



an **inevitable** novel

a million little
moments

RILEY HART

A Million Little Moments

An Inevitable Novel

by

RILEY HART

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Kindle Edition

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Published by:

Riley Hart

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Cover Design by Sleepy Fox Studio

Cover Image by Vincent Chine

Edited by Keren Reed Editing

Proofread by Judy's Proofreading and Lyrical Lines Proofreading

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About the Author

Sutton

Jasper's been my best friend my whole life. From losing my family when I was young, to living together and running our business, it's always been me and Jasp. I feel more for him than I should, but confessing the truth would be the first step to losing him.

Our lives are so entwined, it's hard to tell where one of us ends and the other begins. It's killing me more each day to be this close to him and not be able to call him mine, so when it hurts too much, the only choice is to walk away.

Jasper

My life is perfect. I have my family, my business, and my best friend. But when Sutton starts pulling away, everything changes, and it's ripping me apart, forcing me to admit hard truths—that I feel *different* when he touches me; that I need him always by my side.

The thing is, I'm in love with Sutton, and apparently he feels the same. Loving Sutton is as easy as breathing, yet knowing my parents won't accept us, not with all the backward things they raised me to believe, makes each day a struggle.

But one thing I know for sure—the world doesn't make sense if Sutton and I aren't together. We've had a million little moments to prove it. And to be the man he deserves, I have to fight for him, for us, and maybe that means fighting for myself too.

A Million Little Moments is a double bi-awakening, friends-to-lovers romance filled with first times, self-discovery, and two men destined to be together.

**A Million Little Moments deals with themes of homophobia and contains homophobic language.*

Special Thanks

AJ, Max, Noah and Darrel, thank you so much for reading A Million Little Moments and giving me your thoughts on Jasper's journey. I appreciate it more than I can say.

PROLOGUE

Sutton

Twelve years old

MY LEGS HURT, but I couldn't stop running. Tears mixed with sweat, both running freely down my face as I pushed myself harder, faster, needing to get away, to escape as far as I could because maybe then I could lie to myself and pretend my reality didn't exist.

When I finally slowed down, my legs feeling like they would collapse beneath me, I wasn't surprised to realize I was on the Finches' property. Jasper Finch had been my best friend since we were five. He was the coolest person I'd ever met, but the best thing about Jasper was that he didn't know it. Sometimes he acted like he did. He tried to make himself seem big, but he told me once he didn't feel big at all. Those were the kinds of things he shared with me and no one else.

But he *was* big—sometimes it felt like the whole world revolved around him, in the best way. Being with Jasper made everything better.

I didn't want to feel better right then, though. How could I ever feel better again? How could I be normal once I watched my mama, daddy, and sister get lowered into the ground and knowing I was gonna be forever without them?

I made my way toward the back of the Finches' property, through the woods that separated their house from the railroad tracks. Sometimes Jasp and I would sit back there and watch the trains speed by, and we'd tell each other stories about jumping into one of the cars and letting it take us all over the country, pretend we could ride it into eternity, anywhere we wanted to go, exploring life outside Ryland, North Carolina.

I wished a train would go by right now. Wished I could jump on and just...go.

I sat down against a tree, ripping off the stupid blazer I was wearing. Why did you dress up when someone died? I didn't get it. Didn't they deserve the real you? The one they laughed with and hugged and ate dinner with every night? This dumb suit wasn't me, and I hated it.

"Hey," Jasp said, and I dropped my head back against the tree. Of course he would come. Of course he would find me.

"How'd you know I was out here?"

"Your uncle Brian called Mama to say he couldn't find you. She asked if I knew where you were. I didn't, but then I thought...if I were Sutton, I'd wanna run away, so I figured you might be here."

It didn't surprise me he'd worked it out. How could he not? No one knew me better than Jasper. "I wanna disappear."

Jasper sighed, walked over, and sat beside me. "Don't."

"Why not?"

"Cuz I'm selfish and I don't know what I'd do without my best friend."

Like I knew what I'd do without him either. "I don't want 'em to be dead."

"I know, but we can't do nothin' to change that."

"I should have been with them." I swiped at my face with the sleeve of my shirt, leaving dirt, tears, and sweat behind.

"Don't say that. I get scared just thinkin' about the fact that you coulda been."

"You do?" I turned to look at him for the first time. At the freckles across his nose and cheeks, and his thick, blond hair that was usually messy but now looked like his mama had styled it on account of the funeral today.

“Course I do. You’re basically my brother. The only person where all I’d have to think about is how I’d feel or what I’d do and know exactly how to find ’em. Who else would I talk to? Or laugh with?”

“So it’s all about you?” I teased.

“Are you surprised?” Jasper joked back. It was one of those moments where he tried to pretend he didn’t care as much as he did, that he was more confident than he was. Sometimes his daddy made him feel like he had to be all these certain things, told him stuff about boys not crying and things like that. Jasper always tried real hard to be just like him.

I pulled my legs closer to my chest, watched for a train that wasn’t coming. “I don’t wanna go to the funeral.”

“Then we won’t.”

“Your mama will kick your ass.”

Jasper shrugged. “Don’t care much right now. You don’t wanna go, we won’t go. We’ll sit right here and imagine all the places we could go.”

And the thing was, I knew Jasper would stay if I asked him to. I also knew his mama would be pissed, and though he would deal with her anger for me, Jasper hated disappointing her; both his parents. They were a close family, the way we had been before I stayed home with a stomachache and they got into a car accident and died.

“I’m all alone now,” I said softly, leaves rustling and settling with the wind around us.

“You have your uncle Brian.”

Who was going to raise me now. He was all right. I knew he was a good guy. He’d never been married, didn’t have kids, and as far as I knew, never wanted them. He was nice enough but didn’t talk too much, kept to himself. My mama used to tell my daddy she thought Uncle Brian was sad, but Dad just said Uncle Brian didn’t like to talk about his feelings and that he was fine. Lots of adults didn’t think men should talk about

their feelings, I'd noticed. I didn't understand why we shouldn't.

"You have me," Jasper added when I didn't reply.

I froze when he reached up and began wiping the tears and dirt from my face. I held my breath because he'd never done something like this before, and I didn't know what he was doing. His thumb was slightly rough, but he used it gently, like I was fragile, this thing he wanted to protect and do anything not to break. There was a voice in my head telling me I shouldn't like this, that it made me weak, and I thought maybe it would have if it were anyone but Jasper. I didn't have to be embarrassed of anything with him.

He kept touching my face, one cheek, then the other, and when more tears sneaked out, he fought them off for me too. I watched him the whole time, even when he was blurry and swimming in my vision. Eventually it cleared, like he was the sun breaking through my rain clouds, and the tears dried up.

"I hate cryin'."

"There's no shame in it. Your family died."

But would there be shame in it if they hadn't? I didn't know if that was what he meant.

I held my breath again when Jasper scooted close to me, when he slid his arm through mine. My chest hurt, but I didn't let myself breathe until I rested my head on his shoulder, and he didn't tell me to move it or push me away. Like always, I was safe with him.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Me too," I replied, knowing he meant he was sorry they died.

"I'll always be here for you, though. We'll be best friends forever. I know it's not the same, but it's somethin'."

"It's perfect." I hoped that didn't sound weird. I just didn't know what I'd do without him. He said he would always be there, and he would be; he was. Every important moment I

could remember, good or bad, Jasper was there, just like I'd always be there for him. I didn't know how much time passed when I said, "I need to go...to the funeral...but I don't want to wear this suit."

"Then we won't wear one. Your mama wouldn't care about that. I think it's silly to dress up for funerals anyway."

"Me too." I chuckled for the first time since the police officer came to my house with Uncle Brian to tell me what happened.

Jasper stood and held his hand out for me. The sun shined behind him, looking like it was borrowing Jasper's glow. I took his hand and let him pull me to my feet, and then we let go and walked back to his house.

We both changed into jeans and T-shirts. Ms. Finch didn't look happy about it, but she just shook her head, called Uncle Brian, and told him I'd come to the funeral with them. I figured he probably appreciated that, and that way, he wouldn't have to see me cry and try to console me. He did try, but it was like he didn't know how.

Jasper stayed by my side the whole day—at the church, when they were lowered into the ground, when I stayed by the graves until long after everyone left.

The reception was at Jasper's house. His mama said she would host it, which Uncle Brian had been grateful for. Everyone kept trying to talk to me and tell me they were sorry. When they didn't know I was around, I'd hear them talk about me, poor Sutton Manning who lost his whole family and had to live with his uncle who didn't know anything about raising a kid.

"Sorry about your mama," Sammy Joe, Jasper's cousin, said.

"Thanks. I gotta go." I was tired of talking about it, of being reminded I was alone, so I went to Jasper's room, curled up in his bed, and fell asleep. I didn't wake up until the middle

of the night, the room dark around me, Jasper's warmth in the bed beside me.

When something brushed against my pinky, I realized our hands were touching. In his sleep, he hooked his with mine, and neither of us let go.



Jasper

Eighteen years old

THE CENTER SNAPPED the football to me. I caught it, danced around on the balls of my feet as the guys in front of me blocked the other team. I knew exactly whom I was looking for, whom I wanted to throw the football to on the final play of our final high school football game.

Sutton.

Somehow, I knew he would break free, that he would be open. It was kind of perfect that we ended our high school football career this way. Two best friends. The Terrible Twosome. Thunder and Lightning.

I cocked my arm back, let the ball fly. It felt like it all happened in slow motion, that time stopped for this moment, the whole field and stands quiet as everyone watched the most incredible pass fall right into Sutton's arms.

He took off, showcasing the speed he was known for, dodging the few players who could almost catch up with him. He was lightning quick, and before I knew it, Sutton was diving into the end zone and I was running his way. I jumped at him, and the rest of the team did too as we cheered our win and lived and breathed this moment that had been four years in the making. I didn't know if it would ever get better than this.

Sutton grabbed my helmet, shook it a little, then pressed his to mine. "Fuck yes! That was a badass pass!"

“Thunder and Lightning do it again! Bringing down the rain!” the announcer said, and the crowd began to chant *the Terrible Twosome*, then *Thunder and Lightning*. We’d been the Terrible Twosome most of our lives, and the other nickname they’d come up with our freshman year. It was kinda dumb, but also pretty cool. Our high school team wasn’t high ranking in the state. Most of us weren’t going to college to play football, none of us were expected to go to the NFL one day, but to those in our county, to people who lived in Ryland, we were football gods. We were the best team Ryland had ever had.

We all ran to the sidelines together, dumped Gatorade over our coach, and made our way to the locker room. It felt like a fireworks display was going off in my chest, like I couldn’t control the explosions igniting inside me as we laughed and celebrated.

Sutton and I ended up in shower stalls next to each other. He leaned closer to me, smelling like the coconut shampoo he always used, his dark hair hanging over his forehead. “I can’t believe Miranda’s parents are out of town and she’s throwin’ a party tonight.”

Usually we ended up having keggers in fields or out in the woods, somewhere that we wouldn’t get caught. “Meant to be. She wants your cock. I bet she’s gonna congratulate you tonight with some pussy.”

“I wouldn’t say no.” Sutton waggled his eyebrows, and I laughed.

“Who the fuck would say no to Miranda Hall? She’s the prettiest girl in our year. I’m kinda jealous.” I pushed at his arm over the barrier between us.

“As you should be. I bet Kathy would hook up with you.”

Kathy was Miranda’s best friend. I was sure Sutton was right, and it made sense, really. Sutton actually liked Miranda, and I knew he wanted to go out with her. If he dated her, I

could date Kathy, and it would be perfect. “You should tell Miranda to put in a good word for me.”

“Hell yeah,” Sutton replied.

We finished our shower and went to Miranda’s house. She lived outside of town on ten acres with no neighbors in sight. Even if the cops heard something, I’d bet money they wouldn’t come out and break up the party. Not after Sutton and I just won the game. They’d want us to celebrate.

The house was packed with what I was pretty sure was everyone from our high school. My cousin Sammy Joe was there with his best friend Molly, but neither was drinking. His mama was an alcoholic, and though me and Sammy weren’t real close, I knew he didn’t touch the stuff.

The first thing Sutton and I did was get red Solo cups and fill them from the keg. Country music pumped through the speakers, people were laughing and dancing and making out.

Miranda found us in no time flat, as if she had a microchip implanted in Sutton. “If it isn’t the Terrible Twosome.” She pressed her body against Sutton’s. “Good game tonight, boys.”

“Thanks, gorgeous. You gonna hang out with me tonight?” Sutton asked her.

Already? I figured we’d chill a bit together before he went with her. I tried not to let it annoy me.

“You know I am.” She kissed his neck. “You were so hot out there.”

“Thank ya. Where’s Kathy at? I was thinkin’ me, you, her, and Jasp could—”

“She didn’t come. She has the flu.”

Well, shit, there went my plan for the night. Sutton was gonna get his dick wet while I sat out here with my thumb up my ass.

“Oh.” Sutton made eye contact with me, and I shook my head. No way in hell did I expect him not to hook up because

Kathy wasn't there. Plus, I could always find someone else.

Miranda said, "She likes you, Jasper. She was real sad she couldn't be here."

"I ain't goin' nowhere. You tell her I wanna see her as soon as she's better."

"Okay, I will." Miranda tangled her fingers with Sutton's. Damn, she worked quick.

"Can I get you a drink?" Sutton asked her.

"Nope. I'm staying sober tonight. But I do have some weed in my room. Let me make sure things stay calm out here, and then maybe the three of us can smoke a bowl."

"Hell yeah," Sutton said, bumping his fist with mine before pulling Miranda into his arms. She buried her face in his chest, and he grinned at me over her head.

We stayed in the main part of the house for about an hour, Sutton and me finishing our beers and Miranda going back and forth between checking on everyone at the party and attaching herself to Sutton's side again. Jesus, they were gonna fuck and might start dating. Did she think that meant they were married?

Finally, she sneaked us up to her room, which was the only one on the third floor. Miranda's parents had money, one of the only families in Ryland that did, really. Her family came from old tobacco or something.

I watched as she locked the door behind us. Sutton and I went over to sit on the bed. We didn't smoke weed often, but it was fun to get high every once in a while. We'd each had a few beers, and I didn't know about him, but I was feeling slightly buzzed, my skin hot and tingling in the best way.

Miranda pulled out a locked box she kept under her bed; inside was a pipe, and a little baggy of pot.

"You pack it." She passed it to Sutton, and he did, while she sat down between us.

He lit the lighter for her, holding the flame over the weed as she inhaled. When she was done, he handed both to me, and I joked, “Not gonna light it for me too?”

He flipped me off. “You fucker.”

I laughed and took a hit, then Sutton did. We passed the pipe between the three of us a few times, the room smoky, the familiar skunky, earthy scent filling the air. When it was dusted, Sutton fell backward, lying on the mattress, his legs hanging over. “I’m so high.”

“Me too.” I joined him, even more tingly, little laughs building in my chest. I turned my head and looked at him, his whiskey gaze settling on me. Sutton smiled, and I did too. Miranda was still between us, but she was sitting up.

“Weed always makes me horny.” She giggled.

“Me too—oh fuck,” Sutton groaned, this deep, scratchy sound full of pleasure.

“What—oooh, shit,” I added when I felt Miranda’s hand on my cock, which immediately filled with blood.

Sutton’s eyes widened, and he mouthed, “*Is she?*”

I nodded, then risked a glance at her to see her right arm moving. Holy fuck, she was stroking both of us. We had all our clothes on, but still.

I had no idea what to do. Miranda was fucking hot, and I was hard as stone, but like...what did she expect? Did she want to have sex with both of us? Had she done this before? Could I share a girl with Sutton? Was that strange?

“I can’t believe I have Sutton Manning and Jasper Finch in my room. We need to celebrate your win, ya know?”

I moaned when she took her hand off my dick, watched as she rolled on top of Sutton, straddling him.

His hand went to her skirt-covered ass, rubbing her, looking up at her. “Fuck, you feel good,” he said.

Miranda giggled, then dropped her mouth to his. This was weird as fuck, and I knew I should get my ass out of the bed, leave this room, and never come back. Instead, I watched as they kissed, as Sutton pushed his tongue into her mouth and slid his hand up her skirt. Neither of us were virgins. I'd seen Sutton kiss a girl before, but I'd never been in the same bed with them, never watched him rut against someone, or seen how their tongues moved together, or the veins in his hand when he grabbed someone's ass.

"I should, um...I should go." My cock was throbbing. I wasn't sure I'd ever been so hard. Miranda was gorgeous, and I was horny, and of course watching two people together would turn anyone on. That was normal, right?

"You should stay. It'll be fun." She leaned over, still straddling Sutton, and kissed me. Our tongues tangled the way hers had just done with Sutton's, and all I could think was he was there, right there in bed with us. Was he still touching her? Was his hand under her skirt? Was she wet, and could he feel it while she was kissing me?

Miranda pulled away, sat on Sutton, and pulled her shirt over her head. Her tits popped free, and fuuuuck, they were nice. Huge handfuls covered in black lace.

"I should go," I said again. "You and Sutton..."

"It's just a little fun. No one has to know," Miranda replied. "It's not like I was going to tell anyone I had sex with both of you. Y'all would get applauded while I'd get called a slut."

It was sad that she was right, but my brain couldn't concentrate on that right then. She wanted to have sex with both of us. Together. My dick ached, trapped behind my jeans.

"Should I go?" I asked Sutt when Miranda began unbuttoning my pants.

He palmed her tits, rubbed her nipples, but his eyes were on me. "It's kinda hot."

"It is." I mean, a threesome? Sign me up.

Sutton added, "It's not like we're gonna touch each other."

We weren't gay or nothing. This was about Miranda. And sex. And a threesome. And I was really fucking hard.

"No one has to know," I confirmed.

Sutton sat up, unhooked her bra, then latched his mouth onto one of her pink nipples. He startled when I began sucking the other one, our cheeks touching.

It was all like some strange sort of dream after that... Miranda standing up and taking her clothes off. Calling us silly boys before she stripped first Sutton, then me. The two of us had known each other most our lives, had sleepovers and played on sports teams together, dressing and undressing in locker rooms. I'd seen Sutton naked, but never really took it in.

I noticed how the muscles in his stomach contracted when she started sucking him off. His dick was thicker than mine, his balls plump and full, and holy shit, I'd just studied Sutton's cock. I forced my gaze to his eyes instead. I wasn't sure that was much better, because he looked at me, all blissed-out with a girl on her knees for him while I lay naked beside him.

I was just about to give up and grab my shit when Miranda reached over and started jacking me off while still blowing him. I felt Sutton staring, his gaze burning into me, but I didn't look at him, just watched Miranda's hand gliding up and down my dick, wondered how deep she was taking him, what kind of face he was making.

"Fuck," I groaned, squeezing my eyes shut so I didn't look at Sutton.

Eventually, we crawled around on the bed, ended up with our heads on the pillows, taking turns kissing and touching her. When Miranda put a condom on Sutton, then climbed on and started riding him, I stroked myself, focused on her.

"Suck my nipples," she said.

Gladly, but I had to lean over Sutton. My mouth latched onto her, and I felt his naked body close to mine. Got some of his sweat on my skin as he fucked up and into her. The bed shook, his movements vibrating me too.

There was a hand on my leg, heat zipping down my spine before it jerked back.

“Shit...sorry...was reaching for her,” Sutton said.

I pulled off her tit. “It’s okay.” And then I heard myself tell Miranda, “I want you to suck my dick while he fucks you,” almost as if I wasn’t in control of my own words.

“Fuck yes.” Sutton flipped Miranda on her back. He knelt between her legs, holding one up. I went on my knees beside her head, and just as he thrust into her, I slid my dick between her lips.

We moved together, Sutt and I, focused on pleasuring her. It wasn’t about us; it was about Miranda, I reminded myself. Every once in a while, our gazes would catch, or we’d accidentally touch. It wasn’t on purpose. How could it not happen when we were fucking the same girl?

And hearing the masculine sounds he made, how they matched mine and were so different from Miranda’s... When he cried out, fucking harder and blowing his load into the condom, my world went fuzzy and I filled Miranda’s mouth with my release. *I know what Sutton sounds like when he comes.* I wasn’t supposed to know that.

We were quiet then, neither of us looking at each other. My heart beat too hard, and I felt...man, I didn’t know how to explain it. Uncomfortable and nervous, my gut twisting.

“God, that was good. You’re both so hot. I can’t believe I fucked Thunder and Lightning,” Miranda said.

Sutton got off the bed first, pulling off the condom, and I turned away from him.

“Y’all aren’t gonna be weird now, are you? Sutton, don’t go. I really do like you. This was just for fun.”

That was my cue to get out. Miranda had wanted to hook up with me, but she liked Sutton.

“You stay. I’ll go,” I said, collecting my clothes and covering myself up.

“Jasp, I’ll go with you.”

“No. Fuck no.” Finally, I looked at him. His brows were pulled together, his eyes lost. He was naked. I kept thinking about that but didn’t let my gaze stray from his eyes. “Stay with your girl.”

He didn’t argue.

I tugged my clothes on and went home.

The next day, Sutton showed up at my house early. We went outside, by the barn. “Last night was just a thing,” Sutton said, digging his toe into the dirt. “It don’t mean nothin’.”

“We were high...and drunk.” Well, buzzed.

“Exactly.”

“It don’t mean nothing,” I said too.

“No one will know,” Sutton said. “We just go back to how things were before. Pretend it didn’t happen.”

“Okay.”

And for the rest of the school year, Sutton dated Miranda, and I dated Kathy. The four of us hung out all the time, Sutt and I best friends like always. Nothing would ever change between us. Nothing as small as a threesome or an orgasm could ever come between us.

He was like a brother to me and always would be.

CHAPTER ONE

Sutton

July

“**D**AMN. LOOK HOW pretty she looks. We did good,” Jasper said as we stood in front of the lawn we’d just finished.

It had been a big job. Once in a while, we hired temporary help, people who wanted to pop in for a week or so to do some of the larger jobs with us, but most of the time it was just me and Jasp. We liked it that way. Good help was hard to find. It was our names on the line, and there was no one we trusted more than ourselves to do quality lawn-care work. “We always do good,” I replied.

Because we did. We were both good with our hands, always had been. Going away for college hadn’t ever been our thing. Jasper thought about it for a while. He got accepted to North Carolina State in Raleigh, but in the end he hadn’t gone. We’d started Jasper & Sutton’s Landscaping Designs three years ago when we’d been twenty-three, and hadn’t looked back since. Jasper’s dad was always telling us that we’d do a lot better if we grew some—had a couple of crews at least, Jasper leading one and me the other so we could do double the work—but I’d never been the kind of guy who needed a lot; Jasp neither. We liked things the way they were—just me and him.

Jobs like this were good for us, though. We’d relandscaped their whole yard—added trees, bushes, a patio, and a built-in fireplace with stone seating around it.

“We should do somethin’ like this at the house,” Jasp said as we finished packing up. “I want a firepit. The metal one we have is shit.”

I rolled my eyes. Jasper was always making all these big plans for his house. “You just want free labor from me,” I teased. “I’m gonna end up helping you remodel the whole damn thing for you and your future wife.”

“I mean, can you blame me?” Jasper waggled his brows playfully, cheeks pink from the sun, his freckles a little darker.

I’d gotten my own place after high school. My parents hadn’t owned their house when they’d died, hadn’t had life insurance or anything like that, so things hadn’t been easy. While my uncle was a good man, and I knew he loved me, it was awkward with him sometimes. He liked being alone more than not, and raising a twelve-year-old boy had never been in his plans. I figured he’d want his life back.

Jasper lived in his own house on his parents’ property. I’d helped Jasp build his place, and after a year of bugging me about it, I’d eventually moved out of my place and in with him.

I shook my head and bit back my smile. He was such a damned fool.

We cleaned up, got the check for our job, and were on our way.

As Jasper drove, I watched the familiar scenery speed by. I’d felt...heavy lately, though I couldn’t say why. And I didn’t even know if using the word *heavy* to describe it made sense, but that was the only one I had.

“I’ll go with you tomorrow,” Jasp said.

I wasn’t surprised he remembered. He was a good friend like that. Not everyone saw how much Jasper always thought of others, but I did. I saw it because I felt it so much. He’d always been there for me. “You don’t gotta do that.”

“I know. I want to.”

“Nah, I’m good. I’ll go by myself. I don’t need you to hold my hand for everything.”

I felt his frown before I turned to see it. “What the fuck does that mean? I’m not tryin’ to hold your hand for nothin’. I’m just bein’ a good friend.”

I rolled my eyes. “You know what I mean. It’s been fourteen years. I’m not even gonna stay long. I just always go.” Tomorrow was the anniversary of losing my mom, dad, and sister in one swoop. The day my life changed forever. While I didn’t go to their graves as much as I used to, I always went on the anniversary.

“Yeah, sure. Whatever. Was just an offer.”

I could feel myself pulling away from Jasper lately. Nothing had happened, but...we were twenty-six years old and inseparable. I looked at most people our age, and they were married, or had been dating forever like Sammy and Molly, or they were...hell, I didn’t know. They weren’t like me and Jasp.

As soon as we got home, Jasper forgot all about the awkwardness of a few minutes before. He parked in front of his log cabin and jumped out. In the distance, I saw his dad out by their horse stables on the other side of his folks’ house. “Fuck, I’m starving. Don’t know if I wanna cook or just head over and see what Mama’s makin’. You?”

“We got leftover spaghetti in the fridge. I’ll eat that.”

“I forgot about that.” Jasper opened the door, and we went in. He had the master bedroom with an en suite, so he headed in there.

I grabbed clothes, went to the hallway bathroom, and showered. When I got out, Jasper was already in the kitchen, wearing a pair of basketball shorts that hung low on his hips. The white band of his boxer briefs stuck out of the top, and he didn’t have a shirt on. He was piling two plates full of dinner he’d warmed up.

“Slow ass,” Jasper teased. “I cleaned up, rubbed one out, and got dinner ready before you even got out.”

My cock was at half-mast, a little achy and likely pissed at me because I hadn't jerked off. Probably should have done that. "Not my fault you're a quick trigger."

"Oh, fuck you," Jasp replied. "I got stamina for days. I just wanted to bust a nut and fill my belly."

We laughed as he put our plates on the small table in the kitchen. I went to the fridge and grabbed us each a beer, then joined him.

"Caroline texted," Jasper said. "She wants me to come over tonight."

The two of them had broken up some months back, partly, I thought, because Jasper's mama hated her so much. She wasn't good enough for Ms. Sherry's baby boy, but I was glad for it too. Caroline and Jasper weren't right for each other. They didn't fit, wanted different things. Caroline would never be satisfied with the simple life Jasp wanted. But he also liked getting his dick wet, and Caroline still liked fucking him, so they still had sex sometimes.

"You gonna go?" I shoveled a forkful of noodles and sauce into my mouth.

He shrugged. "Why not? Got nothin' better to do. It's a Friday night. Unless you wanna go out and get a drink. Go to the bar and play darts. Or we can fuck around and work on things here. You know I got projects. I always got projects for us." He grinned, then sucked noodles into his mouth, flinging sauce everywhere.

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, I know, and nah, go see Caroline. I might see what trouble I can get up to as well."

He frowned. "Who? Paula?"

I shrugged.

"Jesus fucking Christ, don't tell me you're hooking up with Layla again."

Layla and Paula were both on-again-off-again hookups for me, but neither was anything serious. I'd never had anything

serious. Jasper hated Layla, though. “Nope. I’ve actually been talkin’ to this woman on a dating app—Kendra. She’s fucking beautiful. Real nice too. We haven’t met up yet, but we’re talkin’ about tryin’ to set something up. She lives in Cloverhill.”

Jasper’s brows pinched together tightly. “You’re on a dating app?”

“Yeah. I know everyone in Ryland and ain’t interested in any of ’em. I figure if I’m ever gonna settle down, I should expand my dating pool.” Jasper stared at me like I’d sprouted another head. “What?”

“Just didn’t know you were lookin’ to settle down.”

“I mean, I should at some point, shouldn’t I? We ain’t gettin’ any younger. But I haven’t even met her yet. Why’s your face twistin’ up like you sucked on a lemon?” I laughed. “Poor Jasper thinks he’s gonna lose his free labor if I find a nice woman to start me a family with?” Actually, I wasn’t sure I wanted a family at all, but he didn’t need to know that.

“You’re an asshole. I just didn’t know you suddenly wanted all that. Good for you.” He shoveled more food into his mouth, chewed, swallowed, and took a swig of his beer. “I think I’ll go to Caroline’s,” he said, but he’d already basically said the same thing earlier.

“Okay.”

“You should go and meet Kendra.”

“I’m thinkin’ on it.”

We finished eating. Jasper washed up the dishes real quick, then got dressed and headed out. I didn’t call Kendra, though, messaging Paula instead. Since we both wanted to get off, I went to her place and we did just that, twice through the night. When I got home the next morning, Jasper wasn’t there. I showered again, got dressed, went to get flowers, and made my way to the cemetery.

Someone else had beat me to it: if it wasn't obvious from the way the three gravesites had clearly been cleaned up, the fresh flowers in front of each of their headstones would have been a dead giveaway.

It could have been Uncle Brian, I told myself, but I knew it hadn't been. There wasn't a doubt in my mind it had been Jasper.

CHAPTER TWO

Jasper

“**Y**OU KNOW Ms. Evelyn over on Blue Belle? She has a niece who’s movin’ from Charlotte to live with her. Ms. Evelyn says she’s real nice—and single. I was thinking you might want to meet up with her. She could use a friend when she gets here,” Mama said.

I groaned. This was nothing new, but sometimes I didn’t understand her. One minute she’d tell Dad there was no reason I had to rush to settle down, that I was young and had to find the right woman—which if I waited for her to like someone I dated, I’d never settle down. But then the next she’d be trying to introduce me to someone, because there was no doubt in my mind she was talking about being more than friends with Ms. Evelyn’s niece. “I’m only twenty-six.”

“Look at Sammy Joe. He’s a year younger. Him and Molly have been together for years now.”

Not the first time I’d heard that either, and I knew it wouldn’t be the last. “Why do you try to get me to date when you don’t like any of the women I go out with anyway?”

“I like ’em okay, just not for my son. But I trust Ms. Evelyn, and while I’m not as insistent as your daddy is, you can’t stay single, playing the field and hanging out with Sutton your whole life.”

I didn’t see why not. I liked women a lot. They were beautiful, soft, sweet. I liked touching them, kissing them, pleasuring them, and at some point I’d find one I wanted to settle down with too. I just hadn’t yet, and I wasn’t in a rush. You were only young once. “I know that, but we can’t all be Sammy and find our person when we’re young. I wanna be secure anyway, on my feet better before I do all that.”

“Very smart.” She kissed the top of my head and patted my cheek. She was like a damn roller coaster sometimes. I never knew what she wanted.

“Thanks, Mama. How’s Aunt Carrie?” I hadn’t seen her around in a while. Mama had me stop by and leave her some food a few weeks back. I knew Sammy had been with Molly nearly every weekend, which surprised me. Maybe he was finally gonna stop taking care of his mama. I felt bad for her, I did, but I also thought a whole lot of pressure was put on Sammy because of her struggles.

“As good as can be expected, I’d imagine. She’s not talkin’ to me much.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too.” Mama wiped her hands on her apron. We were in her kitchen. I’d come over to see what she was up to while Sutton was out. It was afternoon, and I’d expected him home a lot earlier from visiting the cemetery. He’d been gone all day, which was unlike him.

At the familiar sound of Sutton’s truck coming down the driveway, I stood and stretched. He acted like the anniversary of his family’s passing wasn’t as painful as it had been fourteen years ago, but I knew how hard it was for him.

“I’m gonna head home.”

“You boys gonna come over for dinner? You know how I like havin’ my family together,” Mama said.

“No, thank you. We got some food at the house that needs to be eaten up.” It was a lie, and I wasn’t sure why I told it. I kissed her cheek. “See ya later, Mama,” I said, then went out the back door and jogged across the property to our house.

Sutton was drinkin’ a glass of water in the kitchen when I went in. His shirt had pulled up, showing some of the golden skin of his muscular stomach, and I flicked my gaze away. He’d let his hair grow some lately. When the strands got wet, it hung over his forehead. He was a little smaller than me, with

more slender features, a thin nose, and...why was I examining his looks so damn much?

Sutton said, "You went to the cemetery without me."

I shrugged. "Thought I should make sure it was nice for ya since you're a stubborn bastard and wouldn't let me go with you."

He chuckled, but it wasn't a real one, then set his glass down and sighed. "Libby would be twenty-one. Can you believe that shit?"

No, I couldn't, and I knew it was a million times harder for Sutt. "Let's pack up the truck and go camping tonight. I know it's late, but we can hit up our spot. It's close. We can swim and build a fire and just fucking let all the other shit go. It'll be fun. We haven't gone camping in a long time."

Sutton smiled, which made me feel a strange sense of pride having been the one to make him do it. He was the best person I knew, and I was thankful every day that he was my best friend. "It's been three years. You got drunk off too much tequila, gave me a ten-minute pep talk about how I could be or do anything I wanted, vomited, then passed out." And then he'd cleaned me up, changed my clothes, and gotten me into the tent.

"You stayed up all night babysitting me," I laughed.

"I worried you were gonna throw up again and choke on your vomit in your sleep."

"Always such a worrier," I joked.

"One of us has to be."

"I haven't drunk tequila since and don't ever plan to again. See? I can be responsible." I wasn't sure why I'd had so much that night. I wasn't a big drinker. I liked a beer in the evening or whatever, but I was always cautious because of what I'd seen with Aunt Carrie.

But then I started wondering why it had been Sutton who'd been there for me. My girlfriend at the time had been with us

—his had been too—yet Sutt had taken care of me. He'd gotten into an argument with her the next day. They'd stayed back while we'd gone swimming. When I returned early with a headache, I heard him fucking her in his tent.

Thoughts of that morphed into that night in high school, flashes of him and Miranda flickering through my head—Sutton touching her, Miranda touching him, his skin against mine.

I shook off those memories. I didn't think about that, or at least I tried not to. We hadn't talked about it once in the eight years since we said we'd forget about it.

“Jasp?” he snapped me out of my thoughts.

“Let's go camping. We've been workin' our asses off. We deserve a night out.” When he didn't reply right away, I added, “Sutt...come on. You know you want to. Don't make me beg cuz I'll do it...or just tie your ass up and drag you to the truck. I'm not above force if necessary.” Sutton laughed, and something about the sound, the lack of heaviness to it, told me I had him and had gotten my way. “Hell yeah.”

“I didn't say yes.”

“Come on. Don't pretend I don't know you. You're itchin' to get out of here and have some fun just like I am. It's a yes.”

He gave me the finger. “Fine. It's a fucking yes. Let's do this.”

“That's what I'm talkin' about.” I grabbed his shoulders and shook him playfully before guiding him toward the hallway.

“I know where my room is.”

“Just makin' sure.” We parted ways at his, and I continued to mine. I threw a bunch of shit in a bag, not really paying much attention to the clothes and toiletries I grabbed. I did make sure to grab my guitar, knowing he would as well. “I'll pack the food if you get the rest of the stuff,” I said, making my way down the hallway.

“Yep. Got it.”

Our cooler was in the pantry. I added some ice from the machine, but we’d have to stop and get a few bags. I tossed in bottles of water, beer, food for tonight and the morning, plus some snacks. By the time I made it outside, Sutton was putting the camping supplies in his truck—since our work trailer was attached to mine.

Today was an example of why I wasn’t looking forward to settling down. I liked our lives the way they were, liked that we could drop everything and go camping if we wanted and could work as late as we wanted, and didn’t have to worry about someone expecting us home.

“Wanna drive?” I asked, knowing that Sutt liked driving when it was more than just around Ryland, probably because it made him feel more in control over it. But we basically shared vehicles, so it wasn’t unusual for me to take his truck or him mine.

He nodded and we climbed in. We’d just pulled out onto the main road when I rolled down the window, hung my whole torso out of it, and shouted, “Woooweeeeee!” at the top of my lungs. I hadn’t realized how much I needed this until we were on our way out.

“You’re such a dork. Get your ass in here, cowboy,” he said, tugging on my arm.

I wasn’t a cowboy. I grew up riding horses and working ranches just like he did, and we both knew our shit when it came to that kind of thing, but it wasn’t what either of us had wanted to do.

When I sat back down, he said, “You got issues.”

“I’m fun.”

Sutton shrugged. “You’re all right.”

“Can I shout one more time?”

“No.”

“Sutt...”

“Yeah. Then get back in the truck and put your seat belt on.”

“Yes, sir!” I hung out of the car again and yelled for a second time. Wind rushed around me, the smell of home and Sutton in the air, both completely familiar to me. When I got back in and clicked my seat belt into place, he smiled, and I could tell he felt a whole lot better than when I first saw him earlier in the kitchen.

Fuck, I loved my life. I didn't ever want it to change.

CHAPTER THREE

Sutton

WE MADE A quick stop at the store to grab a few things we needed, then made the hour drive to our favorite camping spot. It was always quiet there, the swimming hole too small for most and the amenities almost nonexistent, unlike the grounds ten minutes up the road. That's why we liked it so much—we didn't have to worry about being crowded out by people, and we could just do our own thing.

My gaze kept flickering over to Jasper. He had his window down, arm out of it, curving up and down like a wave.

“What?” I asked.

“What, what?”

“You're smilin'.”

“Just happy, is all. Fuck, life is good, ya know? Got my house, my business, family, friends, *you*.”

My heart skipped a few beats, stuttered like it might die, then picked up again. “Yeah?”

“Of course. Don't know how I got so damned lucky. I want it to stay like this...like the perfect fuckin' summer or...a music video for a feel-good song where everything is just right. Hell, I'm ramblin'. I just... Promise me it won't change.”

My chest was heavy, like there was suddenly an invisible weight holding me down. “Things will change one day, Jasp. It can't be like this forever.”

He closed his eyes, then turned his head toward the window and opened them, watching his own arm as it swam through the air. “Well, lie to me and tell me it will be.”

I swallowed around the knot that had formed in my throat. "It'll be like this forever. Of course it will." I wished it could be too, but I wasn't as optimistic as Jasper.

He turned my way and winked. "Thank you."

I wanted to ask him why. What was so special about now? About us? Why didn't he want to grow up and find someone he loved, get married, and start a family? But his answer scared me. Or maybe I scared myself, with that quiet thought that had been in the back of my head for as long as I could remember. The one I buried as deep as I could, lies and reality on top of it. The one that said Jasper was more to me than he was supposed to be, more than I'd ever have, because he would never want the same thing, no matter what he said.

"Remember the first time we went camping by ourselves?" Jasper asked. "I don't mean sleepin' in one of our backyards, but drivin' out here alone. I was scared as shit we were gonna get murdered by some mountain man."

I laughed. I remembered. We'd been sixteen and went to the same place we were going today. "Yep. I woke up with you snuggled into me."

"I was hopin' you'd protect me from the killer mountain man," Jasper teased, then cleared his throat. "I wasn't snuggling with you."

"I didn't mean...not like that."

"I know." He gave me his crooked grin. "You meet Kendra last night?"

"Nah, just stayed at Paula's. It wasn't the best night to meet someone new."

"You're okay, though? Today?" He reached over and put a hand on my arm. "I want you to have a good day."

My stomach twisted up, all tangled and knotted, that truth trying to unbury itself. "Yep. I'm good. I think this is gonna be exactly what I needed."

"Perfect."

We didn't talk about much of anything the rest of the drive. We parked, then grabbed everything out of the truck and put it on our rolling camping cart. It was about a half hour walk to our camping spot. It was already close to five, so even though we were both looking forward to this night, it would be a short trip where we didn't have time to do a whole lot.

"I love how quiet it is out here," I said as we walked. We were surrounded by lush trees, nature, and fresh air that felt infinite.

"Yeah, it's nice, that's for sure. Don't know how everyone doesn't want to live in the country. I couldn't imagine spendin' my life anywhere but here."

"What about the train?" It had been a long time since we'd talked about that. "All the places we said we'd go?"

Jasper hesitated a beat. "Not sure. In a lot of ways, it was just fun to dream with you. Talk about all this shit we would do that we both knew we never would. Like we were writin' our own story or somethin'. But I don't have all those dreams, not really. I like what I got right here just fine. That's why I didn't go to Raleigh for college. Do you really want it?"

"No." I shook my head. "I like what I got here just fine too." I couldn't imagine life got much better, though sometimes I felt a little...fuck, I didn't know. Alone, or like something was missing.

We got to the campsite and set up our tent first thing. We were in a small open area in the middle of a group of trees, with a charcoal grill and a small firepit. It smelled like freedom out here and felt like comfort. It was as familiar as curling up under a warm blanket when it was cold outside, while listening to the *crackle* of wood in the fireplace.

Jasper said, "Let's go swimmin'. I wonder if that old rope swing is still out there. If so, I betcha I can swing farther out than you."

"You're such a kid." Though I couldn't lie, the challenge set fire to my blood. I loved competing with Jasp.

“Like you’re not mentally plottin’ out all the ways you can try and beat me.” Jasper wrapped an arm around my neck, pulled me into a loose headlock, and gave me a noogie like I was a damn kid. I smelled sweat on his skin, mixed with an earthier smell like fresh-cut wood and amber.

I wrestled out of his hold before trying to do the same to him. Jasper was a quick sonofabitch, though, and was able to twist out of my grasp. Not one to give up easily, I went at him again, catching him off guard, tugging him close, just as my foot caught on a root and I went down.

Jasper fell on top of me, my body hitting the ground with a loud *ompf*.

“Clumsy ass,” he teased, before going straight into grappling mode, only all it did was end up with me on my back and Jasp between my legs. We were both trying to fight each other, but each time he moved, his body thrust against my cock, and...what the fuck? Warmth shot to my groin, blood flowing in that direction. I tried to twist us, tried to fight him off, but all it did was make Jasper rub against me more, the heavy massage of his body against my dick only making it throb more, plump faster, and Jesus fucking Christ, I was getting *hard*. If he felt it, if he realized it, it would bring that secret closer to the surface. It would ruin everything.

I shoved him off me and scrambled backward. Jasper hadn’t expected it, so his body had gone easily, his pupils blown wide in confusion. “What’s wrong? Did I hurt you?”

No, you felt good.

That thought twisted up my insides, made me both not like myself and feel more like myself than I ever had. But I couldn’t tell him that, couldn’t let him know, couldn’t ever risk losing him.

And I would.

Lose him.

There was no doubt in my mind about that.

“You elbowed me in the nuts,” I lied, giving an excuse to cup myself.

Jasper laughed, the sound working itself over me like a caress even though we weren't touching. He was sweaty and dirty, both of us were, but fuck if his crooked smile wasn't the happiest damn thing I'd ever seen, like the sun had crafted it itself.

“Sorry. I didn't feel nothin'.” He winked.

“Ha-ha.” I didn't mention that he'd seen my dick and there was definitely something there to see.

I turned away from him and shoved to my feet. I heard Jasper doing the same behind me. I adjusted myself, my dick already chilling out some as I heard him going through his bag, which he'd set on the picnic table.

When I heard a zipper, I knew he was tugging off his jeans to pull his swim trunks on. I couldn't stand there forever with my back to him. I shouldn't need to. So I turned around and went for my own bag. I changed into my swimming trunks too, and then we put everything in the tent and were on our way.

I needed to get my shit together, get my head on straight and evict these thoughts about Jasper that had been plaguing me more and more lately.

No good would come of it. No good at all.

CHAPTER FOUR

Jasper

SOMETHING WAS GOING ON with Sutton, and I couldn't figure out what. The only thing that came to mind was the anniversary of his family's death. Obviously, that was a major heartbreak in his life and always would be, but he hadn't been this *off* on this date in years. And lately...sometimes he would be like his normal self, but then suddenly it was like a switch had been flipped in him, like when we were wrestling. How many times in our lives had we done that? And he'd never thrown me off him the way he did now. I was pretty sure I hadn't elbowed him in the nuts.

I was determined to make him smile, though, to bring back my Sutton and wipe away whatever it was that made him down.

"I'm tired." I jumped on his back, and he immediately caught me. I knew without seeing his face that he rolled his eyes, but he didn't drop me, and he even chuckled when I gave an exaggerated yawn. We were almost at the swimming hole, so I let him carry me the rest of the way. He dropped me with his own heave when we arrived.

We didn't bring towels or anything with us to the water, so all we had to do was take off our shoes and shirts. We were right at the water. To the left was a hill, and at the top, a tree that looked like it had been there since the beginning of time, with a rope swing hanging from it.

Sutton went to step into the water, but I grabbed his bicep. It was firm and warm and...fuck, I didn't know. I let go. "Nope. I don't think so. We're gonna jump right in from up there. No getting used to the water first."

"Has anyone ever told you you're bossy?"

“You, Sutton, my whole damn life.” I grinned.

“Shut up and go.” He pushed me and I went, Sutton following behind me as we headed up the hill.

When we got to the top, neither of us went to jump right away. We just took in the scenery—all the green that met the bright blue of the sky, the way the ground continued to get higher from where we were, wrapping almost all the way around the swimming hole, as if hiding it inside walls of earth.

“I really do,” Sutton said.

“Really do what?”

“Like where I am just fine.”

I nodded. “Good, because you’re not allowed to go nowhere. Well, except in that water right there. You wanna go first?”

“Hell yeah I do.”

“There we go. That’s my boy.” I gripped his shoulders and gave him a little shake, watched as Sutton’s expression changed to almost pinched. But just as soon as it had come, it was gone, and he grabbed the rope, took about fifteen steps back, held on, ran, and jumped.

“Woohoo!” I shouted, watching him fall into the water. He was under for just a second before he broke through again, hair plastered to his head, drops of water clinging to his stubble, and the happiest smile on his lips. That right there was how Sutton Manning was always supposed to look.

I caught the rope, ran back, then forward again, swinging through the air. My stomach dropped, that quick panic of being in the air, then the freedom of flying before I let go and landed with a large splash beside him. Water rushed over my head as I sank, and then I surged to the surface again, shaking water from my head and laughing.

“Fuck, that was fun,” Sutton said, bobbing in front of me.

“You have shit in your hair.” I picked the weeds or whatever it was off his head. “Let’s go again.”

We kept on, over and over, using that damn rope swing like we were twelve years old again, kids without a care in the world other than having fun. That was my favorite thing about being with Sutt—how easy it was to let go with him, how I could be grumpy or immature or whatever because I knew he’d always have my back the way I would always have his.

Eventually we got tired of jumping and just swam, floated, played around in the water, and dunked each other. I thought maybe it was the most perfect day I’d ever lived.

We were out there for a good two hours before Sutt said, “We should probably head back to the campsite so we can get dinner goin’.”

“Always ruinin’ all the fun,” I teased, though my stomach was growling.

We got out of the water, droplets all over his shoulders, matching the freckles on my face. Sutton shook his head like a dog, trying to dry himself off. “Fuck, we should have brought towels.”

He grabbed his T-shirt and started wiping himself off with it. His muscles had gotten more cut lately, like Sutton spent his days carving his body out of stone.

“What? You’re lookin’ at me funny.”

Was I? I hadn’t realized it. “It’s cuz you’re so ugly.”

“That’s not what Paula said last night.” He wagged his brows the way I often did, and I popped him with my shirt. “Ouch. Shit. You’re always abusin’ me.”

“I give as good as I take.”

We grabbed our phones and started the walk back to the campsite. When we got there, Sutton said, “Imma go to the bathrooms and get changed.” Which he didn’t typically do, but whatever.

“Don’t stink it up too bad.”

“That’s you, and you’re gross.”

I laughed as he disappeared with his bag. I got a towel and dried off, stripped out of my clothes real quick so I didn’t get the tent wet, and changed.

I was just finishing getting the charcoal going in the grill when he got back, hair kinda messy and cheeks kissed pink from the sun.

I watched as Sutt got the folding chairs out, setting them by the firepit. He was wearing a pair of shorts and nothing else, the muscles in his back contracting and twisting as he moved. “Want a beer?” He went to the cooler.

“Sure.”

He plucked two out, opened them both, and brought me one. He plopped down in his chair, took a couple of long swallows, throat working as he did. When he cocked a brow at me, I turned away.

“We got a busy schedule next week.” I sat in the other chair. It would be a while until the charcoal was ready.

“Yeah, I know,” Sutton said. “We have to start the sod on that new build. The yard is a fucking mess. It’s gonna take me forever to get all those weeds pulled and the ground graded.”

We talked shop for a while. We both loved our work, loved the sun on our faces and ending the day with sore muscles and a job well done.

“You think you’re gonna meet that Kendra girl?”

“Maybe. She’s real nice.”

“What if she wants you to move to Cloverhill?”

“I haven’t even met the woman yet, and you already got me moving away with her? You tryin’ to get rid of me?” Sutton teased, nudging my calf with his foot. “I don’t know if it would ever go there. I doubt it, but if it did, it’s only thirty minutes away. Or maybe she’d move to Ryland.”

“Can you imagine how Mama would lose her shit if you moved a woman in before I did?” I laughed, but he frowned. “What?”

“If I moved in with her, we’d get our own place, dumbass.”

“Shit. Not sure what I was thinkin’.” I rubbed a hand over my face, got up, and started a fire in the pit just to keep my hands busy. The feel of Sutton’s gaze on me made my skin feel like I was sizzling out in the sun, but I didn’t let myself look at him. Couldn’t say why really; it just felt like too much.

When I finished with that, I went over to the grill to check the coals, which were ready. As I put the chicken on, I joked, “So you just gonna let me do all the work, or what?”

“I was thinkin’ so, yeah.”

“Bastard.” I winked at him, feeling a little more grounded again, like my insides had deflated enough that I wouldn’t float away.

We talked while I cooked the chicken. When I pulled it off the grill, he scooped potato salad onto our plates. We had another beer and ate together at the picnic table. I laughed when I looked over and saw barbecue sauce on Sutton’s cheek. “You’re a fuckin’ mess.” I grabbed a napkin and wiped it off, his body going slightly tense in an unfamiliar way before he pulled away and tugged the paper towel from my hand.

“I can clean my own face.”

Yes, yes he could. That was...odd, right? Doing that for him?

When we were done, we cleaned up and packed everything to keep the bears and other critters away. The bugs were bad, so I lit a few citronella candles and sprayed myself with repellent before handing it over to Sutt.

His fingers brushed against mine when he took it, and my stomach did something weird, this sorta dip like I was on a roller coaster and suddenly fell in a quick swoop.

It was starting to get dark by now. Sutt turned on a couple of the lanterns for extra light, and I asked, “You wanna play with me?” When he gave me a mischievous grin, I added, “You know what I mean, pervert.”

“You said it, not me. And yep. I do.”

I climbed into the tent and tugged out the two cases. His uncle Brian played, and when Sutton showed interest, he got him a guitar. It wasn't long after his family died that Brian started to teach Sutt how to play. I thought it kinda saved him in those early months. It was one of the few ways he and Brian really communicated, and it gave Sutton something to focus on, to be good at, something that helped him forget the heaviness his life had become.

It was Sutton who started teaching me. He caught on quick, was definitely better than me, but I wasn't too bad. I liked seeing him in his element, liked watching him lose himself, and fuck, find himself at the same time.

That year, when my birthday rolled around, we met at the railroad tracks. He nodded toward our tree, and sitting below it was a Fender.

“What?” I knelt down and danced my fingers along the fretboard, plucking lightly on the strings.

“I been savin’ for it.”

He'd bought me a guitar? I wasn't sure what to say. It couldn't have been cheap, and I knew Sutt and his uncle didn't have a whole lotta money. Not that we did either. “This is too much.”

“It's fine. I used the money I earned mowing lawns last summer and helping out Ms. Debbie around the house.” Ms. Debbie was an elderly woman who lived within walking distance from Brian. She was a widow and didn't have kids, so both Sutton and Brian helped her out sometimes.

“Yeah, but that money is for you. So you can get somethin’ for yourself.” A tingling, twisting feeling filled my stomach, made my skin oversensitive in a way I didn't understand.

“I wanted to get that for you.” When I didn’t reply, he added, “Plus, it’s kinda for me too. That way I don’t have to share with you.”

It was the best gift I’d ever gotten, and I knew right then I’d keep it forever. “Thanks, Sutt. I—”

“Jasper. Hello? You in there?” Sutton said from one of the chairs by the fire.

I was kneeling by the tent, lost in the past. I didn’t play on that old Fender anymore, but I still had it in my closet at home.

“Sorry. Spacing out.”

I handed his over, then got my own. We started off with old Bob Dylan songs, then some Leonard Cohen. It was the kind of music Brian liked, and he got Sutt into it, who then did the same for me. We played Simon & Garfunkel, then some Cat Stevens, before Sutton drifted off into a melody I didn’t know. I tried to watch, tried to figure it out, but then just got lost in the hypnotic sound of the chords and the way his nimble fingers moved along the fret.

He hummed along, this smooth, honey-coated sound that made my heart beat too fast and my body relax at the same time. The fire danced and crackled, and Sutton’s music filled me up, left me in awe, before he looked at me through his dark lashes, hooded eyes seeking, but I didn’t know what.

He cleared his throat. “Sorry. Lost myself a bit.”

“You don’t gotta apologize. That was gorgeous.”

Sutton sang too, but not in front of anyone. Once in a while he did for me, or I’d hear him through the walls at home, his voice smoky and comforting.

“I’m tired,” Sutton said. “I’m gonna take a piss and hit the sack.”

I nodded dumbly, stood when he did, and walked through the woods some. Sutton turned his back to me, standing close to a tree. I didn’t know why I did it, but I stepped up beside

him and pulled the front of my shorts and underwear down so I could take my cock out.

Sutton cocked a brow, eyes firmly on mine. “There’s a whole fuckin’ forest around us, and you gotta take a piss right next to me?”

“It’s dark and scary out there. We should stick together so I can protect you,” I teased, and he rolled his eyes but didn’t move. We peed, tucked ourselves away, then headed back to camp and used one of the bottles of water to wash our hands.

Sutton made sure to put the fire out while I put our stuff in the tent, and then we both climbed in, side by side, on our backs.

“Night, Jasp,” he said, his voice husky and maybe a little sad.

“Night, Sutt.” The words nearly stuck in my throat.

Sutton rolled over, turned away from me, but I stayed right where I was, aware of him beside me, of his breathing evening out and the little moan he made sometimes when he was sleeping.

I smiled in the dark and closed my eyes.

Yeah, I liked it here just fine, and I didn’t want anything to change.

CHAPTER FIVE

Sutton

WEEKS WENT BY. We worked hard every day, spent some dinners with Jasper's family and some at home. Jasp went out some, fucked a couple of women, had some drinks at the bar, the typical thing. I was still talking to Kendra, but we had yet to meet up. She'd asked a few times, but when she did, I always made up some excuse. I just wasn't as interested in her as I should be, as I wanted to be. I tried not to think about what that meant, why I didn't want to take a chance with a beautiful woman and why I'd be happy being Jasper's best friend and roommate forever if I could.

Tonight we were having dinner with Sherry and Bob, Jasper's parents. Sherry had called for a family get-together, and when she asked, everyone came; that was how it worked. I loved it, though, loved feeling part of a family. When I'd lost my own, Jasper's had been that for me. Sherry had taken to me even more than before, treating me just the way she did Jasp. That was part of the guilt I felt sometimes, about my mixed-up feelings when it came to Jasper. He was supposed to be like a brother to me. His mama loved me like I was her son, his dad too, and there I was, having to bury these unwanted thoughts about him. It was fucked up.

So yeah, I was thinking about that a little at dinner. Sammy, his mama, and Molly were there too. Sometimes Sammy and Molly confused me. They were close as close could be, but something was off. I couldn't put my finger on what it was, or hell, maybe I was batshit crazy and there was nothing at all.

Jasper was saying, "We're thinkin' about redoing the floors in the cabin. Sutton's real good with hardwood. We never shoulda put carpet in there in the first place, but it was

cheaper.” He always talked about the cabin like it was both of ours. And yeah, I lived with him, but it wasn’t mine. “Now that I got a little money put back, I think we might do it ourselves,” Jasper said while we were all shoveling food into our mouths. No one could cook as well as Sherry. I loved her food.

“You guys are getting too old to live like a couple of bachelors,” Bob said, making the hairs on the back of my neck rise and guilt fill my belly with discomfort. He was the kind of man who didn’t have a lot to say most of the time, but when he spoke, people listened. “What you need to do is stop depending on each other so much. Find yourself a wife, Jasper, and then she can help you figure out what you want to do with the cabin.”

I didn’t look up when they spoke, couldn’t, just took another bite like they weren’t talking about me. Bob was right. That was what should happen, what would happen one day.

“They’re best friends,” Sherry replied. “They’re still young. There’s no reason for either of them to rush into a family. Jasper and Caroline broke up just a few months back. She was horrible for him. We don’t need a girl like that in the family. The right one will come along.” Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her reach over and squeeze Jasper’s hand.

I needed to say something, needed to hammer home that she was right and remind myself what I needed to do, what I would do. “Don’t plan on livin’ with him forever,” I said.

The heat of Jasper’s stare made fire lick up my skin, made me shift uncomfortably in my seat. Why did that surprise him? Why did it upset him? Because I knew it did. He confused me so fucking much sometimes, like maybe he had some of the same thoughts I did.

“Well,” Sherry said, “when you find someone, make sure she’s like our Molly here. From what I hear, you’re hardly ever home anymore, Sammy. Even when Molly’s at work, you’re at her place.”

I breathed out a sigh of relief, knowing the conversation had shifted away from us.

They talked about Sammy and Molly for a while. Sherry gave Sammy's mama a hard time about her rarely coming over lately. Their family was strange. They were all really close. All Sherry and Bob talked about was the importance of kin, but then Carrie was often on the outskirts, and Sammy too. I thought maybe I got Carrie some, though. There was a lot of pressure from Jasper's parents. Carrie kept to herself, especially after one of her incidents in town, and it wasn't too long ago that the rumor mill had been going crazy about her being so drunk, they had to call Sammy Joe to get her from the bar.

We finished dinner and had dessert. When the company left, Jasp and I decided to go home too. Sherry pulled me into a hug and said, "You too, you know?"

"Me too, what?"

"We'll be excited when you bring home a nice girl too. You're part of this family, Sutton Manning. I always want to make sure you know that."

Would you still feel that way if you knew what I keep buried deep?

"Yes, ma'am. I know."

"We love you. And your mama and daddy, they would be so proud." She kissed my cheek, and I thanked her, throat thick with emotion. She hugged Jasper next, and then we were on our way.

We were halfway to Jasper's house when he asked, "You okay?"

"Yeah, my stomach is a bit off for some reason," I lied.

"Want me to make you somethin' when we get home? Or I can start you a bath or—"

"I can start my own fucking bath, Jasper. Jesus," I snapped, my words bitter and sad, disguised by anger.

“Fine. Whatever. I was just tryin’ to be nice. Don’t know why you suddenly have a burr in your saddle.”

Fuck. I was being an asshole. It was just so damn hard when he said things like that, did things like that. It blurred the already fuzzy line in our relationship, at least for me. “Sorry. Just not feelin’ so hot, is all. Didn’t mean to be a dick.”

“S’okay. You think you got a fever or anything? I...” His words trailed off, like he realized what he was doing, that he was trying to take care of me again in a way most other friends didn’t. “If you’re good, I might go out tonight. See what some of the other guys are up to.”

We did have other friends, people we hung out with sometimes, had a drink or played pool and darts with at the bar. We just weren’t with them the way we were with each other.

“I’m probably just going to go to bed, see if I can shake this off.”

“All right,” Jasper replied.

He disappeared into his room when we got home, and I did the same. I heard the shower come on and then heard the front door when he left. He didn’t say goodbye like he usually did. Did he feel it too? Did it scare him?

“Stop it,” I told myself. I had no business thinking that, wondering if maybe I could ever have him, letting myself admit silently that I wanted him.

That I was in love with him.

That I’d been in love with Jasper Finch my whole damn life and what that had to mean for me.

Was I bisexual? Because I liked women a whole lot too. Hell, I didn’t know what label it meant, and at the moment I didn’t care. I just loved him and needed to bury it deeper, find a way to stop feeling this way about him. Because if I didn’t, I was gonna ruin everything.

CHAPTER SIX

Jasper

THE NEXT MORNING, Sutton said he still wasn't feeling great when I asked him if he wanted to go to Iris's, one of the diners in Ryland, for breakfast. I almost stayed home myself, but that was ridiculous. Just because Sutton didn't feel like going didn't mean I couldn't.

We were basically connected at the hip, always had been, and maybe that wasn't such a good thing. Maybe we needed to figure out a way to get a little bit of space between us. Maybe Dad was right and we were too damn old to be so close. So I went next door and told Mama, "Grab your purse. I'm gonna take you out to breakfast."

She grinned. "Well, isn't this a surprise. Your daddy will be upset he missed it. He's at church. Where's Sutton?"

Discomfort slid down my spine. It wasn't as if I never spent time with my family without Sutton. Was it so weird that I'd come over and asked my own mom to go to breakfast without him? "He's at home. I just felt like hanging out with you this morning."

She gave me a smile. "My sweet boy. I'm lucky to have you."

I deepened my voice playfully. "Sweet man, you mean."

"Well, you're certainly not my man."

She had a point. We laughed, she grabbed her things, and I drove us into town. There were a few places to eat in Ryland, of course, but Iris's was the most popular. Molly was a waitress there and had been for as long as I could remember.

When we arrived, I opened the door for Mama, and she slipped inside. Iris's was busy, like always, but the hostess

seated us quickly, asking how we were doing and what was new before saying, “And where’s Sutton? We hardly see one of the Terrible Twosome without the other.” We didn’t hear that nickname much anymore, but it popped up from time to time.

“He’s not feelin’ so great,” I replied. That was weird, right? It had to be just a little off that people expected to always see us together.

“Well, I’ll let you get to it. Oh! Did you hear the news?” she asked, her voice softer.

“What news?” Mama asked.

“You know that man? City boy who moved here a while back. Keeps to himself and don’t talk to anyone?” He’d moved here a few years back. I didn’t know anything about him—no one did. I just knew he was a loner I’d seen around town a few times. “Emerson Fox, that’s his name, only turns out that’s not his name at all. He’s Bentley, some hotshot businessman from New York who killed his boyfriend.”

Automatically, I leaned away from her, twisting my hand on the bottom of my T-shirt, unable to keep still. “Boyfriend?” I asked, just as Mama gasped, “What? He killed a man?”

“Yes, ma’am. They found him not guilty, which is curious if you ask me. Probably paid them off. I’m sure he’s not above it. I even heard he laughed when the verdict came through, and that there’s a few people he admitted it to.”

“Good Lord! You just never know about someone.” Mama eyed me. “You stay away from him, Jasper Finch.”

“Why would I be around him? And he’s not gonna kill me. I’m not afraid of him.” But it was weird to think about the guy I’d seen at the farmers’ market sometimes as a murderer...and gay...and he’d apparently killed his boyfriend. “Maybe he really didn’t do it.”

Both of them looked at me like I’d lost my damn mind. “There you go lookin’ for the good in people. You and Sutton are the same that way. It’s gonna get you into trouble one of

these days,” Mama said, then turned to the hostess. “We need to do something—get him outta town. We don’t need that here. Has anyone told the sheriff?”

They went on, but their voices became background noise to my thoughts, and I basically blocked them out. I’d never known a gay person in Ryland before. They had to be there, of course, but none that were out, none that people knew about. Why the hell would he come here?

When I saw movement in my periphery, I turned to find Molly walking up to us, in her Iris’s uniform. Her hand shook as she pushed a lock of her blonde bob behind her ear. “Jasper, Ms. Sherry, how are y’all this mornin’?”

“I’ll let you to it,” the hostess said, leaving us with Molly. “Have a good day.”

Molly’s face was pale, her gaze darting around like she was scared of something.

“You okay?” I asked, instead of answering her question.

“Yeah, I just... Sammy...never mind. I just need to talk to him about something, but I think he’s sleepin’ through my calls.”

“Want me to go to your place and rouse him? I can.”

“No, no,” she rushed out. “I’m fine. It’s not a big deal.”

Mama said, “Terry was just tellin’ us about that Fox gentleman. The one from up North who thinks he’s better than everyone else. Turns out he was just tryin’ to keep a secret about who he is. You stay away from him, you hear me? Sammy needs to get his mail route changed. I think that awful man is on it. I’m gonna call him.”

“I’ll take care of it!” Molly wrung her hands together, nothing but nervous energy.

I said, “It’ll be okay. Even if he’s on Sammy’s route, he’ll be safe. What reason would he have to associate with that man at all? He’s just gotta put the mail in the box and go.” I figured that had to be scary for her, knowing Sammy was going out to

his place. Honestly, it made me nervous for him too. Sammy and I might not be real close, but we were family, blood, and I took care of my own.

“I know. It’s fine. Just ignore me. Y’all want coffee? Orange juice? It’s good to see you both again.” Molly tried to cover up that she was upset but didn’t do the best job. I felt bad for her. Sammy was her whole world. It was clear as day how much they loved each other.

We put in our order, and when Molly went to the kitchen, the conversation immediately went back to Emerson Fox, the gay man in Ryland who had murdered his lover. It was all anyone talked about, Mama included. I couldn’t even say how many people stopped by our table just to see if we heard the news. Every now and then, I’d hear his name from tables around us. Nothing like this had ever happened here before, and it had folks worried.

I tried to change the subject. It felt, fuck, I didn’t know, weird or wrong talking about it like this, gossiping about a dead man and another who had been found innocent.

When we got home, the first thing I did was go to Sutton’s room. I heard him playing his guitar, humming softly. The door was ajar, and I pushed it open, watching him for a second, seeing him release all this emotion from the tips of his fingers into the chords he strummed.

There was something so damn sad about him that I felt it, and it weighed down my heart. I couldn’t handle seeing Sutton this way. I didn’t know what was wrong, but he wasn’t acting right.

“Hey,” I said softly, and he startled some, before looking up and into the mirror facing the door. He could see me in it, and I him, but he stayed on the bed, not turning around. *Look at me. What’s wrong? Why won’t you look at me?* I silently pleaded with his reflection.

“Hey.”

“You’ll never guess what happened. That Fox guy, the one who lives outta town and don’t talk to nobody? Apparently, he’s a queer and offed his boyfriend. Went on trial and everything, but was found innocent. Folks think he paid them off, but I don’t know about that. Maybe he didn’t really do it, right? He got off and all, but damn, this kinda thing don’t happen here.” I held on to the doorjamb, waited for Sutton to reply, waited for him to acknowledge what I’d said at all.

“You shouldn’t use that word that way.”

I frowned. “What word?”

“Queer. If you don’t mean no harm, it’s okay to say someone *is* queer—at least from what I’ve heard or read online—but they’re not *a* queer, and you shouldn’t use it as a derogatory term.”

My frown deepened. I’d never heard Sutton talk that way before, didn’t know he was hearing anything about anyone. Who would he even have heard that from? Why would he have been reading about it? “I didn’t mean no harm. I was just sayin’ he’s...that. Gay. Whatever. That’s not what was important. He might’ve killed his boyfriend.”

He still wasn’t turning around to look at me directly. “Yeah, man. That’s fuckin’ crazy.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yep,” Sutton answered, but he wasn’t.

“You didn’t invite me in.”

“Do I have to? I’m not sure I’ve ever had to invite you into my room—which really isn’t my room at all as it’s your house.”

“Okay, what the fuck, Sutton? This isn’t your house now? Your room? What’s goin’ on with you?” I didn’t wait or expect him to invite me in. I just went, marched right over and stood in front of him so he had no choice but to look at me.

“Nothin’.” He shook his head. “I guess the anniversary a few weeks back just hit me hard this year, and I’m not bein’

myself. Then gettin' sick last night. It's just got me kinda messed up, but I'm good. We're good."

I breathed out, deflating my lungs, and holy shit, had I been holding my breath? I had been. "Okay. You better now? Maybe we should get you to a doctor or somethin'."

He smiled, and somehow it slowed the hyper beat of my pulse. "I don't need to go to the doctor, *Dad*. Jesus, you're like a mother hen sometimes."

"Father hen, apparently. You just called me Dad. You feel good enough to go for a ride? We can take the horses out. The fresh air will be good for you."

He seemed to hesitate, and for a moment I thought maybe he was going to say no. It sounded ridiculous, but it wasn't often Sutton said no to me. I didn't to him either. We simply did what the other wanted because it was usually what we wanted too. "Yeah, sure, Jasp. I'll go for a ride with you."

My insides lit up in a strange way, too bright and happy, like he'd just offered me the world. There was a quiet voice, a slight whisper deep in my head that told me it was too much, too big a reaction for something so small. I ignored it, though, like I usually did, and that tended to quiet it again.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sutton

THE NEXT FEW days were busy as hell. Things fell easily into place with me and Jasper, the way they always did, like the wind or the ocean, natural in their flow. Unstoppable, no matter how hard you tried. I couldn't stay mad. Was that the right word for it? I wasn't mad at him. Maybe I was mad at me, but I couldn't stay away from him, couldn't change this friendship that was such an integral part of my being that I wasn't Sutton without it. I didn't even know who I was without it, like maybe I wouldn't exist at all.

So I just kept those feelings buried the way I always did. Lied to myself that they weren't there, told myself it wasn't as bad as I thought. Jasp and I could just keep being us, and that other stuff would go away.

We'd had a long day at work. It was a Thursday, and we were both beat by the time we got home. Our job had taken longer than it should have because the man who owned the house kept coming out to talk to us about the alleged murderer in Ryland and how they needed to chase him out.

I didn't know about all that. He'd been found innocent, and that was what mattered to me.

So yeah, we were tired, and after dinner, we both ended up going to bed early that night.

I shot up, heart in my throat when Jasper burst into my room in the middle of the night. "Sutt, we gotta go. Somethin'...aw, shit."

"What's wrong?"

He'd flipped the light on, and I was already climbing out of bed. It took me a minute to remember I was naked. My gaze

shot to his, to Jasper in my doorway. His steel-gray eyes on me felt like a touch, like he could reach out and pleasure me with just one look. I trembled, *wanted*...fuck, why did I want him? Why did this keep happening?

“Shit.” He turned away.

“Sorry. I, um...sorry.” And now my dick was hard. Nice. I tugged on a pair of briefs. “Is it your mama? Bob?”

“Aunt Carrie. I don’t got all the details, but she was walkin’ or something and got hit by a car. They’re transferring her to Charlotte. We gotta go.”

We. It was always we. Technically, I didn’t have to do anything. I wasn’t their family, but I knew Jasper needed me, so there wasn’t anywhere else I’d be.



THERE WAS A whole lotta waiting when someone was in the hospital. We’d been so wild with worry, I’d gotten dressed and we’d headed right out, only to learn partway there that Carrie wasn’t even in Charlotte yet. That had to be a good sign, right? If she was in too bad a shape, they would have rushed this.

We found a twenty-four-hour breakfast place not far from the hospital. We drank our weight in coffee, and ate just as many pancakes. Jasp was a little broader than I was, had a little bit more weight on his bones. He was still in shape, had to be with how active he was, but I’d always been a little smaller, my muscles leaner, and like tonight, he’d always been able to eat more than me. This time, some of it was likely nerves.

It was morning now, the sun already up, and people were flooding the diner. Jasper was in the booth seat across from me, feet beside me, his head leaning against the window, teetering between awake and taking a nap. “Sorry...for jumpin’ the gun and gettin’ you out of bed. I wasn’t thinkin’ it would take this long, and then...hell, she ain’t even your aunt. You don’t gotta be here.”

Didn't I, though? Wasn't I always? "You know I love your family like my own. Plus, it's not you if you're not makin' some boneheaded decision about somethin'."

Jasper chuckled softly, nudged my thigh with his foot. "You okay? I didn't think...cuz your family and the car stuff, that this might be hard for ya."

Oh, shit. I hadn't even thought of that, not really. All I'd considered was Jasper and how hard this would be on the Finches and Sammy if something happened to Carrie. "Nah, I'm good. It's been a lotta years."

"Yeah, but you've been havin' a hard time lately."

Not because of that. "I'm good, Jasper."

His mama messaged to let us know they were at the hospital in Charlotte. It would still be a bit before Carrie's surgery. I wasn't sure of all the details, just that her body was beaten up some and needed to be patched up. Jasper went to the bathroom, and I ordered him another coffee to go and paid.

"Thank you. Don't know what I'd do without ya," he said when we were back in my truck.

I don't know what I'd do without you either. "It'd be a mess, I can tell ya that."

We laughed.

Sammy and Sherry were inside with Carrie when we arrived. Bob was quiet, gruff, the way he always was. While I was familiar with a man of few words, having grown up with Uncle Brian, it was different with Bob. Uncle Brian just seemed sad, not frustrated the way Bob sometimes was, like he expected the world to fall into place with whatever was easy for him.

"Where's Molly?" Jasper asked him.

"She's still in Ryland," Bob replied.

Was it strange that I was there with Jasper but Molly wasn't with Sammy? As if he had the same question as me,

Jasper's gaze caught mine, then quickly shot away.

"Oh, you boys are here," Sherry said when she came back into the waiting room. She hugged Jasper, then me, before fingering my hair and saying, "You need a haircut."

"Yes, ma'am," I replied, loving that she treated me like a son, that she reminded me what it was like to have a mom.

"Hey, Sammy. How you doin'?" I'm really sorry about your mama." Jasper hugged his cousin, who returned it.

"Me too," I told him.

"Thanks for bein' here," Sammy replied, his focus not on any of us, worry clearly weighing him down and making him anxious.

"She'll be okay," I said.

Sammy nodded. "I'm gonna... I need to sit down for a minute."

Eventually, they let Sammy know she was going in for surgery, and he was a nervous wreck, going back and forth between pacing and sitting down, his knee bouncing like crazy.

Jasper whispered to me, "Mama said she'd had a lot to drink...stumbled into the road. Poor Sammy. He's spent his whole life takin' care of her. Wish I knew how to ease it for him." He was like that—big-hearted. If he could fix it for Sammy, Jasper would, quietly, without letting anyone know, and they'd never suspect it was him. It was one of my favorite things about him.

"I know you would." I reached over and squeezed his knee in support, then pulled my hand back. What would he do if I left it there? How would it feel to twine our fingers together? To brush my thumb against his palm to reassure him I was there? To run my fingers through his blond hair and tell him he'd never have to deal with anything on his own...

I cleared my throat as Sammy sat on the other side of Jasper.

“Thanks for bein’ here. Shit, I think I already said that. Can’t even remember.”

The door to the waiting room opened then, and Molly came in with... What the fuck? Was that Emerson Fox? Why in the hell was Molly with him, and why had she brought him here?

I watched him as his gaze went straight to Sammy, held on, his eyes filled with emotion that snapped and crackled in the air.

Movement came from the other side of Jasper, Sammy on his feet, making quick steps toward Molly and Emerson, the loner guy people told rumors about. I expected Sammy to go to her, to pull his girlfriend into his arms, but...

“What the fuck?” Jasper asked softly when it was Emerson that Sammy hugged, Emerson who held him and shushed him, and...my heart punched my chest, my vision a little blurry, white noise filling my ears.

Molly watched on, nothing but support in her gaze. She had a small smile on her lips like she was proud of Sammy or something.

The way they touched each other was so...emotional, so real, like in that moment, they *needed* each other. They spoke in whispers, continued with the gentle touches. I couldn’t hear but didn’t need to. This man, he meant something to Sammy. They were in love, and Molly knew and approved. It was clear as day, and I couldn’t wrap my brain around it, knew what it meant but couldn’t even form the thought in my head.

“What in the fresh hell is goin’ on here? You’re that limp-wristed Northerner who killed his boyfriend,” Bob spat, his disgust evident.

Sherry moved beside him, and when Jasper stood, I followed. How could I not? It was Jasper, but this was... Sammy Joe was gay? I didn’t understand.

“Uncle Bob.” Sammy’s voice held a warning.

“What are you doin’ with my nephew? You takin’ advantage of him? That man from the city wasn’t enough and you’re movin’ on to Sammy Joe next? Over my dead body.” Bob puffed out his chest.

“That’s enough! Don’t talk to him like that.” Sammy’s voice was even firmer than it had been before.

I stood beside Jasper, who was by his parents, my world spinning, nothing what I thought it was. Somehow, even though the scene was right in front of me, it didn’t compute, the picture and voices distorted.

“Can’t he stick up for himself?” Bob growled. “Man enough to kill someone and take advantage of you, but not man enough to talk to me like one?”

“I can,” Emerson said. “I’m just trying to be respectful of Sam. His mom is hurt, and I don’t see how the two of us arguing will help the situation. You don’t have to like me or trust me. I don’t give a shit what you think about me. I only care about Sam and what’s best for him.”

And then...then my knees nearly went out from under me when Sammy reached over and held on to Emerson’s hand, tangled their fingers together the way I’d just been wondering what it would feel like if Jasper and I did it.

“Sammy?” Sherry looked shocked.

“You’re a queer?” Jasper asked, and I flinched at how he’d said that, at the accusation in his voice.

Would he say that to me if he knew some of those hidden thoughts in my head? Would I lose him?

Jasper added, “What about Molly?”

And Molly replied, “Nothing about Sammy has changed, and he’s never lied to me. He pretended to be my boyfriend because it was best for both of us.”

Both of them? Was she gay too? Was that how Sammy identified? How did they know? How did *I* know? I had a million questions I wanted to ask them.

Bob's dislike was clear in his curse, but Sammy, standing taller, back straighter than I'd ever seen it, said, "I'm gay. Always have been, always will be. I love Emerson, and I don't care whether you accept it or not. Right now, I'm just glad he's here with me because I need him. I'm worried about Mama and I need him."

Sammy found himself in Emerson's arms again, holding on for dear life. They clutched each other like a lifeline, like if they let go, they would drift away, and it left me feeling emptier, more bereft than I'd ever felt in my whole life. The older man kissed the top of Sammy's head, told him he loved him, that it would be okay, and...and I fucking *wanted*. Maybe *needed*. That. Right there.

With Jasper.

When Sherry and Bob walked away, Jasper did too, and like always, I was there with him, but my head wasn't. It was with Sammy.

I couldn't take my eyes off them, Sammy and his boyfriend. Right there in front of us. Open and honest and, fuck, for a second, I thought I hated him for it because that made this feeling inside me more real. Made it crawl out of the dirt, unable to stay buried any longer, fighting and pulsing to get to the forefront. If Sammy could have this with Emerson, why couldn't I with Jasper?

Because Jasper doesn't feel the same. Because he would never let himself even if he did.

But seeing it made the need inside me grow.

I really was bisexual, and I was so fucking in love with Jasper that it hurt...that it was killing me, and if I didn't find a way to make this go away, I wouldn't ever recover.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jasper

EVERYTHING WAS A whole damn mess, and I still couldn't make sense of how we'd gotten here.

First, it was all about Aunt Carrie being hurt, and then Sammy Joe was gay and in love with a man who'd maybe killed his ex-boyfriend, and my mama and daddy were losing their damn minds.

I loved Mama, but she liked to be in control, liked to know everything, and this had hit her out of left field. Sammy's sexuality was something she hadn't been let in on, and Molly, whom she thought of as part of our family, had lied to her and wasn't with Sammy at all.

Dad was pissed, threw ugly names around that made acid burn through my gut and the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. It hit me hard, which was confusing. I didn't think of myself as a hateful person—people should be able to live their lives authentically and all—but I'd never thought a lot about other people's sexuality outside of angry things I'd heard Dad or others say, so I was taken aback by how strongly his words made my throat tighten and my stomach sick.

Sutton and I had left the hospital when we knew Carrie was going to be okay. Dad too. He rode back with us so Mama could keep the car, and all the way home, he kept harping on about Sammy Joe and Emerson, saying things that made my skin crawl. Things you shouldn't say about anyone, but especially not family. Wasn't family supposed to be the most important thing in this world?

Every time I peeked at Sutton in the rearview mirror, he wasn't looking at me. I'd wait, gaze locked, pleading with him to glance my way, but he never did. Why wouldn't he look at

me? We were always on the same wavelength, could speak to each other without words, and it helped me make sense of things. I was out of sorts without it. I couldn't say what I expected him to do about how shaken up I was, but I needed *something* from him.

“Don't know what that kid is thinkin'. It's because his daddy wasn't around. We shoulda taken him in ourselves,” Dad growled. Because living with us would have made Sammy less gay? It didn't work that way. I was still trying to come to terms with what had happened myself, but that much I knew.

Sutton didn't speak the whole drive, and when we got home, he went straight to his room. I wanted to go in to talk to him, but couldn't make myself do it, didn't know what I wanted to say or why I felt...a million miles away from him. I'd never experienced that before, not with him. It scared me, and I wanted to cling to him, hold tight and make sense of it all, but that was unnerving too. It wasn't the kind of reaction I should have.

I spent the afternoon pacing. Sutton came out eventually, but we were both fairly quiet as we had dinner and watched a show together. Something was off. Was he pissed at me? Had I done something wrong? I went to bed with a knot in my gut, thinking about Sutton and Sammy Joe and everything that had gone down.

Mama came home the next day, and went on and on about Sammy not being himself and how *that man* had gotten his claws in him, messed around with Sammy's head.

I told her, “When I think about it, I'm not all that surprised about Sammy. That he's gay. And nothing's changed about him.” He was just Sammy. Like I said, I was thrown in a lot of ways and still sorting through the past couple of days, but hell, even I knew he was just Sammy and hadn't suddenly morphed into a different person.

“*That man* is dangerous. That's my biggest worry. I don't trust him. He's already hurt one young man, and Sammy is

impressionable. He wasn't...well, he was happy with Molly before that man came around."

Not according to Sammy and Molly, he wasn't, but I didn't tell her that. I knew how she was when she got like this. She wouldn't hear a damn thing I said.

The next few days went by just as messy as the ones before them. Aunt Carrie was gonna be okay. Apparently, after she was released from the hospital, Molly was taking her to Tennessee for an inpatient rehab program. I heard Mama on the phone with her, and Aunt Carrie told her Emerson was paying for it. According to Mama, he was trying to buy his way into the family.

Sutton and I didn't talk about it, about Sammy being gay and how everyone had lost their damn minds. We didn't talk about much at all, really. He was quiet, and I let him be. We worked together and went home together, but we weren't *us*.

Like right now, we were sitting in the truck, me driving after work, and we weren't talking, weren't laughing and trying to figure out what we'd have for dinner, or giving each other shit.

When we got home, I said, "I'm gonna go see Mama. Wanna go?"

I wasn't surprised when Sutton shook his head. "Nah, need a shower."

I nodded, watched him, wanted to say something but couldn't find the words, so I just turned and headed for my parents' house.

She was alone when I got there—Dad was at work on the Lenny Ranch—and she was crying.

"Hey, what's wrong? Is it Aunt Carrie? Did somethin' happen?" I sat beside her at the kitchen table, wrapped an arm around her.

"Sammy left." She swiped at her tears.

My stomach got heavy. "What do you mean, left?"

“He moved! Left with that man. We don’t even know where he is. His mama is telling me he’ll be okay, but she doesn’t get it. She’s so sorry about the things she’s done that she won’t risk gettin’ him mad at her by tellin’ him this is wrong.”

Was it, though? Shouldn’t Sammy be able to live his own life? He’d never done a damn thing for himself. If he stayed, he’d have to take care of her, and on top of that, I couldn’t imagine it’d be real easy to be gay in Ryland. “I’m sure Sammy knows what he’s doin’,” was what I settled on.

“That man will hurt him. You mark my words. This whole family is fallin’ apart, and I don’t like it. No matter what’s happened, I’ve always kept this family together, and it’s all unraveling now.”

“There’s nothin’ we can do. We gotta trust Sammy to make the right decision. And our family ain’t fallin’ apart. I would never let that happen. Maybe this is a good thing. Aunt Carrie can get healthy, and Sammy...” Well, I didn’t know what to say about Sammy. I didn’t let myself think on it much because it made my head fuzzy and my chest feel a little strange.

“You’re such a good boy. I’m so lucky to have you. You and Sutton both. You both’ll always do the right thing.”

Me and Sutton. She spoke of us like we were brothers. It put an uncomfortable weight on my shoulders to always be what she expected, what the family wanted.

I tried to smile, my stomach tense and nauseous. “I love you, Mama.”

“I love you too.”

When I got home a little while later, Sutton wasn’t there.

It was late when he got home. I told myself I wasn’t staying up waiting for him, but that was a lie. I turned on the TV before he came in and leaned back against the couch, relaxed and watching—

“You hate the news,” was the first thing he said.

“Just changed the channel,” I lied. “Where were you?”

He ran a hand through his hair. “Drove over to Cloverhill and met Kendra. We had dinner, then went back to her place for a bit.”

My brain was going into overdrive, but I didn’t know what I wanted to say. I couldn’t figure out what to think or why I felt...alone. Why did hearing that make me feel so alone?

“That’s...good. Good for you, man.”

“Thanks.”

“Sammy left. Moved away. Mama said he told her to tell me he loved me. I’m a little bummed he didn’t talk to me himself.” I should’ve texted him when he came out, should have told him it was okay. Maybe if I had, he would have said goodbye.

Sutton smirked. “The phone goes both ways.”

“Asshole.” I smiled, trying to be me. To be us. I scooted over, expecting him to sit down with me and talk shit.

“I’m gonna go to bed.”

Oh. “Yeah...yeah, me too.”

I turned the TV off, stood. Sutton watched me as I did, then nodded. “Night, Jasp.”

“Night, Sutt.”

He walked away without looking back, and I stood there, looking at the empty hallway.

PART TWO

CHAPTER NINE

Sutton

November

IN THE THREE months since that day in Charlotte, I'd been visiting Uncle Brian more. The first week or so after Sammy left, I'd gone over. That wasn't abnormal. I tried to stay engaged with him. But then I went again two weeks later, then the next one. I'd ended up there every few days eventually. I never really stayed long. We didn't talk a lot, but it kept me away from home, something I'd been trying to do more and more of lately, trying to put a little space between me and Jasper.

Most of the time, Uncle Brian and I would hang out for an hour or so, shoot the shit, and then I'd be on my way. The last two times, we ended up playing the guitar together, something we hadn't done since I'd moved out. I liked feeling close to him this way, getting to know him as an adult, something I hadn't taken as much time to do when I was younger.

"How's work goin'?" I asked, sitting with him on the deck he'd built this summer. It was a cool autumn day, but at least it wasn't raining.

To be honest, Uncle Brian's house had been a piece of shit when I was younger, but he'd slowly been working on it over the years. It was real nice now, and all of it had been done by hand, like Jasper's place.

Shit. It always went back to him.

"Work is work, I reckon. It's a factory. Ain't real excitin'."

I laughed. "Nope, I guess not."

"You're lucky you got something you love. I don't hate my job, but I don't love it either. You do, and you got Jasper with

you. I'm sure that makes it even better. I've never known people as close as the two of you."

My chest tightened with his words, this pain that was always there, deep and achy, but sometimes it pulsed with renewed strength, sharp and damn near debilitating. "Yep."

"Though you've been here more."

"Yep," I said again, wondering if this was something I could talk to him about, if there was any possible way Uncle Brian would understand. I'd never heard him be homophobic, but he kept his feelings about everything to himself so much that I guessed it could be there in hiding.

He was all I really had besides Jasper, and I was trying to focus on Jasper less, trying not to make him the center of my world, which left it feeling colder than it should. I was pretty sure Jasper noticed, but he didn't call me on it, which meant he knew something was wrong and didn't want to talk about it.

"You stayin' for dinner?"

"Nah, I can't. Need to head home and change. I'm going to Cloverhill to have dinner at Kendra's." We'd gotten pretty close the last few months. Being with her helped keep me away from Jasper, but I just plain liked her. She wasn't him, though.

"Been spendin' a lot of time with her lately too."

"You're awfully observant *lately*," I teased, earning myself a chuckle from him.

He stopped long enough to take a drag of his cigarette. Uncle Brian was a strange smoker. He didn't do it all the time. I figured he could quit if he wanted. Sometimes he just liked to smoke, so he did. "She special to you? Don't think I ever saw your mama smile as big as she did when she looked at your dad. From then on, I knew he was the one for her."

The nostalgia in his voice nearly choked me up, but also made me smile. I liked hearing snippets like that about my parents. Uncle Brian didn't share like this often. I wondered

how many stories he carried around in his head and if he ever wanted to let them out more than he did.

I said, “I wish I remembered more things like that. I mean, I remember them, of course, but less and less...or it feels further away, which makes sense.”

“It does,” he said without looking at me.

“Kendra’s a good woman. We have fun together, but...” But she wasn’t Jasper. I was in love with someone else, someone I could never have.

“But what?”

“Nothin’. I don’t know. Nah, it’s not serious. Just hangin’ out.” What would he say if I told him I was in love with Jasper? Maybe I’d lose the only family I had left. Maybe it wouldn’t matter a damn bit. It was shitty that I had to wonder at all.

“Yep, I hear ya.” And that was that. Somehow, I knew the heart-to-heart was over.

When I got home to shower, Jasper was out working in the yard. “You gonna come help?” he called out. I never would have told him no in the past. Even if I had other plans, I’d have canceled them.

“I can’t. I have plans,” I replied as he walked over.

“Oh.” For a moment he looked hurt, but then his expression changed and he shrugged. “Have fun.”

“You too.” It hurt to walk away. When I drove off, I saw Jasper looking my way.



“OH MY GOD! He really said that?” Kendra asked. We were sitting on her couch after dinner, and I was telling her a Jasper story. She had her legs curled up beneath her, and was wearing a skirt that rose up on her thighs. She was curvy in all the right places, maybe slightly round to some, but just how I liked women. She was sexy and beautiful and smart—smarter than

me, but she never made me feel stupid. She'd gone to college, was a therapist, and kindness just oozed out of her pores.

I could fall for her, knew I could if I gave myself the chance. Maybe I could have what Uncle Brian was talking about earlier when he said how crazy my parents were about each other, but there was a block there I had yet to knock down. One that wouldn't let me entertain a future with her. Not yet.

Though we'd been hanging out for almost three months now, I hadn't fucked her, couldn't bring myself to do it even though she made my dick hard. But I knew I wasn't ready to give her what she deserved, and the last thing I wanted was to lead her on.

"He did," I finally replied. "Jasp is an idiot, but the best kinda idiot, if you know what I mean."

She laughed again, then took a drink of her wine. She wrinkled her nose in a cute way. "Yeah, I know what you mean. What happened next?"

I finished telling her the story about me and Jasp when we'd been twenty-one. She laughed in all the right places, honest laughter too, and damn, did I have a good time with her. I liked her, wanted to keep being her friend. Wished she could make me stop loving Jasper, that I could let myself want to be with her because if it wasn't for him, I thought we could be happy together if she felt the same.

"I'd love to meet him sometime."

My stomach twisted up. I leaned forward, grabbed my water off the coffee table, and took a drink. "That'd be real nice."

Kendra placed her wineglass beside mine, and then we both leaned back against the couch, her still sorta sideways and facing me.

She leaned in, pressed her apple-and-wine-flavored lips to mine. I flicked my tongue out and teased her just a second before she let me in. My body reacted the way I knew it

would, heat pooling in my groin, my dick growing firm behind my fly. I wanted her; fuck, I wanted to strip her bare and lose myself in her body, get that release I hadn't had in too long, but I couldn't because I *did* like Kendra so much. Because I didn't want to hurt her, didn't want to do wrong by her.

Still, it was Kendra who pulled away first. "I like you, Sutton Manning."

I gave her my best grin. "I like you too."

Her lips were so red, and I couldn't stop myself from focusing on them. Maybe if I did, I wouldn't hear what I knew she was gonna say next.

"But I don't think this is going to work...not that way. I wanted to kiss you one more time to see, but you're holding back. You're always holding back when we're together."

Fucking Jasper. I was going to kill him. Why the hell couldn't I get him outta my damn head? Why couldn't I make this shit go away?

I rubbed a hand over my face, groaned and leaned forward, elbows on my knees. "I'm sorry. It's not you. You're gorgeous. I'm attracted as hell to you, and I like you just as much as a person, a friend. I just..." Fuck. I couldn't even say the words. I was giving up a chance with this perfect woman for something I couldn't even say and someone I would never have.

"It's just that you're in love with Jasper, which isn't a little thing at all."

My head whipped in her direction so sharply, pain shot through my neck. My heart crawled up my throat, and I damn near puked the thing out right there on her couch. "I..." Could deny it but was so tired of denying it. I'd kept it buried in myself for years, and now it was freer, but still locked inside the prison I'd made for it. "Yes."

"Does he know?"

I shook my head.

“You’re...?”

“Bisexual, I reckon. I’m not lyin’ when I’m with you. I like you more than I’ve ever liked anyone other than him. I just can’t stop lovin’ him. I try, but it don’t work, and I don’t want to hurt you in the process of me figuring out my shit.”

“I like you too, but we caught it early enough that we don’t have to worry about me getting hurt. Now I know we’ll just be friends, and I’m okay with that. We can still be friends, right?”

My breath whooshed out of me. I didn’t realize how much I needed that, how much I feared I would lose her completely, and that would have hurt a whole lot. I needed a friend, something or someone who wasn’t attached to Jasper. I was so thankful it got to be her. “Yeah, I want that a lot.”

“Me too, and thank God, because now I can get out of this annoying skirt and put my sweats on. I was dying over here.”

She laughed, and I did too. I could tell she was trying to put me at ease, trying not to make a big deal out of the whole bisexual thing, but now that it was out there, I needed to talk about it, needed to share it with someone before I exploded from holding it in. “I’ve never been with a guy, though...not at all. I’m attracted to ’em if I let myself be, but most of the time I don’t.”

“You and Jasper never...”

“Not unless you count a threesome with a woman when we were eighteen, and we didn’t touch each other that way. I think I wanted to even back then. Hell, I’ve never even told anyone, never said the word out loud until tonight.”

Her gaze softened. “I’m sorry. That has to be hard. You don’t think you can tell him?”

I thought about him calling Sammy a queer, and the things his dad said when we found out about Sammy being gay, and how much his family meant to him, how he always wanted to make them proud. “Nah, I can’t tell him. It’ll never happen.”

“His loss.”

If she knew him the way I did, she would know it was mine too.

CHAPTER TEN

Jasper

February

“WHAT ARE YOU doin’, bonehead? We already got enough rock back there,” I teased Sutt as he was halfway through filling the wheelbarrow. He’d been out of it even more the past few months, spacing off and not paying attention. “What’s stealin’ your thoughts?”

He grinned, sorta looking away from me like he didn’t want me to see it. “Nothin’. You’ve been askin’ me that my whole life.”

“Well, stop losin’ your train of thought, then.” I nudged him, the two of us chuckling the way we used to but rarely did anymore. If it wasn’t always on my mind how much things had changed, I could have forgotten right then. That’s how much we were like our old selves. But then Sutton must have realized it too because he closed up tight again, reinforcing those walls that were always between us now. I hated those fucking walls, wanted to take a bulldozer to them, but the fear of what was on the other side kept me from doing it. Because if I knew, my whole life might change. I felt that and wasn’t sure how to make sense of it, so I blamed it on Kendra and the fact that Sutton clearly liked her more than he ever had anyone else. That when people used to tell us we’d grow up and things would change, this was what they meant.

“Just tryin’ to get this done before the rain comes, is all,” Sutton said. “It’s cold as shit.”

It was winter now, the months having gotten away from me since Sammy left and Sutton had started putting distance between us. Sammy and I texted a few times, but not about anything important. He’d tell me whatever state and city he

was in and about some of the things they were doing, but we didn't talk about him and Emerson. I didn't ask him the questions that were always waiting on the tip of my tongue.

"You always get so cold." I rubbed my hands up and down his hoodie-covered arms to warm him. I wanted us back, wanted to find a way to get to where we used to be, even knowing I'd been pulling away from him too. That way, I could deny how much I needed him, because I knew that wasn't right. It wasn't normal. My guard was down today, though, the fight too much, my mind and heart too damn tired to keep it up.

He stepped away from me. "I don't need you to keep me warm, Jasp. I just wanna get this job done."

Fuck, he was right. What would someone have thought if they'd seen us? I didn't think about those things much before Sammy, just once in a while when my dad would clear his throat or make some kinda comment. Or when I compared the way we were to the way other male friends of ours acted.

"Yep. Let's get to it, then."

Work was a lot slower this time of year due to the weather and what people were willing to pay to get projects done in winter. Funds were always a little tighter and the days off more frequent. That gave Sutton a whole lot more time to spend with his girlfriend, Kendra. He spent a lot of time in Cloverhill. He didn't talk about it much, and I sure as shit didn't ask, but it was clear they were getting serious. Sutton was getting serious about someone, and I was fucking my way through Ryland and the surrounding areas. How many women had I had? How many nights had I been sweaty in bed, a woman naked beside me, feeling emptier than I ever had?

I turned toward the backyard again, but Sutton didn't move right away. I got almost to the side of the house, pivoted to look at him, and he was watching me like he was trying to tell me something, beg something of me with his eyes. Something I knew and wanted to answer but couldn't make the wires in my brain connect. "We doin' this or what?"

“We’re doin’ it.” He adjusted his beanie and followed me.

It took us about three hours to finish up. Sutt didn’t talk much, just answered my questions and directed me if he needed to, but we didn’t *talk*, not really. *I miss you. I miss you so fuckin’ much.* How did you miss someone who was right beside you? Who worked with you and lived with you? It didn’t make a damn bit of sense. Fuck, there was something wrong with me. I needed to get my shit sorted out, and I needed to do it now. “You wanna walk the job with the owner, or do you want me to do it?”

“I got it,” Sutton replied, then went to the door.

I packed up our things while he showed the homeowner what we did and made sure he was satisfied. Fifteen minutes later, we were in the truck, headed home.

My cell buzzed just before we pulled down the driveway, and I saw a text from my mom. I turned to Sutton. “I gotta run to the house real quick. I gotta help Mama get some stuff out of the attic. You gonna be here when I get back?” Kendra’s or Brian’s? Which would it be? He hardly hung out with our friends anymore, didn’t go to the bar or anywhere he might spend time with me.

“Yeah, I’ll be around for a bit still.”

A bit. No longer. It was Friday, so that meant he might be gone all weekend.

“Well, ain’t I lucky, then?” I said, my words sharp, like whatever it was that kept ripping up my heart.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Nothin’.”

I shoved out of the truck and slammed the door. I was being a jackass, but I didn’t much care. Stomping across the property to my parents’ house didn’t help, but I couldn’t seem to stop myself from doing it.

“Hey, baby,” Mama greeted me. “Your dad twisted up his back some, and I don’t want him carrying boxes out of the

attic.”

“I’m fine, Sherry,” Dad grumbled. “I’m not helpless.”

“No worries. I got it.” I pulled the door down from the ceiling, stairs sliding down, when Mama’s cell rang.

“It’s your aunt,” she said, picking it up. “Hello, I—”

Mama started pacing, which made me pause before stepping onto the ladder. Aunt Carrie had cut her off with something, and by the slack-jawed look on Mama’s face, I was scared something was wrong. Had she been drinking again? She’d been sober for months now. Was it Sammy? Had Emerson hurt him, or was—

“They caught him?” Mama said, and Dad frowned. She listened, then turned toward Dad. “That don’t change much. He left you, left the family.”

Clearly, she was talking about Sammy, but fuck that. He hadn’t left his mama. He deserved to live his own life. He’d dedicated the whole damn thing to her, and as for the family, I thought it was us who left him. Maybe I messaged from time to time, but that didn’t matter.

“I’m glad he’s happy, Carrie, I am. I just—”

She must have been cut off again. My legs felt a little wobbly as I waited for them to finish their conversation, wanting to know what was going on with Sammy. When she hung up, Mama looked at me, then Dad. “Apparently, they arrested the person who killed that man’s boyfriend.”

That man. Emerson was still *that man*. My gut burned uncomfortably.

“They got proof he didn’t do it. Carrie is hopin’ that means Sammy Joe will come back.”

“Don’t change nothin’,” Dad said, making the feeling inside me intensify, almost making me throw up. “Still don’t want him around here.”

I must have made a face because Mama asked me, “What’s wrong?”

What was wrong? Dad had said he didn’t want Sammy here, and we both knew exactly why that was.

“Nothin’,” I snapped.

“Don’t bite my head off, and where’s Sutton? How come he’s not here helpin’ you? He ain’t been around as much. Is he seein’ someone?”

Her attempt to change the subject from Sammy couldn’t have been a bigger misstep. I dropped my head back, closed my eyes, and tried not to sigh. Because of course she would ask me about the one thing I didn’t want to talk about. Of course she’d mention Sutton and seeing someone, how I was losing him, which left me empty, feeling like a shadow of myself. “I don’t know, Mama. Why don’t you ask him?”

“I would, but he’s not here.”

“Good,” Dad cut in. “He should be seein’ someone. It’s not natural, the two of you and how close you are. That’s not the way friends are supposed to be, and if you ain’t careful, people are gonna think you’re like your cousin.”

His words punched through my chest wall, fisted my heart and jerked it from my body. I tried to cover it, tried not to show I was freaking out, that I couldn’t breathe, that one question ran circles in my head. *Would it be so bad if we were?*

“Bob Finch! Don’t say stuff like that about your son.”

Because it *would* be a bad thing to them. That was what they meant. “I ain’t like Sammy. I just fucked Lacey Prichard two nights ago!”

Mama gasped. “Jasper Robert Finch. Don’t you say things like that in front of me. There’s no reason to be crude.”

Dad said, “She’s a good woman, from a good family, and real smart, wants a family and all. She’d be a good match for you.”

The Prichards did our taxes every year. Lacey went to work for her daddy a couple of years back, and while Dad made his assumptions about her, she didn't want a family at all. Lacey wasn't any more ready to settle down than I was.

"I didn't know the two of you were datin'," Mama added, and I knew I'd fucked up.

"Don't go around town repeatin' that. We're not together. It was just a thing, is all. We had fun. That's it." I was twenty-six years old and explaining my hookups to my parents. What happened to my life? "I'm getting the boxes down and goin' home."

I didn't wait for them to reply, just made my way up the stairs and carried the boxes down. My parents had retreated. Mama was likely disappointed, and Dad was...hell, I didn't know what he was, but I knew it wasn't good. My chest got heavier and heavier with each breath, with each replay of the conversation, of many of our recent conversations, all resting heavily on my shoulders.

Being their only child, they had a lot of expectations from me. Getting married and having kids, making them grandparents. Settling down the way they had in mind for me, what they'd wanted from me since before I was born.

The thing was, I'd always thought I wanted that too. It wasn't until recently that their vision of the future started feeling like it was strangling me, like it was sucking the life out of me and would leave me alone...so fucking alone.

Once I was finished, I did my best to avoid them, sneaking out the front door, since they were in the kitchen in the back.

When I got home, Sutton was showered and dressed, his hair wet, still dripping water onto the clean hoodie he'd put on. There was a bag at the door, which meant yep, he wasn't coming home all weekend.

"Goin' to see your girlfriend?" I crossed my arms and leaned against the counter.

"Is there a reason I shouldn't?"

Don't ask me that, don't ask me that, don't ask me that.

But there was more. I felt it in my bones. “What else? You have somethin’ to say. You’ve had somethin’ to say for a while now, but you don’t. Is it what you’re thinkin’ about every time you space off at work?” I was already raw from my conversation with my parents; might as well cut myself open.

Sutton had a bottle of water in his hand and began peeling the edges of the wrapper. His fingers were shaking. He was nervous, which meant this was big, and fuck, it took everything in me not to go to him, to tell him it would be okay. To try and make Sutton feel better because I never felt as worthy as I did when I made him happy, or made him smile, or just let him know that he would never have to be alone. Not on my watch.

Finally, he said, “I think I’m gonna—no, not think. I’m gonna move out. Not this weekend. That’s not what the bag is, but soon. Kendra’s gonna help me start lookin’ for my own place and...”

He kept talking, but I couldn’t hear him, couldn’t make out the words over the blood whooshing in my ears and the pain screaming in my chest.

It was so fucking stupid. Of course he would move out. Of course we wouldn’t live together forever. How could we? But it wasn’t supposed to rip me apart, wasn’t supposed to feel like my heart was on the ground and Sutton was stomping on it, pulverizing it until there was nothing left.

“I need somethin’ different, and Cloverhill’s only half an hour away. It won’t affect work. We still got J&S and—”

“Cloverhill?” I managed.

Sutton frowned. “Yeah, that’s what I was sayin’. Been in Ryland my whole life, ya know? If I stay here, I’m not sure I’ll be able to figure out all the things I need to figure out.”

Don't go... Please don't go...

“It’s not natural, the two of you and how close you are. That’s not the way friends are supposed to be, and if you ain’t careful, people are gonna think you’re like your cousin.”

“I think...I think that’s a good thing.” But I didn’t. I just couldn’t stop myself from sayin’ it. He was leaving me. He hurt me, and the only way I knew how to deal with it was pretending I didn’t care.

“You do?”

“You already decided it anyway. Don’t know why you care how I feel about it, but yeah. We both always knew this would end at some point. It ain’t normal, carryin’ on like we’re young the way we do.”

Don’t go... Please don’t go...

“Feels normal to me,” Sutton said softly. He set his bottle on the counter, went to the door, grabbed his bag, and walked out.

The second I heard his truck start up, heard his wheels on the gravel and felt him driving away, the first tear slipped free.

I stumbled toward the wall, back hitting it, and slid down to the floor. My shirt was wet. Jesus, how was my shirt that fucking wet? But the tears were flowing freely now, like the dam had broken and a whole lifetime of denial and want was released in the flood that fell from my eyes.

I miss you...

Don’t go...

Christ, I was so fucking broken. What was wrong with me? Who lost their shit this way because their best friend was moving out?

You know why. Call him. Tell him.

But I didn’t do either of those things. I curled into a ball, right there on my kitchen floor, and drowned in all my pain and sorrow.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Sutton

I HAD TO force myself not to turn back, to keep driving despite the ache in my chest. This was smart. Eventually, I would have to do it anyway. Might as well cut the cord now, but damn, it hurt. I was hollowed out, like I'd left everything important to me, every vital piece of myself back at the house with Jasper. To him, what I felt for him wasn't normal, and there was no getting around that. All it would do was devastate me in the end.

So I kept driving to Kendra's. I was so fucking thankful I had her in my life. She'd let me vent a whole lot about Jasper in the months since I'd told her. She was my closest friend outside of him—because no matter what, Jasper would always be that for me. But she was the only person I could talk to about it all, the only one who knew how I felt and nothing bad had come of it. She'd accepted me right off the bat, helped me see how much I needed to do this.

Because if I didn't do it now, I never would.

I would spend my whole damn life in love with someone who didn't love me, not in that way.

"Hey, you," Kendra said. "Oh no. What's wrong?"

"I told him I'm lookin' for a place of my own. I had to." I stepped inside and set my bag down.

"Shit. I'm sorry."

"Me too. But I don't want to talk about it. I'm so fuckin' tired of feelin' this way. I need to move on. I want to forget."

Kendra's rosebud lips stretched into a smile. "Let's go out."

“Huh?”

“Let’s go out. To a gay bar. We’ll have to go into Charlotte, but it’s only an hour from here. You don’t have to do anything but be around queer people. See them happy and loving, and hell, hooking up. I’m sure it can feel so stifling here. You’ve got to see what it can be like. We’ll have fun!”

I’d never even thought about going to a gay bar. It wasn’t something that would have ever crossed my mind, partly because it hadn’t been all that long since I’d admitted to myself I was bisexual.

Kendra was saying, “I could use a good time. I went out with this guy last night, and it was a disaster. Well, at least he made me come.”

I couldn’t help laughing. Kendra was great. And damned if I didn’t want exactly what she’d said, if I didn’t want to let loose and have fun. “Okay, let’s do it.”

“Eek!” Kendra bounced on her heels. “I need to go get ready.”



KENDRA MADE ME change out of my hoodie. A flannel was the best I could do, so I put one on over my T-shirt and left it open.

We got to the bar...club...whatever it was, around nine. She said that was early to be out, but we’d make do. I was used to going to small bars around Ryland where nine wasn’t really considered early. Lots of folks ended up there by six, when they got off work.

I couldn’t believe I was doing this. More than once, I had to talk myself into it all over again, but I was going to a gay bar in Charlotte, so it wasn’t as if anyone from Ryland would see me. And if they did, well...they were there too. I wasn’t at the place where I was ready to come out to everyone yet. Since I couldn’t have Jasper, I’d likely end up with a woman anyway. That made me think about Sammy Joe and how he hadn’t had that choice. He was gay, and it was only men for

him. It must've been so hard for him to have to lie to everyone all those years...

I couldn't pretend I wasn't nervous, though.

"You ready for this?" Kendra asked as we stood in front of the bar.

"As ready as I'll ever be." But it was difficult not to think of Jasper, wishing he were here with me. Nearly all my firsts in my life, Jasper had been a part of, but that wouldn't be the case anymore, and fuck, that hurt.

"Don't do that. Don't think of him right now. You deserve this, Sutton. I'm not saying you should end the night going home with someone, but you deserve to have some fun."

"Thank you, darlin'." I wrapped an arm around her and kissed the top of her head.

It was loud inside, pop music flooding the speakers. It already seemed pretty busy to me, but what the hell did I know? About ninety percent of the people here were men, some dressed like me, others in things like crop tops and wearing makeup. I saw a huge guy, with thick arms that could probably bench-press me and Kendra together, wearing sparkly stuff on his eyelids.

Men kissed each other, talked and danced and held hands. The world didn't implode. We weren't sucked into a fiery pit of hell.

It was natural.

Everyone was just...happy, and damned if that wasn't freeing.

"Want a drink?" Kendra asked close to my ear.

"Just a Coke. I'll get it, though." I wanted to stay sober tonight, wanted to stand back and take it all in.

We made our way to the counter. It didn't take long for the bartender to get to us. I got my soda and Kendra asked for an amaretto sour.

I was nervous, which made me run my finger along the top of the glass. When I was uncomfortable or worried, I had to keep my hands moving. We leaned against the counter, watching people all around us.

“What kind of guys are you attracted to?” she asked.

That was hard for me to answer. It wasn't something I'd let myself think about a whole lot, and it wasn't typically as strong as my attraction to women. “I don't know... Regular, everyday guys.” Guys like Jasper. Damn it. I needed to stop thinking about him.

“You look scared. Don't worry. We don't bite,” a voice came from beside me.

I looked over to see a guy about my age. He wore a backward ball cap the way Jasper sometimes did. He had on jeans and a flannel. His hands were veiny and calloused, the left one with a scratch that he maybe got from working. Him, right there. He was the kind of man I was attracted to.

“First time?” he asked when I didn't answer.

“That obvious?”

He chuckled, deep and raspy. “We all have our first time at some point. What's your name?”

“Sutton.”

“Mark,” he replied, and we shook hands. His grip was firm.

“This is my friend Kendra.” I pulled my hand back.

“Nice to meet you, Kendra.”

We talked for a while, my attention alternating between them and watching the people around us. I saw two guys making out. My dick got hard, which was also a reminder that I hadn't even allowed myself to try to watch gay porn yet.

Mark was nice. He worked in concrete, lived in Charlotte, had recently broken up with a long-term boyfriend, and was looking to get laid.

I was pretty sure I blushed at that, and Mark said, “Fuck, you’re sexy. That something you’d be interested in? Leaving with me? Or I could go with you so we can make sure your friend gets home safe.”

I wanted to be interested. I really did. Jasper didn’t want me. He’d never want me. There was no reason I shouldn’t experiment with this man, hook up and explore this new world I was finally opening myself up to, but... “I can’t. Not because you’re not hot or whatever. You are. But I’m hung up on someone, can’t seem to get past it.” Mark nodded and took a small step back, respecting my space. “He’s straight.” But sometimes...sometimes I wondered.

“Been there, done that. I don’t recommend it. You can take my number if you want—you know, if you need a friend or anything. It’s hard when you first come out.”

I nodded, liking the idea. We swapped numbers, and as much as this was good for me, I needed to head out. I wasn’t ready for all this. Not when I couldn’t go five whole minutes without thinking about Jasper.

“I’m sorry,” Kendra said when we got outside. “Was it too early? I thought this would be a good idea.”

“It was a good idea. This was nice for me to see. I just can’t forget about him yet.”

She hugged me, and I wondered what Jasper was doing, wondered if he was alone.



KENDRA HAD A spare bedroom at her house, which was where I slept when I stayed over. It was after one in the morning, the room dark, but I couldn’t sleep. Every time I tried to close my eyes, I didn’t get any closer to peace, so I ended up staring at the ceiling I couldn’t even see.

A man had hit on me tonight. That had never happened before, but it now had, and that opened up so many possibilities, but also broke my heart. It made me miss Jasp more, *want* Jasp more.

My pulse jumped when my cell rang. The last time I'd been woken up in the middle of the night was when Jasper came in because of Carrie's accident.

I fumbled picking it up, not surprised to see Jasper's name on the screen. My finger lingered. Should I answer it or not? I knew Jasper, and if I didn't, he'd just keep calling. But there was something in my gut too, this forewarning that made me feel like I might throw up and it made me click to answer.

I didn't speak right away, didn't even say hello, and Jasper didn't say a word either. Moments ticked by, until he finally whispered, "Don't go. Please don't leave me, Sutt. I don't even know who I am without you, and I wanna know. I mean, I don't wanna know. Shit. I'm drunk."

I shoved up to sitting, tried to breathe and speak around the emotion in my throat. Worried I was going to die right there, that my heart was beating too fast and I wouldn't survive it. "Where are you? Are you at home?"

"It's not gonna be your home if you leave. Don't leave me, don't leave me, don't leave me, don't leave me." He just kept saying that over and over, making my heart bleed with it.

"Jasp, where are you? How much did you drink?" This wasn't like him, not at all. Especially after everything they'd been through with his aunt. I couldn't say he'd never gotten drunk, but it was usually for fun; definitely not like this.

I was already on my feet, light turned on and stepping into my jeans.

"You remember that time we got in the truck and just drove? We went damn near all the way to Raleigh, found a lake, got as close as we could, put the tailgate down, and just sat in the bed of the truck all night?"

I smiled at the memory. "Yeah, Jasp. I remember that." We'd been...twenty? Twenty-one? We'd watched the sun set, the lake busy; then, when we'd watched it rise, we were alone. Just us. Me and Jasp.

“You were going through that phase where you were obsessed with Big Red gum. You smelled like cinnamon. We talked so much, you started to lose your voice. Do you remember that? You sounded like you’d been smoking for fifty years.” He chuckled. “And you were wearin’ that stupid Hawaiian shirt with the white flowers. It was so ugly. I don’t know what you were thinkin’. I told you it was a bad idea then, and it’s a bad idea now.”

“I still have that shirt. It’s in my closet.” But I didn’t wear it.

“I know. You drank Cherry Coke, and then your breath smelled like cherries *and* cinnamon. You picked a leaf out of my hair. When we lay down, our arms brushed together, and the hairs on mine stood on end. I told myself I should move away, but I didn’t, Sutt, and you didn’t either. You peeled the wrapper on your soda like you did today with the water. When we took our shoes off and rolled our pant legs up to wade in, you had a three-inch cut on your leg from when you caught it on that piece of metal, and I made you go get a tetanus shot even though you said you were fine. And because you hate shots, we got you ice cream afterward like you were a damn kid.”

My eyes were watering, leaking all over my face as I listened to him. My heart was beating out the syllables of his name over and over and over again.

“I remember everything, Sutt. Why do I remember every damn thing about every fuckin’ moment we’ve ever had? That ain’t normal.” His voice broke, and then he started rambling words I couldn’t make out.

“Where are you? Tell me where the fuck you are.” I pulled the cell away just to tug my shirt on.

“Don’t leave me. I know I shouldn’t say that. I know it shouldn’t matter, but don’t leave me. I need you.”

“Jasper.” He didn’t reply, just breathed. “Jasp, talk to me.”

The line went dead, but not before I heard the sound of a train in the background.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Jasper

I WAS LOSING my shit, and I couldn't make sense of it. I rarely ever got sloppy drunk like this. It was scary as shit and made me worry about becoming like my aunt. But I'd started with one drink, and then another, replaying my conversation with my parents, then Sutton, who was leaving. Sutton, who was moving out, maybe to Cloverhill. He had a girlfriend, someone he cared about, and he was going to leave me. I didn't know how to be me if Sutton wasn't by my side.

"Fuck!" I sat down, pressed my back against our tree, the one where I'd found Sutton on the day of his family's funeral. The one we kept returning to through the years. The train sped by in front of me. I let myself wonder where it was going, what would happen if Sutt and I just jumped on it and let it take us away the way we used to talk about when we were kids.

My tears wouldn't stop, and I hated every fucking one of them. Wished they would hit that point where they would dry up, wished they hadn't come at all because there were too many truths behind them, truths I'd never allowed myself to admit, to see. To acknowledge were there.

I rubbed my eyes with the palms of my hands, didn't know how long I sat there when I heard the *crunch* of twigs breaking beneath feet behind me. I knew without looking it was him; of course it was him.

"How did you know where I was?" I asked, looking around for the bottle of tequila I'd been drinking. Where the hell had it gone? My cell battery had died, and it was dark as shit.

“I heard the train in the background. I had to drive here from Kendra’s, though. I didn’t know if you’d still be here.”

I winced at her name, that Sutton had been at her place when I called, likely in her bed. They probably sat around and laughed at me. Maybe she’d been listening, hearing me spill my fucking guts and begging him not to leave me.

I dry heaved.

“What the hell are you doing, dumbass? I can’t believe you drank this much.” Sutton knelt beside me.

Me neither.

He shined his cell flashlight at me, making me close my eyes and try to turn away from him. The thought of him seeing me like this twisted up my insides, made me want to shrink into myself even though I knew this was Sutton and he would never judge me. I could always be myself with him.

He cupped my cheek gently, turned my head so I faced him. I looked at him, saw all that heartbreak in his dark eyes. Because he was leaving me? Because he hated hurting me?

“Jasp,” he said softly, then started wiping my tears, the same way I’d done to him when we sat in this same spot talking about the funeral. That only made the tears start flowing again, uncontrollable and filled with the words I didn’t know how to say.

“What’s wrong with me?” My gaze still held his, and he wavered in my vision, watery and blurry. Sutton kept trying to dry my face, but there was no use, it was endless, like maybe they would go on for eternity.

The wind blew, and Sutton trembled. It was downright cold, and that snapped me out of it a bit. “Here.” I tried to take my hoodie off for him, but my fingers kept fumbling it. I couldn’t pull it up. He shouldn’t be cold. He should be comfortable and warm.

“Stop. You’re not givin’ me that. Let’s just go home, okay? We’ll figure this shit out at home.” I let Sutton grab my hand

and pull me to my feet. The alcohol made my head spin, and I stumbled, Sutton reaching out to wrap an arm around me. “You fuckin’ idiot. Don’t drink so damn much next time.”

“Not the first time you’ve called me that, and I doubt it will be the last.” The reality of our situation hit me as Sutton took a step, helping me along. “Or maybe it will be. Maybe everything changes after tonight. It already has. I already lost ya, I feel it. I’ve felt it every damn day for months.”

“Don’t talk. You’re fuckin’ with my head right now. I can’t do this until we get home.”

So I did what he said. It was the least I could do. I’d already screwed things up beyond repair.

We were quiet as we walked home. To our home. It would always be our home, even when Sutton left me.

“I thought you were gonna be quiet?”

“I said that out loud?”

He chuckled, but I could tell it was forced. There was more pain behind it than real joy. “Yeah, you mumbled something about our home and it always being ours.”

“It will.”

“Still not shutting up.”

But I did smile. This was so us, and it was perfect.

I was pretty sure I managed to keep quiet the rest of the way. If I said anything else, Sutton didn’t tell me. The words were building up inside me, though, fighting each other, trying to be the one to get out first. It didn’t matter how much I tried to swallow them down, they were right there at the end of my tongue.

The second we stepped into the house, they burst free. “I’ll fix it, Sutt. Whatever I gotta do. Tell me how to fix it so you won’t go. Tell me how to fix us. No matter what it takes, I’ll do it. I’ll—”

“Shut up!” he shouted, hands fisted in his hair, tugging the strands as he walked away. I swayed on my feet slightly. “I can’t do this anymore. It’s killin’ me, Jasp. Don’t you get that it’s fuckin’ killin’ me?” His eyes were pleading, a need in them for me to see, for me to understand, for me to make it better.

I threw my hands up. “Then tell me how to fuckin’ fix it! I told you I’d do whatever it takes. Don’t care what it is. I just can’t lose you.” If Sutton left, my whole life would be derailed. I wasn’t sure I’d still be tethered to the earth, just wandering and trying to find the place I belonged, when I already knew it was with him.

His voice was stern, loud, when he spit out, “I’m in love with you! Don’t you get that?” My heart rammed into my chest over and over. Then softer, “I’m in love with you, and it’s been slowly killin’ me for years, even though I didn’t always realize it. I can’t do it anymore. I can’t be around you all the time and not be able to have you. One day, once I get past this, maybe, but...”

I swayed again, emotion clogging up my airway, my vision swimming, and my chest...why did it feel so big? So fucking full? But I was off-balance too, like my world was shifting, everything off its axis, or hell, maybe it had been, maybe my whole life had been wrong and now things were settling into place, finally righting themselves. “Then we’ll do that. If that’s what I gotta do to keep you, then I will.”

He sighed and closed his eyes. “Real nice of you to make that sacrifice for me. I don’t want you to handle being with me because you’re afraid to lose me. I want you to do it because you feel for me just a shred of what I feel for you.”

Because he loved me. Sutton was *in love* with me. This man who knew me better than anyone else, who saw every single part of me, was in love with me. How did I get so lucky? What did I do to deserve him loving me like that?

“You’re talkin’ out loud again, and you’re really fuckin’ confusin’ me. Sometimes I think you feel it too, do you hear

me, Jasp? Sometimes the way you look at me, the things you say to me... Tonight, the way you remember all those details, everything about us. I think you feel it too, and that just messes me up worse because you don't...or if you ever did, you couldn't do nothin' about it. You wouldn't let yourself. Not for real. Maybe the only way you could is by tellin' yourself that you're doin' it for me, but I need more than that. If I don't go now, I'll spend my whole life waitin' for you, taking whatever scraps you can give me until you settle down, get married, and don't need me no more."

"I won't ever not need you," I admitted. It was the truth.

I thought about that day at the lake, the scent on his breath and the way he made me shiver when I felt it against my cheek. The warmth in my belly when our arms touched. The way I could listen to Sutton talk forever, and how nothing was more important than making sure he was okay.

"I'm in love with you! Don't you get that?"

I thought about how it felt to play guitar with him, the smile that settled in my heart when he hummed or sang. I thought about cooking dinner together and food fights. About that time I got sick and he didn't leave my side. About getting him ice cream after his tetanus shot and lazy summer days with him by my side. Always by my side.

The threesome when we were eighteen, and how I remembered every curve of his body, the way every muscle in his body shifted. The way a tingle zipped across my skin when we'd accidentally touch.

Flying off rope swings into the water, laughter, tears, holidays, mowing lawns together, and picking fresh-cut grass off his sweaty neck. How I always knew what Sutton smelled like, and it reminded me of home.

"I'm in love with you! Don't you get that?"

Sleepovers when we were kids and building our house together and dreaming of cities to visit on a train because I knew it was what he liked to hear.

So many moments...

Was that what it felt like to be in love with someone? Like there was nothing you wouldn't do for them, and every second you ever shared was held in its own locked vault in your head so you knew they would always be there?

My gaze met his, and I realized he'd been watching me, seeing me sort through all this stuff inside me, building the picture of something I'd always had. Every piece of the puzzle had been there inside me, waiting for me to put it together, waiting for me to find the courage to fit them together the way they were always meant to be.

“Jasp?”

And somehow, hearing my name on his lips cemented everything I was finally letting myself see. “I'm...I'm in love with you too.” I didn't know what that meant for me, for us. Clearly, it was something. I'd never thought of myself being with a guy, but I wasn't sure I could ever love anyone the way I loved Sutton.

“No. Fuck you, Jasper. You don't get to do that. You can't say that shit to me right now, not when you're drunk and just tryin' to find a way to keep things the way they are. That's not fair. I can't...”

He tried to turn away, but I grabbed hold of his biceps, stepped closer, smelled the fresh-cut wood and amber of his skin, and felt it in my bones. “I'm not... I don't know... I'm not sure how to do this, or fuck, how could I not have known? How did I not see that I'm in love with you?” The words were both foreign and so fucking right. My head was a mess of conflicting emotions, fear and worry, but one thing was certain through it all. “I'm in love with you, and that scares the shit out of me, but not as much as losing you does. Sutton... I...”

Needed him. I didn't have all the words or answers. I didn't know where we went from here, but I needed him, and I knew he needed me too. So I stepped closer, wrapped my arms

around him, felt the warmth of his skin, his heartbeat against mine, his breath on my throat as he buried his face there.

“You’re gonna fuckin’ ruin me, do you know that? It’ll break me to have you, then lose you.”

Still, his strong arms encircled me too, squeezed me so tight, I thought he was trying to get us to mold together, and the truth was, I’d be okay with that. We’d always felt like we were one anyway.

I’d hugged Sutton a million times in my life, but this was different. His chest against mine—different. His grip in my hoodie—different. The way we breathed each other in and melted together, like our bodies were saying, *Finally. This is where we’re supposed to be. This is how we’re supposed to be.*

My lips brushed ever so gently along his neck, and Sutton trembled against me.

“What do we do now, Sutt? I don’t know how... What do we do?”

“We go to sleep. This is a conversation we don’t need to have tonight, especially since you’ve been drinkin’.”

I nodded, knowing he was right but not wanting to let him go, afraid he would slip through my fingers and I’d never get to hold him like this again.

“Come on.” He tried to pull away, but I didn’t let him, couldn’t send the signal from my brain to my arms to loosen my hold.

“I wanna sleep in your bed with you. I’m scared to let ya go.”

“Jesus, Jasper. You really are gonna ruin me. Let’s go.”

This time I went. He took my hand, and damned if my cheeks didn’t feel warm. Sutton grabbed a bottle of water, and I knew it was for me. He led me to his room, where we sorta stood, unsure what to do.

I watched as he pulled his flannel off.

I did the same with my hoodie.

His tee came next, then mine.

“We’re bein’ ridiculous,” he said as he tugged his shoes off, then his pants, and stood in front of me in his underwear. I’d seen his body a million times, but still my breath caught at the sight of him. At the cut of his abs, and the trail of hair that dipped below his briefs. At the bulge and...I was gonna touch that if we were together, wrap my hand around him the way I did to myself. Maybe explore it in other ways. I was scared, worried about what to do and how, but this was us. We could figure out anything together.

I leaned over to take my shoes off and lost my balance. He caught me, held me against him with all that bare skin, and yep, this was totally different. I wasn’t hard, but I was also drunk and emotionally drained.

Sutton led me to his bed, and when I sat down, he knelt and removed my shoes and socks.

“Sutton.”

“Shut up.”

“I was just gonna say thank you.”

“Take your pants off.”

“If I wasn’t freakin’ the fuck out, I’d make a joke about you being bossy.”

He smiled, and that made everything a whole lot easier.

I stood, stripped down to my boxer briefs. Sutton pulled back the blankets, and I climbed in.

I watched his ass when he went to the light switch, and... oh, there was a little twitch down there. It was a really nice ass.

He killed the lights, then a second later the bed dipped and he was there, both of us on our sides, me with my back to him. Sutton put his arm around me, making me the little spoon.

“This all right?” he asked.

“This is perfect,” I replied.

The day and the emotions caught up with me, taking the rest of my strength, and I went to sleep.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Sutton

I WOKE UP before Jasper did. Usually, he was a morning person—well, he was an all-day person. He was one of those people who woke up early, bright-eyed and ready to start the day. Jasp was mostly always happy and liked to have fun and make people smile. He might complain a little about being tired from work, but he could also have endless energy if he wanted.

But today he slept in later than me, likely because of all the drinking he'd done and the emotional turmoil of the day. I'd told him how I felt, that I was in love with him, and we were there, in bed together in our underwear.

I was trying not to get my hopes up, not to think that everything was now gonna change and we'd be together and happy and wouldn't have any obstacles in our way, but I knew that was a lie. Jasper might have said he was in love with me, but he hadn't come to terms with what that meant. Hell, I still hadn't, but I'd been able to admit to myself I was bisexual and attracted to some men. Could he? *Was* he? Didn't that mean he had to be some kind of something? Would Jasper be okay with that?

And what did this mean for us? Were we gonna be together? Would we just go on like we had been in public, but behind these walls we'd be something more? What happened if his family found out, or people around town, and they didn't take to it too kindly? Would Jasper be able to deal with that? I could, if it meant having him, but Jasper had more at stake than I did. I knew what it was like not to really have family, and I didn't know if that was something Jasper could handle. Was this really what he wanted, or was it like he said—he'd make the sacrifice if it meant keeping me.

“Stop thinkin’ so hard,” Jasper said softly, back still against my chest. I liked holding him this way, feeling the warmth of him, the hardness of his muscles and how we matched.

“I gotta, cuz I don’t think you’ll think enough. You’ll just jump in with both feet, livin’ in the moment, then lose your shit when all hell breaks loose.”

“I got a penis against my ass right now. If you don’t think I’m doin’ a whole lotta thinkin’ about that, then you’re nuts.”

Oh shit. I pulled my groin away, loosening my hold on him. Clearly, I’d known I was hard and that there was a very delectable ass there, but there’d been too many thoughts in my head for me to focus on that. “Sorry.”

Jasper rolled over and faced me, lifted the blanket a little and nodded his head downward so I would look, and yep, holy fucking shit, he was hard too. He had a fat bulge, his underwear molding to the length of him. My fingers twitched where they rested on my thigh. What would it feel like to touch him? To stroke him until his eyes rolled back and he came?

“You just moaned. Whatever you were thinkin’ must’ve been good.” He laid the blanket down again. “I was lookin’ at ya last night, Sutt...and the night of Aunt Carrie’s accident when you got outta bed naked. If I let myself reevaluate my life, I’d probably see that I’ve been lookin’ at you some sorta way the whole damn time. I did that night with Miranda.”

“Me too,” I admitted softly, still trying to believe we were here. “What about other guys for you?”

Jasper frowned. “What? No.” His eyes widened. “Do you?”

“I mean, yeah. I didn’t realize it until recently, but yeah. Not a lot, just certain men. Kendra took me to a gay bar last night, and there was this guy who wanted to hook up with me, but—”

He paled, this look on his face like he was pained...and pissed. “You fucked around with a guy last night?”

“What? No. If you’d chill the fuck out, I would’ve said *but I turned him down*. Couldn’t do it yet because I just wanted you. He was interested, and if there wasn’t a Jasper, I would’ve been too.”

A deep growl vibrated out of his chest. Jasper rolled the opposite direction in one fluid movement that didn’t seem possible from someone as drunk as he’d been last night. He sat up on the side of the bed. I could tell his leg was bouncing, and he had his face in his hands. I moved slowly, unsure what to do, then risked sitting behind him, one leg on either side of him. He tensed up for a moment, then relaxed into it. I wrapped my arms around him, risked pressing a soft kiss to his shoulder. “I didn’t know you were so possessive.”

“I’m not normally, but the rest of them ain’t you.”

Well, hell. That was hot. I couldn’t help smiling against his skin. “I told him no. I don’t want anyone but you, Jasp. Maybe focus on that.”

“I’m tryin’, but it’s hard. I’ve never been like this, felt like this. I can’t work out how to deal with it. Plus, you’re a guy and...it’s just you for me, Sutt. I ain’t never seen another man I want.”

I sat with that for a second, wondering what it meant. That maybe no matter what, that truth would ruin us, or maybe it wouldn’t matter. “It might be because you’ve never given yourself permission before. You didn’t let yourself acknowledge it was there.”

“Maybe.”

I kissed his shoulder again. This was nice. This was fucking perfect.

“Wait. Kendra brought you to a gay bar? Your damn girlfriend was there when some guy was hittin’ on you? And Jesus Christ, you have a girlfriend. I can’t... We shouldn’t...”

“She’s not my girlfriend. She’s...my friend. My best one outside of you. I told her I was in love with you months ago. She was helpin’ me try and move on. I ain’t done more than kiss her, and that was just in the beginning.”

He whipped around, shoulder accidentally smacking me in the nose. Pain shot through my face. “Ouch. Fuck.”

“Shit. I’m sorry.”

I pulled back, covering it. Jasper moved closer to me, pulling my hand away to examine me. “Looks fine, ya big baby.”

“Let me shoulder you in the nose and see how much you like it.”

“You told her? About us?”

I knew he’d freak out about this. “I told her about *me*. It was just me at that time.” But there was my answer as far as Jasper’s comfort level. He’d nearly lost it just because he thought Kendra knew. I wasn’t saying I wanted to tell everyone. I wasn’t ready for that either. We had a lot of shit to figure out, but I’d eventually be there. I couldn’t help wondering if Jasper ever would be.

He reached out, cupped my face in his calloused hand, brushed his fingers over my nose. “I’m sorry I nearly knocked you out.”

I grinned. “I wouldn’t go that far. And stop bein’ charmin’. I think we need to talk.”

His whole face lit up. “You think I’m charmin’?”

“You know you are. You’ve had me wrapped around your finger my whole damn life, Jasper Finch.”

He closed his eyes, and I worried I’d said too much.

“And you haven’t with me? I don’t think I can ever care about anyone the way I care about you. Felt like I was losin’ myself when you started pullin’ away.”

“Shit.” Those words scrambled my brain, made my heart take off at a fast gallop.

Jasper licked his lips. “I really wanna try kissin’ you, but I gotta piss so bad, my damn bladder might explode. I might get so excited, I pee all over ya, and you’d never let me live that down.”

A laugh jumped out of my throat the way only Jasper could make me do. “I might be willin’ to risk it if the reward is kissin’ you. But we really should talk.”

“Do we gotta, though? Hell, we just started this. We’re just figurin’ it out. Can’t we just enjoy havin’ each other? We can’t tell no one, and I just... I wanna enjoy this. I wanna know you’re mine. I finally have you, and damned if I don’t want to revel in that. Let’s just focus on us, on havin’ what we deserve, and we’ll worry about the rest of it later.”

“We can’t tell no one.”

Never? He couldn’t mean that, but the rest of what he said made sense. We sure shouldn’t bring anyone into it now. We needed to get used to being together ourselves, settle into it some, and fuck, I wanted to protect this. To keep it. What was the point in talking it to death when we could enjoy it? He was right. We shouldn’t tell anyone right now, not when we were still figuring out what it meant and learning how to go from straight to not straight, from best friends to...boyfriends? Even thinking that word was strange, and if I hadn’t come to terms with all that in my own head, it wasn’t yet time to bring anyone else into it.

“I need to tell Kendra.”

“You tryin’ to make me jealous of her?”

I rolled my eyes. “She’s my friend. I love you. I’ll always love you.”

The smile that stretched across his face rivaled the sun at its brightest. “Hold that thought. I really gotta piss, and then we’ll...do...stuff.”

Do stuff. I could work with that.

Jasper ran to the bathroom in his room. I went to the one in the hallway, emptied my bladder, washed my hands, and brushed my teeth, my heart running the fifty-yard dash the whole time.

I was about to fool around with a man.

I was about to fool around *with Jasper*.

I made it back to my room before he did. I'd just lain down when he launched himself on the bed like a kid.

"What the fuck are you doin'?" And how are you not hungover?"

"I guess I'm just fuckin' awesome is why. My body is too good to succumb to something like that."

I was on my back, Jasper on his stomach beside me. "Don't do that again, drink so much like that. What if somethin' happened to you? And you should be careful. Alcoholism is—"

"I won't." He quieted me with a finger against my lips. "Not after Aunt Carrie. I wouldn't do that to my mama." I nodded, and he continued. "I wanna kiss ya now, Sutt. Not gonna lie, I'm freakin' the fuck out inside, but I wanna do it. Wanna see what it's like and see if..."

See if he liked it. If this was something he could do. Maybe he loved me but just couldn't let himself be with a man. It'd kill me if that was the case. "Want me to go first?" This was so silly, so ridiculous. We were twenty-six years old. We'd both kissed and fucked more women than was probably appropriate, but in the ways that mattered, this was our first time. "It's a kiss. It's just like kissin' anyone."

"It's all good. I got this. I think I need to do it first."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jasper

I LOOKED DOWN at Sutton, at his black hair and how messy it was. At his dark, whiskey eyes that could find places deep inside me I didn't know were there. His jawline and cheekbones were stronger than mine, his face perfect and sculpted like an artist had created him. And his mouth... Christ, I craved the taste of his mouth.

He was so pretty, and handsome too. He was what I never knew I wanted. He had my dick hard, and we hadn't even touched yet. I remembered not having an erection last night, and that worrying me. Now, I could pound a fucking stake in the ground with my cock if I needed to. It was the stuff in my head I was still sorting through.

“Jasp, we don't have to do anything yet.”

“Shh. I know what ya smell like...know how you sound when you come. Now I wanna know what you taste like too.”

“Jesus, that was sexy. I like hearin' ya talk to me like that.”

“I like doin' it. Now shut up so I can kiss you.” I leaned down, pressed my lips gently to his, over and over and over again. So far, it just felt like a kiss. When I was brave enough, I let my tongue sneak out, flicked it against him in a silent plea for him to open up for me.

Sutton, my best friend my whole life.

Sutton, the man who meant more to me than anyone in the whole damn world.

Sutton, the man I was in love with.

The *man*. I was. In love with.

His lips parted, my tongue taking its first dip inside. He'd brushed his teeth, and I couldn't help smiling against his mouth, even though I'd done the same.

Our tongues touched, the way our bodies had done accidentally how many times in our lives? But we didn't pull back this time. We savored it, savored each other while Sutton let me explore him.

I pressed my lips to his more firmly, my pulse banging against my skin, fast and dizzying. When Sutton put a hand on my waist, holding me, securing me, reminding me we were in this together, I relaxed into the moment more, my insides settling while also being on fire for him.

I kissed the corner of his mouth, along his stubbled jaw, which was different, but...exciting? Yeah, it was. He pressed his fingers in with just a little more strength, and then more, like he was using me as an anchor.

I kissed his throat, tasted his collarbone, which was salty. My dick twitched, hard and aching. I liked that idea, the thought of licking Sutton's sweat from his skin. "What do you think?" I asked, my mouth journeying to the other side of his neck to finish tasting him there.

"I think this is the best moment of my whole damn life."

Mine too.

I kissed him again, hard and hungry. I was a dying man, one who was starving, and the only thing that could sustain me was Sutton. My tongue made long sweeps, probed and eased off, danced with his.

What did his body feel like? I was curious, hands shaking, my insides surging with a need I'd never known. I'd been turned on a lot before, but it was nothing like this; it had never been all-consuming. It was like every single minute I'd ever had, it had all been leading up to this moment with him.

My hands fisted in the pillows, wanting but not yet ready to explore.

When Sutton's arm wrapped around me, I leaned into it. When his hand tightened in my hair and he took over the kiss, tongue inside me tasting and pleasuring, I all but dissolved into him.

I slowly leaned backward, hand on his shoulder now. We didn't break the kiss as we rolled, Sutton on top of me, my legs falling open and him settling between them, and...*oh*.

"What's wrong?" he asked, easing away slightly. "Should I slow down? Or not lie on you like this? The way you were movin', I thought it's what you wanted. You can get on top of me."

Sutton tried to climb off, but my hands acted now, grabbed him, held him in place on top of me. This muscular, masculine man felt *right*, like this was where he was supposed to be. Like his weight belonged on me. "Don't go. It's just..." Damned if I wasn't embarrassed. My gaze darted away. "Cock. I felt your cock, and it was different, is all. I mean, earlier against my ass, but now against mine, it's just...new." And would take some getting used to, but... "I like it. Feels good. Your, um...dick rubbin' against mine."

The want in his stare matched what I felt deep inside me. It lit fire to my soul and made my cock throb harder.

"Like this?" he asked, circling his hips, thrusting against me.

"Shit yes. God yes."

"Holy fuck, right? I swear I'm 'bout to bust a nut already. Who knew?"

He pushed up on his hands, looked down so I did too. Our underwear was tented, our gazes locked on our groins and how they moved together, pressed and rubbed, cock against cock.

"That's kinda hot, huh?" I asked.

"Can you imagine if we were naked?" He pumped his hips. "You should, um...grab my ass."

“Yeah, okay.” It should have been embarrassing, the way we both seemed so inexperienced, but it wasn’t because it was him. I palmed his ass, felt it tighten, hard muscles, and...well, a plump bottom, if I was being honest, filling my hands.

I tugged him closer, which made our dicks stroke harder together. I moved with him, met him thrust for thrust. My balls were throbbing. Each time he rubbed against me, the best kind of buzzing sensation shot up from my nuts and through my body.

“Kiss me again, Sutt. Hard like you did. Need you to kiss me.” I was begging in a way I never had, needy in a way I would never be with anyone else. I’d never known myself to have walls up during sex, or hell, at any time, but when I was with Sutton, I realized I did with others, because I was so damn open with him.

His mouth slammed down onto mine, our bodies torso to torso. He pushed his tongue between my lips, owned me with that kiss, and I liked it, wanted it, wanted Sutton to make me come undone the way no one ever had before.

He pressed me into the mattress, hips pumping, his body hot and hard, his dick lovin’ up on mine, while his tongue did the same to my mouth. It was the best thing I ever felt, perfect in ways I didn’t know were possible, and sexy in ways I’d never allowed myself the freedom to imagine.

My balls drew up, pleasure zipping up my spine as I arched toward him. Our mouths parted, “Yes, fuck yes,” falling from mine as I shot my load into my underwear.

Sutton thrust again, gaze locked on mine, the muscles in his neck tightening as he cried out, finding a release of his own.

He fell down beside me, both of us quiet, breathing.

“That was incredible,” he said, but I didn’t answer, not right away. Words and thoughts were trapped inside me. “Are you okay? Was it too much too fast? We can slow down.” He

rolled toward me, held my face, brushed his thumb over my bottom lip.

“I don’t wanna slow down. I was just wonderin’ how I made it twenty-six years on this earth without knowin’ pleasure like that existed. I’ve had a lotta sex, but it’s never been like that. How did I survive not havin’ you this way?”

Sutton’s smile warmed me up from the inside, comforted me and made me feel like a king.

“I love you. Can I keep sayin’ that now?” Sutton asked.

“You’d break my heart if you didn’t.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Sutton

I ROLLED OVER to my side, unable to keep my eyes off him. I'd just had an orgasm with Jasper. He was lying on his back, in my bed, one leg bent, eyes closed, lips slightly parted.

I knew exactly where his dimples were when he smiled. Knew the way the left side of his mouth kicked up just a little more than the right. The freckles on his cheeks and nose looked darker than usual. His blond hair was a halo around his head, shaggy and messy—probably hadn't been brushed in days unless I counted his fingers combing it.

His right eyebrow had a scar from when we were eleven. We'd been exploring the woods, and Jasper fell and hit his head on a rock. I'd never seen so much blood in my life, or felt the kind of fear I had in that moment, heart turned chaotic, beating like a stampede of wild horses. I'd taken my shirt off and held it to his face until we got home, arm around him while we walked, prayin' Jasper was okay.

When he opened his grayish eyes, his gaze snagging on me, I wanted to tell him he was beautiful, but I didn't know if that was strange or not.

“What?” he asked, giving me that crooked smile.

“Just can't stop lookin' at ya, is all.” Hoping he didn't change his mind, that he didn't freak out or consider this a mistake. Now that I had him, I didn't know what I would do if I lost him.

“Then you don't gotta.” Jasper cuddled close, wrapped an arm around me, and nuzzled his face into my chest. “Let's take a nap.”

“We have cum in our underwear.”

“I don’t care. I’m tired. It’s been a long six months, Sutt, feeling you slowly pulling away, losing you a bit more with each passing day...” His arm tightened around me.

Yeah, yeah it had been. A very long, fraught six months.

We fell asleep in each other’s arms, and I woke up to Jasper’s lips against my chest, peppering it with kisses. The light through the window was bright, telling me it was late morning or maybe early afternoon.

Jasper held on to me, kissing my throat and pecs, then rolled to his back again. I ended up on top of him, my dick hard against his cloth-covered erection.

“Want ya again, like earlier. I figure we got a lot of time to make up for.”

I grinned down at him. “You’ve always been the horniest damn thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Are you complainin’?”

No, no I wasn’t.

I answered him with a kiss, feeding him my tongue. We made out, rutting against each other like our damn lives depended on it before spilling another load into our underwear.

“Now I need a shower,” I told him, though part of me didn’t ever want to get out of this bed with him. If I did, I was scared he’d realize what we’d done and tell me he wanted nothing to do with me anymore.

“Wanna do it together?” Jasper pumped his eyebrows dramatically.

“If you’re serious, in no world will the answer to that be no.” I might not know a whole lot about being with another man, but I was game for practice. I wanted to see Jasper naked as much as possible.

“Okay. Let’s go in my room.”

I nodded and went with him. Jasper’s room was the biggest in the house, and he’d made his own little space out of it. He

had glass doors that led to a small patio area, made private by a white trellis with thick vines and leaves twined through it. This side of the house also faced away from his parents' property, thick trees not too far behind it, almost like it was its own world.

I waited by the en suite door while he went to the tiled shower and got the water running. When it was to temperature, he turned to me. The best way I could figure to go about this was to follow his lead, so that was my plan. I did think it was important that we talked about everything soon, even if that scared the shit out of me.

When I didn't move, just stood there with my arms crossed, watching him, Jasper kept his gaze on me as he pulled his boxer briefs down his thighs. He wasn't hard, his dick hanging soft over his balls. The nest of hair at his groin was darker than the blond on his head, and he had a little birthmark on his left hip bone. I wondered what it tasted like. Had wondered more than once.

He stood there letting me take him in, study his body in ways I'd never been able to do before.

"So?" he eventually said.

"It's cute."

"Cute? You asshole." He took a roll of toilet paper off the shelf and chucked it at me. "My dick isn't cute. He's...big and manly. He's hot or somethin'. Anything but cute."

I laughed and walked over to him, setting down the toilet paper I'd caught. I wanted to touch his dick, but I was nervous. Rutting together was one thing, but taking hold of it was another. "I've seen it before, more than once. Little glimpses here and there. Watched it slide into a woman's mouth, somethin' I don't ever wanna see happen again. It's...huge, might be the biggest one in the state of North Carolina."

"You jackass."

"And it's hot, sexy." I brushed his shoulder with the tips of my fingers. "I want it real bad, Jasp. At some point. I'm not

sayin' I'm ready today, but I wanna touch it, wrap my hand around it and make you come. Pretty sure I wanna suck on it too. Maybe I'll spend a whole day just gettin' to know your *not* cute dick." Well, shit. Talking to him like that was getting me hard. The fear was there, the insecurity and the never-been-with-a-guy thing, but then this was Jasper, which made all those things smaller, less significant.

"I think he likes that idea." We both looked down to see Jasper's cock standing at attention. "Do I get to see you too, or you plannin' on showerin' in your briefs?"

I tugged mine down, and when I did, my dick brushed against his, making us both hiss, before Jasper took a small step backward.

"It's cute." He winked, but I could see the nerves in him, knew by the way he wouldn't make eye contact.

"I can take a shower in my room. This isn't a race. You don't have to do it all in one day to prove how you feel about me." That was part of the reason we needed to talk. I needed to confirm this was what Jasper really wanted, that he wasn't doing it just to keep me.

"I don't want you to shower somewhere else. It just takes some gettin' used to, is all. My whole life I thought I was a straight man, and now I'm in love with a guy and naked in a shower with him. It's easier to go with the flow because it's you, but sometimes it all just sorta hits me. It's like I don't even know who I am...or what I am, because I can't want you the way I do and be straight. It's a lot to work through."

"I know. We'll figure it out. Let's just take a shower. Then I think we should talk."

"Yeah. Okay."

It wasn't a sexy shower other than the fact that Jasper was naked in it with me. We didn't touch or kiss, didn't explore each other's bodies. We washed up, accidentally bumping each other sometimes, then apologizing like we were two strangers

on the street and not two men in love, or hell, even best friends.

When we got out, Jasper grabbed himself a towel, then handed one to me. We dried off, each of us putting one around our waist.

He went into his room, past his bed. I followed, but leaned against the sliding glass door, holding the towel in place around my hips and waiting.

“Jasp...do you really want this? Want me? This ain’t about just makin’ sure I don’t leave you, right? I gotta know, and now’s better than later. We can’t jump into this on a whim because you’re scared things are changin’. You gotta be sure.”

He turned to me, watched me with the same intensity I was watching him. “I want you. Don’t think I ever wanted anything in my life more than you. I know that, but my head is still strugglin’ with the details. Ain’t yours?”

“Yeah, it is. That’s why we have to be honest with each other. We can’t hold back, or it’ll ruin us.”

He nodded before walking closer to me. I was in the house and a small step up from him. Jasper held my waist and looked up at me. “I love you. I wanna be with you. The sex stuff is both excitin’ and scary. But even without that, I just want you to be mine.”

“I am.” There was no reason to deny it. I’d always been his.

“What are you askin’ of me, though? Because I can’t... Like I said last night, I can’t march down the street holdin’ your hand or let you kiss my head the way Sammy did with his boyfriend in the hospital.”

“Ever?” I was scared too, but were we supposed to stay a secret forever?

“No, I’m not sayin’ that, just...not yet. You’re my guy now, Sutt, you are, and I’m sorry I’m not ready to claim you to

everyone, but in all the ways that matter, you're mine. I'm just askin' you for time. I might...I might lose them over this."

"Shit." He was right. I knew it just as much as I knew Jasper was meant for me. I wrapped my arms around him, kissed his head the way he was just saying we couldn't do in public.

"If you need me to do it, Sutt, I'll do it, but—"

"No. Fuck no. I'm not askin' you that. I'm just tryin' to figure out where we stand. I don't ever want you to lose your family because you love me. As long as I have you, I'll hide it our whole damn lives if we have to." Just seconds ago I'd dreaded that outcome, and I still did. I wanted to be able to be with Jasper the way other couples were, but if it came between being out or losing him or Jasper losing his family, I would sacrifice that for him.

"Okay. Then we keep it between us for now. And I need to reconfirm that I do want the sex stuff...and I think you're sexy as hell. Just...I'm fine one minute, but then it hits me and I get all up in my head about it. When I'm comin' my brains out or you got your mouth on me, nothin' else matters."

"Guess we need to keep my mouth on you or you comin' your brains out, then."

"Guess so."

I leaned in and kissed him. It was slow and soft this time, our tongues not tentative, but languid and relaxed, enjoying each other like we had all the time in the world.

Until Jasper's stomach growled. We laughed against each other's lips, then reluctantly parted.

"Come on, Jasp. Let's get dressed and make breakfast."

"I'm starvin'. You don't have to tell me twice. Can we also stay locked up in the house all day together? We can watch movies and play video games and do lots and lots of kissin'. I need the practice kissin' a man and all."

“I think you do it just fine, but I’m not tellin’ you we can’t spend the day doin’ it.”

Because between these four walls, we could pretend the rest of the world didn’t exist. We could pretend that if people found out we loved each other, Jasper wouldn’t lose his family.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Jasper

THE NEXT FEW weeks went by, February turning into March, and things were the way they used to be with me and Sutton. We spent all our spare time together. We talked and laughed and complained all day at work. We cooked dinner and ate together. We went out on the weekends when it wasn't raining, found places to explore and visited our favorite hiking trails, waterfalls, and old, abandoned barns. We'd always loved doing things like that. We didn't go eat at Iris's or go to the bar. We didn't do anything with anyone we knew, outside of going to dinner at my folks' sometimes. We just enjoyed each other.

The only difference now was that we did a bunch of kissing. And *cuddling*. We made sure the doors were locked and the blinds closed when we watched shows. Sutt would lie down, and I'd be on top of him, nestled between his legs, or both of us on our sides, him with his arm around me. It was real nice and not something I did much with the women I'd dated.

We spent a whole lot of time naked together. We hadn't done more than rub off on each other, Sutton on top of me, thrusting our cocks together, which...who knew it was basically the best thing that could happen to a guy? Especially when we started doing it without underwear on, and Sutt would wrap his hand around our cocks together. I got boned up just thinking about it.

The other difference was that I'd spent a bunch of time researching sex between men on the internet. I hadn't shared that piece of information with Sutton yet. It was embarrassing to feel so clueless, but it was more than that too. It got me interested in stuff I never thought I'd wonder about. Like, I

didn't get how anything could feel good going up your ass. Apparently, lots of guys felt the same, but others talked about how amazing it was. And when I watched some porn while Sutton was at Brian's, it sure as shit looked like they were having a good time. That made me...interested.

But that was porn, not real life. It was all confusing and made me feel, well, *weird*, to be honest. Why was I suddenly curious about that? Why wasn't I thinking more about doing it to Sutton rather than being curious about how it would feel for me?

It was those thoughts that fucked me up sometimes. Like why was I twenty-six and just now thinking about that? Hell, I read about women pegging men, and that wasn't something I'd ever considered, but now I was with Sutton, and everything was upside down. Like I didn't know myself. When we were together, none of the other stuff mattered, but when we were apart, my brain would get going, running too fast for me to stop it.

But none of it was enough to make me walk away from him. That would feel like cutting out my own heart.

Sometimes I thought about talking to Sammy about it. I'd send him a text to say hi and see how he was doing, and I'd consider saying, *Hey, wanna tell me about butt sex? Do you get penetrated? How long have you known you're gay? Were you scared to? Do the thoughts and confusion ever get easier?* But he had enough going on. He shouldn't have to worry about my shit; about the cousin who called him a queer and still hadn't told him it don't matter none that he's gay. I didn't know if I'd ever have the courage to talk to him about these things, so I tried not to dwell on it.

I rolled over in bed to see Sutton watching me. "What are you starin' at, creeper?"

He chuckled. "Your thoughts were going crazy. I could feel them." Sutton danced his fingers from my temple to my chin. I shivered. No one in my whole life had made me do that

before. He treated me like I was something precious, and while I wasn't sure how I felt about liking it, I did.

Just like I loved that we slept in my bed together.

"You good?" Sutton asked after a minute.

"Yep. We gotta get ready and go help Mama, though." It was always awkward being around my folks now. I was overly cautious, keeping my distance from Sutton, worried every move I made would make them realize we were together. Plus, I didn't want to hear Dad's comments about the two of us being too close. That was getting old, and I knew it hurt Sutton, made him not want to be around Dad.

"Yeah, I know." He kissed me, then rolled over and sat on the edge of the bed, in his underwear. When his phone buzzed, he picked it up and started typing.

"Kendra?" I asked, annoyance making my stomach tighten.

He looked at me and grinned. "Will you stop bein' jealous? After the way I hightailed it out of her house with nothing more than a text in the middle of the night, and how I'm suddenly not moving out and always with you and spending less time with her, I'm pretty sure she knows we're together."

My spine straightened, pinpricks of discomfort poking at the back of my neck. "She knows?" He'd said he wouldn't tell anyone yet, not even her. I sat up, legs over the opposite side of the mattress from Sutton. Mine were bouncing and my gut twisting. I wasn't proud of my reaction, but this was all so damn new to me.

Sutton cursed, got up, walked around, and knelt in front of me. "It's fine, Jasp. She don't know for sure, but even if she did, she'd be supportive. She would be someone we could be together around, and that might feel kinda good. She would never tell anyone."

"I'm not ready for anyone to know," I answered honestly. He'd been trying to get me to talk to Sammy too, but I hadn't.

This was between me and Sutton, and until I had my legs under me, I wasn't ready to talk about it to anyone but him. "I don't need to be around anyone but you." I wrapped my hand along his nape and tugged him closer.

Sutton had a slight amount of stubble that bit at my face in a way I'd grown to love over the past few weeks. I liked those subtle differences, those reminders that this was me and Sutton, and though my head was a fucking mess, we were right together.

I kissed him, licked at the seam of his mouth, and he opened up for me. When we pulled away, he sighed. "Don't think I don't know you just did that to change the subject."

"It's hard bein' with someone who knows me so well. I can't get away with nothin'."

"I'm pretty sure you get away with everything." He winked, then headed into the bathroom. I went with him. We took turns pissing, then brushed our teeth, shaved, and got dressed.

Sutton walked across the property with his hands shoved in his pockets.

"I know it's tough, bein' around them. I know I get weird. I'm sorry I'm not better at this for you." I was. I wanted to be like Sammy and claim Sutton the way he deserved, but I couldn't make myself do it.

"You're perfect at this. I'm not ready to completely come out either. And it kills me when you say shit like that where I can't kiss ya or nuzzle your neck the way you like. But I got you, and that's more than I ever thought I'd have."

"You're so sweet on me." I winked, but really I was wishing I'd said that somewhere we were alone too so Sutton could do just what he said he would.

"Eh. You'll do," he teased.

"You guys comin' or gonna stand there staring at each other all day!" my dad yelled from the porch, and I saw Sutton

tense up. It'd be a lie if I said I didn't do the same. "Your mama's got breakfast ready!"

"Let's go," I said, putting a little more space between us.

We took the porch stairs to my dad, who had his arms crossed in the doorway. "Rain's comin' this afternoon. You're not gonna have time to finish if you don't stop lollygagging."

"Yes, sir," I replied, then went inside.

"Mornin'," Sutton said behind me.

Mama was making us breakfast since we were cleaning out the rain gutters this morning. The last good rain we had, we realized how full they were when they'd ended up with a waterfall off the side of the house.

I picked a piece of bacon off the plate, and she smacked my hand. "You wait till we sit at the table."

"I just like your cookin' so much."

She grinned. "Stop being a charmer." Then without turning, she added, "And I know you're stealin' bacon behind my back, Sutton Manning. You're just as bad as he is. Two peas in a pod, or should I say the Terrible Twosome?"

"I don't got nothing," Sutton said, mouth clearly full of food he was trying to hide.

She held up the spatula she was using for the potatoes. "Don't know what I'm gonna do with the two of you. Wash your hands and sit down."

"Yes, ma'am," we both said.

Sutton playfully tried to nudge me out of the way of the sink, and we started wrestling a bit, trying to get there first. We were both big-ass kids most of the time, and I loved it. I had fun with him.

When my dad cleared his throat, I straightened up and said, "You go first, ya big baby," trying not to act like anything was up but putting an end to our games.

Sutton washed his hands, and I did too. We weren't at the table five minutes before Mama said, "Oh, guess who I ran into at the grocery store yesterday? Lacey Prichard." Mama grinned. "She asked about you."

"You ain't seein' her no more?" Dad asked, shoveling eggs into his mouth.

"Nope. I told you it was just a one-time thing, that we weren't dating." I forced myself not to look at Sutton, knowing he'd be all sorts of tense beside me.

"That's not the way a man acts. That's not fair to her. It's not appropriate to be sleeping around like that at your age," Dad said.

"I sure as shit didn't force her. She knew it was just a good time."

"Jasper!" Mama gasped.

"Well, if we didn't have this conversation all the time, I wouldn't say stuff like that," I snapped, unable to hide my irritation.

"If you'd grow up, we wouldn't have to have this conversation," Dad countered.

"I built my own house from the ground up and got my own business. If that ain't grown up, I don't know what is."

"I'm not one to push, but if you...went out with her, you must like her," Mama added.

My hand was shaking, but I couldn't stop myself from putting it on Sutton's thigh, under the table. I just needed to touch him, to ground myself to him and so he knew it was him I wanted.

"Can we just eat breakfast in peace? How's Aunt Carrie? The two of you still goin' to that knitting thing?" Since Aunt Carrie had gotten home from rehab, they'd been spending more time together. Mama was a strong personality. I knew that, knew that she sometimes put pressure on my aunt, but things seemed better now that she was sober.

The table was quiet for a second, but then Mama gave me my way, let me change the subject. She talked about her plans that day and how the gutters on the back of the house were worse than on the front.

“More trees back there,” Sutton said. “All the leaves and stuff fall in. We’ll start there.”

After breakfast we got the ladders and cleaned out my parents’ gutters. Sutton worked real hard, the way he always did, despite the fact that if they knew who he was to me, they wouldn’t want him around, and he’d lose the only mama he had left.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Sutton

“**B**EEEN A LITTLE more scarce lately,” Uncle Brian said as we sat outside on his porch while he smoked a cigarette. Rain splattered the ground, the two of us protected beneath the wooden roof.

“Jasp and I have just been real busy. Despite the weather right now, it’s been a light year for rain, so we’re not losing as many workdays so far. We’re probably gonna start gettin’ rid of the carpet at home and putting in hardwood floors. He’s been talkin’ about it since last summer, but we haven’t done it yet.” Still, I needed to make time for Uncle Brian. He and I got a lot closer over the six months I tried to pretend I wasn’t in love with Jasp. It wasn’t fair to ditch him now. “You could come help one day if you want. Or just come over for dinner or somethin’. We been tryin’ to find new recipes to make a few days a week. Tryin’ not to rely on his folks so much. We ain’t bad cooks, though I’m better than him. Just don’t tell him that.” I chuckled.

Uncle Brian’s gaze was real curious on me, questions in his eyes, and that’s what made me realize I was talking about Jasper like we were a couple, which we were, but he didn’t know that. On the other hand, I wasn’t so sure it was any different from how I’d always talked about Jasper. How the hell did it take us so long to figure this out?

Society, most likely. Stigmas. Judgment. Bigotry.

Uncle Brian took another drag, then let the smoke out of his lungs. It seemed like he was smoking more lately. “He’s good for ya. It’s nice you’ve both had each other all these years. I know I wasn’t always the best or most attentive uncle. I ain’t good at that, but...it was okay? Growin’ up here?”

“Yes,” I rushed out, surprised he was asking. “I was lucky to have you. If I hadn’t...” I might not have been able to stay in Ryland. I wouldn’t be with Jasper.

“Don’t do us any good thinkin’ of what could’ve happened. I was here, and it was okay. And you had the Finches too—still do.”

I nodded, despite knowing there might come a time soon when I didn’t have any of them other than Jasper. “Yeah, I’m pretty blessed. Jasper’s birthday is next month. I’m tryin’ to figure out what we can do. We usually end up somewhere outside of Ryland, though we always stay close to home. We like explorin’.” It was something we’d always done. It was how we found that lake in Raleigh and our favorite camping site.

Uncle Brian smiled at me. “It’s good to see you happy again. You haven’t been for a while, but you are now. Whatever it is that has you smilin’ the way you do, hold on to it. Happiness ain’t always easy to catch.”

No, it wasn’t, was it? And the way he was looking at me, those dark-brown eyes of his saying things neither of us would speak out loud... He knew. He knew about me and Jasp. Hell, maybe he always had, but he was telling me it was okay.

“What about you, Uncle Brian? Are you happy?”

He shrugged. “As I’ll ever be, I guess. It ain’t always that simple for me.”

“You deserve to be.” When he shrugged again, I knew he was done talking about that. Still, I had one last thing to add. “Thank you, for taking me in...for giving me a home and family. I don’t know if I ever said that.”

“You didn’t have to. I know you appreciated it. That’s what family is for.”

Yeah, yeah it was.

The conversation was done then. I could tell Uncle Brian had talked too much. We played guitar together for a little

while before I headed home, earlier than I'd planned.

My nerves had been kicking in more since our breakfast with Jasper's folks last weekend. Every time I left him, I was afraid he'd start thinking while I was gone, and that when I got back, he'd tell me it was over. That he couldn't do this. That he didn't want to be with a man or that he didn't love me.

I unlocked the door. We didn't use to keep it that way as religiously as we did now. His folks rarely ever came over, and they always knocked, but it wasn't something Jasper felt comfortable risking.

He wasn't in the living room. I tugged my shoes off and made my way to his room. He was lying on his back on the bed, wearing a pair of earbuds and looking at his phone. He hadn't seen me yet. I was about to say something to him when his hand slid down his stomach, to the bulge and thick pole of his erection. He rubbed himself, and blood rushed to my groin, my dick already swelling behind the fly of my jeans.

I wasn't sure if I should keep watching this way. I wanted to, wanted to see the show Jasper put on, but my fingers were twitching to touch him too. We hadn't done a whole lot yet, but I couldn't get enough of him. He was a deep-seated hunger that always sat low in my gut, never fully going away.

I took a step toward the bed, then another. It wasn't long before he saw me, an "oh fuck" slipping out as he fumbled his phone. It fell faceup on the mattress and...

"*Ho-lee* shit," fell from my lips as I saw what he was watching. His hot stare burned into me as I looked at the screen and the two men there, one of them working his fingers in and out of the other's ass. The guy leaned in to lick it, traced his tongue around the rim stretched out with his fingers—and Jasp snatched up his cell and clicked the button for the screen to go black.

He tugged the earbuds out and tossed them to the nightstand. "I didn't know you were comin' home so soon."

“I didn’t know you were watching gay porn or I’d’ve been home earlier,” jumped out, and I was thankful when Jasper gave me the middle finger.

“I figured we should know what to expect, dumbass. Well, not what to expect, but just see what it’s like, or hell, I don’t know. Never thought about two men together until it was me and you.”

Warmth spread through my chest as I walked over and sat on the bed. “I know we’re talkin’ about porn here, but that’s sweet.”

“No it ain’t,” he said, but he grinned. Jasper liked being sweet.

“What do you think?” Watching gay porn wasn’t something I’d done yet. I didn’t know why. Before I had him, the whole thing was just about loving him and not having him, and now it was all about Jasper loving me too. I didn’t care if we never did more than we were doing right now, as long as it was enough to keep him satisfied.

“It’s sex. It’s hot.” When I cocked a brow, he continued, “Fuck, this is weird, Sutt. I’ve been tryin’ to figure out how it can be pleasurable—somethin’ goin’ up your ass. But stimulating your prostate is supposed to feel real good. Like, if you can make someone come that way, the orgasm is supposed to be intense. Thinkin’ about a dick in my ass is scary, I can’t lie, but the guys in porn can’t get enough of it.”

My head was spinning. I didn’t know what to say, what to concentrate on first: Jasper watching gay porn, or that he was interested in butt stuff?

“You’re bein’ quiet. You know I’m freakin’ the fuck out here, right? You just caught me watching some guy finger another, and now you ain’t sayin’ anything.”

“Don’t stress out. I’m just tryin’ to wrap my head around it.”

“Aren’t you curious? From what I read, it’s not somethin’ all gay men do—not that we’re gay, but...you know.” He still

wasn't comfortable with the word. I was settling into bi pretty well. "So, it's not somethin' we ever have to do. I didn't know if that's too..."

"Gay?" I asked. "We're in love with each other. We might not identify as gay, but I figure in some ways it don't get any gayer than that. It don't bother me at all." We'd been raised to have certain thoughts and feelings about being queer. It never made sense to me, but now I knew it was downright wrong. I just didn't get it, and I didn't want to get it. I wanted people to open their damn eyes. Love should always be celebrated. I leaned in, brushed my lips over his jaw. "And yes, I'm curious."

"I watched...fuck, I watched this guy suck a cock, and you'd've thought it was the best thing he'd ever done. Just all this stuff I never thought of...and I don't know if... It's hard to think when you're lovin' up on my neck like that."

I smiled into his throat, peppering kisses along his salty skin and lashing it with my tongue. "Good. And we don't have to rush. I don't care about the sex as much as I care about havin' you. I can start it too, when we're ready. I can try and blow you, and when we fuck, I can be the one to take it." I couldn't pretend that nerves didn't sizzle at the base of my spine, but I wanted all of Jasper that he was willing to give me.

He must have liked that idea because he trembled.

I kissed his throat again, then licked his collarbone. I didn't know what it was about that bone, but I loved to taste it. That and his Adam's apple.

"Do you wanna watch with me?" Jasper asked, making my pulse spike.

"Fuck yes. That's so hot." I ripped my shirt over my head, making Jasper laugh.

I didn't expect us to get here this quickly, but it had been over a month of rutting together and me jacking us off. It made sense that we were ready to try new things. I guess I just thought it would be sucking dick where we landed first and not

anal play, and hell, maybe we would. Maybe I was jumping the gun, but I was surprised that Jasper had been reading and looking into the ass. Hell, I hadn't thought about being fucked or even fucking him, and I'd had more time to get used to this.

But I wasn't complaining. There wasn't a damn thing I didn't want with Jasper.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Jasper

I CLOSED AND locked the bedroom door while asking Sutton if he'd done the same with the front. I knew he did, but it was something I obsessed about now. My fear was that we'd be together and Mama would come in and catch us, that she'd freak out and tell Dad and I'd lose Sutton just when I finally got him. Either that, or I'd have to lose them.

He stripped out of his clothes, then grabbed my laptop. "Bigger." He pumped his brows.

"Your cock is bigger than it was five minutes ago too," I teased. I hadn't touched him much yet, at least not there, but as I took him in, how thick he was, the way he curved slightly, the nest of dark hair and his heavy balls, I had to admit I was curious.

Just like I was about...that other stuff. I was still trying to figure out how to tell Sutton I wanted *him* to try and touch *my* hole and not the other way around. My insides kept telling me it was something I shouldn't want, but there was no denying that I did. I hadn't settled on how to get comfortable with it yet.

Sutton lay on my bed, hard and ready, looking eager and like he didn't feel any of the nerves that played chase in my gut.

I took my underwear off, my dick having softened some, which was something he noticed.

"We don't have to."

"I want to. Just up in my head again."

"I'll distract you." Sutton grinned, and damned if that didn't help. Once I was on the bed with him, I took over the

laptop, and he said, “I wanna watch whatever you were watching before. Did you get a membership?”

My cheeks heated when I nodded. My hands shook as I logged in and scrolled until I found *Touch My Hole*. Sutton’s gaze was on me, I knew it without looking. What thoughts were going through his head? Did he think I was weird for being curious about that?

We ended up sitting on our asses, backs against the headboard with the laptop between us. The video started, and it was a typical, corny setup—a smaller guy meeting up with a bigger one. The smaller guy was delivering food and ended up inside. He kept fidgeting as he talked to the larger guy, and I couldn’t help doing the same. For him, I thought it was supposed to show how much he wanted to...well, have his hole touched, but my thoughts started going crazy again. I was bigger than Sutt. Was I supposed to be that other guy? Was I supposed to have a no-trespassing sign back there, and if so, why wasn’t I sure I wanted that?

“Hey, you okay?” Sutton asked.

I wasn’t, but I should be. Even though I knew I could tell him anything, it was hard to get the words out. And somehow, Sutton knew.

“I have an idea.” Sutton picked up the laptop. “Come here.”

I went to him, both of us on our sides, him spooning me. He put the laptop in front of me, then wrapped an arm around me, holding me close, comforting me. And just like that, I relaxed into him. Everything was better when he was touching me.

“We good?” Sutton asked.

“We’re good.”

The movie went on, the small guy saying he’d never been with a man before, but that he wanted him.

“Want me to what? Fill your hungry little hole?” the bigger one asked, and Sutton and I both chuckled.

“Good acting,” I said, and then we quieted as the delivery guy said he was curious, that he wanted the guy to play around back there and show him what it was like to have something inside him. That was the whole point of the video. I knew because that’s why I’d chosen it. I’d read every description before I found what I was looking for.

And now I was watching it with Sutton.

They ended up in the bedroom, the smaller man on his stomach on the bed, legs wide. The other one sat beside him, a bottle of lube on the bed. He spread the guy’s ass cheeks, then circled his rim with a finger.

“So good. Put it inside me.”

The bigger guy listened, starting with one, letting him adjust, then using two. I kept shifting, my cock hard and my balls fully loaded. When I moved back to...hell, I didn’t know, Sutton’s cock was right there against my ass. I shifted again, felt the hot length of him against my crack, watched as the man on the bed took three fingers, his ass wide open as he rutted against the bed, saying how good it felt and crying out for more.

I was so fucking curious, my need a gentle caress down the length of my body. What if Sutton touched me there, ran circles along my hole with his finger while he jacked me off? What would it feel like? I trembled.

Sutton’s hand reached down and started stroking my dick. It was dry with just a little bit of lubrication from my precum. I should do this for him, should reach behind me and fist his dick, but instead I pushed my ass against him again...and again...and again...

What am I doing?

“Fuck, Jasp. That feels good.”

If I pressed my ass to his groin enough, would he understand what I wanted? I couldn't figure out how to say the words.

My top leg slid up some, toward my chest, opening me up just a little. *Please... Is this okay? Is it weird?*

Sutton's soft lips explored my shoulder the way he so often did. When I moved a little more, his cock slipped between my legs, under my sac. He slowly pumped his hips, rubbing along my taint, sending pleasure shooting through my gut.

"*You like that? You like having me in your hole?*" the guy on the screen said.

"Sutt... I..."

"What do you want? You can tell me anything. Whatever it is, I'll do it. You know there's nothing I won't give you, right?"

The thing was, I did know that. I could trust him. Sutton could see every piece of me, good and bad, yet kept on loving me. I thought maybe we were built for it, like if there was someone out there who created us, God or whatever, they made Sutton and me just right for each other.

"I wanna try." Heat ran the length of my body, starting at my forehead and traveling down. He kept moving between my legs, sliding his hips forward like he was fucking me. "I'm curious what it feels like to have you touch me...there."

Sutton tensed behind me, his whole body suddenly going stiff and still. Panic flared in my chest, making my heart nearly explode. He didn't want to? But he'd said... "It's okay if you don't."

"Are you fuckin' kiddin' me? I want. I just didn't think *you* would. I really fuckin' want." Sutton's calloused hand dragged up my thigh. Surprising me, he reached over for the laptop and closed it. "Don't need to hear them. This moment is just for us."

I smiled because he was so damn ridiculous and charming, he made me feel like a million bucks all the time.

“How do you want it?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never done this before.”

“Okay. Shit. Okay,” Sutton rambled. “Sorry, I’m losin’ my damn mind. In the best way. I just...fuck. I’ll get it together. I’ll make it good for you.”

“I just want your finger, not your cock. Let’s start with that and see how it goes. I might not like it.” But deep down, I wanted to like it, wanted to know what it would feel like to have Sutton inside me.

He rolled to the other side of the bed and pulled out the tube of lube he’d bought. He used it when he stroked our dicks together. I didn’t know where he got it. I doubted he bought it in town, but our mail often ended up on my folks’ porch, so I knew he wouldn’t risk that.

Sutton set it on the mattress and said, “Roll on your side and face me.” I did, and he lay down facing me. He pulled me close, lifted my top leg and hooked it around his hip. I was like a damn doll, letting him maneuver me like I couldn’t handle it myself.

He pressed gentle kisses to my mouth, swiped at it with his tongue. “Kiss me, Jasp.”

My tongue immediately sneaked out and swept inside his mouth. It was a deep kiss, one I hoped was all-consuming. A kiss he would always remember as the best one he’d ever had, one that he felt in his bones.

I shook slightly when his hand journeyed down my back, over the curve of my ass, which instantly tightened up.

“It’s okay,” he said softly. “It’s just me.” And then we were making out again, Sutton kneading my ass cheeks like we had all the time in the world.

When his finger dipped inside my crease, sneaked toward my hole...an unexpected laugh bubbled out of me. Sutton

pulled back.

“What the hell was that?”

“Sorry. Don’t really know. Keep going.”

He frowned, but then started kissing me again, finger drifting along the light dusting of hair between my cheeks. When he pressed against my rim, another laugh fell from my lips.

“Did I miss somethin’ funny?”

“I’m sorry. I can’t...” My chest tightened, and I chuckled again. “I can’t stop thinkin’ about it. That my best friend is about to play with my asshole, and I know it’s a crazy response, but it makes me laugh. I never thought I’d want anyone to touch me there, and then I’m like, what if he doesn’t like it? What if *I* don’t like it? Oh my God, what if Sutton *sees* my butthole?”

He groaned and flopped onto his back, but I could see he was trying not to smile. “You’re the biggest idiot I’ve ever known.”

“Sutt, I mean, come on. Don’t tell me you ever thought I’d see you there.” He didn’t answer, probably because he knew I was right. “What if you think it’s gross?”

“I won’t, and why would that make you laugh?”

“Cuz I don’t know how else to respond, I guess.”

“That must mean I’m not doin’ a good enough job,” he said, and before I could make sense of what was happening, Sutton had me on my back. He was looming over me, kissing his way down my throat, my chest, sucking and tugging on my nipples, making my damn world spin. He bit my pec, and I arched toward him, my dick throbbing. He just kept moving south, though, until he was kneeling between my legs, pushing them toward my chest.

The nerves were back then, fierce and attacking me with a vengeance. My breathing was too fast, but I fought to get it under control, not wanting Sutton to stop.

When I felt the first ministrations of his thumb on my hole, it was like all my nerve endings came alive. Pleasure shot up from my ass, through my groin, sparking a wildfire in my chest.

“Keep doin’ that. Just touchin’ it, rubbin’ it.”

“I swear to Christ my dick is leakin’ like a faucet. I can already tell how tight it’s gonna be inside you.” How did I get so lucky that he wanted me this much? “You’re so sexy, Jasp. Do you know that? Sometimes I look at ya and all I can think is goddamn, he’s the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen.”

A lightning bolt struck my chest, all excitement, want, and need. “Push...can you push inside?”

“Hell yes. Lemme get some lube.”

My eyes never left him as he plucked it off the bed, squirted some onto his fingers because...because he was going to push one inside me. Desire collided with nerves, creating a perfect storm inside me.

“I’ll be careful. Tell me if you don’t like it. I’ll take care of you, Jasp. You know that.”

The reminder helped ease some of the stress twisting through me.

He looked down at me and me up at him, lying on my back, legs spread and pulled back, all this unfamiliar, but also...good. Yeah, it was fucking good because it was Sutton seeing me like this, and I’d always be safe with him.

“You ready?” he asked.

“For you to put your finger up my ass? Yes.”

He rolled his eyes. “Stop.” Then he leaned down, studying me. He slid his finger between my spread ass cheeks and circled my rim. “It’s so damn sexy. Wish I knew the words to tell you how much I want ya. How fuckin’ incredible you look all opened up for me like this. I can’t believe a part of me is gonna be inside you like this, Jasp. That you’re gonna let me in this tight hole.”

His words stoked the fire already raging inside me, made me moan and tilt my hips up, silently begging for more. “Fuck, I like hearin’ ya talk to me like that.”

“Then I’ll make sure to keep doin’ it. Right now, I wanna try something.”

My lids fluttered open. When had they even closed? I watched as Sutton bent forward, face just a breath away from my cock.

“You smell good down here, real masculine and musky. Like sex and...hell...like a perfect day in the sun, not too hot but just right, where we’re lazin’ around together, laughin’ and just being us.” He breathed me in, and damn, I liked that. “Don’t know that I’ll be any good at it, but I’m gonna try and suck your cock while I finger you.”

My dick twitched in response. “I ain’t complainin’.”

He chuckled. “I didn’t think you would.” Before doing anything else, he bent forward, kissed, then sucked at my left hip.

“What was that?”

“Been wonderin’ what that birthmark tasted like.”

“And?” I asked, feeling dizzy.

“Tasted like mine.”

A shiver ran the length of me.

Sutton was still teasing my hole, still making pleasure shoot through my groin, but then his tongue sneaked out. He gave my shaft a tentative lick that made my balls tighten up. “Christ, do that again.”

He did, licking at my cock like he was trying something new and realizing it was his favorite meal.

Sutton wrapped one hand around my dick, the other one pressing at my hole. He took me into his mouth, not deep but just a little, sucking on the head as the tip of his finger breached my ass, and...oh.

“What’s wrong?” Sutton asked.

“Don’t know that I like it... It’s weird.”

“I can stop—”

“No. Keep going. Let’s give it a chance first.”

He looked at me, gaze filled with concern, but nodded, going back to work on me. The hot suction of his mouth was a fucking dream. I’d had a whole lot of blowjobs in my life, women who took me deeper, whose mouths and hands were more skilled, but this was Sutton, and that made it everything I never knew I wanted until he forced me to open my eyes.

His finger slid in deeper, my body telling me, *Whoa there, buddy. Stuff don’t usually go this direction*, but I didn’t tell him to stop. I wanted this, wanted to give myself to Sutton this way.

He fingered me while bobbing on my cock. A couple of times he took me too deep and gagged or pulled off. It was messy but also fucking perfect. The discomfort in my ass hadn’t eased yet, but the feeling of Sutton’s mouth on me was stronger than anything else.

And as he kept sliding inside, then pulling out again, I could feel my body relaxing, the glide easier as I loosened up for him. “Try to, um...curl your finger toward my belly button. Look for a spongy spot. That’s supposed to be my prostate.”

He pulled off my prick and said, “Okay,” before peppering sweet kisses along my shaft. Christ, I was so gone for this man. He made everything feel like so much more than I thought it should. His finger moved around, then, “I think this is it.”

I damn near shot off the bed. Sparks exploded in my stomach as I let out a guttural groan that vibrated through my rib cage. “Fuck...yeah...right there. Rub it again.”

He did as I said, melting my brain with the intense fireworks setting off inside me. It was like my prostate

controlled the rest of my body, like one touch there was touching me everywhere, in the best way.

Sutton massaged me, pleased that spot deep in my ass that just might become my new best friend, while all the time teasing my cock with his tongue and his lips, making the most incredible chaos sweep me up and make me hope it never let me go.

My balls were tightening, drawing up, filled with the load begging to be set free. My whole body was shaking. I kept trying to fight it off because I didn't want this to ever stop. I wanted to be here in this bed with Sutton, his finger in my ass and his mouth on my cock for all eternity.

“I'm gonna come. Fuck. I can't hold back!”

Sutton pulled off, jerking my dick and rubbing my prostate as I spurted my release on my groin and up my chest, hot cum splashing on my skin.

My body liquefied into the mattress. Sutton pulled his finger out of me, then shot up to his knees, wrapped a hand around his cock, and jerked it. The muscles in his stomach tightened, his head dropped back, his dick hard and leaking, and I thought maybe this picture, him there above me, was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. He cried out as he came, his cum splattering on my stomach, joining mine, before he fell down on top of me, giving me the weight of him, which I learned I loved so much.

It should be weird, knowing his load was on me, but it wasn't. I liked the thought of it there, wanted him to rub it into my skin so I smelled like him.

Sutton kissed my neck, my throat, thrust against me some, and I wanted... Christ, why did I want...? “Can you slick your finger up and put it in me again? Just for a minute.”

He leaned up, a look in his eyes I couldn't read, but I knew it was good. “Yeah, Jasp. Anything.”

“I just like havin' ya that close to me,” I admitted. I wanted to be connected to him that way.

“There ain’t a world in which I wouldn’t do everything in my power to stay inside you.” He lubed his finger, then rolled to his back. I went with him, on my stomach, one leg thrown over him. Sutton slipped his finger in my ass again, teasing, sliding it in and out.

I didn’t understand it, how he did this to me, how anyone could look at us and see anything wrong with it.

“I liked markin’ you up with my load. I can’t claim you in public, but I can claim you that way.” He let his finger drag almost all the way out of me before pushing it in deep again. “I like claimin’ ya this way too.”

I smiled into his chest. “I guess we’ll just have to keep doin’ it, then.”

Sutton chuckled. “I guess we will.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Sutton

WE SPENT THE next few weeks lost in each other, every moment we could—work or home, weekends hiking, exploring, making up any reason to be alone. When we were out of Ryland, or locked away in our house, we could be us—the together us, the us where we touched and cuddled and I could tell Jasper I loved him. When we were around others, though, it was a different story. We had to keep our distance, something we did even more now than we had before, afraid any touch would let people know what was going on behind closed doors. I had to admit, it was already harder than I thought it would be. Jasper was my whole damn world, and I wanted everyone to know it.

But whatever I had to go through to have him was worth it for every second we got to spend together: when we watched TV, all hugged up on each other; when we showered together; when we laughed and talked and Jasper said he loved me; when we came together, me rutting against him or with my fingers deep inside him, and the way Jasper always wanted me to keep them there, even after he came. There was nothing like him needing me that close, needing to be connected to me that way.

But today was his birthday, and we were on our way to Asheville, where we were spending the night at a house I'd rented. While it was only about an hour and a half from Ryland, it was like stepping into a different world in some ways. Not all, of course, because there were assholes everywhere, but Asheville was like this accepting bubble surrounded by areas where most people would think me and Jasp were wrong.

Well, at least that's what I read online. I'd been there a hundred times before but had never looked at it from the perspective of a bisexual man who was in love with another man.

"So...what are we gonna do for my birthday?" Jasper pumped his eyebrows up and down.

"Hopefully spend a lot of time naked," I teased. "There's a hot tub at the house, and I wanna take you out too, like a date. I also read that there's a couple of gay bars in town if you wanna try that. There'd be no chance of seein' someone we know there." He didn't respond right away, which I knew meant he wasn't so sure about it. "We don't have to go. I was just thinkin' it might be good for us. When I went with Kendra, it felt good seein' people be themselves freely, loving each other or wanting each other without any fear." I wished for that for Jasper, wanted him to see that eventually, we could have that too, if he was willing. It wouldn't be easy because of his family, but they would have to come around, wouldn't they?

"We'll play that part by ear."

"I can handle that."

"It's my birthday, after all."

"You gonna keep sayin' that all day? Findin' ways to say it's your birthday?"

"Are you surprised by this?" He grinned at me, and it made my pulse go wild. It was crazy sometimes, the power he had over me, and I didn't think he knew it.

"Not at all."

In no time, we arrived at the house. The place I'd chosen was a secluded one in the woods, and it had three bedrooms, a large deck, a hot tub, and nothing but me and Jasp for as far as the eye could see.

We went straight to the deck first, where what looked like an ocean of trees greeted us.

“It’s so damn beautiful,” I said. “Every day I wake up and I’m thankful to be alive when I see all this beauty around me.”

“Me too.” Jasper was standing at the railing, and I crowded in close behind him. I pressed my groin against his ass, wrapped my arms around his body, and rested my chin on his shoulder. “Maybe we could have our own place like this one day—back home in Ryland, of course. And I know you got your own house and all. We can stay there if that’s what you want, but—”

“Yeah?” Jasper turned around to face me and held on to my hips. “You’d wanna do that?”

“Would *you* wanna do that?”

“My mama might have a conniption, but yeah, I think so. We can buy our own land and build it ourselves like we did the cabin.”

“And since I’ll have some say this time, it’ll be even more functional than the house now.”

“Fuck you,” he teased, punching me.

“Ouch. Damn it.”

“You’re supposed to be nice to me. It’s my birthday.”

“Is it?”

“You’re not very nice to me.”

“I’m the nicest.”

I was surprised when Jasper answered me by leaning in and pressing his lips to mine. We kissed lazily, like we had all the time in the world, no fear of anyone seeing us. Here, at this house, we could just *be*, and damn, did I want that more than anything. I just wanted to live my life with him.

When he pulled away, his arms now around my shoulders, fingertips dancing along the tender skin of my nape, he said, “I like bein’ able to kiss you outside like this. At a house that feels like it could be ours.” He dropped his head back, the long

column of his throat right in front of me, and yelled, “I’m in love with Sutton Manning!” at the top of his lungs.

Laughter bubbled out of me, happiness suffusing me. “I’m in love with Jasper Finch!” spilled out of my mouth, voice just as loud as his.

“Woowee!” he shouted, and we dissolved into laughter.

We stayed outside for a little while, enjoying the fresh air. Then, after carrying everything into the house and checking out the master bedroom, we ended up naked, me jacking our cocks together until we came.

“Wanna play?” Jasper asked as we lay naked in bed.

“Sure.” I watched his tight ass when he walked across the room to get our guitar cases. He brought them both over, neither of us making any attempt to get dressed, just sitting on the bed with our guitars on our laps. “What song?”

“Hmm...” Jasper’s fingers strummed the strings as he tested the sound. “‘Cat’s in the Cradle.’”

“I love that one.”

“I know.”

We played the old Harry Chapin song, then lost ourselves in Bob Dylan’s “Hurricane” and “Mr. Tambourine Man.”

Eventually, Jasper said, “I wanna learn to play the harmonica. We can be our own two-man band.”

“I like that.”

We moved through the times some, from Queensrÿche to Pearl Jam. When Jasper started the next song, it took me less than a second to realize what it was: “Today” by The Smashing Pumpkins. I joined in, my fingers moving from memory, up and down the fretboard. I could count on one hand the number of times we had played this song together, though we both knew it well.

The first time had been when I’d gotten into an ATV accident and broke my leg. I wasn’t living with Jasp at the

time, but he'd been there when I'd wrecked and had brought me home from the hospital to his folks' place. I remembered him telling me how scared he'd been when I'd crashed, and when I'd gotten home, he'd played the song.

Had he been telling me all that time and I didn't know? Or hell, maybe *he* didn't know.

Since then, that song had marked other important days in our lives, like when we graduated from high school, and Jasper started it after telling me he wasn't leaving for college; and then again, later on, he played it when I agreed to move into the house with him.

And now, playing it together, when we'd found each other in a whole new way.

I smiled as I went into the lyrics, my voice not great but feeling the words deep in my chest, needing to let them out.

Jasper watched me. I knew he was even though I looked down at my guitar, worried my heart would break open and shatter if I turned to him.

As soon as the song was over and I was done singing about the greatest day I'd ever had, I set my instrument down, then plucked his from his hand and did the same to it, before climbing onto his lap, straddling Jasper and kissing him.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Jasper

WE WENT INTO a little bookstore in Asheville. Neither of us was a big reader, but we were walking around and going into all the shops, antique stores and stuff like that. Sutton had always been into that shit, finding little towns and exploring.

As we made our first turn inside the bookshop, my feet rooted to the floor. Right there in front of us was a big rainbow and a whole rack of gay books. LGBTQ books? I didn't even know what to call it. This kind of thing was so foreign to me and not something I'd thought a lot about before me and Sutton.

We were about ten feet away from it. There was a woman there with a teenager, pointing out one of the books and telling her about it. On the other side, a man was reading the back cover of another. I could tell he wasn't with the other two—he was simply there, shopping for books about himself...because he was comfortable in that. Because he knew it was okay. Because he was proud of who he was and...fuck, I wondered how he got there. I wanted that. Wanted to figure out how I identified and then stand strong in that. *How?* I wanted to ask. *How did you do it?* Sammy was doing it, being true to who he was. And I was pretty sure if it wasn't for me, Sutton would be able to do it. If not now, soon.

It wasn't fair to him. It wasn't fair to me.

But maybe it was because they knew their label. Sammy was gay, and Sutton had settled into bisexual. I had to be that, I guessed, but it didn't quite feel comfortable yet.

Have you let yourself feel comfortable? Have you given yourself permission to be who you are?

“You okay?” Sutton asked, because I was just standing there like an idiot, staring at the people and the display.

I’d never been insecure in who I was. I’d never much cared what people thought, and I hated that I did now. I just wanted... I wanted to be with Sutton and for nothing else to matter.

My heart was causing a ruckus in my chest, but I tried to ignore the banging and the blood rushing through my ears as I reached over and tangled my fingers with Sutt’s.

He did the same, taking my lead. “Jasp?”

“This okay?”

“Yeah. This is good.” He squeezed my hand in support.

The woman and her daughter turned around and smiled at us before walking away. We went up and down the aisles, holding hands. My insides were stuffed full of chaos, but I didn’t let that stop me, didn’t let it prevent me from continuing to make this the greatest day.

We went from the bookstore to the next store and the next, and I didn’t let go of Sutton’s hand the whole time. It wasn’t the same as doing this in Ryland, but it was a step.

“It’s a nice day. Wanna sit outside a bit?” Sutton asked. We still had time before dinner.

“Perfect sixty-nine degrees for my birthday.” I waggled my brows.

“You got issues.”

“You love me, so what’s that say about you?” I teased. “And yeah. You should buy me a pastry first.”

“Oh, should I?”

“Yep. It’s my birthday, after all.” I was planning on milking that shit for all I could.

He chuckled as we went into this little coffeehouse. I got a cinnamon coffee cake, Sutton a Danish, then went over to a

grassy area with lots of trees surrounding it and sat down on the grass. Well, he sat. I lay down and put my head in his lap. I wanted this day so fucking much, and I was trying not to care about anything else.

Sutton looked down at me. “I like this.”

“I’m pretty likable.” I winked, then got serious. “Why is it so much easier for you?”

“I don’t know that it is. I mean, some, but like I said before, I’m not pushing to take out an announcement in the Ryland newspaper. But...I’ve had more time, I guess. I realized how I felt before you did, and I’ve been dealing with these feelings for longer before I acknowledged it to anyone else. I got to figure out what that meant, which led to me realizin’ I’ve always been attracted to guys too.”

I growled. “I hate those guys.”

“Every guy I think is hot?”

“Yes, and not hotter than me, right?”

He laughed. “No, not hotter than you.” He took a bite of his Danish, and a crumb dropped onto my cheek. I plucked it off and ate it before eating some of my treat. “You should talk to Sammy.”

“I’m not ready. I’m sorry. Does that hurt you?”

Sutton shook his head. “How many times do I gotta tell you that I don’t care about anything else as long as I have you?”

Damn, I would never get tired of hearing those words. They made my chest feel full. “I’m a catch.”

“You’re okay.”

We ate quietly for a moment, me still with my head in Sutton’s lap. It felt perfect there, like his legs were made to be my pillows. “I remember this one time when we were kids... fifteen maybe? I can’t remember for sure. We were tryin’ to

pull an all-nighter, watchin' horror movies. You remember that?"

Sutton smiled. "We did that a lot."

"We did, but this time you fell asleep. We were on the couch, and your head tilted to the side and fell on my shoulder. I remember I just...I just couldn't stop starin' at ya. I was scared to death you'd wake up and think I was some kind of freak. But you were sleepin' with your mouth partly open. I could hear you breathe, and your hair tickled my face. I was afraid to move because if I did, I thought you'd pull away. That night, I didn't want you to pull away, Sutton. I wanted to run my fingers through your hair and see if it felt the same there as it did against my cheek. I might not've let myself acknowledge what this was or even seen it, but I've been feelin' it just as long as you."

"Shit, Jasp. I don't think you know what you do to me." He ran his fingers through my hair the way I was just talking about doing to him. "I thought I was gonna die that time with Miranda."

"Fuuuuuck, me too. I felt like I was gonna throw up when I left you with her. Every time we accidentally touched, it was like my heartbeat moved to the exact place on my body where our skin met. Like everything good I was feelin' lived right there."

"That was the first time I wondered what that birthmark on your hip tastes like."

"And now that you know?"

"If there's a heaven, it's in that exact spot."

We sat there and talked, Sutton playing with my hair the whole time. We had so many memories together, so many moments to reminisce about.

Eventually we walked to the restaurant for dinner. We'd eaten out a million times before, and I'd never wondered if people thought we were on a date, but I did then, and while it

was a little nerve-racking at first, it only took me a few minutes to be able to ignore it.

We ate, talked, and laughed the way we always did. Everything had always been fun with Sutton, but it was even more now. After Sutton paid the bill, our waiter smiled at us and said, “You guys make a good couple. I hope I have that one day.” And damned if I didn’t want to jump on the table and scream that I was in love with Sutton the way I’d done at the rental.

I wasn’t ready for the night to end, so when we walked outside, I turned to Sutton and said, “Let’s do it.”

“Do what?”

“Go to a gay bar. It’s early, but...”

“Yes. Fuck yes. I wanna go with you.” The excitement in Sutton’s voice jump-started my heart.

We sat on a bench and looked them up on his phone. There was one within walking distance, so we decided to leave the truck where it was parked and head over. I couldn’t pretend nerves weren’t like a group of angry bees in my gut, but I ignored it. We deserved this.

There was a rainbow flag out front, so there was no denying what the bar was. My feet slowed down a bit, and Sutt asked, “You sure?”

“Yeah, I am.”

We headed inside, some pop song playing that I didn’t know. I grabbed ahold of Sutton’s hand again, wanting to feel grounded by him, connected to him because that made everything in my world easier.

The bar wasn’t busy, but there was definitely a good crowd of people—mostly men, but I saw two women holding hands too. Some people said hi to us as we passed, friendly and like this wasn’t anything new. We made our way to the bar without a wait, and Sutton said, “Jack and Coke, and just a Coke.” The one with Jack was for me.

“Coming right up,” the bartender said. He had eyeliner around his eyes that made his blue irises pop. “You guys from around here?”

“Bout an hour or so away,” Sutton replied, putting his arm around me, and some kind of something twitched in my chest. I liked feeling as though I belonged to him, liked the thought of him making sure everyone knew I was his.

“Just out?” the guy asked with a smirk, and goddamn, how did he know? Before we could answer, he added, “Good for you. We’re happy to have you. We all deserve to be free. This one’s on the house.” He winked and moved on.

“I’m glad we’re here,” I told Sutt.

“I’m glad we are too.”

We took a seat at the bar, backs to it so we could see what was going on around us. I nursed my drink, not wanting to get drunk or need another. We watched men dance and kiss and talk. Watched them laugh and look like they didn’t have a care in the world.

“Show me someone else you think is hot,” I said, not knowing why I did.

“What?”

“Just show me. I’m curious.” I knew what kind of women he liked—curvy, soft, pretty, and I was none of those things, so I was interested what he liked about men.

Sutton sighed. “Okay.” He took a drink of his Coke, eyes darting around the small space. It only took about a minute before he pointed out a guy—backward ball cap, dark hair and freckles, stubble along his jaw, and wide blue eyes. He was wearing a V-neck tee that stretched tightly across his chest and upper arms, which were thick and muscular. “Him,” Sutton said. “I think he’s sexy.”

The guy was dancing by himself. I stared at him, studied him, how plump his lips were, and goose bumps danced down my arms when he licked them. His hands were big, looked like

they could be strong. I wondered what it would be like to have him on top of me the way Sutton often was, how the veins in his neck would bulge and what the bliss in his eyes would look like if he rutted against me. Not because I wanted him. I didn't want anyone except Sutton, but...I let myself imagine the possibilities, opened myself up to the parts of me I never knew were there. "Me too," I admitted. "Fuck, he's really hot."

Sutton laughed. "Simmer down, big guy, before I get jealous."

I turned toward him, buried my face into his chest and breathed in the sweat on his skin. God, I loved him, and I loved this, us, being there. "The bartender...I think he's kinda cute too. He's a little..."

"Softer," Sutton answered for me.

"Exactly." Okay, so this was new. Check me out. I thought men other than Sutton were attractive, and it was different kinds of men. Not just one. I was bisexual, like truly bi. Well, I'd always been bi or something if I wanted Sutton, but now I was feeling it, seeing it. *Owning* it. "I'm attracted to men too. Not as much as women, I don't think. Like, if I didn't love you, I don't know if I would've explored it. I would've kept on repressing it, but, yes, I'm attracted to them." I'd been lying to myself, I realized. I didn't think I'd noticed men before but I had to have, at least a little bit. I'd just never let myself see it.

Sutton smiled, like I'd made him proud. Like maybe he needed to hear that to believe we could really last. If I couldn't acknowledge who I was even to myself, how could we?

"I love you, Jasper."

"Then dance with me."

We set our drinks down, and that was exactly what we did—danced, held each other, let our hands explore each other's bodies, right there for everyone to see. Other men kissed, and it made my skin heat and my dick swell, so I grabbed Sutton's face and pressed my lips to his, let my tongue dip into his mouth and my arms wrap around his shoulders. His went

around my waist, and he squeezed me so tight, I thought he might kill me, but it would be an okay way to go.

We kissed while I swallowed down his laughter and tasted his happy tears.

This really was the greatest day I'd ever had.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Sutton

WE DIDN'T GET to ride the high of Jasper's birthday for too long. The day after we got home, his mama let us know we were expected to dinner in an hour. They were having the Prichards over. It was obvious to me why she told us when she did. She knew Jasper wouldn't make a scene that close to them coming over. That he wouldn't make up an excuse at the last minute not to be there because he wouldn't want to be rude to Lacey and her family.

He'd told me about having sex with her and how he'd accidentally let it out with his folks, which again, was a big clue on why they planned today and why they often brought her up in conversation.

I couldn't figure out if they knew about us or not. Bob definitely had more and more feelings lately about how much time we spent together. Sherry, I was on the fence about, but I knew they both wanted their son with a woman from what they considered a good, Christian family. It fucked with my brain some because they cared about me—Sherry had always loved me like a son—but the truth was, I wasn't family, and I wasn't what they wanted for Jasper. If it was between me and the future they wanted for him, they would choose that future, and I'd lose my second family.

"Fuck." Jasper dropped his head back, the two of us alone in the house. "Can we go back to Asheville?"

"I wish." And I did. Everything had felt so easy there. I'd gotten to kiss him and touch him in public, and he'd done the same to me.

"I'll put an end to the Lacey stuff after dinner tonight. I'll tell 'em I ain't doin' this again and that I'm not gonna be with

her.”

“Okay.” But damned if I wasn’t hoping he would tell them about us instead. Then I felt guilty for it because I was wishing for him to turn his whole life upside down and risk his relationship with his family for me. “It’ll be fine. It’s just one dinner.”

Jasper wrapped his arms around me, buried his face in my neck, and kissed the skin there. I couldn’t lie, that helped.

“Should we take a shower together to get ready?” Jasper asked.

“I think we should.” I smiled, trying to pretend that dread wasn’t weighing me down, that it didn’t feel like it was spreading through my body like some kinda virus.

We showered and got dressed. We stayed at the house until the last moment without being rude and not getting there before the Prichards. Part of me wanted to stay home, but I knew that would make them wonder even more. I was always involved with things like this before. I’d always been treated like part of their family.

Plus, I didn’t mean any offense to Lacey because I liked her. She was great. She didn’t know about me and Jasp, and none of this was her fault, but I also didn’t want to leave her alone with my man.

We happened to approach the house just as their car was pulling down the driveway. I wondered what Lacey thought about all this because from what Jasper said, she wasn’t looking for anything serious either. But then, I doubted she knew that Jasper had told his parents about them. It was normal for them to have people over for dinner sometimes, just to be neighborly and all. That was how it worked in Ryland.

Jasper and I stopped outside the house to wait for them. His folks came out onto the porch too, and I wondered if Jasper was as nervous as I was, if he felt the shift in the air or if his chest was as heavy as mine.

Her folks got out of the car first, followed by Lacey. She didn't live at home with her parents anymore, so they must've decided to come together.

The first thing I noticed was that she looked real pretty, in a flowy, summer dress even though it was only spring. She had closed-toe sandals on, and strangely, I wondered if her toenails were painted. I bet they were.

Lacey had long, wavy, auburn hair, freckles, and a pretty smile. She liked camping and hiking. She loved football and would hang out at the bar watching sometimes. Someone like her would be good for Jasper. He would be happy with her. And despite hating thoughts like that, I knew it was true.

"It's so nice to see y'all!" Sherry said as she approached them. She and Olivia, Lacey's mama, hugged.

Bob shook hands with Alfred. "Thanks for coming."

"Jasper Finch, it's been too long since I've seen you." Lacey hugged him, and Jasper hugged her back. My gut clinched, the back of my neck prickling.

"Good to see you, darlin'," he said to her. That kinda endearment wasn't anything new. Jasper always used endearments with women our age, but now it burned through me in a different way.

"Sutton. It's good to see you too. Your hair's getting longer." She ruffled my hair and hugged me.

"How ya doin', Lacey?"

She grinned. "I'm doin' just fine." Their folks started walking in, Lacey falling into step beside Jasper, me on his other side. "Why does this feel like a Southern setup?" she whispered softly, slowing down so the parents could get ahead of us.

Jasper's gaze darted to mine, then quickly away. "Probably because it is. They've been puttin' pressure on me to settle down. Think I'm too old, but I ain't looking for that. I mean, with no one. I'm not..."

The screen door closed, their folks going inside.

“You don’t have to tell me that. I said the same thing when we got together. Because I’m a woman, I’m supposed to want to get married and pop out babies? I’m not my mama,” Lacey said. Those words should make me feel better, and in some ways they did, in others they didn’t. Because if it wasn’t Lacey, it would be someone else. To most folks, the Laceys of Ryland would always be better for Jasper than I’d be. As long as no one knew about us, they’d always be trying to set him up or get him to settle down with one woman or another.

“Sorry. I just didn’t want to lead you on,” Jasper replied.

“Which is sweet of you, but I’m good. You gonna be one of those forever bachelors? We’re both bucking the system.”

Again, his eyes shot to mine.

Tell her, tell her, tell her. Jesus, what was wrong with me? Did I have the right to want that from him?

Jasper chuckled, clearly uncomfortable. “Guess you can say that.”

My chest tightened, but I tried to ignore it, as we took the stairs and went inside.

I felt like a third wheel right off. It was obvious what the Finches were thinking: they were pumping Jasper up to Lacey and talking about things they had in common.

I forced myself not to stay too close to him, not to let myself look at him too often or too long, afraid everyone would see in my eyes what he was to me. That the thought of losing him killed me, and how much I wanted to claim him, to tell them he was mine. That I loved him, and I’d always do whatever I could to protect him and take care of him. That I was a man and that wasn’t what they wanted for him, but no one would ever love Jasper the way I did, and wasn’t that what mattered?

We were all in the living room, waiting for dinner. I excused myself to the bathroom more than once. They

probably thought I was having stomach issues, when really, it was my heart. The third time I came out, Sherry was just telling us it was time for dinner.

Jasper's gaze snagged mine, and I could see the questions there. He wanted me to let him know I was okay, so I smiled, hoping that did the trick. I didn't know why this was getting to me so much. I knew we had to stay a secret. I knew Jasper loved me, that he didn't want Lacey, and hell, she didn't want him either, but I just...fuck, I wanted to be *right* for him in their eyes. I didn't want him loving me to ever be a burden for him.

Jasper walked beside me into the kitchen. Our fingers brushed briefly, and I knew he'd done it on purpose. Warmth spread up my arm and landed in my chest, but it froze when I saw the table. Even when they had company, Jasper and I had "our" side of the table. We always sat together. But now, as I looked at our two chairs, then at the three across the table for the guests, I realized that third extra chair on the other side was for me, not Lacey. They wanted me across from him. And when Sherry directed Lacey to where I usually sat, my suspicions were confirmed.

Jasper stiffened beside me.

"S'okay," I said softly, then went and sat beside Mr. and Ms. Prichard.

We were having fried catfish, mashed potatoes, gravy, green beans, and rolls. Olivia looked at me and grinned. "How's your uncle doin', Sutton?"

"Real good, ma'am. We been playin' guitar together a lot. Still workin' at the factory, of course."

"He's a good man," she said. "I never understood why he didn't get married. The ladies used to go crazy for him when he was younger."

"Olivia..." Alfred said.

"I'm not gossipin'! Just makin' conversation," she replied, and they all laughed.

“He’s happy on his own,” I lied. I wasn’t sure Uncle Brian had ever been happy in his life.

“Well, don’t you boys get any ideas like that. A man needs a good woman by his side.” Olivia patted my hand in a way I knew meant she cared and was trying to be supportive, trying to be like a mom, I figured, but this was the last thing I wanted to talk about.

“You can say that again. Been tellin’ Jasper it’s time to quit playin’ around and look to start settlin’ down. He ain’t a kid anymore,” Bob said.

“Nope. I’m a grown man, which is why I can decide when I settle down or not.” Jasper scooped mashed potatoes into his mouth.

“Jasper! You know that’s not what your daddy means,” Sherry said.

The table was thick with tension that wasn’t coming just from me. Bob cleared his throat and changed the subject... kinda. “What’s new with you, Lacey? I know you’re workin’ with your daddy, but you still doin’ that volunteering?”

They went back and forth for a while, basically praising Lacey for how perfect she was, and again highlighting all the things she and Jasper had in common.

I didn’t say anything else through dinner, didn’t look at Jasper, except once when Lacey laughed at something he said and put her hand on his arm. For her, there was no reason she shouldn’t do that, but it felt like a knife to my gut.

It had hardly been two months since Jasp and I got together, and lying about it was already breaking my damn heart.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Jasper

MY FOLKS WERE putting it on thick tonight. My small outburst didn't matter none. The rest of dinner ended up like the first part, and when we went into the living room to talk afterward, there was more of the same.

Sutton was hurting. I'd have to be a fool not to see it. If I tried to move closer to him, he moved away. I couldn't stop thinking about how this had to feel to him, how I'd feel if I were in his place. I didn't know that I wouldn't lose my damn mind. That wasn't something I was proud of, but it was true. I couldn't handle the idea of someone wanting Sutton with anyone other than me, of someone he'd slept with touching him the way Lacey did to me.

It didn't make things any easier that he wouldn't even glance my way. *Look at me, look at me, look at me. Let me know you're okay.*

"How about some dessert?" Mama said. "Jasper, we have three pies in the fridge in the garage. Will you and Lacey go get them?"

Because that wasn't obvious at all. In any other world, she would have asked me and Sutton. She never would have asked a guest. Did she think we'd fall in love on a romantic walk to the fridge? "Yes, ma'am," I replied, Lacey saying the same thing. When my eyes wandered over to Sutton, he was looking down at the couch, picking at the seam.

I'm sorry, Sutt. Look at me.

But he didn't, and I went with Lacey to get dessert before they noticed anything.

Lacey said, “I think our parents really believe they’re setting up a love match or something. There a reason they’re tryin’ so hard? Mine have been bugging me for years. They want grandbabies.”

Yeah, there was a reason, and a part of me wanted to tell her so damn bad, wanted the whole fucking world to know I loved Sutton and he loved me, but I didn’t know how to make the words come out. “Just how they are, I reckon.”

“Is everything okay? You seem a little down. Sutton too. You guys have some kinda fight?”

“No. Just a strange night, is all.” Shame immediately washed over me. I could tell her, I thought. I could trust Lacey. Sutton had Kendra to talk to. A few weeks back, she’d made it clear she knew, and Sutton talked to me about it. “Let’s get this pie. Sutt and I gotta go home soon.”

Lacey frowned slightly, but I ignored it. I opened the fridge and grabbed two pies, leaving the third for her.

I plastered a smile on my face when we went back in. The seven of us had dessert together, and not long after, the Prichards were ready to leave.

“We’ll have to do this again sometime. Wouldn’t that be nice, Lacey?” Olivia asked.

Instead of answering, Lacey said, “We’ll see you all real soon.” She hugged me, then Sutton.

We said our goodbyes. When the door closed, I went to the window and watched them head to their car.

“She’s such a lovely young lady!” Mama said. “I think she likes you, Jasper. I mean, she must if...”

“You’d do well with someone like Lacey,” Dad said.

I turned and looked at Sutton, at the way he stood in the corner, hands shoved into his jeans pockets. I thought about how special he’d made my birthday. How he’d dealt with tonight no matter how hard it was, as my folks went on and on and on about me and Lacey and...

“Stop it.”

“Stop what?” Mama asked.

“Don’t do that again. Don’t try and set me up. I don’t like Lacey that way, and I never will.” Though maybe I could if there wasn’t a Sutton, but there was, and that’s all that mattered.

Mama went on as if I hadn’t said anything. “I don’t know what’s wrong with you anymore. You haven’t been right for a long time. You used to go out, have fun, go on dates, but now you’re always locked up in that house, don’t go nowhere unless it’s the two of you. You need to figure out—”

“Nothin’!” I shouted. “I don’t gotta figure out nothing.”

“Why wouldn’t you want a woman like Lacey Prichard?” Dad countered.

I turned to Sutton, took in those eyes that were now intense on me. Thought about the way it felt to be held by him, how he watched me when he didn’t know I was looking, the way he smiled at me when he told me he loved me, and...he deserved better. He deserved more.

“Because I’m in love with Sutton,” I said, the room going deadly quiet. “I’m in love with him. Always have been and always will be. We’re together. He’s my...boyfriend,” I said, voice shaking, but at least the words were still coming out.

Mama gasped, and I knew she was crying. I felt the rage coming off Dad, the anger, but even worse, the disappointment.

Sutton wasn’t speaking, but he wasn’t turning away either. He looked...damn, he looked in awe of me. Proud. And I wanted that, to make him proud.

“I didn’t mean to tell you this way, but tonight wasn’t fair to Sutt. I don’t ever want to put him through that again.”

“Sutton, I’m gonna have to ask you to leave. I’d like to have a word with my family,” Dad said, voice hard and unwavering. You could feel the anger rolling off him.

“No, sir,” Sutton replied. “I don’t mean no disrespect to you in your home, but I’m not leavin’ unless Jasper wants me to go.” And then he walked over and stood beside me, shoulder to shoulder.

“What did you do to my son?” Dad snapped, taking a step closer to us. “First Sammy and that murderer, and now the two of you.”

I said, “Emerson’s been proven innocent, which you know, and Sutton didn’t do nothin’ to me. I’m in love with him, Dad, and I know...” Fuck, this hurt. My eyes welled with tears. “I know this ain’t what you had in mind for me, but he makes me happy. He treats me right. He’s my best friend. Ain’t that supposed to be what matters?”

“But you’re not... You haven’t... Have you been hidin’ this the whole time? Were you lyin’ about Lacey the way Sammy did Molly?”

“No. I like women a whole lot. I just love Sutton. Didn’t even admit it to myself until a couple’a months back. But he’s it for me, and that’s that. There ain’t no changin’ it.”

“What will everyone say?” Mama asked. Because that was what mattered. To her and to some other people, we were something to be ashamed of.

“I want you out of my house,” Dad said to Sutton.

“If he’s not welcome, then I ain’t either. I—”

“Mr. Finch, the last thing I want is to come between you and your family. That’s never been my intention. Jasper loves you and his mama more than anything. If you don’t want me in your house no more, I won’t come. And, Jasp, that don’t mean you never come either. They’re your folks, and they love you. I don’t want you to lose your relationship with them over me.” Sutton turned back to them. “There’s not a person in this world that’ll love him like me, that’ll treat him as well as I do. There’s not a thing in this world I wouldn’t do for your son. I’ll do everything in my power to make him happy every day of my life. Hate me all you want, but don’t ruin your

relationship with him because of me. He's a good son, a good man. He don't deserve that."

Dad didn't acknowledge Sutton, didn't say a damn word to him. He just looked at me with an open disappointment that broke my heart. "This ain't how I raised ya. I raised ya to be a man." He shook his head. "This is family business, and it should stay in the family. Don't go flauntin' your lifestyle choice all around town. I won't have it. You do that, and you're not welcome here anymore either, Jasper." He meant not to tell anyone. He meant to keep lying.

Then, without another glance in my direction, he walked outside to the backyard.

That was that, then.

"Give us some time to deal with this ourselves, Jasper. I just... We need some time to make sense of all this and figure out how to move forward." Mama wiped the tears from her face, tears because of who I loved. Why did it matter? Why couldn't I love Sutton and they just be happy for me? Why did we have to be something they needed time for or to figure out?

I nodded, took his hand, and we went out the front door, heading for home.

"Jasp," Sutton said, but stopped when I held up my hand.

"I can't right now. Wait till we get home."

I wasn't proud of the fact that my hand was shaking in his, that my face was wet, and with each step we took, it got that way even more.

I was pretty sure I'd just lost my family, and while they were clearly in the wrong, that hurt like hell. I didn't know if it was something I could deal with.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Sutton

THIS ONE TIME, a few years back, a friend of Jasper's dad brought over his wood chipper. He cut down trees for a living, and we had some on the property that had to go. We'd fell them and cut them up before they'd gone into that chipper, the herculean strength of the blades shredding the solid, hundreds-of-years-old wood, little pieces shooting out the other side.

That was how my heart felt right then, as if Bob had ripped it out of my chest and tossed it into that chipper, watching all the pieces scatter afterward. They'd always been second parents to me, but tonight they'd cast me aside.

And I knew it had nothing on how Jasper had to feel.

The second we were in the house, the door closed behind us, I tried to pull him into my arms. Jasper resisted, turning for the hallway. "We should get out of here."

"Where are we going?" I asked, following him to his room.

"Don't know...hotel or somethin'? We can't stay here." He went straight to his dresser and began pulling clothes out of the drawers and dropping them into a pile on the floor.

"Jasp."

"Maybe we'll just leave altogether. Take a page out of Sammy's book."

"Jasp." I stepped up behind him. Jasper loved Ryland. He didn't ever want to move.

"We can do what you always wanted and just go. See what's out there."

“Jasp.” I wrapped my arms around his waist, squeezed him to me. His whole body was tense, rigid from the pain. “It’s okay that you’re hurtin’ right now. You have every right to be.” He relaxed into me, gave me his weight, leaning back and letting me hold him up. “There ain’t nothin’ wrong with us lovin’ each other, and I can’t imagine what you’re goin’ through...but we can’t just go. This house...it’s your home. You built this with your own hands. We got a business we run. They’re your family, and they love you. I know it’s hard right now, but runnin’ ain’t gonna solve a thing. Give them time, like your mama said. They’ll come around. I know it.”

I had to believe that. How could they walk away from their only son just because he loved me? How could I live with myself if Jasp left his family because I couldn’t control how I felt about him? He might be ready to walk right now, but I knew Jasper. He loved them, and he wanted to make them proud. Family was important to him. Eventually, he would resent me for it, and I couldn’t let that happen. It would only make me lose him. This had to be fixed because I refused to let loving me break his heart.

“He’s never looked at me like that before, Sutton. Did you see it? Like I disgusted him...like I wasn’t his son no more.”

“I’m sorry.” I kissed the side of his neck. “I’m so damn sorry. You didn’t have to do that. You shouldn’t have felt forced to tell them. I didn’t mean to make you feel that way.”

“You didn’t. I wanted to. I didn’t want to deal with somethin’ like that again.”

“We’ll fix it,” I whispered softly against his skin. “We’ll find a way to make it better. Once they settle into it some, they’ll see there ain’t no one better for you than me. This ain’t our fault, and we shouldn’t be the ones to have to fix it, but you’ll regret it if you walk away right now. We gotta try.” I knew that down to the marrow of my bones.

His whole body started shaking, like a damn earthquake lived inside him.

I led him to the bed, and he let me. Kneeling on the floor, I took off his shoes, then stood to remove mine.

I turned on the lamp by his bed and the big light off before I laid him down, got into bed with him, and pulled him close. Jasper held me so tight, he damn near squeezed the air out of me. I didn't care. I'd let him crush me to death if it helped him somehow. He cried into my chest, quiet but like each and every tear yanked his heart out over and over again.

"I'm here. I got you. I love you so fuckin' much. There ain't nothin' I wouldn't do for you. I'll fix it. We'll fix it. They love you." I just kept throwing things out, not knowing how to make this better, not knowing how to help him.

Jasper eventually cried himself to sleep, and I watched over him, like I could somehow fight these battles for him, like I was his protector and nothing could hurt him while I was there...but it could, and it did. He was hurt for loving me, and there were no words for how that made me feel.

I wiped and kissed tears off his face, ran my fingers through his hair, brushed the back of my hand against his cheek, just needing to touch him. I wanted him to know, even in his sleep, that I was there, that I'd always be there.

It was always Jasper's first reaction to run, to go. I thought maybe he always had an itch beneath his skin, but when something bad happened or he was feeling stuff, that's often when he went exploring or hiking or something like that. We had that in common, so most of the time, we ended up together. Tonight, though, he'd wanted to leave his house. I was thankful that he'd listened, that he'd stayed.

And I was so fucking angry at Bob and Sherry that I didn't know if I could ever forgive them.

He slept for a good few hours, and it was after midnight when he stirred, looking over at me, eyes fluttering as he woke up, clearly still filled with pain. "I gotta pee," he said, trying not to show his sadness.

"Okay. Need help?" I wagged my brows.

“I know it’s big, but I can handle him.”

I rolled my eyes and watched as he went to the bathroom, closing the door behind him. The sound of it echoed through my head, felt like it was a wall between us, and all I could do was hope things weren’t going to change. That I wasn’t going to lose him, which felt selfish as shit, considering what he went through today.

He was in there for a few minutes. I breathed out a sigh of relief when he came back out in his underwear, his face looking as if he’d washed up some.

Jasper immediately climbed right back into bed with me, limbs around me like if he held me tight enough, if *I* held him tight enough, the rest of the world would go away.

“Sorry. It’s embarrassin’ that I lost it like that.”

“You don’t gotta apologize. There’s nothin’ wrong with cryin’. Maybe you should call Sammy. It would be nice to have some support, someone to talk to.”

“I got you to talk to.”

“It’s different.”

He shook his head. “I can’t, Sutt. Sammy Joe lived his whole life for his mama, he’s never had anything for himself, and now he has. The last thing I wanna do is be a burden on him, and it will be. Knowin’ him, he’ll bring his ass back here just to be there for me, and that ain’t right. Especially considerin’ I’m not sure I deserve it. I wasn’t there for him. I wasn’t all that nice to him. I called him a queer, and I get it now, the difference in puttin’ that *a* in front of it. I think...I think part of me knew how I felt about you when he came out, and I was jealous that he was brave enough to admit what I couldn’t even acknowledge in my own head...and because I knew that Aunt Carrie would be okay with it in ways Mama and Dad ain’t.”

I hated this world, hated that it had to be this way. “I’m so sorry, baby.” I kissed his temple, and somehow, felt him smile.

“I like that...bein’ your baby.” His fingers danced up and down my spine. “Need to feel close to you, Sutt. Need to feel connected...like I’m not all emptied out. Can you do it? Put your fingers inside me?”

Little pieces of my heart started to put themselves back together again. “Yeah, of course. In no situation will I ever say no to that.” I loved that he liked it so much, that feeling me inside him gave him something.

“I don’t know why I need it so much. Couldn’t ever say it to anyone but you.”

“As long as I’m breathing, you won’t ever need it from anyone but me.” I rolled over and got the lube from the nightstand. Jasper hooked his fingers in his boxer briefs, but I shook my head. “Don’t move. I’m gonna take care of you.”

He nodded and waited while I stripped out of my clothes. My dick was already half hard, pointing toward him. After climbing back onto the bed, I slid his underwear down his muscular, hairy thighs. The second his cock sprang free, I licked my lips, wanting to taste him. I loved sucking his dick, loved to feel the heat of his steely length on my tongue, the taste of his salty skin, and even his release, now that I’d begun swallowing it down.

“Fuck, I love your body.” I placed my hand on his chest, Jasper arching upward as I let it slide down his torso.

“I love yours too,” he replied.

Using the lube, I slicked up my fingers. I went down on my side, Jasper rolling to his, and then he lifted his top leg and hooked it over my hip.

We’d done this what felt like a hundred times, but it was still never enough. I sneaked my finger between his ass cheeks, rubbed his hole with the tip, circling it before I eased it inside. He immediately shuddered, or hell, maybe it was me and I couldn’t tell. It didn’t really matter. It was always like we were part of each other anyway, like Jasper was an extension of me and I of him.

“Fuck, I like this,” he said as I pushed my finger in and out of him. “It’s almost like I need it, like it makes me feel... whole.”

“I love bein’ the one who gets to give it to you.” I added a second finger, fucked him with them, sometimes rubbing his prostate and other times just letting him feel full, letting him know I was inside him.

“Why do I need this so much?” Before I could answer him, Jasper leaned in and took my mouth, tasting every part of it, nibbling my lip and sucking my tongue.

We lazed around together, just kissing and making out while I fingered him. His ass was so tight and hot, like it was made for me to be inside.

“So good,” Jasper said, pushing against me like he couldn’t get close enough, like he was trying to ride my legs, and damn, that felt good. Thinking of that made my dick harder.

“You don’t know what this does to me, how it feels to see you like this, knowing I’m the only person who’s ever been inside you and the only one who ever will. This is my hole, Jasp.”

“Fuck!” he cried out, his body vibrating, his dick rubbing against my thigh. “I need...”

“What? What do you need, baby? Whatever it is, you know I’ll give it to you.”

“Please.” He was breathless, so much want in that one word, in the way his body touched mine. “More.”

“This?” I asked, working three fingers into his ass. He pushed back against my hand like he wanted the whole damn thing up there.

“Fuck me,” fell from his lips, and we both froze. “I...” His eyes darted around, pupils wide like he couldn’t believe he’d asked it. I couldn’t either, but I wanted it so damn bad. And then his gaze met mine. There was clarity there, the truth

taking root inside him and Jasper being okay with it. “I want you inside me. Want you to fuck me. Need you to be closer to me than anyone ever has, as close as you can be.”

“Yes, God, yes. I might die. I swear I feel like busting out of my skin at just the thought of havin’ my dick in your hole.” While I knew this was partly about sex, it was about more than that. It was about connection, about having one other thing between us that we would never have with anyone else, something that was ours. It was about comforting each other and showing in a whole new way how much we loved each other.

“I got tested after Lacey and before we started this.”

“I’ve been tested since then too.”

Jasper nodded, and like with everything else, we were on the same page—we were doing this bare because that was another thing we were giving each other.

I grabbed the lube and slicked up my cock. My balls had never been so full. I was scared the second I was inside him, I’d shoot my load.

“How should we do this?” I asked.

“I don’t know. What do you think?”

And somehow, I knew this was another way to take care of him, that Jasper needed me to control this. “I wanna look at you while I’m inside you. I want to see your face when I make you come.”

“Okay.”

I grabbed a pillow and said, “Lift up.” I’d never had anal before, and yeah, I’d seen it in porn, but it was totally different to be doing it for the first time.

I shoved the pillow beneath him, tilting his hips up higher. Jasper spread his legs, pulled them back, eyes filled with fear and body trembling.

“I’ll make it good for you. Don’t care if it kills me, this’ll be good for you.”

“I know, Sutt.”

And damn, was I glad to hear that. Just to be safe, I lubed up his hole. I’d just had three fingers inside him, so he was open for me. I looked down at him, legs spread for me, face flushed, cock hard and leaking. He was the prettiest thing I’d ever seen.

“Tell me if it hurts or if you need me to stop.” I was on my knees in front of him. I took his legs and placed them on my shoulders. “You look so sexy like this.”

With a hand at the base of my cock, I leaned forward, pressed against him, watched as my crown breached Jasper’s body. “Oh God, Jasp. You don’t even know.”

“I do...fuck, I do. Gimme a little more.”

I went slow. It about killed me, but I did. His body was pulling me in, squeezing my cock, which felt like it hardly fit. I pushed the whole head inside, and we both groaned together. My prick was throbbing, little by little working its way into his body, until it was almost down to the base. When Jasper whimpered, worry shot through me. “Too much?”

“No...God no. It’s incredible. This pressure and fullness but like...I don’t even got the words.”

I couldn’t pretend I wasn’t proud, that hearing those things didn’t make me feel like there wasn’t anything I couldn’t do. “I’m gonna go the rest of the way in.”

“Yes. Now. Please.”

My hips snapped forward. A wave of pleasure nearly wiped me out before I got hit by another. His body molded to mine, his tight, hot hole made just for my cock. I was inside him, bare, and there was nothing like that feeling.

“Jesus, yessss,” he hissed, and that was all the motivation I needed. I pulled back, then snapped forward again, fucking him, my head spinning. I was buzzing, each thrust making the

intensity increase. His body moved with every pump of my hips, precum pulsing from his tip.

Jasper's eyes closed, his mouth open, the tendons in his neck tight.

"Open your eyes. Look at me," I ordered, and he did, gray gaze holding mine.

I wrapped a hand around his erection, jerking him and fucking him, and Christ, was there a world where I could live inside him? Where we never had to leave this bed and we could get whatever our bodies needed to survive from each other? From my dick inside him?

"Sutt...I'm gonna come. Shit, I can't believe I'm already gonna come."

"Me too," I replied, thankful I wasn't going to ruin this before Jasper could orgasm.

I sped up my strokes, matching the thrust of my hips. Jasper's hole spasmed, squeezed and milked my cock, making my balls tighten and my load shoot from them, my release filling his body. His cum splattered on his stomach, Jasper's back bowing upward while I continued to fuck him through both our orgasms.

As soon as I pulled out, I dropped down on top of him and pushed two fingers inside him, feeling my sticky release filling him.

"Yes. God yes. I'm tender, but I need you to still be in me," he said, and there was nowhere else I'd rather be. I craved being inside him in every way I could, always a part of him. I had a place in his chest, and my fingers and cock belonged in his ass.

I rolled off him, keeping my fingers in place and pulling Jasper with me.

"That was...there's nothin' like that," he said. "Stay in me as long as you can."

“I will,” I promised, and as perfect as that moment was, I couldn’t let it take me away. Our problems were still there waiting for us.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Jasper

I WOKE UP before Sutton. The lack of light from the window told me it wasn't dawn yet, but my internal clock told me it was close. Growing up out here, I'd spent years waking before the sun when I used to work at the Kennedy Ranch with Sutt, or when my dad would get me out of bed early to go fishing, Sutton there with us sometimes. Often the three of us would go camping. We'd watch the sun rise over the lake, poles in the water, Dad telling us stories, talking to us about life and the importance of family. The thought now made my chest fill with sadness, an infection working its way through me.

I sneaked out of bed. My ass was sore from Sutton fucking me and then keeping his fingers inside me for hours afterward. I thought about that as I quietly gathered clothes from the pile on the floor and slipped out of the room.

He'd fucked me, and I loved it. I craved it, like this unquenchable thirst I would never sate. I needed Sutt, I needed him to survive, but having him could make me lose my parents, my home.

I waited to feel some kind of shame about what we'd done. From how I'd been taught, what I'd been raised believing and what I heard all around me, a man was supposed to feel humiliated by that. It was wrong. That wasn't what men did, right? But it *was* what some men did. Why was I supposed to feel less than for taking pleasure in a certain way? For needing to feel loved the way Sutton made me feel. For needing that connection to the person I knew would never, ever leave my side.

There was nothing weak about that.

There was nothing wrong with it.

I didn't know how I'd come to that realization while I slept, but I had.

The very man who used to tell me about the importance of family would judge me for it, though.

Using the hallway bathroom, I cleaned up a bit and got dressed.

A blanket of darkness still covered the property, the barest of light peeking through. I didn't have a plan, not really, but when I reached my folks' back porch and saw my dad in a rocking chair with his coffee and a cigarette, I knew I was where I was supposed to be. My gut was a mess, but I ignored it, climbing the four stairs and sitting in the seat beside him.

Dad didn't look at me, didn't say a word as he lifted the cigarette to his mouth and took a drag.

"Mama's gonna throw a fit if she sees you smokin'."

He'd quit ten years ago, but either that was a lie or I'd driven him back to the habit.

When nothing but silence greeted me, along with the *squeak* of his chair, I sighed. "I remember one time, I was about ten, I reckon. Aunt Carrie was havin' a real hard time. Mama went to the house and packed up a bag for Sammy Joe and brought him here. We were goin' on vacation to that lake house, remember? We went a few times when I was a kid, and it was always the best time. Anyway, I was excited for it to be just me and Sutton. Sammy and I were never as close as we should've been. I see that now. He's family, after all. I was mad at Mama because she said Sutton and I had to play with him, and that everything we did, Sammy had to do too.

"He was younger than us and just different. I got upset and stomped outta the house. You found me and asked what was wrong. I said I didn't want to hang out with Sammy and didn't understand why I had to, and you said because it's the right thing to do. He's family, and there ain't nothin' more important than that. It's been seventeen years, and I remember those words. You always told me a man is judged for how he

treats others, and I spent my whole damn life thinking you followed what you preached. I thought you were the best man I'd ever known, and I wanted nothing but to be just like you.”

He kept rocking and smoking, not turning to look at me or saying a word. His hand was shaking, though.

“The older I get, the more I see that’s not true.” A tear sneaked out, but it was the only one, all of them having been cried out already. “We got real pretty words, Dad, but we don’t follow through. We might have taken Sammy to the lake house, but we never did enough to help him with Aunt Carrie. We never did enough to help her with her struggles either. And when Sammy said he was...said he was gay, you turned your back on him. I didn’t completely, but I didn’t tell him it was okay, that I supported him, that nothin’ had changed.”

Please, please, please look at me. Talk to me.

“And now you’re turnin’ your back on me too, all because of who I love. Ain’t that some crazy shit? That lovin’ someone can cause all this? That lovin’ someone can be a hard limit a person can’t get past, or hell, somethin’ they care about at all? I get that I’m not innocent. Before Sutt, I might have been right along with you, and I ain’t proud of that, but I get it now.”

Still nothing. I didn’t get it—how people talked, the things they made you believe, and how different those words could be from their actions.

“I’m gonna do what you taught me but don’t follow yourself. I ain’t walkin’ away from Sutton, but I ain’t walkin’ away from you and Mama either. I’m gonna be good to my family, love my family. Maybe I can teach you what family is supposed to mean. If you want me gone, if you don’t love me no more, then you’re gonna have to tell me that, you’re gonna have to tell me and Sutt to leave, because I go where he goes. You can hurt me all you want, but you can’t hurt him. You can ignore me all you want, be angry with me, but I’m not gonna stop lovin’ my family, because that’s what the dad I thought you were raised me to do.”

I waited. The sun was rising now, everything fresh and new.

His chin wobbled.

Talk to me, talk to me, talk to me.

But he didn't, so I stood. "I love him. That ain't ever gonna change. And I love you too."

I walked down the porch stairs, across the property, and back into the house.

"Hey," Sutton said, his voice tentative. His hair was wet, and he had a towel around his waist, clearly having just gotten out of the shower. "Everything okay?"

He meant me. Was I okay, because of my folks and because of what we did.

"I don't touch you," I admitted, ashamed of myself. "You rub off against me. You jerk us off. You suck me and fuck me, and I don't touch or pleasure you other than kissin'."

He sighed, walked over, and sat on the edge of the bed. "I know." And the way he said it, with the pain dripping off both words, I knew how much that hurt him. "I figured it was too much for you. I hoped maybe one day you would, but if not, I don't care. I got you. That's all I need."

"I don't ever wanna hurt you—not you, Sutt. You're the only person in this world who I know would never do that to me. I'm gonna work on that. I know it's wrong, but I gotta ask you, though, if we can keep this quiet for a little while longer. It's not fair, and I know I just said I don't wanna hurt you, and I don't. If you can't do it, we won't, but I wanna try and fix this with my folks, and I'm hopin' I can manage that if it's just between us for now. I need to deal with them before I can deal with everyone." I wasn't proud of that, but it was true. I was still figuring everything out, and I didn't know how I could do it with all the outside noise.

"Yeah, Jasp. Of course. Hell, you didn't have to tell your folks last night. This ain't a race, it ain't a movie or a TV

show. It's our life. This is real, and life is complicated."

Christ, I loved him, so fucking much.

"Thank you. And...I might not be able to give you that yet, but the things I can...I wanna start sharing those with you."

It didn't make sense, but it felt like I was moving in slow motion as I walked over to him, as I knelt between Sutton's spread legs.

"Oh fuck," came out of his mouth, all raspy and needy.

"I ain't even done nothin' yet," I said with a smile, hoping I looked more confident than I felt.

"I don't want to rush you. If you're not ready, then we can just keep goin' how we have been."

The thing was, Sutton would never rush me. He'd keep going forever like this if it was what I needed, and while I was nervous, I wanted to do this. Not only for him, but for myself. I wanted to have him that way. Somehow, it hadn't hit me until today, or maybe it was the same as my feelings for him, this thing inside me that had always been there but I hadn't allowed myself to see. I was curious. I wanted to know what he tasted like. How his cock would feel against my tongue. I wanted to love Sutton this way too.

"I know," I told him, "but you don't get to have all the fun."

"You sayin' you haven't been having fun?"

I chuckled. "You know what I meant."

And then I reached out, slowly opened Sutton's towel. He was already getting hard, but not at full mast yet. Because of him sitting, his balls were pushed up against his dick. He wasn't quite as hairy as me, but his pubes were darker, as was the fur on his thighs. This low buzzing started in my gut, along with a flutter at the base of my spine. His erection plumped and lengthened under my gaze. My hands rested on his thighs, and fuck, he was so goddamned beautiful. So sexy and so mine.

This time when I reached out, I wrapped a hand around his shaft. It felt like...well, it felt like a dick, the same as mine did every time I touched myself. Still, it was different too. The heat radiating off him felt different, he was thicker, more veiny, and the head was redder. My hold slid upward, and when I tightened my grip, a drop of precum pushed from his slit.

“Fuck, baby. I can’t believe you’re touchin’ me.” His voice was filled with lust.

“I let you have my ass last night.”

“And I fuckin’ loved it, but there’s something special about this.” Because this was more than me giving myself to him. This was me taking Sutton in the same way.

“I like it...the feel of you in my hand. When I stroke you, I can see the muscles in your thighs tighten.”

“Is it okay to admit it’s because I seriously might shoot my load already?”

I smiled, loving that it was me driving him wild this way. I was gonna like this. I was gonna want to do it a whole lot more, and often. “Don’t do that. You gotta let me explore.”

“You won’t hear me complainin’. You can explore me anytime you want.” Sutton scooted closer to the edge of the bed. He opened his legs more for me as my hand slowly worked his cock up and down.

“Fuck, this is so sexy. When I twist my palm around the head, you make these little sounds from the back of your throat.”

“A hand on my dick has never felt so good.”

It was my plan to keep making him feel that way. After licking my palm, I began to jack him off again. Precum dripped down his shaft, adding to the lubrication. His dick fit well in my hand. The skin was so soft, but his cock was hard as stone. It amazed me that it could feel so different from my own even though it wasn’t. How many times had I touched

myself in my life? I knew what a dick felt like, but this was Sutton's dick, and that mesmerized me, kept me in this lust-filled trance that was so damn overpowering, I didn't know how I'd waited this long to touch him.

He pumped his hips some into my hand, kept making those sexy little noises and whispering my name.

I licked my lips, craved the taste of him on my tongue, felt a hunger for him I'd never felt for anyone or anything in my life. Slowly, hesitantly, I leaned in and swiped my tongue at his crown. He tasted salty.

Sutton hissed, snapping his hips forward, his cock sliding along my cheek. "Shit. Sorry. I almost lost myself."

"S'okay. I like that you want me this much."

I did it again and again, just licking him, not sure if I was ready to suck him into my mouth. Part of me was a little jealous of Sutton, that he'd taken to all this so much faster than me, both physically and mentally. I wanted to take a bulldozer to the walls inside me, but I didn't have all the tools to do it yet.

But this? This I could do, so I let my tongue travel from his ball sac to his glans, then sucked him into my mouth.

"Jasp...oh fuck, baby." He was looking down at me, so much love in his eyes, and I kept my gaze on him and his dick in my mouth.

We didn't turn away from each other as I tried again, lowering my mouth farther down his shaft.

I'm sucking cock. There's a dick in my mouth. Thinking that only got me harder for him, made me want to be better for him.

I used my hand too, jacking him while I blew him. Sutton's went from my nape to my hair, massaging me as he said things like, "Just like that, baby. You're so damn good. Wanna live in your mouth."

I was so hot for him, loved the powerful feeling I got from being on my knees for him. Who knew kneeling could make you feel so strong? But it did for me because I was doing it for him. I was pleasuring him and letting my desire fuel me. I wasn't letting myself think of the role I always thought I filled, and instead let my insides lead me, just like I'd done when Sutton had fucked me.

This was perfect, everything I could want. I kept trying to take him deeper, ignored it when I gagged. My dick was throbbing, Sutton's swelling even more in my mouth. I wanted to do this forever, didn't want to stop, but then his hand tightened in my hair and he gasped out, "I'm gonna come."

I ignored his warning to pull off. I kept going, wanting to take everything Sutton could give me.

He called my name, his cock spasming in my mouth, his release coating my tongue. I did my best to swallow before he shot again. It tasted salty and different, but it was a part of him, and that was all I cared about. I kept him in my mouth until his breathing evened out, his orgasm subsiding.

"Come here. Let me make you come," he said, but I shook my head.

"Just wanna lie with you, is all."

"I can do that too."

We climbed into bed together and did just that.

PART THREE

Summer

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Sutton

“HOW’S JASPER DOING?” Kendra asked.

I was on the phone with her while Jasper was at the grocery store, picking up a few things we needed. I hadn’t seen her since Jasper and I started this. She’d invited us over a few times, wanting to meet him, but I always made excuses. I wasn’t sure how he would respond, considering she knew about us and Jasper wasn’t comfortable with people knowing. The only other people who did were his parents, and his dad hadn’t spoken to him in months. Sherry did, but she still made it clear she didn’t approve. She just wasn’t willing to never speak to her son again over it, the way Bob apparently was. Kendra was accepting, obviously, but Jasper hadn’t had any real positive experiences so far, which made it hard for him. And honestly, I was scared that we’d never be out because of it.

“Not great. He’s okay and all. I know he’s happy with me, that he wants this, but it’s killin’ him that he’s losin’ his family over it. He tries to act like it don’t bother him as much as it does. He was so determined to stick it out, to stay in the house and not walk away from his family, but the longer it goes on... it’s hurtin’ him, Kendra—a lot. And the guilt is eatin’ away at me because of it.”

We hadn’t had dinner at the house since the night he told them about us. That wasn’t how Jasper and his family had ever worked. They were close, leaned on and spent time with each other. Sherry would talk to him when Bob wasn’t home. Any time Jasper and his dad ran into each other on the property now, they either ignored each other or Jasper would try to talk to him and Bob would pretend he didn’t hear a damn word of it.

“It’s not your fault. Don’t let them make you feel guilty for their bigotry. That’s not your burden to carry.”

“Yeah, but I love him, and I hate to see him goin’ through this.”

“You can’t control them, and you shouldn’t feel guilty about it. You also don’t have to feel bad about wishing the two of you could be public with your relationship.”

I groaned because that was a sore topic. I did wish for more, but I wasn’t upset with Jasper because of it. I understood. He was trying to obey his family’s wishes so he could get close to them again. He was trying to win that battle before we opened ourselves up to more. But sometimes I just wanted to be able to hold his hand when we walked through Ryland. I wanted to put my arm around him when we walked to the truck after work. I wanted to be able to confirm to Uncle Brian and the whole fucking world who we were to each other. But I would never push him. Still, part of me worried his family was an excuse, that Jasper would never feel comfortable being bisexual or letting the world know he loved a man. And that hurt.

“I can’t believe this is so hard. Folks who haven’t gone through it don’t understand. I never would have before. And the thing is, we’re missin’ out on people who would be acceptin’ and affirmin’ because of the hateful people. Feels like lettin’ them win.”

“I know. I’m so sorry. I wish there was something I could do. He still won’t even tell his cousin?”

“Nope.” Though I could see his reasoning there. Jasper was right about Sammy—he’d come home and try to fix it; that’s how Sammy was—but I had to spend a whole lotta time trying to convince myself that was the only reason Jasper wouldn’t talk to him.

“Ask him about coming over. You guys work, stay home, or take off together for the weekend or a day, camping or hiking, doing your thing. But it’s important to be around

people who are in your corner. All he's seeing are his parents, who make him feel like he's doing something wrong. That can't be healthy."

I sighed. She was right. I just wasn't sure how to make Jasper see it. "I thought things were better, ya know? I mean, it's not something you see in Ryland every day, but I got eyes in my head. It's on TV and the internet. There are Pride parades, gay bars, and people being true to themselves all over Asheville and Charlotte, places like that. And while I know it's better than it used to be, I think there's a false sense of security, especially for people who aren't queer, thinking everything is equal now and some people don't have the need to still hide. It's stupid, I know it, but I've been lookin' stuff up, and people are judged, hurt, regulated by laws every fuckin' day. I can't understand it, and then I wonder if I would've been just like those people if it wasn't for Jasp."

"You wouldn't have."

"How do you know?"

"I just do."

The front door opened, and Jasper came in with a handful of bags. He grinned at me the way he did that made me feel like nothing bad could ever touch me, like it would all be okay because I had him. "I'm gonna go. I'll talk to you soon."

"Ask him about it."

"I will."

Jasper set the bags down by the door, came over, and flopped down on the couch, lying with his head in my lap. "Love up on me. I had to do all the shoppin' by myself. I deserve a medal."

"I did it last week."

"That's beside the point," Jasper replied, and I snickered before running my fingers through his hair.

"How did you survive it? All that work in the grocery store? It must've been torture."

“It was. I think you should spoil me because of it.”

“You always want to be spoiled.”

“Can you blame me?” he asked. “And you like doin’ it.” I did. “Were you talkin’ to your girlfriend?”

I rolled my eyes. “You can stop bein’ jealous. I think we all know who I want.”

“I’m givin’ you shit. It’s fun to see you get all riled up.”

I looked down at him, brushed my fingers across his cheek. “She wants us to come over. We can have dinner and hang out or somethin’. It’ll feel good to get out. We don’t go to the bar or meet up with any friends anymore. It’ll be good for us to be around someone else, someone who knows about us.”

Jasper sat up and tried to joke, “You gettin’ sick of me?”

“You know that’s not it. Think about how good it felt at the bar in Asheville that night.”

“Right before everything went to shit.”

“Those don’t have a thing to do with each other. Kendra’s great. You’ll love her.”

He cocked a brow, but I could see the playfulness in it. “Again with the makin’ me jealous. Your life would be easier with her.”

“And yours would be easier with Caroline or Lacey or any number of women. You got a great ass and suck a mean dick. I ain’t goin’ nowhere.”

Jasper laughed. When it came to sex, I was still always the one fucking him. Something about it, Jasper just *wanted*, and I was more than willing to give it to him. He was much more comfortable now with needing it too, and he did suck me off sometimes.

“You really want this?” Jasper asked, not taking my bait to lighten the mood.

“I do. She’s my friend. I leaned on her a lot when I was sortin’ out my feelings for you. But I also think it’ll be good for us.”

“Okay. But only if you put the groceries away.”

“Deal.” I smiled, feeling it in my chest.

“And cook dinner tonight.”

“Sure...”

“And do the dishes. And—”

“You’re askin’ for a whole lot.”

“I was gonna add that you gotta fuck me tonight real good too.”

“I’d do that regardless.” I moved over on top of him, pulling Jasper so he lay beneath me. “I’ll fuck you real good right now as well, then keep my fingers inside you...and every time my load tries to leak out, I’ll push it right back in where it belongs.” I rolled my hips against his growing erection. “I was also thinking about puttin’ my tongue inside you. I bet you’d like that, like me tonguin’ your hole until you lose your fuckin’ mind the way you do.”

“Fuck, yes. We totally gotta try that.” He wrapped his legs around me, pulled my head down, and pressed his mouth to mine.

We lay there kissing and laughing.

Groceries and dinner would wait.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Jasper

I SAT IN the passenger seat of Sutton's truck as he drove to Kendra's the following weekend. Sutton was rambling on, clearly excited, making me realize that we hadn't done much of anything with anyone since we started this. The weekend in Asheville had been great. The bar was fucking awesome, but even that was different in that it wasn't with people we knew. We weren't going out with a friend for a beer or having someone over at our place. Both of us had always been pretty social people, but our world had become so singular now because we were scared of people finding out our secret.

Well, I was scared. Sutt said he wasn't ready to come out yet either, but I had a feeling he was doing that for me. It made me wonder if he sometimes regretted this. If he was wishing he hadn't told me how he felt because it was too much work to be with me.

"You're quiet over there. You nervous? We don't gotta go. She'd understand."

"You don't gotta baby me. I know we don't have to." I wanted Sutton to have this. He deserved it.

He was quiet for a minute, then asked, "Are you ashamed of bein' with me?"

I'd known Sutton most of my life, and his voice when he asked that sliced through me. He was scared the answer was yes.

"What? No. It ain't like that. It's just different. I'm still getting my legs under me and all. The shit with my family don't help, but I'm not ashamed of you. How could I be? You're the best person I know."

“Okay,” he replied, but I could tell he didn’t believe me.

I reached over and put my hand on his thigh, felt the muscle tighten. I wasn’t doing right by him, and I hated myself for it. “I’m not. Most of the time, I can’t believe you chose me, that you put up with my shit. But then I look in the mirror and I see how hot I am, and it all makes sense.”

He laughed like I was hoping he would. “You ain’t *that* hot.”

“Aw, now you’re breakin’ my heart. I don’t know if I’ll ever recover.”

“You’re just tryin’ to get me to tell you how sexy you are. That I can’t look at you without wantin’ to jump your bones, which is basically the truth.”

“And it worked,” I teased, waggling my eyebrows at him. We had so much damn fun together.

Sutton turned onto a residential street, then parked in front of a small light-blue house, with a privacy fence around the back. “You ready for this?” he asked.

“I can’t wait. It’ll be fun.” And if I let myself, I was sure it would be.

We got out and headed for her door. Sutton had just knocked when it pulled open to reveal a beautiful redhead. She was all soft curves, which was definitely Sutton’s type—well, when it came to women.

“Hey, you. Glad you finally decided to come hang out with me again,” she said.

“Hey, sweetheart. Good to see you.” Sutton hugged her and gave her a kiss on the temple. They’d gotten close quickly, which I knew. He’d opened up to Kendra about his feelings for me, which meant she had to be special to him. I tried not to let the green-eyed monster in as I watched them together.

He pulled back, then with a smile on his face that just might be brighter than the sun, said, “This is Jasper. My Jasper. Jasp, this is Kendra.”

“Nice to meet ya, ma’am.”

“Oh goodness. Don’t you ma’am me. We’re the same age,” Kendra said before hugging me too. Damned if I didn’t like her already. “Come in. Let’s not hang out in the doorway all night.”

And then, because I wanted to touch him, because I wanted to show him I was okay with this and I wasn’t ashamed of him—okay, and maybe to stake my claim just a little bit—I reached out and took Sutton’s hand.

He looked at me, one brow cocked, and yeah, he knew what I was doing, but he liked it too.

“Y’all want a drink? Beer? Wine? Sweet tea?” We followed her toward the kitchen in her open-concept home.

“I’ll take one beer,” Sutton said. “I gotta drive home later. Jasp?”

“Yeah, I’ll have one too.” I inhaled, savory scents tickling my nostrils. “Smells good in here.”

“Beef roast and potatoes. It’s my specialty.” She winked, before handing me a beer. Her gaze darted to our clasped hands, and she smiled. Suddenly, I hated that I had to let go of him to twist the top off my bottle. “I’ve heard a lot about you.” Kendra leaned against the counter.

“Kendra...” Sutton said, like he wasn’t sure how I would respond.

“All good things I hope.”

“Well, you’re certainly as hot as he said.”

“Ah, shit,” Sutton replied just as I said, “Wait. What were you sayin’ in the truck? That I ain’t that hot?”

“Oh, baby, if he said that, he was lyin’. He’d go on and on about you, how sexy you are, and like fuckin’ perfect or something. He’s got it bad.”

“Remind me why I’m friends with you?” Sutton teased her. I fucking loved her. I could see why Sutton had taken to

her so quickly.

“You got it bad for me, huh?” It took me a second to realize how I sounded—like I was flirting with him, and...I was okay with that. Not because I was jealous over Kendra. Just because...it was fun...and we were a couple...and we were supposed to be able to do these things, weren't we? She was Sutton's friend, and she knew about us. We were safe here.

“You know I do,” Sutton replied, his voice slightly unsure.

“Because I'm so hot?” I took a swig of my beer, then smiled.

“Actually, I'm not sure why at the moment,” he teased.

“Don't believe him,” Kendra said.

“I don't.”

“I regret introducing the two of you now,” Sutton added, but I knew he didn't. The way his eyes sparkled and his grin kicked up even more, I knew he was happy. It was so damn easy to make him happy. I loved that about him.

“I love you too,” I joked, then brushed a quick kiss to his smile.

“You guys are adorable. I'm so happy for you.” Kendra grabbed her beer, walked over, and held up the bottle to us. “To love and finding happiness.”

We clinked our bottles together, Sutton and I repeating her cheers.



“COME ON, BABY. You got this,” Sutton said from beside me on the couch.

“You realize Jenga isn't a team game, right?” Kendra told him. “The point is to win. You want him to knock down the tower.”

“Nope. Because he's a good boyfriend.” I pulled one of the wooden blocks out, the tower wobbling but not falling over.

It had been a great night. We had dinner together, the conversation flowing well the whole time. Kendra was hilarious and fun and made me feel right at home. Afterward, we went out in the backyard to hang out for a while. I started a fire in the pit, and the three of us roasted marshmallows like we were kids. Now we were inside for game night, Kendra on the floor, the coffee table between us and her.

It was just like a night spent with any friend, like we used to spend nights with people we knew, only now we were doing it as a couple. We'd kiss and touch each other, and it didn't matter, just the way it shouldn't, and damn, did I want more nights like this. I wanted our life back, with this new part to us—the one of Sutton and me as a couple.

“All right, let's do this.” Sutton examined the blocks, trying to find the perfect one to pull.

“He always does this toward the end. Once, he literally took ten minutes to make a move on a game so he made the right one.”

“I was sixteen!” Sutton countered.

“That ain't an excuse,” I said playfully.

“I love that you guys have been so close most of your life. That's really special.”

“Nearly every big moment I've ever had he's been a part of,” Sutton replied. “Though if he keeps making fun of me, I'm gonna kick him to the curb.”

Kendra and I both laughed, and she said, “Somehow I doubt that.”

“Just you wait and see.” Sutton continued to look before gently tugging on one of the pieces of wood to pull it free. Just as it was almost out, the whole tower crumpled to the table. “Goddamn it!” Sutton cursed.

Kendra teasingly cheered.

“It's okay, sweetheart,” I told him. “I still love you even though you suck at Jenga.”

I felt his happiness, this magnetic energy buzzing off him and into me. “I love you too.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Sutton

THE SECOND WE stepped into the house, Jasper's mouth was on mine. The kiss was brutal in the best way—demanding, like he was trying to own me with his mouth, and I had to say, I was willing to be possessed by him. Hell, I already was.

We stumbled toward the bedroom, lips fused together, hands wandering, my heart a riot in my chest.

“Fuck, tonight was perfect. I didn't know I needed that until I had it,” Jasper said, pulling down the neck on my shirt and sucking the skin of my shoulder into his mouth hard enough to mark me.

I shoved a hand down the back of his jeans, cupping his muscular ass. “Same for me.”

Our teeth clanked together when we kissed again. My whole body was feverish, pressure already building in my gut and at the base of my spine. I was always so damn needy for him, like my body required him for survival, but no matter how much I got, it was never enough.

We parted only for Jasper to rip my shirt over my head, then roughly do the same to his. He sucked on my pec the way he'd done my shoulder, making blood rush to the surface, hot and potent. He licked my nipple, making me hiss, then slid his hand down my torso and grabbed my jeans-covered erection. “I love touchin' this now. Sometimes I just wanna lie with my head in your lap and suck on it, even after you ain't hard no more. Kinda like how I need your fingers inside me...this never-ending need to be close to you.”

“Fuck, Jasp. You wreck me when you say shit like that.”

“Sometimes I think it’s impossible for you to feel it as strongly as I do, this energy that’s always inside me that gets charged up by you. The thrum of it louder, the vibrations stronger, every time I touch you. Do you feel it? Like the whole world ain’t right if we’re not together?”

“I feel it. Christ, I feel it.”

We started working the button and zipper on each other’s jeans like the fastest one to get the other out of them won everything in the world that would ever make them happy. We shoved down pants and underwear, kicked out of shoes, jerked clothes off until Jasper fell to his knees, his nose buried deep into my pubes, breathing me in.

“Now that I’ve had you, I can’t get enough of you. I swear I could get drunk just off your scent.”

“Who taught you how to do all this dirty talkin’?” I teased.

“Just bein’ real.” He breathed in against my balls, then gave them a lick. He went to my cock next, lashed his tongue over the sweet spot under the head, kissed my crown like it was a precious gift and Jasper wanted nothing more than to worship it. “I spent my life not seein’ the beauty in this—not in receiving it, at least. Not allowing myself to admit the way my heart skipped when I looked at ya. Not acknowledging the beauty in a man’s body and the strength it took to be on my knees for one. You gave me that.”

I cried out when he sucked me into the wet heat of his mouth. Jasper had taken to dick-sucking like a pro. There was a sweet ache in my balls, and I ground my teeth together, already wanting to feed him the load in my nuts. He used his hand along with his mouth, and damned if I didn’t get lost in the sensation, in feeling him and looking at him and how much he wanted to pleasure me.

It was Jasper who kept his head about him, who pulled off and shoved to his feet. “I need ya to fuck me. I want your cum and your fingers inside me all night.”

“Yes, fuck yes.”

I pulled him down to the bed. Jasper immediately rolled onto his stomach, legs spread. I settled between his thighs, my cock jutting out hard and throbbing. When I massaged his firm ass cheeks, he groaned, opened up for me more, his body going lax. “Tell me how much you love it. Tell me how much you love it when I play with your ass.”

I didn’t know why, but it was one of the things that surprised me the most about this—about him. Maybe it was my own preconceived ideas on sex, pleasure, and masculinity. I hadn’t thought Jasper would ever let me near his ass, much less crave this the way he did.

“Love it. Want it. Need it. There ain’t nothin’ like it.” He pushed his hips up toward me, making his cheeks spread.

I leaned down, kissed one globe, then the other, before I let my tongue sneak out and tentatively lick his rim.

“Fuck!” Jasper cried out. “Do it again.”

So I did, over and over and over again, now with more pressure, softening him, eating him out like he was my favorite meal. I was ravenous for him.

I sucked on my finger, then probed him with it, watching his ring swallow it up, pull it in while I worked him, then licked him, trying to squeeze my tongue inside.

“Jesus, that’s good. You don’t even know. You’re gonna make me shoot all over the bed.”

My dick was leaking. I wanted inside him so bad. “You like that? You like my tongue in your hole?”

“Yes. Fuck yes.”

“Me too,” I replied, then dived in again, alternating between finger and tongue, fucking him until he was writhing.

“Give me your cock, Sutt. I need to feel owned by you.”

How could I deny him that? I grabbed the lube while Jasper pushed up onto his hands and knees.

“Is this okay?” he asked. “Want you to take me from behind.”

“I’ll take you any way I can have you.” And I would. Once we were both slicked up, I pressed my cockhead against him and eased in. “Christ, baby. You’re gonna kill me. Your ass was made for my dick.”

He pushed back against me, and I forced myself to stay still. Jasper pulled back some, then pushed his hole farther down my cock, working himself with it, fucking himself, taking what he needed from my body, this thing I gave him that no one else ever would.

He was stretched out around me, swallowing me and easing off, faster, then slower, my body nearly about to explode from the pent-up energy bouncing around inside me.

“You like that, don’t you? Fucking yourself on me.”

“Yes, so much.”

I reached around him, fisting his prick and jerking him off while Jasper continued fucking himself on my dick. Both of us were breathing heavily, my heart banging at my chest like it was expecting a door to open and be let out. His ass was so hot, so puffy and tight around me, that my damn brains felt scrambled.

When his ass spasmed around me, his hole constricting while hot spurts of cum pulsed from his cock to slide between my fingers, gooey and slick, I let myself tumble over the cliff too, free-falling into my orgasm, his name ripping from my lungs. I thrust into him, filling him, emptying my balls in the hole that was made just for me, until we were both wrung dry.

Jasper collapsed onto his stomach, me on my side. Immediately, I pushed two fingers into his hole, though I knew it had to be tender. It throbbed around me, and damned if that wasn’t the sexiest thing I’d ever experienced.

“Best sex I ever had,” Jasper said breathlessly.

I kissed his shoulder. “Me too.”

We didn't talk for a long while, the sound of our breathing and my fingers sliding in and out of his cummy hole lulling us both. Every now and again, I'd kiss his shoulder, lick the sweat from his skin.

Jasper said, "Next Friday, I wanna take you to Iris's for dinner. Then afterward, we should head to the bar. Play some billiards, or I'll kick your ass at darts or somethin'."

I smiled into his neck. "Yeah?" It would be the first time we'd be doing something like that since this began. I knew we wouldn't be going out as a couple, that no one would know, but right then, that wasn't what mattered.

"Yep. And your fingers ain't movin'."

I laughed, pumping them in and out again. "You're so bossy."

"And you love it."

"At least when it comes to being in your ass I do."

He turned to face me, his head resting on his arms. "One time, when we were fifteen, we went to the beach with my folks, do you remember that?"

I nodded.

"We were swimming, and you went under the water. Then you burst out of it, the setting sun behind you, the biggest smile on your face, and I thought to myself...this moment right here, I'm gonna remember it forever. You were the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. You still are. I got a million little moments like that inside me, and I remember every one."

"Christ, Jasp." I leaned down and kissed him. "I remember every moment too."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Jasper

“YOU’RE LOOKIN’ AT that menu as if it hasn’t been the exact same for at least four years,” I said, sitting across from Sutton at Iris’s. We’d been coming here again at least once a week ever since we’d gone to Kendra’s house, well over a month now. It wasn’t like we were holding hands and showing folks we were together, but damn, did it feel good to start going out around Ryland again. I’d been so freaked out that people would take one look at us and know we were a couple that I’d denied us both.

“Sorry if I don’t eat the same thing every time I come. Also, you know exactly how long the menu has been the same?”

“I don’t have the same thing every time,” I countered. “And no, smart-ass. It was sarcasm.”

“Okay, one of three, and you rotate ’em. Your sarcasm could use some work,” Sutton teased.

“Can’t help it if I know what I like.” I winked, and Sutton’s nostrils flared in this way they did when I turned him on real good. “None of that here,” I said softly.

“You started it.”

“That’s cuz you make it easy.” He rubbed his foot against my ankle, which made me smile.

Sutton was the one to look away first when our waitress, Ms. Dana, approached and said, “Molly’s on break, so I figured I’d grab the two of you real quick. How you boys doin’?”

Ms. Dana was in her sixties and had been working at Iris’s my whole life. Her husband had died when they were young,

and she'd never remarried, just spent her time working and volunteering with her church.

"We can't complain," I said. "How are you, Ms. Dana?"

"Takin' each day as they come. That's all anyone can ever do. I meant to ask you guys, I was thinkin' of gettin' some stone work done in my backyard. My patio is cracked, and I wanna put in a new one with a path through the yard."

"We can do that for ya," Sutton replied, then asked her a few questions.

I sat back and let him do his thing. Sometimes I just liked to watch him with people. That might sound creepy, but he was good with them. Sutton made everyone feel at ease and as if they had all his attention all the time. I didn't know if he knew what a good quality that was.

When they were finished, she said, "I gotta say, I always smile when I see the two of you in here or out workin' together around town. You boys have somethin' real special, and I hope you know that."

She could've been talking about friendship. It fit, but something about how she'd said it told me she wasn't. I waited for it to bother me, for the nerves to kick in, but they just... didn't. I was so damn tired of caring. Of spending every day in fear or only showing parts of myself. It was like a whole side of me had to always stay hidden, and because of what? Because people were assholes and bigots? Because my dad who hadn't spoken to me in months was ashamed and I was trying to win him back by respecting his wishes? Because I thought if I kept trying to talk to him or helping Mama at the house, he would realize how much family meant to me and wouldn't be hateful anymore? It was exhausting.

"Thank you, ma'am," I answered. "I'm lucky he puts up with me."

Sutton's gaze snapped to mine, likely because this conversation sounded like we were together.

“I’d say you’re both pretty lucky. My Norman, he was my best friend. You never saw one of us without the other. I still miss him.”

“I’m so sorry,” Sutton said.

“Me too. But I’m just blessed I had him. Anyway, you don’t want to chat with me all evenin’. What can I get you boys?”

Sutton got a Philly cheesesteak, and I got a pulled-pork sandwich. When she was out of sight, Sutton said, “That was a surprise.”

“Just don’t know how much longer I’ll have the energy to keep pretendin’, is all. Was that okay with you?”

“It was more than okay.”

I nodded, his foot still rubbing against my ankle. I leaned back in the booth, and we talked about our upcoming workweek and fitting Ms. Dana in so we could go give her an estimate.

When our food came out, it was Molly who brought it. She’d let her blonde hair grow out a bit since Sammy left. Her cheeks were slightly pink like she’d been spending time in the sun. Molly usually worked mornings, so I wasn’t used to seeing her here much in the evening.

“Hey, Sutton, Jasper. Where have you two been hiding?”

We weren’t ever real close to Molly. She was just my younger cousin’s best friend and then his girlfriend, only that hadn’t been true at all. It made my gut clench when I thought about how long Sammy had hidden who he was, how long he’d had to lie and pretend his relationship with Molly was something different than it was. Sutton and I were essentially doing the same, only we hadn’t done it for years, like Sammy and Molly. I was pretty sure it would kill me to do that.

“We’ve been at home a lot, or hiking and stuff like that. How’s Sammy?” Sutton asked.

Her whole face glowed when she said, “He’s doing great. I miss him somethin’ terrible, but this is good for him. I know you’ve texted with him some, but he and Emerson have been traveling all over. They’re in Colorado now. They’ve been there for a while and seem to like it. I don’t know if that’s where they’ll land for good, though.”

“I’ve been meaning to call and actually talk to him. I got a few things I want to say—to him and Emerson both. I hate that we weren’t fair to Emerson, that we believed he did those terrible things, and for Sammy, well...you know...he shouldn’t’ve had to hide who he is.” Molly’s mouth fell open, and I chuckled. “It ain’t that surprisin’, is it? I’m not that big a jerk.”

“No, Jasper. You’re not. Sammy’ll be happy to hear that from you.” The bell over the front door jingled, and she said, “Oh, look. Your mama and daddy are here.” She waved at them.

I turned to see them. Dad’s eyes locked with mine, his jaw setting as he saw me and Sutton together. Mama smiled, took his arm, and the two of them headed over. They really didn’t have a choice now. If they didn’t at least come talk to us, people would start talking, and by tomorrow, there would be a hundred rumors about something going down in the Finch family.

“We didn’t know y’all were comin’ here tonight,” Mama said.

“We felt like gettin’ out of the house,” I replied, then looked at Dad, waiting for him to say something, pleading for him to, because no matter what, I still loved him. I still wished we could have a relationship. I wanted things to change.

We were all quiet for a moment, Molly too. She should be getting back to work, but I figured she was curious, that maybe she could sense the tension between us or had noticed that my own dad wouldn’t look at me.

“We were just telling Molly how happy we are to hear that Sammy and Emerson are doin’ well.” Baiting them had never been me, but I couldn’t hold back. I wanted them to know we hoped the best for Sammy, and that Sutt and I were the same and that wasn’t ever gonna change.

“That’s what Carrie’s been sayin’,” Mama replied.

“Oh, I didn’t realize since we haven’t been invited over for dinner when she comes.”

“Jasp,” Sutton said softly.

I was a little surprised at myself, but something had definitely gotten into me.

“How ya been, Dad? We’ve been real good, in case you’re wonderin’.”

“Jasper.” It was Mama warning me this time.

“We’ll let you two get back to your dinner,” Dad said, then headed for the hostess.

“Just a family disagreement. You understand that,” Mama said to Molly, then, “I love you, Jasper.” And she did, just not enough to tell her husband to get his shit together and accept his son.

“I love you too,” I replied, watching her walk away from me too. When I turned back to them, Sutton gave me a sad smile. To Molly, I said, “I’d appreciate it if you didn’t tell Sammy about that. Like I said, I gotta talk to him.”

“Of course. I’m not sure what’s going on, but I’m here if you need anything.”

“Thanks, Molls.”

Sutton watched me, our food still sitting between us, untouched. I didn’t speak right away, trying to sort through what I wanted to say, what I wanted to do. As soon as the thought entered my head, it immediately calmed something inside me I hadn’t even realized was so riled up. “I think we should start looking for a new place. One that’s just ours, that

we choose together, like we talked about. I don't want to leave Ryland because—”

“I don't want to leave either. This is our home. If we ever go, it should be because we wanna see what else is out there, not because we were pushed away.”

I nodded, feeling lighter. I was still hurting, of course. There was still a whole mess of things that felt up in the air, some that scared me, and lots of decisions we had to make, but this one? This one felt right.

My dad had been telling me for a long time now to grow up, to get serious, and while his idea of that was a wife while living on his property, it wasn't mine. Not anymore. It was Sutton and me, on our own. Making a life together that was all ours by design, with no say from anyone else.

“Are you sure? That's your home, Jasp.”

“Nah, that ain't nothing but four walls and a roof. You're my home,” I told him, and Sutton's face softened. “Don't look at me like that. You're gonna get me all mushy in the middle of Iris's. Eat your dinner so we can get the hell out of here.”

He didn't argue with that.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Sutton

“YOU KNOW YOU can bring Jasper when you come over, right?” Uncle Brian said as we sat in his living room. We’d still been trying to spend time together more regularly, though with how busy work was, plus how we’d started looking for a place, things had been hectic.

“Yeah, I know.” I couldn’t say why I didn’t bring him over. Maybe because this time with Uncle Brian felt like we were connecting in ways we hadn’t before. Something about the way he smiled at me when I’d show up, how he got lost playing guitar with me, and the deeper discussions we had lately, told me he might need this even more than I did. Hell, I’d always had Jasper, and he had...no one but me.

I said, “I’m in love with him. He’s my...boyfriend? Partner? Hell, I don’t even know what word to use. None of them seem strong enough for what he is to me. I know you’ve hinted before that you know, but I wanted to tell you, wanted to make sure you know I trust ya with that.”

“Yep, I figured.” Uncle Brian took a drag of his cigarette. “I ain’t like those folks who care ’bout shit like that. I’m just surprised it took the two of you as long as it did.”

I laughed. “Me too. Guess we’re stubborn like that. His parents don’t like it. His dad hasn’t spoken to him in months. His mom does, but she also doesn’t hide the fact that she’d rather he was with a woman, any woman and not me. Jasper’s been determined to fix things. He tries to talk to his dad, but... nothing. We’re keepin’ us a secret partly because it’s what his dad wants. I think...” I strummed a few chords on the guitar. “I’m afraid that ain’t the real truth, though, and that Jasper just can’t handle the thought of everyone knowin’. Then I feel

guilty because he's been doin' a whole lot better. Ms. Dana from Iris's found out, and Molly's wonderin' something. Kendra knows. We've also been lookin' for a place of our own to move out of the house on his folks' property. That just makes me feel bad too. That's his home."

Uncle Brian didn't respond right away. He just kept smoking his cigarette like I hadn't poured my heart out to him. But Christ, I was glad I had him. That I could talk to him this way.

"Do you think my mom and dad..."

"They wouldn't've cared. I've never known anyone who loved the way your mama did. She gave everyone she cared about her whole heart, like hers had more capacity than most. And there was no one she loved more than you and your sister. She wanted the world for you both. She was a romantic. She would have been your biggest champion. I can promise you, she would've told Bob Finch where he could stick it."

Another laugh fell from my lips, this one both sad and happy. I wished she were there. I wished they all were. "And my dad?"

Uncle Brian lit up another cigarette. "Your mama made my brother a better man. It didn't happen overnight. He was a bit of a troublemaker. Our folks didn't know what to do with him growing up. Nadine and I had been friends our whole lives, as you know. Me and your mama were nineteen when I got a place with Phil. He was fuckin' up a lot, drinkin' too much. I tried to help, but I couldn't get through to him, yet somehow, your mama could. She'd come over to see me, and the two of them would get to talkin'...and, well, eventually he got his shit together and they fell in love and all."

"But you didn't know, right?"

"Nah, they started spendin' time together without me. I didn't know until Nadine told me. It was right before she got pregnant with you."

“Oh.” I was kinda surprised she hadn’t told him sooner. She’d been twenty-one when she had me, and she and my dad not even married yet. They’d been so damn young when they’d died.

“Anyway, the Phil he was before your mama, I’d question him, but not the one he became after her, so yeah, he would’ve been okay with it. He just wanted you happy.”

My eyes were blurry, my pulse pounding in my ears. I didn’t realize how much I needed to hear that—that they wouldn’t have cared, that nothing would have changed.

That they would have loved me.

What kind of broken world was this, where that was even a question?

“Earlier,” Uncle Brian went on, “you said you feel guilty about Jasper movin’ out. It’s okay to feel that way, but don’t let it change nothin’. He chose you. He loves you. That ain’t the ending everyone gets. That other person don’t always love us back.”

My gaze traveled to a photograph on the bookshelf. It had been there as long as I could remember. The frame was old, the photo faded. It was of Uncle Brian and my mom. They were nineteen or so in it. I knew it was before my parents got together. Uncle Brian had his arm around her. She was laughing at something, pure joy on her face. She’d been good at that—being happy. Uncle Brian’s attention was all on her, like she mesmerized him. Like he could meet every person in the whole world and none of them would be to him what she was.

It was the way I looked at Jasper.

He’d been in love with her, and I’d never seen it. Jesus Christ, he’d been in love with her, and she’d ended up marrying his brother, and then they’d died, and he’d spent his life raising their son. “Uncle Brian—”

“It’s gettin’ late. You should probably head on out. Bring Jasper with you next time, okay?”

He stood, and I did the same. I wanted to ask him about it. Hell, I had a hundred questions I wanted to ask: Had they ever been together? Had she known? Had Dad known? But I couldn't hurt him that way. He'd made it clear the conversation was over.

"I will," I finally replied. "And thank you...for everything."

"That's what family is for. I gotta take care of somethin'. You can see your way out."

Uncle Brian disappeared down the hallway. Without any other choice, I packed up my guitar and left.



JASPER PULLED DOWN the driveway right after me. I leaned against my truck, arms crossed, watching him with a smile on my lips as he parked beside me, got out, and walked over.

"What's that look for?" he asked.

"Nothing. I'm just way happy to see ya." But then that immediately made me think about Uncle Brian, how he said Jasper and I loving each other wasn't the ending everyone got, that they didn't always love you back.

"Hey, now. What's wrong?"

I was surprised when Jasper grabbed onto my hips, stepping closer to me. Sure, we were at home and no one was around, but his parents could look out and possibly see us. He didn't typically do this outside the house.

"Nothin'. I mean, I really am happy to see you. Uncle Brian said something that makes me believe..." I rubbed a hand over my face. "Hell, I think he was in love with my mama."

Jasper's eyes widened. "Why?"

I related some of the things Uncle Brian had said to me over the past months, the history of how he and Mama were

the best of friends before she ended up with my dad, and then told him about the photo he'd kept up all these years.

“Damn. That’s big. Are you okay?”

I nodded. “I am. Feel bad for him, is all. And I got questions, of course. But mostly it’s just sad...and yet feelin’ sad is complicated because it was my dad and there ain’t no me without him and Mama. They were crazy about each other.”

“I’m sorry.” Jasper pressed a quick kiss to my lips, then let our foreheads do the same, not moving.

“You’re bein’ very affectionate in public.”

“We ain’t in public.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I’m tired, Sutt.”

“Me too.” I took his mouth tenderly, and we let our tongues slowly move together, taste and give. When we parted, Jasper kept his forehead against mine, and I said, “I think part of why it gets to me so much is because if you hadn’t felt the same, I would’ve been him. I would’ve been alone, watchin’ you fall in love, get married, have kids... Just spendin’ my life quietly lovin’ you.”

“Jesus. You ain’t never gonna be without me again. You won’t ever have to know what that feels like.”

“I know.” I smiled.

At the sound of rocks crackling under tires, we both turned to see Carrie’s car pull up in front of Jasper’s folks’ house.

“We should go say hi.” When I cocked a brow at him, Jasper said, “She’s my aunt. I don’t ever go see her when she’s visitin’ so I don’t upset the balance. I ain’t doin’ that no more.”

I nodded, trusting him to make the best decision.

We didn't hold hands or nothing as we made our way to the other house. Carrie saw us, gave us a big grin, and waited as we made our way over to her. She looked good since she'd gotten home from rehab all those months ago. Her eyes were brighter. She was a little fuller, like she was eating better. Her skin had a healthy glow to it.

"Well, if it isn't my favorite nephews!" she said, making my heart jump. I liked hearing that, liked that she would consider me that way. It wasn't something Carrie had said before, but she'd been a part of my life too for as long as I could remember. And yet it was also a little strange because I was hoping to end the night with my dick in Jasper's ass, which wasn't very brotherly.

"Hey, you." Jasper hugged her. "You look better every time I see ya."

"Thank you. I feel better than I have my whole life. And you've been lookin' good too—happy."

"I am," Jasp replied.

She gave me her attention next. "Good to see you too, Sutton."

"Thank you, Ms. Carrie." We hugged as well. The screen door squeaked behind us just as we parted. When I turned, there were Jasper's parents, and my spine immediately stiffened.

"I'm so glad you're all here! I got the best news!" Carrie clapped her hands together. "Let's go inside so I can tell you!"

She went for the stairs, Jasper lingering behind, so I did the same. His gaze shot to his dad, who stood there watching him.

Carrie got up the porch stairs before she noticed Jasper and I weren't following. She looked at us and frowned before turning toward her sister. I wasn't surprised Sherry hadn't told her anything. Carrie stuck by Sammy. It likely made Sherry see how wrong she was for not doing the same.

“Jasper, Sutton, the two of you comin’?” Sherry asked, trying to save face like always. God forbid anyone knew they were a real family with fucked-up issues just like everyone else.

It took Jasper a second to respond, but then he said, “Yep, we’re comin’,” probably because his dad didn’t argue.

Bob went into the house, followed by the sisters, then me and Jasp. We weren’t in there but a second when Carrie said, “Sammy Joe and Emerson are here! They didn’t say a word to me, just surprised me yesterday by showin’ up at my place. They moved back, gonna get a farm goin’ at Emerson’s house, and they got married! My baby boy is a husband, and he’s home, and I couldn’t be more thrilled!”

The four of us just stood there for a moment, stunned, albeit for different reasons, Sherry and Bob staring at me and Jasper. All I could focus on was Carrie’s happiness—it didn’t matter that Sammy had a husband now; all that mattered was that her child was home and that he was happy. That was the most important thing, and I wanted that for Jasper so damn bad, I ached with it.

“What’s goin’ on here?” Carrie asked, gaze darting between us and Jasper’s folks.

“Nothin’. It’s just a bit of a surprise, is all,” Sherry said. “And you know we have complicated feelings about Sammy and—”

“If you finish that sentence, I’m walkin’ outta this house. That’s my son, and you’re my sister. I don’t wanna choose, but if I have to, it’ll be him,” Carrie said, more strength and conviction in her voice than I’d ever heard from her. “This is important to me, and I wanted to share it with my family. I wasn’t always there for Sammy the way I should’ve been, and I’ll be damned if I won’t be now, but if you can’t say the same, then we don’t have anything else to talk about.”

“Of course we want Sammy to be happy,” Sherry said, but that wasn’t really a response to what Carrie had said.

It must not have clicked with Carrie, though, because she seemed relieved. “Thank you.”

“I’m real happy for Sammy,” Jasper said. “And I can’t wait to get to know Emerson better. Sutton and I will go see them. We got some good news of our own.”

I froze, blood rushing through my ears. I knew exactly where this was going.

“Jasper,” Sherry warned, but he ignored her.

“Sutton and I, we’re together too. We’re lookin’ for our own place, thinkin’ about buyin’ a piece of property for ourselves and buildin’ there.”

I swear I held my damn breath, waiting for Bob to yell or call us names, tell us to get out and that we weren’t welcome in his house at all now. But he just turned and walked out of the room, something we’d become familiar with.

“Oh, Jasper...Sutton, I’m so happy for ya both.” Carrie walked over and hugged us, squeezing extra tight, like she could give us enough love for Sherry and Bob too. She’d gotten a bad rap, I thought. She’d done some things that weren’t great, I couldn’t deny that, but she’d been sick. She was an alcoholic, but now she was sober and doing her damndest to stay that way and live every day the best she could.

“Thank you, Aunt Carrie,” Jasper said. “We appreciate the support. I think we’re gonna head out, though. We’ll keep you posted on where we land. We’ll have you over sometime.”

“I’d like that. The two of you are always welcome at my house, I hope you know that.” She squeezed his hand, a sad downward curl to her lips.

“We know it. I’d appreciate it if ya didn’t say anything to Sammy about this. I wanna talk to him myself,” Jasper added.

“Of course.”

As we headed out, we heard a quiet but firm, “Sherry, what is *wrong* with you?”

CHAPTER THIRTY

Jasper

A FEW DAYS after I told Aunt Carrie about me and Sutton, we ended up heading to Sammy's place. Things were a little awkward with me and Sutt. Not bad, just...he worried that I was jumping in and doing things I would regret. I'd been so determined to fix things with my folks, and now I was throwing all that out the window. When I'd told Carrie, I knew Dad would be pissed. I was going directly against what he asked, but if he couldn't even look me in the eyes, why was I still trying to make him happy? Why did I care when he didn't?

I'd hit my limit, and it felt good even if it was a bit of a struggle too. I wanted my folks to react the way Carrie had. I wanted my family, and that was why Sutton worried. He felt guilty, but it wasn't his fault. It was theirs.

"We should have called first," Sutton said as we made our way down the driveway.

"Yeah, why didn't we do that?" I teased.

He rolled his eyes, but he was smiling. "Because my boyfriend is an idiot?"

"You called me your boyfriend."

"We've done it before. Is there somethin' else I should say instead?"

"Nope. Just like hearin' it, is all. And I didn't call because I'm a bit of a baby, not because I'm an idiot, though I'm that too." I chuckled.

"No, you're not, and it'll be okay. You already told your folks and your aunt about us. This is easier. Sammy's queer too."

But both of those two times, I hadn't planned it. I'd just gone off instinct. Plus, nerves were also warring with remorse when it came to Sammy. I wasn't just telling him about me and Sutt; I was apologizing for not supporting him the way I should have when I was with a man now too. It felt wrong on every level.

"It'll be okay," Sutton reiterated, then reached over and rested a hand on my thigh.

"I know."

Sammy and Emerson came out of the barn when we arrived, both with their shirts off, sweat glistening on their torsos. They'd clearly been working in there and came out to see who'd shown up.

Emerson was fifteen years older than Sammy, but you couldn't tell it from how in shape he was. He reached over, held his hand at Sammy's nape like he was worried Sammy might need his support from something. From me, I guessed.

Sammy just gave me his typical happy-Sammy smile. He saw the world differently from anyone I'd ever known. Life hadn't been easy on him, but Sammy wasn't bitter. He always looked on the bright side of things.

"This is a surprise," Sammy said, plucking a T-shirt off a bench and wiping himself down with it. "Everything okay?"

"Yep. I just heard congratulations are in order, and we thought we should come over and give them in person."

"Yes, sirree, I locked him down," Sammy joked. Emerson rolled his eyes, but chuckled with the rest of us. "He's hot. I wasn't givin' anyone a chance to steal him away from me."

If that wasn't a Sammy Joe reply, I didn't know what was. He'd been closeted most of his life, had only told us he's gay when his mama got hurt, and this was the first time I'd seen him since that day, but here he was, joking and being proud of who he was.

I wanted to be more like him.

“As if I’d ever go anywhere.” Emerson wrapped his arm around Sammy’s shoulders, pulled him close, and kissed the top of his sweaty head. “Unless he keeps telling me bad jokes.”

“You love my corny jokes.” Sammy leaned closer to me, whisper-yelling, “It’s how I hooked him.”

He was open and accepting, no questions on why we were there, but it was clear that as nice as Emerson was being, he was a little more cautious. He didn’t want us to do or say anything that would hurt Sammy. He was obviously protective of him.

“I should’ve tried that with Sutt. Maybe I would’ve gotten him sooner,” I said tentatively, but wanting them to know about us and that I wasn’t there to give them a hard time. That I was like them. Reaching over, I took Sutton’s hand, and Sammy’s face split into the biggest smile I’d ever seen.

“No shit?” Sammy asked.

“No shit. Can we maybe talk for a bit? Just us?”

“Yeah, of course,” Sammy replied. “Em?”

“I got it,” he answered Sammy’s unspoken question, then turned to Sutton. “How about we go inside and get a drink?”

“Thank you. That’d be real nice.”

Emerson held Sammy’s face in both hands, pressing a kiss to his mouth before he signaled for Sutton to follow him.

Once they left, Sammy said, “Let’s go for a walk. I got a billion questions. Not sure which one to settle on first.” We began making our way across their property. They didn’t have animals there yet. From what I’d heard, Emerson had given his to a friend when they left. “How long have you and Sutton been a thing?”

“Since the beginnin’ of the year. It was...a surprise. It wasn’t like it seemed to be with you. I didn’t know I was...”

“Queer?”

“Yeah, still adjustin’ to it all. I haven’t landed on a label yet. Been assumin’ bi because I’m attracted to women, some men too, but it’s mostly women for me.”

“Sounds like bi works if that’s what you want to use. Labels are personal. Can’t no one tell you how to identify as long as you don’t erase others’ existence. Not everyone even uses labels. And it also don’t gotta be this fifty/fifty thing to be bisexual. Life ain’t black and white, Jasp. There’s a whole world of colors out there.”

He sounded older, more mature than I’d ever heard him. Like experiencing life outside of Ryland had given him new perspective. “How’d you know all this? I can’t wrap my head around it, that you always understood your sexuality, and then hearin’ you talk right now...”

“I always knew I was different from most folks around here.” He kicked at a stick as we walked. “But then, why is it considered different? That’s a conversation for another day, though. But I never wanted girls the way other boys my age did. I always knew it was men for me, just as I also knew I couldn’t tell no one, couldn’t act on it, so I spent most of my life pretendin’.”

“I’m sorry.” I wasn’t sure what else to say.

“Me too. Anyway, right before me and Molls started tellin’ people we were together, I admitted my truth to her. We figured lettin’ everyone believe we were a couple suited us both well. But her story is hers to tell.”

“I understand that. Did you... How did you...”

Sammy laughed. “I used to go up to Charlotte to meet men, if that’s what you’re askin’. I had enough to deal with here, so gettin’ off with someone was enough until I met Emerson.” You could hear the love in his voice when he spoke his husband’s name.

I said, “I didn’t understand how I felt, wouldn’t let myself acknowledge what I was feelin’ all these years. Then Sutt started pullin’ away, and it felt like he was rippin’ my heart out

over and over again. I wouldn't let myself put it together, I reckon out of fear of what it meant for myself, or who I always thought I was. Then he told me he loved me, and my whole fuckin' world suddenly made sense."

"Your folks?" Sammy asked, making my gut sink.

"Nah, they ain't takin' it well. Mama don't like it, but she will deal with it. She'd deal even better if it wasn't for my dad. He hasn't talked to me in months."

"Shit, Jasp. I'm real sorry about that." We stopped walking. Sammy put his foot up on the bottom wooden slat on the animal pen, forearms resting on the top one. I leaned against it too.

"Yeah... I can't understand it. All I wanna do is love Sutton. What's so wrong with that?"

"Nothin', but I don't figure you always felt that way yourself."

His words made my gut churn. Not because he said them, but because they were true. "That's the main reason I'm here. I owe you an apology for how I reacted when you told us about you and Emerson, about you bein' gay. It shouldn't've mattered. I should've just been happy for you. I should've supported you. I know we've been texting off and on, but I feel like that was the coward's way of me to move forward. I tried to make my way into your life again without tellin' you I was wrong, without lettin' you know I have your back and always will, without tellin' you it don't matter who you love. It shouldn't matter who any of us love, just that we love 'em the best we can."

Sammy clamped a hand on my shoulder. "It's okay. I forgive ya, and welcome to the club." We both laughed, my chest feeling lighter. "When I decided I wanted to move back home, Em was worried—about us bein' accepted, about me bein' out for the first time around everyone I know, about bein' the only out queer people in Ryland. Somehow, I knew

it'd be okay, and now I already got my own cousin addin' to the LGBTQ population. I think that's a reason to celebrate."

I smiled, liking this closeness with him, wishing we'd had it our whole lives. "That sounds good to me," I replied, but then I lingered, and said, "I love him so much it hurts. I didn't know that was possible. Is it that way for you?"

"Yeah," Sammy replied. "Yeah, it is. That's how we know it's real."

"Did you ever struggle with any of it? In your head, I mean? Comin' to terms with it and, like, shit you hear people say? Hell, I don't know what I'm sayin'. I wanna be with him. That's not the problem. Sometimes the outside shit fucks with my head, though."

Sammy was quiet for a moment, clearly thinking. "I figure it was a little different for me. I had a whole lot longer to accept it. There wasn't any real question for me. Plus, I never had the same life as you—the family, the friends." Which was sad, considering we were family ourselves. "I get it with your daddy and all. He's not open to this. But you're bein' true to who you are. You're with Sutton. All you can do is take it one step at a time."

"Thank you." I pulled him into a hug, making sure he knew how much I appreciated this and how much I loved him too.

When we got back to the house, Emerson and Sutton were laughing together about something.

"We figured we'd get the grill going so Sutton and Jasper can stay for dinner," Emerson told Sammy.

"Sounds good to me," Sammy replied. "Though we should probably clean up a bit so we don't stink 'em outta here."

I put my arms around Sutton's waist from behind, letting my chin rest on his shoulder. "We can get the grill goin'."

"Perfect," Sammy replied.

They explained where everything was, then headed for their room. I nuzzled Sutton's neck, kissing him. I was excited for tonight, wanted to be a couple with Sutton around people who wouldn't judge us, who had similar experiences as us. Another small step ahead, but it felt like more.

“I love you, Sutt.”

“I love you too.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Sutton

THE WEEKEND AFTER we had dinner with Sammy and Emerson, we met Shelly Kemper, a local real estate agent, at the house on Stone's Throw Lane, a dirt road just outside of Ryland. It was located pretty far back. Hell, I hadn't ever seen the house or the land myself, which said a lot.

Ms. Kemper was waiting outside her car when I pulled my truck to a stop behind her. One look and I knew, fucking knew this was the place for us.

The house wasn't anything special. We'd known that when we saw it online. It was smaller than our place now and could use a lot of work, but that wasn't what we were buying it for. No, that was the property. It was five whole acres, with woods behind it similar to what Jasper's folks owned.

There was a small pond that needed to be cleaned out and have some drainage work done on it. It was only about three feet deep because of the debris, and when it rained a lot, it would get too full and back up. But those were things Jasp and I could do ourselves, the kind of things we wanted to do ourselves.

Even outside of that, the land needed work too.

"We'd need to get a tractor in here to get it all cleaned out," Jasp said.

"And Ms. Kemper said we'd need a new septic system if we're planning on expanding the house."

The price on this property was good, almost too good to be true, but also because it was kind of a dump. The work would cost money, something we didn't have a whole lot of, but...

“If we snatch it up,” I told Jasper, “the upgrades can happen slowly. We don’t gotta rush, but she’ll be ours, and eventually we can make it into everything we’ve ever wanted.”

“Yep. I don’t even gotta look. I want it,” Jasper replied.

“Don’t go out there sayin’ that. We gotta play our cards right. We shouldn’t be gettin’ ahead of ourselves so we’re not disappointed if it don’t happen.”

“It’s happening, Sutt. I can tell ya that right now.”

I chuckled. “Let’s go. We’re keepin’ her waitin’.”

We got out, and I had to remind myself to chill the fuck out. I couldn’t believe this was even a possibility—a property that would be *ours*, not his folks’. A home that was *ours*, not Jasper’s because his folks wanted him to live there.

“Hello, Ms. Kemper. How are you today?” Jasper asked when we approached.

“I’m doin’ just fine. I was surprised to hear you wanted to look at this place. I thought you lived with your mama and daddy?” It was impossible not to know almost every damn person in Ryland, or at least for them not to know you or something about you.

“I got a house there, yeah, but Sutton and I are lookin’ to get somethin’ of our own.”

The way her mouth fell open slightly, her gaze shooting between us, I knew she realized what he meant by a place of our own. That we were together. Or at least she was wondering if we were. I could tell when Jasper realized it too by the way he cleared his throat.

We weren’t out there letting the whole town in on our relationship yet, just Carrie, Emerson and Sammy, Ms. Dana at Iris’s, and the way Molly was smiling at us when we had dinner there, she knew for sure now too. The more people who found out, the harder it would be to contain.

“Good for you,” she replied. “This is a smart investment, and I know the two of you together can make it great. It would be a nice place to raise a family or whatever you decide.”

I smiled. “Thank you, ma’am.”

“I’ll show you around.”

We nodded and went along with her. I was grateful for her response. Most people didn’t care, I figured. Sure, there were assholes out there, but there were a lot of good people too. Sometimes the bigots were just the loudest, making it hard not to focus on them. I still worried what Jasper being more open about us would do to his relationship with his folks, but I was trying to trust him and just...be happy. We deserved that, didn’t we?

Ms. Kemper led us through the ranch-style house, which, again, needed a whole lot of work, but it did have good bones. Jasp and I weren’t fancy people. We didn’t need much. We could make it work until we could turn it into something better.

“There’s a lot of options here, Sutt. We can fix her up, remodel to get some more space, have a barn and some animals and whatever else we want.” The excitement in his voice matched the one in my chest. It was perfect.

“I’ll leave the two of you alone for a minute.” She headed to her car, and Jasper and I did a sweep of the property.

“It’s expensive...” I said. “Less than it should be, but maybe too much for us. It’ll take more of our savings than we planned.” Still, I wanted it. I was just trying to be smart.

“We deserve this, Sutt. We’ll figure it out. We can make a home here that’s just ours. It ain’t a spot of land on my folks’ property. It ain’t my house that I designed and you helped with. Everything we do will be us. Can you imagine comin’ home to this after work every day? Spendin’ our weekends buildin’ our future together with our own two hands? Makin’ this everything we could ever want?”

I smiled, my heart going a little crazy. “Yeah, baby. I can imagine it.” And it sounded fucking amazing. “Everything feels almost too good to be true.”

“It ain’t. I won’t let it be.”

And just like that, I believed him.



“WE SHOULD GO out and celebrate,” Jasper said after dinner. We’d played it cool after looking at the house, then came home, called Ms. Kemper, and put in an offer. We got lucky and the owners accepted right away.

“Go out where?” I asked.

“The bar, I guess. We can have a beer. I’ll kick your ass in billiards, then darts. You know, the usual.”

“Whatever, fucker.” I tweaked his nipple, and he jumped off the couch.

“Ouch, damn it.”

“Then be nice. You don’t always beat me.”

“I beat ya most of the time.” Jasper winked. I couldn’t say he was wrong.

“Sounds good to me.” I liked that it felt like we were getting our social lives back *and* Jasper was still my guy. I couldn’t pretend I wasn’t slightly nervous about the day when the guys we socialized with found out about us, and I figured it’d likely be soon. Ms. Kemper wasn’t a gossip as far as I knew, but nothing stayed quiet too long in Ryland.

We showered, changed, then climbed into my truck and headed to the bar downtown.

Rock music was playing when we stepped inside, a band I didn’t recognize, but I liked their sound right away. Larry, the owner, was behind the counter with another male bartender. Larry was older, born and raised in Ryland, and an all-around solid guy. And the bar was pretty busy, people shooting darts,

playing pool, sitting around at tables and at the bar, chatting and drinking. I'd missed this place, I realized.

"Jasper! Sutton! Long time no see," Lacey called.

I looked over to see her at a billiards tables with Paula—because of course women we'd both slept with would be there together. Allison, a friend we hung out with sometimes, was there with her husband, Chet; and next to them were Duke, Earl, and Earl's cousin Clyde, who lived about an half hour or so away, though we knew him well because he was Earl's family. Unfortunately, he was also a bit of a dick.

"Looks like the whole crew is here," I said, wondering if this changed anything, if Jasper would suddenly wish we hadn't come. We'd sat at this same bar a thousand times before with these same people, but everything felt so different now that we were together. Sometimes it felt like we lived in a whole new world from the one we'd been raised in.

Jasper clamped a hand on my shoulder. "Come on. It'll be fun."

We made our way to the group. They were sitting close to the pool table, and were sharing a few pitchers of beer.

"Y'all been hidin' way too much lately! I missed seeing you around." Lacey hugged Jasper, then me.

"Things have been real crazy," I said, just as Paula approached.

"Yeah, last I heard from you was in the winter, Sutton Manning. You can't at least send out a text or come say hi?" Paula kissed my cheek, staying close to me. While I didn't owe her anything and she didn't me, we were definitely used to fucking each other when the mood fit, and I knew Paula well enough to know she was thinking about it tonight.

"Sorry. Like I said, things have been real crazy. Jasp and I got a million things going on."

I took a step back just as Earl, Duke, Allison, Chet, and Clyde all gave us hellos, and for a moment it felt like old

times. We were laughing and talking shit to each other. They offered us to get glasses and share their beer. Clyde was playing a game of billiards with Chet and getting his ass kicked.

I was sitting at their table, nursing a beer, Jasper ten or so feet away talking to Duke, Lacey, and Earl, when Paula approached me. “I feel like you been avoiding me.”

“I ain’t avoidin’ you. I’ve been avoidin’ everyone,” I said, hoping it made her laugh but also didn’t feel personal.

Paula stepped between my legs. “I texted you a few months back and you didn’t reply.”

Shit. I’d forgotten about that. My gaze darted up to see Jasper looking at us.

“Wanna come to my house tonight?” This was typically how Paula and I worked, so she had no reason to believe things had changed.

“I, um...can’t. I’m with someone. They’re, um...it’s serious.” Jasp and I should have discussed this before we arrived. I’d been letting him tell people about us when he wanted to. But his aunt and the real estate agent were a lot different from a bunch of drunk people in the bar, half of them people we’d known and been friendly with our whole lives.

“Be still my heart. Sutton Manning has a girlfriend,” Paula said, a little too loudly, playfully clutching her chest.

My gut twisted up in knots.

“Wait. What? Sutton’s seein’ someone? Who is she?” Lacey asked.

Girlfriend.

She.

My gaze met Jasper’s as I tried to figure out what to say. He looked slightly panicked, which made my heart plummet. I tried not to feel that way, tried not to let it bother me, but it did. He’d been more open, so I’d told myself it was getting

better, that he wasn't ashamed of being with a man. The look in his eyes told me he still was.

But then the look changed. There were nerves there, but something else too that I couldn't quite read...until I could. Slowly, I nodded, telling him it was okay, that it was up to him. Jasp gave me a nod in return, took a drink of his beer, and said, "Actually, he's with me."

I swear the whole bar got quiet, though really it was likely only the people in our group.

Duke laughed, then let it fade out when he realized it wasn't a joke. "Wait. You ain't shittin' us?"

Lacey hugged Jasper. "Good for you. I'm happy for y'all."

"Well," Paula added, "if y'all aren't the best couple in the history of the world, I don't know who is," and I breathed out a sigh of relief.

"Hear, hear!" Allison said, which was followed by Chet's, "Congrats, guys."

"Didn't know you swung that way," Earl said, "but I don't care. I'm just here to drink beer and play pool, if these two ever finish their game." Earl pointed to Chet and Clyde, which was when I saw the look of disgust on Clyde's face.

I immediately tensed up.

"We ain't supposed to care these two are takin' it up the ass from each other?" Clyde spit.

"Hey, brother, that ain't cool," Duke said, putting a hand on his arm, but Clyde ripped it away.

"No, *they* ain't cool. I'm tired of this shit. It's everywhere you look nowadays. Men wearing fuckin' makeup and prancin' around in dresses and shit."

People around us started noticing. I pushed off the stool, taking a few steps toward Jasper, who was a whole lot closer to Clyde than he'd been a minute before. Jasper's gaze

snapped to mine, and it was filled with a look that made my whole body rigid.

“Jasp, let’s get outta here,” I said, knowing this couldn’t end well.

“Clyde, man. Cut that shit out,” Earl told him. “This is Jasper and Sutton. Who gives a fuck?”

Clyde sneered at Jasper. “Why don’t *you* get on outta here like your girlfriend said, unless that’s you. You ain’t a real man. You the girl in this relationship? I bet you are.”

I lunged for Jasper but knew it was too late. He was already out of reach, his arm flying backward, and then his fist flew forward and connected with Clyde’s face. Clyde’s head snapped back, and then he was the one to swing, his punch connecting with Jasper’s cheek. The whole bar was paying attention now, Chet and Earl both grabbing hold of Clyde while I grabbed Jasper.

“Fuck you!” Jasper shouted at Clyde, trying to pull out of my hold. It was chaos, everyone crowding around, trying to figure out what was happening.

My heart banged against my chest. “Jasper.”

“Fuck you, Clyde. Don’t you ever say that shit to us again.” He tried to get away from me, but I held on tighter, tugging him away, but Jasper was having none of it. “I’ll show you how much of a man I am!”

And suddenly Larry was there, yelling at us. “Get the hell out of my bar with that shit! You don’t fight in my place!”

“Me? Did you hear what he said? He should be the one getting kicked out.” Jasper gave his attention to Clyde again. “Fuck you, Clyde.”

“I heard him, son, but you’re the one who swung first. I don’t give a shit who you sleep with or who you love, but if you’re starting a fight in my bar, you’re the one getting kicked out.” Larry turned to me. “Get him out of here, Sutton, before he gets himself into trouble. I’ll deal with Clyde.” He gave me

an apologetic look that said Clyde wasn't his favorite person and that he was doing this mostly for Jasper's own good.

"Let's go," I said tersely, pulling him with me, and this time Jasper came. Paula and Lacey both tried to talk to us, to apologize, but I just said, "We gotta go. We'll talk later."

Once outside, Jasper tugged out of my grip and spit blood. "Fuck him. I can't believe that shit. He's a homophobe and we get kicked out? You shouldn't have held me back."

"Get in the fuckin' truck, Jasper." I jerked the passenger door open, my whole body vibrating with anger and sadness.

Jasper cursed but got in, the side of his face already red and swelling.

I slammed the door behind him before going to the driver's side and getting in. I didn't say a word and he didn't either, his leg bouncing as we drove.

The second we got into the house, Jasper plopped down on the couch. I went to the kitchen, filled a bag of ice, and brought that and a towel to him.

Jasper put it on his face, dropped his head back, and closed his eyes. He looked...fuck, so damn defeated, and I knew if I stayed there any longer, I'd always keep the shit I needed to say bottled up, that if I didn't sort through my thoughts, I'd continue to bury them so I didn't rock the boat and lose him. Because the truth was, I felt defeated as well. There were all kinds of thoughts swimming around in my head that I needed to make sense of.

"I gotta get outta here," I told him. "We'll talk after I think some."

Jasper shot forward from where he'd been leaning, panicky in a way that broke my damn heart. "What do you mean? Where are you goin'?"

I shoved a hand through my hair. Why the hell hadn't we just stayed home and celebrated together? But then, if this hadn't happened tonight, it would have happened some other

night. “I don’t know, Jasp. Kendra’s? Uncle Brian’s? I just need to sort through shit before I say something the wrong way.”

“Sort through what? Say what the wrong way? I was defending us! Who we are together. Why are you pissed at me?” Jasper pushed to his feet. “You should’ve stuck up for us too!”

I sighed, bile climbing up my throat. Was that really what he thought? That I wouldn’t stand by us? “That ain’t what that was about, Jasp. You weren’t stickin’ up for us. You weren’t protecting what we have, and you know I would always do that. You were ashamed. You heard what he said about fuckin’ and which one of us is the girl, and all that got in your head and you reacted. That sure as shit wasn’t about you and me. It was about you provin’ you’re a man because it bothers you that you like me to fuck you, that you like me inside you. That you’re with a man and what that means for your masculinity. I knew it before, but...seein’ it was different.”

“So we’re just supposed to let people say shit to us? Let ‘em get away with it? Act like we can’t defend ourselves?”

“I ain’t sayin’ he didn’t deserve what he got, but I saw it, Jasp. I saw the look on your face when he said what he did, and...I need to wrap my head around it, is all, figure out what it means for us. Does bein’ with me make you feel like less of a man?”

He didn’t answer, which was all the answer I needed.

“I’m gonna go. I’ll be at Uncle Brian’s.” I turned for the door.

“Are you breakin’ up with me?” he asked, his heart in every syllable he spoke. I didn’t doubt he loved me. I never would, but his insecurities ran deeper than I’d thought.

“No, baby. It’s just a fight, and I need to figure out how we deal with this. What it means for us, for you. Bein’ with me... I don’t wanna be somethin’ you’re ashamed of.”

I kept walking, got to the door and put my hand on the knob.

“I love you, Sutton.”

“I know you do. I love you too.”

And I always would.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Jasper

I COULDN'T SLEEP all night.

I just lay there, thinking about looking at the house, at the property. How good it felt that Ms. Kemper had known about us. Being with Sutton was the best kinda high, and knowing we were moving on together, planning our lives and our future had made me feel invincible.

Wasn't he satisfied with how much better I'd gotten? Sammy and Emerson knew. Aunt Carrie knew. Kendra, Mama, Dad, Ms. Dana, Molly, Brian. Hell, I'd been the one to tell everyone at the bar too. He'd said he'd wait, that he wouldn't push me, that he wasn't in a rush, but then he'd acted like I was ashamed of being with him? He got angry when I defended us?

"You weren't stickin' up for us. You were ashamed."

"It bothers you that you like me to fuck you...that you like me inside you."

"Does bein' with me make you feel like less of a man?"

I shook my head, tried to get his voice and his words out of there. I hadn't done what I had because I was ashamed of being with him. Being with Sutton made me feel alive. He was, and had always been, the best part of my life. Just looking at him made me realize how lucky I was that he chose me, that I got to call him mine, but...

But...

"You're that limp-wristed Northerner..."

"Can't he stick up for himself? Man enough to kill someone and take advantage of you, but not man enough to

talk to me like one?"

"It's because his daddy wasn't around. We shoulda taken him in ourselves."

All those things my dad had said about Sammy when we found out about him, all the names he'd called him... And when I let myself think about it, those weren't the only times. How often had he said shit like that my whole life?

When I was a kid and he'd tell me to toughen up, not to cry; that men didn't cry and I'd look soft and people would think I was gay.

When he'd make fun of someone else for the same.

When we were in Charlotte once and we saw a man who walked too feminine for Dad's liking, how he'd called him a name and said the same thing Clyde had, that he had a man at home and he was the woman...how sick it made him.

When someone gay was on TV...more names, more curses about what happened to men being real men.

"This ain't how I raised ya. I raised ya to be a man."

When he found out about me and Sutt, how loving him immediately stripped away my masculinity in his eyes.

That wasn't how it worked, but even if it were, what was so wrong about a man being more feminine? Why was that a bad thing? Why did who I loved automatically mean I wasn't the right kind of man no more? To him, to so many people, being gay or bisexual made a guy less than. Meant he wasn't as manly, as if that was the most important thing to be. Like being with Sutton didn't make me *me* anymore. None of those things were true.

When I let myself acknowledge it, though, I hadn't been much better, had I? I'd called Sammy a name when I'd found out.

When Sutton and I first started this, I liked him on top of me, but I hadn't felt comfortable liking it.

When I started watching porn, watching men have their asses touched, my first instinct was to wonder why I thought about Sutton doing it to me and not me doing it to him... because in my head, I wasn't *supposed* to want that.

When Sutton first started penetrating me, I'd fucking loved it, the closeness it gave me to him, how I craved to feel full, how much pleasure it gave me, but in my mind back then, it should've made Sutton see me as weaker. What made me think that? What made anyone?

I was bigger than him, right? I'd thought that meant I was supposed to be *the man*, just like Clyde had insinuated—as if how we had sex was what differentiated that. As if a man shouldn't want those things that I loved so much, but they could and that was okay. It had nothing to do with being small or weak, which meant...

I shoved out of bed, hardly made it to the toilet before I was on my knees, violently emptying my stomach. My gut clenched, cramped up as I vomited everything inside me, my body continuing to try even when there was nothing left.

After flushing, I lowered myself to the bathroom floor, just lay there, looking up at the ceiling.

Sutton had been right. Last night wasn't about us at all. It was about me. About all the ugliness I'd heard off and on my whole life and how I'd taken it in, how I'd internalized it and let it mold my thoughts and feelings about myself and the world around me. Shame *had* filled me, fueled me when I went after Clyde, because I'd felt like there was something wrong with me if I liked the things he'd said.

In that moment, I hated myself for those thoughts. I hated the world for making both men and women think this way, for raising little boys to feel like they had to act a certain way to be a man.

And I wasn't gonna perpetuate that any longer. I sure as shit was going to do everything in my power to evict those thoughts that had been woven into how I'd been raised.

I pushed to my feet, brushed my teeth, pulled jeans on and a tee. My shoes were by the door, and I shoved my feet into them.

It was early, about seven judging by the sun and the look of the property. My folks would already be awake, but even if they weren't, I wouldn't have let it stop me.

I banged on the door so hard, my hand burned.

It was Dad who opened it, eyes wide and concerned before they turned suspicious when he saw it was me.

"You lied to me," I said, pushing around him into the house. "You both lied to me, my whole fuckin' life. You told me family mattered. You told me how you treated people mattered. You took me to church and told me to love my neighbor, but that wasn't what you did, it wasn't what either of you did."

"How dare you—"

"No," I cut Dad off. "I'm talkin' this time. You said all those things to me, yet anytime someone wasn't exactly who you wanted them to be, you judged them for it. Aunt Carrie for her drinkin' problems, homeless people on the streets when we'd go to Charlotte, men who weren't your idea of what masculinity is supposed to be. I think I would've realized how I felt about Sutton sooner, and maybe I would have opened myself up to the possibility of being bisexual or whatever I am, but I'd internalized every fuckin' thing you said. Every name you called someone, every time you told me it was weak to cry, made me feel like men had to act a certain way and women another. You made me hate parts of myself I couldn't even admit were there. Do you know what that does to someone?"

My voice broke, but I didn't cry. Not because there was anything wrong with it, and not because it was weak or because I was a man. I'd cried how many times in front of Sutton, and he'd never judged me for it. But I was done shedding tears over my folks. I was done fighting to get back

into someone's life if they didn't want me there. I was done trying to prove myself to them.

“There's nothin' wrong with bein' queer. There's nothing wrong with being feminine or with a woman bein' masculine. There's nothin' wrong with Sammy Joe, and there's nothin' wrong with me lovin' Sutt. There ain't a damn thing wrong with how he holds me and makes me feel cared for, like I'm precious to him. There ain't nothin' wrong with me.”

“Jasper,” Mama started. “You know we love you. Those things you're sayin'—”

“Are true. I shouldn't be something you have to adjust to. You might not've said the things Dad did, but you never countered them either. Even now, you don't want it to be like this. You want me with a woman, I don't doubt that, but if it wasn't for Dad, you would have accepted it by now. I ain't doin' this anymore.” I turned to Dad. “I feel sorry for you—that you don't practice those things you preach, that you can look at me and Sutt and not see the beauty in us. I hurt him last night because I was lettin' that shit get in my head, because no matter what I said, deep down I was lettin' myself be ashamed. I ain't doin' it no more. If we're ever gonna have any kinda relationship, it's gonna be the two of you comin' to me.”

And then I walked out of the house, my head held high, prouder than I'd ever been in who I was.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Sutton

I WAS MAKING myself crazy, going over and over what happened last night. We'd gone from the best day to a bar fight, and then me walking out on Jasper. That was a big part of what had my mind running. I stood by what I said. I didn't know how this would ever stop plaguing us if Jasper didn't get a hold on it, if he spent his days feeling like there was something wrong with him because of us. Eventually he'd resent me for it. But I didn't know if I should have walked out on him; I just hadn't known what to say or do. All this was so new for me as well, and I was just trying to find my way in it all. I wanted us to be able to love each other and be happy. Was that too much to hope for?

"How you feelin'?" Uncle Brian asked, coming out of the kitchen with a cup of coffee.

"Like I fucked up and left Jasp when he needed me the most."

"Maybe you did, maybe you didn't. You ain't perfect, Sutton. You can't always do the right thing or have all the answers."

No, I couldn't, but I sure as shit could try. "I just... I saw it, saw the look on his face when Clyde said what he did. He's ashamed of the things we do together, of what he thinks it means for him. And I don't know what that means for us. I just know I can't lose him. I'm not sure how to live without him." I rubbed a hand over my face, let my fingers tangle in my hair as I leaned back against the couch.

"You won't lose him. He loves you too. That has to count for somethin'."

Unlike my mom? She hadn't loved Uncle Brian, not the way he had loved her. Christ, I still didn't know how to sort through that either.

"I gotta go home. I need to talk to him," I said, just as we heard a knock.

Our gazes darted to the door. My heart immediately started slamming against my chest. Uncle Brian didn't have a whole lotta visitors other than me, and considering last night, there was a good chance that was Jasper.

What if I'd done the wrong thing? Given him time to think and he decided that being with me, dealing with this, wasn't what he wanted? What if I'd pushed him away?

Uncle Brian set his mug down. "I'll get it." I watched him go to the door and open it. "Mornin', Ms. Finch. Ain't this a surprise?"

One second I was still sitting on the couch, the next I was on my feet halfway to the door. Jasper's mama was there? I couldn't think of any good reasons why she would be.

"What's wrong? Did something happen to Jasp?" I asked, heart in my throat, my breath coming out too fast.

"No. Nothin' like that. I just... I wondered if I could have a word with you?"

"If you're gonna ask me to walk away from him, I'm tellin' you now that ain't a possibility."

Sadness washed over her features, but not the kind I expected. Sherry shifted, clearly uncomfortable, before she replied, "That's not what I'm here for, Sutton."

Uncle Brian said, "I'll go for a walk, give the two of you some time." He turned and squeezed my arm in support before slipping out of the house. I was so damn lucky to have him. When I was younger, I saw it just because he was the only person I had, the only family, but now I saw it in a different way. He was the best kind of man.

I stepped aside and invited Sherry in. She wrung her hands together as she came inside, and I closed the door behind her. “Can I get’cha something to drink?”

“No, thank you. I’m okay. I... Jasper came by the house this mornin’. He’s real torn up, said he hurt you, said a lot of things. He has a bruise on his face and—”

“Not from me. We don’t fight like that. Is he okay?”

“Yes and no.” She sat down in a chair. “He’s scared of losin’ you, and he’s hurtin’ real bad over whatever happened between y’all. But he also... I don’t wanna say too much. The two of you need to talk, but he put his daddy and me in our places this morning, made me see some things in a whole new light. I’d seen some already after Carrie found out about y’all. She’s been talkin’ to me, but admitting I’m wrong, that ain’t easy for me.”

“No, ma’am, I know it’s not,” I answered, feeling pride build up in my chest. Not for me; for Jasper. I didn’t know what happened, but he’d clearly had some things to say.

“He loves you. He loves you more than maybe I’ve ever seen someone love another person.”

“I feel the same about him.”

“Then you gotta give him a second chance. Like I said, I don’t know what happened, but whatever it is, Jasper will fix it, and I’m sure it also wasn’t his fault. He made me see...his daddy and me, we did a real number on him. I didn’t know at the time, when he was younger, I didn’t see what we were doin’, and now...hell, I don’t got an excuse now, but I love my son. I don’t wanna lose him. I want him to be happy.” Tears ran down her face, her eyes more pained than I’d ever seen them.

“He ain’t gonna lose me, not ever. I love him too much.” I picked up the box of Kleenex from the end table and handed it over.

“You’ve done a better job at lovin’ him than we have. I see that. And I...” She wiped her eyes, her nose, trying to clean

herself up. “I want you to know how much it means to me, the way you’ve always loved him. And I’m sorry I didn’t show you that before, or how much you mean to me too. In some ways, I feel like I had a hand in raising ya. You were family. You’re a good man, Sutton, and I love you too. I think that got lost in all this, and I wanna make sure you know it.”

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. My eyes welled with tears because I’d needed to hear that. “Thank you. Your family means the world to me. You were like a mama to me.”

She nodded and stood, taking one last swipe at her face before clearing her throat. She was done crying. I knew that because Sherry wasn’t the kind of person who showed a lot of emotion that way.

“You take care of him, you hear me? I can’t make any promises about his daddy, but I ain’t goin’ nowhere. I’m gonna fix what I broke.”

Jesus, that felt good to hear. I hoped she stuck with it, but if not, we’d be okay. I’d find a way to make sure Jasper was always okay. “I will. I promise.”

Sherry patted my arm and walked out.

Me? I was going home to get my man.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Jasper

I JUST ENDED a call when the familiar sound of Sutton's truck pulling up had me jumping to my feet. I'd know that rumble anywhere. I ran to the door, pulled it open just as he stopped on the stairs, looking at me like I was the whole damn world, like he was just as broken up as I was, like nothing would ever be right if we weren't together.

"Jesus, baby. Your face." Sutton came closer and trailed his finger softly down the bruise on my cheek, making me shiver.

"Did I get ugly overnight?" I teased, but Sutton didn't laugh. He leaned in and pressed his lips to it gently.

"I think I might kill Clyde."

"Don't do that cuz then I'll have to do somethin' to get thrown in prison too."

Sutton smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes.

I said, "We got a lot to talk about."

"Yeah, your mama came to see me."

That shook me. "She did?"

"Yep. She said you gave it to them this mornin'...and said she loves you, loves me too, and that she ain't goin' nowhere. I told her I wasn't either, not without you at least." He stepped inside and froze. "Unless you're plannin' on leavin' without me."

I could see why he'd think that looking at the living room, at how I'd started packing. "No, you're stuck with me now. I ain't letting you get away, but we gotta leave. I can't stay on this property anymore. I called Sammy and asked him if we

can stay with them until the house goes through. If that's okay with you, of course. I just... I'm not doin' this anymore, this hangin' around waitin' for whatever scraps he throws me, fightin' for a father who doesn't deserve my love right now. I wanna focus on the future, with you."

Sutton turned to me, held my face, careful because of my bruise as he pressed me against the wall. "Christ, Jasper. Do you know what it does to me to hear you say that? You deserve so much more than he gives you. You deserve everything."

He pressed his mouth to mine, licked the seam of my lips, which made me immediately open for him. Sutton slipped his tongue inside, kissing me with so much want and love, I felt it in my bones.

As much as I needed him, we needed to talk more, so I pulled back. "I got a few things I need to say."

"Okay, just as long as you know the answer is yes, I'll go anywhere with you."

I smiled as Sutton took my hand and led me to the couch. He sat down beside me.

"You were right about me, about last night and what it was. I ain't proud of that, but it's the truth, and I'm gonna fix it. I want you to know I'm gonna do everything in my power to get my thoughts right. My head is all screwed up with things I've seen and what I've been taught, but I know in here"—I touched my chest—"that it's wrong. I just need to get my heart and my head to sync better. I'm not ashamed of you or of lovin' you, and it sure as shit don't make me feel like less of a man, but I gotta figure out how to unlearn all the stuff that's been fed to me my whole life."

"I'm here for whatever you need. We'll figure it out together."

I knew we would, but it was exactly what I needed to hear.

"What happened?" Sutton asked.

I told him what I'd realized last night and this morning, and about the things I told my parents, the things I now saw.

“Fuck, I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry.”

“I am too, but I'm done tryin' to be who he wants me to be. I love who I am with you, that I can be myself in ways I can't with no one else. I love the way you touch me, the way you make me feel like I'm the most important thing in your whole fuckin' world, and that ain't weak, Sutt. That's *strength*.”

Saying the words reinforced their truth. This world was so fucked up sometimes, but this, me and Sutton, people like us, we were changing it.

“I want you, Sutt...want you to fuck me, remind me who I belong to. Let me feel you inside me because that's where you belong.”

His eyes blazed with undeniable heat. It singed me, burned me up, and damned if I didn't want to end up in ashes because of him.

Sutton's mouth slammed down on mine. His tongue pushed past my lips, tasting me, taking me. I gave myself to him—I'd always been his anyway—as he worked open my pants and I did the same to him.

Sutton's mouth parted from mine, pulling a whimper out of my throat.

“Shh. I ain't goin' nowhere. Not now, not ever.”

He pulled me on top of him, so I straddled his lap before tugging my T-shirt off and throwing it to the floor. His strong arms wrapped around me, his mouth exploring my torso. He kissed my chest, licked my nipples, nibbled them and sucked hickeys along my pecs, marking me.

“Fuck...that feels so good.” My hand tangled in his hair, and I pulled him closer, wanting nothing between us. “I need more. Need to feel you inside me.”

“Where?” he asked. “Where do you want me?”

I knew what he was doing. It made my lust kick up another notch, my dick get harder and my craving for him grow.

“In my ass...your fingers in my hole.” There was strength in saying that, in telling him what I wanted, in owning it. I didn’t want to spend my life wondering why I liked it so much. I just did, and there was nothing wrong with that.

“It’s my favorite place to be.” He kissed the tip of my nose, swatted my ass. “Get up,” he told me, and I did.

We stood, and Sutton took his time removing my clothes—shoes, jeans, underwear—until I stood naked before him. My dick was aching and leaking, my nipples red, and three purple marks from Sutton’s mouth painted my chest.

I watched, riveted, as he took his clothes off. “I want to suck you off first. I like it, bein’ on my knees for you and how it makes me feel.”

“Yes, fuck yes,” Sutton replied, and I dropped down.

I breathed him in, musky and salty. He hadn’t showered like me, but I didn’t care. I inhaled deeply, taking in the scent of him, before licking the head of his cock.

“Christ, you don’t know how fuckin’ beautiful you are like that, down on your knees for me.”

“I like drivin’ ya wild. I feel like I’m in control down here.” He didn’t get the chance to respond before I sucked him down. I couldn’t say I was the best at it. I gagged and couldn’t take him deep, but Sutton didn’t care. My name fell from his lips over and over and over again, like some kind of prayer. His fingers tangled in my hair. I used my hand to stroke him while I licked and savored the feel of his cock on my tongue. I kissed his balls and heard him hiss before taking one, then the other into my mouth, laving them, tasting the sweat of his skin, and damned if I didn’t love that too.

“Fuck, Jasp, I’m gonna come. You’re gonna make me feed you my load if you don’t slow down.”

Sutton pulled me to my feet, took my hand, and led me... to the kitchen, which I hadn't expected. He turned me so I faced the island, him behind me, kissing the back of my neck as he rutted against my ass. "You're so fucking incredible. I can feel you, pushing your ass out toward me. Fuck, I'm so lucky to have you. I'd spend all day every day inside you if I could. That's what you want, isn't it?"

"Yes...fuck yes."

"I love how perfect we are for each other, love that you come undone for me this way, and that I do the same for you. You know that, right? That you take me apart and put me back together just as much as I do you. It don't matter who's doing what." He kissed my nape again, holding on to my hips.

"I know...we're perfect...so fucking perfect."

"I love that I get to see you this way, just me. That I'm the only person in the world who knows every piece of you. That I can fuck you and hold you, then work in the sun all day with you...camp with you and have competitions with you. We match in every way."

A shiver raced down my spine. This moment felt so dirty, but so right too. He kissed my back, each knot of my spine as he lowered himself, rubbing his scruff against my skin.

When he got to his knees, Sutton kissed one ass cheek, then the other. "Show it to me...show me your hole...show me where you want me."

My back stiffened briefly, and then...then I just let go, soaked in the moment and this pleasure between us. I reached behind me, grabbed my cheeks, and spread them open.

"Fuck...this is such a perfect hole, Jasp. So fucking tight and pink and pretty. You want me to taste it? Want me to lick you soft and open for my fingers and my cock?" His voice trembled, his desire for me in every word.

"Put your tongue in me."

“Gladly.” His face pressed into my crease, his tongue swiping at my rim. Every time he touched me, tingles shot down my spine. He ate at me like he was ravenous for me, like there was nothing in the world he wanted more. Like he was teetering on the edge and I was his lifeline.

My body shook, heat pooling in my gut. Each swipe of his tongue, each time he lashed at my hole or pushed inside me, built the already relentless battering of sensation raining down on me.

Sutton pushed a finger inside me, brushing it against my prostate. “More...fuck, I need more.” I needed it all.

“I wish you could see this, see how hot you are for me, see your body open up for me while I finger you and get you open for my cock.”

“Fuck me,” I begged.

“Soon.”

Sutton reached up onto the counter and grabbed the bottle of oil. He slicked his fingers, then pushed two into me, stretching me, a burn that was nothing but pleasure, making me lose my mind.

“You’re so hot. God, I want you all the time, Jasp. How can I want someone so much?”

He pushed three fingers into me, making me cry out. My hands fisted on the counter. I arched back, trying to get closer to him, fucking myself on him. My balls were full, my cock throbbing. This felt incredible, but it wasn’t enough. I needed more, needed to be connected to him. “Please, Sutt. Need you. Want your dick, want to feel your balls empty themselves inside me.”

“Jesus.” He shoved to his feet, grabbed the oil again, and this time I knew he was slicking up his cock.

He pressed the tip against my hole, pausing to kiss the back of my neck. Somehow, I knew what he was waiting for. “Fuck me, Sutton.”

Hands on my hips, he pushed inside. The pressure was so familiar to me now, the fullness, and I welcomed it. It reminded me how well we fit together. That I was Sutton's man and he was mine.

"So good," he whispered against my skin. "So tight. So mine."

He pulled back some, then snapped his hips forward again, taking me, giving himself to me too. I could swear I felt his heartbeat inside me, like each throb in his cock matched the beat of mine, the two of us syncing up.

Sutton's arm twined around me, his hand taking my dick. He stroked me while he fucked me, saying my name, kissing my skin, licking the sweat off me. Each time he slid home, he was building me up. The pleasure was incredible, but even more than that, there was nothing but beauty in this. It didn't change anything about me and who I was, but then, maybe it did. It made me more real, more whole. It rounded up those pieces I'd never known were missing. Not the sex, not really, but just being true to what I liked, not letting myself feel any shame.

I pushed back against him harder, fucked myself on him, wanting to drive Sutton out of his mind with need for me.

"Jasper! Fuck, I'm gonna come!" he gritted against my skin just before his cock twitched, pulsing spurt after spurt of his cum inside me. I tightened around him, let myself get taken away by my orgasm, my own release shooting over his hand, on my stomach and on the counter.

"That might be the most amazin' thing that's ever happened to me... *You* are the most amazin' thing that's ever happened to me," Sutton said, and I knew it was true because he was that for me too.

We showered together, then took a nap, since neither of us had slept well the night before. I didn't think I knew how to sleep anymore without being in his arms.

When we woke up, Sutton told me more about the conversation with my mom. It gave me hope, but I was still gonna wait for her to come to me. My dad? I didn't have that same hope. I figured life happened that way sometimes. Not everything could be perfect, not everything could be tied in a pretty little bow, but I had Sutton, we had our future, and that was what mattered.

Love was what mattered, and Sutton and I had enough of that to live an eternity on.

EPILOGUE

Sutton

The next summer

“JUST SO Y’ALL know, we didn’t invite you here to be nice. We’re hopin’ we can talk y’all into free labor this summer,” Jasper teased our friends and family, whom we’d invited to our place for a beginning-of-summer barbecue. Or, I guess, if you asked Jasp, it was a job interview where everyone got hired.

They all laughed.

“You know Em and I are good for it. Things are a bit busy on the farm, but we can make time,” Sammy said from where he was sitting on top of the picnic table we’d just built.

We’d been doing some work since we’d moved in last fall, but there was so much left to do. We hadn’t done a whole lot on the inside yet. We were still making plans on how we wanted to move forward with that, but making the outside our own little oasis was more important for now. We’d gotten the pond sorted out—cleaning the bottom had added a couple of feet of depth, and we built a dock so we could use it for fishing. We never kept the fish, just threw them back into the water.

We’d also created a little hangout area with tables, a grill, and a gazebo with a swing, where we’d sometimes sit in the evenings, listening to all the bugs singing their songs, just being together. We were cute as hell that way.

“Speak for yourself,” Emerson said, making everyone chuckle. He wasn’t always the friendliest. He was a quiet guy, unlike Sammy, and he kept to himself more, but he was getting more comfortable around everyone, especially when it was just the two of them and me and Jasp.

“Don’t go actin’ like you won’t do basically anything for me,” Sammy said playfully.

“Hey, how come you won’t do anything for me?” I teased Jasper.

“Do you even know us?” he countered, keeping the game going. I liked this, being able to be ourselves around the people in our lives.

“I’m with Jasper on this one.” Kendra nudged me with her arm.

“Traitor.”

The conversation changed from there, everyone chatting in little groups about random things. Jasper’s mama came out of the house with Carrie, each holding a bowl of something they’d made.

Jasper was checking the meat on the grill and tried to pick something out of the bowl his mama carried, and she smacked his hand like she was known for doing. “Wait till dinner, Jasper Finch.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He gave her his most charming smile.

His dad hadn’t come around, though none of us were real surprised about that. It caused some strife between him and Sherry, but that didn’t stop her from having a relationship with her son. Once Sherry decided something, there wasn’t any changing her mind. She told Bob he had two choices: keep his mouth shut when it came to me and Jasp and her supporting us, or he wasn’t just gonna lose a son but also a wife. I hated that she was in that situation, but we had to keep reminding ourselves it wasn’t our fault; it was Bob’s.

“Why don’t monsters eat ghosts?” I heard Sammy ask Emerson, drawing my attention.

“Why?” Emerson answered.

“Because they taste like sheet,” Sammy replied. Emerson rolled his eyes but there was no doubting he loved the joke.

They kissed and then Charles, Emerson's friend said to me, "It's really pretty here. Don't tell Emerson, but I might like your property better than his."

I'd met Charles twice before, when he'd come out to visit Sammy and Emerson, but now he was here for the summer. I didn't know how someone could afford to go somewhere for a whole damn summer, but apparently Charles could make that happen.

"I heard that, asshole," Emerson told him.

"Oh, sorry, I thought you were too busy kissing." Charles winked at him. "Also, who's that broody guy with the dark hair? He's sexy as hell. Maybe the gay gods will show me some love and he'll swing our way." He pointed to where Jasper, Earl, Chet, Lacey, Allison, and Duke were talking.

I cocked a brow. "Gay gods?" Charles was different from any guy I knew. He was city at heart and much more blunt when it came to being who he was.

Emerson said, "I don't know which one in that group you're pointing at, but I'm sure none of them are queer."

"You just met them," Sammy countered. "For all you know, maybe they are."

"Do *you* think they are?" Emerson looked skeptical.

"No, but I ain't *assumin'*. You know what they say. It makes an ass outta you."

Emerson grinned and kissed him.

"No," Charles said, "not them. The guy under the tree, smoking by himself. He looks like he can use some fun. I'm fun. It would work perfectly. Especially if it's naked fun." He wagged his brows.

I frowned, a little surprised. "Um...that's my uncle. And no, he ain't queer, but now I'm freaked out at the thought of you wantin' to get naked with him," I said, and Emerson barked out a laugh.

Charles only gave a little shrug. “Sorry...I think? He’s hot. That’s all I was saying.”

I stood. “I think this is where I leave the conversation.”

“Charles don’t mean no harm,” Sammy said. “That’s just how he is.”

“It’s still weird.” I smiled so they knew I wasn’t really upset, then made my way to my uncle. I’d been trying to get him out of the house more, which most of the time didn’t work. But he’d come over for dinner with me and Jasp a few times. We’d sit outside by the firepit, the three of us playing guitar together, and I figured that was a start. I’d gotten lucky today.

“How you doin’, Uncle Brian?” We still hadn’t talked about how I thought he’d been in love with my mama. How did you even bring that up? I wasn’t sure it was something I should say at all.

“All right. You got yourself a good support system now. That’s real good.”

“Made even better because you’re part of it.” I nodded toward the group. “You should come socialize.”

“I’ll be there when I’m done smokin’, though I can’t promise how social I’ll be.”

I chuckled. “Well, that’s something.”

As I started to walk away, Uncle Brian looked up at the sky. “Storm’s comin’ later,” he mused.

There wasn’t a cloud up there, but then, there didn’t have to be. This was North Carolina.

Sometimes we had four seasons in one day.

I hung out with Jasper and the crew for a bit. When dinner was done, we sat around in camp chairs and at the picnic table to eat. Once during the evening, I saw Uncle Brian smoking again, Charles there talking to him. Charles was barking up the wrong tree, but then, people would have thought that about me

or Jasper before we went and fell in love with each other, and it couldn't hurt for Uncle Brian to have a friend. I couldn't figure out what in the hell they'd have in common, but I guess you never knew.

It was about nine when the last few people left and me and Jasper were finally alone.

We were still sitting outside, side by side in camp chairs by the fire, which we'd lit earlier to roast marshmallows. Jasper was drinking sweet tea because we'd made sure not to have any beer there today, trying to be respectful of Carrie.

I playfully kicked his chair. "It was a good day."

Jasper turned to me, giving me his crooked smile. "It's a good life."

"Yeah, yeah it is." The best life. I was thankful for it every day. I wished my family were around to see me, to see how happy I was with Jasp.

The fire and moonlight sparked off his eyes, with a little glimmer of Jasper mischief. He set his tea down. I knew something was up, and one second he was in his chair, the next he was lunging at me.

I reacted quickly, used to this playful Jasper, fighting to roll us over as soon as we hit the ground. It didn't quite work as planned, and we ended up grappling in the grass, both of us working to get the upper hand, which was hard because we were laughing so hard while wrestling.

My stomach muscles ached and my cheeks hurt from chuckling. I flipped him, only for him to lick the side of my face to distract me before I ended up on my back, Jasper straddling me, holding my arms down.

"You ain't fightin' back."

"Maybe I like where I am." I smiled up at him, the look in his eyes going from playful to hungry, and I didn't mean for food.

“I loved today, and I can’t think of a better way to celebrate than havin’ you.”

“Guess you better take me, then.”

Our mouths slammed together, a wave crashing against the shore. We pulled apart just enough to rip our shirts over our heads and toss them to the ground. Jasper fell on top of me again, kissing me and rutting against me. We were getting real good at sex now, experimenting and trying new things as often as we could.

Jasper had started fucking me too some months back. We’d had a talk about it the first time, how he felt like he was coming full circle. He wasn’t ashamed of being with me or of me being inside him, but it also felt like he was giving himself to me because at first, he’d been so intent on me doing the touching, the stroking, the sucking. He didn’t have any hang-ups anymore, and I didn’t care who did what; I just wanted him. But he was right—it was incredible having him inside me.

I loved it, the feeling of him taking me, but topping still fit me better, just like bottoming did for Jasper. Most of the time that was the way it worked between us.

Tonight, though, it was clear Jasper wanted my ass, and I was more than happy to give it to him.

We kissed while frantically shucking our clothes, the moon and the fire giving us light. This was gonna be quick and frenzied. The hunger in Jasper’s gray gaze, along with the need surging through me, told me that.

Jasper pulled a packet of lube from his pocket, and I moved to my hands and knees. The grass scratched against my skin, adding to the sensations as he prepared me.

And then he was pushing in, and I was pushing back against him, both of us wild in our need for each other. Like I figured, we didn’t last long. Jasper fucked me like he’d die if he didn’t have me, and after we came, calling each other’s names, we fell to the grass together, breathing hard.

I heard crickets somewhere in the distance, a few frogs from the pond, as we lay there together, spent and sated.

Jasper kissed me, then said, “Promise me something.”

“Anything.”

“When we finally work on the house, I’ll get my hardwood floors we’ve been talkin’ about for what feels like forever now.”

I laughed. “You can have all the hardwood floors you want.”

“Thank you.”

We were looking up at the starry sky, when Jasper suddenly yelled, “I’m in love with Sutton Manning!” the way he’d done on his birthday in Asheville.

“I’m in love with Jasper Finch!” I yelled, same as I did back then. It didn’t matter that it was a bit ridiculous. It was us, and it was true. I rolled toward him and let him hold me.

“We had a million little moments, Sutt, all of ’em leading us here. I can’t wait to spend my whole damn life makin’ a hundred million more of them with you.”

I smiled into Jasper’s throat. There was nothing I would ever want more. “That sounds perfect.”

A drop of water hit the ground, then another and another. Out of nowhere, the sky opened up, rain falling down on us in a wild summer storm. There was a loud rumbling, then a bright light flashing above. Thunder and lightning. Jasper and Sutton. We just went together like that.

Somehow, it was the best ending to one of my greatest days.

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About the Author

Riley Hart is the girl who wears her heart on her sleeve. Although she primarily focuses on male/male romance, under her various pen names, she's written a little bit of everything. Regardless of the sub-genre, there's always one common theme and that's...romance! No surprise seeing as she's a hopeless romantic herself. Riley's a lover of character-driven plots, flawed characters, and always tries to write stories and characters people can relate to. She believes everyone deserves to see themselves in the books they read. When she's not writing, you'll find her reading, traveling or dreaming about traveling. She has two perfectly sarcastic kids and a husband who still makes her swoon.

Riley Hart is represented by Jane Dystel at Dystel, Goderich & Bourret Literary Management. She's a 2019 Lambda Literary Award Finalist for *Of Sunlight and Stardust*. Under her pen name, her young adult novel, *The History of Us* is an ALA Rainbow Booklist Recommended Read and *Turn the World Upside Down* is a Florida Authors and Publishers President's Book Award Winner.