



MY GRUMPY
Sweetheart

RAY CELAR

MY GRUMPY
SWEETHEART

SWEETHEART ESCAPES

BOOK FIVE

RAY CELAR



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Cover Art & Formatting by Whimsical Reverie Design LLC (<http://whimsicalreverie.design>)

Editing & Proofreading by Alphabitz Editing

CONTENTS

[Synopsis](#)

[Content Warning](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Want the rest of the series?](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Ray Celar](#)

SYNOPSIS

Bailey

Rewarding your own accomplishments is important – and if rewarding myself will also get me a mini vacation and a hot date while I’m doing something for charity? Sign me up. Well, I did. That’s why I’m on the way to a fantastic weekend with a sexy axe murderer. At least he looks like one. Minus the axe – for this trip at least. But he doesn’t need one anyway. If looks could kill, I’d already be dead without even making it to our destination.

I don’t understand why he’s so grumpy since he signed up for this, too, but that’s okay. Some people need a little longer to warm up to me. But in the end, they all do.

Dakota

I didn’t sign up for this and I don’t want to be here. The fact that my friends auctioned me off behind my back, and then guilt tripped me into actually going along with their crazy plan is still eating away at me. I know I’m taking it out on my date and I know that’s not okay, but Bailey is just so... annoyingly bright. No matter what I’m throwing at him to let my frustrations out, he gives it a positive spin. It’s driving me freaking crazy.

I have no idea how to not kill him if we have to spend the whole weekend together. In the most romantic suite the B’n’B had to offer. Sharing a bed.

As two people who couldn’t be more different from another are thrown together by a charity auction and a well-meaning

B'n'B owner, tension rises and sparks fly, until they're not sure if they want to rip their heads or their clothes off.

But they only need to get through the weekend before they can go their separate ways and leave this weird, confusing weekend behind them.

At least if that's still what they want to do.

CONTENT WARNING

This work contains mentions of past child abuse.

CHAPTER ONE

BAILEY



“Could you repeat that, please?” I asked, my voice a weird mix of shaky and high-pitched. I couldn’t have heard correctly, could I?

“Of course, Mr. Sullivan,” Mr. Silva, the head of marketing and my boss’s boss, said. Well, *technically* my boss’s boss’ boss, but ever since Olivia had quit to move across the country, the position had been vacant, so I’d been working with him on quite a few projects. Every single person within our department had applied to fill that position, though, and there’d been plenty of external applicants, too. “I’ve been watching you closely for the past few months — and especially the past few weeks — and I’m happy to offer you the position as Head of Social Media Marketing.”

I had heard correctly.

Oh my god!

“Yes!” I shouted, a wide grin spreading on my face. “Of course, yeah!”

My heart was beating a mile a minute, and I realized I’d jumped to my feet in excitement.

Fuck. They certainly weren’t promoting me for my professionalism.

While my face was probably burning a bright red, Mr. Silva just looked at me indulgently, the smile never leaving his face. “Don’t hold back on my account; that enthusiasm is exactly why we promoted you, Bailey. Can I call you Bailey?”

He laughed. “I figure since we’re going to work a lot more closely, it’s more convenient.”

“Sure, Mr. Silva.”

Apart from Mr. Silva, I was on a first name basis with everyone in our department, anyway. With everyone in the company, really. It was just a lot more friendly and familiar, and I hated this fake, stuffy, and often forced professionalism. I could wear a turquoise oversized hoodie and be perfectly professional at the same time, thank you very much.

“Call me Joaquín.” He shook his head, his silver lined hair not moving a fraction even though it looked like he hadn’t used any product at all. It was kinda hot. Then again, Mr. Silva – Joaquín – was kinda hot. You didn’t have to be into silver foxes to appreciate him. “Anyway” — he browsed through a couple of documents strewn on his desk — “I was thoroughly impressed by your work and your work ethic. I’m not going to lie, when Olivia recommended you as her successor, I was a little apprehensive. I’ve seen your work, which, again, is impressive, but I’ve also seen your less than professional looking appearance and the way you’re constantly chatting with people from all departments.” He shook his head, his hand fumbling with his glasses. “But I’ve since come to the realization that you are the right candidate for this position despite those traits I’ve seen as flaws but because of them. You chatting with colleagues from different departments? You know about everything that’s going to come our way. You’re making teaser graphics way before I even know we’re gonna need them. Your way of clothing? The people on this new Social Media clock thing seem to love you for it. And...” He kept searching for something, his eyes roaming the papers. “Yeah, here, according to Olivia, you’re the one who created that account in the first place.”

Joaquín looked up from his documents, smiling widely. “I’m really looking forward to working with you. I really enjoyed working on the promo tour for Eliot J. Rhodes with you. Your input was invaluable, and the links show your Social Media campaign worked like a charm. Here’s a copy of the updated contract for you, and I’m sure you’ll be happy to

see the position comes with a... *significant* pay raise since you're still on a junior salary."

I was still in all kinds of shock as Joaquín shoved a stack of papers in my direction, but my hands had a life of their own and quickly grabbed my contract.

Significant pay raise?

Sign me up!

I could... rent a bigger apartment or move to the city — though it probably was an either-or thing. Either get a bigger apartment in Stamports or move to NYC into a shoebox sized apartment.

My eyes flew rapidly over the page, skimming the contract, gathering the most important parts like PTO, sick leave, salar... *holy shit!*

Joaquín chuckled. "Told you," he said. "You can take the contract home, have a look at it, and bring the signed copy back to work tomorrow. We'll announce your promotion as soon as we have the signed contract, and you can start your new position as early as next week."

I nodded, standing up to head out of the office, but I couldn't help but turn back to Joaquín with a smirk. "One last question."

"Sure." Joaquín furrowed his brows.

"My new position doesn't mean I have to change my... less than professional looking appearance, does it?"

It took him a second, but then he started laughing wholeheartedly.

"No, Bailey, it doesn't mean you have to change your appearance. Wear whatever you want."

Now it was up to me to chuckle. "You might regret saying that."

I winked at him and quickly left his office before he had a chance to change his mind.

Outside his door, I took a deep breath, trying to calm my racing heart and shaking hands.

Holy fucking shit. Like... seriously. Head of Social Media Marketing for Greenfield Publishing at twenty-seven? My mom would be so proud.



When I entered Dogtower Fitness that afternoon, there was a skip in my step. Well, to be honest, I was basically bouncing around rather than walking. I definitely needed my yoga class tonight; otherwise, I probably wouldn't get even a minute of sleep.

“Hi, Mikey!” I said a little too loudly to one of the regulars currently sitting at the juice bar slurping something that looked like it'd already been eaten at least once. Mikey raised his hand to give me a short wave, but his eyes never left the book he was reading, so I didn't think he'd enjoy my company.

Bummer.

Especially since I could tell him that the second book in the series — a very gruesome thriller — was even better than the first one and would be available next week. Also, he could win a signed paperback copy if he followed our Instagram account because there was this giveaway going on that'd gone live just... I looked at the big clock on the wall behind the bar... an hour ago.

But alas, I didn't want to annoy him, so I went over to the multipurpose room the yoga class was taught in, hoping I'd find someone to talk to there. Seriously, I'd lose my damn fucking mind if I couldn't tell *someone* about my promotion asap. Getting through the day without blurting it to some of my colleagues had been hard as hell.

Because this promotion thing? Was a-fucking-mazing.

Which was why I let out a little squeal upon entering the room, skipping over to my yoga instructor, Evan.

“Guess what?” I said, my smile stretching from ear to ear.

“Good afternoon, Bailey,” he said calmly, looking up from his phone in his zen way I admired the hell out of.

“Guess what?” I said again but didn’t wait for him to actually take a guess since I hadn’t told him about the position I’d applied for, so he couldn’t know the right answer, anyway. “I got a promotion. Like... a big one!” I rocked to my toes and jumped up and down. “Like Head of Social Media Marketing big; like... double my current salary big. Big big.”

It was unbelievable.

Evan ran one hand through his silky, black hair, pocketed his phone, and smiled at me. “Congratulations. That sounds like an amazing opportunity.

I nodded, suppressing the urge to clap my hands. “It is. And I’ll treat myself to a... mini vacation or something like that.” I shrugged. “Or maybe not. I really want to go on a trip, but I don’t want to go alone, and most of my friends are all lovey-dovey and coupled up. And I’m happy for them, but... if I go on vacation with any of them, their partners will be there, so I’ll end up being the third wheel.”

Evan furrowed his brows. “Going alone isn’t an option?”

I shook my head. “Nah. Been there, done that, got the t-shirt, but... yeah. Ideally, I’d have my own boyfriend to take, but where do I find one right now?”

“Carousel,” Evan suggested.

“The dating app?” I still had it on my phone, but I hadn’t used it in months. “I mean, yeah, I could start using that again, but... do you think I’ll find a boyfriend fast enough to take on a mini-vacation in like... the next couple of months?”

Evan’s face turned thoughtful for a moment. “I think there’s some kind of charity bachelor auction going on there at the moment. You bid for someone to go on a blind date weekend getaway with.”

“A date and a vacation?” I clapped my hands. “That sounds like it’s exactly what I was looking for!”

Evan just smiled indulgently before he turned around and greeted a group of middle-aged ladies who'd just entered the room.

I sighed, walking toward the back of the room to grab a yoga mat and secure a spot where I was comfortable and wouldn't interrupt the class. I had the feeling I wasn't going to be the epitome of calm and collected today. Unlike Evan. The dude was seriously chill. And bendy — something else I definitely hadn't mastered yet.

“Good afternoon, everyone.” I heard Evan's voice, calm as ever but somehow loud enough to drown out the conversations in the room. “Please grab a mat and get set up. We're starting in a minute.”

Quiet music started filling the room, and I took a deep breath. Yoga. Calm. Relaxing.

Not thinking about bachelor auctions, blind dates, and weekend-getaways. No problem.

At all.



Evan was right; Carousel did have a charity bachelor auction going on.

I smiled at my phone as I clicked and answered my way through the question and legalities they probably had to ask me. Well, they probably had to ask most of the questions — I didn't see how my choice of either cake or pie would help them cover their asses on a legal basis, but they were fun to answer.

I grabbed my bottle of coke from my coffee table and took a gulp.

Yes to small towns and nature.

This was really fun, but... shouldn't I be looking at questionnaires and profiles instead of answering questions? I

mean, I was going to bid on someone; I didn't want to enter as someone *others* could put a bid on.

"There," I said when a notification finally popped up on my screen informing me that I'd answered all the questions. Next, the auction site opened, and there they were. The questionnaires.

A smile tugged at my lips as I started scrolling.

These looked like tamer versions of the regular profiles, less nudity that bordered on dick pics. Mind you, most people still didn't have pictures of their faces up and there were plenty of abs to look at, but all in all it seemed a bit less hookup and more dating.

I liked it.

And I really liked the questionnaires. Especially the fun questions, though I wasn't sure if I should choose Petey-with-a-y because he preferred Lord of the Rings over Star Wars like I did or Will-I-69 because he didn't, and the arguments could be fun.

I reached for my bowl of microwave popcorn, placed it next to me on the couch, and grabbed a handful. Salty, buttery goodness hit my tongue, and I let out a little sigh.

In the end, I closed both profiles and kept scrolling. There were so many options available... how would I ever be able to choose one?

Abs, smiley face, abs, abs, smiley face, axe murderer, abs, smiley... Wait a minute! I scrolled back up, frowning at my display as I saw the photo I'd just scrolled past. There he was, the glaring axe murderer in all his hipster-lumberjack glory. He was even sporting the iconic flannel shirt! Damn... I bet he'd look really nice if he'd smile. But he didn't. He looked into the camera like he wanted to kill someone — probably with the axe he had casually draped over his shoulder.

Seriously, who thought it was a great idea to use a picture of themselves holding an axe as a profile picture for a dating site that wasn't called *Date a serial killer*?

Still, I found myself weirdly fascinated by his profile. He'd definitely managed to get my attention. And, to be honest, I was interested in what kind of guy was hiding behind his frowny face.

Huh.

I chuckled, shaking my head.

Attention.

Interest.

Was that guy in marketing?

Did he try to use the AIDA model to sell himself?

If so... I was even more intrigued.

My logical brain tried to tell me I'd probably get myself killed if I actually won a date with him, but the fascinated part of me won out, so I started browsing through his questionnaire and photos.

The profile was... weird, especially his pictures. I had to admit, the frowny axe-holding picture really was the best of the bunch. The others all looked like they used to be group pictures and he'd just badly cropped the other people out of the photo... like, there was a picture of him with a random arm slung over his shoulder and the top of someone's head partially in front of his thigh like said person had been sitting and leaning against him when the picture had been taken.

Shaking my head, I exited the photo gallery and closed the profile.

I'd just scored a promotion, so I didn't want to be the first victim of what would be known as the Carousel Killer, thank you very much.

Oh! My promotion!

A quick glance at my phone's clock told me it was late enough to give Parker a call to tell him about my exciting news. He'd know what a big deal it was. After all, he'd worked at Greenfield Publishing, too, before he'd decided to open up his own marketing firm.

Hitting the call button, I prayed for him to answer because I'd literally die if I couldn't tell someone soon.

After what felt like an eternity, I was ready to hang up when the ringtone was replaced by a sleepy, kind of raspy voice.

“Hello?”

“Guess what!” I told him while bouncing on my couch, my smile returning to my face.

“Uhm... Bailey?” Damn, he sounded like he'd been asleep. I checked my phone, but it was only a little past eight, not his usual bedtime at all.

“Yeah. Of course it's me. Now guess what!”

Parker chuckled. “Okay, I'm not sure. What?”

Spoilsport. I rolled my eyes but couldn't be mad. I was too happy. “Do you remember telling me to apply for that promotion like... months ago?”

“Uh, yeah.” He didn't sound like remembered. In fact, he still sounded half asleep. “Oh shit! Did you get it?” Aaaaand now he was awake. I giggled at his sudden outburst.

“Yes! You're talking to the new Head of Social Media Marketing. O.M.G... I still can't believe it, but it totally happened. Joaquín — because Mr. Silva and I are on a first name basis now — called me into his office and gave this long ass speech about how my less than professional work attire was what made me great at my job. And then he offered me the promotion.”

Grabbing my coke, I shook my head. It wasn't that I wasn't wearing appropriate work attire, it was just that we had very different definitions of what was appropriate and professional. Fortunately, the results were apparently speaking for themselves.

“That's great, Bailey! Seriously, I'm so happy for you. I knew you'd get it, even if Mr. Silva is a hard ass about your clothes. You'll do great.”

“Nah, it’s fine. I can keep the clothes because, apparently, our TikTok followers love me.” I giggled. In hindsight, the kinda pained yet indulgent expression on Joaquín’s face had been priceless; I’d just been too occupied to appreciate it in the moment. But I sure as fuck did now. “The best thing? I get a raise. Like... double my current salary. It’s amazing.”

Parker laughed quietly, but there was a hint, a barely there undertone, that sounded... off. “Look at you, living the high life now. Next time we go out, burgers are on you. After all, I’m a struggling business owner now.” He chuckled. He was joking because I knew for a fact his company was doing fine.

Before answering, I put him on speaker so I could go back to Carousel and keep browsing the profiles. It shouldn’t be that hard. After all, I didn’t want to find my future husband, just someone to have a fun weekend with.

“*Of course* the burgers are on me,” I told him, rolling my eyes dramatically even though he couldn’t see it. “It’s the least I can do. I’m convinced I wouldn’t have gotten the job in the first place if it hadn’t been for you. Anyway, when will you be able to sneak off to have burgers again?”

Silence.

Oh shit. I’d put my foot in my mouth — again. To be fair, Parker’s boyfriend was a controlling asshole. Unfortunately, Parker didn’t seem to see that.

“Fuck, man. When you put it like that, I realize how screwed up things were.”

“Were?” I asked, blinking at my phone in confusion. He’d used past tense... did that really mean what I thought it meant?

“Yeah. Collin and I...we broke up.”

“Thank god!” I exclaimed and let out a sigh in relief. Parker finally being rid of that asshole was possibly even better news than my promotion. Wait, not possibly — definitely. But... shit. Not empathetic. At all. “I mean... I’m really sorry for you, Parker. I know you loved that douchebag, but... yeah... I’m sorry. What happened? How are you? Do

you need a night of heavy drinking instead of burgers? Because I'm in."

Absentmindedly, I kept scrolling through the profiles, but they were all kind of... bland. Generic. Nice bodies, nice smiles, nice abs. But in the end, most of them were interchangeable.

"Wow, tell me how you really feel, man." Parker laughed, but the exasperated affection in his tone told me he wasn't actually mad at me. Good. Because I'd never meant to anger him. "But yeah, I know you never really liked him. Neither did my brother. I should've listened to you two. I clearly was fucking blind."

Parker went silent for so long, I checked if the call was still going. "I'm doing ok. With the breakup, at least. Things are becoming clearer now that I'm not caught up in it, you know? I'm starting to see just how much of a controlling dick Collin really was. And you know, him taking all my fucking furniture when I was at my mom's for the day was a big wake up call."

"He did what?" I gasped. "That's crazy. How did he even... wait, that's not important. The important thing is that you got out of that relationship. And, hey, now you can start fresh. Get new furniture, maybe paint your apartment and style everything the way *you* like it, not him. If you need someone to go to IKEA with you... I'll go. And because I love you, I'll even go on a Saturday."

Joking was always the best option to light up a situation, right? I sure as fuck hoped so because I felt so fucking helpless talking to Parker on the phone right now. He sounded so sad, so broken... I just wanted to hug him and tell him everything was going to be okay.

"Wow, you really must love me. And I might take you up on it. Pierce offered, but I'm pretty sure we'd just end up killing each other. I'm just glad I listened to my family and never put Collin on the lease like he wanted me to in the first place."

"Otherwise, you'd have to move in with Pierce, and if you think you won't survive a visit at IKEA with him, you

definitely won't survive living with him." I laughed when an idea struck. "But... seriously. Can you take a little time off work to clear your head? I'd tell you about this great bachelor auction where you bid on someone to go on a mini-vacation slash blind date with, but I do actually know that's too soon. So, I'll just throw the weekend-getaway part in the room."

He should enjoy that. He didn't need to take the guy with the... woah, that definitely was an eight pack... on a blind date. Save that guy for me. I opened his questionnaire and furrowed my brows. Thank fuck Carousel had added a section that asked about kinks to the questionnaire because holy shit, we were not compatible. *At all.*

"Um, ok...that was a lot to unpack, and I have no idea what you're talking about. Blind date auction? I've been out of a relationship for less than a month, Bailey..."

Closing that profile, I let out an impatient sigh. Had he even been listening to me? "Yeah, I get that. That's why I said it's too soon for you."

"Okay...sorry. Spell this out for me, man. I'm not following."

Rolling my eyes, I told him all about my encounter with Evan and the charity bachelor auction.

Meh. I sighed as I scrolled past even more of the same profile pics. Abs, smiles, abs, abs, abs. Nice, but nothing that caught my attention like... "I'm actually currently browsing through the profiles," I added, sighing internally as I gave in and scrolled back up, hoping to hell I'd find his profile again, "and I might go for the axe murderer for funsies, but... yeah, you don't need to know that, either. I just thought you might want to get away for a weekend to... relax. Minus the blind date part."

"That sounds awesome, Bailey. For *you*. You really should do it. You deserve to treat yourself. Maybe skip the axe murderers, but yeah, it sounds like fun. But I think I'll skip this one. A vacation sounds nice, but I don't think I'm in the headspace to deal with all that right now. Plus, I just started

my own business. It's doing well enough, but I don't know if this is the best time to get away."

I whined. "But the axe murderer is hot." I let out a breath both in relief because there he was, Mr. Axe Murderer, and because Parker might have a point about skipping potential murderers. "Maybe you're right. I haven't placed a bid yet, but I definitely will. Especially since it's a win-win-win situation. I get a hot date, a vacation, and the money will help homeless queer teenagers. It's a no brainer for me. But I totally get why it's too early for you. I'll just invite you to the pub for burgers next week."

I'd hoped Parker would be happy about my invitation, but he just went silent on me before sighing heavily. "Fuck, you play dirty, Bailey. The money goes to homeless queer teens?"

I blinked at my phone. Was he listening to what I was saying? Because I was getting the feeling he wasn't hearing what I was *actually* saying. Which, yeah, was fair, I guess, since he was going through a breakup, but... "You do know I'm not trying to play dirty, right?" I took a deep breath, trying not to feel hurt by his words, though they definitely stung a little. But this wasn't about me. This was about Parker. And if he wanted to know more about the charity, I'd tell him. So I made sure to mark Mr. Axe Murderer's questionnaire as a favorite — just in case I wanted to have a look at it again, not that I was seriously contemplating actually bidding for him; nope, nu-uh, not at all — and went back to the info section to read up on the charity because I might've only skimmed through that part.

To be completely honest, I didn't really understand why Parker considered doing the charity auction, even after he explained a little bit about his brother to me, but if it helped him getting over the asshole, I was all for it. And that's what I told him — minus the name-calling part.

"Thanks, Bailey, I'll let you know if I end up doing this damn thing."

I chuckled. I sure as shit hoped so. If I ended up being responsible for him getting out there and getting laid, I wanted

to know all the good stuff.

“Okay... but I call dibs on the axe murderer!” I giggled, though I was only half joking. Damn the fucking AIDA method. He’d caught me hook, line, and sinker, that fucking grumpy fucker. “You’ll know it’s him if you see his profile. He looks like he wants to murder you — with the axe he’s holding. But I kinda like that... Damn, that sounds messed up, but it’s not, I promise. Anyway... What do you say? Let’s hit the pub next week?”

“No judgment man. I don’t kink shame,” Parker said, laughing what sounded like a real, heartfelt laugh. “But I promise the axe murderer is all yours. And yeah, that sounds perfect. Text me later to make plans? Because you know me well enough to know I’ll forget the other way around.”

Like he was the only one of us to forget stuff. If I didn’t add it to my calendar, I’d have forgotten all about it in like ten minutes, max. My object permanence was crap at the best of times. “Will do. Bye.”

“Take it easy, man. And congrats again, Bailey. You completely earned that promotion.” Parker paused for a moment. “All right, I’ll talk to you later.”

A couple of minutes later, I was still sitting on my couch, staring at my phone, trying to work through everything that’d happened just now. It felt like a lot.

Fuck. I felt so bad for Parker. He deserved better.

I really hoped the auction, should he enter, would help him get over the douchebag.

Oh. The auction!

I tapped away on my screen, going back to Mr. Axe Murderer’s profile.

Yeah, he still looked like a grumpy, murdering, hipster lumberjack. But according to his profile, he also loved animals — especially dogs — nature, and he had a strong dislike of *everything that’s fun*.

I giggled. I sure as fuck hoped he loved sarcasm; otherwise, it was going to be a long ass weekend because yeah... fuck it. The AIDA method totally worked on me. He'd caught my attention, got me interested, awoke the desire to meet the weird guy who posted murderer-selfies as profile pics to an online dating app, and now I'd take action and get that date with him.

I entered the price I was willing to pay into the little box at the bottom of the questionnaire and closed my eyes for a second.

Here's hoping I hadn't made a huge mistake.

CHAPTER TWO

DAKOTA



“You did what?” I screamed at my friends, staring at them in horror and disbelief, searching for hints that they’d lost their fucking minds because they very clearly had.

This was supposed to be a fun, relaxing weekend camping trip, but the throbbing vein in my neck told me I was everything but relaxed.

“Listen, man...” Liam started to say, nervously turning the beer bottle in his hands.

“I *am* listening, but I must have misheard because I think you guys just told me that you fucking SOLD me off like cattle.” I swear, I tried not to shout — but how could I not, considering everything they’d done?

The bottle in my hands shook violently from rage, my chest was heaving, my vision blurring from the tension inside of me.

“We didn’t... it’s not like that... we just...” Jason shrugged helplessly, looking at the others for help.

“It’s not like *what?*” I asked, breathing in deeply through my nose, holding my breath for a couple of seconds before carefully releasing it. This anger wasn’t good for me. I knew that. And I hated always being this angry, feeling the rage setting fire to my blood.

I’d left the corporate world behind to get a handle on my issues and cut out a big chunk of the stress and pressure, and most of the time, I was fine now. At least if my friends didn’t go and sell me off, which, as far as I knew, was considered

slavery and was generally frowned upon within the US. “Did you or did you not auction me off without my consent?” There. I’d managed to ask that quietly. Through clenched teeth, but quietly.

“Yes, but it was for charity,” Jason hurriedly said, his cheeks turning bright red.

“And for your own good,” Murphy added, biting his lip.

“Okay.” I nodded and took another deep breath. I could still hear the blood rushing in my ears, but it wasn’t as loud as before, a wild river instead of Niagara Falls. Progress. I guess. “Let me get this straight: slavery is okay as long as the proceeds go to charity and it’s for the slave’s own good?”

“Oh, fuck off!” Jason rolled his eyes. “You’re being a drama queen.”

I raised my eyebrows pointedly, doing everything I could not to go off on them again.

But seriously? I was being a drama queen? They’d sold me to some random guy on the internet, but I was a drama queen?

“You get a free vacation out of it,” Murphy said with a wry smile.

“Thanks, but I’ll pass.”

I was on vacation right now, a vacation I actually wanted to be on — with my friends, not some random dude who obviously thought buying people was completely fine.

“You can’t pass. He already paid, and it’s for a good cause.”

“So? Then refund him the money, and he can bid on someone else; easy peasy,” I said with a shrug. I honestly didn’t care about some guy’s money. If one bought people off the internet, one needed to expect unforeseen things to happen. And me not showing up was definitely better than a SWAT team entering his house and arresting him for human trafficking. In my opinion, he should consider himself lucky.

“It’s *not* that easy.” Liam sighed heavily, taking a big swig out of his beer bottle like he needed time to brace himself for

what he was about to tell me. “Look. This event... the bachelor auction? That took place in June. It was a one-time thing, so if you back out, he gets nothing. No date, no weekend trip, and the queer homeless teens don’t get the money. And even if it wasn’t a one-time thing, the chances of finding someone for next weekend are slim to none.”

I furrowed my brows. “You do know that I’m unavailable next weekend, right? We have plans next weekend.”

None of my friends met my gaze.

Cowards.

“About that...” The vein in my neck started throbbing again as Liam started talking. He usually was the quietest and calmest out of all of us — probably why Jason and Murphy let him do the talking now. It was a lot harder to be mad at him if he kept looking at you with his big, brown doe eyes.

“Let me guess. There is no trip next weekend, right?”

I’d known something was off when they’d made plans for two weekends in a row, but they’d assured me it was just a coincidence. And I’d trusted them. Like a fucking *fool*.

“No.” That was Jason speaking. He swallowed nervously. “We needed to make sure you were free that weekend, so we made up the camping trip.”

I nodded slowly, trying to work through all the information without going off again. Oh, how I wanted to tell them off again. I wanted to scream and rant and... I didn’t even know.

I was angry, but foremost, I felt fucking *betrayed*. They were my friends. They were supposed to *have* my back, not stab me *in* the back. And yeah, I should work through the pain of their betrayal differently but letting it all out in a giant rant was so fucking tempting.

But I didn’t. Instead, I took another deep breath, balling my fists to let at least a fraction of the tension inside me out.

“Okay. Do I understand correctly that you’ve been planning this whole thing for more than *three months*? And you chose to tell me *now*? Literally a week before I’m

supposed to go on that trip. And your reason for telling me this late is so that I can't back out without losing that charity money, which means you're basically forcing my hand?"

I was met with three people staring at the forest floor like it held all the answers of the universe.

Great.

Just fucking great.

Who needed enemies if they had friends like mine?

"If you say it like that, it sounds really bad," Liam whispered.

"Maybe it sounds really bad because it is," I snapped, running a hand through my beard.

I knew I wasn't the easiest person to be around, okay? I was grumpy, a hothead, and a ton of unpleasant things my exes had called me over the years. But never in my thirty-two years of life had I done anything so fucking deceiving to anyone. Not to my enemies, and *definitely* not to my friends.

"We were drunk and thought... we thought it sounded like a fun idea..."

I wouldn't comment on that. I couldn't discuss this now or I'd just start shouting again, and I didn't want that. It wasn't like I enjoyed being this angry. I fucking hated it. I hated *myself* when I got like that.

"How much?" I asked instead.

"What?" Murphy furrowed his brows.

"How much did the guy pay for a weekend with me?"

My friends — could I even consider them my friends any longer? — exchanged glances.

"Three thousand dollars," Liam said, worrying his lip.

I sucked in a breath. Wow. That was a lot of money to spend on a weekend with a guy he'd never even met. And a lot of money for charity.

Fuck.

I really didn't want to go, but I also didn't want to be the asshole who flunked out. For all those organizers and the guy knew, I'd been a willing participant. Right?

Wait...

"Didn't they want me to give consent to being sold or anything?"

"We... uhm... might have forged your signature," Murphy mumbled.

Of course they had.

What the fuck?

I swallowed all the curse words back down, clenched my jaw, and closed my eyes. I couldn't believe what they'd done. I might've understood if they'd come clean right after they'd sobered up after they'd drunkenly sold me off. But they had opted to keep going.

And now I was left with two shitty options. Not go and look like a complete asshole. Or give in and go even though I didn't want to go on a date with some random guy I didn't know anything about.

We sat there in silence. The others exchanged glances they probably thought I didn't notice because I was staring into the campfire, watching the flames dance, but I was well aware of my surroundings.

For instance, I knew that my truck was only about fifteen feet away, and I could reach it within three seconds if I wanted to.

And man, did I want to. Get in, get off, get away from this shitshow that was supposed to be a fun, relaxing camping trip.

"Okay," I finally said, nodding. "I'll do it."

Mainly because I knew a bit about being a homeless teenager, and taking away money that was supposed to support them wasn't something I was willing to do. A fact my friends were very well aware of, which only made the situation infinitely worse.

“That’s great!” Jason said, a smile spreading on his face, but I just held my hand up to signal to him I wasn’t done talking.

“Under one condition,” I kept going.

“Sure, whatever it is. Just tell us.” Liam nodded, his eyes big and hopeful.

“I’m selling myself for those three thousand dollars. I think it’s only fair for you to do your part to help out those homeless teenagers you care so much about.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m basically making three thousand dollars — and so will you. Each of you pays a thousand bucks to that charity organization.”

They blinked at me as I got up, put the beer bottle down next to the cooler, and grabbed my backpack.

“What are you doing?” Liam asked as I slowly walked towards my truck.

“Going home.”

I opened my truck door and threw the backpack on the passenger seat before getting in. I didn’t care that I was leaving my tent, my sleeping bag, and my other gear behind. I just wanted to get away from this shitshow. Just wanted to forget this whole thing was happening. Wanted to forget that my friends thought it was okay to sell me off just like... like... I still couldn’t come up with a fitting comparison because it was just plain wrong. No ifs, ands, or buts about it.

“Dakota...” Liam came running towards my truck.

I shook my head, turning the key in the ignition.

What a great fucking weekend it was.

CHAPTER THREE

BAILEY



“Yeah, I set the post to go live at 11am,” I said, my phone trapped between shoulder and ear while I hopped through my apartment trying to get this incredibly cute but fucking annoying shoe... ooo... done! One down — one to go. “And I don’t want to be rude or anything, but technically, I’m on vacation and I really have to get going. If you have any questions, just go and ask Jacsyn. He’s responsible for the Social Media campaign running this weekend.”

I heard her gasping for air. Shit. I knew she was one of those old-school *interns are my personal coffee slaves* people, so I definitely knew better than mentioning her precious Social Media campaign was run by an intern — that was until after the fact it’d run successfully and without a hitch because our twenty year-old intern was very, very familiar with Social Media. Stephanie, my mid-fifties worrywart who’d, up until now, never run a Social Media campaign for any book she’d edited? Yeah... not so much. “Jacsyn? But he’s...”

“A digital-native. Exactly.” I smiled brightly, hoping to hell that it showed in my voice. “Honestly, he’s the perfect candidate, I promise. And you know that I would never do you dirty, right? You’re one of my favorite editors to work with.”

I was laying it on thick, but technically, it wasn’t a lie. Her having no idea about Social Media meant that she’d basically let me and my team do whatever we wanted. The hard part wasn’t selling her the campaign, the hard part was explaining to her what exactly we wanted to do and babysitting her

afterward because she was worried everything was going to hell.

Grabbing my second show, I leaned against the wall in my hallway, carefully trying to get it on without falling against the suitcases I'd packed for my weekend-long date next to me.

Yes, suitcases.

Plural.

I liked to be prepared, and I had no idea what kind of things we'd do in an apple orchard, so sue me.

She was giggling — thank fuck! “You're always so sweet, Bailey,” she practically purred into my ear. “You know, usually, I wouldn't trust some intern, but... I trust your judgment.”

“And you won't regret it,” I told her. She wouldn't. This was an easy thing. Jacsyn was ready to spend his weekend replying to all comments to keep post engagement levels high, and I... would be visiting some kind of apple orchard with my axe murderer.

Speaking of whom... I needed to get going. Like... five minutes ago. Thankfully, I'd already picked up our rental — because for some reason the travel agency couldn't reimburse me for gas, but they could rent us a car for the weekend — and only needed to pick up my date.

My pulse sped up.

Three months was a long time to wait for a date, but it'd be worth it. I didn't know how I knew, but I did. My gut feeling told me this was going to be an amazing weekend with an amazing man at an amazing location. I was a hundred percent certain of that.



Okay, axe murderer definitely is the right name, I thought as I drove the car along winding roads, right into the middle of nowhere. Don't get me wrong, the scenery was absolutely

beautiful: dark rich greens, deep browns, and the first hints of the gorgeous fall colors that were to come once the leaves started falling. Everything looked like someone had cranked the saturation up to max, and I was living for it.

But also... the guy posing with a fucking axe on his profile pic living in the middle of nowhere? It sounded like the beginning of a bad horror movie.

Fortunately, it could also be the start of a romance novel, and I decided to go with that because my axe murderer devouring me in a bed in some cozy bed and breakfast sounded a lot better than him devouring me after hacking me into pieces in his garden shed.

My pulse was kicking up a notch as the navigation app on my phone told me to take a turn to the left.

The forest was getting lighter and lighter, and it didn't take too long until the first houses came into view. It wasn't like a town or anything, but every minute or two there was a house visible through the trees.

Another left turn, a bumpy dirt road, and there, at the cul-de-sac — if it could even be called that — was the house I was looking for. My axe murderer's house. I should probably start calling him by his name, but... I didn't know it yet. Somehow, it hadn't come up in our sparse conversations via Carousel's messenger function.

First thing on my to-do list: get his name.

His house was cute, though. I'd half expected a wooden cabin, but it wasn't. It was a real house with a stone base, a cute, starkly slanted roof, and dark green window shutters. It was giving me *Hänsel and Gretel* vibes.

Just as I came to a stop in front of his house, the door opened, and my axe murderer appeared in all his hipster-lumberjacky goodness. Full beard, long hair, he was even wearing the same flannel shirt he'd worn in his profile pic. The only thing that was missing was the axe. Instead, he'd slung a small travel bag over his shoulder, and I couldn't help

but raise an eyebrow. Was that his luggage? That one little bag?

How?

What?

Had he packed more than a couple of spare boxers?

Okay, maybe I was being dramatic. The bag wasn't actually *that* small. It was pretty regular sized. It just seemed small compared to my two suitcases.

Opening the driver's door, I hopped out of the car and went over to where he was locking his door.

"Hi," I said with a smile. Damn, compared to me, my axe murderer was huge. A proper mountain man. "I'm Bailey."

The guy turned around and frowned at me. "Like the liqueur?"

I giggled. "Like my great grandmother on my mother's side, but I do like the liqueur."

He grunted but didn't say a thing. Nothing like, "Hi, I'm Henry, and it's so nice to meet you." Though, I didn't think his name was Henry. He didn't look like one.

"Soo... what's your name?" I asked when it became painfully obvious that he didn't plan on striking up a conversation.

His sigh confused me a little. He almost sounded annoyed. I just couldn't figure out why. "You don't even know my name?"

What a weird question.

"Nope," I said, popping the 'p'. "It wasn't on your profile, and you didn't tell me when we set everything up. And I might've been too excited to ask."

"Hmpf."

He walked past me toward our car, his bicep brushing against my shoulder, almost knocking me down the stairs. He was strong — which I liked — but I'd have preferred to find

that out in a different way... like him lifting me up and pressing me against a wall to kiss the ever loving shit out of me.

But I wouldn't give up now.

It was still relatively early... somewhere in the world. Maybe he worked at night and this was the time of day he usually slept?

I skipped down the stairs and easily caught up to him, seeing as he'd only made it to the back of the car where he'd opened the trunk and was staring at what was inside in either fascination or horror. I'd go with fascination.

"Soo... your name?" I asked again.

"I thought this was a weekend-getaway?" my axe murderer said.

"It is."

"Okay... so am I seeing double?"

"Did you drink?"

He pinned me with a look that gave me serious murderer vibes. Like... maybe he really wanted to chop me into bite sized pieces — at least in that moment. "No, I did not drink. I'm driving."

I blinked. "I've been driving, but if you want to take over, that's fine with me." I gave him an extra wide smile. Honestly, I didn't like driving all that much; riding shotgun was so much more fun, especially since we'd travel the countryside, so I expected to see quite a bit of beautiful scenery. "Anyway... what's your name? I can't keep calling you Axe Murderer in my head for the next two days."

"You've been... what?" He cocked his head, brows furrowed to a frown that seemed to permanently mar his handsome face. Some people had a resting bitchface, he seemed to have a resting frownyface. I probably shouldn't find it as adorable as I did. "Wait, don't answer that," he said hurriedly before I got the chance to answer. "I really don't want to know. I'm Dakota."

“Nice to finally meet you in person, Dakota.”

“Yeah... we’ll see about that.”

He smashed the trunk shut and stalked to the driver’s side without even sparing me another look. I guess that was my cue to get in the car. I wasn’t entirely sure he wouldn’t just drive off without me if I wasn’t fast enough.

So, I hopped in the car and made myself comfortable in the passenger seat by taking my shoes off.

“What are you doing? And what the fuck is all this stuff?” Dakota — because I knew my axe murderer’s name now — asked, nodding toward an array of snacks and sweets that might look a little like a kid on the loose in a grocery store.

“I’m taking my shoes off,” I told him with a shrug. “We’ve got a four-hour drive ahead of us, and since I won’t be driving, there’s no reason for me to keep them on.” Hello? Wearing just socks was so much more comfortable. “And I brought snacks for our drive. I didn’t know what you liked, so I brought a variety of things.”

Maybe I’d gone a little overboard, but I didn’t want to be rude by only bringing stuff for me. I thought I’d packed a good variety of things, but apparently, I’d missed something. Hell, I’d brought chocolate, crackers, chips, protein bars, cut up fruit, Skittles... and more. I even packed vegan and gluten free options.

Not because I’d been nervous about our meeting and wanted it to go well. Nope. Nu-uh. I wasn’t nervous. Just... considerate.

“Okay.” It was the last thing he said before he started adjusting the driver seat to his much bigger size. A minute or so later, the engine rumbled to life and off we went towards our weekend getaway.

In silence.

I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself, and looked out the window at the deep green forest.

Maybe Dakota was one of the shy types who masked their shyness by being gruff. Or maybe he just seemed gruff but wasn't. Anyway, I'd just give him a couple of minutes to get acclimated, and then I'd try to start a conversation. After all, we had four hours to kill.

CHAPTER FOUR

DAKOTA



B *aily.*

My buyer's name was Bailey, and he was... so... so... I couldn't even describe him. Certainly not what I'd been expecting, that was for sure. When I thought about who might buy someone off an auction online, I'd thought about some old guy in his sixties who wanted to feel young for a weekend. Grey hair — or no hair at all — a beer belly, khakis, and those god-awful button-down shirts I'd burned the minute I'd turned in my resignation two years ago.

Bailey was none of these things. For starters, he was young. So incredibly young. He looked like one of these new Gen-Z types, so... twenty? Twenty-two? Fuck, did he still go to college?

Though I had to admit he was cute but not even remotely my type. He was a tiny, twinkly thing with turquoise fingernails and a smile so bright it'd almost blinded me the first time he'd directed it at me. And he seemed to smile a lot. Non-stop.

Not even when I'd growled at him for bringing so much luggage. Or for taking off his shoes — seriously, who did that in the car? Not even when he'd had to ask for my name for the third time because I had ignored his question the first two times. Which was an asshole move, yeah. And I did feel bad about it, just... not bad enough to apologize.

Thankfully, he let me drive and stayed blissfully silent so I could enjoy the rumbling of the car engine and the scenery

outside. I hated the thousand shades of gray in the city. The smog-filled air, the light pollution. I'd done that for almost ten years, and I was fucking done with it. This? Field after field orchard after orchard, tree after tree? That was my speed. Quiet, calm, *no people*.

Except for the wiggling, sparkling, fucking beaming man next to me.

Clenching my jaw, I fought the urge to ask him how much coffee he'd had today. Or energy drinks. The youth liked those fucking disgusting cans of poison, right? Instead, I remained silent while trying to think of a reason why someone like Bailey — young, good-looking, seemingly outgoing — felt the need to buy someone like cattle off a website. I wouldn't ask, of course. I wasn't here to make friends. This wasn't an actual date. This was me trying to survive this damn weekend so my friends had to make good on their promise and match the donation Bailey had made. Three thousand dollars. How the fuck did someone as young as Bailey get his hands on that amount of money to throw out of the metaphorical window?

Another question I wouldn't ask.

“Soo... I'm curious. Why did you sign up for the auction?” he asked, shredding the silence between us to pieces.

I let out an annoyed sigh. I'd known this question would come, but I hadn't expected it to be the first one. “Why did you bid in the auction?” I asked gruffly instead of giving him an answer.

“Oh... I got promoted and wanted to reward myself, and a date, a mini-vacation, and doing something for charity rolled into a delicious treat of win-win-win sounded like the perfect way to do so.” He smiled so fucking brightly he was rivaling the sun outside.

I, on the other hand, had to fight the urge to scoff. A promotion. What kind of promotion could someone like him, who likely just graduated from college — if that — a few months ago, have gotten?

“Uh-huh,” I said instead and gave a sharp nod as a sign that I’d heard him. I didn’t really need to answer verbally.

“So... if you don’t want to talk about your reasons for signing up — and I get that. Like... we’re basically strangers, and your reasons for joining the auction might be private. Anyway... what do you want to talk about instead?”

Oh fuck.

He was a talker.

“Nothing?” I suggested. I swear I could see his face fall for the blink of an eye, but then his smile was back. It even lit up his eyes like he wasn’t fazed by my rude comment at all.

“I guess I could start a philosophical discussion about why nothing is called nothing.” He sounded thoughtful but dead serious.

I shot him an alarmed look because philosophical discussions about the meaning of words sounded like my personal hell, but when I did, the little shit had the audacity to giggle. Not laugh. Not chuckle. *Giggle*. Like a schoolgirl. Only... he somehow managed to make the sound manly. And infectious. Like I could easily fall in if I wasn’t careful.

“Sorry, but you should see your face.” He snorted and pretended to wipe tears out of his eyes before pulling a face that looked like he hadn’t taken a dump in at least a week and was seriously constipated in what was obviously a caricature of me.

I didn’t look like that. I. Did. Not.

“Oh... wait, I have another question I was dying to ask you.” He clapped his hands and turned his whole upper body to me. “Are you in marketing?”

“What?”

“Are you in marketing?” he repeated as if that were the most logical question in the world and not completely unprompted and out of left field.

We drove by one of the thousands of apple orchards within Connecticut and I secretly wished it was *our* apple orchard.

Because that would mean I could get out of this car and get a little distance between us. But it wasn't. And according to the app on Bailey's phone, it'd take another three hours and twenty-eight minutes to get there.

"No, I'm not. Why would I be?" Fuck. He got me. I'd actually answered one of his questions.

I hadn't thought that it was possible, but his smile widened even more, and he jumped up and down in his seat. If it weren't for the seat belt, he'd probably hit his head on the ceiling. "Ohh... it was just something that crossed my mind when I saw your profile. I knew it was a long shot, but your profile is like a perfect example of the AIDA method, so... I thought I'd ask. But... if you aren't in marketing, what is your job?"

"None of your business."

He laughed again. Fucking laughed at the answer.

"You know, if you keep up being all secretive and evasive, I'll start thinking you actually are an axe murderer. Though... I highly doubt you can make much money off of that, soo... hitman? Oh, oh, oh... do you *work for the government*?" He clapped his hand, wiggling his eyebrows as if guessing my profession were his favorite game. And I had to admit, I almost laughed at the ridiculousness of his guesses. Almost.

"I'm not a murderer," I said, shaking my head because... was this guy for real? If he even considered me to be a criminal — a murderer at that — why would he get anywhere near me? Let alone get in a car with me to spend a whole fucking weekend together. That'd make two days until anyone would miss him.

Was this guy a lunatic?

"You didn't say you don't *work for the government*." There was that adorable brow wiggling again.

Nope.

Not adorable. *Annoying*. Both started with an *a*. Easy to confuse, especially if you had to keep up a weird-ass conversation with a lunatic that left my head spinning.

“I’m self-employed,” I finally said just to shut him up. I should’ve known better.

He giggled again, brushing a strand of his bright blond hair out of his eyes. “So... not a murderer, but... what about a mercenary? Bounty hunter? Or... ohh, I know: private investigator. There’s this really amazing thriller series featuring a jaded private investigator who used to be a cop — because apparently, all private investigators had to be cops before something bad happened which made them quit. It’s one of the rules of publishing... anyway. It’s still an amazing series...”

And off he went.

I let his excited voice wash over me and tried to focus on the road, which was really hard because I could see him wildly gesticulating out of the corner of my eye, his head occasionally bobbing up and down, his smile never faltering.

“Do you read? I mean, sure you read, duh. Who doesn’t like to read? The question is: what do you like to read?”

This was going to be a long fucking weekend.



The apple orchard was... cute, I guess. To me, it looked exactly like the hundred other apple orchards we’d passed on our way to this specific one. Lush green grass, knotty apple trees carrying a variety of different apples — green ones, red ones, striped ones — and a long, very narrow road that led us through the apple meadows to the big farmhouse that also happened to be an LGBTQ+ friendly B’n’B.

The whole thing looked very quaint. There were people picking apples in the field, putting them in big, wooden baskets like we were still living in the nineteen hundreds.

“Wow, it looks amazing! So cute,” Bailey gushed next to me, pressing his nose against the passenger door window. “Oh my god, do you think we’re gonna get to pick apples?”

I sure as fuck didn't hope so. "We're not free labor," I reminded him. "This is supposed to be a..." I stopped, not wanting to say the word *date*. Everything in me revolted against the word because I still wasn't over the stunt my friends had pulled.

After I'd taken off from our camping trip, they'd left text messages, voicemails, emails, and hell, one of them had even written me a fucking letter, but I'd ignored them. I didn't want to because they were my friends, but whenever I even thought about what they'd done, my blood began to boil, and I just got so damn angry.

I hated getting that way. Really. I didn't enjoy screaming at people. I didn't enjoy the feeling of my blood rushing through my veins or my heart beating so hard it felt like a sledgehammer was sitting in my chest.

And yeah, maybe I was being petty or a stubborn bastard or whatever, but I just didn't know how to get over the betrayal. Yeah, they'd made a dumb, drunken mistake, and had they actually *talked* to me about it after they'd sobered up, I... fuck, I'd have probably been mad for a couple of minutes, but in the end, I'd have laughed about it.

But they hadn't.

"Are you okay?" Bailey asked, his voice a strangely soft, comforting tone like he'd realized I was spiraling.

I frowned at him. "Why wouldn't I be?"

He nodded towards my hands that were holding on to the steering wheel for dear life, my knuckles completely white.

"Everything's fine," I ground out. Well, it would be as soon as we got inside and got to our respective rooms. I needed some alone time. I needed to decompress, needed to not have this ray of sunshine next to me, I needed... *something*.

Definitely not the cute, white, three-story house we were heading to. Not the apple stand, not the white barn, not the stable, not anything I was seeing here. This looked like

someone had taken a page out of one of my four-year-old niece's picture books and brought it to life.

The problem was that places that looked as perfect and beautiful as this one did were too good to be true. They weren't real. There was a downside somewhere. Always.

"Oh my god, it's so cute!" Bailey was jumping up and down in his seat, clapping his hands in excitement, his whole aura radiating joy. "Oh my god, Dakota, it's amazing. You chose such a great place!"

"I didn't choose this," I told him.

He blinked at me, furrowing his brows. "You... didn't?"

"Nope. I thought you did." I sure as shit wouldn't have chosen an apple orchard or anything like it. And if my friends had chosen this for us, I'd have no choice but to kill them.

Great. I'd turn into an axe murderer after all. Bailey would be so excited.

"Huh." Bailey nodded slowly, then shrugged. "I guess that's why I had to answer all those weird questions like am I a city or a country person. They probably randomly chose something based on our answers." The smile was back in place, almost blinding me with its brightness. Seriously, how could someone have teeth so perfectly white? Not this fake bleached-white but a natural white-white. At least they were a little crooked. "I always wanted to try this vacation-destination-based-on-my-interests thing, anyway, but I never had the guts."

How? How could he just be fine with it? Hell, be happy about it? I didn't get it.

I entered the small parking lot in front of the B'n'B, killed the engine, and immediately hopped out of the car, desperate to get a little bit of distance between Bailey and me.

God, that man was irritating as fuck.

Unfortunately, he followed me. To the trunk, out of the parking lot, to the B'n'B and inside, all the while chatting

happily and telling me about how cute or adorable everything was.

“Hello,” an annoyingly cheery voice greeted as soon as I’d set a foot into the lobby. “Welcome at *Alcott’s Apple Orchard and B’n’B*. I’m Hailey, and I’m happy to help you out today.”

“Hi, Hailey,” Bailey said, somehow managing to raise his hand for a quick wave despite the fact that he had two giant suitcases he was currently dragging along behind him.

Should I help him? Probably. But he had it coming. Who needed two suitcases for two days? And not empty ones, either. I’d pulled those fuckers out of the trunk. They were heavy.

“I’m Bailey Sullivan, and this is Dakota.” I heard him introduce us, and I was fine with that. I just wanted to get this over with. The less I had to do to get us checked-in, the better. “We’re with *Carousel*? The app? We won this weekend...”

“Yes!” Hailey practically shouted, her cheeks tinting a deep red. “I mean, I know who you are. Lance — the owner — he was so excited for the orchard to be chosen as a weekend-getaway spot for the charity bachelor auction. He told me all about it, and he made sure to book you the best room we have. Soo... you’re in our *honeymoon suite*.”

Her voice told me she was trying to sell this as an amazing thing, but the only things I heard were *honeymoon* and *suite*.

One room — well, a suite, but that wasn’t the point.

One. Single. Room.

Bailey was still smiling like he didn’t see any problem at all. And maybe he didn’t. He’d wanted this date, so maybe he was fine sharing his room with a stranger, but I wasn’t.

“Uhm, sorry,” I said, stepping up to the reception desk and leaning against it. “Did you just say honeymoon suite?”

Her head bopped up and down. “Yes. You’re so lucky to get it. It’s usually booked months in advance, but Lance...”

“...wanted to do us a favor. Got it.” I nodded sharply, still trying to keep my cool even though I could already feel my

heart starting to hammer against my ribcage. “The honeymoon suite doesn’t by any chance happen to have two beds?”

The color draining from her face said it all.

“I’m afraid not.”

I sighed. There was pressure forming behind my temples, a dull ache just waiting to turn into a full-on raging headache.

Gripping the reception desk, I felt the smooth wood beneath my fingers. Usually, I’d appreciate the craftsmanship that had obviously gone into making this masterpiece, but not today.

Today, I could only think about me gripping the wood hard enough to leave dents in it because my nightmare of a weekend just turned into hell on earth.

“That’s no problem,” Bailey said. He had the audacity to step up right next to me and put a hand on my forearm. “We’ll just ask for a room change.” Turning his head to the receptionist, he put on the widest, brightest smile I’d seen up until now. “We really appreciate the offer and kindness of your boss. However, we just met three hours ago, so we’d be more comfortable with a regular room with two beds.”

I had to give it to him, he could be charming. It wouldn’t work on me, but it definitely did on the receptionist. She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ears and started tapping away on the keyboard in front of her. After a while, the tapping sped up, sounding more and more desperate.

“I’m so sorry...” she started, but I didn’t need to let her finish to know what was coming next.

“No,” I said and just shook my head.

“What?” She blinked, looking at me like a deer in the headlights.

“You were going to tell us that there is no other room available. And I said no. That’s unacceptable.”

“Please, Mr....”

“Nolan,” I supplied even though it didn’t fucking matter.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Nolan, but we’re booked...”

“No,” I repeated, shaking my head again for good measure. “Not acceptable. Try again.”

Her eyes got wider, and wider, the color draining from her face, lips pressing into a thin line. “If you’d listen, Mr. Nolan...”

“Oh, I am listening,” I told her, my voice sharper than intended. “And I know it’s not you who got the dumb idea to book two virtual strangers into a room with only one bed, really, I do hear that. But the fact remains that someone — your boss, apparently — had the dumb idea. And I’m telling you I’m not comfortable with that.”

I wouldn’t survive more than forty-eight hours with Bailey without a minute of reprieve. I’d probably claw his eyes out or kill him. He’d wanted a date with an axe murderer, right? Well, by the end of the weekend, I’d probably be one.

“I understand,” she said again, swallowing heavily. “But there’s a festival the next town over and that always draws a big crowd. I’m so, so sorry, Mr. Nolan. I can assure you my boss only had your best interest at heart when he booked the honeymoon suite... but there really isn’t any other room available until, well, Sunday. Which, I realize, is when you’re leaving.”

I was almost at the point of calling this entire thing quits and just cough up the money for the charity myself when I heard Bailey’s fucking bright voice again.

“It’s fine, Hailey,” he said in a soft, comforting tone. “I’ll just sleep on the couch, no harm done. We know it’s not your fault, which is why my date’s behavior is a lot less acceptable than the suite you’re so kindly accommodating us with.”

Yeah, I probably deserved that jab. He looked at me expectantly with raised brows, his signature smile almost — but still not completely — gone from his face. It was obvious what he wanted me to do. However, I wasn’t a little kid he could force to apologize. He cleared his throat, and... *dammit*.

“I apologize,” I told Hailey begrudgingly, because I hadn’t done anything wrong. “I still think booking a room with only one bed for a couple you know is on their first date is pretty presumptuous, but I could’ve been kinder about voicing my opinion.” I glared at Bailey. “Happy?”

He grinned, suppressing a giggle. “Ecstatic.”

God help me to survive this weekend without committing a felony.

CHAPTER FIVE

BAILEY



The room was beautiful. Truly stunning. When I'd heard apple orchard, I'd expected the décor to be a little grandmotherly. Warm pinks and reds, throw pillows, maybe even ruffles.

But this suite looked everything but grandmotherly. White walls, exposed wooden beams, dark hardwood floors. Taking the suite in, I whistled through my teeth. Color me impressed. Really impressed. Like... I'd take the whole interior home and redecorate my apartment impressed.

“Could you actually head inside and get your monstrosities out of the way?”

Rolling my eyes, I suppressed a snort and followed Dakota's... request. Well, it'd sounded like a demand, but I chose to think of it as a request.

He roughly shoved his way into our suite, took a second to orientate himself, then confidently walked over to the left where the bedroom was separated from our living room by an archway. Not a door.

Personally, I loved the open floor plan, the brightness of the room, the big windows, and the red-brownish leather seating arrangement. I loved the macrame-art hanging on the wall, the fresh sun and cornflowers sitting in small vases all over the room. However, I suspected that it was too open for Dakota — especially since I got the feeling he was someone who was used to being alone. Being in the company of a

virtual stranger without reprieve for more than forty-eight-hours straight... yeah, that could be challenging.

While I was still admiring the décor, I heard Dakota's heavy footsteps behind me, walking through the bedroom. I heard the telltale creaking of a door being opened, heard a gasp, a little huffing, then the footsteps again.

"Looks like you'll have to go through the bedroom every time you want to use the bath... wait." I turned just in time to see him stop dead in his tracks, staring at the leather sitting group. "Uhm... where's the couch?"

I bit my lip but couldn't hide a giggle, though it might have been a slightly desperate one. "Surprise," I said, throwing my hands in the air. "The honeymoon suite comes with a gorgeous, giant, comfortable looking bed but without any big couches." There were two leather armchairs and one leather two-seater arranged around a wooden coffee table that had a giant gift basket on it. I wanted to have a look at the monstrosity of sweets and goodies, but this was not the right moment.

Because I had to agree. There was no couch for me to sleep on. Even if I would be fine sleeping on a stylish but kind of hard looking leather sofa, the two-seater wasn't big enough for me to lay on — if I didn't want to sleep curled up in a fetal position, that is. Which I didn't.

Dakota rubbed a hand over his face, stroking his beard. I wanted this beard to rub against my face. I bet it'd feel amazing. "Fuck. I mean, you're pretty much pocket-sized, but that sofa is too small even for you."

"Thank you," I said, smiling at him. Some men had a problem with being small, but I'd learned to embrace it. Eighth grade me would be so proud.

"Soo..." Dakota sighed again.

"So, the good thing is since I'm *pocket-sized*, I won't take up much space in the bed at all. You probably won't even know I'm there."

"Yeah... not gonna happen."

I shrugged. “It’ll be fine; you’ll see. Anyway, I want to explore a little... do you want to come with me or stay here?” I already knew he’d want to stay here, but asking was the polite thing to do. I really did want to explore, and after being cooped up in the car for four hours, I really needed to move, but I also wanted to give Dakota the space he obviously needed.

Maybe he’d be less of a grump after a little time to himself to decompress. Though... I didn’t really mind his grumpy way. It was oddly charming.

“Nah, I’m good,” he said, just like I’d expected him to.

“Okay, see you later.” I gave him a small wave, grabbed one of the room keys, and turned to walk out of the door.

I already had my hand on the doorknob when I heard him clear his throat. Looking over my shoulder, I saw him rubbing his neck, a weird expression that I couldn’t read yet on his face. “Have... have fun, okay?”

Grinning, I winked at him. “Oh, trust me, I’m good at entertaining myself.”



I made it outside the B’n’B and to a bench standing beneath a big oak — not apple — tree. Plopping down, I pulled my phone out of my pocket and searched for my text conversation with Parker.

Bailey: Just wanted to let you know we’re here – and I’m still alive.

Bailey: Barely.

I snapped a photo of the big white house surrounded by a million shades of green and sent it to Parker. Leaning my head back, I closed my eyes and let the light breeze wash over me while sunrays danced over my face whenever they found a way through the thick canopy.

To my amazement, it only took about a minute until my phone buzzed in my lap.

Parker: What do you mean barely? Do I need to come get you... or send Pierce to get you? You know you don't have to stay.

I laughed, shaking my head.

Bailey: It's fine... I expected us to get along better, but it looks like I got myself a grump.

Parker: Grump or asshole?

I bit my lip and thought back to his conversation with the receptionist. He'd been toeing the line, but... he'd acknowledged that it wasn't her fault and apologized. Granted, I'd prompted him to, but if he really was an asshole at heart, he'd have seen no fault in his behavior.

Bailey: Grump.

Parker: If he crosses into asshole-territory let me know. Pierce was in the military; he knows how to get you out of there.

Giggling, I pulled my knees up on the bench, resting my head on them before texting Parker back.

Bailey: This is not a hostage extraction situation. I happen to like my grumpy axe murderer. Seriously. He's delicious... he just needs to get used to me.

Parker didn't reply to that immediately, but he didn't need to. I know what he'd say, anyway. He'd reiterate that I could always call him if I needed to get out of here. I didn't doubt he'd move heaven and hell to get me somewhere safe the minute I didn't feel safe with my date.

He always protected everybody... the problem was that he needed protecting, too. And it might be too early to say, but I really, really hoped he'd found that someone in his little

rebound fling. The way he talked about him... yeah. Different than the way he'd ever talked about his douchebag of an ex.

Shaking my head, I let my eyes wander, taking in my surroundings. The neighing of horses, the distant rumbling of a tractor, laughing, cicadas chirping, and the wind rustling through the leaves.

There was movement behind one of the windows on the third floor, and when I looked up, I caught a big figure looking down at me. It was only a second until he disappeared behind the white curtains, but I'd seen enough.

A smile spread on my face.

Looked like — secretly at least — my axe murderer couldn't take his eyes off me.



Today's evening activity was a cider tasting.

I thought it was a great idea, and upon entering the big dining hall, I was met with heavenly scents. Apple — duh — cinnamon, vanilla, but there were also spicy notes and the sharp hints of alcohol.

Next to me, Dakota groaned, but it was decidedly not a good groan. Furrowing his brows, he gave me a pleading look. "Can we go? This is like... a club meeting of a retiree-group."

Laughing, I lightly punched against his upper arm — it was fucking solid. "There are younger people here, too." Granted, those were middle aged couples, but that was still a lot younger than the group of about sixteen older people who looked like they were at least in their eighties.

Go them for still doing trips!

"Yeah..." Dakota sighed, running a hand through his long, wild hair. He'd lost the beanie he'd been wearing and had exchanged his signature flannel shirt with a white button-down. Also, he was now wearing tight black dressing pants,

not the washed jeans he'd been sporting before, and he looked fucking hot. Like rugged-businessman hot.

Still... I kinda missed his axe murder slash hipster lumberjack vibe.

Not that I'd tell him. I appreciated him making the effort to look nice. I'd done the same; I just wasn't sure if he appreciated my kind of dressing up. He certainly hadn't said anything about my skintight jeans or the loose fitting, turquoise silk blouse that matched my fingernails and the hint of eye shadow I'd applied.

"There's our happy Carousel-couple," someone, a waiter I'd never seen before, greeted with a happy smile on his face. "We've got a special table for the two of you. Right over here."

Our special table was nestled in a little nook at the end of the dining room. Rose petals lay strewn across the white tablecloth and there were honest to god candles lit.

"Our cider tasting is accompanied by a five course meal," our server said while we were taking our seats. "The first course will be served in about ten minutes. Have a great night."

And then, he was gone, and I was left with Dakota who still looked a little uncomfortable but decidedly less so ever since we got away from the crowd.

Huh. Maybe people-ing really wasn't his thing.

"Soo... do you like apples?" I asked the first question that came to my mind, and I couldn't help a little laugh spilling out. "Because if you don't, I'm afraid this is going to be a long, long weekend for you."

That actually got me a smile. A very short-lived one, but I'd take it. "I like apples. Though I'm not convinced I like apples nearly enough for this." He nodded towards the dining room. "Please tell me the apple part is reserved for the cider, not the food."

Giggling, I shrugged. "I highly doubt they'll find ways to incorporate apples in every single dish they're serving this

weekend.”

Dakota raised his brow at me. “You’re way too optimistic.”

Turns out, he was right.

The first course — smoked salmon on an apple fennel salad served with a sparkling, mulled cider — was delicious, but definitely hinted at the direction this dinner would go in.

“Told you so,” Dakota grumbled, looking at his plate in distaste. “What do I get for being right?”

I batted my eyelashes at him. “A kiss?”

I’d known it was a long shot, but his completely taken aback, even a little horrified expression hurt, at least for a second, until I reminded myself that we barely knew each other, and this was our first date. Besides, the way his eyes were almost bulging out of his head was too funny, so I giggled a little, deciding I’d go light on the flirting until he was more comfortable with me. “You should see your face!”

“You little...” He stopped, shaking his head before grumbling something into his beard that sounded a lot like *menace*. I’d been called a lot worse — by former boyfriends, nonetheless.

Also, *my little menace* could totally be a cutesy nickname. We just needed to work on adding the my-part.

Dakota started picking at his meal, and I did the same, deciding to just enjoy this experience as much as I could. And, to my surprise, the first course was amazing — apples and all. And the cider...

“This is really good,” I said, raising my champagne flute filled with the bubbly cider.

“It’s... not bad.” Out of Dakota’s mouth, that was probably the closest thing to a heartfelt compliment.

Grinning, I raised my glass a little higher, clinking it against his. “To a great date-weekend.”

For a moment, I could swear his look turned sour, but after the blink of an eye, his face was back to his grumpy-frown I'd come to like. "To a nice weekend."

We both took a sip of our cider and then polished our plates quietly.

"Tell me something about you," I prompted when Dakota placed his cutlery on his empty plate.

"What do you want to know?"

Giggling, I carefully eyed the hand he'd placed on the table. Usually, I'd see that as a sign that he wanted me to take his hand, or at least offer his hand. But with Dakota, I wasn't sure. And I didn't want to screw up by being too forward again.

People always told me I was a lot, and yeah, I got it. I just refused to tone myself down for others. Been there, done that, and all it got me was a year of therapy.

"I want to know whatever you're willing to share with me."

It'd seemed like a good idea, right up until the point where he raised his brows and his lips turned downwards into a frown. "Well..." He started stroking his beard, his eyes glossing over a little. "I... like dogs," he finally admitted, making it sound like it'd cost him a lot of bravery and energy to get the words out. "I'm actually in the process of getting one."

"I love dogs!" I blurted. "What kind of dogs do you want?"

Something flickered in his eyes, a brightness I hadn't seen there before. "I, uh... I wanted to get a German Shepherd. I've found a breeder already and was on the waitlist to adopt one of her puppies, but... It looks like her dog got away when she was in heat, and the father is definitely *not* a German Shepherd, so I apparently will be adopting a German Shepherd and Golden Retriever mix. The pups were born two weeks ago. The breeder said I didn't need to take one since it's not what I signed up for, but in the end, I want a dog. Besides, the

little rascals will have it hard enough to find a good home without them being pure-bred.”

“That sounds like an adorable combination. Do you have photos?” I couldn’t help but wiggle in my seat. Puppies were the cutest. As were kittens. And kits, and... well, probably all baby animals.

“Sure.” He pulled out his phone, tapped the screen a couple of times, then handed it to me with a completely serious expression.

How he could stay so serious faced with the cuteness on the screen, I didn’t know. Four small puppies in varying shades of brown and gold were in the picture, cuddled up against the mommy.

I wanted one. Scrap that, I wanted all of them.

“Oh my god,” I gushed, looking at Dakota with big eyes. “I want them all.”

He hummed. “You can’t have them all.”

I rolled my eyes. “Sure, you’ll get one, but look at them. They’re the cutest, most adorable creatures I’ve ever seen.”

“They’re all right.”

“*All right?*” I huffed. “They’re pure sugar. They’re so sweet they’ll give me cavities *and* diabetes.”

He snorted, grabbing his phone before I could get another look. “They’re living, breathing beings. Having a puppy takes time and effort. They’re not cute accessories you buy and throw out once they’re over the adorable-puppy and into exhausting-teenage-dog state.”

The way he said it sounded like he’d already had experience with people giving dogs away, so I just nodded.

“I know. I wasn’t serious about taking them all in. I mean, I totally would if I could, because seriously, have you seen them? How can you not melt into a puddle of goo looking at them? But I can’t. In theory, I can work from home, and I do so once a week, two times, if I’m lucky, but I have a lot of meetings, and I can’t take a dog into the office... I think. I’d

have to ask. Still, it wouldn't be fair for a dog to be cooped up in an office for a whole day. And there's the commute, which is kind of a pain in the ass."

"Commute?"

Ha! He'd asked a question. Well... he'd said a word, but he'd made it sound like a question.

"Yeah. I work in NYC."

He nodded, furrowing his brows. "But you don't live there?"

Shaking my head, I smiled. "Nah. The city's great and everything, but it's also super expensive. Like... I just got a promotion which doubled my salary, but I still wouldn't be able to afford more than a shoebox sized apartment if I want to live anywhere close to work. And I like Stamports, you know?"

"Promotion?"

I nodded, clearing my throat to answer, but the server came with the second course — a light radish soup with croutons, bacon, but without apples — and I waited until he was gone.

"Yeah. Actually, the promotion is why I'm here." I laughed. "I got promoted to Head of Social Media Marketing in the publishing house I work for, and I wanted to treat myself, you know? So, the charity auction was like the perfect timing."

Dakota grabbed the spoon and tried the soup. Either it wasn't to his liking, or he was thinking really hard about something because his forehead was creased into a deep frown. I didn't care. I was counting his one-worded questions as progress. And the first time he'd showed any interest in me at all.

So... *yay!*

A bubbly feeling spread through my body, warming me to my core while I smiled to myself. Maybe it wouldn't take him that much time to warm up to me after all.

CHAPTER SIX

DAKOTA



I was over apples already. I got it; they were an apple orchard. They had a theme going on, and everything apples was probably a really cheap ingredient for them, so it was only logical that they wanted to stuff their menu with as many apples as they could, but... I wanted something else, too.

Bailey didn't seem to mind. But then again, he didn't seem to mind anything. Not the fact that we were sharing a room — and a fucking bed, too — not the fact that every single drink this dinner had been made out of apples, nor the fact that four courses out of our five-course meal had apples in them, too.

No. He'd smiled, and laughed, and giggled, and... god! I turned in bed, doing my damndest to stay on my side and as far away from Bailey and his fresh, sweet scent as I could because I needed to clear my head. I couldn't do that if I was constantly reminded of his presence and of him in general.

Much to my dismay, I had to admit I'd been wrong. I'd thought he was fresh out of college or even still in college, but it appeared he already had a management position. If he hadn't exaggerated by, like... a lot. Maybe the publishing house he worked for was really small. It was very well possible for him to be the head of anything if that meant managing one or two other people.

I pulled my pillow over my head, letting out a loud groan that was fortunately muffled by the stuffing of the pillow. The last thing I wanted was to wake up Bailey and have him ask any more annoying questions. On the other hand... I could ask him about his job.

Not that I wanted to know more about him, personally. I just wanted to know more about what kind of company would give someone like him so much responsibility.

Before I could stop myself, I'd grabbed my phone and opened Google. Finding him shouldn't be complicated, right?

I typed in *Bailey and Head of...* what had he said? Right. *Social Media marketing*.

Instantly, my display was filled with his face, grinning widely at me. There were pictures, video links, and... oh, there was a website, too.

I hesitated, my thumb looming over the display. Was I invading his privacy googling him like this? I mean, I could've asked, and I was pretty sure he'd have told me all about his job — much more than I wanted to know — but I hadn't.

Fuck. If I were on speaking terms with my friends, I'd text them right this second to get their opinion. And a part of me wanted to. The other part reminded me that they were the sole reason I was here in the first place, so I'd have to figure this out on my own.

After a couple of seconds, I opened the website, barely able to suppress a gasp when I realized which publishing house he worked for. Because it wasn't a small indie press. He wasn't just the boss of one or two people. I actually knew the publishing house. Hell, I had books they'd published in my living room.

I read through the short text announcing that Bailey Sullivan was taking over the Social Media Marketing department, and blah, blah, blah... I wasn't interested in the rest. Instead, I went back and clicked on the different links. Instagram, TikTok... there were a lot of videos. A lot of book trailers, but a lot of videos of Bailey in the office, too. Grabbing a pair of headphones, I plugged them into my ears and connected them to my phone, then started the first video, turning up the volume until my head was filled with Bailey's cheery voice.

Twenty minutes later, I was well into the fifth video clip of him talking to his coworkers, authors, or answering viewer questions during a live video.

I could feel the smile tugging at my lips at Bailey's exuberantly happy and energetic antics that I would've said were only for show had I just watched the videos of him, but... he was the same with me. Happy, bubbly, and so damn energetic.

Only that it wasn't rubbing me the wrong way on screen. Not at all. It looked... passionate. The way he talked about books and covers and... *anything*. It didn't matter what he talked about; he was so damn earnest the whole time.

Blinking slowly, I forced myself to pause the video.

What was I doing? I was forced to spend the next day and a half with this guy against my will. The only time I'd get a reprieve from him was at night. Sleeping.

Why was I wasting that precious time for myself watching videos about him?

Shaking my head, I willed my thumb to close the video but managed to open the comments instead. Those phones, as big as they might be, weren't made for someone with hands and fingers as big as mine.

Reading through the comments made me smile, laugh, and angry at the same time. The viewers or readers or whatever they were seemed to love Bailey. A little too much for my liking.

I mean, I got it. Complimenting someone was great, especially on the internet where people tended to be nasty, but... the comments were sometimes bordering on inappropriate. Who offered themselves on a silver platter like that in a comment on a video by a publishing house? Didn't they realize this was his job? He wasn't stripping, he wasn't trying to be sexy or flirty or anything like that, yet I'd already found the fifth comment about someone wanting to suck his dick or fuck him.

Subsequently, I'd found the fifth guy I wanted to punch in the face for being so nasty.

Groaning, I put my phone down on the nightstand, pulling the pillow back over my face. How much alcohol had those bubbly, fuzzy cider drinks contained? For me to start having those thoughts, it must've been a lot.

Which meant I'd have to sleep it off. And tomorrow, my head would be back to normal.

Hopefully.



I was warm, comfortable, and surrounded by the sweetest of scents. A little like honey but combined with a spiciness I couldn't identify. Taking in a deep breath, I burrowed my nose deeper into the aroma letting my mind wander back to the hazy remnants of sleep lurking at the edges of my consciousness.

When was the last time I'd slept so peacefully at a strange place?

I couldn't remember. But the sheets were soft, the comforter so incredibly warm, and the scented pillow... was moving. And sighing.

Opening my eyes in shock, my hands were already on the moving pillow, pushing it away as hard as I could. What the actual fuck?

"Ouch!"

Oh shit.

Oh holy shit.

Oh no, no, no.

Blinking hard against the bright morning sun, I tried finding Bailey's blond mop of hair — aka my pillow — but couldn't. There was just the end of the bed and... My brain

was stuttering, trying to catch up with everything that was going on.

I'd obviously cuddled Bailey in my sleep, not a pillow. I'd shoved him when I'd thought my pillow was moving. So he should be laying on his side of the bed. Only... I was the one laying on his side of the bed, which meant Bailey was... *on the floor*.

Carefully peeking over the edge of the bed, I saw my... companion for the weekend sitting on the hardwood floor, rubbing his elbow, face contorted with pain.

My chest tightened, and I balled my hand into fists.

"I'm so sorry," I said ruggedly, voice still heavy with sleep.

"s okay," he mumbled, blinking owlshly. "What... what happened?"

Oh great, he'd been asleep, so I'd basically woken him up by literally throwing him out of the bed.

"I... I..." I really didn't want to explain this one to him.

"It's okay," he repeated, voice a little more alert, but there was still no smile on his face. Which made him look... weird. Not like the annoying little shit I'd met yesterday. I definitely didn't like it. Not that I liked his perky, uber happy attitude, but I didn't like seeing him in pain because of me, either. "It's time to get up, anyway." He pushed his hair out of his eyes, looking up at me with the barest hint of a smile tugging at his lips. "Are you ready to go apple picking? Because that's the first part of today's activities."

I blinked, racking my brain trying to remember when something was said about today's activities.

Bailey cocked his head, his bright blue eyes studying me for a moment until realization hit him. "Oh... yeah, sorry. You were on the toilet when Sean came over."

Sean? Who the fuck was Sean?

My confusion must've been obvious because Bailey kept talking, his smile widening slowly until his face was back to

his usual happy face. “Sean was our server. Well, actually, he’s Lance’s nephew. You know, the owner of this place? But since Lance and his husband never had kids, they asked him if he’d be interested in taking over the orchard one day. No pressure.” A quiet laughter bubbled out of him. “I asked. Anyway, he’s currently in college but on the weekends, he works here to get a feel for the place and, well, pay for college.”

How was that the *anyway*?

“The activities?” I asked, my head swirling from all the information. I’d been gone for maybe five minutes. To me, that didn’t seem to be enough time to even cover that much of someone’s life story. But apparently, there’d been other topics, too.

“Oh yeah. Right. There’s breakfast — duh. Then at ten, we meet to go to one of the old apple meadows — like the newer meadows have the apple trees planted in neat rows, but the really, really old ones are more meadow than trees. There, we’ll have like an hour or two to pick as many apples as we want, and then at noon, there’s an apple pie making class where we can use part of our apples to make pie. Oh... and I think we’re making apple butter and apple sauce and or jam is this afternoon... so we need, like, a lot of apples.”

Yeah. It sounded like it.



If I’d been alone and not accompanied by a guy who’d bought me for the weekend as well as about ten other couples who’d signed up for the orchard experience, I’d have probably enjoyed wandering through the seemingly endless apple meadows, listening to the buzzing of bees and wasps, enjoying the sun on my face and the light breeze in my hair.

But alas, they were here with me. As was our guide.

Sean.

The guy who’d disclosed his whole life story to Bailey yesterday. The guy who kept stealing glances at Bailey who

was walking along beside me, his arm occasionally brushing against mine. The guy who tried throwing flirty smiles in the direction of the one he had to believe was my date.

How fucking rude.

Rolling my eyes, I glared extra hard at him, trying to kill him with a single look. Needless to say, it didn't work. But after I caught him staring at Bailey for the fourth time, he got the message and kept his sleazy eyes to himself.

God. What was it with the tiny ray of fucking sunshine next to me that the whole world seemed to think it was appropriate to harass him? First, the comments under his videos, now the slimy sleazeball of an apple orchard tour guide.

“Are you okay?” Bailey asked quietly, hesitating a second before laying his hand on my forearm.

“Why wouldn't I be?” I was fine. Peachy.

“You look like you really don't want to be here,” he mumbled, cocking his head in that cute way that showed his piercing blue eyes, which were often hidden beneath his blond locks. “You know this is supposed to be a fun date, right? So if you hate the idea of apple picking, we can totally skip it and just do our own thing. I want you to have fun here, and I'm down for basically anything.”

Don't go there, I told my mind, but that fucker didn't listen, coming up with different scenarios in which Bailey might've muttered the exact same sentence. *I'm down for basically anything*.

I didn't need to think about him that way. He'd thought it was appropriate to *buy* me for fucks sake!

“It's fine. I just... didn't sleep well.”

An utter and complete lie.

“Oh...” Bailey pouted for a second, then grinned at me deviously. “At least you weren't woken up by someone literally shoving you out the bed.” A giggle bubbled up from his chest again. “Not that anything would've happened if I'd

tried shoving you. I mean... look at you. And then look at me.” He waved his hand up and down his slim body.

And look I did. At his blue eyes and rosy cheeks, at the little dimple in his pointy chin and the slim, snub nose. At his wavy blond hair that reflected the sunlight, making it look like gleaming, woven gold. At the oversized hoodie he was sporting that was so big on him, I wouldn't be surprised if it actually fit me.

Not for the first time, I thought that he looked so much younger than he had to be for the position he had. He looked younger, while I probably looked older than my thirty-two years of age. Or maybe it was my beard. Or the frown. My grandma had always told me to stop frowning so much or one day it'd stick. Guess she was right.

Suddenly, the ground beneath my right foot gave way, and I was rudely pulled out of my thoughts by the fast-approaching grass.

“Oh fuck,” I grunted just as my body hit the ground and the air got punched out of my lungs.

“Are you okay?” Bailey kneeled beside me, his eyes wide with worry.

I coughed. “Yeah, I'm fine.” The good part about falling on a meadow was that the ground was soft. There might be a me-shaped dent now, but at least I didn't feel more than a dull ache.

“That's good,” Bailey said, offering me his hand to help me get back on my feet. A sweet gesture I almost declined because compared to me, he was just so small and almost fragile. But when I took his hand, his grip was surprisingly firm, as was his pull. After I was standing upright again, his eyes searched my body like he was expecting a bone to randomly stick out somewhere. “You know,” he began after making sure I really was okay, his smile turning a little devious, “I know I said nothing would happen if I shoved you, but I didn't mean you had to avenge me by knocking yourself to the ground. You can't be the perpetrator and the knight in shining armor at the same time.”

I snorted involuntarily. Really, I didn't want him to be funny. Unfortunately, he was. "Would you consider yourself a damsel in distress?" I asked with a raised brow.

Bailey huffed, puffing up his cheeks, putting his hands on his hips while attempting to reply with what I knew was going to be a lot of snark and a little indignity — at least if his facial expression were anything to go by — but Sean deemed this the perfect moment to go over the boring ass rules for the apple picking contest. Because yeah, apparently it was a contest, and apparently you could pick apples the wrong way.

It wouldn't even have occurred to me to pick obviously not ripe apples since Bailey said we'd use them later, and trying to hide branches in your basket to make it appear fuller was just low.

The other couples or contestants spread out quickly, running towards the nearest trees, frantically searching for apples, while I was standing there, mouth agape.

"I'll get us baskets," Bailey said happily without any rush, and he walked over to a cart and got us two woven baskets. He didn't appear to be in any hurry, and I felt myself relax upon seeing him skip over the meadow.

Yeah. We didn't need to win this stupid contest; we just needed to make the most of it and have fun.

"Okay, Mr. Axe Murderer, perpetrator, and knight in shining armor, let's pick some apples."

"Aren't nicknames supposed to be shorter?" I asked, trying to muster up my usual frown but finding it really hard with Bailey.

"Meh," he said, shrugging. "If you want a shorter nickname, I can totally work with that, but you don't look like a duck."

"Duck?"

"Dakota — Dak — duck."

Oh... I'd found my frown and glare again.

Bailey just giggled, shoving me good-naturedly. He was right; he didn't even move me an inch. "Thought so. I prefer grumpy axe murderers, anyway."

With that, he skipped ahead, stopping at a big apple tree and starting to pick the first apples, carefully placing them in his basket.

I, on the other hand, could only stare at him in... fascination? Horror? Utter and complete shock?

Was he kidding me or was he actually serious?

Why does it matter? a little voice inside me that sounded a lot like my conscience asked. *You already decided you don't like him because he thought it was okay to buy someone else.*

Yeah, I'd decided that. But by getting to know him more, it was getting harder to ignore one little teeny, tiny fact: he'd thought I'd sold myself off willingly. And he didn't seem to be the type to ever even force me to go through with the date if I'd told him how my profile happened to be on the app in the first place.

Shaking my head, I tried to clear my thoughts, but everything was a tangled mess. There was only one thing I knew for sure: I wouldn't let that sleazeball Sean anywhere near him. Which meant I needed to hurry because the guy didn't get the fucking message and was on the way to Bailey, phone in hand. Not on my watch.



"I still think you overreacted," Bailey told me, but he didn't look upset. Quite the contrary, he looked perfectly happy, walking into the next activity of doom.

Two hours of apple picking, one hour of free time to take a shower and stuff, and now we were headed toward the kitchen area. Apparently, they regularly gave cooking classes in a farm-to-table style environment. Whatever that was supposed to mean. It was on their website that I'd looked up while Bailey was blocking the shower.

“He was being incredibly rude,” I defended myself, crossing my arms in front of my chest.

Bailey’s pupils dilated a fraction and his tongue peeked out to lick his lips. “He just wanted to stay in contact.”

I blinked at him incredulously. He couldn’t seriously believe that, could he? “He asked for your number so he could ask you out. He’s been trying to flirt with you whenever I had my back turned.” Which basically meant I hadn’t taken my eyes off Bailey the whole time we’d been apple picking. Not a single second, which didn’t help my confusing thoughts even one bit but helped the rage inside me calm down. “Considering he knows perfectly well that we’re on a date this weekend, it’s just so... fucking rude.”

Bailey beamed at me, one corner of his mouth lifting a little higher than the other, giving him a crooked smile that was so earnestly happy, it hit me like a punch to the gut, leaving me breathless for a moment. He cocked his head and placed a hand on my forearm, a gesture I thought should feel condescending but somehow didn’t. Somehow it felt comforting, relaxing. It helped to chase away the tightness in my shoulders and jaw.

“I’m sorry,” he said, the smile toning down a little. “I didn’t even realize he was flirting. I thought he was just being nice.” He bit his lip for a moment. “And honestly, I get it. I think I’d be pretty pissed if someone tried flirting with you during our date.” Now he was giggling again. “But I think I don’t need to worry about it. Not because people wouldn’t want to flirt with you!” he hastily added, his face turning beet red. “I mean, you have to know you’re fucking hot. Like... seriously. You’re a wet dream for anyone who digs the whole mountain man-lumberjack-vibe. But your glare is *spectacular*, and anyone trying to flirt with you while you’re looking at them like you want to kill them has to be a special brand of crazy.”

“Like you?”

Bailey just laughed. “I’m not crazy. I’m adorable.” He batted his lashes at me, making my lips twitch.

Dammit.

“No, you’re a lunatic who’s into serial killers,” I grumbled, thinking about our first day.

Yesterday.

Had it really only been a day? Granted, we’d spent almost every waking minute together, so if a regular date was two hours, we were already at date four? Five? But in real time, it had been merely twenty-four hours since he’d picked me up.

“Welcome to today’s apple pie making class,” someone shouted cheerily, and the room fell silent.

I took a deep breath. For some reason, I had the feeling this was going to be a long afternoon.

CHAPTER SEVEN

BAILEY



Hot – cold – hot – cold – hot – cold.

Dakota was certainly keeping me on my toes, but I didn't mind that. My prickly, grumpy axe murderer was finally thawing. We even had a moment. Granted, a very short one until our baking instructor had interrupted us, but it totally counted.

While I felt his whole body tense under my hand at the sound of the new voice, I turned my head to the front of the classroom equipped with multiple baking and cooking stations and saw the epitome of what I'd expect a pie baking instructor to look like.

The lady at the front was maybe in her late fifties, early sixties; a slightly rounded figure; a bright smile; and glowing red, rounded cheeks. All about her screamed happy baker, from the frilly, dark pink apron to the fifties style dress peeking out from underneath that sported an honest to god pie-print. Like a dark plum color with thousands of small, steaming hot pies printed all over it.

She was a character — and I was in love.

Seriously.

Could she be even more perfect?

“Okay, we're all gathered here today to make some beautiful, delicious home-made pies you'll all want to devour. And I get that, I really do. I swear, as soon as I scent the crispy-gooey deliciousness, I'll want to jump it, too. And you will be able to do just that. There's only one thing I ask you

not to do: we really, really don't need a reenactment of *American Pie*."

Yes, yes she could.

I couldn't suppress a snort, followed by full-out loud laughter at the serious way she'd asked this. Meanwhile, Dakota stared at her somewhat horrified, his eyes wide open, mouth agape.

"You might think this is funny, young Mr.," she told me with a little headshake, her perfectly coiffed hair not moving even an inch, "but I wouldn't tell you that if it hadn't happened before. And trust me, that's really not something I ever want to see again."

I wasn't so sure she was joking anymore, but it didn't really matter. I loved the way she'd told the story, and I obviously wasn't the only one. She had the rapt attention of everyone in the room. Most looked amused, a few a little put-out, but they were all listening to every word she was saying while she was showing us the different steps it took to make the perfect apple pie — so good you definitely wanted to put it in your mouth instead of putting your dick in it. Her words.

"Now the pie is ready to go in the oven, which means it's time for you to get started yourself. I'll stop by every one of you, but if you have any questions, don't be shy and wave me over. Okay?"

A few people mumbled something that could be taken as a yes before every couple chose a table.

"Here," I said, hefting one of our baskets full of apples onto the stainless steel countertop that clashed a little with the farmhouse décor. But I got it. Stainless steel had to be easier to clean. "So... what part do you want to do?"

Dakota furrowed his brows, shrugging. He was back in a flannel, an olive green and black plaid one, wearing a black V-neck shirt underneath that showed a bit of his ginger chest hair.

"Can't we just start?"

I laughed. “I’m a fan of clear boundaries — in relationships and baking. We’ll make a mess if we’re both trying to do the same thing. So... you can either do the crust or the filling.”

Silence. Well, not really. The other teams were loud, and for some reason, I heard a mixer running — which definitely hadn’t been part of the instructions.

“This is stupid,” Dakota said. “We should just relax and get to eat the pie, not doing all this free labor. Is this a vacation or training to start working here?”

“Not the point, soo... crust or filling?”

He sighed, rubbing a hand down his face in an attempt to hide his exasperated expression from me.

The apple picking had worked out better than expected. We’d managed a real conversation and had even strewn in the occasional humor, but now it seemed like we were back to square one.

And I didn’t like it.

Oh, I liked him grumbly, I liked his frowny face, I liked the exasperation — if it wasn’t directed at me. Him grumbling at Sean and being grumpy about everything while joking and talking to me like a regular human being? Maybe it was wrong, but it made me feel important. Like he was letting me in.

“Crust,” he finally grumped, grabbing a bowl from one of the cupboards. Apparently, we were back to one-word answers. And after this morning, that just wouldn’t fly.

I needed to make him loosen up a little. If he stopped thinking about this as work, he’d have fun.

“Okay, I’ll prepare the filling. It’s probably better that way because I have plenty of experience at being filled.”

He started coughing, and I couldn’t contain the giggle.

His cheeks were bright red, and he had this look again. Fire in his eyes, a dark murderous expression, and yeah... that was doing things to my insides.

Maybe he was right. Maybe I was a lunatic.

But a cute one — he'd see.

Not wanting to stress him out too much, I actually got to work by peeling the apples. All the apples. A never-ending amount of apples... okay. Seven. I peeled seven apples, but it seemed like a never-ending amount because I fucking hated peeling anything. I even cooked all my potatoes with the skin because I hated peeling stuff so much.

I snagged a strip of the peel, shoved it in my mouth, and started munching away, humming happily because even the little bit of actual apple I got like this were juicy and incredibly tasty. A little sweet, a little sour, crisp. Basically, I was in heaven.

“Are you seriously eating the peel?”

“Did your mom never tell you that most of the vitamins are in or directly under the peel?” I asked, popping another bit into my mouth.

Dakota just shook his head, glaring at the peel as if it'd done something to personally offend him.

“A – I'm pretty sure that's just an excuse parents tell their children to get out of having to peel their fruit, and B – my mom was more the *if you haven't eaten your dinner by the time your dad is home, he'll show you not to disrespect me* type of parent. She didn't need to make excuses for not peeling my apples because the threat of my dad beating me with the wooden cloth hanger was pretty effective.”

I stared at him in horror, mouth wide open, my heart stuttering in my chest at the casual way he'd just dropped that bomb of abuse on me without a second thought while he didn't even stop weighing the flour as if nothing had happened and this was just a conversational topic.

A couple seconds went by, and I was still trying to come up with something to say because *That's horrible*, while certainly true, wasn't the right thing to say, but *I'm so sorry* didn't sound right to me, either.

Finally, he looked up from his bowl of flour and ice-cold butter. His eyes met mine, and I saw the exact moment he realized what he'd just said. Within the blink of an eye, his face was ashen, and he buried his hand in his hair, tugging hard.

"I'm sorry," he said, voice a little rough, "My friends are used to me saying stuff like that, and I wasn't thinking..."

"It's okay," I said when it became obvious he wouldn't finish the sentence. And it really was. It was a little fucked up, but my brain couldn't get over the fact that he apparently felt as comfortable with me as he did with his *friends*. "After all, this is a date, and we're supposed to get to know each other, so it's alright."

"I'm pretty sure that conversation is not first-date material," Dakota grumbled, averting his eyes. Apparently, he needed something to do, at least it seemed that way when he started spooning ice water into his crust mix and kneading like his life depended on it.

"We're old enough to decide on our own what first date material is. Do you want me to tell you something I usually wouldn't say on a first date?"

That got his attention.

Good.

I started chopping up the apples while I was waiting for his answer.

"Fine," he finally said. "Out with it."

"Okay. Hmm..." I laughed, tipping my finger against my bottom lip as if I needed to think about it really hard. "I *could* tell you that I occasionally like to wear lingerie — like silky panties and stuff? — but I've totally told that on a first date before. Or... ohh... I could tell you about an ex. Talking about exes on the first date is a no-go, right? But honestly, they're all boring and in the end, it was always the same: they couldn't handle me having more energy than most people or me being so cheery."

"Douchebags," Dakota grunted.

“Exactly,” I agreed, winking at him. “So... do you want to know more about lingerie or the one time my mom accidentally opened a package for me and came face to face with a purple, sparkly dragon cock?”

That shocked a laugh out of him, and I giggled.

“You... what?”

“It was the summer break before my senior year of college,” I began the embarrassing tale. “I was staying with my parents and was browsing one of my favorite fantasy-dildo sites when I came upon that one dragon cock that was different than all the others.”

“Because it sparkled?”

“Duh,” I said, waving with the knife in my hand. “I looked at it for a solid three days until I was running out of arguments not to buy it. So I ordered it, delivered to my parents’ house. Not a big deal, right? My name would be on the outside of the box, right? And they offered discreet packaging, so my mom wouldn’t have the first clue. Only... my mom had ordered a new hair dryer the same day as I’d ordered my dragon dildo, soo... One day I came home to an open box sitting on the kitchen table, the tip of the purple cock peeking out and an extremely flustered Mom who tried to explain that she hadn’t opened it on purpose and would never do anything like that again.”

Dakota was smiling now, and I was pretty sure he was fighting with laughter.

“Anyway. That was one uncomfortable conversation, and I never could get myself to actually try the purple dragon. It’s living a sad life in the back of the drawer of my nightstand.”

Dakota’s laugh was a deep rumbling in his chest, a rolling wave that barely made a sound but had a crushing impact at the same time. It didn’t wash over me; it hit me full force, knocking the breath out of my lungs.

And then there it was. A smile.

An honest to god smile that transformed his whole face, because he didn’t just smile with his lips, he smiled with

everything he got.

“That was a good story,” he conceded, giving me a nod. Slowly, second by second, the smile dimmed until he was back to scowling, confirming my hypothesis. My axe murderer had a resting frownyface.

“It is. It’s also the truth. And the reason why I’m telling you is because my mom has pictures of the incident, and the first time you meet my parents, you’ll absolutely, without a doubt, be subjected to these pictures. And the question will be if you’ve already gotten to know my sparkly purple dragon cock on an intimate level. So really, I should probably start telling this story on the first date to get it out of the way.”

Maybe I should have told him that instead of my purple, sparkly dragon cock, I’d ordered a turquoise one as a replacement, but I couldn’t very well give away all of my secrets on our first date. Some things needed to stay a surprise.

Here’s to hoping he’d actually get to see it.

Turning on the oven, I started zesting a lemon while Dakota started rolling out the dough and preparing a pie pan.

I had to admit, making pie together was fun, but the best part about it had been our conversation. I liked talking to him, even though I did the majority of the talking. I liked him. Which was entirely too early to feel, but it was the truth. And a little frightening.

A short glance at my date told me he was completely focused on his task, so I pulled my phone out and typed a quick message to Parker, because — quite frankly — I didn’t know who else to tell this without having to give an endless amount of context.

Bailey: So... I told my axe murderer about my lingerie collection and about the sparkly, purple dragon cock.

Bailey: Which means I like him.

Bailey: Oh, and I told him I liked to be filled, but I think that might’ve been TMI.

Bailey: Or not. I mean, it's important for him to know.

Staring at my phone, I wondered if Parker would answer immediately or not. He always managed to make me feel better about myself, but just getting this out, telling someone else, had helped.

Not enough to get all this buzzing energy out, but a little.

Maybe I should use a little of our spare time to do a bit of yoga, center myself and all that zen shit Evan was always talking about. I might not really believe in the spiritual stuff, but it seemed to work nonetheless.

I was just about to put my phone away when Parker's response came in. A row of laughing emojis. Snorting, I put my phone away. At least he was entertained by me.

I looked at the bowl filled with apples and lemon zest and started adding sugar and the spices. Cinnamon, a pinch of nutmeg, even less ground cloves, but a little cardamon, too. The last one hadn't been in the recipe our baking instructor had shared, but I knew for a fact that my mom always added it. Apparently, it balanced something out; I just didn't know what.

We continued working side by side, then hand in hand to get our pie in the oven.

"And now we wait," Dakota said with a sigh, resting his hip against the countertop.

I snorted out a laugh, but it almost sounded desperate. Waiting while my thoughts were buzzing like little hummingbirds... that was a recipe, too. But not for pie – for disaster.

CHAPTER EIGHT

DAKOTA



I hated to admit it, but the pie baking had been fun.

Okay, spending time with Bailey had been fun. His story about that dildo he'd ordered? Hilarious. The outraged and put-out expression on the faces of the couple working next to us? Next level funny.

The baking itself had been okay. Nothing new since I'd gone through a *fuck you and your antiquated world view, mom and dad* phase right after quitting my corporate job and moving out to the schticks. That had entailed doing stuff my parents had always told me were a woman's job. Like cooking. Baking. Knitting. I'd even tried feminine clothing and make-up but had realized that really wasn't my thing and doing it just to spite my parents who weren't in my life wasn't a healthy way to cope.

Taking in a deep breath, I closed my eyes, listening to the rustling of leaves above me. I was sitting on the same bench Bailey had been sitting on yesterday when I'd watched him from our living room window, thinking about the best ways to maybe end the date early.

Twenty-four hours later and here I was, finding myself weirdly attracted to that annoyingly hyper ray of sunshine. The thing was: he still pissed me off. The constant happiness, the way he could give everything a positive spin.

Me casually throwing out I'd been abused by my parents? *No problem, thanks for telling me. Hey, do you want to know about that one time that my mom unpacked one of my dildos?*

Who did that?

And why was it infuriating and comforting at the same time?

I wanted to talk to my friends, wanted to see if Liam, Murphy, or Jason had any advice for me on how to proceed, but... I couldn't. Okay, so maybe Bailey wasn't as bad a person as I'd been afraid. Maybe this date-weekend wasn't the most horrible thing that ever happened to me. But they'd still screwed up. Majorly. And I didn't want them to think that me not completely hating my date's guts made what they did okay.

Because it didn't.

Closing my eyes, I tried focusing on the calmness around me instead of the chaos inside of me. There were leaves rustling in the wind, the faint sound of a wind chime, and... the buzzing of my phone.

"What?" I barked without looking who was trying to call me.

"Uhm... Mr. Nolan? Mr. Dakota Nolan?" a female voice asked. She sounded insecure and I immediately felt like an ass for being so gruff and rude to her.

"Yes. Who am I speaking to?"

I heard her sigh in relief, then she cleared her throat and powered on with newfound strength in her voice. "Hi, Mr. Nolan, this is Darcy from Smooth Getaways. We're calling to check up on you. Our records show that you and your date picked up the rental and checked into your suite. So, I just want to make sure everything's fine with you and your date."

This is the opportunity to get away, my mind screamed at me. Just tell her you're uncomfortable. They're doing a wellness-check. Use it as an out.

It was tempting, oh, so tempting to take the easy way out, but... what would happen to Bailey? Would he face any repercussions if I told Darcy I was uncomfortable with him? He wasn't doing anything wrong he was just so... *him*, and I was so *me*.

“Mr. Nolan? Dakota? Are you okay? Are you... safe? Do you need me to call the orchard to get you out of there?”

“No, god no!” I shouted into the phone. I could already see that slimy bastard Sean getting me to safety by escorting me off the property, before walking back to console Bailey.

Over. My. Dead. Body.

“So, you’re fine? I actually need you to confirm that for me, please.”

Swallowing around the lump in my throat, I nodded, even though she couldn’t see me. Which was probably for the best because I was having a hard time unclenching my fist at the thought of Sean swooping in, trying to make a move on my date after all.

“Yes, I’m fine,” I ground out, closing my eyes again. What was I saying? Why wasn’t I grabbing this chance to get out of the date right now with both hands? “Bailey, my date, is very nice and considerate.” The worst part? That wasn’t even a lie.

“Oh, I’m so glad to hear that.” Darcy laughed. “You won’t believe what I already had to deal with over the past few weeks. Anyway, I don’t want to keep you from your date. Have a nice weekend, Mr. Nolan.”

“Thanks.”

One second later, the line was dead, and I was staring at my phone, even more confused than before. I’d had the chance to end this farce of a date right now. But I hadn’t taken it. I had been too concerned about Bailey. Laughing, giggling, smiling, fucking annoying Bailey.

I buried my face in my hands, gripping the long strands of hair and pulling tight until it hurt.

Somehow, I’d need to survive the next twenty-four hours in Bailey’s proximity. I didn’t know how, but since I couldn’t end the date and leave him here with Sean I had to. Afterwards I could go back to my life. I could go back to my house in the woods, could go back to my lonely existence without this exasperating young man.

Piece of cake, right?

Jumping to my feet, I walked back to the B'n'B. It was almost time for the apple butter and apple sauce making class. Spoiler alert: it was basically a how long to cook apples for what results class.

Boring.

I'd much prefer to play free labor again and go pick a couple more apples. With Bailey, but without the other couples. I didn't want to be under constant scrutiny, didn't want to have eyes on us the entire time we tried to get to know one another. I didn't want anyone listening in on our conversations, didn't want nasty looks thrown our way because we were talking about dragon dicks.

But... I'd signed up for this weekend. Indirectly. In the end, I'd said I'd go. Which meant doing all the stupid couple activities I didn't want to do.

The stairs up to our room seemed to drag endlessly until I finally reached our floor.

There was soft music coming from our room, a calming melody with rain, and chirping birds in the background. Not what I expected Bailey to listen to, but whatever.

I opened the door as quietly as I could, not wanting to interrupt whatever he was doing. Which turned out to be yoga. In sweatpants. Freeballing.

Holy fuck!

His ass was on full display, the pants stretching tight over his cheeks, showing off every dip, every curve. Hell, even his balls were on full display, two tight orbs nestled close against his slim body. He'd lost the shirt, so there was an endless amount of flushed, smooth skin right in front of me, the sheen of sweat glistening in the afternoon sun.

My mouth was dry and watering at the same time.

The tension in his muscles was exquisite, the light tremble in his body as he slowly twisted it from one pose into another.

His hair was sticking to his forehead, the strands curling up in his neck.

My cock twitched in my jeans, definitely interested in the way the sweatpants outlined Bailey's ass, pulling tight in his crack, making his round cheeks look extra bubbly.

Oh damn. I wanted to get my hands on him. Wanted to pick him up just like he was, carry him to the bed, throw him on the mattress, and have my way with him.

What had he said in the pie baking class? He liked to be filled? Well, I liked to do the filling. I just wasn't sure if he'd be able to handle the way I liked to do it.

"You can take a picture if you want to keep staring at my ass" — I heard Bailey's voice, slightly out of breath with a teasing lilt to it — "because I definitely can't stay in this pose much longer."

"What if I don't just want to stare?" I asked, biting my lip because it was all I could do to not walk over to him and just grab his ass. "What if I want to touch?"

There was a dull thump and then Bailey was lying sprawled out on the floor.

"Meanie," he chastised me, shaking his index finger in my direction. "You made me fall."

"I didn't even touch you!"

"You made me fall — and now you're not even helping me up. That's not very gentleman-like."

I snorted. "I thought I was an axe murderer."

"Who says you can't be both?"

Yeah... who said that? The murderer part probably implied it, but... I still walked over to Bailey and hoisted him back up to his feet by grabbing his hips, my fingers digging into the soft, fleshy parts, feeling his hot skin beneath my palms. Feeling the way he shivered as I dug my fingers a little deeper, holding him tight even though he'd already found his balance, and I could let him go.

I just... didn't want to.

Bright blue eyes were staring right into mine, pupils dilating farther and farther with every second that ticked by. His labored breathing got even more ragged, coming in puffs that brushed against my chest, he was that short.

“Da...” he started saying my name, but he didn't get to stay more because one moment I was staring at his delectable mouth, his pink, plush lips, and the next I was claiming said mouth, pressing my lips against his, my tongue immediately licking at the seam of his lips, demanding entry. He was quick to give in to my demands, a sigh escaping him as his tongue met mine, flicking against it, inviting me to play.

I groaned, gripping him even tighter, pulling him against me. His cock brushed against my thigh, his sweatpants doing nothing to hide his rapidly growing erection. A tingling shiver ran down my spine, and I shifted my grip, his delectable ass fitting perfectly into my palms, one cheek per hand. I lifted him up, and Bailey immediately wrapped his legs around my waist, locking his feet behind my back, plastering himself to my front, his arms wrapping around my neck.

I groaned as he humped me, his erection rubbing against mine, making it twitch almost painfully against the zipper of my jeans.

I didn't know where this was coming from, how I'd gone from being confused and annoyed by him to wanting him with every fiber of my being, but I found I didn't care. Not when he was biting my lip, then licking away the ache; not when his hands were gently scratching the back of my neck, making shivers wreck through my whole body. Not when everything about this felt so perfect and right.

Bailey moaned, a sweet, desperate sound against my lips, and he humped me again, his cock twitching against me.

“Bed,” he demanded, and while I liked to be the one to call the shots in the bedroom, I internally commended him for his great idea.

I wanted to throw him on the mattress just to see him bounce there, to see him laid out on the giant bed for me, but at the same time, I didn't want to let go. I didn't want this moment to end, and I was a little afraid that whatever spell was there between us would break the second we weren't touching. So I gently lowered Bailey to the mattress, crawling over him and nudging his legs apart so I could place a thigh there, pressing right against his cock and balls. The pressure made him moan and arch his back, his cock twitching in his pants, and a second later, there was a small wet spot darkening the gray fabric.

My own erection ached, demanding attention. But for now, all my focus was on Bailey and his slender hands that were currently trying to get my flannel off my shoulders.

Chuckling, I ripped my mouth away from his and sat up so I could get rid of the offending fabric myself, pulling my t-shirt off at the same time.

Bailey hummed happily, his hands exploring my belly and chest, fingers threading in my chest hair, lightly tugging at it.

"Damn," he whispered, eyes glinting with mirth. "Had I known exactly what you were hiding under your flannels, I'd have begged you to take me last night."

I shivered, and the smile on my little devil's face widened.

"You like that idea, huh?" he said, wagging his eyebrows. "Which part? You taking me or me begging?"

"How about both?" My voice sounded foreign to my ears, all raspy and ragged.

"Deal." Bailey flicked my nipples, sending electric shocks right into my cock. "But you'd better make it worth my while."

Laughing, I turned him around to slap his ass. It couldn't have hurt, not through the fabric of his sweatpants, but he moaned nonetheless, sticking his ass out, silently begging me to do it again.

Interesting. Very interesting.

My hands slid over his back, tracing his spine, down to the hem of his sweatpants before pulling them down in one swift motion, baring his ass for me. There was no handprint, but the cheek I'd slapped was a cute pink, and I wanted to do it again and again until his ass was bright red and hot, until Bailey was begging me to fuck him, until he was writhing on the bed with need, but...

Not until we talked about it.

"Lube? Condoms?" I asked, internally chastising me for not being prepared. But I hadn't even considered the possibility of something like this happening. Hadn't factored in the sheer force that was Bailey.

"Nightstand," he panted, wiggling his ass right in front of my face until I gave in and slapped it again. His cheek jiggled, and he let out a breathy moan. "Again," he pleaded, trying to chase my hand with his ass. "Please."

I shouldn't, but damn. I wanted to. So I did. Harder this time. Bailey tensed for a fraction of a second until his whole body seemed to melt into the mattress just as my handprint started to bloom a bright pink on his left ass cheek.

"Oh fuck," he breathed, sounding almost out of it already.

"Fucking is something we can certainly do," I snarked, taking the opportunity to get the supplies out of his bedside drawer.

"Yes. All the yesses. To everything," Bailey said, trying to turn around, but I liked him like this, his beautiful ass on full display. Nudging his legs further apart, I kneeled between them to keep them spread wide, giving me full access to all the goods.

Opening the bottle of lube with a click, I saw goosebumps rising on his skin and a shiver going through his whole body.

"Tell me if I'm going too fast," I demanded in a deep voice that elicited another groan from him.

Bailey pushed his upper body up and turned around to me. "You're not going too fast. Right this moment, you're going too slow. Get your dick inside me already!"

Slap.

He fell back to the mattress, his face turning as bright red as his ass did, a groan coming from deep within his chest. I slapped him again for good measure, my dick twitching at the sight of his ass jiggling. Fuck, his ass was a piece of art. Sculpted to perfection.

Slicking up my fingers, I placed the bottle of lube next to me, then used my free hand to pull his cheeks apart, baring his pretty hole for me. His ring of muscle clenched in anticipation, which was the sole reason I waited for a couple of seconds before doing anything.

“Dakota, please,” he begged, and oh, he begged so prettily, his voice all airy and breathy, a hint of desperation coloring his tone.

Slowly, I dragged a slicked-up finger through his crack, rubbing over his hole, watching the muscle clench and unclench, his legs twitch. The skin on his thighs and even on his ass was covered in goosebumps, his dick twitching desperately against the bedsheets.

Maybe I should pull him up by the hips, make him go to his knees, rob him of the sensation of the sheets rubbing against his dick, but... next time. Right now, my own self-control was stretched thin. I wanted nothing more than to bury my cock to the hilt in Bailey’s ass. Wanted to pound him and watch his cheeks jiggle. Wanted to grab them, slap them, wanted to draw more of these desperate moans out of him.

So I did just that.

Circling his hole, I watched for the moment he relaxed into my touch, watched for the second he accepted that I was calling the shots, that I was the one who decided what to give him and when.

And that was the moment I pushed a finger inside of him. His muscles fought against me for a second, then almost seemed to pull me in, letting my finger slide inside. I moaned at the tight heat welcoming me. It was a shame I needed to pull back out and apply a little more lube to slick up the way.

But it only took a second and then my finger was back, sliding deeper into Bailey. He was trying to push back against my hand, impaling himself on my finger, but I used my other hand to keep his hips down on the mattress.

Bailey let out a mix between a moan and an annoyed huff, which made me smile. He was so damn expressive. I didn't have to second guess anything; he was showing me exactly what he wanted.

And that was for me to hurry up.

So I did.

One finger became two, then three, his hole greedily sucking them in. His moans became louder, his hips frantically humping the mattress until I slapped his ass again, reminding him not to come until I was actually in him.

“Then hurry the fuck up!”

I chuckled, giving him what he was so obviously begging for. My hand came down on his ass one last time before I pulled my fingers out and quickly rolled the condom over my straining erection.

“Ready?” I asked teasingly.

Bailey just pushed his ass against my cock, my hard length gliding into his crack, the tip rubbing against his entry.

He threw his head back and groaned. “Pleeeasee!”

His begging was divine, a melody made in heaven.

My cock twitched against his hole and then I gave in and slowly pushed my hips forward in one languid thrust until I was all the way inside him, fully engulfed by his tight heat, his velvety walls constricting around me, tempting me to pull back out only to push in again.

But I forced myself to wait until his labored breath eased up, until he wasn't white-knuckling the sheets anymore, until he looked over his shoulder, his eyes burning with desire.

Sliding an arm beneath him, I pulled him up to his knees, legs still spread wide so I had a perfect view of my thick cock

disappearing in his pretty hole.

Grabbing his hips, I slowly pulled back a little, then thrust in again. And again. And again, until I had a firm rhythm going.

Bailey was moaning beneath me, legs shaking, shoulders still pressed into the mattress, hands frantically grabbing the sheets.

He looked like temptation personified like this, ass up on display, begging me to take him harder, faster. I circled a hand around him and found his cock, already slick with precum, twitching in my hand as I grabbed it and stroked it in sync with my thrusts.

I knew he wouldn't last, and neither would I, so I was almost relieved when I felt the telltale signs of his orgasm. The way his cock grew even bigger in my hands, got even harder, the way every muscle in his body tensed for a second. And then he came, his cock pulsating, shooting his release right onto the sheets. His inner muscles tightened around me to the point where it became almost painful, but that slight sting was what pushed me over the edge.

I pulled his hips flush against my groin in a bruising grip just as my own orgasm came barreling in, crashing into me and punching the breath out of my lungs. There was only white and the pleasure overloading my system, a static noise in my ears.

I didn't know how long it went on, couldn't have been more than a few seconds, but it felt like an eternity.

Coming back to my senses, I carefully pulled out of Bailey, tied the condom, and threw it next to the bed before rolling to my side, facing him.

For maybe the first time since I'd met him, he wasn't brimming with energy. He looked completely relaxed, a satisfied smile on his face, his hair a wild mess.

"I guess we missed the apple butter making class." I had no idea why that was the first thing that came to my mind, but

it was. And since my filter was still out of order, it was the first thing coming out of my mouth, too.

Bailey giggled, moving closer until he was snuggled up in my arms. “I don’t give a fuck. I’m right where I want to be.”

I sighed, burying my nose in his hair that still had the same tantalizing, sweet scent it had this morning. “Same.”

“I’m glad,” he whispered like he was letting me in on a secret. “Because I really like this date. I... really like you.”

My heart skipped a beat before starting to hammer against my ribcage.

Same. The word was there, on the tip of my tongue, but I couldn’t get it out. So I just kissed the top of his head instead, hoping it’d be enough.

CHAPTER NINE

BAILEY



I liked sleeping in just like the next guy, but after going to bed early — and thoroughly exhausted, thanks to round two — by the time eight AM rolled around, I was wide awake.

Wide awake and so damn giddy about being in Dakota's arms it wasn't even funny. I mean, I'd hoped for an outcome like this because hello? Dakota was fucking hot. Fire. His huge, muscular body paired with his softer tummy... delicious. Add in his hair, his style, and the pissed-off aura and I was in heaven.

But it wasn't like I'd expected him to fuck me within an inch of my life. Hoped? Yes. But not expected. I mean... yeah, he'd put himself up for auction, but that meant he agreed to a date. He wasn't an escort. Nowhere was specified that he had to sleep with me — quite the contrary, I'd had to sign like five times that I knew I wasn't buying someone for sex.

So him ravaging me? Yeah, extremely pleasant surprise. You could say a rather... satisfying surprise.

Giggling about my thoughts, I snuggled deeper into Dakota's arms, breathing in his scent, drawing with my fingers on his chest.

“Quit laughing. You're shaking me awake,” he grumbled, his arm tightening around me until it was hard to even take a breath. Not that I minded it; there were definitely worse things than dying from being squished against a hard chest. My cock twitched against his hip, taking interest in the action. Dakota

just groaned. “I’m trying to keep you immobile so I can sleep. This is not foreplay.”

“But it could be,” I suggested, flicking his nipple. I would’ve licked it, but Dakota really didn’t want me to move, and there was no chance in hell I’d be able to free myself if he didn’t want me to. Which, yeah, was incredibly hot, too, and not helpful for my current situation at all.

“Or it could be me telling you I want to sleep.”

“Could I entice you to stay awake?” I asked, peeking up at him through my lashes, a lazy grin on my face.

Dakota eyed me critically, brushing a strand of hair off of his forehead. “If I say no, will you let me go back to sleep?”

Grimacing, I pushed against his arm and sat up, looking at him with furrowed brows. “Real talk for a moment, ‘kay? I very much hope that this” — I waved between us — “is consensual. If I say no, I expect you to respect that. So, I will respect your no, too.”

Dakota’s cheeks turned red and he rubbed a hand over his face. “Sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know,” I said. “But consent is like... super, duper important. Especially since we don’t really know each other. I mean, I know the essentials from your profile and what you shared the last two days, but... that’s not enough for that kind of joke.”

Groaning, Dakota reached for the unused pillow lying on his side of the bed. He pulled it over his face and pressed down with both his arms. His sounds were muffled, but I was pretty sure he was shouting and swearing. Pulling the pillow away, he eyed me with an unreadable expression. “You don’t, by any chance, remember anything I put in my profile?”

I laughed. “Were you drunk when you created it, so you don’t remember?” When he flinched, I laughed louder, slapping his upper arm. “Oh my *god*. Really? That’s gold!”

“Yeah...you can make fun of me all you want. You’re not the first one laughing about my participation in this glorification of human trafficking.”

Human... I giggled. "Did you just make a joke?" I asked him, grinning widely. "Who are you and what did you do with my grumpy axe murderer?"

Dakota rolled his eyes at me. "Sarcasm is like the darkest and grumpiest form of humor there is. So... I'm still me. Still grumpy, still not an axe murderer."

"Pah." I waved my hand. "That's exactly what an axe murderer *would* say if he wanted to lure the innocent virgin into his... lair? Shed? Wherever he's gonna do the axe murdering."

I was fully aware I was being dramatic and extra and a little hyper, but... joking with Dakota was just so damn fun. And I didn't want to hold back. I was over that. Either he liked me despite the fact that I was a lot, or he didn't like me.

Dakota eyed me for a moment. "You weren't drunk yesterday, were you? Because I know for sure you're not a virgin. Which means you'd be safe regardless of my... *profession.*"

I smirked at him, biting my bottom lip, trying to look innocent. "Maybe you need to remind me..."

The suggestion hung heavy between us, and for a moment, nothing happened. There was this electricity, the sparks flying between us, the air almost sizzling, but at the same time, it was eerily quiet. The calm before the storm. A storm in the form of a big lumberjack throwing himself at me and taking my lips with almost brutal force. Stealing my breath, he pressed me into the mattress with all he had, his big hands grabbing my head as he thrust his tongue into my mouth.

I moaned and rubbed my hard cock against his already straining erection. No matter how hard I thrust against him, he didn't move even an inch, and that fact alone almost made me come. There was nothing sexier than being ravaged by a grumpy axe murderer and being unable to do anything against it.

Not that I wanted to. *Fuck no.*

I wrapped my leg around him, holding on to him with everything I had, trying to get more friction on my dick.

Dakota pulled back, the loss immediately leaving a pang in my chest. One moment his hot lips were on mine, his hands holding my head still, the next moment he turned us around so he was lying under me.

I opened my mouth to protest but closed it again as his strong hands pushed me down his body, over his chest, and down his belly until my head reached his dick.

“Want me to suck it?” I guessed and looked up at him through my lashes, biting my lip for good measure.

His dick twitched on his stomach, a few beads of precum dripping onto his soft, furry belly as a deep groan made its way out of the depth of his chest. The rumbling sound made my balls tighten, an electric shock shooting through my body. I really, really hoped the answer was yes because I definitely wanted that monster inside my mouth.

The almost purple tip was already glistening with precum, his balls drawn tight against his body. He was definitely on the larger side and girthy.

“Suck me,” he commanded, voice a gruff growl.

I wrapped a hand around his base and slowly flicked my tongue over his tip, humming happily as his salty flavor hit my tongue.

“Like this?” I asked innocently, looking up at him with big eyes. It was a game. I knew perfectly well what I was doing — I was driving him mad, the short flicks over the tip of his dick merely lasting a second at a time.

“Bailey,” he ground out, jaw firmly pressed shut, his hands tightening into fists. His whole body was tense, muscles working hard beneath his skin.

“Or rather like this?” I licked a long stripe from base to tip, treating his dick like the tasty treat it was.

Dakota thrust his hip up, his dick rubbing over my cheek, spreading a mix of saliva and precum. I didn't mind. Having a

man as strong as Dakota under me, driving him crazy, was fun. I knew I was playing with fire, knew I was testing his patience — that was the whole purpose.

My dick twitched at the thought of what he'd do when he finally lost patience. I flicked my tongue against his slit, licking up the beads of precum that ran down his dick. Dakota's whole body tensed beneath me. Again and again with each small, teasing lick.

“Cut the crap!”

I smirked up at him, losing hold of my faked innocence. I really wasn't good at pretending.

“Make me.”

That seemed to be exactly what he'd been waiting for. His hands gripped my head again, fingers threading in my hair, pulling at it as he maneuvered my head towards his dick. His thumbs pressed into my cheeks, forcing me to drop the grin and open my mouth.

The second my mouth engulfed his dick, the tip sliding over my tongue, he pushed my head farther down while shallowly thrusting upwards.

Stars exploded in front of my eyes, clouding my vision, and I sucked in a breath through my nose, trying desperately not to gag as his dick filled my mouth, pushing against the back of my throat.

My own dick twitched against the comforter, my hands desperately trying to find something to hold on to as Dakota pulled my head back a little, giving me a second to get myself together before shoving it back down onto his dick, forcing me even deeper.

Tears pooled in my eyes as I finally grabbed his hips, digging my fingernails into his skin, making him moan.

“So good, Bailey,” he panted, shallowly fucking my mouth, holding my head firmly still.

I closed my eyes, stopped trying to think, and just held on for dear life. His dick was stretching my mouth wide open, my

jaw starting to ache even after this short time, and his fingers kept pulling at my hair, maneuvering my head just like he wanted.

He was taking his pleasure from me just the way he liked it — and I almost came on the spot upon the realization that he was *using* me.

My dick was rubbing against the sheets, my head swirling with thoughts and weirdly quiet at the same time. My scalp was burning; Dakota was tugging at my hair just right, keeping control over the situation.

His thrusts got harder and harder, speed picking up, his dick dipping into my throat again and again, spreading a delicious ache throughout my whole body. My eyes watered again, and I forced myself to breathe through my nose whenever he pulled his dick back. Precum hit my tongue again and again, erasing every taste but his.

There was only Dakota. His taste, his smell, his hand, his dick. The delicious, deep, growling moans spilling over his lips. His pubic hair tickling my nose, his legs straining beneath me.

Then his dick seemed to get even bigger, the ache in my jaw ticking up a notch. His body tensed, every muscle tightened, his hips snapping forward, pushing his dick deep into my throat. A shiver ran through his body, and his dick started pulsating on my tongue, pumping rope after rope of cum into my throat, making it hard to swallow everything.

“Fuck, Bailey,” he groaned, hands still buried in my hair, dick twitching in my mouth for what seemed to be forever.

I was still trying to catch my breath when Dakota turned me around yet again, pushing me on my back. His calloused hand closed around my straining dick, using my precum to slick the way. He stroked me hard and fast, his thumb brushing over my tip.

Heat pooled in my gut so fast, it was mere seconds until I was ready to tumble over the edge. And that I did — with some kind of keening shout. I wasn't really sure what I said,

just that there was something falling from my lips the moment my vision turned white and pleasure crashed into me like a tidal wave.

I didn't know how long it took for my breathing to get back to normal and my vision to clear up, but when I did, I found myself lying in Dakota's arms again, my face squished against his chest. Closing my eyes, I let the even rise and fall of his chest calm me down even further while the sun tickled my nose, trying to tell me I needed to get up because this was our last day and we needed to get out of the room by ten.

Which I didn't want to.

I wanted to stay here. Here on the orchard. Here in Dakota's arms. Here in this little bubble where the date was a success and we really hit it off because it all felt so fragile. Bubbles were finicky things. They burst as soon as there was something in their way, as soon as something as much as touched them — and I didn't want Dakota and me to burst. I wanted us to last. Against all odds, I wished our bubble would turn into something more substantial.

Because this? Us, lying here after the best sex of my life? This was a slice of heaven I wasn't willing to part with.

But then there was a knock on the door, and just like I'd been afraid, the bubble that was just us burst.

CHAPTER TEN

DAKOTA



Waking up and fucking Bailey again hadn't been planned.

Waking up, fucking Bailey again, and then falling back asleep *also* hadn't been planned.

Waking up, fucking Bailey, falling back asleep, and then being woken up by the receptionist because we needed to check out definitely hadn't been planned.

To be fair, I didn't have a plan for the day, but even if I did, it wouldn't be this. It wouldn't be us scrambling to get out of bed. It wouldn't be us having to get dressed without even taking a shower after three rounds of sex. We reeked, yet there was nothing we could do about it because we needed to leave the room like... half an hour ago.

"This is a first for me," Bailey quipped happily while absolutely dosing himself in deodorant. The sweet, spicy scent that hung heavy in our room made my cock twitch again, but it was his mischievous smile that made my heart do weird things in my chest. "I mean, I've done the infamous walk of shame. But never in a hotel, and never after fucking right through check out time."

"We slept through check out time," I corrected him with a sigh, pulling a white t-shirt over my head.

"In theory, you're right," he relented, his bright laugh dancing through the room in an enticing melody. "But the reason we fell asleep was because of that spectacular blowjob. So, sex was the reason we're late checking out. Not a walk of shame, but a check out of shame. I kinda dig it."

Throwing one of my flannels on, I cast him a dubious look, my conscience already going off on me in my head. I'd been too rough, too demanding, too forceful. Bailey's face was covered in beard-burn, his eyes a little red rimmed, and his hair... God, his light, golden hair basically screamed that someone — me — had messed it up. Sex hair at its finest.

“You might want to fix your hair,” I told him gruffly, even though that was the last thing I wanted. Fuck, I was going full on caveman because I was almost proud that I managed to dishevel him so much.

“Nah.” Bailey looked at me, winked, then threw his hairbrush into one of his gigantic suitcases. Unused. “I'll do the check out of shame with pride. Seriously. Hands down the best sex of my life — and everyone is welcomed to know.”

My pulse sped up, embarrassment mixing with an odd sense of pride, but there were also tendrils of an unpleasant feeling taking root inside my chest.

However, before I could decide how to proceed, if I should let the topic go or insist on him cleaning up, he put a deep red hoodie on and put the hood over his head, effectively hiding his sex hair. Unfortunately, it hid so much more. His slender figure. His hips marked with my fingerprints, his fair skin, the adorable path of golden hair trailing from his navel to the hem of his jeans.

God, I could stare at him for days and still find new things to admire.

Someone knocked on the door again.

“Sirs?”

Stamping towards the door was less effective without heavy boots on, but my weight alone meant the person on the other side probably heard enough to get my point across.

“Yes?” I barked upon opening the door to reveal... Sean. That little, slimy weasel.

“I'm sorry to interrupt, but...”

“We know we need to check out,” I told him with an eye roll before resuming to glare at him with everything I had. If I were lucky, I’d finally master the art of killing someone with a look — or at least setting them on fire.

But nothing happened.

Sean shrank back on himself but tried looking past me after a second. “Is Bailey...”

“Busy packing his suitcases? Yes he is.”

How I wished Sean could see his sex hair now. Or my fingerprints on his hips. Or the last flakes of dried cum...

“Sean, hi.” Bailey happily skipped over to me, resting his head against my arm. Warmth spread through my body, and my lips twitched. It was weird. The few boyfriends I’d had in the past hadn’t been this affectionate. At the time, I’d thought I’d liked it that they were so independent, but... I looked down at Bailey, his wide smile, his sparkling eyes, and the way he seemed to seek me out, the way he tried to get as close to me as possible. He was independent. But maybe independent and affectionate didn’t have to exclude the other. “I’m so sorry, we... uhm... overslept. If you know what I mean.” A pretty blush crept up Bailey’s neck, settling into his cheeks as he winked at Sean. “But I promise, we’re almost done packing. We should be out of your hair in about ten minutes tops.” He bit his lips, then looked up to me to wag his eyebrows at me. “If you need to apply some kind of late fee, I totally understand. And I’ll happily pay it. It was so worth it.”

I had a feeling the last sentence wasn’t meant for Sean, but for me.

In the end, it didn’t matter who he wanted to hear that one. He managed exactly what I’d started yesterday — he got Sean to take the hint for good.

“Thank you, Bailey. As long as you vacate the room within the next fifteen minutes, there’s no need for a late fee.”

“Oh, you’re a darling. That’s so nice of you. Thank you.” Bailey threw him a wide smile. At the same time, I felt his elbow digging into my side.

“Yeah... thanks,” I grumbled.

That fucking menace. Sean did not deserve my gratitude after the way he'd tried to weasel himself between us yesterday.

But if it made Bailey happy...

Fuck. No.

I needed to stop thinking like that.



I was kinda having déjà vu.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I barked at Bailey, who looked up at me with his bright blue eyes, one shoe already in his hand, his sock-clad toes wiggling happily.

“Same thing as last time: I’m taking my shoes off.” He laughed, then proceeded to do just that, pulling the second, heavy boot from his foot, wiggling his toes like he’d just freed them from a sad existence in a tight prison.

“You could just buy your shoes a size bigger if they’re hurting you.” No, he definitely should buy bigger shoes if they hurt his feet so much. It still wasn’t a reason to take his shoes off during a car drive. Who did that? Especially since this was a rental. He had no idea where this car had been. How many people had put their sweaty feet... on the seat. Just like him. “You’ll give yourself foot fungus,” I grumbled.

Bailey just placed a hand on my arm and smiled at me, his eyes gentle. “Thank you for your concern. It means a lot that you’re already worried about me. But you really don’t need to be. First of all, my shoes are the right size, I just like being comfortable, and no shoes are always more comfortable. And I won’t get fungus or whatever. I promise. And if I do, I’m happy to let you tell me *I told you so*. Deal? I’m sure you’d love to do that.”

What I’d love to do was strangle him.

Preferably with one of the Twizzlers he was pulling out of his backpack right now. Followed by Nerds. And chocolate. And cookies, and...

“Where the fuck did you get dried apples?” We already had a trunk full of apples. And pie. Why did he need more?

“Didn’t you see the gift basket?” Bailey asked, offering me a chocolate covered dried apple, but I shook my head. I wasn’t hungry yet. “They had a whole assortment of things. I’m a little bummed they didn’t offer any chocolate-covered-apples-making-classes. But they did sell them in the little booth out front. I bought a couple of bags, and even got them to tell me how to make them.”

I blinked at him in disbelief.

“When?”

“Oh... I had a few moments here and there.” Bailey shrugged, taking a bite of apple, humming happily. “Apparently, I need a dehydrator, but I already bought one online, so I’ll just have to figure out how to use it. The chocolate dipping part should be easy. Oh, hey, maybe we could do that as kind of a second date?”

A second date.

My thoughts came to a screeching halt. Swallowing, I dared to look at Bailey for a second before focusing back on the street ahead of me. Two days ago, I had refused to even call this farce of a weekend a date. And now?

Yeah, there was no way of denying that it, in fact, had been a date. And as much as I hated to admit it, I’d had fun. I didn’t care about the orchard or the pie making class or anything, but I’d had fun with Bailey. He was... *light*.

The word confused the ever loving shit out of me, but it was the first thing that came into my mind when I thought about the little minx sitting next to me, happily munching on a whole bag of apple-treats after having spent the whole weekend eating and drinking everything apple.

His appearance, his smile, his hair, his eyes, his laugh, the way he walked, his giggling... everything was light. And I

enjoyed that. It grated on my nerves, but at the same time, it warmed my heart.

And the sex?

He'd called it the best sex of his life — and I had to wholeheartedly agree. It was off the charts.

Fuck.

An image of Bailey's lip stretched around my cock, his eyes watering, my hands tugging at his hair came alive inside my head, and my dick made a valiant effort to harden once again.

Off the charts.

But...

“Not that you need to go on a second date with me if you don't want to,” Bailey quickly said, waving his hand like it wasn't a big deal. He was even still smiling, but... the sparkle in his eyes was gone, and his lips trembled a little. He was definitely putting on a brave face. “I mean... this first date was more like my choice than yours. Sure, you signed up for the whole auction thing, but I was the one who bid on you, right? So, if I'm not really your type and you want to treat it like a Vegas-trip, that's fine.”

“A Vegas trip?”

“Yeah, you know. What happens at the orchard stays at the orchard?” He laughed, but it wasn't the airy melody I was used to; there was a weight to it dragging it down. “That's okay. I'd just like to know where we're standing. For the record — and just in case it isn't obvious — I do like you a lot. Even if you might be an axe murderer and the only thing that's saving me is the fact that I'm not a virgin.”

This time his giggle sounded a lot more like himself, and I managed a smile at his antics, but my mind was still tangled up trying to think about what to do.

Did I want a second date?

Did I want to treat this like a... Vegas trip?

I didn't know.

I... liked Bailey.

Which was weird.

He was light and colorful and fucking annoying, and everyone around us seemed to be drawn to him — a fact that drove me fucking crazy — but...

I was none of those things. And while having his splash of color in my life for a weekend had been a nice change, it was hard to imagine having him in my life all the time.

I liked the quiet. I liked peace. I liked predictability. With Bailey, my whole life would be turned upside down.

“Soo... what do you say?”

I blinked, turning my head toward him, brows furrowed.

“What do I say to what?”

“The second date?”

Oh. Right.

“I...” I bit my lip, trying to find the right words to explain why it wasn't a good idea. That we just didn't fit. But my mouth had a different idea. “I'd love to.”

Bailey let out a small sigh and punched my arm. “Meanie! For a second, I was really worried you were trying to come up with a way to gently let me down.” Scrunching up his nose, he shook his head. “Though that wouldn't really be you. You'd probably just tell me straight on. I should've known you were fucking with me.”

My heart plummeted. Yeah. About that...

CHAPTER ELEVEN

BAILEY



“Patience,” I told myself, taking a deep breath. “It’s only been three days.”

But it’d been three days without a single word.

Hopping up from my couch, I went to the kitchen, then headed back to my living room, turned around, and went back again.

Pacing helped. Yoga did not. I’d tried. It was a miracle that Evan hadn’t kicked me out of the class.

In the kitchen, I glared at the box containing my own homemade chocolate dipped dried apples. They were delicious, they looked amazing, and they were a constant reminder that Dakota hadn’t even managed to react to the photo I’d sent him to show them off.

Okay, and maaaaaybe I’d tried to get him to text me that way.

It hadn’t worked.

Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I saw a thousand Instagram notifications — I was still logged on with my work account — but nothing from Dakota. Not a single thing. He’d seen the message almost right away but hadn’t sent a thumbs-up or anything. Being left on read sucked.

And yeah, some people just forgot to answer. I got that. I got distracted a lot, too. Which was why I’d sent him a second text to ask if I should save any for him. That message, too, had been read.

Once might be a coincidence.

Twice?

Harder to say.

Should I message him again?

Ask him about that date?

I wanted to, but I didn't want to annoy him. On Sunday, I'd told him that the only thing I wanted to know was where we were standing. And he'd said he wanted a second date, so maybe he was just busy. Maybe something had come up workwise. Not that I knew what he was working as.

Well, besides my theory that he was a mercenary. But that'd been a joke. Mostly.

I think.

Fuck. I stopped in the middle of my hall and sank against the nearest wall, hitting my head lightly against it.

I was going mad. The uncertainty was killing me. That was exactly why I'd told Dakota I wanted to know where we were at —

so that something like this didn't happen.

I'd been there before. Exes telling me that everything was fine, yet there were fewer and fewer texts coming, the time between them growing with every day. And then the inevitable happened. The breakup. Them telling me that it just wasn't working. That I was too loud. Too needy. Too hyper. It was always the same. Always.

So this time, I'd wanted to be upfront. Be blunt. And yet... it was happening all over again, but somehow, it was even worse than before.

Brushing a stray tear out the corner of my eye, I grabbed my phone.

I didn't know if Parker was at home or if he was busy with his Mateo, but... I needed a friend. Someone who knew at least a little bit about the situation I was going through.

Granted, his weekend-getaway date had turned out really different from mine, but still. He'd tried the auction thing, too.

Taking a deep breath, I hit the call button and slid down the wall until I sat crouched against it, my knees pulled up to my chin.

"Hey, Bailey. Did you call to tell me about your date? I was a little surprised and worried I didn't get a call on Sunday. But your message said it was good?"

A lump built in my throat. "It was good..." Biting my lip, I hit my forehead against my knees. It'd been so, so good. Far better than I'd expected. We'd both hit it off — at least that's what I thought on Sunday. But now it was Wednesday.

"But?" Parker asked, immediately sounding more alert.

"I don't know." I let out a heavy sigh. "He needed a little time to warm up to me, but... you know me. I know I'm a lot, but I really thought we'd hit it off on Saturday. I mean... in the morning he'd barely look at me and by the end of the day he spanked me and fucked me within an inch of my life. Hello? It doesn't get much closer than that. And on Sunday, we just picked right up where we'd left off..."

Parker sighed. "First of all, TMI, Bailey. TMI. Second, you won't be a lot to the right person. And trust me, I'm an expert on that. I spent my whole life apologizing for being too much. Ok, sorry. TED talk over. What happened on Sunday? It sounds like everything was great, but you sound sad."

I laughed. "I'm not sad. I'm at a complete loss and on the verge of going crazy. I asked him point blank if he wanted a second date and that I only wanted honesty, and he said yes. But ever since I dropped him off on Sunday, he left me on read. He doesn't reply to my messages and hasn't tried contacting me himself. I tried twice, but I'm not sure if I should wait or text him again?"

I just wanted him to answer. To have an explanation why he went all Houdini on me.

Parker stayed quiet for such a long time, I actually pulled my phone away from my ear to see if the call was still going.

Then, finally, he cleared his throat. “How much do you like him?”

Closing my eyes, I hit my head against my knees again. “Probably entirely too much for only having spent a weekend together.”

“That’s what I was afraid of,” Parker said, and I couldn’t help but laugh. Hysterically.

“Yeah. When I fuck up by falling for the wrong guy, I’m not throwing any punches. I go all in.” Which was another thing about me being too much that my exes used to criticize. And yet I’d done it again.

“I want to tell you to just fuck him, and not in the fun way, and forget about him, but if you really like him as much as I think you do, text him one more time. I think you’ll question the what if’s if you don’t.” Parker sounded reluctant, but the next words were said with a lot more force and conviction. “But Bailey, if he doesn’t answer, if he’s really ghosting you, don’t waste your time on him. Trust me, I’m an expert on dating stupid fucks and you deserve better. He doesn’t get to be an asshole, no matter how *much* you think you are..”

“Thanks.” I tried smiling, even though he couldn’t see it and I didn’t really feel like it. Smiling was the first step to trick my body into believing I was happy, which was the first step to actually being happy. “I’ll try that. And then... I guess I’ll have to figure out which god is most likely to listen to my prayers. I really hope I won’t have to like... sacrifice a goat or a lamb or anything.”

Parker snorted, and a little spark of warmth traveled through my body. Making others laugh never failed to make me happy.

“Never change, Bailey.”

“I’m not planning to. Oh, hey, next time we meet, I’ll bring a great snack. Dehydrated apples dipped in chocolate. I made them myself because I have entirely too many apples left.”

“Um, yes please. Anything dipped in chocolate is a yes, please.

Letting out a small sigh, I said goodbye to Parker, ended the call, and stared at my phone, trying to come up with a message for Dakota that didn't sound too needy and clingy but wasn't complete bullshit, either.

It was harder than I'd expected.

I wanted to ask what happened. I wanted to tell him he was an ass for not even managing to reply with a fucking emoji. Most of all, I just wanted him to tell me everything was okay.

Bailey: Are you currently doing a job for the government or chopping some poor virgin up in your garden shed? Because those are about the only excuses for disappearing on me for several days *wink wink* In complete honesty: I'd love to hear back from you because I'm still hoping I'll get that second date we talked about.

Taking a deep breath, I hit send, then put the phone on airplane mode. The ball was in his court. The only problem? I was pretty sure it was going to stay there forever.



Friday rolled around and with it the five-day mark since I'd last talked to Dakota, as well as the seven-day mark since I'd first met him.

Honestly? Being so messed up because of a guy I'd met a week ago was kind of ridiculous.

Yet, here I was, sitting at my desk in my office, staring at my computer monitor without really seeing anything. I should be working on a reel for a historical romance novel. I should edit another TikTok video. Hell, there were more than fifty emails in my inbox just waiting for me to pull my head out of my ass. But alas, I seemed unable to.

My head was constantly spinning, a thousand thoughts running through my mind at the same time. Possible explanations of what'd happened that prevented him from answering even though he was seeing my fucking texts — *yes, you moron, I can see you read them*. Things I wanted to say —

or do — to him. And my emotions? Yeah, I didn't even want to start with them. They went from hurt to angry to desperate to... all of the above.

“Bailey?” That was Joaquín. My boss. And if his voice was any indication, this wasn't the first time he'd said my name.

“I apologize,” I said, looking up at my boss who was standing in the middle of my office, the door closed behind him.

Yeah. I should definitely have heard him come in.

He was looking good, sharp as always in a dark blue suit that highlighted the silver strands in his hair. A hot fucking silver fox, but he didn't hold a dime compared to Dakota with his strawberry blond hair, his resting frownyface, and the flannels... fuck. The *flannels*.

I might've found a new kink of mine.

“Are you okay?” he asked, voice full of compassion as he lowered himself to the leather chair on his side of my desk.

“Yes, of course,” I said, trying to force a smile on my face.

“Excuse me, Bailey, but you look like you're in pain. Also, to be quite frank, I've had three separate people in my office telling me off for letting you work while you're sick.” *Oh fuck.* “And while I appreciate your team and friends throughout the company trying to protect you from being taken advantage of, I really don't appreciate them accusing me of forcing you to work when you should be taking sick leave.”

Now was the right time for me to find out how to make the ground swallow me up whole. Pulling my shoulders up to my ears, I hid as much of me inside my hoodie as I could.

“I am so, so sorry, Joaquín.”

He sighed, shaking his head. “I know. And I also know that you didn't sic people on me. But I get where they're coming from. If I didn't know for a fact that I'm not blackmailing you or forcing your hand or anything like that,

I'd probably think the same. Which is why I'm here. I'm worried about you."

"I'm fine," I tried telling him, but the words sounded insincere to my own ears. Sighing, I shook my head. "No, that's not the truth. This week sucks for a few personal reasons, but I promise I'll deal with it this weekend. Come Monday, I'll be back to normal."

Joaquín laughed. "I hope so; otherwise, your friends will probably skin me alive — and the problem is that *everyone* here is your friend. I'm outnumbered. So, I'm doing the responsible thing: I'm sending you home. And before you say anything. Yes, I'm aware that you already had last Friday off. No, I'm not making you officially take half a day off. We both know you put in a lot of hours during the last couple of months. You deserve a little time for yourself."

Swallowing around the lump in my throat, I nodded. "Thank you, Joaquín."

He waved at me. "Ah, it's nothing. I'm just saving my own skin. Have a good weekend, Bailey."

Sure I will, I thought sarcastically. But I didn't say it out loud. Instead, I gave him my first smile of the day. "You, too. Joaquín. Don't forget the TikTok video we have scheduled to film on Monday."

"I wish I could, but I made the mistake of telling my sisters about it. Now I'm constantly getting links to videos they want me to recreate. And I don't understand even half of it." Shaking his hand, he waved at me one last time before leaving his office.

I closed my eyes and leaned my head back against my office chair. I needed to get Dakota out of my head. It was obvious he wasn't going to call. Hell, he wasn't even going to text. As much as I hated it, I needed to look forward.

It was only one weekend. It wasn't like we'd been in a relationship for months or anything. One weekend. Two amazing fucks and a spectacular blowjob. No biggie...

If only I could believe myself.

CHAPTER TWELVE

DAKOTA



Tick, tock, tick, tock. The clock in my living room sounded like a hammer, the ticking echoing through the silent room, making me flinch time and time again. Sitting on my couch, I stared at my phone for what felt like the thousandth time this week, waiting for a message I knew would never come while feeling like a complete asshole.

Probably because I *was*.

Bailey had texted me on Monday. Then on Tuesday. And a third time on Wednesday. Whereas the first two texts were casual and on-brand for him, the third sounded forced. I just knew, I fucking *knew* he was hurt when he'd sent the third text. Still, he'd had the courage to text me again even after I'd ignored him twice.

Now it was up to me to do something, he'd made that very clear — yet I was still hoping to hear from him again.

There was no reason why he should message me. Bailey was a lot of things but certainly not a pushover. He wouldn't message me again because he wouldn't allow me to string him along.

So if I wanted to stay in touch with him, it was obvious what I had to do: answer his fucking messages.

The only question was: *did I want to?*

I buried my hands in my hair and tugged hard until I yelped from the pain.

Memories flooded my mind of my fingers tangled in Bailey's hair, feeling the silky strands in my hands, feeling him shiver whenever I tugged lightly. Of me, maneuvering his head exactly like I wanted to, urging him to take my cock deep, of his eyes closed in ecstasy while tears were streaming down his cheeks from choking on my cock.

How had things gotten so out of hand?

It was supposed to be a long, dreadful weekend with a horrible human being who loved asserting dominance by buying his dates.

But that hadn't been the case at all.

Damn Bailey! Why did he have to be so fucking likeable? Why couldn't he just let me hate him? Everything would be so much easier if I could hate him.

Someone pounding on my front door made me jump. For a second, there was a spark of hope inside of me that Bailey had come to demand answers.

"Dakota Joseph Nolan. Enough is enough. We know you're home and you'll open that fucking door or we *will* use one of your axes to tear it down!"

Oh.

Not Bailey.

The disappointment felt like a bucket of ice water that someone dumped over my head, thoroughly squelching any hope I'd had harbored for even a fraction of a second.

How I'd wished it were Bailey on the other side of the door. He'd be pissed beyond belief, but I'd take his ire. I more than deserved it.

But it wasn't Bailey. Deep inside my heart, I knew he wouldn't come here. He had more dignity than that. No. His last message was the final one. The way he'd worded it made that obvious. He'd firmly stated that it was on me to reach out.

But I hadn't.

"Open that door!"

Oh. Right. My friends.

My heart constricted, a lump forming in my throat. Was I ready to talk to them? Closing my eyes, I waited for the anger, the pain of their betrayal, and it was there, but... it wasn't burning as bright and hot as before. Everything was muted by a bone-deep tiredness.

“Last chance, Dakota!”

Fuck.

Jumping up, I crossed the room with six long steps, ripping the door open with enough force to smash it right into the wall of the hallway.

“What do you want?”

Three sets of eyes stared at me, blinking in disbelief. Rolling my eyes, I looked down, taking my appearance in. My shirt was... not great. There might be questionable stains on it that even I didn't know the origin of, and my sweatpants had also seen better days. Okay, so it was entirely possible that I'd forgotten to change clothes for... probably too long.

But that wasn't a reason to look at me like I was a rabid dog.

“Oh, Kota,” Liam breathed, shaking his head. “What happened?”

Why was there a lump in my throat that made it hard to swallow? I turned around so my friends couldn't see how much trouble breathing and swallowing was and headed back inside. This, whatever it was going to be, wasn't a conversation I wanted to have on my doorstep.

Upon entering my living room, I instantly regretted my decision. Seeing it with fresh eyes, it looked... bad. Not like I'd been wallowing in misery and self-doubts for the past six days, but rather like I hadn't left the couch in a month. Empty pizza boxes, bags of chips, remnants of said chips on the floor, and a ton of empty soda cans. The stench... Yeah, I got why Murphy headed directly towards the windows and opened them to air out the place.

“Dakota?” Liam sat down right next to me on the couch, tentatively placing a hand on my shoulder. “What’s going on? We expected you to be angrily chopping all the wood for winter, but this... this isn’t you being angry, is it?”

Combing a hand through my hair, or rather tangling it in my slightly matted hair, I shook my head. “I’m still angry,” I grumbled. That just wasn’t my main issue at the moment.

“Which we get.” I looked up at Jason, furrowing my brows. “Really, we do.” He let out a sigh. “I’m sorry for calling you a drama queen, okay? If you’d listened to any of our voicemails or read any of our texts, you’d know how sorry we are.”

“Yeah,” Murphy reiterated, voice unusually solemn. “After you stormed off, we talked and... well, honestly, when we were back home, I still wasn’t convinced you hadn’t overreacted, so I told my mom about it, and she almost ripped my head off.”

I chuckled, picturing Murphy’s tiny mom hunting him with a wooden spoon in hand. She’d never actually hurt him, but she was a spitfire and not above threatening him with bodily harm if she thought it was warranted. In a weird way, she reminded me of Bailey. Small bodies with big personalities.

Damn, I could still see him right in front of me, his eyes sparkling with mischief, lips curled into that ever-present smile, his hair glinting in the morning sun.

“What is your face doing?” Liam pointed at my lips. “It looked like... were you *smiling*?”

“No.” There was no reason to smile. I’d fucked up. Tremendously. Bailey would probably never speak to me again. Not that I’d contact him. But if I did, he wouldn’t want to have anything to do with me.

“You totally were.” He shoved me lightly. “The only question is: why?”

My chest tightened. I could lie. I could tell them I’d imagined Murphy being chased by his mom and just leave everything about Bailey out, but... I didn’t have it in me.

Maybe it was the sleep deprivation or maybe it was my bad conscience or I just wanted someone to fucking talk to, but the lie just wouldn't come out of my mouth.

“Dakota? Dude?” Looking up, I saw Jason staring at me with worry in his eyes. “What’s going on?”

“It’s...” *Nothing. Everything.* Gripping my hair, I pulled at the strands, hoping the pain would clear my mind a little, but it just hurt without lifting any of the confusion. “I fucked up.”

“We’re used to that,” Murphy said.

Liam sent him a scathing look, then turned his attention back to me, his face softening. “How?”

Letting go of my hair, I balled my hands into fists. “The only thing he wanted was to know where we were at. And I told him I wanted a second date, but in reality, I was so conflicted about him, and now I ghosted him and I... I fucked up.”

“Uhm...” Liam blinked. “Are you talking about your date?”

I rolled my eyes. “Yes. Who else would I be talking about? It’s been two weeks since we last saw each other. It’s not like I had months to date a thousand random people.”

“And there’s the grumpy asshole we missed so much,” Jason quipped, earning a death glare. He should be really careful; he was still on my shitlist for the whole auction thing.

“So... your last weekend wasn’t awful?”

Laughing, I shook my head. “It was *apples*.”

Confused, Liam raised his brows. “You mean... it was bananas?”

“Nope. It was apples. Every-fucking-thing was apples. We stayed at an orchard, and the owners made sure no one would ever forget which kind of fruit they grew.” I rolled my eyes. It’d been ridiculous.

“But you liked your date?”

I laughed. “Bailey was... *gah*. He drove me crazy. Seriously, it took him less than five minutes to get me to the point where I wanted to throttle him. He’s so... *enraging*. He always smiles. Always. Even in his sleep. And he takes his shoes off during long car rides and thinks that’s completely normal.

“Also, his snacking habits rival any ten-year-old’s, and he overshares. A lot. I didn’t need to know about him wearing panties, but alas, he still told me like it was nothing. In public. And don’t get me started on the way he just attracts people like they’re moths and he’s the light. Seriously. Not that I wanted to be on a date with him, but it was so fucking rude that other people tried to give him their number while they *thought* we were on a date. And Bailey didn’t even notice. He was all like *Oh, he’s just being nice*. Can you believe that?”

Liam’s mouth hung open. Murphy just blinked. And Jason? He appeared to have transformed into a statue.

“Oh my god,” Liam finally gasped, laying a hand over his heart. “You’re in love.”

“What?” Fear gripped my heart, squeezing tightly. “No. Didn’t you listen to a word I just said? He’s driving me crazy!”

Murphy laughed. “Yes, you moron, we heard you. And apparently, you’re into that. And panties. Which, dude, I did *not* need to know.”

Jason chuckled. “Maybe they’re both good at oversharing.”

I really wasn’t. I excelled in keeping things to myself. Like the fact that I’d slept with Bailey. And that the panties thing was a lot more harmless than everything else we’d done that weekend.

The spanking. The *blowjob*. I shivered just thinking about it.

“Ugh.” Liam shuddered, giving me a disgusted look. “You totally boned, didn’t you? You have that happy, satisfied sex-face going on.”

I had no reason to be happy. I'd screwed up, and I'd never see Bailey again. If I did, he'd probably kick me in the nuts.

"Aaaand... it's gone." Murphy shook his head.

"What happened?" Liam asked softly, the humor gone from his voice.

"Like I said. I fucked up."

Liam nodded in understanding, placing his hand on my knee. "You said that. But can you tell me what exactly you did?"

Pressing my lips together, I slowly nodded. "I... ghosted him. He's been texting me, but I left him on read. He tried three times, and the last text sounds like..." I swallowed. "It sounds an awful lot like a goodbye."

Liam looked at me with pursed lips, his brows furrowed, slightly shaking his head in disapproval.

My heart twisted as my stomach tied itself into knots. I knew I'd fucked up — but seeing my friends being disappointed in me really drove the fact home extra hard.

"Why?" Jason asked. "I mean, ghosting people is so shitty, and while you're a big grump, you're not a bad person. There must be a reason why you didn't text him back. Did your gut tell you that there was something off with him? Maybe something inside you told you he was bad news."

"There's nothing wrong with Bailey," I snarled at him. Victim blaming Bailey for my horrible behavior was so not okay. "I mean, aside from the facts I've already told you... the shoe thing is so weird. But he's..." There was a lump in my throat that I couldn't dislodge; it made talking hard, but I forced the words out nonetheless. "He's incredible. Like... He just... makes people like him. It drove me crazy because I felt like everyone wanted a part of him, but at the same time, it's kind of a gift. And special. Because he's not slimy about it. Honestly, I have no idea how he does it. Hell, I tried to dislike him. I tried to make him hate me. But... he just rolled with it. It's wild."

“Dude, you’re definitely falling for him,” Murphy said with a chuckle. “I never thought I’d see the day. You find flaws in everyone you date. It’s like you’re trying to manipulate yourself.”

“Yeah,” I admitted, rubbing a hand over my beard. “My therapist said the same thing. It was something like me always waiting for things to go bad and for the other shoe to drop so that I was actively looking for the bad things rather than the good ones.”

Liam nodded wisely. “If that’s the case, it’s no wonder you freaked out when someone just slipped past your defenses — and within two days, at that. So, yeah, I get why you did what you did. But that doesn’t justify your behavior. Especially if he asked you to be honest with him. You had the chance to tell him that you needed time or whatever. Instead, you chose to hurt him in one of the worst ways possible.”

“Now, don’t exaggerate.” Jason shook his head. “Dakota definitely made a mistake, but hurting him in *one of the worst ways possible*? I can think of a lot of ways he could have hurt him way worse.”

Liam huffed. “Sure, you’re probably thinking of all the physical things like stabbing him and stuff like that. But ghosting someone is a mindfuck — same as gaslighting. If someone tells you they’re not into you, it sucks, but you know the reason. But Kota here told him he was into him and then ghosted him. So now that Bailey guy will always have to wonder what he did wrong — and that’s what makes it so bad. He’s denied closure.”

I released a shuddering breath, grabbing my hair. Liam’s soft-spoken words were punches right into my gut, making me unable to breathe.

I hadn’t wanted to hurt him. I definitely didn’t want him to feel like he did something wrong when it was all on me and my messed-up head.

“Kota? Are you okay? You’re really pale.”

I shook my head. “No. I’m not.” And I wouldn’t be until I’d made things right. Could I even make things right? Would Bailey answer me if I tried calling after a week of radio silence? “What do I do now?”

“That depends on what you want the outcome to be.” Murphy shrugged. “Do you want to win him back? I’m afraid that’ll take a lot of work. Groveling. Apologizing. And an explanation of why you ghosted him. Do you want to leave things as they are but don’t want him to wonder what went wrong? Send him a message and explain that you’re not in the right headspace. It’s not a great solution, but it’s better than doing nothing.”

What did I want the outcome to be? That was the quintessential question. Did I want to be with Bailey? Or at least another chance with him?

The answer came surprisingly, frighteningly easy.

Yes.

Yes, I wanted to see him again, wanted to see his eyes light up with mischief again, wanted him to elbow me because I’d made a sarcastic comment. I wanted his light, his laughter. I wanted his kisses, wanted him to snark at me right until he melted into my touch.

“I think I know the answer to that question,” Liam quipped.

I glared at him.

“Hey, now. We’re your friends. We’re here to help you,” he said, raising his eyebrows at me. “That means, if you forgive us for the stunt we pulled.”

Murphy laughed. “He doesn’t get to sulk any longer. After all, he went ahead and fell in love with his date — the date he wouldn’t have had if it weren’t for us. Besides, us paying a thousand dollars per person is a pretty harsh punishment in and of itself.”

Shaking my head, I snorted a laugh. “Yeah, yeah. You’re forgiven — as long as you promise to never, ever, ever do something like that again. It’s really not cool.”

Jason rolled his eyes. “Dude, if I have to pay a thousand dollars every time, I don’t think my bank account would agree to do this more often. It’d get really expensive really fast. Besides... if you manage to make things right with your loverboy, it’d be kind shitty to send you on a date with someone else.”

If I managed to make things right with Bailey; it being a big if.

A thought crossed my mind, a spark of an idea taking root.

“Hey... uhm... do any of you happen to have a good recipe for apple butter?”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BAILEY



Neither my yoga class nor the yoga videos I'd tried following along this weekend had helped me to feel any more zen and calm about the whole Dakota thing. It fucking sucked — especially since I was still seeing his stupid face whenever I saw an apple.

It was fall. We were in Connecticut... there were apples everywhere. And the city I worked in? Was called the Big Apple, so thank you very much, you fucking asshole, for making it impossible to forget about you!

The fact that I still had an entire bucket of unused apples sitting on my countertop didn't help, either. I'd tried giving them away, but my parents had already taken some off my hands, and I couldn't very well bring a whole bucket to the office. Well, in theory, I could, but did I really want to ride the train with a heavy bucket in my hands? Not really.

So the stupid fruit sitting on my countertop kept reminding me that yet another person thought I was too much. Or whatever his problem was — I didn't even fucking know. It was maddening. I'd thought everything was fine. Our chemistry... I shuddered. Yeah, it'd been off the charts. And he'd smiled — just for me. And damn, if that smile didn't transform his whole face. The knowledge that this bright smile, the light in his eyes was just for me was exhilarating. Only... it probably hadn't even been for me in the first place.

Stupid Dakota.

Stupid apples.

Angrily, I kicked my shoe away, which really wasn't the smart thing to do considering I had to put it on. Which meant running after it and retrieving it from under the couch because the weekend was already over and I needed to go to work. Where I'd have to fake being happy so my colleagues didn't rip Joaquín's head off so he didn't, in turn, rip my head off.

Yay.

Shaking my head, I grabbed my messenger bag and walked toward my front door, stopping in front of the mirror in the hall. At least I didn't look as bad as I did on Friday. Concealer really was a miracle worker.



The day dragged. Usually, I loved my work. I loved brainstorming with my colleagues, loved coming up with new ideas, loved creating graphics and content. Hell, I even loved the meetings with the other teams and departments. But today it seemed like one annoying and unnecessary question after the other. Especially since the answers were all in our presentation.

Closing my eyes, I thanked every god there was that it was finally over.

At least Joaquín hadn't said anything about my team trying to murder him, so maybe I'd managed to fake my happiness well enough for people to believe me.

Unfortunately, the faking happiness to feel better and actually be happy thing hadn't worked for me today.

Maybe tomorrow. Or on Wednesday. Or next week.

At one point, the apples would be gone and my recollection of my weekend at the orchard would fade into a distant memory. Maybe I'd even manage to see it as a fun experience in a year or ten.

"Bailey?" The front desk manager, Julia, waved at me.

Sighing internally, I put on a smile and headed over to her. “Hey, Julia, how are the kids?”

She smiled and tucked a strand of her dark, curly hair behind her ear. “Oh, they’re fine. I’m supposed to thank you profusely for sending that poster of the shifter girl book home with me.” Shaking her head, she laughed. “Kaila adores it — and the book.”

Suddenly, smiling was a lot easier. “I’m glad. That girl on the cover reminded me of her, so I wanted her to have it.”

“She said the same. She’s planning on dressing up as that girl or a panther for Halloween.”

“I definitely want to see a photo.”

Julia grinned. “I’ll make sure to show you one. Anyway, that actually wasn’t why I called you over.”

Raising my brows, I cocked my head. “It wasn’t?”

“No. There was this guy asking for you about an hour ago.” She pursed her lips and shook her head. “He was very... demanding, bordering on rude. He insisted I let you know he’s here and to call you down to the lobby, but I firmly explained that I couldn’t even tell him if you were in the building, and I couldn’t help him without him having an appointment. He really wasn’t happy about that at all.” She sighed, shaking her head again. “I know this TikTok thing is all the rage — trust me, Kaila tells me all about it and how funny and entertaining you are — but I really don’t like the attitude of some people. He wasn’t the first one to show up here, but he was... I don’t know. Usually, I wouldn’t even tell you about them, but he was so... demanding. He only left after I threatened to call security on him.”

I laughed. “Julia, we don’t have security.”

She winked. “He doesn’t need to know that. Anyway, he left, but I have a bad feeling like maybe he’s waiting outside for you. He was giving me major murderer vibes.”

I perked up. Dakota’s profile picture appeared in my mind with that axe and his impressive glare. It was a ridiculous thought because I hadn’t told him where I worked in the first

place, but this silly seed of hope started to take root inside my chest even though I tried fighting it as best as I could.

“Murderer vibes, you say?” I asked, my voice sounding a little thin and a little too high to pass as regular interest. “Maybe... axe murderer vibes?”

She blinked at me, then raised her brows. “Uhm... I guess so? He was wearing a flannel, now that you mention it.”

My heart jolted in my chest. “A flannel? And maybe a rust colored beanie? Did he, by any chance, have strawberry blond hair?”

Was it really possible that Dakota had tried visiting me at work?

What would he even be doing here? By not answering my messages, he'd made it very clear that he didn't want a second date after all.

“Yes... oh my god, do you actually know him?” Julia reached out, placing her hand on my forearm. “I'm so sorry, Bailey. I really thought he was one of those uber TikTok fans. Next time just let me know you're expecting a friend to pick you up.”

I blinked, trying to make sense of what was happening. Dakota was here. Well, he had been here. But... why? And how? And... what could he possibly want after a week of just... disappearing off the face of the world?

But those questions didn't concern Julia, so I smiled at her and shrugged. “I didn't expect him at all. I think he wanted to surprise me.” If it was a good surprise or not remained to be seen. “Anyway, thank you for protecting my privacy.”

She smiled. “That's literally my job description, but... my pleasure. And have a great evening with your axe murderer.” She snorted. “I would've never, in my wildest dreams, imagined that you'd go for such a, uhm... serious type.”

I laughed even though there was a pang in my chest.

“He's... just a friend.”

“Mhmm.” Julia waggled her eyebrows. “My husband used to be *just a friend* once, too.” Swallowing heavily, I flipped her off, but she just laughed, shooing me away. “Go see if your friend is still waiting for you!”

I swallowed hard, still fighting with the sliver of hope growing stronger with every passing second. Maybe it’d all been a mistake. Maybe... Maybe I had the wrong number and the person on the other hand just hadn’t bothered to inform me about my mistake?

Oh my god! Had Dakota thought I was ghosting him the whole time? If that was the case, I needed to find him.

“Will do. Bye, Julia,” I said, rushing towards the glass front doors, my eyes already firmly on the steady stream of people passing by outside.

As soon as I stepped outside, I craned my neck, eyes searching for my mountain man in the middle of the businesspeople crowd. He was tall, so it should be easy to find him, right?

Probably, if I wasn’t so damn short. Usually, I didn’t mind, but in moments like this a couple of extra inches would be incredibly helpful.

“Bailey!” The sound of his deep voice sent a shiver down my spine. It was gruff and rough and filled with emotions I couldn’t decipher.

“Dakota.” Turning my head, I finally found him, leaning against the white exterior of the building, right next to the gleaming metal sign that declared it the home of Greenfield Publishing. “What are you doing here?”

He looked at his feet, his hand snaking to the back of his neck, scratching a spot there. “I... uhm... I came to, well...” He looked up at me, his brows drawn together, face blazing red. “I came to apologize.”

I grew cold.

“Apologize?”

Not a wrong number, after all. Just plain old ghosting.

The hope inside my chest that I'd fought so hard from growing instantly died on its own.

"Yeah." He cleared his throat, kicking his feet. "For, you know, ignoring your texts. I'm... I'm sorry."

I blinked at him, cold still spreading through my whole body, making me shiver – unfortunately, this time it wasn't in a good way.

"Let me get this straight," I said, blinking up at him while white, hot rage slowly melted the cold inside of me. "You ignored me for a whole week, and now you think it's fine to just turn up at my place of work, say you're sorry, and everything's fine? No explanation, no nothing? Just *I'm sorry*, and I'm supposed to forget about it until you don't feel like answering me again?"

"That's not... I mean, I want to explain, and I even brought you a gift."

Rolling my eyes, I shook my head. "I don't care about stupid fucking gifts. I care about honesty. Reliability."

"But..."

I held up a hand. "No. Parker is right. I deserve better than this. I deserve someone who is being up front with me — especially after I explicitly asked. I deserve someone who cares enough about me not to let me stew in my own self-doubts for a week."

My gut wrenched. Forcing the words out made tears spring to my eyes. It was the last thing I wanted to say, but I wouldn't put up with this. I'd seen what Collin had done to Parker. I'd witnessed first-hand what emotional manipulation could do to a person, and I'd never knowingly put myself in a position like that.

Dakota had already shown me that he was capable of shutting me out, and that was fine. I'd gotten the message. But I wouldn't be pulled back in.

"Bailey..." he started, his voice so rough it was almost a whisper.

“Nope.” I shook my hand, angrily wiping my eyes.

It felt like someone was stabbing me right in the heart as I turned around to leave. I’d really thought we’d hit it off. That there was chemistry, and even feelings between us. I’d really thought he’d felt it, too. And god, I’d hoped he’d have an easy explanation for me. But he didn’t, or he’d have led with it.

“I was fucking *afraid!*” I heard his shout around me, his deep, booming voice carrying the sound, drowning out the noises of rush hour.

I whipped my head back around him to see him half-way toward me already, his entire body tense as a spring while the people surrounding him gawked.

“I was afraid,” he repeated, softer this time, which made it incredibly hard to understand him. “I’ve got issues. Trust issues. I tried my best to push you away, but you managed to weasel your way into my heart like no one else ever did before, and when I realized how much I already liked you, I... I freaked. And I’m sorry. You have no idea how sorry I am for ghosting you, but I just didn’t know what to do.”

I let out a weak laugh. “Maybe try communicating next time,” I yelled at him.

His eyes widened. “Next time?” he echoed almost tonelessly.

I had said that, right?

Shrugging, I grabbed his hand to pull him along with the never-ending stream of people. “Yeah. No.” Shrugging again, I looked up into his bright blue eyes shimmering with wetness. “I’m not sure yet. I really, really liked you and I was certain there was something between us, but now...” I sighed, shrugging again. “I’m not sure if I’m ready to forgive you. But I’m also not sure if I’m willing to give up on you just yet.”

“Thank you,” he said, squeezing my hand almost to the point that it hurt. “I know I need to do better.”

Shoving him lightly, I laughed. “Yeah, no kidding. If you ever, ever, ever pull a stunt like that again, you better plan on staying gone. Because if I find you, I’ll end you.”

Now it was Dakota's turn to snort. "I thought I was the murderer between the two of us."

"Nah. I decided we're going to be the cute but crazy murder-couple. What do you say?"

"I say... let me take you on another date?"

My heart fluttered in my chest even though there was still that nagging anger in the back of my head, reminding me that not everything could be forgiven and forgotten within the blink of an eye.

"Yeah," I said after a while. "Yeah, okay."

And I really hoped that it would be.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

DAKOTA



This was either the best or the stupidest idea I'd ever had; there was no in between.

Taking a deep breath, I started my truck, sparing one last glance to the middle console where all the snacks were. Like *all* the snacks. I'd bought so much yesterday that even Bailey's assortment from two weeks ago paled in comparison.

So yeah, I might've gone a little overboard, but I needed to make this right. At first, I'd thought about maybe sending Bailey flowers or other small gifts to his place of work. Well, actually Liam had suggested that, and I'd have almost gone with it if not for Bailey telling me he didn't want gifts but honesty and reliability. Which was actually a lot harder to give him than a couple of gifts.

He wants you to put in the effort, I told myself. He doesn't really care about those sweets and snacks. But he will care about the fact that you went out of your way to get them.

Hopefully.

And then there was the whole date-idea thing.

On Monday evening, I'd thought it was a stellar idea. He was still mad, so he needed a valve to let out his emotions. I knew what I usually did when I was mad — I went outside and chopped wood until every muscle in my arms screamed in agony. But I couldn't very well tell Bailey to chop up my firewood. It wouldn't be a fun or thoughtful date if I made him work for me — even if the orchard had done exactly the same thing. Except for the fact that we'd gotten to keep the apples,

and I highly doubted Bailey needed firewood for his apartment.

I crossed the town line, getting closer and closer to my first destination: Bailey's apartment.

Then we'd be off to our actual date. The drive took more than an hour, so I was expecting Bailey to take off his shoes like the little lunatic he was. That was okay, though; there was a blanket I'd placed on the passenger seat in case his feet got cold.

The closer I got to his house, the faster my heart beat inside my chest. This was it. My last chance. If I screwed up today, I wouldn't get another one.

So... it was time for some truth bombs, no matter how much I wanted to just keep them to myself.

Upon seeing Bailey standing at the curb, my nerves spiked, yet a part of me relaxed at the same time. He'd shown up and was waiting for me.

And *holy shit*, he'd taken my advice to dress in casual or workout clothes to heart. I'd expected loose jeans or sweatpants — not yoga pants. Yes, they were loose fitting, but they were also a light gray and didn't do much to hide anything. Not that I minded. Not at all.

Bailey pulled his phone out, glanced at it, then started looking from one side to the other, wrapping his arms around himself. He was wearing a deep purple tank top and some kind of sweater jacket that clung to his arms and torso and looked like it was made out of thin t-shirt material. He had to be freezing.

I stopped the car right in front of him and reveled in the wide smile that lit up Bailey's face as he saw me. He quickly opened the door and climbed inside my truck.

"Ugh. It's fucking freezing," he told me, shivering.

Immediately, I put on the heat and nodded towards the passenger seat he was already sitting on.

"You're sitting on a blanket."

Bailey raised his eyebrows but hoisted himself up from the seat, staring at me in disbelief as he picked up the cozy blanket.

“Do you always have a blanket stored away in the car?”

I chuckled. “Nope.”

Well, I did, but not a comfortable fleece one. Rather a thick but itchy wool blanket that I kept in the back of the car in case of an emergency.

“Oh.” Bailey’s smile softened into something warm. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.”

I maneuvered the car back on the road but kept watching Bailey out of the corner of my eye. He spread the blanket over himself and let out a small, happy sigh. Then he put his left foot on his right knee and started unlacing his boots.

I chuckled.

“Aren’t you going to ask me what the fuck I’m doing again?” he challenged me with a laugh.

“Nah. I already know I’m going on a date with a crazy person.”

He shrugged, still smiling as he took off his shoes. “Well, I’m going on a date with a grumpy axe murderer.”

I can’t help but huff out a laugh, a weight lifting off my shoulders. Fuck, sparring with him felt so good. “I told you I’m going on a date with a crazy person. That just drives my point home.”

Bailey giggles, then eyes the array of sweets next to him. “Did you rob a candy shop?”

“First you think I’m an axe murderer, then I’m a mercenary or an FBI agent or whatever, and now I’m a robber. What will you come up with next?”

“Well, I wouldn’t have to come up with outrageous ideas if you’d just tell me what you did for work.” Snagging a pack of Twizzlers, he winked at me.

I didn't think I'd laughed as much in the past year than I had in Bailey's presence. "Not gonna lie, I'm a little afraid you'll break things off once you realize my job is really boring."

Bailey just smiled and placed his hand on my upper thigh, squeezing lightly. "Are you really afraid I'll think that way or are we still joking? I get the feeling we're not, but I don't want to make things awkward if we are."

Oh, how I had misjudged him when I'd first seen him.

"You're pretty blunt," I said, smiling at him to let him know it wasn't a problem. Quite the contrary, it was... refreshing. "It's a little bit of both. I like my job and I'm good at it, but it's what most people consider boring as fuck and definitely not as out there as axe murderer or mercenary."

Not in the slightest. Most people used my job title to describe others as stuck up and uptight, and looking at it from the outside, a couple of years ago that probably would've been a fitting description for me.

"Come on, just spill it." Bailey's thumb stroked my thigh. "Honestly? I don't care what you do for work. And believe it or not, I'm well aware of the fact that not everyone can have such an exceptionally cool job as I do."

I laughed, the tension inside me shattering into tiny pieces. "I'm an accountant, mostly for small businesses in the area."

Bailey smiled at me. "You're right. I wouldn't have pegged you for an accountant. You really don't look like one."

I shrugged, keeping my eyes firmly on the road to be able to get the next bit out. "Well, up until two years ago, I fit the description. I'd worked my way up to CFO of a pretty big company in New York City, but then..." I trailed off, the tension snapping back in place. "I needed a change," I finished lamely. This was not the right time for such a heavy conversation. "So I packed my stuff and moved away from it all."

Bailey giggled. "And became the axe murderer in the woods, luring in small business owners with the promise of

huge tax returns only to murder them in your garden shed.”

I let out a deep belly laugh. “You’ve figured out the truth. Now I can never let you go.”

“Play your cards right and you might never have to.”



Half an hour and an endless string of chatter later, I finally took the last turn and stopped the car in front of a big, wooden building. The right side featured big windows, allowing us a view of the rustic but nice inside where various tables and booths were placed.

“A restaurant?” Bailey looked at me with raised eyebrows. “You told me to dress casual or ready for a workout to take me to a restaurant?” He giggled. “That’s certainly a new one.”

“It’s more like a bar than a restaurant, and we definitely can grab a bite to eat later, but I wanted to do something else first.”

Smiling, I nodded towards the big wooden sign right above the entry.

Bailey gasped.

“Axe throwing? Are you fucking kidding me?” He started jumping up and down on his seat, his hands clasped over his heart. “That’s... that’s...”

A horrible idea? Incredibly stupid? Dangerous?

“Dakota, that’s *perfect*. Like literally so fucking perfect. Thank you.” One moment he was grinning at me like the mad man he was, the next moment, I had my lap full of Bailey, his arms wrapped around my neck, peppering me with kisses. My arms snaked around him and I pulled him flush against my chest, burying my nose in his hair, letting out a relieved sigh before pulling my head back a bit.

“I was afraid you’d think it’s dumb.” There, I was trying all this communication and honesty shit.

“It’s hilarious. You know, you’re this big grump with an epic resting frownyface, but under the surface, you’re so funny. It’s amazing.” He beamed up at me, his blue eyes sparkling with so much emotion it was hard to hold his gaze. But at the same time, I didn’t want to look away. I never wanted to look away from him.

And for the first time since he’d given me one last chance on Monday, I was starting to believe I might not blow it; that I might be able to make this weird thing between us work.

“Do I even want to know what you mean by resting frownyface?”

Bailey giggled, pressing a quick kiss to my cheek right above my beard. “Probably not. No, definitely not. Just don’t ask.”

Okay then. I wouldn’t ask. I’d just stay like this forever.

Well, until Bailey moved, which unfortunately took only another few seconds. Then, he was off my lap again and jumping out of the car.

“Your shoes?” I asked, looking at his bare feet in horror.

He smiled, looked down to his feet, and wiggled with his toes, completely unbothered. “Oops. I guess I’ll have to put them on, right?”

“I doubt they’ll let you handle an axe without wearing shoes.”

Bailey just shrugged, walked around the car, and climbed back in on the passenger side. “To be fair, I highly doubt my sneakers would do much to protect my feet from an axe.”

Looking at my steel toed shoes, I bit my lip. Should I have told Bailey to wear something like that? Then again, I doubted he even owned steel toed shoes.

“It’s fine.” Bailey watched me with his head cocked to the side. “I promise I won’t throw an axe on my foot, so you can stop worrying about it already, ‘kay? Because I want to go have fun and throw axes at... things.”

“Targets,” I said. “Bailey, we’re going to throw axes at targets.”

“Bo-ring,” he sing-songed, then giggled again. “But okay. Today, you’ll show me how to throw an axe and we’ll practice with a target. Next time, we’ll just build a throwing range in your garden and throw axes at fun stuff.”

What had I done?

I got out of the car and had to break into a sprint to catch up with him. “Wait... what do you consider fun stuff?”

He just smiled deviously at me. “Don’t worry about that. You find out what we need to build a throwing range, and I’ll take care of our targets.”

Somehow that wasn’t exactly reassuring, yet I had no doubt that I’d actually end up building an axe throwing range in my backyard if Bailey batted his pretty eyes at me.



“Noooo!”

What the fuck?

“How the hell did you manage to get the axe stuck in the ceiling?”

Maybe I shouldn’t build that throwing range after all. Or I needed to build it far away from everything else. Far, far, *far* away.

“I don’t know. I followed your instructions!”

“If you’d have followed my instruction, your axe would be sticking in the target, not in the ceiling. How do you even manage that? You threw it with both hands, and the ceiling is like twelve foot high.”

Bailey hid his face in his hands, his slim shoulders shaking. He’d lost his ridiculously thin jacket about half an hour ago and was tempting me ever since with his loose fitting tank top that almost showed his nipples. I wanted to tug it

down just an inch, and... I couldn't get a boner here. Especially not now since I'd probably have to call the manager over to confess about Bailey's... mishap, even though I really had no idea what he'd done. He'd thrown it with both hands over his head, just like I'd shown him for the past twelve times. With the right technique, it shouldn't even be possible to get the axe in an upward motion.

"I'll have to call Stan over," I grumbled.

"I can do it," Bailey offered, but I just shook my head.

Stan wasn't the friendliest of guys, and I didn't want Bailey to be attacked for a minor — or not so minor — mishap. These things happened. However, blinking up at the ceiling and the handle of the ax, I couldn't help but wonder how often these things happened.

"I think I can see a few other notches up there," I told Bailey. "So you're not the first one."

Bailey pouted for a second, then giggled. "That's a shame. Being the first one to do dumb shit like that is a real accomplishment. Now I'm just a nobody who's bad at axe throwing."

Shaking my head at his antics, I extended my hand. "What do you say about calling the axe throwing part of our date a day and transitioning to the eating part? My arms are starting to feel sore."

They didn't, but I'd seen the way Bailey had winced the last time he'd raised the axe. He was getting close to his limits.

Grabbing my hand, he pulled me towards the exit. "I know you're lying about being exhausted, but I'm hungry so I'll let it slide. By the way, after I've seen you throw a fucking axe and hit the bulls eye time and time again, I'm even more convinced the whole accountant thing is just a cover for your real job."

I laughed, putting an arm around his shoulder and pulling him close.

"Of course you're thinking that."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

BAILEY



Seeing Dakota fidget was weird. In the short time that I'd known him I'd seen him uncomfortable, angry, sorry, sad, happy... I'd gotten a glimpse of almost every emotion there was, and never once had he sat there and fidgeted in his seat.

Instead, I'd seen him brush his fingers through his beard or tug at his hair. But not being able to sit still for even a second? That was my routine — and quite frankly, I didn't like seeing him like this. Especially since nothing was wrong.

I mean, we were sitting in a very rustic roadhouse-chic bar that was made out of a hundred percent wood — seriously: floor, walls, ceiling, furniture, it was all made out of the same kind of washed-out brown wood — and waiting for greasy burgers. It wasn't a classy date in some kind of fancy restaurant, but we'd been having fun and that was far more important. In my opinion, the date had been going well right up until the moment we'd sat down in the small booth in the back corner of the bar.

Now he was jittering so badly I was almost surprised the table wasn't vibrating.

“What's up, Dakota?” I finally asked after the server who'd brought us our drinks had left. “Because you're starting to freak me out. Like, I'm glad you weren't that nervous when we were throwing axes; otherwise, my axe in the ceiling would've probably been the least of our problems, but yeah... where's my stoic grump?”

At least he stopped fidgeting. Not that he looked any less tense — quite the contrary, the blood draining from his face made him look like he'd pass out any moment.

“Dakota?” I repeated, carefully reaching out and placing my hand on his forearm. The skin beneath my fingers was colder than I'd expected and did nothing to reassure me that he was fine.

Maybe he'd caught a stomach bug or the flu or something?

“I'm fine,” he finally said, voice so hoarse his words sounded like a whisper. “But you said you didn't want gifts, you wanted honesty and reliability, so I'm... I guess I'm trying to gather the courage to be honest with you and maybe explain myself a little.”

My heart constricted in my chest. “Oh, Dakota, you don't need to...”

“But I do,” he insisted, giving me a shaky smile. “You were right about the honesty part. I haven't been honest with you about quite a few things, and I hope it won't change anything, but if it does, I understand.”

Blinking, I held onto him a little tighter, just in case he wanted to pull back. Because I wouldn't let him. I'd licked him, so he was mine.

So, I did what I did best and sent him a reassuring smile and waited until he was ready to go on with whatever he felt like he needed to tell me.

“Do you remember when I asked you about my profile on that dating site?” he finally asked, his eyes searching mine. “You wondered if I was drunk when I'd entered the auction because I didn't remember anything I'd put on there?”

I nodded slowly, raising my brows at him.

“The truth is: it wasn't me who was drunk. My friends were. And I didn't put myself up for auction, my friends did. I'd never ever voluntarily enter an event like that — and my friends know that. Which is why they only told me about our date three weeks ago. Up until then, they'd let me believe we'd go camping for a weekend. Then they tried to guilt-trip

and blackmail me with the money going to charity.” He swallowed, his jaw tensing. “This is definitely not a conversation for a second date, but I know one thing or the other about being a queer, homeless teen, and my friends are well aware of that fact and used it against me.”

Squeezing his arm, I inched a little closer to him. My heart went out for him and anger ignited in my gut. That was a really shitty thing his friends had done. To Dakota, and ultimately to me, too.

“So you’re trying to tell me that in reality, you aren’t a grumpy grizzly but a cuddly teddy bear?” I asked, winking at him to ease a little bit of his tension.

And it worked. Dakota barked out a laugh but shook his head.

“Sorry to get your hopes up. I’m definitely still a grumpy bastard, but I’m usually not this angry. Or I’m trying not to be. I had a bit of an anger issue back when I worked as CFO, but I quit that job, did a lot of therapy to work through stuff, and... that’s also not second date material and not the point. The point is: before meeting you that Friday, I spent a whole week hating your guts. I didn’t know you, but in my mind, you were this sleazy guy who got a perverse kick out of buying people like cattle. And when I met you, I tried holding onto that hate. I’m a pretty stubborn guy, you know? The last thing I wanted to do was to have to admit that you weren’t that bad. Because in my mind, that would’ve implied that what my friends did wasn’t that bad.”

“But it was,” I whispered, close enough to him now that I could rest my head against his biceps. “I’m sorry, I know they’re your friends, but we already established I’m a pretty blunt guy, and... forcing a date on you with emotional blackmail? It makes me want to... I don’t know. I’m not a violent person, so I don’t want to punch them, but... oh yes! It makes me want to *glitter bomb* them.” Dakota bellowed out a laugh, put his arm around my shoulder, and pulled me flush against his side. His body heat seeped into me, and I took a deep breath, inhaling his woodsy scent and the barest hint of sweat.

“Please do that... I’d love to see their reaction.”

I laughed. “I just might. But seriously, you liking me isn’t an absolution for their actions, and you have every right to be pissed at them.”

Gradually, Dakota relaxed, his whole body sagging a little in relief. “I know that now. But during the weekend? I was so confused and still angry and hurt, and... it was just too much. I really didn’t want to like you, but you were so... you. Funny, happy, and the last person on earth who would ever seriously bid for a person for nefarious reasons. Even that first night when I lay in bed and watched the TikTok videos you did for work, I felt protective of you.”

“Wait... you watched what now?” Giggling, I shoved against him, not moving him even an inch. “You pervert.”

“I’m not a pervert! I wanted to... investigate your job. But that’s not the point. The point is there were a lot of conflicting feelings at war inside of me, and maybe a few insecurities, too. And I let those feelings get the best of me. I want you to know that ghosting you was killing me, okay? I missed you like crazy.”

My heart skipped a beat and I looked up at him, searching his eyes for a sign he was kidding me. “We only knew each other for two days.”

Dakota chuckled low. “Yeah. It’s crazy, isn’t it? I sound like a teenager who’s in love for the first time, but it’s the truth. I missed you so damn much, and I felt so bad for ignoring you.”

In love? Had he just said... he’d definitely said those words. Granted, in a comparison, but that was semantics.

Telling someone on their second date they were in love with them was too much — exactly the thing I’d do. My heart fluttered in my chest and my whole body broke out in goosebumps.

He was perfect.

Literally perfect. Well, apart from the ghosting thing, but it sounded like that was firmly behind us now.

“Bailey?”

“Huh?” I asked, blinking up at him, meeting his piercing blue eyes. A shiver ran down my spine.

“Were you listening to me?”

I blinked again, wrecking my brain trying to remember anything he’d said after the teenager in love part, but I came up empty. There was nothing there, just static noises.

“I’m sorry, I’m still kinda hung up on the whole in-love-like-a-teenager thing,” I admitted, grinning up at him. Then I realized what I’d just said. “I mean, not that I want to imply you’re actually in love with me. But, like, it’d be totally okay if you were, but also if you weren’t, and...”

“Bailey?” Dakota grinned at me.

“Yeah?”

“I’m not sure if I already am in love with you, but I can definitely see myself falling for you. Actually, I think I’m at least halfway there.”

Blood rushed in my ears, and everything but Dakota faded into the background. There was only him and me, his tender smile, and the way his eyes widened as I climbed onto his lap and pressed my lips against his in a fierce kiss. It took only a second, then his arms wrapped around me and pulled me against him, almost crushing me against his chest. His chest heaved, and I wasn’t sure if he was shaking or I was or both of us were. And I didn’t care. I only cared about him.

My sweet axe murderer with the hard shell but oh so gentle core.

“Dakota?” I whispered against his lips.

“Hmm?”

“Do you think we can get the burgers to go? I kinda want to be alone with you and do things with you, but I’m afraid neither the bartender nor the customers will appreciate the show.”

He shook his head, his hair hitting my face in the process. “You’re impossible.”

Out of his mouth, that definitely sounded like a compliment. I kissed him again before I reluctantly climbed off his lap. Turning back to face him, I gave him a wicked grin. “Oh, just for the record, I’m at least halfway in love with you, too.”

Then I got up and hurried towards the bar to change our order into a to go one, Dakota hot on my heels, growling at me, and just like that, I knew that we’d be fine. Some things were just meant to be.

EPILOGUE



ONE YEAR LATER

DAKOTA

The crunching sound drove me fucking insane. Crunch, crunch, crunch, a bag of chips crinkling, lips smacking, and then the crunching started all over again. And I didn't even want to think about the crumbs he was getting all over my truck. *Again*. Because Bailey was a snacker. As soon as our trip was supposed to last longer than an hour, he had an array of snacks packed and was ready to get rid of his shoes as soon as his ass hit the seat.

"I'm so excited to go back. Do you think we'll make it to the apple butter making class this time?" Bailey asked, giggling. "I mean, not that I'd have a problem missing it if you fuck me into the mattress again."

Oh yeah, and he was still a talker, too. And an over-sharer. Nothing about that had changed since last year – and I was still as irritated and weirdly charmed by his antics as ever. More than that, I loved him for the way he was so unabashedly himself.

"We'll see," I said, shrugging. Honestly? I couldn't care less if we attended any classes at all or if we spent the whole weekend holed up in our room, picking apples or walking Crispin. I still didn't understand why we desperately needed to visit the exact same orchard on our one-year anniversary. There were a thousand other orchards in our state alone, and on our way here we passed at least a dozen. "Remind me again: why did we need to book a room at the same orchard as last time?"

Bailey rolled his eyes at me, his smile still firmly in place. "Because it's romantic. *Duh*." His face softened a little. "I know you don't care, but that weekend changed so much for me — well, for us, really — and I just want to celebrate it where it all started. Look at it this way: at least this year you

are here voluntarily and haven't been sold off by your best friends."

Huffing out a laugh, I shook my head. "I don't think they'll ever do anything like that again."

"They better not. You're off the market."

Raising my eyebrows, I shot Bailey a meaningful look because he knew damn well that I'd meant something else. "Two words: glitter bomb."

Bailey cocked his head, his big blue eyes looking at me with complete innocence. "Is it two words? Or is glitterbomb one word? No, I think you're right. Two words."

"Bailey. That's not the point I'm trying to make."

Blinking, he bit his lip, playing the whole innocence-thing up, but I knew he was full of shit. "I have no idea what you're hinting at. And even if I had the inkling of an idea what you mean, I just want to remark that glitter isn't really that bad. There are pages online that let you send dog shit to someone. Oh, and elephant poop."

"So you want to tell me my friends should be glad you didn't send them shit instead?" I snorted. "Please, I want to hear you tell them that."

Bailey giggled. "You just have to give things a positive spin. You should try it one day. It certainly worked on you."

Nodding along, I bit my lip to keep myself from smiling. These days, I did a lot more of that. I still wasn't considered a happy person by any means, but there were a lot more reasons to smile in my life. Namely, my boyfriend and my dog. Said dog was sleeping peacefully in his crate, snoring loud enough to be heard over the music.

"Wait... did you just say you manipulated me into agreeing to this weekend trip?"

Bailey just smiled — and shoved another handful of chips into his mouth, crunching away. "Well," he said, taking a big gulp of soda, "first, manipulating sounds incredibly negative. I highlighted positive aspects. For example, that we'd be able to

stop at that burger place you love so much — *twice*.” Shaking the almost empty paper cup from *that burger place I loved so much* that was once filled to the brim with diet coke, he giggled. “And I made good on that promise.”

I groaned, rubbing a hand over my head. He’d played me. The little shit had really played me. But for some weird reason, I wasn’t annoyed. Amused, yeah. And there was the warmth in my chest that spread through my whole body whenever Bailey did something to trick me into stuff I didn’t want to do but would ultimately end up liking.

Just like this trip.

I just had to bitch about it sometimes.

“Oh, look, there are the first meadows!” He excitedly pointed at yet another meadow filled with row after row of apple trees. I had to admit, the colors were pretty. Everything was different shades of green and the apples were such a bright red that they almost looked like they were glowing in the afternoon sun. “Do you think they’re Crispins?”

“What?” I raised my eyebrows and shot him a glare. I had fucking *known* that there was something behind that weird-ass name list of his. I just hadn’t been able to figure out what. And then he’d never brought it up. “What did you do?”

“I might’ve thought it’d be cute if you named your dog after an apple variety.” Looking over his shoulder, a font smile spread on Bailey’s face as he looked at my — well, officially my, but in reality it was definitely our — dog. He tucked a strand of his golden hair behind his ear and beamed at me. “So, I might’ve googled apple varieties and printed out a list with options.”

“You mean to tell me you didn’t really want me to call my dog *Spartan*?”

He laughed freely, the sound sending a tingling sensation down my spine. “Oh god, no! Honestly? It was just a funny idea, and I hadn’t expected you to go for any of the options. I definitely thought you’d realize what I was doing since I suggested *Granny Smith* or *Pink Lady* — for a male puppy.”

I groaned, internally facepalming myself. Because no, in that moment ten months ago, I hadn't realized what he was doing. "I thought it was weird."

But weird tended to be Bailey's normal. There wasn't much that could still faze me. *Always expect the unexpected* was kind of the motto of this relationship.

"So Crispin is named after an apple variety."

"Maaaybeeeee." Bailey giggled. "Okay, no. Definitely. But you love his name."

I really did.

So, I just gave him a half smile and shrugged. "It's not bad."

It was better than not bad.

"Yeah. Oh, look. There, that's definitely one of their meadows!" Jumping up and down in his seat, Bailey pointed at a meadow that definitely belonged to the orchard. How I knew that? There was a big-ass sign saying *Alcott's Apple Orchard* right in front of it. And there was a colorful mix of people picking apples in the background. Great, they already had their first activity going on.

"It is." I gave a short nod.

"Perfect. I'll have to ask if they have Crispin apples. Oh, or what other kinds of apples they grow because, you know, we already talked about getting a brother or sister for Crispin."

"I said we might one day get a brother or sister."

"Semantics. Besides, I just want to be prepared."

The mischievous smile on his face told me that one day wasn't that far off anymore.

I turned into the driveway of the orchard, taking a deep breath to brace myself for all the things that were to come this weekend. Annoying guides. Ridiculous classes. Other couples who would probably make me want to turn into a real axe murderer.

But the thing I wasn't braced for was the little pang I felt in my heart upon seeing the big white building housing the B'n'B or the small shiver running through my body seeing the bench under the big oak tree.

I'd never admit it out loud, but maybe Bailey was right with the whole it being a special place thing.

"Let's see if they got the honeymoon suite ready for us."



They did.

Of course they had. Bailey had specifically booked it because it was just as special as us being here in the first place. And, as he'd told me with a bright smile on his face, this time, it wasn't scandalous at all that we had to share a room — it was something we were doing all the time. I was still waiting for the moment Bailey realized he'd moved in with me. All his stuff was over at my place — even his kitchen gadgets like the dehydrator he'd bought after our weekend getaway last year. Hell, I'd bought him a damn dresser solely for his clothes. He'd filled it over the last two months, but he still hadn't uttered a single word about him never being at his place anymore.

Well, I happened to like it this way.

As Bailey unlocked and opened the door, the smell of freshly cut apples hit my nose. It took me every ounce of strength not to roll my eyes because seriously? Now they even apple-scented the rooms? What was up next? Making the guests wear apple hats upon entering the B'n'B? Would the honeymoon suite soon be equipped with apple flavored lube and condoms? The fact that I wouldn't put it in the realm of impossibility was kind of terrifying.

"Oh look," Bailey said, pointing at a big, comfortable looking couch that definitely hadn't been here last year. I knew that because this couch actually looked like you could sleep on it. Gone was the small leather sectional. "Just imagine if they'd had this sofa last year."

Crispin ran after Bailey, and I dropped his leash to hurl all our suitcases into our room.

“Actually, I don’t think I want to imagine what would’ve happened if we hadn’t shared a bed last year,” I said, shrugging. “I kinda like the end result.”



“Sean,” I bit out as I was the guy standing in the middle of a circle made up of couples that tended to be a lot older than me and Bailey. Of course, the fucker who’d kept flirting with Bailey last year was at it again.

And if the way his eyes lit up as he spotted Bailey were any indication, he remembered him.

Fuck that shit.

Wrapping my arm around Bailey’s waist, I firmly pulled him against me, pressing a soft kiss to his temple.

I wasn’t a caveman and didn’t need to stake my claim by ravaging Bailey right here on the grass or pressed against an apple tree — no matter how much I might want to do that — but a little PDA never hurt anyone, right? Just to remind that slimy sleazeball that he’d caught us fucking right through our check-out time which meant Bailey had been taken last year, just as he was taken now.

Crispin was trotting along, sniffing here and there, tail wagging as he spotted an apple on the ground and happily bit into it. Internally sighing, I clicked my tongue and signaled for him to come over. That damn dog loved apples. Unfortunately, apples didn’t love him. Well, the apples probably didn’t care, but Crispin’s stomach wasn’t a big fan of his namesake.

“Bailey,” Sean said with a smile on his face that faltered a little upon seeing me. “And your...”

“My boyfriend, Dakota. And our dog, Crispin.” Bailey grinned at him, his smile almost making me lose my glare. That, and the fact that he’d called Crispin ours in front of other people.

“Sure. Right. You were on this blind-date charity thing last year, right? I thought it was just a weekend thing.”

Rolling my eyes, I spoke up. “No. When Bailey bought me, it was for good, you know? I’m never going to escape that guy.”

Bailey elbowed me gently. “Like you’d want to escape.”

I made a thoughtful face and stroked my beard. “Hmm, I guess you’ve grown on me.”

“Naaw.” Bailey smiled up at me, practically glowing. “You’re so sweet.”

Okay, so maybe I shouldn’t add the *like a fungus* part.

Got it.

Sean grimaced, which made my lips curl into a satisfied smile. “It’s... great you’re still going strong. And amazing that you chose to come back. Well, I need to get this show on the road. Do you still know where to find everything?”

I nodded towards the woven baskets that were placed under a particularly big tree. It wasn’t like the concept was that complicated. Grab a basket, go out, and pick as many apples as you can or want.

“How many do we need to pick for you to be happy?” I whispered into Bailey’s ear, making him shiver.

“At least twenty.”

“Twenty apples?”

Bailey giggled. “Twenty pounds — but ideally, we’ll manage thirty or forty. I’m prepared. I have the dehydrator set up and chocolate just waiting for the apples to be dipped in it.”

Heaving out a sigh, I slightly knocked my head against his. “The things we do for love.”

Bailey wrapped both his arms around me and beamed up at me. “Naaw, you love me.”

“I do.” Like I’d never loved someone before.



BAILEY

Cute couple's activity planned: check.

Romantic dinner booked: check.

Amazing, secluded spot for my proposal during sunset: check.

Engagement rings...

Oh fuck.

My heart started racing as I patted myself down even though I knew there was no way I had the black, velvety box hidden anywhere on me. Nope. Too risky. Dakota occasionally liked putting his hands in my pockets to grope me, and while it'd certainly be hilarious and unforgettable for him to find the ring that way, I had put so much work into this whole thing, I wouldn't screw it up like that.

But that meant the rings were still in the suitcase. Wait, no. The suitcases had already been unpacked by Dakota. Had he found the ring box? In my opinion, I'd found an amazing hiding place for it, but what if he'd found it by accident? That would ruin everything.

Pursing my lips, I crossed the room, ripped open the closet door, and looked for my shoes. A sigh escaped me upon seeing the beautiful, black ankle boots that made my butt pop but were uncomfortable as hell neatly placed in a row with the other shoes on the bottom of the closet.

I grabbed the right one and shoved my hand right in, sighing with relief as my fingers hit the firm velvet.

Still there.

Carefully, I pulled the small box out of my shoe, the smile returning to my lips upon having it safe inside my fist.

Engagement rings: check.

There really wasn't anything to do but wait for Dakota and Crispin to return from their walk.

Which was bad because that meant I had plenty of time to think about this. Again. And again.

I knew Dakota loved me. Even if he wouldn't tell me all the time, I'd know it. It showed in everything he did. In the way he was grumpy with everyone but me — and Crispin, but he was a dog, and everyone loved dogs. In the way he told me to be safe whenever I went to work. In the way he had my favorite rom-com and a bowl of popcorn ready when he knew I'd had a taxing workday. In the way he bought me gifts he knew I'd love. Lip gloss. Panties. Colorful hoodies and blouses. Things my exes never bought me because they were too loud, too feminine, too extra.

But Dakota didn't just barely tolerate those parts of me, he embraced them. Cherished them — without thinking I was fragile or less than.

Still, he might not say yes to a proposal.

But I needed to try because patience wasn't my strong suit. And I'd already waited for almost a year to pop the question. Hell, I'd pretty much known he was it after our second date in that dingy axe throwing place and bar. So, for me the question was a long time coming.

But what if he wanted to be the one to ask?

What if he was on a different timeline?

Shaking my head, I flopped down on the bed, the ring box still clutched in my hand, tempting me to open it for the hundredth time since I'd gotten it from the jeweler on Monday. My fingers twitched, and my breathing picked up as I visualized the rings in front of my inner eye.

I knew exactly what they looked like. I'd had them custom made, and it'd taken a fucking long time until I'd found someone who was willing to work with me. In fact, I'd had to start searching on Etsy to find someone fitting.

Fuck it. I needed to see them one last time — and then I needed to get dressed or we'd be late for the apple butter making class. Because yes, this year we were actually going to make it.

Popping open the box, my heart skipped a beat and a shiver ran down my spine. My skin prickled hot and cold with anticipation and fear as one word dominated my mind.

Beautiful.

Dakota's ring was truly stunning: polished, gleaming silver with an inlay of apple wood on the left side while the right side had small carvings in it, giving the ring texture and a more masculine feeling. The dents of the carvings were somehow blackened, like the silver was matted just in those places.

I loved it — maybe even more so than I loved my own version. Mine also featured the applewood inlay, but it was slimmer with a few zirconia's added to give the ring a sparkling, more elegant look. The pair would still match — but it'd match each other *and* our personalities.

The only thing that was missing was Dakota saying yes.

The clicking sound of the door being opened ripped me out of my thoughts and admiration of the craftsmanship, dousing me with fear and stress. Closing the box, I frantically looked around for a hiding space within reach.

Paws scratched on the hardwood floor and Dakota's heavy steps came closer and closer. The door fell shut, and I was still lying in the middle of the fucking huge bed. I wouldn't even be able to reach the nightstand without scrambling suspiciously, and I couldn't hide the box inside my clothes since the only thing I was wearing was a pair of lacy panties.

No, no, no, I chanted, tears threatening to spill. This wasn't going to happen this way! I just needed to...

“Bailey?”

In a desperate attempt to hide the box, I shoved it beneath my pillow, throwing myself on top of it just as Dakota rounded the corner, his hair tousled from the September breeze, cheeks a little red, a fine sheen of sweat glistening on his forehead, which he proceeded to wipe away with his signature flannel. God, he was so fucking hot.

“Hi,” I said, raising a hand and waving at him. Oh fuck, he’d know something was up. My voice sounded squeaky like one of Crispin’s toys. And the waving thing? Way over the top — even for me.

He proved my concerns right a second later. “Are you okay?” he asked, heading straight for the bed, a frown on his face. “Why aren’t you dressed yet?” Dakota blinked, shaking his head. “God, forget I asked you that question. I rather like you waiting in bed for me in nothing but those panties. Definitely something I could get used to.”

I laughed, trying to shake off the nervousness that made my skin itch. “I guess I could be talked into that,” I flirted, winking at him.

Dakota growled, his eyes flashing, his hand twitching in my direction. Then he shook his head. “I thought you wanted to go to that stupid apple butter making thing. Crispin and I hurried back to be on time.”

Right, my plan.

Cute class.

Fancy dinner.

Romantic walk.

There’d be time for sex after we’d done everything on my list.

“I do. Sorry, I think I might’ve snoozed off a little.”

Lie. My whole body was buzzing with energy and nerves, the thought of falling asleep right now was ridiculous.

“Yeah, I get it. Your week was hell.” He placed his hand on my back, right above my ass, his warmth seeping into me, making me automatically relax and press my back against the touch. Slowly, his hand stroked over my spine, all the way up to my neck where he squeezed gently, eliciting a small gasp from the. “I know you’re stressed.” Back down he went, but this time he wasn’t stroking with his whole hand, just his fingertips were dancing over my skin in a barely-there touch. His calluses were a stark contrast to my own soft skin, and I

loved to feel his roughness. “You can relax now.” His hands glided back to my shoulders with firm pressure. “I’m here to take the stress away.”

A moan slipped past my lips as he dug his fingernails into my shoulders and lightly scratched over my back. I arched my back into the sensation, goosebumps spreading everywhere his nails went. Up and down, left to right, small circles. His nails left a path of pain that turned into a pleasant warmth within seconds.

“Dakota...” I gasped, my cock twitching inside my panties.

I had a plan.

Class.

Dinner.

Walk.

“Let me make you feel good,” he breathed against my ear.

“But...”

“We still have time, I promise.”

Closing my eyes, I gave up on my half-hearted protests. He was right, we still had a little time, and this felt just so, so good...

His hands were everywhere on my back, his nails sometimes digging into my skin, making white hot flashes of pain shoot down my spine and right into my dick, sometimes scratching me with a featherlight touch until I was floating on a cloud of warmth and a prickling sensation on my scalp.

“More,” I moaned, rubbing my cock against the bedding.

“Hey!” Dakota slapped my ass, sending another wave of pleasure through my body. “You’re supposed to relax.”

And we were supposed to be on our way to that apple butter making class. Right. But...

“Please...” I wiggled my ass, knowing he wouldn’t be able to resist me. “I’d be a lot more relaxed if you made me come.”

Dakota let out a low chuckle. "I guess you're right."

I nodded eagerly. "Yes. Besides... you can't let me walk into the class with a boner, can you? I mean, Sean is the one who's teaching it."

I knew the next swat was coming for riling him up like that. And it did. Three hard slaps in fast succession lit my ass on fire.

"Fuuck!" It was too much. Almost. My whole back was burning, my ass was burning, and my cock was begging for attention.

A nagging part of my brain reminded me about my plan, but it didn't seem that important. Nothing bad would happen if we missed the first ten minutes of class. We'd just have to make this quick.

Turning around, I eyed Dakota, who was wearing way too many clothes. Aka all of them.

"Strip," I told him, waving my hand at him. "We don't have much time."

Rolling his eyes, he got rid of his flannel and t-shirt in one swift motion. "If you wouldn't insist on attending these stupid classes, we'd have plenty of time." But there was a fond smile on his face that told me he didn't really mind. It was just the way he was.

His boots followed next, and within a minute, he was hovering over me, completely naked.

"Please tell me you're still prepped from last night." He lowered his head, his hair tickling my nose as his lips searched mine.

Without waiting for an answer, he pressed his lips to mine, taking my mouth in a deep, wild kiss, eradicating every thought from my mind. There was just him and me. His hard cock, his hands, his beard scratching against my cheek. His breath hitting my face, his leg nudging mine apart.

A distant click, and then a finger sliding between us, dodging my cock and balls and going right for my entrance.

I hissed at the coldness of the gel, then moaned as his finger slipped inside of me.

Dakota really wasn't wasting any time at all — and my heart warmed at the thought of him making this quick for me. Because I wanted to do the class. Not him. I knew he didn't care about it.

A second finger joined the first one, stretching me wide, pumping me in a hard, fast rhythm, bordering on painful and too much but never actually toeing over the line.

Then his fingers were gone. The next moment, he grabbed me by the hips and my world spun around me until Dakota was under me, his hard cock pressing against my hole, already slick and ready to go.

Biting my lip, I looked down at my boyfriend and the sexy smirk splayed on his lips.

“You really want to make this quick.” He winked at me before pulling my hips down. The tip of his dick slipped past my ring of muscles, and I threw my head back, sucking in a breath as the sudden feeling of fullness and an edge of pain overwhelmed me for a second. Dakota didn't let up, though. Slowly and carefully, he pulled me down while raising his hips, impaling me on his cock in one motion like I knew he loved it.

“Fuuck, Bailey,” he groaned as my ass hit his groin.

I let out a weak chuckle, still trying to catch my breath as the pain slowly faded away and pleasure took over. Carefully, I tried swirling my hips, but Dakota's fingers dug into my ass and hips, keeping me still for a moment longer.

A bead of precum leaked from my tip and slowly ran down my shaft. Everything in me wanted Dakota to grab my cock and pump it, but I knew he had other plans.

Once he'd gotten his bearings, he raised me a little, then pulled me back down on his cock, forcing me into a quick, hard rhythm. My mind spun, my cock twitched, my thoughts swirling around the thought that he was using me for his pleasure. It was all about what he wanted. His rhythm, his

intensity, his movements — and I fucking loved it. Nothing to worry about, nothing to think about, and my usually loud and busy mind just... quieted down.

I only needed to feel. Feel the way his cock hit my prostate over and over again, the way his fingers kept digging into my skin, the way he thrust his hips up, burying himself inside of me to the hilt with every thrust. The way my thighs burned, the way his chest felt beneath my fingers. The way his nipples hardened as I rolled them between my fingers. How his cock got even bigger and impossibly harder inside of me, how he pulled me down, his whole body tense beneath me just before his cock started pulsating inside of me. How one hand grabbed my cock and started pumping hard and fast, making me tumble over the cliff just seconds after the first burst of come had hit my insides.

White, hot pleasure crashed into me, robbing my breath, my sight, and every coherent thought.

When I came back to it, Dakota's hands were back on my hips, carefully guiding me off his cock, his eyes firmly set on my face until I gave a weak nod and willed my legs to work so I could climb off of him and lay down next to him, my hand drawing circles in my release on his stomach.

“That was...” he started, then shook his head.

“Incredible?” I suggested.

Huffing out a laugh, he nodded. “Yeah, but also... really uncomfortable.”

I started nodding but stopped as his words hit me. Uncomfortable? How in the world could it be uncomfortable for him if we were lying in a soft bed and he was the one running the show?

“I don't know what they did with the pillow, but I could swear there was a hard edge underneath digging into my skull... there!” To my horror, he triumphantly pulled the velvet black box out from under the pillow and showed it to me. “I knew I felt something off.”

His forehead knitted into a frown as he studied the small, black box containing the engagement rings like it was an alien object he'd never seen before, turning it around in his hands, looking intently at every single side before slowly opening the box.

I was frozen in horror as my carefully laid out plan went out the window and I was left with no idea what to do.

Next to me, Dakota sucked in a breath, and I saw his eyes widening, gaze fixed on the gleaming rings placed on the dark blue velvet inside. It felt like an eternity until his eyes searched for mine, a thousand questions written on his face.

“Bailey...”

“Well... this definitely isn't how it was supposed to go,” I told him, my heart beating in my throat. “I had everything planned out, you know? Take you back to the orchard for our anniversary, do the class we missed last time, have a romantic dinner with you, and then pop the question while watching the sunset from beneath an apple tree. Trust me, it would've been romantic as fuck.”

And now my proposal included the word fuck. *Great.*

Dakota just smiled at me, his eyes ping-ponging between the ring and my face, and I couldn't help but giggle.

“But maybe this is more fitting. You don't care for that class, anyway, and it's kinda meaningful that we're missing it again because we were busy fucking, soo... I know we haven't talked about marriage at all. I know you're the grumpy kind and an accountant at that and you would probably ask for tax reasons or some shit like that. I know you might not even be interested in getting married, but... I love you. I've known you're it for me for fifty weeks now, and I'm done waiting for it to be not too soon to ask. If you want something, go and get it, right? So, I want you, Dakota. Forever. Always. I want your resting frownyface to be the first thing I see when I wake up and for it to be the last thing I see before I fall asleep. I want to spend my life living with you in your house in the woods pretending you're an axe murderer even though I know you're a big softie — at least for me. And I want everyone to know

that you're mine. So, I guess what I want to say is... will you marry me?"

For a moment, I was sure he was going to say no. He certainly was studying the rings like they were the key to all secrets in the universe. "Is it made with apple wood?" he asked.

I giggled. "Of course. What other kind of wood could it possibly be?"

His eyes met mine, and there was a sparkle in them. "You're impossible, Bailey. Please, never change."

"Not going to, but don't you want to answer my question? It's a pretty important one, and I'm starting low-key freaking out over here."

Dakota snorted, then carefully took his ring out of the box and slid it over his finger. I let out a gust of air upon seeing that it fit perfectly. Sneaky measurement taking while he was asleep for the win!

"Does that answer your question?" he asked.

I rocked my head from side to side. "I know you're a quiet guy, but yes is only one syllable, and I know you're capable of one-syllable answers."

Laughing, he pushed me on my back, taking my face between his hands. "Yes," he whispered. "Yes, I will marry you." Then he gently kissed me, his lips telling me all the things he hadn't said out loud.

Sighing, I melted into the mattress, my heartbeat finally slowing down in relief as the tension of the past weeks was lifted off my shoulders.

"Oh, Bailey?" Dakota said, a devious smile on his face. "Please promise me our wedding will be apple-free."

Giggling, I shook my head. "You know I can't do that."

His long suffering sigh made me laugh even harder. "Yeah," he said, his voice soft and fond, betraying his words. "That's what I was afraid of."

THE END



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to the amazing Sweetheart Escape Group Chat. Upon entering the Collab last year, I'd have never imagined how fun this project would be, and I love how positive and supportive you all are. So thank you for always being there, for always cheering me up, and for being as awesome as you are.

A big thank you to RS McKenzie, because without you and your ideas this whole project wouldn't exist – and I can't wait to see what other (more or less) crazy ideas you'll come up with in the future. Please know, that you can almost always sign me up for them.

Thank you to Alphabitz Editing for not being fazed by my crazy schedules.

And a big thank you to you, the readers, and the love you keep showing my books and characters.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ray Celar lives with her husband, daughter and two cats in Southern Germany.

When she was six years old, she proudly declared she'd be an author one day, and that dream never changed. She was declared "most likely to ever publish a book" in her yearbook and only four years after her graduation, this statement and her lifelong dream came true — though she still isn't sure whether she should send a copy of her books to the teacher who nominated her for that title.

If she isn't chasing after her daughter through the apartment, she's probably translating books, writing books or procrastinating doing any of those things by watching too many DIY-videos online — she might even be working on one of the DIY-projects she picked up.



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