

RED DOOR DADDIES

BOOK TWO

ONE MORE

Boy

B. RIPLEY

One More Try

B. Ripley

One More Try

Red Door Daddies Book #2

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Content Warnings

This book centres around themes of grief and loss, as well as the process of mourning. Some scenes may be hard for those who have experienced loss and find themselves in the process of grieving a loved one.

In addition, the following content warnings apply:

-car accident, drinking and driving (historical event mentioned within narrative)

-physical and sexual assault (side character)

Should any of this content cause issues for you, please take care of yourself first and reach out to supports local to you if needed.

Self care is never selfish.

Chapter One

JOEL

The flowers were white this week.

I had spotted them from across the graveyard as I'd exited my car, brilliant against the backdrop of grey stone and green grass. I'd instinctively looked around the cemetery, searching the emptiness for a sign that the deliverer was still around, lingering somewhere in the trees that bordered the graves. As I got closer to the headstone the flowers sat on though, I could see that there was withering at the edges of the petals, so it had likely been a few days since his last visit. Daisies this time, I noted, their buttery yellow centers browning at the very tips to match the slow death of the petals themselves. For a moment, I found myself stuck staring at them, wondering where he got the money to buy such pretty flowers every week before realizing that I probably didn't want the answer to that question.

I closed my eyes and reached out, resting my hand on the top of the cool headstone, feeling the tickle of the petals that this boy-turned-ghost had laid for the lost love we both shared. It had been two months since this weekly flower delivery had

started, and despite trying to pin it down to a specific date or time, I hadn't been able to figure out a pattern. Not that I was sure what I'd do if I did figure it out. Would I come here, hoping to meet him? Would we have a conversation about what had happened? The death and the aftermath we'd both struggled through?

Would he even want to see me?

Did I even want to see him?

Sometimes, I thought I'd caught him out of the corner of my eye but when I'd turn my head, it would be someone else with similar shoulder length curls or freckled cheeks that were close but didn't quite match his. In the days after he had left the house we'd all shared, I looked for him in the faces of every passerby, searched for him in the boys that had come to the club night after night to no avail. I hadn't seen Tiernan in over a year, though it wasn't from lack of trying.

"I wish you were here to talk some sense into him," I murmured, crouching in front of the headstone. "He always listened to you." I reached out and brushed dirt away from the letters that spelled Daniel's name and the carved-out numbers of his birth and death. Beneath the dates was a simple line stating, "beloved husband, partner, and friend," but Daniel had been so much more than that. The light he'd been made of couldn't possibly be captured in scripted letters carved into cold stone. Tiernan had insisted that the letters be filled in with brilliant color somehow, the blues and yellows and coppers that Daniel had loved in life. He'd even tried to buy paint to

color them in himself, but I'd stopped him, not wanting to damage the precious granite. Standing in front of the stark headstone now, I wished I hadn't.

I wished I hadn't done a lot of things.

"I miss you," I whispered to the headstone, like I expected an answer. A shout from the sky or a laugh that would accompany the twinkle of an eye. The longing to have my husband back ran bone deep and I felt it settle into me every morning when I woke up alone in the bed we'd once shared. Those moments always threw me a little bit, how almost two years after the car accident I could still wake up believing he'd be there in bed with me, Tiernan tucked between us. In my memories, Daniel would look over our boy at me and give me that slow, gentle smile of his that told me we were right where we'd always meant to be. Daniel would pause then and reach over to gently trace the lines of my forehead with his fingertips for a brief moment before scooping Tiernan into his embrace and shuffling them both over into my waiting arms. Since his passing, I'd spent many mornings lying in bed, my hand curled over to the empty spaces beside me, silent tears streaming from my eyes as I yearned for a syrupy slow morning full of silent smiles and warm embraces.

Sometimes, I thought I missed his smile the most. The way his lips curled, and his eyes shone warmth were the first things about Daniel that had captured my attention. We'd only been fresh faced twenty-somethings when we'd met at the University of Alberta campus coffee shop. In a moment that appeared to be ripped right from some romantic comedy

movie, Daniel had bumped into me, spilling the hot coffee he held down the front of my clothing. As I'd stood in the middle of the coffee shop, shocked at the sudden splash of heat, he'd grabbed napkins and tried his best to mop up the drips that had trickled down my shirt. I'd walked out of that coffee shop with a reddened chest, damp T-shirt, and a phone number that when called, would serve to start the best years of my life.

Daniel had finished his education, becoming an occupational therapist and starting a brilliant career working with people who'd had strokes at the local hospital, but I had dithered a bit longer to figure myself out. I was so proud the day I'd walked into our apartment to tell him the news of my new job and that pride in myself had resonated back to me from him. The Red Door was a members only club, and though we'd been members for only a year, getting a position in the front of the house had been a huge win for me.

And it had brought us to Tiernan.

Daniel had spotted the boy first, seated at a table with Perry, one of the littles that frequented the club. He'd been sipping at a bottle of water, curling his tongue around the rim suggestively as he'd noticed my husband watching him. Tiernan had been bold and that called to Daniel as much as it intrigued me where I stood across the room, clad in my work T-shirt. It had only taken a glance between us for me to understand what Daniel had been asking, and my nod of agreement had set everything into motion. I'd radioed my co-workers saying I was taking a short break while Daniel had gone to collect the boy who'd interested us both. When they

arrived at the booth, Tiernan slid right between Daniel and I seamlessly, entertaining us with statements about what he was looking for and stories of where he'd been in his short life.

Tiernan had been a joy and a challenge wrapped up in one little package. He'd pushed and pulled as much as he'd snuggled and loved, but the best part of the entire relationship had been watching Daniel come into himself as a Daddy. He had been warm and kind with the boy in ways I hadn't been. In ways he hadn't been able to be with me. Daniel and I were a match in all things, save for the need to capture and care for another that drove a wedge between us both. In our early years, we'd struggled, circling each other like feral animals, both trying to take control while giving up none in return. The decision to find a third, a boy for us to dote on, build up and love, had been something we'd hotly debated, though in the end we'd both deemed it necessary. I couldn't have been everything to Daniel just as he couldn't have been everything to me. We tried a few times to find a boy to be ours, only to have it end in disappointment and frustration. When Tiernan had sat down between us at the club that night though, we had known we'd finally found him, and he admitted that he'd been looking for what we could offer together. A kind, patient place to land after a rough day in Daniel, and expectations and rules that accompanied a push to be the person he'd wanted to be from myself. Tiernan had often joked that I was the tough Daddy and Daniel was the softie, and while that comment had garnered many a raised eyebrow in his direction, it had been true.

Maybe that's why he'd left.

Maybe the loss of his soft, warm Daddy had been too much to take when he'd looked at what he had left over. I couldn't hold a candle to the comfort that Daniel had been and the love he'd given to both of us. In the moments after Daniel's death, I felt like I'd been measured and found wanting by the boy we'd once shared. I had loved Tiernan, in my own way, but I knew it wasn't enough for him. While I was incredibly hurt and angry that he'd abandoned the house we'd shared without so much as a word of warning, I couldn't find it in myself to blame him for making the choice. The sadness at the loss of him turned sour though, tinged red with anger and frustration, when I considered that he'd also taken Daniel's wedding band when he'd left. I'd checked every single pawn shop for it in the months after Tiernan left, hoping that I would find it while also hoping that he'd hold onto it for as long as he could because that meant things weren't so desperate for him that he would have to sell the things that mattered most.

I leaned forward, pressing my hand to the carved letters of Daniel's name, feeling the bumps and grooves beneath my palms. I would give anything to have that ring back. To have that boy back and that husband and everything I had lost.

"Rewind," I whispered, tracing the slope of the D on the granite face. "I want to rewind. I want you to never have gotten into that car. I want that drunken asshole to never have gotten into her car. I want the roads to not have been slippery. I want... I want you, Daniel. I want you back. This was so much

easier with you here. I don't know what I'm doing anymore, D. I really don't."

As the tears pooled in my eyes, I tilted my head back, turning my face up to the sun like I was waiting for a response. I silently begged whoever was listening to give me my rewind. To turn back the hands of the clock and bring me some peace in the aftermath. A warm breeze rippled through the graveyard, but no answer came. It was the same every week and at this point, I didn't know what I'd really expected. The clouds weren't going to part and Daniel wouldn't float down with a smile on his face so I could take him home with me again. With a heavy sigh, I stood, using Daniel's headstone to help me up from my crouch because my own legs felt too weary for the task.

I rested my hand on the top of the granite, eyeing the dying daisies as the petals of the flowers Tiernan had brought to the grave rippled in the breeze for a few moments. Glancing around the quiet cemetery again, I found myself looking for him once more even though I knew he was long gone.

He'd be back though.

Next week would bring more flowers to die on the headstone of the man we'd both loved, and more memories of the boy who had left me behind to keep me company in the silence. I lingered there by the headstones as the day turned darker, the sun still setting early, though the spring was coming closer. I had to get going soon, the rest of the day was

filled with things designed to occupy my time now that I was alone and grieving losses I couldn't put to words.



I didn't talk about Tiernan.

Every Thursday night before the club opened, I came to this dusty church basement for a bereavement support group my therapist had recommended. I sat in the circle on a hard wooden chair, drank lukewarm coffee and talked about Daniel like it was only yesterday that the police had arrived to let me know there'd been an accident. I would accept the sad smiles and the knowing nods as I unpacked my grief from the box it lived in inside my head and then when the group was over, I'd pick up the pieces I had spilled and cram them back inside where they belonged. Week after week I did this, not knowing what I was supposed to be getting from this experience of living the loss of him out loud for a bunch of strangers to listen to. A creature of habit though, I had simply incorporated this group into my routine and kept coming like clockwork.

But I never talked about Tiernan.

It wasn't like there weren't things to tell there, but whenever I seemed to open my mouth, the words choked in my throat and I'd end up blubbering away like a nonsensical baby, making little to no sense with what I was saying. I wasn't certain the group assembled around me would understand, that these older men who'd lost wives and young women who were without parents or siblings would understand the measure of the love that had existed between the three of us in the house

we'd all called home. I'd had a hard enough time opening up about Daniel at first, letting them all know that I intended to talk about my dead husband instead of my dead wife in bits and pieces until they all came to understand who I'd lost. Trying to explain Tiernan seemed like an impossible task, though every time I sat in this circle, he lived inside my head, silently claiming his role in the stories I'd tell as memories flitted through my brain.

I'd talked about the fancy coffee maker Daniel had bought me for our last Christmas together and how the morning after his death, I'd bawled the moment I'd turned it on. Tiernan inside my memories had reminded me that he'd given me a gift that Christmas as well. A set of three mugs that still sat upside down on the tray beside the coffee maker like at any moment they'd be used again. Two of the mugs matched and were printed with the face of a brown bear, the words "Daddy Bear" scrawled beneath the image in looping script. The third mug was smaller than the others, intended to match the size of the boy who'd given it, the face of a bear cub on it and the scrawled words "Baby Bear" wrapped around the rim.

I talked about the coffee maker that I still used every morning.

I didn't talk about the mugs that I hadn't touched since Daniel died and Tiernan left.

I didn't talk about Tiernan.

"Joel?" a voice asked. "Are you all right tonight?"

I snapped out of my ruminating about mugs and glanced up from the cold paper coffee cup I held in my hands. Patricia, the therapist who ran the group, was watching me with a gentle look of concern on her face. I cleared my throat and nodded. “I was just thinking about the stuff left afterwards.”

“The stuff?” she prompted, as I knew she was going to.

“The things left behind, you know? Like clothing and coffee cups and things that belonged to Daniel.”

“I threw everything out,” one of the men across the circle from me commented, though not in an unfriendly tone. “I couldn’t handle walking into the house and seeing her things everywhere, so I got rid of them all. Sometimes I wish I hadn’t.”

The talk around the circle turned to the subject I’d started, but my brain didn’t follow. The wistful tone of wishing in the man’s voice had caught me and my mind was elsewhere, considering the things I had left over from Daniel and Tiernan.

Everything I had left over if I was being realistic. My home hadn’t changed one bit in the length of time between the knock at the door by the officers and this morning when I woke up, clutching Daniel’s pillow to my face and breathing in the traces of his scent that I swore still lingered, even though I’d washed them over the years. Everything we’d all owned was exactly where it had been left in the aftermath.

The coffee mugs in the kitchen.

The toothbrushes in the bathroom.

The clothing in the closet.

The football sized heavy cement duck that sat in the entryway of the house. I tripped over it every time I walked inside yet couldn't find the courage to move the duck from the spot it had sat in since Daniel had brought it home. When I looked at it, all I could see was the twinkle in his eyes as he'd watched my entire face scrunch in disgust. I hated that duck, but I hated the thought of moving it even more.

My home was a museum of items that nobody would ever use again, yet I couldn't bear to part with any of it. I lived around the objects that had once been loved and cherished and used by both Daniel and Tiernan, unwilling to part ways with anything that resembled the life I'd once had. Though the spaces I occupied felt like ticking time bombs of grief, just waiting for me to set them alight, I couldn't fathom getting rid of things they'd once touched. Unhealthy? Probably. My therapist would urge me to part ways with some of the items, or pack them up and put them into storage to allow myself more space to live in without tripping over memories everywhere I turned. If he knew what still lingered behind, that was, but I didn't mention them to him.

I was good at not mentioning things.

I didn't talk about the museum of grief I lived in, and I didn't talk about Tiernan.

The meeting drew to a close and I stood, crumpling the now empty paper cup in my hand, surprised that in between all my thinking, I'd managed to finish the coffee that had been inside

it. I said my goodbyes and headed for the door, stepping out into the cool night air. I made my way to my truck to head to the club for my night at work, the routine I'd set in place to keep myself going through the aftermath of my life being torn apart as solid and heavy in my mind as an immovable concrete duck.

Chapter Two

TIERNAN

The wind caught in Joel's hair, ruffling the short, dark strands, and my breath caught in my throat.

Beyond the clump of trees I was hiding in at the edge of the cemetery, my former Daddy kneeled on the cold grass, running his fingers over the granite face of the same grave I had come to visit today. The petals of the daisies I'd placed on the headstone last week fluttered in the breeze and the stems of the red carnations I'd brought with me today dug into my clenched fists. I loosened my grip so I wouldn't crush them as Joel glanced up from the headstone and peered around the cemetery like he was looking for someone. My heart fluttered wildly behind my ribcage as he looked right at the tree I had tucked myself behind. A heavy moment lingered in the air as panic and fear threatened to overtake me, but he turned back down to the headstone without further inspection of the trees. I exhaled a slow, shaky breath that rattled out between my lips, realizing how much the idea of being seen by him made my gut ache and my muscles tense.

This was not what I needed today, but it had seemed like the universe had decided that today was going to be a “Fuck you, Tiernan” day. I was doing my best to roll with the punches as they came, but Joel being at the cemetery was doing one hell of a number on my already weary heart.

I had never seen him here before. Not that I thought for one moment that he didn't come visit like I did, but seeing him standing there at the headstone had my entire body frozen in place, head racing with possibilities and fear. If Joel saw me, I didn't know what would happen and that unknown was the only thing that held me captive like a statue behind the thick trunk of the oak tree. I was rooted in place, digging deep in the dirt with the toes of my shoes as a reminder to stay silent and unseen while my heart screamed for me to run to him, to leap into his arms and press my face against the soft leather of the jacket he always wore. The jacket that would smell like the oil paint he would use to make his art in the garage of the house we'd shared. It would smell like hope and home and him.

Both of them.

The men I'd called my Daddies.

Joel reached up and gently fingered one of the petals of the dying daisies again and I swallowed a noise of want and craving that was threatening to creep up from somewhere feral inside me. I knew what it was like to be touched by those hands and the knowledge that they were right there, he was right there, and I couldn't have him sat in my gut like a heavy stone. I would have to settle for watching as he touched and

caressed things I had brought to the love we'd once shared because after what I'd done, there was no way in hell Joel still thought about me with anything but hate.

I wasn't really certain I had factored into much of his world to begin with.

At one point, I thought he might have cared for me. Loved me, maybe, but in the aftermath of Daniel's death at the hands of a drunk driver, I hadn't really felt anything from him other than the long lingering feeling that I wasn't wanted or needed by him. With Daniel, it was never a question. I had known every single day of his life that I was loved and cared for.

Cherished.

That was the word Daniel had used when he told me how much I meant to him. He'd hold my freckled cheeks in his hands and make me look right into his eyes as he said, "Tiernan, I cherish you more than the sunshine." That simple word always hit me in a deep place that not even love or care could touch. Cherish was soul deep, and I lived for the moments I would hear it coming from Daniel's lips because it was the one thing that made everything feel okay inside me. Joel never used a word to tell me what he thought of me. He was always ready with a correction if I fucked up though, and I didn't know what to do with that outside of throwing myself headfirst into trying to impress him and make him proud of me. Most days, it felt like an impossible task and sometimes I felt like I was being asked to herd cats with one hand while stapling Jello to a tree with the other. On the rare occasions

that I did do something right and managed to capture his approval, I felt like I could conquer the world.

Maybe that's how Joel had shown that he cared for me. Not that I'd stuck around long enough after Daniel had died to ask him about it.

Running away like a thief in the night from the house we'd all shared hadn't been the best choice, but in the months that had followed the funeral, things had shifted. I had been cast aside, like a once loved toy placed back on a shelf to collect dust as Joel moved through his days pretending I didn't exist. I'd watched, helpless and unheard, as grief swallowed him whole and he'd started spending days on end in the garage, splashing paint onto the canvases he'd chosen to occupy his time with while I lingered inside like a ghost, waiting for him to come to me, though knowing he wouldn't. I'd tried to help him dig himself out as best as I could. I'd brought him food while he painted and covered him with blankets when he'd fallen asleep on the dusty drop cloth covered cement floors of the garage, but it was never enough to reach where his grief had taken him. It had been so easy for that same old thought that told me he wasn't really the one that had wanted me in the first place to creep back into my mind. So, I'd left. He'd been at work, and I'd packed up my shit and walked out of the house where love had turned sour for the last time.

I hadn't meant to end up without a home, but who really did? I had taken enough money to cover a hotel for a few nights while I'd tried to find an apartment and a job only to find doors slammed in my face time and time again.

No job? No apartment.

No apartment? No job.

When all was said and done, and the money had run out, I'd been forced to leave the hotel. Instead of a roof and a job, I'd ended up wandering the streets, looking for a sign that I hadn't fucked myself over too bad with my poor planning and seeing nothing but hidden corners to tuck myself into, out of view of the world I suddenly didn't belong in anymore. I didn't mean for this to happen.

Nobody I'd run into on the streets had really intended to be there either and there was some comfort in that, I supposed. I wasn't alone in thinking life wasn't meant to be this way. Some of the people I'd met were on the streets because they'd been raised in terrible places, some had aged out of foster care and had nowhere else to go like my friend Bryce, and some were there because they couldn't feed their addictions, maintain a job, and pay rent at the same time. The hidden corners of the city were littered with broken people, and I'd never meant to become one of them. If I'd done the work of planning for my departure, I wouldn't have ended up where I was, but I had been created impulsively by two teenagers who weren't ready to be parents and had no room for me in their lives after I'd turned eighteen. Their moment of snap decision making without considering any consequences had turned into the pattern I followed my whole life, despite knowing better deep down inside me.

Daniel had helped me slow down and make better choices, but without him I was lost in every way that mattered.

Beyond the trees, Joel stood up from the ground and rested his hand on the headstone, tilting his head upwards to the sky with his eyes closed. I thought I could see the tracks of sticky tears on his cheeks even though I was a far enough distance away to not really be able to tell if there were. I felt my own sadness bubbling up inside me at the very thought of seeing Joel cry again. At the thought that he still felt the loss of Daniel like it had happened only yesterday and knowing that if I could rewind time, I'd bring him back just so Joel could have him again. A glimmer of gold flickered where he stood as the ring he wore caught the sunlight streaming down, bringing a thickness to my throat that was hard to swallow around. I reached up to my chest on instinct and grasped the companion to Joel's wedding ring in my hand. The simple golden band inlaid with a strip of tiny diamonds on the silver chain around my neck had been Daniel's, and I had taken it in my anger when I'd left. I couldn't say for sure why I'd taken that particular item when there was a whole house full of stuff Daniel had owned that I could have picked instead. I definitely hated the thought in the back of my mind that whispered I'd chosen the wedding band because I'd known it would hurt Joel the most.

I didn't want to be that sort of monster, but I couldn't deny that I was guilty of the crime and the thought that accompanied it. If I was a better person, maybe I'd have the

nerve to step out from behind the tree I hid behind and hand it back to him. Apologize and atone for what I'd taken.

Sadly, I was not a better person. Not today anyway.

I blinked back my tears as Joel pressed his lips to his hand, touching the golden band to his mouth, then gently touched the daisies again like he was giving them the kiss instead of the granite beneath them. Carefully, he turned and walked away from the grave that held Daniel, heading for the big black truck he drove in the colder months, his pace quickening as he moved like he had just realized he had somewhere to be.

As his vehicle pulled away from the parking lot, I lingered in the trees, watching the taillights disappear around the corner before creeping out from my hiding place. I stepped swiftly through the undergrowth, dodging the rotting branches on the ground and stepped into the sunlight and grass. When I reached Daniel's grave, I placed my hand right where Joel's had been, feeling the daisy petals beneath my fingers, imagining I could sense the warmth of Joel's palm lingering on them.

"Hi Daddy," I whispered to the headstone as the tears I'd held back since I'd arrived in the trees finally spilled from my eyes. I choked as I inhaled a breath, then coughed into the silence around me, hand shaking where it lay on the daisies, the red carnations clutched tight in my other hand. I gently placed them beside the daisies, then wiped my eyes with my hands. "I brought you red ones today. I know you like red."

Stealing flowers from the church I did my laundry in was the least of my crimes and one I would gladly pay for if I was ever caught. Daniel deserved flowers. Brilliant reds and shimmery golds reminded me most of him, and when I'd seen the fresh carnations sitting in a bucket on a pew, I hadn't been able to resist taking just a few of them. Daniel had lived a life surrounded by color and I wanted his death to be the same.

Our house had been an incredible sight. He had turned what was a cold, sparsely decorated space into a warm, cozy home for all of us over the two years we'd all been together. Joel had always poked fun at him whenever he'd come home from work with a new piece of something for the house. A throw pillow. A painting. A figurine of a chunky tabby cat. Daniel had often stopped at this one boutique on his way home from the hospital he worked at and rarely came home empty handed, even though Joel would always protest that we had enough stuff. Despite being the one of the two of them who was into art and creating, Joel was a minimalist at heart and liked everything to have a place and a reason. He didn't understand the need for decorative bowls and plush throw pillows, but of all the things that perplexed him, the large concrete duck that sat in the entryway of the house was the one he always got stuck on. He'd asked Daniel what the purpose of it was once, but Daniel and I had known that it didn't have to have a real purpose. It just needed to be a duck. I wondered sometimes if Joel had gotten rid of it all. If Daniel's death had allowed him to clear out the spaces Daniel had filled with color and things. The thought that Joel had

gone through and removed everything Daniel had bought from the home we'd all shared made my stomach clench.

“He probably did,” I whispered to the headstone. “Joel never liked clutter. Even though it wasn't really clutter. We knew that, right, Daddy?”

Sinking to my knees on the grass, I pulled my heavy backpack off my shoulders and placed it beside the gravestone. My shoulders ached without the pressure and weight of it on them, and I winced as I reached up to rub them. I needed to consider getting something smaller to carry and ditching some of the things I didn't need. I wasn't a big person, I was five foot six and built like a twig on my best day and carrying around a heavy bag was hell on my body.

Settling onto my butt, I sat cross-legged in front of the headstone and reached out to trace the letters that made up Daniel's name. I always did this when I came, and I always wished I'd brought paint with me to color them in like I'd threatened to do once when I'd still lived with Joel. The look of horror and the sharp admonishment he'd delivered had stopped me, but I still thought that color would suit Daniel's final resting space much more than the cold, grey granite.

“I know you'd approve,” I whispered to the space where Daniel wasn't. “I know you'd think it was perfect for you. I miss you so much. I had a really bad day.”

I inhaled a deep breath as the rest of the words caught in my throat. I had woken up to find the place that Bryce and I called home, a hollowed-out cement basement open to the sky, had

flooded with freezing cold water due to the warmer temperatures melting the snow that surrounded it after the winter chill had started to lift. We'd packed up our things and left our makeshift home behind in the early hours of the morning, sopping wet with our stomachs growling from a deep hunger we didn't have the food to stop. As it was, Bryce was standing on a street corner somewhere wearing clothing designed to entice some man into taking him to a hotel so we could have cash. Thinking about him needing to do that sent prickles of unease down my spine. I hoped he was being safe, though I was certain he was. I had to believe he was anyway. If anything happened to the one person I trusted out here, I didn't know what I would do. I had told Bryce as we'd walked away from the basement that I would go pickpocket to help with getting cash, but the sheer fury in his darkened eyes had made that notion poof away into nothing. I wasn't allowed to do that anymore. Not after I'd gotten caught the last time I'd tried and had spent a couple of hours in lock up, walking out of the police station with a few charges on my record and a fine I had no clue how I was supposed to pay.

I didn't have money. I didn't have a job or a home. I didn't have anything to my name save for the ring around my neck and the little items in my backpack that had no real value to anyone.

What a shitty existence.

I frowned at my negativity and shook my head at myself, like that would somehow throw the growing despair right out of my head. I reached out to touch the letters of Daniel's name

again, pretending I was clearing away dirt that lingered in the chiseled marks but knowing none existed. Joel had already cleaned things up, but I couldn't stop brushing my fingers over the granite surface, dipping them into the hollows of the letters and numbers on the front of it as my heart squeezed in my chest.

“I don't like who I've become, Daddy,” I whispered to nobody. “I want to do better things with my life. I want to have a home and a purpose again. I want to be... better. Be the boy you and Joel thought I could be.” I inhaled a deep breath, Joel's handsome face at the forefront of my mind as I laughed a sad sound into the silence around me. “I still want him to be proud of me, you know. Can you believe that? It's so fucking weird, but I still want him to approve of what I've become, but how could he ever do that if I'm not even proud of that person?”

Tears swelled in my eyes as I waited for an answer that was never going to come. I slammed them shut as a stronger breeze swept through the air, ruffling through my shoulder length hair, tangling up the strands tight into strawberry blond knots and snarls. I bit back the urge to give into the crying and instead let my body sway with the wind in front of the grave of one of the men I'd loved more than life itself, wishing the other one was here to help me make sense of the mess I'd turned into.

As the wind died down around me, one thing became clear. I wasn't going to get anywhere good by sitting around being sad and wishing I could do better. I had to act, and though I

wasn't sure if the idea had come because I'd thought of it, or if Daniel was somewhere in the afterlife pulling some strings, but I knew exactly where to start.

I had to give Daniel's ring back to Joel.

Chapter Three

JOEL

Would it be the picture on the fridge today?

Or maybe the hideous green rug on the floor in front of the sink?

I sat at the kitchen table, eyeing all the things around me as I wondered. I knew it wasn't the coffee cup in my hands or the plate I'd put my sandwich on. It wasn't even the sandwich or the knife I'd used to spread the butter on the bread with. I glanced beyond the kitchen, taking stock of the things in the living room that sat in their places, trying to figure out which one of them it was going to be that would hit me in that strange place in my mind where nothing existed but sadness and misery.

The clock? I glanced up at the wooden circle on the wall, listening as the seconds ticked by in the silence like a countdown to the moment it would become clear. The house was a ticking time bomb, and I knew that soon enough, something would make me explode in grief. I just didn't know what it would be today.

If it even was today, that was. Sometimes, I went for days, even weeks, without falling into the hole inside my head where memories lingered and moving forward became a lie I told myself during every support group meeting. I had even made it a handful of months at one point before the sight of a fat little robin splashing in the bird bath outside the kitchen window had me opening my mouth without thinking to call for two men who didn't exist in my world anymore to show them the bird they weren't there to see. I'd sank to the tile floor of the kitchen, unable to even cry as the explosion dragged me under. When I'd managed to peel myself off the ground, the clock reset itself silently in the background, the countdown starting all over again as the time bomb ticked away.

Tick.

The blue running shoes on the boot tray in the entryway.

Tick.

The pink and red pillow on the couch.

Tick.

The painting of a camel on the living room wall.

I hated the camel. Would it be the camel? I eyed it carefully, waiting for a stirring of something inside me and finding nothing. That was a relief. Of all the things I'd had a meltdown over, I wasn't sure I wanted it to be the ugly camel painting. There were far better things to cry over, not that I ever had the option of what it would be that would set me off.

I turned back to my sandwich, plucked it off the plate and took a bite, chewing and swallowing methodically before taking another bite. It didn't really taste of much, but I didn't find many things held a taste anymore. I lived on sandwiches and frozen meals now, having almost lost the will to even eat most days but knowing that I had to in order to keep going.

At the very least, I had to keep eating so that I could have the energy to deal with what I had to at the club. The Red Door was my home away from home and in the months following Tiernan's departure, I'd almost lived there until Ambrose, the owner and my best friend, had called an intervention of sorts and forced me back to this house. I wasn't allowed to show up at the club before six p.m. now, and I needed to leave the moment the doors shut or I'd get sucked into doing my paperwork and forget to go home entirely. My therapist had applauded that when I'd told him about it, stating that work/life boundaries were important, but then again, he didn't know about the things ticking away in the background inside this house.

Tick.

The cow shaped milk jug.

Tick.

The purple blanket on the couch.

With a sigh, I finished the last bites of my sandwich and grabbed my plate, placing it in the sink. I stood for a moment staring out of the kitchen window into the backyard that was slowly becoming a soupy mess of melting snow. Sunlight

shone down through the two big trees that sat along the back fence and created pockets of shadows across the mix of sloppy mud and dirty grass. Once, Tiernan had asked for a hammock so that he could sit back there and relax, and I waited as that thought ticked away without causing an explosion.

I regretted not getting it for him when I'd had the chance. Daniel had thought it would be a great birthday present and had planned for much more than a hammock for our boy before he'd died. He'd Intended to create an outdoor escape for Tiernan to relax on the days where the world went belly up for him. Not that Tiernan had many of those, but he was prone to impulsivity and sometimes that created issues. One time he'd applied for a job at an animal rescue only to realize that part of the duties included caring for animals who might pass away before they got their forever homes. Daniel had held him as he'd sobbed the day one of his favorite dogs had died and he'd quit the next day, unable to stomach any more of his furry friends passing away. On more than one occasion, I'd wondered if the hammock had been set up for him, would he have left? Would he have run if he'd had a place to go to unwind and think, or had that not really mattered to him in the end? I wished I knew what had been running through his head when he'd packed up his things and left, or if he'd been thinking at all about what he was doing.

Abandoning the window, I made my way down the hallway that led to the bedrooms of the house. It was a small bungalow with just two bedrooms upstairs and one in the basement, but it was more than enough space for me. It had been more than

enough space for all of us at the time. When Tiernan had moved in, he'd been given the spare room for himself in the off chance that he wanted his own space. I smiled at the memory of him turning his nose up at the spare bed when it was offered and stomping right into the bedroom Daniel and I shared, throwing himself on the bed and spreading himself out over the mattress. That night had ended with the three of us together, my dick buried in Tiernan's ass and Daniel's mouth wrapped around Tiernan's cock as he screamed his pleasure out loud, his noises making the entire room shake around us.

Fuck, I missed that. It had been a long while since I'd had sex. The times I'd touch myself in the shower paled in comparison to the feeling of Tiernan wrapped tight around me. We were electric together, all three of us, but even the times I'd grab our boy by his hair and bend him over in the kitchen when it was just the two of us had made the sparks fly.

With a sigh, I reached into the closet and yanked one of my black work T-shirts off the hanger then grabbed a pair of the same old jeans I wore every time I headed to the club. I didn't bother with leather pants anymore, even though I had considered throwing them on every now and then. Mason, one of the newer staff members, was always meticulously dressed in his tight black shirt with the logo for The Red Door on it, his tight leather pants and boots that looked like they could do some damage. He was a rather intimidating man at first glance, which worked well considering he served as one of our Dungeon Masters, overseeing scenes and ensuring that everyone played within both their agreed upon rules and

boundaries, as well as the rules of the club itself. I had a streak of jealousy trickle through me when he'd walked in for his first shift, tall and handsome in his chosen outfit, well put together in a way I hadn't managed to capture since everything had changed in my life. I had been a bit fearful of his perception of me at the time, given that I was meant to be his boss and he seemed far steadier than I was at the given moment, but Mason had proven to be an eager learner when it came to club protocol and hadn't questioned my leadership in a way that made me feel threatened once.

When I was dressed, I checked my reflection in the mirror then tucked my shirt in, deciding that an extra bit of effort would be all right for the night. I might not be completely put together, but I could at least put on a good show of it. A quick glance at the clock told me I was in danger of being late, so I rushed to the entryway and grabbed my leather jacket off the hook it had always hung on, sweeping it around me quickly as I reached for the bowl on the table beside the door that held my keys and wallet.

The world seemed to move in slow motion as, in my rush, I knocked the small ceramic tabby cat that sat beside the key bowl and sent it tumbling to the tile of the entryway. I watched in horror as it smashed on the ground, one of its legs and its tail snapping off at the impact.

And there it was.

What I'd been waiting for all day.

A strangled noise left my throat as I lunged for the cat, plucking all the pieces of it off the ground and bringing it up into my face so I could inspect the damage as my heart leaped to my throat. I whispered a succession of “oh no’s” into the air as tears sprung to my eyes, remembering Daniel bringing it home after work and Tiernan placing it there where it had sat ever since. I had picked it up time and time again over the years to dust the table, only to place it right back in that spot because it belonged there.

It belonged there.

He belonged here.

They belonged here.

Clutching the pieces of the cat in my fist, I sank to the tile, bracing my back against the wall as tears streamed down my face unchecked, lost to myself entirely.

Boom.

— e e —

“I look handsome tonight.”

I grinned at the boy in front of the desk I sat behind, as he held his arms out to the side, letting me get a good look at the dinosaur printed T-shirt and overalls he wore. “You do look very handsome, Perry.”

“And cute,” he added with a grin as he fished in the top pocket of his overalls and pulled out his Red Door membership card. He held it out in one hand, his triceratops

stuffly clutched tight in the other, and I gave it a cursory glance before waving it away. Perry had been a fixture at the club for a few years now, having stumbled into the place wide eyed and shaking like a leaf a handful of years ago. He had been the first little to seek out the club and while we still didn't have many on the membership list, it didn't seem to bother Perry too much anymore. He'd created a space for himself, slowly but surely, in one of the back booths beside the bar and would come every night that he could to play with the toys kept in the tubs beneath the table for him. Eventually, the little room would be done and he, along with any others that chose to come, would have a space to play that was bright and cheerful.

“Is Morrie coming?” I asked as Perry tucked his membership card into one of the pockets of his overalls. The only other little that came fairly regularly was Perry's best friend, but he'd recently hooked up with a Daddy named Scott and I still wasn't sure how that would change things for Perry, if it ended up changing them at all.

“Yep.” Perry grinned. “His Daddy is coming too.”

“And Silas?”

Perry's cheeks went red, and he went through a myriad of reactions, shrugging and smiling nervously in response. It was no secret that he had developed a bit of a crush on a man named Silas over the last few months, even if the extent of it was longing glances across the club to the booth the Dom in question usually sat in. I wasn't sure if Silas had the same interest, I couldn't see it myself, but they'd make for an

interesting pair, that much was clear. Silas was a Dom through and through, often sought out by the subs that frequented the club because they knew he was skilled at giving the things they craved. I'd watched him wield whips and floggers with careful precision, lighting fires in the men he'd play with that burned long after they'd parted ways, but I couldn't for the life of me picture the man sitting down to drink juice boxes and snuggle with a little like Perry. It would be a sight to see, that much was certain.

"No teasing," Perry finally blurted at me in response to my question, his eyes stern though uncertain. "That's not nice. Say you're sorry."

"You're right," I responded, properly cowed. "That wasn't very nice of me, and I am sorry, Perry."

He nodded once, his blond curls bouncing on top of his head, but his joyful expression sobered as he searched my face. "Are you okay, Joel?"

Joel. Not Daddy Joel as he usually used when he was playing. I blanched a bit at the question but nodded. "I'm okay. Just tired."

Perry scanned my face again, his mouth turning down into an even bigger frown. "Lying isn't nice either, Joel."

I don't know why I continued to have little prickles of surprise whenever Perry did things like that. I had learned long ago that there was much more to the boy than the adorable little who played with dinosaurs and colored pictures with his friends. Beneath that head of tumbling blond curls lay a

brilliant brain that was constantly at work, analyzing and collecting bits of data on the people who surrounded him. Perry was intuitive and clever, incredibly skilled at reading other people's feelings. I had tried hard to mask my bad days away from him, but he always seemed to catch me off guard with a comment that told me my attempt at hiding had failed, yet again.

"I had a rough moment earlier," I offered, recalling the mess I'd been on the floor of the entryway of my house, clutching the broken cat trinket in my hand. "I'm okay now, though. Settling in."

Perry eyed me carefully before nodding curtly, his smile creeping back to his face. "Is Hobie here?"

"He is." Hobie was another one of the boys that frequented the club, but like Morrie, he had a Daddy. Ambrose had seen something in the boy when he'd stolen a guitar right from under his nose out of the office at the back of the club. Despite my words of caution about boy thieves, Ambrose had gone ahead and moved the homeless boy into his life, giving him a roof over his head and money in his pockets. Try as I might, I still couldn't look at Hobie without the tiniest bit of warning ringing in my ears. He was friendly enough and appeared to be the perfect match for Ambrose, yet I still didn't trust him entirely, so I kept my distance. Sometimes, I'd catch him looking at me with a strange expression on his face, head cocked to the side in interest like he'd just seen me for the first time and couldn't figure something out about me. He'd never

said anything to indicate to me what was on his mind, and it was all a bit unnerving.

Perry headed for the inner door to the rest of the club as the front door that led to the street opened again, bringing in more regulars to run through the usual ID and membership card check. I didn't always get to do this job anymore, but I'd arrived and learned that the usual guy up here, Aaron, was out sick tonight. I'd jumped at the chance to hang out at the front, checking IDs and getting some of my backlog of paperwork finished.

Plus, the silence in between patrons was always helpful. As it was, I was exhausted from the effort of simply staying present today. The only downside of working the door was that Ambrose had hinted that I could be made to leave earlier tonight. He'd suggested that I could take my work home with me to finish and that thought curdled inside me, even though I'd agreed with the suggestion.

I wasn't ready to head back to the museum of my past that kept right on ticking even though I wasn't around to feel it.

Chapter Four

TIERNAN

“It looks the same,” I whispered, staring at the house across the street from where I stood. Overhead, the streetlights cast shadows on the front of the bungalow, but I could see the blue trim and the white wooden front porch that I’d spent so many sunny mornings sitting on, drinking my morning coffee as I watched the world wake up.

“I can do it, if you don’t want to,” Bryce offered, gesturing to the envelope in my hands. The envelope containing two things: a ring and a chain. I had thought about tucking a note inside, but I wasn’t sure what to say. Not that I had paper to write anything down anyway.

“I can do it,” I responded, giving him a smile. Bryce would do anything for me, I knew, but this was something I had to do for myself. When I’d told him about my plan to return the ring to Joel, he hadn’t necessarily understood, but he’d supported me all the same. That was just Bryce. Calm, often silent, and supportive.

I turned to look at him where he stood beneath the streetlights, wondering at how this tall, handsome man came to

be in my life. Though Daniel and Joel would always hold two thirds of my heart, it had been an easy task to hand the last third to Bryce. Once I'd gotten to know him, that was. The first time I'd seen him, I'd been fairly new to the streets and was still trying to figure things out. We'd been in Swanlea Park that night, even though Hobie, another boy who had lived on the streets at the time, had insisted that it wasn't the safest place to be when the sun went down. Hobie had gotten off the streets a few months ago, having met and moved in with his Daddy, a man named Ambrose who ran The Red Door club.

It never failed to baffle me how it was almost like Hobie and I had switched lives. He was a regular at the BDSM club I used to frequent when I'd had my Daddies, spending time with all the people I had once called my friends, and I was lingering on the streets, as he had done since his teenage years.

There was a difference though, and that difference was currently eyeing me carefully, like he was certain I wasn't doing as okay with the plan for the night as I'd said I was. I had Bryce, and Hobie had spent much of his time alone out here and that made a world of difference. The night I'd met Bryce in Swanlea Park, I hadn't known how much he'd come to mean to me. He'd been an intimidating figure at the back of the group we were with, his lips set in a stern line and his jawbone sharp enough to cut glass. The pile of tattoos that snaked down his left arm drew me in because they were colorful, but the sharp look in his dark eyes had reminded me so much of a shark that I'd shivered uncomfortably as he'd eyed me up and down. He'd kept watching me throughout the

night, making my stomach quiver with both fear and promise until he'd sidled up to me and nudged me with his shoulder meaningfully, raising a suggestive eyebrow as he scanned my body top to bottom. All it had taken was a nod. A tiny little dip of my chin downwards to accept the offer he'd clearly been making. Escaping to a hidden corner of the park, we'd gotten lost in each other, body inside body, hand in hand as we'd escaped the shitty life of the streets for a few moments. When we had finished, Bryce had turned to me and finally introduced himself, and the laugh that barked out of my lips as I'd pulled my pants back on had echoed through the entire park. We'd parted ways that night, but always seemed to seek each other out until eventually we'd become inseparable. Bryce and I didn't get lost in each other's bodies that often anymore, we'd learned that our needs and desires didn't closely align in that way, but he held onto that piece of my heart all the same. I knew I meant as much to him as he did to me. He was sometimes my lover, but always my best friend.

"Meet me at the hotel?" Bryce asked, smoothing out the hoodie he wore. I knew that beneath, a brilliant yellow crop top clung to his lithe torso, highlighting the planes of his swimmer's build. He had matched that with a pair of tight black pants that he only wore when he hit the streets to find a hook up who'd pay him for what he had hidden beneath all the clothing he wore.

"Don't let them be rough with you," I cautioned, resisting the urge to wag my finger in his face and scold him. Bryce was always taking far more chances with the men he picked

up, letting them take advantage of him in ways I despised, even though he always made sure he got paid in the end. I couldn't stop him from selling sex on the streets, I had tried and failed enough times to know that as gentle as Bryce was, he was stubborn like an ox on his best days and an immovable rock on his worst. "Be safe. Pick someone safe."

"I'll try."

"Bryce."

"What?" He sighed, crossing his arms across his broad chest. "I said I'd try. I can't control who's out there looking. You know that."

I bit back my own sigh. Yeah, I did know that. I also knew that sometimes, he caught the interest of little men who wanted to revel in making my tall, broad best friend bend over in front of them and take whatever they had to dish out to him. I'd taken care of his bruised body more times than I'd ever wanted to, but no ounce of caution I'd given ever seemed to sink into his brain. "Just... be safe, okay? Lots of lube, if you have to do that tonight, and a condom. Don't let them go bareback, even if they say they're on PrEP or whatever. No car rides. Meet them at the hotel or stay in the alley beside the diner where it's safe."

"I know," Bryce responded, growing a bit exasperated with me, but I couldn't stop the reminders I gave him every single time from dropping out of my mouth. He sighed, reaching out and cupping my face in his hands. "I know, Tiernan. I know, okay?"

“I just worry.”

Bryce nodded, pulling me closer to him and pressing a kiss to my forehead, the tiny stubble that clung to his lips brushing against my skin. I closed my eyes and breathed him in, the scent of the clean deoderant he used filtering through my nose. When he let me go, I was surprised to find that tears had gathered in the corners of my eyes.

“Meet me at the hotel afterwards,” he said, brushing them away with his thumbs. “And we’ll have some snacks and a bubble bath. Or at least a shower if the tub is too gross.”

I nodded. We’d been staying at an incredibly shitty hotel the last few nights, handing over fifty dollars of the money Bryce earned each night for the privilege of resting our heads on lumpy mattresses and showering in rusty bathtubs. It was better than the alternatives and miles above the waterlogged basement we had called home.

Bryce pressed another kiss to my forehead before letting me go and walking away down the street, leaving me behind in front of the house I’d once called home. I dithered for a long while, watching him go until he disappeared around the corner that led back to the downtown core where he’d go to work for the night. I hoped he’d be safe, as I’d asked him to, and I was blaming that uncertainty for the sudden burst of butterflies and nausea rippling through my stomach because it was easier than acknowledging the house I stood across from.

I’d have to eventually, I knew. The whole point of the night was making amends for what I’d done. I viewed it as the first

step to being a better person and making better choices, and that was what I needed to remember. Plus, if I had my days of the week correct, Joel would be at work anyway. I'd make sure to leave the envelope poking out of the mailbox so he'd see it, but I wouldn't have to see him in person and that was fine by me.

Steeling my nerves, I crept across the street in the darkness and came to stand at the edge of the driveway that led to the attached garage. My heart swelled and ached as I stared at the home I had loved so very much. The home that had been filled with light and color and joy in the years before Daniel had died. It looked very much the same, save for the empty ceramic flowerpots that lined the walkway. Daniel had always planted them every spring and it ached inside my guts to see them sitting empty with the soil unturned.

I inhaled a deep breath, shivering in my nerves as my stomach churned, but I forced myself to take my first step up the concrete walkway that led to the wooden porch. Moving molasses slow, I crept up the sidewalk and took my first step onto the porch, the wood clunking softly as my booted foot hit it. I took each step one at a time, heart pounding in my ears, until I came to stand in front of the blue door. Holding my breath, I reached for the metal mailbox hung on the side of the garage and opened it, the squeak of unused hinges sounding far louder to me than it probably did in reality. I carefully placed the envelope inside and was making sure the corner of it was sticking out when the porch light went on and the front door flew open, revealing Joel.

I let go of the mailbox, leaping backwards and almost falling off the step as my entire body went rigid with fear and a chorus of “oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck” screamed inside my head. Frozen in place, I stared at Joel, meeting his own wide eyes with mine as every piece of me melted down inside.

He looked terrible.

Awful.

Exhausted. The bags beneath his eyes were so deep that his chocolate brown irises were sunken into his skull and the lines of his face were drawn tight and pale. His jaw ticked as he stared at me, muscle jumping beneath the skin at how tight it was clenched. I wanted to reach out, smooth my hands over his wrinkled forehead to take the worry away and leap into his arms, hold him close and never let him go. My fingers flexed at my sides as I stared at him, unable to make words happen while I drank in the sight of him up close for the first time in almost two years. Joel stayed just as still as I was, looking down at me from his six-foot frame, his nostrils flaring every so often as his chest rose and fell like he was having the same internal panic moment I was. What struck me the most was that Joel had always felt larger than life, but the man who'd thrown open the door looked frailer and older somehow than he'd been when I'd seen him from a distance. How old was he? As I stared, I did the math. If I was twenty-six and he was nine years older than me, that would make him thirty-five. Only thirty-five, yet he appeared ages older where he stood in the doorway of the house.

“Tiernan,” he finally said, his voice rasping out my name into the space between us.

“Daddy,” I whispered, unable to stop the word from tumbling from my lips but regretting it as he winced at the sound of it.

Silence rippled between us again as tears prickled my eyes, threatening to spill forward. Finally, Joel inhaled a deep, shaky breath that seemed to rattle his whole body where he stood in the open door.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

I snatched the envelope from the mailbox and gripped it tight in my shaking hands, pressing it to my chest for a few moments before holding it out to him. “I’m sorry.”

Joel’s eyes finally left my face and trailed down to the envelope. Carefully, he reached out and took it from me, ripping it open right in front of me and reaching inside to pull out the ring on the chain inside. He held it in his hand, his eyes growing impossibly wide before he looked at me, and then to the ring again.

“Fuck,” he muttered, and I bit back a nervous laugh.

His face crumpled as he braced himself on the door frame, cupping his hands around the ring, tears spilling down his cheeks unchecked. My own tears dribbled down my cheeks as I watched Joel close his eyes, pressing his hands against his lips, the chain dangling from between his fingers. He wavered

on his feet slightly, his body shaking with the force of his grief. Or maybe, the relief that he had the ring back in his possession.

I had done the right thing.

Watching Joel's reaction confirmed it for me, and I had to think that if Daniel was watching from somewhere above, he'd be proud of me. Maybe Joel was proud of me too somewhere inside beneath the tears, and that was enough for me to feel content inside. Satisfied, though feeling slightly empty without the weight of the ring around my neck, I turned and made a move towards the stairs that would take me away from this house for the last time ever.

"I miss you," Joel croaked out, stopping me in my tracks.

My head reeled as I turned to look at him. "You... miss me?"

He nodded, tears streaming down his face. He choked on whatever words he was about to say, instead letting loose a noise that spoke of a pain and misery so deep it rattled every part of me. I had never heard a sound like that come from him and it tripped every alarm I had in my body. Joel was so strong. So silent and stoic in every moment that had passed between us in the moments after Daniel had died that this outward display of emotion was throwing me off. When I considered all the ways Joel could have responded if he ever saw me again, this was not among the possibilities.

"I am sorry," I offered, again hoping to fix a piece of whatever was happening inside him. "I shouldn't have taken it.

I know that. I knew that at the time, I think.”

“Then why did you?” Joel’s eyes caught a hardened edge, and I prickled with unease.

“Because...” I let the rest of the sentence trail off, not wanting to admit the reason I knew I’d stolen that particular thing.

“Because, why?”

“Because I knew it would hurt you the most, and I wanted to hurt you like you hurt me.”

“Get the fuck off my porch,” Joel snarled, his entire body rigid and his eyes narrowed as he slammed the door in my face.

Chapter Five

JOEL

Because he knew it would hurt me.
Because he wanted to hurt me.

I gripped the ring so tight in my fist that I could feel it digging into the palm of my hand as rage bubbled inside my gut, turning my head into a wasteland of thoughts that only served to fuel the fire. That I meant so little to him that he could take something like Daniel's ring from me on purpose, just to spite everything I'd ever done for him and given him. My head rattled with the thought that he would do something like that, along with how badly I wanted to open the door, throw him over my knee and spank the shitty behaviour right out of him as I would have done before when I had permission to do such things to his body.

My fingers flexed at my sides as I tossed his words through my mind, stomach tightening with each hateful syllable he'd thrown at me until I hit a point in his sentence that made my entire body go rigid.

He'd wanted to hurt me, yes, but only because I'd hurt him first, somehow. Christ, I had missed that piece entirely. What

the hell did that even mean?

Acting on pure instinct, a creature of rage and confusion, I threw open the front door intending to go find him, to demand to know what he'd meant. I didn't have to go far at all, though. Tiernan was sitting on the top step of the porch, his head in his hands, his hair spilling out like a halo in the dim porch light, catching the glow as his shoulders shook. I resisted the urge to reach out and grab those strands in my hands as I'd done time and time before, using his hair to move him where I'd wanted him and listening to him whimper and purr at the pressure of it against his scalp.

Tiernan loved being manhandled like that and it was only the fact that I didn't have permission to do that anymore that slowed my hand down. Instead of grabbing his hair tight in my fist and giving it a sharp tug, I rested my hand on his head, feeling him quake suddenly at the touch. He sniffled and turned his head up to me.

“What do you mean?” I demanded, watching tears drip down his rosy cheeks, scattering among the freckles that covered his nose like stars. “You wanted to hurt me like I hurt you?”

Tiernan opened his mouth to talk, but I cut him off, glancing at the quiet neighborhood around us. Though I was uncertain about him coming into the house and witnessing the state of it, I couldn't have this conversation where everyone could open their windows and listen to my shame out loud. “In the house.”

He startled a bit, but rose to his shaking knees, his jaw ticking beneath his skin as the muscles tensed. I thought for a moment that he was going to cut and run again, but instead he stomped forward, entering the house and staring at me, red cheeked and tear stained. I made my way to the couch in the living room, needing to sit before I heard whatever it was he was going to tell me, and he watched me go, his eyes trained on my movements like a cat watching its prey.

“Explain,” I said as he took his shoes off and left them in a pile on the tile floor.

“You heard me.”

“I did. Explain how I hurt you.”

Tiernan came to stand in front of me in the living room, his arms crossed in front of his chest. “Not if you’re going to be a dick about it.”

I nodded my agreement and he visibly relaxed, if only the tiniest bit. Reaching over to the end of the sofa he’d always sat on before, I patted the cushion in a way I hoped looked less hostile. “Come sit and tell me what I did to hurt you.”

Tiernan hesitated, then carefully slunk to the couch to perch on the very edge of it like he was ready to run at any moment. His shoulders rose and fell as he took some deep breaths, the sound of it rattling in my ears where I sat beside him. He was shaky and tense, a wild animal ready to run or fight, and try as I might to settle my own self down, I was on edge where I sat, preparing for the worst.

“You didn’t want me, Joel. I know you didn’t, and after Daniel... after he was gone, I knew for sure you didn’t. At one point, you might have loved me, or grown to love me like Daniel did, but... there wasn’t enough time for that before...” he trailed off, shaking his head.

“What are you talking about? What did I do that told you that?” I sputtered, baffled as my voice took an edge I regretted the moment the words left my lips.

“Nothing,” Tiernan snapped, returning my tone with his own sharpness, his face turning red as he balled his hands into fists on his knees. He met my face full on with anger rippling through his handsome features, his jaw set tight beneath his skin and his eyes narrowed at me. “You did nothing and that was the problem, Joel. You did nothing. Said nothing. Not a single word to show me that you cared for me, let alone loved me. You issued demands and set bars so impossibly high that I couldn’t possibly reach for them, but damn it, I tried. I tried so fucking hard all the time, but after Daniel died... you became impossible to please and that’s all I wanted. I couldn’t stay here knowing you didn’t really want me. I couldn’t make myself do it day after day while you hid in the garage painting and falling asleep on the cold floor and pretending I didn’t exist anymore, so I left.”

“And you waited until I was at work instead of talking things out, instead of following the rules we’d put into place about conversations instead of impulsive actions?”

“Yes,” Tiernan bit out, his snarl still close to the surface. “Because what the fuck was the point? The moment Daniel died, you stopped giving a shit about me, about the house, about yourself. Fuck Joel, you hardly took care of yourself anymore and no matter what I did, you wouldn’t respond.”

“My husband died,” I protested, rising to my feet, anger surging through me. “What the fuck was I supposed to do? What did you expect of me?”

“To love me,” Tiernan shouted back, rising to his feet as well. “To eat some goddamn food and to change your clothes for fuck’s sake. I expected you to be my Daddy, Joel. I expected you to be there for me as much as I was trying to be there for you.”

“I did love you. As best as I could, I’m sorry that wasn’t good enough for you up there on your high fucking horse. I’m sorry I couldn’t be all soft and cuddly like Daniel was. I’m sorry I wasn’t him.”

“I never asked you to be Daniel!” he screamed, crossing the living room to stand right in front of me, his whole body shaking and shimmying with pent up rage. “I didn’t need you to be him. All I wanted was for you to be my Daddy. As you were. As you promised you would be. We said we were in it together, but we weren’t. I was fucking alone, Joel. You forgot about me, and I couldn’t stomach being ignored for one more moment. It was killing me to watch you, knowing that you never wanted me in the first place.”

Alarm rippled through my body. “What do you mean?”

Tiernan took a deep breath, then another one, settling himself down before his cold, hard eyes met my own. “You loved Daniel and who he was with me, but you didn’t love me for who I was without him.”

I hesitated, breathing heavy into the small space between us as Tiernan’s eyes flashed anger up at me. Without thinking about what I was doing, I stepped forward into him, bringing his chin to my chest before I bent and hauled him upwards, cupping his ass in my hands. He squawked a noise of surprise but wrapped his legs around my waist and his arms around my neck, clinging to me like a koala bear.

“How could you even think that?” I whispered, my lips inches from his own. “I always wanted you. I always thought of you. I always, always loved you. You hear me, Tiernan?”

“You didn’t ever tell me that,” he murmured back, leaning his forehead on mine as hot tears streamed down his face. “How was I supposed to know that if you never told me?”

I was about to offer more words, another explanation for all the ways I’d fucked up, but Tiernan closed his eyes, and I felt the slightest press of his lips on my own, probing and uncertain. I knew I shouldn’t, but I didn’t even hesitate to answer his unspoken question, meeting his lips with my own, fierce and certain that the feel of him on me was what I needed. What he needed. I reveled in the press of him against me, right where he’d been missing from for the last two years. This was the worst idea, but it felt like one of the best, and

though I'd regret it later, I couldn't deny myself just a taste of the boy who had once been mine.

Tiernan whimpered the tiniest bit into the kiss as I licked at his lips, expecting his tongue to join mine, but instead he grabbed my lower lip in his teeth and bit down hard enough I felt it ringing through my body. He released me and grinned, pulling back a moment to look into my eyes mischievously before leaning in and touching his lips to mine.

"Little shit," I mumbled against his lips, feeling the tang of the bite on my tongue.

"You fucking love it," he murmured back, telling nothing but the truth. Tiernan and Daniel may have played soft, but he'd always been wild with me, feral and unhinged when he'd climb on me and demand that I make him feel good.

How could he even believe I hadn't wanted that? That I hadn't craved that?

His lips pressed against mine again, needy and sure this time, and I gave back what he offered, meeting him in the middle until I felt I'd kissed all the air out of his lungs and he fell to my chest, breathless and solid.

"I hate you," he mumbled into my chest. "I hate that I love you. I love you. I don't know, Daddy. Why didn't you just fucking talk to me?"

"Joel," I corrected, wincing at the title I didn't deserve.

"Joel. Why didn't you just talk to me, Joel?"

“I’m not good with words.” I never had been. Daniel had been the one to lay his feelings bare for everyone to see and I stumbled over the simplest things. Saying the words “I love you” didn’t come easy for me, and those words of caring stuttered in my brain before I could ever let them out.

“You did pretty good just then,” Tiernan pointed out, offering a wry laugh that jostled him where he rested in my hands.

“I’m not a good Daddy, Tiernan,” I confessed, putting to words the one thing that had been on my mind since he’d walked out. “If I was, you’d have stayed, I’m sure of it.”

“You just had to try. You are a good Daddy when you try.”

“I don’t think I’m much of a Daddy anymore. With Daniel it was easier. He filled in all my gaps and when I wasn’t good enough, he was always there. Without him... I don’t think I’m anything.”

Though Tiernan was a slight weight in my hands, my back started screaming at me to put him down. Instead of putting him on the ground, I shuffled backwards to the couch, settling down on a cushion, Tiernan straddled over my lap. Closing my eyes, I reveled in the feeling of him against me, bottling it up for the moment he’d walk out the door for good. Taking stock of the holes in his jeans and the ratty shirt he wore, knowing he’d leave, and I’d be alone again with yet another memory to add to the rest of things in the back of my mind.

“What are you doing?” he asked, removing his hands from around my neck and bringing his palms up to cup my cheeks.

“Memorizing you,” I whispered back, throat clogging with thickness and tears building up behind my eyelids.

“Why?”

“So that when you leave, I can remember what this feels like. I wish I’d had a chance to do that in the first place, before you’d left. I wished all the time that I could remember what your body felt like against mine, what you smelled like, how your hair felt gripped in my hand. I thought I could remember it sometimes, but it was never a good, clear memory.”

“I’ll come back this time,” he replied, sounding the tiniest bit concerned. “I don’t have to go for good when I leave tonight. We could talk a little more. Work some stuff out, maybe?”

“It’s okay, Tiernan.”

“I have a wild idea. Couldn’t we try? Maybe meet up, have coffee or something? I’m trying to figure some stuff out, but I have missed you too much to walk away forever again. Maybe we could start slow and see if we could fix what we both broke? Find out if there’s anything between us anymore worth holding onto?”

My heart screamed for me to agree, to say yes, that we could rewind the clock and start over again, but I knew that was impossible. Without Daniel, I wasn’t sure I could be everything Tiernan needed. Everything he deserved. I could provide him with a roof over his head and money, but I couldn’t be the Daddy he needed, and I knew it.

“If you need a place to stay, you can stay here,” I offered.
“But I think we got ahead of ourselves.”

“Joel—”

“We’ve gotten ahead of ourselves,” I repeated. “There’s too much to consider. Yesterday, I didn’t even know where you were and now that you’re here... I don’t want you to make another snap decision you’ll regret in the end, and this definitely feels like one. I could be a friend, maybe.”

“I already have a friend I can kiss whenever I want,” he protested. “I don’t want another one.”

That was news to me, but then again, I hadn’t asked too much about what his life was like now. Where he lived, how he got money and met his needs. He smelled like clean soap and fresh linen where he was pressed up against me, and for the first time, I found myself considering how he made it all happen.

“Do you need money?” I asked, loosening my grip around him as my heart ached.

“I can get money, and I have a roof over my head now.” He sighed, crawling off my lap. “I don’t need another friend I can kiss sometimes, and I don’t need money or a place to stay. I need a Daddy who loves me. Who knows what I’ve lost because he’s lost the same thing as me and understands that things are hard without Daniel, but we could be something great together. Different, but still great.”

“Tiernan, I’m not who you think I am.”

“You’re not who you think you are either.” He shrugged, crossing the living room and sliding into his shoes in the entryway. “I have to get going back to the hotel or Bryce will call the cops and report me missing or something.”

“Who’s Bryce?”

Tiernan offered a small, sad smile my way as he opened the door. “My friend I kiss sometimes. I told you, Daddy, I don’t need another one of those. I’ve already got one. See you tomorrow.”

As I sputtered out a correction to call me by my name and ask what he meant by “see you tomorrow,” he opened the door, and without another word, disappeared into the night.

Chapter Six

TIERNAN

I hopped onto the lumpy hotel mattress beside Bryce's sleeping form, and spread the newspaper I stole from the front desk over my side of the rust colored sheet. I'd woken up a few moments ago and had drifted across the parking lot half awake to the main office of the hotel where the only coffee maker on site was apparently located. I'd intended to get a cup for myself while Bryce slept, but the paper had caught my eye. I made my cup of coffee, then shoved the newspaper under my armpit and ran as fast as I could back to our room, trying my best to not slosh hot coffee down my arms.

Bryce snorted loudly, then rolled over, cracking an eye open as the edge of the newspaper crinkled beneath him. I hadn't even had a chance to talk with him last night when I returned to the hotel. He'd been fast asleep in the bed, curled into a ball, and I'd been unwilling to wake him as he'd snored and mumbled things beneath his breath. He yawned, blinking at me with a look of confusion on his face. "What's noise?"

I laughed softly. "Noise is newspaper. Go back to sleep."

"Newspaper?"

“I’m looking for a job,” I announced, gently pulling the paper out from under him. I smoothed the crinkled edge out and turned to the classifieds section. Not many places posted jobs in the actual newspaper anymore, but I figured it was worth a try at least. Bryce pulled the blankets up beneath his chin and yawned again.

“You need an app or something,” he mumbled, his eyes drifting shut. “It’s all apps and internet these days.”

“Or maybe I’ll check the job board at the food bank while I’m out.”

Bryce nodded slowly. “Could work. You heading out?”

“After I finish my coffee and have a shower, yeah. We haven’t been for food this week so I thought I’d see if I could get us some stuff to eat. Want to come?”

He grumbled under his breath, shaking his head. “Tired. Late night. No pick-pocketing, okay?”

“Okay,” I agreed. That wasn’t on my mind anyway today. Today was about taking another step towards being a good person and making good choices. Last night with Joel had only served to bolster my resolve to make things different and act instead of letting myself linger on thoughts and wishes. Though he’d cautioned me against making snap decisions regarding the two of us, I was certain he couldn’t see what I saw when I looked at him. If he could, he’d know that the closest I’d felt to home since leaving was when he had hauled me into his arms and held me like I mattered.

I had missed that more than I'd known, at least until that moment. My heart had stuttered in my chest and my entire body had craved to be touched by his strong, sure hands. Even if they weren't so sure anymore. Joel had been certain enough about him and I together that he'd held me, but not certain enough that he could be what he thought I needed, and that prickled at the back of my mind as I scanned the classified ads. There was a sadness that clung to him now, far deeper than the one he'd carried before I'd left, and while I knew my departure owned a piece of the blame, I wasn't sure it was completely because of my actions.

"Tiernan?" Bryce mumbled, apparently more awake than I'd thought he was.

"What's up?"

"Can you get me a coffee?"

I laughed, but the sound trailed off as he sat up on the edge of the bed slowly, the sheet sliding down to reveal his bare back to me. My eyes went wide and a gasp, followed by a noise of distress rattled from my throat. Across his skin were an array of mottled, angry bruises, bursting red in the centers like the skin had been grabbed and pressed hard over and over again. "What did you let him do?"

"It's fine," Bryce mumbled, grabbing the sheet and throwing it over his shoulders to hide what I'd already seen. I gripped the blanket in my hands and yanked it off his back, feeling him bristle as I exposed his skin again.

“No more,” I whispered, my voice shaking with anger and fear as I took in the hand shaped bruises that littered his lower back. I raised my voice a little bit to be sure he heard what I was saying. “You hear me? No fucking more, Bryce.”

“Tiernan, it’s fine. It was worth it. Check the TV stand.”

I slid off the bed, heart aching as I moved to see the stack of bills beside the TV. I counted them up and didn’t come up with a number relatively close to justifying the state of his back. “You’re worth more than this. Why do you keep letting people hurt you so much when you know you don’t like it? I don’t understand this train of thought you fall into all the time, Bryce, where you think that anyone can do whatever they want to you for any price. It scares me because what if someone goes too far. What if they hurt you really bad?”

He shrugged, and I sighed, putting the bills back down where he’d placed them last night. I watched him for a moment, still waiting for words from him to tell me that he understood how unsafe he was being, to let me know he cared for his own safety as much as I did. He offered nothing in return, so I crossed the room to stand in front of him where he sat on the edge of the bed. His darkened eyes met mine, head tilted back so I could see the bruises of exhaustion that circled his eyes, and I stepped forward between his legs. Cradling his head in my hands, I pulled his cheek to my stomach and held him there, feeling him lean into me, his shoulders shaking against my hips. I wasn’t sure if he was crying, shivering, or both and it didn’t matter. I stood in silence, stroking his prickly hair with my hand and giving comfort through the gentle touch

he secretly craved the most but would never ask for from the assholes on the street who bought his body, doubling down on my resolve to get not only myself, but both of us, out of this mess of a life we'd created.



I hefted my backpack on my shoulders as I stepped up the stairs leading to the front door of Joel's house, a smile playing at the corners of my lips. The food bank had given me enough food and snacks to get Bryce and I through the next few weeks, plus I'd grabbed some information on some open jobs around the city. There wasn't anything great and nothing full time, but even a part time position was better than nothing. If I played my cards right and made some calls, I was sure I'd have a good start on a solution to making sure Bryce didn't feel the need to do what he did for money anymore.

Bolstered by the great day I'd been having since leaving the hotel behind, I couldn't help but grin to myself as I anticipated the look on Joel's face when he opened the door to find me there. To see that I had come back as I'd promised I would after the conversation in the early morning hours.

My stomach swooped nervously though as I raised my hand to knock on the wooden door. I swallowed the tiny curl of uncertainty down and gave three sharp raps to the surface, then took a step back, waiting for Joel to come answer. I rocked on my feet as I waited, tipping from heel to toe and then back to my heel as the weight of my bag jostled at my back. I loved the feeling of a fully loaded backpack, it had come to mean

comfort and promise of good things to me out here on the streets, and that feeling meant everything when I didn't have much to my name.

“Tiernan.” Joel sighed as he opened the door, his face gaunt and his eyes sunken into his skull. New stubble cupped his cheeks, creating darkened shadows that made his entire face thin and frail. He yawned as soon as the sigh had finished, and I watched as he pulled a shaky hand up to cover his mouth. Had he not slept a single wink last night? I cocked my head to the side and took in the outfit he wore, a pair of paint splattered dark blue sweatpants and an equally grubby grey T-shirt that had drippings of dried color across the front. It all looked ratty and old where it clung to his frame and that was worrying when Joel had always been so well put together before.

“Hi, Daddy,” I murmured, finally meeting his eyes. “Were you painting?”

He shook his head, then scrubbed a hand down his face and sighed again. “What are you doing here?”

“I told you I'd come back this time,” I offered, stepping towards the door. “I promised I would and I wanted you to know that I meant it. Can I come in?”

Joel lingered for a moment like he was thinking, but I could see the longing written into his eyes as he scanned my body. I knew he wouldn't find much there, living rough had left me with nothing but beaten up clothing and less pounds on my thin frame than I really could afford to lose. Sometimes I

looked in the mirror now and wondered where all the meat that had once clung to my bones had gone, knowing full well that without carefully planned meals, I'd waste away to nothing and die starving on the streets.

I had seen that happen once and the memory of that frail, gaunt skeleton of a woman tucked beneath a torn apart cardboard box she had used as a blanket would never leave me.

Instead of waiting for a response from Joel in words, I stepped into him and wrapped my arms around his waist, breathing in the scent of him as he tensed a bit, then gave in. His chin hit the top of my head, and I could feel each breath he took ruffling my hair as I melted against his body.

“You smell good,” I whispered, closing my eyes and inhaling the scent of him again. Leather and oil paint filled my nose, like that was what he was made of. I could have been remembering another time he'd held me, but that didn't matter.

“What do I smell like?” he asked with a small laugh.

“Home.”

Joel stiffened in my grasp the tiniest amount and took a little step away from me, making me loosen my arms around him. He took another step back and sighed, gesturing into the house. “I guess you could come in. I was just thinking I should get ready for work, though.”

“I won't stay long,” I responded as I walked in, kicked my shoes off and placed them in the boot tray, right where I'd

always put them before. Daniel's electric blue Nikes sat there still, the laces tied like he'd slipped out of each shoe without untying it first like he always did. I fingered the laces for a moment, half expecting him to come rushing around the corner and scoop me into his arms, but when I glanced up, he wasn't there. I found myself swallowing hard at the memory of all the times he'd been there before. Another hit came as I saw the concrete duck that Joel hadn't understood sitting right beside the tall, thin table that held a ceramic bowl full of house keys and receipts, as it always had been. In my anger and sadness, I hadn't taken stock of the house the night before but I was starting to get the picture of what existed in the space around me now that I was calm. I touched the duck, resting my hand on the cool concrete and closing my eyes for just a minute as more memories flooded my brain. The moment it had come home, the way Joel had frowned in his confusion, and the grin on Daniel's handsome face. "I don't get it."

"What was that?"

"It was what you said so many times. You never understood the duck." I turned my head up to look at Joel, offering a small smile.

"I still don't. Not really, but it's important to me now."

That same lump rose in my throat as the hurt in those words wiggled its way right into my brain. I blinked back a sudden spate of tears, knowing that I couldn't let myself start crying over everything I saw in this house or I'd never stop. Joel met my eyes and nodded like he understood even though I hadn't

said a single word. Before I could find it within myself to speak, he gestured for me to follow him and made his way into the kitchen, his socked feet shuffling over the grey tiles like they were too heavy for him to lift. I got up from my crouch on the floor and left the duck behind, taking in the way everything looked exactly as it always had, surprised to see that not a single thing I could think of was missing. Even the camel picture that Joel had hated hung on its spot on the wall and the bright red kettle sat on the stove still, like it was waiting for Daniel to come and make tea. It was like a snapshot taken in a time before Daniel had died and where there should have been comfort in the familiarity, I found only concern building up inside me.

How had he not changed a single thing over the last two years?

“Coffee?” Joel asked, holding up a mug I recognized. My mug. The one printed with the words “baby bear” above the outline of a tiny brown bear cub silhouette. I glanced at the counter as I nodded, seeing the accompanying “Daddy Bear” mugs I’d bought him and Daniel sitting in their spots beside the coffee maker. My heart thudded in my chest as I nodded, the joy I’d had inside when I found those mugs online rippling through my brain like a distant memory I couldn’t quite grasp the shape of anymore.

“You kept it all the same,” I commented, a bit surprised as more and more of Daniel’s things came into my view.

The bright colored daffodil magnets on the fridge.

The yellow sugar container printed with tiny bumblebees.

Daniel had been a maximalist at heart, but everything had always had its place. Still had its place, I supposed, though it prickled and ached at me as I took it all in knowing that Joel, who hated clutter, hadn't moved a single thing.

"I did," Joel responded, placing my full cup on the counter and sliding over the bee covered sugar container.

"Do you have any whipped cream?" I asked, crossing the kitchen to open the fridge because I knew there was a good chance there was a container inside. Despite being into eating healthy, Joel had a sweet tooth and loved whipped cream on his desserts as much as I loved putting it into my coffee so it would melt to make my drink creamy and delicious.

Joel made a small sound of disapproval and concern behind me, and as I pulled the door open, I realized the reason. His fridge was nearly empty save for a half emptied carton of milk, a small container of butter and a handful of sandwich meat in a baggie that had been shoved to the back corner of the top shelf. I was stunned as I stared at the lack of food where there had always been plenty of fresh vegetables, cheese and snacks in the fridge. Joel had always insisted that I eat well and made delicious, healthy meals for the whole house back when we'd all been together. It was because of him that I picked up cans of veggies from the food bank instead of filling my bag with the cookies and snacks I craved more than healthy stuff. Even more worrying was that Joel lived for those gross pudding cups that you had to keep cold or else they'd

spoil. He'd always called them his favorite little treat after a long day and to see that there were none in there was alarming. "Where's all your food, Daddy?"

Joel was silent and I turned to him, then back to the empty fridge, worry bubbling inside me. I slowly closed the door, then opened the freezer to find a stack of frozen meals covered in little bits of frost like they'd been bought some time ago and not been touched since. Clearly, he hadn't been eating those either, and as I closed the door, I turned to see his reddened cheeks, half hidden behind the scruff on his face as he looked down and away from where I stood.

"Are you not eating?" I asked, trying to be gentle though my alarm was obvious.

Joel slowly shrugged. "I have sandwiches, mostly."

"Daddy," I breathed, shaking my head. "What happened to eating healthy and all of the things you taught me before?"

"It's fine, Tiernan." There was an edge to his tone that I almost recognized, but I didn't heed whatever warning he'd meant.

"It isn't though," I protested, obviously speaking out of turn yet unable to stop myself. "This isn't okay at all."

"Tiernan, please."

Joel finally turned to look at me, I was struck with the sorrow in his eyes and the shame that made his face bleak and drawn. I couldn't help but reach for him, grabbing his arms and pulling him forward, letting the man I couldn't stop

thinking of as my Daddy lean into me. I had seen him cry and rage at me the night before, but this was completely different, and all I could think to do was care for him as Daniel had cared for me once.

“It’s been hard, huh?” I whispered, mimicking the words Daniel used to say to me, as I ran my hand down Joel’s back. It was such a strange feeling to be the one offering comfort, to be the one in this position where before it had always been reversed, but Joel needed it. I hadn’t realized the gravity of what he’d been going through. The thought that he’d been dragged so far down that he’d stopped doing the very basic things he’d always done floored me, though the signs had been there since I’d seen him last night. I had thought for these past two years that he was fine, that he was better off without me hanging around taking up spaces I didn’t belong in, but feeling him against me had me wondering how wrong I’d been and how much more about this new Joel I had yet to discover.

Finally, Joel sighed and stood upright, offering a small smile. “That was weird.”

“Reversed,” I agreed with a small laugh. “But I meant what I said.”

I let him go and headed for the entryway where my backpack sat, filled to the brim with food and toiletries for Bryce and I. Joel raised an eyebrow as I picked it up and put it on the kitchen table, undoing the zipper, then came to stand beside me as his curiosity rose.

“What’s all this?” he asked, looking at the canned vegetables and boxed goods.

“I get these healthy things now because of you, Daddy,” I murmured, pulling out a can of peas, which I secretly hated but ate anyway, and a couple cups of microwavable macaroni and cheese so he could see. “I think it’s shitty to barely eat when you taught me to take care of myself. Yeah, it’s just canned stuff but it’s vegetables all the same.”

“You buy veggies?” Joel had the strangest look of amusement on his face, his lips threatening to curl into a real smile.

“I choose them.” I shrugged, placing the things back in my backpack. “I can pick whatever things I want, but I always make sure I choose some vegetables and some healthy grains and stuff.”

“Pick from where?”

“The food bank.”

Joel inhaled a sharp breath like that news somehow surprised him, though I wasn’t sure how. Clearly with my beat up clothing and patched up bag, I was struggling.

“Tiernan, do you have a home?”

“Yeah,” I responded with a shrug. “Well sort of. I told you before. Bryce and I are staying at the Satellite Motel. It’s a roof and a bed. We lived in a basement for a while, that was a whole thing I’ll tell you about sometime, but we have a roof now.”

“The Satellite Motel.” Joel sighed, shaking his head. It definitely had a reputation, but the motel was the only thing Bryce and I could afford for the time being, and until I had a stable job, it was the best option. “I thought you’d gone home to your parents’ place.”

“Why would I ever do that?” I snorted, laughing as I shook my head right back at him. That was ridiculous. My parents and I had parted ways when I hit eighteen, and I hadn’t spoken with them much since. They’d never really wanted to have a kid and once I’d hit eighteen, they were content with letting me out into the world on my own. They’d done their job getting me through high school and making sure I had a tiny bit of money to get set up as an adult, or so they’d told me time and time again as I’d packed my bags and headed out to start living without them. I’d had a job working at a fast food restaurant and while I had hated smelling like grease all the time, I was able to afford a place of my own and the fees for The Red Door. That was the life I thought I was going back to when I’d walked out of Joel’s, and it stung a bit having to admit that things had not gone the same this time around when I’d gone off to venture on my own again.

“So, you’ve been homeless?”

“Yeah, mostly. It sucked at first, but I got through. Made some friends, learned where and how to get things. Bryce and I manage... Well, we do okay? Sort of?”

Joel went silent but I could see a question written into his eyes that he wasn’t saying out loud. He paused for a long

moment before inhaling a deep breath. “And Bryce is your friend. The one you kiss sometimes. Are you... together?”

Ah. That look made a lot more sense now. I grinned and shook my head. “Nah. We kiss sometimes, but we haven’t slept together in a sexy way in a long time. We used to, but we’re not compatible that way.” Joel nodded slowly as he took everything in, and I charged forward with the rest of what I wanted to say. “Because he’s not a Daddy. I think he might be a boy, but we’ve never really talked about it. All I’ve wanted since I left is to have my Daddy back and to let him know I missed him a lot.”

“Tiernan.” Joel sighed. “I’ve told you, I’m not that person. I don’t know if I ever was.”

“And I told you that you don’t know who you are.” He was a Daddy all right, he just needed a reminder, I was sure of it. Joel shrugged my words off and grabbed his coffee mug, heading towards the living room. Despite telling me that he had to get ready for work, he pulled the purple blanket off the back of the couch and settled down onto the cushions. Taking a sip of his coffee and snuggling into the blanket, I was struck by a thought as I watched him like he was some sort of odd zoo creature I’d never seen before.

There he sat on the couch, huddled in the blanket his dead husband had wrapped around him every single night before bed, a mess of hollowed, sunken eyes and frail hands too shaky to wrap around the coffee mug he cradled in his lap.

Somewhere in there was my Daddy, and I was going to find him.

Chapter Seven

JOEL

Tiernan disappeared around the corner, heavy backpack on his shoulders, hair glistening in the dimming light of the afternoon, and my heart clenched watching him walk away knowing where he was headed.

The Satellite Motel sat on the outskirts of town and was a known refuge for people who either had nowhere else to go or who wanted to take advantage of the lack of security policing the place. I had only ever driven past it and even seeing it from a distance was enough to let me know that it was no place for a boy like Tiernan and his best friend. I had bitten my tongue so hard when he'd told me about where he and this Bryce were staying, swallowing the urge to demand he move into my house where I knew he wouldn't be in danger. I didn't even care if he brought Bryce with him, or whatever else might happen between them behind closed doors, as long as they were safe.

As long as he was safe.

With a heavy heart that felt as unsure about things as my brain did, I stepped away from the front window and made my

way to the bathroom, pushing as many thoughts and worries about Tiernan out of my head as I could. Certain things lingered though. The way his arms had felt around me had meant much more than I'd ever confess out loud.

It had been two years since someone had touched me beyond a simple handshake.

Though offers had been there from some of the boys at the club, I could never find it inside myself to genuinely consider any of them. The thought of being with someone who wasn't Daniel or Tiernan curdled my stomach and made me nauseous, but when I had confessed that to my therapist, she'd told me that these things take time. Until last night, I'd still been waiting for that time to come when I could look at another boy without wanting to cry for the one I'd lost or rage at how he'd left me.

I turned on the taps and got the water heating up for my shower while I stood in front of the mirror in the bathroom, pulling my clothing off and dropping it to a pile on the black and white tile Daniel had picked out. As I looked in the mirror, I took genuine stock of what I looked like, scanning my body with much more scrutiny than I had over the last few years.

What did Tiernan see when he looked at me now?

Could he see the way my frame had lost definition, sinking into itself where muscles once stood proudly? Did he notice the lines and wrinkles on my face, the crow's feet by my eyes that had popped up out of nowhere after spending so much time smiling followed by hours and hours crying? I was in my

mid-thirties, but I was struck with a vision of myself as an old man, frail and withered where I stood in the bathroom, naked as the day I was born as I stared at the places I used to love about myself. Gone were the lines of abs that had once made my torso look far more chiseled than it truly was. I'd known how to stand and flex to get everything to line up just right, to look perfect for my husband and our boy. I flexed slightly, pretending that I was the same as I'd always been but my reflection resembled a ghost trying to capture what it felt like to have a body that was strong and solid again. I sighed, slumping where I stood, the damage these last two years had done rippling through me like a freight train.

Was he attracted to me anymore?

Tiernan looked much the same, save for a bit thinner. Where I had lost muscle definition, he'd found his, though whether that was an outcome he'd achieved on purpose or by accident through the cost of being homeless, I wasn't sure. He was every bit as enticing as I'd always found him to be, and I was at war with myself over whether that was a problem or not. I'd always found him handsome with his chiseled jaw that held the tiniest cleft in the middle of his chin. He'd call it his "bum chin" when he wasn't feeling comfortable inside his own skin and would pick himself apart with words if Daniel or I let him. I'd always place my thumb there in that divot, curling my fingers beneath his jawbone just to feel the sharpness of it against my skin, reminding him with my touch that I loved every bump on every bone he had inside his body.

I had never told him that out loud, and in the aftermath of learning the reason he'd fled the house, I regretted trying to make my touch say things my mouth didn't have the words for.

Sighing out loud, I stepped into the shower and let the hot water trickle down my skin, feeling it dribble into soft places that were once hard and soft, that were hardening as my thoughts turned to the lithe build I knew to be hidden beneath Tiernan's ratty clothing. I ran my hand down my stomach as I closed my eyes, imagining that Tiernan was there with me, sharing the shower as he'd often done before. He was never shy when it came to sex. Tiernan had always been eager to get into the water with me even when I'd told him no and promised a spanking if he persisted. "A spanking can be fun," he'd tell me, mischief twinkling in his eyes as he'd get to his knees on the bottom of the tub and press his nose into my groin.

A soft "oh" crept from my lips as I brushed my fingers down my hardening length, uncertain if I wanted to take myself in hand or let the erection fade into nothing as I often did. I stroked my fingers down my cock again before gently wrapping my hand around it, giving it a small squeeze just to see how it felt, imagining for just a moment that it was Tiernan's wet mouth instead of my own fingers.

I stroked myself once, picturing the redness of his cheeks in the heat of the bathroom, my boy on his knees in front of me, looking up at me with his eyes as he waited for me to use him as he wanted to be used.

Tiernan always wanted to be used.

I gasped softly, stroking my cock again, skin tingling as my hand moved over myself drawing goosebumps to the surface of my skin. Tightening my grip, I pushed my hips forward, sliding my wet dick through my fist as my body came to life in ways it hadn't in a long time. My nipples, always sensitive, turned to hardened buds as I leaned forward, bracing myself on the wall of the shower with one hand, stroking harder with the other. I let my mind drift as I gave myself over to pleasure, not surprised when it landed on the way Tiernan would moan and squirm when I'd reach for his hair and wrap it in my fist, holding him in place as I fucked into his mouth, fast and hard. His hands would hang by his sides for a few moments before reaching up to cup my ass, pushing me into him deeper and making me stay there until I was certain he couldn't breathe. His tongue would lap at my skin, his throat swallowing around me as I held him and he held me.

Right where we wanted each other to be.

He'd make a noise at the back of his throat as I'd finally slide out, giving him space to breathe as his watery eyes would meet mine.

I moaned loud into the bathroom at the memory of how blown wide with arousal his pupils would look beneath the spray of the hot water. My hand furiously stroked my cock, hips thrusting forward as I bucked into my fist, chasing an orgasm that was coming quicker than I'd anticipated. My entire body tensed like a coiled spring, ready for the pressure

that was building up inside to release, and with a few final thrusts, I came hard, panting and moaning into the echoes of the water crashing to the bathtub. I rode out my orgasm in short, quick thrusts, cum spurting onto the tiles I leaned against.

“Fuck,” I whispered as my body relaxed, slumping a bit where I stood. I let go of my cock and let go of my thoughts, standing in the bathroom with the water beating down on my skin, too tired now to even move. After a few moments, I yawned and stood upright, feeling my muscles pull beneath my skin as I moved to finish up my shower so I could get to work.



Ambrose made a show of checking his watch as I walked in through the employee door, glancing between me and his wrist with a look of mock surprise.

“Don’t,” I warned, anticipating a sly comment to come sliding out of his mouth. I was running late for my usual schedule, yet early for the club.

“Six forty-seven?” Ambrose asked, giving me another look of mock surprise, punctuated by hanging his jaw agape for a few moments.

“I come in late sometimes.”

“No, you don’t. Are you getting sick?”

“Ambrose.” I laughed. “I’m fine. Just running a bit behind, that’s all.”

He eyed me carefully, like he was waiting for me to confess to something. The real reason I was running late, perhaps, even though I knew I couldn't tell him about Tiernan's sudden arrival in my life again. After stomping around here like a righteous asshole and giving him shit about Hobie, I couldn't handle telling him about the boy I'd found again.

The boy who wasn't mine and wouldn't be mine again, I reminded myself, sobering my thoughts as reality crept back in.

Ambrose nodded once, though he still looked uncertain that I was telling him the truth. He appeared like he was about to speak again when the door behind me clanged open and a ruckus ensued behind me. I turned to see Hobie stumbling through the door, hefting a backpack and a guitar case in his hands. He scowled as he bumped the case against the wall and nearly dropped the backpack.

"Fuck this," he muttered as he bumped and clanged down the hallway, half dragging the backpack behind him.

"Rough day, sweet boy?" Ambrose asked, reaching for Hobie and being gifted nothing but a frown in return.

"I hate school. This is fucking stupid, why did I let you talk me into this shit?" Hobie grumbled, as he slumped in front of his Daddy. Hobie had started training to become a music therapist at the beginning of the semester and three weeks in he was starting to struggle a bit with the pressure. Ambrose had confided that he was proud, but worried that the boy was taking on too much at once with the heavy course load he'd

chosen. As Hobie stood scowling at the world, I wondered if Ambrose wasn't right about that, not that I'd ever say as much out loud.

"I talked you into nothing," Ambrose offered in response. "I said it was your choice and that this might be too much at once. You were the one who chose this, my sweetest boy."

"Don't remind me," Hobie griped, scowling hard at his Daddy.

Ambrose tucked his hand beneath Hobie's chin, and I noted the way the boy melted at the contact, a feral animal calmed at last by the touch it needed. His body relaxed and he sighed for a moment as Ambrose murmured something to him that I couldn't make out. Whatever the words were, it worked as Hobie righted himself and headed away down the hallway that led to the main area of the club, leaving behind his backpack but taking the guitar case with him.

"He owes me a song." Ambrose smiled, watching his boy disappear at the end of the long hallway. He turned to me with a frown on his lips though. "And he owes you an apology. He didn't even say hello."

"No big deal," I responded, because it wasn't really. Hobie and I had never warmed up to each other, though there was not real hate there either. It was more of an unspoken agreement between us that we both cared for Ambrose in our own way and we left it at that. As far as I knew, there was no animosity between us, and I liked to think that if Hobie outright disliked me, Ambrose would let me know so we could work it out.

“It is a big deal,” Ambrose responded with a smile as the wonky sound of a guitar being tuned rattled through the air. “And I bet whatever’s made you walk in late with an actual hint of a smile on your face is a big deal too.”

I offered a shrug and a smile in response, as Ambrose nodded like he understood, though what he imagined was likely far from the truth. Leaving my boss behind, I headed for the front of the place to start the work of opening up, the sound of Hobie working his way through some classic rock song filling the spaces in the silence where memories of Tiernan didn’t already exist.

Chapter Eight

TIERNAN

Bryce stood at the edge of the cemetery by the wrought iron pedestrian gate, his back to me as he scanned the horizon. He'd taken up that post the moment we'd gotten to the graveyard, unwilling to step through the gates and visit people he knew that were buried here, but also unable to make himself leave my side today. He'd been a bit clingy since we'd woken up, following me into the bathroom when I'd showered and then inviting himself to join me when I left the room behind. I was secretly more pleased to have him with me today than I'd ever let him know. If he was with me, he wasn't being reckless with himself in darkened alleyways or on the streets.

I sat on the ground in front of Daniel's headstone, smoothing my fingers over the words that made up his name as I always did when I visited here. The only difference was that I hadn't been able to bring flowers today and that felt sort of odd to me. I'd have to make it up to him later and bring extra next time in the brightest colors I could find. The red carnations were long gone, probably having been tidied away as they'd wilted by someone who worked at the cemetery or possibly swept away by the wind.

“Hi, Daddy,” I whispered, settling onto the earth though I knew I wouldn’t be here long today. Not with Bryce waiting, and the shelter to still head to before it closed. I had called about jobs from the cracked brown phone in the hotel room before it had stopped working well enough to place more calls. The line crackled and fizzed now when I tried to make a call, but the shelter would have a phone I could use to continue my job hunt.

Turning my focus back to the headstone, I rippled with the tiniest bit of excitement. In all of the times I’d been here, it had never been a happy visit, but today it was different.

“I went back,” I told Daniel, swirling my fingertip over and over again through the first letter of his name carved into the granite headstone. “Home, I mean, though I don’t know if I can call it that anymore. It’s Joel’s home now, but you are everywhere still. He has everything still, Daddy, and though it was awesome to see you all over the house, it makes me a little bit worried. Remember how I said I thought he’d probably gotten rid of stuff he didn’t like? I think part of me hoped just a little bit that he had. Even if he’d only taken down the stupid camel picture. That ugly ass thing that you loved, but Joel and I hated. I don’t know. It just felt strange to be standing in the house filled with all of your stuff and knowing that instead of just keeping a few things to remember you by, he kept it all.”

I paused, considering what I was saying because coming from my lips the idea that Daniel’s things should be packed up

and removed felt cold and callous. Maybe that feeling was the reason everything still sat where it had always been.

“It feels... frozen in time,” I ventured again, trying to explain my thoughts. “Like... a stuck sort of feeling. Yeah. That’s better. It feels frozen and stuck, like it’s all just waiting for you to come back, but you’re not coming back.”

That felt like a clearer explanation for the thoughts going through my mind as I’d looked around the house, and I smiled, satisfied that I’d managed to figure out what I was trying to say. My voice pitched lower, softer as I started talking again, the words murmured instead of spoken out loud as I glanced over my shoulder to make sure Bryce wasn’t listening to me chatter away to a piece of rock in the ground. Not that he’d judge, but it still felt uncomfortable. “He doesn’t know who he is anymore. He isn’t eating, and I don’t know if he’s sleeping. I didn’t even get to ask if he’s painted anything cool lately, but seeing him? I don’t know if he has. He told me he’s not sure he ever was a Daddy and he thought that was why I left. Because he couldn’t be you.” I inhaled another breath as I shook my head. “I’m going to find him again. He’s in there somewhere. I can see him peeking out at me sometimes, and I’m sure he had a lot of things he wanted to say to me about where I’m living now but he kept his lips zipped. He’s not the Daddy I knew, but I know I can find him again if I try.”

I glanced over at Bryce again, to find him shifting uncomfortably on his feet, a sure sign he was ready to leave. Standing up off the ground, I brushed the dirt and dead grass

from the seat of my pants, then touched the top of the headstone, resting my hand against the smooth, cool granite.

“I’ll come back,” I promised. “I’ll bring flowers next time. Lots of them. I love you, Daddy, and I miss you so much.”

I gave the headstone a small tap with my hand to say goodbye, then turned and made my way through the rows of graves to join Bryce at the beginning. He smiled as he saw me, his eyes meeting mine with an unspoken question written into them.

“I’m all right,” I offered, guessing at what the look was all about.

“Okay,” he replied, nodding his head. “Ready to go head to the shelter?” There was a bit of a snarl at the edge of the last word, and I grinned, knocking into him with my shoulder.

“It’ll be fine. Nobody’s going to lock you up and demand you stay there, Bryce.”

He shrugged, but I knew what was on his mind. He’d spent a lifetime being shuffled from place to place in the foster care system after his mom had died, and he wasn’t willing to settle down in another place with rules and guidelines he felt were unfair. Whenever we’d stayed in the shelter before, during the coldest nights of the year when the basement was too chilly to stay down in, he’d hardly gotten any sleep, and he’d been grouchy as hell the entire week.

“All I want to do is check the job board again and use their phone.” And maybe see if one of the workers could help me

build a resume sometime soon, though I didn't really have anything to put on it. My last job was years ago when I'd worked at that kennel for a week before I needed to leave. I hadn't been able to handle animals dying without having a warm and loving forever home, though my dream job was still doing something with cats and dogs. I just wasn't sure what that would be.

"Maybe I could be a cat trainer," I said out loud as Bryce and I walked down the gravel road that led away from the cemetery.

"A cat trainer."

"It could be a thing," I protested, even though it likely wasn't.

"A cat trainer," Bryce repeated in that same flat tone he used when I said something he found ridiculous.

"It could be a thing, Bryce. You never know. There's lot of jobs people do now. Maybe someone needs a cat trainer. What do you want to be?"

Bryce hesitated, and I expected another non-committal shrug, as was his specialty, but instead he inhaled a slow breath, eyes straight ahead as the gravel gave way to the pavement. "I just want to have money. I don't care what the job is, and I don't have to make a lot, I just want to have enough cash to live on, you know?"

I nodded my agreement, though I wasn't certain we were exactly on the same page. Bryce's desire to have enough

money to live on drove him to make really risky decisions that even I on my worst days couldn't imagine making, and that scared me for him.

"I love you, you know that right?" I blurted, needing him to hear it today for some reason. "You're my best friend and you're really important to me."

"I know," he responded. "You're my best friend and I love you too."

"Okay."

Silence was our company as we made our way through the streets of the city heading for the shelter, my head full of quiet worries and little pieces of excitement at what we'd find when we got there.



"Daddy!" I called out as Joel opened the door of his house to me.

Joel sighed, but he didn't correct me for calling him that, and I could see the hint of a smile at the corners of his lips. "Hi, Tiernan."

"I have exciting things to share. Can I come in today?"

"Exciting things, huh?" he responded as he stepped back from the door to let me in.

I stepped into the entryway, kicking off my shoes and not putting them in the boot tray on purpose. He'd always been a stickler for tidiness, and though he made a small scrunched

face at my shoes strewn in front of the door, he didn't say anything about it. I left them there, just to see if he'd eventually comment on it or provide the correction I knew had to be somewhere at the back of his mind.

“Yes, exciting things. I have been looking for a job.”

“Oh?” Joel said, following me as I traipsed past him into the living room and settled onto the couch. He came to sit at the opposite end, grabbing the purple blanket and wrapping it around himself. I noted that today he was dressed in a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt again, but this time they weren't falling apart or covered in paint and that felt a bit better than yesterday, even if he looked like he hadn't slept again.

“I'm going to be a dog groomer,” I announced, hardly able to contain my excitement. One of the shelter workers had shown me that there were a bunch of jobs I could do that had to do with animals, and I had been drawn to the idea of bathing and clipping dogs. And cats. I would probably learn how to groom cats as well since I secretly liked them a tiny bit more than dogs.

“A dog groomer?”

“Yes. I'm going to find a job that will teach me how and then I'm going to find a space to have my own business.”

“Tiernan,” Joel said, a warning hidden in the tone that made my entire body light up in recognition. Here it came. The moment my Daddy would caution me to not be hasty and to take one thing at a time. I prickled with anticipation at the words of warning that were probably going to contain an offer

to help me get through my thoughts so I could plan properly for success instead of jumping into failure like I always seemed to do. I was a big picture kind of person; my brain was already jumping to what my grooming salon might look like even though I knew there were probably a thousand steps that had to come first.

“Yes, Daddy?”

Joel made a face, then shook his head. “Never mind. I’m sure you’ve got it figured out. You always did like animals.”

“I did. I do,” I responded, a bit disappointed at the lack of reprimand I’d gotten.

Joel sank into his seat on the couch and gave me a half hearted smile, though I could see his mind was working hard behind his chocolate brown eyes. He yawned, his eyes sliding closed for a brief moment to reveal the bruised lids, darkened by what was an obvious lack of sleep on his part. His head dipped a little bit but he caught himself before he drifted off, and I was struck with how sleepy he looked today. Far worse than the day before, even if his clothing was better. There were just so many things about him now that felt off, that felt wrong about the man I knew Joel to be.

“Did you work late last night?”

“Not really, just didn’t sleep well. I have a bit of a headache,” he mumbled, yawning again before he closed his eyes and made a tired sort of humming noise underneath his breath. He reached up and rubbed at his temples, his eyes

scrunching and his lip curling upwards like he was in genuine pain.

“Did you take something? Tylenol?”

He shook his head, and I sighed. Of course he hadn't. That was one thing that hadn't changed for him, apparently. Joel had always hated taking pain relievers and would often suffer through whatever ailed him until Daniel would step in and make him take something to take the edge off. I rose from the couch and Joel opened his eyes, wincing at me.

“Where are you going?”

“To get you a Tylenol,” I called back as I headed for the bathroom.

He made a small noise, and I heard the couch squeak as I turned the light on in the bathroom and looked around the space, taking in the black and white tiles Daniel had gotten installed and the hot pink towels that hung on the rack, just waiting to be used. I reached for the medicine cabinet, but stopped short, hand hovering over the toothbrush holder on the countertop right beside the sink. All three of the openings held a toothbrush, and as I took in what I saw, my heart rose in my throat.

He kept Daniel's toothbrush.

And mine.

“What the fuck?” I whispered as I reached out and plucked the green toothbrush that had been mine from its spot. I ran my finger over the used bristles, not even caring that it was

probably full of germs as I tried to fathom why this had been kept. Paintings, trinkets, and pillows made some sense, but toothbrushes were a whole new level of worrying. What else had he held onto that should have been thrown away years ago? I pulled open the medicine cabinet on the wall, still clutching my toothbrush in one hand.

My eyes went even wider as I saw Daniel's brush sitting on one of the shelves, his blonde hairs still clinging to the bristles. I picked it up with my free hand and held it up, eyeing the strands that had once sat on his head with sadness and more than a little bit of concern rumbling inside me.

A small sigh from behind me made me whirl around, eyes wide, to find Joel standing there, a sad look in his eyes.

"Daddy, why did you keep these?" I asked, holding out my toothbrush and Daniel's hair brush like he hadn't already realized I was holding them.

Joel shrugged, but I could see distress rising behind the cool demeanor he was trying to give off. His eyes darted from my full hands to the holder on the counter where Daniel's purple one sat. I plucked it from the ceramic container with the same hand that held mine, watching as Joel appeared to stuff down a protest, his throat bobbing like he was swallowing the words he'd wanted to say.

"This is garbage," I murmured, holding both of the used toothbrushes and the hair clogged hairbrush. "Why did you keep them?"

“I don’t know” he whispered, reaching out like he wanted to take them from me, but I pulled them away with a shake of my head.

“This is garbage,” I repeated. “We should throw them away.”

Joel swallowed hard again, eyes darting wildly around the bathroom as he held his hand out for them a second time. “Please, Tiernan.”

I hesitated, holding onto the items so tight they were digging into my palm. What I held in my hands was trash. Two-year-old, germy trash. “We should throw them away.”

“Tiernan,” Joel said, his voice pitching a bit louder, a bit higher as his distress became visible. His eyes filled with tears and his hand shook where it lingered in the air, still outstretched. “Put them back. Please.”

“Why?”

“Just put them back.”

“Why, Daddy? Why did you keep these?”

“Because,” he snapped, his face running red as a tear made its way down his drawn cheek. “Because they were his. Put them back.”

Startled at the snarl in his tone, I took a step back, bringing my full hands to my chest. “He doesn’t need them anymore. You can throw them away. It’s okay.”

“They were his things.” Tears streamed down his face, and his cheeks grew red with anger as he stared at the items in my hands, then turned his eyes to mine. Joel shook where he stood, though whether it was fear or anger, or both, driving this reaction, I wasn’t sure. “You don’t get to waltz in here after what you did and tell me what I should have kept and what I should have thrown away. It’s been two years, Tiernan. Two fucking years without a single word from you. You don’t have the right to take things that were his away from me again.”

That last sentence stung like a slap to the face, and though I deserved it, I bristled all the same. “Daddy—”

“No,” Joel snapped, cutting me off. “Not Daddy. Put my stuff down.”

Narrowing my eyes, I dropped the toothbrush that had been Daniel’s and the hairbrush to the ground, the clatter of them hitting the tiles ringing in my ears. I held onto my toothbrush though, and raised it so it was right in his face. “This was mine and I can do what I want with it.”

“Tiernan,” Joel warned, but I was beyond done with listening to him. I stomped past him and made my way to the kitchen, opening the cupboard where the trashcan sat. Joel followed, hot on my trail as I flung open the door to the cabinet beneath the sink.

With a defiant glare at my Daddy, I threw my old, grimy toothbrush into the can and slammed the cabinet door shut

with a satisfying crash. Crossing my arms, I turned and glared at Joel. “That’s where it belongs.”

His mouth dropped open, but no words came forth. Slowly, like a melting ice cube, his entire face crumbled, his trembling hands coming up to cover his quivering cheeks as he sobbed into them, shoulders shaking. He fell to his knees, a sobbing mess, holding his hands to his face like he was ashamed of his tears. My own anger dissipated as I listened to him sob, the gut deep noises coming from him setting off every alarm inside my head like a firework.

“Daddy?” I whispered as I got to my knees in front of him and reached for his hands. I pulled them off his face and wrapped my arms around him, cradling him close as his tear stained face landed on my shoulder. I held him there, cooing soft noises into his ears that Daniel had always given me when the world seemed far too big and far too ugly for me to manage.

“They’re his.” Joel sniffled, the words falling into my ear. “They’re his things.”

“He doesn’t need them, Daddy.”

“I thought... I kept them... because...” He trailed off, shivering and sniffing where he leaned against me.

“Because why?” I prompted, softly, gently in Daniel’s way.

“Because if I kept them, I could pretend he was coming back some day. That you were coming back some day.”

My heart ached as his longing to not be alone became clear and the damage I had done when I'd left resonated in every syllable of his words. "He won't come back for them, Daddy. But I did. I came back."

Chapter Nine

JOEL

“I came back,” Tiernan whispered into my ear, the words cutting through the panic and the grief that clung to my body like a blanket, leaving me slumped against his small frame.

God, I had to be hurting him. I pulled back, lifting my head off of his shoulder and feeling the loss of his arms around me. I caught my breath, then looked down at him, exhausted and absolutely full of shame and sorrow that made my insides ripple with unease.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, rubbing at my heated cheeks again. “I don’t know why I did that.”

“I do,” Tiernan offered with a shrug. “You haven’t been caring for yourself, Daddy.”

“I wish you’d stop calling me that.” I felt even less like the man I’d once been as I slouched on the floor, fresh from a toddler sized meltdown over some old toothbrushes and some hair stuck in a hairbrush. Rocking back off my knees, I slid to my ass on the cold, tiled floor of the kitchen, propping myself up against the wall behind me and bending my knees. Tiernan

scrambled forward and pushed at my knees until they fell open. He quickly climbed between them, settling himself with his back to my chest and leaning into me just as hard as I'd leaned against him.

“Hold me, okay?” he asked, tilting his head up just a bit so I could hear his request. I complied, wrapping my arms around him and even pulling him closer to me as I leaned my cheek against the top of his head. He smelled clean and fresh, the scent of whatever lemony shampoo the hotel had filling my nose, and I indulged myself in a long inhale of him, holding him in my lungs and letting him take over my senses. “Now listen. You *are* my Daddy.”

“Tiernan—” I started but he smacked my arm hard and growled at me under his breath like a dog giving a warning. I snorted softly, laughter bubbling up inside at the petulant noise. “Did you just growl at me?”

“Yes. Because shut up for once and listen,” he started again. “You *are* my Daddy, but I think you're a little bit lost right now and that's okay. I can wait for you to find yourself again, but I know you're in there.”

“Tiernan.” I sighed. “I'm not the man I once was.”

“I'm not the boy I once was either, but I think that's okay. People change and we are two when we used to be three. We loved three but we can't have that. As much as I'd love to bring Daniel back for you, he's not coming back. One is lonely, so I think we have to learn how to be two.”

“I'd bring him back for you too, if I could.”

“He was our glue.” Tiernan nodded, feeling heavier in my arms. “But I think we could learn how to stick together as two.”

I inhaled a deep breath, catching the lemon scent again. “I can’t be him, Tiernan.”

He turned in my arms until he faced me and reached up to cup my cheeks in his hands. “I don’t want you to be him. I want you to be you, but you have to talk to me this time. You have to tell me that you love me and you have to tell me that I’m good and that you’re proud of me. I need words, Daddy.”

“Cherish.” I remembered, and as I said the word, Tiernan’s eyes closed, and his hands shook on my cheeks.

“That was Daniel’s word,” he whispered, sadness filling his eyes. “He used to hold my face just like I’m doing to you and tell me that word and it always felt bigger than even love could be.”

“Is that a word you need to hear from me?”

“No. That was Daniel’s word. When you feel it, something deeper than even love can go, then you can tell me the word that comes to you, and I’ll put it right beside cherish in my heart, okay?”

I nodded, though I felt about ten inches tall being coddled like this after what he’d just witnessed. The softness of his tone prickled as much as it soothed the feral parts of me that were still lingering inside. “Even after my meltdown, you still want to try?”

“Yeah.” Tiernan smiled, smoothing his thumbs across my cheekbones as he looked into my eyes. “You’re my Daddy. You just kind of suck right now.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “I do suck right now.”

“You do, but we can whip you back into shape. You’ll be yelling at me in no time, I’m sure.”

Maybe so, but I would try a bit harder this time to give him what he needed. Words and encouragement like Daniel would have given along with the touch I found easier to give.

“And spanking me.” Tiernan grinned, his eyes twinkling at me mischievously. “In the back room of the club with one of those floggers you love so much.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yep. Or a paddle. I’m not picky.”

“What about my hand?” I asked, smiling back slightly at the memory of him bent over my knee howling and squirming as I made his cheeks blistering red.

“Oh, yes. That’s good too, and then you could fuck me.”

“I could, could I?”

“Yep!” I laughed again as Tiernan stroked my cheekbones with his thumbs. His expression sobered again and his smile turned into a stern line. “You have to eat, Daddy. And you have to sleep and take care of yourself.”

“I go to therapy,” I offered. “Once a month, and a support group once a week for bereavement. It’s clearly not helping.”

“Maybe you need more right now and maybe...” He looked around at the kitchen filled with Daniel and my stomach quivered. “Some of it needs to go. Not all of it, but some. The unhelpful things, like the hairbrush and toothbrush.”

“The hairs are all I have left of him,” I whispered, swallowing back tears that threatened to start over again. “I don’t want to forget what his hair looked like.”

Tiernan nodded, then let go of my face, rising to his feet. He paused for a second before sliding open one of the drawers that ran beneath the countertop and pulling out a box of Ziploc bags. Settling back down on the floor, he handed the box to me. “We can put some in here for safekeeping.”

I held the box in my shaking hands as I nodded my agreement. “When did you get so good at this?”

“I’m just giving you what Daniel would have given if he was still here,” he explained, his shoulder shrugging a little bit. He smiled, placing his hand on top of the Ziploc baggies. “There’s a piece of him I carry with me all the time that reminds me that I am capable when I don’t think I am. I’m trying to do good things and get my life back together because of that piece of him that tells me that I can do it. I bet you have a piece of him you carry too, even though you might not know it yet. We’ll find it. I’m sure.”

Hopefully that piece was his patience. His softness and kindness. As I watched Tiernan stand and head for the bathroom from my spot on the tile, I wished for Daniel’s

ability to comfort him when he needed it because that was the piece I had failed at giving him before.

Time would tell if I found it inside me or not.



Ambrose's vehicle was already parked in the parking lot behind The Red Door when I arrived at work. I took a deep breath as I pulled into the parking stall beside his and stepped out of my truck, preparing myself for the conversation I needed to have with him. Tiernan mentioning the club earlier had made me both excited and terrified to bring him here on my arm. The promise written into his eyes when he'd mentioned the floggers and paddles we used to play with paled in comparison to the nerves that had risen knowing that I'd have to have a conversation with Ambrose to let him know that Tiernan had returned.

I wasn't sure how he was going to handle the news. Ambrose had been the first one I'd called when I'd gotten home from work to find Tiernan gone with Daniel's ring in his pocket. I had been so angry, so vicious with my words then, and that had continued every moment since. The theft was a sore spot for me still, but when I looked at Tiernan's freckled cheeks, I could push that aside and remind myself that we had both made serious mistakes two years ago. It would be a process learning to forgive him for his part of it, but I was willing to try to have him back again, filling space he never should have been made to feel he didn't belong in.

Steeling my nerves, I made my way across the parking lot and pulled open the back door, entering into the silent back hallway. Ambrose's door was slightly open, the light emanating from within the only glow lighting up the back of the club. It was still early enough that nobody else was around, and while I was breaking the rules being here at five thirty instead of six, I didn't want this conversation to be overheard. I walked to the door and knocked gently, hearing a friendly "come in" in response.

Ambrose sat behind his desk, computer on and a stack of paperwork piled high beside the monitor. He frowned a little bit when he saw me, but I forged ahead, plopping down into the seat across his desk from him.

"Early," he commented.

"With a reason," I offered, reaching into my pocket and pulling out Daniel's ring. It caught the light as I held it out to Ambrose, and I saw his eyes go wide.

"Is that Daniel's?"

"It is. Tiernan brought it back to me."

"You're kidding me," Ambrose breathed, reaching across the desk and taking the ring from me like he couldn't believe it was real.

"Not at all. He showed up a week ago and gave it back."

Ambrose handed the ring back to me, and I placed it in my pocket again, where it could be safe. "I'm so happy you've gotten it back."

“There’s more,” I said, a little nervous now. “He brought... himself back to me too.”

Ambrose raised an eyebrow, but a smile curled the edges of his lips and he nodded. “Makes sense.”

“What does?”

“That smile you’ve been wearing. It makes sense now.”

“I smile.” Did I? I couldn’t remember. Certain things had to have made me smile over the last few years. Coloring and cuddling with Perry. When Hobie played a song I actually enjoyed. That one time we were deep cleaning the back rooms and Ambrose dropped a bucket of soapy water on Mason by mistake and Mason had retaliated by throwing a soggy sponge at his face. Surely I’d smiled at some point.

“Not a real one,” Ambrose explained. “Not like you have been lately. So, the wandering boy returns, huh? He staying with you?”

“No, he’s staying at the Satellite Motel.” Ambrose made a face and I nodded. “Trust me, I know. He’s got a friend he’s staying with, though, and they’re really close. I’m not sure about moving him right in again just yet and he hasn’t asked. I’m trying to not overwhelm either of us right now. It’s only been a week.”

“Sounds fair to me. You trust him?”

“Not sure yet. I’d like to think I do, but time will tell. It’s nice knowing he’s around, at least. He’s convinced I can be his

Daddy again.” I shrugged, still not believing that to be totally true.

“Of course, you can.”

Ambrose’s faith in me was unshakeable, and I was surprised to see that he’d simply accepted what I’d said unlike I had done for him when he’d met Hobie. I grimaced and cleared my throat, causing Ambrose’s eyebrow to raise again in question. “I’m sorry I was an asshole about Hobie.”

Ambrose leaned back in his creaky chair and looked at me for a few moments before nodding. “We both do shitty stuff when we’re hurting. I’ve moved on. Some things are worth the risk, and I hope you find Tiernan worth the try again.”

I was about to speak again, to tell him I hoped he was too, but a loud noise from the door caught my attention, and I turned to see Hobie standing there, eyes wide as saucers.

“Tiernan?” he asked, looking between me and his Daddy.

“What about him?” Ambrose asked, clearly as confused as I was.

Hobie ducked his head a little bit, then offered a sugary sweet smile to Ambrose that carried a hint of guilt. “I know him from the streets.”

“You know Tiernan?” I blurted, staring hard at Hobie. “You’ve known where he was this whole time?”

Hobie nodded, his cheeks pinking up a little bit though when he met my eyes, I could see caution and a bit of a snarl hidden in his brown irises. “He told me not to tell anyone he

was still around. I was keeping a promise to a friend.” He cut his hardened eyes from my face to Ambrose. “You said that was okay. That I could keep promises I made to my street friends.”

Ambrose sighed, looking between us like he anticipated a fight. “I did say that. You’re right. Tiernan used to spend a lot of time here.”

“He was mine,” I murmured, still staring at Hobie. “I was his Daddy.”

“You are his Daddy,” Ambrose reminded me, his tone soft and thoughtful. “He’s come back to you.”

“He did?” Hobie asked, his face lighting up a little bit. “You were the Daddy he was missing all this time? He told me all about you and another Daddy, how you shared him and how much he loved you both. He talked all the time about how badly he felt he’d fucked up and how he wished he could go back to what he had, even if it was different now.”

I couldn’t find any real words to offer, still a bit surprised that Hobie had known Tiernan, though I didn’t know why. It made sense that two boys living on the streets of the city would run into each other and perhaps strike up a conversation or two. Maybe even a friendship. Hobie offered a tentative smile.

“He really missed you.”

“I missed him too.”

“Is he hanging out with Bryce still? I always liked Bryce, even if he was always really quiet. And scary. He’s really intimidating when he wants to be.”

“Is he?” That made me feel a bit better about Tiernan living in the motel with him for the time being.

Hobie nodded. “Yeah, back when I used to sell... uh...” He cut himself off, cheeks turning bright red as he wrapped his hands around his stomach and held himself tight like if he didn’t he was scared he’d fly into pieces.

I glanced at Ambrose, seeing his lips set in a concerned line on his face as he watched Hobie’s face scrunch up like he was considering how to end that sentence, or maybe if he even wanted to end it.

“I sold sex,” he finally whispered, looking right down at the ground. “Beside this diner at the edge of downtown. Bryce does that too. He kept us all safe out there.”

Ambrose stood from his chair and circled the desk faster than I’d ever seen him move. He scooped Hobie into his arms and held him against his chest, petting the boy’s head like he was a soft little kitten as Hobie sighed, then scowled a bit before sighing again.

“Did Tiernan?” I asked, mouth suddenly dry as a pit opened in my gut. In the seconds before Hobie’s answer, I found the actual idea of Tiernan selling sex wasn’t the cause of the discomfort rippling through me. The inherent dangers that came to mind when I considered who he may have been with if he had done that were the cause of my concern. Had he been

in unsafe spaces with unsafe people and if so, what damage had been done to him in those moments?

“No,” Hobie responded from the comfort that was Ambrose’s arms. “Bryce wouldn’t let him. He tried once and Bryce got so pissed off. They didn’t talk to each other for like a week. It was kind of funny, because they still lived together the whole time.”

Relieved, I reached out a hand, unthinking, and rested it on Hobie’s arm, causing him to startle a little bit. “Thank you.”

“If you take Tiernan home, we have to make sure Bryce is safe too,” Hobie whispered. “He only stays safe because Tiernan is there to come back to, and I don’t know what he’d do if someone wasn’t watching out for him. He’s scary to other people, but he’s more scary with himself.”

“We’ll keep your friends safe, sweet boy,” Ambrose promised, pulling back to cup Hobie’s face in his hands.

I took my leave, head spinning, as Ambrose planted a gentle kiss on his boy’s lips. Closing the office door behind me, I made my way to the front of the club to get started on opening the place up. I welcomed the distraction from my thoughts that cutting limes and lemons and prepping the juice boxes and bags of snacks for Perry and Morrie brought me while worries over Tiernan and his best friend played in the back of my mind.

Chapter Ten

TIERNAN

The house smelled like cinnamon, and I grinned as I stepped through the door that Joel held open for me, my full backpack heavy on my shoulders. I'd spent the morning walking around the city to get food and supplies we didn't have at the hotel, like deodorant, mouthwash, and stuff for sex. I'd grinned to myself as I'd walked through the doors of the HIV outreach offices and helped myself to a handful of their free condoms and lube, wondering if I'd be the one using them this time instead of Bryce. It had been a while since anyone but myself had touched my dick, and that was a tragedy if I was being honest.

“It smells so good in here, Daddy,” I commented as I kicked off my beaten up shoes and dropped my backpack to the floor of the entryway, nearly taking out the concrete duck with it. I reached down and patted the duck's head. “Sorry, dude.”

“Did you just apologize to the duck?” Joel asked, his lips quirking into a smile.

“I almost knocked him over.”

Joel laughed softly. “I doubt that. That thing is so heavy, I’ve tripped over it more than a few times and it hasn’t toppled over once.”

“If you keep tripping over it, then why don’t you move it?” I reached down and grabbed the duck around the chest before trying, and failing, to lift it. Clearly, I had forgotten how solid the damn thing was because it didn’t budge an inch, but in trying to move it, I knocked the table beside it and the little tabby cat figurine tumbled off the edge. I watched in horror as it landed on the tile, its leg and tail snapping off. “Shit, fuck. I’m so sorry, Daddy. I didn’t mean to.”

My stomach sank, and I turned to look up to Joel, anticipating a dirty toothbrush level of tears and panic, but was met instead with a gentle smile. “I broke the cat a few weeks ago. It’s just the glue I used that gave up.”

“Oh,” I breathed, relieved as Joel bent to scoop the pieces of the cat off the floor. He held them for a moment in his hands, breathing a few deep breaths, then placed them into the dish along with the keys and receipts. “Why don’t you move all the breakable stuff out of the entryway then?”

Joel shrugged, and I got it. It was another pretending Daniel and I were coming back thing for him. He bent down and wrapped his arms around mine where they were still circling the heavy duck. “I’ll help. Where’s a good place for this thing?”

“Beside the couch,” I suggested. “By my spot?”

Joel nodded, and together we lifted the duck, shuffling across the living room from the front door to deposit it beside the end table by the spot I'd always sat on the couch. When we'd placed it, I reached out and gave it a small push, tucking it in beside the table just enough that it was still visible, but wouldn't be a tripping hazard.

“See? It fits there.”

“It fits there better than in the entryway. Why didn't we put it there in the first place?”

“Daniel thought it was funny to walk into the house and see a duck sitting there.” I shrugged with a smile at the memory that popped into my head.

“And you egged him on the whole time, you brat,” Joel added, his lips curled into a small, thoughtful smile.

“I definitely did.”

Joel extended his hand slowly, and I put my hand in his, feeling the tiniest tug of my arm. With a smile, I went to him and he wrapped his arms around me, drawing me close to his chest. My cheek came to rest against his shirt, and I inhaled the scent of oil paint and leather that I still swore clung to him even though he wasn't wearing anything that would give off that smell.

“It's good to see you,” he whispered as my arms came around him.

I nodded against his shirt, cinnamon filling my nose but that wasn't coming from him at all. It lingered in the air, and I

sniffed again and again, trying to figure out what he was doing that smelled like that.

“Apple cinnamon mini-muffins for the freezer. I went shopping this morning.”

“You did?” I pulled out of his grasp and raced for the kitchen, my feet thudding over the tile and my socks slipping a little bit as I moved.

“Slow down,” Joel warned from behind me, sending a small thrill down my spine.

I looked over my shoulder to see his frown. “Sorry, Daddy.”

He nodded back, and I yanked open the fridge, seeing that the shelves were still fairly empty, but that there was actual food on each one of them. A small bag of carrots and another bag of sugar snap peas. A block of marble cheese. A box of pudding cups. A full container of milk and one of orange juice. And...

“Whipped cream!”

Joel laughed as I pulled the container off the shelf with a grin. “There’s another in the freezer. I know you’re a bit of a whipped cream monster.”

“You love it too. Can I have some?”

“In your coffee, sure.” Joel held out his hand for the container and I handed it to him, watching as he pulled off the lid. “You left some things out of place though, and I think you should go figure out what those could be.”

My shoes. My backpack. I grinned as I headed to put my things away nicely for the Daddy who was really trying, even if he sounded a little bit hesitant. I put the shoes in the boot tray beside Daniel's blue ones and moved my backpack to the wall beside it. Someday, I'd probably forget again, and I'd bitch and grumble under my breath as Joel told me to go back and make sure his house was in order, but today I was overjoyed.

Heading back into the kitchen, I found Joel pulling a steaming tray of delicious mini-muffins from the oven. He placed them on a rack to cool and I reached for the whipped cream container again, popping the lid off and scooping a little bit out with my finger.

"Tiernan," Joel warned as I lifted my finger to my mouth.

"You said I could."

"In your coffee."

I stuck my finger in my mouth and sucked the whipped cream off as Joel's cheeks flushed a little bit above his scruff. "Delicious. I'll save the rest for my coffee, I promise."

Joel nodded as he grabbed my baby bear mug from its spot and filled it with piping hot coffee, gently pushing it across the counter to me. I grabbed one of the spoons from the drawer and scooped a healthy portion of whipped cream into it, not stirring it because it was just better when it melted on its own, even if it meant I'd get a face full of whipped cream if I sipped it too early. Joel poured his own mug full of coffee, then picked it up gesturing at the living room.

“Want to go sit for a bit? I got you something this morning that I want to talk about.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“Patience.” Joel laughed, gesturing at the living room again. I nodded eagerly, and made my way to the couch, coffee mug in my hand as Joel headed down the hallway towards the bedrooms. Placing my cup on the coffee table, I sat in my spot and reached down to pat the duck on its concrete head. “This is a good spot for him.”

“It is,” Joel agreed, walking into the living room carrying a small white box. He placed it on the table in front of me and pushed it towards me. I recognized the logo on the front instantly.

“A phone?” I asked, reaching for it and cracking the top open to reveal a shiny new smartphone in a navy blue case. I pulled it out and held it up, like Joel hadn’t already seen it or something.

“For you to use as your number on resumes,” he started. “And for you to call me if you are ever in trouble. I don’t like that you’re staying at that motel, but I won’t demand you move in with me until we get to that point. All I ask is that if you, or Bryce, are ever in trouble or if things get dangerous there, you call me. I programmed some numbers into it for you, turn it on and take a look.”

Pressing my thumb against the button on the side, I watched as the screen lit up. Once it had finished turning on, I scrolled to the contacts app then clicked it.

“Daddy,” I read off the screen. “Ambrose. The club... Hobie?”

I turned to Joel, eyes wide as alarm rippled through me though I wasn't sure why. He had to have put the pieces together by now that I'd known Hobie when he was homeless. Joel nodded, offering a small smile.

“I thought you might like a way to get in contact with him again,” he offered. “I know you were friends. There's another friend in there you used to have, and I thought maybe you'd like to talk to him too.”

Heart beating, I scrolled down and found the name he was talking about. “Perry. Oh, I fucking miss Perry so much.”

“He misses you a lot too. He doesn't know you've resurfaced, but I'm certain he'd love to hear from you.”

I hoped so, but I wasn't sure. Perry was one of the sweetest people I'd met in my life, but he also felt things the deepest. Running away like I had and disappearing had to have hurt him. I could only hope that it hadn't cut as deep and that I could salvage and build on whatever friendship was left. If there was any. “Did he find a Daddy yet?”

Joel shook his head, and I frowned a little bit. Perry had been searching for a long time for someone to call his own. After he'd left his last shitty relationship, he deserved the world and I had hoped someone would have taken the chance to get to know him. “That sucks. He needs a Daddy.”

“He does,” Joel agreed. “I’m sure he’ll find someone soon enough. He’s made friends with another little named Morrie. I’m sure he’ll tell you all about everything when you call.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Joel cleared his throat and gestured at the phone in my hand. “There’s a rule that goes with the phone though, Tiernan.”

“Besides calling you when and if I’m in trouble?”

“Yeah. The rule is that I will pay the bill until you are able to pay it yourself. I’d like you to keep doing the things you want to do to make your life better.”

“The job.” I nodded.

“Pet grooming, was it? Have you done any looking into that?”

I hadn’t. I still thought it was a great idea for me and I had a bunch of papers back at the motel with information on the career along with some contact information from some grooming places around the city, but I had put them on the table and forgotten about them. “Kind of?”

“Is pet grooming a real choice or is it an impulsive choice because you need a job and that’s the first thing that caught your eye?”

“It’s a real choice, Daddy. I still think I would be good at it, and I love animals.”

Joel nodded, gifting me a smile that almost looked like pride. “Can we make a rule that says you have to follow

through with your choices?”

“Like the one I had before.” I nodded, warmth filling me as my old list of rules flooded my mind. There had been so many things that had kept me on track and even when I broke them or when something had gone wrong, I knew they were there for me to fall back on.

“If that works for you?” Joel asked, tentative and uncertain. I put my shiny new phone down on the table beside my coffee and shuffled over to where he sat, jostling until I moved onto his lap. A soft “oof” left his lips as I landed with a thud, leaning against his chest as his arms came around me.

“It works for me,” I promised. “I want rules. I want to make you happy and proud of me, and I need structure. Clearly.”

“I can give structure,” he said, sounding a tiny bit more sure of himself. “I was always good at that, I think.”

“You were.”

“So we can agree that the phone is to be paid by me until you have a job, and that you’re going to do some real looking into pet grooming?”

“Yes.” Easy-peasy. I could definitely do that. “Can I use your address on my resume though? I don’t think employers would like seeing that I live at the Satellite Motel.”

“You definitely can, but I’d like us to have an agreement like we used to. The rule we had that said we talk about things instead of getting mad and making snap decisions.”

Yeah, the last one I broke when I left him behind. I sighed, leaning back into his arms. "I'm sorry I broke that one."

"Me too," he whispered. "I'm sorry that you didn't think you could come talk to me. That I made you feel like I didn't want you here and that I shut you out when you needed me."

"Then that should be a rule too. We talk. We tell each other things instead of just assuming because look where that got us."

"That's a good rule."

"And," I said, my stomach quivering a little bit at what I was about to suggest. I'd always been able to help with making rules before, but I wanted to make a brand new one of my very own and that was a bit unnerving. "I meant what I said before. I want us to go through Daniel's things and see what needs to really be kept and what can be given away or thrown out."

Joel stiffened beneath me, and I could feel him breathing a bit heavier against me. Finally, he exhaled a long, slow breath. "Together."

"Together." We sat in silence for a few moments more, me lingering on his lap surrounded by his warmth and him holding me tight against him until something struck my mind. "I want rewards."

"Rewards?" Joel asked, laughing a bit.

"Yes, Daddy. If I've been good, I want rewards."

"And what if you've made mistakes?"

“Punishments,” I mumbled, scowling. There was a fine line between a spanking that was fun and a spanking that I felt deeply inside, and Joel definitely knew where it was. He’d always hold me close afterwards and whisper that he was proud of me though, and that part made it all worth it. Almost.

“And you want to play at the club sometimes?”

“Yes, please.” I missed that a lot. I hadn’t been lying before when I’d told him what I’d wanted. I wanted to be bent over, held down and flogged until the thoughts that raced through my head gave way to that glorious bliss I hadn’t felt in so long. I wanted to float and fly, and I wanted him to take me there because I knew he could.

I trusted that he could.

Paddles and flogging weren’t part of every boy’s needs, but they’d always been something I’d been very into ever since the first time I’d gotten too curious for my own good about what went on in the private rooms at the back of the club. I’d wandered into the hallway, listening to the muffled noises coming from behind closed doors until I’d found myself faced with an open one, the sound of someone crying out startling me as much as it intrigued me. My heart had stuttered in my chest as I’d peered into the open room, knowing that I wasn’t doing anything wrong by watching, that the door was open so people could watch, but feeling like I was intruding all the same.

What I saw had floored me. A man I didn’t know was bent over at the waist and behind him was V, one of the Doms at

the club, wielding a thick paddle. I watched in awe as he smacked the man over and over again, drawing cries of pain and pleasure out of him until the man slumped over and nearly slid off the table he was braced on. I remembered that look of contentment in his hazy eyes, the sheer bliss on his features and, what's more, I had craved that feeling.

Luckily, Joel had agreed to try to give it to me and that had been such a success that as I sat on his lap, I could feel arousal trickling through my body.

Sadly, I was the only one feeling it, apparently. Joel gave my hip a pat, then carefully maneuvered me off his lap, placing me on the couch. He stood and stretched himself out, his shirt riding up to reveal the lower part of his pale stomach, then relaxed and gave me a smile.

“I’ll work on writing out our rules tomorrow morning and they’ll be on the fridge for both of us to remind ourselves what we’re going to agree to. Right now, I need to go get ready for work and you need to start playing around with that phone to get used to it. I downloaded a job-hunting app that you might find useful, but there’s probably other stuff you’d like on there, Instagram or whatever. You have data with your plan so you can search whatever you need to, whenever you need to.”

“You don’t want me to leave?” I asked. Every single day so far, I’d left when he’d started getting ready for work, not because I wanted to, but because it just seemed like the right time to go.

“I’ll give you a ride to the motel. I don’t like you walking all that distance and your bag looks heavy today.”

“It is, lots of food and stuff.”

Joel nodded, then hesitated just a moment before bending down and cupping my cheek in his hand. He leaned down and pressed his lips to my forehead, and I smiled.

“Thank you for being patient while I learn how to do this right for you,” he murmured, thumb stroking my cheekbone.

“Thank you for giving me another try to be your boy.”

Chapter Eleven

JOEL

Hot water sluiced down my body and I tilted my head back beneath the spray, letting it trickle down my face. I was tired today, far more tired than Tiernan realized. In my rush to make sure I was at the house when he arrived, I'd forced myself to wake up early to go get groceries after a long night at the club, and I was barely hanging onto being awake.

I yawned, my body heavy and tired where I stood, but a shuffling noise met my ears. I opened my eyes to find that I wasn't alone in the bathroom, and beyond the shower curtain, Tiernan stood, watching me. I grabbed the edge of the curtain and pulled it back popping my head out to see him as he pulled off his shirt and dropped it to the floor of the bathroom.

“What are you doing?” I asked, though I absolutely already knew what he was up to.

“I'm good at showers, Daddy,” he offered back, undoing the button on his jeans, followed by the zipper holding them on.

“Tiernan, I'm tired.”

“But I’m good at showers.” Tiernan quickly pulled his pants down and stepped out of them, leaving them in a pile alongside his shirt before turning to look at me, mischief twinkling in his eyes as his lips curled into a devious grin. “Really, really good at showers. I promise.”

“I said no,” I responded, heart kicking wildly in my chest as I played my role in his little game. The little game I’d missed and had fantasized about only a handful of days ago.

“I said yes,” Tiernan responded, doubling down on his grin as he ran a hand down his tight torso. I was in awe of how his fingers dipped into hollows that hadn’t existed before. He was thin, as he’d always been, but he was no longer the softer sort of boy he’d been. Lean muscle now clung to every inch of his body, making him appear a far more formidable opponent than he was before when we’d play. He turned his eyes to me suddenly, uncertainty marring his features. “Do I look okay? I’m skinny, I know. I tried to eat as much as I could, but the walking makes me lose it all.”

“You look strong, Tiernan,” I murmured back. “Like you’ve been carrying heavy things for far too long.”

“I have been.” He nodded.

“But I have to get ready for work,” I reminded him.

He smiled at that and slowly slid out of the plain white underwear he wore, his hard cock jutting out obscenely from his pelvis. Tiernan had always been perfectly proportioned, his small frame boasting a shorter, thinner dick that matched his size. He had once commented how much he hated that he

wasn't built like an elephant beneath his pants, but I had shown him over and over again how much I had enjoyed his body and how he'd been built. My mouth went dry as he held his arms out at his sides, gesturing at me like he wanted me to look at him, to gaze at him and want him.

"You are beautiful," I offered, trying my best to give him the words he wanted, but failing to capture the sum of all his parts as he stood before me laid bare. It must have been an okay word because for a brief moment, his warm smile returned before it turned back into his devilish grin. Tiernan splayed his hand on his chest, then slid it down his stomach slowly, stopping when his fingertips reached the thatch of strawberry blond hair that lay above the base of his cock. My gaze lingered on his hand for a moment, waiting to see if he would touch himself, hold his dick in his hand and give it a stroke, but he stayed put, grinning at me. I met his eyes, seeing the promise written into them, then pulled my head behind the curtain, returning to stand beneath the spray of the water as I waited for him to ignore my protests. My own cock was rapidly filling, thickening as arousal licked down my spine and hardening even more with the promise that Tiernan's hand opening the curtain gave.

"Hi, Daddy," he murmured, stepping into the tub and giving me that devious, bratty grin again. Before I could even respond, he sank to his knees in the bathtub and leaned forward, closing his eyes and resting his cheek on my thigh. I reached down, placing my hand on his head and stroking his hair a few times as my cock bobbed beside his face, the visual

obscene and sweet at the same time. Tiernan rested for a few moments, a small smile on his lips as he leaned against me, then he opened his eyes and pulled back to look up at me. “Anything you want.”

I raised an eyebrow and he grinned at me, nodding slightly. My heart beat like a rabbit’s, excited and a bit nervous as I wrapped my hand around the base of my hard length, placing my other hand on the top of his head. “Open for me?”

My words were far shakier than I would have liked, but joy filled his eyes and his lips parted, revealing his pink tongue. I placed the head of my cock against his upper lip, smearing the pre-cum that was beading there onto his skin as he closed his eyes and shivered a little bit. Slowly, very slowly, I tightened my grip on his hair and held him in place while I slid the mushroomed head of my cock between his lips, resting it on his tongue. I could feel his breath, hot and fast on my flesh where I lay in his mouth.

“Do a good job, okay?”

He nodded as much as he could with the tiny bit of leeway he had, his hand moving to replace mine where it wrapped around my length. Tiernan bobbed his head forwards, taking me into his mouth slowly before pulling back off and circling his tongue across the crown of my cockhead. He dipped his tongue into the slit, lapping at it gently while his hand stroked my length, and I grinned down at him, arousal making my cock jerk a bit where he held me tight. He sucked me back into

his mouth, wet heat engulfing me as his lips slid tight down my length, then back up as he pulled off.

I tilted my head back and let myself go, giving myself over to simply the feeling of my boy as he licked and sucked at my length, listening to the tiny little hums of contentment as much as I could feel them vibrating at the back of his throat. Tiernan didn't let up for one moment, not even to catch his breath as he moved on me, pulling me so far back into his throat I thought for sure he was struggling to breathe at moments. Finally, he pulled me in impossibly deep, backing off quickly as he coughed and gagged, the sound of it rippling through the bathroom and poking into the piece of my brain that enjoyed that feral sort of noise.

“Good boy,” I murmured, opening my eyes and looking down at him where he kneeled, breathing heavy as his hand stroked my cock. He looked up at me, his jaw hanging slack and his eyes blown wide with his own arousal. I could see his own ignored cock jutting out between his legs, the head of it glistening and perfectly pink. I reached out and ran my fingers through the drool that gathered at the corners of his mouth, listening as he breathed heavy, a small whimper of need leaving his lips at my touch. I moved my hand to grip his hair tight in my fist, curling the locks in my fingers and his eyes went wide in his face again, snapping to mine in anticipation. I held him there, wrapped in my fist as I smacked his hand away from my cock and took hold of myself.

“Open up,” I demanded, placing my cock on his lips again. “I want to fuck that pretty mouth.” Tiernan responded

immediately, dropping his mouth open wide, and I placed myself again on his tongue. He trembled in my grasp, and I smiled down at him as I pushed myself deeper into his hot, wet mouth, then pulled out, feeling the slide of his tongue on my dick. He moaned softly as I fucked into his mouth slowly, reveling in the feeling of him simply sitting there, letting me use him as I saw fit. I pulled back out until the tip of me rested just inside his mouth and he sucked gently at it, tightening his lips like a good boy would. I rewarded that with a gentle tug at his hair that had his eyes rolling back in his head.

He always did like it rough, my darling boy, and the more he responded the more confident I grew.

I slid myself into him faster this time, watching his eyes widen as I went deeper, his mouth stretched wide around my cock, drool slipping from the corners of his lips. When I pulled out, he stroked my length with his tongue, pushing the tip against my cock as I moved. I moaned low, pressing forward again, burying myself into his heat as I brought my other hand up to cup his face, digging my fingers gently into his jaw so I could feel it move as I thrust. Tiernan whimpered a bit as my hips worked hard, holding him in place on the floor of the tub while I used him.

Soon, I felt my orgasm coming, the release building tension inside as I clenched my eyes shut and tilted my head back. I let loose a strangled moan as it built inside, my body alive with sensation and focused solely on the warm, wet mouth surrounding me. Another deep thrust had my hips stuttering, shaking as stars burst behind my eyelids and tension gave way

to pure pleasure. I shot into Tiernan's mouth, feeling him swallow around my cock as I rode out my bliss in his skilled mouth, gripping his hair impossibly tight in my fist. When I stilled my motions, I looked down and saw him staring at me, eyes full of need and want, but also satisfaction.

“Good boy,” I murmured, loosening my grip on his hair, and pulling myself out of his mouth. He inhaled a lungful of air and licked his lips as I reached out and gathered the remnants of my release that had dribbled from the corner of his mouth. I captured it with my thumb, then held it out, watching as he latched on and sucked it off, swirling his tongue around the tip of my finger.

Tiernan slumped where he sat, eyes falling closed as he reached for his own cock but I reached down and slapped his hand away. I pulled him to his feet and he wobbled where he stood until I turned him around, bracing him against my chest. He leaned into me, and I wrapped an arm around his chest, snaking my other hand down to grip his length in my fist. I gripped him tight and started stroking, hard and purposeful as he moaned softly, his head tipping back to my chest, resting against one of my pecs.

“Come for me, Tiernan,” I whispered, stroking him fast and hard. “Come on.”

“Daddy.” He gasped, eyes opening as I held him captive in my grasp.

A few quick strokes were all it took for my boy to let go, spurting his release over the tile in front of him in short bursts,

punctuated by tiny “Oh’s” that fell from his lips. I kept stroking him through it until he’d finished, then let him go as his body squirmed in my arms and his eyes fell closed again.

We stood in silence for a few moments, breathing together in the rapidly cooling spray of the shower until he turned in my arms and looked right into my eyes.

“I told you I’m good at showers,” he said, grinning at me, though he looked shattered and utterly exhausted.

“I never doubted you for a second.”

Only myself, though I didn’t say that out loud. It should come easier in time, I hoped, to give him what he needed and to read what he desired, but for now I’d let myself revel in the afterglow for just a while longer.

Chapter Twelve

TIERNAN

“**B**ryce, come see this tattoo!”

I cocked my ear towards the bathroom, waiting to hear a response but none came. I had been watching videos on my phone for the last hour and had found one of a tattoo artist doing a piece of a haunted house I thought Bryce would really like. He'd always been into street art, but he'd fallen away from spray painting buildings lately. He said paint was too expensive, but he'd always made sure he had money for it before. I wasn't sure when that had changed in his mind, when the indulgence in the one part of life he actually enjoyed became too much of an expense for him to justify to himself.

I called for him again, hoping to get a response from him. He'd been strange since I'd gotten back to the motel. Short tempered a little bit and sullen for the beginning of the night which sucked because I wanted to cuddle on the bed with my best friend and watch a movie or something on YouTube now that we had more things to watch than the shitty TV in the room had available.

When he didn't appear, I stood and headed for the bathroom, knocking at the door softly. "Bryce?"

"What's up?" he asked from beyond the door.

"I wanted to show you this video. It's super cool."

As the door opened, rage grew inside me at what was behind. Bryce stood in front of the mirror in his tight black pants, a short white crop top clinging to his torso. He was getting ready to head out, and I saw red.

"No."

"No, what?"

"No more, Bryce. No more of this bullshit."

"Tiernan." He sighed, turning to me, his eyes stormy. He pursed his lips like he was mad, but I didn't care. After the bruises that had clung to his skin for far too long, I thought I'd been clear that there were better ways of getting money and we should be doing that instead.

"Bryce, please don't do this. You don't have to do this. We still have a pile of money left over from last time and we have so much food and stuff now. We don't need anything."

"Maybe you don't," he mumbled under his breath as he turned back to the mirror and started smoothing his fingers over his eyebrows.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He sighed and dropped his hands, turning to me again. "You don't need anything, Tiernan. You with your Daddy and your

brand new phone and everything. What if I want a phone, though? I have to go get money to buy one from JJ's Pawn. So yeah, I do need to do this. To buy things for myself because I don't have anyone else to rely on like you do."

"That's not fair."

"What's not fair is you standing there telling me not to do the one fucking thing I know I'm good at. I'm good at sex. I can take a hit and they pay me even more if I let them get rough with me. Why won't you just let me fucking do what I'm good at?"

"Because you don't have to!" I shouted, raising my voice as I clenched my fists at my sides. "You don't have to do this for money. There are other ways. Ways that don't leave you scarred and bruised or fucking bleeding. I have cleaned up your blood, Bryce."

"I'm good at bleeding," he snarled, his eyes flashing pure rage at me, his lips curled downwards in a sneer. "I can take it."

"What is this obsession you have with destroying yourself piece by piece?"

"I'm good at it."

I inhaled a deep breath, forcing myself to calm down as much as I could. "What if they hurt you so bad you can't get back here? What if they kill you? People have died on the streets before Bryce, doing the same thing you're doing."

"Maybe I don't care about that."

I reeled back as his words hit me like he'd slapped my face hard. My head spun and I charged forward, stepping right into his space without care that he might not want me there. I slid my phone into my pocket, then reached out and cupped his sharp cheekbones, pressing my palms against them. "How could you not worry about that all the time out there?"

He winced a little bit and then sighed, looking down at the ground. "I don't think about it because I don't know if I would stop even if I did consider the dangers. They want me, Tiernan and that means everything to me. I make a lot of money because they want me."

"I want you too."

He shook his head. "Not like I want to be wanted. I want someone to..."

He just wanted someone for himself, I knew, finishing the sentence he left hanging between us. Bryce wanted to be desired and he wanted to be sought out and thought of in ways I couldn't give to him, but there was a darkness that hid beneath those words that I couldn't imagine the depths of even if I tried. Bryce frowned as I wrapped my arms around him, pulling him close to me. "It's okay to want someone to be there, Bryce."

"It's not just that," he protested.

"Then what is it?"

Bryce breathed heavy and hard into the bathroom, tensing like he wanted to punch me or run away but I had experience

with running from uncomfortable feelings, and I wasn't letting my best friend get away with that shit. I held him tight against me as he slowly relaxed.

“You don't need me anymore,” he whispered. “I knew someday you wouldn't, but I wasn't prepared for it. It's been two years of us, Tiernan. Me and you against the world and now it's changing. I'm happy for you that you have Joel back, but... I feel like I'm losing the closest person I've ever had to me, and I just want to be somewhere that I don't have to feel that for a night.”

“Bryce,” I exclaimed, aghast that he could even think such a ridiculous thing. “You are my best friend in the whole world. I love you so much. Of course I need you. Maybe we can't kiss anymore, because I don't have permission for that, but I am always going to be your best friend.”

“I don't want to kiss you anyway,” he responded, with a slight snicker underlying his words. “You kiss like a dead fish.”

“Shut up, I do not.” He laughed softly, and I pulled him into a hug again. “I need you Bryce. You're always going to be my best friend, even if I have Joel. Okay?”

I felt his head slowly nodding and he relaxed into the embrace, putting his arms around me back. “If you forget me, that's okay Tiernan.”

“Listen,” I whispered back. “Daniel died two years ago, and I haven't forgotten him. He has one third of my entire heart. I left Joel two years ago, and I have him in one third of my heart

still. I carried him there the whole time I was apart from him. Know who has the last third?” Bryce mumbled something into my shoulder that I couldn’t make out, but it didn’t matter. “You, you gorgeous lump of man. You have the third part of my heart and I’m always going to carry you there, okay?”

Bryce went silent, and I pulled back to see the storm waging a war through his handsome face. His forehead was wrinkled and his eyes distant, but he finally focused on my face after a few moments of silence. “You’re a sappy shit.”

“You love it. Now, get changed into something comfortable and meet me in bed. I grabbed popcorn from the food bank earlier and we’re going to spend the night watching YouTube.”

Bryce slowly nodded, though he still looked troubled. I leaned forward and pressed a kiss to his cheek before turning and heading for the bedroom, grabbing the bag of popcorn on my way to the bed. As I waited for him to join me, my head raced with worries and thoughts about what would really happen if I moved in with Joel full time and left Bryce behind in the motel.

As he appeared in the doorway, dressed in a pair of navy blue sweatpants and a fluffy yellow hoodie, I realized I would never do that. As much as I loved Joel and how great it felt that we were getting back to the rhythm we’d lived in before, I couldn’t fathom leaving Bryce behind. No matter what happened, I’d follow through on my silent promise that when I left this shitty life behind, I’d make sure he ended up somewhere safe as well.

Come hell or high water, I wasn't leaving my best friend behind.



“I want to show you something,” Joel said, heading for the garage door.

I had arrived a few moments ago at his door, having left Bryce at the library to read as he often did now in the afternoons, and Joel had told me to keep my shoes on when I went to kick them off. I eyed the door hesitantly, a bit of worry creeping in when I considered the last time I'd been in the garage.

It had been the day before I left, and I'd gone to bring Joel some food while he painted in the garage. I'd opened the door to find that he'd passed out on the cold concrete, paint soaking into the clothing he'd been wearing at the time. That hadn't been the worst part of the scene though. The canvas on the easel had been torn apart like it had been attacked by a wild animal, the red paint mixing with the blood that seeped from Joel's torn apart fingertips. I had heard yelling and banging noises, but I hadn't ever thought that he would have the capacity to lose control in the way that he had, taking out his anger and grief viciously on the canvas that had once been a painting of a farmhouse in the prairies.

“Is that okay?” he asked, drawing me out of the horrible memory and into the present.

“Yeah. Have you been painting much?”

“Sort of,” he offered with a small smile as he opened the door and flicked on the light. He headed down the short staircase that led to the second parking spot in the double car attached garage and stood there, waiting for me to join him. I made my way down the stairs warily, eyeing the cleanliness of the place he called his studio with a bit of relief.

“This is what I’ve been working on,” he said, gesturing me over to where he stood in front of a cloth covered easel. He grabbed the sheet and pulled it off, revealing a painting unlike anything I’d ever seen him do before.

Wild swirls of blues and whites created circles on the black canvas, the neon colors brilliant against the darkened backdrop. The way the swooshes of color had been placed made the image look a bit like a set of angel wings, even though they were abstract and without real form. I had never seen Joel paint like this before, but it was beautiful.

“Oh wow,” I breathed, reaching out to touch one of the brilliant teal blue swipes of color. “Spray paint?”

“Yeah,” Joel responded, coming to stand right beside me. “I can’t do realism anymore, but I think... I like this. I did a whole series of them, I guess you could call it. Ambrose took the rainbow colored one and hung it in his house, so I guess they’re okay?”

“It’s beautiful, Daddy. I have never seen you do things like this and I love it.”

“I started doing things like this when...” Joel shrugged and sighed a little bit before continuing. “After Daniel died, it was

hard to paint real things. It felt wrong somehow, or uncomfortable maybe? I don't know, but I started painting things like these after his funeral and they feel better to me."

"These are the things you were doing out here?" While I was waiting for you inside was the rest of the sentence that didn't need to be said out loud, even if I was thinking it inside my head.

"Sort of," he responded. "Those ones I did in those days were angry. It was all I could do to hold myself back from ripping apart the canvas because I just needed all of the ugly shit I was feeling out of me."

"You did rip apart a canvas once, though."

"Yeah. I did, and though I'm not proud of it, it felt amazing to just tear and destroy something into pieces. Kept me from doing something worse, like calling up the family of the woman who hit him and yelling at them for letting her leave that family dinner so drunk, or going over to their house and beating in their windows with a baseball bat."

I nodded, though I didn't quite understand the depth of what he was talking about. In the days after Daniel's funeral, I had cried a lot and I had spent a lot of time in silence, whether it be my choice or not. I hadn't felt the anger he was talking about, just a deep sense of sorrow at the loss. I'd secretly felt sad for the family of the woman who had run the red light at a speed reserved for NASCAR raceways and struck Daniel on the driver's side of his vehicle. She had died too that night, and I couldn't help but think of her family sometimes, hoping that

they were okay in the aftermath as my world had crumbled to pieces around me.

“I am sorry you had to see that, Tiernan,” Joel said, breaking into my thoughts. “I had intended to clean up my mess before you came out to the garage, but I was so tired afterwards, I didn’t get there in time.”

“It worried me,” I confessed. “I didn’t know how to help, or if you even wanted me to help.”

“I’m sorry,” he repeated, moving to stand right in front of me. He placed his fingers beneath my jaw and tilted my head upwards so I was looking into his eyes. “I mean it.”

“Okay. You’re forgiven.” I smiled up at him and he lowered his lips to mine, capturing me there in a sweet kiss that could have easily turned into something else entirely if he hadn’t pulled away.

“I have something else to show you,” he said, the words a bit shaky and hesitant as they left his lips. I nodded eagerly, wanting to know more, to see more of this part of Joel he’d always kept so hidden. I was always allowed in the garage before and had always gotten a look at what he was doing, but he’d never shared his art with me on purpose like this. With a smile, Joel went and grabbed a smaller canvas from the rack where his finished pieces had always sat. He plunked it on one of the empty easels along the wall, and my mouth dropped open as I took in the colors he’d chosen. Brilliant coppers and strawberry pinks made the wing shapes this time, but centred

atop the image were two shapes that resembled devil horns, though they were as indistinct as the rest of the piece.

“I called this one Tiernan,” he offered with a shy smile.

I crossed the garage to look at the piece that was given my name, my heart warming as I saw that the background wasn't black as I had thought. Up close, it was a rich darkened purple, one of my favorite colors. “I love this so much.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes, the horn shapes at the top are perfect. I demand you hang it up in the house immediately.”

Joel laughed, shaking his head. “I don't know if I have a spot for it.”

“Anywhere is a great spot, Daddy. Why not take down that ugly camel in the kitchen and put me there?”

Joel went silent, and as I turned to look at him, I saw his face scrunched like he was thinking. He reached up and plucked at the bits of scruff that clung to his face, staring at the painting that was named for me. Finally, he let go of his facial hair and sighed. “That's tough.”

“It is, but the camel is really hideous and we both don't like it. So why don't we move it? We could put it out here for now and think about getting rid of it later.”

At his nod, I raced up the stairs to the kitchen and pulled the camel painting off the wall. It really was a hideous thing, just a swampy mess of moss greens and dark browns that were meant to depict a camel in the middle of the desert. Daniel and

I tended to align on our tastes more often than not, but even I couldn't seem to find any love for this particular painting. I rushed back and held it out to Joel who took it from me and, with a heavy sigh, slid it into one of the open spots among his finished paintings.

“I think I'm a better image than that ugly old painting,” I offered as Joel grabbed the one he'd painted off the easel. “I'm much prettier. Less camelly.”

“Camelly.”

“It could be a word.”

Joel snorted a laugh and headed for the stairs, carrying my painting in his hands carefully like it was just as precious as he believed me to be. Once inside, he placed it on the empty hook, then eyeballed it, moving it this way and that to level it on the wall. When he was finished playing around with it, he took a step back, then gestured for me to come join him. I sidled up to him, pressing against his sides and wrapping my arms around his waist.

“Perfect.”

“It really is.” He nodded, wrapping his arms around me, and pressing a kiss to the top of my head.

Chapter Thirteen

JOEL

There were rules on the fridge again, scribbled in my own handwriting on a piece of yellow lined paper and held up by a magnet shaped like a bunch of grapes. Every time I went to the kitchen to pretend that all the delicious food I'd bought didn't taste like ash in my mouth, I stopped and stared at it, taking in the harsh lines of my own writing, the absence of Daniel's loops and flourishes hitting a bit too hard in the pit of my stomach. They were very much the same rules that we'd had before, though they held tiny differences within them.

Communication.

Respect.

Proper meals and enough sleep.

Tiernan will do research and get a job of his own choosing.

Tiernan will think about choices before making them and will talk it out with Daddy if he needs to.

Tiernan will call Daddy if he and/or Bryce are in danger or if they need help.

Tiernan will help keep the house tidy when he is there (things put away in their proper places).

Tiernan and Daddy will go through the house together and pack up things that aren't needed anymore.

That one had hit me like a freight train as I'd written it, but I knew it was important. It was the one rule that Tiernan had ever suggested on his own and that mattered. The first time rules had appeared on the fridge, Daniel and I had alternated writing lines back and forth as the three of us had talked things out over cups of hot chocolate with marshmallows at the kitchen table, but Tiernan had given the two of us the lead. For him to make a completely new rule on his own told me how important it was to him, and though the thought of going through the house filled me with a sense of dread, I couldn't have left it off.

The conversation between Tiernan and I had been far shorter and as I stood in front of the fridge, I hoped I'd done it right. I didn't know if I had, and what a fucking feeling that was. I'd always been so certain about who I was and how things should go before everything had changed. I'd been confident in my abilities to give him the guidance he'd admitted to craving and sure of what I expected of Tiernan and of myself in return. To stand in front of the fridge, staring at the paper with rules I'd gotten a verbal agreement to, and have the thought that I wasn't certain if I was doing things right floored me. Tiernan seemed so convinced in my abilities to be the Daddy he wanted and deserved, and while that should have

been a comfort, I was only convinced of one thing as I stared at the list of rules.

“I am going to fuck this up,” I mumbled out loud to the ghost of Daniel that didn’t exist. “I’m going to fuck this up and lose him again. I know it.”

That thought rattled me where I stood, and I turned, glancing at the spot on the wall where the devil with angel wings I’d named after Tiernan hung. I’d painted it months after he’d left when my therapist suggested that I use my art as therapy to work through feelings, like I hadn’t already been doing that. Like I hadn’t already gotten lost in paint to the point that everything else around me felt numb and hazy, the world becoming unclear and disconnected from who I was when I was in the garage alone, laying grief into canvas with my brush. The concept of painting to cope with emotions wasn’t a unique idea like the therapist presented it to be, but I hadn’t had the ability to express that I’d already been doing that in excess at the cost of so many other things.

I sighed and opened the fridge, intending to pull out the baggie of carrots for a snack to follow the rules and ease the grumbling my stomach had been doing all morning, but I found myself reaching for one of the pudding cups instead. My only real vice in this life had been these, and I used to have to pace myself when it came to them, or I’d eat them all in a day. I turned the chilled pudding cup over and over in my hand, lost in a moment of memory as the sound of Daniel’s footsteps heading into the kitchen came into my mind. I closed my eyes and let it come, picturing the way he’d snickered at me when

he caught me awake and shoveling pudding into my mouth at three in the morning. The glow emanating from the fridge had lit up his features as he'd grinned at me, clearly pleased with catching me at the crime of early morning snacking.

"Don't let Tiernan catch you," he'd whispered, reaching his finger in to scoop some pudding out of the cup I'd held. "He'll want three in the morning pudding too."

I'd smiled and licked the spoon, watching as Daniel had eaten the tiny bit he'd stolen from me off his finger. "He can't have any. It's against the rules." Balanced meals were important for a boy like Tiernan who could easily live on sweets and junk if left to his own devices. Eating properly throughout the day had been made a rule at his approval, and Daniel and I had been pleased with him for agreeing, wanting to see our boy shine in every possible way. That he had agreed eagerly didn't make the actual doing part of eating healthy easy for him though.

"He'll try," Daniel had responded, and I had nodded my agreement.

Tiernan had always tried. Always pushed and prodded, skirting the lines of the rules with brattiness while reveling in the punishments that followed when he stepped over the boundaries. As I came back to myself in the kitchen, I opened my eyes and closed the fridge, finding myself face to face with the new rules I'd written again, wondering which one he was going to break first. It could be an effort on his part to completely ignore what we'd agreed on just to poke and push

at me on purpose, or it could be an unconscious thing where he let his brain move faster than it should, carrying him away from what we'd worked out between us but at some point, I knew a rule would be broken.

I just hoped that I'd prove myself to be the Daddy he needed when the time came.



"I'm really scared." Tiernan sighed from his spot on the couch. He'd arrived a few moments ago looking like a mixture of frazzled and excited, his knees shaking as he jittered where he sat and his hands clutching his cellphone tight in his hand.

"You can do this," I responded, settling onto the couch beside him and tucking him into the crook of my arm. I felt him lean into me and smiled at the shaking of his knee that persisted. "I know you can. It's scary, but exciting, right?"

"I'm going to throw up. Maybe I won't go."

"Read the ad to me again," I prompted, hoping that he'd get back the excitement he'd had when he'd arrived to show me what he'd found.

He lifted the phone to his face and turned the screen back on, revealing the reason for his nervousness. Clearing his throat, he glanced at me before looking back down. "Now hiring. Paws and Relax is looking for a part time groomer's assistant, potential for full time hours in future. Must be eighteen years of age or older. No experience required but must be comfortable with animals of all sizes. Advancement

opportunities and training available. Apply in person with resume, and then there's the address."

"Does that make you excited at all?"

"I'm terrified. I'm going to throw up."

I laughed softly, leaning back on the couch and kicking my feet up on the coffee table. "You aren't going to throw up, Tiernan."

"I might," he protested, turning where he sat to see me. "I might get there and throw up right on the floor. You don't know."

"And you don't know that's going to happen either," I pointed out. "Do you want the job? That's the only question that matters right now."

"I do." He paused and I gave him space to compose himself in, but he came back sounding just as anxious as he had during the whole conversation. "What if this is an impulsive choice? What if I don't really want it, but I just think I do?"

I hesitated, a thousand thoughts rushing through my head. Tiernan had always talked about working with animals, and I didn't think this was impulsive at all, not like the job at the animal rescue had been. That had been a nightmare. He'd only gone into the rescue to pet some kittens and had walked out with a full time job, not even considering the work itself. This time he was researching, or at least telling me that he was looking into the job. "Have you been reading about it?"

“Sort of,” he replied with a sigh. “I’ve tried to read what the shelter worker gave me, it’s just hard around the motel. It’s been loud the last couple of nights.”

“Are you safe there still?” Worry crept up my spine like a cascade, and I dropped my feet to the floor and leaned forward on the couch, turning to face him directly.

“I’m fine, I remember the rule.” He frowned at me, then glanced at the piece of yellow paper where it hung on the fridge. I’d shown it to him when he’d arrived and had gotten his approval in a signature at the bottom of the page. His eyes had lit up as he’d read them, but now he was scowling a little bit at the fridge like it had personally attacked him.

I reached out and touched his chin gently, sliding my fingers along his sharp jawbone as I turned his face to me. “Listen, okay? I wasn’t even thinking about the rule, Tiernan, but I am glad you’re fine.”

“I’ll call you if things get too bad here. I promise.”

“Tiernan,” I breathed, running my thumb over his cheek, wondering at how warm he was where he sat captured in my hand. “I know you will. I just worry, that’s all.”

He went silent for a moment like he was considering something, and I didn’t fill the space with words. Finally, he nodded. “You didn’t worry so much before.”

“I never really had to worry,” I replied, picking my words carefully as I let his face go and glanced around at the space we’d once shared. “I thought you were safe in this house. I

thought we were all safe here and nothing could touch us as long as we were together.”

“Me too.”

Silence crept in and sat heavy between us. Tiernan looked down at his lap, his knees still shaking a little bit while his lips pursed and forehead crinkled like he was thinking hard about something. I regretted letting the sadness that seemed to live inside me now creep into yet another conversation. I sighed in frustration at myself before reaching out to place a hand on his knee. He startled, then looked up at me, carefully resting his hand on my own where it lay on him.

“I’m sorry,” I said, hoping that the right words would come. “I didn’t mean to make it sad again. I just...”

“Always have sadness inside.” He nodded, offering a small understanding smile as he finished my sentence. “It comes out sometimes without you even realizing it. I know. I do it too.”

Simply put, yet very true. I nodded back and he laced our hands together, shuffling close to me on the couch and leaning against my shoulder in silence for a few moments before muttering, “I don’t even have a resume.”

“I bet there’s a laptop around here you could use,” I offered, giving his hand a small squeeze. “It’s in the spare room on the desk if you want to go grab it. We can print it here too when you’re done.”

“I’ve never done a resume before. Every other job I’ve gotten, I just walked in and told them to hire me.”

“There should be a template you could use. I’m sure you can figure it out, Tiernan.”

He sighed, slumping back on the couch. “What if I throw up?”

I laughed, nudging him with my shoulder as he grumbled beside me. “Then you throw up. They’ll remember you at least.” He snickered softly beside me but didn’t make a move off the couch to go get the laptop, and I could feel the nerves settling around him again. Words, I reminded myself. Tiernan needed words, and I hoped I was getting them right. “You’re smart, Tiernan. Smarter than you think you are, and I know you’d be a great groomer’s assistant. This is a good choice.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes,” I responded, moving my hand from his own to gently grasp the back of his neck. I gave him a gentle nudge to get him to look at me and he lifted his head to meet my eyes with his own. “You can do this. Go get the laptop and I’ll help if you need me to.”

Tiernan closed his eyes for a brief moment, a small smile playing on his lips as I gently rubbed the sides of his neck. “I get rewards if I do it?”

I laughed, letting go of his neck as his eyes opened again. “If you stop hesitating, do your resume and go to the grooming place, then yes. Rewards.”

“Even if I don’t get the job and throw up all over the floor?” He grinned at me, still shaking with nerves a bit, but looking

far less heavy where he sat.

“Yes. I promise. Rewards, Tiernan. Tomorrow when you come over, I’ll have rewards ready for you.” I would give him something today, but we were cutting it close to my work hours as it was and he had a lot to do ahead of time. I liked to take my time with giving him what he needed, moving slow to ensure that his pleasure and joy was rung out of him in inches, not rushing to fit a deadline. Words would have to suffice for today, I only hoped I’d be able to say the right things when the time came.

“Fuck yeah,” he whispered, eyes sparkling with happiness. I opened my mouth to comment on his word choice out of habit, but he grinned again, glancing at the list on the fridge. “You didn’t say no swearing.”

“That was a Daniel rule,” I responded with a small smile.

“I hated that rule.”

“We don’t have to have it.” It had been important to Daniel as he viewed swearing as disrespectful, but it hadn’t mattered to me. I was no stranger to dropping a bunch of foul language myself and it felt like a double standard to expect that Tiernan wouldn’t.

“Fuck yeah,” Tiernan whispered again, rising to his feet and heading out of the living room. I heard his footsteps carrying down the hallway as I leaned back on the couch, waiting for him to come back, as another tiny difference between how things had been before and how they were now rippled through my mind.

Chapter Fourteen

TIERNAN

I thought I'd gotten used to disappointment, but as I walked out of the grooming salon, I could feel it ringing through me like a brand new type of ache.

I had gotten there too late and the position had already been filled. I sighed as I walked down the sidewalk of the bustling shopping area, heading for the street that would take me back out through the outskirts of the city to the motel. I wished I had said yes when Bryce told me to take some of the money he'd earned and get a bus ticket, but I had refused. I was usually fine with walking everywhere, but today I felt heavier than usual as I skirted through alleyways and side streets, taking a path only those of us who lived on the streets knew by heart. The entire city was full of shortcuts, whether it be crossing through a certain backyard or hopping a specific fence, and I had once taken pride in knowing how to get around the city far easier than anyone else. As I trudged down a gravel alleyway that led to the edge of the path cut through a field that headed out of the main core of the city, I didn't quite feel proud at all.

Not getting the job wasn't the end of the world, but it surprised me exactly how disappointed I was that the position had been filled. I had wandered in with my resume in hand to find the owner of the grooming parlor, a purple-haired girl named Tabitha, in a heated verbal argument with a screaming husky and hadn't been able to stop grinning the entire time I'd been there. I'd always loved animals and my favorite things that Daniel brought home were always related to dogs, cats, and birds. He'd once suggested that he was working on Joel when it came to pets in the house, just so that I could have a cat like I'd always wanted. Joel wasn't a huge fan of pets, but at one point before Daniel had died, I'd thought I'd been getting close to having a cat of my own.

Sadly, that potential future cat seemed about as far off as me getting a job was at this point. At least Tabitha had looked a little bit sad at having to turn me down and had said she'd keep my resume on file in case the person she did hire didn't work out. I supposed that was something I could hold onto, though I didn't feel overly positive about it. That was probably just something employers said to make the sting of being rejected hurt a bit less. I sighed as I came to the part where the gravel lane I was traveling on turned to dirt, eyeing the mud up ahead carefully. Muddy shoes would be the icing on the disappointment cake I'd been baking in my head and there was no way I deserved that today. I turned right instead of continuing forwards, sticking on the gravel that wasn't quite as dirty and gross. It would take me a bit longer to get back to the

motel, but I was up for the walk while I sorted out my thoughts.

It wasn't like there was anything waiting for me at the motel anyway right now. Bryce was at the library again, reading and hanging out in the soft seating area in the basement as he often did. He'd been going more often these days, and while I was curious as to why, I wasn't going to say anything. The alternative was him standing on a street corner, and I'd take a safe, cozy library for him any day of the week.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, startling me as I walked. I still wasn't used to having one of these again, and I laughed out loud at myself for being startled, shaking my head as I stopped walking to pull it out and see what Joel had sent me because it was only Joel who contacted me. I hadn't gathered the nerve to reach out to Hobie or Perry yet, and there was no way on earth I was reaching out to Ambrose, though I had his number. I would rather chew off my own toes than call him out of the blue in hopes that he wouldn't automatically hang up when he heard my voice.

Turning the screen on, I found a text message that simply asked if I was done yet and how it had gone. I sighed, clutching the phone in my hand tighter than I needed to before sending a simple thumbs down emoji and moving to put the phone back in my pocket. As I did though, it started ringing in my hand, and I hesitated, seeing Joel's name there as nerves met the disappointment in my stomach and shook hands, churning my insides up.

I just wanted him to be proud of me.

That's all I wanted. To live a good life, do good things and make my Daddy proud to call me his.

With a heavy sigh, I answered the call and mumbled a soft hello.

“Are you okay?” Joel asked, sounding concerned.

“I'm all right. Just disappointed, that's all.”

“Tell me how it went?”

I dove into the story of my day, from the time I left his house so full of hope and excitement to the moment I'd felt disappointment creep in as I'd heard the news that the position was filled. Joel made small noises on the other end of the call, letting me know that he was listening, and when I finished I waited for words, cautiously hoping they were coming because I needed them.

“She kept your resume on file?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“That's good news, don't you think?”

“Isn't that just something employers say to be polite?” I shrugged my shoulders and glanced around, looking for a place to sit down. Finding a big rock sticking out of the gravel, I made my way over and sunk onto it, feeling the bite of the edges in my butt and thighs.

“I think it's a good sign, Tiernan,” Joel offered. “Maybe the person won't work out and she'll call you.”

“Maybe. I just didn’t realize how much I wanted it until I was told I couldn’t have it. That’s all.”

“It’s okay to be disappointed. I’m proud of you.”

A ripple of warmth crept through me at those words, and I smiled gently, closing my eyes. “Say that again.”

“I am very proud of you, Tiernan. You made a choice and followed through. I’m sorry it didn’t work out the way you wanted, but I am so proud of you for taking the chance.”

“Again.”

“Proud of you.” Joel laughed.

“Once more.”

“Proud, Tiernan.”

I sat and let it wash over me in the silence, feeling some of the disappointment slipping away in the knowing that my Daddy was proud of me enough to tell me that he was. Joel didn’t say much in words and to hear it was a balm to my aching self. “Rewards?”

“Yes, you ridiculous boy. Come over tomorrow morning and I’ll have a reward ready for you.”

“Is it your dick?”

“Tiernan,” Joel sputtered, laughing loud on the other end of the call. I grinned at the sound of it in my ears, pleased at making him genuinely laugh.

“But is it though?”

“Maybe.”

“Fuck yeah,” I whispered into the phone as Joel kept right on laughing.



I curled up beneath the covers with just my head peeking out as I stared hard at the locked door to the motel room that opened to the parking lot. Bryce hadn't returned from his trip to the library yet, but I had been fine at the hotel by myself until a few moments ago. I had been relaxing and playing a game on my phone to chill out after unpacking all of the thoughts that rattled through my head about the disappointment from earlier and the excitement of what tomorrow would bring from Joel, but a loud shout from next door had forced my heart into my throat. I had quickly shut down the game I'd been playing, then slunk around the room in silence, carefully turning all of the lights and even the TV off before crawling into the bed to try and be as quiet as I possibly could. I wanted no part of whatever was happening out there and hiding felt like the safest bet as the noises and shouting got louder from next door. At some point, a rattling noise had come from the door like someone was trying to get inside, and I had started shivering in the covers, terrified at who could be out there and what they planned on doing if they got inside. The butterflies and nerves were still churning in my gut as the loud shouting continued, spilling all around me from the room beside ours into the parking lot. I couldn't make out the words, but I knew enough to know when people were pissed off to the point that violence became a possibility, and I

just hoped they'd leave me alone while they fought out whatever it was that had made them so mad.

Or that someone would call the police. I clutched my phone tight in my hand beneath the sheets, but I couldn't make myself call 911 because I didn't want to be on the police's radar with my outstanding fines for theft. I wasn't sure they wouldn't haul me into jail and make me stay there to serve the time instead of paying the money. Plus, there was a strong likelihood that the cops would come, tell everyone to be quiet and then things would get bad again after they left, except then I risked having a target on my back as a snitch if the police let it slide that I'd been the one that called. Calling the police myself was too risky, but I had to hope that someone else would take the chance.

The doorknob rattled again, and I closed my eyes, shaking beneath the covers as the worst-case scenarios flitted through my brain. Someone could come in and steal my stuff. They could take Bryce's hard earned money and beat me up. They could touch me in places I didn't want them to. They could kill me. Beat me with a bat. Stab me with a knife. Throw me in the dumpster out back.

A soft noise of fear left my mouth and I clamped my lips shut as the rattling stopped again, a moment of slight relief trickling through me.

I hated this motel.

It had been fine earlier when it was a bed to lay my head and a place for Bryce and I to be without having to go to the

shelter, but I hated it now.

“I should call Daddy,” I whispered to myself, burying the words in the blanket around me. I knew that this situation met the rule about calling for help if I needed it, but Bryce was somewhere out there and I didn’t want him to come back to the hotel to be alone if Joel came and took me away. Or to get hurt and have nobody around to call an ambulance if things escalated out there. Bryce was no stranger to throwing a punch and I had seen him defend himself before, but not knowing who was out there had me hesitating, frozen in the bed beneath these covers.

Another rattle came to the door, and I doubled down on my shaking and quivering in the bedsheets, certain that my heart was thumping so hard and so loud behind my ribcage that the sound of it was echoing around the room. I swallowed hard as loud shouting started outside the door, my ears pricking up to hear what kind of danger I was about to be in.

“That’s my fucking room,” Bryce’s voice shouted, like he was standing right outside the chipped white door. A voice that wasn’t his responded with words I couldn’t make out from my spot in the bed but Bryce growled back again, words I could make out clearly. “I don’t know who the fuck Jim is. That’s my fucking room. Get away from the door or I’ll call the cops.”

A moment of silence went by and my anxiety crept up my throat, nearly choking me as I stared at the door, waiting for Bryce to enter. When the door finally did open and he walked

in, relief as deep as the ocean pooled in me. His eyes were narrowed and angry, his face marred with a scowl that looked like it was made of fear and rage. Bryce slammed the door shut and did the lock up again, this time adding the chain I couldn't have done up because it would have locked him out entirely.

“We have to get out of here,” he murmured, coming to sit on the bed beside me. He placed his hand on my shivering shoulder and I snaked my own hand out to rest on top of his, needing to feel him skin to skin.

“What’s going on out there?”

“Some huge asshole on drugs or something. Looking for a guy named Jim. He was certain this was Jim’s room and only walked away when I threatened the cops. I don’t know if he’s going to come back and try to get in again.”

“I think he might have tried to get in next door too, but they opened the door and yelled at him.”

Bryce nodded, his body still tense on the bed as he kept glancing between me and the door over and over again. His hand shook on my shoulder and I saw his chest rise and fall as he took some deep breaths. “We have to find a new place to live.”

“Because of the one guy? Maybe he’ll go away.”

“Not just the one guy.” Bryce sighed. “I didn’t want you to feel unsafe, but there’s other people here that aren’t... great. I

saw some guys I know from the streets heading into one of the rooms down the way.”

“Swanlea Park guys?” I asked, needing clarification. Swanlea Park, though it was where I’d first met Bryce, was overrun with drugs, violence, and theft. It was a terrifying place to be at night and only a certain group of people we knew on the streets hung out there. My stomach sank as Bryce nodded.

“Isn’t there another shitty motel down the road? Do they charge the same as this one?”

“They’re the same price, but it’s worse than this one,” Bryce offered, shaking his head at the idea of it. “Cops were just there this last week busting up some drug dealers or something. This was the better one of the two of them.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah.”

I swallowed hard, clutching my phone in my hand. “I have to call Daddy.” Bryce’s eyes hardened as his jaw clenched tight, and I reached out to wrap an arm around him. “It’s a rule. He’ll help us out.”

“He’s your Daddy, Tiernan,” Bryce commented, his voice soft though pensive. “He’ll help you out.”

“And you. That’s part of the rule. If either of us are in danger or need help, I’m supposed to call him.”

Bryce’s eyebrows lifted briefly in surprise, but he turned his head away from me and looked down at the floor. He breathed

for a few moments into the silence of the room before nodding. “Call him.”

Chapter Fifteen

JOEL

“Mason?” a tiny voice said, drawing my attention up off the stack of papers I was going through. The club was basically empty for the night, and I’d recruited Mason to help me sort through the paperwork, matching invoices to receipts and taking stock of what was outstanding still. I had bit back a laugh when Ambrose had come to find me shortly after I’d arrived, confessing to having been distracted while he was working on organizing the paperwork in his office and asking for my help. His face had been beet red, and he’d been fairly sheepish as he’d made the request, but I only had to look behind him at the satisfied grin on Hobie’s face to understand entirely what that distraction had likely entailed.

“What’s up, Perry?” Mason asked, also abandoning the paperwork to the table between us. He exchanged a concerned glance with myself as Perry slid into the booth beside him, his face flushed red and his eyes glassy. “You feeling okay?”

“I just need a minute, if that’s all right?”

Mason nodded and opened his arms, letting Perry scramble onto his lap and curl into his embrace. The boy shoved his thumb into his mouth and closed his eyes, smiling a tiny bit as he was wrapped up in the safety and comfort that was Mason. I got it, if I was being honest. Mason was a strong, take no shit type of man, but he had a huge heart that hadn't taken Perry very long to weasel his way into. I could still remember the way Perry's eyes had lit up when Mason had walked into the club for his first shift. He'd sidled up to the tall black man and before Mason had known what was happening, he was being dragged over to play blocks, his caramel colored eyes wide with surprise. It was an initiation of sorts, I had told Mason later on. Passing the Perry test was a bit of a joke among the staff at the club, but Ambrose always reminded me that it spoke volumes about the measure of a person and the ability to accept whoever came through the doors. He wasn't into hiring staff that had no regard for certain parts of our community, and while he made certain that we all knew and understood that we weren't expected to play with anyone, respecting the differences between people and their needs was always at the forefront of what we did.

"He's really warm," Mason murmured, reaching up to place a hand on Perry's forehead. "I think he might be running a fever."

"Perry?" I asked, reaching across the table and placing my hand on the boy's arm. "You feeling sick, bud?"

"I should go home," he mumbled, pulling his thumb from his mouth. "I thought I was healthy, but maybe I'm not."

“You should go home and crawl into your bed,” Mason replied, brushing his hand over Perry’s head of blond curls. “Do you need someone to drive you?”

Perry opened his eyes and shook his head, yawning a bit where he sat. “I’m okay to drive. I live close enough. Can I just have a few more minutes? Is that okay?”

“Of course, you can.”

Perry smiled again and snuggled back down into Mason’s embrace, closing his eyes and Mason’s gaze met mine over the table. “Is he really okay to drive himself home?”

“He doesn’t live very far at all. He’s got a fancy penthouse in one of the buildings downtown. He only drives because it’s safer than walking home late at night around here.”

Mason’s eyes widened in surprise at the mention of Perry’s home, but I didn’t offer any more than that. The story of the boy on his lap wasn’t my business and I wasn’t one to share things that weren’t mine to tell. Instead, I went back to shuffling through paperwork, as Perry cuddled on Mason’s lap, humming softly to himself.

“I can’t find the receipt for the groceries Aaron bought the other day,” I mumbled, rifling through pages. “I’m sure we paid him back, but I can’t find a record of that anywhere here.”

“Maybe it’s somewhere in that mess Ambrose calls his desk,” Mason offered, speaking softly so he wouldn’t bother Perry.

I nodded my agreement, knowing they were likely in there somewhere. Turning back to my work, I continued going through things for a few more minutes until Perry sighed and opened his eyes. Without a word, he crawled off of Mason's lap and stood at the end of the table, stretching his arms up to the sky and blinking his hazy eyes.

"I'm gonna go home now," he mumbled. "I hope I can sleep this off."

"Me too," I responded, giving him a smile. "You still okay to drive?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine Daddy Joel. Thanks for letting me snuggle a bit, Daddy M. I needed that."

Mason nodded, offering a smile as Perry waved and made his way to the front door of the club, walking slowly and carrying himself like he weighed a thousand pounds. When the blond had left our view, I glanced around at the rest of the club, noting how slow things appeared to be. Only one other booth was taken in the front and I knew that the play rooms at the back weren't busy either. It was likely going to be an early night for us, and instead of the dread that thought brought me, I found that I was looking forward to going home so I could get some sleep and be in a good space for Tiernan's visit tomorrow. The idea of giving him a reward for trying at the grooming place had filled me with a mix of excitement and apprehension. With any other boy, a reward might be a spur of the moment thing, but Tiernan had always liked knowing he was getting something for good behavior and the anticipation

it would build in him was one of the best parts of being his Daddy.

I was hit with a memory of coming home after a long night at work to find Tiernan naked on the couch, Daniel seated beside him, slowly stroking the boy's hard cock and murmuring things into his ear. Tiernan had whimpered so loud when I'd walked in, begging me without words to go to him and make Daniel let him finish, though knowing I wouldn't. Teasing Tiernan was part of Daniel's fun, and I had delighted in watching the boy squirm and grumble as Daniel brought him to the edge over and over again before finally letting him leap off the side of it.

"He chose this," Daniel had informed me as Tiernan grumbled under his breath. "Our boy has been very good this week and I told him that he could pick his reward tonight."

Tiernan had frowned as Daniel had stroked him again, his eyes almost rolling back in pleasure and irritation. "I asked if I could have a handjob. I didn't ask for this."

"Red?" Daniel had asked, offering Tiernan the safe word that would make everything stop.

"Green." Tiernan had sighed, providing the one thing that would make sure it didn't.

I inhaled as the memory tripped through my mind, fading away into the nothingness as they often did. I could capture moments for a time, but they'd started leaving almost as quickly as they came to me these days, and I wasn't certain how I felt about that. There were things I was sure I'd never

forget, though the thought that I might someday rattled me. If I forgot the way Daniel's eyes had looked so full of life all the time, the sound of his laugh when Tiernan was being a shit, the tone of his voice when he was aroused, I wasn't sure what I'd do.

"You okay over there?" Mason asked, breaking into what could have been a dark train of thought.

"Yeah," I replied with a smile so he'd know I meant it. "Just thinking, that's all."

Mason nodded, then glanced down at the table before bringing his brown eyes back up to mine, and the understanding inside them told me that he wasn't unaware of what had happened in my life. I'd never spoken about anything like that with him, but Ambrose must have said something at some point. Daniel's death and Tiernan's disappearance wasn't a secret, the whole club knew what had happened and had supported me in the aftermath, and I wasn't concerned with Mason knowing as much as everyone else did. He opened his mouth to speak, but my phone started jittering in my pocket, and I offered a small smile as I pulled it out and took a look at the screen.

Tiernan's name and face greeted me, his image in my phone being an old selfie he'd taken years ago. I was struck for a moment at how different he looked now, how much longer his hair was and how his once round cheeks had slimmed over the years.

"Hey you," I said, answering his call. "What's up?"

“Daddy,” he whispered, his tone sending alarm bells ringing in my head and a chill running down my spine. “I’m scared.”

“What’s happening?” My heart leapt into my throat and Mason’s face across the table wrinkled in concern at my tone.

“There’s people here. Someone was trying to get in. Bryce and I aren’t safe here anymore. I need help.”

“Okay. Is the door to your room locked?” My heart raced and I could feel my hands slicking with sweat as my body was flooded with urgency and need to make certain he was safe.

“Yeah.”

“Good boy,” I responded. “Did you call the police?”

“No, they won’t come, and if they do, they’ll just tell everyone to stop being noisy and won’t do anything. We turned all the lights off and we’re hiding in the bed.”

“That’s good thinking. I’m coming to get you both.”

“It’s not safe,” Tiernan whispered, sounding panicked. “There’s a bunch of scary shitheads around here tonight.”

“Give me one second, okay? I’m not putting the phone down, but I need to find someone to come with me.”

“Okay, Daddy. Silas would be good.”

He wasn’t wrong, but I knew Silas, one of the Doms that frequented the club, wasn’t here tonight. I glanced around the club anyway, just to be sure in case he’d snuck in somehow. Silas was a genuinely kind person, but he was also one scary

looking dude, and I couldn't think of anyone better to take with me to the motel.

“Mason? Is Silas around tonight?”

He shook his head, and I cursed under my breath. “What’s going on?”

“My boy and his friend have been staying at the Satellite Motel. It’s a long story, but they’re in danger and I need to go get them.”

“I’ll come,” Mason said, sliding out of the booth without a second thought. I watched him raise himself up to his full six-foot-two height and admired the muscles that rippled beneath his tight black T-shirt. His once friendly face had turned to a scowl that was tinged with a hint of danger, and I nodded. He wasn’t quite as off-putting as Silas was, but that same air of “don’t fuck with me” clung to him and that would definitely make people think twice before coming at us.

But still, I hesitated. “It could be a bad scene. There was someone trying to get inside their room.”

“Understood.” Mason nodded, his jaw tightening beneath his skin.

I turned back to my phone, giving Mason a grateful smile. “Okay, Tiernan. I’m coming to get you. I want you and Bryce to pack up all of your things, if it’s safe to do that. Be as quiet as you can and keep the lights off so it looks like nobody is inside. You won’t be going back to the motel again, so make sure you take everything you want to keep.”

“Okay, Daddy, we’re in room 127 almost at the end,” Tiernan whispered. “Thank you.”

“Thank you for calling me, you did the right thing.”

Tiernan said a quiet goodbye, and as I got off the phone, I rocketed from the booth, adrenaline rippling through me like a shockwave. He sounded terrified in a way I’d never heard from him before, and I was so thankful that he followed the rules we’d agreed on. He’d earned himself one amazing reward once I had him and his friend to safety, that much was true, but the more pressing issue was getting him out. In the back of my mind, a voice whispered that he could be gone when I got there, that someone could take him from me. I was doing my best to tell it to fuck off, though it was hard to not jump to the worst possible scenario.

“I’m going to go tell Ambrose,” I said, putting together the plan as quickly as I could in my mind. “Meet me in the parking lot and we’ll head over at the same time.”

Mason nodded, then we both headed across the bar area towards the hallway that led to both Ambrose’s office and the back employee door. We parted ways at the wooden door Ambrose and Hobie were behind and Mason nodded once more in my direction before continuing on through the back door that led to the parking lot, the cool night air gusting through the warm hallway and making me shiver. I raised my hand to knock on the door, not wanting to interrupt something I didn’t want to see, though my hands were shaking and the knocking was frantic.

“What’s happening?” Ambrose asked, throwing open the door.

“Tiernan is in trouble,” I blurted out. “Mason and I are going to get him and Bryce from the motel, but that leaves you and Aaron alone here. There’s no one out there. Not really.”

“Breathe, Joel,” Ambrose said, reaching out and resting his hand on my shoulder. “Aaron and I will handle it. Do you need my help? We can shut down early.”

“No, Mason and I should be okay. The less attention the better, I think. We just have to get in, get them out, and it’ll be over.”

Ambrose nodded. “Mason’s a good man to take. Stay safe. Call me when you’re all on your way out of there.”

I sputtered a thank you before rushing down the hallway and bursting forth into the night air. Mason stood beside his already running dark blue truck, the headlights cutting through the shadowy parking lot behind the club, and I nodded to him as I made my way to my own black truck. I climbed in and my headlights joined his in the darkness as I led us both out away from the safety of The Red Door and into what I hoped wasn’t going to be a bad decision.

Chapter Sixteen

TIERNAN

I shivered beneath the blankets on the bed, eyes stuck on the door as Bryce paced around the room like a caged tiger. Around us the shouting and noise continued, loud music adding to the cacophony of sound. I was sure there was just a party going on somewhere at this point, but that thought wasn't doing anything to quell the anxiety that was trickling through me like water. Bryce's agitation showed on his face, his handsome features screwed up into a scowl and his fists clenched at his sides like he was ready to throw a punch or two if someone tried to get into our room again.

"He'll be here soon," I whispered to myself. "Daddy is coming."

"What kind of vehicle does Joel drive?" Bryce asked, drawing my attention off of staring at the door and up to his face. I hadn't even noticed that he'd stopped pacing about the room to peer through the blinds at the parking spot out front of our hotel room.

"A big black truck."

“A big dark blue one just pulled into the parking lot. Right in front of our door.”

“That’s not him.” And that the truck parked outside of our exact door made my stomach ache. Bryce abandoned the window and went to stand by the door to our room, his entire body tensed to the point that I could see the cords of his muscles rippling down his forearms. I held my breath for what felt like forever until a knock came to our door.

“Go the fuck away,” Bryce snarled, and I flinched.

“Bryce, we’re supposed to be pretending we aren’t here,” I whispered, shivering.

The knock at the door happened again, and I jittered where I lay, fear pooling into me and making me useless as much as anger was fueling Bryce. My phone lit up with a text message though and relief calmed me down a little bit.

“Daddy texted. He says it’s safe to open the door.”

“You sure?” Bryce asked, turning to show me the caution written into his face. “Blue truck. Not black.”

“He says it’s okay.”

Bryce nodded, then slowly undid the chain and the locks on the door before carefully turning the knob. I rose from the bed as the first bit of the overhead street light outside lit up the entryway of the room, clutching my phone tight in my hand as my heart raced. When the door was opened, Joel raced into the room, and I leapt at him, heart aching as I became a barnacle, pushing my body into his as close as I could get it. I wrapped

my legs around his waist and held onto him as tight as I could, feeling his soothing hands running down my back as I shivered.

“I was so scared,” I whispered. “Someone tried to get in twice. I was so scared.”

“I’m here,” Joel murmured, his voice and touch quelling much of the fear and stress that had captured me. “I’ve got you.”

I let him hold me for a few more moments, inhaling the leather and oil paint scent of him into my lungs where it sat like joy, before slowly lowering my legs and coming to rest on my own two feet again. Joel reached down and cupped my chin in his hand, tilting my head upwards so he could press his lips to mine quickly.

“Thank you for coming,” I said, meaning every single word more than he could ever know. “I thought we were fucked for sure.”

“I told you I’d come get you if you or Bryce were ever in trouble.”

Bryce. Right, I needed to make some introductions. Turning away from Joel though, I found a curious scene playing out in front of me. Bryce stood by the TV, eyes wide as he looked at the person Joel had brought with him. The black man was tall, almost the same height as Bryce, but where Bryce was built muscle on a thin runner’s frame, this man was built bigger. Sturdier and more solid, like a rugby player with a thicker chest and big thighs. He was very handsome as well, his head

shaved and his face carrying only the hint of a beard that clung to his well defined jaw. There was a recognition in his big, light brown eyes as he looked at my friend and as I glanced from him back to Bryce, I saw the same acknowledgement there.

“Who’s that?” I asked, nudging Joel.

“Library guy,” Bryce offered, though I wasn’t talking to him. His voice was a mixture of hesitation and wonder as he stared at the handsome man in front of him.

“Mason,” the man responded, giving Bryce a gentle smile that brought out a dimple in his cheek.

“Bryce.”

“Nice to finally know your name,” Mason replied.

Bryce swallowed hard, nodding once carefully as a response. I was fascinated and full of questions, but now was absolutely not the time or place to start a conversation. Shouting and music carried through the walls of the motel, reminding me again where I was and pushing me away from Joel to go grab my overloaded backpack so we could get the hell out of here. I snagged Bryce’s bag as well, hefting it into my arms and carrying it to drop at his feet. The thunk of it hitting the carpet and the smack of it against his leg seemed to jar him from whatever thoughts he’d been having and he turned to me, offering a small smile.

“Thanks,” he whispered, his whole body looking far more relaxed than I’d seen him in a while. Something about this

Mason calmed him, soothed the feral part of him, perhaps. Whatever it was, whatever it meant, I approved.

“I’m the big black truck,” Joel offered, looking right at Bryce. “If you want to go with Mason and put your stuff in, it’s unlocked and running.”

Bryce frowned, glancing between the two men that had just arrived. “I don’t think I’m going to go with you guys.”

“Bryce, you have got to be shitting me,” I blurted, shocked that he was even considering it. “Where the fuck are you gonna go, huh?” I dropped my backpack on the floor and stomped over to him, grabbing his face and holding him tight in my hands. “Listen. It’s not safe here. You said it yourself. Swanlea Park guys are just down the way. Swanlea Park, Bryce. Get your bag and let’s go to Joel’s.”

“I just wanted you to be safe,” he whispered, looking right into my eyes. “I’ll be okay. I’ll find a place for me to go.”

“Me and you against the world,” I muttered back, smoothing my thumbs over his cheekbones. “Remember? Come with us.”

Bryce hesitated, shaking his head slightly where I held it. I glanced back at Joel, showing him my worry and seeing the same written into his face, but before I could say anything to convince Bryce that he needed to be safe too, his entire body stiffened in my grasp. I let go of his face and took a step backwards to see that Mason had gripped the back of Bryce’s neck in his hand, his fingers gently soothing the tightened muscles that ran beneath the skin there.

“You’re going to pick up your bag,” he murmured, leaning forward and putting his lips right beside Bryce’s ear. “You’re going to carry it outside and put it into one of the trucks there. Joel’s black one, or my blue one. That is a choice you can make right now.”

Bryce bristled at the directions and made a move to pull from Mason’s grasp, but the man followed him, still gently moving his hand against his neck. “Settle, boy. Settle down now. You’re okay.”

I watched an entire battle take place over Bryce’s stormy features, his eyes narrowing and opening again, his lips pursing like he was going to spew venom laced words before relaxing and his jaw tightening, then loosening itself. Finally, in a surreal moment, all of the fight seemed to leave him in one fell swoop and he leaned into Mason’s touch the slightest bit. Mason smiled at him as he bent to pick up his bag where I’d dropped it on the floor.

“Ready to go?” Joel asked. “You have everything you need?”

“Yeah,” I responded, gripping my backpack tight. I followed Joel out of the motel room and opened the back door of his truck, slinging the heavy bag up onto the seat there. I kept the door open for Bryce, but watched in alarm as he slowly made his way over to Mason’s big blue truck, staring at it for a few moments, his eyes darting around from truck to truck, person to person. Finally, after a long moment of silence

and deliberation on his part, he threw his bag into the truck bed of Mason's Ford.

"Bryce?" I asked, moving to stand beside my best friend. "Joel's truck is the black one."

"I'm going to go with Mason," he whispered, stepping close to me. "I think... Tiernan you need to be with your Daddy now. Alone, I think."

Tears filled my eyes and I shook my head. "One third of my heart, Bryce. One whole third."

"I know, Tiernan. I know. Go spend time with another third of it. Be happy and safe. That's all I've wanted," he replied, his own eyes watery now. He reached for me, and I went to him, trusting that the two men who'd come to help us would keep us safe because it felt like something important was ending, and I couldn't be stopped from trying to hold on to it for just a moment longer.

"But what about you?" I asked as I wrapped my arms around him and pressed my cheek against his chest. "I want you to be safe too. Will you stay with Mason or are you planning on bolting as soon as you can?"

"I'll stay," he responded, wrapping himself around me. "I'll try. You know me, though..."

"Settling down is scary." I nodded, finishing his sentence. I hesitated as I held onto him tight, not wanting to let go. Bryce on his own was a scary thought, the damage he'd do to himself in search of whatever he felt was missing inside him made me

want to demand he get into Joel's truck but I couldn't do that. "Promise me you'll stay with Mason and if he doesn't have room for you or if it doesn't work, you'll come to Joel's with me?"

Bryce went silent for a moment before slowly nodding. "I'll try, Tiernan."

"Try really hard. I love you," I offered, releasing him from my arms. "Call me tomorrow from Mason's place, okay?"

Bryce nodded and leaned down, pressing his lips against my forehead in a kiss that felt like a goodbye. We parted ways and I climbed into Joel's truck, watching as Bryce hopped into Mason's. My heart screamed a protest as Joel got into the driver's side and pulled out of the parking lot, turning left onto the road that ran alongside it. Out the rearview mirror, I watched as Mason turned right. I inhaled a slow breath as I watched the blue truck carrying my best friend disappear into the darkness, tears dripping down my cheeks.

"He will be okay," Joel offered, reaching over and placing his hand on my knee. He gave it a quick squeeze, and I nodded, though I wasn't so sure. Joel didn't know the measure of a man like Bryce and his safety couldn't be promised. All I could do was hope that he'd try his best to stay where it was safe.

"I'll be okay too," I said out loud, needing to hear the words said.

"We'll have to get him a cell phone so you two can chat and text."

“Yeah?”

Joel nodded as I glanced up to look at him. “I’m sure Mason will set him up with something.”

“Is Mason a Daddy?”

“The jury is out on that one. He’s pretty new to the club, only been with us a couple of months, but he’s really skilled. He’s been teaching things to some of the newer members and they’ve learned a lot from him. We all have, really. We’re getting even better at what we do because of him taking time to teach us new things.”

“You’re learning how to be a better Daddy from Mason?”

“No,” Joel responded, gifting me a quick smile before turning his head back to watch the road. “I’m learning that from you, Tiernan.”

“Oh.” I didn’t have more words to add because I was a bit stunned. He was learning how to be a better Daddy from me? I really liked the sound of that. I smiled to myself as I settled into the passenger seat, entwining my fingers with Joel’s on my lap as the streetlights went by overhead. Though the motel had been terrifying tonight and parting with Bryce was weighing heavy on my heart, the night had at least ended up in a space I’d longed to exist in for the last two years.

I was with my Daddy, and we were going home.

Chapter Seventeen

JOEL

“Can we watch a movie or something?” Tiernan asked, flopping onto the couch and throwing himself backwards until he was laying sprawled out over the cushions. “I can’t settle down. My head’s a mess.”

“Sure, pick one out. I just have to send a text to Ambrose so he knows we’re safe.” I had meant to give him a call as we were leaving the motel, but Tiernan had seemed to need silence. He’d even turned the radio off in the truck as we’d driven.

“Do you still have my Avengers ones?” he asked, not moving an inch off the couch, and I smiled where I stood in the kitchen, holding onto my phone. He had always loved those movies and Daniel and I had taken him to see each one as it hit the theaters. Buying him all the Blu-ray copies had been the answer to the question of what to get him for every Christmas and birthday. Even though they were all available through streaming services now, like everything else in the house, I’d kept them.

“I do,” I responded, hitting send on the text to Ambrose. He texted back quickly with an order that I take tomorrow off from the club to get some rest and I didn’t even consider putting up a fight. I was far too tired for protests and not having to work the following night was fine by me. I put my phone down on the counter and glanced up at Tiernan where he lay on the couch. “Want a snack?”

“No, just some water maybe? My stomach feels a bit weird.”

I grabbed a glass printed with daisies and went to the fridge to fill it from the jug I kept in there. “Weird?”

“Yeah, it’s all rumbly and weird.”

He was still stressed out, I knew. He’d been as still as a stone on the ride here, but I’d seen the remaining dregs of the anxiety deep within his exhausted eyes. I carried the glass of cool water to the table and placed it in front of him, then waited as he sat up on the couch. Sliding into my usual spot, I watched as he took a slow sip of water, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed and his eyes sliding closed for a few seconds before opening again. When he was done drinking, he exhaled a small noise of satisfaction and put the nearly empty glass back down.

“Better?”

“Yeah, a bit. Maybe I was thirsty. I still feel off, though.”

“Relaxing with a movie should help,” I offered, hoping that I wasn’t lying to him. “Want to watch it in here or in the

bedroom?”

Tiernan’s mouth dropped open at my words, and I almost laughed out loud at the stunned expression on his face. “In the bedroom, Daddy? What happened to ‘the bedroom is for sleeping not for watching TV’?”

“Daniel,” I offered with a shrug. “That was a Daniel rule, like the swearing.”

What I didn’t add was that it had felt better to stay in bed for days on end in the aftermath of finding him gone. I had brought the TV from the office in there to entertain me while I’d cried into the pillows and turned the bed into a nest of loneliness.

“He’d be so upset,” Tiernan replied with a small, sad smile. “He hated TV in the bedroom.”

“He did.”

Tiernan was silent for a moment, picking up his glass and taking another sip of the last of his water before turning back to me. “I lied. I think he’d be happy you changed something around here.”

“Would he?” Or would he be unimpressed that the one thing I actually did change around here was dragging the old TV into the space he’d always wanted reserved for sleep and sex?

Tiernan nodded like he was certain though. “He wouldn’t want you to live like this, Daddy. I know he wouldn’t.”

“He wouldn’t have wanted you to live the way you’ve been living either,” I pointed out.

“Yeah.” Tiernan sighed, shaking his head sadly. “I made a bunch of mistakes. Bad choices, like I always do.”

I could feel the heaviness of the night and everything that had led up to it lingering in the air around him, but there was something he wasn't considering. I leaned back on the couch, grabbing his shoulders and pulling him back into rest tucked against my side, right where I'd always liked him to be. The familiarity of having his weight beside me again was jarring, but in the best possible way, and I found myself wanting him to capture some of the same warm feeling I was having. “Not always. You made the best choice tonight to keep yourself safe. You followed the rules exactly.”

“Yeah?” he said, the word a bit shaky, though laced with anticipation that more was coming, and I reminded myself again. *Words, Joel. Words.*

“And I am proud of you again,” I offered. “Two times in one day you've made me proud, Tiernan.”

“Oh,” he breathed, melting against me. “I really like the way those words feel.”

Looking down, I could see a peaceful smile curling the ends of his lips upwards slightly. I let him sit in silence for a few moments before nudging him gently with my shoulder. “Bedroom or here for the movie?”

“Bedroom.” He grinned, slowly rising off the couch and stretching. He made his way over to the TV cabinet and kneeled, pulling open the drawer that held all the DVDs and

Blu-rays. He rifled through them until he found the one he was looking for, before plucking it out and clutching it to his chest.

“Which one are we watching?”

“Thor.”

I grinned. I should have known. Tiernan always had a thing for Chris Hemsworth, and Ragnarok was one of his favorite movies. He moved to stand at the mouth of the hallway, holding the case tight to his chest still as I moved around the front of the house, turning off lights and locking doors. When I finished, I turned and was struck by the vision of him standing in the shadows, head tilted slightly downwards and hair spilling forward over his shoulders. His profile beyond the hair that covered his cheeks was illuminated by the scant light that poured into the house from the streetlights outside the windows, his nose and lips outlined against the darkness that surrounded him. I had never seen something quite as breathtaking. I stood for a few minutes, drinking in the moment, savoring the view like a precious moment I knew I would add to the list of things I didn't want to ever forget.

Daniel's voice.

His laugh.

His smile.

And now beautiful Tiernan, silent and still in the moonlight on the night he came home.

— e e e —

Something tickled down my sides and I jolted awake, heart beating and lungs squeezing in my chest. A giggle met my ears followed by a tiny, whisper quiet “oops” and I turned my head to find Tiernan laying there, curled in a ball with his arm outstretched towards me. The last thing I remembered was us changing into pajamas before crawling into the bed and putting a movie on the TV. The room was silent and dark now, save for the boy beside me in bed.

“Did I fall asleep?”

“Yep,” Tiernan whispered. “As soon as the movie started, actually.”

“Did you get some rest?” I asked, still mostly asleep and a little bit stunned to be seeing him in the bed beside me when I’d woken up to cold silence for so long.

“I tried.”

I nodded, closing my eyes, and drifting away into sleep again before another tickle drew me back into awake. I frowned and jolted a bit as the tickling sensation trickled down my side from my pec to the top of my hip. Opening my eyes, I grumbled a little bit under my breath as I took in the wide-eyed expression on Tiernan’s face.

“What are you doing?” I mumbled with a sigh.

“Can’t sleep, sorry.”

I yawned, closing my eyes again for a brief moment before a sharp poke into my hip bone made me open them. “Stop. If you can’t sleep, you are welcome to throw on another movie.”

“I don’t want to watch another movie,” Tiernan grumbled.
“I can’t sleep. I feel shitty.”

“How so?” I responded, frowning as I blinked the lingering sleep out of my eyes.

He shrugged as much as he could in his laying position, then flopped onto his back, shaking the whole bed. Then he pushed himself up off the bed and plopped back down again. And again, laughing a bit as the mattress wobbled beneath him and I.

“Tiernan, stop. I’m tired.”

“I’m tired too,” he mumbled back, sounding a bit snarly.

I inhaled a deep breath, begging for patience and kindness to come to me as I rolled to face him. “Why can’t you sleep?”

Tiernan shrugged once more, then rolled onto his side to face me, reaching out to poke my nose with his finger. I sighed and frowned at him as he did it again. “Do you need something?”

Another shrug and another poke of his finger into my nose.

“You’re being a brat,” I warned.

“So what?” he shot back, his lips curling into a satisfied smirk. Raising an eyebrow, I watched as the smug little grin on his face faltered a bit before returning full force. “I feel shitty, Daddy. I can’t sleep.”

I resisted the urge to haul him over my knee and spank the smirk right out of him, reminding myself that Daniel would

listen and ask questions instead of acting. He would have patience in a moment like this, and I needed to do the same. “Why do you feel shitty? What can I do to help you sleep?” His shoulders started to raise, and I narrowed my eyes at him. “Don’t you dare shrug at me again. You are coming awfully close to breaking two rules and we just agreed on them yesterday.”

“Which ones?” he demanded, glaring at me.

“Respect and communication.”

He rolled his eyes and scowled at me. “But I can’t sleep.”

“So you’ve said.”

“I feel shitty.”

“You’ve said that as well, but you haven’t answered any of my questions.”

Tiernan connected his eyes to mine, then purposefully made a big production out of dramatically shrugging his shoulders, a tiny little smirk playing on his lips the entire time.

“You’re being really rude.”

“So what?” he shot back, raising his voice at me. “I can’t sleep. My head is full of worries and this house is full of memories. I’m exhausted, but I can’t stop thinking of Daniel and Bryce and you and everything. I feel shitty and mean.”

“And?”

“And I keep thinking that you don’t want me here,” he confessed, his voice wavering a bit. “That you only brought

me here because I was in trouble and had nowhere else to go.”

“Of course, I want you here, little heart,” I murmured, reaching out to tuck a lock of his hair behind his ear, the nickname I’d given him years ago falling out of my mouth with ease.

His expression softened for a moment at the term of endearment, but hardened again quickly. “You’re just saying that. Soon, you’ll want me gone again. I’ll take up too much space or demand too much and you’ll pack my bags for me this time.”

“Tiernan.”

“I can’t sleep.”

“And you’re making stories up inside your head. How can I help?”

“Figure it out yourself,” he snapped, scowling at me hard.

For a moment, for one brief little moment I saw his resolve to be shitty waver, his lower lip sucking between his teeth and his frown wavering before it solidified again. Clearly talking wasn’t working for him, and he needed action. Weighing out pros and cons in my head, I made a decision, hoping it was the right one. Tiernan was untethered and becoming more and more unhinged without being grounded back down into himself. Into this space where he was wanted and desired and cared for, even if I wasn’t certain how to do that a hundred percent correctly for him just yet. I knew what I would have done before though, and maybe that was the right call to make

here. Worth a try anyway. I sat up and swung my legs over the side of the bed.

“What are you doing? You’re leaving me now?”

“Come here,” I responded, patting my knee. “Pants down. I will give you what you need.”

Tiernan hesitated, and I heard a sharp intake of breath from the bed behind me. I counted to five in my head, then turned, looking over my shoulder to where he sat, frozen in bed, eyes wide and lips pursed. “I mean it. I will give you what you’re asking for and what you have earned with this behaviour tonight.”

The bed rocked as Tiernan scrambled over to my side and climbed off. He carefully pushed himself to a standing position and gripped the waistband of his thin plaid pajama pants. With a shaky inhale of breath, he pushed them down and discarded them on the floor then took a step closer to me, holding out his arm the tiniest bit towards me, his eyes begging me to take control and make him feel okay in his own skin again. I grabbed it and pulled him close, maneuvering him with skills I hadn’t used in years until he was face down on my lap, his pert ass cheeks glowing in the moonlight that spilled through the curtains from outside.

“Is this what you need?” I whispered as I ran my hands over his skin, cupping each soft globe in my hands. “Is this what will make you feel okay?”

“Daddy, please?” he responded, his tone soft and hesitant.

I raised my hand and gave one of his cheeks a tiny tap with my palm, testing it out, getting a feel for it again and swallowing at the thickness that was creeping up my throat and the strange tears that were forming in my eyes. I gave him another gentle tap and he whimpered a little bit, the noise as out of practice as my hands felt against him.

“Do you not know by now how much I want you?” I raised my hand and gave him a harder smack this time, watching his butt cheek jiggle for a few seconds before I turned to the other one and brought my hand down on it. “That I have missed every piece of you?”

“Daddy,” he choked out. Tiernan turned his head up so I could see the tracks of tears dribbling down his cheeks already, and I reached over and smoothed them away, watching as they were replaced with more. His watery eyes screamed at me to keep going, to help him get out of his own head and to bring him back to the earth again after he’d gotten so riled up into his own thoughts.

“I’ve got you,” I whispered, taking my hand away from his cheek. He settled into my lap, sniffing a little bit as I raised my hand and brought it down on his ass with a heavy smack. His whimper met my ears, and I felt success rattling through me. I gave his other cheek a hard smack and he jittered on my lap, sniffing and whimpering softly.

Chapter Eighteen

TIERNAN

I breathed fast as Joel smacked my ass, hard and firm, with his palm. I bit back a loud whimper, chewing on my lips as I reminded myself I needed this. Had asked for this and had craved it. I had tried so hard to sleep, but my head wouldn't stop circling thoughts about Bryce being unsafe, the job I'd wanted but had failed to get and Daniel being dead. I had been okay at first, but the longer I'd laid in the darkness of the bed we'd all shared the more the ache of his loss had grown inside me. I would never feel his arms around me in this bed ever again. I had worked myself into a frenzy while Joel had been fast asleep, shaking and jittering and growing meaner by the second. The only thought that had resonated through my mind was pure anger at Joel for sleeping while I was falling apart beside him, but when he'd asked me what I'd needed I couldn't find the words for it.

I needed to be brought back down.

To be reminded.

I needed this.

Joel brought his hand down on my ass again, and I let loose the whimper I'd held back as the sharpness of it radiated through me, drawing me out of my thoughts and into this moment where I was being handed joy in the form of a supposed punishment. Tears dripped down my cheeks, but I didn't move to wipe them away. I liked the sticky feeling of them against my skin and the heat that was being drawn to my face as much as Joel's hand was drawing heat to my ass. It was beautiful, but it wasn't enough.

"More," I begged. "Please, Daddy. More."

"I've got you," Joel repeated above me, and he followed through on that promise with a sharp smack to my ass cheek that had stars bursting behind my eyelids as I squeezed them shut against the pain. And the pleasure. I could feel my cock growing hard as Joel spanked me, and I was doing my very best to not rub against his thigh beneath me, though every blow to my ass jostled me where I was, sending arousal skittering up my spine as my cock brushed his pajama pants.

"Don't you dare," he murmured, rubbing and squeezing my tingling butt cheeks. "You are not allowed to get off after that behavior."

"I wasn't," I protested, the words choking out of my thickened throat.

I anticipated more words from him, but what I got instead was another smack to my ass, harder this time than the rest. Joel was growing more confident above me and I felt a bit of pride in bringing another piece of him back to himself, though

I wouldn't dare say as much out loud. Not at the moment anyway, I didn't think he'd approve of me complimenting him during a punishment. Or a funishment? I wasn't sure what this was. Giving me what I needed, either way.

“Five more?” Joel asked, and I turned my head, nodding. I could take them, but I knew what was coming. What I hoped was coming anyway. Joel had taken it pretty easy on me thus far, but I knew he'd just been warming up.

The first of the five showed me how right I had been in that assumption. The moment his hand landed hard on my butt cheek, pain echoing through my entire body. Number two was just as bad as was number three. Fire licked its way up my spine from my ass and new, hot tears of pain cascaded down my cheeks. I whimpered at the whoosh of air above my heated cheeks as Joel raised his hand into the air again before bringing it crashing back down to my aching, angry skin.

Fuck my entire life.

Ouch.

My whimper turned into a sharp cry that barked out of my throat involuntarily. I inhaled a ragged breath, focused only on Joel's skilled hands and what he was doing in anticipation of the last one. My final spank. It was going to be a doozy, I knew, but my cock hadn't softened one bit as he'd spanked me, and I was still a mess of need and desire where I draped over his thighs.

“One more,” Joel murmured. “You're doing so good.”

I didn't have a chance to respond, or even think of a response, before pain lanced its way through me, the sound of the solid strike echoing in my ears almost as loud as the howl that left my lips was. My ass was a mix of heat and ache, and I begged silently for a bruise to form, for a mark to be left so I could push against it with my own fingers and remember that I had a Daddy who knew what I needed. Who would give me what I desired when I didn't have words to ask for it.

"Don't move," he commanded, like I was somehow going to peel my melted body off him and slide to the floor in a pile of wrung out pain or something.

"I don't think I can, Daddy."

His hands gently kneaded my butt cheeks, sending the ache through my body, and I moaned low in my throat as each movement he made brought my hardened dick firm against his thigh. Pleasure rippled behind the pain, and I found myself giving over to it, pressing my hips forward and rubbing myself on the fabric of his fleece pajama pants.

"Horny, huh?" he whispered.

I nodded, rhythmically humping at his thigh, chasing the arousal and welcoming it into my body to play with the pain. I didn't even care that I was behaving like some kind of animal in heat, I needed release so desperately. Joel tapped my hip and I reluctantly stopped gyrating against him and shuffled off his lap, anticipating being told I wasn't allowed to finish what his hands against my ass had started. I closed my eyes and breathed hard, focusing on the sting of my backside even

thought that hardly helped me out. The bed jostled and I assumed Joel was leaving to go get a cloth or something to wick some of the heat out of my cheeks with but the mattress dipping so quickly had my eyes popping open. Joel came to lay on the bed beside my prone form, his pajama pants having been discarded and his own dick rising hard and thick from his pelvis.

“I shouldn’t let you do this,” he murmured. “Not every punishment will end with you getting your way, so don’t assume this is how every one will end.”

“I won’t.” I sniffled, a hot, horny, painful mess of need and want clawing its way out of my throat in a stifled sob.

“Come here, little heart,” he murmured, patting his chest and a thrill laced through me at the invitation combined with the words he was using as my name again. “Come take what you need from me.”

I scrambled on top of him, straddling his waist and resting my hardened length on his lower stomach. My hands shook at my sides as he reached down and pulled a bottle of lube from the bedside table, opening it and coating his palm in a thick layer of slick liquid. With a gentle smile, he put the bottle down, then gripped me in his slick fist, giving my cock a gentle stroke that had my eyes rolling backwards in my head. Whatever this was about to turn into, I was certain it was going to be much more satisfying than humping away at his flannel pajamas. He carefully adjusted our cocks so they lay

beside each other, touching. I canted my hips the tiniest bit, watching as my smaller one slid up the side of his thick one.

“Oh,” I murmured, doing it again. “I can feel yours against mine. Oh wow.”

“Let’s make it even better.”

I nodded and Joel reached up to my biceps, pulling me forward onto his chest, and I went with some hesitation, not understanding entirely what he wanted from me. As my head hit his chest, my nose resting by his collarbone leaving my ass up in the air, his hands trailed downwards to cup my aching cheeks. With a small nudge, he pressed my hips down and forward into him, and I gasped as I felt the drag of my cock against his lower belly, sliding against his own length where it was trapped between our bodies.

“Oh, wow,” I breathed as he pushed me gently again, feeling the continued sting of my reddened cheeks as he showed me what he wanted of me. More than happy to oblige, I mimicked his motions with my hips a few times as best as I could, our cocks slicked with lube gliding against each other between us.

“Good boy, keep going,” he whispered as he moved his hands from my aching ass and wrapped them around my back.

I kept moving my hips, taking my pleasure in long strokes of my body against his, reveling in the feel of him beneath me. He smiled down at me, his eyes filled with heat and longing and my heart swelled as I moved, cheeks burning red against the heat of his chest. Bliss filled me as I moved against his

body, feeling him shiver the tiniest bit against my skin, and I tilted my head up to watch his eyes slide closed for a brief moment, a small smile curling the edges of his lips upwards. Heat pooled into me and my body sang with renewed arousal, my entire body shivering with need and desire for my Daddy.

I had thought I could stay like that forever, rubbing against him as I chased the release I needed against his skin, but he moved beneath me like he wanted me to stop. I protested the tiniest bit as he jostled me around on his hips, wrecking my rhythm entirely as I was nudged backwards to rest on his thighs. Joel quickly pulled himself to a semi-seated position, propping himself up against the headboard and pillows behind him, his cock arching obscenely in the air. Catching on a little bit to what he wanted, I shuffled forwards again as he settled, my legs straddling his thighs, my knees pressed into the bed on either side of them. It wasn't easy, I didn't have the longest legs in the world, but I made it work as best as I could, knowing this was going to be worth it. Joel offered me a small smile, trailing his hand down his stomach until he reached between us to take both our cocks into his hand, giving them a stroke together as my eyes went wide.

“Oh, Daddy. That feels so good.” I sighed as he stroked us again, my body rippling with pleasure of his hand on me, his cock trapped beside my own. I propped myself up with my hands behind me on his legs, gripping them tight and pushing my pelvis forward even more to make it easier for him to work us both in his tight, wet fist. The sight of the head of my cock popping out of his fist as he stroked me drove me to new

heights of arousal, almost as much as the visual of his own thicker dick pressed against it was.

“Such a beautiful little cock,” Joel murmured, his head tilted downwards and his eyes watching the same thing I was captured by.

“So small.” I sighed, mournfully. I had wished for a bigger one time and time again, but I was proportionately tiny, even as I’d become an adult.

“Perfect.”

I looked up from Joel’s hand and met his eyes, seeing the stern certainty written into his heated eyes. He looked back down to his hand and where it worked on both of us at the same time, sweat slicking his chest and my own body rippling with arousal, and as I looked down, I swore I saw what he did. “Perfect.”

Joel’s slick hand tightened around us, and I let loose a small moan, tilting my head back and closing my eyes so I could just feel him against me. His hand started moving faster, pulling me to the edge as my release drew near. My body tensed, and I breathed heavy as his skin slicked against mine. A strangled moan met my ears, and I opened my eyes in time to watch Joel’s orgasm, his eyes clenched shut as pearly white cum spurted from the tip of his cock, coating his fist as he stroked us both. I could feel my own body tensing and jittering as his fist slicked his release over my length. A loud moan escaped my mouth as I pressed my hips upwards slightly, his steady pace drawing me closer and closer to the edge until finally I

came with a gasp. My cock jerked in his grip as I spilled over his fist, my cum joining his as he stroked me through my release.

When I finished, Joel released me and I moved off of him to flop down onto the bed beside him on my back, boneless and utterly wrecked, my body still quivering the tiniest bit as my hips and ass screamed in relief. Joel leaned back as well, slumping into the pillows behind him, breathing heavy into the silence of the room around us. We lingered in the quiet for a few moments until the bed jostled, making me grumble a bit at the movement. Now that I wasn't all riled up and horny, the ache of my reddened ass was back at the forefront of my mind and the skin felt rubbed raw.

"Ow," I whined loudly, trying to lift my butt up off the sheets beneath me. "Daddy, my ass hurts now."

"Could be because you earned a spanking," Joel called back, and I opened my eyes to find that he'd left the bedroom and was in the attached bathroom.

"Could be." I grumbled to myself for letting myself get so wound up that I'd needed to prod at him to bring me back down. Pissing him off and catching a spanking wasn't exactly the first night together that I'd envisioned, yet somehow as I thought it through it fit pretty well for how we used to be, and how I hoped we'd become again. Joel walked into the bedroom, carrying a handful of wet cloths and a tube of what looked like lotion. He cleaned off my front, taking care to wipe away all the slick lube and cum that coated my pelvis,

before nudging my hip with his hand. I rolled over, eagerly, plopping down onto my stomach as my bruised ass sang with renewed pain.

“How does it feel?” Joel asked, sounding a tiny bit worried. I glanced over my shoulder to see uncertainty marring his features, his eyes flicking from my ass up to my face then back down again.

“It hurts,” I offered. “But it’s okay. I like that it hurts. I needed it. Thank you.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, you did a good job, Daddy.”

I grinned at Joel over my shoulder before turning my head back down to the bed and closing my eyes. A cool cloth landed gently on my butt cheeks, and I could feel Joel patting at it softly, wiping away some of the heat that lingered within the skin. I yawned and snuggled into the bed as I started finally drifting off to the sleep I’d been failing to capture all night long.

“Sleep well, little heart,” Joel murmured as he turned the cloth over, bringing the chilled side down on my skin.

“Night, Daddy.”

Chapter Nineteen

JOEL

If I'd believed that the ticking of the house would stop with Tiernan here, I would have been sadly mistaken.

I found myself on edge this morning, just waiting for the explosion to happen, still not knowing where it would come from or when. The sound of laughter echoed through the house though, reminding me that things were different this time. I wasn't alone with only my thoughts as company. I glanced up from where I was watching our breakfast dishes to see Tiernan in the living room sitting cross-legged on the couch. He held his phone to his ear and hadn't stopped laughing since he'd made the phone call to Hobie a couple of minutes ago. They hadn't chatted in a long while, he'd told me as we'd eaten a simple breakfast of eggs and toast together. He said that since Hobie had hooked up with Ambrose and had started school, he hadn't seen much of the person he had just started calling a friend and that he'd missed him. Then he'd added that of all the numbers I'd put into his phone, he felt the most comfortable reaching out to Hobie, like it was a task I'd given him to complete instead of a desire to connect on his part. I had reminded him that he didn't need to call anyone, that I

didn't expect him to call friends just because he had a phone, but he'd insisted that he wanted to call Hobie today. It appeared to have been a great choice he'd made, and I made a mental note to tell him that later. I was starting to realize exactly how much he needed to hear things like that in words, instead of the touches I had always offered before. Daniel had clued in far faster than I had to what Tiernan needed and I felt like I was playing catch up, but I was pretty determined to get there. To get to the point where words came as easy as touch did for me and saying things wasn't a guessing game of what was helpful and what wasn't.

I had never been a great communicator when it came to my feelings. Daniel had pointed that out time and time again, sometimes getting frustrated when I'd find myself unable to let him know the things I'd felt inside, but I'd always felt that my strength lay in my ability to caress. To touch and hold and comfort through skin on skin. My parents hadn't been great with words either and I supposed my reluctance to say things came from them in some way. They'd been largely quiet themselves, my mother offering comfort through hugs and my father offering small grunts of approval whenever I succeeded to his standards. Not many words were shared in the farmhouse I'd been raised in, but I hadn't thought anything of it until Daniel, full of words and bursting with stories, had come into my life. I was sure some psychologist somewhere could look at the way I was raised and point out moments that shaped me into the person I was today, but that didn't really

matter. All that mattered was doing better for the boy laughing in the living room.

As Tiernan continued talking away, I finished the dishes and moved to the kitchen table to finish my coffee and give him as much space as possible in the open front half of the house. It was almost an impossible task though, there was no wall between the kitchen and the living room anymore. Daniel had had it knocked out when we'd bought the house, insisting that everything should be open in our tiny bungalow, so it was brighter and more welcoming. I leaned back in my chair and yawned, still a bit exhausted from the night before. Tiernan glanced up at the scrape of my wooden chair across the hardwood floor and gave me a grin that lit up his entire face, his smile so wide I could count all his teeth. My heart warmed and ached at the same time. In the years we'd been together before, those smiles had been rarely directed at me and it hit me that the little piece of Tiernan that Daniel had always delighted in was all mine now.

And how heavy that thought was as it ticked away in the back of my mind.

I lifted my coffee cup to my lips and took a small sip as Tiernan burst into laughter again, closing my eyes as I swallowed. I inhaled a deep breath, settling myself as much as I could before opening my eyes to glance around at the things in the kitchen that seemed to be ticking in a different way this morning. I wasn't sure if I was ready for whatever the next time bomb would be to explode, not with Tiernan here, but I also knew I really didn't have a choice.

As I finished the last dregs of the coffee in my cup, Tiernan said his goodbyes to Hobie and rose from the couch, bounding into the kitchen with his phone in his hands and a smile on his face.

“All is well?” I asked.

“Yeah.” He nodded, gifting me another genuine happy smile that I committed to memory before he started speaking again. “He wanted to know if I’m coming to the club anytime soon. I guess he lives there now or something.” He laughed softly, shaking his head. “I knew he’d find his place there.”

“He makes Ambrose very happy,” I commented as Tiernan slid onto one of the kitchen chairs beside me.

“Can we go to the club sometime? Would you take me there?” he asked, tilting his head to the side as he watched my face carefully.

“Anytime you’d like.”

“Really?”

He sounded fairly amazed with my response, and I turned to search his face for the reason why, finding nothing but a cautious smile there. “Is that surprising?”

He nodded slowly, his tumble of hair catching the light streaming in through the kitchen window and lighting the strands up in the fiery red that lingered beneath the surface of them. “I wasn’t sure you wanted me to come there, or... if I’d be welcomed back.”

“You will be,” I said, knowing that to be true. While some members who’d known what happened would likely be shocked to see him with me, he’d definitely be welcome back with open arms. Though nobody had directly said anything to me out loud, I got the sense that he was thought of often by some of the friends he’d once had. That he was missed and worried about whenever his name came up in casual conversation about the boys who weren’t around anymore.

Tiernan smiled to himself for a second, turning his eyes down to the phone in his hand. The smile was replaced with a small frown as he turned the screen on and then off again. “No Bryce.”

“He’s probably settling in with Mason,” I offered, hoping that was the truth. “And likely sleeping still. Last night was a long night.” Tiernan nodded slowly but uncertainty marred his features, his nose scrunching up and his forehead wrinkling with whatever thoughts he was having. I reached out and placed my finger beneath his chin, gently raising his face to mine. “He’ll be safe with Mason.”

“With Mason,” he responded softly. “It’s the without Mason part that scares the shit out of me. Bryce has some demons, Daddy, and sometimes they get really loud inside his head. I just worry, that’s all.”

“Have you been taking care of him?”

Tiernan laughed, shaking his head sadly. “Bryce doesn’t listen to anyone. I’ve tried, but he can’t get out of his own head long enough sometimes. I’m sure he’ll be fine as long as

he's with Mason. He settled right down last night for him, and I've never been able to get him to be that relaxed in that short of time. That hand on his neck? That would have gotten anyone else a punch to the face, but Mason got away with it."

The thought that I was fairly glad Bryce had chosen to go with Mason flitted through my mind before I shoved it aside, reminding myself that whatever type of disaster the boy was, he was still Tiernan's best friend. Instead of voicing anything out loud, I reached my hand over to Tiernan and turned my palm upwards to him. He grinned, placing his hand onto mine and winding our fingers together.

"What are we up to today?" he asked as he squeezed my hand a couple of times.

"I was thinking we'd unpack your backpack, then get your things washed and ready to be hung in the closet." Tiernan's eyes lit up and he nodded eagerly before his face fell. He lowered his gaze to the table and his fingers became slick where they rested in mine. I gave his hand a squeeze, but he didn't look back up at me. "Words?"

"I don't have much good stuff," he whispered with a shrug. "What I do have is a bit torn up and worn. I'm sure you've noticed. The clothes I wore to come visit you are the best of the bunch."

"Then maybe we should go shopping?" I offered. "For new things."

"Just some T-shirts and jeans, maybe."

Tiernan loved simple clothing, but there were more items than just jeans and T-shirts that he would need. “And a sweater or two for when it gets cold out. Spring hasn’t quite sprung yet and the wind gets chilly still. And you’ll need underwear and socks.”

Tiernan nodded, turning his head up and giving me a small smile. “Can I have a pair of fleecy pajama pants? I ripped the ones I used to have and haven’t been able to find a new pair at the thrift store that feels like the ones I like.” I knew exactly what type of pants he was talking about. Daniel had bought us all the same soft, warm, plaid pajama pants every single year when the weather got cold, and his dresser drawers still held multiple pairs. An idea came to my mind, and I closed my eyes as it rattled and ticked in my head, wondering if it was a mistake. Tiernan squeezed my hand gently. “Daddy?”

I opened my eyes and exhaled a slow breath. “Would you like to go through Daniel’s dresser and see if anything in there would fit you?”

Tiernan stilled where he sat, turning to wide eyed stone beside me. Finally, he nodded, swallowing hard. “I can?”

“Yes. I’m not sure if any of his stuff will fit, but you can try whatever you’d like and see. I think he’d like that.”

“I think so too,” Tiernan responded, looking thoughtfully towards the hallway that led to the bedroom. “I think he’d like knowing that his things were being used again.”

He rose from the table, letting go of my hand and heading for the hallway, but as he entered the doorway, he turned to

look at me before nodding meaningfully at the fridge where the list of rules hung. “Together?”

I glanced at the fridge as well, though I knew the rule about going through Daniel’s items by heart. Rising from my chair, I followed Tiernan into the bedroom as he moved to stand in front of Daniel’s wooden dresser. I settled onto the edge of the bed behind him as he slid open the top drawer and reached in slowly, pulling out a pair of the pants he’d been talking about. He unfolded them from the position they’d sat in for two years, the lines along the folds embedded in them now. They were blue and white plaid and looked brand new. A wash would get the creases out, but I couldn’t recall Daniel ever wearing them.

“Try them on?”

Tiernan nodded, then slid out of the threadbare pants he was wearing, dropping them to the floor. He stepped into the new plaid ones and his eyes slid shut for a moment as a noise that sounded like a purr left his throat. I laughed softly as he grinned.

“So soft, Daddy,” he murmured, running his hand down his thigh. They were a bit long as Daniel had been taller, but the waistband seemed to fit him all right. “I didn’t think the waist would fit. I’ve lost a lot of weight.”

“You’ve gained muscle now though,” I pointed out, gesturing to the lines of his abs that ran along his front.

Tiernan glanced down at his stomach and ran a finger along his front, appearing a bit fascinated by what he saw there.

“Those are new. I think?”

“You didn’t notice before?”

He shook his head, plucking at the elastic around his waist. “I tried not to pay attention to how I looked. Mirrors aren’t easy to come by out there, and I just focused on getting enough food so I wouldn’t starve. I saw that happen once and it was terrifying.”

I inhaled a sharp breath at that last sentence, the reality of where he’d been coming back to smack me in the face. He’d probably seen and experienced far more things than I could ever imagine. That I would ever want to imagine. “I’m sorry you saw that.”

He shrugged a little bit at me, but when I raised my eyebrow, he smiled. “It’s okay. I don’t like... feel about it much. Just a reminder to me that that isn’t how I want to die. That’s all.”

I nodded, taking those words in and trusting he’d tell me if he was having feelings about the things he’d seen. “Those pants suit you well.”

Tiernan grinned at me. He must have felt the same because he turned back to the drawer and started pulling out pairs of pajama pants, placing each one on top of the dresser. When he had five pairs pulled out, he slid the drawer shut and turned to me. “That’s all there is. I mean, his underwear is there and so are his socks, but I don’t think I want those.”

“That’s absolutely fine,” I responded with a smile. I’d definitely buy Tiernan the things he needed after he was done raiding the dresser. “We can figure out a plan for whatever you don’t want to have. What about some of his other stuff though?”

Tiernan nodded, turning back to the dresser and sliding out the next drawer. He spent time going through Daniel’s T-shirts, picking out ones that he wanted to wear and commenting on some of the uglier ones that Daniel had loved. I remembered some of them as Tiernan pulled them out, recalling how Daniel had needed to have them when they’d been hanging on the rack at the store but had never actually worn them after they’d come home. As Tiernan went through the clothing, I started considering what to do with all the things that weren’t needed anymore and that had my stomach churning.

Donate them or throw them out were the two choices rattling in my brain and I couldn’t bring myself to commit to either one. It still felt wrong to do both options, but they couldn’t be kept when Tiernan needed the space. We could pack them up, but that felt wrong too, so I sat, ideas rolling through my head, stomach rumbling uncomfortably as the bedroom ticked around me.

“This wins the ugliest shirt award,” Tiernan commented, holding up a teal blue shirt with a giant pink flamingo wearing sunglasses on the front. It was something Daniel had picked up on a vacation to Banff, finding it hilarious that a shirt featuring a summer flamingo was available for sale in the mountains.

“Flamingos don’t live in Banff,” I whispered, recalling the words he’d cackled as he’d held up the shirt in the store.

“What was that?”

I cleared my throat and offered a wobbly smile. “It’s what Daniel said when he found that shirt. He bought it in some little shop in Banff and thought it was funny.”

“It’s ugly. I’m keeping it.” Tiernan smiled, throwing the shirt on top of his “keep” pile and turning back to the dresser to continue searching through it.

Pieces of clothing landed around me where I sat on the bed, shaking a little bit as they landed like tiny bombshells, though none of them were rattling me to the point that I wanted Tiernan’s exploration of Daniel’s things to stop. Instead, I sat around the ticking landmines that were my husband’s clothes, watching as our boy—my boy—dug around, searching for pieces of Daniel he could keep for himself.

He held up a blue shirt printed with a logo for a local coffee shop, and I smiled.

He pulled out a green and white striped shirt with a Christmas tree on the front of it, and I nodded my approval.

I closed my eyes for a moment, surrounded by things that I swore still smelled like Daniel. Things that still felt like him. I forced a deep breath in and out of my nose, trying to stay calm, though I could feel the need to shove them all back into the drawers where they belonged rising inside me.

It was only a strangled, sad noise that drove me away from that urge. I popped my eyes open at the sound and found Tiernan on his knees on the floor, clutching a grey sweatshirt to his chest. He bent over it, nose pushed into the fabric as he inhaled deeply. I slid off the bed, my own time bombs forgotten as I came to sit cross-legged beside him, reaching out my hand to place it on his back.

“You okay?” I whispered, though I knew he wasn’t.

Tiernan turned his face up to mine, a tear dripping down his reddened cheek, trickling through his freckles. He opened his mouth to speak, but all that left was a mournful sob and that’s when I knew.

The bomb that had been ticking away in the house today wasn’t meant for me.

Tiernan held up the sweatshirt, another strangled sob escaping his throat in place of words, and I nodded, recognizing it immediately. The shirt was a simple one, plain grey with nothing special about it, but it held more of Daniel than any other piece of clothing. He’d had it for years, refusing to get rid of it as it had started showing the wear and tear of being a favored piece of clothing. Any day that we weren’t leaving the house Daniel had worn the grey sweatshirt that Tiernan now gripped so tight in his hands his knuckles were turning white.

“It still smells like him, Daddy,” he choked out, pushing his nose into the fabric again as tears streamed down his face.

I opened my arms and he scrambled onto my lap, wrapping his legs around my waist, and pressing Daniel's shirt into the space between us where he was missed the most. Tiernan placed his head on my chest, and I held him there on the floor of the bedroom as he shook and sobbed, the explosion carrying him under in a wave of grief I knew all too well.

Chapter Twenty

TIERNAN

Two full garbage bags sat in the entryway of the house, propped beside the table that contained the bowl of keys, receipts and broken ceramic cat pieces. Joel stood beside them with his shoes on, hand resting on one of them like they contained precious jewels instead of the pieces of clothing we'd cleaned out of Daniel's dresser and his side of the closet.

"We can wait," I offered again, still rattled a bit from my sob fest on the bedroom floor earlier. "We don't have to do it today."

"We should," Joel offered with a small tentative smile. "Because if we don't, I'll end up taking them all out and putting them back into the drawers."

I nodded, understanding entirely. The task of going through Daniel's clothing had been far harder than I'd imagined it would be and it was only because Joel had been there with me that we'd gotten it done. As I'd pulled piece after piece from the places they'd been for the last two years, I'd realized exactly why Joel hadn't done it before I'd come back. It had seemed so simple to me when I'd made the rule, but I hadn't

considered the memories attached to every single thing Daniel had ever touched. The task of going through his clothing and bagging them up with the intention of donating them was a reminder that he was really gone and he wasn't going to ever come back. It needed to be done, that much was true, but that didn't mean it hadn't hurt us both soul deep as we'd worked our way through it.

I slid into my shoes and grabbed one of the bags. "Is there anything in either of them that you want?" I wanted to be certain that Joel had also kept what he wanted because once it was donated, it was gone. There was always the possibility of buying it back at the store, but I wasn't mentioning that out loud. Part of me feared that Joel would go and do exactly that, filling the space again with Daniel's stuff when we'd both ached so much while picking through it. It was over and done, and we had to move on with the things left over, I just hoped he felt the same way.

Joel considered for a moment, then shook his head. "We kept a lot of stuff."

I laughed softly, nodding. We had filled a couple of unused storage totes with the clothing that Joel couldn't bear to part ways with just yet, and I'd taken a bunch of things for myself, including the soft, warm pajama pants, a stack of t-shirts and the grey sweatshirt. I wouldn't wear that particular shirt, I knew, but I wanted it all the same and would keep it with my things. The idea of packing it away or giving it to the thrift store made my gut ache and my heart scream.

“Ready?”

“Yeah,” I replied. “Let’s do this. Then you can give me the reward I earned because I still remember you owe me, Daddy.”

Joel grinned, raising an eyebrow at me. “Do I?”

“Yes.”

“Wasn’t last night a reward?”

I blushed a little bit, the ache of the bruised ass I woke up to still lingering as much as the thrill of having him take us both into his large hand was. But still, that was no true reward. “That was a punishment for being a shit.”

“Ah, seems to me you enjoyed yourself.” He shrugged. “Forgive me for getting it mixed up.”

I blushed even harder, but frowned a little bit as I shrugged right back at him. Sometimes, punishments felt like rewards in the end and that wasn’t my fault. “Before that, though, you were proud of me.”

“I am proud of you,” he corrected, emphasizing the word ‘am.’ “I remember it all, Tiernan. You’ll get what you’ve earned, I promise.”

Warmth pooled into me at the reminder, and I smiled at my Daddy, popping onto my toes to give him a kiss on the cheek. He smiled back down at me, then turned to the garbage bags on the floor.

“Ready for this?”

“Yeah, let’s go.”

Joel opened the door, and I followed him out to the truck, slinging the heavy bag up and into the truck bed where it landed with a thud. Joel threw his in as well, then we climbed into the vehicle and set off down the road.

“Which thrift store again?” he asked as he turned out of the residential area and headed for the downtown core.

“The Belle,” I responded, without even having to think of it. There were a number of thrift stores in town, but the one operated by a local mental health non-profit was the best as far as I was concerned. They had given me clothing and a backpack for free when I’d first hit the streets and had no idea how to get money for the things I’d needed. I’d learned after I’d met up with Bryce that they’d done the same for him, as well as for so many other people over the years. It was a bittersweet feeling to be able to finally give back to them, knowing it was Daniel’s things that were letting me do that.

I was about to open my mouth to ask if we could get a coffee while we were out when my phone jittered in my pocket. Pulling it out I saw an unknown number, and though I hesitated for a second, I answered it, offering a tentative hello.

“Hey,” Bryce’s voice offered, and I grinned as relief poured out of me.

“I was hoping you’d call soon.”

“I know. I was sleeping. I just woke up.”

“Last night was tough,” I responded, picturing him nodding on the other end of the call. “How are you today? How’s Mason?”

“Fine,” Bruce replied.

“Did you just shrug?”

He laughed softly. “Yeah. Sorry.”

I glanced at Joel beside me and saw a small smile curling his lips. Yeah, I had shrugged a bit too much last night just like Bryce usually did when he was out of sorts. Maybe it was something I’d picked up from my best friend when we’d been living together.

“Are you really okay?” I murmured into the phone, turning away from Joel in hopes he wouldn’t hear me. “Are you comfortable there?”

“I am. Mason is... nice.”

“Library guy. At least now I know why you were hanging out there so much. You keep too many secrets for someone who calls himself my best friend and says he loves me.”

Bryce snorted a small laugh. “What was I going to say? I have been going to the library to stare at this gorgeous man I’m terrified to talk to? You would have laughed right in my face and teased the shit out of me.”

“I wouldn’t have!”

“Oh, yes, you would have.”

“Only a little bit,” I admitted.

Bryce laughed long and hard on the other end of the phone before going silent again. When he spoke again, his voice was softer, more contemplative. “I missed you last night.”

“I missed you too.” Waking up to find Joel fast asleep beside me had been incredible as had everything else we’d done, but I’d missed seeing the usual pinched expression on Bryce’s face as he dreamed. He always looked like he was fighting the entire world when he slept deep, the terrible dreams he’d had since he was little often plaguing him hardest when he was just trying to rest. “Did you sleep okay?”

“Sort of,” he replied after a longer silence in which I was certain included a shrug on the other end of the call. “I’m happy you’re with Joel, Tiernan. I really am.”

“Me too,” I confessed. “But that doesn’t mean I love you any less.”

“I know.”

“Please stay there, Bryce.”

“I promised I’d try, right?”

“Yeah, you did.” But the word try hung heavy between us and I was sure we both felt it. “Are you going to the library today? Or not, since you’re actually with the person you’ve been going to look at?”

“Mason has so many books,” Bryce replied, sounding lighter. “I’m going to stay here and read, I think. He showed me how to use his computer this morning, and I might do

some of that job hunting online you were doing before. Maybe I could find something for me. I don't know."

"I suggest being a cat trainer."

Bryce snickered softly. "That's not a real thing but Mason has a cat and I think it likes me. It slept on me all night at least."

"A cat? I'm jealous. What's its name?"

"Buttercup. Which is ridiculous because it's black."

"That makes no sense, I love it."

"Me too. He's really cute."

I grinned to myself, unable to stop from teasing Bryce just a little bit. "Mason or the cat? I'm not sure I'd use that word to describe Mason, but if you think he is, that's fine."

"Tiernan," Bryce warned, though I could hear the smile in his tone.

Joel pulled up outside The Belle and turned the truck off. He didn't say anything about me being on the phone, but I felt an urgency to get out and carry Daniel's things in with him. "I should get going. We're out for a bit today, doing some errands. Can I call you later? Is this a good number to reach you at?"

"Yeah," Bryce replied. "Mason lent me his old cell phone and got it set up for me while I was sleeping. This is my new number."

"Perfect."

“I miss you,” he whispered into the other end of the call.

“I miss you too,” I replied. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Tiernan.”

I finished saying goodbye to him, then got off the call. Joel’s hand landed on my thigh, and I looked up into his concerned face.

“Everything okay?”

“We were always together for two whole years,” I offered. “It’s hard being away from him, that’s all.”

Joel nodded like he understood, because he did. Though I didn’t love Bryce the way Joel had loved me, the feeling of someone suddenly missing when they’d always been there before wasn’t foreign to him.

“I’m sorry, Daddy,” I murmured again, still clearly not feeling okay enough to stop apologizing for leaving as I’d done.

“We move forwards,” Joel responded. “No more apologies needed, okay?”

“Okay.” I glanced out the window at the sign above the door of the thrift store. “You ready for this?”

Joel nodded slowly. “I think it’s time.”



“Did we get everything you think you’ll need?” Joel asked, stifling a yawn as he walked from the big box store out to his truck.

“More than,” I responded, doing my best to keep the heavy bags from dragging on the ground as I walked. I had picked out a few T-shirts and pairs of jeans, plus some shoes that weren’t falling apart, but Joel had added more to my pile. A jacket. A handful of sweaters. Underwear and socks. Added in with the clothing I’d saved from Daniel’s collection, I was pretty well set up. Probably even more than I’d ever been, including the time I’d lived with them before I’d run. “Home?”

I could use a nap, and I could see the bags beneath Joel’s eyes. I wasn’t sure if he meant to go to work tonight, but I was already preparing a protest in the back of my mind. My Daddy was exhausted and he needed sleep as much as I did. Maybe even more if I was being truthful.

“One more place,” Joel said as we climbed into the truck. “I have a boy who earned a reward, I seem to recall.”

Okay, well I was tired but there was no way I was saying no to that. “Where are we going? Somewhere fun?”

“I think you’ll appreciate it.”

I opened my mouth to demand to know where he was taking me that I’d appreciate, but I was met with a curt shake of his head in return. A surprise it was then. I sat in the passenger seat watching out of the window as Joel traveled through the city streets, winding and turning in a bunch of different directions until I got the feeling he was purposely trying to confuse me. Finally, Joel turned onto a street that seemed

vaguely familiar to me and as I watched the storefronts creep by, my heart started pounding fast in my chest in excitement.

“Oh,” I breathed as he pulled over to the curb. “Oh, I know where we’re going. Oh my God. This is the best reward.”

Joel laughed softly as he turned the truck off, and I scrambled from my seat, heading around the truck to stand at his side beneath the black canopy above the store’s door that read “The Love Box.” We had spent so much time here before picking out toys to use in the bedroom and at the club. Joel and Daniel had kept a fairly well stocked toy chest of things they loved using on my body when we played. And on each other. One time, I’d walked into the house after hanging out with Perry to find them side by side in the bed kissing, their cocks stuffed into the same cock sleeve as they fucked into it together. It had been one of the hottest things I’d ever seen, and I had been so in awe that I’d simply watched them as they’d both finished, filling the sleeve with their cum just moments apart.

Then of course, I’d pulled out my own cock and jerked off because I wasn’t about to let a good erection go to waste. That had been a really great day and as I stood outside of the sex shop, I hoped for a lot more in my future.

“Good reward?” Joel asked, turning to look at me.

“Perfect. How many things can I get? Can I get two things?” I was already planning out what I would pick out, running through the list of things they’d probably have in stock behind the smoky glass door.

“How about you pick out one thing for yourself as a treat and I will pick out something for a reward?”

A treat and a reward? Hell yes. I nodded eagerly and Joel leaned into my side, dropping a kiss on my forehead. I smiled up at him as he opened the door, then followed him inside.

For being a sex store with a dark front and blacked out windows, The Love Box was a bright and open place, the shelves lined with books about romance and things like massage oils, plus racks of lingerie and costumes dotted throughout the front of the space. Beyond a set of swinging doors at the back though, lay all the good stuff and that was where I headed as soon as Joel and I had walked in.

“Wow,” I murmured as I stepped into the back room, looking around at all the things available. A lot of money could be spent in a place like this, but I was going to be kind to Joel and not take advantage of the fact that he hadn’t set a price limit for me.

A shiny pair of chaps hanging on the wall caught my eye, and I sauntered over to them, then got sidetracked by a set of studded paddles hanging beneath them and then proceeded to become lost in my own thoughts completely as I wandered around the store taking in everything that was available. It was overwhelming knowing that I could pick something for myself and also not knowing what the best thing for me would be. I circled the store by myself, leaving Joel behind entirely as my brain prickled with ideas and options. I could get a new flogger for my ass, or a dildo, or a sleeve or... literally

anything else. Having too many options was making my concentration wane, and I forced myself to keep moving before I impulsively grabbed something off the rack because the shiny leather purple whip was starting to look like a great idea even though I knew from experience that I hated being whipped. I liked a hard thud against my skin with a bit of sting, not a purely sharp, cutting sort of sting that would bite into my flesh. I forced myself to walk away and found the paddles again, knowing that they were more like what I would enjoy.

“Having trouble choosing?” Joel asked, sidling up to me and making me jump. I glanced away from the paddles and found a small knowing smile on his face. He held a small package in his own hands, but I couldn’t make out what was inside.

“Too many choices,” I agreed. “What did you pick out?”

Joel held it up and popped open the plain white top of the box. “Stick your fingers in.”

I hesitated, narrowing my eyes at him. “Is it going to hurt me?”

“My boy.” Joel chuckled. “Would I ever hurt you without getting permission?”

He wouldn’t. I trusted that he wouldn’t. I carefully stuck my fingers into the box and felt around inside, encountering something squishy and soft. It felt like one of those koosh balls I played with when I was little, but softer and nubbier. I knew exactly what it was.

“A cocksleeve?” I asked, pulling my hand out.

Joel revealed the front of the box with a hopeful smile. “After what you got up to last night, I can’t think of anything better.”

“You got up to things too, Daddy.”

“I did,” he replied with a smile as he closed the box again. “And think what else we can get up to with this. Have you picked out a treat yet?”

“I don’t know.” I sighed, turning back to the paddles, though my cheeks were heating up a bit now at the suggestions he’d put into my mind.

“Close your eyes,” Joel whispered, and I gave him a look before I complied, wondering what he was up to. His hand grabbed mine and pulled it forwards, placing it against one of the paddles. He ran my hand down the surface of it. “This?”

“No,” I decided, keeping my eyes closed. It was a simple thing, and I knew it would feel good, but it wasn’t what I wanted. Joel ran my hand down different objects, some with metal studs embedded and some with cut-outs that I could feel the edges of against my fingers, but none of them felt right.

“How about this instead?” Joel murmured into my ear. He let go of my hand entirely, then pressed something into my palm. I closed my hand around it, feeling strands of soft suede tangle through my fingers. A flogger, I knew. I played with them for a moment, taking in how they slid through my fingers before opening my eyes and seeing what it looked like. It was

far bigger than I imagined, but I'd learned that didn't mean it would hurt more. It would hurt different. With as many different pieces of the thick, soft suede as this one had, when wielded right it would give me that hard thud with just a tiny bit of the sting. Exactly how I liked it.

"This," I blurted, tangling my hands through the strands again and again. "This for sure."

"It's pretty perfect," Joel agreed. "Thicker tails than the one at the club we've played with before. You certain?"

I nodded eagerly, still playing with the strands. "Absolutely."

As Joel paid for the things we'd chosen, I stood silently by his side, listening as the girl behind the counter went through the care instructions for the flogger and noted the return policy in case things didn't work out.

I was sure they would work out, though. Piece by piece, I was getting Joel back and as we walked out of the store, he tipped his head up to the sunlight like he was soaking it all in. His cheeks, though still shadowed and a bit hollow, appeared fuller as the light hit them and the haphazard stubble that had once clung to his face had been groomed, neatly shaped into what I assumed was going to be an attempt at a beard. Joel had always wanted to grow a beard before, but always shaved himself smooth for Daniel who had sensitive skin. I hoped he'd keep it growing this time, if not for himself, then for me. I couldn't imagine anything more handsome in my mind than my Daddy with a full beard of chestnut colored hair to match

the short strands on the top of his head. A small smile crossed his lips as he looked down again at me, giving me a confused smile.

“Everything okay? You’re staring at me awfully hard over there, little heart.”

“Everything is perfect, Daddy. I promise.”

Chapter Twenty One

JOEL

“Come on, sleepy boy. We’re home,” I murmured as I plucked Tiernan out of the passenger seat of the truck. Despite his excitement at having new toys to play with and the promise I’d made that we could use them as soon as we got home, as I’d driven his eyes had dropped shut and a soft snore had risen from his lips. I held him aloft like a child and carried him up the front porch stairs, listening to him snuffle and whine as I jostled him around.

“M’awake,” he muttered. “Promise.”

“You are absolutely not awake.” I laughed, gently lowering him to the ground so I could open the door. I waited for a moment, holding onto him as he got his footing before pulling my key out and letting us inside. I glanced back as I pushed the door open, watching Tiernan waver where he stood and blink sleepily into the sunlight overhead. He winced and frowned at the sun like it had personally attacked him.

“It’s dumb out here,” he grumbled, closing his eyes and leaning against the door frame.

“Head inside and go have a nap,” I said, giving him a gentle nudge.

“I want to play with the things,” he mumbled, trying to open his eyes again.

“Later, little heart. We’ll play with the things later. Right now, I want you to go get into some comfy clothing and have a good nap.”

Tiernan pursed his lips into a pout, and I reached out, tapping his lower one with my finger. “None of that.”

“Daddy,” he whined, prying his eyes open again and glaring at me for a moment. I raised my eyebrow, wondering if he was seriously trying to get another punishment for the second day in a row, but he sighed softly instead. “Sorry. I’m shitty when I’m tired.”

“You always have been.” While Tiernan was always a bit of a bratty boy, he got a thousand times worse when he was tired. He’d been punished for bad behavior many times in the past for simply not giving into the sleep he needed and pushing and snarling at both Daniel and myself instead.

“Comfy clothing,” I ordered again, hoping he’d take me seriously. “Then sleep.”

“Yes, Daddy,” he mumbled, yawning as he made his way into the house. He kicked his shoes off in the entryway, shuffling them into a reasonably tidy position with his socked foot, then stumbled towards the bedroom on wobbly legs that looked almost too heavy to carry him all the way there safely. I

listened carefully for the sound of him falling or tripping over himself, but when none came, I headed back out to the truck and grabbed all the bags containing the things I'd bought him.

Carrying them into the bedroom, I placed them on the floor by the now half empty dresser that had been Daniel's and glanced at the bed. Tiernan was fast asleep, but clearly, he'd forgotten the comfy clothing part of what I'd asked of him. Instead, his slightly bruised bare ass greeted me from where he'd thrown himself across the bed diagonally like a starfish, completely naked. His clothing lay on the floor in a pile and one sock dangled off the end of his foot. I bit back laughter as he snored loudly into the sheets beneath him, his one hand resting on his pillow above his head and his other hand tangled in his own hair. Tiernan had always slept soundly, but that sleep was also marked by the strangest positions known to man. Daniel and I had watched him once in sheer wonder as he'd pulled one leg up beneath him and shoved his own fingers into his eyes, certain that he'd wake himself up and growing highly amused when he hadn't.

Making my way to his side, I pulled the sock off his foot and dropped it to the floor with the rest of his clothes. Grabbing a spare blanket from the closet, I headed back to cover him so he wouldn't get cold, then tucked it around him knowing he'd probably throw it to the floor at some point. I gently lifted the blanket again to take a look at his bruised up butt. It wasn't as bad as I'd seen it in the past, and though I'd caught him throughout the day shuffling on his seat like he was in pain, I'd been told he was putting pressure on it to

remind himself how good it felt when I'd asked if he was hurting.

That was a matter of pride for me, and I held onto it with both hands, smiling at myself for taking the control I'd taken the night before. It was such a small thing, but I had felt like I was genuinely reading him, giving him what he needed and making sure he understood how much he mattered to me.

I felt, for a moment, like his Daddy. Like the Daddy he'd told me I was, though a fraction of the man I'd once been. Not that I wanted that man back entirely. I craved his confidence, his surety, and his knowledge, not the pieces of him that had made this boy on the bed feel like he wasn't loved. That he wasn't wanted. Those were the pieces of Joel that could stay gone, I figured.

"I'm trying my best," I whispered to Tiernan's sleeping form, or maybe more for my own benefit. Maybe I was talking to Daniel, promising that I would take care of what was ours far better than I had before now that he was back in my life.

With a deep breath, I pulled the covers back over Tiernan, then slipped from the bedroom, closing the door halfway so that I wouldn't wake him up. I headed for the living room and lay down on the couch. I intended to watch TV, but my own eyes were growing heavy and as some show about dolphins started, I slid into dreams myself.

elle

I stood in front of the plain white canvas, waiting for inspiration to strike me. I had woken up a few moments ago and had been hit with the urge to come out here and create something new but was having trouble grasping what that was. I had picked up an orange can of spray paint before putting it down and picking up a black one, but that didn't quite feel right either.

Inside the house, Tiernan slept away, having curled himself into a ball, crammed his knees to his cheeks and tossed the blanket over his face. I had checked on him before coming out to the garage, and that had urged me on to go create. To put to canvas the things I was feeling about being able to walk into the bedroom and see him there, right where he should have always been.

I put the black spray paint down and crossed my arms, staring at the canvas hard, but my eyes strayed to where my finished paintings sat in racks along the garage wall. My completed canvases along with one that I couldn't make myself part ways with, though I knew I should have long ago.

With a deep breath, I headed for the racks and slid the broken canvas from the very back, kneeling on the dusty floor with it in front of me. I had taken a knife to the front of it, slashing through the raw red of the paint I'd splashed over the farmhouse I'd been trying to create but that hadn't felt like enough. I had abandoned the sharp blade in favor of ripping and tearing at it with my own hands. I could still remember how it had felt to pull at the wood of the frame, splinters biting into my fingertips as I'd snarled and screamed and melted

down like a volcano of ache. The evidence of my grief was there, written into the frayed edges of the canvas itself, layered into the splintered wood that was stained red, though I couldn't be certain that was all paint. I had bled at some point, my fingertips leeching out over the frame as I'd smashed it into the ground over and over again.

"You kept it," a voice whispered from behind me, and I startled, whirling my head up to find Tiernan standing there wearing a pair of his soft pajama pants and nothing else. His hair was a mess of tangled curls and his eyes, though wide, were sunken a bit into his head like he was still in need of rest.

"I did."

Tiernan kneeled on the concrete beside me, huffing a small breath as his knees hit the ground. He reached forward and touched the frayed edge of the canvas, and I bit back the urge to smack his hands away. To tell him that something as precious as him didn't need the stain of the rage this wrecked canvas was built of.

"That scared me," he whispered, running his hand carefully over the sharpened edges of the broken wood.

"I'm sorry you saw that." Because I was. I had barely been holding it together, painting ridiculous things like forests and waterfalls and farmhouses. Anything that came to mind was thrown onto canvases in an effort to make my mind not focus on the loss. The landscapes hadn't helped in the least, and I had bubbled over into my rage. I hadn't meant for Tiernan to

witness my destruction, the moment I gave myself over to everything dark that had been building up in my head.

“I’m not,” he responded, still running his hand over the canvas. “I’m not at all.”

I turned to him, taking in his profile, the curve of his nose and the sharpness of his jaw. “What do you mean? This was the night you left.”

“I regret how I left you. I will always regret that, Daddy.” He leaned back onto his knees, pulling his hands away from the canvas and holding them on his lap as he looked down at the wreckage in front of us. “But I don’t regret leaving.”

“Oh.”

“Because if I hadn’t left, what would we have become? Would we have stayed like this?” He gestured at the canvas on the ground, jagged and messy, before turning his eyes up to mine. “Or would we have become this?”

I followed his hand as it trailed from his lap to my chest, then to his, resting above his heart. With shaky hands, I reached out and placed my hand on top of his, feeling his warmth. “I like to think we’d become this, but...”

“We weren’t in a good place, and I don’t know that if I hadn’t left, we wouldn’t have stayed just like this.” He gestured at the wrecked canvas again with his free hand.

We probably would have, and I was stunned by the boy beside me. How clever he was and how he’d grown into himself without me there. He’d come back to me stronger, far

stronger than he'd been before, yet still needing me. Still wanting me to be his Daddy and offer him rules along with a safe place to land when things went sideways as I'd never been for him before.

"I adore you, Tiernan," I blurted out. "I adore everything about who you are."

"Oh," he breathed, closing his eyes. "Oh, Daddy. That is your word."

"Adore?"

"Yes. I can feel it. Deeper than love. It's like cherish. That's where I can feel it."

Longing to hold him swelled inside me and I turned sideways, pulling him into my arms there on the dusty concrete, the wreckage of what we once were below us. "I adore you, my little heart. I adore you."

"I love you, Daddy," he whispered back, leaning into my arms, wrapping his own around me. "I always have. You have a third of my heart."

Those words melted into me as I held him, feeling his breath against my neck, his body against mine. If adore was the word he needed to hear from me, then the fact that he had reserved a third of his heart for me was what I'd needed to hear from him. It wasn't said lightly, that much I knew. Divided among the three men he loved most in the entire world, I would take my third and hold onto it tightly, not wanting to throw it away again.

“I adore you,” I whispered. “My little heart.”

“One third,” he whispered back.

Chapter Twenty Two

TIERNAN

“**Y**es,” I said into the phone, grinning so wide that my face was starting to hurt. “Next week?”

“Yeah, if that works for you,” Tabitha responded on the other end of the call, sounding incredibly pleased with my answer. “I know it’s short notice and you may have other things planned. “

“No, none. I’m good to go anytime.”

“It’s tempting to say come tomorrow, but I have a slower day on Monday, and I’ll be able to show you more things then.”

“That sounds fair to me.” More than fair. It was incredible. The minute the phone had rang and I’d seen the number, my heart had leaped into my throat with anticipation. Tabitha offering me a job on the other end of the call had me almost bursting with joy, and I finished the call with so much excitement I was jittering on my feet in the kitchen, listening to Joel’s little laughs coming from the table behind me.

When I finally hung up, I whirled around to see him, putting my phone on the table. “I have a job.”

“You have a job,” he repeated with a smile.

“Yes. That was Tabitha at Paws and Relax. The other girl didn’t show up for her shift yesterday and then didn’t come again today so she fired her and wanted to hire me and now I have a job! It’s mine. I work Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays for now. I’m going to be an animal groomer. Dogs and maybe cats. Maybe I can groom cats, do you think Tabitha grooms cats? I should have asked her.”

“Breathe, Tiernan. Breathe.”

I gasped for air as he stood and came to stand beside me, rubbing his hand down my back. “Wow. I ran out of breath there.”

Joel laughed, still rubbing my back gently as I hauled air into my lungs for a few minutes until I could breathe again.

“I am very happy for you,” he said, pulling me into a hug that felt tight and warm. “I know this will be such a great start.”

“Do I need scissors?” I asked, hugging him back.

He laughed again, but I was serious. I had completely forgotten to ask all the questions that were now rattling through my head and as soon as Joel let me go, I reached for my phone. I was about to call Tabitha back and ask her everything I suddenly needed to know when Joel plucked the phone from my hands.

“Hey, what are you doing?” I asked, holding out my hand.
“Give it back.”

“Tiernan, I need you to breathe and think right now. I know you’re excited, but I just want you to take a moment to settle down because you’re going off the rails a bit.”

“Should I not be excited?”

“You’re allowed to be excited, but I need you to think things through before you do them. Like we agreed, right?”

I nodded slowly, but I still wanted to have my phone back so I could ask all my questions.

“Who were you calling?” Joel asked, holding onto my phone.

“Tabitha. To ask everything I wanted to ask but forgot when I had her on the phone.”

“Are those things you need to know now, or could they wait until your first day?”

“I want to know now.”

Joel paused for a moment, taking a deep breath before speaking again. “Want or need? I think that’s what you should consider.”

Well, fuck. There was a difference I wasn’t considering. I slowly nodded, catching onto what he was saying, smiling a bit at the words Daniel had used with my hyped-up brain time and time again coming from a different Daddy. From the Daddy who was here and cared enough to use words even

though they were hard for him sometimes. “Thanks for the reminder.”

Joel smiled at me, nodding, and looking a bit relieved if I was being honest.

“Can I call Bryce?” I asked, holding my hand out for my phone.

“Of course.” Joel handed it back to me and smiled again. I’d been getting a lot of those lately and every one of them warmed me inside. He captured my arm before I could leave the kitchen behind though. “I’m proud of you.”

“Thank you,” I responded, feeling those words settle deep down inside me.



“We don’t have to do it all in one night,” Joel reminded me as I shut the truck door.

I rolled my eyes but stopped when I saw his frown. Feeling chastised, I offered a smile instead. “I know, Daddy, but I want it all.”

“Your choice,” he reminded me, hefting the small bag of items we’d brought from home out of the backseat of the truck.

Ahead was the back door of the club, and I was so excited I could hardly hold still. We had discussed things through over the last week and Joel had asked me to consider letting him plan something for me. I had readily agreed, only regretting

the tiniest bit when he'd informed me that the things we'd bought at The Love Box would be saved for our first night at the club together as a couple. I had prepared myself accordingly for this night as well, trying my best to be the sort of careful boy my Daddy deserved and shining as he'd checked me over and found me to his liking. I was clean, shaved, and ready for whatever he asked of me. Within reason, that was. Our discussion had heavily featured the use of safewords, and I was ready to employ them at any time if I didn't feel comfortable. Joel had promised he would use them too if he felt he needed to and that had made me feel even safer going with him.

“What are your words?” he asked, as we walked across the parking lot.

“Traffic lights,” I responded. “Red for stop, green for go.”

“And?”

“Yellow for slow the fuck down. I got them, Daddy. I know.”

“And you know those count for everything, okay? If you want to go home because you're uncomfortable at any point in time, you make sure to tell me.”

“I know, Daddy.” I sighed, rolling my eyes behind his back where he couldn't see me. I probably needed the reminder though. I wasn't going to let him know how nervous I was. Seeing Hobie was no big deal, but the rest of the people I'd once counted as friends could be there too and that had my stomach swirling with a mix of uncertainty and anticipation.

Joel opened the back door and gestured for me to enter, so I ducked beneath his arm and found myself taken by the familiarity of the entryway of the club.

“Nothing has changed,” I murmured as I looked around the darkened hallway.

“Did you expect it to?” Joel laughed, giving me a nudge with his elbow. I took a step forward, eyeing the door on the left carefully. It was cracked open a little bit and a yellowy warm light emanated from behind it. Ambrose’s office. Hobie would likely be inside, but so was Ambrose and that was a whole new level of fear for me. As I was gathering my nerves, the door flew open and Hobie came rushing out, eyes wide and a grin on his face.

“Tiernan!” he cried out, racing over and scooping me into a hug. “Oh my God. You’re really here.”

“I am,” I responded, a little bit bewildered. Hobie and I had been friends, but we hadn’t been close. Not hugging close, or so I’d thought. I wrapped my arms around him and gave him a squeeze before he left me go and took a step back, glancing up and down my body.

“You look good,” he offered. “I like your shirt a lot.”

It was a simple deep purple T-shirt, but it had some shimmery threads sewn through it and it clung to my body tightly, showing off the muscles I didn’t know I had until Joel pointed them out to me. It was one from the pile I’d bought when Joel had taken me shopping earlier in the week. “Thanks.”

“Tiernan,” a voice boomed from behind Hobie, and I flinched a little bit. “The wayward boy returns.”

“Hi,” I muttered, fear creeping up my throat a little bit as Ambrose stepped out of his office. Hobie moved away from me, and Ambrose came to stand in front of me, his eyes warm as I’d remembered them being, but his face dotted with stubble as he’d never had before. He looked a bit older, though still handsome, the grey appearing on his temples making him look a bit more distinguished.

“You have been missed.” Ambrose stepped forward, and I squawked in surprise as he gathered me into his arms, holding me close against his chest.

“I have been?” I mumbled into the black dress shirt he wore.

“You should have come to me,” he whispered into my ear, soft enough that nobody else could hear him. “I would have done anything to help you, Tiernan. I wished you had known that.”

“I’m sorry.” I hadn’t even considered talking to Ambrose. I hadn’t thought he’d cared for me as much as he cared for Joel. I was a bit floored at his words and reeled a bit on my feet as he let me go. Ambrose gave me a kind smile and took a step back, holding onto Hobie’s waist gently as he exchanged a look with Joel.

“Why don’t you two go see who else is around?” Joel suggested, looking between Hobie and I. “I’ve got some stuff to catch up on so the rest of the night will be free for us.”

I understood the meaning entirely and Hobie apparently did as well, judging by the grin on his lips. He grabbed my hand and popped onto his tiptoes, placing a kiss on Ambrose's cheek before pulling me away down the hallway. I waved over my shoulder at Joel as Hobie dragged me out from the hallway and into the main bar area of the club.

"You guys picked a good night," he said as he scanned the tables carefully. "Not many people here on a weeknight."

I glanced at the booths, taking it all in as memories tumbled through my brain. The corner booth was where Perry usually sat and across the room was the booth I'd first sat in with Daniel and Joel at my side on the night we'd met. The little stage was where I'd watched a boy get spanked by his Daddy, hard enough that I had squirmed as Daniel had jerked me off beneath the table, clamping his hand over my mouth as I'd come hard in my own pants. We'd broken one of the club rules that night about sexual activity not being allowed outside of the private rooms save for demonstrations like the one we'd been watching, but Daniel hadn't been able to resist, he'd said. We'd kept that secret between us as much as I'd kept the secret about how once, just once, I'd gotten onto my knees for Joel beneath one of the tables, licking and sucking at his dick while he did paperwork long after the club had closed. He'd come into my mouth as he'd tabulated the night's income, and I had never felt so needed and so ignored at the same time. I'd been there for him to use and there was a simple pleasure in giving my Daddy exactly that.

A hole.

A mouth.

I'd been all of those and more in this very building and the thought that I was back here after so long to play again with my Daddy was staggering.

"You okay?" Hobie asked, putting his arm around me.

"Yeah," I responded, offering a smile. "Just weird being back. So many memories."

"Is Bryce coming? How has he been?"

I frowned and sighed a little bit. I had called Bryce throughout the last week or so, but I got the distinct feeling that he was pulling away from me, and that hurt more than I'd imagined it ever would. Since the last night at the motel, he'd gotten quieter and I didn't trust that from him, but what was I going to do? "He didn't want to. I told him to come with Mason, but he said he wasn't into it."

"He would like it if he let himself like it. Has he been... you know... on the streets?"

"No," I said, shaking my head emphatically. "He promised me he would be safe, and I trust him." Hobie gave me a weird sort of smile that told me he didn't, but that was okay by me. He and Bryce had never really talked, save for Bryce keeping him safe when they'd be out together selling sex to strange men. "I don't think Mason would tolerate him letting strangers fuck him. You should have seen how he responded to Mason's touch. I have never seen Bryce that shaken up or that relaxed."

“Bryce, shaken up? I’d pay good money to see that.” Hobie laughed.

I was about to open my mouth again to blabber a bit about Mason and Bryce and how I hoped secretly that Bryce would take a chance to connect for real with him, when a loud screech met my ears.

“No way!” Perry squealed from the doorway of the club, drawing all the attention of every patron to him. “No! It’s not! Tiernan?”

I nodded but he was already barreling over to me in his red overalls and white T-shirt, his triceratops stuffy gripped tightly in his hand. He hit me like a train, throwing his arms around me and squeezing me so tight I couldn’t breathe.

“You’re here,” he murmured as he squished me against him. “You’re really here. I missed you. So much. Why did you go?” He let me go and shoved me away from him, frowning as he crossed his arms. He stomped his foot into the ground and glared hard at me. “Actually, I’m mad. Never again. Don’t ever leave again. Promise me right now. Right. Now.”

“Perry,” I breathed, watching his eyes fill with angry tears. He swiped at them, still frowning and stamping his foot at me to emphasize his demands that I promise never to leave again.

“I mean it” Stomp, stomp. “Never.” Stomp. “Again.” Stomp, stomp. “Promise.”

“I promise! Perry, I promise. I won’t leave again. Not like I did. I’m so sorry.”

He glared at me once more before uncrossing his arms, his face relaxing a little bit though his jaw ticked beneath his skin again. “I’m mad at you.”

“That’s okay. I’d be mad at me too.”

He wiped his eyes quickly with a hand. “I hate you.”

“I’d hate me too.”

“I don’t like crying,” he added. “You made me cry and that’s mean.”

“Perry,” I said, stepping forward and putting my hand on his shoulder. “I am really sorry. I really am. Things were hard, and I made a bad choice. I know I did, and I didn’t realize it would hurt so many people.”

He paused for a moment, thinking it over before he lunged forward and grabbed me in another hug that I welcomed, wrapping my arms around him as well.

“I’m serious,” he murmured into my ear. “I thought we were friends, Tiernan. Do you know what it feels like to hear your friend has run away instead of coming to you for help? Do you understand how much it hurt that you didn’t even call me to let me know that you were okay? You were missing. Just poof. Gone. I even considered filing a missing persons report and almost hired a private investigator to find you until Ambrose talked me out of it. He’d said that you needed space and would come back when you were ready, but two years? Two fucking years?”

I swallowed hard, shaking my head as he held me tight, his body trembling in mine as I held him back. “I didn’t know what to do, it was bad, and I just needed to go.”

“Don’t do it again.” Perry released me and swiped a hand at his face again, cleaning up the last of his tears before inhaling a deep breath and exhaling it slowly. “You’re coming to color with me.”

“Sure,” I agreed.

“And play blocks. You too, Hobie. Morrie is coming later with his Daddy, and you can meet him too. He’s a different kind of boy than me. He likes ocean stuff, which is boring, but don’t tell him I said that. That’s secrets.”

“I can keep a secret.”

“You always could,” Perry said, giving me a small, tentative smile. “I’m glad you’re back.”

“I’m glad too. I missed you a lot.”

He smiled at me, his features lighting up a little bit before he headed for his table, clearly expecting Hobie and I to follow.

“He doesn’t know this, but the little room that he and Morrie helped design is almost finished,” Hobie said, gesturing to the door that led to the private rooms along the back of the club. “It took longer than Daddy wanted, but the final mural on the roof of the room is almost done. It’s a big blue sky with clouds and birds. And a pterodactyl or two hidden among them.”

“He’ll love that,” I responded, as we walked together to join Perry at the table that currently served as his play place. “He’s a good friend.”

“The first I made when I started coming,” Hobie agreed.

We slid into the booth and got lost in playing with our friend, stacking blocks for his dinosaur to knock over and coloring pictures in his coloring book.

Chapter Twenty Three

JOEL

I watched from a distance as Tiernan, Perry, and Hobie slid into the booth Perry usually played at, the bag containing the items we'd bought at The Love Box along with some other must haves clutched in my hand. Perry dug up a box of blocks from beneath the table and Hobie exchanged a glance with Tiernan that ended in smiles and shrugs. Soon, both boys were being made to stack blocks for Perry's dinosaur to knock over, Tiernan squeezed between the other two in the booth. He smiled as Perry offered him his triceratops stuffy, giving it a hug before handing it back to the little, and a tiny curl of pride blossomed inside me.

"He looks good," Ambrose offered, coming up to stand beside me. "His hair has gotten so long, and he looks bigger somehow."

"He has," I confirmed with a smile. "He's grown up a lot, but..." I trailed off, not sure how to capture the thoughts I was having about the boy sitting at the table with his friends.

"He's still Tiernan?"

"Yeah, he's still Tiernan."

“This is a nice sight to see,” Ambrose offered, motioning towards the table of boys.

“Yeah. Feels good to have him back and to see him spending time with his friends again.”

“I wish Bryce would have listened to me. Those boys are the kind of group he should be a part of,” Mason offered, coming up to stand beside us. I glanced over and saw a small frown curling the edges of his lips downwards. I had been surprised that Bryce had chosen to not come, given that Tiernan was here and that he also knew Hobie from his time on the streets.

“Is he giving you trouble?” I hoped not but given what Tiernan had told me about his friend, I feared the worst. Mason shrugged though, his arms flexing beneath his Red Door branded shirt.

“Nothing I can’t handle. Yet.”

“If he becomes too much, you can bring him to my place.” I still wasn’t sure about Bryce, but Tiernan loved him, and after being told that he relied on my boy for safety, maybe having him under my roof would go better than I anticipated. He reminded me a little bit of Claude, a very troubled boy that Ambrose was with for some time, but where Claude was violent with other people, I had reason to believe that Bryce’s violence was directed solely at himself.

Mason shook his head. “He’ll be all right once he settles in, I’m sure.”

Tiernan looked up at me from the booth, offering a smile that felt a little bit like he was having a good time and a little bit like he was begging me to get him the hell away from Toyland. He always played along with Perry and counted him among his close friends, but Tiernan had never been one for playing with toys other than the kind I held in the bag in my hand.

“I think I’m going to go rescue my boy,” I said, leaning in so Ambrose could hear me. “That all right, Boss?”

“By all means,” Ambrose replied, gesturing at the table. “Aaron and I should have it covered out here, and Mason can take the cameras. It’s a super slow night. Go. Enjoy.”

The fact that it was a weeknight had definitely come into play when I’d been chatting with Tiernan about coming to the club. The weekends would have been impossible for us to get to spend time together, but I was able to clock out and have some fun on a slow weeknight. As I parted ways with my friends and headed to collect my boy, Tiernan perked up, offering a grin that made his eyes sparkle in that mischievous way they did when he was excited.

Or when he was about to be a brat on purpose to catch a spanking.

“Are you being careful?” I asked, giving him a meaningful look that I knew he’d read.

“Of course, I am.” He scoffed, gesturing at the table. “We’re just playing with Perry. Nothing else is happening over here.”

I raised an eyebrow, but he didn't falter at all so taking it on face value, I trusted that he wasn't about to start behaving poorly. "Are you ready?"

"Oh yes." He scrambled down in the booth, and I watched, incredibly amused, as he crawled beneath the table and emerged in front of me.

"I could have moved." Hobie snickered from the edge of the table.

Tiernan blushed a little bit but shrugged his shoulders. "This was easier."

"Sure, it was."

Tiernan made a face at Hobie, then grinned at him before turning to me. "I'm ready."

"Come on then," I said, motioning towards the door to the private rooms. "The blue room at the back."

There were a number of rooms behind the big red door that led to the short hallway, but the blue room was my favorite. It was pretty sparsely decorated, painted a light blue with a tiled floor and cabinets that contained everything needed to give someone a really good time lined up beside the small bathroom. That bathroom was the piece that made all the difference when it came to the rooms at the back. Ambrose was working on a plan to have them added to all of the private rooms, but so far, the blue room was the only space that was completed to that level. It was one of the more popular rooms

at the club, and I'd been pleased to find it not booked at all for the evening when I'd checked a few days ago.

Tiernan waved at his friends, then bounded for the door at the back, pulling it open and disappearing behind it before I even got there. When I finally reached the back hallway, he was standing outside the door to the blue room, practically vibrating. I laughed as I came to stand beside him, opening the lock on the door with the number combination I'd had memorized for years now and pushing it open so he could get inside.

"Forgot about the lock, huh?" I asked as he rushed past me into the room.

"Yep."

As the door closed behind us, I waited until the lock buzzed, letting me know that we weren't going to have anyone pop in randomly to watch. There was a slot in the door I made certain was latched up tight as well. Some of the club members enjoyed putting on a show and while that was fine for them, when it came to me and my boy, privacy reigned supreme. I placed the bag down beside the plastic chair by the door and watched as Tiernan took in the sights, eyes widening and then narrowing as he spotted the adjustable leather table and the leather restraint bench.

"I hate this thing," he mumbled, walking over to touch the cuffs dangling from the leather pads of the bench.

"I know you do," I responded, walking over to him and placing my hand on his shoulder. Tiernan wasn't a fan of being

held down or restrained in any way, save for my hands. We'd learned that the hard way our second time here when he'd nearly had a panic attack while strapped down to the bed with a set of soft, gentle restraints. The bench he was staring at with its leather cuffs and thick chains was far more rigid than anything he'd experienced or ever would experience. "Don't worry. That's not the plan at all. Should we move it out of here so you can relax? We can shove it into the hallway until we're done."

He shook his head. "Nah, it's fine. Just don't make me use it."

I stepped in front of him and put myself between him and the bench. "I would never."

He tilted his head upwards, and I leaned down to give him a gentle kiss on his perfect lips. Reaching my hand up, I cupped his cheek and ran my thumb over his cheekbone, feeling him move into the touch the tiniest bit. When I released him, I grabbed his hand and led him over to the leather topped table where we would be spending our time. "This is better?"

"Yeah, this one is much better." He reached out and touched the leather top, running his hand over the smooth, cool surface. "Then you can be the one to hold me down."

"I can, can I?"

"Yes, Daddy. You know what I like."

"And you know what I like," I offered right back, giving his body a once over. He grinned at me and grabbed the hem of

his shirt, yanking it off and throwing it on the floor. His pants and underwear quickly followed, then he hopped around as he discarded his shoes and socks to the pile of clothing. I had only started to raise my eyebrow when he stooped and carefully arranged his clothing, folding and sorting the pile before picking it up and carrying it to a plastic chair by the door.

“Good boy,” I murmured as he came back to stand beside me. I circled him slowly, paying attention to the dips and curves that he was created from. His body was beautiful, lightly freckled across his shoulders and chest to match the spattering across his cheeks and nose. I could have spent the entire night connecting them all with my tongue, licking my way up and down his body, but he was growing nervous by the minute, and I didn’t want to let him linger in that headspace for too long.

“Are you going to spank me now?” he asked, jittering on his feet a little bit. He was almost bursting with energy and excitement, shivering a bit though I wasn’t certain he was cold at all.

“I’m going to use our new toy, if you are ready for that.”

“Yes, please.”

“And what are you going to say if you don’t like it and want it to stop?”

“Red.” He sighed, rolling his eyes at me. “And green if it’s good, and yellow if I want you to slow down. We do this every time, Daddy. I know the words.”

I reached over and gave him a sharp tap on his bare bottom for the eye roll and he squeaked a little bit. “It’s important.”

“Yes, Daddy. I’m sorry.”

I nodded my approval and without me saying another word, Tiernan faced the table and leaned forward over it, propping himself up on his forearms as he always liked to do. In this position, his pert butt popped out enough for me to get some solid strikes in without hurting him, but he still felt able to move away if he got forgot his words. Another piece of safety we’d built in through trial and error. The familiarity was astounding, and I only hoped I’d be able to replicate the best nights we’d had together back here once I got started using our new, soft flogger. I ran a hand down his lower back, cupping the curve of his ass in my palm and giving him a small squeeze before trailing my fingertips downwards over his creamy, freckled thighs.

“I could spend so much time licking these freckles,” I murmured, leaning over him and putting my lips beside his ear. “You look absolutely delicious, my boy.”

“Thank you, Daddy,” he breathed back, eyes closed the tiniest bit. “You could eat me if you wanted to.”

I laughed softly. “Maybe I will, little heart. Maybe I will.” Tiernan grinned over his shoulder at me, his cheeks pinking up a little bit, and I couldn’t wait to see his ass and thighs match the color. Leaving him behind, I went to grab the bag of our things and carried it over to the table, unzipping it and pulling the flogger out.

“It’s soft,” I said, giving him a reminder as much as confirming it for myself. “That doesn’t mean it won’t hurt, though.”

“I know, Daddy.”

I inhaled a deep breath, then made sure I was holding the end of the flogger right so I could get a good swing going when I started. Tiernan might know that it was going to hurt, but what he didn’t know was that I’d spent the better part of the last two nights practicing with it while he slept, needing to be certain I could swing it properly and hurt him right instead of wrong. I didn’t want to damage him in ways he didn’t want to be damaged or leave permanent marks across his skin.

“Hold very still, okay? I don’t want the tails to wrap. Remember your words.”

“I will.”

“We’ll start with a couple of swings to make sure it’s what you want.”

Tiernan nodded, and I took a step back, clutching the flogger in my hand as I judged the distance I needed to be away from him to make it land right. Having the tails wrap around his body and strike his front would be the worst and as I flexed my wrists, eyeing his butt, I sent him a silent promise that I wouldn’t do that to him. With another deep breath to center myself, I swung the flogger towards his bare bottom, watching the tails hit him perfectly on the meatiest part of his butt. He jumped a little bit at the impact, then settled right back down quickly. I followed that with a few more slow, easy

strikes, listening to tiny little “Oh’s” fall from his lips at every hit against his body.

“Color?” I asked.

“Green. So green.”

“Good boy. I’m going to go until I’m done but use your words if you need to.”

Tiernan nodded, inhaling a deep breath. I waited for him to exhale it before starting again, swinging the tails of the flogger towards his left ass cheek, then striking the right shortly after in a downward motion. He breathed heavy as I struck him, moving from ass to the backs of his thighs, then back up to his ass again, still moving slow but not giving him much time in between blows.

“You are so perfect,” I murmured as I swung in a slow figure eight, drawing red out of his skin and bringing it to the surface. “I adore how well you’re doing.”

“Thank you, Daddy,” he squeaked out as I kept moving, picking up my pace. I didn’t want to push him too hard, but he could definitely take more than I was giving him.

Soon, his little oh’s and tiny squeaks turned to gasps and moans as I hit the same spots over and over again, creating a patchwork quilt of reds and creams scattered across his ass and thighs. I stopped swinging and stepped forward, cupping his heated cheek in my cooler palm, giving it a little squeeze that made him cry out in surprise and probably a bit of pain.

“Hurts.” He gasped at me over his shoulder. “Cold.”

I trailed my hand down his ass again, but reached between his legs this time to see if he was hard and finding his dick plumping up, though still a bit soft. With a grin, I wrapped my hand around his cock and gave him a stroke, then another one, listening to his moans into the room around us.

Reaching down for the bag, I plucked out the cock sleeve I'd bought, along with the bottle of lube. I quickly uncapped it, then gave the inside of the sleeve a liberal coating, feeling the nubs against my fingertips as I spread it around the cylinder until I was satisfied. I gently pulled Tiernan a tiny bit away from the table and caught his dangling, hardened cock with my hand. His eyes went wide as I slid the sleeve over him, his hips jerking forwards as he pushed himself into the wet warmth.

“Oh,” he moaned. “Oh, Daddy. Oh wow. That feels amazing.”

“I want you to hold onto it tight and stay still. No moving allowed.” Tiernan squawked out an indignant noise at me and I raised an eyebrow. “Be a good boy for me.”

“I'll try.”

“You will do,” I responded, giving him a tiny tap on the nose with my finger.

He frowned at me slightly, but sighed as I pushed his hips forward, making his dick slide the tiniest bit in the sleeve. “You said no moving.”

“I said you couldn't move, not that I couldn't move you.”

“Fucking semantics,” Tiernan muttered under his breath, and I gave him a tiny pop on the ass for that comment, drawing a gasp from his lungs. “I’m sorry, Daddy.”

Taking up position behind him again, I went back to my work, swinging the flogger and listening as his cries of pain became tinged with pleasure. He couldn’t move, but that didn’t mean that every strike down his ass wasn’t pushing him forward a little bit into the tight sleeve, sending sensations I hoped he enjoyed down the length of his cock.

Grinning as he moaned, I swung again and again, taking care to hit him in the best way, pushing him higher into the mixture of arousal and pain that he deserved.

Chapter Twenty Four

TIERNAN

I was shivering. Shaking. Squeaking. Screaming. A bunch of 's' related words, but I was also hard as hell and starting to ache a bit at the continued movement of my dick through the cock sleeve. It wasn't much, but it was enough to have my entire lower half feeling like a ball of hurt and need.

Behind me, Joel swung the flogger, smacking my ass and thighs repeatedly, bringing me the thuds I loved and the little stings I could handle. I was fairly certain my whole ass was probably as red as a cherry, but I didn't care. I moaned and shivered through it all, letting myself go into simply feeling him. Of breathing with him behind me, giving me what I'd been missing. A tear streaked down my face as he struck me again, harder and faster than before.

"Oh!" I cried out as he struck my ass cheeks rapidly, my hand shaking where I cupped my cock with the sleeve he'd bought for me. Being unable to move was torture when all I wanted to do was pull out then push into the tight, wet heat around me.

But I was being good. I could be good for him. He'd started very hesitant, but this Joel behind me now was one I knew and one I loved. He deserved a good boy while he treated me so kindly.

"Your little ass is so red," he murmured as the strikes stopped and my body prickled with need.

"Daddy," I mumbled, glancing over my shoulder to see his eyes cast downwards. He moved forward, and I could feel him kneeling behind me, his breath scattering over my heated, burning skin.

"Lean forward more," he demanded, pressing down on my lower back. I shuffled backwards a bit, trying to manage all the things I was supposed to do.

Hand on sleeve.

Sleeve on cock.

Don't move.

Bend over.

Finally, I put it all together and shuffled into a position that made my ass pop right up. I felt a cool breath blow over my stinging, achy skin, followed by something slick and wet. I moaned softly as Joel did it again, licking my heated skin and blowing cool air over it, drawing goosebumps to the surface.

"Delicious," he murmured, his lips moving against my skin as he spoke.

I felt him lean into me, his hands pushing my cheeks apart and exposing the pucker there to his view. He didn't move for a few moments, but a long swipe of his tongue across my hole had my knees going weak where I stood, trying my best to not move for him. Joel lapped at my hole again, flattening his tongue over it and slicking me up with his saliva. I moaned as my hips canted forwards while he licked at me, pushing my dick into the sleeve, then moving the tiniest bit backwards as he maneuvered me.

“Please, Daddy, can I move?” I begged, growing a bit desperate at the sensations of pain, pleasure and heat surrounding me on all fronts.

“You want to fuck that sleeve?” he murmured from behind me, pressing kisses to my sore ass cheeks.

“Yes. Please, yes.” So bad. The nubs inside felt like torture, but the best kind as they bumped the slightest bit over my dick.

“Well, I want to fuck you,” he responded.

I wanted that too. I wanted all of it. I nodded eagerly, sweat dripping down my face and chest from the tension of having to stay still. Closing my eyes, I lingered in a floaty sort of space, feeling and hearing Joel shuffle around behind me. Not quite the deep sub space I'd been in before when he'd bring me to the back rooms, but not quite grounded as I'd been when we'd started.

The sound of a lube bottle snapping open seemed to echo through the room and the first touch of cold liquid dribbling

between my cheeks had my body tensing up a little bit. Joel's fingers snaked between my legs, and he swirled his finger around my spit slicked pucker, gently massaging it and coating me up with lube so that once he started fucking me, he wouldn't have to stop. I whimpered as he pressed against it gently, then moved away.

"Needy?" he murmured as he circled my hole with his finger again.

I nodded as he pressed against it harder, pushing out as much as I could to help him. His finger slid into me slowly and I moaned softly at the intrusion. Joel held himself there for a few seconds before tapping both of my ass cheeks with his palm gently, drawing the ache of the flogging back to the forefront of my mind and pushing the sting of being opened up for him to the background.

Joel pulled his finger out, then pressed back in slowly a few times before the stretch of him entering me grew. I gasped as he slid two thick fingers into my body, resisting the urge to clamp down and force him out as much as I could because I wanted this so badly. Joel's fingers slid in and out of me, growing faster with each thrust until my body relaxed and the movement became easy. When he slid free, I opened my eyes and caught him discarding his clothing, his hard cock jutting out from his body, the thick mushroomed head of it sending a shiver down my spine. Joel was built bigger than me in all ways, his dick thicker and definitely longer than mine. He curved to the left the tiniest bit when he was hard, and I knew

the scrape of that curve inside me almost as much as I knew the back of my own hand.

He reached into the bag on the floor and grabbed a condom, opening it and sliding it over himself before grabbing the lube and slicking his sheathed cock up. He smiled at me, looking a bit uncertain in that way he did sometimes now, but I smiled right back at him as best as I could before closing my eyes and waiting for him.

I could feel his heat behind me again where I rested, slumped over the table with my aching dick still in the cock sleeve, followed by both of his hands on my cheeks. He spread them apart, digging his fingers in to send more of the sensations lingering from my flogging through my body as he'd always done.

“You look beautiful like this, spread open for me to use.”

“Yes, Daddy,” I murmured, smiling.

The head of Joel's cock butted against my pucker, and I inhaled a deep breath, pushing out as he pressed against it hard and firm. He pulled away for a moment, then came back, pushing again at my hole, asking it without words to open and let him in. As my body relaxed and he slid into me, I moaned softly, feeling the sting of being pried open combining with the thrill of having Joel inside me again.

My Daddy.

My heart was full as he slid out and pressed into me again, deeper this time, delving into my body carefully like I was

precious and he didn't want to break me. Joel would be hard on me, I knew, but he always took great care with my body, making sure I was ready for whatever he was going to give me. Slowly, he slid in and out, letting me feel every inch of his thick cock until he made one last, deep push and bottomed out inside me, bringing his thighs to my ass cheeks with a soft smack.

“Oh!” I cried out as the pleasure and pain combo ripped through me. That was exactly what I wanted, but it wasn't enough. “More of that.”

“Don't be pushy,” Joel warned, though the sternness he was trying for was undercut by a slight tremble. I opened my eyes and turned my head as best as I could to see him, finding his eyes closed and his head slightly tilted back, his lower lip caught in his teeth. He inhaled a few heavy breaths, then opened his eyes, meeting mine. “You feel too good.”

“So, you do.”

He smiled and disconnected his eyes from mine, looking down to where we were connected for a few seconds before sliding out of me, then pushing his way back in. He thrusted into me, bumping me forward and backward as my own cock reveled in the joy of finally fucking into the sleeve in longer strokes. After a few thrusts though, Joel stopped, his cock halfway out of me, and I protested the sudden change.

“Be good,” he murmured, reaching forward and gripping my hair in his fist. He gave it a tug and I rippled with arousal

and pain again. “You told me you wanted to fuck that sleeve, so go.”

“Christ,” I breathed as I slid backwards, impaling myself onto his cock slowly. Pressing forwards with my hips had my cock bumping along the nubs in the sleeve I held in my hand, and I whimpered at the sensations of being filled and surrounded at the same time. Slowly, my hips started moving in a rhythm, pushing me backwards onto Joel’s thick cock and sliding me forwards into the sleeve. I moaned as Joel gripped my hair tight in his fist, holding me right where I was, hips bucking wildly as I fucked into the toy and slid myself onto him.

“Good boy,” Joel murmured as I pushed myself back onto his cock again. “Fucking yourself on Daddy’s cock. Giving that sleeve your dick. Look at you.”

I whimpered softly again, feeling the glide of the sleeve over me again, followed by the sensation of being filled to bursting with him. Over and over again, I thrust, my body rippling with pleasure and pain, my hair held tight in Joel’s fist as he grunted softly behind me. The sounds dropping from his mouth filled me with pride, knowing that I was doing a good job of getting both of us to the very edge of release.

“Oh fuck.” He gasped, hand quivering where he gripped my hair. “Fuck, you feel so good.”

I didn’t bother with a response, but the small amount of pride that curled inside me made me grin. Joel let go of my hair, leaving my scalp singing with pain, and moved his hands

down to grip my hips. With a push, he took over, moving me into the sleeve and onto his cock, pushing and pulling my hips backwards and forwards. I let go and reveled in the sensations, sweat dripping down my chest, hips aching and ass screaming in pain. My cock jerked in the sleeve, and I moaned loudly, pulling it onto me as Joel pushed me forwards into it. I was desperate to come, and I could feel it building inside of me.

“Daddy,” I mumbled, the words coming out as a half-moaned whisper. “Daddy, I’m gonna come.”

“Let go, little heart, take what you earned,” Joel murmured back, pulling me backwards so roughly that my ass hit his hips hard. A loud moan crept out of my mouth as the inside of my sleeve stroked my dick again and again, drawing me closer and closer to the edge.

Finally, Joel gripped my hips tight and pulled me backwards onto him, reaching down and grabbing the sleeve off my cock. I snarled at him in protest, but his hand wrapped around me instead. Joel stroked my dick hard and fast, his cock embedded so deep inside my body, I swore I could feel him in my stomach. He gripped me tight in his fist, his hand drawing out my orgasm and when the release finally came to me, I cried out loud enough that I was certain it could be heard through the entire club. I trembled and my stomach quivered as my body rippled in his grasp, my eyes shut and pure pleasure coursing through my body. Joel stroked me through my release, my cum coating his fist and dripping to the floor beneath us. When I finished, my body went limp and I flopped forward onto the table as he let my softening cock go. Joel

thrusted into my battered hole, his hands moving to dig into my hips hard, holding me in place for him to use me as he saw fit. I breathed hard as he moaned low above me, his cock slamming into me a few more times until his thrusts stuttered. His hips slowed as he stroked long and deep into my body, riding out his orgasm buried inside me.

When he finished, he leaned over me where I lay on the table, breathing hard onto the leather surface. His chest hit my back and he pressed a kiss to my sweaty cheek, wrapping his arms around me as best as he could.

“My little heart,” he whispered, kissing me again. “I adore you.”

I smiled, closing my eyes as he slid free from my body. A rush of cold hit my back as he moved away from me, and I grumbled a protest in sounds and garbled nonsense that wasn't even close to being words.

Without even asking what I needed, Joel brought me a warm blanket, covering me with it where I rested against the table. With my eyes closed, I couldn't tell exactly what he was up to, but I knew that this was where the second-best part of the night came into play. Joel uncovered my aching ass and thighs, making sure the blanket stayed on my back and shoulders as he brought a cool cloth to all the places he'd used. He cleaned me up as gently as he could, then covered me again with the blanket, letting me linger on the table.

“Come snuggle and have a snack?” he asked from behind me, and I nodded.

Peeling myself off the table, I wrapped the blanket around me and headed for the bed in the corner. Joel came behind me, arms out just in case I lilted over in one direction on my shaky feet or threatened to fall over entirely. He used to carry me, but I'd always hated that and was pleased that he'd remembered. When I was on the bed, he crawled behind me and propped himself up against the headboard before reaching down and hauling me between his legs. I turned sideways, resting my cheek against his chest, closing my eyes, and breathing against his skin.

“Want a cookie?” he whispered.

“Not yet,” I murmured back. “I just want this. This is perfect.”

His arms came around me and he rested his cheek on the top of my head. Joel, My Daddy, held me there in the hazy afterglow as my heart beat in my chest, one third reserved just for him.

Chapter Twenty Five

JOEL

I wanted to talk about Tiernan.

I sat in the circle at the bereavement support group I'd been neglecting the past few months, taking stock of the faces around me and how much had changed. The man who'd talked about giving away all his wife's items wasn't there, and in his usual spot sat a young man in a soft pink sweater. I had watched him slump into the room, his face reddened and lips turned downwards into a petulant scowl. Even as he sat, he seemed more angry than sad, but I reminded myself that I also carried the capacity to be angry when I was mourning.

"I am glad to see you here," Patricia whispered as she walked past me, giving my shoulder a squeeze. "You look good."

I smiled at her, offering something I wasn't sure she'd ever seen before, and her eyes lit up as she returned a smile of her own. Was I cured entirely? Not even close, but having Tiernan back was helping, even if some days I wasn't certain I was doing the right things. The catalyst for me coming to group tonight had started with an explosion in the house that had

started with finding a Christmas present with my name on it tucked into the back corner of what had been Daniel's side of the closet. With his clothing in the way, I hadn't known it was there. It hadn't even been remotely close to Christmas when he'd died, but he'd always planned ahead, and finding it was enough to have me sobbing on the floor of the closet. Tiernan had found me when he'd gotten home from work and had tried to get me to open it, but I had declined.

It didn't feel right.

Nothing felt right.

So, I had come to group to see if that would help, leaving Tiernan at home watching some show on Netflix he'd gotten into while he soaked his scratched up hands in a bowl of warm water. Tabitha did groom cats, he'd learned, and cats generally did not like baths.

"Welcome," Patricia stated, calling the assembled group to attention. "Thank you for all coming tonight. For those who are new, we ask that you share what you are able. We are a no pressure group and all we ask is that you remain present and respectful of others." The group murmured an agreement and Patricia looked around the circle, meeting eyes with every one of us as she always did. "Does anyone have anything they'd like to share?"

I wanted to talk about Tiernan.

Opening my mouth, I inhaled a breath, the urge to divulge where I'd been the last few months pushing at me hard. "I

haven't been here for a while. I met someone. I mean, I ran into someone I once knew? Someone I once loved. Do love."

Patricia nodded as I stumbled over the words, letting them fall out of my mouth in a stream of consciousness.

"I do love him," I confirmed, taking a deep breath as my body trembled a bit where I sat. "He was once a huge part of my life, but we went separate ways and now he's come back to me."

"A lover?" Patricia asked.

"Yes. You could call him that. I have loved him for a long time." I adored him.

"Did he know your husband?" one of the women who I'd seen many times before asked from across the circle. The question was simple, but the answer was far more complicated.

"Yes," I responded, weighing truth versus keeping safe in this circle of strangers. "They knew each other very well."

The woman nodded, satisfied with that answer.

"Connection with people who knew our loved ones can be healthy," Patricia offered with a smile. "Have you been able to talk about Daniel with him?"

"All the time." I laughed softly, shaking my head. "We talk about Daniel all the time. He mattered a great deal to both of us. It's been good having someone around who knew him, who grieves as hard as I still do for him. Tiernan has made me realize that I've been letting myself slip into someone Daniel

wouldn't even recognize anymore. He'd sort of forced me to be a better Da—person.”

I almost slipped the word “Daddy” out of my mouth but a quick glance around the circle showed me that nobody had caught on. Nobody, except for the young man in the pink sweater. He'd narrowed his eyes at me from across the circle, tilting his head sideways like he suddenly had questions burning inside his mind and was weighing out his thoughts. I hoped he'd not note my slip up out loud and keep his thoughts inside his head. I was proud of being who I was to Tiernan, but I didn't feel much like turning this entire bereavement group into an education session on kink. Finally, he nodded at me once, casting his eyes downwards at his hands and staying silent.

“I still have a lot of issues,” I admitted, now that I was comfortable to carry on. “I found a Christmas present from Daniel with my name on it this afternoon, and I had a meltdown in the closet.”

“I have a birthday present from my mom that I haven't opened yet,” one of the women offered. “I keep telling myself that she would want me to open it, but I also keep telling myself to save it for my birthday. I've been saying that for three years now and every birthday, I don't open it because I don't want to taint that day with sadness.”

“Exactly,” I responded. “I don't want to open it, but I do. I don't know if what's inside is going to hurt or not and I'm trying to be stronger, better for my boy... friend. My

boyfriend. I don't know if I can keep slipping back into the same grief over and over again without him getting sick of me."

"Does grief change?" Patricia asked, her eyes sparkling at me like she held the answer already.

"I think so," I replied. "I think it gets less intense over time, but I don't think I'm at that point yet." I wasn't sure I'd ever be at that point, but I was trying to be as hard as I could. A glance around the circle told me that some people agreed, but some clearly did not.

"I think it can stay the same sometimes," one of the men said. "My wife died five years ago and some days I'm okay. I can go out, be with friends, go to work and do everything I need to do. But sometimes, it's huge and I can't even breathe because I miss her so much."

"I don't feel it as strongly as I did before," someone else piped up.

Another couple of people agreed with the man, a few more agreed with me and finally Patricia broke into the murmured conversations with a simple word. "Journey."

She paused, then carried on. "Everyone here is on their own journey through grief. Some of us have moments of incredible sadness and some of us feel it less intensely. It doesn't mean we love our person any less. It just means that we are all different. How does that feel?"

I nodded, listening to her words as I connected eyes with the man across the circle who'd spoken of his wife. He offered a shaky smile and a nod back at me and I gave him the same.

"I guess," the boy in the pink sweater said, speaking up for the first time. "My sadness is different. I lost my dad. The person who was supposed to be my dad? Sperm donor." He nodded as he landed on that word, and I bit back a laugh. "I don't mourn for him at all, but I wish... sometimes, I wish he'd been the Dad I'd wanted and that's where I get... sad." He shrugged and looked down at the floor.

Talk around the circle turned to mourning lost chances, and I drifted away into thinking about Tiernan and Daniel, and the Christmas present. Would I ever feel okay about opening it? I didn't want to become the woman across the circle, holding onto a present year after year, but I also wasn't sure whatever was inside wouldn't carry me into a tailspin of misery. As the time for the group to end came closer, I still didn't have the answer to that question, but that was never the point of group. I came here to share thoughts on bad days, not to get solid answers to questions that likely didn't have them.

Patricia closed the group and I rose from my seat, stretching out my aching back from the hard plastic chair. Across the circle, the boy in the pink sweater watched me carefully, and as I headed for the door, I could feel him following me. When I hit the street outside the church's front door, I turned around and came face to face with his sheepish smile. He was a head shorter than me, only slightly taller than Tiernan. He carried a bit of thickness around his middle, and his platinum blond hair

and chubby cheeks made him look far younger than he likely was.

“I think you have questions,” I offered with a small laugh.

“Do you know Hobie?” he asked. Confused, I nodded and watched a slow, friendly smile appear on his lips. “I thought you might. I’m his brother. Sort of. Duke.”

“Duke?”

“Yeah, I’m Duke.”

His name surprised me almost as much as learning Hobie had a brother, sort of. I offered my hand out to Duke. “Joel. I work with his... person.”

Duke laughed as he shook my hand, the delighted sound tinkling in the air like piano keys. “His Daddy. At the club?”

Relief washed over me as he let go of my hand and I realized how much this Duke actually knew about Hobie. I smiled. “Yes.”

“He keeps telling me to come there and find a Daddy for myself.” Duke sighed, shaking his head. “But I don’t know if I’m ready. How do I know if I’m ready?”

“I don’t think you know,” I offered, understanding what he meant. “I don’t know if there’s a right time for anything in this grief journey Patricia was talking about.”

“Oh.” Duke’s lips curled downwards into a small frown and his nose wrinkled.

“But that’s okay. It’s better that way. If you aren’t waiting for a sign to know when it’s the right time for something, you can believe that any time could be the right time.”

“Oh,” Duke repeated, looking a bit less confused. “So, if I met someone. Like a Daddy? It could be the right time without me even knowing it’s the right time?”

I laughed softly, nodding. “Sure. If you meet someone you like and he respects you and treats you kindly, then it’s the right time.”

“Was it the right time for you and your boy?”

“I think it was,” I replied with a smile. “I think I needed him to come back to me as much as he needed me to be there when he did. Grief is messy and hard, Duke. It gets under your skin and makes you someone you don’t recognize, but when someone comes along and offers to help you crawl out of who you’ve become? You have to take that chance.”

“Okay.”

“And think about coming to the club. Hobie and the rest of the boys will welcome you with open arms. They’re a good bunch, Duke, if you need someone to talk to.”

He nodded and we parted ways, him heading for his golden car and me for my black truck. As I turned the key over, I watched as he drove out of the parking lot, hoping that he’d reach out to Hobie and come to the club.

“He’d be a good friend for Tiernan,” I muttered to myself as I drove out of the parking lot, eager to get home to see my boy.



“I just want to look.”

I raised an eyebrow, hesitating outside of one of the local pet stores. We had been out for brunch to celebrate Tiernan’s first full week at work and when he’d asked to come here, I hadn’t been able to say no. Now that we’d arrived though, I could see the mistake I’d made.

“Only looking.”

“Of course, Daddy. Just looking, I promise.” He grinned, popping onto his tiptoes and plunking a kiss on my cheek that felt far too sweet for me to believe the words attached to it.

“We’re walking out of here with an animal,” I muttered to myself as Tiernan whirled around to look at me.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.” I sighed. “Go look.”

“Just looking,” he repeated with sing song sweetness.

I followed him into the store and watched as he made a beeline for the adoption center first thing, letting me once again believe that we were leaving with a pet of some kind. I had never had pets growing up. My parents hadn’t been into having shedded hair covering all their surfaces. Animals were meant for outside; I’d been taught time and time again. Even the dogs we’d had were working dogs, there for herding and protecting the cattle from predators. They’d slept in the barn with their charges, as did the barn cats who had the job of

rodent control. Adding to my hesitance at getting a pet was the knowledge that I was not a fan of having to keep something constantly entertained. I was still settling into having Tiernan there, I thought with a gentle smile as my boy crouched in front of one of the kennels containing a small puppy.

God, I hoped he wouldn't get attached to a dog. If I had to, I could maybe handle a small cat, and I had hoped that he would go that way when he would inevitably start begging me for one of the critters in one of the cages. He stared at the puppies though, cooing words to them through the wire edges of their kennel, sticking his fingers in to scratch as their poofy little heads.

“Aren't they cute?”

“They're furry,” I replied, staring at the little puffballs bouncing around in the kennel.

“They're adorable.”

I couldn't deny that fact, but I also couldn't deny that the sheer amount of fur on them was making my insides cringe. What kind of dog had that much hair? What type of animal really needed that much fuzz to survive? Tiernan stood up and looked around at the rest of the cats and dogs up for adoption before stopping stock still.

“Oh, Daddy. Look at him,” Tiernan whispered, standing and heading for one of the glass fronted cages a few steps away from the puppies. He peered in and turned to me, waving his hand at me to join him.

When I'd joined him, I saw clearly what had caught his attention and I had little bit of relief thread through me. The cat was small, though not a kitten, the pitch black of its short fur broken up only by a splotch of white across its face and one white back paw. It butted its head against the clear front of its cage, right where Tiernan's hand rested. Peering past the cat, I saw a small cat tree and a litter pan along with a fairly battered looking toy mouse on the bottom of the cage.

“He likes me. I wonder if they'd let me play with him.”

“Tiernan,” I warned.

“I'm just going to look at him up close. Just looking.” He walked away from me, presumably heading to find someone who could let him hold the cat, and I stared at the creature behind the glass.

It stared right back at me, its big green eyes curiously wide, and I sighed. “You better be a good cat.”

The cat didn't respond other than to slowly blink its eyes at me, but Tiernan returned with a young woman who let us into a back room with a big armchair and a much larger cat tree. She unlocked the solid back of one of the animal crates and lifted out the black and white cat, handing it to Tiernan, then reached back into the cage. When she turned around again, she held another cat in her hands. This one was a light grey tabby colored thing, and it was far larger than the other one.

“There's two?” Tiernan asked, scratching the black and white cat's chin.

“A bonded pair,” the girl responded with a smile as she held out the big grey one to me. “They have to be adopted together. Separating them would be cruel. This one was hiding in the cat tree, you didn’t see him?”

“No,” I replied, baffled as I took the grey cat from her since she kept holding him in my direction. “We did not see two cats.”

“The black and white is Marshmallow and this grey one is called Pudding Pop.”

“I like those names,” Tiernan offered, sitting down on the chair, and placing the black and white one on his lap. I sighed and handed him the grey one, watching as it snuggled up to him, bumping its head against his hand. He grinned up at me, scratching both cats at once, looking absolutely overwhelmed with joy.

“I’ll leave you for a moment,” the girl offered, heading for the door that led out to the store. “I’ll be back in a bit, and you can let me know what you think.”

She left, and I turned to Tiernan. “No.”

“I am just looking up close,” he reminded me. “They’re really good cats, I think.”

“Tiernan.”

“I like that they’re friends. That makes it much easier to leave them at home when we go out.”

“No.”

“Also, they could play together and occupy each other’s time, so we’d have to spend less time entertaining them. We could put a cat tree in the front window for them so they could watch the birds.”

“Just looking?”

“Just thinking,” he responded with a grin.

“When did we progress from looking to thinking?”

“When I leaned there was two of them. Who else would take two cats at once, Daddy?”

“Certainly not us.”

“Definitely us.” Tiernan’s grin widened even more for a split second before he glanced down at the cats on his lap and then back up at me, hope shining in his eyes. “Please?”

“We said looking.” I sighed, shaking my head.

“I can pay for their food and for the vet,” he offered. “I’ll clean the litterboxes, so you don’t have to do it.”

“Litterboxes? More than one?”

“Two cats, two boxes. At least.”

“Oh my God,” I breathed, sighing again.

“Marshmallow, Daddy. He’s called Marshmallow.”

“Looks like a burned marshmallow to me,” I muttered, staring at the black and white cat.

“And Pudding Pop? That’s adorable. Marshmallow and Pudding Pop.” He paused for a second before grinning again.

“Daddy Joel, Tiernan, Marshmallow and Pudding Pop. It’s perfect.”

I felt my resolve crack a little bit as I watched the cats tumble around on his lap, batting at loose locks of his hair that had escaped from their usual place behind his ear. He was happy, truly happy, and that meant the world to me. I let loose a frustrated grumble as I shook my head. “Daddy Joel, Tiernan, Burned Marshmallow and Pudding Pop it is.”

“For real?” Tiernan asked, eyes wide as he looked up at me.

“For real.”

“Oh my God, thank you. Thank you so much. I have wanted a cat forever, Daddy.”

“I know you have,” I replied, leaning down to scratch Pudding Pop behind the ear. “I know Daniel was trying to get you one before he died.”

Tiernan went silent for a moment before looking up at me with a smile tinged with a hint of sadness. “He would have loved Pudding Pop a lot.”

“Yeah, he would have. For what it’s worth, I’m sure there are worse pet ideas out there than cats.”

“Yeah.” Tiernan laughed. “I could have chosen a spider.”

I cringed, shivering a little bit where I stood. Too many legs. “That’s never happening.”

“Maybe someday.”

“Maybe not.”

“First, two cats. Then, one spider?” I didn’t even have to respond in words, I’m sure the look on my face said it all. Tiernan cackled to himself before turning back to the cats in his lap, cooing soft things at them as he scratched their ears and kissed their noses.

Yeah, there were worse choices to make, that much was clear.

Chapter Twenty Six

TIERNAN

I sat in Perry's booth, sipping at the glass of ginger ale Joel had brought me and making eyes at him from across the room. I'd been told he wasn't able to play with me tonight, the club was too busy for that, but that didn't mean I couldn't do my best to entice him. I'd worn a pair of skintight black pants and paired them with a tight white shirt that showed off all my new muscles. Every so often, Joel would look at me and I'd do something suggestive, like rub my nipple through my shirt or stick my finger into my mouth and suck it. I was probably going to catch hell for teasing him all night long, but I had been feeling a bit out of control lately, so I was just rolling with it.

Hobie had come and gone already, saying he had some project for school he was working on and that left me with Perry, his best friend Morrie and Morrie's Daddy, Scott. They were good friends to me, but watching Perry and Morrie play together was making my heart ache in a different way.

I missed Bryce.

I had only seen him a handful of times since leaving the motel behind, and that was hardly enough for me. He was still at Mason's and by his reports, all was well there, but he hadn't responded to my calls in a couple of days, so my worry was growing.

Joel glanced my way again, and I slowly lifted my shirt, exposing my nipple to him. He frowned, shaking his head at me, and I grinned right back. He narrowed his eyes as I licked my finger, then flicked my nipple hard enough that it almost hurt.

"You're cruising for a bruising," Scott warned.

"I fucking hope so," I mumbled as Joel turned his reddened, angry face away from me. He leaned into Mason's ear and I watched Mason nod at whatever he said, my insides prickling and irritated at seemingly being ignored.

But I was quickly proven wrong as Joel clasped a hand around Mason's forearm, then let go, giving him a nod and heading right for the table I was sitting at. I swallowed hard as he came to stand in front of me, the table creating a barrier away from his disappointment.

"Hi Daddy," I said, offering a smile.

"Here. Now," Joel uttered, pointing to the space right in front of him.

"I seem to be stuck behind the table." I gestured at my surroundings for emphasis, unable to get myself to stop pushing and poking at him.

He narrowed his eyes at me. “Crawl.”

Fear zipping through me at his tone, I ducked and scrambled out of the booth, crawling beneath the table. I raised myself to my full height, looking up into Joel’s hardened eyes.

“Do you think you’re being cute?”

“No, Daddy.”

“Then what are you trying to accomplish by distracting me when I am trying to work?”

“Nothing, Daddy.”

“Lying is disrespectful,” Joel murmured, leaning in so only I could hear him. “I am not proud of your behavior right now, little heart. Since I am not able to bend you over my knee and spank you silly, you have earned time out.”

“Time out?” I squawked as the words “not proud” laced through me like a sharp cut. He hadn’t said that he wasn’t proud of me, just how I was acting, but that still didn’t feel great. And time out? I had never been given a time out in my entire time with Joel and Daniel.

“Yes. Pick a corner and cram that little nose into it.”

“But Daddy—” I protested, but he cut me off.

“Tiernan, you have ten seconds. One.”

“You have got to be kidding me.”

“Two.”

I scowled at him, my own frustration with myself and with Bryce spilling out of me in every way. He raised an eyebrow

as he counted three, then four. With a resigned sigh, I stomped over to the nearest corner and turned my face to it, still pouting and snarling at myself inside my own head. Why had I pushed? Why did I always push?

“You will stay here until I come to collect you,” Joel murmured from behind me. “And then we will talk about what proper behavior at my workplace is.”

“Okay, Daddy,” I whispered back, feeling the shame. I felt a whoosh of air behind me as he left but instead of letting him go, I turned my head and called for him to come back. Joel frowned at me, but he came right back.

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry, Daddy.”

He sighed and reached out, cupping my cheek in his hand. “Thank you, Tiernan. Calm down a bit and do some thinking while you’re here. We’ll talk in a few minutes.”

I nodded, turning back around to face the corner I’d earned and leaving his warm palm behind. I still felt prickly and itchy though, like something was wrong but I couldn’t quite put my finger on what it was. I hadn’t spent this much time with structure in a few years and perhaps that’s what was driving me to make awful decisions. I hadn’t been without Bryce for this long either and that had to be part of why I was feeling feral on the inside. My heart ached as I stared at the darkened corner, hearing laughter and chatting from around me as I lingered in the place I started calling the shame corner in my head.

“Psst,” a voice hissed from behind me, and I startled a little bit. Turning my head slightly, I saw Perry standing there. He glanced around at the club, then pressed a small baggie of animal crackers into my hand. “Punishments deserve snacks.”

I bit back laughter because that would definitely cause heads to turn in my direction, but I whispered a thank you before Perry left me alone again in my shame corner.

I carefully opened the package, hoping Joel wouldn't catch me, then lifted a cookie to my lips, plopping it into my mouth. As I chewed, I thought things over, focusing on what I was feeling and why I could be feeling it as strongly as I was. No matter what I came up with, something felt off and wrong inside me. I finished up the entire bag of animal crackers as I stood in the corner, trying to figure out what was happening and why I felt so prickly and raw inside tonight.

This punishment seemed to go on forever and that didn't help matters either. I shifted from foot to foot as I stood, leaning into the corner, then leaning out of the corner, playing a game with myself to see how far backwards I could lean before I started to feel like I was going to fall over. Finally, I heard noise coming from behind me and I righted myself, standing up tall and proud and ready for a discussion with Joel. I hoped he'd be able to help me sort things out because I needed him to do that tonight before I imploded in a terrible way and did something unforgivable.

“Tiernan,” he said from behind me, sounding worried and a bit serious. “I need you to turn around, and I need you to listen

to me, okay?"

"What's wrong?" I asked as I did what he told me. As I looked at him, movement behind him caught my eye and I glanced past Joel in time to see Mason practically flying out of the front door of the club. Connecting my eyes back to Joel, my entire gut nearly dropped out of my body. "Daddy, what's going on? Where's Mason going?"

"Bryce is in the hospital, my little heart. He just called Mason."

"No, because he's not," I murmured back shaking my head. "Because he's at Mason's and he's safe."

"He hasn't been at Mason's," Joel responded, shaking his head sadly. "He left yesterday afternoon saying he wouldn't be back."

"No, but he's at Mason's," I repeated, certain that he was there. He had promised to be there. He had promised. Hot tears welled in my eyes, and I blinked them away because they weren't useful.

"He's in the hospital, Tiernan. Someone hurt him pretty bad."

"No, he was going to be safe." It didn't make sense. None of it made sense to me.

"If you would like to go see him, we can go. He has asked for you and there is about an hour of visiting time left tonight."

I nodded, biting back my urge to snap and snarl at him. I didn't want to take out all the things I was feeling inside on

my Daddy because he didn't deserve it, but I was starting to feel a bit like my skin was too tight for me, and I couldn't breathe. I'd already gotten one punishment tonight and didn't want to earn another one. Not when Bryce was sitting in some hospital bed, broken and battered.

Joel quickly shuttled me off towards the back door of the club, pausing to wave at Ambrose where he sat in his office as we went by. When we were outside, the cool air hit my skin, and I breathed deeply into the night, forcing down my urge to scream and replacing it with stomach eating worry.

"You're going to be okay," Joel offered as we climbed into his truck. "I'm here, Tiernan."

I nodded, pursing my lips shut against the thought that I really needed my Daddy to be there for me tonight and hoping that Joel was serious when he'd promised to be more considerate this time around. That was a shitty thought to have when he'd been attentive thus far, like Daniel had been with me all the time before he'd died. I swallowed hard at that thought too, pushing it down with the rest because it wasn't helpful.

Daniel died.

Bryce was hurt.

And I had Joel by my side, whatever that would look like, when I needed him the most. I reached over and grabbed his hand from the center console, smoothing my fingers between his and giving him a squeeze.

“I’m sorry I was shitty before,” I whispered.

“Tiernan, we’ll talk about that later. I know you understand the mistakes you made.”

“I still need you to know that I’m sorry before I can go see Bryce.”

“I know, little heart. I know you’re sorry.”

“Okay.”

I held onto my Daddy’s hand tight as he drove us out of the parking lot and headed towards the hospital, hoping my best friend was going to be just as okay as I was.



Bryce was a disaster. He lay in his hospital bed, blackened eyes swollen nearly shut and nose broken. His lip was split and had been sewn back together, but I knew what I could see wasn’t the worst of it. He whimpered as he moved in the bed, trying to sit up, and I almost cried out loud, but that would have summoned Joel and Mason from outside the closed door. Silent tears streamed down my face as I stared at him, trying to piece together what had happened but having none of the details to do so.

I didn’t want the details.

I was certain they’d only make my already churning stomach burn even stronger. I sighed and sunk onto the chair beside his bed, reaching for his hand. He hesitated, then reached out to me, sinking his fingers into mine.

“Why weren’t you careful?” I asked on a whisper that felt heavier than the air.

“I don’t know,” he responded with a shrug that made his entire face crumple in pain.

“Broken ribs,” I offered with a knowing glance at the bandages wrapped tight around his bare torso. “Can’t shrug at me anymore. I guess you better use words to explain yourself.”

Bryce leaned his head back on his pillow, his tongue darting out to touch the place his split lip was held together by thread. He inhaled a few breaths, wincing at the pain of it, before sighing. “You know what it feels like to wake up and feel nothing?”

“What do you mean?”

He offered a sad smile to the roof, refusing to look at me. “I don’t feel anything Tiernan. Not happy. Not sad. I just feel... nothing.”

“I don’t understand.” I’d seen him happy before, and sad. I’d seen his pleasure and had felt his love.

“Never mind,” he said, turning his head down to his lap and offering the blanket a small smile. “It’s all right. I’m just loopy on the pain drugs, that’s all.”

“It sounds more than that, Bryce. I’m here if you want to tell me.”

“Nah, just the drugs.”

“Well, if you have nothing to say, then I guess I’ll talk,” I started, giving his hand a gentle squeeze. “I’m really pissed off at you, Bryce.”

“I know.”

“I don’t think you do because you still left anyway when you promised me you wouldn’t. I don’t know how to make you safe with your own body. I can’t like... peel off your skin and make it stay safe. I can’t crawl inside there with you and take control so that you don’t end up getting all fucked up.”

“I don’t want you to peel off my skin.” He barked out a short laugh that sounded like it hurt, followed by another one that ended in a wince.

“Stop laughing,” I responded, cracking my own smile. “I’m fucking serious here.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Was it so bad at Mason’s? Was it terrible?”

Bryce pursed his lips as best as he could with the split lump, then shook his head. “I don’t want to talk about Mason.”

“Did he hurt you?”

“No.”

“Bryce, make it make sense.”

“I am so tired of being offered things I can’t keep, knowing that they’ll be yanked away in the end. My dad. My mom. My foster homes. My apartment. My job. You.”

“You yanked me away from you,” I pointed out. “You yanked.”

“I did.” He sighed. “You’re right. It was easy for me to tell myself that you were like everything else I loved.”

“Except I didn’t yank. Nobody yanked me except you.”

“I yanked when I should have yoinked.”

I snickered in spite of myself. “Shut the fuck up, what is yoinking?”

“Yank is like... take away. Yoink is bring close? I think.” He tried to shrug at me and failed miserably, ending up in pain. “Ow. Fuck. I should have yoinked you.”

“You should have,” I agreed. “I was there for yoinking, Bryce.”

“I know.”

We both went silent until Bryce inhaled a sharp breath of pain that had tears forming in his eyes. “Fuck.”

I hesitated, heart trembling, hands shaking until I took a deep breath. “You want to talk about what happened?”

Finally, at last, my best friend turned his swollen shut eyes to me, and a single tear trickled out from them, dancing down his cheek like a raindrop. “You don’t want to know, Tiernan. I don’t want you to know what I let them do to me.”

“Them?”

“Them.”

“Oh, Bryce,” I whispered. “Why didn’t you yoink?”

“I don’t know,” he whispered back. “I don’t know, Tiernan.
I don’t know.”

Chapter Twenty Seven

JOEL

Tiernan was a shivering bundle of sadness and rage on the couch. We'd just gotten home and even his cats had taken one look at him and scampered off to the spare bedroom to sleep the rest of the night away.

"Talk to me," I said, sitting down beside him.

"I don't have words," he responded, gritting his teeth as his body tensed.

"Okay. I'm here when you do." I thought. I hoped. Fuck me, I was out of my depths here and I was panicking, imagining me fucking this up and Tiernan walking right out of my life again.

"I'm so fucking mad at him."

"That's okay, you're allowed to be. He did ask for you though, so I think he knew you'd be upset."

"Why didn't he call me then?" Tiernan demanded, turning his rage filled eyes to mine. "Why didn't he answer my calls?"

"Did you ask him that?" I reached for Tiernan to pull him onto my lap and hold him, but he pulled away.

“I wanted to, but I didn’t. I’ll ask him later.”

A bit hurt at being pushed away, I nodded, taking a deep breath as my head raced. The only question in my mind was, “What would Daniel do?” and I was doing my best to figure it out on the fly. Daniel would give snacks. Snuggle. Listen. Understand. I could do those things, but in all our time together, I had never seen Tiernan this worked up. This hurt. When Daniel had passed, he’d been inconsolably sad, but had come to me for comfort that I hadn’t been able to provide. Now that I was ready to give him what he needed, he couldn’t seem to tell me what it was that would make him feel better.

“How can I help?”

“I don’t know,” he snapped, shooting me a look. “Spank me or something. Get this fucking anger out of me. Figure it out, Daddy.”

“There’s no need to speak to me like that,” I murmured, though I was prickling inside at the tone he was taking with me.

“I’m sorry.” He wasn’t, I knew. Or at least he wasn’t at the moment. When he settled, he’d realize how he’d talked to me, and he’d come to me apologizing. I would accept it when he was ready to understand, but right now he was too worked up to even think.

“Do you want to watch TV and take your mind off things?”

“No.”

“How about a bath? Maybe?”

He shook his head, practically vibrating beside me as his pinched face scowled. “I can’t believe he did this. I fucking told him, Daddy. I told him and he promised and now look where he is. I’m so mad. I’m so fucking mad at him. At the men who did this to him. At Mason for letting him go. I’m even mad at you.”

“Why me?”

“You yanked me away from him,” he shouted, rising to his feet, red faced and belligerent. “You yanked me.”

“I did no such thing. I offered you both a place here and he chose Mason. I suggest you calm down and remember who you are speaking with and what rules we have in place.”

“Your rules can eat a fucking dick.”

I could feel my body tensing as his words hit my ears like bullets. Never had he spoken to me like this before and it was unacceptable, though he wasn’t ready to hear that from me. There was no getting through to him when he was like this, and I was done with patience and kindness. It wasn’t doing me any good to let him linger in this garbage inside his brain, so I did what came to me in the moment. There was one place in this house he could behave as he needed to, and I was going to show him how to use it. Rising to my feet, I towered over him, raising an eyebrow.

“Boots on. Garage. Now.”

I stalked towards the door that led to the garage and opened it, gesturing for him to come. Slowly, slightly fearfully, he

crept forwards to shove his feet into his boots, then scampered through the door and down the steps. He wasn't far gone enough yet to refuse to let me try things with him and that was a helpful sign. When I made my way down the stairs, I found him standing in the middle of the space, surrounded by drop cloths and half-finished canvases.

“What are you gonna do? Smack my ass good with a paint brush?”

“No.”

I reached for the easel and removed the painting I'd been trying to work on then carried it to my work in progress rack and depositing it there. Returning to where Tiernan stood, I reached for the rack beside him and grabbed a fresh, clean canvas from my stack, dropping it onto the easel with a thunk that echoed through the garage.

“What are you doing?” he asked, sounding a little bit worried.

I didn't answer him, instead choosing to move around the space, setting up the small table I used as a palette beside where I usually stood to paint. Turning, I headed for my supply closet and grabbed as many tubes of cheap acrylic I could find in as many colors as I had, before snapping up two of my older paintbrushes. I made quick work of placing everything close by the easel with the new canvas, then stepped back and eyed my work.

“Pick a color,” I said, glancing over my shoulder at Tiernan.

“What?”

“Pick a color.”

“Y—yellow?”

I grabbed the tube of yellow paint, then reached for Tiernan, pulling him forwards. I squeezed the yellow onto the table, then handed him a paintbrush. Taking a step back, I pushed him in front of me, turning him to face the blank canvas head on. “Go.”

“Go?”

“Paint. Get it all out. Everything you’re thinking. All the anger and the sadness and the rage. Get it out of you so it stops eating you alive and you can think clearly. Paint. Go.”

Tiernan gave me a look like I’d grown a second head, but he stepped forwards and stabbed the end of the paintbrush into the yellow smear on the table. He turned to look at me where I stood behind him, arms crossed and eyebrow raised as I waited for him to get started, certain this would help. Carefully, he turned around again and raised his hand, created a yellow streak of paint through the white canvas. Taking a step back towards the table with the paint, his hands shaking at his sides, he stabbed the paintbrush again into the yellow, then scraped it across the canvas again. I moved to quickly put dabs of all the colors on top of the table I used as my palette, watching him out of the corner of my eye as I hoped I was right about this. When everything was ready for him to use as he saw fit, I stepped back again, silently watching him work.

Tiernan glanced down and grabbed some red with his brush, stabbing it into the canvas in hard, angry dots, then did the same with black before dropping the brush to the floor and slamming his bare palm down on the table, making paint splatter all over the floor and his clothing. It didn't faze him at all though, instead of focusing on that he zeroed in on the canvas, smacking his paint covered hand onto it hard, leaving a streaky handprint. He growled as he smeared his hand around, muddying up the colors, bringing his second hand up to join in.

“What are you thinking?” I asked as he scraped his nails across the canvas, leaving angry scratch marks.

“I'm so fucking mad at you!” he shouted as tears tracked down his face. It wasn't meant for me, I knew, but Bryce. The one who held a third of his heart alongside the ones claimed by Daniel and myself. Tiernan reeled back and made a fist, flying forward and punching at the canvas. Paint smeared over his knuckles, and he pulled back again, leveling another blow to the muddy paint. He punched it again with his other fist, letting loose a frustrated noise from the depths of his stomach.

Reaching for more paint, he grabbed at the table, then flung his hands towards the canvas with another snarl.

“Why did you do that?” he screamed into the silence, punching hard enough at the canvas that the center support, a flimsy piece of wood at the back gave way. He snarled at the canvas where it drooped in the middle, then let loose another noise of hot, feral frustration, raking his hands over the paint

again. Tiernan grasped at the slumping piece of the canvas, tearing at it with his fingers in a way that felt so familiar to me. He pulled and pulled at it, trying to tear it apart with both hands until it came off the easel and clattered to the garage floor. He took his foot and stomped on it a few times, smashing the sides of it into splintered pieces with his boot as he clenched his fists at his sides.

“Why doesn’t anyone I love listen to me?” he shouted as he stomped, grabbing another handful of paint and flinging it downwards onto the canvas before falling to his knees and punching at it again. Finally, with a soul shattering, mournful cry, he stopped and fell forwards, curling into himself as loud whooping sobs escaped his trembling form.

I crawled onto the ground, placing my hand on his back, rubbing it gently as he sobbed over the wrecked canvas. He lifted his head up and turned to me, his face a broken mess of tears and splattered paint. I settled back onto my butt and opened my arms, welcoming him to come to me if he wanted to. Tiernan scrambled forwards, nearly knocking me over as his body crashed into mine, heaving sobs against my body and gripping my shirt so tight in his paint covered fists, I thought he would choke me with it.

“It’s okay,” I murmured as I rubbed his back in small soothing circles. “You’re okay.”

“I miss Daniel,” he sobbed. “I miss Bryce. I’m sorry I was mean and shitty to you. Please don’t leave me, Daddy.”

“Oh, Tiernan. You’re mine. You aren’t going anywhere.”

“You want me?” he murmured as he hiccupped into my embrace.

“I do,” I promised, knowing that my arms weren’t enough to remind him. Tiernan needed words to remind him. To make him feel wanted and desired and needed. “I adore you, my little heart. I want all of you here, always.”

He pulled back to look into my eyes and nodded slowly. “Yeah, you do want me. You do. I know you do.”

“Exactly,” I responded as he leaned in and gave me a small kiss. “Know why I call you little heart?”

“No, I just thought it was my cute little nickname. Like boy, or something, but cuter?”

I smiled, pressing a kiss to the top of his tangled hair. “It’s a reminder to me that a little heart can carry big love.”

“Oh,” he breathed, softly into my chest. “I like that.”

“You love big, Tiernan, but that means you hurt big too, and I am going to be here when you need me. With words.”

“I like words,” he muttered, sweat pouring down his face.

“Tired now?”

“I feel like a limp noodle.”

“Yeah, it does that.” I laughed, brushing his hair off his sticky forehead.

He pulled back and looked at the canvas on the ground. “I get it.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” He sighed, sinking against my chest. “That felt really good.”

“I’m glad.”

“This feels better though,” he mumbled as he wrapped his arms and legs around me like a koala bear. “Much better.”

I held onto him tight because he was right. Nothing could compare to the feeling of my boy in my arms, right where he belonged.



There were no flowers on the headstone today.

Instead, they were clutched in Tiernan’s hands as we walked across the cemetery together. We hadn’t been to visit Daniel in a while, and when Tiernan had woken up asking if we could go today, I had eagerly agreed. He rushed ahead of me, wild hair tangling in the breeze as he careened around the headstones belonging to other people’s loved ones, making his way to Daniel’s.

“Hi, Daddy,” I heard him say as he sank to the ground at the base of the granite stone. “I brought Daddy Joel today with me.”

I came to stand beside the grave marker bearing the name of the man we both loved, taking the brilliant red and white carnations from Tiernan’s hand. Settling them on the top of the granite, I crouched beside my boy and joined him in the task of wicking dirt away from Daniel’s name.

“It always gets so dirty.” Tiernan sighed.

“It does,” I agreed, brushing debris from the curve of the D at the beginning of his name.

“I still think we should get it painted bright colors.”

“I know you do, and we’ll talk about it more when summer finally comes.” I had looked into options a few weeks ago, wondering if what Tiernan wanted to do was even possible. More research needed to be done, but I was in agreement that Daniel needed bright colors to mark his last resting place. He was brilliant and bright in life and should be the same in death.

“Did you bring it?” Tiernan asked, glancing up from the carved letters.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out what he’d found at the dollar store, handing it to him as his eyes lit up. Tiernan took the tiny cement duck on a wire stake from my hands and stuck it into the ground at the base of the headstone. It wasn’t the same as the duck in the corner of the living room, but it was close enough that he hadn’t been able to resist grabbing it for Daniel’s grave.

“It’s perfect,” I commented, reaching out to tap the duck’s beak with my finger.

“I bought it myself,” Tiernan offered, and I almost responded that I knew that before I realized he wasn’t talking to me. “I have a job now and I love it. You’d be proud of my choice. I’m going to be a groomer when I’m done learning,

and I've worked my way up from part time to almost full time. Four days a week. I don't like grooming cats, though."

I smiled at his scratched up fingers from his job that accompanied a long streak of red that ran the length of his arm. That one was from an unfortunate incident involving catnip and Pudding Pop. Despite being even tempered most of the time, catnip made him go absolutely feral and we'd learned that lesson the hard way. Burned Marshmallow was much nicer, choosing to enjoy his catnip by becoming a lazy lump of fluff.

"I got my cats," Tiernan continued. "Well, I got one cat. Burned Marshmallow is Daddy's cat. He loves him the most."

"He loves laying on my clean clothing," I corrected. Both of the cats had a clear favorite in the house, and it was definitely not me.

Tiernan grinned up at me and nodded. "Yeah, that's true actually. He's such a shit." He turned back to the headstone and smiled, though it was a bit sad this time. "Bryce is still in the hospital. He's got some bad things going on, but he'll be okay, he says. Mason keeps going every day to sit with him, but he doesn't talk to Mason ever. I don't know what's going to happen, but I hope for good things."

I did as well. I still didn't understand Bryce, but my heart couldn't help but long for some happiness for the broken boy in the hospital. Mason's insistence that he was going to be there for him eased some of the ache. If Bryce had felt alone

before, he wouldn't be moving forward. I only hoped he was ready to accept what Mason wanted to give him.

“And that's it,” Tiernan said, his voice going softer. “Unless there's anything I missed. Daddy?”

I swallowed hard, inhaling a deep breath. “Thank you for the Christmas present, Daniel. I love it as much as I hate it, like everything else you brought into the house.”

“That shirt is perfect,” Tiernan added, with a grin.

I had to agree that the electric blue t-shirt printed with bright yellow ducks I'd found when I'd unwrapped the Christmas present Daniel had bought for me before he died was pretty perfect. It had clearly been bought with the anticipation of my reaction in mind and I was certain that where ever he was, Daniel had cackled loudly as my face had scrunched up in horror before giving way to the smallest smile. I hadn't cried over the shirt either, not as I'd thought I would when I'd found the package. I'd had a conversation with my therapist about it, confessing that I was surprised at my own reaction and how it hadn't contained misery and despair, and he had responded that I was working on acceptance.

Accepting that Daniel was gone and while that still ached, I could survive it.

Accepting that Tiernan and I were different together now, though stronger than we'd been before when our love was a broken canvas.

Accepting that life was shifting and moving forwards, but knowing that things changing didn't mean loving Daniel any less.

"Anything else? Did I miss anything?" Tiernan asked, fingering the petals of the flowers he'd picked out today.

"No. You missed nothing."

"Except I love you," he whispered, trailing his hand downwards from the flowers to touch the letters that made Daniel's name. "And I miss you so much."

"I love you, Daniel," I murmured, placing my fingers alongside Tiernan's. "I hope I'm doing a good job of caring for what was ours."

"What is yours," Tiernan corrected, turning his head up to me.

"You're right. What is mine."

We stood, and I held out my hand, offering it to what was mine. Tiernan placed his palm against my own, clasping our fingers together, and we headed away from the cemetery hand in hand, red and white flowers fluttering in the breeze on a headstone behind us.

Epilogue

Bryce

I breathed, slow and even where I rested on the hospital bed. Through the slatted blinds covering the window, I could vaguely make out little pinpricks of light dotted into the darkness. Whether they were streetlights or the stars I was telling myself they were was up for debate, but that didn't matter. What mattered was that I could see them through my better eye and for some reason, that was keeping me from feeling trapped in this space, even though I knew I was.

I wasn't going anywhere anytime soon.

Broken ribs. Blackened eyes. Split lip. Cigarette burns dotting my back and buttocks.

All those things meant that I was probably going to be stuck here for a while.

A shuffling sound from behind my back reminded me that I wasn't alone, and I closed my right eye again, welcoming back the darkness as the chair scraped gently across the floor. I felt him moving closer, this presence I was ignoring while I pretended to sleep, staying as still as a statue in the starched, clean sheets of the hospital bed.

I didn't know why I'd felt the need to call him and let him know where I was, because now that he was here, I really didn't want to talk to him.

I didn't want to have to explain why I'd headed out, intending to find someone to treat me as I deserved to be treated for a night because I didn't really have an explanation. Why the urge to self-destruct in someone's careless hands constantly ate at my brain, and why I always gave into it in the end always escaped me whenever I thought about it too hard.

I felt nothing, most days.

Somewhere inside me there should be more than cold stone, yet when I looked, I found nothing there except a void that left me numb and hollow.

At least when I was in pain, I could feel something.

I should have known, though, that this time, my quest to feel something would end up like this. The man who'd scooped me off the street corner hadn't felt overly safe, but he'd promised money and said that he had a motel room we could use. I'd readily agreed, needing the nothingness to be gone for just a moment and knowing that he'd give that to me. I'd thought I'd be safe and had even walked there on my own speed, choosing to agree to meet later instead of climbing into his car.

Had that mattered the moment the motel room door had opened, and I was faced with not one, but three men? No, but I still gave myself some points for walking there, even if I had to take them all away again for what had happened next.

I could have walked away.

I should have walked away.

The chair squeaked behind me, and I bit back the urge to snap. To demand that he leave. To scream that I didn't want him here and that he was wasting his time trying to wait for me. How much patience could one man really have? I hadn't found the depths of his yet, but I knew I would soon enough.

Eventually, he would decide I wasn't worth the effort, and he would leave, like everyone else had done.

My father, who had gone overseas to die instead of staying home to raise me.

My mother, who had disappeared at the end of a gun, leaving me with a promise of grilled cheese sandwiches that I still hadn't gotten to eat.

The foster families that had come and gone over the years, each one trying their best to deal with the aftermath of both of my parents choosing to be dead.

I had made a joke of yanking and yoining earlier with Tiernan, but the reality was that everything I'd ever held close to me had disappeared into nothingness.

I was so used to the nothingness that the promises whispered into the darkness of my hospital room by the man in the chair behind me felt like more lies. More stories that wouldn't come true and more heartbreak to my already weary heart.

He'd offered me a home and I'd walked out.

He'd promised me a healthy future and I'd left to go play among the trash.

He'd told me he could see me and that had terrified me back to the streets, to sell my holes to men who only saw me as nothing.

And still, he sat there, day after day, waiting for me.

"I know you're awake," he murmured, his voice strong and sure.

"I'm not," I mouthed silently into the room, the stitches in my lip catching on the pillowcase beneath my head.

"I will wait for you, Bryce," he continued. "I have all the time to wait for you."

You'll be waiting forever, I promised to myself as I lay in the quiet stillness.

"You think you're too far gone, but I see you. I can see the boy you want to be, the boy you could be if you learned to let yourself feel the things you've wrapped up in pain."

I didn't want him to see me, because seeing me was knowing me, and I wasn't sure which one was scarier coming from this beautiful man behind me. I'd watched him from a distance at the library, picking out books I didn't even want to read just because he'd been in that section at the time. He was gorgeous, taller than me, which was a feat in and of itself, with arms as thick as tree trunks. Arms like that were made dangerous, strong, and sturdy. Able to carry and hold when I'd inevitably stumble and fall. I'd admired those arms more than

I'd ever admit out loud, certain that they held the promises written into his light brown eyes. Safety. Comfort. Solace. I hadn't been able to help myself from smiling when he smiled at me, noting the dimple in his cheek that popped out when he did. From nodding when he'd asked if I liked the book I'd clutched in my hands, then offered to help me find another just like it.

I'd named him Library Guy in my brain, certain that that was all the handsome black man would ever be to me, not knowing then that I was wrong.

Library Guy was kind yet wasn't to be walked over. He carried himself like a man who knew his purpose, and when I'd had the chance, I had followed, wanting to know if he could help me find mine. Yet once he had, I had cowered and run like a feral animal back to what I knew best.

I was an artist, once. My tags lined broken down buildings and boxcars on trains that traveled all through this country, but my best medium wasn't spray paint contained in rattly cans. It wasn't pencil or pen or crayon. My art was self-destruction, and in that, I was a master.

"You could be him," the man continued behind me, telling me things I didn't want to hear, yet couldn't turn away from. "You could be the boy you want to be. I can help you find him. You're worth it."

No, I'm not.

"I promise, Bryce. You're worth it."

No.

“I’ll say it a hundred times until you believe it. You are worth everything.”

“No,” I shouted, from my position on the bed, the words crackly and dry as they leeching out of my broken mouth. “No, I’m not. Stop fucking talking to me. Stop sitting there. You hear me? Stop. Just stop. Please. Fucking stop it.”

The creak of the chair met my ears as the man rose, his feet carrying him over to my bedside whisper-soft against the tile floor of the hospital bed.

“There you are,” he murmured, sounding like he was smiling. “I’ve been looking for you.”

You don’t want to find me.

Nobody does.

I’m not that boy.

But when Mason put his hand on my shoulder, I wished I could be.

Books by B. Ripley

The Boys of Horseshoe Lake

Halfway Down

Red Door Daddies

One More Song

One More Try

Standalones

The Cabin

(part of the Final Days multiauthor series)

Haunting With A Ghost

(part of the Haunted Love multiauthor series)

To Wish Impossible Things

(part of the Home for the Holidays multiauthor series)

A Little Christmas: Morrie

(part of the A Little Christmas multiauthor series, set in the
Red Door Daddies world)

About The Author

B is a self described weirdo from the wild prairies of Alberta, Canada who lives on a diet of coffee, hockey and horror movies. Along with her collection of increasingly weird art and slightly off-putting oddities, B lives with her husband and a bunch of animals that she didn't mean to adopt, but couldn't stand saying no to because she's a bit of a sucker for unwanted, broken creatures.

She grew up knowing she was meant to tell stories but it wasn't until much later that she realized those stories were meant to star beautifully flawed people learning who they are, overcoming obstacles, and falling truly, madly and deeply in love. B has a passion for mental health and spends her days coordinating a suicide prevention program for a national non-profit organization and her nights crafting stories about recovery, resiliency and growth.

You can find, friend and follow B here:

Website: www.bripleywrites.com

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/authorbripley/>

The B Hive Reader's Group:
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Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/bripleywrites/>

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