



BOOMER

CERBERUS MC BOOK 25

MARIE JAMES

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Boomer
Cerberus MC Book 25
Marie James

Copyright

Boomer: Cerberus MC Book 25

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Cerberus MC

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Synopsis

Secrets are poison.

They eat away at you from the inside.

I doubt there's a single person in the club that would have a problem with who I am.

Keeping my mouth shut is all about my own shame.

Who I am isn't acceptable.

That's what my Fundamentalist family raised me to believe, but even after leaving home, I couldn't be myself.

Fighting against it never really became a struggle until the flirty bartender set his eyes on me.

He made me wish for things I couldn't have.

Resisting him was easy until that first kiss.

Now there's a very real chance my shame will ruin us both.

Prologue

Boomer

18 Years Old

My hands tremble uncontrollably as I walk through the nearly knee-high grass on the side of the road. I've been a nervous wreck since last night. All through my shift at work today, I couldn't concentrate. I guess it's a good thing that bagging groceries at the local mom-and-pop store doesn't require much brain energy.

I stumble on a beer bottle hidden in the grass, barely regaining my footing before landing on my face.

I saw the threat in Jacob's eyes last night. I knew things were going to change. I didn't sleep at all, knowing I had to stay cognizant of my surroundings. I know what happens to boys who get caught doing what I was doing.

Masturbation is bad enough, a sin according to the teachings. Paul, our Prophet, speaks about it often.

Despite the sinful nature of touching one's own body, most of the guys do it anyway. Jacob's issue wasn't that I was doing it, but how I was pleasuring myself.

The tremble in my hands is renewed as I think back to last night and how he caught me, what my fingers were doing when he walked into the room to find me naked from the waist down.

My urges are an abomination, immoral, and unrighteous.

They're something I hate while at the same time struggling to control.

I'm a disgrace to my family, and although I've known this for years, I've always been good at hiding it.

It's possible my brother loves me despite my sins, and maybe that's the reason I wasn't confronted by my father or the other elders in our community.

I keep my head down at the sound of tires crunching on the gravel

behind me. Walking has never bothered me, but I've also never gotten used to the cruelty of others not connected to the church. Anyone who leaves the compound runs the risk of being taunted at best. At worst, we chance getting hurt. We're an oddity for those that don't understand, and although I work outside the community, I know enough to get my day done and return to the sanctity of the ranch.

Only today I don't feel the safety that normally washes over me as I approach the gates.

Emmanuel, the man providing security at the entrance to the massive compound, narrows his eyes as I approach. I swallow the lump lodged in my throat as I give him a kind smile. He doesn't return it as he normally does, and it makes chills race up my arms and travel down my spine.

I was foolish to think that my brother Jacob would keep quiet about what he discovered me doing yesterday evening. Living a principled life increases your chances of joining God in Heaven, but disclosing the sins of others so they can be redirected down the right path will ensure your place beside the Father.

Our belief that holiness supersedes all things guarantees Jacob won't keep silent. The look in Emmanuel's eyes as he opens the gate for me says it louder than words.

I know what I have to do long before Jacob steps into my path. I feel the others at my back. I also know that no matter how much I beg, my pleas will never change the outcome.

My biggest mistake was not packing my things and slipping away during the night. I can tell by the rage in Jacob's eyes that not acting last night was the only reprieve he was willing to offer. He thinks of me as a fool for not taking it.

Remaining hopeful that my truths wouldn't be shared was a mistake I'll never make again.

The first strike of one of the boys behind me takes me to my knees.

The second is a blow to my face by Jacob, and I feel the pain deeper than the injury to my body.

As his older brother, I always tried to live in a way that would garner his respect. I acted with as much righteousness as I could manage in an effort not to lead him astray, despite knowing I was headed to Hell for who I was. Just because I was destined to burn didn't mean that he had to follow me along that path.

He's doing what needs to be done, and although I know I shouldn't fault him for it, a bone-deep sense of betrayal sinks inside of me.

I have no recourse for mercy. I'm not owed leniency.

I also have no right to fight against the punishment I'm owed, and thinking of such is prideful and arrogant, two more sins I'll have to atone for eventually.

I cover my face, doing my best to curl into a ball as the kicks and blows continue.

The rush of blood and the beating of my heart fill my ears, blocking out all other noise. I don't have to hear them to know what they're saying, how they use modern-day slurs despite our separation from nearly all things secular.

I smile as I realize what's happening, what my brother and men I considered friends just yesterday are providing .

"Look at that grin," Ezekiel hisses, disdain dripping from his words. "He's an even bigger pervert than I thought."

"He likes the pain?" Jacob snaps. "Give him all you've got."

The rate and force of the kicks increase.

Maybe blood atonement isn't their goal, but dying for my grievous sins is the only way forgiveness could be considered.

"I consent," I manage just before another kick lands against my temple.

The world goes dark, my body turning light and pain free.

I pray for my brother and friends. I wish them well in all that they do.

But hours later, the cold is threatening to freeze the tips of my fingers as darkness surrounds me.

Tears burn the cuts on my face as I realize they didn't follow through with my atonement. They refused me my chance to get into Heaven by leaving me alive. Men like me never get into Heaven.

My face feels twice the size it normally does, but I refuse to give in to vanity by lifting my hands to my skin to assess the damage. It takes great effort to rise to my feet.

I know better than to go back to the house. Showing my beaten-and-battered face would not be well received. I have no doubt my brother has shared my disgrace with anyone who will listen, including my parents.

Despite pulling all of my saved money from the slit in my thin mattress before work this morning, I didn't pack a bag. I was holding onto hope that Jacob would dismiss my sin.

I walk toward the gate, wondering if the man on guard will even say a word as I leave the property.

When the gate swings open without a word, I know my exile is complete.

I also know when the gate slams at my back that I'll never miss a soul inside. I never had to confess my sins for them to be known, and honestly, I'm shocked I've been allowed to stay as long as I have. I've been treated as an outcast for as long as I can remember. I've never been in my father's favor, and as the sixth child of the nine my mother has, I've been overlooked more times than I can count.

Boys in our community are a dime a dozen. Only the girls and women hold any sort of value.

And even more so, those boys with sinful tendencies can't be allowed to stay.

My ribs ache, my left leg incapable of bending right at the knee as I walk away.

I feel no eyes on me. No one rushes through the gate to beg me to stay.

I hold absolutely no worth to anyone inside.

I've thought of walking away for years, but I knew I'd never be brave

enough to do it on my own.

The plans I made were more wishes and hopes than actual strategy.

When I finally make it back to town, I all but fall onto the park bench, knowing I won't be able to stay here long before the local police arrive and make me leave.

I pull my cash from my pocket, the small, folded pile looking much smaller now that I'm on my own.

I watch as the card I was given a few days ago flutters to the ground at my feet.

I have no idea why I kept it, but right now it's all I see.

The money I have won't get me very far, but the promises made by the man who handed it to me echoes in my head.

"It takes discipline, bravery, a commitment to brotherhood. I think you'd be perfect."

"Have we met before?" I asked him after carrying his bags of groceries to his truck.

A slow smile had spread across his face as he extended his arm to me. "Sergeant Tanner Boulware, United States Marine Corps."

Chapter 1

Boomer

Present Day

“Do you know the difference between Caesar salads and blow jobs?”

I frown at Drake, but it doesn't affect his smile.

“No,” I mutter.

The bartender leans closer, his hands gripping the towel he was just using to wipe down the bar.

“Well then, can I take you to lunch?”

I cough to cover the chuckle that threatens to bubble up my throat. The man is relentless in his flirting. I both love and hate it in equal measure.

If he wasn't known for acting this way toward everyone who steps up to the bar here at *Jake's*, I'd be concerned. I'd worry what people thought about me, what assumptions they were making. The leather cut I'm wearing that boasts the three-headed hellhound deters most people from causing problems, despite what they might think. Cerberus frequents this bar on a regular basis and, for the most part, is well respected in the Farmington community.

Drake is equal opportunity in every way imaginable. I've witnessed him getting off early and leading both men and women alike down the back hall that I know leads to the stairs up to his apartment.

“I'm making you uncomfortable,” Drake says as he straightens away from the bar.

“You're not,” I mutter.

“So you like it?”

“What's that?” I ask, pretending like I haven't noticed the way the man flirts with me.

Acknowledging that it's happening issues an unspoken challenge as to why I haven't bothered to shut it down.

The opinions I carried years ago no longer have the same hold on me they once did. But there are many things from the life I once lived that still cling to me like the rancid scent of death that clung to the road I walked on as a teen in Utah.

I know that what Drake does and who he is at his core is wrong, but I hold no ill-will toward the man. I save all my castigation for myself these days. His judgment is not mine to determine.

I don't find him disgusting. If anything, Drake, along with several of the men I work with that live openly homosexual and bisexual lives, make me curious. No one is immune to sin, but even after nearly ten years since leaving the ranch, I find myself in awe with how open people are about their transgressions.

I've done my best to deconstruct the religious beliefs I was raised to think were the be-all and end-all, but some fundamentalist ideologies still cling to me, and I have to actively shove them down.

"You like it when I flirt with you," Drake says, the corners of his mouth tugging up in a half-smile.

"I wish you'd stop," I say, half of me hoping he'll listen if only to avoid the temptation and the other half praying he never does.

I live for the time I spend at the bar, especially on those nights that the other Cerberus members stay back at the clubhouse. I'd never indulge myself the way I am tonight if they were present.

"Another soda?" Drake asks, reaching for my glass.

I slide the glass across the bar, swallowing hard when his fingers brush mine.

We've touched fingers a few times, and like all the others, a rush of something I have a hard time understanding most days rushes over my skin.

Arousal threatens to take hold of me, my cock kicking in my jeans.

I spent eight years in the Marine Corps before getting out and joining Cerberus not long after my discharge. I've seen some things. I've watched men with no qualms about who sees them in every state of sexual gratification, yet somehow the brush of his fingers on mine has the ability to

make my palms sweat and my breath quicken.

Drake is slow to pull the glass away, and the man chuckles when I realize we've both been frozen with our fingers touching for much longer than necessary to make the exchange.

I look down the bar, grateful for the light crowd tonight, and doubly thankful that no one seems to be paying either of us any attention.

"Want a little whiskey in it?" Drake asks as he lifts the nozzle for the soda toward my glass.

I keep my eyes locked on his face, getting lost in the vicinity of his mouth. The sight of it makes me lick at my own suddenly dry lips.

"No thank you," I say. "I'm on my bike."

The excuse is only part of the truth. The half I won't admit to is that adding alcohol into the mix, when my brain is already threatening to take me places it can never go again, is the worst idea in the world. A splash of whiskey in my soda would allow for excuses. It could possibly have the power to convince me that the actions I want to take are perfectly fine.

"You're one of those wholesome types, aren't you?" Drake asks, as he tops off the glass before sliding it back across the bar in front of me.

"I'm not wholesome," I argue, my eyes drifting to the droplets of condensation on the glass.

"Liar."

I snap my eyes up at him, hating him a little for the challenge I see on his face.

"You come to the bar nearly every night, but you never drink. I never see you leave with a woman. You never take me up on my offers. You never —"

"Maybe I'm not interested," I interrupt.

His smile never falters as he hitches his thumb over his shoulder. "See the mirror behind me?"

I don't pull my eyes off him. Of course, I see the damn mirror.

“It’s not just used for making the top shelf liquor bottles look better.”

I swallow as I start to understand where he’s heading.

“Realizing you’re not as sly as you thought you were?”

Drake leans on the bar in front of me, his hands once again twisting that bar towel.

“I’m bored at the clubhouse when we aren’t working,” I say, trying to distract him.

I should know better, though. Drake is an expert at multitasking. It’s what makes him a great bartender.

“Every time I turn around to make a drink, your eyes drop to my ass. The look in them tells me you’re interested.” His voice is all but a whisper right now, our conversation as private as you can get in a public setting. “Are you not out yet? Is that the problem?”

I straighten on my bar stool, making sure to put only the required amount of distance between the two of us for common courtesy. I won’t cringe away from him or get defensive. Either reaction says too much about how the man makes me feel, and it’s already bad enough that I haven’t put my foot down about him flirting with me. I’ve noticed two distinct reactions to Drake’s flirting with straight men. Some threaten to beat his ass, proclaiming loudly and proudly that they’re as straight as an arrow. One such man I saw sticking around at closing time, and as I sat in the parking lot, he still hadn’t exited more than an hour after the lights went out inside.

Others just laugh him off, as if his flirting is funny. These are the reactions he gets from most of the Cerberus members. I haven’t seen a single person from the club act offended when Drake winks at them or says something suggestive.

“I don’t look at your ass,” I mutter, refusing to even touch on the questions he asked.

“You do,” he says, a smugness in his tone that makes me want to blacken his eye.

“Maybe because I’m wondering how you breathe in such tight jeans.”

His eyes sparkle with mirth, but I refuse to get lost in the olive color. Doing that would be just as bad as letting him add that splash of whiskey to my drink he's always trying to convince me to have.

"Maybe you're wondering what I look like out of them?"

"You're going a little too far," I warn.

"Maybe I'm not going far enough," he counters, his eyes dropping to my mouth.

The heat that threatened to rise earlier begins to simmer once again.

I know I'm torturing myself. I know I could avoid all of this by staying back at the clubhouse. Coming here and not giving in to him isn't a challenge to me. I don't do it because I have to make sure I keep from acting on the urges that threaten to eat me alive most days.

I'm here every chance I get because I can't help myself. I'm weak, trying to convince myself that letting the flirting happen, getting this attention from him, isn't as bad as actually giving in. It's like licking the spoon after mixing cake batter but declaring not to eat a slice once it's cooked.

I'm not in denial about what I am, although I'd never say it out loud.

I no longer believe in the same God that I was raised to fear my entire life, but I still can't seem to give up many of those beliefs.

"I'll leave you be," Drake declares, smacking the bar top with his towel before walking away.

I should feel relieved as he approaches another guest with a wide smile on his face, but all I feel is regret.

Chapter 2

Drake

Flirting is my thing.

I'm not selective about who I smile at or who I act suggestively toward.

Everyone who walks through the doors at *Jake's* is at risk. Most take me with a grain of salt, giving me a quick smile and a shake of their head before walking away. Some get that look in their eyes that tells me they'd be down for a quick fuck in the bathroom on my break. I rarely take them up on those offers these days. I'm worth waiting for until at least closing time after all.

I've been working at *Jake's* for several years, and despite a rough beginning, I've settled into the position quite nicely. Jake, the bar's namesake, offered me the upstairs apartment after a rough breakup shortly after being hired, and that's when things started to change for me. I had someone to answer to, someone to show that I wasn't destined to be a fuckup forever.

I take pride in my work, but I also have fun with it when I can.

Boomer, Cerberus MC club member, is no different.

He's one of the most fun men I've had the pleasure of meeting.

Not only is he gorgeous with his sandy blond hair and deep blue eyes, but the man is also mostly a mystery. That appeals to me much more than those that slide up to the bar and lay out their entire life story as if I'm a therapist. Don't get me wrong, I don't mind being privy to all the small-town drama, but Boomer is a breath of fresh air on the nights he shows up alone.

"You're sure that's all you need?"

The woman smiles back at me, her eyes dropping to my lips. I've perfected the crooked, flirty smile she's witnessing. It earns me twice as many tips as the other bartenders. It allows me forgiveness on busy nights if I'm struggling to keep up. It gets me laid if that's my end goal.

Her eyes on me, the suggestive way she touches the corner of her own mouth with the very tip of her pink tongue, don't foster the same reaction that Boomer's eyes on my mouth garnered just minutes ago.

There's something electric about him watching me that I've rarely ever experienced before.

"Just the Coke, whiskey, and lime for now," the woman says, her tone dripping with sexual offering.

I wink at her before turning away to refresh her drink.

I cast my eyes in her direction first, grinning when her eyes drop to my ass, before looking at the mirror at the other side of the bar.

I'd taunted Boomer earlier about watching my ass when I turned around, but I don't find his eyes locked on the tight denim, rather his eyes are locked on my own reflection in challenge.

There's one very bad thing about wearing such tight pants, and it's going to become obvious to everyone paying me any attention if that frustrating man doesn't stop watching me.

I lose the challenge, pulling my eyes away first.

"Keep the change," the woman tells me, sliding a twenty across the bar for her ten-dollar drink.

I give her another wink as I pull the bill from the bar top.

"Let me know when you need a refill," I say before walking to the cash register.

I flirt to get tips but also to filter through those that think they can buy time with me. I'm much more receptive to those that tip the normal dollar or two per drink. I don't perceive the ones that offer more than normal as being better. Those are the ones that are trouble. Those are the ones that think they own some part of you, like they spent the night making tiny down payments on a piece of you.

Boomer, on the other hand, drinks soda or water all night and leaves five bucks extra when he closes his tab.

I told him earlier I'd leave him alone, but the draw to him is just too

much as I make my way down to his end of the bar.

“Another soda?”

He slides the glass toward me, quick to pull his hand back this time. Brushing his fingers twice in one night would probably send the man over the edge.

I make his drink, keeping my eyes on him the entire time. As if he refuses to back down to some unspoken challenge, he keeps his eyes on me. His gaze doesn't drift down my neck. It doesn't get lost in the tightness of my t-shirt or the way the fabric clings to my defined chest. He doesn't glance at my belt or any area below it, but that still doesn't stop me from feeling like the man knows every one of my secrets.

I know I shouldn't flirt with him, but I think I'm half in love with the way his cheeks turn pink when I really get going. I wouldn't bother him if he hated it. If I thought for a second he was a hundred percent straight, I'd leave him alone, but the off chance that one day he may take me up on one of my offers keeps me teasing him.

“Can I get straw?” he asks as I hand him over his drink.

“If you need something to wrap those pouty lips around...”

He blinks in my direction, seemingly unaffected by my words.

“Here,” I tell him, grabbing a straw from the bin behind the bar and handing it over to him.

He thanks me as he takes it from my fingers and it sounds more rote than from actual gratefulness.

Someone yells for me from down the bar, and I give them a quick glance before turning my attention back to Boomer.

His eyes are slow to lift to mine, and I have to wonder how often he watches my mouth when I'm distracted by other customers.

“All jokes aside,” I begin, suddenly a little shy for some reason. “What's your name?”

He's been coming here for months and all I've ever heard is people call him Boomer. He never even offered his road name up himself to me.

“Boomer,” he says flatly.

“Your real name,” I prod. “Your legal name.”

“They aren’t going to leave you a tip if you make them wait any longer,” he says, angling his head in the direction of the two guys that got my attention just a moment ago.

“Rochelle will help them,” I say, my eyes narrowing as I look around.

I haven’t seen my co-bartender for a while. She normally tells me when she’s going on break, but I’ve also been more distracted than normal tonight. It’s very possible she told me and I wasn’t paying her enough attention to retain the information.

“I get off in an hour,” I tell him. “I don’t have to close tonight.”

Technically, I’m only scheduled to close three of the five nights I work, but with my apartment right upstairs, I normally stay down here until the place clears out. It’s not like I could sleep with the jukebox blaring and people talking right below me. The apartment is a nice perk, but it’s not like it’s soundproofed up there.

“Okay,” Boomer says, peeling the paper from his straw before inserting one end into his drink.

There shouldn’t be a single thing sexy about a damn straw, but the sight of his fingers holding the top as he sinks it into his glass sends a tingle of awareness up my back.

“I was thinking maybe you’d like to hang out after.”

His eyes find mine, his lips slightly parted for a second longer than it would take him to tell me no.

He scoffs as he pulls his eyes away.

“A little fucking service!” one of the guys at the other end of the bar yells.

I hold up a finger to the irritated man, but when I look back at Boomer, his eyes are locked on the man that yelled, irritation evident in the rigid clench of his jaw.

“Just let me know,” I tell him before wrapping my knuckles on the bar and walking away to help the pissed-off guys.

Boomer’s answer is clear when he’s gone by the time I turn back around.

I never see him again tonight, even as I stick around and help Rochelle close.

Chapter 3

Boomer

Two Months Later

“You’re distracted.”

I look up from the bottle of baby wash in my hands, finding Alyssa watching with sadness in her eyes.

We’ve gotten a lot of these looks since we got back last week.

“Sorry,” I mutter. “Was this on the list?”

She shakes her head. “The other kind with the lavender in it. You know you can talk to me about anything.”

This isn’t the first time she’s offered, but speaking about what happened in Costa Rica and how it’s left me feeling like I’ve been wasting my life one day at a time isn’t a conversation I’m ready to have with anyone.

“He’s going to be okay,” Alyssa says, her voice soft and comforting.

“I know,” I answer because it’s what is expected, but Aro lost part of his leg on our last mission. Physically, he’ll overcome whatever challenges he faces, but I don’t know how he’ll fare mentally.

I know I’d struggle more than I do every day if it happened to me.

“What else is on the list?” I ask, in an effort to distract her.

Conversations about battle and loss with someone who has never been involved in such things aren’t something I’m going to engage in. Civilians have no idea what it’s like, and their perceptions, drawn from things they watch on television and in movies, are almost always wrong.

“Crap,” she mutters as she scrolls on her phone. “We forgot the hand soap for the bathrooms.”

“We’ll grab them on the way back to the register. What else do we need back here?”

“Diapers,” she says, giving me a small smile. “Always diapers.”

I grab them from the shelves as she lists off the brands and sizes, still a little amazed at how some of the babies have to have certain types based on their skin sensitivities. I never knew children were so complicated. Boys and men back on the ranch where I grew up weren't involved in such things. The women cared for the children. Once the boys were old enough, they were sent outside to work. Adjusting to life outside the compound was a challenge, but the Marine Corps had a way of getting you ready for everything you could possibly face in life.

"That sexy bartender is here," Alyssa says, her voice a conspiratorial whisper.

Well, the Corps prepares you for most things, I guess.

I only falter a little as I reach for the next pack of diapers.

"Aren't you going to go say hello?" she urges.

"Should you be noticing other men?" I ask, refusing to make eye contact with her.

I also won't look around to find Drake in the store, but it doesn't keep my cheeks from warming at the knowledge that he's near.

"Sexy men," she clarifies. "And Harley knows I'm loyal to him."

I haven't had a single conversation with Alyssa about my urges, but that hasn't prevented her from making her own assumptions. I know she doesn't judge me. She'd never open her mouth to say something negative, but there are too many occasions where she hints that she wants me to make my confessions.

I'm not confused about who I am, but accepting it without the shame that was ingrained in me as a child and beat into me as a young man at the direction of my brother and friends my last day on the ranch, isn't possible.

I was raised differently, and with that comes a distinct inability to just flaunt my sins like everyone else seems capable of doing.

"I'll go get the hand soap," I tell her after a long moment of her staring at me expectantly.

"Can you also get a couple of pregnancy tests?"

I stop dead in my tracks, my brain going offline for a second before I can manage to turn around and face her.

A smile spreads across my cheeks as I watch her roll her lips between her teeth to keep from smiling.

“Really?”

She shrugs. “Maybe.”

“Alyssa! That’s amazing news. Harley is—”

“Let’s not get a head of ourselves.”

“I’ll get soap and tests,” I tell her, my steps a little lighter, my heart less heavy as I cross to the other side of the store.

Harley and Alyssa had a very difficult beginning. He wasn’t the most receptive to her after losing his wife in a car accident. He has a daughter with his late wife already, but I know he’d welcome another child with Alyssa with just as much enthusiasm. The man loves her unconditionally.

My first stop is the soap aisle, and I realize my mistake of not grabbing another cart when I’m juggling multiple bottles of hand soap toward the family planning aisle of the store. Instead of dropping one and making a mess to clean up, I line them up on the floor to the side before taking a step back to look at the pregnancy tests.

This is just one more mistake. The selection is vast, the price ranges just as wide. There are name brand and generic, lines versus digital. I have no freaking clue which one to pick.

I grab two different ones from the shelf, turning them both over to read about the things each boast that make the better brand.

“I hate to tell you this,” a smoky voice says. “If you’re needing the tests, it’s already too late for the soap.”

My heart is already racing by the time I lift my eyes to Drake.

He seems different, and I don’t know if it’s seeing him for the first time outside of the bar or if something has really changed about him in the two months since I’ve been there.

A lot has happened since his offer to hang out after he got off work. I could blame any number of things as to why I haven't been back, but I know it has more to do with *wanting* to spend time with him outside of him standing on one side of the bar and me sitting on the other than anything else.

I smile at him as if he's a dear old friend before I can stop myself.

I don't realize until this very second with my eyes on him that I missed him. I missed his flirty smile and the way his clothes always seem to cling to the best parts of him.

"These aren't for me," I tell him, holding the pregnancy test up a little higher.

"I would imagine not," he says, his smile growing wider.

"You make a lot of assumptions about people," I growl, taking a step closer to him.

"Is it a wrong assumption that you don't have a uterus?"

I tilt my head to the side. I'm in the wrong here, thinking he was making a jab at my sexuality rather than my gender.

"Who are they for?" Drake asks.

I clamp my mouth closed. I could easily explain, but those details aren't mine to share. Alyssa is the closest friend I've made since coming to Cerberus, and I'd never compromise that to cement the fact that I don't have some woman in the community questioning whether I got her pregnant.

"If it's that woman Ugly took to the bathroom a couple months ago, I'll tell you that she has a history of trying to trap guys, so if he didn't wrap it up ___"

"It's not for Ugly, either," I say, my eyes dropping back down to the tests.

"I heard about Aro," Drake says.

I don't look back up at him, even when I sense him shifting to get a little closer to me.

"He's heading to Albuquerque," I explain. "He'll go through physical

therapy and he'll come back as good as new."

"I'm glad you're safe."

I don't flinch the second his hand comes into view. I don't pull away like I should when it rests on top of mine. The touch is comforting, having none of the flirty edges to it I've come to associate with Drake.

His fingers curl, gripping my hand, unconcerned for the pregnancy test still there.

It's somehow intimate without being sexual. It's different from the brushes of fingertips while exchanging drinks or money at the bar.

It's too personal, the tenderness of his actions threatening to make my throat seize.

This isn't the same man who puts on a flirtatious show at *Jake's*, and I can't decide how I feel about it.

My heart pounds in my chest as I lift my eyes to his. There's no familiar smirk on his face. His eyes aren't sparkling with playfulness.

I made many assumptions about Drake, probably more than he's made about me, but I never would've accused the man of being capable of being serious.

"You are okay, aren't you?"

I shake my head, not in response to his question, but in an effort to get my thoughts right. He's thrown me for a loop, and I can readily admit that my mind has been a jumble of so many different thoughts since returning from Costa Rica. A lot of things are put into perspective when you see a friend clinging to life as those around him try to stanch the bleeding of his wounds long enough to get him to a hospital.

"I'm fine," I tell him, noticing when he squeezes his fingers once again that we're still touching, practically holding hands.

I pull my hand back, but I don't snatch it away as if I'm offended by his touch. I'm not. Even if I hadn't had impure thoughts about this man, I wouldn't be offended. It took me a long time to understand that touch is one way people comfort each other—a soft hand on the back, a warm hug of

comfort. None of them are sexual. They aren't bad despite being told on many occasions growing up that they weren't allowed.

Mothers raising children in the Fundamentalist Church were never overly attentive to their children. There weren't many occurrences of hugs and words of encouragement. Succeeding at anything was expected, not celebrated. Emotions were ignored because they were wasted if they weren't in celebration of the Lord.

I shake my head as I take a step back. I've spent a lot of time actively trying to let go of every hold the Church had on me, but no matter how hard I try to forget my life before the Corps existed, sometimes it pops up like I was kneeled in prayer just yesterday, when in fact it's been nearly a decade since I hit my knees with reverence on my lips.

"It's okay not to be okay," Drake says, sounding more like a therapist than a bartender.

My lips form a flat line as I tuck the two pregnancy tests into the crook of my arm before bending to grab the hand soap.

"If you're not busy, I was thinking we could go grab some lunch."

My heart kicks up another notch.

I don't know what's worse, the offer two months ago at the bar that I have no doubt would've ended up with one or both of us naked and begging for more, or the soft, comforting way he's looking at me now without a hint of sexual need in his eyes.

I shouldn't want either side of this man, but for some reason, I want a little of both.

He hasn't advanced a single inch in my direction since touching my hand, but it doesn't stop me from taking an additional step back, putting even more distance between the two of us.

"No," I tell him, a sharpness to my tone I know he doesn't deserve. "Have a good day."

I turn and walk away, knowing it's rude but uncaring. I was too close to telling him yes, too close to wanting whatever he's offering.

“I grabbed two different kinds,” I tell Alyssa when I find her close to the front of the store.

She thanks me as I place the items in one of the few empty spots in the cart. I’ve never had a problem going with her to get the shopping done for the clubhouse daycare that she works in. It gives us a chance to chat, and it also helps with her fear of being in crowded places. Target isn’t exactly a madhouse midmorning during the week, but she’s still reluctant to come completely alone.

“Did you get to say hi to him?” Alyssa asks, nodding her head in the direction of the self-checkout lane.

“No,” I lie easily, frowning all over again when I watch him scan the box of condoms before pulling out his wallet to pay for his purchase.

“Looks like he plans on having a good time tonight,” she says with a laugh.

I ignore the comment, turning around once it’s our turn to load the items onto the conveyor belt.

I haven’t seen the man in two months because I’ve avoided the bar. I knew the chances of running into him today were slim, meaning if I’m able to avoid *Jake’s* in the future, there’s a real chance I’ll finally be able to get the man out of my head.

Chapter 4

Drake

“It’s not going to happen,” I say, my smile bright despite my irritation.

“You never know,” Maude says, her eyes glossy and a little unfocused due to the numerous drinks she has had tonight. “Some guys are into older women.”

“They are,” I quickly agree, biting my tongue to keep from telling her that there isn’t one Cerberus guy I can think of that’s going to be into a seventy-five-year-old alcoholic.

Cerberus is all about clean living and, from what I’ve heard, really dirty sex.

The women at the bar chat incessantly about their dalliances with the guys, and since I swing in both directions, they include me in on those conversations. The stories I’ve heard would make most people blush and want to cover their eyes in embarrassment of it being spoken about out loud.

“You never know,” Maude continues. “Tonight might be my lucky night!”

I hand her a napkin when she misses her mouth. It isn’t the first time it’s happened tonight, and the woman is getting dangerously close to getting cut off. If I wasn’t aware that she gets a ride to and from the bar on the nights that she visits, I would’ve stopped serving her over an hour ago.

“Look! Here comes one now!”

I glance up, my heart rate kicking up for a quick second before realizing it’s Ugly walking this way, not Boomer.

Tonight is the first night he’s been in here in months, and of course, he came with an entourage instead of alone like he was prone to do before I fucked up and asked him to join me after I got off work.

He walked through the front door over an hour ago, and I haven’t noticed him looking my way once since he arrived.

“Jesus,” I say teasingly as Ugly presses his palms to the bar. “You look

as good walking toward me as you look walking away.”

Ugly gives me a charming grin, a wide smile on his face.

“Get your own!” Maude snaps at me, her sneer revealing lipstick on her teeth.

The woman seriously thinks she has a shot with anyone under the qualifying age for AARP.

I hold my hands up in false surrender.

“He’s all yours,” I tell her, winking at Ugly.

The man turns his attention to her, his smile never faltering. You can tell a lot about a man by how he treats women, children, and the elderly. I haven’t seen a single Cerberus member slip up in any way in the years I’ve been working here. At first, I looked for it, kept my eyes on them because honestly, no one is perfect. Everyone has a bad day every now and then, but I’ve never witnessed any level of disrespect that wasn’t earned.

I know the guys taught a lesson out back to a man who drugged a woman at the bar. I know they’ve shunned some of the women who frequent the bar hoping to catch a Cerberus man because they disrespected someone close to the group. But I’ve never seen them ever be rude where that response wasn’t earned by the other party being disrespectful first.

Kincaid, the club president, is very selective about who he allows to join the group, and so far, he’s won every single pick.

“A couple more pitchers of beer?” I ask Ugly.

He nods, his eyes still on Maude who looks half in love and a hundred percent drunk as she gleams up at the man.

“Good evening, Maude. May I buy you a drink?”

She giggles like a schoolgirl, if that schoolgirl wasn’t fifty years deep into a two-pack-a-day habit.

“Two pitchers and a hot cup of coffee for my friend,” Ugly says in a way so charming Maude doesn’t even drop her smile at the news that she’s done drinking for the night.

I busy myself with the beer and coffee as Ugly continues to chat up the elderly woman at the bar.

Maude thanks me for the coffee when I hand her the cup, and the joy is clear on her face at the attention she's gotten from such a handsome man.

"I think she has a crush on you," I tell him in a low tone, knowing she's hard of hearing.

"I think you're right," he says with a grin as he pulls his wallet out.

"Makes me wonder if I still have a chance with such stiff competition," I tease, my eyes darting over his shoulder, noticing that Boomer is still in conversation with Harley and Alyssa, his eyes bright as he talks and smiles.

The man is utterly devastating no matter the mood he's in, but seeing him happy after seeing him so lost at Target a few weeks ago brings such relief.

Ugly leans in closer. "I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but Maude has more of a chance."

I huff a laugh when Ugly winks at me before slipping his hands through the handles of the beer pitchers and walks away.

Ugly is as straight as an arrow, but it makes it no less fun to flirt with him.

"Hey," I yell when he gets a few feet away. "Boomer is looking a little low."

I hand over a bottle of water, forcing Ugly to set one of the pitchers down to tuck it under his arm before grabbing the handle and walking away again.

Boomer doesn't look in my direction when the bottle of water is handed over, and I know there's a good chance that Ugly didn't tell him it was from me. There's also a very real chance that I messed up more than I realized when I clasped his hand the last time I saw him.

The man looked broken, and I know it had at least something to do with Aro getting hurt in the line of duty. Those outside of Cerberus don't know many of the details. The members keep almost all of their stuff close to

home, but Kincaid and Jake are close. Jake and I are close, and that means sometimes I hear things that wouldn't otherwise be spoken about in the presence of mixed company.

I only touched him to offer support, but maybe it was taking things a little too far. Maybe I misjudged him, thinking that he liked it when I flirted with him. Maybe he's fed up with me altogether.

"I know he's in love, but I'm going to play hard to get," Maude says, her voice distant and dreamy.

"I think that's a great plan," I tell her, before heading down to the other end of the bar to take the drink order for a couple of women that just entered.

"Ladies," I say as I approach, my best, tip-earning smile in place despite not feeling very jovial.

I would've been fine. My mood was perfect when I came downstairs earlier. There's just something about sharing space with him and being completely annoyed that he has the ability to drive me a little insane.

"Wow," one of the women says, unconcerned with me noticing the way her eyes scrape down the length of me. "The bartender at the other bar was right. You're really fucking hot."

I make a mental note to thank Roger later for sending them my way. I think a glitter bomb sent to the bar on liquor delivery day would work best.

"I hear you're wild in bed," another one slurs, making it very clear if her friend hadn't even said anything about the other bar, that *Jake's* definitely isn't their first stop on their crawl tonight.

"I snore," I tell her with a smile, wondering who else they've been talking to. Roger would never talk about me and sex in the same sentence. He'd be too afraid people would connect the dots that would lead people right to his mostly closed closet door. "What can I get you to drink?"

"I want a Leg Spreader," the first woman says.

"I'll have a Lick Her Right," the third woman says for the first time.

"We're out of orange vodka," I lie. "How about a rum and Coke?"

The woman scrunches her nose. "What about a Dick Sucker?"

I clear my throat, my patience very thin with them. I know it has more to do with Boomer than anything. The way the women are acting is nothing new. Honestly, it's a nightly occurrence for people to speak suggestively to me.

"How about a round of Sex with the Bartender," I suggest, trying to get myself out of the shitty mood I'm in.

They cheer, the first woman asking for a double. I know I'll pour hers a little weaker than normal because she's already slurring her words.

As I step away, I notice a couple waiting to be served that wasn't there moments ago. I put on a different smile, one that won't alarm the man, because flirting with a guy's girl when he's been drinking is always a bad choice.

"What can I get you?" I ask, placing coasters down in front of each of them.

"I'll take a beer. Whatever you have on tap."

I look to the woman next, her eyes wider than I normally see in the bar. "And for you?"

"I think an angel shot for me."

I nod in her direction, my heart racing as I look over her shoulder.

"Do you know which kind of liquor you'd like in that?"

She shakes her head.

"We have a wide selection. Rochelle, can you help her pick the flavor of her drink?"

Without looking confused, Rochelle rounds the bar toward the woman.

"We have a pink champagne that's to die for," she says as she takes the woman's hand. "But if you're not into bubbly drinks, then I'd suggest the..."

Her words trail off as they walk toward the back.

"Give me just a second," I tell the man. "Have to get some drinks made for those ladies down there before they cause a scene."

He grumbles about having to wait as I look over his shoulder, making eye contact with Ugly.

I'm not surprised that they saw Rochelle escort the woman away. It happens more often than it should.

I busy myself making the drinks, but I hear the scrape of the bar stool beside the guy.

I drop off the drinks to the group of already drunk women before pouring the guy's beer.

"Here you go," I tell him.

"And the drink for my lady?" the guy asks, his brow drawing in as he looks around. "Where did she go?"

"To the rest room I think," I lie, knowing that the woman is safe in the employee area with Rochelle.

She ordered an angel shot, meaning she was feeling unsafe in her current situation. It doesn't necessarily mean the guy she's with is a criminal or a bad guy, but at the very least, she felt uncomfortable and wanted to get out of the situation.

"You like the Raiders?" Ugly asks, pointing to the team logo on the man's baseball cap.

I can't help the disappointment that washes over me that it wasn't Boomer who approached the bar to help in this situation.

The guy chuckles as he takes a sip of beer. "Not really. My nephew got me the hat for my birthday. Didn't want to disappoint the little guy."

Ugly nods and smiles and lifts a finger, appearing to order a beer. I pour him one, knowing that he'll distract the guy while the woman that arrived with him gets a safe ride home.

The rest of the evening is uneventful. The guy with the Raiders' hat looks only mildly disappointed when he realizes that his date disappeared.

Boomer leaves without ever approaching the bar or looking in my direction.

Chapter 5

Boomer

Some things were harder than others to get used to after leaving the compound ten years ago. Wearing restrictive clothing wasn't one of them. I loved the freedom a soft t-shirt and lounge pants allowed over shirts buttoned to the chin and work pants that had no give in the fabric.

I tug at the collar of my shirt, gaining a frown from Alyssa as she reaches over to re-straighten my tie.

“Would you stop twitching like a child,” she mutters.

“That sounded very motherly,” I mutter.

She gives me a small smile. It tells me that the test we purchased a few weeks ago didn't bring with their use the news she was hoping for.

Harley has nothing but love in his eyes as he walks in our direction, a cup of fruit punch in each hand.

He frowns playfully when Alyssa takes them both, offering one to me. I wave my hand at her, rejecting the offer. My stomach is in knots right now. I've been a part of this endeavor since almost the beginning, but I see too much familiarity in the women mingling around to be comfortable.

Growing up, it never sat right with me when a woman would be corrected at the hands of her husband, no matter how much he said it was the responsibility of the man to ensure his wife made it to Heaven. Even if it took a slap to the face to get her there.

After years in the military and now the jobs we do for Cerberus, I'd never sit idle again after watching someone strike someone else.

Violence is almost never the answer, but even thinking that feels almost contradictory, considering the missions we complete while working for Cerberus. I justify those actions because of the heinous crimes those people are committing against others.

“There's a lot of women here,” Alyssa says, leaning her head on Harley's chest as her eyes travel the room.

“Too many,” Harley says.

“This isn’t even half of them,” I say. “A lot of the women we’ve helped aren’t comfortable in large crowds.”

“Dr. Alvarez is here,” Alyssa says.

“And talking to Drake?” Harley adds, sounding just as confused as I feel at the sight of him across the room.

I’m instantly annoyed at the sight of him. It’s one thing to flirt with me at the bar or approach me in Target, but showing up here of all places is disrespectful.

There’s no way this is coincidence. There’s a very slim chance, after going months and months of never seeing him outside the bar, that I’m now running into him for a second time. A sense of unease and violation settles inside of me as I excuse myself from Harley and Alyssa’s company and cross the room.

Dr. Alvarez is walking away by the time I approach him.

“Boomer,” he says, a light smile on his face, his eyes a little shifty.

“Are you kidding me? Of all the places for you to show up,” I snap, trying to keep my voice down even in my annoyance with the man. “We’re doing serious work here for domestic violence survivors. Being here is disrespectful to everyone involved.”

Drake doesn’t look guilty, and it further adds to my irritation.

“You need to stop,” I hiss. “Stop showing up everywhere I am. Stop sending me bottles of water at the bar. Stop flirting with me because it’s never going to happen.”

“Boomer, I—”

“And now I’ll give the floor to Drake Hill,” Dr. Alvarez says.

Drake takes a deep breath before stepping around me and climbing the three steps leading up to the small stage at the front of the room.

I watch in pure confusion as Dr. Alvarez hands him the microphone.

“I see some familiar faces,” he begins. “Some from work, some from

group.”

The man looks down at his feet before lifting his face to the crowd.

“I’m nervous, and I know that may surprise a lot of you.” Laughter echoes around the room. “I normally don’t have a problem talking, but today is a little different. There are a lot of misconceptions, a lot of preconceived notions about what domestic violence looks like. I’m not here to change your mind, but to open your eyes to all the possibilities. Partner violence isn’t always a man against a woman. Sometimes, the man is the victim. Sometimes, it happens in same-sex partnerships, and that’s the situation I found myself in a couple of years ago.”

I swallow as I take a step away from the stage.

I just confronted this man, accused him of practically stalking me, and it turns out I’m the asshole here.

I’ve always been the first one to step up and remind people that domestic violence doesn’t look like just battered women. It’s one of the reasons I joined this coalition with Slick and Dr. Alvarez, to bring more awareness to what goes on behind the closed doors of more households than people want to accept.

“I’m a man,” Drake says, as he paces the width of the stage. “I’m not supposed to be weak. I’m not supposed to ask for help. We solve all our own problems, right?”

An echo of understanding runs through the room before he continues.

I feel like the biggest jerk in the world as he continues to talk about how he was groomed for years to think that the abuse he was suffering was deserved, and I grow angrier and angrier with each word he speaks. Man, woman, or child, no one deserves to be hurt. No one deserves to feel like they are less than anyone else.

He speaks of being trapped, a prisoner despite there being no physical walls to prevent him from leaving. He speaks of loving the man that was hurting him, of thinking he deserved the pain he suffered because that’s what he was conditioned to believe. He explains that although he didn’t exactly come from a happy home, he knew what real love looked like. His parents weren’t accepting of him, but they loved each other fiercely. Yet, he couldn’t

accept that he deserved love himself. He spoke of broken bonds and mistrust, of the struggle in learning that the things he was forced to endure weren't okay.

It speaks to me in a way I never thought possible.

My situation and his are completely different. Our indoctrinations weren't approached the same, but at the end of the day, they look very similar. He was abused with hands and fists. I was crushed and conquered by the threat of Hell and disappointing God.

Tears burn the backs of my eyes, and I feel no shame by the time he's done. There isn't a dry eye in the house.

"Did you know any of that?" Alyssa asks.

I shake my head rather than snapping at her which is my first instinct, but that anger is also misplaced.

I accused him of disrespecting those in attendance with his presence, but I'm the one who has no right to be here.

I watch him leave the stage, but I lose him in the crowd.

I know I should apologize, but after looking for him for twenty minutes, I give up.

The man doesn't want my apologies. Just like he spoke about on stage, I made assumptions about him. I was the one that messed up, not him.

I'd probably mess up the apology since I can't seem to clear my emotions from my throat.

I find a couple of the others standing near the exit and make my way in their direction.

"That makes me see him in a different light," Harley says.

"I don't think he wants that," Slick says.

"Dr. Alvarez never mentioned him," I say, feeling a little betrayed at being blindsided by him taking the stage.

"She wouldn't," Slick says. "As psychologists, we don't talk about clients. That information had to come directly from him."

I watch Slick as her eyes drop to the cup of fruit punch in her hands. Things have been different for her since she came back from Albuquerque. She was by Aro's side for weeks and weeks before coming back to Farmington. Ugly is there with him now. I've accompanied her on several rides, also needing to be close to someone yet being unwilling to speak. It's worked out for us.

As the event draws to a close I wonder if I'll ever lay eyes on Drake again.

I feel like a complete judgmental asshole as I climb behind the wheel of the SUV when it's over.

"It was a nice event," Alyssa says from the back seat, her hand firmly clasped in Harley's.

"It was," I agree, my eyes scanning the parking lot for Drake's car but coming up empty.

He must've told his story and took off. I fight the urge to head to the bar to look for him, knowing full well that if I was alone, I'd turn right instead of left at the stop light.

Chapter 6

Drake

I'm an incredibly personable man. I learned long ago how to smile through the pain, how to not let on what my mood really was. I was a quick study of how to control my emotions because not doing so meant loads of trouble for me. Some might call my behavior fake or tell me I'm a fraud, but I don't see the point in taking my bad mood out on someone who didn't create it.

The problem with all of it is that bad moods tend to build. A minor irritation one day has the power to fester and grow if it isn't dealt with.

That's how the last month has been, more than four weeks of watching the front door at *Jake's*, waiting for Boomer to walk back in.

I took off after telling my story, one I was encouraged to share by Dr. Alvarez because she was sure it would help people understand the complexities of domestic abuse rather than making quick judgments about it. I was apprehensive to do it before getting on the stage and even more nervous after Boomer made those assumptions.

I couldn't stick around after because if he walked up to me with some half-assed apology, I might have blackened his eye, and violence is something I've vowed to stay away from, both giving and receiving. The man just has a way of getting under my skin, and he's been there more than ever over the last month.

He's also been noticeably absent.

In fact, I haven't seen any of the Cerberus members walk through the door since the event.

The numbers have grown smaller and smaller over the years. The men and women of Cerberus tend to stay closer to home after they've settled down with a partner. On occasion, they might show up for a beer or two, but even that's uncommon.

It makes me wonder if all of them have in fact found someone, and that has a way of making me irrationally pissed if it includes Boomer.

It makes me question everything I thought about him, which is just another irritation. I've always prided myself on being a great judge of character and figuring out who people are with very limited information.

Despite telling myself that tonight is the night I'll stop looking when the door opens, my eyes still dart up when it's pushed wide.

My heart kicks a little harder when Harley and Alyssa step through. It's racing by the time Boomer catches it before it can close all the way and steps inside the bar.

He doesn't look my way. He takes over for Harley, guiding Alyssa to the tables in the far back corner as her man makes his way to the bar.

"Couple of pitchers?" I ask, finding it difficult to pull my eyes from the leather cut on Boomer's back as he makes his way to the tables.

"Just one, and a bottle of water, please," he says, giving me a quick smile before scanning the rest of the bar.

Cerberus are good for business. Anyone who knows who they are won't usually cause problems in here, and if people who are unaware of who they are cause trouble, they're always quick to step up and solve those issues. The ladies flock to the bar when they get word that members are in attendance, even if those members are in committed relationships.

I take the cash from Harley after passing over the bottle of water and pitcher of beer, thanking him for the tip before turning to help another customer.

I have absolutely no claim to Boomer. Hell, I don't even know the man's real name. Maybe it's this annoyance that's been building where he's concerned for the last month, but the sight of him smiling at a woman, who wasted no damn time approaching him, makes me want to turn into a petty asshole. I envision walking up to her and telling her that he's not the interested type or even offering to join in a little threeway action just to annoy the shit out of him.

The threeway suggestion heats my blood in a way I wish it didn't right now—both in arousal and jealousy. Boomer deserves neither from me.

I'd probably act on my irritation if it weren't for the way he lifts the

woman's hand from his leg with a scowl on his face.

I spoke of stereotypes at Dr. Alvarez's event a month ago, and what I'm witnessing is no different.

If a man were touching a woman without permission, most would see it as assault or at minimum, incredibly fucking creepy and inappropriate. But there are women that come to *Jake's* who think it's perfectly okay for them to touch men in an unwanted way, as if men who aren't interested in them can be enticed into hooking up or something just by an unwelcomed brush of their hand. It may work for some men, but it's not working on Boomer. Honestly, I've never seen it work on a single Cerberus member in all the years I've worked here. Their moral compasses are more finely tuned than most. Their unflagging integrity makes them trustworthy and reliable. You know what you're getting with these guys and women.

Boomer, on the other hand, is different. He was quick to assume I was following him, showing up at places he's at. As if Target is some out-of-the-way location that requires special circumstances to utilize. I never expected him to actually take me up on my offer to grab lunch, but it felt like the right thing to offer since he was looking so sad after I mentioned Aro. The man looked lost in his thoughts, so distracted it took him the longest time to realize I was touching his hand. He didn't jerk away like he was disgusted but stepping away from me also irritated me. Out of pettiness, I bought condoms, hoping he'd see them and be jealous or something, rather than getting the damn shampoo I went there to get in the first place.

The way I respond to the man and how he's capable of annoying me in the worst and best way just by existing are rather annoying.

I've been turned down before. Hell, I flirt with so many people just to pass the time that being told they're married, straight, or not even interested happens regularly. Boomer's rejections shouldn't affect me any more than the next person, but somehow it hits me differently.

I'd pounce on him if he agreed. I'd never deny that. But shit, I'd probably strip naked in record time if Aro, Ugly or even Slick paid me any attention. Realizing I'm no damn better than the women who flock into the bar to shoot their shot with them makes me fucking cranky.

I pull my eyes from the pitcher in my hand when the door opens again

and Slick walks inside. Aro and Ugly aren't very far behind her.

I feel like an intruder, watching them walk toward the bar, because everyone inside has their eyes locked on Aro and the cane in his hand. Other than the light limp, the man looks no worse for wear. He's scowling like someone kicked his fucking puppy though.

"What are you guys having tonight?" I ask Ugly as he places both of his hands, palm side down, on the bar top.

"Couple of pitchers of beer," he says, and I get to work on them.

I fill two pitchers and slide them across the bar before grabbing a bottle of water as well.

"Here you go," I tell Ugly. "That's for Boomer. He's looking a little low."

Ugly grabs the pitchers, leaving the water for Aro. I nod at the man as he grabs the water, not knowing what to say to him. I wouldn't consider myself close to any of them. I've never been to the clubhouse or hung out with them for any reason outside serving them beer here or getting a little help from them when a customer gets a little too rowdy.

Because I don't know how *glad you're home* would be received, I simply keep my mouth shut.

I step out from behind the bar to clear a table. We aren't that busy but one of the waitresses decided not to show up, and that leaves the bartenders responsible for cleaning.

"What the fu—" I snap when I'm roughly spun around, but my words fall away when I see an angry Boomer standing right in front of me.

"I look thirsty?" he growls, pressing the bottle of water into my chest.

I don't reach for the thing, and it falls to our feet and rolls away when he releases it.

"What?" I hiss, my blood boiling from this man thinking he has any right to touch me the way he did.

"You told the guys I looked thirsty and sent over that fucking bottle of water."

I understand the way he received what he was told immediately, but that really isn't the point.

I glare down at the hand he still has clamped on my upper arm until he drops it away.

I could stand here and argue. I could cause a scene, but it would get me nowhere.

I choose to walk away, both wanting him to go back to his table and to follow me.

My pulse pounds in my ears, striking the same notes as the song playing on the jukebox, as I head toward the hall leading to the restrooms. His shadow follows right behind me.

"We need to talk," he snaps the second we're alone in the hallway.

I turn to face the man, wondering when I'll ever get over this crush I have on him. Maybe it's the challenge that's making me a little obsessive, but I just can't seem to let it go.

"I didn't tell Aro you looked thirsty," I clarify. "I told him you were looking a little low. Most people would think I'm a good bartender for sending them more to drink when they're about to run out."

He narrows his eyes at me, his annoyance with me drawing him so close, his shirt brushes mine with every inhale he takes.

"Listen, I'm sorry for how I acted at the domestic violence event. I made assumptions, and I shouldn't have. But you've got to stop doing things to rile me up."

"Me?" I huff a humorless laugh. "I'm doing shit to rile you up?"

"You know you are," he growls.

"It seems just the sight of me riles you up," I mutter, my skin igniting when his eyes drop to my lips. "Are you really sorry for what you said at the event?"

He nods, his throat working on a swallow, but his eyes are still locked on my mouth.

“There’s only one apology I’ll accept,” I say, my voice dropping low.

Taking a chance I know will probably get me punched in the nose, I lean forward and press my lips to his.

He doesn’t exactly kiss me back. He doesn’t tilt his head for better access. He doesn’t part his lips at the brush of my tongue on them.

He does take a long moment to pull away. He does make an indescribable sound very similar to a moan that settles in my nuts, drawing them remarkably closer to my body.

“What was that for?” he asks, his blue eyes lifting to look at mine.

“I was accepting your apology,” I say, my hands trembling with the need to pull him against my body.

Chapter 7

Boomer

“I really am sorry,” I say, somehow breathless standing in front of him.

“Don’t apologize a second time, or I’ll have to accept a second time.”

I’m close enough to him to see several tiny freckles dotting the bridge of his nose. His pupils are huge, nearly blocking out all of the olive color of his irises. I don’t know if it’s the darkness or arousal that’s making them so big.

His lip twitches, and for the first time, I translate it as joy rather than some sort of challenge he wants me to face.

“I am,” I say again, my voice husky and filled with a need I’ll have to feel guilty over later. “Sorry.”

White teeth dig into his lower lip before the smile he’s trying to hold back bursts forth. There’s a victory in it, a certain type of celebration in the sexy curve.

He doesn’t move quickly, but I know he moves faster than it feels as he grips my shoulders, turning me so my back is to the wall. He presses closer, making my stomach flutter in a way I can’t recall ever feeling before.

He’s as turned on right now as I am, but where there’s a tremble of insecurity in my hands, his fingers as they brush down my cheek are filled with confidence and experience.

“I’ve never kissed a man,” I confess as he inches closer, his intent as easy to read as a flashing neon sign.

“I know,” he whispers, no level of arrogance in his voice. “We don’t have to.”

He’s giving me an out, and I sort of hate him for it. If I allow it, I can place blame on no one but myself later.

I don’t stop him as he leans even closer.

“Do you want this?” he asks, only his breath brushing my lips.

“I shouldn’t.”

“That wasn’t the question.”

“God help me,” I breathe before leaning forward and closing the distance between us.

His inhalation of breath the second our lips touch settles inside of me, causing a wave of flutters in my entire body.

His lips on mine are nothing like the times I’ve kissed women, trying to ignite some spark that would make my sinful cravings shift in a different direction.

Those kisses were mechanical.

There were no sparks, no rush of electricity.

I didn’t feel those kisses in my jeans the way I do this one.

His teeth nip at my bottom lip, and I don’t even try to stanch the moan that bubbles up my throat.

I grip his shirt in my fists, pulling him even closer, whiney with need when he rolls his hips against mine. His thickness swipes against mine, and my body doesn’t care that there are several layers of fabric between us. It feels beyond amazing. The warmth of him, his hardness against my own, the cherry taste on his lips, all of it makes for the most miraculous experience.

I ignore the part of me that knows this is wrong. I’ll have to deal with the guilt and regret later. This is the part of sinning that makes it so damn hard to resist. Acting immoral never feels bad. If it did, fewer people would do it.

Breathless and pupils even bigger than before, Drake pulls his mouth back from mine, chuckling when I lean forward, chasing his lips.

“Fuck, that’s better than I could’ve imagined,” he says, his pink tongue skating out to trace his lower lip.

“I should—”

“You should come upstairs with me. Rochelle can tend the bar for half an hour.”

My first instinct is to turn down his offer because it's what I've always done, but I don't manage the words before his lips are on mine again, his tongue pleading his case, one swirl against mine at a time.

I'm putty in this man's hands, almost losing my ability to stand on my own when he sweeps his palm down the front of my jeans.

I whimper with need, the things I've experienced before not even registering when compared to how he's making me feel.

The hum of approval Drake makes as he curls his fingers around my erection is almost enough to make me embarrass myself.

He's dangerous, not just for my soul but for my body. I've never struggled with addiction, but I can see how easy it would be to form an attachment to this man. Hell, some would argue I already have. What started as simple flirting, Drake smiling at me much the same way he does with nearly everyone else, has shifted over time. At first, my cheeks would heat with embarrassment, now, I don't know that I go a full twenty-four hours without imagining him in all kinds of compromising positions.

"Are you ready to come..." he asks, his lips brushing mine again. "Up to my room?"

I swallow down my answer at the second part of his question because he took it in a direction I didn't think he would.

I know what I should do. I'm just incapable of it right now. It would be impossible to pull away from this man and the way his lips move over mine, so I live in the moment, knowing once it's over, it can never happen again.

"Fuck, you turn me on," he whispers, his tongue striking out to swipe at my lips in a carnal, messy sort of way that I had no idea I'd like as much as I do. "Those sounds you're making are a serious turn-on. I think—"

"Shit, sorry."

My pulse pounds uncontrollably in a very different way at the sight of Slick and Aro standing in the entrance to the hallway. There is literally no alternative reason for why Drake and I are standing against each other like we are, other than the truth.

My head drops in shame, my throat threatening to seize with guilt. I

push at Drake's chest, considering it a small blessing when he takes a step back rather than forcing the issue.

I walk away from all of them, my heart filled with disgrace. The lower half of my body hasn't caught on to what's happening, and I have to walk through the bar with an erection. I don't make eye contact with the woman who didn't seem to understand no when she touched my leg more than once earlier. Thankfully, she doesn't follow me out the front door.

I'm climbing into the SUV when the passenger side door opens. I don't say a word to Slick as we both settle inside. I know Harley and Alyssa will catch a ride with Aro and Ugly, so I don't hesitate to start the vehicle and drive out of the parking lot.

We don't say a word as I drive back to the clubhouse, even though I feel like I need to make excuses for what she witnessed. I fight the urge to apologize for putting her in such an awkward position, to have observed such shameful behavior. I don't open my mouth because a man kissing another man isn't something foreign to either of us. Snatch and Itchy kiss. Tug and Max kiss. Landon and Rick kiss. None of those couples apologize for loving another man. They don't make excuses because, to them, what they do isn't wrong. I don't look at them with judgment. I don't think about how their souls may be destined for the pits of hell because that isn't their belief.

My beliefs are what I struggle with, and I feel as if they only belong to me. I've never tried to push my beliefs onto someone else. As I drive and think about this, I consider that maybe I'm losing my mind. Maybe I'm not the sanest person as I once considered myself to be.

None of the men involved in less-than-traditional relationships are going to go to hell because it's not a part of their beliefs that they will.

If only shifting my own belief system were easier, then maybe I too could be who I am without remorse or regret, without the fear of facing the devil one day.

I release a slow breath as I pull into the parking lot outside the clubhouse. I know I won't be able to solve any of these problems tonight. It's something I've been dealing with for as long as I can remember.

"It's not what you think," I find myself saying as I hit the ignition

switch on the SUV.

Silence fills the inside of the vehicle for a long moment.

“But it could be, and that would be okay,” she whispers.

Slick is a psychologist and probably the one more qualified to help me work through the things I’m struggling with, but she’s also a teammate. The last thing I need is anyone on the team looking at me differently. It could compromise missions or, even worse, somehow harm my position with Cerberus.

I don’t say another word as I climb out of the SUV and head toward the garage. Besides Aro, Ugly, and me, everyone else is partnered up with someone. I’ll have privacy in the garage because the other two single men are still back at *Jake’s*.

I have no idea what the next conversation with Aro is going to be like. If he pretends he didn’t see a damn thing that would be best. One thing I do know is that I don’t have to worry about being confronted by men I thought were my friends seconds before they beat the crap out of me.

I’m nothing but a simmering ball of confusion as I grab a bottle of water from the fridge in the garage. Summer has made its way to New Mexico and even ten at night is still rather warm.

I stare down at the bottle in my hands as I take a seat in one of many chairs situated in a circle.

The scent of oil and gasoline from numerous bikes in various states of assembly fill my nostrils.

Selective, or in my case not exactly selective, confusion has always been a struggle for me.

I don’t look around at the people in and connected to Cerberus and pick apart what my raising would consider sins, but I can’t help doing exactly that when it comes to myself.

I don’t see any of them as sinners. I have a strict policy of only saving that for myself.

Pressing two cold fingers to my lips, I try to feel the right amount of

guilt I should feel for what happened with Drake tonight, but I can't seem to manage it. Maybe because of the adrenaline or pleasure, but I just can't muster the shame I should be feeling.

I enjoyed what happened tonight. I crossed a line I've never crossed before. I probably wouldn't consider it as sinful, if there was such a scale on ranking sin, as some of the things I've done in the past.

I justified those experiences because it was something actively done to me rather than something I was doing myself.

Tonight, I pulled Drake closer. I tilted my head and opened my mouth wider when he urged me to do so with his tongue.

I was completely engaged and enthusiastic in my participation, but everyone is a sinner, right?

I'm having a hard time seeing the wrong in what I've done. If everyone is a sinner, and sins are forgiven, then why not live a sinful life?

I'm not even religious any longer. I don't pray or repent. I'm a good person. I help others. I don't usually lie, mostly because I don't open my mouth very often. I save the lying for myself when I inch dangerously close to rock bottom.

How can I say it's okay for others, but not allow it to be okay for myself?

I'm sure Slick would have the answers to several of these questions, but I just can't bring myself to ask her.

I convince myself that I have to just keep my distance from Drake. If I'm not near him, then I won't be enticed to act on any of my temptations.

But hours later, after leaving the garage, showering, and heading to bed, my mind wanders as I drift to sleep about what all I'd like to do to him and for him to do to me.

Chapter 8

Drake

I've always been a strike while the iron is hot kind of guy. I know what it's like to miss opportunities and later regret not taking risks.

It's what told me to lean closer and press my lips to Boomer's.

His confession of never kissing a man before echoes in my head as I serve Maude another drink. She's in a reflective mood tonight, a drastic difference to the flirty mood she's usually in.

I thought Boomer whispered those words as an excuse to step away, and I was floored and turned on more than I ever have been in my life when he kissed me again. Hoping something would happen and it actually occurring had always seemed like a farfetched anomaly to me. Of course, each time I flirted with the man, I prayed it would end much like it did earlier in the hallway, but I never really expected it to come to fruition. It's almost like looking at house plans online that would never be within your budget. You invest the time, knowing, deep down, the impossibility of it.

I scrape my teeth over my lower lip, somehow still feeling him there even an hour after he made his hasty retreat. I can stand behind the bar and fantasize about the direction things could've taken with him all night long, but there's also that part deep inside my head that warns me of getting so lost in someone. I did that once before, and it was the very relationship I spoke of at the domestic violence event. Kenny chipped away bits and pieces of me, and even years later, there are days I still don't feel whole. I'll never give another person that much power over me.

"I'll find a ride," I hear Ugly say as he approaches the bar with Harley and Alyssa not far behind him. "I'm not some old married couple like everyone else."

"I feel like that's a fucking jab at me," Aro mutters. "I'm not old, just tired as fuck."

"It's not even midnight," Ugly grumbles.

"Sow your wild oats, young one," Harley says, as he claps Ugly on the

back with one hand while using his other arm to draw Alyssa tighter to his chest. “Us geriatrics are going to bed.”

Ugly’s lip twitches as he noticeably scans the couple. “I don’t think you’re going to sleep.”

“Never said anything about sleep,” Harley says, drawing a blush to Alyssa’s cheeks before he guides her away.

Aro follows behind them, his reliance on the cane more prominent than it was when he entered the bar earlier.

“Another beer?”

“And a drink for this lovely lady,” the man says, as he gives a sexy smile to the woman sitting a few stools down.

“No thanks,” she mutters, barely lifting her head enough to acknowledge him.

I do my best not to laugh when he looks back at me, his face a mask of confusion and shock.

These guys don’t get shot down that often. Because of their success rate in picking up women, especially at *Jake’s*, it’s always a little surprising when women don’t take the bait.

She’s a stronger person than I am because turning any of them down would be nearly impossible for me.

I pass Ugly his beer, taking another long look at him, and realize just how much trouble I’m in when I snap my mouth closed rather than opening it to flirt with him. It doesn’t feel right to kiss Boomer in the hallway and then flirt with one of his friends, and that isn’t like me at all.

My stomach turns a little with the realization.

“I’m closing the bar tonight,” I begin. “But if you’re still around when I get off work, I can give you a ride home.”

“Thanks, man,” he says as he raps his knuckles on the bar before walking away.

The man took my offer as exactly what it was because I didn’t add a

wink or say it in a flirty tone, despite feeling like I should've to get back whatever piece of myself that I've unwittingly already offered to Boomer.

I busy myself making drinks, chatting with customers, and working on the things I can prep for tomorrow.

The night is slow, the excitement and action happening too early in my shift to make it go by faster.

There's no drama or fights to break up, only the regulars and the one woman I didn't recognize that Ugly tried to pick up not long ago.

The man must've found someone to give him a ride home because I haven't seen him for the last half hour. It's no big deal. It's not like the guy would invite me into the clubhouse. Rumor is that not many people outside of the club are allowed, and if they are given temporary permission, it's because they're hooking up with one of the members.

Movement from the corner of my eye catches my attention, and I turn to see Ugly coming from the hallway, looking a little lighter on his feet than he did the last time I saw him.

The woman I didn't recognize earlier clearly changed her mind. I notice when she follows behind him a couple feet with a smile on her face as she wipes at her lips with the back of her hand. The woman went from being annoyed he offered to buy her a drink to looking completely starstruck at the opportunity to suck him off in a bar bathroom. I swear these guys have been blessed with some kind of voodoo when it comes to enticing women.

"Looks like you won't be needing that ride home," I tell Ugly as I pour him another beer.

"She's going to need a cab," he mutters, his mood changing drastically from just a moment ago.

"She's drunk?" I ask through clenched teeth.

I only served her one drink, but it's always possible someone else bought her some and I didn't notice.

"She's married," he says, sounding rightfully annoyed with my assumption. "She had a friend drop her off at the bar. She didn't drive."

“She told you she was married?” I ask, leaning a little closer because I’m a sucker for drama.

He shakes his head. “Saw the tan line on her ring finger when she was working my cock.”

“You looked a little too happy coming out of the hallway for a man that put a stop to getting some action because a woman is married.”

He scoffs. “Put an end to it? She took the vows, not me.”

I shake my head at the audacity, unable to keep from smiling.

“Careful,” I say, darting my eyes to the side where the woman is sitting, her eyes still a little dreamy as she watches Ugly. “She already looks a little in love with you.”

The cocky bastard winks at me. “They always do.”

He takes a seat on the barstool, purposely ignoring the woman, while I shoot a text to the cab company through their app to order her a ride.

The woman slips Ugly her phone number before she leaves, smiling like she’s won the lottery. I can’t imagine the damn predicament the woman is going to put herself in because she hooked up with a Cerberus member. I know all of them have been loyal and devoted once they fall in love, but some of them are dogs and downright scoundrels before they take that leap. Ugly is no exception.

He sticks around, waiting as the bar slows, people closing out their tabs and heading home. I have to call several more cabs for those that imbibed a little too much, letting them know that their keys will be available when the bar opens for lunch tomorrow. With it being locals who are well aware of the rules, I get no arguments. It doesn’t hurt that Ugly has been belly up to the bar since he came out of the bathroom. There aren’t many people willing to argue when he’s paying attention to the conversation.

“Need help with anything?” he asks after I lock the front door and wipe down the bar.

“You trying to get out of paying your tab?”

He shakes his head, chuckling, as he pulls his wallet from his back

pocket. He closes his tab, giving me the ability to do the nightly paperwork and count the till.

It takes another half hour to make sure everything is ready for the lunch shift tomorrow before I'm able to get him home. He doesn't seem to mind, and he doesn't rush me through the nightly routine.

It isn't until he stands from the bar stool with a little stumble to his steps that I realize the man is drunk. He grins wide, shrugging his shoulders as he catches himself before he topples over. The man is absolutely adorable in a he-could-kill-me-with-one-hand sort of way.

"You alright?" I ask, as he slowly makes his way to the front door.

"I'm tired as hell," he says, his words slow.

"Let's get you home then."

He follows me to my truck, a blue, single cab, Chevy S10 I've had forever.

He pulls his phone from his back pocket just before climbing into the passenger seat. He grunts as he gets settled, his phone resting on his lap as his eyes flutter closed. I laugh at the way he makes it sound like it's almost too much effort to move.

He's snoring lightly before we even make it to the turn leading to the clubhouse.

I haven't been out this way in a very long time. The road ends in a dead end, meaning no one comes this way unless their intention is to end up at the clubhouse or they get lost.

A row of houses line the street across from the clubhouse. Those weren't there the one time I ended up on this end of town. Even then, I used the turnaround area at the very end of the street, taking heed of the no trespassing sign on the fence at the entrance to the Cerberus clubhouse.

There's no massive sign indicating that it's Cerberus land. There isn't the huge three-headed dog insignia that graces the leather cuts the members wear, but there's still a sense of foreboding about the place. Not in a way that makes me feel like I'll be hurt if I turn into the parking lot but that I'm not welcome without an invitation.

Ugly's head is canted to the side in a way that makes me concerned for his posture as I put the vehicle in park.

I know it's devious, but my eyes dart down to the phone in his lap.

I should do exactly what Boomer has done with me and avoid him at all costs, but I know I'll never be able to manage it.

I'm risking making a complete mess of things when I reach for Ugly's phone, but it's not enough to stop me.

I turn the thing in his direction, holding it a foot from his face when it asks for a code. Thankfully, the face recognition software opens it for me. I don't go digging through the man's phone. I'm on a mission, hunting for one thing only.

I stare at Boomer's contact information, memorizing his number before closing out of the contact list and locking the phone. I know it will be seen as a breach of trust, and that's why I've almost convinced myself that I won't use it.

"What are you doing with my phone?" Ugly asks, no alarm in his tone when I try to put it back on his lap.

"I was going to give you my number in case you wanted to thank me for giving you a ride home." I wink at him, unsure if he'd even be able to see it in the darkness of the truck.

He chuckles. "I figured you'd be trying to get Boomer's number."

His tone is even. There's no teasing or question to it at all. It's a matter-of-fact statement that has no hint of explanation. It doesn't say that Boomer talks about me. It doesn't say that he'd be fine if Boomer and I hooked up.

They're just words, much like they'd sound if he told me he had a burger and fries for lunch.

I reach for the ignition, but his words stop me.

"There's no point in turning off the truck. You can't go inside."

I nod. "I heard it was invitation only."

“Invitations are normally only extended for sex,” he says on a sigh. “There were supposed to be all these orgies. It was one of the perks of Cerberus, but no one wants orgies. They all want the people they love.”

He sounds a little bitter, disclosing the news.

“There are only three single men left, and that’s going to be two soon enough, if Aro ever gets his head out of his ass.”

I presume he’s talking about himself and Boomer, but I don’t ask.

“See ya later, Drake the bartender.”

Ugly climbs out of the truck, his feet seeming heavy as they carry him toward the front door.

I’m a little disappointed that I didn’t get to go inside, and it has nothing to do with the novelty of it being the Cerberus clubhouse. I let myself imagine that I’d go in and help Ugly to his room, running into Boomer on my way out. We’d pick up exactly where we left off in the hallway.

I clear my throat and put my truck into gear. Getting lost on any hope that Boomer will want to make out with me again is fruitless. I should just feel lucky that he wanted to kiss me once. Thinking it will happen again is a waste of time.

Chapter 9

Boomer

It takes a little longer this morning for the guilt to hit me from the dreams I had last night, but it slams into me harder than normal after my brain comes back online and I think about actually kissing Drake last night. The reality of the experience is much different from the fantasy I've had until this point.

In the darkness of night, in the silent clubhouse, it was easy for me to convince myself that everything would be fine, that it wouldn't be such a big deal if Aro or Slick told the others what they saw.

But as I lie in bed, I think about everything they could've seen. The kiss was bad enough, but the way I got lost in Drake's hand running down the front of my jeans, the way we both rolled our hips, seeking friction? That's a little too much for anyone to witness.

I feel three times heavier than I actually weigh as I sit up on the side of my bed. I know I'm going to face people who know the truth about me. I know it as well as I know my name. The members of Cerberus are no different from any other group of people close enough to consider themselves family.

I don't know how many breakfast conversations I've heard that started with the words "So did you hear what happened last night?" or "So and so were caught doing XYZ."

Secrets have a hard time staying that way around this place, and I only have myself to blame. I knew when I pulled Drake closer to me last night that we were in a public place. I enjoyed myself, but I wasn't so caught up in the pleasure that I didn't consider getting caught. I knew there was a chance. I was just willing to take the risk.

It's no big deal if my name is on everyone's lips this morning over coffee and scones. I haven't met one person connected to Cerberus that has a problem with same-sex relationships. Several people have even asked me what my deal was when I've been caught watching one of the couples, wishing I was accepting enough of myself to be able to have something

similar to what they have.

I run through scenarios in my head as I shower, knowing I won't lie to anyone who asks. My go-to response when the subject comes up is silence, but I haven't exactly been asked directly. I know that reprieve will be coming to an end today.

I can't deny the fact that I'm gay. I don't even deny it to myself. I know I am. It's just that I don't *want* to be.

Liking men, imagining myself with them in every way imaginable, feels more like a curse than freedom. I know a lot of people struggle with the *am I* part of their journey.

Despite being told it's a choice, all my life growing up, I know for a fact it isn't. I wouldn't have picked this path for myself, given the opportunity to choose on my own.

I've tried ignoring who I am, but of course, that doesn't work either.

Years ago, I settled on being who I am, but not participating in any of the acts. Maybe not knowing what it was like for a man to touch me would make it easier to avoid Drake, but there are some things I've experienced since leaving the compound. None of those even compare to the way Drake pressed me into the wall last night with his body.

Irritated with my inability to keep him from my thoughts, I scrape my hands over my face with a growl, wishing I could just circle the drain and wash it away instead of facing the rest of Cerberus today. I hoped that by being celibate, I'd be able to avoid this conversation, but the urges last night after he brushed his lips over mine were just too strong to ignore. Kissing him at that point wasn't a want. It quickly became a need, a must. I couldn't see myself surviving if I walked away, never having his tongue brush mine. It was like trying to breathe while submerged in a hundred feet of water... impossible.

What I can accept is that last night was a slipup that can't happen again, even after facing my team as my truths come to light.

I continue to take my time, toweling off slowly, ignoring the heavy length between my thighs as I refuse to give into that weakness. I know it's not Drake's fault. Not many people live by the same rules I do. They aren't

disciplined. They aren't weighed down by the remorse of their sins. Many don't see what they do as sins at all, and that's okay too. My journey and theirs aren't the same.

I know I shouldn't either. My religious upbringing should no longer affect me the way that it does. I've done so much research on religion since limping away from the compound at eighteen. I know all about the discrepancies and that all religious books were written and rewritten and edited and reedited to fit whatever agenda people had at the time. I know that texts have been altered over hundreds of years. I can even accept that there's more evidence that God doesn't exist than there is that he does.

My guilt is no more a choice than my sexuality is. I don't want to feel bad. I want to have fun and fall in love with a man that loves me just as much as I love him. I want happiness and a family. I want to consider adopting kids and raising them to be respectful men and women, rather than feeling like a pervert for bringing children into a home with prevalent homosexuality. I want to smile at a good-looking man without having to worry if he's going to follow me until I'm alone and beat me to death. I want to love and be loved without fear of going to Hell for being happy.

I want a lot of things I know I'll never have.

I'm no closer to knowing what I'll say to my teammates as I get dressed than I was when I first woke up.

Telling them I'm celibate because of beliefs I just can't seem to shake makes it sound like I have a problem with anyone else who may live that lifestyle, and that would never be my intention.

I grab my phone and the keys to my motorcycle, understanding now, especially after what Ugly said about Aro last night, why Slick has been taking so many rides lately. The urge to hit the open road for a few days is nipping at my boots like an unavoidable thing, and I know I won't be able to resist it for very much longer.

My phone screen flashes, and the notifications covering the screen are unfamiliar.

I don't have many people I keep in contact with outside of Cerberus. I haven't spoken to anyone in my family or back at the compound since the

day I left.

Unknown: Thanks for the kiss.

Unknown: You've been holding out on me.

Unknown: Apology accepted.

I know exactly who the texts are from, but it doesn't stop me from staring down at the messages as if an alien has somehow gotten my cell phone number.

Who is this? I text back, unsure that I shouldn't block his number the second I hit send.

I expect a written message when my phone buzzes again, but instead, I look down and find a picture of Drake, shirtless, his eyes sleepy, his smile perfectly charming, looking back at me.

The man has the ability to break every damn vow I've made to myself. Getting flirted with by the sexy bartender was my guilty pleasure. The words helped ease that part inside of me that was begging to be unleashed without actually taking any steps I would later regret.

Then came the brush of the hand at the bar and the comforting hand squeeze at the store. It left me wanting more. It left me aching for something I know I can't have.

This picture is ten times worse as far as my restraint is concerned. My finger hovers over the delete button, but I just can't manage to pull the trigger.

Instead, I save his contact information before getting lost for a long moment in the sight of the strategic placing of the photo, and how I can get just a hint of that trail of hair below his navel. I would've guessed that he was fit with the way his clothes clung to him, but seeing it is a whole other story. The ridges on his abdomen make my mouth water. The ink covering his muscled chest makes my fingers itch to trace each of the dark lines slowly, repeatedly.

I'm snapped out of a fantasy threatening to take root when he texts again.

Drake: Send me a picture of you.

I shake my head as if the man can see my refusal and feel like an idiot for it.

Instead of closing out the texting app, I snap a picture of just my hand, my middle finger extended.

It doesn't take long for him to respond, but once again, I'm shocked at his response.

Drake: That may be the sexiest hand I've ever seen. I can't help but hope it's an offer.

Me: Enough.

Telling him to stop seems like the right thing, but it doesn't keep me from smiling as I leave my room.

The living area is already filling up with people because we have a meeting scheduled later today. There have been a lot of impromptu gatherings since Aro was hurt in Costa Rica. It's as if there's an unspoken need to come together after such a tragedy. I've noticed since becoming a member that bonding by proximity seems like Cerberus's thing.

I grab a cup of coffee, heading back out into the living room instead of taking a seat at one of the tables in the kitchen. If someone is going to bring up the news Aro or Slick spread about me, they're going to have to track me down. I won't allow myself to be an easy target for the impending conversations.

I hover around for the better part of an hour before Aro shouts to get everyone's attention at the front of the room.

My skin grows cold, my hands so clammy I have to wipe them down the front of my jeans. What's coming doesn't carry the same sort of fear I suffered after my brother walked in on me that day, but my nerves are still on edge.

I hold my head high as he begins to speak, my insides a mess my outside demeanor doesn't betray.

"I want to thank everyone for the visits, calls, and prayers after I got

hurt,” Aro begins. “It’s been a hard battle both physically and emotionally, and I know I wouldn’t have made it through without you.”

A murmur of understanding circulates through the crowd.

“During the time I spent in Albuquerque, I got really close to another member of the club, and it was impossible not to fall completely in love with them.”

“You said it was a secret!” Ugly yells from the other side of the room.

A roar of laughter goes up, and I find myself smiling as well. I honestly think it’s because Aro isn’t pointing fingers at me and spreading the news I’m so unwilling to share myself.

Aro shakes his head at his friend, a small smile playing on his face. The look in his eyes transforms into something softer, more intimate when he looks at Slick.

“You have to say it!” Gigi, one of Kincaid’s daughters, yells. “A look isn’t good enough!”

Another round of laughter fills the room.

“Slick and I are together,” Aro announces, despite no one in the room being confused after the way he just swept his eyes down the front of her. “And completely in love.”

I can tell by the rise and fall of Slick’s chest that she was possibly as nervous for this announcement as I was, thinking they were going to be discussing what I did with Drake last night.

A raucous cheer makes a wave through the clubhouse, and I use everyone’s distraction as an opportunity to sneak out. I’ll congratulate Aro and Slick at a later time.

The open road is calling, but I know I only have an hour or so to myself before the scheduled meeting. I head toward the garage, praying everyone else stays inside.

I consider it a win when my phone buzzes in my pocket, and I resist the urge to pull it out.

Chapter 10

Drake

Many holidays are celebrated in the United States around the hard-earned freedom we have as a country.

The Fourth of July just happens to be my favorite.

The heat of the summer has a firm grip on the day by the time I climb out of my truck, close to the center of town.

The excitement is palpable by everyone I pass, considering I had to park almost a half a mile away. Many others in town have the same idea as I do, as we slowly walk toward the park.

The event is sponsored by Cerberus. They normally hold their summer event at the clubhouse, but I've never been to one. Their clubhouse is undergoing some renovations right now, so they've opted to make their event even more public this year.

This is my first Fourth of July off since I started working at *Jake's*, and it took begging Rochelle for more than a week for her to take my shift. When I made the schedule for the month weeks ago, I didn't consider that I'd want to go so badly.

He's the reason I can't seem to stay away.

He's been on my mind constantly for months.

I track a small group of leather vests as I edge closer to the park, but none of them are Boomer. He's the only reason I'm here.

I only speak to people who speak to me. There's a certain silent oath taken by bartenders. We hear so many secrets once folks are plied with alcohol. We witness sins and infidelities. We hear confessions. We're privileged to secrets.

Many men drop their eyes when they see me before escorting their life partners in another direction, guilt, and fear of being exposed, making them hasten their steps.

Women who dress a certain way for the bar are a little more proper at

this family event.

“Think they prayed over the sauce?”

I grin at Ugly as I step up to the ladies selling BBQ plates.

The woman handing out plates frowns, and I do my best to hide my smile, but even rolling my lips between my teeth doesn't seem to be enough.

“I wouldn't think Cerberus would get tangled up with any religious faction,” I say, once I have better control of my facial features.

“We're in no way linked to the motorcycle gang,” the woman says, her hands trembling as she passes me a plate with a pulled pork sandwich on it. “We're raising money for a new swing set at Believer's Baptist Church.”

“We're not a gang, ma'am,” Ugly says, his voice showing no irritation, but I can see in his eyes he's getting tired of having to make the distinction.

“The event was open to all vendors,” she says to me as if Ugly didn't just speak to her. “We don't condone what that gang stands for, but the children need new playground equipment.”

I have no doubt this woman doesn't have a clue just how much she'd avoid speaking to me if she thinks the club is bad. I'm certain who I am to my core would make her have a stroke.

“Do you have any idea—”

My words snap to an end when Ugly places his hand over mine.

“For the children,” he says, holding a fifty-dollar bill in her direction.

“I don't have change,” she says, looking down at the money as if she's surprised he's offering to pay rather than throwing the food back at her after what she said.

“Keep it,” he says, giving her a small smile.

“For the children,” I repeat before walking away, my hands trembling to the point I'm afraid the food on my plate will end up at my feet.

“That's wasteful,” Ugly says as I inch toward one of the many trash cans spread out around the park.

“You’re actually going to eat it?”

He shrugs. “I’m hungry and it smells great. Plus, I’m going to eat it out of spite, and smile the entire time.”

“I thought religious people were supposed to be accepting. Those without sin cast the first stone and all that shit.”

Ugly chuckles, and I follow him to a table, the plate of food still in hand because he’s right. It does smell amazing, and I’m incredibly hungry too.

“People pick and choose which sins they will allow. That woman would never consider that her judgment of Cerberus would be considered just as sinful as whatever she thinks the club does.”

“It’s stupid.”

“It’s life,” Ugly says around a huge bite of his pulled pork sandwich. He chews and swallows before speaking again. “I think they must’ve blessed the sauce. It’s amazing.”

“It’s probably poisoned,” I mutter, but lift my sandwich to my mouth.

Motion to my left catches my eye, and I nearly choke on my food when I see Boomer walking up. He has a huge smile on his face as Alyssa holds most of his attention. His steps falter when he notices me sitting across from Ugly.

I watch his sexy-as-hell throat work on a swallow as he quickly decides that walking away will cause more of a scene than taking a seat.

I take another bite as he settles beside Ugly.

“Did you get preached at to get that sandwich?” I ask Alyssa as she places her plate on the picnic table.

“Right?” she says with a light chuckle. “I thought I was going to have to repent in order to get a fork for the potato salad.”

“Making fun of people because of their beliefs is just as bad as them judging you for not having any,” Boomer says, his voice flat and unimpressed.

“We weren’t making fun of—”

“I was,” Alyssa interrupts with a chuckle as she looks at her friend. “That woman is hateful. I’m not much of a religious person, but I don’t think being hateful is approved of in any religion.”

Boomer tilts his head to the side as if considering her words.

I haven’t seen him since the kiss. My texts since he sent the picture of him flipping me the middle finger have gone unanswered. I haven’t sent many because there’s a fine line between trying to entice him and harassing him. After a handful, I stopped sending them altogether.

It’s been weeks and weeks since his fingers were tangled in my shirt in that darkened hallway.

When my eyes lock on his mouth as he takes a bite of his sandwich I remember how they felt when they touched mine.

I’m known for flirting incessantly, and there was a time in my life where I sought out company nearly every night of the week. I’ve slowed down in that department, understanding with the help of therapy with Dr. Alvarez that seeking the company of someone else was my way of avoiding the difficulty of being alone with my own thoughts.

Maybe I’m hyper focused on Boomer because it’s been so long since I sought something sexual with anyone else.

Boomer does his best to avoid looking at me as conversations swirl around us. I try my best to keep up, despite him distracting me just by being near. Despite the Cerberus members living in such close quarters and seeing each other every day, they seem to be able to carry on many lines of conversation, surprisingly not one about their jobs.

I try to keep my eyes on Ugly as he speaks when Boomer stands to leave. I reason with myself that anyone sitting around a table would look up when someone gets up to leave as I watch him stand, his empty plate in his hand.

“We’re going for dessert,” Alyssa says as she too stands. “Do you want us to grab you something?”

“That’s very sweet of you,” I say, slow to pull my eyes from Boomer.

“But no thank you.”

I regret not asking her to grab me a funnel cake or an ice cream cone, because I imagine that they won't come back now that I haven't given them a reason to.

I'm distracted by conversation with Ugly and Grinch when I feel a presence beside me.

I jolt a little when I turn my head to find Kincaid standing directly beside me.

There's just something unsettling, being in the presence of the man. Despite his age, I imagine he could still snap my neck with his hands if he wanted to.

His wide smile as he looks down at me doesn't seem intimidating, but it still doesn't stop my heart from pounding in my chest.

Is he here to tell me to leave Boomer the fuck alone? Would I be able to listen if he is?

“It's... umm... been a while since I've seen you,” I say as I stand.

Ugly chuckles from the other side of the table, but I don't pull my eyes from Kincaid.

“I don't get out to the bar very often these days,” the club president says.

“He has a hard time seeing at night, with the glaucoma and all,” Ugly says.

Kincaid's lip twitches.

“I'm sorry,” I say. “I didn't know you—”

“I don't have glaucoma,” Kincaid says, his voice full of humor. “Ugly thinks he's hilarious. What he doesn't realize is that eventually he'll get older as well. I wanted to ask a favor of you.”

Here it comes.

“We're going to have a club event, and I want everyone to enjoy themselves rather than having to worry about cooking, cleaning, and making

drinks. That's where you come in."

"I'm not a very good cook," I say, praying the man doesn't want to hire me as a janitor.

Kincaid laughs. "But you're a great bartender."

Ugly laughs as if me being flustered around his boss is hilarious. I make a note to water down his drinks for the next month.

"I'd like you to bartend. It's a paid job. It's in two weeks."

"I can do that," I tell him, knowing I'm going to have to beg Rochelle once again to cover another shift for me.

Missing an event at the clubhouse, which comes with a chance to see Boomer, isn't going to happen.

"Perfect, I'll have Emmalyn email you a contract," Kincaid says before walking away.

"A contract?" I mutter as I watch him stride across the park.

"He's a very official guy."

I spin around, shocked to see Boomer once again sitting beside Ugly. I swear on everything holy that the man is purposely trying to drive me insane with the ice cream cone in his hand.

I look from him to the place I was sitting before Kincaid walked up several times, trying to decide whether I should take a seat. If that man licks that cone any sort of way, I'll be stuck, the boner I know I'll have, keeping me locked in place.

I guess I'm a glutton for punishment because I swing my leg back over the picnic table bench and take a seat.

"I wonder what a contract with Cerberus looks like," I say.

"Normally about eighty pages, and full of rules and regulations you never would've even considered," Ugly says, but he doesn't sound annoyed with the information.

"I'm sure it has more to do with you keeping your mouth shut in case you hear stuff you shouldn't while serving drinks at the clubhouse," Boomer

says, rolling his eyes at his teammate.

“That makes sense,” I say, wondering how long I can act normal, and if doing so, keeping the flirting to a base level, will keep Boomer right in front of me.

I try to keep my eyes off his lips unless he’s speaking. I think I manage to only glance at his hands a half a dozen times. I don’t say anything suggestive, and he stays across from me for the better part of an hour as we all chat.

He does eat his ice cream cone, using his teeth to bite rather than his tongue to lick, and it has no less of an effect on me than the latter would’ve. Just as I predicted, I’m locked at the picnic table because there’s absolutely no way to hide my erection in my tight shorts.

“We need a guys’ trip,” Ugly says. “You realize that we’re the only two single guys left, right?”

“So Aro finally bit the bullet?”

Ugly smiles. “The man is head over heels.”

“Good for them,” I say honestly, wondering if Boomer has avoided the bar because he got caught by the newest Cerberus couple with his lips on another man.

“I’m single, too,” I say, considering it might be pushing a little too much.

Ugly nods. “You should come with us.”

“I didn’t agree to anything,” Boomer says. “But you two have fun.”

“Nope,” Ugly says with a clap to his friend’s back. “You’re going, too.”

Chapter 11

Boomer

“I don’t understand driving in today when the game isn’t until tomorrow,” I mutter from the back seat of the SUV.

I didn’t hesitate to jump back here when we pulled up outside of *Jake’s* and Ugly announced that Drake was coming with us.

I know I wouldn’t be able to handle a nearly eight-hour drive with the man staring at the back of my head. I’d be insane before we made it to Denver.

“I didn’t want the entire day to be a rush,” Ugly says, his eyes locked on the road.

“Yet, you’re going eighty in a fifty-five,” I mutter.

“At night,” Drake adds from the passenger seat, as if he’s a little on edge as well.

Ugly sighs as he pulls his foot from the gas pedal.

Conversation is a little stilted as we get closer to Denver. Even Ugly doesn’t open his mouth to speak, and it makes my suspicion grow every second. The man always finds something to say.

“Did you both bring a suit?” Ugly asks as he slows to take the exit into town.

“I did,” Drake says.

“You didn’t mention a suit, jackass,” I mutter. “Why would we need a suit?”

“Dinner,” Ugly says, but I know he’s lying the second his eyes find mine in the rearview mirror. “And a show.”

“We’re not exactly dinner-and-a-show people,” I say. “I’m not going to a strip club.”

It’s not that I haven’t been to one before. You can’t really make it through Marine combat training without being peer pressured into it, but I

know I didn't enjoy the ones I've gone to in the past.

I've done very well to avoid Drake since that kiss, but I'm not sure I could control my face if I had to witness him getting a lap dance by some beautiful woman.

"We're not going to a strip club," Ugly says but his assurance sounds more like smoke and mirrors than a way to calm my fears.

Drake chuckles, the sound making me think he just figured something out, but he doesn't share the information.

"This is going to be so much fun," he says instead.

"You didn't think to mention this around the same time you swore that we weren't going to a strip club?"

Drake laughs once again, but I don't get the feeling he's laughing at me, so I let it slide.

We've already checked into our hotel rooms and dropped off our luggage.

Drake and Ugly have both changed into nice suits, but I don't feel out of place, staring up at the sign, in blue jeans and a t-shirt.

I'm not wearing my leather cut because Ugly was adamant that we wouldn't need it where we were going. Besides, the three-headed hellhound wouldn't exactly pair well with the Gucci suit Ugly has on.

"If you're worried about the price, don't be," Ugly says as he opens the driver's side door. "I've paid for your entry fee."

"I wasn't worried about the price," I mutter as I climb out of the back seat on the driver's side.

I've done this now both times I've gotten out of the vehicle, making sure not to place myself on the same side as Drake. It feels a little childish, but at the same time, I can only resist the man for so long. It took herculean strength not to stare at him the entire seven-hour drive to Denver.

"Maybe I can just swing back and pick you up when you two are

done?” I say through clenched teeth, more annoyed now than I was at the thought of Drake getting a lap dance.

This is so much worse than I could’ve ever imagined.

“No one is going to force you to do anything,” Drake says. “Have you never been?”

I shake my head. “No desire.”

“You’ve been before?” Ugly asks.

Drake doesn’t answer with words, but the sparkle in his eyes says it all.

We slowly walk toward the front door, and I have no idea why I go instead of insisting that Ugly hand over the keys to the SUV.

“Welcome to Hale-ish,” a huge man says from behind a counter to the left when we enter.

The room is dark and edgy, having a sensual appeal to it in a classy sort of way.

“Reservations under Alexander Smith,” Ugly says, forcing my head to snap back in his direction.

“Really?” I hiss.

“Is that your real name?” Drake asks, his smile a little too sexy for how I’m feeling right now. “Alex.”

The shortening of my name is said on a whisper, and I like it a little too damn much.

How in the world am I supposed to resist him in a place meant for giving in to your deepest desires?

How do I bear witness to him with someone else?

“Very good,” the man says after typing something into the computer on the desk in front of him. “What color bands for you?”

My brow draws tight in confusion.

“Black,” Ugly says.

“Black,” Drake mimics.

“And for you?” the man asks.

“I don’t need a band,” I say, having no idea what they’re even for.

“Everyone must wear a band,” the man says, holding out a laminated card.

I hesitate so long to take the thing from him that Ugly pulls it from his fingers and shoves it in my direction. My friend seems eager to get his night started.

I sweep my eyes down the list, knowing my answer before I even get to the second offering.

“White,” I say, shoving the card back in his direction.

Both Ugly and Drake chuckle, a knowing sound as if they could’ve predicted my choice without putting much thought into it.

“You’re able to come back out here and change your band if you like,” the guy says, holding up a solid white band and urging me to step forward. “You may not participate in any activities with this band on. You understand?”

I lock eyes with the man, the warning in his eyes, forcing my body to have some sort of reaction.

I swallow, nodding instead of speaking because I’m certain my voice would fail me right now.

“What do you say?” he asks after placing both Ugly’s and Drake’s bands on their arms.

“I understand,” I mutter.

The man behind the counter frowns in my direction.

“Thank you,” both Ugly and Drake say, making the man cock an eyebrow at me.

“Thank you,” I repeat, watching as his lip twitches in amusement.

“My name is Rosco. If you have any trouble inside, look for the

monitors in the bright yellow shirts, and remember no touching unless you change your band color.”

I follow quickly behind Ugly and Drake.

“I almost forgot, Mr. Smith,” Rosco says. “Your stamp.”

He motions me forward, instructing me to hold out my hand.

He presses a stamp to my skin, *WELCOME TO HALE-ISH* left behind when he pulls it away.

“All first-time visitors have to get stamped,” Rosco explains.

Drake is chuckling as I rejoin them, staring down at the ink on my skin. As if the white band on my wrist, declaring I’m not interested in any of the things offered on the list I glanced at isn’t enough, now I’m marked for all to see as a newbie.

I follow closely behind the two guys, one of whom I used to consider a friend. I’ll have to reevaluate that connection after leaving here tonight. We aren’t teenagers. It’s not okay for him to trick me into showing up at such a place, but at the same time, I didn’t have to enter either. I made a choice, and I can’t blame anyone else for that.

“Long time, no see, handsome.”

I snap my eyes up to see who spoke, only to witness Drake and the man behind the bar shake hands, their grip a little too familiar, a little too long, for mere acquaintances.

“Ugly,” the bartender says. “Looking as fuckable as ever.”

Ugly chuckles, unconcerned with the man flirting with him.

“And who is this guy?” the bartender asks.

“Dylan, this is Alex,” Drake says before Ugly or even myself tell the man who I am.

Drake urges me forward with a hand at my elbow, and for some damn reason, I allow it.

“Jack and Coke,” I say, drawing both Ugly’s and Drake’s eyes in my direction.

“Really?” Drake asks. “You choose now to drink?”

I ignore him. “I’m old enough, if you’d like to see my ID.”

“You wouldn’t be standing at my bar if you weren’t old enough,” Dylan says with a chuckle, his eyes sweeping down the front of me until they lock on the bright white band on my wrist. “I take it you rarely drink?”

“Never,” Drake says, his response grating on my nerves.

“The man is talking to me,” I snap, whipping my head in Drake’s direction.

His gaze locks on my lips and damn it if I don’t consider drinking a bad idea before it even happens.

“Make it just a Coke,” I mutter.

I wanted the alcohol to calm my nerves, but it’ll probably end up making me act on the things I know I can’t. Just the atmosphere makes me want to cut loose, not to mention the things I can see in the mirrors behind the bar.

“I can already tell you’re going to be a lot of fun to watch tonight,” Dylan says as he passes me the drink.

I pull my wallet from my back pocket but he waves me off, pointing to a small sign on the wall that reads *TWO DRINK MAXIMUM, COVERED BY ADMISSION*.

I still pull out a twenty and drop it in the tip jar on the counter, wondering if every bartender is exactly the same when he winks at me the same way Drake did when we first met.

Ugly orders a beer and Drake orders a Coke as well. It doesn’t take Dylan long enough to make them. Before long, my companions turn around to face the rest of the room. I hesitate for a long while, wishing Dylan wasn’t off helping someone else. I’d like to just sit at the bar all night, despite knowing Ugly would never let that happen.

I’ve seen a lot of things in my life. Between the Marines and Cerberus, there isn’t much I haven’t bore witness to, but my first real glance at what goes on at Hale-ish quickly brings a blush to my cheeks.

Chapter 12

Drake

I shift, not for the first time, in my seat.

There's a huge difference in suit pants and jeans with a little stretch. As my cock strains against the zipper of my designer pants, I regret not just staying in the clothes I traveled in. No one batted an eye at Boomer when he walked in the doors in jeans and a t-shirt. I know there are certain events where formal wear is required at Hale-ish, but tonight isn't one of those nights.

I'm wearing a black band, meaning I'm down for anything and everything, but I haven't moved from Boomer's side.

It didn't take long for Ugly to be dragged away by a woman wearing all leather. I didn't feel like it would be right to leave the clearly inexperienced man all alone.

When kissing me, he'd mentioned that he'd never kissed a man before, but the bright flush of his cheeks, a feat to see in the darkened room, makes me wonder just how far he's gone with a woman.

My guess would be not very far at all. The scene playing out on the stage in front of us is tame compared to some of the things I've witnessed down the back hallway, and yet his eyes are glued to it, his throat working on periodic swallows as if he's never seen such debauchery in his life.

The scene doesn't turn me on as much as watching him experience it does.

Despite his hands clasped in his lap, I can tell the man is just as hard as I am.

The scent of sex permeates the air, heavy, warm, and thick, clinging to everything it touches.

I ache to run my nose up the line of his neck and bite the lobe of his ear. I want to hear him whimper and beg for more. I want his mouth on mine more than anything else. I want his hands on me, his fingers exploring, prodding, grasping.

I clear my throat, turning my attention back to the stage when I notice him dart his eyes in my direction. He's an astute man. I have no doubt he can feel me watching him, and I imagine it's my attention that turns him on more than what he's seeing play out in front of us.

When the woman on stage moans as the man ramming his cock down her throat reaches over her back to play with her ass, it's Boomer's turn to shift in his seat.

On hands and knees, the woman is on full display, her pussy and ass visible with how wide her legs are spread.

The man dips his fingers in her dripping cunt before circling it back around that forbidden pucker of flesh.

For a man that was hesitant to walk through the front door, Boomer sure seems enthralled by what he's watching.

His jaw hangs open a little more when the man presses that first inch into her ass. Mine clenches in unsated lust, watching it unfold.

"Excuse me," Boomer says, standing in a rush before walking away.

I knew Hale-ish wasn't the place for him the second I figured out this was where Ugly was taking us. I thought it would be fun to watch Boomer struggle with being here. Now, I feel like a complete asshole for not offering to leave with him when he suggested it.

I watch his back, but the man doesn't head for the front door to leave. He arrows toward the restroom on the far side of the vast room.

I wait less than a minute before standing and walking in that direction.

I shove open the door to the bathroom, expecting to find one of the stalls closed with Boomer on the other side, but the man is breathing heavily, his hands grasping the edges of the porcelain sink.

He turns his head to the side to look at me, and he seems relieved at the sight of me. It does more to me than watching the performance on the stage had the power to do.

"We need to talk," he snaps but instead of walking toward me, he heads into one of the overly large stalls.

The second I step in front of it, I'm pulled inside.

Warm lips and nipping teeth greet me, and a moan I'll probably be ashamed of later escapes my lips. He swallows the sound down, his hands bruising with force on my back as he pulls me to his chest.

He's still hard, the walk to the bathroom having little to no effect on him. My heightened state of arousal matches his.

I wonder how far he'll let me take this, but before I can reach for him, his palm runs down the front of my pants.

Never in my wildest fantasies did I think this would ever happen. Touching me unprovoked? I've wanted it more times than I could ever count, but never expected it to happen. Not even after the kiss I can't forget about.

"Alex," I whisper against his lips when his fingers grip me over the fabric of my slacks.

I don't know if I'm pressing my luck, but I reach between us and unzip my pants, nearly buckling under the pleasure when he sweeps his hand down me with only my underwear separating skin from skin.

"Jesus," I grunt.

"Touch me," he pleads against my lips, his tongue tracing the lower curve before he pushes it back into my mouth.

The things I've dreamed of doing to this man drive me insane as I reach for the zipper of his jeans. I direct all of my focus on him because if I take even a second of concentrating on my own pleasure, I'll fucking blow before I can even stop myself.

He gasps, a whimpering, desperate and needy noise, the second I slide my hand behind the fabric of his boxer briefs.

He's warm and thick, a perfect handful as I slide my hand down his length to cradle his heavy sac.

"Drake," he whimpers, his hips thrusting forward to urge me to give him more.

I want this to last a lifetime. I want to savor every single second because I know, after this, he'll avoid me for the next year or so, going by

how much distance he put between us after just one kiss.

His breath is hot on my skin, his rapture audible in the pattern of his breathing and the noises filling the air around us.

I resist the urge to drop to my knees, both not wanting to push him too far and not wanting the hand still gripping me over my boxers to be pulled away.

It doesn't take long before concentrating on our lips is just too much effort for him, and I sort of love that he can't manage two things at once as he presses his forehead to mine, his eyes downcast to watch our hands work.

It hits me that I'm not even going to need his hand directly on my skin a second too late to stop it. My cock jerks in his palm, my cum jetting in my boxers, the wetness spreading almost immediately.

I register the gasp escaping his throat, then his own cock kicks in my hand, jizz jetting from the tip with so much force I'm both jealous and amazed with what I've been capable of making him do.

His cum coats my hand, and I use it to tighten my grip, my strokes growing easier with the lubrication.

I expect him to shove me away when he pulls his head back, but his gaze is unfocused, a lazy smile on his lips.

Lifting my hand, I press my wet fingertips to his lips, nearly falling over in shock when he opens his mouth.

My own jaw practically unhinges when he wraps his lips around my semen-coated fingers, his tongue twisting around the digits as he licks them clean.

"God. Damn," I grumble, pulling my fingers clear and leaning forward to press my lips to his once again.

This kiss is no less powerful than the first one, no less needy after our orgasms, than the one before it.

I pull back, seconds away from offering to call a cab so we can go back to the hotel and pick up where we left off, but the bathroom door opens, soft sensual music following whoever just joined us inside until it cuts off again

when the door closes.

As if cold water had been poured on him, Boomer takes a step back, a feat in such an enclosed space. He stops just short of shoving me away, but I can see in his eyes that he desperately wants to.

I nod in understanding as I zip up my slacks. I'll have to worry about the mess later.

Stay in here, I mouth.

I take a step back, quickly realizing that we didn't even bother shoving the door to the stall closed before we got down to business.

I freeze at the sight of who is standing in the room. I lock eyes with them, but his eyes are locked on the mirror, easily seeing who is standing behind me in the reflection.

Boomer swallows as he zips up his jeans, and surprisingly, he steps out of the stall with his head held high.

"You need to get your band changed," Max says the second Boomer steps out of the stall. "They take that shit pretty seriously here. You have to change your band if you change your mind."

Max walks out of the bathroom as if nothing happened.

I turn back to look at Boomer, the reflection in the mirror not enough to satisfy me.

"This shouldn't—"

I hold up my hand to silence him.

"Don't fucking say it," I snap. "Deal with your regret on your own time. And while you're at it, don't forget you pulled me into that stall. You touched me first. So I don't want any blame thrown in my direction."

I leave the bathroom without another word, and, unsurprisingly, Boomer doesn't try to stop me.

Chapter 13

Boomer

I didn't bother looking for Ugly to get the keys to the SUV after leaving the restroom.

I went directly to the front and had Rosco call me a cab.

The hotel room doesn't offer me the same comfort my room back at the clubhouse would. Leaving Hale-ish would be easy to explain to Ugly without having to go into detail. Leaving Denver altogether would raise too many flags, so I'm stuck here until we all ride back home together tomorrow after the game.

It means I'll not only have to see Drake, but I'll have to spend more time with him.

I had no idea that Max would be at Hale-ish, but if he was there, then his partners, Jasmine and Cerberus member, Tug, were there as well. I haven't gotten involved in many of their conversations, but I know they don't come here unless everyone in their triad is here.

I got lucky with Slick and Aro being so tangled up in each other that neither of them opened their mouths about the kiss and caress they witnessed months ago.

I know I won't get lucky twice.

I sneer at the door separating mine and Drake's rooms, hating it now even though it had a certain level of appeal when I realized we shared it when we first arrived.

I have no doubt Drake stayed behind, wanting to put his night to better use than some half-assed hand job in a bathroom stall. Hale-ish was a place where all sexual fantasies were capable of coming true.

I guess I can only hope that he stays up all night and is too tired to attend the baseball game tomorrow, but I know I'd never get that lucky.

An unwelcomed wave of goosebumps skate over my arms and down my back at the memories of what happened tonight.

That man's hand on me was better than anything I've ever experienced in my life. Guilt where Drake is concerned seems to always be simmering just under the surface. If I'm not feeling remorse for the things I've done, then I'm feeling it for the things I wish I could do.

Right now I feel both guilt and fear because once again I'm put in a position to wonder what tomorrow will look like. It's as if there's some other force at work here. What are the damn chances that Max of all people would be the one to walk in and find us in that restroom? Max was supposed to be back in Farmington over seven hours away. It was more likely that Ugly would walk in on us.

I can't get close to Drake without someone from my professional life witnessing it.

Max didn't look disgusted, but why should he? There's nothing weird to the man about seeing two men kiss and touch each other. He's involved with a man and a woman. His relationship doesn't draw any unwanted attention, so why should what I did make people take pause?

I know this is more about me than about anyone else, but it doesn't stop my feet from carrying me across the floor of the hotel room and back again. Over and over I pace the room as if doing so will somehow alter the outcome.

I know it won't. I know everyone finding out about me is only a matter of time.

I grumble in annoyance, my hands scraping over the top of my head in frustration for my inability to control my hormones. Watching that man and woman on stage was arousing. Sitting beside Drake while it happened heightened it somehow. Then the man touched her ass, and I couldn't handle it any longer. I was close to jetting in my jeans like a damned teenager just witnessing it. Then Drake had to follow me into the restroom while I was trying to get a grip on myself.

"Ah!" I growl, pulling my hair in irritation.

It feels like sabotage, the way I keep getting caught with Drake, as if the man is somehow orchestrating the chance encounters where we get caught by Cerberus members.

I know it's a crazy thought. I know I'm just making up excuses because Drake is right. I've been the one putting the two of us in compromising situations. It's my lack of control around him that has caused all of this.

I don't think Drake is the type of man that would go out of his way to set me up like that.

He is, on the other hand, the type of man that would do anything with anyone. I'm nothing special. Had it not been my dick Drake was touching tonight, it would've been someone else's. Or a woman, since Drake plays both sides of the field.

The incredibly messed-up part is none of that makes me want him any less. I just don't want everyone knowing about it.

I might be able to justify my recent behavior if it were leading to that one chance at happiness I don't let myself imagine very often. If I were closing in on my own happily ever after then maybe I could justify acting like I can't control myself, but it's not. Drake isn't that man for me. Hell, Drake isn't that sort of man for anyone.

I freeze at the gentle knock coming from the door separating our rooms. I've only been back to the hotel for ten to fifteen minutes. Him being back in his room already means he didn't leave Hale-ish very long after I left.

He didn't stick around to sow his wild oats or go flirt with Dylan, the utterly sexy bartender.

The knock is a little heavier the second time, and with it comes whispering too low for me to understand from the other side of the room.

I inch closer in that direction, curiosity getting the better of me.

I open the door, hating how hard my heart pounds at the sight of him.

The man is an addiction I never asked for.

"I figured you'd stay behind and do something with that black band of yours," I mutter like a jealous petulant child.

"The man I want, the man that's been driving me crazy for months, left. There was no point in sticking around."

His words hit me in the chest. I try and fail not to let them sink inside of me. I suspected the man of just going with the flow, taking whatever was offered to him no matter or distinction of who was handing it out.

“You’re wasting your time,” I tell him.

The man has to know I’m not going to get involved with him. He needs to understand that I’m not playing hard to get. I could never be anything more than a handful of mistakes where he’s concerned.

“I understand that you’re not out yet,” he says, the smile on his face small and annoyingly understanding.

“*In the closet* implies that there’s something to confess. I assure you there isn’t. Cerberus wouldn’t bat an eye at the news if Max decides to tell anyone what he walked in on.” I know it to be true when the words leave my mouth. “They aren’t the type of organization that has a problem with men being involved with men.”

“I figured them finding out is why you’re so standoffish and secretive.”

“It’s not,” I mutter. “I don’t want to be gay.”

To his credit, Drake doesn’t snap his head back in disgust. He gives me another small smile, one I interpret as understanding.

“It won’t stop it from being true.”

“I’m not in denial about my urges, Drake. I just can’t act on them.”

That small smile transitions to a flat line before curving down into a frown.

“I’ve known for a very long time what I am. I’ve gotten very used to living with the guilt of it.”

Chapter 14

Drake

“Guilt?” I ask.

This poor fucking man.

Although I knew by the early age of twelve that I liked both boys and girls, I hid that part of me for a very long time. My parents weren't the type to accept anything other than what they considered *normal*. They didn't voice those opinions very often, but it didn't take a rocket scientist to watch their faces when they saw same-sex couples out in public together. They weren't brazen enough to speak out against them, but just the curl of their lips in disgust was enough to keep my lips sealed and my closet door pulled tightly closed. Having a son that could just as easily bring home a man to family dinner as a woman wasn't something to be celebrated in that household.

That distance made it easier for my ex to sever those ties completely, almost effortlessly.

Acceptance is hard for nearly everyone. Sometimes it comes quickly, sometimes it takes a long time. Usually by his age, that acceptance, despite not being open about it, has already happened, but if this man still feels guilty about who he is, then he only thinks he's accepted it.

“I won't have a sexual relationship with you,” he says, but it sounds like he's trying to convince himself more than he's trying to convince me.

“We can be friends,” I offer, feeling a little sorry and sad for the guy.

Boomer's eyes narrow in suspicion.

“Unless you're afraid of what people will think or assume if you're my friend.”

“I don't give a shit about what people think,” he says, his lips tugging down even further. “Sorry for my language.”

I huff a laugh, thinking he's telling a joke, but the chuckle quickly dies away as I try to recall previous conversations and whether the man has used colorful language with me.

“A friend would invite me into his room so we could talk rather than making me stand in the doorway like a stranger.”

I’m probably pushing my luck, but the guy needs to make a decision one way or the other. I’ve already lost enough sleep, enough time wishing and hoping for something with this man, to continue to do so.

I’m not lying about being his friend. It’s not exactly all that I want from him, but I’m not such an asshole that I would push my agenda on him when it’s clear the man is struggling in his own life. There was a time I would’ve turned and walked away. Drama and work where a friendship was concerned was just too much, but I’m no longer that man. I’m healthier, capable of helping if I can.

“Just keep a little distance,” he says as he steps out of the way.

“No problem,” I say, kicking off my shoes and dropping to the bed.

He glares at me as I situate myself with my back against the headboard but he doesn’t tell me to move.

“Everything you said at the domestic violence event was true?”

I have to nod, praying he doesn’t want me to go into detail about it. I go to therapy every week, as well as attend group counseling. I don’t want the time I spend with Boomer to be just another session.

“Tell me about yourself,” I urge.

“Like what? You know I work for Cerberus, and I’ll tell you before you can ask, I’m not going to speak about my work.”

“I wasn’t going to ask you about your work. Tell me about your childhood.”

“I’d rather talk about work,” he mutters, as he drops into the small chair on the other side of the small hotel room.

He smiles when I laugh.

“Have you gone to therapy?”

“I’m not talking to Slick.”

“There are other therapists than Slick,” I assure him. “Maybe if you—”

“I grew up FLDS.”

“Mormon,” I say.

“Different than Mormon,” he begins. “The branch of the church my family was a part of isn’t accepted by other LDS sects.”

“So you’re from the group that has multiple wives and shit? I mean stuff. Multiple wives and stuff.”

He huffs a laugh, and I find myself grinning.

“You don’t have to watch your mouth around me. I’m a Marine, remember? I’ve heard worse than you can ever come up with.”

“I don’t know,” I say, my eyes dropping to his mouth before I can help myself. “I’ve got a filthy mouth.”

He licks at his lips before clearing his throat as he shifts in the chair.

“Sorry,” I tell him. “Old habits are hard to break.”

“My full name is Alexander Isaiah Smith. I was born on a compound on the Utah side of the state border with Arizona. My father had three wives by the time I left. According to their beliefs, that’s how many a man had to have to enter the kingdom of Heaven. I was the sixth born child for my mother who had nine kids by the time I turned eighteen.”

“I get it now,” I say, sadness creeping into me.

“Get what?” The man can’t even maintain eye contact with me, and it makes that ache forming inside of me that much stronger.

“You mention beliefs. Religion is one of the hardest things to understand, especially for someone who doesn’t meet the criteria spoken about from the pulpit on Sunday mornings. I imagine it’s even harder for you than most because of how controlled by your faith you were with your upbringing.”

He slow blinks at me as if I’m the first person to make any sort of sense to him.

I understand control.

I’m well aware just how easy it is to fall back on old ways and to let

fear and the words, judgments, and abuse of others, rule one's life.

He doesn't agree nor argue my words.

"So did you leave on your own?"

He scoffs, a derisive sound that makes me wonder a million things at once.

"I don't think I ever would've left willingly."

"You regret being forced to leave?"

"I knew I couldn't stay, but I was never brave enough to leave the property and just keep on walking. I would've saved myself a lot of pain had I just not gone back that day after work."

"Pain?" I ask, my voice barely less than a snarl.

People who hurt others for things they can't control make me irrationally angry.

"One of my brothers caught me the day before."

"Caught? Like with another man?"

He scoffs again.

"Another man? He wouldn't have waited nearly a full day to jump me had he caught me with another man." He shakes his head, his eyes going distant as if he's remembering that event. "I was masturbating in a way they didn't condone. That's what he caught me doing."

"You get beat up and tossed out on your ass for masturbating?"

"You do for the way I was doing it." His tone is flat, not meant to entice, but fuck, imagining him playing with his own ass makes parts of me stand up and take notice.

"Sorry," I grumble when I have to press my palm to my growing erection.

"You like the idea of me being in pain?"

I huff a humorless laugh. "I like the idea of you playing with your own ass."

He blinks in my direction, his throat clearing once again before looking away.

“You didn’t deserve what they did to you,” I assure him.

“I know I didn’t. I can comprehend that their beliefs could possibly be wrong. There are so many religions. So many contradictions that the majority of them have to be wrong, but—”

“But what if the one you grew up with just happens to be the winning ticket?”

“Something like that.” He sighs a defeated sound. “I don’t judge others. Like I don’t look at you flirting with others and leaving the bar with them as being sinful.”

“If you’ve been paying attention to who I leave the bar with, you’ve been watching me a lot longer than I thought. I haven’t left the bar with anyone in a very long time unless you count Ugly.”

“What?” he snaps, his head whipping back around in my direction.

I hold my hands up at my ears. “He had too much to drink. It was the night Aro and Slick caught us in the hallway. If we’re doing the full-disclosure thing, I was hoping to get invited inside so I could run into you.”

“Ugly isn’t gay or bisexual,” he says.

“I’m well aware.” His eyes narrow. “And not aware in a way that you’re probably thinking. I haven’t done more than flirt with him, and you’ve witnessed a lot of it. Can we visit this little dose of jealousy I’m witnessing? It turns me on nearly as much as thinking of you with your fingers deep in your—”

“Enough,” he says, but it’s breathed out on a chuckle, not irritation. “That was a very traumatic time for me. I didn’t have hardly any money. I ended up at the Marine recruiter’s office the very next day. It took me months before I could join the Marine Corps because I didn’t have a birth certificate or social security card. I had to jump through a lot of hoops before I could fully enlist.”

“And the rest, they say, is history until I came along and turned your world upside down?”

He takes a deep breath but doesn't answer.

"Before me there had been no acting on your impulses?"

I say the last word with a level of mockery because just the idea of thinking the way he was raised to think makes my blood boil.

"Not exactly."

My face falls, that part inside of me that was doing back flips over being the first man to share anything with him falling flat.

"You said you'd never kissed a man before," I clarify. "You were lying?"

"I hadn't ever kissed a man before you," he says. "Doesn't mean I haven't done other stuff."

"Like you've sucked a guy off, you just haven't kissed them?"

"I guess I should say, I've had things done to me."

I swallow the lump of arousal threatening to climb up my throat. God, I'd give this man every damn first he hasn't experienced yet if he'd let me, but friends is what we agreed on. It's all that he's comfortable with, no matter how potent the chemistry is between us. It's so damn strong, I can feel it even now as we stare at each other in silence.

"So you've been sucked off but have never done the sucking yourself?" I ask, unable to just drop it like I'm sure he wants me to.

"I don't think this is a conversation friends would have."

"Then you haven't had many real friends," I tell him with honesty. "This is exactly a conversation friends would have."

"Would friends have the conversation with erections?"

I drop my eyes to the front of his jeans when he adds the s to erections.

Yep. Shit. We're both standing at attention.

"I've never done that to someone," he says after a long pause.

"Why did you lick your lips when you said it?" I ask, unable to give the man even the slightest amount of reprieve. "Are you picturing it? Your

mouth wrapped around my cock? My cum coating that perfect pink tongue of yours? I'd let you if that's what you wanted, Alex. Do you want to stuff that thick cock of yours in my ass? Want my cock in yours? All you have to do is say the words, and I'd help you live out every fantasy you've ever had."

He remains silent, his eyes locked on mine, as if looking away would be some admission of defeat.

"Do you ever want to just forget all of it?" I ask after a long moment. "The worry? The judgment? The fear of where your soul will end up?"

"All the time," he whispers. "I'm not even religious anymore. I don't pray other than to something nameless each night that I wake up a different person. That either I accept who I know I am or I wake up wanting what I'm expected to want."

"Who expects it besides yourself?"

He shakes his head. "No one, I suppose. I've had this argument with myself more times than I can count. I know there aren't people in my close circle that would judge me. I know I could show up hand in hand at the clubhouse with a man and it wouldn't be an oddity."

A man, not me. The clarification stings more than it probably should.

"I'm sorry I said those things. I sometimes have a problem stopping once I get started. I'm serious about wanting to be your friend, but I think it's best that you know that I also find you ridiculously fucking hot. I'm incredibly attracted to you, and I'm willing to be your experimental partner if that's what you're looking for."

He scoffs again, and I'm beginning to hate the sound coming from him. "I'm not looking to experiment with anyone but thank you for the offer."

"You remember the story I told at the domestic violence event?"

"How could I ever forget? And while apologies are being spoken, I—"

I hold my hand up. "It's not necessary. I can see how it looks, but tracking you down at Target? Seriously?"

He gives me a weak smile. "It wasn't one of my finer moments."

"Back to my story, you do realize that religious grooming is just as real

and widely used as the type of grooming I went through, right?”

“I’m well aware. I also don’t know if I’ll ever be able to let go of it. Scholastically, I know that men being involved with men isn’t wrong. I don’t look at other same-sex couples and think they’re disgusting. I don’t picture them burning in Hell for their choices. But when I put myself in their shoes, that’s all I see.”

“Was kissing me tonight painful for you?”

“Of course not,” he answers without hesitation.

“Were you disgusted with yourself for touching me?”

He shakes his head. “But there’s a very good chance that I will be when I wake alone in the morning.”

“Then don’t wake alone,” I tell him, shifting my weight until I’m under the covers.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m tired as hell,” I tell him as I pull back the covers and open my arms. “Maybe what you need is immersion therapy. Maybe getting used to something until it feels normal is what you need. I think holding you until you’re okay with being close to a man is exactly what you need.”

“That could take an eternity,” he says.

“Well, if it takes that long, I’ll have to make arrangements at work to have more time off.”

He watches me for a while, but I wasn’t lying when I told him I was tired. I received the delivery truck this morning, and we had that long-ass drive to Denver.

Eventually my arms fall, my eyes drifting closed.

The bed dips at some point, and I don’t hesitate to reach for him, smiling against the back of his neck when he turns rigid in my arms. At least he took this first step. Now if I could only convince my dick that I’m being helpful and that this isn’t an open invitation to see how far I can make this man go.

His quiet sobs are unmistakable, but I don't pull away. Much to my surprise, he doesn't try to escape either.

Chapter 15

Boomer

I woke several times in the night with the urge to run as far and as fast away as I could manage, but I stayed, wrapped in his arms, having at some point turned over in my sleep so my head is now on his chest rather than him at my back.

Waking offers no more acceptance than I fell asleep with. The only thing trying to convince me this was a good idea is the morning wood I have no chance of controlling.

I take deep breaths, trying to calm my pounding heart, and as I settle, my other senses kick in. I register the warmth of his breath on the top of my head, the occasional twitch of his hand against my back. His heart rate is nearly a perfect match to mine, and it makes me wonder what he's dreaming about to have made it jump so quickly in his chest.

I focus on the rhythmic beat, finding that I like the feel of it. I honestly enjoy the warmth of his body against mine. That guilt I worried about last night still hasn't sunk in, but I know it's coming. It always rears its ugly head eventually.

I never imagined having such a serious conversation with Drake like I had last night. It doesn't help to keep him in that box I've been trying to shove him into the last couple of months. The rules of that box tell me that doing anything with this man wouldn't be worth the risk to my soul.

I resist the urge to roll my hips, blaming my need to piss on the erection straining in my jeans, all the while grateful we fell asleep fully clothed last night.

I jolt when he says my name.

“Alex?”

Man, I love the sound of it coming from his lips. He took right to it, not even bothering to ask if I had a problem with him shortening it.

“Is that a cucumber in your pocket or are you just happy to see me?”

I huff a laugh, the sound more a breathy snorting sound as I bury my face deeper into his shirt.

He could've said a million things, but joking, still being the man I know to say something funny, despite the very real pull I can't help but press into him, makes me smile.

I shake as he laughs.

“Two guys went to a brothel. They tried the handle but it was locked. There was a sign on the door. Do you know what it said?”

I shake my head, still refusing to pull my head back because that means facing him, facing this day, and facing the fact that we slept for hours in the same bed.

“It said beat it. We're closed.”

He waits, silently, and it takes me a minute to understand the joke, and then I lose it. I laugh so hard, I have to push off his chest to breathe.

“That's ridiculous,” I manage after a long moment.

He has that same sleepy smile on his face he did in that picture I still haven't had the strength to delete from my phone. I'm not proud of how often I look at it or what I sometimes do to myself when I do.

“Your heart rate jumped before you spoke. What were you thinking about?”

I know now the man wasn't asleep.

He shakes his head. “Don't worry about it.”

I sigh. “Really? After everything I told you last night?”

“I was thinking about wrapping my lips around that thing you've been poking me with for the last hour.”

My mouth snaps closed.

“Sorry,” he mutters. “I'll try harder at this friend thing.”

It is nearly impossible to keep from rolling my hips which are still pressed against him. I lower myself back down, feeling like I'm taking

advantage because I know he'll never tell me to get off of him.

Facing him as I speak feels too hard, but I'm certain I can manage it with my head back on his chest.

His arm doesn't hesitate to wrap around my back, the muscles flexing a little as if he wants me closer than I can physically manage.

"I got a blow job once from a guy in the Corps. I justified it at the time because it was something done to me, not something I did myself. I didn't even touch him. I just laid there and took what he had to offer. I convinced myself for all of five minutes that it was his sin, not mine."

I grin against his shirt. "Your heart just kicked up again."

"I'm just thinking about how sinful I am. How sinful I want to be right now."

I shake my head against his chest. "Don't do that. Don't turn my failures and trauma into a joke."

A warm finger lifts my chin until I'm looking up at him. "That isn't my intention at all, Alex."

I try to look away but he doesn't let me.

"Tell me when it's too much."

I nod, my throat working to shove down the reminder that we're supposed to be friends, as he turns me to my back, his body straddling me at my knees.

"I want you to know I didn't plan this," he whispers, his mouth dangerously close to my ear. If he touches me there, I'll lose my mind. "I heard you last night when you said you don't want to be who you are, but it doesn't change the fact that this is what you need."

Need makes it sound permissible, like food or water, air or shelter.

And damn it, I do need him. The urgency in my body making me want to beg for more feels as if I wouldn't survive if he were to get up and walk away right now.

"Are you uncomfortable?"

I shake my head, my breath hitching when he leans in closer.

“How about now?”

I give another shake of my head.

I groan when his warm lips meet my neck, my head angling of its own volition to give him better access.

His mouth on my skin puts his body lined perfectly with mine, making me absently realize that we’re about the same height, although my build is slightly thicker, just a little more muscular compared to the trim athletic one he has.

“What’s wrong?” I ask when suddenly he’s standing at the side of the bed.

He gives me a knowing smile, and it makes me feel like I played the wrong hand.

He locks eyes with me as he adjusts himself in his slacks, and I take a little pride in the fact that I may be affecting him in the same way he’s affecting me.

“I can’t stop thinking about what happened last night at Hale-ish,” he says, his voice heavy and thick, laced with sleep but also more than a hint of desire.

“It was the first time I ever touched a man like that before,” I confess, doing my best to keep my eyes on him even when he licks at his lips.

“I enjoyed it more than I should have.”

“You enjoyed it,” he corrects. “That’s where the statement needs to stop.”

The next flex of his arm makes my eyes drop to his waist, my cock leaking in my jeans at the sight of him fisting himself over his clothes.

“Do you want to see it?”

I tried watching it last night with my forehead against his, but we both came too fast for me to pull the fabric of his underwear down to get my eyes on it.

“I don’t think—”

“Then don’t think,” he interrupts. “Tell me when to stop.”

My mouth is dry the next time I try to swallow as he uses both hands to open the zipper of his slacks. Once again, he grips himself, this time over his boxers.

I want to beg for more, but I can’t seem to manage the words. I realize this will just be one more thing I’ll consider his sin, and it doesn’t feel right. It doesn’t carry the same relief that it did that night in the barracks when I was in the Corps.

“More,” I whisper. “Show me.”

This is no longer about what he’s doing, but what we’re doing together. I won’t let him own all the guilt or blame.

He doesn’t give me what I want. Instead, he releases himself altogether.

But then his hands are unbuttoning his shirt.

“Faster,” I beg, but the man doesn’t listen. Each slide of every button feels like a million years. It’s a tease I never asked for but I’m both hating and enjoying it all the same.

I’m grateful the man is a little rough around the edges when he pulls the sides of the shirt apart, revealing his bare chest rather than an undershirt.

I’m faced with those same tattoos I’ve grown obsessed over since he sent that picture.

“Too much?” he asks once again, as he shoves his slacks to his ankles, not pulling his eyes from me. He kicks them off, his hand working up and down his shaft, still over his boxer briefs.

I want to growl in frustration when he takes a seat across the room in the chair I was in last night rather than climbing back on the bed with me.

His cheek twitches with mirth when he reads my frustration for what it is.

“How about now?” he asks, one hand working his cock, the other

tugging at his balls.

His boxer briefs are tight, and although they don't leave much to the imagination, it's still not enough.

"Not enough," I confess. "I want to see you."

"Tit for tat," he says, making my heart threaten to pound right out of my chest.

My hands are slow out of nervousness rather than trying to be a tease, like he'd previously done.

"I've never done this before," I confess, my mind threatening to go back to the last time someone saw me with my hands on my own body.

It didn't end well that time for me.

Rather than reveal myself completely, I shove my hand down the front of my unzipped jeans, my fist working up and down my shaft, the luxury of it so delightful my toes curl and my head presses harder on the pillow.

When I manage to open my eyes and look back at him, he's still stroking on the outside of his boxers.

"Please," I beg.

"Take your jeans and boxers off."

This time, I don't hesitate to do his bidding. I don't have to fear this man or wonder about what comes later. I don't have to worry that he's going to physically hurt me for doing his bidding.

The second I kick my jeans away, his hand slips inside his own underwear. As if we're in sync, when I start to pull my boxers down, he does the same.

"Look at you," he breathes. "That perfect cock of yours, leaking from the tip."

I have to squeeze myself right under the head to keep from ending this all too soon.

His light chuckle tells me that he knows exactly what's happening, but I feel a little victorious when not a second later, he has to do the very same

thing.

“Spread your legs, Alex. Let me see all of you.”

I comply faster than I probably should, the coolness of the air in the room hitting me in so many spots at once that a shiver runs over my entire body.

“Bend one knee. Spread wide. Jesus, look at that hole.”

“Drake,” I groan, hating how just his words have such a hold on me.

“Do you want my cock there? My tongue? What about my ass, Alex? Do you want to slide that thick dick of yours inside me?”

My breath hitches.

“Or do you want my mouth? My lips wrapped all the way around you? Oh God. I picture your mouth on me, that perfect tongue of yours swiping at the tip, falling flat while I coat it with cum.”

“Drake,” I moan again, my balls tightening, warning of ending this, but I don’t have the ability to stop it.

I manage to lift my t-shirt out of the way, enjoying my orgasm ten times more when I open my eyes to find him jetting on his own chest.

“Yes,” he hisses out, his fist tight as he strokes out the last few bursts of cum from himself.

He’s still straight and thick, pointed directly at me as he stands.

I’m certain he’s going to walk out of the room, through the connecting door, but instead, he slinks up the bed, our messes combining when he presses his stomach to mine.

I angle my head toward his, waiting for the kiss I know is coming, but once again Drake backs away. It feels like a manipulation for a second before his mouth skates over my abdomen, his hot tongue licking at the mess we made.

“Oh God,” I manage when his tongue circles my navel.

The memory of tasting my own cum last night off his fingers hits me like a ton of bricks, and once again I’m desperate for more from him. He

doesn't make me wait long, his lips glistening as he curls over me again, every inch of his naked flesh touching mine as he lowers his mouth.

The saltiness of his kiss is utter perfection. The moan he releases into my mouth is heady as I suck all that I can from his tongue, hopelessly needy for all he's offering me.

It's filthy, the combined taste of us, but he takes it a step further when he pushes up on one arm, using the other hand to swipe through the semen on my stomach.

I don't even pretend I don't want it when he lifts that hand to my mouth, much like he can't pretend how much he enjoys me sucking his fingers clean. His own mouth hangs open while I do it, his eyes locked on my lips.

"I was trying to be a good boy," he whispers, his middle finger still in my mouth. "But this isn't really helping my need to shove my cock down your throat."

I lick at my lips when he finally pulls free.

"I may have to up my game," he says as he climbs off the bed.

I don't realize I didn't argue with him until after he closes the door separating our rooms.

Chapter 16

Drake

He didn't look at me the next day. We spent hours at the baseball field, and then another seven hours on the ride home, and Boomer somehow avoided all eye contact.

I don't know if it's because he wanted to avoid suspicion or if it was because he'd already regretted what we'd done.

It's been a week and not once has my phone chimed with a text or the front door at *Jake's* been darkened with his shadow.

I haven't reached out either. Whatever this is between us, as strong as it seems to me, it may not be the same for him. The ball is in his court and pushing him into something he may not want or may never be ready for isn't something I'm going to do.

The waiting doesn't make me think of him any less. I go to bed with him on my mind. He infiltrates my dreams in some of the filthiest ways. I wake with an erection each morning and his name on my lips. I spend nearly my entire shift at work with my eyes glued to the door, waiting for him to show up. I imagine bumps in the night when I'm trying to fall asleep that it's him making his way up the stairs to my little apartment.

I don't know how many email subscriptions I've recently opted out of because I get a little too excited when they chime with sales information, the ding making me scramble thinking he might be reaching out.

I'm frustrated, wanting to pull my hair out by the roots, when my phone dings.

I'm slow to pick it up, and then the thing almost slips out of my hand. I barely catch it before it smacks me in the face when I see that it's him.

I stare at the notification, wondering if this is the exact moment I lose my mind. What are the chances that I've been lying here, thinking of him for the last twenty minutes, arguing with myself about reaching my hand in my boxers to the thought of him, and fighting it because in my head, refusing it somehow punishes him, and now he texts.

When I see that it's a video, I gear myself up to do exactly what I've wanted since awareness sank into me as I was pulled from sleep.

I tickle my lower abdomen, fingers teasing the sensitive skin there as I open the video.

I'm torn between disappointment and amusement after playing the video to see it's Alex, unfortunately fully dressed, with what looks like a construction site in the background.

Sadly, it doesn't stop me from watching it twice with my hand slowly making its way into my boxers.

His cheeks are flushed from exertion, his eyes bright as if he's been up for hours rather than thirty minutes like me.

Alex: Working with the construction team on the clubhouse renovations.

Me: You should be doing what I'm doing.

I curl my lips between my teeth, biting them to keep from laughing when he texts back again.

Alex: And what would that be?

The man is very aware of my personality. He knows he's opening a door he may not want standing open while he's in mixed company, but then again, maybe he knows exactly what he's doing.

Who am I to deny him if that's what he wants?

I switch apps, turning the camera around to face my lower half, making sure to moan when I wrap my hand around my cock, fisting my length behind the fabric of my boxer briefs.

I stop both the video and stroking because I'm just too damn close, and like everything else with this man, I want it to last as long as humanly possible.

I send it over, anxiously waiting to see his response. The best outcome would be him excusing himself and running to someplace isolated so he can join me, but knowing what I do about the man, I may not hear from him for another couple of months. Well, that isn't exactly true. I do have the event at

the clubhouse in a week. He won't be able to avoid me for long.

While I wait, I can't resist the urge to keep stroking. The man sets my body on fire, and the thought of him watching the video I sent and getting aroused by it is better than any other aphrodisiac in existence.

The thought of him watching and touching himself, being so turned on that he has to step away to take care of himself, makes me wild. I turn the camera back on, catching my release as I explode, the sounds I make sexy even to my own ears.

I quickly send over the second video, hoping that maybe it will entice him to respond in some way.

I continue to wait and get nothing.

I'm not surprised, but I am disheartened.

I know the man struggles daily. I know it can't be easy to want something and to also feel like that desire is a sin bad enough to send you to hell. For a lot of people, hell isn't a concern. It's more of an idea than a real thing.

I didn't grow up in a religious household. My parents didn't spout off anything concerning God or the Devil unless it suited their narrative. They surely didn't bring up anything theological while they were sinning themselves.

I don't see who I am and what I crave as being sinful, but I know that's not the same for Alex. I can't grade him on the same scale I'd grade myself or others because we aren't even reading from the same textbook. It's frustrating, the fact that he just can't accept himself and understand that who he is isn't wrong.

The whole religion thing makes my skin crawl anyway. But if I want to be in his life in any form or fashion, I guess I'll just have to deal with it. Discounting it altogether would only push him away, and that's the very last damn thing I want. The man is like an addiction.

Maybe that's not the best way to describe him. It implies he's something that will need to be eventually overcome, and I don't think that's the case with him.

He's fresh air.

He's electricity miraculously contained in a ridiculously amazing package.

I shake my head, not needing to get worked up all over again. Just thoughts of the man seem to have that ability.

My obsession can't be healthy, but that also doesn't mean I'll be able to stop any time soon.

The jukebox, playing for the lunch hour downstairs, is audible by the time I make it out of the shower.

My phone screen remains blank.

I realize when I open the mid-sized fridge that I'm in desperate need of going grocery shopping, but I just can't seem to muster the want to head to the store. I reach for the peanut butter after pulling the strawberry jam from the fridge. Peanut butter and jelly are my go-to when I can't figure out anything else to eat. Most people would probably be over them by now with how often I eat them, but it's my number one comfort food.

I vow to not look at my phone while eating and become even more disappointed when I check the damn thing after washing my plate.

I'm exhausted from the night before. It wasn't the first time that one of the beer pumps went down, but I can't recall it ever happening on a Friday night, which, of course, is always our busiest night unless we have live music or some type of festival in town. Rochelle stayed late, which was a blessing, considering she's the one opening for lunch today.

My bones ache from the stress. I'm entirely accustomed to being on my feet all day, but there was just something about last night that drained me more than usual.

We were able to engineer a way to limp the pump through the shift, but I'm meeting with a repair man this afternoon to get it fully functional.

I know sitting on the couch is a very bad idea the second my ass hits the cushion. I all but melt into the thing.

I hear a chime. I scramble for my phone, which took all my willpower

to leave on the kitchen counter.

I realize I should still be sitting down when I read his text message.

Alex: *How bad is it that I want to lick that drop of cum on your left nipple?*

I sputter a laugh, my cock wanting exactly what his message says, but it feels off, as if someone else has typed that message because it's very not him.

Me: *Who sent that message?*

Those three dots show up twice before disappearing altogether.

My mind races, thinking I fucked up somehow. If someone got his phone and saw what I sent, I'll probably never see the man again.

My hands have a slight tremble in them when my phone buzzes again.

The text is a picture of Alex smiling, holding a piece of paper with today's date and the current time on it, proof that he was the one to send the previous message.

Jesus, that changes so many things.

Me: *It took you a long time to respond.*

I'm tired of letting the man off the hook for ghosting me.

Alex: *I was busy.*

That may explain today while he's working with a construction team, but the man has left messages unresponded to in the past.

Me: *Doing what?*

It's a challenge. Maybe I'm pushing a little too hard. Maybe I'm expecting more than I have a right to from this man, but I need to know where I stand.

There are no dots indicating a response this time.

Me: *From your proof-of-life text it doesn't look like you're outside working any longer.*

Nothing.

Me: It tells me you're no longer outside playing with wood.

Alex: Because I was inside playing with wood. Going back to work.

The first part of his text is accompanied with a winking face emoji. What I know about Alex, that doesn't seem to fit his personality either, but I think I'm discovering that I don't know him nearly well enough.

I text back suggestive things several more times, but each of those go unanswered as well.

Despite the lack of response, I head downstairs to the bar with a huge smile on my face, my muscles no longer tense and tired.

Chapter 17

Boomer

“Really?” Harley asks, his eyes locked on my jeans. “You’re just going to let it chime?”

“I’m working,” I tell him, my lip twitching, threatening a smile. “We might get more done if you worried more about the cross beam than my phone chiming.”

“It could be an emergency,” he says, finally turning his attention back to the beam we’re trying to get level before securing it into place.

“It’s not,” I assure him. “Down an eighth of an inch.”

Once he secures it, I lift my shirt to wipe sweat from my forehead. It’s hot as blue blazes and it’s only one in the afternoon. I squint before blinking rapidly, realizing my mistake at the first hint of burn to my eyes.

“My sunscreen is getting in my eyes,” I say to no one in particular.

“Shit,” Harley mutters. “I knew I forgot something. Ali is going to have my ass. I’ll be back.”

He grumbles all the way down the ladder, complaining about sunscreen being for pussies. I watch with a smile on my face as he grabs a bottle from the care station, as Emmalyn called it when she started putting out bottles of water, snacks, bandage, and sunscreen.

“Why such a large first aid kit?” I ask, chuckling as Harley scrunches his eyes like a toddler before turning the sunscreen bottle toward his face.

“Fuck!” Roker yells.

I turn just in time to see his hammer fall to the decking at his feet.

Harley points at the man who is now holding his hand. “That’s why.”

“I don’t know that we’re cut out for this shit,” Roker says around the thumb he has inserted into his mouth.

“Is it bleeding?” Kid asks. “If it is, it’s probably not best to put it in your filthy mouth.”

“Simone loves my filthy mouth,” Rocker argues.

“And so does bacteria and germs. Go get that shit cleaned up. You’ll end up having to have something fucking amputated,” Kid grumbles, using the back of his arm to swipe at sweat dripping at his temples.

“You don’t want that,” Aro says as he grabs a bottle of water. “Trust me.”

“Maybe this was a bad idea,” Rocker says, pouring a bottle of water over his injured thumb rather than using a real antiseptic.

“Speak for yourself,” I say, twirling my hammer and sliding it into my tool belt. “I’m a professional.”

“Not everyone was raised to build a barn in two days,” Grinch mutters.

I don’t know why the man is complaining. He’s just as capable at construction as I am. I’ve seen his work today, and it’s top notch.

“Stereotype much?” I ask with a smile.

I give credit to the texting with Drake or more specifically, those videos he sent, for my jovial mood. No one questioned me when I had to head inside for a little while. I’m sure they thought I was flaking on work or had to use the restroom. No one gave any indication they knew I went inside and masturbated like a teen boy who lost the battle with managing his urges.

“I worked odd jobs,” Grinch says. “I didn’t have anything better to do on leave, and I wanted to stay busy.”

A couple of other guys nod their agreement. We’re the type of men who don’t do leisure very well. Grinch isn’t exactly wrong about some of my skills coming from growing up on the compound, but I’ve continued to use them while in the Corps, doing exactly what Grinch just described. Working with my hands and exhausting myself through construction work helped me tamp down those urges I’ve fought against for so many years.

“You don’t have to help,” Kid says to Rocker, squeezing his empty water bottle, collapsing it before screwing the lid back on it.

“Like hell,” Rocker snaps, still looking down at the injury to his thumb. “I’m not going to let you guys talk shit about me.”

“There are other things that you can help with,” Kid continues.

“We’ll need lunch soon,” Grinch tells his best friend, his smile wide on his face.

“We’re not going to start that sexist gender role bullshit,” Kincaid says as he approaches.

Rocker looks justified, but it still doesn’t wipe the smirk off of Grinch’s face.

“I seriously appreciate all the help you guys are providing,” Kincaid says as he stands in the makeshift door cut out from the side of the living room. “Finding enough workers to get all of this done has been impossible.”

“Blame them if it ends up being a complete shit job,” Rocker mutters.

“Says the guy who can’t hit the damn nail,” Kid says, getting in on the ribbing.

“Go have Em look at that,” Kincaid says. “You probably need a tetanus shot.”

“He’s had all his shots,” Shadow says as he walks out onto the decking platform we had built before ten this morning. “It’s looking good out here, but damn it’s hot.”

A wave of agreement goes through our group of men.

“Not joking,” Kincaid says to Rocker.

He grumbles as he walks back inside the clubhouse, making several men laugh at him.

My phone chimes again in my pocket, and my eyes immediately dart back to Harley, who has already voiced his concern with me not answering it.

“You going to get that?” Kincaid asks.

“Not while I’m working,” I answer.

“Could be important,” my president counters.

“It’s not,” I assure him the same way I did Harley earlier.

I don’t answer the text or even look at it when I pull my phone from

my pocket and silence the thing.

“We need to discuss the camping trip,” Shadow says, shifting his stance so he’s a little more shaded from the sun.

“I wouldn’t consider a bunch of cabins in the woods camping,” Kincaid says. “More like glamping.”

“Gigi refuses to sleep in a tent,” Hound adds.

Kincaid nods, the reference to his daughter not a surprise for him. “I didn’t figure she would. We need to get a count of how many are willing to sleep in a tent because we have a huge group and only so many cabins.”

“If we double up on the cabins—” Kid begins.

“No,” Hound interrupts. “I think privacy is important.”

Several men chuckle before they can help themselves, but it falls away quickly when Kincaid clears his throat.

Hound and Gigi have three kids together but hearing any details about your children having sex, grown or not, can’t be comfortable.

“One family per cabin,” Kincaid agrees. “Em and I don’t mind being in a tent.”

Each guy speaks their preference.

“Harley, I presume Alyssa is going to want a normal bed?” Kid asks, making notes on his phone.

A wide grin spreads across Harley’s face, and I immediately know the reason for it. My blood sings with happiness for them.

“I think all families with small children should get the cabins,” Kincaid says, taking the attention from Harley so the man doesn’t have to make the announcement right now if he doesn’t want to. “I remember traveling with the girls, and it’s miserable without a little space to yourself when you’re not in the comfort of your own home.”

“Agreed,” Hound says.

“Before the trip, remember we have the party this weekend,” Kincaid says.

“A lot going on at one time,” Shadow mutters.

“We can’t cancel the party. We’ve scheduled caterers and staff. It would be rude to do it now. Those people have been counting on these jobs,” Kincaid reminds everyone.

The party.

Drake is going to bartend at that party. I didn’t exactly forget, but it hasn’t been in the forefront of my mind this last week either.

I’ve been more focused on not showing up at the bar. Controlling myself in his presence seems like an impossibility. We already got caught in the hallway, and after what happened at Hale-ish and in the hotel room after, I don’t know if I could go back to just sitting at the bar and watching him work.

I’d never be able to turn the man down if he made another offer to join him upstairs or suggested I meet him after his shift was over.

Now I have to worry about not getting caught watching the man bartend here at the clubhouse, among a group of men that are highly trained to read unspoken behaviors. I’ll have no way to hide how I feel or what I want from the man. My finger itches to grab the bike keys from my pocket and dart away.

But then I think about watching him from afar and the thrill of the challenge of not getting caught brings. It’s not like anyone would have a problem. If Kincaid didn’t trust Drake, he never would’ve invited him to bartend at the party. There are too many other qualified people around town for him to have to choose someone he didn’t trust. The invite coming directly from the Cerberus president means a lot because it could’ve easily been Em or Misty to extend the invite.

Maybe I’m finally working through all of my issues that go hand in hand with the desires I feel. I don’t think what happened in Denver was a cure-all, but I definitely haven’t spent every second of the last week, dwelling on regret for how Drake and I spent our time.

I know I feel a little guilty for not feeling really guilty which I know makes no sense, but I’m not the one who wrote the book on this stuff.

“Boomer?”

I snap my head in Kincaid’s direction.

“What’s up?”

Several of the guys chuckle, and my cheeks heat in embarrassment, cautious about what I was asked and feeling like an idiot for missing it.

“Tent okay?”

“Of course,” I say. “I never expected to get a cabin.”

Kid nods as he types into his phone, taking notes for Kincaid.

“Em and Misty have lunch waiting for everyone. It may be best to wait until it cools down this evening before picking back up,” Kincaid says. “I can’t have anyone having a heat stroke.”

We follow Kincaid into the clubhouse, none of us complaining about how cold the showers will be with so many heading to their room to take one.

We haven’t gotten word on when the new members would get here, but extending the living area and adding a second story on to the clubhouse are all in preparation for them to arrive.

Kincaid is using the construction as the reason for us not working right now, but I know it has more to do with everyone working through their counseling sessions with Dr. Alvarez, after what happened to Aro in Costa Rica. I know, despite him not even being present, that the man blames himself for what happened. Somehow he’s internalized Aro’s mistake in choices, and he’s doing everything he can to prevent it from happening again. One solution is mental health assessments after every mission, making sure each person is in the right headspace for the next. He’s also going to have more teams and rotate them, giving us more time off instead of the back-to-back jobs we’ve been used to.

I jump in the shower, letting the cool water rush over my body, and like always, it doesn’t take long for thoughts of Drake to infiltrate my mind.

I don’t attempt to shove them away this time. Instead, I feed them, picturing exactly what could happen if he showed up right this very second.

My cheeks are flushed both from arousal and embarrassment by the

time I turn the showerhead off, praying that no one heard the noises I made.

What would I even say if they asked me why I said Drake's name while in here alone?

Chapter 18

Drake

I've texted back and forth with Alex this last week. It never turned sexual again after his comment about playing with wood. I decided that I'd let him lead the charge as far as that topic was concerned, and, much to my disappointment, he hasn't mentioned it.

There have been no more confessions of what he wants to do to me or requests for videos, despite making several over the course of the last week in order to be ready should he want one.

It doesn't stop me from picturing him watching the videos I have sent, and so far, those thoughts have been enough to give me the fodder I need to take me right where I need to go.

If someone told me that I'd be the type of man to jack off to a picture of a hand or just a smiling face, I'd have called them a liar. But that would leave me eating crow because they would've been right. There is absolutely nothing inherently sexual about the images he's sent, but there are parts of me, namely the ones below my belt, that just don't care. To my dick, everything about Alex is sexual. His eyes, that little grin he gets when he thinks someone is being ridiculous. Even the redness in his cheeks because he was working outside in the hot summer sun in the video he sent. All of it turns me on. It doesn't take much for my imagination to conjure how his sweat-slick skin would taste or how his rough hands would feel on my skin.

I grab another beer from the cooler, handing it over to a man I don't recognize, despite the crisp leather cut on his back. I've deduced that this is some sort of welcoming party for new members. I've noticed three so far, but they don't have road name patches on their brand-new leather cuts.

"Thanks, man," he says, dropping a five-dollar bill on the counter.

"It's a paid gig," I tell him.

"And I tip when I drink," he says, giving me a quick smile before turning and walking away.

I shove the money behind the bar with the other pile of cash. I

purposely didn't put a tip jar out because other parties I've worked had a no tipping policy. They didn't want their guests feeling the need to hand over cash. Most just tip at the end of the night, but the payment for doing this for Cerberus was so big, I honestly wasn't expecting anything additional. I didn't exactly read the contract Kincaid's wife, Emmalyn, emailed over because Ugly was right, the damn thing was like a million pages long, and reading isn't really my thing. I just know to be on my best behavior and not to repeat a damn thing I hear if the guys get loose-lipped after a couple of drinks.

Kincaid wasn't joking about this being a party for his crew because there are no outsiders here at all. I recognize many partners of members, but unless one-half, or one-third in Max's, Tug's, and Jasmine's case, is wearing a cut, the others aren't here.

I don't see Detective Colton Matthews or Drew O'Neil, both closely connected to the club but not members. The odd man out is Kincaid's brother Dominic, who is in attendance but not wearing a leather cut. I don't know the full story behind him, but I've heard he works for Cerberus but isn't technically a member.

I try to keep my eyes moving. There's a certain awareness everyone here has, as if they can read minds. I do my best to not think of Boomer, but I have to pause each and every time my eyes land on him. It's an uncontrollable urge to assess him, letting my eyes rake over him from top to bottom, all the while praying no one notices.

I'm a little disappointed in myself when he catches me looking in his direction. I know the man wouldn't be very impressed if someone else noticed me paying too much attention to him, but his lips are smiling, his eyes sparkling in the dusk of the evening when I can finally manage to get my eyes off everything below his chin and look him in the eyes.

Instead of turning around and giving me his back, which let's be honest is just as great a view as the front, he excuses himself from chatting with Alyssa and Harley and begins to walk in my direction.

I busy myself, wiping down the top of the makeshift bar, which is built better than anything we would've had at *Jake's*. The email Emmalyn had sent me just instructed me to show up, that everything would be provided. I've had instructions like that before, and always end up short on something, so I

stocked the passenger seat of my truck with all the things I might need that many forget, like cocktail onions for those that prefer them over olives. I know I'm not going to need anything I brought because for the first time in my bartending career, the bar was actually fully stocked when I arrived.

My heart is racing by the time Alex is standing in front of me. I know it probably looks like I'm playing hard to get when I take a moment too long to look up at him, but in reality, I'm just trying to get my heart to stop pounding.

Any effort to get better control of myself is futile, I realize when I look up and see his smiling face.

"I hate you a little," I confess.

His smile fades some. "Hate me?"

"If you could feel my chest right now."

"Pounding like crazy?" I nod. "Mine too."

I lick at my lips, wickedly turned on that he would make such a confession unprovoked.

"I imagine you're thirsty," I say, jokingly grabbing a bottle of whiskey.

He doesn't stop me when I pass the glass to him, knowing that the man doesn't drink. Just like has happened numerous times in the bar, our fingers brush when I pass the drink to him. To distract myself, I also place a cold bottle of water on the bar top for him because I know he won't drink the whiskey.

He looks down at the drink, his throat working on a swallow as he lifts it to his lips.

I almost laugh at the man when his nose scrunches with the tiny sip he takes. He plays it off as best as he can manage, but it's evident he's not very impressed with the taste.

"Are you the type of man to try and get someone drunk and take advantage?"

My nose scrunches in disgust. "No. Of course not."

“Too bad,” he says with a saucy wink as he places the glass of whiskey on the counter.

The man grabs the bottle of water and walks away before my brain can manage a response, and I’m left watching his back with my jaw hanging open a little.

“I hear you’re also the bartender at *Jake’s*,” a man says, pulling me out of those dirty thoughts that were threatening to sneak back up.

“I am,” I say, my smile back in place as I turn to face him.

“I’m Bishop. I’ve been to *Jake’s*. Didn’t see you there.”

“I’ve worked there for a few years.”

“When I came to town, Cannon was a bartender.”

“Ah,” I say, nodding my head in understanding. “I started right after he left. What can I get for you?”

“A beer would be great.”

I pull a bottle from the cooler, popping the cap off before handing it to him.

A wave of laughter draws our attention, and once my eyes land on the laughing form of Alex, I just can’t pull my eyes away.

“He your boyfriend?”

My head snaps in his direction, and I know I have to look like a deer caught in a set of headlights.

“Fuck no,” I say, my heart racing in a different way than it did when Alex approached earlier.

But then I realize that defensiveness could be read the wrong way.

“I wish,” I tell him.

“Yeah?” Bishop sweeps his eyes down the length of me.

“Are you out?”

His husky chuckle is loud but not abrasive.

“You thinking of hitting on him?” I can’t exactly tell if there’s a hint of jealousy in my tone, but I wouldn’t be surprised if there was.

The man laughs. “Man, I’m straight as an arrow. I don’t even know what Boomer’s sexual preferences are, but there are folks in the club that aren’t in hetero relationships. I caught you watching him more than once, and I just don’t want there to be any problems.”

I frown in his direction. “You were testing me?”

He tosses a ten-dollar bill on the bar.

“You passed with flying colors,” he says, before walking away to join the group we were just watching.

“Rainbow colors,” I mutter, annoyed that anyone would look at me and think for a second I’d be the type of person to have an issue with someone in a same-sex relationship. But also kudos to the new guy for being ready to put a stop to anyone thinking of being a problem for his teammates.

Maybe Alex wants to keep who he is in the darkness because he doesn’t truly believe they would have his back if they knew the truth?

Chapter 19

Boomer

“There’s a list,” Ugly repeats.

“Like written down or we’re just expected to remember who we can’t touch?” Stormy asks, as if he feels like this is a pop quiz he didn’t study for.

“Shouldn’t,” Ugly clarifies. “We can’t tell you who to hook up with or not, but if you want to avoid trouble then yes, there’s a list.”

“Meaning if we want to go looking for some fun, we need to have you or Boomer with us to make sure we don’t end up with a stage-five clinger?” Legacy asks, the grin he’s had since he arrived still taking over most of his handsome face.

It’s almost as if the man can’t believe that it’s real—his acceptance into Cerberus. I remember feeling much the same way when I first stepped onto the property.

“Drake, the bartender, can help you out as well,” Ugly replies.

“Seems like a nice guy,” Bishop adds, making me wonder exactly what they talked about moments ago.

“He’s the best. Just look at him when approached by one of the women in the bar. He’ll either nod or give you a headshake. I’d heed his warnings.”

Stormy nods at Ugly as if he’s a sponge soaking all this information up.

“He wouldn’t shake his head because it’s someone he wants?” Bishop asks, as he tilts his bottle of beer to his lips.

“I doubt it,” Ugly answers. “He’s more likely to have his eyes set on one of the dudes, which brings me to another point. If you have any problem with getting flirted with by a guy, you’ll need to get over it. Drake can’t control it. If his eyes are open, the man is flirting with people.”

Ugly sweeps his eyes over the three new guys standing in front of us, but none of them seem disgusted by the instruction.

“And if you lean in that direction, I’ve heard good things about him. Just don’t break his heart. He’s the best bartender ever.”

I nod in agreement, refusing to let that green-eyed monster show at Ugly suggesting one of the guys hook up with Drake. I have no right to feel the way I do. I don’t own the man, but it’s not like it’s something I can control.

“And what about,” Stormy says, leaning in closer as if sharing a secret, “the orgies?”

“We haven’t had any since the two of us arrived,” Ugly says, twitching a finger between him and me. “Other than the two of us, everyone in our group has already fallen in love and shit.”

Stormy’s nose scrunches in disgust as if Ugly just said people are eating raw meat rather than finding their happily ever after.

“But,” Ugly hedges with a wide grin. “With six new members and all the people coupled up moving out, maybe it’s something we can arrange.”

This news makes Stormy incredibly happy, and I’m surprised he doesn’t rub his hands together in delight.

“That,” Ugly says in a different tone that grabs my attention before I can look back at Drake. “Will be a problem.”

“It’s nothing,” Bishop says, but it takes him a little longer than it should to pull his eyes off Rivet and Cannon as they stand on the other side of the pool, speaking with Shadow and Misty, Cannon’s parents.

“Kincaid won’t tolerate any bad blood.”

“It’s nothing,” Bishop repeats before walking away.

I look to Ugly for an explanation, but don’t open my mouth to ask.

I know these guys are top notch. They wouldn’t be here if Kincaid found any issues with them, but they’ve been at the clubhouse a handful of hours, and I’m just not comfortable picking at what appears to be old wounds in front of men I don’t know.

Ugly goes right back into talking about the orgies he’d like to see happen.

I stand there, knowing I'd never participate in what Ugly, Stormy, and Legacy are planning, but I also can't walk away. My positioning gives me a direct line of sight to the sexy bartender.

"He has a crush on you."

I snap my eyes up, finding Bishop standing right beside me.

He must've left to go to the restroom or something because he wasn't gone very long. Thankfully, Drake is pouring a drink for Jasmine, grinning at her like they're best friends rather than looking in my direction.

"He was flirting with you when you got your drink earlier. I saw it in his eyes."

"Drake flirts with everyone," I say, pulling my eyes from the guy in question slowly because jerking my eyes away would say more than I'd like it to. "It drives his tips up."

"I'm sure that's all it is," Bishop says, his tone saying he doesn't believe it at all.

I open my mouth to argue and reiterate what Ugly had said earlier about Drake's relentless flirting, but Ugly speaks first.

"How about it?"

"How about what?" I ask, giving him all my attention, because staying on the other topic of conversation can't happen.

I can't consider Drake actually liking me rather than just having fun with what we've done together so far. It opens up doors I need to keep closed in order to keep a handle on my guilt.

"We're thinking about hitting the bar after this is over. Stormy is eager to see what Farmington has to offer."

"I'm in," Bishop says with a shrug. "Who else do you think will come?"

"I'm not," I say. "I'm exhausted from working all day."

Construction on the clubhouse has continued all week. The exhaustion I feel each day is the only thing that has kept me from heading to *Jake's* to

see Drake.

“The four of us,” Ugly says, swirling his finger to include himself and the three new guys. “Everyone else will be home with their spouse.”

His emphasis on the last word makes me think it’s another warning to Bishop about whatever his issue seems to be with either Rivet or Cannon.

“We’ll need a designated driver,” Ugly says, looking between the other three, making it very clear it won’t be him.

“I can do it,” Legacy says, holding up his bottle of water.

Ugly smiles, and I’m glad to see him getting to know the new guys better. Aro and he were pretty close, but Aro is very distracted these days with Slick. It may take months before those two are satisfied enough with each other that they can last longer than a couple hours without disappearing.

I look around the crowd, smiling wide when I realize they didn’t even last that long tonight. They’ve already left.

“And when are the other guys supposed to be here?” Stormy asks.

“Other guys?”

He looks at me. “Maybe I’m confused. I thought Kincaid said there were going to be a total of six new members.”

I look to Ugly. If he’s aware of whatever issue Bishop has with Rivet and Cannon, then maybe he’s heard something about this too.

“Six total,” he confirms. “We have to finish the extension to make room for the others.”

Satisfied, Stormy nods his head.

“Still shocked to be here,” Legacy says. “Glad I made it on the first wave.”

We stand and chat for a little longer, several couples saying their goodnights and heading back to their homes across the street from the clubhouse.

I chat with Kincaid briefly as hired staff start cleaning up. I don’t look often, but I keep track of Drake as he straightens his area.

I have a wild urge to do something crazy and impulsive, but I don't make my mind up until right now. After watching him gather empty bottles, I head inside the clubhouse. The chances of running into any member of Cerberus are slim. The couples are already wrapped up in each other, and Ugly and the new guys headed to *Jake's* half an hour ago.

My chest is pounding as Drake walks past me into the kitchen. The man isn't trained like we are, and that works to my advantage.

I listen to the clank of glass bottles as he rinses them in the sink before putting them into the trash. He chats briefly with one of the other staff members, but it's more a common courtesy because it doesn't seem like he actually knows them before heading back out of the kitchen.

His keys rattle in his hand, telling me he's done for the night, and it wouldn't be suspicious if he didn't head back outside.

I grab him, a thrill of spontaneity rushing through me as I drag him, my hand over his mouth, into the darkened hallway.

My mouth is on his before he can speak, and it takes a second for his lips to move against mine, no doubt the shock of being grabbed taking a second to fade.

But when he does figure out what is happening, he gives me all of his attention. It's in his mouth as he angles his head and deepens the kiss. It's in his hands as they cling to my leather cut. It's in the roll of his hips and the erection pressing against mine.

Reluctantly, I pull my head back, loving the way his face inches forward as if he's chasing my mouth with his own.

"I was thinking we could hang out tonight," I whisper. "Here, not at the bar, because Ugly and the others are there."

His eyes seem locked on my mouth, and I take it as the answer I want, but he doesn't budge when I pull his hand in the direction of my room.

"I'm not done," he says, his voice full of gravel and sexy as hell.

I frown, making him lean forward and wipe it away with another brush of his lips.

“I have to meet up with Kincaid. He’s waiting for me.” His eyes dart in the direction of the back door. “He may come looking for me.”

I drop his hand like it burned me, and it’s Drake’s turn to frown.

“I’d like to hang out with you,” he says. “If the offer still stands.”

I should tell him no. Having him here with me is way too risky, but the man is a habit I just can’t seem to kick.

“That’s my room,” I tell him, pointing to my door down the hall. “I’ll leave it unlocked.”

Chapter 20

Drake

“Did you need a drink?” I ask, finding Jasmine standing at the bar when I return.

There’s a lightness in my steps that wasn’t there moments ago, and I pray she doesn’t call me out on it.

“I’ve been told to stay put until Max finds me,” she says, her voice filled with the same eagerness swimming through my veins.

“Let me know if you need anything,” I tell her as I give the bar one more once-over.

It was set up when I arrived and Kincaid assured me it would be taken care of after I left, but I don’t want to leave a mess behind for someone else to clean up.

“How was it?”

“Hi, Uncle Diego,” Jasmine says as Kincaid steps closer.

“Where are Max and Tug?” he asks, glancing around. “I don’t want you walking home alone.”

“You act like it’s not right across the street.”

He blinks at her as if he feels it doesn’t matter if it was only ten steps away. She shouldn’t have to make the trek alone.

“There you are, gorgeous,” Max says, wrapping his arms around her and burying his nose in her throat.

The embrace isn’t overtly sexual, but with the way she chuckles after Max whispers in her ear, I imagine his words were.

“Enough, you two. Take it somewhere private.”

Max and Jasmine both laugh, saying their goodbyes before walking away.

He’s nodding his head at them, but there’s a smile on his face when he

turns to face me.

“What do you think of my new men?”

I tilt my head, not exactly sure why he'd even ask me such a thing. My history proves I haven't always been the best judge of character.

“They seem pretty nice. I think you have another Boomer on your hands.”

Kincaid's eyebrows raise. “Is that right?”

“Legacy drank water all night, same as Boomer.”

“Ah!” he snaps, laughter in his tone as if he thought I meant something completely different. “I think you did a fine job tonight. We appreciate you helping us out.”

“It was my pleasure.”

“Here you go.”

He hands me an envelope, and it feels thicker than the check I was expecting, but I don't open the envelope. I trust him to have paid me the full amount agreed upon by the contract I returned to Emmalyn. No matter the people in town's opinions on the club, they aren't known for stiffing people. Generosity is more their thing.

“I appreciate the extra work.”

“Have a good night,” he says. “I'd normally have you walk around to the parking lot, but I don't know if Max and Jasmine made it all the way home, yet.”

He winks at me, telling me he's saving me from walking up on something I may not want to see. I didn't consider that I could've lost my opportunity with Boomer because he'd expect me to walk around the clubhouse.

“Appreciate it,” I tell him, more grateful than he'll probably ever know.

The clubhouse is silent when I enter, all the hired staff already gone, leaving the kitchen sparkling clean. They were wrapping up when I brought

the empty bottles inside earlier, so I'm not surprised to find the lights out except for a small one over the stove.

I see no one, but hear a chuckle before a long groan of pleasure. My cock jerks, taking notice of what I'm hearing. I'm not one to really get off on seeing or hearing other people please each other. At the club, it was more Alex's reaction to what he was seeing that turned me on, much like it being the anticipation of the sounds he may make soon that thrill me rather than hearing someone else being pleased.

I don't bother knocking on his door because he assured me it would be open.

The room is darker than the rest of the clubhouse, the only light after I close the door coming from a slit under what I have to presume is the bathroom door. I turn the lock for good measure before slowly making my way across the room.

The sound of rushing water greets me as I walk across the room. I don't exactly know how it will be received, but the thought of him naked on the other side of the door has me stripping out of my own clothes.

We've already done so much but also so very little, that I have no clue how he's going to react to the sight of me standing in the doorway.

I stop cold when I slowly push open the doors to find Alex leaning forward, his head dropped between his shoulders as the water pounds down on his back. He seems lost in thought or maybe it's the regret and guilt he spoke of always feeling that's got him so downtrodden.

I can't stand here and just watch him, but at the same time, I don't think anything I could say would make it better. He himself explained that how he feels doesn't make any sense. If getting over his hang-ups were as easy as just dropping them at his feet, he would've done it already.

I turn to leave, realizing this is the worst idea ever. What started as fun flirting has turned into something that's going to be hard for me to get over. The longer I stick around, the worse it's going to be for me.

"I don't think I've seen the ink on your back."

I stop in my tracks, looking back over my shoulder.

Alex stands in the center of the shower stall, water still rushing over every part of his body, including his erect cock.

“You seemed lost in thought,” I say stupidly. “I didn’t want to bother you.”

He rolls his shoulders. “Worked all day. My muscles are stiff.”

“That’s all?”

He chuckles. “Isn’t that enough?”

I grin at the playfulness in his tone.

“I’m shit at massages,” I say.

“Let me be the judge of that,” he says, holding open the glass door in invitation.

Steam swirls around him, and I’m frozen at the sight of him not distorted by a wall of glass.

“You’re fucking magnificent,” I say before I can stop myself.

“I’m getting cold,” he counters. “Are you going to join me?”

Somehow, I walk rather than run to the shower. My balls are heavy, just imagining the things we can get up to in here.

Like he did in the hallway, Alex is the one to lean forward, instigating the kiss. When he wraps his arms around me, I grab one wrist and move his hand to the front of my body, locking my fingers over his as he grips my cock.

He groans, the sound filling my mouth, and I swallow down his pleasure at touching me.

I have to shift on my feet, the neediness in my body urging me to move faster than I think he’s willing to go.

It’s thoughts of him falling to his knees that make me drop to mine. I turn my face up, uncaring of the water rushing down on me as I watch him.

Awe fills every feature of his face, his teeth digging into his bottom lip as I sweep my tongue out over the head of his cock. His hips jerk forward, his

dick gliding over my cheek.

I want to take my time, catalog every grunt and groan, memorize the saltiness of his precum and the exact shape of his cockhead as it glides over my tongue. But Alex is eager for my offering, using two fingers to press down on the root of his shaft to get a better angle into my mouth.

I'd laugh at his impatience if it weren't for the same need swimming through my blood.

I press my palms to his thighs, using them for balance as I take him to the back of my throat.

He doesn't reach for me. He doesn't tangle his fingers in my hair or try to gag me in his pursuit of release. He doesn't say filthy things or beg for more. He isn't exactly silent either. Awe and wonder fill the air around me with his pants and groans of satisfaction.

A sharp intake of air and the tensing of his thighs is the only warning I get, but I doubt I would've pulled off even if he managed to vocalize his impending orgasm.

A wave of salty heat hits my tongue and I don't hesitate to swallow, continuing to suck him down until he takes a step back.

His eyes are glossy, his mouth a tiny smile hitched up only in one corner as I stand.

I press my lips to his, wondering when he freezes for a split second if he's going to shove me away. It wouldn't be the first time he's tasted his own cum, but this could be seen as a little different from the times before.

But then his lips move, his tongue sweeping over mine, another ball-tightening moan on his lips.

"That's so wrong," he whispers against my lips.

"You like it," I challenge, dipping my tongue back into his mouth.

"More than I should," he confesses, his hand tilting my head to the side to give him deeper access to my mouth.

"I think you're filthier than you let on," I say, licking at my lips when he pulls his head back.

“I’m sure I have nothing on some of the men you’ve been with.”

I want to challenge him, explain that somehow nothing I’ve ever done in the past even compares to what doing this with him feels like, but then his hand is on my shaft, a slow, teasing stroke up the length of me, and it makes me incapable of speech.

Chapter 21

Boomer

I feel like a crazed animal, as if I'm on the outside, watching what's happening in the shower rather than actively participating in it. I'm not exactly happy with the dissociation, but it does allow me to act in a way I'd be too self-conscious to act otherwise.

I watch his face, obsessed with the way his jaw hinges open when I stroke down his shaft, letting my index finger run over his sac on the downward motion.

I've never touched a man like this before him. I only know what I like. I guess I should be grateful that he seems to enjoy me touching him in the same way I enjoy touching myself.

It could be the steam, the connotation that water has the ability to wash away sin, but for some reason, I feel safe in this small area with him. It's as if nothing bad or wrong can touch us right now. I don't notice guilt trying to wrap its talons around my throat, but that makes me notice the odd absence of it, which has the power to bring on a wave of emotions I just don't want to face right now.

"Kiss me," I plead, drawing his eyes from my stroking hand to my mouth.

His smile is slow, his pink tongue tracing the lower curve of his mouth, and I suddenly have to know exactly how it feels. I don't ask permission or hesitate to lean forward and swipe my tongue over his lips.

His breath is warm on my mouth, and even with the heat of the water rushing down my back, a wave of gooseflesh travels down my spine, my spent cock threatening to get hard all over again.

I'll imagine him on his knees, my cock buried in his throat, for the rest of my life. It paled in comparison to the one blow job I got in the Marines. I get the distinct feeling that it won't carry the same guilt I felt the day after that one either.

"You're going to make me come," Drake says, his words spoken into

my neck, his fingers clinging to my back as he rolls his hips to glide his shaft along my palm.

“That’s kind of the point, right?” I manage, my cock already back at full attention.

A hand job seems safe. Despite him getting to his knees in front of me, I can’t seem to garner the courage to do the same for him. It has more to do with a fear of doing it wrong than anything else. I can bet that the man has had hundreds of top-notch blow jobs, and I don’t know if I would survive giving him a bad one.

“Jesus,” he groans. “Just a little tighter.”

I clench my fist, his shaft thick and hot in my hand. I feel the first jerk of his orgasm. The second comes with the spurt of warmth on my thigh, and I’m unable to resist the urge to pull back enough to watch as he paints my skin with his release.

When it’s over, he pants as if he couldn’t manage a breath the entire time he was orgasming.

I feel the appreciation in his touch as he swipes his fingers over the mess he made on my skin.

I frown in disappointment when he traces my erect cock with his cum-coated finger rather than lifting it to my mouth.

This is something I’ve discovered with him—my enjoyment of the taste of cum, be it his or my own. I never once crossed that line while alone or with the one guy I let myself experiment with before. It’s not something I’ve done since on my own, but I long for it every time I’m with him.

“Feel good?” he asks, his hand now stroking the length of me.

“So good,” I answer honestly.

His fingers travel and explore. Maybe it was the way that I teased his sac that somehow gave him permission to touch mine, but I’m enjoying it all way too much. So much so that I want to lift my leg to give him better access but doing so would be too much of a confession.

It’s not that what he’s doing doesn’t feel good, because it has the

power to make my eyes roll back in my head, but there's this voice inside of me, reminding me that there's so much more he could do.

"This okay?" he asks, after another handful of strokes down my shaft.

"Yes," I moan when his finger dips into the crevice behind my balls.

In the next breath, he's back down, crouching in front of me. I have to wonder if this was his plan all along, to get me off quickly so then he could play with me more the second time around.

"You have the prettiest cock," he whispers.

"Don't make fun of me," I say, mildly annoyed that he'd do such a thing when I'm so open and vulnerable to him right now.

He looks up, his olive-colored eyes staring back at me. "Not making fun at all. It's fucking perfect."

I could never open my mouth to say something like that, but I appreciate his ability to.

My mouth hangs open when he traces that seam once again behind my balls.

I clench my jaw when he pulls away, giving me the slightest brush of what I need before disappearing.

"Oh," he says, his eyes sparkling with humor. "Need something?"

I swallow instead of asking.

"I noticed the way you reacted at the club when that man swiped his finger over the woman's little asshole."

My breath hitches when he does exactly that to me.

"I knew it's what you wanted. It is, isn't it?"

I nod, my muscles tensing as I try to resist lifting my leg once again.

Suddenly he stands, and disappointment washes over me in a way that threatens to make me irrationally angry.

"Do you have lube?"

My body sings with need at his question.

“Over there on the shelf,” I pant, reality not hitting until he makes a sound of surprise in his throat.

He’s grinning when I look over at him, a bottle of lube in one hand and a silicone toy in the other.

“Who cleans your room?” he asks, twirling the toy in his hand.

“We clean our own space,” I say, a little offended at him thinking we need someone to take care of us. “We’re adults after all.”

“Calm down,” he says, laughter in his tone. “I was wondering if you kept this out at all times.”

“I don’t, actually,” I say, wishing he’d just drop the subject and get back to what he’d planned on doing.

“You forgot it the last time you used it?”

I break eye contact with him, embarrassment heating my neck and cheeks.

“You’re just full of surprises aren’t you?”

“Are you done?” I ask, turning away to turn off the water.

“I like being surprised,” he says, the warmth of his body covering my back just as slick fingers trace the crease between my cheeks. “Turn around.”

I should tell him to go home, but my head and body aren’t exactly connected right now.

“I know this is what you want,” he says, once again teasing that sensitive area behind my balls. “And if you get that, then I get this.”

In less than a second, he’s on his knees, his mouth teasing the head of my cock. The urgency in my body hasn’t waned even after my first orgasm.

“Up,” he urges, his free hand pressing against the back of my thigh.

I lift my leg, positioning my foot on the small bench built into the shower.

Next, he grabs my hand and places it on the back of his head. My

fingers don't waste a second, tangling in the soaked strands.

I hear rather than see him coat the toy in lube, and my legs are trembling by the time he sweeps it over that forbidden part of me.

My fingers hold on tighter, my grip urging his mouth further down my length. I feel like an animal, controlled by instinct and need, rather than cognizant thought. Drake doesn't seem to mind if I'm reading the noises he's making correctly.

My knees threaten to give out with the blindingly amazing pressure I feel when he presses the toy to my entrance. I try not to tense up, but that's something I'm rarely capable of controlling even when I'm alone. I have the toy out of necessity, and I don't indulge this way very often. It's what got me excommunicated from my childhood home after all.

"So tight," Drake says, his words ghosting over the tip of my cock.

He presses a little further, the first bead of the toy making its way past that initial ring of muscle.

I gasp, unable to contain my reaction as I lift on the tip of my toes.

"I think I'd come the second I got my tip in you."

"Drake," I pant as he pulls the toy out, only to push it back in again.

I have absolutely no control over my body, and the second he leans forward again and wraps his mouth around me, I explode, the orgasm the only thing keeping me from crying out in embarrassment.

Instead of dwelling on it, I grip Drake's hair tighter, dragging him to standing, my mouth colliding with his the second it's within reach. He kisses me hard, his body pressing against mine so roughly, I have to take a step back, wincing when the shower control digs into my spine.

I'm insatiable, licking the taste of myself from his mouth.

The kissing doesn't stop. The hands don't stop wandering for a very long time, but by the time they do, our bodies are mostly dry, other than the second orgasm Drake has, painting my hip.

My lips feel raw and swollen when he finally takes a step back, his eyes unfocused.

“You’re taller than me,” I say stupidly, realizing only now that I have to look up a little to stare directly into his eyes.

“Only by an inch or so. Besides,” he says, tracing a finger down my sensitive cock. “Your inches are elsewhere.”

I jerk my hips back, wanting more but knowing I’ll end up raw if we keep going.

“Might want to wash that off,” he says, pointing to the creamy mess on my skin as he steps out of the shower.

He keeps his eyes locked on me as he towels off. I quickly wash my body, stepping out of the shower to him holding a fresh towel out to me.

An unfamiliar vulnerability hits me when he reaches for his clothes piled by the bathroom door. Before he can pull them on, I grab his hand, directing him toward the bed.

He doesn’t say a word or argue about going home as his clothes fall from his fingertips.

We settle the same way we woke up in the hotel a week ago, with my head on his chest and his arm wrapped tightly around my back.

I doze off to the sound of his beating heart.

Chapter 22

Drake

I'm frozen in place when I wake with Boomer on my chest. I don't know what managed to pull me from such a deep sleep, but experience tells me to figure it out quickly.

I notice no noises. I don't feel another presence in the room. It's been years since I woke to someone pulling me violently from the bed in punishment for some wrong I committed, but the initial fear takes a moment to go away even after there being no threat.

I know I'm lucky enough to get this time with Alex, and at the same time, my head races through all the reasons why I deserve this. It should have nothing to do with luck.

I'd be a liar if I said I was excited about coming to the clubhouse. I knew I'd get to see him even if it was in passing. Him winking at me while I worked behind the bar tonight was the highlight of my day until he pulled me in for a kiss in the hallway. That tipped the scales.

Then he invited me into the shower, and I was over the moon.

The things he let me do to him?

How in the world did I get so fortunate?

"Hey," I whisper, giving Alex a little nudge.

As much as I'd like to stay, I know my luck will run out the second he wakes in the morning to find me still in his room.

Part of me wants to stay just to challenge that part of him that insists on remaining hidden, but I know better.

"Hey," he says, his voice groggy despite the way he rolls his hips against me.

I have to laugh. The man has the stamina of a bull facing a pasture full of cows.

"I need to go," I whisper, wishing he'd ask me to stay but knowing he

never would.

He doesn't open his eyes as he lifts his head, his lips puckered for a kiss. The sight of it surprises me. It's an unexpected reaction.

I bend forward, cupping his jaw as I brush my lips softly against his. It's not a kiss of passion, but familiarity, coated in sweetness and a promise of *see you soon*.

He settles back on the bed, his breathing evening out before I can get my clothes back on.

I pull my phone from my pocket, noticing that it's inching close to two thirty in the morning as I use the flashlight to make my way out of the room and into the hallway, so I don't run into furniture.

I imagine all the highly trained Marines in this place wouldn't hesitate to jump out of bed and see who's causing such a disturbance if I were to end up kicking the doorframe or something.

I stand stock-still in the hallway after pulling his bedroom door closed behind me, listening. After hearing nothing for a few seconds, I make my way slowly toward the front door. The clubhouse isn't pitch black, but there isn't much light in the room to offer anything more than the shadows of furniture and outlines of windows, backlit by the moon outside.

The parking lot is just as silent, the rows of motorcycles and black SUVs just as impressive as I imagine is intended.

My single cab truck looks out of place, both in size and age as I approach it. There's a beep noise that comes from my vehicle because I have to unlock it with a key rather than having the luxury of an electronic fob.

Alex is still on my mind as I climb inside. Tonight was perfect, from witnessing the camaraderie of the Cerberus members, to the wink Alex gave me before walking away from the bar. Even the challenge by that new member Bishop was refreshing.

I don't know how long it will take Alex to fully open his eyes and realize the kind of support system he has, but I hope he does it before he ruins what we have. I'm not like many of the women at *Jake's* who freshen up their makeup the second they get a whiff of Cerberus leather. I don't have

any wild dreams about having a permanent connection to the club. A lot do it because it means safety and security. It comes with a certain level of possession, and who doesn't want to be idolized the way the members obsess over their love interests?

I genuinely like Alex. He's the first man I've had fun with who I don't wish was gone the second it was over. The danger of linking myself to someone like that again is just as thrilling as it is terrifying.

I'm distracted in a way I shouldn't be behind the wheel when a flash of lights pulls me from my thoughts. I startle, managing to keep the truck on the road as the other vehicle passes, but it isn't the threat of almost crashing that keeps my heart racing. It's the flash of taillights that makes the muscle pound in my chest.

I'm worried about a damn stroke when the SUV turns into the Cerberus parking lot.

It's knowing who is in that vehicle and what seeing me leaving this dead-end road says to the people inside.

My hands are shaking, my foot trembling uncontrollably, to the point I can hardly keep it on the gas pedal.

What I considered an amazing night has just crashed and burned.

I could play stupid. I could drive back to my apartment over the bar and pretend I didn't see a thing, but that doesn't seem fair as I round the final bend in the road and pull over.

I hesitate a second time as I stare down at my phone.

Knowing this will more than likely be the end of whatever it was Alex and I have, I still type out the text message before darkening my phone and driving home.

The crash is so much worse after such amazing highs. If I had known tonight would be the last, I might have done things differently. I might have stayed in bed with him a little longer. I would've reached for the erection he pressed against me instead of climbing out of bed.

My text goes unanswered, and I know it could be because Alex is still asleep. The second I step into my small apartment, I power off my phone

completely.

I don't need to know the exact second he sees the text, understands what it means, and puts an end to all of this.

My body is heavy, weighed down with defeat and regret rather than exhausted from everything that happened in the shower, as I collapse on my bed.

I could easily chalk what we had up to fun, and I might be able to think that way if I hadn't let myself get in deeper with that man than I had ever planned to do.

Chapter 23

Boomer

I know I shouldn't be surprised.

It seems like anytime I share any level of intimacy with Drake, we get busted in some way.

Drake: Just passed Ugly and the other guys on the road outside the clubhouse.

I blink at the text message as if it will disappear, but I never have such luck.

The guys were on their way back from the bar as Drake was leaving here. Fifteen minutes sooner or later and he might have been in the clear.

Fate or really crappy luck has a way of intervening though.

Drake brought Ugly home one night. He told me as much, so I know that Ugly knows exactly what Drake drives. The clubhouse is on a dead-end street, so there's never any traffic unless it's related to the club. The party ended just before eleven, meaning there was absolutely no reason for Drake to still be here. I'm the only single man other than the ones that went to *Jake's* and there isn't one person connected to the club that would just randomly hookup with the bartender. Not even Max, Tug, and Jasmine mix it up with those connected to the club. They save those kinks for the club in Denver.

Ugly is a smart guy, meaning it wouldn't take long for him to deduce why Drake Hill was at the clubhouse in the middle of the night.

I close out the messaging app without responding. It's not exactly as bad as getting caught red-handed, but I know Ugly doesn't have the same level of couth as Aro and Slick. Ugly isn't the type to mind his own business the way Max did at the club. I have to suspect that Tug and Jasmine know because they don't seem the type of triad to keep any level of secrets from each other, meaning Max told them exactly what he saw in the bathroom at Hale-ish, despite none of them bringing it up to me.

I will not get as lucky with Ugly.

I can see it now—Ugly mentioning it at breakfast and Aro and Slick saying something now that the cat will be out of the bag.

I have another slow shower, if anything just to kill time. I showered right before falling into bed with Drake last night.

My heart isn't pounding the way it was when I stepped into the hallway the night after Aro and Slick witnessed that first kiss at *Jake's*. It isn't even beating as fast as it did when I saw Max standing in the bathroom at Hale-ish.

Laughter greets me before I can step into the kitchen. I give the guys at the table a quick nod before heading to the coffee pot. I need something to do with my hands, but the caffeine, after seeing that text, isn't necessary. I'm wide awake and in defense mode already.

"Hope we didn't wake you up last night," Stormy says, his smile wide.

"You didn't," I assure him, thinking it would probably be best to escape while I can, considering Ugly isn't in the kitchen.

I look around the table, noticing each of the guys are bright-eyed. Not exactly what I'd expect after their first night in town.

"You all look less hungover than I'd expect."

A round of chuckles circles the table.

"I don't imagine Ugly will be able to say the same thing," Stormy says, his grin never faltering.

"We had to carry his ass in last night," Bishop mutters, less impressed than the others.

"Does he always act that way?" Legacy asks in a whisper.

"No," I assure him. "He was probably just excited to have a group of guys who are willing to go out and drink with him."

"It was incredibly immature. Like a housewife who doesn't get out very often and ends up showing her ass by the end of the night because she doesn't know when to cut it off," Bishop grumbles.

"He left the bar with a woman, and we thought he wasn't going to

come back. But he was in the parking lot, leaning against the SUV, after last call,” Stormy explains.

“Looking like he got the shit beat out of him,” Bishop adds.

“I told you I tripped,” Ugly says, coming into the kitchen.

“And that’s how you got the busted lip?” I ask, noticing the swelling on his lower lip.

“My hands didn’t exactly work like they were supposed to,” he mutters as he crosses the room, his hair still damp from a shower.

We all watch his back as he makes a cup of coffee.

Stormy and Legacy are grinning. Bishop looks as annoyed now as he did talking about it a few minutes ago. I’m holding my breath, waiting for Ugly to mention seeing Drake’s truck leave the parking lot.

“I don’t think I’ll be going out with you much if you’re going to get so drunk you can’t walk inside when we get home,” Bishop says, not even hiding his irritation.

“How much did you have to drink after you left the bar?” Stormy asks.

“Nothing,” Ugly says, earning a scoff from Bishop.

“You weren’t stumbling drunk when you left.”

“It won’t happen again,” Ugly says as he takes a seat at the table, sounding like a child being chastised by a parent.

I lift my coffee cup to my lips, my need to escape fading because it seems like Ugly wasn’t even awake when they returned to the clubhouse last night.

Ugly stares down at his coffee cup, looking confused and disoriented. I’ve been out with the guy before, and he never got so drunk that he had a hard time walking. Maybe he got excited, like I said, by the guys being there with him. I’m not exactly a party animal, and because I don’t drink, those around me don’t seem to have the urge to drink as much.

“Are you guys going to help with the remodel today?” I ask, hoping to get more help.

“We have a meeting in the conference room,” Legacy says with a frown.

“It’s all the HR shit,” Ugly grumbles.

I cringe. “I remember.”

“I’d rather be building something,” Stormy mutters.

The front door of the clubhouse opens, and less than a minute later, Jinx and Rocker walk in.

“Nice,” Jinx says as he heads toward the coffee pot.

“Are you guys helping today?” Rocker asks.

“It’s HR day for them,” I say, noticing Bishop’s eyes on me.

“Gross,” Rocker and Jinx say at the same time.

Bishop continues to look at me as if he has something to say, as if he knows something, but he doesn’t open his mouth.

“You look like shit warmed over,” Jinx says, clapping Ugly on the back as he drops into the chair beside him.

“Got trashed last night,” Bishop helpfully supplies.

I’m starting to get the feeling that this guy may be the first to cause problems in Cerberus.

“Really?” Jinx asks, his brow drawing together. “That doesn’t normally happen.”

“Weird fucking night,” Ugly mutters, his eyes still locked on his cup of coffee.

“I guess you’re going to head back to bed?” Rocker asks.

“I’ll rally,” Ugly mutters.

I head out to the construction area, already finding several of the guys working. We don’t have a set schedule, and all help is appreciated, not expected, but it seems some are more eager to get it done than others.

“Been working long?” I ask Thumper.

“Not very long. Gonna be over a hundred today. Figured it would be best to get in what we can before we risk heat stroke this afternoon.”

I work side by side with the other guys, not surprised that Ugly doesn't make it outside once. My phone buzzes in my pocket twice, but I don't pull it out to check the messages.

I don't need the distraction right now. I know it has to be Drake, trying to figure out if anything happened after he left last night.

What we did in the shower was the best thing that has ever happened to me. It was a new experience that was somehow tainted mere hours later by waking up to his text warning about the guys in the SUV spotting him.

I know my luck at not being confronted about what's been going on between the bartender and myself has run completely out. Three times, we've messed around. Three times, we've been caught. Three times, we haven't been questioned.

There's no way a fourth time will bring the same results. I started thinking I was going to have to call it all off, ignore him completely for good, but as the sun gets higher in the sky, I find myself smiling, wondering what it would be like to do all the things to him that he did to me.

When the workday is over, I'm exhausted, my muscles aching in a way only a hard day's work can manage, but the smile is still on my face.

The fear I felt earlier is nowhere to be seen.

As I shower and redress, I know I'm making plans that may land me in more trouble than I'd like.

Chapter 24

Drake

I shouldn't be as sad as I am.

I should be ecstatic for the fun we had instead of considering all the things we could've had but never had the chance to experience.

Boomer—I have to think of him this way. Alex is just too intimate and personal. He isn't the man for me. Closeted men, in my experience, are easily angered. They get frustrated that they can't find the courage or strength to come out. And God does it take courage and strength for most of us. Being anything other than what the majority of society considers normal is fucking hard.

The last thing I need is for him to grow frustrated with me because of his own failures. His beliefs keep him shrouded in darkness, and there's nothing I can say or do to change that for him. There's no magical wand I can wave over his head and make him accept who he is.

For most of us, the worry is being accepted by others.

I can't imagine what he's going through with his internal struggle.

For the first time in a very long time, I hate that I'm stuck at the bar. *Jake's* is normally the place I consider home. The folks that come in during the day are almost always familiar faces. I know their orders before they even sit down. I don't feel the need to put on an act or a performance like I sometimes do during my evening shifts, but today everything is an annoyance.

Add to it the fact that I've texted Boomer twice to find out what happened last night and once again, he's fucking ignoring me.

Childish behavior bugs the shit out of me.

I hate that there's something special about the man that makes him nearly impossible to just cast aside. I know for a fact I wouldn't put up with this shit in any other situation I've been in after the number my ex did to me.

Despite knowing I'm barreling down a dead-end road, knowing I

should pump the fucking brakes, I can't help but keep pressing my foot on the damn gas. The crash is inevitable, but hell, it'll be something I suffer alone. Boomer doesn't seem like a man with the balls to actually tell me it's over... whatever it was we had in the first fucking place.

"Gonna scrub a hole in it," Maude mutters. "Maybe go clean down there instead of right in front of me."

I pull my rag from the bar top, tilting my head to the side.

"Everything okay?" I ask her. The woman is prone to a couple of bad days every now and then, but she normally spends those keeping to herself.

"Same shit, different day," she grumbles.

I leave her to whatever demon she's fighting and head to the other end of the bar.

I have less than an hour until I get off. Rochelle showed up fifteen minutes ago for the one hour overlap I write into the schedule.

"Looks great," she says, after coming back out from the kitchen. "I think that new guy back there is going to work out. The burger he made me yesterday was amazing."

I'd have to disagree, but I don't feel like getting into just how much of a mess the kitchen was this morning. "Stay away from him."

"What?" she asks, humor in her tone and a sparkle in her eye.

"He's not a toy, Rochelle. He needs this job."

"Everyone needs their job," she says, her smile falling when I don't return it.

"He's here on work release."

"Jail?"

"Prison."

Her eyes widen. "You didn't think to tell me a criminal was cooking the food?"

I roll my eyes at her. "Forgetting that you're here on work release as

well?”

She rolls her lips between her teeth. “I was hoping you’d forget that part. Was it hot checks like me?”

She was jailed for forgery of a financial instrument, but it was the drugs she was on at the time when she changed the hundred-dollar check given to her by her employer to a thousand without making adjustments to the written line, that probably got her caught.

“I didn’t ask Jake for details, and you shouldn’t either. It’s not your job.”

She frowns. “You shouldn’t have said anything. Now I’m curious.”

“Remember how embarrassed you were when your parole officer stopped by to visit?”

She frowns. “She had no right. Everyone in town knows who she is.”

I raise an eyebrow at her. “I’m sure the man just wants to work and leave that part of himself in the past. Let him.”

“Everything comes out in the wash,” Maude says, making me realize she’s been listening to our entire conversation.

My eyes dart toward the small digital clock under the bar. Thirty more minutes left on my shift.

“Make sure he doesn’t leave a pile of dishes in the sink. You’re opening tomorrow so you’ll be the one cleaning them up.”

She grumbles good-naturedly as she mixes Maude another drink.

The front door to the bar opens as I’m pulling a container of limes out of the mini fridge to restock the bar. Unlike how I used to be, I don’t look in that direction. Hoping gets me nowhere, so I’ve decided to stop wasting my time.

I nearly drop the container of limes when I turn back around to find Boomer sitting right in front of the garnish tray.

“Can I get a Coke?”

I stare at him as I take the top off the container of pre-cut limes,

refilling that section of the garnish tray without saying a word.

“Only a little ice?” he asks, holding his finger and thumb about an inch apart.

I can’t decide if I want to kiss or smack the smile off his face, knowing I’d never honestly resort to violence.

Once the limes are full, I turn back to the mini fridge and grab the maraschino cherries, refilling those silently before making his drink.

I step away, helping another customer without a word, wanting to growl when I look back over at Boomer to see his glass is empty. The man always nurses his soda, making two last for hours.

I head back in his direction, my lips flat as I reach for his glass to refill it.

“Drake,” he says, grabbing my hand before I can pull it back.

I stare down at the connection, wondering how long it will take for him to realize he’s intentionally touching me in front of people. Granted, it’s only Maude sitting at the bar and she looks about ready to be poured into a cab, but still, we’re in public.

“I was wondering what time you got off.”

I lift my gaze from his hand on mine to his eyes, hating how my heart kicks up at the sight of his smiling face.

He pulls his hand back when the front door opens again, but his eyes never leave mine.

“I was thinking we could hang out.” He still affects me in the worst ways, I realize when his eyes drop to my lips.

I should tell him no, that he should kiss my ass, but I internalize my anger.

Maybe he was just busy today. Maybe I jumped to conclusions. It honestly wouldn’t be the first time.

“Half an hour,” I tell him, unable to hide my grin.

I refill his drink and then work on getting Maude a damn cab before

she falls off the stool.

I'm walking on air the entire rest of my shift, but when I get off, Boomer doesn't follow me upstairs.

I shoot him off a text after being in my apartment for a few minutes, anxious to see him.

Me: Did you change your mind?

Alex: Give me a few minutes. I want to make sure no one is going to see me come up there.

I know the man is battling his own demons, but the implication that he's ashamed for others to know his plans for the night rubs me in all the wrong places.

I should text back and tell him never mind. I should be strong enough to take a stand and tell him this isn't going to work for me, but I can't manage it.

It has the same edge I came to recognize in therapy that I had with my ex. As I stand in the middle of my little apartment, growing more and more angry by the second, I realize trauma really is a vicious fucking cycle because I'm facing the same shit all over again.

Chapter 25

Boomer

I don't get excited about many things. I'm the type of person who usually accepts things as they come, and they may upset me or make me smile. Every atom in my body is pinging around inside of me as my eyes dart back and forth.

I close out my tab with Rochelle with very little fanfare. The evening is starting to kick up, and she doesn't pay me much attention since I turned down her suggestive flirting very early when I first came to Farmington.

I feel devious and naughty, and instead of it making me want to head out the front door guiltily, my pulse is pounding when I come out of the restroom and head toward the back staircase instead of back out into the bar.

The rhythm of my steps as I climb the stairs matches my heart, excitement flowing through me.

I look over my shoulder, my body now shrouded in darkness, before lifting my hand to knock. If someone saw me up here, there would be no excuse for why I'm here. The truth would be insanely evident, and despite not wanting to get caught, there's also a certain thrill to the risk as well.

I grow even more nervous and not in a good way when my knock goes unanswered. With a heavier hand, I knock again, shoving inside and closing the door behind me the second it opens.

"What?" I ask, a slow smile on my face that falls away nearly just as fast when I see Drake standing a few feet away with an unimpressed look on his face. "Sorry."

I don't know exactly what I'm apologizing for, but it seems needed right now.

He continues to soundlessly stare at me, making me feel like I'm being inspected or assessed.

"I thought we were busted when I saw the text about Ugly and the other guys passing you when you left the clubhouse. He was too drunk to even stay awake in the vehicle, so we're in the clear. The new guys have no

idea what you drive.”

I don’t see the relevance in mentioning the way Bishop looked at me this morning in the kitchen because the new member didn’t actually say anything about it. I haven’t gotten the perfect bead on the man yet, so it feels premature to worry about him.

The man in front of me remains silent, taking a step back when I step closer and reach for him.

“Are you ever going to get to the point where you’ll be okay with people knowing?”

My mouth suddenly turns into a desert. One sentence, yet it feels like an ultimatum.

I don’t answer because my immediate thought of *never* isn’t something that Drake is going to want to hear.

“Do you feel guilty for what happened last night?”

I blink at the man, knowing I can answer this in a way that he’d like, but also have to consider the repercussions of it. I can’t explain that I woke feeling high on life only to once again be terrified that I was going to be confronted with the reality I’ve been so desperate to keep secret. Guilt really didn’t factor into it much. I just don’t want to have to speak openly about something I don’t fully understand or accept.

Drake scoffs at my silence.

“But why would you feel guilty? You didn’t do anything. Isn’t that how you justify it to yourself? You didn’t get on your knees, so I’m the one to blame.”

My pulse pounds in my ears, the fear of this man asking me to leave greater than the fear of waking up to the text from him.

“It’s my sin, right? Because you didn’t really participate?”

I clench my jaw, hating the way he’s throwing my confessions back into my face. Had I known we were only going to fight, I would’ve stayed at the clubhouse. It wasn’t supposed to be messy and yet here I am getting chastised like a child.

Unwilling to let something that was supposed to only be a good time, a way to feed that part of me without anyone knowing, I turn toward the door, resolved that this wasn't going to work out any other way, despite me wanting to drag it out as long as I could.

I reach for the doorknob, ready to bolt from his apartment, when he speaks.

“Maybe we should—”

I spin to face him, a look so angry on my face that his words cut short.

“Is it the lack of participation that bothers you?” I snap. “Do I not please you?”

His groans of pleasure have echoed in my ears more than once, so I'm pretty sure that can't be the case.

“Is it because it's only been hand jobs?”

His own jaw is twitching with irritation as I inch closer to him.

Fear of never being able to do the things I've done with him ever again swims inside of me like a virus infecting everything. It has the power to control my actions and decisions. As much as I feel the urge to leave and never look back, there's an unidentifiable part of me that just won't let me leave this room.

Drake doesn't take a step backward as I inch closer, and like everything else this man does, his determination and unwillingness to back down turns me on in a way that would give a psychologist weeks of work to decipher.

“Is it not enough?” I ask, my hands going to the front of his jeans.

There's a challenge in his eyes despite no sound coming from his lips.

I'm not gentle when I tug down his zipper and reach into his boxers. I expect to scoop up a hand of unprepared cock and balls, but his erection is already at nearly fit performance. I feel the thrill of it in my own jeans as I drop to my knees in front of him.

“Is it more you're after?” I snap, wanting to sound angry and in control, but there's a lusty hitch to my voice. “Something like this?”

I mouth the tip of his cock, watching his jaw go from tense to lax with what I have to presume is awe.

“Ever think that maybe I haven’t done this with you because I never have? That I’m worried you won’t enjoy it?”

“Never? Jesus, Alex. More.”

I give him what he asks, grateful for the guiding hand he places at the back of my head.

I’ve thought about this, pictured me on my knees exactly like I am. I can’t count how many times I’ve gotten myself off to the thought of him in my throat.

The reality of it, however, involves gagging and an inability to figure out when to breathe versus holding my breath.

His fingers tangle in my hair, and embarrassment heats my cheeks when he pulls me off him.

“This is why I didn’t—” I begin, an apology for being so terrible at it on my lips.

He shakes his head, cutting me off. “Your mouth is fucking perfect, Alex. Just the sight of you on your knees, looking up at me, is almost enough to make me coat your lips in cum.”

I gasp, a thrill of need at the implication running down my spine.

“You like the idea of that?” I nod enthusiastically, the pull of his fingers in my hair bringing pain that isn’t exactly bad. My body’s reaction to it, my cock leaking in my boxers, is something new. “You have to work for it. Slow down and watch your teeth.”

There’s no reluctance in my movement as he urges me back down onto him, and I part my lips the second the warmth of his cockhead touches it.

I never thought I’d be grateful for sin, but the pleasure-filled tremble in his thighs when I lick that spot just under his crown makes me pleased to have seen it in porn I never should’ve been watching.

Before I hit my knees, I hated Drake a little for being right, that I resisted actively involving myself in sexual things. But as I take a deep breath

and draw him in as deep as I can without gagging, I know I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be.

I don't worry about how I'll feel about it tomorrow. I don't worry about the consequences to my soul.

Being on my knees for this man makes me feel invincible.

Being the one to draw out the sounds he's making, the pleading for more, makes me feel like I'll live forever.

There is absolutely nothing better, nothing more spiritual, than being the one to supply his pleasure.

The blasphemy of that thought doesn't even register.

"Ah fuck," he grunts, his hips jolting forward. "I'm going to come, Alex. If you—"

His warning is cut off by a low hum of delight, his salty release coating my tongue.

I can honestly say I'm the happiest I've ever been with the first swallow. The second thrills me so much, I can't resist the urge to hastily pull my own cock out.

I feel like an amateur because two strokes down my length is all it takes, but I somehow manage to keep my mouth on him through my orgasm.

My breaths are heavy as if I just participated in an Olympic relay, and I imagine how I feel when I look back up to him to see heavy-lidded eyes and a dopey grin would be the equivalent of winning the gold.

"You're a cumslut," he whispers, a hint of awe rather than degradation in his tone.

I shake my head, rejecting the filthy accusation immediately.

He swipes a finger at the corner of my mouth before dipping the cum-covered digit back to my lips. I understand immediately when my mouth unhinges and I can't resist the urge to lick his finger.

Chapter 26

Drake

I was ready to put an end to all of it.

Hearing the man confess that he hasn't done more because he thinks he'll be bad at it?

Jesus, how could he ever think that?

I was ready to blow before he even got my dick out. His lips on me? Nothing short of a miracle.

The way he drank me down as if he couldn't get enough when I was certain he'd either spit out or pull off before I came? That has the power to make me put up with much more than I ever would. The thought of it scares me, but not enough to keep me from dipping my fingers into his mouth and relishing the feel of his tongue sweeping over them.

"You don't have any idea how much you turn me on, do you?"

"I have an idea," Alex says after I pull my fingers from his mouth.

He sweeps his tongue out, swiping at the tip of my unflagging cock. The man is like a shot of Viagra, and I don't imagine my cock will flag at all so long as he stays on his knees.

I pull his hand up, inserting his fingers into my mouth. His eyes swim with desire, arousal making his cheeks pink. His breathing shifts, turning a little more ragged than it was before.

"How do you feel about this?" I ask, manipulating his hand in mine as I trail it down my abdomen. The trail of spit left behind on my skin thrills me, the coolness compared to the heat coursing through my veins in contrast with each other.

I spread my legs a little as his guided hand sweeps down my taut sac.

He stops me, his arm stiffening after just the first brush of his fingers behind my nuts.

I take a deep breath, reasoning that I'm pushing him too far too fast.

Showing disappointment right now would be too akin to coercion, and I'm just not the type.

"I'm not ready to go that far," he says, his words sounding like an apology.

I nod in understanding. I taunted him earlier, my anger getting the better of me. I fully expected him to leave, and I just needed to get in the last words, a consolation prize of sorts for the way he made me feel when all I wanted was a little fun. I never intended for those words to make him drop to his knees.

"Please don't be mad," he says, his words a confession of vulnerability.

"Never," I assure him. "I want to take care of you, though."

I pull him up, my lips finding his the second they're within reach.

"You taste like cum."

He shudders, his lips pulling up into a smile against my mouth.

I reach for him, expecting to have to unzip his pants, only to find his wet-tipped cock instead.

I pull back an inch or so, looking down.

"I don't know if I'll be able to come again," he whispers.

"Again?"

"Sorry," he says. "I made a mess."

I take a step back, the jeans around my knees making it hard to move quickly.

"Fuck," I mutter, seeing the result of his own orgasm pooled on my clothes.

"Sorry," he repeats.

"No," I snap, cupping his jaw and forcing his eyes up to mine. "Do you know how fucking hot it is that making me come had the same effect on you?"

He licks at his dry lips.

“Might be hot, but now I’ve missed out on a blow job because I came like a teenager.”

The disappointment in his voice makes me grin.

I release his face, taking another half step back before bending over to pull off my shoes and jeans.

His eyes are on me the entire time, his gaze raking down my body when I straighten to pull my shirt over my head.

“Who said you’re not going to get one?” I ask, motioning with one hand toward his erection. “Looks like you’re ready.”

“It might take too long to get me off.”

“There’s no such thing as too long,” I say, reaching for the hem of his t-shirt.

He lifts his arms, those perfect little muscles along his ribcage that look like fingers rippling with the motion. I can’t get over this man’s body. I have definition in most of the right places, but he’s utter perfection even in all those hard-to-train spots.

“I want to lick you from head to toe,” I confess. “Every fucking inch of your body.”

His breath hitches, and I bite my lower lip to keep from laughing, having a very good idea of the spots he’s thinking of my tongue exploring.

“Yes, Alex. Even there.”

Once I get him fully naked, and he stands there, stock-still, letting me get my visual fill of his body, I take him by the hand and guide him into the bathroom.

“It’s going to be a little cramped,” I say. “My shower is nowhere near as big as yours.”

“It’s perfect,” he says in a way that makes me believe he isn’t just placating me. “It makes us—”

His words fall away, and I follow his line of sight, a slow grin spreading across my face at his discovery.

“Look familiar?” I grin at the sight of the lube and sex toy on the small shelf in the shower stall.

“I thought—” He shakes his head instead of finishing his sentence.

“Thought what?” I prod, not wanting him to feel like he can’t be completely open and honest with me.

“I thought you’d always top.”

“I’m verse,” I whisper in his ear, my front against his back, my hand trailing over his naked hip. “I love all of it. Giving. Taking.”

A shudder runs through his body that echoes in mine.

“That’s probably a conversation we should’ve had before things got this far.” I grip his length, relishing the pulse in it. “But I’m guessing this means we’re compatible?”

Alex leans his head back, resting it on my shoulder. I use the opportunity provided to nip his neck.

“You like it?” I tease. “Are you thinking about me inside of you or getting lost thinking about sliding this big cock of yours inside of me?”

He groans, his hips jutting forward as I continue to stroke him.

“Maybe a little of both?”

His breath hitches, his thighs growing stiff, and I release him, pulling a groan of frustration from his lips.

“Not yet,” I say, stepping around him to turn on the water.

His fingers trail over my ass, shooting cold chills from that very spot until they reach the top of my head. This man is so damned dangerous, but I just can’t seem to heed any of the warnings.

We spend the next hour in the shower. Even after I get on my knees, his warning of not being able to come proved false very quickly, we kiss and touch, letting our hands explore each other.

It’s a level of intimacy I don’t know that I’ve ever achieved with anyone before.

Our fingers look like prunes, our body temperatures higher from being under the hot water for so long as we towel off.

It's a good thing he can't seem to take his eyes off me, because I'm not able to manage to look away from him.

Everything is sexy about this man—from the way his hair sticks out all over the place after he towel dries it, to the way he gathers his junk in the towel.

He takes considerably longer to dry himself than I do, but the time spent watching him seems like a reward.

“Really?” I ask when he begins the process of drying between each of his toes. “Are you stalling?”

He looks up at me, his face half-smile, half-confusion.

“By getting dry?”

“You're telling me you dry between your toes after every shower?”

He stands to his full height, satisfied that his feet are dry.

“You don't? Have you ever had athlete's foot?”

I cringe. “Talking about athlete's foot isn't sexy.”

“What's not sexy is nearly losing a toe from infection.”

My eyes dart down to my own feet, my fingers itching to grab my towel. “I've never had it.”

I sure as hell don't want it either.

“I saw so many gross things in the Corps. I'm not willing to risk it.”

I nod in understanding. I imagine he saw more than rotten feet, but I'm not going to ask about his time in the service. I know that there's a likelihood of PTSD with military service. It's as prevalent as suffering from it after escaping a traumatic relationship like I did.

We step out of the bathroom, our arms brushing due to the confined space.

“Can you stay?” I ask as he bends to gather up his discarded clothing.

He doesn't hesitate to leave them in the pile we created before heading to the bathroom over an hour ago.

"It's not a king," I say, feeling like a fake adult as I glance over at the full-sized bed.

What would he think if it were still the twin it was when I first moved in?

I'm surprised when Alex reaches for my hand, a tiny grin on his face. "I guess we'll just have to stay extra close."

He's different from how he was that first night in the hotel. I don't register any stiffness in his muscles as he situates himself half on my chest, half on the bed.

His breath is warm on my skin, a smile wide across my face as we settle.

He lifts his head, catching me smiling, but he doesn't call me out on it. He simply lifts his mouth to mine before dropping his head back down to my chest and falling asleep.

Chapter 27

Boomer

I'd be worried about waking up in an empty bed in a strange place if Drake's apartment wasn't so small.

It's one room besides the bathroom, meaning it doesn't take but a slight shift of my eyes to see his naked back as he stands in the small kitchenette area about twenty feet away.

The man is absolutely exquisite, his trim back muscles working as he holds a coffee pot under the faucet.

The very distinct tan line at his waist tells me he spends time outside, and I have to shove down the hint of jealousy that threatens at thinking of others seeing him without a shirt. The possessiveness is something new for me, but I'm not going to waste what limited time I have with the man on worrying about it. I'll save it for when the guilt he spoke of last night sinks in. I'm just glad it hasn't had time to settle into my bones just yet. I wouldn't want our first morning together to be spent that way.

I shift, absolutely in love with the way the silky sheets feel on my skin.

Twice, both times involving Drake, is all I've ever experienced being in bed naked. I've always gone to sleep wearing clothes. I was raised that way, and it carried on in adulthood. Wasting time on needing to get dressed in the Corps meant losing valuable time that could be life or death.

He looks over his shoulder at me before pouring the water into the coffee machine, and it makes me realize I'm a little obsessed with the sleepy grin on his face. This man is dangerous, but like all sins, I can't look past the appeal right now to understand the impending consequences.

I feel alive, more so than after any mission I've ever been a part of. Just the sight of him across the room, the promise of him touching me, is more thrilling than anything I've experienced before.

Our shower together was soft hands, exploring mouths and fingertips. After I told him I wasn't ready to touch him in some of the ways he touched me, he never pressed the issue. It left me a little regretful because twenty

minutes in, I wanted to press my fingers inside of him, but found myself incapable of instigating that after putting a stop to it beforehand.

“You’re looking creative this morning,” he says over his shoulder, pausing a second from scooping coffee grounds into the filter he just placed in the machine.

“I have a few thoughts,” I tell him, my voice filled with sleep and satisfaction.

He finishes with the coffee, turning the thing on before facing me. His thick cock points directly at me, bobbing with each step he takes as he crosses the room in my direction.

“Is this one of them?” With a not-so-gentle hand, he grips the back of my head, pressing his erection to my lips.

I open my mouth, incapable of even pretending this isn’t something I want. I’m too desperate for the man to tease and taunt him the way he so easily does me. My hand is exposed, all cards on the table when he’s close to me. I have no idea how I held out so long other than the fact that we were never alone until that night in the hallway downstairs.

I know if we weren’t interrupted, I would’ve taken the man up on his offer to come up here.

“You need this as much as I do,” he says, pulling free and running the wet tip of his cock down my cheek, giving me an opportunity to confirm or deny.

“Yes,” I pant, my mouth open, my eyes lifted to his, hoping they’re portraying the begging I don’t know that I could manage vocally.

“Absolutely perfect.” His mouth hangs open, silent awe on his face as he presses back inside the warmth of my mouth.

The scent of coffee as well as the gurgling sound of the machine filters in, but there won’t be any real need for caffeine this morning. This man has exactly what I’m needing, and I work hard for it.

“Fuck,” he grunts. “Quick study I see.”

I grin around his dick, but then sputter and pull back because losing

focus means choking, apparently.

“So fucking eager,” he praises when I dive right back in after catching my breath. “The determination is hot. Will that thick cock of yours come again from sucking me off?”

The appendage in question jumps below the sheets, my hips jerking forward in need.

Either he’s a mind reader, or he’s just as needy to please me as I am to please him. He throws the sheet off my lower half, reaching for my erection a second later.

His hand is cold compared to the heat of my skin, but it’s not an unwelcome difference. I moan around him as he strokes me.

“Already leaking. Can you take me deeper?”

I do my best, and from the noise he makes as he bends forward to swipe his tongue across the tip of me, it sounds like he approves of the effort I’m putting forth.

I’m lost in the warmth of his mouth, my own not moving very much, but he seems quite content, and rather coordinated as he sucks me off and thrusts his hips forward at the same time.

My tongue is flat, enjoying the scrape of his cock on it, and I wrap my arms around his thighs, needing more of him touching me as that tingle starts low in my abdomen.

“Coming,” he says around my cock. It’s not a warning as far as I’m concerned, and I have little doubt that he’s saying it as one.

He hit the nail on the head last night, calling me a cumslut because I am desperate for this part. It’s not only the taste of him, but the satisfaction that I’m capable of bringing him to this point. His pleasure is literally my pleasure, I realize, because the second that first rope of cum hits the back of my throat, my own cock jerks with release. His orgasm sets my orgasm off, and I continue to suck him through every pulse, every spurt, as my cock mirrors the exact same.

We’re both gasping for air when he pulls back, but it doesn’t stop him from leaning forward and pressing his lips to mine.

It's less of an intimate kiss and more of an offering of the cum coating his own.

It feels naughty, full of debauchery, but I can't manage to feel guilt or shame for needing it right now.

"Cumslut," he whispers against my lips after I get my fill.

"You really mess with my head," I confess, my hand on his cheek, his face a mere inch or two from mine.

"In a good way, I hope."

I swipe my thumb over his mouth, bring it to my lips as he grins.

"The jury's still out."

His eyes sparkle with mirth, no doubt still high on his orgasm.

"I have to open the bar this morning," he says as he walks to a small rack of clothes near the bathroom door.

I watch him pull jeans and a t-shirt from his makeshift closet, enjoying the view without saying a word.

He tosses his clothes on the bed before disappearing into the bathroom, and, damn it, if the man isn't just as appealing walking away as he was walking toward me before pressing his dick to my lips.

I lie back on the mattress, wondering for the first time why I took so long to experience all the things I've been participating in with him. It feels like a wasted life, but at the same time, I can't imagine doing this with anyone else. I can't recall one single person in the ten years since I limped away from the compound that I was willing to go this far with.

He wasn't far from the truth last night when he challenged me about my thoughts, whether I was imagining him slipping inside of me or doing the same to him. The answer, had I been able to muster the courage, would've been both. I know I want every sexual situation imaginable with him, only him.

That's what makes everything happening with this man so reckless.

I keep my eyes on him when he leaves the bathroom. I know he's

pulling on his clothes slowly for me. It's a performance I'm grateful for.

"Again?" he asks, humor in his tone as he looks down at my slowly filling cock.

"Like you have room to talk," I say as he tucks his own semi behind his boxer briefs.

"You mess with my head, too," he says, his eyes dropping as if he never meant to confess that out loud. "I'm going to head down. Have a cup of coffee if you need one. Grab a shower to wake up. I can make you breakfast down there if you're hungry."

I sit up on the bed, his offer sounding a little domestic and making me unsure of how to deal with it as I watch him continue to get dressed. The bed dips under his weight as he pulls his shoes on, and I resist the urge to pull him back on top of me. The man said he has to go to work, and I don't think I'd be very impressed if the roles were reversed and he was trying to make me late.

"Yeah. It won't take me long."

"I don't have anything worth stealing," he says before walking out the door.

I shake my head, another smile on my face, not getting offended at all with his parting words. I'd never take anything of his, so it didn't really feel like an accusation.

The man is being honest though. The room is sparsely furnished, but the small space doesn't provide many options. My individual room at the clubhouse is bigger than his entire apartment, including the bathroom, but there's something about a man that doesn't need much. It speaks of what many could consider a nomadic life, as if he keeps from having valuables because he would only have to walk away from them. It gives the appearance of not settling, not getting comfortable in his own space. It's not unlike the years I spent in the military. A lot of Marines had families outside of the gates or living on base. I never rented an apartment. I stayed on base in shared housing, knowing it wouldn't be long before being called right back out on another mission. Having a home base was a waste of time and money, so I just didn't bother with it.

Yet, it's my understanding that Drake has been working at *Jake's* for at least a couple years.

Maybe it has to do with his past. I anger quickly at the idea of him being worried that his ex will come back and try to hurt him. He mentioned in his story that he filed charges, and the man was arrested, but he didn't go into further details. He didn't say if he went to prison or if the charges were dropped. Any of it is a possibility.

Thinking he could still possibly be in danger from that asshole, I jump up and get dressed, pulling my boots on without wasting time with my socks. I shove them in my front pocket as I turn off the coffee pot. The man may not have much but the place burning down with what little he does have would be super crappy.

I didn't see him pick up any keys before walking out because I was too busy checking him out, but I lock the door behind me anyway. I could easily pick the lock if that's what he needed.

I descend the stairs as quickly as possible without falling, unconcerned with anything but this gut-deep need to see him and make sure he's okay. It's an unfamiliar feeling, wanting to protect someone on this level. I don't even feel this when out on a job, knowing what we're going to face when we raid a compound full of sex-trafficked women.

I stop short, but not fast enough, when I hear voices. It leaves me standing like a deer locked in headlights as Ugly turns from the bar to face me.

There's no look of shock or surprise on Ugly's face.

Drake looks a little pale and regretful, but it has nothing to do with him. He has nothing to lose. The man is no doubt wondering how I'm going to react, not because of what it could mean for him.

"I left my debit card the other night," Ugly says. "When I called yesterday, still feeling like complete shit, Drake said I could swing by this morning and get it. He put it behind the bar for me."

My jaw flexes, my teeth grinding with understanding.

The man has always had an issue with me not being as willing as him

to let people know about my proclivities. This seems as easy a way to force my hand with it all.

It's a setup. Him coming down first so he could open the door for Ugly to walk right in rather than me being down here when someone knocked, giving me the chance to hide.

Kudos to him though. It was well thought out and executed.

"Thanks again," Ugly says, sliding the card in question into his wallet before turning back to face me. "See you at the clubhouse, man."

My eyes are slow to pull from his retreating back to the bartender.

"Alex," he says, making his way down to the end of the bar to get to me.

I don't bother waiting, making my way quickly across the bar toward the front door.

And to think I was worried about him and the trouble his damn ex could cause.

Was this some sort of intervention? A way for him to make me admit things? Was he not listening when I told him I'm not confused, that how I feel about who I truly am is bone deep, not some vanity reason or concern that people would look at me differently?

"Alex," he snaps, and I hate the tone he's taking with me right now but I'm too pissed to face him. Anger simmers inside of me like an active volcano, and it's not going to take much for me to explode.

I call upon many years of controlling my emotions when he catches up with me, placing a hand on my shoulder.

"I forgot," he says. "He called, and it wasn't a big deal. Then you showed up."

I freeze, wanting to believe him.

"You wanted to go upstairs, and it's all I could think about. I was trying to get him out quickly. I would've texted a warning, but I left my phone up in the apartment. I—"

“Likely story,” I mutter, shrugging off his hand and walking out.

He must realize I’d never believe his lies because the man doesn’t follow me into the parking lot.

Chapter 28

Drake

The morning somehow drags and goes by too quickly all at the same time.

It seems like an eternity between Alex leaving the bar and the first customer showing up, but somehow the lunch rush is already over, and the afternoon lull has begun.

I wanted to follow him out, make him believe me, but the man had already made up his mind before Ugly even explained why he was here. I don't know how he can think so poorly of me after the night we shared, but shit, maybe I'm the one getting lost in him and the feelings aren't returned at all.

I've considered going to the clubhouse to speak with him. But if he lost his mind at the sight of one of the club members witnessing him come out of the back hallway after having to unlock the door for Ugly, then I can't imagine it would go over well for me to confront him in front of all of them.

I know how it looks. I could tell by the look of betrayal of what he thought had happened.

I trapped him. I came down and opened a locked door for Ugly, meaning the man standing at the bar picking up his debit card could make the only plausible conclusion. Alex didn't get there before him. He was there all night.

I can't blame him for thinking it after the way I confronted him last night.

I shake my head, irritated to even care at all.

I don't do this.

I don't get wrapped up in people.

I don't let them leave me confused.

I'm always one step ahead, the one to bow out gracefully before real feelings get involved.

It happened too soon with Alex. I was blindsided by the man, completely awestruck from the first kiss, and drowning in him with each subsequent encounter.

I have no one to blame but myself, and that's how I spend my day, in complete recrimination to the point I catch myself mumbling my mistakes out loud. Thankfully, there's no one concerned enough to pay me any attention.

"The place is immaculate as always."

I look up, trying to manage a smile at Jake, my boss and the owner of the bar.

"What brings you by, old man?" I ask, trying to be my normal jovial self.

I fall short, but hopefully he doesn't notice.

"Just checking up on the place," Jake says, his smile warm and inviting, something most all bartenders master not long after serving their first drink.

"Haven't burned it down yet," I say, my tone flatter than it normally would be.

He looks around, but it doesn't feel like he's being critical of the place. I take a lot of pride in my job, and I know that in recent years, with Jake taking a step back, I've become the face of the business. I don't want to tarnish his name any more than I want to tarnish my own by giving anyone a reason to complain other than not being impressed when they have to be cut off for the night.

"You should give Rochelle a few lessons," he says, pointing to the outside of the ice bin. "I don't know that she ever thinks to wipe that down during her shift. Look at it gleaming."

"She wipes it down," I say in her defense.

The reason it looks spectacular right now is because I scrubbed the thing earlier in an effort to keep from grabbing my truck keys, kicking everyone out, and heading to the clubhouse. I've cleaned many things today to keep me from doing something stupid.

“I wanted to touch base on Joey Dixon.”

He thanks me with a nod when I hand him a soda.

“I can’t complain. It took him a few days to get the hang of it, but he seems to have a routine down. He’s almost as fast as Wallace with getting food orders out. He hasn’t made too many errors.”

Jake nods, taking a sip of his drink.

“You’re making corrections where they’re needed?”

I give him a weak smile. I had so much trouble when I first started, and got irrationally angry when I was corrected, that I struggled to correct any wrong behaviors when I took over more responsibilities. I never wanted people to feel the way I did even though I know now that the corrections that were made were needed. I had all that personal shit going on and getting nagged felt like it was a personal dig rather than it just being a need for the bar to run smoother. When I became management, I spent a lot of time just doing things myself, and the bartenders and line cooks weren’t getting any better. It was a detriment to the bar because there’s too much for any one person to do.

Jake sat me down and explained the whys and hows. Although it took a while for me to step up and tell others how things needed to be done, I got the hang of it eventually.

“I am,” I tell him with a small grin. “I’ve only had to tell him to slow down once because going too fast and not reading tickets caused a few issues. He’s doing better.”

“Good,” Jake says with another nod. “Rochelle hasn’t had an attendance problem?”

I shake my head. “Not since she kicked Aaron to the curb.”

“Very good.” Jake stands, sliding his nearly empty Coke across the bar top. Like always, he pulls a five-dollar bill from his wallet and drops it on the wood. “Keep up the good work.”

I empty the glass and put it in the tray to be carried back to the kitchen later.

Jake turns back around. “I meant to ask you how the gig went for Cerberus.”

“Very good,” I tell him honestly. “Kincaid tipped way too much, considering that almost every person who got a drink also tipped.”

Jake’s smile is wide. “That’s just how they are. Let me know if you need anything.”

I give him a little wave as he leaves, filling another mug of draft for one of the regulars at the bar.

The anger that was seeping in waned a little with Jake’s visit, but as I get lost in my head once again, it doesn’t take long for it to return.

Alex hasn’t once given me the benefit of the doubt. I wouldn’t be surprised if he doesn’t now think that every time we’ve gotten caught was a setup of some kind.

Likely story.

His last words are on repeat in my mind as I furiously scrub at a spot on the bar top.

We haven’t even fucked yet. I have no idea why it’s even bothering me so much.

I know what may be fast for him is considerably slow for me. Hell, I don’t think I’ve ever met up with someone more than twice before we got down to the full-fledged nitty-gritty. Yeah there are some encounters that are only hand jobs or oral, but those usually are a one-off anyway. I don’t usually get a blow job on night one with a guy and then meet up with them at a later date.

Alex and I have hooked up in one way or another three times now, not counting the first kiss in the hallway. That’s twice more than I’ve hooked up with the same person in years.

Maybe that’s why I’m all out of sorts. My hand freezes on the bar top at the realization. I’ve had nothing but one-night stands and casual hookups since my ex was arrested years ago.

In an effort to keep from ending up in the same situation, I’ve kept

more to myself than anything else. That's the only difference. If I can somehow maintain distance from Alex, I know I can just move on.

It's not like I love the guy or anything, right?

Chapter 29

Boomer

I planned to avoid every living person, but the guys were already hard at work when I got back to the clubhouse.

If I took off or hid out in my room, I'd look like a complete jerk. I don't want anyone to have that opinion of me.

It's been a week since Ugly caught me at the bar, but he hasn't said a word. We honestly haven't been alone since, but I don't think that's the only reason he hasn't mentioned it. The guy could easily tell me he needs to talk to me. I'm honestly surprised he hasn't cornered me or called me out in front of everyone. I don't know why he's been silent.

Come to think of it, no one who has an idea of what I've been up to has confronted me about it. I've seen Tug nearly every day since Drake and I ran into Max in the bathroom at Hale-ish, yet there have been no questions. They don't look at me with expectation. It seems nothing has changed, and it's growing odd, their silence.

I don't know how to read it. Are they leaving the ball in my court? Do they have an opinion different from the one they share with others? Do they see my sins as greater as I do because of my upbringing?

The late afternoon sun is beating down on me. The tips of my ears feel like they're on fire, but I haven't stopped. The longer I stay on the ladder, the more nails I drive, the longer it will be before I have to face anyone.

For some reason, Ugly isn't around today, and that also keeps me busy.

"Fuck!" I snap, my hammer falling from my hand.

"Holy shit, watch out," Grinch hisses, my hammer nearly hitting him in the head.

"Did he just cuss?" Rocker asks. "Boomer?"

With deep, steady breaths, I slowly climb off the ladder, a serious feat with only the use of one hand.

"Ouch," Grinch says, grabbing my hand the second my feet are on

solid ground.

“I’ll get the keys,” Rocker says.

“For what?” I mutter.

“Dude, you have a fucking nail through your finger.”

“If OSHA were around, they’d fucking shut us down,” Tug mutters, his head shaking back and forth in disappointment.

“That’s why you should be wearing a hard hat like everyone else,” Scooter says to Grinch. He must’ve witnessed my hammer nearly knocking a hole in his skull.

“Sorry about that,” I mutter before looking at Rocker. “I don’t need an ambulance.”

A wave of hisses and cringes echo around me when I pull the nail out of my index finger. It burns like nothing I’ve felt before, but the pain is tolerable.

“I’ll go get this cleaned up,” I tell them before walking away.

“I’m going home to get my hard hat,” Grinch says.

“There are extras over there,” Scooter snaps. “Quit trying to get out of work.”

Laughter follows me as I walk back through the new opening in the side of the clubhouse, my right hand a temporary tourniquet around my finger to stanch the blood flow.

I head to my room, ignoring the chatter I hear in the kitchen. I don’t want anyone trying to take over my first aid, not that there are many around here who have an issue with blood.

The reminder of what I was taught hits me in the chest like a lead weight, threatening to take me off my feet.

God hates homosexuals so much they all die of AIDS.

That was a sentence spoken to me in casual conversation with one of the other men of the church when I was no older than seven or eight. I had no idea about my own sexuality at that time, but it stuck with me through the

years. I thought myself to be sick, dying of a disease, the first time I realized why I wanted to hang out with the boys in my group rather than sneak around to see the girls like all the other boys wanted to do.

I know the ignorance of it now, and even hate that it came to mind, but it does tell me I need to have myself checked. We do on a yearly basis. The guys who have more active lifestyles do it more often than that.

Drake and I haven't used any protection.

Cumslut.

I cringe, the word now making me second-guess everything I've done. Drake has had a much more active sex life than I have. We didn't have any sort of conversation or disclosures, and I'd be a fool to think that it was because he knows he's safe. Apparently, passion makes people stupid. I'm just as guilty as he is for not having any sort of conversation about it.

I'm able to get the puncture in my finger pretty clean, but I don't have any real medical supplies in my room. Thankfully the washcloths in here are dark green. I wrap one around my finger and head back out.

The laughter of babies meets my ears several feet before I can enter the code into the door of the nursery. There hasn't always been a code, but someone mentioned most childcare facilities don't allow direct access to the kids. In the next breath, it was decided that these children are a precious commodity of the club and must be protected as much as possible.

Smiling faces greet me when I stand on the other side of the Dutch door, the bottom half closed, preventing me from going any further.

"Hi, hon," Emmalyn says with a wide grin, a toddler on each of her hips.

"Can I borrow Alyssa for a minute?" I ask, holding up my hand to show her that I have a medical problem.

Em frowns in my direction, shaking her head. I'm not the first to get hurt working on the clubhouse extension and I doubt I'll be the last.

"Crush injury?" Em asks, not getting alarmed at all.

"Puncture wound."

Alyssa is a different story when she steps out of the area where they change the babies' diapers.

She rushes to place Gigi's young daughter into a crib before coming in my direction.

"What happened?" she hisses, her voice low as to not alarm any of the kids.

"Nail," I tell her, giving my friend a weak smile to let her know I'm fine. "I didn't have any bandages in my room."

Alyssa opens the bottom half of the Dutch door and ushers me through.

"Boo boo?" Jameson, Hound's son, asks as I walk past him while he's pushing a toy motorcycle along the track pattern on the rug he's sitting on.

"Just a little one, buddy," I tell him as I follow Ali across the room.

"You better not have done this to get out of the camping trip tomorrow," she says as she points to a chair before reaching into a cabinet to get supplies out.

"I already cleaned it," I tell her when I see the bottle of wound cleanser.

"I don't trust your cleaning," Alyssa says, holding up the bottle. "It's a sting-free formula. Don't be a baby."

I hiss when she gets to work. The product may be sting-free but the pressure she's putting on my finger isn't.

She chuckles as if she might be enjoying the pain I'm in.

I want to tell her everything. I want to mention Drake and confess everything that has been going on. I want to ask for advice. She doesn't have much experience in the way of relationships, but she's married to Harley now and that has to amount to something. Besides, women are great at giving advice, and I know I need some.

I want to hate Drake for setting me up.

I want to hate myself for still trying to convince myself that he did, when deep down, I want to believe he didn't.

I don't know if he's the man I've seen or if he's only pretending to be that man.

He's not perfect by any means, but I can't really judge his behavior before we started whatever you want to call what we were involved in. I can't even call it a relationship, but he was kind to me, understanding for the most part, except when his anger got the better of him that night I took too long to follow him up to his apartment.

I watch the side of her face as she works, knowing I can trust her with everything, but wonder what the point would be. Whatever I had with Drake is over. I think I dodged a bullet, and it's only my hormones, the things he was capable of doing to my body, that I miss.

I'm able to keep silent as she dries my wound. My lips are sealed when she puts some kind of antiseptic cream on it. I'm still silent as she wraps a bandage around it.

It's when she's no longer facing me, putting away the supplies that I start to cave.

"I wanted to talk to you about—"

"Mrs. Ali! Pee pee!"

"Give me a few minutes and we can talk."

"We can talk later," I tell her as I stand, already making plans to avoid her by the time I leave the nursery.

Chapter 30

Drake

“Just one more?” The pleading in her voice threatens to break my heart.

I didn’t understand addiction very well until recently. I now know what it’s like to yearn for something I know isn’t exactly healthy for me.

“Nope.” I shake my head for good measure. “Let me get you a cab.”

“I need a whiskey, not a cab,” Maude snaps, her face nearly as bright as the lipstick on her teeth.

“Don’t get mean, Maude,” I say, my voice as soothing as I can manage, dealing with the woman.

She’s grown more and more belligerent in the last several weeks, and instead of smiling, wondering what kind of antics she’s going to get up to when I see her enter the bar, I’ve started cringing at the sight of her. It’s clear that she has some things going on in her life, but I can’t take on the responsibility of trying to fix the people in this town. I have my own freaking problems to deal with.

She’s to the point of cussing me out when I turn my back to call the cab company.

“You aren’t talking about my good friend like that are you?”

I look over my shoulder to see Ugly looking down at Maude, a half-grin, half-chastisement on his lips.

“Why don’t you buy me a drink, handsome?”

“It looks like you have one,” Ugly says, pointing to the complimentary coffee I brought her only moments ago.

“Give you five dollars if you grab me a shot to add to it,” she bargains.

“How about a double the next time I see you?”

She smiles up at him like he’s the sun and stars. He keeps talking to her until the taxi shows up, being a kind man and helping her into it.

I thank him, sliding a mug of beer in his direction when he returns.

“She’s getting worse.”

“No thanks,” he says, pointing to the beer. “Just a Coke for me, please.”

I don’t question his change in routine. It’s not my job to grill everyone who arrives and doesn’t want to drink alcohol despite it being a damn bar.

“Two pitchers,” Bishop, who I was introduced to at the party I bartended at for Kincaid not long ago, says as he approaches the bar. He faces his teammate. “Get your girlfriend all sorted?”

Ugly scoffs, but I can sense the irritation flowing off him where this man is concerned. It’s unusual to see two of the guys not really getting along.

I fix the pitchers, taking Bishop’s money when he offers it to me. Ugly keeps his eyes averted until the other man leaves the bar, carrying the beer back to the other two newer members of Cerberus, who have taken up their normal spot in the far back corner.

I’m not surprised that Boomer isn’t with them. I have no doubt it will be a very long time before I see him again. I haven’t texted or tried to call, but neither has he. I’m certain that whatever it was that was starting between us has already died an excruciating death. I know I feel grief from it ending, but I doubt Boomer does. It was too easy for him to walk away for it to really bother him, more than a week later.

“What’s that all about?” I ask, wanting to distract myself with someone else’s drama, than focusing on mine.

“I drank that night they came to town. He thinks I’m an immature idiot.”

“You don’t normally get drunk,” I say, honestly not able to recall a time that he stumbled out of the bar or needed help to get home.

“It was a weird night. He’ll get over it.”

“Let me know when you need another refill,” I tell him, topping of his soda before moving to the other end of the bar to close out a tab for another regular who waved me down.

“Her husband died last month,” Bill tells me.

“I’m sorry?” I ask, feeling like I missed half the conversation.

“Maude. Her husband died last month,” Bill explains.

“That’s really sad,” I say with genuine concern. “She’s never mentioned a husband.”

“He was an electrical engineer down at the plant. Had a stroke about ten years ago on his way to work. The poor fucker ended up in a coma. Maude tried to take care of him at home, but it was just too much for her. He’s been at the nursing home for a while until he died last month.”

“She visited him every day until his passing,” a woman says, drawing my attention to her.

I look over, giving Sunshine a smile.

“She’s a really nice lady,” she says.

Sunshine works at the nursing home here in town, and although she doesn’t come in to drink, she likes the food for some reason.

“Heading home?” I ask her, after bidding Bill a goodnight and handing back his change. “Let me check the back for your order.”

Before I can make it to the kitchen, the door swings open, nearly hitting me in the face.

Joey stops short, his eyes wide. It takes him a long moment to look at me.

“Is that the order for Sunshine?” I ask him, indicating the bag in his hand.

Another few seconds pass before he nods, pulling his eyes from something behind me. I figure he’s looking at Sunshine. I want to tell him to get back in the kitchen, that the woman at the bar deserves better than him, but it sounds shitty and judgmental even in my head.

“Thanks,” I tell him when he holds it out to me. “Are there more orders?”

“Yes,” he says. “Sorry. Back to it, boss.”

I hate the way he says boss. It sounds more like an insult than a term of respect, but I'm not going to waste my time splitting hairs.

Sunshine has her money ready, telling me to keep the change when I pass her the food she called in.

"Be safe getting home," I tell her, watching Ugly watch her walk out of the bar.

I ring her order up in the cash register and deposit the money before turning back to Ugly.

"Leave that woman alone," I tell him, hoping the man understands the warning in my voice.

"Sunshine?" His grin grows wild, telling me they know each other already.

"Really?" I ask, my head shaking.

"Nah, man. She's too damn good for me. I don't go after the ones that get their hearts broken easily. Besides, she takes care of Big Daddy, Spade's old lady's grandfather. My friend would kick my ass if I hurt Sunshine's feelings much less broke her heart. Who was that by the way?" Ugly asks, nodding his head in the direction of the kitchen. "Looked at me like he saw a fucking ghost or something."

"Just a new cook," I tell him.

Joey's story isn't mine to tell, and I don't know what kind of reaction I'd get from Ugly if I let him know that Joey just got out of prison. It's not like I could answer his questions anyway. I didn't dig into the man's life when Jake hired him, and I don't plan on doing it now.

"How are things at the clubhouse?" I ask, barely holding back the cringe when the question slips out of my mouth.

Ugly looks me up and down as if he's trying to decide how to answer the question.

"Boomer hasn't talked to you?"

I narrow my eyes at the challenge in his.

“I have no reason to speak to Boomer unless he comes to the bar for a drink,” I hedge. “I haven’t seen him.”

Ugly cocks an eyebrow as if he thinks I’m lying, and it rubs me the wrong way.

“I don’t think he’d appreciate you making speculations behind his back either.”

A slow smile spreads across his face as if he approves of something I’m not understanding.

“How about that refill?” Ugly asks, pointing to his empty glass.

I go back to work, making sure to keep my distance as best I can until the bar slows down so much, it grows increasingly obvious that I’m ignoring Ugly.

He chuckles when I stand directly in front of him with a hand on my hip.

“Is there a reason you’ve been sitting here, watching me like a hawk all night?”

I let myself for just a flash of a second think that Boomer sent him here to keep an eye on me, but that thought faded nearly as quickly as it came. Boomer is more likely to show up himself than to tell his secrets and ask one of his teammates to watch me all damn night.

“I was wondering how you feel about camping?”

Chapter 31

Boomer

I growl in frustration, shoving at the pack for the third time, but my anger doesn't make it stay in the back of the SUV any more than shoving at it the first two times.

I was incredibly excited when a Cerberus camping trip was mentioned—the great outdoors, hiking, evenings by the campfire with people I'd consider family. But now, I don't want to be around people. I want a chance to lick my still-bleeding wounds in private rather than having to pretend I'm perfectly fine when I still ache and hurt from the pain Drake caused me. Betrayal cuts in a way that leaves lasting scars, but despite them being invisible to all those around me, I'm still suffering immensely from them.

“Why are you bringing all of this stuff?” I complain, picking the pack up and situating it on top of the other items in the back of the SUV.

“Kincaid asked me to bring it. Their vehicle is full,” Ugly says with a grin on his face like my irritation is funny. “Keep shoving at it. I imagine he'll be appreciative if you break something of his.”

Instead of lifting the nylon bag left at my feet, I carry it around to the rear passenger door.

“You can't use all of the room back there either.”

“No one is sitting back here,” I remind him.

“About that.”

My hackles go up. I don't even have to turn toward the crunch of gravel under tires to know what's happening.

“I was wondering if you were going to show up,” Ugly says.

“Wouldn't miss it.”

The sound is both a relief and somehow the bane of my existence.

I've missed the man. I can't even deny it. The thought of him is like a child's bruise, and I can't help but press on those memories to see if they still

hurt or if I'm further along in my healing process. It does, and possibly will always ache. Him being here doesn't help me at all. Right now, I hate Ugly for what he's done. How can the man know what he knows, yet instead of mentioning it or having a normal conversation, he goes and does something like this? Inviting Drake could be catastrophic. Having him so close while every other member of Cerberus and their families are around is the very last thing I need.

I step away from the SUV, the nylon tent bag in hand, debating how much people would talk if I just headed right back into the clubhouse. But as much as part of me wants to run and hide, there's an even greater part that senses the thrill of a weekend in the woods with Drake.

If I go, I'm stuck. We're heading several hours away. It's not like I can just jump on my bike to clear my head like I've been doing this last week. Out on the open road, I could avoid conversation, could avoid the scrutiny of people questioning why I've been in such a foul mood lately.

I sense rather than see someone follow me to the front of the SUV. The bulk of the shadow says it's Ugly rather than Drake, but I still grind my teeth in irritation. I wonder if I'll be able to avoid a confrontation, but know deep in my bones it's going to happen eventually. I turn on the man I consider a friend, thinking it would be best if that conflict happens now rather than on the road in mixed company or in the woods in front of every person.

"You had no right," I say, my voice low but still menacing.

"Really? You think this has nothing to do with me?"

I'm shaking because I'm so angry at this man.

I don't know why I look over his shoulder to see Drake's position, trying to figure out if he's able to hear us.

"This little lover's quarrel you two are in is causing problems in my own life," he snaps, stepping closer to challenge me rather than backing down like I guessed he would.

I cross my arms over my chest because I'm extremely close to letting this turn violent. I've wanted to hit something or someone for days. As much as I think Ugly may deserve it right now, it's not exactly going to be well received by the others, considering there are several children out here with

their parents as they load the vehicles for the trip.

“Bishop complained the other day that his beer tasted funny.”

My eyebrows scrunch in confusion.

“Drake isn’t making drinks with love anymore, and that’s your fault.”

I don’t know whether to laugh or knock his lights out. This has to be a joke, right?

Making drinks with love?

What a freaking joke.

“Are you serious right now?” I ask through clenched teeth.

“Look, you’ve been a sullen bastard all week. Drake’s mood is affecting others as well. You two need to get over this little snit you’re having,” he growls, drawing the attention of others.

I dart my eyes around, my skin growing hot at others looking in our direction. “This isn’t the time or place.”

“I can easily ride with someone else so the two of you can work your shit out.”

I instantly shake my head, the thought of what could happen in the SUV during the multi-hour drive to the camping area, trying hard to take root.

My spine stiffens when Drake walks up. I’m a grown man. I’ve seen and done things the majority of the world will never experience, but his approach makes me want to kick a rock in his direction and run off like a pouty brat.

I stand my ground, noticing just how hard it is to actually do.

Drake looks from me, a smile on his lips, to Ugly, the grin immediately slipping away.

“I knew better than to fucking trust you,” Drake snaps in Ugly’s direction. “You said he wanted me to come.”

I scoff because I just can’t help myself.

It's Ugly's turn to dart his eyes between the two of us before they settle on Drake.

"The beer tastes funny, asshole," he growls before walking away.

"Look," Drake says turning in my direction. "I'll grab my shit and go back home. He said—"

"It's fine," I grumble before walking away from him.

If I stand there, having a conversation with him like any civilized person should be able to manage, I'll end up focused on his mouth. No good will come of it because just the sight of his lips will make me forget what he's done. My mind has already tried to convince me that I was mistaken, that I jumped to the wrong conclusion too fast. I've always trusted my gut instinct, and I can't start backpedaling now.

Unlike the trip to Denver the three of us took, I ride in the front passenger seat, my pettiness continuing when I refuse to move my tent from the back seat. Drake doesn't complain and finds a way to make it work. I hate his adaptability right now.

The drive is silent, and I can tell that it annoys Ugly, but what in the world did he expect? I don't want to have any level of conversation with Drake, and I sure as hell wouldn't talk about what he expects in front of someone else. I'm still reeling at the casual way he brought up what he deduced at the bar over a week ago. I've decided that Ugly was an unaware participant in the setup, placing all the blame on Drake. It's one thing to be betrayed by a lover. It's a whole other ballgame to be betrayed by a man that's supposed to have your back in life-or-death situations.

Ugly has tried more than once to engage the two of us in casual conversation, but after the first thirty minutes of neither one of us responding, he has also fallen silent, his fingers gripping and re-gripping the steering wheel. I guess it's good if he's annoyed. It's only fair since he created this mess.

"You both need to get your shit together," Ugly says, his voice calm as if he didn't just drop a bomb in the middle of the SUV.

The air grows even heavier, and it takes all my strength to keep from turning my head to look at Drake in the back seat.

“I can tell you guys would make a great couple.”

I recall the smile I saw on Ugly’s face that morning at the bar. He wasn’t shocked to see me there, but he wasn’t upset either. I knew my sexuality was questioned more than once when I didn’t jump at the chance to take women home from *Jake’s*. I know people can’t wrap their heads around a celibate man, and they automatically think they’re hiding how they are if they aren’t promiscuous. As right as their guesses would be about me in particular, that isn’t always the case.

I don’t say a word, and luckily Drake doesn’t either.

However, that doesn’t keep Ugly’s mouth shut.

“No one will care,” my teammate says. “If that’s what’s bothering you. No one will have a problem with it.”

My jaw aches from clenching my back teeth together.

“Maybe I have a problem with it,” I say, my irritation with the entire situation bubbling over.

A long-suffering sigh comes from the back seat, like Drake is still annoyed and has heard the words a thousand times already.

For some reason, it cuts me in a different way, his annoyance.

“And for the sake of conversation no one but you wants to have, how in the world would you know what other people think?”

Ugly swallows, and I can predict his answer before he even opens his mouth.

He shrugs as if it’s no big deal to upturn someone’s life. “I asked around.”

Rage bubbles inside of me, the tips of my ears heating with his words.

I knew people would be gossiping about me. It’s the very last thing I wanted, but I knew it would be completely unavoidable.

Facing it now, I don’t know what’s worse—people talking about me behind my back or if they would’ve said something to my face.

I start to formulate a plan to just disappear, either on one of the hiking

trails or taking off in one of the SUVs once we get settled at the camping site.

Unless you really commune with nature, camping can turn pretty boring. It's a great bonding exercise because people tend to talk more, confess more. As we draw closer, this trip starts to feel exactly like that morning at the bar. I can't help but think it's just another setup, and I have a feeling that more than just Drake and Ugly are involved this time.

Chapter 32

Drake

I don't think I've suffered through anything more awkward than the drive to the Rio Grande National Forest.

I honestly thought Alex challenging Ugly would shut the man up, but of course it didn't. How would either of us get so lucky?

Ugly continued harping on how there were other gay and bi men in Cerberus, and not a single person had an issue with it. That's just par for the course I guess. A man who has never questioned or had his sexuality questioned would think it was easy to come to terms with one's true self.

Just be, he said over and over, as if the repetition would make Alex just perk up and agree.

I wanted to tell Ugly to shut up. It became clear very early on that Ugly's insistence to just beat and badger the subject caused increasing frustration with the man sitting in the passenger seat. My voice seemed to make matters worse, so I sat back, eyes closed, because it was the only way to keep from staring at him, internally begging him to heed what Ugly was saying.

Although it was a long shot that didn't pan out by the time we pulled up to the parking area in front of a row of small cottages, I was a little disappointed not to have made eye contact with him even once during the ride.

I knew deep down, Ugly had lied when he told me that Alex wanted me to tag along.

The man I'm obsessed with would never go to someone else about us, but I wanted to believe it so badly that I didn't question it much.

It was evident the second I pulled up that not only did he not ask me to come, by way of his friend, he wasn't impressed with me being there at all. I saw the need to run in his eyes, but the scrutiny of those around him made him stay.

Alex doesn't waste a second, climbing out of the SUV the moment we

pull up.

His eyes are downcast, locked on his gear as he opens the back passenger door, wordlessly pulling his tent bag from the seat.

“Stubborn ass,” Ugly mutters before climbing out of the vehicle.

I sit in the seat, hands clenching in exasperation, but I can only hold so much of it inside. Unlucky for Ugly, Alex had me to my limits before today.

Seeing others drive up and park makes me calm my frustration some as I climb out of the SUV and head toward the back.

“Do you have any idea what you’ve done?” I growl, my voice low as to not draw any attention to us.

“I was trying to help,” he mutters.

“It’s very possible you made things ten times worse. He isn’t the type of man to be confronted.”

Ugly busies himself, pulling gear from the back. “He needs to understand that no one cares.”

“You need to understand that *he* cares, and that’s all that matters. His struggle is internal. You and the other guys being okay with who he is doesn’t mean much when he isn’t okay with it yet.”

Ugly frowns as he turns to look in my direction.

“Just leave it alone,” I say, a real warning in my voice before he can argue again. “Playing matchmaker isn’t going to fucking work. You’re making things worse.”

I grab my duffel and borrowed tent and walk away. I didn’t have much hope that Alex and I would be able to work things out. Honestly, there’s a part of me that says to keep my distance. The man is clearly not in the same place I am, and going backward was something I promised myself I’d never do.

I probably should’ve stayed and helped Ugly unload everything, but my nerves are shot from the hours spent in the vehicle with Alex. I wanted to reach out for him. Hell, I wanted to have Ugly pull over and get into a different vehicle so Alex and I could talk, knowing he’d never say a word in

front of an audience. Hell, getting him to speak when he's annoyed while we're alone is like pulling teeth.

Other people are milling around, some heading into the small cabins, others picking out their spot to set up their tents.

Alex, of course, has picked a spot as far away as humanly possible to still be considered part of the group. No one questions him, and no one starts to set up near him to help him be included. I can't help but wonder how grumpy he's been lately for them to keep their distance.

Harley and Alyssa head into one of the cabins, their little girl, Aria, toddling behind them with the cutest llama head backpack strapped to her back. The thing is nearly almost as big as she is, and I chuckle when Harley has to palm the back of her head to keep her from falling backward when she climbs the two steps due to the weight of the thing.

I happen to glance over at Alex to find him watching and smiling too. I pull my gaze away.

Happen to look over at him?

Who am I kidding? I can't seem to control my need to search for him. It's hard enough at the damn bar to keep from watching the door, despite my daily vow that I won't. Knowing he's here, that he could be within inches of me at any given time, will make it a hundred times harder not to look around for him.

I can manage this weekend. I've faced many challenges in life, and the first thing I have to do is get set up for tonight.

The tent I borrowed from Jake seems easy enough to assemble, so I don't bother looking at the setup instructions that are in an infographic on the side of the bag. After several minutes of attempting to put up the tent, I have to.

"Something isn't right," I mutter, counting the pieces displayed in the picture.

I could literally wring Jake's neck when I realize that one of the main supports is missing. It is one of the pieces that helps the tent keep its shape at the bottom. I try my damndest to get the thing to work, but because of the

missing piece of the main structure, it just falls over. I'd have better luck using the thing as a fucking sleeping bag than having any expectation of it working like it should.

“Need some help?”

I pray the man doesn't hear the deep inhalation I can't resist taking, nor the slow release of air through my nostrils.

“It's incomplete,” I mutter, taking a step back from the pile of nylon at my feet.

“Let's see,” he says, crouching down and fiddling with the thing for a few minutes before coming to the same conclusion. “Yep. It's missing two parts. Could they possibly be in the rest of your gear?”

“It's a borrowed tent. There's no chance it's in my duffel bag. Thanks for helping though.”

Bishop nods before walking away.

I gather the shitty excuse for a tent, returning it to its bag before heading in Ugly's direction.

“I can't stay,” I tell him. “My tent isn't complete.”

“You have to stay.”

“I literally can't,” I tell him, pointing down at the tent. “I have nowhere to sleep.”

“There's no way out of the forest.”

“I can easily take the SUV and bring it back in two days when it's time for you to leave.”

Ugly shakes his head. “You'll have to room with someone else.”

“Ok,” I tell him, dropping my stuff right next to his. If the man isn't willing to let me leave, then we're about to become best friends.

He chuckles, reading my intent as clear as day.

“Can't. I brought a one-man tent.”

I look around the campground, specifically toward Stormy and Legacy

because Bishop didn't offer when he tried to help.

"They have one-man tents also," Ugly says. "He has a two-man tent."

I follow his gaze, taking a step back as if the man just asked me to dive naked into a frozen lake.

"Not a chance," I mutter. "I'll manage."

I walk away from him, my body liking the idea of being trapped in a tent with Alex. I can't let my head go there. Any hope I ever had of ending up with the man flew out the window the second he came down the stairs from my apartment after an incredible night and saw Ugly standing at the bar.

Chapter 33

Boomer

I grin at Kincaid as he tells the punchline of his joke, praying no one can tell just how fake it is. I drop my eyes to my bandaged finger when I make eye contact with Alyssa and she frowns at me.

She's my closest friend. We bonded very quickly after she came to Cerberus, needing to get away from her family in order to heal from her abduction from her college campus. I was sent to watch over her when she was staying at Harley's house to help take care of his infant daughter. I wanted to tell the woman everything, to make my confessions, knowing she'd hold my secrets as I would've done for her, but I don't want to be the type of person who compares struggles. I've always found it more hurtful than helpful when someone speaks of their trials and tribulations and someone tries to ease their grief by telling a story of their own adversities. So I kept my mouth shut, only explaining a little of where I came from and how I was raised. I lied to her, something I never corrected, but have always felt a little guilty about. I spoke of being Mormon and the family I was raised in being advocates of plural marriages, but I never went into detail about any of it.

Tinfoil crinkles around me, those that took longer to eat just now finishing, where I consumed the amazing meal Misty and Em put together before we left quicker than I probably should have. I never knew food cooked over a campfire could taste so good. It beats the hell of the MREs I grew sadly used to from my days in the Marine Corps.

The group starts to dwindle as families peel off, needing to get their little ones to bed. The group grows a little more boisterous, the jokes a little more colorful, the alcohol consumption a little heavier.

I find myself smiling, having to catch myself because the grin was more in response to the sound of Drake laughing at a joke Shadow told rather than the actual joke itself.

Instead, I focus on the difference in it, wondering as I listen, if this is his real laugh or if the one he uses at the bar is genuine because there's a striking difference between the two.

I watch as Legacy lifts a beer to his lips. I've never seen him drink before, but he must be growing more comfortable around everyone to let loose a little. For some reason, Drake isn't drinking, but then again, I've never seen him drink either. All the other times I've been around him have been when he was working or just getting off from work.

I dart my eyes back to the fire, knowing I can't get caught watching the man drink a bottle of water.

"To this day, he still can't eat shrimp!" Shadow all but yells, drawing another round of chuckles from everyone as he good-naturedly smacks Kincaid in the chest with the back of his hand.

Kincaid nods his affirmation, a slow shudder going up his spine with the memory.

"We had a platoon sergeant," Bishop begins, but I lose interest in his story as I try not to get caught looking over at Drake.

I can't seem to help myself, although I'd rather be doing a million other things than letting that man control any part of me.

I groan internally. Control parts of me? I catch myself biting my lip, and once again have to look away, but my eyes then land on Ugly who I find watching me with a smirk on his face. I wonder if I could make it to the other side of the campfire to punch him before someone stops me.

I'm calculating the chances when I think I hear my name.

"What?" I ask, looking over at Kincaid.

"I asked Drake if he got the problem with his tent solved."

"I haven't," Drake answers, his water bottle making a crinkle sound as he answers.

So someone said his name not mine?

"I suggested he could stay with you," Ugly says, ever so freaking helpful, the noisy bastard. "Since you're the only one with a two-person tent."

That isn't exactly true, but I am the only one with a two-person tent and only one occupant. Cannon and Rivet's tent has a separate bedroom, but I

don't see them standing up to volunteer their space.

"I'm just going to get the real camping experience," Drake says.

I breathe a sigh of relief.

"That's ridiculous," Kincaid says.

"It's no big deal," Drake assures him.

It really isn't a big deal. Every Cerberus member around this fire has slept with their face in the dirt more times than we could count on our fingers and toes. Drake spending two nights in a sleeping bag, surrounded by people willing to defend him from anything that could harm him, is better than what we've suffered through.

"Nonsense," Kincaid continues. "I'm sure Boomer doesn't have an issue with you bunking with him."

How could I deny Kincaid? It isn't exactly an order, but refusing will draw more attention than just letting it happen.

There's a part of me that's thrilled with the idea of being closed inside a tent all weekend with the man, but I shove it down as quickly as it tries to rise inside of me.

I almost open my mouth to suggest him sleeping inside one of the SUVs, but the group has already moved on to a different topic.

"When we were on leave once in San Diego," Legacy starts.

I lose focus once again, hating that Drake is such a distraction that he's preventing me from bonding with my new teammates. I can tell the conversation has been adjusted to include him. More so, the topics of conversation are different than they would be if it were only Cerberus members around the fire. Conversations in the garage have a heavy feel to them, but we've made adjustments before when Cannon was around.

We know not to talk about work or any of the grittier things we faced in the military. It's not that we think those experiences are too gruesome, Cannon is an adult after all, but those things just aren't talked about with civilians.

That doesn't mean we don't share some stories which is evident by

Legacy's recollection of his first encounter with a certain red-light district. Several of the guys give a knowing chuckle, and I try to smile. I might've gone to strip clubs with guys from my platoon, but I never sought companionship in places like Legacy is talking about.

"So the tent issue is settled?" Kincaid asks an hour later as he stands to head to bed.

"I'm fine by the fire," Drake says, and I want to growl at the man.

Doesn't he know that arguing will only bring suspicion?

"It's fine," I say in his direction, somehow managing not to look directly at him. "There's no sense in being uncomfortable if you don't have to. There's plenty of room in my tent."

Kincaid nods before walking across the campground to his tent. My eyes dart in Ugly's direction, and I still think there's a chance, now that the crowd is thinner, to pop him in the nose before being stopped.

I sweep my eyes over the sea of tents, noticing everyone has spread out, making it less obvious the distance that I placed my tent. Further investigation reveals that the people who have partners with them have strategically kept their tents quite a distance from the others. Legacy, Ugly, and Bishop have corralled closer together. From the looks of it, others could speculate that I might have predicted that Drake would end up sleeping in my tent, that we could have done this on purpose. I narrow my eyes in his direction, wondering if part of that is true. He couldn't predict where I'd set my tent, but the other half could be part of his plan.

I hate that the man is making me read deeper into every decision he makes, but after what happened in the bar, I don't know that I could ever trust him fully.

After another hour and a half, I consider the possibility of these guys staying up drinking until the sun comes up, despite being completely exhausted. If they keep chatting and laughing, then I won't have to crawl into a tent with Drake. I'm still so very angry at the man, but I know what the scent of him in the enclosed tent will do to my body. It's already been proven that I can't control myself where he's concerned.

My heart is racing at just the thought of touching him again, and I sort

of hate myself for it. It's not the guilt or idea of sin that makes me want to run from camp until my lungs make me topple over into the trees. I don't think I've considered my eternal damnation once in the last week. My anger for him went even deeper than that. I stopped myself from considering how perfect that man and I could be together, but somewhere in my subconsciousness, it still festered. I feel the loss of something I didn't even have yet, the loss of possibility, something I never wanted to consider with him.

He ruined all of it.

Stubbornly, I continue to sit by the fire, my anger keeping me awake. It's not like I'd ever be able to fall asleep inside the damn tent with him mere feet away.

There's no way I could last an hour much less the rest of the night and tomorrow night for that matter.

Legacy looks over at me in confusion when I groan my annoyance out of nowhere. I ignore his eyes on me, praying everyone else still up and chatting is focused on Ugly as he tells another story about his college days before quitting and joining the Marine Corps.

"What about you?" Ugly asks, and I lift my head, thinking I'll need to tell some kind of story since I've been silent all night, but my teammate's attention is on Drake.

Drake laughs, a humorless sound. "I never went to college."

It's one more thing we have in common. The trouble I went through to get into the Marine Corps after turning up at the recruiting office without a birth certificate or social security card was hard enough. I vowed then I'd never attempt anything that required any type of application process. Thankfully, Cerberus knew everything they needed to know before they even reached out and made contact with me.

"But you have to have stories," Legacy prods. "You're a bartender. I'm sure you've heard all sorts of things."

I look up at Drake, finding his eyes locked on me rather than Legacy.

"I'd never break a confidence. They tell me things they'd never tell

anyone else.” He pulls his eyes from mine back to Legacy. “I’d never share someone’s secret.”

Chapter 34

Drake

It's clear Alex is stalling. He doesn't want to end up in that fucking tent alone with me.

It stings in a way I didn't expect, much like the way he can't seem to look at me without his top lip twitching in irritation.

Maybe I'm stalling too because even after working all night last night and getting up super early to pack for this trip, I still haven't headed in that direction. I could probably lean up against a tree and pass out right now, but then there's no telling what Kincaid would have to say about it in the morning.

Alex looked more pissed that I said I'd sleep by the fire a second time.

I continue to watch him as one of the guys tells another funny story. He's practically nodding off, but still refusing to go to the tent.

There's no sense in both of us being completely miserable.

I stand, stretching my arms over my head, wanting to grin but knowing better when I draw every eye around the fire. Alex's go to the thin line of skin exposed below my t-shirt.

"Gonna hit the sack," I say, turning and walking away before anyone can stop me.

I wave over my shoulder when they all issue their goodnights.

I have to go grab my things from near the SUV where I put them after realizing my tent was a lost cause.

My sleeping bag is soft, my eyes heavy, by the time I crawl into Alex's tent.

I feel like I'm hallucinating when I climb inside the tent because the scent of Alex's skin is all over the place. The man isn't the type to wear cologne or have an overly masculine smell to him. He's a lot more basic and rugged than that. Clean soap with a hint of pine coming in from outside fills my nostrils, and despite feeling a little silly for my deep breaths, I breathe in

again from the bottom of my lungs until they're both full of him as I settle down on the ground. The bottom of the tent is made with an air mattress, so the entire floor of the tent is lifted off the ground several inches.

I might have suffered through sleeping by the fire, but I can admit this is so much nicer.

I try for sleep, channeling all the exhaustion I felt while listening to story after story near the fire, but it just won't come.

With my eyes forced closed, I can imagine every sound I hear as being Alex coming to join me, but even the thought of it is ridiculous. He may eventually stop being stubborn and climb into this tent, but he wouldn't be with me.

As time slowly drags by, I consider all the possibilities.

Alex could come inside and go to sleep.

He could ask me for details and give me the chance to apologize for something I didn't do, because, let's face it, I would.

He could be growing irrationally angry with every second he feels forced to sit out there when he's clearly sleepy.

If it turned into that, he could climb inside and grow violent because I've invaded his space.

I shake that thought away immediately, once again blaming my ex for making me think the worst of people.

I could easily tell Alex didn't want me in here, but I can't help but feel like it's a setup by Ugly and possibly Kincaid as well. I'll go ahead and throw Jake in on the pyre as well because what are the damn chances that not a single person here has a two-person tent besides Alex?

If they are involved, does that mean Kincaid knows about Alex? Did Ugly open his mouth to his boss? Does the man not understand that outing someone is so wrong? It violates all codes, especially if it's done by a friend.

Is that why Ugly isn't drinking? Did he get drunk and say something?

I scoot closer to the wall of the tent, giving Alex more than half of the area if he ever decides to come inside. I'm feeling more and more like a

complete asshole for being here. I knew deep down Ugly was fucking lying. I knew that Alex didn't tell him to invite me. I lied and used that as a shield, not wanting Alex to dislike me any more than he already does.

I growl in frustration, hating the way the man is stuck in my head. I'm seconds away from climbing out of the tent. I figure I can make it back to the main road in less than an hour if I leave all my shit behind. It's all replaceable anyway, but then the sound of the tent's zipper being pulled fills my ears, and I freeze.

I nearly choke, holding my breath so long as Alex enters the tent, from what I can tell, crawling on his hands and knees. The thing isn't big enough to stand up inside.

He nudges me, but I know it's not on purpose as he pulls off his boots. My eyes stay squeezed shut, but then his clothes make a noise as he pulls them from his body, and I swear I hear the rasp of his zipper as he pulls it down.

My cock takes notice, the damn thing always quick to get wild ideas despite there being absolutely no chance. With squinty eyes, because I'm a fucking pervert who can't resist the sight of him, I watch as he peels down his jeans, his muscular legs more shadow than anything. The man turns me on so badly I sometimes question my sanity where he's concerned.

"I know you're not asleep," he mutters as he pulls back the edge of his sleeping bag.

"I figured you didn't want to talk," I whisper.

"Looks like you got something right."

My heart shatters just a little more which is honestly surprising, considering the condition it's been in for the last week. I didn't think I had any more hurt left in me, but he seems very capable of finding those buttons and pushing them.

I simmer in my anger and headache, wishing I could settle on the anger rather than the hurt. This isn't the first time someone didn't believe me. My family had long disowned me by the time I got brave enough to leave my ex. By the time I showed up on their doorstep after two years of being gone, they'd written me off completely.

Somehow, this hurts more than that. I know how laughable that is, considering I'm comparing my parents to a man I barely hooked up with a couple of times.

Misery settles inside of me as I grow more and more dejected. It's insane how close we are yet being worlds apart right now.

I consider inching closer, consider laying my hand on his hip or forcing him to turn over and place his head on my chest. I have the wild idea, that if he hears my heartbeat he'd know I'd never do anything to hurt him taking over my mind.

I have to wonder what pushing him into action would look like. In my head, he'd cave. He'd tell me he was sorry for walking away from me, and I'd spend the night kissing away his tears and swallowing his cries of pleasure.

I don't think it would go that way, however.

My throat threatens to close at the thought of him letting the truths about himself come to light in anger if I pushed him too far and he got loud or belligerent.

He'd never forgive me then, but that thought means that I still somehow believe there's room inside of him to forgive me now.

I shake that thought away, my eyes locked on his sleeping bag covered back.

I think I want the anger over anything else. Hatred would be better than indifference or actually being friends like I suggested that night in the hotel room.

I can hardly stomach the thought of it much less actually being forced into it.

"I know how it looks," I finally say, only to be met with continued silence. "I didn't set you up with Ugly."

More silence, and it brings a sting to my throat.

It wouldn't be the first time someone didn't believe me, but somehow this hurts more than it ever has before.

“I was so fucking excited that you came to me, that you wanted to spend time with me, that I forgot everyone else in the world existed.”

I chew the inside of my cheek when my voice trails off, the emotion taking over.

I stare at the shadow of a tree branch as it dances on the side of the tent in an effort to get myself under control.

“You hurt me,” I say, probably too low for him to hear even if he is awake. “I swore I’d never let anyone hurt me again.”

I feel like a complete baby as the tears begin to fall.

He must be asleep because the man I know would never let someone suffer through so much pain without offering a shoulder to cry on.

Chapter 35

Boomer

I wanted to be pissed. I wanted to hate him.

Man, I wanted a lot of things I've never let myself focus on for long because it would only leave me disappointed. Wanting something you can never have is a wasted effort.

The subject of Drake is no different.

The sound of him trying to muffle his tears nearly broke me.

None of this was my intention. I didn't plan on him.

I had my mind set on how my life would go. It never involved someone else.

I mean, there were times I could picture a different outcome, one that included a family, but those were dreams, fantasies, something that could never come to fruition.

Drake was supposed to be safe, fun. Something I could kick myself later about, but I imagined that chastisement would come from the things I did, the sins I committed, not from hurting him. That was never my intention only because it wasn't supposed to get that serious.

I try to convince myself it doesn't matter, that his pain doesn't affect me, that I'm not responsible for how he feels, but I just don't have it in me.

Eventually he quiets down, his breathing growing rhythmic.

By the time I realize he's asleep, the sun is trying to infiltrate the heavy growth of trees surrounding the camping area. If I know anything about sleeping outside is that people don't stay in tents much long after.

It's too late to do anything, too late for conversation, I realize as I turn over to face him for the first time.

His pretty olive-colored eyes are hidden behind pink eyelids, and the sight of salt dried at the corners make me feel like the biggest jerk in the world.

I guess it would be easy to pass Drake off as a cutup. He flirts incessantly with anyone that crosses his path. He's always smiling, always has this air about him that makes one think nothing bothers him, but it's evident that isn't the case.

He's human after all.

I can't stay in the tent with him any longer without wanting to curl up against him and apologize.

I know it's guilt I shouldn't feel making me want to have that reaction, so I do the only thing I can. I quietly pull on a clean change of clothes, gathering my boots and socks to put on outside of the tent.

I'm as silent as I can possibly manage, unzipping the tent and zipping it back up after exiting.

I'd say I was in there less than a handful of hours, and my eyes feel like sandpaper. I make my way to the outdoor kitchen Em and Misty so effortlessly set up yesterday, grateful for actual electricity because camping without it is honestly no fun at all.

I set to making coffee, singing those two women's praises as I flip the switch on the coffee pot. It's difficult to make coffee right over an open fire, and the damn thing has already burned out. Exhaustion swims inside of me as I wait for the brew to be complete, keeping my eyes on my occupied tent the entire time.

I fight the urge to go back inside, knowing that no matter what my body is trying to tell me, I'd never be able to go to sleep beside him. I'd either lie there awake like I've done since going to bed or I'll lie there fighting the urge to wrap my arms around him.

I shove down the thought of him hurting, trying to convince myself that his emotions aren't mine to worry about, but I can't seem to manage it with my first cup of coffee. My mood starts to shift when others come out of their tents and cabins.

This really is a beautiful campground, but it isn't until Alyssa steps outside, her nose turned up into the air as she takes a deep breath that I realize I'm missing the magnificence of it with my attitude problem.

I can either dwell on something I have no control over or I can move past it.

I choose to move past it when Alyssa smiles at me as she takes her first step off the porch.

“You’re up early,” she says as she pulls the lid off a tote on one of the picnic tables.

“Hard to sleep in a tent.”

She grins at me as she pulls several powder-filled jugs out of the tote. “I figured a rough-and-rugged Marine like yourself would—”

Her words fall away as her throat works numerous times on a swallow, her hand going to her stomach.

“Is it bad?” I ask when she manages to open her eyes again.

“Not too bad,” she says with a little grin. “Worth it.”

“Of course it’s worth it,” I agree. “But wouldn’t it be nice to be able to pass some of that off on to your husband?”

She rolls her lips between her teeth for a long moment before responding. “He’s promised to change all the diapers for the first year. It seems like a fair trade.”

“He’d change all those diapers even if he was the one with morning sickness.”

She beams at me. “How did I get so lucky?”

“Some people are just born with it,” I tell her.

Alyssa looks over my shoulder, her smile growing wider. “Now I see why you didn’t get much sleep.”

I follow her eyes, turning to look back at her immediately. There’s no way I can watch Drake emerge all sleepy-eyed from my tent.

“It’s not like that,” I assure her. “When are you going to make your announcement?”

She frowns at the change of subject, but doesn’t prod. “The second

trimester. We still have a couple of weeks.”

“It’ll go by in a flash,” I tell her with a quick smile.

“Every day feels like a week,” she complains. “I think it’s because I’m so excited.”

Despite carrying on a conversation with her, my eyes still manage to track Drake as he walks toward the front of the cabins, disappearing around the corner.

A flash of regret threatens, but if the man is leaving, I think that’s beneficial to everyone involved.

As I continue to help Alyssa, several others join us, making getting breakfast ready a group effort, shared by all. It’s an undertaking to feed so many people, but nothing new for us. We have more room to spread out than we would back at the clubhouse in the kitchen there. Hound mans the bacon and sausage on one grill. Kincaid is grumbling about being a short-order cook, dealing with the eggs, and I stand with Alyssa who is making pancakes faster than I can distribute them to those waiting.

“They’re getting feral,” Ugly says, holding another plate out for Alyssa to pile high with pancakes.

I have to smile at my teammate as he looks over his shoulder as if terrified by the hungry people at the picnic tables.

The fun time continues, and I feel my mood lift.

It’s as if I can breathe a little better with Drake gone, but it doesn’t stop me from repeatedly glancing over at the side of the cabin where he disappeared.

Eventually, the rabid crowd is fed, Alyssa smiling at me as she hands me a plate with a couple of pancakes on it.

“Eat,” she urges.

Somehow there are still scrambled eggs and even a couple slices of bacon left, and I do as I’m told, taking a spot beside Shadow and Misty at one of the picnic tables.

I grin around a bite of eggs as I watch Kincaid try to convince his

grandson, Jameson, to eat more of his eggs rather than getting distracted by a chipmunk that keeps darting closer, expecting to get fed.

The group is just as present for cleanup as they were in getting everyone fed, and we make quick work of getting everything squared away just in time for Kincaid to declare a group hike.

I'd never heard of Cerberus prior to the phone call I received from Kincaid, but the more he spoke to me about the organization, the more I knew I wanted to be a part of it. I was inspired by the job they did and the people they helped, but more than anything, it was the unity of the group that appealed to me. It had been a very long time since I ever felt a sense of family. Even before I left Utah, I didn't have anything like I have now.

This man and a handful of his closest friends have created something phenomenal. Even Bishop, one of the newest members who is normally a walking attitude problem, has a small grin on his face as he watches little Jameson dart away from his mom. Hound, Jameson's dad and Kincaid's son-in-law, chuckles from deep in his chest, his steps proud and sure even with a wiggly toddler strapped to his back. Amelia, the couple's oldest child, stays very close to her mother, old enough now to understand that there are things in the woods that could hurt her.

The kids running around are making too much noise for the animals to be brave enough to stick around, but the low-grade climb is still very pleasant. Just like always, there are smaller groups making conversation. Some seem just happy to be getting some exercise, taking deep breaths of the fresh mountain air.

I can't decide which person I am today. Part of me wants to be carefree, unconcerned about anything I can't control, but part of me is also stuck on the memory of Drake's back as he rounded the side of the cabin.

No one has mentioned him, and I know better than to ask where he went or if he's coming back.

Ugly doesn't give me knowing looks. He's too busy showing Stormy something on his phone.

Aro held back at camp with Slick, saying he isn't quite ready with his prosthetic to climb a mountain, but I've seen the man do amazing things in

recent weeks. I'm certain he just wanted a little private time with Slick. Their relationship is still in that honeymoon phase where they can't seem to keep their hands off of each other.

I start to feel like a creep, the way I'm watching and smiling at the families that surround me.

Cerberus, in and of itself, is a family, and I feel like a full-fledged member, but the smaller branches within the organization leave me wanting. I've always hoped for a family, wanted it as much as I want to be myself without the regret and guilt. I dreamed of it as a child, prayed to have one just to prove to others that I could love and nurture my kids, give them what they needed rather than being too busy and spread too thin to love them the way they deserved. All of that changed as I started to realize it could never happen for me. I couldn't be someone I wasn't long enough to create a family, and I'd never subject a woman to a loveless, sexless marriage.

Being a part of Cerberus is the closest I knew I could get, and I'm grateful to be a part of it.

The hiking trip lasts longer for some. I keep climbing when others start to turn back because convincing an irritated toddler to hold on for just another half an hour to reach the top isn't plausible.

It's only adults—myself, Kincaid and Em, Shadow and Misty, Bishop, Stormy, Legacy, and Ugly who make it to the top. We spend a few moments looking out over the forest-covered mountain, taking in the beauty surrounding us before heading back.

By the time we make it back to camp, it's late afternoon, and the benefits of breakfast are long gone.

I'm smiling at the group of people putting together something to eat, but then my eyes land on Drake and the new tent he's putting up. Of all the places he could've decided to set up, and he had to choose the spot not ten feet from mine.

Chapter 36

Drake

I do my best not to think about the way Alex frowned when he saw me setting up my tent.

I have no idea why I even borrowed one of the SUVs to head toward the closest town to buy a new tent. If Kincaid was willing to let me take the SUV, he probably would've let me drive it all the way back to Farmington, like I suggested to Ugly yesterday.

I'm not normally one to force my presence on people who make it very clear they don't want me around, but for some reason, I drove an hour to buy the damn tent and an hour to return just to witness that man's frown.

I didn't exactly do it for him. I didn't concern myself with what people would think or say if I didn't come back. I wasn't worried about their speculations of what may have happened in the tent last night that made me leave. I just couldn't walk away from a chance to see him, to be close to him. I know when we get back to Farmington, he's going to avoid the bar, and other than a chance meeting like that one day at Target, I'll likely never see him again. He has to put himself in my path because chance encounters are very few and far between. I couldn't stomach the thought of going a long time without seeing him, despite what him being near makes me feel.

I can't blame Alex for my heart choosing to lock in on him. It's not his fault I can't seem to manage my own feelings. I hate that he doesn't return them, but forcing someone to care never works out the way one would expect them to.

I drop my eyes the second I look up from finishing setting the tent up and see that Alex still hasn't adjusted the irritation on his face. I know I'm close to pushing him too far because he's not even concerned about hiding his reactions to me right now. He's making it very clear he thought I was gone for good, which means he hasn't spoken to anyone about me. He wasn't concerned about where I was going when I left his tent first thing this morning and disappeared. It answers so many questions, but my heart doesn't care. For some fucked-up reason, it's still holding out hope, and I can only imagine what the fallout from the heartbreak is going to be.

I guess I should be grateful that he was asleep for my confessions last night. It somehow makes the rejection a little easier, less messy, than it would be if he heard them and looked me in the eye before telling me to fuck off.

Exhausted yet smiling faces trickle in from the hike almost everyone took. I hate that I missed it, but I know I wouldn't have had the strength with as little sleep as I got last night. I can't imagine anything more embarrassing than falling out in front of such a large group of fit, manly men.

Lunch looks to be campfire-cooked hot dogs and chips, but I decline since I grabbed a burger and fries before leaving the little town with the overpriced everything.

As the day continues, full of more avoidance, my annoyance grows. I'm irritated with myself more than anything. I'd been given the opportunity to leave. I doubt Kincaid would've filed charges on me if I hadn't come back with the borrowed SUV. Yet, I made my purchase, stopped for a quick drive-thru lunch, and then headed right back to camp where I could not only be ignored but actively dodged and evaded.

If I walk in his direction, he turns his back to me. If we happen to stand at the same time, like we did when he was done with lunch and when I was getting up to grab a bottle of water, he sits down on the opposite side of the large circle formed by everyone, of course.

It's childish and petty, and so is the attitude that's threatening to bubble over from his behavior.

This takes place for several hours until Alex stands one last time, walking away from camp after saying something to Alyssa and Harley that's too low for me to hear.

I wait, unable to keep from watching him disappear into the woods before standing and heading in a slightly different direction.

I pray no one is paying any attention to me as I walk away from the group.

My plan, as impromptu as it is, includes a multitude of options. I'd like to corner him, make him listen to me, but it's not like I can trap the man against a tree and force him to stand there while I regurgitate my feelings. I know they will fall on deaf ears, but I just can't close this chapter without

him hearing me out.

I'm left turning in a circle, wondering where the hell he went after only walking a couple hundred yards into the woods. I know almost immediately that I've made a mistake. The thought of getting lost or worse, having to be rescued would be something I'd never live down after a team of Marines have to waste their time looking for me.

Stubbornly, I keep walking, but there are no sounds coming from camp. I've already made it too far, the thick trees drowning out any laughter or chatter that I could hear only minutes ago.

"Fuck," I hiss when I trip over a fallen branch.

Silence surrounds me but it does nothing to calm my fears. I should've done some research. Are there bears in these woods? Mountain lions? Snakes?

I drop my eyes to my sneakers, just the thought of snakes making my skin crawl.

I rip my hand away from the tree, imagining some creepy crawling thing taking a bite at me.

"You'd never cut it as a Marine."

I spin around, unsure if Alex somehow came up from behind me or what.

"You're walking in circles."

I don't know if he can see the relief in my eyes at the sight of him. If he can, he doesn't acknowledge it.

He seems even more agitated now, which is a feat, considering that the man has been simmering with barely held back rage nearly the entire trip.

"Alex, I—"

"You need to just let it go," he interrupts. "Pretend it never happened."

I could no sooner hold my breath until I died.

I shake my head. "I can't."

He takes a step closer, his boots soundless despite the layer of earthy debris under them.

He's trembling with anger, but I don't miss the quick sweep of his eyes from my gaze to my mouth before glaring back at me.

Deciding to go for broke, I take the last step separating us. Each ragged breath he takes brushes his shirt against mine, but he doesn't move back. I may be a few inches taller than him, but this man isn't the slightest bit intimidated by me. I'm glad because that's not the face I'm trying to portray right now.

All he would have to do is pucker his lips and they'd brush mine, but he keeps his mouth in a flat, ever disappointed line.

"Is it your guilt?" I ask, swallowing when my words come out with a level of emotion I don't think he'd be impressed with. "Is that what's keeping us apart?"

He remains stubbornly silent. The man could easily tell me to fuck off and end this right now, but he doesn't.

"Is it me? Am I not good enough for you?"

I hate the tremble in my jaw as I wait for him to answer. I'm not normally an overly emotional person, but there's something about this man that pulls at my heart strings. Maybe it's the fact that I know what's coming, and also that I can't imagine ever getting over it. My ex did a real number on me, but the pain of his fists have nothing on how losing this man is going to damage me.

"You want more than I can give," he says, taking a step back.

Cold air swirls around me, and I step forward once again to close the distance he created, unwilling to just accept what he's saying.

"I've given you space because I thought this was another part of your internal struggle," I confess. "If it is, then it gives me hope. If it's me, if I'm not enough for you, then I need to know. The hope is killing me. Thinking there's still a chance that one day you'll see what's right in front of you is chipping away parts of me."

My eyes flutter closed when Alex brushes his lips over mine, but in the

next breath he's gone.

"It isn't about you," he whispers. "But there's still no hope."

I don't think I've ever been torn between emotions in my life. It's no consolation that I'm not the reason the man doesn't want to be with me. It doesn't make watching him walk away any less painful.

It also doesn't crush that hope he vows I shouldn't have.

I have no idea why I can't accept exactly what the man is saying, but I follow after him anyway, making it back to the edge of camp in less than ten minutes.

Alex is nowhere to be found, and I can't help but think I did the wrong thing. Would I have had another opportunity to speak with him if I had walked separately? For someone who is adamant that there's no hope, I know the man wouldn't let me wander around the woods as the sky turns darker.

I debate turning right back around, but there's a real chance of getting lost a second time. I highly doubt Alex is sticking around to see what I plan to do.

"We're getting ready to sit down for dinner," Ugly says. "Have you seen Boomer? He was supposed to help with the steaks."

I shake my head. "Haven't seen him."

Ugly narrows his eyes, and I don't know if he's trying to decide whether I'm lying to him or if he's trying to think of where the man in question might be.

"But I'm not too bad on a grill. I don't mind helping," I offer, which doesn't lower Ugly's suspicions.

"Report to Kincaid," he says, frowning when I mock salute him.

I feel like a complete idiot as I walk up to the president of the Cerberus MC, but he doesn't seem to have a problem with the help I'm offering.

The man doesn't question me or grill me about Alex, and as I help, I have to wonder if this will be the very last time I have the opportunity to be involved in anything Cerberus does.

Chapter 37

Boomer

For as long as I can remember, even back to the time before my brother walked in on me the day my fate with the church was sealed, I've concerned myself with keeping up appearances. I went out on dates with girls as a teen, despite those looking nothing like modern dates. I did my best to look the part when I ended up at strip clubs with members of my platoon. I chatted and made the appearance of flirting with women at *Jake's* on occasion. I might be gay, but it feels nice to know that others find me attractive.

Tonight, I just can't seem to manage an ounce of worry for others. I stay in the woods, hovering on the edge of the forest all evening. Even as the sun disappears and dinner is served, I stay to myself. I don't care if people are concerned or if they're left wondering where I might have disappeared to. I need space, a little distance from all of it.

The run-in with Drake in the woods left me more drained than the sleepless night and hike has. I feel completely depleted, thinking of the vulnerability in the man's eyes as he questioned whether he was good enough for me. I couldn't bring myself to confess that it was me who wasn't good enough for him. The man has a heart of gold. He's patient, funny, accepting, all things I don't deserve with how I've acted.

I've picked and chosen when he can fit into my life. I ignore and reject him when it isn't convenient for me.

I've been a total dick to him, blaming him for Ugly being at the bar, letting myself almost believe that he did that to hurt me, knowing full well it was just another stroke of crappy luck.

I've pointed fingers, blamed, and accused when Drake hasn't done anything wrong. I've avoided him, grown angry with just the sight of him, because it has gotten nearly impossible not to go to him, to tell him of my fears and the plethora of things I'm struggling with. I ache, knowing that I'm not even close to being done with all the things I struggle with.

I can't be who he needs. I wasn't lying about that part, but I don't want him sticking around, hoping I'll eventually be the person he needs. It isn't

fair to him.

The thought of him finding someone who will be all the things I can't makes my knees threaten to buckle.

I know better than to think that I'm feeling this way about him because he's just the first guy I've done certain things with. There's more to Drake than the sexual experiences. I think I might have known that before the kiss in the hallway despite my constant effort to deny it.

I somehow convinced myself it was just fun, which would make it easy to walk away from.

I'm finding it the most difficult thing I've ever faced, even knowing he has a right to more than I can give.

Silently, I make my way to the other side of camp when I see Alyssa kiss Harley on the cheek, whispering something in his ear before walking toward Drake who is sitting off by himself.

I see their lips moving as I inch closer but can't hear what they're saying.

I don't know whether to be angry at Alyssa for prodding, or to be proud to call her my friend for her noticing how despondent the man looks.

I haven't given much information to her about Drake, but much like Ugly, she seems competent in figuring stuff out on her own.

I slink around a little further, noticing Ugly darting his eyes in my direction. He's not the only one who has done so, and it doesn't surprise me that several of my teammates have tracked my movements. I guess I should just be lucky one of them hasn't labeled me a threat and come after me.

"You have to keep trying," I hear my friend whisper.

A sense of betrayal sinks inside of me at hearing her words. The woman is supposed to be my friend, and she should know better than to meddle. At the same time, she's a kind and generous woman, and not the type to watch someone hurt and take sides.

"He's going to end up hating me," Drake says, his eyes locked on a twig he's been turning over and over in his hands for the last half hour that

I've watched him. "I can't keep pushing. If he doesn't feel how I feel, then I'm just wasting my time."

He's saying exactly what I thought I wanted to hear, but the pain in his voice makes my chest ache in a way I've never felt before. I told him to walk away, urged him to do it, but hearing that he may actually do what I asked pains me greatly.

"What does your heart say?"

Drake shakes his head, his face upturned, his eyes blinking rapidly as if he's fighting tears. "It doesn't matter what my heart says if his doesn't say the same thing."

"So you're just going to give up?" My lip twitches at the unfamiliar irritation in my friend's voice.

"One-sided love doesn't work, Ali. I can't love him enough for the both of us. The man can't even look at me."

My throat threatens to seize when they both grow quiet.

Anger is the first emotion I let see the light of day because this wasn't supposed to be this way. Drake was meant to be fun. No matter what I thought or how I felt about the man, he was supposed to remain the flirty playboy that didn't have an issue doing a little messing around. Our time together was supposed to be easy to walk away from, both on my part and his. He was supposed to remain carefree and flaky, just as I viewed him before I ever brushed my lips against his.

He has no right spilling his guts and sounding all broken to the person I hold most dear in this world. Getting her involved complicates things. She'll confront me for it, and I'll want to make her happy.

I shake my head, clearing it of those thoughts. Blaming others has become a very bad habit, and not something I'm proud of.

My choices are my own, just as Drake's choices are his.

He only thinks he wants me. He's delusional, thinking he cares for me as much as he's telling her. It's only because I was the one to take a step back, when I'm sure he's the one to pull the plug most often. It's the sting of rejection that's making him upset, not the actual loss of me.

Drake is a playboy, the man not selective in who he spent time with. What we shared was supposed to be no different. I picked him because of how easy it was supposed to be to walk away after the fun was had.

He was never supposed to be the one capable of offering me everything I ever wanted. He wasn't supposed to be the one that made the risk of my soul worth it.

I watch, a little heartbroken and definitely uncertain of my future, as Alyssa wraps her arms around him, pulling him close to her in a motherly way that tells me she'd take his pain and mine if it were possible.

I don't deserve her any more than I deserve him.

She cups his jaw, saying something too low for me to hear before getting up and walking back over to Harley.

I watch Drake for a long moment, feeling an even greater loss when he stands and walks across the campground.

I ache for things I shouldn't want when he disappears into his tent.

I spend the next hour wishing I could teleport to a deserted island someplace a thousand miles away before heading back to my own tent.

I said things I didn't mean, hoping it would be the truth someday.

From the conversation I overheard between the two of them, he's starting to believe the things I said. It should make me feel better, but the idea that Drake thinks I hate him eats away at me as the evening turns into night.

It's too early for bed. I imagine the guys will stay up by the fire drinking and laughing just as late as they did last night. But instead of going to hang out with them, I stay in my tent, the man less than twenty feet away in his own tent the only thing I can think of.

I thought I made my decision. What I told him was final.

Yet, as I stare up at the tree branches' shadows dancing across the outside of my tent, I find myself hoping that he doesn't believe what I said, that he'll do exactly what Alyssa urged him to do and keep trying.

All he'd have to do is step into me one more time, and I wouldn't have the strength to keep my distance any longer.

I spend hours lying there awake, both hoping he'll come to me and praying that he doesn't.

Chapter 38

Drake

You have to keep trying.

Words spoken from a woman who is in love and literally living her happily ever after.

I don't dislike Alyssa for butting her nose into my business, but the woman is delusional, much like every person who has ever found their soulmate. They just can't wrap their head around the fact that some people stay lonely. Some people never find that person who fills in all the holes and voids inside of them. Some people stay incomplete.

I grumble as I roll over in my sleeping bag, feeling like a broken Hallmark card.

Maybe I should be arguing that people can be alone and not be lonely.

That's how I envisioned myself before Alexander Isaiah Smith came along.

I was fine with the fun I was having.

I was content to go out a few times a month and get laid.

No strings was the perfect plan.

Hell, Alex was supposed to be no strings, but the look on his face every time someone caught us devastated me. It was as if he saw the people in his life pulling away from him, as if their love and kindness were conditional, and he compromised that by getting closer to me.

I hate the family he was born into for fucking up his head so badly, but the fact of the matter is that he can't change. He's been gone from that place for ten years. For a decade the man has lived in a world where sexual orientation isn't as readily bashed. Most people these days just give nasty looks before moving on. Most places you don't have to worry about getting hurt or lynched for holding hands with a same-sex partner. Most people who stare do so because they consider it an oddity not because they're honestly disgusted.

If the last ten years haven't made him change his opinion about himself, then a couple months of hit-or-miss hooking up doesn't have the power to do it either.

I sigh for the millionth time since talking with Alyssa, grateful that I can return to the apartment over the bar tomorrow to lick my wounds. I put myself out there today with Alex. I gave him the chance to explain why he was avoiding me. I've tried apologizing about Ugly showing up to the bar.

If he can't be bothered to listen, then despite Alyssa's urges, I can't keep throwing myself in front of him. I was being honest when I told her he was going to start hating me. We may not have a chance at a future, but I'd never survive his hatred.

I'm still reeling over the fact that I even acknowledged caring for Alex in that way at all. I've never spoken to anyone about the man. I wouldn't even have a conversation with Ugly if he were the one to walk up to me, even though he seemed to know a little about a lot on the drive up.

She told me she was tired of watching her friend struggle, and it angered me at first. If I had a choice, I wouldn't be alone in this tent right now, but the decision wasn't left up to me.

If things were different, I'd—

My thoughts freeze at a noise outside of my tent, my breath catching in my lungs.

I stiffen at the sound of my tent zipper lowering, but keep my eyes closed.

I know it's him, but I know better than to think that he's here for the reasons I'd want him to be. If anything, there's a chance he's going to attempt to silence me.

A warm hand grips my shoulder, tugging me to my back, but before I can pull my arms from the sleeping bag, his warm body covers mine.

He brushes his lips over mine, and my heart jerks in my chest at possibly getting everything I've ever wanted, but I know better. He said there's no hope, and if that's the case, I can't continue with the secrets and hiding and pretending he doesn't exist when it suits him.

I manage to pull my arms out from the sleeping bag, my palms pressing against his shoulders to move him off me.

The man doesn't budge, and I'm an idiot for thinking I could ever move the mountain that is Alex.

"Don't," I grunt as I turn my head, even though it kills me to do so.

"I'm scared," he whispers, his lips brushing the shell of my ear.

He climbs off me, and I sit up to face him.

"Of people knowing?"

I want to reach for him, to pull his face from the cradle of his hands.

I want to look into his eyes, vow to protect him from everything that could threaten to harm him, but his fear isn't based in this lifetime. He's afraid for his soul. I can't compete with that. I never had a chance with this man.

"What if," he says. The two words are broken as much as he is. "What if my old church is right? What if they happen to be the one branch of religion that God calls upon?"

I don't know how to handle this at all, and I'm terrified of saying the wrong thing. Him being here means so much. Him coming to me instead of the other way around is monumental, just like it was all the other times he put forth the effort. The man is no more indifferent to me than I am to him.

"There are over four thousand religions in the world," I tell him, having looked it up after the first night we spent together.

He finally raises his eyes to mine.

"I'm not discounting how you were raised or what they believe. You have to be the one to decide whether a one in four thousand chance is worth walking away from a man that loves you with his entire heart."

He swallows as he considers my words.

"A chance in a lifetime," he whispers.

"If you're willing to take the risk," I return. "I can't—"

His lips are on mine in the next breath, and this time I don't push him away.

His tongue brushing against mine is the best, most perfect thing I could've ever imagined.

His hands wander, his fingers brushing over so many different areas of my body, each touch lighting my skin on fire.

There's a moment where our lips are barely touching that we just look into each other's eyes, and somehow I know it's his apology. It's his way of telling me that he lied, and that there is hope. I'm worth the risk to his soul, and that should make me take pause. I shouldn't want to be that for him. Being with me shouldn't be a choice between love and salvation, but the man makes me weak.

"Missed you so much," he pants before pressing his lips to mine again as his hand tugs the zipper on my sleeping bag down.

I don't waste a second, pushing it to the side, gasping when the warmth of so much of his skin touches mine. He didn't even bother pulling on his pants to come to my tent, instead choosing to sneak across the wooded distance in nothing but his boxer briefs.

I groan into his mouth when his hand sweeps down the front of me, my erection aching for more than he seems to want to give.

"Alex," I say, somehow finding the strength to push at his chest. "Stop."

He licks at his lips as he pulls his face back from mine.

"I can't do this—"

"What will it take to—"

"I can't do this if tomorrow you just find another reason to try and push me away."

He shakes his head. "No more pushing. I can't guarantee it's going to be perfect, but I want this. I need you."

"This can't be just sex. It's not what—"

He presses two fingers to my mouth, effectively silencing me. “It’s not just sex.”

“I need you to say it. I mean, I’ll say it first if that makes it easier. Alex, I—” He presses those fingers tighter to my lips.

“Drake Hill, I love you.”

“Really?” The word is muffled by his hand.

“Really.”

When he presses his lips to mine, no longer are there any reservations. I may not know everything about the man, but I know he isn’t a liar. I know his words to be true, and that makes every risk we may take going forward worth it.

He moves back, urging me to lift my hips as he pulls down my boxer briefs. Hesitation isn’t even a word in my vocabulary right now as I shove at his boxers.

“I have condoms and lube,” I tell him, chuckling when he draws his head back in confusion. “Ugly said you wanted me here. I figured I should be prepared.”

“People sticking their noses where they don’t belong will be the death of me,” he complains, but he doesn’t hesitate to move toward my duffel bag when I point to it.

I notice the tremble in his hands as he pulls the supplies from my bag.

“Here,” I tell him, taking the condom from his hands.

“What are you doing?” he asks as I open the package and start rolling the latex down his length. “I thought you’d—”

“You thought you’d let one more thing happen to you?” I ask, unable to hide the frustration in my voice.

I can’t help the dig, the reminder that the man used to purposely let things happen to him and use that as justification to ease his guilt later. If he wasn’t the one doing, then the sin wasn’t as bad. This can’t be another one of those situations.

“Listen. Alex, maybe this isn’t—”

“Nope,” he says, pushing at my chest and forcing me to lie back down. “You’re not going to backpedal out of this now. I know I’m big, but I promise to work that hole of yours until you’re ready for me.”

My cock leaks on my stomach.

“I’ve been dreaming of you filling me for months,” he whispers as he opens the bottle of lube. “That toy in my bathroom has gotten so much play time, but I want this too.”

We both hiss when he presses his slick fingers to my ass, his teeth digging into his lower lip as he presses the tip of one finger in a little deeper.

My jaw hangs open.

“Want you inside of me so bad,” he whispers. “But I want this too. Going to have to think of geometry formulas or something to keep from nutting in two seconds, though. Mmm, damn you’re tight.”

I whimper, swirling my hips. As gentle as he promised to be, it’s been a long time since I’ve done this. My blood is singing with apprehension as much as it is with need.

“Fuuuccckkk,” I moan when he curls that finger deep inside.

Even though I know I’m not, I almost open my mouth to tell him I’m ready for him.

“Shhh,” he admonishes. “You trying to wake everything in the forest?”

“Feels so good,” I rasp. “So, so good.”

I spread my legs wider, lift my hips higher, and his smile is electric.

“Don’t,” he snaps, using his forearm to prevent me from reaching for his cock. He digs his fingers into me at a different angle and I groan in pleasure. “Touch me, and it’ll be over. We’re probably going to have to do this a dozen times before I have the ability to last more than five seconds.”

“Sounds good,” I tell him, my cock pulling away from my body, my nuts drawing up. “Alex, please.”

“Nothing else matters but you when we’re alone,” he says, his mouth

drawing closer to mine. “It probably isn’t a big deal to you, but you’re the first person I’ve ever done this with.”

I swallow, having known this to be true before he said it but it doesn’t lessen it in any way.

“We don’t—Oh shit.”

“The only one I want to do this with,” he says, pushing inside another inch.

His mouth hangs open, a look of awe only visible with how close his face is to mine.

I lick at his lips, needing every part of him the way he has every part of me right now.

“Alex,” I moan, swirling my hips to get more but also to ease the ache of being so full.

“Please be still,” he begs as I bring my calves up around his hips. “Never. God, I’ve never... never.”

His words are a chant, a song of praise as he presses forward as far as he can go.

“Alex, fuck.”

As sensual as I’d like this to be, I know the man is lost to his own pleasure, and I’m here to take that ride with him. Clawing at his back, I try to draw him in closer as he shifts back before pressing forward again.

Somehow, he’s in a perfect position, the scrape of his lower abdomen on my cock with each forward thrust threatening the very same thing he’s concerned about.

“Alex,” I gasp again, but fuck, it’s too late.

My cock kicks between us.

“That—oh shit,” he groans, no doubt feeling the convulsion of my ass as I orgasm.

His breaths are expelled in the same rhythm of his pulsing cock, and I store the feeling away in my memory, praying he doesn’t have a change of

heart anytime soon.

This man has ruined me for every other person that walks the planet. There's no chance I'll let him walk away now.

Obsession doesn't even begin to describe what I feel for this man.

"Your mouth," I beg, reaching up to cup his face.

He obliges, his kisses breathy and long.

"So much wasted time," he mutters, finally burying his face in my throat.

"Only going to happen once," I begin. Having a hard time breathing, I'm chuckling when he pulls up on his hands to stare down at me. "Unless you stop crushing me."

He grins down at me. "Sorry."

After another brush of his lips, this time with a little more restraint, he settles on me.

"I want this every day," he says. "Although, I can't promise that every day will be this easy for me."

"I know," I tell him. "Just don't expect to throw an attitude at me and think I'll walk away, because I won't. I love you too much to let you get lost in your head for too long."

"You're everything I never thought I could have."

His words mean so much to me that more tears threaten.

"Never forget it," I tease, lifting to press my lips to his. "I have more condoms. I think it's time to give you what you want so badly."

The speed the man moves to lie on his back with his legs spread makes me laugh so hard there's a very real chance I woke up everyone in camp.

He silences my laughter with his mouth, keeping his tongue there until after we've come a second time.

Chapter 39

Boomer

It's not waking up alone that bothers me so much as it's the chatter going on outside the tent already.

My exhaustion from the night before, partnered with the enthusiastically athletic way Drake and I used our bodies last night, left me dead to the world.

The heat in the tent tells me that it has to be late morning, possible midday already, and I want to shake Drake for letting me sleep so late.

"Have you seen Boomer?" I hear Ugly ask. "He's not in his tent."

"Uh." That's Drake's voice, and I freeze wondering how in the world he's going to get us out of this one.

I hate that my first instinct is to want him to lie.

"He's in Drake's tent," Kincaid says, a little laughter in his voice. "Let the man sleep."

Drake stays silent, neither confirming nor denying what my boss just said with such ease it baffles me as to why I've had such a damn problem with any of it in the first place.

I haven't made up my mind as to what I should do until after searching through Drake's duffel bag, looking for something to wear. I tug on a pair of flannel lounge pants, grateful for his extra height because it gives my larger frame a little more room to fill in.

My hands are trembling as I reach for the zipper. I guess there's a small chance that I can slip out of here undetected... that doesn't feel right, not after what Drake and I said to each other last night.

My challenge with all of this has been my own problem, not stemming off of the atmosphere around me. I've never once felt like I wasn't safe to be who I am. The thought never crossed my mind that I would be looked at differently if anyone or everyone in Cerberus knew the real me.

It's these thoughts that give me confidence as I unzip the tent. I do

head in the direction of mine. If I'm going to face my teammates, I need the armor of my own clothes to do it.

I change out of the lounge pants quickly, pulling on my own jeans, a shirt, and my boots before leaving my tent. I have to do it quickly before losing my nerve, but as I walk in the direction of the picnic tables where people are starting to congregate, I lock eyes with Drake.

There's an apology in his but it's also tainted with worry and doubt. He looks terrified as I draw closer, and the tremble in his chin has the power to rip me open from the inside.

I told him some days will be harder than others, but this isn't one of those days.

"Coffee?" he asks as I get closer, his eyes searching mine as if he's trying to figure out how I'm going to react.

"Thank you," I tell him, taking the proffered cup from his hand and pressing my lips to his.

It isn't a deep, intense kiss, just a small brush of our lips, but he understands the meaning, and it leaves him stunned, staring back at me as if he's seen an alien.

"Breathe," I tell him softly.

He nods, but it takes another few seconds before I see his chest rise with a breath.

There's no burst of energy from the crowd. No one screams that it's about time. The group doesn't break out in applause, and, more importantly, God doesn't strike me down from Heaven.

I don't have to come out to these people. I don't have to explain that I'm in love with this man or make excuses as to why it took so long for me to get my life together where Drake is concerned.

"I thought you were making that for me," Ugly grumbles as he walks closer. "Can I get a cup? Are we trading kisses for coffee because I'm tired enough right now?"

"Get your own," I growl playfully.

“Coffee or man?” Ugly challenges.

“Both,” I mutter, loving the warmth of Drake close to my back as we cross to a picnic table and take a seat.

My friend’s laughter follows me all the way.

Breakfast is quick and simple, dry cereal and protein bars since we won’t be here too long today, and I can’t help but watch my man’s mouth as he eats.

“You’re going to make me hard,” he warns after looking around to make sure no one is paying us any attention.

“Good,” I tell him, grateful my back is to everyone. “No reason I should be the only one suffering with a hard-on.”

His chuckle is powerful enough to heal the sick. I’m certain of it.

It cuts short as his eyes dart over my shoulder.

“What is she doing here?” Drake asks as he stands.

I do the same, turning around to see Colton Matthews, a homicide detective with Farmington police and Dominic’s son-in-law, rush toward a female that has walked around the edge of one of the cabins.

“You know her?”

“It’s Lennox Maison. She’s a cop with the PD,” Drake says. “She’s answered a few calls when one of the people at the bar gets a little too unruly.”

“She’s a little far from home, isn’t she?” I ask as we walk closer, Cerberus closing its ranks quite literally into the center of the campground.

Men reach for their women, who in turn wrap their arms around their waists as we watch.

Colton doesn’t look happy as the plainclothes cop shows him something in a folder, but she doesn’t seem to want to listen to him as she walks past him.

“She’s pretty,” I observe.

“Don’t say it to her face,” Drake grouses. “She’s a real hard-ass. I don’t know that I’ve ever seen her smile.”

“Sawyer Maddox,” she says, walking right up to Ugly without hesitation or seeming intimidated despite all the people staring her down.

“Hey there, beautiful,” the man says, growing perkier than ever even though he claimed to be tired earlier.

“Do you recognize this woman?”

I lean to the side to see the picture she’s showing him.

He shakes his head. “Can’t say that I do.”

She closes the folder, tucking it under her arm.

“Should I?”

“I’m Detective Lennox Maison with the Farmington Police Department. Can you turn around please and place your hands behind your back?”

“Not really into being watched during kinky time,” Ugly says as he spins, a smile still on his face.

His face falls when she actually pulls cuffs out of her back pocket and clicks them on his wrists. She leans in close, having to stand up on the tips of her toes to get close to his ear.

“You should recognize her,” she spits. “You’re under arrest for her rape and murder.”

A wave of disbelief echoes around the group as the detective drags Ugly back toward the cabins.

“Prez?” my teammate asks, terror in his eyes as he looks at Kincaid.

“We’re on it, Ugly,” Kincaid assures him, pulling his phone from his back pocket.

“Holy shit,” Drake mutters.

“Did you see the picture?” Bishop asks Legacy.

Legacy nods.

“Do you recognize her?” I ask, my head swarming with confusion.

“That’s the woman he left the bar with that first night we came to town.”

THE END

Ugly’s Story is next

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Hooking up with a cop was supposed to be fun.

How joking with Detective Lennox Maison about her handcuffs transformed into her actually arresting me was something I could’ve never predicted.

I thought it was a joke at first, but what kind of person would joke about the murder of a local woman?

Lennox claimed I was the last one to see her alive.

I should have an alibi. I should be able to tell them exactly what I was doing that night.

The truth is, I can’t remember, and that argument never holds up in court.

I manage to convince her that I’m innocent, only for it to happen again.

I not only have to worry about being falsely accused of murder, but now I have to worry if I’ve put Lennox in the crosshairs of a serial killer.

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