

RULES
WE BREAK

Book #3

DON'T

BANG YOUR STEPBRO

DJ JAMISON

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CHAPTER 1



WES

I WOKE SLOWLY WITH A SMILE ON MY FACE. CRISP SHEETS LAID cool against my skin, and a warm body rested under my right arm.

Hell, yeah. I must have hooked up last night.

I scooted a little closer, still only half awake, but my cock fully engaged as it rubbed up against the hard ass in front of me. I skated my right hand over firm abs. Damn, I must have picked up an athlete. For half a second, my mind flickered with a confused reel of images. Bars that were decidedly not located in my hometown of Granville. Colorful shots. Flashing lights. Poker chips...

That's right. We're in Vegas, baby!

I thrust my hips a bit more enthusiastically at the thought of a smoking hot pickup in the city of sin and slid my hand up to find...hard, muscled chest?

Huh?

A low groan echoed through the hotel room. In a voice I recognized.

Oh, shit. Beckett!

I scrambled back so fast I nearly fell out of the bed. The one I was sharing with my stepbrother, instead of the female hookup I'd expected.

Beckett turned in time to see me mid-flail, eyes squinted against the light pouring through the gap in the blackout

curtains. “Were you just feeling me up?”

“Oops?”

“Oops?” Beckett echoed, sounding incredulous.

“I thought you were a hookup.” I glanced across the room to the second unmade bed. *My* bed. “Why am I sleeping here?”

“Probably because you spilled most of the bottle of champagne you insisted on bringing back here last night.”

“Champagne?” I grimaced. “Why the hell would I...”

I trailed off as memory flickered. It was a bit fragmented, but the pieces were all there.

Gambling with Beck. Winning a couple of hundred dollars and celebrating hard. Coming across a gay bar by accident and laughing about it before deciding to dance together because, what the hell, we weren’t homophobes who were afraid to let their swords bump and grind.

At some point, Laurie texted, telling us not to do anything he and Tucker wouldn’t do. About twenty years ago, they’d gotten married secretly, and to my drunk-ass brain, it had sounded like the greatest idea ever. The prank of all pranks.

After a quick break to puke in the bar bathroom—which was probably the only thing that kept me functional enough to make it anywhere else—Beck and I had grabbed an Uber. There were some stops we made I didn’t remember, the last one...it was a doozy. We ended up at a twenty-four-hour chapel.

My prank was supposed to stop with some pics and a joke to freak out our friends, but...

“Ohhh fuck!” Beckett exclaimed beside me in the bed we never should have shared. “Why is there cum dried to my abs?” I looked up just in time to see his eyes widen in horror. “And a ring on my finger! What the fuck? What. The. FUCK!”

“Don’t panic.”

“Too fucking late, Wes! Tell me this isn’t what I think it is.”

“Uh...I don't know what you think it is,” I hedged.

“Well, I think I'm wearing cum and a wedding ring, and the only one here with me is you.” He grabbed my hand and lifted it to eye level. “And you're wearing a ring too.”

“Surprise?” I said with a weak grin. “I guess we got a little wild last night.”

He laughed, sounding slightly unhinged. “A wild night is partying with strippers, Wes! It's not...not...this! You're not supposed to bang your stepbro, man!”

“Well, hey, at least we got married first?”

Beckett grasped his hair. “Ah, Christ, we're dead. Dad is gonna kill us. Well, no, he'll kill me. You'll be fine, but I'll be out of the family, out of a job. We're supposed to be brothers, not—not—”

His breathing went haywire, his body was shaking, and it was clear that Beckett was losing his shit.

“Hey,” I said softly. “Hey, it's going to be okay.”

I wrapped an arm around his shoulders, pulling him against me. He resisted for thirty seconds, tense and vibrating, before he collapsed against my chest with a shuddering breath. “We're fucked,” he murmured, his breath brushing over my right nipple.

My cock hadn't gone down, despite the fucked-up news I'd married my stepbro. Not to mention whatever else had happened. I squirmed, trying to will it away, and Beckett looked up at me, face pale, eyes big and vulnerable. “What are we gonna do?”

I don't know what possessed me just then. My desire to comfort Beckett? The knowledge that we might have already messed around last night? My hard dick, which despite a hetero appetite for most of my life, didn't really care that it was my stepbrother in my arms?

Whatever the reason, I dipped down and kissed him.

Beckett's lips parted with a gasp as I brushed my lips softly over his, more of a request than a demand. He leaned

into the kiss with a small noise that sounded almost like a question. I answered by running my tongue along his bottom lip, then taking it one step further, giving in to the urge to taste him.

In an instant, we caught fire. Beckett climbed into my lap, still kissing me, mouth eager and wet. So hot I thought I'd incinerate. When he settled his weight on my aching cock, both of us naked under the sheet, I groaned and kissed him even harder.

Beckett's hands were all over me: in my hair, scratching along my flanks, squeezing my pecs. I responded by grabbing his bare ass and squeezing. Then parting his cheeks, my cock skimming through the cleft of his ass and prodding his hole.

We both snapped back to reality at the same time.

Beckett jerked back so fast he fell off my lap, then flung himself to the side to grab a pillow and slam it over his lap. I'd already seen his cock, as hard as mine, long and slim and flushed a dark pink.

"What the fuck was that?" he asked, eyes wide and dark.

"Well, it is our honeymoon," I joked weakly, not knowing what else to say.

Beckett's eyes turned murderous, and he gave up on modesty to whack me with the pillow. Right in the face. Then again, knocking me from the bed. He followed to the edge of the bed, continuing to whack me. "This." *Whack*. "Is." *Whack*. "Not." *Whack*. "A joke!"

I caught the pillow and flung it away. When he continued to come after me, lunging forward, I grabbed his shoulders and wrestled him back onto the bed. Beckett struggled, which only brought every part of our bodies into contact, rubbing and grinding until I was panting with more than just exertion.

"Calm down," I ordered. "I know it's not a joke, okay? I know!"

His chest heaved, but he stopped straining against my hold. "W-why did you..."

I wasn't sure how to answer that question without exposing a part of myself I'd been trying to shut down the past few months. Beckett was my stepbrother and a man. He was everything I wasn't supposed to want.

But being so close to him, naked, married. That was an adrenaline hit.

It was standing on the edge of a cliff with only a cord between me and death. It was standing in the open doorway of a plane, ready to jump.

It was betting everything on one hand in a game of poker, the gamble of a lifetime.

So I answered truthfully and hoped it didn't ruin everything.

"We already made the fuckup of all fuckups, so I just figured...why not enjoy the honeymoon? I mean, we probably messed around last night, and I don't know about you, but I want to at least remember how it feels."

It seemed inevitable, really, after all the months of wishing away the urge to get closer to him. From the moment I'd witnessed our first set of male friends kiss, I'd wondered: What would it be like to kiss Beck like that?

It'd be wrong, I'd told myself. I liked women. So did he. And we were brothers, not lovers.

And yet...the thoughts hadn't gone away. The curiosity had shifted to desire. A craving that just wouldn't quit.

I hadn't thought it would lead to us getting married.

But here we were.

Beck stared at me, lips parted, shock written across his face. "I didn't think you were into guys."

"Neither are you, but..."

"You're different," he whispered.

"You're different too."

Beck moved suddenly, as if to escape me, and I released his wrists, not wanting to restrain him. His hips bucked, he shoved my shoulder, and suddenly he was the one on top, pinning me. He shifted his hips, dragging his cock along mine, and a ragged moan escaped me.

He stilled for a moment, and I thought he'd end the heat beginning to boil over between us, but then his mouth slammed down on mine, filthy wet and desperate.

"Yes, fuck," I gasped between kisses, bucking my hips up to meet his, the sweat between us deliciously slippery. "Give it to me, Beck. I want it."

"Y-you r-really want me?" he stuttered, sounding stunned. He was breathing hard, body writhing deliciously on top of my dick. My brain was all but melted in my head, but his eyes seemed so desperate for an answer, I wanted to give him a good one.

"Hell yeah, I want you," I gasped out. "Want you to bust all over me, man. Fall apart for me. Give me everything you've got because you're mine."

"Damn," he whispered, shuddering.

Beckett still held my wrists, but he wasn't holding me in place so much as just holding me. I broke loose and grabbed his ass, rocking him against me more forcefully, chasing the climax that was just out of reach.

He moaned into the crook of my neck, heat blooming between our bellies, and the knowledge that he'd come all over my body was enough to catapult me into orgasm.

As I came back to my senses, Beckett's gaze met mine again. There was so much love in his eyes that it stole my breath away. But it didn't last. Between one blink and the next, Beckett's light went out.

"We can't do this, Wes. The family..."

"I think we just did."

"I'm serious," he said, peeling himself off my body so quickly that the cold swept in and made me shiver. "We have

to undo this marriage and hope like hell that no one ever finds out we were so stupid.”

Each word was a small dagger to the heart, but I knew he was right. We were supposed to be brothers, not lovers.

Not husbands.

But for a minute there, it had almost felt possible.



BECKETT

I SOAPED up in the shower, mind spinning out with memories of Wes’s big, strong body under and over mine, his tongue in my mouth, his hands on my ass. Damn, but we’d been hot together.

And wrong.

We shouldn’t have crossed that boundary. Bad enough we’d gotten freaking married. At least that could be undone.

But this... There was no undoing this.

Guilt flickered. Wes thought we’d already had sex last night, but I remembered now why I’d woken with cum dried on me, and Wes hadn’t put it there.

It was embarrassing, really, but while Wes had puked his guts out in a club bathroom last night from drinking too much, I’d been one stall over, clumsily jerking off from getting so hot and bothered while dancing with him.

Wes had banged on the stall door right as I’d started to come, startling me enough that I’d managed to come all over my stomach. Luckily, I’d pulled up my shirt, or I’d have really been a mess. I’d hastily mopped up, though clearly not enough, to join him on our wild night of Vegas adventure.

Which is where everything had gone sideways, because I’d suggested we get married for real.

Yeah, me. I was the reason we were in this predicament.

I didn't know how to tell Wes. He'd wanted to pull a prank on our friends for laughs. I was the one who'd suggested it would be a lot more convincing if we actually got married. This was my fault.

Wes might have wanted to fuck around this morning, figuring the damage was done, but my feelings were more complicated than that. I'd been fighting the itch under my skin, the craving to get closer, to touch him, to claim him, for at least two years.

I'd dated women, had a few relationships, but nothing ever stuck because I was closer to Wes than anyone else in my life. We worked together, lived together, hung out together. Thankfully, Wes had always been oblivious to my confused attraction. But now? After being able to touch him the way I'd wanted for so long? I didn't know how I'd ever manage to go back to just being his brother.

And that's exactly what I had to do.

"Fuck!" Wes cursed from the next room.

He'd let me shower first, telling me he'd charge our phones while I cleaned up. We'd let our batteries die last night, too drunk to remember to plug them in.

My stomach clenched.

There was only one reason for him to be swearing up a storm right now. People must know what we did.

Not all of it. Not the sex part, but...

I glanced down at the ring on my finger, such a simple little piece of metal with such big ramifications. Did everyone know I'd married my stepbrother? How would I ever live that down?

I pushed aside the shower curtain. "Wes? Everything okay?"

He didn't answer me, and I couldn't stand the suspense. I grabbed a towel and rushed out of the bathroom, still dripping.

"What's wrong? Does everyone know?"

“I don’t want you to panic,” he said slowly, eyes still locked on his phone.

“That’s not as reassuring as you think it is. Come on, just rip off the Band-Aid and tell me so I can deal with it.”

Wes finally looked up. For a moment, his gaze caught on my body, making me aware of my nakedness in a way I hadn’t been around him before. We lived in a small trailer, so it wasn’t like we hadn’t seen each other half-naked before. I’d seen Wes walking around in nothing but form-fitting boxer briefs more times than I could count. The man hated clothes and shucked them the instant he was home.

It had stopped feeling brotherly a while ago for me, but I’d never seen blatant appreciation in *his* gaze before.

It was almost enough to distract me from the suspicion that the honeymoon was about to come to an end.

“They don’t know,” Wes said, surprising me. “Not for sure.”

I crossed the room and plucked the phone from his hand to look for myself. There was a video. Stomach churning, I hit the play button.

“Listen up, Laurie and Tuck!” I shouted from the screen, a huge drunken grin on my face.

“And all the rest of you Granville suckers who aren’t in Vegas, baby!” Wes added, then whooped for good measure.

“You said not to do anything you wouldn’t do...” The me on the screen panned the video to display a chapel in the background.

“Oh, no,” I muttered to myself as I watched.

Wes—the Wes with me in the hotel room—wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me in against his face in a hug that made my stomach flutter despite the train wreck I was watching online.

Video-Wes laughed like a loon. “You’re not the only ones who can get married in secret!”

Video-Beckett swatted his arm. “Shhhh! It’s not a secret if you tell everyone.”

“Oh. OH. Right!” Wes gave an exaggerated wink. “We totally aren’t getting married in Vegas.”

The video cut off.

“Fuck,” I whispered.

“See? It’s not so bad.”

I looked down at Wes, eyes wide. “Not so bad? We basically told everyone we were getting married!”

He grimaced. “Yeah, but we hadn’t done it yet, and we were drunk and silly. We can play it off as a prank. That’s what we told Laurie in his text, right? It’d be an epic prank. That’s all it has to be.”

I glanced back down at the video, biting my lower lip as I read the comments.

Are you guys for real? our friend Bobbi asked.

You two are hilarious, Darren Rafferty posted, with half a dozen laughing emoticons.

Congratulations, maybe? Clark Fletcher wrote.

But it was the last comment that made my heart twist. Nathan Potter, my stepfather and Wes’s dad. *This isn’t funny.*

“We’re so screwed,” I said.

“No. No way.” Wes pushed me back a step to look up at my face. “We’re still in Vegas and none of this exists.”

“But—”

“We have plausible deniability. We were drunk and stupid.”

“That’s not much of an excuse,” I mumbled.

“We joked around in front of a chapel,” he insisted. “No one can prove anything.”

“You really are determined to be optimistic, aren’t you?” I complained.

He smirked, eyes smoldering. “Well, if you’re determined to believe the sky will fall when we get home, I guess we should enjoy the time we have left here.”

My breath caught. “You mean...”

Wes answered by tugging my towel loose, then letting it fall to the ground.

He was finally looking at me with the same kind of desire I’d shamefully harbored for too long.

His heavy gaze on my dick worked its magic. I hardened as cool air brushed my balls, making me shiver with arousal.

Still, reason tried to prevail. “W-we should be coming up with a plan. Researching annulment. Anything but this.”

“We could do that,” he said, “or...”

“Or?”

“I could get you off again.”

“Fuck.” My hips bucked of their own accord, and Wes wrapped his hand around me, giving me a tight, squeezing stroke that felt perfect.

“On the other hand, we’ll have plenty of time to strategize on the flight home.”

His lips curled up. “Thought so.”

Wes leaned in, his face so close to my cock I nearly lost it right then. He nipped my thigh with his teeth, and I jerked with a groan, my cock hardening more in his fist. My skin felt too tight, my pulse throbbing in my shaft to the rhythm of the words in my head: *want want want*.

I gave in then, the last of my restraint crumbling. We could have this now, if only for the next twenty-four hours. Just until we left for Granville, and our friends and family and their expectations that we be brothers instead of lovers.

“Fuck it,” I said with a gusty exhale. “If this is wrong, I don’t want to be right.”

He chuckled, working my cock with a strong hand while he ran his tongue from hip to hip, teasing at my navel. I curled over, grabbing his shoulders to keep myself upright as he shattered my fantasies with something even better.

Something real.

The knowledge that it couldn't last. That it was just a taste of an alternate reality where we weren't stepbrothers and we could be together, one moment out of time, only made it more intense.

Wes took command of my body, cock included, so confidently you'd never know it was his first time with a man. But that was Wes. Always all in with everything he did. He found all my sensitive spots, using lips and teeth and strong fucking fingers to play me to his tune. I began to shake with so much pleasure I felt as if I'd self-immolate.

"Wes, fuck!" I broke into a million pieces as I came, scattering to the universe, part of me staying in that place where I could be his and he could be mine.

"Knew I'd make you scream for me," he rasped, but his words were distant as I floated on waves of pleasure.

When I came back to myself, I wasn't whole. Because I'd gotten a glimpse of that other life, what could be, and I knew...I could never have it.

CHAPTER 2



WES

BECKETT WAS RIGID IN THE SEAT BESIDE ME ON THE PLANE. HE hunched over his phone, eyes fixed on the screen, shoulders halfway up to his ears. He'd gradually become tenser and quieter the closer we got to returning home.

Packing had been a depressing affair, with Beck flicking me despairing glances between neatly rolling his underwear into bundles. No amount of joking around as I tossed my clothes willy-nilly into my big duffel bag had lightened his mood, though he'd given me a weak-ass smile for the effort.

Once we got to the airport, he withdrew further, eyes staring blankly into the distance, only distracted acknowledgments when I asked if he was okay. If I knew Beckett—and I did—his mind was busy spinning out worst-case scenarios.

People in town tended to think we were both just a couple of dude bros acting like idiots. But the truth was, Beckett was much more complex than he let most people see.

He played the fool with me when he wanted to. That side of him was real, or we'd have never managed something as wild as getting married in Vegas. But there was always more going on under the surface.

He thought and thought and thought some more.

When he followed my lead, it was because he wanted a break from all that heavy headspace. Because I helped him let go and have fun.

He was probably regretting that right about now.

I glanced out the window to see the city of Omaha spread out ahead as the plane approached for landing. Once we arrived, we'd still have an hour-plus drive back to Granville, but our vacation would be officially over.

So was the unexpected but oh-so-gratifying honeymoon.

I was conflicted about that. Part of me was relieved to get back home, because hell, I'd never expected to act on this feeling, and I didn't know how to be Beck's boyfriend—or husband—when I was also his brother. Part of me was also regretful though, because hot damn had the sex been good. Who knew guy-on-guy action could be so hot? I was sure Tucker and Laurie knew firsthand, along with our other queer friends, but I'd never expected that for me.

My memories felt weird, sort of like a dream that had happened to someone else. If I knew Beckett, he was feeling everything I felt times one hundred.

“You okay, man?” I asked, despite asking half a dozen times in the past few hours. I grasped the back of Beckett's neck, squeezing gently. “You're strung pretty tight.”

He sighed, muscles loosening under my hand. “I was just reading up on annulment. That's not going to work for us because we didn't commit fraud, and as questionable as our decision-making was, we can't really claim mental incompetence either.” He gave me a wry look. “Although Dad might disagree on that one if he found out the full truth.”

“Can't we just get a divorce instead?”

“Yes.” He shifted toward me. “But that'll mean the marriage happened. Legally speaking. I kind of was hoping to erase all this, you know?”

“Ouch, Bee. Pull out the stinger.”

Beckett scowled. “You know I hate that nickname.”

I smiled. “I know you pretend to hate it.”

It was a name I'd given him shortly after he'd moved in with our family. We were both sixteen, and he'd been prickly

at first, quick with a sharp tongue that had primarily lashed out at me. It was a defense mechanism, and he'd calmed down once he felt more secure. But during that time, I'd coined him Bee because he was so quick to sting.

Beckett tried and failed to suppress a smile. "Better to be known as Bee than jackass, which was mostly what I called you back then."

I laughed. "You weren't exactly a Wes fan. Good thing I won you over, huh?" I winked.

Instead of bantering back, like he normally would have, Beckett returned his gaze to his phone screen, a light pink peeking through his freckles. As a redhead, he really couldn't hide strong emotions, and I realized I'd just made him blush.

Huh. That had never happened before.

Not gonna lie. I didn't hate it.

"I can't believe being family isn't grounds for annulment," Beckett complained. "That would make things so much simpler."

"Well, we're not really family."

He tensed right back up. "Thanks a lot."

"I just mean, like, bio family, Beck."

"Yeah, I know."

He said he knew, but he still wasn't looking at me, and not because he was bashful this time. I could tell my words had upset him, but I wasn't sure why. Beck had been part of the Potter clan for a decade now. Heck, most people referred to us as the Potter brothers even though Beckett's last name was actually Monroe.

I put my hand on his thigh, leaning in. "C'mon, man, you know you're an honorary Potter."

"Just not a real one."

"Well, you did just marry one," I joked. "So if you want my name, just say so."

“You can’t make jokes like that!” His voice went oddly high-pitched with nerves. “We’re almost home. We need to get back to normal.”

“Dude, I’m being totally normal—”

“Then why is your hand molesting my thigh?”

I glanced down, and sure enough, my casual touch had turned into a bit of a caress when I wasn’t looking. I’d moved my hand up and inward, nearly nudging his crotch, as I gently squeezed.

“Oops, my bad.” I forced myself to withdraw, even though it was hard to stop touching him. I continued to lean into his space, however. “Seriously, though, you know we’re family in the ways it counts. But considering what went down this weekend, I’m glad we’re not bio brothers, aren’t you?”

Beckett wrinkled his nose as my meaning hit him. “Yeah, you make a good point.”

I grinned. “I always do.”

“Seriously, though, Wes. We need to get back to being family, not...” He lowered his voice. “Not husbands or...”

“Fuck buddies?” I wagged my brows. “Bros with benefits?”

“Shut up.” He chuckled, so I knew he was relaxing. “No more jokes about this. What happened in Vegas—”

“Stays in Vegas,” I finished for him. “I know.”

I glanced out the window, noting that the plane was flying lower as it prepared for landing. As the seat belt light dinged on and the flight attendant announced we should put our seats in the upright position, I cupped Beckett’s jaw in one hand.

“But we’re not home yet.”

He parted his lips, but no protest emerged, so I swooped in and kissed him one more time, savoring the feel of his wide mouth beneath mine, the taste of him. I didn’t stop until my ears popped and the plane was gently taxiing across the tarmac.

When I pulled back, he blinked hazy eyes at me. I liked that look on him. It was the sort of look that made me want to drag him into the nearest bathroom and put that mouth to other uses.

Damn. The man was sensual as fuck, and I don't know how I'd missed it for all those years. I guess I had my straight-guy blinders on, too focused on hooking up with women to see what was right in front of me.

I'd never fail to notice again, not now that I'd had that mouth all over my body, kissing, licking. Even biting sometimes. And the sounds he made. *Fuuuuck*. Little whimpers and moans, but in a raspy, low voice that somehow made it sexier instead of weird.

Beckett looked out the window at the tarmac as the plane taxied and came to a stop. "Home sweet home."

"Yeah," I agreed, but this homecoming felt a lot less sweet than I'd expected. I'd kind of thought gorging on Beck in Vegas might get this craving out of my system, but now, as I considered that this kiss might have been our last, I was pretty sure I'd only managed to get myself addicted to something I couldn't keep.



BECKETT

WE ARRIVED in Granville a few hours later, our truck reeking of takeout from a burger dive we'd stopped at on the way home. I'd drowned my sorrows in a chocolate-banana shake and tried to remember how to make normal conversation with Wes.

Usually we could shoot the shit about anything.

Does a hot dog qualify as a sandwich?

Is cereal really soup?

Does pineapple belong on pizza?

Yes, yes, and hell no, but banana peppers are the bomb.

Today, we'd struggled, conversation strained as we tried to recapture our normal dynamic while working to forget the boundaries we'd crossed in Vegas. Like we hadn't gotten married and had sex. Like finally touching Wes the way I'd secretly craved for far too long hadn't permanently altered me.

Because I couldn't let it.

This was Granville, the nosy small town of all nosy small towns. Pretty much everyone here knew us. Knew us as Wes and Beck, brothers. Most folks didn't apply the step, though I was always aware of it, being the single Monroe in a household of Potters.

They'd always treated me as one of their own, but they weren't my first stepfamily, and after my former stepdad, Craig, walked out of my life after ten years, I didn't trust those bonds to last forever.

Much less withstand the strain of me fucking my stepbrother.

Wes drove straight to our little trailer behind Potter Landscaping, parking in the drive that was mostly dirt and dead grass. I gazed at the place we'd called home for six years. Damn, it was small.

Wes and I couldn't take a piss without tripping over one another. That had never bothered me before, but now...with a couple of incredible orgasms between us that we couldn't repeat...a little space would be nice.

"Well, here we are," he said.

"Yep."

Neither of us moved to get out.

"Home sweet home," Wes said.

"Yeah."

He slanted me a glance. "It seems smaller than I remember."

I laughed, the first easy one to come since waking up in bed with Wes. "I was just thinking that too."

Wes grinned at me, all kinds of stupid hot, and I flung open the door and fled the pickup before I did something ridiculous like beg him to kiss me again. That would not be happening, damn it. We were going to be bros, like always.

We grabbed our bags from the truck bed and headed up the rickety steps. Maybe we'd spent too long living in this tin can like a couple of frat boys. Maybe it was time to get an actual, real house.

Our living room was little more than two gamer chairs in front of a huge television and a jumble of gaming systems and remotes. My bedroom was the slightly larger one at the front of the trailer because I'd won a game of rock-paper-scissors for it. Wes's was crammed in the back, right by the bathroom.

"Well, uh, guess we'll catch up later?" Wes said, sounding awkward.

"Yeah..." I motioned toward my room. "I could use a nap."

He smirked. "Feeling a little worn out from—"

"All that traveling?" I interrupted before he could bring up any other reason I might be tired. "Yeah. I'm ready to decompress."

"Right, yeah." He shrugged. "I might kick back with some games for a while. Maybe order a pizza."

Our conversation was stilted, and Wes and I had been a lot of things over the years, but awkward was never one of them. I wasn't a fan.

"Just don't get any pineapple on that pizza," I joked, "or I'll have to kick you out of this house."

Wes grinned, and something loosened in my chest. We could do this. We *could*.

"I wouldn't want to call that bluff," he said.

I went into my bedroom and tossed my duffel on top of my dresser against the wall. My neatly made queen-size bed looked inviting, but as soon as I stripped down to my underwear and crawled under the blankets, my mind wouldn't

shut off. A highlights reel of our time in Vegas played on repeat, making me burn with a mix of arousal and shame. How could I have let this happen?

I took out my phone, desperate for a distraction, but only ended up doom scrolling through the comments on the video we'd made. I had dozens of notifications from friends and coworkers. Most people really did seem to think we were full of shit. I'd never been so relieved to look like an idiot.

I pulled up a Google search and put in "divorce attorneys" and "Omaha." No way I'd trust anyone in this little town not to blow our secret. Attorney-client privilege might exist, but it wouldn't stop the questions from all the people who saw us visit their office.

Eventually I drifted off. When I woke, I stayed in my bedroom. Yes, I was officially hiding. I just needed some space and time...

Wes and I tiptoed around each other for the next day, until he rapped on my bedroom door Sunday evening.

"What's up?" I called, trying to sound nonchalant, even as my heart pounded at the idea of seeing him again.

As if seeing my stepbrother, the man I saw on a daily basis and had for *years*, was suddenly the most thrilling thing that could happen to me.

Wes poked his head in, doing me no favors by looking as gorgeous as ever with his stylishly messy hair and dark stubble along a strong jaw. My mouth watered at the sight.

"Hey, uh, Dad just called."

Fuck. If the idea of seeing Wes had made my heart race, the thought of seeing Dad damn near gave me a heart attack.

Wes continued calmly, as if he wasn't about to send me to my grave early with this shit. "He was trying to get us to come over for dinner tonight, and you know what that would mean."

I grimaced. "He's gonna tear us a new one."

"Yeah, so uh..." Wes looked a little sheepish. "I panicked and made an excuse not to go."

I exhaled with relief. “Well, that’s good, right?”

“Well, yeah. But my excuse was that we had trivia tonight.”

I winced. “So instead of facing Dad we have to face all our friends? Not to mention everyone in that pub?”

“I know, man. I’m sorry. But I figured the lesser of two evils, you know?”

“I guess we can’t avoid it forever.”

Although I had hoped to avoid it for more than a day and a half. I should have known better. Our lives here wouldn’t stop just because I needed time to wrap my head around what happened between Wes and me.

“Sorry. I should have come up with something else. I was just...”

“I get it,” I said. “He put you on the spot.”

Wes’s gaze dipped to my chest, reminding me that I was barely dressed. My skin prickled with awareness, and a flash of lust swept through me at the look in his eyes.

“No one’s here,” he said, his voice lowering in register, as if he knew exactly where my thoughts had turned. “It could be our secret.”

“We can’t,” I said quickly. “It’s going to be hard enough with what happened in Vegas. But that’s Vegas. It’s like another life, you know? Or a dream. It wasn’t this life, wasn’t this reality. It can’t be.”

His forehead creased in a frown. “If that’s how you want it.”

“It’s how I need it.”

My heart ached with protest, calling me a liar. It clearly needed something entirely different.

Needed Wes’s strong arms around me, a wide smile on his face, and his dark eyes smoldering with promise.

Not the flash of hurt on his face before he turned away.

“Right, well, guess I should go get ready. Sorry I didn’t come up with a better excuse for tonight.”

He was gone before I could think of anything more to say. I sat in my bed, feeling more alone than I had since the day I’d moved into the Potter household and Wes had decided to embed himself in my side, first as a thorn, and then as a vine, or maybe a root.

He anchored me to the family. He always had. But now with this strain between us, it felt as if all it would take is one strong wind to blow me loose.

CHAPTER 3



WES

“WELL, IF IT ISN’T THE NEWLYWEDS!”

Catcalls and whistles erupted as we stepped into The Stag Pub. I chuckled and glanced sidelong at Beck to see how he was taking it. Judging by the grimace on his face, not great.

He’d talked a good game about us not avoiding shit forever, but that didn’t mean it was easy.

I thrust both my fists into the air, drawing most of the attention toward me. “Yes! Most epic prank everrrrrrr. You all got punked!”

Laughter met my response, along with trash talk from some of my favorite Granvillians.

“You didn’t fool me!” Tracy Willoughby called cheerfully. “Beckett is so not your type.”

“Yeah, because she is,” Beckett grumbled under his breath.

His response wasn’t exactly surprising. He’d never liked Tracy much. But for the first time I wondered if he was jealous.

Even more disconcerting, at the thought that he might be, my chest warmed and expanded as if he’d climbed right inside my heart. It was a soothing balm for the bruised ego he’d given me by rebuffing my offer to pick up where we’d left off in Vegas.

I knew, logically, that Beck was right. It would complicate the fuck out of our lives. But we had been so fucking good

together. I didn't know how to shut the door on the best sex I'd ever had.

"I don't know," Loretta, a regular at the bar, teased. "They do make a handsome set of grooms!"

"In your fantasies maybe," the bartender, Calista, joked before shooting us a wink.

Was that wink flirtatious? She'd dated Beckett before breaking it off to be with her girlfriend. They were still girlfriends, weren't they? Because if she thought she was getting her hands on Beck ever again...

"In everyone's fantasies!" Loretta called with a cackle of laughter, pulling me from my spiraling thoughts.

"Well, I never believed it for a second," Percy Helix said with a sniff. "Anyone can see they've got no chemistry."

I snorted. "Like you'd have the first clue—"

Beckett interrupted me. "You're so right, Percy. I guess you're too smart to fall for our tricks."

"That's right. I am."

Percy puffed up a little in his seat, the little shit.

"Actually, Percy, you—"

"Shhh!" Beckett tugged me away. "Do not engage. This is good."

I huffed with annoyance. "That guy wouldn't know chemistry if it bit him in the ass."

He'd said the same thing about Hunter and Clark, and those two were a perfect match. In that case, he'd probably been jealous. He and Clark had one disastrous date that didn't end well.

"We want people to think like him," Beckett reminded me. "Don't argue with a good thing."

I shut my mouth, even though I wanted to correct Percy so much it was making me twitchy. I'd never been able to stand

that guy, even before he'd started a fight with Clark in the middle of their first date.

We made it to the table, where our closest friends had gathered for the weekly trivia game. Bobbi sat at the head of the table as always, our sole female member. Augustus, a smart but fussy man with dark auburn hair, was seated to her right. Then Tucker and his husband, Laurie, beyond him. Hunter and his boyfriend, Clark, were on the left. Two empty chairs were available for Beckett and me.

None of them had been among the trash talkers as we crossed the pub, and their silence made me more nervous. My palms broke out in a sweat, and I overcompensated.

“What kind of friends are you? No congratulations for the newlyweds? I'm hurt!”

Beckett muttered quietly, “For fuck's sake.”

“Where's the love?” I continued. “I was expecting wedding gifts!”

“All right, you've had your fun,” Tucker said with a lip twitch. “But your text to Laurie kind of clued us in.”

“Yeah, a prank works better if you don't tell your friends before you do it,” Hunter added.

Thank fuck for the text exchange we'd had that night that led them to believe we were pranking them by pretending to get married, rather than doing it for real. I was a shit liar, and if they'd taken it seriously and asked directly, we'd be screwed.

“Guess you caught us,” I said. “Right, Beck?”

“Right.” He pulled out a chair across from Tucker and Laurie and scowled. “Next time don't text us bad ideas when we're drunk as fuck, okay?”

Hunter chuckled. “He has a point. You never know what Wes will drag the poor guy into.”

“Hey!” I took my seat next to Beckett. “It takes two to tango.”

“That’s true,” Tucker said. “Why *do* you let yourself get pulled into these messes with him, Beck?”

Beckett huffed. “You try saying no to this guy. It’s like trying to convince a giant toddler he can’t have candy.”

“Harsh, man.”

Beck grinned at me, making my heart flip. “I just call it like I see it.”

I smiled, relieved to see him relaxing as familiar banter bounced among our friends. But when I looked at him, his green eyes drew me in, and I couldn’t look away. How had I never noticed how beautiful they were before? Amber flecks ringed his pupil, then gradually transitioned to an olive green before darkening to blue at the outer edge.

Laurie’s voice broke into my momentary lapse of sanity. “Are you two sure you’re okay? If this wasn’t just a prank...”

I jolted back into the moment as Beckett laughed, a slight edge of nervousness to it. “Don’t be ridiculous. We’re brothers.”

“Stepbrothers,” Laurie qualified, and despite the situation, I appreciated that someone was making the distinction.

“They’re still family,” Clark protested. “You don’t have to be related by blood.”

Hunter wrapped an arm around his boyfriend’s shoulders. “No question of that, angel. Toby loves you as much as I do.”

Toby was Hunter’s son, and Clark had become like a second father to him since moving in with his boyfriend.

Laurie glanced at Beckett, who’d ducked his head to hide his expression, and winced. “Oh, I didn’t mean to say...”

“We know you didn’t,” Tucker said, wrapping his arm around his husband.

Geez, we were surrounded by couples. No wonder I’d lost my mind and married Beckett in Vegas. Everywhere I turned, one of our friends was falling in love.

First, Augustus had given in to his attraction to his coworker, Joe. Then Clark had broken his personal rule not to date fathers of students to be with Hunter.

But I was most surprised—along with everyone else in this town—when a husband Tucker had kept secret for nearly two decades arrived in Granville and rekindled their relationship.

They'd all made leaps of faith to be together. But it wasn't the same for Beck and me. We were family, blood-related or not, and there was more at stake than just our feelings on the matter. I hadn't liked that Beckett shot me down earlier today, but I understood why.

Taking that leap together would be a fuck ton more complicated than it had been for any of our friends.

I rubbed my ring finger, missing the weight of my wedding band. I'd only worn it for twenty-four hours, and somehow it had made a lasting impression.

One I wasn't likely to forget anytime soon no matter how much I pretended what happened in Vegas was nothing but a prank. I realized Laurie was watching me and stopped abruptly. His gaze met mine, a lot more answers than questions in his eyes.

Beckett must have noticed because he “accidentally” knocked over Clark's beer. Laurie's gaze was diverted as Clark jumped back, and Hunter grabbed a stack of napkins.

“Shit, sorry,” Beckett said. “I'll order you a new one.”

While Beck went to replace Clark's drink and order a couple for us, the conversation moved on—though Laurie's watchful eyes didn't.

It was pretty clear that while most of our friends were inclined to believe our marriage was a joke, Laurie Ellis wasn't so easily convinced. I resisted the urge to rub my ring finger again, the weight of that wedding band feeling heavy even if it was nowhere on my body.

I watched Beck return, standing to help him set the glasses down on the table.

“Thanks,” he said, sounding surprised.

“Always happy to help,” I said in a low voice.

When I retook my seat, everyone was watching me with expressions ranging from bafflement to suspicion.

“What? I can be nice!”

Beckett snorted. “You must have gotten too much sun in Vegas, huh?”

Our friends busted up in laughter again, reverting to the trash talk we all embraced as our love language.

Beckett kicked my ankle under the table when I didn’t join in, giving me a warning glance.

Right. Everyone expected me to be his trash-talking stepbrother, not the guy who’d kissed him stupid in Vegas, and definitely not the guy who wanted to do it again. Right now.

This pretending shit was harder than it looked.



BECKETT

I RAPPED on the bathroom door at 5:55 a.m. the following morning. “Hurry up! We’re going to be late.”

I was showered, dressed, and caffeinated—all while Wes hit snooze a dozen times in a desperate attempt to cling to sleep. This was a familiar routine, and going through the motions of it made me feel more normal than I had since we went to Vegas.

When trivia ended last night, I’d gone straight to bed and actually managed to sleep better than I had since we’d gotten home. Ripping off the Band-Aid with our friends had been reassuring. The sooner we faced everyone, the sooner we could move on.

Inside the bathroom, Wes cursed, the shower curtain rattled, then the door opened. He grabbed my coffee mug from

my hand, which I'd already cooled with a couple of ice cubes because of what he'd do next.

Wes gulped the coffee down in three huge swallows, Adam's apple bobbing as his throat worked.

The kick of my heart as I watched water droplets course down his bare chest was also familiar. But it was more powerful than it had been before, shattering the illusion that I could pretend we'd never had sex.

I spun away, knowing that in two minutes, Wes would emerge from the bathroom butt naked to rush into his room and pull on jeans and a Potter Landscaping T-shirt—still half wet, so the fabric clung to him in unfortunately delicious ways. There was a time I'd hung around intentionally to see that, figuring that enjoying the view did little harm.

I knew better now.

I went out the front door, down the two rickety steps, and was halfway across the dirt yard to the Potter Landscaping main office—also a trailer, though even smaller than ours—when Wes caught up with me.

“How funny is it that we're landscapers and we have the most shit yard ever?”

“Less funny than the first time you said it...six years ago?”

“Nah, it's still funny.” He chuckled, amused by his own wit.

When I didn't laugh, he elbowed me in the ribs.

“Fuck off!” I said with a grin and shoved him in return, not that he moved much. Wes was the kind of sturdy that didn't budge unless he wanted.

Which means he let you win that wrestling match in Vegas...

He wanted you on top of him, squirming around on his dick.

“Hey, you okay before we go in there?”

I blinked. We stood before the door to Nathan Potter's office. I didn't even remember the rest of the walk over. Wes was looking at me with concern, probably assuming I'd been panicking rather than overtaken by scandalous memories. I swallowed and attempted to smile. "Yeah, sure. It's only my job, my place in the family, and my last shred of respect at stake."

Wes scoffed. "None of those things are at stake. You're the responsible brother." He nudged me with his shoulder. "I'm the son who fucks up, and Dad knows it."

But he was the *real* son. It didn't matter how much talk of family not being blood that I heard, I had the scars to prove that some so-called family bonds were flimsy as fuck. I wanted to believe Nathan Potter was more loyal than my last stepdad, but there was always a little doubt lurking in my mind. And that was *before* I fucked his son.

Wes opened the door and I followed him inside, dread sitting heavy in the pit of my stomach.

My stepfather was an imposing man, even now when he was mostly retired. He had a full head of salt-and-pepper hair, a square jaw covered in dark stubble at all times of the day, and shoulders and arms that were still muscled enough to stretch the confines of his T-shirts—though they were considerably less tan now that he left all the manual labor to Wes and me.

He glanced up from some paperwork as we entered. "Cutting it close."

"Close is still on time," Wes said.

"I wanted to talk to you both before you head out for the day. You know we're getting ready to expand Beaver Hole."

"Oh, I've thought of nothing else." Wes grinned. "We'll fill that Beaver Hole sooooo good."

I bit down on a smile, while Nathan glowered.

"Is everything a goddamn joke to you?"

"Pretty much."

“And what about you?” His piercing gaze landed on me. “You’re awfully quiet, but you weren’t so quiet on that fucking video you two clowns made in Vegas.”

“I’m not laughing,” I said, gut clenching.

“Well, the rest of the damn town is. You two are the faces of Potter Landscaping, and now everyone associates that with drunken idiocy, and that’s if we’re lucky and they don’t believe you two actually got married!”

Wes took a step forward, drawing his dad’s attention away from me. “What, no congratulations? You’re ruining the honeymoon.”

Nathan’s face shifted from mild irritation to full-on anger.

“Seriously, Wes,” I muttered behind him. “You wanna poke the bear and get eaten?”

“We all know Dad’s pissed. Might as well talk about it.”

When Nathan spoke again, the words were spit from between clenched teeth. “We’ll talk over dinner tonight. Get to work. I’m assuming you can do that without making us more of a joke than we already are?”

“We’ll do our best,” I said.

Nathan didn’t look much more impressed with me than Wes. “See that you do. You’re already going to be late.”

“And whose fault is—”

I opened the door and dragged Wes outside before he could finish his sentence and make the situation worse.

“Do you really have to wind him up like that?” I demanded as I stomped toward the pickup.

“He was overreacting,” Wes said, “so yeah. He needs to chill.”

“Easy for you to say. You’re not the one he’ll cut loose.”

“C’mon, Beck, that’s not true.”

I huffed and threw the keys at him. “You’re his son, the one who’ll inherit Potter Landscaping when he retires fully.

Me? I'm just the spare stepkid, as dependent on him for a job as anyone else in the company. He can fire me, Wes."

I got into the truck, and after a pause, Wes joined me. As he started the engine, he glanced sidelong at me. "He'd never do that."

"He might. You heard him. This bullshit is a bad look for the business."

Wes scoffed. "Whatever, we prune bushes and lay sod. People don't care if we fucked around in Vegas. They care that their yard looks great when we're done."

I shook my head. "It's not always that simple."

"It is," he insisted. "And even if it's not, do you really think I'd let him fire you? Over my dead body, man." He held out a fist. "Bros first and forever, right?"

I reluctantly smiled and tapped knuckles with him. "Right."

But inside, I wasn't so sure. Nathan had been angry, and judging by his glares, most of that anger had been directed toward me.

CHAPTER 4



WES

“HELL YES, I LOVE BIG EQUIPMENT!”

“Ah, that explains why you married Beck, then!” Luke, one of our longtime crew members, called out with a shit-eating grin on his face.

Beckett and I had just rolled up to the empty lot adjacent to Beaver Hole Park, a trailer attached to the back of our pickup to haul off brush and limbs. Our crew had already assembled, and a Bobcat and cherry picker were on site so we could begin moving dirt and removing trees to clear the way for a larger green space.

Luke’s joke was probably going to be the first of many, but Beckett and I had discussed how to handle the guys on the way here. I was a shit liar, and we both knew it, but so long as the idea of our marriage remained a big joke, it was unlikely anyone would suspect the truth. And there was nothing I was better at than trash talking with some friends.

“Aww, are you jealous, Luke?” I said with a mock pout. “Sorry, but I don’t know if lumberjack is really Beck’s type.” I looked to Beck. “What do you think?”

“Yeah, not really my type,” he agreed. “I’m not into beards.”

I resisted the urge to scratch at my stubble, wondering if I should have made time to shave this morning. Not that it mattered what Beck thought, because we’d already agreed that what happened in Vegas would stay there.

“I’m not a lumberjack,” Luke grumbled, crossing beefy arms over a broad chest. It was too hot for flannel, but come winter, he’d definitely be rocking the complete look that went with his bushy beard. “And I’m not interested in Beck.”

“Just my equipment,” Beck said, his dry humor hitting the mark as it always did.

The guys all busted up laughing, and Luke flipped us all off, face red.

We’d neatly diverted the topic from our marriage until fucking Colton piped up.

“This marriage thing isn’t true, right?” he asked, face scrunched with a look of disgust. “Andi said it was just a big joke, but it’s not really funny.”

Andi was my baby sister and his girlfriend, and pretty much the only reason he was still on this crew after more than one fuckup.

“C’mon,” Ryder said with a snort. “Of course it’s fucking funny! They’re taking bros before ho’s to a whole new level! It’s an epic fucking prank.” He high-fived me. “You guys are legendary.”

“Gross,” Colton muttered loud enough that we heard him.

I opened my mouth to tell him where to stick it, but Beck clapped his hands, drawing everyone’s attention. “All right, you’ve all had your fun. We need to get to work.”

“And I call dibs on the Bobcat,” I said.

“Aw man, you always take the best jobs,” Luke complained.

“Just for that, you get to go for a ride in the bucket,” I said. “I’m sure trimming those trees from the top down under the heat of the sun will be a walk in the park, right? After all, you’re our lumberjack.”

Luke grumbled, but everyone knew he was the best man for the job, including him. He did the majority of our tree trimming and removal jobs. Not just anyone could hop in the bucket and safely go to town on an 80-foot bur oak tree.

“What about me?” Colt asked.

“You’re with me,” Beckett said. “Just because we’re starting on the park project doesn’t mean all our other work stops. I’ll be taking a crew out to cover our residential jobs.”

Colt pulled a face, no doubt wanting a turn at the bigger machinery—or at least at the more exciting project. “You mean mowing and weed-eating and boring-ass shit.”

Beckett’s face grew stern. “I mean our bread-and-butter as a company. Big projects may be more exciting, but they don’t keep us in regular paychecks.”

Colton turned to me. “Isn’t this your call to make?”

“Beck just made the call, so obviously not. Get your ass in gear unless you’d rather go home without pay.”

He winced. “Nah, man, I need to work. I was just making sure.”

Bullshit. He was a little weasel who was trying to put Beckett in an awkward position by turning to me for guidance.

We ran our crews pretty informally. While I technically had stepped into my dad’s shoes when he stopped leading the work crews, Beckett and I had always shared the responsibility and every one of these guys knew it.

Ryder stepped forward. “Where do you want me, Beck? I’ll mow the shit out of some yards for you.”

He was a good guy, showing his support for Beck so that Colt’s little stunt wouldn’t further undermine his authority.

Beckett nodded. “Thanks, Ryder. I’d love to have a reliable second on our residential jobs today.”

Colton huffed, but he was smart enough to keep his mouth shut this time.

We directed a few more of the guys to their assignments for the day. Then the group broke up to get to work, some of them heading for areas of the park, while others went to the trucks that towed our mowers and other equipment for more routine work.

I stopped Beckett as he turned away, feeling a flicker of guilt. “Hey, man, if you want to stay here and have me go...”

He snorted. “Please, you love big equipment. We all heard it.”

“Doesn’t mean I should hog all the fun. I wasn’t thinking...”

Beckett always had been the more responsible of the two of us. He looked at the big picture beyond the fun of operating a Bobcat for a day or two. That’s why we made such good partners. I loved the job, loved being outside and working with the guys, even when it was sweaty-balls hot. I couldn’t imagine sitting in an office all day, even the management office for Potter Landscaping.

Beckett was different. He had a sharp eye for design, and he could turn the ugliest spaces into magazine-worthy with the right freedom to combine his knowledge and creativity. He’d incorporate native plants, raised flowerbeds, and paving paths to create beautiful spaces, and I’d happily follow his instincts any day.

We had a plan from the city for the park—a rough blueprint of where park features needed to be located—but we had plenty of wiggle room on how to beautify the area and I knew Beckett would make us look great.

“Just do a good job today,” Beck said. “You know what’s more important than big equipment, right?”

“What’s that?”

“Knowing how to use it.”

I chuckled, my voice dipping low as I replied. “I know exactly how to use it, and you know it, Beck.”

Our words had taken on a second layer of meaning, and Beck’s face—already flushed from the heat of the sun—seemed to grow brighter, the cute spray of freckles across his cheeks even darker than usual.

“Uh...good. I should...”

“Yeah, go, man. I’ve got this.”

“Don’t think you get to have all the fun with Beaver Hole though,” he warned.

“Don’t worry, man, you can have all the bush.”

Snorting a laugh, he rolled his eyes and turned away, breaking into a jog toward the pickup where Ryder already waited.

I watched him go, probably smiling like an idiot, thinking how damn lucky I was to go to work with my favorite person every day. Colton was an immature dick who wanted to play games, but I knew better than anyone that I couldn’t do half the job I did without Beck’s brains to match my brawn.



BECKETT

WE’D NEARLY FINISHED MOWING and edging Emily Rafferty’s yard, the smell of fresh-cut grass and my own sweat heavy in the air. It was noon, and the sun was beating down from directly overhead, blazing across the back of my neck.

Only the coppery-colored tan I’d gained from months of summer work would save me from burning.

I caught Ryder’s eye and nodded toward the yard next door, which belonged to Iola Fletcher. The grass was getting a bit tall and the boxwood shrubs in front of her porch a bit scraggly.

Ryder gave me a two-fingered salute and loped toward the backyard, where Colton rode the riding mower. The kid was a brat, pure and simple. He’d complained so much today that sticking him on the mower, the least labor-intensive of the jobs we did, was the only way to shut him up. Ryder had looked as if he was ready to do murder, and I couldn’t have that on my conscience.

It all made a good distraction from thinking about my situation with Wes. For the first time since waking up married, my chest had loosened enough for me to take an easy breath,

We'd have to get through dinner with our parents—most likely Andi would also be there with popcorn to watch the show—but life was already beginning to feel a little more normal.

We could go back.

Even if I always felt that pull toward Wes, I was strong enough not to give in. Our lives as brothers and friends were more important than any sexual attraction. I just had to remember what was at stake.

Colton arrived at my side, shirtless.

“Beckett, why is Ryder saying we're gonna do Iola's yard?” he complained. “She's not a client, and I'm dying for a break.”

You're dying for something...

“Colt, put your fuckin' shirt back on,” I said.

“But it's hot.”

“I don't give a flying fuck, man. It's unprofessional, and I doubt Emily or Iola want to see your pasty-white chest.”

I wasn't sure *what* Andi saw in him. He was an okay-looking kid, but not nearly good enough to make up for his crappy attitude.

“Geez, fine.” Colt grabbed the tank hanging from his back pocket—also not the approved Potter Landscaping T-shirt the rest of us wore—and tugged it over his head. “No need to flip out.”

“You should be thanking me,” I said. “You want skin cancer?”

He huffed and rolled his eyes. “Okay, Dad.”

I weighed the satisfaction of making Colton mow Iola's yard against how much his moaning and groaning would annoy me. In fairness, Iola wasn't a client. This was strictly a gesture of kindness, so I let him off the hook.

“Go cool off in the truck. I'll mow Iola's yard.”

“Yes! Thanks, man!”

He thrust out his knuckles for a bump, and I reluctantly tapped fists. Colt might bug the shit out of me, but he was still someone I had to maintain a decent working relationship with.

I jogged around the house and climbed aboard the mower, scanning the yard to ensure Colt hadn't half-assed it. There was one sketchy area I went over, but mostly it was up to snuff, so I steered through an open gate and into Iola's yard.

About thirty minutes later, I drove the mower back up the ramps extended from our pickup. Ryder loaded the edger and hedge trimmer from the side.

“Oh, you boys!” Iola called from her front porch. “You didn't have to do that!”

Ryder and I returned to her front steps.

“It was no trouble, ma'am,” Ryder said. “It only took a few minutes.”

“But I can't afford to be one of your clients.”

“Then it'll just have to be our secret,” I said with a wink.

She squeezed my arm. “Well, at least let me thank you with a slice of pie.”

I exchanged a look with Ryder, and we grinned. Starting lunch with dessert? Heck, yes. Colton could sit in the pickup while we indulged.

After a nice chat with Iola, which included her telling me all about her new matchmaking venture she was launching and that if I hadn't *really* married Wes, then I should apply for her services.

Ryder had muffled a laugh as I contemplated the Catch-22 I found myself in. I couldn't admit that Wes and I were married, but that meant unleashing a matchmaking nana on myself. I remembered the match she'd tried to make for my friend, Clark, and it was not pretty. Percy Helix had been a pompous ass who'd ditched Clark midway through their date.

And Clark had been relieved when it happened.

“Uh, thanks, but I’m not really looking for love.”

“Oh, pfft! Everyone needs love in their lives. You’re a good man, Beckett. You helped out an old lady like me when you could have saved yourself some time under that awful sun. You deserve a proper thank-you.”

“The pie is more than enough.”

Ryder caught sight of my desperate eyes and added, “It’s really delicious, Mrs. Fletcher. A perfect thank-you.”

“No, no, no. I insist.” She beamed at me, eyes sparkling. “Laurie Ellis has given me start-up funding. I just need to build a client roster, but don’t you worry, Beckett. I’m going to find you the perfect woman...or man?”

“Uh, I’ve only dated women,” I said.

Not a lie. Wes was the only man I’d felt a spark with. The only man who made me want to get closer and closer. At first, I’d thought it was just our bond as brothers. We’d become good friends, and I trusted no one more. But over time, that urge to get close had transitioned to a physical craving.

One night, after a particularly heated debate over the best Batman—obviously Christian Bale, though Wes insisted on Michael Keaton—and wrestling match, I’d gone to my room flushed and semihard and found myself fantasizing about what might have happened if that wrestling match had gone on long enough for my cock to grind against Wes, if perhaps he was hard too...

I’d had my hand around my cock before I could fully process what I was doing and how freaking bad it would be to allow myself the pleasure. I stroked, images unspooling of Wes pinning me down, of him jerking his own hard cock from his sweatpants and making me suck it.

I’d come so hard to fantasies of my stepbrother that my head had spun and a sickening pit of guilt opened in my stomach.

I’d never been able to look at Wes the same way. But I’d never, not in a million years, ever expected him to reciprocate like he had in Vegas.

I should regret it. I wanted to regret it.

But I couldn't. Not then. Not now.

Wes had given me my heart's deepest, most shameful desire.

I'd hold that inside me for a lifetime, treasuring the intimacy we shared, even if it had lasted for little more than a day.

But regret or not, it couldn't happen again, so I gave Iola the best smile I could muster. "All right, Iola, do your worst."

She clapped her hands and laughed with glee. "Oh, you just wait, Beckett. I'll find your perfect match! You won't regret this!"

I was pretty sure I already did, but Iola had already made it clear she was determined, and she was not a woman to be deterred. I might as well embrace it as a way to move on. After all, it was better to go on a few bad dates I regretted than to implode my life by trying to attain the impossible with Wes.

CHAPTER 5



WES

I WAS HALF-STARVED BY THE TIME WE GOT TO OUR PARENTS' place. Beckett and I had to shower and change before we were suitable for any kind of company, much less a dinner where we were sure to be grilled mercilessly.

I'd nearly made a fool of myself a second time when Beckett walked out of the bathroom in nothing but a towel, transporting me straight back to the hotel room and the moment I'd tugged his towel off and bared his body to me. That day, he'd looked a little shocked, but in a good way, as if he couldn't believe his luck.

Now, as we prepared to walk into the lion's den at our parents' house, he barely looked at me.

I couldn't stand it, so I stopped him on the wide front porch. Behind us, the beautifully landscaped yard was a testament to our father's business. Azaleas blooming with delicate pink petals framed the front of the house. Beautiful sprays of lavender, intermingled with bright yellow lilies, lined the front walk.

The flowers' perfume hung in the air, but I moved in close enough to smell Beckett, a clean, masculine spice that made me want to bury my nose in his neck and just breathe.

"Listen, man, before we go in there..."

His eyes met mine, full of worry. "Yeah?"

"Everything's going to be okay as long as we have each other's backs. Just like always, okay?"

He exhaled and shook out his hands as if trying to loosen up before a fight. But with any luck, there would be no punches thrown.

“Do you trust me?” I asked him.

“You know I do, but—”

“No buts,” I cut in. “We’re in this together, and as long as we stick together, we’re going to be fine. But we can’t let this come between us, okay, Beck?”

“Yeah.” He nodded. “Yeah, you’re right.”

“We’re bros first,” I said, holding out my fist for a bump.

I’d rather hug him, brush a thumb over the arch of his cheekbone, taste those soft lips again. But these were precarious times, and I had to consider what Beck needed right now. The urge to touch him, to pull him closer, might never fade. I’d have to learn how to resist that instinct. But the urge to protect him? That wasn’t going any-fucking-where, and it was the one thing I could do right.

Beckett tapped knuckles with me, a small smile on his face that felt like a victory.

The door opened, and my little sister, Andi, stood framed in the doorway. “Are you two dorks going to stand out there all night?”

“If only we could,” Beckett muttered before pushing past her to go inside.

Andi fixed her wide eyes on me. She looked innocent, but she was far from it. A wicked grin overtook her face. “You are in so much trouble. I can’t wait to watch this trainwreck.”

“Thanks for the support, sis.” I wrapped an arm around her and messed up her hair.

“Hey, stop it!” She fought my hold, but she was no match for me, and I’d made a rat’s nest of her blond hair before she escaped. “You’re a brat!”

“No, you’re a brat,” I said, always ready with a witty comeback.

“Seriously, though, Dad is mad,” she whispered. “Tread carefully tonight.”

“I will. Where’s your worse half?”

She pulled a face. “He said he’d already had plenty of the Wes-Beckett show today. He was pretty surly after work. What did you guys say to him?”

I shrugged. “We just made him do his job. If he doesn’t like it, he can quit.”

She slapped my arm. “Nice!”

I reached for her hair again, ready to retaliate, when Dad’s voice boomed from the next room.

“Stop harassing your sister. Christ.”

I pointed at her. “She started it!”

“Nuh-uh. He started it!”

Dad turned toward Beckett, as he usually did when his children were driving him bonkers. “Where did I go wrong as a parent? Why won’t they grow up?” Before Beckett could respond, Dad waved away the comment. “What am I asking you for? You’re just as bad. I really thought you had better judgment, Beckett.”

Beckett’s face fell, and I was halfway across the room before I registered even moving. “Don’t take out your anger on him. It took two of us to—”

“To what?” Dad cut in. “Behave like idiots? I’m pretty sure you both know how to do it on your own, but you sure as hell make it ten times worse together, don’t you?” He shook his head. “I can’t believe I trusted you to take over the business when I retire.”

“What? This has nothing to do with work.”

“It has everything to do with it,” he argued. “You think I want to hand my legacy over to someone who’ll turn it into a big goddamned joke?”

“He’d never do that,” Beckett said quietly.

Dad sighed. “And before you two went on video and made a mockery of the Potter name, maybe I’d have believed you. Marriage is not a joke, and neither is this family. You two are supposed to be brothers!”

“We *are* brothers,” I said.

“What in the hell were you thinking, then?”

“We weren’t thinking about—”

“Damn right, you weren’t. That’s exactly the problem.”

Beck’s mom chose that moment to step out of the kitchen. She laid a hand on Dad’s arm. “Dinner will get cold. Let’s eat, hon.” Her gaze flitted to me and Beckett, a soft sweetness in her eyes that was a counterpart to Dad’s sledgehammer approach. She would never contradict Dad, but she’d temper him.

“Yeah, all right. No sense wasting good food,” he grumbled, turning away.

Andi grimaced at us as she passed by, probably realizing that her idea of an amusing night was going to be a hell of a lot tenser than she’d expected.

I bumped Beck with my shoulder. “See? We’ve got him right where we want him.”

He snorted a quiet laugh. “Yeah, it’s going really well.”

“It’s probably only going to get worse.” I grimaced. “I’m sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing to me?”

“We both know I’m the wild one, and you’re the reasonable one.”

Beckett shook his head. “Then I should apologize, because I wasn’t reasonable in Vegas. Like...at *all*.”

I thought about all the unreasonable things we’d done, and couldn’t find it in myself to regret it. A small smirk tugged at my lips. “Definitely don’t apologize for that.”

He rolled his eyes. “You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I know you usually rein me in when I go too far.”

“But not this time,” he said quietly.

Not this time. Which begged the question, was the reason Beckett failed to stop me from this impulsive step because he’d been drunk and wild too—or because for once, he really hadn’t wanted to?

“Guys, come on!” Dad called. “The food’s getting cold!”

We exchanged one last look before turning toward the dining room. “I guess it’s time to enjoy our last meal before the execution,” Beckett muttered.

I chuckled. “Nah. Dad’s bark is always worse than his bite.”

“Famous last words.”



BECKETT

AS USUAL WITH the Potter men, food took priority over everything else, and we all fell into devouring Mom’s pot roast. Wes was making these little sounds of pleasure in his throat as he ate that were absolutely indecent.

I kicked his ankle to make him stop before I had an indecent situation of my own.

He glanced at me, confused.

“Slow down,” I said. “I don’t want to have to do the Heimlich on you.”

“There, you see,” Dad said, pointing a fork in my direction. “That’s what you should have done when Wes proposed this ridiculous prank.”

“Told him he didn’t want to do the Heimlich?” Andi asked, eyes dancing with mirth. She was such a little shit stirrer.

“Told him to slow the fuck down,” Dad growled.

“Who wants another dinner roll!” Mom asked, her voice extra cheery in an attempt to counter his glower.

She held the basket out over the table looking so damn hopeful I couldn’t leave her hanging. I grabbed one. “Thanks, Mom. This is all so good.”

“You’re rewarding bad behavior, Carol,” Dad grumbled. “We should’ve served liver and onions tonight.”

My mother tilted her head. “Do *you* like liver and onions?”

“Well, no...”

She nodded. “So you’d punish yourself just to make a point?”

Dad sighed, knowing when he was beat.

I took a big bite out of my roll, watching the mastery of my mother at work. She was quiet and often came across as timid. She hated conflict and always had, which was probably why her marriage to Craig had lasted as long as it had. But she had her way of speaking up, and when she did, she usually hit her target.

As much as I appreciated Mom’s defense, I wished it wasn’t necessary.

“I’m an adult,” Wes said into the quiet tension hanging over the table. “It’s not fair to blame Beck for my poor choices.”

“No, you’re right. You’re an adult, and you need to act like an adult.” Dad reached for Mom’s hand and linked their fingers. “Marriage isn’t a joke. Carol and I love each other. We take our commitment to one another seriously.”

“We weren’t mocking that,” Wes protested.

“You damn sure were,” he said. “But even if that wasn’t your intent, you made people question what the hell is going on in this family. And like it or not, we’ve got a business to run. You get drunk on video, you might as well be telling all our clients that you’re irresponsible.”

“You’re right,” I said. “That video was very bad judgment.”

“It sure was.”

“But no one takes it seriously,” I continued. “It’ll blow over.”

“Maybe,” he grumbled. “But it’s made me seriously question stepping down from the business. I can’t put Potter Landscaping into hands I can’t trust.”

“You can trust us,” Wes protested. “We always get the job done.”

“Running a business isn’t just about the labor. It’s about perception. Potter Landscaping needs to be a respectable business. Wes, this isn’t the first time you’ve acted without thinking, so until I see some evidence that you’re ready to be a responsible adult, I can’t risk giving you the business. I’ve had an offer from Greener Gardens in Riverton. They want to buy our operation so they can expand into Granville.”

Wes dropped his fork. “You can’t be serious. Beck and I have worked our asses off for this business!”

“Sure, and so has the rest of my crew,” Dad said. “I have to think about the bigger picture.”

Wes sat back, looking so defeated that my heart hurt for him. Nathan was never going to give the business to me. I’d known that ever since the day Wes came home, all excited because his father had given him the team leader position.

“Man, I thought he’d keep us waiting for another five years!” he’d said. “We’ve finally got our shot to show him we can take over the business. With your brains and my beauty, we can’t lose.”

He’d simply assumed we’d lead the crew together, and eventually the business, and I hadn’t wanted to rain on his parade. It was enough that Wes respected me and treated me as an equal. It had to be enough.

Nathan Potter might have welcomed me into his family, but that didn’t mean he wanted to pass on his legacy to

someone who didn't carry his name. It hurt, but I understood. He'd had a plan to give Wes the business before I was even in his life.

But Wes? Wes deserved better. Wes deserved everything.

"What kind of legacy will you be leaving if you sell to Greener Gardens?" I asked.

Dad's attention fixed on me. "Not a very good one."

I nodded. "Wes has devoted his whole life to Potter Landscaping. Maybe he's made a few mistakes. Maybe we both have. But the name Potter Landscaping means something in Granville. If it didn't, you wouldn't be so upset."

He sighed, a grudging respect entering his eyes. "That's true. I don't want to throw in the towel yet."

Wes straightened in his chair. "We made a mistake, but like Beck said, it'll blow over."

"Until the next one."

"There won't be a next one," Wes said quickly.

Dad snorted. "That's easy to say right now. But when I'm not there and you're feeling drunk and stupid, who's to say you won't make another, even bigger mistake."

"Because I won't."

"I'm gonna need more than just your word."

"Like what?"

Dad exchanged a look with Mom, who nodded, and then let out a gusty sigh. "All right, here's the deal. Beaver Hole is big. We need to work with the Dix owners to satisfy everyone."

I could feel Wes's desire to pop off with a sex joke, and I kicked him under the table before he could ruin this deal before Dad finished speaking.

Wes kicked me back, making me jerk in my seat.

"If you can manage this project and all the aspects of it," Dad said, "meaning liaising with Dix as well as working

Beaver Hole and coordinating with the city on their five-year plan so we can nail down future projects”—*dear god, he was really testing our fortitude with these innuendos*—“without a single hiccup, and I mean one goddamned problem, then and only then will I feel comfortable fully retiring and letting the Potter Landscaping name carry on with you.”

“Done,” Wes said quickly.

Dad smiled ruefully. “Don’t get cocky. I’m not bluffing on this. I hate to say it, but I’d rather let the company end with my retirement than live with the embarrassment of what you might do the next time you get a dumbass idea. It’s time to grow up.”

CHAPTER 6



WES

I WAS HALFWAY THROUGH MY MORNING JERKOFF IN THE shower Friday morning when Beckett banged on the door. “Wes! We’re gonna be late. Get your ass out here.”

“Say it nicer!” I called, stroking a little faster.

Beckett was featuring in just about all my fantasies lately, but that bark wasn’t going to get me there. He could be bossy, it was true, but what really got me were the decadent, needy sounds he’d made when I’d touched him in that hotel room.

“Fuck off!” he called, clearly not willing to play.

Probably for the best, since he was determined to forget Vegas. I should be following his example, but I was bad at resisting things I enjoyed, and I’d enjoyed Beck.

I finished myself off perfunctorily, the orgasm not even slightly satisfying, then got out of the shower and flung open the door, water still coursing down my naked body.

Beckett shoved a coffee cup at me. “We have five minutes.”

I lifted it to my mouth and took a gulp while Beckett took off down the hall. He hadn’t even paused to gaze at my chest longingly today. Shit really was getting back to normal.

Problem was, I wasn’t sure I wanted it to be.

Saying you’d leave something in Vegas was easier than actually leaving it, especially if you still wanted the damn thing. I wasn’t sure how to put my craving for Beckett back in

the box. But it was too early to figure it out now, so I gulped my coffee and grabbed a towel to dry off.

Beckett was waiting outside, coppery hair shining in the sun, when I finally emerged dressed for work. Like me, he wore jeans and a light green Potter Landscaping T-shirt. Unlike me, he looked fucking put together, almost too sophisticated to be someone who played in the dirt all day. But there was no denying he loved it just as much as I did.

We swung by the Potter Landscaping office to check in with Dad and see if there were any new jobs to work into the schedule, then headed out to Beaver Hole. In the three days since we'd started, we'd finished clearing trees and brush. As the lead contractors on the job, we'd be overseeing the entire project, which meant coordinating with subcontractors who'd be installing a gazebo, covered picnic areas, and a playground for the kiddies.

Lots more big equipment, but I wouldn't get to personally play with most of it, which wasn't as much fun.

"You want to oversee the site today?" I asked. "I'll take a crew out to cover the residential schedule."

"Nah, Dad expects you to be here. This is no time to rock the boat."

"Everything's been going fine," I protested. "We're three days in and it's been smooth sailing."

"Right, so let's not rock the boat," he said, insistent.

"Whatever you want, bro," I said. But as he walked away, I couldn't resist adding, "But it's more fun when the boat is rocking!"

Beckett spun around, calling out, "That's what gets you into trouble! Be good."

Logan, a new guy who was hired on as temporary seasonal help so we could cover this park project, gave a low chuckle. "I thought you were the boss?"

I turned a smirk his way. "I'm your boss, so get to work."

"Maybe I should ask Beckett first," he snarked.

I flipped him the bird. “I’ll rock your boat, if you don’t watch it.”

“Promises, promises,” he said, eyes dancing.

I did a double-take, caught off-guard. He wasn’t...flirting, was he?

Before I could decide how to react—Was I flattered that a dude thought I was hot? Kinda. Was I annoyed that one of my crew members was flirting instead of working? Probably should be—Ryder called out with a question about the placement of the picnic area in relation to the large trees we were working around in the already developed portion of the park.

I sent Logan on his way and got to work, and before I knew it the sun was high in the sky, and I’d sweated through my T-shirt.

I called a lunch break and decided to walk over to The Stag Pub. Some of the guys brought their lunch, but in the hottest months we all needed an air-conditioned break anyway. When I got there, I spotted Beckett already at a table with Colton and Luke.

I walked up. “Hey, small world. Mind if I join you?”

Beckett scooted over on the booth bench seat, making room for me to drop down next to him. Everyone at the table had been working out in the sun, but somehow I could identify the scent of Beckett over everyone else. His skin was still dewy with sweat, giving him a glow that was a little too appealing. I kept sneaking looks at him, unable to help myself.

This was a man I’d known most of my life, one who I’d called my brother and best friend for years. There should be nothing new to see, nothing to keep drawing my gaze back, but it was as if he were a magnet pulling me in.

He wasn’t the same old Beckett, he was something new and exciting, even if he shouldn’t be.

He was the man who’d looked at me with need and desperation, the man who’d gasped and moaned and come unraveled for me.

I'd never be able to unsee that. I'd never go back to seeing him as only my stepbrother and friend. Beckett had been my lover, if only for a day, and it had changed everything.

"Are you even listening?" Colton asked, his tone pissed off enough that I blinked back into the moment.

"What?"

"When can I work with you instead of Beckett? He's a hardass."

I scowled. "Excuse me? He's your boss."

"No, you're my boss."

"Whoa," Luke said. "I think I'll just excuse myself before Colton ends up being served for lunch."

The big guy left the table in a hurry, but Colton had my full attention now. "Beck runs the crews with me. You know that. I'm not sure what crawled up your ass, but I do know if Beck's a hardass, it's only because you're being a pain in the ass."

"I think you just want his ass," Colton muttered.

"Excuse me?"

"Nothing," he grumbled. "I've lost my appetite."

He shoved the chair back and stomped off. I shook my head. "Unbelievable."

Beside me, Beckett sighed. "I think maybe Andi said something about the whole ultimatum business. He's been pushing me all day."

"Sorry, man. Want to swap him out for the rest of the day?"

"And give him what he wants? Hell no."

I chuckled and tapped knuckles with him. "Good call."

"He's been worse since we got back from Vegas," Beckett added. "Pretty sure he's weirded out by the marriage thing."

"Don't let him get to you. We got through the worst of it and faced Dad. Colton is nothing compared to that. This is

already blowing over. I haven't heard a joke about it all day."

"Yeah." Beckett smiled at me, and my heart fluttered in response. Fuck. That needed to stop. "Things really are getting back to normal. We should figure out a time to head over to Omaha to meet with a lawyer."

A lawyer. To undo our marriage. I should want that, right? I forced a smile. "Yeah, it's gonna be tough with this park on our plate. Not sure how we'd explain an absence to Dad."

Beckett gnawed on his bottom lip. "I'll look into it. Maybe we can do it online, or someone will offer evening or weekend hours or something."

"Yeah, maybe."

If I hoped that wasn't the case, well, it didn't really matter, did it? If Beck wanted this divorce, it would happen. I'd never deny him anything. But if we were just too busy to legally undo our little mistake, it wasn't like it wouldn't keep for a while.

"There's no time limit on this," I said. "It'll happen when it happens."

Beck gave me an incredulous look. Before he could respond, Maude stopped by the table. "Wes, you snuck in on me. You want your usual Philly cheesesteak and fries?"

I rubbed my stomach. "Sounds great."

She plonked down a pitcher of ice water and a glass. "All right, I'll have it out soon. Hydrate. We can't have you boys dropping from heat stroke out there."

"No, we can't," I agreed, pouring myself a glass. "Thanks, Maude."

"It feels like summer will never end," she grumbled as she walked off. "I remember when September didn't feel like July."

She wasn't wrong about it being a blazing hot day. I lifted the glass, gulping water to replace all the liquid I'd lost through sweat. When I lowered the glass, I caught Beckett

watching a little too closely. I licked a bead of water from my lips and a blush deepened on his cheeks.

Yeah, shit was back to normal.

As normal as it could ever be after what we'd done.

We'd both have to get used to the new normal, I supposed. Because as much as I enjoyed rocking the boat, that wasn't how Beck was built. And with Dad's ultimatum on the table, the last thing either of us should do was revisit the memories that surfaced every time I was alone—the tastes, the sounds, the feel of Beck's lithe muscles under my fingertips.

It was enough to harden my cock, to make me shift uncomfortably, right there in public. When I was alone, I had no chance. My hand was on my dick every night while I thought about my stepbrother on the other side of our small trailer and wondered, was he doing the same thing? Did he still want me the way I wanted him?

The thought that he might was both erotic and torturous. I wanted to be in there with him, but I knew I couldn't be.

So yeah, we were finding our new normal. But I was beginning to think that normal was overrated.

In fact, normal fucking sucked.



BECKETT

IT WAS after midnight before Wes got home Friday night, slamming the door behind him. He'd gone out with some friends, but I'd stayed in because while things were getting back to normal, we weren't all the way there yet.

Working with separate crews had given me some much-needed time apart from Wes, but we still lived in each other's pockets. Going out and getting drunk with him? Very bad idea.

Still, ever since he'd gone out, I'd done nothing but torture myself with the possibilities about how his night might end. Like with a redhead who was far more curvy than me who'd

cry out, “Oh, Wes, yes!” so loudly that I couldn’t avoid hearing her. Living in a small trailer with your stepbro had its downsides, and noisy sex that carried through thin walls was one of them.

Even when I’d realized I wanted Wes these past couple of years, I’d been able to cope with the reality that he wasn’t into men, and so, would never be into me. I’d popped on headphones and pretended I didn’t care.

But now? I didn’t know if I could stand it if it happened again.

I called my cousin, Fisher, to kill some time and shot the shit for a while. He was having man trouble, and it was a nice diversion to focus on someone else’s problems. I watched a movie, but I couldn’t concentrate. Eventually, there was no distraction from the thoughts circling my brain, so I turned out the lights, stripped down, and tried to sleep.

It didn’t come. Instead, my hand found its way down to my cock, and I began stroking myself as I thought about things I really should not be thinking about.

When I heard Wes come in, my heart lurched with a thrill of fear. Was he alone? If he was, would he come look in on me? If he wasn’t, would I have to listen to him fuck someone else?

The what-if scenarios were killing me. I could have gone out with him, of course, but watching him pick someone up at the bar would have been even worse than imagining the possibility. At least here in my bed, with my hand slowly working my cock, I could play out the situation in all the ways I didn’t dare in real life.

Me, emerging from my room to demand Wes throw his hookup aside for me, and him eagerly complying, of course. The hookup in question, a faceless woman, would vanish and Wes would beg me to forgive him, offer to do anything, then drop to his knees and swallow my cock.

I shuddered a little under my thin sheet, ears straining for any indication that Wes hadn’t returned alone. But all I heard

was him cursing as he tripped over something, then snickering like an idiot and shushing himself, which was so ridiculous I smiled.

Wes was alone, I was pretty sure. A surge of relief made me light-headed, and I spread my legs, stroking my cock a little faster, heart hammering.

A sound outside my door made me freeze.

“Beck, you awake?”

My cock throbbed in my hand, practically begging me to invite him inside to see just how awake I really was. I kept my silence, but I couldn't resist squeezing my dick to relieve the pressure. My door inched open and Wes peered inside.

It was dark. There was no way he could know I held my dick in my hand with the wish for him to climb into this bed trying to break free of my lips.

He just stood there, looking down at me, and it was wrong, so wrong, but I held his gaze as my hand moved on my cock. The sheet rustled slightly, and Wes's head turned, and I was sure he could see my hand moving, knew exactly what I was doing.

“Fuck,” he whispered into the darkness.

I didn't say anything, couldn't, because if I did, it would all be over. I stopped moving, and he groaned quietly.

“I don't see anything,” he muttered. “I'm not here. You're alone, just you and your fantasies. Stroke it, Beck.”

A gusty exhale escaped me, but I couldn't resist the command. I resumed stroking, and knowing he was watching me—even if he couldn't see a damn thing—made me far more sensitive. A small pleased sound broke from my clenched teeth.

“Yeah,” he whispered. “Do it.”

Fabric rustled, then the sound of a zipper being drawn down.

Wes pulled out his cock and began to stroke along with me. I was covered with a sheet and cast in darkness, but the light from the kitchen backlit him, and I could see the thick meat in his hand as he worked it ruthlessly. But it was his face I really liked watching. His eyes closed, his bottom lip pinched between his teeth, tension twisting his features into almost a snarl. He tipped his head back, a groan rumbling from him, and seeing his throat exposed strangely sent a jolt of lust through me.

My climax hit, and I crammed the knuckles of my free hand into my mouth to muffle my cry. Wes heard it anyway. “Fuck, yeah,” he said. “You sound so hot when you come.”

He gave a ragged groan, spurting over his fist as he came too.

Afterward, the room echoed with our noisy breathing. Wes wiped his hand on his jeans and tucked his cock back into his pants. He waited a minute, as if he expected me to say something.

“You weren’t here,” I finally muttered.

“It was just a dream, Beck. I know.”

He withdrew from my room, closing my door far more gently than he had the front door when he entered. Had he wanted me to hear him come in? Had he hoped something would happen?

Fuck, but this situation was messing with my head. All week, work had gone smoothly. Despite Dad’s ultimatums, we had the business well in hand. We’d managed our evenings okay too, even if there was a bit of awkward tension between us whenever we were alone.

It had seemed as if things were getting back to how they should be. Now? I wasn’t so sure.

I drifted into an uneasy sleep, and the following morning, I got up and heated up a breakfast burrito. Wes emerged from the hallway, hair still messy, sweatpants doing little to disguise the shape of the cock I’d already memorized.

It was the moment of truth. If he called me on what happened last night, I was fucked.

He smiled at me, a knowing gleam in his eyes as he opened a cabinet to pull out a box of cereal. “You have any good dreams last night?”

“I don’t remember,” I said. “You?”

He sent me a searing look. “Oh, I remember,” he said in a low voice that made goose bumps erupt on my skin. “But I doubt you want to hear about all that.”

“Yeah, probably not,” I said, my voice only a little shaky.

He nodded. “Fair enough.”

But it wasn’t fair. Not to either of us.

If last night was any indication, I was going to have to find a way to put more space between us, even if the thought of who might step in to fill that spot in Wes’s arms did kill my soul just a little.

CHAPTER 7



WES

“COLTON AND I HAD A BIG FIGHT. I COULDN’T STAY THERE another minute.”

Andi stood on my doorstep, eyes filled with tears. I opened the door wider to let her in. She carried a duffel bag over her shoulder, and I was pretty sure I knew what that meant, but Beck wasn’t going to like it. He’d been avoiding me ever since the “dream” last night, so he was out right now.

I took the bag from her and set it down. “Do I need to kick Colt’s ass?”

“No, I just needed some space, you know?”

Space. What a novel concept. I just hoped Beck didn’t decide he needed space from me. He’d been gone most of the day, doing who knew what, and like an addict that needed his next hit, I was already itching to see him again.

“I get it, Andi. But why not go to Dad and Carol? You know they have way more space.”

“Not to mention cleaner space,” she said with a snort as she eyed my burrito wrappers and collection of soda cans. But hey, moping made me hungry. And lethargic. Beckett usually ensured I picked up after myself...eventually.

“Are you really gonna insult my housekeeping right now?”

“No, sorry.” She sighed. “The truth is, I don’t want Mom and Dad to know. I can’t handle another I-told-you-so. They’ve never liked Colt.”

“Carol seems to like him fine,” I countered.

I’d never been able to call her Mom. Not when it felt as if I’d be betraying my mother’s memory. She’d died from an undiagnosed heart defect when Andi was still in kindergarten, so in a way Carol was the only mom she knew. It hadn’t been the same for me. I was twelve then, and sixteen by the time Dad married Carol.

“Yeah, but she likes everyone,” Andi said. “Dad doesn’t like him, and neither do you or Beck.”

“We just want someone who is good for you, Andi.”

The tears had dried up, and now she glared at me. “Well, that’s for me to decide, and if it doesn’t work out, I don’t want to be judged for it! You love who you love, right?”

Well, hell, I wasn’t in a position to argue that point. I wondered what Dad would say if he knew the full truth about me and Beck? I had a feeling *I told you so* would be the furthest thing from his vocabulary then. Maybe over my dead body. If he was threatening to withhold the business from us over what he believed to be a prank, he’d really blow his top over a real marriage.

“I’m not judging you, Andi.” I pulled her into a hug, and she clung to me tightly enough I knew she was really hurting.

The door opened and Beckett walked in, pausing at the sight of us. “What’s going on?”

“Colt,” I said as Andi pulled out of my arms.

“Aw, shit,” Beck said, stepping forward to hug Andi. “I’m sorry, hon. Are you okay? Do you need anything?”

As usual, he said all the things I should have. That was why I needed him here by my side. He was the sensitive one.

“Thanks.” Andi turned her big Bambi eyes on him. “Do you think I could stay here? Just for a few days. I know it’s inconvenient, but if I go anywhere else, everyone will know. I can’t take everyone judging us while we try to figure out our shit.”

“You’re not ready to give up, huh?”

“Not yet,” she whispered. “Is that stupid?”

We exchanged a look. Neither of us liked Colt. Andi could do way better. But after she’d called me out for being judgmental about her choices, I wasn’t about to say that. “You love who you love,” I said instead.

Beckett’s gaze was searching. Probably wondering if that was directed at him. I hadn’t meant it that way, but it wasn’t far from the truth. I couldn’t really say I was in love with Beck, but I’d loved him for ages, and with sex thrown in the mix, my feelings were muddled. The boundaries between friendship and romantic love had blurred.

“So, can I stay here then?” Andi asked, directing her gaze to Beckett. “I won’t stay long. I could take Wes’s bed, and—”

“No,” Beckett said. “Take my room. You know he’s a pig.”

“Hey,” I protested. “I’m not that bad.”

They both glanced at my mess.

“I was going to clean that up,” I argued.

Andi grinned. “It’s okay, Wes. You’ve got other charming qualities. Cleanliness is just not one of them.”

“Thanks,” I said dryly.

“Let me just pack up some of my clothes from my room,” Beckett said. “Then it’s all yours for however long you need.”

That was awfully generous. I was kind of surprised he wasn’t resisting. Andi’s presence meant sharing a bed with me because without a couch and little floor space, there really weren’t any other good spots to bed down for the night. Could it be that he’d decided he wanted to be closer?

My heart skipped, arousal unfurling. To have Beck in my bed, willing? Well, that was the stuff of my ongoing fantasies.

While Beckett packed up some clothes, I went into my room to clean up the worst of my mess. I was trying to force my closet door shut, clothes, shoes, and clutter all piled inside, when Beckett spoke from the doorway.

“What are you doing?”

I spun around and leaned against the door, trying to look casual. “Just getting the room ready to share.”

He shook his head. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll find somewhere else to crash for a few days.”

My heart faltered. “What? No...”

“I think it’s for the best, don’t you? After the ‘dream’”—he raised his fingers to make air quotes—“we need more space, not less.”

Now I understood why he’d agreed so easily to Andi staying here. He was looking for a way out. But it really wasn’t that simple.

“How are you going to explain to people why you can’t bunk with your brother for a few days, man?”

“I’ll think of something.”

“You think anyone is gonna buy that something isn’t going on between us after that marriage prank?”

“Things are getting back to normal,” he said, tone sharp. “You said it yourself.”

“Yeah, they have been, so do you really want to start a new round of gossip?”

He sagged, looking defeated, and I took no pleasure in hammering my point home, but a sense of desperation and urgency led me to do it. I was worried that if Beckett left now, he might never come back. It would be the end of any more dreams, sure, but it might also be the end of us, at least the us we were now.

I couldn’t handle that.

“Andi came to us because she doesn’t want anyone to know she left Colt’s place,” I said. “If you go try to stay with someone, you’ll have to either tell them her business or ours.”

“Shit.” He tossed his duffel on my bed and dropped to sit on the edge of it, back to me. “I can’t believe you out-logged me.”

I laughed, because neither could I. “Obvious sign you’re not thinking clearly.”

He snorted. “I guess.”

I edged around the bed so I could sit beside him. “Beckett, I won’t cross any boundary you set. You’re safe with me. If you don’t want anything to happen, it won’t.”

He glanced sidelong at me. “That’s the problem.”

Hope fluttered. “You want something to happen?”

“No, of course not.” He stood and shot me a falsely bright smile. “It’s fine, man. I can just go out tonight. If I hook up with someone, no one will think twice about me sleeping somewhere else.”

“Beck...”

“You should go out too. It’s time we put all this shit behind us, right?”

I frowned. “I already went out last night and look how that ended.”

“I guess you weren’t doing it right,” he said, a teasing note to his voice.

“Or maybe I just know what I want, and I’m not afraid of it.”

It was the wrong thing to say. Beck backed toward the doorway. “See you later, Wes. Don’t wait up.”



BECKETT

I KNOCKED BACK another Jack-and-Coke and surveyed the dark club. I’d driven over to Riverton, unable to face trying to pick up someone in Granville. Someone Wes might know. This was hard enough without rubbing it in his face.

There was a brunette who’d been giving me flirty eyes the past fifteen minutes. She was gorgeous, and I was trying to

motivate myself to move my ass from the spot I'd claimed at the bar.

I raised my empty glass and waved it at the bartender. He finished serving the couple in front of him then returned to refill my drink. If I went to go talk to Flirty Eyes, I'd never get such prompt service, I reasoned.

"Might want to slow down, man," he said. "You're putting them away tonight."

"Liquid courage. Everyone needs it sometimes, right?"

He arched his eyebrow, looking skeptical. "This kind of drinking isn't about courage." He set the glass in front of me. "Besides, judging by the looks you're getting, doubt you need it."

"Wha' do you mean?"

My words slurred. I guess the drinking was catching up with me. I lifted my glass and took another gulp anyway.

"You know what I mean," he said, nodding his head toward Flirty Eyes.

Yeah, I guess I did. I didn't need courage to talk to a woman, though. I needed courage to leave Wes behind.

The thought made my heart twist painfully, and I fumbled my phone out, needing to hear his voice. To make sure he was okay. I'd left things badly between us. I needed to know that we'd still be us when we came out the other side of this.

The screen was blurry, and I kept hitting the wrong buttons. Finally, just as it connected, the phone tumbled from my fingers.

"Let me help."

It was the bartender again, his eyes kind.

"Need Wes," I mumbled.

"All right, I got it." He hit the button, waited for it to connect, then said, "Wes? This is a bartender at Boom Town in Riverton. I've got someone here who wants to talk to you. I

think he needs a ride home. Uh-huh. Okay, thanks, I'll hand you over now."

He extended the phone to me, and I held it to my ear.

"Beck?" Wes said. "You okay?"

"Yeah, fine," I said. "I jus' wanted to say hi."

He chuckled. "Hi, bro. How about you let me come get your drunk ass and bring you home?"

"I'm not that drunk," I said indignantly. "I can hold my courage. I mean, liquor."

I could hear the grin in his voice as he answered. "Well, humor me then. I'd feel better if I came and got you."

"Okay, but Flirty Eyes might beat you to it."

Wes's voice got stern. "You tell Flirty Eyes you've already got plans tonight, all right? You're coming home with me."

A shiver went down my spine at his possessive tone. It was wrong to want him like I did, but all the liquor in my system was quickly converting from courage to lust. "If you want me so bad, come and get me," I said.

"Oh, I will," he said. "Don't go anywhere."

It seemed like it was only one blink to the next before Wes was standing beside me. "Hey, you with me, Beck?"

I leaned into him with a relieved sigh. "There you are."

"Here I am."

His voice rumbled through his chest soothingly, and I snuggled in and closed my eyes. I was suddenly exhausted.

"How worried should I be?"

I was too tired to summon an answer, but that was okay, because the bartender replied for me. "I cut him off a while ago. He's had nothing but water since he called you."

"Good, thanks."

"He's clearly upset about something," the bartender said. "Maybe you know what it is?"

“I have some idea.”

“Well, take care with him, yeah?”

“I will,” Wes said. “Only the best for my bro. Right, Beck?”

“Mm,” I said, which was about all I could muster.

Wes pulled my arm over his shoulder and lifted me off the barstool. For a moment, my legs didn’t want to support me. I leaned heavily on him, giggling. “Oops.”

“Work with me, Beck. I’m strong, but I still can’t carry your ass all the way to the pickup.”

I managed to get my body under my control enough to stumble along at his side. He helped me into the pickup, giving my ass a shove to get me onto the front seat. He grabbed the seat belt to buckle me in, and I raised a hand to his jaw, palm prickling as it rubbed over his beard growth.

“Love your stubble,” I said.

“I thought you weren’t into beards?”

“Beards, yeah. But stubble? It’s hot when it scrapes over my skin.”

“Damn,” he whispered.

“What?”

“Nothing.” He pulled away. “Let’s get you home.”

I missed most of the drive, falling asleep soon after Wes started the pickup. I didn’t fully wake again until I was already out of the truck, leaning against Wes, and Andi was on my other side, struggling to help him get me up the porch steps.

“Shit, does he do this a lot?” she asked.

“Not usually,” Wes said.

We got inside, and there was no way three people could fit down the hallway at once. Wes waved her off. “Get some water and Tylenol? I’ll get him into bed.”

He started me down the hall, but I abruptly planted my feet. “Wait.”

“C’mon, Beck, let’s just go to bed.”

“No, no. I can’t.”

“You can,” he said, giving me a tug to get me moving again. I was really in no position to resist even though my brain had suddenly reminded me that I’d been trying to avoid this. Wes gave me a push, and I dropped to the bed like a sack of rocks. I groaned as my stomach gave an unsettling lurch.

Wes sat a trash can beside me. “If you need to puke, do it here.”

I took a slow breath, pushing back the nausea. “I’ll be fine.”

Wes pulled off my shoes and helped me under the covers. Andi came and went at some point, delivering the water. He helped me drink it and take a couple of pills, then settle back onto my pillow.

“Just sleep it off, bro.”

He was leaning over me, so close that I could see the small scar bisecting his bottom lip from when he’d made a slide in a high school baseball game and ended up biting through it. I pressed my thumb to it, brushing it lightly, and his breath caught.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

He didn’t ask what I meant. He just smiled sadly and kissed my thumb before removing my hand from his face and giving it a squeeze. “Me too.”

I closed my eyes and drifted off, wishing tonight could have ended differently. Not me with some random hookup, but me with the person I really wanted, sober and free to kiss his beautiful face. No amount of liquid courage could ever fix what we’d broken in Vegas.

CHAPTER 8



WES

BECKETT LAY IN MY BED, RED HAIR BRIGHT AGAINST THE black silk pillowcase, and groaned pitifully as he slowly woke. It was nearly noon, and I'd just opened the door, peeking in to check on him as I'd done off and on all morning.

He'd never thrown up the night before. He'd probably feel better if he had. His skin was pasty, freckles standing out in sharp contrast, and his eyes were crusty.

I'd never seen anything more beautiful.

Really, Wes? Nothing? Not even when you hooked up with that hot number on that Omaha trip?

I brushed that memory away. It was insignificant beyond being a fun night. I'd dated a lot of women and slept with even more. All of them were attractive. But none of them affected me like Beckett did.

I couldn't explain it. We'd been friends for so long, and I'd never felt this way until recently. Never been attracted to men. But like a new planting, my feelings slowly took root, and now that they had, I wasn't sure how to rip them out—or if I even wanted to. After all, Beckett was the thing that nourished my feelings, and he was too damn important to be torn from my life.

"Is he awake yet?" Andi called from the end of the hall.

I turned. "Shhh."

"I'm awake," he said, voice still groggy.

I slipped into the room and closed the door behind me. I had no idea what to think about Beck's night out. I was a little hurt that he wanted to find a hookup, but I understood too. I'd pushed the boundaries with that little jerkoff session the other night. If I'd backed away and given him privacy, not tested the waters, maybe he wouldn't be freaking out now.

"How are you feeling?" I asked cautiously.

"Like ass."

I took a seat on the edge of the bed and handed him a Gatorade. "This might help."

He twisted off the lid and eased up enough to sip it. He still wore his bar clothes from the night before, a clingy button-down that was wrinkled to hell now and jeans. Given our circumstances, I hadn't undressed him as I might have done a few months ago.

My lips quirked, and I attempted to make light of the situation. "I know you were worried about sharing a bed with me, but damn, Beck. If you wanted to sleep in your clothes, you could have just said so."

He threw the bottle cap at my chest, and it hit me and bounced into the bedding. "Thanks, asshole."

He took another careful sip. I squeezed his calf through the blankets. "Seriously, Beck. I need you to trust me to give you whatever you need."

His eyes met mine. "I don't even know what that is."

I nodded once. "Well, when you do..."

"I'll tell you."

The door opened behind me and Andi poked her head in, her hair still in a messy bun. "Beck, I made some breakfast earlier. We have pancakes and sausage left. I can warm it up for you."

Beckett turned wide eyes on me. "Who is this woman and what happened to our bratty sister?"

I busted out laughing, relieved to see the return of the Beck I knew before Vegas happened. The one who was quick with snarky sarcasm and witty jokes. Who might be more serious than me, but still had a great sense of humor and laughed with me instead of at me. The guy who always had my back.

Whatever happened between us, I didn't want to lose that guy.

"Laugh it up," Andi said. "See if I do anything nice for you again."

She stuck out her tongue, just as she'd done when she was eleven years old, and withdrew from the room.

"Sorry not sorry!" I called after her.

When I turned back to Beck, he wouldn't meet my eyes. "I guess I should shower and try to eat something."

I nodded. "Finish drinking that first."

He turned the bottle in his hands. "I didn't think we had much in the fridge..."

"Yeah, I made a grocery run this morning. I knew you'd be hungover, and I wanted to have something decent for you to eat and drink."

He looked surprised. "Thanks, man."

I shrugged. "No big. I was gonna grab you a greasy meal from the diner too, but Andi insisted on cooking. I think she feels bad for invading. She was, uh, up last night when I got you home from the club."

Beckett grimaced. "Shit. I wish she wasn't seeing this."

"I'm sorry. Do you want me to ask her to find another place to go? Because if this is too much..."

"No way. How would we even explain that?"

"We could think of something."

Beckett shook his head. "No, I overreacted. I'm sorry."

"Maybe I under-reacted." My voice choked up a little as I added, "I don't want you to be afraid to be around me."

“I’m not,” Beckett said quickly. At my skeptical look, he sighed. “Okay, maybe I was freaked out about sharing a bed again, but that’s not about you. It’s about me and the situation and...you know, everything that’s happened.”

“I just want to make sure we’re okay.”

“We’re always okay,” Beckett said. “We’re bros first, right?”

“Always.” I stood up. “I’ll let you take that shower. Probably best I don’t make Andi wonder what the heck we’re talking about.”

Beck smiled wickedly. “Just tell her we’re plotting new ways to decapitate her Barbie.”

I laughed as I headed for the door. “Harsh, man.”

But I was relieved that Beck seemed more like his old self this morning. When I’d gotten that call to pick him up and found him falling-down drunk, I’d been scared that I’d already lost him. From now on, I’d tread more carefully.

No more spontaneous jerkoffs. No more teasing and flirting.

I’d rather have Beck as my bro than nothing at all.



BECKETT

“YOU TWO ARE QUIET TONIGHT,” Laurie said, his eyes far too perceptive across the table at The Stag Pub, where Wes and I had joined our friends for our regular bar trivia night. Our team, Smarty Pints, had won last season’s tournament—mostly thanks to Clark, the history teacher in our midst.

“Beck’s still hungover,” Wes said. “He apparently forgot he was a lightweight last night.”

I flipped him the bird. “I would have drunk you under the table if you’d been there.”

“Would not.”

“Would too.”

“Would not.”

“Would too!”

“Would—”

“Okay, we get it!” Clark said quickly. “You both drink yourselves stupid.”

Everyone froze in surprise. Clark was usually the sweetest one of us. He reddened at the sudden attention.

“Sorry. I’m just cranky. We’ve been working on the house, and I joined the historic neighborhood preservation board, and school just started back up. I’m a bit frazzled.”

Hunter squeezed Clark’s neck, massaging gently. “You push yourself too hard, angel. I told you we could take a break from the house renovations.”

“Toby loves working on the house though.”

Hunter chuckled. “He does. It might be the death of all of us if he keeps insisting on restoring it to its original grandeur.”

Everyone’s attention had shifted to Hunter and Clark, which was good by me. Wes and I had fallen into our brotherly bickering like it was second nature, but I couldn’t forget all the things we were hiding.

The day had passed in a haze of hangover misery and Wes tiptoeing around me like one wrong word might shatter me. I guess I’d given him fair cause for concern with my behavior last night. I’d screwed the pooch on that one. Instead of moving on, I’d shown him I couldn’t even go out for a night on my own without needing him to swoop in to rescue me.

On the upside, I was pretty sure he wouldn’t be making any moves on me. No more dream jerkoff sessions, which frankly, had done nothing to satisfy me and everything to make me think about what I couldn’t have.

On the downside, I was pretty sure he wouldn’t be making any moves on me, which was depressing as fuck, because regardless of what a bad idea it was, I *liked* his moves.

By the time we'd headed out for trivia, I was mostly recovered from the hangover but strung tight from pretending all day. First around Andi, and now around our closest friends. When would it end?

"Beck, what about you?"

"Hmm?" I realized I'd lost track of the conversation.

Clark was looking at me hopefully. "Would you want to help out too?"

"Sure, of course," I said, having no idea what I was agreeing to. "Just tell me when and where."

He gave me a strange look. "Okay, like I said, I'm not sure when yet we'll start the next project, but it helps so much when you all pitch in. Pizza and beer will be on us."

"Sounds good," I said gamely.

Wes nudged me. "You don't even know what you said yes to, do you?"

"Of course I do," I lied.

Wes snorted, clearly not buying what I was selling. But then, that was nothing new. No one knew me better.

"Okay, fine, I'm clueless," I muttered under my breath. "Did I agree to sell a kidney?"

He chuckled. "Nah, just some labor of love at Ball-Sack."

I choked on my beer, sputtering a laugh, at his phrasing. Hunter and Clark's house was on the corner of Ball and Sack streets, so *of course* most people in town called it the Ball-Sack neighborhood. Granvillians were never afraid of a good sexual innuendo.

"Asshole," I grumbled. "You did that on purpose."

"Well, it's better than the scowl you've been rocking all night. If you don't relax, someone's going to stage an intervention."

I glanced across the table, and sure enough, Laurie was watching intently. Shit. I plastered a grin on my face and

pretended to be extremely interested in my loaded fries.

The conversation moved on to the next trivia question displayed on television screens around the bar. It was a picture of some sort of monument overseas, and I had no idea what it was, but Clark was already scribbling the answer on the sheet of paper.

“I’ll take it,” I said, needing a minute to myself. “I want to hit the bathroom anyway.”

Clark handed me the slip, and I walked it across the room to the trivia host who ran the game. I went into the bathroom and splashed my face with water.

The door opened and shut behind me. I glanced into the mirror, half expecting to see Wes there. But it was Laurie.

I reached for a paper towel and blotted at my face.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

I shrugged and tossed the paper towel into the trash. “I guess that hangover isn’t totally gone.”

“No,” he said. “I mean, are you and Wes okay?”

I stilled. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“I think you do,” he said gently. “Something happened in Las Vegas.”

I could feel the blood drain from my face so quickly I felt light-headed. Laurie stepped forward to grab my arm as I swayed.

“Hey, whoa. Don’t panic, Beck.”

I shook my head, speaking through numb lips. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“It’s okay, Beckett. I’m your friend. I didn’t mean to freak you out.”

I exhaled slowly, regaining my equilibrium. “I’m fine. Just hungover, like I said.”

Laurie gazed into my eyes, a crease of concern in his forehead. “I only wanted to let you know I’m here if you need

to talk. No judgment.”

I hesitated, but I knew Laurie didn't have a vindictive bone in his body. He'd rivaled Clark for sweetest member of the trivia team since he'd come to Granville and won Tucker's heart.

“How did you know?”

He shrugged. “Everyone else here has known you all your life. They see you and Wes as brothers. But I'm newer. I've always seen something more there.”

I licked my dry lips nervously. “There's not been anything there. Not before...”

“Before Vegas?” When I didn't answer, he said, “You know what I think, Beck? I think you two did get married. And I think once you did that, well, other things were harder to keep locked down. But you don't have to tell me anything you don't want. Just know that you can trust me to have your back, okay?”

“Thanks, but whatever happened in Vegas is staying there.”

“Beck...”

“No. I appreciate that you care, Laurie, but my family, my job, everything relies on leaving Vegas behind, okay? So, what I really need is for you not to bring this up to anyone else.”

“I won't. Of course.”

I dipped my head. “Then I better get back out there before people wonder if I fell in.”

Laurie smiled tentatively. “If you change your mind, you know where I am.”

I left the bathroom, my stomach churning despite Laurie's reassurances. He thought he only saw through us because he hadn't known us as brothers for years. But what if everyone could see? What if they knew our prank wasn't really a prank at all?

I couldn't do anything about the sexual tension with Wes, or what the proximity of sharing a bed might tempt us to do. But I could do one thing.

It was time to get that divorce.

CHAPTER 9



WES

NORMALLY, WHEN TRIVIA ENDED, BECK AND I WOULD STICK around a while, drink a few more beers, maybe compete to see who could pick up some company for the night. Obviously, that wasn't happening now. Because if Beck wanted to hook up, he would have done it last night, and I was so ridiculously grateful he hadn't there was no way I was in any shape to flirt my way into someone else's bed.

No, I'd made my bed with Beck, and I was going to lie in it tonight. Platonically. Without pushing any boundaries.

Even if it killed me.

Beckett was quiet on the drive home and we'd nearly made it to the trailer before I felt the need to break the silence. "I thought tonight went well."

"Did it?"

"No one brought up Vegas. I call that a win."

"Yeah, it would be, except..."

I looked over as I braked for a stoplight to see Beckett hesitating, bottom lip pinched between his teeth. Uh-oh. I knew that expression.

"Except what? Spill it."

He sighed. "Laurie knows about us."

"The fuck he does."

"He told me."

While I drove the rest of the way home, head spinning, Beckett told me about the conversation he'd had with Laurie in the bathroom. He was calmer about it than I had expected.

"He's not going to tell anyone," Beck said.

"Even Tucker?"

"Well, I don't know," he admitted. "But you know Tucker. He won't spread rumors."

I nodded. Tucker was as steadfast and loyal as they came.

"But, Wes, you know what this means?"

"What?"

"If Laurie saw through us so easily, then we *really* can't risk letting anything else happen." He licked his lips. "We're going to be in the same bed, but..."

"I know," I said. "I wouldn't do anything you didn't want."

"That's the problem, Wes. It's not about what either of us want."

I knew he saw it that way. The risks outweighed the rewards in his mind. I just wasn't sure I agreed, probably because I'd never been great at denying myself. I had practically nonexistent willpower. But if this was what Beck wanted, I'd rather chew my damn arm off than do wrong by him.

My jaw was tight, a muscle twitching with the arguments that wanted to spill out. The protests and pleas that we were two grown men who should be free to do what we wanted. But I ground out the words I knew I needed to say.

"I understand."

Beckett exhaled, as if he'd been holding his breath. "Good. Thanks. We have to get past this, and that won't happen if we keep..."

"Yeah."

He opened his door and slid out of the seat. There was nothing left to do but face the music. I followed him inside.

Andi was in the kitchen, hunched over the breakfast bar—which served as our only table—while she ate a salad.

“Hey, you! How did trivia go?”

“Good,” I said. “We won.”

“Awesome. And uh...did you hear...”

“Hear what?” I asked at the same time Beckett answered, “Nope, no gossip about you.”

“Oh. Okay. Good.”

Andi didn't sound all that reassured though. While Beckett excused himself to the bedroom, I decided to linger a while to give him some alone time to settle in. Tonight would be our first night sharing a bed while sober, and I wanted him to relax as much as possible in this situation.

Plus, it seemed like Andi could use a friendly ear. I leaned my forearms on the breakfast bar across from her. “Did you want us to hear gossip?”

“No, not exactly...”

“So?”

She pulled a face. “I just hoped he was so miserable without me that he'd make it obvious and everyone would be saying what an idiot he was.”

I burst into a laugh. “You don't ask for much, huh?”

She stuck her tongue out. “Not any less than I deserve.”

“You do deserve that,” I said seriously. “He is an idiot, and I look forward to telling him to his face tomorrow.”

“You don't have to do that.”

“I know. What do you think big brothers are for?”

She rolled her eyes. “I think you and Beck have your hands full with work. Dad put the screws to you. I didn't come here to stir up trouble with Colt and the crew.”

“Yeah, I know, but if you think I won't tell him to watch himself with my baby sister, you don't know me very well.”

She huffed a laugh and put her bowl in the sink. “Okay, macho man, I’m going to bed. I can’t stop you from calling Colt out. Just don’t make me kick your ass for being an idiot about it too.”

I snickered, the image of my petite sister trying to kick my ass an amusing one, then turned out the lights and crept into the bedroom.

I shed my clothes as quietly as I could in the dark. I could see Beck on his side, eyes closed, but I was pretty sure he was only pretending to be asleep.

As I settled onto my side of the bed, my shoulder brushed his, and my foot bumped into his leg, barely an inch between us. “Sorry,” I whispered.

“It’s fine,” he murmured, confirming my suspicion he’d been awake all along.

I turned on my left side, but that only caused my ass to rub against his hip. “Well, shit.”

Beckett actually laughed, which felt a little like a miracle after the tense night we’d had.

He shifted beside me in the bed, kicking me this time. “Oops, my bad. This is a tight fit.”

“It was easier when you were passed-out drunk. You didn’t move all night.”

Beckett flicked me in the back of the head. “Asshole.”

I chuckled, feeling some of the tension between us ease. “See? This isn’t sexy at all. It’s…”

“Claustrophobic? Yeah, you’re right. Maybe you’ll annoy me so much, I won’t want—”

He stopped short, but I could guess the rest. He wouldn’t want me. I rolled onto my other side to face him, nearly getting a knee in the groin for my trouble. I kept my hips back, well away from any danger zones.

“I’ve been known to be a blanket hog,” I admitted.

“Not on my watch,” Beckett said, tugging the blankets a little tighter to him.

I grinned. “Remember that camping trip in the mountains when we were eighteen?”

“We had to share a sleeping bag because we were freezing,” Beckett said.

“Yeah, and you made us strip to our underwear to share more body heat because you’d read it in a book,” I said with a laugh. “I was half convinced you wanted to molest me.”

“You were not!” Beckett said, sounding horrified.

I smiled. “Only a little, maybe.”

“Why did you go along with it?”

I shrugged a shoulder, even though Beckett probably couldn’t see it in the darkness. “Because you were always the smarter of the two of us, and I trusted you.”

“Oh.”

“And because it really was fucking freezing.”

“It really was.” Beckett shifted onto his side to face me, and I could just make out the gleam of his eyes from the small amount of moonlight trickling through the gaps in the window blinds. “For the record, I didn’t think of you that way back then.”

“I know.”

“Did you ever...” Beck hesitated.

“Ever what? Think of you that way?”

“Yeah. Before Vegas, I mean.”

This felt like dangerous territory. Beckett had done nothing but push me away since the moment we’d come together. I knew he was afraid of the fallout if other people found out. Afraid of what our family and friends would think.

But maybe if he was asking this question...maybe part of him wanted something more than he was ready to admit?

“Yeah, Beck. Not back on that camping trip, obviously. I was still an immature idiot then. But more recently...”

“When did it start?”

“I don’t know exactly,” I said. “We’ve been close for a long time. And that’s great. But it wasn’t enough. I just kept wanting to get closer, you know?”

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “Me too.”

“So, if we both want the same thing, why are we fighting it so hard?” I asked.

He sighed. “You know why. Dad. Our friends. The business. There’s a lot of reasons this can’t happen.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I guess.”

If it were up to me, I’d roll the dice and gamble on things working out. But I knew Beck didn’t work that way. He was more deliberate in his decisions. He evaluated the risks before he acted. It was still sort of unbelievable he’d ever fucked around with me in the first place, not to mention married me.

I really wished I could remember that night more clearly. I would have liked to see the moment Beck said “I do” to spending his life with me. When he was excited, his smile grew so wide it nearly took over his whole face, the cutest dimples popped in his cheeks, and I couldn’t help but feel a surge of happiness too. If I could bottle that feeling, I could make a fortune.

I was smiling, just thinking of it. Until Beck brought me back to earth with his next words.

“If Laurie saw the truth of us, others might too.”

My heart sank. “I guess it’s possible, but we’re doing our best to be careful. I don’t know what more we can do.”

“We can get that divorce,” he said. “Before someone finds out we really are married.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, pained by his words, though I couldn’t fully understand why. Only that what I’d told him

earlier was true. No matter how close we'd been, I'd always wanted to be closer. And now that I was, I had to give it up.

“Wes?” he prompted.

“Yeah, we can figure it out later,” I managed, my voice only a little flat. “We should get some sleep now. We have work in the morning.”

“Okay. I'll figure out the logistics of it this week. By next weekend, everything will be back to normal.”

Normal. I was beginning to hate that word.

I closed my eyes and willed sleep to come, doing my best to ignore the shifting of the mattress as Beckett got more comfortable, the heat of his body beside mine.

He was so close, but as always, not close enough.



BECKETT

I WOKE FEELING LIGHTER than I had in days. Not even the fact that Wes and I were entangled, our bodies slick with sweat, could get to me. Instead, I thought of that camping trip, when Wes and I had huddled together in the cold and joked about our unexpected man-on-man action.

It made my heart warm. There was a lot more to Wes and me than the secrets between us, and soon, one of those secrets would be gone.

I slipped out of bed and grabbed a shower while Wes snoozed, as was our usual routine.

The talk last night had done me some good. Just knowing that Wes felt something for me before we were married in Vegas, that he hadn't just hooked up with me because it was easy or convenient, made all the difference.

We still had to get that divorce. We were already on thin ice with Dad. I was pretty sure he'd been bluffing at dinner about selling the business to a competitor in Riverton. But that

was when he thought we'd pulled a prank. If he found out we were really married, really fucking around, the consequences could be a whole lot worse.

I could lose my job and my standing with the family. That scared the shit out of me. But even worse would be watching Wes lose his birthright. He'd spent his whole life believing that he'd follow in his father's footsteps. And Wes had always admired his dad, always wanted to take the path laid out before him. To lose it now would devastate him.

I got dressed, then went to the kitchen to make coffee. Wes would emerge after the alarm went off the third time, and I'd have to hurry him to make it to work on time. Business as usual, a small comfort in the midst of this recent storm.

Andi was in the kitchen when I got there, already setting the coffeepot to brew. "Hey, Beckett. How'd you sleep?"

"Okay," I said.

"You and Wes managing okay in bed?"

I fought a blush. She wasn't asking about anything other than the cramped space we were enduring. "Uh, yeah. It's not forever, right?"

She winced. "I hope not."

"Oh, I didn't mean..."

She opened the bread bag and tossed a couple of slices of wholegrain wheat into the toaster. She'd obviously influenced Wes's shopping trip, because that man was white bread all the way.

"No, I know," she said. "I'm cramping your style. You and Wes have no privacy."

"Privacy?" I gave a nervous chuckle. "What would we need privacy for?"

She blinked at me. "I don't know. I know you guys 'date' casually." She used air quotes around the word date. "You can't really bring someone home when you don't have your own bed."

“Oh. Right. Well...” I shrugged. “You’re more important than a few hookups.”

Maybe making Andi feel guilty would encourage her to leave sooner and free me from the temptation of sleeping beside Wes, but she felt bad enough already. I wasn’t going to pile on, so I plastered on a grin and wiggled my brows. “Besides, it’s not like I can’t find a bed somewhere else if I really want to.”

She laughed. “Good to know I’m not cockblocking you.”

“Ew, never say the C-word again.”

She laughed harder. “I’m not a little girl, you know? I’m a grown woman who can take care of herself.”

I raised an eyebrow. “By crashing with her big brothers?”

She stuck out her tongue.

“Yeah, that’s totally convincing me of your maturity,” I said dryly.

She huffed. “You’re no longer my favorite brother.”

“We all know Wes is your favorite brother.”

“Well, you were my favorite *step*brother.”

“Also your only stepbrother, so that’s real special.”

“It *is*,” she insisted. “I love Wes because I have to. I love you because I *choose* to.”

I was sure that was meant to be reassuring, but it only reminded me that love was often conditional. It certainly had been with Craig, and who was to say it wouldn’t be with Nathan or Andi if they knew the truth of what happened between me and Wes?

“I better go give Wes his five-minute warning.”

I tossed a couple of ice cubes into Wes’s mug so he didn’t burn his tongue when he guzzled it down in two seconds flat.

“Beck, before you go...”

“Yeah?”

“Can you please make sure he doesn’t beat Colt’s ass at work today? Our problems aren’t his problems.”

I arched an eyebrow. “That depends. Do I get to kick Colt’s ass?”

She laughed and swatted my arm. “No! But thanks for caring.”

“Well, you’re my favorite sister,” I teased.

“I’m your only sister,” she countered.

“Lucky thing, then, because you’re a pain in the ass.”

I ducked out of the kitchen before she could throw something at me, chuckling as I went down the hall to bang on the door. Wes opened it, water streaming down his delectable body, and damn, but it got to me every time.

I thrust out the coffee cup. “Time to get to work. Better hurry or Andi’s likely to get a look at your bare ass.”

“Nah.” He took the cup, taking a quick gulp. “You know you’re the only one who gets to see that.”

I turned away, but not before I caught a glimpse of him heading from the bathroom to his bedroom without a stitch of clothing, the ass in question a glorious temptation to throw caution to the wind.

I headed back toward the kitchen. I was going to have to be very, very careful around him. Even more so now that I knew the truth.

Wes Potter wanted me as much as I wanted him—and it wasn’t a spontaneous moment in Vegas that spurred it, but something deeper. Something much harder to shake.

It should have rattled me, should have freaked me out all over again. But honestly? It made me feel less alone. It reminded me that I wasn’t the only one wrestling with these feelings.

For better or worse, marriage or divorce, Wes and I were in this together.

CHAPTER 10



WES

DAD WAS SORTING MAIL AT HIS DESK WHEN BECKETT AND I checked in at the office before heading out to meet the crew.

“How’s the park project coming along?” he asked.

“Great,” I said. “I’m meeting with the Dix head today.”

Dad looked up from the mail he was sorting with a scowl.

I held up my hands. “What? I meant that seriously!”

Behind me, Beckett disguised his laugh with a cough. I couldn’t hold back a grin. He’d been more relaxed today, maybe because sleeping together in the same bed hadn’t led to sleeping together, as he’d feared.

The shit-eating grin did little to endear me to Dad though. “You better not make jokes like that at the meeting. People need to feel respected. In fact, maybe Beckett should—”

“I can handle it,” I cut in. “Beck is presenting a landscaping plan to the Michaels today. That’s his specialty.”

“The Michaels as in Mayor Michaels?” Dad asked in surprise.

“They’re unhappy with Greener Garden in Riverton,” I said, failing to keep a smirk from my face. “Might want to rethink that plan to let them take care of your legacy.”

“Poking the bear again,” Beck muttered behind me.

But Dad didn’t snarl at me. He looked appraising. He was impressed that we were stepping up. Not that we hadn’t

before. We might have been idiots while on vacation in Vegas, but we worked damn hard the rest of the time.

“Just remember to take that Dix meeting seriously.”

“He will,” Beckett said firmly. “Wes can win over anyone.”

My chest warmed at the few words of praise. After the recent tension between me and Beck, it was reassuring to know he still had my back.

“Fair enough.” Dad flung a few envelopes toward us, spinning them through the air like paper airplanes. “Here, then. Take your mail with you when you go. It got misdelivered again.”

I scooped the scattered envelopes from the floor. “And you say I’m the immature one.”

Finally, he cracked a grin. “Get out of here. Don’t expect to see me next week. I’ve promised Carol we’ll take a trip to visit her sister in the Ozarks.”

Beckett perked up. “Oh, Mom will love that. Wish I could go. It’s been ages since I’ve seen Fisher or Boone.”

“Well, I’ll be sure to tell your cousins hello for you.”

“Thanks,” Beckett said. “I’ll have to make time for a visit myself.”

I slung an arm over Beckett’s shoulders. “I wouldn’t plan on it, bro. Owning a business doesn’t leave much time for travel. Isn’t that right, Dad?”

Dad eyed us across his desk. “You don’t know the half of it yet.”

“But I will,” I singsonged as I pulled Beck toward the door. “Because the project is going perfectly.”

As soon as we were outside, Beckett gave me a little shove. “You’re gonna jinx us.”

“Dude, turn that frown upside down.” I grasped his face and used my thumbs to turn his lips up. “Because we are awesome!”

Beckett twisted out of my hold and smacked me, but not before he broke into a laugh. “You’re an idiot!”

“Got you to smile though.”

Beck drove today, taking a slightly different route to the park so that we could go through the Dix neighborhood to meet up with the liaison. Two blocks were undergoing renovation to revitalize the neighborhood and create more affordable housing as part of the city’s five-year plan to Stop Granville Shrinkage. Thanks to a small-town innovation grant and matching funds from investors, an old, deteriorating portion of Granville was getting a facelift. Some folks were upset it hadn’t been used to improve the town’s most historic neighborhoods, but as Tucker had pointed out, the goal was to create more affordable housing, which was more easily accomplished with modest homes than disintegrating estates.

Work trucks were parked up and down the street. Men crawled over the roof of one house like ants, while two doors down a couple of guys were giving a home a fresh coat of paint. Indoors, plumbers, electricians, and carpenters were all engaged in projects.

Lyle Jennings—an old friend and foreman for the head contractor overseeing the project—stood on the sidewalk with Paul Minner. He nodded so much he could have been a bobblehead doll, a stoic expression on his face, while Paul talked a mile a minute into his ear.

Lyle was a man suffering, and I was about to wade into the breach right next to him.

“Shit,” I muttered as Beck parked at the curb. “Not Paul.”

Beckett snickered. “Have fun with that.”

I hesitated to get out. “You sure you don’t want to come with me?” I gave him my most charming smile. “I might need my wingman.”

“Nah, you got this. Standing up the mayor is probably a bad idea.”

I sighed dramatically. “I guess if you want to be all responsible about it.”

“Although I wouldn’t say no to a trade,” Beckett said with a nervous chuckle. “Selling people isn’t my strong suit, like it is yours.”

I considered it for half a second, but while I might be able to charm the mayor, I hadn’t done the research and designed a landscape presentation to win her over. That was all Beck.

“No way. She’s gonna be blown away by your presentation,” I said. “I’ll just have to pull up my big-boy pants and deal with Paul.”

“Thatta boy,” Beck said, giving me a thump on the shoulder. “Now go and count yourself lucky you don’t have to deal with Colt.”

“I wouldn’t call it lucky,” I grumbled. “I was looking forward to tearing him a new one.”

Beckett’s eyes glinted with malice. “I’ll try to save you a piece, but no promises.”

I laughed as I got out of the truck. While I headed toward Lyle and Paul, Beckett pulled away.

“Wes, you’re here!” Lyle said, sounding more eager than I’d ever heard him in my life. “Paul, you know Wes, and Wes, Paul is the neighborhood liaison here. I’ll leave you two to discuss any questions or concerns regarding the park’s impact on the residents here. I’ve got to get back to work.”

“You’re not staying?” Paul asked. “I thought you’d help facilitate—”

“Sorry,” Lyle said quickly. “My crew needs me.”

He clapped me on the arm and whispered in my ear, “The man is a black hole of rambling nonsense. I had to escape the vortex.”

“I thought we were friends,” I protested.

He grimaced. “So I’ll owe you a beer. But there are some things in life every man has to face alone.”

“Fine!” I called as he walked away. “But you’re buying tonight!”

He shot me a thumbs-up just before rounding the corner of a house and disappearing from sight.

Damn. The universe was conspiring to make me take this meeting on my own. I'd hoped to at least have Lyle there as a buffer. Maybe I really had jinxed it by bragging to Dad. I'd just wanted him to see that his business was in good hands.

"Wes, I'm so glad we finally get to do this. The Dix neighbors are excited to have a park, but understandably they have a lot of questions and concerns. For example, you will be planting a screening shrubbery between the park and the backyards, won't you? Ed Barton is concerned about his privacy, and understandably so if there's going to be folks having picnics and wedding receptions and all manner of parties at that gazebo and picnic area. And then there's the question of what exactly you will be planting. All the town hall plans were more conceptual than exact. Posy Matthews has some suggestions that would attract more hummingbirds. A lot of folks really enjoy birdwatching. In fact, I indulge in the hobby myself..."

Words just kept pouring from him, like a torrential river. I tried to pay attention. I really, really did, but at some point, my mind shut down to protect itself. Maybe I really should have traded with Beckett, because keeping track of every complaint or concern from the residents of the neighborhood was a lost cause.

Instead, my mind drifted to the quiet conversation Beckett and I had shared the night before. The intimacy of it had actually reminded me of a simpler time in our lives. When we were younger we used to have gaming marathons, go camping, or drink ourselves stupid, and we thought nothing of crashing in the same bed. And some of those nights, we talked in the darkness, sharing parts of ourselves, binding ourselves closer together.

I wondered, were we always headed for this fucked-up relationship where we both wanted more than just brotherhood? A few years ago, I would have denied it. But from the moment Beck and I had made peace with being brothers, he'd had a special place in my life. In my heart. He

came before all others in my life, and he had for a very long time.

“Don’t you think, Wes?”

I realized Paul was staring at me, waiting for an answer.

I wasn’t sure exactly what he wanted from me. There had been more than one town hall to address residents’ concerns, and the plan was in motion, so there wasn’t much I could do to assuage these worries. My job was to enact the approved plan, not reinvent it.

My best bet was to make Paul—and by extension, the neighbors—feel as if they’d been heard.

“Yes, of course we’ll do our best to ensure everyone is happy,” I said. “We all want the same thing, right?”

He smiled. “Great. I knew you’d agree! Beaver Hole is going to be such a pleasure for Dix.”

“I really can’t argue with that,” I said with a mostly straight face. Because damn it, I could do this. I could be a responsible business owner who overlooked obvious sexual innuendos the way my father wanted.

Beck had believed in me, so I would too.



BECKETT

I PULLED around the other side of Beaver Hole, where subcontractors were still installing playground equipment. There was only so much we could do until the heavy machinery moved out or any planting would be in danger of being trampled before it properly took root.

The crew met me by the pickup to discuss our agenda for the day. Luke was still trimming some of the trees in the pre-existing portion of the park. He’d need at least one person to assist. Normally, I’d choose Ryder for that job, but I needed him to manage the residential clients while I was meeting with

the Michaels. I didn't trust Colt to do that on his own, and Logan was too new to take the reins.

"All right, everyone, I've got to head out in a minute for a landscape presentation, and Wes is meeting with a liaison of the neighborhood to ensure that we all play nicely together."

There were a few chuckles. Colt, I noticed, was avoiding eye contact. The little shit probably knew he was in the doghouse for fighting with Andi.

"That means you all have to manage for the next hour or two without us. Luke, you're on trees, as usual. Logan, I want you to assist."

"Sure thing, boss."

"Ryder and Colt, you're on maintenance."

Ryder nodded. "You got it."

"Again?" Colt complained. "Why can't I assist Luke? The new guy can mow lawns."

I had considered that option, but Logan got along better with Luke. Hell, Logan got along better with everybody.

"Maybe next time," I said. "Wes and I will rejoin you guys when we can get free of meetings. In the meantime, Ryder and Luke call the shots."

I turned for the truck, but Colt muttered something that made me stop and turn back.

"Whatever you want to say, Colt, I suggest you keep it to yourself today of all fucking days."

Colt huffed. "I didn't say anything, but it's not like it matters, right? You don't ever want to give me a chance anyway."

His entitled attitude pissed me the hell off. I worked damn hard for this business. When I first started working here in high school, I fucking bled for this crew. I went to bed with splinters and aching muscles and sunburns after busting my ass to keep up with men who'd been on the job for years. I'd earned the respect of the crew by proving myself again and

again. But Colt? He just wanted it all handed to him on a silver platter.

My voice was deceptively calm as I strolled up to him and got right in his face.

“Not sure why you think you deserve more. You’re only here because of Andi, not because you’ve earned it. And let’s face it, you don’t really deserve her either, do you?”

Andi didn’t want gossip spreading, so I resisted the urge to threaten him with an ass-kicking, but I think my tone conveyed the sentiment.

Colt glared. “I knew it! I knew you were holding me back because I’m dating Andi.”

I scoffed. “That’s not what’s holding you back, and the fact you can’t figure that out is the whole fucking problem.”

“Beck...” Ryder started. “Maybe we should all cool off, huh? I know you’re just assigning work as you see fit, not treating anyone unfairly.”

Colt opened his mouth to protest, and Ryder cut him off. “We’re a crew, and we have to be prepared to do any job needed. If you can’t handle the day-to-day grind, this line of work might not be for you. Hell, you should be happy. Mowing is one of the easiest jobs we do.”

“I don’t want easy,” Colt said. “I want to be treated like everyone else.”

That was the first thing out of his mouth I could respect.

“Get your house in order, Colt,” I said, giving him a pointed look so he’d know I meant to make shit right with Andi. “Change your attitude and do the work. You only get the respect you earn.”

Colt’s jaw clenched, and I saw the battle raging behind his eyes.

“Fine,” he bit out and stalked off.

Ryder gave me a wry smile. “He just has some growing up to do.”

“I know.” I sighed. “Sorry to saddle you with him. I couldn’t trust Colt and Logan to go out on their own.”

“Yeah, I understand.” Ryder shrugged. “Truth be told, I don’t mind it. I meant what I said to Colt. You have to take the work as it comes and embrace it. Otherwise, you’ll be miserable.”

I nodded. “That’s a good outlook. We’re lucky to have you.”

He grinned. “I know that too.”

By the time I got to the Michaels place, I’d simmered down, which was good because Cynthia Michaels was not the type of woman to tolerate a hothead. She met me in front of the house to shake hands, her manicured nails a sharp contrast to my short, blunt ones. At least they weren’t dirty—yet.

“I’ve mapped out a design I think you’ll really like, Mayor.”

“Oh, please call me Cynthia,” she said with a little laugh. “I’m only mayor for a couple more months. Soon, the baton will pass to someone else on the council.”

Granville was small enough we didn’t elect the mayor. Instead, the City Council appointed one of their own to the role, and it was mostly ceremonial.

“Doug Lattimer?” I guessed.

“Let’s hope, because I don’t think any of us can handle LeRoy Smalls taking that role.”

I chuckled. “He’d keep things interesting.”

“No doubt about that,” she said with a smile. “Now, before we get started, Beckett, I have to ask. What was all that chatter about you and Wes getting married in Vegas. I thought you two were brothers?”

Shit. Dad was right. I’d never once considered having to answer to a potential client for my behavior outside of the job.

“We’re actually stepbrothers, not blood-related,” I said, downplaying our connection. “To be honest, uh, we just got a

little drunk and stupid while on vacation. We thought pranking our friends would be funny.” I chuckled awkwardly. “In hindsight, it wasn’t the best choice.”

Or a good one at all...

“Well, it’s certainly entertained the town’s gossip circles,” she said, as if she weren’t in that loop despite having heard all about it.

“I assure you, Mayor Michaels, that Potter Landscaping is nothing but professional on the job.” I lifted the tablet. “If I may show you the landscape design, I think you’ll like the way I’ve incorporated native plants, especially drought-resistant and hardy varieties to withstand Nebraska weather, while also giving you vibrant colors and scents for your yard.”

The mayor stepped closer to peer at the screen as I pulled up my designs.

“I noticed you had a hummingbird feeder, so I included trumpet honeysuckle,” I said, pointing to the image on the screen. “They love it, and it loves the sun, so win-win. I also thought we could put in a birdbath or a misting fountain here, which will draw more of them to the yard.”

“You’ve done your homework,” she said, a note of approval in her voice.

“I have,” I said. “I’ve taken the amount of sunlight, shade, and wind into consideration while choosing plants that will thrive best. That was one of the mistakes your last landscapers made. The delphiniums on the west side of your house are beautiful, and they can thrive in the Midwest climate, but they’re getting too much shade right now.”

“Well, this all looks beautiful,” Mayor Michaels said as I wrapped up the presentation. “I’m impressed.”

“Thank you, Mayor.”

“Please call me Cynthia.”

“Thank you, Cynthia. I’ll give you some time to think about what you want to do.” I fished a business card out of my

wallet and handed it to her. “Call Wes, and he’ll handle the details if you want to get on the schedule.”

“Not you?” she asked.

I smiled sheepishly. “You can call me if you want, but Wes has a way of reassuring clients they’re in good hands.”

“I don’t doubt it,” she said. “I’ve heard nothing but praise about Potter Landscaping from my neighbors.”

“That’s good to hear.” I hesitated. “May I ask you a question?”

“Go ahead.”

“Why did you originally go to Riverton for your landscaping needs? I’m curious if there’s some aspect of service they offer that we don’t.”

“Nothing like that,” she said. “When you’re an elected official, you walk a careful line between supporting your town and not wanting to be accused of having special interests or favoring one local business over another. When we first bought the house, All Seasons Lawn and Tree Care was still in business.”

“And our competitor,” I said with a nod. “You didn’t want to choose.”

“Exactly.”

“All due respect, Mayor, but I think if you’d asked us or All Seasons, we’d have preferred you chose one of us—even if it meant losing out to a competitor—rather than see your business leave town altogether.”

“You’re probably right about that,” she said. “I’m going to consider that the next time I have a choice like that to make. I care about Granville, and above all, I want its businesses to succeed.”

“Well, I appreciate your consideration now,” I said. “Thank you.”

We parted ways, and I headed for the truck, feeling confident about my presentation but a little worried I might

have put off the mayor by questioning her choices. This was why Wes was the client charmer, and I was the guy who did the research and planning. I'd just have to hope my landscaping plans really were impressive enough to win her over.

We needed all the wins with Dad that we could get.

CHAPTER 11



WES

BECKETT SWUNG BY TO PICK ME UP AT THE END OF THE workday, our shifts too off-balance to share a lunch break. We'd stayed in touch via texting, so he knew exactly how much I'd suffered through Paul Minner's rambling, and I knew he felt pretty good about the presentation with Mayor Michaels. I'd saved the best news for seeing each other face-to-face though.

I hopped into the truck and held out my fist. "Way to bring it home today."

"You mean..."

"You locked down the mayor," I confirmed.

He tapped knuckles with me. "Hell yeah, I knew you'd close her for me."

I scoffed. "She was already closed. She loved how knowledgeable you were. We definitely made the right choice, sending you over there."

"I guess so," he said, almost shyly.

He was always so modest, as if he didn't know his value. So I amped it up a bit. "We're killing it out there! I had to say it. I don't even care if it jinxes us."

Beckett chuckled, sounding pleased, and shifted the truck into drive. "I'm not going to argue."

"Good." I rested my arm on the window sill, feeling content. Today had been a good day. Beckett seemed more at

peace too. Maybe Andi pushing us into the same bed hadn't been all bad, not if it helped Beck trust me and my intentions to respect his boundaries.

"Actually..." Beck said.

"Hmm?"

Beckett flicked a quick glance toward me but quickly refocused on the road. His hands tightened on the steering wheel just enough to send a flash of foreboding through me.

"I did some research on the divorce issue."

"Oh, did you find a lawyer out of town? I don't know when we can make time to get over there, but—"

"No, actually."

My heart skipped. "No?"

Maybe Beckett had second thoughts about ending our marriage too. Maybe—

"We can file online," he said, snuffing out the fragile hope that'd been trying to bloom amongst the weeds. "We just fill out some forms, pay with a credit card, and presto! No more marriage."

My gut tightened with unease. "That sounds too easy."

"I know!" Beckett sounded enthused. "But it isn't a scam. I found some on legal websites and the forms are legit. I checked them out."

"Great," I said weakly.

"We can take care of this tonight."

I couldn't explain the sense of panic gripping me. This was always the plan. Sure, I'd been in no rush to officially end our marriage, but it wasn't as if I ever expected us to actually *stay* married. What would be the point when we could tell no one?

Still, the excuse flew from my mouth.

"I'm meeting Lyle at the pub tonight. I'm just going to shower and go as soon as we get home."

“Oh.” He nodded. “Well, that’s okay. I can do it on my own.”

“No,” I said quickly, that panic clawing at my insides again. When Beckett gave me a startled look, I flailed for an explanation. “We started this together. We should end it together. Don’t you think?”

Beckett’s gaze was searching, and I did my best to look as stoic as Lyle had this morning. I wasn’t as good at hiding my emotions as him, but thankfully, I was still better than Beck. He smiled tentatively. “Yeah, you’re right. This is a milestone moment, even if no one else knows it but us. We’ll do it together.”

“It feels right,” I said, the knot in my stomach loosening a little.

Beckett pulled the truck over our bumpy, rutted drive and parked in front of the trailer.

“Yeah, I guess it does.” He glanced at me, an uncertain smile on his face. “I know I’ve been...kind of a mess, but I need you to know, Wes, that there’s no one I’d rather divorce.”

I snorted with amusement. “Never thought I’d hear that, but I feel the same.” I grabbed his neck and tugged his forehead to mine. “There’s no one else I’d rather fuck up with, bro.”

He gave a shaky laugh. “If we’re not careful, Andi is gonna think we’re kissing out here.’

I grinned. “Well, we can’t have that. What if no one believes we want a divorce?”

He shoved me away with a laugh. “Idiot.”

His voice was so fond it made my heart contract, and I longed to pull him close again, to actually kiss him, to hell with what anyone thought. Instead, I forced myself to open my door and hop out of the truck.

Andi was inside, sprawled in one of our gamer chairs on the floor with glazed eyes and messy hair. Damn, we were

going to have to get her out of here before she turned into a slob like me.

“Hey,” she said, gaze flicking up from the television screen. “You ready to throw down, Wes? I’ve been practicing all day, and I’m gonna kick ass.”

“Sorry, I’m headed out. You’ll have to play with Beckett.”

Even though he’d promised to wait to file the divorce together, it wouldn’t hurt to keep him occupied so he didn’t get any other ideas.

I continued through the living room, stripping off my T-shirt as I went. I was soaked with sweat and grime after a long day in the sun. Behind me, I heard Andi and Beckett trash talking one another and smiled to myself. It would be good for them to spend some one-on-one time together. They’d never been as close as Beck and me, and I was probably partly to blame for that, because once we’d become friends, I’d hoarded the time with Beck like a dragon hoards treasure. I hadn’t wanted to share.

Still didn’t, if I was honest, but tonight I had other goals. Like delaying the inevitable.

I hopped into the shower and rinsed off before changing into fresh jeans and a clean T-shirt. Then I grabbed my wallet and keys and high-tailed it out of here while texting Lyle to meet me at The Stag Pub.

I got there before him and ordered the special, meatloaf and mashed potatoes, and a beer. There were plenty of friendly faces, and I could have had company if I’d wanted. Tracy had waved at me with a hopeful look, and Darren—there with his boyfriend, Linc, and a few of their friends—had greeted me with a fist bump as I passed by. But I wasn’t in the mood to flirt or socialize.

I was still processing Beckett’s bombshell. By tomorrow night, I’d be a single man again. So would he. Sure, the paperwork might take some time to process. But ultimately, our marriage would be over. This whole wild ride would be done.

And I already knew I'd never be the same.

Maude brought my meal over, and I ate it mechanically, silently stewing, until Lyle dropped into the seat across from me. We hadn't been close friends in high school. He was a freshman when I was a senior. But Dad was good friends with Anthony Scott, the owner of Scott Construction, and Lyle was practically an honorary son. He'd been best friends with Truman Scott his entire life, and in the past few years, they'd become a lot more than just friends.

Not that anyone knew that was ever a possibility before it happened, because Lyle Jennings played all his feelings close to the vest.

"You really wanted that beer, huh?" he said dryly. "I figured you'd at least let me have dinner first. What the heck did Paul Minner do?"

"Paul was fine."

"Then why did I rush over here?"

Lyle didn't sound ruffled, just a little curious.

I sighed. "If I tell you something, can you take it to the grave? Because if Beck finds out I told you this, he'll most definitely kill me."

He tilted his head. "Of course. Sounds serious."

I lifted my chilled mug and took a gulp of the pale ale I'd ordered. "It is serious. Seriously fucked up."

"This have anything to do with those rumors about you and Beckett getting hitched in Vegas?"

I groaned as I lowered my glass. "Shit. He's right to be freaked out, huh? If you went there immediately, then half the town is wondering if we really did it."

"Maybe. But not everyone is seeing this look on your face. So I have an advantage there."

"What look is that?"

"Like you're about to tell me your best friend left you and your dog died."

“Well, you’re half right.”

He leaned forward, eyes dark with concern. “Is he leaving? You two are so close. I never thought anything could come between you.”

I shook my head. “Not *leaving* leaving. Just...making it official.” I glanced around then leaned in further, whispering the secret. “Divorce.”

“Oh.” Lyle swiped my beer and took a gulp of it. “Shit. That sucks. I guess you really feel...”

I nodded. “It came as a surprise, but yeah. I guess I do.”

Lyle’s smile was sympathetic. “Well, I can relate to that.”

Despite my inner turmoil, I’d always been curious about Lyle’s relationship with his best friend. “How did that all come about anyway?”

“If you want to hear that story, I’ll need to get a beer of my own.”

“Better make it two. You still owe me for bailing this morning.”

He grinned. “Hey, what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger, right?”

“You weren’t the one subjected to two hours of birdwatching tips.”

He chuckled. “All right, I guess you’ve earned it. Be right back.”

While he went up to the bar to place the order, I finished off the last of my dinner and checked my phone. No messages. Beckett was probably still playing games with Andi. I tried not to feel jealous, even though it’d been a long while since we’d just chilled and gamed without any tension between us.

I guess that was my fault. If I wanted us to keep our simple friendship, I never should have suggested we screw around when I realized we’d gotten drunk-married. But damn, it was tough to regret it when it’d brought me so much closer to him, even if only for a short time.

“Okay,” Lyle said as he returned and plonked the beer in front of me. “I’ll tell you about the way all my friends sideswiped me with the truth about my feelings for Truman, but first, you have to listen when I tell you a truth.”

“I’m listening.”

“Your feelings won’t go away just because they’re inconvenient. You and Beck... I know it’s complicated, being stepbrothers, but you’ve been closer than close for a long, long time.”

“So, what am I supposed to do now?”

“I don’t know,” Lyle said. “But whatever choices you make, don’t let this thing come between you. Take it from someone with firsthand experience. Losing him from your life will be so much worse than anything you’re feeling now.”

I swallowed and nodded. Lyle was right. Regardless of my misgivings over filing for divorce, it would be ten times worse to lose Beck for refusing to give him what he needed. Ready or not, this marriage had to end. If only so that I could hold on to him.



BECKETT

“I DON’T KNOW why I let you talk me into this.”

Beside me, Andi sniffled. “What? It’s a good movie.”

“It’s a terrible movie,” I argued. “She can’t possibly win him over, and even if she does, then she’s the villain.”

Andi let out a blubbering wail. “I knowwww!”

On the big screen, a movie starring Julia Roberts tormented us with pining and a missed opportunity for love. Ordinarily I wasn’t one to get sappy over romance movies, but it was hitting me straight in the feels, too damn similar to my own life at the moment.

Andi and I had given up on gamer chairs and created a mound of pillows to lean on. Wes and I didn't have that many, but luckily our sister came with a shit ton of them. A pizza box sat on the floor before us, having arrived while we were in the gaming phase of the night and I was at least marginally happy.

“So, why are we doing this again?” I asked.

“Well, I don't know about you, but I'm doing this because it's cathartic. I need to purge all my heartache over Colt.”

“That dumbass,” I muttered.

Andi smacked me in the gut. “He's not a dumbass. He's just...”

“A jackass?”

She laughed. “Shut up and watch the movie. You need this too.”

I'd had to confess that I was having some romantic trouble in my life. I couldn't tell Andi that her brother was the source of my melancholy, of course, but she'd been too perceptive to miss it altogether.

All day, I'd fooled myself into thinking I was in a good mood. I'd done a great job winning over the mayor. I'd found a workable plan for filing for the divorce. Then I'd convinced Wes to go along with it...

And that's where my mood went to hell.

Maybe it was just an adrenaline drop. I'd been all revved up to file the paperwork tonight and put our mess behind us. Once Wes left, I was back in a holding pattern. That was the logical explanation.

But after I admitted that I was bummed about a relationship too, Andi had put on this damn movie and insisted that watching it with her would help. But I felt worse than ever, my eyes burning with a desire to spill when I hadn't cried since Calista Locke shoved a butt plug into my ass too fast, sending blazing hot pain ripping through me. That woman was wild as fuck, and I wished her girlfriend luck, because yeah,

I'd ended up liking the pegging, but the other stuff she'd wanted to try? Too far, man. Too far.

"I need ice cream if I'm going to finish watching this," I grumbled.

Andi swiped at her tears, voice surprisingly bright for a woman who was bawling. "We have ice cream?"

"We have caramel-praline."

She blew a raspberry. "Yuck."

"And death by chocolate."

"Yessss. Give me all the chocolate."

I snorted as I pushed to my feet. "Okay, princess. You just recline on your throne of pillows while I serve you."

She smiled. "You really get me, Beck."

Despite the depressing movie and the tearing up and the wallowing that Andi had led me into, I was glad we'd spent this time together. She was hurting more over Colt than I'd realized, and maybe I was hurting more over officially ending the marriage with Wes than I had realized too. I felt a kinship with her that I'd never experienced before.

In the kitchen, I pulled bowls from the cabinet and scooped up chocolate ice cream for each of us. Wes was the weirdo who liked caramel best. I mean, I didn't hate it. But no one else I knew chose caramel as their favorite flavor.

Wes had always had quirky tastes though. That was probably why he was into me. The women he'd dated were beautiful, of course, because Wes was hot as fuck. But usually they were beautiful in unconventional ways. Kind of like Julia Roberts, with that mouth that was a little too big for her face—not so different from mine when I thought about it—and yet somehow that imperfection enhanced her beauty and made her more compelling.

He also liked cheap, nasty pale beer, then insulted me for my tastes in imported brews. He'd stolen a swig of my beer at trivia one night, then given me shit about my preferences when he was obviously the one—

“Hurry, Beck!” Andi called from the living room, pulling me from my thoughts. “You’re gonna miss the end.”

“Maybe that’s all part of my plan,” I said, but grabbed spoons and headed back to the living room anyway. Might as well see this train wreck through to the end.

Andi looked like a miserable, tear-stained mess, but when I returned, she grinned and made grabby hands for the bowl. Women really were such strange creatures. I handed it over quickly, a little fearful as she shoved a bite into her mouth and moaned decadently. Thank fuck I’d never had even the smallest attraction to Andi. I’d only ever regarded her as an annoying pest of a little sister, and there was no danger of her escaping that designation—unlike Wes, who’d always been more like a best friend and wingman than a brother.

Maybe that’s where we’d gone wrong. Instead of being brothers, we’d become friends and roommates. We’d spent so much time together we could finish each other’s sentences. We knew each other’s favorite foods and drinks. Knew exactly which buttons to push to get a rise out of the other. Knew how to joke and banter and...possibly...flirt with each other.

I shoveled in ice cream nearly as fast as Andi, both of us groaning over brain freeze as the movie wrapped up with an ending that went pretty much how I expected.

Andi sighed. “The gay guy was the best character. Why is it that straight men are such assholes?”

I chuckled. “I don’t know. Most of my friends are gay.”

She snorted. “Really?”

“Well, gay or bi,” I clarified as I ticked them off on my fingers. “Tucker, Laurie, Clark, Hunter, Augustus... And that’s just my trivia team.”

Andi giggled. “Granville is full of man-on-man action, isn’t it? Jordan, my bestie from high school, came out after he left for college. He’s a big romance movie buff. He has a whole group of friends that watch movies together every week.”

“So I have *him* to thank for this torture,” I joked.

I stood and stretched, deciding to call it a night before the topic veered back to what was happening in my own sex life. Andi might be aware that there was no shortage of queer couples in town, but that was a hell of a lot different from realizing her brothers had dabbled in a little man-on-man action of their own.

Andi stood up and hugged me with one arm, ice-cream bowl still clutched in her other hand, though it was empty now. “Thanks for doing this with me, Beck.”

“Sure, no prob.”

She held on to my arm when I tried to move away and held my gaze. “Seriously. I’m sure this isn’t your idea of fun. I’ve barged into your life and taken your room, and I really appreciate that you’ve put up with it. I know you’ve got better things to do than sniffle over a sappy rom-com with me.”

I scoffed. “Some rom-com. There wasn’t even a happy ending.”

She chuckled. “In a way, that makes me feel better. I’m not the biggest screwup out there. I could be like her and let life and love pass me by. I’m trying, at least. That’s all we can do, right? Try to find love, and if we’re lucky enough, hold on to it.”

My throat tightened. “Yeah,” I scraped out. “Well, if you need us to kick some sense into Colt, let me know.”

She smiled tentatively. “Nah. It’s not all his fault, you know? It takes two people to make a relationship work.” She sighed. “Maybe, also, two people to ruin it.”

Her eyes were glassy again, and I was worried we’d have to watch another movie to pull her back from the precipice. So I gave her a hug, and when her defenses were down, messed up her hair. It was a patented Wes move, and she squealed and shoved me away with a glare. Holding up a hand tipped with manicured nails, she said, “Don’t make me unleash the claw on you!”

I laughed, feeling a little lighter myself, as I retreated. “I wouldn’t think of it. Goodnight!”

Once I was in Wes's bedroom, though, Andi's words cycled through my brain.

It takes two people to make a relationship work. Maybe, also, two people to ruin it.

Whatever happened, I couldn't allow that to become the story of Wes and me.

I couldn't let the Vegas wedding or the sex or the fears of what people might think ruin our relationship. We might not be boyfriends, but we were bros, and I refused to give that up. The pining and the moping and the worry had to stop—before everything between us became as tainted as the love Julia Roberts' character had for her best friend.

I was still awake, mind too troubled for sleep, when Wes slipped into the room. It was dark, and I could only make out his silhouette as he undressed. I closed my eyes, not wanting to invite conversation when I was so conflicted over what we had to do next.

The bed dipped as he climbed in on his side. I tried to breathe evenly, though my heart raced as it always did when we first got into bed together. My body remembered Vegas all too well and all the things we could get up to when in close proximity.

Wes shifted a couple of times, then rolled over and put his arm over me. He nuzzled the back of my neck, making goose bumps rise. Then he whispered so quietly I almost didn't catch his words.

"I miss happy Beck. That's why I'm gonna do this. To get him back."

I almost answered, but something stopped me. And when he brushed a kiss to my neck, I knew what it was. Shame swirled with arousal, but I couldn't bring myself to let him know I was awake. I was afraid he'd stop touching me. Also afraid I'd beg him to touch me more.

So I listened in the darkness as he held me, whispering truths he was afraid to say in the light of day.

“I don’t want anything to come between us, ever. I can’t lose you.”

He squeezed me once more, then rolled away. His breathing evened out and soon turned to quiet snores. He’d gotten his truth off his chest, even if he didn’t believe I’d heard it. But me? My truth was still fighting with my good sense, trapped in my throat, making me feel as though I couldn’t breathe.

CHAPTER 12



BECKETT

“LOOKS LIKE YOU AND WES ARE GOOD FOR MORE THAN bickering with each other after all.”

I pivoted on my heels, still in a crouch, where I'd been assisting Logan with the planting of one of the water-tolerant plants edging the pond, a red twig dogwood. These plants would add a bit of beauty to the area, but more importantly, they would help curb erosion along the pond's edges.

I tipped my head back to see Tucker and Laurie silhouetted against a blazing sun. “Eh, he's on residential maintenance today, or I'm sure we'd be going at it as usual.”

That was a lie, and Logan's sidelong look at me said that he knew it too. Tension had thrummed between Wes and me, both of us all too aware of our plans to file for divorce tonight. We'd met with the crew as usual, dealt out assignments for the day, and parted ways with barely two words between us but far too many looks.

Every time our eyes met, they seemed to catch and hold. There was that same feeling that hung in the air just before a storm, like something was brewing, and it was time to batten down the hatches. When it broke, I didn't know if I'd still be standing or if I'd be swept away.

Or maybe I needed to stop watching romance movies with Andi.

“This is looking great,” Laurie said.

“It really is,” Tucker agreed, glancing around. “You all are working some magic out here.”

I stood and pulled off my dirty gloves then smacked them against my thigh to make some of the clinging soil drop free.

“There’s a lot more to do. We’re really just getting started. Had to wait for the big machinery to come and go.”

“We saw the gazebo on the walk across the park,” Laurie said. He grinned at Tucker. “Maybe we should get married again there.”

Tucker chuckled, an ease to him that had been missing before Laurie came back into his life. He seemed more relaxed these days, a smile quicker to come to his face as it did now. “I think three honeymoon periods is more than enough.”

Tucker and Laurie eloped in their twenties, then reunited earlier in the summer, when they had a second wedding reception. But then they re-proposed to each other for real after that. Apparently, that proposal was just to agree they were going to stay married, not get married again, though that gazebo would make a nice setting for one last ceremony.

It kind of made my one single marriage to Wes seem more normal. If only he wasn’t my stepbrother.

Laurie grinned. “Pretty sure Lula Miller would say every day should be a honeymoon period, and she gave us the wedding gift to prove it.”

Tucker turned a little red, piquing my curiosity. “What did she give you guys?”

“Nothing,” Tucker said quickly.

“Was it a little something by our sex toy empress, Paula Goodman?” I asked coyly.

Tucker spun on his heel, gazing around the park as if suddenly interested in every blade of grass. Laurie grinned and nodded yes behind his husband’s back.

“Why so shy, Tuck?” I teased. “It’s practically tradition that every new couple be initiated with a dildo from Paula.”

Behind me, Logan laughed. “What?”

I glanced over my shoulder. “I forget you’re new here. It’s a very...intimate sort of community.”

Paula wasn’t above accosting people in public to extol the great virtues of using a sex toy to spice up their love lives. It made her husband absolutely bonkers, which I think was half of the appeal to her. Paula and Dirk’s marriage hadn’t been the smoothest. Rumor had it she’d once brained him with a frying pan for cheating on her.

Tucker’s phone rang, cutting through the peaceful sound of water rippling and birds chirping, the construction work at the adjacent Dix neighborhood distant enough from this area of the park to be only faintly heard.

“Oh thank god,” Tucker said as he pulled his phone from his pocket. “I have to take this call.”

He took a few paces away to talk privately, and Laurie turned to me. “Can we talk?”

There was a serious tone to his voice that made me think we needed a little privacy too. “Sure. Why don’t I give you a tour?”

I left Logan working with the dogwood, while Colt and Luke hauled and placed coarse stones around the edges where we weren’t planting. My sister’s ex had looked as if he wanted to murder me when I gave him that job, and it’s true, I did get a little vindictive thrill from it, but it’d do Colt good to toughen up.

“We’re actually planning a lot more landscaping around the gazebo,” I said, “as well as more trees in the large open swath around the picnic area. We want more shade there.”

Laurie nodded. “Uh-huh. Sounds good. So, how are you doing?”

“With the project?”

“With what happened in Vegas between you and Wes.”

I glanced around uneasily, but we’d distanced ourselves from anyone who could overhear. “There’s no easy answer to

that.”

He bumped me with his shoulder. “I’m not trying to pry. You seemed pretty overwhelmed the last time I saw you, and I just wanted to know you were doing okay.”

I blew out a breath. “We’re getting a divorce.”

He pulled me to a stop, forehead creasing as he frowned. “Do you mean—Are you two...”

I caught on to his meaning and shook my head quickly. “No, we’re good. We’re fine. It just needs to be done. I mean...” I laughed nervously. “It’s not like we can just stay married.”

Laurie tilted his head. “Can’t you?”

I huffed. “No. There’s way too much on the line. I told you before—”

“You’re worried about your family,” he said. “That’s understandable. But, Beck... I’ve traveled this path you’re on.”

I squinted. “You fell in love with a member of your family?”

He chuckled. “No, but I fell in love with someone they didn’t approve of, and I can tell you that giving up on what we had was not easy to live with.”

“It’s not the same situation.”

“It’s not,” he agreed.

“It’s been so tense and confusing,” I admitted. “My sister crashed with us, so we have to sleep in the same bed. I should find a new place to go, put some distance between us because my willpower is only so strong, but that would only start gossip Andi doesn’t want.” I took off my hat and scrubbed a hand through my sweaty hair. “Fuck, but it’s all a mess. I don’t know how to turn off the feelings, but the divorce, that I can do. It feels weird, but being married is weirder, so I can’t win.”

Laurie let me vent my feelings, patiently waiting until I ran out of steam and heaved a heavy sigh.

“You know, Tucker and I shared a bed for a while too. Before we got intimate again.”

I raised my eyebrows. “That must have been frustrating.”

He laughed. “It was. I called Elle, his dog, my official cockblocker. The truth is, though, nothing was going to happen unless we both wanted it to happen. If staying platonic with Wes is so hard, I think you need to consider that there’s a reason for that. Maybe a reason worth exploring.”

My heart gave a flutter as the words ignited a hope I’d tried to squash ever since we got back home. I shook my head. “I don’t know, Laurie. I wish it were that easy.”

“Some of the scariest things are simpler than we realize, Beck. Just think about it.”

I nodded once. “I will.”



WES

TIME SEEMED TO SPEED UP, work passing in a flash, then slow down again as Beckett finished his shower after we got off shift. The big D—and not the fun kind I’d come to discover with Beck—had been hanging over my head all day, and at this point, I just wanted to get the divorce over with so the lead ball in my gut would go away.

I’d already showered and changed, so while Beck cleaned up, I decided some comfort food was in order. I buttered a slice of bread and put it into a hot skillet to grill, then grabbed cheese from the refrigerator.

Andi ventured out of her bedroom, looking more presentable than I’d seen her in a few days. Her hair was combed and she wore jeans and a flowery pink tank top instead of the yoga pants and plain tees she’d been lounging around in recently.

“Look at you,” I said. “You almost pass for human.”

“Ha-ha.” She scratched her nose with her middle finger. “Nice to see you too.”

I grinned and turned to the stove to attend to the sandwich I was making, adding cheese and a second slice of buttered bread before flipping the whole thing over. “You want a grilled cheese? I promise I’ll only burn it a little.”

She laughed. “Well, that’s tempting...but, no. I’m going out.”

I gave a mock gasp and rounded the counter to grab her up in a big bear hug. “You’re done hibernating? This is amazing!”

She shoved at my shoulder. “Let me go! Oh my god. You’re such an idiot.”

Beckett emerged from the hall, sniffing the air. “Is something burning?”

“Shit!” I dropped Andi and raced back to the stove to pull out the sandwich, which, sure enough, was a little burned. “Ah well, a little charcoal never hurt anybody, right?”

“Oh sweet, you made grilled cheese,” Beck said, sounding delighted. “Do we have any tomato soup?”

“In the pantry. I was gonna get to that next.”

Beck loved to dip his sandwich in the soup like it was au jus. I could take it or leave it, but when it came to making Beck happy, I was always going to take it.

Andi smiled. “You two enjoy cheesy charcoal! I’m off to win back my man.”

Beckett and I both turned at the same time.

“Wait,” I said.

“What?” he said.

Andi shrugged and smiled, a light blush coloring her cheeks. “We’re meeting for dinner. Wish me luck.”

“Andi, are you sure you want to take this asshole back?”

Her face tightened. “You don’t even know why we were fighting.”

“No, but I know you and I know Colt,” I said. “It doesn’t take a genius to figure out he’s the asshole here.”

She shook her head. “Love isn’t always easy, Wes. Sometimes you have to work for it. Ask Beck. He knows.”

She turned and walked out the door. I turned to Beck, raising an eyebrow. “What do you know?”

“Lots of things,” Beck said airily.

“Uh-huh. Like what?”

He shrugged as he crossed to the little cabinet-sized pantry to grab the can of soup while I kept a closer eye on the new sandwich.

“Last night we watched a movie and purged our feelings.” He shot me a nervous smile. “Andi was hurting, and I haven’t exactly done a great job of hiding my turmoil lately. So, when she asked, I told her I’d had some bad luck in the romance department too.”

“Oh.” I frowned, unsure of what I wanted to ask. “Are you...upset? I mean, do you not want...”

“I barely understand what I feel.” He poured soup into a pan and placed it on the open burner to heat on the stove. “Even though we need to do this, it’s not easy. You know?”

“Yeah,” I said quietly. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what?”

“For being a drunk idiot and proposing freaking marriage. I got you into this mess.”

“Wes...” Beckett shook his head. “There’s something you should know about that night.”

“What? Did you remember something else we did?”

“Sort of,” he hedged. “Let’s finish the cooking and we’ll talk while we eat.”

“Okay,” I said, feeling uneasy. What more could I have fucked up without realizing it? Maybe Dad was right to be so

pissed at me. Being responsible for actions I couldn't even remember was no way to go through life.

I made two more sandwiches, and Beck ladled the soup into bowls. We didn't have a table, so we cleared off the counter and ate while standing. I let Beck enjoy his meal for a few bites, watching as his eyes closed in bliss and he made a pleased little humming sound that went straight to my dick.

That's new...

I shifted and tried to distract myself from the hard-on trying to form. Tonight was definitely not the time.

"So, what did you remember about that night in Vegas?" I chuckled weakly, trying to make light of it. "Did I embarrass myself even more than I realized?"

"Actually, you didn't." Beck winced. "I did."

"What do you mean?"

"I, uh...I'm the one who suggested we get married for real. To make the prank seem more legit. You were totally game for just taking some pics and having a laugh. I'm the one who fucked up, Wes."

I stared at him, shocked. I didn't know what to say. Beckett and I had a pattern, and that pattern was that I did stupid shit and he either reined me in or did damage control when he couldn't. Never had the reverse happened. Beckett was the smart, level-headed one. He liked to have fun, but he knew where to draw the lines. So for him to have proposed marriage...

"What aren't you telling me?"

He crammed the last bite of sandwich into his mouth, as if he needed a few more minutes to compose his answer. That was fine. I needed time to process. I wasn't upset, of course. I'd believed the marriage was my idea, but even if it wasn't, I'd agreed to it.

But...a fraction of my guilt eased. Because we really were in this together. I hadn't dragged Beckett into my ridiculous ploy. Hadn't persuaded him to make a bad choice. He'd been

right there with me, impulsive and spontaneous and...a little crazy, but only in the very best way.

Beckett swallowed, licked his lips nervously, and said, "We didn't mess around that night either. I remember."

"But...the cum dried on you..."

Beckett turned bright red and mumbled something.

"What was that?" I asked.

"It was mine," he said a little louder. "I jerked off while drunk." His eyes met mine, so intense I had to resist the urge to look away, to escape the emotions floating there for anyone to see: the guilt, the shame, the longing.

"Wes, this whole thing is my fault. We got married because of me. We hooked up because you believed it had already happened...because of me. We're in this position because of *me*."

The break in his voice slayed me. Absolutely killed every last shred of restraint in me.

I grabbed his face and kissed him.

Hard enough to bruise.

Hard enough to satisfy a deep primal urge I'd been suppressing for days.

Hard enough, I hoped, to wipe the apology from his eyes.

CHAPTER 13



BECKETT

THE DIVORCE FORM WAS CUED UP ON MY PHONE, AND WES was kissing me as if I'd given him a love confession rather than an apology.

But then, maybe I had.

I clung to him, helpless to do anything other than kiss him back. His mouth was hot against mine, relentless as he forced my lips open with his and pushed his tongue in. He wasn't gently seeking entry, he was ruthlessly taking what he wanted, and I fucking melted against him with a needy moan that was almost embarrassing.

Almost, because there was no room for embarrassment when Wes Potter was in the process of taking me apart.

He grabbed my shirt and yanked it up, pulling away to get it over my head and strip off his.

"W-wait," I stuttered as a few inches of air swept between us, and my head cleared enough to form sentences. "What are we doing?"

Wes pulled me flush against him, and the heat of his bare skin against mine sent a fresh bolt of lust through me. He threaded his fingers in my floppy hair and gazed directly into my eyes. "If you want to stop, we'll stop. But whatever happens with the marriage thing, I just... I need you, Beck."

"Are you sure about this?" I asked, even as I pressed my hips forward, grinding against his thigh while leaned back against the counter.

“Please don’t make me beg,” he whispered.

“Never.” I dropped to my knees and gazed up, taking in the bulge in his jeans that showed just how much he wanted me, the taut stomach and built chest and arms that were proof of the manual labor he did nearly every day, his strong jaw and full lips, and those dark, dark eyes that were usually full of good humor but now just smoldered with fire for me. “I’m the one who should be begging.”

He ran his thumb over my bottom lip, pushing down lightly until I let my mouth drop open. He shuddered. “Fuck, Beck. You don’t need to beg. You can have anything you want from me.”

A feeling of peace came over me. Maybe Laurie had been right and it was time to stop hiding from this.

I swallowed hard. “Right now, I just want your cock.”

It was a small truth, far from the whole of what I wanted. I wasn’t yet sure what I could or should have. But as the words rolled off my tongue, I could suddenly breathe easier. I’d admitted I wanted Wes, and the sky hadn’t fallen. Not yet.

Not before I got my mouth on him and tasted him properly.

“Fuck yes.” He ripped open his button. The sounds of his jeans opening seemed exceptionally loud. My heart raced, making my pulse roar in my ears, and still, the sound of his zipper going down was like a train clacking down the tracks. He pulled his cock from his navy-blue briefs and directed it toward my open mouth. “Suck it. I wanna see your mouth stretched around my dick. Wanna cream all over your face. Make you my dirty slut.”

Holy shit. Maybe I should be offended, but his words made me even hotter.

I wrapped a hand around his cock and licked the tip tentatively. In Vegas we’d gotten off together more than once, but never like this. It would be my first time sucking a cock, but I didn’t feel any hesitation. Quite the opposite. My mouth had been watering for him for weeks. For years, really.

His skin tasted salty, with just a hint of sweetness underlying it.

“C’mon,” he urged. “Don’t tease.”

Just for that I fluttered my tongue over the tip, getting a quick burst of bitterness as my tongue swiped through precum. I shifted to press kisses down the side of his shaft, taking my time.

He gave a tortured groan. “You’re such a brat.”

I chuckled, letting my breath gust over his balls, and he shuddered.

Wes’s fingers tightened in my hair, tugging. “We’re about three seconds from me taking care of this myself,” he growled.

Oh, hell no. If I’d come this far, I wasn’t about to sit back and watch Wes get himself off. As hot as that might be, we’d done that before and it hadn’t come close to satisfying my desires. This time, if we were going to cross the line, I planned to make it worthwhile.

I dove down on his cock so fast I gagged and choked.

“Whoa, easy,” Wes murmured as I retreated to clear my throat and gasp for air. “I’m not going anywhere.”

I took the tip of his cock back into my mouth, moving a little more slowly. Wes put one big hand on my head, not pushing me down, but guiding me where he wanted me. Showing me he wanted this as much as I did.

“There you go. You got this,” he murmured. “You’re made to suck my cock.”

My thoughts scattered as his thick length invaded my mouth, rubbed against my tongue, then nudged at my throat. Wes let me take my time and feel him out, urging me along with dirty praise.

“That’s good, Beck. You’re a total cocks slut for me, huh? You like that dick in your mouth, don’t you? Aw yeah, I’m gonna bust so fucking hard for you.”

I shuddered and reached down, unable to ignore my own arousal any longer. I groaned, the sound muffled by my full mouth, and fumbled to unfasten my pants.

“Yeah, Beck, yeah. Take out your cock. I wanna watch you jerk it. Want you to come with my spunk all over your face.”

I made a desperate sound that was a little embarrassing as I got my hand around my shaft, stroking it and sucking him harder, wanting to give him everything he wanted. He cursed, then suddenly shoved my head back, pulling his cock from my mouth.

I parted my lips, ready to protest, when the first shot of cum sprayed my chin. I closed my eyes just as the second blast hit my forehead and dripped down the bridge of my nose.

“Fuck, yeah,” Wes uttered. “Now you’re my cumslut.”

Just like that, I was gone. My cock pulsed in my hand, and I shot my cum onto our kitchen floor.

It was so dirty.

But so good.

I glanced up, catching sight of Wes’s smiling, satisfied, smug lips. Heat rushed to my cheeks as I thought of the dirty things he’d said. But when I faltered, his expression shifted to something soft and sweet.

“Come here.” He reached for my arm and tugged me to my feet. “You’re amazing, you know that?”

I couldn’t find the words, my throat too tight to speak. As my orgasm ebbed, all I could think about was what we’d done. What we’d been fighting so hard not to do. All that resistance gone in the heat of the moment.

Wes kissed me gently. “Everything is going to be okay.”

“Is it?” I asked, my voice shaking.

“Yes,” he said, with all the confidence I lacked but needed to hear. “Let’s clean up. Then we’ll figure out where to go from here. Because this whole thing where we pretend we don’t want each other? That bullshit is over.”

I blinked, a little startled by his firm tone.

“But...”

He kissed the protest from my lips, and I sighed, sinking into him. He didn't seem to care that my lips were dotted with cum or that my mouth probably tasted like his dick. He swept his tongue in possessively, acting as if he owned me.

And that's when I realized...he did.

He broke the kiss, eyes searching mine.

“No one else has to know,” he said softly, a sharp contrast to the way he'd just taken my mouth. “As long as we're honest with each other, we'll be okay.”

“Okay,” I said, relieved. I was so, so tired of wrestling down my feelings. So tired of longing for something I couldn't have. “But the divorce...”

“I know we have to do that,” he said, his arms tightening around me. “I can deal with that as long as I have you. But on one condition.”

“What is that?”

“That it makes you happy,” he said. “Being with me, I mean. I doubt a divorce makes anyone happy, even when they need one.”

I remembered his words from the night before, spoken in the darkness while he thought I was sleeping. *I miss happy Beck.*

Finally, I could respond to the intimate confession he'd made.

“I'm happy as long as we have each other,” I said. “That's my only condition. Even if this...doesn't last forever, Wes, I don't want it to come between us.”

“It won't,” he promised.

It was the kind of promise that was easy to make, but difficult to keep. But I didn't doubt him. Wes had always had my back, and I knew he always would.



WES

THIS WASN'T how I imagined my divorce taking place. I was lounging, naked in bed, with my equally naked stepbrother cradled in my arms. Our skin was still damp from the shower, sticking a bit where we touched.

I'd indulged in access to his whole body for the first time since we were in Las Vegas. Beckett had a wiry frame, but it hid a lot of muscle he'd built on the job. He was lean but strong, slender but hard.

It seemed counterintuitive that I'd be so turned on by his firm muscle when I was used to softer bed partners, but there was no denying how hard my cock got when I'd scrubbed his back and massaged that tight ass...

"Wes, did you hear me?" Beckett waved his phone in front of my face, a reminder of a much less pleasant reality. "I've got the forms pulled up here. We just have to fill them out."

My warm bubble popped. "It'll be done? Just like that?"

"I guess so." Beck tilted his head back to gaze up at me, his eyes soft. "It doesn't mean we don't care about each other. It's a formality. Just paperwork."

I made a noncommittal sound. Beckett was right that it wouldn't change our relationship. It wasn't as if I was ready to be married. If Beckett and I hadn't been stepbrothers, I was pretty sure our attraction would have taken a more normal course. We'd kiss, hook up a few times, date. We wouldn't even consider marriage, not for a long time, anyway.

But since it was already done... Well, undoing it felt sort of like giving up on our relationship before it ever began.

"Are we sure this is legitimate? Maybe we should go to a real lawyer," I said. "We don't want to find out this was a scam and we're still married twenty years from now."

“Like Tucker and Laurie?” Beck said. “It kinda worked out for them.”

I chuckled. “True, but if we’re going that route, I say we skip the part where we think we’re divorced for two decades, and we just spend all those years together.”

An image of us kicking back with beers, both of us old and gray, popped into my head. It wouldn’t be the worst thing, would it?

“You think you’re clever, don’t you?” Beck said, catching on to my attempts to dissuade him.

“Well, yeah.” I grinned sheepishly. “But mostly I’m just happy you’re not pushing me away.”

“Uh-huh.” Beckett sounded skeptical, but he nuzzled into my neck and sank his teeth into my flesh enough to make me gasp. My cock stirred again. When he lifted his head, his eyes were glazed with lust. “You might have to push me away now.”

“Not a chance.”

I grabbed the back of his neck and pulled him in for a deep, wet kiss.

He instantly went pliant, allowing me to take charge. I rolled us, flattening him beneath me, and drank in his whimper of need.

“Your ass is mine now,” I whispered in his ear.

He shuddered beneath me. “M-my ass?”

“Figure of speech, Beckett. I wouldn’t assume you’d let me fuck you.”

“I would,” he said, surprising the hell out of me. We had both lived as straight guys up to now, and I was pretty sure neither of us had much experience with the receiving end of anal.

“Just like that?” I asked.

He swallowed, Adam’s apple bobbing, the pale flesh of his neck calling to me so strongly I had to dip down and kiss it.

His voice stuttered as he tried to answer. “I-I... Calista...”

I lifted my head. “What about Calista now?”

“She pegged me.” Beckett blushed as I stared at him in shock. “It’s just been toys, but...I liked it. Sometimes I still play with my ass.”

“Holy shit.” I slid my hand under his thigh to brush a finger over his hole. He jolted at the contact. I rubbed light circles, then watched his expression as I slowly pushed just the tip of my finger inside him. His body was tight and unyielding, but his eyes were dark with lust, his mouth open and panting. I lifted my fingers to my mouth, getting them spit-slick before returning them to press into his hole one at a time.

I went slowly, letting his body adjust to the intrusion, and *he let me* inside.

It hit me hard, just how gorgeous he was. How much I wanted him again. How much I’d always want him.

“Don’t divorce me yet,” I whispered against his open mouth.

His closed eyes sprang open. “But...”

“Please, Beck. It’s just a formality. We can figure it out later, if necessary. No one knows. No one has to know.”

I knew it wasn’t fair to talk to him about our plans while he was letting me command his body like this. But I couldn’t help it. Suddenly, I couldn’t stand the idea of signing my name to our end, even if it was just the end to something no one knew about.

“O-okay.”

I stilled, raising up to meet his eyes. “Yeah? You’re not just saying that because I’ve got you all horned up and craving my dick?”

“Damn, Wes.” He covered his face with his hands as he laughed. “If this is how you talk, it’s no wonder you could never keep a girlfriend.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, a little offended.

“You called me a cumslut earlier, and now you’re talking about how I crave your dick.”

“Are you saying that’s not true?”

“No, I’m...” Beckett huffed, lowering his hands. “I’m saying that it’s a little embarrassing for you to point out how pathetically needy I am when it comes to you.”

I slowly withdrew my fingers from his body, watching Beckett instinctively widen his legs and tilt his hips up as if begging for more. *Damn*. He was needy, but I loved it.

“You’re so hot, Beck,” I said. “I don’t always talk this way. You bring it out in me.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, of course. You affect me just as much.” I waved a hand to my hard-on. “But you don’t have to answer me now about the divorce. It’s not fair to ask it when I’ve got you all hot for me.” I winked to show him I was playing.

Beckett rolled his eyes. “I guess...I wasn’t sure what to put in for our married name anyway. We could at least wait until we get the marriage certificate to be sure all the information we submit is correct.”

I smiled down at him, my heart fluttering with excitement. Beckett sounded relieved that I’d given him an out, and I was pretty sure we could both guess which name Beckett would have wanted to take when we married. It was his chance to finally become a Potter like the rest of his family.

But I wasn’t about to argue with his convenient excuse when it got me what I wanted.

“Good,” I said. “Let’s get back to enjoying this honeymoon then.”

His cock was hard, curved up against his belly, and already wet at the tip. I rubbed my fingers through the precum forming there, making him jolt.

“That’s not exactly what I—*ohhh*.”

“I want you to be a slut. Just for me.” I held his gaze as I pressed my fingers to his mouth. Slowly, he opened. “Suck your precum off my fingers.”

His face turned red, but he sucked my fingers in with a groan, his eyes slipping shut.

“Get them good and wet because they’re going back in your ass.” His eyes flew open, and I chuckled. “Oh, did you forget these fingers were in your ass? Yep. You’re my dirty slut, and it makes me incredibly hot for you, Beck. It makes me desperate for you.”

Some of his tension ebbed and I watched him fully give in to his desire. He swirled his tongue around my fingers, sucking and moaning, and when I pulled them free, he parted his thighs eagerly.

I plunged them back into his hole, this time hard and fast, and he cried out.

“Too much?” I asked.

“No,” he rasped. “Need more.”

I reached for the lube, not wanting to push Beck’s limits too far, even if he thought he could take it. I squeezed out some slippery liquid, then worked my fingers inside, stretching his tight, tight hole until he could take three.

My cock throbbed with envy. It would feel so fucking good to sink into that heat, but now wasn’t the time. Andi might come home soon, and I doubt we could be quiet enough to escape her notice.

Besides, I was no Calista. I’d only done anal twice, and I was too desperate for Beck right now. I didn’t trust myself not to hurt him. So instead I stroked Beck inside and out, squeezing and pumping his cock with one hand while thrusting my fingers in and out of his ass with the other.

Eventually, I wanted to dive down on his cock as eagerly as he had mine. But we were both new at this, and right now, Beckett looked at me to lead.

I wanted to give him that. So instead of venturing out of my comfort zone, I used my hands to work him over and tried to ignore the growing ache for my own relief. My mouth pooled with saliva, and the urge to kiss and lick him everywhere grew and grew.

Beck thrust his hips up, pushing his cock deeper into my grip, before sinking down on my fingers. His body trembled, tension winding tighter and tighter. The tendons in his neck stood out, and a full-body blush spread across his chest.

“Fuck, Wes,” he muttered. “I’m almost there.”

I angled my fingers up, grinding against the bundle of nerves inside him that all our queer friends had told us far too much about, and his ass clamped tight around me. It was the only warning before he came, spilling messily over my fingers and dripping onto his abs. His stomach flexed and twitched as his cock sprayed, his ass continuing to contract around my fingers.

I released his cock and grabbed mine, giving a hard jerk.

That was all it took for me to come, and I added to the mess on his skin with a curse.

I carefully pulled my fingers free of his body and dropped down to the bed with a loud exhale, and Beckett slurred out, “Thanks a lot.”

“What?” I rolled my head to see Beckett dragging a finger through the pool of cum on his abs. Before I could react, he dragged his finger over my lips and smirked. “There, now you’re a cumslut too.”

I pulled him toward me with a growl. “Clean it up.”

Beckett licked the cum from my lips, then kissed me, trading the flavor of us with me. It didn’t taste good, but it was still erotic as hell.

“Better?” he asked as he pulled back, his lips plump and shiny.

“Much better,” I said, pulling him down to cradle his head on my shoulder. “Now be good and cuddle with me.”

He gave a surprised laugh. “I didn’t think you’d be a snuggler.”

“There’s plenty you still don’t know about me.”

“Like you’re a filthy, dirty-talking cuddler,” he mumbled, like the brat he was.

I pinched his ass, then kissed away his protests, before leading him to the shower to clean up for the second time that night. Andi came in just as we slipped back into bed, both of us naked and spent.

“This has been really nice,” Beckett said, almost as if he wasn’t sure it’d happen again.

My chest tightened. “Yeah, it was, and it will be again and again. Because we’re doing this, right?”

“Right. But...”

I pressed a quick kiss to his lips. “I know.”

He didn’t have to say it. This was a reprieve, nothing more. Beckett hadn’t changed his mind about divorcing me, merely granted me a delay. But every day we had together was a day more than I ever thought I’d get.

Every day was another that I could show him just how good it could be if we took a risk.

It wouldn’t be easy. We didn’t stop being stepbrothers just because we’d become lovers. But if Hunter could discover a new side of himself for love, if Tucker could let Laurie back into his heart after years apart, then who was to say we couldn’t find a way too?

CHAPTER 14



BECKETT

I LOOKED AT THE MASSIVE CHICKEN FRIED STEAK SMOTHERED in skillet gravy, fluffy scrambled eggs, and mound of hashbrowns that Wes had ordered for me before I arrived at The Diner to meet him for lunch. He'd told me to come alone, and I'd half expected him to suggest we sneak away for a quickie rather than a gut bomb.

"I hope you're giving me the afternoon to sleep this off," I joked.

"Nope, but you can give yourself time off anytime you need it."

"What?"

"I'm not your boss," Wes said matter-of-factly.

It always astonished me when Wes treated me like an equal partner, despite the fact everyone in this town knew that Potter Landscaping was really his. Dad might still own it on paper, but he'd been grooming Wes to take over ever since he was old enough to hold a rake, and most folks had treated him like the owner for years.

I'd entered the picture much later, and I'd had a lot of catching up to do. So much so that I'd had to take classes in landscape architecture just to make up for the years of experience Wes had on me.

The truth was, Wes *was* my boss. But he didn't want to be, and that meant a hell of a lot to me.

“I invited you here because I wanted to treat you to a special morning after.”

I glanced around, but no one was paying us any attention. Seeing Wes and I eat together was like seeing the sun rise; it happened every day. It was occasionally worth a second look, but it was never surprising.

“It’s not morning,” I pointed out unhelpfully.

He smirked. “I know, you brat. We had to go to work.” He dragged his fork through the maple syrup pooling around his pancakes. “I just wanted you to know this means something to me.”

My heart skittered, and I couldn’t stop the smile blooming across my face, nor the hint of amusement in my voice. “Wow, that’s sweet.”

“Ugh, I know. Shut up.”

I laughed, my heart feeling lighter than it had in weeks. “I didn’t know you had it in you.” I leaned in over our plates, murmuring, “All that dirty talk and you’re really just a softie.”

Wes’s eyes smoldered over his plate. “If you want dirty, I can give you—”

“Beckett Monroe!” a high-pitched voice interrupted. “You are a difficult man to pin down.”

“Not for me,” Wes muttered under his breath as Iola Fletcher approached our table.

I kicked him in the ankle, heat flashing through me as I remembered how easily I let Wes pin me to the bed last night. And this morning.

Fuck, but I wanted him to do it again.

Wes had seemed a little wary when we woke up entangled in each other and the bedsheets, as if he expected me to have regrets. But I’d given up fighting our attraction. I’d fully surrendered, and after three more orgasms between us, there was no putting that genie back in the bottle.

Maybe Laurie's words about trying to live without the love he found with Tucker had gotten to me. Or maybe it was a fight I always would have lost. Wes was like a magnet, always pulling me to him, and when he actively tried to pull me close, there was no way I could resist.

I didn't regret giving in. I was so fucking relieved that I had. Finally, I could indulge my cravings. I could revel in my fantasies made real.

Years of pent-up desire finally had an outlet.

We still had to be careful. We had to keep it a secret, but it shouldn't be that hard. We already spent a lot of time together. Already lived together.

We could keep the secret for years if need be.

"Beckett, I've called you twice," Iola scolded, breathing a little heavily as she reached our table. The poor lady had practically sprinted across the diner to ensure we didn't get away.

"Sorry. I've got a lot going on with work."

And with sucking my brother's dick and letting him finger fuck me.

An illicit thrill went down my spine. Wes's gaze latched on to me, intense, as if he knew exactly what had just gone through my mind.

"Well, love waits for no man."

"Huh?"

"Beckett!" she exclaimed in exasperation. "I promised to find you a date as a thank-you for taking care of my lawn whenever your crew maintains Emily Rafferty's place."

"That's really not necessary," I said.

Iola waved my words away. "Matchmaking Mamas is just getting off the ground, but once I have your profile, it'll be easier to match you. Now, then. Do you prefer blondes, brunettes, or redheads?"

"Iola—"

“Brunettes,” Wes said with a smirk, eyebrows wiggling at me. “Definitely.”

“Calista wasn’t a brunette,” Iola said. “Wasn’t she your girlfriend for a bit?”

“Doesn’t count,” Wes said. “Calista is everybody’s type.”

Iola tittered. “It does seem that way. All right, brunettes. Now, then, what do you value in a partner?”

“We should get back to work,” I hedged.

Iola turned to Wes expectantly, as if she already knew he’d provide the answer. Wes leaned forward, a mischievous spark in his eye. “Well, I know this one. He values honesty, trust, loyalty...”

“All important qualities,” Iola agreed.

“But he needs someone fun-spirited too. Beck gets in his head too much. He needs a little spontaneity in his life. He needs someone who can crack that shell of his.”

“Dear god,” I muttered.

Iola beamed. “This is perfect. Thank you, Wes! Shall I add a profile for you too? Plenty of women would be eager to snap you up.”

“What am I, chopped liver?” I complained.

“Oh, no, Beck, you’re lovely, dear,” Iola said. “I won’t have any trouble matching you with a date either.”

She looked back to Wes expectantly. He shook his head, less amused to be in the hot seat. “Thanks, Iola, but I’m good for now.”

“All right, well, maybe you’ll change your mind after you see Beckett happily matched up, hmm?” She smiled brightly. “Expect to hear from me within the week, dear.”

Wes looked suddenly taken aback. “That fast?”

“Matchmaking Mamas prides itself on making its clients a priority. We won’t rest until Beckett finds love!”

Wes cleared his throat. “Uh, we’re in the middle of a big park project. He might not have time...”

“Pfft. He’s got to have dinner sometime!” She turned her head. “Oh, there’s Anna Patterson! I need to go chat with her next. She’s signing up for matchmaking too. Soon I’ll have everyone in this town happily settled.”

Iola waved a hand at Anna, who looked as dismayed as I felt when Iola spotted me, and headed across the dining room.

“Shit. You don’t think she’ll match Anna with you, do you?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “She wouldn’t be able to match anyone with me if you hadn’t fed her answers for her profile.”

Wes winced, giving an awkward chuckle. “Sorry, I was in stepbrother mode.”

“Not a bad thing,” I said grudgingly. “Since that’s the mode we need to show people. Not...”

Wes’s eyes darkened. “Pin-you-to-the-bed mode?”

I squirmed in my seat, glad he’d kept his voice to barely more than a whisper. “Yeah.”

“Maybe I should tell Iola that Anna’s your ex?” Wes suggested. “Stop her from putting you in an awkward position.”

“So what you’re saying is, you’d rather she match me up with a woman who hasn’t already put me in the friend zone?”

“Fuck.” He threw down his fork. “Why didn’t you stop me? I don’t want you matched at all.”

I smiled and dug into my food, suddenly ravenous. “You know, watching you squirm is fun.”

“Not as fun as it’ll be to make you squirm on my cock,” he said darkly.

I nearly spit out my gulp of coffee. “Jesus, man, watch what you say in public.”

“No one can hear me,” Wes said. “Besides, you started it.”

“Did not.”

“Did too.”

“Did not.”

“Did—”

“Wes!”

He laughed. “Sorry, slipped into stepbrother mode again.”

I rolled my eyes. “Just so you know, it’s not attractive.”

He fixed his gaze on me as he lifted his fork and licked syrup from the tines. I held my breath as I watched, feeling like I needed to squirm right now.

“Yeah, I can tell how not into this you are,” he said.

I balled up a napkin and threw it at him. “Cocky bastard.”

“And don’t forget it.”

I wouldn’t. That threat—or promise?—to make me squirm on his cock would stick with me all day.

I was glad I’d given in to desire, but damn, had I known just how good it would feel to finally indulge my lust for Wes, I would have done it a long time ago.



WES

BECKETT and I were both dripping sweat by the time we headed home for the day. I tilted the A/C vents to blow against my damp skin and sighed with relief. “Damn, that was a long day.”

“Sure was.”

“I’ve been thinking about what I want to do to you ever since this morning.”

Beckett shivered next to me. “I’ve...been thinking about that too.”

I pulled our pickup into the rutted drive in front of our trailer and killed the engine. “When we get inside, we’re going straight to the bedroom, where you are gonna squirm so fucking good for me.”

His eyes darkened even as he protested. “Wes, we’re filthy. I need a shower—”

“Fuck that,” I said. “You’ll be dirty for me if I want you dirty.”

He hesitated, but the flush crawling up his neck told me all I needed to know. Beckett was just as turned on as I was.

“You *are* my dirty slut, aren’t you?”

“Fuck.” He shuddered. “Okay, if that’s what you want.”

“Damn right it is.” I opened my door, and he did the same. As we rounded the pickup, I gave him a little shove toward the trailer. “Come on. Hurry before I bust in my pants from just looking at that ass.”

Beckett picked up his speed, giving a delighted little laugh. “You’re ridiculous.”

Just as he stopped to pull open the door, I hooked an arm around his chest. “I think you mean I’m incredibly sexy.”

“T-that too,” he said, voice stuttering as my fingers brushed over a hard nipple through his T-shirt.

I rocked my hips against him, letting him feel my semihard cock through our clothes. “Tomorrow, you need to come to work naked. New rule.”

Beck laughed, sounding breathless. “Like I said, ridiculous.”

“And sexy,” I reminded him, giving that nipple a quick pinch.

“Ah! Yes,” he agreed, trembling in my hold. “Always that.”

“That’s better. Now, get your ass to the bedroom so I can —”

The door suddenly opened, and Andi was there, looking at us with a strange expression. “What are you guys doing? I heard you pull up like five minutes ago.”

I released Beckett so quickly he stumbled forward, and I gave him another push for good measure. I’d been so turned-on I’d completely forgotten that Andi could be here. We really needed to get the woman a car—or a bicycle or bell or something—so we’d know when she was near.

“We were just arguing over who would shower first,” I said. “Beck needs to get his ass in there because he’s filthy.”

Beckett shot me an incredulous look. “So are you.”

I grinned. “Yeah, but I smell like roses no matter what.”

Andi wrinkled her nose. “You both smell like ass, so I don’t care who showers first as long as you both clean up ASAP. I’ve got dinner on the stove.”

The smell of charring beef registered now that I wasn’t focused on deflecting so that Andi didn’t see too much. Beck would never forgive me if I got us found out on our very first day as a secret couple. If we even were a couple. I wasn’t sure what this was between us, just sex or something more? I wanted more. Of course I did. This was Beck. But we hadn’t exactly discussed where this was leading. Considering it was secret, and I’d barely gotten Beckett to agree to that, I wasn’t ready to push my luck by asking about the future.

“The steaks are almost done,” Andi said with a too-bright smile. “I figured you guys would be starving after a long day on the job.”

We probably would be, had it not been for that huge breakfast at The Diner in the middle of the day. But we’d done some heavy lifting, finishing up the rock border around the pond, so I could definitely eat. I’d rather be eating Beck, and the look that passed between us told me he wished the same. But there was regret in his eyes that told me he didn’t see it happening anytime soon. Damn it.

“I’ll make my shower quick,” he said. “Thanks, Andi.”

“It’s the least I can do,” she said. “I really didn’t intend to stay so long. I thought after last night...” Her eyes turned suspiciously shiny. Shit. Was I really going to have to make good on my offer to kick Colt’s ass? She waved a hand. “Anyway, I need to intrude for just a little longer, if it’s all right?”

“Do I need to have words with Colt?” Beckett asked, sounding so stern when he’d been nothing but a quivering puddle for me. Watching him step up for Andi made me so damn proud, even though I could feel our plans for the night slipping away.

“No, no,” she said. “It’s just a work in progress, and if I rush it, I’ll only make it worse. You know?”

“Are you sure he’s worth all this?” I asked.

“I’m sure,” she said firmly.

“Then we’ll trust you on that,” I said. “No ass kickings for Colt.”

“Yet,” Beck added, and the dark tone of his voice made my balls tingle. I might be the one who was taking charge in the bedroom, but Beckett never shied away from taking control of a situation when needed. He let me push him around in bed because he wanted to. If that ever changed, I’d be the one spread wide with fingers buried in my ass.

Fuck. I needed to stop thinking about sex before Andi noticed something weird was going on.

“You can stay here as long as you need,” Beckett was saying, the conversation moving on while my mind spiraled into X-rated fantasy. “We don’t mind. Right, Wes?”

I hesitated only a beat before I nodded.

Beckett excused himself to head for the shower, and I quickly made an excuse to head for my bedroom so I could catch him before he reached the bathroom. Halfway down the hall, I grabbed his elbow and steered him into my room.

As soon as the door shut, I pinned him against it and kissed him.

“If we hurry, we can still do this.”

Beckett’s eyes went comically wide. “No, we can’t. Andi is right out there.”

“But I want you,” I grumbled, sounding petulant. “Maybe I could sneak into the shower...”

“Wes.” Beckett shook his head, eyes too focused for my liking. When they were glazed over by lust I could get him to do almost anything. But when he was thinking clearly... “We can’t do this right now. Not with Andi so close. You know these walls are paper thin.”

“But—”

He kissed me, but softly. Briefly. Then swiped his thumb over my bottom lip as he smiled at me. “Our time will come. We just have to be patient, right? We’ve spent all this time resisting each other. What’s one more evening?”

“It’s too much,” I complained, even though I knew Beckett was right. We couldn’t risk being found out.

“Andi needs us tonight,” Beckett said, going in for the boner killer. “She’s hurting, and we need to be sensitive to that.”

I groaned. “Oh, sure, use my sister against me.”

Beckett chuckled and smoothed my hair back from my face. “Don’t act like you don’t care about her. I know you do.”

The move was so gentle it made my heart squeeze, a sweet ache spreading through me. I wanted this man so damn bad, and not just because he was sexy, but because he genuinely cared about people. So much, he’d put his needs aside for Andi, or me, or anyone else without a second thought.

“Of course I care,” I said, admitting defeat. “If Andi needs us, we’ll be there. It’s just one night, right?”

“Right,” Beckett confirmed, before slipping out of the room to start the shower.

Except it wasn’t just one more night. It was three.

And by then, I was the one squirming helplessly.

CHAPTER 15



BECKETT

“WHAT IS THE ONLY US STATE WITH A SPANISH MOTTO?”

Bobbi read the words displayed on the television screen as part of trivia night at The Stag Pub. Our team, the Smarty Pints—formerly called Ho & Bros but renamed to be more child-friendly when Clark got involved with a dad—was gathered around two tables in the center of the room.

“That’s got to be Texas, right?” she guessed. “They’re so close to Mexico.”

“Don’t think so,” Hunter said, then glanced toward Clark. “Do you know this one, angel?”

Clark hummed thoughtfully. “It’s not ringing any bells.”

Our friends discussed their options, the conversation bouncing around the table. New Mexico could be logical. Maybe Arizona? One by one, Clark dismissed them as not quite right. As the history teacher in our midst, he usually had the strongest base knowledge for trivia.

“What do you think, guys?” Bobbi said, turning toward us. “Either of you got any guesses?”

Everyone looked at us, and I shifted, uncomfortably aware of Wes’s hand on my thigh, thumb brushing up and down my inseam. I could hardly remember my name, much less pull some trivia tidbit out of the recesses of my brain—assuming the answer had ever been in there to begin with.

“Don’t look at me,” Wes said, a shit-eating grin on his face as he glanced toward me. “Beckett is the brains in the family.”

Oh, that man knew exactly what he was doing. From the moment we'd sat down, he'd been finding excuses to touch me when no one was looking. His shoulder would brush mine when he lifted his beer to take a drink. His knee would bump into mine when he spread his legs under the table.

At a certain point, he'd stopped pretending all the touching was innocent and had gone to outright teasing, inching his fingers closer to my dick, making my temperature rise with each minute we spent in the pub, where I had to play it cool.

I slid my hand directly onto his crotch and squeezed, making him jolt, because damn it, two could play at this game.

"I don't know," I said to the table full of friends. "Guess we're going to have to wing this one."

"Shoot," Clark muttered.

Wes's gaze met mine, dark and smoldering, and I withdrew my hand before someone caught on. I was as horny as he was after days of making do with only quick fumbles that barely scratched the surface of my desire.

Andi was just always around, her reconciliation with Colt seeming to grind to a halt. The news had gotten out that they were on a break, and she'd been nearly inconsolable after a friend texted her to ask if it was okay to go out with him.

Wes had even cornered Colt at work and grilled him about his intentions of fixing his relationship with Andi, and Colt had sworn that he was trying. But trying didn't get us any alone time.

I felt on edge and needy all the time, and I knew Wes had to be feeling the same to be pushing me like he was tonight.

Once the attention had drifted away, I stood up, desperate for a breather. "I'm gonna get another beer."

Wes opened his mouth, but before he could offer to come with me—and probably try to talk me into sneaking into the bathroom—Laurie stood. "I need another drink too."

He tipped his glass, gulping a third of it to make that statement true. I rolled my eyes. Here we go.

As soon as we were out of listening range of the table, Laurie went in for the kill.

“You and Wes seem on good terms tonight.”

“Do we?” I said, trying to sound nonchalant as I leaned my forearms on the bar to wait for Calista to finish orders for other customers.

“Yeah, real close,” Laurie said. “He’s been looking at you a lot. Smiling like the cat who got the cream.”

“Not lately,” I muttered.

“What was that?”

I pinned him with an annoyed look. “Get to the point.”

“I’m glad you seem happier,” Laurie said sincerely, dropping the teasing tone.

“Well, I got some good advice recently,” I said. “Decided to take it.”

“Did you? Well, whoever gave you that advice, he must be one smart guy.”

I grinned. “Yeah, I guess he’s learned a thing or two, but then, he is old as fuck.”

Laurie gasped and clutched at his chest. “Is that the thanks I get for trying to help two friends? For genuinely caring and —”

I laughed. “Sorry, but you were too smug. I do appreciate the advice, Laurie. And the...willingness to talk about tough things with me, even when I didn’t want to hear them.”

Laurie smiled. “I was happy to do it. And really, Beck, you look so much happier.”

“Not too much happier, I hope,” I muttered as Calista put a fresh beer in front of me, not even needing to take my order after weekly trivia nights for the past three years. “I can’t afford to advertise this.”

“We’re all friends here,” Laurie said. “They’d understand. Everyone loves you. Wes too.”

If he kept this up, I was gonna get freaking weepy. Thankfully my phone rang, and I picked it up to escape the mush. Unfortunately, Iola was on the other end of the line.

“Beckett, good news! I’ve got a match for you.”

My heart went into freefall. *Shit*. How did I get out of this one? As I retook my seat, Wes edged his chair closer, and I noticed Hunter and Bobbi watching us with a little too much attention. Maybe we hadn’t played it as cool as we thought.

“That’s great news, Iola!” I said loudly, so everyone would hear. “I can’t wait to meet my date.”

“Wonderful!” she said. “I’ve matched you with Anna Patterson, and I just know you two are going to be so, so happy.”

My stomach did a precarious flip.

“Anna, huh?”

Wes and I had joked about Iola picking Anna, but I hadn’t really thought she’d do it.

“I know you two have tried dating before,” Iola said. Of course she did. Everyone knew all the gossip in a town this size. “But that was two years ago, dear, and you’ve both grown as people. You really are so compatible I think it’s worth trying again, don’t you? Sometimes all we need is the right timing for love.”

Unless you’re stepbrothers. There’s no right timing then, is there?

“All right, Iola. I’ll trust in your process.”

“That’s the spirit!”

As I hit disconnect, I had every one of my friends’ attention.

“You let Iola matchmake you?” Hunter asked, sounding astonished. “Did you not learn anything from Clark’s experience last winter?”

“Well...” I hedged. “You know Iola. I was sort of cornered.”

Clark winced. “Sorry. If you want me to get my nana to back off, I can try.”

I snorted. “And it worked so well for you that you had to fake a relationship.”

“True story,” Hunter said. Then grinned. “But hey, it all worked out, so maybe this will too.”

“But isn’t Anna one of your ex-girlfriends?” Tucker asked.

“A second chance at love didn’t steer us wrong,” Laurie replied, though his eyes were sending me the message, *what the fuck?* No wonder, since we’d just been talking about my happy relations with Wes. I attempted to convey with a look, *I don’t know! I panicked!* But judging by the confusion on his face, I’d only managed, *I have no idea what I’m doing!* Which was also true.

Bobbi pouted playfully. “If you really wanted a date, I’m right here.”

“Sorry, Bobbi. You’d have to take it up with the matchmaker,” I joked.

But among all the chatter, my full focus was on the one person not talking. Wes was scarily silent beside me. When I chanced a peek in his direction, he was gazing into his beer, doing a shit job of hiding the scowl twisting his handsome face.

His hand, which had returned to my thigh the instant I sat down beside him, tightened almost painfully. And when the conversation moved on to the trivia answer—which we’d gotten wrong, because it was freaking Montana, with the motto *oro y plata*—he leaned over and whispered, “You are in so much trouble when we get home.”

A shiver went down my spine.

Andi was sure to be there. Wes couldn’t do too much to me in her presence. And yet...goose bumps erupted in anticipation of just how he intended to make me pay for agreeing to that date.

Because even if he must know I'd done it to maintain our cover, there was no mistaking the undertone of jealousy in his voice or the smoldering promise in his eyes. Wes had reached the end of his patience, and I was about to pay the price.



WES

I DROVE HOME, feeling tense and agitated, my hands reflexively tightening on the steering wheel every time I recalled Beckett agreeing to go on a date with his ex. I knew he'd done it so no one would suspect us of being involved, but I still didn't like it.

For one thing, I didn't think it was necessary. And for another, what if he liked the date?

He might go out with her and realize how much easier it was.

He might see a future with her that he didn't believe he could have with me.

"Wes, about that date..." Beckett said as we were pulling into the drive at home. "You know it doesn't mean anything, right?"

"I don't want to hear about any date," I said shortly. "Tonight, I'm taking what's mine."

I shivered. "But what about Andi?"

"I need you to trust me. Can you do that?"

Beck hesitated a beat, but when I heard his breathy "yes" I knew I had him.

"Good." I parked in front of the trailer, then slipped my hand behind him, skating my fingers under his shirt and brushing hot skin. Beckett was already trembling as if he knew what was coming next. "When we get inside, you're going straight to the bedroom, where you'll strip naked and wait for me on the bed."

His exhale was noisy. “But what if—”

“Leave the details to me. Now, go.”

Beckett nodded once and opened his door. I did the same, following on his heels as he headed for the front door.

We entered the darkened living room quietly, easing the door shut, but it wasn't late enough that Andi would be asleep yet. She peeked out from her bedroom. “Hey, how was trivia?”

“We lost,” I said.

I gave Beckett a nudge and whispered, “Go.”

“Night,” he muttered in Andi's direction before heading down the hall.

“What's with him?” she asked.

“You know, I don't think he's feeling too great. I'll go make sure he's okay.”

She nodded. “Okay. I'm watching a movie on my laptop, so I'll just...get back to it.”

“Goodnight, Andi. Maybe we can do dinner tomorrow.”

She smiled weakly. “You guys are too good to me.”

She didn't know the half of it. But if Andi had any idea what her intrusion to our home really meant, she'd have probably found another place to crash. The fact she was here, though, meant that she needed more than a bed. She needed love and support.

And I would be sure to shower her with it.

Tomorrow.

Right now, I had a naked Beck waiting for me, and I didn't intend to let that go to waste.

I exchanged a few more words with her, not wanting to be rude, then headed down the hallway to the bedroom, keeping my pace unhurried. I stepped into our bedroom and closed the door behind me.

The light was off, and it was nearly pitch-black, which wouldn't let me enjoy the sight I'd been waiting for. I edged

over to the dresser and turned on the small lava lamp I had there, which cast a gentle glow over the bed—and the pale curve of Beckett’s ass.

Holy hell.

He’d done what I asked. There wasn’t a stitch of clothing to hide his long, lean form. Beck lay on his stomach, arms wrapped around the pillow beneath his cheek, broad shoulders and back dotted with a spray of freckles. His back tapered to a narrow waist, a generous swell of a sculpted ass, and then flowed into long legs fuzzed with coppery curls.

“Hey,” he said quietly. “I wasn’t sure how you wanted me.”

“This is good for now.”

I kicked off my shoes, then climbed up onto the bed to straddle him. I draped myself over his body, my jeans scratching against his thighs and ass, my T-shirt a softer touch on his upper back. I slid one hand into his hair, pulling his head back, and used the other to hold his jaw as I kissed him hard.

He gasped, but accepted my tongue, moaning softly as I pulled away.

“You’re going to be absolutely silent,” I told him. “No matter what I do to you. If you want me to stop, tap me anywhere, my arm, my hip, whatever. But you won’t make a single noise. Not a moan, not a whimper, nothing.”

Beckett’s breathing was ragged. “Got it.”

I pinched his ass, and he gave a yelp. “Want to try that again?”

He shot me a glare, but wisely, he didn’t speak up to argue. I kissed him again, softer this time, to convey my approval. He sighed and his eyes fluttered closed. Yeah, he was ready now. I moved my lips to the corner of his mouth, then dragged them along his stubbled jaw until I reached his throat.

Beckett angled his head, inhaling sharply when I nibbled the delicate skin, but he kept his silence, so I rewarded him

with a slow lick and watched him shiver in response.

We hadn't had the chance to properly take our time with one another since that night Andi was out with Colt. Sleeping in bed with him, fumbling under the covers in the dark, quick and rushed, was not the same. Tonight, I was going to be thorough.

I worked my way down his back, kissing each knob of his spine, skating my hands along his flanks, finding every nook and cranny that made him quiver for me. His body was different from the women I'd been with, but there wasn't anything about him, not one little characteristic, that turned me off.

When I got to his ass, he pushed it up into my hands wantonly, silently begging.

I parted his cheeks. "If you make a sound, I stop instantly."

He huffed a breath, the only acknowledgment he'd heard me. I brushed a finger through the cleft of his ass. He squirmed, and a glance up showed me that he was biting a knuckle on his left hand. I followed with my tongue, just a quick, teasing brush, and a small whimper escaped him.

I pulled away.

"No, please," he whispered.

"Shh." I climbed off the bed. "You know the rules."

Beckett rolled over, showing me his chest, flushed with arousal, his nipples dark red peaks. Between his legs, his cock curved up from its nest of red curls, fully hard. His eyes were begging, and of course, I wasn't going to leave him in that state.

I pulled my T-shirt over my head, watching Beck's gaze dip to drink in the sight of my bare chest. I had a patch of dark hair between my pecs, narrowing to a thin strip that led into my pants. I popped my jeans button, and Beckett's cock twitched as he watched. I knew he wanted me, but it was gratifying to see his desperation. He'd fought so hard not to do this, and part of me was always a little unsure whether his

feelings had been as intense as mine. But seeing him like this, there was no doubting it.

Beck was mine.

I pushed down my jeans and boxer briefs, taking a minute to untangle each leg, and when I straightened, I caught Beckett licking his lips as he gazed at my thick cock. It wasn't quite as long as his, but it was girthy. I wrapped my fingers around my shaft, giving myself a single stroke.

Beckett propped himself up on his elbows, and seeming to know what I wanted, opened his mouth and extended his tongue.

Hell yeah.

I straddled his shoulders and fed him my cock, letting him get it wet and suck it.

"Fuck," I whispered as the heat and pressure enveloped me.

He raised an eyebrow.

"I said you had to be silent, not me," I added with a smirk.

He somehow managed to scowl around a mouthful of cock, which made me quietly chuckle. I lifted my leg and swung around to put us into the sixty-nine position. I hadn't had the chance to properly suck Beck, and it was long past due.

I lowered my face, rubbing my scruff down the side of his shaft, and his entire body jerked beneath me. His mouth, still working my cock, sucked even harder and I muffled a moan in his groin before flicked my tongue over salty skin. Inch by inch, I explored my first cock, and it was the fucking sexiest thing ever, so freaking hot and hard for me. I sucked in the spongy head and reveled in the way Beck filled my mouth even as I filled his.

We were two sides of the same coin like this, giving and taking in equal measure.

I didn't arrange all this to exchange only blow jobs, though, as good as it felt. After a few more sucks, I gave up

my new treat and rolled away to open the bedside table. I lifted out a tube of lube.

“Turn onto your side,” I instructed.

Beckett gazed at the lube, eyes full of questions, before obeying.

I settled behind him, in the big spoon position, and slicked my cock.

“This is the part where you trust me,” I whispered in his ear, just before snaking one arm beneath his neck to wrap a hand over his mouth. His breath was hot and panting against my palm.

He was excited. Maybe nervous. But I didn't sense any resistance.

I angled my cock and thrust my hips, pushing slowly between his tightly pressed thighs. My breath stuttered at the feel of Beck all around me, even if it wasn't his ass. I rocked in and out of the tight channel of his thighs, plunging forward until my cockhead bumped into his balls—Beckett's breath catching each time—then pulling back to do it again.

With my right hand, I explored his body, pinching and rolling a nipple, then pressing against his flexing stomach, and finally stroking and squeezing his cock.

Beckett's breathing quickened along with mine, his breaths creating moisture against my palm. I was pretty sure he'd remain silent either way, but muffling his mouth added a layer of eroticism to the act that was hot.

Pleasure began to build, my climax nearing.

“Gonna come soon,” I whispered into his ear. “Should I shoot it all over your ass?”

His breathing stuttered.

“Maybe I'll part your cheeks and come right on your hole.”

His panting stopped, as if he was holding his breath, and it told me all I needed to know. I released Beckett's mouth,

shoved him onto his stomach, and repositioned myself to grab his left cheek and pull it aside. I guided my cock back to his cleft, rocking through the furrowed channel, stroking over his hole, letting my cockhead catch on his rim while I jerked off.

He made a small, desperate sound, giving up the game, but I was too far gone to stop now. I shot onto his ass, cursing quietly while I pumped my cock and watched sprinkles of cum dot his skin.

I leaned forward and used my cock to smear my cum around his hole. Beckett's hips jerked frantically before he muffled a moan into his pillow, coming onto the sheets below him.

"No one else gets to do this to you," I murmured as I finally slumped over his back, breathing hard. "Right?" After a pause, I added, "You can talk now."

"Only you," he said quickly. "I'm only a dirty slut for you."

I let my full weight come down on him, blanketing him, and dropped a soft kiss to the curve of his jaw. "Yeah. That's what I thought."

Beckett turned his head with difficulty, expression hazy. His words came out almost vulnerable. "Will you kiss me? I need..."

I brushed my lips softly, reverently over his. The angle was awkward, so I rolled off him, then pulled him into my arms to kiss properly. He relaxed in my hold, kissing me back in a way that was decadent and drawn out, rather than urgent.

Lust shifted to something else, something warm and sweet as his lips clung to mine.

I pressed my forehead to his as our mouths parted. "Are you good?"

"Very good," he said softly. Then, added, "I know I'm yours though. You don't need to keep telling me."

I laughed softly, unsurprised that he'd called me out. "I admit I was feeling a little...something about that date. I know

I was a bossy fuck tonight.”

“And it was good.” His lips quirked. “I needed it. Needed more.”

“Yeah, me too.” I cradled his face. “I needed you to know you’re mine, but...I’m yours too. You know?”

“That’s why I let you do it,” he said, pressing smiling lips against mine. “That, and you make me come harder than anyone else with your dirty talk.”

I smirked. “I knew you secretly loved it.”

“Mm-hmm. And now, I’d love a wet washcloth to clean up.”

“Well, I guess it’s the least I could do after coming all over your ass.” He groaned, a hint of embarrassment to his tone, so I added, “I rubbed my cum all over your hole. Maybe when I clean you up, I’ll push some inside, mark you inside and out.”

I wouldn’t really do it. Not until we had a talk about STD screenings and all that. But eventually I hoped it could be more than a fantasy.

“Jesus, Wes.” He chuckled. “Wash that mouth out with soap while you’re in the bathroom.”

I left him in the bed and slipped into the hall when I didn’t see any sign of Andi. I wet a washcloth in the bathroom and cleaned myself up, then brought it to Beck and washed his body.

“I made a mess of the sheets,” he said mournfully.

“I’ll get a towel for you to sleep on. We can wash them tomorrow.”

Once we’d finally gotten resettled, Beckett in my arms again, he started snickering into my chest.

“What?” I asked, bemused.

“You washed me and brought me a towel, and it should not be romantic at all. But you were sweet and considerate, and I just... This is weird.”

“Is it?” I carded my fingers through his hair as I gazed down into his green eyes. “I think it feels right.”

His wide, full lips twitched into a smile. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” I dropped a kiss on his forehead.

“And you’re not mad about the date? Or jealous?”

“Oh, I’m jealous. But I’ve got a plan for that.”

His eyebrows shot up. “I’m almost afraid to ask...”

I grinned sharply. “Iola is about to get two for the price of one. Because I’m coming on that date too.”

“Uh...Anna might not be looking to hook up with both of us.”

I snapped my teeth at him in a mock snarl. “She better not hook up with either of us. But that’s not what I meant. I’ll bring a date of my own.”

“You want us to double date?” he asked incredulously.

I wiggled my brows. “Genius, right? What better way to convince people we’re not involved than for both of us to go on a date together?”

CHAPTER 16



WES

A COMMOTION NEAR THE FAR END OF THE PARK PULLED MY focus from the saucer-shaped hole I was digging for an ornamental tree planting. These were smaller, decorative trees so we planted them by hand.

I paused with my shovel in the air and glanced toward Luke and Logan, who were working with me on the landscaping along the trail that cut through the park all the way to the far end where it crested on a hill and cut behind the gazebo just before the land sloped down toward the neighbors' yards.

"What is that?" I muttered as shouting filtered through the air.

"Uh-oh," Logan said. "Sounds like it's coming from the gazebo, where Colt and Beck were working."

"Shit." I tossed the shovel aside and broke into a jog toward them, concerned that Beckett had finally lost his patience with our resident pain in the ass.

As I neared, I realized Beckett wasn't laying into Colt. An older guy I recognized seeing around the hardware store on occasion, Mel Goble, was giving both of them a piece of his mind. Loudly.

"Do you think my wrinkled old ass is really what folks want to see when they decide to get married at the park? Use your gosh-darned brains!"

“Why do you keep looking at me?” Colt exclaimed. “I just do what I’m told.”

“Instead of thinking for yourself—”

“I don’t have to listen to this!”

Beckett stepped forward. “Cool down, Colt.”

“Sure, because everything is my fault,” he snapped. “Like always.”

“I didn’t say that,” Beckett said, his voice tense. “We should hear him out without losing our tempers, that’s all.”

“Easy for you to say. He didn’t accuse you of being a peeping perv!”

Mel caught sight of me just then. “Wes Potter, please tell me you know what’s what around here! I can’t get a straight answer with these two bickering, and I’m not getting any younger.”

Colt opened his mouth to protest, but Beckett sent him a glare and he snapped it closed again, crossed his arms, and glared at the ground. He looked so much like a frustrated teenager being chastised by his parent I didn’t know whether to laugh or give the guy a hug. Colt was not my favorite person by any stretch of the imagination, but he was young, like Andi, and our sister loved him. That meant he had to have some redeeming qualities.

“Mel, I’d be happy to help, but I’d appreciate it if you’d stop insulting my crew.”

Colt whipped his head up to stare at me in surprise.

“Colt is a hard worker, and it’s sure not his fault if you’ve got a problem with our plans. And Beckett is my partner in crime around here,” I said. “He runs this company just as much as I do, and he’s our best landscape designer. So if you’ve got questions, you can come to either one of us. We’re equally responsible.”

“Well,” Mel blustered, “if Beckett’s such a good designer, why does this dang gazebo have a direct line of sight to my

deck? I've got no privacy, and trust me, no blushing bride wants to see me on her special day."

Beckett spoke up, saying dryly, "Mel told us he enjoys nude sunbathing, and he generally walks around his place naked. With the windows open."

"I enjoy a fresh breeze on my nether regions," he said.

"I see." I tried to maintain a neutral expression, but it wasn't easy. "Beckett, you would know better off the top of your head. When we're finished, will there be a clear view into Mel's yard?"

"Not from where we stand. We'll be planting hedges to screen off the park from neighboring properties. We know you all don't want everyone in your business, but there is one potential angle that might be unobstructed. Give me a minute to take a look."

"Well, thank you," Mel said, sounding chastened now that he realized we weren't just a bunch of idiots who wouldn't listen to his concerns.

While Beckett circled the gazebo, presumably checking the view from different vantage points, I made awkward small talk with Mel. The old guy seemed a little sheepish about his initial temper tantrum. "Tell your dad I said hello," he told me. "I bet he's sure glad to hand off the heavy lifting to you, huh?"

"Me and Beck," I said as Beckett returned. "We run the business together."

Beckett gave me a look I couldn't quite decipher before turning to Mel. "All right, so there is one angle we don't quite have covered, but I think we could adjust our plans slightly to ensure that there's proper screening."

"Well, that sure is a relief. I'm sorry I blew my top without getting all the information. I told the Dix liaison, and he said he'd pass it on, but I never heard anything back. When I tried asking the young man there, he didn't know anything about it, and I assumed the worst."

"Colt's a good guy," Beckett said, proving what I already knew, that Beck also had our crew's back. "He's just newer to

the business and hasn't been involved in all the planning we've done."

"Well, thank you again." Mel guffawed. "I'm sure all the families who enjoy this lovely space in the future would thank you too for saving them from the need to bleach their brains."

Colt snorted, and Mel wagged a finger at him. "See, this one gets it. I'll let you all get back to your work."

Mel shook Beckett's hand, then Colt's, then mine.

"Just do me a favor and don't tell all your neighbors about this," I said with the most charming grin I could deliver.

His bushy eyebrows rose. "Why not?"

"Your concerns were easily addressed, but that's not always the case. We're happy we can help you out, but the fact is, plans were presented at a town hall, everyone got a chance to give input, and now we're locked in."

"Ah, I see. You don't want a flood of folks over here making demands."

"We couldn't meet them all," I said, infusing my words with regret. "We've got a budget for labor and supplies, and revising the plan at this stage would create complications."

Mel nodded. "I understand. Don't you worry. I won't flap my lips like some of the gossipers around here. I know how to be discreet."

"Great, I appreciate it."

Beckett watched him walk off. "How long until he blabs?"

"I give it less than a day," I said.

"I give it less than an hour," Beck retorted with a grin. "Thanks for swooping in with the Potter charm though. He was already blowing steam by the time I arrived to find him and Colt arguing."

"I wasn't arguing," Colt said defensively.

"I wasn't blaming you," Beckett said, tone mild.

Colt looked suddenly chastened. “Uh, thanks for standing up for me. Both of you. I didn’t think either of you thought I was worth the shit on your shoes.”

I shook my head. “If you really think that, then we need to grab a beer and clear the air. Because I will always have your back while you’re on this crew, Colt. Beck will too. We need to work as a team.”

Colt looked between us, but his gaze lingered on Beckett as he said, “You don’t hate me?”

“Of course I don’t,” Beckett said.

Colt looked skeptical, so I decided to break the tension with some levity.

“He doesn’t hate you, but you do annoy the shit out of him.”

Colt gave a bark of laughter, and Beckett shoved me, making me stumble to the side.

“Finally, some truth,” Colt said.

“Just for that, you’re buying for both of us tonight,” Beckett said.

Colt looked surprised. “You were serious about getting a beer?”

“Yep.” I slung my arm over his shoulder. “Shit’s been festering too long, and not just with work. It’s time to sort out this shit with Andi too. Let’s all meet at The Stag about an hour after work. We’ll grab dinner, a beer, and get on the same page.”

Colt swallowed hard and looked away. “Yeah, okay. I’ll be there.”

“Good man.” I gave him a little shove. “Now go help Beck, and don’t give him any lip.”

He chuckled. “Yes, boss.”

Beck turned away. “Come on, those perennials won’t plant themselves.”

“Yes, boss!” he called, loping after Beckett with a grin.

Maybe there was hope for that kid after all.

Maybe there was hope for him and Andi too.

And if patching things up between them got me and Beck some privacy in our own home? Even better.



BECKETT

“ARE you sure this is a good idea?” Andi asked, sounding uneasy as we entered The Stag Pub to meet with Colt. “We’ve tried having dinner, and it didn’t really fix anything.”

“Well, maybe you just need a mediator to help you along,” Wes said.

Andi looked skeptical. “You’re not just here to threaten him into making it work with me, right? If you really want me out of your house, I can go stay at Dad’s. He and Mom are heading out of town soon, so...”

“It’s not about getting you out of our hair, Andi,” Wes said.

“We want you to be happy,” I added, because it was true.

Andi might be putting a cramp in our sex life—but that wasn’t really her fault. She should be able to rely on her brothers without worrying she might intrude on a secret affair.

And it wasn’t like we were really suffering. The silent sex with Wes had been incredibly intense. I was a very vocal guy and holding in the sounds that wanted to spill out made my body react even more strongly to every sensation.

Did I want the freedom to be with Wes without worrying we’d be busted? Of course. But as long as we continued this affair, there would always be some chance of that happening. At least with Andi staying at our place, it kept us from being too reckless.

“This isn’t only about you two though,” Wes said. “There’s been tension at work. We could all do with a good talk.”

“Huh.” Andi smiled. “I didn’t see it before, but now I do.”

“See what?”

“You, as a boss. You’re good at it, aren’t you?”

“He’s great at it,” I said.

As much as Wes credited me as his equal partner, he was better at leading the crew. Better at obtaining their respect, at diffusing disagreements, at charming cranky residents like Mel Goble and closing sales with new clients.

Colt arrived shortly after we’d grabbed a four-top off to one side of the bar. The newer booth seating that stretched along the far wall—an improvement made with the help of Laurie’s investment in the pub—had filled up early, but this gave us more privacy anyway. It was a weeknight, so while the pub did a steady business, it wasn’t packed like it was on the weekends.

“Hey.” Colt stopped next to the table, hands shoved in his pockets. He nodded to Wes and me, but his gaze went straight to Andi. “Thanks for meeting me.”

“Sit down,” Wes said. “Beckett and I will grab a pitcher while you look at the menu.”

“Cool, thanks.” He pulled out the only remaining chair, directly across from Andi and sat down. “I’ll probably just get the special.”

“He loves the Philly,” Andi said with all the proprietary warmth of a long-time girlfriend.

Colt smiled, looking almost bashful. “Yeah, I’m predictable, I guess.”

“Oh, there’s nothing wrong with liking what you like,” she said quickly.

“Thanks,” he said, sounding awkward.

Wes and I headed over to the bar. We could have waited for a server to come by the table, but this way Andi and Colt could have a few minutes to talk privately.

“You think this will work?” I asked.

Wes glanced at them, a frown creasing his brow. “Not sure. If they get any politer, they might actually become strangers.”

I huffed a short laugh. “I guess they’ll need a little of that Wes Potter charm to help them along.”

He grinned, charm in full effect and making my insides flutter as if I were a young boy with his first crush.

“Maybe. But I’m hoping maybe a little Beckett Monroe good sense will do us all good too.”

I raised an eyebrow. “How do you mean?”

“This isn’t just about them. Colt’s struggling at work, and I can’t help but think that’s partly on us.”

I frowned. “I don’t know, man. Colt pushes me and pushes me...”

“I know. I just want us to hear him out tonight. Be open to why his attitude has been so shitty lately. Maybe if he feels heard, the way Mel felt heard today, we can mend some fences and we’ll all be happier for it.”

“My brother, the optimist,” I teased. “Watch out, or I’ll have to tell everyone you’ve turned into a big softie.”

“Oh, fuck off,” he said without heat before turning to place our order for a pitcher of beer and four glasses.

I helped him carry everything back to the table, where the tension was thick enough to cut with a knife.

“All right, let’s get this party started,” he said.

“Fun,” Colt said, his words so dry I snorted a laugh.

“It’s like going on a date with your parents, huh?” I said.

Colt cracked a small smile, which felt like a breakthrough. “Are you Mom or Dad?”

“Do you really have to ask?”

“Beck’s obviously Mom,” Andi said with a smirk.

“Bullshit I am!” I exclaimed. “Wes is fun-loving, but I’m the one who keeps everyone in line. I keep us organized, I clean up the messes, I...oh, shit. I *am* the mom.”

Everyone burst out laughing, and I tossed a coaster at Wes. “You should appreciate me more!”

“Total mom words,” Colt choked out.

Andi wiped at her streaming eyes, huge smile on her face.

With the ice officially broken, Wes poured us each a beer. We sat and drank and joked around for a few minutes, just letting everyone get comfortable. But eventually we had to discuss the elephant in the room.

Wes cleared his throat. “Okay, so, let’s talk about why we’re here. You two have been having problems, and Colt’s not happy at work.”

The mood at the table grew more serious, though it was still nowhere as tense as it had been when Colt first arrived. I counted that as a good sign.

Andi nodded. “I mean, that’s pretty much why we’ve been having problems.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Colt hates his job.”

“I don’t hate it,” he defended. “I just...I don’t feel great about the job, or me, or...”

“Or?” I prompted.

“Or you,” he admitted. “You’re always on my case, Beck, and I need to vent to someone when I go home. Andi is my girlfriend, so I bitched about it, but she’s also your sister, so she defended you, and it became this ugly cycle we couldn’t break.”

I looked between them, stunned. “Are you saying...you guys have been on a break because of *me*?”

“I wasn’t going to let Colt talk shit on you all the time, Beck. You’re my family.”

My throat grew tight, and I had to take a drink of beer to hide my expression. I didn’t know how to react. It wasn’t that Colt was pissed at me either. That didn’t surprise me. It was that Andi stuck up for me. I’d always loved her like a sister,

but I'd also kind of assumed since she had Wes, I was just kind of a substitute when the real thing wasn't available.

We'd gotten a little friendlier since she came to stay with us, but I never would have dreamt she'd put her relationship on the line just to have my back.

"Andi, that's really sweet, but I don't want to be the reason you two can't work it out."

"You're not," she said. "But Colt needs to understand I won't listen to my brothers be disrespected."

"And I need someone who will support me when I'm having a tough time," Colt said. "Did you consider that?"

"I did, and I tried," Andi said. "But it was just so much. Every night, you stomped in furious about something. I thought leaving would give us both some perspective, but I'm not sure it's working."

"Okay, let's take a breath," Wes said. "We have dinner coming, and there's no need to fire both barrels just yet."

"Sorry," Andi said softly. "I just...don't know what to do."

"Neither do I," Colt muttered.

"Maybe we should discuss what's going on at work," I said. "Colt, why didn't you talk to me or Wes if you were unhappy with the situation?"

"Do you think I didn't try?" Colt shrugged. "You view me as a nuisance. You bring up the fact I only got my job because of Andi, and I know you don't think I deserve to be there. There's no way you were gonna hear anything I had to say."

I winced because while I didn't think that was entirely true, I had been annoyed that Colt had been handed his job and didn't show any sign of truly wanting to earn it.

"You haven't really put in the time yet," Wes said diplomatically. "You're still learning the ropes, and that means you need to show up with a good attitude and listen to the men who've been on the crew longer than you—not just me or Beck, but Ryder and Luke too. When you've got more

experience, you'll get the respect you want, Colt. No one here is your enemy."

While Colt mulled that over, a server—a woman named Kara who'd been a few years behind me and Wes in high school—stopped by our table to take our order.

We spent a couple minutes making polite small talk about Kara's daughter, now a pre-schooler, which damn, that made me feel freaking ancient, before placing our orders.

As expected, Colt asked for the special. So did Wes. Andi got a chipotle-chicken pasta I didn't even know they served, and I stuck with a basic turkey melt, my stomach a little too unsettled to eat something more adventurous.

Colt's words were hitting uncomfortably close to home, and it was a difficult look into the mirror. I never wanted to believe I'd treated someone unfairly, but maybe I'd let my personal history with Potter Landscaping and how hard I'd had to work to prove myself influence my view of Colt.

"I'm sorry I made you feel that way," I said.

Colt shifted in his chair, barely meeting my eye. "I mean, I know I bitch and moan a lot."

"You do," I said, "but...I think the real issue is I didn't think you appreciated the opportunity Andi got you with the crew. I worked my ass off to be where I am."

He gave me a skeptical look. "But you and Wes are in the family. I'm just treated like the guy not good enough to be in the family."

"And now we're getting somewhere," Wes pronounced.

"I had no idea you felt that way," Andi said, her stance softening at Colt's admission. "Is this about your dad?"

He flushed. "Not really. I mean, I should just suck it up. It's not Wes or Beck's fault that they get a business from their dad, and I get nothing but debt from mine." He grimaced, meeting Wes's eyes, then with more difficulty, meeting mine. "I need this job, and I want to make it work with Andi. I'll turn it around, if you're willing to give me a chance."

“Colt, I’m happy to give you a chance, but I need one thing.”

“What’s what?” he asked, looking wary.

“Give me a chance to start over too. I’m sorry I was so hard on you. I guess I was projecting a bit because of how I felt when I joined the crew. I know you think because I’m in the family, this job is a given. But I worked really hard to prove I could be Wes’s equal.” I flashed him an apologetic glance. “Still not sure I’ve succeeded, but every day I try.”

“Please,” Wes said. “You’re more than my equal. I strive to be a better boss because of the example you set.”

“Okay, you guys love each other to a weird and codependent degree,” Andi said with a chuckle. “We all know that.”

Wes flipped her off while I laughed awkwardly, hoping like hell I wouldn’t blush and give away that her words were truer than she knew.

“As I was saying, it’s possible I wanted to see you earn it the way I felt like I had. But our situations are different, and I shouldn’t have held you to a different standard than the rest of the crew.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that.” He hesitated. “But I know I’ve had a crappy attitude, and you were usually justified in riding my ass. I promise I’m going to work on that.”

When dinner came, we shifted to more comfortable topics, like how many irate neighbors we might see in the next few days once word got around we’d helped out Mel, how Andi’s job was going at the Friendly Bean, where the coffee didn’t taste like battery acid. My loyalty to Jake and Miles at Glazed Holes prevented me from enjoying their delicious confections, sadly, but I got to eat my feelings in the shape of glazed and cream-filled holes, which...sounded naughty enough to come out of Wes’s mouth while we had sex. Just the way Jake and Miles would want. They knew *exactly* what they were doing with that business name.

By the time Wes paid the check, it felt like we'd cleared the air and there might be brighter days on the horizon. Not just for us, but for Andi and Colt too.

I was still overwhelmed by the thought of Andi standing up for me like that, but it was also true when I said that I didn't want to be the reason her relationship failed. I had to try harder with Colt.

When we all headed for the door, I pulled him aside.

"Listen, I know I we already cleared the air about work stuff, but I just want you to know I understand how you feel about the family stuff too."

His brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

"I know what it feels like to be attached to a family and yet not fully one of them. It's hard. Even if you love them, and even if they love you, there's always going to be a degree of separation between you and them."

"Do you mean..." He glanced over to Wes, who was currently making Andi squeal as he enveloped her in a bear hug.

"Yeah. It's complicated. Some of it's just in my head," I said. "But some of it, like who gets this business when Wes's father fully retires? That's not. I'll never be the son who gets the business. I'll never really be the boss."

Colt ducked his head. "And I guess me pointing out Wes is the boss and not you didn't help, huh?"

I chuckled. "You're not telling me anything I don't already know, Colt. The difference is, I respect Wes, and I know he respects me. Whatever happens with the business, with the family, he's got my back. So I'm telling you that from now on, I've got yours."

CHAPTER 17



WES

“BEAVER HOLE IS LOOKING BEAUTIFUL—” SNICKERS interrupted Tucker’s statement, and he rolled his eyes. “I’m surrounded by immature idiots.”

Beckett looked contrite. “Sorry, Tucker.”

The rest of us nodded like good little boys, but truth be told, we were all shamelessly grinning. I might feel worse, but one of us was over eighty years old, and if LeRoy Smalls wasn’t too old to laugh at beaver jokes, then why should I be? He was one of the happiest guys I knew, so I figured he was a role model in a way. His new boyfriend, Eugene Wright, sat at his side, shaking his head but smiling, much as Beckett was. Shit, were we going to grow up to be LeRoy and Eugene? I didn’t know how I felt about that. I mean, at least we found each other before the age of eighty. That was a plus...

Hunter Rhodes, the marketing manager for the city, cleared his throat. “Yes, Tucker, please continue,” he said, though he was smirking with amusement.

We’d met at The Diner for a late morning meeting about the city’s five-year strategic plan, *Stop Granville Shrinkage*, which generated plenty of snickers of its own. As the city manager, Tucker was the lead on implementing the plan, while LeRoy and Eugene were both city council members appointed to a board to help make decisions.

Beckett and I were here only as consultants, since Tucker specifically wanted to discuss plans for green spaces today. We weren’t guaranteed to get the work, but the more we

participated, the better our chances. It also didn't hurt that we ran the only local landscaping company.

"We've beautified downtown Main Street," Tucker continued, "but the intersecting streets of Chestnut and Maple have a number of small businesses, and if we were to improve the green spaces there, it would give us more of a full downtown square, rather than a single corridor."

"I don't know, Tucker," LeRoy said with an uncharacteristic frown. "Folks were a little upset that Beaver Hole got so much attention. They feel like Ball-Sack has been neglected."

Oddly, when LeRoy said it, none of us laughed, despite the many innuendos he was dropping. I did shudder a little at the visuals.

"If we invest in another park, we're done," Tucker said bluntly. "We don't have the funds to spread all over the city. We have to be strategic."

"What if it wasn't a park?" Beckett suggested.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, not a full-size neighborhood park as such. What if it was a community garden? Or even a more traditional garden that could celebrate the historic origins of the neighborhood."

"Hmm. It's a nice idea," Tucker said, "but that neighborhood is far from revitalized. Is it worth the investment?"

"I've been working with the Historic Homes Preservation group to apply for grants to improve the neighborhood," Hunter said. "It won't be an overnight process though. It won't even be a year-long process, though Laurie's offer of matching funds will certainly help."

Tucker blinked. "He did what?"

Hunter chuckled. "Nothing's official, and I'm not sure we want to take him up on it, but he's offered to match any grants we manage to win to give us a little more bang for our buck."

Tucker heaved a sigh, though he couldn't suppress a smile. "That man..."

"He also offered to purchase some of the uninhabited homes, rehab them, and resell them."

"Of course he did. He loves this town."

"He loves you," LeRoy said. "Don't take it for granted. Love is precious." He glanced toward his boyfriend. "Right, cupcake?"

Eugene blushed but nodded. "It is to me."

"Aw, you're so cute it's disgusting," Beckett teased.

"I do feel a bit queasy," I added, before making gagging sounds.

Someone threw a balled napkin at me while Beckett elbowed me in the ribs, which was pretty much par for the course. It wasn't much of a meal if I didn't annoy someone.

Tucker chuckled. "All right, I think we've covered enough for today. Beckett, can you work up some numbers on the Ball-Sack garden."

There was a phrase you didn't hear every day. I didn't miss the fact that Tucker was asking Beckett, rather than me. It had been Beckett's idea, and he was the creative force behind Potter Landscaping. I'd accepted that a while ago. But it still made me feel like a pointless accessory at these meetings.

"And then we also need an idea of what sort of investment it would take to improve those side streets. I think the downtown square has to be our primary goal," Tucker said, "even if not everyone likes it. It's essential to our growth, and we only decided to improve and expand Beaver Hole because of its proximity to Dix."

"Dicks," LeRoy said with a giggle.

Tucker shot him an annoyed look but didn't allow himself to be sidetracked this time.

"The point of the plan is to grow Granville, and as much as our historic neighborhoods are an important part of our past,

we need to look to the future.”

“So why am I working up numbers on the garden proposal?” Beckett asked.

Tucker snorted. “Because knowing my fool husband, he’ll want to foot the bill if the city doesn’t. So we’ll look at all our options and see what we can pull off within our budget.”

“Okay, I’ll work up some plans,” Beckett said.

“I need some idea for the downtown plans too,” Tucker said, sounding apologetic.

“We can do those,” Beckett said.

I glanced at him in surprise. He was generally the plan guy, and I was the client whisperer. He’d present landscaping designs, and I’d sell people on working with us. We both obviously put a lot of sweat labor into the business, too, but those were sort of the roles we’d fallen into.

“I can?”

Beckett elbowed me in the gut again. “Don’t play dumb so I have to do all the work. You were your dad’s right hand when we did the Main Street project. You’ve got a lot of experience in that.”

That was true. Beckett had been with Potter Landscaping then too, but he’d been in the process of taking courses at the college in Riverton, so he wasn’t working as much. Plus, Dad had a much larger role back then, actively managing the crew. It was later, after Beckett finished those courses and Dad saw how much he’d learned and what a good team we made, that he stepped back and let us take the lead.

“All right, I’ll work on it,” I said, still a little skeptical. I’d worked up a landscaping plan or two in my time—there was software to help, so it wasn’t too difficult—but it wasn’t my comfort zone.

“Great,” Tucker said, pushing his chair back. “Let me know when you have more info for me. We have a town hall coming up to update the community on the strategic plan, and it’s going to be an utter nightmare.”

I laughed. “Tucker, I didn’t know you were such a drama queen.”

“Just wait until half the town is glaring at you for making choices they don’t like,” he grumbled. But then he smiled. “At least Laurie will be there to have my back.”

“And Iola,” Hunter said with a chuckle. “She can shut down any rabble.”

“Let’s just hope she’s on our side,” Tucker said with a grin. “I don’t ever want to face down that five-foot ball of indignant fury.”

As we all stood, I nudged Beckett. “Why’d you volunteer me to do that? You know I’m not good at that stuff.”

“Bullshit,” Beckett said. “You sell yourself short, but you have tons of experience in this field, Wes. I like landscape design, so I don’t mind doing more, but you’re not incapable of anything.”

“I mean, I’m glad you’re confident...”

“I am,” he said firmly. “Besides, we don’t want to keep Tucker waiting, and we’ll be done faster if we split up the work. Right?”

“Yeah, of course,” I said, feeling a little flicker of guilt. Had I been relying on Beckett to shoulder too much? “I’ll step up.”

“I know,” he said. “You always do.”

I watched him cross The Diner, chest warming from the few words of support. Beckett didn’t need to sing my praises. He showed that he believed in me every day.



BECKETT

WES and I swung by Pete’s Pump and Dump, the oh-so charmingly named gas station, on the way to meet up with the crew. Today, I would be leading a few guys in the landscape

project at the mayor's place, while everyone else kept up with our mowing schedule and park project. It had been crazy busy over the summer, but the further into fall we got, the more things would slow down. Over the winter, we found work blowing leaves, shoveling snow, and installing holiday lighting displays, but it was nowhere near as profitable, so we were working double-time to fit in all the projects we could before that happened.

"I'll fill it up," Wes said.

"That's what you keep saying, but it hasn't happened yet."

Wes's eyes widened in shock before he laughed. "You're such a brat."

"Yup." I opened the passenger door to hop out. "I'm going to grab a water. You want one?"

"Yeah, but grab me an energy drink too."

I raised an eyebrow at him. As guys who worked outdoors, we'd learned a long time ago that you had to hydrate properly with water or Gatorade, not indulge in crap like soda or energy drinks. Even when the worst heat of summer passed, working under the sun all day took its toll.

"For later," Wes said with a smile that promised dirty things. "I'm going to need my energy to deliver on that promise."

I snorted a laugh. "Good luck with Andi moping around."

"Hey, she and Colt had a good chat. I think things will turn around soon. And if not, well, Dad is leaving."

I shook my head at him, knowing he'd never kick out Andi—or even suggest she could go somewhere else if she wanted to stay with us—but it was fun to daydream about the day we might have plenty of time and privacy to get our fill of each other.

If that was even possible.

I pulled open the door and stepped into the convenience store. The water—and energy drinks—were in the coolers on the far wall. I opened the glass door, a cool blast of

refrigerated air hitting me in the face as I grabbed what I needed.

When I turned to go, I nearly bumped into Anna.

“Hey,” I said in surprise.

She gave me an awkward smile. “Hi, Beck,”

“I’ve actually been trying to call you,” I said.

She winced. “Yeah, sorry. I’ve just been busy...”

I recognized a brush-off when I got one, but luckily I wasn’t interested in pursuing Anna for real.

“I just wanted to touch base about this matchmaking thing Iola is set on.”

“Yeah, I figured that was why.” She gave a nervous laugh. “I didn’t really sign up for that. Iola sort of decided I had, and I wasn’t sure how to tell her no.”

I grinned. “Yeah, same. Iola is a force of nature. No one can say no.”

She looked relieved. “Oh, thank goodness! I mean, not that you’re a bad match. It’s just, we’ve tried dating before, which I told Iola, but she was insistent we were the perfect match, and then she brought up Tucker Ellis and his husband, and how amazing love could be if you gave it a second chance...” She spread her hands in a gesture of helplessness. “But the truth is, I’m sort of interested in someone. Nothing has happened yet, but...”

“Hey, me too,” I said quickly. “This is all coming from Iola, not me. We tried it out, and we’re better as friends. I’m on the same page.”

She smiled, her whole demeanor more relaxed now that the awkward truth was out of the way. “That’s exactly it,” she said. “You’re a great friend, Beck. But I don’t know how to convince Iola of that.”

“How about we just go out to dinner as friends?” I suggested. “We can tell Iola we went on a date, so her work is done. If it doesn’t work out, well, it just doesn’t, right?”

She nodded. “Yeah, we could try that. But what if it doesn’t work? What if she wants to keep setting us up on more dates, or with other people?”

“I don’t know. Dodge her for the rest of our lives?”

“Or keep pretend dating each other?” Anna said. “Get fake married?”

“Hey, it works for some people in this town,” I said with a grin. “But I don’t think it’ll come to that. I mean, we can always go into Witness Protection.”

We both busted up laughing just as Wes approached.

“Hey, man, what’s keeping... Oh. Anna. Hey.”

His tone wasn’t unfriendly, but it wasn’t Wes’s normal level of Golden Retriever warmth either.

“Hey, Wes! Beckett and I were just catching up.”

“Oh? What about?” Wes said, as if he didn’t know.

“Just planning our date,” she said with an impish smile. “You remember what those are, right, Wes? It’s where you actually take a woman to dinner instead of straight to your bed.”

“Hey, I know how to date,” he protested.

“I’ll have to see it to believe it,” she shot back.

I’d forgotten the animosity that had always come to the surface between these two.

“Actually, Wes is going to double-date with us,” I said before they could escalate into a full-on snarky war of words. Going on a fake date with Anna would be tough enough without the added tension. And if Wes was going to come along, and I knew he was determined to, I at least wanted everyone playing nicely.

“Really?” Anna sounded surprised. “Did Iola get to you too?”

He chuckled. “Nah, but I’m sure it would just be a matter of time. Might as well head her off at the pass, right? If she

sees Beck and me are happily coupled up, she'll back off."

My heart skipped at his phrasing, but Anna didn't seem to read any double meaning into it.

Because she doesn't suspect the truth. This is good.

"So, who are you bringing on the date?" Anna said. "It better not be Janine."

He barked a laugh. "No way I'm giving her any more ideas." Wes and Janine had a brief fling while I was dating Anna, and there'd been a period where Janine was weirdly possessive and jealous and started fights with nearly any woman in his vicinity, even those entirely uninterested, like Anna, who was my girlfriend at the time and had never found Wes anything other than annoying. "I'm bringing Bobbi."

"Bobbi." Anna laughed. "Okay, well she's fun, but there's no way you're really interested in her. I doubt even Iola will fall for that one."

"I guess we'll see," Wes said. "Lots of friends become lovers, right? You never know when people's relationship might change in unexpected ways."

I held my breath as Anna looked from him to me. Then she shrugged. "Okay, whatever. Text me the details. I need to get going."

"Yeah, us too. Thanks for playing along."

She rolled her eyes. "As if Iola is giving any of us a choice. Pretty sure she'll match up half the town, willing or not."

I carried the bottled drinks to the line at the register, Wes on my heels. I sensed his heavy stare on the back of my neck. "See? It's fine. It's not a real date."

He huffed. "That didn't stop Hunter and Clark."

I shot him a look. "Don't turn into Janine. You hated how possessive and jealous she got."

He grinned. "Yeah, but you like it." He leaned in close to speak directly into my ear so no one else would hear. "Your

ass is mine, and you know it.”

I shivered, my blood rushing hot at the words. “That’s not the point.”

“Oh, it is,” he said. “Because I aim to please, and I always do, Beck.”

While I stood there, trying to rein in my body’s response to his teasing, Wes sauntered out of the store. He no longer looked jealous. No, he looked smug.

The sexy jerk.

CHAPTER 18



WES

“LET’S PICK UP THE SLACK, GUYS. WE’VE GOT TO GET THIS shit finished.”

Colt turned from where he’d been working to uproot a row of dying bushes behind Mayor Michaels’ house. “I’m trying, man.”

“Well, try harder,” I said, though as nicely as I could manage. “We’ve got ten other things to get done by the end of the day.”

Colt’s face twisted, and I braced for a tirade. But he swallowed it down. He looked constipated, but hey, it was progress.

Beckett stepped up beside me, the wind tossing his red hair into his face. Fall had finally hit with a brisk chill to the air, and most of the guys were wearing long-sleeve shirts today. Beck impatiently shoved his bangs out his eyes.

Fuck, but he’s beautiful.

“We’re all busting hump,” Beckett said, gaze flicking between me and Colt, his tone apologetic. “This job was a little bigger than I anticipated. I didn’t know she was going to want us to do the extended acreage behind the house. Sorry.”

The mayor’s home was on the edge of town, just far enough from the rest of the city to feel like a country estate. She had a manicured front yard, and a bit of a wild jungle growing in her immediate backyard. What Beck hadn’t counted on was her request for us to go through the less

landscaped acreage that extended beyond the yard, which hadn't been well-maintained.

We took the job, of course, because we were trying to take all the work we could before winter hit. But it was a bitch to get everything done with the park project on our plate too.

“Hey, you brought in paying work. That’s never something to apologize for.”

“Still, we could have planned better for it if I’d been more thorough.”

“Beck.” I laughed. “Stop being a perfectionist. You won over a great client. We’ll figure it out.”

Colt tossed the bush he’d uprooted into a wheelbarrow. “Wes is right, Beckett. Getting overtime isn’t exactly making me sad.”

We’d called in a few crew members on their days off, including Colt. I’d half expected him to throw a fit, but he’d claimed he was happy for the work. Out of all the problems we’d had with Colt, showing up to work wasn’t ever one of them, so I suspected he needed the money to cover his bills.

Still, his attitude now did surprise me—in a good way. I knew he and Beckett had butted heads on several occasions. Now, Colt was giving him a word of support, and damn, my eyes must be deceiving me, because Beck was actually smiling and squeezing Colt’s shoulder as he passed him.

It was a hard, long day, but as we wrapped up, I felt satisfaction humming through me. My muscles ached in the way they did when they got a workout, but seeing everything we’d accomplished felt good.

We’d had to divide and conquer some of the work to keep up with everything, and Beckett pulled up in the pickup, Colt in the passenger seat, just as I called an end to the day. Colt opened the door and clambered out.

“Good work today!” Beckett called to him.

Colt froze, looking shocked. “Really?”

I laughed and clapped a hand to his back. “Shit, we really were assholes if you’re that astonished to get a compliment.”

Colt shook his head, looking a little embarrassed. “Nah. We just got off on the wrong foot, I think. I’m trying to get my shit together. Here and with Andi.”

“Keep trying, and we’ll always be good,” I said. “Ain’t that right, Beck?”

Beckett ducked his head to see us both through the open door. “Yep. Though I can’t speak for Andi.”

I snorted. “Fair point. She’s her own woman.”

“That’s all right,” Colt said. “We’re going out tonight.”

That got my attention. I turned, eyebrow raised. “You don’t say?”

He hesitated a beat. “I asked her to, uh, spend the night so we could spend some time talking and try to work things out. I mean, I’m probably sleeping on the couch,” he added quickly, as if we were going to scold him for wanting to score with our sister. I didn’t want to imagine said scoring, but Andi was a grown woman and he was her live-in boyfriend until recently, so I figured being protective of her virtue would be a bit pointless.

“Well, I hope it works out,” I said. “I’m pretty sure Andi loves you.”

“I love her too,” he said quietly.

“Then find a way to show her that.”

Colt nodded, and I climbed into the pickup truck. While Beckett pulled away from the curb, I rubbed my hands together. “Did you hear that? Andi’s going out tonight!”

He chuckled. “You have a one-track mind.”

“Hell yeah, I do, but in my defense, I haven’t been able to follow the track to its final destination. Can you blame me for being excited?”

He flashed me a distracted smile. “Of course not. I’m looking forward to it.”

“So, what’s on your mind then? You seem…”

“Dad texted me about wanting to talk before he left town. I know it’s probably fine, but I don’t know what it’s about.”

“Ah.” I shrugged. “Probably work shit, right?”

“Maybe. He didn’t ask to see you though.”

“I guess I’m being replaced as the favorite son,” I joked.

“You’re the only son.”

“Bullshit,” I said. “He has two sons, Beck. It doesn’t matter who’s bio and who’s not. We’re family.”

Beckett’s smile twisted a little, and he didn’t sound totally convinced as he said, “I guess.”

Maybe he wanted to downplay our familial connection because of the sex issue? I could see why that might be the case. I settled a hand on his thigh and squeezed. “Don’t worry. I won’t think of you as my brother when my dick is buried in your ass.”

Beckett made a choked sound, the truck swerved, and I laughed as he swore loudly. “Fuck, man, do you want me to wreck?”

“Wow,” I said, still laughing. “You’d think I said something you didn’t already know was gonna happen.”

He shook his head, shooting me a glare. “That dirty mouth of yours always takes me by surprise.”

I smiled, long and slow, putting as much sex appeal into it as I could. “Well, this dirty mouth is all yours tonight.”

He took a breath. “Fuck, man. Stop turning me on. I can’t go talk to Dad with a hard-on.”

I raised my hands. “Oops, my bad.”

We pulled into our driveway in front of the trailer, and I could see Beckett was nervous.

“I’ll come along to his office,” I said when we got out of the truck. “I’m sure it’s just a work thing, but if not…”

Beckett shot me a grateful smile. “Thanks, Wes.”

“Hey, what have I said before? I always have your back.”

Beckett linked his fingers with mine on the walk across the lot, though he pulled away just before we reached the door. Dad was behind the desk, looking frazzled when we entered.

“Finally,” he muttered. “What took you so long to get over here?”

“A little thing called working our asses off,” I said dryly.

Dad chuckled. “Fair enough. Beckett, I wanted to talk to you before I left town.”

“Okay,” Beckett said hesitantly.

“Someone’s got to manage the work schedules and payroll while I’m gone. I want you to take point.”

“See? Work shit,” I muttered under my breath.

“Me?” Beckett sounded surprised.

“Yeah, why not?” Dad said.

“I just assumed you’d want Wes to take the lead in your absence. I mean, he’s the crew foreman, so...”

“Well, running a business is about more than one person, Beckett. It’s about having a team and playing to your team members’ strengths. You’re the one best suited for this. You’re one of my most trusted team members. I hope you know that.”

“Thanks,” Beckett said in a soft, surprised voice. I didn’t know why he always seemed so surprised when Dad showed him love and respect. He deserved that.

Dad glanced at me, where I stood a step behind Beckett and to the side. “I trust Wes with other things, which I think he knows.” I nodded agreement, so Dad continued. “So, what do you think, Beck? Can you step up and do this for me while your mother drags me on vacation?”

Beckett chuckled. “Yeah, of course.”

“Good man. I knew I could count on both of you.”

“You always can,” I said.

Dad nodded, eyes speculative. “I’ve seen how you’ve handled the park project. That’s a big undertaking for us, and you’ve been doing great. I’m really proud of you boys. I think when I get back, we’ll talk about me formally stepping down.”

My stomach flip-flopped. “Really? You’re ready?”

He gave me a rueful smile. “Carol has been ready for the past three years. But yeah, I think I’m ready too. This vacation is a bit of a test run for retirement. Carol wants to move up there, or at least spend summers over that way.”

“Wow, Dad, that’s a big deal,” I said, a little caught off-guard. “I didn’t think you’d ever leave Granville.”

“Well, nothing’s decided. But I know if I do leave, my business will be in good hands.”



BECKETT

“HOLY SHIT, man, the business is basically ours!” Wes said, grabbing my waist and spinning me. I was heavier than any of his prior girlfriends, and he grunted with the strain.

I laughed as he set me on my feet, none too gently. “Fuck, man, you’re ridiculous.”

He laughed. “I’m just happy.”

Andi emerged from her bedroom, and when the hell had I started thinking of it as her bedroom, instead of mine?

Almost from the beginning. Definitely after the first time Wes and I hooked up in his bed. That room felt like home now, even as cluttered and disorganized as it was. Maybe once Andi moved out, we could switch rooms and have a bit more space, but I couldn’t imagine going back to sleeping separately now.

“What’s going on?”

“Dad just the same as said he’s going to retire when he gets back from vacation,” Wes said with a grin. “We’re finally gonna take over the business.”

“That’s great! You both deserve it.”

Andi hugged Wes and me in turn, and I didn’t bother correcting her assumption we’d both be owners. Wes always included me in those ownership statements, and he treated me like an equal partner at work. It wasn’t the same as being an actual partner on paper, but it was the next-best thing, and I knew he was genuine about meaning it. Maybe one day, after he took over, he could let me buy in, and it really would be true.

“That’s great news, guys. I’d cook dinner to celebrate, but I already told Colt I’d go over there.” She hesitated. “I could reschedule though.”

“No!” we both practically shouted.

Andi laughed. “Geez, you must really want to get rid of me.”

“Of course not.” Wes tried to ruffle her hair, but she ducked away before he could. “We just want things to work out for you. We’ll celebrate another time.”

She smiled nervously. “Okay, wish me luck!”

The second she walked out the door, Wes grabbed my face and kissed me hard. “Now, what do you think? Do we need to have dinner first, or can we start with dessert?”

“If I’m dessert, then I vote for the second.”

He slipped his hands down to my ass and squeezed. “Good. Let’s go shower so I can eat this ass properly.”

“Jesus,” I muttered.

He swatted my ass, making me jump. “You got a problem with that?”

“No! Nope. No problem.”

I hustled down the hallway, Wes on my heels, and we fell into another kiss while the shower heated up. Wes pulled my shirt over my head, then his, and yanked me into another deep, wet kiss that went on so long that the whole room was fogged by the time we came up for air.

“Shit.” I laughed. “We’re never gonna make it to the bed at this rate.”

Wes stepped back, raising his hands. “Take off your pants and get in the shower before I say to hell with dirt and sweat and bend you over the bathroom counter.”

As sexy as the thought was, I preferred to be clean for this, so I quickly kicked off my shoes and unbuttoned my jeans. Wes’s gaze was heavy on me as I shoved my jeans down, then hooked my fingertips under the waistband of my boxer briefs. I bit my lower lip, peeking at him from under my lashes.

“Take them off,” he finally growled. “You’re driving me crazy.”

With a little laugh, I pushed them over my hips, then untangled my feet from the mess, standing naked before him. His gaze swept over my body, head to toes. “You’re gorgeous.”

“I’m a man,” I pointed out.

He smirked. “I think we’ve already established we’re both guys, and that we’re hot for each other anyway.”

“Yes, but we haven’t...” I wasn’t sure how to explain why tonight felt different. “Never mind. I don’t know what I’m saying.”

I climbed into the shower, tipping my head under the spray to get it wet. Wes joined me a minute later, hands gripping my wet waist. He turned me, guiding my back to his chest, then pumped some body wash into his cupped palm.

When he began soaping me up, working up a lather on my chest and stomach and then down to my thighs, I shuddered to feel his hands on me again. My cock went rock hard in record time, but Wes ignored it, concentrating on washing me.

“I know what you were trying to say,” he said. “But for me, it doesn’t really matter if it’s blowjobs or fucking your ass. We’ve already crossed that line. I could never go back.”

I turned in his arms to look into his troubled gaze. “Hey, neither could I. I just want you to be sure.”

He kissed me gently. "I'm sure, Beck."

"Me too."

He lowered himself to his knees, and my pulse leapt. His mouth was two inches from my eager cock, and he rocked forward to place one small kiss to the tip. Heat flashed through me, but he didn't take me into his mouth as I'd hoped. He grabbed my hips and turned me again, so that it was my ass in front of his face.

"Let's get you ready for the big show," he said.

Then he parted my cheeks and skimmed a finger through my crack. I gasped as a soapy finger entered me, then two. He worked me over, using water and soap to clean me, then grabbed the detachable shower head to rinse me clean of suds.

"Wes," I said, my voice a broken plea.

"Soon," he murmured, just before his tongue flicked over my hole and I flailed so suddenly I nearly slipped and fell. Only Wes's tight grip on my waist kept me on my feet. He laughed, breath gusting over sensitive skin, and I felt like I'd fly apart any second. "Relax, babe. I'm just loosening you up."

"Babe? That's what you're going with?"

"Would you prefer me to call you bro while I eat your ass?"

"Babe is good," I said quickly.

He chuckled again, then dove in, licking, then nibbling and sucking at the rim of my asshole. I pushed back, the teasing driving me to new heights of desperation.

"Please, Wes, please. I need you in me. I need to be fucked."

It felt surreal to hear those words tumble from my mouth. Aside from some experimental pegging with a girlfriend, I'd never been fucked. And I'd never felt as if I'd die without it. But here, now, I didn't just want Wes inside me, I fucking needed it.

“Shh, babe. I’ve got you. I’m gonna give you everything you need.”

My body was strung tight; I was edgy and needy. But his words soothed the strange sense of panic that had been building inside me.

Wes would take care of me. I believed that. Wes would always give me what I needed. Give me anything at all.

Wes stood and shut off the water, and only then did the full impact of his nakedness hit me. His broad chest with wet dark curls, water droplets coursing over his nipples and tracking down toward his heavy, thick dick.

“Wes,” I said in a trembling voice I barely recognized.

“What, baby?”

“You’re so sexy.”

I drank him in, sweeping my gaze up and down his powerful, masculine body that really put mine to shame. We both put in hard labor, but where my muscle was hidden beneath a lean frame, Wes was built as fuck and showed his strength with big shoulders, biceps that strained all his shirts, and big, beautiful pecs.

It wasn’t the first time I’d seen him naked, not even close, but being totally naked and wet together, just before he fucked me? That made it all feel new and different. This big strong man was gonna pin me down and thrust his cock inside me.

I shuddered, and not from the water cooling on my body.

“So are you, Beck. Sexy as fuck. So how about we go do something about it?”

“Yeah,” I said, feeling almost shy suddenly. “Take me to bed. I don’t want to wait anymore.”

CHAPTER 19



BECKETT

WHEN WE GOT TO THE BEDROOM, I EXPECTED WES TO THROW me on the bed and get busy. Instead, he drew me into his arms, gaze holding mine—intense and full of emotion.

“I hope you know what this means to me.”

I swallowed hard. “I do. I feel the same. Otherwise, we wouldn’t be here now.”

“Yeah.” His lips quirked in a wry smile before he nuzzled my nose. Nuzzled! Who was this man and where had my filthy stepbrother gone?

Before I could get too worried, he kissed me, tongue diving deep, claiming my mouth so possessively I instantly went pliant and let him take charge. He pulled my bottom lip between his teeth, tugging, and I moaned quietly.

“There’s my slut,” he murmured against my mouth.

A wash of heat flooded me at his words, my cock getting even harder. It should embarrass me to be called out as wanton, and in a way it did, but it always managed to turn me on more.

I dropped to my knees and pressed my face into his groin, doing my own nuzzling of his balls. He cursed quietly, fingers sinking into my hair, as I kissed and licked my way up his shaft and took the head of his dick into my mouth.

I’d been a little intimidated the first time I did this, but by now, it was second nature. I loved the heavy weight of his dick on my tongue, how it stretched my mouth with its width. I

imagined him thrusting into my ass instead of my mouth, and a desperate, horny noise escaped me.

“Shit.” Wes grabbed my arm and tugged me to my feet. “You’re too good at that. I’ll blow before I get inside you.”

My heart skipped. Wes was going to be inside me tonight. Holy hell.

He kissed me once, hard and fast, then guided me down to the bed. He was gentle as he covered my body with his, and far too intent on dragging this out. I squirmed, impatient as he made a meal of my neck, then sucked a kiss to my collarbone. He licked and nibbled my nipples until they were throbbing so much I felt an echo of it in my cock.

“Wes,” I groaned. “Come on. Fuck me.”

He chuckled, breath gusting over the wet nipple he’d just teased to a hard peak. “So needy for me.”

“Duh,” I said, my voice grumpy. “Stop being a tease.”

“Oh, I’m a tease now?” He pushed between my thighs and raised two fingers to my lips. “Suck them, slut.”

I knew exactly what he intended to do with those fingers, and my hole—which was still craving more after the treatment he’d given it in the shower—contracted at the thought. I opened my mouth and eagerly sucked his fingers, licking over and between them, coating them with as much saliva as I could produce.

“Fucking hell, you’re hot like this,” he muttered.

I gazed at him, knowing the debauched picture I must present, sucking on his fingers like I wanted them to be a cock. I’d always loved oral, even with my female partners, but everything with Wes was on another level. There was an eroticism to sucking—his fingers or his dick—a sort of surrender that I’d never felt with women.

I was giving him my body to use how he wanted.

Wes pulled his fingers from my mouth and lowered them between my legs. There was no other warning. He speared them into my hole, nothing slow or gentle about the entry. I

cried out loudly, but if there was pain, it was buried in the pleasure of finally being filled.

He pumped his fingers and spread them, stretching my hole to its limits, then crooked them to rub against my prostate. I jolted and moaned.

“Hell yeah, you’re ready,” he said.

“Been ready for ages,” I mumbled.

“Watch it, brat, or you’re gonna regret that attitude when I tear up your ass.”

Another wave of surrealness hit me. We were really doing this. I was going to let this man, this big and built guy with a thick-as-fuck cock, shove inside my body and do what he wanted with me.

But he wasn’t just any man. He was Wes.

And that made it all right. Because Wes was more than a man, more than a stepbrother. He was my person. The one who was always there for me. The one who’d cheer me up when I was grumpy, who’d smile every time I entered a room, who was genuinely happy to spend every waking minute with me. He laughed at my jokes, and he flattered my intelligence. He was my best friend and my soul mate, all rolled up into one forbidden package.

And really, how could I ever have made any other choice that Vegas morning when he bent down to brush his lips against mine? Of course I kissed him back. I was already his.

“Hey, where’d you go?”

Wes hovered over me with a concerned smile.

“I’m here,” I said. “Just got lost in my head for a minute.”

His gaze searched mine. “You know I’ll be careful with you, right?”

I licked my dry lips. “Yeah. I’m not worried.”

“Good.” He winked. “I’ll be gentle when I take your ass virginity.”

I slapped his bicep. “Watch it, or maybe I’ll decide to take yours instead.”

If I’d expected Wes to flinch away from the idea of bottoming, I’d be disappointed. But I knew him too well. When he grinned and said, “Bring it on, baby,” I wasn’t surprised. Wes was the kind of guy to roll with new experiences. He didn’t shy away from anything.

“Want me to bottom right now?” he asked. “I will.”

I gasped. “Don’t you dare! I want that dick in me right the fuck now.”

He grinned as he sat back to roll on the condom, then slick it with lube. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

Wes made quick work of lubing my hole, and then the wide head of his cock was there, pressing and pressing. It felt massive, and I was beginning to think maybe I’d made a terrible mistake, maybe I wasn’t ready at all, when my body gave up resisting and he was suddenly inside.

“Fuck!” I hissed, unprepared for the sharp burn that accompanied the stretch.

“Too much?” he asked, worried. He started to pull back.

“No!” I grabbed his arm and locked my legs around the back of his thighs, trying to hold him in place. “Just...stay.”

“Okay.”

“You’re just big.”

Wes grinned, looking pleased. “When you adjust, you’re gonna love my big dick pounding your tight ass.”

I shuddered. “Yeah.”

“I’m gonna make you beg for more, Beck. Gonna make you scream my name as you come all over yourself with me balls-deep in you.”

“Fuck,” I whispered. “Yeah. Move.”

“You sure?”

I tugged his arm. “Move!”

“Okay.” He laughed. “So bossy.”

I realized suddenly that he was right. In the moment that I’d needed control, Wes had given it to me without a second thought. He’d been careful with me, as he’d promised, making sure I could handle him before moving when he was probably as desperate to come as I was.

The second I gave him the green light, he plunged deep inside, so deep I was shocked I couldn’t feel him in my belly. He pushed onward, spreading me and stretching me, until a sweet ache echoed through my core.

It wasn’t pleasure quite yet, but it wasn’t exactly pain either. It was a hot ember, and I was burning to feed the flames.

Wes pulled back and thrust in again, and I caught fire, groaning as pleasure sparked through me. He rocked in and out of me, his strokes deep but slow, as my body reformed around him.

He was on his haunches, my ass in his hands, his gaze trained on the place where we were joined.

“Fuck, Beck,” he said, a sound of awe in his voice. “I wish you could see your hole taking my cock so good. It’s spread so fucking wide, but there’s no resistance at all. You want me inside you.”

There was the dirty-mouthed guy I knew and loved, though the expression on his face was amazement rather than lust.

“Yeah,” I said. “I can take it harder.”

His gaze flicked to my face. “Yeah?”

“Fuck yeah.”

Wes’s hips bucked more forcefully, and hell yeah, I felt that. A moan burst from my lips, and he did it again and again. Words tumbled from me, but I hardly knew what they were.

More. Harder. Please.

I fisted my cock while he pounded into me, shifting position to give me more force, until I was wailing with the pleasure-pain of it. I was pinned beneath his weight, so fucking full of him, and it still didn't seem like enough.

With my left hand, I clawed at his shoulder, pulling him toward me. Wes lowered until we were panting in each other's mouths, sharing air but too gone to actually kiss.

"Your ass is so tight, Beck. It feels so fucking good."

I groaned, jerking my cock harder between our bodies. "I need to come."

"Yeah, baby," he murmured. "Do it now. I want to feel it when it happens."

He angled his hips just right, nailing my prostate once, twice, three times, and I erupted with a strangled cry, back arching, neck straining, everything strung tight until it snapped like a rubber band and I was flying apart.

Cum pulsed from my cock, shooting over my fingers and dribbling onto my abs, but that wasn't even the most incredible part of the orgasm. No, that was in my ass, tightening and releasing with each wave of pleasure.

"F-f-fuck," Wes stuttered.

He shuddered hard and collapsed on top of me, panting hot breaths against my neck. I wrapped my arms around him and held him tight, not caring that I was sticky with sweat and cum. Not caring that his weight was impeding my breathing.

I needed his skin against mine to remind myself that this was real.

I needed his weight pressing down to anchor me in the moment.

I'd just let my stepbrother fuck me, and I'd never be the same.

But then, maybe I hadn't been the same since that first kiss.

Or maybe I was lost long before that. The first time I imagined him when I was jerking off in the shower. The first time I'd looked a little too long when he ventured out of the bathroom in only a towel.

The first time he'd smiled, and I'd reflexively smiled back, simply because he was Wes, and if he was happy, so was I.

A thousand little moments had led to this one, and as complicated as it was, I'd never regret it.



WES

BECKETT LOOKED up from the grilled cheese and tomato soup I'd whipped up and brought into the bedroom—not even burned this time, thank you very much!—and smiled quizzically. “What? Do I have something on my face?”

“No,” I said. “But the blankets are covering your dick, so what am I supposed to look at?”

He smacked me. “Ass.”

“They're covering that too.”

He rolled his eyes, but I saw the smile before he took a big bite of his sandwich, humming with delight. The noises he made while he ate might have turned me on, if not for the fact that they didn't come close to the pornographic moans and whimpers I'd pulled from him in the act. Beckett was generally more reserved than me—though I tended to bring out his playful side more than others—but his guard vanished entirely when he gave his body to me.

And there was no mistaking it. Beckett didn't just have sex with me, he invited me in, let me have control, and thanked me for the pleasure. And there was something incredibly touching about that kind of trust.

“Seriously, Beck, you're beautiful.”

He ducked his head, letting his red bangs flop into his eyes. “Shut up.”

“Don’t hide.” I put a finger under his chin and tipped his face up. “It’s true.”

“Whatever,” he mumbled, his freckled cheeks reddening.

“Aw, are you blushing? You’re blushing!” I laughed in delight as he began to swear at me. I grabbed his jaw and kissed his hot cheek, then the arch of his brow. I brushed my thumb over his bottom lip as I pressed the tip of my tongue to one of the freckles under his eye.

“You’re such an asshole,” he said, though there was a smile in his voice. “Should I tell you all the ways that you’re sinfully sexy?”

I immediately sprawled back on my pillow, my body naked on top of the covers. “Hell yes. Tell me.”

He chuckled and set his plate on the bedside table. It was mostly empty, with nothing more than a crust lying beside a bowl holding a small puddle of red in the bottom. “I should have known your ego would enjoy stroking.”

“Mm, I always enjoy stroking when you’re involved.” I clasped a loose fist around my semihard cock to demonstrate, watching his eyes darken to a mossy green shade as I slowly stroked myself. But curiosity got the best of me. “I do want to know what you see in me though.”

His eyes widened. “You’re kidding, right?”

I shook my head, feeling a bit awkward that I’d let my underbelly show. “I mean, I know a lot of women like my looks, but...”

“Well, of course they do.” He gave an incredulous laugh. “You’re stacked from working hard labor your whole life. You have these incredible, smoldering eyes that are super intense when you’re into someone. I swear you could practically make me come with that look alone.”

I snorted. “That might be fun to try. Maybe I’ll make you watch me get off while smoldering at you.”

“You think you’re joking,” Beckett said, sounding almost embarrassed as he shook his head. “You’ve got charisma and

presence, and...a truly magnificent dick.”

I smirked. “I’m the whole package, huh?”

“You are,” he said softly.

“Well, so are you,” I said.

“But none of that would have made me take the leap with you in Vegas, Wes. Or stay married to you when it was a terrible idea.”

“No? I thought we were just waiting for the marriage license.”

Which really should be here by now, come to think of it. But who was I to argue with karma that was in my favor? If it got lost in the mail, I wasn’t going to cry over it.

“No.” Beckett bit his bottom lip, nervous. “You know that’s not really the reason.”

“Tell me,” I ordered. Then added, “Please.”

“You’re just the best person,” he blurted. “You make the people around you happy. You’re good-natured, and generous. You have charisma, and you charm people without trying, which is why you’re taking all the client calls while Dad is gone.” He chuckled. “I get boring payroll and planning for a reason. People like you. People love you.”

“Yeah? Does that include you?”

He held my gaze. “You know it does.”

I nodded once, then grabbed his thigh and tugged him down in the blankets, making him yelp and laugh. I crawled over him and kissed his pink lips, thin but somehow still so incredibly soft and succulent.

“I hope you didn’t think we were done for the night,” I murmured. “Who knows when we’ll get privacy like this again.”

Beckett rolled us, catching me by surprise, then grinned down at me from his perch astride my thighs. “Oh, I plan to make the most of it.” He dipped down to kiss my chin, his

hands going to my pecs and squeezing. “You got your chance to play. Now it’s mine.”

When he sucked on my Adam’s apple, I was the one who moaned like a slut.

Of course, Beck was too nice to say it. I was the dirty one. The one who used sex talk to hide just how deeply Beckett had burrowed under my skin.

As he explored my body with his hands and mouth, taking charge for a change, he drew small gasps and moans from me. When his tongue tickled my balls before tracing up my dick, I choked on my breath.

With patience he never displayed when he was the one squirming beneath me, Beckett took me to the edge of my endurance, and with his mouth sucking ruthlessly at my cock and hands roughly pushing my thighs wide, I exploded.

All without a single word, clean or dirty.

I couldn’t find anything to say as Beckett gazed up at me, watching me come for him, watching me unravel, stripped bare for him to see.

Not my body, but my emotions. My heart. All of it on display.

He pulled his mouth away, milking me through the orgasm with his hand, eyes locked on mine. “There you go, Wes. You’re safe with me. I’ve got you.”

I pulled him into a full-body embrace, squeezing him so tightly it must have hurt. Beckett didn’t complain as I crushed him to me, needing to hold him in the aftermath, needing to let my insides settle back into their allotted spaces so that I wasn’t flayed open for everyone to see.

Beckett was hard against me. I felt his cock as he wiggled a bit. I grabbed his ass and encouraged him to thrust. “Fuck my abs,” I murmured. “Use my body to get off.”

He groaned. “I was trying to be romantic. I don’t have to.”

I squeezed his ass, then slapped one cheek hard enough he yelped. “Do it, Beck. Come on me.”

He worked his hips, rutting against me fast and desperate, breathing ragged, until he came with a shudder and I felt his cum spreading between our bodies.

“You claimed me this time,” I said into his ear as he quivered on top of me. “Now there’s no returning me to the store.”

He laughed. “Are you kidding? You were a bargain, putting out for free.”

“Hey, are you calling me easy?”

He lifted his head, a smile lingering around his lips. “None of this is easy, but it’s worth it.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, my heart expanding at the warmth in his eyes. “It really is.”

CHAPTER 20



BECKETT

“YOU’RE NOT WEARING THAT, ARE YOU?”

I looked down at the date outfit I’d just put on, a dark green button-down with a metallic sheen and black jeans. “What? I thought I looked good in this.”

“Exactly,” Wes said, voice holding a hint of darkness. “Too good. That color brings out your eyes. Makes you fucking captivating. And that shirt is practically molded to your body. Do you really want to give Anna the wrong idea?”

I laughed. “Don’t be silly. She knows it’s not a real date.”

“She might change her mind.” He crowded me up against our bedroom door, putting his mouth by my ear. “Do you really want to look sexy for anyone but me?”

“Maybe it is for you,” I countered. “You’re going on this date too.”

“Mm, true.” Wes pressed a small kiss under my ear, then another on the corner of my mouth. Just as I leaned in to kiss him for real, he drew back with a smirk. “I guess you can wear it then, as long as you’re dressing like that for me.” He threw in a wink so I’d know he was kidding, though there was definitely an undercurrent of unease to his smile.

“Hey, same to you,” I said, gesturing toward him. Dressed in faded blue jeans and a dark Henley that clung to his shoulders and pecs, with a wide leather belt, he looked hot as fuck. The outfit was casual, in that *I don’t give a fuck* sort of way that only made him more attractive.

He scoffed. “What, this old thing? Don’t worry. It’s all for you, babe.”

His gaze met mine, heavy and intense, and I suppressed a shiver. That look got to me every time. I wanted to drop to my knees and rip open his jeans to prove to him that he was all I wanted. I forced a smile instead. “I hope this works.”

“It better.” He grabbed my jaw and finally pressed the hard kiss to my lips that I’d expected earlier. “I don’t like sharing.”

I cupped his jaw with my hand. “You’re not sharing anything but dinner with friends.”

He smiled sheepishly. “Right, I know. I’m not trying to be a weird possessive asshole. I hated when Janine got that way. This is just...”

“I know.”

We’d had so few opportunities for true intimacy, and with everything hanging over our heads, it had taken a while to fully acknowledge that our feelings weren’t going away. It felt wrong to go out and pretend to date other people, but what else could we do? Our relationship was secret, and it needed to stay that way—at least for a while. Maybe eventually...maybe when there was less at stake...

“Let’s get this over with,” Wes said, interrupting my thoughts. “Andi is with Colton again tonight, and I’ve got plans that don’t include Anna or Bobbi.”

Fuck me. Most likely, his plans were exactly that. I’d been longing for another night alone. Andi was working on her relationship with Colton, and she’d spent more time with him, but she wasn’t ready to move back in, she’d said. I was trying to be patient and understanding, but damn, now that I’d had Wes inside me, I was desperate for more.

I fumbled for the bedroom door and opened it to stumble into the hall before I was tempted to stand up Anna and Bobbi. “Let’s hurry, then.”

Wes grinned as he followed me into the hall.

We all met up at The Dinner Bell. Perhaps not the most chivalrous way to start a date, but Bobbi and Anna were independent women and Wes and me...well, to be completely honest, we were codependent men. So it worked for all of us.

“Hi,” Anna said with a nervous smile. “You look nice. Green is such a good color on you.”

I felt Wes’s heavy stare as I gave her a quick embrace and a peck on the cheek. “Thanks, Anna. You’re lovely, as always.”

It wasn’t a lie. Objectively, Anna was beautiful. She’d worn clingy jeans with a burnt-orange camisole and a crocheted white lace shawl ovetop, giving her a shabby chic vibe.

Behind us, Bobbi said, “See, Wes? That’s how a date behaves. Where’s my compliment?”

“Sorry, my bad,” Wes said, his low voice rolling through me and pulling my attention from Anna with ease. “You look dressed to kill, Bobbi.”

She grinned and hooked her arm through his, leaning in close. “Thanks. Maybe if you’re lucky, you’ll be my next victim.”

I laughed a little too loudly. “Wow. I don’t know if that’s a come-on or a threat.”

She grinned. “Maybe it’s both.”

“Great.”

Now I was the one who was jealous. Bobbi tended to be flirty with everyone, but that didn’t mean I liked to watch her hang all over Wes. Besides, I was pretty sure in Wes’s case, her flirtation wasn’t all an act. She’d happily take him home and show him a good time anytime he liked. Me too, probably. Maybe even both of us at once.

I shoved that image out of my head, because just like Wes, I didn’t want to share.

Bobbi smirked. “What’s wrong, Beck? Jealous?”

My gaze flicked to Wes, who was already looking at me. I shrugged, trying to pretend her words weren't true. If I wasn't careful, I'd give away the truth, so I forced a grin to my face. "Nah, just hungry. Let's go in."

"Great idea," Anna said brightly, reminding me she was still beside me.

I opened the door and followed her inside, Bobbi and Wes behind me. Behind us, I heard Bobbi giggling. "This is going to be so much fun."

"You're trouble, aren't you?" Wes said, sounding amused.

"Didn't you already know that when you invited me along?"

He huffed a laugh, making jealousy flare even hotter inside me. "I guess I did."

The hostess, a teenager named Wendy, greeted us with a smile and invited us to write our names on the chalkboard. The Dinner Bell was a former schoolhouse that had been converted to a restaurant and was now Granville's No. 1 romantic date spot. They'd incorporated a few schoolhouse traditions, such as the chalkboard where dates could write their names and other messages and take selfies, and the chiming of a school bell they played over the stereo system whenever a new couple dined with them for the first time.

Anna and I exchanged a look. She shrugged. I nodded and stepped up to the chalkboard, drawing a big heart and writing our names inside. Before I finished, Wes stepped up beside me, his shoulder pressing against mine.

"Don't get too cozy with her," he whispered as he took the chalk from me. "You're coming home with me."

I huffed out a breath. "Bobbi might have other ideas."

He raised his hand, writing his name and Bobbi's into the heart I'd drawn. I noticed he'd put his name directly beneath mine, the letters touching, while Bobbi's name was spaced out a bit farther.

"Bobbi's ideas don't interest me."

“Good. Then maybe—”

“How about a picture?” Bobbi said, interrupting our whispered conversation. “Share the fun, boys. I’m feeling a little left out here.”

Anna giggled. “Right? Those two are always connected at the hip.”

Bobbi grinned. “Yes, they’re very close. I’m aware.”

“When Beck and I used to date, Wes was always around. It used to drive me up the wall.”

“I’m hurt,” Wes said with a smirk. “I just wanted to share in the love.”

Bobbi chuckled. “See? Missed opportunity, Anna. You could’ve had two for the price of one.”

Anna’s cheeks flared red. “Yeah, right!”

I forced a chuckle. “We’re close, but not that close.”

Wes didn’t say anything. Bobbi raised her eyebrows at him.

“What?” he said lightly. “I was just trying to picture it.”

Anna whacked him with her purse.

“Let’s take the pictures, like Bobbi suggested,” I said quickly.

I pulled Anna into my side, but before I could get a single snap off, Wes crowded in on my other side, with Bobbi beside him. He slipped his hand behind us, squeezing my ass, and I fought to maintain a complacent smile as I raised my phone higher, to get all of us in the frame. I snapped the picture, then examined the shot.

Wes’s smile was devilish, and mine was a little incredulous. Anna looked uncomfortable and Bobbi amused. She was certainly enjoying her role as Wes’s date, I thought uncharitably, as I glared at her hand resting on his chest in the photo.

“All right, how about we get you all seated?” the hostess said.

“Good idea,” Anna said quickly, obviously wanting to move on with the evening.

We were directed to a four-seat table in the center of the room, making me feel strangely on display for the whole town. I recognized several of the couples seated around the room. Most of them were older: Lula Miller and Tom Moore were a well-known couple in town. Moore had run the hardware store until finally ending the feud with his son to retire and pass the business on. His grandson Evan was dating the assistant football coach at Granville High. Dirk and Paula Goodman were on the other side of the room. Paula was the woman who sold sex toys that I’d told Laurie about. I’d been curious enough to check out the website she shared with virtually everyone, and her best sellers were dildos branded with romantic tropes like *The Boy Next Door* and *The Bad Boy*.

Wes leaned over, spotting where my attention had landed. “Think she has a stepbrother model?”

“Doubtful.”

He grinned. “Too bad. Your birthday is coming up.”

I shoved him away with a laugh, only to spot Anna and Bobbi watching us a little too closely.

“Want to share with the class?” Bobbi asked.

I swallowed, uncomfortably aware of how close Wes had sat down next to me. His knee pressed against mine under the table.

“I was just commenting on Paula’s side business,” Wes said with a grin. “That would be one way to spice up a date night.”

“I think we’ve got plenty of spice without it,” I muttered.

I didn’t intend that to be a commentary on my sex life with Wes, but the searing look he sent me told me that he agreed.

The server stopped by the table, saving us from any further questions from Bobbi or Anna. We all placed our drink orders,

and when Anna took the conversation in a safer direction, asking about the park project, I gladly talked shop for a while.

We ordered our meals and ate, mostly without incident, but I couldn't help noticing that Bobbi had engaged Wes in a private conversation, bending her head close to whisper to him. He laughed softly, intimately, in a way usually reserved for me. I tried to focus on what Anna had to say, but my gaze was drawn to him, a scowl forming on my face.

"Once again, I'm competing with your brother," Anna said.

I blinked back to attention. "Sorry. I'm just tired tonight."

"Uh-huh. Well, I guess it's good this date is just for show," she said. "Because I'm remembering all the reasons it didn't work out the last time."

I winced. "This isn't the same."

Anna didn't look convinced, and I suddenly wondered if she was right. I'd harbored feelings for Wes for a long time. Even when I'd dated, I'd dropped everything and rescheduled plans to make time for him. He had always been my top priority, and my girlfriends—most of them short-lived—had always come second.

I couldn't imagine putting Wes second to someone else, though. Not because he was my stepbrother, but because he was so much more.

I guess, even when I was in denial, he always had been.



WES

BECKETT LOOKED miserable on his side of the table, and while Bobbi was entertaining me with commentary on the other couples in the room—half of them old enough to be our grandparents, though I spotted Garrett Rafferty and Kevin Rhodes in a cozy corner, candlelight flickering over Kev's glossy lips—Anna looked a little pissed off.

I kicked his foot and shot him a smile that he struggled to return.

“I’m gonna hit the john,” I said, giving him a pointed look. “Don’t leave without me.”

“As if we could,” Anna said with an eye roll.

I squeezed Beckett’s thigh under the table, hoping he understood I wanted him to follow, then headed for the bathroom in the back corner of the restaurant. I was delayed briefly as Garrett called out a hello and I stopped to greet them both and happily accept an invitation to one last backyard barbecue before a cold front swept in. Garrett still held gatherings in the winter, but they turned into indoor potlucks.

By the time I made it to the bathroom, I was practically vibrating with the need to touch Beckett. The door opened behind me and I whirled, grin on my face.

“Finally—” I started, only to cut short when Bobbi sauntered into the men’s room, bold as you please. My eyes went wide. “Bobbi, what the hell?”

She tilted her head. “I was sure that you were sending out an invitation to come into the bathroom. I’m pretty good at reading signals.”

“You read wrong.”

She came closer, and I fought the urge to scuttle away. “If you didn’t want me to follow you in here, then that signal must have been for someone else.” She raised an eyebrow, and *shit, shit, shit*. She knew, didn’t she?

I shook my head, but I couldn’t summon the words to properly deny her insinuation.

“You and Beckett have always been close,” she said carefully.

“We’re brothers,” I said.

“Hmm yeah, but you’re closer than brothers even, aren’t you?” She put her hand on my shoulder. “Unless...you really did want me to follow you here?” Her tone was teasing. “If

you're not hoping Beck comes through that door, why don't you prove it?"

I thought about it for half a second, leaning in toward her. Thinking that Beck could forgive one kiss surely, one kiss to deflect Bobbi's suspicions.

At the last minute, though, I pulled away. "No. I can't. No."

"Why not, Wes?"

"Because."

"Because why?"

"Because... I wasn't waiting for you."

"Who were you waiting for then?" she persisted.

My heart thundered, and my palms grew clammy. Bobbi met my gaze directly, and I found it impossible to lie in the face of such a direct question.

"It's okay," she said softly after a beat. "I shouldn't have teased you like that. I'm sorry. You don't have to tell me. I just want you to know that you *can* trust me if you ever want to share."

Her statement broke the last shred of my resolve, and the words tumbled out, too fast for me to censor or retract. "I was waiting for Beck. Yes, okay? You're right. I was waiting for him to follow me back here."

"And why is that, Wes?" she asked softly.

"Because I love him," I blurted. "I love Beckett."

"Of course you do," she said gently as she drew me into a hug. I was shaking a little as she wrapped her arms around me, my own words shocking me. I'd known at some level all along that I loved Beck. But I'd loved him as a friend, as a brother. Now, it was something different. Something more. Something all-consuming.

The door burst open, and Beckett walked in. He took in the sight of me and Bobbi in an embrace, and his jaw clenched. "The date is over. I paid the check, and Anna left."

Bobbi pulled away and turned toward Beckett. “We were just talking.”

He gave a ragged laugh. “Sure, whatever. I’m going home.” His gaze landed heavy and hot on me. There were so many emotions swirling in his eyes that I felt the impact like a punch to the chest. “Wes is coming with me.” His voice was rough, but I heard the slight quiver he tried to hide. “Aren’t you?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Always, Beck.”

He nodded once without meeting Bobbi’s eyes and walked out the door. She glanced toward me, looking worried. “Sorry. I think I put my foot in it.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “I’ll explain. He won’t blame you.”

Her smile twisted. “If you say so.”

The door swung back open, and Beck sent me a glare. “Are you coming, or do I need to make other plans for the rest of the night?”

“Oh, fuck that,” I said, hurrying toward the door. “I’m coming.”

“Not yet,” he muttered as I followed him through the restaurant dining room. “But you will be.”

“Not if I make you come first.”

He shot me a sidelong look as we stepped out onto the sidewalk. “I guess we’ll just have to see who cracks first.”

I grinned, never one to turn down a challenge. “I guess we will.”

We made it to the truck, but I grabbed his arm to stop him when he reached for the door. He tried to pull away, and I pinned him against the side of the truck, bent over the hood and put my mouth close to his ear. “You’re free to take your frustration out on me tonight. I’m fucking happy to take it. But just know, Beck, that I’d never betray you.”

He craned his head enough that our eyes met. “You better fucking not.” He swept his foot between my legs and tilted his

hips, and the next thing I knew, he'd spun out of my grip and was shoving me down. "I don't like sharing either."

I broke free of his hold, smiling despite the thick tension thrumming between us. "Glad we're on the same page."

CHAPTER 21



BECKETT

WE'D BARELY MADE IT THROUGH THE DOOR WHEN WES shoved me against a wall and kissed me hard. I started to melt for him as usual, going lax under his weight. He pinned my hands beside my head and rocked his hips against mine, making me gasp.

"There we go," he murmured. "I'm gonna fuck you so hard tonight you forget all about that stupid date."

My eyes flew open, a spark of residual jealousy igniting. "You didn't have to flirt so much, you know. It was kind of a dick move."

He looked surprised. "I wasn't... I mean, you know how Bobbi is."

I scoffed. "Yeah, I do. You shouldn't have encouraged her."

"It was a date, and it was your idea—"

"No, it wasn't! I never invited you or Bobbi. That date was for me and Anna, but you couldn't leave it alone."

"Oh, fuck that," he growled. "It's okay for you to go on a date, but not me? And with your ex, no less?"

I shoved him back. "I wasn't the one who snuck off to the bathroom."

"I was hoping *you'd* follow me, not Bobbi."

"You sure as fuck looked cozy with her though, didn't you?"

Wes pushed me back against the wall. “I knew the date was a stupid idea.”

I strained against his body weight, tilting my hips and twisting in an attempt to reverse our positions, but it only ended with me face-first against the wall and Wes pinning me there, his breath panting in my ear.

“Now, are you going to be a good boy and let me prove that your ass is the only one I want to nail or what?”

Heat pooled in my groin, memories of the last time he’d been inside me stoking my arousal. I’d been craving a repeat ever since, but I was still unsettled by the way our night had gone.

I didn’t doubt that I was the one Wes wanted. But I hated what I saw in that bathroom. Hated sitting by while he flirted and laughed and touched Bobbi in public, easy as ever, while we had to conceal our true feelings.

“If you want my ass, you’re gonna have to earn it,” I said, feeling belligerent.

There was a restless tension simmering in my blood that needed an outlet, and challenging Wes was easier than sorting through my emotions.

He stepped away from me, and I turned to see him smirking. “Tell you what, we can wrestle for it.”

Before I could fully process what he meant, he stripped off his shirt and took off down the hall. I gave chase, a manic laugh spilling from my lips. “Oh, it’s on!”

“Bring it, baby!” he called.

The endearment made my footsteps falter for just a moment, but my blood was thrumming with excitement. It was fight or flee, or in this case, fight or fuck. Even better, fight and fuck. I reached the bedroom to find Wes stripped down to his boxer briefs.

I tackled him to the bed, landing on his back.

His breath left him in a whoosh, and then he laughed. “Oh, shit, I’m gonna fuck you so hard for being a jealous brat,

Beck. You're gonna cry when you come."

His dirty talk got to me just enough my hold loosened, and he flipped us over. I tried to restrain him, but he sat on my chest, backward, ass in front of my face, and wrestled open my jeans. I bucked my body, trying to unseat him, but he used my hips lifting as an opportunity to drag my jeans and underwear down to my knees. Then I was even more trapped.

"Fuck," I grunted, shimmying my legs to get free of the jeans while Wes spun to pin me down.

He grabbed my wrists and held them down on either side of my head and kissed me deep and dirty, his tongue claiming my mouth so thoroughly I was groaning and arching up against him, mind blanking out for a moment.

"There's my sweet Beck," he murmured.

I huffed an annoyed breath and renewed my fight to unseat him. I caught him by surprise, and he toppled to the side with a shout. I scrambled for purchase, on top of him, and we full-on wrestled until we were sweaty and slippery and gasping each time our hard cocks bumped. Wes was still in his underwear, but I was entirely naked now, and the friction was doing my head in.

Wes locked my arms back in a full Nelson hold. "You're mine now!"

He flopped backwards, and we landed with him sprawled on his back, me on his chest, my cock waving like a fucking flag in the air.

The bed made an ominous crack and the mattress tilted sideways.

I gave a shout of surprise, it taking me a moment to understand what was happening. We'd broken the fucking bed! Wes laughed hysterically, even as he released my right arm to wrap his fingers around my cock.

I moaned and thrust into his fist as he latched his mouth onto my neck.

That's when the bedroom door flew open, and Andi peeked in. "What the hell are you two idiots—oh my god!"

Her eyes practically bugged out, and who could blame her? I was there in all my glory, lying on top of Wes's body, his hand on my cock.

He rolled me to the side farthest from the door, turning to shield me from view, but I knew it was already too late.

She whirled away, practically running from the room.

"Fuck!" Wes jumped from the bed, wild-eyed. "I'll go after her. I'll tell her we were just horsing around—"

"While naked?"

"Fuck, I don't know. I'll figure out something! I can't just let her leave like that."

Wes hurried out the door in just his briefs, but I wasn't about to run out there butt naked. She'd seen enough of my nudity. I pulled on a T-shirt and sweats, then grabbed an extra pair for Wes.

When I caught up to them in the living room, Wes was talking fast, quietly, while Andi averted her face.

"You know we're ridiculous," Wes was saying. "And we have no boundaries."

She snorted. "Well, I thought you had *some* boundaries."

I tossed the sweats to Wes, who muttered thanks and pulled them on.

"I'm sorry you saw that, Andi," I said.

She finally looked up, seeming relieved to see me fully dressed. "I didn't mean to walk in on...that. If I'd known—" She stopped short, seeming unable to finish her sentence.

"That we were involved," I prompted.

Wes sighed. "Beck..."

"She already saw us," I said to him. "I was naked and on top of you. I think the horse is already out of the barn, you know?"

Andi moaned. “Can you please not repaint the whole picture? I’m having enough trouble forgetting what I saw as it is.”

“Yeah, you’re probably gonna need some brain bleach for that,” Wes said, sounding rueful. He’d apparently given up on talking his way out of it. “Sorry. We thought you were going to be out all night. Otherwise, we wouldn’t have risked it.”

“I came back to grab my things. I’m moving back in with Colt, so I guess...this...” She waved a hand toward us. “Whatever this is, you won’t have to worry about me being in the way anymore.”

“You’re always welcome here,” Wes said. “We’re your brothers.”

She looked at us, seeming so confused. “I think of you both as brothers, but this...you two...you must not feel the same way about each other.”

“It’s complicated,” I said. “I was a teenager when our parents got married. Wes has been more like a best friend than a brother, I guess. Or maybe a weird mix of both? I don’t know. But at some point, it just...it shifted.”

“How long?” she asked.

“Just since we went to Vegas,” Wes said.

Her eyes went wide. “Oh my god. Did you really get married then? That wasn’t a prank?”

“Yeah,” Wes said softly. “But Dad doesn’t know yet, and we don’t even know if we’re going to stay married. We’ve been waiting for the marriage certificate to arrive to decide about filing for divorce.”

“It hasn’t arrived?” Andi said. “But that Vegas trip was weeks ago.”

“Yeah.” He frowned. “It’s weird. I’ll have to call and check on it. I knew it should be here by now, but I didn’t really want to deal with thinking about it.”

She shook her head, looking from one of us to the other. “But why would you get divorced if you’re...you know...”

“In love?” Wes asked, and my heart kicked. Was he seriously saying he loved me, or was he just guessing at Andi’s thoughts?

“Yeah,” Andi said after a beat. “I mean, if you love each other, then why would you end it?”

“What do you think people will say?” I asked. “What do you think Dad will say?”

“I don’t know,” she said softly. “I know he won’t be happy that you guys lied about everything. That hurts. I mean, I know you haven’t always seen me as a real sister, Beck, but —”

“That’s not fair,” I said. “You haven’t seen me as your real brother either. I’m the step.”

“You’re both being dumb,” Wes said, which earned him a glare from each of us. He shrugged. “What? It’s true. Monroe is just a name, and stepbrother is just a label. It’s how you feel that counts, and you both love each other. We’re family. Maybe a sort of weird one now that Beck and I are fucking...”

Andi gave a shudder. “Ugh.”

“What? Too soon?”

She gave a little laugh. “Yes, too soon! *Gawd.*”

“Can you ever accept it?” I asked tentatively. “If me and Wes were to stay together?”

“What choice do I have?”

I flinched at the less than reassuring comment, and she sighed, rubbing her eyes. “I’m sorry. It’s so late, and I’m still reeling. I need some time to wrap my mind around it.”

“That’s fair,” Wes said. “Can you keep it to yourself though?”

“For now, but you can’t expect me to keep this from Dad forever. You’re going to have to tell him eventually. Either that, or you’re going to have to end it.”

“I know,” he said. “We just need a little time to figure things out.”

She nodded once. “Okay.”

“I’m sorry we didn’t tell you something was going on,” he added. “We’ve been trying to figure this out.”

“Looked like you’d figured it out a little too well, if you ask me,” she grumbled, but her lips quirked in a smile that made some of the tension in the room dissipate.

Andi said her goodbyes and left for Colt’s soon after, leaving me and Wes standing in the room, our secrets laid bare.

“She’s not the only one who knows,” Wes said, sounding guilty.

“What do you mean?”

“I told Bobbi that I loved you.”

My eyes widened. “You said *what?*”

“I’m sorry I blabbed the truth. She was baiting me, and she obviously suspected, but I shouldn’t have—”

“No, not that part.” I grabbed his face, looking him in the eye. “What did you tell her?”

“I said I was waiting for you, not her. That I...that I loved you.” He licked his lips, looking more nervous than I’d ever seen him. “I love you, Beck,” he said softly. “I don’t want to get that divorce. I never have, and I never will. That’s the truth.”



WES

I HELD my breath as I waited for Beck to respond to my love confession. It couldn’t have come at a worse time. Right after we’d been exposed to our sister. Right after admitting that I’d told our secret to Bobbi, who less than an hour ago, had made him ridiculously jealous. I’d be lucky if he didn’t want to kick my ass.

If he started another wrestling match, I'd let him pin me and do whatever he wanted.

"You love me?" he said, sounding incredulous.

"Yeah. Of course I do."

"Not like a friend or a brother?"

"I'm in love with you, Beck. I can't think about anyone else. I know you were jealous tonight, but I have zero interest in being with anyone other than you. I'm sorry if the flirting bothered you, but Bobbi suspected the truth and that's why she cornered me in the bathroom."

Beck kissed me, catching me by surprise. We'd kissed so many times before, but there was a tenderness to this kiss that stood out. It was slow and sweet, lacking all the sexual tension and urgency that usually flared between us.

It was different too, because Beck was kissing me instead of the other way around. I liked taking the initiative. I liked commanding his body. But there was something so reassuring about him kissing me. He was so responsive when we were together that there was no doubt he wanted me, needed me even. But this? It made me feel *loved* too.

When Beck pulled back, his eyes were filled with wonder. "I'm in love with you too, Wes. I was never really jealous of Bobbi. I was jealous of what you could have with Bobbi."

"What do you mean?"

"You could flirt openly. Hold her hand. Hell, you could go on a date with her in the first place! It didn't matter if anyone saw that you were interested. You could be in a relationship without hiding anything."

"Beck, we don't have to hide either."

I scoffed. "Really? How do you think Dad will take that?"

"I don't know." I reached for his hand, held it between both of mine. "I know you're afraid of the fallout, but Dad isn't like Craig. He thinks of you as a son too."

“Thinks of me as one,” Beck said, a hint of bitterness to his voice. “But I’m not one. I thought Craig loved me, and when his marriage to my mom ended, I was nothing to him. Invisible. He wanted nothing to do with me. He was the only father I knew before yours, and he bailed on me.”

“Come here.” I drew him into my arms and hugged him tight. “That’s not going to happen again. Potters don’t let go.”

I squeezed even tighter to emphasize my point and he gave a strangled chuckle.

When I released him, I cupped his jaw so that he could look me in the eye and see how serious I was. “I know my dad was upset over Vegas, and I have no idea how he’ll take the idea of us being in a relationship. I believe he’ll come around even if he gets mad.” Beck started to open his mouth to protest, so I rushed on, “But I know you’re worried, and that’s fair. Let me just tell you this, Beck. I have your back. I’m your partner, if you’ll have me, and where you go, I go. So if Dad were to react badly, if he were to try to take it out on you, well, he’d have to get through me first, okay?”

“But this isn’t just about what it might cost me. If he finds out before he gives you the business, he might decide he doesn’t want his legacy in the hands of stepbrother husbands. What then?”

“I can’t believe he’d really do that.”

“You didn’t think he’d give you an ultimatum over a prank, either, did you?” Beck challenged. “Maybe we should wait until everything with the business is settled.”

“Who knows when that will be?” I countered. “I don’t want to put our relationship on his timeline, and we can’t ask Andi to cover for us. That wouldn’t be fair.”

His shoulders slumped. “Yeah, you’re right. But, Wes... this could cost you everything.”

“Not everything,” I said firmly. “We’re in this together. And whatever happens, we’ll figure it out together.”

Beck’s voice trembled. “Are you *sure* you want to take that risk?”

“For you? Absolutely. One hundred percent.”

He nodded once, a determined expression overtaking the vulnerable look in his eyes. “Then we need to figure out a plan for how we want to make this happen.”

I quirked a smile. “There’s my Beck.”

“But first, I need to fuck you because you’ve got me all wound up and I can’t think straight.”

I laughed. “I’ll let you pin me down and do whatever you want.”

CHAPTER 22



WES

BECKETT LED ME TO HIS BEDROOM SINCE MY BED WAS BROKEN and smacked my ass. “Get naked for me.”

My heart lurched. This was happening, then. I’d offered up my body for Beck’s taking, and I was open to any kind of sex with him, but still...never really had anything in my ass before.

I stripped down and climbed onto the bed on my hands and knees. “How do you want me?”

My dick was still soft, maybe a little nervous about this endeavor. My balls hung heavy between my legs. Something about this position made me feel vulnerable and exposed, but this was for Beckett, and I’d give him anything he wanted.

There was the soft shushing sound of Beck removing his clothes. When his hand touched my lower back, I jolted, my nerves getting the better of me.

“Relax, I’m not going to jump you without warning.”

I chuckled. “Right. I know.”

Beckett pushed my hip, knocking me off-balance, then rolled me to my back. I didn’t fight him. I’d agreed to let him pin me, after all. But when he hovered over me, his hands pressing my arms into the mattress, he frowned.

“It’s not as much fun if you just let me pin you.”

I grinned. “Just trying to give you what you want. If I fight back, you won’t end up on top.”

He huffed. “Cocky bastard.”

“Sorry?”

He rolled his eyes. “Tell you what, how about we pick up where we left off and we’ll just see what happens?”

I eyed him skeptically. “Beck, I had you immobilized.”

“I’m aware.”

“My hand was around your dick.”

“I remember.”

Heat simmered through me, and my gaze met his, which was steady, no signs of uncertainty. Still, I had to ask. “Are you sure that’s how you want this to go? You can have me however you want me.”

“That’s how I want you, Wes. That’s always how I want you.” He sat back on my lap, settling his ass over my dick, which was now fully hard at the thought of having Beck at my mercy again. I wasn’t lying when I said I’d be happy to bottom for him. That I’d have sex with him any which way. But there was no denying I had a preference, and that preference was for Beck to be a puddle of need in my hands. “But if you want something else—”

“I want you begging and desperate,” I cut in. “Whatever gets me that...”

He snorted. “You don’t want much, do you?”

I grinned. “Grab the supplies and get in position. We have a wrestling match to finish.”

He laughed as he reached for the bedside table and pulled open the drawer, withdrawing condoms and lube. My pulse kicked up a notch when he tossed them on the bed beside me. Before we could carry on with possibly breaking another bed, I drew him into a long, tender kiss. “I love you, you know? I really am happy to have any kind of sex you want or none at all. We could snuggle all night and I’d be happy.”

He pulled a face. “Look, I like cuddles as much as the next guy, but what I really want is your fat dick buried in my ass

while you use your strength to manhandle me like a ragdoll.”

My breath whooshed out. “Fuck. My dirty mouth is rubbing off on you.”

Beckett smiled, his expression incredibly fond considering the filthy things he’d just said. “Maybe it is. This is who we are, Wes. It doesn’t have to change just because we love each other. In fact, it’ll only be better, right?”

“Oh, it’s going to be fantastic. No doubt about that.”

I gripped Beck’s biceps and tugged him toward me. With some careful maneuvering we got back into the position we’d assumed before Andi’s interruption. Beck lay with his back pressed to my chest, his arms over his head. This time, I didn’t have to restrain him, so he locked his hands behind my neck, freeing me up to caress the length of his body.

Beck was incredibly gorgeous stretched out over me, lean muscle on display. His back was arched slightly, stomach trembling, long, slender cock curving up over his lower abs. I coasted my hands down his ribs, absorbing the tension in his body, the goose bumps rising on his flesh as anticipation built.

I grabbed the bottle of lube, slicked my hand, then bypassed his cock to hike up a thigh and circle his hole with a fingertip.

Beckett gasped and pushed his leg down, straining against me enough to give me the illusion of resistance rather than a real fight. *He wants to play*, I thought with delight, and tightened my grip, yanking his leg back more firmly as I pushed my finger inside him. A strangled moan escaped his mouth.

“You like it,” I said into his ear. “You want me to make you take it.”

He strained to fight my hold on his leg—while keeping his hands behind my neck as if they were handcuffed there, rather than held there voluntarily. I pushed a second finger inside him, and he pressed down, taking them deeper inside him.

“Answer me,” I ordered. “Tell me you want it.”

When he didn't answer, I started to withdraw my fingers.

"I do," he gasped.

"Beg me for it."

"Please," he mumbled.

"Please what?"

"Please fuck me."

"You can do better than that," I said, teasing at his hole but pulling away when he tried to get more penetration.

"Wes," he groaned. "Please fuck me like this. Hold me tight and make me take it."

"Better," I agreed.

I shifted him a little to roll on a condom and slick my cock, then I pulled both his legs back. Beck had to help me a little, dropping one arm to guide my cock to his hole. When I pushed inside, we both groaned.

Beck reached for his cock, but I yanked his arm back over his head, and speared into him from below. He gave a ragged cry, fingers tangling into the hair at the nape of my neck. I kept one arm across his chest, holding him in place, while I held his left leg up in a tight grip, no doubt leaving bruises.

"This what you wanted? My dick tearing up your ass?"

"Yes," he gasped.

"Because you're greedy for it, aren't you? Too greedy to give me a turn, huh?"

I gave another hard thrust and he whimpered. "It's so good. Don't wanna give it up. Please."

I grinned, though it probably looked more like a grimace. This position was fun, but it wasn't the most relaxed way to have sex. I rolled us to our sides, giving me better leverage to fuck him. I crushed his body to mine in a tight grip.

"You can have anything you want, baby," I muttered into his ear, starting to lose control as the pleasure built. "I'm yours."

“Make me come. Please, Wes. So close.”

I grasped his cock, stroking, and when he spurted hot over my fist, ass tightening around me, I came with a harsh shout I buried in his shoulder.



BECKETT

I WOKE to the sound of Wes speaking quietly on the phone. “Uh, I guess I need to order another copy then. Yeah. Thanks. How long will it take? Hm. Okay, then. I appreciate it.”

I squinted against the sunlight pouring in through the windows. My internal clock told me it was late morning. My ass throbbed faintly from being well-used the night before. More than once. Damn, Wes had been a beast when I set him loose on me.

It had been incredible, and I didn't for one second regret choosing to bottom again and again. I'd fucked a lot of people, and sure, I'd fuck Wes if he wanted, but taking charge had never been what did it for me. I loved the way he made me feel out of control. The way I let go of everything and held on for the ride.

“What are you doing?” I wrapped an arm around his waist and tugged him down. “You should be cuddling with me.”

“I should, huh?” He sounded amused, but he set aside his cell and wrapped himself around me, throwing his right leg over my hip, his arm over my shoulder, and tugging my face into the crook of his neck. “You weren't so interested in cuddles last night.”

I hummed against him. “Well, my ass is too sore for another round right now.”

Wes shifted us to look into my face, worry forming a crease between his brows. “Are you okay? We went at it pretty hard.”

I smiled, heat flooding into my face. “I’m okay. It was really good.”

He tipped up my chin to kiss me softly. “It doesn’t always have to be like that though.” He slid his hand over the curve of my ass, gently caressing. “I can be a gentle fucker too.”

I laughed. “I know.”

We made out for a while, lazily trading kisses, before I pulled away. “Who were you talking to on the phone?”

“Oh, I called to check on the marriage certificate.”

“Oh.” I swallowed, my throat feeling tight. “Why, though? We’re not getting divorced.” I hesitated. “Are we?”

“I hope not.” He brushed his thumb over my cheek. “I just thought I’d get it to make sure I hadn’t imagined the whole thing.” He gave a chuckle. “It’s weird it never showed up. They say they mailed it.” He shrugged. “I guess it got lost.”

“It happens.” I hesitated before adding, “I could have told you it wasn’t your imagination though. I’m the one who suggested we get married for real, remember?”

“Yeah,” he said.

“I remember going to the marriage license office. I remember saying our vows.” I bit my bottom lip. “Some of it’s fuzzy, but it definitely happened.”

Wes brushed his mouth over mine. “I’m glad one of us remembers it.”

My stomach twisted uncomfortably. We were married, and Wes didn’t even remember it. That didn’t feel right.

“I’m sorry. I was drunk too, but I should have used better judgment. We never should have done something like that when we weren’t sober.”

Wes shook his head. “I don’t regret it, Beck. How could I? I only regret that I don’t remember every moment of standing there promising you forever.”

“You’re sweeter than you pretend to be,” I told him.

He grinned. “Don’t tell anyone my secret, okay?”

“All your secrets are safe with me,” I said.

“Well, maybe soon, I won’t have so many to worry about,” he said. “Let’s talk about this plan we need to make. What’s step one?”

“Step one, I think, is telling the rest of our friends.”

“I guess half of them know anyway.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Plus, if things go to hell, we’ll need the support.”

He snorted. “Way to be optimistic.”

“I’m just planning for worst-case scenarios,” I said apologetically. “Hopefully that won’t be the reality.”

He nodded once before kissing me again. “I get it, Beck. It’s one of the reasons I love you. You think things through. You’re cautious. But don’t forget the reason you love me.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Do tell?”

“I’m a charming fucker,” he said with a grin. “And when I’m through with this town, the only gossip is gonna be how adorable we are together and who tops who.”

“Think they’ll guess it right?”

“I don’t know,” he mused, to my surprise. I figured Wes would immediately claim he was the obvious choice of top. Instead he said, “You *are* pretty bossy when we’re around our friends. And after last night, I kind of think I’m only the top because you want it that way.”

I smirked. “Finally you see the truth, huh?”

Wes grinned. “Well, as long as you let me pretend I’m in charge while we do dirty things, I’m happy. I’m dick-whipped and happy to admit it.”

I rolled on top of him and peppered kisses all over his face. “Pretty sure we’re gone for each other, Wes. It’s kind of pathetic.”

“Yeah.” He slid his hands down to cup my ass. “We totally shouldn’t spend the entire day in bed.”

“Not at all,” I agreed.

“But you know me,” he said, wrapping his arms around me. “I can never turn down cuddles.”

I giggled and nuzzled into his neck, letting him absorb my weight and relishing the feel of his arms holding me so fucking tight. I’d never been with a partner like this before. Someone bigger than me, stronger than me. The bruised spot on my thigh gave a little throb as I thought about how he’d handled my body the night before, giving me the fierceness I’d craved. The soft brush of his fingers against my back now gave me something else just as important though.

With Wes, I could have everything I needed. The sweetness, the passion. The hard and the soft. I could feel overpowered by his strength one moment and empowered by his love the next.

He was everything I wanted. But more than that, he was everything I’d never even known I’d needed before now.

Would anyone understand the love we had for each other? I didn’t know. But I held on tight, choosing to believe we’d make it through the challenges ahead together.

CHAPTER 23



BECKETT

WHEN WE ARRIVED AT TRIVIA, OUR FRIENDS WERE IN THEIR usual seats, chatting over appetizers and beers. My stomach rumbled noisily.

Wes snorted. “Work up an appetite today?”

Heat rushed into my cheeks as memories assailed me of all the many, many ways we’d both worked up an appetite. We’d spent most of the night indulging in each other in a way we hadn’t been able to when Andi was nearby, then wallowed in bed most of the day as well—Wes wrapping his arms and legs around me and protesting when I so much as suggested getting up. But eventually life intruded.

We always came to trivia, and though I considered suggesting we skip it, I knew that wouldn’t really get us out of facing our friends. Bobbi had already texted a couple of times to make sure we were cool after the date fiasco.

We neared the table, and I sidestepped Wes to take the seat next to Bobbi. Over the years, we’d all kind of migrated into regular spots around the table, and Wes usually sat beside her. Wes raised an eyebrow at my move, a smirk tugging up his lips because he knew I was being a jealous brat.

Not that I didn’t trust him. I did. But I figured Bobbi and I would need to talk tonight anyway, and if it put a little more space between her and Wes, well...thankfully green had always been a good color on me.

“I’ll go order us some food,” he said. “Let you and Bobbi chat.”

What, already? I hadn't planned to jump into it quite this soon. I needed time to warm up and maybe have a beer or two for liquid courage. But Bobbi was already leaning in eagerly, one long-nailed hand clutching my forearm.

"Beckett, are we okay?" she asked.

"Of course," I said, meaning it even though my voice was a little too stiff. "I said we were when you texted."

Laurie watched from across the table, but Tucker and Hunter were involved in a separate conversation. Clark and Augustus had their heads bent together, as well, meaning we didn't have too much of an audience.

Bobbi frowned. "I know, but I'm not convinced we really are. You're not even looking at me."

I forced myself to turn and attempt a smile in her direction. Bobbi was a pretty woman, though about ten years older than Wes and me. I'd never once gotten the idea he was interested in her—or vice versa, really. Bobbi was playful and flirty. That was who she was. Would she sleep with Wes if he offered? Maybe she would have before she realized we were involved. But now? I didn't think so. "I'm not mad. I promise."

She exhaled noisily. "Oh, thank goodness. You know I only want the best for both of you. Whatever makes you happy, okay? Even if it's—"

I stepped on her foot before she blurted it out loud enough for the whole bar to hear. She winced, but thankfully stopped babbling.

"I know. We dragged you into that date. And, really, I was more uneasy because it's just hard to know how anyone will react to this situation."

"Well, I'm not just anyone, you know? I'm your friend. I'll always be on your side."

Bobbi was right. Our friend group had always been supportive and nonjudgmental.

Augustus, Clark, and Tucker had all found love—sometimes in unexpected or unorthodox ways. No one had

held it against Tucker that he had a secret husband. No one had been angry with Clark when they found out he'd started out only pretending to date Hunter.

None of them were related, though. Wes and I were pushing the envelope. But what was new? We'd always been the troublemakers in this merry little band.

"Thanks, Bobbi."

"So, all's forgiven?"

Clark looked up just then. "What is there to forgive?"

Hunter and Augustus looked our way too.

Bobbi fumbled for a reply. "Oh, I just, um..."

"It's no big deal," I said.

Wes came up behind me and set down two beers along with a plate of nachos. "What's no big deal?"

I craned my head to look up at him. "Clark was just wondering why Bobbi was apologizing to me."

His gaze met mine, and my heart skipped at what I saw there. Acceptance. We'd spent the weekend discussing the pros and cons of when and where to tell our friends. It seemed the moment had decided to arrive on its own schedule. I nodded my head to let him know I agreed.

"Shoot," Bobbi said. "I've screwed up again."

"Nah, it's okay," Wes said, pulling out the chair beside me and dropping into it. "We wanted to tell everyone anyway. Right, Beck?"

"Yeah," I said, my voice weak. "I guess it's time."

Wes leaned into me, pressing his shoulder and thigh to mine. Unlike the many times he'd surreptitiously touched and teased me in public, this was a show of support. Also a message to our friends. When Wes hooked his pinky through mine on the table, Clark's eyes widened comically. "Holy Shitake," he gasped.

Laurie snickered. "Shitake? As in the mushroom?"

“I can’t cuss at school,” Clark said. “But wow. Okay. I’ll just say it. Holy shit.” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “Are you two...?”

“Bobbi was apologizing for making my husband jealous on our double date,” Wes said.

Boom. The truth landed in the middle of the group, a prolonged silence following in its wake. My blood rushed in my ears. This was it. If our friends didn’t accept us, we had no hope of convincing Dad or anyone else. Andi hadn’t exactly given us her blessing, either, though she’d at least seemed calmer by the time she left, saying she needed some time to process. Maybe it would be the same with them. Maybe they just needed time.

“Well, I guess congratulations are in order,” Laurie said. “If I haven’t said it before, I’m happy for you.”

“Wait,” Hunter said.

“Husband?” Bobbi whispered in shock.

Wes grinned at them. “And you all thought we couldn’t pull off a prank. Ha! We got you all. We didn’t pretend anything when we were in Vegas. We got married for real.”

Everyone started talking at the same time.

“Are you serious?”

“Why didn’t you tell us?”

“Does your family know?”

I wondered what we must look like to the rest of the pub, all of us leaning in over the table and hissing out whispers like middle-schoolers. Maybe we should have found a more private place to confess the truth. But what were we gonna do? Invite our friends over to our miniature trailer? It was barely large enough for one houseguest.

Besides, it felt right to tell them here, where we all hung out every Sunday. This was where we saw Hunter kiss Clark for the first time. This was where Tucker and Laurie joked about their multiple weddings—and where they asked for our

support when they had to prove the validity of their marriage in the eyes of the law because of Laurie's toxic family.

Sunday trivia nights had become something of a special bonding experience for us all. And it seemed fitting that we were giving them our truth here and now.

"This isn't really a prank though, right?" Clark said, looking at where our hands remained linked by our pinky fingers. "You're planning to stay together?"

Wes and I exchanged a look. "Yeah," he said. "We are."

"We haven't told our dad yet," I added. My voice rasped a bit because my throat was too dry. I picked up my beer and gulped half the glass.

"What do you think will happen?" Tucker asked.

Wes shrugged. "It doesn't matter, because I've got Beck's back." He smiled at me, his eyes warm. "I love him."

"I love you too," I said quietly.

Clark gave a delighted laugh. Laurie grinned. And Bobbi grabbed my right arm and shook it a little as she said, "I'm so happy for you."

Our friends were coming through for us. There was no chastisement for hiding the truth. Only support and congratulations. I should have realized they'd be in our corner. And it was great to see. But now, with the truth out to more people, I realized it wasn't really about them at all.

It was about us.

I hooked my foot around Wes's and lowered my hand from the table to squeeze his thigh, wanting more connection. He put his hand under the table, lacing his fingers with mine.

We were choosing to share this truth so we could be together completely. To our friends for now, sure, but eventually to our family and everyone else in town.

Then we'd be free to live our lives as we wanted—as *husbands*—and to hell with what anyone else thought.

Because Wes would be there. He'd have my back.

Always.



WES

“GOTTA LOVE PAYDAY.”

Beckett sat in Dad’s office chair, eyes fixed on the computer screen, as he printed off checks.

“You wouldn’t love it if you were the one managing payroll,” he grumbled.

“But you’re so good at it.” I circled around behind him and squeezed his shoulders. Leaning lower, I murmured into his ear, “Dad won’t own the company forever. Soon, this will be your permanent gig, so you’re not allowed to hate it.”

“It’ll be your company, you mean.”

“*Our* company,” I corrected.

“He’s giving it to you.” I could feel his shoulders tense under my hands. “Assuming, he doesn’t get so pissed at us he takes back the offer. Wes, are you sure—”

“*Yes*,” I cut in firmly. “We’ve been over this. It’s worth the risk.”

I massaged Beck’s shoulders, digging my thumb into a knot that made him sigh and slump back against me. “I’m sorry. I just hate the thought of being the reason you might lose what you’ve worked so hard for.”

“We’ve both worked for it,” I reminded him. “And Dad will see that.”

I knew Beckett was unsure of that, and hell, sometimes in the middle of the night, I was a little less sure too. Dad felt very strongly about family, and in his mind, Beckett and I were brothers, not lovers. But I *had* to believe he’d do the right thing. And if he didn’t...well, Beckett was my first priority. Now and always.

The door opened and Logan came in. He was grinning and rubbing his hands together. “Show me the money!”

I chuckled, straightening up but keeping my hands on Beckett’s shoulders. Not because he still needed reassurance, but because I needed the contact. Person by person, our secrets were coming out, and the more people who knew, the harder it was for me to continue the pretense. I wanted to touch Beckett. Hold him. Kiss him. Acting like we were nothing more than stepbrothers—even stepbros who’d always pushed boundaries—wasn’t enough. There was an itch under my skin that had me reaching out to brush a hand across his back, to lean a shoulder into him, to graze a finger down his arm, relishing it when he shivered in response.

We had the house to ourselves now that Andi had returned to Colt. We could have all the sex we wanted. And still, it wasn’t enough.

I wanted to claim Beckett as mine to the whole town.

Beckett leaned forward, out of my grasp, to pluck the check off the printer and hand it to Logan. “Sorry for the delay. I should have had this ready Friday.”

“No worries. It’s your first time,” Logan said easily.

Colt came in as he left, his gaze darting around the small office. “Just here for my check.”

“Yep, I’ve got it,” Beckett said, sorting through the stack of checks he’d been printing. “Sorry you had to wait till today.”

“That’s okay. I mean, I’m a little late on one of my bills.” Colt scratched at his neck. “But, uh, I know your dad is gone, so...”

“Yeah, I’m pulling double duty,” Beckett said. “But you could have said something. If it was gonna be a problem, I’d have come in over the weekend.”

And interrupted our orgasm-palooza? I was sure as fuck glad that hadn’t happened.

Colt took the check from Beck's hand, his eyes fixed on the paper. "It's okay. I'm sure you were busy."

My hands tightened involuntarily on Beck's shoulders, and he let out a pained hiss. I released him. "Did Andi say something to you?"

Colt's gaze flew to mine. "What? No!"

Yeah, that kid couldn't lie for shit.

"It's okay if she did," Beckett said. "You're her boyfriend. She needs to confide in someone."

Colt fidgeted. "Yeah, I guess. It's not my business."

"You work for us," I said. "And you're dating our sister. I think it's your business more than a lot of people's. But we're not quite ready to tell the whole world..."

Colt nodded jerkily. "Yeah, I won't blab. I'd probably just say the wrong thing anyway." He shrugged. "I always put my foot in it. I pissed off another park neighbor today."

I cocked my head. "How'd you manage that?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Apparently I was watering too much."

We'd picked all native Nebraska shrubs and plants, and ideally, they'd be able to thrive in our natural climate, but the park would require some regular maintenance. We'd be given the contract for mowing, pruning, and watering since Granville didn't have a parks department like many larger cities.

"Well, don't let it get to you," I said. "You've been doing great."

"We've noticed how hard you're trying," Beckett added.

Colt managed to look us in the eyes. "Thanks. I really do want to turn shit around."

"We know."

"I love Andi."

"Good," I said. "Keep it that way."

He chuckled. “I will. Don’t worry.”

Beckett cleared his throat. “Is she okay? About all this...” He waved his hand toward me, and I caught it and tangled our fingers. Colt knew anyway, so fuck it.

“She’s still processing, I think,” Colt said. “It’s...I don’t want to say weird, but...”

“I’m sure it’s weird for her,” Beckett said.

“Yeah.” He nodded. “She loves you guys so much. It’s why we were fighting. She’s loyal. I’m pretty sure she’s just worried about how your dad will take the news.”

“Aren’t we all?” Beckett said dryly.

“Don’t feel like you have to be our go-between,” I added. “But if you don’t mind letting her know that we care about how she’s feeling, and we’re ready to talk when she is...”

“Yeah, of course.” Colt smiled tentatively, his voice uncertain when he said, “We’re all sort of family, right?”

“We are,” I said firmly. “You don’t have to be a Potter to be important to us.”

Beckett smiled up at me, eyes glowing, so irresistible that I bent to brush my lips over his.

Colt backed toward the door. “Well, I should go...”

I flicked a glance toward his uncomfortable expression. “Sure. Go. I want to give my husband a *real* kiss.”

Colt was out the door in two seconds flat, and my next kiss with Beckett was sloppy, both of us laughing, but also fucking awesome, because I’d gotten to claim him as mine, even if it was just in front of Colt.

Now, we just needed to wrap up this park business and talk to Dad so that we could finally focus on what mattered: building a real life together, as husbands rather than brothers.

CHAPTER 24



BECKETT

“BABE, I’M GOING TO TACO LOCO!” I CALLED TOWARD THE back of the trailer as I opened the front door. “Be back in a few!”

Wes had been hunched over his laptop ever since we got home from work, and the man needed to take a break and eat. The town hall meeting about the parks projects the city was doing as part of their five-year strategic plan, *Stop Granville Shrinkage*, was coming up fast and we had promised Tucker we’d have plans ready for him to review a few days before that.

We were a little behind, given that we’d opted to spend most of last weekend in bed rather than doing our homework.

I stepped out the door and stopped short to see Andi standing in our driveaway. Colt’s decades-old tan pickup was in the driveway, the man himself behind the wheel.

She smiled tentatively. “Babe, huh?”

Heat flooded my face, and I knew with my stupid fair complexion, she’d see the blush, so I ducked my head, which probably did little to hide that I was embarrassed. “I was, uh, just trying it out.”

“It’s sweet,” she said.

I glanced up, uncertain. “Did you, uh, want a taco? I could pick up extra if you want to stay for dinner.”

“No,” she said quickly, and my heart sank. “Colt and I were just on the way to the grocery store, and I wanted to stop

and apologize for my reaction the other night.” She bit her bottom lip. “I was caught off-guard.”

“Of course you were,” I said. “You don’t need to apologize. But will you come in so Wes can hear this too?”

She nodded. “Yeah.”

“Ask Colt in too,” I said. “He doesn’t need to sit in the truck.”

She hesitated a beat, then turned and waved Colt toward us. He opened the door and stepped out. “I don’t want to intrude...”

“Just come in, Colt. You’re part of this crew now.”

Only a small smile flickered across his face, but Andi lit up at the words, so I knew it was the right move.

“Okay, yeah,” he said. “Thanks.”

Andi and Colt followed me inside, and I excused myself to go fetch Wes. He had to get dressed so I made Andi and Colt some ice water to kill time.

“So, uh, work’s going good, huh?” Colt said, awkwardly breaking the silence.

“The park project is pretty much done,” I agreed. “Winter is coming on. Things will slow down a lot.”

He nodded, a little furrow forming between his brows. “This will be my first winter with the crew. Will, uh, there be enough work?”

I’d gathered from what Colt had said in the past that he needed the work. “There will be for you,” I said. “Logan will have to move on.”

“Oh.”

“We pick up work with snow removal, storm cleanup, and hanging Christmas lights. There’s always some tree trimming and removals to be done. It won’t be crazy busy, but we’ll keep you afloat.”

Colt took a sip of his ice water. “Okay, cool.”

Wes joined us. “Hey, I didn’t know we were throwing a party.”

Andi laughed nervously. “Surprise!”

“It is a surprise,” he said seriously. “You seemed pretty uncomfortable when you left the other night.”

She scoffed. “Well, yeah, I saw my brothers naked.”

Colt shifted, his face giving away his discomfort. I supposed picturing two men together might not be his cup of tea, much less his two bosses.

“Hey, I had underwear on,” Wes protested. “Only Beck flashed all his goods.”

“Thanks a lot,” I said dryly. “But hey, at least you didn’t have to see your real brother in the buff.”

Andi smacked my arm. “Stop that. You’re both my real brothers.”

I grimaced and rubbed my arm, even though she hadn’t really hurt me. “Sorry. Reflex.”

She shook her head. “I’m not here to re-imagine the scene.”

“Yeah, let’s not,” Colt muttered.

“I’m here to tell you I’m sorry for freaking out on you. I should have...”

She faltered, and I realized that Wes and I had gravitated toward one another. He’d slipped his arm around my waist, and I’d leaned into his side.

I started to pull away. “Sorry.”

“No, don’t,” she said. “You two are so sweet together. Really. You’ve always been close. Colt told me what a good team you make at work.”

I raised my eyebrows at that.

Colt shrugged. “You do. You’re always on the same page.”

Andi continued. “I was focused on me and how I think of each of you. You’re my brothers. But if you...you love each

other, then you should be together. You should be happy. And I wanted to come over here in person to tell you that I want to be there when you tell Dad. I want to support you.”

“Aw, Andi, girl. I knew you’d come around.” Wes stepped away from me, opening his arms, and she dove into a tight hug. When he released her, she turned to me, and I hugged her too.

“Don’t feel like you have to stand up to Dad for us,” I said. “There’s no reason you have to take a bullet too.”

“Well, I’m your sister. Just try and keep me away.”

Wes pulled me back against his side and dipped to kiss my temple. “Beck is amazing, but he doesn’t always have faith that we’ll keep him no matter what happens. I’ve told him that Potters don’t let go.” He murmured in my ear. “I really never will.”

My heart quickened. “I’m starting to see that.”

Andi smiled at us, not seeming too bothered by the open affection. It was surreal, being held by Wes with people looking on. As if we were a real couple, one who could walk the street hand-in-hand.

“Whatever happens, we’re family,” Andi said. “I won’t stop being your sister just because you two want to be something more than brothers.”

Shortly after, Andi and Colt left, and I reluctantly pulled out of Wes’s arms. “I should go get dinner.”

He drew me into a kiss. “How about I come with you? I need a break anyway. We can pretend we’re on our own date at Taco Loco. If you get me drunk enough, I might even put out.”

I laughed. “Are you saying you wouldn’t put out without margaritas?”

He winked. “I guess there’s only one way to find out.”

We linked hands for the drive to the restaurant, tossing goofy grins at each other. I knew once we were inside, we’d

have to keep our hands to ourselves, but day by day, our secret had a little less power over us.

As much as I feared facing our dad, and the fallout that could rain down on us, it had started feeling inevitable that our path would lead here. That we could never undo what we had started in Vegas. What had started in my heart even before then.

I was in love with Wes Potter, and there was no turning back.



WES

“YOU’RE AWAKE EARLY for a Saturday morning.”

Beckett’s sleep-rough voice drew my eyes from my laptop screen to his sleep-rumpled form beside me in our bed. The one we hadn’t broken yet.

“Just figured I’d get in a little work before we go to Hunter’s place.”

I was still putting the final touches on my street beautification proposal for the city. Between daily work and the help we’d offered to give Hunter with his latest house project, I didn’t have a lot of time.

Beckett also had plans to design—for a community garden in the historic neighborhood—but that was his area of strength. He’d whip them out in no time. I was slower and a little afraid I’d embarrass myself with a stupid mistake.

“You worked so much last night,” Beckett said with a frown. He slipped his hand onto my knee beneath the blanket, the warmth and weight of it comforting. “I thought you were pretty much done.”

“Just double-checking a few things. I don’t want Tucker to think I threw this shit together.”

“He won’t think that.”

“Still...”

Beckett pushed himself upright and leaned his head on my shoulder. I was pretty sure he was sneaking a peek at my laptop screen as well. “You’ve got this, Wes. Trust yourself.”

Then the sneaky brat turned his head and kissed my neck. It was game over. I put the laptop aside and pinned him to the bed. We didn’t come up for air again until I noticed my phone ringing.

“Fuck, it’s Hunter,” I said and checked the time. “We’re supposed to help repaint two of the rooms at his place today.”

“I’ll go hop in the shower,” Beckett said, leaving me alone to face the music. Again, such a brat. I’d have to punish him later.

I clicked connect. “Hey, man.”

“Hey,” Hunter said. “Everyone else is here. Just wondering...”

“Yeah, I got sidetracked. Sorry. We’ll be over soon.”

“No worries,” he said with a laugh. “I remember those days.”

“What days?”

“The honeymoon period.”

My stomach lurched because yeah, he was right. This was our honeymoon period, even if we’d kept it secret from most everyone. It was still an adjustment to realize we didn’t have to do that with our friends anymore.

“Right, you got me,” I said with a chuckle. “We’ll hurry though.”

I threw aside the phone and went to join Beckett in the shower. By the time we’d fully embraced our honeymoon period, we were even later. We ran by Glazed Holes to pick up some apology doughnuts and one of the owners, Miles, flirted with both of us shamelessly. He really didn’t care if someone was queer or straight, as long as they played along.

“I want all the cream today,” I told him. “I just want my mouth full of it.”

Miles grinned in delight at my words. “I’ve got all the cream you can handle, baby. I’ve been waiting for a man like you to walk into my life.”

He grabbed tongs and began placing doughnuts in a box for me. While his attention was on the glass case, Beckett snorted and said under his breath, “This morning wasn’t enough cream for you?”

“I’m greedy like that,” I joked and he huffed a laugh.

Five minutes and three sexual innuendos later, we were on our way.

By the time we got to Hunter’s place, work was in full swing. We offered up our apology doughnuts and took the good-natured ribbing from our friends about struggling to leave our love nest.

Beckett, looking a little embarrassed, was quick to grab a paintbrush and go to work. I joined Tucker and Laurie in a different room, where they were stripping wallpaper, and for the next couple of hours, everyone worked hard.

We took a lunch break, and went back to it, this time all working to finish the paint job on the final room. I glanced down and caught sight of Beckett crouched low by my feet to do the baseboards. The back of his neck was bared, and it was just too much temptation. I swiped my paintbrush over it, making him yelp, and then cursed as he lunged up and smeared paint across my cheek.

I laughed. “Fuck, man, not the face!”

I swung at him in retaliation, he swung at me, and next thing, we were on the floor, rolling around on the tarp, each of us fighting to paint the other more.

I’d kind of tuned out the room until I heard Hunter laughing. “I feel like I should be charging admission to watch this.”

“How did we ever miss it?” Clark mused. “We must have been blind.”

I froze and looked over, my moment of inattention my undoing as Beckett flipped me over and pinned my wrists. “Aha! I finally got you!”

“Yes, you do,” Laurie said in a silky voice.

Beckett seemed to realize we had an audience, and his face went red. “Shut up, we’re just playing around.”

“Sure,” Laurie said, sounding as if he didn’t believe us.

“We are!”

“Are you telling me you two have never used wrestling as foreplay?” Hunter asked, a smirk in his voice.

“Uh...” Beckett very obviously couldn’t tell a lie for shit. Our friends lost it, laughing.

“Look at that blush,” Bobbi said.

“I know,” I said, pushing up onto my elbows now that Beck had given up pinning me. “Isn’t it adorable?”

Beck shoved my chest, knocking me back to the floor, but he was laughing. “You’re such an asshole.”

“But I’m your asshole.”

“TMI,” Tucker muttered.

I grabbed a handful of Beckett’s shirt and tugged him down for a kiss. He was tense at first, no doubt aware we weren’t alone, but when I kept it relatively tame, he relaxed, kissing me back and then rolling off with a groan. “I’m exhausted.”

“With Wes for a husband, I can’t blame you,” Tucker said, his tone wry.

“Hey, I take pride in exhausting him.”

“Again, TMI.”

I laughed, pushing up to sitting, and shoved my sweaty hair away from my face. I saw that Clark was standing next to

the cooler of beer and made grabby hands. He rolled his eyes but grabbed a couple of beers for me and Beckett.

The rest of our friends lowered themselves to sit in a semicircle around us.

“Where’s Toby today?” I asked, glad Hunter’s son hadn’t witnessed our inappropriate roll on the floor. Beckett was probably going to kill me later for starting that little tussle that got out of hand.

“He’s hanging out with a friend. I wanted to surprise him. He’s been helping us so much with the projects around the house, but with school back in session, he deserved a break.”

The conversation meandered from topic to topic, Tucker bringing up the town hall and how very much he wasn’t looking forward to it. “It’s always a clusterfuck. Someone will be unhappy about something.”

“You can’t please them all,” Laurie said. Then leaned in and kissed his cheek. “Just worry about pleasing me.”

I reached for Beckett, wrapping my hand around his leg and tugging him closer. I wasn’t satisfied until he was pressed all along my side and I could rub the supple muscle of his inner thigh.

He shot me a mock glare, but when I tapped my lips with a smile, he only hesitated a beat before leaning in and gifting me with a kiss.

“You two are seriously too cute,” Bobbi said.

“You just like watching,” I joked.

She laughed. “I’ve got plenty of eye candy with this group.”

Clark chuckled from his spot tucked under Hunter’s arm. Joe lay with his head pillowed on Augustus’s lap. And Tucker and Laurie sat shoulder to shoulder, much like us.

It hit me then, as I looked around our friend circle, that this was what it was like to be a real couple. To be free to express your love and not worry about ramifications.

I turned to look at him and found his gaze already fixed on me, a small smile tilting his lips. He felt it too. I saw it in his face, in the easy way he smoothed his hand up my back, how he leaned into me, no tension in his body from worry or stress.

This is what it would be like for us once the truth was fully out. We'd be free.

Free to gaze at each other like saps. Free to touch.

Free to love.

"I'm happy for you two," Laurie said.

"Me too," Beckett and I said at the same time.

The rest of our friends laughed.

"They're going to be even more insufferable," Augustus muttered.

I wasn't offended. I knew from him that was the same as congratulations.

I lifted my beer. "Here's to us being insufferable for a good long time."

"I'll drink to that," Beck said.

The rest of our friends murmured their agreements, but I hardly noticed. I was too busy gazing into Beckett's eyes, wondering how I'd missed how very pretty they were for so long. How I'd overlooked those pink lips. The cute upturned nose. The freckles that made me want to devour him one speck at a time.

Wondering how I hadn't noticed when friendship shifted to love, but feeling so damn grateful it had.

My phone vibrated in my pocket and I excused myself to answer it. Dad's name flashed on the Caller ID, making my stomach somersault.

"Hey, Dad, how's the vacay going?"

"It's pretty much over," he said. "I feel more tired now than I did when I left."

"Uh-oh." I laughed. "Are the fish biting too hard?"

He snorted. “No, but Carol and her sister are. They’ve had about all the family time they can handle. We’re going to be back Wednesday.”

“Oh, wow. That’s sooner than I thought.”

“Yeah,” he said dryly. “Try not to sound so excited to see me.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

He chuckled. “It’s all right. I want us to all get together for a family dinner as soon as I’m back though.”

“Well, we have the town hall on Wednesday,” I said. “Beck and I need to be there to answer questions.”

“Ah, right. I better show my face too or they’ll think I’ve already retired.”

I snorted. Half the town did think that because Dad was never out on the jobs with us anymore, but I wasn’t going to be the one to tell him that.

“We can have dinner the next night then,” he said. “It’s important we reconnect as a family and get on the same page.”

“Uh...okay,” I said hesitantly.

I wasn’t sure what he thought we all needed to discuss. I selfishly hoped he’d heard rumors about Andi’s problems with Colt and that this sudden urge to get on the same page wasn’t related to me and Beckett.

But it brought home more than ever that we couldn’t continue to keep this secret. Andi had promised to give us some time, but that was easier when she wasn’t looking at our father across the dinner table. That girl would fold in two minutes flat if he looked at her sideways.

No, the moment of truth was headed our way, ready or not.

I glanced back toward my friends, my eyes automatically seeking out Beckett. He was watching me, brow furrowed, as if he could tell something was wrong. I worked to relax the tension in my shoulders and flashed him a reassuring smile.

Maybe this was good. I wanted to claim Beckett like I had today, to be open and free with him in all aspects of my life.

Our relationship might not have happened in the most conventional way. It might not be convenient. Chances were we'd be judged for it. And there was no telling how Dad would react and what the consequences of our love might be.

I hoped we'd be accepted. But at the end of the day, I didn't care. Because having Beck, having the love of my best friend in the world, knowing he'd be beside me, no matter what came our way?

That was the most incredible feeling in the world. One I wouldn't trade for anything.

Not even my father's approval.

CHAPTER 25



BECKETT

“THERE’S THE MEN OF THE HOUR,” DAD BOOMED. “YOU gonna make me proud tonight?”

People milled around us, mingling and gossiping in the leadup to the town hall. Voices bounced around the meeting hall, echoing in a room that was mostly empty aside from folding chairs.

“You know it!” Wes said with a grin, though it was a bit tight with nerves. I understood the feeling, my stomach fluttering with anticipation.

There was a lot riding on tonight. Dad had given us an ultimatum to take point on this park project and see it through, and tonight would be the culmination of all that work. But more than that, in just twenty-four hours, we’d be meeting up for family dinner and sharing our biggest secret with him: the one that might make or break this family.

No pressure or anything.

“We’re good,” I said. “Tucker’s the one in the real hot seat.”

Though we’d crafted proposals for him to present and would be on the hook to answer some questions, Tucker would be the one addressing the crowd in his role as city manager. Well, him and Hunter, who worked as the city’s PR manager.

Dad chuckled. “You couldn’t pay me enough to take that man’s job.”

He looked relaxed and happy after his time away. Maybe telling him wouldn't be so hard after all?

He clapped a hand on Wes's shoulder. "So, what did I miss while I was gone? No more pranks, I hope."

"No." Wes chuckled awkwardly.

"Lesson learned," I added, keeping my voice light, even though the reminder of how he'd reacted to said prank and how far it really had progressed was sending my heart racing.

What the hell had I been thinking? Telling him was going to be so fucking hard.

"Beckett and I need to sit up front since we'll be helping Tucker during the Q-and-A portion of the night. Did you want to join us?"

Dad snorted. "Hell no. You go ahead. I'm going to go catch up with a couple of buddies and watch from the back. This is your show. Just pretend I'm not here."

As we started across the room, I could practically feel Wes vibrating with nerves. It caught me a little off-guard because usually nothing got to him.

"Are you nervous about telling him the truth?"

"No." Wes shook his head. "I mean, I am, but it's also just Dad watching, you know? I want to show him that I really can handle all this."

"The park project has gone great," I said.

"Yeah, but what if I overlooked something or made a stupid mistake on that proposal for the street beautification? You know I don't normally do that kind of thing. I'm the muscle, not the—"

"Don't you dare say you're not the brains in this operation," I said, giving him a little shove as we reached our chairs. "You have a ton of experience, and your insights are valuable."

He grimaced. "I guess. I didn't take classes like you though."

“I did that to catch up with you, not to surpass you,” I said. “You had years of knowledge before I ever started working on the crew.”

Wes gave me a surprised look, but before he could comment, there was a tap on my shoulder and a testy voice in my ear. “Beckett Monroe, you’re a hard man to track down!”

I turned to see Iola hovering behind my seat, mouth downturned into a little pout.

“Am I?”

“Yes,” Iola said, sounding put out. “I left you two voicemails inquiring about your date with Anna. Matchmaking Mamas is a full-service matchmaker. We don’t just wash our hands of you once a date is made, we help you through the whole process!”

“That’s great, Iola, but...” Her eyes were so big and expectant, I didn’t know how to tell her I didn’t want her services. I cleared my throat. “I just don’t check my messages. I’m used to texting. Sorry.”

She threw her arms up. “Young people!”

Wes snickered until Iola’s gaze turned his way. “I heard about you going on a date with Bobbi.” She tsked. “That woman is all wrong for you. You just let me know if you want to sign up too.”

“I’m good, thanks,” Wes said.

She shook her head. “I don’t think you are, Wesley. What’s the longest you’ve ever dated a young lady? Two months?”

“Uh...I guess? I can find my own dates though.”

She pursed her lips. “Matchmaking is about finding your heart’s match, not just a date. Clearly you struggle with that.”

There was a screech of feedback from the microphone Tucker was fiddling with up front.

“Oh, look,” I said quickly. “We’re getting ready to start. I’ll give you a call Iola and we can talk more later.”

“See that you do.” She squeezed my shoulder, her bony fingers digging in a little painfully. “If Anna isn’t right for you, I’ll find someone who is.”

I nodded. “Thanks.”

She held my gaze for long enough that I had to fight the urge to fidget nervously like Wes had been. Thankfully this whole fiasco seemed to have distracted him. He casually let his knee rest against mine while he turned to greet LeRoy and Eugene, taking seats on our other side.

Tucker began to speak. “Thanks, everyone, for coming out to the town hall regarding our five-year strategic plan—”

“Stop Granville Shrinkage!” LeRoy yelled out from beside us and I fought a laugh at the epic eye roll that Tucker failed to hide.

“Yes,” he said dryly. “We’re here tonight to specifically talk about our plan for green spaces in Granville. But first, let’s give a hand to Potter Landscaping for doing a fantastic job improving Beaver Hole while satisfying the needs of Dix.”

There was a round of snickers. The community center wasn’t quite as full as it had been during the town hall to discuss neighborhood improvement plans over the summer, but there were still a good number of people filling the first three rows of chairs.

Tucker sighed, sounding resigned as he said, “Yes, I said Dix. Are we done?”

There was a little more laughter at his exasperation. He cleared his throat and plunged forward, giving an overview of the work done at Beaver Hole Park and the proposals Wes and I had provided for future projects, including a street beautification to extend downtown’s quaint vibe to a larger area and a community garden for the historic district.

“These are by no means approved yet,” Tucker said. “This is an informational meeting, and we want your input. Wes and Beckett from Potter Landscaping are here to answer questions as well, so why don’t we get them up here?”

He waved us to the front of the room, and we answered a couple of general questions about the proposals Tucker had presented. Wes had turned on the charm the moment he had to speak to the crowd, and they were eating out of the palm of his hand, so clearly he had nothing to worry about.

But just as it seemed everything would go smoothly, an older gentleman stood up. I didn't know him well, but I recognized his thick head of silver hair. "Now, hold up a second, I'd like to speak."

Tucker nodded. "Of course, Mr. Russell. We're listening."

That's right. I remembered his name now. Burt Russell. He kept to himself mostly, but I'd seen him at The Stag Pub a few times.

Burt snorted. "That might be a first. You all moved right on to these new proposals, like Beaver Hole Park is a done deal and we should all be happy."

Wes had been answering a lot of questions, so I took this one. "We've got a few finishing touches to do, but yeah, we are pretty much done. It's gone very smoothly, and I think everyone is going to love the improvements there. We've taken care to plant natural Nebraska plantlife that will thrive, provide shade, and beautify—"

"But what about the water drainage issue?" he interrupted.

I blinked. The what?

"I'm not sure I know what you mean," Wes said.

"When we have a big rain like last weekend, there's water that runs downhill into the adjacent yards. The empty lot was mostly a buffer, but now that's gone, so it's even worse! We thought this would be taken care of with the park improvements, but my backyard was a bog and my basement got wet. If I have damages, I'm holding you all liable!"

I glanced at Wes, but he seemed lost for words. He shook his head. "I'm sorry. I, uh, don't think..."

"Damn right, you don't think! Clearly!"

The local reporter with *Inside Granville*, Linc Tate, started scribbling madly in his notebook as Tucker stepped forward.

“Okay, let’s tone it down and keep it polite.”

Burt huffed, continuing to glare. “I want a solution, that’s all. I have complained about this, and I’ve gotten nowhere. I had to bring it up in public so that I could be heard. This park project should have addressed this problem from the start. It’s a huge oversight that they’ve just ignored a longtime problem.”

Oh, shit. This was bad. This was really bad. Water runoff must be a result of the downward slope from the park to the adjacent properties since it was built onto a hill. But this was the first I was hearing of it. If we’d known in the beginning, we could have moved dirt, perhaps created a culvert for drainage. But now? When our budget and time was nearly all used up? When we’d already done all the landscaping and would run the risk of ruining it by bringing in any heavy equipment?

When Dad is watching...and expects us to have this all in hand.

Burt turned toward our dad, as if he’d just heard my thoughts. “What do you think, Nathan? This business has *your* name on it. You *must* have some answers!”

“Fuck,” Wes whispered so quietly I thought I was the only one who could hear him. When I looked over, he was swallowing hard, eyes bleak.

He was the one I relied on to win people over, to smile and soothe. But he was clearly freaking out.

Dad looked calm, but I could see the disappointment in his gaze. No doubt Wes could too. “It is my company and my name, yes, and we’ll get you some answers,” he said. “I’ve been out of town and my sons have been running this project, so—”

“You don’t know anything either then,” Burt said dismissively.

Dad's smile tilted into more of a grimace. "If mistakes were made, they'll be corrected. You have my word on that."

"It'll be a priority to look into your claims," I added.

Burt's attention snapped back to me. "Claims? They're not claims! It's the truth!"

Tucker raised his hand. "This forum isn't the place to solve the park problem. You've aired your concern, and we'll follow up. Are there any other questions?"

Park problem. Shit.

Dad's ultimatum came rushing back to me. Everything had gone so smoothly up to now that I'd almost entirely dismissed it as a concern.

But it was easy to see he was unhappy, and rightfully so. We'd obviously missed something.

But if Wes lost everything because of one oversight, I'd never forgive myself.

All our hard work these past weeks, all our plans to tell Dad the truth about our relationship from a position of strength, withered on the vine.



WES

SHIT SHIT SHIT SHIT SHIT.

This was my fault. I was sure of it.

I knew I was going to miss something in that meeting with the neighborhood liaison, Paul Minner. I'd tried to listen, but he just talked so damn much that I couldn't keep my mind focused. Maybe I really was just an irresponsible idiot. Beckett would have listened better. He would have caught this early enough to prevent this embarrassing public spectacle.

Dad thought our prank was embarrassing, but it had nothing to do with our ability to get the job done. After seeing this—when I really had embarrassed the Potter legacy—would

he follow through on that ultimatum? I never thought so before, but now I wasn't so sure. I'd fucked up. Bad.

Even if he accepted our relationship, how would he accept this?

Tucker smoothly wrapped up the meeting in a matter of minutes, and the second he did, I turned on my heel, fleeing for the nearest exit at the front of the room. I needed to get away from the crowd of eyes that'd watched me fumble for answers. Away from Dad, whose disapproval stung like ants biting my skin.

Away from Beckett, who I'd let down when he deserved better.

Why did I think I could be the man he needed? The son and business owner my dad could trust? I was just a jackass who'd skated along on smiles and charm. But smiles and charm couldn't fix this.

I pushed through the door and rushed into an empty hallway. I made it three steps before I fell against the wall and slid to the floor. I buried my head in my hands, chest aching, eyes burning. I wanted to punch something. I wanted to punch myself.

I settled for slapping the flat of my hand onto the floor. "Fuck!"

"Hey!" Beckett crouched in front of me. I hadn't even seen him follow me into the hall. "Take a breath, Wes."

I inhaled deeply, sucking in air, trying to pull my shit together. I didn't want Beck to see me like this. Like a failure. But he already knew that, didn't he? Beck was quick. He'd figure out I'd screwed the pooch without me confessing to it.

Still, I felt the need to say it.

"I fucked up."

"No," Beckett said softly.

"I must have," I said, my voice rough. I sounded angry, but my only anger was for myself. "I missed something. I didn't listen."

He cupped my face and kissed my forehead. “Listen to me.” He locked his eyes on mine. “Can you do that?”

I nodded once.

“If a mistake was made, we made it together.”

“You don’t make mistakes.”

“Of course I do,” he said. “We’re in this together. We’re partners, aren’t we?”

I hesitated a beat, and his eyes narrowed.

“Isn’t that what you always say?” he demanded.

“Yeah, but...”

“But nothing,” he said. “We’ll figure this shit out.”

“What about Dad?” I croaked. “He saw it all. He was embarrassed. You know this project was a test. What if I just ruined everything?”

Beckett gave me a wobbly smile, but he couldn’t hide the crease of worry between his eyebrows. “You couldn’t ruin everything, Wes,” he said gently, “because *you* are everything.”

“I’m not.”

“To me, you are.”

The band around my chest loosened. “You mean that? Even if...”

I couldn’t bring myself to say it, but I didn’t need to. Beck knew what I meant. Even if Dad didn’t forgive our mistake. Even if we didn’t get the business or he was furious about the marriage.

“You always tell me you have my back,” he said. “Well, I have yours too.”

I pulled him in tight, hugging him, letting out a shuddering breath. “Maybe if Dad’s really mad, I can convince him to make you the boss so you can keep me out of trouble.”

“Do not make me kick your ass.”

I laughed. “What?”

“This isn’t all on you, Wes. That’s what I keep saying. We’re a team. We will face Dad together.”

I licked my lips nervously. “Yeah, okay. But what about, uh...outside of work? We’re in a shitty position to tell him the truth.”

Beckett nodded. “It’s not great, no. Do you want to hold off until things settle down?”

Just the thought of keeping our secret from Dad, of continuing to fear he’d find out another way or judge us harshly once he did know, made me feel sick. I couldn’t keep doing it. And it wasn’t just me who’d have to keep that secret. It was Beckett too. It was Andi. Colt. All our friends.

“I don’t think I can hide how I feel anymore.”

Beckett smiled nervously. “Yeah, me neither. We’ve come too far.”

We really had. It seemed like a lifetime ago we’d agreed to leave what happened in Vegas behind us and go back to being stepbrothers. We’d been naive to think we could bury those feelings when they were so strong.

The door swung open, and Dad emerged into the hall, a sour look on his face.

“Well, thanks for leaving me to face the masses in there,” he grumbled. “It was a heck of a homecoming.”

Beckett and I rose to our feet, our quiet moment bursting like a balloon.

“Shit, Dad, sorry,” I said. “I needed some air.”

Beckett nodded. “Yeah, I was just...”

“Checking on Wes,” Dad said wryly. “I know. You two are always in sync.”

We exchanged an uncertain look.

I cleared my throat. “I take full responsibility for the oversight with the park. Just please don’t hold Beckett

accountable for what happened in there.”

“Well, I sure as heck will,” Dad said. “If you fucked up, you did it together.”

I winced. “But I was the one who—”

“Shut up, Wes,” Beckett said. “He’s right.”

“What matters now is finding a solution,” Dad said. “Forget about dinner tomorrow. You both need to come over tonight and we need to get to the bottom of some things.”

“Now?” I asked, caught off-guard.

“Yeah, now,” he said. “I’ll call Carol and let her know to put on some coffee. It might be a long night.”

We watched him stalk down the hall toward the exit.

Well, shit. It seemed the moment of truth had arrived—with a sledgehammer to destroy our vision of a friendly family dinner confession after proving ourselves as competent business owners.

We were going from the pan and straight into the fire.

“Buckle up,” I muttered. “It’s going to be a bumpy ride.”

Beckett gave a shaky laugh. “Let’s hope we get through it in one piece.”

“If we don’t...”

He met my gaze, his unflinching. “Then we’ll have to piece each other back together again.”

I glanced down the hallway to make sure we were alone. The regular exit for the town hall was on the other side of the room, but anyone could come through that door just as Dad had.

But to hell with it. We were telling him the truth tonight anyway. I grabbed Beckett’s face and kissed him.

He leaned into me, giving me exactly what I needed.

Like he always did.

CHAPTER 26



BECKETT

WE ARRIVED AT DAD'S HOUSE AND WERE USHERED IN BY MY mom, who hugged each of us. "It's so good to see you two. I was hoping we could catch up over a nice dinner."

"You and us both," I muttered.

She smiled. "Well, we'll just have to get a raincheck on that. Your father is pacing the den like a caged tiger."

Great visual. Makes me feel much better.

"I guess we better go face him then."

Mom patted my shoulder and headed in the opposite direction as Wes and I made our way to the den. She was a smart woman—and someone who shied away from conflict—so I wasn't surprised she wanted to steer clear of our business conflict.

Dad looked up when we entered his den, a smaller version of the living room with Dad's favorite recliner, a leather loveseat, and a massive flat-screen TV on the wall. The room was illuminated only by the glow of the television, playing sports highlights while on mute. But that was better than the news. Dad got really riled up when the talking heads started screaming at one another.

"Finally," he muttered. "I'm an old man. How late do you expect me to stay up?"

"Hey, you asked us over," Wes said. "This could have waited until tomorrow."

“Not if I want to get any sleep tonight,” Dad grumbled, but thankfully, he took a seat in his recliner and waved us toward the loveseat. “Sit.”

He seemed to be chewing over what to say, his eyes fixed on the window rather than us, as we settled hip to hip. I wiped my clammy palms on my jeans, trying to breathe through the nausea the ball of nerves in my gut was causing. But Wes’s warmth along my side was a comfort, reminding me that I wasn’t in this alone.

“I left town because I trusted you both,” Dad said finally, making my insides clench with guilt and dread. “I thought you could handle the project without me.”

“I’m sorry I let you down,” Wes said.

Something about the defeat in his voice triggered the opposite in me.

“We can handle it. We did,” I said emphatically. “We worked our asses off every day on this project.”

“I’m sure you did,” Dad said. “But I don’t appreciate being left out of the loop. I looked like a damned fool. I may have taken a step back, but it’s still my business until I decide otherwise.”

There was an unspoken warning in those words. He had the power to give us everything we’d been working for, and he had the power to take it away. But would he? That was the real question here. I didn’t always know exactly where I stood, but he loved Wes fiercely.

“We didn’t leave you out of any loop,” Wes said. “We didn’t know. I’m not denying we missed something somewhere, or that we messed up somehow, but—”

Dad’s phone rang, cutting through the room. He lifted a hand. “Give me a minute,” he said gruffly. “It’s Paul Minner on the line.”

Paul Minner was the Dix neighborhood liaison, so I could only imagine what he had to say about the situation. Dad was likely to come back in an even worse mood.

He left the room to take the call, and Wes groaned. “Well, this is going really well.”

“He just needs to cool down,” I said, hoping it was true. Wes’s father had always had a quick temper, but generally he was also quick to calm down once he’d said his piece. He wasn’t an unreasonable man. He’d talk this problem out with us and realize that while we may have made a mistake, we were willing to own up to it and figure out a solution.

I had to believe that even if he didn’t accept our relationship, he was a smart enough man to do that much.

Wes pulled his phone from his pocket. “Colt texted. He’s freaking out that this was his fault. Apparently he thinks he should have realized why some neighbor was yelling at him and prevented this whole mess.”

I snorted. “You two can start a Blame Club.”

“Yeah.” His fingers flew in response, then he frowned as he read the reply. Before I could ask anything else about the conversation, Dad re-entered the room.

“All right, that was Paul, and it sounds like there was an oversight between the city and the neighborhood. You two are off the hook for missing something.”

Wes exhaled noisily. “Really?”

“Yeah, that’s the good news,” he said, “but it doesn’t mean we’re off the hook on finding a solution.” He ran a hand through his dark hair peppered with white strands and sighed. “Shit happens when you run a business. That’s the reality. And it doesn’t really matter if it was our fault or not. We all looked like idiots tonight.”

I noticed he was including himself by saying we, seeming to accept some accountability too. It was a relief to feel like we were on the same team instead of opposing sides.

“We’ll break out the park plans and figure it out,” I promised, sitting forward. “You don’t have to worry.”

“Well, yes, I do,” he said. “Maybe not about that, but I do worry because you may not have kept me in the dark about

this project, but you sure as hell didn't tell me about this."

Dad held up an envelope, and Wes and I exchanged a confused look, before he came closer and I read the type on the sender line: Clark County, Nevada.

The pieces clicked together in an instant. Clark County was the office that issued marriage licenses. Like the marriage license that hadn't shown up and we'd assumed was lost in the mail. Apparently, it hadn't gotten lost so much as taken a small detour to our father.

"I found this at the office and opened it by mistake. Imagine my surprise. You told me you played a prank," Dad said. "Not that you'd taken it so far as to get legally married."

"It's not what you think," Wes said.

My heart dropped, and I swallowed hard. Shit. Was he going to backpedal now?

No. No way. Wes had said time and again that he'd stand by me no matter what, and even faced with his dad's disapproval, I didn't believe he'd let me down.

Wes took my hand in his, proving me right.

"I love Beckett. It's not a prank. We're married, and it's real."

I choked on my breath, squeezing his hand so hard it would have made a lesser man complain. Wes just smiled at me and murmured softly, "We got this. We're in this together, remember?"

I should never have doubted him. Not even for half a second. Wes would never leave me hanging. He was a man of his word, always.

I nodded, my eyes burning as all that fight-or-flight adrenaline turned into a surge of emotion that threatened to spill out. My voice was barely a whisper when it came out.

"I love you."

Wes grinned, his voice strong and clear as he replied.

"I love you too."



WES

THERE WAS a ringing silence in my father's den after Beckett and I exchanged I-love-you's. I had no idea how Dad would react, but saying those three words felt incredible anyway. Not because we'd never said them before, but because we got to say them without the burden of secrecy.

I couldn't stop the smile pulling at my lips as I gazed into Beckett's shiny eyes. He looked shaken, his hand trembling a bit in mine, but I could sense the relief pouring off him too.

"No more secrets," I whispered.

"Never again," he said emphatically.

My father cleared his throat, and I finally tore my gaze from Beckett, reminded that while we'd face our biggest fear, we weren't quite through with this trial by fire just yet. I turned my head, braced for the worst.

But when I forced my gaze to my father, he was looking on with...approval?

I blinked, wondering if I'd actually passed out and started dreaming. Why wasn't he yelling?

"I found your marriage certificate right before I left town," he said, sending my stomach back into freefall. "It must have been misdelivered to the office instead of your trailer." He chuckled wryly. "I was pretty mad at first, I won't lie. I thought you'd taken the prank too far." He cleared his throat, sounding sheepish as he added, "Carol made me see some sense. She insisted I take some time and think before I confronted you. And she pointed out how close you two have always been. I wasn't sure what to think. Neither of you has dated a man before."

"It was a surprise to us too," Wes said. "I don't know why it happened. I just know Beckett is my person, you know? I realize...not everyone will understand, with us being related and all."

Dad nodded, looking thoughtful. My family had always been a good, open-minded bunch, so I knew Dad wouldn't freak over a same-sex relationship. But accepting a relationship between the two men he considered sons might be a tougher proposition.

He raised his voice. "Carol? Come on in here, will you?"

Beckett's mother entered the room quickly enough I realized she hadn't gone far. She went to stand by my father, laying a hand on his shoulder.

"Tell the boys what you told me," he said.

Carol didn't miss a beat. She smiled at us and said softly, "It's a little unorthodox, but you're not actually brothers. If you love each other, I don't see how that can be wrong."

Her reaction didn't completely surprise me. In the years since they'd married, I'd learned that Beckett's mom was open-minded and compassionate, always. Even though my dad had invited Beckett to call him Dad, Carol had never made any such requests. She'd told me quietly that I was welcome to call her anything I wanted, because she would never presume to replace my mother who I'd lost so unfairly.

Carol was very quiet, and it was easy to think she was timid, but she fought for her family in her own way. Her acceptance and support was clear to see, warming my heart.

Dad continued. "I spent most of the time I was away thinking about this and talking with Carol about how to handle it, what we should say or do. I wish you'd told us the truth from the beginning."

Suddenly words spilled from my lips. "You ripped into us the second we got home, though, Dad."

"You jumped to a lot of conclusions," Beckett added.

He winced. "I guess that's true. I didn't have an inkling there might be something real between you. I thought you were pulling pranks and mocking marriage, and it pissed me off. Love is precious." He reached up and squeezed Carol's hand. "I loved Wes's mother, and I love Carol, dearly. That's not something to mock."

“We weren’t—”

“Just let me finish,” he said. “I need to know, once and for all, that this isn’t a joke to you. I know you’ve said you love each other, but are you really committed to forever? Marriage is serious business.”

“It’s not a joke,” I said.

“We take it very seriously,” Beckett added.

Dad opened his mouth to speak, but before he could get anything out, Andi rushed in, a queasy-looking Colt behind her.

“Wes and Beckett love each other!” she exclaimed. “I support them and so should you, and if you don’t accept their relationship, well...” She seemed at a loss for a minute. “Well, then I’ll be really mad at you!”

Dad looked bemused. “All right.”

She paused. “I mean it. They’re my brothers and I have their backs!”

“Okay.”

Andi kept going, though her words were losing heat as Dad’s lack of reaction started to sink in. “I’m not coming to family dinner unless they’re invited too!”

“Makes sense,” he said. “Not much of a family dinner without your brothers.”

“That’s right! We’re a family, even if they’re...they’re...”

“Banging?” Colt offered helpfully when she seemed to stall out.

“Oh my god, Colt, no!” she exclaimed, cheeks flushing red. “I was going to say even though they’re married!”

“My bad,” Colt said.

Dad looked as if he were fighting a smile, and Carol had turned her head away and covered her mouth.

I leaned over to Beck, murmuring, “Colt told me she wanted to come support us when we texted. I tried to talk them

out of it.”

“She’s doing a great job,” Beckett replied, sounding fond. “Even if we don’t really need the help.”

It was no wonder Andi was expecting more of a fight. Dad had a couple of weeks to get used to the possibility we’d gotten married, but Andi—and the rest of us—were struggling to catch up with the idea that he knew and accepted the truth.

“Why aren’t you mad?” she finally asked, sounding confused.

Dad smiled. “Maybe I’m just proud to see my daughter fighting for her family.” He looked over at us. “I’m proud of you guys too. I know I came down hard when I thought you’d messed up. But the truth is, I was feeling guilty for putting everything on your shoulders.”

“You wanted us to prove ourselves,” I said. “We understood.”

He shook his head. “You shouldn’t have to prove anything. You’ve been doing most of the work to run this company for years. And even if I do sign over the business, I’ll still be available as a resource for you, which is what I should have been throughout this whole process. And it’s what I’m going to be now.” He looked at his wife. “Carol, break out the coffee. We have some work to do, me and the boys, to figure out this water drainage issue.”

She nodded. “Sure, thing. You want some pie too?”

“Is that even a question?”

She smiled and kissed his cheek, then left the room.



WE’D ALL JUST DUG into a delicious strawberry-rhubarb pie Carol had bought from The Diner when a sleepy-eyed guy wandered in, sun-bleached brown hair mussed from bed, skin a golden tan, a cute spray of freckles over his nose.

It took me a second to place him, but then Beckett's eyes widened, and he exclaimed, "Holy shit, *Fisher*? I can't believe you're here!"

He jumped up, making his chair scrape loudly, and tackled his cousin in a hug.

Fisher laughed, his whole face lighting up. "I needed to get away from that place."

Carol said quietly, "Man problems."

Fisher pulled out of Beckett's embrace. "I heard that, but no, there's no man problems. For man problems, there'd have to be a man." His eyes narrowed, his expression broadcasting irritation. "And as far as I'm concerned, that man does not exist."

Beckett caught my eye, a slight smirk on his face, even as he patted Fisher's arm in solidarity. "You'll find the right man eventually."

"I guess." Fisher cast his gaze around the room, taking each of us in. His gaze lingered on me the longest, making me wonder what Beckett had told him. "I thought family dinner was tomorrow night?"

We all exchanged glances, laughing.

"This is just a preview," Carol said, smiling. "These guys have a work problem to hash out tonight, but I'm still planning a meal for tomorrow so you can get a proper welcome when you're fully awake."

Beckett returned to his seat by me, a grin on his face. "We'll be here. Fish and I have tons to catch up about."

Fisher eyed how closely Beckett sat to me, and I realized we didn't have to hide anything, so I pressed a quick kiss to Beckett's temple. "Yep. Lots going on around here."

"I see that," he murmured, eyebrow arching.

We finished our pie, Andi and Colt said their goodbyes, and Fisher went back to bed. Eventually, it was just Dad and us, a laptop, and our park plans so we could hash out a solution together.

Working as a team once again.

CHAPTER 27



WES

“YOU BOYS REALLY DID DO GREAT WORK OUT HERE.”

Dad was walking the perimeter of Beaver Hole Park with us to evaluate exactly where the water runoff was happening and assess which of our ideas from our brainstorming the night before might work. As we walked, he got his first good look at the finished landscaping around the edge of the pond, which had been accented with water-loving plants and encircled with a rock barrier that helped it stand out from its surroundings; the new picnic and play area that had been installed, complete with shade trees; and my favorite part, the gazebo, which had been surrounded by shrubs that would flower at different times of the year, ensuring a beautiful setting for wedding receptions or other special occasions. We'd expanded the park into the previously vacant lot, enclosed the driveway there, and planted grass and bushes to create some privacy screening between the park and the neighbors.

Unfortunately, enclosing that vacant lot had only worsened the water drainage problem that had already existed. Before, some of the water had escaped through a driveway. Without that exit point, it now had nowhere to go but toward the other yards as it continued to run downhill.

“I wish people at the town hall could have seen this, instead of us taking a public beating,” I said.

“Well, son, running a business isn't for the faint of heart,” Dad said. “When mistakes are made, you take a flogging, and you have to learn to take it gracefully.”

“Sucks though.”

Dad chuckled. “Sure as hell does.”

By the time Tucker and Paul arrived—along with the reporter, Linc—we’d assessed our options and agreed on a plan. It almost seemed too easy in the end. Because most of the go-to options required too much money, heavy machinery that could damage the landscaping, or were just plain ugly, we were going for a more natural, less invasive approach.

“Tucker, Paul, thanks for coming out. You too, Linc,” Dad said, shaking hands with each of them. “I know you’ve all got better things to do.”

“No problem,” Tucker said. “This problem is at least half our fault, and after the shitshow at the town hall, we had to loop in Linc to set the record straight.”

“Well, I hope you can make us look a little smarter than that meeting did,” I said.

Linc smiled easily. “Hey, you were put on the spot. That’s never easy. I just hope to provide some clarity and update everyone on the plan going forward.”

Paul cleared his throat, sounding sheepish as he said, “I really can’t believe I didn’t think to mention the drainage issue in my talks with Wes. I assumed the park redesign would mitigate it and was focused more on the new ways the park expansion might affect the neighborhood. I didn’t do my due diligence, and that’s on me.”

“Me too,” Tucker said. “The city did get complaints. I’ve spent the morning looking into it. The complaints were filed by the former property owner and dated years ago. Somehow that little detail fell through the cracks, even with our public input meetings.” He rubbed at his eyes, looking almost as tired as I felt. “I apologize you had to be the scapegoat for our mistakes.”

“Sounds like a lot of miscommunication all around,” Linc said.

Tucker smiled wryly. “Yes, we’ll be revisiting our research policies before we break ground on future projects. Please be

sure to print that.”

“The important thing now is that we fix it,” Dad said. “Why don’t you walk them through your plan, Wes?”

I felt a little flush of pride, along with an uncomfortable sprinkle of guilt. “Well, Beck deserves most of the credit. I got the idea from a landscaping plan of his out at the Fleming place four years ago.”

“It’s your idea, Wes,” Beckett said, giving me a nudge. “You’re good at this, so just take the compliment.”

“Okay, okay,” I said with an embarrassed chuckle, knowing he was right. Designing landscaping plans would never be in my comfort zone, but my years of experience did give me insights I hadn’t fully appreciated. “It’s not that impressive, but here’s the gist of it...”

I explained that we couldn’t give the water a place to drain, so we needed to give it time to absorb into the ground without affecting the neighbors’ homes. A larger-scale rain garden—which would involve digging to create a depressed area of ground for the water to pool and planting native plants that could capture and temporarily hold the water—could give us that time.

Of course, there was still the matter of ensuring the runoff ended up where we wanted it, but Beckett had been quick to piggyback the idea of digging swales—or shallow trenches we could hide in the landscaping—to channel the excess water toward the rain garden and away from the homes.

“It’ll mean giving up some of the green space in the expanded area of the park,” Beckett said, “but we can make it look intentional with a little work.”

“I’m going to leave that part to Beckett,” I said. “Maybe I’ve got some ideas, but he’s got the magic touch when it comes to design.”

Beckett looked as if he might scold me again, but Dad nodded. “It’s a smart man who knows how to play to people’s strengths. I agree Beckett will do a good job.” He looked at Tucker and Paul. “Assuming you both sign off on this?”

“It’s better than what I was expecting,” Tucker said. “I worried we’d have to go back to the City Council and get more financing, perhaps even extend the project timeline. We’ve got enough discretionary funds for this, though, so I’m all for it.”

Paul nodded. “I think the neighbors will love it, assuming it won’t be ugly since it’s going to be within their line of sight.”

“We’ll make sure it’s not,” Beckett said.

“Well, then, I think we’ve got a plan,” Tucker said.

“Official enough to print?” Linc checked.

“Yeah, but if you hold off a couple of hours, we’ll get you some more specifics about the steps involved.”

“Sure, no problem. Just shoot me an email.”

Once the three men left, it was nearly lunchtime, and I was thinking that perhaps I could convince Beckett to indulge in a little afternoon delight.

Last night, we’d crawled into bed well past midnight, too exhausted to do much more than cuddle. “It feels wrong to just go to sleep,” I’d muttered into Beck’s hair as he’d snuggled into my arms. “Should we fuck to celebrate surviving the night?”

He’d huffed hot air against my shoulder. “Romantic.”

“It is romantic. We’re a *real* couple, babe. We don’t have any more secrets.”

He’d craned his head up to peck a kiss to my lips. “We don’t, do we? That’s awesome, but...I’m so tired. Maybe we can celebrate being a real couple by not having sex.”

I’d chuckled. “Sounds legit.”

We’d fallen asleep in each other’s arms, and there was something comforting about knowing that Beck would be there for me, with or without sex.

Of course, now that I was rested up and a little less stressed about this whole situation, I wanted those long legs

wrapped around my waist while Beckett moaned under me. But when we walked Dad to his car, it became apparent those plans would have to wait.

“I’d like you two to come back to the office with me,” he said. “We’ve got some more business to discuss now that things are back on track.”

Beckett and I exchanged a look. He seemed as unsure as I did. It could be that Dad just wanted to talk about some housekeeping matters now that he was back in town and trying to get up to speed. Or...

He could finally be ready to talk about formally retiring and handing over the business.

But where I’d once have been a ball of excited nerves, I felt calm and steady, realizing that whatever happened, I already had everything I needed.

Beckett’s love was more than enough to make me happy and excited for what the future might bring.

Everything else took second place.



BECKETT

DAD WAVED us into the seats in front of his desk, then pulled open a filing cabinet and retrieved some paperwork. My stomach somersaulted. This had to be about passing the business on to Wes. Even though I knew those papers would have Wes’s name, not mine, excitement fizzed through my veins.

He’d worked hard, and he deserved this.

Dad sat down behind his desk, spreading out the papers as he reviewed them, and cleared his throat. “Okay, now then. I know we’ve talked about what happens when I retire, but I want to make sure we’ve got all the details ironed out. This paperwork was drawn up by me and your mom together, Wes, with terms that we thought would be fair to you.”

“Mom helped write this?” Wes leaned forward to study the words, as if he might catch one last sight of his mother through the print on the page. My heart clenched, knowing that losing her must have been hard.

It hadn’t escaped my notice that Wes always called my mother Carol, even though I’d tried to embrace the Potter family wholly. It had felt like a double standard at one point, Nathan wanting me to call him Dad while Wes didn’t do the same with my mom. But I saw it from a different perspective now. Wes’s mother had *died*, while the only father figure I’d known had chosen to walk away from me.

I was lucky to join the Potter tribe. I’d always known that, even when my insecurities made me doubt my place among them.

“This paperwork only has my name.” Wes sat back with a huff. “Beckett tried to tell me this was your plan, but I never believed you’d leave him out like this.”

His dad looked chagrined. “It’s not about leaving him out...”

Wes jabbed a finger at the text. “I don’t see his name anywhere, so what do you call it?”

“Wes, it’s okay,” I said, realizing for the first time that it really was.

Nathan wasn’t Craig. He hadn’t bailed because I wasn’t the perfect stepson. He’d supported me, even in a difficult situation, and I knew now that his love wasn’t conditional—even if Craig’s had been.

“The hell it is,” Wes said. “We’re partners.”

“You’re not just partners,” Dad cut in. “You’re married, which means half this business is Beckett’s no matter what the paperwork says.”

Wes hesitated. “But that’s not the same. I mean, think of how this makes Beckett feel. You always say he’s your son too. I thought you meant that.”

Dad looked stricken. “I do mean it. Beckett, son, this is not about playing favorites.”

“Then what is it about?” I couldn’t resist asking. Yes, I could accept it if the business passed only to Wes. I knew he’d always treat me as a partner. But I would always feel that I hadn’t measured up in some way. “I’ve worked so hard to prove that I’m worthy.”

“Of course you’re worthy. Goddamn it.” Dad stood suddenly, face stormy, and I half expected him to yell at me. Instead he circled the desk and yanked me up into a hug, squeezing me. “I fucked this all up.”

“So make it right, Dad,” Wes said, his tone firm.

I widened my eyes at him over Dad’s shoulder. If he wasn’t careful, the man might tell us to shove it and keep his business to himself. Wes had worked too long and hard to lose everything over me. Putting my name in the papers was really only a symbol at this point. It wasn’t worth risking Wes’s birthright.

“No, Dad’s right,” I said. “We’re married, so it doesn’t matter.”

“It does matter,” Wes insisted.

Dad released me and returned to his side of the desk, keeping his eyes on the papers, seeming unable to meet our eyes. “We’ll change the paperwork. The last thing I want is for Beckett to think I don’t value him.” He cleared his throat and finally looked at us again. “It seems so obvious now that I should have done it long ago, but... Well, I drew these papers up with Wes’s mom. The money to start the business came from her parents, and she wanted the business to pass to her son.”

Oh. *Oh*. I suddenly understood, and it changed everything.

Nathan could view me as a son, but Wes’s mother had never met me. It was her inheritance being passed on, in a way.

“It’s no excuse, but I was sentimental,” he said. “This was the last plan we ever made together.” He gave a gruff laugh

and blinked hard. “If I’m honest, that’s why I took my sweet time doing this at all. You two have been ready to take over for a while now. I’m just an old man who wasn’t ready to let go of the last piece of my life with Vickie.”

“I didn’t know,” I said. “It makes sense now. If this is her gift to Wes, then of course it wasn’t meant for me.”

“Oh, but it is,” Dad said. “I see that now. Because you’re his brother—” He stopped short and shook his head. “Or his husband. I guess the point stands, either way. You’re his family, which makes you her family, even if she isn’t here to see it. We’ll change the paperwork, because it’s what she’d want too. I feel that in here.” He tapped his heart. “She was very giving.”

Wes nodded. “She’d have loved Beck.”

“She absolutely would have.” Dad picked up the papers and handed the sheaf to me. “We’ll add your name, son, but why don’t you two take a couple of days and read through all the fine print before we make changes.” He paused and shook his head with a chuckle. “I guess we would have had to change them to update Wes’s name anyway, huh?”

“What do you mean?”

He looked between us. “Well, the marriage certificate said Wes took your name of Monroe. I assume you would only sign it that way if you intended to legally change it?”

“Uh, right,” Wes said. “I better get that done before we sign everything.”

“All right, then I think we’re done,” Dad said.

I stood up, my head reeling, and followed Wes through the door, the sheaf of papers in my hand. We were halfway across the parking lot before I’d marshaled my thoughts into anything coherent.

“Wes, are you sure you want to take the name Monroe? I mean, my dad was an asshole. I don’t need to carry his name on.”

“He might have been a dick, but you’re not,” Wes said. “I signed it Monroe for a reason, babe.”

I scoffed. “You were drunk, so I doubt you knew what you were doing.”

“Maybe, but this feels right. You’ve always felt a little like the odd man out among all us Potters. Now you won’t be the only Monroe. You’ll have me.”

I was floored by how easily he put aside his name—the one better known in this town, the one associated with his business—just to make me feel less alone.

“I’ve always had you, haven’t I?”

He grinned. “Yeah, but you know what they say.”

“What’s that?”

“If you’ve got it, might as well flaunt it.”

I grinned. “Are you saying I should flaunt you?”

He tugged me close and kissed me. “Hell, yeah, I’m totally worth flaunting.”

“You are,” I agreed.

“Now, how about we commemorate the moment by fucking before our lunch break is over?”

I tucked my face into his neck, laughing as I held him tight, feeling like this moment was the perfect embodiment of our relationship. No one made me feel precious, sexy, and ridiculous all at the same time.

“Hell yeah,” I said. “That sounds perfect.”

Some people might not think it was romantic when he groped my ass and gave a whoop, hustling me toward our trailer, but his style of ravenous lust absolutely did it for me.

Maybe if I was lucky, we’d even break another bed.

CHAPTER 28



WES

I WAS KNEELING IN THE DIRT, ON THE EDGE OF A HOLE I'D DUG and filled with water a few hours ago, when I heard Logan say "holy shit" under his breath and Colt promptly dropped the ruler we were using to measure the water-absorption rate.

"What the hell?" I muttered, leaning forward to fish it out.

"Wait!" Logan grabbed the back of my shirt, tugging me back before I could dip my hand into the muddy water. "I think Beckett needs to talk to you."

"He's not even here," I grumbled. "He went to Omaha with his cousin to visit the greenhouse there and have some fun, so—"

"Wes," Colt said emphatically. "Just turn around."

"Fine, you fish out the ruler then," I said as I pivoted on my knee. "Not like I want to get all muddy any—whaaa..."

My brain blanked out, unable to process what I was seeing for a minute. Beckett was on one knee, a ring box open in his hand.

"Hi," he said.

I rose to my feet, staring. "You're back early."

He smiled, lips trembling enough I could see he was nervous. "Well, not really. That was all part of the plan."

I cocked my head, my eyes taking in the ring box, but not fully comprehending what was happening. Was he... But we were already...

“I thought about doing this at a fancy restaurant or at home with just the two of us, but I decided that here was most fitting.”

My brow furrowed in confusion. “At Beaver Hole?”

He chuckled and shook his head. “No, just...on the job, doing what we both love together as partners. I think it’s really here that our friendship began, you know? And that was the beginning of everything.”

“Oh.” Beckett and I had bonded while working on the crew together as teens. Before that, we hadn’t seemed to have much in common. He was quiet, and I was loud. He seemed withdrawn, and I was a huge extrovert. But our first summer on the crew, we’d bonded over the long hours and aching muscles. “Yeah, I guess this was our first love.”

“But not the last,” Beckett said with a small smile.

I swallowed hard, emotion hitting me like a wave. I was pretty sure Beckett was proposing. He had a ring. He had love declarations. I was a little confused because we were married, but yeah, it was all adding up.

Beckett cleared his throat. “Wes, I think you know by now what you mean to me. I hope you do. You’ve taken risks to be with me. Gambled your future to bet on me, and I’ve come to love you more for it every day.”

“Well, we did get married in Vegas,” I teased. “It seemed fitting to gamble a little.”

He laughed. “Well, still. You could have folded and walked away. You didn’t. That means everything to me.”

“I’d never walk away from you.”

His eyes were warm, and he smiled indulgently. “We got married impulsively, though, while drunk, and...I don’t know if either of us would have made that choice if we were sober.” My heart faltered a bit. “You’re everything I could ever want in a husband, Wes. I love you. But I don’t want us to be husbands because we got drunk and crazy one night. Or because our names are on a piece of paper that says we’re married.”

“What do you want, then?” I asked, feeling a thread of uncertainty.

He licked his lips. “I want you to choose the future you want, to go into it with a clear head. Wes, I can’t imagine anyone else by my side as I go through life. So I’m asking, will you marry me...on purpose this time?”

My breath rushed out of me in a relieved laugh. I’d known this question was coming, but I still felt as if I’d just survived a sharp drop on a roller coaster ride. “Fuck yes.”

I was moving before I could think, grabbing Beckett’s arm and tugging him up for a kiss. I didn’t care that our crew was watching. In fact, I was glad. We hadn’t expressly been making any announcements in public, but I was over hiding my feelings for Beckett.

There was a smattering of claps from our very small audience.

“Congrats, you guys,” Logan said.

“Again,” Colt added, sounding a little confused. “Does this mean you’re getting married a second time?”

I pulled back and raised an eyebrow at Beckett, unsure of the answer myself. He smiled sheepishly. “I thought we could have a wedding reception at least. Renew our vows? I thought maybe you’d want to remember...”

He trailed off, as if a little embarrassed, but my heart expanded at how sensitive and insightful Beckett was. As much as I’d committed to him one hundred percent and wanted to continue this marriage, it did feel surreal to know that Beckett was actually my husband. My memories of that night were fragmented, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle scattered across a table that I couldn’t quite put together.

“I’d love that, Beck,” I said as I continued to hold him. “I wish I could remember that night, because I’m sure it was amazing. But this...” I had to speak around the lump forming. “This is perfect. I’d love to celebrate with friends and family. To show everyone what you mean to me.”

Beckett pulled away with a shaky grin. “Do you think I could put the ring on it, then?”

I looked down, remembering belatedly that the ring box served more purpose than a prop to tell me Beck was proposing.

“Right, yeah. Rings. But hey...that’s not the same one from Vegas.”

Beck nodded, lifting the black ring from the box. “This one is silicone.”

Logan snorted. “That’s what he said.”

“How does that even make sense?” Colt asked.

“If you have to ask...” Logan teased, and Colt’s cheeks flushed red.

Beckett rolled his eyes. “Trying to have a romantic moment here.”

“With Wes?” Logan joked. “Good luck with that.”

I pointed a finger his way. “That’s it. Don’t come back after Thanksgiving. You’re fired.”

“Harsh, man,” he said with a laugh because we all knew Logan was a seasonal worker who would be moving on around that time anyway.

“Okay, Beck, you were about to give me a ring?” I held out my hand, fingers spread.

He pushed the silicone ring over my finger. “This one should be safe to wear at work. We still have the Vegas ones if we want to bring them out when we’re off the clock.”

“It’s perfect, Beckett.” I tipped my head forward and murmured, “And if you want me to get you a silicone gift in return, Paula is a phone call away.”

He laughed and shoved me. “Maybe Logan was right about you.”

“What? I’m romantic! I just want to please you in all the ways, Beck. You can’t fault a guy for that.”

“Ugh, this is getting TMI,” Colt said.

I turned toward them. “Knock off early if you want, guys. I’ve got to take my man home and—”

Beckett slapped a hand over my mouth, muffling my comment about filling more holes. Probably for the best. Colt didn’t look ready for gay sex jokes. I’d have to save my best material for Miles and Jake at Glazed Holes. Now those men could always appreciate a dirty sense of humor.

It didn’t take long for Logan and Colt to scatter once I’d set them free, and I linked hands with Beckett as we headed for our pickup, raising our arms so I could press kisses to his knuckles every couple of steps and admire the functional silicone rings he’d picked out for us.

It was just like Beckett to be incredibly sweet while also being practical. He balanced me out so incredibly well. I was the more spontaneous one of the two of us, but that was what made it so special that he went along with some of my crazier impulses. Because Beckett thought about it first, then decided to go along with it anyway.

Which got me thinking...

“I love that you proposed today, but I’m also glad we got married in Vegas,” I said. “Without that step, we might never have gotten past the barriers that kept us apart. That wild, impulsive marriage gave me permission to feel all the love I had for you, the love I’d been fighting for months, if not years. And I wouldn’t give that up for anything.”

“I was wrong,” he said. “You’re terribly romantic.”

I grinned. “I did tell you I was. Now, let me take you home and show you exactly how glad I am you wanted to marry me, both then and now.”



BECKETT

“WE SHOULD GET READY FOR TRIVIA.”

“Mmm.” Wes nuzzled into my neck, nibbling. “Or we could stay in bed...”

I laughed, pushing his hand away when it ventured a little too far south. “No! We’ve been in bed all weekend.”

Ever since my proposal, which had been strangely nerve-racking considering we were already married, Wes had spent the better part of two days showing me how very romantic he could be with the filthiest dirty talk I’d ever heard. I was bursting with happiness—and *aching* just about everywhere.

“I’m just enjoying my *fiancé*,” Wes said with a sinfully sexy smile.

“Thought you were my husband.”

“I am, but right now I’m celebrating you *asking* me to be your husband.” He brushed his fingers over my abs in a light caress, making me tingle. “Don’t you want me to keep doing that?”

“Y-yes, but...” I trailed off with a breathy sigh when his lips replaced his fingers, tongue sneaking out to tease as my navel. I gripped his hair, not to pull, just to anchor myself, as he ran his stubble prickled between my thighs and his hot breath fanned over my now-throbbing cock. “*Wes*.”

He chuckled, glancing up at me, eyes full of amusement. “Yes, baby?”

I bit my lower lip. “I promised Fisher we’d take him out.”

He nodded, saying in a serious tone, “So you don’t want me to suck your cock, then.”

I groaned in dismay. *Of course* I wanted him to suck my cock. The thought of not getting his hot, commanding mouth on me was *awful*.

He started to pull away. “That’s too bad—”

I latched onto his arm. “Wait! I didn’t say to stop.”

He raised an eyebrow. “No? But what about trivia?”

I pulled at him, but he didn’t budge. He wouldn’t until he was good and ready. But I wasn’t above begging. “Please,

Wes. We can be quick, right? We'll only be a few minutes late."

"You want it quick and dirty, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Sloppy."

My breath accelerated. "Yes."

His dark eyes were intensely focused on me. "Beg me."

I shuddered. "Wes, please! Please blow me. I'm dying here. I need—*fuck!*"

Wes dove down, taking me deep. He couldn't have done this even a week ago, but we'd gotten in a lot of practice this weekend. His tongue worked the underside of my cockhead, and I shivered. When he plunged down again, swallowing around me, I was gone, giving a strangled warning as I spurted over his tongue.

Wes sucked me through it, then finished himself off with a few hard strokes, and climbed up my body to kiss me.

"All right, now you can get out of bed," he said.

I snorted. "So you're done enjoying your fiancé just like that, huh?"

He grinned. "Nah. I'll enjoy claiming you as mine in public too."

My stomach clenched with nerves. His words were a reminder that we'd be going out as an official couple for the first time. Gossip would have traveled by now, of course, but we hadn't left our place all weekend. Tonight would be our first taste of how our neighbors were going to take the news.

"Hey, it's going to be okay," Wes said.

I swallowed. "I know."

He brushed one more kiss across my lips. "Come on. Let's go face the music before you think yourself into an ulcer."

He knew me so well.

By the time we'd showered and dressed, I'd gotten my nerves under control. The most important people already knew the truth about us. If a few neighbors didn't approve, we could handle that.

We picked up Fisher at our parents' house, and then drove downtown to The Stag. Wes slung an arm over my shoulder, and I wrapped mine around his waist, taking strength from the closeness, even if it did make us more conspicuous as we entered the pub with Fisher.

We were claiming each other for everyone to see.

There were second looks and hushed whispers as we passed the bar. Loretta, an old regular, grinned our way. "I *knew* you two were too close for brothers," she crowed.

Her comment unleashed a wave of chatter, some of it directed our way, and some of it just said to the room at large.

But they're brothers...

They're only stepbrothers.

Still kinda weird though, right?

I always knew those two were hiding something...

Percy Helix, one of our trivia rivals and Clark's worst date ever, stepped into our path, scowling. "You lied before. You said you weren't together!"

"Pretty sure you drew your own conclusions," I said.

That first visit to The Stag we had let people believe our marriage was a prank, but we'd never outright announced anything.

"Yeah, what did he say, Beck?" Wes asked. "Something about us not having any chemistry?"

"Clearly, he was wrong about that," Fisher muttered. "If you guys had any more chemistry, you'd have to charge everyone here admission to the show."

Wes chuckled. "Jealous?"

“Yes,” Fisher said emphatically. “Have mercy on the horny virgin and stop making out at every opportunity.”

My face heated as I recalled the way Wes had kissed me at the last stoplight, the two of us so gone that Fisher had to tell us to break it up when the light turned green.

Percy wasn't amused, which was pretty much to be expected. “A lie of omission is still a lie. You two should be ashamed.”

He stalked off, and I glanced at Wes, a flicker of guilt rising inside.

“No, you don't,” Wes said firmly.

“He's kind of right, though,” I said quietly as we continued to make our way across the room, the weight of half a dozen gazes burning on my skin. Did they all think of us as liars?

Fisher spoke up. “You don't owe everyone your truth. It's your relationship, not theirs.”

Wes squeezed me tighter against his side. “He's right, baby. We didn't know what the hell we were doing when we came home. We weren't ready to explain anything.”

“I guess that's true.”

“But now we are, right?”

I smiled nervously. “Yeah.”

“Good.” He grasped my jaw and pressed a soft kiss on my lips, right there in front of everyone. “Let them all see you're mine.”

“I think you mean that you're mine,” I argued.

A whistle cut through the room. Then a catcall and some laughter, breaking the tension of our arrival. Percy's accusation and the few unsmiling faces we passed lost their significance. We would find acceptance with the people who were worth knowing, and the rest could kick rocks.

I wished I could go back in time and tell the freaked-out Beck I'd been at the beginning of this journey that everything would work out. But knowing me, I wouldn't have believed

myself. And I supposed the journey, with all its ups and downs, made the ending more satisfying. After all, if we never took risks for each other, if we never had to bet on one another over everything else, then would we even really know what it meant to truly love?

We reached the table where Tucker, Laurie, Hunter, Clark, Bobbi, and Augustus had taken their seats.

“Hey, everyone, this is Beckett’s cousin, Fisher. He’s going to hang out with us tonight.”

“Hi, Fisher,” several of our friends said. “Glad you could join us.”

I gave a quick round of introductions as we took our seats, and Wes went to grab us some drinks. Fisher got stuck with a soda, since he wasn’t drinking age yet.

“So I guess the secret is all the way out, huh?” Clark said when Wes had returned and we’d all gotten settled. “Congrats.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Wes said. “We told the family, so it’s official now.”

“How did that go?” Laurie asked, his tone a little concerned, which made sense given his family’s reaction to his marriage to Tucker.

“Good,” Wes said.

“*Really* good,” I added. “We’re taking over Potter Landscaping as soon as all the paperwork is done.”

“That’s great!” Bobbi said. “You guys have worked hard for it.”

“Yeah, we have. But that’s not the biggest news.” Wes grinned and flashed his ring finger. “Beckett proposed. We’re getting married!”

Everyone exchanged confused looks.

“But I thought...” Clark said.

“You’re already married, aren’t you?” Augustus added.

But Tucker and Laurie just smiled as if they totally got it, which they probably did.

“Well, yeah,” Wes said, “but now we get to do it on purpose!”

Everyone laughed, and I slapped his chest, trying to pretend I was exasperated with him but too damn happy to drop my smile.

After that, the night was a mix of our usual friendly banter, trivia questions, and congratulations from well-wishers who’d heard the news that we weren’t just dating but were engaged/married. There seemed to be a bit of confusion over our status, but that was to be expected. I was a little confused too.

I leaned in and asked Wes, “Which are we, anyway? Married or engaged?”

He grinned. “Both, baby. We’re both.”

I laughed, feeling a little ridiculous, but in a good way. In a way that only Wes could bring out. Maybe most people wouldn’t want to do things backwards, getting married impulsively and *then* getting engaged, but we’d never been like most people. Wes was my bro and my fiancé and my husband. He was my everything, and it didn’t really matter when or how it happened, only that, against all odds, he was *mine*.

Garrett Rafferty stopped by the table, a tall, hulking presence as he waited quietly until we finished our conversation to turn to him. Then he smiled, his voice surprisingly soft. “I heard the rumors, but I wanted to wait until you were officially telling people. Congratulations on your engagement.”

Wes grinned and stood to give him a quick hug. “Thanks, man.”

Garrett squeezed my shoulder. “If you ever need anything, you just let me know.”

He was smiling, but there was a seriousness to his tone of voice. He was giving us a message of support. He’d have our

backs if needed.

I didn't know Garrett well, but he was Tucker's longtime friend and living with Hunter's brother. He wasn't a man who gave his word lightly. I knew that if we ever needed backup, he'd be there for us, and that made it a little easier to accept the few disappointed faces in the crowd.

"Don't I get an introduction?" Fisher asked, a playful pout in his words.

I took one look at the way he was gazing at Garrett. "No. Nope. Not happening, little fish."

He huffed in annoyance. "Rude."

Wes laughed. "Kevin would claw your eyes out. Don't even think about it."

As he spoke, Garrett's boyfriend sauntered up and tucked himself under Garrett's arm. "Whose eyes am I clawing out?"

"No one's," Garrett said. "We're all friends here."

Kevin narrowed his gaze at us all in suspicion, a little intimidating even dressed in a jean skirt and lavender sweater, or maybe he was intimidating because of that. No one had faced more scrutiny in our small town than Kevin, who was a femboy who often wore feminine clothing and moonlighted as a drag queen.

"If you say so," he finally said in a tone that promised he'd get all the details out of Garrett later. Then he turned a sunny smile our way. "So, hey, welcome to the club."

"What club is that?" Wes asked.

"The Hot Gossip of the Week Club," he said with a grin. "I remember when Garrett and I had everyone stirred up." He sighed dramatically. "They forgot all about us and moved on."

He was joking, but I appreciated the reminder that the attention would pass, because I really could do without all the stares.

Garrett chuckled. "I don't miss it."

"I won't either." I glanced at Wes. "But it's worth it."

Wes smiled softly at me. “Yeah, it is.”

The truth resonated in me, gaining strength as the night went on. I had nothing more to fear.

Wes and I were free to love one another, and no one and nothing would ever stand in our way again.

EPILOGUE



SIX MONTHS LATER

WES

I WAS JUST STEPPING OUT OF THE BATHROOM AFTER A SHOWER, steam billowing out behind me, when Beckett rushed into our bedroom. We'd moved into an actual house three weeks ago, and we'd chosen one with a large owner's suite with an attached bathroom—and space for a large, *sturdy* bed that we hopefully wouldn't break.

Beckett was sweaty and panting for breath, his T-shirt sticking to him, his red hair darkened at the temples, and his cute freckles standing out against deliciously flushed cheeks.

“Damn,” I murmured, reaching for him. “Is it time for the honeymoon yet?”

He dodged around me. “There won't be a honeymoon if you touch me right now. We're running late.” Beckett pulled his shirt over his head, his words muffled as he continued. “Besides, I'm filthy!”

“Well, you know I love my filthy slut,” I said playfully.

“Ha. Well, this filthy slut needs a shower, and you need to get your sexy ass into that tuxedo.”

I followed him into the bathroom, watching as he kicked off his shoes and shoved his jeans down, admiring the flex of his back muscles and the bunching of his glutes as he undressed and started the shower.

“Where were you anyway? I thought you just ran out to check on the cake?”

“I did,” he said. “But then I ran into Iola, and we got to talking...”

“Uh-oh. Was it another guilt trip?”

“Oh yeah.” He pulled the shower curtain aside and stepped under the spray. “She’s very disappointed I didn’t tell her I was into men. She *definitely* would have matched us up otherwise, because she knows a perfect match when she sees it!”

I laughed. “So...how does that explain you being all sweaty?”

He grimaced. “I sort of volunteered to mow her lawn real quick.”

“Seriously? On our *wedding day*?”

“I didn’t know how else to get out of the conversation! Mowing seemed quicker.”

I chuckled. “Well, that’s fitting. You got into the matchmaker mess by mowing, and now you’re getting out the same way.”

“Maybe,” he said, voice muffled by the fall of water. “Something tells me Iola has a *long* memory.”

He ducked his head under the water to shampoo, and I retreated to dress in the formal black tux hanging on my closet door. Beckett joined me soon enough, dressing in a navy blue tux fitted to his torso in all the right ways.

“You look stunning.”

His cheeks reddened. “Stop it.”

“It’s funny that you blush at that, but not when I call you a filthy slut.”

He laughed. “Shut up.”

I pulled him into my arms and cupped his face. “You’re my beautiful slut too, you know. You should own it.”

His eyes were warm. “You should put that in the vows.”

“Oh, I did. Don’t worry.”

He laughed and pushed me away to grab his shoes. “You better be joking.”

“I guess we’ll find out.”

“The honeymoon might be a little chilly if you do,” he warned, eyes narrowed.

I rubbed my hands together. “I can’t wait to get you back in the city of sin! This time I’m going to press you right up to one of those hotel windows and fuck you while the whole city watches.”

“Fucking hell,” Beckett muttered, pressing the heel of his hand to his crotch. “Can we save the dirty talk for the actual honeymoon at least.”

I grinned. “I’ll try, but no promises. You make me want to say dirty things to you all the time.”

“One of the things I love about you,” he said. “You look really gorgeous too, Wes. I should say it more often.”

“That’s okay,” I said easily. “You show me every time I touch you.”

“So modest...”

I collected my wallet and phone, and Beckett returned to the bathroom to style his hair. It felt strange to know that in a few minutes we’d be exchanging vows of love and commitment. My heart skipped a beat each time I thought of it.

I wasn’t nervous. I knew I loved Beck, and we were *already* married and had been for months. But there was a simmering anticipation. A thrill to knowing I could finally share this important moment with our family and friends.

Beckett stepped out of the bathroom. “Are you ready?”

“More than ever.”

He smiled at me, affection and warmth emanating from him. “Then let’s go get married on purpose.”



BECKETT

WE DROVE to Beaver Hole Park for our wedding ceremony. It was more a celebration of our existing marriage than a legal proceeding, so we didn't need an officiant. But it was a chance to exchange vows that we could remember clearly, words of love and commitment that we both meant because we'd planned this wedding rather than leaping into it impulsively.

Not that I could regret my actions in Vegas *too much*. They had led me to a future with the only man I'd ever wanted.

As we drove through downtown, we passed the street beautification project in progress. Wes's plans were coming together beautifully despite his anxiety about designing something on his own. Small ornamental trees, benches, and brightly flowering perennials gave the street a vibrancy that made it feel alive. It was similar to our downtown main street, but with just enough differences to complement it rather than copy it.

We continued on through the Dix neighborhood, where the house renovations were finally complete, creating two blocks of lovely but affordable homes, and circled around to a parking area on the other side of Beaver Hole.

It was spring now, and everything was blooming so beautifully that I felt a rush of pride.

This park had been our test. As work partners, but as lovers too. We found our footing while we planted the flowering shrubs around the gazebo where we'd exchange vows. Just as the plants' roots took hold, so did ours.

Those roots had already been there as we became brothers and friends. But they'd branched out, growing even stronger as we bloomed into lovers and husbands.

White folding chairs were set out in rows in front of the gazebo, just one solid block with no rows between, since we were *all* family. Not just Potters or Monroes, but every single

person in Granville. Because that's what this town was, a big, extended family full of close, giving friends, annoying pests, and nosy grandmas.

People were already mingling as we made our way across the lush grass.

Lula Miller and Paula Goodman were over by the picnic table, setting down gifts wrapped in sparkly paper. I could already guess what was in those, and judging by Wes's smirk, he could too.

Darren Rafferty and his boyfriend, the reporter Linc Tate, were off to one side, chatting with a small group of friends, including the assistant football coach, Dawson Woods, and his boyfriend Evan Moore. Lyle Jennings gave us a nod, and his more effusive boyfriend Truman Scott waved with a big smile on his face.

Wes had told me that Lyle helped him through some of those tough days when we were both coming to terms with what we really wanted from each other. I'd have to make time to thank him—and Laurie, too—for their support while we floundered.

Beyond the group of friends were Elmer and Agatha Boyd—owners of the news blog in town, as well as two stores downtown. They'd remarried about a year ago after many years as bitter exes and already defied the odds by *staying* married this time, though they appeared to be bickering about a car. Anna and her new boyfriend, Derek, watched with wide eyes. Iola had told me at length this morning about the new match she'd made with Anna and how well it had turned out, so at least Anna had gotten a happy ending too, and Iola had a feather to put in her cap even if I had scuttled her matchmaking plans for me.

Wes and I veered away to avoid getting ensnared in Agatha and Elmer's argument only to stumble directly into the path of LeRoy and Eugene.

"Ah, the grooms to be," Eugene said with a smile. "Congratulations."

“Thanks,” Wes said.

“Don’t get too used to being the men of the hour,” LeRoy said, eyes sparkling. “I’m going to drag Eugene up to that altar next!”

“Oh, are you engaged?”

Eugene appeared to be a little flustered. “Uh...”

LeRoy dropped to one knee. “Genie, will you make me the happiest man ever and marry me in this beautiful park?”

Eugene gasped, looking horrified. “LeRoy, you can’t propose at someone else’s wedding! It’s so tactless!”

“Life is too short for tact!” LeRoy responded.

Ever since he’d had a near-death experience on the operating table a few years ago, LeRoy had approached life with a *carpe diem* philosophy.

Wes laughed. “It’s okay, Eugene. We don’t mind. Do we, Beck?”

I was smiling so wide it hurt. “Nope. We’re happy for you. Assuming you’re going to say yes?”

Eugene’s eyes widened, and he turned back to LeRoy. “Yes! Yes, of course! I’ll marry you, LeLe.”

“Thank goodness, muffin,” LeRoy said, then groaned. “Now, can you all help me get up? My old knee is not cooperating.”

Wes darted forward to help LeRoy to his feet and limp to a chair, a beaming Eugene settling beside him.

We finally made it to the front row, where Mom, Dad, Andi, Colton, and a few of the crew members were finding their seats.

Mom rushed over and pulled me into an embrace. “Oh, honey, everything is so beautiful!”

Dad was a few steps behind her, a relaxed contentment to him. Retirement seemed to be suiting him, though he checked in with us every now and then to talk shop. “You really did an

amazing job with this park. It makes the perfect setting for a wedding.”

“You both look great too,” Andi said.

My mother had moved on to hugging Wes, sounding weepy as she spoke into his shoulder.

“It’s going to be a beautiful ceremony. I’m so glad you two decided to share this with us.”

Wes patted her back. “Well, we couldn’t rob our mom of a chance to see her sons get married, could we?”

My heart skipped. I’d never heard Wes call her anything but Carol before. It was clear he’d caught my mother by surprise too.

She froze for just a moment and then the biggest smile spread over her face even as her eyes spilled over with tears. She pressed a hand to Wes’s cheek. “Thank you.”

It wasn’t clear if she was thanking him for the wedding itself or calling her mom, or perhaps both.

Dad handed her a handkerchief. “Come on, Carol. If you keep hugging the boys, they’ll never get married.”

He shot us a wink as he guided her into a chair and we continued toward the gazebo.

“You called her Mom,” I said softly. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“I did, though,” Wes said. “I got used to calling her Carol, but she’s been my mom in my heart for a long time. It doesn’t mean she’s replacing my mother. I can have more than one.”

“Of course,” I agreed. “I’ve definitely had more than one dad, though I have to admit, this one is a major upgrade.”

Wes laughed. “You finally believe that, huh?”

I smiled sheepishly, knowing that I’d held too much doubt in my heart for far too long. Maybe my insecurities were helped along by Nathan’s original plans to give the business to Wes rather than both of us, but now I could see all the ways he’d shown me his love and support.

“Yeah, I do.”

“Hey, save those words for the altar,” Wes teased. “Speaking of...are you ready to marry me, bro?”

I gazed into his dark eyes full of love and devotion and knew without a doubt that I’d made the right choice to take a risk on this man.

“Eh, well, we’re already married, so it would be kind of awkward to say no now.”

He laughed and bent to whisper in my ear, “You’re gonna pay for that later, brat.”

Anticipation shivered through me as his heavy, intent gaze met mine, promising all sorts of delicious punishment once we were alone.

I hurried up the gazebo steps, eager for what came next.

Not just Wes’s sexy retribution or the vows we’d share in front of our friends and family to celebrate the impulsive but wonderful marriage we’d started in Vegas all those months ago.

I couldn’t wait for every day of the life we would share together.

As brothers.

As best friends.

And as husbands.



*CURIOUS ABOUT FISHER and his man troubles? Find his story, [Dock Tease](#), in my upcoming series, *Swallow Cove*!*

NEXT UP, Logan—the seasonal landscaper from Wes and Beckett’s crew—will make his way north to Christmas Falls. Watch him find love in [Grinch Kisses](#)!

THANK YOU FOR READING!

I hope you enjoyed Wes and Beckett's romance, and the whole little world I created in Granville, Nebraska. This concludes the series...for now.

It's possible I'll return at some point or write a bonus story for a box set in the future. Never say never!

But I am very excited to follow Fisher back to his home in the Ozarks, where my new series, Swallow Cove, will be set. If you think a small Nebraska town is quirky, wait until I get my hands on a fictional little lake town!

It will be fun to create another colorful place with great characters, close friendships, and swoony romance, so I hope you'll come along for the ride!

If you're new to the Granville setting, make sure you explore the Games We Play series, where it all started! There have been so many great characters and love stories along the way. I'll really miss this gossipy little place, but I look forward to the next adventure!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DJ Jamison writes romances about everyday life and extraordinary love featuring a variety of queer characters, from gay to bisexual to asexual. DJ grew up in the Midwest in a working-class family, and those influences can be found in her writing through characters coping with real-life problems. DJ spent more than a decade in the newspaper industry before chasing her first dream to write fiction. She's spent a lifetime reading and continues to avidly devour her fellow authors' books each night. She lives in Kansas with her husband, two sons, one snake, and a sadistic cat named Birdie.

DJ is active in her Facebook group, [DJ and Company](#), as well as [Queer Romance Fan Club](#).

You can also connect with her on other social media platforms.



BOOKS BY DJ JAMISON

Rules We Break

Don't Date A DILF: As a teacher, I live by this rule. But when matchmaking drives me to fake date Hunter Rhodes, resisting this man may be the one test I can't pass.

Don't Mess With The Ex: I've lived by one simple rule for the last twenty years. But when Laurence Kensington III shows up to tell me we're still married, we'll both be put to the test.

Don't Bang Your Stepbro: I'm not one for rules, but not hooking up with your stepbrother is kind of a no-brainer. Until I wake up with him in a Vegas hotel wearing nothing but a wedding ring.

Games We Play

Two Truths and a Lyle: When our friends use a party game to drop a truth bomb that my BFF and I are in love, the drunken kiss that follows opens my eyes to feelings I never thought possible.

Never Have I Evan: When a party game reveals I still have my V-card, it's embarrassing. But when the sexy new guy in town wants to coach me in the art of flirtation, it's game on.

Truth or Darren: When I push my ex-girlfriend's brother too far with a dare, I'm the one to pay the price. A very sexy but utterly confusing tongue kiss with a guy.

7 Minutes in Kevin: When my dream man steps into the closet during a make-out game, I jump at the opportunity to get my hands on him. It might be a terrible idea, but how often will I get a chance to kiss my friend's sexy dad?

Mistle-Joe Kisses: A bit of mistletoe sparks an amazing night between coworkers. But will the prickly office manager Augustus bend his rules for love? A Games We Play/Rules We Break cross-over novella.

Thrust Into Love

Swiped By My Dad's Best Friend: Cooper is a frat boy, general screwup, and... Daddy's boy?

Matched By My Rival: Simon is an ex-football star, a bitter rival, and... falling for the enemy?

Tapped By My Roommate: Ethan is a shy geek, newly bi-curious, and... propositioning his gay roommate?

Sexted By Santa: Christian Kringle is a college professor, reluctant Santa, and... fake dating his neighbor?

Marital Bliss

Surprise Groom: Caleb is shocked to learn his family could lose Bliss Island Resort—unless he can pull off a marriage of convenience with an investor's gay, go-go dancing son.

Wrangling a Groom: Wyatt and Diego made a childhood pact to get married one day. But they grew up, life got messy, and young love wasn't enough. When Diego visits the ranch, they have one more chance... Can they get it right in time to fulfill that marriage pact after all?

Nobody's Groom: A sexy ranch hand and a naïve country boy ignite each other's tempers—and passions—in this bisexual awakening, cowboy romance.

Faking a Groom: Avery Kinkaid has been repressing his deepest urges for as long as he can remember. But when his father pushes him too far, he's ready to call his bluff. All he needs is a groom, and his first love is the perfect man for the role of fake fiancé.

Hearts and Health

Heart Trouble: Nurse Ben Griggs is leery of trusting his heart to anyone, let alone a thrill-seeking patient, but he agrees to a series of dates, if only to prevent more injuries!

Bedside Manner: Zane Kavanaugh is still recovering from a traumatic coming out, but he finds himself drawn to the calm, collected, much *older* ER doctor who treated him.

Urgent Care: Surgeon Trent Cavendish returns to his hometown—and his first love. Xavier isn't the kid he remembers, but a sexy man in lace *and* a competent nursing student. And neither version of the man is going to make it easy for Trent to find his second chance at love.

Room for Recovery: When Beau is bullied, teen heartthrob Wade comes heroically to his rescue. But their growing attraction won't come without painful truths.

Surprise Delivery: A thrill-seeking doctor teaches a workaholic administrator how to live in the moment before the responsibility of a baby arrives, and in return he finds love after loss.

Orderly Affair: A bi-curious orderly explores with a geeky lab tech, but between Ian's reluctance to come out and Callum's annoying ex, they'll have to work for their HEA in this hookups-to-lovers romance.

Operation Makeover: A cute but insecure X-ray tech and a gorgeous hairdresser join forces for a makeover that brings them both a love they never saw coming.

Rapid Response: A firefighter discovers a new side to his sexuality with a bossy male paramedic. Their chemistry is red-hot, but Sean will have to come to terms—not just with his attraction to a man, but with his desperate need to please.

Standalone Romances

Yours for the Holiday: Remy loves to hate his brother's best friend. Or maybe he hates to love him. Either way, sparks fly when the two share a room during a holiday vacation.

All I Want is You: One kiss under the mistletoe destroyed a friendship. Will another Christmas kiss remake it into something better?

Five Fake Dates: How many fake dates will it take to decide if your best friend should be your boyfriend, and whether one kiss was a fluke or only the beginning of a bisexual discovery? Five, obviously!

Love by Number: Aidan doesn't have the best record with relationships, but he's had a lifelong love affair with baseball. When he needs a ride to the World Series, though, he must rely on a sexy artist who is as spontaneous as Aidan is rigid. Will their differences add up to love?

Want more?

This is just a sampling of my books. See my [full catalogue](#)