

CITY UNIVERSITY OF
MONTRIDGE



A
MAFFICHA
made in **HELL**

BOYFRIEND CAFÉ BOOK 1

F.A. RAY

A Matcha Made in Hell

An Enemies-to-Lovers MM Romance

F.A. RAY

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Bonus Scene: Tall, Dark and ... What a Weirdo

Rhett arrives at City University of Montridge ready to forget his miserable high school experience and reinvent himself. First, he's got to figure out where the hell "Club Room 302" is in this giant maze of a campus. Luckily, he bumps into Tall, Dark and Handsome. This "Albert" guy seems to know where everything in this school is. Can't hurt to follow a hot guy toward the Campus Pride meetup and see what happens...

To get this exclusive four-part bonus scene of Rhett and Albert's first meeting, simply head to [Patreon](#) after you're done reading!

Chapter One

Rhett

THE WORST DAY OF MY LIFE was my first day of high school.

I realize how cliché that sounds, believe me, but I can't change the truth.

It was a decent-sized school district that combined all the shitty little towns scattered around the area, including the one where me and Mom still live. I arrived to my first day at the “big” school, as I thought of it, full of dread. I was, and am, an introvert, and this new school lived up to its moniker from the moment the bus dropped me off outside. So many people going so many directions. Everyone seemed to know where they were headed and what they were doing except for me.

And they all seemed very normal.

I stood out before I even escaped middle school. There was nothing I could do about it. Everything I said and did seemed to be a blazing neon sign that screamed, “Hey, look at

the weirdo.” It was like even the way I breathed set off some alarm alerting the cooler, more normal kids that I was invading their cozy little world. They zeroed in on me like jackals, using me as a punching bag, the butt of every joke. Mom told me they were sad little dweebs. She comforted me through every fit of crying and frustration. But she didn’t have the power to make those jerks leave me alone.

It happened in middle school. And the moment I entered Callow Valley Regional High School, I knew it would happen here, too.

He caught my eyes from the other end of the sidewalk where the buses were dropping us all off. His gaze locked onto mine, and I swallowed.

Here we go again.

I hurried into the building. It was a big school. He was a big kid. Maybe he was older than me. Maybe I’d never see him again. Maybe our classes would take us in completely different directions.

He wasn’t, I wouldn’t, and they didn’t.

When I reached my homeroom, he entered only a few steps behind me. My heart sank in my chest as the big kid with the dark eyes and dark hair and shit-eating smirk sat behind me. I didn’t like having him back there somewhere. It was like catching sight of a bear in the forest then losing him in the trees. You couldn’t do anything but hope he didn’t feel like fucking with you.

Spencer Marsh felt like fucking with me. He felt like

fucking with me a lot.

By lunch, I was in a locker. Like, physically in a locker. He shoved me inside, then slammed the door shut, sneering at me through the grate.

“How do you like it in there, queer?” he said.

A gaggle of similarly asshole-shaped kids chortled around him.

I didn’t answer. He slammed his big fist on the locker, the noise rattling around inside my damn teeth.

“Tell the other queers we’ve got lockers for them, too,” he said. “I know you freaks all hang out and do freak shit together.”

I fucking wished. In reality, I was alone for much of that first year. I gathered some friends by sophomore year, and yes, they were mostly “freaks” like myself, but it made no difference. Like a homing missile, Spencer Marsh came back to me over and over, turning every school day for four long years into an exercise in pure misery.

He did worse shit than shove me into lockers, but I still think of that first day as the worst of my life.

It was an omen of what was to come.



I’M HALFWAY THROUGH a boss fight when Emi bursts into our shared dorm room with tears streaming down her face.

She flops onto the couch in what passes for our living room, and I have to lift my arms so she can lay her head in my lap.

“Men are bastards,” she cries. “Except you.”

I pause the game and set aside the controller, holding back a sigh. My kitted out warrior freezes mid-swing of his unreasonably huge sword, but I’ve got a more important mission than hacking down the monster on the screen. I pet Emi’s silky, dark hair, and she immediately calms down enough to speak normally.

“He dumped me,” she says.

“Wait, the guy from the party?” I say. “Were you two even dating?”

“We were kind of dating,” she says.

“You were hooking up.”

“Hooking up and hanging out. That’s basically dating.”

I don’t correct her. Who am I judge? I haven’t had anything but “hooking up and hanging out” since high school and that was a total disaster. Of course, the fact that every douchebag jock in the school decided to make fun of the only out gay kids didn’t exactly help the relationship. Eric and I took a heap of shit for holding hands in the hallways, and eventually it simply became too much. We were kids. We had a lot to deal with even before jerks like Spencer Marsh decided to make us their punching bags.

Whatever. That was high school. I left that all behind when I came here to the City University of Montridge to study

engineering. It was a fresh start, and my best friend and roommate Emi was part of that fresh start. At least, she was when she wasn't crying about some guy.

I comb my fingers through her hair while she cries in my lap.

"It's the beginning of the semester," I say. "How have you even had time to get your heart broken?"

"We're juniors, Rhett," she says. "It's called having friends. Do you seriously not do anything over summer?"

Nothing except work.

I don't bother telling her that. No one here, not even Emi, realizes how many jobs I've been juggling over the past two years. Even with scholarships, paying for college isn't all that easy when you don't come from some kind of money. And me and Mom definitely don't come from money. It's just the two of us, so I'm on my own to figure out this college thing.

Emi doesn't need to know any of that, though, so I simply pet her hair and tell her that the guy is a huge jerk. Which, in fairness, he probably is. Emi is one of the sweetest people I've ever met. She genuinely cares about others, but it leaves her a little naive. This guy isn't the first who's taken advantage of that. If I could, I'd shove every one of these callous idiots into lockers. Too bad I'm usually the one getting pushed into lockers myself. Instead, I scratch gently at Emi's scalp and let the tears and words pour out into my lap.

Eventually, Emi drags her head up. Her lovely, dark, almond-shaped eyes are red and puffy. Her face shines with

tears. Yet she smiles through it.

“You’re really good at this, you know that?” she says.

I chuckle. “I didn’t really do anything but listen.”

“You’d be surprised how many people suck at that.”

I simply shrug and brush back the hair sticking to her damp face. “Let me make you some tea. Stay right there.”

I head to what passes for our kitchen. Technically, dorm rooms at C U of M don’t have kitchens; there’s a communal dining hall instead. Emi and I set up a little portable stovetop that we use for clandestine tea and instant ramen. It sits on the windowsill in the narrow span separating our rooms, a space consumed mostly by the sofa we found on a curbside one day.

Within minutes, the teapot is whistling shrilly. I fill two cups, pouring steaming water over the teabags they harbor. An earthy aroma curls up out of the mugs that I deliver to the couch. Emi cradles her cup, breathing in the steam, and I settle beside her to do the same. After one sip, she’s smiling through the sniffing.

“This is the best,” she says. “You’re the best.”

“It’s just tea.”

She shakes her head. “I can make myself tea. It’s different when you make it. It just tastes better somehow.”

“Must be my magic touch,” I say.

“You’re being sarcastic, but it’s true,” she says. “You should charge for this. It’s the number one breakup cure in the whole world.”

“If I could charge for making you tea every time some guy is shitty I wouldn’t be a broke college student.”

“So why don’t you then? I mean, not me, but there must be plenty of other people on this campus who could use a cute guy to cry on when their heart is broken.”

“You remember the part where we can only be roommates because of how incredibly gay I am, right?”

Emi heaves a sigh. “Yes. Unfortunately.”

Emi is far from the only girl who’s hit on me, but they all meet with disappointment the moment I open my mouth. I might look like a date-able guy my swept back blond locks and bright blue eyes, but the illusion shatters as soon as I speak. The all-American boy starts looking a lot less all-American when he wears a loud rainbow ensemble for Pride month. I was never able to hide how queer I was growing up, and college certainly isn’t going to be the place where I tone it down. Hell no. I went to college partially to leave the closet so far behind I can’t even find the door anymore.

“You don’t have to be their *real* boyfriend,” Emi says. “You just have to be their boyfriend until they feel better. It’s like ... a host club, but American.”

Emi has told me all about the host and hostess clubs she has back home in Japan. They definitely sound like an experience. But I’m just one gay guy. I can’t fake date a whole university of girls trying to get over guys they met at frat parties.

It’s a ridiculous idea.

Except...

Except, well, I really am that broke. And I really do talk Emi and sometimes even her friends through this stuff all the time. I like doing it. Despite being an introvert, I like people. I like helping. These women deserve better than some shitty guy who wants to hit it and quit it, and someone should tell them so. It's really not that hard to simply listen, and that often mends the hurt. Besides, my last off-campus job disappeared during summer break and I've been scrambling to find a replacement since August.

"You're thinking about it," Emi says. "I can tell that you're thinking about it."

"Aren't you supposed to be heartbroken?"

A devious grin has replaced Emi's tears. "I can be heartbroken and conniving at the same time, thank you." She pats my arm. "Just consider it. You'd be so good at it. I can help you set it up, the first American host club."

"We can't call it that. No one will have any clue what it is."

She thinks, tapping her lips as she does. "The Boyfriend Club?"

I glance at the tea she's still cradling. "The Boyfriend Café."

Her smile turns absolutely wicked. "The Boyfriend Café."

“AND THAT’S WHY I need to borrow your basement,” I say.

Albert raises a thin, black eyebrow. His dark eyes are serious and skeptical behind his glasses, his frown carved deep into his mouth. His hair lays neat, his beard close-cropped, his clothing immaculate. He’s the essence of tall, dark and handsome, but we’ve never gone there, even though we’re both queer. That’s just not how things are between me and Albert. They’re more like this, me stumbling over with some crazy idea and Albert sighing and seeing me through my next misadventure.

“I could just help you with your tuition instead of whatever th—”

“No,” I cut him off. “Hell no. You know how I feel about that. No money, no sex. That’s not how this works.” I wave between the two of us.

He sighs, but I know he agrees. Money and sex would fundamentally change our friendship, and neither of us want that. We met in freshman year and instantly forged an unlikely bond. Or, rather, we met in freshman year and I decided we were instantly forging a bond. Still, it works, and I’m not going to mess it up when I’ve got a way better idea in mind.

“You realize that what you’re proposing is a business,” Albert drawls.

“It’s not a business,” I say. “It’s a club. A boyfriend club.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I’m going to heal the broken hearts of Montridge. It’s basically a public service. Like charity.”

“Charity that you get paid for.”

“Charity that I get paid for.”

Albert sighs, shoulders slouching, and a toothy grin breaks across my face.

“Only the basement,” Albert says.

“Of course,” I say. “No one will go anywhere near your house. It’ll just be tea in the basement. Totally chill. You won’t even know we’re there.”

“If the university finds out...”

“They won’t,” I insist. “Besides, your house is off-campus. What can they even do?”

Albert’s lips twist into a deeper frown. We both know there’s plenty the university can do if they find a clandestine student-run business operating just off campus. Albert lives within walking distance of the front gates, well within the university’s reach. I’ll just have to make sure the school never knows, which shouldn’t be hard if it’s just me serving tea to Emi’s friends.

Except my mind is already spinning like a hamster sprinting around a wheel. Multiple tea blends, full formal tea parties, baked goods to compliment the drinks, more “boyfriends” on hand than just me... The Boyfriend Café could become so much more if I can just get it off the ground, but that’s the engineer in me talking. I always want to make

things bigger and better and more, and it's often Albert who keeps me from crashing and burning spectacularly.

"This is going to be a disaster," Albert mutters.

"It's going to be awesome," I say.

And it is. It's so freaking awesome. I spend the next week cleaning out Albert's basement. It's already pretty clean, unsurprisingly, but it lacks warmth. I find a rug someone is throwing out and spread it across the floor. A little table and a couple chairs come from a local Buy Nothing group. I already have the stovetop and tea set at home. Emi isn't thrilled about sacrificing it, but I promise her that as soon as the Boyfriend Café is bringing in some cash, I'll replace it. Finally, I hang fairy lights around the whole place, adding a soft, warm glow to the cold concrete walls.

I set my hands on my hips, observing my handiwork. One tiny table with three chairs sits in the middle of the basement. The carpet and lights warm the room even more than the sunlight that sneaks in through the ground-level windows. It isn't much, but this is only the beginning.

Albert joins me, and for a long moment, he evaluates my décor in stony silence.

"You swept the floor," he finally observes dryly.

I'm standing here in my best (read: only) suit pants and formal vest and that's all he can say?

"You need wall art," Albert says. "And more lights. Do you only have one tea set? People will expect a table cloth, as well."

Fast forward another week and Albert has made an “initial investment” in my little business. There are now two — two! — tables for customers, as well as additional tea blends, more cups, table cloths for both tables, standing lamps and an array of art on the walls that ranges from something I’d expect to see in a retirement home to something I’d expect to see in a hotel lobby. So, yeah, it’s not much, but the couple hundred bucks I now owe Albert have definitely improved the place.

“You don’t actually owe me money, you know,” he says.

We’re standing in his basement again as he jots down the inventory of the whole room in some imposing looking leather-bound notebook.

“You know my rule,” I say.

“Yes, I do, but half of these items came from the house itself. The rest are simply practical. You cleaned up my basement. I can provide a couple lights.”

Practicality is Albert’s way of being generous, and I know that, but I mentally tally up the price of the items he provided. The guy reeks of cash. Everyone else around him might be happy to take advantage of that, but I’ll sleep on a cardboard box in his driveway before I take a penny from him. And once this Boyfriend Café takes off, I won’t need to, either.

Because this is going to be awesome.

I turn toward the open door leading into Albert’s backyard and throw my arms out wide. Emi stands just out in the yard with a couple of her friends. I flash them my brightest

and toothiest grin.

“The Boyfriend Café is open for business.”

Chapter Two

Spencer

“THAT’S WHAT YOU’RE WEARING?”

I glance at myself in the full length mirror in my room. Jeans and a T-shirt. I could throw a hoodie over it, but I’m a big enough guy that the slight chill in the air in September doesn’t really bother me. My dark hair is short enough that it doesn’t look messy even when I don’t really do anything with it. I could use a shave, but the dark stubble shading my cheeks hasn’t grown wild yet. Besides, it matches my eyes, both so dark they’re nearly black.

I shrug. “What’s wrong with this?”

Britt rolls her eyes and pouts. “They dress nice at this place.”

She waves at herself. She wears a cute sundress with leggings under it and some kind of shawl thing over it. It’s a little bit “grandma” for my tastes, but apparently this is her idea of dressing nice.

“I thought you said it was a café,” I say.

“It is,” she says. “But it’s, like, a nice café.”

“Why are we going to a fancy café again? Can’t you get tea somewhere else?”

Britt huffs dramatically. “It’s not about the tea, Spencer. It’s about the experience. Besides, Emi says this place is amazing.”

“And Emi is...”

“My friend? Geeze. Do you ever pay attention?”

I don’t and I should and she is completely correct, but I’m also the new guy at this college, having just transferred in this semester, and I haven’t had time to learn Britt’s entire intricate web of friends. We only met a couple weeks ago. It’s kind of a fluke that I already have both a girlfriend and a fraternity at C U of M, so I should probably shut up, count my lucky stars and go to the damn café, but a tea party isn’t exactly my ideal Friday night. I’d rather stay here and start drinking with the other guys in the frat house, but Britt is hot and into me for some reason, so I’ll endure one tea party if it makes her happy.

I let her force me into a nicer shirt that actually buttons down, but I stick with jeans and sneakers for the rest. Alan and Joe are in the living room gaming as I leave, and I catch them shooting rolled eyes and snarky smirks my way as Britt drags me out of the frat house.

Greek Row lies just beyond Montridge’s campus, which apparently places us pretty close to this café thing as well. I watch the homes the various fraternities and sororities have

rented go by with a pang of longing. We're only a couple weeks into the semester. The essays and projects haven't had time to pile up yet. All of which means someone is going to throw a banger tonight in one of these houses — a banger I'll be missing to sit around drinking tea.

Britt scoops up my hand as we walk. Evening is setting in. The air cools as the sun dips low. Unfortunately, New Jersey boasts more than its fair share of mosquitoes, and the little pests love a cool fall evening. I'm swatting them away from my ears by the time we reach a home about ten minutes from Greek Row and just outside the front gates of the university itself.

“This is the café?” I say.

It definitely doesn't look like one, though I can't say I've spent that much time in cafés. When I was going to school at the community college near my parents' place in South Jersey, I pretty much just went to school and went back home. Besides, South Jersey is more farmland than cute little cafés. Montridge sits close enough to New York that there's plenty of fancy shit to do if that's your thing, but in my couple weeks here I haven't explored much beyond the bounds of the campus itself.

“Don't be a grump,” Britt says. “It's around the back.”

“I am not a grump,” I say. “I'm a ray of sunshine, baby. That's why you like me.”

She rolls her eyes, but she's smiling, partially because she knows it's true. My goofiness has always been something that

attracts people to me. Maybe I take it too far sometimes, but as long as people are laughing, it's gotta be working, right?

She tugs on my hand, leading me around the house. I try to take her advice as we round a two-story home. It's definitely cleaner than the frat houses, I can see that even from the outside. The porch contains a rocking chair and an end table with a newspaper resting on it. A path of individual paving stones studs the neatly trimmed grass, sweeping around the side of the house and toward a tall fence. The gate stands open, and we step through it into a back yard both wild and meticulously tamed. Someone has pruned back the trees that cast shade over the whole yard. A vegetable garden consumes the back corner, while lawn chairs and a glass-top table sit atop a deck.

Light spills from a door just beside that deck. Beside it stands a chalkboard sign like you'd find outside a real coffee shop, except this one says "Boyfriend Café" in flowing script. Someone even turned the dot of the "I" into a flower.

Britt squeals with delight. "Oh my God, it's so cute. Emi was right. Isn't it adorable?"

It is pretty cute, and I really am trying not to be a jerk, so I nod. This is clearly important to Britt, so I slap on the most genuine smile I can muster. The old Spencer would have grumbled and complained, but I (hopefully) left that guy behind in South Jersey. This is the new Spencer, the Spencer who's more considerate, more kind, less of a dick to everyone around him. I was an angry kid in high school, and I often took it out on the wrong people. That's part of the reason I

transferred to a school at the other end of New Jersey. This is my fresh start, my do-over. If Britt wants to spend one Friday night at some silly café her friend told her about, then damn it, I'm going to put on a smile and do it.

What's the worst that could happen?

A tall guy with hair and eyes somehow even darker than mine steps gracefully out of the basement and strides up the couple steps to ground level. He wears suit pants and a vest that shimmers a little when it catches the light. He moves with a strange sort of elegance as he approaches us with a notebook in hand.

"You must be the eight o'clock," he says. "Brittney?"

"Britt. Yes, we are. This is the Boyfriend Café, right?"

"Indeed," he says. "Please, right this way."

He leads us down the steps and into the basement, and I hear Britt gasp in a breath. The whole place is like something out of a cartoon. Fairy lights hang from the ceiling like fireflies hovering overhead. A warm carpet covers most of the floor, and two little tables sit upon it, each decorated with a tablecloth and a tiny glass with a lit tea light floating on a bed of water. Plants cast lacy vines over the edges of the windowsills to tumble to the floor. The scent of earth and flowers and vanilla and chamomile suffuses the whole basement, likely thanks to the tea.

"This is amazing," Britt breathes. "Rhett did such a good job. Wow."

Wait. Rhett? That's a somewhat unusual name, one I

never thought I'd hear again after high school, but we are at a decent-sized university. It's got to be a coincidence.

I shrug it off as Tall, Dark and Handsome leads us to one of the two tables and invites us to sit. Britt grabs my hand under the table, her face glowing from more than just the candlelight flickering around us.

"Thank you so much for doing this with me," she says. "I didn't want to come here alone, even though that's kind of their whole deal."

"It is?"

She sighs. "Yes. Didn't you listen when I explained? It's a Boyfriend Café. So, like, when you get dumped or you're just fed up with men or whatever, you come here and a hot guy drinks tea with you and makes you feel better."

"Wait, that's what this place is for?"

"Duh. That's the whole point. Otherwise I'd just go get tea at the cafeteria or something. It's about the experience."

I shift in my seat. "Then isn't it kind of weird that I'm here with you?"

Britt shrugs. "I mean, you don't *have* to be sad to come here. That's just how the place got started. Emi was upset about some guy, and Rhett helped her out, and then he realized he could actually make some money doing that. Or, well, I guess Emi talked him into it a little. But apparently he's talked her through, like, every breakup she's had in the past two years, so he's really good at it, even though he's gay."

A warning pings in the back of my brain. A guy named Rhett who's gay. That definitely narrows down the possibilities, but there's no way we both left South Jersey and wound up at the same university in North Jersey. There are a ton of schools up here, a ton of schools all over the country. Why the hell would the Rhett I bullied in high school stay this close to home? Surely he'd want to get as far away from my bullshit as he could.

My blood is going cold. My palms are sweaty. I'm supposed to be leaving all that shit behind. I'm supposed to be reinventing myself. I'm supposed to be a new Spencer, a better Spencer, a Spencer who wouldn't even recognize the dickhead who picked on people like Rhett during high school.

A curtain hanging from the ceiling cuts off a square of space at the back of the room. It rustles, and my heart tries to crawl up out of my throat. There are lots of people named Rhett. There are lots of gay people named Rhett. At least, I hope there are. Because there is nothing worse than *that* Rhett stepping out from behind that curtain right now, nothing worse in the entire damn universe.

*Please let it be a different Rhett. Please let me be wrong.
Please please please.*

My desperate prayer goes unanswered. The curtain shifts, and my heart stops dead in my chest.

The moment his bright blue eyes meet mine, all doubt evaporates. It's him. Rhett Ellison. The guy I tortured the shit out of in high school.

His face goes still and hard. It's the look of a cornered animal, the look I forced him to wear far too many times when we were teenagers. He's mostly the same, that same sweep of blond hair, that same faint, light shimmer of stubble on his face, those same stunningly blue eyes, eyes I was always supposed to avoid in high school, but found myself falling into all the same. The moment I felt myself sinking, I would lash out, even though it was never his fault. Rhett did nothing but exist, and I took it out on him in the worst ways possible.

I want to melt into the floor and disappear. My blood has gone from ice cold to boiling hot. If Rhett strides over here and punches my lights out, I'll deserve nothing more. I don't even think I could fight back. I'm frozen in place, caught between wanting to drop to the floor and beg for forgiveness and bolt back out the door.

I came here to escape this. I came here to escape the version of myself who made this guy's life hell. I came here to be different.

Now, my past is staring wide-eyed at me from across a basement dressed up like a fairy tale.

It only lasts a beat, then Rhett shakes it off. His eyes break free of mine and he splashes a charming smile across his face.

Fuck, he's beautiful when he smiles.

No. I can't think that. I can't dare to think that. Those kinds of thoughts caused all the trouble we had in high school, though Rhett never knew that.

But how am I supposed to push it aside when Rhett is flashing that toothy grin and striding up to the table with a confident swagger? He's lean, but nearly as tall as me, and the crisp suit pants and vest look incredible on him. When he gives Britt a little bow and kisses the back of her hand, she almost melts in her seat.

“Welcome to the Boyfriend Café,” he says smooth as butter. “I look forward to our time together.”

Chapter Three

Rhett

I FREEZE THE MOMENT I step out from behind the curtain.

Spencer Marsh.

It's impossible, yet my high school bully is sitting right before me, shock slackening his face. I stall out as my entire disastrous high school career flashes before my eyes. It mostly consists of Spencer shoving me into lockers or making crude jokes or flinging spitballs at the back of me and Eric's heads during class. Somehow, I got out of there and ran away to a college all the way up north.

Apparently, I didn't run far enough.

My stomach ties itself in knots. The reservation was for two, but I never thought to ask Britt about her boyfriend. Some of the customers we've had in our first few days have brought boyfriends or friends. It's never been an issue. Until now.

I suddenly wish it was Mal covering this shift and not me. He's a fashion student I met at some LGBT event on campus.

We got along easily, so I hit him up after the café started picking up steam. He seemed like the type who might do well with the gig — outgoing, charming, friendly. So far, that's proven true. Mal is crushing it, allowing me to add more reservation spots and raise the café's profile and revenue. But it's just me tonight. Mal had a real party to go to instead. He could not have picked a worse time to leave me here alone.

I shake myself and plaster on a smile. I don't have time for this high school stuff. I need the money, need it badly enough to put up with a guy I'd rather punch in the face than serve tea to. I stride up to the table with all the confidence I can muster and take Britt's hand, kissing the back of it.

“Welcome to the Boyfriend Café. I look forward to our time together.”

Britt squeals with delight. I dare not look over at Spencer for his reaction. She's the only one that matters here anyway, and if Spencer is anything like he was in high school, sooner or later she'll be back here alone to complain about how he broke up with her. Poor girl. I'm already convinced she deserves better.

I sit down, cross my legs, prop my elbows on the table, and perch my chin on my hands. In high school, Spencer would have had something to say about how flamboyant I look sitting like this, but the show isn't for him, it's for this poor woman he roped into dating him. For her, I smile sweetly and tilt my head in a way I know makes a tuft of soft blond hair fall across my forehead.

“What can I get for you today, honey?” I say. “I have every kind of tea you could want. Do you want a little caffeine boost or something more sedate? What’s your favorite kind of flower? I bet I have a tea that will match your eyes.”

Britt’s smile grows, just as I knew it would. “That’s so amazing. Um, I really don’t know. I like teas that aren’t too flowery. Maybe something more earthy, you know? But not grassy. Do you have something like that?”

“Of course, sweetheart,” I say.

I nearly sweep back to my feet, but Britt says, “Oh, Spence, what do you want?”

I cling to my smile like a man hanging off the edge of a cliff while Spencer dithers.

“Oh, um, I don’t really drink tea.”

“Come on,” Britt says. “Just get something. It’s part of the experience. The price is the same either way. The tea is included.”

Spencer isn’t looking at me, apparently more fascinated by the daisies on the tablecloth. “I don’t really know what kind...”

“What would you recommend?” Britt says.

I have to bite my tongue to keep from retorting with “poison,” but it’s probably not a great idea to kill off my customers’ boyfriends, even if I suspect she’ll be back and want to kill him herself in a month at the most.

“How about something dark and bitter?” I say.

Spencer looks up, just for a second, and his piercingly dark eyes meet mine. A flicker of fear flashes through them, and I'm honest enough to admit that I like it. I like it a lot. Britt is thrilled by the suggestion, but Spencer heard the deeper meaning beneath my words, and it scared him. Good.

I take my opportunity to escape, rising as gracefully as I can manage and heading for the curtained off area that forms a sort of employees-only room. It isn't much, just a little table for the stovetop and some tea supplies, but right now it feels like a refuge. I never want to leave, so I take my time selecting two tea bags and heating up water. Customers usually want me to drink with them, but a man can only have so much tea in a single day. Once Britt and Spencer's tea is ready, I place my cup on the tray as well. I've been sipping from it for the past couple hours, nursing it as customer after customer passes through. Not for the first time, I think about how badly I'd like for us to add a baker to this arrangement. There's gotta be someone in the culinary school who needs some cash, and it would really help if I could nibble at a scone or something instead of drinking a gallon of tea.

I'll tackle that problem some other day, preferably one where I'm not serving tea to the guy who made being gay during high school an exercise in constant misery.

I'm just about to steel myself and head back out there when Albert slips into the "back room" with me.

"Are you okay?" he says.

Right to the point.

“It’s him, right?” Albert says. “That guy you mentioned from high school.”

Albert knows all about high school. He knows all about most things. Comes with the whole “best friend” thing. I don’t hold anything back around him, but he can be overprotective at times. Like right now.

“I’m fine,” I say. “He’s just here because of his girlfriend. We’ll act like we don’t know each other and get through it. I doubt he’ll ever come back.”

“Are you sure? I can handle this one.”

I shake my head. “You said you didn’t want to do front of house stuff. I respect that. I’ve been doing customer service since I was sixteen, but it’s not for everyone.”

Albert looks skeptical, so I add, “Hey, maybe he’s feeling guilty and will leave a big tip.”

It’s supposed to be a joke, but Albert isn’t laughing. He studies me with those serious, dark eyes of his, but finally nods. “I’ll be just outside reading in the yard. If you need anything...”

“I won’t. Really. I’m fine.”

I go for the tea before Albert can push any more. I balance the tray of teacups on one hand and force myself past the curtain and back out into the main café. Britt and Spencer cut off what sounds like a contentious conversation. A petty part of me wants to smile to myself. The semester has barely started and Britt is already sick of him. Good. He deserves it.

Britt brightens when I set a teacup before her. I'm tempted to "accidentally" spill Spencer's all over him, but manage to hold back. He'd probably try to get me arrested for assault or something.

"Wow, this smells amazing," Britt says, cradling her cup. "What's yours smell like? Pass it here."

Spencer gives her his cup, and she inhales deeply. At least someone is appreciating my perfectly brewed tea. I take pride in what I've put together here. The tea is decent stuff, not that cheap bargain crap they serve in the cafeteria. The cups match the lace-edged tablecloths. The lights criss-cross overhead so they shimmer on the surface of the drinks. It's not just a cup of tea; it's a whole aesthetic condensed into one perfect cup.

"I'm glad you like it," I say. "We're just getting to know each other, but I thought it suited you."

Britt blushes faintly, her lips fighting to curl into a smile. Spencer sits beside her glaring at me, but it's not my fault he can't figure out how to say anything sweet to his girlfriend. It isn't even hard. Just be honest and kind. That's all most people really want, man, woman or otherwise.

"What's your major?" I say.

It's a lame conversation opener, but at a university, it works every time. Britt starts talking about physics and her passion for science, and I find myself wondering how in the world Spencer ever attracted a woman like this. He's probably studying physical education or some other jock major, and Britt's here trying to become a scientist. Cruelly, I look

forward to the day she returns here to complain about him because he inevitably messed up the relationship.

I hold out my hand and she sets her fingers in my palm. “You are incredible, do you realize that?” I say. “A scientist? Girl, that’s amazing.”

A shy smile graces her pretty face. “It’s not as fancy as it sounds.”

“Hush,” I say. “If you were a man, don’t you think you’d be bragging about this to everyone you met? You’re studying to be a freaking scientist. Own it.”

That smile she’s been holding back finally breaks free, and it’s truly gorgeous. If I was straight, Britt would be a certified catch.

“He better deserve you,” I say in a mock whisper and with a jerk of my head toward Spencer.

Spencer finally checks into the conversation, anger falling like a mask over his face. It’s a shame, too. That dark stubble and those devastating eyes would be so much more useful if they belonged to someone who wasn’t a total prick. Spencer oozes the kind of male energy that makes me want to get thrown roughly onto the nearest bed, but with a stink of jerk spoiling it all.

Britt is flustered by my statement, but Spencer isn’t. The rage I remember from high school breaks loose.

“Who the hell are you to say something like that to my girlfriend?” he says.

“I’m just making conversation with a customer,” I say, innocent as can be.

“You’re making conversation with my girlfriend.”

“And? Is she your property? Can I not talk with her?”

Spencer’s mouth twists into a snarl. “You turn less queer or something since high school? Why are you so interested?”

“Spence!” Britt says.

I snort a bitter laugh. “If I made it through all of high school with you and still came out gay, why the hell would I stop now? Why are you so threatened by a gay man, anyway? Can’t even satisfy your girl yourself? Do you need me to show you how?”

It’s too far, way too far. Even I know that. But fuck this. Fuck him. Fuck Spencer Marsh being back in my life for some reason. Right now, the anger in my chest burns so hot it’s incinerating all my common sense, leaving behind only the desire to hurt him even a fraction as much as he hurt me.

Spencer lurches to his feet. I forgot how big the guy is. He could be on the football team. He could be a wrestler. He could throw even another man around if he really wanted to.

And nope. No. I shouldn’t be thinking that. Not about a guy who looks like he wants to rearrange my face right here in the café.

I stand as well, and that apparently triggers some animal instinct in Spencer. He rushes around the table and grabs me by the front of my shirt. The raw power in the hand gripping

me sends a thrill through my whole body, but I'm angry enough to shove it aside and glare right back at him. Britt is yelling at Spencer, but he ignores her, his dark eyes fixed on mine. I wait for him to say or do something, to lash out like he did in high school, but he just holds me like that, the closeness of our bodies becoming more awkward with each passing second that doesn't contain a threat or punch. Why the hell is he just holding me? Why the hell am I just letting him? This is starting to feel like something very different from a fist fight, but I dare not name it, not even in the privacy of my own mind. I want to struggle just to see how he'll react, and that's a damn dangerous thought.

Before either of us do more than glare at each other, Albert is there, taller than Spencer even if he's not broader. He forces us apart and tells Spencer to get out in a commanding tone that leaves no room for discussion. Spencer obeys silently after one last dark-eyed glare in my direction. There's more in that look than hatred, but I'm in no position to deal with that with my heart racing from fear — and something I dare not name.

What the hell just happened in my café?

Chapter Four

Spencer

“WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT?” Britt says as we storm back toward Greek Row.

I don't know what to tell her. It was all a blur. I tried to ignore Rhett, pretend he wasn't there, but then he started talking to Britt all flirty and that mean thing inside of me stirred back to life and... Shit. I'm no better than I was in high school, am I? I've fallen right back into being the bully who messed with Rhett back then.

The realization only makes me angrier. I've been trying so hard to leave that all behind. I thought I'd moved on, become better, but here I am falling right back into the same old bullshit I pulled when I was a kid. I can't continue being that guy. I won't.

I ball my hands into fists, mostly angry at myself, but that's apparently not how Britt interprets it. She slaps my arm.

“Cut it out. Leave that poor guy alone.”

I snap out of a haze of anger. “What?”

“Rhett,” she says. “You were glaring at him the whole time. What the hell was up with that? All he did was bring us tea.”

“This isn’t about him.”

It’s absolutely about him, but there’s no way I’m telling Britt that. People here aren’t supposed to know who I was, who I’m trying to leave behind. I’m not sure how I’m going to manage that now that I know Rhett is here, and he knows I’m here. Fear curdles in my gut like spoiled milk, leaving my mouth with a sick, bitter taste. Can I actually start over when my biggest regret will be right here on campus the whole time?

“Fuck,” I hiss at myself.

Britt scowls at me. “What is your problem?”

“Nothing.”

“Don’t tell me ‘nothing.’ You hated Rhett the moment you saw him. What did he ever do to you, huh? Why did you have to be such a jerk? You ruined the whole night.”

She isn’t wrong, but that alone isn’t going to pierce the thunderclouds clustering around my head. Part of me wants to hunch over and vomit out the small amount of tea I managed to drink. It was delicious, surprisingly delicious, exactly bitter and strong enough for my tastes. Did Rhett realize that or was it just a lucky guess? Maybe he’s just that good at his job. It would make sense. He was always friendly and charming, if quiet, at least until I snuffed all of that out of him.

Britt is still justifiably chastising me while I lose myself in my swirling thoughts. “And what did he mean by ‘I made it through all of high school with you?’”

The thunderclouds dissipate in a rush. Anger turns to cold dread. I nearly stumble over my own feet. I have to dig my nails into my palms to keep from sprinting away and never speaking to Britt again.

“I don’t know,” I mutter, unconvincing even to my own ears.

“Bullshit,” Britt says. “Do you know him? Did you go to school with him?”

All my worst fears lurch in my belly. Britt grabs me by the shoulder and shoves me so we stop on the path facing each other.

“You know him.” It’s an accusation, not a question. “Why do you know him? Why did you guys hate each other the moment you saw each other? What the hell is going on?”

“He’s just some guy from high school,” I say. “It’s no big deal.”

She’s way too smart to believe me. Her anger shifts into suspicion.

“Is there something going on between you two?” she says.

“What?”

“You couldn’t stop staring at him the whole time we were there. It was like I didn’t even exist. And he said something

about being gay in high school. Is he an ex or something?”

“An ex?” I nearly shout. “I’m straight. How the hell could he be an ex?”

“I don’t know, but you were kind of acting like exes, so you tell me.”

My throat clogs up. I’m staring down the barrel of everything I thought I’d left behind in high school. Barely two weeks into my life at my new university, and I’m running away from the accusation that I’m queer all over again.

“I’m not gay,” I manage.

“Fine. Maybe you’re bi or something. I don’t really care. I just want to know if this Rhett guy is going to be a problem for us.”

“You can’t be serious. You can’t seriously believe I’m going to cheat on you with a dude.”

Britt shrugs, throwing up her hands. “How should I know? We just met and you’re obsessed with some guy already. What am I supposed to think?”

“That. You. I’m not. That’s.”

I can’t get more than aborted stuttering past my lips. Britt looks more doubtful by the second. A horrible thought takes root, that she’s going to tell everyone, that the whole university will think I’m gay, that what I did to Rhett during high school will start happening to me. It’s no better than I deserve, but that doesn’t make me any less desperate to avoid it. This is the new me, damn it! This is my fresh start.

At least, it's supposed to be.

The longer Britt narrows her eyes and purses her mouth at me, the more I feel myself falling backward into my past. The very first thing I want to do is go take it out on Rhett, go lash out at him for putting me in this position. It's not really the guy's fault, but who else am I supposed to blame?

I shouldn't think that way. I can't think that way. That's the old me. I'm going to squash that nasty, cruel part of myself no matter what it takes.

Britt sighs and shakes her head, then laughs bitterly at herself. "I should have known getting a boyfriend was too good to be true. Damn it. Why do I always do this to myself?"

"What are you talking about?" I say. "Everything's fine. We're fine."

We're not fine. Britt is shaking her head and dashing all my fragile hopes in one little motion. "Good luck, Spence. Really. I hope you figure out ... whatever it is you're here to figure out."

She starts walking away, and I nearly lunge to grab her wrist and stop her. Something holds me back.

"Where are you going? What are you doing?" I say.

"I'm going back to my dorm," Britt says. "I'll see you around."

"What about the party?"

She stops walking away and looks over her shoulder at me. "It was fun, Spence. You're hot. I even think you're a

pretty decent guy underneath whatever this is. But I'm not here to be anyone's life coach. You're going to have to figure this out on your own."

"Are you breaking up with me?"

She shrugs. "We barely dated for a couple weeks."

"Britt. Come on. Wait a second. Think about this."

She smiles before she turns away again. "See you around, Spence."

And then she's gone.



I FUME FOR THE rest of the night. In one evening, my fresh start has shattered. I've lost my girlfriend, my pride, all my momentum toward being the new me. Worst of all, Rhett is here for some reason. It all combines to shove me right back to where I was two years ago in high school. I thought I'd worked on myself and made some progress, but maybe there's no fixing me. Maybe I'll always be a product of my upbringing, a product of my father's hateful words. Maybe I can't be better no matter how hard I try. Britt apparently didn't think so.

I'm still pacing my room in the frat house the next day. What am I doing here? I got into a fraternity because my father was in this fraternity in his own time at Montridge. If it weren't for that, I'd be completely alone right now.

I curl my hands through my short, dark hair. Part of me

wants to tear it out in chunks. I hate the world, but my loathing for myself goes far, far deeper. A low bass beat thumps through the floor, emanating from the living room below. I should be partying with my girlfriend tonight; instead, I'm pacing my room thinking about some guy. That one brief encounter with Rhett has upended everything I was trying to build here, and a piece of me would like to march back down to that stupid Boyfriend Café and punish him for that.

That would be even worse than the mess I've already made of my life, so instead I stomp downstairs and grab a beer from the cooler in the kitchen. I'm an early birthday, always the first in my class, so I can already go on beer runs for the house despite being a junior. It means the cooler is always stocked with something I actually like, and I plunge my hand through the ice without even looking at what I'm grabbing. I fall into the flow of the party, loud voices and loud music drowning out my thoughts. The beer helps too, and I'm on my second one before I even realize it. People are still filtering into the house, the sorority next door as well as friends and hangers on. I should probably be flirting with someone. It might take the edge off the breakup. But that's not where my thoughts are, even as the house fills with college kids in all states of undress.

Instead, my thoughts are back in the café. Back with him.

Rhett Ellison.

How can one guy be the source of every one of my problems? I came here to get away, and he's already planted himself firmly in my path. The more I drink, the more I find

myself reliving the moment he stepped out from behind that curtain and those ridiculously bright eyes locked onto mine.

My stomach clenches. My mouth is sour from more than just the beer. This can't be happening. It seriously can't be happening.

I surge to my feet, restless and desperate, and grab another beer, popping off the top before I head for the door. Joe catches me before I can slip away.

“Hey, man, where are you going? Party's just starting.”

“I gotta do something,” I say.

He looks unsure, but Joe's only known me a couple weeks. He's a friendly guy. I think we could be close. But we aren't there yet, so I easily shrug him off.

“I'll be right back,” I say.

“Alright, man,” he says. “Don't get lost or something, alright? You have my number if you need anything. I haven't been drinking.”

He really is a good dude. He probably deserves better than me for a friend. Everyone deserves better than me. Britt, Joe. Rhett.

I make it out the door. There's no one left to stop me, least of all myself. I take a long swig of the beer as I march away from Greek Row and toward the Boyfriend Café.

I don't know what I plan to do when I get there, but it probably won't be good.

Chapter Five

Rhett

I'M LOCKING UP THE CAFÉ when footsteps pound toward me. I barely manage to get the key out of the door before Spencer Marsh is bearing down on me, stormclouds roiling in his pitch black eyes.

“What the fuck is your problem?” he says, shoving me back by the shoulder.

I hit the door and blink. I'm on the bottom step leading down to the basement. Spencer is a step or two above me, which makes him feel even bigger than he usually is. I won't lie. It's the stuff of more than a couple fantasies. Or, it would be, if it were anyone but Spencer and he didn't look like he was going to crush my face into dust.

“We're closed,” I say.

“Let me in,” Spencer says. “I'm going to smash every stupid teacup you have in there.”

“Hm, a tempting offer, truly, but I think I'll pass.”

My snide tone deepens the rage digging harsh lines into his face.

“You think that cutesy shit will work on me?” Spencer says.

“It works on most people.”

“Like my girlfriend?”

Ah. There it is. That has to be what has him storming over here tipsy and pissed off. Him and Britt visited the café yesterday, and by the time they left, a breakup seemed imminent. That’s hardly my fault, but it doesn’t look like I’ll convince Spencer of that very easily.

“You think it’s funny flirting with another guy’s girlfriend?” Spencer says.

What do I even say to that? I have no interest in Britt except as a customer, and the guy who spent high school calling me names should know that better than anyone.

Spencer shoves my shoulder, and I hit the door again. “Well? I asked you a question, shithead. You think it’s funny?”

It’s all I can do not to roll my eyes at this display of testosterone run amok. “If you think I was flirting with your girl, I’ll refer you back to our days in high school. You remember, right? You spent four solid years making my life miserable because I *wasn’t* flirting with girls. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have better things to do than deal with straight male beer rage.”

I’m smaller than him, but he’s drunker than me, so I

manage to shoulder my way past by moving quickly and decisively up the stairs. Unfortunately, I only make it a couple steps into Albert's back yard before Spencer recovers and comes after me, grabbing my arm to spin me toward him. Even through the dark stubble, I notice a muscle in his jaw jerk as he apparently grinds his teeth together. Dark lashes frame his eyes. His hand is strong where he grips my arm, his bicep flexing under his shirt. God, he'd be hot if he wasn't such a jerk. His eyes sweep up and down me. Mom always raised me to tell the truth, so I have to confess that that hungry, predatory look does something powerful to me. I wish it didn't. Oh, how I wish it didn't. But Spencer might as well be licking his lips with the way he's sizing me up, and I'd have to be dead to feel nothing about that.

He starts backing me up, and I'm surprised enough to go along with it. We hit something, Albert's shed, I'm pretty sure. A tree overhangs the shed. Between that and the night settling in thick and cool, it feels like we're isolated, cut off from the rest of the world. With how mad this guy is, that should be terrifying, but I'm feeling a whole lot of things that aren't terror.

And apparently Spencer is, too.

It takes a second for my brain to recognize the gleam in his eyes, the way his lips are slightly parted, the change in how he grips my arm. It's subtle, so subtle I'm not sure if Spencer realizes the change coming over him. I swallow, doubting my own perceptions. It can't be. Not from him, not from the guy who teased me for being gay for four years. I must be seeing

things. Yet the longer we stand there against the shed just panting softly at each other, the harder it's becoming to shrug this off.

Spencer isn't mad. Or, he isn't *only* mad. He's also...

"She broke up with me," he says.

It takes me a second to realize he's still talking about Britt. "Oh, uh, that sucks, I guess?"

"You guess? It's your fault, asshole."

I can't help scoffing. "If I have the power to break up your relationship, it wasn't going to last. Trust me, Britt is not on my booty call list."

"She thinks I am, you idiot," Spencer snarls.

I blink, incapable of coming up with any kind of snappy retort. The sarcastic jokes that have shielded me my entire life can't help in the face of whatever the hell this is. "Wait, what? She broke up with you because she thinks..."

"She said you were a problem for us," Spencer spits. "She said..."

His words bunch up. He seems to choke on the thick knot of them, and gives up on them entirely in favor of shaking me. My back thumps against the shed, but I barely notice. I'm still trying to recover from the shock of what he just said. He marched down here drunk and angry because his girlfriend dumped him for ... being into me? That can't be right.

"Did you tell her you're not, uh..." I say.

"She wouldn't listen. She's got this idea in her head and

she... How did you make her think I'm gay? What did you say?"

He shakes me again. I have to grab at his shirt to steady myself and God help me, there is a lot of firm muscle under this top.

"I didn't say anything to your stupid girlfriend," I protest. "All I did was serve her tea. You saw our entire interaction for yourself. Cut it out."

"Why does she think I'm gay? What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything. Jesus. Chill. The gay isn't contagious, okay. Back off. I'm not the problem in your stupid hetero relationship."

"You have always been the problem," Spencer growls.

Wait a second. Always?

"Why the hell are you messing up my life again?" Spencer says.

Now it's my turn to snap. Because how dare the guy who bullied me throughout high school say something so utterly idiotic?

"Excuse me?" I say. "I messed up *your* life? Are you serious? You tormented me the entire time we were in high school."

"That was kid shit."

"No." My voice rises, but I don't care. "That was my fucking life, dickhead. I dreaded going to school. I dreaded you and your stupid friends coming up with something new to

call me. You absolutely don't get to brush that off as 'kid shit.' That was real, you utter piece of shit."

He doesn't respond, but his breathing seems heavier, more labored. Maybe he's just working himself up into a rage.

I yank my arm free of his grip so I can jab my finger against his firm chest. "You were a complete asshole. I could have thrown you out of my café at first sight yesterday, but I didn't. I let you and your girlfriend come in and I made you tea and I treated you like any other customer until you showed your true colors again. So don't come down here accusing me of ruining your life. That's all you, buddy."

"I'm not gay," he says weakly.

"I don't give a shit about your sexuality. You could be the whole damn rainbow for all I care. You're an asshole either way, and the fact I didn't dump hot tea on you should qualify me for a Nobel fucking Peace Prize."

I'm gaining steam, and in a fit of self-righteous anger, I grab the front of Spencer's shirt in my fist. It's nice feeling him stumble a little when I tug, nice feeling him move because I moved him. The power in that simple motion is more intoxicating than whatever cheap swill he's had tonight.

"If you think I'm still the kid you pushed around in high school, you're wrong," I say. "I have a life here, and it's a damn good life, and someone like you is sure as hell not going to march in and ruin it. I don't know why Britt dumped you, but it seems to me like she dodged a bullet. She deserves better than you, and the next time she's in my café, I'll be more than

happy to tell her that.”

“You shit—”

“Shut up,” I snap, and, remarkably, he does.

I’m buzzing, riding a sweeter high than sex or drugs could ever provide. When I push, Spencer stumbles back; when I spin us around, he goes. His back hits the shed and he grunts, but doesn’t fight. I might be slimmer and shorter, but not by that much. I pin him against the side of the shed with the hand fisted in his shirt and nearly shudder from the way his lips part around his surprise. A piece of me wants to shove him down to his knees, but there’s no way he’d go along with something like that.

At least, that’s what I would have thought at the start of this night. Right now, however, Spencer’s chest heaves under my hand. His throat bobs as he swallows. His eyes do another swift flicker, going right to my lips, and that’s not a look any straight guy has ever given me.

What the fuck is going on here?

It’s messed up, so messed up, but when I have my high school bully cornered like this, I can’t help but push.

“Maybe Britt was right,” I say. I slide a little closer, only my fist keeping us apart. “I never would have guessed it, but she’s a smart woman. Maybe she saw something I missed.”

“Shut up,” Spencer says.

It’s weak. I swat away the denial with a roll of my eyes.

“You really are pathetic,” I say. “All this time, and you

were just some closet case. God, I should have known. No one gets that twisted up about other people being gay unless they're worried about themselves."

"Bullshit," he says. "I'll—"

"You'll what?" I cut in. "You don't really look like you're in a position to do much of anything. I'm not scared of you, Marsh. I haven't been in a long time. So if you think you're going to pull the shit you did in high school, I've got really bad news for you." I eye him up and down, noticing the bulge in his pants. "Or good news, depending."

His throat bobs again. I slide my leg between his, raise my knee up slowly. I can't believe this is happening, even as I feel his semi-hard cock right there against my thigh. It's real, as real as the groan that sneaks past his lips when I apply a little pressure.

Spencer Marsh is hard.

For me.

I don't know if this is a fantasy or a nightmare, but it's leaving me straining against the zipper of my suit pants either way.

I know it's wrong. Mom would be so disappointed. But I lower my leg and lean forward anyway, and then I take Spencer's mouth for my own. I seal my lips against his, let his stubble scratch against my face as I press closer, feel his excitement on my hip when I tilt our bodies together. He moans down my throat. The moment I swallow that sound, there's no more hope — for either of us.

Chapter Six

Spencer

THIS IS HAPPENING. Oh fuck, this is actually happening.

Rhett is kissing me. Or I'm kissing him. I don't really know. I just know his mouth is on mine and it's hot and firm and all I can think about is having more of it, more of him. A sound I'll never admit to escapes my throat, and I feel a wicked smile curl his mouth. It sends a shiver down my spine. I might be bigger than this guy, but right now, I'm helpless in his hands. He could do anything to me and I'd probably thank him for it.

My brain starts rifling through excuses. I just got dumped (because Britt suspected exactly this). He's forcing me (he's totally not. I'm the one who marched over here). I had those beers (and sure, they got me buzzed, but I'm way too sober now). None of those things explain why Rhett's kiss has taken me from a semi to so hard I feel like I could split open my jeans. I've kissed plenty of girls, and it was never a bad

experience, but this is pure electricity sparking down my throat. This is fireworks exploding in my chest. This is a current zapping through my whole body and igniting something in me that I've been waiting my whole life to feel.

This is trouble.

Rhett still has his fist knotted in my shirt. He yanks me a little closer and sticks his tongue in my mouth, and I'm a dog on a leash, pulled this way and that at his command. I never suspected the guy had this kind of aggression in him. He's built, but slender, and that bright blond hair gives him an almost boyish kind of charm. In high school, he barely fought back when I'd call him something stupid or shove him in the halls. Now he's the one shoving me around, and I'm scared of how much I like it.

Rhett stops prying open my mouth with his tongue, but he doesn't go far.

"Hard for me already, straight boy?" he says.

His voice is lower and rougher than I've ever heard it. The sound goes straight to my dick.

"What's wrong?" Rhett says. "You had a lot to say in high school. Suddenly you're speechless?"

Speechless doesn't begin to cover it. It feels like rabid squirrels are running laps in my chest. My heart is pounding like it's terrified and wants to escape. I can't seem to suck down a full breath, no matter how hard I pant for air.

Rhett releases my shirt, but my relief is short-lived. Instantly, he's cupping my crotch instead. It's sweet, agonizing

torture, the pressure exquisite and painful all at once. Shame burns beneath desire. There's no more hiding how hard I am, how much I want him. Oh Christ, I want him. I want Rhett.

He palms over my jeans, squeezing me through my pants. I bite down on a moan, but it's a useless effort. As he keeps rubbing, the sound squirms out anyway. He isn't being delicate about it, and the rough strokes are everything I never knew I needed.

"Tell me you want me to get you off," Rhett says. "Say it out loud."

I groan. I've barely just admitted it inside my own head. No way in hell am I saying that out loud.

Rhett senses my hesitation. He releases me and starts to back away.

I grab him before he can leave, panicked, frantic, trembling with a need I've squashed and silenced since I was thirteen and in a treehouse with Jimmy Baker. Now I have to say it out loud, give voice to something I've diligently suppressed, and it's like trying to swallow rocks. The words get caught in my throat, but Rhett starts to pull away as I hesitate, and I gasp out a plea of pure desperation.

"I want you," I manage. "Please. Rhett."

His name sizzles on my tongue. I've said it before, but never like this, never with need dripping off of every letter. It's like watching someone else use my mouth to speak, yet the words feel more true than any I've spoken in my entire life.

Rhett pauses, his light eyes weighing me. He could break

me with a single word. I quiver in his hold, completely at his mercy for the first time in my life.

“Pathetic fucking closet case,” he growls.

Then he’s on me, his mouth striking me so hard my head thunks against the shed behind me. I don’t fight the moan that winds out of my chest when his lips caress mine. He leans his body against mine, his weight like an anchor tethering me to the ground. He’s the only thing that’s solid and real in this surreal moment, and I grab his hips and pull him closer to steady myself.

The second our hips meet, I’m overcome by the urge to fuck against him. He’s just as hard as me. Every time I shift, our cocks rub against each other through our pants. I know he feels it too, know it from the way he grabs at my shirt and holds on like he might collapse otherwise.

His mouth breaks away from mine. Rhett seizes my hair, somehow getting a good enough grip on the short strands to tilt my head back. My throat is exposed, and he dives in like a beast devouring its prey. My breath hitches. I never realized how sensitive a neck could be until someone used their teeth and tongue against like Rhett is.

“Oh fuck,” I moan.

Why does that feel so good? Why does all of this feel so good? Why am I not stopping Rhett as he slides his free hand down my body and fiddles with the clasps on my pants? This should be the breaking point, the point of no return, but I’m already so far gone it doesn’t make a difference when he gets

my pants open and shoves his hand inside them.

I gasp when he grabs my cock. He still has his other hand in my hair tilting my head back, and it leaves me totally helpless. I can't close my mouth to hold in the moans. I can't push him off. I can't stop pre-cum from beading at the head of my cock and revealing just how damn into this I am.

Rhett swipes his thumb across it and drags it down my shaft. He chuckles darkly as he does, and a delicious twinge of fear tightens my chest.

“God, you're fucking pathetic,” Rhett says. “All this time, and I could have kept you off my back with a goddamn handy.”

The words sting, but in a way that drags another pitiful noise out of my throat. The more Rhett talks, the more I shatter — and I'm loving every second of it. I'm watching him ruin me, but it feels so damn good I don't want him to stop.

He leans close as he keeps stroking me, placing his lips by my ear.

“Remember when you used to call me queer?” Rhett says. “Remember when you suggested I join the girls' sex ed class so I could learn about my period? Remember all that shit? Huh? Eric and I used to eat lunch alone because of you. No one wanted to become your next target. Then Eric's parents moved him away. Too much trouble to stay here. And I ate lunch alone. That was because of you, Marsh. All of that shit was your fault. Now look at you.”

I hate being reminded. It's a knife driving deep into my

chest.

“I’m ... trying to be better,” I say.

Rhett’s laugh is another dagger in my sternum. “How? By having me jerk you off? Do you think you can’t be a dickhead and gay at the same time?”

“No, I. I just. I didn’t come here to—”

This is way too much to explain at a time like this. My cock is nearly screaming for Rhett’s touch. My raspy breathing scratches its way out of my throat. My pants are halfway down. I’m a total mess. Now is not the time to unpack my fucking childhood.

But Rhett doesn’t seem to have a shred of mercy in him. He lets go, and I whimper — actually whimper — from the pain of his hand leaving my cock.

“Do you really think you deserve this?” he says.

“No.”

The answer comes to me immediately. It’s the simple truth, but it seems to surprise Rhett as he leans back to regard me.

“I don’t,” I say.

Rhett’s eyebrows knit together. The playful mean act gives way to something more honest for a moment, and that’s scarier than any cruel words he might hurl at me. Honesty is the last damn thing either of us need entering this fragile bubble of lust.

“I don’t deserve it,” I say. “But I want it. Fuck. I want it. I

want you.”

I swallow after dragging those words out of myself. They’re a plea for mercy, and boy, will they ever have consequences, but I’ll deal with that when I’m not so hard I could probably come from a light breeze.

And still Rhett pauses, scowling at me, leaving me teetering on an edge that cuts like a knife. My body winds tight around the lingering echo of pleasure, screaming for more, for the push that will get me over a precipice I’ve avoided my whole life.

“Fine,” Rhett finally says.

I enjoy only a second of relief. Then he grabs me, hard, and pumps mercilessly, the friction burning me with nothing to smooth the way. A dry handy should not have me this destroyed, yet it only takes a couple strokes until I’m right back where I was moments ago.

“Oh God,” I moan, tilting my head back and letting my eyes fall shut. “Rhett. Oh fuck.”

“Don’t use my name,” he says.

The command snaps through me like a slap. I groan and nod all at once, eager to obey and incredibly turned on by the way he orders me around.

“I’ll let you get off,” he says. “Even if you don’t deserve it. But then you’re going to do something for me.”

“Anything,” I say, even though I have no idea what he’s going to ask for and no experience in this area. What if he asks

for something I can't do? Or something I don't want to do? I can't imagine saying no to much right now, so desperate for his every touch that it seems like anything and everything would feel amazing.

He chuckles. "You might regret saying that. Are you really sure?"

"Yes," I say immediately. "Yes, please, whatever you want."

"Mm, what a good boy you can be. Then I'll give you a little treat."

He thumbs over my head, dragging more pre-cum down. It doesn't help much with the burn, but I'm too blissed out to care.

His voice is closer when next he speaks. "I'm going to let you get off," he says. "Then you're going to kneel down so I can finish on that pretty bastard face of yours."

He barely finishes before I finish too. The intent behind his words hits me like a truck, and it's all I can take. I explode over his hand, my legs trying to go out from under me. I don't even get a chance to agree before an orgasm unlike any I've experienced is barreling through me to leave me dizzy and weightless.

I slip from his hold, going right to my knees, ready for whatever he wants to give me. Eager for it, even. The thought of having him make a mess of my face, the thought of him ruining me as I kneel before him, it leaves me crazed. He hesitates for a beat, and I scramble for his pants, trying to fish

him out.

Rhett pushes me away. “Did I say you could touch?”

“No. I’m sorry. No. I just. I didn’t want you to stop. Please don’t stop.”

He makes some little noise that’s part disgust and part cruel laughter. It burns through me, but all I feel is a pleasant sizzle. I’m still riding the aftershocks of my orgasm, my body singing with a satiation it has never quite achieved before.

Then Rhett reaches in his pants and pulls himself free, and I’m eye-level with someone else’s cock for the first time in my life.

My first thought is that it’s beautiful, longer than I would have thought and thick enough to fill Rhett’s hand. I want to touch it. I want to lean forward and throw myself on it, taste him all the way to the back of my throat. My mouth waters for that juicy cock, and my own dick makes a painful attempt at stirring anew.

I groan, part pain, part desire, but I dare not make a move. He told me to kneel and not touch, and I can’t fathom doing otherwise. I stay where he put me as he starts stroking himself, the motion mesmerizing. My eyes can’t help but trace the movement of his hand and wish it was my hand or mouth on that perfect cock instead. I never fathomed looking at someone else’s dick with such raw desire, but the want has me choking on every breath.

Rhett grabs my hair again, holding my head steady. He aims his cock at my face. His breaths come faster and harder. I

know what's about to happen, and part of me thinks I should be trying to squirm away or hide, but I kneel there transfixed, eager, panting nearly as hard as Rhett himself.

“Desperate for it,” he rasps. “Fucking pathetic.”

“Yeah,” I agree.

“Thought you'd at least have some self-respect.”

I don't, and I don't want to. All I want is for him to make more of a mess of me.

I look up at him, dark eyes meeting light, and hope that look conveys all the things I'm too breathless to say.

Apparently, it does.

“Oh fuck,” he groans.

He closes his eyes and tilts his head back a second before I feel warm cum splatter onto my face. I close my eyes instinctively and more hits me, covering my nose and mouth. Part of me is disgusted, but that feels like an old instinct, a wrong instinct. Most of me is screaming with joy as Rhett finishes all over my face and finally releases my hair.

I don't move. I don't attempt to wipe away the cum. I haven't even fixed my pants yet. I simply stay where he placed me with his mess on my face and watch him.

Rhett catches his breath and tucks himself away. In moments, he looks just as tidy as he did when I first barged my way over here. He shakes his head at himself, running a hand through his blond hair.

“Fuck,” he mutters at himself. “What a mess.”

I doubt he's talking about me, though the sentiment certainly applies to me as well.

“Clean yourself up and go home,” Rhett says. “And never come back here again.”

He strides away before I can think of how to respond to that. I'm left kneeling there in the back yard, cleaning my face off with my T-shirt and trying to think up an excuse to offer the guys when I return home shirtless. My mind is still whirling. My body is still humming with a pleasure I don't know how to comprehend. I have no idea what I'm going to tell my fraternity brothers, but as my mind cools, that seems like just about the least of my worries.

Chapter Seven

Rhett

I FORCE A SMILE. “Thank you for your time. I’ll be in touch in the next week.”

The guy sitting across from me rises and offers a handshake. Was it Emmett? Emile? I only spoke with him for about fifteen minutes and I can’t remember his name. Not a great sign when I’m looking for charming servers to deliver engaging conversation along with tea.

Emmett or Emile leaves the café. For a moment, it’s just me in Albert’s basement, sitting alone at one of the two tables we have for customers. We’re trying to add more, but that means we need more than just me and Mal, the fashion student. We’re doing alright splitting the work between us, but with the semester ramping up, we’re going to need help if we want this thing to keep growing. And it certainly seems like it can keep growing. We fill up our schedule during every shift, which right now is just four a week. If we can just get a little

more help, we might make enough money for more decorations. Mal has even floated the idea of doing some themed outfits and stuff, but fabric is way more expensive than I ever guessed.

That's all a distant dream for the moment. In the short term, Mal and I desperately need help so we can clear out our growing waitlist.

It's a lot to worry about on top of being a full-time university student, but it's better than worrying about whatever the hell happened in the back yard a few days ago. I haven't heard from Spencer since. Haven't even seen him around campus, not that I have much reason to. We live completely separate lives, him with his frat house and physical education degree, me with my dorm with Emi, work at the café and engineering degree. At a school as big as C U of M, it's easy to steer clear of each other.

As far as I can tell, that's what he wants, but part of me keeps bracing for him to come stomping over here again some day, demanding some kind of proof that what happened didn't actually happen. It certainly doesn't feel real. Never in my wildest fantasies did I imagine having Spencer Marsh, high school bully extraordinaire, on his knees practically begging for me to make a mess of his handsome face.

The image flashes through my brain: Spencer's pleading eyes, his open mouth, his flushed cheeks, the mess I left on his face. I can't believe I did that to him. I can't believe he let me do that to him. Before I really understood what was happening, four years of anger and frustration burst out of me.

It was ... addicting.

I take a sip of the matcha tea I brewed for myself before starting the interviews I rounded up for this afternoon. My throat is suddenly dry, but not from asking the same five or six questions over and over. It's the image of Spencer burned onto my brain. It's the memory of how good it felt being just the right amount of mean to him. It's the echo of how much I enjoyed having that power over him. I want it again, but there's absolutely no way that's happening. Silence is probably the best possible reaction to whatever happened that night. The alternative is dealing with a closet case, one who probably came out to himself as he got down on his knees for me.

God help me, I must be the dumbest queer person at this entire university. Why can't I just join an LGBT organization on campus and meet a nice, normal guy there? Why the hell am I hooking up with my high school bully instead?

No, not hooking up. Hooked up. Because this definitely is not happening again. I came out of the closet a long time ago, and Spencer freaking Marsh is not going to shove me back inside it. I'm smarter than this. I don't need dick so badly I'll settle for the worst guy I can possibly choose.

Except...

As soon as I attempt to steel my resolve, I remember the feel of Spencer's dick in my hand. Thick. Long. A dick worth savoring. There's a hell of a lot more I could do with a gift like that than a rough, dry handy, and part of me wants to despite how disastrously stupid it would be.

“Hello?”

I nearly choke on my tea. I splutter, thumping my chest and coughing until my throat clears. Two men stand just inside the café looking confused.

“Sorry,” I say when I can speak again. “We’re closed right now.”

“Oh, yeah, we know. We’re here for the server position?”

“Both of you?”

One of the guys smiles broadly. He’s got a gorgeous smile. It carves a dimple into one side of his mouth. Freckles splatter across his nose. He’s freaking adorable, but the guy next to him couldn’t be more different. While they both have dark hair and gray, almost translucent eyes, that’s where the similarities end. If the first guy is adorable and bright, his friend is a cloud covering up all that sunshiney brightness. His hair hangs longer and shaggier, though he’s shaved it on the sides. Stubble shadows his jaw and tattoos peek from beneath the hem of both sleeves of his hoodie.

“Both of us,” the sunshiney one says. “We’re a packaged deal.”

He approaches, and I hurry to stand up and seem like I know what I’m doing.

“Gabriel,” the sunshiney one says. He extends his hand, and I shake it. His companion offers no such courtesy. “That’s Trent.”

“Hey.”

“Uh, hi,” I say. “Well, um, I’m Rhett. Right now I do most things around here, though I do have one other server working with me, Mal. He’s in class right now. I got this place started, but quickly realized I needed a few extra hands. Mal got on board early, but we’re thinking with one or two more servers, we could start getting through our waitlist.”

“Oh wow,” Gabriel says. “You have a waitlist? I heard this place was popular but I had no idea.”

“Yeah, it’s been going pretty well.”

“That’s so amazing. See, Trent? I knew this was an awesome idea. They have a waitlist!”

Trent’s only reply is a grunt.

“Why don’t we sit down and chat?” I say.

If only one of these guys had come in for the interview, I might have been skeptical, but there’s something about the way they play off each other that has me intrigued. I invite them to sit and even brew some tea for them. Gabriel asks for something fruity and light, while Trent takes just about the most bitter thing I can find among our supply.

“So, how’d you hear about the Boyfriend Café?” I say.

“Are you kidding?” Gabriel says. “Just about the whole dang university is talking about it. I feel like I can’t go to a single class without someone mentioning it. You guys are seriously a hit.”

That makes sense. Our waitlist keeps expanding, and it seems like every time we get a customer in, three more hear

about us and show up the next time we're open. As Albert likes pointing out, we're rapidly outgrowing his basement.

"What makes you want to work here?" I say. "It can be a demanding job. We don't just serve tea. It's about having a personal, one-on-one experience. People can get tea anywhere. The whole point of coming here as a customer is that whoever you're with is going to treat you like their best friend for an hour. That's the part that people are really paying for."

Gabriel's eyes are almost glowing they're so bright. Trent seems completely unmoved.

"That is so cool," Gabriel says. "Who wouldn't want to work here? I'm excited just to get the interview. I'm actually studying to become a therapist, so talking people through their problems is kind of what I do. I mean, not that everyone needs to come here and just trauma dump."

"Some do," I admit. "You're okay dealing with that? I did start this up after my best friend had a pretty bad breakup. Comforting people when they need some tea and a friend was definitely part of my intention."

"I'm so okay with that. I love it. I wish there were more places like this, actually. Self-care can be so important, especially when you're in college and already have so much on your plate, you know?"

I nod, then turn to the stoic shadow beside Gabriel. "And what about you?"

Trent shrugs. He hasn't had any tea. "I go where he goes."

My surprise must show on my face because Gabriel steps in to explain.

“We’ve been best friends pretty much our entire lives,” he says. “Everyone always said we were like twins, though we’re not related, let alone actual twins.”

“You weren’t kidding when you said you were a packaged deal, huh?”

“Nope! I hope that’s not a problem. Trent is a really hard worker, I swear. He might not seem like it, but he’s super good at everything he tries. You could have him clean or make the tea or do whatever needs doing.”

“I’m really just looking for servers right now,” I say. “We not only chat with our customers, but also brew their tea for them. Having someone else do it makes it more impersonal. I’m looking for people who can talk to a new customer for five minutes and already have a tea selection in mind.”

“Matcha,” Trent says.

“Huh?”

“Your tea,” he says. “It’s matcha. I’m guessing you choose it because it doesn’t have too much caffeine, but still gives you a boost. You prefer matcha green when you can get it, but regular will work in a pinch. You also enjoy vanilla chais.”

I blink. “How did you...”

Gabriel flashes a toothy smile. “I told you. He’s super smart. Trent is totally amazing, isn’t he?”

I have a few more questions for the pair, but I'm barely listening. Mostly, I'm churning over what I've already learned. These guys are completely different. When they first walked in, I would have said Gabriel was a perfect fit and Trent was a disaster. The longer I talk to them, the more I revise that assumption. Trent is quiet, but he knows when to step into the conversation. Gabriel could charm a brick wall, but that kind of energy isn't for everyone. While Gabriel will definitely win over most of our customers, I can envision Trent being more of a specialist, having a few super dedicated customers who prefer someone who is a little lower energy, a little quieter and less overwhelming. And the fact they come as a duo opens interesting possibilities. Could I have both of them working one large group? The way they play off of each other has a certain charm to it that neither myself nor Mal can replicate on our own.

By the time I run out of questions, I'm shocked to realize an entire hour has passed. I shake both their hands and escort them to the door.

"I'll let you guys know soon," I say, even though the decision is basically made. They're perfect, and my mind is already whirling over all the possibilities.

I'm cleaning up our tea when Albert pads down into the basement. He leans against the doorframe, arms crossed over his chest.

"How did it go?"

"Pretty well," I say. "The last two guys I interviewed

were great. They're definitely the ones. That'll bring us up to four, five if you ever join us."

A smirk tugs at Albert's mouth, but he says nothing. We've had this conversation several times. He's happy to do the books for us, insists on it, in fact. He even does scheduling. But being one-on-one with customers just isn't his thing.

That's fine by me. We can get by with four, though it would be great to add a baker to the crew. I'll work on that when I have a second to breathe. Right now, the addition of Gabriel and Trent to the roster means I need more tea, more tables and a whole new schedule. Maybe I can get all five of us together to talk about it this week.

"I'm glad things are going well," Albert says.

"Thanks, I am too. I can't thank you enough for letting me use this space. It's been incredible."

"So I have seen. I'm proud of the work you've done here. It's certainly an improvement over me using this space just for storage."

He steps a little closer.

"You haven't had any trouble, have you?" he says. "Any ... unwanted visitors?"

Fear flashes through me. He doesn't know about Spencer, does he? I don't actually know if he was home or not the night that ... everything happened. Sometimes Albert leaves on café nights. Sometimes he hangs around and pops his head in or even helps out here and there. That night, he wasn't around, so I figured he wasn't home. But it is his house. He could have

come back at any point.

“No,” I say. “Not that I can think of.”

I’m not sure how convincing I sound, but apparently it’s convincing enough. Albert studies me behind his glasses for a long, heavy moment, then shakes his head at himself.

“Alright,” he says. “If you should have any trouble, you know you can call on me any time, right?”

“Of course. But we’re good. Really. Everything is going so great right now. I’m just a little overwhelmed, honestly. I didn’t expect it to take off like this. As soon as we get more guys in, everything will be fine. I promise.”

It’s not what he asked or what he implied, but Albert doesn’t push it, just weighs me for another moment before shrugging to himself.

“I gotta get going,” I say before he can decide my answers have been too evasive for his liking. “But I was thinking of planning a meeting for the staff this week. Mind if we use the basement an extra day?”

“It is yours to use whenever you like.”

“Thanks, man. I’ll see you then, okay?”

He nods, and I try to make my escape. Just as I’m brushing past him to head for the stairs, he calls out.

“If there is trouble some day,” he says, “you’ll tell me, won’t you?”

I have to swallow around a lump in my throat. “Of course, dude. Definitely.”

Definitely.

Chapter Eight

Spencer

THERE'S THIS THING they do at church like once a year. I don't remember why. It might have something to do with Easter or Lent.

The priest dresses up more than usual, brings out the really good robes, the ones with all the gold embellishments. Then he walks down the aisle between the pews waving this gold contraption that looks like it came right out of a medieval castle. He murmurs as he goes, tick-tocking the gold thing on a long chain. It swings like a pendulum, a long, slow arc from side to side.

As he passes, people cross themselves and murmur prayers. It's like a wave building toward you, the priest getting closer, the mumbled prayers getting louder, a sea of heads bowing until you're at the front, standing tall. The pendulum swings, flinging water into the pews.

I remember I always thought it was lucky if I got a few

big drops right in the face. That was the point, right? You were supposed to get hit by the water. So why not get hit by a lot of it? Why not get soaked in it, have it dripping down your nose and into your mouth?

Amen.

After Rhett ... did what he did, I cleaned myself up with my own shirt and stumbled home in a daze. I tried to formulate an excuse along the way, but how the hell do you explain having sticky cum drying on your face and in your hair?

By the time I got home, all I could think to do was pretend I was stupid drunk, an act everyone at the party seemed to accept. The moment I could, I fled to the bathroom and washed it off as best I could. No one's said anything weird since then, but it feels like a matter of time until they catch me. I haven't known these guys long, just since I pledged over the summer, but my sudden vanishing act has got to seem weird. I've been terrified of leaving my room and encountering questioning looks. When I have classes, I cut it as close as I can, nearly running out of the frat house so I don't have to interact with anyone.

I haven't even cleaned the damn shirt. The one with all the ... evidence smeared all over it. I keep thinking I should wash it or throw it away, bury my shame, but every time I go to do it, I end up keeping the damn thing instead. Sometimes I even ... smell it. It smells like him, musky and dark, absolutely filthy, utterly intoxicating. When that disgusting scent hits me, my brain blanks out. I usually end up shoving my hand down my pants. By the time the fever passes, I know

I'm not getting rid of that stupid shirt.

“Uuugggghhh,” I groan, rolling over on my bed.

The explosions and rumbles of a distant video game tremble through the floor to reach my room. I should be down there with the guys, but all I want to do is hide. What if they know? What if Rhett said something? He doesn't seem like the type to out someone. Besides, isn't that, like, a huge no-no in the LGBT community? Not that I wouldn't deserve it, but I'd rather avoid ruining my university experience when it's barely begun.

It'd be a lot more fun if Rhett took out his resentment on me again.

“No. Nope. Not going there.”

I roll off my bed to pace back and forth across the carpet, but that thought chases me like a hound nipping at my heels. The moment Rhett started being mean to me, the moment he really let loose — it freaking rewired my brain. I'm still thinking about it, still craving it. I'm like a criminal banging on the doors of a church, begging for salvation. The more cruel Rhett's words, the more I wanted him.

I'm not going to reflect on how fucked up that is. It'll only make all of this worse. I'm already hiding from my new fraternity brothers and living in constant fear that they somehow know what I did. But I've heard the jokes they make. They're the kind of jokes I made in high school, the kind of jokes I lobbed at Rhett. And sure, I deserve to get every bit of that abuse thrown right back at me, but I doubt it's

going to be fun and sexy when my boys do it.

Part of me wants to go crawling back to Rhett like a sinner in a confessional booth, begging him to tell me what I need to do to earn my penance. Growing up Catholic in South Jersey, I'd get assigned some Hail Marys when my dad caught me screwing up one too many times. I doubt that'll be Rhett's solution to my many transgressions.

A particularly loud explosion vibrates through the floor, followed by a raucous cheer. I wish I was down there with them. Being alone sucks, and it's only making me think about stuff way more than I want to.

I steel my resolve and head for the door, hand lingering on the handle before I take a deep breath and shove it open. My legs are wooden as I force myself down the stairs. The steps deposit me in the living room, where four of my brothers are crowded onto the couch, some sitting on the sagging arms so they can fit. I could turn aside and escape into the kitchen, pretend I came down here because I was hungry, but Joe catches me before I can slip away.

“Hey, look who finally crawled out of his room. You want in?”

He waves an Xbox controller. I have no idea what game they're playing, but I agree anyway. No one's giving me any weird looks. Joe's the only one who took any notice of my arrival. It seems like everything might actually be fine.

For a while, it is. I jump into the fighting game they're playing, beating up on the other guys with my chosen martial

artist in her booty shorts and crop top. I'm pretty good at these kinds of games, and falling into the flow of defending my title distracts me for the first time in days. I almost feel like myself again, until the guys start getting bored of losing to me.

"It's good to see you out of your room for once," Pug says. His real name isn't Pug. It's Charles or something. But he's got this smushed up nose that makes him look kind of like a pug, so that's what everyone calls him.

Joe shoves his shoulder. "Cut him some slack. He just got dumped."

"Oh shit, you did? Sorry, man."

I shrug. "It's fine." Besides, it's not Britt that's been keeping me locked up in my room. It's Rhett.

"What happened?" Pug says. "I thought that whole thing was going well."

"It was," I say. "But it's not like we really knew each other or anything. It only went on for a couple weeks. It's no big deal, really."

Joe sits wedged between me and Pug. His hand lands on my shoulder.

"It's okay if it's not okay. You know that, right? We're your brothers now."

Something catches in my throat. Joe is a good guy, a super good guy. He's a way better friend than the likes of me deserves. But I still prefer him thinking I've been secretly crying over a girl rather than reliving a hot, forbidden

encounter with some dude, so I just nod a little and count on stereotypical male stoicism to provide me with a convenient excuse for not talking.

“No more moping,” Alan says from where he sits on the floor. “The man’s ready to move on. Right, Spence?”

“Very ready.” At least that much is the truth.

“I’ve got the perfect solution,” Calvin says.

He slides off the arm of the couch and heads to the kitchen, returning a moment later with beers probably leftover from last weekend’s party. I’m more than happy to accept one. To all appearances, I’m just a man drinking away his girl troubles, and that’s fine with me.

The fighting game matches get sloppier. We’re spending more time trying to manipulate the camera into giving us upskirts than actually fighting each other, but I’m laughing and relaxing, which I wouldn’t have guessed I could still do even a couple hours ago.

Then Alan opens his big damn mouth.

“Hey, wait,” he says. “Didn’t you and Britt go to that Boyfriend Café thing everyone keeps talking about? Don’t tell me she dumped you for one of the guys there.”

There’s a chorus of laughter. I slap the back of Alan’s head.

“Don’t be dumb. Of course she didn’t. I think most of those guys are gay anyway.”

“How can they be a Boyfriend Café if they’re gay?” Alan

says. “Aren’t they supposed to flirt with their customers or something?”

“Girls love gay dudes,” Pug says.

Alan and Calvin nod as though this is some sage wisdom that’s just been dropped into their lives.

“Wait,” Alan says. “Did the gay server dudes flirt with you? Is that why you and Britt broke up?”

“Ew, what? No,” I say. “How does that even make sense? You think Britt dumped me because a guy was into me?”

Alan puts up his hands defensively. “I don’t know, man. I’m just throwing out theories, okay? You haven’t talked to any of us about it.”

“Because there’s nothing to say. We had fun for a couple weeks, then went our separate ways. Just let it go.”

“Chill,” Alan says. “I was just joking.”

“Yeah,” Calvin says. “Don’t sell yourself short. I’m sure a big, fit guy like you could have some dude calling him ‘daddy’ if you really wanted.”

Everyone laughs except me. I grind my teeth together. They’re just joking. This is how guys joke with each other. They don’t seriously believe any of this.

Try telling that to the part of me that’s still running scared from my dad and South Jersey.

“Hey, guys, cool it,” Joe says. “Let’s just let it go, okay?”

The others aren’t listening.

“I gotta see this café,” Alan says.

“We could go now,” Calvin chimes in. “They’re open today, right?”

My heart sinks as they spin up, playing off of each other’s bad ideas to concoct a disaster of truly epic proportions. Soon we’re all up and moving, and I’m caught in the tide of this wild misadventure.

“I think you need a reservation,” I say.

“Whatever. We’re just going to look, right?” Alan says. “I just want to see what it’s all about. If it’s good enough to make Britt break up with you, it must be pretty special.”

“You think they’ll flirt with us?” Calvin says.

“Ew, gross,” Pug says.

“It’s their job,” Alan says. “They gotta flirt with us, right? We’re paying customers.”

“I thought we were just going to look,” I say.

They’re way beyond such practical concerns. The plan takes shape as we walk down Greek Row, and nothing I say is so much as slowing the other guys down. Only Joe shoots me a look with any amount of sympathy in it, but he doesn’t do any more than me to stop the others. By the time we’re nearing the familiar house near the gates of the university, a nauseating stew of anger, shame and raw fear lock up my jaw and clench my hands into fists.

I’ve spent the past two years trying to reinvent myself, trying to be a better version of myself than the guy who bullied Rhett and his friends in high school. Now, I’m about to

march into Rhett's life once again and ruin everything I've been working toward.

Who am I kidding? I was never going to improve myself. Being this mean, petty, cruel person is in my blood. It's part of being a Marsh. How did I ever fool myself into thinking I could overcome everything I've been taught to be for my entire life?

Still, I wish it was anywhere but here and anyone but Rhett. It's too late, though. The guys are barging their way into the basement that houses the Boyfriend Café, and I'm just a helpless bit of flotsam dragged along in their manic current.

Chapter Nine

Rhett

WE'RE HAVING A pretty good night at the café until my worst nightmare barrels in.

Up until this moment, things were going perfectly. Mal was charming the pants off a few women who have become regulars of his. I even had the new guys, Trent and Gabriel, working a table together. I was right about the way they bounce off each other; it plays great with customers. I'm envisioning them handling some larger groups in the future while Mal and I stick to more intimate one-on-one reservations.

I was taking a break, stepping back to observe and make sure Trent and Gabriel got into the swing of things all right, when a commotion interrupted the serene ambiance of the café. Before I could do more than look up from my tea in alarm, several guys were piling into the café. Now they're making a full-on scene as they demand a table.

Mal shoots me a startled, fearful look. He's a small guy, and every single thing about him from his flamboyant fashion to his K-pop haircut calls him out. In that single look, I see my whole life reflected back at me. But instead of making me scared it makes me angry. Extremely fucking angry.

I stomp toward the rowdy group before they can disrupt my customers and smear on the least sincere smile in my arsenal.

“What can I do for you gentlemen?” I say with all the sweetness of a viper about to strike.

Every single one of these guys probably outweighs me, but when I spot Spencer hunching his shoulders and staring at the floor from the back of the group, any fear burns away in a righteous rage. If this is some kind of retribution for what happened the other day, he's vastly underestimated me. I'm not the cowering kid I was in high school. I can push back just as hard as him now, and I certainly will if he means to threaten what I've got going on here at the café. This place is too important to me, to all of us. It's a safe space not just for me and Mal, but also for a lot of our customers. They come here for a quiet, peaceful retreat from whatever they have going on in their lives, and a group of drunk frat bros is not going to take that away from them.

“We're here for a drink,” one of the guys says, slurring slightly.

“I'm sorry, but we're booked up through the rest of the month. You're welcome to join our waitlist.”

Like hell am I ever letting them off that waitlist, but they don't need to know that.

“Aw, c'mon,” another guy says. “We just want tea and crumpets, right, guys?”

A few of the guys laugh. Notably, Spencer does not. Is he actually ashamed of how his friends are behaving? No, that's not likely, given what I know of the man. The surer bet is that he's afraid I'll tell these guys what we did the other day and he'll suffer some of the abuse he heaped on me when we were kids. He'd sure as hell deserve it, but fortunately for Spencer, I'm not that kind of asshole. I'm not going to out him, no matter how much of a douche he is. That's simply a line I won't cross.

That said ... what's the harm in letting him sweat it out a bit?

“Marsh,” I snap, “I see you've brought your boys instead of your girl this time. That's very thoughtful, but rude jocks were never really my type.”

An “ooh” passes through the group. Spencer looks like he wants to chew through the concrete floor.

“Now, I really must ask you all to leave,” I say. “You're disturbing our paying customers.”

“We can be paying customers.”

“Yeah, we have cash. C'mon, let us have the tea and crumpets.”

I sigh. “First, we don't have crumpets.” Though I still

want to find a way to get some baked goods into the mix, but that's irrelevant to these guys. "Second, we clearly cannot accommodate your whole group in here. This is a place for quiet, intimate retreats from the stresses of daily life, and you gentlemen are the very embodiment of the stresses of daily life for many of our patrons."

There are a few bewildered blinks, then one of the bros says, "I think he just called us assholes, but, like, in way fancier words than that. Damn, I thought you were supposed to be nice to us. Butter us up a little. That kind of thing."

"I save that for my paying customers," I drawl.

One guy digs in his pocket, extracting a wallet. He fishes out a few bills. I can't tell the denominations, but it's still a nice wad of cash.

"Hey, guys, you got cash? Hurry up. Gimme whatever you have."

Incredibly, some of the other guys obey this order, and soon the wad of cash has grown to a sizable heap.

"Now can you serve us?"

Despite all my better instincts, I hesitate. I should be kicking them out. We really don't have table space for them, not unless we sent away our real customers so we could use up all the chairs for these guys.

But...

There is that deck set Albert keeps in the back yard. And that is definitely a lot of cash, a whole lot of cash. Besides, I

was on a break. I am technically free to serve them some tea and take their money if that's what they really want...

I shoot a look over my shoulder at Mal. He meets my eyes as I give him a slight nod. He doesn't look entirely convinced, and hell, I'm not entirely convinced either. But I'm doing this, so I need him to know the café is his for the moment. Albert isn't here tonight. It's just us.

"Let's go outside," I say before I can second guess whatever madness has come over me. "We don't have space indoors, but there's a table outside. I'd be happy to help you fellas there."

They hesitate like they don't understand what "outside" means, and I gesture that direction to get them moving. Thankfully, they go, and soon I'm seating them around that glasstop deck table with a combination of the chairs available outside and a few extras from indoors.

"Now," I say when they're all somewhat settled in, "I don't suppose I can get you gentlemen some tea?"

"Isn't that kind of a fruity drink?" one of the guys says.

Another elbows him.

"Oh. Right," he says, looking at me. "I meant, uh, like the flavor is fruity. Not fruity like..."

"Like me?" I supply.

The guy's eyebrows jump. One of his friends snorts.

"Come on, boys," I say. "You can't possibly be afraid of a little tea. Is your heterosexuality really that fragile?"

Some of them laugh. I sneak a look at Spencer, whose shoulders jerk at that barb. He is definitely that afraid, and his heterosexuality is definitely that fragile. I have to wonder if he still considers himself straight at this point. I for one have never met a straight man who wanted me to finish on his face, not even the “just curious one time” types.

I grant him mercy, this time, rising from my seat among the group to head back into the basement and start preparing five cups of vanilla chai. It has a little hint of sweetness, but the base is black tea. I should be giving these guys some awful peppermint throat soothing abomination, but part of me can't help but try to serve them tea they'll actually like.

Mal slips behind the curtain into the staff area while I'm steeping the cups.

“Hey,” he says quietly, “you alright?”

His concern is sweet. Despite meeting at that event when we were freshmen, we really aren't that close. I see him occasionally in a class or at some LGBT event, but that was the entirety of our acquaintance before the café. All I really know about the guy is that he's Korean and wants to get into fashion. It shows in how he dresses and does up his bleached silver hair in gravity-defying swoops. He even has a little eyeliner on, which makes his dark eyes seem huge. He's always threatening to dress and style the rest of us, but we haven't had time for anything like that quite yet.

“Yes,” I say. “I'm fine.”

“They're assholes.”

“I’m aware, but I can handle myself. So far all they’ve done is make a lot of noise.”

Mal seems skeptical. “Fine. But if they get aggressive or something, shout and we’ll be out there in a second. For real. Please don’t take their shit.”

He’s serious and sincere, his eyes boring into mine as he searches for any sign of reluctance on my part. We’ve both dealt with guys like this in our lives, the type of insecure little boys who take it out on the obvious queer kid in their school. Suddenly, I can’t help wrapping Mal up in my arms, hugging him more to reassure him than myself.

“Thank you, hon,” I say. “It means a lot. Really.”

He hugs me back. “If we don’t look out for each other, who will? I’ve got your back.”

“I know.”

The timer for the steeping goes off. I give Mal one last squeeze before letting him go and attending to the tea. He lets me set it out on a tray and slip out of the staff area to deliver it, but his words linger in my mind. Maybe I’m feeling so bold tonight because of people like Mal. I might have just met him, but I have no doubt he’d really come out there and defend me if necessary. Trent and Gabriel too. They’d all rush out there if they believed there was something going down. I don’t know if that would be a fight we could win, but the simple knowledge that I wouldn’t be in that battle alone steels my resolve. There was no one in my life like these guys when I was in high school, no one flying to my rescue. Mom would

have if she could, and every time I came home roughed up she threatened to contact the principal, but the school never actually did anything about it. I was alone.

I rejoin the frat bros with renewed confidence. These men have no more power over my life, no more power to push me around and expect me not to fight back.

I'm not afraid anymore.

I set out the tea like I would for any other customers, then take a seat and elegantly cross my legs, setting my hands on my knee. I refuse to act or speak differently because these guys intend to treat my café like it's one big joke.

"Hey, this is pretty good," one says as he takes a sip. "It's like ... sweet or something."

"That would be the vanilla, darling," I say. "It's vanilla chai with black tea. I figured something a bit more bitter would suit you all best, but the vanilla is a gentle introduction to adding some flavor to your dull little lives."

"I think he's making fun of us."

"No shit, he's making fun of us, dumbass."

"Shouldn't you be nice to us? You're nice to all the girls who come here."

"The girls are nice to me," I respond.

This stops the bro in his tracks. I can almost see the wheels churning somewhere in his meaty head. He kind of looks like one of those pug dogs.

"Okay, but we're still customers," he says.

“Indeed you are,” I say, “but this relationship goes both ways. I know you straight boys aren’t used to things being reciprocal, but that’s how we prefer to do things around here.”

“Hey, I reciprocate. I eat pussy,” one bro brilliantly responds.

I roll my eyes. “And I’m sure your girlfriend was absolutely thrilled by the two minutes of cunnilingus you so graciously provided.”

Another “ooh” ripples through the group. Some of the guys openly laugh. One slaps the bro who spoke up on the back as the guy turns progressively redder.

They seem to love it when I give a member of their group shit, so I keep on doing it. The verbal sparring feels a bit one-sided with them all tipsy and me in my element, but they came here and asked for this, so who am I to refuse? Besides, it feels good. Not as good as it felt being mean to Spencer, and certainly not as sexy, but still damn good.

“Then tell me this, if you’re so smart,” one of the bros says at some point. “Why do girls always say that all the good ones are gay?”

“Please,” I say with overly dramatic emphasis. “We dress nicer. We take better care of ourselves. We treat them nicer. We actually listen when they talk. The only thing we’re missing is the desire to sleep with them, but otherwise, I’m afraid we’ve got you boys beat in every possible way.”

“Why would girls want us to dress like—” He cuts himself off, revises his language mid-sentence. “Like you?”

That can't be real. Chicks dig tough manly guys. They don't want some fancy boy."

I wave behind me at the café, which has been bustling with activity all night.

"Okay sure but... Someone help me out here," the bro pleads.

No one comes to his aid, though they do laugh heartily at his consternation.

"If more of us were bisexual, you fellas would be in a real pickle," I say. "You might even have to try."

"You'll teach us how to dress fancy though, right? You seem like a nice guy."

I pause in surprise at this. This is the guy who's spoken the most tonight. His name might be Al? Alan? It's been difficult keeping track, but this guy is the one who's instigated most of the conversation. I figured he was just a stupid frat bro, but this last statement is distressingly sincere.

I recover quickly. I'm not letting a moment of softness make me forget how guys like this usually act, what they usually say to people like me. Besides, they barged into my café causing a scene tonight. They do not deserve my sympathy.

Instead, I lean forward, perching my chin in my hands, and wink. "That comes at an extra charge, sweetie."

Al or Alan reels back a bit. "Dang, he really will flirt with dudes! Be honest, Spence. He flirted with you, and Britt got

jealous. That's why you guys broke up."

Spencer's head jerks up. He's avoided most of this conversation, avoided me. I figured he was embarrassed and tense, but when he finally raises his eyes, it's not fear I witness in those inky, dark depths.

It's hunger.

He's been hiding it all night and now it's shining like a beacon. He looks right at me, eyes locking onto mine, and I realize I've been giving his boys shit the whole night, teasing them, mocking them, screwing with them just like I screwed with him the other night.

He likes it.

He likes when I push back. He likes when I'm mean. I can see it in how his lips part, how his eyes stay fixed on mine, how his chest rises and falls a bit too sharply.

He still wants me, and God help me, but that knowledge lights my whole body on fire.

I recover more swiftly than Spencer. My jaw is tense, but it probably makes it more credible when I finally respond to Alan with a dull, "He's not my type."

Thankfully, the guys all find this deliriously hilarious.

Oh, if they had any idea what a lie that is.

Chapter Ten

Spencer

I BARELY SURVIVE the tea. Every pointed word Rhett throws at the others burns its way through me like sparklers crackling under my skin. His flippant little “he’s not my type” hurts the worst — and the best. If I thought for even a moment I might have gotten over what happened the other night, my body proves me very, very wrong as Rhett keeps giving my boys shit until they laugh and throw a wad of cash on the table. Rhett barely gives me a glance before he scoops up the money and leaves to take care of real customers who aren’t my crappy friends. I want to apologize or explain, but he’s already gone, and the guys are all talking about getting back home.

I follow them without a word, praying they simply don’t notice me. Alan and Calvin are at the head of the group, still laughing and talking. Honestly, these guys all handled this better than I would have guessed. They took the joking in stride. It almost felt like friends just playfully messing with each other.

Well, except for the part where it left me so turned on I have to think about puppies to get myself into a state where I can follow them home without embarrassing myself. It works a little, but my brain is still buzzing. Rhett said he has another customer tonight, but it's pretty late. That must be the last one. Then what will he do? Go home and sleep, I suppose. Why does that thought bother me? I should be grateful I made it out of this situation intact, but some part of me is already thinking about going back.

"Hey, you okay?"

I startle when Joe speaks up beside me. I didn't even realize he was there.

"Yeah," I say. "I'm fine. Just tired probably." An idea strikes me, a horrible idea, but one I chase nonetheless. "Actually, I've been kind of slacking off in my classes. You know, with the breakup and all. Not the best start to a new semester at a new school. I think I might hit the student store and get an energy drink, try to pound out a late night study session or something to catch up."

"You sure? I can help you study if you want. I actually work at the tutoring center."

Shit. I forgot about that. "Nah, it's good, man. I just need a little boost. I'll be fine."

"You want me to walk with you? It's kind of late."

I chuckle, hoping it sounds convincing. "I'm a big guy. I'm sure I'll be fine. Besides, it's like five minutes away."

Joe pauses, and I start praying to all those Catholic saints

I've mostly forgotten about. *Please let him leave. Please let him stop asking question. Please please please.*

“Okay,” Joe says finally, “but if you need anything, you can knock on my door any time. You know that, right? We’re brothers. I’m here for you, no matter what it is.”

My throat is suddenly tight. I can’t tell if it’s fear or something else. The way Joe phrased that... He can’t possibly know what I did, right? He can’t somehow see inside my mind and guess what I’m planning? No way. That’s impossible. At worst, he’s throwing out a blind guess, and I sure as hell don’t plan to confirm it.

“Thanks,” I say. “Really. I’m lucky to have you guys while I’m still getting used to everything here. I’ll check in with you tomorrow if I don’t get any studying done tonight, okay?”

“Alright,” Joe says.

He puts up no protest when I veer away from the group at the front gates of the university. The campus is quiet this time of night, the brick buildings dark and silent. A few students mill about. If I went far enough along the winding, tree-lined paths, I’m sure I’d find a bustle near the cafeteria. But I’m not going that far. In fact, all I really do is make a loop around the first academic building I find, the sciences building, then head right back out the gate. My body knows where I’m going, even if my brain won’t quite admit it. In a few minutes, I’m right back on the street where the café is, hating myself for returning but incapable of turning away.

I only left maybe a half hour ago, so I have some time to kill. I sit on the curb on the opposite side of the street and simply watch the house. No one comes or goes for a while, and most of the windows are dark. Someone must live upstairs, but I'm pretty sure it's not Rhett. Maybe it's one of the other guys who work at the café, though I'm pretty sure two of them were new. I only recognized Rhett and the guy with the silver hair.

A group of girls come giggling around the corner of the house. I stay very still, but they don't bother noticing me as they turn toward the university and, likely, their dorm rooms.

I tense when the next group comes around the corner, then the next. That should mean the café is closing up, but none of the guys who work there appear for a long time. I start to lose my nerve, and rise to drag my pitiful ass back home, but just then the new guys appear.

I'm already on my feet, so I duck behind a tree. The guys are so similar looking in the dark that they could be brothers or something. One is doing most of the talking as they get into a car and drive off.

I let out a breath. That leaves the silver-haired guy, who dutifully appears almost as soon as I think of him. He was the one glaring when we barged into the café, so I duck behind the tree again and press myself against the trunk until I hear his footsteps fade away into silence.

There's no one left, but I could still leave. I could stop myself from making the same mistake again, even if that feels

like too little, too late.

“You might as well come out,” Rhett says before I work up the nerve to run away.

I really hope he’s talking about the tree. I slide out from behind it, hands in the pockets of my jeans and shoulders hunched.

“Back so soon?” Rhett says. “Where’s your friends?”

“They went home. I ... I’m sorry. About them.”

Rhett snorts. “I’ve handled worse.”

Worse. Like me. I cringe at the reminder.

“So,” he says, “what are you doing here?”

“I, uh...”

God, what the hell am I doing here? I can barely admit it inside my own head, let alone out loud. I can’t possibly bring myself to say that I listened to him shit talk my boys and came back because I found it so sexy I couldn’t help myself.

He heaves a sigh so big I wonder how there’s still any air left in his lungs.

“Come on,” he says. “Get in. Before I realize what a terrible idea this is.”

I hear a car unlock and jerk my head up. Rhett is getting in the driver’s side. He reaches across the seats and pushes the passenger door open. For me.

I don’t have time to dither. I hurry to his car and slide into the passenger seat without a word. Our seatbelts click, then the car is rumbling to life, filling the awkward silence with the

grumbling of the motor. It's an old car, super old, but Rhett's hung an air freshener that makes it smell new. There's no garbage on the floor or spare junk collecting on the back seat. It's like the café in a way, tidy and clean, if a bit slapdash. For some reason, I kind of like that. It feels like getting a tiny glimpse into Rhett's head. He's probably like this with everything, I realize, working on a budget, but making the most of it, creating something beautiful no matter how little he has to work with.

Am I something he could work with? Or are my good qualities so pathetically paltry that not even Rhett could dig out something worth keeping?

"Your car is nice," I say.

He scoffs. "Thanks, I guess. I keep it clean at least. You like music?"

"Sure, who doesn't?"

He attaches his phone to a USB and turns it on. Taylor Swift washes out of the speakers to fill in the gaping holes in our conversation. It keeps us from having to talk. In four years, we were never alone together, never had a real conversation together. Now I'm in this guy's car, and I have no idea where we're going or what will happen when we get there.

"So," Rhett says, "are you going to tell me what you want like a big boy or are we doing this with eye contact and inferences alone?"

"I'm, um, I guess I'm not really sure."

"Bullshit."

He doesn't raise his voice, but the sharpness of his tone finally drags my eyes up from where they settled on my knees. Rhett is looking straight ahead at the road, but his hands tighten on the steering wheel.

"You would not have come back if you didn't know you wanted something," Rhett says. "If you can't say it out loud, fine, but let's be clear about one thing here: I'm not going to talk around this to spare your feelings. As far as I'm concerned, this is a transaction. You get me off, I get you off. We don't have to talk about it beyond that, but I'm not going to pretend it's anything but what it is. You cool with that?"

I nod.

"Gonna need you to use real words, Marsh."

"I-I'm cool with it."

"Good."

Rhett goes back to driving, but I struggle to take my eyes off him. His blunt, brutal words are so different from how he talked at the café, but they have just as powerful an effect on me. I want him even more than when I hid behind that tree waiting for him, want him so bad I don't even realize we've left the university behind until we're on Route 46 for some reason. We're not just leaving campus, we're *really* leaving campus. I have no idea where we're going, especially with the night so thick around us. The lights of passing cars flash by like comets falling to Earth, each burning my eyes with their brightness as we speed along.

"I'm not going to murder you and dump your body in the

woods,” Rhett says dryly. “As tempting as that sounds.”

“I couldn’t blame you if you did, though I’d really appreciate it if you didn’t.”

He snorts a laugh. It almost sounds genuine. “Believe it or not, I am actually more interested in getting laid.”

I swallow at the blunt reminder of why I’m in this car. “Cool. Uh ... me too.”

That’s about as close to admitting it out loud as I’ve ever gotten. Even that much leaves me a bit shaky, though the horniness is helping me push through it. Rhett has completely taken command of this situation. Wherever we’re going and whatever we’re going to do when we get there, it’s entirely in his hands. Giving him control like this, feeling small and helpless beside him — it has me squirming in my seat as he pulls off the main road and takes an exit for some side street I’ve never heard of.

He doesn’t speak as he navigates. Even in the dark, he knows the way, and soon we’re pulling into a parking lot beside a hiking trail.

I swallow hard. “Sure you haven’t changed your mind about the murdering?”

He turns off the car. Finally, he eyes me up and down, his cool, light eyes appraising even the parts of me he can’t see right now. “Yes. I’m sure. Are you?”

God, yes.

The words nearly leap out of my throat on their own. I

hold them back somehow, though I'm not really sure why.

"If you're having second thoughts," he begins.

"No," I cut in. "No, I'm not. I just..."

"Wish it wasn't me?"

"More like I wish it wasn't me."

He winces, which isn't the response I expect. He's about the last person on the planet who should be feeling sorry for me.

"Well," he says, "the feeling is mutual. But we're here, and if you still want to do this, we can do it."

"I ... I still want to."

He unclicks his seatbelt. I do likewise. Something about that sound feels heavy, final, like a gavel coming down in a courtroom. My sentence: A lifetime of self-loathing and humiliation.

The doors unlock. "Get in the back seat," Rhett says.

I stumble out of the car, then into the back seat, just as ordered. I feel too big for this section of the car, but Rhett just climbs in on the other side and moves both seats forward to give us as much space as possible.

"So, um, how do..." I say. "I've never..."

"I am well aware that you're a closet case and a man-virgin," Rhett interrupts. "God, I must be desperate."

It's hard to see him in the dark, but I can feel his eyes evaluating me like I'm a wrong answer on a quiz.

“Have you ever had a cock in your mouth?” he says.

I blink several times.

“I presume that’s a no. Have you ever wanted to have a cock in your mouth?”

“I...” I think back to that first encounter, how inexplicably good his dick looked, how the word “juicy” immediately sprang to my mind. I’ve never thought about a dick that way, but when I saw his... “Yeah,” I say. “I think so.”

“At least you can admit that much. Fine. I can work with that. Now take your pants off. And your shirt, if you want to keep it cleaner than last time.”

There’s no room for debate in his tone. His words strike me like a slap, and I scramble to obey.

Chapter Eleven

Rhett

I STILL DON'T UNDERSTAND why a guy who used to fling spitballs at me from across the cafeteria is now obeying my every whim, but the moment his shirt comes off, I no longer care. He's broad across the chest, with a smattering of dark, wiry hair on his firm pecs. They look just as good as they felt through his shirt last time, and I find my hands moving before my brain has time to catch up.

Spencer emits a little gasp when I fill my palms with his pecs and lunge for his mouth. I smother the sound as I kiss and grope him, but there's more where that first gasp came from. He's wonderfully expressive, moaning and whining as I take what I want from him.

Who would have guessed my high school bully could be such a good boy when put to the test?

Certainly not me. But hey, I'm not complaining. If this is going to be the biggest mistake in my entire life, it might as

well be a fun mistake.

The car groans as I push to get closer to a man I should absolutely despise. He not only made high school hell, but he barged into my café tonight with his stupid friends and nearly ruined not just my night, but my customers' nights.

I let the anger simmer inside me, let it fuel the way I greedily grab at his chest, squeezing until he gives me a sad little moan. I'm not about to let up, though. This guy brought all of this on himself, and when I flick my thumb across a perky nipple, I can feel how much he's enjoying the consequences.

He jerks a little from that touch, and I smirk to myself before doing it again. A shiver ripples through his body, a delicious confession that echoes under my hands.

"No one's ever touched you there, huh?" I say against his lips. "God, you heterosexuals can be so damn vanilla."

I don't know if he can really call himself heterosexual anymore, but neither of us seem to care. The idea that he's a straight guy going against his better instincts has a certain appeal, especially since we're stuffed in the back seat of my four-door like high schoolers sneaking around between classes.

I push him back against the door behind him so I can lower my head and lick around his nipple. His reaction is exquisite. Spencer gasps, his body bucking toward me as he contends with a sensation I doubt he's ever imagined. I go a little harder, sucking at the nipple, getting my teeth on it to tug.

His hand flies to my hair, fingers a tangle among the blond strands as he holds onto me like he might fall off the seat otherwise.

I pull away with a pop, eyes trailing down the hair darting down his abs like an arrow pointing to the bulge straining his jeans.

“Thought I told you to take those off,” I say.

“Sorry.”

His apology is quick and automatic, like he’s too used to that word. I shove him back, and a flicker of fear crosses his face. I shuffle back a little on the seat we sit sideways on, then peel off my shirt. The fear vanishes, replaced with hunger as he eyes my lean chest up and down. The blond hairs are too faint to be visible, especially in the dark. I’ve got nothing on all that broad muscle cording across his chest. Yet he looks at me like a five-course meal.

Fitting that look into my “Spencer lexicon” atop all the sneering malice he displayed in high school lends this moment a surreal quality, like a heat mirage wavering right before my eyes, but I’ve come too far to start questioning this. Instead, I flick open the fly of my pants.

“You want this?”

“Yeah.” His throat bobs as he swallows.

I shift back a little more, trying to engineer a better position for both of us, but the back of my car presents some logistical challenges no blueprint could possibly overcome. It’ll have to be good enough. I’m definitely not taking this guy

to my room, and I'll be damned before I get caught in a frat house with some bro. Nope, this is happening right here, right now, engineering hurdles and all.

My back ends up against the door. I have one foot on the floor so I can open my legs as much as possible, giving him a show as I reach into my pants for myself. His eyes follow my hand, tracing every motion as I stroke myself. I leave my pants on, partially covering myself, teasing him by offering only small glimpses.

He crawls forward without me ordering it, fitting as best he can between my legs. He's bulky, but I'm flexible. We'll make it work, especially since we're both so inexplicably determined.

"Can I?" he says, wetting his lips.

Yeah, never, ever seen a straight boy who looks at a cock like that. Spencer has some heavy soul-searching to do, but that is not my problem. If he wants to suck me off so badly, who am I to stand in his way?

I finally get myself all the way out of my pants, though the garment is still mostly on.

"All yours," I say, like my cock is the last bite of cake at a party.

Spencer certainly goes for it like it is. Before I even get my hand out of the way, his head is dipping down, his lips around my head. For someone who has never done this before, it doesn't take much before he's sinking down me, plunging all the way to where my hand stops him at the base. He makes a

frustrated little noise I can feel in my dick, then slides back up, coming all the way off.

“Let me,” he says. “Please?”

It’s weird hearing him so meek, but I remove my hand. The moment I’m out of his way, Spencer dives back into his work, throwing himself down me without an ounce of grace or finesse. There’s no tongue, no complimentary hand motion, no teasing at my balls, just the blunt drive of his hot mouth around me as he takes me in so deep his nose ends up against my skin.

For all that, it’s good. Goddamn good.

“Fuck,” I breathe as I tilt my head back against the cool window behind me. I close my eyes, and it’s almost like someone I don’t despise is on my cock instead of Spencer goddamn Marsh.

I flick that thought aside. It doesn’t matter who he is. All that matters is that I haven’t had any action since sometime last semester, and his mouth is as good and wet and hot as any. Plus, he’s enthusiastic as hell, which is always sexy. He might be clumsy, but he’s going at me like he means to become an expert by the end of this night. And I suppose that kind of makes sense. We’re in his realm now, the realm of pure physicality with no plan or blueprint to guide the way. He’s a man who knows how to use his body, even when he’s on unfamiliar terrain.

He finds a rhythm for himself and bobs his head steadily. His hands aren’t on me. He’s probably trying to hold himself

up as he bends over awkwardly on the seat. The clumsy position doesn't seem to hinder him, however, and a pleased murmur rumbles from his chest and right into my cock.

I grit my teeth around the sound, eyes squeezing shut. It requires more concentration than I'll ever admit to hang on as he hollows his cheeks and sucks me. Where the hell did he learn a thing like that? Maybe it's just a lucky guess. Either way, it's got my thighs tensing around his head. I press one hand up at the ceiling to brace myself while the other reaches for any skin I can find. It lands on his broad back just as he sinks down my cock, and my hand curls into a claw as pleasure ripples through my whole body.

“You like my cock, straight boy?” I say.

He moans around me, but I didn't speak just for his sake. In truth, I need a distraction or this isn't going to last much longer — and I absolutely refuse to have Spencer be the guy who gets me to blow too quickly. So I let the words keep coming, taking out my frustration from this inexplicable day on the guy with his mouth around me.

“Come on, you can do better than this. Is this how you treated your girlfriends? I see why you had to switch to guys.”

He moans from every barb, soaking up whatever I can give him. It doesn't even matter than I'm breathing so hard it undercuts the sharpness of my words. He takes it all, working harder like if he just gets better at sucking my dick I might be a little nicer.

Bad news, Spence.

“Fucking coward,” I sneer. “Chasing me around, hiding behind a fucking tree.”

My breath catches in my chest as he sinks down somehow even deeper and sucks hard. I swear I’ve got to be hitting the back of his throat, but he doesn’t gag, doesn’t back down.

“All because you can’t get enough of my cock.”

He nods, but goes on working me despite that. He’s a goddamn cock sucking prodigy, and pretty soon there’s no more holding it back, no words I can use to delay the inevitable. I scratch at his back, groaning as my balls tighten to bursting.

“Marsh, back off. I’m gonna... Shit, if you keep going like that, I don’t think I’ll be able to stop it.”

He nods again. God, I hope that was a nod. I don’t have a lot of time, and his mouth is too full of cock for me to make out coherent words, or for him to offer any.

“Spencer, seriously.”

I lob out one final plea, but he isn’t budging. He’s singularly focused, taking me so deep I know I’m in the back of his throat now. There’s no more room for doubt.

“Fuck, Spencer,” I groan.

And then it’s all over. I’ve given him every warning I can give, tried my best to spare him, but he didn’t seem to want any mercy, and now I’m spilling down his throat relentlessly. He makes some little sound, but he stays down my cock and

takes every last bit of it. He groans afterward, and that's when I realize his other hand was never part of this process; he was too busy using it for himself. Incredibly, even after all this, he asks me for nothing, finishing over his own hand.

I sit back, my weight sinking against the door behind me. The glass is cold compared to the heat inside the car. Spencer is sitting up, wiping at his mouth with the back of his hand. I'm too stunned to do much of anything but sit here panting. This guy hunted me down and let me drive him out into the woods late at night to ... blow me and get nothing in return?

I swallow, get myself back in my pants. I'm supposed to be in charge of this. I should at least have the experience to navigate this situation a bit better. But to be honest, I'm just about as shattered as Spencer looks as he sits there with his hair mussed and a mess in his hand.

“Oh, shit, uh, here.”

I rummage around on the floor. It's mostly clean, but I always keep some blankets in the car in case of an emergency. I'm not thrilled about ruining one of them, but I feel like I owe the guy at least this small measure of courtesy.

Spencer accepts the blanket and cleans himself up. In a few moments, we're both dressed and look more or less the same as when we arrived. But this is where we stall, sitting in the back of my car simultaneously wondering what the hell comes next.

“You good?” I say.

“Yeah.”

“I tried to warn you. I didn’t plan to have it, uh, end that way.”

“I didn’t mind,” Spencer says, and incredibly enough, I believe him. Whatever he was like in high school, the guy absolutely loves cock, and I can already tell that’s going to be a problem.

“So, um...” Spencer starts.

“Phone,” I snap.

I am not going to sit here and have some damn heart-to-heart. No way. We’re scratching an itch, nothing more. It’s up to me to set that hard boundary before things can get weird. Well, weirder than they already are.

Spencer hands over his phone, and I start punching in my phone number. I hold it up so he can see the display. “Next time you want your face fucked, you’re going to use your words like a big boy. No more barging into my café with your asshole friends, got it?”

“I-I didn’t—”

“I don’t care. You’re never doing that again, do you understand me? I’m not letting you ruin what I’m building here because you’re horny and repressed.”

He just nods. I’ll have to take that as a win.

I encourage us to get out of the back of the car so I can drive us to the university. The truth is that I’m too rattled to stay back here with him. Exchanging phone numbers is somehow the scariest part of this whole adventure. It’s

personal. It's normal.

Nothing about this should feel normal.

I get Spencer back to Greek Row, dropping him off a few houses down from his actual destination so no one notices my car. He doesn't protest this, but as he gets out of the car, it looks for a moment like he wants to say something.

Uh-uh. Nope. Not happening.

"Goodnight," I say before he can speak.

"Yeah, goodnight," he says.

He still looks like he's about to speak again. I tense, but after a trembling beat of hesitation, he shuts the door and walks off into the night. I let out a sigh of relief. Disaster averted. Kind of.

Chapter Twelve

Spencer

MY PHONE BUZZES on the way to class. It's been doing that a lot more lately. When Rhett gave me his number, I didn't hesitate to use it, just like he said. We hooked up in his car again, then once in an abandoned classroom. And I have to admit, it's hot as hell. I never thought hand stuff and mouth stuff could be this good. I always thought getting my dick inside something was all that really counted. Rhett is teaching me differently.

What are you doing? the text says.

Going to class.

Sounds boring.

I actually like most of my classes. They're more interesting than the bland electives and core classes I took at my community college back home. All those credits I carried with me when I transferred mean that here I get to focus on the stuff I actually bothered coming to school for.

Rhett would probably laugh and call it “jock stuff,” but I didn’t choose physical education as my major because I thought it was an easy road or something. Sure, I like sports, like hitting the gym and all that stuff Rhett would probably scoff at, but I also genuinely like getting other people into the gym with me. It doesn’t matter if they’re a total beginner or a gym rat; there’s just something fun about motivating other people, seeing them work hard in a way they never thought they could, watching the light go on behind their eyes when they “get it.” Too many people are out of touch with their bodies, and that kind of sucks, I think. It’s like our own bodies are strangers to us, opponents to be conquered, when really they’re our best friends. This relationship goes both ways. Happy body, happy mind, and vice versa. At least, that’s how I tend to look at it.

Of course, I’m not going to say any of this to Rhett. His perfect body is apparently just really good genes or something. He never seems to hit the gym or do any intentional exercise, and yet every time I see him with his shirt off I want to get down on my knees and pray ... or do other stuff.

In any case, it means my Functional Anatomy class will probably sound like torture to him. You can’t plot out and plan the human body. It’s a series of miracles held together with magic and good luck.

It’s not that bad, I reply as I enter the classroom.

I take my usual seat in the back by the window. It’s not that I’m shy or anything, but ever since I transferred to Montridge, I’ve been trying not to stick out the way I did in

high school. Part of my atonement, I guess. I'm not here to be that guy stomping through the hallways with a cluster of friends; I'm genuinely here to earn this degree and try to make something out of my life.

In that case, I probably shouldn't have joined my dad's old fraternity, but hey, a guy can still have some friends, right?

Anyway, my grades are fine so far, even if it is only a few weeks into the semester, so I think I'm entitled to a little bit of indulgence here and there.

One such indulgence buzzes in my pocket as Professor Stevenson enters the room to start class. He dives right in, launching into a chapter about the biomechanics of the shoulder and its surrounding muscles and joints. For a while, I have to pay attention to keep up, but I did the assigned reading for this section, and pretty soon I feel like I'm more or less on top of the lesson. When someone raises a hand to ask a question about ligaments, I finally sneak a look at my phone, which has been going off like crazy throughout this.

Damn, Rhett, you really can't wait today, huh?

It's a flattering thought — at least until I actually extract my phone from my pocket and see "Dad" on the caller ID along with Rhett.

My good mood deflates. It's suddenly a lot colder in the classroom, even with me bundling up in a hoodie to keep away the fall chill as I walked over here. It's only been like three weeks. He can't seriously be on my ass already.

I scan through the past three weeks, searching for what I

could have possibly done wrong. I got into the same frat he joined. I haven't skipped a single class. He can't possibly know that Britt dumped me; he never knew I was dating her to begin with.

Does he somehow know I'm messing around with a guy?

My heart stops dead. Cold fear fogs my mind. I try to pierce through with logic (*he can't know. Nobody knows. Who would have told him? Rhett wouldn't tell him. Rhett would hate that man. No, there's no way. It's impossible, totally impossible*), but this is an old, heavy terror, one that I'm not going to shuck off with reason alone.

My phone buzzes again. I nearly scream, thinking it's gotta be Dad, but it's Rhett. I finally open his messages.

Sounds that bad to me. He must have been talking about my class.

Then: *I'm bored. You should skip your jock class.*

Then: *Damn, no reply? Look at you being a good student and shit.*

I smile a little to myself, the fear dissipating. Rhett's snarky reply has a grounding effect. My hands are more or less steady when I respond, *I always was a good student.*

Could have fooled me, he replies right away.

Yeah, could have fooled a lot of people, but I actually always had really good grades. I just never told my douchebag friends that.

Afraid they'd tease you for being a nerd? How ironic.

Believe me, I understand the irony. It's not my proudest accomplishment. There I was picking on people like Rhett, and all the while I hid my good grades from my supposed friends for fear of receiving the same treatment in return.

Almost as ironic as now, Rhett says.

I don't know what I'm supposed to say to that. We both feel the grating, almost surreal irony of whatever the hell we're doing. Mostly we don't talk about it, not unless Rhett uses it to rile me up. As much as the shame burns, when it comes from him ... I don't know why, but I like it. I crave it. It hurts and heals all at the same time, like stretching a tight, stubborn muscle, and I want him to do it more.

He texts again. *What would your jock friends in jock class think if they knew how bad you want my ass?*

Whoa. Hold on. He's never proposed anything like that before ... if he's proposing what I think he's proposing. Is he? No, he can't be. That seems like ... a lot, and all we do right now is hand and mouth stuff. I don't even think I've ever seen him completely naked.

I can see you blushing even through text, Rhett writes. *What's wrong? That too far? You can admit you want to fuck me.*

I do. Holy shit, I do, but I haven't so much as dared to think it. Is that something I can just ... do? How does it work? Isn't it a little more complicated than, like, other stuff?

My mind is whirling, and it has nothing to do with the diagram of a shoulder that Professor Stevenson has on the

smart board.

I never said I wanted that, I write, hedging my bets.

You didn't have to. Your dumb neanderthal jock face made it pretty clear.

I like my face. It's an okay face, all things considered. I have to shave a lot, but girls, and I guess Rhett, always liked the stubble. The dark hair and dark eyes seem to play pretty well too.

Not the point, Rhett says. Do you want my ass or not? Emi went on some trip out to Manhattan with her friend. Won't be back until tomorrow.

Emi. That's his roommate, I think. He's saying he's alone. He's inviting me to his dorm while he's alone. And he's asking if I want his ass when I'm there.

Holy shit.

I mean, yes, I do want it, I respond. But are you really okay with that?

Three dots appear on my screen, blinking out of existence a moment later. Rhett takes longer to respond this time, and I sweat in my hoodie.

Finally, he writes, *I probably shouldn't be okay with it, but I'm horny, and I'm pretty confident you aren't going to murder me or something. We all have to live with what we can get. You're better than nothing. So are you coming over here or not?*

Not a glowing endorsement, but it's actually comforting

to hear he has some doubts about this. He should have doubts. I'm me, after all, and Rhett deserves so much better than just the first guy who stumbles his way. He's really making something of himself. He's a freaking engineer. And he's got his café, too, which seems to get more popular by the day. He's smart, he's funny, he's super talented at everything he does, and his blond hair and blue eyes belong in a fancy painting of some old timey noble who got called things like "fetching" in history books. It's weird thinking this about a guy but he's ... he's beautiful. Classic, in some artsy kind of way. Graceful and delicate, yet powerful enough to put me on my knees when he chooses to. There's a clash of hard and soft that manifests in the softness of his hair and the hardness of his cool eyes, the sweetness of his lips and the harsh line of his nose. He might be taking what he can get, but I'm winning the fucking lottery. And I have no idea why he's letting me.

Yes, I respond before I can think better of it.

He might deserve more, but I'm too much of a selfish jerk to stop him from settling for me.

Chapter Thirteen

Rhett

I MUST BE SOME kind of idiot. The horny kind, I suppose.

The moment I get that yes, I head for the shower. I have until the end of Spencer's class to prep, which is plenty of time. As mind-meltingly horny as I am, this is not something I'm willing to leave in the hands of a dumb straight jock. When I bottom, I do it on my terms, especially with Spencer Marsh.

Oh, God. I can't even think his name. It'll ruin the moment.

At least, it should, but the thought of Spencer seems to be having the opposite effect on my dick. An image of Spencer shirtless in the back seat of my car flashes in my mind, and I leap out of the shower to check how long it'll be until his class is finally over. You see, the problem with all this is that Spencer is hot. Like, really hot. I love getting my hands on that broad chest of his, feeling that wiry, dark hair smattered all

over it. I love how strong his grip is on my body, how hot his mouth is. The look in his eyes when he wants me is enough to set the whole campus on fire. Having that intensity focused just on me is a high like no other. Plus, the instant I had his cock in my mouth, I knew I wanted it elsewhere as well.

And he lets me be mean.

I won't deny there's something cathartic in that aspect of things — and apparently that goes for both of us. The more I berate him, the more he moans, and God, it's fun. Letting out all that pent-up frustration is better than booze and therapy combined. Mix in an orgasm or two and they should be packaging this shit as the new designer drug.

His class should be over, and I check my phone anxiously, but there are no messages. He should need me to let him in. Unless someone else has let him in? You need your student ID to buzz into the elevator on the ground floor, and his shouldn't work in Ivers' Tower, but people buzz each other in all the time. We're not exactly living in Fort Knox.

I'm about to text him when a tentative knock sounds at my dorm room door. That sound shoots through me, electrifying everything it touches. I fling open the door and drag him inside. Before he has time to say "hello" or drop the backpack he grips in one hand, I kiss him against that door so hard it slams shut. I'll worry about the noise later. Right now, my body needs this hot idiot like it needs air.

"Have fun at jock class?" I say when I'm done sucking his face.

“Yeah. We learned about anatomy.”

Jesus Christ, he’s being sincere. He actually did enjoy his little jock class or whatever it was. Why the hell is that so endearing? Spencer Marsh is the last person on the damn planet who should seem endearing to me, but I get the impression he’d ramble about shoulder joints for an hour if I let him.

I shake myself. That’s not the sort of anatomy I want to be thinking about right now. The only part of the human body I really care about at the moment is the one nudging at me from inside his pants.

I start moving us toward my room. The dorm is small. The door opens into the narrow space Emi and I shoved a couch into, and soon enough I’m bumping into that couch. With my hands gripping Spencer’s shirt, the motion tugs him forward. Then we’re leaning against the furniture as he kisses me so hard I almost fall back onto the cushions.

The backpack thuds to the ground, then both his hands are on me, large on my waist. And I don’t want to wait anymore. The two or three steps to the bedroom seem like far too much distance between me and my prize. Thank God I shoved a condom and lube in my pocket. I figured I should keep it close just in case, and it turns out I was right.

I shove him away. His lips are bruised from kissing, his dark hair spilling across his forehead. His eyes flicker around, scanning me for any sign of hesitation, but I’m way past being coherent enough to regret this. Plenty of time for that later.

“Right here,” I say.

“Here?”

He looks around, uncertainty dulling the passion in his eyes. I turn in his arms before either of us can overthink this. It leaves me right against the armrest of the couch. I reach backward for him, arching my back as I push my ass against him. He rumbles behind me, his body enveloping me as his hands slide forward to my hips.

“Right fucking here,” I repeat.

There’s no protest this time. Whatever dim, struggling lightbulb exists in that neanderthal head of his finally goes off, and he rubs his cock against my ass. Our pants are an egregious hindrance as our bodies sway against each other, but I don’t plan to leave things that way for long. I’ve got one night of Emi being out of town, and I’m damn well going to make the most of it.

Even if this is a huge mistake.

I let go of him to dig in my pocket for the supplies I fortunately placed there. I pass the condom over my shoulder to him.

“I trust you don’t need help with that,” I say. “Britt seemed like a smart girl.”

“I’m good,” he says, a little breathless.

He takes the condom, and I get to work on myself. I already feel ridiculously ready for this, but I’ve also experienced the girth of that cock in my mouth, so it doesn’t

hurt to make doubly sure. Belts jangle. I shuck my pants down and don't worry about my shirt. The important parts are bare. Then I lube up my fingers and reach behind myself, bracing on the couch with my other hand.

Leaning forward pushes my ass against him. Spencer gives me a little space to work as I feel around my hole. At least, that's what I assume at first, but as my fingers slide inside myself and Spencer's breathing deepens, I start to suspect he stepped away to enjoy the show.

"S-should I, um, help?" he says.

The offer would be sweet if it came from anyone but him.

"You'll help by fucking me when I'm ready for you," I say.

I concentrate on my fingers, spearing two inside, scissoring them a bit to encourage the muscles to relax. And maybe to show off a little. I'm sure he's watching, sure he's following every motion, sure he's imagining his cock sinking into me instead of my own fingers.

I pull my fingers free. It probably wasn't quite enough, but fuck, I want him so bad. It's been a while since I've had a warm body inside me instead of a toy. That must be why I'm being so reckless and stupid with Spencer. It's just horny desperation.

Still, I'm not completely unhinged yet.

I pass the lube back. "Put some on yourself. Then go slow."

“Okay.”

He does exactly as he's told. I brace both hands on the arm of the couch, completely bent over, my ass at his mercy. It takes a few seconds before a lube-slicked head is prodding at me. I have to force myself to breathe, to relax. It's not fear; it's the anticipation of getting that thick cock inside me.

It happens more easily than I would have thought after going a while without bottoming, but maybe that's because he's really taking the “go slow” part to heart. It's sweet agony the way he eases cautiously inside.

The moment I groan, he stops.

“Did I hurt you?”

Hurt me. He fucking cares about hurting me? It's enough to make me want to reach back there and slap him.

Instead, I bear down on him and push my hips back myself, trying to take more of him.

“I didn't tell you to stop,” I say.

It's hard to sound firm and commanding when my whole body is screaming for his cock, but apparently I pull it off well enough because he keeps going, fitting himself inside me inch by torturous inch. Every time I think I've got a handle on this, more squeezes inside me. There's a moment where I wonder if it really is too much, if this'll be the first cock I've come across that I can't take, then he stops and lets out a sigh that brushes along my back. My skin prickles, even with my shirt still on.

“Wow. Damn,” he says. “Can I ... can I move?”

“That’s kind of the point,” I say. “Please don’t tell me I need to teach you how sex works.”

“It’s just ... I’ve never done it like this. You’ll tell me if you’re not okay, right?”

“I’m not fucking you out of pity,” I snap. “If I didn’t want you inside me, you wouldn’t fucking be here.”

I brace against the couch and move myself to make my point, and fuck, he feels good inside me. Every shift of my hips grinds him against my walls. It leaves me with my back curling as pleasure twists through me.

“Fuck, Rhett.”

The way he breathes out my name trembles through my chest, but I don’t have to worry about that for long. Spencer finally starts moving, holding onto my hips as he rocks his own.

He’s tentative at first, but that’s fine for me. Like I said, it’s been a minute. Spencer’s own inexperience masks any trepidation that might be lingering thanks to my dry spell. Besides, it doesn’t take more than a couple thrusts before any doubt or discomfort melts away. I’m fully in my element, my body singing from the fullness, every nerve ablaze as his cock churns inside me.

“Harder,” I say. “Don’t be a pussy about it.”

He groans and obeys, just as I knew he would. I’m not sure I actually needed it harder, but it feels good to boss him

around, almost as good as when he fucks into me hard enough for his hips to slap against my ass.

The walls are thin in dorm rooms, and we are putting them to the test. That slapping keeps up, a steady beat like a metronome counting the spaces between moans. Our voices rise, his deeper and gruffer than mine, a rumble that shivers through me as his cock pounds into me. My fingers curl on the couch, digging into the fabric like it's his broad, scratchable back.

His hands skim a little higher on my hips. When they reach my waist, they feel enormous, like they could wrap all the way around me. I curl into the sensation, yearning for him to engulf me in his powerful grip. He uses that hold to pull me into him, thrusting harder, using my whole body as leverage as I claw at the couch and scream at the battered furniture.

“You're so good,” he gasps. “Holy shit. You're so tight. You're beautiful.”

Beautiful?

“Shit, I'm close already. What do you need?”

I shake myself. I'm pretty damn close myself, but I don't let men jackhammer an orgasm out of me as a matter of policy. No way. I'm not giving anyone the satisfaction of leaving here thinking their cock is a magic orgasm stick.

“Reach around me,” I manage.

Thankfully, he doesn't need more direction than that. One of those big paws leaves my waist and fumbles around for my cock. I'm hard just from him fucking me. Embarrassingly

enough, I probably could come just from the penetration. But I grit my teeth and hang on as he takes me in his hand and pumps in time with his hips.

Damn jocks. He's more coordinated than I bargained for. His cock teases my prostate in time with his hand running up and down my dick, and the effect leaves me so delirious I have to close my eyes to keep from toppling onto the couch. I'm waging a war against the orgasm swelling inside me, trying to hold it back so I don't go before him. I will never, ever, *ever* let Spencer Marsh think his cock is so good it can get me off this easily ... even if it could.

No. Shit. Damn it. No! I can't give him that. I won't. Even if it feels like my balls are going to pop if I don't let go in the next three seconds.

He slams deep and it very nearly undoes me. I hang on by a fingernail, clinging to the edge like a climber trying not to fall off a cliff. I'm edging myself into oblivion, the orgasm seeming to grow and grow inside me like a beast devouring me from the inside out.

"C-can I?" Spencer chokes out. "Oh shit, I don't think I can hold it any longer."

"Fine."

It's all I can do to keep the relief out of my tone, to hold firm as the end finally nears.

As soon as he has permission, he hunches over and drives into me, his moan muffled against my shirt as he leans his forehead on my back. He's shuddering, his hips hitching in

desperate little echoes. But he never stops his hand moving, never once forgets about my cock in his hold. He keeps stroking me, even as he spills inside me.

I can't hang on any longer. My body is desperate for release, especially because Spencer hasn't let up for a second. I give up the fight, coming in his fist, relief snapping through my body.

Every muscle relents all at once. I try to sink down, but his cock is still inside me. I'm stuck bending over the couch until he softens a little and eases himself out of me.

I don't have the strength to put up any further pretense. I sink all the way to the floor, heedless of the way my pants are still tangled around my ankles. I end up sitting on the floor with my back to the couch, panting for breath as my body hums with delight.

Fuck, that was good. That was dangerously good.

Spencer is looking a little unsteady as well. I jab a finger back toward the door he entered through. Fear flashes across his face until I say, "Bathroom's there. Towels above the toilet."

"Oh, right."

He slinks off. I pull my pants back up and collect myself while the water runs in the bathroom. By the time Spencer re-emerges, I'm wiping a couple errant cum spots off the couch, but mostly feel human again. I should have time to clean more thoroughly before Emi is back. She'd rightfully kill me if she knew I had sex on shared furniture. Maybe she'd forgive me if

I explained that it was hate sex with my high school bully and it felt so fucking good I'm not sure I'll ever completely recover from it.

Yeah, probably not.

“So, um...” Spencer says.

I leave the couch in a semi-clean state and straighten. Spencer is shifting from foot to foot in my living room. I don't remember when he ditched his shirt as well as his pants, but either way he's completely naked now and seems utterly unbothered by that. And sure, why not? His body is like a Greek statue, all muscle and man from head to toe. If I looked like that I'd probably strut around naked too.

He scratches at the back of his head, sheepish, but not because of the amount of skin he's showing off. When he finally meets my eye, there's a question in his gaze.

“You said Emi doesn't come back until tomorrow?”

Fuck me. He wants to stay. He wants to do this again. And eyeing up all that perfectly muscular man meat, I want that too.

Chapter Fourteen

Spencer

I FINALLY SEE RHETT naked that night.

I've seen all the pieces, but never all together. That changes once we recover enough to stumble into his room. My clothes are still on the floor in the living room, but he put all of his back on for some reason. Did he really want me gone that badly?

If he did, that opinion has since changed. He lets me tug his shirt off, lets me kiss along his neck and down to his chest as he leads me toward his bed. The blinds are drawn, but it's not that late yet. There's enough light sneaking in that I catch a glimpse of the furniture the instant before we tumble onto it. I want to do that thing he did to my nipples, see if I can make him feel the way I felt, but he shoves me onto my back before I get a chance.

We pause to eat at some point in the evening. It's just some cereal he's got stashed in his room, but I don't care. I'd

go without food for a week if it meant staying in his bed all that time.

Then we're right back to it. Now it is dark, but Rhett is finally as naked as me, and the way the scant light limns his lean body is something truly heavenly. I'm on my back, my hands traveling up his body to rest at his waist. He's so thin here. I feel like I could wrap my hands around him and lift him. The space just above his hips fits against my palms like it was made for me.

I only get to enjoy it for a moment. He's all business, and soon I'm squeezing my eyes shut thanks to his wonderful mouth.

I'm pretty sure we manage to sleep at some point, but we're racing against time. The morning will bring the awful news that we've exhausted this brief window together. The frat house will certainly never be this empty, and Rhett would never invite me back here when Emi or anyone else might know what's going on. Though, with the amount of noise we're making, and the number of times we're making it, I have to imagine someone on this floor of his dormitory realizes something is going on.

The night knits a patchwork of hazy dreams and bursts of pleasure. Sometimes I pass out completely spent and exhausted. Sometimes I wake up hard and search for him. Sometimes he's the one waking me, or maybe that part was a dream.

We sleep in earnest at some point. We're young and

horny, but no one can keep going the way we've been going indefinitely.

The next time I open my eyes, there's genuine sunlight creeping into his room. I arrived here sometime before dinner yesterday and now it's morning. My fraternity brothers are going to think I'm dead, but I'll just tell them the truth — I got lucky last night.

They will never know exactly how lucky.

I appreciate Rhett as he sleeps beside me. His blond hair is long enough to curl against his cheeks in places. He's on his back, his hands folded on his belly, the sheet barely covering one leg.

I'm struck by the image of him from last night, a long, lean silhouette kissed by errant streetlight, an outline of some ethereally beautiful creature that doesn't belong among us mortals. He's human again, but somehow that's even more appealing. My eyes skim the tiny freckles speckling his shoulders. The hair on his body is so light it's like a shimmer against his skin. He's more toned than he gives himself credit for, but at the same time there's a grace to every limb, even when he's asleep. I've never seen someone look so ... so *pretty* while they slept, though I'm not sure if that's the right word for it. Would he object to that term? It's not because he's gay. I just can't think of any word other than beautiful to describe him.

I dare to kiss along his shoulder. He stirs but doesn't wake, and I gain a little confidence, making my way to his

chest. His breathing deepens as I straddle him. I perch over him, only touching him with my lips as I taste the sleepy heat clinging to his collarbones and warming his chest.

He sighs awake, his fingers combing through my hair. Encouraged, I work my way lower, but he tightens his hand to stop me. Rhett spreads his legs around me, hands roaming down to my ass to pull me down against him. I gasp from how hard he is, my body leaping to respond despite how many times we've done this.

“Like this,” he says, sleep thick in his voice.

I go for the lube we somehow haven't exhausted. Once I've got a bit in my palm, I shift my hand between us to stroke it along both of us. Then I settle my weight atop him and let our bodies sway together.

It's a familiar pace now. Our hips know how to move to match each other. In a single night, I've gone from experiencing a first to feeling like I know every hitch and shiver of someone else's body. This won't be a long one, I can tell from how Rhett tilts his hips at me and digs his nails into my back. The second those nails bite into my skin, I let loose, driving my hips at him. He plants his feet and pushes right back up at me, our bodies a sloppy mess of lube and desire.

Normally, this would be the part where he starts calling me a useless straight boy or something, but this time he just holds on and moans, and I do the same. Our bodies are a tangle of limbs, our hips thrusting greedily at each other. Every time the sweet pressure of his body presses against my

cock, I feel like I could blow. We aren't even doing all that much compared to everything that happened yesterday, but it doesn't matter. I'm starting to suspect that if it's Rhett, my body will blast off from just about anything.

His hands travel down my back. He reaches my ass, gripping it tight, urging me on. I throw myself harder against him, the friction almost enough to burn, even with the lube. We moan at each other, and that sound is so delicious it makes my stomach clench.

I lunge for his mouth while I still can, sealing my lips against his. It's not like we haven't kissed before, but this one feels ... different. We usually start by kissing. It's like foreplay. Doing it at the end like this, doing it when we're both so close, when our bodies are locked together, when we don't strictly *need* it in order to get things going... It's dangerous.

I love it.

Like this, I can feel every moan. I can taste Rhett's need as it builds up inside him. Every time I buck my hips, his joyful response quivers on his lips. It's almost more enticing than the way he shoves his hips up at me, his cock grinding against mine.

“Rhett.”

The name sneaks out. He stiffens in my arms just a little, and I focus on my hips instead, jerking them like I'm right on the edge. I wasn't quite there yet, but I was certainly close enough to fake it to smooth over that little slip. I just can't help wanting to say his name, no matter how much he evidently

hates that.

We finish with throaty moans and bucking hips, spilling our mess all over each other. My limbs go limp, my body depleted of every last drop it can possibly give. Even a college kid can't fuck this many times in one night without some kind of consequences. Right now, that consequence is that I feel like gravity has been turned up to two hundred percent and I'm never going to move again.

Of course, that means I'm lying atop Rhett, my weight smothering him, his arms still around my back. I hold still, but he doesn't pull away. I dare to let myself enjoy it. This whole night, and we've never really held each other like this, but now that it's happening I like it. I like it a lot. He's soft, but I don't feel like I'm actually going to crush him or anything. Every time we breathe our chests push closer together.

I tilt my head and rest it beside his. We're close enough to kiss, but he doesn't turn toward me, just stares up at the ceiling. The moment hangs like spider silk stretching precariously between two trees. As soon as one tree falls, it's going to tear everything down with it. I brace, unprepared and unwilling to hit the ground so soon, lingering in this moment for as long as I possibly can. I want to wrap my arms around him, want to turn on my side and hug him against me and keep him there until I'm sick of holding him, if that's even possible. I want to—

Rhett jerks away, and I lose my grip on him.

Chapter Fifteen

Rhett

I SOMEHOW COME AGAIN, despite how many times that's happened since yesterday evening.

Spencer collapses atop me, turning his head so his lips are almost against my cheek. His weight is like a blanket. Some part of me wants to hold on, wants to wrap my arms around him and let myself have this moment of pure connection. It's not the raw need we've been flinging at each other up to this point. This is more human than that. Spencer is very nearly holding me there against him, like he wants me, like this isn't his experimental college phase that he'll forget about when he graduates and has a wife and kids like he's supposed to.

I jerk free of his hold, slipping from his arms and off the bed. Before he can say or do anything, I hurry from my room and into the bathroom, throwing the door shut.

Okay, maybe that was a little dramatic, but my heart is pounding in my throat. I splash some water on myself, clean

the bodily fluids off my torso. Then I linger there at the sink, avoiding my reflection in the mirror where Emi and I leave little notes to each other in liquid chalk.

It's your turn on cleaning duty! she wrote most recently. She turned the dot of the exclamation point into a flower to soften the blow.

I shake my head at my reflection. I have to get Spencer the hell out of here before Emi returns. There's no way I'm going to try explaining all this to her. Hopefully having sex so many times my dick is chafed got the guy out of my system and we can both move on, him as a good, straight jocky boy and me as the token gay guy in every class.

I emerge from the bathroom with a damp towel, a peace offering of sorts. When I return to my room, Spencer is sitting on the edge of the bed, but he hasn't made any progress toward actually leaving.

"Here," I say, handing over the towel.

Spencer accepts it and cleans our combined mess off of his stupid perfect abs. It probably doesn't help much. We both reek of sex. A damp towel isn't going to fix that. Yet I hesitate to offer him a shower. We have plenty of time before Emi arrives, but I'm too scared he'd want to share that space, and that feels almost as intimate as that moment when he laid atop me. I'm not here for intimate. Not with Spencer Marsh. Even if it did feel good. Even if it's something I've gone even longer without than sex. Being held is more foreign than the blunt mechanics of a hookup, but why does it have to be *him*?

I find some C U of M sweatpants on the floor and shrug them on, keeping my back to Spencer, creating more space. He's still sitting there when I turn back around, and the expression he wears stabs a dagger of fear through my chest.

"You can borrow some clothes if you need to," I say to deflect. "They'll probably be small but I might have something you can wear just to get home."

"I'll be okay," he says.

I'm out of cards. I tried the bathroom. I tried putting on clothes. I tried suggesting he get dressed. The guy isn't budging, apparently determined to make this as awkward as possible.

"You know," he says slowly, "we could just, like, hang out for a while. If you want. If we have time."

We do have time, but that's not the problem. The problem is that he's Spencer Marsh, and I left high school swearing that neither him nor anyone like him would ever hurt me again.

"I don't think that's a good idea," I say.

"I don't mean sex," he says, as though I didn't understand. I did. "I'm pretty tapped out. I just meant we could, like, lay here, you know?"

I know. And part of me wants to dive into his arms and soak up that offer of pure, body-to-body comfort.

A different part of me, the part that got shoved into lockers and shot at by spitballs, flares with rage. I'm wearing nothing but those sweatpants, and the heating in student

housing isn't exactly top tier, but suddenly I'm burning hot.

How dare he? How dare he use me as a punching bag for four years, then show back up in my life and try to do something as ridiculous as *hold me*? How dare he think he's anything but a toy to me, that he deserves to be anything but a toy? This is me scratching a physical itch. Nothing more, no matter how many sad puppy dog looks he shoots at me or how endearing his talk of anatomy lessons is or how attentive his every touch is as he learns my body. Great, so the guy grew up and became *not* the absolute biggest asshole in all of New Jersey. First of all: Low bar. Second: That doesn't erase how he treated me when we were kids.

"No," I say.

It's just one word, but it plunks down into my dorm like a boulder. There's no room for argument, no room for questions, just a single, definitive statement.

"Oh," Spencer says. "Right. Um, sorry if I... I don't really know how this works or anything."

"*This* doesn't work at all," I say, waving my finger between us. "*This* is not a thing that works. *This* is not a thing at all. Don't get it confused."

"I just thought—"

"That must have been very novel and startling for you, but I don't care what you thought."

This isn't the playful, flirtatious meanness I deploy when we fuck. This emerges with a different sort of heat, a sharp, biting, ugly kind that Spencer flinches away from.

“Get dressed. I’m not doing this,” I say.

“Not doing what?”

He gets off my bed, but makes no move to dress himself. And let me just say: It is really damn frustrating to finally unload on the guy you’ve wanted to punch for like a quarter of your life while his stupid perfect body is completely naked in front of you. This is definitely not how this moment played out in my fantasies back in high school. Most of the time, I punched Spencer so hard he put a new crater on the moon.

Reality is a bit less flashy.

“We are not doing this,” I repeat. “This thing where the experienced gay guy has a secret straight boyfriend who pretends he doesn’t exist outside of the bedroom. No way. I’m not being your dirty secret. You want a booty call? Fine. I’m desperate and easy, luckily enough for you. But I’ll never be so desperate and easy you can lay in bed whispering in my ear and then trollop off to live your nice, uncomplicated straight boy life outside of my bedroom. I tried that shit in high school after Eric got chased away, and guess what. People like *you* found out and bullied us both so much the relationship ended.”

Spencer hangs his head, avoiding my gaze, but that only ramps up the rage boiling inside me. He doesn’t get to hide from his own actions. He created this; he can live with it.

“I will not go back in the closet,” I say. “Especially not for you.”

Spencer hunches at that last remark, his shoulders closing in around him like a shield. Whatever shred of me isn’t

hulking out has the decency to feel a little ashamed about that, but nothing I said was untrue. Besides, I deserve to get to live my life on my terms. If he's having his bisexual awakening that's great and all, but I don't have to participate in it beyond enjoying a few good lays and moving on. And I will move on, no matter how good those lays were, no matter how tempting it sounds to explore more with Spencer. He's been sweet and nice and downright kind throughout this, but maybe that's too little, too late.

He drags his eyes up from his feet, shooting me a tentative glance. Even though he's bigger than me, that look makes me feel like I'm towering over him.

"You're right," he says. "I'm sorry. I would never ask you to go back in the closet, but..."

"But you also aren't going to tell your friends. You're going to hide this, pretend it didn't happen, go on living your life like I don't exist."

"Probably," he admits.

"Then I need you to leave."

His eyebrows twist, pain tightening his face. He nods and shuffles toward the living room where his clothes and backpack lay scattered on the floor. Spencer pauses right at the door of my room.

"I really am sorry," he says. "Not just about this. I ... I know it probably doesn't mean much, but I didn't want to be that guy anymore when I came here. I wanted to leave that behind, try to ... I don't know. Try to be someone better than

the kid you remember from high school. I guess it didn't really work." He gives a wry chuckle.

Spencer finally goes in search of his clothes. I listen for a moment, forcing deep breaths through my nose. When I hear him heading for the door, I rush out after him. Because apparently I just can't stop being stupid when it comes to him.

"You aren't that guy," I say.

He stops, his hand frozen on the doorknob.

"You aren't the Spencer Marsh from high school anymore. I've noticed. You have changed. But."

"But?"

I shake my head. Why does this feel like a breakup? Why does it hurt so damn much?

"But I can't go back in the closet, Spencer. I lived that life for too long. It wears you down. It erodes your soul. I'm here and I'm out and I have a bunch of friends who are out and most people don't care who we sleep with or who we love. I can't hide for you. This has to be just ... a casual thing. It can't be anything else. I'm not doing that to myself."

Spencer hikes his backpack onto his shoulders. He probably still smells like me. The crescent moon marks of my nails probably still adorn his shoulders. If anyone asked him how he got those imprints, he'd probably say he hooked up with some random girl.

"I understand," he says. "I'm sorry, Rhett. I didn't mean to hurt you again. Do you believe me?"

Incredibly, I do. I nod, and a flicker of a smile ghosts across his lips. All of my righteous anger deflates. I approach. His shoulders tense, but he holds still, letting me brush a kiss against his cheek.

“I hope you figure out whatever you need to figure out,” I say, “but I can’t give up everything I’ve worked so hard for to help you find yourself.”

From up close, that wavering smile is as brittle as broken glass.

“Thanks, Rhett.”

That’s all he says before slipping out the door.

Chapter Sixteen

Spencer

THE WORST DAY OF MY LIFE was the day before my confirmation ceremony at the tiny Catholic Church in my hometown.

I realize how lame that sounds, but it is what it is.

A bunch of the kids I saw at school had to go and get confirmed too. None of us liked it, especially the part where we had extra school after real school so Jimmy Baker's mom could read us a Bible passage and ask us to recite it. But when you're a Catholic kid in South Jersey, those extra CCD classes are just part of the deal. So me and Jimmy and half the rest of my eighth grade class sucked it up and did it.

CCD was on Tuesday night, and the Tuesday before the worst day of my life, Jimmy's mom warned us to get ready for our confirmation ceremony on Friday.

Confirmation is kind of like the church saying you're an adult now. You write a letter to the priest that's an essay on

some Catholic saint, go to confession a bunch of times, and recite the stations of the cross. Most of us were mainly excited to get to drink the holy wine. Because we were twelve and thirteen and it was wine. But we also had to dress up and sit in a long, long church ceremony on top of the usual Sunday mass.

Which meant if we didn't want our entire weekend ruined, we had to hang out the night before the ceremony.

Jimmy lived down the street. And with his mom being the CCD teacher, I pretty much had free rein to go to his house whenever I wanted. He was "safe" because he was a good Catholic boy with a good Catholic mom married to a good Catholic dad. He had a younger sister, too, and she was already singing in the choir every Sunday. In my dad's eyes, I couldn't have picked a better buddy.

But to be honest, I was starting to feel a little weird about Jimmy by that point.

I didn't have a name for the way my stomach sometimes got twisted up when he laughed or for why I knew he had exactly three freckles on his neck. I had no words for those things, no language whatsoever for something that felt both natural and terrifying. Maybe if I had the words, things would have gone differently. But I didn't.

We were in his back yard. His dad had built him a sweet tree fort in this huge old oak with thick branches that coiled around like they were the hairs on Medusa's head. They cradled a single room we climbed up to via the boards nailed

into the trunk.

“I got us something,” Jimmy said as we settled in the tree fort. The fort contained a couple pillows, some G.I. Joes and a whole lot of illicit candy wrappers we hid from his mom.

And now, a paper bag that Jimmy pulled from within his hoodie.

He set it proudly on the floor between us, where it gave a little thump. It sounded heavy, solid. When he slid the bag down, it revealed a square glass jar full of something bright pink.

“What is it?” I said.

“A little sacrament,” he said, wiggling his eyebrows. “You know, for practice.”

“Huh?”

“They’re gonna start letting us drink wine at church tomorrow, dude. We have to practice. You don’t want to mess up drinking Jesus’s blood, do you?”

This sounded very reasonable to me at the time. Jimmy’s mom let us have little sips at CCD, but we didn’t really get to taste the wine. And we wanted to. All of us wanted to.

“Why is it pink?” I said as Jimmy unscrewed the cap. It smelled like too much sugar and something artificial and fruity.

Jimmy shrugged. “I don’t know. It was the only thing Ben’s older sister was willing to buy us for ten dollars.”

I rolled my eyes. Everyone knew Ben’s sister was the

person to go to for illicit underage alcohol purchases, but everyone also knew she always took a cut. Meaning this shit probably cost five bucks and could likely shrivel your liver at a sniff.

Jimmy took a swig, then immediately grimaced. “Oh shit, that’s nasty.”

He passed the bottle my way. I took it and sniffed gingerly.

“Is this really wine?”

Jimmy shrugged. “Ben’s sister called it ‘hobo wine,’ so it’s some sort of wine, I guess.”

I forced myself to take a swig. It burned its way down. The moment it hit my stomach, my body tried to reject it. Jimmy nearly fell over laughing.

“Don’t be a pussy, dude,” he said.

He snatched the bottle back and drank, but his hubris left him choking a moment later as he struggled to swallow a large gulp. He banged on his chest, eyes watering.

“Oh God, that’s nasty,” he said, giggling wildly. “Come on, help me.”

I took the bottle, drinking more cautiously. It definitely wasn’t wine, or anything remotely close to wine, but every time Jimmy took another swig his eyes got brighter and his cheeks got warmer, leaving the freckles atop them swimming. I was warm, too, warm in a way I had no words for, no language to describe. Every sip made me warmer, and I didn’t,

couldn't, understand why. All I knew was that I couldn't tear my eyes from those freckles, couldn't help thinking that the bottle touching my lips had just touched his.

Those weren't things I was supposed to think, but I was young and the booze was strong and once it hit me all those years and years of conditioned denials fell away like cascading dominoes. The thing with Catholics is that they'll rarely tell you outright that it's bad or wrong to be different; they just heavily imply it, shove it subtly and silently deep under your skin. They'll build a brick wall around your heart and you won't even fucking know it until you realize you want out.

When that wall fell, my heart pinged around my chest like a wild animal set loose from captivity.

The bottle was on the floor somewhere. I didn't know where. It didn't matter. Jimmy and I had both had enough to be giggling wildly at nothing. I grabbed his wrist on some sudden impulse, some urge that flared up inside me formless and nameless.

Jimmy just laughed and grabbed my wrist in return, and then we were scrabbling, tugging on each other, wrestling with no real end goal in mind. I wasn't sure if I was winning or losing. I just knew I liked yanking him closer, liked when he pulled me around, liked when we ended up on the floor rolling over and over each other and knocking into shit.

It was just dumb kid stuff, the type of stupid playing any boys will do when left alone long enough. But like something out of a goddamn movie, eventually we wound up tangled

around each other. We were lying on our sides, our hands fisted in each other's shirts, our legs interlocking.

We froze, panting for breath. His face was so bright, exertion and booze softening already soft features. I still remember how red his lips looked, like pomegranate seeds, hanging open and stained by the wine.

I still remember how suddenly and urgently I wanted to feel what his mouth was like.

Emboldened by illicit "wine," I leaned closer. It was more like gravity than any conscious decision. Jimmy drew in a startled little breath, but he didn't move away. His fist was in my shirt, but the fingers went limp, his hands putting up no resistance as I got close enough to taste that terrible wine in his breath. He watched me, blinking his big eyes, those freckles filling my vision as I crept closer.

That's how Mrs. Baker found us when she popped her head up into the tree fort to tell us it was time for dinner. There was no denying what we were about to do, no hiding the alcohol sitting out in the open, no plausible explanation for how close our faces and bodies were.

She marched me home by the ear and told my dad everything. He held his cool until she left. Then...

Then he was my dad, the freaking Roundup of budding homosexuality. He killed that shit at the root and left nothing but scorched earth in his wake.

The problem with weed killer is that it doesn't just kill the weeds; it kills the ground itself. The soil dies. Nothing can

grow, not even the good stuff. Sure, you destroy the weeds, but at the cost of anything else that might have grown there.

We never spoke of any of it again. We never went over to the Bakers' place for a barbecue or a friendly get together. I never hung out with or spoke to Jimmy again. It was like the Bakers simply didn't exist, like that day never existed. It was just me and my dad and my mom and my brother — and that secret we never spoke of.

I got mean, but you have to be mean to survive on scorched earth. I buoyed the lie my parents constructed, so desperate to believe it that I buried myself alive.

None of it was ever good enough.

No matter how stellar my grades, no matter how many girls I dated, how many friends I had, how many sports teams I joined, it was never enough to absolve me of the sin of that one day with Jimmy Baker. It was like the stink of it clung to me for good, and they couldn't bear to get too close to me lest it infect them as well. I was a good son, but I would never be the son they wanted. When they looked at me, they saw what they wanted to see, what they needed to see, a boy who'd never gone to Jimmy Baker's tree fort that afternoon. My brother was the normal one, and I could see how they treated him differently, how they *looked* at him, simply looked at him without flinching or turning away or constructing some fucking Frankenstein's monster out of only the pieces untainted by the truth.

I grew up without language for what I wanted, with that

brick wall cemented around my heart. And the moment I got a glimpse of what lay on the other side, my father reinforced the barrier brick by painful brick. He scorched that thing budding gingerly inside me, razed it until I was so barren and burned nothing could grow at all.

I don't know why I ever believed I could build someone new out of a foundation that broken.



I DON'T LIKE DWELLING on that day, but it's hard not to after leaving Rhett's dorm. His words ring in my ears. What we did echoes through my body, shivers of pleasure and loss washing through me in equal measure. I had it for just one moment. I busted through that double reinforced, barbed wire brick wall my dad helped me build, but it wasn't enough.

I don't blame Rhett. He doesn't know my past, and even if he did, it's not fair for him to suffer because my dad's a dick who ensured I was also a dick. Besides, that doesn't excuse any of my actions. I still made Rhett's high school experience a living hell; that's all on me.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. There's no hope that it's Rhett, so I ignore it, but it goes off again.

"What?" I grumble as I extract the device from my pocket.

I stutter, nearly tripping over my own feet as they carry me through the sleepy campus toward Greek Row. It's Dad.

Shit. I forgot about his messages from yesterday, especially when Rhett started texting. I definitely didn't think about the messages at any point in that whole crazy night, and now a stack of them await me, the latest simply reading: *Answer me, Spencer.*

Fuck. I can't ignore him. Or, rather, I shouldn't. He's footing most of the bill for this. Without him, I'll suddenly be thousands of dollars in debt, if I continue my studies at all. Being on the hook like that means he can demand a prompt response any time he feels like barging into my life.

Like now.

I go back through the message chain, starting with the messages he sent me during anatomy class yesterday.

Give me a call when you can

Did you get my message?

Spencer, did you get my message?

I need you to call me tonight

It's late. Why haven't you called? Where are you? You can't be in class this late

Three missed calls between eleven p.m. and one a.m. interrupt the texts. Then there's one from seven this morning, when I was still in Rhett's bed, still in that warm, fragile cocoon of comfort that couldn't possibly last.

Okay, I get that you're young and you're having fun, but when I ask you to call me, you need to call me. It's unacceptable for you to not even answer a text, Spencer

And finally, the latest installment from only minutes ago:
Answer me, Spencer.

Fuck. I can't avoid him. I fire off a quick text: *Heading to my dorm. Will call in a few.*

I stuff my phone in my pocket and try not to think about it as I weave through campus. A few people are heading to class, shooting me questioning looks as I slouch home obviously rumpled. I've got my backpack, at least, but it provides scant camouflage. I reek of "walk of shame."

Except I'm not ashamed, not really. Rhett is incredible, and what we did — it sure as hell didn't feel like anything worthy of shame. My arms still long for him. My chest remembers the way he fit against it. If I wasn't such a fucking coward, I'd run right back to his dorm and scream down every hallway that I want him, that I want...

The very thought chokes me up. It's a pretty fantasy, but who am I kidding? I can't go do that. I'm not that guy. I can't be out and proud and confident like Rhett and his friends. I'm twenty-one and still don't know *what* I am, which label even fits me, which label I'd be willing to wear. I'm just that kid getting caught almost kissing Jimmy in his tree house on the eve of our confirmation ceremony.

I can't be like Rhett.

No matter how much a part of me wants to.

The sight of the frat house sinks a new weight into the pit of my stomach. Slinking through campus with sex hair sucked, but calling my dad is going to suck even more.

It's early, at least in frat house time, but when I walk in Alan and Calvin are on the couch with that fighting game again.

"Hey, the stud returns," Alan shouts when I walk in.

"Someone didn't come home last night." Calvin looks over his shoulder to waggle his eyebrows at me. Alan seizes the moment to pummel his sumo wrestler character in the game.

I just roll my eyes and shuffle inside. "You guys still at it with that stupid game?"

"It's fun," Alan says.

"It's fun when you win," Calvin corrects.

"Whatever."

I shrug it off and attempt to reach the stairs, but the video game announcer booms a "winner!" and the match apparently ends. Calvin groans, but Alan doesn't even bask in his victory. He whips around on the couch to stop me before I can escape.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" he says.

"To my room. To shower. And sleep." *And call my asshole father.*

"Like hell you are. You've got sex hair, dude. You're not sneaking away without spilling the details."

I freeze. Normally, I'd have no problem spoiling the guys with my sexual conquests. I've definitely heard too much about all of theirs. But none of those conquests have been with guys.

“Later, man, I’m exhausted,” I plead.

“Up all night?” Calvin waggles his eyebrows again.

“Yeah,” I admit, letting a smile sneak through. It’s easy when a memory of Rhett’s body tangled around mine flashes through my mind.

“Shit, dude, you’re smitten as fuck,” Alan says.

I blink. “What?”

“That smile wasn’t a hookup smile. Who was it? Did Britt take you back?”

My blood goes cold. Thirteen-year-old me is back in that tree fort getting caught by Jimmy’s mom. I want to drop my backpack and run. It requires several purposeful swallows before I can reply.

“Fuck off, man. I’m not telling you.”

“Why so shy?” Alan says. “Oh, was it someone you gotta keep secret? Tell me you banged that one hot professor in the English department.”

At least I can roll my eyes at that. “I didn’t fuck a professor. It was no one. Drop it.”

“Wait, I know. It was an orgy. You got *freaky* freaky. Nothing wrong with that as long as you didn’t cross swords with another dude.”

“Crossing swords” is about the mildest thing Rhett and I did, but I’m definitely not explaining that to these guys.

And that’s the problem, isn’t it? Put to the test, I freeze up, I go all cold and clammy, I lie and deflect. If I could tell

anyone, shouldn't it be my only friends here? My *brothers*? But Alan's questions feel a whole lot like my dad's, just lobbed out in jest rather than in anger. Ultimately, I'm that kid who could barely stand to sit on a pew the day after Jimmy's mom caught us, that kid whose dad helped him build a brick and barbed wire wall around his heart.

I'm a coward. And Rhett was right to send me away.

"It was just some girl," I say. "Probably won't see her again."

Alan and Calvin look disappointed, but they accept the story and let the matter drop. I make my escape, barely breathing again until I'm safely locked in my room.

I really need that shower, but I already feel like shit. Might as well get that call over with while my mood can't actually get any worse.

"Hey, Dad."

"Spencer. How generous of you to find time to actually respond."

"I'm sorry, Dad. I was in class and stuff."

"All night? I find it hard to believe you couldn't spare five minutes to at least send a text. What were you doing all night?"

Fucking a dude.

Part of me wants to just blurt it out, to fling it at him like a punch. It would feel good, damn good. He would go ballistic, I would end up in debt or dropping out, and my little

moment of defiance would ultimately mean nothing.

I deflate, surrendering to the inevitable and recoiling from that barbed wire that threatens to cut me if I ever push too far.

“Sorry,” I say. “I was with a friend. I lost track of time.”

“A friend.” He scoffs. “These friends of yours distracting you? I’m not paying for your tuition so you can make friends.”

“No, Dad. My grades are, like, perfect. Did you call me to give me shit about my friends?”

“Tone,” he snaps. “And no. I called you because your grandmother is coming to town. I thought you might actually want to see her. But if you’re too busy with your friends, I’ll let her know.”

Judgment drips off of every word. As though I’ve already fucked up. As though I’ve managed to disappoint his every expectation in three short weeks. In a way, I guess I have, just not in the way he assumes.

“I’m not too busy,” I say. “When’s she coming up?”

“October. Just got her plane ticket.”

He relays dates and times, but I’m barely listening, just happy to have him on a safe topic. I do truly want to see my grandmother. That part is the truth. She lives by herself in South Carolina, my grandfather having passed away, and she still goes for a swim in the ocean every single day. Dad keeps pushing her to move up to Jersey so he can look after her, but she keeps telling him she’d rather die in the ocean than sitting in a rocker on his back porch. I wish I had half her balls,

especially when it comes to my dad.

A crazy thought hits me. An absolutely crazy, stupid, dumb, dumb thought. I can't help wondering what *she* would say about this Rhett situation. Surely, a woman who isn't afraid of the whole Atlantic Ocean at age seventy-something isn't afraid of her grandson being gay? Or is that whole generation just not cool with gay stuff?

"So you'll be there?" Dad says, cutting into my fantasy of Grandma righteously coming to my defense.

"Yeah," I say. "Yeah, sure."

Anything to get him off the phone.

Anything to get away.

Chapter Seventeen

Rhett

ALBERT ADDED A MIRROR to the staff area of the café. He also bought these fancy wood screen things so we have more than just a curtain closing us off. I tried to tell him not to spend money on the café when we're already mooching his basement, but he bought the mirror and screens before I could stop him.

In any case, it means I get a chance to check myself out while my current table's tea brews.

And damn, I look good.

Mal went to town on some crazy secret project to make us all matching costumes for a special event night. Again, I told him not to spend his own money on it, but he was done before I even knew it was happening. The day after my epic night with Spencer, I came to the café and the costumes simply existed.

“Ta-da!” Mal said as I entered the café that night.

Still stuck in my head over all that shit with Spencer, I startled.

“What do you think?” Mal said.

It took a moment to realize he'd laid something on the nearest tea table. I picked at tweed fabric adorned with little yellow buttons.

“So, before you say anything, I used this as a project for a class, so the cost of the materials totally doesn't even matter,” Mal said.

Too late. I was gaping. And I'm still gaping now as I check myself out in the mirror. The matching jackets Mal whipped up make us look like members of some sort of prep school. There are even personal touches on each one. Mine has some kind of handkerchief in the front breast pocket. Mal is wearing a bow tie. Trent has a chain connecting from a belt to a pocket in his pants, and Gabriel has a tie.

The Boyfriend Café's first ever special event, “Prep School Night,” is underway.

We ran things an extra day this week just for this. It's taxing on all four of us, especially with classes starting to pummel us with assignments, but it was the only way to make the special event work. And if it goes well and brings in extra cash, who knows? Maybe it'll become a regular thing. I'd love to be able to tell Mom I've got this semester handled. Every dollar I bring in eases not just my worries, but hers as well.

I fix the handkerchief in my pocket and remove the teabags from the cups where they're steeping. So far, so good.

When I call Mom tomorrow, I anticipate having positive news to share.

That's not the only reason I'm enjoying this, in all honesty. The mood in the café tonight is like a miniature festival. Everyone is buzzing, customers and staff alike. Albert's even hanging around this time, "tending the books," as he says from where he sits in a big arm chair he set in a corner for himself. It's a fantastic distraction from all the things I'm trying not to think about. For the first time since that weird, long night, I'm not replaying every word and breath and touch I shared with Spencer.

Fuck. Okay, maybe that's a lie. But I'm *mostly* not thinking about it, and that's got to count for something.

Besides, if Spencer Marsh ever taught me anything, it was how to grin and bear it.

So I do, sweeping back out into the café with three cups of tea, two for a pair of women who are new to the café and one for myself. I chose a mild chamomile for myself, but a ruby red raspberry nectar for one woman and a soothing white tea with vanilla and coconut for the other. They each sip, and their eyes widen.

"Wow, this is incredible."

"I've never had tea like this."

I flash them a smile. "I thought the flavors suited you each." Indeed, ruby red raspberry went to Quinn, whose lipstick and floral dress almost match the tea itself, and the soothing white tea went to Danya, an English lit major who

even now has a book stuffed in her coat pocket.

“How did you know?” Quinn said.

I fold my hands before me and perch my chin on them in a gesture that never fails to charm. “Just an observation. It’s not that hard if you actually pay attention.”

“Ugh, tell that to Donovan,” Quinn groans.

And now we’ve hit the meat of it.

I let them unload their Donovan-related grievances throughout the course of our hour together. Somehow, the guy managed to piss both of them off individually, incidentally forging a bond between the two women that he may come to regret.

Seriously, dude, scorning not one woman, but two? You sound like a serious prick.

My job is almost too easy when I have customers like this. I genuinely feel for them. Plus, it’s not a stretch to commiserate about what a dick this Donovan guy is when I’ve got my own man troubles to vent.

Not that I’d ever tell customers about my own problems. Unless things go seriously sideways, no one will ever know about Spencer, not even the other guys at the café. It makes me a little jealous of Quinn and Danya and all our customers. They get to expel their woes in safety; I have to hide mine.

What would I say, anyway? “I let the guy who shoved me into lockers during high school ride my ass and it was almost destructively good, but I can never see him again because he’s

a total closet case.”

I’m obviously not in the closet, but I’ll pass on being quite *that* out. Even my queer friends like Mal and Albert would probably look at me sideways for this one, and I really can’t blame them. If a friend came to me with this, I’d tell him to get the hell out and never look back. Which is what I did. Except for the fact that I keep thinking about it.

I can’t help it. It’s been a while. And it really was that good. And beyond that, there were all those little moments, like when he was just lying there atop me, skin to skin, body to body, his weight engulfing me in a way that made me feel tethered, secure. A few days ago, I would have told you I just needed to get laid. What Spencer did inadvertently opened a chasm to a far deeper desire.

Not that it matters. Spencer Marsh is never coming out of the closet, and I’m never going back in. It’s an insurmountable roadblock in this little adventure. Neither of us are wrong for that, either. I’d never force him to come out. He should do it in his own time, if he ever does it at all. But it is what it is.

Part of me thinks it would be easier if one of us was wrong.

Couldn’t he go back to being an asshole? Why is he trying to be so damn *nice* to me? Dismissing dickhead Spencer Marsh and keeping his dirty secret to myself would have been fun and easy, a good story for parties. Dismissing sweet, caring, wants-to-freaking-*hold-me* Spencer Marsh is a lot less fun and easy.

I am so fucked.

I try not to show it during “Prep School Night.” I think I might even succeed. But afterward we’re all supposed to hang out at the café for a meeting. We have to clean anyway, so it’s the most convenient time to talk, even though we’re all exhausted from the constant stream of customers. The fresh wad of cash in my pocket helps keep my motivation high, however. By the time we finish cleaning and gather the chairs around in a semi-circle, I almost feel like I can actually do this.

Albert is with us this time, and he kicks things off, opening his leather-bound ledger on his crossed knees.

“It looks like our revenue is growing week over week,” he dives in without preamble. “Though I’d like to do an analysis of how well this themed night performed compared to our standard service.”

I last all of two seconds before I’m zoning out. Forgive me if I can’t focus when the most frustrating straight boy on the planet is fucking with my head.

What was I supposed to say? What did he expect me to do? “Oh yeah, sure, I’ll bang you in secret while you work out your life. No problem. Let’s go snuggle like an actual couple. That’s totally freaking normal.”

I might be a loser running a café for venting your problems to fake temporary boyfriends, but even I have more self-respect than that.

I should be able to let it go. I should let it be his problem and not mine. But as I sit here thinking about it instead of

focusing on whatever Albert is saying, my chest closes up like a fist clenching around my heart. I actually feel *sorry* for the guy who made sure all of high school was pure hell. It's just, well, I wasn't lying when I said he's changed. He has. Whatever he's been doing for the past two years, it has definitely worked. And while I'd love to get all righteously angry with him, seeing the guy who tormented you actually, genuinely change for the better is basically the best possible outcome. Sure, it doesn't feel as satisfying as revenge, but I have no doubt that Spencer Marsh won't be calling anyone a "queer" ever again in his life. He's an okay guy under all the bullshit, and that's a good thing. It's a really good thing. It means people can change, people can learn, people can grow.

Besides, if I want revenge, there are other ways to get it.

Such as when he's on his knees.

I physically shake myself to dislodge the image that springs to my mind of Spencer doing just that. I really, really, *really* don't need to be thinking about that right now, but goddamn it feels good seeing him like that, having him obey whatever nasty little command I flick at him.

Is this why people get into BDSM?

I always figured I was pretty happy with the usual sort of stuff, but Spencer has taught me a few unexpected things about myself these past weeks, things that have heat tingling in my gut as I attempt to focus on absolutely anything else.

"What do you think?"

I snap back into the moment. Everyone is staring at me,

four sets of expectant eyes trained on someone who didn't hear a single word leading up to this question.

“Oh, uh, sorry. Um ... yes?” I try.

Albert sighs. “I asked how you think we should go about finding a baker.”

“Right! Of course. I think, um, I think we should...”

Christ, a baker is just about the last thing on my mind at the moment.

“What if we put up some posters on the bulletin board in the quad?” Mal puts in helpfully. I could kiss him. Except I won't.

You prefer a lot more jawline and a lot more scruff than that baby face, my brain cynically supplies.

I must grimace because Mal tilts his head at me and knits his sleekly manicured eyebrows together.

“Yeah,” I rush to say. “Yeah, posters in the quad is a great idea.”

Albert shakes his head. “We can't advertise on university grounds. Too risky. We're already garnering far too much notice on campus. It seems a matter of time before university officials start asking questions — questions we cannot answer, I will remind you.”

“Then we'll tell them to fuck off,” Trent says. Gabriel, dozing against his shoulder, nods in agreement.

Albert's familiar scowl deepens to something of truly epic scowliness. “We will certainly not. Either way, that does

not solve the problem of the baker.”

“Where would he even do his baking?” I say. “It’s not like we have a kitchen down here.”

“He may use the one in the house.”

“Are you sure that isn’t too much? It’s your home. I said from the beginning I didn’t want to intrude.”

Albert waves his hand. “It is no intrusion whatsoever.”

I should probably argue harder against him giving up his kitchen as well as his basement, but I don’t have it in me right now. The meeting goes on, and I pay a little more attention, but thankfully everyone else is as tired as I am distracted, so Albert keeps things snappy.

Just when I think I might escape, however, Mal stops me with a soft hand on my shoulder. There’s barely any pressure behind it, but I pause anyway. He’s shorter than me, and uses that to leverage those pretty almond-shaped eyes of his as he looks up at me beneath his mop of bleached silver and fashionably coiffed hair. He knows exactly what he’s doing with that look, and it’s what makes him so popular with our customers.

“Hey,” he says, serious and quiet, a voice that’s definitely *not* for the customers. “Is everything okay?”

Well, there goes my hope of wallowing in secret.

“Yeah, of course,” I say.

He’s totally not buying it. Not for a second. “You’re super spacey today. Did something happen? Is it a guy or

something?”

My stomach clenches. Damn, this guy is good. Part of me wants to give in and tell him. I press my lips tightly together to hold back the confession. Whatever’s going on between me and Spencer, it’s not stuff I want anyone else knowing about, maybe as badly as Spencer doesn’t. I’ll look like a complete idiot for hooking up with someone who’s a walking billboard for “huge fucking mistake.”

“We’re here to help, you know,” Gabriel speaks up.

He’s practically hanging on Trent’s shoulder, who barely seems to notice. Trent nods, which is about as sweet a gesture as that guy can muster. Albert is staring at me, too, his arms crossed under his chest. I’m walled in by care and concern, and it’s making me want to claw my way through the floor.

“I’m fine, seriously,” I say. “I’m just tired. I didn’t realize how much work an extra shift was going to be.”

Mal narrows his eyes at me. Albert doesn’t budge an inch. I am so, so boned.

“I know we all came together for this pretty recently,” Mal says, “but we’re here to support each other. It’s not just an act for the customers. We’re really here to take care of each other. That’s the only way this works, right? Otherwise we’ll burn out way too quickly, and I really don’t want to see any of us burn out. This is working. And it’s awesome. But if one of us cracks we all crack.”

I swallow. He’s right. And I sure as hell don’t want to be the weak link on this team, the broken support beam that

brings the whole thing crashing down around us. But how can I tell a group of (mostly) queer people that I'm being the dumbest queer on the whole freaking planet by hooking up with the closet case from high school? It's so embarrassing it makes me want to crawl under a rock.

I sigh, shoulders deflating.

"For now, can it be enough for me to say I'm okay?" I say. "Because I am. I truly am. It's ... it's complicated, but I'm okay. I swear. And if I'm ever not, or the time comes, I swear I'll tell you guys. I will. Just ... can we not do it right now?"

Mal shoots a look at Albert. He's the one who pats me on the shoulder, his hand a reassuring weight, the steady anchor that's always tethering me back to the ground.

"Go home and get some rest," he says. "You all did a great job tonight. There's nothing more that needs to be said right now."

And that's that. With Albert's blessing, Mal and Gabriel and Trent let it go. Because Albert isn't just my anchor anymore. He's everyone's. If he says it's okay to let it go, it's okay to let it go. I have no doubt he'll know the truth some day, but I sag with gratitude when he lets me slink back to my dorm without any further explanation.

I'll tell them all eventually. When my head isn't spinning anymore, I'll tell them everything.

Chapter Eighteen

Spencer

ALPHA PHI SORORITY is hosting a party this weekend. It gives our house a weekend off, which it desperately needs if the state of the kitchen is anything to go by. I should be stoked, but as I walk over tipsy with the rest of the guys, I'm struggling to find any hype for this gathering.

This week has been some sort of purgatory. First that stuff with Rhett, then the call with my dad. Class has been hard. Hanging out with the guys has been hard. Even going to the gym has been a chore rather than an escape.

I stumble into Alan as we bumble down Greek Row. Alpha Phi is only a few houses down from ours, but I hit the pre-gaming a bit too hard and it feels like we're marching to the other side of the world. In my defense, I really needed a drink ... or five.

"You good, Spenny?" Alan says. The nicknames have grown over this past month living with the guys.

“Yeah, man. Yeah. I’m great,” I say.

I stub my toe on the edge of the sidewalk and nearly fall, not helping my case at all, but Alan is drunk enough to simply catch my arm and laugh about it.

“Bro, you’re so drunk,” he says.

“Shut up. So are you.”

“Hell yeah I am. I’ve been waiting for an Alpha Phi party since summer. The hot chicks *always* go to Alpha Phi. It’s like a rule or something.”

That should be exciting. That should spark something inside me. Not that long ago, it would have. Tonight ... not so much.

Alan elbows me. “Dude, I heard Janice Shelby joined Alpha Phi. She’s so hot, dude. And she’s finally single. If she’s there I gotta go for it. You mind? Bro code.”

It takes me a moment to realize he’s asking if I’ll get in his way if he goes for Janice. *Not unless she’s actually a mean blond with cold blue eyes and the prettiest cock I’ve ever seen.*

I shake myself. “Yeah, of course. Bro code.”

Alan slaps my shoulder. “Thanks, man. You’re a good one.”

“No problem.”

Alan traipses off ahead of me, throwing an arm around Calvin. Those two are a dangerous combination, but the rest of us are way too drunk to do anything about it. I hang back as they skip ahead, eager to get to Alpha Phi and all their

potential conquests.

I watch them go like I'm watching an echo waver away into silence. Was I really like that a few weeks ago? It feels like someone else's life instead of my own. That guy would be imagining all the girls he could hook up with at this party, but all I'm worried about is my next drink. I'm way too coherent, way too capable of thinking about Rhett, and only more alcohol is going to help with that.

Alpha Phi is already thumping by the time we get there. The night is cold, but the moment we step through the door, a wave of body heat washes over us. The musk of bodies and sour tang of alcohol tugs us inside and envelopes us in the pulsing pace of the party. We follow the flow of hallways crowded with people until they deposit us in a kitchen full of open alcohol and red solo cups.

I go right for the vodka, something blunt and strong. I take a quick shot, then do another with the boys.

The party dissolves around me. I'm a blood cell in a giant, throbbing heart, pushed this way and that by the stream of other blood cells bumping into me. I dance with a girl, I think. She smiles at me, and something pings in the back of my brain. I could leave with her, but instead I tell her I need the bathroom and stumble away.

I do need the bathroom, but there's a damn line for it. I wait, the music beating through me. Bang, bang, bang. Every base hit is a tiny fist thudding against my chest. Maybe it can finish the job my dad started and squash the troublesome

thoughts chasing me through the party. No matter how hard I try, I just can't seem to be *here*. Half my mind is somewhere it can't possibly go, that quiet, secret dorm room with the couch shoved between the bedrooms.

I make it to the bathroom, but the sudden hush when I close the door is worse than the noise outside. I stall out trying to wash my hands and end up staring at myself in the mirror. Glassy eyes greet me, eyes so empty, so gone, that it's like looking at a stranger.

Someone pounds on the door. I jerk away from the sink and get myself out of there, then make a beeline for the kitchen and all those mismatched bottles of alcohol covering the counters and table. I'm already shitty, and I'm not planning to stop until I'm completely blasted. I don't want a single brain cell still operating by the time I'm done here.

I'm pouring juice into the next shot of vodka when Joe catches up to me.

"Hey, man, you good?" he says.

"Yeah. Absolutely. Juss need a drink." I slur a little on the "just," and worry digs a line between Joe's eyebrows. "You wanna drink?" I hold up my latest solo cup.

Joe shakes his head. "I think I'm good. I think you might be good too."

"Bro, come on. Iss a party."

He scowls, and it's really harshing the buzz I'm trying to maintain.

“Why don’t we go outside?” he says.

Getting away from the noise for a bit sounds nice, so I nod, but I bring my drink with me. We squeeze out of the back door, blocked by a couple making out against the sliding glass, and escape to the back yard. A few people sit on a little stone wall that might have protected a garden but now mostly protects empty beer cans and solo cups. The butts of cigarettes light up like fireflies glowing in the dark. A few feet off the patio and onto the grass of the yard, fire crackles in a freestanding fire pit, which seems insanely dangerous given how many drunk college kids are around, but whatever. It’s cold as balls, even with the alcohol coursing through me, and I go right for the fire.

Joe and I stand close to the flames. There’s something about watching them dance, something about the way little embers spit free and flit away until they disappear into the darkness. I want to catch them in my hands and cradle them, protect them, keep them safe until I can find somewhere they can glow without burning out. But there’s no helping it. The embers are too hot, too free. They fling themselves away from the safe, comfortable core of the fire and burn out alone.

I take a swig of my latest concoction. It’s awful, but it stings just right on the way down.

“Enjoying the party?” Joe says.

“Yeah. Yeah, totally.”

We can speak at a normal volume out here. The quiet rings in my ears, even with music spilling out of the house.

Joe sighs. “Look, man, I know we just met, but are you okay? Like, are you really okay?”

“Of course,” I say.

He turns himself toward me, and I drag my gaze out of those flames throwing themselves heedlessly into the night.

“We’re brothers,” Joe says. “It sounds corny, but whatever. We’re not a big fraternity, but I really do think of us as some kind of weird little family. We’re not just drinking buddies who play video games together once in a while. And you’re one of us now. That means when something’s wrong, you gotta tell us. Don’t shut us out.”

I swallow. “Nothing’s wrong. I just had a long week. I’m blowing off steam. It’s not a big deal.”

He’s utterly unconvinced. “Is it the breakup with Britt? You haven’t been quite the same since that went down. It’s okay to be upset about it, man. It doesn’t make you weak or something to lose your girl.”

It’s not my girl I’m worried about losing.

I stuff that down swiftly. “It’s not. I promise.” I exhale, shoulders ticking down. “If you want to know the truth, I had to talk to my dad the other day. We ... don’t really get along. I didn’t want to mention it because he’s like half the reason I even got into the frat.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

It sounds like he actually is. It sounds like he really is sorry that Dad and I don’t get along. It almost drags a

confession out of me. Because, sure, that phone call sucked major ass, but it isn't even half the reason I'm drowning myself in cheap vodka tonight. If I told him, if Rhett knew that I told even just one guy, would that mean I could get close to him again? Could this confession be part of my atonement, a bead on a rosary I have to pray my way around to earn the salvation waiting at the other end?

Joe pats my arm, then leaves his hand lingering there on my bicep. "If it wasn't just that, if there was something else..."

My whole body goes rigid. "There's nothing else."

"If there was, we can talk. You know that, right?"

I nod, incapable of words.

Joe releases me to drag his hand through his hair. "I'm not the best at this. I just ... I can tell something isn't right, man. I don't know why you're so scared to tell us. Maybe because we've only known each other a little while. But I hope there's someone you can go to, if it isn't us. Because we like you. You're a good guy, Spenny. None of us want to see you get hurt. If it's Britt or your dad or, shit, I don't even know what else, we've got your back, man. Whenever you're ready to trust us, we're here."

My throat is clogged with too many emotions all at once. "Thanks," I manage amid the cacophony struggling to burst free.

Joe nods.

"I ... I really gotta pee," I say. "I'll be right back."

Joe lets me go, but I know the moment I step into that house that I'm not going anywhere near the bathroom. I'm still clutching my solo cup as I weave through the tangle of bodies in search of the front door.

The party expels me like a rotten pit it's spitting out into the night. I shoot off in a direction, my feet going before my head catches up. Even before I'm conscious of the decision, I know where I'm going. It's the only place I've wanted to be this entire damn night, the only place I've thought about for the past week, the only place I need to be.

I'm going back to him. What I'll do when I get there, I have no idea. But I know there's no turning back.

Chapter Nineteen

Rhett

THE ONLY THINGS I want in the entire world are a shower and my bed.

I'm still dressed for the café when I park on campus and climb out of my car. I could walk to and from the café, but I prefer not to when we have meetings after work, which we've been doing more and more recently. It keeps us all late, but there aren't many other times when we can all get together and talk about the café. This thing is growing faster than any of us bet on. We haven't even been back on campus for a full month and we're already almost booked out for next semester.

Which is great. Really. I need the money. The last time I talked to Mom, she sounded really relieved that I have some steady cash coming in. She can't help much, not that I'd even ask her to. She has enough to worry about. It was my choice to go off to school, and I'll be the one to deal with the money. I'm basically betting on the café keeping me afloat for now

and my engineering degree keeping me afloat later. I know that's not always how it works, but coming from where I do, it feels like I don't have all that much to lose if it crumbles around me.

So far, though, it's not crumbling. The café is booming, even with our copious lack of a baker. Albert seems fixated on that point. He insists a baker would elevate our revenue to a level where we could make some major improvements, but frankly, I'm too tired to imagine expanding or elevating. All I do these days is work and go to class. And fuck straight boys, I guess.

I've given up on that last one, at least. Whatever will I do with this sudden boon of free time now that I'm not stepping on my high school bully?

Mm. Stepping on him, crushing his needy little cock under my shoe. I never actually got to do that. I mean, I guess I walked all over him figuratively, but doing it literally tempts my tired mind with the sorts of images I don't need to be dealing with when I'm trying to get to my comfy, *empty* bed as quickly as I can. The beginning of a headache throbs behind my eyes. I try to rake my hand through my hair, but there's way too much product in it, courtesy of Mal's insistence that I try to swoop up my blond locks the way he does his hair. It's a look, that's for sure, but now my hair feels like it belongs on a Ken doll; it's all one big, plastic-y block.

Ivers' Tower, where Emi and I live, plants itself in my path, a large, dark rectangle in the gloom. Lights glow in several windows, but it's Saturday night. Most people are out

somewhere, unless they're a loser like me who spent the whole night working. Still, that sleepy, dark, cramped tower is like a lighthouse on stormy seas. I hurry toward it with the single-minded ambition of face-planting into my bed.

Therefore, I almost miss the man stomping toward me until he's right on top of me. I startle just in time, swinging toward him and putting up my hands instinctively.

“Marsh?”

Holy shit, what is he doing here? And why is he storming toward me like he's going to tackle me?

I use whatever precious seconds I have left to edge closer to the light spilling from the first-floor entry hall of Ivers'. It provides scant protection as Spencer charges up to me, not slowed at all by the potential of being thrown into the light.

He stops just before me, and I can immediately tell he's been drinking. He reeks of it, for one thing, but his eyes are clearer than I'd expect if he was still drunk. He's breathing too hard, throat bobbing as he swallows over and over.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I say.

Maybe I should be more scared or worried. The guy is pretty big, and he just bolted at me out of the dark. Maybe I've simply forgotten how to be scared of him now that I've put him on his knees and into other compromising positions.

“Rhett,” he says. That's all. Just my name. Like that explains anything that's going on here.

He reaches for me, slowly this time, and I back away

from his touch.

“Seriously,” I say, “why are you here? You were drinking. What do you think you’re doing?”

“I wanted to see you.”

I can’t help it. I snort. This night is too ridiculous for me to do anything else.

“Flattering, really, but I thought we had a clear understanding here,” I say. “Hookups only.”

He scowls like my words are bitter in his mouth. “I don’t care about that.”

“How swell for you. I do.”

“Why?” He lowers his voice. “You know I’ll do whatever you want.”

Goddamnit, I do know. And that knowledge tingles through my whole body like static presaging a lightning strike. He’s a bolt from the blue come to smack me down where I stand.

“You are way too shit faced to say stuff like that to me,” I say.

He shakes his head. “Walk sobered me up.”

“That doesn’t really help your case, you know.”

“I’m fine,” he insists.

“You’re fine. That’s why you, I’m guessing, walked all the way over here from some frat party and jumped out at me from the bushes?”

“I wasn’t in the bushes. There was a tree.”

What is with this guy and hiding behind trees?

“Can we go to that park?” he says. “Or...” His eyes slide up the tower beside us, searching for my dorm room, doubtless.

I’ve had a long night, a long week. I’m tired. I smell like hair products and tea. All it would take is a few words and this guy would lick the sweat off me or wash my hair or massage my feet until I was done with him. And damn, that is a powerfully tempting thought. He’s obviously desperate, obviously eager for me to give him an order so he can leap into action proving how good he can be for me. I want to see him do it. I want to send him scrambling around at my behest and withhold even the barest thread of praise until he’s trembling for a single kind word.

It would be wrong, but it would feel really, really fucking good.

Like, really good.

I drag in a deep, unsteady breath, batting aside the flutter in my stomach.

“I told you I’m not doing this,” I say. “I’m not sneaking around with you, not that this really counts as sneaking around at the moment. You realize you’re standing in full view of anyone who’s in that tower, right? They can see us if they bother looking.”

“We look like we’re fighting.”

“For now. How do you explain me bringing you inside while we’re apparently at each other’s throats?” I wave my hands to bat away that thought. “No, actually, screw that. I don’t care how you explain it. I’m not interested in *explaining* myself. I told you I’m done with that. I’m not sneaking you inside and then coming up with some excuse for you.”

“No one will see,” he says, stepping a little closer.

I take an answering step away. “Back off, Marsh.”

He stops, but I don’t really trust the pause, so I hurl some more at him.

“You’re straight. What do you even want?”

“Am I?” He seems to be genuinely asking, as though I might have the answer to that. “Jimmy.”

Jimmy? Who the hell is Jimmy? What is he talking about? I don’t even want to know. This is crazy straight boy rambling and I am way too tired for it. If we’re going to continue hooking up he needs to learn some damn boundaries. But before I can send him away, he rubs the back of his neck and mutters, “I’m not as sure about some stuff as I used to be.”

“Congratulations. I wish you luck on your riveting journey of self-discovery.”

He pouts at the sarcasm in my tone.

“I’m for real,” he says.

It’s disgustingly sincere, and it does the most horrible twisty things to my insides. I turn away, making for the doors, but Spencer catches my wrist after only a couple steps. I glare

daggers at that connection, and he jerks his hand free like my eyes are capable of burning through his flesh.

Regardless, that motion placed him close. I'm only half facing him, which means his larger body is nearly up against my back. I can smell the booze and sweat on him, feel his breath tickling the hairs along the back of my neck. The heat of his body laps against me, a beacon amid the night's chill.

"Rhett." The puff of my name passes his lips and brushes my neck. "I really want you. I do."

I huff a bitter laugh. "You just want me because I haven't told you no yet."

"That's not the reason."

"I don't care what the reason is." My voice is a little louder than I intended. I rein it in with an effort. "I don't have so little self-respect that I'm just going to sleep with a homophobic straight boy on demand like this."

A held breath stretches between us, expanding to push us apart. A little kernel of regret wriggles into my chest. He's been working on himself. I can see that. Maybe what I just said was unfair in that light, but my entire experience of Spencer Marsh has been lockers in high school and this strange, bizarro-world sex we've had for the past few weeks. It hits me with a nauseating wave of vertigo if I think about it too hard, and my head is already pounding dully.

"I'm not homophobic," he says. "I'm ... working on stuff, but I'm not homophobic. I'm trying not to be, anyway. I thought I was doing better."

“Fine,” I concede. “You’re not homophobic. I still don’t need to deal with whatever all this is.” I wave vaguely behind me. “Text me when you grow up or something.”

I turn a little more away from him, blocking any sight of him, but then the heat of his body presses a closer, that held breath between us compressing like a balloon about to pop.

“Tell me what to do,” he says. “Anything. Anything you want.”

The request shivers through me. “And if I tell you to fuck off?”

“Then I’ll go. But I don’t think you really want me to go. I think you want me to stay and...” A little closer, and the space between us trembles from the strain of keeping us apart. “And touch you.”

I shudder. Because I want it. Because whatever’s keeping us apart is about to burst. And when it does there’ll be no stopping this.

“I hate you, Spencer Marsh,” I say.

“I know.”

“I fucking despise you.”

He gets close enough to put his hands on my waist, those big paws that feel like they could encircle me. The fragile bubble bursts, and I suck in a breath that’s pure heat and want and *him*.

He places his lips close to my ear as he says, “Make me pay for what I did to you. All those years of fucking with you.

Make me regret it.”

I’m going to ruin this man.

Chapter Twenty

Spencer

FOURTH OF JULY fireworks displays have nothing on what's going on inside me. I'm a hundred fireworks displays all at once, a raucous thunder of explosions. Bombs go off inside me, leaving my skin so sensitive that the slightest brush lights me up all over.

Rhett slips out of my grasp, heading in quick, clipped steps for Ivers' Tower. I follow, praying he's not going to tell me to turn back and go away.

He doesn't. We enter the glaringly bright lights of the entry hall. He's a few steps ahead of me and moving fast. There's someone at the desk, a bored girl I recognize from my lit class. She has her head down in a book and barely acknowledges the wave I throw her way.

Is it bad that she saw us come in here together? If she thinks anything of it, she doesn't show it, just goes right back to her book. It's not like Rhett acknowledged her — or me —

anyway. So maybe this looks like a random coincidence.

The elevators halt us. Rhett is hitting the button over and over, like if he has to stand still too long, he'll lose his nerve. I really, really don't want that. I can't go back. I need whatever he has in store for me so bad it's making me crazy.

The elevator dings. We nearly sprint inside. The moment the doors close, I plant my hands on the wall on either side of him, bringing my body as close as I dare, breathing down at him, aching to close that distance but just barely holding myself back. He glares up at me, eyes like ice chips fixing me in place.

"You're panting like a fucking dog," he says.

The elevator shudders, bumping us closer together for a moment. I want to touch him. I want it so bad. I've always wanted it. My faded away buzz has taken all the brakes off, stripped away all the years of repression. I'm not stupid. I knew since Jimmy Baker that I wanted this, but survival is a powerful instinct, and I believed I could fix myself, that they could fix me, that if I just tried hard enough and believed hard enough, I could make a more acceptable version of myself real.

All of that falls away as Rhett glares up at me. I drowned my defenses under cheap vodka earlier this night. Even sober now, there's nothing left but the raw, ugly me that has been screaming for freedom since my confirmation ceremony. Rhett is a breath of freedom in that life of denial, an unbunching of tense shoulders. For just a little while, I can let go.

He grips my chin and pulls me closer, but doesn't let me taste his lips, keeping them just out of reach. His lashes are long when he looks down, watching my mouth.

“Follow. Quickly. Don't look at anyone. Don't talk to anyone. If we're lucky, the hall will be empty.”

I nod, eager to obey. With a flick, he tosses me aside. I stumble back a step as the elevator pings and the doors slide open.

As ordered, I follow him down the hall, laser-focused on his back. I don't hear anyone, but I'm not sure I'd notice even if I walked right into them. All that matters is that he's taking out his key, opening up his door, dragging me inside by the collar. I don't know if Emi is here, but Rhet doesn't seem to care. He leads me to his bedroom and throws the door shut, and suddenly we're draped in the dark. Finally alone.

I can't help it. I storm up to him and pin him against the door, taking his mouth with feral hunger. A note of surprise trembles from his mouth into mine, then he recovers and sucks on my bottom lip, tugging it with his teeth. His hands dance along the hem of my shirt, fingertips grazing the skin just beneath. That feather-light touch crackles along my skin, and I suck in a shuddering breath I can't hide with him gnawing my lip.

He grabs my stubble-roughened jaw and yanks me away from his lips. I whimper from the loss, but there's no fight in me tonight.

I'm his.

“I’m going to fuck you,” he says, rough and low, his voice quivering in my gut. “Going to fuck your thighs until you’re begging for the real thing. Make that virgin hole ache for me.”

I suck in a breath that sits heavy in my chest. I’ve forgotten how to exhale. And yeah, there’s trepidation there. But the tingling, vibrant excitement overwhelms it. I’m stripped raw, over-sensitive to every touch, and he hasn’t even gotten my clothes off yet.

He hauls me away from the door by my shirt and pushes me onto his bed. Rhett stands over me as he loosens the tie he must have put on for the café. He doesn’t toss it aside, however. Instead, he regards that length of silky fabric in his hands, his eyes keen when he glances up at me again.

“Sit up and take off your shirt,” he says.

A lump clogs my throat as I push myself up to obey. Rhett climbs onto the bed, his weight shifting the mattress as he positions behind me — and guides my wrists behind my back.

“I want to see your face in the mattress while I fuck you,” he says while wrapping the fabric around my wrists. “I want you helpless. Struggling.”

“Yes,” I breathe, quivering with anticipation.

He’s moving so damn slowly, doing something with that tie that loops it around my wrists before it suddenly cinches tight. I would have assumed the tie was for show, but when I wriggle, the restraint is solid. I’m not getting out of this until

he lets me out, a truth that trembles through my entire body.

“Tell me if it hurts,” he says. “In a way you don’t like, I mean.”

My heart slams at my ribs. Rhett is shuffling around behind me. I can hear him removing his shirt, but I can’t actually see him. Being left in the dark is killing me in the best way. Being helpless, being under his control, the anticipation of discomfort, even — it’s all churning around in my stomach and leaving my body fluttery and jittery. It’s like I chugged a bunch of coffee before I came here and the caffeine is racing through my blood.

His hands haven’t been on me in what feels like hours. My skin is crackling, over-sensitive to every brush of air. I strain my ears for him, searching for some sign that he’s coming back.

After an eternity, I get one hard shove to the back.

I’m too surprised to do anything but fall forward, my face in the mattress. With my hands behind my back, all I can manage is to turn my head sideways. It doesn’t reveal much, just the dark and Rhett’s vague, gray silhouette.

I suck in a sharp breath when he appears behind me, his hips against my ass. He palms my ass through my jeans, grabbing hard and squeezing.

“Why did you come back here?” he says. “Arrogant prick, assuming I’d let you back in, assuming I even wanted to see you.”

The words sting, but the way he’s groping me eases the

bite. "I just wanted to see you."

He snorts. "Do you think I find that sweet? Some obsessive straight boy stalking me?"

I'm not sure if he expects an answer, and anyway, his hands are sliding to my hips, sliding all the way around me to rub at me roughly. These jeans are going to kill me if he doesn't get them off me soon.

He's draped against my back as he says, "I asked you a question."

"N-no," I say. "Yes. I'm not sure. I wasn't ... wasn't really thinking."

He sighs like my answer is unbearably tedious. Then he flicks open the fly of my jeans, granting my aching cock the tiniest hint of relief.

"You don't deserve this," he says. "Just remember that."

I nod against the sheets. "I will. I'll remember."

He doesn't respond, but I must have gotten at least one thing right because he starts sliding my jeans and boxers down. We have to shift to get it all off my ankles, but then I hear the sweet music of him shedding his own pants as well. Even though I can't see it, my mind floods with the image of him naked behind me, that cock I can't seem to stop salivating over finally free. Part of me hopes he's going to throw me on my back and fuck my face, feed me that delicious cock, but he leaves me as I am and rummages around on a nightstand.

I don't need to hear the cap come off to know he's gone

for the lube. His every breath is full of purpose.

“What use does a straight boy have for an ass this nice?” he murmurs, almost to himself.

His hands glide along me, slick and cool. He spreads the lube on my thighs, I think. It’s the same temperature as the heated air in this room, and my body is a livewire, so I’m struggling to keep track of what’s going on back there.

There’s no more ambiguity as his slick cock rubs against my ass. He grinds between my cheeks, his cock grazing my hole.

I jerk. No one’s ever touched me there. Not once. I haven’t even touched myself there. None of the girls I was with were into anal, so I didn’t do it to them, either. Sure, I’ve fucked Rhett once, but this is mostly brand new territory. I have no idea what to expect or what he intends, but the tremor of fear is only heightening all my senses, leaving me even more thrilled by his touch.

“Want to fuck you here so bad,” he groans. “Get into this tight little virgin straight boy hole. You’d love that, wouldn’t you, straight boy?”

“Y-yeah,” I gasp, startled to find that it’s true. The grind of his cock is lighting me up, and I can only imagine how incredible it would be if he actually fucked me.

“Mm, yeah you would,” he says.

He thumbs along my hole, teasing and prodding. But it’s only a moment, then he’s pushing my legs together and setting his knees on either side of them as he feeds his cock between

my thighs.

“That’ll have to wait,” he says.

I whimper. The sound comes out all on its own, like some deep place inside me is so distressed by the way he holds back from fucking me that it can’t stand it.

He ignores me, pushing his cock between my thighs. He grazes my balls, sending a tingle shooting through my whole body. My gasp inhales the scent trapped in his sheets, the scent of *him* sleeping in this bed. It’s as potent as the feel of him squeezing between my thighs, one hand on my bound wrists to keep me where he wants me.

“Mm, you make such pretty little sounds,” he says. “I’m not even fucking you. I bet you’d scream so good for me.”

“Nnnn,” I groan. I want to give him the sounds he’s describing. I want to give him everything. My body, my mouth, that place no one but him has ever touched.

He slaps against me harder, our bodies beating out a slick, greedy rhythm. My thighs clench as he grazes against me.

“Fuck,” he hisses. “Like that. Squeeze me. Harder.”

I leap to obey, holding him as tightly between my legs as I can. Muscle flexes. He pushes between my thighs with a sweet burn, even with the lube there. His hand sneaks away from my bound wrists and along the curve of my low back. I curl into his touch, hips pushing up as high as I can force them.

His thumb tickles along my rim again. Then he presses

harder, igniting a sweet pleasure I never suspected existed. Another little push and I'm making noises that sound like they must be coming from someone else, so high and needy and breathless they can't possibly be me.

Is this me?

The fireworks seem like they should belong to someone else, yet I feel him everywhere, between my thighs, along my hole, against my ass. He's so present. He's everywhere. He's in every ragged breath I drag down my throat.

But I've never known anything like this. I, Spencer Marsh, have never been touched like this. I never even thought I wanted to be touched and used and fucked like this, and suddenly I want this and more, so much more. I want him so deep inside me I can't figure out where my body ends and his begins.

"Rhett," I sob against the sheets, the only word I have to describe everything boiling inside me right now.

He responds by reaching around to grab my cock. My eyes snap shut, color popping behind the lids. He moves his hips and hand in time, a talent I'll appreciate some other time, perhaps, a time when my whole body isn't shoving itself at him with desperate need. I don't know what this is. I don't know how I'm supposed to feel about what he's doing to me. All I know is that it feels so good my moans sound more like sobbing and my dick is a breath away from going off in his hand.

"Yeah," he pants. "Just like that. Keep doing that."

I have no idea what I'm doing except screaming from his every touch, but I revel in the praise anyway. It's like a soothing balm over all those biting remarks.

"Come for me, straight boy," he says. "Come from me fucking your thighs."

I'm so eager to obey him. I'm so eager to give him everything he wants. I shoot off in his hand, and Rhett catches up every drop, milking it out of me while his hips keep pivoting.

"That's it," he rasps. "That's it. Such a good boy. Such a fucking good little slut."

"Mmmmff," I groan into the mattress.

I'm floating on the praise, drifting out of my body as every single drop of cum I can muster spills into his hand. His hips stop jamming against me. He drapes over my back. Then his warmth splatters all over my thighs, painting me in filthy stripes.

"Fuck," he hisses as his body stutters against mine.

All I can do is whine and shudder, my body a mess of quivering limbs and sweet satiation. Nothing feels as good as this. Nothing has ever felt as good as this. It doesn't matter what he does to me. All of it is heaven, and I'll do anything to come back here. Anything at all.

Anything but come out.

Even fucked half out of my mind, that tiny truth rings in the back of my head. I bite it back, stuffing it down as Rhett

goes slack atop me, his weight almost tipping me over with my hands bound and my legs close together.

“Christ,” he breathes. “Really wish screwing you didn’t feel that fucking good.”

My chest constricts, the warmth swirling around inside it not enough to fight off the finality of that remark. Rhett sighs a little as he shifts off of me (*too soon*, a piece of me cries out), and I hear him cleaning up. He even comes back and cleans me up, wiping the cum off me while I’m still prone on the bed. My heart can’t help whispering that he wouldn’t do this if he really hated me, that this is too intimate, too sweet. But maybe Rhett is just a considerate partner. Maybe he feels like it’s his responsibility to take care of me since he was in charge. That’s a thing, right?

He unties my wrists, and I flop down onto my side in his bed. He lies in front of me, still naked, and it takes all the willpower I can muster to keep from touching his smooth chest after being denied for so long.

“How are your wrists?” he says.

Back to business.

“Fine,” I say.

I can’t help it. My fingers wander on their own, grazing the planes of his chest. He stiffens, but doesn’t pull away, letting me touch him like I’m skimming the surface of a pond, afraid of making ripples.

He finally takes my hand, holding it still against his chest. His heart taps at my palm.

“You gotta stop doing that,” he says.

“Why?”

I search for his eyes. Even in the dark, there’s uncertainty there.

“Because we shouldn’t have done this,” Rhett says.

He might as well have shoved a knife through my chest.

“But it felt good, right?” I say.

His eyebrows flicker, a quick up and down. “Yeah. It felt good.”

“Good” doesn’t even begin to describe it, not for me. “It felt amazing. I ... I didn’t know it could feel like that. No one ever, um, touched me there.”

His eyebrows shoot up and stay up this time. He watches me for a long time, so still I worry I’ve done something wrong. Finally, he tips toward me, his lips gentle against mine, like a bandage lying over a wound.

“Straight boy,” he sighs, “you’re going to ruin me.”

He kisses me harder, his hands tangling into my hair, and that’s the last we speak of it that night.

Chapter Twenty-One

Rhett

A SHRILL RING shatters the deepest, darkest sleep of my fucking life.

I groan as consciousness returns too soon. I try to slap at my phone on the nightstand, but when I creak my eyes open to check it, it's dark and silent. Then where the hell is that ringing coming from?

“Hello?”

I freeze where I lie. Spencer's voice is foggy and thick with sleep. He's right next to me. In my bed. In my dorm room.

Because he stayed here the whole night.

Fuck. Shit. Christ. How did I let this happen again? At least the first time I was able to tell myself that it was just because Emi was out of town and we had to make the most of that window of time. What's my excuse this time? Emi is home. She almost certainly came back last night ... while we

were ... making all that noise.

Fuck. Shit. Christ.

Just like every other time I've been around Spencer, I didn't think. I just acted. After that first time, I let him suck me off, crawling over him so I could get his cock in my mouth at the same time. We fell asleep with each other's cum sliding down our throats, and I slept so deeply and contentedly that it took until this very moment for me to realize I never bothered kicking him out.

What am I going to do? How am I going to get him out of here?

Ivers' Tower is huge, several stories all packed with students. We only managed to sneak in last night because everyone was out partying, but there's no hope of such a quiet exit this morning. Someone is going to see Spencer Marsh leaving my room, and I'm not asking Emi to take the fall for that.

"Unnn," I groan.

Spencer must think I'm groaning at him, but he's been silent ever since answering his phone. Still, he crawls out of bed, still naked as he pads toward the window, the farthest spot from my little twin bed we barely squeezed into.

"Yeah," he says quietly. "I know. Yeah. I know. I—"

Whoever is on the other end of the line doesn't seem to be listening. Their voice is a constant, low drone, an angry tirade with no end in sight. Spencer rubs at his eyes. His head is probably pounding, and whatever's happening on the phone

doesn't seem like it's helping.

It's not my problem, but I slink out of bed anyway and throw on boxer briefs and sweatpants. Emi has seen me shirtless enough times that she's not shocked when I shuffle out of my room in my disheveled state. She's sitting on the couch with a cup of tea cradled in her hands.

I close the door behind me, shutting Spencer in. A problem for later.

"Morning," Emi says.

"Hey. You get home late last night?"

I head to the bathroom to get my toothbrush and scrub the funk out of my mouth right there in the living room. Emi is smiling down at her tea in a way that makes my stomach flip over itself.

"Kind of late," she says. "Not that late."

She shoots me a look, one eyebrow quirking up.

She definitely knows.

I delay the inevitable by returning to the bathroom to spit out toothpaste and wash out my mouth. Then I busy myself boiling water on the stovetop I bought to replace the one I commandeered for the café.

"I thought you'd be asleep," she says. "You worked at the café last night, didn't you?"

"Yeah."

"So?" Her smirk is full of accusation.

"I had a, um, visitor."

“Uh-huh. And?”

The water on the stovetop is ready, and I take full advantage of the distraction, pouring out two cups. The tea perfumes the steam curling off the mugs, nutty and dark from the chocolate infused in this particular blend of black tea. A kick of caffeine made elegant by the richness of the dark chocolate. It's one of my best, and I feel like we'll both need it this morning.

“I promise I will tell you everything later,” I say.

“You better. I didn't even know you were talking to anyone.”

“I'm not. Not really. It's ... it's weird, okay? I'll fill you in later, I swear.”

She huffs but accepts my deflection, and I sneak away with the tea. I feel bad about leaving her in the dark, I really do. Usually, I tell Emi everything. That's how this whole Boyfriend Café thing got started, after all, from us over-sharing and me usually being the one to brew some tea and calm us down. But at the moment I don't know what to say to her, how to explain this mistake I'm making in agonizing slow motion. It's so obvious I shouldn't go anywhere near Spencer Marsh. So why do I keep saying yes? Why has he woken up in my bed twice?

I sneak into my room, kicking the door shut as Emi cranes her neck to see who I have hidden away inside. *No one in particular. Just the worst fucking person I could have chosen on the entire fucking planet.*

The worst fucking choice on the entire fucking planet is still standing in the corner by my window, his face tense and lips pressed together in a hard line. I set our mugs down to pluck the tea bags free, depositing them in the trash can beside my desk before offering a cup to Spencer.

“Here. It’s tea.”

He nods and accepts it, but it looks like his teeth are damn near glued together, he’s clenching them so tightly. I take my own mug and retreat to my bed, sitting on the edge. It’s not my problem if he’s getting chewed out by his frat brothers or whoever. They’re probably pissed he left them last night. He clearly stumbled over here from a party or something. It only makes sense they’d want to know where he disappeared to.

But then he says, “Dad, I *know*,” and my heart sinks down my chest.

I don’t know what kind of relationship Spencer has with his father, but it doesn’t seem great. Mr. Marsh always had a reputation for being kind of ... intense. He was the sort of dad who showed up for sports and nothing else. Not that I went to jock shit all that much, but the one time a friend coaxed me into attending a football game, there was Mr. Marsh, practically dragging Spencer off the field by the ear. I couldn’t figure out why he was so mad. Our team won, and it was just stupid high school football in New Jersey. I couldn’t see how it mattered enough for anyone to be so *angry* about it, but it was the one time in my entire high school career when I actually felt sorry for Spencer, an emotion I immediately stuffed away.

Now that feeling is back, and it's making me all itchy and uncomfortable everywhere. The voice on the other end of the line is getting louder, so loud I can almost make out the words. I can't fathom needing to be that angry at *anyone* this damn early on a Sunday, let alone my own freaking son, who by all appearances gets decent grades and has a bunch of friends and looks perfectly on track to become a normal, functioning adult.

It seems like Mr. Marsh disagrees.

"I said I'm coming," Spencer says. "Yes. Yes, I heard you. No, I know. Dad, please."

His pleas don't get him very far. I try to sit there on the bed and sip my tea and not care about whatever's going on in this straight boy's life, but the more his shoulders bunch up, the more some piece of me wants to snatch that phone right out of his hand and crush it. It's one thing for me to fuck with Spencer; it's another for this asshole to do it.

He ends the call with a sigh, leaving the phone on the windowsill and tilting his forehead against the blinds.

"Fuck," he breathes, and my whole chest squeezes tight.

I'm nearly trembling with the need to leap up, to touch him, to smooth away the tension in his shoulders. But instead I wait, swallowing down every instinct. No matter how much I want to protect him from whatever this is, I shouldn't. I'm just a hook up. An experiment. And this? This is real.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Spencer

AS IF MY HANGOVER wasn't bad enough already.

Having Dad scream in my ear for twenty minutes really did not help, and now Rhett is watching me like he wants to leap up and hug me. That look stops me in my tracks before I can bolt.

I trudge to his bed, settling down beside him. I'm still naked, but it hardly feels like it matters. I cradle that tea he brought me. When I hold it up and breathe in, the aroma of earthy tea cut through with chocolate and nut winds down my throat and settles in my chest. I take a sip, letting that warmth spread through my whole body. It really is soothing.

"This is good," I say.

"I thought you might like it."

I smile a little. Because he was thinking of me. And because he's right. I do like it. It suits my tastes and this moment perfectly. It's mellow and quiet, but still hits me with

enough caffeine to help clear my head and ease back the hangover brewing behind my eyes. Guess this is why he's so good at his job.

"Thanks."

We sit there sipping for a while. I should probably be explaining myself, but I'm just happy, and a bit baffled, that he's not hurrying me out of here. I need this. To sit. To drink tea. To be in this quiet space with him for a minute. His presence beside me is as soothing as the tea.

"So, um..." he starts.

"It's fine," I cut in. "It's not a big deal."

Mostly true, since every conversation with my father goes like that. Besides, I didn't come here to make him my therapist.

"I'm sorry for barging in last night," I say. "I got wound up at that party and never really calmed back down."

"Yeah, you were pretty wasted. You had some strong opinions about how the night should go."

He quirks an eyebrow at me, and I find myself chuckling, something I didn't think I'd be able to do so soon after that phone call. Some of the tension seeps out, and I chase the rest with a sip of warm tea. It settles in my chest, unknotting all the bunched up muscles, and I breathe a little easier.

"It was my dad," I say. "He wants me to come home."

"Is that a bad thing?" Rhett asks carefully.

"No. Not really. I mean, I said I'd visit when my

grandmother was in town. But..."

"But?"

Why am I even telling him this? "But I guess that wasn't good enough. I can't only stop by for dinner, even though they're not even two hours away. He wants me there for the whole weekend."

"And you don't want to go."

I shake my head, staring down into the tea.

"Then don't go."

I snort. "Yeah, just don't go. Just like that."

"What? You're an adult. And you're here. You're busy. You can't just leave every time he wants you to leave."

"Try telling him that."

I can feel Rhett looking at me, but I keep my eyes firmly on my tea. I don't want to see pity on his face. Why the hell should he show me of all people any pity? He shuffles a little closer on the bed so our thighs are touching.

"So, I'm guessing he feels like he can make you come back whenever he wants," Rhett says. When I nod, he goes on. "He helps pay for school?"

"Doesn't help. He pays. For all of it. Sure, I did a couple years at community college and that was cheap enough that I could handle it on my own, but this is different."

"It sure is," Rhett mumbles. "Okay, so you have to go back because he's paying for school, but does that mean he gets to push you around?"

“I mean, yeah, kind of.” The words come pouring out on their own, but it’s not Rhett I’m mad at. It’s me. “I want this. I really want this. I want to go to school. I’m not just here to party and fuck around, as much as it might seem that way. I actually care about what I’m doing. I know you think my degree is silly, but I don’t. I love getting people moving. I love seeing the light go on when they realize what their bodies can do. I want to instill in people that their body can do so much just the way it is right now. They don’t have to beat themselves down or look a certain way to feel good. It’s corny as hell, but I really believe that.

“But...” I stop myself with a breath. “But I can’t do that without my dad’s help. And as long as I’m not gay and I come home when he tells me to, he’ll keep helping. That’s just how it is.”

Rhett doesn’t respond for a long time. I keep my eyes on anything but him. I never noticed the books he has stacked on the floor or the camera sitting among them. There are even a few printed photos on his desk, and just about every one of them seems to feature him and the same woman. I’ve never asked Rhett about his family, but the older woman’s pale hair and light eyes are a dead giveaway. In the photos, the two of them always look so happy. They have their arms around each other and wear huge toothy smiles. My own family photos are more like a police lineup, everyone forced to stand shoulder to shoulder and barely not grimacing.

There are other photos too. Pictures of buildings, of ducks on a lake, of trees. A few of them might be Central Park. I’m

no expert on the city, but how many parks are surrounded by skyscrapers?

“You like photography?” I say.

“Yeah,” Rhett says.

“Is that your mom?”

“Mhm.”

“No photos with friends or anything? Just your mom?”

Rhett shrugs. “My mom is my friend. And I didn’t have many other friends until I came here, honestly.”

Shit. I hang my head. “Guess that would be my fault.”

“A little,” he says easily. “But I always had Mom. No matter what. We’ve always looked out for each other. Maybe that’s kind of a weird relationship, but things haven’t been easy for us. We had to have each other’s backs.”

“Is that why you’re working so hard now?”

“Yeah. She can’t help, and I wouldn’t want her to try. When I told her about the café, she was so excited. She thinks it’s great. Might even get her up here for a visit some day. Obviously, it won’t pay for tuition, but it helps.”

“You and your mom. That sounds really nice. I’m glad you ... I’m glad you had that kind of support when we were kids.”

“I am too. And I’m sorry that you didn’t.”

I finally drag my eyes up. He’s watching me, just watching me. No pity. He’s not going to coddle me through this. But something in his face tells me he understands a lot

more than the scraps I've told him.

"It's okay," I say. "I didn't really deserve it."

He rests a hand on my leg. "Every kid deserves support. You might have been less of a dick if you had it."

I laugh, mostly from surprise, and he grins at me.

"So," he says, "is this why you're hiding and sneaking? I assumed it was the frat bros."

"I ... I guess. I mean, it's kind of the frat bros. They make ... jokes. You've met them. But if it was only them ... yeah, I might be able to do it. Especially because ... especially because I really want to. Now that I've met you. Like, actually met you. I really want to ... come out and stuff."

My speech is all stuttery and broken. I'm dancing around the words, too afraid to say them even to the guy whose dick was down my throat last night. Why can I do that with gleeful abandon, but I can't say in the light of day that I like him, that he's beautiful to me, that I want to be with him? That I'm gay?

I shake my head and jerk to my feet, setting the tea aside and finally searching for my clothing. I dress as I speak.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I shouldn't be bringing all this shit to you. You don't deserve any of this. You've already put up with enough of my shit. I'll get out of here and deal with him. I just..."

Rhett's hand on my arm stops me. My jeans are unbuttoned. I clutch my shirt in my hands. I'm a half-dressed hungover mess, but he halts my frantic attempt to slink away

with a gentle hand and soft smile.

“I haven’t seen my mom in a while,” he says.

My heart skips. I can only blink at him.

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying...” He rubs at the back of his neck. “God, I must be some kind of idiot. I’m saying ... let’s go back home ... together. That way, you don’t have to face him alone.”

“You’re serious?”

He nods, but it looks like he’s clenching his teeth. “I told you, I refuse to go back into the closet, but I can’t just shove you out of it when you’re not ready. That isn’t fair either. I don’t know what the right answer is. You have your reasons and I have mine, and we’re both doing what’s best for ourselves. But ... maybe we both need to go home and figure this out. So let’s do it together.”

“But he knows ... that you’re...”

“Yeah, I’m sure he does.”

I draw a shuddery breath. He steps into my space, cupping my jaw.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I want to try,” Rhett says. “You keep coming back. I keep letting you come back. I don’t know what it is about you that I can’t just push you away, but I don’t think this is an accident.”

“I don’t think that either.” My voice is quieter and breathier than I expect.

“If you want me with you, I’ll go. We’ll face your father

together. And then..."

"And then?"

He smiles up at me, stroking his thumbs along the stubble on my cheeks. "And then we'll see."

I want to see. I want to know what this future could be. I want to follow him into the unknown.

My hands go to his waist.

"I want this," I say. "I want it so much."

"Then don't let him take it away."

It isn't that easy. There's so much Rhett doesn't know. But when he holds me like this, I'm ready to believe that anything is possible.

Even facing my dad.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Rhett

“NOT A FREAKING WORD,” I say as I walk-of-shame right back into my own dorm room.

Emi sits on the couch with a textbook, a cup of tea and a grin that could put the Cheshire Cat himself to shame. “What? I didn’t say anything.”

“But you’re going to.”

She shrugs, and I sigh, slouching to the couch and plopping down beside her in defeat. There’s no point in denying it. She saw me come out of the bedroom with sex hair and make two cups of tea this morning. She saw me walk Spencer over to the elevators. Emi might not even be the only one. We weren’t exactly discreet last night or this morning. Spencer’s coming out seems like it’s happening whether he wants it or not.

“Soooo...” Emi says.

I groan and flop over into her lap. She sets her tea down and combs her fingers through my hair, but it lacks the soothing power it usually possesses.

“I’m the dumbest gay boy in the entire world,” I moan.

“I’m sure someone out there is dumber.”

“Gee, thanks. So comforting.”

I can feel her shrug even though I can’t see it.

“What?” she says. “You’re the expert on comforting broken hearts, not me.”

“I do *not* have a broken heart. Not over Spencer Marsh.”

“But you do feel something,” Emi says. “I’ve never seen you let someone stay overnight.”

She’s got me there. “Can we pretend I was just being desperate and horny?”

“Hmmm. Nope. We can’t. You like him.”

“Ugh.”

“That’s not a denial.”

“You’re the worst best friend in the world.”

She just laughs and keeps combing through my hair.

“It’s okay to like him, you know,” she says eventually.

I push myself out of her lap and sit cross-legged on the couch to face her. “But it isn’t. That’s the whole problem. It’s *terrible* that I like him.”

“Why? He was cute. And he looked at you like he’d throw himself in front of moving traffic for you.”

He did? My mind is whirling, searching for the moment Emi is referencing, but either I missed it entirely or my brain refused to believe what I was seeing.

“Whatever,” I say, shaking my head. “It doesn’t matter. Because he’s... Do you remember how I told you that high school absolutely sucked for me?”

She nods.

“It’s because of him.”

Her eyebrows shoot up. “Wait... That’s the guy... The lockers and everything?”

“That’s the guy, the very same guy who made my life hell for four years.”

“But he...”

I bury my face in my hands. “I know,” I groan against my palms. “That’s why this is the *worst*.”

“Wow,” Emi says softly.

I keep my face hidden in my hands and for a while she says nothing, just lets me wallow in my self-inflicted misery. Sure, last night was fun. It was amazing. Every time with him has been amazing. But that’s probably just the inexplicable magic of hate sex, right? There isn’t anything real there. Not between me and Spencer “let me acquaint you with this locker” Marsh.

At least, there shouldn’t be anything real. There really, really shouldn’t.

But this morning felt real. When he looked at those

photos of me and Mom, the hurt on Spencer's face was so thick I could taste it. I couldn't stop myself from reaching out and trying to help. Maybe I've gotten used to doing that kind of thing thanks to the café and all, or maybe that's just how I am. It's a chicken and egg situation, but either way, I did reach out. I did try to help. And now apparently I'm going to meet his shitty dad.

Oh God.

What have I done?

"I have decided there are a lot of pieces of this story I'm missing," Emi says. "What have you been hiding from me?"

The accusation in her tone compels me to drop my hands away from my face. I grumble, but confess the whole, horrible truth, everything from the first time Spencer and I hooked up in Albert's back yard to the trips to the park to the time she was away to last night.

"That's everything. I swear."

Emi rubs her chin as though she has a long beard to stroke to help her ponder my misdeeds. "You have been very busy this semester."

"Yeah, no kidding. I thought the café was bad. I swear I haven't had a full night's sleep since summer."

"Then of course you're stressed out about this. Sleep is very important, you know."

I roll my eyes. "Could you be a little less of a pharmacy student for two minutes?"

She shrugs, smirking to herself. I know Emi genuinely cares about this stuff, though. She isn't going into her field out of some sort of obligation; she really loves it.

“What does Albert think?” she says.

“I, um, kind of haven't told anyone but you.”

“Ooohhh, he's going to be so mad. You never tell one of us and not the other.”

I cringe. “I've never wanted to hide something from both of you.” It's true. In my entire experience at college, I've told Emi and Albert basically everything. They've always had my back and been my shoulders to cry on. But this is different. This is ... shameful.

Emi pats my leg. “Next time you're at the café, you should tell him.”

“He's going to think I'm an idiot.”

“He won't, I promise. And for what it's worth, I don't either.”

“You don't?”

“Nope. It's actually really sweet.”

I groan. “What in the world is sweet about hooking up with your closeted gay bully?”

“He's changed, Rhett. So have you. Let him be the man he is today, instead of insisting on seeing him as the kid he was six years ago.”

That stops me in my tracks. I find myself staring down at my clasped hands, my knuckles going white. If I let Spencer

change, am I just being a gullible fool? Am I setting myself up to get hurt? Does he even deserve that chance?

“What if he hasn’t really changed?” I say.

“I think you know that’s not true,” Emi says. “He’s here, isn’t he? It sounds like he’s been chasing you all semester. He wants you, Rhett. Even I can tell and I’ve only seen the guy once for thirty seconds. The way he looked at you was downright pathetic. You could have told him to jump out the window and he would have gone.”

She leans toward me, setting a comforting hand on my knee. “You’ve spent so long hating him. Isn’t it time to let that go and get some sort of closure? Maybe it won’t work out. Maybe it is a mistake. But at least you’ll be able to let go of whatever happened in high school. I think you both deserve that.”

I force down a shaky breath. “Why do you have to be so freaking smart?”

Emi pats my knee. “Not that smart. I just know you. And I know what it means when a guy looks at you like that.”

“Fuck,” I curse quietly. I finally look up, offering her a watery smile. “I guess I have to go talk to Albert, huh?”

She nods, and my fate is sealed.



“AND THAT’S WHY I need to disappear for a few days this weekend.”

Albert doesn't react at all, just stands there with his arms crossed over his chest. I want to grab him and shake him, but this is just Albert Albert-ing. I know that inside his head, he's churning over my horrifying confession, taking it apart and putting it back together like a clock maker setting out every tiny gear and spring so he can understand the inner workings of the mechanism.

There's no rationalizing the insane decisions I'm making when it comes to Spencer, though.

"So..." I eventually prompt.

Albert blinks like he's snapping out of a dream. "We can move your clients around. That should not be an issue. We have enough notice to start contacting them."

"Uh, great. So, um..."

He's still dodging the heart of the issue, but his face is absolutely blank and unreadable. Maybe I'm off the hook. Maybe he has no opinion on the matter of my joke of a love life. Optimistically, I start to slide away, easing toward the door that leads out of his kitchen and toward the front of his home.

"You like him?" Albert says.

I cringe, stopping just short of the doorway. Albert is leaning against his kitchen sink, the beginnings of his dinner sitting ignored on a countertop.

"I, uh, I guess. I don't know."

"You don't know," Albert says. "Yet you are going to

spend this important weekend with him. It sounds like you like him.”

I scrub a hand through my shaggy hair. “I’m trying to figure it out, okay?”

“By seeing his father. Who I presume is not supportive.”

“I’m just giving him some backup. Plus, if things really go sideways, we can go see my mom.”

“I see,” Albert says. “And is this trip for him to come out to his father?”

“No. Maybe. I don’t know. It’s up to Spencer, not me. I’m not going to force him to come out.”

“But when you both return from this adventure, will you be together?”

“I ... don’t know that either.”

I really haven’t thought about this. I haven’t thought about any of it. When Spencer got off the phone the other day, I reached out on instinct. For the first time in my life, he made sense to me. Maybe I’m an idealistic fool, but I was compelled to chase that familiarity.

Albert pushes himself away from the sink and strides toward me. He’s not a touchy-feely guy, so I know shit just got serious when he sets his hand on my shoulder. It’s like getting called in to the principal’s office when Albert stares down at me. But his next words surprise me.

“I think it’s good for you to do this.”

I blink. “You do?”

“Yes,” he says. “I know you’re still holding on to high school. Perhaps this can provide you with some sort of resolution.”

Seriously? I scowl down at my feet.

“What is it?” Albert says.

“Emi said almost the same thing when I told her.”

He pats my shoulder before letting go. “Then it seems pretty clear. The moment this Spencer needed help, you reached out. There is something you clearly need here too.”

“But it’s scary.”

Albert snorts. It’s his version of a laugh, and it draws my gaze upward.

“I don’t doubt that it is,” he says.

I wait, but he doesn’t follow that up with anything.

“Aren’t you supposed to tell me it’s going to be okay?” I prod.

He shrugs. “I don’t know if it will be okay.”

“Gee. Thanks. Such support.”

“I could lie to you if you like, but what you’re doing is, in fact, a risk. You’re traveling with a man you once hated to see his unsupportive and potentially volatile father in your home town. This is not an easy situation with a clear resolution.”

“But you still think I should do it?”

“I do,” Albert says. “Sometimes hard things are also instructive. You’ve been living with one foot in your past for

two years. I would like to see you take the final step into this new life you've made for yourself. I've often wondered what it might take to achieve that. Perhaps it is this. Perhaps it is him.”

My stomach bunches in on itself, a heavy knot that sits like a rock lodged in my gut. Emi and Albert and my own instincts are all pointing in one clear direction. Toward Spencer Marsh. Toward whatever this weekend together is going to bring us. But I'm still not sure if I'm ready — or if I'll ever be.

There's one way to find out. And I'm texting him the moment I leave Albert's house.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Spencer

SOMETHING CHANGED that morning my father called me while I was in Rhett's bedroom.

And there's no better proof than the fact that I'm headed back to his room. Right now. In the middle of the day.

There's no hiding where I'm headed. The campus is abuzz with students bustling to and from class. As brazen as I was on Saturday night, I hesitate today as Ivers' Tower rears up before me. Students flow in and out of the main doors on the ground floor.

Soon, they'll see me and Rhett. Together.

Only students living in the tower can use the elevators. Safety and all that. What it really means is that Rhett has to come down to the lobby and get me, and everyone around us will see it.

My heart is hammering in my throat while I stand

between the front desk and the elevators to wait for him. The bored guy manning the desk gives me a nod. I'm pretty sure he was at a party a couple weeks ago and we talked about whether the Jets or the Giants were the sadder NFL team to root for. I guess he remembers me, though he goes right back to playing on his phone after I offer him a little wave.

“Hey.”

I almost leap out of my skin when Rhett sidles up beside me.

“You wanna go up?” he says.

I nod, struggling for words. Part of me is scared shitless; part of me thrills at the sight of him. He's wearing sweatpants that sit low on his hips and offer a tantalizing suggestion of what lies beneath. I never got why girls talked up sweatpants so much, but I get it now. It's like dude cleavage, a tantalizing peek that makes me want more.

Rhett smirks a little when he catches me staring and tucks his hands into the pockets of his hoodie. I follow him to the elevators, forgetting all about the guy at the desk, forgetting everyone around us. There's only him, even when a couple other people get into the elevator with us.

I have no idea who sees us. I'm dimly aware of Rhett saying hello to someone, but all the nerves and self-consciousness melted away the moment I saw him down in that lobby. My hands are itching, fingers twitching like being this close to him without touching him is physically painful.

Thankfully, I don't have to wait much longer. He lets me

into his dorm, and I grab for his hoodie to pull him against me. It's crazy how quickly doing this has come to feel completely natural and normal. Just a few weeks ago, I was still living in the fantasy that I was straight. Now I'm kissing Rhett so hard and desperate our teeth clack together.

Rhett chuckles as he pushes me away. "It's only been a couple days."

"So? I can't want you again?"

He pretends to consider this. "I suppose you can. If you must."

I must. Every fiber of my being yearns for him, my cock already aching hard from that kiss alone.

"Tell me what I can do for you," I say.

Put me on my knees. Take whatever you want. Use me in every way you can think of, I don't add.

Rhett pets through my hair. "Aw, what a good boy. Should I treat you to my cock?"

"Yes. Please." I can feel him against my leg, and my mouth waters.

I expect something mean about how I'm a slut, how I'm a straight boy who loves cock for some reason, but Rhett just smiles like he's holding back laughter and tugs me to his room by my collar.

"Down," Rhett says.

I'm on my knees almost before that syllable passes his lips. From this vantage, the outline of his cock against his

sweatpants is even more of a tease. I almost chase it with my mouth, but Rhett threads his hand through my hair and holds me back.

“You’re like a dog, the way you obey,” he says. “Should I get you a leash?”

The image flashes through my brain. Me in a collar, a leash leading from my neck to Rhett’s hand. I like it way, way more than I should.

“Yeah,” I say. “I mean. Maybe? I think so.”

Surprise quirks Rhett’s lips. “I didn’t think you’d agree just like that. I was kidding but...” He looks around, eyes settling on his dresser. “Stay just like that.”

I’m trembling with anticipation, but don’t dare move as he steps away and rummages through his drawers. His hand emerges after only a moment clutching one of the ties I’ve seen him wear at the café.

I swallow. Hard.

“This one should be long enough,” Rhett says. “What do you think?”

I don’t know how this works. Is this like that thing where people accidentally choke themselves while trying to get off? I nod anyway, sure that if Rhett does it, I’ll like it.

He struts back to where I kneel, then bends down to fix the tie around my neck. It’s almost normal, except the short end of the tie is about as short as it can get. Rhett stands back up, letting the long end of the tie slide between his fingers as

he rises.

“How does that feel?” he says.

It feels like wearing a tie, mostly, but the fact that he’s holding the other end sends a thrill through my chest. As has happened so many times with Rhett, I’m not sure exactly where I’m going, just that I want to go.

“Hmm,” Rhett hums to himself. “I like you like this. On your knees. Leashed. My good boy.”

His good boy. My gut clenches with excitement.

“Yours,” I agree.

Rhett strokes the tie through his hands. Each time, it tugs a little on my throat. Not much, just enough that I can feel him on the other end of it. But that’s enough for me to tilt forward, mouth already open.

“You need my cock?” he says.

I nod vigorously, not caring how pathetic it looks.

Rhett groans, one hand sneaking into his sweatpants. I’m transfixed by the outline of his hand stroking himself. He gives me glimpses, tiny peeks as the motion of his hand dislodges the band of his sweatpants. The whole time, his other hand is on the tie, his movements shivering down that tether and tickling my throat.

I’m ravenous by the time he finally frees himself from his sweatpants. He holds himself just out of reach, leaving me salivating as I size up that pretty dick I’ve come to crave. He tugs on the tie to draw me forward. I make no pretense,

leaving my mouth open and letting him smear his head against my lips before he finally slides inside.

I groan louder than Rhett once he's in my mouth. Without waiting for him, I flick my tongue at him, tasting his salty, musky presence.

“God,” he breathes.

One hand goes to my hair, the other still holding the tie. He uses both to move me, rocking his hips to fuck into my mouth.

I'm his to command. I obey the slightest tug on the tie, the slightest pull on my hair, but he doesn't even have to do that much. If he released me, I'd throw myself down his cock, take it to the back of my throat, impale myself on him until every breath tasted of him.

Maybe he knows this; he holds me back more than he urges me on. It's a battle of wills, me trying to sink more voraciously down him, him trying to control the frantic pace of this. But it's not long before he starts giving in to my attention, loosening his grip in my hair, tugging more with the tie to yank me closer. Every pull is like his hand around my throat, and shit, is that something I want now, too? Even with his cock in my mouth, I'm suddenly thinking about what it might be like to have his hands on my neck.

“You've gotten ... so goddamn good at this,” Rhett says.

I hum from the praise and drag all my focus to the present, to my hollow cheeks, to the weight of him dragging on my tongue, to the tingle of that tether around my throat. I

brace against his thighs, sinking so low my nose is in the coarse hair at his base. Then I swallow, and Rhett makes a noise like he's the one choking.

“Oh shit,” he rasps.

It's all the warning I get before he's coming down my throat, but I don't mind. This is what I've been working toward, this sweet, tangible taste of his pleasure exploding down my throat. He feeds me every last drop, then slowly withdraws from my mouth.

The tie goes slack, lying askew but basically normally down my chest. Rhett stumbles back, hitting his own dresser while he attempts to compose himself. He's breathing hard as he tugs his sweatpants back up. God, I wish he was less eager to do that. It's like he's always holding back a little with me. I can't really blame him, but I hope some day I earn the rest of him, earn the right to get all of Rhett all at once.

“Get on the bed,” he says, still raspy in a way that shoots right to my dick. “All fours. You deserve a reward.”

I go without question, the tie still hanging around my neck when I position myself on his bed as instructed. He takes his time striding up to me, his presence behind me a physical wave of heat that presses closer and closer to my body the nearer he gets. I'm trembling with the need for him to touch me, straining my neck trying to follow his movements behind me.

Finally, he sets himself right behind me, dragging me closer to the edge of the bed by the hips. He reaches around

me to undo my fly, then starts tugging my jeans and briefs down in one slow pull.

I'll admit it. I'm self-conscious with my ass out like this. I don't know if you're supposed to, you know, *do things* to prepare for this kind of situation beyond the shower I took before heading over here. I don't even know what this kind of situation is, how far he plans to go.

He doesn't seem perturbed by any of the concerns churning through my head. Rhett rubs his hand over my bare ass.

"Relax," he says.

"I just, uh."

"Chill. I'm not going to fuck you. Not tonight at least."

There's a promise in that that shivers through my whole body, a promise I like.

"I mean, not with my cock," Rhett adds, and my brain short circuits.

"Wait..."

He laughs behind me, still rubbing my bare cheeks. "Just a finger. It's time you learned about your prostate, okay?"

"I ... I guess." I've heard about this kind of thing, but I've definitely never tried it.

Rhett presses up closer behind me. His fingers drop between my cheeks, touching places so sensitive it makes me gasp, places no one but him has ever touched before.

He chuckles softly. "You're definitely going to like this.

You're so sensitive already. But if you don't, just tell me. It's not a big deal. I don't think that's going to happen, though. I think my good boy is going to learn where his prostate is. I think after this you're going to be begging me for it."

The words slither through my body like a warm bath lulling me under. I nod, my doubts already melting away as he keeps touching, lightly exploring, moving slowly, almost casually. At my hole, he makes a tight circle, and it's like a million new nerve endings wake up all at once.

I know he feels me shudder because the next time he makes his way up there, he doesn't just circle around. He presses a little, testing the resistance. Part of me is confused and floundering, wondering how and why this is even happening, but most of me is lit up brighter than Times Square on New Years Eve. It's like he finds some new piece of me with every pass. Before I realize it, I'm rocking my hips to move with his hand.

"That didn't take much," Rhett says with laughter in his voice. "We're discovering a whole new side of you, Marsh."

The sound I make when he stops is something I'll probably never live down. The whine just *happens*, winding out of me like some animal instinct. But he isn't gone long, and when he returns, his fingers are slick. I tense as I realize what that must mean, but as soon as he starts touching me the anticipation sizzles away.

He's firm and deliberate, always touching me somewhere that makes heat shoot up my spine. One finger pushes at me,

actually trying to get in this time, and I ... I let it. I don't quite know how. My body seems to know what to do, or Rhett has shown it what to do with the gentle insistence of his finger.

“So open for me,” he coos.

I suppose I am. That finger is sliding deeper, and nothing seems to be stopping it. My body welcomes him, even if there's still a little piece of me saying that this is all extremely strange. That fades the more he moves his finger around. There's purpose to his motions, like I'm a lock he's meticulously working open. Rhett deftly employs his other hand grabbing me and touching me and occasionally giving my dick a hard stroke. Those more familiar sensations ease me into the strangeness of him being inside me, until any hesitation is gone and I'm swept up in the feeling of this new pleasure blooming inside me.

“That's it,” Rhett says, as though my body has revealed all its secrets to him. “You're ready for more.”

It's not a question, which is good because I'm not entirely sure I could answer right now. Something is ... happening. My body is screaming for him, begging for something I don't even have words for. I know it when a second finger pushes at my rim, however, know it down to my soul. When that finger squirms inside beside the first, a shudder rattles my body. There's still that strangeness, but it's fading rapidly as Rhett slowly pumps his fingers.

“Good boy. That's my good little slut. I knew you'd take it so good.”

The praise washes over me, heat seeping through my chest to match the warmth gathering lower. My body relaxes even more, and now it's pure, vibrating pleasure the way his fingers squirm around inside me.

He curls them, touches something deep inside me, and it's like I'm experiencing colors for the first time in my life. I arch, my mouth opening around wordless awe.

"Th-that was..." I stammer.

He hums to himself, delighting in my reaction. His fingers keep moving, pumping and curling, working around inside me, touching that place that makes the whole world seem like someone dialed up the saturation. He braces his thumb against something tender and sensitive. Then his whole hand is working, rocking in and out of me, petting deviously over that spot. I can't help following with my hips, fingers curling in the sheets beneath me as the feeling swells to overwhelm me.

"How does it feel?" he says. "I want to hear you. Tell me."

"It's ... it's really good. Why is it so good?"

He laughs, but not cruelly. "Because you straight boys have never met your own prostates."

I can't exactly argue with that, both because he's kind of right and because I'm too blissed out to grit out any more words. Thankfully, he doesn't demand any, instead letting me hang my head and whimper as his hand works.

And God, does it work. I find myself bending forward,

leaving my ass in the air for him as my head withers toward the mattress. All that self-consciousness about him seeing me this way is long gone, replaced with a pleasure that threatens to consume me.

I fumble after my own cock, but Rhett pauses and uses his free hand to bat me away. I whimper from the denial as much as from him stopping, but he soon resumes dipping his fingers inside me.

“No touching,” he says. “I want you to come just from this. I want you to understand what it feels like.”

“Rhett.”

It’s part groan, part plea, all desperation. I want to touch myself so bad it brings tears to the corners of my eyes. The pressure is building and building, leaving me squirming on his hand and throwing myself at his fingers with increasing fervor. But his demand that I don’t touch myself holds me back, no matter how much my balls are aching every time he curls his fingers.

He goes faster, harder. I clutch at the bedsheets, howling into the mattress as my body narrows to a pinpoint of pleasure commanded by his fingers. I am nothing but that place inside me he keeps touching, nothing but the blinding ecstasy that rockets through my body with every stroke.

The end flashes before me like a bright light at the end of a long, long tunnel. I sprint after it, feel it just within my grasp. Then it’s there, barreling into me, knocking the breath from my lungs, startling me with its violence as it racks my body.

Rhett is speaking, but I can't hear him over my own voice. My body is shuddering, cum spilling onto the sheets beneath me thanks to an orgasm that sends me to a height I never imagined.

I drop abruptly back down to Earth, collapsing on the wet spot I made on the bed. My weak limbs can't push me away from the mess I've made, and at the moment I don't even care. I've never had an orgasm quite like that, an orgasm that felt so big it might tear me open on its way out. I'm both numb and giddy, senseless and higher than any substance could get me. My body is a heap, a useless pile of goo, and Rhett sits beside me and pets my sweaty back while I breathe and try to remember my name.

"Holy shit," I say when I can. "I had no idea that felt ... like *that*."

I can't see it, but I can feel his self-satisfied smile. "So you liked it, then?"

"Liked it? You ruined me. I don't know if I can come without that anymore." Every other orgasm I've had in my life feels like a pale imitation compared to what he just did to me. I might as well be a virgin again. "Jesus, Rhett. You're incredible."

A beat of silence falls. His hand stills. Tension winds through satiated muscles as I realize what I've said.

I wait forever, not daring to move or speak, not looking at him, just lying there in my own mess terrified of the words that slipped out of me in a moment when I was so entirely at

peace that I forgot to hold back. Because the truth is I've thought that for a while. I've thought that for weeks. But I've always had the sense to keep it to myself.

Until now.

After an entire, agonizing lifetime, he scoots closer. I turn my head as he lies on his side next to me, our noses nearly touching. My heart is beating so fast it might explode. If he were to send me away right now for what I just said, I'm not sure I could take it.

A smile flickers along his lips, just a flash and then it's gone. "You're kind of okay too, Marsh," he says.

My heart might just explode.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Rhett

TALKING TO ALBERT and Emi was the easy part.

What comes next is the hard part.

I'm standing outside of a fraternity house on Greek Row. Me. The guy who got put in lockers for being queer in high school. If there is anywhere I would be more out of place, someone needs to let me know so I can avoid it like a plague.

Yet here I am. At a frat house. *Spencer Marsh's* frat house.

I must be losing my freaking mind. Earlier this week, sitting in my dorm room, it felt so easy to tell him I'd support him through this. It felt so right. I suppose I just like helping people, hence my job at the café, but going with my high school bully to confront his shitty father is way beyond anything I'd do for most people.

Maybe Albert is right. Maybe I need this too.

It feels like I'm finally closing this chapter of my life, the chapter that started on my first day of high school. I thought going away to college would seal up that hurt, but seeing Spencer has ripped open the scars. Curiously, that doesn't feel like a bad thing. It's more like the wounds healed wrong when I tried to patch them up myself, and they had to reopen in order to close up properly. Part of that has been the strange, aggressive, desperate way Spencer and I have been hooking up. I won't lie, the things I say to him during that stuff feels *great*. But maybe the other part of it is this, going with him to the source of the problem, facing it together.

Ugh. The dirty talk is so much more fun. Can't we heal without actually doing hard things?

Apparently not, I suppose, or else I wouldn't be standing outside a frat house trying to work up the courage to knock on the door.

In the end, I don't have to. I'm still making my timid way toward the porch when Spencer exits and hurries toward me. I thought he might be nervous about all this, but he flashes a smile the moment he sees me and wraps me in a hug without hesitation. It takes me a second to remember to hug him back. Because what the hell? We're *hugging*? It's so ... friendly. So normal.

"Hey, thanks for coming," he says. "If you bailed, I really couldn't have blamed you."

He slides back, cradling my hands in his. That's definitely not a thing platonic heterosexual bros do. I peek around him at

the windows, but can't make out any curious faces watching us.

"It's fine," I say. It's totally not fine. I'm a trembling mess. What the hell am I even doing right now?

"It's okay if you're freaking out. I'm definitely freaking out."

"I might be freaking out. Just a little."

A lot. I'm freaking out a lot.

Spencer squeezes my hands. "You don't have to do this you know."

"I know. But ... I think I want to."

I flash back to those conversations with Emi and Albert, the way they both encouraged me to see this through and close out this chapter of my life. Spencer Marsh is nothing at all like what I expected. I expected my high school bully again. But Emi was right. It's unfair to keep him trapped in those four years. It's unfair to keep myself trapped there too. I don't know for sure that this is the answer, but it's worth a shot.

Shockingly enough, *he's* worth a shot.

I didn't fully realize that until the other day. It was ... different from the other times we've been together. Still intense, yeah. I think both of us just enjoy it a little rougher, and that'll never change. But something far less tangible shifted between us that evening.

You're incredible.

He'd spoken with such wonder, like I was something

worthy of awe. No one had ever looked at me like that. No one had ever called me “incredible.” Let alone made me believe it.

Spencer makes me believe it.

He’s still cupping my hands. I give him a little tug.

“Let’s go get your things,” I say.

Spencer inhales a deep breath. I barely resist doing likewise. We’re about to face his fraternity brothers — and by all appearances that’ll be the easiest leg of this journey.

He keeps holding one of my hands when he turns around to face the house. I expect him to let go the whole way to the front door, but he never does. I wouldn’t even be mad. It’s not like I don’t understand. I’ve told him more than once that I’m letting him take the lead on all of this. If he doesn’t want to say anything, then he doesn’t have to say anything. I’m not going to hide, but I’m also not going to force him out, which is kind of the whole problem and the reason we’re here. Unstoppable force and immovable object, and all that. No one is wrong, but we need fundamentally different things at different speeds, and we’re still trying to figure that out.

Which makes it all the more surprising that he’s still gripping my hand when we step up onto the porch. Mismatched chairs stand sentinel outside the house, most of them cradling an empty beer can or solo cup. There’s no doormat, and the moment he opens the door, the smell of too many dudes living in a house together hits me.

When we step inside, I instinctively start taking off my shoes. Mom was always strictly anti-shoe when it came to

wearing them in the house.

“Oh, you can keep them on,” Spencer says. “Not like this place is clean or anything.”

His voice alerts a trio sitting on a sagging couch in the living room. Two have video game controllers in their hands while the third watches eagerly. They’re transfixed on the screen until Spencer speaks. Then they drag their attention from the fighting game to Spencer.

“Hey, we’re clean-ish,” one says.

I think it’s Alan, the one who did most of the talking that time at the café. His mouth moves before his brain processes the way Spencer and I are standing inside the doorway still holding hands. His eyes flicker to our hands. So do the eyes of the other two guys. For a long, long second, none of them say anything.

Then one finally shrugs and says, “Probably could do with a cleaning though.”

“Spencer should do it. He’s the new recruit.”

“He’s going home this weekend, idiot.”

“Next week then.”

One of the guys rolls his eyes. “Sorry, uh, Spencer’s friend. This is why it’s never clean in here.”

“Rhett,” I say. “And it’s no big deal. We aren’t staying long.”

“Oh. Chill.”

And that’s it. With that farewell “chill” all three turn back

to their game, completely losing interest in me and Spencer. Whatever they thought when they noticed us holding hands, it didn't occupy their brains for long. We haven't even managed to leave the doorway, and they're right back to screaming at each other and mashing buttons to move the little fighters on the screen.

As far as comings-out go, it's hugely anti-climatic, which is probably how most comings-out should go. Why make a big deal about it — positively or negatively? It's only a big deal because other people make it a big deal. For me, though, it's just Tuesday. It's as normal as breathing. I didn't know to feel anything about it until *other people* started feeling things about it.

I can't believe I'm saying this, but I wish more people were like these frat bros: More concerned with a silly little video game than who other people are attracted to.

We make our way to a staircase that creaks with every step. I don't look too hard at the unfortunate carpeting, which has certainly soaked up countless parties by this point. The second floor is all doors, mostly bedrooms, I assume. There seems to be a third floor as well. Spencer is heading for a room along the hall when someone peeks their head out of a door.

“Hey,” another frat guy says.

I think I recognize this one, too. He was a little quieter the day they all barged into the café. Definitely the older brother of the group.

“Oh, hey, Joe,” Spencer says.

I marvel that he doesn't drop my hand on instinct, especially when Joe's eyes flicker to that connection.

"You work at that Boyfriend Café thing, right?" Joe says.

"Yeah."

"Sorry for, uh, that one time. The guys were really rowdy. We made total fools of ourselves."

I have to laugh at his sheepish apology. "I can handle myself around a couple frat bros."

"I don't doubt it if you've got this one under your thumb." Joe jerks his chin at Spencer.

I can't see Spencer's face thanks to the narrow hallway, but I can see his shoulders stiffen and feel his hand suddenly get sweaty. Joe shoots a smile past Spencer to me, and I can't help it. I burst out laughing. This Joe guy is way more perceptive than I would have given him credit for. Still, he probably doesn't even know the half of just how much Spencer is "under my thumb."

"I like him," I tell Spencer.

Joe emerges the rest of the way from what I assume is his bedroom. He's a big guy, like Spencer, like most of these dudes, but he has a friendly, calming presence. He's definitely the guy making sure the bills get paid around here. Everything about him screams "lone voice of responsibility," almost like Albert. The Albert of frat bros.

"So," he says, turning his attention to Spencer, "is this who you've been all messed up over all semester?"

I stand up a little straighter, raising my eyebrows at Spencer.

“Um, I mean, I guess, yeah,” Spencer says.

“Hold on,” I cut in. “What do you mean ‘all messed up?’”

“Well,” Joe says, “there was the time he bailed in the middle of a party, the time he stumbled home shirtless, the week he spent locked up in his room not talking to us. I assume that was all you.”

“I...” I blink, at a loss for what to say.

I did that to Spencer? I had that effect on him? With the exception of that shirtless walk of shame, I never knew about any of this. From my perspective, Spencer simply *appeared* in my life, a massive conundrum in the form of an irresistibly sexy man. I always assumed he was just living on pure id, doing whatever he wanted whenever he wanted without really thinking about it. But apparently he was moping alone in his room for days at a time? What the hell?

“I forgive you,” Joe says, “but you better look out for our boy. Brothers have each other’s backs.” He punches Spencer’s arm playfully. “Ain’t that right?”

This strikes a chord with Spencer. Some secret conversation passes between him and Joe, some memory I’m not privy to. But the meaning is clear. Joe has suspected this for a while, has perhaps even encouraged Spencer to embrace it, and he’s going to make sure the whole fraternity has Spencer’s back through it.

Spencer finally releases my hand. He wraps Joe in a hug,

squeezing him hard before letting him go.

“Thanks, man.”

Joe just nods. “I’ll get out of your way. You two are heading to South Jersey, right? I hope you have a good weekend. Hit me up when you get back. I want to know how it goes.”

“I will,” Spencer says.

Emotion chokes his voice. Hell, it chokes *my* voice, and I’m not even speaking. Joe just offered not merely acceptance, but someone to lean on. There are plenty of people who will say they accept you but don’t want to hear about it and can’t be bothered with the icky details of your sexuality. Joe is taking that extra step and inviting that conversation, and it’s got me nearly as overwhelmed as Spencer.

Thankfully, Joe leaves it there, slipping back into his room before things can get too heavy in the hallway. Spencer lets out a shaky little exhale, then leads me into his room.

It’s exactly what I expected. Small, messy and full of sports memorabilia. Clothes litter the floor. Exercise equipment turns the carpet treacherous. I’m pretty sure there are more textbooks on the mattress than on the actual desk beside the window.

“Wow, didn’t know anyone actually owned these,” I say, plucking up a Funko of some baseball player off the desk.

“Hey, that’s, like, my favorite one,” Spencer says.

Our voices are still tight with unspent emotion, but the

teasing lightens the mood after that moment out there with Joe. I set the figure back down. A poster above the desk depicts what I assume is a football player. I mean, I know what football is. I'm not completely ignorant. I just couldn't really tell you who this guy is or why anyone would put him on their wall.

“Wayne Chrebet,” Spencer explains. “A little before my time. I was really young when he played. But he was a New Jersey boy. Undrafted. Went on to become a fan favorite because he just went all-out in every single game. He was always my mom's favorite Jet.”

“He doesn't look that special.” I'm not being mean. He just doesn't look like the hulking Goliaths I normally associate with football.

“That's the thing, he wasn't,” Spencer says. “He was never the biggest guy on the field or anything. He just played his damn heart out. Sometimes that matters more. My father always said he was too small and they should trade him away, but Mom loved him. I wish I could have seen more of those games with her, but he started playing before I was even born.”

“Maybe you can watch those games with her now,” I say.

Something flickers across Spencer's face. He casts his eyes down. “Yeah. Maybe. We'll see.”

I step up to him, tilting his chin up so he has to look at me. “Hey, you don't have to come out to them, you know. Being out at school is enough for me. I'm not forcing you to

come out to people who are going to be dicks about it. You know that, right?”

“I know,” he says, “but the more I think about what you said about not having to go back into the closet, the more I don’t want to hide even temporarily.”

“That was my journey. It might not be yours. I can still be totally out here. That’s all I meant, Spencer. If you can’t or don’t want to tell your family, don’t. Seriously.”

He’s quiet for a long time, avoiding my gaze even as I hold his chin.

“I’m terrified,” he says at last. “I’m fucking terrified.” When he looks up, his eyes are as set and determined as that football player on his wall, like he’s a receiver with his sights set on the endzone. “But I want to do this. I want ... I want to be with you and I don’t want to hide that for even one damn second.”

I slide my hands down to his firm chest. “We’ll do this together. No matter what, we’ll get through it, okay? Whatever happens, you won’t be alone.”

His smile wavers. For such a large, imposing guy, he looks fragile as spider’s silk in this moment, like he might blow away in a breeze. I pull him down to me, hoping my lips can provide the reassurance my words obviously can’t.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Spencer

TAKING THE EXIT off I-95 for my small South Jersey town drops a lead ball right into my gut.

Rhett and I have spent the drive talking, the kind of mundane stuff we've never actually slowed down and discussed up until now. His favorite color is red. His favorite tea is a fancy authentic matcha, but it's a specialty blend he only allows himself to buy once a year on his birthday (which is in June).

It's the kind of shit I would probably already know if any of this had happened like a normal relationship. But there hasn't really been space for normal amid all this. Instead, we've bumbled forward like we're strapped into a roller coaster and have no choice but to ride it out.

Today, the joy ride ends.

The highway gives way to two-lane roads that wind between housing developments and strip malls with half the

stores shuttered. If I was making this drive with just about anyone else, I might be talking about how my elementary school is just down that road and the water ice stand where I got my first summer job is right over there. But Rhett already knows all that. This is his home too.

Instead, we fall silent. No music, no conversation. Just the whirring of my car as we near the neighborhood where my parents live. If the idle chitchat had been drawing us closer, being this close to my parents' house opens a chasm between us, a tense, fear-filled void.

A wave of vertigo sweeps over me as I pull into the neighborhood. Sure, I've only been gone a little over a month, but so much has happened in that time. So much has changed. I've changed. The guy I've been fighting to become for two years — I can see him now. When I'm with Rhett, that guy is real.

But the moment I pull up to the curb beside an unassuming beige home among similar beige homes, my resolve to be that better man wavers.

Rhett sets his hand on my arm. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah. No. Kind of. I guess."

"We can leave any time. My mother lives right down the road. She knows I'll be around this weekend."

I let out a long exhale. It helps to have an escape plan, and to know that Rhett is here beside me. I lay my hand over his.

"Thanks for doing this," I say. "Sure you don't want to

bail?”

“I’m sure.”

His smile gives me the strength to unbuckle my seatbelt and pry myself from the safety of my car. We make our way toward the front door, my hand itching for his. I hold back. I can’t go into this guns blazing like that. Or maybe I’m simply not brave enough to.

The welcome mat is tidy. A fall wreath hangs on the door. I knock once, then step inside, onto a second mat where we leave our shoes. Mom is a neat freak like that.

She’s the first one to pop her head around the wall blocking our view of the kitchen. We’re standing in a big, tall foyer. There’s even a chandelier. It’s all very classy and clean and *beige*.

“Spencer!” Mom says.

She rushes out to give me a hug. Grandma isn’t far behind. She’s getting older, but she’s still quick on her feet. The moment Mom releases me, Grandma is gathering me up in her arms.

“It’s been so long,” Mom says.

“I’ve only been at school for like a month,” I say.

“You’ve never lived away for this long. Let your mother miss you.” She finally notices Rhett. “Oh, who’s this?”

He waves sheepishly.

“Mom, Grandma, this is, um...”

Is this the right moment? But we just got here. I can’t

throw everything into chaos the moment we walk through the door. Is there any point in hiding it, though? It's not like Rhett is exactly subtle. His voice, his mannerisms, his speech patterns, even the way he's dressed a little too nicely — to people like my family, there's only one interpretation of all that.

“This is ... a friend from school,” I say. Because in the end, I'm a fucking coward. “We actually went to high school together, and we just found out we're both at Montridge. Crazy, huh?”

That diverts attention and smooths over the introductions. Mom fusses over Rhett, who accepts it gracefully when she ushers us into the living room and offers us her homemade iced tea. I always hated the stuff, not nearly enough sugar, but Rhett instantly starts asking her about what type of tea she uses and how long she steeps it, and I'm watching my mother appear more and more charmed by the boy I brought home. It almost pries the truth from my lips.

Then Dad arrives.

He must have been at work, which makes sense since it's Friday. His every footfall is a thud as he makes his way from the foyer back toward the living room where we're all sitting around chatting and drinking tea. The moment he sees Rhett, he raises an eyebrow, and I gulp.

He knows. I don't know how, but he definitely knows.

“Spencer, so good of you to come home,” he says.

“It's only been a month or so,” I say.

“Your grandmother is here.”

I guess that’s supposed to be an accusation? As though I don’t know? As though I wasn’t always planning to come see her while she was in town?

“Oh, leave the boy alone, Thomas,” she says, speaking to him the way only a mother can.

He backs off, at least for now, and the conversation eases back into gentler topics. It seems like everything might even be okay. Rhett and my mom get along so well it’s freaking me out. I didn’t even realize how much my mother is into tea. Then again, she never talks about her own interests much.

Grandma pats my knee while Rhett and Mom are deep into some conversation about the best rooibos blends or something.

“How has school been?” Grandma says.

“It’s been okay. I like the new school. It’s bigger. It’s ... I’m learning a lot.” I’m definitely getting a *physical* education, but Grandma doesn’t need to know that.

“I’m glad,” she says. “It’s important to get out on your own when you’re young.”

“Yeah, I guess so. I’ve liked living at the fraternity. The guys are nice.”

“Is your friend in the fraternity also?”

I nearly laugh. “No, definitely not. That’s not exactly his kind of scene.”

I could swear that Grandma smirks, but all she says is,

“Doesn’t seem like it.”

The oven beeps, and Mom leaves to finish up dinner. Rhett and I chat easily with Grandma, which is good because it means we don’t have to talk to Dad at all. He went right for the basement after getting home. He’s set up a whole gym and second office space for himself down there. I have to wonder why he was so insistent about me coming home to visit if he was just going to hide away in his man cave the whole time, but at least it means I don’t have to see him again until Mom calls us all in for dinner.

We crowd around the table. It’s a tight fit with the addition of Grandma and Rhett and my little brother, Mike. Mike takes one look at Rhett, issues a simple “yo,” and promptly goes back to ignoring all of us.

We pass around potatoes and steamed veggies and chicken with all kinds of seasonings and sauces. Maybe it’s the anxiety or the university cafeteria food or both, but I heap my plate high, eager to dig in. We’re in the home stretch. All we have to do is devour this chicken and we can make our escape.

Of course, this is when Dad decides to speak up.

“So, Rhett, was it? That chicken okay for you? You’re not a vegan or something, right?”

I cringe. It might seem innocuous enough on the surface, but everyone related to this man knows that when he says “vegan” he means a lot more than not eating meat.

If Rhett picks up on the subtext, he shrugs it off. “Chicken is great, thanks.”

How is he so calm about this? He's holding his cool way better than me.

"You two go to school together, huh?" Dad says.

"That's right," Rhett says.

"How'd you meet? Got the same major or something?"

"No, sir," Rhett says. "It was just a coincidence. We recognized each other from high school."

"Small campus," Dad grumbles. "So what's your major then? Tea parties? Fashion? Glitter parades?"

Everything goes very still at the dinner table. Dad has been dancing around this since the moment he saw Rhett, and we've all pretended to ignore it, but there's no ignoring this. There's no pretending he doesn't mean exactly what he's implying.

Rhett doesn't respond. I'm grinding my teeth together so hard they might crack. Mom is shooting nervous looks between me and Dad.

"Come on, boy, it was just a joke," Dad says. "Can't you types take a joke?"

You types. *You types.*

I'm on my feet before I realize I'm moving. My hands slam against the table, rattling the silverware. Mom startles. Mike finally looks interested in what's unfolding around him.

"That's enough, Dad."

"Don't you—"

"That's *enough*, I said." I'm way too loud, but I can't get

a handle on my volume while rage boils up my chest. It's one thing for him to treat me this way for my whole life, but I'll be damned before he does this shit to Rhett.

"He's studying engineering, okay?" I say. "And he's smarter than any of us will ever be. He's amazing. He's brilliant. He's going to build skyscrapers some day, and I'll probably be a shitty gym teacher at an elementary school. So don't you dare—"

"Don't tell me what I dare."

"Don't you *dare* talk down to him because you think he's different. Rhett is amazing, and he's—"

My words finally falter, but the next ones that come from my mouth are the most important I've ever spoken.

"And he's my ... he might be my boyfriend. If I'm lucky. And if he doesn't hate me for dragging him into this fucking house."

Dad goes pale, his eyes widening. The shock swiftly passes and rage sweeps in, his skin going a splotchy red that has meant trouble for my entire life.

This time, I'm not going to take it.

I steel myself, prepared to weather the onslaught of his tirade, say my piece, and leave this house for good.

But it turns out I don't have to.

"Sit. Down."

Everyone is shocked when it's Grandma who speaks first. We gape at her where she sits at the head of the table. She

forces herself up, this tiny, old woman who suddenly feels ten feet tall.

“You will not speak to my grandson that way,” she says.

“Mom, did you hear him?” Dad says.

“I did. Did you? He’s met this wonderful, smart, kind young man I’ve had the pleasure of getting to know for the past hour, and he’s clearly very happy about it. Now what, exactly, is the problem here, Thomas?”

Dad opens his mouth, blinking at his mother. I’m blinking a hell of a lot too. I’ve never, ever talked to Grandma about any of this. With her son being ... the way he is, I always assumed this conversation would go very differently. Did she simply not know about me for all these years? If I’d had the courage to tell her back when I was a confused, terrified teenager, how different would my life be?

“Grandma...”

She smiles at me. “I’m sorry I raised such a miserable bastard, Spencer, but you should know that I only ever want you to be happy. If this boy makes you happy, then that’s wonderful.”

I was prepared to come here and scream and fight, but now I’m choking down tears. This woman in her seventies just got slapped with all this new information about me and she didn’t so much as flinch. I don’t know why I find it so shocking and overwhelming. Maybe a lifetime of having to hide convinced me that everyone would react the way Dad did when I was thirteen. I never fathomed unconditional, instant

acceptance, and now that it's here, it feels so big I don't even know what to do with the emotions filling up my chest.

"I love you, Spencer," Grandma says. "I always have, and I always will. Nothing is gonna change that."

"I ... love you too, Grandma." The words barely make it out. "I'm so sorry I didn't tell you. I've known since I was a kid."

"That's alright, dear." She shoots a meaningful glance at Dad. "I understand."

"This is still my house," Dad grumbles.

"Yeah, I know," I say. "I get it. We'll be going now."

Grandma looks distraught, but it's Mom who speaks up. "You don't need to do that, Spencer. At least finish your dinner."

"I'm sorry, Mom. It was delicious. But we're not going to stay somewhere we aren't welcome."

She looks like she wants to say more, but Grandma gives her a little shake.

I take Rhett's hand. He's shaking a little, and so am I, but I'm getting us the hell out of here as fast as I can. We leave our seats and make for the foyer. The moment we do, Dad starts moving. Panic flashes through my mind, old wounds reopening.

But Mike gets in his way.

Dad stops short, disbelief reshaping his face as he looks down at his younger son.

“Don’t be a dick, Dad,” Mike says.

I can’t help it. I laugh. It’s so simple, so blunt. And more than that, it’s my brother standing up for me when it matters the most.

“Thanks,” I say softly.

Then I drag Rhett out of that house, never once looking back.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Rhett

I DRIVE SPENCER'S CAR to Mom's house. He's a little shaken up. Plus, I know the way.

We pull into a very different neighborhood on the other side of our small town. It's amazing that we can live so close together and yet in such opposite circumstances. There are no cute lawns here, no big beige houses with foyers and chandeliers. The complex is just a few squat brick buildings nestled within a winding parking lot.

I pull into a guest spot and turn off the car.

"Hey, you alright?" I say. "We can drive back to school. I'm awake enough. We'd be back before midnight."

Spencer shakes his head. "You should get to see your mom. And I'd like to meet her, if that's okay."

We climb out of the car and grab our backpacks from the back seat. This time, I'm the one taking Spencer's hand. He

seems like he needs it. And after what he said back there, I kind of can't help touching him. I was prepared to sit there and take his dad's jokes the whole night without complaint. It's not like I haven't heard it all before. But then Spencer was on his feet, shouting him down, telling him I'm amazing. Telling him I'm Spencer's boyfriend.

Am I Spencer's boyfriend?

It felt like it in that moment, but we haven't actually talked about that. We certainly haven't used that word. This has all felt like tripping forward. I assumed we'd fall at some point, but maybe since we haven't, there really is something more here.

I certainly wouldn't take most people to Mom's place.

It's not that it's bad. She worked three jobs when I was in high school in order to afford a two-bedroom apartment here. But it's a world apart from chandelier-lit foyers and man-cave basements and two-car garages.

I spot her car right outside the building before we climb a flight of stairs and knock on the first door on the left. Mom answers immediately, wrapping me in a hug before I even manage to release Spencer's hand.

"Mom, relax, the semester has barely even started."

"I can't miss you because it's only been a few weeks?" she says. "Don't be ridiculous. I'm your mother. Oh, who's this?"

"This is Spencer Marsh. We went to high school together. And ... now we're kind of dating."

“Oh!” A wide grin breaks across her face. “Well, come in, Spencer Marsh. Forgive an old lady for not remembering that name.”

“You’re not old at all, ma’am,” Spencer says.

And just like that, Mom loves him.

She ushers us inside and forces cups of instant cocoa on us. She sneaks a couple marshmallows into each drink, just like I always enjoyed as a kid.

We sip our cocoa on the couch in the cramped living room. It’s a lot less tidy and formal than the one at Spencer’s parents’ house. There are magazines and books on the coffee table. Mom bustles around scooping up forgotten coffee mugs and tossing them in the sink. The long tendrils of some sort of house plant partially block the television.

I love it.

The blankets on everything, the mild chaos, the lingering smell of her morning coffee. This is home. This is her. There’s nowhere in the world that’s safer and warmer than right here.

I hope Spencer feels the same. I know this is a downgrade from how his family lives, but hopefully Mom’s warmth and acceptance makes up for it.

We chat with her awhile, but we’re both exhausted from everything that happened today. I find my old bedroom exactly the way I left it at the end of summer. It only has a twin bed, but Spencer and I clamber in together anyway, preferring that to either of us sleeping out on the couch.

“I hope she wasn’t too much,” I say as we lay in the dark.

“Not at all,” he says.

Spencer hasn’t said much since that whole thing with his family, but I could see the tension ticking out of his shoulders as we drank cocoa with Mom. Still, he has to be having some ... feelings about how this whole night went down. I sure do. What his dad said was awful, but the way his grandmother stepped in — that was shocking in the best way possible.

Not to mention how we both separately declared that this thing between us is real.

I’m pretty sure I’ve experienced the full range of human emotion in just one day.

I roll on my side in the tiny bed to face him. When he does likewise, our faces are close, but neither of us seem to mind.

“So, today was a lot,” I say.

He chuckles weakly. I take it as a good sign.

“Are you doing okay?”

He nods. “Yeah. Surprisingly, I think I am. I ... I’m not even thinking about him that much. I just keep hearing what my grandmother said, how she stood up for me.”

“She’s a badass.”

“Makes me wish I told her sooner. I just always assumed...”

I reach out to pet his stubbled cheek. “Sometimes people surprise us. It doesn’t always go the way you assume it will.”

“I just... If a woman her age can get that news and take it in stride, what excuse does someone like my dad have?”

“What excuse does anyone have, no matter how old they are? Being a bigot is a lot more work than simply letting people live.”

“My dad fits it into his busy schedule.”

“Yeah.”

I trail my finger along his jaw, enjoy the scrape of the stubble on the pad of my thumb. Even though we're this close, I avoid his eyes as I work up to the question that's been humming in the back of my brain ever since that explosion at dinner.

“I get the impression it wasn't so great growing up with him, huh?” I say. “You said ... you always knew. Does that mean he always knew?”

Spencer exhales a sigh.

“You don't have to answer,” I add quickly.

“No, it's okay. I've wanted to tell you. It just makes how I was in high school sound even worse. But yeah, I always knew... I had a friend in the neighborhood. We snuck some wine into his tree house when we were twelve and thirteen. I guess it, uh, lowered my defenses, you know? The stuff I'd been hiding from for so long kinda just came out.

“We didn't do anything, but when they found us it looked like we were going to. That was the last I ever saw of Jimmy. And Dad. He, um, he made sure it would never happen again.”

Spencer winces. Several pieces fall into place all at once. The way he quietly, drunkenly said the name Jimmy that one time. The way he seems to have no language for who he is or what he wants. The way he acted in high school.

“He made you scared to be gay,” I say.

He nods. “And then I turned all that hate outward and made you scared.”

His throat bobs. I rub my wandering thumb over his lips, shuffling a little closer.

“It didn’t really work, did it?” I say.

“No,” he breathes against my lips.

“Fear never does. Not forever. Not when you want something bad enough.”

What I want in this moment is Spencer Marsh, my high school bully, my tormentor for four years, the man I’m quickly coming to adore. What he did sucked, but that’s not the man he is today, that’s not the man lying in my bed with me. And after everything that happened today, I’m ready to leave that hurt kid in the past and embrace the adult he’s become, the one who stood up to a father who wields fear and college tuition like a cudgel.

“I love your mom’s house,” he says.

I pause, a little startled. Didn’t expect that to be the next thing he said.

“I know it’s kind of small and stuff,” I say.

“No, it perfect. It’s so ... warm. I understand how you

became who you are, how you do what you do at the café.”

Emotion clogs my throat in a swift torrent. Why am I getting choked up over that? I guess I assumed he’d sneer at least a little at this place after growing up in that nice big house.

“She worked really hard for this,” I say. “She still works hard, but I won’t let her help me with college. She deserves a break after getting me this far on her own.”

“What about your dad?”

“Never knew him. Never wanted to. He left her the moment she got pregnant. It was always just me and Mom.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Why? Sure, we had it tough in some ways, but we always had each other. There was never a moment in my life when I thought she wasn’t fully in my corner.”

He pauses for a beat. “That sounds nice.”

“She’s in your corner now too, you know.”

He laughs, watery and weak, all the day’s exhausting emotions exhaled out in that sound. It’s hard to remember ever hating this guy, this boy who’s so obviously busted and in need of repair.

“It’s gonna be okay,” I say. “No matter what, it’ll work out.”

“There’s no way he’s paying for next semester.”

“There are other ways to pay for school than relying on a shitty, manipulative parent. I’ll help you. Or you don’t have to

keep going to school at all. I mean, if you're only going for him, just stop. Take a year off or something."

"I'm not just going for him," Spencer says. "I know it sounds dumb, but I really do like physical education. I like getting people to realize how many awesome things their bodies can do."

"Then we'll figure it out. I promise. I know it's scary, but you aren't alone. Me, Mom, Joe, the other frat guys, everyone at the café. None of us are going to let you fall."

He looks me in the eye for the first time all night. As big and physical as he might be, he feels so small in that moment, so breakable.

"I'm really fucking scared," he says. "But also kind of insanely happy."

I can't stand it anymore. I pull him to my mouth, kissing him slowly and softly, savoring the scratch of his stubble against my face. As he has so many times these past weeks, Spencer melts under my touch, instantly pliable, instantly mine.

I snake an arm around his waist, nudging him a little closer. Our legs tangle around each other, our chests meeting.

"Rhett," he breathes.

"Mmm."

"Rhett, I want you."

"I want you too, baby."

"No, I mean. I want... I want you to fuck me."

I pause, drawing back to search his face through the dark.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” he says. “I want to be yours. All yours.”

“You already are.”

He smiles sheepishly. “Please. I really ... I really want to know what it feels like ... having you inside me.”

Christ, how am I supposed to say no to a request like that? My cock responds before my mouth, and judging from the way Spencer wiggles his hips, he feels my answer loud and clear.

“Alright,” I say. “Anything for my little slut.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Spencer

I'M DOING THIS. I'm actually doing this.

I lie on the bed with my head spinning while Rhett rummages around in his backpack. We only packed the bare essentials for this little weekend getaway, but apparently for Rhett that included condoms and lube.

My chest is stuttering when he returns to the bed. After the roller coaster this day has been, I don't even know what to feel. I'm acting on pure instinct, trusting desires I've spent my whole life squashing.

The moment he touches me to peel my shirt off over my head, my whole body relaxes. There's no more doubt, just the thrill of being in his hands. My father can scream and take away tuition money, but he can't change the way I light up when Rhett's full attention turns to me.

He sits up between my knees to take off his shirt. Then he loosens his fly, but doesn't actually take his pants off. He

leaves them clinging to his hips as he crawls over me to kiss me against the mattress, his mattress, the one he slept on all throughout high school. His warm, familiar scent rises from the sheets, and my whole body relaxes.

He pushes up on his hands.

“God, I can’t wait to make you mine.”

A giddy flutter trills in my chest. Fucking him was incredible. It made me feel insane. But somehow the thought of being *his*, of letting him claim me this way, is an even bigger thrill.

I run my hands over his smooth chest. “I can’t wait.”

I mean that literally. My body is a livewire. I need him soon or I might vibrate out of my own skin.

Rhett understands without further words. He lowers his body atop mine, grinding his hips down against me, but it isn’t enough. There’s still so much fabric between us, and I won’t be satisfied until it’s gone.

I flip us over. I don’t know if I’m supposed to or not. Are there any rules here as long as we’re both enjoying it?

“Eager,” Rhett muses.

I fix him with a heavy look. “I told you. I can’t wait any longer.”

“Don’t let me stand in your way.”

I don’t. I clumsily get out of my pants, then pull on his, not satisfied until we’re both bare. Fuck, he’s beautiful like this. I allow myself the indulgence of running my hands along

his lean body, feeling my way from slim hips to smooth chest. Then I climb onto him, straddling his waist.

And that's where I pause.

I don't actually know what happens next. I did this to him, but he was already ready. He already knew how to do this. I don't.

Thankfully, Rhett picks up where I falter. He opens the lube, slicking up his fingers before hiking me a little closer so he can reach behind me.

"Fuck my mouth," he says.

He slides his fingers around me, encouraging me forward. I need no further invitation to ease my dick past those plump, soft lips and into his waiting mouth. He hollows out his cheeks as I brace against the headboard behind him and sink my hips down into that wet, welcoming heat.

"Fuck, your mouth is so good," I groan.

My body has learned to leap eagerly into the attention his tightening lips and searching tongue feeds me. It's familiar now, but no less explosive for that. I moan, hips rolling on their own, searching for the edge inside his mouth.

It almost makes me forget what I asked him for, but then his fingers dip lower, teasing at my hole. I've only felt that a couple times, but it's Rhett, so it doesn't take much before I'm relaxing into the touch, welcoming him inside me. His fingers squirm deeper. When he curls them, I almost lose it inside his mouth, my voice leaping out.

He forces me back. “Careful,” he says. “My mom is sleeping here, you know.”

Shit. I forgot all about the tiny apartment and his mother in the next room over. She’ll hate me if she hears me getting fucked by her son on the same day I met her.

I quiet myself with an effort, but it’s hard with his fingers working inside me, petting over my prostate, loosening me up. I’m rocking on his hand, riding his fingers as my body screams for more. But he just keeps fingering me, leaving me dancing along the edge.

“Rhett, please. I can’t...”

He pries his fingers free. “Fine,” he says. “But a cock is not fingers, you know. And you better not wake up Mom.”

I nod, already scooting backward. All his warnings are very considerate and all, but I’ve never been so sure I wanted something in my entire life.

I reach his hips, then pause for a moment. I’ve put condoms on myself, but never on another man, and suddenly that sounds wildly appealing. I find the condom and tear it open, then hold his thick cock in my hand, slowly rolling the protection onto it. Funny, I always thought of this as something dull and necessary, something that broke the mood, but going slow, teasing the condom onto him one inch at a time, squeezing him as I do it — it produces the most delicious flush in Rhett’s cheeks. He’s chewing his lip by the time I finally get the thing on.

“That part is *not* supposed to be that sexy,” he says.

We both laugh, ragged and broken, harsh puffs of breath heated by our desire.

“Get on me, straight boy,” he says. “I need you.”

Everything in me wants him with a hunger that threatens to burn through me. I slick up his cock and shift forward, then angle him at my hole.

And ... and then I'm doing it. I'm sinking down him. It's tentative and slow and strange at first. And yeah, it's definitely more than fingers, a lot more. But it's happening and the more I feel him inside me, the more I want to feel him inside me. Even if my brain doesn't quite know what to do with this sensation yet, my body sure as hell does. I'm burning, so hot I'm sweating before I even have him inside me all the way. By the time I manage it, I'm panting like I just finished a race.

We both pause, frozen, delirious with the knowledge we're connected in this way. Rhett looks like he might speak, but I don't need anymore words. I only need him.

I rock my hips experimentally, and he shudders. Christ, I caused that. The feel of my body made him react like that. That knowledge alone is enough to melt away the lingering strangeness, the pieces of my brain that are freaking out because this is new and different and *what are we even doing?* That enraptured breath blows all that aside, leaving only a desire to see it again.

Rhett sets his hands on my hips. We move together, setting a slow, easy pace as my body adjusts. His cock is stretching me, filling me in places I scarcely knew existed. Just

the knowledge that it's *him* inside me doing that is enough to have my heart racing around my chest in frantic loops.

He slides one hand down to my cock and pumps. My body jerks in response, moving me harder along his cock. We both have to bite off moans to stay quiet, especially because Rhett doesn't let up. He keeps stroking me, and every pump sends sparks through my whole body. No handy compares to what this feels like in conjunction with his cock filling me, pushing against my walls, grinding over my prostate as I move.

"You look so fucking good like this," he says. "Let me watch you come on my cock, baby."

I surge my hips, eager to give him what he wants. Not that it'll be difficult. I wasn't sure how this would go before it started, but now that I have him, all of him, there's no doubt left in my mind.

I brace on his chest to jerk my hips harder. He moves his hand in time, always staying right there with me, going at whatever pace I set. When he moves his hips, it's almost blinding.

"Th-that feels ... really good," I manage. "Rhett, that feels so good. Oh God."

"Shh, I know, baby," he says. "Come on my cock for me. You can do it."

"I'm gonna. Fuck, I'm gonna."

He keeps stroking as I throw myself at him. My eyes squeeze shut as I chase the bliss inside me, chase it all the way

up to a white hot edge that sizzles through my whole body.

I come so hard it's like driving into a wall. I'm delirious with release, my ass clenching around him like it's trying to get him even closer, wring even more pleasure out of this.

He releases my cock as I fall forward against him. Rhett wraps his arms around me, jerking his hips up at me a few more times before he moans softly against my shoulder and goes still. But I'm still a mess atop him, a quivering heap of limbs. I'm so light I could float away, so blissed out I barely notice him easing his softening cock out of me.

I don't know if we were loud, but I know that right now I don't care. I know that I feel him everywhere, all through my body, and I wouldn't trade it for anything in the world.

"Rhett," I say against him, the lone syllable of his name containing so many jumbled words I'm too incoherent to untangle right now.

He kisses my shoulder. "Spencer Marsh, you are incredible."



I WAKE BEFORE HIM. Sharing his little bed required a fair amount of tossing and turning, but we managed it after we cleaned ourselves off. I was so messed up and sex-sleepy that I really didn't care by the time we crawled under the sheets.

I wake with his back against mine and slip quietly out of the sheets. I throw on my T-shirt and jeans before padding out

of his room.

The rest of the apartment seems to be empty, but there's a pile of dishes in the sink and I go right for them. Rhett's mom is going to love me. I'll make sure of it.

I put the water on a low trickle and move slowly so nothing rattles. The work is simple and steadying, and I kind of need simple and steadying after last night. Having Rhett fuck me was more than I ever imagined it would be, more than I even prepared myself for it to be. I know I want it again, but there's less urgency in that now. After yesterday, I'm ready to do this beside him. In truth, I might not even have a choice. This is who I am. This is the man I want to be. And Rhett is inextricably a part of that.

A bedroom door opens, but it isn't Rhett. It's his mom. I hastily turn off the kitchen sink.

"Sorry, did I wake you? I was trying to be quiet."

She blinks sleepily. Her blonde hair is as bright and warm as Rhett's. "You're doing the dishes?"

"I thought I should help out a little, since I barged into your home and everything."

Her eyebrows raise. She shuffles into the kitchen and rummages through pantries. "Spencer, right? Do you like chocolate pancakes?"

"I'm not sure I've ever had them."

"What? Well, we're going to remedy that right now. If my son is bringing home such a considerate and nice boy, I'm

going to at least make sure he knows about chocolate pancakes.”

She gets to work while I finish with the dishes, and holy crap, I love this woman. She’s so kind, so warm. I can see how Rhett ended up the way he did. She’s welcomed me with open arms, and I’ve done absolutely nothing to deserve it.

Except, apparently in her eyes, I have.

“Rhett will hate me if he hears me say this,” she says while flipping pancakes, “but I’m really glad he finally met someone nice.” She smiles over at me where I’m drying off dishes. “It makes a mother feel good, knowing someone else cares about her boy as much as she does, knowing he has someone with him when he’s not home.”

Emotions well up all over again. I’m not sure how many more I can take before this weekend ends. But I calm down enough to formulate a reply.

“Thanks,” I say. “He’s really ... special to me. And I’m going to make sure he knows that every single day.”

She pats my cheek. “I can tell. And he feels the same. I’m positive. A mother knows these things.”

Does he? Can he? I want to believe her, but a piece of me remains scared, even after last night.

I need to know for sure. I need to be positive.

But most of all, I need to earn it.

And I think I suddenly know how.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Rhett

WE STAY WITH MOM the rest of the weekend. She loves Spencer. Like, she almost loves him too much. The guy does the dishes once and replaces her own damn son.

We see Spencer's mom, grandmother and brother once more, but it's out at some restaurant, and his dad isn't invited. I have to admit, it's the most awkward meal of my freaking life. But we survive it, somehow, and head back to school on Sunday night.

We're both exhausted by the time we get back, so I don't take any offense that we go to our separate dorms that night. I need a second to breathe just as much as Spencer. He kisses me as he drops me off at Ivers', then he heads back to his frat house.

My bed in the cramped dorm room never looked so damn good. But as I fall into it, I find myself tossing and turning, incapable of falling asleep regardless of how tired I am.

And then it hits me.

Spencer isn't here. He has been for the past two nights. That's not a lot of time, but I've already grown accustomed to his body being close to mine, his arm draped over my waist, his warmth against my back. Because...

Because I'm falling for Spencer Marsh.



MY CO-WORKERS at the café totally know.

I still haven't seen Spencer again when I return to work on Tuesday night, but that hasn't taken the skip out of my step. Mal notices the second I show up to set up before the first customers arrive, but I dodge every suggestion.

My first customer of the night is a regular, in so much as we have regulars at this point. Stacy has come by at least twice before now, and she dives right into the party she was at last weekend. I'm happy to follow along, reveling in her tale of some jerk who danced with her friend while she was in the bathroom.

"I just want to meet one nice guy," Stacy sighs. "What am I going to do if I don't have a date by Halloween?"

"Wear something sexy and tear up every party in a five-mile radius," I suggest.

"Oh my God, yes, but it has to be the sexiest costume ever. Help me think of ideas."

I'm happy to launch into an exploration of the weirdest sexy costume ideas we can come up with while we enjoy our tea. Sexy nurses and nuns are fine and all, but everyone has seen those a million times. We go way further afield, brainstorming sexy dinosaurs, sexy Twister boards, sexy scuba divers (the air tank will obviously be full of booze).

"You guys should do something for Halloween," Stacy says.

"Oh, don't worry, I'm sure Mal is already planning to dress us all up."

He hasn't said anything yet, but there's no way he's going to let an opportunity like that pass.

Stacy squeals with delight. "That is so cute. I hope you do it!"

It's not a bad idea. I tuck that one away to bring up later as I finish up with Stacy and start cleaning up our cups to get ready for the next customer. The first theme night went really well, and Halloween is an obvious opportunity to do that sort of thing again. Plus, Mal will probably have a thousand ideas for it. As long as he doesn't overwork himself trying to dress us all up in elaborate costumes, it could be great. We just have to set the theme night on a day other than the one when everyone will be going to their big parties.

I have four more customers for the night. The next three go pretty smoothly. One is someone brand new and clearly nervous, but within five minutes she's relaxing and talking about her crush on a professor. Next is a group of two. I've

seen them here for Trent and Gabriel before. They're easy to chat with and good tippers, so I hope they're planning to come back for Mal at some point, too.

I head to the employees-only area after the duo leaves, cleaning up and taking a breather before the last customer. I straighten out my tie, make sure my vest and suit pants still look relatively fresh, comb a hand through my hair. I'm beat, but there's only one customer left, and the tips tonight have been fantastic, so I just need to push through it and I can head straight to bed after.

An image of falling into Spencer's bed flickers through my mind. The worst part is that it's not even sexual. My fantasy is purely about sleeping with him, like, literally *sleeping*.

The allure of drifting off with his arms around me is so appealing I lose track of time until Albert pokes his head into the employees-only area.

"Ah, there you are."

"Sorry," I say. "Kinda tired. I got distracted. Is my last customer here?"

"Yes. Well, no. I don't believe you have any more customers tonight."

"Huh? No, I definitely had five today. Did something happen?" Cancellations aren't unheard of, but they are pretty rare.

"Nothing happened. Why don't you come see for yourself?"

I have no idea what the hell Albert is on about. I follow him out of the employee area bewildered—

And stop dead in my tracks.

Mal, Trent and Gabriel are already with their last customers of the night, but no one is paying attention to their tea. They're all staring at the man standing in the doorway leading to the basement, the man carrying flowers and wearing slacks and a button down. The man looking right at me.

“Marsh?” I say. “What are you doing here?”

He steps down into the café. Every eye follows him, but I can't even get freaked out. I'm too stunned. What the hell is he doing? Why does he have flowers?

He holds them out when he reaches me. “These are for you.”

I take the bouquet, a simple but pretty arrangement he probably got at the local grocery store.

“What is this? What's going on?” I say.

“Rhett, I'd really like to take you out on a date. If you want to go.”

“Right now?”

“Right now.”

“But...”

I look around me, but even Albert is smirking quietly. The bastard. He knew. He knew my last client of the night wasn't real. How the hell...

“I still don't get it,” I say. “What are you doing?”

“I’m asking you out,” Spencer says. “For real. I want to take you on a date, like, a real one. I’ve owed you this since high school. Please, I’ve got everything ready.”

“I’m supposed to work.”

“That won’t be an issue,” Albert says smoothly.

“Just say yes already,” Trent throws in.

“It’s so cute,” Gabriel whispers to him.

“Don’t torture the poor boy,” Mal says.

I have no escape. Not that I’m searching for one. I’m just stunned that everyone around me apparently conspired to get me on a date.

“All of you knew this was going to happen,” I say.

Smiles and nods seal my fate.

“You freaking traitors.”

Mal gets up from where he sits with his client. He takes me by the shoulders, pushing me a step closer to Spencer.

“You can thank us later,” he says. Then, speaking past me, “You better treat our boy to the date of his life, you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Spencer agrees easily.

He passes the flowers to me and holds out his hand.

“So? What do you say?”

He seems genuinely nervous, but I’m still frozen where I stand, Mal’s hands on my shoulders, a bouquet clutched in my arms. Never in a million years would I have predicted

something like this. Even after all the wild ups and downs Spencer and I have endured these past several weeks, I still can't quite wrap my head around him coming here all dressed up to ask me out on a date, like, a formal freaking *date*.

And he's doing it in front of a bunch of people.

There are the guys who work at the café, but their customers are also here. And this is after he came out to his family, after he came out to his fraternity brothers. I didn't ask him for all this; I would never ask him for all this. If he wanted to ease into things, I wouldn't have protested at all. Instead he's jumping in feet first, and his only fear seems to be that I'll be the one saying no.

As though I can possibly say no.

I shake my head, but a smile sneaks across my mouth.

“You are crazy, Spencer Marsh. Yes, I'll go on a freaking date with you.”

I've never seen anyone look so damn happy in my life.

Chapter Thirty

Spencer

IT'S A GOOD THING Emi uses social media.

The moment the idea struck me, I started searching for her. I knew I'd need help to pull it off, and she was definitely the best person for the job. Albert doesn't seem like he's on social media, and even if he is, he's kind of terrifying.

Emi was able to hook me up with a rough idea of Rhett's schedule, and some ideas to make this whole thing work. It still took me the whole weekend, all of Monday and most of Tuesday to sort it out. I cut a class on Monday evening to drive out to the location and set up a few things.

As I lead Rhett out of the Boyfriend Café and toward my car parked at the curb, I pray my preparations haven't been either stolen or blown away by the cool fall breeze raking through Montridge.

"Sooner or later you're going to have to tell me where we're going," Rhett says.

I open my passenger side door and usher him inside like a fancy valet. “You’ll see,” I say, then close the door.

It requires an effort not to skip to the other side. Gotta play it cool so I don’t look like a complete dork on my first real date with a guy. I’ve liked plenty of the girls I’ve dated, genuinely liked them, but there’s an extra frisson in the air as I start the car and drive toward our secret destination.

“You’re really not going to tell me?” Rhett says after a few minutes of silence.

“Nope,” I say.

“This is giving ‘body found on the side of the highway’ vibes.”

I shoot him a sly look. “We both know you’d win that fight.”

He might be a little smaller than me, but from the moment we reconnected at C U of M, Rhett has had me wrapped around his finger. Our destination tonight is just about the only thing I’ve ever denied him, and I’m vibrating with excitement as I strain to hold back.

God, I hope he likes it.

“Fine, but at least plug in your phone and play some music,” Rhett says. “The silence is freaking me out.”

I go cold. “I, uh, I can’t right now.”

“Give me it, then. I’ll do it.”

“No,” I say way too sharply. “I mean, uh, why don’t you just use your own phone? I’m sure whatever you have on there

is great.”

His suspicion burns against the side of my face, but I stubbornly focus on the highway. Eventually, he gives up and plugs in his phone, shuffling through until he finds what I’m assuming is the latest Taylor Swift album. I recognize the second song, and it’s a huge relief. Emi steered me right.

Rhett sings along to the music until I put on my blinker and angle toward the upcoming exit. Then he sits up straighter.

“Hey, wait. I know this exit,” he says. “This is the park I took you to that one time.”

Damn it. Well, there wasn’t much hope of avoiding that. I’m just going to have to hope the rest of the surprise is worth it.

“Wait, are we just going to bang in the back seat again?” Rhett says. “No, you’re kind of dressed up. A picnic. A movie. Is there a projector back there?”

He twists in his seat to scout out the back of the car, but he won’t find any incriminating evidence there.

“Will you stop trying to guess?” I say.

“I can’t help it. It’s a puzzle. I have to solve it.”

“That is an extremely ‘engineering major’ thing to say. Chill. We’ll be there soon and you’ll see.”

“Ugh. Fine.”

He pretends to pout, but it mostly just looks adorable. He’s still wearing his slacks and tie and vest from the café, which I always thought looked amazing on him.

Coincidentally, it's perfect for what I have planned.

I pull into the lot beside the hiking trail, the same place we went that one night. It's surreal, the distance between that night and this one, the chasm between who I was then and who I am now. Unsure, bumbling Spencer was a mess who tumbled into Rhett's lap with no clue of who he was or what he wanted. Now, I'm the one leading things.

I turn off the car and step out, hurrying around to Rhett's side to open the door for him and offer him my hand. He accepts, bringing his bouquet with him as I help him out. I lead him into the center of the lot before releasing his hand.

"Okay, just stay right exactly there," I say.

His brows knit together as I back away. To all appearances, he's just standing alone in a little parking lot overhung with trees while I run back to my car. He has to be thinking this is all crazy, but I hope to prove him wrong in about twenty seconds.

I reach the back of my car and click the button on my key fob to unlock the trunk. It clicks, but I don't throw it open quite yet.

"When we were kids, I made high school suck for you," I say.

"Spencer."

"No, hold on. Let me finish," I say. I ease the trunk open just a tiny bit. "I made high school suck. So much so that you felt you couldn't be yourself. You couldn't do a lot of the stuff that most kids find to be some of the best memories of their

lives. I took that from you. Because I was insecure and scared and jealous. Because I was hiding. All my frustration came out on you, and it wasn't right."

"That's so long ago," Rhett says. "It's okay. We're past it."

"I know. We are. But even so, I wanted to make it up to you one last time."

I finally open the trunk and reach inside. I hold my breath as I click the button on the remote—

And the forest lights up around us.

Rhett gasps, eyes going to the treetops around us. String lights sparkle like stars hovering overhead. They bathe the parking lot in soft blue light. The same blue as his eyes.

The color isn't an accident, and neither is the first song that plays on my "High School Prom For Rhett" playlist on my phone. "Take Me to Church."

When I face him again, his lips are twisted into an impish grin. "You can't be serious."

I stride right up to him as Hozier begins singing and offer my hand. "Will you dance with me?"

"To this?"

"Yeah."

"God, Marsh. You're ridiculous."

But he's smiling more every moment. He sets the bouquet on the ground and accepts my invitation, sliding his arms around my neck. My hands go to his hips and we sway while

Hozier belts out from the portable speakers hidden in my trunk.

“The rest of the playlist is less depressing, I swear,” I say. “But I thought this was a good place to start.”

“Very thematic,” he says. “Is church the back seat of your car?”

The smile, the glint in his eyes — it nearly undoes my entire plan. I would drop to my knees right here for him, pray to him with more reverence than I ever did in church. But I’m determined to give him this silly, stupid dance under the string lights that glow the same soft, cool blue as his eyes.

For a while, we just rock quietly, holding each other. Then Rhett says, “I’m sorry about how things went with your dad.”

“It was long overdue,” I say.

“Maybe, but still. I can’t help feeling like I just went and made your life harder.”

I’m shaking my head before he even finishes. “You didn’t make me do any of this. I’ve been chasing you from the start.”

“But I told you I couldn’t live in the closet.”

“Yeah. You did. And it made me realize I couldn’t live that way either. I was dying, Rhett. I didn’t realize it, but I was. If my dad doesn’t prefer a son who’s alive and thriving, then I don’t need that relationship.”

The song changes to something far more upbeat, but we fall still, just holding each other and gazing into each other’s

eyes. Rhett's pick me apart, bore into me like he's unraveling every little piece of me. I'm not sure exactly what he finds, but it must be good because he leans up and kisses me without another word.

The world seems to glow brighter. Maybe it's just the lights overhead shifting from cool blue to a rosy red, but I think it's more the way Rhett cups my face, the way he lingers against my mouth, the way his belief in me pours through me the moment our mouths make contact.

We're supposed to dance more. I set up a whole soundtrack. We're both kind of dressed up for the occasion (even if in his case it's accidental). But I can't seem to stop kissing him, feeling him here with me in this moment that belongs only to us. After all we've done, all the sneaking, all the back and forth, all the confusion on my part, we're finally here. It's just us, the rest of the world be damned, and it feels ... perfect. After all this time, the world makes sense.

And it's all thanks to him.

He breaks away with a gasp. "Oh my God. I love this song."

I didn't even notice the change. It's Taylor Swift, I think. Rhett is tugging on my hand, forcing me to jump around to the beat. Soon, we're giggling like kids, making total fools of ourselves as we dance terribly and the string lights I set up in the trees flicker through colors. They're supposed to match the music, but they only sort of manage the job. Neither of us care. We're giddy and stupid and free, and nothing in the world

compares to that.

We sit on the edge of my open trunk when the song finishes and something more sedate replaces it. We're both out of breath and laughing softly between gasps.

"Oh, I almost forgot," I say, reaching behind me. "I brought drinks and snacks too."

"You thought of everything," Rhett says, accepting the glass I hand to him.

"Well, you can't have a prom without someone spiking the punch, right? Though, I guess this isn't really spiked. It's just actual wine."

I pour us both a glass. We clink them together, then sip the fizzy, sweet beverage. It compliments the cool fall evening with a hint of warming cinnamon among the fruitiness.

"This is good," Rhett says.

"Emi helped me pick it," I say. "Actually, she helped with most of this. The lights, the speaker, your schedule. I owe her big."

"In that case, I owe her too. Still, I can't believe you did all this, even with help."

"I did maybe skip a class to get those lights hung. And then I had to pray no one came and stole them or took them down. And I guess I'll have to come back with the ladder tomorrow to take them down. But it's totally worth it."

Rhett sets a hand on my leg. "I'll help. It's the least I can do after you did all this for me."

I might tell him he doesn't have to, that I'll handle it, but I really don't care about any of that shit right now. I'm falling into his eyes again, watching the colors sift through his hair, reveling in the feel of that hand on my thigh.

"Hey," he says, leaning close, his breath sweet with the wine, "you know what else tends to happen on prom night?"

"Church?" I guess.

His smile widens. "Church."

Chapter Thirty-One

Rhett

I CAN'T PULL HIM into that cramped back seat fast enough.

I thought we'd come back and take things slow, test out what a real relationship might feel like. I was content to wait for Spencer and let him set the pace.

Then tonight happened.

And it was magical.

This cheesy, silly gesture has me all fluttery. The lights, the wine, the playlist that Emi definitely helped him put together — it's all perfect. It's all him. How can I be less than charmed at discovering this sweet, thoughtful man rising from the ashes of our mutually troubled past?

We tumble into the back seat. I pull him down on top of me, loving the way his larger body feels atop mine. One door stands open; the lights and music are still going outside. We would be ridiculously easy to see if anyone pulled into this parking lot, but neither of us seem to care. We go right for

each other's mouths, kissing more deeply and hungrily than we did while sitting out on the bumper. Those soft kisses were wonderful, but that time has passed. I need him now, and not in any polite sort of way.

I cup his face, enjoying the scratch of his stubble. He's shaved it down a little more than usual, but it's never really gone, and I'm glad. It looks sexy on him. Feels sexy, too. I'd love to have it scratching up my thighs, but that would be a tight squeeze in a back seat that's already cramped with us lying on top of each other.

I shift my hips, searching for him, and grumble in frustration when I find our pants in the way. But he just goes on kissing me, nibbling at my lips, swiping his tongue into my mouth, doing everything but getting these damn clothes out of the way.

"You're teasing me," I say.

"Never," he says. "I'm just taking my time. What's the rush?"

I reach between us, grabbing his cock through his pants. He grunts and goes still.

"The rush is that I want you," I say. "Now."

His lips twist into a smile. "So mean and demanding."

"You like me that way."

"Mmm," he agrees, but he's still just kissing me, even as he lowers his hips down so I can feel his hard desire rubbing against me.

I hook my arms under his and grab his shoulders, pulling him down. His mouth is at my ear, his breaths puffing against me. I shift my hips to meet him, craving more but incapable of grasping it. We really are just horny teenagers dry humping in the back seat after prom, which is such a hilarious image I almost lose it and start laughing. No one in high school would have ever placed Spencer and I here, but it feels so right, so good, that I'm going crazy from what might count as only second base.

"Fuck, why does this feel so good?" I moan aloud.

"Because it's you," he answers, his voice so close, so low and warm as it drips in my ear.

And he's right. It's because it's me. It's him. It's us. So just about anything feels incredible, even dry humping in a cramped back seat with all of our clothes on. It doesn't matter as long as it's his breath rasping beside my ear, his body so heavy and solid atop mine, his hips grinding down to meet me, enticing me with every sway.

"Spencer," I gasp, "we're going to be a mess if you don't get these clothes off us."

"Nnn."

His groan is pain and bliss rolled into one, and I can certainly relate. He reaches between us and scrambles for zippers and closures. I try to help, but still we don't get very far. Our pants are open, but the rest of his clothes are on, and he does nothing more than shove my shirt up a bit. That, apparently, is the most we can countenance before we need to

touch each other again.

Except that Spencer starts feeling around on the floor, cursing at himself as he does. He's still lying on me, but his attention is on the dark floor as he feels around.

"Oh thank God," he says, popping back up with lube.

"You planned well," I say.

"Can you blame me? We don't tend to last very long around each other."

"Not only do I not blame you, I applaud you. But for the love of God, no more talking."

He seems happy to oblige, pausing only long enough to squirt lube into his palm. Then, blessedly, he readjusts and takes us both in hand, holding our cocks tightly against each other. Spencer strokes the lube along both of us in one long, slow drag, and I gasp so deeply I'm dizzy.

"Oh fuck," I breathe.

His hand is large and strong. He easily holds both of us. Even with the lube, the friction, the contact, is incredible as he pumps up and down us. It's not just that, though. It's the way we're pressed together, the way he's working both of us at once, the way our breath hitches in time as we experience his hand in unison.

He props himself up on an arm, watching my face as he goes on stroking, still slow and steady and patient. I must look like a mess with my mouth opening around gasps and my eyebrows curling and heat rising to my cheeks, but Spencer

gazes down at me like he's totally enthralled.

I reach up, guiding him down to my lips, careful not to disrupt the important work his hand is still doing below. We kiss in sloppy, brief bursts, lips crashing together for a moment before we both need to pant for air again. Soon, we're nearly drooling on each other as much as kissing, too lost in the warmth bubbling through our bodies for focus or grace.

It doesn't matter. I'm all sensation, all the warm friction produced by his hand and our cocks. I jerk my hips toward it, desperate for more, but this time around it's Spencer in control.

Damn, that's hot.

He's been pretty passive in a lot of these encounters, happy to do exactly as I say. And don't get me wrong, that's hot as shit. But seeing a more aggressive side of him definitely has its upsides.

Like the way he growls as the friction builds.

It's low in his chest, but I can *feel* it almost as much as I can hear it, and damn, it's delicious, raw and hungry and dirty. His hips snap harder, and I respond in kind, trying to keep up with him. He's set on his course and charging after it. This time, at least, I'm the one along for the ride.

I throw my arms around his neck and hang on as he sweeps me away. He thrusts into his hand harder and faster. We fall out of rhythm, but it doesn't matter. We're a mess of heat and desire, of jerky hips and roaming mouths and clutching hands. I find his hair, thread my fingers through the

short strands, pull even as I hold on.

He grumbles low, the sound seeming to pass right from his chest to mine. The car is hot and stuffy, full of our moans, our breaths, our billowing body heat. The music is still thumping, a distant echo of the way our hearts pound. And it's all so much, so good, so loud, so everywhere and everything all at the same time.

My eyes flutter shut. My feet search for anything to push against so I can shove myself closer to him, but there isn't much space back here that isn't being used. Everywhere I go, it's just him, just us, our bodies claiming this space with every thrust.

"Spencer," I cry.

He moans like my voice is the sweetest thing he's ever heard. Then his teeth are on my shoulder, right beside my neck, like he's hanging on, like he needs to cling to me with every part of himself.

I hold him more tightly, nails digging into his shirt. The car is rocking. Our moans are drowning out the music. The whole world is crashing in on this one, singularly spectacular point in the universe where our bodies connect.

It smashes me like a punch. I'm delirious as the orgasm hits, arching and arching and arching at his hand, my cock sputtering over my torso.

Spencer is still stroking, still throwing himself at his hand. The overstimulation burns, but I can't bear to ask him to stop. He's so beautiful when he breaks, so magnificent when

pleasure overtakes him and he moans my name into my skin in one long, long syllable.

He sags atop me, somehow even heavier than before, though it's probably just because I'm so blissed out and limp that I can't even hold myself up, let alone him. I let him stay there, enjoy the weight as I swim in the sweet darkness behind my eyes. Lights flash, painting the gloom. The music returns in drips, something by Queen, I think.

"Okay, this song was for me," Spencer says. "I always liked classic rock. Wasn't sure we'd actually get this far in the playlist."

I burst out laughing, way too loud and way too hard. I hug him against me, kissing any skin along his neck I can reach.

"You incredible dork," I say.

He hums happily. "Yeah. Your incredible dork."

"All mine."

He sighs. "I'm glad we got to do this, even if it is super long overdue. When I think about how we could have had this so long ago, how much time we missed out on just because I was such a prick..."

I ease up my hug so I can cup his face and gaze into his dark eyes. "Enough of that, okay? We can't undo the past, but discovering you now, discovering who you are today, has been the most amazing, wonderful, incredible experience of my life. And if I had to go through high school to get it, then so be it. You were worth the wait, Spencer Marsh."

The look on his face is utter joy. He doesn't speak, lips and throat working, eyes shining. When he finally speaks, his voice is shaky with emotion. "You were worth the wait, too."

I pull him down for a soft kiss, sealing those words between us, sealing this night onto our mouths, into our hearts. The lights, the music, the wine — all of it. It'll be with us for a long, long time. Hopefully, it'll be with us forever.

This might just be the best day of my life.

Epilogue

Spencer

Two Years Later

I'M PEELING OFF my cap and gown even before I hop down the stairs into the café. I toss the heavy garment on the floor, immediately spinning to catch Rhett as he skips down the steps and into my arms.

“We did it,” he says as I lift him off his feet and swing him around.

We're both giddy with laughter when I set him back down. He lingers in my arms, his smile turning soft as he gazes up at me.

“We really did it,” he repeats.

I peel off his graduation cap. The past two years have been hard as hell. We both worked a lot while finishing school, which often left us exhausted and with little time for each

other. But we're here, together, diplomas in hand.

Well, not literally in hand. I think that stuff is all digital these days. But it's the sentiment that counts.

I dip down to kiss him. Two years, and the sparks that shoot down my spine every time I kiss him are no less electric.

"We did it," I agree.

Someone slaps Rhett on the shoulder. We ease apart.

"Congratulations," Albert says. He's wearing the same dark blue gown Rhett is.

"You too," Rhett says. "Ready to celebrate?"

"Hmm."

I chuckle to myself. Two years, and I still barely know Albert. He's about as opposite of Rhett as it gets, but they have a weird sort of symbiotic relationship. Rhett gets in trouble; Albert gets him out. Albert speaks in grunts; Rhett translates. It works, and it's kind of hilarious.

Speaking of opposites attracting... Trent and Gabriel bumble in next, Gabriel already talking a mile a minute while Trent just smiles and watches him. They're also wearing gowns. The only ones not in graduation gowns are Mal, who's a year younger, and Jack, the chef the café eventually found. Oh, and there's David, who's mostly only here to smirk at Albert, but that's a story for another time.

It's not just the guys, though. This café had an impact on a lot of people. A few of the regular customers are here, plus, of course, Emi, who's been both a menace and me and Rhett's

biggest cheerleader these past two years. I'll probably be indebted to her for a long time for the number of times she helpfully ignored the noise we made in Rhett's bedroom or stayed out late to give us a little privacy.

Even a few guys from the fraternity are here. We really did end up being like brothers these past two years. Joe graduated a year ago, but came back to see us younger brothers graduating this time around. Alan and Calvin have their own party to go to, but they're here for the free champagne before they head off. Pug will graduate next year, but that won't stop him from partying as well.

Speaking of champagne, Gabriel pops a cork as I take in this big, crazy group all around us. He sends the cork shooting at the ceiling. Foam bubbles out onto the floor, which Albert scowls at, and Gabriel starts pouring. When everyone has a glass, we all crowd around, this huge, strange group who's come together through the Boyfriend Café. Some of these guys I've gotten to know pretty well. Others, like the one smiling fondly at Mal, are complete mysteries to me. But we're all here at the finish line of another semester, and none of us would have gotten here alone.

"To those who are graduating," Albert says, "congratulations, and good luck in your careers. To those who are not, we're still a family. We still all belong here. This café became home for many of us, and it will always be a refuge, no matter how far apart our lives may take us."

"Hear, hear!" Gabriel says.

“Hear, hear!” everyone agrees.

The glasses clink. I throw back my champagne in one go as someone starts up some music. More drinks come out, along with freshly baked treats courtesy of Jack. The graduation gowns end up in a heap on the floor, everyone choosing more comfortable clothing as we chat about the dizzying, bright, impossible prospect of the future.

Personally, I’m not entirely sure where I’ll be yet. Rhett and I haven’t worked that out yet. We both kind of like the idea of getting out of New Jersey, seeing what somewhere else has to offer. But that’s easier said than done when we don’t even have jobs yet. Whatever we decide, however, we’re sure we’ll do it together, and that makes it infinitely less overwhelming.

“Rhett!”

His mother flies into the room, almost tackling her son with a crushing hug. Tears cling to the corners of her eyes.

“Mom, relax,” Rhett says, but he’s laughing as he catches her.

She pulls back enough to kiss his cheeks. “I’m just so happy. Look at my baby. You did it.”

There’s more in that than simple congratulations, and I know this sweet woman well enough now to hear it. She and Rhett have not had an easy time. Things have always been harder for them, and all those years of struggle are infused in her praise. She knows better than anyone how hard Rhett had to work for things many take for granted.

She turns to me next and opens her arms. “Come here, sweetie. Congratulations.”

I hug her as tightly as if she was my own mother. Her unconditional warmth sometimes makes it feel like she is. She’s every bit as proud of me as her own son, somehow, a fact I’ve learned over weekends spent at her place enjoying home cooked meals and embarrassing stories of Rhett as a little kid.

“Thanks, Miss Ellison,” I say.

We get her a drink and some food. Then my family shows up.

Well, some of them.

Mom and Grandma and Mike scan the crowded basement for me. I wave them over. I’m happy to see them, but we still have some work to do on this relationship. The tension isn’t completely gone. They’ve supported me these past two years; they’ve even gotten dinner with me and Rhett from time to time. But there’s also a distance. We never talk about the fact that Dad isn’t there, that he refuses to be there.

I’ve decided it’s his loss, not mine. My life has been better in the past two years than it was in the two decades that came before.

Thus, I make sure Rhett is right at my side as I greet them.

We endure another round of hugs, then get everyone but Mike a drink.

“Aw, come on,” he pleads.

“You’re underage,” I say.

“Yeah? So? Barely. I’m twenty.”

“I’m not getting Albert in trouble for serving alcohol to a minor. Have you met that guy? He’s pretty scary.”

“Pfft,” Mike says, but then he scans the room and finds the man in question glaring right at him. “Alright, fine,” he grumbles.

He’s at school himself in South Carolina — on dad’s dime, of course. While I’ve scraped things together with my own money, and a bit of help from Grandma, Mike has enjoyed the benefits of being Dad’s preferred son. Not that I hold it against him. Mike has been nothing but supportive. Apparently, he’s gone to bat for me with Dad more than once. I always tell him not to push it, to just take the money and enjoy it, but he insists. Either way, I’m sure he’s enjoying plenty of parties during his own university life. He can miss out on one glass of champagne to keep Albert appeased.

We fall into the easy cadence of graduation conversations. It’s the same stuff over and over, and I’m sure everyone else in the room is doing it too. What are your plans? What kinds of jobs are you looking for? Where will you live? All the usual things.

Then Grandma nudges Mom with her elbow. “Go on, then. Spit it out.”

I knit my eyebrows together. “Spit what out?”

Mom is already looking guilty, and it sends my stomach plummeting into my feet.

“Your father is here,” she says.

Instantly, I go cold. Rhett shifts a little closer, protective and wary.

“He said he wouldn’t bother you unless you wanted to see him,” Mom says. “But it would be really wonderful if you wanted to see him.”

I have to pry my teeth apart to speak. We haven’t seen each other since that dinner. We haven’t even texted. In my mind, he’s still that guy making those cruel jokes, and I can’t imagine two years changing that.

“Is he going to apologize?” I say.

“Yes. That’s ... actually why he’s here.”

Surprise knocks back some of the anger. I’m still about to refuse, but Grandma sets a hand on my shoulder.

“I’m not telling you to forgive him,” she says, “but if you feel okay with it, you might at least see him one more time. This might be the only chance you two have left.”

She’s right, but do I want to give him that chance? Does he even deserve it? He was never a warm man. He was never someone I looked to for comfort or support. Still, there were good times. When I was little, he even coached my baseball team. We bonded over sports, the very field I just graduated in, but is that enough to forge a whole relationship after all of this?

Instinctively, I look to Rhett.

“You don’t have to,” he says, “but this is a safe place to do it. We’re all here, if you want us here. Everyone in this room will have your back the moment you need us.”

That steels my resolve. Dad would be on my turf for once. He’d be the one coming to me, with all my queer friends and my boyfriend around me.

“Okay,” I say. “Out in the back yard.”

Mom looks relieved. “I’ll go get him. He’s in the car.”

Rhett gives me a look, but I smile. “I’ll be right back.”

“Okay, but seriously, call if you need anything. We’re all right here.”

“I know.”

His presence lends me strength as I leave the basement and step out into the back yard. It’s instantly quieter, and I have time to contemplate how this was the first place Rhett and I ever hooked up. What a weird place for me to have this confrontation with Dad.

Mom returns, Dad a pace behind her. She doesn’t say anything, just heads back down to the party. Then it’s just me and him in the back yard, standing awkwardly a few feet apart staring at each other. I could swear he’s grayer than the last time I saw him, and he doesn’t meet my eyes as easily as he used to.

“Congratulations,” he says.

“Yeah. Thanks.” I could be meaner, point out that he

made the last two years harder than they had to be, but what's the point? He knows that as well as I do.

"I'm proud of you," he says. "I mean that."

"Okay." I shove my hands in my pockets, shifting from foot to foot.

He steps closer, but it's stuttery, like he changes his mind halfway through. Then he heaves a sigh that sounds like it's been sitting in his chest for two whole years. "Look, Spence, I..."

Something in me snaps. I can't stand his hesitation, his shyness. Is he trying to get my sympathy? He didn't have to be an asshole. He didn't have to cut me off. All of this was his choice, and I refuse to feel bad about finally standing up for myself.

"I'm still with him," I say before he can utter another word. "Rhett. I'm still dating him. We're going to move in together, make a life."

Dad nods, but it takes him a moment to say, "Alright."

"Is it? Because the last time I saw you it wasn't. My whole life, it wasn't. That's half the reason I ended up here. Rhett saved me. I'd still be an asshole if it weren't for him."

"I get that." He's hanging his head, and I just can't stand the kicked puppy act.

"You get it? Or do you accept it? Because one answer means I'll stay here and talk, and the other means I'm going back to my party with my friends and my *boyfriend* because

that's where I'd prefer to be.”

He doesn't answer for a moment. I'm breathing like I'm in a race, my heart pinging around my chest. I've never stood up to him like this except that one time, and it feels ... *good*. I'm angry, yeah, but more than that I feel powerful. I feel like I'm the one in control of this relationship.

“Listen,” he says, finally looking up from his feet, “I'm not going to pretend I get it. I'm not going to pretend it's just that easy for me. I ... I have work to do. But...” His throat works. “You're my son. And I ... I miss you.”

“You can't miss someone you don't even know.”

“I know. I know. That's why ... I want to get to know you. And him. If you'll let me. I can't promise I'll be great at it, but I'm here telling you I want to try.”

All those years of bullying flash through my head, all the years of shame, all the years of guilt. I internalized all of it, and it ate through me like poison. It made me someone ugly, someone I hated as much as other people hated me. I had to do hard work to dig myself free of that guy. I'm still working on it, honestly. The past four years have been like hammering at a rock to try to find the precious materials locked within it.

I did that work. Me. Me and Rhett, lately. But never Dad. He doesn't know the man who stands before him. We might as well be strangers. Because this man, this me — he's the antithesis of everything my father made me.

All of that makes me hesitate before I accept his offer. Some part of me wants to say yes. He's my dad; how could I

not? But if it's going to cost me an inch of what I've earned on my own, I'd rather have no father at all.

"Fine," I say. He looks up, hopeful. "But it's on my terms, not yours."

He agrees without me even explaining what that means. I take it, for now. If I deserve a second chance, he does too, but I'm not going to just dive head first into this. I'm approaching it slowly. If we're really going to have a relationship, it may need to happen in baby steps.

And maybe that's okay.

Before, you could have looked at us and seen a perfectly "normal" family. Someone might argue that I've upended that, ruined it, but life doesn't have such simple rules. It's not that black and white. Some things are worth waiting for and doing slowly. Like Rhett. And maybe like this new relationship with my father.

I return to the party. So does he. My parents chat with Rhett's mom, and I escape to Rhett. He immediately slides his hands to my waist.

"You okay?" he says.

I consider it a moment, and find the answer is actually pretty easy. "Yeah, I am, actually. I'm great."

I lean down to kiss him. Maybe Dad sees; maybe he doesn't. It's something he'll have to get used to if he's serious about rebuilding trust.

I stroke my thumb along Rhett's cheek. He's beautiful as

he smiles up at me, those cool, light eyes focused just on me. Our friends are all around us. We just graduated C U of M with our chosen degrees in hand. The future is huge and bright and full of potential. Whatever happens next, it's entirely up to us.

“Everything is perfect,” I say.

And for maybe the first time in my life, I mean it.

About the Author

F. A. Ray started writing fiction as a child and has never stopped. When they aren't writing, they enjoy rock climbing and hiking in the beautiful Pacific Northwest, where they live with their partner and cat.

Visit linktr.ee/faraywrites to find out more and get free short stories. You can also sign up for my [Patreon](#), where I post WIPs, updates, bonus scenes, deleted scenes and short stories that don't appear anywhere else.

Pumpkin Spice and Chill

EXCERPT FROM BOYFRIEND CAFÉ BOOK 2

Enjoy this exclusive preview of the first chapter of “Pumpkin Spice and Chill,” the second book in the “Boyfriend Café” series, coming in 2023. You can find updates about the book and sneak peeks at linktr.ee/faraywrites or on [Patreon](#).



Albert

I SPREAD MY LEATHER-BOUND notebook open on my knees. Tiny figures march down the page, neat row after neat row telling the story of the past month.

September was the beginning of the Boyfriend Café. My best friend Rhett came to me with a desperate idea, a wild plan to open a café in my basement, one that would cater to the broken hearts of City University of Montridge. Tea and a

shoulder to cry on. That's what the Boyfriend Café offers, and apparently it works. In our first month, we've had such a steady stream of customers that we've built a hefty backlist.

I say "we," but really, it's "they," Rhett and the others who work at the café. I am simply here to provide the space, keep the books and organize customers. I provide these services free of charge; unlike Rhett, I hardly need the money. And if Rhett himself won't accept my help, I can at least offer my expertise to the café.

Which is what I intend to do now. It is why my notebook sits spread open on my knees as I recline in my customary spot in a lone corner of the basement.

It is just about the last quiet space left in this basement. Rhett has completely transformed the rest of it, laying down soft carpets over the hard concrete, hanging fairy lights in rows across the ceiling, arranging small tables with tablecloths and candles cupped in glass. I contributed a few screens to fence off a private area for the staff of the café, but the plants, the tablecloths, the art on the walls — all of that was Rhett.

I cannot help but admire it.

I may have the money and time to casually volunteer my services, but Rhett started this place out of need. And he has worked diligently to turn it into a success. He even recruited Mal, Trent and Gabriel to work beside him as servers and bring in more customers.

Tonight, the Boyfriend Café bustles. All four servers sit with customers, chatting, brewing tea, laughing,

commiserating. It is a skill I do not possess. Were any of these forlorn college students to come to me with their troubles, I would be at a loss. But Rhett and the others ensure even the most heartbroken customers leave soothed and smiling.

Tea cups empty. Chairs scrape over the floor. Customers hug their servers before leaving. And suddenly the constant hum of chatter and activity dulls to a hush.

The guys loosen their ties and unbutton their vests. The standard “uniform” around here is semi-formal, but it isn’t about formality so much as charm, as near as I can tell. A young man in a crisp white button up and pressed vest has a certain allure. Nevermind that nearly all of those young men are queer.

Rhett drags over a chair and flops into it. His blond hair is mussed after a long night, his blue eyes glassy with exhaustion.

For best friends, we could not be much more different. He is bright and charming, an excellent personality for a server at an establishment such as this. Even his appearance is bright, between the eyes and the hair. Meanwhile, my eyes and hair are dark, tidy, controlled. Contained. Even Mal could not tease my short hair into the sort of swoops he and Rhett wear.

But our differences have never mattered. Indeed, they are more complimentary than divisive, and moments such as now prove why. I could not do Rhett’s job. I could not be charming, could not smile on command and listen to people’s problems all night. But what I have in my lap — the notebook full of

numbers, the logistics, the shuffling of customers — that I can happily provide.

“God, I’m exhausted,” Rhett says.

Mal nods agreement. Gabriel has pulled his chair over as close as he can get it to Trent to doze against his shoulder. Trent is apparently our one non-queer member of this crew, but to look at him and Gabriel, you might not believe it.

“I will not keep you long,” I say. “I just want to discuss the past month briefly while we may.”

No one argues. Tired as they are, they listen to me as I go through the numbers, describing our expenses, our revenue, our ever-increasing waitlist.

“We could easily afford a baker,” I say. “If we charged appropriately for baked goods, you would see no decrease in your revenue, either.”

Rhett rubs at his eyes. “God, I have no idea when I’m going to find a fucking baker. I just don’t have time for it.”

“I understand,” I say. “Allow me.”

Rhett is shaking his head before I even finish. “No way. You already do way more than you should have to. You don’t even get paid.”

“I’ve no need of the money.”

“It’s not about that. It’s about fairness, okay? I can’t have you doing everything you’re already doing and finding us a baker for free. I’ll do it. Maybe Spencer can help.”

“Perhaps,” I offer mildly.

I don't add that I'm glad he has Spencer for support. They did not have the smoothest of starts, but now that they've worked through things, Spencer is proving himself a worthy and devoted companion. Rhett seems happier, and I have no doubt Spencer truly would help him with a task like this. If Rhett won't accept my support, I'm relieved he will at least lean on his boyfriend.

"Very well," I say. "Let's move on, shall we? People are already thinking about Halloween. We ought to as well."

Mal immediately perks up, all his exhaustion abruptly forgotten. His huge swoop of bleached silver hair bounces as he sits up straighter.

"Oh my God," he says. "Yes. Please. I have so many ideas. You are all dressing up, even you, Albert."

I don't bother pointing out that I am not a server and no one will much care whether I dress for the occasion or not. It's a moot point with Mal. He has been trying to dress us all, even myself, from the moment the Boyfriend Café opened. He succeeded once, for a special "Prep School Night" in which everyone wore tweed blazers. The theme night was a hit, and Mal got to strut his skills as a fashion student.

"Please do not go beyond your means for this," I say. Knowing Mal, he would spend all his wages on fabric. "We can pay for some amount of materials for you. Judging by the success of our previous theme night, a Halloween event should more than cover the cost of materials."

But Mal isn't listening. He clasps his hands, eyes darting

around as he apparently imagines us all in various costumes. “Rhett should be a cat. No, a vampire. No, a bird. Wait, Gabriel is the bird. Small and sweet. Or maybe me? I certainly have the plumage.” He laughs, patting at his elaborately styled hair.

I let him ramble on. Everyone else looks too tired to stop him.

“The first order of business,” I say when Mal has petered out, “is choosing a date. We do not want to conflict with the parties that will be taking place all over campus.”

“What if we swapped our usual Saturday for a Friday?” Mal says. “That way we don’t conflict with the parties — and maybe we can actually go out for once ourselves.”

“That’s a good idea,” Rhett says. “Spencer mentioned some party on campus he wants to go to. I was going to try not to work that Saturday anyway. What about you two?”

“Mmm,” Gabriel says, nestled against Trent’s shoulder.

“That will work fine for us,” Trent says.

They are both dark haired, both gray eyed, both around the same height, even. And they do this — speak for each other, translate each other. Apparently, they’ve been mistaken for siblings or even lovers, though they claim they’re only friends. I won’t pretend I entirely understand their dynamic, but it works for them, and for several of our customers. More than once, someone has requested them as a duo, even at double the price. Rhett was wise bringing them on together, as unconventional as they are.

That is part of the beauty of this place, however. In some ways, all of us are unconventional choices, a haphazard group of (mostly) queer men learning how to do this as we go along.

“What if we had spooky drinks?” Rhett says. “Or at least fall-themed ones? A lot more cinnamon. Maybe even a pumpkin spice tea.”

“Love that,” Mal says. “Oh, I wish we had apple cider donuts to go with it.”

“We might be able to buy some. There’s a place down the road from here, isn’t there?”

Rhett looks to me. “There should be,” I say. “But failing that, there are plenty down south.”

North Jersey has its share of quaint farms gearing up for apple and pumpkin picking, but the true “garden” portion of the Garden State lies farther south. I don’t mention to Rhett that I will happily drive there and get the donuts myself if necessary, sure he will refuse.

In any case, I jot down the suggestion, as well as a few other things as the guys (mostly Mal and Rhett) toss ideas around. Tidy notes fill my notebook alongside the lists of numbers, but my writing jolts a slip of paper free.

I rush to stow the paper back between the sheets of my notebook. I should have taken it out, but it still needs to be ... dealt with.

I suppress a grimace. That is not a task to handle in front of the guys who work the café. I will settle the matter on my own, hopefully without any of them ever knowing.

“Albert?”

I find Rhett watching me, concern etched in a thin line between his brows.

I shake off my worries, aiming for a neutral expression. Fortunately, no one truly expects a smile from me most of the time, but Rhett has known me long enough and well enough to see through my careful blankness.

“That is all,” I say. “You all ought to get back to campus and rest.”

Trent, Gabriel and Mal need no further convincing, but Rhett hesitates, lingering until the others have left.

“Hey, is everything alright?” Rhett says. His eyes flicker to my notebook, now tucked under my arm, and I have to school my tone into neutrality.

“Yes,” I say.

“Albert.”

“I assure you, there is nothing to worry about.”

Rhett narrows his eyes at me, but just then Spencer, his boyfriend, appears at the top of the stairs.

“Hey, babe, ready to go?”

Rhett hesitates a beat, but exhaustion and the promise of comfort win out. “Yeah, I’m coming.” He looks at me a beat longer. “Don’t think I’ll forget about this, Albert. You’re hiding something. I know you way too well.”

“It is nothing that concerns you,” I say.

Rhett looks unconvinced, but he doesn’t push. He leaves

tucked under Spencer's arm, and I let out a relieved breath when I'm alone in the basement.

I open my notebook, fingering that slip of paper nestled between the pages.

It has come to our attention

illegal business or club off-campus

violation of City University of Montridge policies on student conduct

thorough investigation

we will have no choice but to shut down any such operation

possible expulsion

The letter returns to me in clips and fragments. I wince at each one, but I wasn't lying to Rhett. This isn't something he needs to concern himself with. I will deal with the university. If they want to investigate my home off-campus and search for what they deem an "illegal business or club," I will let them in. I will even show them the basement. They cannot prove this is anything but a private space I've designed for my own amusement.

And if they do want to press the issue, I have the resources to push back just as hard.

They will not take the Boyfriend Café away from us. Of that, I am absolutely sure.

Get more in "Pumpkin Spice and Chill," coming in 2023.

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