



FROM

the
Ashes

denver shaw

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DENVER SHAW

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SYNOPSIS

Can true love rise from the ashes of heartbreak?

Myles

After suffering the tragic loss of my wife, my lone goal was to raise our son to be a man she would be proud of.

Romance was the furthest thing from my mind, and unfortunately cooking was not on my mind either.

When Christmas dinner goes up in flames, a firefighter who looks like he stepped right off a calendar bursts through my door and all my priorities change in an instant.

New feelings emerge as I find myself attracted to a man for the first time.

But Tristan is a much younger man who thrives on no-strings-attached hook-ups.

How can I risk my heart, and my son's, by bringing someone into our lives knowing he's going to leave?

Tristan

I don't believe in labels, or denying myself sexual pleasure with a consenting partner, regardless of gender.

Want to hook up with a hot firefighter?

I'm your guy.

But relationships aren't my thing... until a fateful Christmas Day fire brings Myles into my life.

I thought I could ease the widower into the dating scene and guide him through his bi-awakening.

Yet as soon as I see him dating other guys I realize this is no fling.

I want him all to myself.

For Shay W.

and

*For those fortunate enough to find their second-chance
soulmate, and for those patiently awaiting their own love
story.*

Dear Readers,

In the midst of a world filled with turmoil and challenges, I wanted to create a love story that would span a year—a tale of hope, healing, and a second chance at love. That's how this story, an age-gap romance, came to life.

This story is a departure from high drama, focusing instead on a light-hearted, low-angst romance. It's a journey of two souls finding solace in one another and discovering that love can mend even the deepest wounds.

As you dive into the pages of this romance, I want to provide a content warning: one of our characters battles haunting nightmares, while the other is on the slow path to healing after losing his beloved wife. This story delves into the complexities of grief and the beauty of resilience. It reminds us that, even in our darkest hours, love can rekindle our spirits and light our way forward.

Thank you for joining me on this heartwarming journey, and I hope this tale provides you with moments of solace, warmth, and—most importantly—a renewed belief in the power of love.

Warm regards,

Denver

CHAPTER 1



TRISTAN

Christmas Eve - 2022

I'm fucking exhausted.

Working three 12-hour shifts in a row and then putting in a 24 has been tough. No regrets, though. I would have put in even more, but my chief was having none of it. Not for the first time, she'd used her authority to convince the brass to send me home for some mandatory rack time.

I *need* to get some shut-eye right the fuck now, but I'll never admit it to her. Steph would never let me live it down.

I chuckle just thinking about my bestie. She's a recently-divorced lesbian and ten years older than I am. Despite the age difference, she's also ten times the man/human/firefighter I could ever be. We couldn't *be* more opposite, and I love her for it.

Steph always means well, so I don't hold any teasing against her. Truth is, if I don't get a sliver of rest after those hours I clocked, I won't be effective at my job. Worse yet, I could put the lives of my fellow firefighters at risk if I don't bring my A-game to the job. Holidays are crazy in Tennessee, but I guess I could say the same for anywhere else. The holidays are always super hectic for emergency services, especially the Christmas season. Not surprisingly, this week has seen an endless slew of drunk drivers, home DIY accidents, and, of course, kitchen fires.

There have been so many kitchen fires this week, it's unfucking-believable.

After tossing my keys on the center table, I stalk into the kitchen. Skimming the contents of the refrigerator, I open a container and sniff the cold takeout, not at all sure I can trust my sense of smell for this sniff test. Taking another careful breath, I cross my fingers for luck and give silent approval before putting the box in the microwave and setting the timer.

Meanwhile, I do another sniff test, but this time on my armpits. I'd showered at the fire station, doing my best to wash off the stink of this selfish, dangerous holiday. Then I'd thrown on some sweats and a department-issued t-shirt for the drive home.

Today was brutal. First thing this morning, we were called to a domestic assault situation. Even after doing this job for so long, I'm still not used to how terrible some people can behave. Apparently, the victim's partner was pissed off because his credit card bill had some unexpected expenses. According to the aggressor, the victim had bought some Christmas gifts and gone overboard with the spending. Not to be outdone, he'd gifted her with some broken ribs and a black eye. Obviously, I don't know all the details, but I simply cannot understand why everyone thinks Christmas brings out the best in people. From what I can see, all it seems to do is bring out the worst.

It's bullshit.

Don't get me wrong, I'm no Grinch. I love what I do, and I put in the time and effort to do my job to the best of my ability. When I was fourteen, I lost my parents in a house fire. Yeah, I know it's a clichéd origin story, but it is what it is. My grandma took me in after my parents died. When she passed eight months later, off I went to foster care. So, I was pretty used to being on my own for the holidays. Since this is the busiest time of the year for us, firefighters are rarely afforded the opportunity of time off, so I try to cover as many shifts as I can. I work double and sometimes triple shifts. Since I don't have anyone to come home to, prepare Christmas dinner for, or exchange gifts with, and no non-firehouse family to hug and say "love you" to, I enjoy being able to help my fellow firefighters be with theirs. I figure it's the least I can do.

The ding of the microwave rouses me from my musings. I don't even bother to take a seat, just remain standing and shovel the takeout into my mouth, barely registering its taste. All I want is to fill my stomach before it eats itself. Mentally sifting through my medicine cabinet, I assure myself that I have *Imodium A-D* and *Pepto Bismol*, just in case my sense of smell—or taste, for that matter—fail me. I've got no room in my life for food poisoning and spending half the night in the bathroom. When I hit that bed, I've no intention of waking up before I'm damned good and ready.

I dig out a can of beer from the refrigerator. As I chug the brew, I survey my apartment from where I stand in the kitchen, my heart swelling with pride. This has been my home ever since I became a firefighter eight years ago. The rent isn't cheap, but it's not so much I have to bust my balls or stress about paying it on time. The apartment's not fancy by any means, but it's mine, and I love every inch of it.

The dining area is just off the kitchen with a cozy, round table surrounded by four wooden chairs. A bright pendant light hangs above the table, illuminating the space and creating a warm, inviting atmosphere. Across from it, there's a tall bookcase filled with my favorite novels—gay romance novels, to be exact—and cookbooks. A few small cactus plants on the windowsill bring a bit of nature inside.

To the right, my living room is furnished with an L-shaped couch and a few comfortable armchairs, allowing plenty of comfy seating for the very rare occasions when I have friends over. A modern area rug anchors the room, while a few cute throw pillows add a hint of vibrancy.

I exhale a long “ahhhh” after emptying the can, and another wave of exhaustion washes over me. Burping, I drop the empty can into the recycling bin. I barely muster the strength to make a routine inspection of my apartment. Old habits die hard, and this is a habit I'll never break. *Ever*. Fourteen years isn't long enough to forget the fire that claimed my parents' lives happened in our home.

With the inspection complete and tiredness weighing me down, I'm tempted to bypass my nightly routine. But this is

another thing I refuse to overlook. I enter the bathroom, take a piss, and wash my hands. While I brush my teeth, I stare at my reflection in the mirror above the sink, the image gazing back at me looking tired and dull.

Then I shuffle my way to my bedroom. Since I'd passed the second sniff test, I didn't need another shower, despite the faint smoke smell lingering on my skin. Passing out face first in the bed, the last thing I remember is the fresh scent of laundry detergent on the bedsheet.

CHAPTER 2



MYLES

Three hundred and fourteen days.

Three hundred and fourteen days have passed since Valentine's Day, yet the Cara-sized hole in my heart is still raw, still aching.

Three hundred and fourteen freaking days since my world turned upside down. Much like the Earth, I feel as if my whole world is tilting on its axis. But all I really want is to feel grounded and stable.

When Cara and I said our vows eighteen years ago, I'd never expected I'd be without her. If I'd only known that she wouldn't be here...

I huff out a breath.

Three. Hundred. And. Fourteen. Days!

And all the shoulda, coulda, wouldas in the world won't bring her back to me, to us... to Phoenix and me.

But I miss her so much!

Cara would have been in her element at this time of year, just like she'd been for the last eighteen joyous Christmases. Being a professional chef meant that even at home she'd cook up a beautiful storm of varying cuisines, everything from Greek, to French, to Caribbean, and everything in between. And I was the happy husband who reveled in my wife's love and care, never more so than during her favorite time of the year. And, of course, I was her able assistant, making myself handy whenever she needed me.

Even after Phoenix was born seven years ago, and she wanted her career to take a backseat to our family, Cara never lost her passion for cooking. Big, over-the-top Christmas feasts had become our family tradition. Cara's family was, of course, always on the guest list. And being a sports agent, I obviously had known many athletes, so Cara insisted they and their families also have an open invitation to all of our Christmas celebrations. She didn't believe anyone should be alone at Christmas.

You'd think after eighteen Christmases as a firsthand witness to my wife's culinary prowess, I would've been able to come up with a decent meal to celebrate the holiday. But instead I'm a fish out of water, floundering in the kitchen and making a mess of things.

My eyes scan the modest kitchen, a sharp contrast to the top-of-the-line appliances we'd had before Cara was taken from me. The U-shaped layout is a good choice for the small space since it accommodates a lot of cabinets, and you can never have too many of those. The apartment is small, which I've come to appreciate. It was getting too hard for me to live in the large house Cara and I had bought in the hopes of someday having a large family. Both Cara and I had been only children. She wanted a big family to bring noise and joy into our home. And I was the lucky guy who wanted nothing more than to give the love of my life the world. I guess that's yet another dream of mine that will be left unfulfilled.

It didn't make sense to keep the house, so I sold it not long after Cara died and moved to this apartment complex in the city. This allowed me to take the year off of work and focus on learning to be a single parent. More than anything, though, I wanted to move out of the house that was supposed to be our forever home because I couldn't stand to be there without her.

The last three hundred and fourteen days have been rocky, to say the least. It's been a life full of change. Phoenix and I have withdrawn from the world, for sure. And going from having a demanding, competitive career to being a full-time parent is a huge shift. I have a lot of regrets, so many things left unsaid and undone. I am, however, definitely grateful for

the things I've learned over the past three hundred and fourteen days. Unfortunately, none of those things was learning to cook. I used to be the happy helper, content to bask in my wife's love and her home-cooked meals. This Christmas, it's up to me to get the cooking done.

I huff out another breath.

Enough about me contemplating the life that was and never will be again. I won't let the Madden family's traditions fall apart. Keeping things simple while still including all of Phoenix's favorite foods is the plan. The sliced ham with roasted vegetables and the creamy macaroni and cheese are done. But I forgot to defrost the turkey! So, change of plans. I'll have to rustle up some roasted chicken with brown gravy and hope Phoenix won't be too disappointed. I still want to add one or two more dishes after I put the chicken in the oven.

"Dad?"

Shoot. Phoenix is home. The banging on the door means he's probably been knocking for a while. He knows not to bang on the door, because we don't want to disturb our neighbors. I was apparently so lost in my memories, I didn't hear him.

I'm sweaty, and I'm not done cooking. Swiping my phone off the counter, I check the time. *Where did the time go?*

With a sweeping gaze around the kitchen, I take in the dishes that are stacked a mile high in the sink, the clutter on the counter, and the four burners alight on the stove. So many things still left to do! *Nooooo. I'm not ready.* In my head, I say this in a perfect imitation of Kevin Hart.

"Coming, son," I call out to him. When I open the door, my boy runs into my open arms.

As George and Cynthia walk through the door, their presence fills the room.

"Good evening, Myles, and Merry Christmas." Cynthia, with her warm smile that could light up a room, possesses a timeless beauty. Her emerald eyes twinkle. She's not trying to defy aging, but she seems to have made a pact with it,

embracing the wrinkles as markers of the laughter and happiness.

“Merry Christmas, Cynthia, George.” I smile.

“Merry Christmas, son.” George’s posture, though slightly stooped by time, speaks of a life well-lived and shared with his loving wife.

We greet each other with hugs and kisses, warm like the Caribbean sunshine. But beneath the warmth there’s this weight of sadness, like an unseen force of gravity, pulling down on our hearts and reminding us that someone precious has been lost.

“Thanks for bringing Nix home.”

“You’re welcome,” my mother-in-law says.

“Bye, Grandma. Bye, Grandpa.”

“Bye, Phoenix,” they chorus. Cynthia ruffles my boy’s curls while George gently bops him on his button nose.

And with smiles, they both spin on their heels and leave.

My arms tighten around my son, and he buries his face deeper into my midsection. “How’s my little man?”

“Good, Dad.” Phoenix raises his head, staring at me with espresso-brown eyes the exact same shade as his mother’s. I know he’s trying to gauge how I’m truly feeling. “And you?”

One thing I love—one of many—about my son is how protective he is of me, and how concerned he is about my feelings. Ruffling his curly, dark-brown hair, almost identical to the shade of his eyes, I say, “I’m doing great. But I messed up with dinner, so we’re having chicken instead of turkey.”

Phoenix smacks his lips together. “I’ll eat anything you cook, Dad.” Then, his eyes become guarded, troubled.

My heart hammers in my chest. Sinking to my knees so I can look at him right in the eye, I ask, “What’s wrong, son? Talk to me. You know you can tell me anything.” I smile to reassure him.

“I saw Grandma crying, and Grandpa was sad all day.” When I don’t respond right away, he says, “Dad?”

Clasping his hand in mine, I lead my boy to the living room. I sit with him by the softly-glowing Christmas tree, its lights casting a warm, flickering embrace around us.

“Nix,” I say, my voice trembling. “I need to talk to you about something important.”

Nix’s eyes cautiously meet mine. “What, Dad?”

“Remember, son,” I begin, my hand gently squeezing his tiny one. “This Christmas is different.”

He furrows his brow, confused, before understanding quickly dawns.

I take a deep breath, struggling to find the right words. “It’s the first Christmas without your mommy.”

My son’s eyes well with tears. He whispers, voice cracking, “She’s in heaven now.” Nix sniffles, his lower lip trembling. “Why, Dad? It isn’t fair. I’m not ready for her to be gone.”

I hug him tightly, tears filling my own eyes. “I know, son. I’m not ready for her to be gone, either. But sometimes the people we love very much have to leave us, whether they want to or not. And it hurts.”

He buries his face in my shoulder, his small frame trembling with sobs.

I stroke his hair, fighting back my own tears. “You remember how much your grandparents loved Mommy, right?”

He raises his head and nods, wiping his tears with the back of his hand.

“This is Grandma and Grandpa’s first Christmas without their daughter, and it’s really difficult for them,” I say, trying to explain it to him gently. “They miss her just like we do, but it’s a little different for them.” I rub my son’s back softly to console him. “She was their little girl. They raised her, loved her, and watched her grow up to become your mommy. They

love you; you're their only grandchild. But it's hard for them. They love spending time with you, but they can't help missing your mommy at the same time."

Nix looks at me with wet eyes. "We should make next Christmas special for them, Dad. Mommy would want that."

I smile through my tears, grateful for my wise-beyond-his-years son. "That's right, Nix. And we'll definitely do that. Next Christmas will be a tribute to your beautiful mommy." I plant a kiss on his forehead.

We make our way to the kitchen. Nix hops onto the stool and watches while I prepare the chicken. I can tell he's tired, but it looks like watching me work is soothing to him.

After combining the thyme, salt, pepper, and paprika, I spread the spice rub on the outside of the chicken and in the cavity. Then I place the bird in a shallow roasting pan.

Pointing to the strips of bacon, I say, "You think you can help me arrange them over the breast portion of the chicken?"

My son giggles. Yes, the word "breast" tickles him, like I knew it would. Cara and I never shied away from teaching him the real names of body parts—no weird monikers for our boy. But certain words still make him laugh. It warms my heart to hear that beautiful sound. And it seems to cause a chain reaction, because I'm also chuckling now. That's another thing I miss about my wife; she always had a way of bringing a smile to our faces, no matter what kind of day we'd had.

All too soon our laughter dies, highlighting Cara's absence even more acutely.

When Phoenix finishes with the chicken, I put it into the oven to roast. "Good job, son."

"Thanks, Dad."

"You want to go play with your video games for a little while so I can tidy up and take a quick shower?"

Phoenix's eyes light up. "For real?"

Smiling, I say, "Mmhm. We'll eat when I'm done."

No sooner than the words leave my lips, Phoenix is already scampering off to the living room.

Turning down the burners, I begin making the kitchen more presentable. It's times like these where I really miss my wife's influence; she ran the kitchen like a well-oiled machine. She used to say the only dishes we should need to wash after our meal are the ones we used for eating and serving that meal. Her mantra was "*clean as you go.*" But me? I just go... and pay the price later with a sink full of dirty dishes.

It's those little things... the seemingly insignificant little things I miss about my wife. The little things I'll never get to experience again and again. All I have now are the memories.

I'm not sure how long it took, but I finally finished tidying up. Before heading to the bathroom, I make sure Nix is doing okay.

I huff out a breath as the water cascades over my body.

Thoughts crowd my brain as I soap my body with Cara's favorite scented soap. How long will it take me to get used to her absence from my life? There are so many milestones Cara wanted to be here for that she'll now be missing. Having more kids. Going on family cruises. Our kids heading off to college. Enjoying being empty nesters. Helping with our grandkids. Our retirement. She was going to miss them all.

The shrill beeping of the smoke alarm jolts me from my musings.

I can hear Nix's frightened wails above the sound of the alarm.

A surge of fear rushes through my entire body.

What the hell is going on?

With my heart galloping out of my chest, I grab the towel from the rack and dart out of the bathroom. Feet slipping on the tiled floor, I wrap the towel around my waist and rush out into the hallway.

Looks like I'm never going to pay back all the bad karma I've racked up in my life.

CHAPTER 3



TRISTAN

I sit bolt upright in my bed with a strangled scream, tangled in sheets soaked with sweat. My heart drums a frantic beat. The same nightmare that has haunted me for almost a year flashes through my mind again, and I feel a cold sweat break out across my forehead.

The dream always starts the same way.

The sky is crystal clear, and there's a slight chill in the air. The fresh scent of leaves and flowers floods my senses. I'm one of the first on the scene of an accident. A black, '97 Honda Civic has missed a curve in the road and slammed through the guard railings. The car is now teetering over the edge of the bridge, the river over 100 feet below is foaming white with rage, frothing from bank to bank. Our sirens blare as we navigate through a maze of white lines painted on black asphalt.

Fuck.

The last vestiges of the dream still try to hold me under, as if I'm a drowning man struggling to break the surface of a turbulent sea. And then finally, *finally* I emerge from the watery depths, leaving behind the horrifying images in the dream and embracing reality once again.

Still a bit uneasy from the dream, my mind replays one of my personal mantras: *It was just a nightmare. I can't change anything. Today's a new day.*

Trying to calm my racing heart, I take deep breaths in... and out... in... and out.

I feel like I still fucking stink of smoke. Guess I should have showered last night before falling into bed. Fucking smoke is all over me. And the fucking TV is too loud. Why is it so damned loud? I don't even remember leaving it on.

I try to take another deep, calming breath, but I'm having trouble getting enough air into my lungs. Wait. Hold up.

I didn't leave the TV on.

It's an alarm. A smoke alarm!

And the smell of smoke isn't coming from my sweat-damp skin. Smoke is slowly filling my apartment.

Between the flush of adrenaline and my well-trained muscle memory, I'm on my feet and moving before I can even fully grasp the situation.

Running into the corridor, I quickly identify which of my neighbors' alarms is going off. Banging on the door, I announce myself with a shout of, "It's the fire department," out of habit.

Honestly? I don't know anything about *any* of my neighbors. Because of my demanding work schedule and general lack of interest in forging human connections, it's no surprise when I don't recognize the man who opens the door. I definitely think I would've remembered someone like him if I'd seen him in the hallways. There's no time for that now, though, as I brush past him and into the smoke-filled apartment, the acrid scent of burning grease stinging my nostrils.

I was born to be a firefighter, and I've trained for scenarios exactly like this. Ignoring the frantic man and crying child, I locate the grease fire that's smoking them out. After turning off the burner, I locate a metal lid—which is relatively easy to do in the tidy kitchen—and quickly cover the large pan. I barely flinch when I burn my hand a little in the process. This isn't my first rodeo, of course. Moving over to the cabinets, I manage to find a half-empty box of baking soda to throw over the whole mess on the stove to prevent any straggling flames from spreading. Then I open the windows to fan out the worst

of the smoke and reset the smoke alarm. Hopefully, this will help to calm the kid, who's still screaming his head off. Honestly, it had been kind of a toss-up as to who had been screaming louder, the alarm or him. Sweeping my eyes around, I'm confident the apartment is now safe, and there's no need to call an engine out. Now that the air isn't so thick with smoke, I notice a small burn on the boy's hand, one not so different from my own.

"We need to go. Now!" My voice crackles like lightning, conveying the urgency of the situation.

The man notices my casual clothes but is too frazzled to question if I really am from the fire department as I'd announced. He didn't even question where the hell I was taking him and his son.

I hustle the man and boy out of their apartment and into mine so I can get them cleaned up and into some fresher air. Even though some smoke had made its way into my apartment, it smells like a goddamn paradise compared to theirs.

"I—I don't want to impose." The huskiness of his voice does strange things to me. I'm not sure if it's his natural timbre or a result of the smoke in his apartment, but I'm guessing it's not the latter.

Pointing to his kid, I say, "You don't think I should treat his burn?"

The man looks at the boy's hand and jolts, his eyes widening. "Ohgod, ohgod, ohgod."

He. Loses. His. Shit. Right before our eyes. Seeing at his son's burned hand seems to be the last crack needed to crumble his tremulous composure.

He'd been so freaked out about the fire that he hadn't noticed his son had been burned.

"I'm a terrible father."

"Dad—"

"What kind of father doesn't know his son got burned?"

“Dad, it’s—”

“Sir?” I ask him, trying to intervene since it seems the man is so caught up in his breakdown that he can’t even hear his son.

“What kind of man am I? I failed my wife!”

“Sir!” I try again, a bit more forcefully.

“What kind of—”

“Sir!” I bark, urgency infusing my voice, halting him in his tracks. “You. Need. To. Stop! You’re a good man, sir. You’re not a terrible father. You’re not a terrible husband. If you think you’ve done something wrong, I’m sure your wife will forgive you when she gets home.”

His eyes, glazed with terror, meet mine. It’s the worst thing I could’ve said. His shoulders tremble, and he breaks down completely, blaming himself for this fiery chaos he could not have prevented.

What. The. Fuck!

I watch the tears stream down his face, my heart aching. It’s never easy to witness people shatter like this, no matter how long I’ve been on the job. Dealing with people in the aftermath of a crisis is a major part of my job, a very important part. But I usually have my full gear on—not sweats and a t-shirt—to serve as a kind of buffer, or armor if you will, between me and the situation. And the civilian in question is normally not half naked and crying in my living room. To say I’m feeling awkward is a fucking understatement.

Yet I can’t help but notice his rugged handsomeness. His rich pale skin, which contrasts beautifully with his luscious dark hair flecked with gray, gives him a striking resemblance to George Clooney in his Danny Ocean era. But right now, his looks don’t matter; his pain does.

“Sir,” I say in a tone that I hope will soothe him, “I promise, everything’s gonna be fine. You gotta hang in there.”

What comes out of the man’s mouth next amounts to a garbled story letting me know his wife is dead, and it’s his and

his son's first Christmas alone.

His words set the kid off again. This is a good thing, though, because it brings my attention back to the most important thing: the boy's burned hand. I need to calm him down so I can see the extent of his injury.

Time for me to go into work mode. In my opinion, it's always easier to deal with kids. Call me weird, but I think it's easier to make them feel better.

Kneeling before the boy, I say, "You doing okay, buddy?"

Sniffling, the kid nods his head.

"What's your name?"

"Phoenix."

The man is still inconsolable, sobbing and sniffing, but he isn't in any danger. My attention has to be on the boy first. I need to allay his fears.

"Phoenix, when I was a little older than you are, I was in a terrible fire, and I was scared too. But now I'm a firefighter. It's okay to be scared, you know. But you might feel safer if you learn what to do in case of a fire." I show him my hand and watch as his eyes widen. "Yep, we've got matching burns from being heroes. So here's the plan—Are you listening, Phoenix?"

The boy nods.

Scanning his face, I release a soft exhale of breath. His tears are still flowing, but at least he's no longer outright sobbing. He actually looks more upset at seeing his father falling apart.

"Phoenix?" The boy's gaze swings to me again. "I'm going to fix your hand now. And in exchange, you'll fix mine. Deal?" That seems to do the trick.

The boy nods.

I extend my hand, and the little trooper clasps it. I glance down at our hands, his pale and almost luminescent—not unlike his father's—mine a few shades darker.

“Let’s do this.” I release his hand to grab my first aid kit.

I keep talking and joking through our little first aid improv. By the end of it, Phoenix is smiling, despite his tears, and has clearly warmed up to me.

He listens attentively as I instruct him on how to treat my hand, the same way I had treated his. I stand and notice his father staring at me. I was so zoned in on Phoenix, I hadn’t realized his father had stopped panicking.

I’m used to people staring at me like I’m something special. “Hot firefighter” is kind of a brand, and I’m ashamed to say I’ve played into it to get laid on more than one occasion. But something about the way Phoenix’s dad is staring at me feels different.

Disarming.

Suddenly, the man breaks off his intense stare, as if he’s suddenly come to his senses.

“Needtogetoutofyourway,” he mumbles, along with something about having to put on some clothes.

The crackling flames in his kitchen have been extinguished, but the fire in this man’s soul still rages. And there’s little I can do to quell it. I look him straight in the eye before I speak. “You’re staying with me until your apartment airs out. And you guys are going to eat.”

Weirdly enough, the man agrees.

CHAPTER 4



MYLES

I can't believe I fell apart.

In front of my son.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not one of those parents who tells their sons that big boys don't cry.

I wasn't raised that way. Luckily, my parents had done right by me.

But even if they hadn't, I'm not wired like that. I would never judge a man for showing vulnerability or think he's less than or not a "real man" because of it. That would be unconscionable to me.

Plus, I'm no spring chicken. I've seen enough of life these past forty-two years to know better.

But Nix seeing me break down like that, crumbling like a sandcastle facing a tsunami, unfortunately shows him how tenuous life actually is... and that his father apparently can't keep it together enough to take care of him in a crisis.

Nix has already had a shitty year. Life hasn't been fair to him. Rolling my eyes skyward, I scream in my head—not for the first time this year—cursing the fates or the universe or whoever's supposed to be running things up there. Lord knows they're doing a shoddy job of it. In my mind's eye, I raise my fist in the air, and flip Fate the bird.

But this evening isn't Fate's fault; it's mine. And I'm owning it. Leaving the stove unattended while taking a shower was a stupid, *stupid* move, like to the *nth* degree.

And I hate myself for it.

Putting everyone's life at risk—my son's, the other tenants', my own... fugg, even our rescuer's life—is absolutely inexcusable.

I have to apologize to my son.

And I definitely need to apologize to our rescuer, our personal hero.

I really wish the man—whose name I still don't know—had been around to step in on the day Nix and I lost our favorite person: Cara. Maybe he would have been able to save her.

The way I acted tonight is beyond my comprehension. The sudden jolt of seeing the fire and hearing Nix screaming, feeling his fear... it completely short-circuited my brain. And then I got so freaking frazzled that I didn't notice my own child—my sole responsibility in this world—had been hurt. Thank God it hadn't been worse, and the man who saved us had been able to tend to the burn. I can't believe I wasn't even able to, you know, control a simple kitchen fire.

Here I was, starting to feel like I'd come a long way, thinking I'd made some real progress this year. Thinking I'm making Cara proud. But tonight, I blew all that to crap. I had to be rescued by a guy who looks like he walked straight out of a fireman's calendar. I may as well have been a kitten stranded up a tree for all the good I did.”

But the weirdest part is not even that I broke down in the middle of a stranger's living room and totally unloaded this crap on him. The weirdest part is how good I felt afterward. As much as I hated having to be rescued from such a minor incident in the first place, this guy had a way of making me feel at ease. It may not have happened instantly, but he did get me to stop babbling like a brook. He's calm and funny, and most importantly, he got Nix to relax.

I've never thought of myself as being old-fashioned or needing to be “the man” in a situation; God knows my wife had always been smarter than I could ever hope to be, and she was also better with any kind of tool or device. But the second—the very second—some fearless firefighter walks in and

starts barking orders at me, I was immediately ready to give up all my control. Being taken care of felt nice, actually. Makes me miss Cara being here with me even more.

“Here, man.” The guy tosses me a T-shirt and sweats, similar to what he’s wearing. Good lord, I’d almost forgotten I’m standing half naked in front of a guy I don’t even know. I can feel heat crawling up my neck and spreading over my face. I’m probably as red as his fire engine right now.

With one hand gripping the towel wrapped around my waist, I extend the other. “Um... I’m Myles Madden.”

“Right,” the guy says, taking my hand in his. His grasp is warm and firm. “I’m Tristan Carrington.” He thumbed over his shoulder toward the bathroom. “You can probably guess where the bathroom is since our apartments are basically the same.”

“Thanks, man.” In my haste to get to the bathroom, I nearly trip over my own feet.

By the time I make it out to the kitchen, Nix and Tristan are deep in an animated conversation. My heart warms at the sight. According to our therapist, my son has been adjusting to losing his mother. But sometimes I worry that his world revolves around me. He’s worried about me; I can see it in his eyes. And I hate it. No seven-year-old should be burdened with that weight. He’s already grieving the loss of his mom. He shouldn’t feel like he needs to worry about me on top of it.

Clearing my throat, I say, “Hey, Nix, Tristan.” They both look up. “What’s up?”

“Dad,” my son practically shouts, his eyes shining with excitement, “Tristan’s letting me help with dinner.”

“I sure am,” Tristan says, smiling broadly at my son.

Raising an eyebrow, I say, “You sure it’s okay? I hate to impose.”

“No worries.” Tristan shrugs. “I don’t have any family and usually work during the holidays. It’s not like you’re interrupting any plans.” With eyes dancing, he continues, “But

there's nothing here to eat except Muscle Mac and turkey hot dogs.

I sense there's a sad story there relating to his family, so I don't press him. I can't help but be intrigued by the man, though. Thanks to the emotional meltdown I had in the middle of his living room, Tristan already knows my wife died and that this is our first Christmas without her. But he didn't push for more information; he can easily see this Christmas is an emotional powder keg for me and my son.

Tristan glances at me. "So, you know now what I do for a living. What about you?"

"I'm a sports agent on a short hiatus." Truth is, I don't think I'll be staying in that line of work. I need to do something that doesn't require much travel. I want Nix to have some stability at home, and I can't give him that if I'm always traveling.

"My dad's pretty cool," my son chimes in. "He used to manage Sterling Carter. You know who he is, right?"

Chuckling softly, Tristan shakes his head. "I'm afraid not, Phoenix. They play football?"

"Noooo." My son groans, heartbroken that Tristan doesn't know his favorite athlete. Nix gets like this when he meets other kids too. He thinks it's the end of the world when they're not as fascinated by sports as he is. "He's only the greatest baseball player of all time," he informs Tristan. Then he starts rattling off a bunch of stats I know Tristan doesn't have a clue about. But he's a good sport about it, even though I'm sure literally everything my son says is going right over his head. He's too good a guy to let Nix know this, though. He listens intently and even asks my boy questions... when he stops for breath, that is. It's been a long time since I've seen my son this excited.

And before I know it, the three of us are sitting around Tristan's coffee table eating a modest and hastily-prepared meal. It's certainly the simplest Christmas dinner I can remember having, especially after the deliciously extravagant feasts Cara always prepared for us. But amazingly, this is

somehow perfect, the low-key atmosphere making me feel more relaxed than I have in a long, long time. Being here with my son and Tristan is exactly what I need in this moment. Given that the love of my life will never again be with us, right now there's honestly no other place I'd rather be and no other company I'd prefer to be with.

I've been a sports agent for years, so I've spent lots of time around men—real guys' guys. And Tristan is the epitome of a guy's guy. Tall—maybe six-three or six-four. Muscular body. Beefy arms. Olive skin. Mop of curly dark-brown hair cut short on the sides and full on the top so that it falls over his forehead and just touches the thick eyebrows that frame his beautiful, honey-gold eyes.

And I'm usually comfortable talking to men, at least on a superficial level. I've never been good at forging close friendships. Cara was my best friend. My person. My everything. And then Phoenix came along. In my mind, I didn't need close friends when I already had the two best people in the world.

There's something different about Tristan, though. A certain softness to him? That's not the right word, but it's the only one I can come up with at the moment. He doesn't seem to be putting up a front or trying to act tough. He is who he is.

From the beginning, he had an instant rapport with Nix. And regardless of how it might have made him look, he didn't hesitate to admit that he doesn't know a damn thing about sports. When Nix gave him a sliver of space to talk, Tristan mentioned he loves to bake, but he never has an excuse to do it because he's hardly ever home.

More or less, I was raised in a traditional, Christian household. And having then worked in a stereotypically macho field, I'm experiencing some cognitive dissonance right now related to Tristan. Because he works in a male-dominant, ultra-masculine profession, I find I have certain expectations of Tristan. But he doesn't seem to track.

I'm definitely fascinated by this man, though.

Rising from my chair, I say, "Nix, it's time for us to go."

“Aww, Dad, do we have to?” My son’s eyes plead with me.

“You know we do. Now tell Mr. Carrington thanks for taking care of us this evening.”

My boy faces Tristan. “Thanks, Mister—“

“You can call me Tristan.” He gives Phoenix a fist bump.

“Thanks, Mis—Tristan.” And as if he’s been working up the nerve to ask, he hurriedly blurts, “Can you teach me how to bake cupcakes with the sprinkles on top?”

“Phoenix, I don’t thi—” Tristan’s piercing eyes cut me off.

“Of course,” he says. “How about if we wait until I can devote the entire day to your baking lessons? Sound good?”

“Sounds great.” As if belatedly remembering he actually needs my permission for this, Phoenix turns his pleading eyes to me. “Right, Dad?”

Tristan and I exchange a brief look, his eyes daring me to say no to my son. And my eyes are probably saying, “teach us—teach me—to make cupcakes.”

“Yes, son. It sounds good.”

God alone knows why I don’t want to leave Tristan’s apartment... but I *really* don’t. Is it because I’m lonely, not currently working, and focusing on Nix full-time? Maybe it’s because it’s nice to see my boy take an instant liking to someone after having such a shitty year? Or maybe, just maybe, it was nice to be taken care of again? Cara and I took care of each other, and I miss it. I miss those times we were each other’s comfort and joy.

I’m too exhausted to figure it out now. But I can’t help but love this feeling, and I decide I’m going to hang on to it. And I won’t question it.

Turning to face Tristan, I say, “I promise to buy you dinner as a thank you for helping us out.

The way Tristan’s eyes light up eases my trepidation about asking another man out for dinner, albeit platonically.

Tristan stutters out what sounds like a nervous chuckle.

“Let me do this for you, as a thank you,” I implore, desperately wanting him to accept my invitation.

Rubbing the back of his neck, he says, “Okay.”

We both smile, that goofy, overly eager kind of smile. And this right here is all the confirmation I need to know I’ve made the right decision.

CHAPTER 5



TRISTAN

Since Christmas day, Myles and I have run into each other in the building a few times and said hello, exchanged pleasantries. But earlier today, he insisted he's taking me out to dinner tonight to say thank you. Honestly? There's really nothing to thank me for. I was just doing what every right-thinking human would do under the circumstances, although in this instance, I was actually trained to do what I did.

I would never think of saying no to Myles, although I know this isn't a date. For one thing, he's straight, ruler straight. The most stereotypical meat and potato heterosexual there is. He might be surprised to discover I'm not as perfectly straight as he is.

I don't date, anyway. I'm the hookup guy and have no intentions of settling down, much less to have a family. Never felt I needed to label my sexuality or officially "come out" to anyone. I don't belong to any community. I've belonged to a community of one for most of my life, until I joined the fire service. Hot is hot, whether man, woman or any other gender. My best friend, Steph, probably has her suspicions about my sexuality, which is why she keeps inviting me to places I'm pretty sure are LGBTQ-friendly.

My parents were pretty liberal, and even though I lost them in my early teens, I felt no internalized pressure to be a man's man. But I know what I look like and between that and being a firefighter, I'm able to blend in with the straights by default. I'm guessing that's probably why Myles brought me to a sports bar. But I still don't give two fucks about sports.

Myles opens the door to Sports Haven Tavern, the blast of cheering and the aroma of garlic and tomato sauce wafting out. “After you.”

I hesitate. “You know, I’m not really a fan of Italian food.”

Myles grins, eyes glinting in the dim light that’s spilling from the restaurant. “They have something for everyone here. I promise you’ll enjoy it.”

Damn his persistence. And that smile. “Fine.”

The clink of glasses and hum of conversation hit me as we walk into the sports bar, the bass of some pop song thumping through the air. My stomach twists, and I tell myself it’s the scent of garlic bread. Nothing more.

Still, I’m hyper aware of Myles at my side. His cologne, woody and crisp. The breadth of his shoulders in that navy henley.

Get a grip. Myles is about as straight as they come.

We find a booth in the corner, away from most of the crowd. Myles slides in across from me, scanning the room with a tight smile. His knee jiggles under the table, a nervous tic I’ve never seen from him before.

“Everything okay?” I ask.

“Hmm? Oh, yeah. Fine.” He scrubs a hand over his jaw, his gaze darting away.

I frown. “If you’ve changed your mind about dinner, we can go.”

“What? No, I’m—I’m glad we came out.” He meets my eyes again, a more natural smile now easing across his face. “It’s been a while since I’ve been to a place like this. Brings back memories, you know?”

Memories of his wife, no doubt. Guilt twists in my gut at the attraction and jealousy simmering under my skin. *What is wrong with me?*

A waiter hurries over. “The usual for you, Mr. Madden?”

“Yes, please, Jon,” Myles says, “And whatever my friend wants.” Myles gestures at me.

I scan the menu. “Chicken parmesan.”

Jon nods and leaves.

The silence left in the waiter’s wake is a bit uncomfortable.

Anything to ignore the traitorous want unfurling inside me like the green vines etched into the bar’s wooden beams.

We’re just friends.

Aren’t we?

Who am I kidding? We’re passing acquaintances—nothing more, nothing less.

My gaze sweeps around the bar, fully aware that Myles’s warm gaze is cataloguing my reaction to the place.

The walls are adorned with a hodgepodge of sports memorabilia, team flags, jerseys, and vintage posters. Neon signs flicker overhead, casting a warm, amber glow over the place. A row of high stools lines the long wooden bar where a bartender in a faded Yankees cap deftly pours drinks. On one side, a group of rowdy friends in jerseys huddles around a game of pool, the clinking of balls punctuating their animated conversation. A giant flat-screen TV broadcasts what looks like college basketball, drawing the collective attention of the rest of the crowd. Laughter and chatter ripple through the air, merging into a comforting buzz.

Myles makes a steeple with his hands on the table. “So, what do you think?”

“I like it. It’s clean, and I appreciate the open kitchen concept; I can literally see what’s happening in the kitchen if I wanna.”

The air is thick with the scent of sizzling burgers, mingling with the sharp tang of beer.

Myles’s grin is mischievous as he nudges his head toward the flatscreen TV and asks, “Interested in watching the

game?”

No, Myles, but I think I'm interested in watching you.

“Sure, but like I told Phoenix, I know next to nothing about sports.” *And I give zero fucks about them.*

But Myles, bless his heart, decides to give me a crash course during halftime. “I can run through some of the rules with you.” He begins, leaning in, “You see, there are two teams, and they're trying to get the ball into the other team's hoop.”

I furrow my brow like I'm trying to solve a Rubik's cube. “Hoop? You mean that round thing?”

Myles nods patiently, a glimmer of amusement in his eyes. “Yeah, that round thing. It's called a basket.”

I feign confusion, tilting my head. “Basket? As in a place to store my laundry?”

Myles chuckles, probably thinking he's got a rookie on his hands. “No, Tristan, not that kind of basket. It's where they score points.”

I squint at the screen. “Points? You mean like when you win at Scrabble?”

Myles stares at me, his patience slowly morphing into suspicion. “Uh, no. Points like in goals or touchdowns, but in basketball.”

I nod like it's all starting to make sense. “Ah, I get it now. So, you kick the ball into the basket to score a home run, right?”

Myles finally catches on, his eyes narrowing. “Are you fugging with me?”

“Say what now? *Fugging?*”

His cheeks color prettily. “Yes, fugging. A time or ten, I've managed athletes who've lacked self-control on and off the field, and some of them came close to ruining their careers because of it. I had to do a lot of damage control. And then one day I decided that instead of being preachy, I should

model good behavior.” He uses air quotes on the word “good.” “So I cleaned up my act and stopped cursing like a sailor. My hope was they’d see if you make a concerted effort, you can maintain your composure and restraint in language and behavior, even in the most explosive of situations. I wanted them to see if I could manage it with the major stressors in my life—namely, them—they could do it too. Over time it worked.” Myles chuckles. “But mostly on me.”

I can’t help but grin, and Myles smiles back—that slow, teasing smile that makes my heart flutter. Yep, he’s got me... and I’m loving every moment of it.

“That’s *fugging* fantastic, man.” My heart somersaults when he bursts out in laughter. I like teasing Myles and driving him fucking crazy, but I like the sound of his laughter more. “And yeah,” I say, answering his question, “I’m just fucking with you.” *Wouldn’t mind actually fucking you either, Myles.*

I’m trying to ignore the weird flutter of attraction I feel for him. The man is fucking hot, like a phoenix rising from the ashes kinda hot. When I bulldozed my way into his apartment on Christmas, I was aware he was attractive. But, sitting across from him at this moment? Goddamn! I haven’t even begun to absorb the beauty that is Myles. Though he’s not as tall as I am—maybe about 6-feet—he has a body that attracts men and women alike. The women are simply, and quite boldly, eye-fucking him. But to be fair, a few guys are eye-fucking him too—me included.

The thing that’s so endearing about Myles is he’s completely oblivious to how appealing he fucking is. The stubble of his three-day beard with an even mix of silver and gray, doesn’t diminish his attractiveness in any way. Gorgeous whiskey-colored eyes complete the sexy package. I’ve seen lots of incredibly attractive people—fucked many of them, too—but Myles is just sheer perfection. There’s no other way to say it; he is the epitome of masculine beauty.

I need to fucking dial down my reaction to him. And put on my best red-blooded American male mask, the one I can don without even really thinking about it. When you’ve bounced around as much as I have, it becomes second nature

to resist developing your own persona because all that does is make it harder to blend in. But I'm surprised at how out of place Myles seems to feel here. He obviously comes here a lot, and he's said hello to a few people here and there. But he looks awkward in his own skin at the same time... well, except when he's speaking directly to *me*. I have no idea what's making him nervous, but I push forward and try to engage him in conversation. I'm itching to learn more about him, and my curiosity gets the best of me.

"Alright, Myles, here's a simple one for you. If you had to choose three words people most commonly use to describe you, what would they be?"

He glances at me, a thoughtful expression flickering across his face. "Hmm, I'd like to think I'm considered honest, reliable, and hardworking."

I nod approvingly. "Those are some solid traits. You're painting a picture of a stand-up guy."

Myles chuckles, his laughter carrying a hint of modesty. "Well, what about you?" he asks, the corner of his lips curving up. "If you had to choose three words to describe yourself, what would they be?"

I lean in, lowering my voice conspiratorially. "Handsome, charming, and humble, of course."

Myles laughs again, a warm sound that fills the air between us. "I can see the charm, but I'll have to take your word on the handsome part."

My heart skips a beat, and suddenly, the pub seems a little cozier, a little more rife with possibility. I take a sip of my drink, trying to hide the warmth in my cheeks.

The food arrives and we dig in, conversation flowing as easily as the beer. I lose track of how many we've had, the buzz smoothing over my frayed nerves.

By the time our plates are cleared, Myles's knee has stopped bouncing. We talk easily the rest of the night. I can't remember the last time I felt like this around someone I'd just met. It's nice. It almost makes me feel like I've been missing

out on someone, but I push that thought away. The night goes by quickly, and before I know it, it's time to leave. He leans back in the booth, arm slung over the back of it.

My skin erupts in goosebumps and heat races up the back of my neck. "Thanks for dragging me out tonight. I needed this."

"You're welcome." Myles's laugh is soft, intimate. "What are friends for?"

"Yeah. Friends." I glance away, my pulse skittering. He was obviously joking, considering we're mere acquaintances at best, but his words stir something within me. After I've composed myself as discreetly as I can, my eyes clash with Myles's, his expression unreadable. "You okay?" I ask.

Rising to his feet, he simply says, "Yes."

"Well, let's go then."

We go back to Myles's apartment, since Phoenix is spending the weekend with his grandparents. I only had a couple of beers, but I feel weirdly buzzed on what a chill evening Myles and I have had. I guess the few ounces of alcohol in my system gave me the testicular fortitude to ask, "What weirded you out tonight?" I lean on his kitchen counter, bracing my weight on my forearms.

He huffs out a breath. Reaching for the kitchen cabinet, he turns to me and says, "You want something to drink? Water? Soda? Beer?"

"Water." I watch as he pours water into two glasses. He slides one over to me while he takes a sip from the other. Then he leans back against the counter next to me.

And just when I think he didn't hear my question—or he's pretended he didn't—Myles answers me. "My head and heart still don't know why I lost her... my wife, I mean. On a night like tonight, I would have been with her, you know?"

Shit! I didn't mean to open a can of worms. Nodding my head, I mumble a barely audible "Mmhm."

“Since Cara died, it’s mostly Nix and me. His grandparents chip in occasionally because Nix is their last remaining connection to their daughter. And they love him, you know?” Myles guzzles the water from his glass and then goes for a refill. “But even before losing her, it was just work and family. It was my life, and I didn’t have any regrets about it. We got married young, straight out of college. Cara’s the only woman I’ve known... biblically.” His tentative smile makes my heart stutter in my chest. “And now, all of a sudden, I’m in this scary new world without a clue as to how to maneuver in it.”

What can I do with Myles’s confession? His heart is bleeding. Should I give him a hug? Pat him on the shoulder? Get the hell out of here? I choose the second option; it seems the easiest... and the safest.

Extending my arm, I give his shoulder a reassuring squeeze. I hope the gesture communicates what I’m feeling: I’m here, I hear you, I’ll be your friend through this, and you’ll come out on the other side stronger.

“Cara and I talked about what we would do if one of us died before the other.” He chuckles. “She used to tell me that on the day of her funeral, I’d better just get right into her casket with her, because I could never be happy without her. She was only kidding, though.” He huffs out a breath. “In all seriousness, we both would have wanted the other to be happy, to move on, to find love again. Never thought she would be the one to go first. Never expected to be the one left behind to pick up the pieces.”

Myles glances at me, his eyes brimming with tears, and then he drops his chin to his chest. “I thought Fate was logical, you know? Why leave me behind to take care of our boy, when Cara was the better parent? I know my son loves me, but he adored his mom. She was his everything. It would have been easier on Nix if I had been the one behind the wheel.”

I squeeze his shoulder again before lowering my arm to my side. “Myles, you are good enough. You’re capable. You’re strong. Yes, Phoenix loves and misses his mother, but he’s damn happy that you’re living and breathing, that you’re fucking here.”

Myles releases a heavy breath. “I’d told myself that at the one-year mark after Cara’s death, I’d try to get back into the world, so I didn’t end up becoming some weird, hermit helicopter parent. I promised myself I’d make friends, and even try to date. And now I’m freaked out that the one-year anniversary is hurtling towards me. My wife is the only person I’ve ever kissed, and the whole concept of dating is freaking me out.”

With every confession Myles makes, I want to put every one of his burdens on my back and bear it. I know about loss and pain. I lost both parents in a fire that I was lucky enough to escape, and in my job, not every call leads to a favorable outcome. As a first responder, I see loss almost daily. But if there was one person in this world I could have shielded from experiencing the loss of a loved one, it would have been Myles. Sending up a silent prayer to whoever might be up there listening, I cover the short distance between us, wrapping my arms around Myles and holding him. He nestles his head into the crook of my neck, and the feelings that wash over me are indescribable.

“You’ve made progress already, because I think we’re becoming friends, and we can continue that way. And *please*, please don’t get hung up on dating. Don’t force things; everything will happen naturally, in its own time. Don’t make a big deal about it and psyche yourself out, okay?” I give him a quick, tight squeeze. “Okay, Myles? I need you to answer me.”

With a shuddering breath, he says, “I won’t make a big deal about dating.” And for good measure he adds, “I promise.”

“And besides, if you want me to stop you from obsessing about it, I can always kiss you... as a favor to a friend?”

What. The. Actual. Fuck?

Why the hell did I say that? This is the definition of word vomit. And I’m not surprised that Myles’s head jolts up and his mouth falls open.

“Wha—what did you say?” His eyes ping from my eyes to my lips and then back again.

Good lord, how can I cure myself of this foot-in-mouth disease I’ve apparently just contracted?

“I mean, I can help ease you back into the dating scene, and we can start with me kissing you. Strictly platonic. Casual and uncomplicated. Just think of me as the guy who’s here to assist you in your dating journey.”

In my mind’s eye, I fling my hands in the air with an exasperated sigh at my own damn self.

“The guy who’s here to do what?”

“The guy who’ll coach you in the fine art of kissing, among other things. On a need-to-know basis.”

“But why?”

“Don’t think I can kiss you good enough for you to like it?”

“Wh-wha—” The man’s mouth is gaping so much, he looks like an actual fucking fish.

“What? Who? Why? What are you? A fucking lawyer? I grin. “You questioning my kissing ability, dude?” A flustered Myles is so fucking adorable.

I wonder if he realizes he’s still in my arms.

“I—I—I’ve never kissed a guy before.”

“And that’s why it’s a good fucking idea, because you have nothing to lose.”

“Are you fugging with me?” He laughs, an uninhibited laugh. A laugh that causes the corner of his eyes to crinkle. A laugh that makes the dimple in his left cheek pop, revealing itself to me for the first time. And I’m fucking here for it.

“Maybe, I am. Maybe, I’m not.” I shrug. “Who knows, huh? One thing I know for sure is that it’s the lowest possible stakes.” I think I love teasing my new friend, because although he’s older than I am—though not obviously so, by any means

—there's a certain innocence about him that's endearing to me. I'm so game to tease him some more. "If I kiss y—"

With no fucking warning, Myles crashes his lips to mine. And my entire world goes upside down.

CHAPTER 6



MYLES

My kissing skills are rusty, to say the least. The last time I kissed someone intimately was the day I kissed Cara goodbye before walking out the door and heading to work, before canceling our date on Valentine's Day.

It was the last time I saw her alive.

But *this*... this kiss is clumsy but earnest, or more specifically, I'm clumsy. But I put my heart into it.

And Tristan? He's poised and so very Tristan. He seals his mouth over mine, keeping the kiss light, coaxing me to follow his lead. I think I'm a quick study, learning the slide of tongues and the nip of teeth. Then he lets me do as I please with his tongue.

I can't help but smile into the kiss, lifting a hand to cup his jaw. Tristan makes a sound low in his throat, but he still allows me to control the kiss. My fingers twist into his navy blue henley.

Then we break apart when I come to my senses, "Sorry," I pant. "I shouldn't have—"

"It's okay." Tristan runs his thumb over my lower lip, the side of my throat. "Really, it's okay."

"Is it?" Hope and fear war within me. "I've never—not with a man."

"We can stop whenever you want." He kisses me again, slow and deep, and my heart hammers against his. "Or not stop at all."

This is quite the kiss. I don't know what got into me. Maybe I was just egged on by Tristan's teasing. Or maybe I was a little jealous of how he could so easily suggest it's no big deal to kiss another man. It made me feel like I had to prove something, although I'm not sure whether it's to Tristan or myself.

So, I did it; I kissed him.

Turns out, it's one of the hottest kisses of my entire life.

Tristan was bratty, and his teasing attitude the entire evening has made me needy. And I simply just... want. I want someone to hold me, be intimate with me, to make me theirs.

And maybe, just maybe, I want that someone to be Tristan.

Never in a million years would I have thought I'd want someone who wasn't Cara, or more broadly speaking... a woman. My wife had been the only person I'd ever imagined wanting to kiss. But she's gone now, and I think I want Tristan. A man. And I don't know what to do about that piece of self-realization. Questions swirl in my head. It's not quite a year yet; does that mean I'm being unfaithful? Am I weird for wanting to explore this new world? Should I say "to heck with everything," and simply live in the moment? Isn't it better I explore this new world with Tristan, since he's the one with the experience?

My eyes drink in the shape of Tristan's luscious lips, and as if mine have a mind of their own, they edge closer and closer, until they brush against his lips again. With a needy moan, he captures my lips, kissing me hard, like he's afraid I'll disappear if he lets go.

I slide my hands under his shirt, palming the warm skin of his sculpted back. He shivers deliciously, pressing closer.

When we break for air, he rests his forehead against mine, eyes closed.

"I don't know what I'm doing, Tristan."

"That's okay." He brushes his lips over mine softly, teasing. "I do."

“You’re going to help me get more experience before dating again?”

“Mmhm. Exactly.”

I huff out a laugh, a sense of panic overwhelming me. I really hope he can’t see a glint of panic in my eyes.

Tristan cups my face with his hands, grounding me. “We’ll go slow,” he promises. “One kiss at a time.”

The panic recedes, replaced by a bone-deep longing that stirs heat low in my gut.

“One kiss at a time,” I echo.

Tristan’s smoldering—yes, smoldering—gaze pins me in place. His eyes, dark and intense, linger on my lips before slowly raking up to meet my own. I’ve had zero experience with men, but I’m not oblivious to what’s happening here. A shiver of anticipation runs down my spine from the undeniable fire in his stare.

“Tristan.” My voice is barely audible above my pounding heartbeat, which is growing louder in my ears.

“Myles,” he murmurs, his voice low and gravelly.

His eyes are still locked with mine, and I feel exposed, like he can see straight through to my core. It scares me, but I don’t want to look away. I crave this connection—the intimacy that comes from truly seeing and being seen by someone else. I miss having that with Cara, and I’m not going to miss this opportunity with Tristan.

“Is it wrong that I want more?” I ask hesitantly, my heart pounding in my chest.

“More?” Tristan breathes, one eyebrow raised in question.

“Of this. Of kissing you,” I clarify, trying to ignore the vulnerability I feel with every word.

I watch as Tristan’s eyes drop to my lips, and a hunger takes over his gaze. He licks his own lips, dragging out the moment, making me squirm with anticipation. I can’t help but think how surreal this all feels.

“God, Myles,” he groans, his eyes never leaving mine as he steps closer. “You have no idea what you’re doing to me right now.”

I’m shaking. My heart pounds against my ribcage, a wild animal desperate to escape its confinement.

Tristan cups my cheeks in his strong, calloused palms—rough from years of firefighting—and pulls me close. Our lips touch, tentative at first, as if we’re both afraid of breaking something delicate between us.

His mouth is warm, soft, and unexpectedly tender. The taste of him awakens a delicious sensation, igniting a fire deep in my belly that spreads through every nerve ending. I part my lips, inviting him to deepen the kiss. He accepts, his tongue sliding against mine, exploring, tasting, teasing.

“God, you feel so good,” he murmurs against my lips, his breath hot and heavy.

My hands find their way to his muscular back, feeling the play of sinew beneath his shirt. I want more—need more—but I hesitate, unsure of where to go from here. Despite my uncertainty, the connection between us is undeniable, electric.

As we kiss, thoughts race through my head, jumbled and chaotic. I’m terrified of what this means, of whether I’m getting ahead of myself. But even more than that, I’m afraid of what might happen when this kiss ends.

But then, too soon, Tristan gently breaks the kiss. I’m left gasping for breath, my entire body humming with a newfound hunger I never knew existed.

“Wait,” I say, my voice barely audible, as Tristan walks to the front door.

He opens it, then looks back over his shoulder giving me one last intense look, his eyes filled with unspoken promises and desires.

Anticipation sends a thrilling shudder through me.

“See you soon,” he promises, and closes the door with a soft thud.

CHAPTER 7



TRISTAN

I can't get last night out of my head. My body still tingles remembering Myles's touch, his taste lingering on my lips like the sweetest sin. The way his skin had felt against mine, warm and inviting, has left me craving more.

"God, I need to see him again," I mutter under my breath, pacing in my apartment. My heart wars with my mind, torn between wanting Myles and knowing he's still grieving Cara's death. Not to mention, he'll undoubtedly be grappling with the realization of his newfound bisexuality. But my desire for Myles overpowers my rational thinking, leaving me searching for an excuse to see him again.

Then it hits me: game night. Myles mentioned how much he and Cara used to enjoy playing chess together and how he'd missed playing it. Going off of memory, I grab my coat and keys, rushing out the door to buy a chess set.

The store bustles with shoppers, but I don't care. I'm laser-focused on finding the perfect chess set that'll bring Myles closer to me. I can already imagine the joy in his eyes as he sees it, rekindling memories of simpler times. It's just the excuse I need.

"Gotcha," I whisper triumphantly, picking up a beautifully-crafted wooden chess set from the shelf. Its intricate carvings and polished pieces call out to me. I can feel the anticipation bubbling within me as I purchase the set and hurry back home.

"Let the games begin," I think, clutching the chess set tightly as I make my way back to my apartment. The cool air

nips at my face, but the warmth inside me grows stronger with every step.

Later, I step out of the shower, steam clinging to my skin and fogging up the mirror. Wrapped in a towel, I shiver as goosebumps race across my body, the anticipation of seeing Myles again making me feel alive. The chess set sits on my bed, waiting for its purpose to be fulfilled. Grabbing it, I can't help but smile at the thought of Myles's reaction. My heart is pounding with excitement.

The moment I open my apartment door, my breath catches in my throat. There, standing just inches away from me, is Myles. His hand is raised, poised to knock, his eyes wide with surprise. Our gazes lock, and my pulse quickens.

"Hey," he says softly, taking in my appearance. "I was coming to see you."

"Great minds think alike," I reply, grinning. "I got us something." I raise the box in my hand. "Chess."

"Really?" Myles's face lights up, his dimple deepening. "That's amazing."

"Let's not waste any more time." We head inside, setting up the chessboard on my living room floor. Sitting cross-legged, facing each other, we're so close I can feel the heat radiating from his body.

"Prepare to be defeated," I tease, moving my pawn forward.

"Ha! In your dreams," Myles retorts, countering my move with his own.

Back and forth we go, laughter filling the room as we exchange playful jabs and witty quips. The tension between us simmers, a delicate dance of desire and restraint. At one point, Myles reaches across the board to capture one of my pieces, brushing against my hand ever so slightly. The contact ignites a deep, primal urge, reminding me of the passionate kisses we shared.

"Focus, Tristan," I remind myself, shaking off the distraction.

“Did you just talk to yourself?” Myles grins, amused and curious.

“Maybe,” I admit with a sheepish smile. “Your move.”

As the game goes on, the air between us crackles with more than just friendly competition. It’s clear we’re drawn to each other, two magnets unable to resist the pull between them. My chest tightens, torn between wanting Myles and respecting the fact that last night might have just been an experiment for him.

“Checkmate,” Myles declares, his voice tinged with triumph.

“Rematch,” I challenge, unable to let him have the last word.

“Bring it on.” His eyes sparkle with determination, and all I can think about is how much I want this man—how much I’d like him to be in my life, even if it’s platonically.

“Prepare to lose,” I taunt, moving a piece with confidence.

“Not today,” he replies, matching my intensity.

Game on, Myles, I think, ready to face whatever comes our way.

And so, we continue to play, each move bringing us closer together. The chessboard may separate us for now, but my awareness of him grows stronger with every passing minute.

The room hums with warmth, and the lingering tension from our game of chess gradually dissolves. Myles’s laughter fills the space between us, settling deep in my chest like a balm for the soul. I watch the curve of his smile, the way it transforms his expression, and feel a thrill of connection.

“Okay, I’ll admit it.” I say, leaning back on the couch, my fingers absently tracing the edge of the chessboard. “You’re good at this game.”

“You’re not bad yourself,” he says, reaching out and giving my knee an affectionate squeeze. “You had me worried for a minute there, before I was able to pull through.”

“Next time, the game is mine to win.” And just those words “next time” fills me with hope in the promise that we’ll do this again. “But speaking about being worried, what is the thing you worry about the most?”

Stupid question, maybe, but I just want to know about him. He intrigues me.

Myles hesitates, his smile fading as he considers my question. His eyes, once bright with mirth, now cloud with uncertainty. And I feel bad for causing him to remember something painful, but before I can open my mouth to apologize, he says, “Coping with losing Cara.” His voice cracks like the strike of a match. “And helping Nix deal with his emotions.”

My heart aches for him, for his son, for the pain they’re going through. I reach out and touch his hand, offering silent support. The contact sends electricity up my arm, but I push past the distraction and focus on Myles.

“Hey, that’s completely understandable,” I assure him. “You’re doing your best, and that’s what matters. You’re an incredible father.”

“Thanks.” He gives me a small, grateful smile, squeezing my hand before letting go.

“And what about you?” Myles asks, shifting the focus onto me. “What do you worry about the most?”

I pause, considering my answer. It’s not often I let people in, but with Myles, everything feels different, like we’ve known each other for years. “Coping with the emotional toll of witnessing traumatic events,” I admit finally. “The stress that comes with firefighting can be overwhelming at times.”

Myles nods, understanding flickering in his eyes. “I can only imagine,” he says, reaching out to mirror my earlier gesture, his hand warm and steady on mine.

“Sometimes, it’s hard to shake off the memories,” I confess, my chest tightening as images of smoke-filled rooms and desperate cries flash through my mind. “But knowing that

I'm helping others, making a difference—that keeps me going.”

“You're one of the bravest people I know.”

His words, so genuine and heartfelt, send warmth flooding through me, chasing away the shadows. We sit there, hands entwined, our gazes locked, and I feel the magnetic pull between us growing stronger by the second. The emotional connection is undeniable, wrapping around us like an unbreakable thread. A charged silence settles between us, and the air crackles with anticipation.

Our faces draw closer, the space between us shrinking until all I can think about is the press of our lips together, the taste of him on my tongue. It's thrilling, intoxicating.

“Can I...?” I trail off, my heart pounding like a drum, drowning out all other thoughts. I want this so badly, and Myles seems to be on board. But am I selfishly pursuing my needs at the risk of taking advantage of his vulnerability? What if this ruins our budding friendship? What if I fall for him, and then he realizes this was a mistake? A thousand doubts swarm my mind, but one look into those soulful eyes of his—filled with so much longing and vulnerability—banishes them all.

“Please,” he murmurs, giving me the reassurance I need.

Our lips meet softly, tentatively at first—like the brush of butterfly wings against skin. It's electric, igniting a fire within me that burns brighter with every heartbeat. I touch him gently, yet insistently, coaxing him to open up, to allow our connection to deepen.

He obliges, parting his lips and inviting me in, allowing me to take the lead. The taste of him is intoxicating—a heady blend of warmth and desire that leaves me craving more. As our kiss intensifies, our tongues dancing together, I'm consumed by the feeling of him: his strong arms around me, the heat radiating from his body, the sound of his ragged breaths intertwining with mine.

“God, Tristan.” Myles pants, pulling away just enough to speak but remaining close enough for our breaths to mingle.

Barely giving him time to breathe, I capture his lips again, this time with a newfound urgency.

Our passion surges, unstoppable like a wildfire, fueled by our unspoken desires. I can feel his hunger—his ache for connection—mirrored in my own longing. It’s as if we’re seeking solace in one another, finding strength in our shared vulnerability.

“Let me take care of you,” I whisper against his lips, my hands roaming over his body, tracing the contours of his muscles, committing him to memory.

In this moment, there’s nothing but us—our bodies pressed together, our hearts beating in sync, the taste of lust on our lips. A primal urge takes over, driving me to claim him, to make him mine.

MYLES

Tristan fists a hand in my hair and drags my mouth back to his. The kiss is hungry, desperate, like he can’t get enough.

Heat pools in my groin and I grind against his hip, swallowing his moan.

“Bed,” he gasps, pupils blown wide. “Now.”

I don’t need to be told twice.

By the time we stumble through his bedroom door, Tristan’s flushed and panting, eyes glazed. He pins me against the wall and kisses his way down my throat. I relish each gasp and groan I drag from his lips.

“Clothes off!” he commands.

We shed clothes as we go, leaving a trail from the door to his bed. By the time we tumble onto the bed, we’re both naked and hard. And I’m positively aching for this man.

He blankets my body with his, rocking against me in a slow grind that makes us both groan. I arch into him, fingers digging into his back.

“Tell me what you want,” he rasps against my throat.

“You.” I’m breathless. “Just you.”

He sucks along my collarbone—I’m sure he leaves a mark—and reaches between us to wrap a large, masculine hand around both our cocks. A loud groan escapes my lips as I buck into his grip, and it’s all I can do not to come right then and there.

Tristan sets a brutal pace, as if chasing the edge of orgasm. I watch lust and wonder chase across his expression. He’s gorgeous like this; I never want to stop looking at him. And I feel wrecked and wanting.

His fingers twist into my hair, and he crushes our mouths together, kissing me desperately. My cock pulses in his hand and I spill between us with a muffled shout, which seems to tip him over the edge after me.

We lie there panting, a tangle of sweaty limbs.

After a moment, I huff out a disbelieving laugh. “So much for ‘one kiss at a time’,” I say. I can hear a hint of panic in my voice.

He brushes my hair back from my forehead and leans in to kiss me slow and deep. Is he hoping to soothe away the panic?

We finally break apart.

While my lips still tingle from Tristan’s kisses, he seems to have recovered quickly.

“See? That wasn’t too bad, was it?” Although the tone of his voice is light and playful, there’s something in his gaze that seems unsure, worried.

But how am I to know what Tristan’s thinking? We barely know each other.

“Cat got your tongue, Myles? Don’t freak out on me now.”

I'm not even sure how to react. Heck, I don't even know where to look. My eyes settle for his stubbled chin.

But, goddammit! That's way too close to the lips I just kissed, the lips that are still faintly moist from my touch.

Trying to keep the tone of my voice equally light, I say, "Well that's one hurdle you helped me to cross."

"And that, my dear friend, is one benefit of having slutty friends."

Say what now? Did he call himself slutty? That doesn't sit well with me.

My gaze pins his. He's smiling, but I'm not sure it's genuine. It seems guarded, somehow.

I don't like hearing Tristan talking about himself like this.

"Since you're an adult, you're entitled to have as many partners as you want as often as you'd like. It doesn't mean you're a slu—what you just said."

Shrugging his shoulders, he says, "I am what I am. It's no big deal."

And that right there tells me so much about the man standing before me. It's like a window has just opened, giving me the smallest of opportunities to take a peep into who Tristan is as a person. He exudes confidence, and I'm comfortable enough in my manhood to admit that he's handsome and sexy. He's physically strong, and from the little I've seen, he's good at his job and good with people. But there's a part of him that's vulnerable, and he tries to hide his vulnerability with that cool, laid-back facade of his.

I don't want him to feel like he's not good enough because of his choices. And suddenly transported back to Christmas when he told me those same words: I'm good enough. I want him to feel the same way, that he's good enough. It's a strange thing, though, to feel fiercely protective of a man I barely know.

Right now, there are so many things I need to process. Like the fact that I just made out with a man, that I just came... *with*

a man.

“Got it,” I say, picking up from Tristan’s last statement.

“Stay the night, Myles.”

I study his expression. His eyes are guileless, vulnerable. A mixture of fear and want. There are so many things for me to unpack. My wife hasn’t been gone a year yet, and here I am kissing and getting naked with someone who isn’t her. And on top of that, I’m contemplating spending the night with him. If Nix weren’t with his grandparents, my answer would have been an outright “no,” not that Tristan would have even asked me to spend the night if my son had been home.

I swallow, trying to dislodge the log that’s stuck in my throat. Wordlessly, I nod.

“Use your words, sweetheart.”

“Yes... I’ll stay.”

I wake to sunlight streaming through the window and an unfamiliar weight across my chest. I blink open my eyes to find Tristan curled against me, arm slung over my torso, breath puffing warmly against my neck.

Memories of last night flood back in a heated rush, and I have to bite back a groan. We’d stayed in his bed exploring each other’s bodies for hours, learning what made the other gasp and moan. I’d never felt so attuned to another person. It was intoxicating.

Terrifying.

Tristan stirs, nuzzling closer for a moment before freezing. I can feel the tension seep into his body and know he’s remembering too. Panic flickers in my gut. Have I ruined everything? What if he just wanted to get his rocks off, and now he regrets it?

I chance a glance down to find him peering up at me through a fringe of mussed hair, eyes unreadable.

“Morning,” I rasp, mouth dry.

He studies me for a long moment, searching. I force myself not to look away, to meet his gaze steadily even as my heart hammers. Finally he breathes out a sigh, tension bleeding from his frame, and his lips curve into a soft smile. “Morning,” he echoes, leaning up to brush his mouth against mine.

The kiss is gentle, almost chaste, but it sparks heat in my veins all the same. I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding, the panic receding, and kiss him back.

“Coffee?” he asks when we part, the smile still on his face.

“Please,” I say, my smile widening to a grin. “You read my mind.”

“Getting there,” he quips.

My laughter follows him out of the room.

Over a cup of coffee, we talk about everything except what happened the night before. All too soon, it’s time for me to get going.

“I need to be on my way,” I say, rising to my feet and slipping on the clothes I’d discarded on the floor.

For a sliver of a moment, Tristan’s face falls, and he looks almost sad. But then he quickly schools his expression.

“Sure.” His eyes are cautious now.

Not long after, I’m back in my apartment. I’m not going to think about the kissing and the hot as heck frotting session—yes, I know that’s what we did—with Tristan until I’m not feeling so conflicted. One thing is certain, though, I want to be a good friend to Tristan. And I’m committing myself to being one, no matter what. It doesn’t seem as if he has many people in his life who care about him.

CHAPTER 8



MYLES

I'm pretty cool about my budding friendship with Tristan, although I've shoved my feelings about the kissing and our makeout session under the metaphorical rug. All of that is currently the big ol' elephant in the room. We haven't talked about it, but it continues to be what I think about in the privacy of my dreams. Regardless of his specific role (friends or perhaps more), Tristan has become a welcome fixture in my life and in my son's life. I've also been going on job interviews here and there. Nothing promising so far, but I remain optimistic. Tristan, bless his heart—the heart I can't forget is covered by his very muscular chest (which I have studiously been trying not to ogle)—he lets Nix stay with him whenever he has a day off. And Tristan and I text each other every day. Sometimes it's a meme, or a joke, or a photo of what we're doing, or just messages about the little details of our lives. It has happened so quickly, this thing (whatever it is) between us. I've decided I'm not going to question it, no looking a gift horse in the mouth.

But nothing makes me feel my age—or more specifically, the 14-year age gap between us—like when we send text messages to each other. Tristan is a jet plane and I'm a minivan stuck in traffic. By the time I've sent one message, he's already sent four, five, or even six.

Tristan: Are you ducking kidding me? He really did that?

Me: That's what Nix said

Tristan: I meant fucking

Tristan: Ducking new phone.

Tristan: Ducking autocorrect

Tristan: Fucking, dammit! I meant fucking

Tristan: Hang on a sex. Gonna turn it off

Tristan: I meant sec, not sex

Tristan: Oh duck, brb

Me: You need to stop that new phone from ducking around *laughing with tears emoji*

I was telling Tristan that Nix mentioned his grandparents bought a new smart TV. Because the remote control is so complicated (to them, at least), his grandpa figured out which buttons on the remote they absolutely needed and which ones were only put there to confuse him. Then he proceeded to tape over all the confusing ones!

Me: I know what you meant, filthy-mouth man.

Tristan: I've got a filthy mouth, huh?

God alone knows why I allow this text chain between us to segue into Tristan's filthy mouth, which, if I'm being honest, turns me on... another detail I've shoved under the rug.

And because I don't know how to act now that we've veered into flirty territory, I decide to bolt.

Me: Sorry. Got to go. Will get back to you.

Tristan: Cool. TTYL.

I might be slow like molasses pouring out of a jar, but I'm not too old to know some text speak. That's some consolation.

Phoenix tugs at my sleeve, his brown eyes pleading. “Dad, please? You promised we could go see the fire trucks today.”

I sigh, running a hand through my hair. The kid’s been on my case for weeks about this, and Tristan’s offered to give us a tour of the station a dozen times.

“Alright, alright. Go get your shoes on.”

Phoenix whoops, dashing off to find his sneakers. I text Tristan, telling him we’re on our way.

The station doors are open when we arrive, the familiar scents of exhaust and coffee wafting out. Phoenix dashes ahead, heading straight for one of the ladder trucks.

Tristan strides out of the locker room, his six-foot-plus frame fills the doorway. He has dirt smudged on his cheek, which I have to fight the urge to wipe off. The way his uniform clings to his well-defined physique, accentuating every curve and muscle, sends a rush of heat through me. I’m reminded that I’ve actually seen this man without his clothes, and I’d loved every minute of the time I’d spent worshipping his body. Tristan’s a vision of strength and confidence, igniting my desires with a single glance.

He grins. “Hey, little man. What do you think of the truck?”

Phoenix nods eagerly. “It’s so cool! Do you get to drive it?”

“Sometimes,” Tristan says. “Want to see the hose?”

Phoenix’s eyes go wide. “Yes!”

Tristan laughs, leading Phoenix over to the fire hose. Watching them, warmth blossoms in my chest. Tristan’s so good with Phoenix, patient and playful. He was made to be a dad.

The thought startles me. Tristan and I have only known each other a couple of months. I shouldn’t be thinking about a future together, about him being a father figure for Phoenix.

I push the thought away, following them around the station. Today is about Phoenix, not my complicated feelings.

We'll deal with the rest later.

For now, I'll simply enjoy the excitement on my son's face and the joy in Tristan's laughter.

Tristan shows Phoenix how the hoses unwind and lets him spray a test burst from one of the hoses. Phoenix shrieks with delight, dancing out of the way of the water.

"Be careful, buddy," Tristan warns, but he's grinning. "Want to see the fire engine we take out on calls?"

"Yeah!" Phoenix dashes over to the fire engine, attempting to climb up to sit in the driver's seat. Tristan lifts him down with an apologetic look at me.

"Sorry, little man. You have to be a real firefighter to drive the fire truck."

"Can I see the sirens?" Phoenix asks. "And the lights?"

"Sure thing." Tristan helps Phoenix stand up on the sideboard, showing him the light and siren controls. He flips them on, the station filling with the wail of sirens.

Phoenix cheers, clapping his hands over his ears. "So loud!"

"But cool, huh?" Tristan ruffles his hair. "Ready to see the bunk room and kitchen?"

"Yeah!"

Tristan lifts Phoenix down, grabbing his hand to lead him into the station. Watching them, that warmth blossoms in my chest again. Tristan really would make an amazing dad.

I shake my head, hurrying to catch up. One day at a time.

Tristan leads us into the bunk room, gesturing around. "This is where we sleep. And the kitchen's through here."

The kitchen smells of coffee and leftover takeout. A few firefighters are sprawled around a table, playing cards. They look up at our entrance, greeting Tristan with a chorus of "Hey, Triscuit!"

Tristan rolls his eyes at the nickname, nudging Phoenix. “Buddy, these are the reasons I go prematurely grey.”

“Hey, little dude!” The blonde woman—Haley—waves. “I’m the prettiest one here, in case you couldn’t tell.”

Phoenix giggles, ducking behind Tristan’s leg.

Tristan ruffles his hair. “Don’t worry, they only bite on Wednesdays.” He gestures to each firefighter in turn. “Phoenix and Myles, meet Nick, Jared, Haley and Connor. And this is Captain Torres, but everyone just calls her Steph.”

I greet them with a sweeping wave of my hand and a friendly smile, but their main focus is on my son, and I wouldn’t have it any other way.

Steph waves from where she’s making a fresh pot of coffee. “Nice to meet you, Phoenix. Tristan’s told us a lot about you.”

Phoenix peers around Tristan’s leg, giving a shy wave. “Hi.”

Nick leans forward, waggling his eyebrows. “So, you’re the little dude who’s got Triscuit wrapped around your little finger, huh?”

Tristan flushes. “Knock it off, Nick.”

“What?” Nick raises his hands in mock innocence. “Just stating the obvious. He talks about you all the time, kid.”

“Do not,” Tristan mutters, though he ruffles Phoenix’s hair again.

Phoenix blinks up at Tristan, eyes wide. “You talk about me?”

“Only good things,” Tristan promises. “These guys just like to tease.”

“He won’t shut up about you,” Connor adds, deadpan. “Phoenix said this, Phoenix did that—”

“All right, that’s enough.” Tristan’s blush deepens, but he’s fighting back a smile. “Why don’t I show you the gym and equipment, buddy?”

“Okay!” Phoenix chirps, following Tristan from the kitchen.

I hesitate in the doorway, meeting Steph’s gaze. She smiles, jerking her head after Tristan and Phoenix. “He’s great with kids. And he really does talk about Phoenix all the time.”

“Does he?” I rub the back of my neck, watching them through the glass walls of the gym. Tristan’s showing Phoenix the weights and climbing equipment, hands moving as he talks. Phoenix is gazing up at him adoringly, mimicking Tristan’s gestures.

My chest aches, and I look away. “They’ve become close.”

“More than close, from what Tristan says.” Steph studies me, smile softening into something sympathetic. “He really cares about you both, you know. As more than just friends or neighbors.”

I stare at her, throat tightening. “What?”

She pats my arm. “Just thought you should know... in case you feel the same.”

CHAPTER 9



TRISTAN

What the hell am I doing?

I've been asking myself that question over and over, and I still don't have an answer. Feeling dazed seems to be my new normal since Myles and Phoenix visited me at the station. When I spotted them, I felt like I was walking on air, caught up in a feeling of pure happiness. I was seeing the two people who've quickly come to feel like family to me hanging out and laughing with the people who are already the closest thing I have to a family. I took the teasing and joking all in stride. But then again, what the hell am I fucking doing?

Almost stumbling over my feet as I hoist the bag of trash over my shoulder, I mutter some choice words under my breath. Since the crew seems to be getting a break from battling fires at the moment, I'm getting some housework done at the station.

After nearly knocking myself in the head for the fifth or sixth time while cleaning equipment, I heard my best friend's voice. It was slightly raised, like she'd called me more than once already.

"What's up, Chief?" I try to defer to my best friend's position while we're at the workplace... most times.

She straightens her petite, five-feet-four-inch frame and folds her arms. "A word with you in my office, Tristan?" The words are phrased like a question, but I know she's not really asking.

Simultaneously raising a brow and tilting my head to the side, I say, "Sure." I toss the rag on the bench and dust off my

hands on my pants. I have to wonder why my best friend wants to speak with me in the privacy of her office rather than right here since I'm the only one in the room. My brain quickly conjures up possibilities, most of them not good.

I follow Steph into her tiny office, stomach churning. Steph slams the door, folding her arms across her chest. "Spill. What's going on with you?"

"Nothing. I'm fine." The lie tastes bitter as I stare at the scuffed linoleum floor.

"Bullshit. We've been friends too long for that." Steph sighs, collapsing into the chair. "Look, I know you like to keep your personal life private, and I try to respect that. But you haven't dated anyone in over a year, and now you're moping around here like a lovesick puppy. Is it Myles?"

My face flames. I shake my head, quickly looking at her and then glancing away.

"Tristan," she cajoles, her voice gentle. "It's okay if you have feelings for him."

"I don't." My jaw clenches with the lie.

"Then look me in the eye and tell me that."

I meet Steph's gaze, but the words stick in my throat.

"Ah." A knowing smile tugs at her lips. "I see."

"Nothing's going on." I rake a hand through my hair. "He's not even into guys, and he has a kid to think about. I'm just being there for him as a friend."

"Uh-huh." Skepticism drips from Steph's tone. "Just remember to be careful, okay? I don't want to see you get hurt."

"I know, I know." I wave a hand. "Now can we get back to work? Some of us have floors to mop, you know."

Steph rolls her eyes, shooing me out the door. "Get out of here before I assign you latrine duty for a week."

I escape with a laugh, grabbing the mop. But Steph's words echo in my mind. *Be careful*. If only it were that easy. I

really like Myles, and I'm pretty sure he likes me too. Whether that's just as a friend or something more, I don't know. I honestly don't think Myles even knows at this point. He's never been with a man before, and presumably never even thought about it. His wife's been dead less than a year, and then there's Phoenix to consider. I adore that little boy, but how would he handle his dad and I being more than friends? And even if he were fine with it, what if Myles and I didn't work out? What would that do to Phoenix? I'd sooner cut off my own arm than hurt him. So, Myles might not be completely straight (if our recent kisses and our one incredible night together are anything to go by), but two things are abundantly clear: 1) he's off-limits—he has to be, and 2) his being off-limits doesn't stop my heart from wanting what it can't have.

It's V-Day. I pace my apartment, nerves twisting my stomach into knots. Should I go over to Myles's or not? I don't want to intrude, but the thought of him being alone tonight makes my chest ache.

Before I can talk myself out of it again, I grab my keys and head over. Myles answers the door in sweatpants and a faded t-shirt, hair mussed like he's been running his hands through it.

"Tristan." Surprise colors his tone, but he steps back to let me in. "What are you doing here?"

"I just thought I'd keep you company." I shrug, shoving my hands in my pockets. "If you want to be alone, though, I can go."

"No, it's fine." A small smile touches his lips. "Nix is staying with his grandparents, so I really appreciate the company actually."

The knot in my stomach eases at his words. "So, uh, want to watch a movie or something?"

"Sure." Myles nods. "That sounds good."

"Want us to make some hot chocolate?"

“Sounds good too.”

We settle on the couch, some action flick playing in the background. And we each have a cup of hot chocolate cradled in our hands. An easy silence falls over us. Glancing at Myles, the shadows under his eyes stand out in the flickering light of the TV.

“You okay?” I ask softly.

He blows out a breath, scrubbing a hand over his face. “It’s been a long day.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Myles is silent for a long moment. “Not really. I just—thank you for coming over. It helps more than you know.”

My throat tightens. “Anytime.”

As the movie plays on, I find myself watching Myles more than the screen. The urge to wrap him in my arms and comfort him is nearly overwhelming, but I squash it down. I’m here as his friend—nothing more—no matter what my traitorous heart desires. *Be careful*, Steph’s voice echoes again. I really, really wish it were that simple.

About midway through the movie, Myles shifts, leaning into my side. I freeze as his head comes to rest on my shoulder, his breath warm against my neck. My heart leaps into a gallop, pulse racing. Does he realize what he’s doing?

“Thank you for coming over,” he murmurs. “I don’t know what I’d do without you, Tristan.”

“You’d be fine,” I say, even as I savor the feel of him against me. “You’re stronger than you think.”

“Not today.” He sighs, the heat of his breath seeping through my shirt. “Today would have been a mess without you here. You always know the right thing to say to make me feel better.”

“I try.”

The weight of the world hangs heavily between us. I can feel the ache in Myles’s heart even before he begins to speak.

“Tristan,” he starts, his voice trembling, “you know today marks one year since my wife passed, but...” He takes a deep breath, his eyes glistening with unshed tears. “It was also her birthday.”

I’m stunned into silence, my heart sinking as I absorb the magnitude of his loss. What should’ve been one of the happiest days of the year for their family had become a day etched in sorrow.

Myles continues, his voice filled with a mixture of grief and admiration. “Cara is... was incredible. She was not just an amazing wife but also the best mother to Nix. She made every day special; she was like... like magic.”

I reach out and place a comforting hand on his shoulder, struggling to find words that can offer any solace. “Myles, I can’t even begin to imagine how tough that must have been for you and Nix.”

Myles wipes away a tear, his voice trembling. “It’s been... it’s been a rollercoaster. I miss her, and I don’t know how to fill the void she left behind.”

I squeeze his shoulder gently, my own emotions welling up. “Cara may not be here physically, but her love—her memory—will always be with you and Nix. And you’ll get through this, together. And I’ll be here too... to see you through this.”

Swallowing hard, I give in to the urge to wrap my arm around his shoulder, pulling him closer. He comes willingly, nestling in with a contented hum. The knot in my stomach comes undone, replaced by a surge of warmth and affection for the man in my arms.

I should move away, put some space between us before I do something I’ll regret... but I can’t. Not yet. I want to hold him and offer what comfort I can, even if it’s only for a moment.

Myles sobs into my chest, his tears soaking through my t-shirt. I hold him tighter, rubbing his back to soothe him.

The ache in my chest nearly brings me to tears too.

A desperate urge to ease this man's pain surges through my veins, and before I can contain it, my lips crash against his. I'm overwhelmed by a wild need to end his suffering and fight off all his demons, even if it means having to sacrifice my own sanity in the process. The fire inside me is uncontrollable, and I cling onto him, intoxicated by his presence but wanting to be a distraction for his pain.

He freezes.

Shit. What did I just do?

I pull back, panic rising. "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have—"

But then his mouth is on mine, hungry and desperate, his hands fisting my hair.

Heat explodes in my belly and shoots straight to my dick. I moan into his mouth, sliding my tongue against his.

He tastes like the hot chocolate we were drinking and something more, something intoxicating—something that's just him.

I break the kiss to trail my lips down his neck, and he tilts his head back with a groan.

"Tristan." His voice is wrecked. "Please."

"What do you need?" I mumble against his skin.

"Make me forget."

My heart clenches. I know what he's asking for, what he needs to quiet the demons in his head, if only for a little while.

I grip his waist and lift him onto my lap, settling him so he's straddling me.

Then I take his mouth again in a bruising kiss. My hands roam under his shirt, memorizing the feel of his skin and the ridges of his abs.

He whimpers into my mouth and grinds down onto my cock.

"Fuck," I gasp. I'm so hard it hurts.

I trail one hand down to cup him through his sweatpants. He's just as hard.

"Let me make you feel good," I whisper.

Before he can answer, I yank down the waistband of his sweats and shove my hand in to grip his cock.

He shouts, bucking into my fist.

I stroke him fast and rough, swallowing his cries with my mouth. His hands twist almost painfully in my hair.

"Come for me," I growl. "Come in my hand."

With a broken sob, he shudders and spills over my fingers and onto both of our shirts.

I gentle my strokes, drawing out his pleasure until he collapses against me, panting.

We stay like that for a long moment, his head tucked under my chin as I hold him close.

I'm shocked when Myles pulls back and slides off my lap to kneel between my legs.

He looks up at me through his lashes, eyes glazed and cheeks flushed, and licks his lips.

"Your turn," he says, his voice rough.

Before I can respond, he undoes my fly and pulls out my cock. I groan at the feeling of his hand wrapped around me.

Then his mouth is on me, hot and wet, and I nearly come undone.

"Fuck, Myles," I gasp, tangling my hands in his hair. "Are you sure?"

He slowly pulls away until my dick plops out of his mouth. I miss his warmth immediately. Myles raises his eyes to me, lips swollen. "You're the first."

And the fucking last.

What the hell? I don't have the right to make that claim.

Myles didn't wait for me to respond, just dips his head and claims my dick again. He bobs his head, taking me deeper with each pass. The suction is incredible, the sight of him on his knees in front of me even more so.

I guide his movements with my hands, thrusting into the welcoming heat of his mouth.

The pressure builds low in my gut until I'm writhing under his ministrations, chasing my release.

"Gonna come," I warn, trying to pull him off, but he bats my hands away and redoubles his efforts.

With a shout, I climax, spilling down his throat.

He swallows around me, milking me for every last drop until I become too sensitive and have to push him off.

Myles sits back on his heels, cheeks flushed and lips swollen, looking thoroughly debauched.

A surge of possessiveness rises in my chest at the sight. *I did that. I made him look like that.*

He's mine, a voice in my head whispers. And I have to agree, because I don't think I can ever let this man go.

CHAPTER 10



MYLES

I wake to the soft breaths of Tristan beside me. His bare chest rises and falls, peaceful in sleep. I feel no panic as I watch him... only contentment. Cara would want my happiness. And Tristan makes me happy.

Tristan stirs in my arms, his breath warm against my neck. I run my fingers through his hair, brushing it back from his forehead. His eyes flutter open, meeting mine. Vulnerability flickers across his face, and my heart twists.

“Hey,” I say softly.

He tenses. “Hey.”

I cup his cheek. “You okay?”

He hesitates. “Yeah, I just... wasn’t sure how you’d feel. About this. In the morning.”

My thumb strokes his stubbled jaw, then his lips. “Stay with me.”

Tristan searches my gaze. “You sure?” His voice is small, vulnerable.

“I’m sure.”

I pull him against me. His body melts into mine, all hard muscle and warm skin. He nuzzles into my neck, his breaths tickling.

“This okay?” he asks.

“Very okay.” I kiss his hair, inhaling his scent. He nuzzles into me even further, some of the tension leaving his body.

We trade lazy kisses as pale light filters into the room. His hands roam my back, my sides, relearning me. I revel in his touch, the solid warmth of him. We lie tangled together, and Tristan's touch gentles me. His lips graze my collarbone, my jaw, my mouth. Soft. Unhurried. Like we have all the time in the world.

When his stomach rumbles, I grin. "Breakfast?"

"Please."

We cook together in an easy rhythm, stealing glances and touches. Domestic. Right. After, he helps me straighten up before my in-laws drop Phoenix off.

And then it dawns on me how risky my behavior has been in the last 24 hours. My in-laws could have come back early with Phoenix or my son could have just walked into the apartment without knocking, given that he lives here. He could have seen Tristan and me together in a compromising situation. The thought is unsettling. I was so wrapped up in my grief, and then wrapped up with Tristan, that I probably narrowly avoided a very difficult, if not uncomfortable scenario.

"I should probably head out before they get here," he says regretfully.

I nod, hating to see him go but knowing he's right. "Come back later? Spend the day together?"

His smile lights up his face. "Absolutely."

One last searing kiss and he's out the door. I touch my tingling lips, heart full. I can't wait to see where this unexpected gift takes us next.

I hear the knock on the door, taking a deep breath before opening it. George and Cynthia stand there with Phoenix. Their matching outfits are a testament to their enduring connection. George, dressed in a well-fitted suit with a colorful pocket square, is the perfect complement to Cynthia's floral dress. As I observe them, I can't help but feel that their partnership has always been about balance and harmony. But there are lines on their faces now that weren't there a year ago.

“Hey, buddy,” I say, lightly squeezing my son’s shoulder.

He gives me a smile. “Hi, Dad.”

I thank my in-laws and exchange some small talk before they leave. Kneeling, I study my son’s face. There’s a sadness in his eyes that tugs at my heart.

“How was it?” I ask gently.

He shrugs. “Okay, I guess.”

“Did you have fun with Grandma and Grandpa?”

“A little.” He scuffs his shoe on the floor. “I miss Mom.”

I pull him into a hug. “I know, buddy. I miss her too.” I swallow past the lump in my throat. “But she’ll always be with us, in our hearts. And she’d want us to keep living and being happy. Right?”

He nods against my shoulder. I squeeze him tighter, then pull back.

“Hey, guess who’s coming over today?”

“Who?”

“Tristan!”

At this, his face lights up. “Really? Yes!” He jumps up and down. “Can we go to the arcade?”

I laugh. “I think that can be arranged.”

Right on cue, a knock sounds at the door. Phoenix races over, throwing it open to reveal Tristan standing there grinning, three arcade passes in hand.

“Hey buddy, ready to get your game on?”

Phoenix cheers, grabbing the passes. As we head out, I drink in their laughter. Tristan’s obviously a little nervous given the magnitude of this day, but I can see he’s making a sincere effort to keep things light and happy for my son. My heart swells at this new dynamic between us. Unexpected, but so very right.

Hours later, we return home exhausted but happy. Phoenix is chattering a mile a minute about all the games he played and

tickets he won. As we step inside the apartment, he lets out a huge yawn.

I ruffle his hair. “I think it’s bedtime for you, mister.”

“But I’m not tired,” he protests, even as his eyes droop.

“Sure you’re not.” I steer him toward his room. “Pajamas on and teeth brushed. I’ll be there to tuck you in soon.”

He trudges off down the hall. I turn to Tristan who’s lingering in the doorway.

“Thanks again for today,” I say softly. “You were great with him.”

Tristan rubs the back of his neck. “No problem. I had fun.”

We stare at each other for a moment, the air suddenly charged between us. I step closer, my hand coming up to grasp his shirt, pulling him toward me. Our lips meet in a heated kiss that steals my breath.

When we break apart, panting, Tristan rests his forehead against mine. “God, Myles, you make me... feel,” he whispers.

My throat goes dry as I wait for him to make the next move.

With visible effort, he takes a step back. “I should head home. Early shift tomorrow.”

Disappointment wells within me, but I know it’s for the best. This thing between us is still so new, so fragile. “Text me when you’re off work,” I tell him. “We’ll get dinner or something.”

He leans down and brushes a soft kiss over my lips. “Goodnight, Myles.”

“Goodnight, Tristan.” I watch him walk away before closing the door.

I inhale sharply, every muscle in my body tensed as I walk toward my son’s bedroom to tuck him in. The air is suddenly thick and oppressive, the weight of guilt pushing down on me like an avalanche. How could I have possibly considered

finding solace in someone else's touch, in their kisses? Sought sexual gratification from someone else? Felt joy on the anniversary of Cara's passing? I let out a strangled sigh. Guilt and joy. How do I reconcile these two conflicting emotions?

CHAPTER 11



TRISTAN

The sun blazes overhead, reflecting off the shiny red fire trucks as if it's trying to outshine them. I can't help but smirk at the thought. *Good luck with that, Sun.* As families pour into the station for our annual Family Fun Day, my heart races in anticipation of seeing Myles and Nix. It's ridiculous how excited I am to spend more time with them.

"Tristan, quit daydreaming," Haley teases, nudging me in the ribs. "We've got kids to entertain."

"Sorry, sorry." I snap back to reality, plastering a grin on my face. The sound of laughter and boisterous chatter fills the air, mingling with the scent of popcorn and hot dogs from the refreshment stand. We're all about safety here, but we also know how to throw a party.

My excitement level is through the roof, not just because of the event, but also because Myles and Nix will be here soon.

"Tristan!" Nix's voice cuts through the noise, and I turn to find him sprinting towards me, his dad in tow. My heart thumps wildly. *Oh boy, here we go.*

"Hey, Nix," I greet him, ruffling his hair. I try to act casual, but the way Myles's eyes linger on me makes my breath hitch in my throat. "Glad you could make it."

Myles dazzles in a navy tee, jeans that hug his lean frame, and worn sneakers. His disheveled, silver-streaked raven hair, sun-kissed skin, and warm smile draw my eyes. As the sun illuminates his brown eyes, I'm so thankful I get to share moments like these with him. The man has been haunting my

thoughts every second of the day. He stands beside me, his warm smile easing my nerves but heightening my senses.

“Thanks for inviting us!” Myles grins, his voice smooth like honey. And my stomach does somersaults. *Get it together, Tristan.*

“Alright, kiddo,” I say, focusing on Nix so I don’t get lost in Myles’s eyes. “You ready for a tour of the fire trucks for a second time?”

“Totally!” Nix’s enthusiasm is contagious, and we dive into exploring the trucks with gusto. His laughter rings in my ears, creating its own melody against the hum of conversation around us.

“Whoa, check out these cool shirts!” I exclaim, spotting the merchandise table. There are shirts in every size, with our department’s logo emblazoned on them. “What do you think, Myles? Father and son matching attire?”

“Absolutely,” Myles chuckles, his eyes crinkling in the corners as we pick out the perfect sizes for him and Nix. The weight of the shirts in my hands brings a warmth to my chest that has nothing to do with the material. The look of delight on their faces makes my heart swell with joy.

Nix tugs at Myles’s sleeve, his eyes wide with excitement. “Dad, can we go?” he asks, bouncing on his heels.

“Okay, buddy,” Myles replies, patting his son on his back. “Let’s check out what the firefighters have in store for us.”

Nix nods enthusiastically, and together, we dive into the festivities. Kids surround the fire trucks, climbing on board with glee. Firefighters explain the equipment, and Nix listens intently, absorbing every word like a sponge.

Meanwhile, Myles and I watch, exchanging knowing glances. It’s easy to see why Myles is such a great dad; his connection with Nix is palpable. My heart aches with admiration and a twinge of envy.

As the day unfolds, we wander through various stations set up for the families. Fire safety lessons, demonstrations, and interactive games abound. Nix participates with enthusiasm,

learning valuable skills while having a blast. I can't resist snapping a picture of Myles and Nix sharing a laugh together. The image captures a moment of genuine happiness, and it's a memory I want to hold onto.

Little man plays a whole bunch of carnival games, barely winning any prizes, but he's such a good sport about it. I lead my two guests to the prize punch board where Nix is guaranteed to win something. His dad and I watch as he punches the board and retrieves his prizes—a jumbo pair of sunglasses and various other loot. Nix's eyes are brighter than the sun. My heart flips. Not only am I falling for Myles, but I'm falling for his adorable son too.

“Tristan, you want to try the firefighter obstacle course?” Myles asks, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

I chuckle, shaking my head. “Nah, I think I'll leave that to the pros.”

We join the line for refreshments, where Myles orders hot dogs for him and Nix and a veggie burger for me. We sit at a picnic table, enjoying the food and each other's company.

After we eat our weight in junk food, we explore the face-painting booth. Nix chooses a fierce dragon design while Myles opts for a simple heart on his cheek, earning him a playful tease from me. We laugh together, the carefree atmosphere of the day lightening our spirits.

“Alright, everyone,” I announce, pulling out my phone. “Time for some selfies!”

“Tristan, you're such a goofball,” Myles teases, but he's smiling as he wraps an arm around Nix and me. We snap silly photos, sticking our tongues out and making ridiculous faces. My thumb hovers over the shutter button, capturing a moment where all three of us are grinning like loons, happiness radiating off each face. It's perfect.

I watch Myles, trying not to stare too blatantly. He's talking to a group of parents, laughing at something one of them said. His smile is so genuine and warm, it makes my heart ache. *God, I'm falling for this man. Hard.*

“Earth to Triscuit!” Nick’s voice draws me out of my thoughts, and I turn toward him. “You’re drooling over Myles again.”

“Am not,” I retort, my cheeks burning. No one has ever affected me like this, and it scares the hell out of me.

“Relax, we get it. You’ve got it bad for the guy,” Haley says, grinning as she wipes down a table. “It’s cute.”

“Sure, cute. That’s *exactly* how I want my love life described.” I roll my eyes, but deep down, I know they’re right. And it terrifies me. I’ve slept with plenty of men but never felt this... connected. It’s all-consuming, like a fire raging inside me.

“Aw, come on, Tristan,” Connor teases, nudging me with his elbow. “Maybe he’ll be your Prince Charming and sweep you off your feet.”

“Right,” I scoff, trying to play it off. But truthfully, I can’t help but have romantic thoughts about Myles. Yet, I know he’s still grieving his wife and probably only using me to explore his newfound bisexuality. It’s a dangerous game we’re playing, both emotionally and physically.

“Hey,” Jared chimes in, smirking. “You might wanna close your mouth; you’re catching flies.”

“Ha-ha, very funny,” I say, forcing a chuckle, but my gaze keeps straying back to Myles. *I don’t stand a chance.*

“Seriously, though,” Steph says, placing a hand on my shoulder. “It’s okay to have feelings. Just be careful.”

“Always am,” I reply, even though it’s not entirely true. With Myles, everything feels different, and I’m not sure how to handle it.

“Good,” she nods, giving my shoulder a reassuring squeeze before moving on to other tasks.

But as the day wears on, I can’t help but be drawn to Myles. Every smile, every shared moment, it all feels like something more. My heart races, and I catch myself having thoughts—thoughts about the future—that I’ve never had

before about anyone I've been sleeping with. And I've slept with quite a few.

I can't deny the magnetic pull between us—the way his laughter fills my ears, his touch lingers on my skin, and his smile ignites my soul. But I'm acutely aware that Myles is still grieving, still healing from the loss of his beloved wife, Cara.

He's been upfront about it, using our connection as a way to ease back into the dating scene. Myles is bisexual, and I've accepted that whatever we have is temporary. It's not the ideal scenario for me, but I can't help how I feel.

As the sun dips below the horizon, I'm left with a bittersweet ache in my chest. I want more than this, more than fleeting moments and stolen glances. I want Myles—I want all of him—and I want him to want me back. But I know the timing is all wrong.

As the crowd begins to disperse, I find myself standing near Myles, our hands brushing together accidentally.

"Thanks for inviting us today," he says softly, his eyes meeting mine with a look that sends shivers down my spine. "Nix had a blast."

"Anytime," I whisper, trying to sound casual. But inside, my heart is pounding like a drum.

"Maybe we could do this again sometime?" Myles suggests, a hopeful note in his voice that makes me feel dizzy with excitement.

"Definitely," I agree, but I can't help wondering if we're talking about more than just hanging out at the fire station.

"Great, I'll hold you to that." He grins, squeezing my arm briefly before walking away with Nix. His touch lingers on my skin, branding me like a wildfire, threatening to consume everything in its path.

"Way to go, Triscuit!" Nick calls after me, laughing at my flustered expression. "You've got yourself a date!"

"Shut up, Nick," I mutter, but secretly, I can't deny that I hope he's right. And as I watch Myles and Nix walk away,

their figures gradually fading into the twilight, I can't help but feel a twinge of sadness. For the first time since losing Mom and Dad, I yearn for forever with someone, with a family that is undoubtedly mine. I've never wanted anything more in my life.

"Triscuit, come help us clean up!" Nick shouts, snapping me out of my reverie once more. One last glance at the retreating figures of Myles and Nix, and I promise myself I'll hold onto this feeling, no matter what happens next.

I head back to my place with a satisfied grin and whip out my phone. Time to share my photographic genius with the world. The department's hashtag is all over social media, and I'm eager to add our happy memories to the mix.

"Let's see," I mutter to myself as I scroll through the photos. "Ah, here's Haley covered in whipped cream from that pie-eating contest." A chuckle escapes me as I upload it. "And Jared trying to balance three hula hoops while riding a unicycle. The man's a legend!"

The laughter of families, the scent of grilled burgers, and the taste of cotton candy still linger in my mind as I continue posting pictures. But then, I come across one selfie that makes my heart skip a beat. It's me, Myles, and Nix, all smiles and warmth. There's something different about this photo, though; my feelings for Myles and Nix are practically shining through my eyes.

"Damn, Tristan," I whisper to myself. "You've really gone and fallen for him, haven't you?" My finger hovers over the share button, but I can't bring myself to press it. This photo feels too special, too personal to share with the entire world. Instead, I save it to a separate folder on my phone, tucking it away like a treasured secret.

"Alright, enough reminiscing," I tell myself. "Time to get back to reality." With a sigh, I put down my phone and start tidying up my apartment, trying to push thoughts of Myles to

the back burner. It's not long before I hear a knock on my door.

"Who could that be?" I wonder aloud, opening the door to find Nick standing there, his eyebrows raised in amusement.

"Hey, Triscuit! Did you survive your big 'date' with Myles?" he teases, a wicked grin spreading across his face.

"Shut up, Nick," I groan, rolling my eyes. "It wasn't a date. It was a family event."

"Whatever you say, Romeo," he chuckles. "I just came to give you this." He hands me a small envelope. When I open it, I find a gift card to a local coffee shop. "It's from all of us at the station. Thought you could use it for your next 'non-date' with Myles."

"Seriously, Nick?" I shake my head but can't help smiling. "You guys are ridiculous. But thanks."

"Anytime, buddy," he replies, clapping me on the back before leaving.

As I close the door, I hold the gift card in my hand, thoughts of Myles swirling in my mind. Maybe, just maybe, there could be something more between us. And even though I'm terrified of what that might mean, I can't help but feel a spark of hope.

CHAPTER 12



MYLES

Tristan whisks together flour and baking powder in a bowl. “Okay, Nix, just add a pinch of salt,” he says to my son, as they both stand side by side in the cozy kitchen of Tristan’s apartment.

Flour dusts the countertops like a powdery snowfall, and the aroma of sugar and vanilla fills the air. Tristan has his sleeves rolled up and big, strong forearms on display as he guides Nix through the delicate art of cupcake making. I can’t help but smile as I watch them work together.

“Like this?” Nix’s little fingers fumble with the salt. “Oops!” he says when some sprinkles onto the counter.

“No worries, it’s perfect!” Tristan praises him, his eyes sparkling like the shimmer on a lake when the sun hits it just right. “Now, the eggs.”

My son’s eyes widen. “I’ve never cracked eggs before. What if I make a mess?”

“Then we’ll clean it up. Don’t worry, buddy,” Tristan says with a grin. “I’m right here. Just be gentle when you crack them, okay?” His patient tone has a hint of amusement. He demonstrates how to crack an egg without getting bits of shell in the mixture. “Ready for your turn?”

My son nods, concentrating on the task at hand.

The sight of them together warms my heart. Tristan’s ability to connect with Nix, to teach and guide him, is nothing short of incredible.

He teases Nix gently, “Remember, we want cupcakes, not scrambled eggs.”

Nix giggles, his eyes sparkling with delight. “Got it!” It takes him two tries before he gets it right.

I lean against the counter, feeling blessed that I get the chance to take this all in. My heart warms as I observe the easy camaraderie between Tristan and my boy. Darn him for being so handsome and charming, especially when he’s teaching Nix how to bake.

Tristan stirs the batter in a big red bowl, a smudge of flour on his left cheek, while Nix stands on his tiptoes, straining to see over the edge of the bowl.

“Careful, buddy. Don’t fall in.” Tristan ruffles Nix’s hair, which seems to be one of his favorite things to do.

“I won’t.” Nix giggles. “Can I add the sprinkles now?”

“In a minute.” Tristan glances up and winks at me. “We have to fill the cupcake liners first—but not too much or else they’ll overflow and cause a muffin top.”

The scent of vanilla wafts through the kitchen. My mouth waters. When was the last time I ate home-baked anything? More than a year ago, before...

I shake off the thought and focus on Tristan and Nix. The domesticity of the scene tugs at something deep inside me. A longing I’ve ignored for too long.

Tristan scoops batter into the liners with a smile, my boy mirroring his movements. Tristan then shoves them in the oven to bake and takes them out when the timer buzzes. While the cupcakes are cooling, the three of us chat about the fun science experiments Nix has been doing at school.

The warmth in the kitchen has nothing to do with the heat from the oven. It’s the way Tristan interacts with Nix that makes my chest feel tight and my stomach do somersaults. He’s patient, gentle, and seems to be genuinely enjoying himself. And Nix? He’s absolutely smitten with his new baking buddy.

“Here, let me show you a trick,” Tristan says, picking up a cupcake and demonstrating how to spread the frosting just right. His strong, capable hands are mesmerizing, and I try to focus on anything but the urge to touch him.

“Wow, that’s awesome!” Nix exclaims, eyes wide with admiration. “You’re really good at this, Tristan.”

“Thanks, little man,” Tristan replies, aiming a wide smile at my boy. “But you’re doing a really great job too. You’re a natural in the kitchen. You’re already way better than I was at your age.”

I can’t help but be amazed by their connection. It feels like they’ve known each other for years instead of just a few months. As I watch them laugh and tease each other, my heart swells with gratitude. And something else—something I’m not ready to name.

“Alright, now for the fun part... the sprinkles!” Tristan announces, pulling out three containers filled with an assortment of shapes and colors. The grin on Nix’s face is contagious, and I find myself grinning too.

“Yesss!” Nix bounces off the chair and onto his toes.

“Easy there, little man.” I catch him before he stumbles. “You’ll end up wearing more sprinkles than the cupcakes.”

“Can I do the red ones?” Nix asks excitedly, already reaching for the container.

“Of course,” Tristan agrees, handing it over. “Just be careful not to dump the whole thing on one cupcake.”

“Oops!” Nix holds up a cupcake with an avalanche of red sprinkles. It looks like a massacre on frosting mountain. I stifle a laugh.

“Go wild, buddy,” Tristan says with an exaggerated sigh.

Nix dumps rainbow sprinkles onto each cupcake with gusto. The colorful critters litter the counter, but I can’t bring myself to care. Not when Tristan and Nix are both grinning from ear to ear, covered in a mess of their own making.

A lump forms in my throat. When was the last time I saw Nix this happy? The realization hits me like a punch to the gut.

Rubbing his palms together with a mischievous glint in his eyes, Tristan says, “Alright, taste test time!” He hands each of us a cupcake. The first bite is heavenly—moist and sweet with just a hint of salt. Perfection.

“Delicious,” I murmur, my eyes meeting Tristan’s. For a moment, it’s just the two of us in our own little world. A world where I want to stay... if he’ll let me.

My cell phone rings, the ringtone cutting through the air, shattering the moment and forcing me back to reality. I glance at the screen to see the name Sterling Hayes. *Darn, I haven’t talked to him in a long time.* Sterling is a 32-year-old MLB second baseman. He’d been one of my athletes during my sports agent days, and he’s been a friend ever since. Excusing myself from the kitchen, I head to the living room for some privacy.

“Hey, Sterling,” I say, my tone warm with familiarity.

“Mylo, my man!” Sterling’s voice booms with enthusiasm on the other end. “It’s been ages.”

“I know.” The last time we’d spoken was a little over a year ago.

“How are you holding up?”

I take a deep breath, the question hitting me like a ton of bricks. “I’ve had good and bad days, Sterling. Today’s one of the good ones. Thanks for asking.”

Sterling’s tone softens. “I’m so sorry, Myles.”

“Yeah,” I murmur, my thoughts drifting to my late wife. “It’s been tough overall.”

Sterling’s voice becomes more tender. “And how’s Nix?”

“Good, good,” I reply, a smile tugs at my lips as I picture my boy in the kitchen. “He’s adapting well, everything considered. He’s baking cupcakes with our neighbor right now.”

Sterling chuckles, the sound warm and comforting. “That’s the spirit! Is Nix becoming a little baking prodigy?”

I laugh. “You could say that. My neighbor is showing him the ropes.”

Sterling’s voice drops conspiratorially. “Ah, your neighbor, huh? You’re letting her near your precious boy, Mylo?”

I roll my eyes although I know he can’t see me. “My neighbor’s great with Nix. And they’re not exactly a stranger, you know.” *Why am I using gender-neutral pronouns when I darn well know which pronouns Tristan uses? Plus, there’s no shame in letting Sterling know that my neighbor is a man, a very handsome one.*

Sterling teases, “Well, you know how it goes. Cupcakes today, marriage proposals tomorrow.”

I laugh again. “You’re ridiculous, Sterling.”

Marriage? Will I ever love someone even half as much as I loved Cara? Because I didn’t want to delve into that thought too deeply, I change the focus of the discussion.

“Speaking of relationships, what’s the gossip on your end? Are you still dating that model, Charlotte? Or have you moved on already?”

“No, dude, I’m not dating anyone. Charlotte was a fling, and it’s over.” I could hear the grin in his voice. “And what about you?”

So much for shifting the discussion to Sterling. Sharp pain lances my chest. If I hadn’t known Sterling since the beginning of his baseball career, I would’ve been offended by the question, but after being his agent for the better part of a decade, we’ve become more than just business acquaintances; he’s become my friend—a friend I’d shut out immediately after Cara’s funeral and ignored his calls ever since.

“Uh, no,” I stammer, feeling heat rise in my cheeks. “Not really looking right now.” Even as I say those five words, I feel like a liar. I know it may seem silly for this forty-two-year-old man to be acting more like a sixteen-year-old, but I

can't help it. Any time I've been with Tristan, it's felt as if I were on a date with him.

Sterling's tone grows thoughtful. "You know, Myles. I remember Cara saying once—I think it was at that charity event you dragged me to—that if anything happened to her, she'd want you to find love again."

My heart clenches at the memory of that conversation years ago. Cara was laughing and insisting that I shouldn't be alone if she were gone. Then Sterling teased me about the countless women who'd come knocking on my door.

"Yeah, she did say that." I sigh inwardly. Cara had been so full of life that night. I'd never have imagined what the future held.

There's a pause on the line before Sterling continues, more gently this time, "So, are you looking for love, Myles?"

I sigh, leaning against the wall. "I don't know, Sterling. Love feels... complicated right now."

His voice softens. "It doesn't have to be, my friend."

We chat a bit more, exchanging stories and laughter, and then say our goodbyes. As I end the call, I turn around to find Tristan standing there, his expression difficult to read.

"Hey, everything okay?" His light tone belies his unfathomable expression.

"Uh... yeah," I stutter, suddenly feeling very exposed. *How much did he hear? Did he catch the part of my conversation with Sterling when I mentioned not dating anyone?* "Umm, Sterling Hayes just called to check in on me." Then remembering that Tristan doesn't follow any sports, I tease him a little, trying for a light and airy tone, "You don't know who that is, huh?"

"You—"

"Finished using the bathroom," Nix announces, breaking the weird vibe that seems to surround Tristan and me.

"Remember to wash your hands, little man?" Tristan asks.

Extending his still-damp hands for inspection, my son assures Tristan that he did, in fact, wash them.

“Then let’s clean up.”

Tristan and my son head back to the kitchen with me following closely behind.

CHAPTER 13



TRISTAN

Yes, I fucking did it.

Eavesdropping on Myles's phone call with what's-his-name was wrong, so I'm going to apologize for doing it. It's certainly nothing to be proud of.

It doesn't take a genius to figure out they were talking about Myles's love life.

I wonder if it's my fault Myles hasn't started dating again. It's been over a year since Cara passed, and Myles had said he'd put himself out there. I love having Myles all to myself—and Nix is an adorable bonus—but I haven't been a good friend to him. I told Myles I'd help him ease back into the dating scene, but I haven't done a damn thing so far... except kissing the hell out of him and making him come a couple of times.

I know I'm shooting myself in the foot by helping him find someone else when I want him for myself, but I made a promise. It's time to follow through.

We were sitting in Myles's living room after spending hours over at my place baking cupcakes. Poor Nix was absolutely exhausted once the cupcake high wore off, even though he repeatedly insisted he wasn't tired. In the end, he barely had the energy to brush his teeth, put on his pajamas, and head for bed.

“So, about dating...” I cleared my throat. Myles scowled at me, probably already guessing where this was headed.

“Don't start, Tristan.”

“You said you’d try.” I hold up my hands in surrender. “I’m just calling in that promise.”

Myles sighs, raking a hand through his messy hair. “I don’t know. It’s too soon.”

“It’s been over a year, Myles.” I place a hand on his shoulder, feeling the warmth of his skin through his shirt. “I didn’t know Cara, but I’m sure she would want you to be happy. She’d want you to find love again. And going out with someone doesn’t necessarily have to lead to something long term. It’s about getting the opportunity to meet new people, and to feel comfortable with them while being your authentic self. Who says that every woman you meet has to become your girlfriend? There’s no need to rush, because it’s not a race.”

Myles looks away, but he doesn’t pull away from my touch. “Guess someone was listening in on my conversation with Sterling.”

“And what if I was?”

“Never mind. Maybe you’re right.”

“I know I’m right.” I give his shoulder a gentle squeeze. “And I’m sorry for listening in on your conversation. I promise it won’t happen again.”

“Good.” This time Myles is looking me right in the eye.

“Why don’t we make you a dating profile?” Feeling like a traitor to my own heart for what I was about to do, I pressed on. “We can look through matches together. If you don’t feel a connection with anyone, we’ll delete the whole thing. No harm done.”

Myles worries his bottom lip, considering. “Alright,” he says at last. “But don’t go signing me up for any weird sites.”

I laugh. “Scout’s honor.”

We settle in on the couch with Myles’s laptop and get to work. Helping Myles set up a dating profile feels like attempting to defuse a ticking bomb while wearing a blindfold. I can’t escape the swirling turmoil in my gut as I scroll

through the dating site's registration form. The promise I'd made to Myles to help him navigate the treacherous waters of dating once again looms over me like a dark cloud.

His expression is a mix of anticipation and apprehension. I can sense his vulnerability, his need for companionship after losing Cara. And even though a selfish part of me wants to keep Myles all to myself, a larger part knows that I have to honor my word.

"Okay, Myles. Let's get this show on the road," I say, trying to inject some enthusiasm into my voice. "First, we need some good photos."

Myles sighs, his phone clutched tightly in his hand. "I don't have many recent photos."

I grinned, reaching for the phone. "No worries, I'll be your personal photographer." I snapped a few candid shots of him, talking shit to coax a smile out of him. Capturing his genuine smile and the twinkle in his eyes has become one of my favorite things to do. "There we go. Looking good!"

Myles chuckles, looking at the photos I'd taken. He's genuinely surprised at how good he looks in them. "Thanks, man."

With photos in hand, we delve into the online form. As we fill out Myles's profile, I can't help but notice the irony. Here I am, helping him look for love, even though a part of me still hopes he'll find it with me.

I'm getting the opportunity to learn even more about him. It turns out we're both Leos; our birthdays are only a day apart. We're both non-smokers but drink alcohol occasionally. And we both enjoy playing board games. But we're also different in some ways. For instance, he enjoys sports and even played high school and college football. Me? I only watch sports because of the scenery. Helloooo! Haven't you noticed how sexy baseball players' asses look, or all the lovely skin on display when swimmers wear those tiny bathing suits, or how thick soccer players' thighs are? And don't get me started on all those tight ends on the football field.

Under marital status, Myles initially selects married, and then freezes. He draws in a deep breath and then expels it slowly before selecting widowed. At that moment, I really wish I could bring Cara back for him.

When he gets to the part where he has to specify his preferences, I watch as he hesitates for a fraction of a second before clicking on both “men” and “women.” My stomach churns, and I have to remind myself to breathe.

“So, you’re open to dating both men and women?” I ask casually, masking my inner turmoil.

Myles nods, his gaze fixed on the screen. “Yeah, I figure I shouldn’t limit myself.”

My stomach flips, but I have to respect his choices. If he finds happiness with someone else, then I have to be happy for him. I can’t be selfish.

Under different circumstances, he might not have even been attracted to men. Plus, I’m right here, after all. But I guess he’s not interested in me romantically.

Even though the thought of Myles dating makes me queasy, I know he’s a damn good catch, and men and women will be lining up to meet him. But ultimately, I want Myles to find happiness again. If that means setting aside my own feelings, so be it.

Myles thanks me when we finish. I tell him not to thank me yet; we have a lot of weeding out to do. But I already know I’ve made the right decision in helping him take this first step. Maybe, if I’m lucky, I’ll even find a date of my own along the way.

Stranger things have happened.

As soon as Myles’s profile goes live, the floodgates open. Messages from potential dates pour in faster than we can process them. I can’t deny that Myles is a great guy—kind, handsome, charming. He’s the total package. Who *wouldn’t* want to date him?

We sift through messages, weeding out the fakes, the creeps, the overly aggressive, and the people with whom he

has absolutely nothing in common. I try my best to give Myles space to communicate with potential matches, but it isn't easy. Jealousy gnaws at me, and I can't help but wonder if I've made a colossal mistake.

"How about this one?" I ask, showing him a message from a guy named Marco. His profile picture shows a friendly smile and kind eyes. "He's a teacher and likes hiking and reading. Seems normal enough."

Myles peers at the screen. "He's a good-looking guy. What's the catch?"

I laugh. "Hopefully there isn't one. I can't promise you won't get someone trying to catfish you, but it doesn't hurt to try."

"All right, so Marco passes the Tristan test. I'll send him a message." Myles types up a quick introduction, asking Marco about his favorite books and hiking trails.

A knot forms in my stomach, but I ignore it. This is progress, I remind myself.

We spend the next couple of hours sorting through more messages and making small talk with some of the more promising matches. By the time Myles logs off for the night, he has a date set up for this weekend.

I give him a smile, but I have to put extra effort into it so it looks real. It certainly doesn't reflect how I really feel.

"See? This isn't so bad."

"Not at all." Myles claps me on the shoulder. "Thanks for pushing me, man. I needed it."

"Anytime." I stand, ready to head home. "Let me know how it goes with Marco."

"I will." Myles walks me to the door. "Really, thank you. For everything."

The knot in my stomach tightens. I know when Myles starts dating again in earnest, it's going to hurt like hell. But tonight, seeing the hope in his eyes, I know I've done the right thing.

“You’re welcome,” I say, and head out.

CHAPTER 14



TRISTAN

The station house is bustling with the usual chaos. Nick and Jared are arm wrestling at the table, Haley's doing pull-ups at the gym, and Connor's snoring on the couch, probably dreaming of donuts.

"You call that muscle?" I tease Nick. "I've seen better arms on a T. rex."

"Jealous much?" Nick grunts, veins popping in his neck.

"In your dreams." I roll my eyes. "The only thing you're beating is off in the shower every night."

"Tristan!" Haley scolds, dropping from the bar. "There are limits."

The alarm blares before Nick can retort. In an instant, the playful atmosphere evaporates, replaced by the urgency of our duty. The familiar rush of adrenaline kicks in.

This is what I live for—the thrill of the unknown, never knowing what emergency awaits us on the other end of the call. Will it be a heart attack? A multi-car accident? A fire?

"Possible assault at the alley behind 5th and Elm," the dispatcher's voice crackles over the radio. "Two victims, one critical. Proceed with caution."

I rush to the ambulance, Connor taking the wheel, while Nick hops into the first responder engine accompanied by Haley and Jared. We're out the station doors in seconds, alarm still blaring.

I glance over at Connor, and his jaw is set in a grim line. We both know a call like this could go either way.

The ambulance roars off ahead of the engine, Connor leaning out the window to wave. Then we're alone, weaving through traffic on our way to whatever awaits us in that alleyway. My heart pounds as I think of the worst.

But I'm ready. I've seen it all. Whatever we find, I'll stay cool under pressure. Keep a level head. Do what needs to be done to save a life.

This is the job I was made for. And I love every second of it.

The dark alleyway comes into view, illuminated by the flashing lights of our vehicles. Empty liquor bottles, cigarette butts, and ratty blankets litter the ground, telling a grim tale of life on the streets. The wind pushes trash into the corners, and the distant sputter of a car engine adds to the eerie ambiance.

I jump out of the ambulance, barely waiting for it to come to a stop, and grab my trauma bag. Connor is right behind me. The acrid stench of urine and rotting trash assaults my senses, but I ignore it, scanning the scene.

As we approach, my heart sinks. Two figures lie motionless on the cold, unforgiving ground. The larger of the two, a burly man who appears to be in his late thirties, looks like he's been through hell. Bloodied and beaten, he lies motionless.

My eyes then fall on the other patient, a young man in his late teens, slim and fragile. A handprint bruises his neck, and his pants are unzipped and unbuttoned, revealing the aftermath of a horrific struggle. This is a grim reminder of the darkness that lurks in the shadows of our city. A wave of disgust rises in me, but I push it away. I have a job to do.

Connor rushes to the older patient, assessing his injuries. I stay with the younger one, my heart heavy with a mix of anger and sorrow at the cruelty of the world. Kneeling over him is a young man, probably in his early twenties.

Our eyes meet. His are red-rimmed, filled with a mix of fury and fear. "Help him," he rasps, clutching the teen's limp form. "Please, help him."

“I’m Tristan and that guy over there is my partner, Connor. We’re here to help. Tell me what happened.” I keep my voice calm, reassuring.

The guy, who I later learned is named Maddox, recounts his version of what happened. The older guy was assaulting his boyfriend, Ethan.

“I beat the shit out of him.” He glares at the assaulter.

“Okay, Maddox, I need you to step back now, so we can help Ethan.”

He hesitates, then pulls away. I turn my focus to the boy—Ethan—checking his vitals. Pulse is thready, breathing shallow. Not good.

“Ethan, can you hear me?” No response. Pupils dilated, signs of head trauma. We have to move fast.

Footsteps announce the arrival of Nick, Haley, and Jared less than five minutes after our arrival. They quickly assess the scene even as Connor and I fill them in. Nick races over to assist Connor with the assaulter while Haley and Jared stay with me.

“Maddox, does Ethan have any medical conditions we should know about?” Haley asks.

He shakes his head, eyes never leaving Ethan’s face. “Nothing that I know of. Please, just help him. I can’t lose him too.” His voice cracks on the last word.

I straighten, meeting Maddox’s gaze. “We’re going to take care of him,” I say firmly. “Ethan is in good hands now. Let us work.”

He nods, blinking back tears. I turn away, refocusing on Ethan, on saving his life. After all, that’s what I do. It’s who I am.

This young man *will* live to see another dawn. I’ll make damn sure of it.

Connor and I secure Ethan onto the stretcher, and I turn to Maddox, offering what comfort I can.

“Can I ride with him?” Maddox asks, his voice wavering.

“Of course. Let’s get him to the hospital.”

Tears well up in his red eyes as he nods, his voice choked with emotion. “Thank you.”

Connor races through the streets, siren blaring. In the back, I continue working on Ethan, stabilizing his neck and his breathing, starting an IV to pump fluids and medication into his system.

Maddox sits beside Ethan, clutching his free hand. Maddox’s eyes never leave his boyfriend’s face. The heart monitor beeps out a staccato rhythm.

“How is he?” Maddox rasps, voice rough with fear. “Will he be okay?”

“We’re doing everything we can. The doctors will take over when we arrive.”

Maddox swallows hard and nods. I glance over my shoulder, meeting his gaze. “We’re almost there. Just hold on.”

He grips Ethan’s hand tighter, leaning down to press his lips to Ethan’s forehead. Eyes closed, he begins to whisper something too softly for me to hear. A prayer, perhaps. Or words of love.

Either way, he’s speaking from his heart. And in this moment, that’s exactly what Ethan needs.

We pull up to the emergency room entrance. A team is waiting, and they take over, whisking Ethan away on a gurney. Maddox tries to follow but a nurse stops him, explaining they need space to work on the patient.

He stands frozen, staring at the doors Ethan disappeared through. Lost. Alone. A stranger in a sea of people.

I know how he feels.

Entering my apartment, I can't help but feel a sense of emptiness. Silence never bothered me before, but tonight it's deafening. For the first time in my life, I long for human companionship. I long for a time when I could come home to a lover, a husband or wife, a kid or two or five. I long for Myles. And Nix. Being with them has given me a taste of what a fulfilling life could be. And I... I want it. No, I need it, dammit.

A hot shower is the first order of business, washing away the grime of the day.

But as I step out of the bathroom, wrapped in a towel, a knock at the door catches me off guard. I quickly throw on a T-shirt and jeans before answering.

And there stands Myles, a bag of Chinese takeout in hand.

I blink in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

Myles grins, his eyes warm and inviting. "I thought you could use some company. I brought dinner. Chow mein and sweet and sour chicken."

"You're too good to me."

But Myles is already stepping inside, and I follow him to the kitchen. The last time we were both here, Myles was merely the observer as Nix and I had a whale of a time making cupcakes. This time, Myles is busy making himself at home as he plates our dinner. We settle at the kitchen table when he's done.

We sip on soda from the refrigerator, chatting about our respective days. In addition to the medical emergency earlier today, we were called to the scene of a two-vehicle accident where we had to use the Jaws of Life to extract one of the drivers. Spoiler alert: they both survived. I also had a bunch of paperwork, equipment checks, and inventory to do. It was a fucking long day. Myles says he's still job hunting but hasn't found any positive leads yet. His presence is a soothing balm, easing the tension that had built up inside me today.

As Myles and I tidy up the kitchen, a chore that feels surprisingly intimate, a sense of contentment settles over me.

The clink of dishes being placed in the dishwasher echoes in the quiet of my apartment.

“Thanks for coming over,” I say, trying to keep my voice casual. “I really needed this.”

Myles smiles, his eyes filling with warmth. “Anytime, man.” He rubs the back of his neck. “Guess I should get going.”

I couldn’t let him leave just yet. Plus the night was young, and the prospect of being alone again holds little appeal.

“Wait,” I blurt out, my heart racing. “Nix is with his grandparents tonight, right?”

A deep V forms between Myles’s eyebrows. He looks decidedly perplexed. “Yeah. He’s spending the night with them, and his granddad will take him to school in the morning.”

“Would you... would you mind staying a little longer?” I ask, my voice betraying a hint of vulnerability.

Myles hesitates for a moment before a slow smile creeps across his beautiful face. “I’d love to.”

Relief washes over me. I couldn’t help but smile back, grateful for his presence. “Great, it’s settled then.”

As we stroll into the living room, the familiar glow of the television screen casts a soft light across the room. I fumble for the remote, contemplating our viewing options. “Netflix?” I suggest.

Myles nods, gifting me with a warm smile. “Sounds perfect. What were you thinking of watching?”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. “Well, I was thinking of re-watching the ‘Arrow’ series.”

Myles’s response was a simple, “That’s fine. Cara and I had actually started watching some of the DC series on Netflix, but we never got around to watching Arrow before ...”

She died.

Another thing she didn't get to finish.

I silently vow that to make sure that, over time, Myles watches every DC series on Netflix, even if I have to drag him by the hem of his shirt, kicking and screaming.

I sink down beside him on the sofa, close enough that our thighs kiss each other. I can feel the heat radiating off of his body, sending a warm glow down my spine. It was a strange feeling, having someone over for a Netflix night that didn't involve the expectation of sex. But it's also a liberating one.

As the first episode of "Arrow" begins to play, I can't shake the sense that this night is special. It's a night where I can simply be myself, without pretense or ulterior motives. Just being here with Myles, enjoying each other's company, feels like a rare gift.

Despite the flickering images on the screen, my mind keeps wandering back to him. I wish, perhaps selfishly, that he could be mine forever. But I know I don't have that right. His heart still carries the weight of loss, and I can't rush him into something he might not be ready for. And then there's Marco...

I mentally shake off the thought. I refuse to let my mind dwell on his upcoming date with the man.

The hours pass in comfortable silence, punctuated by occasional commentary on the show. Even though Arrow has a dark, serious tone, we debate which of the two characters, Oliver or Diggle, is sexier. I love hearing the timbre of Myles's voice as he argues, with faux heat, that Diggle is sexier. Another spoiler alert: I think both of them are hot as fuck. Myles says he'd most likely take Thea Queen on a date if she were at least ten years older. I'd take Felicity Smoak on a date, hands down.

As the final credits roll on the last episode of season one, I realize this night has been the singular best night of my life. It wasn't about grand gestures or passionate encounters; it was about the simple pleasure of being with Myles.

With a gentle sigh, Myles shifts closer, his head resting against my shoulder. I yearn for more, for something deeper and more meaningful with him. Yet, I know I have to remember the assignment: helping him reenter the dating scene.

The night wears on, and eventually, fatigue creeps in. As I look down at Myles, I observe how heavy his eyes have become, and I can tell he's on the verge of falling asleep. I brush a strand of hair from his face, and my heart fills with a mixture of longing and tenderness; a pang of want, need, gnaws at me...

“Sleep,” I whisper softly. “I’ll be right here.”

With those words, Myles closes his eyes, and his breathing gradually slows to the steady rhythm of slumber. I watch him for a moment, feeling a rush of affection.

As I contemplate the future, I can't deny the strong attraction between us. I want Myles and Nix in my life, but I also know I have to respect Myles's journey and his healing process.

In the quiet of my apartment, I resolve to cherish any moment I have with him, no matter how fleeting. This night has been a taste of something beautiful, and I'm determined to savor every moment of it.

With a soft smile, I settle back on the couch, my arm wrapped protectively around Myles. A contented sigh escapes my lips as I reflect on how lucky I am to have met him. Tonight, I'll hold onto him and this feeling for as long as I can.

CHAPTER 15



MYLES

I stand in front of the mirror in Tristan's bedroom, staring at my reflection. I'd come over before heading out for my date with Marco. A bundle of nervous energy is roiling inside me, and I needed Tristan's calm nature to help soothe me.

My hands shake as I comb my fingers through my hair. The air is laced with the scent of cologne and anticipation. But it's been so long—two decades—since my last date. *How did I even get here?*

"Relax, Myles," Tristan says, leaning against the doorframe, his arms crossed. "You'll do great tonight."

"Easy for you to say," I grumble. My heart races like a freight train, threatening to derail any moment.

"Seriously, man. You're overthinking this." Tristan's smile is warm, but his eyes betray a hint of sadness.

"Am I?" I ask, my voice wavering. I look down at my outfit, a button-down shirt and slacks. "Is it too little? Too much? Does it scream 'I'm trying too hard'?" I worry aloud, chewing my lip.

Tristan chuckles. "No, Myles, it doesn't. Look, all you need to do is be yourself, okay?" Tristan reassures me, his tone light. "Marco already likes you."

"Right." I nod, trying to swallow my nerves. The taste of anxiety coats my tongue. "Just be myself. I can do that... I think."

"Good," Tristan says, walking towards me and resting his hands on my shoulders. "Now take a deep breath."

I inhale deeply, the air from the AC filling my lungs. More than anything, I want this night to go well. For Marco. For myself. And maybe for Tristan. My head's a mess, because that doesn't even make sense.

"So ..." I begin, my voice shaky. "I don't know how to approach this with Nix. He's only 8, and I haven't dated since... well, since his mom."

"Hey, it's okay." Tristan gives me a reassuring smile, but I can't help but notice the slight stiffness in it. "You don't have to talk to him about it right now. You don't even know if things will work out with Marco yet."

I nod, trying to take comfort in his words, but my thoughts are a tangled mess of nerves and confusion. If only Tristan knew how much I'd rather go on a date with him than with anyone else. We click in so many ways. But unfortunately for me, he's not interested in a serious relationship right now, if ever. If he were available, I would've asked him out on a date in a New York minute.

His cologne, a combination of sandalwood, with the hint of sweet vanilla, fills my nostrils as he leans in closer to me, providing a momentary distraction. "Besides," he continues, "Nix is a well-adjusted kid, mature beyond his years. When the time comes for you to talk to him, I'm sure he'll be supportive."

"But what if he thinks I don't love his mom anymore?" I blurt out, the fear gripping my chest. "Cara was everything to me, and I don't want Nix to think I've stopped loving her because I'm dating someone new."

"Listen." Tristan's voice is firm but gentle. "Nix is smart, and he knows how much you loved his mom. He won't think that, trust me."

"Thanks for saying that." I feel a weight lift from my shoulders. But even as

Tristan reassures me, I can't help but notice his responses seem a bit reserved, his smiles forced. *Is there something else going on beneath the surface?*

“Of course,” he replies, his tone light, but not entirely convincing. “That’s what friends are for, right?” He gives my shoulders a reassuring squeeze before dropping his hands to his sides.

“Right.” I try to dismiss my concerns, focusing on the present. The soft fabric of the shirt Tristan helped me pick out from my closet the day before brushes against my skin, a reminder of the date that awaits me.

“Remember, Myles, etiquette is key.”

“Etiquette?” I repeat under my breath, panic rising in my chest. “Oh god, what’s even considered good etiquette nowadays?”

My jittery hands fumble with the doorknob, and I curse internally. *Get a grip, Myles. You’re a grown man.*

“Hey, it’s not that big of a deal,” Tristan says, appearing behind me. “Just be polite and listen to him, okay?”

“Okay.” I exhale slowly, trying to drown out the doubt gnawing at my insides. “I can do that.”

“Remember,” Tristan adds with a playful wink, “don’t do anything you’re not comfortable with.”

“Trust me,” I chuckle, “I won’t.”

“Good.” He pats me on the back, his touch warm and reassuring. “Now go get ‘em.” But again, his expression seems sad, almost fearful. With a final nod, I turn away from him, trying to quell the unease in my gut.

With a weak smile, I leave Tristan’s room, my legs feeling like jelly. As I close the door behind me, I steal one last glance at Tristan. His smile definitely seems forced now, but I can’t help but feel grateful for his support. I just hope I don’t screw this up.

As I step outside, the cool air nips at my face, a stark contrast to the fire of the nerves burning inside me. The streetlights cast long shadows on the pavement. My thoughts race between Nix, Marco, and the lingering worry about Tristan’s odd behavior. But for now, I have a date to get to.

I step into the cozy, Italian restaurant, the warm scent of garlic and herbs hitting me like a comforting embrace. The dim lighting casts a romantic glow over the tables adorned with red-checkered tablecloths. I spot Marco at a corner table, looking even better than his dating profile pictures, but still not as handsome as the man who'd help me get ready for this date.

Tristan and I had hung out at a restaurant once, but we'd only been there because I felt I owed him a 'thank you' for rescuing my son and me from my kitchen disaster. I sigh mentally. It's wishful thinking wanting to be on a date with a guy who's more interested in helping and befriending a clueless, older guy than dating him.

"Hey!" Marco exclaims when he sees me, standing up to greet me with a firm handshake. His smile reaches his eyes, and I can tell he's genuinely excited for our date.

"Hi, Marco." My stomach flips with nerves. "You found the place okay, then?" I smile, trying to hide my nervousness.

"Absolutely, it's a charming little spot." He gestures for me to sit down before retaking his seat. "So, Myles, tell me about yourself."

We dive into conversation, sharing bits and pieces of our lives. He tells me about his passion for teaching sixth-grade students, the satisfaction of seeing their growth throughout the year. "There's something profoundly satisfying about watching them become independent thinkers," he gushes, his eyes sparkling with enthusiasm.

"Sounds rewarding," I reply sincerely. But in my head, I wonder if I could ever feel that passionate about anything again. Since Cara's passing, everything feels duller, less vibrant... except when I'm with Tristan and Nix.

As we share a plate of bruschetta, Marco regales me with stories about his latest hiking trip and the breathtaking views from the summit. The way he describes it makes me want to

lace up my boots and hit the trails. Our entrees arrive—he’s having lasagna, while I opted for shrimp scampi—and we seamlessly transition to discussing books.

“You mentioned in your profile you like fantasy. Have you read ‘The Night Circus’?” he asks, swirling pasta around his fork. “Magical realism isn’t usually my thing, but this one was enchanting.”

“Actually, yes!” I say, surprised. “It’s a beautiful story. The imagery is vivid.”

“Exactly!” He grins. “I’m glad you get it.”

Marco is easy-going and friendly, so much so that I didn’t even realize how the nervousness I’d been fighting before had simply disappeared. Despite feeling relaxed with him, I can’t shake the nagging thought that Marco would be an amazing friend... but not a life partner, not even someone I’d like to date. “Enough about me, though,” Marco says, dabbing his lips with a napkin. “What about you? What do you do?”

I chuckle before answering. “I used to be a sports agent. Managed some top athletes, negotiating contracts and endorsements.”

“That must have been exciting!” he exclaims, eyes wide with interest.

“Yeah, it had its moments,” I admit, smiling. “You wouldn’t believe some of the stories I have.”

“Give me a taste,” Marco urges, leaning in conspiratorially.

“Alright, there was this one athlete—I won’t name names—who’s known for his precision on the field. He was challenged to a pie-eating contest.”

“Tell me about it.” Marco’s eyes twinkle, as if he can already tell how the story will end.

“Well, he went all in, just like he does in every game. But he underestimated the pies, thinking it was going to be a cakewalk—pardon the pun. As soon as they said ‘go,’ he dug

in, but the pies were so slippery they kept sliding away from him. It was like they had a mind of their own!”

“I can picture it.” Marco says with a huge grin. “What happened next?”

“He finally got hold of one, but he’d lost track of time. When the whistle blew, he was still holding the pie, and he had whipped cream all over his face. The organizer said, ‘You have to eat the pies, not wear them!’”

Marco leans back in his chair. “I guess he didn’t know how to handle a sticky situation, huh?”

We burst into laughter, drawing the attention of nearby diners. *Oops!*

“Exactly! He might be a legend on the field, but when it comes to pie-eating contests, not so much.

We continue swapping stories as we indulge in tiramisu for dessert. But despite the laughter and easy conversation, something’s missing. There’s no spark, no fireworks. And all I can think about is Tristan, my next-door neighbor, with his kind heart and caring nature. Despite the age difference, there’s something about him that feels comforting, familiar. For the nth time this evening, a part of me wishes I were on a date with him instead, sharing an intimate conversation over candlelight.

Feeling guilty for not being fully present, I force myself to focus on my date. Marco really is a great guy, and I don’t want to waste his time. I know I need to be honest with him about my feelings, or lack thereof.

But that’s a conversation for later. For now, I’ll enjoy the company of this charming, funny man and this delicious food. And who knows? Maybe we can still find common ground as friends.

As the evening wears on, I find myself growing more introspective. The clink of silverware against plates and the murmur of conversation around us fade into the background as I search for the right words to share with Marco.

“Marco,” I begin, my voice sounding strangely distant to my ears, “there’s something I need to tell you.”

His eyes, warm and attentive, focus on me. “What’s up?”

“Since my wife, Cara, passed away a year ago, I’ve been... well, trying to figure out who I am.” I pause, feeling a sudden weight in my chest. “As a person, I mean.”

“Hey, that’s completely understandable,” Marco replies gently. “It’s never easy losing someone you love, and it’s natural to go through a process of self-discovery afterward.”

“Thanks for understanding,” I say, touched by his empathy. “It’s just... it’s been hard, you know? Re-evaluating everything, trying to pick up the pieces.”

“Of course,” he nods, offering a smile. “But don’t forget you’re allowed to take your time and heal at your own pace. There’s no rush.”

I appreciate his kindness, but as we continue to talk, my thoughts again drift towards Tristan. Maybe it doesn’t make sense to try to pursue a relationship with him, you know? When I was a sports agent, I knew dozens of men Tristan’s age, and for many of them, the last thing on their mind was being in a serious, loving, monogamous relationship. It was all about the chase, having sex with multiple people, and remaining single for as long as possible. For many of them, kids were not on their agenda either.

“Hey, Earth to Myles,” Marco says, playfully snapping his fingers in front of my face. “You okay there?”

“Sorry,” I chuckle sheepishly. “Just lost in thought, I guess.”

“Must be some pretty deep thoughts,” he teases, a mischievous gleam in his eye. “Anything you want to share with the class?”

“Uh, not really.” I try to brush it off. “Just, you know, life stuff.”

“Ah, life stuff,” he nods sagely. “The most mysterious of all stuff.”

We share a laugh, but deep down, I feel the undeniable truth gnawing at me. As lovely as Marco is, he's just not the one for me. He could make a great friend, sure, but my heart longs for someone else.

“Anyway,” I say, steering the conversation back on track, “I think it's important for me to explore new parts of myself. That might mean trying new hobbies or meeting new people... or going on a date with a handsome, sixth-grade teacher.” I try to offer him a flirtatious grin, but I think I failed miserably.

“Hey, I'm always up for helping people rediscover themselves,” Marco laughs, clearly enjoying the banter. “And who knows? Maybe we'll both learn something new about ourselves along the way.”

His words resonate with me, and I can't help but think of Tristan again—the stunning, young man with, I'm sure, so much love to give. It surprises me that it doesn't even matter that I'd never once in my forty-two years even thought of any guy in a romantic way, much less considered dating one. I guess after losing the person I thought I'd spend the rest of my life with, making a big deal about loving a person of a particular gender is the least of my concerns. It's about loving someone with all my heart and soul and hoping that love will be reciprocated. It's about being with someone who gets you, a person who sees you at your worst and knows all your faults but chooses to love you anyway, someone who is willing to tolerate you for the rest of your lives together.

“Cheers to that,” I say, raising my glass. As our glasses clink together, I can't help but hope whatever the future holds, it will lead me to happiness... and perhaps even a second chance at love.

As Marco and I finish our dessert, the sweetness of the coffee-flavored dessert lingers on my tongue. My stomach feels full and content, yet my heart remains heavy with uncertainty. Marco's laughter fills the air around us like a warm embrace, but it doesn't take away the nagging feeling that something is missing.

“Let me get the bill,” Marco insists, waving away my attempt to reach for my wallet. His smile is genuine, his eyes twinkling with kindness.

“Are you sure?” I ask, knowing our meal wasn’t exactly cheap. But Marco nods, his determination evident.

“Absolutely, it’s my treat.”

Before we part ways, Marco takes a deep breath and looks me in the eye. “Myles, I had a great time tonight. And I think you’re an amazing guy, but I can tell you’re not attracted to me,” he says gently, and I can’t help but admire his honesty.

I feel the need to apologize, heat rising in my cheeks. *How did he know? Was I that transparent?* Still, I feel a rush of gratitude for his understanding. “I’m sorry, Marco. You’re an incredible person, but...

“Hey, no worries!” Marco reassures me, his voice warm and understanding. “I’d be happy if we could be book buddies, since we share a love for the same genres. And maybe I could convince you to join my hiking club sometime?”

My lips curl into a grateful smile as relief washes over me. “I’d like that,” I say sincerely, appreciating his offer of friendship.

“Great! Let’s exchange numbers and stay in touch, yeah?” Marco suggests, pulling out his phone. The soft glow of the screen illuminates his face as we swap contact information.

“Perfect,” I reply, feeling genuinely excited about the prospect of our newfound friendship.

“See you around, Myles,” Marco says with a warm smile, extending his hand for a friendly handshake. His grip is firm and reassuring, a tangible reminder of the connection we’ve forged tonight.

“Definitely. Take care, man,” I reply, giving his hand a final squeeze before we part ways. As I step out into the crisp air, my thoughts drift back to Tristan—his kind eyes, his gentle touch, the kisses we’ve shared, getting naked with him, and the way he makes me feel alive again.

CHAPTER 16



TRISTAN

Woke up single again. It's the story of my life. Always has been, and the way things look like right now, it always will be. I guess nobody can say I'm not consistent. Consistently sleeping around. Consistently shying away from being in a committed relationship. Consistently hiding a part of myself, so no one knows the person I truly am.

And yes, I got up in a shitty mood, but it promises to be a great day.

It's little man's birthday, and we're going to celebrate it at the family entertainment center with his friends. As I drive into the parking lot, my mood lightens considerably. No way will I ruin Nix's special day.

The cacophony of the center assaults my senses as I stroll in. The scent of pizza and over-excited children fills the air while the bright lights from arcade games flash sporadically. My ears are bombarded by the sounds of laughter, squeals, and the occasional frustrated groan from a parent trying to keep up with their kid.

My eyes scan the room until they land on the beautiful man I'm falling for and his precocious son. Myles looks all kinds of handsome as he organizes party hats and goody bags. Damn, how does he manage to look so good in this chaos? He whips around as if he senses my presence, and my heart does that annoying flip-flop thing that seems to happen whenever he looks at me. He gives me a smile, his dimple popping. Trapped under his spell, I smile in return, my heart still somersaulting in my chest.

Nix races towards me. “Tristan! Look at my Batman cake!” He tugs me toward the table where a Batman-themed confection awaits his eager hands.

“Wow, that’s an awesome cake, buddy,” I say, grinning down at Nix whose face beams with excitement.

“Alright, everyone gather ‘round for cake!” Myles announces, and the kids jostle for position around the table, already hyped up on sugar and excitement. They enthusiastically sing the happy birthday song, sounding more like a cackle of hyenas than anything else.

Nix closes his eyes and makes a wish before blowing out the candles. The room erupts in cheers and applause, and I can’t help but feel a warmth in my chest at how happy he looks. It’s moments like these that make all the chaos and noise worth it.

Myles and I start cutting the cake and passing out slices. Nix is practically bouncing on his toes as he waits for his piece of cake. I take the opportunity to sneak a glance at Myles. He catches my eye and winks, a small smirk playing on his lips. I feel like I’m on top of the world, like Jack Dawson in the Titanic movie... well, before the iceberg, I mean.

“Hey, Nix,” says a girl with pigtails who looks suspiciously like she’s planning something devious. “You wanna see something funny?”

“Uh huh?” Nix says, a quizzical look on his face.

“Watch this,” she whispers before shoving a handful of cake into another kid’s face. The boy with the cake-covered face giggles uncontrollably. It looks like the two kids had that planned all along. Laughter erupts around us, and even I can’t stifle a chuckle.

“Okay, okay, settle down, you little devils,” Myles says playfully, attempting to regain control. “Let’s move on to the Ticket Blaster!” The cylindrical contraption looms large, filled with colorful tickets that are about to be blown around like a tornado. He helps Nix into the transparent tube. “Get ready,

son!” The boy’s eyes widen with anticipation, the look of pure joy on his face making my heart swell.

“Remember, grab as many as you can!” I shout encouragingly, trying not to laugh at how seriously he’s taking this challenge.

The machine roars to life, and a whirlwind of tickets fills the tube. Nix jumps, spins, and contorts himself in every possible way to snatch up as many as he can. His limbs flail wildly, and I can’t help but snort at his determination.

“Come on, buddy, you can do better than that!” I tease, laughing at his valiant attempts. In my mind, I muse, *Ah, to be young and carefree, where the most important thing in life is how many tickets you can grab in thirty seconds.*

“Got one!” Nix shouts triumphantly, clutching a single ticket in his hand like it’s the Holy Grail. The countdown timer ticks away, and I cheer him on as the seconds slip by.

“Three, two, one!” Myles counts down, and then the blower comes to a sudden stop. Nix emerges from the Ticket Blaster, grinning from ear to ear, and presents his winnings—a small handful of hard-earned tickets.

“Nice job, kiddo,” I say, patting the boy on his back. “Now let’s go trade those in for some prizes!”

The rest of the party flies by in a flurry of arcade games, laughter, and moments shared between Nix, Myles, and me. And through it all, I can’t help but feel grateful for this chaotic, noisy, beautiful mess that I’d love to call family.

I find myself watching one of the parents—Jenna or Gemma, or whatever her name is—as she leans in closer to Myles, giggling at his every word. The sound grates on my nerves like nails on a chalkboard. *I mean, seriously? Does she have to be so obvious about it? It’s not like Myles is a stand-up comic.* He’s thoughtful and serious and sweet and doesn’t use curse words. And yes, Myles is witty, but enough to elicit such over-the-top giggles? *Good grief.*

“Isn’t this just the best place for a kid’s party?” Sam, another parent, asks, trying to make conversation with me. But

my attention keeps drifting back to Myles and his admirer.

“Uh, yeah, it’s great,” I mutter, forcing a tight smile. My eyes flick over to them again, and I can practically feel the jealousy clawing at my insides. I should be the one standing next to Myles, sharing inside jokes and basking in the warmth of his laughter. Not her.

“Did you try the pizza? It’s pretty good,” Sam continues, oblivious to my inner turmoil. I nod, feigning interest in our conversation while my mind screams that it’s just pizza; it’s nothing special.

“Hey, look at this!” Nix exclaims, running up to us with a cheap plastic toy he’d bought with his tickets. For a moment, I’m grateful for the distraction, but then I catch Myles smiling at Jenna-or-Gemma, and my stomach clenches with envy.

“Wow, that’s cool, buddy,” I say, trying to focus on Nix and the happiness radiating from him. If only I could bottle that joy and save it for a rainy day.

“Okay, everyone, it’s time to wrap up!” Myles announces, finally tearing himself away from his new best friend. Parents gather their kids and belongings, and the noise level drops as they prepare to leave.

“Bye, Tristan! Bye, Myles!” Miguel shouts, dashing towards two men waiting for him. “Papá! Papi!” he beams, leaping into their outstretched arms.

“Does Miguel have two dads?” Nix asks, looking up at his dad and me with innocent curiosity.

“Seems like it,” I reply, watching the happy family reunion. Myles takes a deep breath and explains to Nix that some people have two dads or two moms instead of one of each, just like some kids have only one parent, or even none.

“Okay,” Nix says, furrowing his brow. “That means Miguel’s parents are gay, right?” Myles nods before Nix continues. “But when I went to Grandpa and Grandma’s church, the pastor there said that gay people will go to hell. Is that true?”

The question hits me like a punch to the gut, and I see Myles flinch as well. We exchange a worried glance, both of us momentarily speechless. And then, I can't help but think how important it is for us to set things straight—no pun intended—for Nix's sake.

The words echo in my mind like a bad song stuck on repeat: gay people will go to hell. The silence that follows feels heavy, suffocating even, as Nix looks up at Myles with wide, questioning eyes. I can see the gears turning in Myles's head, trying to find the right words to say. He's caught off guard, and if I'm being honest, so am I.

"Um," Myles stammers, his face a mix of confusion and concern. "Well, buddy, not everyone believes that."

"Pastor Johnson seemed really sure about it," Nix says, his voice small and uncertain.

"Sometimes, people say things because they're afraid or don't understand something," Myles explains, kneeling down to Nix's level. "But that doesn't make it true."

"For real?" Nix asks, searching his dad's face for reassurance. My heart aches at the vulnerability in his voice. And for a moment, I'm flooded with anger toward whoever planted this hateful idea in his young, impressionable mind.

"Absolutely," Myles replies firmly, placing his hands on Nix's shoulders. "Love is love, kiddo. And no one should be punished for loving someone else, no matter their gender."

I feel a surge of admiration for Myles as he navigates this delicate conversation, and I can't help but chime in. "That's right, Nix. Love is what makes us human, and it's a beautiful thing. We shouldn't let anyone tell us otherwise."

Nix seems to consider our words, his brow furrowed in deep thought. Finally, he looks up at Myles with a bright smile. "Okay."

"Good," Myles says softly, pulling Nix into a hug. "Now, let's—"

Jenna/Gemma cuts Myles off unintentionally—at least, I think it was unintentionally—but I'm understandably annoyed.

A little blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl has her hand clasped in hers. “You know what a rainbow is, right?” Jenna/Gemma asks Nix.

He nods, his eyes lighting up with excitement. “It’s when all the colors mix together in the sky!”

“Exactly! All those different colors coming together in one giant arch—that’s also what love is like.” Jenna/Gemma releases the little girl’s hand and gestures with her arms to illustrate her point. “Love comes in so many forms—two dads, two moms, one parent, no parents... And just like we can’t choose the colors of the rainbow, we can’t pick and choose who we love either.” She looks down at the little girl and reaches for her hand. “Sania’s uncle, my brother, is gay... just like Miguel’s papá and papi.”

Nix nods, but his interest in the subject quickly wanes as his attention is drawn to the plastic toy the little girl has in her hand. He whips out his own toy from his goody bag and engages the little girl in a conversation about their toys.

Jenna/Gemma clears her throat. “Walk us to the car?” Her eyes fix on Myles, and my mood takes a nosedive.

Don’t go, I try to telepathically convey to Myles, but he doesn’t get the signal. Plus, he’s a really nice guy—a gentleman—so of course he’s going to walk them to their car.

“Sure,” he says.

As I watch Myles walk away with Jenna/Gemma and the little girl, a pang of jealousy grips me. I’m not sure why I feel this way. After all, it’s not as if I’m in love with Myles, right? But the thought of him being with someone else, even in a platonic sense, stings.

“Nix,” I say, forcing myself to focus on him. The little boy is still playing with his toy, oblivious to my inner conflict. “I’m gonna start the clean-up.” Thing is, there’s no need to clean up; the staff at the center takes care of all of it. “Stick close to me until your dad gets back, okay?”

I need to fucking do something to get my mind off of Myles and his flirtatious friend, but the thoughts keep creeping

up, uninvited. I wonder what they're talking about at her car, if they're laughing and having a good time. I wonder if Jenna/Gemma is trying to make a move on Myles, and if he's even aware of it. I wonder if he's attracted to her, if he's thinking about her the way I think about him.

The thought is gut-wrenching, and I take a deep breath, trying to steady myself. *This is ridiculous*, I scold myself.

Between hearing about what kind of church Myles's in-laws attend and seeing how Jenna/Gemma flirted with Myles, I can't help but think maybe things are working out in the way they were meant to. It would be so much easier if Myles were with a woman. His life would be far less complicated if he weren't involved with me.

The gods are probably laughing at my expense, because I've spent my whole life committed to the idea of not burdening myself with a family. And now I feel like an idiot for letting myself want to be a part of this one, Myles and Nix's family.

But maybe Myles would be better off with Jenna/Gemma, someone who can provide him with an easy, uncomplicated kind of love. Being with a woman would make life simpler for him. He was married to one before; society perceives him as heterosexual. Navigating through this world can be hard for a same-sex couple.

My mood continues its downward trajectory when Myles returns, his face bright with an easy grin.

"Jenna invited me to take a cooking class with her tomorrow," he says, completely oblivious to my inner anguish. My stomach clenches.

Is he fucking kidding me?

I want to shout from the rooftop that I... *I* could teach him how to cook. He doesn't need this Jenna to take him somewhere so she can get him all to herself—to touch him and let him touch her—when I'm *right* here.

Dammit, Myles, can't you see me?

I wish I could kick my own ass for volunteering to ease him into dating and guide him through his bi-awakening. It's not like he had asked me to help him. Now someone else is getting the privilege of being with him in the way I want to.

Mentally shaking my head in exasperation, I can't believe I've willingly signed up to get my heart broken, because having to watch Myles fall for someone that isn't me will wreck my heart.

When Myles had left my apartment for his date with Marco, I'd been an emotional mess, wondering if he and Marco would hit it off and plan for a second date... or worse yet, spend the night together after their first date. My thoughts had escalated to the point that I'd even imagined them marrying and spending their honeymoon in the Bahamas! I'd paced the hardwood floor until the soles of my feet ached, right up until I heard Myles knock on my door.

He'd stood there looking as handsome as ever, and my eyes had blazed a trail over his face looking for any signs that Marco had kissed him stupid. But his lips hadn't seemed kiss-swollen, and his pupils hadn't been dilated. Or at least, I hadn't thought they were. I'd been so messed up after having a mini meltdown all night that I hadn't even been able to tell. And I'm a firefighter and paramedic, for fuck's sake! I honestly don't even know why I had bothered looking. Even if they had kissed, it's not like his eyes would have *still* been dilated, not unless Marco's kiss had also come with a glaucoma test or something. I really needed to stop taking all the things I read in romance novels so literally. At least I'd known for certain he didn't smell of another man's cologne; there was nothing but the same delicious sandalwood and citrusy scent he'd always worn. I'd pulled Myles in and asked him questions about how the date had gone, all the while bracing myself for him to drop the bombshell that he was going to see Marco again.

Myles had beamed as he told me about how much fun they'd had and that they'd both read the same books. He'd raved about how amazing the food had been, and about the intimate atmosphere of the restaurant.

As it turned out, Myles had been very impressed with Marco and wasn't averse to seeing him again, but only as friends. I still couldn't stop myself from feeling relieved that he wasn't going on anymore dates with Marco.

The relief I felt hadn't lasted long, though, because I somehow knew things wouldn't stay that way forever. At some point, someone would come along—maybe this Jenna, or maybe someone else—who could make him happy in a way he couldn't see himself feeling with me.

I will myself out of the memory and back to the present, back to feigning excitement over Myles's upcoming date with the beautiful, voluptuous Jenna. And back to slowly dying inside.

“Really? That's wonderful,” I lie, my voice cracking. “She seems like a lovely lady.”

“She is.”

Two words. Two fucking words are all Myles says, but those words stab at my heart like tiny daggers.

He looks around him as if just remembering where we are at. “Tristan, what are you doing? You know we don't have to clean up, right?”

“I know, but I—“

“Thought you were doing housework at the station?” Myles interjects.

I bark out a laugh. I didn't expect him to say that, but yeah, I'll go along with it. Plus, I'm grateful for the distraction. But my laughter is tainted by the knowledge that Myles will be with Jenna tomorrow.

“Don't worry,” Myles says, slinging his arm around my shoulders. “I like you anyway.”

My heart swells at his words. “Me too, man.” Though touched by his words, the feeling is still overshadowed by the looming threat of tomorrow. What if Jenna steals Myles away? I can't shake the feeling that my world is about to unravel.

CHAPTER 17



MYLES

I'm standing at George and Cynthia's doorstep, my heart pounding like a jackhammer. I never thought I'd see the day when knocking on my in-laws' door would feel like stepping into a lion's den. Yet, here I am, taking a deep breath and rapping my knuckles against the polished wood.

"Come on in, Myles!" George booms, throwing open the door with a grin that could rival the Cheshire Cat's. "We've been waiting for you!"

"Thanks," I mutter, walking inside and taking in the familiar scent of cinnamon and vanilla wafting through the air. It's a cozy scene, all soft lighting and warm colors... but a cold dread has settled in my chest, making it hard to appreciate the ambiance.

"Sit down, sit down," Cynthia insists, bustling me into a chair at their dining table. "We were just talking about how well Nix is doing in school."

"Ah, yes," I reply, forcing a smile. "He's really blossoming, isn't he? Despite everything... Losing Cara..."

"His resilience is remarkable," George agrees, his eyes misty with unshed tears. "She'd be so proud of him."

"Speaking of Nix," I interject, hoping to steer the conversation away from the emotional minefield. "He loves that Bill Nye's VR Science Kit you got him for his birthday. He can't wait to start experimenting."

"Really?" Cynthia beams. "We thought it would be right up his alley."

“Did you see the pictures from his birthday party?” I ask, pulling out my phone and swiping through the photos. “He and his friends had a blast.”

As we laugh over the images of Nix and his friends covered in frosting and silly string, I feel the tension in my shoulders ease slightly. Maybe this won’t be so bad. Maybe I can get through this visit without stirring up any trouble.

Without a doubt, I had to address this thing that has been bothering me since my son’s innocent revelation about my in-laws. Clearing my throat, I decide to dive right in.

“Speaking of Nix,” I say again, my voice wavering just a bit. “He told me something interesting the other day. He said that your church’s pastor mentioned that gay people would go to hell. Please tell me he’s mistaken,” I implore, my heart hammering in my chest as I search their faces for any sign of denial.

George and Cynthia exchange glances, the reluctance in their eyes evident. My heart sinks; Nix hadn’t misunderstood or made up anything. The hateful rhetoric was part of their church’s teachings.

“Uh, well,” George stammers, rubbing the back of his neck. “It’s not like the pastor preaches that every Sunday or anything...”

“One time is enough!” I snap, barely able to contain my anger and fear. Because if they find out I’ve been developing feelings for a man, will they try to take Nix away from me? Or try to poison his mind and turn him against me? I don’t give a darn if they’re disgusted by finding out that I might not be straight. I’m too old to care about what people think about me. Plus, since losing Cara, I’ve learned that life is too short to live a life of regret, fixating on things I should have said or done but didn’t.

“Look, Myles,” Cynthia says, her voice soft but firm, “we don’t personally agree with everything the pastor says, but we’ve been going to that church for twenty-five years. We can’t leave over one statement.”

I can't believe I'm having this conversation. The people I've known and loved for over two decades, standing in front of me, defending a place that preaches hate. My heart pounds in my chest, threatening to burst out.

"Can't you?" I retort, my words dripping with sarcasm. "Imagine having the power to choose where you worship and which beliefs to support. Must be nice."

"Are you calling us homophobic?" George bristles, his face flushing red.

"I don't know. Are you?" I shoot back, my pulse racing.

"Of course not!" Cynthia exclaims, looking genuinely offended. "We're allies."

"Then prove it," I challenge, staring them down. "Show me... and your grandson that you're not just sitting back and passively accepting hatred. Show me you're willing to stand up for love—all types of love."

Their expressions shift uncomfortably.

As the silence stretches between us, I can't help but wonder if I've crossed a line I can never uncross. But the ball is in their court now, and all I can do is wait and hope that they'll choose love over prejudice.

"Can you honestly say," I ask, the words tasting bitter on my tongue, "that you're okay with taking Nix to a church where they preach that gay people are going to hell?"

"Of course not!" Cynthia insists, her eyes wide with disbelief. "We were just as shocked as you when we heard it."

"Then why didn't you do anything? Why didn't you leave?" The questions hang heavy in the air between us, tugging at the strings of our relationship.

"Because it's complicated," George murmurs, almost too soft to hear.

"Complicated?" I scoff, feeling the heat of anger rise within me. "You want to know what's complicated? Trying to raise a son without his mother. Trying to navigate this world while keeping him safe and happy. That's complicated." My

voice trembles, but there's no turning back now. "And now I have to worry about the subtle poison of intolerance seeping into his life through the people he loves? That is beyond complicated."

I feel deceived, as if I've only scratched the surface of who my in-laws truly are. After years of knowing them, I'm only now discovering that they were part of a congregation that endorsed such hateful beliefs.

"Did Cara know?" I demand, my blood boiling. "Did she know this was the kind of church you attended? One that teaches and preaches intolerance?"

George and Cynthia exchange glances, then Cynthia speaks up. "You already know Cara never hid her opinion about religion and didn't even want to get married in a church. She'd stopped going to church long before we'd started attending that one."

Ours was a beach wedding, and it was the best day of my life, right up until the day Nix was born. Those two days have stood unparalleled in my mind.

The fact is Cara and I hadn't been particularly religious and barely went to church. We'd gone to obligatory weddings and funerals, and that was about it.

"We're not homophobic, Myles," George says, jolting me out of my musings.

"Not homophobic?" I shot back incredulously. "Yet you sit and listen to someone who condemns people simply for being who they are. They're going to hell because of who they love?" My chest heaves with anger, and I can feel the bile rising in my throat.

"It's not like every Sunday the pastor says that," George tries to reason.

Oh, great. That makes it all better, doesn't it?

I scoff, rolling my eyes so hard it's a miracle they don't get stuck in the back of my head. "Once, twice, a million times—it doesn't matter; the pastor shouldn't have said that in the first place," I snap, barely able to keep my voice from shaking.

“Look, Myles, we—” Cynthia starts, but I cut her off.

“Here’s something to chew on,” I interrupt, taking a deep breath to steady myself. “If you’re saying you’re not homophobic, that you’re allies, what have you done to prove it?” They stutter a response, eyes darting between each other. I press on, answering my own question. “Obviously not much, since you sit and listen to an intolerant pastor every Sunday.” The room feels colder somehow, as if the temperature has dropped several degrees.

“Have you made any gay friends? Used your privilege—whether it’s your physical or monetary resources—to support the LGBTQIA+ community, issues, or projects?” My heart is pounding in my ears, a mix of sadness and defiance fueling me.

They shake their heads, confirming my suspicions.

“No, we haven’t,” George says.

“Look, Myles, we understand how you feel,” Cynthia says, attempting to placate me. “But leaving our church isn’t as simple as just walking away. We have friends there, a community.”

“Ah, yes, a lovely community that believes some people deserve eternal damnation simply because of who they love,” I retort, the sarcasm rolling off my tongue. “Sounds like a real winner.”

“Alright, that’s enough!” George snaps, raising his voice. “We made a mistake, but we’re not bad people. We’ll talk to the pastor, try to make things right. What more do you want from us?”

“What do I want?” I rasp, my voice cracking with emotion. “I want to know that the people I trust with my son’s life won’t let him down. That they’ll stand up for what’s right, even if it’s hard, and even if they’re standing alone.”

We stand there, the silence as thick as a blanket, suffocating us with its weight. I can see the pain in their eyes, the love and confusion that muddles their thoughts. And as much as it hurts me, I know I have to draw the line.

“Until things change,” I finally say, my voice firm despite the tears threatening to spill over, “I don’t think—Fugg that. I *know* it’s *not* a good idea for Nix to be around that kind of influence. I need to protect him, and so do you.”

The air around us feels heavy, and I can see the shock and hurt on their faces. But this is about more than our feelings, it’s about the safety and well-being of a young boy who only knows love. And I will fight tooth and nail to make sure that love always wins.

“What are you saying, Myles?” Cynthia says after a long pause, her voice wavering.

Cynthia and George exchange puzzled glances.

“We don’t understand,” George says.

“Then let me be clear.” My voice is firm. “I love you both as if you were my own parents, especially since mine are no longer here, but unless you do better, I won’t be bringing Nix over here anymore.” The words taste bitter on my tongue, but I know they need to be said.

I can see the hurt in their eyes, but it’s not enough for me to change my mind. They need to understand that actions have consequences, and that loving someone means standing up against hate, even when it’s difficult.

“Alright,” Cynthia says quietly, her voice barely a whisper. “We understand.”

And as I drove off in my car, I take a deep breath. I’d made a painful decision. George and Cynthia love Nix, but I love him more. I could never stand by and allow my son to be exposed to intolerance, even if it meant confronting the ones I loved most. And I promised myself I’ll always fight for love, no matter what the cost.

CHAPTER 18



TRISTAN

I'm sitting on Myles's couch, staring at the TV but not really watching it. My mind is racing, torn between wanting Myles to heal from losing Cara and wanting him all to myself. There's something about him that I can't resist—his openness, his honesty, his charm, the way he adores his son. *Ugh, my brain feels like it's playing ping pong with my heart.*

When Myles asked me to babysit—kidsit—for him while he was on his date with Jenna, I agreed despite completely hating the fact that he'll be with someone that's not me. But how could I refuse the man I was falling for, and his son whom I adore? Spending time with the little man is no hardship. And how could I say, even if it's to myself, that I care about Myles but then won't do him this small favor. And besides, he'd told me about the falling out he'd had with his in-laws. It saddened me when I heard the news, but I supported his decision one hundred percent.

“Tristan, can you help me with this math problem?” Nix asks, bringing me back to reality.

“Sure thing, buddy,” I reply, forcing a smile and focusing on him.

We sit at the dining table, Nix's math homework spread out in front of us. I guide him through the steps, and we make a pretty solid team. After we finish, Nix grabs one of his favorite storybooks.

“Can we read this together?” he asks, eyes wide with excitement.

“Of course,” I say, unable to deny him anything.

As we take turns reading aloud, I can't help but get lost in the story, too. It's a moment of genuine happiness and peace amidst my internal chaos. Nix's laughter fills the room as we bring the characters to life.

"Okay, time for dinner," I announce after we finish the book. Together, we prepare loaded chicken nachos—a culinary masterpiece, if I do say so myself. We dig in, savoring each delicious bite, the cheesy goodness momentarily distracting me from thoughts about Myles.

It's 8:30 PM when Nix starts yawning, rubbing his eyes. "Alright, little man, time for bed," I say gently, coaxing him to brush his teeth and put on his pajamas. He grumbles but obeys, and I tuck him into bed, making sure he's comfortable.

"Goodnight, Tristan," Nix whispers sleepily.

"Goodnight, Nix," I reply, a genuine smile on my face.

"Dad will be home soon?"

"You'll see your dad first thing in the morning." Before I even finished the sentence, the boy was in dreamland.

I stand in the doorway, watching Nix sleep. The soft rise and fall of his chest is rhythmic and calming. I can't help but notice how much he looks like his dad—those same thick lashes resting against his cheeks, the curve of his nose, that mop of thick hair.

"Chip off the old handsome block, huh?" I muse to myself, smiling despite the whirlwind of emotions that continue to plague me. With one last lingering glance at the sleeping child who's stolen my heart almost as much as his father has, I close the door and head back to the living room. Alone with my thoughts, the weight of my feelings for Myles comes crashing back down.

I suppress a sigh as my thoughts drift back to him, and the way he looked when he left for his date with Jenna.

"Damn him for looking so good," I grumble under my breath, remembering Myles's sky-blue button-down clinging to his toned chest, and those dark jeans accentuating every inch of his perfectly-sculpted legs. I know Jenna will

appreciate his sexiness, and the thought makes my stomach churn.

Get a grip, Tristan. It's not like you have any claim on him, I scold myself, trying to maintain some semblance of reason. But God, it's been a year since Cara died, and I can't help but wonder if tonight will be the night Myles finally moves on, physically at least. Would Jenna make the first move? Or would Myles be the one to initiate things? God, I hope he won't spend the night at Jenna's place. If they fuck, I don't think I'll survive it.

Stop torturing yourself with these thoughts, I chastise myself, feeling an odd mix of anger and frustration. My usually sarcastic wit seems lost, replaced by this tormenting desire for a man who might be slipping through my fingers.

"Maybe if I'd said something earlier... No, too late now," I mutter quietly, raking my fingers through my hair. I force myself to focus on the present, the sounds of the apartment settling around me.

I need a drink, I think, considering the possibility of raiding Myles's liquor cabinet. But no, I can't let myself go down that path. I need to be present and clear-headed, in case Nix wakes up or needs me.

"Alright, Tristan, pull yourself together," I tell myself firmly. "You've got this."

Maybe I'll start with a cup of tea, I decide, hoping the warmth and soothing aroma will help ease the maelstrom inside me. And who knows? Maybe I'll find a good book to read.

But deep down, I know no matter how hard I try to distract myself, Myles will continue to haunt my thoughts, leaving me torn between wanting him to be happy and yearning for him to be mine.

I let out a sigh.

"I should just call someone," I mutter to myself, grabbing my phone. I scroll through the contacts, considering. "Netflix and chill" sounds like a good distraction, doesn't it? But as my

eyes pass over each name, I find myself hesitating. There's something that makes me pause every time, and I know just what it is: none of these people are Myles.

Ugh, this is pathetic, I think, rolling my eyes at my own desperation. *I don't need a random hookup, I need... him... I need Myles*. Admitting it feels like a weight off my chest, but at the same time, it only adds to the complexity of the situation. How can I want someone so much when they're not even mine to begin with?

Maybe reading will help, I thought, reaching for one of the books on Myles's shelf. I try to lose myself in the words, but my thoughts keep drifting back to Myles and Jenna. Are they having fun? Do they have that spark? The thought of them together twists my stomach into knots.

"Alright, enough," I snap, putting the book down and turning on the TV. I flip through channels, settling on some mindless reality show. *There. This should numb my brain enough to forget about them*.

But it doesn't work. Nothing seems to distract me from the gnawing feeling that Myles might be falling for Jenna. What if he comes home tonight with his eyes shining, telling me all about their amazing date? What if he decides she's the one who can help him heal, not me?

I need to find a way to distract myself from these thoughts, even if it's just for a little while.

"Okay, Tristan, stop pacing," I scold myself, realizing I've been wearing a path into the floor. I peek into Nix's room, relieved to see he's still sleeping soundly. "At least one of us can relax tonight," I mutter, closing the door gently.

"Deep breaths," I remind myself. "Just focus on something else, anything else." But even as I try to push the thoughts away, they cling stubbornly, refusing to be forgotten. And in that moment, I know that no matter what happens with Myles and Jenna tonight, my feelings for him aren't going anywhere.

Never in my life have I talked out loud to myself until tonight. I don't even know what to think of this new

development.

The sudden rattling of the door jerks me out of my thoughts, and I glance at my watch. Not even 9:30 yet. Myles shouldn't be back so soon, right? Unless... *Nope, Tristan, don't go there.* With a sigh, I tiptoe to the door and peer through the peephole.

"Great," I mutter sarcastically. "It's just the guy I'm trying not to think about."

"Tristan?" Myles's voice filters through the door, sounding anxious. "You in there?"

"Yeah, hang on," I say, fumbling with the lock before swinging the door open. The sight that greets me has my mouth going dry: Myles, standing on the doorstep with his hair slightly mussed; I fucking hoping it wasn't Jenna's fingers running through it. But his expression... his expression looks like he's been through an emotional wringer.

What's wrong?

"Hey," he says softly, his eyes searching mine. "I couldn't go through with it."

My heart skips a beat. "What are you really saying, Myles?"

"I'm saying that I didn't go on the date with Jenna."

I can't help the snort that slips out. "Really? You expect me to believe you left a hot date with Jenna to come back home and do what, exactly?"

"Be with you." Myles's gaze is steady, serious.

Without hesitation, I reach out, gripping his shoulders to pull him into my arms. Our bodies press together, and it feels like coming home. My lips crash to his with a fierce and passionate kiss that speaks of all the longing and desire I've kept at bay for far too long.

Don't ask me who closed and locked the front door or how we got into Myles's bedroom, because I don't know. All I know is that this is the man I've been pining for—lusting after

—for months, and now he’s in my arms. We’ve only barely pulled apart to grab some air before I pull Myles back to me.

I whisper his name, my voice barely audible above the sound of our breath. My heart is pounding, and I feel my cheeks flush with heat.

Myles smiles, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

Emotion swells my heart as my gaze follows the soft curve of his lips, and I see the unspoken invitation in his eyes. Without a word, I lean forward and touch my lips to his.

This kiss is gentle and tender. I feel an electric spark run through my body as his lips move against mine. My body aches to feel closer, and like a magnet, I plaster myself to him. We move together as one, our passion and desire building with every breath.

And God, is he hard... and hot.

Myles wants me. He fucking wants me just as badly as I want him.

The sensation of his hot breath against my lips is overwhelming. I’m so lost in the feeling of being in his arms, my heart racing with each kiss. I feel my skin tingle with anticipation as his tongue finds mine. We explore each other, tasting the sweet nectar of each other’s lips.

The kiss deepens, growing in intensity. I gasp as his hands find the small of my back, sending jolts of pleasure up my spine. The sensation is both tantalizing and overwhelming. I feel my world spinning, as if I’m standing outside myself watching this happen in some kind of dream.

Eventually the kiss slows, and I raise my gaze to meet Myles’s. As I look into his eyes, I see my own reflection mirrored there. We reluctantly part, both breathless, and I feel a wave of emotions sweep over me. I feel so close to him, so connected, and the intensity of the moment overwhelms me.

“That was incredible,” I gasp, my voice barely more than a whisper.

“I’m serious, Tristan,” Myles says, his voice firm. “I can’t stop thinking about you. And I realized tonight that I don’t want to.”

“Even though you’ve spent the past year mourning Cara? Even though you’ve got Nix to think about?” I ask, the words tumbling out despite myself. I want so badly to believe him, but I can’t let myself get carried away by my feelings for him until I know he’s right there with me. The heart can lie to itself, but the head knows the truth.

“I *am* thinking of Nix,” Myles replies, determination etched on his face. “He needs a parent who’s happy, and I can’t be that if I’m denying my feelings.”

“Your feelings?” I echo, trying to wrap my head around the idea of Myles actually having feelings for me.

“Tristan,” he breathes, stepping closer. “I want you. All of you. And you’re not leaving this apartment until you know how serious I am.”

“Fine,” I say, my voice shaking. “Prove it.”

Myles doesn’t hesitate, his hands grasping my shoulders as he tugs me toward him. Our lips crash together, and my resolve crumbles like a house of cards in a hurricane. This is what I’ve been wanting—no, needing—for so long. And now that it’s here, I can’t believe it’s real.

“Is this proof enough for you?” Myles murmurs against my lips, his breath warm and sweet.

“Maybe,” I reply, my grin cheeky despite the tears prickling at the corners of my eyes. “But I might need a little more convincing.”

“Good,” Myles says, his smile lighting up his face. “Because I plan on spending the rest of the night showing you just how much I want you.”

CHAPTER 19



MYLES

My heart's pounding in my chest, and I can't believe it. Tristan wants me—*me*, a widower, a dad in his 40s—when he could have anyone he wants. It's surreal. My thoughts race as I try to process this development.

“Let me take care of you,” I insist, when Tristan reaches for the buttons on my shirt. My voice is firm but gentle, laced with a mix of excitement and nerves. He hesitates for a moment, then nods. His eyes, those deep lust-filled eyes, draw me in, and I'm entranced.

“Alright. Show me what you got, baby,” Tristan replies with a flirty grin.

My heart trips over itself at the sound of the endearment.

As I start to undress him, my hands shake slightly. I laugh nervously. “You'd

think I'd never done this before. It's not like I've never had sex.”

“You haven't, baby... not with a man.” Tristan's eyes soften. “Cut yourself some slack.”

“First time since my wife passed,” I admit, feeling a sudden surge of vulnerability. My hands pause momentarily before continuing their task. “I'm not sure what the heck I'm doing. I'll need your guidance.”

“Thank you for trusting me, Myles.” His words are sincere, and they help ease my anxiety.

Tristan's clothes fall to the floor, revealing his muscular body. I'm immediately captivated by it—every curve, every

angle, every line. The scent of his cologne fills my nostrils, sweet and intoxicating.

“God, you’re beautiful,” I murmur, my hands roaming over his toned arms and chest.

“Thanks, old man,” Tristan teases, a smirk playing on his lips.

“Hey! You like this old man, remember?” I counter, poking him playfully in the ribs. My hands begin to explore further, tracing the lines of his abdomen, fingers dipping into the waistband of his underwear.

“True, I guess I do,” he admits with a chuckle, his eyes locked on mine as I pull down his briefs.

I take a deep breath, savoring the sight of him completely naked before me. And my hands automatically reach out to touch him again, gliding over the smooth planes of his body. I can feel the heat radiating from him as I press my lips to his neck, tasting the salty sweetness of his skin.

Capturing my lips, Tristan kisses me passionately, his lips pressing against mine with an intensity that takes my breath away. The taste of him is intoxicating, like the finest wine. His tongue explores my mouth, and I can’t help but moan in pleasure.

“See?” he whispers between kisses. “You’re already getting into it; you’re a natural.”

Heat rises inside me.

“Your turn,” Tristan says, reaching for my shirt once more.

After stripping me of my clothes, his hands roam over my body, leaving trails of fire in their wake. The sensation sends shivers down my spine, and even though we’ve done a few naughty things together already, this... *this* right now makes me feel alive in a way I haven’t in over a year. My doubts begin to fade as I focus on the present, on Tristan and the incredible passion we share. “You’re beautiful, sexy...” he murmurs, moving to lick and nibble at my neck. I gasp as his teeth graze my skin, sending shockwaves of pleasure through me. “And you’re mine.”

“You’re really good at this,” I manage to say, turning my head slightly to give him better access.

“Thanks,” he grins, mischief dancing in his eyes. “I try.”

As he continues to explore my body, I find myself drowning in sensation. His hands are everywhere, touching me in ways I never imagined possible. His hand glides down my chest to my stomach and then grazes over the length of my dick. I can’t help but shudder at the intensity of it all.

“Okay to keep going?” he asks, looking up at me with concern.

“More than okay,” I assure him, my voice heavy with desire.

“Good,” he smiles, before lowering himself to his knees and taking my dick into his mouth.

I gasp. The suction is incredible, better than anything I’ve ever experienced. I can hardly believe this beautiful man—this amazing, sensitive young man—wants me as much as I want him.

“Tristan,” I moan, my fingers tangling in his hair. “That feels... oh God, that feels amazing.”

He looks up at me with those mesmerizing golden eyes, and I know I’m a goner. I’m completely under his spell, and I couldn’t be happier about it.

“Slow down,” I pant, feeling the pressure build inside me. “I’m forty-two, not twenty-two. I don’t want this to end too soon.”

“Okay,” he agrees, releasing me from his mouth but continuing to stroke me gently with his hand. “Just let me know when you’re ready.”

“Trust me.” I grin, still breathless. “You’ll know.”

Tristan crowds me until the back of my knees hit the mattress. We topple into the bed, laughing like two deranged clowns, and the feel of his masculine body over mine heats me up from the inside out. We shuffle our bodies to the center of the bed, and as I lie there reveling in the sensations coursing

through me, I can't help but think how lucky I am to have found Tristan. He's everything I never knew I needed, and I can't wait to see where this journey takes us.

"Ready?" he asks, smiling down at me.

"More than ever," I reply, my heart pounding in anticipation.

"Good," he says, moving to straddle me once more. "Because I can't wait any longer."

I can't believe this is happening. I haven't had penetrative sex with anyone but Cara. It's been over a year since I've felt this alive, felt this kind of overwhelming desire. But now, lying here with Tristan, every nerve in my body is on fire, and all I want...

"I... I want to fugg you," I say, my voice thick with need.

His eyes widen, and a slow grin spreads across his face. "You want to *fugg* me?" He grins. I know it amuses him that I don't curse. "I thought you'd never ask," he teases, making me laugh even as my heart races.

"Wait," he says suddenly, pulling away slightly. "Do you have any lube or condoms?"

Shoot. "No, I don't," I admit, feeling a twinge of embarrassment. "It's been so long, I just... didn't think about it."

"Hey, don't worry," he reassures me, pressing a gentle kiss to my lips. "We'll figure something out. I'm negative, by the way."

"Me too," I reply, relieved that we're on the same page.

Tristan looks thoughtful for a moment before grabbing his dick and starting to pump himself. I've never actually watched another man do this in person, and the sight of him pleasuring himself electrifies my senses. The rawness and vulnerability of it stirs something deep inside me, making me even harder—if that's possible.

I wrap my own hand around my dick, fondling myself as I watch him intently. His breathing grows ragged, his cheeks

flushed, and the sight of it sets my blood on fire.

“Fuck, Myles,” he moans, his grip tightening around his shaft. “You have no idea how hot you look right now.”

“Likewise,” I manage to choke out, my throat tight.

With one final stroke, Tristan comes, his seed spilling into his hand. I can't tear my eyes away from the sight; it's raw and primal and absolutely intoxicating.

“Here,” he says, reaching for me with his cum-covered hand. “This should work.”

I watch in awe as Tristan slathers my dick with his cum, using it as lube. The sensation is electrifying, a mixture of hot and cold that rushes through my veins like liquid fire. I bite my lip, trying to hold back a moan. My body feels like it's been set ablaze, and I know I won't last long like this. I can't help but marvel at the fact that, even in my 40s, I'm still capable of feeling this alive, this turned on.

“Damn, you're so hard,” Tristan breathes out, and I can hear the raw need in his voice. It sends shivers down my spine, the anticipation building to an almost unbearable level. Just the thought of plunging into him has me teetering on the edge of pleasure.

Is this really happening? I wonder to myself, unable to shake off the surreal feeling. The answer comes crashing over me as Tristan leans in for another deep, searing kiss. His lips taste like sin and salvation all rolled into one, and it's addicting.

“Ready for me?” Tristan asks, breaking away from our kiss just enough to look into my eyes. I nod, my heart pounding against my ribcage, threatening to break free.

“Definitely,” I reply, trying to sound more confident than I feel.

Tristan smirks, a wicked glint in his eye. “Alright, big guy, I'm going to open myself up for you.”

He moves away from me for a moment, adjusting his position on the bed before spreading his legs wide. The sight

of him has my mouth watering and my dick throbbing in anticipation.

“Okay, here goes,” he murmurs, reaching down to touch himself. I watch, fascinated, as he slowly inserts one finger, still slick with his cum, into his hole. The moan that escapes his lips sends a jolt of desire straight to my core.

“Feels so good,” he gasps, adding a second finger. My heart races as I watch him stretch himself, preparing to take me in. The sight is so erotic, so enticing, that it’s all I can do not to just bury myself inside him right then and there.

“Almost there,” Tristan pants, working a third finger in. “God, Myles, I want you so bad.”

“Trust me, the feeling is mutual,” I assure him, my voice rough with need.

Finally, he pulls his fingers free, his glistening hole open and inviting. “Okay, I’m ready for you.”

As I take my position between his legs, I can’t help but think that this is the moment where everything changes—where our two souls collide and become one. And I couldn’t be more excited... or terrified.

“Ready?” I ask, my voice barely a whisper.

“More than ready,” Tristan breathes out, his eyes locked onto mine as I place the head of my dick at his entrance. His face is flushed with desire, and I can’t believe that it’s all for me.

“Here goes,” I say, taking a deep breath before starting to push into him. The warmth and tightness surrounding me is almost overwhelming, and I have to bite back a moan.

“Fuck.” Tristan gasps, his hands gripping the sheets. “You’re big. You might split me in two,” he rasps.

“Sorry,” I mumble, wondering if I should stop. But then he shakes his head as if he can read my mind.

“Feels amazing,” he assures me, and I can see the truth in his eyes. So I continue, slowly sinking deeper and deeper inside him until I’m fully sheathed. And I still for a moment,

giving him time to adjust to my size... and to give me time to shore up my control so this isn't over way too soon.

"God, Myles," he moans, his legs wrapping around my waist. "Move."

I start to thrust, gently at first, but soon we find a rhythm that has us both panting and moaning. Every time I slide in, I hit the spot inside him that makes his eyes roll back, and it spurs me on.

"Like that?" I grunt, trying to hold back the urge to just pound into him. "Like my big dick in your ass? *Can't believe I said the A word.*

"Y-yes," he stammers, biting his lip. "Don't stop."

"Wouldn't dream of it," I tell him, picking up the pace. Our bodies are slick with sweat, our skin slapping together as I dick him down harder and faster.

"Close," Tristan whispers, his hand moving to stroke his own dick in time with my thrusts. "So. Fucking. Ungh. Close."

"Me too." The pressure builds, and I know I won't be able to hold back much longer.

"Come for me," he urges, and that's all it takes. With a final, desperate thrust, I spill into him, my vision going white with the intensity of my orgasm.

Moments later, he follows, his own release painting our chests as he cries out my name.

I gasp, still trembling from the aftershocks of my orgasm as I collapse on top of him." Darn," I breathe, utterly spent. "That was..."

"Amazing," he finishes for me, a blissful smile on his face.

"Agreed." I pull out carefully and roll off of him, both of us panting and sweaty.

"Stay right there," I tell him, getting up to grab a washcloth from the bathroom. I wet it with warm water and return to the bed, gently cleaning him before doing the same for myself.

“Thanks,” he murmurs, watching me with heavy-lidded eyes.

“Of course,” I reply, tossing the cloth into the laundry hamper. We change the sheets quickly, neither of us wanting to sleep in the mess we’ve made and slip on some clothes. I would love to sleep naked with him, but we do have a precocious little boy sleeping just down the hall.

Crawling back into bed, Tristan says, “Come here.” He pulls me close as we settle under the fresh sheets. His body is warm and comforting against mine, and I know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that this is exactly where I want to be—wrapped up in his arms, feeling his heartbeat against my chest.

“Good night, sweetheart,” I whisper, pressing a kiss to his forehead.

“Night night, baby.” He snuggles closer, and soon we’re both drifting off to sleep, surrounded by the scent of laundry detergent and fabric softener, and the knowledge that something truly special has just begun between us.

CHAPTER 20



TRISTAN

My senses slowly come alive to the smell of coffee and bacon. I stretch, last night's memories flooding in, making me smile. Myles, that beautiful man, and me finally... finally giving in completely to our desires.

It's been a minute since I had a dick up my ass all night long, so getting up with fire in it wasn't unexpected. But it was worth it.

Hell, yeah.

Myles rearranged my insides with his cock, and I loved every minute of it.

I get out, albeit gingerly, and limp to the adjoining bathroom to take a piss.

My guy, my sweetheart, has a toothbrush still in its package as well as a towel, a white T-shirt, and grey sweatpants neatly folded for me. It's been a long time since someone outside of my squad took care of me like that.

I did my business and quickly got dressed.

But then I hear it—the sound of laughter accompanied by Myles's voice. Oh God, I forgot Nix is home.

I tiptoe to the door, opening it a crack, and peek out into the kitchen. Myles is standing beside the stove, while Nix is sitting on a stool, swinging his legs back and forth.

“Nice catch, Dad!” Nix exclaims, clapping as Myles attempts to flip the pancakes. He definitely needs some cooking lessons.

“Thanks, buddy.” Myles grins, ruffling Nix’s hair.

“Okay, Tristan, think,” I mutter under my breath. “You can’t just waltz out there like you own the place. You’re not even supposed to be here this early.”

Maybe if I act casual, they won’t notice, I tell myself unconvincingly. Yeah, right. Like an 8-year-old won’t question why their neighbor is strolling out of his dad’s bedroom wearing his clothes.”

Deep breaths, Tristan. Deep breaths.

With a shaky exhale, I push the door open and step into the hallway. The floor creaks beneath me, and I wince. Nix’s eyes lock onto mine, and he breaks into a grin.

“Tristan!” he exclaims, hopping off the stool and rushing toward me. He throws his arms around my waist, hugging me tightly.

“Hey, Nix,” I say, my voice cracking slightly. I clear my throat and try again. “Good morning, little man.”

“Morning, Tristan!” His enthusiasm is infectious, and I can’t help but smile down at him. My heart swells with love for this kid, a love that’s only grown since Myles and I became friends.

“Why are you wearing Dad’s clothes?” he asks, pointing at my borrowed T-shirt and sweats.

“Uh, yeah,” I stammer, feeling the heat rise in my cheeks. “I, um, spilled something on mine last night, so your dad let me borrow some clothes.” I glance at Myles, who’s looking equally flustered.

“Really?” Nix tilts his head, his eyes narrowing suspiciously. “You had a sleepover?”

My mind races, searching for a way to explain without revealing the truth about Myles and me. “Sort of,” I say, glancing over at Myles, who shrugs helplessly. I narrow my eyes at him slightly in mock annoyance, and he just grins at me. *The infuriatingly sexy asshole!* “We watched some movies and fell asleep.”

“Awesome!” Nix beams, completely accepting the explanation. “Can I have sleepovers with you too?”

“Sure thing, kiddo,” I reply, relief washing over me. “I’d love that.”

“Tristan, do you want some breakfast?” Myles asks, gesturing towards the pancakes.

“Definitely,” I say, suddenly realizing how hungry I am. “Thank you.”

Myles plated the pancakes and set them before me at the table, along with maple syrup, bacon and scrambled eggs. I’m just about to take a bite of pancake when Nix’s voice interrupts me.

“Did you shower here too?” Nix asks, his eyes wide with curiosity.

“Um, yeah.” I scratch the back of my head, trying to come up with an excuse that will satisfy him. “I got sweaty from our movie marathon last night, so your dad let me use the shower.” I slip the pancake into my mouth and begin to chew.

“Where did you sleep?” His questions are relentless, and I can’t help but admire his curiosity.

“Right here on the cou—“ Myles gets cut off by his son.,

Ignoring his dad, Nix turns back to me. “Did you sleep with Dad, like Mom used to?” Nix asks innocently.

I nearly choke on my pancake. “Wha— No!” I sputter, coughing as Myles pats my back sympathetically. “No, Nix, it wasn’t like that. We just... had a sleepover, like friends do.”

“Like friends?” Nix repeats, eyeing us both shrewdly. The intensity of his gaze makes me squirm in my seat, despite my attempts to maintain composure.

“Tristan slept on the couch,” Myles says, saving me from having to answer. “Just like you do sometimes when we watch movies late into the night. “And, yes,” he says, looking at Nix pointedly, “just like friends.”

“Okay,” Nix finally relents, turning his attention back to his breakfast. But I can tell he’s not entirely convinced.

I exchange a nervous glance with Myles, and we both expel a silent sigh of relief. For now, it seems, we’ve managed to dodge that particular bullet. But I can’t shake the feeling this won’t be our last challenging conversation with Nix about our relationship.

I try to focus on the taste of the pancakes and the warmth of Myles’s hand brushing against mine under the table. We’ll figure this out together... one step at a time.

“Wow, this place is amazing!” Nix exclaims as we step into the Adventure Science Center. His eyes widen with wonder, taking in all the colorful exhibits and interactive displays surrounding us.

“Isn’t it?” I reply, grinning at his excitement. I can’t help but feel a little giddy myself. I’ve always been a bit of a science nerd and seeing Nix so enthusiastic about learning makes my heart swell with pride.

As we wander through the center, Nix’s curiosity is insatiable. He eagerly asks questions about everything from dinosaurs to outer space, and Myles and I do our best to keep up with him. It’s incredible to see his love for science flourish right before our eyes.

“Check this out, Dad!” Nix calls, beckoning us over to an exhibit on renewable energy. “It shows how solar panels work!”

“Very cool,” Myles agrees, studying the display alongside his son. While their attention is focused on the exhibit, I steal a glance at Myles, admiring the way his eyes light up when he talks about science with Nix. The love between them is palpable, and I can’t help but feel grateful they’ve allowed me into their world.

As we explore the center, Myles and I find subtle ways to connect with each other without drawing Nix's attention. Our hands brush against one another as we reach for the same display, sending sparks dancing up my arm. We exchange meaningful glances from across the room, sharing a secret smile that leaves my heart racing.

"Hey," I whisper into Myles's ear when Nix is momentarily distracted by a planetarium show. "I've got some... plans for you later." I let my breath linger on his skin, and he shivers in response.

"Really?" he murmurs, a blush creeping across his cheeks. "What kind of plans?"

"Dirty ones," I admit, smirking at his reaction. "But you'll have to wait until Nix is asleep to find out."

"Deal," Myles whispers back, his blush deepening. He looks so adorable with pink cheeks that I can't resist stealing a quick kiss before Nix returns.

By the time we make it back to the apartment building, Nix is practically dead on his feet. The excitement of the day has taken its toll, and his eyelids droop with exhaustion.

"Alright, buddy," Myles says, ruffling Nix's hair affectionately. "I think it's time for bed."

"Aw, but Dad—" Nix protests weakly, stifling a yawn.

"Trust me, kiddo," I chime in, grinning down at him. "You'll need your rest for tomorrow if you want to try some of the cool science experiments we learned about."

"Fine," Nix relents, rubbing his eyes tiredly. "Goodnight, Tristan."

"Goodnight, Nix," I reply, giving him a warm hug. As he trudges off to his room, his dad close behind, I feel a tremendous swell of affection for this kid. He truly has captured my heart.

About ten minutes later, Myles strolls out of his son's room. He closes the door before turning to me with a mischievous grin. "So... about those plans..."

I press a finger to his lips and teasingly tell him, “All in good time, Mr. Impatient.”

“Can’t blame a guy for being eager,” Myles chuckles, wrapping his arms around me. “But you’re right; we’ve got all night.”

With that promise hanging in the air, our lips meet in a slow, languid kiss—a tantalizing preview of what’s to come. And as our bodies press closer together, I’m beginning to feel like this is right where I’m meant to be... with Myles and Nix, building a life and a family together.

CHAPTER 21



TRISTAN

As I slide my fingers under the hem of Myles's shirt, I feel the heat radiating from his skin. "You ready for this?" I ask, smirking as he nods, a mixture of lust and anticipation in his eyes. With a swift motion, I lift his shirt over his head, revealing his toned chest and abs. He really is a work of art, and I can't help but let out a low whistle.

"Damn, Myles, you're gorgeous," I say, unable to keep my hands off him. My fingertips tingle as they trace patterns on his warm skin, feeling the goosebumps that form under my touch. I lean in, pressing my lips against his neck, breathing in that intoxicating scent that is uniquely Myles. I suck gently, causing him to let out a soft moan that elicits spine-tingling sensations within me.

"Tristan... oh, God," he pants, gripping my shoulders for support as I make my way down to his nipples.

I can hear the humor in my voice as I tease, "I've been wanting to suck on these the entire day." I dip my head to slurp on one rigid bud before moving to the other. "You taste fucking delicious, baby."

His breath hitches at my words, and I smile against his skin, loving the effect I have on him. I continue to explore his body with my tongue, leaving a trail of wet kisses down to his belly button. We strip out of our clothes, and I stand before him, naked and unabashed. I can't help but marvel at how beautiful he is... inside and out.

"Your dick is perfect," I tell him, not able to contain myself.

He chuckles. “Didn’t hear any complaints last night, so I guess you’re right,” he says with a shy smile. I smile back at him, remembering how incredible it was having him inside me.

“Damn right,” I respond, running a finger along the length of his shaft. “You fucked me so good last night, baby. I hope one day I can return the favor and show you how amazing it feels to have a dick up your ass.”

Myles shivers at my words, and I can see his dick twitch slightly in response. I move closer to him, burying my face in his trimmed pubic hair, inhaling deeply. “You smell so fucking good,” I murmur into his skin. I squeeze his ass, feeling the firm muscle beneath my fingertips. “And this peach of an ass is fucking perfect.”

“Tristan,” Myles moans, clearly aroused by my words and actions. I can practically feel the sexual tension between us, electrifying the air.

“Hey,” I say, pulling back from his crotch to look into his eyes. “I want to try something.” I see curiosity flicker in his eyes as he waits for me to explain.

Truth is, I was ecstatic when I saw Myles’s uncut dick for the first time. I’ve never done what I’m about to do with any of my past lovers. It’s only fitting this first should belong to this man who has so completely captured my heart in the months I’ve known him.

“Pull your foreskin back and hold it,” I instruct him.

He follows my direction. Myles’s eyes grow wild when I stretch my foreskin open and outward over the head and shaft of his dick.

Our breaths quicken.

“Now you’re gonna release it.”

Together we work to pull his foreskin as far as possible over my dick.

Our cockheads touch, tip to tip, encased inside each other’s foreskin. The sensation is indescribable, a mix of pleasure and

intimacy that sends shivers down my spine. Our pre-cum flows, creating a suctioning effect similar to a fleshlight as I begin to stroke both of our dicks simultaneously.

“Tristan... this is... this is amazing,” Myles gasps, his eyes locked onto the incredible sight between us. I have to agree; the feeling of our cocks sliding against one another, enveloped in shared warmth, is unlike anything I’ve ever experienced.

“Feels so fucking good, doesn’t it?” I manage to say between moans. My heart races as the heat between us intensifies.

It’s an intense, erotic dance, our bodies moving together in perfect harmony. This moment, this connection, is everything I’ve ever wanted with Myles.

As the sensation builds, I feel it deep within, a pressure that demands release. I glance at Myles, and his eyes are wide with wonder and pleasure as he experiences this intense connection.

“Tristan,” he gasps, “I’m gonna... I can’t hold it...”

“Me too,” I confess, my voice trembling with need. “Let it happen, Myles. Let’s do this together.”

Our bodies tremble, and suddenly, we explode in unison. Our cum fills the space between our foreskins, causing them to swell and overflow. I watch Myles’s expression, a mix of awe and ecstasy, as he takes in this incredible sight. The warmth of our intermingled fluids only adds to the sheer intensity of the moment.

“Fuck,” Myles breathes, his chest heaving. “That was... mind-blowing.”

“Damn straight,” I agree, unable to suppress a grin. *He actually said the word fuck!* The humor of the situation isn’t lost on me. We’re two grown men, covered in our own mess, but I couldn’t be happier about it. In this moment, I feel closer to Myles than ever before.

As our heart rates return to normal, we slowly ease our foreskins apart, savoring the lingering warmth and wetness.

Our still-hard dicks slip against each other, slick with our mingled cum.

“Wow,” Myles murmurs, clearly still processing what just happened.

“Definitely one for the books,” I say, smirking. “I mean, you even said fuck! If that’s not a ringing endorsement, I don’t know what is.” Myles blushes so prettily, I just have to kiss him silly—*have* to—I can’t even help it.

Some of our cum slips through my fingers, and I’m amazed at how perfect this moment is. It’s messy and raw, but it’s also the most intimate and real thing I’ve ever experienced.

“Tristan,” Myles begins, his voice soft and vulnerable. “This... us... I don’t know what to say.”

“Hey,” I say gently, wrapping my arms around him. “You don’t need to say anything right now. Just let yourself feel it.”

I slowly and sensually bring my cum-covered fingers to my lips, feeling the sticky warmth as I savor every last drop. Myles’s eyes are transfixed on me, his gaze intense and unwavering. A sense of pride washes over me at the effect I have on him. His dilated pupils and flushed cheeks are all the evidence I need that this moment is affecting him every bit as much as it is me. Tasting our combined release—salty, bitter, yet somehow sweet—is indescribably intimate. It’s like tasting the essence of our connection.

“Tris,” Myles breathes, his voice hoarse with desire. “You’re... you’re incredible.”

My heart melts at the way he’s shortened my name. “Am I now?” I reply with a smirk, feigning nonchalance even as my heart races in my chest. “Well, I’m glad you think so.”

“Come here,” he murmurs, reaching out and pulling me closer. Our bodies press together, slick with sweat and other fluids, but neither of us cares. The sensation of his skin against mine sends my senses spinning, and I know I’ll never get enough of this man.

“Tell me what you want,” I whisper into his ear, nipping gently at the lobe. He shudders beneath me, his grip on my

hips tightening.

“Kiss me,” he says simply, and I oblige without hesitation. Our lips meet in a searing kiss, tongues tangling together in an erotic dance. The taste of our combined release still lingers on my tongue, a reminder of the passionate moment we just shared.

“Can’t believe how good that felt,” Myles admits, his voice barely audible, as if he’s afraid speaking too loudly will break the spell we’ve woven around ourselves. “Never imagined anything like that before.”

“Neither did I,” I confess, my mind still reeling from the intensity of our shared release. “But damn, I’m glad we did it.”

“Me too,” Myles agrees, his eyes filled with warmth and affection. As we lay there, entwined in each other’s arms, it occurs to me—not for the first time—how lucky I am to have found this beautiful man. He’s everything I could ever possibly want, and I’ll do everything in my power to keep him by my side.

“Promise me...” he whispers into my ear, his breath warm and tickling. “Promise me you’re sticking around.”

“Of course, baby,” I say softly, pressing a gentle kiss to his forehead. “Where else would I want to be?”

“Good,” he says, pulling me in for another lingering kiss. “Because I don’t ever want to let you go.”

“Never gonna happen,” I assure him, feeling warmth flood my chest at the thought that he wants me as much as I want him. “You’ve got me, Myles. And I’ve got you.”

As we hold each other, basking in the afterglow of our passion, I can’t help imagining the future we could have together. Myles, Nix, and me—a family bound not by blood, but by love. It scares me, the depth of my feelings for him, but it also excites me in ways I can’t even begin to describe.

“Whatever comes next,” I whisper into the darkness, “we’ll face it together.”

“Darn right,” Myles murmurs against my skin, nuzzling closer to me. “Together.”

And as we drift off to sleep, wrapped in each other’s embrace, I know I need to tell Myles that I love him.

CHAPTER 22



MYLES

“Ready to make some magic happen?” Tristan asks, entering the kitchen with a wink. His smile is contagious, and I can’t help but chuckle.

“Absolutely,” I say, grabbing a mixing bowl and a wooden spoon. “Let’s do this.”

With Tristan’s 24-hour shift was finally over, he has 48 precious hours of time off from work. That means he can spend the day with me. Not seeing him for an entire day meant I was in dire need of my Tristan fix. The anticipation makes my heart flutter like a moth trapped inside a jar.

Tristan unloads a bag full of ingredients onto the kitchen counter: buckwheat, coconut oil, and honey to name a few. Nix bounds into the room, rubbing his sleepy eyes, and doesn’t even complain about being up so early.

“Morning, kiddo,” I say, ruffling his hair. “Ready to make some homemade cocoa pops?”

“Yay!” Nix exclaims, wide awake now. He hops up onto a stool and starts helping Tristan measure out the ingredients.

“Careful, Nix,” I warn as he almost spills the buckwheat all over the counter. I feel such peace as we work together. We’re a natural team, and it warms my heart more than any fire ever could.

“Alright, let’s get stirring,” Tristan says, guiding Nix’s little hand as they combine the chocolatey mixture. The smell of cocoa wafts through the air, making my stomach growl with anticipation.

“Into the oven it goes,” Tristan announces, sliding the tray of soon-to-be-crispy cereal into the preheated oven. Nix’s eyes are glued to the oven’s window, eager to witness the transformation.

“Can I lick the spoon?” Nix asks innocently, looking up at us with puppy dog eyes.

“Sure, bud,” I concede, laughing at his enthusiasm. I start brewing coffee for Tristan and me and warming some milk for Nix.

Breakfast is a delicious treat, Nix asking for a second serving of milk and cocoa pops. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee fills the air.

“Alright, now that breakfast is done, let’s make chicken Caesar salad sandwiches for Nix’s lunch,” Tristan suggests, wiping his hands on a dish towel.

“Yum!” Nix exclaims, still energized from his morning sugar rush.

We gather the ingredients: rotisserie chicken, anchovy fillets, Parmesan cheese, romaine lettuce leaves, mini baguettes, mayonnaise, and other condiments. Nix lends a hand, grating the cheese while I supervise him, and Tristan works on shredding the chicken.

“Great job, Nix,” I say, patting his back. “You’re a natural.”

“Thanks, Dad,” he beams, clearly proud of his culinary skills.

As we put the final touches on the sandwiches, I watch as my son’s face lights up with pride. He’s eager to show his culinary creations to his friends later at lunchtime.

“Almost time for school, buddy,” I say, helping Nix pack his lunch bag with the freshly made hash browns and other goodies. He zips it up and runs over to Tristan, wrapping his arms around him.

“Love you, Tristan!” Nix exclaims, catching us both off guard. Emotion floods Tristan’s face, his eyes shimmering

with unshed tears. It's a beautiful sight, and I find I'm just as touched by it as Tristan seems to be. Knowing that Nix loves Tristan too means more to me than anything in this world.

"Love you too, kiddo," Tristan replies, his voice cracking a bit as he hugs Nix tightly.

"Alright, let's get you to school," I say, ushering my son out the door while Tristan stays behind to clean up. As I drive away, my heart swells with gratitude for the love and happiness filling our lives. *Should I feel a little guilty about that? Am I moving on too quickly?*

The drive back home feels strangely heavy, like my car is filled with the weight of my thoughts. My grip on the steering wheel tightens as I stare through the windshield, lost in a sea of memories. Cara's laughter echoes in my mind, her beautiful smile clashing with the image of her still figure lying in the casket.

"God, I miss you," I whisper, my voice barely audible above the hum of the engine. A single tear rolls down my cheek, joining the chorus of raindrops drumming against the windows.

Is it possible to love again? I ask myself, thinking about Tristan and the way my heart beats just a little faster when he's around. I never thought I could feel this way after losing Cara, but here I am, driving home to a man who has somehow snuck his way into my heart.

"Tristan... what have you done to me?" The words escape my lips before I can stop them, revealing a truth I've been hiding from myself: I'm in love with him. And I need to tell him.

"Okay, Myles, you can do this," I say, taking a deep breath as I park the car in front of my apartment building. I wipe away any lingering tears and put on a brave face before stepping out into the rain.

As soon as I walk through the door, the delicious scent of our morning cooking session envelopes me. I find Tristan in the kitchen putting away the last of the dishes.

“Hey,” I say softly, my heart pounding in my chest. “Thanks for cleaning up.”

“Of course,” he replies, flashing me a warm smile that sends shivers down my spine. “It was fun cooking with you and Nix.”

“Yeah, it was,” I agree, desperately trying to find the right words to express my newfound feelings. “Tristan, there’s something I need to tell you.”

He stops what he’s doing and turns to face me, his eyes cautiously searching mine for answers. “What is it?”

“I... I’m in love with you.” The words tumble out of my mouth like a waterfall, leaving me breathless.

For a moment, Tristan just stands there, staring at me with wide eyes that seem to reflect the shock I feel at my own confession. But then, slowly, a smile starts to spread across his face, and it lights up the room.

“Really?” he asks, almost as if he can’t believe it.

“Really,” I confirm, my voice barely above a whisper. “I never thought I could love someone like this again after Cara, but... here we are.”

“Here we are,” he echoes, stepping closer until our bodies are mere inches apart. “I love you too, Myles.”

Hearing him say those words feels like a knot untangling itself deep within my chest. It’s overwhelming and terrifying, but at the same time, it’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever experienced. And as I look into Tristan’s eyes, I know without a doubt that this love is worth fighting for.

“You do?” I ask, feeling the heat rise in my cheeks as Tristan’s eyes lock onto mine.

“I do.” His voice is strong, sure.

Those two words immediately catapult me back to my wedding day two decades ago, when it was Cara saying them to me.

“I’ve been dying to tell you, but I was waiting for the perfect moment.” Tristan smiles shyly. “I guess that moment is now.” He reaches out and clasps my hands in his. “Myles, I never thought someone could love me the way you do, or that I was capable of loving someone the way I love you.” He takes a step closer to me. “But there it is, and here I am.”

The air crackles with electricity, and the love arcing between us is palpable.

I can’t believe that I’m here, loving someone new, someone completely different from my first love. The organ in my chest expands as the words I feel most deeply spill from my lips, “My heart has room enough to love you.”

Without breaking eye contact, Tristan reaches for the hem of my shirt, slowly pulling it up and over my head. My heart races.

His hands are like hot coals as they trail across my exposed skin, setting my whole body alight with pleasure. My nipples stiffen at his merest touch, sending a wave of electricity coursing through my veins and making my heart flutter. His breath is hot against my ear as he whispers passionately, “God, you’re so beautiful. You make my heart soar.”

“Tris,” I moan quietly, giving into the desire building between us.

“Shh,” he replies, placing a finger on my lips. “Let me take care of you.”

He helps me out of my pants and underwear, leaving me completely exposed to him. My breath catches in my throat as he guides me toward the kitchen counter, bending me over it. I feel the cold countertop against my skin, a stark contrast to the heat radiating from Tristan’s body.

My mind races with anticipation, wondering what he’ll do next. Heart thudding in my chest, excitement builds within me, every nerve screaming with anticipation of what is to come. His tongue flicks back and forth, tracing circles that spiral up the soft skin of my butt in a dizzying pattern, sending shivers through my body. There’s no way I can hold back the sounds

of pleasure bubbling up inside me. I quiver in delight as each new pass brings a wave of pleasure that threatens to overwhelm me. And then I feel it—his tongue sliding along the sensitive skin of my buttock.

Ohmygod, ohmygod, ohmygod!

When I woke up this morning, I never anticipated Tristan's tongue and face would be buried in my butt. It's a good thing I'd had a shower first thing this morning.

"Does that feel good, baby?" he asks teasingly, already knowing the answer.

"Y-yes," I stutter, my thoughts clouded by lust. He continues to lick and kiss my butt, his tongue exploring every inch of me, occasionally dipping inside me just enough to drive me wild.

"Tristan," I moan desperately, my legs trembling beneath me. "Please, I need more."

"More?" he asks, feigning innocence. "What do you want, baby? Tell me."

"I want you to fuck me," I beg, my voice choked with desire.

"Are you sure?" Tristan asks, his hand gripping my butt tightly.

"Please," I repeat, unable to form any other words.

"I'll give you what you want." His voice is thick with lust.

Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine myself doing the two things that I've done today: telling a man that I'm in love with him and asking that man to fuck me. Yet I have no regrets. And given the chance, I would do it all again.

He moves quickly, retrieving a bottle of coconut oil from the nearby drawer. I'm nervous, but the anticipation outweighs the nerves as Tristan coats his fingers in the slick liquid. Cara had never fingered my butt; I wasn't interested, and she'd never tried. But now... now a finger is being pushed inside of me. And it's being done by a man... a man I'm in love with. This is the classic case of the unpredictability of the

future. And it's that unpredictability that has me nervous; I have no idea what to expect or how I will react.

"Relax," Tristan murmurs, adding another finger and slowly stretching me open. I force myself to breathe through the slight discomfort, hoping it will soon be replaced by pleasure.

The sensations that flow through me as Tristan begins to thrust his fingers in and out of me are incredible. His slick fingers slide in and out of my tight hole, pushing deeper each time until I'm filled with pleasure. My head swims as he slips a third finger inside me, my breath coming in heavy, ragged gasps.

"Ready?" Tristan asks, lining up his cock with my entrance.

"More than ready," I reply, sounding braver than I really feel, yet eager for him to fill me completely.

With a final deep breath, Tristan pushes into me, inch by splendid inch, until he's buried to the hilt. We both let out guttural moans, our bodies connected in the most intimate way possible.

"Tris, please," I beg, needing him to move, to take control and claim me as his own.

"Your wish is my command," he replies, pulling back before slamming into me again and setting a rhythm that leaves us both gasping for breath. "God, baby, you feel amazing." Tristan grunts between thrusts, his hands gripping my hips tightly as he drives into me.

"Harder," I plead, wanting him to push me over the edge, to send me spiraling into ecstasy.

"Like this?" Tristan asks, increasing the intensity of his thrusts, making me see stars behind my closed eyelids.

"I... ungh... was born for this." I gasp, unable to form coherent thoughts as he pounds into me relentlessly.

Tristan thrusts faster, and I feel my body responding, pushing back against him as I ride the waves of pleasure.

Every movement causes sparks of pleasure to ignite in me, and I'm lost in a sea of sensation.

I can't believe how great it feels, and even as I'm being fugged so deliciously, I already can't wait to do it again. I've never experienced anything like this, the intensity of the sensations overwhelming my senses. My heart beats faster as Tristan moves closer, curling his body over my back. His hips grind against my butt as he slides deeper and deeper inside me with each thrust.

The heat building between us intensifies until it's almost unbearable, all of my nerve endings alive with sensation. My breath catches in my throat as Tristan rocks into me, rearranging my insides until there is nothing but blissful pleasure coursing through me. I've no control over myself now; all that matters is the pleasure radiating from deep within me, driving me onward towards orgasm. I'm barely aware of myself now; all I know is that what we're doing feels extraordinary, and I never want it to end.

"Come for me, Myles," Tristan urges, his voice strained with the effort of holding back his own climax.

"Tristan!" I cry out. Without even having touched myself, my orgasm tears through me like a tidal wave, leaving me trembling and weak. Moments later, Tristan follows suit, his body stiffening as he spills his cum inside me.

"God, Myles," he whispers, pressing a soft kiss to the nape of my neck. "That was incredible."

"Beyond words," I agree, still trying to catch my breath as we separate, our bodies slick with sweat and spent desire. I can't believe how great anal sex can be, and my first experience being fugged in the butt was.... wow. Just, wow.

"Let's clean up," Tristan suggests, an impish grin on his face. "And maybe try this again sometime soon?"

"Absolutely," I reply, my heart overflowing with love for the man who has brought such joy and passion back into my life.

CHAPTER 23



TRISTAN

I'm dancing around my living room, feeling the beat of some pop music when Myles walks into my apartment, a quirk of a smile on his lips. It's the last 24 of my 48 hours off before heading back to my 24-hour shift. I was in the mood to shake my ass to some good music. Because I was expecting Myles to stop by after dropping Nix off at school, I'd left the door unlocked.

"Really? You're listening to this trash?" he teases.

"Excuse you!" I retort, hands on my hips. "This is quality music. But if you want me to listen to old people music, then bring it on."

"Challenge accepted." Myles whips out his phone from the back pocket of his jeans and scrolls through his music library.

"Sounds like Mariah Carey," I say, as the singer dubbed the Queen of Christmas belts out a tune.

"Darn right it is." Myles shoves his phone back into his pocket.

"I've never heard this song before."

"You haven't?" Myles's eyes are so wide, they look comical. "It's *One Sweet Day*, with Boyz II Men, one of the best collabs in music history." He has this faraway look on his face as if he's reminiscing about the "good ole days" as the old folks—pun intended—say. "It was released in 1995," he continues. "I can remember fourteen-year-old me listening to this song like it was yesterday."

“Oh my God, dude!” Roaring with laughter, I’m barely able to get my next words out. “That’s the year I was born.”

“Keep rubbing it in, *dude*.” Myles’s eyes spark with humor. “I’ll admit it; I’m a dinosaur.”

I sneak in close to him and steal a kiss. “But you’re my dinosaur.”

“And you’re my sweetheart.” Myles slides his fingers up my nape and tangles them in my hair.

“For you, I want to be everything.” *Could my heart get any fuller?* The depth of feeling I have for this man sometimes astounds me. Every day it seems like my heart grows bigger and bigger with the love I have for him. I’ve never opened my heart to give and receive love like this before. Having lost my parents at such a young age, it’s made me fearful that I might put my heart in someone’s hands only to have them die on me again. I’m honestly not sure my heart could take that.

Cupping my cheeks with his palms, Myles presses the softest of kisses to my lips. “Your heart is safe with me, sweetheart.”

What can I say to that? It’s as if he’s read my mind and seen my deepest, darkest fears. Tears threaten to fall—not tears of physical or emotional pain, but tears of relief. The tears don’t come, though, simply because my man chooses to lighten the moment with the next song. And it’s a lightness I welcome.

“Now tell me, what do you think about this one?” Myles asks me, giving me a cocky smile like he just knows I’m going to love this song.

God only knows what he’s going to be blasting through the speakers next, so I decide to play with him a little bit when the song starts. “Now this is what I call music... that puts me to sleep.” I pretend to yawn, stretching out my arms.

“Watch it, mister,” Myles warns, poking me in the side as we sway together, laughing and having a great time despite my teasing.

“Admit it, you secretly love this song,” Myles whispers in my ear, sparking a heated reaction in my body.

“Maybe,” I concede with a wink. “But only because I’m listening to it with you.”

As Whitney Houston’s “I Will Always Love You” fills the room, Myles pulls me close, our bodies pressed together as we begin to slow dance. Our eyes lock, and I’m struck by how incredibly sexy he looks despite being dressed simply in khaki shorts and a dark-green polo shirt. His strong arms wrap around me, and the intensity of his gaze sends blood rushing to my cheeks... and other places.

We grind against each other, our growing erections noticeable even through the fabric of our clothes. The friction combined with the emotional connection sends waves of pleasure coursing through me. I lean in, capturing his lips in a passionate kiss that leaves us both breathless.

“God, I can’t get enough of you,” Myles murmurs into my ear, his voice husky and filled with desire. The sound of it makes my dick twitch.

“Same,” I admit, our lips brushing. Our hands roam each other’s bodies—teasing, touching, exploring. It’s erotic and sensual, the dance becoming an extension of our growing connection. Everything around us fades away until it’s just Myles and me, lost in each other’s embrace, dancing to a love song that perfectly encapsulates how I feel about him.

“Promise you’ll always be mine,” I whisper, half-joking but also entirely serious.

“Forever,” he promises, sealing it with a searing kiss that leaves me dizzy.

I can’t take it anymore. The intensity of our dance, the way our bodies fit together like puzzle pieces—the desire coursing through my veins is almost unbearable. I grab Myles’s hand and practically drag him toward the bathroom.

“Shower,” I pant, desperate for relief. “Now.”

“Bossy, aren’t you?” he teases, but his eyes are dark with lust, and he doesn’t hesitate to follow my lead.

We strip each other quickly, hands shaking with anticipation. Every touch sends shivers down my spine, and I struggle with the button and zipper on his shorts. God, why are there so many contraptions on clothes?

“Need some help there, hotshot?” Myles whispers, his breath warm on my neck as he reaches around me to undo the button and zipper himself. I groan in response.

Finally, we’re both naked, and the sight of Myles’s toned body leaves me breathless. I turn the shower on, the water steaming up the glass door immediately. We step inside, and the hot spray cascades over our needy bodies.

“Fugg, Tristan.” Myles gasps as I press him against the slick tiles, my lips finding his. Our tongues dance, mimicking the rhythm we’d shared moments before. When we finally break apart, breathless, I gently turn him to face the tiled shower wall. And I can’t stop myself from giving his pert little ass a squeeze.

Reaching for the lube, I make short work of opening up Myles’s ass. Then with hands gripping his hips, I position myself behind him, guiding my aching cock to his entrance. “You ready?” I ask, needing to hear him say it. Hearing his husky voice beg so sweetly for me to do all manner of dirty things to and with him makes me feel mushy inside... in all the best ways.

“Please,” he rasps, and that’s all I need to hear. I push forward, entering him slowly, allowing him time to adjust to the fullness. His forehead drops forward to the wall, a moan escaping his lips.

God, he feels incredible.

“Move,” Myles commands, his voice thick with desire. I comply, thrusting into him gently at first, then building in intensity as our bodies find their rhythm. The water beats down on us, adding to the symphony of our moans and gasps.

“Tristan, oh fugg.” Myles breathes, his eyes squeezed shut as he groans out his pleasure. “Don’t stop.”

“Never,” I promise, my own pleasure building with every thrust. “You’re perfect, baby. So perfect.”

Our bodies collide, the sound of wet skin slapping together echoing in the small space. It’s primal, raw, everything I’ve ever wanted and more. And then, suddenly, I’m there. And I’m careening over that edge I’ve been teetering on for what feels like hours.

“Ah, Mylessss!” I cry out as I come, filling him with my cum. My vision goes white, bliss washing over me like a tidal wave.

As I slowly come back to my senses, I lower myself to my knees, still panting from my orgasm, and I quickly turn Myles to face me. When it comes to Myles, I’m always greedy, always wanting more—wanting to taste him, to worship him.

“Your turn,” I murmur, taking his throbbing cock into my mouth. He groans, his hands tangling in my wet hair, guiding me as I suck him off.

“Tristan, oh god, yes,” he moans, his hips rocking gently into my mouth. I work him expertly, using my tongue and lips to bring him closer and closer to the edge.

“Tristan, I’m gonna...” he warns, his breathing ragged. I don’t let up, determined to swallow every last drop of him.

With a final cry, Myles comes, spilling himself into my mouth. I greedily swallow, savoring the taste of him. It’s intimate, intense—one of the million little moments with him I’ll cherish forever.

“Delicious,” I say with a smirk, looking up at him through my lashes. Myles laughs, his chest heaving as he tries to catch his breath.

“God, I love you.” Myles pulls me up for a searing kiss.

“Love you too,” I reply, my heart swelling with happiness. As we stand there under the cascading water, our bodies pressed together, I feel like the luckiest man alive.

When we’re done, we wrap ourselves in towels, their lavender-scented fragrance wafting in the air. Myles and I step

out of the bathroom, still flushed from our steamy shower. “Here,” I say, tossing him a t-shirt and some sweats. He catches them effortlessly, a grin spreading across his face.

“Thanks,” he replies, pulling the shirt over his damp hair and then sliding on the sweats. I do the same.

We crawl into bed, the soft sheets a cool contrast against our warm skin. I reach for the book on my nightstand—one of my beloved gay romance novels. “Let’s read together,” I suggest. Myles raises an eyebrow, curious but game.

“Sure, why not?” he agrees, settling in beside me.

I give him the Cliff Notes of the best-friends-to-lovers romance I’ve been binge reading. Then we take turns reading aloud. Some of the scenes we read together, and our voices blend together like music. It’s intimate, sharing something I enjoy doing with him, and I can’t help but feel a little vulnerable. I’m a novice when it comes to sharing things like feelings.

Myles chuckles at one particularly steamy scene. “I didn’t know romance novels could be so... graphic,” he admits, a hint of pink blooming on his cheeks. “Cara used to read them all the time, but I never really got into it.”

“Ah, so you’re a romance novel virgin,” I tease, nudging him playfully. “Don’t worry; I’ll be gentle.”

“Very funny,” he retorts, rolling his eyes. But there’s affection in his voice, and I know he’s enjoying this as much as I am. “When did you know?” His expression is suddenly serious.

“Know what, baby?”

“That you were falling in love with me?”

“Honestly, babe? I’m still falling.”

His rich whiskey-brown eyes meet mine with intensity. The electricity between us is palpable, igniting a fire in me. The bedroom is filled with a charged energy as if a storm is brewing.

I draw myself towards him, and when I'm close enough, I feel his warm breath against my skin. His lips are slightly parted, and his eyes are heavy with desire. A slow smile spreads across his handsome face.

My body presses against his, and I feel the contours of his muscled chest through the t-shirt I loaned him. His hands wander up my arms and settle at the nape of my neck, and I gasp at the touch of his fingers on my skin. He draws me closer, and our lips meet in a passionate kiss.

The heat of his mouth on mine sets my desire for him aflame. His tongue slips between my lips, exploring my mouth with a desperate hunger I'm all too eager to give in to. I moan softly, and his hands move to my hips, holding me tightly against him.

Myles's kiss is fervent and demanding, yet tender and loving. His lips caress mine with a tenderness I didn't know I craved, and I respond in kind. Our mouths move together in an ever-escalating rhythm, and my body melts into his. I want to stay in this moment forever.

His hands slide around my waist, and I arch my back, pressing my body to his. His lips wander over my chin and along my jaw, making me quiver with need. I can feel his desire for me as his hands roam over my body, and I'm powerless to resist him. He kisses my neck and nibbles at my earlobe, and I can't help but moan in pleasure.

Our kiss takes on an almost desperate intensity as if nothing else matters. His hands wander hungrily over my body and the room around us seems to tilt dizzily as we drown in each other.

“I want to eat your ass again, baby.”

A lovely shade of pink spreads across Myles's cheeks, the shyness in his expression only adding to his irresistible charm. He stutters, clearly embarrassed, but he can't hide the desire in his eyes. I lean in, my breath hot on his ear as I whisper, “I promise I'll make you feel so good you'll beg me not to stop.”

As I coax Myles onto his hands and knees, I have to stop to admire the view he presents—toned muscles, smooth skin, and that perfect, round ass. My body aches with need, but I force myself to focus on him, wanting to give him an unforgettable experience. I know we did this yesterday in the kitchen, but it was rushed, and Myles didn't know it was going to happen. This time, I want to take my time with him. And I want him fully present from start to finish, so I can show him how truly incredible this act can be.

“Relax, babe,” I murmur, kneading his ass gently to help ease the tension in his body. “You're perfect. Your ass is irresistible, and I can't wait to fuck this tight little hole again.” My words seem to do the trick as Myles begins to unwind under my touch, his breath hitching when I graze a fingertip over his entrance.

“Tristan...” Myles whispers my name like a prayer, and my resolve crumbles. The urge to taste him becomes overwhelming, and I lower my head, my tongue eager to explore every inch of his hole.

My heart races as I spread Myles's cheeks, exposing his most intimate parts to me. The scent of him is intoxicating, and I find myself lost in the moment, my tongue tracing a path around his balls, taint, and ass, then up around his ass cheeks and back to his big dick. As my tongue continues its journey, Myles shivers beneath me, his body relaxing into the pleasure I'm giving him. He makes all kinds of sexy noises, driving me wild with desire.

“God, baby,” I groan. “You taste amazing.”

I make another track around Myles's balls, ass, and cheeks, each pass eliciting more moans from him. With every lick, I become more aware of the power I hold over him, and it excites me. The control, the trust he places in me—it's heady stuff, addictive even.

“Tristan...” Myles gasps, his words barely decipherable, lost in the haze of pleasure.

“Shh, just feel,” I whisper, nipping at his ass cheeks with my teeth. I spread them wider, determined to stimulate every

nerve ending hidden within him. I revel in his complete surrender to me and the way his vulnerability only serves to strengthen our connection.

As I continue to tease and tantalize Myles, my mind races with thoughts of how far we've come together—from a smoke alarm to passionate moans. It feels like destiny, and I want nothing more than to give him everything he deserves.

“Your pleasure is mine, baby,” I murmur against his skin. “I want you to know how much you mean to me.”

“Please...”

His breathless plea spurs me on, and I can't wait to leave him completely undone.

I press my fingers against Myles's taint, rubbing gently, feeling the heat radiating from his body. The weight of his balls rests in my hand, smooth and warm to the touch. I lean down, exhaling hot air onto his inner thighs, watching goosebumps rise on his flushed skin. My fingertips trace along the inside of his thighs, teasing and exploring every inch.

“Tristan...” Myles whimpers, his voice barely more than a breathy moan.

“Tell me what you want,” I command, my voice husky with arousal.

“More... please,” he begs, pushing his body back against mine, grinding into the mattress.

“God, you're fucking sexy.” I growl, reaching around to cup his balls while swiping my tongue along his taint. I pepper gentle kisses on his ass cheeks, eliciting shivers and sighs from him.

“Your taste is driving me insane,” I admit, my mind racing at the thought of devouring him completely. “You have no idea how much I want you.”

“Please,” he pleads, his voice strained with need.

I give his ass cheeks a playful swat with my palm, making him gasp. Sliding my hands underneath his tailbone, I lift him up as if he weighs nothing, positioning his ass before me like a

feast. And then, without hesitation, I dive in, going to town on his hole as if it's my last supper.

“Fuuuugg, Tristan!” Myles cries out, his voice trembling with pleasure.

“Your ass tastes even better the second time, baby,” I confess between licks, feeling intoxicated by the mix of our scents and the sounds he makes. “Let yourself go, Myles. Let me make you feel good.”

His moans are a soothing serenade, fueling my desire to push him to the edge of ecstasy. I want him to remember this moment, remember the way I make him feel... desired, worshipped, loved.

“I... I can't take much more.” Myles gasps, his body trembling with the effort to hold back.

“Good,” I growl, my voice low and primal. “But I'm not nearly done with you yet.”

As I continue to eat him out, my mind races with thoughts of our journey together—from stolen glances to whispered confessions, from tender kisses to nights spent tangled in each other's arms. And it's all led us here, to this pinnacle of passion and connection.

Myles's moans echo in my ears as I vary the texture and pressure of my licks and sucks on his ass. I can't get enough of his taste and the way he trembles beneath me. I decide to take it a step further, wanting to push him as far as I can.

Wanting him to go insane with desire, I start spelling out his name, feeling him writhing and moaning underneath me. M-Y-L-E-S. The feel of his sensitive flesh under my tongue is intoxicating, making me want more.

“Tristan... Tris...” Myles gasps, his body quivering in anticipation. “What are you doing?”

“Baby,” I murmur against his skin, “I'm writing your name in your hole with the tip of my tongue. Hold on for me; I want you to feel good.” I press a kiss on his left ass cheek and then scrape my teeth over the right one.

“Tristan... fugg...” Myles gasps, his body quivering in anticipation.

“Your middle name, Myles... what is it?” I ask, desperate to keep teasing him.

“Jim,” he huffs out a laugh.

“Jim?” I swat his ass playfully. “You’re lying.”

“Alright, alright.” He laughs again, breathless. “It’s Bartholomew. Eleven letters, Tristan.” Myles huffs out a breath. “I don’t know if I can hold back that long.”

“Try,” I warn him, my voice low and commanding. “You’re not allowed to come yet.”

“Fugg, you’re killing me.” He groans, but I can hear the pleasure in his voice.

I spell out Bartholomew and Madden with my tongue, slowly working my way around his ass, delighting in the way he whimpers and bucks against me. His vulnerability is beautiful, and I cherish every moment.

“Please, please, please!” Myles begs, his body teetering on the edge.

“Almost there, baby,” I say, and without warning, I thrust my tongue deep into his ass.

“TRISTAN!” Myles screams out his release, his body convulsing as he finally comes. I can feel the heat of his release on my thigh, and I savor the satisfaction of knowing I pushed him to this point.

I flip him over on his back, and my hand wraps around my leaking dick, pumping it furiously. The sight of Myles, sated and panting, pushes me over the edge. With a groan, I cum all over his stomach and chest.

“God, Tris...” Myles breathes, looking up at me with those incredible eyes that always seem to see right through me. “That was...”

“Only for you,” I finish for him, leaning down to press a tender kiss to his lips. In this moment, we are everything to

each other—lovers, partners, friends. It's an intimacy I never imagined possible, and I'm grateful for every second of it.

Later, I teach Myles how to make chicken Alfredo, a dish I've perfected over the years. As we chop, sauté, and mix, our laughter fills the kitchen, bouncing off the walls like a symphony.

"Watch it," I warn playfully as Myles steals a piece of chicken from the dish. "You're gonna spoil your appetite."

"Can't help it," he grins, popping the morsel into his mouth. "Your cooking is too good."

We dance around each other in the small space, our movements fluid and seamless, like we've been doing this together forever. And when Myles wraps his arms around me from behind, pressing a gentle kiss to my neck, I melt into him.

"Y'know," I say softly, leaning back against his solid warmth, "I love your dimple." I reach up, tracing the indentation with my fingertip. Myles chuckles, nuzzling my ear with his nose.

"Is that the only thing?" he teases, making me laugh. "I thought you loved all of me."

"Of course, I do," I assure him, turning to capture his lips in a tender kiss. "But that damn dimple... it's fucking cute."

"Hey now," Myles protests, feigning offense. "Cute isn't exactly what I'm going for here."

"Too bad," I tease, pressing another quick kiss to his lips. "Because you've got cute all over you."

"Fine," he huffs, pretending to be put out. "But you better watch yourself, Tristan. Or I might just have to prove how not-cute I can be."

"Promise?" I ask, grinning cheekily.

"Definitely," he replies, swooping in for one last kiss before returning to our culinary masterpiece.

In that moment, standing side by side in the kitchen, surrounded by laughter and love, I think I've never been happier. And as long as I have Myles by my side, I know there are countless more happy moments to come.

All too soon it was time for Myles to prepare to pick up Nix from school. The scent of chicken Alfredo still lingers in the air. We'd spent the entire day together, but I was already missing him.

"I'll be back soon, okay?" he says.

"Go get our boy." Oh shit, I shouldn't have said that. "I... I didn't mean to—"

"Tristan," he cuts me off softly, but firmly. "You think I don't know you love my son like half his genes were yours? You think my heart didn't melt when he told you that he loved you?"

I'm too overwhelmed by the sincerity of his words to reply.

Myles smiles at me, that dimple appearing once more. My chest tightens with a blend of fear and love and relief. He presses his lips to mine in a sweet, lingering kiss before slipping out the door.

As it clicks shut behind him, the quiet emptiness of my apartment wraps around me like a blanket. The sound of my own breathing fills the silence, and I'm struck by the sudden, all-consuming realization that I don't want to be afraid anymore.

For most of my life, I've believed it was better to avoid love than to love and lose it. And then Myles—that wonderful man—and I have shared so much in such a short time... laughter, passion, vulnerability. And I was terrified of losing it all. But now, instead of being scared, I'm excited by the possibility of a future together with Myles and Nix.

"Forever," I whisper to myself, daring to believe. "I can see forever with Myles."

My heart races as I imagine the life we could build together. Nix would be an integral part of it, of course. He's

already captured my heart, and I know I'd do anything to protect him and make him happy.

“Tristan and Myles, Myles and Tristan,” I say aloud, testing the way our names blend together. A smile creeps across my face, warming me from within. It feels right, no matter the combination.

My thoughts drift to the holidays, envisioning cozy nights spent together, decorating a tree, and baking cookies for Santa. “Maybe we'd start our own traditions,” I muse. I can hear Myles's laughter filling our home as Nix squeals with delight during a snowball fight or as we all snuggle together on the couch, watching cheesy holiday movies. I chuckle as I envision us sending out Christmas cards to our family and friends with one of those kitschy holiday photos where Myles is dressed as Santa and Nix and I are his trusty elves.

Then, completely unbidden, an image of Myles dressed as a sexy firefighter Santa fills my mind, and suddenly I'm not laughing anymore. My mind has taken a sharp left turn from the wholesome to the X-rated. I imagine him trussed up in my firefighter gear—Myles shirtless, wearing the suspenders and pants (open, of course) from my gear, helmet atop his head, holding a strategically-placed Christmas gift over his own um... gear. Wow! That definitely took a turn... one I plan to explore later with my gorgeous boyfriend. My boyfriend. My boyfriend. I'll never get tired of saying that. I can't help hoping one day I'll be able to call him something more... like fiancé or husband. And I'll officially adopt the little man.

My heart swells with love for these two people who have quickly become my world. The fear of losing them remains, but it's tempered by the hope and joy they bring into my life.

“Forever,” I repeat, more certain now than ever before. “I can see forever with him... with them.”

With each passing moment spent in the comforting silence of my apartment, I grow more confident in our future together. It won't always be easy, but love—true, deep, soul-stirring love—is worth fighting for.

And as I stand here, surrounded by the echoes of our laughter and the warmth of our passion, I know I'll fight for Myles and Nix with everything I have. Because they *are* my forever.

CHAPTER 24



TRISTAN

The scent of chili and laughter fills the air as I enter the firehouse kitchen. Firefighting is damn hard work, so whenever the crew gets the time to relax and talk shit, we take it. A grin tugs at my lips, because banter like this can only mean one thing: a moment of relative peace. They're rare, so we firefighters cherish them.

"Hey, Triscuit!" Nick calls out, waving me over with a spoonful of steaming chili in his hand. "Get in here before we eat it all."

I fill my bowl and settle in between Jared and Connor. Haley's across the table, her cheeks flushed pink, most likely from the heat and laughter.

"God, this is amazing," I say, after taking a heaping bite of chili. The warmth spreads through me, and the spice lingers on my tongue. "You couldn't have made this, Nick. It tastes almost as good as mine."

"Whoa, shots fired," Jared chimes in, chuckling.

Nick double flips us the bird. "Fuck you both," he says without any heat behind his words.

"Ouch." My hand flies to my chest, feigning hurt. "That's cold, man. You wound me. You really do."

Nick turns to Haley, a mischievous look on his face. "Speaking of cold, how was your date with what's-his-name... err, Brian?" Nick asks, winking.

"Very funny, Archibald Rufus Barnaby Nicholas, the guy who only wants to be called by his surname," Haley teases as

she rolls her eyes. “Go ahead, pretend you don’t know his name is Ryan, not Brian.” We all crack up with laughter, even Nick. “But seriously, guys,” Haley continues, “Ryan invited me to meet his parents for dinner this weekend.”

“Ooh, getting serious,” Connor teases, wiggling his eyebrows.

Haley huffs, tossing a crumpled napkin at him.

“Hey!” Connor exclaims, feigning injury. “The woman got up from her nap and chose violence!”

“Shut up,” Haley laughs, shaking her head. “It’s just dinner.”

“Sure, sure,” Jared chimes in, grinning widely. “Just dinner... with the future in-laws.”

My chest tightens ever so slightly at the thought of Myles and Nix. In my eyes, the three of us are already family, but one day I’d like us to be family in the legal sense of the word. I want to marry Myles and adopt Nix. That’d mean they’re permanently mine, and the only thing that could take them away from me is death. I shiver at the thought of losing one or both of them. I will myself to shake off the thought, focusing on the present conversation.

“Speaking of dinner,” I say, shifting my gaze to Nick. “How was your date with Layla?”

Scrunching up his face, making it look like an accordion, Nick says, “It was meh.”

“Meh?” Haley says, pretending to be outraged. “What the hell does that mean, Nick?” She sucks her teeth.

“Calm down, Hales. I’m not looking for anything serious right now.”

“Can’t tie down the legendary Nick.” Connor snickers.

“Exactly.” Nick smirks, crossing his arms over his chest. “I’ve got too many hearts to break, you know?”

“Watch out, ladies,” Jared jokes, waving his hands dramatically. “Heartbreaker Nick is on the prowl.”

“Damn right, I am.” Nick laughs, raising an imaginary toast. “Here’s to me—saving lives and breaking hearts.”

“Cheers,” we all chorus, clinking our metaphorical glasses together. It’s a moment of camaraderie I cherish, but I cherish Myles and Nix so much more.

“Alright, Triscuit,” Nick drawls, turning to me and looking me dead in the eye. “What’s up with you? You’ve been all smiles lately.” Leaning back in his chair, he props his feet up on the table.

“Who, me?” I ask innocently, feigning surprise. “I’m always smiling.”

“Yeah, but it’s different,” Connor chimes in, narrowing his eyes at me. “You’re like... extra happy. Like you’re floating on cloud nine or something.”

“Maybe he’s just been hitting the gym harder,” Jared suggests with a smirk. I roll my eyes, trying to brush off their prying.

“Or maybe he’s seeing someone,” Haley adds, giving me a knowing look. I feel the heat rise in my cheeks.

“Ha, well, you know me,” I deflect, grinning. “Always seeing someone.” Truth is, I hadn’t really seen anyone but Myles, and before him, I’d been in a dry spell. My mind drifts again to Myles—the man who’s captured my heart—and his son Nix, who’s stolen a piece of it as well. The day I can share them with my friends feels achingly close, but we’re not quite there yet.

“Come on, Triscuit,” Nick presses, his eyes twinkling with mischief. “Spill the beans. You can’t hide that dopey lovesick grin from us.”

“Fine,” I sigh dramatically, playing along for now. “I’ve fallen in love with... pizza.”

“Tristan, we all love pizza,” Haley says, rolling her eyes.

“Ah, but not like I do,” I insist, winking at her. “Pizza and I have something special.”

She laughs, shaking her head. “Alright, keep your secrets,” she concedes, a smile still playing on her lips. “But seriously, whenever you’re ready to tell us, we’re here for you.”

“Thanks, guys,” I say, touched by their support. The warm, familiar feeling of camaraderie washes over me, but it’s tinged with a bittersweet ache. I know I can’t keep them in the dark forever. And I don’t want to, really. They may not be my family by blood, but they’ve been my family by brotherhood. It’s a brotherhood formed by coincidence because we just happened to work together and share similar interests, but it’s also a brotherhood forged in fire... literally. Our lives depend on each other, and we never forget that. But there’s always been this part of me that I’ve kept separate from everyone else. I figured if I never gave all of me, I’d be able to come through any disappointment or loss relatively unscathed. But this crew... they’re the perfect people to talk with about the loves of my life, Myles and Nix.

Soon, I tell myself. Soon, I’ll share my happiness with them. But for now, I focus on the laughter and love that fill the fire station, grateful for the family I found in the most unexpected of places eight years ago.

“Anyway,” Nick interrupts, clapping his hands together. “Enough of this lovey-dovey talk.

“How are Myles and Nix doing?” Haley’s voice cuts through the noise.

“Good, yeah... they’re great.” The thought of them, as always, warms me from within. “We’ve been cooking healthy meals lately, trying to find the balance between nutritious and delicious.” I tried to suppress the stupid smile that was spreading across my face, but I couldn’t. “We made this killer cauliflower fried rice the other day.”

“Really?” Jared perks up. “I knew you could cook, but I don’t think I’ve ever asked you where you learned to do it.”

“My parents taught me everything I know, even at a young age,” I admit, chuckling. “But it’s been fun, and Nix loves helping out in the kitchen.”

Then it suddenly dawned on me. I'd actually just chuckled... fucking chuckled at the thought of my parents. I don't even know when that happened. Because for half my life, I've lived with the chronic pain, the ache of losing them.

"Speaking of Nix," Haley says, bringing me back to the present, "Are you still doing those experiments?"

"Yup! Last week we made a volcano with baking soda and vinegar." The corners of my mouth lift up in an involuntary grin at the memory of Nix's wide-eyed amazement. "He loved it."

"Sounds like a blast." Connor smiles, and I know he's genuinely interested. "I remember making those when I was a kid."

"Nix is a great reader too; he loves reading to me. And I've introduced Myles to some of my books, and we read them together." I caught my own damn self off guard with that admission. It feels strange to tell people that I also read with Myles. The vulnerability and the intimacy of it all makes my heart race.

"Hey, no shame in that!" Haley laughs. "It's cute."

"Thanks," I mumble, trying to brush it off. *Please don't ask me what books I read with Myles. Please don't ask me what books I read with Myles*, I chant repeatedly in my head. As much as I love this family, they don't need that kind of information.

My gaze clashes with Nick, and my heart stumbles over itself. His eyes are knowing, as if the puzzle pieces are finally clicking into place, and he knows my feelings for Myles and Nix are more than casual. He wouldn't be wrong, but he doesn't need that confirmation just yet.

Nick's brows furrow. "You—" He's cut off by the shrill sound of the alarm, and we instantly snap into action.

"Looks like it's go time," Connor says, already on his feet.

"Let's do this," Haley agrees, her expression all business as she heads for the door.

“Alright, guys,” Jared calls out, following suit. “Let’s save some lives!”

“Stay safe, everyone,” I say, pulling on my gear and joining them. My heart pounds with adrenaline, and the faces of Myles and Nix flash through my mind. I promise myself, once again, that soon I’ll share my happiness with my friends. But for now, we have a job to do.

CHAPTER 25



MYLES

I stand in the kitchen of my apartment, kneading dough for homemade sausage rolls... a recipe Tristan taught me. Who knew I'd become somewhat of a baker under his guidance? The aroma of warm spices fills the air, and I can almost taste the flaky crust.

“Look, Dad,” Nix exclaims from the living room, pulling me out of my culinary daydream. I glance over to see him holding up his VR goggles. Tristan, with his strong, firefighter arms and that boy-next-door charm, is helping Nix with an experiment—their laughter, a beautiful melody to my ears.

“Great job, kiddo!” Tristan cheers, giving Nix’s shoulder an affectionate squeeze. A wave of warmth floods my chest as I watch them interact, my heart swelling with love for the two most important people in my life.

“Looking good from here, son.”

“Hey, Myles, are those ready to go in the oven?” Tristan asks, gesturing toward the sausage rolls on the counter.

“Almost,” I reply, rolling out the last bit of dough. “Just give me a second here.”

“Take your time, no pressure,” he says with a wink before turning back to assist Nix on his science adventure.

“Okay, I think they’re ready,” I announce a few minutes later, sliding the tray into the oven. The sizzle of the sausages teases my ears as they begin to cook.

“Perfect timing,” Tristan says, glancing at the clock. He wraps an arm around Nix, who beams up at him. My heart

skips a beat at witnessing their bond. *How did I get so lucky?*

“You’re doing great with the baking and all,” Tristan says, leaning against the kitchen counter. “You’ve come a long way since that burnt toast incident.”

“Hey, I thought we agreed never to speak of that again!” I feign indignation but can’t help the laugh that escapes my lips.

“Alright, alright, it’s our little secret.” Tristan grins, raising his hands in mock surrender. “But seriously, you’re amazing. Nix is lucky to have you.”

“Thanks,” I murmur, feeling my face heat up. “He’s lucky to have you too.”

Smiling, his eyes soft and reflecting the love he feels for me, Tristan says, “I better head back to the little man before he blows up the living room.”

Peeping over Tristan’s shoulder to make sure that Nix’s attention is still on his science experiment, I blow Tristan a kiss, wafting up the flour still in my hand.

Watching his retreating figure as he heads back to the living room, the cheeks of his derrière on full display make my dick twitch in response. But a knock on the door startles me, pulling my attention away from the sexy sight.

“I’ll get it,” I say, wiping my hands on a towel.

“Thanks, Dad,” Nix calls out, his attention still on the science experiment unfolding in front of him.

As I approach the door, curiosity pricks at my thoughts. Who could it be at the door? Peering through the peephole, I’m met with the unexpected sight of George and Cynthia, my in-laws. My heart plummets like an anchor into the depths of my chest.

“Great,” I mutter under my breath, remembering our last conversation weeks ago—the one about the church they took Nix to, the same one that preaches against people like me and Tristan. I swallow hard, trying to push down the unease slithering up my spine.

I swing the door open, inviting my in-laws inside. “Hi George, Cynthia. How have you been?”

“We’re doing fine,” Cynthia says, her eyes wary.

“Grandma! Grandpa!” Nix’s eyes light up at the sight of his grandparents, as he races towards them with open arms.

“Hey there, kiddo.” George chuckles, bending down to scoop Nix into a bear hug. The sound of laughter fills the room, melting away some of the tension that had settled in my chest.

“Such a warm welcome,” Cynthia muses, her smile genuine as she ruffles Nix’s hair. Yet, I can’t shake the feeling there’s something off about her demeanor. It’s hard to place, but it leaves me slightly on edge.

They follow me to the living room where my boyfriend is standing, looking adorably nervous.

“Tristan, meet Cara’s parents, George and Cynthia.” I gesture between them, trying to sound casual. “George, Cynthia, this is Tristan, my next-door neighbor.”

“Boyfriend,” I whisper under my breath, testing how the word feels on my tongue. How I long to introduce Tristan as such, but we haven’t figured out when or how to come out to our loved ones just yet. For now, “neighbor” will have to do.

“Nice to meet you.” Tristan offers a friendly grin, extending his hand. But I know my man well; he’s nervous.

“Likewise,” George replies, shaking Tristan’s hand firmly. Cynthia nods her greeting, her eyes flitting between me and Tristan as if she’s trying to decipher a hidden message.

“Would you two like anything to drink?” I ask, hoping to steer the conversation towards neutral ground. I gesture for them to take a seat.

“Water would be nice,” Cynthia says, and George agrees.

“Sure thing, just give me a second,” I say, making my way to the kitchen to grab glasses for everyone. As I fill them up, I can’t help eavesdropping on the conversation happening just beyond the kitchen.

“Your dad tells us you’re quite the scientist, Nix.” I could hear the pride in George’s voice.

“Yep!” Nix responds excitedly. “Tristan and I were doing a cool experiment before you came.”

Nix’s laughter fills the air as he animatedly explains the experiment to George and Cynthia. Their eyes are glued to him, captivated by his enthusiasm. It’s a heartwarming sight, but I can’t help feeling tense as Tristan strolls toward me.

“Should I, uh... should I go?” Tristan whispers, perhaps sensing my unease. “Give you some privacy?”

I glance at him, then back at my in-laws chatting with Nix. It’s tempting. But something within me refuses to let Tristan leave. I swallow my nerves and shake my head. “No, stay. Please.”

Tristan nods, offering a small, supportive smile. It’s like sunshine poking out of the dark-grey clouds after a storm.

As I watch Cynthia laugh at something Nix says, I notice her gaze flicker towards me. There’s an expression on her face I’ve never seen before—curiosity mixed with something else I can’t quite place. My chest tightens. Could she suspect there’s more between Tristan and me than just friendship?

“Alright, Nix,” George says, clapping his hands, then rubbing them together. “You’ll have to show us that science kit in action when we stop by again, okay?”

“Yes, Grandpa,” Nix agrees enthusiastically. His excitement is contagious, and despite my lingering anxiety, I can’t stop my smile.

“Here you go,” I say, as I serve the glasses of water.

“Thank you.” Cynthia takes a sip as the room falls silent for a moment, the air thick with unspoken thoughts.

George clears his throat. All traces of humor vanish from his face. “Listen, Myles...” he starts, looking uncomfortable. “There’s something Cynthia and I wanted to talk to you about... regarding our last conversation.”

My heart beats faster, adrenaline coursing through my veins. The memory of that heated exchange and the events leading up to it send a shiver down my spine. I take a deep breath, steeling myself for whatever comes next.

“Alright,” I say, trying to keep my voice steady. “Let’s talk in the kitchen,” I suggest, not wanting Nix to overhear our conversation. They nod in agreement, following me into the other room while I brace myself for whatever is about to unfold.

We migrate into the kitchen, leaving Nix and Tristan behind. In my peripheral vision, I see Tristan stoop in front of Nix and have a whispered conversation with him. Then rising to his feet, he takes Nix’s hand, and they both walk to the bedroom. When I hear the door snick shut, I face my in-laws. I can’t help but wonder if this conversation will change everything...– whether for better or worse. Only time will tell.

CHAPTER 26



MYLES

“Y’know Myles,” George begins, running his hand over the stubble on his chin, “we haven’t gone back to that church since you set things straight with us a couple of weeks ago.”

“Really?” My eyebrows raise in genuine surprise.

Cynthia nods, her eyes welling up with tears. “Your words were like a slap in the face, but in a good way. We realized we were saying we were allies of the LGBTQIA+ community, but our actions didn’t match our words.”

“Going to a church that preaches hate against other people... It’s unconscionable how blind we were,” George adds, shaking his head.

“Like listening to a bad singer at karaoke night and not having the heart to tell them,” I muse, trying to inject a bit of humor into the heavy atmosphere. They chuckle lightly, and I feel my chest tighten with an odd mix of relief and sadness.

“Exactly,” Cynthia agrees. “We should’ve spoken up against that hateful rhetoric and left the church the first time that pastor opened his mouth.”

“Better late than never, right?” I give them a small smile, my heart swelling with gratitude for their willingness to change.

“Indeed,” George says, leaning forward. “But there’s something else we need to say, Myles.”

“Shoot.”

“We’re ashamed of ourselves,” Cynthia admits, her voice cracking. “And we’re sorry for hurting you and our grandson.”

Darn right, you should be, I think to myself before taking a deep breath. It would be stupid of me to hold on to anger and disappointment. It's easier to forgive than to hold on to resentment.

"We understand why you needed to protect him," George adds, his own eyes misty now. "We hope you can forgive us."

"Of course I can," I say after a moment, swallowing the lump in my throat. "I'm not one to hold grudges, unless it's over the last slice of pizza."

As we share a laugh, I feel warmth spreading through my body, bringing me comfort like a warm mug of hot chocolate on a winter night. It's a tiny spark of hope that maybe, just maybe, everything will be okay after all.

"And because we know the importance of walking the walk," George says, his voice full of determination, "we've started volunteering at a shelter for LGBTQIA+ youths who've encountered hardships because of their identity."

"For real?" I ask, my eyebrows shooting up in surprise. "That's... wow. That's amazing."

"Yep," Cynthia chimes in, her eyes shining with pride. "And we're doing other things too, like donating to two LGBTQIA+ charities."

"Color me impressed." My tongue suddenly feels like sandpaper as a potent mix of relief and happiness washes over me. "You guys are really going all out."

"Like you said, Myles, actions speak louder than words," George explains, adjusting his glasses like a professor about to impart wisdom. "We want to make sure we're not just saying we support the LGBTQIA+ community, but actually showing it."

"You opened our eyes, Myles," my mother-in-law says. "You helped us see that being indifferent to the plight of our fellow man is a terrible, terrible thing."

"Thank you," I whisper, my voice choked with emotion. "It means more than you know."

“Listen,” Cynthia says, reaching out to clasp my hand in hers and giving it a squeeze before releasing it. “We know we can’t erase the past or change the hurt we’ve caused, but George and I have committed to doing better moving forward. For you, for Nix, and for everyone else out there who deserves love and support.”

“Thank you. That means everything to me.”

“Family is everything,” George adds, patting me on the shoulder.

“Even when they drive us crazy,” I quip, bringing laughter back into the room.

“Especially then,” Cynthia agrees. She looks at me with a glint in her eyes. I can tell she’s got something else on her mind. “You know, Nix mentions Tristan to us whenever he comes to visit,” she says casually, too darn casually.

“Does he?” I ask, trying to hide my surprise. My inner voice screams, *Oh great, what did he say?* I willed myself not to fidget nervously, but beads of sweat form on my forehead.

“Mhm, he does,” Cynthia continues, her voice light and teasing. “He said that Tristan is a firefighter and lives next door.”

“Ah... um, yes, that’s true.” I try to keep my composure, but my stomach is doing somersaults. It’s like she’s reading my thoughts—thoughts about Tristan, my handsome neighbor who’s somehow burrowed his way into my heart. Thoughts about all the sex we’ve been having. Thoughts about wanting to marry him.

“Aaaaaand...” Cynthia smirks, and I brace myself for impact. “What I didn’t know was how handsome he is.” She raises an eyebrow at me, her eyes filled with mischief.

My cheeks heat up. To say I’m embarrassed is an understatement. I let out a nervous laugh. “Well, yes, he’s good-looking,” I admit, unable to deny the truth. “But you know, beauty isn’t everything,” I add quickly. Everything was happening faster than I’d anticipated. Tristan and I have never discussed the logistics of our coming out to family and friends.

“Of course not,” Cynthia agrees, though I can tell she’s enjoying my discomfort. “But it doesn’t hurt, does it?” Her eyes never leaving mine.

“No, I suppose not,” I concede, feeling more flustered than ever. The room suddenly feels ten degrees warmer, and I’m acutely aware of the pounding in my chest. I’m not sure why I’m acting like this. I negotiated million-dollar deals for professional athletes for years, and they were a cakewalk compared to this. Why a 5-foot-nothing woman interrogating me makes me nervous completely baffles me.

“Anyway, I wanted to let you know that I think it’s wonderful how close Nix has become with Tristan. It’s obvious they have a special bond.”

“They do.” I’m both relieved and grateful my mother-in-law seems to be moving on from the topic of Tristan’s attractiveness. “Tristan has been a great help to us, especially since Cara...” My voice falters, and I swallow hard, trying to keep my emotions in check.

“Of course, dear,” Cynthia says gently, reaching out to squeeze my hand again. “We all miss her so much. But I know she would be happy to see how well you’re taking care of Nix, and how much he adores Tristan.”

I’m touched by her kind words. But deep down, I can’t help but wonder how her attitude might change if she knew everything. If she knew the truth about my feelings for Tristan, would she still be so understanding?

“Actually, Myles, I’ve observed a few things,” Cynthia says, leaning in closer and lowering her voice. “And this might surprise you.”

“Okay.” I gulp, trying to keep my voice steady. “What are those things?”

“Tristan looks at you differently than he did George and me,” she says matter-of-factly, her gaze never leaving mine. “He doesn’t look at you like you’re just a friend. He looks at you like... well, like he’s in love with you.”

My cheeks burn with embarrassment, and I stutter, tripping over my own words. “I... I don’t... Wha—“

“Relax, Myles.” Cynthia chuckles, patting my hand gently. “I didn’t mean to fluster you. I just thought you should know.”

Cynthia exchanges a knowing glance with George, and I feel my stomach drop out. *Oh God, what now?*

“What I do know for sure is...” Cynthia says, her voice gentle but firm, “You look at Tristan the same way he looks at you.”

My face feels like it’s on fire, my heart pounding in my chest. I wish the floor would open up and swallow me whole.

“Is it true, Myles?” Cynthia asks softly, her eyes searching mine for the truth. “Are you in love with him?”

My heart is in turmoil, wrestling with the conflicting emotions within me. On one hand, I want to tell them the truth—that yes, I’m deeply in love with Tristan, who happens to be a man. On the other hand, how could I admit such a thing to my late wife’s parents? They’ve always been supportive and loving towards me, even though things have become a little strained between us since Cara’s passing.

“Cynthia, George...” I stammer, hesitating. In my mind, an angel perches on one shoulder, urging me to be honest. A devil sits on the other, whispering that it’s better to keep quiet. Caught between the two, I take a deep breath and make my decision. “Yes... yes, I’m in love with Tristan.”

Oh fugg!

I just came out for the first time... to my in-laws. *What?!*

There’s a moment of silence as they digest my confession. I brace myself for their reaction, fearing the worst.

“George’s brows furrow, a myriad of emotions in his gaze: confusion, sadness... and resignation. “You were in love with our daughter.”

“That’s true,” I say, trying to find the right words. “I’ve loved your daughter for most of my life, and I’ll always love her. I’d taken our wedding vows seriously and would’ve never

renege on my promise to Cara. I was completely faithful and had every intention of spending the rest of my life with her.” I slowly inhale a deep breath and then release it with a gush. “And then... and then she died.” My own parents had died in a car accident when I was eighteen, a few months before I’d met Cara. Whether they know it or not, in my mind, George and Cynthia are like parents to me. No way did I ever think I’d be having this conversation with them. I shake myself out of those thoughts and continue, “I’d never thought of another man in a romantic sense before, so this thing between Tristan and me came as a complete surprise. But at the grand young age of forty-two, I’ve learned something new about myself: I’m bisexual.”

Cynthia and George exchange glances, weighing my words. I can see the struggle in their eyes, the love they still hold for their daughter warring with their desire to see me happy. For a moment, the room is thick with tension, and then it’s broken by Cynthia’s soft voice.

“And we still love you just as much as we did a moment ago,” Cynthia says, her eyes full of kindness. “We only want you to be happy, Myles. And if that happiness lies with Tristan, then we will support you.”

“That’s the thing about love,” George says. “It works in mysterious ways.”

Their words bring tears to my eyes, my heart swelling with gratitude. “George, Cynthia,” I say, looking at one, then the other. “You may not fully understand, but your unwavering love and support means so much to me. Thank you,” I whisper.

Cynthia and George exchange another look, a mixture of sadness and acceptance in their eyes. The room is charged with emotions.

My mother-in-law steps forward first, wrapping her arms around me in a warm embrace. “We’re truly happy for you, Myles,” she says, her voice cracking slightly. I squeeze her tightly, grateful for her understanding.

George follows suit, his strong arms enveloping me in a fatherly hug. His tears fall onto my shoulder as he speaks. “Cara was everything I’d ever wanted in a daughter. She was one of the best things in my life,” he admits, his voice choked with emotion. I feel a tear slide down my cheek as well, the weight of his words heavy on my heart.

“But,” George continues, his grip tightening, “I know our Cara would want you to be happy. And if your happiness lies with Tristan, then I approve, too. We both do. Not that you need our approval, but you have it nonetheless.” He pulls back, meeting my gaze with determination. “Plus, we trust Nix. If our grandson likes Tristan, then so do we.”

A small, grateful smile tugs at the corners of my mouth. Their support means the world to me, more than words can express. The thought of losing them had terrified me, but now, with their love and approval, I feel like I can face anything.

“Thank you,” I say again, my voice stronger this time. “From the bottom of my heart, thank you.”

“Of course, son,” George replies, his voice thick with emotion. “You deserve all the happiness and love in the world.”

“Remember,” Cynthia chimes in, wiping a tear from her eye, “we’re always here for you, no matter who you love.”

I nod, gratitude filling my chest. With their acceptance, I feel like I can finally allow myself to love Tristan fully and without reservations. For the first time in a long while, hope blooms in my heart, and I embrace it wholly.

“Seeing you love someone who isn’t our Cara will be hard,” Cynthia admits, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. “It will be an adjustment, but we’ll continue to love you, Myles... just like we always have.”

Her words wrap around me like a warm embrace, and I am incredibly grateful for their understanding. They’ve been my rock ever since I was a teenager, without parents or a sense of direction, and now they’re continuing to be there for me as I navigate this new chapter of my life.

“Thank you,” I whisper, my throat tight with emotion. “You both mean the world to me.”

“Darling,” Cynthia says, giving me a watery smile, “you’re the son we didn’t give birth to. You were there for our daughter, and you helped create and raise our precious grandson. How could we not love and support you?”

I let out a shaky laugh, trying to keep the tears at bay. “I don’t know what I’d do without you two.”

“Hopefully, you’ll never have to find out,” George chimes in, offering me a comforting pat on the back.

“Speaking of Nix,” Cynthia says, a knowing glint in her eye, “you and Tristan need to have a talk with him about your relationship.”

“Y-yeah,” I stutter, my face flushing at the thought of explaining to my son that his father is dating another man. “We... We’ll talk to him soon.”

“Good,” she replies, nodding her approval. “Nix deserves to know, and I’m sure he’ll be happy for the both of you.”

“We’ll be here rooting for you.” George’s eyes are watery.

“Of course, we’ll do anything for our family.” A soft smile lights up Cynthia’s face.

“Even if that family includes an unemployed single father who recently learned he’s bisexual? Oh, and who sometimes burns the lasagna?” I tease, lightening the mood.

“Especially then.” George laughs, and Cynthia and I join him, the sound filling the room like a chorus.

I watch Cynthia and George leave, as we part ways after saying our goodbyes, feeling lighter than I have in a long time. They’ve given me their blessing, and now it’s time for Tristan and me to share our love with Nix.

CHAPTER 27



TRISTAN

Today's the day—the day Myles and I are finally going to tell Nix we're boyfriends.

“Earth to Tristan,” Myles calls out, waving a hand in front of my face. “You okay over there?”

“Better than okay.” My stomach is a swarm of butterflies, but it feels right, like everything is falling into place. Raising an eyebrow, I say, “Ready to make some pizza?”

“Absolutely.”

We gather in the kitchen, Myles, Nix, and I, about to create the ultimate culinary masterpiece: homemade pepperoni pizza with pineapple toppings. *Because, honestly, is it even pizza without pineapple?*

“Alright, team,” Myles announces, “let's make some magic happen.”

Nix giggles. “This is gonna be the best pizza ever!”

“Of course it will be, kiddo,” I say, giving his shoulder a slight squeeze. My heart pounds in my chest, knowing what's coming next.

Myles clears his throat, looking at me with a reassuring smile. “Nix, we have something important to tell you.”

Nix pauses, his hands covered in flour. “Okay, Dad.”

“Tristan and I,” Myles begins, hesitating briefly, “we're boyfriends.”

There's a beat of silence, and I hold my breath, waiting for Nix's reaction.

“Like... like Miguel’s papá and papi?” Nix asks, his eyes wide with curiosity.

“Exactly like that,” Myles confirms, smiling warmly at his son.

“Is that why Tristan’s been around so much?” Nix inquires, looking between the two of us.

“Yep,” I chime in. “I really love spending time with you and your dad.”

“Awesome!” Nix exclaims, returning to his pizza-making duties. “So, can we still put extra pineapple on the pizza?”

“Of course,” Myles chuckles, relief washing over his face. “Extra pineapple it is.”

We work in companionable silence for a short time as Myles stirs the ingredients to make the sauce and I guide Nix as he rolls out the dough on the lightly-floured surface.

Still stirring the pot, Myles shoots me a quick glance for support. “So, do you have any questions about what it means for Tristan and me to be boyfriends?”

I can see the gears turning in Nix’s head as he processes this new information. “Do you guys love each other like Miguel’s papá and papi?”

Myles exchanges another look with me before answering. “Well, I don’t know exactly how much they love each other, but I can tell you that I love Tristan very much.”

“Me too,” I chime in, my heart pounding. “I love your dad with all my heart, Nix.”

“Dad, you still love Mommy even though she died?” Nix asks, his voice small.

“Of course,” Myles responds, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down as he swallows. “I’ll never stop loving your mom. She was an amazing woman.”

“Do you miss Mommy?”

“Every day,” Myles admits, his voice cracking. “Your mom was a big part of our lives, and I’m grateful we had her.

Without your mom, there wouldn't be you."

"You're a gift, Nix, and your mom would be proud of the incredible little man you're becoming." I smile despite the bittersweet emotions coursing through my soul.

Nix beams, his smile lighting up the room. The happiness in his eyes is contagious, and I feel my own spirits lift.

With a mischievous smile on his face, Nix says, "Then you can wrap me up in gift paper and tie me with a bow."

Myles and I burst out in laughter.

"Anytime, little man," I reply, patting the boy affectionately on his back. "Now, why don't we get back to making this pizza? I think it's about time we throw some more pineapple on there."

"Okay." Nix immediately dives back into the task at hand.

We continue our pizza-making extravaganza, but I have to take a beat to marvel at the beauty of this moment. Our little family might not be conventional, but it's full of love, laughter, and pineapple-topped pizza. And that's more than enough for me.

I glance at Myles, our eyes locking as we share an unspoken understanding. It's time to address the elephant in the room—or rather, the firefighter in the bedroom.

"Nix," I begin, my heart pounding in my chest. "You know how much I love spending time with you and your dad, right?"

"Mmhm." Nix is focused on meticulously placing pineapple chunks on the pizza. "You're my family."

"Thanks, kiddo." I smile, touched by his words. "Well, your dad and I were thinking... would it be okay if sometimes I stay over and sleep here with you guys? Like a sleepover, but just with me and your dad."

Nix looks up from his pizza masterpiece, his expression contemplative. "Do you mean like last time when you slept in Dad's room?"

Myles and I exchange nervous glances before I stutter out a hesitant response. “Y-yeah, that’s what we mean. But only if you’re completely comfortable with it.”

“Okay,” Nix says simply, shrugging his shoulders as if this is the most normal thing in the world. “As long as we can have pancakes for breakfast.”

“Deal.” Relief floods through me. I can’t help but laugh at the boy’s priorities. Pancakes—the ultimate cure for any awkward situation.

We return to our pizza-making, the atmosphere now lighter and filled with laughter. As Nix arranges pepperoni into a smiley face, he suddenly turns to me, his question catching me off guard.

“Tristan, can I call you Daddy sometimes?” he asks innocently, his guileless eyes searching mine for an answer.

My breath catches in my throat, and I feel a swell of emotion rising within me. I look at Myles, who nods encouragingly, his eyes glistening with unshed tears. I take a deep breath and turn back to face Nix.

“Of course you can, little man,” I say, my voice thick with emotion. “It would be an honor for me to be your Daddy.”

“For real?” Nix’s eyes widen before a broad smile spreads across his face. “Thanks, Daddy! You’re the best.”

Christ. A minute ago I thought I couldn’t love this boy any more than I already did, but I was lying to myself. My heart is filled and overflowing with the love I have for him. My son. A tear slides down my cheek. “You have no idea how much that means to me.”

“Group hug!” Nix exclaims, his voice pitched high with excitement. Myles and I exchange a glance filled with joy and love before we all envelope each other in a warm embrace.

We’re a tangled mess of limbs, laughter, and genuine happiness as we hold onto each other. My eyes start to water again, but I blink back the tears, trying to focus on the feeling of Myles’s strong arms around me, the sound of Nix’s

infectious giggling, and the warmth that radiates within our little circle of love.

“Best. Hug. Ever,” Nix declares, his voice muffled by my shirt, and I can’t help but chuckle at his enthusiasm. This kid is a natural-born optimist, and it’s contagious.

“Oh yes, it sure is,” Myles agrees, and I feel his breath against my neck, causing goosebumps to spread across my skin. I silently berate myself for getting turned on during a family hug. *Get it together, Tristan.*

“Hey, what do you say we make some fruit juice to go with our pizza?” I suggest, hoping to distract myself from my very inappropriate thoughts.

“Yesss!” Nix cheers, wriggling free from our embrace and darting towards the kitchen cabinets. “Daddy, can I get a pineapple on my glass?”

My heart lurches at the sound of the word daddy on Nix’s lips. That’s my boy. He’s my son. And I’ll never get tired of hearing or saying those three words. He’s. My. Son.

“Of course, kiddo,” I say in response to the question, bringing myself back to the present. I follow him, leaving Myles to finish up the last touches on our pineapple-pepperoni masterpiece. As I prepare our drinks, I steal glances at Myles, watching the way his muscles flex beneath his tight-fitting shirt as he works. It’s a sight that never gets old, and one I’ll never tire of appreciating.

I slip a pineapple wedge onto the rim of a glass and pour a serving of fruit juice into it. “Here you go, little man.”

Nix takes it with a grin, his eyes sparkling with excitement. “Thanks, Daddy!” he exclaims before taking a sip. The word sends a jolt through me, both heartwarming and terrifying at the same time. *Can I really be the father figure this amazing kid deserves?*

“Careful,” Myles warns as Nix slurps the drink, and it’s at that moment I realize we really are a team—all three of us, together. And though the doubts and fears still linger in the corners of my mind, I know one thing for sure: I wouldn’t

trade this moment, or these two incredible people, for anything in the world.

“Alright, guys, let’s dig into this pizza!” I grin as Myles slides the cheesy, bubbling pie onto the table. We gather around, plates in hand, ready to share not only a meal but also our lives, our love, and our laughter.

I feel a newfound sense of belonging knowing that Nix is okay with Myles and me being together. And in this moment, surrounded by laughter, love, and pineapple-topped pizza, I think about the path I had to travel to get me to this point in my life. It may not be a conventional family, but it’s ours, and I couldn’t be happier.

CHAPTER 28



MYLES

The summer months flew past as if they were an eagle soaring through the sky. Sometimes I pinch myself, still unable to believe this is my life now. After losing Cara, I was convinced happiness was a cruel joke. Now, here I am, living the dream with Tristan and our son, Nix. Tristan's work kept us from celebrating the Fourth of July on the proper day, but he wasn't about to let that ruin our holiday. "We can have our own Fourth of July party," he announced, grinning like a kid.

"Alright, you rebels," I say, chuckling as we all don red, white, and blue shorts and shirts. Nix snaps photo after photo, capturing our makeshift holiday. The sound of laughter fills the air, punctuating the clicks of the camera.

"Time for some homemade ice cream," Tristan announces, brandishing a wooden spoon like a sword. I roll my eyes at his antics but can't suppress a smile. We gather around the kitchen counter, the cold metal bowl of the ice cream maker whirring loudly as it churns our sweet concoction.

"Rainbow waffle sandwiches next!" Nix exclaims, eyes wide with excitement. He's been looking forward to making these no-bake treats all day.

"Chop, chop, sous chefs," I tease, motioning them to our assembly line. We spread vibrant layers of cream cheese frosting onto waffles, laughing as we compete to see who can make the most colorful sandwich. The taste of each bite is pure bliss—sweet, tangy, and cool all at once.

My and Tristan's birthdays are just a day apart—July 31 and August 1 respectively. Both of us are Leos, born at the

height of summer, and we couldn't have asked for better presents than waking up to each other's touch those mornings. Our moans mingled with the chirping of birds outside, passion filling the room.

"Happy birthday, babe," Tristan murmured on a late July morning, a wicked grin on his face as we lay there, catching our breath. He'd awakened me to one of the best blow jobs of my life. I laugh, shaking my head at his unabashed boldness.

"Happy birthday to you, sweetheart." And I had proceeded to return the favor by giving him a blow job right as the clock struck midnight on his birthday, which he said was one of the best blowjobs I'd ever given him. I basked in his praise. After I'd swallowed his cum—an art I was perfecting—I'd planted a soft kiss on his lips.

Later, we found ourselves at the coffee shop, armed with a gift card from Tristan's coworkers. The scent of freshly ground coffee beans and warm pastries enveloped us as we placed our orders.

"Two Leos together... a combustible combination," I remark, smirking. Tristan snorts, before launching into some of the bizarre calls the department had received over the years, like people stuck in playground equipment, vending machines or even manhole covers. We trade anecdotes and jokes, relating to our respective jobs (me as a former sports agent) and our laughter mingles with the hum of conversation from other patrons.

"Life is pretty great, huh?" Tristan says, looking at me with a smile that fully reaches his eyes. I nod, feeling an odd mix of contentment and apprehension. I'm not sure why. Except for me working ridiculous hours as a sports agent, Cara and I had a wonderful life together that just got richer when Nix was born. And then she was gone. So, it's like there's still a part of me that's waiting for this blissful life to end. I keep asking myself stupid questions. *Is this really my life now? Can it last?* For now, all I know is that I don't want this moment to end.

Too soon, the summer vacation is coming to an end. George and Cynthia host their end-of-summer BBQ extravaganza in their backyard. The name of the event is a stark contrast to what it really is. It's just family and friends hanging out and having fun with each other. The air is thick with the mouthwatering smell of grilling hamburgers and hot dogs, making my stomach growl in anticipation.

I feel nostalgic as this is the second year that Cara is not at this family event. I don't feel the acute sting of her absence this year, but there's still this low, throbbing pain in the pit of my stomach that's difficult for me to describe. The most important thing is that Nix is doing much better than he was last year. This time last year, Cara had only been gone six months; now, it's more than a year later. Sometimes I fear that as the years go by, he'll forget his mother's smile, or her touch, or the affectionate way she looked at him. That's why I talk to him about her often, and we look at photos of her so his memory of her won't fade. Nix is such an adorable boy, and I want the absolute best for him.

But there's another unexpected dynamic. This year, I have a new partner in my life—Tristan—when for the last two decades, Cara had been by my side. A confusing mix of emotions wash over me: sadness for the loss of my first love, guilt for finding another soulmate so quickly, joy for having someone who loves me as much as Tristan does, and yet more guilt for bringing that person into my in-laws' home. George and Cynthia have come to accept Tristan, but there's a part of me that still feels uneasy about it all.

"Nice spread, George," I say, impressed by the array of toppings laid out on a long table: cheese, lettuce, tomato, pickles, and more condiments than you can shake a stick at. Cynthia seems to have outdone herself with her famous red and green coleslaw.

"Hello, Mr. Madden." Miguel waves at me excitedly, tugging his dads along with him. He and Nix have been inseparable since they became friends, and it's heartwarming to see them so happy together.

“Ready for some fun?” I grin. With a collective cheer, we all head towards the pool, eager to make the most of these last days of summer.

“Marco!” Nix shouts, eyes squeezed shut as he splashes around in search of Miguel.

“Polo!” comes the reply, Miguel’s laughter tinkling like wind chimes as he dodges Nix’s eager hands. I glance over at Tristan, who’s stretched out on a lounge chair looking utterly relaxed... and sexy. The sun dances off his tanned skin, making him glow like some kind of Greek god. My chest swells with love and gratitude for how lucky I am to have him in my life.

“Ready, guys?” Cynthia calls, holding up a deck of cards. We gather around the patio table, each of us trying to maintain our poker faces as we engage in a fierce battle of Go Fish. The conversation is lively, punctuated by bursts of laughter and good-natured ribbing. I find myself chuckling at George’s terrible bluffing skills and Tristan’s teasing banter.

“Got any threes?” I ask Cynthia, trying to keep my face neutral.

“Go fish!” she replies with a wicked grin, clearly enjoying our little game.

The sun begins to dip below the horizon, casting a warm, golden light over everything. I take a deep breath, inhaling the smoky scent of the grill mixed with freshly cut grass and chlorine from the pool. In this moment, life is perfect as I’m surrounded by family, friends, laughter, and love.

And before I know it, it’s back-to-school season. I can’t believe my boy is entering third grade. I watch as he bounds towards the school entrance, backpack bouncing on his shoulders.

“Byeeee!” Nix gives us one last wave before disappearing into the building. With a sigh, I try to tone down that familiar pang of nervousness for him. New year, new challenges... but I know he’ll do great.

“Hey, babe,” Tristan says as we walk back into my apartment, planting a quick kiss on my cheek. “How’re you holding up?”

“Good, I guess,” I admit. “It’s just... he’s growing up so fast.”

“Tell me about it,” Tristan agrees, reaching over to give my hand a comforting squeeze. “But hey, he mentioned something about wanting to try Little League baseball. That could be fun, right?”

“Definitely!” I perk up at the idea, already imagining Nix swinging a bat and running the bases with that determined look on his face. “We should look into signing him up.”

Over the next few weeks, I find myself attending Nix’s practices, cheering him on from the sidelines. Tristan joins me when he has a day off, and together we watch our son thrive in his new sport. The joy in Nix’s eyes as he hits the ball or makes a great catch is absolutely contagious, and I can’t help but beam with pride.

And then there are those precious moments Tristan and I share. I treasure those times we make love. All my life I’d identified as straight, and never had a doubt about it. But after living through forty years and experiencing the devastating loss of my first soulmate, I’m not wasting a single moment wondering why I’m attracted to a man for the first time or why I didn’t realize this about myself sooner. Life is short, and I’m embracing the present without getting caught up in overthinking. Every heartbeat, every emotion is a reminder of life’s fleeting nature. It only took one hot firefighter with those defined arms, that smoothly-muscled chest, and that chiseled jaw to turn my world upside down... but in a good way. Yet he’s more than his outward beauty; he has a heart that’s pure gold. He’s protective, and he loves big. And he’s mine. I’m the luckiest man alive.

And at this moment, his body presses against mine, his strong arms wrapped around me, pulling me closer. The feel of his skin against mine sends shivers down my spine, a delicious blend of pleasure and anticipation. Tonight is warm, our

bedroom bathed in the soft glow of the moonlight filtering through the curtains.

“Tristan,” I whisper, my voice barely audible as he leans in to capture my lips in a searing kiss that leaves me breathless.

“God, Myles,” he murmurs against my mouth, his hands roaming my body, igniting a fire within me that only he can quench. We move together, bodies entwined, his hips thrusting, thrusting, thrusting as his dick assaults my insides. We’re lost in a dance as old as time itself. Our passion builds, escalating to a crescendo that leaves us both gasping for air, trembling in the aftermath.

“Wow,” I mutter, my head resting on his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart. It sounds like home, and I’m grateful for every moment we get to share like this. Slowly, sleep claims me, and I drift off in the safety of his embrace, until...

“NO!”

Tristan’s scream shatters the peace of the night, jerking me awake in an instant. Panic floods my veins as I struggle to comprehend what’s happening.

CHAPTER 29



TRISTAN

Flames crackled and roared around me, the heat of the inferno unbearable. Sweat dripped down my forehead as I gasped for air, my lungs screaming for relief. The smoke was everywhere; it seemed to reach out and grab me.

Through the smoke, and the roaring flames that hadn't penetrated my room yet, I could hear them—Mom and Dad—calling out my name in desperation.

“Tristan!” Dad's voice breaks, his plea piercing my heart like a jagged dagger. “Get out of here if you can.”

“Mom! Dad!” I scream, trying to push forward through the thick smoke that chokes me with every breath. What is Dad saying? That he wants me to leave them behind? I'm not leaving without them.

I could feel my eyes stinging from the smoke as I forced myself forward, determined to get to my parents. My heart raced and adrenaline filled my veins as I pushed through the thick smoke. I had to find them. I refused to leave them behind.

My bedroom door creaked open, and I was immediately met with intense heat that almost knocked me off my feet. The handle of the door was hot, but I was too determined to care. Clearing away some of the smoke, I peered into the hallway and saw it was already engulfed by flames.

I had no time to lose; I had to locate Mom and Dad quickly or they would be lost forever in this inferno. But where were they? Had they made it out, or were they still inside somewhere? My heart pounded as I desperately tried to figure out if their voices were coming from their bedroom or the

living room. But their voices are distorted by the blaze consuming our home.

My throat burned from the smoke, my eyes stung with tears. My body felt heavy, weighed down by an invisible force holding me back.

“Tristan... We... love... you.” Mom’s voice is weaker now, barely audible above the relentless roar of the fire. I can’t breathe. The smoke is suffocating me. My vision blurs, dark spots clouding the edges.

Without hesitation, I spun around and ran into their bedroom, dodging embers that rained from above like fiery snowflakes and blackened beams that crashed around me like thunderclaps in a stormy sky.

“Tristan, wake up!” The sudden touch jolts me awake, and I find myself staring into Myles’s concerned eyes. My heart is beating rapidly in my chest. My breathing is ragged, my whole body shaking from the intensity of the nightmare.

His strong arms grip my shoulders, keeping me anchored as my heart races wildly in my chest.

Instinctively, I try to pull away from him, but Myles holds me tight, refusing to let go. I’m bigger and stronger than he is, but I’m too weak to escape his hold on me right now. My cheeks burn with embarrassment, ashamed that he’s seen me like this—broken, haunted by my past. I want to run, to hide from his all-consuming love for me, but I can’t.

“A nightmare?” His brow furrows with worry. Myles pulls me closer, his soothing voice a balm to my frayed nerves. “Shhh, it’s okay. It was just a dream. I’m here now.”

I nod, swallowing hard. It’s been months since I’ve had a dream like this, so Myles had never witnessed an episode. “Yeah,” I whisper, feeling exposed and vulnerable. “The fire... my parents.”

Myles rocks me back and forth, back and forth. “I’m sorry, sweetheart.”

The guilt of surviving the fire that killed my parents has plagued me over the years, and to be honest, my natural

inclination is to tell him I don't deserve his love and support, not after all the lives I failed to save. The weight of their lives bears down on me, threatening to crush my spirit. The last vestiges of the nightmare have left me bewildered and bereft, and I'm worn thin by the memories of that fateful night. I gratefully lean into Myles's touch.

I bury my face in his unclothed chest as tears burn the backs of my eyes. He tightens his arms around me as if he's trying to absorb my pain and make it his own.

"Tristan," he murmurs, pressing a gentle kiss to the top of my head. "You don't have to carry this burden alone. I'm here for you, always."

His words are a balm to my wounded soul, soothing the self-loathing that threatens to consume me. In that moment, I know I'll never be able to resist the affection Myles offers, because I love him with every fiber of my being. The comfort of being in his arms brings a warmth that seeps into my bones. I need this, I realize. God, how I crave his closeness. And I can only hope that, one day, I'll learn to forgive myself for all the things I couldn't change.

"Sweetheart, it's okay. You're safe now." Myles brushes his thumb against my cheek. "Tristan?" he prompts, clearly worried about my silence.

I swallow hard and force myself to speak. "Sorry, it's just... I didn't want you to see me like this."

"Like what?" he asks gently. "Vulnerable? We all are sometimes. That's nothing to be ashamed of."

"Easier said than done," I mumble, fighting the urge to pull away from him.

"Hey, look at me," Myles insists, cupping my face in his hands. "You don't have to hide anything from me, okay? We all have our demons."

I give a slight nod in agreement, knowing that giving in to this is an admission of one of my biggest flaws. But as Myles starts talking about Cara, I find myself listening. It dawns on me that I know so little about their life together, and I never

felt it was my place to ask about it. Yet here he is, opening up to me.

“Even though I loved being a sports agent, it became an obsession,” Myles admits. “I wasn’t there enough for Cara and Nix. That’s why I won’t go back to that life.”

“I understand.”

“I want to tell you something.”

“Go on,” I whisper, breath hitching in my chest.

“About Cara,” he says, and I stiffen. My heart races, uncertain of what comes next. “I was infatuated with her from the moment we met, and then I fell in love. It was inevitable, you know?” He presses a soft kiss to my forehead. “Every day with her was sweeter than the day before. She was this whirlwind of energy and passion.” His eyes shine with memory, almost lost in the past. “She eventually fell in love with me too.” Myles chuckles, but there was a sadness, a gloomy undertone. “We got married and had Phoenix.”

His fingers trace delicate patterns on my skin, igniting sparks as they move. I shiver, goosebumps dotting my flesh. “There’s so much I loved about her,” Myles says. “Her laugh. The way she’d dance in the kitchen while making pancakes. How she always knew when I needed a hug or a scolding.”

“Sounds amazing,” I murmur.

“I have regrets, though,” Myles admits, voice cracking. “I was a workaholic, almost obsessed with my job as a sports agent. It consumed me.” He swallows hard, pain etched in his features. “I won’t go back to it. I can’t.”

“Then... what will you do?”

“Truth is, I don’t know yet.” A slight smile tugs at his lips. “But for now, I’m going to coach Phoenix’s Little League team. Their regular coach got sick, and it’s something I can do to fill my time.”

“Sounds perfect.” My heart swells with admiration for this man.

“There’s something else I need to tell you.” His voice is heavy with a weight I’ve never heard before.

“Anything.” My stomach twists into knots.

“About Cara’s death.” His breath hitches, and I feel the tears prickling in my own eyes. “It was Valentine’s Day. We were supposed to meet at a restaurant for dinner. But work... it got in the way again.” His words hang in the air, a thick fog of regret and pain.

My chest constricts, sympathy and sorrow battling within me.

“Instead of being there with her, I was stuck at the office. I had to cancel our date.” Guilt seeps from his every word, and my heart breaks for him. “Cara was driving home when she missed a curve in the road. Her car went through the guardrail of Southern Starlight Bridge.”

The truth hits me like a punch to the gut. It’s my failure—one of my greatest—and it ruined Myles’s life! I stare at him, my heart pounding in my chest, as he looks back at me with those warm, trusting eyes.

“Emergency services tried to anchor the car, to get her out,” Myles continues, oblivious to the turmoil raging in my heart, my soul. “But they didn’t make it in time. She fell... with the car... to the river below.” Tears stream down his face, and I’m powerless to stop my own. “I blame myself, Tristan. Completely.”

Myles’s tears glisten as they trail down his cheeks, a silent testament to the raw emotions he’s grappling with.

He takes a shaky breath and speaks, voice trembling. “Tristan, we’re both... broken. We can help each other. You don’t have to hide from me.”

I swallow hard, my chest tightening. His words echo in my head, but I can’t fully comprehend them. My heart races as I stare into his eyes—those beautiful, vulnerable eyes that see right through me.

“Your baggage doesn’t scare me,” he continues, placing a hand on my arm. His touch sends shivers down my spine,

electrifying my senses. I want to lean into it, and yet I want to pull away.

“Can you promise me that?” I whisper, unable to look away from him.

He nods earnestly. “I promise.”

But how can he? How can he understand the weight of guilt that crushes me, the memories that haunt me day and night? Most days I wear the facade that tells the world that all is well with me. The reality, though, is something else entirely. Not even Steph, whom I consider my best friend, knows the real me. Myles is the only person who has pummeled through my defenses and gotten to the core of me. And yet, I’m still not even letting him in entirely.

Numbness envelops me like a dark cloud, choking any sense of comfort I might find in Myles’s words or touch. Instead of relief, all I feel is an icy wall building up inside me.

My parents died because I couldn’t get to them in time. And Cara... that poor woman who slipped through my fingers last February—Valentine’s Day.

“Sweetheart?” Myles’s voice breaks through my thoughts, concern etched on his face.

“I’m sorry,” I murmur, barely able to speak past the lump in my throat. I can’t tell him about the nightmares that followed that terrible day, how Steph had to force me not to overwork myself.

“Hey,” he says softly, pulling me closer. “You don’t have to apologize. We’ll figure this out together.”

But will we? Can I really let Myles in, knowing the weight of my failures might be too much for him to bear? Can I risk breaking his heart—and mine—all over again?

My body goes rigid in his embrace. I clamp my eyes shut, a wave of embarrassment washing over me. I feel a desperate urge to run from him, from my past, from the present.

“Tris?” he asks softly, concern furrowing his brow. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I lie, my voice cracking. The guilt churns inside me, a storm threatening to tear me apart. I can’t tell him. I can’t let him know that I’m the reason his world fell apart.

“Tristan, talk to me,” he pleads, reaching for my hand. His touch burns like fire, and I flinch, pulling away from him.

“Please,” I whisper, fighting the urge to spill my secret, to share this burden with him. That would be selfish, though. I can’t do that to him. Not to Myles.

“Okay,” he says gently, giving me space but not leaving. The kindness in his eyes is almost too much to bear. “But remember, we’re in this together. And whatever it is, we’ll face it together.”

“Thank you,” I force out, a lump forming in my throat. How does he manage to be so strong when everything around him is crumbling?

“You don’t have to do this alone anymore.”

His words pierce through me, breaking down the walls I’ve built around my heart. I want to believe him. I want to trust that he’ll still love me even after learning about my failure. But the fear of losing him is overpowering, crushing any hope I might have.

“Tristan,” he whispers, his breath warm against my cheek. “Let me help you carry this weight.”

I close my eyes, tears streaming down my face. *Can I really do this? Can I really let him in, knowing the truth might destroy us both?*

CHAPTER 30



MYLES

I blink awake, groggy. The room swims into focus. Empty. Cold sheets beside me whisper abandonment. Last night's emotional torrent replays in my head—Tristan and I, tangled limbs, confessions spilling like blood from open wounds, his tension, a storm brewing beneath the surface.

“Did he even sleep?” I ask the empty room. Of course, no answer comes.

Sunlight filters through the blinds, casting stripes on the floor. The house breathes quietly, Nix safely tucked away with George and Cynthia for a few days. My heart clenches at the thought of him, but it's good for him to reconnect with family, to rediscover old bonds.

“Where are you, Tristan?” My voice cracks, heavy with unshed tears.

I rise, restless. My feet touch the hardwood floor. The absence of warmth stings. Memories of Tristan flash like lightning: the heat of our love igniting the air between us, bodies pressed together, Tristan clinging to me as if we were making love for the last time, mouths seeking solace. And now? A void.

“Can I fix this?” Doubt twists my insides. Fear gnaws at the edges of my mind.

A note sits on the kitchen counter. Tristan's handwriting is unmistakable. It screams urgency:

*Called into work suddenly. Didn't
want to wake you.*

- T

The words betray the tremble in the pen strokes. Strained.

“Is this real?” I frown, clutching the paper.

Phone in hand, I text him. My thumb hovers over the screen, hesitating. Then, I press send.

Me: Hey, just saw your note. Everything okay?

Silence follows. Expected, yet painful.

“Please, Tristan,” I mutter to myself. “Talk to me.” Desperation seeps through my body, heavy as lead.

Minutes stretch into hours. The note sits on the counter, a mocking reminder that the cord connecting my heart to his is strained. The weight of unanswered questions presses down on my chest. I pull out my phone again, staring at the message thread.

“Maybe he’s busy,” I tell myself. But doubt lingers, dark and unrelenting.

I left home some time later for Little League practice. It’s the first time I’m coaching the five-to-eleven-year-olds.

Thoughts scream in my head. *Tristan, did I do or say something wrong?* God, I hope that if I did, he’ll know it wasn’t intentional. I’d never set out to hurt him.

Sunlight blares through the windshield, a sharp contrast to the darkness in my soul. But I’m glad for the distraction. I need this.

As soon as Nix sees me, he races over and greets me with a hug. George and Cynthia are beaming. I know they struggled when I’d kept Nix away, but now that we’re back in tune with each other, things are great.

If only Tristan and I were more in synch with each other. I want my sweetheart back in my arms.

“Hey Myles!” A cheerful voice pulls me back to reality. Karen, one of the other parents, waves at me from across the field. I force a smile. Nod. Pretend everything’s fine.

“Great turnout today,” she says, joining me on the sidelines. Her enthusiasm feels like sandpaper on raw nerves.

“Sure is.”

“Have you met everyone yet?” she asks, eyes sparkling.

“No, not yet.” An opportunity for distraction. Grasp it. “Would you introduce me?”

“Of course!” She beams, oblivious to my internal conflict.

Parents mill about, laughter and chatter filling the air. Small talk. Names exchanged. Surface-level connections forged. But beneath the pleasantries, Tristan’s absence drills into my core.

“Mike, this is Myles, Nix’s dad,” Karen introduces. Firm handshake. Smile. Repeat.

“Nice to meet you, Myles!” Mike’s grin is infectious, but I can’t shake the weight bearing down on me.

“Likewise, Mike.” Maintain composure.

As the introductions continue, my phone vibrates in my pocket. Relief floods me, quickly followed by trepidation. It’s Tristan.

Tristan: Hey, sorry for the late reply. Busy day at work. Everything’s fine.

Short and to the point, as always. But something’s off. With each text exchange, the tension between us crackles like a live wire.

Tristan, please talk to me, I plead silently, fingers hovering over the keys.

Me: Are you okay?

I send the text, hoping for an honest reply.

Tristan: Yep, just tired. Talk later?

His response is evasive.

Me: Sure. Take care.

My heart sinks, heavy with disappointment.

Tristan: Okay, thanks. You too.

His words, like a Band-Aid on a gaping wound, are not nearly enough.

“Did you need to go somewhere, Myles?” Karen asks, observing my preoccupation.

“No, just checking in with someone,” I reply, tucking the phone away and forcing a smile.

“Everything okay?” she asks.

“Fine. Just fine.” My reply is clipped, but not unfriendly.

The practice commences—kids running and shouting, parents cheering them on.

I watch the players with a sense of detachment, my mind elsewhere. I try to give them pointers, but my heart isn't in it. Their enthusiasm falls flat against my tattered emotions.

“Hey, Coach Madden,” a little voice calls out, jolting me back to reality. It's one of the players, a small boy with a tangle of curly hair and a gap-toothed grin.

“Yes, buddy?” I crouch down to his level.

“Can you show me how to throw a curveball?” he asks eagerly, holding up his glove.

I grin despite myself, a spark of excitement igniting within me. “Absolutely, let's do it.” I take the ball and glove from him, positioning him just right. “Okay, now watch closely. You want to grip the ball like this,” I demonstrate, “and then twist your wrist at the last second before letting go.”

He nods, eager to try. I help him through a few practice throws, adjusting his grip and stance until he gets the hang of it. His face lights up with joy as he stares at the ball, watching it spin in the air.

“Wow, I did it!” he exclaims, beaming with pride.

“Great job!”

I try to focus on Nix, his laughter as he rounds the bases, but Tristan’s absence gnaws at me. It’s as if a piece of me is missing, replaced by a dull ache that won’t subside.

“Great hit, Caleb! Faster, faster, faster, Zach! Let’s go, Nix!” I yell, clapping along with the other parents.

As I engage more with the kids, my worries start to fade into the background. Their laughter and energy are infectious, and I find myself getting caught up in the joy of the game. For a while, everything feels right in the world.

But as the practice draws to a close and parents start to gather their kids, the reality of my situation hits me again. Tristan and I are still on shaky ground, and I’m not sure what to do about this growing chasm between us.

Can we fix this? I wonder, anxiety bubbling beneath the surface. The question lingers, unanswered, as I head home.

I finally can’t take it anymore; on day four of our impasse, I stand outside Tristan’s apartment, my heart pounding in my chest. Taking a deep breath, I knock on the door.

When he opens it, he looks like shit—eyes bloodshot, face pale, and hair disheveled. It’s a stark contrast to the strong, confident firefighter I fell for.

“Can I come in?” I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

He hesitates, then steps aside, allowing me entry. The apartment is dimly lit, and the atmosphere is suffocating. Every muscle in my body tenses as I close the door behind me.

“Tristan, we need to talk,” I say firmly, trying to keep my emotions in check.

He avoids eye contact, rubbing his neck nervously. “About what?”

“About us!” I practically shout, fed up with his evasiveness. “If you want to break up with me, just do it! Don’t leave me hanging like this, feeling like I’m losing you. And I’m thinking about Phoenix, too. He loves you, but I’m going to do my best to protect him from the pain of potentially losing you.”

Tristan’s eyes widen at the mention of my son’s name. He takes a step closer to me, his hand reaching out as if to touch me, then dropping to his side.

For a moment, there’s nothing but silence. Then, finally, Tristan abruptly turns on his heel and stalks to the kitchen, with me following closely behind.

He grabs a beer from the fridge, popping the cap off and quickly chugging it down. Leaning against the counter, his hands shake as he begins speaking.

“It’s about Cara,” he says, his voice cracking.

I nod, my stomach twisting in knots. “What about her?” I brace myself for the storm that will inevitably follow, hoping against hope our love is strong enough to weather it.

“I was one of the first responders when her car went over the bridge.”

My heart drops. “You... you tried to save her?”

“Yeah,” he says, eyes brimming with tears. “We did everything we could, Myles.”

“Jesus, Tristan...” My head is spinning with this new information.

His voice breaks. “I’ve been obsessing over all the things I could’ve done differently to save her. I have nightmares, Myles. And I didn’t know it was Cara before, but now I do, and I’m afraid you’ll never forgive me.”

“Oh my God...” I breathe out, feeling my own eyes welling up with tears. The pain in his voice, the guilt etched across his face... it’s almost too much to bear.

He continues, detailing every futile attempt they made to save Cara that night. “We secured ropes, tried to stabilize it, but the car just... it slipped and plunged into the water. We desperately tried every conceivable idea we could come up with to save her, but...” Each word cuts deeper, raw and visceral, as the horrifying scene unfolds in my mind.

Why didn't he tell me as soon as I'd told him what happened? Can I forgive him for keeping such a secret? I'm not sure.

I stand there, feeling the weight of Tristan's pain suffocating the air between us. I want to reach out, to touch him, to tell him it's not his fault. I want to be there for him right now, even if my heart is breaking too. But my body feels like it's encased in ice, and I can't move. My thoughts race, colliding with each other in a whirlwind of confusion and hurt.

“Tristan,” I whisper, my voice trembling. “I... I don't know what to say.”

He looks at me, eyes glistening with unshed tears, and I see the fear in them—the fear of losing me, of being left alone with his nightmares and his guilt. It breaks my heart. But instead of comforting him, I do the unthinkable: I turn away from him, heart pounding in my chest, and flee his apartment.

“Wait, Myles!” Tristan calls after me, his voice cracking. I ignore him, pushing through his door, suddenly grateful Nix is sleeping over at his grandparents, so he doesn't have to witness what's happening.

Dammit, Myles, what are you doing? I silently curse myself for my behavior even as I continue to run, unable to stop until I reach the door of my apartment. I hear Tristan's footsteps behind me, but I can't face him. *Not now. Maybe not ever.*

Stopping in my tracks, I stand with my back to him, unable to look at his face and see the pain I know will be etched into his handsome features. “Please, just give me a moment.” I gasp out, breathless from the crushing weight of all the emotions threatening to overwhelm me. “I need... I just need some space.”

“Space? Myles, don’t do this to me, to us,” Tristan pleads, desperation seeping into his voice. “We can talk about this. We can fix it.”

I spin on my heel to look him in the eyes. I try to speak, but my mouth dries up and my throat constricts. All I can get out is a raspy whisper. “Can we?” I try to keep my voice strong and steady, but it sounds far away even to my own ears, as if I’m speaking from another room. His gaze shifts away from me, and his mouth tightens into a thin line.

He kept this from me, gave me nothing but silence when I begged him for answers. I shake my head, regret and sadness making my chest ache. “I’m sorry, Tristan. I just... I can’t. Not right now.”

And with that, I push through the door of my apartment, leaving Tristan standing there in the empty hallway, his heart probably shattering into millions of tiny pieces... just like mine. Tears blur my vision. On autopilot, I strip down to my boxers and flop onto my bed, unable to shake the feeling that I’ve just made the biggest mistake of my life.

CHAPTER 31



TRISTAN

I wake up with my head throbbing relentlessly, the light from the window stabbing my eyes. I groan and pull the covers over my face, trying to hide from the world. If only I could erase last night from existence. I drank way too much after Myles left, desperate to numb the pain. But now I'm left with an even worse feeling: this godforsaken hangover.

I don't have long until I have to be at work, and every fiber of my being is dreading it. I've always prided myself on keeping my personal life separate from my job as a firefighter; I know how crucial it is to be sharp and focused when lives are on the line. But I can't avoid the shame that's gnawing at me, reminding me I've let myself down. Even worse, I feel like I let Myles and Nix down, too.

"Ugh," I mutter, dragging myself out of bed. The cold floor shocks my feet, making me wince. "Why did I do this to myself?"

My reflection in the mirror looks as haggard as I feel: bloodshot eyes, disheveled hair, too-pale complexion, and a hint of stubble. The sight of my own pathetic state fuels my self-loathing. I need to fix this before I go to work.

I stumble into the kitchen and start downing glass after glass of water. Each gulp feels like a lifeline, even if it doesn't quell the throbbing in my skull. I force down a slice of toast and follow it with a swig of orange juice, grimacing as the acidic taste hits my tongue. I pop a couple of aspirin, praying they'll take effect soon.

“Okay, Tristan,” I tell myself, gripping the counter. “You need to power through today. You can deal with the fallout later.”

As I gather my things for work, I notice my phone sitting on the counter, mocking me. I don’t know why I expect to see a text from Myles, but the empty screen still guts me. Maybe it’s because I want him to care enough to reach out, even if he’s angry.

“Damn it,” I mutter, the anger mixing with hurt. My fingers fly across the screen as I type out a message.

Me: Hey Myles, just wanted to say I’m sorry about last night. I understand if you never want to see me again, but I had to tell you how much I care about you and Phoenix.

I hesitate for a moment before hitting send. *Why am I doing this to myself?* But there’s a part of me that can’t let go without trying, even if it only deepens the wound.

“God, what a mess,” I whisper, shoving my phone in my pocket, preparing for the day ahead.

An hour later, the fire station looms ahead, a beacon of responsibility and routine. I take a deep breath, trying to steel myself for the day. My head throbs in time with my heartbeat, a cruel reminder of last night’s transgressions and the fact that the aspirin I swallowed down before leaving the apartment hasn’t kicked in yet.

“Get it together, Tristan,” I mumble under my breath as I push open the heavy door.

“Morning, Triscuit!” Nick greets me with his usual enthusiasm. I cringe at my colleague’s sunny disposition. I’m definitely not in the mood for his happy-happy, joy-joy attitude today, not when I feel completely incapable of those feelings.

“Morning,” I mumble, barely managing a nod in his direction.

“Rough night?” he asks, shooting me a knowing look.

“Something like that.” I regret my curt response immediately but can’t bring myself to apologize. Instead, I busy myself with the daily inspection of the SCBA, oxygen bag, AED and the rest of the equipment, leaving little room for chit chat. Nick and Connor are running through the daily pump test, brake check and other mechanical checks on the engines, and Steph is dealing with her daily admin paperwork. Jared and Haley are knocking out the cleaning chores.

After doing my inspections, I hightail it to my locker, desperate for a moment alone.

“Tristan,” Steph’s voice floats over the din. She approaches me with a concerned frown, her eyes searching for something. “You okay?”

“I’m fine,” I say crisply, wincing when I unintentionally slam my locker shut. The sound reverberates through my skull, further intensifying the pain.

“Alright, man,” she says, raising her hands in surrender.

“No no no, I didn’t mean to do that.” I gesture to my locker. “Sorry.”

“Was checking in on you.”

“Thanks,” I mutter, my guilt gnawing at me. She’s my best friend, and I hate shutting her out like this.

“You know where my office is when you’re ready to talk.” Steph claps me on the shoulder and then she’s gone.

It’s a long day, brutal. The calls come in left and right.

“Man, what a day!” Jared exclaims, wiping the sweat from his brow as we return from yet another call. The adrenaline from the constant action has helped keep the worst of my hangover at bay, but I’m exhausted.

“Tell me about it,” I say, collapsing onto the bench beside him. My muscles ache, and my thoughts drift back to Myles, making my chest constrict.

“Hey, you sure you’re alright?” Haley asks, her voice gentle. “You’ve been off all day.”

“Really, I’m fine,” I insist. “Just a long day, you know?”

“Alright,” she says, clearly unconvinced.

Who the hell do I think I’m fooling?

My body aches, fatigue gnawing at my bones. I want to collapse into bed, but the shrill ring of another emergency call pierces the air. *No rest for the weary.*

“Multi-car pileup on the interstate,” Steph shouts as we scramble into gear. “Injuries, fire, and entrapment. Let’s move!”

Sirens blare, drowning out my thoughts as we speed toward the scene. Chaos greets us—twisted metal, shattered glass, and broken bodies strewn across the asphalt. Flames dance from the hood of one of the cars, smoke clawing at the sky.

“Tristan, help with the extractions!” Steph orders. I nod, gritting my teeth against the exhaustion weighing me down.

“Hey, buddy, hang in there,” Nick says, clapping me on the shoulder. His concern only makes me feel bad about my attitude toward him earlier. He really is a great guy.

“Got it,” I reply, before turning my attention to the task at hand. I can’t let the team down.

“Help me!” a woman screams, her voice cracking with fear. Her car is mangled, pinning her inside. My heart lurches. Panic coils inside me, threatening to suffocate my resolve. *Focus, Tristan. Save her.*

“Ma’am, we’re going to get you out,” I assure her, working alongside my team to pry open the door. Each groan of metal, every strained breath, feels like a battle waged against time.

“Please, my son’s in the back!” she cries. Terror knifes through me. A child. God, don’t let him be hurt.

“Jared, go for the kid. We’ll handle the mother,” I say, determination steeling my voice.

“Roger that.”

“Help, please! He’s scared!” The mother’s sobs rip through me, her fear a vice around my heart. *I can’t fail her.*

“Tristan, we need to cut the frame,” someone shouts. “Get the Jaws of Life!”

“Ma’am, stay calm. We’re going to get you both out,” I promise, sweat dripping down my face as I work on prying her door open. My muscles scream in protest, but I refuse to falter.

“Got the Jaws!”

Nick returns with the heavy-duty cutter, and we quickly set to work. Time is our enemy, each tick of the clock an unrelenting reminder of the lives at stake.

“Cover your eyes, buddy!” Nick calls to the toddler, who’s wide-eyed and trembling in his car seat. The child obeys, burying his face in his small hands. With practiced precision, we make short work of the door, freeing the terrified boy.

“Mommy!” he wails, reaching for his trapped mother as Nick lifts him from the car.

“Go with the nice man, sweetie. I’ll be right behind you,” she says, tears streaming down her cheeks. Her love, her bravery... they fuel me, pushing me to keep moving when every fiber of my being cries out for rest.

“Nick, take him to safety. We’ve got the mother,” Steph says.

He nods, cradling the child protectively as he moves away from the wreck.

“Let’s go, Tristan,” Steph urges. “Time’s running out.”

I know. I won’t let it beat me. Not this time.

The twisted metal groans as the Jaws of Life slice through, sparks flying like fireflies in the night. Sweat pours down my face, blurring my vision. *Blink it away. Focus.* The woman’s eyes lock onto mine, fear and hope battling for dominance. I see Cara in her—that same desperate determination to survive.

“Almost there,” I tell her, my voice barely audible over the cacophony of noise. She manages a weak nod, her breaths

coming in shallow gasps.

“Tell me about your son.” Getting the woman to talk to me will distract her from the pain and fear she feels. She tells me about her son, how he loves dinosaurs and wants to be an astronaut. Her voice trembles, but each word is a lifeline, grounding us both amid the chaos.

“Tristan, watch your head!” Jared shouts, but it’s too late. A shard of glass grazes my forehead, warm blood trickling down. *Ignore it. Keep going.*

“Tristan, get back! It’s dangerous!” Nate yells.

Yeah, I know it’s dangerous, but I can’t leave her. Not when we’re so close.

“Almost... got it!” The last piece of metal gives way, and the woman is free.

Relief floods her features, tears mingling with grime. “Thank you,” she whispers before the paramedics whisk her away.

I stand, ready to move on to the next victim, but the world tilts beneath my feet. Dizziness overtakes me, the edges of my vision darkening. My mind screams in protest, fighting against the encroaching blackness.

“Tristan!” Hands grip my arms, holding me steady. I blink, trying to clear my head, but it’s no use. Blood drips from my forehead, pooling at my feet. I hadn’t realized the cut was so deep.

“Sit down, man,” Nick commands, his face pale. “You’re hurt.”

“Can’t... stop...” I mumble, my words slurred, the adrenaline that had sustained me now evaporating. The world continues to spin, and I can no longer fight it.

“Tristan!” The last thing I hear is Nick’s panicked voice before the darkness swallows me whole.’

CHAPTER 32



MYLES

My thoughts are a tangled mess; Tristan's confession echoed in my head like a haunting melody. I pace back and forth across the living room floor, my heart heavy with questions.

I don't blame him for Cara's death. It would be stupid of me if I did. But can I live with this constant reminder that he was there at the scene of her accident where he tried to save her life, but she still didn't survive? Would this put a strain on our relationship?

I look down at my hands, clenched into tight fists, knuckles white from the pressure. This newfound knowledge about Tristan has opened a Pandora's box of doubts and fears, and I'm not sure I have the strength to close it again.

Are we really going to build a life together? I question myself, the knot in my stomach tightening.

The phone rings, its shrill tone cutting through my spiraling thoughts. I snatch it up, concerned it might be someone from Nix's school. But as soon as I hear the voice on the other end, my stomach drops.

"Myles," Steph says hesitantly. "I'm sorry for stealing your number from Tristan's phone, but... he's in the hospital."

My breath catches in my throat, and I suddenly feel dizzy. The room spins around me, and my knees threaten to buckle beneath me. I brace myself against the wall, struggling to hold back the panic welling up inside.

"Wh-what happened?" I stammer, my voice shaking with fear.

“Tristan was hurt while on a rescue call,” she explains, her voice strained. “His injuries aren’t serious, but I thought you should know.”

“Thank you,” I manage to choke out before hanging up the phone.

But the relief his injuries aren’t serious does little to calm the storm inside me. This is too much like the call I received when Cara’s accident happened, and it’s triggering a flood of emotions I can’t seem to control.

“Tristan,” I whisper, my voice cracking under the weight of my fear.

I know I need to get to the hospital, but for a moment, I’m paralyzed by uncertainty, confusion, and all-consuming terror. Then, taking a deep breath, I grab my keys and head out the door, my heart pounding in my chest as I try to prepare myself for whatever awaits me at the hospital.

My hands grip the steering wheel so hard my knuckles hurt. I can’t shake the feeling of déjà vu as I race to the hospital, trying my best to stay within the speed limit while my heart pounds like a jackhammer.

Steph said Tristan’s injuries aren’t serious, but my mind refuses to accept this reassurance. I remember all too well when they said the same about Cara, just before everything changed forever.

“Focus, focus,” I mutter under my breath. I need to be strong for Tristan, and for Nix.

Waiting at every red light feels like an eternity, my impatience growing with each heartbeat. The car’s engine roars in protest, mirroring the battle between relief and fear raging inside me.

“Dammit, Myles, you can’t fall apart now,” I whisper to myself. “Not again.”

I try to picture Tristan at the hospital, his golden eyes filled with warmth and love, but instead my thoughts are haunted by images of twisted metal and shattered glass. My chest tightens with each shallow breath, a vice gripping my lungs.

“Please let him be okay,” I plead, my voice drowned out by the car’s engine.

Finally, the hospital looms ahead, its sterile walls offering no comfort. I park haphazardly, barely registering the angry honks from other drivers. As I sprint towards the entrance, the sound of my heartbeat seems to keep time with my feet.

“Where is he?” I demand, my voice cracking as I reach the reception desk. The nurse takes one look at my panicked expression and quickly searches through her files.

“What’s the name of the patient, sir?” The nurse’s demeanor remains calm despite my less than polite manner.

“Tristan Carrington.”

“Room 312,” she replies, her voice soft and sympathetic. Then she gives me the directions to the ward.

“Thank you.” I gasp, rushing past her and up the stairs.

The fluorescent lights flicker overhead, casting eerie shadows on the sterile walls. I barely register the muffled cries and beeping machines as my legs carry me through the labyrinth of hallways.

“Tristan.” I breathe his name when I finally reach room 312, my heart lodged in my throat.

I hesitate for a moment, afraid of what I might find on the other side of that door. But then I remember the love Tristan and I share, the way he makes me feel alive and whole again. I can’t let fear control me anymore. It’s time to face whatever comes next, together.

Taking a deep breath, I push the door open and step inside.

My eyes dart around the ward until they land on Tristan, lying in that darn bed, looking like a ghost of himself. A bandage wraps around his head, a small area stained crimson.

“Hey.” Tristan’s smile doesn’t reach his eyes.

“Tristan,” I whisper, my voice cracking. “You look... terrible.”

“Ah, it’s nothing,” he dismisses, waving a hand. “Just a minor head lac. I’m staying overnight for monitoring, but I’ll be fine.”

I yearn to reach out and touch him, hug him to me, but something unknown force holds me back. I try to swallow the lump lodged in my throat, forcing myself to focus on something else. “You need—“

“How’s Nix?” he asks, cutting me off.

I grab onto the new topic like a lifeline.

“Little League’s going well. He’s staying with George and Cynthia for a bit longer.” Why does it feel like we’re a million miles apart? Like total strangers exchanging pleasantries on the bus?

“Good, good,” he murmurs, eyes downcast.

“Listen, I can drive you home tomorrow morning,” I offer, unbidden.

Surprise flickers across his face before he nods. “Thanks, Myles.” His gaze lingers on mine.

As I leave the hospital, the panic that clawed at my chest begins to ebb, replaced by a crushing sadness and exhaustion. I slide behind the wheel of my car, grabbing it tightly as if it were a lifeline.

Get a grip, Myles, I say to myself, but the words tumble around in my head like stones in a washing machine. The drive home feels both too long and too short, the streets a blur of streetlights and shadows.

Tristan could have been... gone, I think, my heart constricting. The realization settles in my chest like lead, heavy and suffocating. I can’t shake it, and it follows me all the way home, weighing me down as I trudge up the stairs to my apartment.

I need sleep, but the image of Tristan lying there, pale and fragile, haunts me. My heart races, thundering in my ears as I toss and turn, sheets tangled around me like a shroud. The

night stretches on, endless and unforgiving, until finally—mercifully—morning comes.

The sun feels like a personal insult as it blazes through my window, taunting me with its cheerful rays. Sleep has eluded me, but I drag myself out of bed, haunted by the weight of what lies ahead.

I get in the car to pick up Tristan from the hospital. My hands tremble on the steering wheel, mirroring the tempest within me. The drive is heavy, each mile marker a reminder of the impending conversation.

As I pull up to the hospital, I see Tristan waiting outside, and his eyes lock on mine. *It's as if he already knows.* My stomach churns, a whirlpool of anxiety and dread.

“Hey,” he says softly as he climbs into the passenger seat. His voice cracks, exposing the raw vulnerability beneath.

“Hey,” I respond warily.

The silence between us stretches taut, an unspoken understanding of what's to come.

When we arrive back at home, Tristan doesn't head for my apartment. Instead, he turns toward his own, and I follow, my footsteps echoing in the empty hallway. He unlocks the door and steps inside, leaving it open for me.

“Tristan, I—” I start, but he cuts me off, his eyes filled with resignation.

“I get it, Myles,” he says, his voice strained. “I wouldn't forgive me either.”

I try to protest, to explain that it's not about forgiveness. It's about how every time I look at him, think of him, I'm reminded of the worst day of my life.

“Please, don't,” Tristan chokes, tears threatening to spill over his eyelids. But then, something steely takes over, and he hardens. “You made the right choice. No hard feelings.”

“Tristan,” I whisper, my heart shattering.

“Just go,” he says, his voice barely holding together. And with that, I turn and walk away, leaving behind the man I love and the life we could have had together.

CHAPTER 33



TRISTAN

I lie in bed, sinking into the mattress. My bedroom is a mess, clothes strewn about, and I don't care. My heart aches, and there's no reason to get up.

Myles.

His name echoes in my head, drowning out any other sound.

Myles and me.

So many memories.

His laugh, vibrant and contagious, filling the air with warmth.

His sexy, raspy voice that sends tingles up my spine.

Cooking together, our hands brushing as we moved around the small kitchen.

Sneaking bites of food in between sizzling pans and chopping vegetables, grinning at me with that mischievous glint in his eyes.

Remembering Nix, a curious kid, always asking questions and trying to help. My heart swells, remembering how he'd climb onto a chair to reach the counter, determined to be part of our culinary adventures. And when the meal was ready, we'd gather around the table, a little family stitched together by love.

The taste of those memories lingers on my tongue, bittersweet. Nights spent binge-watching TV shows, wrapped

in each other's arms, have been replaced by cold sheets and an empty apartment. My chest constricts, and it's hard to breathe.

God, I miss them so much.

My phone buzzes on the nightstand, but I ignore it. I know the guys at work are worried about me, but I can't face them right now.

Too much pain, too many unspoken words.

Three days pass before a knock on my door drags me from my self-imposed isolation.

Steph stands outside, concern etched on her face. "You look like shit."

"Thanks," I mutter, running a hand through my unkempt hair.

"Seriously, though, what are you doing to yourself?" She pushes past me into the apartment. "Wallowing isn't a good look on you."

"Maybe I deserve it," I reply defensively, crossing my arms.

"Is that what you think?" Steph raises an eyebrow, challenging me.

"I don't know, okay? Everything's... hard right now." My voice cracks.

"Tristan, talk to me. What's going on in that head of yours?" Her voice softens. I know she genuinely cares. "Running away won't help. You need to face them, not hide."

"Face what, exactly?" I snap, frustration bubbling over.

"Your feelings, your issues," Steph replies calmly. "You can't keep avoiding them."

"What in the world are you talking about?"

"You're not gonna bluff your way out of this convo." Her voice is firm, but gentle.

I release a shaky breath, feeling exposed by her words. Pain stabs at my chest, sharp and relentless. "You don't

understand,” I mutter, unable to meet her gaze.

“Then make me,” she insists, sitting on the sofa and leaning in, her eyes searching mine.

“I need time to process some things I’ve been going through, but I’ll be fine.”

“There you go again, Tristan. Just deal with the shit head on.”

Well, here goes. “I’m pansexual and while I’m not ashamed of my sexuality, I never cared about making an announcement. Never heard of the straights having to come out; they just live their lives and fuck whoever they want. I deserve that right, too. We all do. It’s nobody’s business but mine and the person I’m fucking.”

“Agreed.” Steph chuckles. “And about your sexuality? You didn’t tell me anything I hadn’t suspected already.”

I smile, my first real smile in days. “Was that good enough, Chief? I admitted I’m pan.”

“Not finished with you, Carrington.” She waves her pointer finger at me, her eyes sparkling with mischief. Before I can open my mouth to give a snarky reply, she raises a warning hand at me. “And don’t bullshit me. Tell me the fucking truth. Why haven’t you ever been in a serious relationship?”

My breath catches in my throat. The words spill out, raw and jagged. “Because I’ve always been alone. Because I didn’t think I could bear losing another person I love. Because I prefer to leave first or give someone an out to leave me if the relationship is getting too serious.”

Steph’s expression softens. She reaches out, gripping my hand tightly. “And yet, Myles and Nix saw who you are, and they chose to love you anyway. I saw it clearly when I met them. You found something beautiful and real. Don’t let it slip away because of fear. You’re amazing.” Steph reaches out and clasps my hand in hers. “It’s easy to love you.”

I hesitate for a moment, then let out a shaky breath. I better go all out and tell my best friend everything. “But it’s easier to

leave me,” I say, thinking about the way Myles and I ended things.

Silence falls between us, heavy with unspoken hopes and fears. My heart races, caught between the desire to fight for what I had and the crippling doubt that holds me back.

“Listen,” Steph says, her voice full of conviction. “If you really give a damn about Myles and Nix, you’ll fight for what y’all have. But no matter how it ends up, you need to be brave enough to claim what makes you happy... because you deserve it.”

Her words burn through me—a searing, undeniable truth I can’t ignore any longer. The question is, will I ever get the nerve to do something about it?



Sunlight pierces my eyelids. My first thought is Myles. *Does he still love me? Is he even thinking about me? Missing me? What has he told Nix about us? Does the little man even understand what’s going on?*

God, my mind is a fucking mess.

I groan, forcing myself up. A shower, that’s what I need. Stepping under the water, it cascades over me like warm silk. I scrub off yesterday’s blues and dress in jeans and a button-down. Grocery shopping—normalcy—is my mission today.

The store’s fluorescent lights buzz overhead as I pick out fresh produce, feeling the weight of each item in my hand. It’s mundane, grounding. I pay and leave, cradling my purchases. Driving back to the apartment, I listen to the playlist with those damn 90s song Myles had shared with me all those months ago. Shania Twain, belting out “You’re Still the One.” Yeah, Myles Madden’s still the one for me. I love that man. Miss him a helluva lot. And want him.

But I’ll never coerce him into wanting me back.

I reach home on auto-pilot. When I round the corner to get to the apartment, a familiar voice calls out.

“Daddy!”

God, I’ll never stop loving the sound of that word.

Daddy.

Phoenix Madden’s daddy.

My pulse races. I drop the bags on the floor, not caring if anything gets crushed, cracked, or broken. Arms open wide, I brace for impact as Nix rushes over and slams his body into mine. He wraps his slender arms around me and buries his head into my waist. Cradling the back of his head with one hand and hugging him with the other helps to ground me.

“Little man, you good?”

“Mmhm.” He looks up at me, his eyes beaming. “Wow, you’ve got a lot there!” Nix exclaims. “Whatcha cooking?”

“Um, nothing special, just restocking.”

I steel myself and sneak a look at Myles. He’s beautiful as usual, dressed casually in navy-blue shorts and a white T-shirt—muscular legs, broad shoulders and buff arms on full display—but right now, he’s looking like a deer caught in headlights.

“Guess what, Daddy?” Nix bounces, eyes shining like stars. “I have my first Little League game coming up. You gotta come.”

“Of course, kiddo,” I say, giving him a tight squeeze. “Wouldn’t miss it.”

Nix and I part, and the boy strolls back over to his dad.

Myles shifts his weight, awkwardness dripping from him. His lips part, but words falter. The silence crashes between us, leaving me breathless.

“Great to see you, Tristan,” he mumbles.

“Y-yeah, you too.” I pick the shopping bags up from the floor and clutch them tightly.

Can’t take this tension. Just gotta go.

“Bye, guys,” I say, darting inside my apartment. Heart racing like a freight train about to derail, I slam the door, drop

the groceries on the kitchen counter, and collapse against it.

I wish my life wasn't so damn complicated.

Nix's excitement echoes in my head. I want to be there for him. But Myles... Can't avoid him forever. I'm not even sure if he wants me at Nix's game.

God, I still love him.

How do people navigate this mess called life?

Steph's words seep into my thoughts, stirring up a storm of emotions. She's right, as much as it pisses me off to admit it. I don't deserve to be kept from Nix. I love that little guy more than anything, and I'd be a complete shit heel if I didn't show up at his game just because Myles and I aren't talking.

Fingers tap rhythmically on the counter, anxiety bubbling beneath my skin. I need to do something about this, but the thought of confronting Myles makes my stomach churn. Texting seems too impersonal, too immediate. Heart pounding in my ears, I grab a pen and paper.

As the weight of my decision settles onto my shoulders, I feel something shift inside me. The darkness that has consumed me begins to recede, replaced by a flicker of hope. I'll not let my issues with Myles keep me from Nix.

I really love that kid.

"Okay," I whisper to myself. "You've got this."

I brew and pour some coffee since I need the liquid courage. With pen and paper in hand, I sit at the kitchen table. The ceramic mug presses against my palm as I take a sip of coffee. With the bitter taste still on my tongue, my hand shakes as I scrawl the words.

Dear Myles,

I know things between us are... complicated. But I don't want our issues to affect my relationship with

Nix. I love that kid more than anything, and missing his game because we're not speaking isn't fair to him. He means the world to me, Myles, and I want to be there for him. I'm not asking for us to be best friends or even talk, but I want to be there for him. Can we put our differences aside, for his sake?

Best,

Tristan

Each word feels like a weight lifted off my chest. I read them over, the pen tapping against the table. They'll do. I fold the note carefully, creasing the edges. Head over to Myles's apartment.

Deep breath, Tristan, I remind myself.

I crouch, hesitating for a moment before sliding the note under their door, careful not to make a sound and watching as it's swallowed by the shadows of their apartment. A chill runs up my spine as I stand. It's done. My heart thuds in my chest like a ticking bomb.

Alright. You did it. You put yourself out there.

I lean against the wall, the cold plaster pressing against my back. My mind whirls, thoughts colliding and crashing like waves on a rocky shore. *What if Myles doesn't want me there? What if he thinks I'm overstepping?*

"Shut up, Tristan," I mutter, shaking my head. "Focus on Nix. This is about him, not you."

But the gnawing doubt remains, sinking its claws into my chest. *Will this make things better? Or will it only drive*

another wedge between Myles and me?

“God, I hope I’m doing the right thing,” I murmur, closing my eyes and letting out a shaky breath.

If I can’t have the other half of my heart, I still want to have a relationship with the boy who brought light into my life. So for Nix, I’ll face my fears, even if it means dancing on a tightrope with my heart in my hands, exposed and vulnerable.

CHAPTER 34



MYLES

I'm suffocating. A crushing weight presses down on my chest, stealing my breath. I stare at the ceiling as I lie in bed, feeling the cool sheets against my skin. My heart aches, but it's not the physical pain that torments me, it's the emptiness inside.

Why did I do it? Why did I push Tristan away?

I thought I was protecting Nix. I thought keeping Tristan at arm's length would shield us both from more heartache and loss. But now, each day is a constant reminder of what I've lost.

But the memories of our time together creep in, unbidden. The taste of his lips, the heat of his body against mine—it's all so vivid, like a cruel joke.

What is even crueler is the memory of the conversation Nix and I had a couple of hours ago.

Nix and I had stepped into our home immediately after speaking with Tristan in the hallway. The sound of the door clicking shut had echoed through the apartment. His face had been etched with confusion, his eyes searching for answers.

"Dad, why don't we see Tristan anymore?" he asks, his voice soft and hesitant.

My heart twists, and I force a smile. "He's just busy, buddy."

"Is he working more hours like you used to before Mom... before Mom died?" Nix's eyes drop to the floor, and I can see the pain in them.

Cupping his dimpled cheek, I say, “He cares about you, Nix. Tristan will never stop loving you.”

How is my son so intuitive? So wise beyond his eight years? I did my best to hide the tension between Tristan and me, but somehow Nix sensed it. And yet, when we saw Tristan in the hallway earlier, Nix didn’t mention any of his fears. He simply invited Tristan to his Little League game.

“Son, no matter what happens,” I say, my hand on his shoulder, trying to convey the sincerity of my words, “Tristan, will always be there for you.”

Nix’s eyes meet mine, searching for reassurance. I swallow hard, feeling the weight of responsibility settle back onto my chest.

I shake off the memory, focusing on the here and now. Today is about survival, about making it through another day. And I need to find a job. I’d made a lot of money as a sports agent, but it’s been well over a year since I’d called it quits, and money doesn’t grow on trees. It takes one mishap to lose everything you own, including your savings. And Nix deserves stability. Unlike my old life as a sports agent, I need to find something that gives me both the time and the means to prioritize him.

As I browse job listings online, I have to wonder if this void in my chest will ever be filled. The bedroom feels suffocating, the silence only amplifying my thoughts. I glance at the clock—Nix should be napping by now, his energy finally spent after an emotional morning.

Shaking my head as if trying to dislodge the thoughts, I sit up, taking deep breaths and trying to regain control.

You can get through this, I remind myself. One step at a time. One moment at a time. Focus on Nix. Focus on being a good dad.

Needing a change of scenery, I leave my room and find myself drawn to the front door. That’s when I notice it—a folded piece of paper that’s been slipped beneath the door. Curiosity piqued, I pick it up, my fingers tracing the edges.

I unfold the note, and shock floods through me when I realize it's from Tristan. My heart races, anticipation and dread mingling in my chest. I read the words, each one hitting me like a punch.

The note is simple, yet its impact is profound. Guilt washes over me; in my haste to protect Nix, I hadn't considered how much it would hurt Tristan to be shut out of his life. Tristan, who'd been nothing but kind and supportive to both of us.

My fingers tremble as I clutch the note, my vision blurred by unshed tears. As much as I want to shield Nix from the complexities of adult relationships, I can't deny him the love and support that Tristan offers. It's not fair to either of them.

But how do I navigate this new reality? How do I maintain boundaries while still allowing Tristan to be a part of Nix's life? The thought is overwhelming, but I know it's a challenge I must face... for Nix's sake, and for my own.

I stand there, note still in hand, the weight of my mistake heavy on my chest. I didn't even consider how much this would hurt Tristan. My breaths come in short gasps as I realize that I've been so focused on protecting Nix and myself that I've lost sight of what really matters. It's time to set things right.

My fingers tap nervously on the screen of my phone as I type out a message to Tristan, trying to convey my sincerity:

Me: Tristan, I'm sorry. I never meant to make you feel you couldn't be around Nix. You're always welcome to be a part of his life. Please come to his Little League game. We both want you there.

I hit send, heart pounding, hoping I've managed to undo at least a little of the damage I've caused.

The reply comes sooner than I expect, and I can't help but hold my breath as I read it:

Tristan: Thank you, Myles. I appreciate that. I'll be at the game. - T.

The response is polite, distant, but I sense a glimmer of relief in those words. It feels like we're taking a small step toward healing the rift between us.

But now the real challenge begins: finding a way to navigate our new reality. The thought sends chills up my back, but I know I owe it to Nix—and to Tristan—to at least try.

Swallowing hard, I text back.

Me: See you at the game. Take care.

The reply comes in.

Tristan: See you then. You too.

With that, there's the faint hope that maybe, just maybe, we can find a way to make this work.

As I put away my phone, I glance over at Nix's bedroom door, picturing his sleeping form behind it, oblivious to the turmoil in my heart. And I make a silent promise to him, and to myself, that I'll do whatever it takes to make sure he has all the love and support he deserves.

"Whatever it takes," I whisper, steeling myself for the challenges ahead. "For you, Nix."

With renewed determination, I turn my focus back to my job search, knowing that my next steps have never been more crucial. As the weight of responsibility settles on my shoulders, I find strength in the knowledge that I'm not alone in this journey—Tristan is with us, too, in his own way.

And that knowledge, despite the pain and uncertainty, brings me a small measure of comfort.

Nerves gnaw at my insides as I step onto the field. The grass, freshly cut, tickles my fingers when I bend down to touch it. First coaching gig, first Little League game, first time seeing Tristan since the hallway encounter.

Breathe. Inhale, exhale.

“Alright, kiddos! Let’s win this thing!” I clap my hands together and smile, trying to mask my anxiety. Nix beams at me, bouncing on his toes, ready for action. My heart swells with pride.

“Okay, Dad!” he shouts, sprinting towards the dugout. I catch glimpses of the other kids, their faces a mix of excitement and nerves. It’s contagious.

“Play smart, play hard, have fun!” I remind them as they take their positions on the field. The sun beats down on us, sweat already prickling the back of my neck. My eyes dart around, scanning the bleachers. *Where is he?*

“Coach Madden,” a timid voice calls out, pulling me from my thoughts. A dark-haired boy with glasses stands before me, uncertainty in his eyes. “What if I mess up?”

“Hey, buddy. We all make mistakes. Just do your best, alright?” I straighten his baseball cap, pulling it down snug against his head (like the real baseball players wear them), hoping to instill some confidence. He nods, his face brightening, and runs off to join his teammates.

“Game on!” the umpire yells, and the crack of the bat echoes through the air. My pulse races, my palms dampen. *Focus on the game, not on Tristan.*

“Nice hit, Tommy!” I cheer as one of our players rounds first base. The energy is electric, the crowd’s cheers filling the air. I glance at the scoreboard; it’s a close game. My stomach tightens, but I plaster a grin on my face.

“Way to go, Nix!” My son slides into second base, dirt clinging to his uniform. I can’t help but smile, my heart swelling with pride once more.

“Thanks, Dad!” he calls out, grinning ear to ear. But there’s still that gnawing feeling in the pit of my stomach, the anticipation of seeing Tristan again.

“Strike three!” The umpire’s call signals our victory. I can’t contain my excitement as I whoop and cheer.

The final whistle blows, and the kids go wild. Cheers echo through the air as our team's victory sinks in. Nix, my heart on legs, jumps up and down, his face a beacon of pure joy.

My eyes sought out Tristan for the nth time. He'd been trying to sit unobtrusively before the game had started, but soon enough, he was cheering for Phoenix just as loudly as everyone else cheering for their kids and the team. Cynthia and George couldn't make it today, so it was nice to have a friendly face in the crowd.

But now... now that the game had finished, I was more acutely aware of his presence in the bleachers. My breath catches in my throat as I take in his smile, his eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. I wish I could stop staring, but I can't...

Until the kids, the winning team, converge on me.

Scooping as many of them as I can into a hug, I boom, "We did it!"

"Best game ever, Dad." Nix's voice is full of joy. As the team celebrates, I scan the bleachers one last time, but—

"Great game, Coach!" Tristan calls out, walking toward me with that signature smile that sends shivers down my spine. I hadn't realized he was making his way toward us.

"Thanks," I reply, trying to sound casual, but my voice betrays me, shaking ever so slightly.

Tristan turns to Nix, giving him a high five. "You're amazing, kiddo!" Nix beams, his pride swelling like a balloon ready to burst. Tristan grabs my son in a bear hug. And then the two of them carry on an animated conversation that no one but them could hear.

I force myself to look away, not wanting to encroach on their moment. I gather the other kids together to send them off with their parents and whatnot. But Tristan's image lingers in my mind, as vivid as if he were standing right next to me. He's beautiful, and it's maddening.

The two people who hold my heart in their hands are still standing where I left them. "Um, Tristan," I start hesitantly,

“Would you like to join us for dinner? To celebrate?” The words tumble out before I can stop them.

Tristan’s eyes flicker to mine, and for a moment, I see something there— spark, igniting our connection. But then, it’s gone, replaced by a polite smile.

“Thanks for the offer, Myles, but I actually have some work to finish tonight. Rain check?” He glances at Nix apologetically.

“Sure thing.” Nix nods, unfazed.

“Alright, then. Have a good evening, guys.” With a wave, Tristan heads off, leaving me feeling lovesick and more confused than ever.

“Come on, Dad. Let’s go eat.” Nix tugs on my arm, snapping me out of my daze. I nod, forcing a smile on my face.

“Let’s go celebrate, kiddo,” I say, my voice strained. As we walk off the field, I can’t help but steal one last glance at Tristan, my chest tightening with a mix of warmth and sadness.

As we walk to the car, I replay the day in my mind. The way Tristan cheered for us, how his eyes sparkled when he smiled, the warmth of his voice.

“Earth to Dad!” Nix waves a hand in front of my face, snapping me out of my thoughts.

“Sorry, bud. Just thinking about the game.” The lie tastes bitter on my tongue.

“Best day ever!”

“Absolutely,” I agree, forcing a smile as we climb into the car.

I grip the steering wheel in desperation as I start the engine, my knuckles turning white with worry and dread. Tristan’s face flashes in my mind and I feel a longing deep within my bones for the connection we once shared. The fear of losing him forever is like a vice around my chest, squeezing

me into submission. *How can I undo the damage I've done when I don't know how to move past these fears?*

CHAPTER 35



TRISTAN

My first day back at work, tension coils in my stomach. I'd ignored my co-workers the first few days I was on leave, and even after that, I'd still kept our conversations on the phone brief.

My time away was one of introspection. Steph's words echo in my head, urging me to make changes. The last time I went to therapy was over a decade ago, but now... now I need it. I close my eyes, the weight of the decision settling on my chest. I take a deep breath and walk through the door.

"Triscuit!" Nick's voice booms, his grin wide as he claps my back. "Good to have you back, man!"

"Thanks, man."

"Welcome back, Tristan," Haley chimes in, her eyes twinkling with mischief. Jared and Connor nod in agreement, their smiles warm and welcoming.

"Miss us much?" Connor teases, wiggling his eyebrows.

"Like a toothache," I shoot back, grateful for the playful banter.

"Ouch, Triscuit. That cuts deep." Nick feigns hurt, pressing a hand to his chest dramatically.

"Keep it up, and I'll give you a real reason to be dramatic," I threaten jokingly, my lips curving into a genuine smile.

Laughter fills the room, easing my nerves. Maybe opening up won't be so bad after all.

Sitting in the station kitchen, the smell of pizza wafts around us as we dig into our meal. Laughter and good-natured teasing fill the room, making my stomach twist with nerves. *This is it. Time to be open.* I take a deep breath and just blurt it out.

“Guys, I’m pan, as in pansexual.”

Silence falls for a moment before Nick breaks it with a snort. “Dude, you’ve got the worst poker face ever. Your ‘I-want-to-bang-that-gay-straight-bi-trans-enby’ eyes give you away every time.”

“Seriously?” I chuckle, feeling heat rise in my cheeks. “Was I *that* obvious?”

“Pretty much,” Haley says, smirking. “But hey, it’s cool. We’re all still your friends, no matter who you’re into.”

“Um... Tristan?” Jared’s expression is an equal mix of embarrassment and uncertainty. “What does it mean to be pansexual?” He raises his hands defensively. “I’m not trying to offend you; I just want to understand.”

“No offense taken,” I say warmly, hoping he’ll realize my appreciation for his interest in learning more about me. “To put it simply, being pansexual means I can connect with people sexually, emotionally, or romantically regardless of their gender or sex.”

“In other words,” Nick, the fucker, says, “Triscuit can bang anyone...,” he pauses for effect, “as long as they’re breathing, legal and willing.” The man doesn’t know when to shut the fuck up, but I know his words are said in fun.

“That’s why you’re sixty-nine and still don’t get any sixty-nines,” I retort, wriggling my eyebrows suggestively. “If you get my drift.”

“Fuck you, asshole.” Nick laughs.

“I’d rather not, dude.” I wink at him. “You’re not my type.”

“I’m proud of you, man,” he says, getting serious for once. “It takes a lot of guts to come out.” We bounce our closed

fists, and he claps me on my back.

When I glance at Jared, he seems deep in thought as if he's pondering my words.

I take another bite of pizza, grateful for their support. "I just wanted to let you know. I mean, it shouldn't matter who I fuck, right? But I figured you deserved the courtesy."

"Damn right." Jared gives me a thumbs up. "Glad you finally decided to share."

"Only took you forever," Connor adds, grinning. "Why didn't you say something sooner?"

"Never really had a reason to," I admit, shrugging. "Never saw anyone long enough to introduce them to you guys."

"Aw, poor lonely Tristan," Nick teases, nudging my shoulder. "Well, now we're all in the loop!"

"Actually," I hesitate, letting out a slow exhale. "There's more. Myles and I were dating."

"Knew it!" Nick crows triumphantly. "We could tell you two were banging."

"Nick!" I groan, embarrassed, but not surprised by his bluntness. "Could you be any more tactless?"

"Sorry, sorry," he chuckles, not looking remotely apologetic. "But seriously, congrats, man."

"Actually..." My voice trails off, and my heart aches as I admit the truth. "We broke up."

"Aw, Tristan," Haley says sympathetically. "I'm really rooting for you two to get back together. You deserve happiness."

I manage a small, sad smile. "I hope we can work things out too."

Before I can say anything more, the alarm blares, cutting through the conversation like a knife. We all jump up, food forgotten, personal revelations cast aside. There's no time for emotions now; we have a job to do.

As we scramble into our gear and head out, the adrenaline kicks in, pushing away the lingering pain of my breakup. Right now, it's just me, my team, and the fire we're about to face. For the moment, that'll have to be enough.

The next game day that I'm off from work, I'm there. Watching. Cheering. My heart swells with pride as I see Nix on the field. It doesn't matter if the team wins or loses; he's my boy, and that's all that matters.

My eyes wander to Myles, coaching from the sidelines. I can't help it; the man is magnetic. His strong arms, his focused gaze, that tight ass... *Dammit, why am I torturing myself like this? I want him so badly it hurts.*

"Come on, Nix, you got this!" I shout, trying to banish thoughts of Myles from my mind. But it's useless. The memory of our time together lingers, taunting me. The way he kissed me, touched me, loved me... I crave it. I craved it then, and I crave it now. But I know better than to hope for more. As much as I love him... want him—shit, I fucking *need* him—I'll never put him in a position where he feels pressured to come back to me before he's absolutely ready, assuming he ever is ready. I'd never do that because I'd be afraid if I did—and his heart wasn't really in it—he'd eventually leave me anyway. And I wouldn't survive that. It would be a loss from which I would never recover.

Nix's team won the game, and afterward, Myles and I exchange pleasantries. It's all perfectly civil, perfectly amiable... perfectly maddening! Inside, I'm screaming, begging him to come back to me. I'm waiting for him and giving him the space he's asked for, but all the while, I'm silently willing him to love me again, to put our family back together.

And of course, Nix is his usual exuberant self, bubbling over with enthusiasm and affection, making me miss the family we'd created even more.

Oh, how I love those two! They're absolutely my favorite humans.

A few days later, I get a notification on my phone signalling an incoming message. It's Myles.

Myles: Hey Tristan, would you mind watching Nix today? I've got two job interviews lined up, and his grandparents are down with the flu, so they can't keep him. I could really use your help.

Without any hesitation, I send my response.

Me: Of course. A day with Nix? Absolutely. No problem.

Myles: Thanks, man. I really appreciate it.

When I arrive at Myles's apartment, there isn't much time to talk. I wish him good luck and he reminds Nix to do his homework, and then he leaves for his first interview.

Once Myles is gone, Nix and I dive into an afternoon of fun. We start with homework, and I help him finish his math problems. Then, I whip up a healthy snack—yogurt parfaits with fresh fruit and granola.

“Yummy!” Nix exclaims, digging in. “This is so good, Daddy.”

“Thanks, little man,” I say, grinning. My heart feels full as we chat and laugh together. These moments with him make everything worthwhile.

“Can we play video games now?” Nix asks excitedly, and I can't resist that adorable face.

“Sure thing,” I agree, and we spend hours playing and joking around. Time flies, and before I know it, Myles is back. Nix gives me a big hug before retreating to his room, leaving me alone with Myles.

The apartment is quiet. Nix is a creature of habit; as soon as his head hits the pillow, he'll be out like a light. Without a doubt, he's already fast asleep in his room, cozied up under his superhero blankets.

Myles and I engage in polite conversation, but the distance between us feels greater than ever. *My heart aches for him.*

“Thanks again, Tristan.” His voice is soft and sincere. “I don’t know what I would’ve done without you. You’re always there for us.”

“Of course. Anytime.” My heart is racing. Our eyes meet, and for a moment, it feels like we’ve gone back to a time when we could have talked about any-fucking-thing. And then he looks away, and the moment is gone.

“It was a pleasure,” I say, giving him a friendly smile, even as my chest tightens with longing.

I turn to leave, feeling Myles’s eyes on me as I walk towards the door. Just before I step into the hallway, he calls out my name. “Tristan.”

“Yeah?” I look back at him, and suddenly, he’s right there. He’s closed the gap between us, and he’s pushing me across the width of the hallway until my back hits the concrete wall with an umph. He presses his luscious lips to mine, and for a moment, I’m too stunned to react. But then, desire and need flood through me, and I kiss him back with all the pent-up passion I’ve been holding inside.

Our mouths move together, hungrily exploring each other. His tongue slips past my lips, teasing and tasting. I moan into the kiss, feeling my body heat up with every touch. Our hands roam, grasping at one another, desperate to feel more skin. I reach beneath his shirt, running my fingers over his firm abs and up to his chiseled chest. *God, how I’ve missed this.*

“Sweetheart,” Myles gasps between kisses, “I can’t stop thinking about you.”

“Me too, baby,” I admit, my voice low and breathless. *This is wrong, but it feels so fucking good... so fucking right.*

But then the reality of our situation hits me like a ton of bricks. We’re half-naked in the hallway, where anyone—possibly even Nix—could see us. *What the hell are we doing?*

“Wait,” I pant, pulling away from Myles. “We can’t... we shouldn’t do this.”

“Tristan, I—” He looks as lost and confused as I feel.

“Sorry,” I mumble, backing away from him. I need to get out of here, now. I rush to my own apartment, my heart pounding in my chest.

Once inside, I slam the door shut and lean against it, trying to catch my breath. My body is still on fire, aching for the release only Myles can provide. With trembling hands, I shove my jeans the rest of the way down and wrap my fingers around my throbbing erection. The thought of Myles’s gorgeous face and his strong hands on me propels me to stroke myself with abandon, and I’m riding the ragged edge of orgasm in no time.

“Fuck, Myles.” I groan, pumping faster. The memory of our heated kisses, the taste of his mouth on mine, has me spiraling towards ecstasy. As I careen over that edge, I cry out his name, feeling my release spill over my hand.

Panting, I slide down the wall, my mind racing. *What have I just done? And what does this mean for Myles and me?* We can’t ignore this any longer. Something has to change. But what? And when?

CHAPTER 36



MYLES

“Congratulations, Myles.” The manager smiles, his voice warm and excited. He extends a hand, which I shake. “Welcome to the Little League family.”

“Thank you,” I say, feeling a surge of excitement. This job—information officer—although not glamorous, is perfect for me right now.

“We think you’ll be a great fit for our organization,” the man says confidently.

I feel a rush of pride and relief, knowing this is the opportunity I’ve been waiting for—a chance to reconnect with sports in a meaningful way, while keeping my priorities in check.

“Thank you.” My voice is shaky, but genuine.

“Oh, and one more thing.” There’s a brief pause as he seems to gather his thoughts. “Your son, Nix, talks about Tristan quite a bit, and we’ve seen Tristan supporting our team.” The man looks a bit awkward but well-intentioned. And I’m more than a little worried about what Nix has been saying about Tristan. “Nix has mentioned how close he is with Tristan,” the man continues, as if reading my mind and trying to allay my fears. “He sometimes refers to Tristan as his daddy. I like that. My grandson has two dads, as well. We just wanted you to know we’re working hard to make our sport more diverse and inclusive for everyone.”

“Really?” My heart skips a beat. There’s so much to unpack here. I know Nix loves Tristan, but hearing it from someone else reinforces how important Tristan is to our little

family. It's also comforting to know that the organization I'll be working for is working to cater to the needs of queer folks like me (yeah, I said it; I'm queer). And the mention of Tristan's name also triggers my yearning for him—the taste of his lips on mine, the heat of his body pressed against me. I can't forget the passion between us, and how much I love making love to him. I want so much to regain the closeness we once shared... before I messed everything up again.

“Absolutely.” The manager brings me back to reality. “We want everyone to feel welcome here.”

“Thank you.” I'm touched by his words. “I won't let you down.”

“We're very confident in your abilities and the contributions you would make here.” He shuffles papers on his desk, signaling the end of our conversation. “You'll start on the first day of next month. We're excited to have you on board.”

“Thanks again,” I manage to say, my mind still swirling with thoughts of Tristan.

On my way home, I replay the manager's words in my head, and then my thoughts drift back to that kiss with Tristan in the hallway. It was hot as fugg. I wanted to crawl inside Tristan's skin and make him beg me to fugging wreck him. Even now, I can feel the softness of his lips, the intensity of our connection—it felt like everything I'd been missing in my life could be found in him. I want to be close to him again, the way we were before I messed it all up.

A wave of emotions crashes over me as I think about what could have been, and what still might be. The heat of desire mixes with the icy grip of fear, leaving me torn between longing for a second chance and dreading the possibility of rejection. Tristan deserves better than the mess I've been, but maybe... just maybe, I can find my way back to him.

A bittersweet smile tugs at my lips as I imagine the best-case scenario: Tristan in my arms, our bodies pressed together in a dance of passion and love in the bedroom. And us—him, Nix and me—as a forever family. But then reality sets in, and I

know I must face the consequences of rejecting him. Tristan is worth the risk, though. Our family is worth the risk.

My thoughts turn to the job I just snagged. “First day of next month,” I whisper to myself, the date simultaneously feeling like it’s an eternity away and happening way too soon at the same time. I take a deep breath, steeling myself for the journey ahead. *One step at a time*, I tell myself. One step closer to redemption... or heartbreak.

The thing that sucks is all I want to do is tell Tristan that I landed this job—one of the best bits of news I’ve had in the past year. The desire to share this significant life event with him is all-consuming. And Tristan is the only person I want to celebrate it with. Perhaps this could be the perfect opportunity to walk back some of my bad choices.

My feet seem to move of their own accord as I walk up the stairs to Tristan’s apartment. I take a deep breath and knock on the door, my heart pounding with anticipation. He’s barely opened the door before I burst into the apartment without invitation.

Tristan stands startled in front of me, taken aback by my sudden entrance. “Hey, Myles. What are you doing here?” He studies my face with open curiosity.

I can barely contain my excitement as I tell him about my job offer. “I got it. The Little League job, it’s mine. I start on the first.” A rush of joy fills me as the news really sinks in. *Why did it not actually seem real until I could share the news with Tristan?*

Tristan doesn’t hide his happiness for me and instantly cracks a warm smile that brightens up the room like sunshine.

God, how I love him... how I miss him.

His enthusiasm is contagious, and soon we’re both beaming with joy over my recent success.

The joy of landing the job and Tristan’s radiant smile sweep me away. Our lips meet, tenderly at first, but the hunger grows. Passion ignites like wildfire between us, just like always.

His lips taste like mint—cool and refreshing. My tongue darts out, exploring, teasing. I crave more. My heartbeat thunders in my chest, drowning out everything else.

“Tristan,” I moan into his mouth, the sound breathy and low.

He responds with equal fervor, our tongues dancing together, sharing secrets and desires. His hands grip my waist, pulling me closer. My fingers tangle in his hair, the strands soft and silky against my skin.

Our breaths mingle, hot and heavy. We lose ourselves in each other, nibbling and sucking on one another’s lips, tongues swirling and tangling. The world fades away, leaving only the two of us in this moment.

Abruptly, Tristan backs away, separating our bodies. I’m left gasping for air, my heart aching with longing. He looks at me, his eyes filled with equal parts love and conflict.

“Bab—Myles, I’m happy for you. I always want to hear your good news,” he says, a hint of sadness in his voice. “But the truth is, this can’t continue. We can’t keep pretending like our relationship hasn’t changed when it’s obvious it has.”

For a moment, it felt like we were the way we used to be. But I fear nothing will ever be the same between us again, not with this invisible wall separating us.

I ball my fists, fighting the urge to pull him back into my arms. My mind races, grappling with the truth in his words. We need to work on ourselves, grow stronger individually. But it’s too darn difficult to let go.

My heart sinks. I get it, though. It’s me who messed up, not him. Tristan needs space now, and I can respect that. *Wasn’t it me not so long ago asking him for space?* I swallow hard, the lump in my throat making it difficult to breathe.

“Okay,” I whisper, taking a step back. The distance between us feels like miles. I turn toward the door, ready to leave his apartment—and him—behind.

“Wait,” he says quietly, stopping me in my tracks. “There’s one more thing. I came out. To my friends at work.”

I look back at him, eyes widening in surprise. A mix of pride and happiness swells inside me, threatening to burst free. “Tristan, that’s... that’s amazing.” My voice is barely audible. “Congratulations.” I know how he avoids most emotional attachments so there’s no chance of him getting hurt, so opening up about his sexuality to his colleagues at work is a huge step for him. For that, I’m proud of him.

“I told them the truth about us.”

“What did they say?” I held my breath.

“That they already suspected we were dating,” Tristan mumbles, looking down at the floor. Then he pins his gaze on me. “And they hope we’ll get back together.”

I hope so too, I think to myself. I want that... need it like my next breath.

“We’ll talk again,” I say softly before leaving his apartment. The door closes behind me with a soft click, the finality of the sound ringing in my ears.

Back in my own apartment, thoughts race through my head. Memories of Tristan and me—and Nix—flood my mind. The laughter we’d shared, and the way Tristan had been there for both of us, even when I’d been too wrapped up in my own mess to appreciate it.

A sudden realization hits me: Tristan is protective by nature, willing to move mountains for those he loves. And if he thinks Nix and I need protection from him, he’d do that, too. That’s why he’s pushing me away; for him, it’s an act of love.

“Dammit, Tristan,” I mutter under my breath, frustration boiling up in me. “You don’t need to protect me from you. Can’t you see that?”

I pace the length of my living room, feeling the warmth of the hardwood floor beneath my feet. My heart aches with love for him—a love that goes deeper than any superficial love or fling. Tristan is family, and I was a fool to let him go.

I stop in the middle of the room, determination taking root. Tristan needs to know the truth... that I want to spend the rest

of my life with him. But it's going to take something big to get his attention, something bold and daring. And I'm willing to do whatever it takes.

“Get ready, Tristan,” I whisper, a steely resolve filling me.
“Because I'm coming for you.”

CHAPTER 37



TRISTAN

I jolt awake, heart pounding. Something's wrong. Smoke fills my nostrils and I'm on my feet in an instant, adrenaline surging through my veins. The fire alarm screeches its warning, but it's not coming from my apartment. It's coming from... next door? Myles and Nix's apartment?

“Shit,” I whisper to myself, panic gripping me like a vice. *I can't lose them. I won't survive it.*

I dash out of my apartment and down the hall, the alarm's siren splitting the air like a knife. My fist pounds against Myles's door, desperation clawing at my throat. It's not only unlocked... it's ajar. My pulse races like a freight train as I push it open, bracing for the worst.

The apartment isn't as smoky as I feared, only a faint haze lingering in the air. I stop in my tracks when I notice Myles in the living room, down on one knee. My brain short-circuits, and all I can manage is a choked, “What the...?” The fear from earlier dissipates, replaced by confusion, my mind still racing to catch up.

Moving on instinct, I dash into the kitchen. My eyes land on a frying pan sitting on the stove, charred remains of something inside. How could something this small create so much chaos? The smoke isn't overwhelming, but the alarm still screams at us.

“Is that what set off the alarm?” I demand, as I watch Myles enter the kitchen.

He nods sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck. “Yeah, I... didn't expect it to smoke up so much.”

“God, Myles,” I breathe, my heart still hammering in my chest. “You scared the hell out of me.”

“Sorry, Tristan. I didn’t mean to.” He looks genuinely apologetic, but that doesn’t stop the whirlwind of emotions coursing through me.

My eyes dart around the apartment. “Where’s Nix?”

“With his grandparents.”

“Let’s just... get this sorted,” I say, trying to steady my voice. “We need to clear the air and shut off that damn alarm.”

“Right,” he agrees, and we both move into action, opening windows and fanning the remaining smoke away. The alarm finally quiets, leaving a ringing in my ears.

“Sorry,” Myles repeats, his eyes filled with remorse. “I didn’t think it would be such a mess.”

“Explain yourself,” I demand, my voice trembling slightly with the remnants of adrenaline. *What’s going on? Why was he down on one knee when I came in?*

“Just hear me out,” Myles pleads, his eyes searching mine for understanding. He takes a deep breath, steadying himself before continuing. “I know this looks bad, but I just... I needed you to come over here.”

“By setting off the fire alarm?” My anger flares as hotly as the nonexistent flames I thought I’d find here. “Do you have any idea how dangerous that is?”

“I know, I’m sorry.” Myles winces, guilt etched into his features. “But I needed to be sure you’d come.”

“Dammit, Myles.” I fight the urge to storm out right then and there. We both know fires aren’t a joke. And yet, something in his eyes keeps me rooted to the spot. A desperation that tugs at my heartstrings, compelling me to stay.

“Sweetheart, please,” Myles implores, sincerity lacing his words. “This isn’t a joke to me.”

The term of endearment sends a thrill through me. It’s been so long since I’ve heard it. “Fine,” I sigh, releasing the tension

in my shoulders. “Talk.”

“Thank you,” he exhales, relief washing over him like an ocean wave. “I needed you to know how much you mean to me, and to Nix, and how much we miss having you around. I didn’t know how else to get through to you. I was scared you wouldn’t listen if I just knocked on your door.”

“Is that what all this was about?” I shake my head, a cocktail of emotions swirling within me. Anger, frustration, disbelief... but beneath it all, there’s a flicker of warmth that Myles cared enough to go to these lengths.

“You’ve changed our lives, and I can’t bear the thought of losing you.” Myles’s voice cracks, vulnerability shining through. “I just... I needed you to know.”

My breath catches in my throat as his words hit home. The annoyance that had consumed me recedes like a tide, leaving only the raw truth of our feelings laid bare. And somewhere deep within, I know I can’t walk away from him now...not when he’s opened up, baring his heart and soul.

“Okay,” I whisper, meeting his gaze. “I’ll listen.”

My head is spinning and my heart thundering in my chest. Myles’s eyes hold mine, a mix of vulnerability and intensity swirling within them. He takes a deep breath, his hands trembling slightly.

“Before we met,” he starts, his voice wavering with emotion, “I was lost. Drowning in grief over Cara’s death. I blamed myself for canceling our date that night. If she hadn’t been alone, maybe she’d still be here.”

His words hit me like a ton of bricks. I’d known Myles was hurting, and I’d sensed he felt guilty about what happened to Cara but hearing him say it aloud makes it all the more real. Inside, I’m torn – wanting to comfort him, yet knowing this is a pain I can never fully understand.

“Every day, I wondered if things would’ve been different,” he continues, tears welling in his eyes. “I never thought I’d find love again. I didn’t think I deserved it.”

My chest tightens as I listen, watching the man who brought so much happiness into my life bare his soul. *How could someone so incredible not see his own worth?*

“But then you came along, sweetheart,” he says softly, his gaze never leaving mine. “You brought joy back into my life, into Nix’s life. You showed us both that love is possible after loss, that hope can prevail even in the darkest times.”

As he speaks, I feel a warmth spreading through me. Not just from his words, but because this connection we share is undeniable—tender and fierce all at once. It’s as if we were always meant to find each other, two broken souls seeking solace and healing together.

“On the day Cara died, my life went up in flames, and ashes were all that remained. You changed everything for me,” he says, sincerity shining in his eyes. “You brought color and light back into my world when I thought it was forever shrouded in darkness. You helped me to rise from the ashes, sweetheart. You did that.”

Myles’s gaze burns into me as he begins to speak, his words infused with determination. “I need you to hear me out and understand why I ended things between us,” he continues, regret written clearly all over his face. “It wasn’t because I blamed you for Cara’s death. I never blamed you, although I’m sure it must have looked that way to you. It wasn’t about blame; it was about the fact that you were there. You were an active participant in what turned out to be the worst night of my life. And I was so scared that I’d never be able to look at you without it reminding me of that night. And I realize how awful that sounds—I really do—but that’s where my head was at. At the time, I couldn’t separate the two. None of it was your fault; you were just doing your job... trying to save my wife’s life, for god’s sake. I admit I was hurt, at first, that you didn’t tell me sooner. But I understand now why you didn’t. I know you were hurting—I knew it then—but I was so caught up in my own pain that I couldn’t—“ His voice breaks then, and he looks like he’s trying to hold back tears. But he quickly composes himself and continues.

“I’m so sorry about how I handled things that night. I’m sorry I hurt you. I’m sorry I made all your worst fears about telling me the truth come true. I needed time to get my head straight. But then you were injured, and I was so scared. I felt like I was thrown right back to that night I lost Cara. And it broke me, sweetheart.” This time, he can’t hold back his tears, but he swipes his eyes and returns his gaze to me. “The awful truth is I left you because I was scared. Scared of losing you, of hurting Nix. We’ve already been through so much loss and pain, and I had this desperate need to protect us... him... and me from any more loss or distress. I thought if I pushed you away now, I could shield us from an even bigger loss later. I was such a fool. I know that now. I made the biggest mistake of my life by leaving you... and in the process, I caused even more distress for everyone instead of sheltering us from it like I’d hoped to. It took someone else pointing out to me just how much a part of our family you already were to open my eyes. I wouldn’t give up a minute of the time I spent with Cara. Even if I’d known what the outcome would be, I wouldn’t have done anything differently. And it’s the same with you. I cherish every moment I’ve had with you, and I would move heaven and earth for even one more. You’re worth the risk.”

He pauses, taking a shaky breath. “I love so many things about you, sweetheart. Your kindness and compassion, the way you always put others first. The way your eyes light up when you’re excited about something, and your laughter—now, that’s a sound I’ll never get tired of listening to.”

My heart skips a beat as he lists each detail, a warmth blooming in my chest. It’s overwhelming knowing that someone sees me in such a vivid, beautiful light.

“Your strength amazes me,” he continues, his voice choked with emotion. “You’ve been through hell and back, and yet you still have the ability to love so fiercely. You make me want to be a better man.”

Tears prick at the corners of my eyes, and I’m lost for words. I don’t think I realized how much Myles truly cares for me.

“Please, sweetheart,” he pleads, his face etched with pain. “Forgive me for leaving you. Let me be in your life again. As friends, if that’s what you want. But I hope... I hope we can be more.”

His words hang heavy in the air between us, a question left unanswered. My mind is racing, my emotions a storm of confusion and longing. But deep down, there’s a flicker of hope that maybe we’ve finally found our way back to each other.

I take a shaky breath, my heart pounding in my chest as I try to form the words. “Myles... I...” I pause, the lump in my throat making it difficult to speak. “I feel the same way.”

My confession hangs heavy in the air between us, a delicate thread of hope weaving its way through the cracks in our broken hearts. Myles’s eyes widen, his gaze never leaving mine.

“But,” I continue, swallowing hard, “when you ended things, it felt like confirmation for me that it really is better to avoid love than to risk losing it.” My voice trembles, the weight of my emotions pressing down on me. “But it also put things in perspective for me. Maybe we both needed that time apart to work on ourselves.”

The light from the table lamp casts a soft glow on Myles’s face, highlighting the vulnerability in his eyes. A shiver runs down my spine despite the warmth of the room; it’s a strange mix of fear and anticipation.

“Sweetheart,” Myles says softly, reaching out to gently cup my face in his hands. “I don’t want to lose you again. In the last month, we’ve both grown individually—let’s grow together now.”

A tear escapes my eye, trailing down my cheek. Myles’ thumb brushes it away, his touch tender and loving. Another sob catches in my throat, choking me with the intensity of my feelings. It’s terrifying to be this vulnerable, but something about Myles makes me feel safe enough to bare my soul.

“Okay,” I whisper, my heart swelling with a mixture of relief and happiness. “Let’s give it another try.”

We stand there for a moment, our gazes locked, the steady rhythm of our breathing filling the silence. My mind races, struggling to process the enormity of what’s just happened.

And then it hits me—Myles was down on one knee earlier. My brain finally catches up, and I can’t help but let out a choked laugh.

“Wait,” I say, my voice still shaking from emotion, “were you... proposing just now?”

Myles laughs, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “No, sweetheart. I wasn’t proposing.”

My disappointment is palpable, though not for long because I know one day I will marry this man. But then Myles reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small, shiny key. He holds it out to me, his expression earnest and hopeful.

“This,” he says softly, “is me asking for you to be a part of our family again. To come home.”

I stare at the key, the weight of Myles’s words sinking in. This isn’t just a key—it’s an invitation, a promise, a new beginning. And despite the lingering fear that grips my heart, I know without a doubt this is where I belong.

“Okay,” I whisper, taking the key and squeezing it tightly in my hand. “I accept. Let’s be a family again.”

As we stand there, surrounded by the warmth of new beginnings and second chances and the promise of a brighter future, I realize that maybe love isn’t something to be avoided after all. It’s worth the risk, because when it’s real, it has the power to heal even the most broken of hearts.

CHAPTER 38



MYLES

“Let’s be a family again,” Tristan had said.

With those five words, I melt into a puddle of emotions. He’s everything I want: the splendor, the color, the joy he brings to my life.

“Sweetheart...” I breathe as I close the distance between us, my fingers tangling in his soft, dark hair, tightening my grip to pull him closer. The moment our lips meet, I’m a goner.

“I fucking missed you,” Tristan murmurs against my mouth, and I can’t help but agree.

“God, I’ve missed you too.”

Our pent-up longing explodes into being, and suddenly we’re both fumbling and jerky in our movements, desperate to consume each other.

We’re all teeth and tongue, devouring one another as if we’re starving for this connection. I can taste the peppermint on his breath, feel the heat of his body pressing against mine, and hear the soft gasps escaping our lips. Our love is a wild storm, raging around us, and we’re helpless in the face of its raw power. We can’t seem to get enough of each other.

“Sweetheart,” I breathe, feeling the laughter bubble up inside me at the absurdity of how desperately we need each other. “You have no idea how long I’ve been waiting for this.”

“Same here,” Tristan all but groans, our mouths crashing together again. It’s intense, emotional, and electrifying. And it’s just the beginning.

He moans into the kiss, fisting my shirt as if he's holding on for dear life. Every nerve ending in my body sparks to life, electrifying me as we deepen the kiss. "God, I love you. I love you. I love you," I murmur against his lips, my heart threatening to burst with the intensity of my feelings.

"Love you too, baby," he replies breathlessly, his eyes locked on mine, full of warmth and affection. We're both grinning like idiots, our laughter mingling with the sound of our galloping heart beats.

"Is this really happening?" I'm still unable to fully process that Tristan—my twice-in-a-lifetime love, the one who made my heart sing again—is here, wanting to put our family back together.

"Damn right it is," he answers with a smirk, pulling me in for another searing kiss. This time there's incredibly even more urgency, more passion, as if we're making up for all the lost time.

"Can't believe you're here," I mumble between kisses, my hands roaming over his strong, muscular body, reacquainting themselves with every curve and ridge. There's something comforting and familiar about the way his skin feels beneath my fingertips; but at the same time, it's also new and exhilarating.

Our kisses are bruising, desperate, full of the longing that's been building up inside us. I notice Tristan's lips have turned a rosy red from our passionate exchange, and it sets my nerves tingling.

"God, you're so darn sexy," I murmur against his mouth, causing him to chuckle before diving in for another fiery kiss.

As he pulls back, my fingers brush over his stubble-covered jaw, and I'm struck by how much I've missed those small details about him. I anchor my hands on his hips, pulling him back to me, needing to feel every inch of him pressed against me.

"Your lips taste even better than I remember," he admits, smirking as he teases me with light, fleeting kisses that leave

me craving more. “You have no idea how much I’ve thought about this... about us.”

“Show me,” I say breathlessly, urging him on. I need to see the desire reflected in his actions, hear it in his words; anything to convince myself this is real and not just some sweet dream that’s going to vanish when I wake up.

“Trust me, baby. I plan to.” His voice is low and seductive, sending a thrill through my body that makes my knees weak.

His mouth finds its way to my neck, where he alternates between hot, open-mouthed kisses and gentle bites that send shivers down my spine. My head falls back, giving him free rein to explore and mark me as his own. I can’t help the hungry sounds escaping me, growing louder each time he sucks on my skin.

“Myles... oh God... Myles.” He pants, my name rolling off his tongue like a prayer. The sound of it only increases the heat pooling in my gut, making me desperate for more.

“Tell me what you want, baby,” he whispers into my ear, his warm breath causing goosebumps to rise on my skin and sending tingles down my neck.

“More,” I beg, not caring how needy I sound. “I need more of you.”

“Anything for you, baby.” The intensity in his eyes tells me he’s not holding back this time, and neither am I.

In a frenzy, we wrench our clothes off, sending boxers and briefs flying across the living room. Tristan’s strong arms wrap around me, lifting my 5’11”, 168-pound frame as if I’m nothing more than a suitcase full of feathers. He carries me with purpose, taking broad strides into my bedroom, where I pray he intends to give me the good, hard fugg we’ve both been craving.

“Oof!” Tristan tosses me onto the king-sized bed, and my body sprawls across the soft mattress, splayed out like a sacrifice to the golden god standing above me. I look up at him, entranced by the sight of his gleaming skin and rippling muscles. He’s a living, breathing sculpture of pure masculinity.

“Fuck, baby,” he growls, eyeing me up and down as if he’s cataloguing every inch of my body. “You have no idea how much I want you right now.”

“Show me,” I challenge, grinning wickedly. My heart races as he leans over me, his hands roaming my body with a hunger I can feel deep in my bones.

“Trust me, baby,” he purrs, lips grazing my ear. “I’m gonna make you feel so damned good.”

“Promises, promises,” I tease, but I can’t deny the shiver of anticipation that runs down my spine as he starts to explore my body with his hands and mouth. The air between us is electric, charged with our now unbridled desires.

He whispers filthy promises into my skin, and a needy moan escapes my lips. “Please, sweetheart,” I beg, feeling the heat pooling in my core. “Don’t hold back.”

“On your hands and knees,” Tristan demands, his rough voice igniting a fire within me, and promising we’re about to experience a night we’ll never forget.

“Like this?” I tease, positioning myself with my butt in the air, my heart pounding wildly in anticipation. I feel exposed, vulnerable, and absolutely exhilarated.

“Fuck, Myles,” he breathes out, his eyes hungrily taking in the sight before him. “I love your ass.”

“Good,” I purr, wiggling it teasingly for him. “Because it’s all yours.”

Tristan smirks, and our banter takes on a dirtier edge. “You’re such a tease, you know that?”

“Only for you,” I shoot back, feeling bold as I glance over my shoulder at him. “Now, come on, show me what you’ve got.”

“First things first,” Tristan says, reaching for the lube in the drawer. But I stop him with a playful grin.

“Who says I need lube?”

“Trust me, babe,” he insists, his gaze darkening. “I’m not gonna hold back. Not gonna go easy on you.”

“Don’t worry,” I retort, capturing his attention as I look over my shoulder at him. “I can handle you.”

Intrigued, Tristan slips his fingers between my cheeks, searching for my entrance, and his eyebrows shoot up when he realizes I’m already lubed up. He huffs out a laugh, clearly impressed by my forethought.

“Did you plan this entire seduction from beginning to end?” he teases, a glint of mischief in his eyes.

“Maybe,” I confess, unashamed. “If my words didn’t convince you that I love you, I had hoped that you fugging me might.”

“Christ, baby.” Tristan chuckles, shaking his head. “Hearing you say ‘fugg’ never gets old.”

“Then come over here and fugging fugg me, you sexy motherfugger.” I catch him off guard with my special brand of dirty talk, as a look of amusement lights up his beautiful face. But that look is quickly replaced by one of sheer hunger as I wiggle my butt at him enticingly. God, I fugging crave the delicious friction of our bodies pressed together.

Tristan wastes no time and immediately positions himself behind me, poised to take me.

His warmth engulfs me as he thrusts his length into me, bottoming out in one long, forceful push, and setting a primal rhythm that has my body writhing in ecstasy. I can feel his chest pressed against my back, every muscle taut and coiled like a predator ready to pounce. His arm snakes around me, pumping my dick in time with his brutal thrusts, and the sensation is electrifying.

“Fuck, Myles,” he growls in my ear, his voice raw with desire. “You feel so fucking good.”

“Harder.” I pant, wanting more of him, needing to be filled by him completely. Our bodies slam together, an animalistic dance fueled by lust and love, the lines between them blurring until they’re one and the same.

“Is this what you want?” he taunts, but his tone betrays his own need for me. “You want me to fuck you through the mattress, baby?”

“Y-yes,” I stutter, the words barely escaping my lips as my senses are overwhelmed by his relentless fugging.

“Then hold on tight, baby,” he murmurs against my sweat-slicked skin. “We’re just getting started.”

His fingers curl tighter around my dick, pumping me in sync with his merciless thrusts. The room is filled with the sounds of our passion—grunts, moans, the slap of skin against skin—as we hurtle toward release.

“Oh, God,” Tristan rasps, his breath hot against my neck. “I’m close.”

“Me too,” I gasp, feeling the coil in my gut tighten, threatening to snap any second now. “Don’t... don’t stop.”

“Not until you come,” Tristan promises, his voice strained with effort. He shifts his angle, hitting that spot inside me that has me seeing stars, and I know I can’t hold off any longer.

My vision blurs as I come undone in his arms, the world reduced to Tristan and the all-consuming pleasure he wrings from me.

“Fuuuuck!” he cries out in pure, primal pleasure, his body going rigid behind me as he comes with a hoarse cry.

We crumble together, a tangled mess of limbs and sweat, our hearts beating in tandem, as if we’ve truly become one. The room is silent but for our labored breathing, and I can’t help but marvel at the intensity of what we’ve just shared.

“Wow,” Tristan whispers, pressing a tender kiss to the back of my neck. “That was... wow.” He whooshes out a breath. “That was intense.”

“Intense doesn’t even begin to cover it.” I chuckle weakly, still reeling from the experience.

“You good?” he asks, concern lacing his tone.

“More than good,” I assure him, turning my head to catch his eye. “I love you, sweetheart.”

A warm smile makes its way across his face, and he leans in for a slow, sweet kiss that has my heart swelling with happiness.

“Love you too, baby,” he murmurs against my lips, and I know that no matter what life throws at us, we’ll face it together—as partners, as lovers, as second-chance soulmates.

“Come on,” I say, nudging him playfully. “Let’s get cleaned up. We’ve got a lot more celebrating to do.”

“Is that a challenge?” Tristan smirks, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

“Maybe,” I tease, unable to resist one last flirtatious jibe. “Think you’re up for it? I know I am, but young guys aren’t like the ones of my generation.”

“Guess you’ll just have to wait and see, old man,” he teases. He presses his semi-hard dick against my back as if to further illustrate the point, the promise of relentless passion hanging tantalizingly in the air.

Laughing, we disentangle ourselves and stumble toward the bathroom, hearts full and bodies spent, ready to face whatever comes next... together.



EPILOGUE

TRISTAN

Christmas Eve ~ 2023

The season has rolled around once more, and I'm surrounded by love. Last year—a far cry from this all-encompassing warmth—I'd settled into a cold bed, alone. Sleep had held me firmly in its grasp until the shrill alarm next door had shattered the silence. Who could have guessed that such a jarring moment would mark the start of my life's greatest adventure? Meeting Myles and Nix, two beautiful souls who now hold my heart.

Who are my family.

My. Family.

I never thought I'd be able to have one, or even want it. But now that I've let go of my fears, it feels like the most natural thing in the world.

As I watch my family, a feeling of belonging envelopes me like a soft, familiar blanket. How could I have ever doubted fate's plan?

Thinking back on this incredible journey, it's amazing how far Myles and I have come. We're both 100% out now with our sexuality, and completely unapologetic about our love. And our lives have only gotten better. Our relationship has grown in leaps and bounds, built on honesty and love. Now living together with Nix in our cozy apartment, it feels like we're exactly where we're meant to be.

Yes, it's *our* apartment, because as soon as my lease was up, Myles demanded—in that sexy, loving way of his—that I

move in with him and our son. After all, I'd spent most of my time in this apartment anyway. I'm not gonna lie; at first, I was worried we were rushing things a little, but after all the things we'd been through, we didn't want to waste any more time. We both know how precious life is, and how fleeting it can be.

At work, Myles is making great strides in inclusivity, spearheading a queer subcommittee focused on youth sports. My chest swells with pride watching him flourish. Firefighting remains my dream career, but now I race home after each shift, eager to be with my family.

I've got so much to be grateful for, like George and Cynthia, Myles's in-laws, who've accepted me wholeheartedly. Tomorrow, on Christmas Day, we'll be having them over for lunch. Nix wants to make it a special day for them, just like his mom would have wanted.

And Cara... I am indebted to her for so much in this new life of mine. Without her, not only wouldn't we have Nix—our adorable little man—but Myles also wouldn't have been the man I fell in love with. She'd had a hand in shaping and molding him into a man that's the perfect fit for me. I hope wherever she is, she can sense my eternal gratitude to her.

At present, our apartment buzzes with anticipation. Dinner preparations are well under way, with Myles and Nix playfully jostling in the kitchen.

"Remember last year's disaster?" Nix giggles, teasing Myles about his failed attempt at cooking a Christmas Eve dinner. Their joyful laughter jolts my mind back to the present.

"Hey!" Myles exclaims, mock offense in his voice. "That's the only reason I ended up with your daddy, you know—my amazing cooking skills."

I chuckle, planting a quick kiss on Myles's cheek. "You've come a long way since then, babe."

"True," Nix pipes up, grinning. "This year, we're not having Muscle Mac and turkey hot dogs."

We laugh together, the sound filling the apartment with warmth and happiness. This... this right here is what I live for:

the promise of many more happy memories to come.

So much deliciousness is on the menu: juicy roasted ham glistening with a honey glaze, green beans sautéed with garlic and almonds, warm rolls fresh from the oven, and a decadent chocolate cake waiting to be devoured for dessert. The sweet and savory smells wafting through the air make my stomach rumble in anticipation. The sounds of sizzling, chopping, and joyous laughter echo all around us, creating a symphony of love and happiness I would have never dared hope for a year ago. I'm proud of our family, stitched together by love and laughter, a foundation stronger than anything I've ever known.

"Careful, Nix," Myles warns, chuckling as our boy reaches for another cookie.

"Can't blame him," I tease, snagging a cookie for myself. "These are irresistible."

"Hey!" Myles exclaims, feigning indignation before grinning at us. "Save some for dessert." He slides the ham out of the oven. "We're just about done."

"Perfect timing." I wipe my hands on a towel. "The rolls are ready too."

"Can't wait to eat." Nix bounces from one foot to the other.

"Neither can I, kiddo." I playfully bop my son on his nose.

After we ate our scrumptious meal, we drifted to the living room. Myles and Nix's excitement is contagious. My eyes survey the room admiring the fantastic job we did a few days ago. The apartment is decked out in twinkling lights, ornaments, and festive decorations that make it feel warm and inviting. I'm immediately reminded of the way the twinkling lights and the soft sounds of Christmas carols playing in the background had framed Myles's and Nix's laughter as they'd decorated the tree. Tonight, it has a pile of gifts beneath it, all waiting to be opened first thing on Christmas morning.

"Can we watch the *Frozen* movies?" Nix asks, practically bouncing on his toes with anticipation.

"Sure thing, son," I agree, chuckling at his enthusiasm.

Nix's eyes light up, and he rushes over to the TV, eager to start our movie marathon. Myles joins me on the couch, and we exchange a knowing glance. I can see the love in his eyes, no doubt reflecting the love in my own eyes for him. I slip my arm around his waist in a hug.

"Are you happy, sweetheart?" He brushes his lips softly against my cheek.

I hug him tighter, wishing we could stay like this forever. "I'm always happy when I'm with you."

This is the ultimate level of happiness. Sometimes it's still surreal to me that this is my life.

"Everything's perfect," I whisper to him, my voice full of emotion.

He nods in agreement, reaching for my hand. "Perfect," he echoes, giving my hand a gentle squeeze.

The hours fly by as we laugh, sing, and enjoy the movies together. Eventually, Nix begins to yawn, rubbing his eyes in a clear sign that it's past his bedtime.

"Alright, buddy," Myles says, ruffling Nix's hair. "Time for bed."

"Okay," Nix agrees reluctantly, clearly still eager to spend more time with us. "Goodnight, Dad. Goodnight, Daddy."

God, that word... Daddy. I'll never get tired of hearing it.

"Goodnight, son." Myles gives the sleepy boy a peck on his cheek.

"Night, kiddo." I give him a tight hug, and then he heads off to bed, but not before he whispers the words, "Dad will say yes" in my ear.

You see, I've already gotten permission from my stepson-to-be, and now the boy is bursting with excitement. Thankfully, he can keep a secret. Because I have a surprise in store for Myles: a proposal. And I know with one-hundred percent certainty, he'll say "yes."

The End

Check out Maddox and Ethan's story [here](https://getbook.at/Fumbled-Hearts).
getbook.at/Fumbled-Hearts

THANK YOU

Thank you for taking a chance on [From the Ashes](#). I hope you enjoyed reading Myles and Tristan's story just as much as I enjoyed writing it.

If you like this book, please consider leaving a review or a star rating on [Amazon](#), [BookBub](#) and/or [Goodreads](#). You can even spread the word about its existence to your friends and family who enjoy stories like this one. Believe it or not, reviews, ratings and word-of-mouth recommendations are the best ways to make books, including [From the Ashes](#), more visible.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Denver Shaw is a girl who enjoys the simple things in life: the first sip of coffee in the morning, the changing colors of sunset, and clothes fresh out of the dryer-although she doesn't enjoy folding them. When she isn't reading romance stories, she spends her time plotting and writing them.

Let's stay connected, have fun, and make amazing memories together!

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