



**KEEPING IT
CASUAL**

JAX CALDER

Keeping it Casual

A Heart-Warming MM Novella

Jax Calder

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Chapter 1

Dustin

As I enter the real-estate office, the woman behind the front desk looks up and gives me a smile that has a scary resemblance to a great white shark. My heart gives an involuntary extra thud. I'm fairly sure humans are not supposed to have quite so many teeth.

"Hi. I'm Dustin Knight. I'm picking up the keys for my new house," I say cautiously as I move toward her desk. Cautious does feel like the correct attitude around a woman giving me the same look I'm sure most predators give their prey.

"Oh, I thought it must be you! We've been waiting for you." The enthusiasm in her voice somehow adds to the ominous feel.

"You've been waiting for me?" I question.

"Yes, we're that small of a town. It's always exciting when someone new moves here. Welcome to Mineral Creek."

"Um...thanks, Ms..." I stumble, but the name she's signed off her emails with comes to me at the last second. "Ms. Anderson."

She gives me an even bigger grin. "Call me Amanda."

"Amanda. Right. Nice to meet you."

"It's nice to meet you too," she coos, sliding me some forms across the counter. "Your house is all ready for you. You just have to sign on pages three and five, and then the keys are

all yours. The pre-property inspection is done, but feel free to call me if there are any issues.”

“Thanks.”

I follow her instructions, scrawling my signature where yellow sticky arrows helpfully point out exactly where I need to sign.

When I hand her back the contract, she scans the paperwork briefly before lifting her gaze, her head tilting. “So there’s no Mrs. Knight?”

The speculative gleam in her eyes has me moving to shut down that line of thought quickly.

“Ah, no. There’s never been a Mrs. Knight, nor will there ever be. If there was anything, it would be a Mr. Knight, but currently, it’s just me and my son.” I say the words as neutrally as possible.

Somehow, the gleam in her eyes grows even brighter.

“You’re single?” she clarifies.

“Uh...yes, I am.”

Despite having grown up in a small town in the South Island, I’ve forgotten this aspect of small-town living. How the word private is applied to the bathroom zone in a house and not much further.

“Oh, you need to meet Jeremy King! He’s a single dad too. You’ll have so much in common.”

Given she’s only just met me, I’m struggling to see how she can be certain there will be points of commonality between this Jeremy guy and me. Unless Amanda has mind-reading abilities to go along with her real-estate skills or she counts being gay and a dad as enough mutual ground to build a relationship.

But I need another relationship about as much as I need a hole in my new house’s guttering.

I smile tightly. “I’m not looking for a relationship right now. Just focusing on my son.”

Lachie isn't off the rails yet, but the carriages have definitely shown some signs of lurching off the tracks. Detentions. Failing to hand in assignments. Caught skipping school a few times. His last report card had been a wake-up call for me.

I missed some of the signs because I'd been too busy dealing with the disintegrating relationship between my boyfriend Robbie and me.

Guilt gnaws at my stomach. It's currently a constant presence, chipping away at my stomach lining, probably causing an ulcer.

When I held Lachie in my arms for the first time, I pledged that he would always be the most important thing in my life. Yet he'd been relegated in my priorities by a guy who'd decided our relationship was changing to an open status without informing me.

It turns out I am very much a fan of closed things. A point of difference Robbie and I couldn't get past.

Amanda hands me the keys and gives me another shark-like grin.

"You'll change your mind once you meet Jeremy," she says. "Everyone loves Jeremy."



Amanda is right about one thing. Everyone in Mineral Creek does seem to love this Jeremy guy.

News that I've just arrived in town and I'm gay—and therefore a potential boyfriend candidate for Jeremy King—spreads ahead of me like wildfire.

Vince, the guy I've hired to mow my lawns, turns up to introduce himself just as the moving guys finish unloading the last of Lachie's and my possessions from their van. He lasts exactly three minutes before he starts extolling the virtues of Jeremy King, telling me what an amazing guy he is and how he's a miracle worker for fixing his shoulder.

“He fixed your shoulder?” I’m not quite sure I’ve heard that right.

Vince nods vigorously. “He’s a physiotherapist. He has magic hands.”

“Oh. Right.”

While it’s quite an appealing idea to meet a guy with magic hands, I’m still not looking to date.

After Vince leaves, I walk the block to the corner store to pick up bread, milk, and other basics to last Lachie and me until I can get to the supermarket.

The store is one of those old-fashioned corner dairies that used to populate most New Zealand neighborhoods but have slowly diminished due to giant supermarkets and online shopping. This one looks to be thriving though, with shelves that have a little bit of everything and an elderly lady with curly white hair behind the counter who gives me a welcoming smile, which I return.

This is what I wanted with our move to Mineral Creek. My job as a legal consultant for the regional council means I can work from anywhere, and I’d wanted a simple, uncomplicated place to get Lachie through his teenage years without the distractions and temptations of city life. A place with a sense of community and old-fashioned values. Mineral Creek, only an hour-and-a-half drive from Auckland, seemed like a great choice.

The lady behind the counter peers at me over the top of her glasses as she rings up my purchases.

“So, I haven’t seen you before,” she says. “Are you passing through?”

“I’ve just moved here, actually.”

Her eyes light up. “Oh, you must be the new guy who’s moved into the O’Neilly’s old place. It’s so lovely to meet you. I’m Joyce.”

Small towns. It’s going to take some getting used to.

“It’s nice to meet you too, Joyce. I’m Dustin.”

“So, have you met Jeremy King yet?”

I’m slightly startled at the swerve the conversation has taken. “Um...no, I haven’t.”

Apparently, the whole town of Mineral Creek is just a giant Grindr site where all swipes lead to Jeremy King.

“He’s lovely. You won’t want to miss out on that.” She accompanies her words with a lewd wink that has me blinking.

What the hell is the mineral in the creek here? Something that makes the residents wildly inappropriate?

“Ah...thanks for the advice. I appreciate it.”

I retreat home, clutching my bread and milk, to find my son has emerged from sorting his bedroom to look through the half of the kitchen I’ve unpacked. Lachie’s recently had a growth spurt and gained about a foot in a short space of time, which still startles me sometimes. It’s like someone has taken my son and stretched him.

“I’ve got some bread and margarine,” I announce.

Lachie greets the news with one of his grunts, which seems to have become his main mode of communication in the last few months. I interpret this grunt as one of approval.

His messy dark hair flops over one eye as he rummages in the boxes before finally giving up and turning to me.

“What box is the peanut butter in?” he asks.

I shift a few boxes stacked on the counter until I find one labeled *spreads*.

“Here.”

“Thanks.”

“You looking forward to starting school on Monday?” I ask.

Lachie gives me a look to show me exactly what he thinks of that question, and his resulting grunt definitely isn’t one of approval.

He actually hasn't been as upset about moving towns as I'd anticipated. I wonder if one part of him is relieved to have an excuse to leave his group of friends behind. He's a smart kid. He must have known they were leading him in the wrong direction.

My phone chimes. It's my sister, Stephanie. I leave Lachie to make himself some toast and walk out onto the front porch to answer it.

I'm immediately bathed in sunlight. It's one of the things I liked about this house when I did a reconnaissance mission here a few weeks ago to sort out a rental—it's incredibly sunny with a large garden in the front and back.

"Hi, Steph," I say.

"So, how's everything going so far?"

"Good. We're about halfway through unpacking. Still got a lot to do."

As I stand on the porch surveying the garden, I notice that the gate at the street, which leads to the little path up to our front door, hasn't been fastened properly. Clutching the phone to my ear, I head down the path so I can fix it.

"Are people making you feel welcome?" Steph asks.

I huff a laugh. "Almost too welcome." I reach the gate, but it won't shut properly. I crouch to inspect the hinge.

"How are they making you feel too welcome?" Steph asks

"Well, the whole town seems determined to set me up with another gay single dad." A stone trapped in the hinge is stopping the gate from closing properly.

"Don't they know how much you hate being set up?" She chuckles.

"Apparently, they didn't get that memo." I tug at the stone, which luckily comes loose easily. "Honestly, Steph, I think I'll spontaneously combust if I hear the words 'Jeremy King' one more time," I say as I finish fixing the gate and straighten up.

Only to find a guy standing on the footpath directly in front of me.

He's incredibly handsome, dressed as though he's just walked out of a commercial for sportswear, with a toned, lean body, black hair that contrasts with his pale skin, and the reddest, poutiest lips I've ever seen.

He's holding a plate of muffins in one hand. He lifts his gaze to meet mine, tilting those lips into a gorgeously wicked smile.

“Hi, I'm Jeremy King.”

Chapter 2

Dustin

O h, holy fuck. My stomach plummets

“Ah...I...can I call you back?” I ask Stephanie.

“Sure,” she replies.

I press the end call button on my phone and then drop my hand to my side.

My mind whirls as I stare at Jeremy, trying to think of something to say to salvage this situation.

Yeah, I’m drawing a blank.

Jeremy angles his head to the side to regard me, still giving the same wicked smile. “So, no spontaneous combustion? I have to say I’m disappointed. I’ve never seen anyone combust before. I was looking forward to observing the phenomenon.”

I swallow. “I might have slightly overstated that probability for a dramatic impact.”

“Oh. Right.” He nods enthusiastically. “I understand.”

I scratch the back of my neck. “Well, this is mildly awkward.”

His eyebrows quirk up. “Mildly? You’re only giving this mild on the awkward spectrum?”

“Yeah, on the spectrum of awkward and embarrassing moments in my life, this actually only rates in the mild category.”

His smirk grows larger. “I’m interested to know what slides into mortifyingly awkward for you.”

“When I was sixteen, I had a complete wardrobe malfunction at swimming sports where my board shorts and I parted ways with the whole school watching.”

He nods knowingly. “Oh, I get it. I understand how this would only rate mild compared to flashing your junk to all your teachers and classmates.”

While he seems to have decided he’s amused by the whole incident, I decide it’s best to be honest. “Look, Jeremy, I’m... uh...sorry you overheard that. It just feels like since I moved here, everyone I’ve met has been trying to set me up with you.”

He’s still nodding. “They are my minions. I have trained them well.”

So he’s funny as well as incredibly good-looking. It’s pretty obvious why the whole town wants to set him up with someone.

“Yes, you definitely have. But I’m just out of a relationship. I don’t want to date at the moment.”

Jeremy’s eyebrows pull together. “Who says I want to go on a date with you? I mean, sure, I get it if someone’s into this tall, dark, and sexy thing you’ve got going on.” He gestures up and down my body. “I can see why some people might be interested, but personally, I’m into short, light-haired, and unsexy guys. That’s totally my thing. I want them as unsexy as you can find them.”

I try to wrestle the smile determined to overtake my lips but fail epically. “That’s your thing, is it?”

“Yep. Sadly, men don’t advertise themselves like that on their dating profiles. I’ve tried searching for the term unsexy, but I always get no matches.”

I let out a chuckle. “Shocking.”

“I know. So I have to resort to the old-fashioned method of making sure everyone in town tries to set me up with

unsuspecting newcomers. I offer an incentive scheme where the person who manages to find me a date gets a free massage, so you can see why they're all trying to lure you to me. I'm a physiotherapist, by the way, in case you think the massage thing is weird."

"I already know you're a physio. I've been informed by Vince, the guy who mows my lawns, that you do miracle work on shoulders."

He gives me a wry grin. "I'm really sorry it's reached the point where the sound of my name makes you want to turn into a human fireball."

"That's okay." I huff a breath. "Uh...shall we try this again?" I hold out my hand. "I'm Dustin Knight."

Jeremy takes my hand into his. For a second, I have this odd, unbalanced feeling. It's like when I spent the day deep-sea fishing, and when I got off the boat, the earth beneath my feet felt slightly unstable. Weird that somehow touching Jeremy's hand gives me the same feeling.

"Jeremy King," he says, his sexy smirk reappearing.

His hand is warm and smooth, and he applies just the right amount of pressure. I've never been turned on by a handshake before, but it appears there's a first time for everything.

I pull my hand away, trying not to let my face betray my body's reaction. It's a handshake, for god's sake. It's been only three months since I broke up with Robbie. I shouldn't be this desperate.

"Oh, these are for you." Jeremy hands me the plate of muffins.

I wrap my hands around the paper plate, glad to have something else to focus on. "Thank you. They look delicious."

His dark eyes meet mine. "No worries. My daughter Lucy made them. Be warned because Lucy has occasionally been known to mix up sugar and salt."

"I have a fourteen-year-old son who hoovers food so fast at the moment he probably wouldn't notice. But I'll make sure I

take a tentative first bite.”

Jeremy’s gaze drops to my mouth for a second before his eyes flick back to mine.

My cock gives a small involuntary twitch because an incredibly gorgeous guy is looking at me like perhaps I’m as delicious as a freshly baked muffin. We stand there staring at each other for a few seconds before Jeremy steps back.

“Anyway, it was nice to meet you.”

“You too.”

“I live just over your back fence, to the right a bit. So I’m sure we’ll see each other around.”

Shit. Having a temptation like Jeremy King in such proximity isn’t exactly what I need right now.

I manage to rummage up a grin.

“Great,” I say. “I’ll see you around.”

Chapter 3

Jeremy

“So, have you met your new neighbor yet?” Portia Newman asks me as I work on her left hamstring.

“He’s not really my neighbor. He’s more adjacent to my neighbor,” I say. “Well, we back up to each other, but we only share a sliver of fence, like one and a half feet. If you are inclined to measure it, I wouldn’t actually know. I’m just estimating.”

Portia raises an eyebrow and gives me a skeptical look, which is quite an achievement, given half her face is currently pressed into my physio table.

It’s not my fault that any mention of my new not-quite-neighbor turns me into a blathering idiot.

I haven’t been able to get Dustin out of my head in the week since I met him. Let’s just say there isn’t an excess of Pierce Brosnan lookalike gay men in Mineral Creek.

There’s just something about him. Initially he came across as serious and broody, yet his spectacular smile emerged once we started talking. I’m pretty sure in the history of humanity, lips have never looked so gorgeous in an upturned position.

Unfortunately, Mr. Dustin Knight is not an option on the buffet. Which is an incredible shame, up there with the cancellation of *Better Off Ted*.

“So, are you going to try to get to know him?” Portia asks.

“He’s not interested,” I say.

“Nonsense. How can someone not want you?”

“It is a crazy thought to contemplate,” I agree. “But occasionally, the world throws up these strange mutants resistant to my charm.”

“You’ll win him over,” she says.

I dig deeper into Portia’s calf muscle, trying to isolate the source of her discomfort, as I contemplate her words.

Is it possible to win a prize that’s not up for grabs?



“Can we go to the playground before bed? Pretty please?” Lucy asks after dinner.

“Okay.”

It’s a beautiful late summer evening, and the neighborhood park is only a block away. Lucy rides her scooter along the footpath, and when we reach the single road between our house and the park, I use it as an opportunity for her to practice her road-crossing skills.

Lucy bites her lip in concentration as we wait for a car to pass, and my heart gives an involuntary squeeze. For all the heartbreak and angst I put my ex-wife through, I can’t bring myself to resent our time together because Emily and I made something amazing. I will never regret my daughter.

We arrive at the park, and because the universe seems to love pranking me, the first person I see is the tall, dark-haired, gorgeous guy I’ve been trying not to obsess over.

He’s kicking a soccer ball to a lanky teenager on the grass right by the path that leads to the playground and the small man-made pond.

Yeah, seeing Dustin in shorts and a T-shirt running after a ball is not what my libido needed.

“Hey,” I say in my best neighborly voice as we walk past. Which may come across slightly husky, but hey, I’ve just had to keep up with a nine-year-old on a scooter. There’s a chance I could be out of breath because of that.

Dustin traps the ball at his feet and his lips curl up. “Hey, Jeremy. How’s it going?”

“Good. It’s all good.” I nod to emphasize my words but stop when I realize I probably look like one of those dog car ornaments. “This is my daughter, Lucy.”

Dustin gives Lucy a bright smile. “Ah, Lucy, the maker of the muffins. Thank you so much for those. Lachie here practically inhaled them.” He nods to his son.

Lucy gives Dustin a wide grin back. Shy is definitely one thing my daughter isn’t.

“You’re very welcome,” she says. “Can we play soccer with you?”

I blink at her. “I thought you wanted to go to the playground?”

“Soccer’s more fun.”

“You can’t just invite yourselves into someone else’s game, Lucy.” I give a half-laugh to illustrate to Dustin and Lachie that at least *I’m* aware of social conventions, even if my daughter is currently overstepping them.

“You’re welcome to join us,” Dustin says. He shoots a glance at Lachie. “Are you up for some two-on-two?”

Lachie shrugs, his face neutral. Dustin seems to take that as agreement.

He looks at me. “Kings against Knights?”

“It sounds like some kind of medieval fantasy novel,” I say. “Or maybe an epic chess battle.”

Dustin chuckles, and a warm flush spreads through me.

“Our team needs a larger goal to make up for the fact I’m the littlest,” Lucy says.

“That seems fair enough,” Dustin replies, and Lucy goes over to stand next to him so they can discuss goal sizes. Dustin patiently listening to Lucy’s monologue is so cute that I have to look away.

I hide my smirk when I realize Lucy has negotiated a goal twice the size of Dustin and Lachie's. Lucy might be little, but she's quick and ferocious on the sports field. And she has absolutely no fear.

Which Lachie and Dustin quickly find out. As soon as Lachie kicks the ball to Dustin, Lucy's in there, expertly tackling Dustin. She removes the ball from his possession, dribbles it up the field, and just as Lachie's about to tackle her, she sends an excellent cross pass to me.

My job is to simply slot it through the extremely wide goal.

Dustin turns to me with wide eyes. "Are you two some kind of soccer hustlers?"

"Absolutely. I've been training her since birth. It's my plan for my retirement fund. But damn, we forgot to play for money."

"That's an amateur mistake," he says.

I flash him a grin. "I really need to work on it. I'm also teaching her pool and poker as backups."

Man, does Dustin look good when he laughs. The way his lips tilt up and his smile lines crease around his gorgeous hazel eyes.

But Dustin doesn't just look good, he also feels good. Something I discover when we start again and I tackle him, our chests colliding. Even that small contact sends heat zipping through me. He smells of earth and sunshine and man.

"I thought soccer is supposed to be a non-contact sport," he says as he draws back.

"Says no one who has ever played soccer properly," I reply, loving it when he lets out another deep chuckle.

Lachie gets slightly more competitive as the game progresses and begins tackling Lucy. At one stage, he and Lucy end up in a tangle on the ground.

I move forward to check she's okay but stop when I hear both of them laughing, Lucy's giggles intertwining with

Lachie's deeper chuckles.

Dustin throws me a grin as he bends over like he's trying to catch his breath. Hmm. Seeing Dustin huffing and puffing in close range isn't exactly what I need to tamp down my attraction to him. Because I can't help thinking about other aerobic activities we could do together to get him breathing similarly.

We play for another ten minutes, and the score is seven-two to Lucy and me when I sense Lucy's waning interest.

"Can I go to the playground now?" she asks after slotting in another easy goal.

"Have you had enough of whipping these guys?" I ask.

She nods, giving me a wide grin. "Yeah."

I glance over at Dustin and Lachie. "You guys okay to call it quits?"

"At this point, it's an act of mercy from you," Dustin says.

"Okay, you can go to the playground," I say to Lucy. "Just stay away from the edge of the pond."

Lucy skips off, still looking fresh and energetic. Dustin, Lachie, and I stare after her, all of us puffing hard.

"Do you realize you're raising the Energizer Bunny?" Dustin asks.

"It has been noted by a few people before," I say.

Lachie goes over to pick up the sweaters we used to mark the goals, leaving Dustin and me alone.

"So, I've had three more people ask me if I've met you yet," he says in an undertone.

I can't help laughing. "Who?"

Dustin ticks them off on his hand. "Freda from the bakery, Lachie's science teacher when I went to meet with her, and the courier who delivered a parcel to my door this morning."

"The courier would be Ada," I say. "She's my mum's best friend, so she'll definitely have been offered some kind of an

incentive scheme by my mother.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “Your mother offers monetary rewards for people to find you a date?”

I nod. “Take the most over-involved mother you can imagine, double it, and you’ve got my mother. Luckily my parents are away in Europe for six months. Otherwise, my mother would have probably turned up on your doorstep the day you moved in and physically dragged you to meet me.”

Dustin sighs deeply, running his hands through his hair. “So, do you have any solutions for how I can stop the whole town from acting like amateur pimps for you?”

I laugh even more at that.

He gives me an amused grin, which then fades. “Seriously, I’m looking for solutions. I’m pretty sure they’ll only humor me for so long, and then they’ll start to demand to know why I haven’t taken their advice.”

He does look slightly worried about the townsfolk of Mineral Creek coming after him with flaming torches and pitchforks.

I imagine being in his shoes, attempting to integrate into a new community. It’s hard to relate because, besides going away for university, I’ve always lived in Mineral Creek. There’s a saying that it takes a whole village to raise a child, and it definitely feels like most of the adults in Mineral Creek played a role in my life when I was growing up.

Hence their over-investment in my love life.

I bite my lip, thinking. “I think we need to go out on a date together. Somewhere very public, so everyone sees us.”

His dark eyebrows knit together. “Won’t that just encourage them?”

“No, because on our date, we’ll just sit there in uncomfortable silence. The whole town will see we’re not compatible, and they’ll give up their campaign to set us up.”

Dustin still looks slightly skeptical of my brilliant plan. “I guess it could work...” he says.

“It will definitely work. My plans never fail,” I say confidently.

Chapter 4

Dustin

I prepare for my date with Jeremy by ironing my nicest shirt, trying to ignore the butterflies flapping in my stomach.

Why the hell am I so nervous?

It's not even a real date.

Yet I make sure I carefully shave, put on the fancy cologne I usually save for special occasions, and spend an inordinate amount of time and products trying to tame my hair into a style.

Lachie does a double take when I emerge into the living room. "You're looking flash."

"I've got a date. Will you be okay with some leftover lasagna for dinner?"

"Yeah, sure," he says. Then he raises his eyebrow. "Is it a date with the guy from the park?"

Something about his eyebrow raise and the expectant look on his face makes me realize I need to be honest.

"Yes, it is. But it's not a real date."

His forehead crinkles. "How is it not a real date?"

"It's a fake date because everyone in town keeps encouraging us to date. So we're going out once to get them off our backs."

Lachie continues to look perplexed. "Why don't you want to date each other for real?"

I blow out a breath. Under other circumstances, I would be interested in Jeremy. I can't deny that. But things are different right now. I don't want to tell Lachie that a major reason I don't want to date relates to making sure I'm the best parent possible.

"Because it's too soon after Robbie. I don't want to date again at the moment."

He still looks slightly puzzled. "Okay. Have fun on your fake date."

"Thanks. I'll try."



Jeremy's already seated at a table in the center of the restaurant when I arrive. I swallow when I see his stunning lips curved into a smile, his lean body dressed in a dark-purple shirt, and his dark hair slicked into a perfectly coiffed style.

Damn. It really would be so much easier if he didn't tick so many of my boxes.

"Hey." He half-stands then hovers as if he's not sure of the appropriate way to greet a fake date.

"Hey." I move forward to give him a friendly hug.

It's only when I've got his body pressed against mine and the scent of his woody cologne invades my senses that I realize touching him is a really bad idea.

Something about having Jeremy close makes my whole body light up.

"You look good," I say, releasing him.

He looks beyond good, actually. Good is not nearly advanced enough to describe how cute Jeremy is.

"Well, I've got to look like I'm putting in some effort. Otherwise, word will get back to my mother that I'm slacking in my dating efforts, and that would not end well," he says as he sits back down at the table.

I mirror him so we're sitting across from each other. "What would she do?"

“She’d probably demand to give me date training over FaceTime from her cruise ship in the middle of the Mediterranean. It’ll include a complete wardrobe evaluation, and then I’d probably have to role-play different dating scenarios with her. Honestly, it would be similar to the torture you’d find in the higher echelons of hell.”

I laugh. “So you’re going to be the perfect date, and therefore the reason our date fails is due to me?”

He shrugs, then gives me one of those wicked crooked smiles he seems to specialize in. “I’m prepared for you to be the fall-guy if it saves my skin. I’m a gentleman like that.”

I chuckle again as I glance around the restaurant. It’s a standard family restaurant. There’s a candle on the table between us, dripping wax down the sides, and the atmosphere is noisy and busy.

The waiter comes over to take our drinks order.

“Do you drink wine?” Jeremy asks.

“Definitely.”

“You want to share a bottle of red?”

“Sure. I’m easy with whatever.”

Jeremy throws me a smirk after he’s ordered a bottle of merlot. “I’ll show great restraint and leave that comment untouched.”

“The world thanks you for that.”

Our waiter slips away, and my eyes follow him before moving to the surrounding tables, and, yep, there seems to be a few people shooting glances at us right now.

“We’ve already got people’s attention,” I comment.

He smirks. “This is going to work better at promoting the idea we’re incompatible than taking out an ad in the local paper. Plus, we get a nice meal out of it.”

“How does a guy like you end up single anyway?” I ask curiously. It’s something that has been puzzling me. Jeremy is incredibly handsome, with a good job and a magnetic

personality. It's hard to understand why he hasn't been snapped up.

Jeremy looks down at the table, reaching out to adjust the placement of his knife and fork. "Well, there isn't exactly an excess of gay single guys around here. Hence why the whole town wants to play matchmaker with you and me."

"They definitely are enthusiastic about setting you up," I say.

He shrugs. "I grew up here. Everyone knows everyone. Since my marriage broke up, some people do appear to be overly invested in trying to find me my happily-ever-after."

He stops speaking when the waiter comes back with the bottle of wine and pours two glasses.

"So you were married to Lucy's mother?" I ask once the waiter retreats. I know we're supposed to be doing the awkward silence thing, but that can start in a few minutes. For now, I really want to know more about Jeremy.

His shoulders tense and he plays with the bottom of his wine glass. "Yes. I thought I was bisexual. It turns out I am very, very gay." He picks up his wine glass and takes a gulp. "Unfortunately, I didn't make this realization until after I was married and we'd had Lucy."

"That sounds difficult. How did your wife take the news?"

He twists his mouth into a smile, but it doesn't reach his eyes. "Not particularly well. Emily's great. Like really great. You couldn't find a better person. So it's not the most fun thing to break the heart of your best friend, one of the nicest people on the planet, and the mother of your child."

"You can't change who you are, Jeremy," I say quietly.

"Yeah, I know. Trust me, I tried." Something deep and dark lurking in his voice makes me realize that underneath all his quips and jokes, Jeremy has been through a lot.

Without thinking, I reach across the table, resting my hand on his.

His hand is warm and soft and just touching him causes all my nerve endings to fire.

Okay, so that was a bad idea. But I can't resist squeezing his hand before releasing it.

Jeremy gives me a tight smile. "So that's how I became a single dad. Anyway, tell me about how you had Lachie."

I can see how much he needs a change of topic, so I launch into the story about how I was a single twenty-four-year-old when my older sister, Stephanie, told me she and her husband were planning to start their own family in the next few years. If I wanted her to be my surrogate, then now was the time.

"It's crazy looking back on it now. I was so young, and I wasn't financially secure. But I'd always wanted to be a dad, and I don't know, it just felt right, even though I was doing it by myself. And New Zealand surrogacy laws are so outdated that using someone outside my family as a surrogate always scared me because you have no legal protection. One of my best friends offered to be the egg donor, so it all fell into place."

"That happens with some of the best things in life, right?" Jeremy asks. "You're not expecting something to happen, but it all just slots into place perfectly and feels right."

I meet his dark gaze. "Yeah, that's sometimes how it happens."

We stare at each other for a few heartbeats.

He breaks our gaze to pick up his wine glass. "I really admire you for deciding to become a single dad. I can't imagine looking after a newborn by myself."

"There were some nights I wondered what the hell I'd done," I say. "But my family was really supportive, and I was lucky that Lachie was an easy baby."

He takes a sip of wine. "You were definitely lucky. Lucy screamed like a banshee for the first three months of her life. I spent a lot of time looking for the return policy."

I laugh. “Now that Lachie’s a teenager, it’s the owner’s manual I’m most interested in finding.”

Jeremy chuckles. “He seems like a good kid. He was great with Lucy playing soccer.”

I huff out a sigh. “Yeah, he is a good kid. But he got into a bad crowd at his last school and was heading in the wrong direction, hence why I decided to move here from Auckland. Give him a fresh start in a place where it’s easier for me to keep an eye on what’s happening.”

Jeremy studies my face. “That’s a big change to make.”

I run my hands through my hair. “I can’t help feeling like it’s my fault he started to go off the rails. I haven’t been the most attentive father in the past year.”

“Why not?”

“I was distracted...things weren’t going well with my boyfriend, and I was focused on that rather than Lachie.”

“No one can be the perfect parent all of the time, Dustin,” he says.

The waiter turns up then to take our orders. I quickly scan the menu before deciding on the steak. Jeremy orders the pork.

When the waiter retreats, Jeremy meets my gaze with an understanding look.

“Do you want me to make you feel better by telling you about the time I accidentally locked Lucy in her bedroom and had to break through a window to rescue her?”

My forehead furrows. “How did you manage to lock her in her room?”

“I was trying to fix her bedroom door and instead managed to jam it. Future note, never ask my advice for any DIY. I’m enthusiastic, but it’s not backed by any level of skill.”

I laugh, and he gives me a wide grin in return.

And then we talk. Somehow, I forget this is supposed to be a fake date to show the town we’re incompatible. Instead, throughout dinner, Jeremy and I swap story after story, first

about solo parenting, but then we move into talking about our jobs and hobbies. We discover we both have a mutual love for cooking and sports.

I barely notice the waiter refilling our glasses or bringing another bottle of wine when we manage to drain the first.

My attention is fixed solely on Jeremy. His smile. The way his cheekbones are slanted at the perfect angle so the candlelight dances off them. His dark eyes that sparkle so mischievously yet contain so much depth.

Somehow this fake date is more fun than every real date I've ever been on. Combined.

Maybe it's the fact that there's no pressure. I'm not wondering whether this will lead to my place or his place. I'm not skipping ahead to thinking about if this will develop into a relationship.

I'm just really enjoying getting to know Jeremy.

"You did not!" I say.

Jeremy nods. "I did. Hand on heart, swear to all the gods of humanity, I then proceeded to eat an entire pinecone. My experiences in the bathroom for the next two days weren't particularly pleasant."

I laugh. "The things we do when we're young and dumb, huh?"

"Yeah, if only I hadn't been twenty-five at the time, I could have totally used the young and dumb excuse."

As I laugh even more, a scraping sound catches my attention.

The waiters are nosily stacking chairs on tables and giving us pointed looks.

Shit.

It appears Jeremy and I are the last patrons left in the restaurant.

I rub my hand along my jaw. "Um...I think we forgot our brief of uncomfortable silences."

Jeremy looks around the room, his eyes widening. “Um... yeah, it appears we did.”

He meets my gaze, and I’m pretty sure the attraction I feel for him is mirrored straight back at me.

Fuck.

“I’ll grab the bill,” I say.

“There’s no way I’m letting you pay,” Jeremy says, standing. “That will definitely give the wrong vibes.”

“We’ll split it then,” I say.

The maître d’ gives a giant smirk when we approach the counter to pay. “I trust you had a good night.” The gleam in her eye makes me realize how epically we’ve failed at shutting down speculation about Jeremy and me.

“We did, thanks, Kimmy,” Jeremy says in an even tone. “Can we split the bill, please?”

Kimmy looks surprised but obliges, splitting the bill and processing our credit cards.

“Now everyone is going to think I’m a cheapskate who can’t even shout dinner to this town’s favorite son,” I complain as we leave the restaurant.

“The split bill is a tactical move. If you’d paid for me, I guarantee by next week, I’ll have people asking me when we’re moving in together,” he replies.

We’re both slightly tipsy. I stumble slightly, and Jeremy puts his hand on my waist. I can feel the warmth of it through my shirt. He withdraws his hand slowly, leaving a lingering sensation on my skin.

“Did you walk?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“If I’d known, we could have walked here together,” he says as he slots in next to me.

Next time. The words are on the tip of my tongue before I swallow them down. Because that’s not what tonight was

supposed to be about. Although it appears we've swerved quite considerably from the original plan.

I normally love how close my new house is to the town center, but tonight, I'm ruining the fact that I don't have much time until Jeremy and I have to go our separate ways.

We reach the corner.

"So this is where I have to leave you." He nods in the direction of his street.

"Yeah," I say, stopping. Jeremy pauses too, turning to face me. I say nothing and neither does he. Instead, we stand there for what feels like an eternity, just staring at each other with only a few inches between us.

His pouty lips are stained even redder than usual from the wine, and I have an incredible urge to kiss him. Holy fuck, do I want to kiss him right now. To claim those lips as mine.

My need to discover exactly what Jeremy King tastes like is almost overwhelming.

The air sizzles between us.

You're not looking for a relationship.

I want to shush my inner voice right now. What does he know?

Jeremy's eyes flicker between my lips and my eyes.

"Thanks for the best fake date I've ever had," he says, slightly husky.

"Yeah, it's been my best fake date too," I say.

We stare at each other for a few more moments while my heartbeat pounds in my ears.

It would be so easy to lean forward and kiss him.

But it's not fair to mess Jeremy around, to send him mixed messages when I've told him I'm not interested in dating.

That thought has me taking a step back. "Goodnight."

"Night."

I turn and walk away quickly. I need to put some distance between us so I'm not tempted to change my mind.

His voice carries after me. "Hope you have sweet dreams."

Chapter 5

Jeremy

So, fake dates. Turns out, they're kind of incredible.

Maybe I should declare every future date fake in an attempt to get the same kind of connection I had last night with Dustin.

I float around my house in a dream-like state all day, replaying parts of our conversation. Replaying how the laughter lines around his eyes creased even more when he smiled. How it was so easy to talk to him, with all the things we have in common. Replaying the hunger in his eyes when we said goodbye, which I'm sure wasn't a figment of my overactive imagination.

Lucy ambushes me as I'm coming in from hanging out the washing in the backyard. "Daddy, can we please go and get some ice cream?"

"You just made brownies and you ate half of the mixture. I think you've hit your sugar limit for the day," I say.

"I'll just have a little cone. It's so hot, and ice cream is the best thing to eat when it's hot. Please, Daddy?"

I'm going to have to learn how to resist those pleading eyes by the time she's a teenager, or we'll be in a whole lot of trouble.

"You're definitely getting the smallest cone they make," I say.

Lucy doesn't even attempt to hide her triumphant expression. I'm probably not winning any parent-of-the-year

awards right now.

It's only a short walk to the ice cream parlor, but it's so hot that I'm looking forward to my own ice cream by the time we arrive.

My heat level ratchets up another notch when we get to the counter and I spot Dustin and Lachie sitting at one of the tables outside.

Dustin raises a hand in greeting. I raise one back, then turn to scan the menu board, trying not to look too flustered.

“What flavor do you want?” I ask, looking down at Lucy.

“Cookies and cream, please,” she replies.

I order that for her and a mint-chocolate one for me from Frank, a young guy I once treated after his rugby injury. Which means even though I order the smallest size, we both end up with a double scoop.

“Can we sit outside?” Lucy asks once she's got her ice cream firmly in hand.

I pause, indecisive.

Is Dustin going to think I'm stalking him if we go outside? But it's a nice day, and Lucy and I usually eat our ice cream in the paved courtyard where picnic tables are scattered under leafy trees.

“Okay, we can go outside.”

We head through the doors, and my attention is immediately drawn to the table where Dustin and Lachie are sitting.

I can't not go over and greet him, can I? That would be rude.

As I hover hesitantly, Dustin's gaze shifts and his eyes meet mine. A slow, easy grin spreads across his face, and it's like he's a magnet pulling me over. Lucy trails after me.

“Hey,” is my highly original opening line when we reach their table.

Dustin's happy expression doesn't waver. "Hey, fancy seeing you here."

"We must have in-sync ice cream cravings," I reply.

His smile widens and he gestures to their picnic table. "Do you want to join us?"

I can't really say no, can I? That would also be rude. And my mother raised me to be polite to gorgeous men who I have incredible dates with.

"Sure," I say.

I take the seat opposite Dustin and greet Lachie. Lucy sits down next to Lachie, licking her ice cream. Lachie watches her warily out of the corner of his eye.

I can't imagine they're going to find any points in common. She's a nine-year-old girl. He's a fourteen-year-old boy. They might as well inhabit different solar systems.

"Can I go look at the goldfish pond?" Lucy asks me between licks.

"There's a goldfish pond? Can you show it to me?" Lachie asks.

Her eyes light up. "Okay."

We watch as Lucy leads Lachie over to the bottom of the courtyard, where there is a large, ornate goldfish pond.

Dustin blinks in astonishment as he stares after his son. "I think that's the most words he's uttered all day. I mostly just get grunts nowadays.

"Ah, I miss the days when I could communicate using only grunts," I say nostalgically. "Between the ages of thirteen and sixteen, grunts were my go-to."

He eyes me skeptically. "I find it hard to believe you went through a grunt phase.

"They might have trended toward expressive, long-winded grunts," I say, and Dustin laughs.

I look down at the table to hide my reaction to his laugh.

I'm not crushing on the guy who's not interested in having a relationship with me.

Okay, I totally am, but at least I'm *pretending* not to crush on him, which has got to count for something, right?

Dustin and I sit across the table from each other in the dappled shade, eating our ice cream.

I try not to stare at him too much, but it's difficult.

He told me yesterday that he was twenty-four when Lachie was born, so using my rusty mental math skills, that would make him about thirty-eight now. He's definitely a well-preserved thirty-eight. There are hints of salt and pepper in his hair and well-defined smile lines around his eyes, but both only add to the overall package of gorgeousness.

I've had a few flings since my marriage ended two years ago, but I haven't been drawn to anyone like I am to Dustin. Like it's a scientific phenomenon that's impossible to fight.

Is he trying to eat ice cream sexily? Watching him swirl his tongue around the top of the cone is definitely causing my cock to take notice.

Ice cream should come with an R18 warning if Dustin is eating it.

He catches my eye and gives me one of those crinkled-eyed smiles. I take the last bite of my cone and wrench my eyes away from his, checking on the kids.

They're still standing by the goldfish pond, and Lucy is talking a mile a minute, probably telling Lachie the names and the life history of every goldfish in the pond. Lachie's standing next to her with his hands in his pockets, his expression patient.

"He's such a good kid," I say.

Dustin is watching Lachie too. "Yeah, he is. He's always been good with younger kids. He's great with his cousins."

I can't help grinning at the pride on Dustin's face. It lights him up, making him even more gorgeous. It was easy to tell from our conversation last night what an amazing dad he is.

He turns back to me, and his gaze drops to my mouth. I can't help thinking about the moment we had when we said goodbye last night. At least, I think it was a moment. It definitely felt like a moment to me.

Is he thinking about that now too?

“Uh...you've got some ice cream above your lip,” he says.

Okay, maybe not.

I try not to blush. “My mouth has been known to share my ice cream with other parts of my face,” I say. “It's generous like that.” I grab a napkin and dab the top of my mouth. “Did I get it?”

Dustin leans across the table and gently wipes the corner of my top lip with his fingertip.

My lips tingle where he touched me, and I can't help letting out a small gasp like I'm some swooning character from a Jane Austen novel.

He pulls back, and for a few seconds, we just stare at each other.

My heart pounds. Oh, holy shit.

“Did you get it?” My voice comes out in a breathy whisper.

He clears his throat before he speaks. “Yeah, I did.”

Chapter 6

Dustin

On Monday morning, I try to concentrate on the report I'm supposed to be writing on the Waitākere District Councils' waterways policy review, but I keep getting distracted.

Do not think of sexy physiotherapists. Do not think of sexy physiotherapists.

Unfortunately, my brain is very disobedient at the moment.

Jeremy King.

I've gone from wanting the whole town to stop mentioning him to my brain chanting his name like it's the mantra I'm meditating to.

I'm...fascinated by him. I admit it. Every interaction we have makes me want to know more about him.

There are so many layers to the guy. Outwardly he comes across as this goofy, funny, sexy guy but underneath, he's got a more serious side, as I discovered on our date.

At lunchtime, I decide to stretch my legs in the hope it resets my brain. I head into the shop to see if they have any newspapers, but they've sold out.

"So, I heard you had a date with Jeremy on Saturday night," Joyce says from behind the counter.

Just hearing Jeremy's name causes a small thrill to race through me. It's getting quite pathetic.

"Yes, we did have a date," I say, my voice cautious.

"It's such a pity," Joyce says wistfully.

“What’s such a pity?”

“That there’s no sexual chemistry between you two.”

I splutter and almost bite my tongue.

“There’s no what?” I ask when I’ve regained the power of speech.

“There’s no sexual chemistry between you and Jeremy.”

I blink. “Who told you that?”

“Jeremy did.”

My eyebrows fly up, and I put a hand on the counter to steady myself. “Jeremy told you that there’s no sexual chemistry between us?”

“Yes. I asked him how things were going, and he said that you were a great guy, but there wasn’t any sexual chemistry between you.” She leans over to pat my hand. “Don’t worry. I’m sure you’ll find someone one day. You can’t force what isn’t there.”

My mind whirls as I leave the shop. Jeremy’s telling people there’s no sexual chemistry between us? What the hell?

My legs seem to have a mind of their own. Because instead of heading back to my place, I find myself striding toward the converted villa on the main street that houses Jeremy’s physiotherapist practice.

I enter just as the receptionist stands from behind her desk.

She blinks at me, startled. “Do you have an appointment?”

“Um...no. I’m actually looking for Jeremy.”

As I say the words, the man himself comes out into the waiting area.

He’s dressed in professional physiotherapist mode, a smart polo shirt and track pants, and my heart skips a beat. Why is everything about this guy just so delicious?

“Dustin.” He stops still. “What are you doing here?”

“Can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Sure. Come through to my office.”

“I’m taking my lunch break now,” the receptionist says to Jeremy.

“Yes, that’s fine, Carolyn.”

I follow Jeremy down the hallway, past the open door to what looks like a treatment room, and through to his office. Following him gives me a great chance to scope out his ass in tight track pants, which should be sandwiched between the Grand Canyon and the Great Barrier Reef as one of the world’s natural wonders.

Jeremy’s office is a small room with a simple desk, chair, and filing cabinet. He shuts the door behind us and then leans against his desk, crossing his arms casually as his gorgeous lips twist into a saucy grin. “How can I help you, Dustin? Do you have an emergency requiring a physiotherapist?”

“You told Joyce we had no sexual chemistry,” I say.

His smile morphs into a smirk. “Oh, that.”

“Yes. That. I was just in the corner shop, and Joyce reassured me I’d find sexual chemistry with someone eventually.”

Jeremy unfolds his arms, holding them up in an innocent gesture. “You know what this town is like. I had to come up with a convincing reason to explain why we won’t have a second date.”

“You couldn’t just stick with the explanation that we didn’t get on?”

He gives me a skeptical look. “Dustin, I’m pretty sure most of the town knows we talked our way through two bottles of wine and stayed at the restaurant until they had to kick us out. No one was going to believe our original explanation, so I had to come up with another one.”

“And you couldn’t think of anything else but that?”

He quirks an eyebrow. “What’s the problem with my explanation?”

“My problem is we would have fantastic sexual chemistry, and you know it,” I growl, stepping close to him.

His eyes widen and he licks his lips. I can't help following the movement across those incredible pouty red lips.

He shrugs, looking down for a moment before looking up at me through his lashes. “I'm a man of science. And that fact hasn't been proven.”

The invitation in his eyes is the straw that breaks the camel's back. Because fuck it, there's only so much self-control a man can have around Jeremy King.

I close the distance between us, and my point is proven as soon as my lips are on his.

Between us is the definition of sexual chemistry, and it's all about the combustible substances because we're quickly on fire.

The kiss is everything I imagined it would be and more. Jeremy's lips somehow manage to be soft yet firm, and it appears his mischievous tongue has talents for more than just funny quips as it brushes against mine in the most delicious slide ever.

His hands are in my hair and on my neck, holding me still, his mouth on mine as we devour each other.

Oh fuck.

I only meant to kiss him to make my point, but there's no way we're stopping at kissing right now.

Lust surges through me. I want to touch him everywhere. I reach for the bottom of his shirt, pushing it up so I can touch his back. His skin is smooth and warm under my fingers.

He presses forward so I'm skewered by the hard press of his body against his desk as we continue to kiss, hard and frantic. The hardness of his cock through his track pants makes me groan with want.

His hands stroke across my back, sending shivers of pleasure through me.

I pull back for air, breaking the kiss. We're both panting, our eyes locked together.

Fuck. Seeing Jeremy like this, chest heaving, pupils blown, mouth swollen, has my cock throbbing.

I grab his face and kiss him again, spinning him around until he's sitting on the edge of his desk. Slotting between his legs, I trail kisses along his jaw to his ear, licking and nipping at his neck as my hands roam over the muscles of his back.

My hands travel down to the elastic waistband of his track pants before sliding around to the front.

I'm fairly sure elastic is the best invention ever as I dip my hand under it to stroke his cock through the material of his boxers, and he moans into my mouth.

Oh, holy fuck.

I push his track pants down, and he lifts his hips so I can get them off, tugging down his boxers for good measure.

Then I drop to my knees.

I can't resist looking up at him. He's watching me with half-lidded eyes, his lips parted slightly.

I don't think I've ever felt such an intense need to give someone pleasure before. To make Jeremy feel good. It's such a simple desire, my whole world boiling down to this man and whatever I need to do to make him fall apart.

I lean forward to lick the head of his cock, savoring the salty taste. I run my tongue up the length of his cock, then back down again.

I continue to tease him, tickling his balls with light touches of my fingers, licking up and down his cock several times.

"Dustin..." he gasps.

I take pity on him and finally take him into my mouth.

His whole body tenses, but I don't give him a chance to recover. I work my way down his shaft until I'm taking him deep, then coming back up again. The feel of him sliding in

and out of my mouth ramps my desire to the point where my cock strains against my pants.

Jeremy fists his hands in my hair, and I can't help the little moan that escapes me. The taste of him, the feel of him in my mouth, pushes me so close to the edge.

“Oh god, yes, Dustin.” His voice is wrecked.

I pick up speed, doubling my efforts. Tremors run through him and he hardens even more. I take him as deep into my throat as I can.

“I'm going to...”

I don't pull off because, honestly, not tasting another part of Jeremy feels like a waste of an opportunity.

He groans just as he explodes in my mouth. I swallow down everything he gives me.

He thrusts his hips a final time and then stills. He releases his grip on my hair, his head falling back, breathing hard.

I slowly get to my feet. I can't help but smile at the blissed-out look on Jeremy's face. Mission accomplished.

He opens his eyes and gives me a sated, sexy smirk. “That's one talented mouth you've got on you,” he says. “Not quite sure I can live up to that.”

“I don't know if it's a competition,” I say as I strip off my pants and boxers. He leans forward and brushes my lips with a quick kiss before dropping to his knees.

He pauses for a second, stroking my length, his dark eyes finding mine.

“You're so hot,” he says.

“Right back at you,” I say before the power of speech leaves me as Jeremy takes me into his mouth.

Fuck. Is there anything hotter in the world than seeing Jeremy's plush lips wrapped around my cock, having him look up at me with pupils blown with lust?

He reaches up and finds my mouth with his finger, and I instinctively suck on it. He pulls his finger out of my mouth and then slides that hand behind my balls, farther... farther...

I groan when he tentatively strokes around my hole.

Okay, I was wrong. There is something hotter. Jeremy fingering my ass while sucking me is even more scorching.

I'm already so turned on that the combined feel of his mouth on my cock and his finger touching me causes me to explode.

Jeremy swallows everything, then pulls off with a satisfied pop, giving me one of his mischievous grins. My legs suddenly lose the power to hold me up, and I slump down next to him, struggling to regain my breath.

"No sexual chemistry, my ass," I pant out.

"Okay, so we've just proven that me and your ass have amazing sexual chemistry," he replies.

I laugh, and he turns to kiss me again.

This time it's a lingering, sweet kiss. A kiss I happily get lost in.

Eventually, he draws back.

"So..." he says, his dark eyes capturing mine. "Can we talk about what that was?"

My heart beats faster. "Releasing unresolved sexual tension," I say.

"Oh, I'm all for resolving the sexual tension," he says. He bites his lip. "So, do you anticipate another build-up of sexual tension that will need to be resolved? Or do you view that as a once-and-done, permanent solution to the problem?"

Shit.

I so want to tell him that, yes, this is something we can do on a regular basis. Because honestly, that was up there with the hottest sex I've ever had.

But as much as I want to tell him yes, I know what my answer needs to be.

“Jeremy—” I start.

“Forget I asked,” he says quickly.

“No. I don’t want to forget you asked. I really like you. And that, that was incredible. But—”

“Why do I feel like this won’t be the fun kind of butt?” he asks.

I ignore his quip. “But I meant what I said the other night at dinner. My focus is on Lachie this year. I can’t start dating again right now. Especially not you.”

He blinks at me. “Why, especially not me?”

I owe him honesty. I’ve stormed in here, had amazing sex with him, and I’m now telling him there can’t be more. I meet his gaze. “Because I get the feeling you would be the ultimate distraction for me,” I say softly.

I mean it. I’m pretty sure being with Jeremy would be so distracting that my house could burn down around me, and I wouldn’t even notice.

Jeremy’s Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows.

“I get that, Dustin. I’m never going to question you wanting to be a good parent.” His voice is quiet.

“I know you won’t.” That’s the thing. Jeremy is a good guy. A great guy. Things would actually be so much easier if he wasn’t such a great guy.

“We can be friends though, right?” he asks.

“Definitely.”

Chapter 7

Dustin

I can't help but question my decision over the next week.

Memories of being with Jeremy haunt me. Particularly when I'm in the shower or in bed, I replay the feel of his hands on my skin, the heat and suction of his mouth, and that wicked smile he gave me right after the most incredible blowjob of my life.

I don't think I've ever jerked off so many times to a single memory.

It doesn't help that I keep seeing Jeremy everywhere I turn.

I mean, I know Mineral Creek is a small town, but right now, it seems microscopic.

Lachie and I go to join the library, and I see him in the library car park. Lachie insists we go to the public pool so he can practice for the upcoming swimming sports, and I spot Jeremy and Lucy coming out of the pools. Luckily the entrance and exit areas are quite far apart, so I get away with a long-range wave.

On Saturday morning, Lachie informs me we've run out of toilet paper.

"I don't understand how we could have run out of toilet paper already," I grumble.

Lachie just shrugs. I study his face closely. There isn't an illicit teenage activity that requires toilet paper that I don't know about, is there?

I go to the corner store and buy some from Joyce, and luckily, she doesn't say anything about Jeremy. I can do without her talking about the sexual chemistry between Jeremy and me when I've been thinking about nothing else all week.

Just as I'm emerging from the store, who should I bump into but Jeremy.

"Hi, friend." He gives me a happy smile, and some of the tension I've been feeling drains. I've been stressing about how Jeremy will react when I talk to him again, but it appears he's not fazed about being friend-zoned after incredible sex. Maybe he has that kind of sexual connection with everyone?

"Hey." I stand there, clutching toilet paper. Which isn't the most romantic prop in the world, but it shouldn't matter, right? Jeremy is just my friend. We've agreed on that.

"How's your week been?" I ask.

"Great, just great. Nothing out of the ordinary. Monday lunchtime, I just had an ordinary hour. And I haven't spent the rest of the week constantly replaying what happened during that hour. Absolutely no replaying at all has been happening in my head."

I laugh loudly. Fuck. I can't deny how much I just plain like this guy.

"It turns out I've been doing a bit of replaying myself," I say, meeting his eyes.

The air sizzles between us.

Jeremy tilts his head. "Amongst all that replaying, did you get your report done?"

I'd forgotten I'd told Jeremy at dinner about the big waterways report I've been working on.

"Yep, I sent it off last night."

"That's great. Want to go out tonight to celebrate?"

I raise my eyebrows, and he, in turn, raises his arms in an innocent gesture. "I'm asking you as a friend. Lucy's at a

sleepover, and I'm meeting some friends at the pub for a boys' night out. I thought you might like to meet some other locals. They're great guys."

"Are you sure me going out with you isn't likely to lead to more speculation about us?"

"But everyone knows we've got no sexual chemistry, remember?" He gives me that wicked smile, and my cock twitches at the memory of exactly how intense the chemistry between us actually is.

I pause to consider his invitation.

The problem with working from home is that it's not easy to meet new people when you've moved to a new place.

It would be good for me to get out tonight after a long work week. I deserve to cut loose a little. Especially as Lachie is also out tonight at a sleepover.

And I can handle my attraction to Jeremy, right? I'm a grown man. I'm in control of myself.

"What time are you heading out?" I ask.

"Around seven. I'll message you. We can meet on the corner and walk into town together."

"Okay."

So that's how at seven o'clock, I end up standing on a street corner waiting for Jeremy.

I ignore how my heart starts to pound faster as soon as I see him coming down the street toward me. He's dressed casually in a blue button-down shirt and jeans, but he still looks undeniably delicious.

"Hey," I say as he draws near.

He gives me a wide smile. "Hey yourself."

We start walking toward the pub, and I try to concentrate on our conversation rather than how Jeremy looks and smells great.

Luckily, talking to Jeremy is just so easy.

He tells me funny stories about his patients and asks me insightful questions about my job, and before I know it, we've reached the town's main pub: the Blue Moon.

Jeremy leads the way through the swinging doors. It's busy for this early on a Saturday night, and as we cut across the crowd, lots of the other patrons come to say hi to Jeremy. This makes our progress slow and slightly awkward because after he introduces me to people, I find myself the recipient of some curious looks. Has Jeremy's comments about us having no sexual chemistry reached everyone in the pub? Are they all speculating about what I lack in that department? Because I'm pretty sure none of these Jeremy fans will blame him.

I feel a bit self-conscious when we reach the booth where Jeremy's friends are seated.

"This is Pete, Jasper, and Beau." Jeremy introduces his friends as he slides in and sits down. I settle in next to him. "Everyone, this is Dustin. He's just moved to town."

Jasper greets me with a welcoming grin but then turns to Jeremy and gives him a pointed look. "You're not supposed to invite your date to boys' night. That breaks all the rules. It's cheating because you date guys."

"He's not my date. I mean, we've been on one date, but we've decided we're better off as friends. Neither of us is really feeling it as anything more." There's a hint of a blush on Jeremy's cheeks. He's not a born liar.

Jasper throws a look between us, clearly not convinced.

"We shouldn't discriminate against Dustin just because he showed bad judgment by going on a date with Jeremy," Beau says.

"You're right. We should be feeling sorry for him instead," Jasper agrees. "He's probably got post-traumatic stress from the experience."

"Hey, I'll have you know I'm an excellent date," Jeremy protests.

Pete looks like he's content to observe the interaction with an amused grin, but then he leans toward me and says in a

mock whisper, “There’s a support group for those who have to deal with long stints of Jeremy’s humor. I’ll slip you the contact details later.”

I laugh loudly.

As the night progresses, I like Jeremy’s friends more and more.

They’re obviously a close-knit group, but I’m not made to feel like an outsider. Any in-jokes are quickly explained, and it feels like I get the backstory on half of the population of Mineral Creek as they exchange stories.

I spend part of the evening trying to figure out the dynamic between Jasper and Beau. Jasper refers to his ex-girlfriend once, and while nothing about Beau indicates he’s anything but straight, something about the dynamic between them raises questions in my mind.

It’s the way they bounce banter between them so quickly it’s hard for the rest of us to get a word in edgeways. The way they finish each other’s sentences.

And as the night goes on and more alcohol is consumed, making everyone looser, there’s something about how Beau angles his body toward Jasper that makes it seem like he’s a wilting plant and Jasper’s the light he needs to survive.

Or maybe my beer goggles make me see gay everywhere.

It’s near the end of the night when Beau glances across the pub and does a double take.

“Oh shit,” he says.

Beside me, Jeremy looks in the same direction and stiffens, his hand tightening around his beer glass.

Jasper’s eyes narrow and he throws a look at Jeremy. “Do you want me to run interference while you escape out the back exit?”

Jeremy smiles, but it’s tense. “It’s okay.”

I follow their collective gazes to a group of four women who’ve just come in and are making a beeline for the bar.

Jasper's eyebrows fold in on themselves. "If she gets drunk and ends up crying all over you again—"

"I said it's okay," Jeremy cuts him off sharply. I stare at him. I've never seen Jeremy wound up before.

His jaw is clenched. He takes a sip of his beer, then swallows thickly.

"I broke her heart. She's entitled to a few tears," he adds.

"It's been over two years," Jasper says.

"Yeah, well, I'm that hard to get over." Jeremy's attempt at humor falls flat, maybe because we can all hear the sadness in his voice.

I want to touch him.

Fuck it.

I reach under the table, putting my hand on his leg and giving a gentle squeeze.

He throws me a small, grateful smile.

I keep my hand on his thigh for a minute, enjoying his warmth, before reluctantly withdrawing. I don't want to do anything to add to the speculative glances Jasper continues to shoot me.

"I should head off home now anyway," Jeremy says. He shoots me a glance. "You ready to go?"

Jasper snorts into his beer. "You're going home together? I thought you guys weren't a thing."

"He lives just around the corner from me, idiot," Jeremy says affectionally.

"Oh, right, well, I guess safety in numbers and all that. You wouldn't want to get mugged on the way home." Jasper's voice contains more than a hint of sarcasm. Because yes, I'm fairly sure the crime rate in Mineral Creek probably doesn't require safety escorts. But I'm not turning down more time with Jeremy.

“It was great to meet you all,” I say as I stand. Jeremy follows suit.

“Yeah, you too.” Jasper gives me an easy grin. “You’re welcome to hang out with us anytime. You don’t need to bring Jeremy.”

“Hey!” Jeremy says. “Stop trying to pinch my friend.”

“Sorry, I wouldn’t want to interfere with your *friendship*.”

I try not to flush at Jasper’s insinuation, but Jeremy rolls his eyes, grinning.

His grin fades as we head past the bar. A tall, beautiful redhead turns around, and her face lights up when she sees him.

“Jeremy!”

“Hey, Em,” Jeremy says softly.

Oh, holy shit, I can see why Jasper and Beau felt the need to run interference between Jeremy and his ex. If she looks at him like this two years after they broke up, what was she like in the immediate aftermath?

She glances over at me, and her smile wilts.

I shuffle uncomfortably from one foot to the other.

“Are you going to introduce me to your friend?” she asks Jeremy.

“Uh...this is Dustin. He’s new in town. Dustin, this is Emily.”

I hold out my hand, and she shakes it, her slender hand feeling delicate in mine.

“Nice to meet you,” I say.

“You’re in the O’Neilly’s old place, right?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“I’ve heard about you.” She’s managed to rummage up a smile, but it’s definitely forced. Her gaze continues to flick between Jeremy and me

“Don’t believe the rumors. They’re not true,” I say, trying desperately to inject some lightheartedness into the awkward atmosphere we’ve got going.

“Well, I heard rumors that you two had to be kicked out of Kelly’s because all the staff wanted to get home, and you were interfering with everyone getting a good night’s sleep.”

I can see she’s trying to be upbeat, but it only adds to the awkwardness. Because Jeremy can’t exactly resort to his ‘no sexual chemistry between us’ line when he broke up with Emily because he literally had no sexual chemistry with her.

“That was us. You know how much I love to interfere with people having a good night’s sleep. It’s a mission of mine,” Jeremy says.

Emily smiles, but it doesn’t reach her eyes. “Yeah, I remember a few times when we stayed up the whole night,” she says softly.

Jeremy looks down at his feet, a flurry of emotions racing across his face. “I remember that too.”

There are another few heartbeats of silence. I have no idea what to say to break it.

“I better get back to the girls,” Em says finally.

“Say hi to everyone from me,” he says.

“I will. Nice to meet you, Dustin.”

“You too.”

As soon as Emily departs, Jeremy takes off abruptly, speeding through the crowd. I have to quicken my pace to keep up with him.

“So...that’s your ex,” I say once we’re outside in the chilly air.

Jeremy runs his hands through his hair. “Yeah.”

“She seems nice,” I say.

“She is nice.” There’s so much misery in his voice that it hurts my heart.

We start to walk in the direction of our houses.

His expression is sad, his eyes downcast. It seems unnatural to see Jeremy's face doing anything but smiling.

"You want to talk about it?" I make sure my voice is the definition of gentle.

He gives a deep sigh that seems to have the weight of the world in it as he continues to stare at the footpath. "Em and I got together in our first year of university. We were neighbors in our dorm and we just kind of...clicked. We became best friends really quickly. She was my person, you know?" He runs his hand through his hair.

"I'd been out and proud as a bisexual since I was fifteen. Hell, I practically hired a marching band to announce it in town, but there weren't many chances to actually be with a guy around here."

"I can imagine," I say.

"I messed around with a few guys when I started uni, started to explore that side of me. But when Em kissed me one night, I was like, great, she's my best friend. I can fall in love with my best friend, and it'll all be great.

"But it turns out, I confused my affection for her with romantic feelings."

"You were a kid, Jeremy. You were still figuring things out."

He shakes his head, his face full of self-disgust. "I was the biggest loudmouth about combating bisexual erasure. You know, how there are people who claim that bisexual people just haven't come to terms with being gay? I fucking hate that narrative, but then I inadvertently added to it by claiming to be bisexual when I really am gay."

We've reached the corner where we should separate, but I plant my feet, staring at him.

"Jeremy, you don't owe anyone an explanation. Your journey to understand your sexuality is your business and no one else's."

“But that’s the thing. It wasn’t just my business, was it? It was Em’s business too, and Lucy’s as well.”

He ducks his head, scuffing his foot along the pavement. “When I started to realize that how I felt about men and women was different, I freaked out. I stuck my head in the sand for so long.” He looks up at me, his eyes dark. “I know I couldn’t have continued like that long-term. It would have destroyed me. But fuck, it’s sometimes hard to feel like you’ve made the right decision when the collateral damage is so high among the people you love.”

My heart squeezes for him.

I don’t know why I feel this way, but out of anyone I’ve ever met, Jeremy deserves to be happy.

Right now, I want nothing more than to get Jeremy’s smile back.

He’s looking so miserable and vulnerable that I do the only thing I can think of.

I step forward and kiss him.

It’s nothing like our kisses in his office that were so fierce and hot.

This is tender and sweet.

I’m trying to tell him, with my body rather than my words, that he’s a good person. That he needs to forgive himself and make peace with the past.

But kissing him is like finally getting a hit of the drug I’ve been denying myself.

He tastes like beer, along with something sweeter, something pure Jeremy. He gasps as I deepen the kiss, tangling my tongue with his.

My lips move softly against his, exploring every inch of his mouth.

His hands come up to cup my face, and I feel tremors running through him.

This kiss was supposed to be me comforting him. But somehow, it's turned into more.

It's pulled to the surface all the feelings and desires I've built up for Jeremy in the short time I've known him.

Fuck. I've never had a kiss like this. It's glistening with emotion.

Jeremy pulls away from the kiss slowly.

His eyes don't leave my face. "Do you want to come back to my place?" His voice is hoarse.

I swallow. "Definitely."

There's no way I can deny Jeremy right now. I sense Jeremy needs to be with someone tonight, and I want to be that person.

It scares me how much I want to be that person.

We walk side by side, not quite touching, but it feels like the air between us is ready to combust.

Jeremy's house is a cute bungalow. I don't get to take much in, though, because Jeremy's on me as soon as we're in the door, pressing me against the wall and kissing me, his mouth firm and unyielding against mine. Through his jeans, I can feel his cock harden against mine.

"Dustin," he moans.

I think I understand what he needs.

He needs to be reminded of why he broke up his family and went through all that pain so he could be his true self.

I can give him that.

I reach up to run my fingers through his hair, grasping fistfuls as he kisses me harder, melding our bodies together.

Then we're suddenly ferociously tugging at each other's clothes, fingers grappling and fumbling in our urgency to get to skin.

As soon as he gets my shirt off, he runs his hands over my chest, leaving a trail of tingling skin.

“God, you’re so sexy,” he says.

“Right back at you,” I pant.

I unbuckle his jeans and push his boxers down so I can take hold of his cock, stroking him as we start kissing again. He responds eagerly, pushing himself against my hand, need radiating off him.

I break off the kiss. “Bedroom?”

“Yeah, okay.”

He steps out of his pants, grabs my hand, and tugs me down a hallway to his bedroom.

We pause at the door for another blistering, intense kiss. Kissing Jeremy is all-consuming, the feel of his lips on mine, the taste of him, the taste of us. It’s like tasting desire.

“Can you fuck me?” he gasps as he pulls away.

I swallow. “Okay.” My voice comes out low and guttural.

I stand there admiring the sight of a naked Jeremy walking to his bedside cabinet to get condoms and lube.

He’s breathing hard from all the kissing, his chest heaving. His skin is flushed, and his muscles are built with definition. His ass is a work of art. There isn’t an inch of him that isn’t completely perfect.

He raises an eyebrow at where I’m still standing inside the doorway.

“Bed?” he asks.

“I’ve got a better idea.”

I grab his hand and tug him over to where I’ve spotted a low set of drawers with a mirror above it.

I press Jeremy against the edge of the drawers and kneel in front of him before taking the head of his dick into my mouth.

I suck and lick while my eyes watch his reactions in the mirror.

His head is thrown back and his eyes are closed. His mouth hangs open.

I cup his balls, playing with them softly while sucking him deeper into my mouth.

I pull off for a second to grab the lube, smearing some on my fingers, then my mouth is back on his cock as I stretch my finger back, circling his hole before gently pushing in. I groan around his cock as I feel the heat of his body encircling my fingers.

His legs are shaking and he makes soft, high-pitched noises as he pushes into my mouth.

My own cock throbs. Fuck. I don't think I've ever been this turned on before just from prepping someone.

Jeremy's hands move to my head, gripping my hair as I slide a second finger in, hooking it around to hit his prostate.

"Dustin." He grips my hair so hard it's almost painful.

I add a third finger, scissoring them, loosening him up. I taste his precum, and it spurs me on.

Jeremy's moaning continuously now. His hips move as he tries to fuck himself down my throat.

His head is back, eyes closed, his abs tightening as he pants.

Holy shit.

I can't wait anymore.

I need to be inside him.

"You ready?" I grind out.

"Oh god, yes," he says.

I pull my fingers out, straighten, and quickly put the condom on. Then I spin him around and grab his hips, pulling his body back onto my cock.

I groan as I slide my cock in all the way, feeling the heat of his body envelop me. Oh my fucking god. The friction is exquisite, like he was designed perfectly for me.

"Look at us," I urge, and he snaps his eyes up to meet mine in the mirror.

“See how good you look. See how you were made for this?”

He nods shakily, his eyes glazed.

I love seeing Jeremy like this.

My eyes don't leave his in the mirror as I move inside him.

“Holy hell, Dustin,” he moans.

Fuck, this is the hottest thing ever. Being inside Jeremy, watching how we move together, the intense pleasure on his face.

Seeing him biting down on his lip as I pound into him harder.

“This is you, Jeremy,” I gasp.

“This...is...me.” His words come out in desperate pants.

My orgasm starts to build deep in my balls.

“Dustin!” he cries out, falling hard over the edge with me.

I lean forward, gripping his hips with my hands, riding out the waves of my orgasm.

I groan, the sound reverberating in Jeremy's body. I keep my grip firm on his hips. I feel the last tremors of my orgasm recede, and I whisper in Jeremy's ear. “This is you.”

I slide out of Jeremy's still-shaking body. Then I turn him around, wrap him in my arms, and stagger us the few feet to his bed.

And I kiss him, trying to reinforce the message over and over again.

This is who he is. And there's nothing wrong with him choosing to be the person he was born to be.

Eventually, our kisses slow, and I pull away from Jeremy, getting up to deal with the condom and get a cloth from the ensuite.

After I've come back and cleaned us up, he lies cuddled into me, and I feel his heart slow down.

I draw circles on his back, loving the feel of his warm, smooth skin.

“You okay?” I feel obliged to ask because Jeremy is uncharacteristically quiet.

“Yeah, I’m definitely okay. That was...intense,” he says.

“It was incredible,” I reply softly, sifting his hair through my fingers.

I know I’ve got to get up soon and go home to sleep at my place so if Lachie arrives home from his sleepover early, I’m definitely there.

But I don’t want to leave a warm and drowsy Jeremy. I don’t want to miss his happily sated expression.

Shit.

This is exactly what I didn’t want. To be torn between a guy and being the best parent for my son.

I place a quick kiss on Jeremy’s temple. “I better get going before I fall asleep,” I say. I hope he can hear the reluctance in my voice.

He opens his eyes sleepily, and those gorgeous dark eyes find mine.

“So was that just resolving sexual tension round two?” he asks, his voice slightly raspy. “Are we hoping it’s permanently out of our systems now?”

Fuck. I can’t keep doing this to him.

I’m realistic enough to know there’s no way I can be around this man and not want him.

“I think we’ve proven this well of sexual tension will keep refilling,” I say slowly. “So my suggestion is that we’re open to the idea of releasing the pressure, no strings, just us having incredible sex whenever the mood strikes.”

A grin slides up his face. “Sex with none of the paperwork, you mean.”

I examine his expression closely. “Are you happy with that?”

“Am I happy that a gorgeous, sexy guy is offering me sex on tap? Hmmm, let me think about that one.”

“Are you okay that it’s just sex, not a relationship?” I ask with a frown. I don’t want him to joke his way out of this. I want to know his true feelings. I hate the idea of taking advantage of him in any way.

Jeremy waves my concerns away. “I’m fine with it. Seriously, Dustin. I’m a big boy. I can cope with keeping it casual.”

Chapter 8

Jeremy

Pinch me now.

Somehow my life has morphed into some kind of epic fantasy porn film. It's like a very, very dirty version of *The Office*. Only the office in question is my pokey little one. Which, okay, probably wouldn't make a good setting for a TV show as it's only ten feet by seven feet, but it's currently an amazing setting for my sex life.

I've never done the friends-with-benefits thing before, but I'm completely sold on the concept. I might even write a book promoting it or compose a ballad singing its praises.

Dustin said we should hook up whenever the mood strikes us. And it appears the mood strikes us consistently at twelve thirty-five every day, just after Carolyn leaves for her lunch hour.

Dustin always turns up with a sexy grin and lunch for me.

"What have you got for me today?" I ask two weeks into our new arrangement when he's just arrived in my office, shutting and locking the door behind him.

Dustin puts the brown paper bag from the bakery on top of my filing cabinet. "You'll find out soon. After some fun."

I raise an eyebrow. "Are you trying to imply you can buy me with lunch? I'm worth more than a simple tuna sandwich, you know."

He smirks at me. "A tuna sandwich and a chocolate muffin?"

“Now you’re talking.”

He laughs, and I grin.

Okay, I admit, it’s not just the sex with Dustin I’m getting addicted to.

I’m also getting addicted to the way he smiles at me. How he laughs at my bad jokes.

“You don’t have to buy me lunch every day, you know,” I say.

“I think you’ll find it’s in my best interests to keep you fully nourished,” he replies.

It’s my turn to laugh.

Dustin’s eyes darken, and he closes the distance between us and kisses me. God, the man can kiss. He really should give classes. Help all the clueless guys out there. Although personally, I’m very happy with our one-on-one tutoring arrangement.

After an extended kiss which has my cock hardening and leaking like its own version of Pavlov’s dog, I pull away from him.

“What do you want today?” I ask in my best saucy voice. “Blowjobs, hand jobs, fucking me? All of the above?”

Now that my life has morphed into a porn film, I keep condoms and lube in my desk drawer. The bottom drawer, hidden under some tax accounting manuals.

“You’re going to condition me to get hard every time I see a desk,” he growls.

“Then we should definitely go office furniture shopping together,” I say. “That would be so much fun.”

“Fun for you,” he says as he backs me into the corner and kisses me again.

Somehow having Dustin’s tongue in my mouth is so familiar, yet kissing him is still incredibly hot.

And it becomes apparent as our kiss quickly turns ferocious that we're not going to have the patience for prepping today.

His cock is hard against mine, rubbing in a delicious torment. The friction makes me groan.

I pull away, pushing him so he lands in my office chair. Then I'm on my knees, tugging his pants and boxers down so I can get to the good bits. Seeing Dustin hard and straining for me only makes me hornier. It's one of those feedback loops with the potential to get out of control very quickly.

"You know, I always like to have dessert first," I say.

"You start comparing my dick to dessert, and we could have issues," he replies.

"I like banana splits," I suggest innocently, licking a stripe down his cock. "And truffle balls are always a highlight."

Dustin moans, and that makes my own cock throb even harder.

I take him into my mouth and suck him, sliding my tongue against the ridge of his cock. My hands find his balls, and I gently massage them as I continue to work my mouth up and down his length.

His salty, musky flavor fills my mouth.

I pull off so I can look up and give him a cheeky grin. "You do kind of taste like salted caramel."

His laugh is choked off when I take him back in my mouth again. He puts a hand in my hair as he thrusts into me.

I continue to work him with my mouth, sucking hard on every downward slide.

Dustin's hand falls away from my head, and he thrusts harder and harder, panting and groaning.

His cock is so hard, so hot in my mouth.

"I'm close," he says, his voice strained.

Hearing the husky desperation in his voice causes me to double my efforts, and he comes apart in my mouth.

“Yum. Definitely salted caramel. Sweet and salty,” I say as I pull off.

He’s laughing as he pulls me into his lap, tugging off my clothes.

Then he’s kissing me so thoroughly that it’s like he’s doing an audit of my mouth. I’m definitely not complaining.

I love how his hands explore my skin, like touching me is something he can’t get enough of.

When he finally grips my cock and starts pumping, it doesn’t take more than a few strokes before my balls clench and intense waves of pleasure shoot through me.

We rest our foreheads against each other, still breathing hard, before our mouths find each other for one last lingering kiss.

Then I climb off him to grab some wet wipes to clean up the mess, which is another object that has recently made its way into my desk drawers.

We go to the bathroom to wash our hands, grinning at each other, before heading into the tiny kitchenette in my minuscule staff room to have lunch. The table is so small that our knees knock. Not that I’m complaining.

This is the friend part of friends with benefits, which is almost—almost—as much fun as the benefits part.

Because it feels like Dustin and I have become good friends very fast.

I guess that happens when you see each other every weekday and message constantly.

I don’t quite know how we fell into the habit of messaging each other so much—it started with him messaging me the day after the pub, checking to see if I was okay. Now messages fly back and forward between us constantly. Sometimes they are serious conversations, where we talk about our childhoods, families, jobs, and what we want in the future. But sometimes

they're fun and lighthearted, where we send stuff to make each other laugh.

Last night we had an epic two-hour debate about which *Star Wars* film was the best. I'm not quite sure whether to class that in the lighthearted or serious category. We both have impassioned views on the subject.

There's one thing I didn't want to ask him in a message, so I bring it up now as I unwrap my tuna sandwich. "Did I tell you about the big shindig I'm having at my place next weekend?"

A crease forms on his forehead. "No, I don't think so."

"It's for Lucy's birthday, but really, it's just an excuse to get a lot of people together for a party. Do you want to come? Half the town is coming. Like, it's not a big deal if you don't want to come, but I thought, you know, you and Lachie might want to meet some more people. If peopling is your thing. It's fine if it's not though. No expectations."

I'm epically butchering this invite. Apparently, I'm more nervous about inviting Dustin than I realized.

"Sure, sounds like fun," he says, and the tightness in my chest eases.

"Great."

"Is Emily going to be there?"

And now the tightness is back.

"Of course she'll be there. She's Lucy's mum."

"How do you find doing joint things like this with her?" he asks.

"Oh, you know, it's all fun and games. Talking about fun and games, you should see some of the games we've planned. You might want to brush up your skills for pin the tail on the donkey. And limbo. Actually, you might be a natural at that. You have proven yourself to be quite bendy."

Dustin stares at me for a few seconds.

“So, do you find it awkward or difficult sometimes when you have to interact with Emily in social situations?” he asks.

Shit. I’ve used my humor as a deflector shield for as long as I can remember, and very few people call me on it. I kind of like how Dustin doesn’t let me get away with it.

“Yeah, it’s sometimes awkward,” I admit. “It feels like everyone is watching us. I guess we did provide good gossip fodder when we broke up, and it’s not nice knowing everyone is discussing you behind your back.”

“I felt like that when everything turned to custard with my ex. We were the hot gossip topic in our social circle for a while.”

I’ve been itching to know more about Dustin’s ex but haven’t wanted to seem nosy. Now I’ve been given an opening, I’m bolting through it.

“How long were you guys together?”

“Five years.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “That’s a significant relationship.”

Dustin huffs out a sigh. “Yeah, it was, and it wasn’t. We only lived together for the last year, and even then, it didn’t feel like Robbie was interested in being part of our family.”

“Why did it end?”

“We had a fundamental disagreement about the importance of monogamy in our relationship. Namely, I believed our relationship should be monogamous, and he didn’t.”

I blink. “He cheated on you?”

“Yep. Multiple times. But hey, at least I found out before I did something stupid like marry the guy.”

I recognize the false upbeat tone in Dustin’s voice because it’s something I’ve injected into my voice so many times over the past two years. The attempt to put a positive spin on something that is actually really, really shit.

“Holy hell, Dustin,” I say. “That’s awful.”

No wonder he's not looking for a new relationship. Something like that would definitely leave you battle-scarred.

"It wasn't the best time of my life." He stares down at the chocolate muffins. "Combine it with feeling like I dropped the ball with Lachie, and you have a perfect storm of my personal life collapsing all around me."

Dustin looks so sad that I can't help reaching across to put a hand on his knee. Definitely time for a change of topic.

"How's Lachie doing with school so far? How did it go with his English essay that he was stressed about?"

Dustin blows out a breath. "He seems to be doing okay. And he got a good mark on his essay, which kind of undermined my lecture about how he shouldn't leave things to the last minute."

"Damn teachers giving him a good grade. You should complain," I say with a grin.

Dustin grins back. "Yeah, that's definitely one for disciplinary action at the teacher's council."

We grin at each other for a few seconds before I glance down at my sandwich, trying to ignore how my heart squeezes from being the recipient of Dustin's smile.

It's okay because my heart and I have had some stern chats where I've reminded it not to get attached to Dustin in any way other than what is fully acceptable within our friends-with-benefits arrangement.



My idea to throw Lucy's birthday party at my house?

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

I didn't think through how much work goes into getting a house ready to entertain a large group of people. The last time we threw a major party for Lucy's birthday, Em and I were still married, and the two of us worked together to get everything ready.

Even though Lucy is staying at my place, she's actually more of a hindrance than a help with preparation. She decided she would clean the glass of the French doors, which I thought was only fair because most of the fingerprints on it are hers. But when I inspect her progress, I see that instead of using the proper glass cleaner, she's used normal kitchen spray, which has left streaky marks all over the glass.

I bite my tongue to stop myself from saying anything. It's her birthday party today. I don't want to shatter the proud look on her face.

There's a knock at the door. I glance at my watch. It's too early to be any guests.

"Can you get that, honey?" I ask.

As soon as she's out of the room, I frantically grab the proper glass cleaner and try to fix the smears she's created.

"Daddy, someone is here for you," she says as she comes into the living room trailed by a familiar tall, dark, and handsome guy.

I'm on my knees as I turn to him.

Dustin meets my eyes and offers me a small grin. I guess he's quite familiar with me being on my knees at the moment.

"The party is not until two," I say as I stand, putting the glass cleaning spray on the coffee table. "Did I tell you the wrong time? Sorry, all this cleaning and tidying has really addled my brain."

"No, I know it starts at two. I just thought you might want some help setting up."

Okay, I might have done some panic-texting to him last night about the state of my house, but I didn't expect him to show up like a knight in shining armor. Although I guess it is in his name.

I want to throw myself at his feet and weep, but instead, I take a deep breath.

"Are you handy with a vacuum cleaner?"

“I’ve been known to operate one in the past,” he says with a smile. “Point me in the direction of the vacuum cleaner, and I’ll take it from there.”

I show him my hallway cupboard, where the vacuum cleaner lives, before retreating to the kitchen. As I frantically mop the kitchen floor, I hear the vacuum cleaner starting.

After I finish my mopping, I take the bucket and mop to return to the laundry. On my way through the living room, I’m struck by lust.

Naked Dustin is all kinds of sexy, but him vacuuming my living room carpet, his forehead puckered as he concentrates, is almost as sexy.

Is it possible to have a cleaning kink? Hmmm...that French Maid costume I had as a Halloween joke costume a few years ago might need to be dug out of the closet.

Dustin looks up and gives me one of his special sexy grins, which I can’t help returning.

I stash the mop away and come back into the living area. I’m thinking hard because I’m pretty sure there’s a fun joke about him using the vacuum cleaner to suck and me rewarding him by doing some sucking in return, but I can’t quite work out the phrasing. Before I’ve had the chance to figure it out, there’s a knock at the door.

I open it to find Em standing there holding a plate of food.

“Hiya!” I say, then cringe at my overbright tone. Shit. I always do this with Em now. Veer from being cautious to overly friendly. It’s awful. I wish we could return to the natural, easygoing way we used to relate to each other.

“I made those cherry tarts you love,” she says as she steps inside.

“Oh, that’s great. Thanks heaps.”

As I take them from her, I remember we used to joke about how we’d popped each other’s cherry and how we were both tarts.

I'm fairly sure that bringing that up now wouldn't be the best idea.

Emily follows me through to the kitchen. I'm just unwrapping the clingfilm off the tarts when Dustin comes in.

"I've finished the living area. Do you want me to vacuum anything else?" he asks.

Em's eyebrows fly up. "Oh, hey." Her gaze ping-pongs between us, and I can see the question mark on her face.

I find myself stumbling to explain his presence. "Dustin just came over to help me because I was freaking out about not having the place ready on time. He's my knight in shining armor. Get it? Because his last name is Knight? And instead of wielding a sword and shield, he's armed with a vacuum cleaner. It would have been interesting if real knights had used vacuum cleaners to fight, don't you think?"

Emily's and Dustin's foreheads rumple identically as I blather on.

Shut up now if you ever want to have sex with Dustin again, a wise voice inside me strongly suggests.

"It's nice to see you again," Em says to Dustin.

Dustin rakes a hand through his hair. "Yeah, you too." He looks over at me. "So, do you need anything else done?"

I'd like you to suck me that effectively later.

And finally, the vacuum cleaner-blowjob joke appears with perfect clarity in my head. It's a pity it's never going to see the light of day because having my ex-wife choke on her tongue is not the way I want to start my daughter's birthday party.

"No, I think what you've done should be fine," I reply.

Lucy comes running out to give Em a hug. "Mum! You're here!"

Even though these moments happen frequently, I can't help the lump in my throat. I have to look away because my daughter shouldn't be greeting her mother like this. We should have all woken up in the same house and gotten ready for

Lucy's party together. We should be a proper family, not the fractured remnants we are currently.

Luckily people start to arrive then, distracting me from the trainwreck I invertedly managed to create. Instead, I'm in the kitchen running an impromptu bar service as I scramble to get everyone drinks.

Dustin slides into the kitchen to help me, and there's something seamless about how we work together, filling glasses of fizzy drinks for the kids, taking bottle caps off beer, and pouring glasses of wine for the adults.

Dustin and I are familiar with each other's bodies, and I'm sure it shows. He puts a hand lightly on my waist as he moves past me to get more ice. I step slightly too close to him to head to the fridge, our hips bumping each other. Despite the frantic pace of trying to keep up with everyone's orders, my whole body prickles at having Dustin so close by.

"You know what they say about alcohol," I say after handing over a white wine to Em's friend, Edith.

"No."

"It's never the answer, but it does help you forget the question."

He laughs his deep throaty laugh, and I grin at him.

"Is this where I get drinks?" Jasper's voice breaks the moment, and I turn my attention to him.

"This is where you can give your drinks order," I reply. "As long as you realize I'm going to veto anything with tequila because I value my furniture and carpet."

Jasper rolls his eyes. "I was seventeen, Jeremy. You've really got to let that one go."

Dustin grins. "That sounds like a story."

"Probably not one to repeat when little ears are around," I say as Gloria, one of Lucy's friends, comes up and asks for a lemonade.

“What can I grab you, anyway?” I ask Jasper after Gloria has retreated.

“Just two beers, thanks.”

“Two? Do you need one for each hand?”

He rolls his eyes again. “One is for Beau.”

I hand him the beers as Dustin comes over to claim the bottle opener, his hand lightly brushing my bicep as he moves past me.

Jasper’s eyes linger on Dustin’s hand before he raises his gaze to me, eyebrows tilting quizzically.

I try not to react, but I feel my face heating like bitumen in summer.

Luckily, my old rugby coach steps up just then.

“What can I get you, Mr. Herbert?” I ask, gratefully turning away to escape Jasper’s scrutiny.



After the rush of the first arrivals, I head out to my backyard, where most of the guests are milling on the lawn. It’s a beautiful day, perfect for a party.

Lucy’s racing around with her friends doing some kind of gymnastics competition. I really hope none of the adults attempt their moves, or else I’m going to be working overtime next week to deal with the injuries. Luckily, most people seem content to mingle in groups, chattering.

I play the host, circulating the different groups. I can’t help noticing that wherever I am, Em is not.

Is she deliberately avoiding me?

Dustin asked me what it’s like hosting events with my ex, and the honest answer? It’s awkward.

I don’t know how Em wants me to act toward her now. Sometimes she appears so happy to see me, like the other night in the pub, but at times like today, she seems to go into avoidance mode.

The problem is that it was an unequal breakup because she was content with how everything was between us. I was the one who chose to leave because I wanted more.

Dustin's manning the barbecue. After talking to Lucy's soccer coach and a group of other soccer parents, I head over to him, feeling my steps lighten as I approach.

"I'm calling you 007 from now on," I say when I arrive next to him.

He quirks an eyebrow. "Why's that?"

"Because you have a license to grill."

He groans. "Seriously? You're going for a James Bond barbecue joke?"

"I actually have a whole plethora of barbecue jokes. I've just been waiting for a willing victim."

"And you've decided I'm your willing victim?"

"Well, you have been cooperative in other areas of my life recently." I lower my voice to a throaty whisper.

Dustin meets my gaze and his eyes sizzle more than the barbecue. "I always aim to be cooperative."

I give him a saucy smile, and he smirks at me in return. Shit. I get the feeling we're undoing my story about how we have no sexual chemistry because I'm sure the chemistry must be palpable between us. It appears to be almost physically impossible for me to look at Dustin and not have my cock perk up with interest.

From the way Dustin's adjusting his apron, there's a chance he has the same problem.

"Do you want a sausage?" he asks.

"Sure. I know how good you are with sausages," I reply.

"Are we really flirting over barbecue meat?" he asks skeptically.

I nod seriously. "Your life will not be complete without some sausage-dick metaphors."

Dustin laughs, and, shit, I really want to touch him.

Instead, I grab a sausage and try to eat it sexily while he watches. Unfortunately, sausages are not good food items to insinuate oral action because chewing is a vital part of the sausage-eating process. Not chewing a sausage properly leads to choking, accompanied by the side effects of loud coughing, gagging, and streaming eyes.

Dustin gives me a solid whack on my back, helping to dislodge the piece of sausage in my windpipe.

“Not your sexiest move ever,” he says.

I choke out my last cough and wipe away the moisture on my cheeks.

“What do you think is my sexiest move?” I ask when I can finally speak again.

Dustin’s eyes darken. “It’s a hard call, but that thing you do with your tongue is up there.”

We stare at each other, gazes heated.

And yes, I’m quite proud of how I managed to salvage a flirting opportunity after a close brush with death-by-sausage.

That’s until I break our eye contact and glance around, suddenly noticing that most of the people on the lawn are staring at us.

I attracted attention with my coughing fit, and it appears Dustin and I have managed to hold their attention subsequently.

Oops.

Time to leave before I completely blow our cover.

“I’ll catch you later,” I say.

“Definitely,” Dustin replies.

I’m heading back across the lawn when Jasper intercepts me.

“Like hell nothing is going on between the two of you.”

I stop still. “What?”

Jasper fixes me with a penetrating stare. “You said at the pub that nothing was going on between you and Dustin. That’s bullshit, isn’t it? You two are definitely fucking.” He says the words with so much certainty it feels pointless to try to deny it.

“We’ve hooked up a few times,” I admit.

“Why the hell didn’t you just admit it then?”

“Because it’s nothing serious. It’s just a casual, friends-with-benefits arrangement.”

Jasper narrows his eyes at me. “What are you doing, Jeremy?”

“What do you mean, what am I doing?”

“I mean, you’re not a casual relationship kind of guy.”

“Says who?”

His face softens, but his gaze remains locked on me. “Says everyone who has ever known you. You’re a relationship type of guy, through and through. Why have you agreed to just friends with benefits?”

I suddenly feel defensive. “Because, in case you haven’t noticed, there’s not a vast array of gay guys in Mineral Creek. I don’t exactly have a queue of more Pierce Brosnan lookalikes waiting to date me.”

“Pierce Brosnan?” Jasper squints in Dustin’s direction. “Yeah, I guess I can give you that. But don’t try to distract me away from my point.”

“Oh, you have a point, did you? I just thought it was pick-on-Jeremy day.”

“My point is you still feel so guilty about what happened with Emily that you don’t think you deserve to be happy.”

His words hit me like a slap.

For a second, I can’t breathe. I suck at the air, desperately trying to regain my breath.

Jasper’s still watching me expectantly, waiting for me to reply.

“Right, amateur psychology hour has officially ended, okay?” I turn on my heel and stalk across the lawn.

“Jeremy,” he calls after me, but I ignore him, continuing to walk away.

I don't know my destination. I just know I need to escape.

Chapter 9

Dustin

I love watching Jeremy at Lucy's party. He's in his element, surrounded by people, talking and laughing. It feels like half of the population of Mineral Creek is here, a sea of faces I've seen around the town.

Something about Jeremy is just so...shiny and bright. Like he reflects everything good in this world. And people are just drawn to him because of that.

Cooking the barbecue gives me an excuse to stand turning sausages and watch him going from one group of people to another, sharing his sunshine. Every time Jeremy leaves a group, people are smiling and happy. He's like an automatic mood adjuster.

He occasionally throws small glances at me, and I find myself smiling back at him.

Eventually, he pulls away from a group of people and sidles over to me. We joke and flirt over the barbecue, and honestly? It's been a long time since I've felt such plain, simple happiness. Standing in the sunshine joking with a gorgeous guy.

When Jeremy leaves, I try to return my attention to the barbecue, but I can't help glancing up to track his progress across the lawn.

Jasper intercepts him, and there's something about Jeremy's stiff shoulders that brings my full attention to their conversation.

Jasper says something to Jeremy that makes him frown.

Shit.

It's like watching the sun being extinguished.

Suddenly Jeremy turns on his heel, heading off in the other direction.

I turn to the nearest person, who happens to be Joyce from the corner store.

“Can you take over watching the sausages for a second?” I thrust the tongs into her hands without waiting for a reply.

Then I'm striding across the lawn after Jeremy.

He moves quickly toward an unoccupied corner of the garden and then disappears from my view around the side of the house.

I reach the corner and see a long, narrow path that runs between his house and the neighbor's fence. He's already halfway along it.

“Jeremy,” I call.

He stops at the sound of my voice.

I quickly catch up to him, my feet crunching on the gravel path.

“Are you okay?” I ask when I reach him.

He looks up at me, his face flushed. “Not particularly.”

“What happened?”

He just shakes his head.

I can't help it. I pull him into my arms.

He lets out a long sigh, and I feel some of the tension drain out of him as he leans his weight into me.

When he draws back enough to raise his eyes to mine, I lean down and brush my lips over his. Just a small, soft kiss. We linger in the gentle press of warmth as we breathe each other in.

There's nothing sexual in this kiss. It's not designed to ramp up into fun times. It's just a way for me to communicate a simple message to him.

I am here for you.

When our kiss finally ends, Jeremy gives me a forced smile that is creaky around the edge. "Is this emergency mouth-to-mouth?"

"It's whatever you need it to be," I reply honestly.

He leans into me again, resting his head on my shoulder, and for a few moments, we stay like that, my arms encircling him.

Eventually, he pulls back and lets out a shaky breath. "I better get back to the party. It's not a good look if the host deserts his duties for a make-out session around the side of the house."

We haven't exactly been making out, but I let him away with plastering a joke over this moment if that's what he needs.

"You want to talk about it?" I ask gently.

He pinches the top of his nose. "It's okay. It's nothing. I'm just being a drama queen. Besides, today's not about me. It's about Lucy," he says.

"Every day should be a Jeremy day," I reply and get a small tug of his lips in response. But it quickly fades.

I'm surprised by the intensity of how much I hate the fact he's hurting right now.

"Thanks," he says, his eyes briefly flitting past mine. He runs a hand through his hair, glancing away. "Um...to curb the gossip, do you maybe want to walk down that way and circle around the house to get back to the backyard?"

"Sure. I wouldn't want to give the matchmakers in this town any more inspiration," I say.

He manages another small smile at that before he turns to leave.

I watch him walk away, feeling helpless. Did I make him feel better? God, I hope I helped him.

When I make it back to the lawn, I keep a close eye on Jeremy as I resume my barbecue duties. Every interaction he has where he smiles loosens some of the tightness in my chest.

My eyes dart to Jasper, wondering what the hell he said to upset Jeremy. It's not my place to confront him, but a large part of me wants to go up to him and demand answers. How could he say something nasty to Jeremy? It's like stomping on a kitten.

But Jasper looks like he's got his own problems, with him and Beau standing under some trees engaged in a tense discussion, which Beau then stalks off from. Jasper is left standing by himself, his face pale.

I turn my attention away from Jasper's shocked face. It's not my business.

Instead, I message Lachie and lure him to Jeremy's house with the promise of barbecue food.

When he turns up, he discovers his friend Connor is also here, being the older brother of one of Lucy's friends, so he happily hangs around even after he's eaten his weight in food. The hollow legs of teenage boys are a phenomenon I don't think scientists have fully explained yet.

At around five o'clock, people start to drift off.

I linger, though, especially as I see the huge clean-up job that lies ahead of Jeremy.

"Lachie and I can help you with the cleanup," I say to Jeremy after the last of the guests leaves.

Lachie's by my side and raises his eyebrows at his inclusion. "We can?"

"Sure we can. I hear people who want expensive mountain bikes for their birthdays are excellent at cleaning up."

He rolls his eyes but doesn't protest as I put him to work in the kitchen washing all the glasses that won't fit into the dishwasher.

I go out to the lawn and wipe down the barbecue while Jeremy moves all the outdoor furniture back to its normal place. Lucy flits around, picking up all the discarded plates and glasses and ferrying them inside to Lachie. Chill music continues to pump through the speakers, and the leftover smoky smell of barbecue mingles with the scent of recently cut grass.

“So, any ideas what you want as payment for your services?” Jeremy gives me a saucy look as he stacks some plastic lawn chairs next to me.

“I’m pretty sure you’ve been paying me enough recently,” I say.

“I’ve made enough deposits into your bank account?” he asks innocently.

“I thought we’ve been sharing the deposits, actually.”

Jeremy laughs, and it takes all my self-control not to close the gap between us and kiss his laughing lips. But I don’t want Lachie or Lucy coming out and seeing us kissing and misinterpreting it.

Jeremy meets my eyes, and he must see my internal conflict because his smile slowly fades from his face. Something in his dark eyes sends an anticipatory thrill down my spine.

“Dad, are Dustin and Lachie allowed to stay and watch the movie?” Lucy asks as she comes back out on the deck.

“Of course they’re allowed to stay for the movie,” Jeremy answers Lucy. He slides a glance at me. “But they might have to get home.”

Lucy turns those big eyes on me. “Do you want to stay for a movie? It’s my choice because it’s my birthday party, and I’m choosing *Tangled*.”

“What’s *Tangled*?”

“You’ve never seen *Tangled*?” Jeremy’s eyebrows shoot up. “I didn’t realize you were so culturally uneducated. It’s one of the Disney animated classics.”

“No, I’ve never seen *Tangled*. I didn’t know that put me in the uneducated category though.”

“I’m always happy to educate you in anything you need education on,” he says.

I chuckle as a warm feeling spreads through me. Somehow, spending time with Jeremy is just an exercise in straightforward happiness.

I don’t want this feeling to fade.

And if spending more time with him involves watching an animated movie, then so be it.

I’m expecting Lachie to ask to go home, but he obligingly sits on the armchair and watches the movie, though he’s scrolling through his phone at the same time.

Luckily *Tangled* is one of those animated movies created with kids *and* adults in mind, containing lots of good one-liners that make me laugh.

Lucy and Jeremy have obviously watched it many times because they have competitions to see who can say the line that’s about to come next. It should be annoying, but instead, it’s all kinds of cute.

We get to the part where Rapunzel and Flynn Rider are in a rowboat on a lake surrounded by glowing paper lanterns floating in the night sky.

“This is Dad’s favorite scene,” Lucy pipes up. “He says it’s romantic.”

He shakes his head at her. “I can’t believe I encouraged you to learn how to talk.”

Lachie and I both laugh at him.

“Nothing says romance than a whole lot of burning lights up in the air,” I say.

He scrunches his nose at me. “You betcha.”

Lucy snuggles into him, and he puts an arm around her, stroking her hair, tucking the strands behind her ear.

Her eyelids start to grow heavy, and she takes longer and longer blinks.

Around the time Rapunzel is confronting her fake mother, Lucy's eyes close for good.

"Is she out?" Jeremy whispers a minute later. She's slumped against him in a position that means he can't see her face.

I nod. "It's been a big day."

He gives me a genuine, happy smile. The warm feeling inside me now threatens to overtake my whole body.

It comes with a craving so overwhelming that it snatches my breath away. I want to scoop Lucy off Jeremy's lap and take her with Jeremy to tuck her into her bed, wishing her sweet dreams if she stirs.

Then I want to go to bed with this man, kiss him, make love to him, go to sleep with my arms wrapped around him, and make sure his smile is the first thing I see when I wake up.

Fuck.

I stand abruptly. "We better get going."

Lachie snaps his head up to stare at me. "But the movie hasn't finished."

He's right.

I sit back down on the edge of the couch. "Okay. But as soon as the movie finishes, we've got to leave straight away. It's late."

I can feel Jeremy eyeing me, but I don't meet his gaze.

As soon as the closing credits are on, I'm back on my feet.

"Come on, Lachie," I say.

Jeremy glances up. Lucy is still asleep on him.

"Thank you for all your help today," he says softly.

"Any time," I reply.

He gives me a small, intimate smile, and yet again, I have an urge to stoop down and kiss him. Instead, I take a step back.

“See you later,” I say.

I walk so quickly on the way home that Lachie has to break into a half-trot to keep up with me.

But no matter how fast I walk, I don't think I'll be able to escape this feeling.

I don't want to identify it. And I definitely, definitely, don't want to give it a chance to spread.

Chapter 10

Jeremy

It's Wednesday lunchtime, and I'm standing on Dustin's porch.

For the last two days, he's claimed to be too busy and has blown me off.

And it's not been the fun type of blowing I'm used to from him.

But he's still been messaging me back when I've texted him. In fact, we had an epic conversation back and forth last night about our favorite memories from growing up in the nineties in small-town New Zealand. Any man with a strong opinion on the tactics for four square is my kind of guy.

Today I decided to front-foot it and come to him. I mean, he has to stop for food sometime, right? Nourishment is a fundamental requirement of life.

It's only when I ring his doorbell that I start to think about how there's a fine line between being keen and stalking, and there's a chance I'm flirting with it.

As soon as Dustin opens the door, words pour from my mouth.

"I know you're busy, but I brought you lunch as a repayment for all the lunches you brought me." I wave to the bakery paper bags I'm carrying. "And it doesn't come with the expectation of sex. Although you have trained me to expect an orgasm every weekday lunchtime, just saying."

His lips quirk up. “I’ve trained you to expect an orgasm every lunchtime?”

I nod. “Yes. So it’s slightly unfair that you’ve withdrawn my supply unexpectedly. You’ve got to at least give a guy a warning that he’s going to have to go cold turkey.” I deliberately keep my voice upbeat, hopefully hiding the hurt buried not too far beneath the surface.

Dustin scrapes a hand through his hair. “Sorry, I’ve been crazy busy trying to get this report finished.”

“Is it that harbor extension one you were telling me about?”

He nods.

“Did you get the council regulations to work with the government’s new environmental guidelines?” I ask.

He blinks at me. “You actually listened to the ranting monologue I gave you about that?”

“Well, I can’t guarantee I comprehended every word. But I probably gleaned enough I could write the CliffsNotes,” I say.

His eyes soften. “You want to come in?” He opens the door wider.

I hover uncertainly on the doorstep. “I don’t want to disturb you.”

“I’m happy to be disturbed by you,” he says.

I venture inside. It’s my first time in Dustin’s house. The house has obviously been recently renovated. The kitchen, dining, and living rooms are all open-plan. The interior is painted white and is light and airy, with high ceilings and a large window overlooking the backyard. Photos of Lachie at various ages are displayed on the walls, along with two Graeme Sydney landscapes, showcasing the sparse beauty of the center of the South Island where Dustin grew up.

“This place is nice,” I say, putting the bakery bags on the kitchen counter.

“Yeah, it is. I didn’t want to buy at first because I wasn’t sure how we’d go here, so I was lucky such a nice rental place was available.”

“You thinking about buying now?” I try to make the words casual, but I’m pretty sure they’re dripping with the underlying subtext: *how long are you planning to stay in Mineral Creek?*

Dustin meets my eyes for a second. “Maybe.”

He grabs some plates from the cupboard and dishes our sandwiches onto them.

I stand by the table and watch him. He’s wearing jeans and a button-down shirt, but he’s undone the top button at his collar and rolled up his sleeves. His dark hair is sticking up at all angles like he’s just run his hands through it repeatedly, and he has a day’s worth of stubble grazing his cheeks.

He’s so sexy it hurts.

He looks up and catches my gaze, his eyes darkening.

“Stop it,” he growls.

“Stop what?”

“Stop looking at me like that, or else we won’t be eating anytime soon.”

“I’m actually not that hungry right now,” I say, taking a step toward him. “Well, not for food, anyway.”

He raises an eyebrow. “I thought you said you didn’t come here with the expectation of sex.”

“I didn’t. Somehow being around you has put it at the forefront of my mind. But you know, only if you want me. I don’t want to force you into anything.” I manage a laugh, but its humor component is relatively low.

Dustin meets my gaze with utter seriousness. “I always want you, Jeremy,” he says.

He closes the distance between us and captures my lips with his.

It quickly turns into a fast and frantic kiss because, you know, we haven't kissed for three days, and that's far, far too long for our lips not to be doing this happy dance together.

His lips are urgent as they trail over my jaw and down my neck, and I'm clinging to him desperately, needing to be close to him.

My hands are in his hair, pulling him down to me while his hands are on my waist, moving the back of my shirt up.

He pulls back to look at me for a second. "I can't imagine not wanting you," he whispers.

And then he's back to kissing me, and we're stumbling through the house, our tongues tangling, tasting each other, hands grappling everywhere.

We finally make it to his bedroom. I kick off my shoes, stripping off my shirt and pants in record time.

Dustin's still fully dressed but looking at me with such heat in his eyes that I'm not complaining.

"Get naked," I say.

"As my man commands." He whips off his shirt, pants, and boxers, then prowls toward me. I lie back on the bed, and he leans over me, his arms on either side of my head, caging me in.

He kisses me again, his tongue tangling with mine, while his hard erection presses against my thigh.

I'm so hard I can't help but rock up against him. The friction of our cocks rubbing together is exquisite.

His mouth is moving again, kissing my chest and nipples and then lower, where I'm aching for him.

He doesn't disappoint—his lips wrap around my cock, taking me deep in his throat.

I'm moaning wildly, thrusting into his hot mouth as he sucks me deeper and faster.

He slides a finger inside me, hitting that magical area, and I practically levitate off the bed.

“I need you now,” I say.

He nods, reaching for his bedside table and taking out lube and condoms.

He goes to stretch me more, but I nudge his hand out of the way.

“I’m okay. I’m fine. I’m ready.”

His forehead creases. “You sure?”

“Yeah, I just need you inside me.” My voice hardly sounds like mine. It’s so strung out, needy. I grab a pillow and chuck it under me.

Dustin’s eyes don’t leave mine as he hovers over me. He slides inside, and we both groan. The stretch and burn are intense, right at the border of pleasure-pain, all my nerve endings on fire.

I can’t drag my gaze away from his.

“Jeremy,” he gasps, and I stretch up to kiss him.

His tongue tangles with mine as he starts to move.

But it quickly becomes apparent that this isn’t ordinary fucking.

Because, despite the frenetic pace that got us to this moment, it’s almost like time stops still.

He’s slow and gentle, sliding in and out of me, his forehead pinched in concentration as he stares down at me.

Our eyes meet, and it’s like no force can pull them apart. Our gazes remain locked together, just like our bodies.

He brings up one hand to cup my face. Small beads of sweat break out on his forehead, but his gaze never wavers from mine.

Holy shit.

This is definitely not ordinary sex.

I’m so hard, and I get a hand between us. The pressure on my prostate and the message of pleasure from my cock threaten to send me to the edge quickly.

“Harder,” I urge desperately.

He thrusts deep inside me, and I see fireworks.

My body convulses, and I’m coming.

He’s right there with me, his eyes squeezed shut, his mouth stretched wide.

“Oh fuck!” He thrusts one last time and then groans as he comes.

He collapses on top of me, and his upper body is so heavy that I can hardly breathe.

Death by Dustin. It would definitely be the way to go.

As I’m contemplating reminding him that my future life requires my lungs to function, he shifts his weight off me. He carefully withdraws from me.

Any smart-ass comment I’m brewing is wiped immediately away by the look in his eyes. I’ve never had any guy look at me like this after sex. Hell, I don’t think I’ve ever had anyone look at me like this, ever.

He runs a finger down the side of my cheek.

“You are…” He trails off.

“I’m what?” I ask.

He continues to stare at me, not saying anything.

“Come on, you can’t leave a guy hanging,” I say.

“You are perfect.” His voice is hoarse. He clears his throat before he speaks again. “Absolutely perfect.”

Warmth floods my chest.

And I know it’s probably just the post-orgasmic glow that causes his words, but right now, at this moment, I’m going to take them.

Chapter II

Dustin

Pulling back from Jeremy lasted two days because there was no way I could turn him down when he appeared on my doorstep with an expression halfway between hopeful and hurt.

Besides, it's not his fault I'm struggling with this thing between us.

He's stuck to the script of friends with benefits perfectly. I'm the one who carries on blurring the lines.

And I get the feeling I've just blurred them even further because that was...fuck...I don't even have the words to describe what that was between us.

What the hell am I going to do?

I decide Future Dustin can worry about that because, currently, I want to enjoy the feeling of Jeremy in my arms. I kiss his warm, smooth shoulder, loving how we're so intertwined that I can feel his heart slowing down against my skin.

"So, remind me why we've been having sex in my pokey office when you work from home and appear to have a perfectly functioning bed," he says.

"Because office sex is hot," I say, kissing down his neck.

"Office sex is hot," he concedes. "But it turns out bed sex has some perks too."

"There are definitely some perks to having a horizontal surface," I agree as I finally manage to wrench my lips away

from his skin.

He turns over and props himself up on one elbow to give me a coquettish look. “I’m definitely not as experienced when it comes to guys as you, but that blew my mind.”

This is one of the things I like so much about Jeremy, how open and honest he is. How he says exactly what he’s thinking.

“What do you mean you’re not as experienced as me?”

“Well, I was a late bloomer in the gay world, you know? Definitely one of the last cabs off the rank. And it’s not like there are an excess of places to park my cab around here if you get what I mean. Or am I stretching the metaphor too far?”

“You’re possibly stretching it slightly too far.” I lean in to kiss him again. It appears I can’t stop this compulsion to kiss Jeremy. Luckily, he seems prepared to indulge me. His plush lips kiss me back sweetly.

But his words play in my mind as we kiss. I hate that Jeremy thinks he’s inadequate in any way.

When we finally withdraw from each other, I lock my gaze on his. “Trust me, Jeremy, even if you were a late bloomer, you’re definitely making up for it now.”

A sexy smirk overtakes his face. “Are you saying I’m currently blooming spectacularly?”

“Absolutely. Spectacular in every way.”

His smile fades. “That’s actually good to hear. Because I sometimes worry. You’ve had long-term partners...you’re an expert while I’m still stumbling my way through the first level.”

I huff a laugh, but it has no humor in it. “I’m definitely no expert on gay sex. After all, my last boyfriend had to go outside our relationship to find satisfaction.”

Jeremy draws in a sharp breath. “Holy hell, Dustin, you’re saying that like it’s your fault.”

I flop onto my back, staring at the ceiling. “Sometimes it’s hard not to wonder what I did wrong.”

“What makes you think you did anything wrong?”

My mind fills with memories of Robbie and the argument we had when I caught him cheating, where he defended himself by listing all the ways I had disappointed him during our five years together.

“Because I wasn’t enough for him,” I say quietly.

“That’s complete and utter bullshit.” Jeremy’s voice is fierce. “You, Dustin, are enough for anyone. And if your ex didn’t realize he was the luckiest guy on the planet, well, that’s on him.”

He kisses me then, and it’s another sweet, lingering kiss. I can’t help but deepen it, sweeping my tongue into his mouth, saying with my body everything I can’t say aloud right now.

Jeremy’s expression is blissed out when he draws back.

But when he looks at the clock on my bedside table, his expression changes to horror.

“Oh holy fuck, I’ve got a patient in like...ten minutes.” He launches out of bed and starts frantically rummaging around for his clothes.

“Shit. I can’t exactly say I’m sorry, Mrs. Anderson. You’re going to have to continue to live with your tennis elbow untreated because I was off having epic, unbelievable sex,” he continues as he pulls his polo shirt over his head.

“Epic and unbelievable, huh?” I raise an eyebrow.

“Don’t let it go to your head.” He steps into his shorts and then comes forward, brushing a quick kiss over my lips. “Talk to you later, okay?”

Despite knowing that continuing this thing with Jeremy will only get me deeper and deeper into trouble, I can’t help returning his smile.

“Yeah, definitely. I’ll talk to you later.”



I spend the afternoon and evening alternating between wrangling with the government’s estuarine regulatory reforms

and thinking about Jeremy.

Despite the fact I'm losing the battle to keep Jeremy in the friends-with-benefits territory, one of these things is definitely more pleasant than the other.

I take a break from working to make dinner for Lachie. I try to engage him in conversation at dinner time, but he's fully in grunt mode tonight and appears determined to shovel food into his mouth like it could disappear at any second. I leave him to do the dishes as I head back to my office to do some more work.

Eventually, I finish my report around nine o'clock.

Lachie's already retreated to his room, so I go into my bedroom, flop onto the bed, and pick up my phone to message Jeremy.

How did fixing Mrs. Anderson's elbow go?

Jeremy's reply is immediate.

Good. I have magic hands, remember?

Please don't remind me of your magic hands when I'm lying in bed with sheets that smell like you.

They smell like me in a good way, right?

I laugh before I reply.

Definitely in a good way.

Suddenly my phone is ringing with a FaceTime call from Jeremy. I'm smiling as I press accept.

"Hey," I say.

"It just seemed like an incredible waste to be flirting with you and not see your face," he says.

"We were flirting? I didn't realize," I say as I stretch out lazily on my bed.

"When you say you like my stench, that definitely counts as flirting," he replies.

"Noted for the future."

He laughs, and I enjoy the sight and sound of Jeremy's laughter. He's on his couch, his hair messier than his usual style, and I have a craving to be there next to him, to get to mess it up further.

"So, anyway..." he says.

"Anyway..."

"You want to...?" He raises an eyebrow suggestively, and my cock immediately starts to plump.

"You want to have phone sex?" I clarify.

"Yeah, if that's something you're up for. I mean, I've never actually done it before, but my house is empty tonight, so I'm game if you are. I've heard it can be hot."

"It can definitely be hot."

"So, Dustin Knight, will you take my phone sex virginity?" he asks solemnly.

"Why do I feel slightly like a creeper agreeing to that proposition?"

"You're not a creeper. You're just providing me with a good educational experience. Like how I provided you with an educational experience watching *Tangled*."

Jeremy removes his shirt as he talks, and my mouth goes dry when I see his chest. Fuck, I love his body, all that lean muscle, his pink nipples standing out in the sparse chest hair, which gets thicker from his navel, as if it's mapping the pathway to the fun place.

I clear my throat. "I'm happy to provide you with an educational experience if that's what you want."

He gives me a grin. "So, how do we start? How do we create a romantic mood?"

"You need to prop your phone up somewhere so you can have both hands free."

He quirks an eyebrow. "Both hands? That sounds ambitious."

There's a fumbling of the phone as Jeremy props it on his coffee table.

In the meantime, I'm shucking off my clothes and trying to set up my own phone at the best angle against my pillow.

"Oh yeah, that's the good stuff," Jeremy says.

His pupils are dark as he stares at my body.

"You need to touch yourself," I instruct.

Jeremy puts his hands lightly on his cock. "Like this?"

I watch as he moves his hand up and down the length of his cock, his fingers circling the head.

"Yeah, like that," I say hoarsely. I start moving my hand up and down my cock, imagining it's Jeremy touching me. My cock swells so fast it must set a record. "Touch yourself all over," I tell him. "Not just your cock. Rub your nipples."

He reaches up with one hand and pinches one, watching me as the other hand continues stroking his cock.

Fuck, I'm throbbing.

"Are you pretending I'm touching you?" he asks.

"Definitely," I gasp.

I can see him on his couch, his lids half-lowered, the way they get when he's turned on, his cock glistening with precum.

"So, my hands are yours? And yours are mine?"

"Fuck yes," I groan.

"Where would you touch me?"

I force myself to breathe through the almost unbearable intensity of my arousal. "I'd have one hand on your cock, and the other would be sliding down to touch your balls." I'm definitely panting now, which makes it harder to get the words out.

"That sounds so good," he says softly.

I groan as I stroke myself. "So good."

"What else would you do?"

I pause before I answer. “I’d be using my mouth on your cock.”

Jeremy gives a groan of his own. “Yes, please.”

“I’d want to lick it,” I tell him.

Suddenly I realize Jeremy’s stopped stroking his cock and is just staring at me.

“Oh fuck. I thought I could do this, but I can’t. Meet me at the fence,” he says.

I try to relocate my brain back into my head. “The fence?”

“You know, the back corner of your property. There’s a point where our fences overlap. Meet me there.”

And suddenly, he ends the phone call.

What the hell?

I have no choice but to get dressed with a throbbing dick. I stumble out into my backyard, the security lights by the house flickering on to give me some light as I lurch my way over to the back fence.

“Are you there?” I ask in a lowered voice.

“Yeah, I’m here.”

There’s a scuffling sound, and then he curses.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, just tripped on Lucy’s bike.”

His voice comes closer, and I see the top of his head and his eyes peering over the large wooden fence.

“Fancy seeing you here,” he says in a sexy voice.

“Such a coincidence,” I reply with a smile.

His hands grasp the top of the fence, and suddenly his torso appears, but then his face morphs from a sexy smirk into something more troubled, and he starts sliding back down, disappearing behind the fence.

“Ow...fuck...”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, it just turns out vaulting fences is harder in practice than it appears in theory.”

Jeremy makes three attempts before he finally hooks his leg up and makes it over the fence while I try not to fall around laughing. I epically fail.

“Okay, so that slightly derailed the mood,” he says when he finally makes it over and straightens.

I’m still trying to suppress my laughter.

Jeremy steps toward me.

“Is my embarrassment right now more or less than yours was when your board shorts malfunctioned at your swimming sports?” he asks.

“I’ll say it’s about equal,” I say as I close the gap between us.

Jeremy tilts his face toward me, and a thrill goes down my body that I’m about to kiss this man.

“Luckily, it’ll take more than fence-jumping incompetence to stop me from wanting you,” I say.

And we’re kissing.

Fuck.

This is what I need. My hand might be able to substitute for him, but nothing in the world can replace kissing Jeremy. His warm mouth, the slide of his tongue against mine, the taste of him.

Luckily he’s wearing track pants, so it’s easy for me to tug them down and get a grip on his cock. He moans into my mouth as I start stroking him.

Touching Jeremy is so familiar now. I know every inch of his skin. I’ve made a mental map of all the sweet spots.

I kiss down his neck to the point I know drives him insane. I suck lightly on his skin, earning a shuddering groan. I continue to kiss down his neck, letting my tongue caress his

pulse point, feeling his erection grow beneath my hand as I stroke and tease him.

“I’m close,” he whispers.

Having Jeremy hot and hard in my hand, inhaling the scent of his skin, has me on edge too.

I stroke him faster. Fuck, I love the feeling of him, velvet over steel. “Come for me,” I urge.

His breathing grows even more ragged, and I pull my face away from his neck because as intoxicating as Jeremy’s skin is, I want to watch him come. I want to see the expression on his face when he reaches the point of no return, that moment when pleasure overtakes him.

He buckles and convulses in my arms, and I feel the pulse of his cock as it spasms and spurts.

Jeremy’s face when he comes is one of the most beautiful things I’ve ever seen.

Seeing him like this is almost more than I can take, and I let him go, taking a step back to breathe, trying to regain my senses.

He slowly opens his eyes, and they’re still half-lidded with pleasure.

“Dustin,” he whispers.

He drops to his knees, tugging down my pants. It only takes a few sucks before I’m flying over the edge. I lean against the fence, panting as he swallows everything.

“Real life is definitely better than virtual,” he says as he pulls off me.

I haul him to his feet so we can kiss again.

We kiss and kiss. Hard and rough kisses. Soft and gentle kisses. One type merging into the other and back again until I feel my spent cock give a twitch like it’s preparing to fight its way back to life despite the two intense orgasms I’ve already had today.

I simply cannot get enough of this man.

Eventually, after what feels like a lifetime of kissing Jeremy, I draw back.

“I better get back inside,” I say reluctantly.

“Okay.” Jeremy’s pupils have swallowed his eyes. He looks so kiss-drunk that I have to summon all my willpower to step away.

“You want a boost to get back over the fence?” I ask.

He gives me a grin. “That might be a good idea.”

Depositing one last kiss on his lips, I bend down to help him up so he can scramble back over the fence.

“Night,” I whisper.

“Goodnight.”

I linger at the fence, listening as Jeremy makes his way across his backyard and onto his deck, hearing the click when he shuts his back door before I head across my darkened backyard.

I’m still savoring the taste and feel of Jeremy on my lips when I step back into my house.

“Dad?” It’s Lachie’s voice, coming from the kitchen.

“Yeah?” I shut the door behind me and head toward my son.

Lachie’s pouring himself a glass of milk, his forehead crumpled.

“What were you doing outside?”

I always vowed not to lie to my son, but somehow ‘I was giving the neighbor a hand job by the back fence, and then he sucked me off’ doesn’t run off the tongue very easily. Nor will it win me any bonus parenting points.

“I heard a noise,” I say.

I’m not completely lying. After all, Jeremy had made a lot of noise in his attempts to get over that fence.

Lachie’s eyes narrow in suspicion, and shame flashes through me.

I'm thirty-eight. Way past the age where I should be sneaking around.

What the fuck is it about Jeremy King that causes me to completely lose my head?



I'm still puzzling over the answer to that question when my sister, Stephanie, arrives on Saturday with her two kids, Max and Lola.

"Lachie," I call as I answer the door.

Lachie comes down the stairs.

"Hey, there's my warm-up kid," Steph says, giving Lachie a hug.

"This is when you say, 'There's my incubator,'" I say to Lachie.

Lachie pulls a face. When he was little, he loved telling everyone how his Aunt Steph was his tummy-mummy. But now he's older, he's more conscious of the things that make him different, and his aunt giving birth to him falls into that category.

"Can we go play in your room?" Max is already taking the stairs two at a time.

Lachie follows him up the stairs, Lola trailing behind.

"How's he doing?" Steph asks as soon as the kids disappear from earshot. She follows me into the kitchen, where I switch on the kettle to make us a cup of tea.

"He seems to be doing okay. I don't know, he doesn't talk to me much about school. Jeremy suggested maybe I should join the parent's group. Apparently, they have a really active one at the local high school. Maybe if I'm more involved at the school, I'll have a better handle on what's going on in his life." I pull out a packet of chocolate chip cookies because I know my sister's weaknesses well.

"Who's Jeremy?" Steph asks as she takes one of the cookies.

“I’ve told you about Jeremy,” I say.

“Wait, the physiotherapist guy whose party you went to last weekend?”

“Yeah, that’s him. We’ve been hanging out a bit.” I try to keep my voice neutral, but her highly honed big sister instincts quickly latch onto my evasiveness.

She narrows her eyes. “Wasn’t Jeremy the name of the guy the whole town was trying to set you up with when you first arrived here?”

“Yeah, that’s him.”

“So he’s gay?”

“Yes, he is.”

It’s almost like the universe is pranking me because, as I say that to Steph, my phone beeps.

And even though I’m pretty sure I’m just providing more ammunition to whatever suspicions are currently frolicking in Steph’s head, I can’t stop myself from checking the message.

Sure enough, it’s Jeremy.

Just doing a little DIY project in my backyard today.

And he’s sent me a photo of some half-built steps that appear to lead up to his back fence.

I can’t stop the smile from overtaking my face.

Steph raises an eyebrow. “Is that message from Jeremy?”

“Ah...yeah.”

She leans forward to look at my screen, but I pull away from her.

“What has you smiling like that?”

“It’s not for sisterly consumption.” I stick the phone back into my pocket.

Her eyebrows fly up. “So, it’s that type of friendship, is it?”

“We might have a friends-with-benefits arrangement going on,” I say as the kettle whistles. “You want a cup of tea?”

“Yes, please.”

I bustle around, making two cups of tea.

“So, you’re telling me there’s this guy you hang out with all the time, who you message frequently, and you’ve also started hooking up with.”

“Yep.”

When I look up from my stirring, her gaze pins me. “Remind me exactly how this is different from a relationship?”

“Because we say it is.” I pass her the cup of tea.

“Oh, now that’s the most convincing argument I’ve ever heard. People should come to you for debating lessons.” She leans back against the counter, clutching her mug, and gives me a cynical look.

I don’t need a reminder about how much I’m pushing the boundaries of this friends-with-benefits thing with Jeremy. I think of the way I crave him when we’re apart, even when it’s only the length of our backyards between us.

Luckily the kids thunder down the stairs then, providing me with a welcome distraction from sisterly scrutiny. Lola’s carrying a soccer ball, and Max is wearing a deep frown that reminds me of my father.

“Uncle Dustin, do you know where Lachie’s other walkie-talkie is?” Max asks me.

“No, I haven’t seen it.” I flick a glance at Lachie. “Have you lost one of your walkie-talkies?”

Steph gave a very expensive walkie-talkie set to Lachie when he turned eleven. It had been his prized possession for a few years.

“It’ll be in my room somewhere,” Lachie says.

I go for a time-honored piece of parental advice. “You wouldn’t lose stuff if you kept your room tidy.”

Lachie just rolls his eyes.

“We’re going to play soccer outside,” Lola announces.

“Okay,” Steph says.

Max and Lola head out the door, but Lachie hangs back. “Hey, Dad, can I go to Sheldon’s house tonight for a sleepover?”

I frown. “Who’s Sheldon?”

“A guy from my art class. He just messaged me to ask.”

I don’t think I’ve heard him mention Sheldon. It supports what I was saying to Steph, how it’s difficult to know what’s going on with him. All his friends I’ve met so far seem nice enough though. Definitely an improvement on the crowd he was hanging around with in Auckland.

Hmmm. Jeremy doesn’t have Lucy this weekend. Steph and the kids are going home this afternoon, and if Lachie’s away, Jeremy could come over, and we could have a complete night together, with no interruptions. As long as Jeremy leaves by the time Lachie gets back, it will be all good. It’s definitely a better alternative to a late-night encounter by the fence, no matter how hot that was.

Lachie’s waiting expectantly for me to answer.

“Okay, you can go.”

And I can’t stop my body from tingling at the idea of a whole night with Jeremy.

Chapter 12

Jeremy

Lucy has a soccer match late on Saturday afternoon. I'm not sure if it's because it's her actual birthday today and turning ten means she's tapped into some double-digit superpower, but her soccer skills are even more enhanced than normal. She's running over the other girls in the competing team like she's in a tank and they're on bicycles.

Emily and I stand together on the sidelines, in a combined state of shock at the whirlwind soccer tornado that somehow, we, two relatively un-competitive people, managed to produce.

"Oh shit," Em says after Lucy kicks the ball and it smacks one of the opposing players in the mouth.

"Fuck, is that a tooth?" I ask as the girl spits out something white among a mouthful of blood.

"I'm sure it was already loose," Em replies unconvincingly. We exchange horrified glances.

"People are going to think I trained her to inflict injuries on the kids of the town just to drum up business for myself," I say anxiously.

Thankfully, the final whistle blows a few minutes later, sparing the opposition any more pain.

"Mum, Dad, did you see my goals?" Lucy runs over to us. Em and I crouch at the same time, and she runs into both of our arms, so we end up having a three-person hug.

My throat tightens as I inhale the familiar scents: mud, grass, and Em's favorite perfume.

These are the moments I miss so much. Being a proper family.

"How could we have missed them? You scored seven," I say as I release her.

"Eight," she corrects.

"I must have blinked and missed one of them. You're quite speedy."

"I feel really bad about hitting that girl," Lucy says. "But she said it was her fault for not ducking."

"I think the whole world should duck when you're armed with a soccer ball, Luce," I say.

She grins at me, her broad smile splitting open her face. Then she glances at Em.

"Can Dad come over for dinner?"

Em bites her lip, sending me a look. "Do you want to?"

"Are you okay with that?" I ask in return.

After we first separated, I'd tried hard to keep us as a tight family unit. To still be involved in Lucy's day-to-day life even when she wasn't with me.

But one night, Em broke down in tears and told me it was too hard to have me constantly around, acting like nothing had changed. So I'd withdrawn to give her some space, even though it killed me to spend so much time away from Lucy.

"I'm okay with it. I think we've got enough, as long as Dad doesn't eat too much." Em throws me a grin.

"We're having bacon and egg pie with scalloped potatoes," Lucy informs me.

"Sounds yum. Hopefully, there will be enough left over for you." I tug at Lucy's ponytail.

She rolls her eyes. "It's my birthday. Like you're going to eat all my food on my birthday."

“Is this where I say, ‘challenge accepted?’” I ruffle her ponytail again, and she dances away from my reach.

As I drive to the cute little bungalow I lived in with Lucy and Em, I try to tamp down my awkwardness and regret. Em and I brought this house when she was pregnant with Lucy, and we slowly did it up together over the years to make it the home we wanted.

Inside, I’m assailed by memories. Em and I painting the hallway and nursery together when Em was heavily pregnant. The wall by the kitchen where we kept track of Lucy’s height every month. I swallow the lump in my throat when I see all of the recent marks I haven’t been here to witness.

“You can sit here, Dad, next to Mum,” Lucy instructs. So I obediently slot into the place next to Em, pretending not to notice when she stiffens as I accidentally brush against her. Lucy sits down opposite us.

Lucy chats endlessly about the soccer game and school during dinner, requiring little input from Em and me.

Em’s parents FaceTime Lucy to wish her a happy birthday, and she carries the phone outside to show them her new bike.

Em scrapes some more potatoes onto her plate. “Do you want seconds of anything?” she asks.

“No, I’m fine, thanks.”

The formality sits awkwardly in the air. This is Em, who I used to have conversations with that lasted all night. How did we ever reach this place where we act like polite strangers?

Just as I’m trying to come up with some safe topic of conversation, I get a message from Dustin.

Lachie’s at a sleepover tonight. Want to come over?

A thrill shoots through my body at the thought of spending the night with Dustin.

I don’t want to seem too eager, though, so I wait a solid minute before I message him back.

Do chicken farmers have feather pillows?

Um...I guess they do. I've never thought about the pillows of chicken farmers.

I'm thinking they'd have an endless supply of feathers that they'd have to use somehow.

Right...so that's a yes? Because I don't actually speak fluent chicken metaphors.

That's disappointing to hear. Hopefully, that's my only disappointment tonight because it is a yes. I'm having dinner with Lucy now, so I won't be home for another hour.

No worries. I'll wait for you.

“Who are you messaging?” Em asks.

I don't want to lie to her.

“Dustin.”

She raises an eyebrow and waggles it. “Dustin, your boyfriend?”

I stuff my phone in my pocket. “He's not my boyfriend. Not a proper boyfriend, anyway.”

Her grin fades, and her eyebrows pull together.

“Is it because of me?”

I swallow. Her simple question brings back a flood of guilt that I feel about Emily.

“No, it's not because of you,” I say, looking away. I stare at the doorway to the kitchen where the pencil markings measuring Lucy's growth are. “Why would it be because of you?”

“You haven't had a proper boyfriend since we separated,” she says.

“Yeah, well, the right guy hasn't come along.”

“Are you sure about that?”

My throat clogs. I find I can't actually answer her on that one. I keep my eyes fixed on the doorway.

“I will always love you, Jeremy. But I’ve fallen out of love with you. I just want you to know that.”

I snap my eyes to her.

She gnaws on her lip, her expression remorseful. “I’m sorry. I think I was so in love with you that I made you feel guilty after we split. And that’s made it hard for you to move on.”

“Em...” I say, my voice thick with emotion.

She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear and takes a deep breath. “For a long time, I didn’t understand how you could walk away from us when so much of our relationship was great. But I saw the way you were looking at Dustin at Lucy’s party. And you never ever looked at me like that.”

“Like what?” I’m not actually sure I want to know the answer.

“Like you want to devour him,” Emily says.

When in doubt, joke.

“It’s nice to know my secret cannibalistic tendencies were on display for everyone to see.”

She nudges my shoulder. “You know what I mean. You really like him, don’t you?”

Her words cause a flutter inside me. I heave out a sigh.

“It doesn’t matter how much I like him. He’s not interested in a relationship,” I say.

“Are you completely sure? Because at Lucy’s party, he definitely seemed to be acting like a boyfriend would.”

My heart lifts at her words.

She leans over to give me a kiss on my cheek.

“Don’t settle for less than what you truly want, Jeremy,” she says.

My mind starts to whirl.

Lucy comes back into the room then, and our conversation moves on to talking about all the news her grandparents shared

with her.

But Em's words are on my mind as I drive home.

Am I settling for less than what I want by agreeing to keep things casual with Dustin?

What do I actually want with him?

I think of his slow-starting smile that builds to something amazing. I think of his gentleness with Lucy. What an amazing dad he is to Lachie. How hot things are between us in the bedroom, yet the way he touches me so tenderly and reverently. The way we can talk about anything and everything. How much we make each other laugh.

Shit. I have my answer.

I want it all with him.

I want to wake up every morning with him. I want to cook with him, laugh with him, have incredible sex with him.

I want to blend our families together, support each other through the good times and the bad.

I want to sit in a rocking chair holding his hand while we watch our grandchildren play.

My eyes prickle at the thought.

Can I convince him to want the same thing? We've agreed to keep things casual, but when I really think about what this is between us, it feels anything but casual.

My phone rings through my dashboard, and I see Dustin's name. I quickly hit accept.

"Hey, I'm just on my way home now, then I'll be right over," I say.

And maybe, based on what I've just realized, I'll be brave enough to talk to him. Brave enough to suggest that what we have together is now way beyond the parameters of where we first started.

"Jeremy."

It's one word. Just my name. But he says it in a voice I've never heard before.

Alarm pumps through me.

“What is it? What's wrong?”

“The police just called. Lachie's been taken to hospital. Some prank with his friends went wrong.” Dustin rattles off the sentences matter-of-factly, but I can hear the brittleness in his voice, like he's about to shatter at any moment.

“Oh my god. Is he okay?”

“They couldn't tell me any more details.”

“I'll meet you at the hospital,” I say, hanging up. Then I pull an incredibly illegal U-turn and plant my foot on the accelerator, breaking the speed limit in the process.

But it doesn't matter.

Nothing matters but getting to Dustin.

Chapter 13

Dustin

I've never had an out-of-body experience before, but I'm close to it now. As I'm driving, I can almost feel part of me detaching and observing from afar.

The other part of my brain is stuck in an endless loop.

This can't be happening. This can't be happening.

I moved to Mineral Creek to keep Lachie safe. And we've only been here a few months, and he's now in the hospital?

I pull into the car park and get out of the car. A car pulls in right after me that I recognize.

It's Jeremy.

When he climbs out of his car, his face is tight, and he rushes over to me, pulling me into a hug.

As soon as I feel his arms around me, I choke out a sob.

"It's going to be okay," he says.

I nod tightly. I don't think I can speak properly right now.

I cling to Jeremy's hand tightly as we rush across the parking lot toward the emergency department.

"My son, Lachie Knight, was being brought in by ambulance." I've barely said the words when the receptionist starts clicking away at her keyboard.

She looks up at me. "Your son was brought in with three other boys. They're just being examined by the doctors now."

"Can I see him? Where is he?"

Jeremy steps in front of me. “Can you let us through to the emergency department, Tara? Dustin really needs to see his son.”

Tara’s gaze flicks between us, and then she nods. She presses a button, and the doors to the emergency department swing open. I dash through the doors, Jeremy on my tail.

“Lachie,” I call desperately.

Jeremy grabs my arm and goes up to the first nurse he sees.

“Anna, we’re looking for some teenage boys who’ve just been brought here from Mineral Creek by ambulance?”

“They’re in cubicles four to seven,” she replies.

Jeremy knows exactly where he’s going as he navigates through the rabbit warren of the emergency department. The harsh fluorescent lighting bounces off the antiseptic-smelling walls, and I can hear the distant beeping of machines.

I cling to Jeremy’s hand. I’m probably crushing it, but he doesn’t complain. The cold sweat coating my palms mingles with his warmth, calming me slightly. Jeremy’s hand is the only thing tethering me to reality right now.

A nurse appears from a cubicle labeled ‘4’ just as we reach it.

“Lachie Knight?” I manage to gasp.

“He’s in there.” She points to the next cubicle.

My heart thumps as we pull back the curtain.

There’s another nurse plus a doctor crammed into the small cubicle, but my gaze automatically goes to my son on the bed.

He’s pale, and he’s gritting his teeth, his face contorted in pain. But he’s conscious and breathing, which is all that matters.

The vice that’s encircling my chest eases its grip.

“Lachie!” I’m at his side in an instant.

“Dad.” Something about his voice seems off, but I don’t have time to focus on it because the doctor steps forward.

She clears her throat, drawing my attention away from Lachie. “Mr. Knight?”

“What happened?”

“A BMX stunt gone wrong, apparently,” she says.

I blink. BMX stunt? What the hell? Lachie doesn’t even own a BMX bike.

I try to focus on what the doctor is saying. “We suspect your son’s leg is broken. We’d like to take him through for an x-ray. If that’s okay with you?”

I nod my consent. “Sure.”

Relief overwhelms me so much my legs wobble. A broken leg. I can deal with that. Thank god it isn’t anything more serious.

But my relief is short-lived when I return my attention to Lachie and get a whiff of his breath.

It reeks of beer.

My head snaps back. “Have you been drinking?”

“Just a little,” he replies, his words slurry. When I peer into his eyes, I can see his gaze is slightly unfocused.

“We’ll take him down to the radiology department now. You’re welcome to come down and wait outside there,” the nurse says.

“Let’s go with him,” Jeremy says.

I’m glad Jeremy is making decisions because my brain is stuck on the fact my fourteen-year-old is drunk.

A nurse aide turns up and maneuvers Lachie’s bed down the hallway.

Jeremy and I trail after them to the x-ray department. Then Lachie vanishes behind the swinging double doors.

I slump down on the cold hard-plastic seats outside the doors.

“Fuck.” Scraping my hand through my hair, I try to process all the emotions of the last hour.

Jeremy sits next to me. “He’s going to be okay,” he says softly.

When I turn to him, he’s watching me, his gorgeous face full of concern. Something about the look on his face makes me open my mouth and start talking. “When I first got the call, I thought...” My voice catches. “It was like my world collapsed. I’ve never been so scared.”

“I know,” Jeremy says. And I can see from his expression that he does understand. “Em and I lost Lucy at Christmas in the Park when she was three. We only turned away for a second, then wham—she was gone.

“I thought I knew what fear was, but it turns out I had no idea until then. Someone eventually found her and took her to the police tent, but that was the worst hour of my life.”

“I can imagine,” I say, my voice hoarse.

Jeremy’s a parent too. That’s one of the many, many great things about him. He completely understands my commitment to Lachie.

I’ve never been in a relationship with a guy who was a parent too, who knows exactly what that means at the instinctual gut level.

Not that Jeremy and I are in a relationship.

The thought pulls me up.

But before I can think about that, Lachie’s being wheeled back out of the x-ray.

Jeremy proves to be a godsend over the next half hour while we head back to the small, sterile cubicle to wait for the doctor to talk through the results of the x-ray.

Lachie, who is sobering up fast, is now in severe pain and panicking about what breaking his leg actually means. He’s

never broken a bone before.

Jeremy sits on the edge of Lachie's bed, talking him through the options of where his leg could be broken and what that would mean in terms of rehabilitation. I'm so used to seeing Jeremy's fun side that it's disconcerting to see him in professional mode. His calm, matter-of-fact voice soothes both Lachie and me.

When the other boys' parents arrive, the full story emerges of four idiotic teenagers who thought it would be a good idea to combine drinking beer stolen from Sheldon's parents' fridge with a stunt where Sheldon tried to jump across the other boys on his BMX down at the skate park.

There's a range of injuries, including a fractured wrist, bruised ribs, and a concussion.

All of the other parents look exactly how I feel, a mixture of relieved our kids aren't more seriously hurt combined with anger that they were so stupid to attempt the stunt in the first place.

The doctor finally comes back and confirms Lachie's tibia is fractured. Then a nurse comes to put a cast on him.

Meanwhile, a storm of guilt and recrimination builds inside me.

How the fuck had I let this happen?

I have a rule about Lachie not going to group sleepovers, knowing studies show that when a bunch of teenagers are together, their capacity to make sound decisions is significantly reduced.

Yet I'd neglected to check if there were going to be other kids at Sheldon's house.

Why hadn't I thought to check?

Because I'd been too distracted by the idea that Lachie going for a sleepover meant I would get a whole night with Jeremy.

The realization makes my body feel cold.

A nurse aide comes with crutches, and Jeremy shows Lachie how to use them. Seeing Jeremy setting the right height for the crutches and patiently talking Lachie through the correct techniques for using them causes a warm feeling to start inside me. But I quickly quell it.

With Jeremy providing some helpful tips, Lachie manages to make it out of the hospital and across the car park to where Jeremy and I are parked.

Together, we manage to get Lachie into the backseat of my car, his leg propped up and crutches stashed in the boot.

Jeremy pauses and turns to me before unlocking his door.

“Are you okay?” he asks softly. “Do you want me to come home with you?”

I shake my head. “No. I need to be alone with my son right now.”

“Okay.” He gives me a small smile, but I can’t manage more than a slight upturn of my lips in return.

“Thank you for coming,” I say stiffly.

“Anytime. Absolutely anytime.” Is there something deeper lurking in Jeremy’s voice? I rip my eyes away from his gaze. I don’t have the emotional bandwidth to think about that now.

“I’m sorry, Dad,” Lachie says as soon as I’m in the car. His voice is small, chastened.

“We’ll talk about it in the morning when you’re sober.” I deliberately keep my voice steady.

Lachie’s not the only one at fault here.

I haven’t been paying close enough attention to him. I’ve done exactly the same thing I did with Robbie, let a guy distract me from being a good parent.

Before I start the car, I see a bunch of messages on my phone from Stephanie. I’d sent her a garbled voice message after calling Jeremy. But I’d left my phone in the car in my haste to get to Lachie. Shit. She must be so worried.

I call her now, and she's already almost reached Mineral Creek. She jumped in her car as soon as she got my message.

She's making the hour-and-a-half trip from Auckland on a Saturday night, leaving her own family, all because I didn't do my due diligence as a parent.

What a clusterfuck all around.



The next morning I'm glad for Steph's presence. Lachie doesn't emerge until mid-morning. And when he does, his leg is hurting and he's grumpy, sitting at the kitchen table with his leg propped up. My mood matches his because I can't find any mode other than disappointed parent.

I serve him breakfast, then hover over him, my arms crossed.

"Why did you do it? Surely you have more common sense than that."

He shrugs as he takes a gulp of his orange juice. "It seemed like fun. And Sheldon has done lots of stunts like that before with no issues. All the other guys were keen."

"Lachie, there are going to be so many times in your life when going along with people is going to seem like the easy option, but you need to learn how to say no."

Steph goes over to him and gives him a quick hug. "I grew that beautiful body of yours, so don't you go breaking it. Okay, kid?"

"And we need to talk about the drinking," I say.

Lachie's face darkens with a scowl. "It's not a big deal. It was only a few beers."

"It is a big deal. Because you are underage and drinking leads to irresponsible behavior. As you so clearly demonstrated last night. And if you think you're not grounded because of that choice, you've got another think coming."

Before Lachie can reply, my phone vibrates on the counter.

I look at the caller ID, and my stomach plummets.

“Who is it?” Steph asks.

“Jeremy,” I say.

“You should answer it and talk to your boyfriend,” Lachie says.

“He’s not my boyfriend.”

Both Steph and Lachie’s eyebrows fly up at my tone.

But I spent so much of last night tossing and turning in bed, beating myself up. I’ve done exactly what I swore I wouldn’t do. I became so wrapped up with Jeremy that I dropped the ball with Lachie.

I was lucky last night that Lachie hadn’t been more seriously hurt. It could have been so much worse.

Then I would never be able to forgive myself.

“I’m not talking to Jeremy now. I’m talking to you,” I say to Lachie.

Lachie sighs and folds his arms on the table, leaning forward to rest his head on his arms as I continue my lecture.

After another hour of conversation where Lachie alternatively gives long-suffering sighs and rolls his eyes, I finally let him escape back upstairs to his bedroom.

“Well, that went well,” I say to Stephanie.

I head to the kitchen and flick the switch on the kettle. After that, I definitely deserve a cup of tea.

The kettle is just boiling when there’s a knock at the door.

“Do you want me to get it?” Steph asks.

“No, I will.”

I walk down the hallway to answer it.

Jeremy’s on my doorstep.

I feel my mouth automatically quirk up because I can never not smile at Jeremy.

“Hey,” Jeremy says softly.

“Hey.”

“How is he?”

I scrub my face. “Sore. And embarrassed. And I’m guessing he’s a bit sick of being lectured at.”

“You didn’t answer your phone, so I thought I’d drop in to see how everything is going.”

“My sister is here.” I say the words as if they’re a barrier to Jeremy, an excuse for not having to think about him and how unfair I was for not replying to him.

“Okay,” he says the word cautiously. “Can I meet her?”

I suck in a deep breath. “I think that’s outside the bounds of what we’re supposed to be doing here.”

He winces, and fuck, I feel a stab of pain myself.

Jeremy studies the ground for a few moments before raising his gaze to mine.

“Why did you call me?” he asks in a low voice.

“What?”

“Last night, was I the first person you called when you found out Lachie was being rushed to the hospital?”

Yes, he was. I swallow hard when I realize I called him even before I called Steph, the person who brought Lachie into this world.

“Yes,” I say.

His eyes search my face. “Why?”

I called him because he was the first person I thought about when I was upset.

I called him because he’s the person I always want by my side.

Those facts slide into my head, unprompted, unwanted.

But I can’t put a voice to them now.

“I don’t know,” I say instead.

Jeremy runs his hand through his hair. He blows out a breath before he fixes his gaze on me. “I’m sorry. I know this isn’t the best time, but I need to be honest with you about what I want. No, it’s not what I want. It’s what I need. Because I don’t think this is just a casual, friends-with-benefits thing we’ve got going on here. I don’t think it has been for some time.”

My heart hammers in my throat. Jeremy’s brave enough to address this. And it’s horrible because I’m going to disappoint him.

I hope he sees the regret on my face as I start to speak. “I can’t be what you want me to be, Jeremy. I can’t be a good boyfriend to you at the moment. I can’t be what you deserve.”

He exhales loudly.

“That’s bullshit, Dustin. Because we’ve been pretty much boyfriends for the last month, and it’s been more than good. It’s been amazing.” He takes a step back from me. “But if you’re in denial about what this is between us, if you can’t see how incredible we are together, then you’re right. You’re not what I deserve.”

He turns and walks down the path. Back out through the gate, past the spot where I first met him.

That moment when my life was turned upside down by a gorgeous physiotherapist holding a plate of strawberry muffins.

He doesn’t look back.

I stumble back into the house, the door closing behind me with a bang.

Fuck. I knew this was coming. I knew this thing with Jeremy was more than friends with benefits. I knew I was risking my heart.

Only I didn’t consider how I was risking his as well.

I make it to the living room, where I sink into the couch, my head in my hands. I wish I could erase the memory of the hurt on Jeremy’s face.

“Are you okay?” It’s Stephanie’s voice, her eyes concerned as she perches on the arm of the couch next to me.

“No. I’m not okay.”

Her eyebrows knit together. “What happened?”

I look up at her, my hands still clutching at my hair with both hands. “I hurt Jeremy.”

She blinks at me. “Why?”

“Because I can’t give him what he wants.”

“What does he want?” she asks, a frown creasing her forehead.

I slouch back against the couch cushions, defeated. “He wants a proper relationship.”

“And why can’t you give him that?”

“What do you mean, why can’t I give him that? Isn’t the answer obvious? I need to focus on Lachie.”

Steph’s frown lines grow deeper. “Lachie is fine, Dustin. He’s a teenager. He’s going to make mistakes, no matter how close you watch him. It’s part of growing up.”

I rake my hands through my hair and sit up straight, looking away from her gaze. “I didn’t come here to find a relationship. That wasn’t the point of moving to Mineral Creek.”

“Stop trying to compartmentalize everything. Who cares if you weren’t looking for a relationship. It appears you found one.”

I nod miserably. Because I can’t deny that Jeremy is right with what he just said. We’ve been in a relationship. An incredible relationship that’s by far the best one I’ve ever had.

I recall how I felt when I touched his hand for the first time. Unbalanced, like I’d just stepped onto land after spending time at sea. But if I think about it properly, the land is actually the stable thing in the equation. You only have the perception of being off-balance when you get off a boat

because you're used to instability, and it, therefore, feels weird when you're finally on solid ground.

I know Jeremy will be the most stable thing in my life if I let him.

“The problem is you started out parenthood as a single dad. So any relationship you've had since then, you've been too worried about how it will affect Lachie. But lots of people have successful relationships and are good parents too. The two things aren't mutually exclusive. In fact, you'll be a better parent if you're happy. And it seems like Jeremy makes you happy.”

Jeremy does make me happy. There's no denying that. In fact, I haven't known happiness like it.

“What if it turns out I'm not a good multitasker?” I ask. “Can I risk it?”

“Can you risk letting someone like Jeremy go?”

My chest feels like it's about to collapse at the idea of not having Jeremy in my life.

Stephanie nails me with a heavy look. “You know what? I don't think this is completely about Lachie. I think deep down you're scared Jeremy's going to be another Robbie,” she says.

“Jeremy is nothing like Robbie.” My words come out with a sharp edge. It feels almost sacrilege to have Jeremy's and Robbie's names in the same sentence.

Her eyes don't leave mine. “How is he different from Robbie?”

“In a thousand ways. Jeremy is the sweetest guy I've ever met. He's got more integrity in his left thumb than Robbie had in his entire body. He's funny and kind and cares about other people, whereas Robbie turned out to be a selfish asshole. Jeremy would never do anything to hurt someone. He's the guy who listens to everything I say, who makes me laugh more than anyone I've ever met, but he's got so much depth as well —”

I stop abruptly as the realization hits me like I've been smacked around the head.

"Oh fuck," I say.

"What is it?"

I claw my hands through my hair. "I am so fucking in love with him."

Stephanie's gaze stays on me. "I know you are."

"And I've been such an idiot."

"Yeah, I think you have."

My stomach hollows.

I'm correct in that Jeremy's nothing like Robbie.

And what I feel for him is a hundred times more intense than what I ever felt for Robbie. It's more intense than what I've felt for any man, ever.

I've found someone who is the first person I turn to when I want to laugh but also when I want to cry. How lucky am I?

And I would be the biggest fool in the world if I let that go.

The memory of the hurt on his face earlier, the hurt I'm responsible for, cuts at me.

Fuck.

I need to make it up to him.

I need to prove to Jeremy I can be everything he deserves.

Chapter 14

Jeremy

My righteous anger lasts about half a block before it turns into sadness and regret.

How can Dustin not see what this thing between us actually is? How can he not see how great together we are? How can he just throw us away?

I don't have Lucy to distract me from my misery, just an empty house that seems to echo my footsteps on the wooden floorboards of the hallway. I can't be inside right now, reminding myself of my lonely existence before I had Dustin to message, Dustin to talk to, Dustin to touch.

I try to lose myself in gardening. I stay in the front yard so I don't spend all of my time looking toward Dustin's house, attempting to gain x-ray vision to see through the fence and walls separating us, see if he's anywhere near as upset over this as I am.

As I start weeding next to the driveway, I can't help smiling at the hopscotch Lucy has drawn on the driveway, but then my smile fades as I stare at the wobbly chalk outline.

I split up my family so I could be true to myself and find a relationship that was right for me on every level. And now I've found someone who fits the criteria of everything I've ever wanted. If only he felt the same way.

When I go to get the lawn mower out of the garden shed, I can't help my eyes being drawn to the back fence. To the half-finished steps I started constructing so I could scale the fence to Dustin's house easier.

The idea I'll never get to touch or kiss Dustin again hollows out my chest.

It's a small town. How will I cope with seeing Dustin around but being unable to be with him?

The day seems to stretch unending.

Finally, the sky starts to darken. I make some dinner, then stare forlornly into my plate of pasta. The concept of food seems beyond the reach of my stomach right now.

Just as I'm taking my plate to the sink to abandon it, there's a knock on my door.

My heart leaps into my throat as I answer it.

It's Dustin.

He runs a hand through his hair, and the sight of Dustin with his ruffled-up hair causes my heart to clench. And it makes me realize exactly how deep my feelings for this guy are. We're definitely in the territory of love right now.

My pulse hiccups and fear claws at my stomach as I realize exactly how much I could gain or lose by what Dustin is here to say to me.

"Hey," he says.

"Hey," I reply.

"Can we talk?"

"Yeah...okay." I step back to let Dustin in the door, but he hangs back.

"Do you want to come for a walk with me?"

I blink at him. "A walk?"

"Yeah. A walk."

"Sure, let's just go for a walk after dark when we could be tucked inside a nice warm house where there's this amazing thing called electricity that provides heat and light." I'm rambling like I always do when I'm nervous as I shuffle closer to him.

Dustin reaches out to grab my hand, and my breathing stutters.

Hope rises inside me as we walk hand in hand off my porch and down to the footpath.

It's a hope so powerful I don't want to say anything to disturb it. Instead, I concentrate on the sensation of Dustin's warm hand as we fall into step with each other. We don't speak. The street lamps have just flickered on, and the night is so quiet. I'm conscious of every step and breath Dustin takes next to me.

My heart pounds in my chest. Dustin coming to me, the way he's clutching my hand, running his thumb gently across the top of mine, has to be a good thing, right?

I don't think I can handle it if it's not a good thing.

Dustin seems to have a destination in mind, leading the way across the road toward the park.

He gives me a tense smile as we step onto the lawn where we played soccer with our kids back when we hardly knew each other. Back when he was just my sexy, almost neighbor, not the man I know so well. The man I love, because it's impossible, as I stare at his handsome profile, to keep pretending that I'm not completely and absolutely in love with his man.

But my gaze doesn't linger on Dustin for long because I'm distracted by something unexpected.

There's something strange going on in the trees around the pond. Hundreds of LED lanterns are strung up in the trees.

We've apparently stumbled across some kind of light festival, which is incredibly weird because I'm sure I would have heard if Mineral Creek was having a light show.

"What is this?" I ask in wonder, staring at the twinkling lights.

When I turn to look at Dustin, he's watching me closely.

"This is me giving you what you deserve," he says.

I blink at him, my feet rooted to the spot.

Surely...he can't mean...

His eyes don't leave mine, a crease marring his forehead. "I'm sorry it took a few hours to come to you. I had to track down everything I needed. It turns out paper lanterns aren't environmentally friendly or in line with New Zealand fire regulations. So I found these LED ones instead."

I slowly turn around, my heart rising in my chest as I take in the sight of the glowing lanterns twinkling in the trees.

"I know it's not the same as floating ones, and they're not really burning, but I was hoping you'd think it's the thought that counts." Now it's Dustin's turn to babble, but I barely notice. I'm too busy twirling around to take in the sight as I realize exactly what this is.

The scene from *Tangled* that I said was romantic. He's tried to recreate it for me.

"Oh my god, Dustin," I finally whisper.

"Is that a good 'oh my god,' or is it an 'oh my god, I can't believe how pathetic this is?'"

"It's definitely a good 'oh my god,'" I say.

His tense expression finally breaks into a smile. He grabs my hand and tugs me toward the pond.

"There's a rowboat here that Vince, the guy who mows my lawns, lent me. He assured me it's watertight."

I laugh shakily as he leads me by the hand to the small pier where an aluminum rowboat is moored.

A tiny needle of skepticism pierces my bubble of happiness when he picks up the oars. "Do you know how to row a boat?"

"Yes, I do."

"Okay then." I step into the boat.

Dustin joins me, the boat wobbling slightly. He unties the boat from the pier, using one of the oars to push us away.

“I’m so glad you trust me to keep you afloat,” he says as he starts to row.

“It’s more like I had to wade in here when Lucy threw her shoe in when she was a toddler, so I know it’s only thigh deep at the deepest point.”

He laughs, and my heart continues to swell.

As he rows us to the middle of the pond, I continue to gaze around in wonder at the lanterns glowing in the trees.

“How did you manage to set this up?”

“I didn’t do it by myself. It turns out when you say that you want to do something romantic for Jeremy King, a lot of people in this town volunteer to help.”

My chest feels tight. “I can’t believe you did this for me,” I whisper.

“I figured I owed you some romance after being such an obtuse idiot.”

“We were both kind of obtuse idiots,” I say. Then I pause to consider. “Although you were definitely more obtuse than me.”

He laughs softly. He stops rowing, resting the oars, and we float along for a few moments. I’m transfixed by the lanterns, transfixed by the idea that Dustin set this whole thing up just for me. The lights reflect on the water, creating the effect of floating in a sea of stars.

Dustin reaches forward to take my hands into his.

“I want you to know that I do recognize what this is between us, Jeremy,” he says.

I tear my gaze away from the lanterns to meet his.

“I’m sorry. I was so worried about being the best parent that I lost sight of everything else. And things with you came so easily that I didn’t fully understand it. I’ve never met someone I just...fit with like I do with you.”

All the emotion in my throat threatens to choke me.

“I think we’ve proven on numerous occasions that you fit quite well inside me,” I say shakily.

He gives me a look so affectionate it’s surprising I don’t melt on the spot.

“I think it’s like the frog in the pot analogy,” he says.

I screw up my forehead. “What frog in the pot analogy?”

“You know, how if you put a frog in boiling water, it will jump out, but if you slowly warm up the water to boiling, it won’t.

“I’ve been falling more and more in love with you, and I didn’t quite realize how absolutely, incredibly, head-over-heels in love with you I am until now.”

I can’t breathe.

I swallow thickly, giving his hands a squeeze. I don’t think I’ve ever had the feeling inside me that I’ve got right now. Like I could burst with happiness.

“Did you just equate falling in love with me to boiling an amphibian?” I ask when I manage to find my voice. “Because I really have to think about how I feel about that comparison. I’m not sure it’s the most flattering thing. You know, if I’m going to come up with a metaphor about how I feel about falling in love with you in return, then I’d probably go for a slightly less slimy animal than a frog. I’m thinking something along the lines of a cute rabbit—”

Dustin leans forward, capturing my mouth in the sweetest kiss of my life. He swallows the rest of my words, which, on reflection, is probably a gift to humanity.

I kiss him back, my hand cupping his face. I will never get enough of kissing Dustin.

Luckily, it appears he feels the same.

So we kiss and kiss, sitting in a small rowboat in a thigh-deep man-made pond surrounded by twinkling LED lanterns.

And it’s more romantic than I ever imagined anything could be.

Chapter 15

Dustin

Jeremy King is now my boyfriend.

That fact is my excuse for all the random smiles I spontaneously break into during the next week. I'm a walking, talking, smiling machine.

The next weekend, there's a food festival held at the high school, and Jeremy and I take Lachie and Lucy there. It's our first time out together as an official couple.

The high school parking lot is full of food trucks with flags fluttering above each one. There are also tents on the school field, each housing a different stall selling everything from cupcakes to fried dumplings.

The aroma of hot dogs and barbecued meat tinges the air.

I can't help continuing my theme of smiling as Lachie and Lucy walk a few steps ahead of us.

Lachie's crutches clack against the concrete, but Lucy happily dances around him, talking a mile a minute.

Jeremy had been a little worried about how Lucy would handle the news he had a boyfriend, as I'm the first person he's dated since Emily and he broke up. Lucy apparently had only been concerned with lining up the next time we could all play soccer together in the park.

And Lachie? Lachie had given me a 'well, duh,' look when I told him one night at dinner that Jeremy and I are now officially in a relationship.

"I like Jeremy," he'd said.

“So do I.”

“He’s a lot better suited to you than Robbie was.”

My eyebrows shot up. For some reason, I hadn’t expected Lachie to have an opinion on the suitability of my boyfriends.

I’d accepted that Steph was right. I couldn’t focus solely on Lachie, and being happy made me a better parent. But hearing his words made me realize I hadn’t stopped to contemplate how good it was for Lachie to see me in a healthy, happy relationship. How important it was to model what a successful partnership really looked like so he knew the type of relationships he should be aspiring to when he grew up.

I’d given my son a smile. “Yeah, he’s definitely better suited to me than Robbie was.”

I actually don’t think anyone could be better suited to me than Jeremy.

Jeremy and I stroll along, holding hands. This is the big difference between what Jeremy and I were before and being officially together. Now I get to touch him when we’re in public too. I’m definitely enjoying that benefit.

I’m trying to ignore all the knowing looks we get from the other residents of Mineral Creek. Because yeah, yeah, if I’d taken their advice in the beginning, we could have saved ourselves a bit of hassle.

But I wouldn’t change our destination for the world.

We line up to join the queue to get Lucy a smoothie. Only when the curly gray head in front of us turns around do I realize we’re right behind Joyce.

She stares down at our joined hands, then meets our gaze with a wide smile.

“You got over the no sexual chemistry thing? Good for you,” Joyce says.

I open my mouth to say something, but Jeremy gives my hand a squeeze.

“Leave it,” he whispers into my ear.

I shut my mouth.

“You’re seriously happy if the whole town thinks we’ve got a problem with our sexual chemistry?” I ask after Lucy has her smoothie and we’ve retreated from Joyce.

Jeremy shrugs. “I’m kind of okay if people think we’re so compatible in every other way that we decided to give it a go regardless.”

I have to smile at that.

“And we’ll be able to justify the amount of time we spend in bed as working on our chemistry, right?” He gives me a wink, and I pull him closer, draping an arm around his waist, loving how he slots in against me. It feels like Jeremy was made to fit me in every way possible.

We walk along together for a while, gaining even more smirks. I’m more than happy to be the subject of Mineral Creek gossip if they’re talking about how crazy in love we are.

And even after we stop to get a hot dog each, we still hold hands as we each eat one-handed.

“So, I’ve got a parenting dilemma for you,” Jeremy says after he finishes the last mouthful of his hotdog.

“Fire away.”

“What would you do if you found something in your child’s room that you know doesn’t belong to them? Do you immediately suspect you’re raising a kleptomaniac, or are there stages you should go through before you jump to that conclusion?”

My eyebrows shoot up. “Lucy’s got something that doesn’t belong to her?”

Jeremy gnaws on his lip. “I was putting away her laundry today, and I found this walkie-talkie in her room that I’ve never seen before. I didn’t want to say anything to her after school and ruin tonight, but now I’m kind of stressing about it.”

My forehead creases. “A walkie-talkie?”

“It’s Mr. Knight, isn’t it?” A voice interrupts us.

I turn, recognizing the woman standing there as Lachie’s English teacher, Miss Bentley.

“Hi,” I say.

“Hi, Susie,” Jeremy says because, of course, he knows her name. I’m fairly sure Jeremy knows everyone in this town.

Miss Bentley looks down at our joined hands and breaks into a grin. “Oh, I heard rumors you two are together. It made me smile to think of Lachie’s and Lucy’s dads dating. Those two have always been so sweet together.”

Jeremy tilts his head to one side. “What do you mean, they’ve always been so sweet together?”

I match his confusion and raise it one. Miss Bentley teaches at the high school. How does she even know Lucy?

She glances between us, her smile fading at our obvious confusion. “You know, as reading buddies.”

It’s my turn to speak up. “Reading buddies?”

Her eyebrows scrunch together. “Yes, they’re reading buddies, didn’t they tell you? We’ve got a program where the high school goes down to the primary school once a week. Lucy’s buddy moved away, so that’s why it was perfect when Lachie arrived.”

Jeremy clears his throat. “No. I didn’t know they were reading buddies.” He shoots a glance at me. “Did you?”

I shake my head. Lachie has never mentioned anything about being reading buddies with Lucy. I would have definitely remembered that.

Miss Bentley still looks confused. “Oh, I don’t know why they wouldn’t have mentioned it. The two of them are one of the pairs I hold up as an example of what a success it can be. They’re always chattering away together.”

“Chattering away does sound like Lucy,” Jeremy says. He’s still wearing a puzzled frown.

“Anyway, nice to see you both.” She gives a wave as she heads off toward the cupcake stall.

“So, apparently, our children have secret lives,” Jeremy says.

Suspicion swells in my mind. I turn to face Jeremy.

“That walkie-talkie you found in Lucy’s room? It’s not blue with a red antenna, is it?”

Jeremy’s eyebrows fly up. “How did you know that?”

“Because it belongs to Lachie.”

His eyebrows threaten to leave his face completely and go into orbit.

“Why does Lucy have Lachie’s walkie-talkie?” he asks.

“I’m not sure. Maybe we should ask the culprits themselves,” I say just as Lucy and Lachie come back to us from the popcorn stall. Lachie’s managing to move quite quickly on his crutches now, despite the unevenness of the grass surface. Lucy’s carrying two bags of brightly colored popcorn. I don’t want to know the amount of artificial coloring our kids are about to ingest. Besides, I’ve got other things on my mind right now.

“We’ve just been talking to your English teacher,” I say to Lachie.

Something in my tone must alert him because he stops, looking hesitant.

My gaze flits between the two of them. Which of them will break first?

“Neither of you two thought to mention you’re reading buddies?”

Lucy immediately has a guilty look, while Lachie decides now is a good time to work out how to adjust the height of his crutches, avoiding eye contact as he fiddles away with the levers.

“Lachie,” I growl. “Start talking. Now.”

“Can I plead the fifth?” Lachie asks.

“Sure, plead away. But as we don’t live in America, you’re not covered by their constitution, so it’s not going to do you much good.”

“What do you want me to talk about? About why I didn’t tell you Lucy was my reading buddy?”

“Yes. That. And while you’re talking, you can explain how Lucy came to be in possession of one of your walkie-talkies.” I cross my arms over my chest and narrow my eyes at him.

“It’s no big deal.” Lachie shrugs in a way that I know means he’s trying to convince me it’s not a big deal. His nonchalant shrug is definitely harder to pull off with crutches. “At our first reading session, Lucy told me her dad was gay and wanted a boyfriend.”

Jeremy lets out an indignant squeak. “Way to make me sound desperate, Luce.”

I keep my eyes on my son. “And then what happened?”

Lachie gives me an innocent look. “I thought after what happened with Robbie, you deserved some fun. So I gave her one of my walkie-talkies, and we kind of coordinated it so you two could bump into each other.”

I blink slowly, taking in the information, before looking at Jeremy.

He’s looking as shell-shocked as I feel, with wide eyes and mouth slightly open.

“The park...” he says. “And the ice cream store.”

The library that Lachie desperately needed to join. The swimming pool when he decided he needed last-minute practice for swimming sports.

How we mysteriously ran out of toilet paper that time, forcing me to make an urgent run to the corner shop just as Jeremy also happened to be there. I knew we couldn’t have gone through toilet paper that fast, dammit!

All those times early on when it seemed like I just turned around and Jeremy was there.

All orchestrated by our kids.

I shake my head in disbelief. “We thought the town matchmakers were bad enough. We had conspirators much closer to home than we realized.”

“Even worse, conspirators we created!” Jeremy says.

“I don’t get why you’re mad. Didn’t it work out okay?” Lachie asks.

I slide a look at Jeremy, and I’m fairly sure I fail to keep my love for him out of my gaze.

He does a cute nose-scrunch at me in return, and I can see from his expression that he’s come to the same conclusion.

“Yeah, I guess it worked out okay in the end,” I say.

Epilogue: Jeremy

One year later

Kelly's restaurant is crowded, even for a Saturday night.

“Did you book?” I ask Dustin as we walk in. “Otherwise, I’m going to have to offer free massages to the wait staff to get a table, and you have no idea how tense the shoulders of people who work in the hospitality industry are.”

He rolls his eyes at my overdramatic commentary. “Of course I booked. I wanted to make sure we’d definitely get a table.”

As we say hi to Kimmy and she leads us across the restaurant, it becomes apparent that not only did Dustin book a table, he booked a very specific table.

“Did you request this table?” I ask Dustin as we sit at a familiar table in the center of the room.

He gives me a smirk. “I might have.”

It’s the table where we had our first date. Well, our first fake date, anyway.

Which is fitting, as today is the anniversary of that date. We've decided to celebrate today as our official anniversary because it's slightly classier than celebrating the date we first hooked up in my office. And celebrating the date we finally admitted our feelings for each other feels false because by then we were already eyeballs deep into a relationship, even though we'd been in denial.

Besides, I think if Dustin and I are honest, we both knew from our first date that the connection between us had the potential to lead to something.

Even in my most fantastical musings, I could never have imagined it would lead to the past year, which has been the most magical of my life as Dustin and I have built a life together.

It's nothing like I imagined a relationship with the man of my dreams would be.

It's so much more.

My DIY steps came in handy as we got really good at scaling the fence. After six months, we realized the stupidity of trying to live separately when we spent nearly every free moment together.

I never imagined that blending our families would be the source of so much fun and laughter, along with the occasional tantrum as two only children discovered what it was like to have a sibling for the first time.

Luckily, we had the ultimate retort for the few times Lachie and Lucy complained about each other. *You guys were the ones who set this up, remember?*

But most of all, I could have never imagined how incredible it is to be with someone who's my best friend but also the person who can turn me into a quivering, horny mess with one heated look or suggestive innuendo. It's fair to say Dustin and I have continued to work on our sexual chemistry to the point that scientists need to develop a new temperature scale to measure how scorching things are between us.

Tonight, though, I don't have time to share my reflection with him because we've barely taken a seat when I realize I know nearly everyone at the surrounding tables. We end up circling the room together like we're visiting dignitaries.

Amanda, the real-estate agent who sold us our new house big enough for us and the kids. Laney Hewitt, who taught Lucy in year three. Joyce, from the corner store with her husband, Ron, who I treat to improve his mobility in his left hip.

People are used to Dustin and me as a couple now, but we still attract more than our fair share of attention. And anytime Em, Dustin, and I are in public together, I feel like we're featuring in a how-blended-families-work documentary.

Luckily Em and Dustin get on great, and Dustin and I both like her new boyfriend, Carl. Carl is Lucy's piano teacher, which is how Em met him. Given he has the patience to attempt to teach our very-sporty-but-almost-tone-deaf daughter a musical instrument, I'm prepared to nominate the guy for sainthood.

Finally, Jeremy and I sit back down and scan the menu. The waiter comes over, and we place our orders.

"Oysters, eh?" I say to Dustin once the waiter has retreated with our menus. "Are you hoping to share them with me and get me in the mood?"

"Well, we do have the house empty tonight," he replies.

Lucy is with Em and Lachie's staying overnight at a friend's house. Dustin has relaxed over the past few months and trusts Lachie more without vetting every social event he wants to attend.

Lachie has received more than his share of lectures about underage drinking and how alcohol affects decision-making. I get the feeling Lachie's memory of how much he hated having to rely on crutches while his leg healed will help him make better decisions in the future.

Our first course arrives, and sure enough, Dustin does encourage me to share his oysters. But I share my pumpkin

risotto back with him, and I'm pretty sure that pumpkin has no sexy connotations whatsoever.

When we've finished, the waiter clears away the plates.

Dustin twists his napkin in his hand. He shifts in his chair, looking slightly uncomfortable.

"Are you okay? Are those oysters not agreeing with you?" I ask.

He huffs a laugh. "I'm fine. I just wanted to talk to you about something."

I pick up my wine glass to take a sip. "Talk away."

He fixes his gaze on me. Something serious in his eyes causes me to straighten and pay attention. I put my wine glass down on the table, my heart starting to pound.

"A year ago, we had our first date here." He swallows hard. "And even though it was a fake date, it turned into the most real thing I could have ever hoped for."

"It's better than anything I hoped for too," I say softly.

"And I honestly can't even bring myself to think of my life without you. I don't want to even try imagining it, because you make me happier than I've ever been. So, I...I was wondering..." Suddenly, Dustin slips from his chair down to the floor.

Dustin is a guy who always looks good on his knees, but this is a different stance from normal. This is him on one knee, holding out a small velvet box toward me.

"Jeremy King, will you make me the happiest guy on the planet by marrying me?"

Oh, holy fuck. There are no words to describe the absolute joy flowing through me right now. I've been certain Dustin and I are forever, but I never expected this tonight.

To be honest, I didn't expect he'd be able to surprise me with a proposal because we know each other so well I was sure I'd see it coming.

I gulp down a few deep breaths to compose myself before tilting my head to one side to regard him. “I have one question.”

“What’s that?”

“Are we going to be the King-Knights or the Knight-Kings? Because both sound like some medieval fantasy game, don’t they? People are going to expect swords when we turn up somewhere.”

Dustin’s lips quirk into a grin. “We can discuss the various options if you like. But you haven’t actually answered my question.”

I glance around, taking in all the people watching us from the surrounding tables. They are not even trying to hide the fact they’re staring at us. I lean forward to whisper to him.

“If I say no, is this going to rate high in the awkward-moment category? Worse than your swimming sports incident with the board shorts?”

“Definitely.”

I grin at him. “I guess it’s a good thing I’m not saying no then, isn’t it?”

“I think you’ll find I’m happy about that for a host of reasons,” he says, giving me one of his special, eye-creasing smiles.

I have a pulse of disbelief that I’m the lucky person who gets to be on the receiving end of that smile for the rest of my life.

I take the box from Dustin, my hand shaking. But I somehow manage to take the ring out and slide it onto my finger.

The close scrutiny Mineral Creek’s residents have been paying this conversation is evidenced by the spontaneous clapping now erupting around the restaurant. It very quickly turns into thunderous applause.

But I ignore everyone as I kiss my fiancé.



A note from Jax:

Thanks for reading! After I finished writing my last book *Beautiful Hearts*, which contained a lot of angst, I found myself desperately craving to write something light and fluffy. Dustin and Jeremy's story turned out to be exactly what I needed. I really hope you had as much fun reading it as I had writing it.

If you want some more low-angst novellas, make sure you check out *The Anonymous Hookup* and *The Inappropriate Date*, both available to read on Kindle Unlimited or to buy on Amazon. You can read the first chapter of *The Anonymous Hookup* on the following pages.

I also have another low-angst novella *Being Set Up* that is only available to my newsletter subscribers. To get access to this novella plus my other exclusive bonus scenes and short stories, you can sign up [here](#).

Happy reading!

Sneak Peek of The Anonymous Hookup

“You need to have a hookup,” is how my friend Jules first broaches the idea. No lead in, but that’s Jules to a tee. Jules has been my best friend since we were ten and she doesn’t call a spade a spade. She calls it a poor excuse for a shovel.

“No strings, just hot and heavy sex,” she continues as she stirs her cocktail and takes a giant slurp.

“I’m not ready for another boyfriend,” I say.

“For an English teacher, you have poor comprehension skills sometimes. I didn’t say get laid in the hope it leads to more. I said to get laid, period.” Jules’ voice gets louder at the end, causing me to dart a glance around the restaurant to make sure no one has overheard us. But all the other patrons seem to be simply enjoying their Saturday night meal rather than eavesdropping on the conversation happening at table eight.

Jules is watching me with her eyebrow raised.

“I’ve never done the hookup thing before,” I hedge.

“Well, it’s time you learned. In fact, you know how you offered to do a guest article for my blog? I’ve just come up with your theme. A beginner’s guide to a hookup.” She leans back in her seat, grinning the type of triumphant grin I imagine graced Napoleon’s face when he became Emperor of France. Or maybe Attila the Hun’s when he did whatever he did to live forever in infamy.

“I was thinking more of a post on the history of Auckland Pride,” I say.

“It’s been, what, five months since you and Preston broke up?” Jules asks.

Five and a half actually, but I don’t volunteer this information. Jules’ question had a rhetorical feel anyway.

“And you haven’t slept with anyone since, right?”

Jules seems to be successfully conducting this conversation by herself. She doesn’t need my input.

“I’m pretty sure Preston is not being as restrained.”

Preston is definitely not showing any restraint about moving on, if the photos he’s posted on social media are anything to go by. Not that I’ve checked more than twice. A day. Every day since he left.

Jules’ grin has a touch of evil in it now. “In fact, I think you should go even further than just a hookup. You need to have an anonymous hookup. Your blog post can be titled ‘A beginner’s guide to an Anonymous Hookup.’ That way your brain won’t invent some fun fairy tale about how the guy is going to morph into your Mr. Right.” Jules leans forward, her eyes intent on mine. “See if you can have some hot, wild, steamy sex with someone without exchanging names. I’m talking about sex where it’s simply about the mind-blowing orgasms, nothing else. It’s time you sowed your wild oats.”

One of the reasons why Jules’ blog is growing so quickly in popularity is she has the gift of painting a picture with words.

Suddenly my mind filled with images of hot, steamy sex. Of another hard body pressed up against mine. Of mouths

grappling, hands sliding across skin, the overwhelming pleasure that comes from touching and being touched.

Heat rises up my chest and neck as images swirl in my mind.

Sex. I like sex.

And it has been a long time.

I'm twenty-five. My sex life really shouldn't have boiled down to the quality relationship between my right hand and my laptop.

Luckily Jules fails to sense my arousal. She'd give me endless crap about it, along with using it as evidence that I really, really need to take her advice and get laid.

Instead, she's distracted herself with another line of thought. "Where does that phrase come from anyway? Why oats?"

I blink, trying to catch up with the new lane this conversation has swerved into. "What?"

"I mean, why are wild oats the grain people get to sow? Why not barley? Or wheat? Is there something more sexually promiscuous about oats?"

I groan. "Please stop now while you're so far behind."

She grins. "Okay, but only if you agree that we're going to Thumpers tonight. And the first guy you lay eyes on, you're going to proposition."

I raise my eyebrows. "Proposition?"

"Yep. Just tell him you want to have wild, crazy animal sex with him."

I feel a repeat of a blush coming, so I quickly grab my beer and take a large swallow.

When I set it down, Jules is still waiting expectantly for me to answer.

"Okay," I say.



I've always thought Thumpers, the most popular gay nightclub in Auckland, is aptly named, because I've never failed to leave without a thumping headache. It might have something to do with the flashing multi-colored lights and the music being played at about twice the recommended volume. Goodbye to the ability to detect high pitched sounds. It was fun while it lasted.

"First guy you see," Jules instructs after we show our ID to the bouncer and make our way into the club. It's ten-thirty, so the place is already pumping.

I tilt an eyebrow skeptically. "First guy I see?"

"First guy you see who you find attractive," she concedes. "I mean it, Lane. No mucking around. You're looking for a hookup, not a life partner. And if the first guy isn't interested, then you just move on to the next one."

"You make it sound so simple."

"It is simple. You're like a younger, better-looking Chris Pratt. Any guy should thank his lucky stars to hook up with you."

I don't have time to respond to her compliment because she's abruptly stopped halfway to the bar. "There. Him. Do you find him attractive?"

I follow the direction of her nod and my mouth goes dry. The guy she's indicated is the dictionary definition of tall, dark and handsome. He's standing at the bar ordering a drink so I can only see his profile, but it's definitely one of the finer profiles I've ever had the good fortune to stare at. Cut jaw, straight nose, full lips.

"Is it actually possible not to find him attractive?" I ask.

"Then you've found your first target."

"Wow, we're using war terminology now, are we?"

She nudges me. "Don't overthink it. Just get over there."

Severely questioning my life choices and taste in friends, I make my way over to the bar.

Jesus. He's even hotter up close. He's leaning up against the bar, sipping at his drink, surveying the club, which gives me a chance to check him out as I approach. Yep, he's definitely tipping the scales toward gorgeous. He's an inch or two taller than my six feet, with thick dark hair, olive skin, and smouldering dark eyes. He looks around my age, maybe a few years older.

Forget dry. The contents of my mouth could now be used as a desiccant.

I try to keep my legs from shaking as I slot into the space next to him and turn to meet those gorgeous eyes.

"Hi," I say.

"Hey," he says, giving me both a charming grin and a quick once over. Which is quite a multi-skilled talent, when you think about it.

"I'm..." I begin, then realize I'm already about to break the rules for an anonymous hookup.

He quirks an eyebrow. "You're what?"

"I'm really thirsty," I say, then almost close my eyes in embarrassment as my cringe reflex hits me.

"Well, that's great. You've definitely come to the right place." Luckily he seems more amused than scornful at my absolute lack of game.

I flick a look at Jules who has settled on a stool at a high table on the other side of the bar. She gives me something between an encouraging nod and a 'do it or else I'll hassle you about how pathetic you are.'

I take a deep breath. "You want to get out of here?"

His brow creases. Yeah, confusion wasn't the response I was going for.

"I thought you said you were thirsty," he says.

"I am." I load those two words with enough innuendo it's surprising they make it out of my mouth.

His confusion lifts and a slow smile spreads across his face. “Oh, that kind of thirsty.”

It appears I’ve chosen my metaphor hill to die on. “Yeah, that kind.”

“And you’re offering me the chance to help quench your thirst.”

“Um...yes I am.”

“Well, lucky for you, I consider myself extremely gifted in the art of hydration.”

I can’t help laughing. He’s funny, which definitely helps me to relax. Funny and gorgeous... my brain starts to race off, but I wrench it back with a thud.

“Ah...just so you know, I’m only recently out of a relationship. I’m not looking for anything serious,” I say.

His eyebrows shoot up. “You’re kidding me, right?”

I blink. “What?”

“Because I was just about to message my ring engraver. He’s been on standby for years, just waiting for me to say the name of my beloved.”

His face splits into an open grin as he laughs at my reaction.

“Okay.” I roll my eyes. “I haven’t done the hookup thing before, but I just wanted to make sure we were on the same page.”

He quirks an eyebrow. “You’ve never had a hookup before? Seriously?”

“Seriously. My friend thinks it’s hilarious. She wants me to write an article for her blog ‘A beginner’s guide to an anonymous hookup.’”

“Oh, that’s brilliant. I’ll happily help you with that.” He props his arm on the bar as he continues to grin at me.

“So you can’t tell me your name,” I continue, because sometimes I can’t turn off the teacher side of me, which needs

to know all the rules have been understood.

“Ooh, I like this idea. Can I use a fake name then?”

“If you want.”

He strokes his chin. “I’ve always fancied myself as a Wilbur. Or maybe Fred? Actually, do you think I can pull off Bernie?”

“Please don’t call yourself Bernie. My uncle’s name is Bernie.”

He slants his eyes at me. “Aren’t you worried about telling me that piece of information?”

“I fail to see how knowing my uncle’s name is Bernie is going to lead you to discover my real identity.”

“If you don’t think I can track down every Bernie in New Zealand and closely examine their family tree, you seriously underestimate my skill level.”

I can’t help laughing again. God, this guy is really something.

He leans in closer to me, and I catch a whiff of his cologne. “And that’s the last time you’re allowed to underestimate my skill level.” His husky voice whispering into my ear and the puff of his breath on my neck triggers my cock, which gives a twitch.

“I promise I won’t underestimate your skill level, Fred.” My voice comes out slightly breathless.

He pulls back and gives me a heated look. “Right, you’re looking parched. I don’t want you to expire, so I suggest we move this hydrating exercise to the next stage.”

We smile at each other. Then he takes a last swig of his drink and detaches from the bar, leading the way through the crowd.

I follow close behind, my heart racing.

I glance at Jules who wears a massive grin and gives me two thumbs up.

Following him gives me a chance to appreciate him even more. He has broad shoulders but is lean everywhere else, although the cut of his button-down shirt shows he's definitely got some muscles lurking under there.

When we make it out to the pavement, he turns to me. "So, in keeping with the anonymous theme, do you want to get a hotel room?"

"Good idea," I say.

He pats his pocket. "Luckily I came out tonight all prepared like a good boy scout. And I tested negative for all the nasties just last week. I can show you my results if you want."

Shit.

I haven't even thought about that aspect of hooking up.

"I...uh.... I got tested when my relationship ended five months ago. And I haven't been with anyone since."

His eyes twinkle. "That's a long time between drinks. No wonder you're so thirsty."

"Ah...yeah."

I struggle to match his light-hearted banter. Because this conversation has just reinforced what's happening, and one part of me can't believe I'm actually doing this. This is a complete stranger and I'm going to have sex with him.

Something about my expression must make him realize how outside my comfort zone I am. I'm talking lying on a bed of nails suspended over the Grand Canyon out of my comfort zone.

"Hey." He steps closer to me. "You're not freaking out on me, are you?"

This close, with the light shining from a street lamp above, I can see how long his eyelashes are. It's a ridiculous thing to focus on, but somehow it makes me feel better. The universe wouldn't bestow Bambi-eyelashes on someone who wasn't a decent person, right?

I take a deep breath. “I’m not freaking out.”

Then I close the remaining distance between us and kiss him.

It seems like a good idea, because if there’s no chemistry between us, it’s best to find out now.

What happens is the opposite of no chemistry. In fact, there’s a whole periodic table of chemistry in this kiss.

His lips are smooth and warm and our kiss deepens so quickly my head spins. Our tongues meet in what is probably the most awesome slide in the history of kissing. He tastes like beer along with something else, something masculine and so, so addictive. One of his palms comes up to touch the side of my face, while my hands have found their way to his hips, pulling him closer to me. His warmth seeps through his shirt where our bodies touch.

I’m panting when we draw apart, staring in disbelief at this gorgeous stranger, who kisses like he’s both a god and a devil combined into one.

Thankfully, he appears as affected by the kiss as I am. His dilated pupils are large pools of black and his chest is heaving.

For a few seconds we only stare at each other.

“I think we’d better get that room,” he says finally.

“Ah... yeah.”

There’s a decent hotel right across the street, so we head there as I try to regain my composure.

We have a mild standoff at the reception desk about whose credit card is footing the bill. He tries to hand his over, but I shoulder jostle him out of the way, ignoring the fact that the receptionist is watching us with amusement.

I am not letting the guy I randomly propositioned pay for a hotel room for us to have sex in. It seems to go against the etiquette of random hookups. Not that I’m particularly well acquainted with the rules, but anyway.

Eventually he relents and lets me hand over my credit card. He takes a few steps back and gives me privacy, which I guess helps to maintain the anonymity thing.

He follows me to the elevator and I punch in our floor number.

“Is this the part where you cross-examine me to check I’m not a serial killer?” he asks as we start our ascent.

“No, I’m not too worried about that.”

He raises an eyebrow. “You’re not? Do I not give out proper serial killer vibes?”

“Nah, you don’t really. And I was the one who propositioned you, remember?” I meet his gaze in the elevator mirror. “Plus, I think the probability of two serial killers being in the same elevator is extraordinarily low.”

His laugh echoes off the walls.

“I stole that off a meme,” I admit.

A dimple quirks in his cheek. “That’s reassuring. I think I’d prefer you to be a meme stealer rather than a serial killer, although it’s a close call.”

Our room is opposite the elevator. A quick slide of the key and we’re inside. He shuts the door and turns to me. There’s still a trace of laughter on his lips, which somehow makes me feel better. Because how do we get this started? Sex in the context of relationships seems to happen organically, but right now I feel stilted and unnatural. We both know what we’re here for, but I don’t know what my first move should be.

Wanna have sex now? It isn’t exactly the most inspiring line ever thought up.

He’s studying me, appearing to be waiting for me to say or do something.

I take a deep breath. “So, you’re going to help me with my article, right? A beginner’s guide to an anonymous hookup. How would you suggest we start?”

A smile edges up his face. “Oh definitely, I’m all about supporting the self-help industry. And in this case, I think you’ll find kissing is a good place to begin.”

He steps closer to me, and I can feel the frisson of anticipation between us.

“I think I can manage some kissing,” I say.

“You proved earlier you’re very good at kissing.” His dark eyes don’t leave mine. “But I feel like I might need some more proof.”

I don’t move as he closes the gap between us, leaning in.

His mouth is soft against mine, a light brush of lips that feels like a tease.

I have never had such a gentle, sweet kiss, never had the chance to contemplate exactly how many nerve endings are in my lips, and how one simple touch can set my entire body alight.

Our kiss stays light, our lips the only point where we connect. His breath mingles with mine. It’s like a Mexican standoff to see who can resist the urge to deepen the kiss first.

Then I feel his tongue lightly probe between my lips and I give in, groaning as I deepen the kiss urgently. Our kiss ramps up until we’re kissing desperately.

One of his hands comes up to cradle my head, threading his fingers through my hair. We stumble back against the wall, our bodies pressing together, and the feeling of his hardening cock against mine makes me moan.

I wrench my mouth away from his, gasping.

“You’re definitely right that kissing is a good place to start.” My voice is husky as I kiss down his neck. “But you didn’t specify exactly where the kissing should be.”

I undo the top button of his shirt and press my lips to the sliver of tan skin exposed, wondering where this burst of confidence has come from. I’m running with it though.

He shivers, and that spurs me on to repeat the gesture with the next button, and the next. Shit. The slightly salty taste of his skin, the lingering scent of his cologne, makes my cock throb.

His chest is well defined, but not too Chippendale to make me feel bad about my own physique.

Sliding to my knees, I undo his last button and place a gentle, lingering kiss on his taut stomach. My heart thuds.

I glance up and he's watching me, his eyes dark with lust, his chest rising and falling.

I take that as a sign he's okay for me to fumble his belt buckle with my shaking hands, to undo his button and zipper so his pants fall to puddle around his feet.

His breath hitches as I tug down his boxers.

It turns out his cock is as gorgeous as the rest of him and I lean forward, taking the tip into my mouth.

"Oh fuck." His head lolls back against the wall.

I've never done this before, never been so assertive in a sexual encounter. But there's something confidence inducing about knowing I'm not going to see him again.

Judging by the harshness of his breathing, he's liking this turn of events too.

Moving my mouth down, taking him deeper into my throat, only increases my own throbbing, to the point where I feel like I'm going to explode myself if I continue too long.

I pull off.

He stares down at me, his eyes wrecked, lips swollen from our earlier kisses.

"Fuck," he mutters.

"Is that what you want?" I ask.

Shit. I can't quite believe I'm being this forward, but I'm enjoying being Hookup Lane, who's not worried about any

long-term consequences, who's simply focusing on feeling good right here, right now.

His eyes darken with lust. "I guess we should discuss the hard limits here. Besides me saying or doing anything to remind you of your uncle Bernie."

I huff out a laugh as I get to my feet. "Well, it seems like a shame to waste a perfectly good bed."

"Yeah, it does." His voice is husky. "You're a top, right? Because I think that was the most toppy blow job I've had in my life."

"I'm actually versatile," I say.

"Me too. What do you feel like tonight?"

My eyebrows shoot up at the casualness with which he asks that question.

Shit. It's like the choice between two delicious flavors of ice cream.

That's the problem with a one-night stand, right? In any other circumstance, I wouldn't be too concerned about choosing, because I'd get to experience the other option. But given this is going to be my only experience with him, what do I want more?

"Um..." Damn. I'd never been particularly good at making decisions.

He leans down to rummage in his pants and triumphantly produces a coin. "How about I flip you for it?"

"We're flipping a coin to decide who's fucking who?" I clarify.

"Why not?"

Why not indeed? In fact, 'Why not?' seems to be my motto for the evening.

"Fine."

"You can be heads since we've already discovered you give great head." He flicks a wink at me. "Heads, you do me,

tails, I do you.”

“Okay.”

I’m happy putting this into the hands of the universe. Judging by what has happened so far, I’m going to have a great time either way.

He flips the coin.

“Tails,” he says.

Which means he’s fucking me.

A shiver shoots down my spine in anticipation.

“Okay. Um...it’s been a while, so...uh...”

He seems to find my stumbling endearing, because he gives me a warm smile. “Don’t worry, I’m all about prepping. I could be a master sous chef. Or one of those survivalists who prepares for the end of the world.”

“Did you seriously compare fucking me to the end of the world?”

He bursts out laughing and I join in.

Shit. I don’t think I’d ever had half as much fun during sex as I’m having right now.

But as our laughter fades, he leans forward to kiss me and things go from funny to scorching within a second.

We stagger back toward the bed, falling on it in a tangle of arms and legs. He proves himself extremely adept at clothes removal, stripping mine off as he continues to kiss me thoroughly.

His fingers trail down my body leaving goosebumps in their wake.

True to his word, he’s incredibly patient at prepping me. Taking his time, one finger then two, carefully stretching me, hooking his fingers inside me and reducing me down to a trembling, heaving mess so when he finally withdraws to put on a condom, I’m ready to combust with want.

My body trembles as he lines himself up.

He watches me carefully as he starts to press inside.

This amount of eye contact feels too intimate, yet I can't break our gazes.

"You okay?" he asks.

I nod wordlessly.

I can read every micro expression on his face as he slowly inches in. Wonder. Pleasure. Awe.

One of his eyebrows is quirked, like there's something about this experience he can't quite figure out.

The pleasure-pain is intense, my nerve endings thrumming.

When he finally bottoms out we both groan.

He brings his lips down to mine in a bruising kiss that somehow gentles to something sweeter as he slowly starts to move.

I hook my legs around him, angling my hips, encouraging him with my body to go harder.

Fuck. He hits the spot inside and stars light up my vision.

"Like that," I gasp. "Again."

He obeys me, propping himself up on his elbows as he pounds out a rhythm that means I'm not only seeing stars, I'm seeing galaxies.

"Feels too good," he grits out. The corded muscles in his neck pulse. "I can't last much longer."

I squeeze a hand between us so I can grab my cock. It's so hard and I'm so close that it only takes a few strokes and my orgasm charges down with a ferocity I can't stop.

"Oh shit, I'm..."

I don't get to finish the sentence before extreme pleasure shoots through me as I come and come.

He's bucking inside me with his own orgasm. His weight is on me, his face buried in my neck, both of our breathing coming in short gasps.

He slowly pulls out of me.

“Holy hell.” He collapses on the bed next to me.

“Yeah,” I manage. My brain is currently offline, frolicking in a happy meadow where unicorns and other magical creatures exist.

Prostate orgasms. There’s nothing better. Pretty sure we could achieve world peace if only more guys got to experience these.

I’m vaguely aware of him getting out of bed and heading to the bathroom.

He comes back with a warm cloth and gives it to me. My hands are still trembling slightly as I clean myself up. I throw the cloth on to the bedside table, then turn to him.

He stares at me, his expression intent. “I promise I won’t break the terms of our deal and beg for a repeat or anything, but... like... wow.”

I clear my throat. “Yeah.”

“It’s probably a good idea if you don’t go into too much detail in your blog post, because you might set up false expectations of how good hookup sex actually is, and there will be lots of disappointed people out there.”

“What, because they all can’t have anonymous hookups with you?” I ask.

“No, because they all can’t have anonymous hookups like *us*. Seriously, that was insanely good.”

Shit, I like how straight up this guy is. No games. No pretenses. After a relationship filled with both, it’s so refreshing to be with someone who simply says what’s on his mind.

But... I’m doing it already...looking at him like he’s a prospect beyond a simple one-night stand.

I scramble to get out of bed.

“That was exactly what I needed,” I say.

“Glad I could oblige.” He smirks at me. “I’ll put thirst quencher on my resume, shall I?”

“I’ll happily write you a letter of recommendation.”

“Ah, but that would mean I’d know your name.” There almost seems to be a trace of wistfulness in his voice.

We stare at each other and, for a few heartbeats, I consider it. I consider opening my mouth and telling him my name, consider asking for his number, consider arranging to meet up again.

But I’m not ready for that. It wouldn’t be fair to him to pursue something when I’m not in the right headspace.

“I need to get going,” I mumble instead.

“Please tell me you don’t have a wife and seven kids waiting at home for you.”

“Definitely not.”

I tug my clothes on, trying not to feel bereft. This is what we were here for. The experience has been completed to mutual satisfaction. I shouldn’t feel disappointed that it’s ending.

He props himself on one elbow and watches me as I get dressed.

And this is the moment where I wish I knew him better, where I wish I could read the expression in his dark eyes. I drop my gaze away from his, but it only lands on his gorgeous chest, which reminds me of how it felt to kiss his skin. It doesn’t help to firm up my resolution to keep this as an anonymous hookup, so I relocate my gaze to the floor.

Once I’m fully dressed, I hesitate, because I can’t just leave, can I? It feels wrong given what we experienced together.

Before I can second question myself, I take the few steps toward the bed and bend down to kiss him.

I keep it light because I know if I fall into one of his scorching kisses, I’ll keep on falling right back into bed.

And I get the feeling if we went another round, I'd break my vow to keep this anonymous. Then where would I be?

It's a sweet kiss. Almost too sweet for the circumstances.

Enough. I stumble back.

"Ah... see you around," I say, and then cringe. The whole point of an anonymous hookup is the fact I won't see him again.

Luckily he lets my comment go unchecked.

"See you," he replies.



I don't have a wife and seven kids waiting at home, but I do have a cocker spaniel called Casper who greets me with a thumping tail.

I lucked into this house-sitting arrangement just as Preston and I broke up, and it saved me from having to wrestle with the dire Auckland housing market. Casper's owners are overseas for a year, and in exchange for a free place to live, I only have to look after Casper and the grounds of their beautiful Grey Lynn villa. It's worked out great so far. Casper is a fantastic roommate once you get past the excess slobber that he shares freely.

While he's outside doing his business, I send Jules a message.

Anonymous hookup achieved.

I accompany my message with lots of smiley faces.

She sends me back a smiley face and an eggplant emoji.

I huff out a laugh.

I feel pretty good about the whole thing. I proved I can mix it up, I can go outside my comfort zone, have scorching hot sex without any strings. Another life skill mastered.

And for once, when I check Instagram, photos of Preston out having a good time fail to cause my stomach to hollow.

Because I had a great night too.

And instead of falling asleep thinking about Preston and all the ways our relationship went wrong, I drift off to sleep remembering a dark haired, dark eyed guy who kisses better than anyone I could ever dream up.

Want to find out what happens next? Grab [The Anonymous Hookup](#) on Amazon today!

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Novellas/Short stories

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[The Inappropriate Date](#): Short Novella

[Coming out at the Ball Game](#): Sweet YA LGBTQ+ Short Story

[Being Set Up](#): Short Novella

About the Author

Jax's stories are all about light-hearted conversations and deeply-felt connections. She lives in New Zealand with her family and a wide assortment of animals. She's a rabid sports fan, a hiking enthusiast and has a slightly unhealthy addiction to nature documentaries. She is also a massive fan of M/M romance and enjoys both reading and writing it.

Jax is an extrovert living a writers' introverted life where she spends WAY too much time in her own head, so she'd love to hear from you in whatever way you want to connect with her:

You can hang out on Facebook in her author group, Jax Calder's Crew...

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/jaxcaldercrew/>

Or follow her on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [BookBub](#), or [Goodreads](#)

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