

RILEY HART



THE
HAVENWOOD
SERIES

Griff's
PLACE

GRIFF'S PLACE

(Havenwood #4)

by
RILEY HART

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GRIFFIN

I always felt I wasn't wired like my peers, but when my brother, Kellan, gave me three terms—ace, aromantic, and demi—I had possible names for it. Those three words have been on my mind ever since, as has my brother's best friend, Josh Westbrook. It's been cool getting to know him and spending time together, just us. He makes me feel something I never thought I'd be able to feel. When we end up alone in a cabin with only one bed, all my crossed wires finally connect and point toward being demi and wanting him.

JOSH

Griff and I were never supposed to be more than friends, but I like him more and more. I like being the reason he smiles, and...yeah, I enjoy making him writhe with pleasure too. But Griff doesn't hook up casually, and I swore off love a long time ago. Still, we keep finding ourselves drawn together, a shared loneliness and a deep want guiding us. Kellan's afraid I'll hurt Griff. Frankly, I am too. My past is still an open wound that keeps me from getting too close.

One thing is becoming clear, though—my Grumpy Griff is making me break my own rules. He says he's never known his place in the world, but I do. It's with me. The only way for us to move forward is for me to stop looking back...before I lose sight of him for good.

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PROLOGUE

Griff

The TV was on, but I wasn't paying any attention to it. The past few weeks had been... Hell, I wasn't even sure I had a word for what they had been. It all happened in this whirlwind I still hadn't caught up with.

My best friend, Chase, and my brother, Kellan, were in love. They'd been sneaking around behind my back. I discovered the truth along with the rest of Havenwood—our hometown.

That was just the beginning of a lot of drama, but it was most of what I focused on. Taking care of Kellan had been my goal his whole damn life. If I was being honest, I would admit I always took on that responsibility when it came to Chase as well, and now they wouldn't need me anymore. They had each other, and while it had come as a surprise in some ways, it hadn't in others. I'd been pissed they'd lied, but I was happy for them. I just couldn't help feeling slightly hurt too.

Knock, knock, knock.

I frowned at the sound of someone at my door. I wasn't expecting anyone, and for a moment, I considered ignoring it, but then got annoyed at myself for the thought. I was pouting, feeling sorry for myself because the two people I loved the most in the world were happy? That was fucking bullshit.

So I went over to open the door, only to see Josh, Kellan's best friend, standing there. His wavy, chocolate-brown hair was a mess like it often was. It looked like he'd run his fingers through it, mussing it and making it stand on end.

"Hey, man. What's up?" I liked Josh a lot. He was a good guy. The only thing that bothered me about him sometimes was his cavalier attitude toward sex, though I didn't know why

I cared so much. It wasn't as if it bothered me when our other friends talked about hooking up.

Still, as much as I liked Josh, he and I never hung out just the two of us, so it was a little odd he was there. Maybe if he'd stopped by the bar or arrived before the rest of the crew got there, but he'd never come to the house to see me.

"Not much. I just came over to kidnap you."

"Huh?" Kidnap me?

"I'd like to go on a hike, and I was thinking...who can I get to go on a hike with me? Oh, I know, I'll go drive Griffin Caine crazy because that's the job of a brother's best friend."

He'd never tried to drive me crazy before. Well, not on purpose. He'd never asked to go hiking with me before either. It was one of my favorite activities. I loved being outdoors, but again, it wasn't something Josh and I did together.

"Come on, man. Go hiking with me. It's not often I beg, but I'll do it. I'll deny it if you ever tell anyone, of course."

Damned if I didn't chuckle. The truth was, I needed to get out of the house. I could use some fresh air, so I said, "Come in. Let me get changed."

Josh nodded and waited while I went to my room for a different pair of jeans and to put on better shoes. A few minutes later, we were climbing into his car and he was driving us away.

"This is a first." I wasn't sure why I was mentioning it.

"Eh, there's always a first for everyone." Then he waggled his eyebrows, I assumed at the sexual innuendo, and I rolled my eyes.

We chatted about random things over the twenty-minute drive to one of the state parks that had good hiking trails. We parked, and he grabbed a backpack out of the back.

"Shit, I didn't bring anything."

"No worries. I got water and snacks and shit like that."

Well, that was...nice.

We started along the trail, and it was slightly awkward at first. We were quiet, and I tried to figure out what to say. But then Josh began talking first, asking me about hiking, and what made me want to open a bar, and pointing out birds along the way. The longer we hiked, the more comfortable I got. The outdoors always had a way of doing that for me.

We stopped at a spot where the trail opened up, near a picnic table. A local craftsman had made a bunch and donated them to the park to give people a place to rest along the trails.

Josh handed me a bottle of water and took one for himself. “You hungry?”

“Nah, I’m good.”

“It’s kind of weird, huh? Chase and Kell?”

I nodded. There was no denying it was.

“I’m happy for them, though.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Josh picked at the paper on his bottle. “I’m an only child. It never bothered me, but something about you and Kellan made me start wishing I had a brother. I know you guys drove each other crazy, but you would do anything for each other too. That’s special.”

I paused for a moment, then realized I was doing the same thing with my water bottle that he was. “You and Kell are like that. You’re not brothers, but you nitpick sometimes and you’d do anything for each other. Family doesn’t have to be blood. Chase is my brother too.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. Kell is that for me. I just hope you know how much he loves you.”

My chest felt slightly tight and uncomfortable, but not the heart-attack kind. It was more of the what-the-fuck-is-going-on variety. Josh and I didn’t talk like this. “I do,” I replied, then, “You okay, man?”

Josh's serious expression was replaced with a mischievous smile. "I'm better than okay."

"You're ridiculous. And that's not what the writing on the bathroom wall of my bar says."

"Hey, fuck you, Caine," he replied, and we both laughed. "Shut up and finish this hike with me."

I nodded, and we did just that. Later, when Josh pulled up at my house to drop me off, I realized how much I'd needed that, to simply get out and have fun and clear my head. "Thanks. I appreciate this. I wouldn't have done it, I don't think, if you hadn't come over."

"No problem."

I got out of the car and watched as he drove away. I wondered if Josh had needed the hiking trip too, or if he'd done it because he'd known I did.

Things started to change for us after that. His obsessive talk about hooking up annoyed me even more than it had before. We nitpicked at each other, and I flipped him off at least once every time I saw him. I gave him shit, and he told me I was always bustin' his balls. Kellan often intervened in the arguments between us. It was months before any of them knew Josh and I hung out sometimes. No matter how much we argued, he continued to ask me to do things from time to time, mostly fishing or outdoorsy things like that.

I always wondered why I went, but still, I never said no.



Last summer

I'd been pacing the hotel room for...hell, I didn't even know how long, my thoughts running even more laps than what I walked.

I hated that I had such a complicated relationship with sex—well, relationships as a whole. Being in my mid-thirties and never being serious about someone, never having really cared

about someone on that level, made me feel...different, especially when you added the sex thing into the mix.

I remembered being a teenager, when everything around me started to become about getting off. All the guys talked about having their dicks sucked and wanting to get laid, and I knew I was supposed to be thinking about those things too. I thought there was something wrong with me, but the equipment worked fine. I could get hard, and I jacked off and it felt good, so why didn't I have that same desire to fuck the way others did? I thought women were beautiful, and I could acknowledge an attractive man when I saw one, but it was different from when my buddies saw someone they were attracted to.

For a while I'd wondered if I was gay, but when I looked at guys, even if I could see their physical attractiveness, I didn't get the desire to fuck them any more than I did women.

I'd thought I was broken. That there was something wrong with me. I'd even tried to talk to my dad about it once, and he told me I was simply maturing sexually a little slower than my peers. He'd said to talk to him again if it didn't change. Later, when I was eighteen, he'd asked me if it'd gotten better, and I'd lied because who the fuck wanted to be broken when it came to sex?

So I'd played it off. I went on dates, and had sex, and talked about sex with my buddy Chase because that was what you were supposed to do. Sometimes I could almost fool myself. When I went off to college, I thought maybe it would get better, but it didn't. Still, I didn't have to pretend there because I wasn't close enough to anyone for them to notice.

Then my parents died, and I went back to Havenwood to take care of Kellan. At that point, wanting to fuck or not didn't matter. I had more important things to worry about, like how to raise a kid, and pay bills, and protect Kell. Focusing on him made it easier to shove my own shit into the closet. I devoted my life to him and Chase. Chase eventually left, and then it was just me, Kell, and a while after, my bar, Griff's.

Then Chase came back and fell in love with my brother, and...I didn't need to take care of Kell anymore. I hadn't needed to take care of Kell in a long time. He was a grown-ass man, but again, I'd lied to myself that he needed me.

That left me Griff's and, well, those three terms Kellan had given me when I admitted I didn't feel the same sexual desire most people did: aromantic, asexual, and demisexual. I did a shit ton of research on them, then thought, who the fuck cared if I walked around with the desire to get my dick sucked by attractive people? I had my bar. My brother. My friends. Josh and I had this weird relationship where we hung out sometimes even though we annoyed the fuck out of each other.

After that, Remington came to town, and he and Law fell in love. They'd always been in love apparently, but they'd finally found their way back to each other.

Callum entered the picture after that. He and Knox were all-in together not long after.

It was the end of summer now. Knox's daughter, Charlie, had gone back to Colorado with her mom. Knox and Callum were getting Knox's son, Logan, ready to start school. It had all been hectic since earlier this summer, when Logan ended up in the hospital with an asthma attack and Knox's ex-wife had come to town, so yeah, they weren't around as much. Law and Remy had eased up on their visits too.

In our circle of friends, that only left me and Josh single. Where I was the least sexual person in our crew, which was a fucked-up way to word it, Josh was the most. He was always on apps, finding guys to spend a night or a couple of hours with. I got it. He didn't have committed relationships and he enjoyed sex, so why shouldn't he? I still didn't *get* it, though; it was this muddled thing in my head, how someone could want something so much that was just *whatever* to me, even if it did feel good during the act.

But watching my friends pair up around me and Josh enjoying fucking his way through life, I began to feel more and more alone.

I thought maybe I wanted that too. Wanted *someone*. Then I told myself I didn't do that, the feeling-needy thing. I was the one who took care of others.

That knowledge didn't change the fact that I was currently pacing a hotel room, waiting for a man to show up, someone I'd found on an app. I'd tried women, more than one over the years, but I'd never actually been with a guy. Maybe I'd give it a go, something would finally click into place, and I'd realize I wanted to fuck a whole lot more if it was with a dude.

I was nervous as hell.

I tried sitting down, but my damn leg wouldn't stop bouncing, making me shove to my feet and begin pacing again.

This was fucked. What had I been thinking? This was the worst idea I could have come up with. I wasn't much into sex, so I planned to screw around with a random man when I'd never touched one sexually before?

I picked up my phone to cancel just as there was a knock on the door.

My pulse became a stampede beneath my skin, and my chest got tight. I could walk away, tell him no, or...I could try. Maybe that was all I needed.

My hand trembled slightly as I went to the door and opened it.

"Damn, man," he said. "You're even sexier in person." It had taken me hours to find someone. I scrolled through profiles, trying to see what kind of guy I would even want. He was about my height, with chestnut-brown hair. He had a nice body, long, lean, and muscular, which I knew because there had been pictures of his abs, back, and ass all over his profile. He liked to work out. Exercise was one of his favorite hobbies, and he played on a gay men's volleyball team. "You okay?" His brow furrowed. Shit. I hadn't replied.

"Sorry. My head's a little...distracted. Come in."

It wasn't until he entered the room that I realized I hadn't returned his compliment. Still, I just closed the door behind him.

“Jesus, I can't wait to see what you're packin'.” He reached out and cupped my crotch. On my search, I'd specifically looked for a bottom, assuming that if I was going to be into sex with a guy, I'd be a top.

“I... Thanks,” I replied, because what did a guy say when someone grabbed their dick? This was what I'd asked him to come here for. The whole point. I'd made sure he knew it—sex, no names, leave.

He chuckled. “This is going to be fun. I've never had sex with a guy who's never been with a man before. Let's get these off you, sexy.”

He looked at me, I nodded, and...wait...he sort of looked familiar.

I shoved that thought away as he bent down. I'd already taken off my shoes, so he worked the button and zipper of my jeans before tugging them down my thighs. “Oh yeah, I'm definitely going to like playing with you. Look at this bulge.”

He cupped me through my boxer briefs, and while I could appreciate the compliment—I knew I wasn't lacking in the size department—I still wasn't feeling anything moving around down there. There was no true lust, no true desire, but if he played with me, I knew I'd get hard simply because of biology.

“Never had any complaints,” I finally managed to say, and the guy laughed at me again.

He got my pants off and then went for my underwear, but my hand shot out and grabbed his wrist. “Wait. Can we kiss first?”

Christ, as soon as I'd said the words, I wanted them back. *Can we kiss first?* I sounded like a scared virgin and, well, I was a little nervous and I'd never been with a guy, so I guessed that was exactly what I was.

I helped him to his feet. When he told me to take off my shirt, I did. We went over to the bed and sat down. He held the back of my head and leaned in, pressed his lips to mine, and it felt...okay. Like a kiss. Like kisses always felt—lips and tongues and spit.

When he rubbed my cock and kissed me, I started to ache and my dick went hard because, again, biology. But something didn't feel right. This was off. My body could react, but my insides weren't getting into it—my thoughts and my brain and my need. Why should I have sex with a random guy to prove I could? Was it really going to change anything? *It might make me realize I want men and not women.*

My brain kept going, repeating that thought over and over. That I could be gay and this would tell me, but I wasn't sitting here craving his ass. My dick was interested, but mentally, I didn't want to have sex with a random stranger at all. That just wasn't me.

I wanted to have sex with someone I liked. Someone I cared about. Someone who meant something to me.

He pulled away, sighing. “You're definitely not into this, gorgeous.” He was right. I'd even lost my erection because my head had been such a mess. “As hot as you are, I don't want to have sex with someone who doesn't want to have sex with me.”

“Shit.” I rubbed a hand over my face. “I'm sorry. This wasn't very fair to you.”

He shrugged. “Eh, it is what it is.” Then he gave me a grin that again seemed familiar. “It's still an early night, and there's an app full of horny men out there.”

He said his goodbyes, but I couldn't really find it in myself to reply. I just sat there staring until the door closed behind him.

It finally struck me why he looked familiar, who he looked like. Apparently, I'd spent hours browsing a hookup app and

chosen a man who looked a whole hell of a lot like Josh Westbrook.



Fall

The music was thumping so loud, my heart shook. The bar was packed, men dancing everywhere I looked. I still couldn't believe I was there. Fucking Josh. I didn't know why he was able to talk me into things I wouldn't usually do. Ever since that first hiking trip, it had been this way, and I wasn't even going to let myself think about that incident this summer, when I'd met up with a guy at a hotel only to realize he was a Josh Westbrook lookalike. Sometimes I couldn't work out why Josh seemed to want me around either. Why had he cared if I'd come to Richmond with them? But we were good friends, better than we'd ever been, so I guessed it made sense.

"Excuse me," I said as someone bumped into me. Chase and I were carrying beers back to our friends.

We got back to the group and handed them the drinks.

"What were you guys talking about?" Chase asked.

"How my brother is going to steal my best friend," Kellan replied.

"Hello pot, meet kettle," I teased. Josh and I were just friends. Kellan had fallen in love with Chase.

"He didn't steal me," Chase replied. "You'll always be my brother, Griff. You know that."

I nodded. "Yeah, but I like to give him shit."

"Aw, does that mean you really do think of me as your bestie?" Josh rested his arm over my shoulders. "I'm touched. And don't worry, boys, there's enough of me to go around. I've always wanted to know what it was like to have a pair of brothers, only it wasn't friendship in my fantasies."

Kellan and Chase laughed, but the back of my neck prickled with awareness, like somehow, Josh touching me had

made something weird start firing off inside me.

“You’re gross.” I tried to pretend I wasn’t standing there analyzing imaginary signals in my body. It happened fairly often after the hotel incident, which made sense once I realized what I’d done.

“You love me, Griffy. I make your life more interesting.” Josh leaned over and gave me a playful kiss on the cheek. It was as if his lips seared my skin, and I jerked back.

“I don’t know where those lips have been.” I wiped my cheek. *Stop thinking about the hotel, stop thinking about the hotel.* That must be why I was reacting to him this way.

“Always busting my balls,” Josh replied.

Callum and Knox disappeared to dance after that. I tried to ignore Josh and pay attention to my beer. If I tried hard enough, maybe I could fade into the background. The group was all chatting around us until eventually Kellan and Chase went to dance too. What would I do if someone asked me to dance?

“You gonna dance with me or what?” Josh questioned as if he could read my thoughts. My back shot straight, and for a moment I lost my words...which was dumb. It was a fucking dance. “Friends can dance with each other, ya know.”

Yes, they could, but what about friends who searched Grindr to find a guy who looked like said friend? “What? It’s not that. I don’t give a shit about that. It’s just not my thing,” I tried to play it off.

It wasn’t long before a guy came up—a beautiful blond guy with plump lips and a confident smile. “You here with anyone?” he asked Josh, and my gut twisted.

Josh’s eyes shot toward me. What the fuck? I didn’t want him to feel like he had to babysit me. I could handle a damn bar on my own. It was the only reason I could think that he wouldn’t say yes. Josh always wanted to hook up. “You should go have fun. That’s what we’re here for, right?” Sex was a lot more fun to him than it was to me.

“You can come along,” the dude said.

“What? No,” jumped out of my mouth. Did Josh do that kind of thing often? Sure, it wasn’t him who’d asked, but I couldn’t help wondering. “Go have fun. You don’t have to babysit me all night.”

Josh watched me, something...confusing in his gaze, almost like he was trying to tell me he’d stay. If I asked him to, he’d stay. When I didn’t reply, he shrugged and left.

No matter how hard I tried not to, my eyes kept finding their way to Josh and the guy kissing and dancing.

Every once in a while, he’d look at me too.

CHAPTER ONE

Josh

“Come on. You can do it. You got this. Only five more,” I encouraged the client who’d hired me for personal training. I continued to spot her as she finished up on the bench press.

When she was done, she grabbed a towel and wiped the sweat from her face. “That felt good.”

“It does, doesn’t it?” A lot of people didn’t understand the feeling of accomplishment from exercising. The burn my muscles always felt reminded me that I worked hard, and I reveled in that. It was why I’d always known this was what I would do. I sure as shit didn’t make a lot of money at it. The only reason I had a house and my own gym was because of the money and home my grandma left me when she passed away. As much as I loved it, though, I would trade it all to have her back. She’d always been my favorite person in the world. My parents and I had never been close. They might have been willing to give me a loan—they could afford it—but I wouldn’t have wanted to owe them. We just didn’t work that way.

We finished up her workout, which was my last of the day, since I was getting off at noon. I noticed the way she looked at me, the spark of attraction in her eyes. She hadn’t been in Havenwood long—she’d recently moved from California—so she had no idea she was barking up the wrong tree.

Her gaze darted down to my hand. Looking for a ring, maybe. Just then something caught my eye in my periphery. Not something, but *someone*, a very sexy male someone I took a quick second to appreciate. I couldn’t help it; I liked admiring beautiful men. It drove Griffin crazy. It was fun to razz him a little, so I often played it up around him, and yeah, I

had no reason to be thinking about Griff right then. Little shit liked to sneak up in my thoughts when I least expected it.

“Of course,” the woman said, drawing my attention back to her. “The really sexy ones are always gay.”

I chuckled and winked. “Yeah, sorry not sorry.”

She laughed. “I’ll see you next week.”

“Have a good one.”

I went back to my office, gathered my things, made sure the computer was shut down, locked the door, and headed for the front. “See you later,” I told Jasmine, one of the employees who worked the front desk. “Text me if you need anything.”

It was a Saturday. Kellan and Chase were having a little get-together at their place this afternoon. Kellan had been acting a little strange all week, but then he *was* Kell, so who knew what was going on in his head?

My house and Griff’s were in town, rather than on the outskirts like the rest of the guys’. Mine sat back from the road, a little blue place I used to stay at when I came to Havenwood to visit my grandma in the summers.

Outside of my childhood best friend, she was the first person I told I was gay because I knew she would accept me. She was the only person who knew about Doug, about who he’d been to me. I’d told her about our first kiss and when I knew I loved him. She’d known our plans—plans that never came to fruition. And when everything went down with him, she was the only person I’d been able to talk to, and she’d come to Raleigh, knowing I needed her.

I shook those thoughts from my head. I’d been thinking about Doug more lately, though I didn’t know why. Most of the time, I did a good job pretending none of it had ever happened.

I checked the mail and tossed it on the table when I got into the house. I went straight for the bathroom off my

bedroom for a quick shower and jack-off session before getting changed, then headed to Kellan and Chase's place.

Their vehicles and Griff's truck were the only ones there so far. I pulled my Mustang up and hopped out.

In the beginning, Griffin and I were never too close. There used to be a distinct separation between our friends. There was me, Kellan, and our friend Natalie, then Griffin's buddies Knox and Lawson. Then Chase came back to town, and I'd hated him when he first showed up. He and Kell got all domesticated and in love, and our friends group merged. It was weird for Griff at first. He'd appointed himself Kellan's protector, even though Kell never needed it. When Griff understood that, it seemed to be a bit of a revelation for him, like he didn't know what to do with himself.

I started hanging out with him more after that, and realized I liked the grumpy Caine brother more than I'd thought I would. He was fun to give shit to. Griff needed more fun in his life, and I was going to give it to him, even if he did come kicking and screaming most of the time.

I skipped a stair, jogging up the porch, and knocked. Kell called out for me to come in, so I did. The three of them were standing in the living room, Griff and Chase yelling at the sports highlights on TV, while Kellan pretended to pout.

"Hey, babe." I kissed Kellan's forehead.

"I did *not* plan this day so you guys could sit around and watch SportsCenter all day," Kellan said. "And hi."

I chuckled. Griff and Chase ignored him, so I stepped in, grabbed Griff's face, and pressed a smacking, playful kiss on his cheek. "Hey, Griffy!"

He jerked away, his eyes wide. "Oh, I get to be on the list of guys you kiss today?"

"Jealous?" I teased. Sex was one of my favorite things. I'd always been a highly sexual person, and I didn't see that changing. And why should it? I was single, and they were always consenting adults. Nothing wrong with having fun and

enjoying sex. Plus, it was the only thing I'd ever allow myself when it came to another man. Outside of friendship, at least.

"God no." He wiped off his cheek like he thought I had cooties.

"Real mature."

"You didn't even know that guy you were kissing at the bar in Richmond last weekend," he countered. The group of us had finally made it into the city for a night out, something we'd been trying to make happen for a long-ass time. Somehow, I'd gotten Griffin to go. It was his first time in a gay club, and I'd hoped it would loosen him up a little. I'd wanted to have fun with him—even if not the sexual kind—so much so that I would have told the guy no if Griff hadn't practically pushed me onto the dance floor with him, after turning me down about dancing himself.

"Again, jealous?" I countered. He was always busting my balls.

"Can you two stop?" Kellan asked. "Josh likes to hook up. We know this. We've always known this. Griff doesn't. Also something we've always known. I don't understand why you guys have to argue about it." Then Kellan gave me his pissed-off face like it was all my fault.

"What did I do? He started it." I pointed to Griff.

"Real mature," Griff said, using my words against me, so I flipped him off. Kellan sighed.

"Who wants a beer?" Chase asked, just as there was a knock on the door.

Their German shepherd, Bowie, came running. He apparently hadn't given a shit when I arrived, but when Chase said to come in and Law and Remy entered with their mastiff, Bear, followed by Knox, Callum, and their pup, Frankie Blue, I understood why. He wanted to play with the other dogs.

We all got drinks and headed out back. Natalie showed up a few minutes later, and we settled in to what we always did,

shooting the shit while someone manned the grill—this time, Kellan.

There was laughter and teasing, the way there always was when we all got together. We were a tight-knit group. I hadn't had anything like this before. There had been friends other than Doug, but the bond when I was younger had been with him, and now it was with them.

Griffin seemed to be avoiding me. I joked around with him all the time, and he did me, so I couldn't see why he would have been upset over what I'd done earlier. He'd been acting differently over the past few months, though, even more standoffish than usual, which was why I'd been so surprised I'd gotten him to go to Richmond. Of course, I hadn't let my shock show. It was a lot more fun to pretend I'd expected it.

I was about to head over to him to make sure we were cool, when Kellan said the food was done. We ate burgers at the table outside while the dogs ran around, all of us enjoying the slightly cooler fall air.

Griff sat with Remy on one side and Knox on the other.

When the food was devoured, I managed to make my way over to him. He was leaning against the wooden railing on the deck, away from everyone else. "Hey, Griffy."

"I really hate it when you call me that," he grumbled.

"No, you don't." I didn't know how I knew that, but I did.

"Whatever you say, *Joshy*."

"I love it when you call me that. It's so cute, our pet names for each other." Forget that we called Knox *Knoxy* too. It was a stupid joke in our group. But in that moment, it was just about us.

Griff rubbed a hand over his face. "You make me crazy. Do you know that?"

"Yes, yes I do. You need my kind of crazy." I nudged his arm. "Come on. You're glad we've gotten closer since everyone started to fall in love around us. Admit it."

“Well, since you’re my only choice, I guess it’ll do,” he replied, making me laugh.

“Asshole.”

“Learned from the best.”

“Wait. Did you just call me the best?”

He opened his mouth to reply, but then Kellan started speaking. “Chase and I have an announcement to make.”

I frowned, wondering what he was talking about. It wasn’t often, or hell, ever, that Kell kept something from me.

Chase cleared his throat. “Things have been crazy around here the last couple of years, but the one thing I’ve always been sure about is Kell. We’ve been watching Cal and Knox, and...I realized I wanted that. Kell always knew he wanted a family, but, yeah, now we both do. Natalie has agreed to carry the baby.” Kellan nudged him. “It’s a long process, so nothing will happen overnight, but we wanted to tell all of you first. At some point, Nat will be pregnant and we’ll be dads.”

I felt Griff stiffen beside me, which meant he hadn’t known about this either. Kell and Chase were allowed to have their secrets, of course. It made sense they would make the decision together before telling anyone, but I had to admit, there was a dull ache in my chest that I hadn’t known this was something they were considering. If I was feeling it, I couldn’t imagine how much Griffin was.

“We wanted to ask Nat before we told you guys, but as soon as she agreed, we planned this,” Kellan rushed out. “And, um, that’s not all.” He turned toward Chase and lowered down to one knee. Holy shit. Was this happening? “Chase Hawthorne, you are the best thing that’s ever happened to me. I’ve loved you my whole life, and—”

“Yes.” Chase tugged Kellan to his feet, answering the question before Kellan could ask it. Then they were kissing and crying, and when they pulled away, Kellan’s shaky hand pushed a ring onto Chase’s finger.

Everyone was clapping and congratulating them, but Kell's eyes searched for Griffin. They moved toward each other, almost as if in slow motion. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you first. I just..."

"Shut the hell up and give me a hug," Griff told him, which Kellan did. "I'm happy for you. You know that," Griff added as I watched the moment between them. It was intense, the way they were looking at each other, and I had to avert my gaze, feeling like an interloper.

"Mom and Dad..."

"Would be too," Griff said, hugging him again. They pulled apart, and Kell came for me next as Griff and Chase hugged, slapping each other on the back.

"Daddy Kellan, huh?" I asked with a grin.

A smile split his face from ear to ear. "And future husband. Listen, I didn't tell you first because..."

I shook my head. "Because it was something special between you and the man you love. You don't need to apologize to me about that. Come here." We hugged. "All I know is, I better be your best man."

"Always. Also, you'll be Uncle Josh," Kellan said, and for a moment I felt strangely sad. Not because I didn't want this for him, and not because I had feelings for him or anything, but...well, because things were changing. Before, we'd all been young and single and only worried about having fun. It wasn't the same anymore. Kellan was going to be a dad and a husband, and Griff and I would be uncles. "I love you, Josh."

"I love you too." Inexplicably, my eyes were drawn over his shoulder to Griff and Chase.

We pulled away, and everyone toasted the news. I congratulated Natalie as well. She was the best kind of friend to do this for them. They weren't going to use her eggs, apparently, so that would be part of the process they started first. They'd use a donor, but once that was sorted, Natalie would basically be the oven for nine months.

The laughter continued for the rest of the evening. Griff was chatting and laughing right along with them, and while I could see his happiness for his brother and best friend, there was something else brewing under the surface too.

Sadness.

His eyes found mine for a second, and it was there, clear as day, but then he turned away, and oddly, I felt like I'd lost something. Whatever it was, I wanted it back.

CHAPTER TWO

Griffin

I didn't know what it was about Kellan and Chase's announcements that had me so twisted up. My emotions were like that game with the paddle and the ball on the string. They didn't make sense and were all over the place, the tether getting all tangled every time I thought I got a handle on them. What was the deal with that game, anyway? Was anyone actually good at it?

On the one hand, Jesus, I was happy for them. In a lot of ways, Kellan's and Chase's best interests had always been the most important things in the world to me. Sure, those two truths used to be two separate entities, but now they were entwined. Kellan and Chase both had everything I always wanted for them, so why was there a part of me that felt like a puppy who'd been left at home alone and had nothing better to do than sit around and wait for their people to come back to them?

It was fucking ridiculous. And embarrassing.

Maybe I'd feel better tomorrow.

I'd left their place a little over an hour ago, grabbed a bottle of whiskey, and was now sitting on my back porch, drinking from the bottle. Even though I owned a bar, I wasn't much of a drinker, at least not hard alcohol. I enjoyed a good beer, but rarely enough for even a buzz.

"Boo!" came from behind me just as I was about to take a drink. It almost tumbled from my hand before I got my grip, and I looked over my shoulder to see Josh standing in the doorway leading from the kitchen to the yard.

"What the hell are you doing here? And why are you in my house?"

He sighed, came outside, and took the chair beside me. It was pitch black in front of us, the sound of frogs and crickets breaking through the night as moths fluttered around the light on the porch.

“I would think the reason I’m here is pretty obvious. To see you, unless you can think of some other reason I should be here?” When I only grunted in return, he added, “And I was in your house because your truck is out front, but when I knocked, you didn’t answer.”

“So you let yourself in?”

“Damn straight, though not really straight at all.” He winked, and I rolled my eyes.

“That was cheesy.”

“Yeah, but I got you to smile, grump-ass.”

Damn it. Fucking Josh was right. I *was* smiling. I didn’t meet his eyes. The thing was, it had been hard to look at him ever since that night this summer when I’d realized the man I’d met for sex looked like him. He’d had the same wavy, chestnut-colored hair, both messy and sort of floppy. The same long, muscular frame, similar angular features, sharp, skinny nose, and high cheekbones. He hadn’t had that damn Marilyn Monroe beauty mark like Josh did, and maybe his lashes weren’t quite as thick, but—Why in the fuck was I thinking about his goddamned eyelashes? What in the hell was that shit?

I tilted the bottle back and took another drink.

“Gimme that,” Josh said, and I handed him the bottle. He took a long swig and passed it back. We sat there for a while, in the quiet fall evening, lulled by the sounds of Virginia nights.

I swallowed down some more.

“It’s weird, huh? Kell and Chase?” he finally said.

“It shouldn’t be.”

“That doesn’t mean it isn’t. I hate that—what people should and shouldn’t feel. We’re fucking human, and we’re all different. There can’t be rules on how something affects us or doesn’t.” He was right. I was about to tease him about being so damn profound, when he took the bottle from my hand and added, “Well, unless we’re the ones who decide what we should or shouldn’t feel. No one else has the right to decide for another person.” Josh drank more, then said, “Whew. That’s strong. Keep it away from me. I think it burned fire down my esophagus.”

Fine by me. I’d keep my whiskey to myself. What he said continued to tumble around in my brain clunkily, like when you threw tennis shoes in the dryer. “What do you mean by that? Unless we’re the ones to decide?”

“Exactly what I said.” He shrugged. “Anyway, I get it. I love Kell. I want him to be happy. I was iffy on Chase at first, but they’re perfect for each other, and I know there’s nothing Chase wouldn’t do for him. It just...”

“Feels like everyone is moving on without you,” fell from my lips softly. I wanted to suck the words back in, wished I hadn’t let him in that way, but there was nothing I could do about it now.

In my periphery, I saw Josh turn to look at me. “Yeah, that.”

“Wait. What? You feel that way?” Damn, my lips were feeling loose, and my chest was burning.

“Yeah, Grumpy Griff. What, I can’t feel left out with my best friend because I fuck a lot?”

“Please tell me you’re not going to start calling me Grumpy Griff.”

I risked a glance at him, and he gave me a goofy grin. “I like it. Might look into some merch too.” He pulled his cell out of his pocket. “Here, give me your best scowl so I can get a photo real quick.”

“Fuck off,” I said, trying not to scowl, but I was pretty sure it didn’t work. He snapped a picture. “Has anyone ever told you you’re annoying as shit?”

“Just you, Grumpy Griff. I save it all for you.”

“Gee, thanks. I don’t know how I’ll ever thank you.” I took another drink.

“Come on, GG. You like it. Don’t pretend you don’t.”

I cocked a brow at him. Hey, apparently, when I was buzzed, it made it a little easier to look at him without thinking about that night in the hotel. “How many names are you gonna have for me?”

“As many as I want.”

Damned if I didn’t chuckle before looking away.

We were quiet again for a moment, just sitting there, and it was...comfortable. I’d always liked Josh. I used to think he would be good for Kellan, before Chase came back. It wasn’t until after Chase and Kell got together that we got this weird thing where he teased and frustrated me. But it wasn’t an angry kind of frustration, more a confusing one.

“You really feel the same way?” I found myself asking. “Like everyone is moving on around you?”

“Yeah. Yeah I do. I think that’s normal.”

“It’s strange. I’ve spent my whole life worried about Kell and trying to protect him, and worrying about Chase too because of the shit with his dad when he was young. When I went off to college, I thought it was finally going to be about me. Then my parents died, and I came back, and now...Kellan doesn’t need me. I know that, but it’s like, what do I do now? Who even am I if I’m not focusing on Kellan?” I’d always worried about my baby brother, but maybe all along he should have worried about me. At least Kellan always knew who he was and went for what he wanted. “Shit. I wish I hadn’t said that. It’s like my mouth is moving and I can’t control it.” When Josh didn’t reply, I turned toward him. “What’s up?”

“We should get out of Havenwood for a while, for a change of scenery.”

“What?” jumped out of my mouth. What in the hell was he talking about?

“Anything. I didn’t really think about it before I said it, but it could be fun. We could do things you want to do. Or do nothing at all. Hell, I don’t know, Griff. Clear our heads a bit and have some fun. When was the last time you went away?”

Outside of that night in Richmond, I couldn’t remember, to be honest. “You mean just us?”

“Yeah. What, you’re afraid I’m gonna give you cooties? We *are* friends, aren’t we?”

I nodded, and where a few minutes ago my lips were running free, now I didn’t know what to say. I landed on, “What about work?”

He rolled his eyes. “That’s the beauty of being the boss. We get to make the rules. They can handle it without us. I’m not suggesting we leave for a six-month trip around the world or anything.”

I couldn’t figure out why he was suggesting this at all. What good would it do? And him and me alone? Yeah, we went fishing and shit like that, but a vacation?

“You hired Miguel not long ago. I think he wants to bone Nat, by the way.”

“No shit?” I hadn’t noticed.

“You’re so cutely oblivious sometimes.” He chuckled, and I felt a strange tingle at my nape.

Miguel had been a lucky hire. He’d worked in bars his whole life, even managing. He’d moved to Havenwood to help out a sick uncle. *And* now I was stalling by thinking about Miguel instead of what Josh had asked me. It was weird, him and me going away together. It didn’t make sense. It would be different if it was all our friends, or him and Kellan, but...I didn’t do this. I didn’t just take off for a week or a weekend or

whatever it was Josh had in mind. “Nah, I appreciate the offer, but I couldn’t,” I finally said.

“Well, actually you probably could, but no biggie. It was just an idea.” My first thought was surprise that Josh wasn’t going to push this. He always pushed. Instead he stood. “I better head out.”

Well, shit. That had been easy. Disappointment flickered in my gut. “You’re okay to drive?”

“Yeah, I had two swallows. I’m fine.” His voice sounded a little strange. Not like he was drunk or anything, just...tight. Then he got that cocky-Josh grin and added, “It’s sweet that you worry, Grumpy Griff.”

“I would about anyone. It’s not you.”

He clutched his chest. “Oh, you wound me so. I don’t know how I’ll ever survive it.”

“Ha-ha. You’re so funny.”

“I’m fucking hilarious and you know it. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go home, maybe jack off, and get some sleep.”

I rolled my eyes. “Did I need to know that?”

“Yes, yes you did.” Josh winked, then walked into the house and out the front door.

A while later, in bed, I slid my hand down my body, wrapped a fist around my cock, and jacked off. As my orgasm began to roll through me, I closed my eyes, and damned if Josh’s face didn’t flash through my head. I arched off the bed and shot all over my chest before melting into the mattress again.

What. The. Fuck.

CHAPTER THREE

Josh

“Do you think it’ll really work?” Doug asked softly. We were in an abandoned house in the woods, where we always went when we wanted to be alone. Well, when we wanted to be alone that way. Since we were best friends, we were together all the time. He stayed at my house or I stayed at his. We played the same sports, and our coaches always talked about how much chemistry we had. Little did they know it was because we were in love with each other. Because I knew what Doug’s mouth tasted like and he was my first...everything.

Neither of us was out. I was pretty sure my parents would be okay with it. They might take a little time to get used to it, but they weren’t the type to put much thought into me anyway, so I didn’t see them caring that much that I was gay.

Doug’s, on the other hand, would be another story, especially his father. He would disown Doug. There was no doubt in either of our minds about that. Our families were close, our parents best friends, and while mine let me do whatever, on the condition it didn’t come back to look bad for them, Doug’s dad put all sorts of pressures on him all the time. He had to be the best at every sport, and get good grades, and go to Stanford like his parents had.

“Why wouldn’t it work? We’re best friends. No one is going to be surprised if I go to California like you.”

“Yeah, but you already got accepted to NC State.”

Little did he know, I didn’t want to go there at all. It wasn’t me. I’d be happy at a smaller college or a community college, as long as I got to be close to him. Hell, I didn’t even know what I wanted to do with my life yet, other than be with him.

I shrugged. "So? I hate the idea of heading off to a new school where I don't know anyone. My parents will probably be pissed, but I don't care." Doug craved his family's approval in ways I never did. I knew my grandma loved me. She was so different from my dad. I didn't know how he turned out that way, having been raised by her. Where my parents cared about money and status, Grandma didn't.

When Doug didn't look convinced, I added, "Stop worrying, okay?"

"I can't help it. You don't worry enough, so I have to do it for the both of us!"

"I'm sorry. I'll...try to worry more?"

Doug laughed. "Shut up."

"It'll be okay. We just keep pretending. Then we go off to college together as best friends, and we'll be across the country from them. No one will ever know, and we can be together for real."

"Yeah," he replied. "We can be together for real."



My eyes jerked open, the dream about Doug already fading. This was freaking me out. I hadn't dreamed about him in a long-ass time. I tried, as much as possible, to keep myself from thinking about Doug. It hurt too much, and I sure as shit didn't want to relive that pain again. Ever. I planned to do everything in my power to keep that from happening. Love... *fuck*, love hurt, and I wasn't a masochist, wasn't fond of things hurting.

Grumbling, I got out of bed and went straight for the shower. It was a little early, but there was no reason to put off getting up and ready for work.

It had been a few days since my crazy-ass, what-in-the-hell-had-I-been-thinking offer to take a trip with Griff. I had no idea where that had come from, and even though I'd felt a stab of disappointment when he said no, I figured it was for

the best. What did I expect to change or get better by going on some weird journey with him to... I didn't even know where I'd planned to go. That was the most fucked-up part of it all. Well, maybe not the most.

I finished getting ready for work, filled up my to-go coffee mug, and headed for Get Pumped.

Sometimes I still couldn't believe it was mine. I'd never had huge dreams to run the world the way Doug had. Part of the pressure came from his family, there was no denying that, but some was him. He'd wanted things I never did. Occasionally I'd wonder how we'd fit so well, how we'd made sense, but we had when we'd been together. He'd grounded me in some ways, and I'd set him free in others.

Shit. I was thinking about him again. My mind was playing tricks on me, and somehow, I knew it had something to do with Griffin Caine. He was both infuriating and a breath of fresh air. Leave it to Griff to be confusing as hell.

I took care of my morning duties before opening the gym. Paul was running the front desk today, and I had Stacy with me, one of the other trainers.

The day went by quickly, without any major hiccups. Those were always my favorite kinds of days. After my shift ended, I got in a workout, then headed home to shower.

I had dinner and fucked around in the house for a little while before I started to get antsy. I'd always been like that, had all this pent-up energy that needed to escape. I tried to work on one of my model cars. It was something I'd picked up when I was a teenager. Doug and I used to do them together, and I had a display case filled with them. But even that wasn't keeping my attention. For just a moment, I thought about hopping on to Grindr or getting in touch with one of the guys I hooked up with, who lived in the neighboring towns, but I didn't do either. Instead, I shoved my phone into my pocket, grabbed my keys, and found myself driving to Griff's.

I hadn't seen him since I offered to temporarily run away with him, so I figured I'd go to the bar, grab a beer, and shoot the shit. From what Kell said earlier, he and Chase had plans. Natalie was at work. That was why I told myself I was going to hang out with Griffin and nothing else.

It was early evening on a weeknight, so when I got there, I wasn't surprised it wasn't very busy. Rock music played through the speakers, and as I made my way to Griff, he glanced up from the beer he was pouring. It looked like he'd gotten a haircut, his black hair now slightly shorter on the sides and longer on top. His behaved in ways mine didn't, lying down just as it should. I watched him as those deep brown eyes of his took me in. Griff had this rugged look about him. Not like Knox, but he had this perma-dusting of dark stubble along his jaw, and deep-set eyes that always looked like he was worrying about the whole damn world.

I took a stool across from him. "What's up, Grumpy G?" I liked that better than Grumpy Griff.

"There's something seriously wrong with you."

I chuckled, but he ignored me as he walked toward the other end of the bar where a group of men were sitting and handed the beer to one of them. When he made his way back to me, he asked, "Did you come here to bust my balls?"

"Nope. Your balls have nothing to do with why I'm here."

Griff frowned, his forehead wrinkling cutely. There was no denying that Griff was hot as fuck. If he wasn't my best friend's brother and, well, straight, I would have definitely hoped to get into his pants.

"What?"

Oh shit. I'd been staring at him. "I said, old man, your balls are safe with me." I was only a couple of years younger than him, but he acted older, so it was a good way to give him shit.

A few people looked our way. Griff froze, and I bit my cheek, trying not to laugh. God, messing with him was fun.

Not in an asshole way, of course. If I'd thought it really bothered him, I would never do it, but I thought...I thought Griffin Caine enjoyed me more than he wanted to admit. I sure enjoyed him more than I ever thought I would.

"I hate you. I can't believe I used to think you were my favorite of Kellan's friends."

"Wait. Are you saying *we're* not friends? You're mean to me, man. I'm not sure how I put up with it. Sometimes I even cry at night when I'm trying to go to sleep, thinking...how can I get Griff to like me?"

He rolled his eyes, automatically filling up a mug of my favorite dark beer and handing it over. "Sorry about your luck. I think it's a lost cause."

"I'm a determined guy when I want something." My voice was low, this flirtatious lilt to my words, and holy fuck, why had I just given Griffin my flirty voice?

"Why did you sound like that? Your voice did that smooth, honey-on-a-biscuit thing you do when you're trying to have sex with someone."

"Wait. You know my trying-to-have-sex voice? And that was the wrong one, anyway. I just gave you my flirty voice."

He frowned. "That's not much better. Why did you give me that?"

I paused, shifted. "Shit. I don't know. It just happened."

"Well, don't do it again. It's strange."

"You really are a bossy motherfucker, and don't worry, I have no plans to." Of course, I hadn't intended on it in the first place, but that was beside the point.

"Good."

"I agree."

"Glad to hear it."

“We’re really weird,” I said, and we both dissolved into laughter. A few people looked our way again, but I ignored them. Griff was still chuckling, his head tilted down, this half grin on his masculine face.

It was strange, when I thought about it, the way my friendship with Griffin had changed since Kell and Chase got together.

“Did you eat?” he asked when our laughter died down. Griff’s didn’t offer much of a menu, but they had a small kitchen in the back and a few choices of greasy bar food.

“Nah, I’m good. Thanks, though.”

He stood there for a moment, and suddenly things felt a little awkward, like we thought we were supposed to say something, but neither of us knew what that was. Our gazes held, and damned if the back of my neck didn’t tingle, which should *not* have been happening at all.

He cleared his throat. “You, um, seen Kellan since the barbecue?”

“No, but we talked on the phone. He’s the happiest I’ve ever seen him.”

“Yeah, I know,” Griffin replied. “I’m having lunch with him this week.”

“That’s good.”

The unfamiliar, thick silence enveloped us again, before someone walked up to the bar. Griff made drinks, and I tried to keep my eyes off him. A few people came in, and he got a little busy. Every once in a while, I’d look over at him as he talked or laughed with customers. He knew what most everyone wanted to drink before they asked, and they all enjoyed talking to him. Griff was good about that kind of thing. I teased him about being grumpy, and in some ways he was, but he also drew people in, probably because they could sense Griffin cared about other people in ways not many did.

“Jesus Christ,” I mumbled before finishing my beer. My brain had done a whole hell of a lot of contemplating weird-ass shit lately, and I was ready to be done with it.

My phone buzzed, so I pulled it out. It was a text from this guy I got together with from time to time. He lived about half an hour away, but he said he was driving through Havenwood and had a couple of hours free, and wanted to know if we could get together.

An orgasm never hurt anyone. I hadn’t hooked up since our trip to Richmond, and even that I’d cut short. All I’d done was dance and make out with the guy before feeling strangely guilty and hitting the brakes.

Just as I was about to reply, Griff returned. “Want another beer?”

“Nah, I’m good. Might head out and meet up with this guy.” He looked like he’d sucked on a lemon, and I chuckled. “Show me how you really feel, why don’t you.”

“I don’t feel anything. I just don’t... You know what? Never mind.”

He didn’t what? I really wanted to know what he almost said.

I tugged some money out of my wallet and set it on the counter for him.

“I, um...before you go, I was just wondering. That offer? Does it still stand?”

I’d just started to move to my feet, but paused midway, cocking my head slightly. “To go away?”

Griff rubbed a hand over his face. “Yeah. No worries if you changed your mind. I’ve just been thinking about it, and I could use it—a break. I thought about going somewhere by myself, but then I knew you were looking for a little trip too, so I figured why not? But again, no pressure. It’s not like I can’t go by myself.”

I sat back down. “Fuck that. You’re not getting off that easily. You’ll probably just do boring shit if you go without me. I’m not letting you be boring.”

Griff shook his head, but the right side of his mouth curled up. “You’re not that fun.”

“That’s not what I’ve been told.”

“Because I’m the only one who doesn’t lie to you.” He was wiping down the counter, bending over to get the edge, which brought him closer to me.

Leaning forward, I grinned. “You think I’m fun, Griffin Caine, and nothing you say or do will make me believe otherwise.”

He trembled. Holy fuck, I was close enough to see him tremble, and why in the hell did making Griff shaky cause me to feel the same way?

I sat back on my ass.

“I take it back,” he said. “I don’t want to go anywhere with you.”

I shrugged. “Too bad. You’re stuck now.”

Griff had to pour another beer. I took a minute to shoot off a quick text, saying I was busy and maybe next time.

We spent the next hour discussing possibilities for our upcoming trip.

CHAPTER FOUR

Griffin

What in the hell had I been thinking?

I'd been obsessing about the fact that I'd agreed to go on a trip with Josh. The thing was, I couldn't figure out why I was freaking the fuck out. I had no reason to. Josh was a friend. I would have gone with Chase, Knox, or Law, had they asked, so why was going with Josh any different? It shouldn't be. There was no reason for it. So I decided there wasn't, and chalked it up to my feeling weird about a whole lot of things lately, particularly the way life seemed to be moving on without me. I was in the same place I'd been in what felt like forever. It had never bothered me before, not really.

It bothered me now. I felt like there was something I needed or something I was missing.

It was my day off, and I was having lunch with Kell. We were going to Mr. Tom's. It was our favorite diner to hit up when it was just us, likely because we used to go there with our parents when we were kids. It was where we'd come numerous times after they passed. Where I'd taken him as a child for treats when he'd been sad.

It was where we'd sorted things out when we talked about him and Chase, and also where he'd given me those three terms I'd never heard before—demisexual, asexual, and aromantic.

My brother was already inside, sitting in a booth toward the back. I walked over and slid into the seat across from him.

“Hey, you.” Kellan smiled. “I ordered you a soda.”

“Thanks.” I didn't have to look at the menu to know what I wanted. When the waitress approached, we both ordered a

burger and fries. When she left, I said, “So, marriage and a baby, huh?”

“Are you sure you’re not mad at me for not telling you first?”

I mulled over my words before replying. Was I mad? No, I wasn’t. I felt left out, but that wasn’t something I was willing to share with Kellan. What kind of brother would I be if I took this moment away from him? I needed to sort this out myself, not drag him into it. “No, Kell. Why would I be upset?”

He grinned again. “I know we talked about it a little that day, but I wanted to make sure. You’re the most important person in my life. I wouldn’t be who I am without you. I’ll always acknowledge that, and I’ll always feel like the luckiest guy in the world for having Griffin Caine for my brother.”

I rolled my eyes playfully. “All right, all right. No need to get all mushy.”

Kellan laughed. We talked for a little while about their plans. Kellan and Chase wanted to get married in the spring. After that, they planned on getting pregnant. “We’re gonna use my sperm. I would have been happy either way. I just want a baby. But Chase, you know how he is. He said he’s always been a Caine. He holds no ties to the Hawthorne genes.”

I didn’t know why, but hearing that made my pulse speed up. I would have loved the baby equally no matter what, but... “I like that. Knowing maybe she’ll look like Mom or have Dad’s eyes, ya know?”

Kellan cocked a brow. “She, huh? You already think you know that?”

“I do. Trust me. The world’s greatest uncle knows these things.”

We laughed.

“Chase also said, when we get married, he wants to either take our last name or hyphenate it with Caine first.”

It was odd how some things could make you happy, could feel right in so many ways but also cause the cold hand of loneliness to wrap around you. It was how I felt in that moment. Chase being a Caine was...right. It just was. He always should have been a Caine, and he'd always been a brother to me. On the other hand, I realized I might want... well, some of what they had, but I didn't think I'd ever get it. I'd never been in love, didn't enjoy sex all that much. I was *different*.

I cleared my throat. "That's good. Perfect. He'll be my brother in name too."

Kellan nearly glowed, he looked so damn happy.

The waitress brought our meals after that. We ate and bullshitted about random things. My stomach felt slightly queasy as we got to the end of our lunch. I was nervous to tell him about going away with Josh. Not that I thought Kellan would mind—he didn't really work that way—but because I was still twisted up and confused about it myself.

"So..." I said, rubbing a hand along my jaw.

"Do tell. I'm intrigued. I have a feeling this is going to be juicy."

"You're such a dork."

"You're stalling."

"No, but I am taking a trip with Josh. We're going to get a cabin in Asheville. Don't know why really, and you guys are welcome to come. Maybe the whole crew can go, but yeah, we are. Taking a trip. I can't remember the last time I went away. I need it." I'd just had a weird case of rambling, which was odd for me. I'd add it to the list of all the other fucked-up shit going on lately.

"Okay, why are you acting like you're nervous to tell me this? Did you think I'd care?"

"No, not really. More my issue than anything."

Kellan cocked his head, looking at me with familiar inquisitive eyes. Kell was always so damn curious about the world. I envied him that in some ways. “Is there something going on between the two of you that you need to talk to me about?”

My mouth fell open, and my heart thudded. “What? No. Why in the hell would you think that?”

“I don’t know, but it would be okay if there was. I’d be a little worried, but it would be okay. I’m always around if you need to talk. About anything. No matter what. Or if you’d rather not with me, there’s Chase or Remy. I know you and Remy have gotten close.”

“Stop.” I waved him off. “There’s nothing concerning Josh that I need to talk to you or anyone else about.” But lately, I’d felt...*different*—that damn word kept popping up—with him. He drove me crazy more often than not. It had felt weird when he walked away with that guy in Richmond, not to mention my fucked-up night in the hotel room with a Josh lookalike. “Aren’t I supposed to be the one offering to talk to you about things? I’m the big brother.”

“Nope. Absolutely not. We’re equal-opportunity brothers, and I’m a big kid now.” It shouldn’t have, but his words gave me a pang in my chest. Kellan really didn’t need me anymore. Maybe he never had. Where did that leave me?

“You’re right. I’m sorry if I ever made you feel otherwise.”

“You didn’t, Griff. God, you’re so damn hard on yourself, and you don’t even see it. You don’t have to take care of the world. Let someone take care of you sometimes.”

I played with a straw wrapper, unable to look at him. He was right. I knew he was, but I didn’t know if I could change it.

“I want you to be happy. Are you happy, brother?” he asked, and I sucked in a sharp breath. Was I happy? That shouldn’t be such a hard question to answer.

“As I’ve ever been, I guess.” Except now I was more lonely.

“I want more for you.”

I thought maybe I wanted more for me too, I just didn’t know what or how to get it.

“Do me a favor, would you?” When I nodded, Kellan continued. “Keep your options open. Don’t limit yourself in any way. You’ve got the biggest heart of anyone I know. Follow it and let it put you first, not other people, okay?”

I considered talking to him about that night in the hotel room all those months ago. Not about that guy looking like Josh, of course, but just that I’d wanted...something, and that hadn’t been it. It felt weird, though, so I didn’t. “Whatever you say, kid. And hell, I can’t call you that. You’re going to be a dad soon. That’s freaky as fuck.”

“Right? I’m *happy*, Griff. I never saw this for myself. I never thought my dreams would come true, but I’m so damn happy.”

I nodded, my chest feeling full. “I know you are. And I’m happy for you. No one deserves it more than you.”

“I can think of one person.”

“I’m fine, Kell.” I was. I had no reason not to be.

“Whatever you say. So tell me about this trip with my bestie? Wait. What are you doing with the bar? This is so unlike you!”

“I talked to Miguel. He’s going to take care of things for me.”

“Holy shit. I can’t believe you’re leaving your bar. This is crazy. You must trust him. Also, Nat wants his dick, by the way. I know she wouldn’t mind me telling you that.”

“No shit? Josh said he thought Miguel was into her too.”

“Ooh! What if they fell in love? Nat needs someone so badly. Of course, he would also need to accept the fact that

Nat is gonna be my baby oven. If he can deal with that, I hope they get together. I want everyone to be as happy as I am.”

I laughed, but then a pair of familiar gray eyes popped into my head, and a familiar pair of laughing lips...

I damn near fell off the chair. Josh had no business in my head when I was thinking about happiness and falling for someone. It was the craziest motherfucking thing that could ever possibly make its way into my brain, was what it was.

I wasn't starting to feel...interested in Josh. I couldn't be. And even if I was, which I wasn't, there was no way he'd feel the same. We weren't anything close to a match for each other.

Josh was gay.

I'd always considered myself straight, but what the hell did I know? I'd never *really* been into anyone at all.

Josh loved sex.

I mentally tolerated it while my body went through the motions.

I didn't know how those things could fit together. Not that I wanted to fit together with Josh or was really thinking about this seriously. My thoughts had just been all over the place lately because I was feeling lonely and left out.

That was all it was.

It had to be.

CHAPTER FIVE

Josh

“You ever been to Lake Lure?” I asked Griffin as I sat in the passenger seat of his truck. We’d figured that would be a better vehicle to take than my Mustang. Well, he had, and I agreed. I thought it made him feel in control or something. Griffin needed that, I was pretty sure.

We’d been driving for close to an hour now and hadn’t talked much.

“No, I haven’t. We used to do some traveling with our parents when we were younger. They liked road trips. I’m not sure why we didn’t spend much time in North Carolina.”

I nodded. “It’s about thirty minutes from Asheville. It was hard to find something last-minute. I got really lucky there was a cancellation. Everyone wants to get their last trip in since the end of the season is October thirty first.”

“You didn’t have to put all that work into it. I told you I could have done it.” I couldn’t help it, I laughed, and he glanced at me before getting his eyes on the road again. “What?”

“Nothing. That was just about the most Griffin thing you could say. I shouldn’t have had to put the work into it, but it’s okay if you did? That’s the way it *should* go, right? Griff taking care of everyone else. I don’t know why I didn’t see this in you until recently.”

He shifted, his body tightening in a way that told me he was uncomfortable. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I think you do, Grumpy G. We’re gonna fix that, you and me. I’m going to turn you into the most selfish motherfucker there is. You deserve that.”

“To be selfish? Isn’t that like saying I deserve to be a dick?”

I rolled my eyes.

“You’re always doing that. Rolling your eyes at me.”

“First, you’re the one who’s always rolling his at me. Sometimes I think you don’t even like me all that—”

“I like you,” he cut me off. “And wait. At the bar you were telling me how much I like you, and now you’re saying I don’t.”

“Same difference.”

He turned to me again. “No, it’s really not. And what the fuck does that even mean?”

I sighed. “You like me, but you don’t want to like me. Or you like me, but you don’t totally agree with who I am or some of the things I do. But I don’t want to talk about that right now. My second point, which I was going to make before I was so rudely interrupted—”

“To tell you I like you! That’s not rude.”

“You just did it again!”

Griffin rubbed a hand over his stubble and groaned. “You’re going to be the death of me.”

“Nope, the life of you. Back to my second point, being selfish sometimes is okay. Everyone should be selfish sometimes. It doesn’t make you a dick; it makes you a normal human being. I’m going to turn you into a normal human being, Grumpy G. You don’t always have to do everything for everyone else. It’s okay to just think about you.”

His eyes darted to me and then back to the road again. “I don’t even know what to say to you.”

“You can start with a thank-you and follow it up with, *Josh, I don’t know what I’d do without you. You’re the funniest, sexiest, sweetest man I’ve ever known.*”

“So you want me to lie to you?” Griff replied, and we both started laughing.

The cab of the truck turned quiet again after that as we both watched the scenery fly by, all the greens, oranges, reds. Fall had always been my favorite season, but then, all those years ago, everything had happened in the fall, and that made it hard too. It sure was pretty, though.

“Are you freaking out?” I asked, hoping to distract myself.

“What? Why would I be freaking out to go away with you? We’re just two buddies taking a trip.”

Okay, well, that wasn’t what I meant, but it was an interesting response, something I’d have to give some thought to later. “No, *buddy*, I meant leaving your bar. You don’t do that very often. And since when did we start calling each other buddy?”

Griff’s hands tightened on the steering wheel. “Since now, and you’re gonna have to give me a little more to go on next time you want me to read your mind.”

I chuckled. “Point taken.” I still thought it was interesting what he’d assumed I meant. But then, I also wasn’t sure how I felt about that, so maybe I would ignore it for now, letting myself dissect it at another time.

My phone buzzed, and I picked it up from my lap to see a notification.

“It’s eight in the morning. Does your Grindr ever stop going off?”

“How do you know it’s Grindr?”

Was it me, or did a slight pink dot Griffin Caine’s cheeks? “I have a gay brother...and all gay or bi friends, in case you didn’t realize.”

Oh, well, that made sense. And he was right about my notifications. It almost felt...stifling sometimes. Or maybe that wasn’t the right word, but I’d been doing this endless cycle for so long, I didn’t know any other way. “I’ll make you a deal.

I'll uninstall the app from my phone while we're away if you promise to force yourself to have fun, to let everything else go and not worry about anything responsible like the bar or such. Just let me show you a good time."

"Sure, but I didn't say that because I care how often you hook up with people. That's your thing. It has nothing to do with me."

"You sure mention it a lot."

"Because I notice it a lot, not because it has any effect on me."

Okay, what in the strange-ass trip with my best friend's brother was going on here? "I didn't say it had an effect on you."

"Yeah, but you—You know what? Never mind. Forget I said that."

The fact was, I didn't know if I could forget it, or why that was. Griff was confusing the fuck out of me lately, and I couldn't figure out why that was from either side.

Still, I hit the Uninstall button and then shoved my phone in the glovebox. I turned to the side slightly and said, "Let's play road-trip games."

"Do we have to?"

I rolled my eyes. "It's going to be *you* who is the death of *me* and not the other way around. Yes, we have to. This is all part of the official Josh Westbrook experience. I don't share this with people often. You should feel lucky."

"The Josh Westbrook experience, huh? What did I ever do to be so lucky?"

"You sound like you're mocking me, but I choose to ignore it. Shut up and play with me." Well, hello there, sexual innuendo.

Griff let out a deep, and yeah, kind of sexy groan, but I wasn't sure if it was because my words had sounded sexual to

him too or because I was forcing him to play games.

“I wouldn’t want to miss out on any part of the experience.”

If he only knew what the real Josh Westbrook experience was. It would be fun to see Griffin lose control, to be the one *making* him lose control, which was not what I should have been thinking at all. Not about Kellan’s brother who, as far as I knew, was straight. He used to hook up with women occasionally, but from what I could tell, he hadn’t been with anyone in a while. It was none of my business, but I couldn’t help wondering why that was.

Shoving all thoughts of sex to the back of my brain—seriously, what the fuck was that? This was *Griffin*—I told him what we would be playing first.

And that’s what we did the whole close-to-six-hour drive to the mountains—played games and just...talked. Even though I’d known Griff for years now, we didn’t really talk like this, not for hours at a time, only the two of us.

His navigation continued to give us directions, and before I knew it, we were pulling up in front of our rental. It was a small, traditional-looking cabin, sitting on a more private part of the lake, tucked between nothing but trees and nature.

Griffin turned off the truck, and we both sat there for a moment. His eyes scanned the area around us, but mine kept finding their way back to him. He made me curious in this strange sort of way lately that I hadn’t experienced with Griff before. I wanted to know what he was thinking, how he felt. I hoped he was happy.

“So?” I found myself asking.

“It’s perfect. I think this is exactly what I need.”

This unfamiliar burst of...pride? Excitement? I didn’t know what it was, but it swelled in my chest. “That’s what I like to hear, Griffy.”

“Is it Griffy or Grumpy G?” He cocked a brow.

“Depends on how I feel in the moment. I like to keep you on your toes.”

He shook his head, but a smile curled his lips. “Whatever you say, *Josh*.”

“Let’s do this.” We got out of the truck and grabbed our bags. I set mine down when I got to the door, looked at the code they’d given me for the lockbox on the door, which would have the keys inside, and typed it in. Once I had the key out and got it open, I stood back for Griff to walk inside. He did, and I followed him, until he stopped right in front of me. “Something wrong?”

“It’s a studio. There’s only one bed.”

“That can’t be right.” I slipped around him, certain his eyes were playing tricks on him, but they weren’t. It was, in fact, a studio cabin with a bed against the back wall. Beside it was the door to the deck, and beyond it, the hot tub. I could see the lake through the glass. There was a small kitchen to the right of the front door, a living-room space with a couch and a television, and another door I assumed was the bathroom. “Well, it’s a studio.”

“No shit. That’s what I said.”

I shrugged. “I can tell them. They must have made a mistake, but I don’t think there’s a big chance they can fix it. Not with this late of notice.”

I set my bag down and took a seat at the small table for two in the kitchen. Everything was made with dark logs, the whole cabin rustic and homey.

I called the company I’d booked with, and, of course, there had been a mistake, and no, there weren’t any other cabins available. I tossed my phone on the tabletop. “There’s nothing they can do, but we did get a discount and a free weekend when they open up again in the spring.”

Griffin looked at me like I’d lost my mind. “That doesn’t help us now.”

“We’ll survive. It’s a king-size bed, at least. I know I’m irresistible, but you’re straight and Kellan’s brother, so there will be no getting handsy with each other.”

“He got handsy with my best friend.”

My eyes shot to Griffin, my heart suddenly beating way too fast.

“Fuck. I didn’t mean—Not that we’d—That wasn’t why I—Oh hell. I’m shutting up now. I don’t want to get handsy with you.”

I couldn’t help laughing. I was looking forward to this week, much more than I should.

I stood, clapping a hand on Griffin’s shoulder. “It’ll be an adventure.”

“Yeah, something like that.”

CHAPTER SIX

Griffin

I didn't know why I was freaking out at the thought of sharing a bed with Josh. There really was no reason to. How many times in my life had I shared a bed with Chase? I wasn't that guy who made a big deal out of shit like this, but then, I'd also never tried to randomly hook up with a Chase lookalike—or, well, any other guy lookalike—the way I had with Josh.

That had me feeling a little twitchy. Then I was pissed at myself for letting it get to me, because making a big deal out of it made it feel like it was *something*, when really, all it should be was nothing.

Christ, this was fucked up.

We unpacked our things real quick and decided to drive into Chimney Rock Village for a late lunch. It was a tiny town, the population somewhere around a hundred and twenty. I'd read about it online when Josh told me where we were going. It was a throwback Western village, where the buildings all looked as though they came from the 1920s and '30s.

“Want me to drive since you drove the whole way here?” Josh asked when we got outside.

“Sure.” I tossed him the keys and went to the passenger side. I was trying not to come off as jittery and unsure as I felt. The fact that it was something I had to try not to do, confused and stressed me out even more.

We were quiet on the short drive—the village wasn't too far from the cabin.

Our studio cabin with one bed.

Our studio cabin with one bed that I was still obsessing over.

“It’s pretty up here. I love the mountains.” Josh’s words broke through my thoughts.

“Yeah, it is nice.”

“My buddy and I, when we were kids, we used to head toward the mountains any chance we got. We found this old cabin out there, and we’d go hang out. Our parents didn’t know about it—no one did. It was just our spot.”

I looked at him, but Josh’s gaze was firmly on the road ahead of him. I wasn’t sure why this conversation struck me as important, but there had been something different in his voice. Something a little huskier, like it was thick with emotion. “Was no one supposed to know about it?” I found myself asking.

“It was just a thing. I don’t even know why I brought it up.”

I couldn’t remember a time I’d ever thought that Josh was purposefully lying to me—hell, to anyone—until that moment. It was so unlike him I didn’t know what to make of it.

I studied his profile, wondering what a guy like Josh could have to hide. I’d known him ever since he’d moved to Havenwood, a few years earlier. He and Kellan were the best of friends. I knew his grandma had lived in Havenwood and he’d come visit her in the summers as a child, but we’d never met him back then. When she passed away, she left Josh the house and some money. I knew he had family he wasn’t close to, who never came to see him.

But I also knew he was confident and funny. That there wasn’t a damn thing in the world he wouldn’t do for my brother and maybe anyone he cared about. Josh enjoyed sex and laughing and didn’t seem to have a worry in the world, didn’t seem to have anything to hide, but as I watched him avoid looking at me and thought about how he’d just spoken, I wondered if I was wrong about that last part.

He looked at me and gave me a cocky grin. “You think I’m pretty, don’t you?”

An unexpected laugh jumped out of my mouth. His words shouldn't have surprised me, not coming from Josh. Maybe it was just that I didn't expect it right then. "Shut up. You wish."

"You do. I can see it."

"Pretty conceited is what I think you are."

"It's cool, man. I'm used to it. There's something special about this face. It's brought stronger men to their knees."

"Are you saying I'm weak?" I teased.

He frowned. "No. That came out wrong. Not sure there's a stronger person than you. Not sure at all." My pulse shot through the roof. It wasn't often that Josh, or hell, anyone, said things like that to me. I opened my mouth, unsure what was going to come out. Josh beat me to the punch. "Shut up."

"I didn't say anything."

"You were gonna, though. Let's go eat." He pulled the truck into the lot in front of a Western-style diner. I hadn't even realized we'd arrived in town.

When we got out, he shoved my keys into the pocket of his loose-fitting jeans. He got to the door first and held it open, signaling for me to go inside.

I did. It was a small diner, filled with dark woods just like the cabin and the outside of all the buildings. There wasn't a hostess, but a woman looked up from the counter in the back and gave us a kind smile. "Y'all can go 'head and seat yourselves anywhere. I'll be right there."

I nodded and went for a booth, sitting down as Josh slid in across from me. The waitress came straight over and handed us menus, asking if we wanted anything to drink.

"I'll take a Coke," Josh said.

"Same," I agreed.

"Two Cokes coming up. I'll be back to take y'all's order."

“I’m starving.” Josh opened his menu and began scanning. I did the same, but every few seconds, my eyes kept finding their way to him. To the way his dark hair swept across his forehead, or to the mole above his lip that Kell always called his Marilyn Monroe beauty mark. To the strong set of his jaw, or the way his tongue snaked out to trace his lip, or—

“You keep starin’ at me, I’m gonna go and think you’re in love with me or something.”

Shit. How did he do that? His eyes never left the menu the whole time. “Just trying to figure out how I’m gonna deal with days on end with you.”

Josh looked up at me. “Funny, I’ve been doing the same thing, Grumpy G.”

“I really wish I could think of something to go with your name.”

“Sucks to be you.” He shrugged.

“Jarring Josh?”

“Are you saying I’m disturbing?”

“Jinxed Josh?”

“Totally not bad luck. You really do suck at this.”

I laughed again. Damn it, he always seemed to be able to make me do that. “Wacky Westbrook?”

“Nope. Not gonna work. You need to face the facts here. I’m better at picking nicknames than you are, especially alliterations.”

He might have had a point there. “I don’t want to play this game with you anymore.”

“Sweetheart, that’s because I already won.”

It was said playfully, but still, the word *sweetheart* sent shivers down my spine, made a tingle form there and then spread throughout my body. That was...unexpected.

“Y’all ready, or you need some more time?” the waitress asked, startling me. She set our drinks in front of us.

My eyes found Josh, but he didn’t seem to be losing his shit the way I was. If that’s what I was doing.

“I’m ready if you are,” he said.

“I’ll have a bacon cheeseburger and fries.”

“I’ll take the crispy-chicken sandwich and fries,” Josh added.

She told us she’d be back and left us alone again.

Josh rambled on about things we could do while we were there—hiking, swimming, fishing, heading up Chimney Rock. I listened and replied when I should, but I kept finding myself focused on Josh’s voice and his lips and the excitement I felt deep in my gut about our time here.

And the studio cabin with one bed.

Fuck, I was back there again.

Our lunch came, and I finally managed to chill out some. We ate and chatted. The food was good. Josh joked about enjoying himself and eating what he wanted while we were away and then getting back on track when we got home.

He tried to pay for lunch, but I insisted we split it. Josh rolled his eyes but didn’t argue.

From there we walked around the small strip of Chimney Rock Village, heading into all the little shops and looking around. They had a lot of local arts and crafts, which made me think of Kellan.

“I saw a grocery store up the road,” Josh said. “Want to head there and get some supplies for the cabin?”

“Yeah, might as well cook there as much as we can.”

Josh automatically went to the driver’s seat of my truck, and we went to the store. We stocked up on food, drinks, and

beer before taking the drive back to our studio cabin with one bed. Christ, I needed to get over that shit.

We put the groceries away and then explored a bit. When evening fell, we took the fishing gear out to our small dock and tried to catch some fish.

I did. Josh didn't.

Obviously, I couldn't let that go. "So...remember that time I caught a fish and you didn't?"

"Oh, you mean ten minutes ago?"

"Yeah. Then. Don't worry. I'll remind you later too."

His head tilted down as he gave a soft chuckle. The sun was setting behind him, bright with pinks and oranges in this way that almost made Josh glow. It hit me strangely in the gut, almost like a punch, stealing my breath.

I shook my head and looked away.

We grilled dinner out back and ate at the table on the deck. The night had a slight chill to it that would continue to get worse as we headed into winter.

We ended up watching a movie after that, some action flick that had Josh buzzing with energy. I noticed he did that a lot.

Afterward we took turns showering, me first. He came out in a pair of basketball shorts and with wet hair that he shook out like a dog, making water hit me.

"Asshole."

"I make your life fun," he joked, then stretched. "I'm ready to hit the sack. We have a big day tomorrow. Lots to do."

"Yeah, I'm tired too."

Josh went over to the bed and pulled the blankets down as I walked over and looked out the window. He was quiet for a moment, then said to my back, "I can sleep on the couch if you want. It's not a big deal."

There wasn't a chance in hell I was letting that happen. "I could too."

"Don't." At that I turned and looked at him. "This is supposed to be your special trip. I want it to be fun for you. You deserve someone to look out for you," he said, looking almost embarrassed, his eyes darting away.

The reaction was so unfamiliar when it came to Josh, and along with his words, made this warmth start in my gut and spread through me. I appreciated what he said. It made me feel...fuck, it made me feel *important*. I didn't know how to tell him that, though, so I just said, "Shut up and get into bed. I don't have cooties, ya know?"

He laughed. "Bossy-ass Griff is back."

I turned out the lights, and the two of us climbed into bed. We weren't touching, but I was distinctly aware of him beside me.

We lay there for who knew how long before I said, "Joshy?" Well, shit. I hadn't meant to call him that.

"Yeah?"

"Thanks...for this."

"Anytime, man."

His breathing evened out not long after, but I couldn't sleep. I didn't dare move, though what I thought would happen if I did, I wasn't sure. I focused on the soft scent of cedar and vanilla drifting from the other side of the bed. It was Josh, I realized, and that I'd already known that was what he smelled like. I didn't know if it was aftershave, cologne, deodorant, or what, but it was him, and I'd recognized it.

It was strangely comforting, so I focused on that as I breathed it in and drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Josh

I woke up to an empty bed and felt a stab of disappointment I had no business feeling, and quite frankly, didn't know why in the fuck I was.

I climbed out of bed, took a quick leak, and washed my hands. It was early, the sun just beginning to rise. I went to the back door and opened it. That's when I saw Griff, sitting on a blanket on the deck, his profile my way. He had his legs crossed, his hands palms up on his thighs, and his eyes closed.

He looked...fuck, he looked really fucking good. I'd be lying if I didn't admit that. Griff was sexy and had a great body, with muscular arms and a tight six-pack. He had a light dusting of dark hair on his pecs, and a tattoo of what looked like hanging paper cranes vertically on his right side.

The sun was behind him, glinting off the water, and damned if my breath didn't catch for a moment. It wasn't just because, as I'd said, he was fucking gorgeous, but Griff looked...he looked peaceful, relaxed, and I suddenly really wanted a part of that with him.

It was clear he was meditating. I didn't want to interrupt him, so I began to close the door quietly, when he turned and looked at me.

“Sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt. I didn't see you at first.”

“It's fine. This is just something new I started doing with Remy, and I've realized it helps.”

“Oh.” I wasn't quite sure what my *oh* meant, and also maybe hoping he'd invite me to join him. “I don't want to interrupt,” I said again.

“You’re not. You can join me if you want. If it’s not your thing, that’s cool.”

“I’d like that,” I replied, heading out. That was when I noticed the soft music playing from his phone. I sat across from him on the blanket. “What do I do?”

“Absolutely nothing. I do it because it helps clear my head. It helps Remy with his anxiety. Just, well, for lack of a better term, *be*, and see what happens.”

Just be, huh? Well, let’s see if I could do that. “Okay.”

Griff closed his eyes again, but I was watching him. Watched as he took deep breaths, as he relaxed and let himself go. A few minutes later, I closed my eyes too, tried to clear my mind of...him, to be honest. Griff was throwing me for a loop, and I wasn’t sure what to make of it. I felt this connection to him lately that took me by surprise. It happened gradually. When it came to Kell, I knew the day I met him that he would be important to me, that he would become my best friend, but it was like a slow dance with Griff, the feelings growing steadily, sneaking up on me.

My body began to relax, my thoughts clearing in a weirdly measured way. I didn’t know how long we sat there, until I noticed the music had cut off. When I opened my eyes, Griff was sitting across from me, only now he was looking at me, his nose slightly wrinkled up in that way it got. He shook it off, like he hadn’t been watching, but somehow, I still felt his gaze on me, which yeah, didn’t make sense, but Griff was messing with me and he didn’t even see it.

“I didn’t expect you to get into that,” Griff said.

“Honestly? I didn’t either. We should keep it up, though. I mean, not when we get home, if it’s your thing with Remy.”

“Not consistently. It’s not even something I do every day. Just when I feel like I need it.”

“It’s a date, then. I’m also going to make you go jogging with me.”

He scoffed. “You think so, huh?” He stood, his muscles tightening and moving as he did so, and fuck, I needed to get my thoughts out of the goddamn gutter when it came to Griffin Caine. I wanted to do bad, dirty things to him. I needed to nip that shit in the bud.

I stood up too, thankful my shorts weren’t tented.

“What’s on the agenda today?” he asked.

“First, I’m going to make you Josh’s World Famous Omelets. Then I figured we could go to Chimney Rock Park.”

“I looked that up. Seems pretty incredible,” Griff said as we went inside. “But you don’t have to make me breakfast.”

“I know, but don’t argue. I don’t make Josh’s World Famous Omelets often or for just anyone. I wouldn’t want to rob you of that experience. It might actually make your whole trip.” It was strange how much I wanted this vacation to be special for Griff. There wasn’t anything the guy wouldn’t do for other people. He spent his life putting Kellan and everyone else first, and I wanted him to feel put first for once.

“World famous, huh?” he asked while I washed my hands.

“I mean, it’s me, so…”

He chuckled. “Obviously.”

I began getting the supplies and food out. “Is there anything you don’t like?”

“When it comes to food? No. And I can cook breakfast tomorrow.”

There wasn’t a chance in hell I thought Griff would take no for an answer. He wasn’t going to take part in this without some kind of tit-for-tat, so I said, “Deal.”

I cut veggies and cooked up some ground sausage. My omelets weren’t anything special, when it came down to it, but it was more fun to pretend they were.

Griff asked if he could help, but I wouldn’t let him. It wasn’t long before they were done and we sat down at the

small table with coffee and our food. I waited, watching as he cut into it and took a bite.

“It’s incredible, isn’t it?”

“Oh God, yes. It’s so good, Josh. I don’t think I’ve ever had something so good in my mouth.”

Two things happened at once. My dick perked up because fuck, that sounded sexual and my cock was definitely interested. Second, Griff seemed to realize how it sounded as well. His eyes widened, and he sucked omelet or something the wrong way and began coughing.

“You have no idea how many times I’ve heard that before,” I joked, which only made him cough harder.

When he finally settled down, he said, “Fuck you. That’s not what I meant.”

Sadly, but I didn’t say that, and fuck, this wasn’t nipping it in the bud. Why in the fuck did I suddenly want to bone Griffin Caine? “Are you done dying now?”

“Ha. Ha.”

We finished eating without sexual innuendo after that. When we were done, we rinsed the dishes, then took turns in the bathroom getting ready.

Before I knew it we were back in the truck, Griff behind the wheel this time, making our way to Chimney Rock Park.

“I’ve heard the view is amazing,” I told him when we arrived. “There are two ways to get to the top—stairs or an elevator. The rock formation is more than five hundred million years old. And you can see Lake Lure and Hickory Nut Gorge from the top.”

“How high up is it?” Griff asked.

“Three hundred and fifteen feet.”

“So over twenty stories... You know we’re not taking the elevator, right?”

I looked at Griff and grinned. “A man after my own heart.” A tingle of excitement spread like wildfire under my skin. I hadn’t felt anything like that in a long time, maybe ever. I didn’t know why, but I was really looking forward to doing this, and specifically doing it with Griff. I wanted to share something unique with him that neither of us had experienced before.

We paid to get into the park, then stopped at Gneiss Cave and looked around. From there we went straight for the Outcroppings Trail, which was what the stairs leading to the top were called. I wasn’t sure if it was the time of day or year, but luckily the trail wasn’t too busy. There were other people on it, but we had our space, no one too close ahead or behind as we began the ascent to the top.

“Who do you think is gonna be more out of breath when we get up there?” I joked.

“You, of course.”

“You wish. I’m basically an athletic specimen.”

Griff laughed.

“Maybe more like a god.”

He laughed harder.

“Hey, I don’t appreciate your lack of faith in me.”

He turned my way and cocked a brow as we continued climbing. “Oh, but it’s okay for you to doubt me.”

He had a point there. “So we’re both badass motherfuckers who are going to feel perfectly fine when we make it to the top.”

“I don’t know about that, man.” Griff’s hand came down on my shoulder and squeezed. Some sort of shock went through me, and Griff pulled his hand back like he’d felt it too. “Static.”

“Yeah,” I replied. Only it hadn’t felt like that, not really. To be honest, it made me want to run for the hills. Sex I could

deal with. Sex I fucking loved, but feeling *that*, whatever it was, wasn't something I was willing to get myself into.

We kept climbing, needing to pass a few people along the way. I wasn't gonna lie, my legs were burning like hell, the back of my neck sweating. Griff was glossy too, but neither of us complained, just kept going, this friendly competition between us.

When we got closer to the top, it was as if we had the same thought at the same time. We paused, looked at each other, looked ahead—there were no people there—then looked at each other again before we started running, trying to take the steps as fast as we could, each wanting to beat the other.

We hit the last stair, then stumbled to the top together, gasping for breath and laughing.

“Holy shit, that was stupid.” Griff was bent over, hands on his knees.

Yeah, but he'd had fun. I could see it in the small smile curling his lips. That was really all I wanted.

“You're telling me. It's all your fault. I wouldn't have gone there, but then I saw the look in your eyes.” Total lie. I would have gone there. I'd wanted to go there.

“Joshy is a liar. Who knew?” he teased, and we both laughed again. God, I was having a blast with him. I couldn't remember the last time I'd enjoyed myself with someone so much.

“Come on. Let's check out the view.”

We walked over to the railing together and—“Wow,” Griff said.

He'd taken the word right out of my mouth. The panoramic view was incredible—looking out over the gorge at the expanse of trees for as far as the eye could see, seeing all the fall colors contrasting with the blue of the lake. We stood there side by side, arms touching, neither of us pulling away.

“I feel so small when I look at the world like this. Not small in a bad way,” I added.

“No, no. I get it. It’s a reminder of how much is out there, so much we haven’t seen. It’s hard to remember how beautiful the world is sometimes, but when you see it like this...”

“There’s no denying it,” I finished for him.

A few moments later, I said, “Hey, wanna hear something weird?”

“Sure.”

This was maybe a big-ass mistake, and honestly, I didn’t know what it meant, just that it was true and I had to say it. “I’m glad it’s you...that I’m sharing this with. I don’t know why, but it just feels right.” Right like it did when Kellan and I started our friendship, and yet different at the same time.

It took him a minute to reply. I was starting to wonder if I’d said the wrong thing or upset him somehow when Griffin said, “Yeah, I’m glad it’s you too.”

We stood there together, just breathing and taking in the world around us. It felt like something shifted, but I couldn’t put my finger on what it was.

Eventually we headed back down. We explored the park some more, had lunch at the same diner we’d gone to the day before, then rented a boat to take out on the lake for a few hours.

We gave each other shit, joked around, argued about dumb things—that seemed to be how Griff and I worked—yet things between us still felt...subtly changed.

We were both beat by the time we got back to the cabin that evening. Still, we grilled some steaks and sat out on the back deck for dinner. We talked about everything, really, but somehow about nothing at all too. The day had gotten to both of us, I thought, the climb and being out in the sun.

We took turns showering again, then watched a movie before heading to bed around ten.

We lay there together. Sharing a bed with Griff wasn't close to the first time I'd shared a bed with a man, obviously. Some of my hookups, we slept together all night; others, we got up and went our separate ways after the sex. I'd slept with Kellan beside me too many times to count—without the sex—but I sure as hell was aware of Griff beside me in ways I wasn't familiar with.

Except the few times I'd spent the night in a bed with Doug all those years ago.

“Fuck,” I whispered softly.

“What is it? What's wrong?”

“Nothing.” I'd thought he was asleep.

We were quiet for a little while, before Griff said, “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.” We were both on our backs, not touching, just as we'd done the night before.

“It's not my business, and I'm not sure why I want to know, but have you ever been serious about anyone? Any of the guys you've been with, I mean. I don't ask that to be a dick. I'm not judging you. I'm just...hell, I don't know why in the fuck I asked that.”

I didn't answer right away, couldn't. My throat felt too tight, like it was stuffed with something and the words couldn't move around it. Finally, I replied, “Once. A long time ago. Don't really talk about it, though.” It still hurt too much.

“Sorry.”

“It's cool. You couldn't have known.” More silence. Then, “You? Have you ever been serious about anyone?”

Griff's voice was soft, hardly audible when he replied, “No...never.”

I was pretty sure we both knew that was enough for the night. This time, we rolled over, facing each other, and went to sleep.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Griffin

I woke up around dawn again. I'd been doing that lately, sometimes even when I was at the bar until late. Josh had changed positions. He was on his stomach, with his arm bent, elbow toward me, his head resting on his hand. His leg was curved the same way, his knee like an arrow at me, his face my way, brown hair messy and sticking up at the ends.

He looked so serene when he slept. It wasn't that Josh didn't seem peaceful in other circumstances, but he always had this air of expectation about him, like he was waiting or looking for the next thing. Not when it came to his friendships, work, or things like that, but maybe as if he couldn't slow down or something would catch up to him. Like he had demons following him around that he was trying to outrun.

"Ah, hell," I said softly to myself. Now I was a therapist?

His eyes fluttered open. I knew I hadn't spoken loud enough for him to wake up, and when a mischievous grin tugged at his lips, I knew I wouldn't like what he said next.

"You really do think I'm pretty, don't you? You looked your fill?"

"You wish." I rolled over and got out of bed.

"We doing the thing again?" Josh asked rather than acknowledging what I said. He sat up, yawned, and stretched.

"I was going to, but you don't have to if you're tired. I know it's early."

"Do you want to be alone? If so, I can give you that, but if you don't mind the company, I'd like to join you."

The truth was, I did want the company. I liked the idea of Josh meditating with me. What I replied with was, "I'm good

either way.”

I went to the bathroom, took care of business, and washed my hands. When I got out, Josh had already laid the blanket on the deck. I went to go outside just as he was coming in. Our bodies brushed against each other as we did, his skin warm and alive, but also with a slight chill from the early morning weather. I shivered, the hairs on my arms standing up, but I didn't think it had to do with the climate.

Josh said, “I'm gonna, um...piss real quick. Then I'll be ready.” Damned if his voice didn't tremble.

I got the playlist going on my cell phone and got into position. Josh was back a few minutes later. We sat beside each other this time. When we bent our legs, our knees touched.

“Shit. Sorry,” he said.

“It's fine.” Neither of us moved. I tried to breathe and let go of all the shit that was a constant whirlwind in my mind: Kellan, Chase, our parents, sex, the bar, being an uncle, Josh. He was there too, and I could almost see him in my damn head, pushing everyone and everything else out of the way, one by one, working his way to the front.

Asking me on this trip.

Making me breakfast.

Dragging me out of the house in Havenwood to go fishing with him, even when I grumbled and we nitpicked at each other the whole time.

Trying his best to take care of Kell.

Understanding how I felt...a little lonely, a little left behind...

It hit me then, as the music flowed around me and everything faded into the background but Josh, that maybe he'd been lonely longer than he showed the world, that maybe he'd been all along, and he kept trying to fill it with sex and men...then spending random time with me.

My eyes shot open, and I tried to shake those thoughts from my head. A person didn't have to feel lonely to like hooking up. Part of me wondered if I was trying to project something I wanted to be true, or if it really was. The fact that I *did* want it to be real opened another can of worms I wanted to seal the fuck back up.

I looked at him again. He had his nipples pierced, a light dusting of hair between his pecs, a flat, muscular belly, cut arms... And why was I studying him this way?

"You're restless." Josh put a hand on my leg. I was wearing the shorts I'd brought to sleep in, so the heat of his hand met my flesh. "You good?"

My fingers twitched to place my hand over his, and that made my chest tighten, made it hard to breathe. Yeah, I'd asked a guy to a hotel room months ago, but that had been an experiment gone wrong. It was not the same as having the urge to intertwine my fingers with a man's for the first time.

I didn't have a homophobic bone in my body, but when the slow heat of want curled deep in my gut, I couldn't help shooting to my feet, both because I *wanted* and because it was with *Josh*. It hit me like a Mack truck, out of the blue, a riot of force behind it. *Want*. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just not feeling it this morning. It's my turn to make breakfast. I'll head in and get it going. You can finish up out here if you want."

"Nah, I'm good. There's not a chance in hell I'm not watching you cook for me."

"Fucker." I shook my head, but I was smiling too. It was such a Josh thing to say. Still, I found myself holding out my hand for him. Josh looked at it for a moment as if confused, before grabbing on so I could help tug him to his feet. We picked up the stuff and went inside.

I made pancakes and eggs. We ate out on the deck together, then got dressed. We both wore jeans and T-shirts.

We were starting off our day with a hike. It wasn't like at the park the day before, but instead, on a quieter trail Josh had

read about. It weaved through miles and miles of forest, with nothing but the sounds of our breathing, footsteps, and nature.

“Can I ask you something?” Josh said as we began our journey.

“Feels like déjà vu from last night.” Shit. I didn’t know why I’d brought that up. The last thing I wanted to discuss was how I’d asked him if he’d ever been in a serious relationship.

“That a yes?”

I shrugged. “Sure.”

“Why?”

“Why, what?” Though really, I knew. Somehow, I knew.

“Why haven’t you been serious about anyone? You’re not the kind of guy who likes random hookups, but you never date. It’s just... I don’t know, really. I can see you with someone. A wife or whatever. You’re a family guy, Griff. Maybe not kids, but you like to take care of people. Why don’t you have someone you can take care of and who you let take care of you too?”

Fuck. Because of course he had to go there. I didn’t even know how to reply because I was still confused on the answer myself. It felt like something was wrong with me. Telling him I’d never fallen in love was one thing, but saying I didn’t feel the sexual desire others did, that I didn’t know if I ever would, weren’t words I could say out loud. It felt like something I should know. By the time a person was in their mid-thirties, shouldn’t they know this kind of thing?

But then I thought of Knox. He hadn’t known he was bisexual until Callum, and I didn’t bat an eye at that. It was always different when you were discussing yourself, though.

I settled on, “Guess I haven’t found the right person.”

“But you don’t date either.”

No, no I didn’t. Dating typically led to sex and me feeling even more fucked up than I already did. “Leave it alone,

Joshy.” The name had just come out. Again. Usually I only used it when I was teasing him.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to overstep.”

“It’s fine.”

“I just... I’ll say one more thing, and then I’ll let it go. You deserve someone. What Kell and Chase have? Hell, Remy and Law, Knox and Callum. That fits you. Settling down. Loving someone. Spoiling the fuck out of them and driving them crazy, only, like I said, it needs to be someone who does the same for you. You need to let someone take care of you, Griff. You can’t be the lighthouse for everyone else to find their way home in the storm.”

My heart was thudding, and it felt like a river was racing in my ears. I stopped, and he did too. We looked at each other, and damned if my pulse didn’t begin sprinting even more.

“You’re not gonna get all mushy on me, are you?”

He was trying to play it off, trying to change the subject, but I wasn’t going to let him. “And you don’t? Deserve that? Want that?”

He rolled his eyes. “Not everyone is cut out for the same thing, and that’s okay.”

“Yeah, but I see it in you,” I admitted. “You like to take care of people too. You’re a protector.” He was more than that. Even this trip proved it. The fact that he’d asked me to go away because he knew I needed it, and he wanted to cook breakfast for me and make the time here special. Goddamn it. I rubbed a hand over my chest.

“Yeah, but if I don’t settle down, I can take care of many, many people. As many and as often as I like.” He winked.

“Don’t do that.” Holy fuck. It was a cover for something. What in the hell had Josh been through, and why hadn’t I seen it before?

“Leave it alone, Griffy.” He’d returned my sentiment from earlier, and I had no option but to respect it the way he had,

but I couldn't get it out of my head.

Josh was running from something.

There were even more ways Josh felt lonely like me.

"There's a small waterfall not too far in. Race you to it," Josh said, then damned if the bastard didn't start running. It was impossible not to do the same. There wasn't a bone in my body that could ignore a competition with him.

I caught up with him quickly as we weaved our way around trees and down the trail, before we hit a creek and a waterfall.

We stopped, both breathing heavily.

"Tie, damn it," Josh said.

"And you cheated."

"I didn't cheat," he countered.

"Um, yeah you did."

Then he tugged his tee over his head, and I found myself doing the same. We took our shoes and socks off and walked through the creek a little, chatting and enjoying the scenery.

We weren't there long before we took the trail again and kept going. We didn't stop until it was time for lunch, which we ate on a large boulder a few feet off the path.

From there we headed back the way we'd come and toward my vehicle. We didn't talk about anything important. Josh was just Josh, and I spent half the time either laughing or wanting to strangle him, so I guessed we were us. In a strange way, over time, Josh and I had become an *us*, which felt different from the *us* I had with any other friend.

"Let's go swimming." Josh was nearly bouncing in his seat as I pulled back up at our cabin.

"That water is cold as fuck."

"Come on, Grumpy G. Don't be a baby." He started poking me in the side like a ten-year-old.

“You’re so immature.”

“You like it. You think I’m fun. I dare you to go swimming with me.”

I swatted his hand away and turned to look at him. “That’s not going to work.”

“Yes it is. Get your ass out of the truck, and let’s go get changed.”

Fucker. He was right. It was so going to work.

We went into the cabin. Josh grabbed his trunks and tossed them onto the bed. He unbuttoned and unzipped his jeans, tugged them down. “Do you think there are going to be little fish that nibble our toes?” he teased.

I glanced at him, and he grinned. “You’re such a dork.” My eyes found their way down his body, taking in Josh’s muscular pecs, the barbells through his nipples, his flat, defined abs, and then landing on the bulge beneath his tight boxer briefs. Lust shot through me, potent and quick, desire burning low in my belly. I turned around quickly, trying to get myself under control.

I wanted him. Christ, I really fucking *wanted* Josh. A man. My brother’s best friend.

One of my best friends too.

Part of me wanted to celebrate, to revel in the desire coursing through me. It wasn’t a biological reaction to being touched or kissed or sucked; this was bone-deep *longing* in a way I’d never experienced.

Josh seemed oblivious, rambling on about our limbs getting eaten and his balls shriveling up in the cold water.

I found my board shorts, and by the time I turned back around, he was dressed. “I gotta take a leak.” I pointed to the bathroom and went in there to change. My dick was half hard, which was exciting but also confusing and scary. Josh was not the right person for me to feel this way about. He fucked a

different guy every week, and that was the complete opposite of who I was or what I wanted.

I tried to shove those thoughts away as I got dressed.

When I got back to the main room of the cabin, Josh was waiting for me by the door. “Get your ass out here, Grumpy G.”

He wrapped a hand around my wrist and tugged. Then, just like earlier, we were racing, only this time it was toward the dock. We ran down it, then jumped off the end, splashing into the cold water that felt like ice against my skin.

“Holy fuck, this is cold. Why did I listen to you? I’m never listening to you again. Motherfucker, I’m freezing.”

Josh’s hair was plastered against his head, his teeth chattering, but still he lunged for me. I dodged him, but just barely. “What? I’m trying to keep you warm. Come here,” he teased, swimming after me as I swam away.

I was laughing, and he was too. I turned around and splashed him, pure joy surging through my chest in a way I hadn’t felt in forever. I had no idea why playing in the lake with him was so damn fun, but it was, and I didn’t want it to stop.

I splashed Josh again, and he did the same. We chased each other back and forth, ducking underwater, then trying to splatter each other with it.

Next time he lunged for me, he caught me. His arms went around my neck, hanging off me. “I’m tired. Why’d you make me do this? Take me back to shore.”

“Me? I made *you*? How about the other way around?”

I turned a little, and he was still hanging on. Our faces were close, our mouths inches from each other. I didn’t know how this happened or why neither of us was pulling away. We were breathing heavily and shivering because of the cold. A drop of moisture trembled on the tip of one of Josh’s lashes before he blinked it away.

We were kicking, trying to keep ourselves above water, and then my hands were on his waist...and what the fuck was I doing?

Josh cocked his head slightly, as if he was as confused as me. “Griff?” His voice was soft, questioning.

When I didn’t move, didn’t reply, Josh began to lean in. Every warning bell inside me went off. I couldn’t do this, couldn’t want this. Not with Josh. We were too damn different, especially when it came to sex. Hell, he probably wouldn’t even be satisfied by someone like me. Or, what if this was a fluke and I didn’t get into it the way I should? I’d always been able to perform when I needed to, but it hadn’t felt like this, the deep-seated need spreading through me at a rapid rate. Just thinking about it scared the fuck out of me.

We jerked away from each other at the same time.

“Shit,” Josh said. “I’m sorry. Don’t know what came over me.”

“I...I gotta go.” I needed to think, needed to clear my head, needed to figure out if this was what I wanted, and what it meant, and how it could be with Josh when we were nothing alike.

“Wait. Go?” he asked as I began swimming back to shore.

“Yeah. I’m fine. Just gotta think. I’ll be back. Just gotta think,” I repeated. It was ridiculous, running from an almost kiss. I understood that, but I couldn’t stop myself.

We got out of the water, and Josh stayed outside as I went in and got dressed. With a scoop of my hand, I grabbed my keys, then went straight for my truck.

I didn’t see Josh at all as I drove away.

CHAPTER NINE

Josh

I stayed out by the dock until Griff's truck pulled out of the drive, kicking up rocks as it went. "Motherfucker." I ran a hand through my hair. That had been...really fucking stupid was what it had been. What in the world had come over me? Sure, I'd been feeling some kind of something when it came to Griffin for a while now, but as far as I knew, he was straight, and he was Kell's brother, and he was different from me when it came to what he was looking for. I couldn't risk more than just sex with someone ever again. My brain wasn't wired that way anymore, and that wasn't Griff. All that kiss would have done was fuck things up, not only our friendship, but our group of friends, and potentially drive a wedge between Kellan and me.

But God, I'd wanted it. Craved it. Craved him.

And for a moment there, I was fairly sure he'd wanted the same thing.

I paced the dock so long I was surprised the wood didn't begin to wear thin. I'd fucked up, and I wasn't sure what to do about it.

It was a kiss—an almost kiss—and while for me, I couldn't quite connect the dots on why it was a big deal, I knew it would have been for Griff.

I went inside, showered, got dressed, but he still hadn't come back. I noticed his cell sitting on the counter, where he'd left it when we went swimming.

I didn't know what to do with myself, so I puttered around the cabin, with each moment that went by my worry scurrying quicker through every inch of my body, swimming in my blood and pumping through my heart.

My hands were shaking. I tried to sit still, tried meditating even, but when I closed my eyes, all I could see were flashes of Doug, then Griff's face instead of his. Griff banged up and broken. Griff in that bed.

“Fuck. Where the hell are you, Griffy?”

I kept telling myself there was no reason to worry. What happened with Griff wasn't the same thing that happened with Doug. That Griff would be fine. One accident didn't mean there would be another, but no matter how much logic fought to break through, my fear kept reinforcing the wall.

Dinner. I could get dinner going so it would be ready when he got back.

I fired up the grill, put some chicken on. When it was done, I plated and covered it.

Time didn't stop ticking, and Griff didn't come back, and my phone couldn't buzz with a call because he'd left his motherfucking cell phone here.

I got a fire going in the firepit, hoping that would distract me. Evening turned to night, the air around me chilled, but I didn't feel it. Just sat in one of the chairs, watching the red glow move. Caught between worry, anger, and confusion.

I'd wanted Griffin Caine.

I couldn't want him. It was the worst idea.

But I did.

And I'd almost kissed him. I'd pushed because that was who the fuck I was, and he'd run, and now... God, what if...?

Lights moved across the darkness as the sound of tires on gravel filled my ears.

My leg started shaking, bouncing like crazy. The fist of fear wrapped around my heart began to loosen because I knew that sound, knew the exact noise Griff's truck made and the sound of his gait as he made his way to me. That only made

the confusion grow even more and a different kind of anxiety twist me up inside.

The second he got close to me, it was like someone took the lid off, like there had been something containing me, and now it was gone, and I just exploded.

“What the fuck, man? Don’t do that. Don’t take off like that. Jesus, I was worried sick. I thought...” What I thought was stupid, ridiculous, but that didn’t change how it felt.

Griff’s brow creased in concern. “Hey, I’m fine. What did you think happened? I said I needed some space and that I’d come back.”

I thought I’d pushed too hard. I thought I’d gotten him hurt. Goddamn it. I was freaking the fuck out.

“Hey,” Griff said again. “What’s going on with you? You’re shaking like a leaf. I’m sorry I scared you.” Griffin reached for my hands, but I jerked them out of his grasp. Ran one through my hair, which immediately flopped into place again.

My legs were jittery, like someone had injected nervous energy into me and I couldn’t stand still. I circled the fire, my chest feeling tighter and tighter with each step.

I was going to have to tell him, wasn’t I? Did I have to?

Fuck, this small voice inside me kept whispering, *You want to.*

“Josh, stop. Look at me. You’re scaring the fuck out of me. Should I call Kellan?”

I stopped and looked at him, could see the worry in his eyes and the hard set of his shoulders. And as much as I loved Kellan, I didn’t need him.

This was a secret not even Kell knew.

“No. I... Fuck.” I fell into one of the wooden chairs by the fire, elbows on my knees, leaning forward with my forehead resting in the palms of my hands.

Griff took the chair beside me, and then his hand was rubbing my back in slow circles. Somehow, that loosened up some of the tension inside me, set it free gradually, unlike the explosion I felt earlier.

“I’m supposed to be taking care of you this week,” I said with a humorless chuckle.

It took a moment for him to answer, but finally, “You have been,” slipped past Griff’s lips, making me suck in a breath. Christ, this was weird, what was happening so incredibly fucked, if I could even figure out what was happening, but I knew it was something.

“Sorry I freaked out on you.”

“It’s okay. Can I ask why you did?”

It was so Griff not to just do so, to word it as a question and give me an out. I knew if I took it, he wouldn’t ask again. Griff would respect my decision because that was the way he was, but for the first time in twelve years, the truth sat on my tongue, waiting to roll free.

“I, um... Fuck, this is hard.”

“Take your time.”

“Goddamn it, Griff.” Even that made me want to open up to him more, like he knew just what to say to pry things out of me that I’d kept locked up.

“What did I do?”

“Nothing. It’s just...I don’t talk about this. The only person who knew about it was my grandma.”

“And Kell?” he asked, and when I looked at him, I knew the truth showed in my eyes. “You don’t have to.”

“I think I do.” Because I wanted him. Because already I worried he would be different for me, but I didn’t think I could let that kind of different in, and Griff deserved the truth. “When I was a kid, there was this guy—Doug. Our families

were close, and he was...he was my best friend. He was everything to me.”

“You loved him?” Griff asked.

Yeah, I had. “My whole damn life. Even before I realized it, I know I did.”

Griff’s hand slid up my back, rested on my shoulder. He gave it a squeeze, massaged the aching muscles there. “What happened?”

“We happened. It wasn’t planned. One day we were friends, the next we were more. We were young, just fucking babies. Sixteen when it started, but I knew what I felt.”

“I would never think otherwise.”

His words settled in my chest. He didn’t doubt what I said, didn’t doubt I could have been in love at sixteen. Goddamn, he was special. “We hid it. No one knew but my grandma here. You would have loved her.” I wished Griff could have met her. She was the best person I knew. She and my dad hadn’t been close. Once he graduated college and started making money, he liked it too much for the simple life Grandma had always lived and loved. “Anyway, we used to sneak out to this old, abandoned hunting cabin to be alone. We played it off like we were just best friends when we were around other people, but Doug had been my whole damn world. Made me feel things I didn’t know I could feel. I think I said that already.”

I couldn’t even remember. Not at this point.

“Even though neither of us was out, I was basically in the closet for him. My family didn’t give a shit; they were too busy to care. His dad would have, though, and he would have wondered about Doug because of me. There’s no way he would have accepted it, and because his dad wouldn’t, his mom wouldn’t have either.”

“Shit. I’m sorry. I’ll never understand it. How does someone hate love?”

Turning my head slightly, I looked at him. “Sometimes I don’t understand you. You have so much to give.” Griff shouldn’t be alone. Griffin deserved better, he deserved more.

“What happened with Doug?” he asked rather than replying to that.

I looked away again. “Me,” I said simply. “We had a plan. We were going to go to California together for school. They’d think we were going as friends, but we’d get to be together, ya know? I had a photo of us together. It wasn’t anything big, but I was kissing him on the cheek and Doug was smiling. We were eighteen, just a few weeks from graduating high school. Our housekeeper found it, and Doug freaked out. He was scared to death she was going to tell someone. He was pissed at me for keeping it and not hiding it better. I was angry that we were fighting over it. It was a heat-of-the-moment thing where I let my emotions get the better of me. I said some shit I shouldn’t have about coming out and hiding for him. I told him I wanted to come out, that I was tired of hiding, even though I don’t even know if that was true. I told him I shouldn’t have to be in the closet because he was.

“We were up at the cabin. Doug left, and he was so... Christ, Griff. I’d never seen him so upset. The second he pulled away, I knew something was wrong, that I should have stopped him, that I shouldn’t have said the things I did.”

My vision was blurry, the fire just a ghost swimming in tears in front of me.

“Fuck.” I wiped my eyes. “Sorry.”

“You don’t have to be sorry for feeling something.”

Maybe I didn’t, but I did have to get this out before I lost my nerve. Then I could lock it all away again. “He got in a car accident—ran straight into a tree. I’ll never know if it was on purpose or not, but regardless, it happened because he was upset with me. I waited for him at the hunting cabin for hours. I didn’t know what happened. I had to hitchhike to town, and then I found out about the accident. He was in a coma. I didn’t

leave for school. I stayed and mourned him every fucking day, while hoping and begging that he would open his eyes again and come back to me. The whole time, no one could know about us. I had to keep pretending he was my best friend and that we hadn't had plans. Had to pretend we didn't want to live together and be together and travel the world. We were going to go backpacking in Europe and fix up old houses in our spare time. He liked that shit, but his dad wouldn't have allowed a career in it. I used to teach him. He was a mess at it at first." Shit. I was smiling. How could I be smiling? "But he got better. He hadn't been used to working with his hands, and I liked to get him dirty... But yeah, I pushed too hard, and I lost him. Lost the person I loved, and then had to pretend I didn't love him." There was nothing like that feeling. It felt like a lie, like a betrayal of who we were.

"Jesus, and then when I left like that..."

"Not your fault. How could you have known?" I wiped my eyes again and leaned back in the chair, my arms along the armrests.

"I don't know what to say," Griff admitted. "I'm so damn sorry. I can't imagine what that had to feel like."

"I'm sorry too. Sorry for him, and for you. Earlier, I shouldn't have—"

"I wanted you to kiss me, Josh. Please don't apologize for that. It's confusing, and I have a lot to figure out, but I can't bear for you to apologize for it, even if it doesn't happen again. It probably shouldn't happen again."

My heart started thudding, and I whipped my head toward him. My mouth opened, and the first words that fell out were, "I wanted it too."

"But it's..."

"Complicated," we said in unison.

"Have you ever?" I asked Griff.

“With a guy? No. Not really. There was this one awkward experience over the summer.”

Over the summer? I didn't expect that.

“I'm sorry about Doug, and sorry for leaving the way I did. There's just...a lot going on up here.” He tapped his temple. “But me and my shit aren't important right now. Jesus, man. Thank you for sharing that with me.”

I nodded. “I need you to know, the thing with us, me wanting to kiss you, the only reason I'm not on board with it is because I can't give you what you deserve. I can't ever put myself out there again like that.”

“I'm not in love with you, Westbrook.”

“What's with the last-name thing?”

Griff shrugged. “Don't know.” He took a deep breath. “Do you want to tell me about him? Doug. You don't have to, but I figure...well, you've never really been able to talk to anyone about him.”

Damned if my hands didn't start shaking. Fucking Griffin Caine was going to ruin me. I didn't know how we got there, but I knew it was true. Because I still wanted to kiss him. And talk to him. I wanted to hold him too. “I think I do.”

And then I started talking. A few minutes later Griff reached over and interlaced our fingers. We held hands like that, watching the fire while I talked about Doug. When the flames slowed, Griff got them going again, then held my hand again. Damned if it didn't feel good.

We stayed up all night and watched the sun rise over the lake. Yeah, Griffin Caine was going to ruin me all right, and I didn't think there was a damn thing I could do about it.

CHAPTER TEN

Griffin

We went back inside the cabin right after the sun rose. Josh looked exhausted, and honestly, I was too, but I didn't know that I'd be able to sleep. My thoughts were still too full of everything that happened last night, hell, over the few days we'd been here, or for the past few months, or ever since Kellan and Chase got together. That was when things had begun to change between Josh and me, and now it had transformed into...I didn't even know what.

All I knew was I didn't want to lose it.

And maybe I needed it.

"I made dinner last night. It's in the fridge." Josh tugged his shirt over his head. I had to force my attention away so I didn't appreciate the view. The knowledge of that hit me in the chest, the impact starting in one place and spreading out.

"I'm good. We can grab something to eat later. Let's get a couple of hours of shut-eye first."

He nodded, pulled off his jeans, and climbed into bed in his boxer briefs.

I stripped down to my briefs, thought about putting on my shorts, but didn't. I got into bed with Josh. We lay on our sides like we had the last night we slept together, facing each other. It was him who spoke first. "Thank you, for last night. I didn't know I needed that."

"Anytime." I meant it. Being there for him felt different than when I did the same for Kellan or Chase or Remy.

Josh's hand moved toward me, cupped the side of my face. I closed my eyes when he leaned in, not knowing what to expect or what I wanted, then breathed when his lips pressed

to my forehead. He leaned back afterward. His hand slid down to my waist. "This okay?"

"Yeah," I replied.

He settled in beside me and went to sleep that way. In the grand scheme of things, I told myself it meant nothing. Josh was an affectionate person. He always had been. He hugged, touched, and kissed Kellan all the time, but he'd never done those things with me. Not outside of a couple of playful kisses.

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't keep my eyes closed. They kept opening and looking at him as I thought about what he'd shared with me. I didn't know why it came as a shock that Josh had been in love. Maybe because I would have thought if he had, it would have been with Kellan, or maybe because he seemed to enjoy being single, the variety of it, so much that I couldn't imagine him only being with one person. I figured Doug was part of the reason why. Josh enjoyed sex, yeah, but he also made it clear he wasn't going to open himself up to a relationship again. The thought made me heavy with sadness for him.

I couldn't imagine having loved someone so much. Even though the loss broke his heart, part of me was envious that he'd cared for someone that deeply.

Sleep didn't find me, and Josh was only out a few hours before he began to wake up. I'd just lain there the whole time, watching him and thinking, making sense of my thoughts and desires when it came to Josh Westbrook.

"You didn't sleep?" he asked when his eyes fluttered open.

"Couldn't really."

"Shit. Sorry. You didn't have to stay here with me."

But I'd wanted to. It was one of the realizations I'd come to while Josh was out. I'd wanted to stay close to him and inhale his scent and feel the warmth of his hand on my hip. Maybe even wanted to know what his lips tasted like and the skin of his throat and how it would feel to nuzzle his neck.

Annd, it was time to shove those thoughts out the window. A really high one.

I rolled over and got out of bed.

It was late morning, and Josh insisted on making us breakfast. We ate outside, took turns showering as usual, then headed into Chimney Rock Village to walk around the Lake Lure Arts Festival, an outdoor event where booth after booth lined the streets, filled with crafts, homemade furniture, food trucks, and more.

It was a little awkward between us, the conversation slower than it had been, a little stilted, but we both maneuvered our way around it without taking it head-on.

We got to a booth that had these small, silver turtle figurines that couldn't have been more than half an inch or so. Each had a white square of paper attached. Josh picked one up and turned it over. The black writing on the bottom said: *This little turtle will bring you luck. Carry him in your pocket, and he'll make each day brighter.*

“Didn't Kell tell me you used to love turtles when you were a kid?” Josh asked.

I smiled at the memory. “Yeah, I did. I used to drag him ‘turtle hunting’ down by the water, which really just meant we'd go search for them, watch them a bit, and leave them be. Don't really know why I liked them so much.”

“Maybe because you knew they were lucky.” He shrugged. “I'll take this, please,” he told the woman behind the table.

I watched Josh as he paid, thinking he was going to keep it, but instead he reached over and pushed it into my pocket.

“There you go. Something to remember our trip by.”

He went to walk away, but my hand shot out, my fingers wrapping around his wrist. “I don't... I wouldn't need anything to help me remember. And thank you. Not just for the turtle; for everything.” I didn't know why that damn gift made my heart beat faster and my insides somehow feel softer. It

was a three-dollar figurine, but it was from him, and he'd remembered I liked turtles even though it was likely something Kell mentioned in passing.

Josh winked. "No problem, sweetheart." He was making light of the moment on purpose. I knew he was. And the endearment...*sweetheart*. It wasn't the first time he'd used it. He called Kellan *babe* all the time, so that didn't mean anything either, but damned if it didn't fill me with... Fuck, I didn't know. Some kind of something. Not the same way *Grumpy G* or *Griffy* did.

We finished at the festival, the turtle heavy in my pocket the whole time. We drove into Asheville and spent some time exploring the city before heading back to the cabin. It was our last night. Since we'd be going home the next day, we decided to spend the evening relaxing.

So we didn't waste the food, we warmed up the chicken for dinner.

"How are things going at the bar?" Josh asked when we were eating.

"Good. Miguel is handling things well." I'd made sure to check in with him every day. "The gym?"

"I assume fine. I told them to call me if anything was wrong, and they haven't. This is a vacation, remember?"

I chuckled. "Show-off." Josh's gym meant just as much to him as my bar did to me. I didn't doubt that for a second, but he was better at stepping away.

As we washed the few dishes together, Josh said, "How about the hot tub tonight? We haven't used it at all."

"Are you kidding? I'm not leaving this place without using it at least once."

So that's what we did. We got it uncovered and ready to be used, before changing. Josh grabbed us each a beer, and we padded out to the deck and climbed in. The hot water sloshed against my body as I fiddled with the controls to turn the jets

on against my back. The sun was setting, so it was the perfect time. Blue LED lights glowed from beneath the water.

“This is perfect.” Josh closed his eyes and dropped his head back. He had the jets going against his back as well.

“Yeah, yeah it is,” I admitted. I took a drink of my beer, looking at him again. At Josh, this man who’d been a part of my life for years now, but whom I wanted in new ways. Ways that weren’t just unfamiliar when it came to him specifically, but with anyone. It might have been because of our friendship, but still, it wasn’t as if I didn’t have a bond with Chase, Law, Remy, Knox, and Callum, so what made Josh stand out? “So...I think I owe you my own truth because of last night.”

Josh opened his eyes but didn’t sit up, just looked at me with his head tilted back. “You don’t owe me anything. If you give me something, I want it to be because you want to, not because you feel you have to.”

“I know. Shit. I didn’t mean it like that.” Josh nodded and sat up then, as if he could tell it was important. I took a couple of long swallows from my bottle. “This is a little weird for me and pretty personal. It’s not like what you shared with me, but yeah, Christ. I’m feeling stupid right now.”

“Don’t feel that way. Ever. I would never make you feel that. Whatever you want to say is important to you, and as your friend, that makes it important to me.”

Damn, he was a good man. I wasn’t sure everyone saw how incredible Josh really was.

“I’ve always felt...different.”

His brows drew together. “What do you mean?”

“Just...it’s hard to put into words. Sexually, I guess. I never really felt the way most of the guys I know did. The physical reaction to sex is there, and it’s pleasing, obviously, but on the other hand, I don’t really get it. The urge to, well, fuck or hook up the way my buddies do. When Chase and I were younger and we’d go out, that was his goal for the night, to find someone and get off, but it wasn’t the same for me, and

not even only when it came to sex. I never really felt physically attracted to people the same way everyone around me seemed to.”

“So you’re ace? Or on the ace spectrum? There’s nothing wrong with that. It’s who you are. A lot of things are making more sense now, though, and I feel I owe you an apology for my behavior.”

“No, no.” I shook my head. “I don’t expect that and never felt uncomfortable or anything. The thing is, I didn’t know if I was ace, demisexual, or what. I wasn’t aware those were even a thing until Kellan told me. He mentioned that with possibly being aromantic. I figured one of those would apply to me, I just didn’t know which. That’s where the guy came in this summer. I even thought maybe I was gay and didn’t realize it. That probably sounds crazy.”

“No, it doesn’t. Not at all. People think of sexuality as this definite set of rules, like you can take a quiz, check boxes, and voilà! You get the answer. It’s not always so cut and dried, and that’s okay. How did it go with him?” His brows pinched together, but I wasn’t sure he noticed it.

“My body reacted physically.” I dropped my head back. “This is so fucking weird.”

“Hey,” Josh said, and I looked at him. “It’s uncomfortable for you, but it’s not weird—you’re not, okay?”

Christ, I hadn’t realized how much I’d needed him to reiterate that until he had.

“Thanks and, well, I would have been able to perform, but up here?” I tapped my head. “I just wasn’t into it. He was attractive, but I didn’t feel it emotionally or mentally, and I need that to want to have sex with someone. I didn’t want him, so I still didn’t have an answer, but...now I think I do. I guess I lean toward demi because I’m attracted to you. I wanted to kiss you yesterday, and if I’d dissected it, I’d have acknowledged wanting to kiss you for a long time now. But it was all muddled in my head—definitions and descriptions and

wants and fears. It hit me hard yesterday, when we were in the lake. When I left, I just drove and thought, and then it all clicked into place, but then there are a whole lot of things that make me worry it's a bad idea, and I don't even know if you feel the same and—"

"I'm attracted to you, Griff. Make no mistake about that. I'd be crazy not to be, but I'm not sure what you're saying you want here, and depending on that, I can't say I'm the right guy for this. Your friendship has come to mean a lot to me. I don't want to lose that, but I also don't know if I can be the man you need—or if I deserve to explore this with you."

"Because of Doug?"

Josh replied with a simple nod.

"I can't figure out what I'm saying I want either, but being attracted to you doesn't mean I'm in love with you. I'm not asking you to devote your life to me. Leave it to you to go there." I said that last part in a teasing voice, because he was cocky and we were us. We had to nitpick with each other. It had become our thing.

Josh chuckled.

I added, "Wanting you this way makes me feel like everyone else, like there's a place where I fit. It's an answer to a question I've had my whole damn life but didn't see it until recently. It's...freeing."

"Jesus Christ, sweetheart. You're gonna kill me here." Josh moved from his spot across the hot tub to the seat beside me. "The thought of kissing you... I don't think you realize how much I want you, how much I've wanted you for a while now, but I gotta be real with you. It scares me too. I've never been scared of that before. The people I hook up with, there's no connection for more, no risk, but there is with you. You're my friend, and you're Kell's brother. And you've seen me. You've seen who I am. I don't have any more to give than that."

He didn't tell me anything I didn't already know, and the truth was, we *were* different. While I wasn't fooling myself

into thinking I wanted a serious relationship with Josh, I was obviously attracted to him. Damned if I didn't want to explore that, to touch and taste and savor, with more than a physical response pushing through my veins.

With desire.

But he was right. There was a lot to consider—our friends, my brother, the fact that my attraction did come from whatever bond we had, from our friendship—yet I wasn't asking for any kind of promises. Josh and I were too different for anything more. Not to mention, I wasn't the guy who'd want to explore this with him while knowing he was screwing around with others.

“Why did it have to be you?” I said, even though I didn't feel it.

“I *am* pretty irresistible,” Josh replied, then, “I wish I could be better for you. I wish I could be who you deserve. I don't know how to give anything more than what I do, not anymore.”

Something came over me then. I reached out, cupped Josh's smooth face. He closed his eyes and burrowed into it before kissing the tips of my fingers. I wasn't sure who moved first, or if we both did at the same time. One minute we weren't kissing and the next our mouths were fused together. My tongue licked at the seam of his lips. He let me in, and we tasted each other, moaned into each other, and all I could think was *yes*, this was what a kiss was supposed to feel like. It wasn't the same as the one I had in the hotel room. It was real.

My whole body was sensitive. My thoughts screamed *more* and *hell yeah* and *finally*. In that moment, I got it, understood why people sought this out, because when your insides were into it too, it was so much more than just a physical response.

It was something I could quickly become addicted to.

As if Josh read my thoughts as soon as I had them, we both stopped kissing but didn't move back. Our foreheads were

pressed together, and we breathed each other's air.

"You're good at that," Josh said with a smile.

"Yeah, I am, aren't I?"

He laughed and pulled away. I missed the contact instantly, which should have told me right then that parting was the right thing to do.

Josh didn't move to the other side of the Jacuzzi again. We sat there, relaxing in the water. We didn't talk about the attraction again, but I knew it was on both our minds.

Eventually, we got out, dried off, and changed. We both went to bed in our underwear again, but this time, I didn't hide the fact that I was taking in the view.

"Jesus, man. You're gonna fucking kill me," Josh said. He was already lying down. He grabbed a pillow and covered his face before screaming into it. I couldn't help laughing. Josh was good at making me do that.

At the moment, I was just riding the high of wanting him so bad and knowing he felt the same about me. Though I guessed Josh wanted a lot of people.

He tugged the pillow away. "What? You're frowning. Why are you suddenly Grumpy G?"

"Nothing." I hit the lights, and Josh pulled the blanket over both of us.

"Griff?"

"Yeah."

"I'm honored...that it's me. The only reason I can't do this is because you're...*more* than the rest of them."

I didn't reply, wasn't sure what to say, but we rolled over to face each other, and when Josh rested his hand on my hip, I pulled him closer. We slept that way, holding each other all night.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Josh

We'd been home about a week, all the while tiptoeing around each other. It was unfamiliar, navigating our relationship since our trip and what we'd admitted to each other—friendship, I meant. Our friendship. It wasn't a relationship.

I hadn't been to the bar at all, which was unlike me. I usually stopped by just to hang out for a little while or to meet Kell there or something, but I chalked it up to the fact that I'd had a busy week at the gym after being gone for several days. Which was true, but not the full truth. It didn't take a genius to figure that out, but I was pretty good at pretending I wasn't as smart as I was. Denial, denial, denial, even if it was only to myself. Just like if I were being honest, I'd admit I let Griff believe something about Doug that wasn't true.

I'd just gotten off work and was waiting for Kell, Nat, and Callum to come by. The four of us were going to have a workout together. It was ridiculous that I was nervous to see Kellan, as if he'd take one look at me and somehow know I'd kissed his brother, wanted to bone him, but turned him down for a hookup because I was all fucked up after losing the only guy I'd ever loved. It was a sign that Griff and I had made the right decision. If things were awkward now, it would only get worse if we started screwing around. Sex had never made something weird for me before, but then, I'd never considered having sex with my best friend's brother. The irony of the situation didn't escape me, considering Kellan, Chase, and Griff had already gone through this when Kell and Chase fell for each other.

I was at the front desk, chatting with Jasmine, when Kell, Nat, and Callum all walked in together. I looked up, my eyes meeting Kell's before I automatically averted them. Yep. I was making this awkward. What in the hell was wrong with me?

I stood and walked around the counter. “Hey, babe.” I kissed Kellan’s temple.

“Hey, you.”

I hugged Natalie next, then said hi to Callum.

“You guys ready for me to show you up?” I teased, only to get three sets of eyes rolling at me.

Callum patted my shoulder. “Whatever you need to tell yourself.”

We headed over to the four open treadmills in the back. I got on the first machine, followed by Kellan, Natalie, then Callum. I was just getting mine going to the warm-up speed when my best friend asked, “So...how was your trip with my brother?” My hand somehow slipped from the handle, accidentally coming down on the Emergency Stop button. The belt halted, and I stumbled, which elicited a “What the fuck was that?” from Kellan.

“Nothing. Hand slipped.” Which wasn’t a lie; it had simply happened, though it coincided, strangely, with him asking me about the trip. I needed to get my shit together. Natalie caught my eye from behind Kellan and frowned. Nothing got past her, damn it. “It was fine.” I got the machine going again. “A few relaxing days in the mountains. He needed it.”

“He did,” Kellan agreed. “I still don’t know how you talked him into it.”

“Have you talked to him since we got back?” It wasn’t a weird question, really, but I sure as shit wasn’t going to look at Natalie to see if she was watching me, just in case.

“Yeah, of course. He said it was fine and told me a bit about what you guys did. You know how Griff is. I really appreciate you taking him, ya know? You’re right, he does need it. I owe you one.”

My stomach twisted. I loved Kell, but Griff was my friend too, and I definitely didn’t want it to seem like I only went away with Griffin as a favor to Kellan. “You don’t have to

thank me. I had fun too. I needed it. And *shh*, don't tell anyone, but Griffin and I are friends as well."

"I think it's obvious to anyone with eyes in their heads that you and Griffin are close," Callum added.

All three of us looked at him, and not gonna lie, my pulse skyrocketed.

"What?" Callum said. "Is that not common knowledge?"

Poor Callum had no clue I was incredibly close to killing him. That would piss Knox off, though, and then I'd have an angry lumberjack on my ass.

"I can't be the only one who sees it," he persisted.

Yes, you could, Callum. Shut up, shut up, shut up.

"Griff is straight," Nat replied.

"Yeah, and so was Knox before I came to town," he countered.

"True, he has a point there. I'm all out of excuses," Natalie teased.

"*Ew*. Gross. Josh isn't..." Kellan made a circle with one hand and pushed his finger in and out of it with the other. "My brother." Then he turned to me. "Oh my God! You're not fucking my brother, are you? Josh, he's not... You don't understand... I can't handle it if..."

"Jesus Christ. I'm not screwing Griff. We're like oil and water when it comes to that. He hates the way I hook up, and I don't see my lifestyle changing." And yet since coming home, I'd turned down two guys who were regulars for me. It was actually pissing me off a bit. Fucking Griff was all up in my head.

"Wait. But would you want to? If Griff wasn't...Griff. Josh, seriously, I—"

When I held up my hand, Kellan stopped talking. "I'm not stupid. I don't even know how we got on this conversation. I'm not having sex with your brother." Truth. "I'm not going

to have sex with your brother.” Unfortunately, that was true too. “And we all know Griffin well enough to admit he would really hate us sitting around and talking about him this way, so can we stop? I don’t even know what makes you think Griff would want to sleep with me.” Which was also kind of true. Well, the first part of my reply was all the way true, and the second part was half true. I was still shocked that Griff was likely demi and seemed to want *me*.

“I’m not trying to be a dick. You know I love you, but he’s my brother.”

“The same way you’re his brother but hooked up with Chase?” I couldn’t stop myself from saying.

“That’s different. I was in love with Chase. You’re one of the most important people in my life, but Griff is... I’m protective of him. I couldn’t handle it if you somehow hurt him, even though I know you would never do it on purpose. I mean, God, I’m supportive if you were serious—dude, that would be awesome if you were serious—but other than that, no. I can’t handle the thought. You and Griff would—”

“Can we stop pretending there’s a me and Griff? How in the hell did this conversation even happen?” Guilt was rattling around inside me, growing with each second.

“I had sex with Miguel!” Natalie blurted.

“What? Girl, he’s hot,” Callum replied.

“I know, right? It just sort of happened. I was at the bar while Griff and Josh were gone, and I stayed late, and...I mean, it’s been a while. Everyone here keeps getting with other men. It’s a little unfair to me,” she teased. “But then he invited me over and...you guys don’t even know. I’m still feeling it.”

Callum and Kellan started rambling on about Miguel and Natalie after that. I looked at her over Kellan’s head, and she gave me a supportive smile. Yeah, Nat would definitely be hitting me up for info later, and I sure as shit didn’t know what I would say to her. In some ways, I wanted to talk to her, to

someone. It sure couldn't be Kellan, but I didn't want to betray Griffin's trust or make this situation any weirder than it already was.

We finished our cardio, then did weight training. Afterward we said a sweaty goodbye before heading our separate ways. We'd be meeting up at Griff's that night. It was the first time in a while that all of us would be there. Just thinking that was another reminder of how everything around us was changing. Our get-togethers used to be multiple times a week. Now Knox and Callum had Logan, and they were busy being dads. Eventually that would be Kellan and Chase too. Remy and Law stayed in more because that was just who they were. I was positive those two would be okay in a world where only the two of them existed. Not that they didn't love the rest of us, they just loved each other that much.

But not Griff and me. In this, it was the two of us on the outside, looking in at the most important people in our lives.

The cold hand of melancholy wrapped around me. Maybe that was it. Maybe that was why Griff was suddenly interested in me. Maybe it was less me and more out of loneliness. The thought was uncomfortable. It made me bristle, an annoying twitch pulsing at the back of my neck.

Goddamn it. I wanted Griff to want *me*.

"Get your shit together, Westbrook," I told myself. Anytime a person started speaking to themselves out loud, there was a problem.

I got home, showered, dressed, and ate. I worked on my newest model car, which, motherfucker—the black Dodge looked suspiciously like Griff's baby.

I lingered at the house longer than I needed to, making sure to get to the bar a little later than everyone else. I didn't know why. It was a dumb thing to do, but hey, I figured it was excusable in this situation.

As I knew they would be, the whole crew was sitting at the bar, in the back corner. Knox, then Callum, Remy, Law, Chase,

Kellan, and Natalie. Griffin and Miguel were behind the bar. I was proud as hell of Griff for hiring someone and taking a little more time to himself than he used to.

I said, “You guys can start having fun now. I’m here.”

“Who are you?” Knox asked.

“Be nice, Knoxy.” I tilted up my chin at him.

“You’re late. Were you with someone?” Kellan asked.

Discomfort pricked at my insides. My eyes darted to Griff briefly. He wasn’t looking at me, just pouring a beer, but I knew he’d heard.

“No. I don’t have sex all the time.”

“Only most of the time?” Law teased. *Thank you very much for that, Lawson.* In his defense, he had no idea what was going on, but still.

“Here you go.” Griff handed me a glass of beer, our eyes not meeting.

“Thanks, Griffy.” I tried to keep my voice light and as natural as it always was when we spoke. “Remy, did he tell you I did the whole meditating thing with him in the mountains?”

“Really? You should go with us sometime. We hike to this secluded spot. It’s really been helping me work through stuff, and I’ve found I’m a lot more creative afterward too.”

“I love it when he gets like that. He’ll write on any and everything because he can’t shut the words off.” Law looked at Remy, and yep, this was one of those moments where there was no one in the world but the two of them.

This foreign, infectious ache of...holy fuck, jealousy throbbed inside me. No, no, no. What was going on with me? Griff had already gotten me all tangled up in feelings I had no business having.

I cleared my throat and took the seat beside Natalie. Her hand came down on my thigh and squeezed. I found myself

placing mine on top of it and holding on in support. “Yeah, maybe I’ll do that sometime,” I told Remy. “How’s Logan?” I asked Knox and Callum. Their eyes lit up like someone shoved the sun up their asses. They were crazy about that kid, which was understandable. He was pretty great.

They chatted about Logan for a while, and then Knox talked more about Carol and Charlie’s plans to move here the next summer. From there, the conversation turned to work and life in general, all of us just shooting the shit and giving each other hell the way we always did.

Miguel came over and talked to us some too. Natalie got all giggly and weird in a way she didn’t usually get with guys she was attracted to, which made me wonder if Miguel was different for her.

“So...what are your intentions with our best friend?” Kellan asked, then eyed me, waiting for me to join in.

“I second that question,” I added.

“Oh my God. You guys are ridiculous.” Natalie rolled her eyes.

“I’m hoping to take her out on a date. Then maybe another one and another one after that,” Miguel replied. Oh, he was good.

“Whew.” Kellan fanned himself. “Is it just me, or was that somehow sexy?”

“Wasn’t just you,” I said playfully, and heard Griff clear his throat. My eyes snagged on him, and the strange urge to apologize hit me, which was all sorts of weird. We weren’t together, and my comment was all in good fun.

“Just remember,” Kellan added, “me and my fiancé-slash-future-baby-daddy love Nat like a sister. And, well, she’s gonna be cooking said baby for us, so you need to treat her right.”

“Ignore him,” Natalie told Miguel.

“Yeah, ignore him,” Chase added. “But also treat Natalie right.”

“I plan to.” Miguel grinned at her. “I didn’t know you had your own group of bodyguards. It’s kind of sexy.”

We all laughed, and I squeezed Natalie’s hand. Yeah, Miguel would be a good fit for her.

My phone dinged with a notification. Damn it. I’d meant to put it on silent. I pulled it out of my pocket to do just that when Chase said, “Tell all your admirers you’re hanging out with us tonight.”

The phone went off again, and Kellan looked over at it. “Yep, Grindr.”

Guilt sludged thick and heavy through my veins. I didn’t have a reason to feel that way, not really. I was a single guy. Griff and I decided not to hook up, but I could sense his stare on me. It was eating through my skin, making me shift and feel exposed in a way I never had before. It felt wrong, just the idea of heading out to meet up with someone, even though it wasn’t something I was considering. I probably should, if only to get things back to the way they were supposed to be, but I didn’t check the messages, instead turning my phone off.

“You heading out?” Griff asked without looking at me.

“Nah, I’m staying.” When I pulled my gaze from him, I noticed Remy, Callum, and Nat looking at me like they knew. Fuck, Remy too?

“Wait. You’re passing up sex for us?” Chase teased, oblivious.

“Yeah, you fuckers better make it worth my while,” I teased back, trying to make everything seem natural, like it was the way it had always been, but it wasn’t. It really fucking wasn’t, and I had no clue what to do about it.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Griffin

Clearly, what I'd admitted to Josh while we were away made shit awkward. We hardly spoke the rest of the night. Sure, we teased each other a bit. We weren't dicks or anything, but things were, for lack of a better term, *off*.

Leave it to me to finally feel this kind of desire for someone, only for it to be the wrong damn person and for me to screw everything up in the process. Maybe this was just how it was supposed to be for me.

The crew stayed for a few hours. When Knox and Callum announced they were leaving, everyone else stood and did the same. My gaze drifted to Josh again, curious if he would go or stay, but he was on his feet too, which gave me my answer. A rolling wave of disappointment washed over me.

We said our goodbyes, mine and Josh's especially short, before they all made their way out. "You and Natalie, huh?" I asked Miguel during a lull in customers.

"She's great. I really like her."

"Will the baby thing bother you?" Maybe it wasn't my place to ask, but I needed to know. I loved Kellan, Chase, and Natalie too much not to worry about how things would go down. Natalie would do anything for Kellan, but I also knew my brother would be crushed if a commitment Nat made to him caused problems with her relationship.

"We're getting a little ahead of ourselves. Natalie and I aren't that serious yet. Can I see it going that way? Yeah, but we have some time ahead of us. But to answer your question, no, it won't. To be honest, it makes me like her even more. My brother is gay. He and his husband used a surrogate. It's the best gift you can give someone."

It was just the answer I needed. Miguel was good people. There was no doubt in my mind about that. “Thanks, man. Sorry for asking.”

“No worries. You’re looking out for the people you love. From what I hear, that’s your MO.”

I shrugged. No reason to deny it.

People began to trickle out of the bar. By closing time, the last customer was paying and Miguel had already begun end-of-day duties, not leaving me much to do. “You can go ahead and get out of here,” I told him. “I can finish up by myself.”

“You sure? I don’t mind staying.”

I waved him off. “Nah, it’s all good.” I probably wouldn’t leave right away anyway. I’d just go home and not be able to sleep.

“Thanks. I appreciate it.”

I walked Miguel to the door and locked up behind him. I just got to the register when my phone buzzed in my pocket. I tugged it out, making sure Josh’s turtle stayed in place. I didn’t know why I carried the damn thing around like it really was lucky, but I had ever since he gave it to me.

Let me in, Grumpy G.

I turned away from the text and went back to the door. I unlocked it, and sure enough, there was Josh. “What are you doing here?”

“Don’t really know. Made it home. Stayed there about half an hour, then came back.”

“Where have you been the whole time?” It had been longer than thirty minutes since our friends left.

“Outside in my damn car. I parked around back so no one saw me sitting there. What the fuck even is that? Why did I sit in my car for nearly two hours, away from view like there was something to hide? Christ, I don’t know what’s wrong with

me.” Josh ran a hand through his hair and began to pace the room.

After putting the locks into place, I went over to the bar and poured two shots of whiskey. With a soft *thud*, I set them on the counter, then went around and sat on one of the stools. I waited, and a moment later Josh came over. We each picked one up, clanked them together, then swallowed them down.

“I wasn’t gonna meet a guy,” Josh said without looking at me.

“You have every right to.” The words were bitter, unfamiliar jealousy curling deep inside me, but they were true.

“But I wasn’t. That’s what matters.”

“You made sure to download your app again.” I shook my head. “Shit. I’m sorry. I had no right to say that.”

“Because I’m trying to get you off my mind!” Josh raised his voice, sending a shockwave through me. “Still, I turned everyone down. I keep saying no.” He sighed, dropped his head back, and I took a minute to admire the long column of his throat, the way his Adam’s apple moved. Josh’s eyes met mine again, fire and want colliding between us. “I can’t get you outta my damn head.”

My reaction was purely instinct. I didn’t plan it, didn’t give myself time to think or come to the decision. I shoved out of my seat, the stool toppling over and hitting the floor with a clatter. I grabbed Josh’s shirt and pulled him to me, crushing our mouths together. I was greedy for him, felt like I was starving. My hand went to the back of Josh’s head, and I threaded my fingers through his hair. I pulled him closer, felt the hard press of his lips, the light stubble on his face, which he didn’t keep as religiously as me, and wondered if he enjoyed the friction of my facial hair against his skin. It was foreign to me, but oh, so fucking good.

Josh pushed me back against the bar, the end of the counter digging into my body. I didn’t care, not when he was flush

against me, hard and grasping, hands on my hips and mouth devouring me.

This was what a kiss was supposed to *feel* like—an answer to a need you didn't know you had. Like the best kind of pleasure, nothing but perfect sensation quenching your thirst and feeding your hunger. If it always felt like this, I'd never stop.

Josh's mouth journeyed down my throat. "Christ, what are we doing?"

"I'll fucking throttle you if you stop."

Josh laughed into the crook of my neck, his breath puffing against my skin. My own soft laughter bubbled in my chest. God, this felt good, so damn good. "Mmm. Bossy Griff. Me likey. What are you going to do to me if I stop?" Josh teased.

Instead of replying, I held his face and slammed our mouths together again. Josh didn't hesitate, his tongue slipping inside and moving expertly against mine. He felt so good, tasted so good.

He tightened his body against mine, making the counter dig into my back. I must have made a noise because he pulled back slightly. "Shit. I lost my head for a second. Wasn't thinking."

No, no, no, echoed through my brain. I wasn't ready to lose this, didn't want to stop this raw, intense pleasure burning through me. I wanted it seared into my skin, into my thoughts, so I could hold on to it and remember what true passion felt like.

I chased Josh's mouth with mine, and he let me catch it. We kissed as I walked him backward. I had no idea where I was going and it didn't matter, not as long as I got to take this feeling with me.

We stopped when the wall made us, Josh's back hitting it with a *thud*. We laughed into the kiss, and it was so damn exhilarating. I hadn't realized how broken I felt until everything fell into place, and I felt *this*, knew I *could* feel this.

“I want to get on my knees for you.” Josh kissed one corner of my mouth, then the other.

My brain scrambled at the thought. I couldn’t form words, even though one was screaming through my head—*yes*.

So I nodded. Josh smiled, this happy, giddy sort of grin, before pressing another kiss to my lips.

He knelt down, his hands going for the button, then the zipper on my pants as I looked down at him, watched him work. God, we were doing this. I couldn’t fucking believe we were doing this, but I sure as shit didn’t plan to stop.

Josh opened my jeans, then tugged them down with my briefs, my cock bursting free. “Oh fuck. Did you do this just for me?” he teased.

I rested an arm on the wall, forehead against it, watching Josh. “You’re ridiculous.”

“You like it.” He wrapped a hand around me and stroked once. I hissed out in response. “Jesus, this is a nice cock, sweetheart.”

I was sure my brain hadn’t caught up with what was really going on, that I wasn’t letting myself acknowledge it because if I did, I might do something to stop it. In that moment, I just wanted to savor this feeling, savor Josh, so yeah, I didn’t let myself contemplate what happened from there. Instead, I let go, allowing my instincts to take over. “Why don’t you shut up and suck it, then?”

Josh just shook his head and smiled, his grin so damn comforting, it settled the nerves I hadn’t known I felt. “I think I’m creating a monster.”

“Do you regret it?”

“Not a single bit.” Josh cupped my sac, wrapped a hand around my shaft, and leaned in. His tongue lashed across my slit, the bead of precome disappearing with the swipe. I groaned. He hadn’t even done much, and I already wanted to empty my balls.

Josh let go of me, unbuttoning and unzipping his own jeans as he licked me, root to tip, twisting his tongue around my glans and pulling greedy sounds out of me. He tugged his pants down his thighs, taking himself out too, and damned if I didn't whimper at the sight. I hadn't whimpered during sex in my whole life.

"You like that?" Josh asked, stroking himself. I should have known he'd be a verbal lover. "Do you?"

"Fuck yes," I admitted.

"That's what I like to hear. You got me hard as a fence post."

Josh fondled his cock, and I watched. Fuck, he was long, longer than me. His glans red, his shaft curved slightly, veins running along the length of him.

"This is a thick piece of meat, Griff." Josh rubbed me, tightened his hold. "I can take it, though." He leaned in.

Josh's mouth stretched around my dick and... "Holy fuck. Jesus. Fuck. I can't." He took me to the back of his throat, didn't work up to it or anything, just deep throated me, humming around my dick, my balls against his chin.

I was going to die. Sex with Josh was... There were no words.

He sucked me, bobbing his head and swallowing around me. Those steel-gray eyes of his looked up with pride in them because he knew what he was doing to me, knew I was losing my mind, and nothing had ever felt so good, and why in the fuck hadn't we tried this a hundred years ago?

His mouth was so hot, so wet, and he knew just how to suck me, how to touch my balls, playing with them and gently pulling them. My world was spinning. I could hardly stay on my feet. My dick wanted to live in his mouth, like maybe we could stay connected like this all the time.

I didn't realize I was holding back until he pulled off and said, "Let loose. Give it to me."

And I did. I pulled my hips back and thrust into his mouth. Josh gagged a bit, but when I went to stop, he wrapped his hands around my thighs and didn't let me, so I kept going. We found a rhythm together, me fucking into his mouth and him smiling around my cock and taking it.

I threaded my fingers through his hair and pulled and savored, and Jesus, my sexual world was blown open in that moment. It wasn't just physical, but this *need* I felt deep in my gut, living in my bones.

Josh started to jack himself, and that just fueled me. He was stroking, and I was fucking his face in this way I'd never done with another soul in my life. It was like he'd set something free inside me.

My balls started to draw tight, my orgasm going from this distant urge to an immediate need. "I'm gonna... Should I pull out?"

Josh shook his head, so I didn't, just kept going until my vision blurred and my balls let loose, my load spurting deep into his mouth in pulse after pulse. Josh swallowed each one down, making me cry out and shoot again.

When my dick slipped out of his mouth, Josh dropped his head back against the wall. He stared up, eyes firmly on me as he sped up the strokes on his shaft, then tensed as the first spurt shot out, landing on his T-shirt, followed by another and another, his load dripping down his hand.

Then...then he looked up at me, and I looked down at him...and it was clear our lust was suddenly taking a back seat to our common sense as we took each other in like, *What now?*

"I..."

"I wanted that," I interrupted him. "Please don't tell me it was a mistake." My logical mind knew it was, but I couldn't hear it. I'd just enjoyed sex in a completely new way. The last thing I wanted to hear was that it had been an error in judgment.

“I wanted it too,” Josh admitted, then leaned in, licking the left-behind come from my shaft. He pulled up my underwear, tucking me into them, followed by my pants.

“I’ll get you a towel.” I walked away, realization hitting me. I’d just gotten blown by Josh Westbrook in the middle of my damn bar.

I tossed him a clean cloth, and he wiped himself off before standing up and pulling up his underwear and jeans. I threw the towel in the trash, and we were quiet again, the air around us thick and uncomfortable.

“I, um, really didn’t touch anyone else all week. I’ve been thinking about you.”

His words were like a hit to the chest, stealing my breath.

“But I still can’t... If we do this again, it can’t be more than sex for me. Even trying scares the shit out of me. I’ve never been afraid of sex, but I am with you... Still, I want you. Damned if I don’t want you, Griff, and I don’t want to walk away from that. It makes me feel selfish as fuck, because you’re... You don’t do this, and you’re Kellan’s brother, and my friend. Fuck, you’re my friend, and I don’t want to hurt you.” His voice broke, the truth and pain clear in the crackle of his words.

It felt like a repeat of the same conversation we had at the cabin—the basics of it at least. Nothing had changed, yet everything had.

“You’re my friend too. If you’re selfish, I am as well because I know this is...worrying for you, because of what you told me and our friendship, but I don’t want to stop. I want you too. God, I want *sex*. What we just did? I’ve never experienced sex like that before. It’s hard to even put into words, but it wasn’t like going through the motions; it was this intense desire like nothing I’ve ever known. I’m not ready to let that go, but hell, Josh. I’m not asking for anything more than you can give. You have sex with people all the time. Why am I different?”

“Because you’re you,” Josh said simply, as if that explained everything, which raised my hackles.

“Please don’t use what I told you against me like that.”

“I’m not. I didn’t mean it that way, but that’s a concern too. Do you know what Kellan said to me today? *Don’t hurt my brother*. We were working out, and Callum and Nat said something that made him think something had gone down between us, and he told me not to hurt you, that he couldn’t live with it if I did.”

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t need Kellan to take care of me.”

“Kellan never needed you to take care of him, but that didn’t stop you.”

He had a point, but I shook it off. “Yeah, and he fucked my best friend, and hid it from me. Would have kept hiding it if I hadn’t found out another way. Why are Kellan and Chase and everyone else able to have this—to fuck around with someone whenever they want—but I’m not? I think the reason this works with you is *because* we’re friends. There’s that bond or connection or whatever. But it’s not anything more than that. This isn’t new for you, but it is for me.”

Josh took a deep breath, closed his eyes. “This is new for me.”

I paused, took a step closer. “What do you—”

“Nothing. Just the friend thing, the kind of friendship we have and the way we’re tied together, is all I meant.” Josh began walking toward me. He cupped my face with so much tenderness, then pressed a slow, soft kiss to my lips. “You’ve got too nice a dick. I don’t think I can walk away from this.”

“From my cock, huh?”

“Yeah, I mean, you’re annoying. Your dick, on the other hand...” He palmed me through my jeans, and I growled in response. “What are you saying you want here? We just... secretly hook up? A friends-with-benefits thing?”

“No.” I shook my head. “Yeah, on the friends-with-benefits thing, but no on the secret part. You’ve never hidden sex, so why would you hide it with me?” The thought hurt, but I tried not to show it. “We’re two grown-ass men, something Kellan has told me more than once. We’re allowed to have sex if we want. We both know what this is. It’s what you do all the time.”

He flinched.

“I didn’t mean—”

“No, it’s true.”

“It probably won’t take long for us to get tired of each other. Kellan and everyone else will have to understand.” My brother had no room to get angry with me or Josh. I just... For once I wanted to feel like everyone else. I wanted to throw caution to the wind and have fun and hook up without all the questions and feeling less than. I wanted to savor this feeling, and it made sense to do it with Josh. I wanted to feel free. Christ, I’d never in my whole life felt free, had I? It had always been about someone else, but this, Josh, this was just for me.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” he asked.

“No, but when have I ever done something simply because I wanted it, and without worrying about everyone else or the consequences?”

“So you want to do me because you want me?” he teased.

“Strangely, yes. But only if you want it too. I don’t want us to do something you don’t feel comfortable with.” Josh had a history I would never understand.

He sighed, purposefully overdramatically. “I guess... I mean, sex with a rugged, sexy guy. It could be worse.”

“I don’t want to share,” I admitted. “If that’s a deal breaker, let me know. I might not be enough for—”

“Shut up, Griff. I said no to numerous people just thinking of the possibility of having sex with you. You’ve already had

me breaking my rules without even asking me to.”

He pressed his forehead to mine, and I couldn't help but kiss him. It felt so damn good to be able to do that.

“I need to be the one to tell Kellan,” he said.

“You sure?”

“Yeah, yeah I am.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Josh

I was a liar.

I'd been up all night, my thoughts spinning circles around my brain. About Doug, how I'd felt about him, what I'd lost. The fact that I didn't deserve this, what Griff was giving me, but I still wouldn't say no.

That wasn't what made me a liar, though. No, that was what I'd said to Griff. He'd told me this was different for him, and I'd admitted it was for me too. Then I'd said it was the friend thing, but that wasn't the case. The truth was, I was afraid I could fall for Griff. Hell, maybe in some ways I already had, maybe I'd been slowly falling for months, with each joke, each tease, each fishing trip and conversation, and I hadn't known it. So yeah, this was different for me because I never had this. Since losing Doug, I'd been afraid of getting hurt, of feeling something, of wanting more. And now that maybe I did, I had no idea what to do about it.

All I did know was I didn't want to stop. I wanted this, wanted Griff so damn bad, it was like this deep-seated ache only he could cure.

Fuck, he even had my thoughts all screwed up.

Spin, spin, spin. That's what my thoughts were doing all night, and now I was heading to Kell's. The night before Chase had mentioned he worked today, and I knew Kellan was off.

I'd stopped and grabbed us coffee and doughnuts, and a few minutes later I was pulling into his driveway. I needed to do this now, today, before I jumped out of my skin. This was so fucked, and I hoped it wasn't a mistake, but I couldn't walk away. Not now.

I killed the engine, grabbed the drink carrier and bag of sugar, and got out. When I knocked I heard Bowie's deep bark in the background, and then the door opened.

Kellan smiled, his chestnut hair messy and looking sleep-mussed, but I was sure he'd been awake. He was wearing flannel pajama bottoms and a T-shirt. His eyes scanned me up and down, landing on the food, then my face, and his gaze turned serious. "No." He shook his head, then turned and walked inside.

Damn it. I should have known he would figure it out. "Babe..."

"You're fucking my brother! I told you I didn't want you to fuck my brother, Josh, not unless you're in love with him. I can't risk losing you, but Griff... You don't get it. God, out of all the guys you can have, why Griff?"

"Don't you think he wondered the same thing when Chase started fucking you?"

"That was different. I was in love with Chase. I always had been. Jesus Christ, I can't believe this. Give me my damn coffee."

A small smile teased my lips as I handed it over.

"Don't do that. Don't smile at me, Joshua Westbrook." Kellan snatched the lidded cup from my hand.

"The full name, huh? You're pulling out the big guns."

He sighed, walked over to the couch, and sat down. I took a step toward him, but he stopped me with, "Bring the doughnuts." I held back another smile as I carried the bag and my drink over, joining him. Kellan didn't speak right away. He took a drink, then another. "Everything is going to change now."

"No, it won't."

"Griff is—"

"A grown-ass man," I cut him off.

“I *know* that. Don’t you think I know that? I’ve spent my life telling Griff I can handle shit on my own. I’m not one to jump into someone else’s business or try and run their lives for them, but...it’s Griff. And he’s not built like you, Josh. Maybe it makes me a dick to say that, but we both know it’s true.”

We did. He was right. But what he didn’t know was that I wasn’t built this way either. I’d turned this way to protect myself.

“Are you in a relationship with him?” I shook my head. “Serious?” I did it again.

“We’re having fun.” It was the only answer I could give.

Kell looked at me, his brows knitted together. “And Griff wants that? He wants to fuck around with you with no strings?”

Yeah, it sounded crazy to me as well. I couldn’t make sense of it, why Griff would choose me. Still, Kellan’s words stabbed into me over and over. All that was missing was creepy horror-movie sounds in the background. “Do you think I would do it without his consent? Do you really think I would do something I knew would hurt Griffin or make me lose you? If that’s what you think, then you don’t know me as well as I thought.”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it. Most of the time, people don’t set out to hurt others. It just happens. Intent is rarely part of the equation. I’m just—”

“Looking out for your brother. I get it.”

“If you told me it was serious, I wouldn’t bat an eye. Fuck, I’d be *giddy*. We’re already like brothers, and I want Griff happy. I don’t think he is. I don’t think he ever has been.”

“I want that too,” I admitted. For the first time in years, I wondered if I was truly happy as well. “Being demi doesn’t mean Griff is in love with everyone he has sex with or enjoys sex with.”

A flash of surprise lit up Kellan's eyes. "He told you he's demi?"

Shit. I wasn't sure if I should have said that or not. Griffin had said Kellan was the one who mentioned the term to him in the first place. "Just know that I'm not stupid, okay? Have a little faith in me, and have some in Griff too. If we're doing this, it's because we both want it, and we both know what the score is. We know what we're doing." Though I didn't really know if we knew that or not. I hoped we did. I hoped this wasn't a mistake. "I promise you I have Griff's best interests at heart. He'll come first, babe. Always."

Kellan nodded.

After setting my drink on the coffee table, I scooted until my back rested against the couch. Kellan followed, leaning against me. I wrapped my arm around him, and he leaned his head against my chest. "Everything is changing."

Yeah, yeah it was. Everything had been changing for a while—except me and Griff. We understood each other in that way. "That's because we're getting old. We're like thirty now. That shit happens."

"Maybe things will change between you and Griff. Maybe you'll—"

"Don't, Kell. Don't do that, okay? Me and Griff will do what we do, and that has to be separate from me and you." Because I knew what he was going to say—that maybe Griff and I would be serious, that maybe we'd end up like him and Chase, or Law and Remy, or Knox and Callum. But it was different for me. I didn't have that to give. I felt like I was stretched too thin—Doug and Griff and Kellan, this tangle in my brain.

"Okay, but I have to say one more thing because I'm me and I wouldn't be me if I didn't. It's kinda perfect when you think about it—like things have come full circle. I fell in love with my brother's best friend. It makes sense that he should fall in love with mine too. Only to keep the pattern, that means

you have to fall for your best friend's brother, the way Chase did. Can you make that happen?"

I chuckled. This was the Kellan I knew and loved. "Is there like a button I push for that? A god I summon or something?"

"Hmm. Maybe I'll take up witchcraft. I can conjure up a love potion."

Fucking Kellan. "Shut up and eat a doughnut."

"I feel like someone is always telling me to shut up." He pulled away, and I handed him some sugary bread. I grabbed one for myself, and we each took a bite, quiet for a moment. Then Kellan broke the silence with, "I've been thinking about this all wrong, ya know?"

"Oh really?" I cocked a brow.

"I think so... I know you, Josh, as well as I know myself. If you're doing this with Griff, then I think he means more to you than you're willing to admit. I don't know why I didn't see it before, but it's true, isn't it? You're scared. What are you scared of?"

The hairs on my arms stood on end, my chest tight and achy. I wanted to tell him I was scared, that I did care. I wanted to tell him about Doug, but if I did, Kellan would tell me I couldn't hold on forever and that it wasn't my fault, all sorts of things I couldn't hear. So I rolled my eyes, pretended he was off track, and replied, "Commitment? That's pretty scary. Or maybe *crazy* is a better word."

He rolled his eyes.

"You don't know what you're talking about. I'm not afraid of anything."

But I was.

I stuffed a bite in my mouth. We ate and finished our coffee. We dropped the subject of Griff after that, except every once in a while when Kellan would tease me.

Things were almost normal between us, if slightly stilted, like there had been a shift. He knew I was screwing around with his brother, and he worried about Griffin's heart. I hoped that wouldn't always be between us now.

When I left his house, I got out to the main road before I pulled over to the side, picked up my phone, and dialed. She answered on the third ring. "Joshua, how are you? It's been a while since we heard from you."

"I'm doing good, Annie. Sorry. Things have been crazy. I should stay in contact better."

"I always enjoy hearing from you. I hope you always know that, but you don't have to apologize for time passing. You were always so good to Doug. It's been twelve years now. Not everyone would keep in contact at all."

I closed my eyes, rubbed a hand over my chest, and hoped it settled my rapid breathing. "I'll always keep in touch." We were quiet for a moment before I asked, "How is he?"

"No change. He's still in a vegetative state. No changes in his brain activity. After all this time, I guess I don't expect there to be, but... I know there's no real odds of him getting better. I know I should let him go. Frank is...well, you know how Frank is, but Doug's my boy. I can't do it."

My eyes started to water, but I swiped it away. Jesus, this was still so goddamned hard. I couldn't close my eyes without seeing Doug in that bed, the machines, knowing he was there but not, alive but not living.

"Josh? Are you there?"

I cleared my throat. "Yeah, sorry. He's your son. You love him. It's understandable."

"Doug cared about you so much, Josh. He loved you. You were his very best friend."

I was in love with him, and I can't move on.

"I miss him," I admitted.

“I do too.” I could hear the tears in her voice. “Anyway, he wouldn’t want us to do this. What’s new with you? Do you have anyone special yet?”

I was out to everyone in my life except Doug’s parents. Not long after everything went down with Doug, my parents left the Raleigh area, and they’d lost contact with his parents.

“No, ma’am,” I replied, when what I wanted to say was, *I loved your son, and he loved me. We were together, and now I don’t know how to move on. For the first time, I think I want to, and I can’t figure out how to make amends. Tell me it’s okay to move on.*

We spoke for a few more minutes before I made an excuse to go. I wiped the leftover tears from my eyes, pulled my car back onto the road, and left.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Griffin

I was making lunch when there was a knock. A quick glance around the living room told me there wasn't a stray T-shirt there waiting for me, so I just headed to the door and looked through the peephole. A tremble slid down my spine like a caress when I saw it was Josh.

Fucking Josh Westbrook. What in the world was going on? Despite what had gone down last night, I still couldn't believe this foreign place in which we'd found ourselves together. This place where I sure as hell liked to be.

I pulled the door open. He crossed his arms and leaned against the jamb. "Hey, Grumpy G. You miss me?"

"So bad that I wasn't sure I would survive. I was actually in there crying, trying to work through how I would ever go a day, an hour, a minute without you."

"Don't worry, it's not just you. I tend to have that effect on people."

"Is there some kind of pill for that?" I teased, and he laughed. A rumble of laughter started deep in my chest too as I motioned for him to come inside. When I closed the door, I realized I was glad he'd come. That maybe a part of me had needed him to come. I was still adjusting, still finding my way around how I felt, and what we were, and what we'd said. I didn't like being uncertain about anything. Most people didn't, I figured, but I was used to having the answers, used to finding them when I didn't have them, but where Josh was concerned, I was in unfamiliar waters without a compass; without even knowing how to drive the boat.

The house was set up so you walked into the living room first. The stairs were to the left by the door, then the dining

room, and the kitchen was behind the living room. There was a couch to the right, two chairs, and a TV on the wall. Josh leaned on the back of the couch, crossing his arms again, and damned if my gaze didn't snag on how his long-sleeved shirt stretched across his chest and his biceps as he did so. I thought about his nipple piercings, wishing I had taken the time to enjoy them the night before.

"No regrets?" he asked after a moment. "It's okay if you have them. We can work through it, or if you changed your mind, then we stop. This is your ball game."

His words didn't surprise me. Josh was the type to always look after others. "I'm pretty sure this is a team sport and we're on the same one."

"Yeah, but I'm not a rookie," Josh replied.

"That doesn't mean you don't get any say in how the game gets played." I didn't want this to only be about me and what I wanted. I needed Josh to want me too.

He gave a simple nod before saying, "No regrets. I want you. Maybe more than I've ever wanted anyone. It's fucking with my head some, but I don't want to walk away. That enough truth for you?"

It wasn't like I'd never had people attracted to me before. There had been women I'd dated and guys who gave me second and third looks too, but hearing Josh say it enticed something in me, made heat curl deep in my gut. "Say it again."

He grinned. "It's like that, huh? You're gonna be a bigger handful than I thought?" I nodded. Josh pushed off the back of the couch and walked closer, stood all up in my space, the soft scent of sugar blending with his vanilla and cedar. "I want you."

"The rest of it too."

"Maybe more than I've ever wanted anyone, you cocky bastard. Isn't that supposed to be my role?"

I wanted to ask him to say it again and again because those words mirrored how I felt. This deep desire for him was a craving I'd never had; one I wasn't sure could be satisfied. "No regrets," I confirmed. Then I reached out, cupped his face with my hands. He had shaved, his skin smoother than it had been the night before. When I leaned in, Josh tilted his head toward mine. Our lips pressed together, a flood of passion and need dragging me under. Yes. This. God, I never knew just kissing could feel this incredible.

Our tongues swiped at each other. Josh's hands went to my hips, and he groaned into my mouth. My cock started to swell, my pulse a sharp staccato against my skin.

When we pulled away, I wanted to drag Josh back to me. Lay him down and explore his body, chasing the pleasure that had escaped me my whole damn life.

He broke the moment with, "I talked to Kell."

My heart dropped. No matter how brave a front I put up, I needed Kellan to understand this, to accept it, because damn, I wanted him in my corner, but I also wasn't sure if this could hurt him. "Okay. Tell me about it while I finish lunch. I'm making Italian subs."

Josh nodded and followed me into the kitchen. We washed our hands, and I continued putting together the food as he said, "It went okay. He was shocked, and not gonna lie, he's worried."

"He's not pissed at you, right? He doesn't have the right to be. It already didn't sit well with me to let you deal with it, but I won't have him taking it out on you."

"My hero," Josh teased, and I rolled my eyes. "Seriously, though, you don't have to be the superhero in every situation. I can take care of myself, and like I told you at the cabin, you deserve someone to watch out for you too."

I didn't know why he was making such a big deal about what I'd said. "I'm not trying to be anything other than what I am. I'm not trying to save the day. I just want to be fair."

“There’s not an unfair bone in your body, Griffin Caine.” Josh pressed against me from behind. I closed my eyes, savoring the heat of him, the press of his lips against the back of my neck.

“This is quite the change from us griping at each other and flipping each other off.”

“We can do that too, if you want. It’s kind of fun.”

I chuckled. He stepped away, making me miss the contact instantly. Josh was quickly becoming addictive.

We finished preparing lunch and ate sandwiches and chips. He told me how it went with Kellan, and as he did, something felt off with him. I couldn’t put my finger on what it was, but there was this edge of sadness to him I wasn’t even sure he knew he showed. Or maybe I was losing my damn mind. “You okay today?” I finally asked.

He frowned like he hadn’t expected me to ask or notice. “Yeah, just working through some shit in my head, is all.”

“Anything I can help with?”

“You getting naked would do the trick.” Josh waggled his eyebrows playfully.

Where a few weeks ago his comment would have grated on my nerves, now it set off sparks beneath my skin. “Always thinking about sex, huh?” I joked.

“Have you seen you? I think it’ll be impossible to keep sex off my brain.”

We both laughed. Somehow I could tell he was kidding. Not that I didn’t think Josh would be game if I got naked, but it seemed like he was trying to deflect. “We have the same days off,” I mused. It was Sunday, and we’d both have today and the next day.

“It’s almost like it’s meant to be.”

“Do you have plans?” This was supposed to be about sex, and I wanted the sex, really fucking bad, but Josh was also my

friend. I wanted to spend some time with him, wanted to try and make him feel the smile he was currently using to hide whatever he was upset about.

“I do now,” Josh countered. “Where are you taking me?”

Well, shit. I wasn’t sure about that. An idea pulled at the back of my brain, though, something I hadn’t done in a long time. “The fair is in town. Do you like that kind of stuff?”

A grin spread across Josh’s face. “Aw, Griffy. You’re asking me on a real date, aren’t you? Will you kiss me on top of the Ferris wheel?”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re ridiculous.”

“But I make you smile. I don’t know how I didn’t see that before.”

“Here we go with the cocky stuff again.”

“Oh, you mean the truth? Yes, I’m a fan.”

“You know what? I changed my mind. I don’t want to go out with you.”

When Josh replied, his voice was more serious again. “Yeah, Griff, you do.” Damned if he wasn’t right. “Guess it’s a good thing I want to go out with you too.”



Josh hung out downstairs while I went up to shower and get dressed. Part of me wondered if I should shoot a quick message to Kellan since Josh had told him about us. We should talk, and I wanted to make sure everything was okay, but something kept me from making the call. Right then I just wanted to go enjoy my day with Josh. If I called Kellan, that would delay it, and knowing myself, I’d sit around trying too hard to keep things on an even keel even if Kellan did say everything was fine. I had a habit of worrying, as my brother had told me more than once, and right then, I was so damn tired of it. I just wanted to *be*.

Josh said I should be more selfish, and maybe he was right. I didn't know how good I'd be at it or how long it would last, but in that moment, I wanted to be selfish, needed to think about what I wanted. And that was spending time with Josh.

So once I was dressed, I made my way back downstairs, where Josh was sitting on the couch, looking at his phone. He turned, glancing at me over his shoulder with this half smile that strangely made my pulse stutter. "Wanna take my car?" he asked.

"Sure. That works." I pocketed my cell, and we were out the door. I locked up, then climbed into the passenger seat of Josh's Mustang. "You like cars?" I asked as he began driving.

"I do. You're currently sitting in what has always been my dream car. It's a little cliché, I know, but I can't help it."

"Nah, you like what you like. Nothing wrong with that."

Josh looked at me, his brows raised. "I like you." A laugh tumbled from my mouth, and he flipped me off. "Hey, fucker. That was good. Smooth delivery and all."

His reply only made me laugh harder. "Does that shit usually work for you?"

"That shit always works for me, thank you very much. You're lucky I do like you, because you're always bustin' my balls. Another man might get his feelings hurt."

"Aw, don't be like that. You know I like you too." I reached over and poked his side.

It took me a second to realize how effortlessly I was playfully flirting with him, this automatic state I wasn't real familiar with. I felt comfortable with Josh. Enjoyed myself with Josh. I had this chemistry with him that came out of nowhere, but one I'd likely been feeling for a long time. Only before, it came out as frustration that he was sleeping with other people instead of me. What had he done to me?

"I don't believe you. I think you should say it again. In fact, I think you should probably say it at least every hour

while we're out today, just so I know how much you like me."

"Pfft." I rolled my eyes jokingly. "You wish, Westbrook."

"Eh, can't blame a guy for trying."

We chatted as we made our way to the fair. It was late afternoon, and the lines were long. When we got to the cashier, I told Josh, "I got it."

Josh frowned, and for a moment I thought he was going to argue with me about it, but he just nodded. I got us each a wristband so we could ride whatever we wanted, and then we were swept into the crowd.

"What do you want to ride first?" Josh asked.

"I don't know. It's up to you."

"No, it's not. I'm following your lead. I want you to have a good time today."

Christ, he was going to kill me. Josh was...fuck, he was sweet and caring in this way I'd never let myself acknowledge. Sure, I knew he cared about my brother and would do anything for him, but he was directing it at me, and that made it feel like it was *more*. "I want the same for you."

He shrugged, his eyes darting away. "I already am, Griffy."

I stopped walking, looked at him, before reaching out and brushing my thumb over his cheek. This was already getting... complicated. Still, I just dropped my hand and said, "Yeah, yeah, me too."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Josh

I wasn't sure I'd ever seen so much raw joy on Griffin Caine's face. It was surprising he got it from a county fair of all places, but he did, and I was glad I got to be there to see it.

We went from ride to ride. Who the fuck knew he was such a ride junkie, but he really was.

After a few hours, I asked, "You hungry? You want some greasy fair food?"

"Is that really a question? Greasy fair food is the best."

He was like a big kid, something about this atmosphere enabling him to break free. I could have sat there all day and night and just watched him.

We headed over to where the food was and got po'boys. We were lucky enough to find a table. The sun was already going down, evening coming quicker this time of year.

"Did you guys go to the fair a lot when you were kids?" I asked him, and he nodded.

"Every single year. Sometimes we'd even travel to them. It was always something we did as a family. When Chase started coming around, he became part of the tradition too." He chuckled. "Kellan used to follow him around with big, moony eyes. I always knew he had a little crush on him, but I didn't know the extent of it. I probably should have."

"Does it bother you?"

He took a moment to reply, finished chewing his bite and swallowed. "I was pissed at first, but that was my protective instinct. Now it just...fits, ya know? Feels like it was always supposed to be that way. I think maybe, if I'm being honest,

part of me worried I'd lose my best friend or my best friend *and* my brother. I know it sounds silly, but..."

"No, it doesn't. Not at all. It sounds honest."

"Yeah, I guess so." Griffin was looking at me funny, his head cocked a little. I felt the stare deep in my chest, so I looked down at my food and took a bite.

Another question sat on the end of my tongue. I debated whether to ask it or not, but who was I kidding? I was too curious not to. "You never...with Chase? You guys are so close, and I know it's about connection with you. The two of you have more of a connection than damn near anyone I've ever seen so..." It took me a second to realize I'd begun holding my breath as I waited for his answer.

"No. Obviously, we never messed around, since other than the hotel guy, you're my first man, but I didn't feel it—the want for him. I don't know why, really. It's just how I feel. It was always only about friendship with Chase. We're more like brothers."

Why me, begged to fall from my lips. *Why aren't things the same with me?* I sure as shit didn't plan to ask that question, though. I wondered if he knew, what he would say if I did ask him. What was it about me that made Griff want me? Choose me? I'd never questioned that kind of thing before, but everything with Griffin was unique. I decided to change the subject. "Save room for funnel cake. We can't go to the fair without it."

Griff nodded.

"Tell me about the tattoo?" I'd been dying to know about it—the three hanging paper cranes and the designs behind them.

"Well, I'd wanted something for a while but didn't know what. My mom, she used to fold a lot of origami. She was really interested in Japanese culture. Paper cranes are the most popular form of origami. My mom told me the story of a young girl named Sadako. She survived the bombing of Hiroshima when she was two. A few years later she ended up

with leukemia as a result of the irradiation. She started folding paper cranes, planning to make a thousand of them. It was how she worked through the pain and her loss. There are a lot of legends about the paper cranes; one is that when you fold one, your dream is supposed to come true. It sounds silly, I know, but that story meant a lot to my mom, and it felt like a way to honor her.”

“It doesn’t sound silly at all. What would be your dream, Griff? I think that’s part of it too, isn’t it? Whatever it is, you deserve it.”

“Yeah, that’s part of it. Maybe I just thought the tattoo would help me discover what that dream even is. I don’t know.”

“Hmm. I think we should figure that out, sweetheart.”

He rolled his eyes, but his face flushed slightly. It was a beautiful sight.

“Okay, enough mushy stuff. We have things to do,” he teased, and I let him change the subject.

We finished eating, chatting some as we did. When we were done, I nodded toward the games, and he followed. I went straight for the baseball one, where you had to hit the bottles and make them fall.

“You know this is rigged, right?”

“Yeah, but you’ve never played with me. It’s my specialty.”

“I have a feeling you don’t think there’s much you’re not good at,” Griff said.

“Your feeling would be right.”

“Jesus, what am I going to do with you?” He wrapped an arm around me, and I liked the feel of it, the weight and his hard muscles over my shoulders, but he dropped it too quickly.

It only took me one try to win the game.

“Which one would you like?” the attendant asked.

I pointed to a bear with a grumpy face. “That one.” He handed it over, and I instantly put the toy in Griff’s arms. “I won him for you. He looks just like you, Grumpy G.”

Griff laughed before saying, “And fuck you again,” but still, he took the bear and tucked it under his arm. I liked the fact that he really kept it.

We rode a few more rides, including the Ferris wheel, which he did not kiss me on top of. We had funnel cake and then were back in the car. “So...you wanna have a sleepover at my place?” I wagged my eyebrows in an exaggerated way so he knew I was being playful and there was no obligation.

“Yeah, I think I do.” Griff had his Grumpy Bear on his lap and was fiddling with the tag.

“No obligation, though,” I said, to make sure he got what I meant.

“I know. I want to go.”

I wanted him there too.

We were quiet on the ride over. I pulled into the driveway and killed the engine in front of the little blue house I’d inherited from my grandmother. *I wish she’d met Griff.* The thought hit me out of nowhere, so much so that it made me feel slightly dizzy. As much as I loved my grandmother, I’d never wished something like that before.

We got out and went inside. I turned on the light and watched as Griff walked around the space. I realized this was the first time he was in my house. When we started hanging out the two of us, I always ended up at his. And when we met as a group, we were mostly at Knox and Callum’s, Law and Remy’s, or Chase and Kellan’s, as they all lived outside of town and had more property.

“I didn’t know you put together model cars.” He walked over to the table and brushed his finger over my latest.

“Yeah, keeps me busy. I used to do them with Doug.” The admission felt natural, even though speaking out loud about

Doug wasn't something I was used to. It felt good, having Griff know, being able to talk to him.

"That's good." He turned to look at me. "I'm glad you have that."

Griff set Grumpy Bear on the back of the couch, and I walked over to him. "You nervous?" I asked him. This was different from before. The blowjob at the bar had been spontaneous, a moment of combustible heat we couldn't contain. This was a plan.

"No," he admitted before our mouths pressed together.

I lashed my tongue against his lips, and Griffin opened them for me. I dipped inside, and then he did the same with me, this gentle, slow dance between us.

When we parted, I hooked my fingers in the belt loop on his jeans and began pulling him toward my room. Griffin came easily.

I stopped when we were beside my bed, and turned on the small lamp on the table. Sliding my hands under his T-shirt, I lifted it, and Griffin helped me take it off before we removed mine too. I leaned over, kissed the tattooed cranes on his side, wanting his dreams to come true for him.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"I don't know." I nodded, then hissed when he brushed his thumbs over the barbells in my nipples. "I like these."

"Why don't you taste them?"

I started when Griff pushed me to the bed, then smiled. I hadn't expected that, but I wasn't complaining. I lay back on the pillows, and he climbed over me, straddled me, brushed the back of his hand against my cheek and down my neck, making me tremble. His hands journeyed across my chest, down my abs, then back up again, his thumbs rasping over my nipples.

"Fuck." I arched off the bed toward him. It felt like he was cherishing me, savoring me, like he had some kind of magic

he was wielding over me. I'd had a lot of sex in my life, but it didn't feel like this. I wanted to bust my nut, and we weren't even doing anything yet.

"This is so different." There was this wonder in Griff's voice before he lay down, settling between my legs, and lashed his tongue across my left nipple.

"Fuck," I gritted out as he tweaked and plucked at my right one, still kissing the other.

I ran my hands up and down his back, dipping into the space at the bottom of his spine, as Griff kept licking and playing with my nipples. I thrust against him, and he groaned before leaning over me and taking my mouth again. Goddamn, he was good. It was like he was teaching me something new, like it was my first time instead of the other way around. Hell, it felt like Griff was wooing me and luring me in, deeper than I'd planned to go, with the simple lash of his tongue.

I wanted more but didn't want to push or stop what we were doing. I'd always loved the hard press of a man's strong body against mine, but with Griffin it became this unexplainable sensation, new and raw and relentless.

My cock was aching behind the fly of my jeans. I must have made a sound because he pulled back and looked down at me. "Everything okay?"

"It's fucking perfect. I'm just going to bust out of these jeans. Are you okay if we take them off?"

"Yeah, okay." He rolled onto his back, and we both unbuttoned and unzipped our jeans, then tugged them off.

I teased the edge of his underwear, my finger tracing along the band and his skin. "These too?"

Griff growled in response, nodding. "Fuck yes. Jesus, what are you doing to me?"

"I don't know, but you're doing the same damn thing to me." We tugged off our underwear, and I got to see his cock

again. A pearl of precome was at the tip. I leaned over and licked it off before saying, "My turn," and lying on top of him.

I licked his balls, ran my tongue up his shaft.

Griff looked like he was vibrating out of his skin. "You don't know. Fuck, you don't even know."

I kissed his hip bones, one, then the other. Licked the tattoo. Sucked his right nipple, then his left, while he writhed and cursed beneath me. "I don't know if I want that thick piece of meat in my mouth again or if I want to get off with you another way."

Griff's hands held the sides of my face, and he pulled my mouth to his again. "I can't get enough of this," he said, and yeah, I couldn't either. I loved kissing Griffin Caine.

His hands tangled in my hair as we ate at each other's mouths. I thrust against him, each rub of our cocks together giving me the best kind of friction and shooting me to the moon. Griffin made deep, hungry sounds. Held me tight as if afraid I would disappear. Ran his hand up and down my back and grabbed my ass, pulled me closer. "Fuck yes," he called out, and I felt like a damned god.

I reached over, still kissing him, and tried to find the lube. When I finally wrapped my hand around it, I tugged it out of the drawer. Griff tried to chase my mouth when I pulled away, but I just said, "Shh. It's okay, sweetheart. I'm not going anywhere."

I drizzled lube over our cocks, which were pressed against each other. Griff was thicker and had more hair where I kept mine trimmed, but we were both hard and leaking and throbbing.

"Fuck, that's so hot," he said.

"Watch us. Jesus, you don't know what you do to me." I held myself above him, hands flat on the bed, and moved so our dicks were rubbing again. Griff did as I said, his eyes looking down and watching. Our balls touched, and he gasped. A drip of precome fell from my tip and onto him, making us

both groan. “Wrap your hand around us both, and keep watching. Don’t take your eyes off our cocks until we cover those sexy abs of yours in come, okay?”

“Holy shit.” Griff nearly jolted off the bed.

“Okay, so you like dirty talk. Got it.” Griff wrapped his large, calloused hand around us, and I fucked into it, our dicks rubbing and jerking in his grasp. I kept rutting against him. He was moving with me, and when I noticed his head dropped back, I said, “No, watch us, remember? I want you to see what you do to me. I want you to see us taking our pleasure from each other. Watch, Griff.”

“Yeah, yeah okay,” he said breathlessly. “I like that, when you lead and tell me what to do like that.”

“That’s good. Always tell me what you like, okay?”

I started pumping my hips again. His abs were tight as we moved and Griff jacked our dicks together. My arms began to shake, the muscles struggling to keep holding me up, but I didn’t want to stop, didn’t want this to end.

“Yeah, that’s it. Fuck, you have a nice cock, Griff. You don’t know how much I liked swallowing your load. Gonna like seeing it paint your skin too, mine and yours mixing all together. You gonna be our canvas? You want my come all over you?”

“Jesus. Yes. Fuck. I can’t... I’m gonna...” He was rambling and jerking us faster. I knew he would bust any second now, and my damn nuts were begging to be drained.

When his body tensed, my own orgasm pulled from my balls. I thrust into his grasp, and the first shot of Griff’s load pulsed all over his stomach. Mine raged through me a second later, spurt after spurt of our come painting his abs just like I said they would.

I fell on top of him, both of us breathing heavily. That had been like nothing I’d ever experienced, and it was scary as fuck. The urge to jump out of the bed intensified, threatened to win, but then Griff’s arms wrapped around me, and he kissed

the top of my head sweetly. “I never knew it could be like that.”

Those words were just one of the reasons I wasn't going anywhere. “It was good.” Too good. If I were going to admit the truth, I'd tell him I hadn't known either that simply rubbing against someone could be so good.

“You're sticking to me,” he said.

“I'll move.” I went to do just that, but Griff held me to him.

“No. I like it. Think you'll be able to go again?”

I sat up a little and looked at him. “Already?”

“No. Later.”

“Holy shit, I've created a monster.” We smiled, then kissed again. “Yeah, I'll be able to go again. Just give me a little while.”

“Okay.” Griff tightened his hold on me, and I lay there, liking it more than I should.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Griffin

We did exactly what we said we were going to do. We lay there together for a while before we came again, this time with me on top of Josh, rutting into his fist, our hips rolling together, cock against cock. It felt like I had a lifetime to make up for, which I knew was ridiculous. It was just that I felt so good, *he* felt so good that I wanted to soak it all up while I had the chance.

After the second time, we hadn't parted, a tangle of limbs while we made out until my jaw ached to the point I couldn't keep going.

Kissing had become one of my favorite things. Any way he touched me was incredible, but something about tasting someone that way, about the slide of tongues and swallowing little moans, got to me.

I stayed the night, and the next day we went for a jog in the morning, then hung out around his place all day, finding ourselves in the same position more than once, bucking our hips together or Josh sucking me off. God, his fucking mouth was to die for. But we also talked, and watched movies, and cooked, and it was...*nice*. I didn't realize how alone I'd truly felt lately until I was with him and felt the contrast in both the quiet moments and the ones where we were calling out each other's names.

I didn't go home until Monday night. My house felt...fuck, it felt even more empty, which should have been my warning that things were already getting too deep for me too quickly. It was amazing how easy it was to lie to myself when doing so meant I got to keep having moments like we'd had the past couple of days—moments that some people took for granted and others savored every day. Moments I'd never known.



Tuesday morning I found myself driving to Kell and Chase's. I knew my brother wasn't home, and I also knew we'd have to talk eventually. Any other situation, I would have gotten ahold of him ASAP to make sure everything was okay. Guilt still ate at my conscience, for fucking around with Kellan's best friend in the first place, for not being the one to tell him, for not rushing to smooth things over once he knew, but damn, I'd just wanted to spend time with Josh. Was it so damn wrong to think of myself first for once? Maybe I really was becoming a little selfish. Hopefully that wasn't a bad thing.

Chase was outside with Bowie when I pulled up. I'd called ahead to make sure he would be around. He raised his hand in a wave as I parked. It was a chilly morning, a hint of moisture in the air.

Bowie jumped all over me when I got out. "Hi, boy. How are you?" I scratched his head and behind his ears.

"Hey, man. What's up?" Chase said when I made my way over to him.

"Not much, brother. You?"

"Dealing with *your* brother, who is freaking out about something between the two of you that he won't tell me about." Chase cocked a brow.

Well, that surprised me. Yeah, no one other than Josh and Kellan knew I'd been questioning my sexuality or my feelings regarding sex, but I thought Kellan would have told him about me and Josh.

"Coffee?"

"Yikes. Now I'm nervous," Chase teased as we went inside. He poured us each a mug, and we doctored it before heading to the back deck. We sat down, the fog in the distance around the trees seeming to match the mood.

"I, um, I'm gonna need you to be my best friend first for this conversation and not Kellan's fiancé." It was a delicate

balance, I got that, but Chase had been my best friend since I was a kid. I needed to be able to talk to him about this.

“Yeah, Griff. Of course. You’re stressing me out a little, though.”

“No.” I shook my head. “It’s nothing bad, it’s just...” I was drawing a blank on where to start, so instead I took a drink of the coffee before setting it down. “Things have, well, they’ve been pretty confusing for me most of my life.”

“How so?”

“Women. Sex. I don’t know. I spent most of my life doing something because it’s what I thought I was supposed to be doing. I felt like there was something wrong with me, so I’d pretend to be like everyone else I knew when it came to sex, when the truth was, I didn’t get what all the hype was about. I didn’t feel the same way about it as I think most people do, and I never understood it.”

“Shit, man. I’m sorry. I’m feeling like an asshole for some of the things I’ve said over the years and the times I tried to drag you out with me.”

“No, don’t. How could you know if I didn’t tell you? I spent my life denying my reality because I didn’t think it was something other people felt. When, um...when everything went down with you and Kellan, we talked. I told him, and he gave me all these terms that blew my world wide open. It was the first time I realized that maybe I wasn’t alone.”

How many times and in how many ways had I felt alone in my life? It was strange how you could come to terms with truths about yourself, how they could begin to undig themselves, making themselves be known, when you hadn’t even been aware they’d been hiding there all along.

“You’re not alone, Griff. Never. I would never allow that. Kellan wouldn’t either, but I’m sorry I wasn’t a better friend to you. I’m sorry I didn’t see you were hurting.”

“I know.” I looked over and nodded. “Even after Kell and I talked, I couldn’t work out if any of those terms described me.

I still can't say for sure, but I'm thinking the closest is demisexual, and—”

“Holy fuck. You and Josh.”

My gaze snapped to him, my pulse kicking up a notch or twelve. Not sure why. It was obvious what I'd come over to tell him. “How did you know?”

“Well...there's been some kinda something with you guys for a while now. You're always nitpicking at each other.”

“Nitpicking is a sign?” I teased. This stuff was so confusing. In some ways, I didn't get relationships at all.

Chase chuckled. “Damn. I never thought I'd see the day when Josh would get serious about someone.”

“We're not. It's not like that. We're just having some fun together.” The words sounded odd, almost wrong, hearing them in my own voice.

“Oh...and you want that? That doesn't...that doesn't sound like you.”

“It was my idea.”

Chase leaned forward. He sat with his elbows resting on his knees and rubbed a hand over his face. “I'm struggling with this because part of me feels like a hypocrite. Kell and I started out the same way. I was determined it wouldn't be serious. We were ‘just having fun,’ even though I think I always knew it was more for him. So I don't think I have room to talk. On the other hand, I'd be a liar if I didn't admit it worries me some, and I'm sure it does Kellan too. I might not have known you had complicated feelings when it came to sex or relationships, but I know you're not really the type to do casual, especially with someone like Josh, who... I'm trying to put this in a way that I don't come off as an ass or like I'm shaming Josh. He likes sex, a lot, with a lot of people. And he has that right, but...”

“I can take care of myself.”

“Would you have said the same thing to Kell if he’d come to you about us from the beginning? If he’d said we were just fucking around and it wasn’t serious?”

I didn’t bother to deny it because we both knew I wouldn’t have. “This isn’t the same.”

“How so?”

I didn’t have an answer for that, so I didn’t even try to give one. It was Chase who began talking again first.

“Josh and I are good now. He’s one of my closest friends, and I know he was only protecting Kell because he cares about him, but you don’t know how much shit Josh gave me in the beginning. He hated me. He thought I was going to hurt Kellan. I’m caught between making fun of his ass because now he sees how hard it is to resist a Caine brother, while another part of me wants to make sure he knows you’re the best man I’ve ever known, and if he hurts you, we’re gonna have words.”

“He’s not going to hurt me,” I replied, hoping like hell it would prove true. I was the one who wanted this, who asked for this, but just thinking about the last few days with him had my feelings already entangled. “I want this, Chase. I need it. I want to have fun. To just...I don’t know, feel like everyone else. To put what feels good to me before everyone else. I’ve never done that.”

“Josh feels good to you?”

Flashes of our time together played like a slide show in my head. “I didn’t know it could feel like that. It’s... Let’s just say I get now what all the fuss is about—at least with him.”

“Then you fight for it. No one deserves it more than you, Griff, and if this is what you want, I’ll back you up. You deserve to be happy, to be selfish, if that’s what you want. Don’t worry about anyone else other than you and Josh.”

I glanced his way and cocked a brow. “Not even Kell?”

“If I were talking to you as the man in love with Kellan, that would be harder to say. You asked for Best Friend Chase, and that’s who I’m giving you. Kell will understand. He knows I’m right. But also, don’t let this shit get between you guys.” He thumped the side of my head.

“Ouch, damn it.” I rubbed the spot. It hadn’t really hurt, just surprised me.

“I’m getting married next year. We’re having a baby after that. I’m gonna need my best friend, and so will Kell. Our little baby is going to need Uncle Griff and Uncle Josh.”

I nodded. I got what he was saying. Our lives were all so entwined. Our group was close, but some of us were family. “It’ll be fine. I’m not looking for anything more than Josh can give.” I hoped I wasn’t lying to myself.

Chase put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed. “I’m happy for you, brother.”

Josh made me happy. He’d been making me happy for a while now, I just hadn’t admitted it to myself. Each time he showed up, or took me fishing, or...just thought about me. Christ, Josh had been thinking about me, had been considering me and my feelings for a long damn time, and it felt good to be important like that.

“Thanks. He said he wouldn’t hook up with anyone else while we were doing this.” It was on the tip of my tongue to ask Chase if that meant something, but I worried it would make him think I wanted it to mean something and would complicate things more.

“No shit? I didn’t expect that. You know what, I take that back. I don’t want to sell Josh short. He’s a good man, and I know he’ll do right by you.”

“He really is. He makes me feel... This sounds crazy, but he makes me feel both special *and* normal. Can those things go together?”

“Yeah, brother. They really can.” Chase nodded. When I didn’t respond, he added, “I’m still talking as Best Friend

Chase here, but talk to Kell, okay? He'll understand.”

“Yeah, I know. I will.” The last thing I would ever risk was something coming between me and my brother.

We hung out for a little while longer before I drove to Safe Haven—Kellan’s studio. It wasn’t open yet, so I knew he was in there alone, getting things done before his first class. I could see him inside, writing something at the counter. I tapped the glass, and he looked up. Our eyes held a moment before he came over and unlocked the door for me. “I figured we should talk.”

“All I need to know is if you want this. If you’re happy, I’m happy. I don’t think you’ve had enough of that in your life, Griff, which I’m partly to blame for. If you’re making up for it now, then I’ll be your biggest cheerleader.”

“I’m happy,” I admitted, and I was.

“Then I am too. I love you, big brother.”

Kellan hugged me, and I wrapped my arms around him and kissed the top of his head. “I love you too.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Josh

It was a little fucked up how I'd gone days, weeks without texting Griff before, and suddenly I had to argue with myself to keep from doing it all day. Arguing with yourself was strange and a little crazy, but I'd been doing it for hours. It wasn't like Griff and I had been the text-each-other-every-day kind of friends. Hell, Kellan and I didn't always talk to each other every day anymore either. Yet here I was, stressing myself out, wondering if he was still okay with everything we'd done, to make sure he still wanted to do it and to reaffirm to myself that we were still friends and this wouldn't come between us. I hadn't realized how much Griffin Caine meant to me until I started worrying I'd somehow lose him.

Griff meant a lot.

Maybe too much.

I also didn't want to be clingy. It was weird-ass shit, having to fight with myself not to be. I didn't get clingy with guys—at least not before my best friend's frustrating brother.

I did well, though. I worked all day and kept myself from turning into a crazy stalker. I shot a message to Natalie to see if she was free and wanted to come over for dinner at my place.

She showed up just after my shower. I tugged the door open, and she came in, pressing a kiss to my cheek. “Hey, you.”

“Hey, gorgeous. I'm lazy and didn't feel like cooking, so I ordered pizza.”

“That's fine with me.”

“Want a beer?”

“No, just water is fine.”

I grabbed her a glass, and we sat on the couch together. Griff used to call me, her, and Kellan the three musketeers because we hung out together so much. I couldn't remember the last time he'd said it, to be honest, but we also didn't spend as much time together as we used to. Not because we didn't mean as much to each other—friendship wasn't based on how often you got to hang out with someone—but because...well, because of the same reason things had changed between a lot of us—Chase and Kellan being serious, Remy and Law staying home sometimes, Knox having Callum and his son living with him.

“What's new with you?” I asked Nat.

“Nothing really. I mean, there's Miguel. I like him, Josh. He's a good guy.”

“He seems like it.”

“You know what he said to me? That he respects me for what I'm going to do for Kell and Chase. That it's not often people do something so selfless. I mean, how sweet is that?” She smiled.

“He's right, Nat. It's amazing. I hope you know how incredible you are.”

“Thank you.” She picked up Grumpy Bear, who still sat on my couch, and hugged him, then leaned her head on my shoulder. Shit. I should have moved the bear. Since when did I have a stuffed animal on my couch? “It's nice...to meet someone like him. I was beginning to believe I'd be alone forever. Everyone around us is falling in love. It's lonely sometimes.”

“Yeah, yeah it is,” fell from my lips. I regretted it the second I said the words. Sure, I'd told Griff I'd been feeling left behind lately, but that was different. Nat was talking about wanting love, and that made it sound like I did too. “Not that I want to settle down,” I added. “You know that's not me.” There was a strange twitch in my chest.

“Why isn’t it you? I mean, it’s okay that it’s not, I just...I think you have more love to give than you think.”

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t you start with me. It’s okay to want to be single.”

“Absolutely. I’m probably way off base, but sometimes I feel like you’re trying to be something you think you have to be or to keep yourself from being something else. Not sure that makes sense. Maybe I’m being weird.”

“Well, you are pretty weird,” I teased. Nat laid her head on my shoulder again, and I wrapped an arm around her. “I wouldn’t be good at that...being serious with someone. I’m not built that way anymore.”

“Anymore?”

Shit. I was fucking up all over the place tonight. I didn’t know what had gotten into me.

“Never mind.” I shook my head. “But you’ll be surprised to know I’m exclusively fucking around with someone. It’s not serious or anything, but we like spending time together. I really want to fuck him, and he’s not the kind of guy to be casual to the extent of not caring if I’m with someone else.” I had no idea why I told her that. It was as if something inside me wanted to share about Griff...was oddly proud or honored. I didn’t get it. The whole thing was fucked.

Frowning, Natalie pulled away from me. “Holy shit. I always wondered, but I thought...no way...they’re opposites in too many ways, and Griff is straight, but—”

“Wait. What? How did you come to the conclusion it was Griff from what I just said?”

“Because something changed with you guys a long time ago. And I can’t see you agreeing to be exclusive with some random guy. It would have to be someone you really care about and...my mind is a little blown right now, but then, it’s also not. You’re different with him. You have been for a while.”

There we went. I stood up. “Don’t start with the *different* stuff. I’m just the same with Griff as always.” It was a lie, and even I knew it.

“Um, yeah you are, Captain Liar Pants.” I cocked a brow at her, and she added, “It was the first thing that came to mind, but it fits.”

“No it doesn’t. I’m not Captain Liar Pants. We’re friends, and we’re having fun together. The end. I’m also feeling like an asshole right now because it wasn’t my place to tell you all this. I didn’t expect you to figure out who it was. This is Griff’s story to tell.”

“Oh, he’s doing it by himself?”

I shook my head. “No, but I’m always open about shit like that. He isn’t.” And this was new for him, and he’d never been with a guy before, and a hundred other reasons. Fuck, how in the hell had she figured out who it was?

“I won’t say anything. I won’t tell him I know.” Natalie set Grumpy Bear down, stood, walked over to me, and held my waist as she looked up at me. “I’m not sure why you’re afraid to be happy, Joshua Westbrook, but I know you are. I don’t know why you’re afraid to love someone, but I know you’re that too. Give yourself a chance, okay? Whether it’s with Griff or someone else.”

Her words struck something in my chest, made some of my edges soften, even as I told myself I didn’t want that. “You’re way off base, but I’ll keep that in mind.” Luckily, the doorbell rang. Saved by the pizza man.

Natalie dropped the subject of love and Griff after that. We had dinner, talked and laughed. I kissed her goodbye not long later.

I worked on my model car a bit, but my head was crowded with thoughts—about Griff, the things we’d done, how much I wanted to keep doing them. How Natalie realized it was him without me telling her, and what she’d said about us being different. Then Doug. It kept going back to him too often

lately. All these thoughts were fighting out a war in my brain, making me edgy and unable to sit still, so I grabbed my stuff, my gaze darting to Grumpy Bear. I grabbed him as well and headed out.

I told myself I was going to Griff's to warn him that Natalie knew. I wasn't gonna lie to him. Yeah, she said she'd keep it to herself, but he deserved to know, and I also knew that yeah, I wanted to tell him, but that wasn't the only reason I was going to the damn bar.

Nope. It was just...him.

It was close to ten on a weeknight, and Griff's was fairly slow when I went inside. Griff looked up. "Welcome to—oh, hey. Didn't know if I was going to see you tonight."

I shrugged. "Yeah, I didn't know either, but here I am, Grumpy G."

"Do I look grumpy to you?" He grinned, and damned if it didn't twist up my insides. It had been doing that for months, hadn't it?

"No, I guess you don't." I sat on one of the stools in the group that was basically our spot when we went into the bar. A guy and a woman sat at the other end, and two guys were playing at one of the pool tables.

"Want a beer?" Griff asked.

"Nah, I'm good tonight. I just came by to..." See him? Because I liked spending time with him? Because Natalie was right and I *was* different with Griff? Because he had such a big damn heart, and put other people first, and made me feel a strange hope I hadn't known I needed?

"Natalie knows about us," I said in unison with his, "Chase knows about us," and we both let out loud belly laughs that vibrated my heart and I felt in my bones. I didn't know why I was laughing so hard, and wondered if he knew why for himself. When we settled down, I sobered because the cat getting out of the bag wasn't the same for Griff as it was for me. "I'm sorry. I didn't tell her it was you. She figured it out."

“It’s okay.” Griff shook it off. “It was the same with Chase. He somehow knew it was you.”

I didn’t want to think about what that meant, if it meant anything at all, so I ignored it. “What about everyone else? I don’t want to do or say the wrong thing.”

Someone got Griff’s attention, and he said he’d be right back. I shuffled in my seat, wrung my hands together, moved around again, and it hit me that I was nervous. I was anxious about what Griffin’s reply would be because it meant something to me. It mattered.

When he came back, he leaned over the counter in this way I wasn’t sure he used to do with me, and shrugged. “I don’t mind if you don’t. We don’t have to make a big deal about it, but we don’t have to hide it either. We’ll just make sure they know it’s not serious.”

“Yeah. People have friends-with-benefits relationships all the time. We’ll make sure they know that’s what this is.”

“It’s a plan, then,” Griff agreed, and I wondered if we were fooling him any more than we were fooling me. This was already escalating quickly. I was so incredibly fucked.

Griffin pointed to the toy. “You brought me my bear.”

“I did.”

He smiled and took Grumpy Bear, then turned and put him on a shelf behind the counter, so he was looking out over the bar. It was the stupidest fucking thing, but seeing the stuffed animal I’d won him at the fair, perched on his own spot in the bar, made my stomach light and fluttery. Like there was always a part of me there or something.

“Do you want to come over when you close down tonight?” I couldn’t have held the question back if I’d wanted to...and I didn’t. “I can give you a little more of last night.”

Griffin smiled. “I’d like that.”

Warmth spread through my chest.

Fucked wasn't a strong enough word for what I was.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Griffin

It sounded cheesy as all shit, but the next couple of weeks were...well, I didn't want to say like something out of a dream because I'd never dreamed about something like this. But it was this fantasy life I couldn't wrap my brain around. I was spending the bulk of my time with a good buddy, whom I laughed with and ate dinner with and gave candy out to kids on Halloween with. We did shit like work on his car, fix a busted pipe in his bathroom, throw the football around his backyard, and rake leaves together. But we also had orgasms together, a whole lot of them.

I'd just be watching a game on TV or closing the bar, and suddenly Josh was there on his knees for me. He sucked me off like I was a fucking god and worshipping me was all he wanted in life. We jerked each other off or rubbed off against each other, come sticky between our bodies more times than I could count.

Sex was...fuck, sex was *explosive* with Josh in a way that blew my mind each and every time. I couldn't get enough of it. All I wanted was more, my hunger for him insatiable, this beast I didn't think would ever be satisfied.

It was strange, but I didn't care. I just wanted to hold on tight and never let go.

Still, I knew we were living in a bubble, in that fantasy life where things were perfect, when really, we hadn't told anyone else about us even though we'd said we would. Where I could forget Josh didn't do relationships because he was still in love with a man who'd died years ago. And where I could tell myself I didn't care because in this place, with him, I didn't always have to be responsible or worry about everyone else. It was as if he'd unlocked something inside me, this space I

hadn't known was there, and now I could just *be* in a way I'd never allowed myself to do.

I liked it.

I liked Josh.

I should have expected this. Josh made me feel desire for him because there was something there, this bond we had, and I should have figured it would grow.

Josh's bed shifted as he rolled out of it. We slept together most nights, and we meditated some mornings, or he'd make me go jogging with him.

I watched as he walked naked toward his bathroom. His ass was...well, shit, it was tight and muscular. My dick twitched just watching him move.

He made it to the doorway, then gave me that stupid, cocky grin over his shoulder. "You watching me walk away, sweetheart?"

"You got a problem with it?"

"Hell no. I'll put on a show for you anytime you want." He turned around and did some silly dance, his flaccid cock flopping around. "Do you think I'm sexy?"

"Not when you do that." But I did. I always thought Josh was sexy.

"Well, now my feelings are hurt," he replied, and we both chuckled before falling silent. We stared at each other for a few moments. I had a feeling he was thinking about tonight, same as I was. It was the first official night when all our friends would be meeting up at the bar since we started doing this, and definitely since we'd decided we would tell people but never actually did. "You wanna shower with me?" he finally asked.

"Yeah, yeah I do."

I got out of bed, and the two of us took a shower together. I kissed him against the wall, water sluicing down between us,

bodies moving together, hips thrusting, my thumbs dancing over those nipple piercings that drove me out of my damn mind. Josh wrapped a fist around us, and we came together, heads thrown back, growls playing on our lips.

“Fuck, that felt good,” he said, and it did. I couldn’t help wondering if it was enough for him, though. Josh was used to sex and lots of it, but now he was always with me. He rubbed his thumb over my forehead. “You have the Grumpy G wrinkles. What are you thinking about so hard?”

“Nothing.” I shook my head. I felt like a fucking idiot, stressing about shit like that.

“Tonight will be okay. It’ll be good. I’ll follow your lead.” Josh was always doing that, always trying to put my needs, wants, and feelings above his.

“What about doing what feels most comfortable to you?”

“Making sure things are right for you is what makes me feel good—the things I can control, at least.”

Somehow, I knew that “*things I can control*” had to do with Doug. Jealousy infected me like a fast-moving virus. Shit. I was jealous over a dead man. I shouldn’t have been resentful at all, but I sure as shit shouldn’t be over someone who wasn’t breathing anymore. “Josh...”

“Come on, man. I gotta hurry and get ready for work.”

I knew him well enough to know the conversation was over. We finished our shower, got dressed—me transferring my turtle to the pocket of my jeans for the day. We had a quick breakfast and then headed out, Josh to his Mustang and me to my truck.

He stopped on the driver’s side, stood in his open door, and looked over the car toward me. “Hey.”

“Yeah?”

Josh opened his mouth, seemed to hesitate as if thinking about what he was going to say. Somehow, I knew the words

that would come out wouldn't be the original ones he'd planned. "See you tonight."

"See you tonight," I replied, then drove home.

It was ridiculous that it was strange to be in my own house. It felt too quiet, with only the creak of a floorboard and the whistling of a ceiling fan I needed to fix. Except for when I left for college, I'd lived in this house my whole damn life. There were memories around every corner: Me swearing to Kellan I'd kick some kid's ass for teasing him when we were in school. Me talking to my dad about my fears about Chase's father hurting him when we were young. Having sleepovers with Chase, and talking about sex, and pretending I was dying for it all the time the way he had been. Calling the school counselors after Mom and Dad died to talk to them about Kell. Worrying if I knew how to take care of him on my own, but knowing damn well I'd figure it out.

Being lonely, so damn lonely.

For years, really. Maybe always.

I went straight for the door, phoning Remy as I did. "You busy?" I asked when he answered.

"Hey, no. I always have time for you. What's up?"

"You wanna go for a little hike before I have to work this afternoon?"

"Sure. I'm at Sunrise now." Sunrise was the café Law owned. "I can head over and meet you at our spot."

I smiled. "See you there."

Remy was maybe the kindest soul I'd ever known. He was gentle, liked his space and his thoughts, but would always be there for a friend. Since he'd come to Havenwood, he'd talked to me a lot about his anxiety and depression. He was quiet and easy to talk to.

When I arrived, he was already at the small, graveled section off the side of the road. There were other trails along bigger lots, but this one was a little out of town, fit only about

ten cars, and there was only one other there now besides mine and Remy's.

He had on a flannel shirt, old jeans with holes in the knees, and beat-up work boots. You would never look at Remy and know he was a famous musician—well, these days he focused mostly on song-writing, but still.

“Thanks for coming,” I said as I approached.

“Anytime. You know that.”

We headed for the leaf-covered trail that went through the middle of the dense area of trees. We knew it by heart. It wasn't anything long or difficult, but being out in nature in the fresh air always helped.

“Everything okay?” Remy asked.

“Yeah.” And it was. Everything was great, for the most part. “Did you like it? Traveling the world?” I found myself asking.

“That's a hard question to answer. In a lot of ways I did. I grew up extremely poor and a little isolated. It was amazing to see so much of what's out there, to experience other cultures, great art, new foods and music and the like. But it also triggered my anxiety a lot. I'd worry about being recognized, or hell, even worry about things that were unlikely to happen, like getting lost or stuck in a foreign country. My brain played a lot of tricks on me. Have you done much traveling?”

“We went on vacations every summer as a kid—road trips and theme parks, that kind of thing, but not as an adult. When I went off to college, that was the first and only time I didn't live in the home I live in now.” I thought about my trip away with Josh and how rejuvenating it had been. “I think I'd like to check out some more places, though. Little trips, ya know? Nothing big, but...” What did I have stopping me other than my bar? Yeah, Griff's meant the world to me, but my trip with Josh was the only real trip I'd taken since I opened the place. Miguel was a great addition. I could take more time off. I

deserved more time off. “Yeah, I think I’d like to do a little traveling.”

Just something different from my usual routine. It was strange to acknowledge the restlessness that had always lived right under my skin, just beneath the surface, where I could pretend it wasn’t there, pretend that as long as I had my bar and Kellan was happy, I had everything I needed.

“You should do it. You deserve that, man. I can’t remember if I told you, but my dad left when I was young. I’m the oldest of my siblings, and like I said, we didn’t have much. I spent most of my life thinking I needed to be responsible for everyone else, that I didn’t need anything for me, except maybe my music. That as long as I had that, I could keep taking care of everyone else and not take care of myself. It wasn’t until I met Law the first time that I did anything that was for me. He...fuck, he changed me. He opened up my world and made me *want* more for myself.”

“But you guys separated?”

“We did then, yeah. I wanted it, but I didn’t have the courage to go for it yet. It wasn’t until I moved here and found him again that I really found myself. Not because of him. Love can help lift you up, but you still gotta do the work, ya know? But loving him made me want to do it, made me want to make changes and to...hell, to really live. What I was doing before Law wasn’t living, it was surviving.”

Remy’s words knocked around in my chest. Had that been what I spent my life doing? Just surviving? It didn’t make sense. I didn’t grow up the way Remy had. I didn’t have anxiety or depression. I’d had a two-parent home and never wanted for anything. And I’d always had Chase too. But as we kept walking, I thought maybe those things didn’t matter. What did was on the inside and...Christ, I never really let myself live, did I? I just kept surviving, kept trudging along, working and watching my friends’ and my brother’s lives move on without me. I’d known some of that before, but the truth felt different as it played through my head today.

Josh's gray eyes ran through my thoughts. His smile, and that damn mole on his face that I liked to lick, and the way he made me laugh.

I fought to shove those images to the back of my brain. Josh had no business in my mind right then, but he was there, and I couldn't deny that. I didn't love him. I couldn't, I didn't think, but something about him made me want to do more than survive.

"I, um...I'm seeing Josh," I admitted.

Remy looked my way and cocked an auburn brow. "Am I supposed to be surprised? The two of you have been dancing around each other for a while now."

"Yeah, but I thought I was straight."

"So did Knox. I always knew I was gay. There wasn't ever another possibility for me. Law questioned a little before me, if he was bisexual, but he didn't really let himself consider the option until me. Then he knew. There were both guys and women after me. Callum always knew, Kellan too. Chase was in his late teens when he realized. Knox was in his forties. Callum's mom always knew, but she didn't own her truth until her sixties. There's no one way to do it. Or acknowledge it. We're humans. We're so delicate and different, and I don't think we ever know what will happen. I didn't expect to play my first gig in a coffeehouse and see the most beautiful boy in the world, a boy who had an even more beautiful soul. I wouldn't ever have expected him to want me, but he did. Life is so damn hard sometimes. We need to learn to take the positive, take what feels good, when we have the chance. So, did I think you were straight? Yeah, but I also think we're ever evolving, and when something's right, it's just right. You and Josh...maybe I'm off base, maybe I'm wrong, but something about the two of you has always felt right to me. But what do I know? I just believe that if it feels good, hold on to it and don't let go."

I stopped, and Remy did too. We stood there a moment just looking at each other. It didn't escape my attention that

Natalie, Chase, and now Remy had all thought something would happen between me and Josh. None of them had been surprised, and according to what Josh said about Callum's comments, Callum likely felt the same.

I hadn't seen it before, but I did now. I'd been jealous when Josh talked about men. I'd looked forward to spending time with him even when I used to pretend I didn't.

Still, that didn't change the fact that Josh was in love with someone else, and even if I wanted more, he wouldn't be able to give it. "We're not serious," I finally replied.

I could see it in Remy's eyes, this disbelief. Still, he only said, "Okay," and I appreciated him for it. If he'd questioned me, I might've had to admit out loud that I wanted more with Josh. He just couldn't give it to me.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Josh

I knew I would be the last one to Griff's that night. Everyone else's vehicles were already in the lot when I arrived.

They were all in deep conversation about something. The bar was pretty full, but not crazy full for a weekend night. Griff looked up as I made my way toward them and gave me a small grin. My foot caught on something—I didn't know what, maybe the air—and I stumbled slightly, making him chuckle.

"None of you look like you missed me entirely enough," I teased.

"Who are you?" Kellan teased back as I leaned over and kissed his forehead.

"I love you too, babe," I joked.

"We're talking about Remy's music," Natalie said. "He's thinking about doing a short set here at Griff's soon."

"No shit?" I cocked a brow at him. That was big news for Remy. There was such a difference in him since he'd come to Havenwood. It was really incredible to see.

Remy nodded. "Yeah, working on the whole living thing, instead of just surviving." His gaze darted toward Griff, who gave him a simple nod. Interesting...

"Good for you, man. I'm proud of you. We'll be your cheering squad." I took the stool that had been held for me.

"Don't say that. It'll just scare me," Remy replied, making everyone laugh.

Law leaned over and kissed him. "You got this."

My eyes scanned down the line—Knox, Callum, Remy, Law, Chase, Kellan. "You guys are all mushy as hell."

“Beer?” Griff asked, ignoring the statement.

“Yeah, thanks, Griffy.”

He smiled and shook his head like he didn’t know what to do with me.

I could feel Kellan’s stare on me. “What are you looking at?” I rubbed my hand over his hair, and he jerked back.

“What the fuck, Josh. I spent a lot of time on that.”

“I spent a lot of time on that,” I mocked him playfully.

“The two of you are like a couple of kids together.” Griffin set my beer in front of me.

“This is news to you?” Just like that, everything was normal again between all of us. I’d been nervous, I realized—it was why I’d come late—but I didn’t need to be. They were my family in ways my real one wasn’t.

We all laughed and chatted for a while after that. Callum talked about studying with Logan for the math-a-thon Logan had signed up for, and Knox added, “It’s great. It’s not something he would have had the courage to do before, even if he’d wanted to. Cal is a whiz with that shit. It really built up Logan’s confidence.”

Callum rolled his eyes, but I could see he was really preening under the praise. “I didn’t do anything other than help him learn some equations. He’s growing and gaining more confidence because he knows he has love and support from his father.” Knox leaned over and rubbed his cheek against Callum’s, and I swear to Christ, Cal trembled. A foreign ache landed in my chest, spread out, took hold of me.

Fuck...I wanted that. What all of them had. I wanted it, didn’t I?

To distract myself, I said, “Nat, Kell, Callum, get your asses to the pool table with me.” The four of us played teams a lot—Kell and me against Natalie and Callum.

“Yes, sir!” Kellan mock-saluted me, but still, the three of them got up and followed me over. Luckily, there was an open table, which we grabbed.

Kellan and Natalie’s gazes kept darting back and forth to each other, and I could tell they both wanted to talk to me about Griffin but weren’t sure if they should in front of Callum.

“Just do it before you drive me crazy.” I knew if I didn’t let them go for it, the two of them wouldn’t give me a moment of peace, even if it was just them eyeballing me to death. At least this way we could get it over with.

“I can’t believe you’re having sex with my brother,” Kellan spoke first, but softly enough not to alert the whole bar.

Natalie added, “Isn’t it crazy that there was a time when Griff was saying that same thing to Chase? And now Kellan is saying it to Josh?”

“That was different,” Kellan countered, but without heat. He wasn’t really angry, just working through it the way Griff had done.

“Wait. Are you really surprised, though?” Callum asked. “I knew that shit would happen by my second trip to the bar.”

“Really?” Kellan asked.

“I started to wonder, but it was more recently,” Natalie said.

“Do you guys need me for this conversation at all, or are you good?” I finished racking the balls.

“I think we’re good,” Kell replied, and I gave him the bird. “I hope they fall in love.”

The back of my neck began to tingle. “Babe...we’re not serious. We talked about this. We’re just friends with benefits.” The words tasted wrong, felt like I had to shove them out of my mouth.

“Oh yeah? Like the way Chase and I were?”

“Kell...”

“Don’t kill my imagination, Josh. It’s how I’m making it through this—*ew*, not that I’m imagining you being friends with benefits with my brother, because gross. But I’m imagining the two of you living happily ever after. Also, I still can’t believe I’m in a place where I say those words—you having sex with my brother. We used to talk about sex and now...yeah, never again.”

“Are we going to play billiards or talk about sex because, you guys, my lumberjack does this thing where—”

“Can you guys stop gossiping so I can concentrate enough to break?” Nat asked, and I silently thanked her. Then she added, “Also, isn’t that stuffed animal on the shelf the one that was in your living room?” Now I wanted to kill her.

“*Aww*,” Callum and Kellan said in unison.

“Friends with benefits,” I insisted.

Nat hit in a stripe, so Kellan and I were solids. She missed her second shot, and Kellan went, followed by Callum.

Just as I bent over the table to shoot, I felt someone lean over my back. “Hey, gorgeous.” Breath whispered across my ear, and I stiffened, not the erection-and-I-want-to-fuck kind of stiffen, but my whole body going rigid.

“I, um...hey...” I stood and moved away from Kade. He was a guy who lived in Charlottesville but had family in Havenwood, so he was in town every once in a while. We’d hooked up more than once.

“How you doing? It’s been a while.”

“Good.” I took another step away. “You?”

My gaze immediately dashed in Griffin’s direction. He was standing by the bar, Grumpy G wrinkles on his forehead, wearing a frown as he stared our way. Call me crazy, but it felt like Grumpy Bear was giving me the evil eye too. As soon as Griff noticed me looking at him, he turned and started to make a drink.

“Not bad,” Kade replied. “Just wanted to say hi. I’ll sit back and enjoy the view while you guys play, though.” He grinned and walked to the wall behind us, leaning against it and looking our way.

I knew Kellan, Natalie, and Callum were all watching me, but I didn’t let myself glance their way, just bent over and took my shot, which I missed.

My gut was twisting uncomfortably as Natalie took her turn, then Kellan. I kept looking Griffin’s way, but he kept busy, our line of sight not meeting again. *Look at me, sweetheart. Come on. I’m not going to do anything with him.* But this was also exactly what I’d been afraid of. Why did everything have to be so complicated?

“You gonna go or make moon eyes at my brother all night?” Kellan asked. “Not that I’m complaining. I would much rather you watch him that way.”

“I’m not making moon eyes,” I grumbled. What did that saying even mean?

We continued the game, but I struggled to keep my attention on it. I kept looking at Griff, willing him to turn my way so I could show him he could believe in me. Even if this was just a friends-with-benefits thing, I’d made a commitment to him not to fuck around with anyone else, and I wouldn’t go back on it. He trusted me, he was giving me something special, and I wouldn’t throw that away. Any other time Kade was there, I would have loved to go home with him, but there wasn’t a single part of me that wanted to that night.

“So, remember that time Natalie and Callum kicked our asses at pool?” Kellan teased when the game was over, but I could hear a little edge to his voice. He was pissed about Kade.

“Jesus Christ. Trust me a little, Kell.”

“I trust you a lot, but he’s my brother.” Kellan handed me his cue, and I nodded. Callum and Natalie were already putting theirs away before going to sit down again.

Kade stood by one of the mounts on the wall, so I walked over and put our cues in the slots. “You free tonight?” Kade stepped closer to me and me away. He frowned.

“I, um...sorry, I can’t.” I had my back to the bar, not letting myself look at Griffin. “I’m doing the exclusive thing for a while.” Kade had a boyfriend, but the two of them were in an open relationship. They had boundaries and rules in place they each followed strictly. I’d known about them from the beginning; Kade had always made sure I did. It was part of his arrangement with his longtime boyfriend.

He crossed his arms but gave me a small smile. “Really? I thought you didn’t do the serious-with-exclusivity thing.” I figured he said it how he did because he and his boyfriend were serious, they were in love, they just had the kind of relationship that worked right for them. Everyone deserved that right.

“I don’t usually, but...” But Griff was different. I didn’t want anyone else but him.

“Well, shit. I never thought I’d see the day. Good for you, man. Whoever he is, he’s a lucky guy. I’m sure hearts are broken all over Virginia.” Kade touched my arm. “Let me know if anything changes.”

I nodded, and Kade walked away. When I turned around, everyone was looking at me, but Griff was gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Griffin

I had no right to be jealous. Josh had told me from the beginning that he wasn't looking for anything serious. I knew that going in. I'd told him I didn't want it either, and I hadn't, but the fire that burned through my veins when that guy had approached Josh told another story.

Not because I didn't trust Josh. I knew he was a man of his word. He'd made a commitment to me, and he'd stick by it. He sure as hell wouldn't flirt or leave with another man in front of me either, but I knew there was a possibility he wanted to leave with the guy. That he was holding himself back because we weren't the same when it came to relationships. That he enjoyed going home with people, having sex, and then walking away until the next time.

That he wanted to do with other men the things he did with me.

More than what he did with me.

That he probably missed it.

I ran a shaky hand through my hair as I paced my office. Fuck, I was losing my shit. I couldn't believe I'd walked away like that. Miguel had squeezed my shoulder like he knew, and I'd just...walked away.

It didn't come as a surprise when there was a knock on the door. I hadn't locked it as I usually did. When it pushed open, Josh stepped inside, closing us in together.

"I wasn't going to leave with him," he said softly.

"I know that. You said it would just be us, and you wouldn't go back on that. If I couldn't trust you, I wouldn't be doing this with you. It's just... I hate that you might have

wanted to. Because I wouldn't, not with any man or woman who came in. Outside of biology, I wouldn't want them because I don't want people that way, but you do. You're holding yourself back for me, and fuck, I hate that shit. It makes me feel like there's something wrong with me, and I wonder if what we're doing is enough because—”

“I didn't want him!” Josh said sharply. “Fuck, sweetheart, I haven't wanted *anyone* else since our trip. It's fucking with my head and scaring the shit out of me because I'm not who you deserve. I don't have it in me anymore. You're afraid the sex isn't enough with you, while I'm afraid I can't be who you need in other ways, but damned if there isn't a part of me that wishes I could. That wants to throw out all my rules, and forget my past and what I owe Doug, and just *be* with you. Sex is easy for me, Griff. It's what I've always been able to give, and I've had a lot of it, but this, this is different.”

There was raw pain and anguish in his voice. I wanted to fix it. Wanted Josh to know that Doug's death wasn't his fault. I wanted to show him he could move on, wanted him to know he deserved to be happy, but all those words were a tangled mess in my chest.

So I covered his mouth with mine instead. Josh grabbed my hips and groaned into the kiss as I flicked the lock on the door and gave him my tongue. He tasted like beer and Josh, and there was nothing I wanted more than to drown in it.

Our teeth clanked together, our tongues and mouths a collision of want and need and hunger. I felt alive when I was touching Josh, like I was this beacon for energy, snapping and crackling with a lifetime of pent-up desire and the truth of wanting nothing more than surviving.

My fingers trembled as I went for the button and zipper of his jeans.

He growled and thrust against me as I worked him open and shoved a hand inside his jeans. Josh was rigid, a massive bulge against my palm, a soothing balm to my soul.

Jesus, what was he doing to me?

On instinct, I dropped to my knees. I wanted to pleasure him, to know what he tasted like, to experience everything in the world that I could with him.

“What are you doing?”

I looked up at him and grinned. “I would think that’s pretty obvious.”

“Hey.” Josh hooked a finger beneath my chin. “You don’t have to do that right now. When you have my cock in your mouth, I want it to be because you’re dying for me to fuck that sexy face of yours, not because of some other guy. I swear I don’t want him, sweetheart, and what we’re doing is enough for me.”

Josh’s words told me everything I needed to know, were a reminder of why he was so special. “I’m dying for you to fuck my face.” Saying stuff like that was so unfamiliar to me, but not with him. When it came to Josh, so many things felt right, clicked into place in ways they never had before. The fact that I was on my knees in my office with a full bar down the hall was proof. This wasn’t the first time I’d had some kind of sex there with Josh, something I’d never done with anyone and sure as shit hadn’t done with people there.

It felt electrifying.

“Holy shit, you don’t know what hearing you say that does to me.” Josh rubbed his thumb over my bottom lip, then around the top one. When he pulled back, I chased it with my mouth, and he gave it to me. I sucked his thumb like it was a cock and felt nothing but hungry for more. “Get those pants off. If I’m coming, you are too. I can’t wait to see what it looks like to watch my dick split your lips. And I want you to jack off. You know how much I love that thick cock of yours.”

My whole body began to vibrate, overpowering need ricocheting around inside me. Josh always took control, leading me with his words, and that made my desire for him skyrocket to even greater heights.

I stood up, and we quickly removed all our clothes. I went down to my knees again, Josh's erection bobbing in front of me. I was dying to taste him.

"You sure?" Josh asked.

"Yeah. God, I want you."

"I want you too." Josh held the base of his cock, then let it make the same journey around my lips that his thumb had a few moments before. I went to lick at him, but Josh pulled back. "Fuck, look at you. You're going crazy for it, aren't you? I've never seen anything sexier."

"It would be sexier if you let me actually blow you," I countered, and he chuckled.

"Lick the tip."

I looked up at him, wrapped my hand around the warm erection I'd grown to know, and swiped my tongue at the precome there, the way Josh did to me.

He hissed, and I took advantage, lowering my mouth around him, feeling the velvet-covered steel on my tongue for the first time. It lit me up from the inside out.

I tried to go down on him but took him too deep and choked. I recovered quickly and found a rhythm that worked for me, using my hand and my mouth on him. Josh told me how good I was, how hot, how much he wanted me, each word like fuel on the fire of my need for him.

"You fucking love it, don't you? Love being on your knees for me, my dick buried in your throat."

I wasn't taking him that deep, of course, but everything else, fuck yes, I loved it. I lowered my mouth to his balls, inhaled the musky scent of him that made my dick even harder. I licked them, sucked one, then the other, salty flavor bursting on my tongue.

Josh's hand tangled in my hair as he led me, took the little bit of control I was giving him. My own nuts were aching, my cock throbbing.

“Fuck, Griff. Goddamn it. What am I going to do? I don’t know how to get enough of you,” Josh rambled, pumping his hips slightly as I took him into my mouth again. “Do you know what it does to me to know mine is the first cock between your lips? Jesus, I want to paint your face with my come, want you to walk out into the bar that way so everyone knows you’re mine. I’m so fucked. I don’t know how to get enough of you,” he repeated, and the truth was, I didn’t know how to get enough of Josh either. I wanted everything he’d just said.

“You can...you can do it. Come on my face.” His urgent groan in response made me feel stronger and even more desired.

I pulled off and spit into my hand. I started jerking my cock as soon as Josh did his. Our gazes held as I knelt for him, each of us pumping ourselves. When he smiled down at me, it felt like something exploded in my chest.

Josh Westbrook was the most beautiful person I’d ever seen, and I wanted him to be mine, truly mine.

I could tell when he was about to come, could see the intensity in his eyes and how his body went rigid. Josh sped up his strokes, his cock jerking as the first pulse of come landed on my cheek. Feeling his hot release against my skin made my own balls tighten. Josh let go again, another spurt landing on my lower lip and chin as my own orgasm pulled from my balls, making me see stars, my load running down my fingers.

We were quiet afterward. Josh looked down at me, cupped the cheek that didn’t have his release all over it. “What are you doing to me? I didn’t think I could... Christ, Griff, you got me all twisted up.”

“I know. We’ll figure it out.”

He gave me a simple nod. “Stay there. Let me get something to wipe you up.” He went over and grabbed the box of Kleenex from my desk.

He came back just as I licked my bottom lip, wanting to taste him.

“Oh fuck. You don’t know how sexy that was.”

I wiped the rest of my lip and pushed it into my mouth. “What? You mean that?” It was...well, it was salty and definitely not the best thing I’d put in my mouth, but it was *his* load, and knowing where it came from and what it meant made me want to swallow it all.

“You’re trouble, Griffin Caine.”

“I thought you liked trouble?” I replied as he wiped the rest of the come from my face with a Kleenex.

“I like your kind of trouble.”

Luckily, there was a bathroom in my office. We cleaned up as best we could with the water and paper towels in there before getting dressed.

When we got to my office door, I remembered the full bar down the hall.

“Hey. It’s fine. Nothing to be ashamed of.” Josh kissed me.

“I’m not...not at all. I’m...proud.”

“Jesus, sweetheart. You don’t even know.”

Yeah, I thought maybe I did.

“Do you want to stay at my house again tonight?” he asked.

“I do.”

Josh nodded, and we walked out and down the hall. As soon as we headed into the main part of the bar, he locked our index fingers together before giving me a wink and pulling away. Our friends and family had seen, though. Knox and Law looked like they were damn near falling off their chairs in surprise, but the others simply looked at us with a smile or a nod of support.

I didn't know what it all meant, where Josh and I went from there, but I was happy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Josh

“Do you want some more coffee?” Griff poked his head around the corner from my kitchen. He was bare except for a pair of boxer briefs. It didn’t matter that it had been over a month since we’d started this thing, I still couldn’t get over the fact that Griffin Caine walked around my house naked, or nearly naked.

Or that he spent every night in my bed.

I still wasn’t sure what that was about. Not that I didn’t enjoy the fuck out of it, because I got to hold him and kiss him and come all over him, so yeah, definitely not complaining, but it surprised me that it had become automatic, Griff coming to my place every day, and that I didn’t mind. I’d had men spend the night or I stayed with them, but not on a regular basis like this.

“Hello?” He waved a hand in the air.

“Sorry. I was spacing off. Yeah, I’ll take one more cup.” I picked up my empty mug and held it out to him. Griff took it, and I went back to work on my model car. We’d woken up early this morning and done the meditating thing before breakfast, and now were lounging around.

It had been about a week since the night at Griff’s when everything had gone down. Griff had blown me two more times since then, but inside I knew that was the least of the differences. Something had changed that night, a switch had been flicked, whether I wanted to admit it or not. Whether we said it out loud or not. Denial or ignorance didn’t change the truth, and our truth was that Griffin and I were more than friends with benefits. Fuck, I *wanted* to be more, but how much could I give?

He came back into the room with my coffee. “Here you go.”

“Thanks.” I nodded toward the table. “Wanna pull up a chair and work on this with me? I know it’s not exciting, but —”

“Yeah, of course I do. I’ve never built a model car before.”

“Well, I’ve never let anyone work on them with me since Doug, so...”

Griffin was getting a chair, but he paused at that. “Shit. You don’t have to.”

Our eyes met, and I saw the sincerity in his. Griffin would never expect that, but he wanted to build it with me. He would tuck away his own desires for mine, though, because that was his way. “I know. I want to. And if you ever want something from me that I’m not giving—not even just me; from anyone—don’t settle. The last thing in the world you deserve is to settle.” I was aware I’d maybe just signed the end of our friends-with-benefits contract, but as much as that thought ripped me up inside, I didn’t take the words back. I wanted Griff to be happy. Always.

“I won’t.” He gave a simple nod, then sat beside me.

“When I was younger, I was really antsy. I always had a lot of energy. Still do sometimes. These gave me something to focus on and helped with that. I guess it’s the meticulousness of the work? That, and I love cars.” I scooted the car toward Griffin and directed him on what to do next.

“You’re not close to your family, are you?” He began to work while I took in the sight of him, of his triceps tightening, his chest rising and falling. The way his tongue traced his lip when he concentrated, which was cute as hell.

“Nah. I grew up in a small town outside Raleigh. Can’t remember if I told you that. My parents love me, but we’re not close. They weren’t into the whole parenting thing as much as they should have been. I think they only had me because it was expected—getting married and having kids—but they were

more into doing their own thing. They moved to Florida not long after Doug's accident—our parents don't talk anymore. We talk on the phone sometimes and send holiday cards, but that's the extent of it." It felt good to be able to say Doug's name. I never talked about him except when I called his mom. I'd never just told anyone about him other than Griff, and I thought maybe I needed to. As if by holding it all inside, I was doing an injustice not only to myself, but to Doug as well.

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I had Doug growing up, and my grandma. Fuck, she was great. She would have loved you. And I have you guys now." Guilt tied my insides into knots, cluttered my brain and my thoughts, because everything I'd said was true, but I was still lying to Griff. I'd never outright said Doug had died, but I let Griff believe he had. Somehow, it was easier that way.

Griff looked over at me and gave me a soft smile. My heart stumbled, fucking felt like it swooped or some shit as the hairs on the back of my neck stood. Christ, I was falling for him, really fucking falling for him, and I didn't want to stop but didn't know how to move forward either.

"Why do you suddenly look like you sucked on a lemon?" he teased, then leaned over and kissed me. It struck me that kissing was something we just did now. Griff wanted me and felt comfortable with me. He had chosen me and trusted me, and I was lying to him. Without waiting for me to reply, Griff continued, "You have us. We're not going anywhere."

"I know."

"My dad...he was great. The best man I've ever known. He took care of everyone and loved everyone. People always say I'm just like him. Act like him, look like him—"

"Damn, your dad was hot, then," I teased, and we both chuckled.

"I always wanted to be like him, ya know? Wanted to make him proud. He would have given someone the shirt off his back if they needed it."

“Well, if that’s what you want, you already got it. There’s no better man than you.”

He looked bashful, confusion wrinkling his brow. “Yeah?”

Did he not know? How could he not know? “Yes.”

“I want him to be proud—of me, of Kellan.”

“There’s not a doubt in my mind that he is.”

“He did a lot of things. Went away to college, volunteered, experienced life in this way I never have, before he and my mom married and started their family. He used to...fuck, he used to tell me he wanted that for me. It was important to him that I left for college. I never told Kell this, Chase neither, but he sat me down once. It was the beginning of my senior year in high school, and he told me he was proud of me, that I was a good man and took good care of Kellan and Chase, but not to forget about myself. He said the strongest people take care of others, but to be able to do that, they have to take care of themselves. That’s what made me apply and go—that conversation. Then...I left, and they died.”

“And you stopped taking care of yourself. Jesus, Griff.”

“No, that’s not true. I have my bar.”

“Which you love, but that’s not taking care of yourself.”

He shrugged, looking away. “This is. What we’re doing. Don’t know why exactly, but it’s taking care of me.”

My heart punched against my chest in sharp, rapid beats. I wanted to be that for him. I wanted to take care of Griffin in ways no one else did. I wanted to be that escape for him.

“Too much?” he asked.

“No,” I answered honestly. “It should be, but it’s not.” I wrapped a hand around the back of his neck, pulled him closer, and he came easily. Our lips met, then our tongues. He tasted like coffee and felt like home.

When he pulled back, we both sucked in deep breaths, like we were trying to savor each other’s air.

“Jesus, I am so fucked,” I said lightly. Like I knew he would, Griffin didn’t take offense.

He pressed a soft kiss to my lips. “I think I want to rent out my house.”

“What?” That came out of nowhere.

“I feel like I’ve spent my whole life standing still. I don’t want to sell the place. I don’t think I would, and I don’t think Kellan would want me to either, but...I don’t want to stand still anymore. It might sound like a small change, but—”

“It doesn’t,” I cut him off. “And if that’s what you want, you should do it. I think that’ll be a good change for you.”

“Yeah, I think I will. I need to talk to Kellan first, of course.”

I suddenly wanted to do everything I could with Griffin. Wanted to keep making sure he wasn’t standing still, that he was moving forward. It didn’t matter if it was big things or small things. I just wanted Griffin to have fun and be happy. “Let’s go to Richmond.”

“Huh? That’s random.”

“So? That’s what makes it fun. It’s Sunday. We’re both off until Tuesday. Let’s pack a bag and go to Richmond. I’ll take you to a drag show and out dancing. But you gotta promise, if someone else asks me to dance this time, you’ll tell them I’m with you.” I waited, but when he didn’t answer right away, I added, “Come have fun with me. I told you when we went away that I was going to make you start living a little. No more standing still, right?”

I wasn’t sure Griff had ever decided to just pack up and leave the same day, even if only for one night, but I wanted him to do it with me.

“I get to tell people you’re mine?” He waggled his eyebrows playfully, making a kaleidoscope of things hit me at once.

I loved playful Griffin.

I wanted to be his.

There was nothing in the world like seeing Griffin Caine smile.

I felt like an even bigger liar...

“Eh. I guess,” I teased.

“You guess, huh? Wasn’t it your idea?”

“I’ll never admit it.” I shoved to my feet. “Last one packed has to drive.”

Then we were both rushing toward my room, laughing and stumbling over each other along the way.

I didn’t ever want this to stop.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Griffin

I'd sent a text to Kellan when we were on the road. **Heading to Richmond with Josh for the night. Be home tomorrow.**

It surprised me how quickly the response came back. **Who is this, and what did you do with my brother?**

Ha-ha.

I'm serious. Who is this?

I'll call you tomorrow.

He was right. I didn't do things like this. I spent my days off with everyone from Havenwood, or working around the house, or doing shit with the bar that I could likely do while I was actually on shift, but it gave me something to keep myself busy. I sure as shit didn't jump in the car to spend the night a few hours away, going to a drag show and a club.

"What are you smiling about over there? Thinking about how much you like my cock?" Josh teased. He was driving. Even though he'd beat me to his room—by cheating, if you asked me—we'd decided to take the Mustang instead of my truck.

"I mean, it's all right, but—"

"Hey. It's a great dick, thank you very much."

"The best I've ever had," I countered. Obviously, it was the only one I'd ever had.

"I don't think I want to go away with you anymore."

"Aw, does Joshy need a compliment? God, it's *so* good. So long and thick—holy shit. I'm chubbing up a little over here."

We both laughed.

“That’s what my incredible cock does to you.”

God, I had fun with him. There wasn’t anyone I enjoyed myself with more than Josh, and it was rare for me to let my guard down with anyone the way I did with him.

I didn’t know what to think about us. I knew about Doug, that Josh was still in love with him and couldn’t give himself to anyone else like that. But ever since that night in my office at Griff’s, things had felt different between us. He’d said then he didn’t want anyone else, and today he said to tell people he was mine.

Josh *felt* mine, down to the marrow of my bones.

We joked around, making more penis jokes, because that was just what one did. After that we talked for a while, and before I knew it, we were pulling up to a hotel that looked a little steep for my blood. I was a simple guy, and Josh was too, so the choice surprised me. Hell, I didn’t even know when he’d reserved the damn thing. It wasn’t something I’d thought about. “When did you do this?” I asked when we parked.

“A gentleman never tells.”

“Well, first, you aren’t one of those, and second, I’m not sure that fits here.”

Josh nudged my arm. “Asshole.” He got out of the car, and I followed along behind him.

“Seriously, Josh.”

“You see, they have these new inventions called cell phones that are able to get this other new invention called the Internet. One quick search while I was safely tucked away in the bathroom this morning and voilà! Our magic hotel room.”

“Did I mention you’re an asshole?” I teased. He wasn’t, though. He was great.

“You love me and you know it,” he countered. It was said in a playful tone, and it sounded like a joke Josh would make. His reply had definitely been him, and yet we both froze for a second, just standing there looking at each other. I felt an

unfamiliar needy pull inside me, this unstoppable force luring me closer and closer to him. Not physically, but inside, as if somehow I could sink into him, meld together.

Holy fuck. I was falling in love with Josh Westbrook. Or had I fallen already? It was hard to tell. How did one know? I'd never felt this before—so comfortable, so right with someone. I'd never been in love before, I never thought I would, but God, I ached for him. Like all these loose ends were suddenly all tied up when I hadn't known they'd been frayed.

“Griff. Breathe. It was a joke. I know you're not in love with me.”

But that wasn't what I was thinking at all. I was thinking that I might be. “The hotel looks nice.” Jesus. I had no idea why in the hell that was what I said.

He shrugged. “I like to do nice things for you, which you know. So stop looking at me all weird. Do you have gas?”

That made a laugh jump out of my mouth. Only Josh would interrupt my thoughts about maybe loving him to ask if I had gas. “Dick.”

“We're back there again, huh?”

“You were an asshole before. Now you're a dick.”

“Who likes to do nice things for you.”

I smiled. “Who makes me happy.”

Josh cocked his head slightly, confusion in his stare, as if he hadn't expected that. He answered not with words, but with his mouth on mine. The kiss felt like, *You make me happy too.*



It really was a nice hotel, boutique style, with this 1920s vibe. Josh had reserved a suite, and after checking in, we grabbed lunch down the block. Apparently, we were close to the bar we'd be going to tonight—which wasn't the same one we'd gone to the only other night I'd come to Richmond. Josh told

me this area was called The Fan, and that it wasn't too far from Virginia Commonwealth University.

After lunch we went back to our suite and ended up taking a nap. Josh was out in no time flat. I had a feeling he woke up earlier than he usually did on his days off because I got up early. It felt like something Josh would do.

I lay on my back, with his head on my chest and his hair in my face, rubbing my hand up and down his arm, and it was so simple, yet so perfect that it nearly stole my breath. I had never had moments like this, the kind you experienced with someone you could talk to but be silent with as well. I wanted to collect them all and lock them away so I'd always have them.

After his nap, we sat out on the balcony a while and watched the people walk by. There were little shops and cafés all around us.

Evening came, and we got ready. Josh seemed quieter, more subdued than usual, but even though I wondered, I didn't ask him why. Somehow I knew he needed to sit with it, to work through whatever it was that had him so contemplative. Or maybe I was afraid of what he would say.

We went to a steakhouse for dinner, then back to the room until it was time to go out.

Josh wore a long-sleeved, button-up black shirt that was tight across his chest, his nipple piercings gently poking against the fabric.

“The drag show is at the same bar we're going to. The shows are upstairs. Figured that makes everything easier.”

“Yeah, that sounds good. Whatever works.”

It didn't take long to get to Barbelle, and I grinned at the name. There was a line, which we waited in. This would only be my second time in a gay bar, and I'd be lying if I didn't admit I was slightly nervous. This was different from the last time, because it was just us and we were *together*—which maybe wasn't the right word, but we were something.

“What’s going on in that head of yours?”

“Nothing.” Though that wasn’t really true. “Just thinking about the turn of events in my life.”

“Second thoughts?”

“Not one.” I cupped his right cheek, leaned in, and kissed him.

“Oh my God. You guys are so sweet!” a guy said behind us. “Well, and hot, but sweet too. You’re looking at each other with *the eyes*.”

“The eyes?” I asked.

“Yeah, you know, when you’re falling for someone but haven’t really admitted it to yourself, much less each other. Believe me, I know. I’ve had the eyes a few too many times, only it’s usually just me, so you guys are lucky. It’s pretty shitty to have the eyes all by yourself.”

Josh chuckled but didn’t discount what the guy said. “I suppose it is. Maybe the right guy is in here tonight.”

“A boy can dream.” He fluttered his eyes dramatically. “Or at least for head in a bathroom stall.”

We all laughed.

Then it was our turn in line, so we paid the cover to get in. The place was packed with gyrating bodies, locked lips, and touching hands. I tensed up briefly out of surprise when Josh threaded his fingers through mine. He led me toward the back and the stairs to the second floor, where it was slightly quieter. Two drag performers were onstage, and one jumped in the air and landed in a split. “Holy fuck.”

“They’re amazing, aren’t they?” Josh said.

“Yeah, I had no idea.”

They finished their singing and dancing number, while Josh and I, luckily enough, found a small table to sit at.

Then the next performers launched into their routine. I had no idea that so much of drag was teasing and interacting with the audience. We ordered a drink, and by the end of the show, my stomach muscles hurt from laughing so much.

We watched for an hour or so before Josh leaned close, mouth next to my ear, and said, “I wanna dance with you, Griffy. I wanted to last time we were in Richmond as well. I didn’t want to dance with that guy. I wanted you to say I was with you.”

I felt a tremble race up my arms and back. “I wanted that too. I won’t make the same mistake again. Tonight you’re mine.” If I could have it my way, every night he’d be mine.

I stood and held my hand out for him. This time it was me entwining our fingers, me leading Josh to the stairs to go back down. I wasn’t a dancer. Going out to bars like this was never my thing, but tonight it felt like I was staking my claim. I was taking something I’d denied myself before, and I was stepping out of my shell in that way that being with Josh enabled me to do. I wanted to experience everything with him.

When we got downstairs, I found a spot on the dance floor and pulled him close. We wrapped our arms around each other, his hand splayed on my lower back, mine journeying up and down his body, wanting to touch him everywhere.

We moved together tightly to the music. Men were dancing all around us, and I thrived on that, while it also felt like it was just us. Me and Josh.

At one point, a guy came up and began dancing behind Josh. I surrendered to the unfamiliar surge of possessiveness flooding through me. “I don’t share,” I told the guy, who held up his hands in defeat.

“My bad, man. Was just having some fun.”

“Mmm, you got all growly when you said that,” Josh told me.

“Making up for lost time. Saying what I should have said last time.”

Then we were kissing, kissing and dancing and touching, and everything inside me settled into place, fit right in, exactly where it was supposed to be.

Because of him.

I wasn't second-guessing myself anymore. There was no *falling* about it. I'd already fallen in love with Josh Westbrook.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Josh

I'd been filled with conflicting emotions all day—well, at least since we stood at the trunk of my car when I made the offhand joke about Griff loving me. I wanted him to. The truth had been obvious the second I'd said it. I wanted Griff to love me. I wanted to be his and claim him as mine because he made me feel alive in ways I hadn't known I needed.

It was strange to acknowledge that I thought I'd been living my best life. I had my own home, and my own business, and the best of friends. I had sex when I wanted, and laughed every day, and didn't lack for anything. But now things were different. Being with Griff, him trusting me the way he did, giving me these pieces of himself he didn't give to anyone else, made me see how much I'd truly been missing. I didn't mean the sex either, just...everything. His smile and his conversation and his care. His feelings and his laugh and his hopes. *That* was my best life. Griff was.

And I wasn't being truthful with him.

It had plagued me all night, while we ate dinner, and while we waited in line, and during the show when he laughed, deep and rich, the sound vibrating in my chest.

When he held me and danced with me and said he didn't share, making me feel possessed, like I belonged, and damned if I didn't want to belong to Griffin Caine.

We stayed at the bar until about midnight.

We were sweaty and laughing, our hands sticking together as we left the bar and walked down the block to our hotel.

When we got to our suite, I motioned toward the bathroom. "Take a shower with me, sweetheart."

Griff followed me into the room. I turned on the water, and we stripped out of our clothes.

“Jesus, this is hot.” I let my fingers dance down the tattoo on his side.

“Not as hot as these.” Griffin brushed his thumbs over the barbells in my nipples, and I hissed.

“Fuck, that feels good. You keep that up, and I’m gonna end up on my knees for you. You know how much I like worshipping this cock.” I stroked him.

“And that’s a bad thing?”

“Not at all, just not in here. I want you in the bed.”

Griff nodded. We washed the sweat off our bodies, but still kept ending up with our hands and lips on each other—kisses on a shoulder, a hand brushing down an ass, a fist wrapped around a cock or cupping balls.

It was like I blinked and the shower was off. Blinked again and we were drying ourselves, blinked again and we were on the bed with me on my back and Griffin on top of me. His body was cradled between my spread thighs, his hand on my face as he looked down at me. “I want you. I want to fuck you...but I want...I think I want to try it the other way first. I’ve never, obviously I’ve never, and maybe I won’t like it, but I want to try it with you.”

His words tangled around my heart, were a knife slicing through the guilt I already felt, while also filling me up in the best kind of way. I didn’t expect that, didn’t think Griff would want me to fuck him. “Are you sure? It would feel good having this thick rod inside me.” I thrust up against him.

“Do you usually...”

“Top? Yeah, but I bottom too, and it feels good. I’d love to bottom for you.” Griffin’s eyes darted away, so I said, “Hey, there’s nothing to be embarrassed about here. Not with me. Not ever, but especially not with me.”

“I’m curious,” he admitted. “If I don’t like it, I can always *top* you.” He said *top* like it was unfamiliar on his tongue. This wasn’t a conversation Griff had ever had to have with a lover.

I wanted him. I wanted him so damn bad, I was vibrating out of my skin with need, but I couldn’t do this, couldn’t go any further until I told Griffin the truth. “Yeah, okay. Okay, I—fuck, I need to sit up for a second.”

Griff frowned, but he moved off me, and I sat up, legs over the side of the bed. My dick was already going soft as my thoughts spun out of control.

He moved over and sat beside me. “What’s going on? Did I say something wrong?”

“No. Hell no. I just—Doug.”

Griffin tensed. “You have sex all the time, and now suddenly you can’t have sex with me because of him?” There was a sharp bitterness to Griffin’s voice I’d never heard before.

“No, that’s not what I—”

“Shit. I’m sorry. I had no right to say that. You loved him, and from the way it sounds, you still love him.”

“It’s not that simple, sweetheart.”

“Why not?”

“I loved Doug. I still love Doug, but... I just... Christ.” I rubbed a hand over my face. “This is so fucking hard.” Why was it still so damn hard? “I don’t know how to move on from him, don’t know that I deserve to.”

Griffin sucked in a sharp breath, his eyes piercing me, holding me, all compassion and confusion. “It’s not your fault that he died.”

Griffin reached for me, but I pulled back. He frowned, uncertain and maybe a little hurt, making the words spill from my mouth. “He’s not dead. I know I let it sound like he was,

but he's not, and I'm so damn sorry I didn't tell you. I was a coward to let you believe that, but—"

"What do you mean he's not dead?" he said, scooting away from me.

I closed my eyes. This was so fucked up. In all the years since Doug's accident, I had never shared the story of exactly what happened. Not with anyone other than my grandma.

"Hey, you're shaking." The warmth of Griffin's embrace wrapped around me. He was hurt and upset, he had to be, but the moment I needed him, he put all that aside to be there for me. It was so typical Griffin that I broke down. Tears streamed down my face, and he pulled me closer, murmuring, "Shh," and "It's okay," against my head, into my ear, over and over.

"I'm sorry. Fuck, I'm so sorry I let you down." I'd failed Doug all those years ago, and now I felt like I was doing the same to Griff.

Griffin, who had the biggest heart of anyone I'd ever known. Griffin, who took care of everyone around him before himself. Griffin, who I'd promised to take care of and put first.

"No, you didn't let me down, baby. I'm confused and a little unsure, but you didn't let me down."

I pulled back enough that I could look at him. Griff held the sides of my face, stroked his fingers across my skin, through my hair, wiping the tears away, and goddamn, he was incredible. I wanted to deserve him. I wanted to let myself love him. "You called me baby."

"I did. That was new, huh?"

I smiled sadly. "Yeah." He was changing me, opening me up, pushing the bravado aside, setting free the other parts of me.

"I'm sure you're going to gloat plenty about that later, telling me how awesome you are, but right now, I really need you to tell me about Doug. My mind is playing all sorts of games on me."

I nodded. He was right. I needed to. “I, um, everything I told you about him—about us—is true. He came out of the accident with a traumatic brain injury. He had to have surgery. They didn’t know if he would wake up or not, and...and he didn’t.”

“Christ,” Griff whispered. “I’m so sorry.”

“Me too.” I took a deep breath and continued. “It’s like a coma...a vegetative state. At first we hoped he would come out of it. I couldn’t move on until I knew. Didn’t leave for college. Nothing. I stayed and visited and hoped, the whole time trying to hide who Doug really was to me. Eventually we realized he wasn’t going to wake up. It’s like, I know that, deep down I do, but I can’t help wondering. His mom, she can’t let go. It came between her and Doug’s dad. They fight all the time. She keeps holding on, though. I guess that’s what you do when you love someone.”

Griff’s eyes darkened, a wild storm of intensity. “I guess you do, and things make a bit more sense now—why you’re holding on. You’re in love with him, and he’s alive, and there’s a chance.”

The pain in his voice was a vise around my heart. Christ, this man would never stop surprising me. “That’s the thing, Griff. I will always love Doug, but I’m not *in* love with him. I’m not holding on for the reasons you think I am. I don’t know how to let go, and I don’t know how to deserve letting go, because it *was* my fault. Why do I deserve to be happy when he’s lying in that bed? But for the first time in my life, I want to try and let go. You make me want to try.”

“I do?” There was awe in his voice, like Griff was surprised my words could be true. Did he really not know how incredible he was? Since the beginning, I had been breaking my rules for Griff, changing because of what he did to me. I wasn’t sure there was anything I wouldn’t do for him.

“Yes. How do you not know that by now, Griffy? We really need to work on making you a little cockier.” It was a joke, and he gave me a small smile, but I didn’t think either of

us was really in the mood to be playful. I wrapped a hand around the back of his neck and tugged him closer. Our foreheads kissed, and we sat there, naked, me with dried tears on my face, breathing each other's air. "You got me all tangled up in you. I don't know how to unravel myself, and the thing is, I don't want to. I want the strings to pull tighter. But that doesn't change how guilty I feel. My thoughts are so messed up, and I'm trying to work through them, but it's not easy working through it all. I'm trying, though. Christ, if you don't make me *need* to try."

The truth was, no matter how much I'd loved Doug, he wasn't coming back to me. It was hard to wrap my brain around sometimes, because he was there, he was alive, and I had never worked through his accident or who we were to each other. I buried it deep inside and pretended to miss him as a friend instead of a lover. Then I moved on, keeping that part of me locked up, giving my body but not my heart. Now there was Griff, digging up my past and working his way around my defenses. Holding parts of me I thought I no longer had to give.

"We'll figure it out. Take it slow. Whatever we need to do. I just know I don't want to lose you."

"I don't want to lose you either," I replied.

My grip on the back of his neck tightened as raw need flooded me. I wanted to touch him, savor him, possess him in ways that were unfamiliar but urgent.

"Please," I said against Griff's lips before pressing a kiss there. "*Please*. I need you."

A deep growl reverberated from his chest and past his lips as Griff pressed them hard against mine, filled with hunger I could taste as he pushed me back on the bed, but I couldn't let go, couldn't manage not to touch him, and pulled Griff with me, until I was lying down and he was giving me his weight.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Griffin

This wasn't the first time Josh had been beneath me, and I sure as hell hoped it wouldn't be the last. I still had the whole night in my thoughts—telling him I wanted him, that I wanted to know what it was like to have him *inside* me. What he'd told me about Doug. The pain on his face. The way it broke me when I held him as he cried.

I couldn't imagine what he'd been through. Just the thought made sadness twist an ugly hand around me. As if he could sense it, he said, "Don't do that. Don't go there. This moment is just for us. I don't want to share it with anyone else. All the other shit will be there waiting for us."

Yeah, that was what I needed too. I answered Josh with my lips pressed to his and my tongue in his mouth, our bodies moving and grinding together. I loved how hard he was, the feel of muscles and ridges beneath his warm skin. The way his cock felt when it rubbed against mine.

I wanted everything with Josh. Christ, I really fucking did.

"I want you to fuck me." I tested the words on my tongue as I moved against him, our foreheads again pressed together. My pulse jumped in anticipation as I surrendered to the truth I'd hinted at earlier. Yes, I wanted to know what it felt like to be possessed by Josh. To know the feel of having someone inside me, becoming a part of me in a way no one had ever been.

Josh stared at me for a moment, then said, "Once I'm deep in this ass, I might never want out." He rubbed his hand down my back before settling on an ass cheek.

I smiled because it was the perfect response. I didn't want him to question my needs. I'd spent my life having sex I felt

on a biological level and nothing else, not feeling that connection I needed to really desire someone the way I did him. Now that I had it, I wanted to hold on, needed to be trusted to know what I craved.

Maybe this sudden want didn't make sense to anyone else, but it did to me. I wanted to know what it was like to be fucked by Josh, and that was all there was to it.

"Let's see how it goes this first time before we make any promises," I teased.

"God, you are so fucking great," he said before flipping us so I was on my back and Josh on top of me. "We're gonna have to play around real good back there to get you ready. Just so you know, I'm about to rock your world."

Josh kissed me, then trailed his mouth down my neck, my chest, kissing, licking, and sucking random spots along the way. He settled with his chest between my legs, his mouth close to my cock. Our eyes held each other's as he used his tongue to travel root to tip along my erection. He sucked my crown, and I gasped, before his mouth traveled back down again. He kissed my balls, sucked them, then kept going.

His breath was hot against my taint when he said, "I'm gonna eat your hole until your damn brain melts. Gonna feast on you until you're writhing and begging for my cock to split you open."

It was like an electric jolt shot through me. I arched off the bed, hands fisted in the blankets, like he'd done more than just speak to me. "You don't know what that does to me. How much I love hearing you talk dirty to me."

"Yes." He kissed my inner left thigh. "I..." Then my right. "Do." Then my sac, which was already tight and full of come. "Roll over. I've been dying to taste your ass."

When he put it like that...hell, I couldn't even find it in myself to be embarrassed. I maneuvered myself around him so I lay on my belly, Josh still between my legs.

Strong hands splayed over my cheeks before he spread them, and *that*, well, that was a little embarrassing. “Jesus, look at that hole.” Josh pressed against it with his thumb before rubbing it. It didn’t feel good or bad, just, well, at that point it was a finger on my asshole. “You ever played back here?”

“Never.”

“It’s pretty, Griff. Pink and tight. Just a light dusting of dark hair, which is so fucking hot.”

“Oh God!” I jerked when his wet tongue rasped over it. Josh did it again and again, making my eyes roll back.

“Do you like it?”

“Yeah.”

“What do you like, sweetheart? Tell me what you like so I know what to keep doing.”

Shit, he was going to make me say it. I wanted his tongue back on me, so I rolled my hips against the bed and said, “I like it when you lick my hole.”

“There we go. That’s what I want to hear.” Josh’s face was between my ass cheeks again, licking and probing and driving me wild. My body was trembling. I fisted the pillows and rambled and begged for more. It felt so damn salacious, but I was starving for it, wanted him to stretch me and eat me and fuck me and make me feel wanted and sexy and...his.

I actually groaned when he pulled back. He answered with a nibble to my butt, his hair tickling it. “I’m just going to get lube and condoms from my bag so we’re ready.”

“Had this planned, did you?”

“I was hopeful,” he admitted. “Just didn’t think it would be going down this way. I’m excited it is, though.”

I watched his ass as he walked over to his bag and dug around. He came back with a bottle and condoms, and set them on the bed before settling between my legs again.

“I can’t believe I get to see you like this.” Josh kissed the small of my back. “I can’t believe you’re mine. Christ, I’m going to do everything I can to deserve you.”

“You already do.”

“Shh. I’m hungry.” He parted me again, *kissed* my hole, then began licking it again. I lost my mind, dissolving into nothing but sensation and Josh. The places our bodies met, and what he was doing to me, and how he made me feel.

I wasn’t sure how long he touched me, tasted me, savored me, which was exactly what it felt like he was doing. Josh was worshipping me, and damned if that didn’t shoot me to the stars even more.

“God, I didn’t know. How could I not have known?” fell from my lips in a tumble of words.

“You know now. Let’s start getting you opened up some more.” Josh grabbed the lube, and my body automatically tightened slightly. “It’s okay. I’ll be good to you. You’re gonna fucking love it. Put a pillow under your hips so I can get to your ass a little better.”

I did as Josh said. I heard the *click* of the bottle, and then his wet finger rubbed my rim. Warm lips pressed to my ass as Josh began to work the first finger inside. I couldn’t yet say it was the best thing that had ever happened to me. It was... uncomfortable. It felt like he was putting something where it didn’t belong, but it was Josh and that knowledge helped.

“We good?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“It’s so damn tight. I don’t know how I’ll survive when it’s my cock splitting you open.”

That helped too. “Fuck.” My eyes rolled back again. I had a dirty-talk kink. Who knew? Josh slid his finger deeper before pulling out again, over and over, then brushed a spot inside me that made my body lurch. “Whoa. Do that again.”

He did, and my body jerked a second time.

“I think someone might become a little slut for ass play.”

“Shut up and fuck me,” I replied breathlessly.

“Yes, sir.”

There was more lube and then another finger joining the first. Josh pumped his hand, sometimes rubbing my prostate, working me open, then pulling back again. Each time my breathing sped too much or my body thrust, my orgasm teetering on the edge, he would stop and just kiss my ass, my balls, rub a hand over me, and talk to me until I was under control again.

It was too much.

It wasn't enough.

It was both at the same time, and that didn't make sense to me, but it was true.

Finally I couldn't take it. I was going out of my mind and needing more, the friction of my cock on the pillow and his fingers in my hole not enough. “Fuck me. Please, baby. Fuck me.”

Josh cursed, then eased his fingers out, and I felt empty, so incredibly empty.

“Get up on your hands and knees for me. Get that sexy ass in the air.”

My face heated. I was slightly embarrassed, but I did it. He'd said I'd become a slut for ass play, and in that moment I felt it. It was...empowering.

Josh slid a condom down his erection and lubed up before drizzling more cold liquid in my crack.

“Arch your back a little, there you go. I'm gonna work in slow. You tell me if you need me to stop.”

“I will.” I dropped my head, closed my eyes, ass in the air, back arched.

The head of his cock pressed at my rim, and he began to push. “That’s it. Look at you opening up for me, spreading your cheeks and letting me inside. Christ, this is sexy. I wish you could see what you’re doing to me, see your hole stretching open to take my dick.”

His words did their job, helping distract me. Still, I felt the burn, the stretch, the pressure, somehow both a little uncomfortable and desperately what I needed.

“Fuck, you’re taking me so good, sweetheart. Look at you, ass in the air for me. You want more?”

“Yes,” I said breathlessly. “More.”

Strong fingers squeezed my hips, and he pressed forward more. One hand slipped around my body and began to stroke my cock slowly, and then... “You don’t even know, Griff. I want to blow my load right now. You feel so good. There’s nothing like being inside you.”

I took a moment to get adjusted to him before, “More.” I sounded so fucking needy, like I was begging for it, but I didn’t care.

Josh pulled out slightly, then worked his way in again, starting with short, slow strokes before moving faster, going deeper. Each time he brushed over that spot in my ass, it was like a fireworks display went off inside me. Josh’s hold on me tightened, and then I was moving against him, pushing back, begging for him to fuck me deep. He leaned over me, kissed the back of my neck, mumbled how good I felt, thanked me, said I was his.

My orgasm built, growing in intensity, a ticking bomb. Josh slammed into me, used one hand to jack me as I thrust back against him. My vision blurred, and the world melted away as my orgasm detonated. I shot, adding more lubrication as he jerked me, before spurting again. Josh’s movements became more erratic before he slammed in. His cock flexed, jerked inside me as he held himself in place, spilling his load in the condom.

When he pulled out, I collapsed to the bed. Josh went down on top of me, then rolled to the side. “That was... Christ, I can’t fucking move. I think you killed me.”

I turned my head and looked at him. “You? I think you killed me.”

“Was a good way to go, wasn’t it?” He cocked a grin.

“The best.”

We were sweaty, and come was all over the bed and no doubt spilling from his condom, but I didn’t care.

Josh kissed my shoulder, my cheek, buried his face in my neck. “Don’t leave me,” he whispered softly. “I’m trying.”

I rolled over and pulled him into my arms. “I’m not going anywhere.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Josh

The next couple of weeks went by with Griffin in my bed every night. I fucked him and held him and laughed with him. He'd talked to Kellan about renting out the house, and his brother was supportive. Griff talked about looking for his own place, but it was something we would mention in passing, and then it never happened. All his stuff except a portion of his clothes and daily toiletries was still at his place. At some point I knew Griff would find a house and completely move out of his, but I liked him in mine. As long as he was officially still in the home he grew up in, I figured he would be spending most of his time with me.

We'd finished the model car together and started another one. He'd bring me lunch at work, or I'd call him to see what he wanted me to pick up at the store for dinner. We still told our friends we weren't serious and that we were just having fun, but I'd uninstalled Grindr from my phone, and he'd noticed, and neither of us made a big deal about it. On the surface, things hadn't changed, but they had. We just weren't talking about it, and I knew that was more Griff doing that for me than anything else. Griffin was giving me the time I needed to work through my shit. I just wished I had the first idea on how to do that.

I wanted to, for him.

It was the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, which we'd all be spending at Knox and Callum's. Knox's daughter, Charlie, would be in town. Remy's mom and sister were away at a retreat.

I was meeting Natalie and Callum for dinner. It didn't escape my attention that Kellan and I weren't spending as much time together as we usually did. As much as I hated to

admit it, I thought both of us were afraid I would screw up and hurt Griff, and we didn't know how to work that out between us.

We'd invited him tonight, of course, and maybe I was overthinking things, but he'd suddenly had something important he'd had to do with Chase.

When I got to the hole-in-the-wall Mexican restaurant we loved, Natalie and Callum were already there, margaritas and a bowl of chips and salsa in front of them. Nat looked up at me and smiled as I slid into the booth seat beside her.

"I see you guys started without me," I joked.

"You were late." Callum popped a chip into his mouth.

"Five minutes."

"It's not often I eat like this. I was excited," he countered, and I chuckled. The waiter approached and asked me what I wanted to drink. I ordered a beer. It was silly, but it felt weird to have margaritas in a group of three without Kell—the three musketeers.

"What's new with you guys?" I asked as I browsed the menu.

"Charlie gets here tomorrow. We can't wait to see her. Y'all, it's so crazy. I never saw myself as a father, but..."

"But you love it," I said.

"I do. And I'm good at it. We're like, Lumberjack Daddy and Nurse Dad. Well, the kids don't call us that. It's a game we play in the bedroom."

Natalie snorted margarita up her nose, and the three of us started laughing.

"Seriously, I'm happy. Life is funny, huh? The way sometimes you find happiness in the most unexpected places? Find out you fit where you didn't think you ever would. That's how I feel, at least. God, I'm sappy."

Callum was right, though. Flashes of Griff's smile filled my thoughts. The way he looked at me when I was inside him, how we laughed together, the way he trusted me, and supported me, and, yeah, I was happy too, and I'd found it in a place I never thought I would.

I cleared my throat. "What about you, Nat?"

"Nothing...well, unless you consider Miguel telling me he's in love with me as something new. *Eek!*" She wiggled beside me in excitement. "He said it first, and I know it's soon, but I really, really love him. Plus, he treats me great. I've never had a man treat me the way he does. When it's right, you just know it's right. And I feel that."

I reached over and grabbed Nat's margarita to take a sip, Griffin Caine taking over my damn thoughts again. Christ, it was right between us, wasn't it? Nat was correct. When you knew, you just knew.

"I'm happy for you." I wrapped an arm around her, pulled her close, and kissed the top of her head.

"I'm happy for you too," Callum said.

"Well, that makes three of us," she teased, before they both looked at me expectantly.

Oh, right. It was my turn for an update, wasn't it?

"Are you ready to order, or do you need more time?" The waiter set my beer down. I was quietly thankful for the reprieve. I got enchiladas, Nat got the same, and Callum ordered chicken street tacos.

The second he was gone, they were looking at me again. "What do you guys want me to say? You know Griff and I are..." Fuck. What did I even say Griff and I were doing? It started out as friends with benefits, which they knew. It was what we continued to say, but I knew, down to the marrow of my bones, I knew there was more to us than that. I rested my elbows on the table, my face in my hands. "Ugh. I am so fucked." With the bottoms of my palms, I rubbed my eyes.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Natalie squeezed my thigh.

Jesus, this was hard. It also felt weird to do it without Kell, but the idea of talking to Kellan about it felt weird too. Talking to anyone about it did, because I didn’t know what to say. I’d never done this, and I felt weak for struggling with it all. It shouldn’t be this hard. Why was falling for Griff this hard for me?

I leaned back in the booth, picking at the label on my beer bottle, which I hadn’t even taken a sip of. “It’s more than it’s supposed to be—this thing with Griff, I mean.”

“Um...no shit?” Callum said. “It’s been there for a while. I just think it took the two of you longer to see it than the rest of us.”

“I agree with Callum. I don’t think any of us were surprised to find out you were seeing each other. Maybe in some ways it’s not supposed to make sense. We all thought Griffin was straight, and you’re the king of hookups and staying as far away from relationships as possible, which is so not Griff.”

I looked over at her. “I love you, but you’re not helping, Nat.”

She frowned. “Sorry. But my point is, despite those things that should mean you and Griff aren’t meant for each other, I think you are. I’m pretty sure we all know that, even Kell, who now might understand why this was all a little hard on Griffin. It’s scary when the two people you love most in the world fall for each other. You’re afraid to lose them, you’re afraid they’ll hurt each other or break up, and you’ll be in the middle of it. Wait, I’m getting off track, aren’t I?”

“Yeah, sweets. I think so,” Callum answered for me.

“It’s not that easy, though. It’s not as simple as saying *I want to be with him* and doing it.”

“Why not?” Natalie asked.

Maybe it should be. Or hell, maybe it was, but I was in denial. How did anyone ever know how they would deal with something like this if they hadn't lived it?

"I'm falling for him, obviously, and I didn't want to do that. I haven't done that in a long time, and I have some stuff in my past I have to work through, that I should have been working through for years, but I don't know how, and I didn't want to, and I feel guilty for even considering it. And I know none of this makes sense without all the details, but..." I shook my head. "I can't."

Callum looked at me with nothing but support. "But you're sharing with Griff? So he knows."

"Yeah. He's the only one I've ever told." I reached for my beer and took a couple of long swallows. "He makes me want things I didn't believe I could ever want. I want to find a way to give him the world because he deserves it."

"But you don't feel like you deserve him," Natalie replied. I had no idea how she knew that, but it was true. "You do, Josh. I don't care what happened in your past. You deserve to be happy, and you deserve Griff."

"I think I believed I was happy until I had him."

"Then fight for him," Callum said. "I haven't been in Havenwood long, but I feel like I know you. You're not one to give up easily. You're there for everyone around you, for all your friends, the way Griff is. You're a smart guy, and you know what the right thing to do is. Whatever you need to do to have Griffin, you'll make it happen."

"Thanks, man." Thankfully, they showed up with our food then, and our conversation was over. Still, it wasn't far from my mind the rest of the night.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Griffin

“Are you sure we have to go? I mean, I’m not a fan of Thanksgiving anyway. It’s really not something we should celebrate. I’d much rather stay in bed all day.” I leaned over and lashed my tongue over one of Josh’s nipple piercings. He hissed as I kissed my way over his chest to do the same to the other one.

God, I loved touching him, exploring him, being naked with him, and having Josh inside me. This, what we had, it was what intimacy was supposed to be. That spark that was supposed to be there but never had been before. He made my skin buzz and my nerve endings come alive. There was nothing in the world like it.

“First, I’m pretty sure I’ve created a monster. You’re like a sex demon now. You always want my cock.”

I kissed my way down his chest and abs. “It’s a great cock.” Stuck my tongue in his belly button. “I do think I want to fuck you at some point soon too.” Kissed his glans, then down his erection.

The truth was, I was slightly nervous to switch things up. Sex with Josh was so different from any sex I’d ever had. I was afraid of losing that, of fucking it up. Things worked the way they were, and I was enjoying the hell out of it.

“You can fuck me anytime you want. I’ll go ass up for you right now if you want me to.”

He would. I knew it. Still, I kept traveling south, licked his nuts, sucked them. “I like balls. Who knew I would like playing with someone else’s sac so much? It’s strangely fun.”

Josh barked out a laugh. “My balls are all yours. You can nuzzle them all you want.”

I looked up at him from between his legs. “Good.” Then I did just that, burying my face in his groin, inhaling Josh’s scent. “I don’t know what you did to me. I went from not caring much about sex to wanting it all the time.” Because it was with him. Because I was in love with him. Christ, I wanted him to be in love with me too.

Josh reached down and stroked his shaft as I sucked his nuts. “That’s because it’s a great cock. You said it, remember? Not me.”

“You’ve said it too.”

“Well, it’s not like I’m gonna lie.”

I laughed. “You’re ridiculous.”

“You like it.”

“I do. You make me feel like I’m fun. I don’t think I’ve ever felt like a fun kind of guy before.”

“Shut up.” Josh grabbed me and pulled me up so I lay on him. He teased the seam of my mouth with his tongue before swiping it between my lips. I sucked on it a little before he pulled back. “I’ve never had more fun with anyone than I do with you.”

“You say the nicest things.”

“Hey.” He held on to my chin so I kept looking at him. “I’m being serious.”

“Okay.” I nodded. The thing was, I believed Josh. I would always believe Josh. “What were you going to say earlier? You said *first*, which means there’s a second.”

“Oh yeah. Sorry, but we do have to go. They’re expecting us. We have the pies. It’s an excuse for us all to hang out, is all. Isn’t that a thing couples do? Spend time with other couples?”

My body stiffened on top of him. It was the first time either of us had called us something like that. I paused a moment to see if he would laugh it off or say it was a joke, but

he didn't. He looked at me, and I at him, until I said, "Yeah, that's what couples do."

I didn't know if that was his way of telling me something or if he was testing the words on his tongue or what, but I wanted to inhale them, wanted them inside me, and to live there, and for them to be true.

"So get your sexy ass up." He swatted my left ass cheek. "Let's get dressed, go have dinner with our friends, then come home and get naked again."

"And you said I'm bossy?" I winked, getting out of bed. It wasn't the first time we'd been up. We'd had breakfast already, and meditated, but somehow we'd found ourselves naked and lying down together again.

We showered, got dressed, got the pies, then climbed into my truck to head over to Knox and Callum's.

There were already cars out front when we pulled up to their two-story log cabin.

"I'll grab the pies," Josh said as we got out.

We walked around my truck and to the door. I knocked, and it was quickly pulled open by Logan. He was small for his age, with thin limbs, a headful of dark hair, and glasses.

"Hey! You guys can come on in." Logan held the door open for us, calling out, "Dad! Griffin and Josh are here!"

It was ridiculous, but I liked the sound of our names together. It had gone from everyone being single to our friends pairing off into duos, and now I was part of one with Josh.

"I'm right here. You didn't have to yell," Knox said from the living room.

"Eh. It's more fun that way." Logan waggled his eyebrows.

"You're gonna be trouble, aren't you, kid?" Josh ruffled his hair.

"Nope. I'm the good one."

“Whatever!” said Knox’s daughter, Charlie, as Knox took the pies from Josh.

“Welcome to the madhouse. Make yourself at home.”

We headed into the living room. Josh and I went straight for Kellan and Chase. Remy, Law, Natalie, Miguel, Callum’s mom, Mary Beth, and Knox’s ex-wife, Carol, were all already there. I hadn’t realized his ex-wife was staying for the holiday as well, but I wasn’t surprised. She and Knox were close, and Callum loved her.

“Hey, babe.” Josh and Kellan hugged the way they always did, but there was something stiffer in the way they did it, in the sound of their voices too.

“Hey, you...how are the two of you doing?” Kellan asked.

“We’re good, Kell,” I replied before Josh had the chance.

“You better be.” His tone was playful, but I knew the seriousness behind it. If the situation were reversed, Kellan would have told me to mind my own business, and I would have deserved it. He did too, but maybe he saw now that it wasn’t as easy as he thought, when you loved and worried about people. I knew he just wanted what was best for us the same way I had when I’d first found out about him and Chase.

“Stop being a butthead.” Josh nudged Kellan.

“Hey, what a coincidence. I say that to him often,” Chase added.

“I’m feeling very ganged up on here, and I don’t like it.” Kellan smiled at Josh. “Sorry. Still getting used to the fact that you’re banging my brother.”

I rolled my eyes. “Nice, Kell.”

“He speaks the truth.”

“I think I might have approached this conversation at the wrong time,” Remy said from behind me.

“No, you didn’t. Save me from these guys,” I teased, and luckily, the tension began to melt away, which was a relief

since it definitely wasn't what I wanted for today.

"Mary Beth, will you play Uno with me?" Charlie asked from the other side of the room.

"Of course I will," Callum's mom replied. It was nice to see her involved. She looked happier than I'd ever seen her.

"She seems to be all about the grandma life."

"She is!" Callum approached. "And...well, I helped her sign up for online dating. She's been talking to a woman who lives on the Eastern Shore. I'm hoping it goes somewhere."

Warmth spread through my chest. Everyone was falling into place, where they were supposed to be.

I looked over Remy to Josh. He smiled and winked, but I saw how the corners of his eyes wrinkled the way they did when he was a little down. It wasn't something I recognized until the past few weeks, but I felt like I knew Josh's moods now. "*You good?*" I mouthed, and he nodded.

We stood around and chatted for a while. Knox and Callum went back and forth to the kitchen a lot, preparing the meal. The rest of us all brought a side dish, but Knox made a turkey, and Callum made, in Knox's words, some of his healthy shit.

Eventually, dinner was done. They'd set a long, folding table with chairs in the living room so everyone could fit. It was the only space big enough for all of us, this makeshift family we'd created together.

"You missed the clumpy cranberries," Josh told me as I was making my plate. "Don't you really like those? I feel like you eat a shit ton of them every year."

"Clumpy is much better than can-shaped, but yeah. I do like them. You know that?" My nose wrinkled. It was such a small thing. I couldn't remember us ever making a joke about my love of cranberries, but he knew. It was something Josh had noticed about me over the years, and that truth settled around me like a warm blanket.

“It’s not a big deal.”

Everyone else was busy and not paying us much attention, except Remy, who stood beside me. “It’s always the small things that matter. Law’s good at that. It’s one of the things that made me fall in love with him.”

Law was standing on the other side of Remy, but talking to Knox. As if sensing Remy was talking about him, he leaned over and kissed the top of his head before continuing his conversation. I’d never seen two people who sensed what the other needed as much as they did.

My gaze darted toward Josh to see how he was reacting to Remy comparing us to them, if that’s even what Remy was doing. He just grinned and said, “I’m good at the small *and* the big things, man.”

It didn’t surprise me that he made a joke out of it. I wasn’t hurt by it either because, well, because it was Josh and I knew what this was. I didn’t expect him to announce his undying love for me or anything, but a twinge of sadness did pinch my chest.

“So you’ve told us, more than once, I believe,” Remy replied. “One might think you’re covering up your true feelings with your overconfidence.”

“*Ooooh!* You got called out,” Chase jumped in.

That was great—I loved seeing how much Remy had grown and how comfortable he felt around us now.

“I thought you were the nice friend,” Josh told Remy, who shrugged.

“Nice and honest.”

“You just leave us alone so I can get my man some cranberries and go eat.” Josh looked at me and winked. Damn it, my pulse fluttered. What was this shit? Being in love was like feeling cut open and raw all the damn time. I wasn’t sure how I felt about it.

Josh pointed the cranberries out to me, and I had missed them. After adding a scoop to my plate, we sat next to each other at the table.

It was loud and messy, everyone talking with each other or in separate conversations. Logan and Charlie argued. Callum told them their plates needed to be colorful, whatever the fuck that meant. At one point, Miguel leaned over and kissed the corner of Natalie's mouth, and I practically saw the hearts floating around her head.

Mary Beth helped Charlie get a drink, and Carol chatted about how she'd be looking for a house to rent before they moved here over the summer.

"I'm gonna rent mine out," I said. "I'm not in a rush. I'd hold it for you." The house was paid off, so it wouldn't set me back to do it that way. I wanted to make sure Carol and Charlie had a place to move to.

"What?" Carol gasped. "I couldn't ask you to do that."

"You didn't. I offered. It's...weird, in a lot of ways, having someone else live in my family home. I think I need some space from it and to find something that's more me, but I want to know it's taken care of too. Who better than the mother of one of my best friends' kids?"

"That's...maybe the sweetest thing in the world. Thank you. Could we come look at it sometime?"

"Absolutely."

"Shit, man. Thank you. That means a lot to me," Knox said, but I waved it off. I wasn't real big on being the center of attention.

Carol looked at Josh. "You have a good one. He's definitely a keeper."

"Yeah," he replied softly. "Yeah, he's great."

"*Aww!*" Kellan and Callum said in unison. They were good at that. Sometimes it was like they planned it out.

The subject got changed from there, Chase teasing Kellan. I risked a glance at Josh, and he was just sitting there, looking at me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Josh

I didn't know what was wrong with me.

I'd done well the rest of the evening at Knox's. We ate our meal and played a game of charades. We laughed and shit-talked and joked about bad language around little ears, before Logan made sure we knew he heard worse things in the school hallways than he ever did at home.

And it was almost perfect.

Too bad I felt like a fraud the whole time.

I was quiet on the way home. Quiet as I told Griff I was taking a shower. Went about my business to get ready for him because Griffin had said earlier he wanted to fuck me at some point, and there was this gentle pulse of truth deep inside me, telling me I needed it tonight. I'd never *needed* to be fucked before. I'd wanted it. I'd enjoyed it. Mostly I wanted to be the one topping, but tonight I needed Griff inside me, which was likely at the crux of what was wrong.

It was getting a hell of a lot harder to deny the things I'd been trying to tell myself I didn't feel.

Once I was finished taking care of business and showering, I wrapped a towel around my waist and went to my room.

Griff sat on the edge of the bed, still wearing his jeans but no shirt. "Is everything okay? You're being quiet."

"Not used to my big mouth being closed, huh?" It was stupid to make a joke right then. I could tell Griff felt the same when he rolled his eyes.

"I'm being serious."

"I know. Sorry." I should tell him I was in love with him, because I knew I was. That I wanted him to be mine for real.

For us to wake up together every day and for him to call this house his. For us to be like Chase and Kell, or Remy and Law, or Knox and Callum. I had all these examples of good relationships all around me, but I was stuck in the damn past. How did I get out of the past?

I didn't say any of those things, though. Instead I took the towel off and walked over to him. I moved to straddle his lap, and Griff automatically sat farther back on the bed to make room for me. I had my knees on the mattress, my ass against the rough denim of his jeans. My arms wrapped around him, one of my hands in his hair, before I leaned down and rubbed my cheek against his dark scruff.

"It's...hard for me. I didn't have real good examples of love when I was growing up. I've never been close to my parents. I always had what I needed physically, but they just... they weren't the kind of parents who hugged or kissed or said I love you, not to each other or me. I didn't really know how to show love until..."

"Until Doug," Griff finished for me.

And then I lost him, only he was still there too, and I hadn't wanted to open myself up for all that again. Until now. "I'm sorry."

"You can't change your past...but the future, the present, those are up to you."

Leaning back slightly, I looked at him. There was more Griff needed to say. It was there in the slight downturn of his lips and the dimness in his eyes, but he didn't. Instead he ran his hands up and down my back, before settling on my ass.

He said, "You make me crazy, you know that? Like I spent most of my life sleeping until you came in and woke me up. How does that work? How do you *feel* someone inside you in ways you don't with anyone else?"

I didn't know, but I felt the same with him.

"I need you." I kissed the corner of his mouth, then his neck. "I need you." I slid down to the floor until I knelt

between his legs. My lips moved over the skin of Griff's chest, down his abs, before I pushed him back so he was leaning on his elbows.

My fingers fumbled the button and zipper on his jeans, and Griffin let me maneuver him until I got his jeans and underwear off. His eyes didn't stray from me as I leaned forward and kissed his sac. "I like your balls too."

He laughed and rolled his eyes. "Shut the fuck up. Is that gonna be something else I never live down?"

"It's something I never want you to forget—how much you like playing with my nuts. Maybe you like it so much, I'll wake up with your tongue on my sac every day. You'll nuzzle down between my legs and make a little home there."

"Jesus Christ." Griffin thrust his hips gently. He was rock hard, his cock fat and tall and proud. "I love it when you talk to me like that."

I stroked his shaft, licked the pearl of precome from his slit. "Maybe you'll like it when I tell you I need you. That I want this thick piece of meat to split me open, to own my hole. Show me how much you want me, Griff. Take what's yours."

A deep growl was my response as Griff grabbed me and pulled me toward him. We kissed and rolled around on the bed until I had my head on the pillows and Griff was on top of me.

His mouth left mine and went to my nipple. "I think you did this just for me. It's my favorite toy."

"What about my balls?" He answered with a nip of his teeth to my piercing that made me arch off the bed. "Fuck yes."

We kissed again, teeth clashing, tongues tangling, moan-swallowing kisses. Griff circled his hips, making his cock rub against mine. I ached, I was so hard for him, wanting him everywhere at once, needing everything at once.

"Roll over," he gritted out but didn't give me time to do it myself. He flipped me so I was on my stomach, and his hands

went to the globes of my ass, kneaded them. “Fuck...I want you. So damn bad, but...”

I stilled beneath him, looking over my shoulder. “I don’t want you to do anything you don’t want to do. If this isn’t what you want, or you’re not ready, or—”

“I want you. I want you so damn bad, it’s killing me. I just —shit, this probably sounds stupid, but I spent my whole life doing the fucking, and it never felt like being with you does. What if I’m just not cut out for it the other way, or not good at it, or this somehow screws up what it’s like between us?”

Jesus, this man was going to fucking wreck me. “You’ll be good at it. There’s no doubt in my mind about that. I’m sure you left all your other lovers satisfied.” He nodded, and jealousy burned through me. Damn, I hated the idea of Griff with anyone else but me. “It won’t be the same simply because it’s us and we’re different together, which can only make it better, but if you want to hold off, we hold off. Sex is supposed to be what we both want.”

“It is.” Griff kissed the top of my spine, then kept going, pressing his mouth down, down, down until he got to my ass. “You’re right. It’s us. That makes it special already.” He reached over and plucked the lube and a condom from the nightstand. “Get up on your hands and knees for me.”

“Are you sure?”

Griff grabbed my ass again, spread my cheeks, and hissed. “I’d have to be crazy not to want to. I’m gonna take what’s mine.” Heat flared to life in his eyes, and damned if it didn’t make my dick twitch.

Griff wet his fingers with lube and spread some over my hole. I trembled, my eyes falling closed. This obviously wasn’t the first time I’d experienced this, but knowing it was him made it feel that way.

He started with one finger. It had been a while for me since I bottomed, but it only took a couple of minutes before I

begged, “Give me another one. Stretch me out for that thick cock of yours,” as I pushed back against his hand.

Griff pulled out, then worked two fingers inside, fucking and twisting and stretching me. There was something about the pressure and knowing it was Griffin that made stars dance before my eyes.

“Christ, this is sexy. You’re so goddamned beautiful like this.”

“Come on. Get your dick inside me. You’re killing me.”

When he pulled his fingers out, I groaned in response.

“I want to see you,” Griff said, a gentle plea that landed in my chest.

“Yeah, okay. I want to see you too.”

I lay on my back as Griffin suited up. He drizzled more lube on his condom-covered erection, and I spread my legs for him, held them back so he could get me at the right angle.

“Fuck,” Griff cursed, rubbing his thumb in circles around my rim, then leaned in. At the first press of his cock against me, my hand tangled in his hair. My body bowed toward him, tugging him as Griff worked his way inside. There was the familiar stretch and pressure, all of it amplifying this thrumming bass inside me, filling me, because it was him.

Fuck. I was so fucked. So goddamned gone for him.

When his groin was against my ass, the muscles there burning, I pulled him down so our foreheads touched and we breathed each other’s air. “All good?” I asked.

“The best. It’s already the best.”

I smiled bashfully, and I knew it was because I felt that way inside. I’d never been modest when it came to sex before, but I’d never had Griff inside me either.

“Look at you...you’re blushing.” He brushed a calloused thumb over my face.

“Don’t tell,” I joked.

“Never.” Then he slowly eased out before thrusting in again with a deep, sharp jab.

“Fuck yes!” I arched off the bed as he did it again, over and over and over, fucking me hard and good and making my heart try to break free from my chest.

Every time either of us got close, he pulled back, teasing me, drawing it out, as if now that he knew what it was like to be inside me, he never wanted the night to end.

We were a sweaty mess. Precome leaked all over my stomach. He flipped me, took me from behind, our bodies slapping together, my dick jerking and my balls full, before he cursed and said he wanted to see me again.

When I was on my back, this time with a pillow shoved beneath me, Griff threaded his fingers through mine, held my hands above my head, and slowed down the thrusts. His cock dragged against all the best spots inside me as our gazes held.

“I love you. Jesus, I am so goddamned in love with you.” As soon as the words spilled from Griff’s lips, he pumped in deep, filling me. I tensed, my cock twitched, my balls emptying out as my release spurted between us. He watched it, then tightened his hold on me and fucked into me harder.

In that moment, I was nothing but the places I was connected to him, the two of us twined together in every possible way. Griff dropped down on me, face in my neck as he cried out, his dick jerking inside me as he rode out his orgasm.

We were quiet then, the truth of what he’d said hanging between us, the fact that I felt the same refusing to fall from my tongue.

Griff began to pull away first. “Shit. I didn’t mean... I have to go.”

“Wait. What?” I sat up just as he was pulling the condom off. Griff tossed it into the trash. “Don’t go, sweetheart. Please

don't."

"I have to. *Fuck*, what is wrong with me? I need to breathe...sort through the mess in my head."

"I—"

"Don't," he cut me off. "I just, I have to go. I'll text you when I get home so you know I'm okay."

I nodded, thankful for that at least. Then I sat quietly, watched Griff get dressed and walk out. As I moved to get out of the bed, my eyes snagged on something on the floor where his jeans had been.

I picked it up—it was his turtle. The one I gave him when we went away. He still carried the damn thing in his pocket, and I hadn't known.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Griffin

I'm home.

Ok...thanks for letting me know. You didn't have to leave. I wish you hadn't. I'd like to talk to you.

I need to figure some things out.

I'd been staring at the texts Josh and I sent on and off all night. I hadn't slept for shit. Every time I closed my eyes, my thoughts journeyed back to him: the way he felt beneath me, being inside him, the words that had spilled from my lips. *I love you. Jesus, I'm so goddamned in love with you.*

They were true, of course. It was something I'd already acknowledged to myself, but it hadn't been something I wanted to say to him. Josh wasn't ready. I'd told him I was on the same page as he was. Hell, the first person I enjoyed sex with and had a fling with, and I'd gone and fallen in love with him. What a mess.

I was in the backyard, on the porch. It was early, just after seven. The morning was foggy, the air thick with moisture as a cool breeze made the hair on my arms stand on end. My cell was in my hand. I kept flipping it over and over before I made a call and held it up to my ear.

"Griff? What's wrong?" Kellan answered.

"Nothing. I just..." Just couldn't finish. Just didn't know what to say. "Nothing. I'm sorry I called so early."

"Are you at home?"

"Yeah."

"I'll be right there, big brother." He hung up before I could argue with him. The thing was, I didn't think I would have. It was why I'd called, wasn't it? I needed my brother.

I didn't move from my spot. It wasn't long until I heard a car in the driveway, then Kellan in the house before he was coming out the back door.

"I brought coffee." He handed me a paper cup from the coffeehouse in town.

"Thanks."

"What's wrong?" Kellan sat in the chair beside me. It took me a moment to reply, but he didn't push, just sat there and waited until I was ready. Kellan was good like that, good in ways I didn't think people always gave him credit for.

Finally, it could have been a minute or an hour later, I said, "I'm in love with Josh."

"Oh...wow...I guess I'm not surprised. I figured you were already halfway there to have even started this with him. That's why..."

That was why he'd been unsure. Because Kellan knew I would fall for Josh and that Josh wouldn't feel the same. He'd told me he was trying, but I didn't know how far that went. If love was a step too far.

"Did you tell him?"

"Yeah..." I nodded. "Didn't really mean to. I'd planned to keep it to myself, but I was a bit lost in the moment. I think I made a rookie mistake." Telling someone you love them for the first time in the middle of sex, someone who'd already told you they didn't have that to give. How cliché was that?

"Okay, I'm assuming I know what you mean by that, but I'm still trying not to think about the fact that you and Josh are having sex."

"Now you see how I've felt this whole time." I cocked a brow at him, and he smiled.

"That's beside the point."

"Of course it is." That's what he always said about it.

"What happened when you told him?"

“I finished and left.”

“Oh, *ew*.” We chuckled, and it was nice to have that moment of levity right then. “But he let you leave? I can’t fucking believe he let you leave. I’m going to kill him.”

“Don’t. It’s not his fault.”

“I’m pretty sure it is.”

“You want me to stay out of what happens with you and Chase. You need to do the same here. The truth is, it’s complicated—things with Josh. And I knew that going into it. I knew what the score was. Hell, I *wanted* it. I was so entranced by how I felt, by how much I wanted him, that it was all I saw. I just knew that being with Josh felt good, and I hadn’t felt good in...probably ever, so I held on. But Josh never lied to me. He never made me believe he could fall in love with me.” It was hard to explain without betraying Josh’s trust. Yeah, things had started to change between us. He’d asked for time and said he was trying, and part of me believed he was. But I’d rushed. I’d pushed. I’d given him something he said was difficult for him, and a guy like Josh would want to give that in return, even if it was too much for him.

“The thing is,” I continued, “how I feel about him, what I said, it’s all tangled up in all these confusing thoughts. I never thought I’d get this, that a relationship was in the cards for me, and maybe it’s not, but I didn’t think love was in the cards for me either. Like I said, I always thought I wasn’t built that way. I wasn’t into sex the way most people were, and I’d never fallen for anyone. I didn’t think I could feel desire or romantic love, but then I wanted him. I tried with someone else before him, and it didn’t work.”

“You did?”

“Yeah, it was stupid. Met a guy on an app. Didn’t realize until he left that he looked like Josh.”

“Did you have sex with him? My mind is so blown right now.”

“Nah. Kissed, but I didn’t feel it—the spark.”

“You feel it with Josh, though.”

I nodded in confirmation. “It’s weird, spending your life feeling different from everyone around you and not understanding why or how. You helped when you gave me those terms, but I still didn’t know who I was. Don’t know if I do now. Am I demisexual? I guess. But maybe I’m not, and I don’t know that it really matters. The only thing that does, for me at least, is how I feel. So yeah, that’s all wrapped up in my feelings about Josh and the way I blurted the words out like that. It’s like I’m still the odd one out, ya know? That guy who can’t do a fling right.”

“Hey. Stop.” Kellan put his hand on my arm. “Those are all just labels. Some people need them, that’s true, but...you say you don’t know who you are, but you do. It’s not made up only of who you want to have sex with or if you want to have sex with anyone at all. And it’s also not made up only of who you love, or if you have a relationship, or when you tell someone you love them. You’re the most honest man I’ve ever known, Griff. Don’t look at that as a bad thing. There’s no one in this world with a bigger heart than you. That’s not a bad thing either. You’re real and layered and human. There are no rules to who we are and how we love. We just do what works right for us, and you did. If Josh can’t see that, it’s on him. And I say that as someone who loves Josh, who will always love Josh, but you deserve to be loved, Griff. You deserve to be *loved*.”

The truth was, I thought Josh wanted to love me. Maybe part of him did, but he didn’t love me enough to let go of Doug. At least not yet. Did I even have the right to expect that? Regardless, I wanted it.

“Thank you.” I took a sip of the coffee he’d brought before setting it down. “You know...our whole lives, you believed I thought you needed me. That’s never been the truth of it. Really, I always needed you. I didn’t show it in the best way, but I did. I needed you so I didn’t have to think about my own shit. I needed you because there is no one in the world I respect more than you—my little brother. You’ve always been

so damn strong, so independent, so *you*, no matter what. And you weren't ever afraid to love with your whole heart, even if that meant you might get hurt. I envy that."

Looking over, I saw Kellan swipe at the tears leaking from his eyes, but they kept coming. We both stood and hugged each other, Kellan cutting open his heart the way he so freely did.

"You telling Josh you love him? That was you doing the same thing I would have done. That was you loving with your whole heart and not being afraid. If you respect that in me, you need to respect it in yourself too."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," Kellan confirmed.

We sat down and finished our coffee. Then we went inside and made breakfast together. We hadn't done something like this in so long, cooking and sitting down to eat this way. It reminded me of when we were young. Soon he'd be married, then have a baby on the way.

He was all grown up.

Kellan had moved on. Not from me, it didn't work that way, but to the next chapter of his life. Damned if I didn't want that too, if I didn't want it with Josh. I wasn't sure about the marriage and the baby part of it, but I was sure about giving your heart to someone and them giving theirs back. Starting a life together. I was so damn tired of being alone.

Kellan stayed with me for a few hours. When I yawned, he said, "You should get some sleep. I can stay while you do."

"No. I'm fine. You can go. I'm going to call Miguel to ask if he can open the bar for me today, and then I'm going to hit the sack."

Kellan nodded. "Thank you for calling me. For trusting me."

"Always. And...go easy on Josh. Things aren't as cut and dried as you think."

He didn't look happy about it but agreed. We said our goodbyes. I called Miguel, then went upstairs and stripped before climbing into bed with my phone. My skin smelled like sex and Josh, and damned if I didn't want to drown in the scent.

I called him.

"Hey," he answered, and there was noise in the background that I couldn't place.

"Hey."

"Griff, I—"

"Wait. Let me get this out, please. I need to get something out."

"Okay."

My pulse thudded, dread growing in my gut, but I needed to do this for me. "I know your past, Josh, and I can't imagine how hard that is for you. Christ, my heart breaks for your loss, but I can't... I know I wasn't supposed to fall for you, but I did. There's no changing that, and the truth is, I don't want to. I love you, and I want you to love me. I deserve for you to love me. You told me if I wasn't getting what I needed, even if it's from you, not to settle. I don't want to lose you, but I...I need more. Eventually I'm gonna need more. I deserve more."

"You deserve everything," Josh replied softly.

When he didn't continue, I said, "Okay." I guess that was my answer. I wasn't going to say it didn't hurt. "Okay," I said again. "I should go. But I... *You* deserve to be happy too, yeah? I made you happy. I know I did. You can't live in the past forever. I love you."

Then I ended the call.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Josh

I'd had to pull over when Griffin called.

After he hung up, I got myself under control and hit the road again. My hands were shaking, and I figured that was part coffee and part Griffin Caine. Christ, what he did to me. He got me all tangled up, and yet not a part of me wanted to be free.

"I don't want to lose you, but I...I need more. Eventually I'm gonna need more. I deserve more."

He really did deserve everything, and I wanted to be the man who could give it to him. I had to find a way to be that man. It was more than just Griff deserving it. I did too.

I didn't stop again until I was parking in the lot at the facility where Doug lived. Elbows on the steering wheel, I rubbed my face, trying to wake myself up a bit. Or hell, maybe I was just trying to get myself ready for what I was about to do.

What I had to do. What I should have done a long time ago.

Say goodbye.

I got out of the car, pulled Griff's turtle out of my pocket, and held it tight as I went into the building. It was a long-term care facility. I was on the list of approved visitors, so I gave my ID to the older woman sitting at the desk and told her who I was there to see.

She smiled and gave me a name tag. "Have a good day."

"I'm trying," I replied.

I knew the way to Doug's room by heart. I walked in, and there he was, as he'd been for twelve years.

Twelve. Fucking. Years.

He was hooked up to the machines keeping him alive, and had a light-blue blanket over him. He was skinny, so damn gaunt, and seeing him this way made pain lash through my chest. He looked older but the same too, and I wondered what he would think if he saw me.

There were photos all over the room—of Doug, of his family, of him and me together. Smiling and laughing and secretly in love.

I closed the door.

My legs were weak, like they weren't strong enough to hold me up as I walked over and sat in the chair beside his bed. I took his hand, Griff's turtle in the other, and it was warm, so warm, so alive, even though his brain and parts of his body weren't.

"Hey, you. Sorry it's been so long since I came to visit." There was no reply, of course there wasn't. There was no movement, nothing that told me he could hear me or knew I was there, but I believed he could and that he did.

"Things have...they've been going well. The gym is great. My friend Kellan, remember I told you about him? He proposed to his boyfriend. They're getting married, and our friend Natalie is going to be a surrogate for them. I'm still not sure if I ever want kids. I know you always did." My hold on his hand tightened. "You would have been a great dad."

He would have been the best dad, spouse, friend.

"I, um, I met someone. Well, I've known him for a while. He's Kellan's older brother, Griffin? I've told you about him before too. God, you would love him. He's more serious than me, like you always were. Keeps me grounded that way, I guess. But we, um...we started seeing each other a while back. It was supposed to be just like everyone else, ya know? A little fun, some sex. But I'm pretty sure I knew from the start it would be more than that. I know I did."

My eyes were blurry, filling with tears. Every time I wiped them away, more took their place. This was hard. Fuck, this was so goddamned hard. I wished Griff was here with me, helping me through it. That's how I knew I was doing the right thing.

“I'm in love with him. I know I promised you I'd never do that. I said I'd wait for you or stay single because I loved you, Christ, I loved you so fucking much. I still do, but I love him too. And that feels like such a big fucking betrayal to you. We were supposed to be together. We were supposed to be happy, and that was taken away from us. I hate that every day, Doug. I do, but God, I love him. And he deserves for me to be able to love him wholly. I deserve it too.”

My voice kept breaking. I could hardly see him, I was crying so much. My hand was hurting, I held him so tightly, but I couldn't let go, couldn't ease up. “You deserve better than you got, but there's nothing I can do about that. I can't change it. I'd trade places with you if I could, but I can't, and I want to be happy. I want to be happy so fucking much, and that feels wrong since you can't be. But I don't know how to live without him, Doug, and I don't think...I don't think you'd want me to, so I'm here because I have to...I have to find a way to let you go. Not completely. Never completely. You will always be my best friend. You will always be the first person I've ever loved. I'll always love you, but I'm *in* love with him, and I have to tell you I'm going back on my promise. I have to be honest about that, if I can ever hope to move forward with him. Please understand. I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry.”

I lost it then, unable to hold back as I cried. I leaned over the bed, held his hands, kissed them.

I cried for the loss of him. For the loss of us.

I cried because the world was robbed of one of the best people I'd ever known. Someone who was strong and loving and always did the right thing. Someone who was serious but knew how to laugh, someone who loved me fiercely.

I cried because Doug would have changed the world. He had changed mine.

I didn't know how long I sat there with him. Eventually there were no tears left, but the ache still sat heavy in my chest.

I didn't leave the chair. I held his hand and talked to him. I recounted old stories from our childhood, asked him if he remembered certain things, even though he couldn't reply. I told him more about Griffin and our friends. I talked about new music I thought he would like, and classic movies we'd loved and how they remade some of them but they didn't hold a candle to the originals.

I talked until my voice was raw.

With each word, each laugh, I was healing inside. I would never stop loving him in some ways. I would never totally walk away from him. I would always check in and always come to visit, but somehow I felt the change, like things were transforming.

I felt like I'd been asleep, like I'd lived half a life, fucking and joking and pretending everything was okay, but I'd been holding myself back, locking myself up.

Yet Griffin still found his way inside. He gave me the key, and Doug was letting me twist it in the lock.

"I know you'd want me to be happy. You probably know I haven't been, not really, but I am now." I stood, leaned over, and kissed his forehead. "I love you. Thank you for understanding. I'll come and see you again soon, okay? And I'll bring Griffin with me. I know you'll want to meet him."

I brushed the blond hair off his forehead, looked at him one more time, and walked out.

I'd just stepped outside when I heard, "Joshua? My Lord. What are you doing here?"

"Annie, hey. It's so good to see you." I pulled Doug's mom into a hug.

“I can’t believe you’re here and I didn’t know. It’s the strangest thing. I didn’t plan to come and see Doug today, but...I just needed to, and now I find you here. I think...I think this is a sign.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Do you have time to sit with me for a moment?”

“Of course. Always.”

We walked over to the courtyard. Stone tables dotted the surrounding garden. We sat at one of them, and as soon as we did, I saw her eyes were wet.

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

She nodded and wiped her eyes.

Doug’s mom had always been a bit different from his father. She went along with what he said, yeah. She never spoke up when he’d put pressure on Doug, but I’d always wondered if she would have accepted him in ways I knew his father wouldn’t if he’d come out. I’d told Doug that more than once, but he’d been too afraid of losing them. It was a shitty way of the world that people had to fear losing those they loved because of who else they loved.

Annie said, “I have something to admit to you.”

“What is it?” I frowned.

“I know...about the two of you. I’ve always known. Well, maybe not *always*, but I’ve known since you were teenagers.”

My breath was sucked out of my lungs. “What?”

“I always wondered about Doug...moms know, but I also knew his father. I’m not proud to admit, I hoped it wasn’t true. His dad, he wouldn’t have understood, and I knew how much his father’s approval meant to him. I wasn’t ever sure, though, until I noticed the way things changed between the two of you. Subtle touches, the way you looked at each other when you thought no one was watching. He was in love with you.”

I looked down, closed my eyes. She knew. All this time, I couldn't believe she knew. "I was in love with him too."

"I know. It made sense to me back then, why I didn't say anything. I wanted the two of you to come out on your own terms, or hell, maybe I was just saving myself. Maybe I was putting my best interests above my son's. I'll always wonder, and I'll always regret it. But I don't know why I didn't tell you I knew after his accident. Maybe because I was ashamed that I let him fear coming out...that I let him carry that burden. That I wasn't a good mom."

"He loved you. He loved you so damn much, and he knew you loved him. He didn't worry about you. He worried about his dad."

"I still should have done something about it."

"Maybe," I answered honestly. "But hindsight is twenty-twenty. You knew, and you loved him. That's what matters."

We were quiet for a moment, each coming to terms with our own truths, I thought. It was me who spoke first. "I fell in love again. I couldn't, before, not with Doug still alive. I felt too guilty. Like I was betraying him. And I loved him so much, at first I still only wanted him, and then I wasn't sure I could open myself up that way again, but it just happened, and I might have ruined it. Because I couldn't... It was still too hard. That's why I'm here. I needed to tell him. I needed to say goodbye."

Annie reached over and grabbed my hand. "You listen to me. You made my son happy. He thought the sun rose for you. He loved you so much, and there is nothing in the world he would want more than your happiness. He would want you to love someone. He wouldn't want you to hold on to him forever. He wouldn't want you to live in his memory. He would want...he would want you to be free...and he would want that for himself too."

My hands started shaking. I thought I'd cried all my tears, but there were more, these a slow trickle down my face. I

knew what she meant, but even though I knew, I asked, “What do you mean?”

“I’ve been thinking...for a while now I’ve been thinking it was time to set him free, but how could I? I didn’t know how. And then last night I dreamed about him, and in the dream he told me he wanted me to be happy. He told me it was time to let him go, and he...said it was time for you to let him go too. I know that sounds crazy, believe me, I know it does, but I woke up crying. I woke up *smelling* him in my room, and I felt like he was there with me. Like I had a conversation with him. I told him I loved him, and I told him I knew about the two of you. We cried together, and he said he loved me, he loved you, but it was time for him to go. I tried to deny it all day, but I couldn’t. I felt him, and I know it was real. I’ll never believe it wasn’t. Doug was on my mind all day, trying to get me here, and I show up and see you...and you’re here to tell him you fell in love. I...” She took a couple of deep breaths as if to calm her breathing. “I think he was holding out for us. I think he wanted to make sure we were okay, and now he knows it’s time for him to move on. We’re happy. We’re okay. That’s all he ever wanted.”

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. Goose bumps traveled up and down my arms. When I inhaled a deep breath, I smelled it—the cinnamon gum he always chewed, mixed with woody shampoo.

Doug telling us one more time, it was okay. He was okay.

It was time to move on and for all of us to finally be free.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Griffin

I forced myself to go to work that evening. I knew I didn't have to. Miguel would have taken care of it, but I also knew myself well enough to admit I'd drive myself crazy if I didn't. I needed to get into my routine, be around the familiar and distract myself from the deep-seated pain in my chest.

It didn't surprise me when Kellan and Chase came in, then Natalie, then Law and Remy, and Knox and Callum. My friends. My family. They were offering support, even though I knew Kellan wouldn't have told them all the details. He would have said I needed them, and he would have been right.

And they'd come.

"Thanks, guys," I said as I handed them all beers.

"Nothing to thank us for, brother," Chase replied.

"Just don't...don't let this fuck up our group, okay? It's not his fault. This is just the way it is, but I couldn't stand it if this screwed us up or if Josh was hurt by it." He couldn't change that part of him that wouldn't let him love me. Maybe that meant he just...didn't, and I needed to acknowledge that.

I still couldn't believe it had only been last night that we'd been together, that I'd told him I loved him. It felt like a world of things had changed since then.

Hours went by. The bar was unusually slow for a Friday night. It was close to eleven, and there were only about fifteen or so other people there besides my friends. My eyes kept snagging on Grumpy Bear all night. Every time they did, another pang hit my chest. "Listen, guys, you don't have to hang out here all night. It's late. You did your part. You can head out."

I had a feeling they would say no, but the door opened then, and we all turned to look. Josh stood there, and he looked...exhausted. His hair was a mess, and he was wearing the clothes he'd worn the day before. His eyes were red, dark circles beneath them, but he stared straight at me, and he was still the most beautiful person I'd ever seen.

The bar went on around me, everyone talking and laughing, not feeling the earth shake beneath us. Except for our friends.

I watched as Josh walked over, knowing the rest of our crew did too. He stopped on the other side of the counter from me, stood there looking at me, and said, "I'm in love with you. Hell, I've probably been in love with you since before our trip, I just never let myself see it. I'm in love with you, and I want to be with you—all the way. None of that bullshit about this just being a hookup, about not being able to give you my heart, because you stole that motherfucker a while ago, and I don't want it back. I love you."

Blood rushed through my ears. I was trembling, my brain still trying to play catch-up with what just happened, with what he'd said.

Josh loved me. He was there, in front of everyone, at my bar, telling me he loved me. "I love you too," finally managed to fall from my lips.

I had to touch him to make sure this was real.

We rushed around to the end of the bar. We met in the middle and pulled each other close, our arms around one another. Josh kissed me, my cheek, the corner of my mouth, hand in my hair, moving to the back of my neck. "I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry. Christ, I love you so fucking much."

We kissed again, my tongue in his mouth. I tasted tears on his lips and wanted to lick it all away. Wanted to fix whatever hurt him, and would do that every day if he'd let me.

There was loud clapping around us. We pulled back to look, and most everyone in the bar was cheering. There were

some people who obviously didn't care or who shook their heads, likely not happy with this development, but they knew not to say anything in my bar, not at my place.

None of them mattered anyway. The only people who did were me and Josh. Natalie and Kellan, who were crying. Chase, who nodded and smiled. Remy, Law, Knox, and Callum, who looked at us with support and love.

"Shit. I wasn't thinking. I just needed to tell you I loved you. I should have taken you somewhere else. It wasn't my place to out you this way," Josh said, trying to pull away.

I held on tight to him, not letting him go. "I don't ever want to deny you. I spent my life thinking I wouldn't have this, wouldn't have someone to love. Now that I do, I won't ever hide it."

"Christ, I don't know how I deserve you."

"Get the hell out of here, you two," Miguel said. He'd fit in with us so well, so quickly. "I'll close the bar."

I sure as shit wasn't going to turn down that offer. "Let's go home," I told Josh.

"This belongs to you. He fell out of your pocket. I took him with me for support." He gave me my turtle back. I'd been upset when I realized it was gone.

"Took him with you? Where did you go?"

"I'll tell you at home."

"Okay." It was a rushed goodbye to everyone. Josh and Kellan hugged, Josh whispering something in his ear. I knew they would eventually have to talk.

"I'm going to leave my car here. I don't want to be away from you," he admitted when we got outside, and all it did was make me love him more.

"I don't want that either."

We didn't talk in the truck, like we both knew it wasn't the time and we wanted to wait until we got home.

Even though the drive took only a couple of minutes, it felt like an eternity before we got to Josh's house.

We got out and went straight for each other again, hugging and kissing and stumbling our way to his door. When we got inside, he cupped my face. "Christ, I love you. I want to keep saying it over and over. I didn't think I'd ever..."

Josh didn't think he'd ever have this again.

I didn't think I'd ever have it at all.

"We're quite the pair, aren't we?"

"We're a sexy-as-fuck couple, is what we are."

I chuckled the way he always made me do. "I love you too, but I need to know."

Josh motioned toward the couch. We went over and sat down. He closed his eyes, and I felt it then, the pain radiating off him, but when he opened his lids to look at me, I saw the resolve too, the clarity.

"I went to see Doug. I needed to tell him about you...and I needed to tell him goodbye."

"Jesus, Josh, I—"

"Please, let me. I need to get this out."

I nodded, and he continued.

"I'd promised him I wouldn't fall in love again. I know that sounds stupid, but it didn't feel right, loving someone else. I didn't anticipate you. You're my Grumpy G...my Griffy."

I rolled my eyes. "You're ridiculous."

"Ridiculously in love with you. I wouldn't have stopped it if I could, and I don't want to stop it, Griff. You found your way into my heart, and that shit won't go away. I don't want it to go away. Nothing makes sense to me the way you do."

My heart stuttered, then soared. "Nothing makes sense to me the way you do either. My whole life I wondered if something was wrong with me, if a part of me was broken, but

it wasn't. It was just waiting for you, waiting for the time to be right.”

“The time is right now. It was...it was hard to tell him. I know that sounds crazy—”

“It doesn't. Not at all.”

“I feel like he heard me. I want you to meet him. You would have liked each other. I, um...I held his hand and just talked to him, told him all about you, and it was healing. Doug would want me happy. You make me happy.

“When I left his room, Annie—his mom—was there, and she told me she knew. Since the beginning, she knew about us, and she told me it was okay. She told me Doug knew how much I loved him, and that he'd want me to move on.”

His eyes filled with tears, and I was there, wiping them away as they fell.

“She dreamed about him. The night you told me you loved me, she dreamed about him, and he said he loved her, that he loved me, and it was time to say goodbye. Then she came to the facility, and I was there, Griff. How does that happen?”

My pulse was thudding heavily in my ears. I couldn't wrap my brain around this, but somehow, somehow it felt right too. “He was waiting for you to be ready.” I would have never believed something like that until that moment.

“She's going to...in the new year, she's going to let him go. I can't be there for that, but I was thinking, would you go with me beforehand? To say goodbye again? I want you to meet him and—”

“Jesus, yes. Of course. Anything. Come here.”

Josh came easily, and I pulled him into my arms. We lay down, me on my back, Josh with a leg thrown over me and his head on my chest. I held him, the two of us hardly fitting on the couch, but that was okay. I didn't want any space between us anyway.

“I'm tired,” Josh whispered.

“Go to sleep, baby. I’m here. I got you. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Promise?” A world of vulnerability hid in that one word. Josh, who came off as so confident, so completely together, was just as scared as the rest of us. People were so damn fragile in some ways, yet strong as steel in others. It was what made us human.

“Yeah. I promise.” I kissed the top of his head and held him, took care of him, the way he took care of me too. The way we always would. Together.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Josh

“Hey, man. How’s it going?” Chase asked when I arrived at their house the next morning. He was heading out with Bowie, I figured to give Kellan and me space.

“Good. You?”

“Doing good, brother.” Chase nodded. “I’m happy for you. You and Griff. In the strangest way, it makes sense. I don’t know what happened in your past, but you did good. It’s not always easy to get over what’s happened to us. If there’s anyone who knows that, it’s me.” He was talking about his dad, I was sure of it. “But those damn Caine brothers...they make us want to, don’t they?”

I smiled, feeling the connection between Chase and me deepen. We both knew what it was like to be best friends with one Caine brother and in love with the other one. They were irresistible and incredible in every way. “Yeah, they really do.”

Chase clapped me on the shoulder before he and Bowie went down the stairs and to his truck.

I waited until he drove away, then raised my hand to knock. The door pulled open before I had the chance, and Kell was there. He stepped forward and wrapped his arms around my shoulders, mine enclosing around his waist. I relaxed into him and let out a heavy breath. I’d needed this. I needed Kell. The way he hugged me told me everything was going to be okay.

“I love you. I’m sorry I haven’t made sure you know that since all this went down,” Kellan said close to my ear.

“Hey, I know. I love you too, babe. I never doubted that.” And I hadn’t, not really. Sure, things had been different, but Kellan and I were brothers for life.

There were still important things we had to discuss, though, things I should have told him a long time ago.

He nodded and let me go. The two of us went to the couch and sat down. Kell pulled his legs up, feet on the cushion and arms around his legs.

“I have to talk to you about a few things.”

“No.” He shook his head. “You don’t. If you want to, I’m here, but you don’t have to.”

“I want to.” Doug deserved that. He deserved to be talked about, for his story to go on.

“Then I want to hear.”

Kellan sat quietly as I told him about my first best friend, about the first boy I’d ever loved. He cried as I spoke but didn’t interrupt. He let me get it all out before he said, “Good God, Josh. I can’t believe you’ve been holding that in all this time.”

“It’s not personal. I hope you don’t think that’s why I didn’t tell you. I just... I couldn’t.”

“But you told Griffin?”

“Yeah, I did.”

Kellan smiled. “Good. That’s good. I’m glad you had him.”

I was lucky to have him. The Caines were really something special.

“I know you, and I know how you take responsibility for those you love—kind of like my brother, if I’m being honest. It’s not your fault; what happened with Doug isn’t your fault. You know that, don’t you?”

I hadn’t. Not for a long time, but that was changing. It had already changed, or at least I was getting there. “I know that now. I made a promise to him, didn’t think I deserved to move on, but Griff...man, there was no denying that. He’s it for me, Kell. He makes me... It’s like everything is settled inside me

when I'm with him, and I didn't even know it was chaos in there before Griff. But it was, and he settles it."

"That's how I've always felt about Chase. It's scary as fuck, but also the most incredible thing, right?"

I chuckled. "No shit."

"I'm sorry...I know I've been weird lately. I don't know why this hit me the way it did. I just..."

"You love your brother."

"Yeah, but I love you too."

"I know, babe."

I kissed the top of his head, and Kellan nuzzled against my side. "I can't believe you're boning my brother. Now we can't ever talk about sex again."

I laughed because it was so damn Kellan. He was crazy. It had always been my favorite thing about him. "Shit, man, there'd be a lot to tell too. He's fucking—"

"No!" Kellan plugged his fingers in his ears. "Lalalalalala!" he said loudly.

"Just remember that when you talk about you and Chase. That's how Griff has felt this whole time."

"Oh my God. That's going to be us now, isn't it? You're going to be on his side, and I can't even be mad because you're in love with my brother. Dude, this is so fucking cool. I can't believe you're in love with my brother. You know, I think all of you guys need to thank me."

I frowned. "Do you now? And what would we be thanking you for?"

"Falling in love with Chase...see, I think that's what started us on this streak. Once Chase and I did it, the rest of you were bound to fall afterward, and now we're all happy and in love and..."

Changing. We were all changing. But some things, our friendships, would always be the same.

“But you fell in love with Chase when you were a kid, so that doesn’t make sense.”

“Shut up, Josh. You’re stealing my glory. What kind of best friend are you?” he teased, and we both laughed again.

We sat there talking for a couple of hours, caught up in ways we hadn’t in a while. Eventually, I told him, “As fun as this is, I need to get home to my man.”

“Oh my God. This is so weird.”

“Yeah, but it’s your fault, remember?”

“Fucker.” Kellan flipped me off.

We said our goodbyes after that, and I climbed into Griff’s truck and headed for home. We’d still need to take me back to the bar to get my car later, but as far as I was concerned, that could wait. I just wanted to spend time with him.

Griffin was sitting on the couch when I got home. “How’d it go?”

“It went well. We’re okay. I told him about Doug.”

Griffin stood up and came to me. He held my face in his hands. “I’m so sorry, baby.”

“I know.” I leaned in, ghosting my lips over his. “Want you.”

“I want you too,” Griff replied, and then we were kissing, kissing and stumbling into the bedroom, pulling each other’s clothes off as we went.

I pushed him down to the bed, knowing Griff liked it when I got a little rough and bossy with him. “You gonna give me your hole?”

His cock jerked against his belly. “Fuck yes. Always. And never stop talking to me like that.”

“I don’t plan on it.”

I grabbed the lube and a condom.

“Do we need that?” Griffin asked.

“No. I’m tested regularly. I’m negative.”

“Me too. I really want to feel you come inside me,” Griff admitted, and damned if hearing that didn’t make my balls tighten even more.

“I want that too.”

I lay down on top of him. We kissed and touched, rutting together, hands wandering, mapping out each other’s bodies.

I lubed my fingers, pushing one inside him, before Griff said, “More. Fuck, I need more,” as he arched toward me.

I went from two fingers to three. When he was writhing and begging for more, I pulled him up. “On your knees. Grab the headboard. You’re gonna need something to hold on to.”

“So fucking cocky.” Griff reached out and stroked my shaft. My whole body started vibrating.

“You do that, and this is going to be over before it starts.”

“We wouldn’t want that. I thought you were some kind of sex legend or something.”

“Yeah, but you bring me to my knees, Griff. Don’t you know that by now?”

“Jesus.” Griff scrambled up and positioned himself like I’d said.

He pushed his ass out, and I rubbed a hand over his muscular cheeks. I still couldn’t believe we were there, that Griff gave me this.

I lubed up, both my erection and him. “I have a feeling this is gonna be over quickly,” I admitted.

“I must be good at this.”

“Look who’s cocky now.”

Griff looked over his shoulder. My chest pressed against his back, and our mouths pulled together as if we couldn't stop them as I began to work my way inside him.

“Fuck...you don't even know. It's so hot, so damn tight. Christ, this hole. I'll never get enough of it.”

We sat there a moment, neither of us moving, my cock buried deep in his ass.

“I thought this was going to be fast,” he teased.

“I'm afraid to move.”

“Fuck me, Josh.”

Well, when he said it like that, how could I not? Hands on Griff's waist, I pulled out, then thrust forward again. I drilled him, my hips a piston as I fucked in and out. The bed hit the wall, Griff holding on and rambling about how good it felt and how much he loved me.

“Want your mouth.” I slowed my strokes. He let go of the bed, wrapped an arm up and behind him, around my shoulders. We kissed, the pace now languid as our bodies moved together, his tight hold a fist around my cock.

I slid a hand down his body, wrapped it around his erection, and stroked in unison with my thrusts. I could feel his body getting tighter, his movements becoming jerkier, and then we were both calling out together. Griff shot, his load dripping down my hand as my dick jerked inside him, filling his hole. “Oh fuck. Jesus, look at you, such a needy fucking bottom.”

“Needy for you,” he replied as I pulled out.

We collapsed onto the bed together. I pushed a finger in his ass, one coated with his release, feeling mine thick inside him. “Now we're in there together.”

I went to pull my finger out, but he said, “No, don't. Not yet.”

So I didn't, and we lay there together as I played with his hole, sometimes kissing, sometimes not. "I love you."

He smiled. "I love you too. I'll never get tired of hearing you say that."

"I'll tell you every day." And I planned on it. Loving Griffin Caine made me the luckiest man on earth. I never wanted him to doubt that.

"Yeah, me too. You know, on the surface, I've always had what I wanted, what I needed—great parents, my brother, Chase, my bar—but I hadn't found my place, where I belonged. I know it now. My place is with you."

"I like that...and my place is with you too. If you think about it, all of ours is in some way. Your bar, the atmosphere you created there, it's where we're safe, where we can unwind. I don't know if you realize how much you bring us all together."

Griff's place had become our home, and I was so damn honored to be the place he called home too.

EPILOGUE

Griffin

Eighteen Months Later

“It’s still hard to believe, isn’t it?” Josh asked as he pulled his car up in front of Kell and Chase’s.

My heart swelled, this strange twitch in my chest. It *was* hard to believe. My little brother, the guy who’d struggled growing up in Havenwood, who hadn’t had a lot of friends, was married and a father. I rubbed a hand over my heart. I wished our parents were alive to see it. “Yeah, it is.”

Josh shut off the car. “Hey, you okay, sweetheart?” I turned in my seat and took him in, this beautiful man who’d changed my whole damn world. Who’d shown me what passion was, who’d made me realize I could have love. We’d been living together for a year. We were in bed together every night. Sometimes we drove each other crazy, but hell, what couple didn’t every once in a while? All I knew was I was so damn lucky to be loved by him.

“I’m perfect.”

He winked. “You’re all right.”

“Funny man.”

He leaned over and kissed me. “Let’s go see our niece.”

It wasn’t the first time we’d seen her. Josh and I had been at the hospital when Natalie went into labor. Kellan, Chase, and Miguel had all been in the room with her, while I paced the waiting room like a crazy person and Josh tried to keep me calm. They’d come home yesterday, though, and everyone was heading to their place to meet her today.

We climbed out of the car just as Knox, Callum, Logan, and Charlie pulled up, followed by Law and Remy.

“Do you think you and Dad will have more kids?” I heard Charlie ask Callum.

Callum wrapped an arm around her. “Nope, we already have the best two.”

“We are pretty awesome, aren’t we?” the little girl replied, and we laughed. She was a handful, that one.

Carol and Charlie had moved into my house last summer, as planned. Charlie was in school in Havenwood and loving it. She still lived primarily with Carol, and Logan with Knox and Callum, but they spent a lot of time at each other’s places.

“Do you want kids?” Logan asked Law and Remy.

“I think we’re all just going to spend a lot of time spoiling the two of you and the little girl inside that house,” Remy told him, and I had no doubt he was right.

“Hey, how’s it going, uncles?” Law asked.

I smiled. “She’s beautiful. Let’s get in there and see her.”

Knox clapped me on the back. “Happy for you, brother.”

“Thanks.” I knocked softly on the door before pushing it open as Kellan said to do. He didn’t want us to ring the bell and wake the baby if she was sleeping.

When we got inside, Kellan was sitting on the couch, Chase beside him, with a bundle in his arms. Natalie was in a chair across from them, twisting the engagement ring on her finger as Miguel stood beside her.

“She awake?” Josh asked.

“She is,” Kell replied. “Everyone, meet Destiny Sue Caine.” Her middle name was after our mom.

Chase stood, and the group of us crowded around them. She was so tiny, had only been seven pounds at birth, then lost a few ounces, but was already gaining them back. Her little eyes were looking around, like they were trying to focus on all of us, her cheeks fuller than the rest of her was.

“Kellan had cheeks just like that when he was a baby.” I brushed my thumb against them.

“She’s beautiful,” Knox said. “Look at that head of hair! Logan was the same.”

“I’m still all hair, Dad,” he replied, and we chuckled.

“I didn’t know it was possible to love someone so much.” Chase brushed his lips over her forehead. “Especially when they mostly just eat, poop, sleep, and yell at me.”

Another round of laughter echoed through the room. Chase doted on Destiny. You could see the awe on his face every time he looked at her.

“She has a set of lungs on her,” Kellan replied. “We were up half the night, and I don’t even care.”

“It would probably be smart if we took turns, but all she has to do is make the slightest sound, and both of us are up and out of bed,” Chase added.

Everyone oohed and aahed over her for a while. At one point, Charlie and Logan sat next to each other on the couch while Kellan let them hold her. This little girl was going to know so much love.

When she began to fuss, Kellan asked me, “Do you want to feed her, Uncle Griff?”

My pulse kicked up. “Please.”

Chase gave me the baby while Kellan made a bottle. I sat in the armchair in the corner of the living room. Natalie looked at me and smiled. She’d had a fairly easy labor from what they said. What did I know? Having a baby sounded hard as hell no matter what.

She and Miguel would be getting married later this year. I’d asked if they planned on having kids of their own, but she said they weren’t in a hurry. They just wanted to enjoy each other and love on their new little niece. They hadn’t used Natalie’s eggs, and there’d been discussions about her role in

Destiny's life; they all decided Auntie Nat was what they felt most comfortable with.

Kellan brought me the bottle, and I put it to her mouth. Destiny latched on right away, and I watched her eat as if it was the most amazing thing in the world.

In a lot of ways, it was.

I sat there thinking about our parents, about life, as everyone chatted among themselves. When we were kids, I never would have expected this, seen this as the life we all lived. Kellan married to Chase. Me having a niece. The strong, loyal group of friends around us...and Josh.

My gaze darted up, and he was looking at me. He winked. God, I loved him. The turtle he gave me poked into my thigh. I still kept it with me every day. The only time I didn't was the day when we went to say goodbye to Doug. Josh had needed it then.

Seeing him had been hard on both of us. Josh had talked to him, had introduced us, and before we left, I gave them some time together. We'd stayed in a hotel that night because I didn't want to have to spend the time driving. Josh needed me, and there was nowhere I wanted to be more than I wanted to be there for him, just like he was with me.

Doug had passed away, and we made a vow to go to the cemetery to see him once a year. Like Josh said, he deserved to be remembered.

"You okay?" He knelt beside me.

"Yeah, just happy."

"Me too."

Destiny fell asleep, so I handed the bottle to Josh, who stayed there, watching her with me. I wasn't sure if Josh and I would ever get married or have kids. We didn't know if that was for us, but you didn't have to marry someone or have babies with them to love them with your whole damn heart.

Happy endings were unique for everyone, and only time would tell.

“It came true,” I said after a little while.

“What did?”

“My dream. Remember when I told you about the tattoo and how I didn’t know what my dream was? It was you...all this.”

“You don’t even know what you do to me. You made mine come true too.”

“I know.” And I really did.

Destiny was so sweet, so small in my arms. I knew I should put her in her crib, but I didn’t want to let her out of my sight. Soon, Kellan made his way over. Josh kissed the baby, then me, before heading over to our friends, who were all gathered on the other side of the room.

“She’s perfect, Kell,” I told him.

“She is. Chase is great with her too. He wants so much to be better than what he had, better than his parents were, but he doesn’t see that he doesn’t have it in him not to be. He’s too good a man.”

“Yeah, he is. Mom and Dad would be so proud of you.”

“They’d be proud of you too.”

Destiny didn’t sleep long. It was as if she didn’t want to miss a thing. Callum and Knox held her for a while, then Remy, then Law, then Nat. I wasn’t sure this baby would ever be put down.

When she was back in Kellan’s arms, I noticed Law was gone. He came back in with Remy’s guitar.

“I, um, wrote a song for her,” Remy said. “Can I play it?”

“Of course,” Kell replied.

Remy had sung at Kellan and Chase’s wedding as well. Once in a while, he played at the bar. His anxiety was much

better, though he was still quirky. That was just Remy, and it was one of the things we all loved about him.

We sat down as Remy took his guitar, the whole room watching as he sang a song about Destiny, about happiness, and about Havenwood.

It was the perfect end to our day.

“We should head out,” Callum said. “Mom and Madelyn want to come and see her soon.”

Mary Beth had fallen in love. She and her partner went back and forth between the house in Havenwood, and Madelyn’s on the shore. It was awesome to see her happy, to see her living her truth, even if so late in life.

“Anytime,” Chase answered.

We said our goodbyes after that. Josh walked to the car with Miguel and Natalie, giving Nat a kiss goodbye before they pulled away.

“Is she doing okay?” I asked. I didn’t know if it was hard for her, as she had carried Destiny for nine months.

“Yeah, she’s good. She’s happy Kell is happy. I asked her, and she said she was just the oven and now she’s Auntie Natalie. She gets to spoil Destiny rotten.”

“Good.”

I was quiet as Josh drove us home.

When we got into the house, Josh closed the door behind us, then held my waist. “I love you...do you know that? Sometimes I think you believe it’s just me who changed your life. You changed mine, Griffy, and I plan to spend every day of the rest of my life showing you how grateful I am that you chose me.”

I smiled, felt the smile in my chest. “There’s only one problem with that.”

“What’s that?”

“I plan to spend every day of the rest of my life showing you how grateful I am that *you* chose *me*.”

“Guess it’s perfect, then.”

We’d all found our place, where we belonged.

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About the Author

Riley Hart has always been known as the girl who wears her heart on her sleeve. She won her first writing contest in elementary school, and although she primarily focuses on male/male romance, under her various pen names, she's written a little bit of everything. Regardless of the sub-genre, there's always one common theme and that's...romance! No surprise seeing as she's a hopeless romantic herself. Riley's a lover of character-driven plots, flawed characters, and always tries to write stories and characters people can relate to. She believes everyone deserves to see themselves in the books they read. When she's not writing, you'll find her reading or enjoying time with her awesome family in their home in North Carolina.

Riley Hart is represented by Jane Dystel at Dystel, Goderich & Bourret Literary Management. She's a 2019 Lambda Literary Award Finalist for *Of Sunlight and Stardust*. Under her pen name, her young adult novel, *The History of Us* is an ALA Rainbow Booklist Recommended Read and *Turn the World Upside Down* is a Florida Authors and Publishers President's Book Award Winner.

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