifted her weight and raised her brows.

“No, not this time. I want it to be obvious I’m only there to see him.” I pressed my lips together. I had to up my game, especially since this Axel dude was in the picture.

“Okay, well I’ll leave you to it. If you need any more info from Olivia, let me know.” She waved her hand. “See you later.”

“Yeah, see you.” I headed toward Mill Avenue and the waiting bakery.

I strolled into the bakery and walked past the colorful, velvet couches and chairs, up to the counter. No one was there. I scanned the area, looking through the doorway to the back, then twisted around to search the seating area. Several students were eating and studying with their laptops open, and a few

older gay couples chatted with each other. Where was Devin? Maybe he was sick or something.

“Can I help you?”

I whirled around, taking in a young man with wavy, dark hair and gray eyes, wearing a black apron. A nametag pinned on the apron strap read, *Nate*. “Oh, hi. I was...” Should I tell this guy I was here to see Devin? What if that got him in trouble? “Um, I’d like...” I did a quick perusal of the cakes under the glass beside me. “That. A slice of that chocolate cake.”

“Oh, good choice. It’s German chocolate and one of my favorites.” Nate gave me a warm smile. “Do you want the cake for here or to go?”

Standing on my tiptoes, I attempted to see more of the back room. “Uh, for here.” Maybe Devin would still show up.

Nate slid the case open and slipped a slice of cake onto a plate with a cake spatula, then set it on the counter by the register. “Would you like some coffee with this?”

“Yes, please. French roast.” I fished my phone out of my back pocket. The coffee had been really good the last time I’d been here, maybe even better than the Starbucks we had on campus. “You have Apple Pay, right?”

“We do.” Nate rang me up.

I opened my Apple Wallet app, then brought my phone close to the POS system and paid.

“I’ll bring your coffee out to you when it’s ready.” Nate twisted around and worked with the coffee machine.

“Okay.” I plucked a fork out of a tray, then grabbed up my cake and walked to a blue couch, then dropped into the center of it, setting my cake on the table. As I peered at Nate, I exhaled and slumped my shoulders. Maybe Olivia was wrong, and Devin wasn’t working today. Or maybe she’d told me the wrong day on purpose to keep me away. I pinched my lips.

“Hey, Devin, can you bring this coffee to that guy over there?”

My gaze cut to Nate, now with Devin standing beside him in his pink apron. My heart stuttered. God, every time I saw him it seemed like he'd gotten even hotter.

"Sure." Devin put the coffee on a tray along with the sugar and creamer then turned, his gaze snagging on mine. He halted for a moment, his eyes growing wide, then skimmed his teeth over his lower lip.

Keeping my gaze affixed to him, my breath quickened. What do I ask him first?

He set the coffee cup, sugar, and creamer on the table. "Hey, Brandon. How are you?"

After a hard swallow, I said, "Good and you? How did your audition go yesterday?"

He hugged the tray to his chest. "Good. I'm in the band." He quirked his mouth into a satisfied grin.

"Oh..." My heart squeezed. That meant he would be around Axel a lot more. "What's the name of the band?" I dipped my gaze to my cake, then tapped it with my fork.

"*Knot Me*, with a *K*," he said. "There's some sort of sexual connotation with the name, but I'm not sure I understand it." He chuckled.

"Uh, yeah, I don't know what that means either." With a deep breath, I forced myself to look at him. "Can you uh, do you have time to, can you sit with me for a minute?"

He scanned the store a moment, then dropped in beside me. "Sure, everything is pretty much handled right now and one of the owners, Nate, is here wanting to meet the customers when they come in, so he's had me working in back."

"Oh." I fixed up my coffee, then took a sip. I needed to ask him about Axel. I drew a deep breath. "So, that Axel guy...did you two have dinner?" I cut my cake with the fork and ate a piece, the creamy chocolate mixing with just the right amount of bitter and sweet and a hint of orange. I let out a soft moan, then glanced at him.

He stared at my mouth, his lips parting and his brows creasing, then smoothing. “Um...” He squirmed in his seat. “No, we uh, we didn’t have dinner. I just did the audition and went home.”

“Oh.” My heart soared. Good, so they weren’t dating. Maybe I could see if he’d want to catch dinner after work. “Would you, um, want to maybe—”

“Devin, can you give Dana a hand? He seems to have made a terrible mess.” Nate snickered, then looked toward the back room.

“I did not.” A voice filtered out from the back.

“Dana, that whole bag of flour is now on the floor.” Nate stood in the doorway. “And on you. You look like a ghost.” Nate giggled, holding his hand over his mouth.

“A hot ghost?” Dana appeared in the doorway, then wrapped a powdered hand around Nate’s neck and claimed him in a deep kiss.

“Oh, damn.” I watched the display. God, I wanted to be that way with Devin. *If only.*

“Yeah, those two are really in love.” Devin stood up. “Guess I need to go help clean up.” He set his hand on my shoulder. “How long are you going to be here?”

Heat shivered down my spine. “Long enough to wait for you, if you want me to.”

His brows dipped for a second, then he looked me over and said, “Yeah, I want you to.” He strode behind the counter and met Dana at the opening to the back. “Come on, let’s get you cleaned up.” He patted Dana’s shoulder and a cloud of white dust puffed off it.

“Thanks.” Dana gave him a quick smile, his face all white powder except for his eyes and mouth. “I should probably shower, huh.”

I cut another bite of cake, then ate it. So far so good. Devin hadn’t gone to dinner with Axel and *maybe* he was interested in me. I sipped some coffee and relaxed into the couch, letting

my gaze wander around the store and out the windows into the late afternoon sunlight and students passing by. When Devin came back, I should probably try getting to know him better. I really didn't know much about him at all.

A few minutes later, Devin strolled out of the back room, removed his apron, and hung it on a hook by the register, then made his way to me. "Well, I'm back."

"That didn't take long." With a smile, I patted the cushion next to me. "Have a seat." If he'd taken off his apron, maybe he was on a break?

"Sure." He sat next to me and eyed my cake. "How's the cake?"

"It's really good. You uh, want a bite?" I sliced off a piece, then held it up to his mouth, holding my hand under it, my gaze catching on his.

He looked deeply into my eyes, then opened his mouth.

Slipping the cake between his lips, my heart fluttered. God, he was gorgeous. As he closed his mouth, I slid the fork out. "Good?" I focused on his lips, the hint of chocolate beaded at the corners.

He swallowed, then ran his tongue around his mouth. "Yeah, it's really good."

"Do you want some more? We can share it." I set the fork on the plate. *I'd like to keep feeding him, but I should probably go grab another fork.*

"No, that's okay. I get to eat this stuff all the time. I'm going to get fat if I don't watch out." He freed a soft chuckle.

With a nod, I said, "Yeah, guess we can't have that." I peeked at him, then chewed the corner of my lip. "So, they're giving you a break right now?" I glanced toward the register.

Nate talked quietly with Dana in the opening to the back room, both of them throwing occasional glances at us and grinning.

"I guess so. Dana told me I should come out here and hang out with you for a while, that it would be good for business. I

don't know why he thinks hanging out with you in particular would be good for business." He scratched the back of his head. "But who am I to say?"

Thank you, Dana. I sent a coy smile to Nate and Dana, and they lifted their chins at me. They knew. They knew I was here because I liked Devin. They might be some of the coolest guys ever. Taking a deep inhale, I relaxed into the couch. "So, Devin, I want to know more about you. You said you were Mormon, right?"

"Yeah." He shifted to sink into the couch, the side of his body almost touching mine.

My gaze landed on his hand, resting on his thigh. What would he do if I held it? My pulse picked up the pace. No, I might freak him out. "Are you out to your family?"

"Me? No." He gave a quick shake of his head. "I think my mom would be heartbroken and my dad might kill me."

With my chest tightening, I shifted to face him. "Jesus, Devin. How are you dealing with it then?" I wasn't out either, but at least I knew my parents would be fine with it.

"Actually, I'm not." He hung his head and wrung his hands in his lap. "I haven't been home since I left in August to start up school again." He snuck his gaze to meet with mine. "Look, I'm still trying to figure myself out. I-I don't know where I fit in yet with this whole queer spectrum thing and until I'm sure, they don't need to know."

"B-but you know you like guys, right?" I furrowed my brows. Maybe he was just questioning his attraction to men. Hadn't I been doing that for the last few years? Never acting on it until now?

Fixating on me, he said, "Yes, I know I'm attracted to guys. I'm also attracted to women. B-but I've never..." He pressed his lips together. "I've never fallen in love with a woman. Only a guy. Once." He huffed out a breath. "I don't even know why I'm telling you all of this."

"Because I asked?" I snatched his hand and rested them on his thigh. "I'm pretty sure I'm bisexual. My brother, Kaiden,

is, too.” Holy shit, I grabbed his hand, just like that. Would he freak out? With a dry swallow, I peeked at our entwined hands.

“Yeah? So do your parents know and are they okay with it?” He creased his brows, seemingly oblivious to my hold on his hand.

“No, they don’t know. My brother hooked up with guys when he was in college, then stopped after he graduated and had this long-term relationship with a woman. That ended badly, but anyways, he has started seeing a guy again.” I brushed my thumb over the top of his hand, my heart blooming with emotion. Just sitting here like this, holding hands, was doing things to me. I glanced at his mouth. I wanted to kiss him. Would he let me?

He did a double take of our hands in his lap, then dropped his mouth open. “Oh, um...” He slipped his hand free, then rubbed his palm on the side of his jeans.

Guess not. Not yet anyways. I edged closer to him, resting my arm over the back of the couch behind him. I needed to lighten it up. “S-so how many brothers and sisters do you have? I mean, being Mormon, you must have a bunch.”

“Actually, no. I only have a younger brother. He’s off doing his mission in New Mexico right now. He’s really into the church. He plans on getting married when he returns and has a job waiting for him at the Glen Canyon Dam.” He sighed. “My mom tried, but didn’t get pregnant after Stuart was born. The birth was pretty bad, almost killed her.”

“Wow, I’m sorry to hear that.” I inched closer. “So what do your parents do up there in Page?” Maybe it was something in how he was brought up that made him so hard to get close to in a sexual way.

“My mom stayed home and raised us. My dad is an electrician and owns his own business. He knows pretty much everyone in town.” He edged closer to me. “What about your parents?”

“My mom stayed home with me and my brother, too. My dad is retired now. He was a higher up in finance at American

Express. They both live in Scottsdale now, but I was raised down in Tucson. My parents moved up here after my brother was in college and I'd told them I wanted to go to ASU." I chuckled. "I guess they sort of followed me." I drew a deep inhale. "My brother's up here, too, now, working as a physical therapist." I'd definitely had a very different upbringing from him.

"And what do you want to do? What are you in school for?" He glanced at me, steeling a peek at my mouth.

"I'm doing speech pathology." I dropped my arm to rest it across his shoulders. Maybe I couldn't hold his hand yet, but maybe he would let me touch him in other ways. My heart quickened. "I had a lisp when I was little, and I was teased a lot. A really good speech therapist helped me get rid of it and I've wanted to be one ever since."

"Wow, that's really cool." He leaned into my side, resting his hand on his own thigh against mine. He brushed his pinky finger over my leg.

Heat shivered into my groin from the light touch of his finger. Oh, fuck. He was going to give me a hard on. No one had ever turned me on like this. No women for sure, not even Gina who I was with off and on for two years. I tugged my shirt over my tightening jeans. "So, have you dated much?" Way to bulldoze into that topic.

"No, I haven't. I mean, sure, I've dated. But I've never had a girlfriend or a boyfriend." His cheeks reddened. "Have you heard about the Mormon Laws of Chastity?" He snuck a peek at me.

"Well, sort of. There's some underwear thing involved, right?" I watched his finger skimming the side of my thigh. It was driving me crazy. But this was important. It might explain everything. "Tell me about it."

"So, it tells us, well, Mormons, that there should be no sexual relations until you're married. And when they say no, they mean *no*." He shook his head and huffed a laugh. "So, yeah, I haven't done much. It's taken the last few years for me to understand myself and be okay with it." With his forehead

wrinkling, he locked his gaze to mine. “I’m still trying to be okay with it.”

Holy shit, was he a virgin? My breath caught. That was sort of hot. No, really fucking hot. As a shiver played up my spine, my cock twitched. “S-so you’ve kissed, right?”

He chuckled. “Yeah, I’ve kissed. Never with a guy though.” He glanced at my mouth.

“Do you want to?” I focused on his plump lips and came in close.

“Hey, Dev, Dana needs you in the back.” Nate stood in front of us, wiping his hands on a rag. “Sorry to break this up.”

Devin jumped from his seat, his eyes wide. “Oh, yeah, sorry I uh, I lost track of time.” He flashed his eyes at me. “Hey, guess I’ll see you around.” He gave me a quick wave then strode off.

Hanging my head, I released a long breath, then combed my fingers through my hair. Just when I thought I was getting somewhere...

“Hey, can I have a word?” Nate studied me.

“Yeah, sure.” I poked at the rest of my cake slice with my fork. Had I scared Devin off somehow, maybe pushed him too far?

Nate dropped down beside me. “You like Devin, right?” He turned on the couch, pulling a leg up between us, throwing his arm across the couch back.

“Yeah, I do.” I straightened, then sipped some coffee. “I have no idea what he thinks about me, if he thinks much of anything at all.”

“Oh, he does.” He tapped the back of the couch with his fingers. “He’s been asking me and Dana about, well, about things. He’s pretty naïve, but he’s trying to change. I know a little bit about that myself. I sort of went through the same thing.”

“You did? Are you Mormon, too?” My gaze met with his. Maybe he would be able to tell me what I needed to know.

Like how could I get Devin to go out with me?

With a chuckle, he shook his head. “No, I’m not Mormon. Just grew up in Montana and left to travel the world after, well, it’s a long story. It was an eye-opening experience and along the way I found out I was attracted to guys. Then I found Dana.” He glanced toward the back room. “He changed my life.” He tapped his fingers on my shoulder. “You can change Devin’s life, too. He needs a little nudge is all.” He snorted. “Okay, maybe a big nudge. That guy is sort of stuck.”

“Stuck?” I lifted my brows. “What do you mean by that?”

“He’s so fixated on working out if he’s gay or bisexual or nonbinary or whatever, that he’s missing the point that he’s just himself and he doesn’t need a label to be who he is. Sometimes it’s like he’s determined to break out of his shell and other times he dives back into it.” He dropped his arm to his side.

“So, you think maybe I should just go with it and ask him out?” My heart thumped in my chest. But what if Nate was wrong?

“Yeah, ask him out. The worst that can happen is he’ll say no.” He patted his thigh. “I don’t think he’ll say no.” He stood up. “In fact, I’m sure of it.”

“Okay.” I rose from the couch. “Where is he now?” I could do this.

“Let me see what Dana did with him.” He strolled off behind the counter, then into the back room.

I wrung my hands in front of my chest, my heart thrumming. I’d never been so nervous to ask someone out in my life. Why was Devin so different? Was it because he was a man, or was there something else?

Nate strode from the back room, shaking his head, then made his way to me. “I’m sorry. Dana dropped the last of the eggs and sent Devin out to buy more.” He brushed his hand over the back of his head. “Dana’s been a real klutz today.”

“That’s all right. I’ll come back in when he’s working next and ask him out. When does he work next?” My pulse settled.

That would give me some time to build myself up to it, maybe get Layla to talk to Olivia for me.

“He’ll be working again on Thursday afternoon.” He gave me a sly smile. “I’ll see if I can give you two some time alone again, like I did today.”

Curling the edges of my mouth, I tilted my head. “Thanks, man. This is really cool what you’re doing for us.” I held out my hand.

Nate shook my hand. “Anytime, man. This is fun playing matchmaker.” He freed my hand. “Anyways, got to go back to work.”

“Yeah, see you Thursday.” I flung my backpack over my shoulder, then sauntered out of the bakery, my head held high. I was on a mission. I’d have a date with Devin on Friday night, and I had to make sure it was perfect.

CHAPTER FIVE

Devin



The next afternoon, I sat at my black dorm room desk, reading an ebook chapter on my laptop on financial reporting for small businesses. I needed to really learn this to do the analysis on the bakery. I propped my elbow on the desk and my forehead in my hand. Brandon's voice flashed through my mind. *Do you want to?* I snuck my tongue out to lick my lips. Yeah, I'd wanted to. A lot.

I lifted my head and shut my laptop. There was no point. I couldn't get him out of my thoughts. What did he want with me anyways? Did he like me or was he just wanting to sort of experiment together? What would that look like if we did? Was I even ready? With a heavy sigh, I lifted from my chair and took the few steps to my raised bed, then dropped down onto it, tucking my hands between my head and the pillows. I wasn't sure I could experiment with him without falling for him. Then where would that lead? Another broken heart, that's where.

My cell phone chimed, and I dug it out of the front pocket of my jeans, then held it to my face.

Olivia

Layla is asking me a bunch of questions about you. I think it's for Brandon. How should I answer?

"Oh, shit." I popped up to sitting and texted.

Devin

What sort of questions? Can you send them to me?

Olivia

She wants to know what things you like to do and what you like to eat. That's weird, right?

I furrowed my brows, rereading the text. What the hell? Maybe Layla was trying to set up a group outing for us all. But why just ask about what I liked?

Devin

Yeah, that's weird. Just tell her I like movies and pizza or something.

Olivia

Okay.

Chewing on my index finger, I tapped into my Instagram app. I couldn't remember Brandon's last name, but it started with a *V*. If I could get it, maybe I could look him up and find out if he was a player or anything. I reopened my text messages.

Devin

Can you find out what Brandon's last name is?

Olivia

Why???

Devin

Just do it...please?

I watched the three little dots pop up disappear, then come back.

Olivia

It's Visser

With my heart ramping up, I thumbed back to Instagram and ran a search on *Brandon Visser*. I scrolled through a few profiles, then found one with his image on it. I tapped it, watching tiles of pictures pop up on my screen. I scanned over them, Brandon with friends at the bar, Brandon with his arm around the shoulders of another man with dark hair and eyes, like his, but even darker. That must be his brother. I stopped on a photo of Brandon with his arms wrapped around a woman's

waist, the two of them gazing at each other, smiling. Who was that?

I tapped the photo and read the date and the caption. It was from over a year ago and the caption read, *happy birthday, baby*. Definitely a girlfriend. I kept scrolling, finding more images of him and the woman in various poses, always happy and out doing fun things, concerts, bars, hiking. I rubbed my forehead. I'd never had anything like that. At least there was only one woman in the photos. Hopefully that meant he wasn't a player.

I fell onto my back on the bed and stared up at the ceiling. I was so out of my element with all this. I'd really wanted to be sure about myself before I started anything. But I couldn't seem to tell my heart that. I'd been so drawn in by him when we were together at the bakery. I breathed in deeply. At least Olivia had given up on him, so I didn't have to worry about that anymore. My phone chimed again, and I held it to my face.

Olivia

What movies do you like and what's your favorite pizza place?

I rolled to my side, rubbing my mouth.

Olivia

I think you're getting asked out on a date<smile emoji>

My heart jolted. "Oh, shit. Really?" I called Olivia and held my phone to my ear.

It rang once and picked up. Olivia squealed into the phone. "Devin, I'm so happy for you. Your first date with a guy, right?"

"I-I haven't been asked out yet. Where are you getting this from?" My chest tightened. Could it be?

"It's obvious, Dev. He's trying to plan something for you both." She sighed. "It's so romantic that he's actually finding out what you like first. Don't you think?" Her voice became

low. “You will go out with him, right? I mean, you’d be stupid not to.”

“Uh...” Brandon’s voice filled my head. *Do you want to?* A shiver rushed down my spine. “Yes. Yes, I would.” I ticked my head. “How do you know it’s him asking through Layla though?” I pushed up to sitting, throwing my legs over the side of the bed.

“Isn’t it obvious? I asked her why she wanted the information, and she said it was a surprise. I’m not stupid.” She huffed a laugh.

“No, you are not.” Especially when it came to relationships. I thought through the conversation and my time with him at the bakery. “Has Layla asked for my number yet?” Wouldn’t that be the first thing he’d do if he wanted to date me?

“No, not yet. Do you want me to offer it to her? I could just say something like, *why don’t you ask him yourself* and send the number,” she said.

“No, don’t do that. It looks too obvious.” I scrubbed my hand over my face. I sounded like some sort of middle schooler, not a twenty-two-year-old man. My lack of dating experience was really showing. Damn Laws of Chastity. It had really gotten into my head.

“Okay, so what do you want me to do?” she asked.

“Nothing. Just answer the questions like you don’t know anything. I don’t want her to think I know.” I sucked in a breath. “And don’t tell her you told me about this.” I’d have to act surprised if he actually went through with it.

“Okay, sure. Playing hard to get, huh?” She giggled. “That is so you.”

“No, it isn’t. I don’t play anything at all.” I glanced at my laptop sitting on my desk. “Listen, I have a lot of studying to get done tonight, so I’ll see you in class tomorrow, okay?” Okay, so I’d *try* to get some studying done. I’d have to do something to get my mind off all this.

“Yeah, sure. I’ll text you if anything else comes up.”

“Okay, talk to you later. Bye.”

“Bye, lover boy.”

I groaned, then hung up the phone and dropped it on the bed, staring at it. I shouldn't look at more pictures of him on Instagram, should I? No. I slid down from my bed, opened my laptop, then logged into the book I was reading and sank into my chair.

Maybe just a little. I snatched my phone off the bed, then opened the Instagram app and scrolled through each thumbnail, reading the captions, piecing together what I could of Brandon's life.

The next afternoon, I strolled into the bakery, and back behind the counter to find Dana hovered over a tray of pastries, icing them with a piping bag, making little swirls of color on each one. “Hey.”

He glanced up. “Hey, Devin. Nate's in the office, so how about you handle the front of the store today?”

“Sure.” I walked to the doorway to the front counter. “Been busy today at all?” I rested my hand on the doorframe.

“This morning was complete chaos, but we handled it. We might have to find another person to help out.” He straightened, then blew a lock of dirty blond hair off his forehead.

“Well, if you do, I'll ask around for you to see if anyone is interested.” I strolled to the counter, snatched my pink apron from the hook and tied it around me. Maybe one of the guys in the band would be interested. I'd find out when I went to rehearsal on Sunday. I perused the front of the store, the usual students studying with pastries and coffees set in front of them and a few older people chatting.

The door opened and Brandon stepped inside, his red flannel shirt showing off wide shoulders. His gaze found mine and a smile swept over his lips as he dipped his head.

Heat climbed up my neck. Was he here to ask me out? I couldn't show that I knew about it already. I had to stay cool. I placed my hands on the counter and shifted my weight from foot to foot.

He stopped across from me. "Hey, Devin. How are you?" Biting his lower lip, he beamed at me.

"I'm good, yourself?" My gaze caught motion at the back of the store and a black head of hair. Shit, it was Axel. Why was he here? Did Axel even know I worked here? Oh, but I did mention something about it when I'd met him in the bar the first night.

Axel sauntered up to the counter, unzipping his black leather jacket, exposing a purple and white striped shirt underneath. "Hey, Dev. So, you *do* work here." He stole a glance at Brandon, then gave me a coy grin.

Peering at Axel, Brandon wrinkled his nose and huffed.

"Hi, Axel. Yeah, I do work here." I glanced between them. "Uh, Axel, this is my um...friend, Brandon. Brandon, this is Axel, the guy I'm in a band with." This was awkward. Why was it awkward?

Axel and Brandon turned to each other and sized each other up.

"Hey, man." Axel held out his fist.

Brandon bumped their knuckles together. "Nice to meet you."

With his attention focusing on me, Axel said, "So, change of plans. We want to spend all day Sunday and maybe Monday night rehearsing. We've got a gig coming up next Friday."

"What?" I widened my eyes. I was not ready. I'd only sang with them the one time.

Axel held out his hands. "Don't worry, we're only playing for a half hour at this little dive bar. It's just a practice run. We can set up an iPad for you to use for the lyrics if you can't get them memorized." He glanced at Brandon, then came back to me. "You can invite your friends, so it won't be so

intimidating.” He set his hand on the counter. “The band already knows all these songs, so we don’t really need to practice all that much. All you gotta do is sing, man. You’ll be fine.”

My chest squeezed. I attempted to speak, but the words stuck in my throat.

“You got this.” Brandon reached over the counter and patted my shoulder. “Don’t worry, I’ll be there to cheer you on. I can’t wait.” He threw a smug grin at Axel.

“See? Nothing to worry about.” Axel crossed his arms over his chest.

“O-kay.” I drew a deep inhale, willing my chest to relax. I’d wanted to break out of my shell, guess I was really doing it.

“So, what sort of treats are good here?” Axel let his gaze skim over the baked goods under the glass.

“It’s all good. I don’t think you can go wrong here.” Brandon set his hand on his hip.

“Okay, then get me one of those pastry things with the red filling.” Axel pointed to the pastry, then lifted his brows at Brandon. “Oh, sorry, man, did you order already?”

“I uh, haven’t, but that’s okay. I’m really here to see Devin.” A soft grin crept over Brandon’s lips.

“Oh...” Axel lifted the corner of his mouth. “You sly devil, you.” He slapped me on the arm. “This is your boyfriend, isn’t it. You don’t have to introduce him as a *friend* to me.”

“No, um.” I waved my hands. Damn it, Axel was messing this whole thing up.

Brandon faced Axel. “We’re not boyfriends *yet*.” He stole a peek at me.

With a nod, Axel said, “I see.” He arched a brow at me.

Just get Axel the pastry and maybe he’ll go sit down so this won’t be so awkward. I fumbled around behind the counter, sticking the sliding door before cranking it open, then almost dropped the pastry from the plate as I picked it up with the

tongs. “Shoot.” I set the pastry on the counter, then blew out a slow breath. “There you go, Axel. Did you want coffee with that?”

“Naw, too late in the day for me to be drinking coffee. Caffeine whacks me out and I’d be up all night. I’ll just grab a bottled water.” Axel stepped to a refrigerated case and plucked out a water.

I rang him up and he paid.

“Thanks, I’ll let you two get on with whatever it was you were doing.” Axel threw a smirk at Brandon, then picked up his plate and walked off into the bakery, taking a chair at a table by the window.

Pursing my lips, I forced myself to face Brandon. Would he really ask me out after all that? If it were me, I’d lose my nerve.

He set his hand on the counter. “Devin, you got a minute?” He scanned the store behind him. “Looks like there’s no one coming—”

“Oh, hey, Devin. I’m done in the back. Why don’t you go hang out with this customer for a little while?” Nate tied his black apron around his waist, a sly grin playing on his lips.

What the hell? Furrowing my brows, I stared at Nate a moment. “Nate, he’s not some customer. He’s a friend of mine.”

“Yeah, I know that.” Nate snuck a peek at Brandon. “Anyways, go hang out for a bit. I’ve got this.”

“But I just got here.” I looked from Nate to Brandon and back again. Something was going on here. “Okay.” I reached behind me to untie my apron.

“No, you can leave that on. It’s cute.” Brandon’s face reddened.

Nate slipped into the back, then returned with two plated rainbow cupcakes. “Here, these just got done, so they’re really fresh.” He handed one to Brandon and one to me.

“Complements of the house. Did you want some coffee?”

I dropped my mouth open. There was definitely something going on here. “Sure.”

“Me, too.” Brandon ticked his head. “Come on, let’s sit over here.” He led me to a green couch at the very back corner and sat down, putting his cupcake on the coffee table. “Sit next to me?”

As my heart thumped in my ears, I took a seat next to him and set my cupcake on the table, then wiped my palms down my thighs. How did they get so sweaty all of a sudden?

He glanced toward the window, where Axel was sitting. In a low voice, he said, “So, Devin, what’s up with that Axel guy?”

“What do you mean?” I gulped hard, then picked up my cupcake and took a bite.

“I mean, uh, how close are you two?” He creased his brows and held his cupcake up.

“W-we just met. We spent some time on Sunday auditioning, but that was it. You knew that. Why are you asking?” I forced myself not to look at Axel. I didn’t want him to know we were talking about him. Why *were* we talking about him?

Brandon set his cupcake back onto his plate and frowned. “I don’t know. I guess I’m wondering if maybe, maybe you might like him?” He peeked at me.

“No.” I waved my hands. “He’s got a huge crush on some other guy. His brother’s friend or something.” Why was he so fixated on Axel?

With his brows wrinkling, he said, “So, you don’t like him because he likes somebody else.” He chewed his index finger, staring at the table.

“Brandon, why is this so important?” I puffed out a breath. He was confusing the shit out of me. *Again.*

As his gaze caught on mine, he said, “Want to go do something tomorrow night? Maybe grab a pizza over at uh, *Spinelli’s*?” As his gaze scanned my face, he held his breath.

I blinked. Was that how he asked someone on a date? It *was* my favorite pizza place. Olivia must have told him about it. At least she got it right. “Yeah, sure.”

“Yeah?” He blew out a breath, slumped his shoulders a moment, then straightened again, locking gazes with me. “How about a movie after? I don’t usually see horror movies, but we can see whatever one you want.”

Horror movies? I raised the edge of my mouth. Okay, Olivia must have been messing with him a little bit. She probably thought getting scared together in a movie theater would result in...well, something. I pursed my lips. I shouldn’t let him know Olivia texted me last night about this. “Yeah, I’ll pick something, and we can go see it.”

“Okay.” He fingered his plate. “Can you wear that eye make-up and stuff you wore to the party on Sunday?”

Dropping my jaw open, I said, “To get pizza and see a movie? Why?”

“Because I like it.” He peeked at me, then squirmed in his seat. “You seemed to like wearing it, too, didn’t you?”

“I-I do, but it was the first time I’d worn it out.” With a huff, I raked my gaze over the store and let it land on Axel. He sure as hell wore whatever the hell he wanted. Why shouldn’t I? “Yeah, okay. I’ll do that.”

“Thanks.” He picked up his cupcake and ate a bite. “Damn, this is so good.” His attention drew to me. “I’ll pick you up at six. Does that work?”

“Yeah.” I ate some cupcake, watching Nate walk toward us with coffees on a tray.

“Here you both go. Sorry it took so long. The machine was acting up on me.” Nate set steaming cups of coffee on the table with a creamer and sugar. “Everything going all right?” He fixated on Brandon.

“It is.” Brandon gave him a sly smile. “Thank you, Nate.” He set his hand high up on my thigh. “We’re going out for pizza and a movie tomorrow night.”

“Are you?” Nate nodded, dropping the tray to his side.

Heat shivered up my leg into my groin. His hand was really close to...I stared at his hand, my breath quickening as my jeans grew tight. God, what if Brandon kissed me tomorrow night? My cock pulsed. I'd lose my shit. I'd waited so long for something like this, dreamed about it even.

“Yep. He accepted.” Brandon gave me a quick grin.

“Good. Then I'll leave you to it.” With a glance at me, Nate walked off.

Brandon blew over his coffee, then sipped it. “So, I guess I should get your number and your address.”

“I-I live in the dorm. Manzanita.” I wetted my lips. Was he just going to leave his hand there? Did he have no idea what it was doing to me and in front of my boss?

“Here, let me get my phone out.” As he fished his phone out of the back pocket of his jeans, his hand left my thigh.

Oh, thank God. I released a long exhale, then drank some coffee. I wasn't sure if the coffee was going to wind me up even more, but I should drink it since Nate was giving us all this for free.

He handed his phone to me, the display opened. “Here, go ahead and put your number in.”

After setting the coffee cup down, I tapped my number into the phone and held it out for him.

He placed his hand over mine, holding it with the phone. “This will be fun tomorrow night. I'm going to ask a lot of questions. I want to know everything about you.”

“You do?” I focused on our hands, the heat from his hand electrifying my body. Why? What was so interesting about me?

“I do.” He took the phone from me, then set it on the table. “Devin, you know I—”

“Hey, Devin, a big group is coming in.” Nate stepped toward us, his forehead wrinkling. “I'm so sorry, man.” He

tossed a glance at Brandon.

“Oh, no worries. I’ll see you tomorrow, Dev.” A wide smile swept over his lips.

“Sure.” *Dev?* He’s acting like we’re best buddies now. I picked up my plate and coffee and hurried to the back of the counter, preparing for the group of students.

Later that evening, I unlocked my dorm room with my key card and stepped inside. As I set my backpack down in front of a mirrored closet door, my phone buzzed in my back pocket. I slid it out and held it to my face. The display read, *Mom*. I started the call, putting the phone on speaker. “Hey, Mom. What’s up?”

“Hi Devin, honey. I’m just calling to see how you’re doing. It’s been a while since I spoke to you.”

How long had it been? Two weeks? “Yeah, sorry. I’ve just been busy, you know, with the bakery job and final projects.” And a band and a maybe a date with a guy. A hot guy.

“Well, it’ll be over before you know it and you’ll be home.” She let out a soft sigh. “Maybe you can rethink going on a mission. You’ll still be young enough.”

I glanced at myself in the mirror. I was not the same man who left last August, let alone the same kid who left at eighteen. “Mom, we talked about this. It’s not for me.” If I had my way, I’d stay down here and never move back home. But I’d need a real job for that, not a part-time bakery counter job.

“But you’ll at least think about it some more, right? It’s so important. Especially before you get married.” Worry filtered through on her voice.

I wasn’t getting married. “Yeah, okay.” At least, I wasn’t going to marry someone from the church. There was no way they’d understand me. I stepped into my room, my chest growing tight. I was going to break her heart one day.

“How are your grades? Good, as always?” Her tone lifted.

“Yeah, I’m getting all As and maybe a B in one class, but I think I can raise it.” I settled into my black desk chair and

gazed out into the dark night, taking in a couple strolling hand in hand under the campus walkway lights between palm trees. Would I be holding Brandon's hand by this time tomorrow?

"They *will* be letting you come home for spring break at that bakery job of yours, right? We really missed you at Christmas."

"I know, Mom, but it was their grand opening. I had to stay. I really like working there. The owners are really nice." My chest bloomed with warmth as my mind filled with Nate and Dana and their close relationship. If only...

"I'd like to see this bakery sometime. Maybe when we come down for graduation?" She chuckled. "The treats sound so amazing."

"Uh, yeah, sure, Mom." No way that was happening. I rubbed my temple. I should change the subject. "So, how's Dad doing?"

"Oh, your father is just the same. He got a contract with a new builder, so he's been busy putting up some new homes." She breathed in. "He misses you, too. I know you don't see eye to eye sometimes, but he misses you."

How about, we disagreed on pretty much everything?
"Well, I'm glad he got a new contract." Leaning forward, I propped my elbows on the desk and my head in my hand. Wonder what Dad would have to say about the band? He'd hate it.

"Yeah," she said. "You all right? You sound sort of down."

"No, I'm just tired. It's been a long week. I went to a—" Shit, don't tell her about the party, or the audition or anything. "I've been studying and working a lot."

"Okay, well, I suppose I'd better let you go so you can get some rest."

"Yeah." I pressed my lips together. The things Mom didn't know and couldn't know were piling up. I'd have to watch myself.

“I love you, son. Take care of yourself and call me at least once a week. Can you do that?”

“Sure.” I winced. “Love you, too, Mom.” With a lump climbing up my throat, I said, “Goodbye.” The call hung up.

“Fuck.” I rubbed the sting out of my eyes. One of these times, I was going to have to say goodbye to her for the last time. I knew it. There was no going back to the straight, Mormon son she loved.

CHAPTER SIX

Brandon



The next evening, I checked the time on my cell phone as I stood at the gray metal door to Devin's dorm room. Six o'clock on the dot. This was it, the start of my first date with a guy, Devin no less. My mind scrolled through all the things I'd read on dating a Mormon. I'd have to be extra cautious and see where his head was at. I didn't want to push him too far, too fast and after my sexual exploits with Gina, that could happen. With my pulse quickening, I knocked.

"Just a minute." Devin's voice filtered out from behind the door.

"Okay." I straightened my thin gray sweater, then peeked down at my black jeans. I hoped I looked all right. I'd tried to dress up, but not be too dressy. I gnawed on my thumbnail. I had so many questions. Would he open up to me?

The door swung open, and he stood there, his ice-blue eyes made even lighter with the thin eyeliner, his plump lips that perfect pink from Sunday night, his hair slicked down the side of his face to a slight curl at his chin.

My breath caught and I took him in from head to toe, the way his white button-down shirt was buttoned to the collar and hung snugly over his slender body and skinny jeans. God, he looked dangerous and schoolmarmish at the same time. What a fucking turn on. I gulped hard. "You look um, you look really nice."

"Thanks." He slid his arms into his jean jacket, then stepped out and shut the door. "You um, you look nice, too." He stole a peek at me.

Stuffing my hands into my front pockets, I said, "Thanks." I didn't want to inadvertently grab his hand, so I better keep

my damn hands in my pockets. “So, after you.” I tilted my head at the hallway.

“Okay.” He led me down to the street and onto a walkway. “So, how was your day? Have any tests?”

“No, next week I have a paper to turn in, but did a lot of work on it last night.” I gazed up at the setting sun throwing red and orange streaks across a wash of clouds beyond the buildings. The day had been warm, but it was cooling down fast. Good thing he had grabbed a jacket. “How about you?”

With a shake of his head, he said, “No, this year it’s mostly papers. I’m going to do a financial analysis of the bakery for my final project. Nate suggested it.”

“Yeah? Nate seems pretty cool. It seems like a good place to work.” I eyed the *Spinelli’s Pizza* sign in red and green, hanging under a metal awning on a brick building. “So, I tried to get us a reservation, but they only take reservations for parties of six or more.” I snuck my hand out of my pocket to scratch my neck.

“Oh, well, it’s the thought, right?” He quirked the side of his mouth. “We can always sit at the bar, I’m okay with that.” He stopped at the glass doors and opened one, then waved me inside. “After you.”

“Thanks.” I stepped inside, taking a quick perusal of the room, the dark wooden tables, the mural of a woman’s face on the wall and a black iron staircase to an open second floor. It was already packed with students and families alike and a few people waited at a hostess stand. Two seats sat open at the end of the bar. “So, bar?” I pointed to them.

“Sure.” He meandered through the tables to the open seats and climbed up into a slatted barstool, then rested his forearms on the wooden bar top.

I slid into the chair next to him, my gaze taking in the rows of liquor bottles lit up against the far gray wall. “Maybe we should have come a little sooner.” I’d been imagining a nice quiet table in the corner that would be a little more intimate.

A male bartender with short, black, gelled hair set menus on the bar, then took our orders for beer.

“This place is always packed. I think on a Friday we would have had to come in at three to get a table.” With a chuckle, he picked up his menu and looked it over.

“What’s your favorite here?” I examined the menu as it lay on the bar.

“I like the supreme pizza. It has all the good stuff on it.” He laid his menu down and gazed at me. “You?”

“That sounds great. Why don’t we share one?” I smiled at him. Whatever he wanted. Tonight was all about him. I wanted him to see how much I had to offer.

The bartender set frosty beers in front of us, then took our order and walked off.

I held up my beer to Devin. “To first dates.” I gave him a broad grin.

With his eyes growing wide, he held his beer up. “So, this *is* a date.”

Tapping my beer against his, I said, “Yeah, what did you think we were doing?” I sipped my beer, my pulse speeding up. Maybe I hadn’t been direct enough. Did he think we were only hanging out tonight as friends? I flicked my gaze to his, then focused on my beer.

“I-I wasn’t sure. I was uh, hoping it was a date.” He bit the corner of his upper lip. “Sorry, I don’t, I haven’t really dated a whole lot.” He wrinkled his brows and drank some beer.

So, I needed to be pretty direct with him. I turned on my stool to face him, then set my hand on his, resting on the bar top. “This is a date. I wanted to ask you out on a date because I...I like you.”

“You’ve probably dated a lot, haven’t you.” He pressed his lips together.

With a stuttered chuckle, I said, “I guess. B-but I’ve never dated a guy.” I glanced at my hand resting over his. According to my research, strict Mormons didn’t have any physical

contact with the opposite sex until marriage. But we were the same sex, so how the hell did this work? “H-how uh, Mormon are you? I mean, is it okay if I hold your hand?”

“Yeah, it’s okay.” He turned his hand over and twined his fingers in mine. “I’m not Mormon anymore. It doesn’t work for me, as you can probably tell. I drink beer and coffee and I work in a queer bakery.” He snuck his gaze to meet with mine. “And *I’m* queer and I intend on acting on it. So, I’m not technically Mormon anymore.”

“Okay, so what do you mean by *acting on it*?” I lifted my brows. I’d definitely never dated anyone like him.

Looking me square in the eyes, he said, “It means I intend on doing sexual things.” He lifted his chin, studying me.

Holy fuck. My cock stirred. I liked the sound of that, especially after everything I’d read. Dangerous didn’t even begin to describe him. “Well, uh, good.” I drank more beer down.

He squeezed my hand, and he leaned in, his gaze boring into me. “Have you had sex with a guy?”

I sputtered on my beer, then coughed, bringing the back of my hand to my mouth. “Shit, no.” I chuckled. What the hell had I unleashed? “Only with women. But I’ve done anal with a girl.” And so, so much more. He had no idea what he might be in for. Gina could probably be described as kinky and she broke me in good.

His eyes widened. “You have?”

“Yeah, I had this girlfriend, Gina, and we, well, we tried a lot of things. She was pretty open to just about anything.” My heart warmed with her memory. “She was—is—a cool chick.”

“You still like her.” With a frown, he slumped his shoulders and let go of my hand, dropping his arm to his side.

“No, I don’t. We parted as friends. We started dating in our senior year in high school and tried to do the long-distance thing, but it didn’t work out. She’s going to Cal Poly for software engineering.” I shook my head. “She’s ridiculously smart.”

He nodded, then sipped his beer. “I’m just going to admit this right now. I’ve only kissed girls a few times on dates I’ve had here at college. Before coming here, I...” He twisted his lips. “I tried to kiss a guy back home, in high school, but he punched me in the face.”

“What an asshole.” I scooted my chair closer to him, then leaned in, my lips brushing the shell of his ear. I whispered, “I’d kiss you back.”

His breath hitched and he squirmed in his seat. “Promise?”

“Yeah.” I licked my lips, then focused on his mouth as he turned his head. I really wanted to kiss him, right here, at the bar. I didn’t care.

“Got your pizza here.” The bartender set the pizza and plates down, then eyed us both. “More beer?”

“Sure.” Blinking a few times, I tilted my glass. I’d already downed it and didn’t even realize it. I was too lost in Devin, in wanting to kiss him.

He gulped the rest of his beer down, then slapped the glass to the bar. “Me, too.”

With a sigh, I lifted a slice of pizza, pulling the melted cheese apart, and set it on my plate. I wanted to know more about this guy he’d kissed and how something like that happened up in Mormon country. Should I ask? I watched him bite into a slice of pizza. “So...this guy you kissed. How did that happen?”

He gulped down his food. “I didn’t kiss him. I tried.” He tensed a side of his mouth. “His name was Charlie and I’d known him since kindergarten. We were good friends, not best friends, but good friends. We hung out with the same kids.” He cut his gaze to me for a beat, then shook his head. “We were in tenth grade. It was the first time I think I understood my attraction to boys was different than to girls. I get um...” He shifted in his seat, creasing his brows. “I am attracted to women, but not the same way as to men. It’s been really confusing.” He huffed. “With men, it’s like it’s the real deal,

the full on everything. With women, it's just a sexual thing maybe."

With a nod, I ate another bite of pizza. No wonder he was stuck and trying to pin labels on himself. "Yeah, I can see how that would be confusing."

The bartender set new beers down in front of us.

"So, what kind of porn do you watch?" I sipped my beer. This might say a lot about his sexuality and help him figure it out.

"P-porn? I-I don't." He faced me, his eyes round.

I huffed out a chuckle. "What? No way." I set my pizza on my plate and wiped my hands on my napkin. "How can you never watch porn? How do you..." I scratched my neck. Should I have asked about this? I didn't want to make him more confused or feel awkward. Oh well, it was too late now to take it back.

"I have a very vivid imagination." He smirked, then drank some beer. "Besides, porn is not something Mormons are allowed to watch." He ate a bite of pizza.

"But I thought you weren't Mormon anymore?" How vivid was his imagination? My cock stirred. Getting him in bed might be a whole lotta fun.

He puffed out a breath. "I'm not, but...I guess some things are still stuck in my brain. I'm working on it." He glanced at me. "What sort of porn do you watch?" He arched a brow, focusing on me.

"All kinds. Anything I can get for free on my phone." I lifted another pizza slice onto my plate, then sucked on my fingers, licking oil and sauce from them. I glanced at him and did a double take.

He parted his lips, his eyes growing dark, his breath becoming audible, his gaze fixating on my mouth. "What um, exactly do you like?"

He was fucking turned on right now. I snaked my arm over the back of his chair, then came in close, my lips only an inch

from his, our foreheads almost touching. “I like to watch guys rub off on each other. Sometimes, I like to watch them fuck.” At least, that’s what I’d figured out after seeing Devin for the first time and knowing I had to come to terms with my own sexuality.

Squeezing his eyes shut, his tongue skimmed over his lips. “Y-you can see all that on your phone? Free?” He opened his eyes, his pupils blown.

“Sure can.” I glanced at his groin, covered by his shirt tails. He had to be hard right now. God, I wanted to touch him. He was making me want to do dirty things to him and I knew all about dirty things after my relationship with Gina. How would he react? As my heart pounded, my shaft lengthened, and I adjusted my jeans. I needed to put a stop to this, or we’d never make it to the movie. I didn’t want to treat him like a hookup. He was no hookup. I straightened in my chair, then drank a few gulps of beer, attempting to calm myself. “So, where were you when you tried to kiss this friend?” I’d get the subject off porn. How the hell had we ended up there anyways? Oh...I’d started it.

His throat dipped with a hard swallow. “I was uh, at a sleep over.” He shrugged a shoulder. “It was a birthday party thing and a bunch of us were playing board games late at night, so we decided to sleep over.” He furrowed his brows. “Me and Charlie were talking out on the back patio of the house on this couch thing after the other guys went to bed.” He hung his head. “I already knew I’d fallen in love with him and, and we were so close, sitting on that couch that I...” He pursed his lips.

My heart ached for him. What a shitty thing for that asshole to do. “Hey.” I’d never, ever let anyone hurt him like that again. I placed my hand over his, resting on his thigh. “You don’t have to tell me any more. It looks like it still stings. I think I get it anyways.”

Letting his gaze meet with mine, he said, “You do? Has something like that ever happened to you?”

“No, I never had the guts to try anything. Not until now.” I quirked the corners of my mouth. Hadn’t I been wondering if he was going to open up to me? It looked like he was, and if only made me like him more. I was done for. “Devin.”

“Yeah.” He drank some beer, then bit into a new slice of pizza.

“I uh...” I chuckled. I was going to sound stupid, but I was going to say it anyways. “I looked up some things on Mormon dating and I’m a little confused now. What’s okay with you and what’s not? I mean, you’re Mormon, but you’re not.” I scratched my brow. I really didn’t want to do something that would make him uncomfortable. He seemed timid sometimes, but other times, not so much.

“What I’m okay with?” He raised his brows.

I shifted in my chair. “Yeah, like are you okay with holding hands, kissing...” I focused on his mouth. “Touching.” God, I sounded like a middle schooler. How did he do this to me?

“Yeah, I’m okay with all of it. Just because I haven’t done something doesn’t mean I don’t want to.” He smirked. “I just haven’t had the opportunity.” A mischievous glint showed in his eye.

Oh shit, I was so done for. The dangerous Devin was back. “I can’t believe no guy has ever asked you out.” I gave him a sly smile.

“I didn’t exactly put myself out there. I did date a few women, like I said. That didn’t really go anywhere though.” He shifted to face me. “I think I’m not forward enough.” He lowered his brows. “Olivia says I was too straightlaced.”

I nodded. “Huh.” Sure, straightlaced on the surface maybe. I glanced at a clock hanging on the wall. “Hey, we need to leave in fifteen minutes if we’re going to make that movie.”

“Oh, yeah.” He finished off his beer, then ate more of his pizza and started on another slice.

A little while later, I followed Devin into the movie theater, holding a buttered popcorn bag and a Coke in a container. “Where do you want to sit?”

“Let’s sit toward the back here.” He made his way into an aisle a few rows down from the back. “I have something to tell you.” He took a seat toward the center of the theater.

“What’s that?” I dropped in next to him, my gaze roaming over the near-empty seats. Not many people were here to see this movie. It had been in the theaters for a while, so maybe its run was almost finished. I set my drink in the holder and popcorn between my thighs.

“So.” He wedged his drink in the holder on the arm of his chair. “Olivia told you I liked horror movies, right?”

Heat climbed up my neck. “How do you know that?” Shit, the girls must have told him.

“While Olivia was texting Layla, she was also texting me.” He smirked, then grabbed my hand. “It’s okay. It was nice that you were trying to find out what I liked before asking me out.”

I snapped my gaze to our hands, resting on the arm of the chair between us. He took my hand for the first time. “Okay, but they weren’t supposed to tell you.” I freed a long breath.

“Yeah, anyways, I don’t like horror movies. Olivia just told you that. I think it was her way of making sure something happened between us.” As the lights went down and the previews started, he glanced at the screen, then leaned in and whispered, “I don’t hate them, but I prefer action movies.”

With a shake of my head, I chuckled, then wrapped my arm around his shoulders. “Well, we can’t let Olivia down now, can we.” Now I could care less if I saw the movie. I was in a dark room with him, and no one was sitting by us. Fuck all this waiting. He had said he was okay with kissing. I cupped his cheek with my hand, turned his head, then fixated on his mouth. “You said it was okay to kiss you, right?”

He stared at me, the light from the screen flickering over his face. He tensed his brows and parted his lips. A soft moan floated out of him. “Brandon...”

A shiver flashed down my spine, flooding my groin with heat. My jeans tightened. Slowly I leaned in, then brushed my lips against his, teasing him.

He chased me, pressing his lips to mine, wrapping his hand around the nape of my neck. A faint whimper broke free from him. He squirmed in his seat.

My cock ached with need. I slipped my tongue inside his mouth and tangled it with his. He tasted like beer and pizza and something I needed all of. I shifted closer, pushing my side against the arm of the chair.

Kissing harder, he made soft, needful noises, his mouth slanting over mine, claiming me again and again.

A thunderous noise rang out in the theater.

With a shock, I broke the barrage of kisses, panting. I glared at the screen, the movie just starting, blood pooling around the head of a female teenager on a tile floor. “Shit, the movie started.” I shifted my attention to him, his chest heaving with deep breaths, his hands affixed to the arm rests. “Y-you okay?” I placed my hand over his, between us. That might have been the hottest kiss of my life.

He gazed at me with wide eyes, shining in the movie flicker. “I-I’m okay. I just...that was...” He ran his tongue over his mouth, then skimmed his teeth over his lower lip. “I can’t describe it.”

“You don’t have to.” I pulled his hand into my chest. “It was really fucking good though.” I offered a smile.

“Yeah.” With a wince, he shifted and pushed on the fly of his jeans.

It had made us both hard. With a faint chuckle, I kissed the back of his hand. “You want some popcorn?” I’d almost forgotten about it.

“Yeah, sure.” He reached across and dove his hand into the bag, brushing it against my groin.

My shaft pulsed. “Damn.” I was on a hairline trigger. I pushed back into the seat.

“What?” He twisted to face me and held a handful of popcorn close to his mouth.

“Nothing.” I ticked my head at him. “You can have all the popcorn you want.” I let the corner of my lips tug up. I certainly wasn’t going to stop him from feeling me up every time he grabbed a handful of popcorn. I was definitely jerking off later.

He settled into his seat, throwing the popcorn into his mouth. “I have no idea what’s going on.”

“Neither do I. We should probably pay attention.” I sank into my chair. I wasn’t sure I was going to be able to focus on the movie with him sitting next to me, not after that kiss. I glanced at him, chewing his popcorn.

He watched the movie, then leaned over and grabbed more popcorn, digging into the bag, tapping his knuckles against my groin.

With a deep inhale, I rested my cheek on my hand, letting a faint smirk play on my mouth. The guy had no idea that he was touching me there. Completely oblivious.

On the screen, a woman walked through a dark house, trembling, holding a knife.

Squeezing my hand, he turned toward me. “This is bad. Why do they always try to find the murderer instead of just running away?”

“Because then there wouldn’t be much of a story, would there.” I freed his hand, then threw my arm round his shoulders and snatched the hand with my other one. God, it felt good to hold him like this. I sniffed his hair, a floral spicy scent, then rested my cheek against his head.

As a loud bang clapped through the theater, the murderer popped out from behind a wall. The woman with the knife screamed.

“Holy shit!” He jumped and snuggled tighter into my side, hiding his head against my shoulder for a moment.

Thank you, Olivia. She’d been right about the scary movie. My heart swelled with emotion. Somehow, I wanted to protect him from more than just a scary movie. Something about him made me want to shelter him from everything bad in the

world. Maybe it was his innocence. Maybe it was the fact that I was falling for him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Devin



After the movie, I strolled hand in hand with Brandon down the sidewalk through the glow of the streetlights, a constant stream of cars driving past us. “So, now what?” I looked around at the students on café patios, tucked into two- and three-story brick buildings, chatting and peeking at their phones. I didn’t want to go home yet. But should I invite him back to my dorm room? The feel of his lips against mine had sent an electric shock down my spine. I really wanted to do that more. There were no rules with men on the first date hooking up, were there? Not like with the women I’d dated.

“Want to grab a drink at one of the bars?” He gave me a swift smile. “I know we just had pizza, but there’s that place down the street called *Four One Four* and it’s a pizza place with drinks and karaoke.” He squeezed my hand. “Feel like singing tonight?”

My heart jolted. “Sure.” I’d have to learn how to sing for people that might make me nervous, like him. I drew a deep inhale and let it go. What if he thought I sucked? I clenched my jaw a moment. No, I didn’t suck. If I did, Axel never would have let me join the band.

“Good, the place is the next one down.” He picked up the pace, tugging me along, then stopped under a black sign with the bar logo on it in neon green, reading, *Karaoke*.

I followed him inside a set of open, sliding glass doors to a low lit, mostly full room with booth seating along one wall, four-top tables in the middle and a bar lining the other wall with a string of orange bulbs hanging over it. A woman held a microphone and sang a rock song in the center of the room.

Damn, I was going to literally be the center of attention when I sang.

“I see an opening in that booth over there.” He pointed toward the back corner.

“Okay.” I let him lead me into the booth, sliding in beside him. What the hell should I sing? I thought back through all the songs I’d sang with *Knot Me* on Monday. I should do one of those.

A waitress stopped at our table and he ordered a pitcher of beer. “Did you want anything to eat?” He dropped his hand on my thigh.

The warmth of his hand tingled straight to my groin. I was so wound up after all the closeness in the theater...and that kiss. “No, I’m good. I’ll just go put a song in.” I rose up and walked to a woman seated at a table, facing an open laptop, typing into it.

Tugging my phone out of my back pocket, I stopped and checked my music app. That was it. I walked up to the woman and said, “Can you put me in for *Dance, Dance* by Fall Out Boy?”

She looked me up and down. “Sure, your name?”

“Devin.” My pulse picked up. This song was a little harder, but it was something Axel had really wanted to do. This was only practice. I needed to remember that. I was pushing myself and that was good.

I strode to the booth and slid in beside Brandon. Two beers were already poured, and the pitcher was half full. “That looks good.” I sipped my beer.

He draped his arm around my shoulders. “So, what song did you pick?”

“You’ll see.” With a shy smile, I dipped my head. Maybe I should have picked a love song or something. Was he expecting something like that? “It’s just a song I need to learn for the band. Axel wants to play it.”

“Okay.” He drank some beer. “I can’t wait to hear you.”

“Yeah.” No pressure. Crap. I drank more beer. I should maybe try to find out a little more about him. “So, you heard a lot about me tonight. Tell me more about your family.”

“Well, like I said, my brother, Kaiden, dated a few guys in college, but I think the real reason he quit was because some asshole called him a faggot when he was out with another guy.” He fingered the condensation on his beer glass.

“That happens here?” My chest tightened. I hadn’t seen anyone behave that way while I was down here. No, only up in Page.

“Yeah, sometimes. They were at a game, so not around here.” He peeked at me.

With a nod, I said, “So your parents don’t know any of this. B-but you think they’d be okay with it?” My heart pinched. What I’d give to be able to go home and be myself. But that could never happen.

He shrugged a shoulder. “Yeah, they wouldn’t care.” He kissed my cheek. “I plan on coming out if—” His eyes grew wide. “Well, you know...”

I shifted to face him, furrowing my brows. “No, I don’t know. If what?” Why was he being cryptic again? This seemed pretty important.

Gazing deeply into my eyes, he said, “If we become boyfriends.”

“Boyfriends?” My heart pounded. God, I’d love if things went that far. I needed to settle myself. “Oh.” I nodded, then sipped my beer.

“You’re not out either, right? What is your family like? Are they strict Mormon?” He worried his lower lip.

“Yeah, they’re pretty strict. My mom keeps asking me to do a mission after I graduate.” I huffed. “I’m not doing that. I don’t know how to tell her...” My chest squeezed. “I’m not going home after this. I think I might just disappear on them or something.” It would probably be best if they never knew. A lump formed in my throat.

“Devin, come on, you can’t do that.” He pulled me into his chest, then kissed my head. “Family is important. I’m sure they’d accept it eventually.”

Staring at the floor, I shook my head. “No, they wouldn’t.”

“Next up is Devin with *Dance, Dance*,” the karaoke woman said over the microphone.

I stood up, straightened my shoulders, then headed for the karaoke table and snatched a microphone. After that conversation, this would be a piece of cake. I could pour all of my messed-up feelings into it.

The drums started up for the song, followed by the bass guitar.

With my gaze finding the television screen, I watched the dots disappear one by one and the lyrics scroll up. On cue, I started singing the first verse, tapping my foot, my knee bending with the beat. As the song built to the chorus, I raised my voice and bowed over the mic, letting my long bangs veil my face, and belted out the lyrics.

As the song worked into a steady rhythm of guitars and drums, I straightened and moved my body to the beat, swaying side to side bending at the knees, bouncing as the beat changed up.

A few girls ran into the center of the bar and hopped around me, their arms in the air, bright smiles on their faces, then more people stood and danced, their arms swinging, the whole room bobbing up and down.

A warm body wrapped around me from behind.

As I sang with all the pent-up frustration inside me, I twisted around.

With a wide smile, Brandon gyrated his hips to the music, swinging his arms high, then planted his hands on my hips, stepping his foot between my legs and brushing his groin over mine through our jeans.

Tingling heat flooded my body. I turned the mic to the side, slapped a hand to his hip, then sang even louder, hitting every

note, swaying with him back and forth to the music until the song ended.

“Holy shit, that was awesome. You’re fucking hot when you sing.” He hooked his arms around my waist and pulled me in for a quick hug, then kissed my cheek.

Panting, I said, “Yeah? You liked it?” I glanced at him, then the mic. I had to bring that back.

“Well, everyone, that was Devin. That was great. Let’s hope he sings another one.” The karaoke woman clapped along with the rest of the bar.

“I certainly see why Axel asked you to audition for his band. You are going to be very popular around campus.” He snatched up my hand, then walked with me to the karaoke table.

I placed the mic on the table. “Thanks. That was fun.”

“You will sing another one, right?” She smiled at me.

“I-I don’t know.” My attention drew to Brandon. All I wanted right now was to spend time getting closer to him. “We’ll see.” I tugged on his hand and led him back to our table. Maybe we could finish up the beer and go back to my dorm. I dropped into the bench seat.

He slid in next to me. “I would not want to be the guy following you up there.” He lifted his beer, then pointed his index finger at a new singer taking the mic, a young man.

“Oh, come on.” I took a few gulps of beer, electricity coursing through my veins. Something about singing these songs made me feel so alive, gave me courage like I’d never had.

Slipping his arm over my shoulders, he leaned in close. “So tell me, what happens to you when you’re singing? ‘Cause you barely looked like the same person out there.”

“Yeah? I don’t know. It’s like something starts pouring out of me and I can’t stop it. I have to just go with it.” I shook my head, grinning. “It feels good.”

He kissed my shoulder. “When you start playing shows with *Knot Me*, I’m going to have to fight to keep the women and men off you, aren’t I?”

With a quick glance at him, I said, “I don’t know about that.” I fingered my beer glass, my heart warming. It would be kind of cool to see him showing his affection that way. I’d never had anyone do something like that for me. But then, I’d never had a boyfriend. Or a girlfriend. “Do, do you want to drink up and head back to my dorm?” My gaze locked onto his stunning dark eyes, framed by brown curls. I was ready for this. I knew I was.

His smile faded. “Yeah, we can do that.” He freed me and downed his beer.

As we came up to the door to my dorm room, I slipped my key card out of my wallet, then unlocked the door.

Brandon tugged on my elbow, turning me to face him. “Hey, maybe we should call it a night and get back together tomorrow? What do you think?” With his lips bowing down, his gaze searched my face.

“What? Why?” My chest squeezed. Did I do something wrong? But everything had felt so right.

With a deep inhale, he hung his head, then planted his hands on his hips. “I don’t want to push this.” As his gaze met mine, his forehead wrinkled. “This is not a hookup. Not to me anyways.”

I widened my eyes. “It’s not a hookup to me, either.” I scanned the empty hallway. What the hell was going on? “I don’t hook up.” I huffed a chuckle. “Hell, I don’t do anything.”

Rushing forward, he pinned me against the door, his forearms on either side of my head, his face close, our chests touching. “I want to do things to you, Devin. I don’t know that I can stop myself if I go in there. Do you get what I’m saying?” He focused on my mouth, swiping his tongue around his lips.

As my breath quickened and heat flooded my groin, I said, “I’m pretty sure I want you to do things to me.” I thrust my hips, skimming my hardening shaft against his. A pulse of pleasure shook through me. I definitely wanted this.

His pupils flared and his chest heaved with deep breaths. All at once, he crushed his lips against mine and shimmied his tongue inside my mouth, flicking it over mine. A deep moan rumbled out of his throat, and he ground our solid cocks together.

With a soft whimper, I slipped my hands under his shirt and kneaded the hard muscles of his back, then came down to squeeze the round muscles of his ass. I rocked against him, seeking out as much friction as I could on my aching dick. Tension coiled inside me. I needed more, so much more. I broke the kisses. “Come inside, please.” I kissed his chin, then bit at his neck, letting only my need lead the way.

“Fuck, I want to.” He panted, pulling my head against him, then pushed himself off the door and stepped back, his face lowered. “I-I have to go, Devin. I don’t want to do this yet.” He flicked his gaze to mine, his brows wrinkling. “Can I see you tomorrow?”

Coldness replaced his body heat over the front of my body. My cock ached for attention. I stared at him. This was his first date with a guy, too. “Why, are you having second thoughts?” Pain sliced through my heart. What if this night was all we’d ever have? I’d let my guard down. I’d let him in. *No...*

He inhaled deeply, then stepped to me. “I am not having second thoughts. Quite the opposite.” He took my hands in his, then shook them once. “Listen to me. I *like* you. A lot.”

My gaze darted between his eyes. “Then why...” I didn’t want him to go. I wanted to *be* together. I was ready.

“Please understand. I want to take this slow. I don’t want to fuck this up.” He furrowed his brows, fixating on me.

With a hard swallow, I nodded and dropped my gaze to the floor next to us. Maybe he wasn’t ready. I needed to honor

that. “Okay. But I uh, I work tomorrow. I close the store, so won’t get done until about nine.”

“Shit.” He squeezed my hands. “So, I’ll see you after. I’ll come to the store at the end of your shift, okay?”

I snapped my gaze to his. “Sure.” But I didn’t understand this. “Brandon?”

“Yeah?” He edged in closer, then brushed a lock of hair from my forehead.

“I didn’t do something wrong, did I?” I pursed my lips.

“No, you did everything right.” Leaning in, he pressed a soft kiss to my lips. “Don’t think for a second I don’t want to spend the night with you. Some day we will.” He released my hands. “Just not tonight. I want it to be special. I want us to really know each other.”

“Okay.” I freed a rush of breath. This was going to be a long night, thinking about all of this. And even longer tomorrow waiting to see him again. “Well, good night then.” I forced a smile.

“Good night.” He placed another gentle kiss over my mouth. “I’ll see you tomorrow night. Think of what you want to do, and we’ll do it. Okay?” As he started down the hallway, he waved behind him.

I watched him go until he turned into the main lobby of the building. “Shit.” I opened my door and strode into my room, shucking off my jean jacket, my mind ruminating over the evening’s conversations. *Porn. It’s all free.*

I quirked the edge of my mouth. God knows I needed to get off after all that had happened tonight. Maybe it was time I checked it out and saw what being with a man was really like? It couldn’t hurt and the damn church couldn’t touch me here.

After getting ready for bed, I walked across my room in a pair of gray boxer briefs, holding my phone to my face. What should I even search for to find what I was looking for? I climbed up onto my bed and lay back against the pillows, then ran a search for *gay porn*. All sorts of websites popped up. “Holy cow.” I clicked on a few of them, the thumbnails

showing men in various states of dress and sexual positions. As I perused the videos, my shaft lengthened, poking out of the waist band of my underwear. What did Brandon say he'd watched? Guys rubbing off on each other.

With a smirk, I ran another search, then stopped on a video of two younger men, naked, thrusting on a bed, their dicks skimming over each other. My cock pulsed, dribbling pre-cum. That was definitely worth watching. I played the video, reaching my hand down into my briefs and placing slow strokes over my shaft.

As the two men on the screen moved faster and snuck a hand between them, stroking both cocks at the same time, my breath quickened, and sensation heightened in my shaft. I lowered the band of my boxer briefs, then picked up the pace over my erection, squeezing the tip. "Oh, God," I said, breathless. I imagined myself as the man on the bottom with Brandon being on top. As pleasure washed over me, I tensed my brows and snuck my lower lip between my teeth, stifling a moan.

I moved my hand faster, jerking my fist over my sensitive cock. My balls drew up. As one of the men on the screen shot a ribbon of cum, I tumbled over the edge, pleasure erupting up my spine. With each wave of orgasm, I let out a sharp gasp and hot cum splashed my chest and stomach. As it slowed, I panted and closed my eyes, dropping my phone to the side of my thigh. That had been intense. Probably the most intense orgasm I'd ever had. How much better would it be with Brandon?

My chest ached. Why did he leave like that? Maybe I'd said something stupid, and he'd decided he shouldn't do anything more than kiss me. Maybe I gave off some weird vibe. Yeah, that was probably what it was. "Damn it." I fisted my hand and punched the mattress beside me. I should have been rubbing off on Brandon, like in the video, instead of watching it by myself. I lay there for a long moment, struggling to stop the flood of thoughts.

With a sigh, I skimmed my boxer briefs down my legs, then wiped the droplets off my chest and stomach with them. I

should go to bed. I had a long day at the bakery tomorrow. Hopefully Brandon would still want to see me.

The next evening, I picked up plates from the tables out on the floor of the bakery, sighing and drooping my shoulders. The place had been really busy earlier, but now people were finishing up and leaving. I couldn't get the whole conversation out of my head from the night before and the more I'd thought about it all day, the more it had bugged me. What had I done?

Dana walked out from behind the glass counter, his white baker's smock smudged with various colors. "Hey." He stopped next to me and placed a hand on my shoulder.

"Yeah?" I straightened with a stack of plates in my hand.

"Put those plates down a second and sit with me." He sat on a green couch, then glanced up at the ceiling, letting his head fall back. "It was a busy night."

I set the plates back down and dropped in next to him. "It was. The people were lined up out the door at one point."

He nodded, then faced me. "You seemed, I don't know, distracted all day."

With my eyes growing wide, I said, "Oh, did I mess something up?" Now I was letting this thing with Brandon get in the way of my job. That shouldn't happen.

"No, no, you didn't mess anything up." He chuckled. "I'm just a little concerned. You had a date with Brandon last night, right? Did everything go okay?"

"Yeah, I did. It went, well..." I slumped my shoulders. Should I confide in him? He was a few years older with a lot more experience. He might be good to talk to.

"It went well, but?" He lifted his brows.

"Yeah, but at the end, Brandon sort of left me hanging." I perused the store. What if Brandon walked in right now?

"Hanging how?" He shifted forward in his seat, resting his elbows on his knees, studying me.

I blew out a puff of air. “At the end of the night, we went back to my dorm room, and I invited him in, but he left instead. He said something about taking things slow and not wanting a hook up.” Brandon’s husky voice sounded in my head, *I want to do things to you, Devin*. A shiver worked up my spine.

“Okay, but it sounds like you don’t believe that.” He tilted his head. “Did he give you a reason not to believe him?”

I pinched my lips. “No.”

“Then why don’t you believe him?” He lifted a leg onto the couch between us, throwing his arm over the back.

“I-I don’t know. I guess I feel like if he really likes me, he would have wanted to spend more time with me.” I sighed. This was stupid. It was obvious that Brandon liked me. He’d said so.

“So you’re equating time spent with the intensity of his feelings and not the fact that maybe he’s trying hard to do the right thing.” He curled the edge of his mouth. “I heard from Nate that neither of you have been with guys before.”

“Yeah.” I wrung my hands together in my lap. “But I’m ready.” I flicked my gaze to his. “What if he’s not? What if he’s still trying to decide?”

He tensed the side of his mouth. “If he is, then you have to let him figure it out. It’s not right to push him.” With a smirk, he said, “But I don’t think that’s the case. I think you need to take him at his word. Trust what he’s telling you.” He tapped my thigh. “I think you need to figure out why you aren’t trusting him. What’s up with you?” Standing up, he set his hands on his hips and looked around the store. “I see a few stragglers coming in.”

I grabbed the plates, then rose from the couch. He was right. I was the one being weird. I was letting my insecurities get in the way. If I was going to change myself, I had to change that, too. I had to have more confidence in myself. I squeezed his arm. “Thanks, Dana. I think that helped.”

“Sure, anytime.” He flashed me a grin, then walked off.
“Better get ready for the next wave.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Brandon



I peeked up at the dark sky, a few clouds drifting overhead, then opened the glass door to the bakery and strolled inside. I'd been anxious to see Devin all day. I hadn't left things very well between us last night. He'd looked so dejected. I'd tried to explain how I felt, that I wanted to get to know him before we got into bed together. With it being the first time for both of us, I didn't want things to be awkward. Plus, I was so wound up already I was afraid I'd push him too far. But damn, it had been hard to walk away and not have my way with him.

As my gaze caught Devin's, I stopped, my heart flickering. Was it my imagination, or was he getting more and more gorgeous each time I saw him?

He cleaned the glass on the baked goods display with a paper towel and a spray bottle.

"Hey, Brandon." Dana walked out from the back room and waved at me. "Hey, Dev, I can finish up if you want to leave." He wiped his hands on a rag.

"No, I was supposed to close. I don't want to leave you to do it." Pressing his lips together, Devin glanced behind him at me. "Hey, Brandon."

I stepped up beside him and peeked inside the glass. "Is it too late to get one of those chocolate petits fours?" I pointed at them.

"Of course not and for you, on the house." With a wide grin, Dana slid the back open on the display and plucked one out, then handed it to me over the counter. "There you go. You sure you only want one?"

“Yeah, that’ll be enough.” I bit into the treat, a flood of bitter chocolate, sweet and a hint of cherry liquor melting in my mouth. I moaned. “Oh, damn, that’s good.”

Devin watched me, lips parting and eyes growing dark.

“I’ll be in the back, getting it cleaned up.” Dana threw a glance at Devin, then left through the door to the back room.

“Hey.” I tapped Devin’s palm with my fingers. Was it okay to hold his hand? “I’m sorry about last night.”

He twined his fingers with mine. “It’s okay. I understand.” With a sigh, he set the paper towel and spray bottle on the counter, then faced me. “B-but you’d tell me if you’re not sure about this, if you’re still questioning it, right?” He creased his brows.

Squeezing his hand, I said, “Yes, of course. But I’m not.” How could I have let him think that? “I’m not.”

With a nod, he released my hand and picked up his cleaning supplies. “It’ll be another ten minutes before I can go.” He sprayed the glass, then wiped it. “Where did you want to go after this?”

I tensed my mouth. I hadn’t thought that far ahead. “I don’t know. Are you hungry? We could grab some Chinese takeout maybe and go back to your dorm room.” That would probably make him happy. Tonight, I wasn’t as wound up and could hopefully control myself.

Stopping his motions over the glass, his attention drew to me, his brows lifted. “Y-you want to go back to my room? Tonight.”

With a shrug of my shoulder, I said, “Or we could go back to my apartment. At least there, we can have a few beers without having to sneak it.” Having him in my place would be like a dream come true with all the fantasies I’d already had of him there. But I had to control myself.

“Okay, let’s do that.” As the corner of his mouth curled, he leaned in and pecked my cheek with a quick kiss.

As I widened my eyes, my heart warmed. Damn, he was adorable.

An hour or so later, I stood at my apartment door, unlocking it with my keys. “My parents set me up here two years ago, but it’s pretty sparse.” I opened the door and stepped inside. “So, don’t expect too much.” I flicked on the light, looking around the room. I wasn’t expecting to come back here with Devin tonight, but at least I’d cleaned up the clothes that had been over the sectional sofa earlier. My gaze snagged a stain on the end of the sofa’s puffy leather armrest. Shit, I’d missed a spot after I’d jerked off last night. “Uh...” I raced into the kitchen.

He strolled inside and made his way to the couch, setting our to-go food containers and a six pack of beer on the square coffee table. “The place is nice, actually.”

“Hold on.” I wet a paper towel, then ran out and wiped the armrest. “Sorry.” I glanced at him. Could he tell what that was?

With a grin, he sank into the couch, pulled a bottled beer out of the box, then twisted the cap off. “Beer?” He handed it to me.

Straightening, I took the beer. “Thanks.” I sipped it and set it down on the end table, under a silver globed lamp. If he knew what that stain was, he sure was hiding it well. “I’ll put the rest of the beers in the fridge and get us some silverware and plates.”

He drank some beer, then grabbed the remote from the table and turned on the television resting across the room on the silver and glass console. “Okay.”

After throwing out the paper towel and getting forks, spoons, and plates, I joined him on the couch, sitting next to him, leaving some space between us. I shouldn’t get too close. It would be too easy to start touching him. “What do you want to watch?” I picked up my beer and drank a few gulps.

“Do you ever watch *Saturday Night Live*?” He flicked through the channels until he found it.

“Not really, but that’s because I’m usually out on Saturday nights.” I opened the containers of Chinese food, then spooned out rice, orange chicken and Mongolian beef onto a plate and slid it toward him. “Here you go.”

“Thanks.” He picked up a fork and pushed it into the food. “This is different, huh?”

“What do you mean?” I spooned food onto another plate, then picked it up along with my fork. See? I could do this. I could sit alone on a couch next to him and not attack him. I snuck a peek at his full lips. But that wasn’t going to last long if I kept thinking about it.

“Usually it’s me serving you.” He gave me a sly smile and ate a forkful of chicken and rice.

“Yeah.” I chuckled and nodded, then ate some beef and rice. I needed to start up some conversation. Things were starting to feel a little awkward. “So, tomorrow you’re rehearsing all day with your band, right?”

“I am.” He washed his food down with some beer. “I hope I can get these songs down by this weekend. I’ve been trying to listen to them over and over when I’m working in the back of the bakery.”

I poked at my food. “Yeah, but Axel said you can use an iPad to read the lyrics.” How the hell did he even have time for all this?

“I know, but that just seems lame. I don’t want my first time out to be me reading the lyrics.” He twisted his mouth, then turned to face me. “Do you work?” He stuffed more food in his mouth.

“No, I don’t. My dad was a finance guy, so he made sure me and my brother had nice, fat college funds so we wouldn’t have to work while we were in school.” I sipped some beer. “I don’t know how you do it, school, work and now a band?”

Furrowing his brows, he said, “Yeah, but Axel says all the guys in the band are doing the same thing, so it shouldn’t be too bad.” He drank some beer. “Really, if I spend a lot of my

weekend nights out in the bars anyways, I might as well be making a little money at the same time.”

“So, you’re getting paid?” I licked sauce off my fork.

With his lips parting, he stared at my mouth, then squirmed in his seat. “Uh, yeah, not much but a little bit and usually a few free drinks.”

It was starting. He was getting turned on. My cock stirred. There was no mistaking that look and the bulge growing under the front pocket of his jeans. This was how I’d gotten so worked up last night. Maybe this was a bad idea. But why was I even fighting it anymore? Would I be fighting it if I was with a woman? I shifted closer to him.

“I think I will need to spend a lot of time studying during the week.” He ate more rice and chicken, then washed it down with beer, his brows wrinkling. “So, I probably won’t have a lot of time to see you.”

My heart pinched. “Oh.” I stared at my food. That sucked. I’d missed him all day while he was at work, and we were just getting started. We’d have to figure something out. “Maybe we could study together sometimes?” I stole a peek at him. I just wanted to be close to him, it didn’t matter what we were doing or even if we were talking to each other.

With a nod, he said, “Yeah, maybe. I do usually study with Olivia since we’re in a lot of the same classes.”

Olivia...I’d been wondering about their relationship. She obviously liked guys and Devin had said he’d dated some women. I sucked in a breath. “So, you and Olivia, have you ever dated or were you always just friends?”

He snapped his brows up. “Oh, we’ve always been friends.” He ate more food, then gulped it down. “She was the first one to see me try lipstick.” He rocked once. “I didn’t know anything about gender fluidity or being nonbinary, and she introduced me to it.” He let his gaze meet with mine. “Have you ever watched *Queer Eye*?”

“Uh, no.” I drank some beer, edging closer to him. Maybe I should if it would help me understand him more.

“Well, one of the guys on that show is nonbinary. He dresses in, well, skirts and dresses if he wants.” He worried his lower lip. “I want to try it.”

I looked him over, imagining him in a mini-skirt. *Easy access*. My cock twitched. Why did my brain always have to go there? “So, why don’t you?”

“You’d be okay with that? You wouldn’t feel weird being with a guy in a, a dress or, or high heels?” He wrinkled his forehead.

“No, I mean, women can wear whatever they want. Why shouldn’t guys?” I closed the gap between us, sliding my food and beer along the table, then gazed deeply into his stunning eyes and brushed his long bangs to the side. “I think you’d look great like that.” I imagined slipping my hand under his skirt like I’d done with Gina and finding him hard and wanting, the way he’d been at his dorm room door last night. God that was fucking hot. My breath quickened.

His brows tensed. “Uh, Brandon?” He focused on my mouth. “Can I uh, can I kiss you?”

With lust tingling up my spine, I nodded. “Anytime you want.” *Don’t go crazy, Brandon*.

He leaned in, tentative at first, skimming his lips over mine, tasting a little at a time. He parted his lips and flicked his tongue at the seam of my mouth.

Opening my lips, I pressed into the kiss, deepening it. My swollen cock ached. I ran my hand down his arm, then up his thigh to stop at his hip crease. God, how I wanted to open his jeans and touch him. *Don’t, not yet*.

Releasing a soft moan, he placed his hand on mine over his thigh, then slowly pushed it toward his zipper. “Please...” He placed needy kisses over my mouth.

As I fingered the edge of his hard shaft under the denim, my cock pulsed with a shockwave of pleasure. Heat washed over my body. I wanted him and I wanted him bad. I broke the kisses to nibble down his neck.

He whimpered, tilting his head back, shutting his eyes and biting his lower lip. He pushed my hand over his stiff cock and his breath shuddered. “Oh, God, please.” He rolled his hips, pressing harder over my hand.

His cock jerked under my palm and the scent of him overwhelmed me as I bit at the sensitive skin of his neck then soothed it with a skim of my tongue. My own erection ached in my jeans and my heart hammered in my chest. How had it gotten this far already? We were supposed to be eating and watching a funny show.

With quick breaths and a raw voice, he said, “Do those dirty things to me.” He fell against the couch back and rushed to open his fly.

Did he really say that? Oh my God, I was in trouble. “No, no, Devin, don’t.” I was going to lose my shit and take him way further than he would want to go. He had no idea the effect he had on me and the things I’d done and wanted to do. I snatched his hands, holding them still. “Stop.”

He peeked at me through his long bangs, his lips bowed down. “Why not?” He dropped his gaze to our hands. “What’s the matter? Why don’t you want to do anything with me?” His ears reddened.

I cupped his cheeks in both of my hands and lifted his face, gazing deeply into his blue eyes. “I do want to do a whole lot of things with you. I’m just afraid that if we go too fast, it won’t be as good as if we waited and got to know each other really well. I’m looking for...” I glanced at the wall. Was I really going to say this? I was starting to sound like a chick. Gina would laugh her ass off.

“What are you looking for?” His gaze dashed between my eyes, his forehead wrinkling. “Finish that sentence.”

“I’m looking for a deep emotional connection with you first.” Heat flooded my cheeks. I’d said it, I’d really fucking said that out loud. What a douche. I huffed and dropped my hands. Why was I even being like this? Because he was special. And these were going to be firsts for both of us. I’d

never met anyone like him before and it felt like that was the right thing to do.

“What? So, like you want to confess to each other first?” He crossed his arms over his chest. “Fine, I like you. A lot. Is that good enough?” He pressed his lips together.

I widened my eyes. Holy shit, all the times I’d said that to him, this was the first time he was saying it back. “Do...do you mean that?”

With a quick glance around the room, he said, “Yeah, I mean it.” His gaze found mine.

Shimmying closer to him, I grabbed his hands and held them between us. “I know I might sound weird. I’m not even sure what’s gotten into me, except...” I thought back through my jumbled feelings. “I don’t want to mess this up. For some reason, you’re”—I ran my gaze over him—“you set off some intense primal shit in me and I seriously don’t think I could stop myself from doing things that you might not be ready for.” Great, now I was feeling like some sort of predator.

He dropped his jaw. “Why is that bad? I’m pretty much ready for everything.” He exhaled a quick breath. “I don’t want to be a virgin anymore.”

A shudder rocked through me. Damn, what I’d give to fuck him right now. Stop it. I had to reason with him instead. “I don’t want to have sex with you just to take your v-card. I want to have sex with you because it feels right, because we have—”

“An emotional connection.” His face grew slack, and his eyes rounded. “I’m sorry. I guess I’m the one pushing you to do things you’re not ready for.”

With my head cocking, I mulled over his words. He was right. I wasn’t ready. But for completely different reasons than having second thoughts. “You know I’m not having second thoughts, right?” I squeezed his hands. “Right?”

“Yeah.” He pressed a long, chaste kiss over my mouth. “I think I understand now.”

“Good.” I kissed him again, then rested my forehead against his. “You are so sexy, you almost make me lose my damn mind.”

“Good, one of these days I want to see that.” He offered a smirk. “Should we eat the rest of our dinner now?”

“Yes, let’s.” I turned to face my food, then shoveled it into my mouth, finishing it off while he did the same.

“Let me get the dishes.” He lifted the plates from the table.

“Thanks, but just leave them in the sink for now and I’ll wash them later.” I drank down my beer. “Can you grab some more beer from the fridge?”

“Yeah sure.” He walked into the kitchen with the dishes, then returned with two opened bottles of beer, handed one to me, then sat down. He arched a brow at me. “So, how are we going to get that deep emotional connection you were talking about?” He snickered.

With a shake of my head, I said, “Dude, you are on a mission to lose that v-card, aren’t you?” I threw my arm over the back of the couch, then shifted into the corner with my legs across the cushions. “Come here.” I wiggled my fingers.

He dropped in next to me. “Now what?”

“Now, we watch this show together.” I reached around him and hauled him onto my chest. “There.”

Laying his head against my chest, he said, “This is nice.” He snuggled into my side, then sipped some beer.

Some time later, I fluttered my eyes open to a movie droning on the television. I looked down at Devin’s head resting on my shoulder, his eyes closed, his chest rising and falling in a slow rhythm. God, he looked like an angel. My heart bloomed with emotion. I was falling so hard for him. Was he really feeling the same? My mind went back over the earlier make-out session. I’d really have to be careful now. I’d had more than a little taste of him and damn, was it good. Everything with him was the best.

With a soft sigh, I skimmed my hand over his hair. One thing I knew, this time around I wasn't going to rush getting into the bedroom. I'd done that too many times over the years, even with Gina, and it always made the first times at least a little awkward. I needed to see that dangerous side of Devin come out in full force, but come out because he felt so safe and connected to me. I didn't want anything to ruin that in him.

Stirring, he mumbled, his fingers toying with my shirt.

I kissed his forehead, then whispered, "Hey, it's late. We should probably get you home." Too bad he would be practicing with his band all day tomorrow.

"No..." He snuggled closer into my side, his eyes still closed. "Can't I just stay here?"

Oh my God, he was going to kill me with this. "Don't you have to go to practice tomorrow?" I brushed my fingers up and down his cheek.

"Yeah, but not until one. I can sleep in." He threw a leg over mine. "I'm so tired, it was so busy today at the bakery."

I hugged him closer, kissing his head. How could I deny him? But how the hell was I going to sleep with him here and not touch him? My cock woke. Damn it, my dick needed to stay out of this. I sucked in a deep breath. "Okay, you can stay here."

A faint smirk played over his mouth.

I did a double take of his face. Oh, he was a devious one. I shimmied up from the back of the couch and stood, then raked my fingers through my hair.

"Where are you going?" He held up his hand.

"I'm getting you some blankets and a pillow," I said.

He sat up. "You're not going to let me sleep in your bed with you?" He rubbed his eye with the heel of his hand.

"I-I wasn't but..." I let out a puff of breath. "Okay. Come on. I've got some extra sweats you can wear." I better not regret this. But how nice would it be to sleep with him in my

bed? Well, except that I was horny as hell now after all that had happened. I held my hand out.

He took it.

Pulling him off the couch, I hooked an arm around his waist and led him into my bedroom.

He plodded along, then stopped and stretched his arms over his head, the hem of his t-shirt letting a swath of taut abdomen peek through over his jeans in the glow of the nightlight in the corner.

Damn. Heat filled my groin. Even that was enough to arouse me. I really had to watch myself. With a shake of my head, I opened a drawer on my dresser and snagged a pair of sweats, then held them out behind me. “Here, you can wear these.” I peeked back.

He stood with his jeans around his ankles and his shirt thrown to the floor. His nipples peaked as goosebumps broke out over the muscles of his chest. “Damn, it’s cold in here.” He grabbed the sweats and shimmied them up his legs.

I really didn’t need to see that. I looked down at the bulge under my front pocket. Were the boners ever going to stop? With a sigh, I grabbed a pair of sweats out of the dresser for myself, tossed my clothes to the floor, then worked the sweatpants on. As I turned around, I caught him throwing the covers down and climbing into my double bed. It was going to be tight having two people sleep in it and not be all over each other.

“This mattress is nice. The one at the dorm kind of sucks.” He snuggled into a pillow on his side.

“Yeah?” I climbed into bed. I had to think about anything but his hot body next to me. “Aren’t they like singles, too?” I pulled the covers up to my chin and lay on my back, staring up at the ceiling.

“Yeah, and they’re hard.” He shifted closer to my side.

“Hard,” I whispered and caught my lower lip in my teeth. He had to say *hard*. A whisper of hot breath shivered over my

neck. I turned my head, coming face to face with him, his wide eyes shining in the dark.

“Can I...can we...” He skimmed his hand over my stomach, then left it on my hip.

With my breath snagging in my throat, I took a long swallow. “Um—”

“It was so comfortable on the couch lying together. I just thought we could keep doing it here.” He lifted his head, then gently placed it on my shoulder. “Maybe you could put your arm around me?”

“Sure.” I wriggled my arm underneath his neck and wrapped it around his shoulder as he edged into my side.

He kissed my chest. “Goodnight, Bran.”

“Goodnight, Dev.” My heart warmed. No one had ever called me that. Coming from him it sounded like heaven. I kissed his head and closed my eyes, holding him tighter.

CHAPTER NINE

Devin



Warm pressure rubbed over my morning erection. Damn, that felt good. I rocked my hips, seeking it out, my fingers curling around soft fabric, my breath quickening. Tension knotted in my gut. I opened my eyes, gazing into Brandon's face, his lips parted, his brows tensed, eyes closed. What the hell was going on? I peeked down and lifted the rustling, blue covers. Our legs were tangled between each other's, and our hips were flush. My hand rested on his ass, clutching his sweats. My damn dick must have found his in the night. Oh, the irony.

I pressed harder against his thigh as he did the same. Sensation pulsed up my spine and my balls grew tight. Just a little more. Last night had me so wound up, I needed to get off like right now, emotional connection or not. Plus, I'd had sex dreams all night. It was a wonder I hadn't blown already. I tugged on his hip, then studied his face.

His eyes flew open, and he stared at me a moment, then scrambled over me, chest to chest, hip to hip. In a ragged voice, he said, "Fuck, I want you." He bit at my neck, then up around my chin to my lips and crushed them with his own, thrusting against me, his tongue penetrating, dancing along mine.

It was finally happening. I groaned and guided his hips until our hard cocks rubbed over each other through the sweats and underwear. Pleasure twitched my shaft and his jerked in response. I met his hot, wet kisses with a hunger of my own. Digging my fingers into the muscles of his ass, I thrust harder, faster, tension building. "Oh, God, I'm close, I'm—"

“Coming.” With his brows creasing, mouth open, he dropped his head into my neck and gasped with each roll of his hips, holding it for a second each time.

As waves of pleasure surged inside me, I threw my head back and cried out, my cock spilling in my briefs, hot wetness coating my shaft and building the sensations even more. My toes curled and everything tensed, then relaxed. “Oh my God.” I took deep breaths, a smile tugging at my lips. “I needed that.”

“You? *I* needed that.” He panted against my bare shoulder, his arms drawn up. “All I dreamt about last night was having sex with you.” He freed a sharp chuckle, then lifted up onto his forearms, wrapped around my head.

“We must have been having sex on the dream plain then, because I’m pretty sure I was having sex with *you* in my dreams.” I gazed up into his stunning, dark eyes framed by unruly curls. God, he was gorgeous, especially in the morning. How was I just noticing this?

“Maybe.” His face grew slack, then he came down and planted a long kiss on my lips. “How do you feel?”

“Great, actually.” I brushed my knuckles over his cheek, as he angled into the touch. Maybe there was something to this emotional connection thing. After being in each other’s arms all night, doing what we did wasn’t awkward at all. In fact... “I feel closer to you now.”

A shy smile crept over his mouth. “Good, ‘cause I do, too.” He skimmed his fingers over my temple, his gaze following them. “I really, really like you, Dev.” His gaze found mine.

With my heart blooming with emotion, I gazed deeply into his eyes. My chest ached in a good way. I was starting to feel the same way I had with Charlie. Was I falling for Brandon? “I really like you, Bran.”

Lowering his head, he rubbed his nose on mine. “You have no idea how adorable you can be.” With a smile, he lifted back up, then shifted off me. “Breakfast?” He picked up his cell phone from a wooden nightstand, next to a modern, silver

lamp and held it to his face. “It’s almost ten, so we should get going.”

As he left me, the wetness in my boxer briefs turned cold and sticky. “Yeah, and maybe some new underwear.” Next time, I’d bring an extra pair just in case.

“Sure. How about you hit the shower and I’ll get you some new clothes.” He shifted to the edge of the bed, throwing his legs over the side. “You’re a little thinner than me, but I think I have some stuff that will fit you.” He twisted and smirked at me.

I raised onto my elbows. The thought of being wrapped up in clothes that smelled like him all day sounded wonderful. Especially since we couldn’t be together. It would be like he was with me. “Okay, good.” I climbed out of bed and looked around the room. It had been too dark last night to see anything. The dresser and nightstands were a warm pine that matched the headboard and the deep-blue bedding had striped pillowcases. “So, your folks got you all this?” I waved my hand around, my gaze snagging on a few Polaroid photos on the mirror over the dresser. I stepped to them.

“Yeah, it was all from *Offer Up* actually. Some people were moving, and this was in their guest bedroom.” He followed me to the dresser.

I studied the photos. They were pretty similar to what I’d seen on his Instagram. I pointed to one of them with the larger, darker man. “Is that your brother?”

“Yeah, that’s Kaiden.” He placed his hand on my shoulder, then rested his chin on it.

“And this is?” I pointed to a photo of him with the blonde woman from Instagram, his arm resting over her shoulders. My chest heated and I wrinkled my nose as I scanned over several more photos of him with the woman in various poses.

“Oh, that’s Gina.” His gaze met mine in the mirror, and he scratched his head. “We’re just good friends now. Nothing more.”

Plucking out a photo of him holding her hand while on a hiking trail, I said, “Yeah, so you said.” Why was this starting to bother me? We’d just spent the night together. He wasn’t hiding anything. I pursed my lips. “How come you don’t have a photo of Layla?” *Bingo*. I slid the photo into its place in the mirror frame.

He blinked a few times. “I-I don’t know. I guess we’re always in class or studying or at bars together. I don’t bring my Polaroid out for things like that.” He twisted his lips. “If it bothers you, I’ll bring it to breakfast and I’ll replace the photos of her with you.”

In a soft voice, I said, “No, you don’t have to do that.” I didn’t want to be petty.

He cupped my cheeks with his hands, bringing our faces close. “I’ll do whatever you want. It’s okay, really. I’d rather have photos of you to look at anyways when we’re not together.”

“No, I can’t ask you to do that.” I furrowed my brows. “Just leave it.” I probably shouldn’t have said anything.

“I’m bringing the Polaroid to breakfast.” He closed the gap, pressing a long, deep kiss over my mouth.

I swooned. Would I ever get used to this?

As he pulled away, he grabbed my hand. “Come on, let’s get cleaned up. I’m starving.”

An hour later, I sat in a booth by a window at a diner close to campus, drinking coffee and watching people stroll by.

“Smile.” Brandon, sitting across from me, held a white Polaroid camera to my face.

“God, again?” With a smirk I set my coffee on the table next to my almost eaten pancakes, then gave him a wide grin. When was that thing going to run out of film? We must have taken at least ten photos already.

A click sounded, followed by the whirring of the film sliding out of the camera. He lowered it, then plucked the photo from it and waved the photo in the air. “Last one, I

think.” He peeked at the photo. “Oh, look at you. So adorable in my white shirt.” He beamed at me.

“Uh-huh.” I’d been hearing that all morning. I cut into my pancakes. “You know, you really don’t have to get rid of all the photos of Gina.” I stuffed a bite into my mouth. I was starting to feel better about that whole thing and now it didn’t feel right to try and replace her.

“Well, those are old, and these are...” Tilting his head, he smiled at the photo. “These are adorable.” He chuckled. “Okay, I won’t replace them all. I’ll keep a few of these in my wallet, so I can pull them out in class and look at them.” He smirked at me.

With a loud exhale, I shook my head. “I think you might have lost your mind with that thing.” I sipped my coffee. But I had to admit, I liked that he wanted photos of me.

“After I come out to my parents, I’ll put some photos on Instagram. How about that?” He chuckled, then waved his phone at me.

With my brows snapping up, I said, “No, we can’t do that. If my family saw the photos somehow, my family would, my mom...” My heart pinched. “I’m sorry, but they can’t know.” I hadn’t even thought about that. At what point would I be able to have photos of my real self on social media? Would I ever? Would my brother be okay with it? I had no idea.

“Uh, okay. But you *will* tell them at some point, right? I mean, not right away, obviously.” He ran his fingers over his coffee cup. “You can’t disappear on them like you said last night. That’s just not right.”

“I-I don’t know. I’m sorry.” I leaned forward and grabbed his hand, holding it on the table. “I can’t face them with this.” My chest ached. “I-I don’t know what to do.” I hung my head, the corners of my eyes stinging. This was so messed up. At some point, I’d have to tell them or just disappear. Or both.

He slid out of his side of the booth and into mine, then wrapped an arm around my shoulders. “Listen, I know we’re just getting started here, but if it gets to the point where I’m

coming out and you need to do the same, I'll be there for you. I won't let you go through it alone."

With a sniffle, I looked deeply into his eyes. He meant it, every word. I could trust him. "Thanks." I attempted a grin.

"My family would love you, you know." He kissed my cheek. "I think my brother might come out to them soon as well with this new guy he's with."

"Yeah?" I leaned into his body, enjoying the warmth of him. How great it would be to have family that was close and accepted me.

"Yeah, so we'd fit right in." He squeezed my shoulders. "Don't worry about it now. We have all sorts of things to get through first, like finals and graduation" He snickered.

"And a show on Friday." I slumped my shoulders. "I better get over to Axel's house." I scanned my breakfast. I was done here anyways.

Later that day, I stood at the microphone, panting, my throat scratchy from singing so many songs in a row. I might need to tone it down a little to get through a set.

A bag of cough drops landed at my feet. I bent over and picked them up, then focused on Axel, his blue, sparkly guitar hanging at his hips with a tight black t-shirt molded to his muscled chest. "What's this?"

"Suck on those, they'll help. You sound like you're getting a little raspy." Axel strummed a chord on his guitar.

"Yeah, sometimes I'd go through a half a bag in a night." Caleb chuckled. "Might help to have some warm tea with honey as well when you get home tonight."

"Okay." I opened the bag, unwrapped a cough drop, then popped it in my mouth. "Thanks." I set the bag on a table next to the wall.

"We should maybe take a break, don't you think, Axel?" Silas unwrapped his black guitar from his shoulder and set it in a stand. "We shouldn't push him too hard."

“Yeah, you’re right.” Axel removed his guitar, placed it in a stand, then waved at me. “Come on, I’ll get you something a little more soothing to drink than that beer.”

I followed him into the hallway, watching the sway of his hips in his ripped skinny jeans. The guy had his look down. If only I had. The breakfast conversation filtered through my mind, followed by the whole evening spent with Brandon. Axel *was* out and gay. Maybe he’d be a good person to talk to? Olivia was good to talk to, but no amount of watching *Queer Eye* would give her the experience Axel had.

He stopped at the refrigerator, then pulled out a water bottle and held it to me. “Here.” He went back in for another one.

Twisting off the cap, I said, “Hey, can I talk to you for a little bit?” I peeked down the hallway, the sounds of the other guys chatting and laughing winding through it.

“Sure.” Lifting the edge of his mouth, he strolled to the sliding glass doors and onto the patio.

I followed him, then shut the door behind us. “How did you know this should be a private conversation?” He seemed like he had some sixth sense, like he just knew things.

“Well, this is either going to be about you being nervous about the gig, or it’s going to be about that guy at the bakery.” With a raised brow, he tapped my arm with his water bottle. “Which is it?”

I freed a stuttered chuckle, then shook my head. “The guy at the bakery.” I scuffed my shoe on the cement patio.

“Let’s sit down. This feels like a sit-down conversation.” He dropped into an iron chair with a flower-patterned cushion at a matching table for four.

Taking the next seat over at the table, I let my gaze roam over the back yard of grass and tall trees. “Who the hell cuts all this grass?” It seemed so weird to have a grass yard in the desert.

“We have a neighborhood kid we each pay fifty dollars do it.” He nodded slowly. “I know, but cheap rent.” He shifted in

the chair to face me. “So, this guy, what was his name? Brandon?”

“Yeah, that’s his name.” I picked at the label on my water bottle. Where to start? “We had our first date on Friday night and, and I saw him again last night. We...I—”

“Devin, my man, you got laid by that guy?” He held out his fist and snickered. “He’s hot.”

“He...what?” I stared at his hand. “No, I did not get laid by him. We, well we did some things, but we’re taking it slow.” No way was I going to tell him about the whole emotional connection thing.

He dropped his hand to his thigh. “Oh.” He huffed a laugh. “Why?” He sipped his water, studying me with narrow eyes.

“Neither one of us have been with a guy before.” I winced, hanging my head. I must sound like an idiot to him.

Leaning in, he said, “Hey, not all of us know or more importantly, accept our sexual preferences right away. Sometimes it takes some time to figure that shit out.” He ran his gaze over me. “You seem like you might be on the fluid side. Are you?”

With a nod, I pursed my lips. “Yeah, and I was raised Mormon.” I huffed. It had always seemed like everyone had had a head start on me, even Brandon.

“Dude, that’s harsh for someone in your shoes.” He pressed his lips together. “So, what’s bothering you? Besides maybe all of it?” A faint grin played on his mouth.

“Well, first, I’m ready, you know, to finally have sex.” Oh, fuck. I stared at him, my heart shuddering. Why the hell had I said that?

He rubbed his jaw. “So, you’re a virgin.” He eyed me up and down. “That’s sort of hot.” He gave me a sly smile. “Go on. It’s cool.” He waved his hand in small circles.

With a deep breath, I said, “Okay, well, I’m ready but Brandon doesn’t seem to be.” Why was I still stuck on that? We’d at least shared orgasms this morning.

Tilting his head, he asked, “And I’m guessing Brandon is having some sort of bisexual awakening with you?”

I blinked. Was that what it was called? Was I having the same thing? No, I had been in love with Charlie. My awakening had been a long time ago. Oh... “Uh, I guess. He had this girlfriend for a long time, and he’s never dated a guy before. He says his brother is bisexual.”

Lowering his brows, he asked, “And what about you? When did you figure out you liked dudes?”

“When I was in high school.” I twisted my lips. Things were starting to be very clear to me. “So, what you’re getting at is that I’ve had longer to process all of this than Brandon has.”

“I am.” He offered a warm smile. “I’ve known that I was in love with Remy since I can remember.” He stared off into the yard, then tensed his mouth. “But whatever, this is not about me.” His attention focused on me. “Give him what he wants. Just go with it. I mean, what’s the hurry?” He held up his open palms. “If you really want to get laid that bad, you can always go on *Grindr*. That’s what I do.” He chuckled. “Just beware, there are some weirdos on there.”

“Uh, what’s um...what’s *Grindr*?” I held my breath. Did I just ask something really stupid?

“Dude, it’s a gay hookup app. Oh my God.” As he laughed, he grabbed my shoulder. “You know what? Don’t go on there. It sounds like you might have something better.” He waggled his brows. “You might have a Remy.”

With my eyes widening, I looked at him. He was right. Brandon was so good to me, so caring, *so loving*. And hot, even Axel thought he was hot. Why was I trying to push things so much? I’d waited this long, a little more time wouldn’t hurt.

Three days later, I sat at my dorm room desk while Olivia lay spread out on her stomach over my bed, hovering over her iPad, open to a book on Finance. “Profit and loss statement, Dev, that’s what you need to put together for the bakery.”

“Yeah, I know, along with a few others. I should probably start with those and see if anything stands out.” I tapped my mechanical pencil on my cheek. “I wonder what the margins are on a baked good? Like, how do you figure that out?” I sighed as an image of Brandon meandered into my mind. I had to focus and stop thinking about him. If I could get this studying done, I might have time to actually see him before the show on Friday instead of having him just visit the bakery while I was working. My gaze travelled to the window and the sunny afternoon. Brandon had classes right now and I had to work again tonight.

“Devin.” Olivia stood beside me, glaring down at me. “What’s up with you?”

“What?” I lifted my brows. “When did you come over here?” I shifted in my chair as a girl with bright red hair strode down the walkway outside my window. I did a double take of her. “What a cool hair color.”

“You are not focused on this finance stuff at all.” She huffed and slapped at my shoulder.

I flinched. “Sorry.”

She focused out the window. “Yeah, you’re right.”

“I’m right about what?” I rubbed my hands down my jeans and stood up, my gaze following hers. The girl outside had stopped to chat with a young man. “If only I had the guts—”

“You do.” Olivia grabbed my arm. “Come on. We’re going to the store to get some hair dye. You’ve done nothing but comment on people’s hair colors for the last six months. It’s time we do something about it.” She tugged on me.

“What? No, I couldn’t pull something like that off.” I glanced behind me at the young woman. Could I?

“You can. You can pick a color on the way.” She hauled me along to my front door, then toed into her clogs. “Put your shoes on.”

“Yeah, okay.” I let a grin curl my lips. Why the hell not. Axel dyed his hair black and lots of people my age dyed their hair. They were all over campus. I’d probably fit in better with

the band, too. “Hey, Olivia?” I bent over to slip on my sneakers.

“What?” She placed her hands on her hips.

“Let’s pick out something for me to wear at the show on Friday night, too.” After fastening my shoes, I stood up and brushed my long bangs out of my eyes.

A smirk crept over her face. “I know just the thing.” Grabbing my shoulders, she turned me all the way around, eyeing me.

“Uh, what are you doing?” I arched a brow. She looked like she was sizing me up for something.

“I think I have a mini-skirt that would look fabulous on you.” She gave a broad smile. “You’ve always wanted to try a skirt, right?”

With a huff, I planted a hand on my hip. “I do, but I don’t know.” I pinched my lips. “A mini skirt? Really?” Was it too much at once? Maybe I should just do the hair for now.

“We can try it and see how you feel. It’s a red and black plaid, so it might look more like a kilt than a skirt on you.” She giggled. “If we paired it up with your ankle boots and the right shirt, it would be so cool.” Holding her fists at her chest, she squealed. “Come on. We’re going to have some fun.”

A few hours later, I stood in front of my bathroom mirror, turning my head back and forth, admiring the swath of bright red bangs in my hair. I fussed with them, moving them this way and that. “I like it.” Why had I waited so damn long to do something like this? Because there would have been no way to hide it when I went home. My chest stiffened. I was making it impossible to ever go back.

“I love it. I’m glad you didn’t do the whole head. I think that would have been too much on you, but this goes with your complexion and your natural hair color.” She tapped my shoulder. “Let’s try on the skirt and stuff.” She sauntered out of the room.

I fingered one of the new silver stud earrings pierced into my earlobes and winced when a dull pain shot through me. “I

can't believe you talked me into getting my ears pierced." Those I could hide if I needed to.

"Yeah, it was time." She appeared in the doorway, holding the mini skirt and a fitted black graphic t-shirt with a red dragon over the chest. "Try it all on. I want to see." She pointed at the drawer next to the sink. "Put on your make-up, too."

My heart picked up the pace. I was really doing this, no more imagining what it would be like. Would Brandon like it? He'd said he didn't have a problem with it. "Okay." I grabbed the clothing, while she left and shut the door.

I tossed my black skinny jeans and shirt in the corner, then shimmied the skirt up my legs, fastened it at the side and wriggled into the tight t-shirt. Taking a moment, I looked at myself in the mirror, my eyes widening. I was starting to see the person I only saw inside my head. "Oh my God." I fingered the fabric of the skirt, then adjusted the shirt over my slender frame, fussing with the folds around my waist.

"Almost done in there?" She knocked on the door.

"No, not yet." I opened the drawer, then penciled my eyes in a thin black line and spread a pinkish lipstick over my mouth. My gaze caught myself and my heart hammered in my chest. Dad would so kick my ass if he saw me like this. But it would be okay, Dad would never see it. As I went for the doorknob, I puffed out my chest. This felt right. I opened the door.

Olivia's eyes went wide. "Oh, my fucking hell, you look good." She walked into the room, fluffing the skirt out around my legs. "You bastard. You look better in this skirt than I do. Look at those legs." She pointed at them.

"You think?" I bent over, looking down at myself. On second thought, it might be a bit too much, too fast. "I-I don't know if I should really go out in public like this." I should just be happy I'd finally tried it.

"What's wrong?" She furrowed her brows. "Are you afraid of what Brandon might think?"

I waved my hand. “No, we talked about it, and he sounded cool with it. I just don’t know if I’m ready to go all out.” What would Axel think? I spied my jeans lying in the corner. “Don’t uh, don’t girls wear skirts over their jeans sometimes?”

“Yeah, but it has to be the right skirt with the right jeans.” Her gaze followed mine and she picked up my jeans. “Like these with that skirt. Oh, that would look really cool.” She handed them to me.

“Turn around.” I stepped into the jeans as she turned her back to me, then skimmed them up under the skirt and fastened them. “Okay.” I gazed in the mirror. Definitely better. Now I felt even more like myself, *fluid*, as Axel had described me.

“Okay, yeah, I really like it.” She held up her cell phone and snapped a photo of me. “Don’t worry, I won’t post this on social media. I know, the family thing.” She tapped the display on her phone. I’m sending this to you, so you can send it to Brandon.” She giggled. “He’ll probably come running out of class to get to you.”

I held my fingers to my lips. “You know what? I think I’ll surprise him on Friday night.” I strolled past her to snatch my phone off my desk. “But I’m going to send that to Axel and make sure he’s cool with it, since I want to front the band like this.”

She nodded. “Oh, okay. Brandon is going to get such a boner when he sees you.”

I dropped my mouth open, flicking a glance at her. “Stop it.” I let a wide smile spread over my lips. He just might though. One can only hope that dirty things would follow. I opened my text app and sent the picture and a message to Axel.

Devin

Hey, I wanted to change up my image. What do you think of me wearing this outfit on Friday night?

I watched the display, rubbing a finger over my chin.

Axel

Damn, that is hot! How are we going to keep the guys off you?

The three dots blinked at me.

Axel

Oh wait, guess that'll be your boyfriend's job.

My heart warmed. *My boyfriend.* Didn't they say, absence made the heart grow fonder? If only I'd thought to take some photos of Brandon with that Polaroid. *Maybe I can get some pictures of him with my phone tonight, if he comes into the bakery.*

"What did he say?" Olivia peeked over my shoulder at the phone.

"He said it was cool." I dropped the phone to my side.

"No, he said it was *hot*." With a snigger, she stepped to face me. "Is there something going on between you and Axel maybe? You got two guys on the hook now?" She arched a brow.

"No, I do not. Axel likes someone else. We're just becoming good friends. That's all." I set my phone on my desk. "Anyways, I should get ready for work." Maybe I'd text Brandon and ask him to come to the bakery tonight. I really wanted to see him.

CHAPTER TEN

Brandon



I peeked up at the streetlamps lining the street, old-fashioned globes topping the street signs. Funny how this little downtown area mixed old buildings with flashy new high rises. I set my sights on the sign hovering over the bakery door. Soon enough, I'd be seeing Devin. Maybe I could convince him to let us study together. I'd really missed him the last few days. Letting a smirk tug at my mouth, I stopped at the glass doors and opened one, then stepped inside.

The scent of sweets and fresh coffee filled my nose, and I breathed it in. I was going to associate this smell with Devin forever. As I walked to the counter, my gaze snagged on him, his back to me as he fiddled with the coffee machine. "Hey, Dev." I smiled wide, then dipped my head, stuffing my hands into the front pockets of my jeans.

"Bran?" With a bright smile, he twisted around, hopped on his toes, then raced around the end of the counter to wrap me up in a quick embrace. As he released me, he let his hands slide down my arms, stopping at my wrists. "Well?"

With a fast blink, I took in the shock of red in Devin's bangs. My heart fluttered. He looked gorgeous. "Wow, you dyed your hair." I touched his bangs. "It looks great, I love it." When had he done that? It would have been nice to have been with him.

"I did it today. Olivia helped me." He lifted the hair above his ears and turned his head. "Pierced my ears, too." Biting his lip, he focused on me. "What do you think?"

"I, uh, it looks great. I like all of it." I tugged my hands out of my pockets and held both of his hands up, focusing on his still-natural nails. "Oh, guess I figured you might do nail

polish, too.” I dropped one hand and tightened my hold on the other. Maybe that was something he could save for us to do together. But it wasn’t like I’d be any good at putting it on for him. I let my gaze roam over his slender body. “This is quite a surprise.”

“Yeah? Well, I did want to surprise you.” He leaned in. “I have more surprises for you on Friday.” He ticked his brows.

“You do, huh? Did Olivia have anything to do with that?” I swung our hands between us. I definitely needed to find a way to spend more time with him.

“Yeah, she did.” He tugged his hand free, then sauntered back behind the counter. “Anyways, what can I get you?” He set his hands on the countertop, leaning into it.

I looked him over. He seemed different somehow, and not just on the outside. Something had changed on the inside, too. It was like he had more confidence. I *really* liked it. As I tongued my lower lip, I perused the treats under the glass. “How about...” I pointed. “A slice of cheesecake with that cherry sauce on it.” I came closer to the counter, my gaze locking onto his. “Only since I can’t have you.” I offered a coy smile.

“Soon enough.” He plated the cheesecake slice for me, then poured the cherry sauce over it. “Any coffee?” He set the cheesecake on the counter between us.

“No, I don’t want to be up all night.” I sighed. I never should have signed up for that early morning Thursday class, I knew it. I fished my phone out of my back pocket.

“We have decaf.” He tapped the screen on the register.

I thought a moment. “You know what? Yeah, that would be good.” I paid for the food. “Are you going to have time to sit with me?” My chest tightened. God, I hoped so.

He glanced toward the back room, then faced me. “Yeah, I think so. Let me get your coffee ready and I’ll sit with you for a few minutes.”

“Good.” I picked up my cheesecake along with a fork, found an open couch and sat on the edge of it, then held up my

phone. He was so adorable in his pink apron and new hair. I had to have a photo. I snapped a shot of him as he gazed out into the front of the store.

With a shake of his head, he wagged his finger at me, then started on my coffee.

I cut into my cheesecake and stuffed it into my mouth. An explosion of flavor hit me, the cream cheese, sugar, egg, and sweet and bitter cherries. A soft moan filtered out of me.

He stood at the couch with a tray in his hand, staring at me, his eyes growing dark. "That's pretty good, huh." He set the coffee cup, creamer, and sugar on the table, then dropped in beside me, placing the tray beside him. "Taste?" He leaned in close.

"Of course." I made a bite for him, then slid it into his open mouth.

"Mmm..." He shut his eyes, his brows tensing. "Damn, I don't know how Dana does it."

Heat swept over my body. Without thinking, I came in close and pressed a kiss to his mouth. As I broke it, I studied his face. "I missed you." My pulse quickened. Were his feelings growing as fast as mine were?

"I missed you, too." His smile waned and he gazed deeply into my eyes, then rested his palm on my cheek. "Friday night, I want to spend the night with you again." His throat bobbed as he swallowed.

"Good, I'd like that. Maybe my place again? Don't you have one of those dorm beds?" I turned my head to kiss his palm. Maybe it would be time to take things up a notch in the bedroom.

"I do." With a faint grin, he dipped his head. "I wasn't thinking of that when I decided to stay in the dorm this year."

"Well, we have my place." I cut off a bite of cheesecake with my fork. "We can use yours for studying." I ate the bite. What would he say to that?

“Um, yeah, we can.” He nodded slowly, then snapped his brows together. “How do you, uh, how do you think that would work? I don’t think we have any similar classes.” He rubbed his chin.

“I don’t care.” I placed my hand on his knee. “I just want to be with you outside of this bakery and more than on the weekend. You do have to read, don’t you?” I pressed my lips together. He’d said he’d missed me. Surely, he would want to spend more time together somehow.

“Yeah, of course I do.” With a quick twist of his lips, he said, “We can do our reading together in my room, for sure.” He glanced toward the front of the store. “Oh, the movie theater must have let out. There’s a bunch of people coming in.” He stood up, taking his platter, then squeezed my shoulder. “Sorry, I have to go.”

“Sure.” I peeked up at him. “I’ll text you.”

“Wait.” Digging his phone out of his pocket, he crouched down next to me, then held the phone up in front of our faces. “Smile.” He draped an arm over my shoulder and held his head against mine.

I looked into the phone and smiled.

He snapped the photo. “There, I’m going to go and get this printed and hang it up in my dorm room.” He stood up, then hurried to the bakery counter.

With warmth flooding my chest, I watched him tend to the new customers. He was definitely having some strong feelings, too. I quirked the corners of my mouth. We absolutely needed to step things up in the bedroom.

Friday night rolled around, and I strolled up the sidewalk to a small bar. I took in some of the buildings, mostly repair shops and convenience stores, interspersed with smaller homes with weedy rock yards, some needing paint and others with obvious roof problems. This was definitely going to be a dive bar. I came to a corner building with a low roofline and dark windows lining it underneath. I peeked at my phone. This was

the right address. It must be the place. I strolled to a set of heavy wooden doors and opened one, then walked inside.

The smell of greasy food, stale beer and old cigarette smoke assaulted me. “Definitely a dive bar.” I chuckled. I had a hard time picturing my adorable Dev in a place like this. As I meandered through a mix of younger and older people to the bar, my gaze caught a head of black hair bent over an amp and large speaker cabinet on a small stage in the corner of the room. If Axel were here, Devin wasn’t too far off.

I rested my forearms across the old wooden bar, then set my sights on a haggard women with a high ponytail, pouring beers. She glanced at me. “Be right with you.”

“Sure.” I let out a long exhale. As warm fingers wrapped around my eyes, I jumped. “Shit.”

“Guess who?”

“Devin?” With a smile, I turned around. I’d know that voice anywhere. As my gaze focused on his dark eyeliner, making his blue eyes pop, then the pinkish lips and down further, my breath caught. “Holy shit, you’re wearing a skirt.” As heat rushed my groin, my gaze fell lower. “With uh, with jeans?” So much for the easy access.

He twirled around. “Yeah, you like it?” He cupped his hands at his chest.

“I love it. It looks really good on you.” I leaned in. “Hot.” I pecked a kiss on his cheek, then glanced around the bar. If he was wearing a skirt in this place, it must okay to kiss him, right? Nobody was going to say shitty things to us, like what had happened to my brother, were they?

“Want a beer?” He turned to the bartender, her attention now on us both.

“Yeah, sure.” A warm hand twined into mine, and I looked down. He was taking my hand. He was obviously feeling very comfortable with himself. I liked it.

The bartender set our beers on the bar top in front of us.

“Put it on my tab.” He sipped his beer, gazing at me from over the lip of the glass. “Olivia should be here soon. Is Layla coming?”

“Yeah, she is. She had some family dinner thing tonight, but she’s coming over right after.” I drank some beer, tightening the hold on his hand, then letting my gaze study him further. He looked like Devin, but not. He looked... gorgeous. I couldn’t wait for later. “So, what’s on the agenda after you play?” Hopefully nothing.

“Not sure. Maybe just hanging out here and watching the next band play. I guess they’re pretty popular and the place is expected to fill up.” He glanced toward the stage. “We’re doing a quick sound check in a few minutes.”

I nodded, perusing three more young men on the stage, one wearing a sheer shirt with sequins. “So, when do I get to meet all these guys you’re in the band with?”

“Right now?” He hauled me through a few low four-top tables scattered across the floor and to the stage. “You know Axel, right?”

Axel straightened and turned around. “Oh, the boyfriend.” With a smirk, he held out his hand.

Boyfriend? I shook his hand. What had Devin been telling him?

“He’s just joking.” Devin freed a choked chuckle, then threw a quick glare at Axel.

He shrugged his shoulders. “If I were you, Brandon, I’d make my move. Know what I’m saying?” He snickered, then twisted around to the equipment, turning knobs, and checking cables.

“Oh, I’ll be making some moves.” As I curled the corner of my mouth, I hooked my arm around Devin. “Not sure what you’re telling him, but I might not hold myself back tonight, especially with how hot you look.” I flicked my tongue over his neck, making goosebumps break out over the sensitive skin. I definitely wasn’t holding back tonight.

His face flushed, and in a whisper, he said, “That’s what I was hoping.” His gaze fell to my mouth.

“So, who do we have here?” A young man with curly blond hair and stark blue eyes cocked his head at us. “Dev, you’ve been holding out on me. Where did this hot dude come from?”

Another young man with wavy brown hair in a white, sheer sequined top came up behind the first.

“Gabe and Milo, this is Brandon, the guy I’m dating.” He tensed his mouth, then smiled.

I snuck a peek at Devin. Was he wanting to be boyfriends? Was that what Axel’s comments were about? I turned my attention on Gabe and Milo. “Nice to meet you both.” I held my hand out and shook each of theirs.

“Likewise, man.” Milo waved his hand and turned around. “Hey, Silas, be friendly and come and meet Dev’s new guy.” He faced them. “Silas is sort of a grumpy Gus, but he’s a good guy.”

A young man with dirty blond hair, cut to his chin, walked up, a black guitar hanging at his waist. “Hey, man. Nice to meet you. Silas.” He shook my hand, then focused on Milo. “I am not a grumpy Gus. Where the hell do you come up with this shit?” With a shake of his head, he scoffed and walked off.

Milo peeked behind him, then held an open hand to the side of his mouth. “Grumpy Gus.” He sniggered.

A few low notes thumped out in the room.

Devin pointed at a young man with almost black hair, cut around his face. “That guy on the bass, that’s Caleb.”

Caleb did a double take of us, then grinned and waved a hand. “Hey, man. Are you Brandon?”

“I am.” With a smile, I waved back at him. They all seemed friendly enough, like they were really close. “You said all these guys are at ASU?” I drank some beer, facing Devin.

“Yeah, Gabe is a just a junior, but Silas is working on his Masters and Axel is graduating with us in the fall, but he’s

twenty-three. Took a gap year after high school.” He led me back to the bar and slid up onto a stool with a vinyl cushion,

“So, these guys are all pretty close, I take it?” I climbed up onto the stool next to him. It had seemed like he was fitting right in with all of them. I glanced at Axel. And maybe getting some cues from him.

“Yeah, Caleb and Axel grew up together and they live in the same house along with Milo.” He drank some beer.

“There you are.” Olivia sauntered up to us, threw her arms around Devin for a quick squeeze, then set her sights on me. “Well, what do you think?” She waved her hands around him.

Hanging his head, he let a grin creep over his lips.

“I love it. He looks really good.” I stood from my stool and gave her a side hug.

“Right?” She beamed at him, then scanned the room. “Where’s Layla?”

“She should be on her way. She had a family thing.” I dropped onto my barstool. “Can I get you a beer or something?” It looked like I’d be spending some time with the girls while Devin was onstage. At least now I didn’t have to worry about Olivia hitting on me.

“Yes, I’m parched.” She giggled, then slapped at Devin’s skirt. “Dev, be careful. Don’t get a stain on my skirt.”

I ordered a beer for her from the bartender.

“What?” Holding his arms up, he watched her bat at him. “I don’t see anything.”

“It’s gone now.” She huffed, straightened herself up and smiled.

“So, it’s *your* skirt?” I pointed at it. Maybe this was just a trial thing for him.

“Yeah, I let him borrow it. I knew it would be perfect for him.” As the bartender set down her beer, she picked it up and took a sip. “He’s been talking about wearing a skirt or a dress

forever, you know.” She threw a look toward the stage. “I think Axel is helping him be himself finally.”

“I’m right here, you know.” He rolled his eyes. “It wasn’t all Axel. It was time.” He focused on me. “I’ve been daring myself to be me since I came down here freshman year and now that my senior year is almost over, I figured it’s now or never, you know?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I know. Senior year sort of makes the real world and what you want to do and be the rest of your life real.” Boy, did I know that. Graduation couldn’t come soon enough.

Layla stepped through the bar and stopped at us, her cropped blonde hair held off her forehead by a pair of black barrettes. “Hey, everyone.” With a grin, she held her hand up.

“Layla, good you’re here.” Olivia wrapped her up in a quick hug, then freed her. “What do you think of Devin?” She stepped back and held her hand out to him.

“Oh my. I hardly recognized you.” Layla gave him the once over. “Stand up for me.”

With his cheeks flushing, he slid off his barstool and turned around.

“You are *hot*. If I didn’t know what equipment you had under that skirt, I might be jealous of my boy Brandon here.” She sniggered.

“Don’t even think about it.” I shook my head, chuckling.

Axel hopped off the stage and strode to us. “Hey, Dev, it’s time, man. Let’s do this.” He patted Devin’s arm.

“Yeah, okay.” Devin planted a quick kiss on my cheek, then jogged up to the stage.

“So, are you nervous for him?” Layla bumped her shoulder on mine, then ordered herself a beer from the bartender.

“Yeah, a little.” I kept my focus on the stage, on Devin snatching the mic and flipping his long bangs to the side. Something happened to him when he got behind a mic. It was like he became someone else with more confidence and the

slightly awkward Devin disappeared. I wasn't sure which one I liked more. Did I have to choose? Hell no, I could have them both.

“Hey, everyone, I'm Devin and this is *Knot Me*. We hope you like what you hear.” Devin flashed his eyes at Axel and nodded once.

Axel started up the harsh guitars to *I'm Not Okay* by My Chemical Romance.

The rest of the band joined in and Devin, dipping his head over the mic, started up the lyrics to the song, his body gyrating to the music.

“Holy shit, is that really Devin?” Lifting her brows, Layla drank some beer and rested an elbow on the bar next to me.

Olivia hopped up onto Devin's vacated stool, then held her phone to her face and tapped on it. “It sure is.”

As my chest warmed, I puffed it out a little. “These guys are going to get popular fast.” How many shows could he play and still keep up his schoolwork and his job? I did a double take of Olivia. “What are you doing?”

“I'm taking a video. They'll need videos of their gigs to show to bar managers to get more bookings.” Olivia kept her focus on the phone. “But of course, we'll have to keep these off social media for now.”

“Yeah, guess that wouldn't be good for his family to see.” My chest grew tight as I perused the bar. More people were filling in, as if his voice was calling out to the masses to come see them. A few people that were seated at tables rose up and started dancing in front of the stage. I took a hard swallow. I'd never dated anyone in a band before. How would it be if he had groupies? I leaned against Layla. “Hey.”

“What?” Layla tapped her foot on the dark laminate flooring, fixating on the stage.

“What do you think the odds are that Devin is going to have groupies?” My chest heated. Why would I even be thinking about this? Was I that insecure? Maybe Axel's comment was getting to me.

Layla side-eyed me. “Brandon, he’s in a cover band at a dive bar. What sort of groupies do you think he’s going to get?” She tsked. “Besides, those are mostly couples up there dancing.”

As my focus drew to the stage, a young woman threw her long, black hair behind her shoulder, lifted her already short dress a little higher, then danced in front of Devin. In a quick movement, she reached her hand out as if trying to touch his leg.

Devin stepped back, sneaking a glance at me, then ended the song.

Rubbing my forehead, I said, “Did you see that?” I tapped Layla’s shoulder. At least it was only a woman. If a man had done that—

“Yeah, you might have a problem.” Layla snickered, then drank more beer.

“That was so cool, wasn’t it?” Olivia twisted on her stool to face them, her face beaming.

“Yeah, that was cool all right.” I sipped my beer. Maybe I should be the one up there dancing in front of him. It had seemed to work when he sang karaoke last weekend. “Hey, let’s all go up and dance.”

The band started up the heavy guitars and powerful drums to Fall out Boy’s, *Sugar We’re Going Down*. As the band became softer and Devin’s voice rang out to the start of the first verse, women shouted and clamored around him on the dance floor, their arms raised.

“Let’s go.” I picked up my beer, then snatched Layla’s arm and hauled her to the dance floor. Did he even know the effect he was having on everyone?

“Wait for me.” Olivia stuffed her phone in the pocket of her jeans, then grabbed her beer and ran up behind us.

As the chorus started up and Axel joined Devin with backing vocals, Devin stepped to Axel, dropping his mic to his side, and pressed his cheek to Axel’s, both of them singing in the same mic.

The women at the stage screamed and clapped.

While Axel sang, he smirked at me, then focused on his guitar strumming with a vengeance.

Devin bounced to the front of the stage as I shoved my way through the screaming women, Layla still right behind me and followed by Olivia.

With my heart thumping in my chest, I stopped and stared up at him. He looked like a rock star. A rock star I'd have in my bed later. My cock stirred. There was no stopping me now.

As he sang, his gaze caught on mine and held it, the lyrics flowing from his mouth, singing about being the friction in someone's jeans. He winked at me, then glanced out across the audience, continuing with the song.

Heat swelled my shaft. He meant those words for me. I knew it. I glanced around me, Layla and Olivia bouncing up and down next to me to the beat. While everyone in this room might want him, he only wanted me. My heart warmed with emotion, and I swayed and bounced to the rhythm of the music, joining Layla and Olivia, letting a smile grow across my lips.

After a few more songs, I left to get everyone new beers, forcing my way through the crowd. The set was almost over and soon, I'd be able to get Devin alone. I stepped up to the bar and ordered the beers. It seemed with each song, more and more people had come into the bar and taken notice of him.

The bartender set three beers in front of me, and I paid, then picked them up with both hands. Hopefully I'd make it back without spilling on too many people. As I meandered back to Layla and Olivia, I spied a young man with short, white hair, gelled into spikes on his head. What, did the guy think he was some punker from the eighties?

The band ended a song and Devin swiped through the iPad set up for him by his mic stand.

The punker waved to Devin. "Hey man, can I talk to you for a second?"

Devin glanced at Axel, who shrugged, then focused on the punker. “Yeah, hi.” He stepped to the edge of the stage.

Narrowing my eyes, I handed out the beers. There was something about that guy I didn’t like.

Olivia and Layla, chatting away, grabbed their beers without missing a beat in their conversation.

“You’re sexy as hell, man, and you have a great voice.” The punker gave Devin a coy smile. “What are you doing later?”

“Oh, uh...” Devin brushed his hand down the back of his head. “I’m actually uh—”

“He’s coming home with me.” I glared at the punker and pursed my lips. “Here, take my beer, Dev.” I held my beer out. If I needed to punch this guy, I didn’t need to spill my full beer, too.

He grabbed my beer, his gaze darting from the punker to me. “Hey, Bran—”

“Who the hell are you?” The punker sized me up.

“I’m...I’m...” I peeked at Devin, worrying my lower lip. How was I supposed to say I was *dating* him, and have it sound serious?

Devin hopped off the stage and wedged himself between the punker and me. In a carrying voice, he said, “He’s my boyfriend.”

Olivia and Layla twirled around, both of their jaws dropped open.

With a huff, the punker looked me up and down. “You’re one lucky son of a bitch.” He smirked. “You should keep a leash on this one, though.” He patted Devin’s shoulder, then walked off.

“A leash?” Devin lowered his brows. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

I cupped his cheeks and pressed a long, deep kiss to his mouth. “It means if I’m not careful, someone’s going to walk off with you.” That guy didn’t know a thing about him.

“I wouldn’t just walk off with someone else. You know that.” He pouted. “You better know that.”

“I do.” I kissed him again.

“Bravo, you two.” Axel clapped his hands. “Now that you’re officially boyfriends, can we please do the last song and finish this set?”

“Oh, I’m uh, I’m sorry, Brandon. That just blurted out of my mouth.” He hung his head, his brows wrinkling.

Softly, in his ear, I said, “Hey, I don’t want to date anyone else, and it sounds like you don’t either, right?”

He nodded.

“Then let’s just be boyfriends. I mean, why not?” I gazed deeply into his blue eyes, rimmed by the black liner. I’d liked him for so long already, and the more I got to know him the more that like was turning into something a lot like love, so why push off the inevitable?

With his eyes widening, he nodded again. “Yeah, why not?”

“Dudes. Last song.” Axel blew out a breath and shifted his weight. “Don’t make me come over there and separate you two.”

“I-I gotta go.” Devin turned to the stage.

“One more and we’re going home.” I slapped him on the ass as he hopped onto the stage, then smirked at Axel. Maybe I liked Axel after all.

Axel gave me a knowing grin.

Layla sidled up to me, holding her new beer to her chest. “Boyfriends, huh?” She wagged her brows. “I guess that means someone is coming out to their folks soon.”

“Yeah? Well as it turns out, Kaiden already did that with his new guy, Jaime, so at least they’ll be broken in already.” I watched Devin pluck the mic off the stand to get ready for the last song. I’d have him meet them, too, as soon as he was ready.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Devin



I wrapped cables, being careful not to twist them, the way Axel had shown me, and helped pack up equipment, following the other guys in the band out to Axel's red Jeep in the parking lot and Caleb's white Toyota Tacoma pick-up truck. "Who knew a half hour gig was really more like three hours with all this setting up and packing up." I flung a duffle bag of cords into the pick-up, then wiped my forehead.

Stepping next to me with his guitar case hanging from his hand, Axel said, "So, are you sticking around or are you leaving to have some alone time with your boyfriend?" He set the case into the open back end of his Jeep.

"Would it be bad if I left?" I tensed the side of my mouth. I'd really missed Brandon this week and playing a gig wasn't exactly quality time together.

Axel planted his hand on my shoulder. "No, it's okay. This other band plays heavier stuff, old nineties grunge music. You're probably not into that, are you?" He arched a brow.

"I'm not actually. I really like what we're playing." I peeked behind him at the back door to the bar. Brandon would be waiting. I should get going.

"You don't like classic grunge?" Silas, carrying a large speaker cabinet, let out a short whistle. "Dude, that's lame."

"It is?" I pressed my lips together. I certainly didn't want to be lame. Especially in front of these guys.

Silas set the speaker into the back of the truck, then turned around. "Psych." He sniggered. "I don't like it much either, but your boy Axel here is a huge Soundgarden fan." With a long exhale, he stopped at Axel's side. "I'm more of a Linkin

Park fan. At least the lead singer, Chester Bennington, was from Arizona.” He lifted his chin at Axel. “And not some punks from Seattle.”

“Dude, don’t worry, you’ll get your Linkin Park songs.” Axel lifted the corner of his lips, squeezing my shoulder. “Devin here can do it. After what I heard tonight, I’m sure he can.”

“Y-you want me to sing a Linkin Park song?” My pulse quickened. I’d sung those in the car before and they’d been pretty hard to sing.

Silas looked me up and down. “Yeah, you better start practicing *In the End*.”

“B-but that song has a rapping part to it. I’ve never done that before.” I wrinkled my brows. If I couldn’t do it, would they find someone else?

With a chuckle, Axel dropped his arm to his side. “Don’t worry, Caleb can do that. He’s actually pretty good at rapping. Singing? That’s another story.”

“I heard that.” Caleb shook his head while loading part of the drum kit into the back of the truck.

“Anyways, go get laid.” Axel waved me off. “Go, we’ve got the rest of this.”

“Okay.” I smiled at each of them. “Thanks, guys. It was a lot of fun.” I turned to leave.

“Sunday for practice,” Axel called out.

“Got it.” With a chuckle, I strode to the back door to find my new boyfriend.

A half hour later, I stood behind Brandon as he fiddled with the lock on his door. What would we do tonight? Would I finally lose my virginity? He did know how to do it. A knot rolled in my stomach. Why was I getting so nervous?

He popped the door open. “There.” He stepped inside and strolled into his galley kitchen of white cabinets and stainless appliances, flicking on the lights. “Want a beer?”

“Do I.” I dropped my backpack with extra clothing next to the sectional, then wrung my hands and dropped into the corner. Maybe not being together most of the week was making me nervous now?

He brought two opened bottles of beer to the couch, handed one to me, then sat beside me, throwing his arm over the back of the couch. “So, you guys were really good tonight.” He sipped his beer, his gaze raking over me.

“Yeah, thanks. The crowd was really fun.” I pursed my lips. “Well, except for that one guy.” My heart warmed. Brandon had definitely made sure the guy knew I belonged to him.

“Yeah, I was ready to punch the guy out if I had to.” He crept closer to me. “Hey.” He nuzzled my neck, resting his beer in his lap.

“What?” Shivers raced down my spine, lodging in my groin. He was starting already. But this was what I was hoping for, right?

With his lips brushing over the shell of my ear, he said, “Can you take those jeans off and leave the rest of it on?” He skimmed his palm over my chest.

As his hand touched my nipples, they hardened and little shocks of pleasure shot to my swelling cock. I whimpered. “Yeah, sure.” But why exactly was he asking for that? As I unfastened my fly, I peeked at him.

His eyelids were hooded and his pupils wide. A clear erection strained under the zipper of his jeans. His lips parted and his breath quickened. “Is it okay if I watch?” He flicked his tongue over his lower lip.

“Yeah, it’s okay.” Tension coiled inside me, and my shaft ached. We hadn’t even touched each other, and we were both already so turned on. I focused on my jeans and shimmied them down my legs, kicking them off. My skirt had ridden up in the process and exposed a peek of my brief-covered balls. “Shit.” I flipped the skirt down. I hadn’t even thought about the logistics of wearing a skirt before.

He edged in closer, set his beer on the coffee table, then glided his hand down to my bare thigh at the hem of the skirt. “You need to start touching me, Devin.” He leaned in and placed soft bites on my neck, then sucked and kissed the marks, moaning against my skin.

I propped my beer between the back cushions of the couch, then turned into him, the heat from his hand burning up my thigh. My cock pulsed, dribbling pre-cum into my underwear. Tentatively, I rubbed my hand over the bulge in his jeans. God, he was as hard as a rock. It twitched under my palm. I rubbed harder, from tip to base.

“Fuck.” He groaned, sliding his hand under my skirt to the edge of my hips, his fingers lightly skimming my balls.

As my balls drew up, I moaned and threw my head back. Sensation surged through my body. “We need to back off or I think I might come just from that.”

He lowered his hand with a deep breath. “You’re so fucking sexy, Devin. You’re driving me crazy.” He lifted his head, gazing at me with dark eyes and swollen, red lips. “We could jerk each other off real quick and try again?”

“A-again? You mean do that and then have sex?” I drew deep breaths, attempting to steady myself. Maybe I shouldn’t have thought about this so much over the last week. Maybe I shouldn’t have watched so much porn thinking about him, too.

“If you want. I mean...” His cheeks pinked. “Oral maybe?”

“Am I still considered a virgin if we do blowjobs?” I rounded my eyes. What a stupid thing to say.

He smirked. “I think in some circles you wouldn’t be, but I think technically, yes you’d still be a virgin.” He unzipped his own jeans and opened them. “There.” He focused on my mouth. “I am going to do dirty, filthy things to you, Devin. Don’t you worry about that.” He slid his hand up my thigh and rubbed over my still hard shaft through my briefs.

“Oh...” I shut my eyes, sensation rolling over me in harsh waves with each pass of his hand.

“Touch me, Devin. Do it.” He found my mouth with his own, and crushed our lips together, penetrating me with his tongue.

I kissed him back, my hunger building. I fingered the tip of his cock, poking out of the band of his boxer briefs, and the sticky wetness. He was definitely as turned on as I was. I slid the briefs down and wrapped my fingers around his shaft, then stroked.

He rolled his lips, releasing low moans against my mouth, then broke the kisses. “Oh, fuck yeah, that’s it. Faster.” He thrust into my palm, then worked my underwear down and fisted my shaft, pumping over it and squeezing at the tip.

“Oh my God.” As intense pleasure shuddered over me, I dropped my head into his neck, and rocked my hips in a rhythm with that sweet hand, my own hand moving quicker over him.

With his body trembling and his breath coming in quick pants, he shuddered and tensed his face. “Coming, oh fuck, I’m coming hard.” Ribbons of cum spurted out, landing on his shirt, and over my hand.

I watched in fascination, my own orgasm rippling through me in sharp bursts of sensation. I dropped my mouth open and gasped as each wave surged through me, my release coating the underside of the skirt. As it all slowed, I relaxed into the couch, attempting to catch my breath. “That was...that was—”

“Fucking hot.” He snuck his hand out from under my skirt, held it to his face, then licked a blob of cum from it.

“What are you doing?” I lifted my brows. Did people do that? People did joke about swallowing when they gave blowjobs.

“I’m tasting you.” His gaze caught mine. “You taste good.” He licked more off his fingers.

I held my own hand up to my face, twisting it, studying the white globs. “Am I supposed...do you want me to?” I slid my index finger between my lips and licked it off. The heady taste of him, salty with a hint of bitter, flooded my mouth.

“Well?” He quirked the edge of his lips. “What do you think?”

“This is...not bad.” I licked more off the back of my hand. “I guess I would swallow if we tried, you know, blowjobs.”

“You’re damn right you’d swallow.” He huffed out a laugh. “Or else I’d have to come all over you.” He cocked his head a moment. “But, that might not be too bad either.” With a sigh, he lay back into the couch. “We should clean up.”

I sucked in a breath. “Oh no.” I looked down at the skirt, then flipped it up, exposing my spent cock. Cum soaked blotches covered the underside of the skirt. “I-I came on Olivia’s skirt. She’s going to kill me.”

He peeked down. “Damn, dude, you came a lot.” He chuckled, then kissed the side of my head. “Don’t worry, we can wash it. I have a stackable washer and dryer in this apartment.” He twisted his lips. “It’s a shame though. I wanted to play with you a little more while you were wearing it.” He rose up from the couch, then held his hand out. “Come on, let’s clean up.”

I took his hand, letting him lift me out of the couch. “Play with me how?” As I followed him, the cold wet blotches stuck to my thighs and shaft. Next time, I should probably make sure I didn’t come on something of Olivia’s.

“Like fuck you in it.” He stopped, taking me in from head to toe. “You need to get some of your own skirts. This is really a turn on for me.” He skimmed his teeth over his bottom lip. “Maybe it’s just you that’s a turn on for me.” He snickered, then pulled me along to the bathroom.

I placed a hand over my chest, following him. He wanted to fuck me in a skirt. My mind filled with a vision of myself spread out over a bed, ass up, skirt folding over my back while he took me from behind. My cock twitched. Yeah, that worked for me, too.

A few minutes later, Brandon started the washing machine, tucked into a closet in the hallway, then strolled out into the

main room, hand in hand with me. “We barely touched our beers.”

“I don’t think I touched mine at all.” I watched the sway of his hips in his black pajama bottoms and smirked. Neither one of us were wearing any underwear and our pajamas left nothing to the imagination. It wouldn’t be long before we were fooling around again. I couldn’t wait to feel what it was like to have his mouth on my dick.

“Here.” He stopped at the couch, then sat down, bringing me next to him. He plucked my beer from the back of the couch and handed it to me. “If it’s too warm, I’ll put these in the refrigerator for a bit and we can open new ones.”

Nodding, I sipped my beer, the cool bubbles flowing down my throat. The couch cushions must have kept it cold. “No, mine is good.”

“Okay.” He drank some beer, looked at the bottle, then downed it. “Mine was a little warm. I’ll get another one.” He jumped from the couch and jogged off into the kitchen. “Why don’t you put something on the TV?”

“Sure.” I snatched the remote from the coffee table and turned on the television, then stepped through the channels. “What do you think? Horror movie?” I let my lips curl up in a grin, remembering our first date and the scary movie we’d watched. It might be fun to watch something like that here, where we were alone.

“Sure, if that’s what you want.” He fell in next to me with a new beer in his hand.

“Okay.” I stopped at a channel playing *The Exorcist*. “How about this?” I’d never seen it, only heard about it. Well, I’d never been *allowed* to see it. I could do, watch, or wear anything I wanted now.

“Dev, that’s like the scariest movie ever. Are you sure?” He crept into the corner of the couch, lifting a leg up behind me.

“Yeah.” I eyed him. I was definitely sure now. Being in his arms was the safest place I’d ever been. I climbed onto his

chest, spreading out along the couch cushions, and rested my head on his shoulder. “I’m not afraid when I’m with you.”

His breath caught. “Are you serious? *I* make you feel not afraid?” He wrapped an arm over my chest.

Holding onto his arm, I said, “Yes, you do. I feel, I don’t know, like I can take on the world and be whoever I want, and you’d be there for me.” My heart swelled with emotion. This was what love felt like, real love, right? “For you to be okay with, let alone embrace the fluid nature of my gender, well it really means a lot to me.” The corners of my eyes stung, and the room blurred. Why was I getting emotional? I guessed I never really thought about what tonight really meant to me with Brandon. My coming out.

He held me tighter, sniffing into my hair. “It’s okay, Dev. Everything about you is perfect to me.”

Turning my head, wetness touched my cheek. He was getting emotional, too. This was a big night for both of us. “Guess you might be learning things about yourself and accepting them, too.”

With a nod, he said, “Yeah. I’ve always known there were certain types of guys I was attracted to, not all guys, but certain types. You fit that type. I don’t know if there’s a word for it, but it’s really great to finally be able to embrace it as you said. To embrace you, like right now.” He kissed my cheek. “I’m falling for you, Devin Taylor.”

I stroked his arm. “I think I’m falling for you, too.” I nudged my head against his. “Okay, now that that’s out of the way, let’s watch this.” My attention drew to the television, then I sipped some beer. He was right, we really needed to start spending more time together somehow.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Brandon



As the movie ended, I drank the rest of my beer and snuck my hand around Devin's hip, fingering the edge of his shaft. It had been all I could do to focus on this damn movie and not give him that blowjob we'd discussed earlier. I was so ready. I'd tasted his cum, and it wasn't a problem, not a problem at all. Now I even hungered for it.

He shifted his hips, putting pressure on my swelling cock.

As a shiver pulsed up my spine, my cock lengthened and I slid my fingers under the waist band of his pajama bottoms, running my fingers over silky skin and down into curls.

With his breath catching, he shifted to his side, facing me. "What are you doing?"

"Playing." As I cupped his balls and gently squeezed, I watched his brows tense, and his lips part.

"If that's playing, I think we should play all the time." He rubbed his hand over my stiff cock through my pajamas, then fondled the tip. "I could, you know, play with you all the time."

I stroked his shaft as it grew in my hand. "We'd never have time to study and how would you ever work or play in that band of yours?" But it was a great idea.

"Maybe I'd give all of that up, just to play with you." He flicked his tongue over my lips, wetting them, then crept closer, slipping his hand down my pajamas. He thumbed my tip, spreading pre-cum over it, then stroked and squeezed out more.

"Fuck." A pulse of sensation wound through my body, giving me goosebumps. One hand job and he was turning into

a little devil. Maybe that's how he got his name. Of course, I was fine with that. I slanted my mouth over his, kissing him fully, winding our tongues together while fondling his balls.

He freed a needy moan into the kisses, his hand moving faster over my weeping cock. "When is this going to get dirty? Brandon, I think I need it dirty."

As I placed hungry kisses down his neck, I whispered, "How about this?" I shifted, climbing over him to straddle him, and lifted his shirt, then came back down, devouring his chest in soft bites followed by soothing sucks and licks. I sucked on a nipple.

Arching his back, he whimpered. "K-keep that up." His cock jerked up into my ass.

With a hard suck on the other nipple, I flicked my tongue over the nub, then straightened my legs, grinding our stiff cocks against each other. Tension coiled inside my gut and my shaft ached for more. I had to work him into the dirty stuff slowly.

A throaty groan wound free from his chest, and he dug his fingers into my sides.

I nipped and licked my way down to his groin and pulled the waistband of his pajamas down. "There you are." As I took in the sight of his firm dick, I tipped my head, offering a coy grin to him.

"Oh, God, do it, Bran. Take it in your mouth." He slid his tongue around his lips, then tensed his brows. His cock twitched and he gasped. "Please."

Licking up the underside, I tongued the spot just under the slit, then wrapped my fingers around the base. "Like this, Dev?" When I'd had this done to me, it had driven me wild. My cock jerked, dribbling in my pajama bottoms.

With a shudder, he fisted my hair. "Oh, fuck, yeah." He rocked his hips.

I freed a quick chuckle. "So, you do swear." What perfect timing. I plunged my mouth around his shaft and pumped it,

sucking on the way up, hollowing my cheeks and fondling his balls.

“I do, oh, fuck.” Groaning, he thrust into my mouth. “Oh my God, keep going, don’t stop.” He panted and his body trembled. Goosebumps broke out over his thighs.

Tipping my head, I stayed on him. He was about to come, and I wanted to see it all. As I sucked on his dick, I lathed the shaft with my tongue and swirled over the head. His cock pulsated inside my mouth, then hot cum spurting down the back of my throat.

He cried out, throwing his head back, his body rigid, his fingers pulling at my hair.

Staying on him, I swallowed it all down, as if starved. As it slowed, I released him with a wet pop, then sat up on tucked legs, swiping the back of my hand over my mouth. My shaft throbbed with arousal. “So?” I felt wetness on my hip and looked down. A wet spot had worked its way through my pajamas where the tip of my cock tried to peek through the band. I fingered it, rubbing the head of my cock through the thin fabric. A shock of sensation rippled through me. I was already so close.

Sitting up, he said, “Damn, you’re so turned on for me.” With a devious glint in his eye, biting the edge of his lower lip, he pushed me backward,

“Yeah, I didn’t even realize I almost came just from getting you off.” I lay back into the corner of the couch, watching him. What would he do? Was he ready to return the blowjob?

He lifted the band of my pajamas, then slipped them down my hips with me raising my ass. His eyes grew wide as he focused on my solid cock. “You have a really nice uh, dick.” He cupped a ball and skimmed his thumb over it, then the other.

“Oh...” I squirmed as tension wound and ebbed inside me. Should I ask him what he was planning? No, that might ruin the fun.

He moved his hand up and wrapped his fingers around the base of my shaft, then slowly, lowered down and flicked the head with his tongue. “Mmm, you taste good.” He flashed his eyes at me and smirked.

“Yeah? Then I guess you’ll need to eat it.” I let a faint grin play on my lips. Was I really saying things like this? I brushed my hand over his soft hair. “You okay?”

“I’m great. I just hope I’m as good at this as you are.” He pressed his lips together, then took the head of my cock into his mouth and swirled his tongue around it.

“Oh, fuck.” I shut my eyes, the sudden sensation shuddering over my body.

He sucked all the way down and up, again and again, pumping in time with his hand.

“Oh yeah, that’s it. That’s definitely it.” As a knot of pleasure coiled in my groin, I snuck my lower lip between my teeth and rode each stroke of his mouth, each lick of his tongue. I was in heaven. As my orgasm crested, my thighs quivered. “Gonna come, oh fuck, coming.” Harsh waves of sensation surged over me, and I gasped, thrusting into his lapping mouth.

He choked a moment, then caught himself and swallowed as much as he could, cum sliding down his hand onto my balls.

When it calmed, I relaxed into the couch. “Damn, Dev, that was great.” I let a satisfied smile sweep over my lips.

He peeked up at me and licked the remaining cum from my balls. “I think I have to figure out the throat thing.” He huffed a laugh. “I almost choked to death.” He climbed over me and lay on top of me, between my legs, propping his elbows on either side of my head. “Or, maybe it’s that you have such a large dick.”

“Me? *You* have a large dick. For a slender guy, your cock is something else.” Laughing, I flung my arms around him and pulled him down onto my chest, then kissed his head. “You

were great though. I kind of liked the choking thing. It was kinda hot.”

He lifted his head, arching a brow. “You liked it when I was suffocating on your dick?”

“I didn’t say *that*.” I tensed the side of my mouth. “Just, you know, when you got it in really deep and your throat—”

“Okay, I get it.” He blew out a breath, then toyed with my nipple. “I’ll get better at it. Maybe I’ll get something to practice on.”

“Like what? A dildo?” I chortled.

“Brandon Visser.” He slapped at my chest. “I was thinking about a cucumber or something.”

“Well, there *is* a sex toy shop around here. We could always go check it out.” I tipped my head. Maybe I was overstepping here. We’d only just started exploring each other. But how was the sex going to work? Who was supposed to be on top and who’d be on the bottom? I twisted my lips.

“What are you thinking about?” He kissed my chest.

“I’m, I don’t know if I should even say it.” I knitted my brows. He wanted to lose his virginity, but shouldn’t we wait for that?

“Yes, please say it.” He rose up on his elbows again, his gaze searching my face. “Say it. Don’t feel like you can’t talk to me, okay?”

My heart skipped a beat. I didn’t want him to think I couldn’t talk to him. “So, about sex. Who’s going to...I mean, do you want to...” I huffed. “I’ve done a lot, but I’ve never tried putting anything in my ass. I have no idea if I’d like it or not, because I’ve never done it.” That was the one place I hadn’t gone with Gina, even though she’d wanted to try it.

“I don’t think I’d mind it. I’ve experimented a little.” He skimmed his fingers in a circle over my chest. “You’re the one who told me about free porn.” He smirked at me.

“Oh, yeah.” As my mind flooded with an image of him watching porn and jerking off, my cock woke. Damn, I could

probably go again in a few minutes. We might need a whole day of this to get it out of our systems. I brushed my hand up and down his back. “So, you tried like what, fingering yourself?”

“I guess, sort of.” His cheeks reddened. “I didn’t put anything inside, just around it.” He touched his forehead to mine, freeing a stuttered chuckle, then focused on me. “Look, I’m ready. Especially with you, I’m ready. I’ll bottom.” He shrugged a shoulder. “And maybe we can see if you’d like to bottom some time.”

Nodding my head, I hugged him to my chest, then kissed the top of his head. “Yeah, we can do whatever feels right. There’s no right or wrong to this.”

“That’s right.” He kissed my chest, then snuggled in.

I thought about tomorrow. “Do you have any plans tomorrow? Do you have to work?”

“I do, but not until four, so I have the day sort of open.” He sighed. “I have to get some studying done though. I have a test on Monday in my marketing class.”

“Oh.” I held him tighter. “So, would that involve any reading?” Maybe we could try out this *studying together* thing.

“It does.” He drew a deep inhale. “Guess we could go to my dorm room and read together, huh.”

“Guess we could.” I smiled against his hair, my heart warming. God, I was falling all the way in. Any more nights like this and it would seal it. “Should we clean up and go to bed?”

“Yeah. But maybe lie here for a just a few more minutes.” He snuggled in deeper. “It just feels good.”

The next morning, I picked up our breakfast dishes from my dinette and brought them to my kitchen sink. This morning’s blowjobs were even better than last night’s, and I was looking forward to spending most of the day with Devin.

Hopefully, I'd be able to talk him into staying the night at my place again.

He wrapped his arms around me from behind and rested his cheek against the back of my shoulder. "Want some help with that?"

"No, it's all right. Why don't you go and get showered?" I turned on the tap, then poured dish soap into a sponge and scrubbed the first dish.

"Yeah, okay. Where do you want to go?" His cell phone dinged, and he fished it out of his pajama bottoms, then held it to his face. "Oh, looks like we need to stop off at the bakery." He brushed his long, red bangs out of his eyes.

"Yeah? Why is that?" As I set a plate in a drying rack on the counter, I turned around. It better not mean that he had to go to work early.

His attention drew to me. "Nate printed out a bunch of financial paperwork to give me for my final project. I'm going to do an analysis of it."

"Oh, well, that's good. Are you going to want to work on it today?" I tensed my mouth. "I mean, you could still do work on that while I read, right?" Was I being clingy? I'd never been a clingy guy before. Why now?

"Yeah, we can do that." With a quick grin, he kissed my cheek. "Let's head over there after we clean up, then we can go back to my dorm room."

"Sounds good." I returned to my dishes. Good, at least we were on the same page.

A few hours later, I stood behind Devin as he unlocked the door of his dorm room, both of us with backpacks slung over our shoulders. This was my first time in his personal space. What would it be like?

He opened the door and stepped into a short hallway with mirrored closet doors on one side. He flicked on a switch inside a doorway. "Here's the bathroom in case you need to use it."

Following him, I took a quick peek into the bathroom. It was sleek and modern-looking with a clean white sink and counter, and dark wood cabinets. I didn't see a lot of stuff on the counter, just two glass containers, one for flossers and one for Q-tips. A hand soap dispenser rested next to the chrome faucet. "Dude, are you one of those neat freaks?" The only time I cleaned or picked up was when I knew someone was coming over. He didn't know we were coming here today before the show last night, did he?

With a smirk, he twisted around. "Kind of?" He meandered into the main room, around a corner.

I strolled around the corner. Neatness was definitely a Devin thing. Everything was in its place, from the mechanical pencils and other desk items in the silver containers lined up across the back of his desk, to a set of floating wooden shelves he had hung on the wall with fake succulent plants arranged like something out of a home and garden television show. My gaze roamed to his bed, the gray bedspread tucked in at the edges and the matching pillowcases, all arranged in the corner the lifted bed fitted into. The walls held framed pictures of colorful flowers, giving the space a splash of color, while under the bed frame were stacked drawers. "Do you uh, you make your bed every day, too?"

He sat in his chair at his black desk, then unzipped his backpack. "I do. Is that a problem?" He raised his brows.

"No, not a problem." I slowly shook my head, then ran my index finger along the black shelf unit opposite the bed, housing a television and a small refrigerator underneath. "How often do you clean?"

"Usually every week. Why?" He curled a corner of his mouth, then chuckled, and slipped a stack of papers out of his backpack. "Not everyone can have an inch of dust on their nightstand like you do."

"Do not. I dusted just last...month." I climbed onto the bed, setting my backpack beside me. My gaze snagged a white board with a few photos stuck to it with magnets on the wall at the foot of the bed. "Hey, what are those?" I slid off the bed

and stepped to them. The photo he'd taken of us at the bakery was hung up next to them.

"My mom gave those to me." With a sigh, he came up beside me and pointed to a photo of a tall man in a cowboy hat and a smallish woman in a long, flowery dress with her brown hair in a single braid falling over her shoulder. "That's my mom and dad."

"Really?" I eyed the photo a little closer. The woman had an inviting smile, but the man's was tight, like he hadn't really wanted to be in the photo. "So, what are they like?"

"My mom was really loving. She's..." He pursed his lips. "She was a great mom to have growing up. She did everything she could for me and my brother, Stuart. She lived for us." He choked out a laugh. "But now I'm here and Stuart is on his mission, so I think she gets lonely with just my dad."

My heart ached for him. I draped an arm over his shoulders. Why was he talking about his mom like she wasn't around anymore? Shit. "Devin, you can't disappear on them."

With a sigh, he hung his head. "Can we not talk about this right now?"

"Yeah, sure." I pointed at a photo of a much younger looking Devin, but the hair was in a crewcut. "Is that you?"

"No, that's Stuart. He's a few years younger, but we look a lot alike. People used to think we were twins sometimes. We're only two years apart." He leaned against my side. "You sort of look like your brother, too. Just a smaller, lighter version." He snickered.

"Yeah, Kaiden is tall, and the guy works out a lot, since he's got all that equipment at the physical therapy office." I turned him to face me. "I'd like for you to meet him. Would you like that?"

"I would." A smile crept over his lips. "When are you going to tell him about us?"

"I already have." As I cupped his cheek, I skimmed my thumb over it. "Turns out, Kaiden's new guy is a friend of Dana's." Funny how small the world was.

“What?” His eyes grew wide. “Who is it? Do I know him?”

“I don’t know, but I do think Dana and Nate have been helping us along because of that.” I pressed a long kiss to his mouth. I’d never really thought about it like that before he said it, but it was all making sense now.

“All those times Nate was telling me to go hang out with customers and it was always you.” Shaking his head, he chuckled. “Damn.”

“Yeah.” I pulled him into a warm embrace, then against his ear, said softly, “I want you to meet my parents. I want to come out to them officially. I think I want you there.” I pulled away to face him.

His gaze darted between my eyes. “Are you serious? Do you really think it would be okay?” He held his mouth open.

“Yeah, I do. They were fine with Kaiden coming out. They’re really pretty liberal about everything.” I studied his face. He should know that at least with my family, he would be accepted. “I’m sure they’d be fine with your gender fluidity, too.”

Dropping his jaw wider, he rubbed his fingers on his forehead. “I-I don’t know about that. Maybe uh, maybe we just drop the fact that we’re together on them first.”

I grabbed up both of his hands in my own, my chest squeezing. “Whatever you’re comfortable with. I’m telling you, they’d be fine with it, but it can wait until you’re ready. Okay?” He looked to be crawling back inside his shell a little bit after being so confident with himself yesterday.

Worrying his lower lip, he stared at our hands. “Yeah, okay.”

With a shake of our hands, I said, “Hey, we’ve got some reading and analysis to do. Let’s not dwell on this. It can happen whenever.” Did I push him too far, maybe?

“Yeah.” He planted a quick kiss on my cheek, then freed me, walked to his desk chair and dropped down. “Anyways, I *would* like to meet them. I do want to be there for you, well, with you when you come out, okay?” He shuffled papers onto

his desk, then moved his keyboard and mouse out of the way and set them down. As he hovered over the papers, he turned one over. “These guys are making a fortune on that bakery.”

“Yeah?” I hopped onto the bed, slipped my laptop out of my backpack, and opened it up.

A few hours later, I sat next to Devin on the dorm room bed, typing on a laptop, his side pressed to mine, while I read from an iPad.

I glanced at the screen of the laptop. This studying together thing was working out pretty well. We would definitely be seeing more of each other and having him so close just felt right.

A ding rang out in the room. “Oh, that’s my cell.” He slipped it out of the back pocket of his jeans and held it to his face, then knitted his brows. “Oh.”

“What, who is it?” I peeked at the display. “Axel?”

“Yeah, he says we picked up a show at *The Club on Mill*.” His gaze met with mine. “Do you know what that is?”

“Uh, yeah, that’s a gay bar.” I shifted to face him. “I didn’t know they had bands there. That’s cool, isn’t it?”

Nodding, he typed on his phone. “Yeah, when I was there, they had a DJ and electronic music. I’m surprised they’d hire us, too.”

My breath snagged. “Wait, when you were there? When did you go there?” And more importantly, what did he do there? I lifted a brow.

“I uh, I went there with Olivia. She told me I should check it out. It was fun, but...” His gaze snapped from his phone to me. “Why?”

“Why? I thought you were, I mean, did you, did you—”

“No, nothing happened. I talked to a few guys, danced a little bit, and went home. I wasn’t all that comfortable with it. This one guy kept pawing at me whenever Olivia and I tried to dance.” He shrugged a shoulder. “I wasn’t into him.” He twisted his lips. His phone dinged.

As my chest heated, I huffed. Some guy was pawing at my Devin? No fucking way. But that was before we met, so how could I be mad at that? I peeked at him, typing away on his phone again. Whoever that guy was, obviously Devin hadn't cared for him. Devin did, however, care for me. I needed to let this go. "So, what is Axel saying?"

"He says that they don't usually have bands there, but since we're an all-queer band they invited us to come in and play. We'll be playing in two weeks." Focusing on his phone, he cocked his head. "Looks like we have another Friday night gig this weekend again. Some bar manager guy was at the last gig and really liked us."

"Gig, huh?" I chuckled. He was really getting into this band thing.

"Yeah, that's what the guys call it," he said, typing some more. "Anyways, we're going to have regular rehearsals on Monday nights and Sundays when I'm not working. I'll have to figure this out with Nate." He pursed his lips.

"And your boyfriend?" I ticked up my brows. Good thing I wasn't working so I could be around whenever he was free.

He glanced at me. "Yes, of course." He flashed a smile at me. "I'll let you know my schedule, so you can work around it and we can spend time together, okay?"

"Sure, that works. I mean, I can get schoolwork done when you're at your gigs. But I think if I spend too much time in the bakery, I'll be the one getting fat." I snickered. We'd work this out together. It would be fun watching him onstage. Maybe I could even get my brother and his new boyfriend to come out. My thoughts ran through the upcoming month. "Hey, what about spring break? Do you have to go up and see your folks?"

With a frown, he shook his head. "No, I'm not going up there. I'm going to make up some excuse, so I don't have to go." He stared toward the photos on the white board.

"Dev." I wrapped an arm around his shoulders. "At some point, you're going to have to face them. I mean, what about

graduation? They'll be here for that, right?" And would I even get to meet them?

"That's a few months away. I have time to think of something." He leaned into my chest, putting his head on my shoulder. "The truth? I have no idea what to do. I can't come out to them, and I certainly can't let them see that side of me, you know."

"You mean the side who wears make-up and skirts?" I kissed his head. I'd loved that side of him yesterday, just as much as I loved the side I was with today. Wait, *love*? I took a hard swallow, my heart pounding. Yeah, it might be love.

He nodded against my shoulder, his fingers toying with a fold in my shirt.

"I can understand how hard that would be. But there's got to be a way to ease them into it maybe." I kissed the side of his head, brushing my hand down the back of it. "You know I'll be there for you. We can come out to my parents first. Then maybe you'll see it's not so terrible."

"But you know your parents are okay with it. They're not strict Mormon." He hid his face in my neck. "Telling your mom won't break her heart." His breath hitched.

"Shit." I folded him up in a tight hold. I'd had no idea he felt this way. "Hey, you must be really close to her, huh?"

He sniffled. "I was. Then I left and I sort of lost her. I lost all of them already. Every year that I've been here, I've distanced myself more and more." He lifted his head and rubbed at his eyes. "They can't know."

Brushing my knuckles over his cheek, I said, "This obviously hurts you. What if you're wrong?" I couldn't imagine any parent not loving their son because they were queer. But maybe that was because of how I was brought up?

"I'm not wrong." His lips thinned and he locked his gaze on me. "They believe in conversion therapy."

I widened my eyes. "What? Isn't that banned?" Maybe I'd been living in a nice little bubble down here in the city. How could anyone still believe in that?

“It’s not banned in Arizona yet and only for minors in most of the places where there is a ban.” He huffed. “And the clergy can still practice it, the ban only covers medical people.”

“They couldn’t make you do that, could they?” My chest squeezed. Was there some way the church could force him since he was still a member?

He shook his head. “I don’t think so. I’d have to be willing.” He focused on me. “But they’d want me to do that. I know it. Especially my father.”

“I’m so sorry.” I drew him into my chest and kissed his head. “Don’t worry, I’d never let anyone force you into doing something like that. I know we’re just getting started here, but Dev, I’m in this. I want you to know that. I won’t let anyone, not even your family, hurt you.” I wasn’t sure how I’d back up that statement, but I knew my own family and especially Kaiden would be there to help.

“Thanks.” His voice cracked and he clutched at my shirt, then pushed me away. “Anyways. Damn, how’d we get on that?” He freed a sharp chuckle. “Let’s move on.” He tapped my nose. “I am not going back home for spring break, got it?”

With a soft smile, I said, “Yeah, I got it.” We’d leave it for now. This was a much bigger deal than I’d ever imagined. I should change the subject. “So, after work tonight, how about you come back to my place again?”

A smirk played over his lips. “Yeah? Are things going to get dirty tonight?” His gaze fell to my mouth.

“They can.” I focused on his plump lips. “Maybe we could try something new?” As in, maybe I’d have to visit that sex shop down the street from my place. When I’d played with toys with Gina it had been fun. How much more fun would it be with Devin?

“Yeah? What did you have in mind?” His pupils flared and his breath quickened. He squirmed on the bed.

“It’s a surprise. Sort of like the surprise you had for me last night at the *gig*.” There, that would fix him. I let out a throaty chuckle, heat shivering up my spine.

He licked at my lips. “You’re going to make me think about sex the whole time I’m at work tonight. Not fair.”

“Good, then you’ll be ready.” I pressed a long, deep kiss to his mouth. I was definitely stopping off at the sex shop. Devin seemed like he’d be into it and I knew I was. As I broke the kiss, I said, “I’m going to paint your nails, too.” Why I wanted to do that so badly, I hadn’t a clue. I just did.

“Oh, that would be fun.” He held up his hand and looked at his nails. “Black, let’s go with black.”

“You gotta deal.” I smiled at him. I had plenty of time for shopping while he was at work.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Devin



I stood at Brandon's door, drew a deep breath, and knocked. Working all night, knowing he had something planned for us, had driven me crazy my whole shift. Would I finally lose my virginity tonight? God, I hoped so. I shifted my weight, the soft clomping of footsteps filtered through the door.

The door popped open. "Hey, Dev." He hooked his arms around my shoulders and pulled me to his chest, his face nuzzling into my neck. "I missed you."

Wrapping my arms around his waist, I returned the hug. It always felt so good to be in his arms. How had I gone without it my whole life? "I missed you, too." And it wasn't a lie. I had.

He released me and stepped aside. "Well, come on in." He held a hand up in invitation.

I walked into the main room, my gaze searching it. Nothing seemed different. After our conversation, I'd expected to see *something* different. I scratched at my neck. "So?" I dropped my backpack on the floor next to the couch.

"Want a beer?" With a wicked smirk, he strolled into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator.

Exhaling, I dropped into the corner of the sofa. "Sure." I looked around again. Okay, maybe he'd cleaned up a little, maybe even dusted. I sniggered. "You cleaned up for me."

He sauntered out to the couch and handed me an opened beer bottle. "I did." With a tick of his brows, he sipped his beer.

I nodded, then drank some beer, the cool bubbles rolling down my throat. "It looks nice." And it did. The place actually

had a little bit of character when it was picked up.

Sitting next to me, he said, “So, I got some things. I didn’t know what sort of things you’d be into exactly, so if there’s something you don’t like, I can always take it back.” His cheeks pinked.

Heat shivered up my spine and woke my cock. “Oh? Like what?” I gulped more beer down as my head swam with possibilities.

After setting his beer on the coffee table, he jumped from the couch, then disappeared into his bedroom. A moment later, he returned with three pink bags in his hands. “I uh, sort of went a little crazy at the sex shop.” He flushed, his forehead wrinkling.

My pants grew tight. Finally, something dirty. I lifted the side of my mouth. There had to be something in there I’d seen in one of those porn sites I’d been watching.

He strolled back to the couch and sank in next to me, then opened a bag. “So, I know you like sort of feminine things sometimes and I do enjoy seeing you in them, so I uh...” He held up a baby blue, one piece negligee in lace, stealing a peek at me.

“Oh my.” I held my hand over my mouth and set my beer on the table. I’d never even thought of that. Why hadn’t I? I touched the fabric, rubbing my it through my fingers and thumb. It was softer than it looked. “I like it.” My dick twitched in agreement. I shucked off my jean jacket and grabbed the bottom of my shirt.

“Wait.” Dropping the negligee to his knees, he grabbed my arms, stopping me.

I stared at him. “What? You don’t want me to try it on?” I was so damned ready for this. Why was he stopping me?

“No, but don’t you want to see the other things I bought?” With his pupils flaring, he bit at his lower lip. “Besides, I’m already turned on as fuck right now. So, if you put this on now, I can’t guarantee you’ll see the rest until tomorrow.”

I glanced at the groin of his jeans, a clear erection straining under his zipper. "I guess you are." My own cock ached. God, I wanted him. I wanted him to do things to me right now. It was like the last few days had awoken some monster inside me. But I'd wait. "Go ahead. But I'm putting that one on as soon as we're done going through the bags." I chuckled and drank more beer.

With a deep breath, he dove back into the bag, then pulled out a few items in packaging. "So, this is a cock ring." He held it up to me.

"A, a what?" I tilted my head. "And what does that do?" How the hell did he know what all this stuff was, and I didn't? God, I was so behind.

"It's for, um, it'll make your dick stay hard." He palmed his groin. "A-and it makes it, well bigger and can make the orgasm better." With a shake of his head, he chuckled, then rubbed his eyes with his thumb and fingers. "I can't believe I'm doing this. It's not exactly how I thought this would go."

"Okay, first, yes to that ring thing." I waved my fingers at it. "And second, how did you think this would go?" I curled the edges of my lips. This was sort of comical.

"I don't know." He freed a long exhale, his grin waning. He pointed to a long, slender, black thing with a rim on the end of it. "So, this is a butt plug. I got a few for you to try, you know, since you were interested in some anal stuff." He dove into the second bag and pulled out a few more. "There are different sizes and some of them vibrate." With his brows lifting, he peeked at me, the ends of his mouth twitching with an almost smile.

"Vibrate? Why?" I parted my lips, knitting my brows. I'd thought vibrators were for women. God knows Olivia loved them.

"B-because it feels good?" He burst out in a fit of giggles, dropping them all in the bag. "I'm sorry, this is just, I don't know. It's a turn on, but damn." He shook his head, then calmed down. "There's a plain old vibrator in there, too, I thought we could try." With a deep breath, he set a hand on my

knee. “I want you to know, I have used some of this stuff before. You know Gina—”

“Yeah, I know. You don’t have to tell me again.” I picked at the label on my beer bottle. I really didn’t want to ruin this moment with talk about what he did or did not do with his ex.

“Sorry.” He shifted closer to me. “Like I said, I wasn’t really sure what you’d be into, and I want to do so many things with you.” His breath quickened and his pupils widened. “Dev, you’re really sexy, you know that?”

“I guess I didn’t. Not until I met you.” I sipped my beer, then set it down. Something about him actually made me think I *could* be sexy. “So, where do we start?”

Picking up the negligee and the bags in one hand, he took mine with his free hand. “Come on, let’s go into my bedroom and play.”

“I like the sound of that.” With a smirk, I grabbed my beer and followed him into his bedroom, tension coiling in my gut. I made a quick adjustment to my still hard dick. “So that cock ring, will it keep me from getting off too soon?” I might need a little help with that after seeing all that stuff.

“I think so.” He stopped inside his bedroom, then set the bags down next to the nightstand and held the negligee out to me. “Here. Do you want to change in the bathroom or something?” He ticked his brows at me.

“Yeah, sure.” I took it from him and walked into his bathroom, flipping on the light, then closing the door. At least now if I had problems getting it on, I wouldn’t ruin the mood and look like an idiot.

I shucked my t-shirt off, skimmed my jeans and boxer briefs down and off my legs, then held up the garment, twisting it on the plastic hanger. It looked a little small, but hopefully it would stretch. After unwrapping it from the hanger, I stepped into it and pulled it up my legs. My cock pulsed and a shock of sensation flickered over me as the fabric slid over it. Damn, this was turning me on way too much. I

peeked at the door. Should I jerk off really quick? No, bad idea. If I came too soon, we could always try again.

I continued shimmying the negligee up my torso. Thankfully, the material was nice and stretchy. It stopped just at my nipples, like some sort of corset. I peeked at my ass in the mirror, an opening showing down my crack. "Holy shit." He'd thought of everything. I cupped my hands over my mouth and turned around, taking it all in. My balls were tucked up tight and my solid dick stretched up to my hip bone. It felt dirty, very dirty. I didn't even know why. Maybe my upbringing was making this feel so wrong in such a wicked, great way.

Knocking sounded on the door. "Hey, Dev, you okay in there?"

Clearing my throat and with a quick last glance at myself in the mirror, I opened the door.

"Oh my God." Brandon, wearing only his boxer briefs, let his gaze roam over me from head to toe, taking deep breaths. As his gaze stopped at my groin, his cock, poking out of his underwear, twitched, and seeped at the tip. "I want to fuck you so bad right now." His body shuddered. "B-but I won't, not yet."

My heart bloomed with warmth. He did this for me, made me feel desired even when I was my real self, whichever way that happened to be right now. "What if I want you to?" My voice was gravelly and low as I peeked at him from under my bangs and bit at my thumbnail.

"Oh, fuck, Dev, you have no idea what you're doing to me right now." He stepped close to me and placed his warm palm on my throbbing cock, then claimed my mouth in a deep kiss, parting my lips with his tongue and tangling them together.

His fingers probed the tip of my shaft, shivering pleasure up my spine. With a low moan, I rocked into his hand and stroked his weeping cock through his briefs.

Groaning, he tipped his head back, breaking the kiss, then led me to his bed. "Get on."

I climbed up onto the bed, then lay on my back, my legs spread, and knees bent. I wasn't sure where he'd wanted to start, but if he touched my dick too much more—

Shucking his underwear off, he pulled out an egg-shaped, silver thing from the bag. "I want to see what happens if I use a vibrator on you." His throat dipped with a hard swallow and his eyes grew dark, his cock standing at attention, almost reaching his navel. "I thought we'd just try some things first."

"Okay. But um, I might uh, I think I might..." I struggled to catch my breath. "C-can I try that ring thing first?" At least then, hopefully, I wouldn't make a fool of myself and come as soon as he touched me with that silver thing.

"Sure." He slipped his hand into the bag and pulled out the cock ring, then climbed onto the bed and sat between my thighs, both of his legs tucked under him. As he opened his nightstand drawer and grabbed a bottle of lube, he said, "Here, I'll just..." He worked my cock out of the leg of the negligee, then lubed the inside of the ring and slipped it into place at the base of my shaft. "There, how does that feel?" He peeked at me, tucking my dick back under the lace, then ran his palm up my stomach and tilted his head as if admiring me.

A heavy pressure filled my cock. It wasn't bad, but it was a little weird. "It's good." I reached for his cock and wrapped my fingers around it, my mouth watering. I'd gotten so used to giving him blowjobs that now I hungered for it. I bit my upper lip and stroked him.

With a whimper, he hovered over me on one straight arm, then pressed a button on an attachment to the vibrator, slowly rocking his hips with my hand movements.

Buzzing filled the room and tension knotted inside my gut. "Okay, so let's see what this thing does." I gave him a sly grin.

He tipped his head down and pressed the vibrator to the middle of my shaft.

"Oh, fuck." As pleasure burst inside me, I bucked my hips. No wonder women loved these things. As my peak threatened to explode, it didn't, leaving me a tingling mess. It was all too

much. “S-stop.” I panted, tossing his hand and the vibrator from me.

“Shit, are you okay?” He fell to my chest, propped up on his elbows by my head, his forehead wrinkling. “God, I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“No, you definitely didn’t hurt me.” His bare, hot cock pressed snugly against mine. If I dared move, it might set me off again. “I-I think maybe I took on a little too much, you know?”

“Yeah, I’m sorry. I should have known.” He gazed deeply into my eyes, then brushed his knuckles down my cheek. “How about we make out, just like this and see what happens?”

With a nod, I wrapped my hand around the back of his head and pulled his lips to mine, then snuck my tongue inside and flicked it against his own.

He moaned into the kiss and rocked his hips, gliding our cocks against each other.

As sensation wound through me once again, I slapped my hand to his ass, rutting harder against him. The ring was doing its job, keeping me from coming, but damn, it all felt so good.

He nibbled on my chin and licked a trail to my earlobe, then flicked his tongue over it.

A shiver played over my spine and down into my cock. Writhing below him, I hissed and moaned.

Sliding a hand between us, he rolled to the side and teased my nipple into a hard nub, then came down lower and sucked on it.

As he took my nipple between his teeth, he pinched the other one.

I gasped. “Oh, fuck, Bran, that feels good.” My cock pulsed and dribbled pre-cum into the panties of the negligee.

He slid down lower, sucking and licking at the lace hugging my body, running his hands over me. As he hovered over my shaft, he rubbed his fingers over it. “You’re so gorgeous,

baby.” As his breath caught, he threw a glance at me and stopped. “I can call you that, right? I mean, it just feels right.”

I gave him a quick nod. I didn’t care what the hell he called me right now, as long he put my dick in his mouth. I thrust my hips at him. Maybe he’d get the hint.

His gaze returned to my groin, and he came down, enveloping my lace-covered cock with his wet mouth, flicking his tongue over it through the thin fabric.

Lifting my knees further, I rocked into his mouth, getting as much friction as I could. Sensation surged through me, held at the precipice. I freed moan after moan and squeezed my eyes shut as his tongue stroked me. Something cold and wet nudged its way into my crevice. “Brandon?” I stared down at him.

He peeked up at me, a mischievous smile playing on his lips. He held up the lube in his free hand, the other lodged below my balls. “You wanted to try anal, right? Is this all right?”

“Yes, hell yes.” I wetted my lips. Finally, I might feel what it was like, after watching so many videos.

“Okay, you might feel a little pressure.” He smirked, then shook his head. “I sound like a doctor or something.”

“Stop that. You’re going to ruin the mood.” With a grin, I glanced at the ceiling, then focused on him, on his face, the way his swollen, red lips parted, his curly dark bangs falling over his forehead, the darkened eyes. It was obvious he was enjoying this as much as I was, even though I’d barely touched him.

He rubbed his finger over my hole, the lube coating it, then hovered closely over my shaft. “Tell me to stop if I need to stop, okay?” As he licked over my balls, then up my cock, he nudged his finger into me.

I adjusted my hips, tensing my brows. This was okay, but nothing to get excited about.

“Okay, I need you to bear down, okay?” He sucked and lapped the head of my shaft, then snuck the tip of the finger inside me.

With a gasp, I bore down on him, burning and pressure filling me. Was this really what all the fuss was about? If I didn't like this, how would I lose my virginity?

"You okay?" He wrinkled his brows. "I can stop if you want."

"No, don't you dare stop." I breathed in deeply, forcing myself to relax. "Keep doing whatever that was you were doing with your mouth on my dick."

"Absolutely." As he returned to sucking and licking my cock, he wound the finger inside me.

I focused on the heat of his mouth laving up my shaft, the surges, and ebbs of pleasure coiling inside me. After a few minutes, the pressure of his finger melded into the rest, then a shockwave of sensation shivered over me. "Oh my God, do that more." My shaft twitched and my thighs quivered.

He hit the spot over and over, moaning into my cock, flicking his tongue at the tip.

As a slow-building wave surged over me, my body shuddered and I cried out, my orgasm forcing its way through, spurting cum inside the panties, over and over. I slapped my hands to the back of Brandon's head, thrusting into him, pressing his sucking mouth to my sensitive cock.

As it slowed, he reared up and, still on tucked legs, fisted his shaft and jerked it, panting, his head hanging, his free hand rubbing over the wetness in my panties. "Oh, fuck, coming. Can I come on you?" With his face tensing, he threw a glance at me.

"Y-yes. Yes, do it." I grabbed his hip, pulling him forward to me.

Dropping onto a straight arm, he pumped himself faster, then slowed as ribbons of cum shot out of his cock. He gasped with each pulse, his body trembling over me. "Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck." As he calmed, he fell to my chest and wrapped his arms around my shoulders, nuzzling into my neck. "I don't think I've ever come that hard before in my life."

I held him tight and against his hair, I said, “Me neither. I was afraid it might not stop.” I released a soft chuckle. “Okay, maybe not afraid.”

“I feel so close to you.” He held me tighter.

As I gazed up at the ceiling, my heart swelled with emotion. Now I think I knew why he wanted to wait to do these things. They hadn’t felt awkward with him at all, even though it probably wasn’t the sort of thing most people would do. “Me, too.” I kissed the side of his head. My shaft ached. I still had that ring on. “Hey, can you get that thing off me now?” I let out a soft chuckle.

“Oh, yeah, sorry.” He rose up onto his knees, then freed my cock from the panties and worked the ring off. “So, how did you like it?” He glanced at me, then set it on the nightstand.

“I liked it.” I pushed my dick back into the wet panties and sat up onto my elbows, taking in the now cold blobs of cum on my chest. There was so much of it. “Damn, you did come hard.” I gave him a coy grin.

“Told ya.” With a snicker, he slid off the bed, then held his hand out to me. “Quick shower?”

“Definitely.” I took his hand and threw my legs over the side of the bed, then stood up.

After cleaning up and throwing the negligee into the wash, I had put on my pajama bottoms and a t-shirt and waited on the couch, sipping a beer, for Brandon to bring the nail polish. I don’t know why he was so hell bent on doing my nails, but after what we’d just done in the bedroom, I wasn’t going to question him.

Brandon strolled into the room with three small bottles in his hand and a grin on his face. “So, I talked to the lady at the drugstore, and she told me you have to have a base.” As he stopped in front of me, he held up a bottle with whitish liquid in it. “The colored polish.” He held up a bottle with black nail polish in it. “And a top coat.” His grin widened as he held up a bottle with clear liquid in it.

I nodded. “Oh.” He’d even gone through the trouble to consult someone at the store. I probably would have just purchased the black polish and left. Of course, then Olivia would deride me for not doing it right. “So, let’s do this.” I shifted to sit sideways on the couch.

He sat next to me and set the bottles on the table, next to his beer, then twisted the top off the bottle with the base in it, his tongue licking at the corner of his mouth.

God, he was gorgeous. And he was doing all of this for me. I held my hand out to him, palm down.

“The drugstore lady said I should dip the brush in the bottle each time I do a finger.” His gaze darted from my hand to the bottle and brush, then back to my hand. “Wait a minute. I think we need to do this at the table.” His cheeks flushed. “Sorry, guess I didn’t think this through all the way.”

“It’s okay.” Leaning forward, I planted a quick kiss on his cheek. “Let’s just move to the table.” I stood up, grabbed both of our beers, then made my way to the dinette and took a seat, setting our beers down. “This is really nice, you know, you doing this for me.”

He joined me at the table and placed the bottles in front of him. “I have a confession.” He tensed the edge of his mouth.

“What’s that?” I rested my hand in front of him, watching him focus in on my nails. I’d just cut them a few days ago, so we didn’t have to worry about that.

As he stroked the base coat across my index finger, then dipped the brush into the bottle, he said, “I was a little jealous that Olivia got to dye your hair and pick out your clothes for the show.” After applying the base coat to another nail, his gaze met mine.

“You were? Why?” I arched a brow. “Me and Olivia have never had anything between us.” Okay, well, she did know a lot of my darkest secrets, but we’d always been just friends.

“I know that, I just...” He brushed the base over the rest of my fingers. “Other hand.”

Setting my other hand in front of him, I said, “You just what?” I sipped my beer.

Pursing his lips, he brushed base coat over the nails of my other hand. “I just wanted to be the one to do that for you. It seemed like sort of a big deal.” He peeked up at me from under his dark, curly bangs, those sexy brown eyes stirring my heart. “You’d never done anything like that before, right?”

With a slow nod of my head, my chest tightened. “I hadn’t. The first time I wore make-up outside of my dorm room was that night at the house party.” It was starting to make sense. When you had someone, a boyfriend, those firsts needed to be with them. Well, as much as they could be. I needed to share these things with him.

“Yeah, so, I guess, I just wished I could have been there for that.” He closed up the base coat bottle and opened the nail polish, then lifted the edge of his mouth. “It’s okay, I was there for the unveiling.” He waved his fingers at me. “Give me back that first hand.”

I switched hands and watched him brush on the polish. “So, have you ever done this before?” At least with Olivia, she would have had some practice, but I wasn’t going to tell him that, or that he was bad at it if it turned out terrible. I smirked.

“Nope. You’re my first.” He fixated on my fingers, carefully brushing each one. “Oops.” He used his finger pad to wipe polish from the skin around the nail. “The lady at the drugstore told me if I messed up, I can clean it with polish remover later.”

“I’m not worried.” With a smile spreading over my mouth, I drank more beer. Sharing this moment was turning into something really special with him. It was showing me a side of him that I thought maybe I’d never find in a partner, someone who really accepted me all the way, just the way I was. “So, I have to know, who did you tell this lady at the drugstore you were doing this for?”

He studied me for a moment. “I told her I was doing this for my boyfriend.”

My chest warmed with emotion. I parted my lips, my breath catching. Every time he called me that, I fell harder for him. “Yeah? Well, uh, well good.” I gulped some beer down, words building in my throat that needed to be pushed back inside. I loved him, I knew that, there was no way around it. But I couldn’t say it, not yet. I shifted on the chair. We needed something else to talk about. “So, uh, what’s the week looking like?” As he finished up the first hand, I gave him my other one.

“Well, I’d like to introduce you to my brother, Kaiden, if that’s all right. Maybe even his new boyfriend. You know, the one that’s friends with Dana?” He brushed polish over the fingers of my other hand.

“Okay, when?” I held up my hand, admiring the polish job he’d done. “Hey, this looks pretty good. Maybe you should be one of those nail ladies and not a speech therapist.” I sniggered.

“Very funny.” He glanced at me, then brushed on more polish. “Maybe this week? I’ll set something up.” He straightened in his chair, his gaze roaming over my hand resting on the table. “What day works for you?” He twisted his mouth. “Other hand, we have to do two coats.”

“Damn, really? There’s so much to this.” With a mock huff, I switched hands again, thinking through my schedule. I’d wanted to get more work done on the financial analysis of the bakery. “I think my week is pretty busy, actually. What if we waited until the weekend?”

“Sure. On second thought, that might work out better since they both have jobs during the week.” He went to work on the final coat of polish, stopped to sip his beer, then kept going.

“What do they do again?” I tilted my head, admiring his wide shoulders under his white t-shirt, the way his muscles moved underneath it.

“My brother is a physical therapist and his boyfriend, Jaime, owns a motorcycle repair shop. I guess he skates with Nate and Dana, too.” He lifted his head. “There, now the other hand.”

“Oh, so that must be the guy who has that cool Triumph motorcycle I’ve seen come into the bakery.” I furrowed my brows. “I think I met him back at the grand opening before the holidays.”

“Mm-hmmm...” He nodded, finishing up the polish job. “There, now last hand. This one is all done.”

I switched out hands again, waving the one that he’d just finished. “I do want to see *you* though, during the week, you know, *this* week.” At this point, I couldn’t imagine even going a few days without seeing him. It would be torture.

He brushed top coat on the last nail, my pinky finger, then sat up. “Of course.” He screwed the brush and cap into the bottle. “You tell me when and I’ll be there.” He beamed at me.

I waved both of my hands, attempting to make the polish dry faster. “Are all boyfriends like this? Perfect in every way?” I chuckled.

“No, just me.” Leaning forward, he placed his palm on my cheek and pressed a hard, deep kiss on my lips. “I’m not really perfect, just so you know.” He raised the corner of his mouth. “But I’m trying really hard.”

“Yeah, I can see that.” I admired the job he did on my nails. The black had gotten onto my cuticles and a little bit on the skin, but it was smooth and glossy. “You did really well. I really like it.”

“Good.” He stood up and gulped some beer down. “Want to watch a movie in bed?” He waggled his brows at me. “Maybe we can play a little bit more.”

My cock stirred. “Yeah, but what about my nails?” I held them up to him. “How long does this stuff take to dry?”

He shrugged a shoulder. “Not long. I got the fast-drying polish.” He picked up the bottles and turned. “Come on. Promise I won’t touch you until your nails are dry.” He strolled into the hallway and his waiting bedroom.

“Okay.” I rose from the table and emptied my beer. “You want another beer?” I called out.

“Yeah, sure.” His voice carried out from the hallway.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Brandon



I lay in bed with Devin beside me, both of us lying on our backs, his hands resting carefully over the bedcovers on his thighs. An action movie played on my television across from us, affixed to the wall and hovering over my long dresser. I'd done it. I'd done everything I could to make him feel comfortable with himself and with me. This was the point of all the waiting. I'd figured it all out when I'd bought the toys and the polish, why I'd really wanted to get to know him before we started fooling around too much. I knew it could be better than anything I'd ever had, but he had to feel comfortable being himself.

I turned on my side, enjoying his profile, the smallish nose, and the way his lips bowed down into a perfect pout. God, I loved kissing him, touching him, the noises he made when he came. I'd wanted so badly to be inside him, to take his virginity, but I knew I had to wait. Even if he said he was ready, I wasn't so sure he was. "Hey, Dev."

"Yeah?" He turned his head and smiled at me, that smile that melted my heart every time.

"We should probably talk about something." I propped myself on an elbow, then grabbed the remote and paused the movie. I chewed my lower lip. How to even start the condom conversation...

"What is it?" He sucked in a breath. "Is, is something wrong? Bran?" His brows wrinkled as his eyes sparkled in the glow of the television.

I brushed my fingers up his arm. "Nothing's wrong." Leaning over, I kissed him, then drew back. "So, I was tested

recently, you know for STDs and I'm clean." What a way to start—with a bang.

His eyes grew wide, and his jaw dropped open.

"I hadn't been with anyone for a few months before that and you're a virgin, so..." I inhaled deeply. There really was no good reason to use a condom was there? It wasn't like I could get him pregnant. My lip twitched in the corner. I shouldn't be smiling right now. This was supposed to be serious.

"Why are you telling me this?" He shifted on the bed, partially turning toward me.

I huffed an exhale. "Because I think when we do have, you know, sex, we don't need to use a condom." There, I'd said it. I watched his reaction.

"I-I never even thought about that. Have you ever had anything? An STD?" He stared at me, his brows lifting.

"I..." I blew out a puff of air. "Yeah, once." Okay, this had now turned awkward. "I got crabs from a hookup last year." I shook my head, chuckling. "It's not really something a condom would have prevented." I combed my hand through my hair. "I was sort of pissed off because Gina and I had permanently broken up for the last time." Okay, way to bring up all my old shit.

He twisted to face me. "What happened? You never really told me very much about that."

"Well, like I said, she went to Cal Poly. We only saw each other in the summer or on breaks from school." I pressed my lips together. "It wasn't enough to keep the relationship going. We tried. We'd see each other when she was here, then when she'd leave, I think it hurt too much and we'd try to break up." I took his hand in mine. The nails had to be dry by now. "When she'd get back to school, we'd start texting again and end up deciding to try and make it work. Finally, she told me she met someone she was interested in." I checked myself. Nope, no heartache for that situation left at all. "I think my pride was hurt more than anything."

“S-so about the condoms.” He furrowed his brows, his gaze falling to our hands, his thumb rubbing over my knuckles. “If we’re talking about this, then it means you’ve decided we should have sex now, right?” His gaze locked onto mine. “I mean anal sex.”

I slowly nodded. “Yeah, that’s what it means.” What a roundabout way to get there. “Tonight, when we were playing with the toys, I really wanted to uh, well to fuck you.” I snapped my brows up. Was I being too vulgar? God, he was a twenty-two-year-old man, why was I always trying to be so careful around him? “I mean, yeah, I think it’s time.”

His breath quickened and he shifted closer to me, his tongue flicking over his upper lip. “I definitely want that.” He took a hard swallow. “And not just to lose my virginity, but because I want to have that connection with you.”

Oh God, he was saying all the right words. My dick hardened in my pajama bottoms. “So, so if we, when we do it, are you okay with not using a condom?” As a pulse twitched my cock, my gaze fell to his plump lips.

“Yeah, if you’re clean and I’m a virgin, what’s the point?” He wrapped his hand around the back of my neck and claimed me in a penetrating kiss, his tongue sliding into my mouth.

I slanted my mouth over his, deepening the kisses, then skimmed my hand down his side to cup his ass, pulling our hips flush, our solid cocks grinding on each other.

He whimpered, then climbed over me, pushing me onto my back. “Fuck, I want you. Can we do it now?” His heavy breath puffed against my neck, and he bit at my earlobe, his needy hips thrusting into mine.

As sensation coiled inside me, I grabbed the band of his pajama bottoms and pushed them down over his ass. “Get these off.”

Rolling to the side, he shimmied out of his pajamas as I did the same. We weren’t going to have sex tonight, were we? I’d just brought up the condom thing get it over with. He was

always so eager and willing. I supposed that was what being a virgin at twenty-two did to a guy.

He crawled between my legs, then licked up my shaft. “Can you use one of those plug things on me while I suck your dick?”

Uh, what? I blinked at him. I did not see that coming. “Sure.” I bent over the side of the bed and pulled out the smallest of the plugs and the lube, then coated it and lay on my back. How would this even work? “Come here.” I waved at him to turn toward me.

He twisted around, putting his ass toward my face while he knelt with his head at my groin, then fisted my cock and dropped his mouth over it, sucking up with a low moan.

“Oh, sweet Jesus.” Pleasure shuddered over me as his hot, wet mouth engulfed me. He was getting really good at that. I lubed up my fingers, then circled his hole and nudged the toy to it.

Wiggling his hips, he sought it out.

I rubbed it over his entrance, teasing it, then slid my hand between his thighs. “Spread your legs for me.” As he spread them, I reached in and pulled his cock down, then stroked it.

He left my dick with a wet pop. “Oh, fuck.” He arched his back, making his erection more accessible. “Do that and put it in.” He devoured my cock once more, flicking at my slit and twisting his hand around the base. Sensation flooded all my senses. What did he want again? Oh...

Very slowly, I worked the toy into his hole while stroking his cock between his thighs. “You okay?”

He hummed over my shaft and pumped it with his mouth.

Tingling shivered over my body. That was a yes. I slowly moved the plug in and out of him angling it to find his internal spot.

“Oh, yeah, fuck, right there.” He gasped and dropped his head, straightening his arms, then panted. “K-keep going. F-faster.”

I pushed the toy in and out, over, and over while pumping his dick with my slick hand, using my thumb to swirl pre-cum over the tip.

As his cock grew harder in my palm and jerked, he whimpered. “Gonna come. Come with me.” He engulfed my shaft with his mouth and sucked hard, cupping a ball.

“Oh, holy shit.” A surge of pleasure washed over me, and I spilled inside his lapping mouth, each wave stronger than the last.

His hole spasmed over the toy and cum spurted out of his cock, over my fingers, falling onto the sheets. He freed muffled moans over my dick, swallowing everything down. As it all slowed, I slid the toy from him and he turned around, dropping into my side.

“I definitely want to have your dick inside me.” He gave me a lazy kiss, then snuggled into my side. “I think I’m lying in cum.”

With a snicker, I said “Yeah, but it’s your own, so...”

“So, I have to clean it up?” With an exaggerated huff, he shifted.

Rolling to my side, I hooked an arm around him, then kissed his head. “No, I’ll do it. You just relax.” With a smile creeping over my lips, I climbed off the bed, then strolled into my bathroom and wet a washcloth. As I made my way out of the bathroom, he sat up. “Should we just change the sheets?”

I lifted a brow. “You really are a neat freak, aren’t you.” I shook my head, then flicked on the lamp. “Show me where.” I pulled the bedding tight, then wiped all the spots I found.

“Here.” He pointed to a new spot, and I wiped it. “And here.” He pointed to another one.

As I continued cleaning, I said, “If it bothers you so much, I can sleep on that side of the bed.” I ran my gaze over the sheets. It looked all cleaned up to me. I’d wash them tomorrow when I wasn’t so tired.

“Okay.” He shimmied to my side of the bed and lay down on his side, tucking his hand under the pillow, smiling up at me.

“You’re kind of a brat sometimes, you know that?” With a grin, I handed him the washcloth. Yeah, he could be a brat, but a loveable one.

“I suppose.” He swiped the washcloth over his chest. “I’ll just go clean up in the bathroom.” He jumped from the bed and sauntered off.

“Okay, I’ll be right here.” Lying in the wet spots, I sniggered. I’d do pretty much anything for that man.

The next morning, I sat at the dinette with Devin in the chair next to me, both of us eating Frosted Flakes cereal and perusing our phones. I came across an image of Kaiden and his new guy, Jaime on Instagram, standing in front of their motorcycles. They must have been out on a ride together. My brother had never looked so happy before. “Hey, when should we meet up with my brother and his boyfriend? What’s your schedule like this next weekend?”

He stopped with the spoon in his mouth, then slid it out, chewed and swallowed his cereal down. “Let’s see...I’m working Friday afternoon at the bakery, then I have a gig Friday night and I have to close the bakery on Saturday.” He twisted his lips. “Maybe we can meet at the bar the gig is at and have dinner there with them? If they want to stay for the gig, they can.”

Nodding, I ate at spoonful of cereal. “Did you invite Olivia to the gig?” If he did, I should probably tell Layla about it, too.

“Yeah, but she won’t be coming until later, so we could have dinner with just your brother and who was it? Jaime?” He set his phone on the table and shoveled cereal into his mouth.

“Yeah, the guy’s name is Jaime. He’s a cool guy. I met him about a month ago. We had lunch together at Five Guys and then dinner with my parents at PF Chang’s right after my brother came out.” I tapped on the screen of my phone, pulling

up my text messages. Hopefully they'd be available on Friday night.

"You did?" He cocked his head. "You didn't mention that." He set his spoon in his cereal bowl. "I mean, you told me he came out to your parents, but you didn't say you were all together having dinner."

"I didn't, huh? Well, I didn't think about it, I guess." I pursed my lips. It had always been a passing conversation. Maybe it was time I told him the whole story. "So, I met Jaime before you and I were a thing. I came out to both of them that day, because I was interested in you." I watched his reaction.

He lifted his brows. "How long were you interested in me before you asked me out?" He studied me, his gaze searching my face.

I guessed I'd never told him that, either. "Oh, at least a month." I chuckled. "I saw you setting up a sign on the sidewalk at the bakery one day and bam, I was smitten." I grabbed his hand and held it on the table. "You didn't notice me at all though. It was always like you were in your own little world and I was an outsider trying to figure out how to get in. Well, until Layla couldn't take it anymore and made me go and talk to you that day." I rubbed my thumb over the back of his hand.

He dropped his gaze to our hands, snapping his brows together. "So why did it take so long for you to say anything?" He focused on me.

"At first, I suppose I was scared, and I was still trying to figure out *why* I was feeling the way I was. I'd liked certain types of guys before, like figure skaters and stuff. More feminine guys, I guess." I bit the side of my lip. Was he going to take that wrong? "But like I said, I was too chicken to act on it."

Nodding, he said, "Yeah, I can be like that." He locked his gaze on mine. "I've always liked guys like you." He smirked. "But none of them ever paid attention to me. No one in my life has ever been as nice and accepting of me as you have." He rolled his eyes. "Okay, maybe Olivia, but no guys."

“When I met Jaime for the first time, for some reason he seemed to like me. He and those other skateboarders are really accepting of everything. So, I opened up to him about you.” I drew a deep breath, my shoulders relaxing. It felt good to talk to Devin like this, having everything out in the open.

“Yeah?” He squeezed my hand, a soft grin creeping over his lips. “I can’t wait to meet him for real, outside of the bakery. Well, and your brother.”

“Yeah, so, I’ll text Kaiden and see if they can meet up with us for dinner at the place you’re playing at.” I glanced at my phone, still in my hand. “What’s it called?”

“The Yucca Tap Room.” He freed my hand and ate more cereal.

With a nod, I texted.

Brandon

Hey, I want you and Jamie to meet me and Devin this Friday for dinner. Are you available?

Three dots popped up.

Kaiden

Hell yes. Tell me when and where. I guess this means you’re boyfriends now?

With a smile, I tapped my phone.

Brandon

Yes, it means we’re boyfriends. Yucca Tap Room in Tempe at six.

My attention drew to Devin. “Does six work?” Maybe I should have clarified that first. Oh well.

“Yeah, that works.” He gazed at my phone, moving his head.

The phone chimed and I held it up to us both.

Kaiden

See you then.

Lifting from his chair, Devin planted a kiss on my cheek. “He knew you wanted me to be your boyfriend.” He dropped into his chair, a satisfied smirk resting on his face.

Heat crept into my cheeks. “Yeah, I told him a while back that if I could make that happen, I’d come out to our parents, and he’d get to meet us and see me being with a guy.” I huffed out a laugh and ran my finger in a circle on the table. “Funny, I always knew he’d end up with a guy. He always seemed happier when he was dating men.”

Pressing his lips together, he sucked in deep breath. “Brandon, how did your parents take it when Kaiden came out, I mean, really. What did they say?”

I slid my chair close to his and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. “Well, when we were all at dinner together talking about it, I think my mom’s exact words were, *you should be with the right person, not the person you think you should be with.*” My mom was the best. Okay and Dad was pretty great, too. I was lucky. I glanced at Devin and did a double take.

His eyes grew glassy, and his lips turned down. “Fuck.” He covered his face with his hands and hung his head, his shoulders shaking with a soft sob.

“Devin, hey, babe, what’s wrong?” Shifting in my chair, I pulled him into my chest, pushing his head to my shoulder. What had I said? God, if I’d hurt him, I’d never forgive myself.

He sniffled against my neck, then sighed. In a shaky voice, he said, “Your mom is right. My mom would never understand that.” He pushed away from me and swiped at his eyes. “I want to meet her, your mom.” With a heavy swallow, he gazed deeply into my eyes, his lashes wet. “I-I need to find people to understand and accept me. Otherwise...” His gaze went blank.

My pulse picked up. “Otherwise, what?” I didn’t think I’d seen this side of him before. He looked so crushed. He’d said things like this about his mother, but he’d never dwelled on it like this. “Baby, talk to me. Otherwise, what?” I squeezed his shoulder, fixating on him, trying to get him to look at me, to see me.

He huffed, then straightened his shoulders and picked up his spoon. “I can’t go back. I just can’t.”

“You’re not going anywhere without me by your side.” I tensed my jaw. This whole thing might be new, but somewhere deep inside me, I knew I’d found the person I was meant to be with, and it was him.

He looked me over, then curled his lips into a faint grin. “You’re right. I have you now.” Leaning in, he placed a soft kiss on my mouth.

A few days later, I sat at my dinette, preparing myself for my midterms, reading through books and my notes, my laptop and notebooks sprawled all over the table. Devin was working at the bakery tonight, so I’d wanted to get all my studying done now and be available for our big weekend. He’d be meeting my brother on Friday and as soon as I could set it up, my parents. One thing kept rolling around inside my head—the sadness I’d seen in him when we’d talked over cereal on Sunday morning. I hadn’t had much time to see him since then, at least not alone, and it wasn’t sitting right with me.

Tapping my head with my mechanical pencil, I glanced at my phone, then gazed out the window at the dark night. It was mid evening and Kaiden should be home. Maybe he’d be a good person to talk to. Or maybe he’d be with Jaime, and I could talk to them both. Right. I dropped the pencil onto my notebook, then picked up my phone and called Kaiden, setting the phone on speaker. It rang a few times, then clicked.

“Hey, bro.” Kaiden’s deep voice came through the phone.

“Hey, Kaiden. Whatcha up to?” I set the phone on the table, then leaned into it, my elbows on the surface.

“Just sitting here watching a show with Jaime.” Rustling sounded.

“Hi, Brandon. How are you?” Jaime’s higher voice sounded out.

“Hi. I’m actually glad I caught you both.” I tensed my mouth. Where to even start with this?

“Oh? What’s up?” Kaiden asked.

“I have something, well something I need to talk with you about. It’s about Devin.” My pulse quickened and I scratched my temple.

“You aren’t calling us for sex advice, I hope.” Kaiden snickered. “Cause, dude, you’re my brother. You can talk to Jaime if you want that.”

“I’m not calling about that. I’ve got that covered.” I smirked. At least the start of this conversation was easing my worry.

“You do, huh? So, I guess you’ve done the deed then?” Jaime asked, a smile in his voice.

“No, but pretty much everything else.” I ran my finger across my notebook. How did we get stuck on sex? “We’re taking things slow. But don’t worry, I’ve got a plan.”

“What were you calling about then?” Kaiden’s voice grew low. “You sounded a little tense. What’s up?”

I picked up the pencil and tapped it to the notebook. “Okay, so Devin is a Mormon.” I winced. “Was a Mormon. His family still is, like strict Mormon.”

“Oh, no.” Jaime sucked in a breath. “I’m guessing he’s not out and doesn’t think he *can* come out to them, right?”

I stared at the phone. Jaime was on point. “Yeah, how’d you know?”

“I dated an ex-communicated Mormon for a few weeks. It was hard,” Jaime said.

“Honey, you never told me that,” Kaiden said.

“It wasn’t a big deal. There literally is nothing to tell.” Jaime sighed. “He had a lot of hang ups about himself because of the way he was raised. But the worst part? His parents didn’t even want to speak to him.”

“Oh, shit.” I dropped my mouth open. No wonder Devin was getting so upset. At least he had worked through his hang-ups, or most of them anyways. “Yeah, every once in a while,

Devin gets pretty upset when he talks about his mom. He keeps saying he's never going home again, like he wants to disappear on them."

"Well, one of my clients is old school Mormon and we've had some discussions while I'm working him out. I mean, he knows I'm with a guy since I came out at the office." Kaiden drew a deep inhale. "He told me the Mormon church is trying to change the way they've been treating the queer community. I think he said they're even working with the government to ban conversion therapy."

"Seriously?" Jaime asked. "Maybe that guy I was seeing finally got through to his parents."

"Well, Devin is convinced that his parents still believe in that crap, and they'd want him to go through it if they knew about him." I slumped my shoulders. There was no way I'd ever meet them. Not like this. "I think with Devin, it's not just the fact that he's bisexual, it's that he's gender fluid on top of it. He's always talking about being accepted."

"Yeah, I get it." Jaime huffed. "Gender is a funny thing in our society. Women are held down in some ways but have the freedom to pretty much wear whatever the hell they want. Men? Not so much. Just think about it," Jaime said. "It's got to be hard for him."

I nodded at the phone. "Yeah, that's exactly what we've been talking about, well, some of it. I like it when he dresses more feminine. It's a turn on for—"

"Nope, not going there, Brandon." Kaiden freed a stuttered chuckle. "What the two of you get up to in the bedroom is none of my business and I certainly don't want to know before I see him on Friday."

"Yeah, yeah." I rolled my eyes. Kaiden could be such a prude sometimes. Thankfully Jaime was not. "Anyways, I don't know what to do for him. I know it's hurting him."

"Be there for him. It *will* come out, his gender and his sexuality, it will all come out. It always does. Best thing for you to do is to be there for him when it does and to pick up the

pieces if he needs you to.” Jaime’s tone was as serious as I’ve ever heard him be.

My chest ached for Devin. “Yeah, okay. I will.” I’d be ready for this, somehow. *Graduation*. My heart lurched. “Oh shit.”

“What?” Kaiden asked.

“What will we do about graduation? I mean, his folks will want to come see him, right?” I rubbed my chest as a knot grew in my gut. Would he hide himself away, or tell them not to come? How would that work? He’d been so proud of himself lately. How could he hide?

“You’ll have to follow his lead, Brandon,” Jaime said. “If that means you become his best buddy for a few days and not his boyfriend, then do it. He should come out on his own terms, if he’s able to.”

“Yeah, okay.” I freed a long breath, willing my chest to relax. So, maybe I would meet his family, but as a best friend. I could do that. It might suck a little, but so what. It’d be for him.

“You okay?” Kaiden asked.

“Yeah, I’m better now. Thanks a lot, you two. I’ll see you on Friday night.” I gazed blankly out my window. I missed Devin. Now more than ever, I just wanted to go to him and hold him in my arms and not let anything hurt him. Not even his own family.

“Yeah, see you. Looking forward to it,” Kaiden said.
“Goodnight, bro.”

“Good night,” Jaime said.

“Yeah, goodnight.” I hung up the phone, then went back to my books.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Devin



I checked myself in the closet mirrors in my dorm room one last time, my gaze taking in my combat boots, then the longer black pleated skirt over my leggings and the slim, white button-down shirt, the tails hanging over the top of the skirt. Tonight was a big night. I was meeting Kaiden and Jaime as Brandon's boyfriend and I had my first full gig. Rehearsals had gone well this week and I'd been able to memorize pretty much all of the lyrics to the songs we were doing.

I brushed my red bangs to the side and gazed at my eyes. I'd used a little thicker eyeliner tonight and a little bit of shadow. I was getting bolder with this whole thing, but I still liked to keep it more androgynous and not too feminine. It was like I was developing a stage persona on top of everything else. I wondered if that was how drag queens felt? I rolled my lips, spreading the lipstick over them. I'd used a darker shade tonight that Olivia had let me borrow, along with the skirt and leggings. At some point, I was going to have to go out and buy some things of my own.

As I fluffed the skirt around my legs, knocking sounded at my door. "Brandon." My heart kicked up and I raced to the door, then flung it open.

Brandon stood there, wide eyed, taking me in from head to toe. "Oh, babe, you look hot." He stepped in and wrapped me up in a warm embrace, then kissed my head. "God, I missed you."

"You saw me." I hugged him back, not wanting to let him go.

"Yeah, but only at the bakery or while we were studying." He freed his hold, then grabbed my hands and planted a deep

kiss on my mouth, skimming his tongue between my lips to tangle with mine.

“Yeah, all right.” I grabbed my jean jacket and slid my arms into it. I didn’t mind him missing me, not at all. It was nice to be missed. “By the way, I sort of missed you, too.” I smirked at him, then shut my door, grabbing his hand.

“Sort of, huh?” He shook his head. “I see how you are.”

“Okay, yes, I missed you, too.” With a broad smile, I planted a quick kiss on his cheek. “Let’s get going.” A ball of tension wound in my stomach. I’d be meeting his brother tonight. It better go well. I led him down the hallway, out the lobby and into the parking lot, taking in the splash of colors in red and orange in the darkening sky.

We pulled up in my Toyota Corolla to a nondescript building that could have been an old convenience store plaza at one time. I glanced around the outside of the building. A sign on a green metal overhang read, *Yucca Tap Room*.

“Well, this is it.” I set my car in park, shut it off, then climbed out and grabbed my backpack from the back seat. I’d found wearing a skirt meant you didn’t have pockets, so the backpack held my things for the night.

Brandon met me at the front of the car and snatched my hand. “Looks like Kaiden and Jaime are here.” He pointed at two motorcycles sitting by the front entrance, a Harley, and a Triumph.

“That’s a big Harley.” As we got closer, I eyed the bikes.

“Yeah.” He chuckled. “When you meet them, you’ll see those bikes fit them.”

“Uh-huh.” I wiped my hand on my skirt. God, I hoped they liked me. “You did tell them about um...” I waved a hand around my side.

“Yes, they know about your fashion choices.” He squeezed my hand. “Stop worrying about that.”

“Okay.” With a nod, I chewed my lower lip. It would be okay.

As we stopped at the double glass doors of the entrance, he opened one and waved me inside. “After you, babe.”

“Thanks.” With a quick shrug, I stepped into the bar. I was really liking his pet name for me. Every time I heard it, it made me feel special and warm inside. As my gaze took in the venue, my eyes grew wide. “Wow, this place is bigger than I thought.” A long bar in wood ran along one side, while a stage sat at the very back with big letters in white, reading, *Yucca*. Wood paneling lined the walls and the area in front of the stage was open. A lot of people could be standing right in front of me when we played tonight.

“Hey, they’re over there.” He tapped my arm and pointed toward an area with low top tables of four.

“Okay.” I recognized Kaiden from the photos, the almost black, long, wavy hair that stopped at his shoulders and his leather motorcycle jacket was pulled taut around his wide shoulders. The man next to him must be Jaime. His blond hair was a little messy and chin-length. He looked to be much smaller than Kaiden. He was wearing a plaid jacket, and definitely had that skater look to him, sort of like Dana at the bakery. Drawing a deep breath, I let Brandon lead the way.

“Hey, bro.” Brandon stood at the table.

“Hey, Brandon.” With a wide grin, Kaiden stood and wrapped him up in a quick hug. “And this is Devin?” He turned his grin on me.

“Hi, yeah, I’m Devin.” I held out my hand, my chest tightening.

Kaiden grabbed my hand, then came in close, hugging me from the side and patting my back. “It’s so nice to meet you.” He released me.

Jaime stood behind him. “Hey, man, nice to see Dana let you out of the bakery.” He threw his arms around my shoulders and hugged me tightly before letting me go. “I love the outfit.” He came in close to my ear. “It’s hot.”

Heat flooded my cheeks, and I dipped my head, scratching the back of it. “Yeah?” I peeked at him. Did he really mean

that? It sure sounded sincere.

Jaime patted Brandon's arm, beaming at him. "You have good taste."

"I know." With a smirk, Brandon pulled a chair out next to Jaime's, then placed his hand on my lower back. "Here you go, babe. Have a seat."

"Thanks." I took the offered chair and slid into the table. Brandon was being so sweet tonight, like he just knew the right things to say and do to make me feel comfortable.

Brandon dropped into the chair next to Kaiden, then propped his elbows on the table. "So, are you both staying for the show?"

A waitress stopped by and set down menus, then took our beer orders.

"We are." Kaiden patted Jaime's thigh, focusing on me. "We're excited to hear you sing, Devin."

"He's awesome. The whole place will be on their feet when he gets started." Brandon grabbed my hand and set them both on the table.

"Yeah? Does he have a fan club yet?" Jaime chuckled, fingering the corner of his menu.

Brandon cocked his head. "No, but I've had to chase at least one guy away from him."

Nodding, Jaime said, "I have another friend who's in a cover band and he's developed an actual fan club. It's all women, but his boyfriend is cool with it."

"I don't think anyone is going to start a fan club for me." I perused the menu, then glanced at Jaime.

"Oh, don't be so sure about that." Jaime's blue-eyed gaze met mine and he gave me a warm smile.

The waitress dropped off our beer and took our orders for burgers.

I sipped my beer, the tension in my gut unwinding. Jaime seemed like a nice guy and so did Kaiden. There was nothing

to be afraid of here. No one was looking at me weird or anything, even with the skirt.

“So, tell us how you met, the first date, all of that.” Kaiden’s attention drew to Brandon.

“Well...” He peeked at me, then straightened in his chair. “I asked him out for dinner and a movie and then we just kept seeing each other.” He squeezed my hand, then picked it up and kissed my knuckles.

“That sounds pretty normal.” Kaiden chuckled, throwing a glance at Jaime. “So, you’re coming out to Mom and Dad soon?” He arched a brow.

“I am. Devin really wants to meet Mom.” With a quick grin, Brandon glanced at me.

“Yeah, Bran’s told me a little bit about your folks. They sound really nice.” I drank more beer, letting the alcohol relax me further.

“Bran?” With a smirk, Kaiden chuckled. “You’re already at that level, huh?” He focused on Brandon. “Do you call him Dev, too?”

“Yes, and babe.” Brandon lifted his chin.

With a shake of his head, Jaime sat forward, fixating on Devin. “Don’t listen to them.” Chuckling, he tapped the table in front of me. “Marsha and Pete, their parents, are good people. You’ll love them and I’m sure they’ll love you.”

“Yeah?” My heart warmed. Jaime was really cool, making sure to tell me this. Plus, he had that same laid-back skater vibe that Dana had. No wonder they were friends.

“Yeah, just be you, man. All the way.” Jaime’s gaze locked onto mine.

I nodded slowly. I knew what he was driving at. My gender wouldn’t matter to them, it wasn’t just that I was dating their son. I’d be fully accepted. It was good to hear that from someone outside the family. “Thanks.”

The waitress set our burgers down.

Kaiden sipped his beer, then spread ketchup over the top of his burger. “So, Brandon here tells me you’re going to school for business. What did you want to do when you graduate?” He set the bun on the burger, then bit into it.

“My interest is in the financial side of business, so I was hoping to get something there.” I stuffed a fry into my mouth. I’d have to start putting a resume together soon if I was going to find a way to stay down here after graduation. Just another thing to add to my list.

“Really? Well, our dad was in finance. I’m sure he still knows people in the industry. Maybe he can hook you up?” Kaiden ate a fry, then washed it down with beer.

“You think so?” Brandon took a bite of his burger.

“Sure, it’s worth an ask.” Kaiden flashed a warm smile at me.

“Well, I’d really appreciate it. I need to find a job down here before graduation, otherwise...” My chest pinched. The alternative was not an option at this point. “I’ll find a job.” I nodded, stuffing more burger into my mouth.

Squeezing my arm and furrowing his brows, Brandon said, “Hey, we’ll figure it out, even if you can’t find a job before graduation. Okay?”

My gaze found his. He looked so determined. Maybe everything would really work out with him at my side. I finally had someone I could lean on and maybe even more than one person. “Okay.” I popped a fry into my mouth, my heart feeling a little lighter.

“Hey, Devin.” Axel strode to the table and stopped, a black Sex Pistols t-shirt hugging his shoulders and a silver bullet belt wrapped around his slim waist.

“Oh, hey.” I turned to face him, wiping my hand on my napkin. “Is it time to set up already?” With a purse of my lips, I looked at the stage as Caleb set a speaker in the back corner of it.

“Not really, me and Caleb decided to come in a little early to check it out and have dinner.” Axel quirked the corner of his

mouth. “Guess you decided to do the same?”

“I’m actually here meeting Brandon’s brother and his boyfriend.” I held out my hand. “Axel, meet Kaiden and Jaime.”

Kaiden and Jaime both waved and greeted Axel.

“Dude, love the Sex Pistols. I have a feeling this place is going to be rocking tonight.” With a lift of his chin, Jaime sipped his beer.

“Thanks, me, too. It’s old school, but they were the best.” Axel looked Brandon over, then planted his hand on his shoulder. “You treating my boy right, Brandon?”

“Always.” I scoffed. It was kind of cool having a bad ass like Axel looking out for me, too.

Brandon peeked at me, then faced Axel. “Yeah, don’t worry about that. I’ve got it covered.”

“Good.” Axel glanced toward Caleb, now walking to the bar. “I’ll see you all in a few.” He patted Brandon’s shoulder. “I’ll let you get back to your meet and greet, and Dev, whenever you’re done. No rush.” He grinned at me, then sauntered off.

“Who the hell was that?” Kaiden drank some beer, his brows lifted.

“That’s the lead guitar player for the band. I think he’s pretty much the leader. He’s the one that asked me to audition for them.” I ate some burger. Plus, he was becoming a good friend, someone else to lean on.

“Huh.” Kaiden studied Brandon. “Anyways, when did you say you were both meeting Mom and Dad?”

“I-I didn’t. I haven’t set it up yet.” Brandon pulled his phone out of his back pocket and set it on the table. “I can text Mom now. In fact, I’ll just come out to them when we all meet. What do you think, Dev?”

“Oh, uh, I have to work at the bakery tomorrow and then there’s rehearsal on Sunday night...” I rubbed my chin. Damn, there really wasn’t a good day for this. “Do you really think it

will be okay to have me meet them at the same time you're coming out?"

"I think so." Brandon's attention drew to Kaiden.

"All Mom is going to ask is when she's going to get to meet you, Devin, so might as well do it all at once." Kaiden flicked his gaze to Brandon's. "Mom and Dad could probably do lunch on Sunday. You know how Mom loves her Sunday mimosa brunches." Kaiden ticked a brow at Brandon.

"Oh, yeah." Brandon typed into his text message app. "She'd love that." His attention drew to me. "Every year for Mother's Day, all my mom wants is to go out to brunch and be served mimosas. It's her thing." His phone dinged and he huffed a laugh. "Yep, she was all over that." His gaze found mine. "So, Sunday at eleven work for brunch?"

"Yeah." I drank some beer down. I didn't think I'd ever done a Sunday brunch before. Growing up, Sunday mornings were for church service and a family meal at home. An ache wrapped around my heart. I'd probably never have that again. Well, the church service I wouldn't miss.

"Maybe me and Jaime can weasel in on this." Kaiden snatched Jaime's hand and held it on the table between them.

"Well, we were supposed to meet the guys at the skatepark, but I suppose they'll understand." Jaime grinned at me, then sipped his beer.

"They'll understand." Kaiden faced me. "Tell Mom to make reservations for all of us."

"Sure." Brandon tapped the display on his phone. "I think this will be the first time both of us will be bringing partners at the same time."

"Yeah, I think it is. Mom is going to be beside herself with joy. I can see it now." With a shake of his head, Kaiden chuckled.

As I watched the two brothers banter, my heart warmed. It was obvious there was a lot of love and acceptance in their family. It was just what I needed.

A few hours later, the stage was set, and everyone was tuned up and ready to go. I wiped my palms down my skirt, a knot in my gut, my gaze taking in the growing crowd in front of us. This place wasn't nearly the cozy dive bar the last place had been. How was it that it always looked so different when you were standing on the stage looking out? I breathed in deeply, my gaze catching on Brandon, standing next to Kaiden and Jaime.

With a broad smile, Brandon raised his beer to me. "You got this, babe."

God, did I love that man. My heart bloomed with emotion. If there was any question of it before today, that had sealed it. I'd never had this kind of support in my life and damn, it felt good, like there was an army backing me up.

Layla and Olivia strode into the room and stepped up beside Brandon, hugging each other in greeting.

"Dude, you ready to start?" Axel whispered in my ear.

"Yep, ready as ever." I turned to the band, taking in Caleb with his bass strapped over a shoulder and his mic ready for the new Linkin Park song we'd worked on, then Silas with his usual smirk, Gabe twirling a drumstick behind his kit and finally, Milo in a white sequined, cropped top behind the keyboard. What a crew we were. I nodded and Milo started with the keyboard, lights flicking to the stage from overhead. I picked up my mic and stepped toward Caleb, singing the first few words.

Caleb thumped on his bass to Gabe's drumbeat and hit every syllable of the rap.

As my parts filtered through the song, I stepped closer to Caleb and let my voice build, bending sideways into the mic. The chorus pumped through the band, and I jumped to the front of the stage, the angst of the words ripping out of me.

A swarm of girls rushed the stage, bouncing in front of me, whooping and waving their arms over their heads.

The song slowed again, and Caleb started the second rap. My gaze found Brandon's and held it. Somehow, he knew. He

knew how I felt singing these words. I'd never been closer to another human being in my life. He'd be there to pick me up when it all fell apart around me. And I knew it would. There was no way to continue the path I was on without that happening. I sang my parts, focusing on Brandon.

As the second chorus came up, Axel jumped beside me with a vicious strum of his guitar.

I sang even louder this time, bowing all the way over, throwing everything I had into the song.

The whole band bounced up and down, banging on their instruments, rocking their heads to the beat.

As I belted out my solo, the bar became still, and a single light focused on me. I was singing about trust. Did Brandon know this was all for him? The third round of chorus came around and the song grew to a thundering finale, the lights flickering all over the band, people bouncing up and down again, fists in the air and the shouts of men with the screams of women all mixed together. My veins flowed with an electric hum, and I threw all my emotions into the song.

As the song came to its close, I panted at the mic while Milo banged out the last of the keyboard part.

The bar erupted with shouting and clapping.

"Dude, that was fucking awesome." Caleb patted me on the back.

"Thanks." I wiped sweat off my brow with the back of my hand, my gaze seeking out Brandon's.

He weaved through people to the front of the stage. "Babe, Jesus Christ, you can sing." He beamed up at me.

"You'll be there for me, right?" I crouched down, holding my arm out. I wasn't sure what had just happened to me, a premonition or what, but I needed him, like right now.

"Of course." He hugged me and kissed my cheek. "I got you. You know that."

With a nod, I let him go and straightened. Now was not the time to get into this. There was another song to sing.

Axel came up on my left, bumping his shoulder to mine. “Hey, you okay?”

I kept my gaze fixed on Brandon’s. “Yeah, I’m okay.”

After the gig, I was giddy. It had gone so well, we were invited to play again in a month. Between sets, I’d had fun with everyone and even Kaiden and Jaime had stayed to the end. I stood on the stage, coiling up cords. Why was it this task had become my thing? I glanced at Axel lifting an amp. “Need help with that?” They always looked so heavy.

“Nope, you just get the cords,” he said with a smirk.

“Uh-huh.” With a shake of my head, I quirked my lips. There was some sort of singer thing going on here and I’d become the cord bitch. I set the cords into a duffle bag, then lifted it.

“Hey, babe, how much longer do you think?” Brandon stood at the edge of the stage, a bottled water in one hand, his phone held to his face in the other and my backpack hanging from his shoulder. “It’s after two already.”

“Don’t worry, he can go after he brings those cables out.” With a smirk, Axel lifted his chin to me.

“I don’t want to be cutting out before you guys all the time.” Pursing my lips, I scanned the almost empty stage around me. My throat was a little sore though, and all I really wanted was a warm cup of tea and bed.

“You’re not. We’re about done.” Caleb picked up a speaker and ambled out with it.

“Just bring the cables out and go.” Axel ticked his brows at me. “We’ll see you on Sunday.”

“Okay.” Waving my hand, I said, “Come on Bran, let’s go.” I was too tired to argue.

With a hop in his step, Brandon followed me out into the cool night air and helped me throw the cables into the back of Caleb’s truck.

“Are we going back to my place?” Brandon faced me, then handed me his water bottle.

“Yeah, that sounds good.” I drank his water, then blew out a long breath, my legs aching. I hadn’t known how tired I really was until that moment.

“Come on, I’ll take you home.” Brandon wrapped an arm around mine, then led me to my car. “Keys.” He held out his hand.

“Are you sure? Haven’t you been drinking all night?” I studied him. He didn’t *seem* drunk at least.

“I’m fine. I started drinking water around midnight.” He poked his hand at me. “You’re exhausted, I can tell. Let me take you home.”

“Yeah, okay.” I fished my keys out of my backpack, then handed them to him. “This gig stuff does take a lot out of you. It’s like I’m tired and wired at the same time. Does that make sense?” I might be rambling now.

“Yes, it makes sense.” Brandon held my door open for me.

As I climbed into the car, he set my backpack on the back seat, then got in and started the engine. I sank into the seat and closed my eyes.

“Hey, babe, we’re home.” Brandon shook my shoulder, a faint grin playing on his lips.

I fluttered my eyes open and looked around. Sure enough, we were parked in the parking lot of Brandon’s apartment complex. “Shit, guess I fell asleep.”

“You did. You got some drool...” He wiped the corner of my lips.

Heat swept up my neck. “No, did I?” God, how embarrassing.

“Don’t worry, it’s gone.” Leaning over the center console, he planted a quick kiss on my cheek. “Let’s get you into bed.”

Bed...My cock stirred. What would we do tonight? I followed him to his door, then leaned against the stucco wall as he opened it.

Brandon stepped inside. “You go get in bed and I’ll get you some chamomile tea with honey.”

“How’d you know that’s what I’d want?” I dragged myself into his bedroom, flicked on the light, then fell onto the bed and shucked my clothing off. I’d brought pajama bottoms to sleep in, but at this point, I was too tired to care about putting them on. I crawled under the covers and lifted them to my chin. If I closed my eyes, I’d surely fall asleep again.

Brandon entered the bedroom with a cup of steaming tea in his hand. “How did I know? A little birdy sent a message on Instagram and told me to have this ready for you tonight.”

I sat up against the pillows and the headboard. “Really? Who was that?” I was pretty sure I could guess.

“Axel.” Brandon dropped in next to me and handed me the cup.

I blew over it, then sipped it. “Figures.” My heart warmed along with my throat as the tea slid down it, coating the earlier scratchiness. “This is perfect.”

“I’m starting to really like that Axel dude. He’s a good guy.” Brandon placed his hand on my thigh over the covers.

“He is. Between him and you, I think I’m pretty well taken care of.” I sipped more tea. My limbs grew heavy. “Bran?”

“Yeah?” As his gaze roamed over me, he tilted his head and brushed his hand up my side.

“Can we just spoon tonight? I’m really worn out.” I fought to keep my eyes open. I couldn’t believe I was saying this. But there was always the morning to look forward to.

“Anything you want, babe.” He cupped my cheek and pressed a soft kiss to my forehead. “I’m going to get ready for bed and be right back.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Brandon



As the morning sun worked its way across my room, threading through the blinds on my window, I watched Devin sleep, holding him against the front of my body. I buried my nose in his hair and drew in his scent. I was so in love it hurt. I'd never loved anyone like this before. It was time to tell him, time to show him. Tonight I'd go all out and he'd be completely mine.

He stirred, mumbling for a moment.

Propping on an elbow, I looked down at his stunning face, the swath of red hair falling across his forehead, his thick lashes, still rimmed in black, the perfect pout of his lips. I kissed his cheek.

His eyes fluttered open, and he turned to look up at me, a faint grin playing over his mouth. "Morning."

"Morning." I brushed my hand up and down his side, under the covers. "How are you? Did you sleep well?" Having him in my bed, tucked against me, always gave me the best night's sleep.

With a nod, he said, "I did." He furrowed his brows, then glanced at the window. "What time is it?" He sat up.

"Uh, probably about eleven, I think?" I grabbed my phone off the nightstand. "Shit, how about noon?" Did we really sleep that long?

"I gotta go. My shift at the bakery starts in an hour." He scrubbed his hand over his face. "I have to shower and, and—"

"Stop." I held my finger to his lips. "It's okay. I'll get you there, all right?" No time for morning blowjobs, but whatever. Tonight there'd be so much more. "Get in the shower and I'll

make us some breakfast, then I'll take you to the dorm. Okay?"

"Yeah, okay." He tossed the covers off, exposing his naked body, and stood up, the perfect globes of his ass flexing.

"Oh, damn." My cock stirred. Okay, tonight I'd definitely be fucking that ass.

"What?" He bent down and rummaged through his backpack that I'd put next to the nightstand last night.

"What? You're giving me a boner, that's what." With a chuckle, I climbed out of bed. It hadn't helped that we'd spent the night naked together.

He snickered. "Yeah, I can't believe we slept so late." He pouted, turning his gaze on mine. "I was really looking forward to our morning blowjob." He held up his pajama bottoms, then rose up and stepped into them.

Did he have to remind me? "Yeah, I know." I watched him comb his fingers through his hair, darting his gaze around the room. "Have you seen my phone?"

"I think it's on the kitchen table. At least that's the last place I saw it." I walked to him and wrapped my arms around him from behind, then kissed the side of his head. "Hey, Dev."

He grabbed my forearms, leaning his head into mine. "Yeah?"

"Come over after work tonight. I'm going to have a surprise waiting for you." I held him tighter. I was going to go all out. He'd be giving me his virginity, well, hopefully he would. I mean, he'd said he wanted to.

"Really?" A wide smile graced his lips. "Like what?"

"Like a surprise, so I'm not going to tell you anything else."

As he turned in my hold, he hooked his arms around my neck, then planted a kiss on my lips. "Okay." He beamed at me. "I can't wait."

The day had felt like it dragged on forever, even though I'd studied and had so much to do to prepare for when Devin got off work, including cleaning my place. I wanted everything to be perfect. I checked on the ribeye steaks that were marinating on my counter, the setting of the broiler, then the dinette all laid out with thick, lit candles and red roses. Finally, I grabbed a rose from the table and strolled into my bedroom. Was I going over the top? Probably, but so what. I picked the petals from the rose and threw them on the bed, my gaze taking in the fat candles I'd placed strategically around the room.

I smirked as my gaze took in the new pink bag from the sex shop. That might be more for me than Devin. I couldn't wait to see how he'd look in the black negligee I'd bought. It even had a short skirt with it that we could play with. I threw the last petal on the bed, then fished my phone out of my back pocket to check the time. He'd be here any minute. My heart kicked.

I strode out to the kitchen and put the steaks on my broiler pan, then slid them into the oven. The mashed potatoes and green beans just needed to be heated in the microwave and we were all set.

Rapping sounded on the door.

I bound to the door and flung it open. "Hey, babe."

Devin stepped into my open arms, wrapping himself around me, nuzzling into my shoulder. "Hey." He kissed my cheek. "What smells so good?"

A smile broke across my face, and I held his hands. "I'm making us a nice steak dinner with mashed potatoes and green beans."

"Really?" He cocked his head, eyeing me, then peeked at the table. "Okay, and the surprise?"

"This is a part of it." I shut the door, then slid his backpack off his shoulder and set it next to the couch. What was going through his head right now?

He took slow steps into the room, past the dinette, then started toward the bedroom.

I came up behind him and snatched his hand, my heart thumping in my ears. “Not yet. We’re saving that for last.” If he saw the bedroom, that would be a dead giveaway.

“Okay.” His face flushed. “Bran, are you...are we...?” He lifted his brows and bit his lower lip.

“You’ll see.” I pulled him with me into the kitchen. “How about you open up some beers for us and have a seat at the table. Dinner is about done.” I checked on the steaks, sizzling in the broiler.

“Sure.” He twisted open a couple of beer bottles, handed one to me and took a seat at the table. “Can I help you with something?”

“No, I got it.” I heated the side dishes, then took the steaks out to rest.

He took a long pull of his beer. “Wait, did you *clean* today?” He stood up and ran his finger over a shelf on the wall, then dropped into his seat, rubbing his finger with his thumb, examining it.

“I did.” I plated our food, brought it out and set it down on the table. “And the roses are for you.”

With his eyes growing wide, he said, “Okay.” He gulped hard, staring at them. “They’re um, they’re red.” His gaze found mine.

“Yes, yes, they are.” I cut into my steak, then did a double take of him. Why was he looking at me like that? “What’s the matter, aren’t you hungry?”

“Red means...It means...” He shook his head and tensed the side of his mouth. “No, you wouldn’t get red roses for that. You just got red roses.” Huffing out a soft laugh, he scooped up some mashed potatoes and slid them into his mouth.

Damn, was it already time? I set my fork down, then swallowed my food. I hadn’t thought he was going to pick up on the color of the roses so quickly. “Devin, babe.” I shifted my chair close to his and grabbed his hand. It trembled in my grasp.

He hung his head, then placed his fork on his plate.

My heart stuttered in my chest. Was he upset? Why was he upset? Maybe I'd gotten this all wrong. I couldn't turn back now. I drew in a deep inhale. "Hey, look at me."

He lifted his head, his eyes glittering in the candlelight, his forehead wrinkling, his lower lip quivering.

"Babe, I love you." I squeezed his hand. In a soft voice, I said, "That's why they're red."

His breath hitched. "Fuck." He swiped at his eyes with the fingers of his free hand, then breathed in deeply. "I love you, too, Bran. You have no idea how much." He threw his arms around my shoulders and buried his face in my neck.

"Oh, I think I have an idea." I held him around the waist and kissed his hair, my heart aching with my love for him, my eyes stinging. How was it he could draw so much emotion out of me so easily?

"No one has ever said that to me." He huffed a chuckle. "Okay, except for my parents, maybe, my mom for sure." With a sniffle, he lifted off me, squeezing my hand. "This is like a dream. I'd always imagined what it would be like and hoped it would be something like this, but I never thought—"

"You deserve this, babe. You deserve all of this." I brushed his bangs from his forehead. "I'd do anything for you. Anything." I pressed my lips to his in a deep kiss, his tongue sliding into my mouth in a needy dance.

He broke the kiss and smirked. "Does this mean you're punching my v-card tonight?" He hooked a brow.

Shaking my head, I freed a sharp laugh. "Stop it. You've been way ahead of me this whole time. Let it be a surprise." Damn, he was a smart little brat.

He straightened in his chair, swaying his head and looking toward the bedroom. "So, what's in there?"

"You'll see." There, that would fix him. I shifted my chair back to my plate and ate a bite of steak, then poked my fork at

his plate. “Eat your dinner. The sooner you eat it, the sooner you can see what’s in there.”

Huffing, he cut into his steak and ate a bite. “You know I’m hard already, right?” He palmed the fly of his jeans.

Heat filtered into my groin. He had to say that. This might be an all-nighter. “Yeah, I’m about there myself.” I shoveled food into my mouth. The quicker we ate, the quicker I could play with him.

After finishing dinner and doing the dishes with Devin drying and putting them away, I snatched his hand. “Want to play?” I dove in, placing a soft bite on his neck.

His pupils flared. “Do I.” He squeezed my hand, then placed it over his hardening shaft and rubbed, his breath catching and his eyes closing. “I could hardly wait through dinner.”

Cupping his balls through his jeans, I gave them a gentle squeeze. “Follow me.” I led him into the bedroom, the soft flickering glow of the candles illuminating the rose petals over the bed.

With a soft squeal, he placed his hand over his mouth. “Oh my God, you did this for me? For my first time?”

“Of course.” I pushed his hair behind an ear, then nibbled his earlobe and the piercing. “I love you, remember?”

He sniffled and wiped at his eyes. “I never—”

“You deserve it.” I wrapped him up in a warm embrace, then kissed his cheek, swaying him. “I’ll say it a million times if that’s what you need. You deserve this.” I released him, then brought him to the edge of the bed and picked up the pink bag. “For you.”

With a nod, his gaze met mine. “I don’t have anything for you.”

“Well...” I smirked. “That present might be as much for me as it is for you.” And if he didn’t like it, the other one was ready and clean and just as good as far as I was concerned.

He opened the bag, peered inside, then pulled out the negligee. “Oh...” His cheeks reddened. “It has a short skirt.” He turned it upside down. “And a hole in the panties.”

With a snort, I said, “It’s all about easy access, babe.” I kissed his cheek. “There are things for you to clean up with in the bathroom. Take your time.” Did he even get what I was driving at? How much did he even know about having anal sex? Not that I was all that picky, but he *was* a neat freak.

His eyes widened. “Oh.” He quirked his lips in a wicked grin, then left for the bathroom.

I undressed and played an unplugged rock music mix on the Bluetooth speaker sitting on my nightstand. I smirked as I spotted the bottle of lube right next to it. Yeah, maybe I did go a little overboard, but damn, it was his first time. I lay down on the bed, propping my back on the pillows resting against the slatted wooden headboard.

He emerged from the bathroom, the negligee hugging his slim body in black mesh, ribbons crisscrossing over his chest in red and the short, silky skirt at the bottom ruffling out over his erection underneath.

My cock ached and seeped pre-cum onto my hip. “Babe, you’re the most fuckable thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Yeah?” He stalked toward me, his hands clasped behind him. “Is it time to play?” He sat down on the edge of the bed, then patted it next to him. “Come here.”

“Definitely.” I crawled to sit beside him, my cock jutting up between my thighs. I’d never wanted someone so much in my life. Hell, a few months ago, I never would have thought something like this was even possible for me.

“Touch me.” His eyelids hooded and he placed a hand on my cheek, guiding my lips to his, slanting his mouth over mine and sneaking his tongue inside to glide over mine.

With a deep moan, I skimmed my hand up his inner thigh, under the skirt and rubbed over his bound shaft. It pulsed beneath my palm. As I moved my fingers over the head, a wet spot grew in the thin fabric. “You’re wet for me.”

A breath shuddered out of him. "Yeah, very." He spread his thighs, then brushed his fingers down my chest, stopping at a nipple and pinching.

I gasped as a shock of sensation jolted to my cock. "More," I whispered against his neck, then fondled his sac, sneaking my fingers underneath and pressing. I'd definitely never had a make-out session like this.

Skimming his nails across my chest, his fingers pinched at the other nipple, then kneaded it, as he licked the shell of my ear, soft whimpers filtering out of him.

Pleasure shivered down my spine and a bead of pre-cum dribbled down my needy cock. I wanted him there. "Suck me."

He shifted in the bed, motioning for me to get on it.

I climbed back into my original position against the headboard and watched him creep between my legs, his tongue swirling around his swollen lips, his breath coming in deep draws, his disheveled, brown and red hair falling into his face. God, he was beautiful.

He wrapped his fingers around the base of my cock, then tilted his head as if admiring it.

A pulse shuddered through me. "Please..." *I was begging?* Damn right I was. Goosebumps broke out over my thighs.

He dove in, sucking me into the tight heat of his mouth, flicking his tongue against the underside of my length as he pulled up, his cheeks hollowing.

"Oh, damn." I bucked, unable to stop myself. As sensation wound inside me, I slapped my hands to the back of his head and clutched his hair. "Fuck." I thrust into his sweet mouth, pushing down on his head.

He moaned against my cock, his hips wriggling, pumping me over and over.

Pleasure grew to the raw edge of climax, tingling at the bottom of my spine. I didn't want to come yet. "S-stop, babe, stop." I pushed him off me.

He sat up on tucked legs, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Where are the toys?”

“The...” I snapped my brows together. How could I forget those? “What do you want first?”

He plopped down on the bed next to me, then lifted his knees. “Surprise me.” He lifted the skirt and stroked his shaft through the fabric of the panties, rolling his hips. “Hurry, I’m so fucking horny right now.”

I slapped his hand away. “Stop that. It’s mine.” With a smirk, I opened my nightstand drawer and took out all three plugs, then slathered the smallest with lube. When I rolled to face him, he was stroking himself again. “What are you doing?”

“I can’t help it.” He groaned, shutting his eyes.

In one quick motion, I snatched his hand, held it above his head, then, nudged the end of the plug into his hole, while hovering over him. “When I let go, I want you to jerk me, but slowly.” Or I’d fucking explode right now. I freed his arm.

With a nod, he fisted my shaft and stroked, agonizingly slow.

I pushed the end of the plug into him, then stopped. “You okay?” A low hum shivered over my body and knotted in my balls.

“Yeah, put it in.” He relaxed for me and adjusted his hips. “I want you to hit the spot that feels so good.”

“Okay.” Slowly, I pushed it inside him, then drew it out and went back in.

He writhed below me, his hand a steady motion on my cock. “Oh, fuck, that feels good. I want you, babe. When can I have you?” As he tongued his lips, his head swayed side to side over the pillow. He thumbed the tip of my shaft, sending a spark of sensation up my spine.

“Oh, fuck.” I dropped my head. If we kept this up, I was going to come way too soon. “Stop.” I had to slow this down somehow, at least my side of it. I left him and grabbed the

larger plug, then slathered it with lube. As I held it up, his eyes grew wide, and he quirked the side of his mouth. “After this, can I have you?”

“Sure.” I climbed over him, between his legs, propping myself on an elbow, then nuzzled the plug into his hole, waiting for him to adjust. “Okay?”

He bit his lower lip. “Oh, fuck yeah. Do it.” He rolled his hips, his cock lifting inside the panties, the spot of pre-cum spreading with it.

Pleasure pulsed through me. Was it possible to come from just watching him? Damn. I adjusted the angle of the plug and drove it into him, in and out, over and over.

He cried out, throwing his head back, then dug his fingers into my sides. “Oh my God!”

Stopping, I said, “I’m sorry, are you okay?” Shit, had I hurt him? I slid the plug out and tossed it on the bed.

“Yes, yes, please, keep going.” He grabbed my arm, his gaze locking to mine. In a whining voice, he said, “Wait, will you please just fuck me? I’m ready, I swear to God, I’m ready.”

My heart thrummed in my ears. This was it. Dropping down, I placed a long, hungry kiss over his lips, then brushed his hair off his forehead. “Yes, but I’m not fucking you. I’m making love to you. I love you.”

He swallowed hard. “I love you, too.” He skimmed his hand over my cheek. “I’m so ready for this, for being connected like this to you.”

My heart swelled with warmth. He always knew the right thing to say. I snatched the bottle of lube, then sat up and slicked my shaft with it, sensation heating my body. “Lift your knees up, like into your armpits.” I’d just realized I wanted him on his back. I wanted to kiss him and watch him come while we did this for the first time.

He lifted his legs, exposing himself to me, the panties parting, showing his perfect hole.

I shifted on the bed and hovered over him, propped on my elbow, my face close to his. “If this hurts, you tell me. Okay?” I nudged my cock head to his hole, the heat almost swallowing me already.

With wide eyes, he nodded quickly. “I love you, Bran. I know you won’t hurt me.”

I pressed a long kiss to his mouth. All the waiting was worth it. “Love you.” Slowly, I worked my shaft inside him, the tight pressure enveloping me. My mouth fused to his and I whimpered against him.

Wrapping his hand around the back of my head, he deepened the kiss, sliding his tongue against mine, little gasps escaping.

I pulled out, then pushed back in, angling myself to find his internal spot, then skimmed a hand down the mesh covering his chest and rubbed over his bound cock, squeezing at the tip, milking more pre-cum from him.

As I moved faster, he broke the kisses, panting against my cheek. “Fuck, that feels good. Keep going. Don’t stop.” He squirmed under me as his body trembled, and he hooked his ankles around my hips. “Faster, babe, go faster.”

I slammed into him, my balls slapping his ass, my hand rubbing fast and hard over his cock. Sensation rolled over me in surging waves and I struggled to hold it back. “Come with me, babe.” I licked the shell of his ear, my hips pumping.

His cock shuddered against my palm and hot wetness spread in the panties as his hole spasmed around me. Gritting his teeth and tensing his brows, he gasped and cried out, his whole body shaking below me.

As pleasure overwhelmed my senses, sparks flew behind my eyes, my release erupting into his tight entrance. Sharp moans ripped from my throat, and I broke out in full-body goosebumps. When it slowed, I fell onto him, gasping for air. “Holy shit...”

He brushed his hand down my back, chuckling. “Holy shit is right.” His chuckling turned into soft giggling.

Lifting my head, I gazed into his face. “What’s so funny?”

He grabbed my hair, pulling my lips close to his. “I’m not a virgin anymore. I’m yours and you’re mine.” He planted my lips to his in a hard kiss. “I’m so glad it was you who took my virginity.”

I smiled at him. “Me, too.” My heart thumped against his, both slowing together. I didn’t think I’d ever been happier and had certainly never felt as connected to another human being. We got each other, understood each other in a way no one else ever would. Anything was possible. I nuzzled into his neck, my spent cock slipping out of him.

He hugged me to him and kissed my head. “Bran?”

“Yeah?” I kissed his neck. I didn’t want this moment to end.

“I uh, I think your pretty set-up here is going to be a mess.” He angled his face toward mine and made to move.

I held him down. “So?” I brushed my fingers in a circle over his shoulder. “I don’t want to get up yet.”

He huffed. “But Bran—”

“Okay, okay.” With a quick smirk, I rolled to my side. It probably wasn’t fair to him to make him lie in our mess.

“Thank you.” He got off the bed and padded his way to the bathroom door, then stopped and turned. “Don’t worry, I’ll be right back.”

“Naked this time?” I wagged my brows at him. I couldn’t wait to spoon him with only our skin between us.

“Yes, naked.” He closed the bathroom door.

I got up and scanned around the bed. It wasn’t too bad. But I’d planned for this, too and had my extra bedding at the ready. I stripped the bed, remade it and climbed back in under the covers to wait for him.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Devin



After cleaning up, I stepped out of the bathroom, naked except for the negligee in my hand. Brandon had thought of everything. That man had captured literally every part of me. Nothing about this had felt weird or wrong. Instead, it had felt completely natural, just two people in love doing what two people in love do. I supposed it was because of my complete trust in him. Well, and the fact that we seemed to get off on the same things, that helped. A lot. Did I feel more mature somehow? Like I had been let into some no-longer-a-virgin club? Sure, but the more important part of all of this was the fact that the man who I gave my virginity to was Brandon. My attention drew to him as I approached the bed. “What do you want me to do with this?”

Brandon lay in the bed with the covers at his waist, his muscled chest exposed, his arms bent, and hands tucked under his head. “Throw it in the hamper and get in here.” He threw a corner of the covers down.

I tossed the negligee into a plastic bin in the corner, then slid in beside him, snuggling into his side, my hand resting on his chest.

His arm wrapped around my shoulders, and he pulled me against him, then kissed my forehead. “I missed you.”

As a faint grin toyed with my lips, I said, “It was only a few minutes.” I gave his nipple a playful flick of the tongue.

He jerked. “You ready to go again? ‘Cause if you start doing things like that, there’s no telling what I’m going to do to you.” A chuckle rumbled out of his chest.

A flash of heat rushed up my spine. “Are they going to be dirty things?” I sucked the nipple.

Groaning, he palmed his cock through the covers. “Yeah. I still have some toys in my nightstand we haven’t used.”

I blinked and rose onto an elbow to look down on his stunning face, his dark eyes and thick lashes framed by darker curls. “Can I do things to *you*?” Tension knotted deep in my gut. Something primal was working inside me, now that he’d had me. It released a hunger inside me, an ache for him that wasn’t just emotional, it was more raw than that.

“Of course. You can do whatever you want with me.” He rolled to his side, mirroring me. “I’m hard again already. You have no idea how much you turn me on.”

“Oh, I think I do.” I sucked my lip between my teeth. What could I do to him? As a grin tugged the side of my mouth, I twisted around and opened his nightstand drawer, then plucked out the vibrator. When he’d used this on me, I had almost given me an orgasm in a second. My cock lengthened painfully fast. I held it up to him. “How about this?”

His eyes grew wide. “Uh, sure.”

I edged into his side, then pushed the covers down, exposing his firm cock, stretching to meet his navel. I rolled my hips, pressing my shaft against him and claimed his mouth in a heated kiss.

With a groan, he found a nipple and pinched, then kneaded it between his fingers.

I moaned against him, a shock of sensation jerking my cock. “More.” I flipped the vibrator on and slid it up his shaft.

“Oh, fuck.” His body shuddered and he bucked his hips. He pinched harder on my nipple, then worked the other one.

My dick twitched against his thigh, pre-cum dripping out the tip. Some unseen wire shot electricity from my chest to my groin with every pinch of his fingers. I thrust harder against him. Could he make me come like this? “More. Oh, fuck, please more.” Panting, I set the vibrator at the sensitive spot under the slit of his cockhead.

He cried out, his face tensing, mouth dropping open. “Fuck, I’m going to come. Don’t stop.” He lowered his head and

sucked on my nipple, flicking his tongue over it. A ribbon of hot cum splattered his chest and he moaned over me, biting harder in my nipple.

Sensation shot through me, tingling over my skin, and I gave a needy rut against him, my peak surging inside me, cum spurting out of my pulsating cock to coat his thigh. I released sharp gasps as each wave hit, my release all encompassing.

As it slowed, he snatched the vibrator from me and shut it off, panting against my chest. “Damn, that thing is good. Holy shit.”

“Yeah, we need to use it sparingly, I think.” I rolled to my back with a grin. I didn’t want to ruin even more bedding. He’d obviously already changed it out while I was cleaning up the first time.

With a fast smirk, he said, “Yeah, only for quickies.” He sprang from the bed and disappeared into the bathroom, then came back out with a wet washcloth a few minutes later. “Here, let me clean you up.” He carefully wiped my groin, then spot cleaned the sheets. “I suppose you want me to sleep in the wet spots again?” With a snicker, he tossed the washcloth into the hamper and climbed in next to me.

“If that doesn’t show your love for me, I don’t know what does.” I cuddled in next to him, his arm hooking me in tightly. There was nothing better than sleeping beside him like this.

“Oh, I see how you are.” As a smile played on his lips, he kissed my head. “Are you satiated enough to sleep now?”

“I am.” I snuggled in deeper, my head nestled against his neck, my body growing heavy.

“You’re meeting my parents tomorrow.” He squeezed me into his side. “They’re going to love you.”

My chest warmed. “I’m so lucky to have you.” Meeting his parents, people who’d given me this wonderful man who accepted me for me, would be so cool.

“I’m lucky to have *you*. I don’t think you understand quite what you are to me.” He inhaled deeply, his chest rising. “You

are exactly my type. I thought I'd never be able to find, let alone have someone like you, but here you are."

I lifted my head, gazing into his face. "So, I guess this acceptance thing goes both ways? You accept me and I accept you?" I'd never thought of it like that before. I wasn't the only one needing acceptance, he did, too, for being attracted to someone different like me. Funny how it all just worked. Of course it helped that we were surrounded by such great people, too. "What are your parents like, you know, besides what you told me already?"

"My mom is a squishy hugger, so expect to be squished." He freed a soft chuckle. "My dad likes to think he's younger than he is. He does stuff he probably shouldn't sometimes." He kissed my head.

"Really? Like what?" I caressed his arm, feeling his soft skin against my finger pads. I loved the feel of every part of him.

"Like he tried to ride my brother's Harley and almost ran it into the garage door at their house." With a squeeze, he snickered against my hair. "My brother almost lost his mind. But it sure made Jaime laugh."

"I'll bet. Jaime seems like the kind of person who sees the funny part of most situations. I bet he keeps your brother from being too serious." I ran my fingers up his shoulder, over his clavicle and up around his jaw, the stubble prickling me.

"He is. My brother can be very serious. They complement each other well." He turned his head and pressed a kiss to my lips. "Opposites attract, you know." His brows furrowed. "I'm not sure what's opposite about us though."

"I like skirts and make-up and you don't?" I lifted my brows, my fingers skimming over his lower lip.

"That's too easy. How about you're a neat freak and I'm normal." He gave me a smirk.

"Nuh-uh. You're dirty." I let a sly grin curl my lips. He was certainly dirty in more ways than one.

"You like that I'm dirty." He made to bite my fingers.

“Hey.” I pulled them away, my hand falling onto the grooves and planes of his chest. “I do like that you’re dirty. I had no idea there were so many fun things to play with.” I brushed my knuckles over his abs, dipping lower to his hip bone.

“You can blame Gina for that.” He pursed his lips. “Sorry. I don’t mean to bring her up again, but she was, well...”

“Yeah, I get it. Thank you, Gina for showing my man all this dirty stuff.” I lifted off his shoulder to plant a quick kiss on his mouth, then settled back in, my mind drifting to the meet up tomorrow. “So, how are we going to do this tomorrow? I mean, you coming out with me standing right there?” A knot formed in my gut.

“I think I’ll go the direct route. I’m just going to introduce you to them both as my boyfriend.” He huffed a laugh. “I can’t wait to see the look on my mom’s face.”

“Are you sure she won’t be mad?” I stopped my hand on his navel. He was really being nonchalant about all this. What if he was wrong?

He twisted his head to face me. “Dev, they will not be mad. They will both be happy. In fact, please be yourself. Wear some make-up if you feel like it, or a skirt or whatever you think makes you look nice, okay?” He grabbed my chin, bringing my face closer to his. “I love you and they’ll love you and I want them to meet the real you.”

I swallowed a lump climbing up my throat. “Really?” My gaze darted between his eyes. He was so serious right now.

“Really.” He kissed the tip of my nose, then lay back against his pillow. “Besides, I think it’s fucking hot when you wear make-up and all that.”

I slapped his chest. “We’re meeting your parents, not having a, a hot date.” I snuggled deeper into his side. “There will be no easy access.” I snickered into his neck, then nibbled on the soft skin.

“Yeah, whatever. Guess we’ll save that for our next hot date then.” He sighed. “Next time you wear a skirt though, can you

not wear pants or leggings underneath it?” He bit the side of his lower lip. “Maybe nothing, just for me?”

“What?” I lifted my head and stared at him. “If I do that on a stage, what’ll you think will happen?” A grin tugged the corner of my mouth. Was he serious right now? The only time I’d worn skirts was onstage.

“Don’t get yourself all worked up. I’m not talking about when you’re onstage. I mean when we’re on a date or, or just around here maybe.” He offered a coy grin. “Just in my apartment.” He rolled on top of me, pressing his hardening cock into my thigh. “Fuck, you turn me on.” He claimed me in hungry kisses, rocking his hips. “You ready for another round?”

“God, yes.” My dick tingled and swelled. I was always ready for him. Every time was an adventure.

The next day, Brandon held a glass door open for me and smiled. “Ready, babe?” He tugged his thin grey sweater over the top of his jeans.

I checked my reflection in the other glass door. I’d gone with just the eyeliner and pink lipstick. I hadn’t wanted to stand out too much. I skimmed my hands down my white button-down shirt, then glanced at my zippered jeans. Huh, it was the same outfit I’d worn to karaoke that night I’d met Axel. My subconscious brain must have thought it was good luck or something.

“You look fantastic. Now, get in there.” He placed his hand on my lower back and gently guided me inside the building.

I scanned the restaurant, all modern, but cozy with white tables and gray upholstered chairs. A set of long tables held a breakfast buffet on our left and modern artwork in black and white hung on the walls. My gaze snagged on Kaiden’s dark head of hair with Jaime’s blond head sitting next to him at a table that was a booth on one side, with an older couple sitting there. That must be his parents. “I see them.” I tilted my head in their direction, my pulse quickening.

“Good. I hope Kaiden didn’t tip Mom off.” With a huff, he snatched my hand and led me to the table. “Hi, everyone.”

I attempted to pull my hand from his, but he held it tighter. My gaze roamed over a handsome man with a bald head and dark eyes like Kaiden’s, dressed in a black fleece. That must be his dad. Then my gaze landed on his mother, dark hair the color of Brandon’s, cut chin-length, with kind eyes and plump lips in red.

Kaiden and Jaime both twisted in their chairs, then stood up.

As her gaze fell to our hands, her eyes grew wide and she wiped her mouth with her napkin, then shifted out of the booth, a wide smile gracing her lips. “Oh my God, Brandon. You little...” She gave me the once over.

I took a step back and flinched. Was this really okay?

“What have we here?” Her smile reached her eyes.

“Mom, meet my boyfriend, Devin.” Brandon beamed at me, his chest puffing out.

She slapped at his arm. “Brandon, I don’t know why, but I am *not* surprised.” She turned to Kaiden. “Okay, now I know what all the whispering and looks were about.” Her gaze came back to me. “Oh, honey, you are gorgeous.” She draped her arms around me and pulled me in tight.

She was definitely a hugger. I embraced her and as she left me, I said, “Nice to meet you uh, Marsha?” Shit, what was I supposed to call her?

“Yes, yes, call me Marsha.” She held my hands and looked me over once more. “You are stunning.”

“What about me, Mom?” Jaime chortled.

Kaiden flung an arm over Jaime’s shoulders.

“Oh, stop it. You know how I feel about you.” She huffed a laugh, and said to me, “Come and tell me all about yourself.”

“Marsha, give me a chance here.” Pete rolled his eyes, then grabbed my hand into both of his. “It’s so nice to meet you,

son.” He shook my hand, his gaze meeting mine. “Uh, was that okay or are your pronouns different?”

“Oh, uh, my pronouns are *he* and *him*. I haven’t changed them.” I smiled at him. I couldn’t believe he even knew to ask me that. “Nice to meet you, too, sir.” In my family, the older men were always referred to as *sir*.

“Pete, you can call me, Pete.” He freed my hand. “Please, sit down.” He held out his open palm.

I glanced at Brandon. We were going to sit together, right? I mean sure, everyone was super nice, and I’d already met Kaiden and Jaime, but it was still a little nerve wracking. I wiped my palms down the thighs of my jeans.

Brandon led me to the end of the table and pulled the chair out next to Jaime. “Here, you sit there.” He slid in across from me and next to his mother.

Marsha picked up a tall, slender mimosa and sipped it. “So, how did you two meet?”

“We met at my job. I work at a bakery on campus and he, um...” I snapped my brows up. Should I be telling her about her son sort of stalking me at my work?

With his hands cupping together over the table, Brandon said, “I found him one day putting out a sign at the bakery and I was smitten. I wanted to be with him, so I did everything I could to get his attention and eventually, he agreed to go out with me.” He shifted in his seat, his gaze taking everyone in.

A waiter stopped at the table, and we all ordered mimosas.

“The place he works at is a bakery owned by some good friends of ours.” Jaime threw a grin at me. “It’s called *Queer Confections*.”

“I’ll have to bring you home something from there sometime, Mom. Everything is delicious.” Kaiden grabbed Jaime’s hand and held it on the table.

“Oh, definitely,” she said.

“Are you in school, son?” Pete focused on me, his fingers rimming the lip of his mimosa.

“I am. I’m studying business with an emphasis on finance.” I nodded my head. The waiter dropped off our drinks and I sipped mine.

“Oh, finance. Now that’s a good thing to be studying.” Pete beamed at me.

“Yeah, we thought maybe you might still have some connections for him when he starts looking for a job.” Kaiden’s attention drew to Pete.

“I sure do.” Pete nodded once. “You let me know when you get your resume ready, and I’ll see what I can do.”

“He’s really smart, Dad. He’s at ASU on a full-ride scholarship.” Brandon smiled at me.

“So, tell me about your family? Do you have siblings?” Marsha drank her mimosa down and motioned for the waiter to bring her another.

“Yeah, I have a brother. He’s doing his mission.” My heart pinched. Would I even see him again? At this rate, there was no point.

“Mission?” Marsha snapped her brows together, then lifted one. “Wait, are you, um, are you Mormon?”

“I was. My family still is.” As soon as the waiter set my drink down, I lifted it back off the table and took a few gulps. This was going to be hard to explain.

“So they know about you and Brandon?” Pete flicked a finger between us.

“No, Dad, they don’t know.” Brandon pursed his lips. “It’s sort of a sore subject, if you don’t mind.” He grabbed my forearm, focusing on me. “I mean, not with me. I mean—”

“He means I don’t think I can come out to them. They won’t understand.” I set my hand over his on my arm. He was doing his best to cover for me, but I might as well just tell them.

“Oh, dear.” Marsha frowned. “Listen, whatever their beliefs, you’re their child and they’ll love you no matter

what.” She lifted her chin. “There is no way a mother cannot love her child. No way.”

But I would break her heart. She might still love me, but it would be with a broken heart. “Yeah, thanks.” I hung my head, my eyes stinging. We needed to get off this subject.

“Devin, if you need anything, ever, you know you can come to us, right?” Pete pressed his lips into a thin line.

“Dude, you know me and Kaiden are here for you, too, and so are Dana and Nate. You have a whole squad behind you.” Jaime squeezed my shoulder.

“And don’t forget Layla and Olivia and the band.” Brandon narrowed his eyes at me, as if assessing me.

With a nod and a forced grin, I said, “I know. I have a whole family down here now.” And every one of them accepted me.

“You do.” Marsha leaned over the table to squeeze my hand, then released it. “Brandon, you take good care of him, do you hear me?” She arched a brow at her son.

“I know, Mom. Don’t worry.” Brandon drank some mimosa.

“So, if your family is Mormon, do you only have the one brother?” Kaiden twisted in his chair to face me.

“I do. My mom couldn’t have any more kids after him.” I toyed with my fork. “I know she wanted more, but there was some medical thing that happened, and she couldn’t. My parents don’t really talk about it.”

“Where exactly are you from and what do they do?” Pete studied me.

“I’m from Page, up around the Utah border. My dad has an electrician business and my mom stayed home and raised us. My mom was a really good mom. She was always there for me and my brother, Stuart.” I breathed in deeply. “My brother’s looking to work at the dam up there when his mission is done.” I pursed my lips. “And probably get married.”

“They don’t still do arranged marriages, do they?” Marsha tensed the side of her mouth.

With a chuckle, I said, “Naw, he had a girl he liked in high school, and she’s sort of waiting for him to get back.” I blew out a breath. What a different world it was in smalltown Page. “You know the Mormon community is pretty tight-knit up there.”

“Yes, I can imagine. It must have been hard to leave all that behind, all your friends.” Marsha tilted her head, her gaze growing soft.

“Not really. I didn’t fit in.” I scoffed a laugh. “If you couldn’t tell.” I gave a shake of my head. I really didn’t care if I ever went back there. The only reason would be to see Mom, or maybe my brother when he came back. Dad? I could probably do without.

“Dude, sometimes people will surprise you. You should ask Dana sometime about his dad.” Jaime twisted in his chair.

“Yeah? Why?” I fingered the edge of my plate, then let my gaze meet his. Jaime really seemed to know a lot. We needed to hang out with Kaiden and him more.

Jaime tapped my arm. “Dana’s dad wasn’t accepting of him and let him know it more often than not. It was kind of a big thing for Dana. Then he met Nate and I think seeing how happy Nate made Dana changed his dad’s mind.” He scoffed. “Or, I don’t know, man, maybe he just gave up.” He freed a sharp chuckle, then quieted and fixated on me, his index finger tapping the table between us. “The point is, people change, and Mom Visser is right, parents love their kids, even when they don’t show it.” His gaze locked onto mine. “Don’t give up.”

An ache hooked around my heart, squeezing it. “Okay.” Could I really have it all? My family *and* my true identity? What was it anyways? Was I a *they* and not a *he*? I’d never even given that a thought before.

Marsha sat back in her seat, a warm smile growing across her lips. “Jaime, you are such a doll. We are so lucky to have

you.”

“I don’t know what I’d do without my little man.” Pulling Jaime backward, Kaiden pressed long kiss to Jaime’s cheek.

With a blush spreading over his cheeks, Jaime said, “You’re damn right, giant.” He sipped his mimosa.

I threw a glance at Brandon. “Giant?” Obviously, there was some pet name thing going on here. What would ours end up being?

“Yeah, well, look at them. Jaime is little and Kaiden is, well, big.” With a snicker, Brandon shook his head.

“All right you boys. Who’s hungry for breakfast?” Marsha set her hands on the table, then rose up from her seat. “I’m famished.

“Me, too.” I stood up, my heart a little lighter. Being with all of them, like this, gave me hope. If nothing else, I had all of them.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Brandon



Almost a week later, I checked my cell phone, looking at the time on the display in the soft glow of the streetlights as I strode down the Mill Avenue sidewalk. It was eight o'clock on a Friday night and Devin had texted saying there was something important he had to tell me at the bakery, so here I was, hurrying along to meet up with him. The scent of orange blossoms filled my nose, tangy and sweet. I loved this time of year. It meant spring was here, but the heat of summer was still a few months away. Spring break would be next week and even though I was sticking around town with Devin, instead of running off to drink myself silly in some place like Rocky Point, Mexico, I didn't care.

I jogged to the glass doors of the bakery housed inside its brick building and opened a door. Sweets and coffee flooded my senses. I had grown to love this smell, too, because it would always remind of my baby, my Devin. As I rushed past the comfy couches and tables to the counter, Devin's face lit up.

"Babe." He stepped around the end of the counter. "We are celebrating tonight." He threw his arms around my shoulders and planted a hard kiss on my lips.

"We are?" I hugged his waist, my gaze landing on Nate standing behind the counter, his arms crossed over his chest and a smirk sweeping over his face. Whatever was going on, I was down for some celebrating after all the tests and papers that had been due this week.

Nate walked out to meet us. "Brandon, how are you?"

"I'm good." I freed Devin, then gave Nate a side hug, patting him on the back. My gaze flicked between them.

“Okay, so what’s up?” Obviously, this thing involved Nate.

Dana stepped out from the back room, wiping his hands on a towel, beaming. “Hey, Brandon.”

“Hi, Dana.” I waved at him, then took a quick look around the store. A few stragglers were finishing up their treats, but the store wasn’t as busy as normal, probably because so many students had already gotten out of town or were already partying at the bars.

“You want to tell him?” Nate rubbed his hands together.

“No, you tell him.” Devin raked his teeth over his bottom lip, eyeing me.

“Come on, Dev, this is your thing. You did this. You tell him.” Nate pushed him toward me.

“For fuck’s sake, what?” Holding my hands out, I glanced between them. They were killing me here.

“Brandon, baby, I got a job.” Devin’s face lit up and he focused on me, grabbing both of my hands in his.

“I know...you have a job.” I furrowed my brows. What the hell were they talking about?

“Here, I got a job here.” He raised his brows. “A real job.”

I stared at him as it dawned on me. “You mean, full-time, real job?” I cocked my head, my gaze sliding to meet with Nate’s.

“Yes, Devin here showed me the preliminary draft of his financial analysis for the bakery and it’s obvious we need to go ahead and open the second store we were thinking about in Melrose. He’s pretty savvy with the numbers, and I think he’d be great to have around, so I’ve hired him to help open the new store and well, help me in general. He’ll be a general manager.” Nate flashed me a smile. “Well, once he graduates.”

“I’ll be making some good money and have full benefits.” He squeezed my hands and shook them between us.

“Oh, holy shit. Oh my God, babe, that’s great.” I snatched him into a tight embrace, then kissed his head, glancing at

Nate. “Thank you so much.” An idea flickered through my head. Now maybe we could move in together. He’d have to leave the dorm and moving in together would be the natural progression, wouldn’t it?

“Oh, it was all on him. Like I said, he deserves it. This kid is going to make us millions.” Nate threw a knowing smirk to Dana.

With a shake of his head, Dana sniggered. “Yeah, millions.”

I lowered my brows. What was that about? There must be some secret between them. I freed Devin, keeping hold of his hand, then stepped back. “So, when do you get off and what do you want to do?”

Devin arched a brow at Nate. “Can I get off early?”

Patting Devin’s arm, Nate said, “Sure. I know it’s spring break.” He looked toward the windows and the young people walking down the sidewalk outside. “The bars are probably rocking tonight.”

As Devin untied his pink apron and unhooked it from his neck, he flashed his eyes at me. “Let’s go get dressed up, then hit that gay bar on the corner. What do you think?” He watched me closely. “Then we can check it out a little bit before my band plays tomorrow night.”

“Y-you mean *The Club on Mill*?” My heart flipped in my chest. I’d seen the place, but had never actually been inside it. But then, we’d be going there anyways tomorrow night with his band. It had just felt better to be going with Axel and the band as a whole unit. But... “Sure.” I stuffed my hands into the front pockets of my jeans. “Did you want to invite Olivia or Layla?” I knew they weren’t leaving town for Mexico until tomorrow.

He pressed up against my side, wrapping an arm around mine. “How about just the two of us?” He fluttered his lashes at me and against the shell of my ear, whispered, “I’ll wear a skirt...with only a jock underneath.”

My breath caught and my cock stirred. Damn. Where the hell did he get a jock? “Okay then.” I swallowed hard and tried

to think of anything but my hands on his bare ass underneath that skirt.

With a wave of his hand, he said, “Bye, guys. I’ll see you tomorrow afternoon.”

“Bye,” Nate and Dana said in unison, both waving at us with smirks on their faces.

An hour or so later, I strolled hand in hand down the brick sidewalk with Devin at my side, looking hot as hell in a black, pleated mini-skirt like something from a girl’s school uniform and a tight, black band-shirt. He’d played up the make-up tonight, adding some glitter to his high cheekbones and had contrasted the whole outfit with combat boots and thick leather wristbands. It was almost like he was trying to pull off a punk version of a vintage Madonna look. Whatever, it was doing it for me and had my cock at half-mast since he’d finally let me see him at the dorm. “You know, you were a real brat making me wait in the hallway for you to get dressed.”

With a coy smile, he dipped his head. “I know, but I was afraid we’d end up playing and not make it out to the bar.”

“Is that so bad?” I gave him a lop-sided grin, letting my gaze rake over his slender frame. Damn, he was killing me with this. I forced myself to take in the restaurants and students flooding out of the bars on the street.

“I don’t have any toys at my place.” His heated gaze caught mine and his tongue flicked at his lower lip. “Yet.”

A shiver of desire rippled down my spine. “So, this stuff isn’t Olivia’s, is it?” I waved my hand up and down his side.

“No, I finally went out and got some of my own things. She helped me though.” He quirked his mouth into a quick grin.

A pang clenched my gut. I’d really wanted to be the one to do that with him. “Okay, so, next time, take me, okay?” I stopped and tugged him back to me. “Okay?” I wrinkled my brows.

He parted his lips, his forehead creasing, then cupped my cheek. “I’m sorry, babe. Next time for sure. She just...she gets

so excited about it, and you were in class.” His gaze flicked between my eyes.

“It’s okay.” I planted a quick kiss to his lips. I had no right to be so possessive, but the more we were together, the more I wanted him all to myself. I’d have to find a way to tone that down. I broke the kiss, giving him a brief smile, then led him to the iron stairway leading up to the bar. Wait a minute... “You didn’t buy the jock strap with Olivia, did you?”

He barked out a laugh. “God, no. That I ordered on Amazon.”

“Good.” I glanced at the skirt as we walked up the steps. “What gave you the idea to get that anyway?” Not that I minded in the least.

His cheeks flushed. “I saw it on a porn clip. I thought it looked hot. *Easy access.*” With a giggle, he pressed his fingers to his lips.

God, he *was* the devil and perfect for me. “Next time, save some of those porn clips for when we’re together, too.” I pulled him to me and pecked his cheek.

“Of course.” He squeezed my hand, stopping at the top of the stairs behind a few other people showing their IDs. “This will be so much better than the last time I was here.”

I stepped toward the muscle-clad bouncer in black as the people in front of us were waved into the bar and showed him my ID. Could I forbid Devin from coming here without me? God, I was getting over the top. No, I could not. *Trust, Brandon, it’s all about trust.*

He showed the bouncer his ID.

The bouncer looked at the ID a moment, twisted his lips, then took Devin in from head to toe.

“Is there a problem?” I leaned in. The photo of Devin on the ID didn’t look much like him. Not anymore. “That’s him, I swear.” I pointed at the photo.

The bouncer curled the edge of his mouth. “Dude, I have drag queens come in here. Do you really think I look that hard

at the photos?” Shaking his head, he chuckled. “I just thought he was hot and wanted to get a better look at him.” He lifted his chin at me. “You two boyfriends?”

“We are.” My chest heated. Was I going to be fending men off Devin all night?

“Good for you, man.” The bouncer slapped at my shoulder. “Go on inside.” He ticked his head at the entrance.

I hooked my arm around Devin’s waist, tucking him into my side. “You are not leaving my sight all night, you hear me?”

Devin turned in my arm, people buzzing around us, lights flickering over the bar and the music thumping in the air. “Someone a little jealous?” He planted his hands on my hips.

After freeing a soft huff, I said, “I don’t think I’m jealous, I trust you. But...you’re mine and everyone in here better get that in their heads real quick.”

“Oh my.” He swayed against me. “I don’t think I’ve seen this side of you.” He gave me a coy grin. “Okay, maybe at that gig the other night.”

“Is it too much?” I lifted my brows. “My brother’s kind of like this, too. He almost killed a guy who...” Maybe I shouldn’t bring that up.

“Who what?” He tilted his head, his eyes narrowing.

“A guy made a slur at Jaime once and Kaiden was ready to knock the guy’s dick into the dirt, but Jaime stopped him. Another time, he almost put a guy in the hospital for the same thing with another guy he was out with.” Was I really that much like Kaiden?

“No one is going to be throwing slurs at us here.” He placed a gentle kiss on my mouth.

“Right, I still don’t want anyone manhandling you. No one but me.” I threw him a sly smile. Enough talk. I needed a drink.

“Oh, I’d like that.” He pressed his hips into mine, his cock a little thicker than normal.

“Someone getting turned on already?” I slanted my mouth over his, then slid my tongue inside to dance along his, my hands falling to squeeze the globes of his ass.

A low groan rumbled from his chest, and he deepened the kiss, his hand wrapping around the nape of my neck, pulling us closer still. Breathless, he parted from me, resting his forehead against mine. “I don’t know why, but hearing you say things like that does something to me. I *am* yours, Every single fiber of my being. You know that.” His gaze locked to mine.

“I do, I know it.” My heart ached with love for him. How could I still be falling in deeper with him? I hadn’t known the capacity that was in me to love until I met him. There was no end to it. “I love you, babe, with every fiber of my being.”

He tapped the tip of my nose. “Good, let’s start off with one of those crazy shots on the board over there.” He freed me and snatched my hand.

My gaze roamed to the dark granite of the bar on the far wall, then behind it to a listing of shots in neon colors on a black chalkboard. “Oh, holy hell. How about the bend over shot, because—”

“You want to bend me over?” He guided me through people, some obviously eye-fucking him.

I glared at a few of the men on the way. “I do. Want to bend you over. Tonight.” As I placed my forearm on the bar, I scanned the area, the stage where a DJ was mixing music on a stand with neon lips and butterflies painted on it. This place was a little nutty, but seemed like a lot of fun. Dancers bounced and swayed on an open wooden floor.

He ordered our shots and a couple of beers from a bartender with a chiseled bare chest in black jeans and short blond hair, gelled up in the front.

The bartender set our drinks down and I paid him. “I’ll get this round.” After all, I was the one with the college fund and not working my ass off to make ends meet.

He picked up his orange shot and held it to my face. “Come on, let’s toast.”

As I lifted mine, I gazed deeply into his eyes. I opened my mouth without thought. “To you moving in with me after graduation?” I wagged my brows at him. What the hell had I just said? Oh, fuck. Where did that even come from? My subconscious mind was a devious bastard sometimes. But it was true. I had been thinking that as soon as I’d found out about his new job.

He stared at me, his jaw dropping open. “M-move in...with you?” He dropped his glass an inch.

“Um, yeah, why not? You can’t live in the dorm after graduation and it’s what people in serious relationships do, right?” I tapped my glass to his, then held it to my lips. He was still staring at me. “What?” I lowered my shot.

“I love you.” He threw his arm around me and hugged me close, then planted a kiss on my cheek. “Of course I’ll move in with you.” Clearing his throat and raising his shot again, he said, “To our new place, wherever that is and the hope that you won’t be a slob.”

I clinked my glass to his, shaking my head, then downed the shot, the sugar and liquor warming my throat. I had that coming. “I’ll do my best to make you happy, neat freak.”

“Oh no.” His eyes widened and he set his fingers over his chin.

“What?” I looked around us. Had he seen someone he knew here or something?

“Couples make up cute names for each other, like Kaiden and Jaime call each other little man and giant.” He chuckled. “Are we going to be slob and neat freak?”

I busted out laughing. “What the hell? That’s the sort of thing you’re thinking about right now?” I set my glass on the counter, steadied myself, then sipped my beer. “You’ll always be babe to me, okay?” I nodded my head, twisting my lips. “Okay, and neat freak every once in a while.”

“Okay, slob.” With a smirk, he drank his beer.

I gave him my best evil eye. “Wait, I got a better one for you.” I lifted my chin at him. “*Brat.*” I watched his response.

He quirked the corner of his mouth. “Yeah, I’m kind of a brat sometimes. Only to you though.” He arched a brow.

“Don’t I know it.” With a quick reach under his skirt, I pinched his ass cheek.

“Ow.” With a jump, he rubbed over the back of his skirt. “Save the pinching for my nipples.” He turned to face the bar with a harrumph.

My cock woke at the thought. Dirty Devin was coming out. God, I could think of a million pet names for him now. Oh, this was too much fun. How was I only realizing now that we were in a gay bar and here, we could play? I stepped up behind him and placed both my hands on the bar top on either side of his body, then nibbled on his neck.

He tilted his head back, closing his eyes, exposing more of his soft skin to me. “Don’t make me hard in this skirt...” He released a soft moan.

I skimmed my hand up his shirt and pinched at his nipple through his t-shirt, biting at his neck.

“Oh, fuck.” With a groan, his body shuddered.

“Isn’t there like a dark room or something in these places?” I licked the shell of his ear. Why didn’t I look this up while I was waiting in that damn hallway at the dorm?

“I-I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He turned around in my arms, his back to the bar, his pupils blown, and pressed his hard shaft into the front of my jeans. “Now look what you did.” He stuck his lower lip out.

Oh, he was playing me good. I bit at his lip, rubbing myself on him, my cock thickening in my jeans. I couldn’t wait to get him home. This bar thing might not last very long. I released him and came in for a needy kiss.

“Oh, look at you. Aren’t you two hot.” A muscular man with short, black hair stood next to us, giving us the once over. “Would you be interested in a third?” He arched a brow at me. “Especially you.” He brushed his hand down my arm.

I blinked. What the hell was going on? This guy was hitting on me *while* I was kissing my boyfriend? How did that even work?

“He’s mine and only mine.” Devin shoved me behind him and faced the man, his hands fisting at his sides, his gaze hard.

Damn, my baby could be possessive, too. My heart swelled with warmth. God, I loved him.

“Okay, no worries. Just thought it was worth an ask.” The man flipped his hand at us and under his breath, said, “Thought maybe you were advertising.” He strutted away into the crowd.

“Advertising? Advertising what?” Devin pinched his lips.

“Hey, babe, don’t worry about it.” I skimmed my fingers up and down his arms. “Let’s grab our beers and hit the dance floor.” The last time we’d tried to dance was at that house party. This time things would be ending very differently.

As predicted, an hour later our hormones won out and we decided to head for home. I strolled beside Devin on the sidewalk, hand in hand, laughing and chatting as we came up to the street corner. I watched the streetlight turn red in front of us and a white SUV barreling toward the intersection. As a smaller, gray sedan started up straight ahead, my heart quickened. “Fuck.”

Devin looked toward the intersection. In slow motion, his hand went up.

The SUV sped on.

The sedan crept into the middle of the intersection.

A clap like thunder rang out.

The sedan spun, airbags exploding, and the SUV screeched to a stop.

The driver in the sedan slumped in their seat.

“Holy shit.” I squeezed Devin’s hand and raced with him to the corner. “Watch for traffic. Let me see if they’re okay.”

“No, babe, there’s smoke.” He flapped his fingers at the hood of the sedan.

With a hard swallow, our gazes locked. There was no time. We had to get that person out of that car. “Babe, call 911.”

As I took off, my heart attempting break free from my chest, I heard Devin speaking on his phone and running behind me.

People on the street shouted and a few meandered into the road, waving traffic away from the accident.

I skidded to a stop at the driver’s side door of the sedan. Thankfully with the warm evening, the window was open.

A middle-aged woman slumped over to the side in her seat and blood flowed down her face. “Ma’am, are you all right?” Was I supposed to shake her? What if she had a spinal injury? I’d watched enough of those first responder shows to not be too stupid about it.

“Babe, we need to get her out of there. The smoke is getting worse.” Devin reached in the open window, unlocked the car with shaking hands, then popped the door open. “Grab her.”

I placed a hand on her shoulder. “But what if—”

She turned her head to me, her blue eyes dazed, blood clotting on her eyelids. “What happened?”

“You were in an accident.” I glanced at the smoke, billowing out from under the crumpled hood, only getting thicker. Probably best not to tell her, her car was on fire, too. “I’m getting you out of here.” I shoved the airbag aside, then unlocked her seatbelt and hooked my arms under her armpits to slide her out of her seat, dragging her feet along the way.

As Devin cleared a way back off the street for us through spectators, a young man, probably a student by the looks of him, held a white towel to his forehead, stained with blood, and stepped up to us. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t see the light change.” Tears streamed down his face. “She’s not hurt too bad, is she?”

“Not sure.” I dragged the woman over the curb.

“Okay, babe, set her down.” Devin’s hand warmed my lower back and I set her on the sidewalk. Sirens rang in the near distance.

An explosion rattled through the night, blowing a hot wind over us. “Holy shit.” I flicked my gaze to the sedan, now engulfed in flames along with the SUV.

“My car.” The woman sobbed, tears flowing down the sides of her face.

“Hey, cars can be replaced. People can’t.” I knelt beside her, looking her up and down for blood or swelling. “Are you hurt anywhere?”

“We’ve got it from here.” A male paramedic in a black uniform grabbed my shoulder, giving me a thin-lipped grin. “You did a great job. You saved this woman’s life.” He looked up at Devin. “You both did.”

Devin wrung his hands over his chest, his eyes glistening. “Is she going to be okay?”

“I think so.” The paramedic nodded.

Standing up, I raked my fingers through my bangs. Holy shit, what a night. I stepped to Devin and wrapped him up in a tight embrace, kissing his head. A thick microphone was shoved in my face.

“Are you the couple that saved this woman?” A blonde woman in thick makeup and a blue dress shoved the mic back into my face. A blinding light lit up the back of her head. “I’m Eva Wilson with *News Channel Three*. Can I speak to you a moment?”

Facing her, my mouth gaped open, then closed. Words stuck in my throat. All I’d wanted was to be sure Devin was okay. He’d looked so upset.

“You two are heroes, you know that?” She flashed a smile at me, her teeth straight and white. The microphone came at me again. The light shifted and a camera man came into focus, the big lens of the camera pointed at us.

“H-heroes?” My gaze flicked to Devin, and I tightened my hold on him. “Yeah, I guess.”

“What are your names? Are you students here?” She stepped beside me, holding the mic in front of us.

“I’m uh, Brandon Visser and this is my boyfriend, Devin Taylor,” I said, dipping into the mic.

“Can you tell the viewers what happened?” She pointed the mic at Devin.

He stepped forward. “We were walking home from the club, and the accident happened right in front of us. It happened so quickly. I think the guy in the SUV ran the light. But there was smoke—”

“We had to get her out of the car. There was no time to wait.” I glanced behind me at the paramedics now lifting the woman onto a stretcher. “Is, is she okay?” God, if the woman would be confined to a wheelchair the rest of her life because of me dragging her out, I’d be a mess. But what was I supposed to do?

She touched a headphone in her ear, nodded, then came back to me. “She’ll be fine. The paramedics said you saved her life. You both are truly heroes. You both put your lives at risk to save that woman.”

A gathering crowd came into view behind the camera man. Someone whooped and yelled, “Sun Devil students rock!”

I puffed my chest out a little, then smiled as Devin did the same. “Yeah, I guess we did.”

“I take it you’re both students here?” She placed her hand on my arm, stepping closer.

“We are.” Devin nodded. “We both graduate this year. I’m studying business and my boyfriend is going to help kids who lisp.”

I leaned into him. “It’s called a speech pathologist, babe.” I smiled at him, my adorable brat.

“Oh, so it sounds like you both have bright futures ahead of you.” She turned to the camera man. “Bill, you can cut now.”

Her attention flicked back to us. “I have a couple of waivers for you to sign. We’ll edit this interview, and it’ll probably air in the next day or so, maybe into Monday morning’s broadcast. We have a segment called, *Something Good* and this is perfect for that.”

Bill held out an iPad to her while she gave him her microphone. “Here you go, Eva.”

She held it out to us. “Just sign with your fingers on those lines there.”

I pressed my finger pad to the display and signed, then Devin did the same. Was this really happening? It was all so fast.

She passed the iPad back to Bill and he started packing everything up. “Okay, that’s a wrap.” Her gaze roamed over us. “By the way, you two are so cute together. It’s so nice being able to show a couple in the queer community as heroes. It’s a great message for the rest of us.”

“Uh, the rest of *us*?” Devin’s brows darted up.

She stepped closer to him. “Bisexual, nonbinary here. They, them.” With a warm smile, they pointed their thumbs at themselves.

Devin nodded, his eyes widening. “Oh...” In a soft voice, he said, “I’m still he, him. I haven’t felt the need for that.” He tossed a peek at me.

They grabbed up his hands in theirs and shook them once. “It’s all good. Be who you are, because you are fabulous. I mean that outfit is just so, wow. I love it.” They released him and clapped their hands together. “Anyways, gotta go.” They winked at him, then tagged Bill and both of them walked off with Bill slinging a large duffle bag over his muscled shoulder.

“I...” I faced Devin. “Holy shit, babe. What just happened?” The world around me was a little fuzzy. Was I in some kind of shock? Because the beer and shots should be worn off by now. I scanned around us. A firetruck blocked the intersection, and the car fires were out. People still milled about, but were starting to disperse.

“I don’t know. It feels like a dream right now.” A smile twitched the corners of his lips. “Can we go home and play?”

“Hell yeah.” I snatched his hand and led him away from everything. Getting lost in my baby was just what I needed.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Devin



After getting back to Brandon's apartment, I waited on the couch for him to bring my beer. I was still a little stunned after the accident. The reporter had been so nice. Meeting someone like that who understood me, especially in that situation, had put me at ease. There had been no judgement in their eyes at all. Which begged the question, did I want to change my pronouns? It didn't feel like it quite fit, not yet anyways.

Brandon dropped in next to me, holding out my opened beer can. "Here you go, babe." He gulped his down. "Damn, that's good." He took my hand in his and squeezed. "You doing okay? You look a little out of it."

"Yeah, out of it is right. I can't believe everything that happened today." I ran through it all in my head, the job offer from Nate and Dana, the fun time at the gay bar, then the accident. I sipped my beer, my gaze drawing to meet with Brandon's. "I'm okay though. It ended on a good note, right?"

"Yeah." He set his beer on the coffee table, draped an arm over my shoulders and edged in closer to me. In a gravelly voice, he said, "Babe..." He flicked his teeth over his lower lip, then came in and nibbled on my earlobe. "So, you ready to play?"

Shivers rippled down my spine, lodging in my balls. My cock lengthened painfully fast, straining the jock strap. "Oh, I'm ready."

His hand roamed over my chest, then stopped at my nipple and pinched while he bit at my neck. "This is what you like, right?" He kneaded it between his fingers.

As a thread of heat shot from my chest to my shaft, my dick pulsed and dribbled. I gasped. In a breathy voice, I said, “Yeah, that’s what I like.” I palmed myself, sensation tensing my gut.

He went from one nipple to the other, teasing and rubbing, then lowered his head to suck and bite at each one.

“Oh, fuck.” I dropped my head back, stuffing my forearm between my thighs and thrusting into it. Between the jock and the skirt, there wasn’t enough friction to get me off, but damn, it felt good.

Lifting my shirt, he dove in again, teasing a nipple with his tongue while flicking the other with his fingers.

As Pleasure and pain mixed on my chest, my balls drew up. I pushed them down with the heel of my hand, letting a low moan rip out of my throat.

He stopped the motions on my chest, then stood from the couch and held out his hand. “Let’s go play in the bedroom.” His lips were red and swollen and his eyelids hooded over his dark eyes. His chest heaved with deep breaths and an obvious bulge ran under his zipper.

Setting my beer on the coffee table, I grabbed his hand and stood. “Are we leaving our beers again?” A deep chuckle rumbled out of me.

“Guess so.” With a quick grin, he led me into his bedroom, flicked on the nightstand light and hauled me toward the edge of the bed. “Bend over.” He unfastened his jeans, then shucked them off along with his boxer briefs. His cock stood thick and tall.

“Are you ordering me around now? No *please*?” I planted a hand on my hip. I loved pushing certain buttons on him, the ones that might drive him a little crazy.

“Please, bend over?” The edge of his mouth went up and he shimmied his shirt off over his head, then threw it. He stepped to me, pressing his hard shaft against the fabric of my skirt, then claimed me in a hungry kiss. “Are you being a brat right

now?” With his gaze locking to mine, he brushed his knuckles down my cheek.

I swayed my hips, our hard cocks skimming each other. “Suck me first. Just a little.”

He dropped to his knees, running his hands up between my thighs, rubbed over the jock strap a few times, then shucked it down.

I gasped as cold air hit my balls. My stiff cock tented out the skirt in front of me.

With a chuckle, he lifted the skirt and swallowed me whole, pumping his wet, hot mouth over me, moaning against the sensitive skin.

Pleasure washed over me in a torrent, heating my whole body. “Oh, fuck, yeah. That’s good.” Slapping my hands to his head, I rocked into his mouth, his tongue lapping at my shaft and flicking at my tip. I peeked down at him.

He wrapped his fingers around his own dick and stroked it, squeezing at the tip. With a groan, he pulled away. “Fuck, I’m going to come if we keep this up. Will you please, please, bend over?” With a lick of his lips, he looked up at me, his brows tensing.

God, was he sexy right now. I had him begging, right where I wanted him. Twirling around, I bent over the bed on straight arms, my ass jutting out. I knew the short skirt wasn’t covering me.

His warm hands slid over the globes of my ass, then between my thighs. “Spread your legs.”

I shifted my legs apart. Whatever he was thinking of doing, I was way on board. “Fuck me, babe.”

“Not yet.” He reached between my thighs and toyed with my balls, then pulled my cock down and stroked it a few times. “What if I fuck you and use a vibrator on you?”

I swallowed hard, my dick pulsing in his palm. “Uh, yeah,” I said, my voice unsteady with need.

“Good.” He stood up, opened his nightstand drawer, and threw the vibrator on the bed, then slicked his fingers with lube and pressed them to my hole.

My entrance spasmed. I’d gotten so used to him touching me there, it didn’t take much anymore for me to accept him.

Flipping my skirt over my back, he groaned and nudged a finger inside me. “Oh my God, babe, you are so fucking gorgeous.” As he worked his finger inside me, he pressed his hot dick to my ass and rubbed over it.

Burning lit up inside me, then it morphed into a shock of pleasure as he hit my prostate. I gasped, squirming my hips, my cock pulsating. He’d gotten good at that, too. Knew just the angle to use.

As he pushed a second finger inside me, he bent over my back and placed biting kisses on my neck, stroking my insides. “You feel good, babe?” He licked the shell of my ear.

A shiver rolled down my spine. My balls ached. I wanted him and wanted him now. “Fuck me, babe. Do it.” I wasn’t a virgin anymore. Hell, at this point I’d probably done things most non-virgins only dreamt about.

His fingers left me, and the sound of lube squirting filled the room, then I twisted my head to see his hips at my ass. His face tensed and his lower lip was caught between his teeth as he nudged his cockhead past the first ring of muscle. He hissed, his eyes squeezing shut for a heartbeat. “Oh, fuck, babe, you’re so tight.” He rubbed my back. “You okay?”

“I’m great.” I pushed back into him. I wanted him to fill me. “Do it.” My dick ached. “Please.”

He pushed all the way inside me, his hips to my ass, then pulled out and pushed in again.

I grunted with the pressure and burn of him, then relaxed. “Fuck me, fuck me hard.” We’d not had sex without facing each other and something about this was just so...dirty.

His fingers dug into my hips, and he thrust inside me, slapping against my ass, then angled his thrusts.

Pleasure sparked up my spine, over and over. “Oh fuck, yeah, right there.” I pushed backward to meet his pumping hips, sensation coiling like a spring inside me.

He gasped with each push of his hips, then bent over me. “I’m close, you close?” His voice was gravelly.

“Yeah, almost there.” I hung my head, panting, attempting to drive him deeper into me.

The vibrator sounded, then an eruption of sensation rolled over my cock as he pressed it to the top of my shaft, just under the lip of my cockhead. I cried out, clutching at the covers, my knees buckling, face tensing. Harsh pulses gripped me in rippling pleasure and my release painted the bed below me.

Dropping the vibrator, he said, “Oh, babe, fuck, yeah.” With sharp moans, he held me up at the waist and his body shuddered against my back while his hips pushed in deeply. He held it, then pushed in again and a third time.

The heat of his orgasm filled me, and I fought to hold myself up over the bed. Feeling and hearing him lose control behind me made my balls ache for him all over again.

As he calmed, he kissed my back, then pulled out of me. “You okay?” He rubbed my ass cheek.

“I’m not okay, I’m fucking fantastic.” I stood up and cum dribbled down my leg, my skirt falling over my ass. I twisted around, wiping my long bangs out of my face. “Oops.”

“That’s hot, watching my jizz roll down your leg under a skirt. Damn.” With a smirk, he rubbed his chin and whistled, his spent cock still swollen and poking out from his body.

“Oh really.” I chuckled and more slithered down my leg. “How hard did you come?” I ambled toward the restroom. This was going to take some doing to clean this up.

“Oh, pretty hard.” He sniggered, covering his mouth. “You are so hot, babe, what did you expect?”

I stopped at the restroom door, then turned attempting to glare at him. “I want *you* to clean up the bed and, and, well,

the carpet.” We might need to cover certain parts of the house in plastic if this kept up.

“Of course, anything for you.” He eyed me up and down.

After cleaning up, I lay in bed beside him, his body curled around my back. I held his arm around me and kissed his knuckles. “So, tomorrow after work at the bakery, we get to go back to *The Club on Mill*, but I’ll be singing all night.” I wasn’t so sure I wanted him out there by himself while I was onstage. Not with the proposition he’d gotten tonight and the way I’d been manhandled when I’d been there with Olivia that time. “Maybe someone can go with you?”

“Well, pretty much everyone I know is going to be out of town, including Olivia and Layla.” He kissed the back of my shoulder.

Furrowing my brows, I said, “What about Kaiden and Jaime? Would they come to the gig again?” The more I thought about it, the more I really didn’t like the thought of him being alone there.

“I’m not sure that’s their scene. They like biker bars and some place out in Mesa. I don’t think either one of them has been to a gay bar before.” He squeezed me. “What’s up with you?”

I rubbed my cheek on the pillow, pouting. “I don’t want you out there alone.”

“Out where?” He lifted his head, peering down into my face.

Twisting my head further into the pillow, I said, “In that place with all those guys hitting on you.” I huffed. “I might have to step off that stage and punch a bitch if they get too close.”

He snorted. “Babe, seriously?” He brushed my bangs off my head. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard you talk like that.”

I turned in his arms, my gaze drawing to his, a grin tugging at my lips. “It’s all your fault. You did this to me.” But the truth was, if I did have to defend my man, I knew Axel would be right behind me.

“No one is going to punch any bitches, okay?” He snickered. “Damn, you get really ornery sometimes.” He kissed my cheek. “I’ll let you put your mark on me any way you want when we get there, okay? It’ll be obvious that I’m yours. You know you’re the only one I’m going to be paying attention to, right?”

He had a point. I knew he loved me, cherished me even. “Yeah, I know.” Lifting my head, I pecked his cheek. “It’ll be fun tomorrow. I’m looking forward to it.”

“Yeah, me, too.” He settled in behind me and held me tighter. “I love you, Dev.”

“Love you, too, Bran.” I closed my eyes.

The next evening, I panted while lugging two duffle bags filled with cables up the stairs at *The Club on Mill*, setting up for our gig. Here I was, the cable bitch again. Though, this time I was pretty happy I wasn’t carrying up all the amps and speaker cabinets. As I set the duffles down in front of the DJ stand, I caught myself in a mirror to the side of the stage. I’d dressed a little more like Axel today, in ripped skinny jeans and a black net shirt with silver chains dangling over my chest. My make-up choice had also only included eye liner, enough to make me look a little scary. Guess my masculine side had come out in case someone messed with my man. I wasn’t having any of that.

Axel passed me with a huff. “So, where’s the boy toy?” He set his guitar case on the make-shift stage in front of the DJ area.

“He’ll be here.” I set about opening the duffle and running the cables across the stage.

He patted my shoulder. “Dude, no skirt tonight?”

Shrugging a shoulder, I said, “No, I was here last night with Bran, and some asshole tried to pick up on him, so—”

“So, you thought you’d pull out the tough guy look and make sure to scare all the dudes away?” With a nod, he rubbed at his chin, his gaze raking over me. “Hot.”

“Stop it.” Snickering, I plugged a cable into an amp, then ran it over to my mic.

“Look at the hero.” Caleb lugged the base drum to the back corner of the stage and set it down, followed by Gabe carrying a snare and a symbol.

“Hero?” Axel arched a brow at me.

I sighed. News travelled fast. I tightened the microphone stand knob, setting the height, and twisted to them. “How’d you know about that?”

“Saw it on the news this morning.” Caleb faced me, stepping closer, then tagged Axel’s arm. “Our little Dev here, along with his boy toy, pulled a woman from a burning car last night.” He came close and slapped my shoulder. “Well done.”

“Holy shit, are you serious?” Gabe walked over to us, his eyes wide.

“Dude, you *watch* the news?” Axel scoffed at Caleb.

“Maybe you’d be more informed if you watched it once in a while, too, instead of burying your nose in TikTok videos.” Caleb chortled. He snuck his phone out of the back pocket of his jeans. “Besides, it’s on the *AZ Family* website now, too. Trending topic.” He held up the phone and Axel and Celeb leaned in, watching.

My heart climbed up into my throat. “Fuck.” I’d been too stunned last night to even think about where that video was going to end up. I pawed at my chest, my gut clenching. “Hey, can I uh, can I see?” But my folks didn’t watch *News Channel Three*. They’d always thought it was too liberal and stuck with the Fox channel. So maybe...

“Holy shit, look at that car. You got the woman out of that?” Axel pointed at the phone.

Caleb turned his cell toward me, the car and truck both blazing.

“No, that was after it exploded. It was only smoking when we pulled her out.” I furrowed my brows. This could be bad.

But if Mom and Dad had seen it, wouldn't I have heard something from them by now?

"Hot skirt, dude. What have you got under that thing?" Axel ticked a brow at me. "Is there anything?"

"Never you mind." I planted my hands on my hips. Was there some way to get that video taken down? But I'd already signed a waiver. I worried my lower lip. There was really nothing I could do about it right now.

"I'm proud of you, man." Silas clapped my shoulder from behind. "That was really cool what you and Brandon did last night." He held his guitar case in his hand.

Rubbing my forehead, my attention drew to him. "So, I guess you saw it, too?"

Silas shrugged a shoulder. "Yeah. I watch the news." He threw a look at Axel, who rolled his eyes.

"Babe." Out of breath, Brandon jogged to the stage. "Did you see?" He bent over, planting his hands on his knees.

"The news video? Yeah." I furrowed my brows. I didn't need to be panicked about this, not yet. What were the chances it would make it to my parents' living room way up in Page? It wasn't local news up there. It wasn't their regular news channel. I brought a shaky hand up to shove my bangs out of my eyes. Then why were my hands trembling?

Brandon snatched my hand, peering at me. "You okay?" He wrinkled his brows. "You don't look so good."

I forced myself to look at him. "I'm, I'm fine. Why wouldn't I be fine?" Don't even say it. I didn't want to hear my biggest fear come out of his mouth.

He thinned his lips, his gaze searching my face a moment. "Okay." He draped his arms around my shoulders and pulled me into a tight embrace, nuzzling into my neck, then said, "I'm right here beside you and I love you. Remember that."

I nodded, my eyes stinging, and threw my arms around his waist. In a thick voice, I said, "Thank you. I love you, too." We could pretend, at least for now, that everything was fine.

We still had this night. We still had so much to look forward to.

He held me tighter, kissing the side of my head, then released me. “What can I help with?”

“Boy toy, how about you help him lay some cables?” Axel snickered along with the others, all setting up equipment.

“Boy toy?” Shaking his head, Brandon chuckled. “I guess he’s got a new nickname for me now, huh?”

“Yeah, just be happy I didn’t tell him about the jock strap.” I pursed my lips. As soon as we started playing, I’d be fine, especially with these guys.

“Jock strap? Should I ask how—”

“No.” I curled a side of my mouth. “It’s just Axel being Axel.” Crouching down, I pulled a long cable out of the duffel. “Here, run this from that amp to the black guitar over there.” I pointed to the middle amp, then held up the cable.

“Uh...” Brandon scratched his head. “What plug do I put it into?”

I stood up and patted his shoulder. “How about you get us some beers?” I placed a long kiss on his mouth.

His shoulders relaxed. “Yeah, I’ll do that.”

A half hour later, I stood with my back to the bar top next to Brandon, watching mostly young men enter the room with a few young women here and there, everyone taking up positions for the show. I sipped from a beer bottle.

“So, how are you going to mark me?” Brandon planted his forearm across the bar top behind me, a coy smile on his lips.

I tilted my head, narrowing my eyes at him as an idea sprang into my head. “How about this?” Grabbing his face, I claimed his mouth in a deep kiss, stroking my tongue against his, then dropped a hand to his ass and ground our hips together.

He freed a soft moan and slanted his mouth over mine, kissing me harder.

Breaking the kiss, I nibbled on his stubbled chin, then down to his neck and sucked, then bit the soft flesh.

In a husky, soft voice, he said, “Oh, fuck me.” He wrapped a hand around the back of my head as if urging me on. His hard cock twitched against mine behind our jeans. “I like this side of you. Damn.”

I sucked another spot, next to the first, then licked over it and lifted my head, my gaze finding his darkened eyes. “What side?” I peeked at his neck. A large, angry red mark grew just over the collar of his white shirt. That would do.

“This aggressive side. I’ve never seen it. Okay, maybe at the bakery and that house party when I first met you.” He breathed in deeply. “I’m glad this time it’s not trying to keep me away.”

“I was never trying to keep you away. I was just stupid and didn’t know why you were hanging around me.” With a smirk, I drank more beer. It was only a few months ago when we’d been to that house party, but I’d changed so much since then. Maybe when this more masculine side of me surfaced, it was for protection?

“Yeah?” He dipped his head. “Good to know—”

“Hey, are you the guy who pulled that woman from the burning car?” A muscled young man with straight, dark hair and ice-blue eyes looked Brandon up and down, then leaned in. “You’re not out with your boyfriend tonight?” He gave Brandon a sly grin.

“I’m right here.” I hooked a brow, then swigged my beer, edging in closer to Brandon, glaring at the young man.

“Oh, I’m sorry. You look uh, different.” The young man chuckled, his gaze darting between us. “Listen, that was really cool what you did. I just wanted you to know that.” He glanced at my beer bottle. “Can I buy you both a beer?”

“Sure.” Brandon chugged his down and set it on the bar top, smiling at the young man. “What’s your name?”

“Charlie.” He flagged the bartender down, then shook Brandon’s hand.

My heart flipped in my chest, and I stared at him. It couldn't be. "Ch-Charlie?" I cocked my head.

He peeked at me, then ordered our beers. "Yeah, Charlie Olson. Why?" He handed me a new beer, then faced me.

"Oh..." I blew out a breath. Wrong Charlie. God, I was turning into a mess. The whole news video thing still had me on edge. I glanced at the stage. Was it time to start singing yet?

Axel's gaze caught mine and he waved me up. "Dude, done scaring people away from your boy toy?" He smirked at me.

"What?" With a snort, Brandon hugged me into his side. "Don't worry, I'll be right up there in front the whole time you're singing, okay?"

I picked at the label of my beer bottle. "You better." I planted a quick kiss on his cheek. Deep down, I knew I had nothing to worry about. It was that damn news video that was making me so insecure and jittery.

"You're in the band, too?" With a wide grin, Charlie held up his own beer bottle.

"I am." I tapped my bottle to his, then sipped it. Charlie wasn't so bad. He certainly was nothing like the guy from last night.

"Can't wait to hear you guys. Some of my friends saw you over at the *Yucca Tap Room* and said you were awesome." He huffed. "I couldn't get them to come here with me though." He hung his head.

"Don't worry, you can hang out with me up at the stage." Brandon gave him a warm smile, then glanced at me. "Right, babe?"

"Absolutely." I touched Charlie's forearm, planted a deep kiss on my gorgeous boy toy, then strutted up to the microphone.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Brandon



Watching Devin sing all night, even without his usual skirt, had been such a turn on and Charlie had ended up being a really nice guy. He did find a hookup for the night, so left before the last set with a guy who didn't look too different from me. Maybe I was his type? I don't know, but at least he'd made Devin feel okay about us hanging out together. After helping the band pack up their gear, I drove us back to my apartment in Devin's car. "Hey, babe, how are you feeling?" I wasn't sure when or how or even if this news video thing was going to affect him and I sure as hell didn't want to be the one to bring it up after all that had happened already today.

"Good." He twisted his head against the car's head rest, offering me a warm smile, then grabbed my hand in his and rested them on the center console. "I had a great time tonight. I'm glad Charlie ended up being cool."

"Yeah, me, too. He was fun to hang out with." I parked in an open spot at my apartment, then climbed out of the car. "You tired or wired?" I met him on the sidewalk, my gaze taking in the landscaping rocks and occasional palm or mesquite tree lining the path to my door. Short poles held globes of light every few feet.

"I'm in-between." He caught my hand in his and strolled beside me. "These gigs take a lot out of me, but they're so, I don't know, energizing."

"Yeah, I'll bet." I stopped at my door, then opened it for us and stepped inside. We were going to live together after graduation. My heart warmed. As I toed off my shoes, I said, "So, should we keep this place or find a new one when you

move in?” I peeked at him, also slipping out of his combat boots.

He wrinkled his nose. “I think we’ll be able to afford something a little bigger, don’t you?” Facing me, he grabbed my hands in both of his. “When is the lease up here?”

“Technically, in August, since I had to sign for a year.” I kissed his forehead, taking in his blue eyes outlined in the black liner. He was so stunning, no matter how he presented himself.

“So, that gives us the summer to find a place of our own. I don’t have much since I’m living in the dorm.” He perused my place. “Like, I basically have no furniture.”

“We can get better stuff if you want.” I squeezed his hands. This felt so damn right to be talking like this with him. I’d never lived with a partner before, but I was ready to take it on with him. Which also meant, I’d better get started on my own resume and job hunt. But with Kaiden already in the medical field and having such a diverse range of clients, it wouldn’t be too hard finding something through him.

“How about a beer? Maybe that’ll relax me a little.” With a smirk, he stepped to the couch and dropped into the center of it.

“Sure.” I ambled into my kitchen, grabbed two canned beers out of the refrigerator, then snicked them open. As I walked out to the couch, my gaze caught Devin’s head of brown hair and red bangs resting on the top of the couch cushions. Damn, had he fallen asleep on me?

A soft moan snuck out of him.

I rounded the couch and my breath caught. “Jesus, babe.”

He’d lowered his jeans and underwear to his thighs and slowly stroked his swollen cock with one hand and fondled his balls with the other. “Just sitting here, thinking about you...” His hooded gaze roamed over me. “Something about watching other people wanting to hit on you, but knowing you were mine and they couldn’t have you, sort of turned me on tonight. I think I had a semi almost all night.”

“Nuh-ah.” With a snort, I shook my head, then set the beers on the coffee table and crouched down between his knees. More beer that would probably be warm when we finally got to drink it. “Here, let me help you with that.” I fisted the base of his cock, then devoured it, lapping at the underside and flicking my tongue into his slit, tingling warmth swelling my own shaft.

He squirmed and gasped, slapping his hands onto the back of my head, then tangled his fingers in my hair. “Fuck, that feels good.” He rocked his hips, fucking my mouth.

Pumping faster over him, I opened my throat and sucked him all the way down. My cock ached in my jeans. Getting him off and watching him lose control was such a turn on, no matter how we did it.

His thighs quivered and his chest heaved with quick breaths, his moans raising in pitch, his hip thrusts growing erratic. “Oh, fuck, I’m close.” He shoved me off him and squeezed his cockhead. “Shit.”

“What are you doing?” I swiped at my mouth, staring at him, then rubbed over my erection, straining against my zipper. A shock of sensation shot through me. Damn, even that felt a little too good.

“I don’t want to come like that.” He shimmied his jeans down and off his legs, then shucked his shirt across the room, the silver necklaces dangling across his chest. “Take off your clothes and come here.” Wagging his fingers at me, he lay across the couch on his back.

“Okay.” I stood up and did as he asked, leaving my clothes in a pile on the floor, my hard shaft lifting up to my stomach. This might be the first time he was directing things. I liked it. With a smirk tugging my lips, I said, “Now what?”

“Go get the lube and come back.” He licked his fingers, then ran them up and down his shaft, arching his back and hissing.

“Sure.” I raced into my bedroom, grabbed the lube from the nightstand, then came back out. “And?”

“Lube yourself up. I want to see you jerk off a little bit.” His eyes grew darker as he continued teasing himself.

Standing next to him on the couch, I squirted the lube out, then fisted my solid cock and jerked. Sensation shivered up my spine as my abs spasmed. I slowed my hand, swirling my palm over the tip. There was no way I was going to last if I’d kept that up.

He skimmed his teeth over his lower lip, fixated on me. “Okay, now put some lube on me and lie on top of me.”

“Can I ask what you have in mind?” I spread lube on his cock, watching his face tense, then climbed over him and came down, our hot dicks pressing together. Propped on my elbows, I looked down at him, his lips red and swollen, darkened eyes focused on mine. “You’re so fucking gorgeous.” I brushed my mouth over his.

“When we first started dating, you said you liked to watch guys rub off on each other. Rub off on me.” He dug his fingers into my ass, then rutted against me, our cocks slipping against each other.

“Oh, fuck.” I dropped my head into his neck, the feel of his slick, hot shaft sending pleasure shuddering through my body. I couldn’t believe we’d never done this when considering everything else we’d done. I gasped against the soft skin of his neck, then nibbled.

“Pinch me. Pinch my nipples, babe.” He groaned and thrust harder into me.

Biting and licking at his neck, I dropped a hand down to rub and knead his nipple.

He arched his back, his mouth dropping open, face tensing. “Fuck, coming, going to come. Keep doing it.”

With a hard pinch to his nipple, hot wetness splashed between us. A surge of sensation tightened my balls and goosebumps broke out over my skin. I gasped as each contraction wracked my body, spilling my release over his, again and again, our bodies struggling to keep it going.

As it slowed, he said, “Holy shit. That was hot.” He chuckled against the side of my head. “We didn’t even need any toys.” Wrapping his arms around me, he kissed my cheek. “*You* are my toy. My boy toy.”

Slowly, I lifted my head and gazed into his face. “That pet name is not going to stick.” With a soft grin I skimmed my knuckles over his cheek. Damn, Axel.

“Oh really, and what are you, the keeper of the pet names?” He arched a brow.

“Yes, yes I am.” I rubbed my nose on his. It was time to pull out all the stops. “If you call me boy toy, then I get to call you dirty Devin.”

“What?” He dropped his mouth open, then planted a quick kiss on my lips. “I guess it’s kind of true. We shouldn’t say that around your brother or, or...” His eyes grew wide. “Not outside of this apartment.” He tapped his finger on my nose.

“Of course. It’ll just be DD for short.” I sniggered. Oh, I had him now.

“Oh, my God. If you say that around Axel, please, please don’t tell him what it stands for.” Devin wrinkled his brows.

“Don’t worry, babe.” I placed a long, deep kiss over his lips. “Love you, now let’s get cleaned up and go to bed. You’ve got a big day tomorrow with the bakery and practice.”

He sighed. “That I do.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Devin



After singing in the practice room for the last hour, it was time to take a break. I breathed in deeply and set my microphone on the stand, then snuck a cough drop into my mouth.

“You’re sounding better and better all the time.” Caleb patted me on the back.

My gaze drew to Silas, tuning his guitar. Why I always wanted verification from him, I didn’t know. “What did you think about it this time?” We’d tried Numb by *Linkin Park*. Another one of Silas’ favorites and one that always hit way too close to home for me.

Silas shrugged. “It was good. Your voice needs to be a little more ragged on the chorus though.” He strummed a chord on his guitar.

“Okay, I’ll see what I can do,” I said with a nod. I had to figure how to get that screaming, singing sound down without wrecking my voice.

Axel set his guitar in his stand, then stepped to me and placed a hand on my shoulder. “Dude, it was great. You don’t have to sound just like Chester. You *can* do the song your way.” He tossed a look at Silas.

With a sly grin, Silas scoffed and waved him off.

My phone buzzed in my back pocket. I fished it out and held the display to my face.

Dad.

My heart lurched. My throat went dry even with the cough drop. “Holy fuck.” I stared at the display. What if I didn’t

answer the call?

“What’s the matter?” Axel guided me down the hallway and into the kitchen as the phone went to voicemail.

“N-nothing.” I started to stuff the phone back into my pocket. Maybe he’d given up or would just leave a voicemail. The buzzing started up again. “A-axel, uh, can you um, please get ahold of Brandon for me? Tell him to uh, come over.” I knew what this was about. I could *feel* it. “I need to take this call.” I strode out the patio doors into the green yard, the sun setting over the trees throwing out splashes of red and yellow. A faint breeze caught the leaves, fluttering them. Funny how everything seemed too real, right now, at this moment. With my hand shaking, I held the phone to my ear and swallowed hard. “D-dad?”

“Devin.”

No hello, just my name said like a dirty word. “Uh, yeah?” I rubbed my forehead, then as my knees wobbled, sat in an iron chair at the patio table.

“You almost killed her.”

“Wh-what?” I blinked a few times. “Killed who? What are you—”

“We saw you on TV. They said you were a hero. You were wearing a skirt, like some girl. You have a boyfriend? *A boyfriend?* Devin, tell me it’s all a joke. Tell me that school hasn’t turned you into a skirt-wearing faggot.”

I bent over the chair, the air rushing from my lungs, my vision clouding. “I’m not a, a faggot, Dad.” My breath hitched. I blinked and hot tears tumbled down my cheeks. They knew. They fucking knew.

“Devin? What the fuck? Who is that?” Axel sped to my side and crouched down, his brows knitting together.

“You need to get up here now. Your mother had a seizure after what she saw. She’s in the hospital. Do you hear me? You almost killed her and she’s still asking to see you.”

I gave a stilted nod. “O-okay, Dad. I-I’ll come home.” I attempted to end the call, but my hand shook over the phone.

Axel yanked the phone out of my hand and ended the call, then tossed it on the table. “Holy fuck, Devin, what the hell was that?” He grabbed both my hands, his hard gaze locking onto mine.

“M-my dad. I have to go home. I-I almost killed my mom.” A sob burst from my throat. I glanced around the yard. It was too green, the chirping of the birds hurt my ears, the breeze itched on my skin.

“I thought your mom was in Page? How the hell could you have—” His eyes widened. “Fuck, the news footage?”

“No, no, no, no, no...” With a violent shake of my head, I tore my hands from his grasp. I had to correct this right now. I had to save my mom’s life. I jumped from the chair and stormed through the sliding glass doors into the kitchen, then popped drawers open, one by one.

“Devin, dude, what are you looking for?” Silas stood by the refrigerator, sipping a bottled water.

“Scissors.” They gleamed in an open drawer, and I snatched them up, yanking my bangs out. If I could go back to normal, she’d be okay. I opened the blades.

“Silas, get those things away from him!” Axel stomped into the kitchen.

“Fuck.” Silas tossed his water and snatched the scissors, then hugged me from behind, holding my arms to my sides. “What the fuck is going on?”

“No, stop it,” I screamed, flinging my body in his hold. “I need to get rid of it, all of it. I have to save her life.”

Caleb, Milo, and Gabe stood at the edge of the hallway, staring at me, jaws dropped open.

“Are you fucking crazy?” Silas fought with me, holding me with a steel grip.

“Get him on the floor. I called Brandon. He should be here any minute.” Through gritted teeth, Axel spat out, “His parents

saw the news footage of the accident and his father called him a skirt-wearing faggot. That *asshole*. I heard it through the phone.” Axel strode out of the room.

All of them wrestled me down to the cool, tile floor, pressing my cheek against it.

“Sorry, dude, but we’re not going to let you hurt yourself. No fucking way,” Caleb said.

“I’m not going to hurt myself.” My voice cracked. “I just need...I need...” As my body relaxed, numbness took hold of me, and everything dimmed. “I need to save her life.” Funny how easy it was to save a stranger. But my own mother? I’d almost killed her. I broke her fucking heart. My eyes stung and droplets fell over the bridge of my nose.

Slowly, the pressure on my body lifted. Voices floated over me.

“Is he okay?” Caleb asked.

“I think so.” Milo said. “Maybe he just needs a moment after all that.”

“Dude, he’s not okay. Look at him.” Silas growled.

“Where is he?”

Brandon? I attempted to push up off the floor.

“Oh, babe, I’m so sorry.” Brandon hauled me off the floor and yanked me to his chest, rocking me. He wiped my cheek with his thumb and kissed my head.

“Let’s give them some space,” Axel gathered everyone and moved them down the hallway.

As a damn broke inside me, I clutched at Brandon’s t-shirt. My chest heaved with sobs, and I curled up into his lap and wept.

He shushed me, rubbing my back, kissing my face.

With him at my side, I could be me. I *was* me. I was accepted. I was safe. After a few minutes, I calmed and took a cleansing breath. “Bran, I love you.”

“I love you, too, babe.” He sniffled and held my head to his chest under his chin. “Axel told me what happened. Why did you take the scissors, babe?” He lifted my bangs off my forehead, pinning them to the top of my head.

“I-I wanted to cut it out. The red. I thought if I could cut it out, then I could, could go home and look normal and save my mother’s life.” I furrowed my brows. I didn’t think I was making any sense. But somehow, it made sense to me.

“How is that going to save her life?” He kissed my forehead, rubbing my back.

“If, if she thinks I’m normal and straight, I can tell her it was...” What the hell excuse did I have? It wasn’t Halloween. I pressed my lips together. “I could tell her we were at a costume party. It was all pretend.” I darted my gaze up to his.

With his brows creasing, a tear hovered on his lashes and wet trails glistened on his cheeks. He brushed his hand down the back of my hair. “Oh, babe, we can’t do that. They know what’s going on. Isn’t it time you told them? Isn’t it time you let them see the real you?”

My vision hazed and my lips bowed down. “B-but my mom —”

“Won’t it be nice for her to see the wonderful person you’ve become? The general manager of a bakery. The lead singer of an awesome band. My God, Devin, she doesn’t know any of this, does she?” His gaze searched my face. “She doesn’t know that her son is loved and accepted. Not just by me, but by so many people. We all love and accept you, Devin, the real you.” He blinked and a tear meandered down his cheek. “She deserves to *know* you, how beautiful and smart and caring and loving you are. And you deserve to be yourself.”

I swallowed a lump climbing up my throat. “Yeah, but, but what about my dad?”

“I won’t let him touch you.” He thinned his lips into a hard line. “We’ll go up there together. Hell, we can bring Kaiden and Jaime if we have to.”

“Or me.” Axel peeked his head round the corner.

“Dude, I’m a way better fighter than Axel is.” Silas stepped out from behind Axel. “I’ll go.”

“Bite me.” Axel crossed his arms over his chest and tossed a glare at Silas.

“Oh, are we headed up to Page?” Milo ambled out, the corners of his lips twitching with an almost smile.

“Maybe there’s a bar we can get a gig at.” Gabe appeared behind Milo.

“Dudes, really?” Caleb shook his head, then came down on tucked legs beside Brandon and me. “Hey, this is your chance. I know it’s scary, but it will be worth it. Believe me.”

“Remember what my mom said?” Brandon kissed my cheek. “Your mom will always love you, no matter what.” He pinched his lips. “Your dad will have to just accept it. Who you are is not something he can decide for you.”

I looked at each of them in turn. They all cared about me, so much so they were all willing to go to Page and take on Dad. I had all of them behind me and knowing that gave me strength. I straightened my shoulders, then stood up along with Brandon and Caleb. “Guys, thank you all for being here for me. I guess I have to go up to Page and see my mom.” I edged into Brandon’s side, dropping my head on his shoulder. “You’ll go with me, right, babe?”

Brandon hooked an arm around my waist. “Of course, I already told you that. When do you want to leave?”

“Maybe in the morning? I have to get the next few days off at the bakery.” I faced him. Would my dad even let me into the house, or would we need a hotel room? There were so many questions tumbling through my head. At least I didn’t have any schoolwork to get through.

“Babe, I think we should talk to Dana and Nate. Remember what Jaime said about Dana’s dad?” He studied me.

I nodded. “Yeah, maybe I’ll call, and we can stop by after the bakery closes tonight.”

Pressing his palm to my cheek, he said, “Sure. In the meantime, we’ll get packed for our trip so we’re ready to go in the morning.” He kissed my forehead. “I’ll take care of everything.”

As Brandon drove me to my dorm, I sighed and held my phone to my face. I really didn’t want to leave Nate and Dana hanging for the next few days. I called Nate’s cell, and the phone rang a few times, then clicked.

“Hey, Dev, what’s up?” Shuffling sounded through the phone.

“I uh...” I glanced at Brandon, and he squeezed my hand, resting on my thigh. “I have a family emergency and my mom’s in the hospital up in Page.”

“Oh no, I’m sorry, Dev. Was she in an accident or something?” Nate asked.

“No, well, I don’t know exactly. She had a seizure.” Because I broke her heart. My chest ached and my vision clouded. I blinked the tears back. “C-can I come in and talk to you and Dana after the bakery closes tonight? I’m not out to them and—”

“Yes. We’ll get everything closed up by eight. With spring break, it hasn’t been as busy as usual anyways. Come in the back door.” Nate drew a deep breath. “See you soon.”

“Yeah, see you.” I hung up the phone. “Okay, so eight o’clock we need to be at the bakery.”

“You got this, babe. We’re all here for you.” Brandon turned his white Hyundai Elantra into the parking lot. “By the way, we’re taking my car up there. It’s newer.” He flashed me a smile.

“Sure.” I unbuckled my seatbelt. I was in no mood to argue, and he was right. “Just so you know, we probably should make some hotel reservations.” Had I really just admitted that?

“Okay, done.” He climbed out of the car.

Later that evening, I stepped through the heavy metal door at the back of the bakery with Brandon following. The back of

the bakery was all cleaned up, stainless steel tables gleaming and the giant mixer all shiny in the glow of the store's nightlights. Grabbing Brandon's hand, I led him through the doorway to the front of the store and past the front counter.

"Oh, good, you're here." Nate stood at a green, velvet couch and ran his palms over the thighs of his skinny jeans. "We have some of those rainbow cupcakes you like so much." He held his hand out to a plate filled with cupcakes on the coffee table. Bottled waters rested beside them.

Dana shifted in the center of the couch, then stood up. "Dev, are you okay?" He glanced at Nate, then focused on me. "You don't look so good."

"I'm, I'm..." My voice cracked and I blew out a long breath. I didn't want to break down in front of my bosses. But they'd become friends, too, hadn't they? I stopped at them and hung my head.

"It's been a big day. His folks saw the news footage of us saving that woman from the burning car down the street." Brandon wrapped an arm around my shoulders. "Let's sit down, babe." He guided me into a red couch that faced the green one, then opened a water bottle and placed it on the table in front of me.

Nate raised his brows. "Oh, shit."

Dana and Nate dropped down into their green couch again, sitting on the edge, both focused on me.

"So, what do your parents know?" Dana rubbed his chin.

"Nothing. They don't know where I work, or that I'm in a band, or, or that I have red hair and painted fingernails and, and that I'm gender fluid and that I have a boyfriend." I peeked at Dana, my gaze growing blurry. If I could only stop with the water works. "Or that I wear skirts."

"I think they might know that now." Brandon huffed, his attention shifting to Dana. "They saw the footage and his dad called him a skirt-wearing faggot."

"Oh, the *other* f-bomb. Nice." With a grimace, Dana shook his head, resting his elbows on his thighs. "My dad used to

throw that word around like he owned it. It really sucks to hear that directed at you, especially from someone who's supposed to love and protect you."

"Yeah, it does." I wrestled my fingers together in my lap, keeping my head down. They didn't need to see my lip trembling.

"So, what changed, Dana?" Brandon pulled me into his side. "I mean, he's okay with you and Nate now, right?"

With a deep inhale, Dana glanced at Nate. "Well, I dated this douchebag a while back and that's really when my dad got bad." He huffed a laugh. "Just when I needed him, he became more of an ass to me. But I think he thought all gay men were like that, lying jerks. I've no idea why." He shook his head. "Then, and granted this took years and years, he came around a little bit. We just didn't talk about it." He clapped a hand to Nate's shoulder. "But the first time he met Nate, my dad shook him up pretty bad with some of his shit, but Nate stuck it out and showed him how much he loved me and that he could be trusted." He hugged Nate into his side. "I mean, what's not to love about this guy?"

Nate planted his hand on Dana's thigh. "Yeah, it was scary, but I knew what I was getting into. Do you know what you're getting into?"

"Not really. He blames me for my mom's seizure. He said the news footage caused it. He said I almost killed her." My breath hitched and I fisted my hands.

"Babe, you can't cause someone to have a seizure. Didn't you say there was some medical thing going on with her after she had your brother?" Brandon wrinkled his forehead.

"Yeah, but she never had a seizure before." I threw a glare at Brandon. Didn't he understand? "I broke her heart, Bran. I did." I gritted my teeth, willing the tears not to fall.

Brandon flinched and his gaze softened. "I'm sorry, I guess I don't know what to say." He frowned.

"Devin, you did not give her a seizure. Something else is going on there. You can't listen to someone like that." Dana

stood up, then dropped in next to me, grabbing both of my hands and shaking them. “Look at me.”

I forced my gaze to his, my chest throbbing. I blinked and a traitorous tear escaped down my cheek. “I broke her heart.”

“You don’t know that. That’s the fucked up voice in your head telling you that. The one that was put there by hearing years of prejudiced bullshit and a religion that doesn’t accept you. You need to tell that voice to shut the fuck up. You aren’t going to listen to that anymore. Do you hear me?” He glared at me, then scowled. “Fuck, Dev, you’re such a great guy. Don’t do this to yourself. Be proud of you who are. People find out pretty quick that if they can’t knock you down, they should quit trying. Show him he can’t knock you down.” He glanced at Brandon. “And you, too, Brandon.”

“Yeah.” Brandon straightened his shoulders.

The pain in my chest lessened a little. “Okay, so—”

“So, tell that voice to shut the fuck up.” Dana squeezed my hands. “Say it with me. Voice, shut the fuck up.”

“Voice, shut the fuck up.” My lips twitched at the corners. This was stupid, but somehow Dana’s brand of therapy was making me feel better.

“Voice, shut the fuck up. One more time.” Dana fixated on me.

“Voice, shut the fuck up.” I choked out a chuckle. “Damn it, Dana, you’re kind of weird, but I think this is working.”

“That’s my Dana.” With a grin, Nate slapped his hands to his thighs and stood up. “Are you feeling better?”

“I am.” I pulled my hands out of Dana’s and faced Brandon. “I’m sorry, babe. You’re the last one I should be snapping at.” I threw my arms over his shoulders and hugged him. “I love you and I know you’re going to be there for me.”

“Damn right I am. Even if you snap at me.” He kissed the side of my head. “I’ll just remind you what to tell that voice.”

The next morning, we were up early and on the road. Brandon had spooned me so tightly last night, there were times it was hard to breath. I glanced at him, driving us up highway eighty-nine in his car. He was being so careful, so watchful of me, treating me like I was made of glass. We'd just stopped for lunch in Flagstaff at a McDonald's drive-through and hadn't talked much. Brandon was probably afraid of saying the wrong thing and I wasn't in the mood for small talk. All I wanted to know was if Mom was going to be okay. Dad, well...he was going to be Dad.

"Hey, babe, you need anything?" Brandon threw a glance my way, then focused on the road. "Got to pee or need a drink or anything?" He lifted his brows.

"No, I'm good." I pulled my drink out of the center console cup holder. "I still have some soda left over after our McDs run." I sipped it from the straw poking out of the lid.

The background music shut off, interrupted by the phone ringing over the speakers in the car. The display on the dash read, *Kaiden*. "I'm going to take this, okay?"

"Yeah, of course." I shifted in my seat, setting the side of my head against the cool window, watching the tall pines give way to scrubby pinions and grasses on the side of the road.

Brandon clicked a button on his steering wheel. "Hey, bro, you're on the speakers in my car."

"Yeah, I heard you were headed up to Page today. Me and Jaime stopped in the bakery this morning." Kaiden let out a long breath. "Which, Jaime's here, too, on speaker. Can we help? Do you need anything? Maybe to talk?"

I straightened in my seat, tossing a look at Brandon.

"I uh, babe, what do you think?" Brandon squeezed my thigh.

"Uh, yeah." I nodded. I didn't know what there was to talk about anymore, but maybe Brandon needed to hear something from his brother. "Bran, go ahead."

"Okay." Brandon twisted his lips. "Kaiden, what could cause a person to have a seizure? I mean can stress cause

something like that?”

With a quick inhale, Kaiden said, “Well, there are lots of things. I don’t think stress itself could cause that, but maybe some underlying condition could allow a traumatic event to bring one on.”

My chest squeezed and I rubbed my palm across it, my gaze darting across the car. I needed air. I cracked the window open. The wind whistled over our heads.

“Kaiden.” Jaime sounded like he was scowling into the phone. “That does not mean that Devin caused his mother to have a seizure. It was probably a pure coincidence.”

“Babe?” With his forehead wrinkling, Brandon fingered the window button on his door panel, shutting my window. “You okay?”

“I’m, I’m fine.” I sank into my seat. I just wanted to disappear under the dash somewhere. Could I make myself small enough?

“I’m sorry, Devin, I didn’t mean that to come out the way it did. There has to be something else going on with her, and Jaime’s right. I’m sure it wasn’t the footage that caused it. You can’t listen to a man that would use that sort of slur on his own son.” Kaiden sighed. “Is she still in the hospital?”

“I-I don’t know. I haven’t talked to my dad since yesterday and I don’t want to.” I pulled my knees up to my chest and wrapped my arms around them. Come to think of it, I had no idea if we should go to the house, the hotel, or the hospital when we got into town.

“We can call the hospital and ask if she’s still there, right, Kaiden?” With his brows creased, Brandon peeked at me.

“Yes, of course. He’s family, so they should tell him if she’s still there,” Kaiden said, “Maybe you can ask to speak with her doctor before you get there and find out what’s going on. I mean, I don’t know what sort of consent she’s given the hospital, but it’s worth a shot.”

“Kaiden, can you be on call in case we need some medical advice? I mean, I know you’re not a doctor, but you are in the

medical field and work with a lot of docs and patients.”
Brandon pursed his lips. “I know you’ve seen a lot of things.”

“Yes, of course. If you need anything, anything at all, just call me,” Kaiden said. “Devin, listen to what Dana told you last night. Be proud to be you.”

In a soft voice, I said, “I know.” The corners of my eyes stung, and I turned my head to the window. How proud would I be when I said goodbye to my mother for the last time? How proud would I be when she looked at me with disgust in her eyes? I pressed my forehead to a knee and clenched my jaw. I didn’t know that. Remember what Dana had said. *Voice, shut the fuck up.* I drew a ragged breath.

“Anyways, uh, guys, we gotta go.” Brandon squeezed my thigh and mouthed, *you okay?*

Turning my head, I nodded at him. Would the day come when he didn’t have to ask me that every five minutes?

“Okay, well, please let us know what happens. We’re here if you need us,” Kaiden said.

“Yeah, thanks guys. Bye.” Brandon steered the car around a slower bend.

“Bye,” Jaime and Kaiden said, then the background music started up.

“Babe, call the hospital and see what’s going on. See if you can get any info on her, okay?” Brandon dipped his head, studying me for a second. “Can you do that?”

“Yeah.” I dropped my feet to the carpeted floorboards and fished my phone out of the front pocket of my jeans. At least this gave me something to do. I searched for the number for Banner Health Hospital in Page, the only one I knew up there, then clicked on the number that came up. As I held the phone to my ear, it rang once, then a menu of options started up. I clicked on the admissions option.

“Page Hospital, admissions, can I help you?” A woman asked.

“Uh, yeah, my uh, my mother is there, I think. Well, she *was* there. I need to find out if she still is.” I leaned forward in my seat, picking at the hem of my gray sweatshirt.

“Can you tell me her name, hun?”

“It’s uh, it’s Amy Taylor.” I furrowed my brows. It was always weird calling my mom by her real name. She was just Mom to me.

“Do you have a birthdate for her to confirm?” she asked.

“Yeah, it’s May 20th, 1979.” I winced. Did I get the year right? Who remembered the year their parent was born?

“Okay, yes, I see that she was admitted on Friday and she’s still here. Was there anything else I could do for you?” she asked.

Friday... So the day of the car accident? How could they have seen the footage so early? It wouldn’t have aired until Saturday. Heat flooded my chest. My fucking dad was lying. That son of a bitch. “Yes, ma’am, can I speak with her doctor? I’m on my way up there from Phoenix to see her and I’d like to get an update on her condition.”

“Let me just check her HIPAA forms,” the woman said, and the ticking of typing on a keyboard sounded through the phone. “Are you Devin?”

“I am.” I blew out a breath, the tightness in my chest relaxing. God, I hope she listed me on that damn form.

“I’ll have the doctor call you as soon as he can, all right? Your mother has you listed on the forms, along with a Stuart Taylor and her husband, Daniel,” she said.

“Thank you.” I dropped back into my seat, my head hitting the headrest. Maybe it really would be all right. My heart jolted. Or maybe she filled the forms out before she knew and now... Don’t think that way.

“Is there anything else?” she asked.

“No, thank you. Goodbye.” I hung up the phone and twisted my head, my gaze flickering to Brandon’s.

“Well?” The edges of his mouth twitched.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Brandon



I stared at Devin a moment, before focusing back on the road. He'd changed his appearance as best he could before we'd left, wearing a hooded sweatshirt and old, faded jeans. But the red in his hair had lightened to almost pink and he still had the silver studs in his ears and the black nails I'd painted on him. A knot balled up in my gut. Something in that phone call had completely changed his demeanor. "What happened? What did they say?"

"The woman at admissions said my mom was admitted *Friday*." He scoffed. "There's no fucking way that news footage caused her seizure. She wouldn't have seen it yet." He fisted his hands on his thighs and growled. "My fucking father is a lying, no good—"

"Easy, babe." Reaching across the car, I squeezed his fist. Holy shit, I'd never seen him pissed off like this. "Let's just focus on making it there and getting to the bottom of this mess, okay?" I couldn't let him go into the hospital angry. That wasn't going to help his mother for sure. "Are they going to let the doc call you?"

"Yeah, she listed all of us on her HIPAA forms." He glared out the window, puffing air out of his nose.

I gave his hand a second squeeze, and it relaxed in my grip. "Okay, so hopefully they'll call us before we get there, and we can go in being ahead of this game." I didn't want to say it, but at this point, I wasn't sure I'd trust anything that came out of his dad's mouth. This was really going to suck. I'd be meeting them for the first time in the middle of whatever family crisis was going on. Would I end up not liking them? Would they not

like me? I was pretty sure his dad wasn't going to want anything to do with me already.

"Yeah." He closed his eyes, tilting his body toward the door and resting his head on the window.

"Babe? I love you. We got this." With a frown, I focused on the car in front of us. I didn't know what else to tell him.

"I'm sorry, Bran. I love you, too." He threw his arms around my neck and planted a kiss on my cheek. "I don't know where I'd be without you. I love you so much." He went back to resting against the door. "I just need to close my eyes for a while." He shut his eyes.

Whatever he needed. I just had to get us there.

After pulling up into the hospital parking lot, I parked the car and we both climbed out. It was a lot cooler up here and I buttoned my plaid, hooded fleece over my chest, then let my gaze wander over the front of the squarish building, painted with white and clay-colored sections. A long metal awning jutted out over the glass doors of the front entrance in a curve, like they'd updated the place to look more modern. The place was tiny compared to the hospitals in the valley. But then, not many people lived up here. As I met Devin on the sidewalk, I grabbed his hand.

"I don't have any idea what I'm going to say." He pursed his lips, striding with a purpose beside me.

"Then let's let them speak first." I held a door open for him, then followed him inside. The circular theme of the front awning had been continued inside with a round desk area in light woods and deep-blue glass, centering a large room. We walked up to a woman seated behind the desk.

"Hi, my name is Devin Taylor and I'm here to see my mother, Amy Taylor. I was told she's been admitted here." Devin's face was blank.

"Oh, yes, I think I spoke to you on the phone a few hours ago. Did Dr. Allen get ahold of you?" She typed on her keyboard, focused on her monitor.

"No, I didn't hear from him." Devin's jaw muscle bulged.

“I’m sorry. He must have been busy today.” Her attention shifted to him. “She’s in room one-thirteen, just down the hallway there.” She pointed behind her.

“Thanks.” Stealing a peek at me, Devin squeezed my hand.

I led him away from the desk and faced him, my heart aching for him. “Are you ready for this?” Was *I* even ready for this? I had to be. He’d need me.

“No, but I don’t have a choice.” He wrapped his arms around my waist. “Just...hold me for a minute.”

“Sure.” I draped my arms over his shoulders and held his head to my chest, then kissed his hair. “I got you, babe. No matter what happens when we get in there, I’ll be right here.”

He sniffled. “What if my mom never wants to see me again?”

“If she tells you that today, don’t believe it. Okay? She *will* want to see you again.” I held him closer and thought through everything I’d read about Mormonism and their stance on the queer community. Maybe there was something I could use from her own church teachings to sway her if she went there with him. My heart pattered in my chest.

He released me, then hung his head. “Let’s go.” As we strolled down the hallway, he held our entwined hands up. “I’m not going to deny a thing, by the way. I’ve decided you all are right.” He glanced at me. “At first I was going to come up with some lie, but fuck that.” His gaze locked to mine. “I love you and I am who I am and there is no shame in that.” He stopped in front of her room.

“Okay, babe. I’m with you.” I shook our hands between us, then inhaled a deep breath. “Here goes nothing.”

He guided me into the room and stopped. “Mom?” His voice cracked.

I took in a smallish woman in the hospital bed, surrounded by beeping equipment on the beige wall behind her and an IV bag hanging from a metal pole. Her brown hair was the color of Devin’s and long enough to fall below her shoulders. Her pale blue eyes were sunken.

She stared at us a moment, then her gaze shifted to our hands, and she frowned, her eyes growing glassy. “Where’s your father?” She swiveled her head away from us, appearing to stare out a wall of windows on the other side of the room with a little courtyard of landscaping rock and new plants outside it. It looked so calm out there, compared to the storm approaching inside the room.

“I, I don’t know. I didn’t see him.” He tugged his hand out of mine and sped to her side, then dropped down on his knees, clutching at her bare arm resting over the crumpled sheets and blanket. “I’m sorry, Mom. Please, I’m so sorry.” A sob broke free from him.

Her breath hitched and she covered her mouth with her hand. “Oh, Devin.” When she turned her head, tears glistened on her cheeks.

I stood there, watching them both, my own heart breaking for them. What else could I do? This was their moment.

“I-I didn’t want to break your heart, I really didn’t. I don’t know what to do. B-but I’m not the person you think I am. I-I can’t be Mormon anymore. I can’t be your son, can I.” He wept at the bedside, his forehead dropping to her arm.

She wept with him a moment, covering her face with her hand.

I stepped toward them, then placed a hand on Devin’s shaking shoulder. There was nothing for me to say, was there? But I couldn’t just watch this anymore. “Hey, babe.” With a glance at his mother, I knelt beside him and brushed my hand down the back of his head, shushing him.

She drew a deep breath, then said, “You are what God made you, and you will always be my son.” She snuck a peek at me. “And you are?”

“I’m, I’m Brandon, ma’am. I’m Devin’s boyfriend and I love him very much. He’s, he’s everything to me.” My heart leapt into my throat. Holy shit, how did such a small woman command such attention, even from a hospital bed?

Sniffing, Devin lifted his head.

I jumped to the cabinet and sink area of the room and grabbed tissues for them both, then handed them out. At least I could do this for them.

Devin blew his nose, stuffed the tissue into his front pocket, then stood up. “Mom, I’m not actually gay. I’m bisexual or... something. I’m also not totally male.” His gaze flicked to hers.

“What does that mean exactly?” She furrowed her brows.

“I think I’m gender fluid, or maybe nonbinary.” He glanced at me. “I sort of go back and forth, depending on the situation or how I’m feeling. I’ve been expressing myself in some female ways lately, I don’t know...”

“Like when you saved that woman from the car?” Her brows rose.

“Yeah, like that night.” He snatched my hand. “We, Brandon and I, were out at a gay bar that my, oh shoot.” He huffed. “I’m in a rock band now, too.”

“He’s a great singer. You should hear him.” I held tightly to his hand in silent support.

“I have heard him sing, in our church choir. He is amazing.” Her gaze softened. “Devin, honey, why didn’t you say anything? Is this why you weren’t coming home?”

Dropping his head, he said, “I was scared.”

She drew a deep breath, her chest raising under the blue hospital gown. “Because of the church?”

“Well, yeah.” He placed his hand over hers. “I’ll be excommunicated, and you wanted me to go on a mission.”

She twisted her hand, wrapping her fingers around his. “You *will* be excommunicated, but that won’t stop me from loving you.” She pressed her lips together. “You never wanted to go on a mission anyways. I knew that the moment you started applying for scholarships for ASU.” She huffed. “Now I know why. You were trying to get away from us.”

His gaze met hers, his forehead wrinkling. “I’m sorry.”

An older man with graying hair and fiery brown eyes stomped into the room. “What’s all this BS? You’re not male? Look at you, you’re not a woman. You’ve got a, a—”

“Daniel!” Amy lurched up in her bed, glaring at her husband.

Devin cowered and I shoved him behind me, facing his father. “Don’t.” I held my palms out to him. If he came at Devin, I had no problem taking him down. I wasn’t huge, but I was bigger than this guy.

“Who the hell are you?” Daniel glared at me, sizing me up, planting his hands on his hips. “You the other faggot he was with in that video?”

“Sir, I’ll ask you once not to use that sort of language.” I pinched my lips, my hands fisting at my sides. Devin’s chest trembled against my back. This asshole was scaring the shit out of my baby. I wasn’t having that.

Daniel flicked at his nose, like a prize fighter. “Really, and what do you think you’re going to do about it?”

“Try me.” I puffed out my chest. “Look, I know you’re the father of the man I love, but I don’t care if you hate me for protecting your son from you.” What did I just say? Did it make sense?

Daniel stepped back a moment, shaking his head and glancing around the room, as if trying to process my words. “You love my son?” His hardened gaze found mine.

“I do.” I crossed my arms over my chest. Had I gotten through to him somehow?

Shaking a finger at me, Daniel shouted, “You’re an abomination, both of you. What have you done to my son?”

“Sir, you’ll need to leave.” A beefy male nurse in vibrant scrubs entered the room with two security guards in dark blue uniforms.

“Fine, I’ll leave. But I want those two gone in an hour.” Daniel stomped out of the room with the guards and nurse following him.

I twisted to Devin and pulled him into my chest. His body shook and so did mine. “Babe, you okay?” That was not what I expected. I mean, I expected the worst, but not like that. Holy shit.

“Uh, I-I think so.” He breathed deeply.

“I called the nurses in.” Amy held up the call button for the nurse’s station. “I don’t know what’s gotten into him. Ever since he saw that news footage, he’s been like a madman.”

Devin turned to face his mother. “Mom, we have a lot to talk about.”

I grabbed a chair from the corner of the room and set it next to her bedside, my insides settling. “Here, sit and talk. I’ll be right here, guarding the door.” At least we could count on the hospital staff and Amy. Chewing my thumbnail, I watched Devin sit in the chair and carefully take his mother’s hand.

“Mom, let’s talk about why you’re in here first.” He glanced at me. “The doc was supposed to call me, but I still haven’t heard from him.”

“Oh, well last week I was doing a lot of work in the yard, spring, you know.” She sighed, lying her head back against the pillow. “I thought I’d exhausted myself and went inside to lie down, but when I woke up, I had a terrible fever.”

I stepped closer to them. I needed to hear all of this, so I could consult Kaiden later if I needed to.

“Okay.” He furrowed his brows. “Like how bad was it?”

“One-hundred five.” She shook her head, letting out a puff of air. “Your father took me into the emergency room here. I guess I was spouting gibberish, too.” She squeezed his hand. “Apparently, I have pneumonia. I didn’t even know it. I wasn’t even coughing that much.”

“Oh my God, Mom.” Devin looked over the bed and up to the monitors and the IV. “So, what did they do?”

“They gave me fluids and antibiotics and that seemed to help pretty quickly. Well, until I had the seizure the next day.” She pressed her lips into a thin line. “After seeing the two of

you on the news.” Her attention drifted to me. “Your father had just turned on the television in my room for me and there you both were.”

He dropped his head forward, freeing a long breath. “So, I did give you a seizure.”

I squeezed his shoulder. “Babe, there were underlying conditions, like Kaiden said.” My brother had been right. Devin didn’t need to take that on himself.

“Honey, there’s something you don’t know.” She huffed a breath. “I guess I’ve been keeping secrets, too.”

“What’s that?” His eyes glittered in the late afternoon sunshine streaming in from the windows into the courtyard.

“I have lupus. I was diagnosed with it after I had your brother.” She tilted her head on her pillow. “I guess some of the afterbirth didn’t clear and I got an infection. After we dealt with that, I got this rash on my face and the doctors told me I had lupus. It was never very bad, only flared up under stress.” She glanced at me, then focused on Devin. “I could never get pregnant after that. Your father and I tried, but…” Her gaze went far away.

His eyes grew wide. “What does that mean? Is it going to kill you? Are you going to die?” He blinked and tear rolled down his cheek.

“No, honey. As long as I manage it with my doctor, I should live a nice, long life.” She gave him a sad smile.

God, how my heart ached for him. I crouched down and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. This was another thing I was going to ask Kaiden about. Could I pull out my phone and run a Google search right there? No, not the right time. “Can lupus cause seizures?”

Her gaze flicked to mine. “Yes, it can with a flare up. So of course, the doctors are monitoring me pretty closely and making sure there’s nothing else. I’ve had all sorts of tests.” She sighed. “Really, I just want to go home.”

“And you shall.” A tall man with short, gray hair and blue eyes hiding behind black glasses entered the room, wearing

scrubs. “Is this your son?”

I stood, grabbing Devin’s hand, and pulling him up with me.

“I am.” Devin faced the man.

“I’m Dr. Allen.” He held out his hand.

Devin shook it.

“I’m sorry I haven’t called, but the nurses told me you were here.” He glanced at me. “And you’re the boyfriend?” He held his hand out to me.

“Yeah, how did you know that?” I shook his hand. Had we become the talk of the hospital with all the bullshit with Daniel? Heat filtered through my cheeks.

“You two are heroes. I saw you on the news.” Dr. Allen smiled at us in turn. “Devin, how should I address you?”

“Uh, what?” Devin stole a peek at me.

“Your pronouns.” Dr. Allen shifted his weight, keeping his gaze fixed on Devin.

“Oh, he, him.” Devin scratched the back of his neck, his gaze flicking to his mother and coming back. “I’m still sort of figuring myself out, but I don’t feel the need to change it at this point.”

Dr. Allen patted his arm. “Sure, it can take some time and even if you do think you have it figured out, things can change. I have a trans daughter. She’s my world.” His smile widened.

I placed my hand on the small of Devin’s back. So, even up here in Page, there were people who understood us. Maybe there was hope for Devin’s family yet.

“Anyhow.” Dr. Allen sucked in a breath and stepped to Amy’s bedside. “I’m releasing you with some medications. All the other tests were negative, no sign of any tumors lurking about, and the bloodwork is looking much better.”

“Oh, thank the Lord.” She held her hands in prayer over her chest for a moment, a faint smile ghosting over her lips.

“Will you be taking her home?” Dr. Allen faced us.

Devin dropped his mouth open. “Oh, uh, Mom, do you want us to take you home?”

She pursed her lips. “Yes. We’ll have to figure out what to do with your father.” She scowled.

“That was the man they removed from the room?” Dr. Allen lifted his brows.

“Yes.” Devin hung his head and wrung his hands.

With a head shake, Dr. Allen said, “That’s a tough situation. Don’t be afraid to call the police.” He huffed. “In the meantime, I’ll have your discharge papers done.” He patted Devin’s arm, then left the room.

Devin’s gaze met mine. “The police? I can’t do that to my dad.”

“I can.” Amy shifted in the bed, sitting up straighter and adjusting the IV line in her arm. “I’m not putting up with him treating you like that. It’s not what the Lord intended. As the good book says, *we are all children of God, deserving of each other’s kindness and compassion.*” She clenched her jaw. “What he’s doing to you is neither kind nor compassionate and I’ll have none of it.” She grumbled. “If only I wasn’t sick. He’d be hearing a lot more out of me.”

“Mom, you have no idea how surprised I am.” Devin’s lips curled into a soft smile, the first one since his father’s phone call.

“Well, I’ve had some time to sit here and think on all of this. I’m not giving up on you. I don’t know that I understand it all or how I feel about this pronoun situation, but I’m not giving up.” She slumped her shoulders. “Come sit on my bed and talk to me, honey.” She patted the mattress beside her thighs. “And you, come closer.” She offered me a gentle grin.

Devin hoisted himself up while I took a seat in the chair. I was taking a liking to this woman. I could see now why Devin had been so upset about breaking her heart. She was a good person.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Devin



Where to start after everything that had just happened? I held my hand out to Brandon and he grasped it, twining our fingers over the edge of the mattress. I didn't break her heart, well maybe for a little while, but she was healing from it. "What do you want to know?"

She quirked the corner of her mouth. "Let's start from the beginning. Did you always know you liked boys?"

I nodded. "Yeah, remember that black eye I got after that all night birthday party?" I dipped my head.

"Yes." She narrowed her eyes.

"Charlie punched me for trying to kiss him." I twisted my lips. I'd lied to her about that.

"So, you didn't fall out of a tree?" She shook her head, a grin creeping over her mouth. "I knew somebody punched you, but couldn't figure out why you didn't want to tell me." She pursed her lips. "He didn't bully you after that, did he?"

"No. He stayed away from me and never said a word to anyone, as far as I know." I toyed with a fold in the blanket with my free hand. "So, I do like girls, too. I mean, I find myself attracted to them, even went out with some while I was at ASU. But I never fell *in love* with them."

She tsked. "You didn't kiss any of them, did you?"

"Mom, I gave up on the Laws of Chastity a long time ago." I glanced at Brandon, watching us so intently. What was he thinking about all of this? He certainly wasn't going anywhere. Not with how he stood up to my dad. My heart bloomed with emotion for him. He was a keeper for sure.

“So, even if you weren’t...what should I call it? Bisexual, queer, what?” She arched a brow.

“Queer, Mom.” I gave her a gentle smile. She was trying.

“So even if you weren’t queer, you were straying from the church.” She released a heavy sigh. “I have to admit, I figured you were going to leave the church with the way you’d been behaving over the summer. You kept to yourself a lot. I had hoped that doing a mission would have brought you back, but I know now that you’re better off where you are.” She glanced at me. “Brandon, you’ve been taking good care of him. I see that. You’re a strong boy.”

“I have, ma’am.” Brandon smiled at her. “Like I said, I love him. I won’t let anyone hurt him.”

“Not even his own father.” She huffed, shaking her head. “I don’t understand why he’s being so awful.”

Because he was always awful. But I couldn’t say that to her. I slumped my shoulders. She saw a different side of him than I did. He’d always been harsh to me. Maybe he had always sensed my softer side and seen it as a weakness? I didn’t know.

“Tell me more about this gender thing. What does it all mean? Are you going to change your sex, like Dr. Allen’s daughter?” She worried her lower lip, studying me, as if seeing me for the first time.

“No, I’m not female. I’m somewhere in-between, I guess, or fluid.” God, how was I supposed to make her understand something I didn’t even understand myself yet? I let out a long breath. “I like make-up, not all the time, but sometimes. And I like to wear things that guys don’t usually wear, again, sometimes. And I don’t know.” I huffed.

“Amy, he is who he is. Maybe that’s all you need to know. He’s...” Brandon glanced at me as if looking for affirmation to keep going.

I nodded.

“It’s not all about his gender, it’s about him as a person. He’s loving and caring and a good person. He’s got this

persona onstage when he sings that draws in a huge crowd and I have to fight to keep men *and* women away from him.” He chuckled. “The bakery he works at is owned by two queer men who helped him, helped us, and they treat him like family,” he said. “He’s smart and everyone just loves him, just the way he is, no matter what he puts on his face or the clothes he wears.”

My eyes clouded. “Dang, babe. Thanks.” God, how I loved this man. With a grin, I brushed my hand down his cheek.

“Well, it’s obvious you love my son, and it sounds like he has good people around him down there in Tempe. I guess we can leave it at that for now.” She smiled at Brandon. “You’re a good kid, too, you know.”

His cheeks reddened. “Thanks, ma’am.”

“Amy.” She patted his shoulder.

“Amy.” He grinned at her.

“Mrs. Taylor? I have your discharge orders here.” An orderly entered the room with papers in her hand.

A little while later, Brandon drove the car up the driveway of my childhood home. It looked smaller to me now, the little white bungalow where I grew up with Stuart. The ash tree stood tall over the grass yard. I’d loved climbing in it when I was a kid. The wood on the front porch needed painting, but the shingles on the roof were a darker color than the last time I’d been home. “Mom, did you get a new roof?”

She twisted in the front seat to focus on me, her black sweatshirt almost hanging off a shoulder. “We did, about a month ago. That new job your father took on has done really well for us financially.”

“Oh.” I gave her a nod. Dad would be in there. My heart pounded in my chest. Would he start up another tirade? I watched Brandon stop the car and turn the engine off. If Dad did get nasty, Mom and Brandon would protect me from him, and Mom would call the police. It would be okay.

We all stepped out of the car and Brandon grabbed Mom’s purse and a bag from the hospital while I helped her up to the front porch, holding her arm.

The door sprang open. “What are you doing home? Why are you with *them*?” Dad pointed at me, then Brandon.

“Oh, hush, Daniel.” She threw him a fierce glare, then brushed by him, stepping onto the wooden floor and into the main room.

Dad snapped his brows up, staring at her, then followed her inside. “Amy, what’s going on? Have they brainwashed you?”

Brandon’s hand warmed around mine, then he leaned over and whispered in my ear, “I’ve got you, babe. Anything goes down and I’m here.” His gaze hardened as it locked onto my dad and he stepped in front of me, like a shield.

With a huff, Mom faced Dad. Jabbing at his chest, she said, “Listen to me. What you said to our son and his boyfriend was terrible. If you try to attack them again, I *will* call the police.”

“What?” Dad dropped his mouth open. “You wouldn’t.” He stole a peek and me and Brandon, winced, then refocused on her.

“Try me.” She pressed her lips into a thin line, staring him down.

“This is insane.” He flicked a hand at us, then stomped off into the kitchen. “I take it you’re better now?” The banging of cabinets sounded from behind the wall.

“I’m good enough. I’ll still need to rest.” She turned to us. “Devin and Brandon, you two have got to be hungry. How about ordering a pizza?” She ambled to the green sectional sofa and dropped into the well-worn corner of it, then rested her feet on a dark-wood trunk serving as a coffee table. “I’ve been craving a pizza. That hospital food is no good. They’d hardly let me have any salt.” She dropped her head against the back cushions, puffing a breath out of her nose.

Keeping my attention on the kitchen, I brought Brandon to the couch and sat down with him.

Brandon set her purse and the hospital bag on the coffee table.

“Yeah, pizza sounds great.” I slipped my phone out of the back pocket of my jeans. “*Pizza Hut?*” I asked, lifting the corner of my mouth. That was her favorite.

“Of course.” She leaned forward, grabbed the remote from the coffee table, then turned on a television resting on a dark wooden stand in the corner of the room. “There’s got to be a ball game on, right? How about some soccer?” She smiled at us.

I leaned into Brandon. “My mom likes to watch sports. Maybe even more than my dad.” I chuckled.

“Really?” With a glance at her, he arched a brow. “Amy, I’d love to watch some soccer with you.”

Dad walked out from the kitchen with a sandwich on a plate and a glass of milk. “I’ll be in the bedroom.” He scowled, then stomped off.

At least Dad wasn’t going to be an asshole and bother us. Slumping my shoulders, I asked, “Supreme okay?”

“Good with me, how about you, Brandon?” She asked.

“Sure.” Brandon sank back into the couch.

I ordered the pizza. “Do you two want something to drink? Water maybe?” I stood up, pulling my hooded sweatshirt over my jeans.

“We have soda, too, if you want that.” She watched the television.

“When did you start buying soda?” I stepped around the coffee table. Even though the church allowed it, Mom had always been pretty strict about caffeine, or so I thought.

“When you and your brother moved out.” She huffed out a laugh. “I didn’t buy it before because it rots your teeth and it’s too much sugar for a kid. Well, you’re not a kid anymore.”

“Oh.” With a chuckle, I strolled into Mom’s kitchen, the same one I grew up with, the same wooden cabinets and white appliances. “You ever going to remodel in here?” I grabbed up a few cans of Coke from the refrigerator, brought them out and handed one to Mom and one to Brandon.

“Why? The kitchen works just fine as it is.” She pulled her can open and sipped it. “Oh, this is good. It doesn’t hurt to have some soda once in a while and this is a special day.” She grinned at me as I dropped in beside Brandon again. “My son is home and he’s brought his partner.”

I snicked my can open and drank some soda, then glanced toward the hallway to the bedroom. “What are we going to do about Dad?” My chest stiffened. He wasn’t in our face anymore, but it was still uncomfortable. It didn’t surprise me a whole lot though. Hiding from a problem and letting Mom handle it was something he was pretty good at.

She leaned over and patted my knee. “Don’t you worry about him. I’ll make him come around.” She pursed her lips. “Well, even if he doesn’t come around, he still needs to treat you with respect and dignity.”

Hanging my head, I nodded. At least Mom was accepting me in her own way. “What about Stuart?” I swallowed hard. Was he going to be like Dad? I really didn’t want to lose him.

“Stuart.” She rubbed her chin. “I think we’ll keep this quiet with him and let him get through his mission before we tell him.” Her attention drew to me. “He calls every two weeks or so. I’m not even going to tell him I was in the hospital. I don’t want to give him a reason to stray and want to come home early.”

“Yeah, guess you’re right.” I toyed with the pull tab on my soda. That meant he wouldn’t know for another six months.

“I don’t think he’s going to care too much.” She sipped her soda.

“Yeah? Why is that?” Brandon shifted on the couch.

“One of his friends in high school came out as gay right before he left.” She cut her gaze from the game on the television to him. “He told me it wasn’t going to change their friendship.”

“I had no idea.” My heart warmed. So, my baby brother had grown up to be an open-minded person. Had I really distanced

myself from everyone to the point that I hadn't seen that coming? I hadn't even judged Mom's reaction correctly.

"Well, that's good, right, babe?" Brandon squeezed my hand and gave me a wide grin.

"It is." I drank some soda.

"Brandon, tell me about yourself. What are you studying, what is your family like, all that." She leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees, fixating on him.

"Oh, well, I'm going to school for speech pathology. I uh, I had a lisp when I was little and got teased pretty badly and a speech therapist helped me. So, that inspired me to help other kids the same way."

"Oh my, you've had a calling." She tipped her soda at him, then drank it. "How about your parents? Do they know about you both?"

"They do. My brother is also bisexual, so it wasn't very hard to come out to them with Devin. They're pretty liberal and stand behind gay marriage and all that." Brandon scratched at his cheek, then stole a peek at me.

I studied her. "I met them, Mom. They're both really nice and—"

"My mom loved him, just like everyone else does." He huffed a laugh. "Well, my dad loved him, too, and was even going to help him get a job if he needed it." He glanced at me. "My dad used to work at American Express. He's retired now." He patted my arm. "Sorry for interrupting. I just wanted to make sure she understood how much we all love you."

"And your mom?" She cocked her head, watching him.

"She stayed home and raised us." He drank some soda.

"Well, they sound like nice people. I can't wait to meet them at graduation." She ticked her brows at me, drinking more soda.

As I shot a look at Brandon, his gaze locked onto mine. "Uh, graduation?" A few days ago, I couldn't even imagine me introducing Brandon to her as my boyfriend at graduation.

Now she wanted to meet his parents? Would Dad be there, too? How uncomfortable would that be?

“Of course, Amy. I’m sure they’d love to meet you.” He placed his hand over mine on my thigh. “Babe, you should tell her about your new job.”

“Oh.” My gaze roamed to hers. With all that had happened, it had completely slipped my mind. “Mom, I got a real job at the bakery. The owner, Nate is hiring me full time to help him with financials and to open a second store in Phoenix.” I straightened my shoulders. “I’ll have full benefits and a nice salary and everything.”

She held her hand over her heart, her eyes growing glassy. “Oh, my goodness. So, you’ll be staying down there.”

“I will.” An ache filtered through my chest. I’d tried so hard to get away from my family, but now maybe that hadn’t been necessary. I inhaled deeply. But I had Brandon, my band, and my whole found family down in Tempe.

“Guess I’ll just have to visit. A lot.” She twitched the corners of her lips.

“You’re welcome to come down anytime.” With a quick smile, Brandon bumped our shoulders. “We plan on moving in together after graduation. We’ll get a bigger place, so you can have a bedroom to stay in while you’re visiting.”

“Oh, thank you, dear.” She beamed at him.

The doorbell rang.

“The pizza.” I jumped up from the couch and answered the door, then brought the pizza to the coffee table and set it down. “Let me grab some plates.” I sauntered into the kitchen, throwing a glance toward the master bedroom. Was Dad listening to any of this, or was he going to continue ignoring us? I grabbed the plates and some napkins, then brought it all out to the coffee table and opened the box.

Mom pulled a slice out and laid it on her plate. “So, I don’t mind you two staying the night, but you’ll have to sleep in separate beds, at least in my house.” She lifted a brow at me. “Brandon can have Stuart’s room.” She ate a bite of pizza.

My attention flickered to the hallway again. “Naw, I think Dad might lose his mind if we did that. We got a hotel room.” I grabbed a slice and chewed off the end. It had been a long time since I’d eaten this pizza with Mom. It felt good.

“You might be right.” With a frown, she peered toward the hallway and shook her head. “He’s going to have to come out of there at some point and face this.”

“How about we just let him be for now and maybe after he thinks about it, he’ll be more open to talking.” I sipped some soda, washing down my pizza.

“I’m going to see what that Dr. Allen has to say. I’m thinking he might have some people who could talk to your father, people who’ve been there.” She ate more pizza.

“That’s a great idea.” Brandon chewed his dinner, then tapped me on the thigh. “Hey, I do want to see your old bedroom before we leave.”

I faced him. “Oh, and why?” I wiped my hands and on a napkin. “There’s not much in there anymore.” I’d never been one to keep a lot of old stuff and had cleaned things out when I’d gone off to college.

“There are a few things. He wants to learn what he can about you while he’s here. Isn’t that right, Brandon?” She gave him a warm smile.

“That’s exactly right.” He leaned into me, his eyes twinkling. “Can I see your old high school and where you used to hang out before we go home?”

I blew out a breath. “Yeah, sure.” I ate more pizza, then swallowed it all down. “There’s really not that much up here, well, besides Lake Powell or Antelope Canyon. But that’s all touristy.” I drank some soda. “Have you ever been up here before?”

“Yeah, my family came up here in this monstrous RV when I was in high school. We stayed at the campsite out at Lake Powell, so I got to see all that stuff.” He wiped his mouth with his napkin. “That’s why I said I wanted to see your high

school. I want to see what young Devin did up here in his spare time.”

“Well then, if you see his room, you’ll see most of it.” His mother let out a sharp chuckle. “Young Devin was always in there studying.”

Heat rushed my cheeks. “Yeah, guess I was kind of a nerd.”

“That’s cute.” He dropped his forehead to my shoulder for a second, then bit into his pizza.

“Here.” Mom shoved the pizza to the side of the coffee table, raised an end of it and took out a photo album. “This thing looks like a trunk, but it has all these secret compartments in it.” She closed the raised end and handed the photo album to me. “Go head, hand it over to him.” She nodded her head at Brandon.

“Oh, good.” With a broad smile, Brandon snatched the album and opened it in his lap, then rubbed his hands together.

“Mom...” I scowled. This would be a little embarrassing.

“Oh, look at that. Is that you as a baby?” He pointed to an image of me in a stroller when I was two. Mom had dressed me in a little sailor outfit.

“Yes, that’s me.”

“You are so cute.” He pecked my cheek.

Mom burst out laughing. “Oh, this is great. Do you know how long I’ve waited to show your baby pictures to your partner?” She covered her mouth with her hand.

“I can imagine.” I watched as Brandon turned the pages, one by one, looking over all the photos of my toddler years, then elementary school years, me always wearing clothes that I thought would make me fit in and not stand out. How much I’d changed. I peeked down at my sweatshirt and old jeans. Okay, guess when I was up here, I hadn’t changed. But next time I came up, I wouldn’t be afraid to be me.

“Wow, you were a nerd.” He placed his finger on an image of me in tenth grade, my blue polo shirt buttoned all the way up my neck and my tan slacks on the baggy side. “A cute

nerd.” He nodded. “You were always cute.” His gaze found mine then dropped to my mouth.

My breath quickened. I wanted to kiss him, but not in front of Mom. I shouldn’t push it. “Yeah, well, let’s get going, so we can let Mom rest.” At this point, I wanted to be in his arms in a bed somewhere, losing myself in him.

“Oh, so soon?” she scoffed.

“Mom, you’re supposed to be resting and I have feeling you’ve got your work ahead of you with Dad,” I said. “Besides, I have to get back to the bakery. I sort of left them hanging.” I ate the last of my pizza slice and pulled another one onto my plate. “When you get better, just come down and see us, okay?” I didn’t think I’d ever invited her down like this. God, it felt so good to be out in the open. A smile nagged at my lips. It would really be all right. Even if Dad never came around, so what?

“I will. I want to see that bakery you work at and meet all those wonderful people who are taking care of you.” She drank some soda.

“Oh, look at that one!” Brandon pointed at an image of me in the choir, singing in my robes.

“Oh boy.” I rubbed my forehead, then glanced at Mom, a smile reaching all the way to wrinkle her eyes. She was happy and so was I. Finally, her heart wasn’t broken, and neither was mine.

A few hours later, I trudged behind Brandon into the hotel room, flicking on the light switch. I’d driven by this place a million times in high school, but never thought I’d be staying here. It was the cheapest place we could find. I set my duffle bag on the dark, wooden dresser and let my gaze roam over the sparse, but clean room, the white bedding, the plain wooden headboard, and modern lamp on the matching nightstand.

Brandon set his backpack on the floor, then surrounded me from behind, kissing the side of my neck. “How are you feeling, babe?”

“Pretty good, actually. Tired, but good.” I dipped my head back, my cock waking. I definitely wanted to forget all the drama of the day and lose myself in him.

“Yeah, I love your mom. She was great.” As the kisses on my neck turned into soft bites, his shaft pressed into my ass. “Feel like playing?”

“Do I.” I skimmed my fingers over his forearms, holding tightly to my waist. “Did you bring anything?”

“The lube, just in case.” His breath shivered over my neck, and he chuckled. “I figured if it went well, we might need it.”

My cock pulsed in my jeans, lengthening. “Good thinking.” I turned in his arms and pressed my mouth to his, parting his lips with my tongue and dancing it over his.

Reaching between us, he moaned and unfastened my jeans, then slipped my solid cock out and stroked it.

Sensation shivered up my spine. It had been too long since we’d been together like this. “Oh, fuck, that feels good.”

“Yeah?” He kissed over my chin and into my neck again. “Because I was thinking, maybe it was time you lost your virginity again.” He bit my neck, then licked over it.

My shaft jerked in his palm. “Does that mean you want me to top this time?” I drew away from him, my gaze finding his. God, I wanted that.

“Yeah, it does.” He nipped at my lower lip, his eyelids hooding over his deep, brown eyes. “I haven’t had time to tell you, but I’ve been experimenting with the plugs and I uh, turns out I like it.” He dropped his forehead to mine, biting his lower lip and stroking me.

“You did that without me?” Tension wound in my gut, and I rocked into his palm. The vision of him jerking off with a plug filled my mind. God, that was hot. If only he’d brought one. A moan escaped my throat.

“Sorry, but I was horny, and you were working.” He stroked faster over my dick, then slicked pre-cum over the

head with his thumb. “I wanted to talk to you about this, but then all the shit with the news—”

“Shut up and get on the bed. Naked.” I pushed him away from me.

With a sharp laugh, he shucked his jeans and underwear down, then stripped off his shirt as I did the same. “I’ll get the lube.” He dove into his backpack and pulled out the bottle, then set it on the nightstand. As he stood at the side of the bed, his hard cock stretching to his navel, he said, “Just be gentle with me, okay?”

“Yeah, sure.” I climbed onto the bed on all fours.

“How do you want me? Facing you or—”

“Facing me.” I sat on tucked legs, taking in his muscular chest and taut abdomen. I could look at him all day, but not today. Today I wanted connection, needed connection with him like this.

He lay on his back and lifted his knees, exposing himself. “Kiss me.”

Creeping between his legs, I hovered over him on an elbow, placing deep kisses over his lips, entering him with my tongue, then skimmed my hand down his chest to pump over his wanting cock.

His body shuddered. “Oh, fuck. We better do this. I’m really fucking turned on right now just thinking about it.”

“Yeah?” I kissed the tip of his nose, rose up and grasped the lube. As I squirted it onto my fingers, I glanced at him, his chest rising and falling with deep breaths, his tongue circling his lips.

“Hurry.” He took a hard swallow, his pupils blown.

I massaged the lube around his hole, stroking his swollen cock, then pushed a finger inside.

He groaned, his eyes fluttering shut a moment, his stomach tensing.

“Relax for me, babe.” Isn’t that what he was always telling me? I spilled lube over his shaft and placed lazy strokes over it while pumping my finger inside him, trying different angles.

“Oh, that’s it. Right there.” His thighs quivered.

I pushed a second finger inside and did my best to rub over his internal spot, over and over. A jolt worked up my spine and my dick dribbled pre-cum down my shaft. Would I even make it inside him? I was getting too turned on just prepping him. “You ready?” My voice wavered.

He nodded, pulling me up to him. “Just go slow, okay?”

“Yeah.” I lubed up my cock and hovered over him again on my elbow, then dropped kisses down his neck, and bit at his clavicle, while nudging my cockhead into his hole. The tight heat shivered over my body, and I whimpered. “God, you feel good, Bran, so fucking good.” I pressed my forehead to his shoulder and slowly pushed inside while stroking his shaft. I was doing this, topping him. “How are you feeling?” I struggled not to pull out and thrust into him, to just *take* him.

“It burns a little, but it’s getting better.” He adjusted his hips, lifting his legs around my waist and hooking his ankles around my back. “Okay, do it.”

I pulled out and pushed back in, sensation sparking in my balls. “Holy shit, you’re so tight.” I gripped his upper arms.

He squeezed my hips. “Go ahead, babe. Just do it. It’s feeling a lot better now.”

“Okay.” With a deep groan, I thrust into him, over and over, my balls slapping his ass. I knew how great this could feel. Was he feeling it? I twisted my head and peeked into his profile, reaching down to milk his cock.

His brows tensed and his mouth fell open, releasing a strangled cry. “Oh, fuck, coming.” His fingers dug into the muscles of my ass, spurning me on, his cum splashing between us.

A shudder rolled over me and I lost myself in sensation, waves of pleasure pulsing my cock deep inside him. I rode each wave, not wanting it to end.

As it all slowed, I freed his dick and wiped my hand over his stomach before bringing my arm up to cradle his head, then fell to his chest, panting. “Did you like it?”

“I did.” He kissed my hair. “A lot.” He brushed his fingers up and down my back. “Did *you* like it?”

I nodded against his shoulder. “I did. A lot.” A soft snicker rumbled out of my chest. “I guess we’re both vers, huh?”

“I guess. This could lead to so many possibilities. I mean, I could fuck you, then you could fuck me, then I could—”

“I get it. There’s going to be a lot of fucking.” I choked out a laugh, my spent cock slipping out of him. “Uh, let’s get cleaned up real quick.”

“You got it.” He planted a kiss on my head.

After cleaning up, we lay in bed, me snuggled into his side, my head resting on his shoulder. I skimmed my fingers around his nipple. “So tomorrow, we’ll just drive by the school. It’s probably in session, so I don’t think we can go inside or anything.”

He nodded. “All right. Was there any place in town you used to hang out at?”

“Not really. I think I spent most of my time at my friends’ houses.” I thought a moment. “We can drive by the church, too, if you want, but at this point I don’t feel right going inside and I really don’t want to see anyone there.” I hid my face in his neck. Hopefully he’d understand. I wasn’t ready and might never be ready for that.

“Yeah, okay.” He kissed my hair, squeezing me. “So, when we get home tomorrow, I guess it’ll be life as usual, huh?”

“Yeah, except that we have so much to look forward to now.” I lifted up and pressed a long kiss to his mouth. “Bran, I have nothing to be afraid of anymore. I’ve never, ever invited my mom to come see me at college. Do you have any idea how great I feel?”

“Even with your dad being a...well, an asshole?” He studied my face.

“Yeah, even with that. I was never very close to my dad. He was always, well, harsh and aloof. My mom was the one who was always there for me. I think my dad will probably just tolerate us in time and that’s okay with me.” I gave him a quick smile. “My mom will keep him in check.”

“So will I.” He planted a quick kiss on my mouth.

“By the way, thank you so much for being there with me and standing up to my dad. I couldn’t have done this without you.” I gazed deeply into his eyes.

“Of course. Babe, I love you, so much. This trip taught me so much more about you and I’m looking forward to a long future with you.”

“Yeah? How long.” I rubbed my nose on his.

“Forever. How’s that?” His eyes glistened in the low light of the nightstand lamp.

“Forever? That’s a long time.” I swallowed a lump creeping up my throat. “Forever will do. Let’s graduate and make that happen.” I kissed his lips. “I love you, Bran, so much.”

EPILOGUE

Brandon



Three months later

“**B**abe, we don’t have time to unpack every box. We have a party to get to.” I freed a sharp breath, watching Devin unpacking yet another box in the kitchen of our new, two-bedroom apartment. Thankfully, my apartment complex let us move to a bigger place and keep the same lease. Graduation was finally over, and Dana and Nate had closed the bakery for a few hours to hold a graduation party for us. “Everyone is probably already there.”

“Well, with you starting that new job on Monday and me working full time at the bakery, when will we have time to unpack?” He continued pulling things from the box and setting them on the counter.

“Hey, I’ll be getting off at four every day. I’ll have time.” Kaiden had indeed helped me get a job at a great therapy office not far from our apartment. I grabbed his arm, stopping him.

“I heard from my dad. He left me a voicemail. He’s here.” Devin left the box to look at me, his brows wrinkling, the dark eyeliner around his eyes making the blue in his eyes pop.

“What? I thought he wasn’t coming?” I brushed my hand up his arm, stopping at the sleeve of the sheer white shirt that he’d paired with a knee-length, plaid skirt, and his combat boots. “He drove down? How long have you known this?” Was he dawdling so he wouldn’t have to see his dad?

“Yeah, he did. I found out an hour ago. Maybe I should change.” He pouted, sticking out his pink lipstick-covered lower lip.

“No, you will not. You’ll have all of us there. He knows what he’s getting into.” Over the last few months, his mother had come down a few times, but his father had refused to even speak to him. “This is big. We have to take this chance with him, but do it on your terms, not his.” I cupped his cheek, forcing him to look into my eyes. “Babe, you got this.”

“Yeah, okay.” With a quick breath, he nodded. “Everyone already knows what’s been going on... Can you text them and tell them he’ll be there?”

“Sure, I’ll put it in the group chat for the party.” I stepped away from him, fishing my phone out of my board shorts, then texted the group chat.

Brandon

Devin’s dad will be at the party. Don’t feel like you have to change anything, just be yourselves. If he mouths off to anyone, I’ll call the police and have him removed.

I rubbed my forehead. It better not come to that. My phone lit up with replies.

Axel

WTF???

Silas

If he starts shit, he’s a dead man.

Nate

Don’t worry, we’ll have it covered.

Dana

No one is going to be a dead man. Dude???

Silas

I didn’t mean it literally. Chill.

Caleb

Well with you, who knows?

Milo

Are we still having a party?

Gabe

Yes, just get your ass over there.

Layla

Oh, this will be interesting.

Olivia

Is Devin okay?

After reading through it, I tapped on my phone.

Brandon

Devin is fine. We're on our way.

“Okay, babe, let’s go.” I grabbed my car keys from the kitchen counter, then scanned the apartment. It was pretty much like my old one, except for a little bigger main room and the extra bedroom and bath. Perfect for us and for when Amy wanted to visit. As I opened the door, Devin stepped in beside me and we left.

A half hour later, I followed Devin up the sidewalk to the bakery, holding his hand. The sweat on his trembling palm slicked mine. “Babe, it will be okay. Don’t worry.”

“I know.” He blew out a breath. “I don’t even think my mom knew he came down.”

“So, what, you think he just drove down here and only told you?” I stopped on the sidewalk in the late afternoon sunshine and faced him while other people passed us by. That just sounded odd to me.

“Yeah, I’m sure my mom would have called me if she knew.” He wrinkled his forehead. “You don’t think he could be planning something terrible, do you?”

“Well, how did he sound on the voicemail? Can you play it for me?” I squeezed his hand. Could I have the police on standby somehow?

He tugged his phone out of a pocket in the skirt, then held it up and tapped the display. “Here, listen.” He held it between us, putting it on speaker.

“Devin, I decided it was time to come down and see you. I’ll be there,” Daniel’s deadpan voice said.

“I assume he meant the party.” He shrugged. “I know Mom told him where it was. She was trying to get him to come down, but he was being such an asshole about it.” He scowled.

“Okay, so let’s assume he’ll behave the way he always does. He’ll walk in, give everyone angry looks, then maybe congratulate you and leave.” I studied his reaction.

He lowered his brows. “You really think he’d congratulate me?”

“Babe, why else would he be here? You think he’s going to like, stand next to your mother and not say anything?” I scratched my neck. This whole thing was pretty baffling.

“Yes.” He stomped his foot. “I don’t care.” He puffed air out of his nose. “Let’s go and get this shit show over with.”

“Okay.” I strode to the bakery with him and a large sign hung on the door, reading, *Closed for a Private Event*. I swung the door open. “After you, babe.”

With a swift grin, he waltzed into the room, already full of people.

We *were* late. We were the last ones. I shook my head, taking in all the guys from the band huddled together with Layla and Olivia, then Nate and Dana chatting with Jaime and Kaiden and finally, my gaze landed on Mom and Dad, standing with Amy and Daniel. *Holy fuck!* My heart jolted and I jogged to Devin, then caught his arm and turned him around. “Shit, did you—”

“Yes, I see them.” He pressed his lips into a hard line. “Let’s go, babe.” He grabbed my elbow and led me past all the colorful couches and tables filled with treats to our parents. My pulse pounded in my chest. How was he looking so collected when now I was a mess?

“Hi Marsha and Pete.” As they both greeted Devin, he hugged my mom, then my dad and turned to Amy. “Mom, how do you like the store?”

“Oh, honey, it’s lovely. I met your bosses and they’re a fine young couple.” She gave him a quick embrace.

Was everyone insane and not seeing Daniel standing right there? They all knew what had been going on. I pressed into Mom’s side. “Uh, Mom?”

She turned to me. “Brandon, we’re so proud of you.” She kissed my cheek.

“Me, too, son.” Dad threw an arm over my shoulders and squeezed.

“Uh, thanks, Dad.” I stepped closer to Mom. “Hey, what’s going on?”

“Go with Devin, honey.” She pushed me toward Devin as Daniel’s hardened gaze took me in.

“Brandon and Devin.” Daniel drew a deep breath, his chest lifting, his hands wrapped around a bottle of water.

The room grew quiet, and everyone stepped closer to us.

I grabbed Devin’s arm and tucked him into my side. If one shitty slur came out of Daniel’s mouth, this whole room would be on him. I held my breath.

“Well...” He wrapped his hands behind his back, looking Devin up and down. “I originally came down here so your mother would start talking to me again and I wasn’t going to say a word to anyone when I got here.” He lifted his chin. “And I can’t say I understand why you would want to dress that way, but I suppose there are worse things in the world.” He glanced out at the crowd, coming even closer. “But your boss, Dana, had a few choice words for me when I got here and well, I guess if his father can change, so can I.” He dipped his head. “Well, I can try.”

I glanced at Dana, holding Nate tightly to his side, a smug grin on both their faces.

“You all seem like really good people, even though most of you are...queer.” He slowly nodded his head. “So, son, I owe you a huge apology.” He tensed his mouth. “And you, too, Brandon. You’re a fine young man and your folks here are

good people *and* they're willing to help me out with this." He glanced up at the ceiling, holding his hands out. "So, God willing, I'll find a way to reconcile with this whole thing and I hope you can find it in your hearts to show me some mercy."

"Thank you, Dad." Tears glistened in Devin's eyes and his lower lip trembled. He stepped to his father. "Can I hug you?"

"I think that would be really nice." Daniel wrapped his arms around Devin and drew him into his chest. "I love you, son."

"I love you, Dad." Devin's voice cracked.

My vision clouded and Dad snuck an arm around my waist. "Don't worry, son, he'll come around. He was raised with a lot of prejudice and he's trying hard to get over that."

"Oh." I nodded, then smiled at my Dad. "I love you, Dad."

"You know I love you." He patted my chest. "Don't make me cry." He wiped at his eye.

"Okay." I chuckled. If *we* were emotional, how intense was this moment for Devin?

Devin released his father, squeezed his mother's arm, then fell into my arms, resting his head on my shoulder. "I don't think I've ever been more loved or happier in my entire life."

"Me, too, babe, me, too." My gaze rose to take in the maroon and gold graduation decorations, the banners on the walls, the twirly things hanging everywhere, then the keg tucked into the corner. It seemed like a long time ago that I'd tried to get Devin to notice me while standing at a keg just like that. *Guess he notices me now.* I hugged him tighter and said, "This is going to be some party, babe."

"All right, let's get it started!" Axel shouted and *Good Riddance (Time of Your Life)* from Green Day started playing over a Bluetooth speaker in his hand, then shouts rose up in the room.

"Fucking Axel." Devin sniffled, then planted a kiss on my lips. "Love you, babe."

"Forever," I whispered against his cheek.

The End



Axel crushes on his brother's best friend, but Remy's afraid of love. When all is laid bare, can love triumph over fear? [Read Come Closer to Me to find out.](#)

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SNEAK PEEK AT COME CLOSER TO ME (ROCK U BOOK 2)

Axel

I pulled my red Jeep to the side of the street in front of my brother's house, then cut the engine, my heart pattering in my chest. Would his best friend Remy be home? Probably not, if Remy knew Leo was making me dinner. Somehow the guy always found a way to remove himself from my presence. I sighed, slanting the rearview mirror over my dash to check on myself. I didn't want to go in there with like, spittle in the corner of my mouth, just in case he *was* there.

I eyed my black hair, parted on the side, framing my cheekbones, noting the bit of brown at the roots. It was time for a new dye job. As I tilted my head, my blue eyes stared back at me, the piercing in my brow glinting. What would my eyes look like if I tried some of that liner Devin, our new singer, had started wearing? It was cool enough for him, it'd certainly be cool enough for me. A corner of my mouth tugged up. No spittle. Time to go inside.

I climbed out of my Jeep and strolled up the driveway and past the front of the gray, single-story bungalow on the walkway, then stopped at the wooden door. Should I knock, or just go inside? If Remy was home, I could fuck with him if I just went inside. I tried the gold knob on the door, and it turned. With a grin, I swung the door open and stepped onto a beige tile floor.

Perusing the main room, the scent of garlic and beef caught my nose. Damn, Leo's cooking was always good. My gaze did a quick scan of the brown leather sofa and loveseat with the black IKEA coffee tables. A television droned on in the corner of the room with the news, but no Remy. "Leo? Honey, I'm home." I snickered.

Leo's brown head of short hair popped out from behind the wall to the kitchen and a wide smile played on his lips. "Oh,

good, it's ready." He looked me up and down a moment. "Nice, uh, ensemble. I see you still like wearing that bullet belt with all the black." Huffing a chuckle, He ducked back behind the wall.

"I do. It's good for my image." With a smirk, I shucked off my leather jacket, and adjusted my belt over the hips of my skinny jeans, then sauntered past the kitchen opening and dropped into a seat at the dinette, just off the kitchen island. His place was like the one I'd rented with my buddies, same neighborhood, and all, but it had been updated with black appliances and nicer wooden cabinetry, it even had dark granite tile counters instead of the old Formica I had in mine. The table had already been set with plates, silverware, a bowl of garlic bread and canned beers. My brother always thought of everything. He'd make someone a good housewife someday. I chuckled.

Leo turned from the counter next to the stovetop with a large bowl of spaghetti in his hands, then set it on the table, his brown eyes beaming at me. "So, how is school?" He sipped his beer.

"Fine, honey." With a smirk, I piled noodles and meat sauce onto my plate. "Spring break is over, so classes start back up on Monday."

"Dude, stop with the honey shit." Shaking his head, he let out a chuckle. "Always have to be a smart ass." He served himself some spaghetti and garlic bread.

"Yeah, whatever." I twirled noodles around my fork, then shoveled them into my mouth.

"Did Remy ever get ahold of you for tutoring?" he said, holding a slice of garlic bread to his mouth.

"No, he didn't. I assumed he didn't need any tutoring. When did he start taking classes?" I sipped my beer. It was a few months ago already that my brother had texted me to ask about tutoring Remy, but nothing ever came of it. "In fact, I think the last time I saw him was when he brought a date to Dutch Bros." I twisted my lips, my chest tightening at the

memory. “I took their orders.” Damn, had it really been that long?

“Seriously?” Leo dug into his pasta. “He started going to night school, so I think he started classes back in January, but he’s taking like one class at a time and each class is accelerated.” He shook his head. “I don’t know. I do know he’s been busy, so I haven’t seen him much.”

“Yeah? Is he still seeing that Chrissy girl he brought to Dutch?” An ache filtered into my chest. Why did I have to ask that?

His brows snapped together. “Chrissy?” He scratched his forehead. “Don’t think so. I don’t remember a Chrissy.”

Good. “She didn’t seem all that into him. Guess it didn’t work out.” With a quick grin, I ticked my shoulders.

The front door swooshed open. “Hey, that smells fantastic.” Remy shut the door, turned, then stalled, his mouth dropping open as his stark grey eyes fixated on me. His brown, wavy hair had that perfect wind-blown look with sun streaks and had grown, the bangs past his brows and the back curling around the blue collar of his shirt.

My heart stuttered. Fuck, he was as gorgeous as ever. Under my breath, I said, “Speak of the fucking devil.” I set my fork on my plate and scrubbed my face with my hands, my pulse quickening. I’d wanted him to be here, but now I wasn’t ready for it.

“Yeah, come join us for dinner.” Leo waved him into the room. “There’s beer in the fridge.”

“Sure.” Remy toed off his work boots by the door, then padded into the kitchen to grab a beer from the refrigerator. “So, haven’t seen you for a while, Axel. Is that your red Jeep out there?” As he snicked his beer can open, he winced and grabbed a plate from the cabinet.

“Yeah, got it a few months ago. I was wondering where *you’d* gone off to. Thought maybe that Chrissy chick kidnapped you or something.” I forced a grin, poking my fork into my noodles.

“Chrissy?” He padded to the table, then dropped down at the head of it. “I don’t um—”

“The woman you brought to get trendy coffee drinks at Dutch Bros, I don’t know, right after the holidays?” Lifting my brows, I focused on him, taking in his muscled shoulders under the button-down shirt. Damn, he didn’t even remember her. But *I* remembered.

“Oh.” With a nod, Remy shoveled pasta and sauce onto his plate. “Yeah, that didn’t go anywhere.” He twisted his lips. “I mean, we still hook up now and again.”

“Hey, how are your classes going?” Leo faced Remy, his brows knitting.

“Good. I start my next one on Monday.” Remy’s eyes grew wide as they scanned to me, then he pursed his lips.

“And what are you taking?” Leo ate some pasta.

“I uh, I’m taking a data modeling class.” Remy hung his head, his free hand fisting on the table.

“Isn’t that the class you failed last time?” Leo leaned toward him.

“Yeah, but that was after...” Remy’s gaze flicked to me, then focused on Leo. “Yeah, it was.” he grabbed a slice of garlic bread and spread it in the sauce on his plate. “I’ll be fine.”

“Dude, I’m great at data modeling. I totally aced that class.” I swallowed hard. Leo had asked me to tutor him, but it was obvious Remy wasn’t on board with the idea. Why?

“I’ll be fine.” Remy flashed his eyes at me, then shoved pasta in his mouth and washed it down with beer. “I don’t need your help.” He stabbed at his plate with his fork.

“Dude, it’s not like I bite. What do you think I’m going to do? Seduce you or something?” I sniggered. I would try at least. It was time to fuck with him. “I mean, just because you’re hot...” I squirmed on my chair. He didn’t need to know I was serious.

Leo snorted. “Axel, would you cut that shit out? I’m sure Remy is not afraid of you seducing him.” He shook his head and ate more spaghetti.

“I’ll be fine.” Remy’s gaze met mine, his pupils dilated, his cheeks flushed, and he snuck his lower lip between his teeth, then ate a bite of garlic bread. “Anyways, I need to get going. I’ll finish this later.” His chair groaned across the tile floor as he stood up, his head lowering, his brown wavy hair veiling his face.

“Already? You can’t even finish your dinner?” Leo turned in his chair, watching as Remy took his beer and plate into the kitchen. “Is something wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong.” Remy’s gaze snagged on mine, then dropped. “Maybe I’ll take this in my room, so I can eat it while I get started on that class.” As his brows furrowed, he took his plate and hurried down the hallway toward the bedrooms.

As a door slammed shut, Leo’s attention drew to me. “What the fuck was that about?”

“No idea.” I quirked the corner of my mouth. That was interesting. If I didn’t know better, I’d say I got Remy a little flustered. God, how I loved getting under his skin. If this was the only way I could, I’d take it. Though, I didn’t much like the thought of him still hooking up with that Chrissy girl.

“I hope him going back to school isn’t bringing up bad memories.” Leo swirled his fork in his pasta, resting his cheek in his hand.

“Like what bad memories?” I sipped some beer. I’d heard a little bit about all the bullshit with Remy’s family, but my brother had been there for him through it all. “Enlighten me. It’s only fair if you want me to talk him into letting me tutor him.”

He bit the side of his lip, then straightened in his chair, taking a quick look at the hallway to the bedrooms. “You know his dad died right after high school graduation, right?”

“Yeah, when that building collapsed in the fire. It was all over the news.” I drew a deep inhale, my mind replaying the look of horror on Mom and Dad’s faces as we watched the exploding building on the news over dinner that night. After, the Gilbert Fire Department had built a little memorial for him at the firehouse. The man had saved a serious number of lives in his time as a fireman.

“Remy lost it. I mean he *lost* it.” Leo lowered his brows, spreading his food over his plate with his fork. “His first year at ASU, he’d tried really hard, but eventually he started spending more time at frat parties than studying and I think that’s why he flunked out. He was partying too much.”

“Yeah, I seem to remember the two of you getting into a heated argument when I came to visit you one time at that ratty apartment you were in off campus.” I studied Leo. I hadn’t known what to do about it, it was so rare to see the two of them fighting. I’d also made sure to never have a ratty apartment and instead, had rented the house around the corner from here with Caleb and Milo.

“Shit, we had just turned twenty, so you had to have been only sixteen.” He scoffed a laughed, then his grin waned. “He dropped out and it almost killed him. His dad really wanted him to get a college degree and he felt like he failed him.”

“Yeah, but he seems to be doing okay now. I mean, he brings in decent money doing that security installation shit, doesn’t he?” I sat back in my seat. Even at sixteen, Remy was the guy I was crushing on. Hell, he was the guy I was crushing on back when I didn’t know what a crush was. Why him? I may never know the answer to that.

“Yeah, he does all right. But I think it’s good for him to go back to school. I think part of him still feels like a failure, especially when he sees everyone else is graduated or graduating.” Leo lifted his chin at me. “Even you, you’ll be graduating in a few months though it took you long enough.”

“Hey, I only took one gap year. I wanted to get that partying out of my system before hitting the books.” I gave him a smug grin. “Besides, it was fun focusing on the band and getting

some money in the bank first.” It was a year to remember, no school for the first time in my life and my band, *Knot Me*, had really started to gel. My thoughts ran back to Remy and his family. “So, what’s the real story on Remy’s little brother? What was his name, Jack?” My chest tightened and I leaned over the table. “I mean, no one ever talks about that at all.”

“Oh, that was, that was horrible.” Leo shook his head, his finger rubbing along the edge of his plate, frowning. “I was there that day. There was a big playdate at Remy’s house. We were uh, six, which would make you two.” As his gaze met mine, his eyes glistened.

Damn, it still hurt him to talk about it. How bad was it for Remy still? I reached across the table, placing my hand over Leo’s. “Who found him?”

“Remy did. Floating face down in the pool. It was summer, you know? We were all outside like the whole day. There were moms and kids everywhere. I have no idea how no one noticed he’d lost his damn arm floaties and drowned.” Leo’s throat dipped with a hard swallow. “God, Remy screamed and screamed. His mom pulled Jack from the pool and did CPR while our mom called 9-1-1.” He shook his head. “Remy’s mom is a strong fucking woman. She knew just what to do.”

“Holy shit.” My heart ached for Remy and for Leo. What a thing to go through at such a young age. Maybe that was why they were still so close. I’d been too afraid to ask about Jack before. It was one of those unspoken things you never asked about when we were kids. But I wasn’t a kid anymore. A thought flickered through my mind. “Oh, shit, so when they called the paramedics—”

“Remy’s dad showed up with the firetruck, right along with the paramedics. They’d stabilized Jack, but he didn’t make it. He’d been without oxygen for too long. I heard he was brain dead and they had to turn off the machines keeping him alive.” Leo sniffled and rubbed at his eyes. “I’ll never forget the look on Remy’s face when they dragged him away screaming.”

“Damn,” I said, under my breath. I glanced toward the bedroom. If I could go in there now and wrap the guy up in the

biggest bear hug ever, I would. He'd think I was crazy...

"So, anyways." Leo straightened and gulped down some beer. "Let's get off that topic, shall we?" He blew out a breath. "Suffice it to say, the Hall family has had a rough time of it."

"Yeah." I ate some pasta, then drank my beer down. "So, why do you think Remy's going back to school now?"

He shrugged. "Hell if I know. Guess he figures he's ready." He ate some pasta. "I still think he's going to need help with that class."

"We'll work on him and I'll make myself available." I finished my beer and ate the last bite of my pasta. After finally hearing the full story of the Hall family tragedy, maybe I should go a little easier on Remy. Naw...teasing was our thing, and he wouldn't know what to think if I stopped. "Hey, I have a gig next weekend at the *Yucca Tap Room*. You should come and bring Remy." I ticked my brows at him. "Our new singer, Devin, is killer."

"Yeah? I'll see if Remy wants to go. I'll probably be there." He sucked down the last of his beer. "Maybe I'll find a date." He arched a brow at me.

"Sure." I picked up my plate and brought it into the kitchen to start on the dishes. "Can you find me a date?" I snickered rinsing my plate and setting it in the dishwasher.

"Why? I'm sure you'll have more than you can handle at your gig. Even being gay, you never seem to have a problem with that. Guys are all over you all the time. Okay, and girls." He strolled into the kitchen. "Thanks for taking care of the mess."

"Thanks for making me dinner." I gave him a warm smile. Was Remy ever coming back out or was he waiting for me to leave? My chest stiffened. This shit had to stop, especially if he needed help with that class.

"Hey, let me give you Remy's number in case he keeps being stubborn and doesn't contact you for help with that class. Maybe you could reach out and check in on him?" Leo

tugged his phone out of his back pocket and tapped the screen. “There, it’s sent.” He offered a wide grin.

“Great.” That number was going to be burning a hole in my phone, I just knew it.

A few days later, I sat at a booth at the *Five Guys* just off campus, eating a burger and fries for lunch with Caleb. We were both in-between classes. My gaze scanned over the diner-style restaurant in white, the large windows showing students walking down the sidewalk in downtown Tempe in the mid-afternoon sunshine. I eyed Caleb, sitting across from me, his hair not quite as dark or as long as mine, but cut about the same way. It seemed we had a thing with our hair. “Dude, what do you think about doing a Soundgarden song? I think Devin can handle it.”

“Why on Earth do you like Soundgarden so much? I thought we were sticking with punk-pop, not old school grunge.” He scoffed, then stuffed fries into his mouth.

“Why? Chris Cornell. Best singer ever and Devin can handle it. Not many bands can pull it off.” I ate a bite of my burger, my gaze snagging on Samuel, a hookup I’d been keeping around. What was he doing here? He wasn’t a student. He’d already graduated and had a real job as a paralegal, as evidenced by his gray suit. Maybe he worked around here?

Samuel walked into the restaurant and stepped up to the ordering counter.

“What?” Caleb sucked soda from a straw, then perused the area around the ordering counter. “No...”

With a smirk, I nodded. “Yeah, that guy in the suit is the guy I’ve been hooking up with.” I puffed my chest out. The guy was hot and looked enough like Remy that when we fooled around, it was easy to fantasize I was with him and not Samuel.

Caleb chuckled and shook his head. “Can you pick someone who doesn’t resemble Remy for once?” His hazel eyes fixated on me.

He totally had my number. “Yeah...no.” I dipped my fries in ketchup, then stuffed them in my mouth. Come to think of it, I still hadn’t heard from Remy. “So, Leo really wants me to tutor Remy, but he hasn’t like, texted me or anything.”

“Here’s a thought. Why don’t you text him?” Caleb raised his brows, his lips quirked in a smug smile.

My pulse quickened. “I can’t do that. Wouldn’t that be weird?” I twisted my lips. “I mean, how could I turn that into some sort of tease?” I had to keep up appearances.

“How about if you stopped teasing the guy and just became his friend.” Caleb drank some soda, then bit into his burger and wiped his fingers on his napkin.

“I don’t know how to do that.” I leaned forward. “You know how I feel about the guy.”

“What guy?” Samuel stood at our table, beaming down at me, holding a tray with a drink and a white paper bag filled with his food. “Mind if I join you?”

“Sure, take a load off.” I patted the bench seat next to me, eyeing him. I’m not sure I would have invited myself over if he’d been sitting here with a friend, but whatever. He was a good lay. “Caleb, meet Samuel.” I waved my open palm across the table. “Samuel, my best friend from probably sixth grade, Caleb.”

“Nice to meet you.” Samuel slid in next to me and held out a hand to Caleb over the table.

Caleb shook his hand. “Yeah, same.” With a smirk, his gaze cut to mine.

“So, to what do we owe the pleasure?” I leaned both my forearms on the table and focused on Samuel. When was the last time we’d hooked up? Had to have been a few weeks ago now.

“I work at a law firm close by.” Samuel opened his white bag and took out a burger, then unwrapped it. “I always loved this place when I was in school.” He bit into his burger.

“Yeah, it’s pretty popular.” I ate some fries, then washed them down with soda. Okay, this was awkward. What do we talk about now?

“Don’t let me interrupt your conversation. Please, go on.” Samuel side-eyed me and continued eating his burger.

“Axel here is trying to figure out if he should contact his lifelong crush for tutoring. The guy’s going to school for the same thing as Axel and needs Axel’s help.” Caleb’s smirk grew wider, and he tented his fingers over his food.

“Caleb,” I said through my teeth. God, he had to go there. I squirmed in my seat. “He’s not a crush, he’s...he’s my brother’s best friend and very, very straight.” With a stuttered chuckle, I brushed my hand down the back of my head.

“Okay, but he is hot?” Samuel arched a brow, holding his burger to his mouth.

“He looks a lot like you, actually.” Caleb held his hand over his mouth, a faint giggle leaking from him.

I was so going to kill Caleb later. “Well, yeah, so I guess that makes him hot, huh?” I bumped my shoulder on Samuel’s and gave him my best smile.

As Samuel dipped his head, his cheeks pinked. “If the guy needs your help, just offer it. What have you got to lose?”

I scratched my temple. What did I have to lose? So, so much. My heart, maybe? But hadn’t I already lost that? “Fine.” I picked up my phone from the table and texted.

Axel

Hey, it’s Axel. Leo gave me your number. How are you doing on that modeling class? Need any help?

I chewed on my thumbnail, watching the message switch from sent to read. The message was innocent enough. How long would it take for him to get back to me? No dots came up. Maybe he was at work and couldn’t text back. “Well, now it’s up to him.” Jiggling my leg, I set my phone down and bit into my burger. I needed a distraction and fast.

“What are you studying, Caleb?” Samuel gave him a warm smile.

“Me? I’m studying IT. I’m not as far along as Axel though. I’m still a junior. He’s a year older than me.” Caleb sipped his soda.

Samuel turned in his seat. “Wait, so, Axel, you’re twenty-three, right? And you’re graduating this year?”

“Yeah. Caleb’s twenty-two, but he’s still a junior.” My gaze flicked to my phone, still silent, then met Samuel’s eyes. I could see him trying to do the math. Most people just assumed Caleb and I were on the same track, since we were so close. “I met Caleb in little league back in sixth grade. He stuck with it longer than I did, but we became best friends back then even though we weren’t in the same grade. We both took a gap year out of high school and here we are.” I threw a smirk at Caleb. Time for pay back. “Caleb follows me where ever I go. Sort of like a lost puppy.”

“Fuck off.” With a quick chuckle, Caleb shook his head and stuffed fries in his mouth. “Dude, you’re so full of yourself.” He chortled.

“And you love me anyways.” I sent him a smug grin, then set my focus on Samuel. “He’s in my band, too and we’re renting a place together just off campus.”

“I play bass guitar.” Caleb shrugged. “I used to sing, but now I only do the rap parts in our songs.”

“We got a kick ass singer. The guy works down the street at that bakery, *Queer Confections*.” I looked Samuel over. Did he even care about all this shit? Usually, our conversations were pretty minimal, and we got down to business.

“Oh, yeah, that place is really good. I love that pastry with the chocolate tequila in it.” Samuel sipped his soda. “Your singer isn’t Devin, is it? The pretty boy who works behind the counter?”

“That’s him.” I ran my gaze over Samuel. He didn’t like Devin, did he? “Devin has a boyfriend.”

“Yeah, I figured that out.” Samuel ate the last bite of his burger and swallowed it down. “When are you guys playing next? I’d like to check it out.”

I squirmed in my seat. Did I want him there? I didn’t want him killing my mojo if a better dude came along.

“We’re playing at the *Yucca Tap Room* next weekend.” Caleb beamed at him.

Fuck. “Yeah, you should come.” I faked a smile, toying with the straw in my almost empty drink. Maybe he wouldn’t show. Or, maybe we’d need to set some boundaries. This guy was nice, but I just didn’t feel it with him. He wasn’t Remy.



Axel crushes on his brother’s best friend, but Remy’s afraid of love. When all is laid bare, can love triumph over fear? [Read Come Closer to Me to find out.](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christie Gordon started writing gay and MM romance books after finding Yaoi fanfiction by accident and falling in love with it. She's always had stories in her head and always enjoyed writing, so she decided to try her hand at it and took up fiction writing classes at a local community college. She published her first MM romance book with eXtasy Books back in 2009. Christie follows her muses wherever they take her, writing a mixture of paranormal, historical and contemporary romances. She enjoys writing about men discovering themselves, overcoming obstacles and finding love in the process, along with a happy ending.

Christie's day job is in the high-tech industry with a Bachelor of Science in Electrical Engineering and a Master's in Business Administration. She currently lives in the Phoenix, Arizona metro area but has also lived in the Bay Area of California and grew up in Minnesota. If she isn't writing, she's watching boys love dramas or creating digital artwork. She's also a mother of two young-adult sons, whose antics keep her on her toes. Her one-eyed rescue pug is always by her side, snoring the day away.