



*Never  
Have  
I Ever*

D J JAMISON

# NEVER HAVE I EVAN

GAMES WE PLAY #1



DJ JAMISON

**Never Have I Ever**

**Games We Play**

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Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content suitable for mature readers.

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# CHAPTER 1



## EVAN

“No. UH-UH.” CALISTA SNAGGED MY ARM AS I TRIED TO SLIP past her, my laptop bag slung over my shoulder. “Where are you going?”

“Bathroom?”

“Nope. You arrived late and you haven’t had a drink yet.” She lifted her red plastic cup to illustrate as if I wasn’t aware of what a drink looked like. “No way you need to pee again.”

“Well, the kitchen’s that way too...”

Around us, noise rose and fell in waves of chatter, laughter, and background music. My right eye twitched. My free time was scarce, and I had so much work to do. I could hardly do it in the middle of the party, but if I locked myself in Calista’s spare bedroom, then maybe the night wouldn’t be a total waste.

“We’ve talked about this, babe. You need some work/life balance. That means you don’t bring your work to a party.”

I didn’t fight it as she relieved me of my laptop bag. But I did whine a little. In my defense, it had been a long week already. “I don’t know why I keep coming to these things. It’s not like I ever meet anyone new.”

“Maybe that’s because you don’t really try.” She arched an eyebrow at me. “If you stop hiding yourself in corners, you might find a cute guy to flirt with. I think it would do you some good.”



My hackles went up. “Why would it do me good? I’m fine as I am.”

“Maybe if you were happy.” Calista wasn’t one to sugarcoat the truth. “You work all the time, babe. Isolating yourself might be easier, but easy doesn’t equal happy.”

“I’m happy,” I protested weakly.

Calista didn’t bother humoring me with a response. She lifted my laptop bag. “I’ll put this somewhere safe.”

“Oh, but—”

She was already gone, weaving her way through the throng, smiling brightly as friends stopped her to talk, ever the butterfly. Unlike me.

The noise swelled, and my eye twitched again. I should have stayed home. But since I hadn’t...

I headed for the kitchen to get a drink. If I couldn’t beat them, the only thing to do was join them. The trouble was, I’d never been particularly good at socializing. My head wasn’t wired for small talk.

A collection of liquor bottles and mixers covered the center island. A cooler full of beer sat next to the refrigerator. People wandered in and out, stopping to refill their drinks or grab a snack before leaving again. Most of them headed back to the living room, but a few went out the back door—smokers and vapers. Calista would be out among them before long, I was sure. There wasn’t a vice my best friend hadn’t tried at least once. She’d even smoke cigars if someone brought them, while the stench made me want to vomit.

“That...is a lot of alcohol,” someone behind me said.

Someone with a deep voice that seemed to roll through my body and leave me tingling. What sorcery was *that*?

I looked over my shoulder to see a few people in the kitchen. Most of them were average. One was...*not*. He was tall, so freaking tall. Six-foot-three, maybe? He had the broadest shoulders I’d ever seen in my life. Dark brown hair, thick eyebrows that were somehow sexy instead of unkempt,

and stubble that darkened his jaw—only serving to accent how pink his lips were above it.

Somehow, I knew he was the one who'd spoken.

*Okay, Ev. This is it. A sexy man is in front of you. Flirt!*

“Did you want to make a drink?” I asked. “I can get out of your way.”

I inwardly sighed. That was *not* flirting.

“No, I’m good, thanks.” He glanced up, and when his gaze locked onto me, my heart skipped. “I should find the bathroom.”

“Let me take you to the bathroom,” I blurted.

He stared at me, nonplussed. Wow, that sounded *bad*.

“I mean, *show* you where it is.” I laughed nervously. “We haven’t met, right? I feel like I know everyone in this town, but I don’t know you.”

His lips quirked in amusement. “Pretty sure we haven’t met. I’d probably remember you.”

Butterflies erupted in my stomach. That was a good sign, right? It had to be a good sign.

“Are you new in town?” I asked as I led him to the bathroom.

He smiled, but there was an edge to it as if he wasn’t entirely happy. “Something like that.”

“Ah, well, I can play tour guide if you need one. Not that Granville is big. You can find everything in, like, two nanoseconds.” I chuckled again, my face warming. “But it’s more fun to see new places with a friend, right?”

That wasn’t bad. I was getting the hang of this flirting thing.

My sexy stranger didn’t say anything right away, and I nervously babbled to fill the silence.

“I don’t really get out much myself. I’ve been building this study date app. Basically, imagine that a dating app and a

tutoring app had a baby. That would be *my* app. Cool, huh? I got the idea after— Well, no, you don't need to hear all that." I laughed. "But, um... Do you go to college? I need more beta testers."

"No."

"Oh. Well, that's cool. I don't either. None of my friends do. Which makes it kind of challenging to find beta testers, but —"

"I just need to hit the head," he interrupted. "Then I need to find Calista."

"Oh." My heart sank. If he was looking for Calista, my chances were nil. He was probably into beautiful curvy women, not skinny geeky guys. Dumb to think I had a shot with a guy like him. Calista had gotten into my head with all her talk about trying to flirt. "Okay, well, the bathroom is right here."

I gestured toward the door on our left.

He stepped inside. Just before he closed the door, he put the final nail in my coffin of hope: "Thanks, kid."



"THERE YOU ARE." Calista found me after I'd returned to the kitchen and poured a Coke. I wasn't in the mood for a hangover, and no one would know there was no rum in it. "Are you *still* getting that drink?"

I bristled. "Yeah, but only because I talked to a guy."

She brightened. "Oh, yeah? How did it go?"

For some reason, I didn't want to tell Calista the guy was more interested in her. If they ended up dating, that would be super awkward. I said the other thing that I was fairly sure was also true.

"I bored him with app talk."

She sighed. "Oh, Ev."

“I know.” I rolled my eyes. “He was probably straight anyway.”

She slung an arm around my shoulders. “Probably dumb too.”

“He seemed nice.”

She gave me a little shake. “Nice and dumb.”

I laughed, but it was strangled by the lump in my throat. It was silly. I’d talked to this guy for all of two minutes. He wasn’t my Prince Charming. The trouble was, I wasn’t sure there *was* a Prince Charming for me.

“Come on,” Calista said, herding me toward the living room. “We’ll distract you from your heartbreak.”

“Ha-ha. I think I’d have to actually exchange names with a guy before I can reach that stage.”

“Not always,” she murmured.

“Maybe I should just go home.”

I didn’t relish the thought of watching the sexy stranger flirt with Calista. She already got all the local guys. How was it fair she got the outsiders too? Not that it was Calista’s fault. She was gorgeous inside and out, with wild curls, curves for days, and a personality that could brighten any room. She was trouble, yes, but always genuine.

When we reached the living room, our friends Kevin and Darren were locked in an argument about...makeup?

“You have to contour,” Kev was saying impatiently.

“Why would you want to, though?” Darren said.

“Because it helps shape—”

“I’m just saying you don’t need all that, Kev. You have a great face already.”

Kev stopped short, blinking in surprise. Sounding a little flustered, he said, “I like makeup. If this is some straight guy thing...”

“No, man.” Darren sat forward earnestly. “The lipstick and the eyeshadow. I get all that. It’s pretty. I’m just saying, accent what you’ve got, you know?”

“Am I hearing this right?” I murmured to Calista.

She snickered. “We better break this up before Kevin thinks Darren is hitting on him. I cannot handle any more dating drama.”

Kevin replied to Darren. “That’s flattering, but I think if you watched some of the videos I’m talking about, you’d see the difference.”

Darren looked disconcerted. “I’m not *flattering* you. I didn’t mean—”

“Hey, you two!” Calista said brightly, interrupting before things could go sideways. There was no way Darren was interested in Kevin or any other guy. He got around just as much as Calista did. And always with women. “I finally found Ev, and he needs a distraction.”

Kevin glanced over. “A distraction from what?”

“Just a little flirting fail,” she said lightly.

I grimaced. “I’m fine. It wasn’t a big deal.”

I had pretty much never met anyone worth flirting with in Granville, ever. And this guy was the hottest person I’d ever laid eyes on in my life. And I’d legitimately never even *tried* to flirt with anyone before...

But no. No big deal. Another sexy stranger would come along in approximately a century. It was *fine*.

“Eh, you need to be distracted from work anyway. You have app on the brain 24/7.”

Probably because I got to actually *work* on the app so little. Besides the difficulty in finding enough beta testers, I was pulled between work at my grandfather’s hardware store, volunteering as the Tech Club adviser at the high school, and the freelance work that actually paid decently.

Calista got Kev to shove over, then pushed me onto the sofa beside him and sat on my other side.

“Who was the guy?” Kev asked.

“I don’t know. Someone new here.”

Kevin perked up. “Oh, really. Tell me more. What did he look like?”

“This isn’t really distracting me.”

“Well, sorry. I’m bored, and New Guy is more interesting than Darren’s opinions on makeup.”

“Yeah, I’m bored too,” Darren said. “But I don’t really need to hear about some guy. He can’t be any hotter than *me*.”

“Oh, are you jealous?” Calista teased. “I’m sure Evan could practice flirting on you.”

I shuddered. “No way.”

“Hey!” Darren objected. “You know you want me.”

I rolled my eyes while Kev snorted. “Not even a little.”

“I call bullshit!” Darren’s expression turned crafty. “But that’s okay. I know how to get the truth out of you two liars.”

He glanced at Calista. “You in?”

They seemed to communicate wordlessly, two equally devious grins spreading across their faces.

“Oh no,” Kev muttered. “I know that look.”

“Time for a drinking game!” Darren announced, popping up from the footstool he’d been perched on. “I’ll grab some tequila.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” I asked. “I thought we decided no more games like that after the Truman-Lyle debacle.”

“Who the hell says debacle?” Kevin muttered half under his breath.

I sent him a look. *I did, obviously. Excuse me for having a good vocabulary.*

Darren scoffed. “I never agreed to that. Besides, everything worked out great.”

Darren and Calista had sideswiped two of our friends with a truth bomb. They had *not* been happy to be put on the spot, but they had ended up happily coupled up. So maybe all’s well that ends well?

Calista waved a hand. “The statute of limitations is up. It’s been more than a year.” She smirked at me. “Relax, Ev. We won’t get you in trouble with any other friends.”

Naively, I’d joined their game last year, thinking Truman and Lyle would be better off knowing the truth. I was honest to a fault, which sometimes did not endear me to people. I’d learned that getting in other people’s business was not a good idea.

Kevin spoke up. “Fine, I’ll play. But *no* Two Truths and a Lie, since we’ve seen how that turns out.”

“Yeah, and no Truth or Dare,” I added. “I don’t need to see Calista’s boobs again.”

Calista smacked my arm. “My boobs are fantastic, thank you very much.”

Darren grinned. “Hell yeah, they are.”

“TMI,” Kevin trilled.

“Don’t worry, I’ll keep the girls wrapped up.” Calista smiled a little too innocently. “We can play Never Have I Ever. That should be safe enough, right?”

I didn’t trust that smile. But I wasn’t in love with my best friend—or anyone else. I really couldn’t think of any hidden truths they could spring on me, either. We knew each other way too well.

Darren returned with the liquor bottle and some empty cups. A few people settled around the coffee table to join the game, but the evening was already winding down, so it remained a small group. I wondered, briefly, what happened to the hot guy. Did he decide to leave without finding Calista?

“Okay,” Darren said as he retook his seat. “I have just one rule. We each have to call out things we *know* someone at this table has done. Otherwise, Ev will be sober all night.”

“Sad but true,” I murmured.

“Aw, poor sweet Ev,” Calista said, ruffling my hair. “We’ll think of a way to include you.”

“Lucky me.”

“Can you believe I saw Truman and Lyle in the kitchen and they didn’t want to play with us?”

“Shocking!” Calista said, her voice loaded with sarcasm.

Darren let it wash over him. “Seriously. I thought we were friends. I’m a little hurt.” He gave a dramatic sigh, then rubbed his hands together. “Okay, let’s make this fun. What to do first?” He tapped a finger against his lips in thought, then straightened. “Ah, I know. Never Have I Ever wanted to kiss...me.”

There was a chorus of groans.

“Seriously?!” Kev asked, exasperated already.

“It’s the only way to get the truth out of you liars,” Darren said.

Calista rolled her eyes and drank. I reluctantly joined in, because I was gay and Darren was hot. To my surprise, Kev did not.

“Ohhhh!” Darren laughed. “I knew it. I’m hot to men and women.”

“You’re awfully proud of that for a straight dude,” Kevin said.

Darren shrugged. “Hot is hot, man. I’m secure enough to take the compliment from anyone.”

Darren had always been cool about my sexuality. But then, a lot of his friends were queer. For a small town, Granville had always been pretty accepting. My friends hadn’t blinked twice when they found out I was gay. It was never exactly a secret. I couldn’t have hidden it if I’d tried. My family had also been



unsurprised when I announced at my twelfth birthday party that I'd wished for a boyfriend when I blew out the candles.

Announcing my wish had been a big mistake, of course. No wish can come true when you do that, and as such, I'd never had a boyfriend. Or that was what I told myself. It had nothing to do with me being a geek who didn't know how to flirt his way out of a paper bag. Not to mention, I stood five-foot-six, had zero muscle mass, and was pasty white from all my time indoors. Guys weren't exactly lining up for me.

A few rounds of innocuous questions went by. We drank, and then we drank some more. I didn't have to drink as much as Darren and Calista. They'd done all number of things that got called out. But eventually, the trash talk started.

"Never Have I Ever wanted to fuck a computer," Kev said, giggling. Then, "Drink up, Ev. That one was for you."

"Ha-ha. Never Have I Ever wanted to fuck Darren's dad," I shot back. "That one's for *you*."

"Ohhh, the burn!" Calista cried, even as she picked up her shot glass and drank.

"What the fuck?" Darren sounded disgusted. "Calista, seriously, you've hooked up with *me*. How you gonna say you want my dad?"

She shrugged. "Like father like son." She grasped his face and squeezed it playfully. "You're both just so cute."

He pulled away, looking annoyed. "Yeah, well, Never Have I Ever made out with one of my friends' *sisters*." His gaze seemed to bore into hers. "And *liked* it."

She flipped him off. "Nice try. I'm not drinking to that because it's not true."

Truman's sister *had* kissed Calista—while she worked a kissing booth at one of our town festivals. But Calista had never mentioned that she enjoyed the kiss. Darren was probably just being obnoxious, but if he wasn't... That would put my best friend in a whole new light. I'd never known her to date anyone but a guy.

Darren smirked. “I call bullshit. Otherwise, why did you \_\_\_”

“Bzzt!” she interrupted. “That’s enough. None of us are drunk enough to listen to your lesbo fantasies, especially Evan. But I know how to get him to drink.” She turned her gaze on me. There was a gleam in her eye that made me nervous. Then she said, “Never Have I Ever been a virgin at nineteen.”

There was a round of laughter and “ouch!” aimed my way. I rolled my eyes, unsurprised she’d thrown me under the bus to escape attention. It wasn’t as if my friends didn’t all know this, so it wasn’t a big deal.

Then I heard the front door close. I glanced over, catching sight of my sexy stranger. He stood just inside the entryway, a backpack over his shoulder.

I gaped at him for a moment, then felt myself redden as I realized that he couldn’t have possibly missed what Calista said. As if my fumbling flirting hadn’t been bad enough. As if him calling me *kid* hadn’t already mortified me. No. The universe thought it was also necessary to spell it out for him.

Evan Moore is a *VIRGIN*.

*Kill me now.*

## CHAPTER 2



## DAWSON

I WATCHED THE CROWD OF FRIENDS, ALL CLOSE ENOUGH TO trash talk and laugh together, and my heart clenched. It had been a long time since I'd felt that connected to anyone. Mostly my own fault, but the void seemed to yawn even wider tonight.

The Never Have I Ever game moved on. I didn't want to intrude, but eventually I got tired of standing at the door.

"If this is what you all do for fun around here, I might need to turn around and leave again," I joked.

Calista was the first to react. "Dawson, holy shit!"

She jumped up from the sofa and hugged me hard.

"Surprise," I said with a shaky laugh.

"What are you doing here?"

I put a hand over my heart. "Ouch. Where is the love?"

She swatted my arm. "Oh, you know I adore you."

Darren, who I recognized from my last visit to Granville when I was eleven, got up to give me a bro hug with a painful backslap. "Hey man, long time no see."

One by one, the few people I'd hung out with as a kid greeted me warmly, as if it hadn't been more than a decade since any of us had talked. After Darren stepped back, Truman and Lyle approached. They'd been best friends for as long as I'd known them, and judging by the way they touched one another, their relationship had shifted to an even closer one. A

tall, slim, almost androgynous guy named Kevin also said hi, though I didn't remember him quite as well.

Thankfully, Calista pulled me aside before I could become overwhelmed. I didn't want to look like an unfriendly asshole, but I was too exhausted to socialize.

“What are you doing here?”

“Uh, well, that depends on you.”

“What does that mean?”

I didn't want to get into the details of why I had no place to stay in front of a room full of people. “Can we talk about that after everyone else leaves?”

“Yeah, of course.” She raised her voice to call out, “Oy! Party's over, so get out!”

One of her friends laughed. “Always so polite, Calista.”

“That's me.” She scanned the room. “Where'd Ev go?”

I'd watched the game long enough to know Ev was the young guy I'd met in the kitchen. He was also the guy Calista had called out as a virgin. He'd looked embarrassed when he spotted me, so I wasn't surprised he'd taken off. It was one thing for your friends to tease you, and another for an outsider to overhear your private business.

“I don't know,” Darren said.

“One less person you have to throw out,” Truman added with a little laugh.

By the looks of things, the party had already been winding down, so it didn't take long for the house to empty out.

Calista closed the door behind the last guest. “You look beat.”

I collapsed on the sofa. “Been a long day. Was hoping I could crash here tonight?”

She looked dubious. “Sure, you can take the couch. I have a spare room, but it's mostly just an extra closet. No bed.”

“I can do the couch.”

“It’s not very comfortable. How long are you staying?”

I cleared my throat. “I, uh...I don’t know. I’ve got a job, but I won’t get paid right away, so...”

“Dawson!” she exclaimed. “That’s great. A job? Does that mean you’re staying for good?”

I laughed a little at her excitement. “Well, I hope so. If my cousin is willing to put up with me, that is?”

She scoffed. “You’ll have to put up with me too, then we’ll see who’s *really* suffering.”

I snorted. “Fair point.”

“But why didn’t you tell me you were moving to Granville? You should have called ahead. Not that I’m not happy to see you!” she added quickly. “You’re family. You’re always welcome, but...you could have stayed with my mom and dad, you know? Their place is nicer.”

I opened my mouth to speak and croaked alarmingly. My eyes felt hot. My throat burned. “Shit, Cally,” I said, using the nickname I’d called her when we were kids. “I have fucked up my life so bad. I didn’t want to see anyone. Not even you.”

I’d planned to slip into town and quietly start my job before announcing my presence to family. I wanted to get my shit together before I had to face them. But after my transmission went out halfway here, draining the last of my already limited funds, I had no choice but to ask for a place to crash until I got my first paycheck.

“Oh, honey.” She took a seat beside me. “I heard about your injury. That must have been really hard. You lost so much.”

“Yeah,” I said hoarsely, though I didn’t really agree I’d *lost* anything. That implied I wasn’t to blame. “And then I went ahead and threw away everything else, too, until there was nothing left.”

Calista slipped an arm around me and rested her head against my shoulder. “There’s always something left.”

I grunted, unconvinced.

“You’re here. With me. Your life is already looking up.”

I laughed raggedly. “I’d forgotten how big your ego was.”

“If you got it, flaunt it,” she joked before standing. “I’ll get you a blanket and pillow. I can tell you’re exhausted.”

I nodded. “Yeah, thanks. I won’t be here forever, I swear. I just need a little time to figure things out.”

“Stay as long as you need,” Calista said easily. “But in the morning, you need to tell me more about this job and everything else that led you here.”

I grimaced but nodded obediently. I really didn’t want to tell Calista the full depths of my fall from grace.

Granville wasn’t just a Plan B, or even C.

It was my Hail Mary.

One last shot to get my life on track.



A CLINKING SOUND WOKE ME. I blinked into the bright room, realizing I must have slept late. Calista was beside me, clearing away empty bottles and cups from the coffee table. More clanking rang out as they fell into the trash bag.

I groaned and rubbed my face. “What time is it?”

“Around eleven. Sorry I woke you.”

I eased into a sitting position, my back protesting after a night on the saggy couch. I arched, attempting to stretch out the kinks. My lower leg ached, but that wasn’t unusual after a displaced fracture that’d required surgery and screws to piece me back together. Ironically, it wasn’t that pain that ended my college football career, but a spine injury—healed but too much of a risk for the NCAA to allow me back on the field.

*But you’re alive. Be fucking grateful.*

For a long time, I’d focused only on the negatives of my accident.

*Accident*—as if I weren't to blame. That was laughable. I never should have been on that roof. I'd known, even drunk off my ass, but I'd charged out there like I was invincible anyway and proven just how wrong I was.

"Can't believe I slept so long," I rasped. "You weren't kidding about this couch."

"You must have really needed the sleep."

"You have no idea."

"And a shower," she added.

I tipped my head toward my pit, took a whiff, and reared back. "Ugh, yeah. That's awful."

She laughed and pointed. "Bathroom's that way."

"Yeah, I found it last night. Your friend Ev showed me."

Her eyebrows went up. "Did he? When was this?"

"Before... I, uh, came in before you saw me. Wandered around a bit. After I hit the head, I went back out for my stuff."

My stuff being a backpack that held a few clothes, a laptop, and not much else. I'd mostly gone out to my car because I'd needed a breather. My fight or flight instincts had kicked in, and I'd almost driven right out of town. Not that I had anywhere to go. If I burned this bridge, I wasn't sure there would be any left. I'd end up flipping burgers for minimum wage.

"I can't believe I didn't see you come through," Calista said.

"I didn't see you either. Kinda figured you were 'busy' somewhere." I used finger quotes, and Calista hit me with a throw pillow.

I laughed. "Just tell me it wasn't with that dick, Darren."

"You've been here for like two seconds! How can you possibly know Darren is a dick?"



I met her incredulous gaze and smirked. “Takes one to know one, I guess.”

She snorted. “Okay, go get showered, smartass. I’ll make you some coffee, and then you can fill me in on everything I’ve missed over the past year.”

I forced a smile, though I had no intention of telling Calista *everything*. It was too painful to think about, much less reveal to my cousin. But I owed her the highlights at least, since she was giving me a place to stay.

“Sure. It’s a boring story, but I’ll humor you.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Something tells me your life has been anything but boring.”

She wasn’t wrong, but I really wished she was. Boring sounded like a nice change of pace from the fucking disaster I’d made of things.

# CHAPTER 3



## EVAN

**Calista: *My cousin was the hot guy, wasn't he?!***

I STARED AT THE MESSAGE ON MY PHONE, MY ATTENTION divided between the customer roaming the aisles of Moore Hardware, my grandfather's store where I worked most days, and the website I was developing for a freelance customer. The website job was particularly annoying because this client didn't understand technology and kept requesting bizarre things, things that were excessive or pointless—or sometimes even detrimental to the website running as it should.

It took me a minute to blink out of my work-fugue state and really process Calista's text. But I still didn't understand it.

**Evan: *What are you talking about?***

"Evan, my boy!" Duke boomed, jerking my attention from my phone. He was strolling down the aisle toward me carrying a shotgun plunger. Yep. A plunger that looked like a shotgun. *Welcome to Granville, Nebraska.*

I'd argued with Grandpa about stocking it—who would *want* that? Turned out, small-town Nebraska folks thought it was a hoot.

Which proved I did not have the vision for a small-town hardware business in the Midwest. Which was fine by me. Grandpa already knew my dreams did not include tools or

paint cans. I'd been building websites and apps since I was a preteen. Through online courses and tutorials—because the high school sure didn't offer much—I'd learned HTML, CSS, PHP, and javascript frameworks.

My ultimate dream was to launch an app that would be used in thousands, if not millions, of households—and I had a plan for how to do it. But if I didn't hold down the fort until Grandpa retired, he'd kill himself to keep the store open. He wouldn't let my father take over after a falling out, so Grandpa and I both pretended that Moore Hardware would last forever, while knowing its days were numbered. I think we were both hoping one of my younger siblings might take an interest so that the store could stay in the family.

Duke was still talking. “How have you gotten so big? I remember when you were just yay high.” He held his hand at waist level and chuckled. “Used to be in here, helping your grandpa sort things. You were so gosh darn cute.”

I smiled weakly. Duke said something similar every time he saw me. Small towns had a lot of advantages, but one of the curses was that pretty much everyone had watched me grow up. They all thought of me the same way, as sweet, innocent Evan.

Even most of my friends were older than me, and *all* of them were more experienced. That was what happened when you were a gay tech geek with zero game in a tiny town with limited opportunities.

That guy last night was the first time in—

*Wait a second.* That guy last night. Was Calista talking about him?! I tried to glance at my phone surreptitiously, but Duke was still reminiscing about memories of my cute childhood shenanigans.

When he paused to draw breath, I interjected in the hopes of moving him along.

“Do you need help finding anything other than the Redneck Plunger, Mr. Lattimer?”

I wasn't joking. That was the actual brand name of the product.

"Old Tom isn't here, I take it?"

"Nope."

I worked nearly forty hours a week so that my grandfather wouldn't. Tom Moore was a stubborn man, and it'd taken a bad case of pneumonia to convince him he needed to slow down. Even then, he insisted on managing the store's business affairs and opened the store every morning.

"Darn," Duke said. "I was hoping to get his professional opinion about a bathroom remodel."

I perked up. Like many small-town businesses, Moore Hardware barely stayed in the black. Even a small remodeling job would be a nice bump in sales.

"Oh, are you finally doing that?"

"Well, I don't know," he said. "It's an awful big expense. It would be nice to have a walk-in shower. Marilyn would enjoy one of them soaker tubs."

I nodded dutifully, but I knew better than to waste my energy trying to sell him on the project. Duke had been deliberating over this bathroom for two years.

"Why is everything so gosh dang expensive?"

I smiled sympathetically. Again, I didn't say anything. If I so much as uttered the word "economy" I'd be here another century.

He shook his head. "I'll keep pondering it."

"Great. So, just the one purchase then?"

"Yep. Ring 'er up!"

"Going hunting?" I joked as I scanned the barcode on the plunger.

"What?" Duke looked confused until I held up the plunger. Then he gave a hearty laugh. "I reckon I am. Water pressure isn't what it used to be."

“Say no more.”

*Really, please say no more, I thought as I hurriedly checked him out. Luckily, Duke didn't elaborate on his bathroom troubles, and after a few more pleasantries, he left.*

I snatched up my phone, quickly skimming the flurry of texts from Calista.

**Calista: *Dawson.***

**Calista: *Dawson, who showed up at the end of the party?***

**Calista: *Dawson, who says you showed him to the bathroom?***

**Calista: *Hello? Has your brain exploded?***

“No,” I moaned to myself as the truth sank in. Last night, I hadn't tried to flirt with some random guy. Or a guy who was looking to hook up with Calista. I'd flirted with her cousin. Her cousin, Dawson Woods. Whose photos I'd seen a bunch of times, now that I thought about it. He was some big football star or something. Most of the pics had shown him on the field, but there'd been one of him with a gorgeous brunette on his arm.

This just kept getting worse and worse.

I saw three dots pop up. Calista was no doubt going to continue until I answered. Quickly, I sent a reply:

***Evan can't talk to you. He died of embarrassment.***

My closest friend, who at three years older than me was really more like a big sister, responded pretty much how I expected.

**Calista: *HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!***

**Evan: *Thanks for making me feel better.***

**Calista:** *I'm sorry. I shouldn't laugh. But Ev, omg. He's like super straight. He's kind of a manwhore tbh. He was the quarterback of his football team, and probably good enough to go pro. Women threw themselves at him, and he was always ready to catch them.*

**Evan:** *Yeah, I get it. Out of my league.*

**Calista:** *Well, you don't really play for the same league, do you? But hey, at least you have good taste! Haha. I can't get over it. First time trying to chat up a guy, and you shoot for the stars! You're such an overachiever, Ev!*

**Evan:** *I hate you*

**Calista:** *You love me.*

She was right. I hated her *and* loved her in equal measure. Calista was just that kind of friend. She'd push me right to the limit, then reel me back in before I could fall. It was aggravating as hell, but it was also reassuring. Because I always knew she cared, even when she was driving me up the wall.

**Calista:** *I really am sorry it didn't go how you wanted tho, babe. Want to come over for a proper introduction?*

I shuddered. *Oh hell no.* I'd had all the mortification I could take for the year. Granville was small, but if I played my cards right, I might be able to avoid Dawson until he left town again.

**Evan:** *I'm busy for the foreseeable future.*

**Calista:** *You can't avoid him forever, but okay. I'll let you lick your wounds.*

That showed what she knew. I was the king of avoidance. Just this morning, I'd avoided my father's attempt at a lecture about how I was letting Grandpa hold me back from my dreams. And then later, I'd avoided telling Grandpa how annoying it was that he wouldn't just forgive my father and hire *him* to run the store. Dad had wanted to come back to Moore Hardware for years, but Grandpa's pride wouldn't allow it.

Being the peacemaker between two stubborn men was a difficult spot to be, but I didn't know what else to do.



## DAWSON

I TOOK A LENGTHY SHOWER, dressed in fresher clothes—fresher, but not fresh, because it'd been a while since any of my clothes had seen a washing machine—and joined Calista in the kitchen. She was smirking down at her phone while she leaned against the kitchen island that'd been covered in liquor bottles the night before. It was now clean of everything but two coffee mugs, toast, and a peanut butter jar.

Calista pocketed her phone. “You still like peanut butter toast, right?”

I took a seat on one of two upholstered barstools. “Hells yeah. I haven't had that in *forever*.”

“I don't have any bananas,” she said apologetically.

“Boo. Hostess fail.”

She flipped me off before sliding over the toast she'd slathered in delicious nectar of the gods. I picked it up and took a big bite, nostalgia washing over me.

Peanut butter toast and bananas had been a mainstay at my aunt and uncle's place. Calista and I used to eat it for breakfast in the morning *and* as midnight snacks when we snuck out of bed to watch movies or play games after her parents went to sleep. They never caught us, no matter how noisy we were. Or



maybe they'd known what we were up to. We'd fallen asleep on the living room sofa more times than I could count.

I'd visited every summer until I was eleven, when my parents got divorced. My mom wasn't close with Calista's parents, and my dad was even more of a workaholic than before. The visits stopped.

"So, spill," Calista said. "What brought you here, and how long do I get to feed your ungrateful ass?"

I swallowed a large bite, held up a finger, and guzzled down half the cup of coffee, scalding my tongue in the process. "Mm. Ow. Hot coffee."

"It's meant to be sipped." She shook her head. "I see you haven't picked up many manners since age eleven."

"Hey, I had peanut butter mouth," I said. "I couldn't speak without clearing the way."

She raised an eyebrow, clearly done with my stalling.

I sighed. "Okay, you know what happened my junior year."

Her face tightened. "I know you fell off a building, and you could have died, and your so-called girlfriend—"

"Right." I interrupted, not wanting to hear her lay out all the details. "So long story short, I couldn't go back to football."

"That must have been..." She stopped as I held up a hand.

"This isn't easy. Let me get it out."

She nodded. "Okay, go ahead."

I didn't like to think about the dark place I'd gone after my fall. I'd been upset at first, of course. But I'd done my rehab, done everything I was supposed to do to get back in the game. I'd missed so much of the season, but I was prepared to take the field by storm the next year. It wasn't too late for me.

But it turned out it didn't matter how hard I rehabbed, how hard I rebuilt my athleticism and kept my grades up through a combination of extensions and virtual courses I could take

from my hospital bed. They were never letting me back on the field with a cervical spine fracture in my medical history. It had been scary as hell, giving me temporary paralysis right after the fall, but as the swelling went down, feeling returned to my extremities. In the end, I had healed without any serious long-term effects. But it didn't matter. The risk was just too great that I'd take a hit and end up paralyzed.

They didn't tell me until the beginning of my senior year, after I'd finished rehab and thought I was ready to play again. They hadn't wanted to "demoralize" me before I was healthy. And that was it—my whole future as I knew it had gone up in smoke.

"It's been a rough couple of years. I won't lie. I went into self-destruct mode for a while. Dropped most of my classes. Burned bridges with my coaches, my teammates. Anyone who tried to help me move on. Because I didn't fucking want to, you know?"

Calista nodded, eyes sympathetic. I looked away from her. I couldn't handle her pity. "I could have gone home, but...I'd already run off Mom once. I couldn't handle her hovering, you know? And Dad... I don't know. He'd probably have been so distant I might as well be alone. I knew, somehow, that relying on them wasn't what I really needed. So I tried to pull it together. Finished my exercise science degree with summer school. Got a lead on a job at the high school here."

"Coaching?"

"Yeah. Assistant coach on the football team."

She smiled. "That sounds perfect for you."

It wasn't perfect. Perfect would be getting drafted by the NFL. Perfect would be realizing my dream. But I clamped down on those objections. I was redefining perfect. I was getting my head out of my ass.

I forced myself to return her smile. "I got lucky."

"Oh, you don't really believe that yet," Calista said. "And I understand why. Coaching in a small town probably feels just a little bit of a step down from the NFL."

“Just a *little*.”

She smirked. “You know, I lost a lot too. I was going to use ‘my cousin is an NFL quarterback’ for all kinds of cred.”

I laughed, amazed she could make me see the lighter side of my situation. I’d had zero sense of humor about it up till now, that was for sure.

“Anyway, I know it’s a change. But if there’s any place that can appreciate all you have to offer, it’s Granville. And the grannies will be ecstatic when they lay their eyes on you.”

I groaned through my laugh. “Oh, man. I forgot about the grannies.”

Granville had a high population of older residents. They tended to treat all the young people in town like their grandchildren. I’d been spoiled rotten by their cooing and endless treats while I’d visited over the years.

No wonder I’d gravitated back here. After keeping everyone at arm’s length, I’d secretly wanted that sense of family back. And I’d never felt it more strongly than in this little Nebraska town.

I lifted my coffee mug. “Here’s to appreciating me, then.”

Calista grinned, eyes dancing. “Oh honey. You have no idea what you’re in for.”

I couldn’t tell if that was a threat or a promise.

# CHAPTER 4



## DAWSON

MONDAY MORNING, I DROVE MY MAZDA MIATA TO MY FIRST day of work at Granville High. Football season had already begun, and Coach wanted me there bright and early. It was a beautiful day, and I drove with the top down, the wind in my hair. The sun shone bright enough for me to wear sunglasses. It soaked through my clothes, right into the dark corners inside me, and lit me up. For the first time in months, I felt optimistic.

My instinct was to squash that feeling. Hope was dangerous. But I forced myself to acknowledge it. To accept it. I was here for a new start, and that didn't just mean a new town and job, but a new mindset.

I passed through Granville's quaint downtown, taking in the row of two- and three-story buildings with plate-glass windows, awnings in greens, blacks, and reds, and business signs stenciled on windows, affixed to rooflines, and occasionally jutting out on flags.

*Agatha's Aged Treasures.* That was an unfortunate name. Sounded like Agatha was selling her old lady parts. *The Stag Pub.* *Moore Hardware.* *Elmer's Family Jewels.* Uh, okay. Another weird name. *Flippin' Pages Bookstore.*

And a doughnut shop called *Glazed Holes.* I choked on a laugh, and nearly hit the curb as I did a double take. I wondered if the owners were really that naïve. I didn't remember Granville having so many...*creative* business names from my visits. But then I'd been a kid, so I doubt I'd have noticed.

Before long, I left the quirky downtown behind, cruised through three residential blocks, and eventually reached the high school. For such a small town, it was surprisingly large. I'd done my research when applying for the job though: It was a 5A school because it pulled students from the surrounding rural areas. A good thing because it meant their program could support an assistant coach.

I parked in the teachers lot where Coach Mayfield had directed me, and he met me at the door. He was a bear of a man with a thick head of graying auburn hair and a bushy beard.

"Mr. Woods, nice to finally meet you," he said, extending a large hand.

I shook, feeling his strength—but also his calm confidence. My nerves settled a little. "Glad to meet you too. I'm excited to be here."

It was true. I was fucking ecstatic. Not because it was the best job opportunity ever. I'd rejected more opportunities than most people would ever get. But because of what it represented: a chance to navigate my way out of a maze of self-loathing.

"My office is just down this back hall," Mayfield said.

I followed him into a small office with two desks, a few extra folding chairs, and one big filing cabinet. Coach took a seat behind a metal monstrosity topped with a computer at least five years out of date, a tattered notebook with permanent marker labeling it *Playbook*, and a desk calendar covered in sticky notes and scribbles. I was guessing he wasn't one of the most tech-savvy coaches.

I perched on a metal folding chair in front of his desk. "I can't thank you enough for this opportunity, Coach. I won't disappoint you."

"It's better if you don't," Coach Mayfield said mildly. His eyes glinted with amusement, but I didn't miss the underlying warning.

*Don't disappoint me.*

I squirmed—just as I had as a player in the hotseat with my coach—a little unsettled. It had been a long time since anyone expected much from me.

Mayfield continued. “I talked with your coaches in Alabama before agreeing to hire you.”

I winced. “How ugly was it?”

He chuckled. “Well, they told me about your accident and the aftermath. Sounds like you’ve been dealing with a lot.”

The aftermath was a polite way of saying my complete and total meltdown. The coaching staff had tried to meet with me to discuss my options, but I’d refused after I realized I couldn’t return to the team. I’d pushed them away, along with every teammate and friend until one day I was alone with no team, no school, and no future.

Granville didn’t immediately occur to me as a solution. It wasn’t until I called Simon—an old friend I hadn’t managed to alienate—that I realized I could start fresh here, in this place I’d always loved. Simon had contacts in coaching and sports management, and for once, the fates had aligned.

Granville High was hiring.

I’d leapt at the chance, knowing in my gut that it was kismet. You didn’t ignore that kind of serendipity in life. At least I never had. The same instincts that had served me as a QB on the field told me this was the right move.

“I’m surprised you wanted me here after hearing my history, but I’m grateful. I’ll work hard to deserve the position.”

Coach Mayfield’s lips quirked. “I know you will. Despite everything that happened, your offensive coach said you were a hell of a player. Not just talented, but dedicated and hardworking. That’s what I want to see here.”

“You got it.”

“I know you were kind of a hotshot in college, and some of the kids will respond to that. That’s fine. A little hero worship

will inspire them to play harder. But I run the show. I decide your job duties, and I won't put up with diva shit."

"I'm not a hotshot anymore," I said. Honestly, I'd never felt less hotshot in my life. "I just want to move forward, and I don't know how to do that without football in my life. It's the one thing I've always been good at."

"You're already hired, Woods. No need to sell it so hard."

I laughed a little. "I'm serious."

"I know. That's why you have the job. I look forward to working with you."

I tipped my head. "Thank you."

He shoved a stack of paperwork across the desk. "District policy. High school policy. Team policy. Read them all and sign to attest to your agreement."

"Okay."

"Tax forms too. And when you're done with those, I've got plays for you to study and game footage for you to watch. We've got your Nebraska certificate for coaching ready to go, but you won't work with the team until I think you're up to speed."

I picked up the stacks of paperwork. "Yes, Coach."

I spent a few hours reading—taking a lunch break to talk game strategy with Coach Mayfield—then watched game video footage until the guys came stomping down the hall like a herd of elephants a few hours later. They were a good team, but they could be better. They had quite a few wins to their name, but they were inconsistent. With the Cornhuskers being close enough to recruit, I imagined some of these guys could find their way onto the college team. Bringing out the best in them could make a huge difference in their lives.

A difference I could make.

When I finally got to step onto the sidelines and saw that beautiful turf and all those guys in their football gear, I nearly cried.



I was finally back.



## EVAN

I HURRIED down a school hallway jammed with students on Wednesday afternoon, my laptop bag banging against my hip with every step. But I was forced to stop when a cluster of rowdy teenage guys blocked my route.

I tried to arrive before the last bell for this exact reason. Being relatively short and young, I tended to blend in with the student body as I came and went from the high school. Usually I preferred it that way. Right now? Not so much. I was already running late for Tech Club, and the vice principal was expecting an update on our project.

The administration had taken interest when they found out we were building a website/app that could connect students to set up study groups, engage in virtual tutoring sessions, share questions and notes from classes, and access additional learning tools—particularly the ones that aided diverse learning styles. Schools were antiquated in their approach to teaching. They still tried to use a one-size-fits-all approach, and the fact was, not everyone learned the same way. Our app could provide tips and tricks to help students with dyslexia, ADHD, and other learning needs. We didn't have the ability to convert every lesson for them, of course, but we could give them tools and resources to understand their own brain and what they needed to succeed.

It looked ambitious from the outside, but part of the reason I'd started this project with the kids was because there was a lot of overlap with my own Study Dates app I was building. We could use a lot of my existing work as a foundation, but tailor it for a high school. Obviously, this program would not include a dating component and had to include a lot more monitoring and fail-safes to protect against cyber bullying or other behavior that could be deemed inappropriate by the school.

It had taken some doing, but we'd built in a lot of features that prevented chat outside of very narrow parameters. Every student would use the app on a school-issued tablet or laptop and log in with a student ID number, rather than a name, to discourage friend cliques or bullying.

After spending last school year on it, we were finally ready to beta test. Which was why the VP, Ellen Simmons, wanted to hear more about it.

Unfortunately, these rowdy guys were blocking my way to the front office.

"Guys. Excuse me. Hello?"

I went right, and someone stumbled into my path. I ducked left with the same result. *Damn it.* More roughhousing. More shouts.

"Coach is gonna bench your ass, man," one said.

"Nah. They need me to play."

"Someone thinks an awful lot of himself."

"Because I'm the best. I'm badass." Hip thrusts and laughs ensued, and I'd hit my limit.

"Hey, badasses," I shouted. "Please stop blocking the hallway. I've got somewhere to be."

One flicked me a dismissive glance. "Whatever."

"No," a deep voice called from behind them. "Not whatever. Let the man pass."

The teens immediately responded to that authoritative tone, turning and looking. As they spread out, I caught a glimpse of him.

*Oh no.*

My heart tripped at the sight of the shaggy brown hair, thick stubble, and broad-as-hell shoulders that had first drawn me to Dawson at Calista's party.

"What are you doing here?" I blurted, horrified.

He smiled a little quizzically, probably confused by my reaction. Maybe I'd get lucky and he wouldn't even remember me. I'd never wished so hard to be unworthy of notice.

"I'm the new assistant football coach," he answered before flicking a glance toward the guys. "Shouldn't you all be headed to practice?"

No. That couldn't be. Dawson was just in town for a short visit. Calista would have told me otherwise—I sucked in a sharp breath, barely hearing as Dawson sent the wayward players on their way. *His* players. Because he was their coach.

Dawson Woods was in Granville to stay, and Calista hadn't told me. That evil wench!

Students still clogged the halls, but they flowed around Dawson as if he were an unmovable stone in a river, clearing the path ahead for me. Except for the fact that I couldn't bring myself to stop staring and step around him.

A reel of Saturday evening's most embarrassing moments played through my mind.

Dawson losing interest as I rambled about my app project.

Dawson calling me *kid* before closing the bathroom door in my face.

Dawson looking on as that stupid drinking game revealed I was a virgin.

I wanted to sink through the floor all over again.

"I didn't think I'd see you here," Dawson said with a smirk that made my insides quiver. "You looked young, but not high school young. Should I be worried my cousin is corrupting a minor?"

"I'm not a student," I snapped, unreasonably annoyed by my reaction to him.

It was one thing when he was a sexy stranger at a party. But now that I knew he was Calista's cousin *and* apparently Granville High's new assistant coach, it was incredibly awkward.

I'd never felt such an intense attraction to anyone before. I didn't know how to deal with it.

Dawson chuckled. "I know you're not a student. It was a joke. Because we met at the party. You're the guy who—"

"No!" I blurted, suddenly terrified he was going to call me a virgin out loud, right there in the school hallway.

He looked taken aback, and no wonder. I'd practically shouted in his face.

"We haven't met," I fumbled out more quietly. "You have to exchange names to meet."

"Ah, my bad." He extended his hand. "I'm Dawson Woods, Calista's cousin. And you're Ev..."

"Evan Moore." I reluctantly grasped his hand, my palm tingling at the feel of his skin against mine. He was ridiculously handsome. So handsome it was almost hard to look at him. Which kind of ruined all those good features, right?

He smiled, jerking my gaze right back to that impossible face. *Gah*. So much for that theory.

"It's nice to officially meet you, Evan."

I wished he wouldn't say my name. Hearing it in that deep tone sent shivers through me. And I couldn't have shivers for this straight football coach who would be out of my league even if he *were* interested in men.

With my hand enveloped in his larger one, standing close enough for his body warmth to leech into me, my brain short-circuited.

"You're too hot," I blurted.

He blinked. "Sorry?"

The urge to vomit rose suddenly.

"I—I mean...I'm too hot." I pulled my hand away, my gut churning with horror. "I feel sick. Sorry, have to go!"

It wasn't much of a lie. If I didn't get out of his presence pronto, I feared I'd vomit all over him.

How could Calista not warn me that Dawson was in Granville to stay? That he worked at the high school, which I visited *every week*.

I was going to murder her.



## DAWSON

“WHAT DID YOU DO TO EVAN?” Calista demanded as soon as I got home that evening.

“Uh, nothing? I ran into him in the hallway at school, and he seemed a little sick. Is he feeling better?”

Calista snorted. “I doubt it. He threatened to unfriend me forever.”

I held out my hands, at a loss. “I didn't do anything, I swear.”

“That's probably the problem.”

I wasn't following. I replayed my conversation with Evan in my head. He'd been flustered in the hallway as the group of players blocked his way. At first, I thought he was a student they were bullying. That shit didn't fly with me, so I stepped in.

He'd been slim enough, short enough to be one of the freshmen. I'd instinctively wanted to shield him from my asshole players. But Evan hadn't appreciated my joke that he might be a student. Had he taken that more seriously than I intended?

Other than his sudden sickness, I couldn't think of anything too weird. Except that strange slip when he'd said, *You're too hot*. But clearly he'd just misspoken. He'd meant to say, *I'm too hot*. Right?

Otherwise, that would mean...

“You do know Evan is gay, right?” Calista said into my silence.

“I do now,” I said slowly. “But are you sure you should be telling me his private business?”

“Oh my god, if you’re this oblivious, maybe you *would* be perfect for him.” At my blank look, she added, “It’s not a secret. Evan is out and has been for ages. I can’t believe you didn’t notice that he was into you.”

I rolled my eyes, playing it off. “If I noticed every person who was into me, I’d never get anything else done.”

She smacked my arm. “How do you carry around that head with your ego inflating it like that?”

I grinned and shrugged. “It’s something I’ve just learned to live with.”

“Dork,” she said. “Tell me how your first few days have gone over dinner?”

“Sure.” Wasn’t like I had any friends here yet. Calista came with her own set, but she hadn’t invited them over yet, wanting to give me time to settle in, which I appreciated. Joining the coaching staff after the season started had put me at a disadvantage, and I was trying to play catchup.

“It’s been going well, I guess. I haven’t really done much coaching.”

“Well, it’s only your third day,” she said.

While Calista browned beef at the stove, I nursed a Mountain Dew instead of one of the beers in the fridge. I’d already spent too many days numbing myself with booze.

“Coach Mayfield is very particular about how practice is run. He wants me to observe and get to know all the players before I get involved.”

She glanced over her shoulder. “Is that a bad thing?”

“No,” I said slowly. “It’s just...I worry he’s going to be too controlling. I want to coach these kids, you know? I feel like I

finally have something I can offer. Instead, I'm stuck giving out water bottles and reading Coach's emails for him."

Calista laughed. "Reading his emails?"

"He hates technology. Like, *hates* it. Which is weird for me because my last coach loved that shit. There are so many programs that make it easier to share game footage and notes, not to mention test out new plays."

"Really? Well, maybe you can bring him into this century."

"If he lets me," I grumbled.

So far, his emails had been all about pep rally scheduling, getting VIP boosters good seats, and some meeting the vice principal wanted about player grades. When I'd asked about that, Coach had been vaguely annoyed, saying that a few of the players had trouble maintaining a good GPA last semester.

Calista turned to me. "Give it some time. This is a great opportunity, right? You like being back around football."

"I *love* being back around football."

"Then just take it a day at a time. You weren't quarterback in your first week of playing, were you?"

"No. Of course not."

"Coach Mayfield just needs time to feel comfortable sharing his team. He'll come around."

"I hope so."

"In the meantime, don't blow it by getting impatient," Calista said. "I'm getting used to the idea of you sticking around Granville. I'm going to be very put out if you leave. I might have to unfriend you."

She was teasing, but it reminded me of something she'd said when I first got home.

"Hey, what you said about Ev..."

She waved a wooden spoon. "Sorry. I should have kept my big mouth shut. It's not as if Evan *wants* you to know he's got

a crush. It's not a big deal, okay? He knows you're not into guys."

*Crush* seemed to be overstating things. Evan hadn't seemed as if he even liked me when we talked in the hallway. If anything, he'd been pissed to see me there. Aside from the flustered babble, when he mixed up his words, and the blush in his cheeks...

Ugh, why was I thinking about that? It didn't matter. Like Calista said, he knew I wasn't gay. No harm, no foul. I should be flattered. Evan was a cute guy—in that super-smart geeky kind of way. He had amazing cheekbones and full lips. If he'd been a girl, I would have probably—

Nope. He wasn't a woman, and I wasn't going there, even in my mind.

"I'm not worried about it," I said, disconcerted by my own train of thought. "I just wondered...why would he threaten to unfriend you?"

"Oh, that." She laughed. "Well, I teased him about hitting on you Saturday night, and I didn't tell him you'd be in town for good, so he felt blindsided today."

"Wait, what? He never hit on me."

She pointed the spoon at me again. "See? Oblivious. Just like Ev."

But that wasn't true. I'd been hit on by enough people to recognize the signs. If Evan was trying to come on to me, he was a *long* way from making his intentions known.

Not that it mattered. I wasn't interested in men.

Not even sweet geeks like Evan.



# CHAPTER 5



## DAWSON

I BLEW THE WHISTLE AROUND MY NECK, A FLARE OF PRIDE warming me. I was a real goddamn coach. It felt amazing to step onto the turf, to hold a football in my hands, to be part of something larger than myself again.

I was no longer alone and lashing out like a wounded beast.

“Okay, guys, time to hydrate,” I called as I opened a cooler full of electrolyte drinks and bottles of water. “We don’t want any of you to stroke out on the field. The boosters might complain.”

The players came jogging off the field, grabbing drinks and razzing each other about their moves during the practice scrimmage. Coach Mayfield paced a few feet down the sidelines, cell phone to his ear and a brooding expression on his face.

Quarterback Alex Rojas, in particular, was a firebrand. The kid was talented—I could see that much—but he still had plenty to learn.

“Kelley be like, where’s the ball, where’s the ball...” he mocked, turning one way, then the other while squinting at the sky in an exaggerated fashion.

“Shut up, man,” Brent Kelley, one of the team’s wide receivers said, as the other guys laughed. “The sun was in my eyes!”

“Rojas, have you ever heard the expression, ‘People who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones?’” I asked.

He looked confused. “Yeah, so?”

“So you’re dropping your arm too much before you throw the ball. You’re hesitating *and* you’re staring down your target. You know what that tells the other team’s defensive players? Exactly *where* you’re going to throw the ball.”

Rojas sputtered, “Well, that’s because of Kelley being all over the place, man.”

“The footage from several games says differently. It’s a pattern.”

Rojas huffed. “That’s bullshit. You’re here a week, and you think you know me and my game?”

“I’m just saying—”

“We all saw the news,” he cut in. “We know how you messed up your future, but that doesn’t mean you gotta take it out on us.”

How quick the tides turned. The guys had been jazzed to have me join the coaching staff. A real college football star. Now, Rojas was using the public knowledge against me. Not that the news had revealed what really happened that night—only enough to allow people to make assumptions about it.

The speculation about what happened to me was humiliating, but somehow it was still better than the truth, so I never corrected anyone’s assumptions.

I stepped up to him, chest to chest and eye to eye. “What happened to *me* is irrelevant to your game, Rojas.”

“You know what I think?” Rojas started, eyes gleaming. “I think you couldn’t handle—”

“Rojas,” Mayfield boomed from behind me, cutting him short. “Hit the showers. You’re done here.”

“But he—”

“Shut your mouth and go,” Mayfield ordered. “The rest of you, back to drills.”

“Thanks for backing me up, Coach,” I said as the guys jogged back out onto the field.

He glared at me. “You didn’t leave me much choice. Rojas will be useless for the rest of the day. That’s valuable practice time down the drain, thanks to you.”

I blinked. “What?”

“Coach Woods, when I asked you not to get involved in coaching without my oversight until you knew the players better, did you think I was talking to myself?”

“No, Coach. Rojas was giving another player a hard time. I simply pointed out he had some areas to work on, as well. I wasn’t trying to cross any lines.”

He scowled. “Well, if you’d studied my write-ups on the players, you’d know that Rojas requires careful handling. I don’t approve of what he said, but he’s easily provoked. He may be a hothead, but he’s also sensitive as hell. Criticism messes with his game.”

“But...how do you coach him if he can’t take any criticism?”

Coach Mayfield smiled wryly. “Very carefully.”

“You’re not doing him any favors, handling him with kid gloves. He’ll never be able to hack it in a college program.”

Mayfield’s eyes turned flinty. “I think you’ve done enough damage for one day. I need to focus on the team now.”

My heart dropped. “Sorry, Coach.”

“I just got a call from the vice principal. She’s all fired up about some damn computer program.”

“Okay?” I wasn’t following the abrupt subject change.

“They want us involved. A consultation or some nonsense to better tailor it to players’ needs. I don’t have time for it. So you’re going to do it.”

*Lucky me.*

I knew better than to argue. Coach was pissed at me, and maybe he was right to be. He'd asked me not to dispense any coaching advice until I'd observed the team dynamics and he gave me the green light. I'd spoken without thinking, annoyed by Rojas's grandstanding.

I was right about Rojas, but this job was too important to me to draw battle lines in my first week. I'd have to do whatever it took to get back on Coach's good side.

"I'm happy to do whatever you need, Coach."

He seemed to relax. "I'm pretty sure that's not true, but I'm glad you're a team player. Go on down to the office. They'll direct you to the right place. I'll wrap up here on my own."

"What, now?"

"No better time."

This was the equivalent of sending *me* to the showers.

All in all, not what I wanted to happen in my second damn week.



## EVAN

THE DOOR JANGLED on the hardware store, and Grandpa shuffled in with a big box of doughnuts. My heart leapt. *Finally*. I'd called him three times before he'd answered his phone.

I was running late for Tech Club. Grandpa always came in to cover the store on Wednesday afternoons. Usually, he was here early, chomping at the bit to take over. After running the store for so many years, slowing down hadn't been easy for him.

"Was having coffee and lost track of time," he said with a guilty expression. "Sorry, Ev. I brought you some Glazed Holes as an apology."

I really wish he'd stop calling them that. *Glazed Holes*. The owners, Miles and Jake, were gay. They had to know *exactly* what imagery that called to mind. They'd once had the perfectly respectable business name of M&J's—before Granville got focused on downtown redevelopment and most of the businesses rebranded themselves. Miles and Jake must have had a good laugh when they imagined innocent old ladies saying the words *Glazed Holes*. Then again, not many of the Granville grannies were *innocent*. They were far too invested in living vicariously through the younger residents' love lives.

The grannies had asked if I was seeing anyone approximately one hundred times—and always seemed more disappointed than I was when the answer was no. They'd tried to play matchmaker one summer, parading all sorts of guys through the hardware store like I was on some sort of bizarre bachelor show. None of those guys knew they were being displayed as potential boyfriends either, so it was awkward all around.

“This is Evan. Isn't he cute as a button?” one of the grannies would say. “Such good hair, and aren't his eyes pretty behind those big glasses?”

The guy of the hour would blink in confusion, then mumble something about needing to get back to work or to an appointment he'd forgotten about. He'd run, and I couldn't really blame him, though it was hard on my ego. Most of these guys probably weren't even gay. But they too knew how the grannies of Granville could be. You had to escape while you could, or next thing, you'd be hurtling toward marriage without knowing how you even got there.

The grannies had finally moved on when it was clear they weren't going to be successful, which was a relief. I hadn't appreciated being presented like a hog at the county fair. But they *had* inspired me to get contacts to show off my *pretty eyes*. It wasn't as if I had a lot of other features I could flaunt.

I hurried from behind the checkout counter when Grandpa entered, my bag already slung over one shoulder. “I was getting worried about you. I called Dad.”

Grandpa's expression turned stony. "You can leave and close the store if I don't turn up, but don't you *dare* ask your father to mind the business."

I was in no mood for their drama. "I called Dad to check on *you*, not to cover the store. But you should stop being so stubborn. Dad apologized years ago. He wants to carry on your legacy."

Grandpa harumphed.

"Whatever, I don't have time for this. Call Dad and let him know you're alive, at least."

He looked contrite. "Here, take the box of doughnuts to your club. Maybe it'll make up for being late."

"I can't carry that on my bike."

In a small town like Granville, a car had never been necessary. Why add to the earth's carbon footprint when everything was relatively close together? I'd converted my bicycle into an electric bike by adding a motor and battery. I could only go about twenty miles per hour, but it was enough to get me from Point A to B when it was too far to walk.

"Take my truck."

"Grandpa..."

"I know you don't like to drive, but you're already late, Evan."

I sighed. "Fine. Give me the keys."

Taking the truck allowed me to shave a good five minutes off my arrival time, but the clock showed I was still fifteen minutes late when I arrived at the high school. I hustled inside, running through empty hallways rather than fighting a crowd this time. All the students not staying for extracurriculars were long gone.

I slowed to catch my breath as I approached the classroom where the club met. The door was open, and I could hear voices drifting out into the hall. One much deeper than the others.

I paused, frowning. That voice didn't belong to any of my club members.

“If your adviser isn't here in two minutes, you're all going home. I'll inform vice principal Simmons that today's meeting wasn't a priority.”

My eyes bugged. *The meeting with Coach Mayfield!* I'd known he would meet with us eventually, but not precisely when. We were at the mercy of the football coach's schedule, and we'd discussed the possibility weeks ago.

I hurried inside. “I'm so sorry, Coach May—”

Dawson glared back at me from the center of the room, arms crossed over his chest and a brooding air permeating the space around his body. My club members must have felt it too because they'd all withdrawn to the far end of the classroom. There were only four of them: Warren, a senior; Zach and Robert, both juniors; and Crystal, a sophomore.

“Dawson,” I said in surprise. “Er, Coach Woods, I mean. Sorry.”

One eyebrow went up. “Mr. Moore. You're late.”

My heart quickened. Stupid thing. So he'd remembered my last name. Big deal. At least he wasn't saying Evan in that deep, smoky voice of his. I didn't want the whole Tech Club to see me quiver.

“Sorry. I thought Coach Mayfield would be meeting with us?”

Dawson frowned. “Then you'd have wasted his time instead of mine. How about you just tell me what I'm doing here so I can get on with my day?”

My heart dropped. Some mix of annoyance and impatience marred that handsome face of his. And it was all directed at me.

“Weren't you told what this was about? We're building an app for students that connects them to study groups, virtual tutoring, and other learning resour—”



“Yeah, got it,” he said, interrupting me. “But what do you need from *me*?”

I felt unaccountably disappointed. The Tech Club and this project were so intrinsically intertwined with my own mind and talents that it felt as if Dawson were dismissing me. Which was silly. I’d known all along he had no interest in me, so why should I care that he didn’t want anything to do with my work either?

I calmly put the box of doughnuts on the table, fighting to keep my composure.

“I don’t need anything from you, Coach Woods. You can go.”



## DAWSON

EVAN’S blue eyes were impossibly wide and filled with hurt. Shit. I was being a complete dick.

Mayfield’s dismissal rankled, and I’d taken it out on Evan and his club. Treated them like they were a punishment unworthy of my attention because that was how Coach Mayfield had made it feel when he sent me off the field.

I pulled out a chair. “No, really. Tell me how I can help.”

“If you’re sure...” Evan hesitated. “We can correspond through email if you’re too busy to be here.”

He was giving me an out, and I felt even shittier for it. I wasn’t too busy to be here. Maybe I’d prefer to be on the field, but it wasn’t as if Mayfield wanted me there. Practice would be wrapping up soon anyway.

“I’m not too busy.”

Evan gave a strained smile. “I know it’s your second week. You probably would rather be focused on coaching.”

That was hitting the nail on the head. He’d seen right through my asshole behavior.

I cleared my throat. “That’s not your fault.”

He nodded, seeming to accept my words, though he averted his gaze. “Everyone, gather round please. Let’s not keep Coach Woods any longer than necessary.”

The students got up, chairs scraping on the hardwood floors, and headed toward the one long table in the center of the room. Computer stations lined the walls around the perimeter, taking up most of the space. Even this table included charging ports for tablets or laptops.

“I brought apology doughnuts for being so late,” Evan said.

He flipped open the doughnut box lid, revealing rows of glazed holes and jelly-filled rolls. *Glazed Holes*. Like the name. I smirked as I looked at it. When I caught Evan’s eye, he reddened and looked away.

The kids were already converging on the box, so I snagged a jelly roll before everything was demolished by hungry teenagers.

“Okay,” Evan said, his eyes fixed on the now half-filled doughnut box instead of me. “So you know the gist. We’ve built an app for students. We’re now in the testing phase so that we can discover problems to troubleshoot and so that we can take student input about what’s working for them. We could potentially add more features or tweak the ones we do have.”

I nodded. “The school plans to put this in place when?”

Evan hesitated, glancing at one of the students. “We don’t know. It’s possible they’ll never use it.”

I gaped. “Never? But... This is a lot of work, isn’t it?”

Evan and a couple of the kids laughed. “What do you think, Warren?” Evan said with a teasing smile that lit up his eyes.

*That* expression suited him. He seemed happy and light when he looked at the student. Passionate about his work.

*Not bullied by an asshole coach.* I kicked myself again for being such a dick when he arrived.

“It’s a *lot* of work,” Warren said with feeling.

“We’ve been working on it since last year,” Robert added.

“Wow,” I said. “So, why wouldn’t it be put to use?”

Evan regarded me carefully, as if he still had his guard up. “This is a learning process for the club. It’s like any other school project. Sometimes, it’s academic in nature. So, I can’t promise that any help you give us will lead to anything tangible. My students already understand that. They’ll be able to use these skills in the future, not to mention put the experience on college and job applications. It has a lot of value.”

“Okay...but it’s possible the school will use it?”

“The school board would have to approve it. It would have to meet a lot of safety guidelines. Can’t risk cyber bullying or improper content. We’re building this app as if we’ve gotten the greenlight. We’re trying to anticipate as much of that as we can.”

“I understand. It’s not a given.”

“Right.”

“So...I’m still not sure where the football department comes in?” I quickly added, “I’m not trying to be a jerk about it. I just need some clarification.”

“Warren, why don’t you explain?” Evan said. “It was your idea.”

Warren nervously eyed me. “Uh, well, we thought the testing would get better results if we had all kinds of students involved. Not just techies like us, or uh, honor students, but jocks too.”

“Athletes,” Evan corrected gently. “We’re also talking with the drama department. We’d like to have one or two student reps from various interest areas so that all students find the app as useful as possible.”

So, really, they didn't need *my* help at all. I shouldn't feel disappointed. I didn't need anything else on my plate. Learning a team, and the coach's moods, was a lot to handle. I was rebuilding my life. But I found myself wishing I could be the one to help Evan.

Maybe I was still feeling guilty for treating him badly. I should really apologize. But here, in front of the students, didn't seem like the right time.

I cleared my throat. "Right, so you want me to rustle up a couple of student volunteers to use the app?"

"Yes."

"I'll have to run it by Mayfield," I said, cringing inside because obviously Evan had expected and probably wanted Mayfield here instead of me. Because I didn't even have the authority to give him what he needed. I added, "I'll convince him though. No problem."

As if I was the coach's favorite guy right now. But hopefully Mayfield would cool off and be in a better place to listen. I'd apologize to him too, again, more thoroughly.

"Okay, thank you. That's all we needed."

So little, and yet I'd made it into such a big clusterfuck.

I lifted the jelly roll for a big bite. At least I'd have something sweet to go with all the crow I was going to have to eat before I was back on the right side of the men at this school.

# CHAPTER 6



## EVAN

“ONE CHAI TEA LATTE.”

I startled and looked up from my tablet screen, where I’d been testing the functionality of my Study Dates app. Dawson stood beside my table with an “aw shucks” expression on his face. He rubbed the back of his neck. “The, uh, barista told me what you like to drink.”

Barista was stretching it. Miles knew just enough to operate their fancy espresso machine, but he was continually scorching the milk. I glanced over my shoulder to see him watching us with a big grin and a thumbs-up.

Gah. This town was so embarrassing.

I turned back around, hoping Dawson hadn’t seen that. “Thanks? You didn’t have to do that.”

He shrugged his big shoulders. “I wanted to apologize for earlier today.” He gestured to the chair. “Do you mind if I sit?”

I’d come to Glazed Holes—bypassing the more popular coffee shop, The Friendly Bean—for a quiet place to work. With so little income coming in, I lived in Grandpa’s spare room. Mom and Dad had my younger sisters to deal with, and this way I could have a little more privacy while contributing to Grandpa’s bills without hurting his pride.

The downside was that Grandpa could get in chatty moods. After a dozen interruptions tonight, I’d packed up my things so I could get some work done. Despite that, I couldn’t say no when Dawson stood looking at me with those shoulders and

those eyes and that *scruff*. Not to mention the sheepish expression.

“Sure,” I said. “What brings you to Glazed on a Saturday night?”

He smirked. “Don’t you mean *Glazed Holes*?”

There was a playful gleam in his eye. I gave a mock shudder. “I try not to think about what inspired Miles and Jake to give their shop that name.”

“Miles and Jake. So are they...”

“A couple?” I asked. “Yeah.”

He nodded. “Cool.”

My tablet chimed with a notification, and I glanced down. A message had come in, but it was just a “Dick” pic from Truman being a goof. He, like most of my friends, had been corralled to help beta test the Study Dates app. Not to be confused with the app I was building at school. *So many projects, so little time...*

Truman had sent me a picture of Dick Cheney and the message, ***Does the idea of teaching this Dick make you hot?***

“Are you busy?” Dawson caught sight of the screen. “Wait, what is *that*?”

Before I could answer, another Dick came in. This time, it was Dick Van Dyke. ***Maybe you’re more into classic Dick?***

I hurriedly typed out: ***Omg go away.***

Dawson, who had the unfortunate ability to read upside down, laughed. “Uh, do you need some privacy for this?”

My cheeks went hot. I was constantly blushing around this guy, and I was over it!

“No! No. This is my idiot friend giving me a hard time about my app.”

“So, it *is* your app.” He leaned over the table for a better look. “Wow, it really looks like a dating app.”

“Because it is.” I flipped my tablet over, and Dawson took the hint to drop back into his seat.

“This isn’t the app project at school.”

“Right, it’s the one you told me about at the party.”

I couldn’t hide my surprise. “You remember that?”

“Well, some of it. You were talking kind of fast.”

I groaned and hid my face in my hands. “Geeky babble. It’s a thing.”

He chuckled. “Don’t be embarrassed. I think it’s really cool you have something you love so much. I can relate. I totally nerd out over football too.”

I dropped my hands. “I can’t see you ‘nerding’ out over anything.”

“Hey, I’ll have you know I was an honor student in high school.”

“Gotta keep your grades up to play.”

“Well, sure, but I didn’t do the bare minimum. I always liked school.” He shrugged. “I got a little sidetracked in college, what with the party scene...”

“And being the big football star?” I teased.

He sagged, smile flagging. “Yeah, that too.”

I knew some of what had happened to him. Calista told me he fell off a building, though she didn’t know all the details. He’d been injured pretty badly, and she’d been incredibly worried. But he and his parents were close-lipped about exactly what happened. I’d gone online and found a news article about his fall. There were reports that he’d been drunk, but no specifics.

If that *was* true, I could understand why he might not want to talk about it.

“So, hey, tell me more about your app,” he said.

I let him change the subject. I was always happy to talk about my app, but I didn’t want to bore him. “You sure you



want to know?" I asked. "I drive most of my friends batty with this stuff."

"Yeah. Lay it on me."

"Okay. So, I got the idea for the app because I got messaged on a hookup app to help some guy with his college trig."

"You did not!"

"I did!" I laughed. "I'm not sure I should admit to this story. Kind of embarrassing to be hit on solely for my math skills."

"What did you do?"

"Eh...I helped him figure out his math problem, then told him to message back if he was interested in more than my tutoring." I shrugged uncomfortably. "He never did."

"What an ass."

I smiled a little. "Better than a pity hookup, I guess?"

"If you were on a hookup app..."

"What?"

Dawson looked curious, but he shook his head. "Nope. Not my business. Continue the story."

"That's it, really. It gave me an idea to create a dating app that would connect college students with Study Dates. Like, it's basically the ice breaker to allow you to get to know one another. But you can also find people who have similar interests."

"Huh. Interesting."

"Yeah. There's people who want more out of a dating app than, like, immediate sex, you know? Some of us want to get to know someone. Want *real* connection." I was getting too emphatic. "At least, I hope so," I added with a laugh. "Otherwise this app will be a huge fail."

"I think it's amazing you can create something like this. That could never be a fail."

I took a swig of my Chai Tea Latte to hide how his words affected me. This was the most Dawson and I had ever spoken. And sure, he was apologetic for being cranky earlier, but he didn't have to listen to me ramble on about my work. He genuinely seemed interested.

"Thanks. I'm kind of stuck on the beta testing phase though. I have a few friends on it, but they're not the target audience. I need to get some college students involved, but no one's really responded to my notices online. Probably because I can't pay them."

"There's a few colleges around here. Riverton and Hayworth. Can't you just go visit campus and recruit beta testers?"

"You make that sound so easy." I laughed nervously. "You may not have noticed this, but I'm kind of a geek."

"What?" Dawson said with mock shock.

"I'm a little shy."

He tilted his head. "You don't strike me as shy."

"Um. Maybe I've made more effort with you?"

His eyebrows went up at that, but he didn't comment. Which was probably for the best. I didn't want to explain *why* I'd tried to force myself out of my shell with him. And I didn't really trust myself not to get nervous and babble about how hot he was again.

"Well, here's an idea," he said after a charged moment of silence. "I'll help."

"Help?"

"Yeah. I'll help you recruit some college beta testers. I've got a high school buddy who went to Hayworth. I'm betting he can get us in with his circle of friends, no problem. He has connections at Riverton too, but I think Hayworth would be better, being more of a traditional college campus."

"Wow, that's...really nice. Are you sure you have time for that?"

Dawson dropped his head back, exposing the column of his throat with an impressively large Adam's apple, as he groaned. "Not the time thing again. You're never gonna let me live down acting like an imperious ass, are you?"

I couldn't help laughing. "I didn't mean it like that."

He smiled at me, and it was so charmingly boyish my insides fluttered. "Well, you'd be well within your rights to rub it in a little. I'm sorry I was a dick, and I'd be more than happy to help you out. In fact, I need to get out and meet people around here anyway. You'd be doing *me* a favor by getting my ass off Calista's couch."

"Well, okay," I said dubiously. I was pretty sure Dawson could meet anyone he wanted without much effort. Even in the quiet hours of the doughnut shop, he'd gotten a second look once or twice. He wasn't just handsome; there was something almost magnetic about him. A sort of energy he exuded. That was why his mood had been so disconcerting at Tech Club last week.

"Great." He stood and grabbed his empty coffee cup. I glanced at the time and realized we'd been chatting for an hour. Wow. "I should let you get some work done." He waved toward a table behind him, where I saw a thick folder. "I've some work of my own to do."

"A little light reading, huh?"

His lips quirked. "Oh yeah. Gotta get back on Coach Mayfield's good side."

"Trouble in paradise already?"

He snorted. "Just a smidge. But I'm working on it."



## DAWSON

THE ATMOSPHERE WAS cool when I entered the coaching office Monday morning. Coach Mayfield tipped me a nod before returning to scribbling in his favorite notebook. I didn't know

if his mood was residual annoyance with me or the team's loss on Friday.

"Morning, Coach," I said as brightly as I could manage.

He grunted a reply.

I set the thick folder of player profiles onto his desk and retreated to my corner. I booted up the computer and began going through emails since Mayfield hated dealing with them. There was an email from an angry parent who insisted we'd not made enough use of his son's talents. I made a note of the last name, Turley. He had a lot of potential, but he was one of our younger players. Two boosters wanted to give us coaching advice. They both commented that Coach Mayfield had not been answering his phone. Yeesh. And the school vice principal wanted to know what Mayfield thought about the tutoring program that the Tech Club was testing. Did he want to include some players? She went on to point out that Alex Rojas needed to bring up his grades, as did Keith Manning.

"What is this?" Coach Mayfield asked from his desk.

I glanced over. He was frowning at the folder I'd left for him.

"The player profiles. I finished reading them."

He hitched an eyebrow. "Is that right?"

I got up and leant back against the side of my desk. "Yeah, Coach. I'd been working my way through them, obviously, but I made it a priority to finish this weekend. I want to be an asset to this team, not a hindrance. I hope you know that."

He nodded. "I do. Rojas is a tough case. I hear what you're saying about his long-term future in football. Friday's game only demonstrated that he needs to grow as a player."

He'd thrown interception after interception, and Coach had resorted to running the ball more, which tended to be more common in high school because not everyone had the skills for effective passing. Coach Mayfield had explained to me that they'd been fortunate to have very talented QBs in past years, though, and they'd developed a better passing game.

Rojas had the skills too, in my opinion. He just needed to fine-tune them.

I didn't want to overstep again, so I cautiously asked, "Do you have any ideas about how to move forward?"

"I'm working on that." He tapped his temple. "Things are percolating. I'd like to hear your thoughts about the game. Don't hold back. Hit me with everything."

"Well, actually, I did already make some notes. I know you're not a fan of technology, but would you mind if I queued up a program I used?"

"I suppose, as long as you operate the dang thing."

I laughed. "No problem."

My heart was lighter as I pulled up the Scrimmage program on my laptop. Technically, I was using an old log-in from my college days. Hopefully, if Coach liked it, we could get our own copy before I got locked out.

It allowed me to attach notes to video clips of the game. So it was effectively reviewing game footage and making notes, and it would make it much easier to demonstrate my points. Coach pulled up a chair and watched as I commented on the various plays through the game. Mayfield mostly listened, though he chimed in once or twice.

When we wrapped up, a good hour had passed.

"That is something else," he said. "Game footage and notes all in one."

I nodded. "We used it at Alabama. The coaching staff would send these clips out to players over the weekend. Then on Monday, there would be a larger conversation about how we wanted to address changes in practice or game strategy."

"That would save some time," he mused.

Since Coach was seeming amenable, I pushed it a little further. "I know Rojas is sensitive. Receiving criticism a bit more distantly, with video to support the coaching suggestions, might make it easier for him to take. He'd have time to really

see what we mean and think about it without being on the defensive.”

“Hm maybe.”

“These clips can be sent only to certain players. It doesn’t have to be a public dressing down.”

Mayfield nodded along. “Maybe you should have gone into sales, Woods.”

“Sorry.” I laughed. “I won’t lie. I love this program. But I’m used to it. I know it might not be everyone’s preference.”

“No, no. You gave me some food for thought. I’m pondering the Rojas situation. Things do need to change. I know I came down hard on you last week when you called him out, but that doesn’t mean I won’t listen when you’ve got good ideas. I’ve already told Rojas he was way out of line. I *do* have your back, even if it didn’t seem like it at the time. You’re smart as hell when it comes to this game, and you were a QB, which means Rojas can benefit the most from your experience.”

A lump formed in my throat. I realized just how worried I’d been that I might remain a glorified errand boy instead of the full-fledged coach I wanted to be.

“Thank you,” I said, my voice thick. “I really do want to be a good coach. I know it wasn’t my first dream, but it’s... becoming a bigger part of me every day.”

Mayfield patted my shoulder with a big hand. “I have no doubt you’ll be a great coach, Woods. Give yourself time to get to know this team. It’ll come.”

I nodded. I’d have to be more patient, as Calista had advised. Coach Mayfield had run this program for a long time, and he’d been without a coaching partner—beyond part-timers with more enthusiasm than experience—for a few years. Of course he was used to running the show. But I hoped he’d give me more responsibilities as I proved myself to him.

As he stood up to return to his desk, I remembered the email. “Oh, Coach. About Rojas...”

“Yeah?” His tone was guarded, as if he thought I was going to push harder on his coaching methods for the kid.

“The vice principal says his grades are falling?”

Mayfield grimaced. “Damn it, not again. This kid...”

“He’s had problems before?”

“Was on academic probation last season. Had to miss several games.”

“She also mentioned Manning.”

Coach swore. Manning was a running back. Put Rojas and Manning together, and you had our two best players for getting the ball to the endzone. We couldn’t really afford to lose one, but both? That would be a big fucking problem.

“We’ll have to talk to them. Get them studying. Goddammit.”

“She mentioned them in the same email about the tutoring program the Tech Club is testing. She might be thinking they could benefit from using it.”

I’d briefed Coach about it, but he’d been in a foul mood most of last week. He frowned now. “How would that help?”

“Well, I only know the basics. I think if they were involved, they’d use the app as intended. It would connect them with peers who could study with them or even tutor them. There’s other stuff on the app, but I don’t know all the features.”

Coach Mayfield looked dubious. “Everything’s computer programs this and apps that. What’s wrong with talking to people face-to-face?”

I decided not to comment. After a moment of silence, he sighed.

“Well hell. Fine. Go ahead and deal with that.”

“Deal with it?”

“Sign them up. It’ll get the administration off my back about this project. But those grades better go up. Otherwise,

we're all going to be in trouble.”



# CHAPTER 7



## DAWSON

I LED EVAN INTO A HAYWORTH COLLEGE FRAT HOUSE SPILLING over with people. The party was jampacked, loud, and exactly as chaotic as I remembered from attending dozens of others. Something crunched beneath my foot, and a plastic cup, now dented, rolled away. A shout went up to our right as a crowd hoisted a guy into the air while he pumped his fist like a champion.

The sights and sounds and smells—beer mixed with too much perfume, cologne, and hair product—threatened to send me right back to my Alabama days. I’d partied a lot, especially while dating Kelsey.

*Especially the night of my accident...*

Before I could go too deep down that rabbit hole, a beefy guy stumbled and almost fell into Evan. I grabbed Ev’s wrist, instinctively pulling him out of the way. Closer to my side.

Evan’s eyes looked too big for his face, like a deer in headlights. His discomfort got me out of my own head. I’d brought him here. I couldn’t afford to get lost in my own shit. Shit I was supposed to be leaving behind, not dwelling on.

I was a different person now. I wouldn’t drink tonight. Wouldn’t go out onto any rooftops in a misguided attempt to play the white knight. I’d learned my lesson; I wasn’t a hero. I didn’t rescue damsels; I was more likely to cause them distress. At least, that’s how it had always seemed to play out with my ex-girlfriend.

I bent my head to speak close to Evan’s ear. “You okay?”

He nodded, swallowing hard. “Parties aren’t really my thing.”

I cocked my head. “But we met at a party.”

“And you saw how well that turned out.”

I laughed, charmed, as his cheeks turned red. He was still so embarrassed when he really didn’t need to be. “It’s not a big deal, you know.”

“What’s not?”

“The virgin thing.”

He groaned. “This isn’t happening.”

“Probably plenty of virgins at this party,” I added.

“Stop. Please. The only thing worse than you knowing is actually talking about it with you.”

I lifted my hands. “Okay, sorry. But if it bothers you, we could probably find you someone here tonight...”

Evan’s eyes went even wider. I didn’t think that was possible.

“No way! We’re here to recruit beta testers, remember? Let’s focus on that.”

I relented even though teasing Evan was a good way to distract myself from the landmines in my memories. When Simon had suggested a party at his old frat would be a quick way to mingle and recruit students, it had seemed like a good idea. We could have passed out fliers on campus, but most of them would have ended up in the trash—or littering campus sidewalks.

Still, I should have realized a frat party would dredge up things I didn’t want to think about.

*It’s fine. You’re not under the influence of alcohol. You can take care of yourself. Take care of Evan.*

“All right. Time to turn on the charm. Stick close to me, Ev. We’re a team.”

“Yes, Coach,” he teased, sounding slightly more relaxed.

His presence at my side relaxed something in me too. Gave me a point of focus outside of myself.

As we moved through the party, I flirted effortlessly with the women, despite having zero interest in dating anyone. After Kelsey, I didn't trust my own judgment. Better not to tempt fate.

But flirting was fun. It was like a sixth sense I'd never lost.

*"Are you a football player?"*

*"Used to be."*

*"I can tell..."*

A smile, a few compliments, and then I segued into introducing Evan and his app project. They weren't all interested, but when I asked if I could install the app on their phones—a plan Evan and I'd worked out before arriving, since fliers and business cards were more likely to be tossed or lost—several of them agreed. A few asked if I'd put my phone number in too. I deflected with a tease about them trying to extort my digits.

The guys were tougher sells. But a few of them were jocks, and it was easy enough to shoot the shit about the latest ballgames with them before we moved on to talking about drinking too much and dealing with class while hungover—which created a nice transition to Evan's app.

"Hey, Woods!" I looked over, and Simon grinned at me. "Long time no see, man!"

"Hey!" We embraced, exchanging backslaps. "How have you been?"

"Really good," he said. "I want you to meet my boyfriend, Parker."

His voice held a note of challenge, as if he were daring me to judge his sexuality. I was surprised, no lie. Simon had dated girls all through high school. But if he was happy, it was all good.

"Nice to meet you, Parker."

“Yeah, you too. Any old teammate of Simon’s has to be a good guy to have put up with him on the field.”

Simon gave him a playful shove, and I laughed. “He’s got your number.”

“I know,” Simon grumbled. “It’s so annoying.”

I gestured toward Evan, who still stuck close to my side but had gone quiet. “This is my friend, Evan. The app designer from Granville.”

Evan waved a hand awkwardly. It was kind of adorable how shy he was. He had no reason to be. Dressed in skinny jeans and a purple button-down that hugged his body, he looked nicer than half the people in the room but not so overdressed that he would stand out. His hair had been styled so that his bangs swooped across his brow.

The thought resurfaced that with a little more flirting skill, he could easily score a hookup.

Simon turned to Parker. “Hey, isn’t Linc from Granville?”

“Why are you asking me? He was your frat brother.”

“Yeah, but you’re way nicer than me and you pay attention to details.”

Parker snorted. “You flatter me.”

Simon craned his head, scanning the party. Then he raised his voice. “Hey, Linc! C’mere!”



## EVAN

LINC LOOKED VAGUELY familiar to me as he jogged over to us. He was lean, clearly not a jock like Simon and Parker, with dark auburn hair. He was still three inches taller than me, but I was used to that. His face was long and thin, more triangular than square. His wide smile and warm hazel eyes gave him an attractive, boy-next-door vibe.

“What’s up, Sy?”

Linc fist bumped Simon, then Parker. Then turned curious eyes on me and Dawson. As Simon made introductions and explained I was from Granville, Linc's eyes lit up. "Evan Moore? Your family owns the hardware store downtown."

"Yeah." I nodded. "What's your last name?"

"Tate."

"Tate as in Dr. Tate?"

"That's my mom," he said with a laugh.

"Granville *is* small, huh?" Simon said.

Linc snorted. "You've got no idea, man. How do you all know each other?"

Simon filled him in, razzing Dawson about their playing days together. Soon, they'd fallen into reminiscing about old games.

Linc turned to me. "So how long have you been going to Hayworth? Can't believe we haven't run into each other. But hell, this campus feels bigger than our hometown, huh?"

"Oh, I don't go to school here. Dawson is a new coach in Granville. He just brought me up here because I'm trying to recruit beta testers for my new app."

"An app, huh? That's cool."

"Yeah, it's a study slash dating app. You can meet people and make good grades." I laughed, feeling nervous. The idea had sounded so good in my head, but whenever I had to explain it aloud, I felt ridiculous. Was it a terrible idea? I wasn't exactly on top of college dating trends, considering I didn't go to college *or* on any dates.

Linc grinned though. "That's so cool."

Despite it being *cool*, he immediately changed the subject. Lowering his voice, he asked, "So, you and Dawson..."

"What about me and Dawson?"

Linc glanced from me to Dawson and back. "Never mind. I was just trying to figure out if you guys were, you know..."

I shook my head. I really didn't know. "What?"

"A package deal?"

I was confused for a beat, until I finally realized what he meant. "*Oh*. No. Dawson's straight," I said. "But I don't blame you for being interested."

Linc smirked. "Oh, I'm not interested in him. I see plenty of guys like him around campus. That really doesn't do it for me."

"Oh." I tried not to look relieved. "Well, good, because I think half the women here have already hit on him."

"Uh-oh. Sounding a little jealous there," he teased.

Glancing sidelong at Dawson, I saw that he'd thankfully drifted a couple feet away as he and Simon took turns talking and gesturing wildly, clearly reenacting a football story, while Parker laughed his ass off.

"Would you be interested in beta-testing the app?" I asked, wanting to get away from the subject of my jealousy. Not that I was *really* jealous. Envy was a more appropriate word. I envied anyone who had a shot with Dawson. I wasn't sure why I'd latched on to this crush so hard, but I couldn't seem to shake it. The friendlier he was, the worse it got. Ugh. If only he'd continued to be a dickhead...

"Maybe," Linc said. "Do you have a profile? You want to help me study for my physics test?"

"Physics isn't really my best subject."

Linc laughed. "I was kidding."

My cheeks heated. These situations where I couldn't follow social cues were the *worst*. "Right. Uh, I do have a profile for testing, but it's not under my name."

"Is your pic on there?"

"It's actually a photo of Alan Turing."

"Turing, ah. I know that name..."

“He invented the machine that was the basis for the first computer.”

Linc snapped his fingers. “Almost had it. Well, I’ll have to Google him and look you up sometime. Maybe we can grab a coffee when I come home for holiday break. Assuming Abby—my twin sister—doesn’t persuade our parents to take a skiing vacation to Aspen instead.”

*Abby Tate.* I suddenly realized that Linc’s sister was the same Abby who worked at Shear Brilliance salon in Granville. She was also Darren’s ex. One of many relationships from his high school days, and one of the messier ones if I remembered right.

I wasn’t about to bring up any of that though.

“Uh, sure,” I said. “If you give me your phone, I can install the app.”

“Sounds good.” He handed over the latest model Google Pixel. “If you ever want a tour of campus, let me know. You seem too smart to stay in Granville long.”

“Pretty sure spending thousands to learn what I can find on the Internet for a fraction of the cost is the opposite of smart,” I said. “But thanks for the offer.”

I handed back the phone and Linc waved toward the room behind him. “Well, I should get back to the party. I’m one of the frat members so...”

He turned and threaded his way into the crowd, quickly disappearing. I frowned after him, wondering why his demeanor had changed so quickly.

Dawson returned to my side as Simon and Parker wound their way into the crowd.

“Are they leaving?”

“Just grabbing drinks. They’ve got a lot of friends here, so they want to mingle.”

“Oh.”

“So, Linc, huh?”



“What about him?”

Dawson snorted. “Are you serious?”

“What?”

“Are you telling me you seriously didn’t notice that the guy was into you?”

“Into me? No, I don’t think so. I’m not sure he’s into guys at all.”

Dawson laughed, though it wasn’t mean. “Evan!” He grasped my shoulders, shaking me playfully. “No wonder you’re still...”

“Don’t say it.”

“Single. I was going to say single.” He smiled. “Linc was sending out some pretty strong signals, and you didn’t even notice.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Simon mentioned Linc recently came out as bi. But even if he hadn’t, I could have figured that out by the way he was checking you out. You’re not totally bad-looking, you know.”

“Thanks a lot,” I grumbled.

He laughed, wrapping a beefy arm around my shoulders. I was so short I tucked up against him easily. “What do you think? Did we get enough testers that we can get out of this madhouse? I’d kill for a burger and a Mountain Dew.”

I leaned fully into his side, reveling in the hardness of the muscle under me. Maybe I’d never get to experience Dawson’s hard body the way I pictured in my fantasies, but if he was going to pull me against all that yummy muscle, could anyone really blame me for enjoying it? Just for a few seconds?

“I’d love to leave, but I can’t in good conscience allow you to drink a Mountain Dew.”

“No? Why not?”

“You’re an athlete, Dawson! That crap will corrode your arteries.”

“How about a chocolate shake? Is that acceptable?”

“Yes.”

“So, chocolatey ice cream is *healthier* than Mountain Dew?” he asked as we finally stepped out of the front door and into the crisp fall air.

I breathed in deeply, then told Dawson as seriously as I could: “Chocolate has a lot of antioxidants. That means it’s good for your heart health. It boosts endorphins, which is good for your mood. Chocolate is *always* the right answer.”

# CHAPTER 8



## DAWSON

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING THIS WEEKEND?”

Evan glanced up from his laptop, where he was setting up beta user accounts for my players. Rojas and Manning were at the other end of the room, getting a quick tutorial of the program’s features from the tech club members. They hadn’t been thrilled to find out they’d been volunteered to use a tutoring program, but a reminder they could ride the bench instead had done the trick.

Rojas had sought me out to apologize for talking shit about my accident. He was a good kid with a hot temper. He had a rough home life, according to Coach’s profile on him. I hoped the tutoring program would help him get his grades up, and when that happened, maybe he’d begin to trust me enough to work on his game too.

“I’ll probably check up on our new beta testers. See how it’s going.”

“You going to look for Linc’s profile?” I teased.

Evan blinked. “Well, if he signed up to beta test, then yeah. I’ll look at them all.”

He spoke so matter-of-factly that I snorted. “No, I meant, you know...” As he continued to look baffled, I elaborated. “*For personal reasons.*”

It suddenly clicked, and Evan glanced over toward the students. They couldn’t hear our lowered voices. “No,” he hissed. “I have no reason to do that.”

I squatted down beside his chair to put us eye to eye. “Why not? He was interested.”

Evan rolled his eyes. “Agree to disagree.”

He was already so much more comfortable with me than the first couple of times we’d interacted. After the party the weekend before, we’d grabbed a bite to eat and spent an hour just talking about anything and everything. I’d learned that Evan was a huge *Stargate* fan in addition to all his tech stuff. He also loved New Wave music. He seemed almost embarrassed to admit that very little in popular culture appealed to him, but I thought it only made him more interesting. If anything, I was the boring one. Give me a good football game or Marvel movie and I was happy.

“Do you really think I wouldn’t be able to tell?” I asked. “I’ve got a masters in the art of flirting.”

“Well, even if that’s true... I’m not interested in him.”

“Okay, but you do want to date, right? I mean, I got that impression. I’ll shut up now if I’m wrong.”

Evan was quiet for a long moment. Perhaps I’d pushed him too much.

It wasn’t really my business whether Evan got out of his bubble of work and tried to meet someone special. Maybe I was projecting my own loneliness onto him. For so long, I had a big social circle. Before my accident, I never spent a night alone unless it was by choice, and now... Well, I was the new guy in town. Even with my connection to Calista and her parents, I was short in friends my own age.

“I’d like to meet someone,” Evan finally said. “It’s just hard in Granville, and you saw how well parties go for me.” He met my eyes. “Even when I do try to talk to a guy...”

“Hm?”

He huffed. “Well, he turns out to be straight. Or something.”

I smirked. “Are you talking about me?”

“No!”

I laughed. “Very convincing.”

Evan lifted his hands to cover his face. “Fine, you obviously noticed I was interested.” He hurried to add, “When we first met, I mean, when I didn’t know you were Calista’s cousin.”

“I actually didn’t realize it until later. Your flirting might need a *little* bit of work.” I held up my thumb and index finger a millimeter apart. “I mean, so the guy you’re chatting up at least realizes what’s happening.”

“Not that it would have mattered,” he muttered. “I should have known you wouldn’t be interested.”

“Why would you know that?”

He looked surprised. “Well, because...”

He waved a hand toward me, which I took to be a reference to my looks or body. A strange warmth washed through me. Plenty of people had complimented my looks, but it was the first time a guy friend had said anything that wasn’t a back-handed compliment that I drew all the female attention.

I’d made a bad wingman at parties, according to them. But I’d actually be a decent wingman for Ev. Because he wouldn’t be looking for women.

“Mr. Moore?” Warren called. “Are those profiles set up yet?”

Evan’s gaze jerked to the computer screen, which he’d been ignoring as I pestered him. He tapped a few keys and closed the window. “All set,” he said.

Then he flashed me a look. “I should work. I’ve got a few bugs mentioned in the latest feedback. I want to check the code and see about making a couple of tweaks.”

I recognized when I was being dismissed.

“All right, but this conversation isn’t over.”

“Coach...”

“See you at Glazed Holes tonight?”

We'd met up at the doughnut shop a few times by accident. I liked to get out to give Calista some space, and it was a relatively quiet spot to work on player notes.

"I can't believe you can say that with a straight face," Evan said instead of answering the question. But that was okay. It was as good as a yes.

I grinned. "I'll see you there."



## EVAN

"I'M FINALLY HERE," Dawson said as he dropped into the seat on the other side of the table. "Your night is now complete."

"My night is far from complete," I murmured as I continued scanning old code that was mucking up the database I'd agreed to revamp and expand. It should have been a fairly easy project, but so many people had worked on it that it was a muddled mess. "I've got so much to do."

Dawson scoffed. "It's an expression, Ev. It means..." His voice dropped an octave, immediately sending a frisson down my spine, "You're very happy I'm here."

My gaze snapped to his. He grinned. "See? Flirting. It's a skill."

"Is there a reason you're trying to flirt with me?"

"Not trying. Doing." He winked. "Consider it a demonstration, since you seem to have a little trouble recognizing it when it happens."

I glanced between the laptop and Dawson, torn between a pile of freelance work and the infuriating guy across the table who oozed confidence. Fuck, that was sexy. I really wished Dawson would dial it down a notch. How was I supposed to get over this stupid crush when he was so...*Dawson*.

"Linc didn't sound like that," I protested.

Dawson smirked. “Well, he was a touch more subtle. I thought I’d better make it obvious to get my point across.”

“And what is your point?”

Dawson leaned in over the table. “You, my friend, need a crash course in Flirting 101.”

“Are you applying to be the teacher of this course?”

“Call it what you like. Teacher. Coach.” One corner of his mouth curled up as he held my gaze, intent and unwavering. “Tutor.”

My stomach clenched, and my pulse sped up. It was a strange feeling. Tense but thrilling? I’d never in my life felt anything precisely like this. I’d had stomach flutters over guys. I’d felt my heart skip a beat. But this was something different. It wasn’t that feeling of crushing from afar. It was...more visceral. An actual physical reaction to his words.

Getting any closer to him would be a bad idea. Flirting with him, even for practice, was like playing with fire. But... then again, if I wanted to move past my infatuation with Dawson, what better way than obtaining the skills to meet someone else? Assuming it was even possible.

“What do you say?” he prompted.

I realized I’d left him hanging while I processed my feelings.

“You really think someone would want to date me if I knew how to flirt better?”

Dawson reached for my hand and squeezed it, which didn’t help the racing of my heart one bit.

“Ev, I know it. You just need to come out of that shell of yours and look around.”

“Okay,” I said dubiously. “If you think I can really be taught something like that. I’m not the best with people.”

“Nah, you’re fine.” He released my hand and raised his index finger to tap my temple. “You’ve got so much going on



in here that you miss the signs. There's more to life than work."

I frowned. "Yeah, I know. Calista has told me plenty of times, but it's not like I have a lot of choice. I have goals."

"Goals are great. Hard work is great. You just need a little balance. For instance, what's so important on this laptop tonight?"

"Database project."

"Not one of the apps?"

"No, I pick up extra freelance work to help my grandfather with expenses."

"He owns the hardware store where you work?"

"Yep. It's been in our family for generations, but it's struggling. Plenty of people drive over to Riverton now that there's a big Lowe's there. They've got better selection and lower prices."

"Ah the small town vs. corporate goliath story. Sounds familiar."

"Yeah," I said glumly. "The only thing keeping the store afloat is that we don't have to pay any employees."

"Just you, huh?"

I shook my head. "Well, yes, but what I make doesn't come close to covering all my hours."

"I've seen you there on the weekends. Is it just a few hours here and there, or..."

"Full time, pretty much," I said. "Grandpa covers while I go to Tech Club."

"So basically you get time off work to go do other work."

"Well, when you put it that way..."

"Okay, that's not healthy. I have no choice but to kidnap you tonight."

I blinked. "Excuse me?"

“Close the laptop and come along peacefully.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Well.” He smirked. “You’ll leave me no choice but to toss you over my shoulder and carry you out of here. And Miles and Jake, who are watching us like a couple of gossip-hungry grackles, will gleefully share that story with half the town.”

I glanced over my shoulder, and sure enough, they were watching. As was Iola Fletcher, the former school district nurse. Even if Miles and Jake took mercy on my soul, she wouldn’t. The granny network would know the ugly details before tomorrow morning.

“Ugh, fine.” I shut down my programs and slid my laptop into my bag. “I’ve got deadlines, you know. I can’t just choose to play hooky because I need a break.”

“Mm-hmm. Don’t stress. I’ve got a plan.”

“A plan?”

“Yep.” He pushed back his chair and stood, waiting for me to finish packing up and fall into step with him.

“So, where are we going?”

“To look at a room for rent. You can help me decide if it’s a good deal since you know Granville better. Someone could extort me, and I wouldn’t know the difference.”

“Where’s the room?”

“A lady by the name of Ada St. Johns rents rooms in her house on Palisade Lane.”

I blinked. “You’re worried Ada is going to extort you?”

“Well, I don’t know.” He glanced toward Iola as we reached the door, intentionally raising his voice to be heard. “Not all the women in this town are to be trusted. Some are downright naughty.”

Iola giggled and fluttered her lashes. “Why, Coach Woods, you’ll make an old lady blush.”

Forget the old lady, my cheeks felt warm just hearing Dawson say *naughty* in that smoky tone of his. Which I was coming to learn was apparently part of how he worked his flirting magic. No matter how much tutoring I got, I was pretty sure my voice would *never* do that. I was also pretty sure I'd never get old Iola to blush. She was bold and sassy, but simpering? Not so much.

Yet there was a pink tinge to her cheeks as Dawson continued to charm her.

“Good luck with the game Friday,” she said.

He nodded. “Thank you very much, Iola. Will I see you in the stands?”

She clucked. “Me? Oh no. My arthritis... But I'll be sure to send my grandsons along.” She paused. “And maybe my granddaughter? Caroline. She's a dental hygienist. Not that you need it. Those teeth of yours are so straight and white...”

Dawson chuckled. “Thank you, Iola. I'll have to ask for her when I have my next dental appointment.”

“You do that,” she called as we went out the door.

“How often does that happen?” I asked as we hit the sidewalk.

“What?”

“You, flirting with one of the grannies.”

Dawson shrugged. “I don't know. Is it a problem?”

“Well, that depends. If you let them, they'll meddle in your love life until you can't go anywhere without fear of an ambush.”

Dawson didn't look suitably frightened.

“I'm a football coach, Ev. I get ambushed everywhere I go anyway. Everyone and their dog has an opinion on the game. Either we should have given someone more playing time, or we should have run a different play.”

“But didn't you guys win last weekend?”

“Yup. But we could have won by *more*. And what about poor Greg? He didn’t get his chance to shine!”

I laughed. “Oh, man. That sounds awful. How do you put up with it?”

He shrugged. “It’s just part of the job. I remind myself they’re invested because they care. I try to be patient with them. Coach Mayfield, though...” He laughed. “He just stops going out or answering the phone.”

“Smart man.”

“Mm-hmm. But I’m new. I figure I owe it to people to let them get to know me a little. Maybe their trust will improve with time.”

“It’s cute that you think that.”

He laughed and gave me a playful shove that nearly knocked me off my feet. Luckily, he grabbed my arm before I could hit the pavement. “Sorry. Didn’t expect you to be so light.”

“Not a linebacker,” I reminded him.

“No.” His gaze lingered on me under the streetlight pooling around us. “I couldn’t ever mistake you for one.” His tone turned musing. “And that’s not a bad thing.”

# CHAPTER 9



## DAWSON

I WHISTLED LOW AS I PULLED UP IN FRONT OF A TWO-STORY Victorian, complete with a wide porch and a balcony supported by pillars. It was dark, but large windows set in decorative frames glowed brightly, and the porch light illuminated a set of white double doors.

“That is a lot of house,” I said, guessing there had to be at least five bedrooms based on the number of windows. “No wonder she rents out some rooms.”

“Oh yeah,” Evan said as we got out of my car and approached the sprawling front porch. “The Grand House is a historic home. It was built in the 1860s by the founder of Granville. It’s passed through the family for generations, until there was just Ada left.”

“She doesn’t have family?”

“A son who went to law school in Boston and opted to stay there. He and his family visit now and then, but Ada is on her own most of the time.” Evan paused as we reached the steps. “You really don’t need me for this. Ada will give you a more than fair deal.”

“I’m not worried about that.”

“Then why...”

I shrugged, unable to really explain it myself. I wanted to spend more time with Evan. “It seemed like a good distraction. You can keep me company while I do this, and as a thank you,

I'll come by the hardware store and help out so you can get some work done during normal daytime hours."

Evan looked surprised. "You don't have to do that. You already have a job."

"Everyone helps everyone in this town, right? It's no problem."

"My closest friends don't even do that. They know that once they start, they'll be on the hook forever."

It sounded like a warning. Or maybe a challenge. I smiled. "Maybe I'm the better friend, then."

He laughed. "You don't give up, do you?"

"Nope."

"Fine. Let's get your room rented before Ada goes to bed for the night."

He started up the stairs in front of me, hips swinging just enough to catch my gaze. I averted it, feeling strange to notice the pert roundness of a guy's behind. That was weird. But outside of football uniforms, those pants were the tightest I'd ever seen on a guy. Most of my college friends were more likely to wear baggy shorts or sweats. I'd just noticed the difference was all.

Evan glanced back over his shoulder, porch light glinting on his dark hair. "You coming?"

"Yep." I shook off the weird vibes and jogged up the steps to knock on the door.

"Well, hello!" Ada had opened the door so quickly she must have been waiting for my arrival. "You must be Coach Woods."

She smiled wide and patted her white curls, her face fully made up despite the fact she wore a fuzzy pink robe over what looked to be flannel pajamas.

I took her petite hand in mine, giving it a gentle squeeze. "Yes, ma'am."

Her skin felt thin, papery, but her blue eyes shone bright. She reminded me a little of Betty White—small and innocent-looking but with a mischievous gleam in her eye.

“And this is my friend, Evan. He came along with me to check out the room for rent.”

“Oh, yes, I’ve known Evan since he was toddling around in pull-ups. How are you doin’, darlin’? How’s the hardware business?”

Evan smiled tightly. No doubt he was loving the visual she’d painted of his younger years. “It’s business.”

She clucked. “Well, come on in before we burn the midnight oil. I’m already in my PJs. I figured if you’re going to live here, you might as well get used to it!”

I laughed. “You wear them well.”

She pointed a finger. “You, sir, are a charmer. I’ll have to warn our one female resident about you.” She tilted her head. “Or maybe I should warn you. She’s fresh off a divorce and looking for a rebound.” She tsked. “I prefer no hanky-panky among the guests, but you’re all adults, so if you do get involved with a neighbor, just keep it from causing problems. This is my home, and I like it peaceful.”

“No hanky-panky with the neighbors is a fine rule by me.”

“Good. Well, this sitting room and the dining room are community spaces, so feel free to make yourself at home in these areas. I make breakfast in the morning. It comes with the room.”

That wasn’t something I expected, but I imagined a home-cooked breakfast and my mouth watered. Would Ada be a bacon-and-eggs kind of gal or baked goods? Didn’t really matter. I’d been living off boxed cereal for years.

“That’s very generous of you.”

“Well, don’t say that until you taste my cooking!”

I laughed as Evan said, “Ada, don’t play. You’ve won enough county fair competitions that everyone knows you’re a stellar cook.”



Ada beamed. “You always were such a good boy.”

“This is really a lovely home,” I said, taking in the antique furniture in excellent condition. Either Ada was a miracle worker, or much of these furnishings had been replaced over the years. Still, I suspected Ada didn’t put up with snacking on the velvet-covered fainting couch or the high-backed Victorian chairs. I’d have to nosh on Doritos and Mountain Dew in my room, but that was okay. “The bedrooms are upstairs?”

“Yes. There’s two rooms open on the second floor, but the first one on the right is the best one.” She glanced between me and Evan. “It’s got the largest bed.”

I couldn’t honestly say if she believed we’d be sharing a bed, or if she was just commenting on that because I wasn’t the smallest guy. I smiled politely. “I do like to stretch out at night. Thank you.”

She fished in the pocket of her robe and extracted a key. “Go on and take a look. I’ll stay here. Those stairs aren’t kind to my hips.”

I thanked her, and Evan and I took the stairs to the second floor. The bedroom was just a few feet down the hall. I used the key to unlock it. It stuck a little, and I had to jiggle the doorknob and shove it with my shoulder to get it to open.

We stepped inside and looked around.

“Wow,” Evan said. “This is...homey.”

I laughed. “Very.”

The room looked as if it had been decorated by a grandma—because it had been. Crocheted doilies covered the arms of a love seat and rocker that formed a tiny sitting area on one side of the bedroom. On the other, a full-size bed was covered in a rose-patterned quilt. If that was the biggest bed in the rooms for rent, I probably couldn’t have slept comfortably in any of the others.

Frilly curtains around a single window and delicate lamps—one glass shade patterned with angels—completed the look.

I didn't have any furnishings of my own, so I couldn't really complain. I kind of liked it, anyway. It felt comfortable and homey. Sure, I wouldn't have chosen to decorate this way myself, but it gave me nostalgia for my grandparents' house. My grandma had also had a fondness for crocheted doilies. And the weekends I spent at her home as a child were among some of my best memories. Those and my visits to Granville.

Evan called out from a doorway, "Hey, there's a private bathroom." He glanced over his shoulder at me, wrinkling up his nose. "It's pink, and about thirty years out of date."

"Hey, if it has a shower and a toilet, I'm happy."

"Yep. An old claw-foot tub with a shower attachment. You might have to hunch over to wash your hair. You're so tall."

There was something about his tone that clued me in. Evan liked my height. I strolled over to the bathroom doorway, leaning against the doorjamb to peek inside.

"Hmm yeah. It'll be a tight squeeze in that shower." Evan appeared to hold his breath. I glanced sidelong at him. "You'd fit in there more easily, huh?"

His breath came out in a whoosh. "It's getting late. Maybe we shouldn't keep Ada waiting."

He turned and headed back across the room. I caught him in a couple of strides, grasping his arm. "Ev, wait."

His cheeks were pink again. Such pale skin to easily flush like that. I rubbed a thumb over the blush staining his cheekbone, wanting to feel the warmth. His gaze flew up to meet mine, startled, and I pulled my hand away. *Not appropriate.*

"That was just a little Flirting 101," I said, to explain away my innuendo by the bathroom.

His forehead creased. "Talking about the size of the shower?"

"Talking about how well *you* would fit into my shower," I said. "That made you picture it, maybe picture all the reasons you might need to use my shower, right?"

He looked considering. “That was intentional...”

“Yeah.” Only a half lie. The flirtation had flown off my tongue without much thought, but Ev did agree to flirting lessons. That had obviously given my subconscious permission to run wild. “Sorry if I caught you by surprise.”

“No, that’s okay,” he said. “I should have realized what you were doing, but I kind of thought you’d just give me some pickup lines or something.”

“Oh no. Pickup lines are a nonstarter,” I said. “You have to connect with a person. Compliment them, engage with their interests. Then you can playfully tease and send out signals.”

“That sounds impossible.”

“Aw, nothing’s impossible, grasshopper. Just stick with your flirting sensei, and you’ll see.”



## EVAN

MAYOR CYNTHIA MICHAELS came into the hardware store late Saturday morning. She swept in, took one look at me, and faltered. A moment later, her blinding smile was back in place. She came straight to the far end of the checkout counter, where I’d set up my laptop.

Sadly, I hadn’t so much as booted it up. The mayor was the third customer in an hour, and I’d yet to finish bagging and tagging some small hardware for restocking. While most folks went to the bigger hardware store in Riverton for their major projects, they popped by ours for smaller everyday needs. It was enough to keep us afloat—and occupy more of my time than I’d like—but not much more.

“I’m looking for your grandfather,” Mayor Michaels said.

“You just missed him.”

“Shoot.” With pursed lips, she glanced at the clock on the wall. “I wanted to talk to him about a business proposition.”

“On a Saturday?”

I shouldn't have been surprised. The mayor was the type to wheel and deal every second that she breathed. More surprising was that Grandpa would figure into any of her business plans.

She waved a hand. “I have a busy schedule during the week. I was told he was here most mornings.”

“Early mornings,” I corrected. “He'll be back on Monday.”

She smiled. “And you hold down the fort here.”

“I do my best.”

“You do just fine,” Mayor Michaels said, despite never having shopped at the store to my knowledge. Her husband, Jeremy Michaels, *had* been spotted at Lowe's in Riverton. That didn't endear the mayor to me. Shouldn't she of all people be supporting local business? “Does your grandfather still make all the business decisions for the store, or are you the man I should be talking to?”

Her smile had turned calculating. I didn't like the way she was looking at me, as if she were sizing me up to figure out how easily I could be sold on something.

“Like you said before, I'm just holding down the fort.”

No one in my family—including me—really wanted to believe it was anything more than that. I had my own dreams to pursue, part of the reason I was such a workaholic. But I was happy to help out for a few years if it meant prolonging Grandpa's life. Without someone else to rely on, he'd work himself to death.

Mayor Michaels tapped one lacquered nail on the countertop. “Well, it sounds like Tom is the man I need to see then,” she said reluctantly. “I'm just not sure he'll listen to what I have to say.”

“He's pretty stubborn,” I said. “But then, you probably know that already. Didn't you serve on the downtown redevelopment board with him?”

She laughed. “As a matter of fact, I did. You’re right. That’s why I was hoping to catch him unaware. That man is cagey and bullheaded.”

I smiled, knowing that her words were more compliment than insult. Grandpa had made a reputation for himself when Granville rebranded its downtown. Moore Hardware was one of the few stores that didn’t reinvent itself in some way. Grandpa had supported change for most of downtown—but not for *his* store.

The door jangled, announcing a new arrival, and Mayor Michaels and I both glanced over to see Dawson stroll in with a Tupperware in his hands.

“Mornin’,” Dawson said as he headed our way.

“Morning, Coach Woods,” Mayor Michaels said. “You’re going to win this Friday. I can feel it.”

“Good to know. I’ll relay it to the team. It’ll be a load off their minds,” he said with a wink.

She laughed. “You’re such a charmer.”

Wasn’t he, though?

The mayor turned back to me, smile more natural now that she’d stopped trying to schmooze me. “I’ll take off. If you see your grandfather, don’t bother telling him I’m looking for him. He’ll just avoid me more.”

I snorted with amusement. “Okay.”

As she went out the door, she yelled, “Go Grasshoppers!”

“I had no idea the mayor was such a sports fan,” Dawson said with a grin.

I shook my head. “How often do people *cheer* at you?”

“Oh, all the time.” He grinned. “Your day isn’t complete until you do it. Wanna try?”

“I’m good.”

“Darn. I really wanted to see what team spirit looked like on Evan Moore.”

“Uncomfortable, most likely.”

Dawson grinned as he set the Tupperware down. His gaze skimmed over the baggies of hardware I’d been working on before Mayor Jennings sidetracked me. Then my laptop, closed and off to the side.

“What are you doing here?” I asked. “Need something for your new place?”

“Not yet, but then I’ve only spent two nights there so far.”

Dawson had gone ahead and rented the room from Ada, joking that he was pretty sure Calista would geld him before long if he continued to cramp her style. I doubted that was true. Aside from teasing me, Calista had been all *Dawson* this and *Dawson* that. It was pretty clear she adored her cousin. Still, I could understand wanting some private space. It was the reason I’d moved in with Grandpa. He might like a good chat in the evening, but it was better than staying home with my parents and two sisters. *That* household was a never-ending chaos.

I’d offered to help Dawson move his belongings, but he said he only had a few personal items. That had struck me as a little sad. Dawson was always so upbeat, but what caused him to move to a new town with hardly more than the clothes on his back?

“Ada does have a few lightbulbs out around the house, though,” he mused. “I should pick up a set and change them for her.”

“That would be nice. I can show you where to find them.”

“No, that’s okay. I’m not here to make you work.”

“Oh?”

Dawson opened the Tupperware, and warm steam and the savory scent of sausage gravy wafted out. “I brought you breakfast, courtesy of Ada. When she heard I was heading over here, she insisted on feeding you.”

My mouth began to water. “Seriously? That smells great.”

Dawson reached into his back pocket and withdrew a fork. “Have at it. I’ll get to work.”

“Wait, what?”

Dawson was already rounding the checkout counter, where I’d been bagging nuts and bolts. “I can finish these up while you eat.” He picked up a baggie I’d done. “About ten per bag?”

“That’s right.”

“Got it.”

Without further ado, he began sorting and bagging the hardware from a larger box that I had on the floor. He moved efficiently. Not that it was a challenging task. It was more tedious than anything else. Calista had helped me once or twice, though, and she’d moved slow, usually too busy talking to focus.

He seemed to have it in hand, and I couldn’t resist the biscuits and gravy a minute more. I dug in, moaning as the first tangy bite of that gravy hit my tongue.

“Good, huh?” Dawson said with a grin. “I think I’m going to like living at Grand House.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Hey, why’s it called Grand House but the town is Granville? You said it was built by the town’s founder, right?”

I swallowed and nodded. “His name was Grand. It’s speculation at this point, but we think the settlement was called Grandville, originally, but at some point before it became an official town added to maps, the D was dropped. Probably because people talk so fast you couldn’t hear the D in the name.”

“Huh. Grandville. Granville.” Dawson said both versions of the name with the D only slightly distinguishable. “Yeah, I see what you mean. And Ada is related to this original Grand?”

“Yep. Her great-uncle, I think. St. John is her married name, but her husband died about ten years back.”

“That’s too bad.”

“Yeah, he was a dentist in town. Well-liked.” I shrugged. “Age eventually gets us all.”

“Says the nineteen-year-old,” Dawson teased.

I tried to shove him, but Dawson barely moved. It was like pushing a tree. I growled in frustration. “You could at least pretend I have enough strength to budge you.”

He grinned. “Sorry. I’ve been tackled by huge-ass linebackers, so you’re like a little bee bumping into me.”

“I’m not that little!” I shoved his arm again, and he staggered dramatically.

“Oh, a big powerful bee!”

I laughed. “Shut up.”

Dawson returned to working while I ate, and we stood side by side in companionable silence until I finished up and rinsed out the Tupperware in the bathroom. When I came back, he was gathering up the hardware. “I’ll go hang this up.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that. I can handle it.”

“Ev, I’m here to help out. Fire up that laptop and do what you gotta do. I’ll get this sorted, and then you can point me to the next task.”

I hesitated. “You’re sure? It’s one of our busier days, and you don’t have to volunteer your time.”

“I’m sure.” He bumped me with a shoulder as he passed by, his hands full of the hardware packaging. “I got this. Do your thing, tech wizard.”

“Wow. I don’t know how to thank you.”

He winked. “I’ll think of something.”

I hesitated. “Is that more flirting?”

He chuckled as he walked away. “You’re finally catching on!”

I shouldn’t have smiled so big. It wasn’t *real* flirting. But a gorgeous man had just volunteered his day off to help me *and*



he brought me breakfast. Honestly, the teasing was just a bonus.

# CHAPTER 10



## DAWSON

“I WANT YOU TO WORK WITH ROJAS ONE-ON-ONE. WE’VE GOT a tough game against our Riverton rivals coming up in a few weeks, and we need to be ready for it.”

“Intense rivalry?”

Coach Mayfield grunted. “You’ve got no idea. I had to shave my head.”

I couldn’t suppress a laugh. “What?”

“There’s always a friendly wager between the coaches. Motivates the players without there being any nonsense among the students. Kids used to harass the rival students, steal each other’s mascots, vandalize the other team’s bus. We had to crack down on that kind of behavior. The coaches came up with a plan...a *humiliating* plan, but one that seems to keep the rivalry in a fun but civilized place. Also helps the town feel we’ve adequately *atoned* when we fail to deliver a win.”

That sounded intense. “What’s the wager going to be this year?”

“Not sure.” He grinned evilly. “Maybe I can pawn it off on you.”

I laughed uneasily. “Well, now *I’m* motivated to get the team ready.”

Mayfield pounded me on the back. “Good. Because before we get started today, I want you to give the boys a little demonstration. Their lack of discipline is a problem. I want them to see what to expect at the collegiate level, and I think

it'll go a good way to getting them to listen when you have advice. Especially Rojas.”

Coach had slowly been giving me more authority with the players, but Rojas continued to be defensive and prickly, even when I tried to sugarcoat my words.

“It’s been a long while since I played,” I said dubiously.

Coach Mayfield wasn’t deterred. “It’s like riding a bike. You never really forget; your body just gets old and refuses to cooperate. You’re still in great shape, though. You’ll be great.”

Glad he thought so, but my stomach twisted with nerves. I hadn’t been on the field since before my accident. What if I couldn’t perform? Worse, what if I could, and it sent me back down that rabbit hole of grief and depression?

Before I could come up with a compelling argument that wasn’t *I might fall to pieces*, because that surely wouldn’t impress my boss, he was calling the players to the sidelines.

“All right, guys. Riverton is only *three* weeks away.”

“*Looooosers!*”

“*We’re gonna crush it, this year!*”

“*We got this, Coach!*”

Mayfield patiently let the guys heckle their rivals for a few minutes before moving on.

“Today, we’re going to work *hard*. Don’t think Friday’s win means anything now. We’ve got new challenges ahead to focus on.”

“Yes, Coach!” the team called.

I don’t think I’d ever heard them so in sync. But I knew from my playing days the power a rivalry held. It amped up the game, for the players and fans both. It was a hell of a lot of fun—if you won. If you lost, man, it was a brutal blow to your morale.

“It’ll take hard work.”

“Yes, Coach!”

“Discipline.”

“Yes, Coach!”

“I expect each and every one of you to push your game to the next level.”

“Yes, Coach!”

“With that in mind, Coach Woods is going to show us how it’s done. I want you all to see what dedication and discipline can do for a player. If you want to play college ball, you have *got* to step up on the field.”

“Oh, hell yeah!” one of the guys shouted.

There were catcalls and whistles and clapping. The guys were clearly jazzed by this turn of events.

I grinned, feeling a shot of adrenaline join the nerves. The guys’ excitement was contagious. It wasn’t an entirely foreign feeling. I’d felt the same sensation before each game I played. “No pressure, huh? I haven’t played in two years, guys. Keep that in mind.”

“Don’t go easy on him,” Coach Mayfield called, contradicting me. “Make him work for it.”

“Thanks a lot,” I muttered to myself as I trotted out to the center of the field.

Someone tossed me the football. Coach sent out a wide receiver and I warmed up with a few passes. It felt strange. Like a sense of *déjà vu*. It was unusual, but so very familiar. After a few minutes, my muscles felt loose and warm. Coach sent more players onto the field, including defensemen. Not a full team scrimmage, but close to it, so that I had to work to complete my passes.

“Absolutely no tackling Coach Woods!” Mayfield called out at one point. I tensed, fearing he’d announce my prior injuries to the whole team. Instead, he said, “I can’t afford a lawsuit, and neither can this school.”

There was laughter, and I relaxed. I’d probably be fine if I took a hit in these circumstances. As a quarterback, my body took less impact than most other players on the field. But with

that injury to my back, one wrong tackle could paralyze me. I understood it was too big a risk to take to keep playing. I might have done it anyway if the NCAA had allowed it. Now, with some distance between me and the game, I was glad they hadn't.

I loved football, but not enough to risk my quality of life.

My fear that I wouldn't be able to perform faded away. Everything came back to me, smooth and seamless, thanks to muscle memory. The shifts and pivots as I avoided defenders while reading the field. The fluid movement of my arm as it came into position and I let loose a perfect spiral. That coiled tension and release as I watched it fly, knowing it would reach its mark.

It was magic.

For twenty minutes, Coach Mayfield gave me back the game I'd lost. But it wasn't as bittersweet as I'd expected. I'd missed it, no lie. But I was a different person now. I was no longer chasing a dream that was just out of reach. No longer desperate to hold on to who I used to be.

I was ready to embrace the here and now.

This was where I belonged, on the field with the kids of Granville High. Showing them what was possible. Earning their respect.

Earning my own, too.

After the team put me through my paces, it was their turn. Coach sent Rojas to one end of the field to drill with me, while he handled the rest of the players, having a backup quarterback step into Rojas's usual role as they scrimmaged.

Rojas took to the coaching better than I expected. After that little demonstration, he had a newfound respect for my game.

"This is awesome, man. Riverton doesn't stand a chance, not with me getting private tutoring from one of the top quarterbacks in the motherfucking nation!"

"Language, Rojas."

“Sorry, Coach.”

“That’s all right. Let’s focus. Get back into position. We’re going to drill until your muscles know what to do no matter how much pressure you’re under. Got it?”

“Yes, Coach!”

The respectful—and enthusiastic—response was a first. As Rojas listened avidly to my coaching, without getting defensive, I had to give credit to Coach Mayfield.

That man was a genius.



## EVAN

I BENT over Warren’s shoulder, scanning through the feedback notes that had come in. The honors students who were beta testing the tutoring program were full of insight about the way they connected and learned. At Amy Wilson’s suggestion, we’d added a virtual planner that allowed users to keep track of assignment due dates and study sessions. Then, at Brent Becker’s suggestion, we’d added in an API that would give them the option to sync it up with their Google and Apple phone calendars for ease of use. Amy then mentioned how helpful it would be if any study events created in the app—from IRL study groups to virtual tutoring sessions using a video chat technology—would automatically show up in the planner without the user needing to input it.

They’d had a handful of other features they wanted, some more realistic than others. But for the most part, we’d been able to address their needs and their input had offered us a good window into the brain of a highly organized achiever.

But, ironically, the honor students weren’t the ones who would most benefit from this kind of program. It was the students who struggled with academics who needed it. Those who were more inclined to extracurriculars rather than academics, or those who learned in atypical ways.

“Any feedback from any of our other student groups?”

“The drama kids love the planner too,” Crystal volunteered from her seat beside Warren. Each tech student had been assigned to manage beta testers, so they all had a point person. “They can input rehearsals and plan their study time around it.”

I turned to Robert. “Do you have anything to add?”

He was coordinating with several teachers and counselors to try to address needs of students who might have different learning requirements.

“Um, let me check my notes.” Robert lifted his phone and scrolled through it for a minute. “Oh, yeah. I knew there was something. One of the counselors wondered if there was a way to set alerts so, like, if someone creates a study group meetup or video session, users would see it and have the opportunity to join it. Mrs. Adams said that some students might feel too timid to ask for help, but if it was there, they’d join.”

“But that’d be way too many notifications,” Crystal pointed out.

Before I could answer, Warren was jumping in. “We could allow them to set their notifications though. They could choose the subjects that apply to them.” He glanced at me. “Right?”

I nodded. “That’s not bad. Add it to the work file, Warren. You guys can update me on your progress next week.”

While I could only be here once a week, the kids worked on our project on a daily basis. They’d probably live in the tech room if the school allowed it.

The project was going well. Even when our beta testers asked for something unattainable, it was a great learning exercise for the tech club. They were learning *so* much about trouble-shooting—from a technical standpoint, but also from a client-needs perspective. When working on large-scale programs, you needed to continually evolve to fulfill users’ wishes.

Something I’d learned the hard way through my years of freelance web programming.



“Did someone order pizza?”

I jumped as Dawson spoke right behind me. I’d been so focused I hadn’t noticed him slip in.

The scent of sausage and peppers hit me, and Warren was out of his chair in a flash. “Hell yeah, I’m starving.”

Dawson had laid out three pizza boxes on the center table, along with paper plates and napkins, and the teens converged on them—including Rojas and Manning, the two football players who’d agreed to beta test our program. They’d yet to give me any useful feedback.

“Oh, good. We need feedback from the athletic department.” I started toward the table. “Rojas, can you—  
whoa, what the fuck!”

Dawson lifted me off my feet, his arms wrapped around my waist from behind, and spun me in a circle. “Nope, no work talk. It’s pizza party time!”

Crystal snorted with laughter. “Oh my god, I’ve never heard Mr. Moore swear.”

I squeaked—in a manly way, of course—as I grasped at his arms, which were so hard with muscle they felt like iron bars. All the kids were in stitches as Dawson finally put me down and I stumbled a couple of steps, dizzy.

My heart fluttered like a hummingbird. His damp hair had brushed my neck, sending goosebumps rushing over my skin, and the feel of his big muscled body pressed up against me, holding me, was just as dizzying as the spin. Even startled, I’d seemingly cataloged every detail—which I couldn’t dwell on unless I wanted to make things weird. Even with Dawson’s playful flirting in the name of educating me, he was still a straight guy who would probably freak if I got too suggestive.

Or if I popped a boner. I willed my body to calm down ASAP.

“What was that?” I demanded, shaken by my own reaction. “Do you want me to puke on your shoes?”

Dawson took a big step back, but he grinned unrepentantly. “Sorry. I’m in a good mood.”

“Coach rocked it at practice,” Rojas said. “You should have seen him on the field, showing us all how it’s done.”

“Oh yeah?” I took in Dawson’s smile, noting the glow that wasn’t always present. Joy just beamed from the man. “I’m sorry I missed that. You must have been impressive to get Rojas singing your praises.”

To my surprise, Dawson averted his gaze. That was usually my move. He raised a hand, rubbing at the back of his neck. “It was no big deal. Rojas exaggerates.”

“I do not!” Rojas protested, his mouth full of food, which prompted a series of disgusted groans from the other students. But I was still watching Dawson, who was honest-to-God flustered.

*Look at that. Dawson Woods is adorably modest.*

Not what I expected of a man who had shown me nothing but confidence since we met. Then again, there was a difference between confidence and ego. I liked that Dawson was humble. That was probably why he was so down-to-earth and easy to talk to, despite us having vastly different interests.

Dawson headed toward the food. “We better grab a slice before the pizza’s gone.”

“Why are you feeding us?” Warren asked. “Not that I’m complaining!”

Dawson chuckled. “Well, I knew you guys would be working late. You’ve all been really dedicated to this project. You deserve a reward.”

“Aw, thanks, Coach,” Crystal said.

“Yeah, thanks,” Robert echoed.

Dawson’s eyes met mine. “Plus, I figured it was the only way to ensure Ev—er, Mr. Moore—had dinner at a reasonable hour.”

Everyone looked at me, and I had to laugh. “Busted,” I said. “But I have a protein bar in my bag.”

“Save it for a late-night snack. I know how you burn that midnight oil.”

I didn’t argue, but truthfully, I’d pulled fewer late nights recently. Dawson had stopped visiting Glazed as often now that he had his own place, but he’d taken to popping in at the hardware store whenever his schedule allowed—usually the last couple of hours of the day after he wrapped up practice—and it had freed up time for me to work during the daylight hours.

He really was a great guy.

*A great friend*, because that was all he could ever be for me. Sadly, he kept doing things that made me wish for something different. While I was used to *wishing* for things I didn’t have, I wasn’t used to suppressing the urge to go after them.

I might be sheltered here in Granville, but I chased my dreams hard—even while keeping my grandfather’s alive. But this was different. I couldn’t chase Dawson. I had to find a way to appreciate the gift of his friendship, which was invaluable, without ruining it with hopes for what could never be.

While the kids snarfed their pizza, Dawson leaned over. “We still on for tonight?”

I should say no. A flirting session with Dawson didn’t seem conducive to me getting over this crush. But he gave me those puppy dog eyes and sweet smile, and all I could do was agree.

“Sounds like fun.”

It wasn’t even a lie—though it might be better if it was.

# CHAPTER 11



## DAWSON

I SQUATTED DOWN TO GRAB A COUPLE OF SODAS OUT OF MY minifridge, groaning as my muscles protested. I handed a Mountain Dew to Evan and pressed the other to the front of my shoulder. I ached everywhere, from my deltoids, to my lats and pecs, to my damn glutes and hamstrings. My lower leg, which I'd injured last year, throbbed in time with my pulse. Most of the time, I managed without painkillers, but tonight I was going to need to take the edge off.

It almost made me wish I kept beer in my fridge.

"You okay?" Evan asked.

"Just sore. Playing QB was fun, but I'm not in condition anymore."

I'd been too high on endorphins to feel it earlier. It wasn't just my time on the field playing quarterback, but my time on the field acting as Rojas's coach. Giving real, tangible advice. Watching it transform into real, tangible improvements.

It'd all felt so good that part of me kept waiting for the inevitable crash. When I was alone with my thoughts, would this positive outlook remain? Or would I be hit with the crushing despair I'd known for too long?

I hadn't been ready to find out, so I'd hung out at tech club until Evan was free to come over for a little Flirting 101. I knew from experience that wallowing in what I'd lost was dangerous. A little playful lesson with Evan would make a great distraction. All the better because I knew it wouldn't go

anywhere. We could have all the fun of flirting without the pressure of expectation.

“Do you need to ice up or something?” Evan asked, looking concerned.

“Nah, it’s not that serious,” I said, not wanting to let on how much I was hurting. “Let’s sit. We’re supposed to be teaching you to flirt, not nursing my aches and pains.”

“Well, who says we can’t do both?”

“Hey, not bad,” I said as I carefully lowered myself onto the love seat. “You’re getting the hang of this flirting thing.”

“I wasn’t flirting.”

I smirked. “I know. But you could have been.”

“Oh.” Evan laughed at himself as he perched on the edge of the cushion beside me and placed his unopened Mountain Dew on the small side table. “I’m so bad at this.”

“Nah.” I stopped using my soda as a cold pack to pop the top and take a drink. Sweet tang coated my tongue, and I sighed with pleasure. “Like I said, that would have been pretty smooth if you’d meant it.”

He cleared his throat, gaze flicking to mine and away. “Well, I could mean it.”

“You could,” I agreed easily. “And if you did, how would that work? An ice pack isn’t exactly sexy.”

“No. Uh. I’m pretty good with my hands.”

Surprise flared. I’d expected to coax Evan more before he said something suggestive. “That’s bold.”

He reddened. “No, I mean. Not like... My mom has a bad back. I gave a lot of massages.”

“Bringing up your mom is definitely a flirting no-no,” I joked, back on firmer footing. Evan hadn’t meant his words suggestively. He was still hung up on my sore muscles.

He groaned. “Yeah, I know. That’s not how I meant it.”

Evan looked tense now. Ready to run.

“Hey, relax. It’s just us here. This is why we’re doing this, right? To get you comfortable with the idea of flirting with someone.”

“Yeah, easy for you to say,” he grumbled.

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing.” He started to stand. “Maybe I should go—”

“Ev, no.” I grasped his wrist, easily encircling the delicate bones in my larger hand. “Stay. Come on. I’m interested in this massage.”

“Don’t placate me.”

“I’m not. Seriously.” I shifted, wincing as my muscles protested again. “I shouldn’t have teased you so much. I was just having fun with the flirting thing. If you’re not cool with that...”

Ev dropped back onto the cushion. “No, I’m being weird. I know it.”

“You’re just uncomfortable. I get it. This is pushing you out of your comfort zone.”

“Yeah.”

I set down my soda and turned, so my back was to him. “How about this? You show me your massage skills, and we can practice flirting when you don’t have to look me in the face? In fact, I’ll be at your mercy. You can hurt me if I laugh.”

“I would never hurt you.” Evan sounded affronted.

I glanced back over my shoulder. “I believe you. What do you say?”

He gave in with a little laugh. “You’re very persuasive. Fine. Turn back around.”

I faced forward, not really expecting a whole lot from the massage. I’d had plenty of professional rubdowns while playing for my college team, and I doubted Evan would have the skill to bring me that level of relief. But when he tentatively began kneading my shoulders, it still felt good.

I sighed and relaxed into his touch. “You do have good hands.”

Evan was all business now. “Which muscle groups hurt?”

“My lats along my sides.”

Evan shifted his hands, smoothing along my flanks, and I couldn’t suppress a groan. “Yeah, there.”

“Want to take off your shirt? It might feel better.”

“Sure.” I whipped off my T-shirt without a second thought, wincing as my muscles pulled through the motion. “But I don’t undress for just anybody.”

“Oh, I’m special, huh?” Evan teased, clearly more comfortable now.

“You and the entire football team.”

He chuckled. “I think they got to see more than your shoulders and back today. You must have showered before you turned up at tech club.”

“Picturing me naked? You *are* getting better at this flirting thing.”

“No!” Evan faltered for a minute. “Your hair was damp and you smelled like soap. I was making a deduction, not *imagining* you naked.”

“And that is *not* flirting,” I reminded him.

“Right, my bad...”

“This is just a game, Ev. You don’t need to be afraid to say something suggestive. We’re just doing a little role play.”

A little role play that was coming too easily. Part of me recognized that it felt natural to playfully tease Evan, even though I’d never flirted with a man before in my life.

“A game,” Evan said slowly. “Right. I’m used to shutting down any flirtation around straight guys. It can be dangerous.”

I’d never considered that at all. My straight-guy privilege was showing. I glanced back over my shoulder. “You’re



welcome to flirt with me. I won't ever hurt you either. No matter what, okay?"

He smiled tentatively. "Well, in that case, my imagination is incredibly X-rated."

I laughed, turning to face forward again. "That's better."

Evan doubled down on his massage efforts, and I got lost in the relief of sore muscles loosening up and warming under his hands. He worked my lats, my trapezius, even my triceps on the back of each arm. Flirting was the last thing on my mind as I murmured, "This feels amazing."

"It really does." Ev froze at his own quiet confession.

The realization that a man who found me attractive had his hands all over my bare flesh made me prickle with sudden awareness.

Evan waited a beat, but when I didn't stop him, he resumed the massage. I didn't know if it was in my head, but his touch began to feel more sensual. My body erupted in goosebumps as he ghosted his fingertips over my ribs. He circled his arms around me to knead my pectorals, and a jolt of pained pleasure went through me when he brushed against my sensitive nipples.

I moaned, my dick hardening in my pants.

*Oh, fuck.*

Evan stilled. "You, uh, okay?"

*No. I'm horny AF with my dick hard for a man. Not okay at all.*

"Yeah," I lied, "but maybe stop—"

Evan leapt off the sofa so fast I nearly fell over. "Yeah, it's getting late. I should go."

I grabbed my shirt and pulled it over my head, my nipples still tingling from the brush of Evan's hands. I crossed my arms over my chest, hiding the hard peaks showing through my T-shirt. "I can give you a ride home."

“No,” Evan said quickly, sounding nervous. “I should— I need...fresh air. I’ll walk.”

His face wasn’t red with one of those pretty blushes like when he got embarrassed, but pale. With mortification? Or fear? The thought made my own heart constrict.

I followed him as he rushed for the door, limping a little as pain shot through my leg. Shit. I needed that Aleve sooner rather than later. “Are you sure you’re okay to get home on your own?”

“Yeah.” His gaze darted down to my crotch, where my dick was still semihard. God knew what Even thought about why I was popping a boner for him.

*Not for him. You’re just touch-starved, that’s all. It’s been a long time since you’ve had anyone touch you so intimately.*

In retrospect, the massage had been a bad idea. I’d had so many professional, totally impersonal massages that I hadn’t expected this to feel so different. My body wasn’t supposed to respond like desert land getting its first drop of water in a year.

“I’ve had a long dry spell,” I said lamely. “I’m sorry I made this weird.”

Evan’s expression was hard to read. He looked skeptical but relieved. “My whole life is a dry spell, so...”

I smiled sympathetically. “I guess we both need to get out more.”

He looked away, face tense. “Yeah, probably.”

This was weird and uncomfortable for us both, but the last thing I wanted was to lose our friendship.

“Text me when you get home safe, all right?”

“Okay.” He glanced at me uncertainly. “You’re limping a little. When you walk. Did you hurt yourself?”

I winced. “No, it’s just...an old injury. I’ll take a painkiller and be all good. No worries.” I smiled wide, hoping to hide how off-balance I felt.

“Okay,” Evan said. “I guess I’ll see you later.”

I closed the door behind him, feeling confused as hell and still horny. The awkward situation had deflated my dick, but one flickering thought of Evan's hands brushing over my nipples and I was rock-hard again.

A dozen dirty fantasies swept through my head. Evan not stopping to ask if I was okay during that massage, but instead skating his hand down to my hard-on. Tentatively brushing his fingers over my erection. Asking, oh-so-innocently, if he could touch me. Evan parting his pretty lips to suck me. Evan naked beneath me, his tight, round ass tipped up to take me inside. The images were simultaneously erotic and terrifying.

I didn't understand why my mind was going to these places. I had never been attracted to a man. True, Evan was different than most of the men I'd spent time with. He was more petite, softer-spoken, shy. But he was still a man. Nothing about him was feminine, though his lips did look incredibly soft and plush.

I wondered, briefly, what it would feel like to kiss him, then shoved down the thought ruthlessly. But my hard-on persisted.

"Fuck it," I muttered. "I'm just pent-up."

I leaned back against the door Evan had just exited, resting most of my weight on my good leg, and pushed down my pants. As soon as I gripped my shaft, pleasure swamped me. Need that I'd shoved down raced back in to flood my system. I groaned, ridiculously loud given it was my own hand on my dick, and began stroking.

With my free hand, I plucked my left nipple, remembering again the sensation of Evan's palms skating over my chest. "Wrong, wrong, wrong," I muttered.

But I didn't stop. I stroked myself harder and faster, until I came explosively over my fist, with Evan Moore's face in my mind's eye.

As the haze of orgasm cleared, I dropped my head back against the door with a thump.

*This isn't you. You like women.*

The words were empty. Hollow. I cleaned up, my head a chaotic, confused place. But one thing was certain: I was no longer worried about my emotional fallout to retaking the football field. I couldn't think about anything but Evan. What it meant that I'd reacted as I had, wondering what was going on in his head, and hoping like hell I could fix this mess without losing our friendship.



## EVAN

AFTER I LEFT Dawson's room, I walked the three blocks to Lyle and Truman's place. As much as I'd needed air, I didn't want to walk the mile to my house. I also wasn't ready to face Grandpa. Not when I was still so raw from my colossal mistake with Dawson.

I'd never expected that massage to turn so sensual or for Dawson to get *hard*. I'd simply gotten lost in the feel of his body under my hands, the quiet sounds of his pleasure as I worked his muscles, and his murmured words of how amazing it felt. When he'd moaned so decadently—that moan somehow different from the others—I'd been shocked out of my waking fantasy.

I *wanted* to believe Dawson was turned on by me, but I knew deep down it was just a reaction to physical stimulation.

Dawson would only ever be a friend, and maybe not even that now. He'd probably feel awkward and uncomfortable around me. I'd seen it happen before.

Truman opened the door after the first knock. "Evan? What are you doing here?"

"I just humiliated myself with a straight man."

"Oh, honey..." Truman ushered me inside and wrapped an arm around my shoulders. "What happened?"

After I swore them to secrecy and blurted out the highlights, Truman wrapped me up in a fuzzy blanket on the sofa while Lyle made me a cup of hot herbal tea.

“I’m mortified, not sick with the flu,” I said.

“Do you not want the tea?”

Truman reached for my chunky brown mug that was clearly an amateur pottery project. I held it out of reach. “I didn’t say that.”

He smiled and sat back, curling into the corner of the sofa with his own throw blanket. Lyle soon brought him a mug of tea, then settled into a nearby recliner with his own cup.

“Is this what you guys do every night? Drink tea like old ladies?”

Truman snorted. “Nice, Ev. Here we are trying to comfort you and you’re comparing us to the Grannies?”

“No, sorry. That came out wrong.”

“It always does,” Truman murmured, but not unkindly. He smiled fondly at me, someone who knew my quirks and accepted them.

Yes, I sometimes spoke too honestly. Just one more reason I had been worried about letting down my guard around Dawson. I never knew when inappropriate truths might come tumbling free.

Heck, I’d told him he made me too hot one of the first times we met. Lucky for me, he’d believed I was confused and sick.

“So why didn’t you go to Calista?” Lyle asked. “Not that we mind. But she’s your bestie.”

I winced. “Well, for one thing, the guy in question is her cousin.”

“Dawson Woods?” Truman sat forward, eyes wide. “You gave Dawson Woods a—”

I threw up my hand. “Don’t say it!”

“A massage. I was going to say a massage,” he said.

Lyle chuckled. “Sure you were.”

“Still. Dawson Woods. That’s...impressive.”

Truman did sound impressed. Lyle frowned. “What’s so special about Dawson?”

Truman scoffed. “Uh, he’s hot as hell. Former football star. Still in amazing shape. And that stubble...” Truman groaned theatrically.

I sighed. “He’s gorgeous.”

“He’s just a guy,” Lyle muttered.

Truman waved a hand toward him. “You’ll have to excuse Lyle. He’s so in love with me he can’t even see the attractiveness of any other guy.” Truman smiled sappily at Lyle. “Or woman, for that matter.” He glanced back at me, eyes twinkling. “I’m just so freaking amazing.”

Lyle ignored Truman’s gloating over winning his best friend’s love. Though they’d never really discussed it with us, I suspected Lyle was somewhere on the asexual spectrum. Considering how handsy Truman got with a few drinks in him, I was guessing demisexual. Lyle certainly didn’t seem to mind the attention his boyfriend lavished on him.

“Let’s focus on Ev,” Lyle said. “How can we help?”

I groaned in defeat, sinking back into the newly purchased overstuffed sofa. Truman and Lyle had slowly been refurbishing the place since Darren moved out. “I don’t know. The horse is out of the barn, right? It happened.”

Truman snickered. “If by horse, you mean huge boner.”

I rolled my eyes. He could be so juvenile.

“It was huge, right?” Truman asked. “I mean, probably not as huge as Lyle. That sucker is like, whoa! Holy Grail of cocks, if you know what I mean. But it’s big, right?”

Lyle gave a beleaguered sigh. “Truman...”

“Sorry, hon. I like to brag on you.”

“Well, I’m not answering that,” I said.

“No fun,” Truman said.

“Maybe I *should* have gone to Calista,” I mused. Truman wasn’t taking any of this very seriously. “But even if I didn’t tell her it was Dawson, how could she possibly understand? Guys just about always appreciate her attention.”

“I’m sure she’d still be happy to listen and be supportive,” Lyle said.

I nodded. Calista wasn’t really the sympathetic type though. She operated on more of a tough-love ethos. She’d probably laugh and say, “You poor, sweet summer child. Why would you even entertain such fantasies about Dawson? You’re only hurting yourself with wishful thinking. You’ve got to stop looking for something that isn’t there so you can move on to something that’s real.”

And she wouldn’t be wrong. But I was already beating myself up. I didn’t want Calista’s brand of honesty to kick me while I was down.

“I can be supportive,” Truman said seriously. “And I do understand how you feel. For years, I really didn’t think I ever had a chance with Lyle. He was my closest friend in the world, and he was straight and unattainable. I was trapped between wanting him as a boyfriend and not wanting to lose his friendship.”

“How did you deal with that?”

His smile was bittersweet. “Not as well as I could have. I ran away to school and avoided him for a year when I should have just been honest with him. Maybe we would have been together sooner.”

“And if he hadn’t wanted to be with you?”

Truman shrugged. “Then I could have moved on more easily, knowing the truth instead of guessing at it.”

I didn’t like this advice. What was I supposed to do, tell Dawson I was attracted to him? He already knew. And it wasn’t as if I were in love with him. It wasn’t the same situation at all. We’d only begun our friendship weeks ago. It was fragile, not the hardy stock of a lifelong friendship like Truman and Lyle had to fall back on. Even if Lyle hadn’t

wanted romance, they'd have found a way to remain friends in the end.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I pulled it out, surprised to see Dawson's name.

**Dawson:** *You get home safely?*

**Evan:** *Went to a friend's house. Sorry I didn't text.*

**Dawson:** *No worries. I just wanted to make sure you were okay.*

Truman leaned in. "Who are you texting with?" He caught sight of my screen. "Ooh. Dawson is checking on you. This doesn't seem as doomed as you make it sound."

"He wanted me to text him when I got home. I forgot. He's just being friendly."

"More like chivalrous." Truman wiggled his eyebrows. "With straight guys, that's, like, the equivalent of screaming, 'I'm into you!'"

I scoffed. "I don't believe that."

Truman turned to Lyle. "Back me up here. Have you ever worried about one of your guy friends getting home safe?"

He shrugged. "Maybe if they'd been drinking or something."

"Were you drinking?" Truman asked.

"No."

"I rest my case."

I shook my head. "Lyle, if you knew I was walking home in the dark, would you check up on me?"

Lyle scratched at his jaw, clearly not liking this game. "You both do know I'm not straight, right? I have a boyfriend."

"Oh, we know! Sorry." Truman popped up to lean over Lyle's chair and kiss him. Not just a little peck either. It was a



deep, wet kiss that had me shifting uncomfortably. “You’re the closest thing we have to a guy who at least *thinks* like a straight guy, because neither Ev or I ever thought we were anything but gay. I didn’t mean to make you feel like we were erasing your identity.”

“I know. I’m just saying, even if I did think I was straight, I never was. My reactions don’t mean anything one way or another.”

“For that matter, not all straight guys act the same,” I said. “I already know that. Truman is being silly.”

My phone buzzed again.

**Dawson: *So, I had an idea...***

**Dawson: *We should go out Saturday. Simon invited me to a bar arcade type place that’s eighteen-plus. I can be your wingman, and we’ll try to find a cute gay boy for you to practice those flirting skills on. What do you say?***

Well, that pretty much said it all, didn’t it? If Dawson was still this gung-ho to help me meet another guy, it was doubtful he was experiencing any feelings for me. Not that I’d really expected him to be.

“What did he say now?” Truman asked.

I passed my phone over wordlessly. Truman’s lips turned down as he read it. “Screw the tea, I’ll make you ice cream.”

“I should go home.”

“With chocolate syrup and peanuts,” Truman added. “Text your grandpa and let him know you’re sleeping over. The couch is pretty comfy.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Has Lyle made you sleep on it?”

Truman laughed on his way to the kitchen. “Not yet.”

Lyle pushed out of his chair and patted my shoulder on his way past. “Hang in there, Ev. Whatever’s meant to be will happen.”

I nodded, trying to ignore the tightness of my throat. I knew I should be grateful that Dawson was trying to salvage our friendship. Better that he insist on playing wingman than avoid me entirely. I just had to accept that no matter how much I wanted Dawson, it just wasn't meant to be.

**Evan:** *Sure, sounds fun. I'm ready to get out there and try.*

# CHAPTER 12



## EVAN

“DO YOU THINK I’D LOOK GOOD WITH A BALD HEAD?”

I glanced sidelong at Dawson as we waited in line to pay the cover charge to get into LevelUp, a “barcade” that Simon and Parker liked to frequent.

“Uh...I know I’m still new at the flirting thing, but even I don’t think it’s a good idea to bring up baldness.”

Dawson laughed, and the knot of unease in my stomach loosened a bit. We’d driven twenty-five minutes to Riverton, and this was the first time we’d exchanged more than two words. The first time since “Bonergate”—as Truman had dubbed it—that we’d even attempted to hang out.

And so far, it’d been...*awkward*.

“No, you’re right. I don’t recommend it,” Dawson said. “But I might not have a choice. The coaches apparently lay bets on the Riverton game every year, and Mayfield is threatening to make me pay the price if we lose.”

“You’d have to shave your head?” I said in horror. Dawson’s hair was a little shaggy. He could do with a trim, but the longish style suited him. I tilted my head, trying to picture him without his hair and wrinkled my nose. Nope, couldn’t picture it.

“I guess that answers *that* question,” he mumbled.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Your face said it all for you,” he said dryly.

“Sorry it’s just... You do know Granville loses every year, right?”

He huffed. “I’ve heard a rumor or two to that effect, along with a few jokes that I better break the losing streak or else. At least, I think they were jokes...”

Behind us, Truman and Lyle snickered. I had suggested inviting them along, needing some sort of buffer after Wednesday night.

“Dude, do *not* let them shave your head,” Truman said. “What if you have one of those weirdly shaped skulls with lumps and bumps? No one will ever look at you as the sexy football coach again.” He clucked his tongue. “You’ll just be Coach Weird Head Guy.”

Dawson ran his hands through his hair, looking concerned. “I’m not lumpy. I don’t think? Should I be able to tell?”

Truman stepped forward eagerly, hands outstretched. “Let Dr. Truman have a feelsy.”

Lyle tugged him back. “Sorry, Tru. I can’t subject Dawson to that. Maybe we should let Evan field this one?”

Dawson and I glanced at each other.

I spoke. “Oh, I’m sure your head is...”

“Yeah, it’s fine,” Dawson said quickly, clearly not eager to have my hands on him again. Not that I could blame him for that. “We’re gonna win this year anyway, so it doesn’t matter.”

A strange tension arced between us. I wanted to say something, *anything* to make everything go back to the way it’d been before. But I didn’t have the words. I settled for attempting to apologize with my eyes.

I wasn’t sure he got the message. He looked away, swallowing hard, unease sneaking its tendrils between us once more.

Fortunately, the group in front of us moved along just then, and we could finally pay admission and go inside. Truman and I got our wrists wrapped in under-21 bracelets, then we

stopped by the bar to order drinks—still with no sign of Simon and Parker.

Lyle ordered a dark amber beer they had on tap, and Truman asked for a Roy Rodgers. I raised an eyebrow, surprised when the bartender started to make it without question.

Dawson leaned on the bar next to me, his forearms braced on the edge, dark hairs covering lean muscle. “It’s non-alcoholic. A friend of mine used to order them when we went out because he wanted people to think he was drinking. Looks like whiskey, but it’s similar to cherry Coke.”

“Why did he want people to think he was drinking?”

He shrugged. “To avoid getting hassled by our friends.”

“They don’t sound like very good friends.”

Dawson winced, and I regretted my words.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t judge. My friends sometimes give me a hard time, too. Obviously. You’ve seen it.” My face heated a little at the memory of Dawson watching as Calista pointed out I was a virgin. “They support me more than anyone when I need it though.”

“Yeah, Calista doesn’t sugarcoat anything.”

“She really doesn’t. I’m kind of like a little brother to her.” I remembered she was Dawson’s cousin, and even though we’d never be more than friends, I felt the need to add, “Though I’m not really, of course. No relation.”

The bartender finished making drinks for Lyle and Truman and turned to take our order.

“You want a virgin drink?” Dawson asked. With mostly a straight face. His lips twitched a bit, and ugh, how I hated being a virgin at nineteen. How I hated that he *knew*. How I wished that Wednesday night could have gone differently. The next evening, home alone in bed, I’d replayed it with a different ending. It was ridiculous and unrealistic, but hey, all I had were fantasies.

“No thanks,” I said glumly. “I’ve had enough virginity to last a lifetime.”

Dawson coughed. “Uh, right.”

“I’ll take a Coke,” I told the bartender.

“Make it two.”

“You’re not drinking?”

Dawson shrugged. “I drove.”

“Oh, yeah. Of course.”

He hesitated a beat, then added, “I don’t drink much anyway, though.”

I wanted to ask why, but it wasn’t my business. Besides, I could guess. I heard enough about his accident through Calista. It wasn’t a stretch to imagine drinking was involved.

He’d lost so much. I couldn’t even imagine having my dreams snatched away like that. What if one mistake meant I couldn’t code anymore? It was unfathomable.

I swallowed down my questions and took my soda from the bartender while Dawson handed over his credit card.

“You don’t have to pay for my drink,” I pointed out.

“You can get the next round.”

Lyle turned to us. “What now? Do you see your friends?”

“Not yet,” Dawson said.

Truman took a swig of his mocktail. “Well, I see an Asteroids game with my name on it. Come on, baby, let’s go shoot some stuff.”

Lyle let himself be dragged along in Truman’s wake, which was pretty much how they always were. Their personalities worked well together.

Dawson and I turned to look out at the room. The barcade was crowded, crammed full with arcade machines and small groups of two and three people clustered around each one, clogging the aisles.

“Okay, time to play wingman,” he said. “See any good prospects?”

I shook my head. “I mean, I see the backs of a lot of heads. How do you flirt with a guy who’s zoned in on a game?”

He chuckled. “I don’t know. I guess you sidle up, ask if you can play the next round, and then compliment his gaming prowess.”

He wiggled his eyebrows obnoxiously, and I laughed.

“This is going to be a disaster. We’re not even in a gay bar. What if I hit on the wrong guy?”

“Don’t you have gaydar?”

I looked at him pointedly. “I don’t have the best track record with that.”

He gave a sheepish laugh. “Shit, sorry. I’m an idiot.”

“It’s okay. You’re used to having half the population potentially interested in you. I’ve got a much smaller percentage to work with.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I guess I was making assumptions based on my own experiences. But don’t worry. We can just mingle and feel out the situation as we go. I’m pretty good at reading people.”

“If you say so,” I said dubiously.

He *had* noticed Linc’s interest in me at the Hayworth party—assuming he’d been right about that. “But what if we don’t find anyone who’s interested?”

He shrugged. “Then we’ll have fun together.” He put his arm over my shoulder, the first time he’d touched me since Wednesday, and gave me a comforting squeeze. “I’m a great wingman. I’ll make sure you have a good time, no matter what.”



**DAWSON**



I TOOK THE LEAD, weaving through games—pausing to check out the men who were on their own. Well, pausing to let Evan check them out. But ever since Wednesday, my head had been in a strange place, and I found myself scanning men, searching for some sign of attraction I'd missed before.

None of these guys inspired any interest on my part. I glanced toward Evan each time we paused, and he shook his head. Guess he wasn't feeling the sparks either. Couldn't blame him, really. It was hard to get a good read on these guys while their whole focus was on a game, often mumbling to themselves or swearing loudly while they slammed buttons as if their lives depended on it.

Maybe this hadn't been the best place for this particular exercise.

The next guy we spotted had more potential. He wore tight-fitting jeans that hugged his ass and showcased his long legs. He wasn't broad like some of my jock pals, but slender like Ev, though much taller. His hair was a reddish brown, a little longer on the top, and from his profile, he looked like he could be attractive.

I paused and glanced at Evan. He shrugged, which I took to mean he was interested. I hesitated, though. Was Evan really ready for this? What if this guy wasn't into men, like Evan feared? Worse, what if he was but shot Evan down and hurt his feelings? Or what if he didn't, but he turned out to be a creep?

Before I could make sure Evan truly wanted to engage, the guy stepped back from the Addams Family pinball machine and recognition hit me.

Evan noticed him at the same time. "Linc?"

Linc grinned when he spotted us. "Evan, hey! I didn't think you guys were here yet."

I noticed he didn't greet *me* by name.

"You knew we were coming?" I asked.

"Yeah, Simon mentioned it. Hope you don't mind that I decided to gate-crash? I love gaming."

“What’s your favorite gaming system?” Evan asked.

While Linc launched into a long story of his gaming life—*yawn*—I stood by at loose ends. There was something about Linc that I didn’t like. He seemed friendly and interested, just as he had at the Hayworth party, but something was different now. I didn’t like the way his gaze kept slipping to Evan’s mouth, as if he might be imagining a kiss. It was rude, right? He was...practically *objectifying* Evan.

At one point, Evan turned to include me in the conversation and Linc’s gaze shot straight to his ass.

I glared at Linc, trying to beam him warnings with my eyes, but he didn’t seem to notice. That, or he didn’t care what I thought. Most likely, he was too busy ogling Evan to even see me.

Simon and Parker finally arrived, distracting me from my growing irritation. Their guilty smiles took my brain on an involuntary detour to what had made them so late. Images of two strong bodies twined together, hands grasping, and low, guttural groans filled my head.

I shut it down fast, my stomach squirming uneasily. I didn’t want to think of my friends that way! I wasn’t homophobic, but my mind had never delivered such explicit or X-rated visions of men together. It had never been something I’d thought much about, beyond understanding the basic logistics of what two guys might do together.

I’d had no *interest*, so why now?

“Come with us to grab a drink?” Simon asked.

“Let me just tell Evan...”

“Eh, he’s fine with Linc. Leave him.”

Sure enough, Evan was talking and laughing easily with Linc. He didn’t seem to need a wingman at all. I hadn’t even had to smooth the way for him with a little flirty banter.

My spirits sank, and I wasn’t sure why. If Evan decided to date Linc, that was good right? It’d resolve the weird tension

that had formed between us since my body betrayed me, and I wouldn't have to dwell on these weird thoughts in my head.

I'd really liked the idea of helping Ev. But in the end, he didn't need me.

Reluctantly, I joined Simon and Parker at the bar while they ordered drinks.

"What's Linc doing here anyway?" I grumbled.

Simon smirked. "I think he's got a thing for your friend. That's why I thought we should give them a little space."

No shit he had a thing for Ev. He wasn't exactly subtle.

I glanced back across the room, spotting Linc's hand on Evan's arm. He was drawing Evan in front of him, so that he could reach the controls, and bracketing his body with his own. He set his chin on Evan's shoulder, whispering something in his ear.

Then his hand shifted to Evan's hip, and something hot and wild burst in my chest.

Sounds disappeared beneath the roar of blood rushing in my ears, and I moved toward Linc and Evan without a word to Simon or Parker.

My eyes cataloged all the places Linc touched Evan. The hand resting possessively on his waist. The lean of his chest against Evan's upper back. His lips practically brushing Evan's ear as he spoke to him.

This was too fast. Evan was barely coming out of his shell enough to flirt. What if Linc tried to take it further? What if he wanted to take Evan back to his dorm and fuck him? Evan was a virgin, and Linc was too damn smooth.

I didn't like it. I couldn't trust this guy to do right by Evan. He might be too rough for Evan's first time. He might not respect Evan's wishes if he changed his mind halfway through. Hooking up with a stranger could be risky.

"Everything okay here?" I asked brightly—and far too loudly.

Evan looked relieved. “There you are. I thought I’d lost you for the night.”

“Never. We came together, right?”

Linc backed up a step. “I was just showing Ev how to play...”

“Evan codes brilliant apps and computer programs. Pretty sure he can figure out a pinball machine.”

Linc stared, apparently at a loss for words, while Evan’s eyes shot wide. “Dawson, he was just being nice.”

“Nothing nice about what he wants from you.”

Evan looked confused. “I don’t... What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing!” I growled.

*Everything!*

I hated Linc for no good reason. I couldn’t tolerate his hands on Evan. I couldn’t fucking *stand* the idea of them together.

My heart was racing, my palms clammy, as realization slammed into me.

I didn’t want Evan looking at another guy the way he looked at me. I didn’t want him to get cozy with someone like Linc, to give him a sensual massage that lit up his body and made his cock hard. Didn’t want him to finally take it further, to touch and taste and...and *come* with someone else.

*He should do it with me.*

The thought scared the hell out of me. I quickly amended it. *I can make it good for him. Make sure he’s happy and safe and appreciated.*

I wasn’t gay or bi, but I was open-minded enough to know sexuality could be fluid. I’d gone a long, long time without sexual release with a partner. I’d been messed up after my toxic, fucked-up relationship with Kelsey had imploded. I knew I couldn’t handle the baggage of dating someone, but I *could* do this.

I could help Evan explore his sexual side, teach him how to please and receive pleasure in return so that when he met the right person, he felt confident of his worth. Because he was worth so much. He didn't seem to realize it yet, but I could show him.

And if I got some sexual release too? Well, honestly, that was a bonus. I wanted to help Evan experience everything he wanted. I was his friend, and sex was just sex, right?

Decision made, I couldn't stand by for another minute.

I reached for Evan's arm. "Can we talk for a sec?"

"Now?"

I nodded. "Yeah, right now."

"Uh." Evan glanced from me to Linc, seemingly unsure. "Yeah, okay."

*Thank fuck.* Relief swamped me as I tugged him away from Linc, heading toward a quiet corner where we could talk alone. My heart thumped fast and hard, and my stomach did flip-flops. But my mind, which had been spinning chaotically for days, finally quieted.

I had no doubts about what I was about to propose. It felt right.



## EVAN

LINC WAS A NICE GUY. Attentive. But I'd felt nothing, no spark, while we'd talked.

It felt a little like cheating, running into him. Because I didn't even have to try to flirt. Linc did all the work, and while he'd been so subtle at the Hayworth party I hadn't realized he was into me, he seemed to have changed tactics. Even if I didn't catch all his innuendos, all the touching clued me in.

My heart had quickened when he caged me in against the pinball machine, ostensibly to show me how to hit the highest

scores on the game. It *was* exciting to finally be the object of someone's interest. But it was a little unnerving too. Did I really want this with Linc? I was beyond ready to meet someone, to shed my virginity. *Meaningless societal construct* or not, I wanted to experience what everyone else did. I wanted to know pleasure and intimacy. And to be blunt about it: I was nineteen and horny as hell.

But this unease was precisely why I'd never hopped onto one of a dozen hookup apps to get on with it. I'd installed many of them. I'd even chatted with a few men. But I could never bring myself to take the plunge, too afraid of rejection once we met in person, too nervous my virginity would be all too obvious, and a little afraid because I couldn't really *know* or *trust* any of these guys. None of them wanted to spend a year coaxing a nervous virgin into a hookup, so I'd given up on that idea, hoping that instead I'd magically meet the right person.

Yeah, that wasn't working out.

But here was Linc, totally nice and into me, and I felt meh.

Not even close to how I felt when Dawson returned to interrupt us and pull me away, his voice all growly. If he'd been the one caging me in against that game, I'd have leaned back into him to feel his muscled bulk against me.

*Not everyone can be a Dawson*, I reminded myself. *Linc is cute*.

I felt a little guilty for not being attracted to Linc. So he was slender instead of muscled. So what? I was the same, being a tech geek whose only form of exercise was riding my bike around town. Who was I to crave the exact opposite of myself? It felt hypocritical, wanting a big strong man like Dawson. It also felt unrealistic. It made for a great fantasy, but if I wanted real sex, I'd have to let it go.

Dawson led me to an isolated corner tucked between three games marked Out of Service. It was the quietest spot in the bar, though the pinging sounds of various games still reached us, along with the distant murmurs of conversation and laughter.

“What’s going on?” I asked. “It was pretty rude to ditch Linc like that.”

I couldn’t imagine what could be so urgent. We’d had plenty of opportunity to talk on the way here.

“I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

I stared up at him, puzzled. “Why wouldn’t I be okay?”

“Linc was moving fast. His hands were all over you.”

I flushed, remembering the uncomfortable feeling of Linc pressing close. I’d ordered myself to relax, to try to enjoy the attention.

“Isn’t finding a guy who actually wants to be close to me the point?” I said before I could properly filter my thoughts. The words came out strangely accusatory.

Dawson didn’t flinch from my words though. He grew even more intense. “No. The idea was for you to flirt a little and get comfortable with seeing yourself as someone worthy of attention.”

“Okay...”

“You *are*, Ev. You deserve someone who will appreciate everything about you, from your intelligence to your sweet blushes. Not just your...”

“What?”

His voice came out in a whisper. “Your amazing ass.”

My face heated as I laughed. “*What?*”

Dawson took a second to gather his thoughts. “I kind of pushed you into this, when you think about it. I didn’t mean to, but... All that teasing about learning to flirt, and me playing wingman. Maybe...”

“Maybe what?”

He spoke slowly, the words seemingly pulled from somewhere deep inside. “Maybe I was too invested in your sex life.”

My heart skipped. Was he saying what I thought he was saying?

“Why would you be?”

“I don’t know.” He hesitated, then added, “Say the word and we can leave this idea behind. You don’t need to lose your virginity. Who *cares* as long as you’re happy? If or when you want sex, it’ll happen.”

“But I do want sex!”

I clapped my hand over my mouth, realizing my voice had risen.

Dawson raised an eyebrow. “With Linc?”

I dropped my hand, sighing. “Not really.”

He nodded. “What about with me?”

My breath caught. I stared at him, unable to speak, my brain stuck on his words, sure I’d misheard him. “Sorry?”

“Do you want to have sex with me?”

I licked my lips, suddenly nervous. “Why would you ask me that? You’re not...into men.”

“Not normally,” he said. “But the thing is, I can’t stop thinking about what happened the other night.”

“Your body reacted to stimulus, that’s all. It was embarrassing and awkward, but—”

“It wasn’t just that. I mean, thanks for giving me an easy out, but no. I keep thinking about *you*, specifically. You and me, and...all the things I could show you.”

Heat washed through me. For once, it wasn’t embarrassment, but something headier. Did Dawson *want* me?

“I must be dreaming,” I murmured.

“I don’t want there to be any confusion,” he said. “I’ve never been into guys before, and I don’t know why this is different. My last relationship ended horribly, and I’m not sure I can ever date again, can ever have someone trust and rely on me that way. But, uh, we could...explore things. Together.”



“Sex things?” I said, needing to clarify.

Despite the tense tone of the conversation up to this point, Dawson suddenly smiled at me. There was a predatory gleam in his eye. “Yeah, Ev. Sex things.”

I expelled a big breath, my head spinning. It was a lot to process. I’d been so certain Dawson was entirely out of reach—especially after Bonergate. But instead of freaking over his reaction and trying to stay away from me, he wanted to pull me closer. To explore his sexuality with me.

It was probably a terrible idea, right? What if he ended up hating it? What if I fell in love with him while it was just sexual release to him?

But as Dawson Woods, the most gorgeous man I’d ever seen in real life, offered himself to me, I knew I’d never say no. Dawson checked all my boxes. Even if it was only physical, it would be incredible to experience it with him. And unlike Linc, or any of those guys on apps, I knew him. I trusted him.

“Okay,” I said, knowing I might never get a chance like this again. “Yeah.”

If there was emotional fallout, I’d deal with it later.

“Yeah?”

Some sense of preservation made me say, “But you’ve got to kiss me first. I’ve never been properly kissed, and—”

*I want to be sure you’re not turned off by it.*

Dawson’s mouth came down on mine before I could finish my sentence. His lips were hard at first, almost bruising in force. Lust flared even with the discomfort. Or perhaps because of it. His strength, his size nearly overwhelmed me. He bent over me, his hot hands covering my face as he tilted my chin up to the perfect angle for his kiss.

But he gentled soon enough, coaxing my lips apart with his before sweeping his tongue in to stroke mine. It sent a thrill through my body, making me gasp.

Dawson answered with a low sound in his throat, and there was no mistaking it as anything other than pleasure.

Dawson Woods was kissing me—and he liked it.

# CHAPTER 13



## EVAN

“DO YOU WANT TO COME BACK TO MY PLACE?”

My heart quickened at Dawson’s words as we watched Truman and Lyle let themselves into their little rental house.

After Dawson had kissed me at the bar, we’d had to return to our friends and spend tortuous hours pretending everything was the same. It wasn’t, of course. With one kiss, my reality had shifted.

Each look from Dawson felt charged, gliding warmly over my skin. Each smile seemed to promise more. More kisses. More touching. More *sex*.

My heart skipped erratically. I was finally going to have sex—and with Dawson. Could this really be happening?

It felt fast. Dawson had kissed me so well. But it *was* his first kiss with a man. Just days ago, he’d been weirded out by his reaction to me.

“Is that what you want?”

“I want whatever you want.”

“That’s not an answer,” I said tightly.

“Evan...” Dawson reached for my hand and squeezed it. “I already told you I wanted to do this with you. But there’s no rush. If you’re nervous—”

“Aren’t you nervous?” I blurted. “You’ve never been with a guy, right?”

“No.”

“So, aren’t you nervous?”

He leaned in a little closer, eyes locked on mine. “No, Ev. Nervous isn’t the right word.”

“What is?” I whispered.

His gaze dropped to my mouth. He swiped his tongue over his bottom lip. “Lucky.”

*Ohhh.* My heart swooned, and I surged forward, meeting his mouth with mine, half afraid that he would still change his mind and push me away. But he caught me, one hand grasping the back of my neck and grounding me. His other hand landed heavily on my thigh while his mouth slowly took me apart.

When he drew back, he asked again, “What do you want to do?”

I clutched at his shoulders, so strong under my hands. I remembered the feel of him as I massaged muscles rippling under hot, smooth skin. I wanted to feel that again. “Y-yeah. Your place. I want this.”

His lips quirked in a little smile. “Me too. You know I’ll take good care of you, right?”

My mouth went dry as I pictured all the ways that Dawson might soon take care of me. I didn’t know how far this could or should go tonight. Just kissing him had me reeling. But I’d been waiting so long. I’d take anything and everything he was ready to give.

“I know,” I croaked.

He pressed a fast kiss on my lips before reversing out of Truman’s drive. The trip to Grand House went quickly, and soon we were tiptoeing up the darkened stairs and quietly slipping into Dawson’s room.

“What now?” I whispered in the dark.

Dawson crowded me against the door, putting his lips close to my ear. “Now you tell me your fantasies. And I make them come true.”

My breathing sped up, dozens of desires crowding my head and clamoring for attention. But there was one that was stronger. “Can I massage you again? And this time...”

I trailed off, too shy to say the words. But Dawson understood.

“You won’t stop when I get hard for you?” he murmured.

I shook my head. “N-not unless you want me to stop.”

“Mm. Pretty sure I won’t want to stop, Ev. I’ll show you just how to touch me. You want to make me feel good, make me moan for you?”

Just his words were heating my blood, making my cock stiffen in my jeans. “Please,” I whispered. “I just wanna see you, and...and touch you everywhere.”

He grasped my hand and dragged it down to his jeans, pressing my palm against the hard line of his erect cock. “Sounds like a win-win for me. But what about you, Ev?”

“What about me?”

“I think we should make you come too. Don’t you?”

“Oh.” I’d been so focused on finally getting my hands on Dawson I hadn’t thought twice about my own release. But that was why we were doing this. I was the virgin here. “Yeah. I’m pretty sure once I touch you the way I want, that will take care of itself, to be honest.”

He laughed, but it wasn’t mean. Like every other sound out of him right now, it was soaked in lust. “Then, I guess we better get that massage started, huh?”

He backed away. I remained by the door, trying to regain my equilibrium. I felt hazy, as if Dawson’s nearness had intoxicated me. I took a deep breath, trying to calm my racing heart. A moment later, a soft light filtered out from a lamp by the love seat.

Just as my eyes adjusted, Dawson stripped off his shirt, and my knees went weak.

His chest was so broad. I hadn't gotten a long look at anything but his back Wednesday night. I'd mostly averted my gaze, trying so hard to hide my attraction and remain respectful. But now Dawson stood before me, sexy smile seeming to dare me to look my fill. His pecs were impressive, muscular and covered in dark hair that was thickest in the center of his chest but lightened as it narrowed to a strip that disappeared behind his waistband. His stomach was flat, defined by muscle, though he didn't rock a full-on six-pack as he might have when he was still playing football.

"Doing okay?" he asked when I continued to stand frozen, drinking him in, trying to memorize even the smallest of details, like the three small freckles on his collar bone, the thin silvery scar that slashed over his lower right ribs.

I forced myself to take a step forward. When my legs supported me, I took another. "Yeah, I'm just...still trying to make myself believe this is really happening."

He grinned. "I know I'm dreamy, but I promise I'm a real man. Come feel."

*Oh god.*

I raised my hand when I was near enough but froze up again. Dawson grasped my wrist and gently guided my palm to his chest, right over his breastbone, where I could feel his heart thumping.

"See? I'm alive. My heart is racing."

I laughed a little, curling my fingers into his chest hair. "I feel it. Nerves or excitement?"

"A little of both," he said. "This is a big step for me too."

"Right..."

He tipped his head forward, whispering. "But I like you touching me. You can explore more."

I accepted the invitation, raising my other hand and mapping out the shape of his chest and stomach. I circled behind him, reaching up to massage his shoulders. He was too tall, though. "Can we sit?"

“Sure.” Dawson lowered himself onto the love seat, angled sideways so that I could settle behind him. He glanced back over his shoulder. “This feels familiar.”

I put my hands on his flanks, slowly massaging my way up and around to his chest. “I think this is where we left off.”

Dawson spoke, his voice hoarse. “Seems about right.”

I cupped my hands over his pecs, squeezing. His nipples pebbled beneath my palms. This time, I gave myself permission to press up against his back and really feel his body. I massaged his pectorals, trying to gather the courage for more.

Dawson leaned back into me. “Pinch my nipples. Make me squirm.”

I flushed to hear him talk so bluntly, but his instructions made it easier to touch him this way. I felt for his nipples and pinched the small buds between my fingers.

“Harder,” he murmured.

I squeezed and twisted, and he gasped. “Yeah, perfect. Be rough. I like it.”

I tugged even harder, still halfway convinced I’d hurt him, and he moaned low in his throat as he had Wednesday night. I levered myself onto my knees, arms still around him, to look down his body. Fuck, he was gorgeous: his nipples were reddened and puffy from my tugging; his stomach muscles were tight and flexing; and his pants bulged with the force of his hard-on.

“Doing so good, Ev,” he said. “Do you like touching me?”

“Yes.”

“You want to keep going?” His voice was gentle, coaxing. I knew he’d let me stop at any point.

Taking a breath, I answered his question by sliding one hand down his abs toward his waistband. Tentatively, I brushed my fingertips over his zipper.



“Fuck.” He rocked his hips up, seeking more contact. “I’m so hard.”

I traced the length of his shaft, which snaked part way down his thigh, trapped as it was in his jeans. He grunted, hips restlessly rocking as he sought more contact.

“Evan, I don’t want to rush you or anything...”

“What is it?”

He groaned. “I need to get out of these pants.”

A loaded silence hung between us.

“Is that okay?” he asked.

*Was it okay?* Was it okay that Dawson Woods, the most gorgeous man I’d ever met, the man I’d wanted deeply even when I knew I’d never have him, wanted to strip for me?

“Uh, yeah, Dawson. Seeing you naked is more than okay.”

He chuckled. “Good. And how about you, Ev? Do I get to see you too?”

Even more nerves flared, and I bit my lip. It was easy to watch Dawson bare himself. I was desperate to see every inch. But it was more intimidating to reveal myself. Dawson had been with women before this.

But he’d chosen me, hadn’t he? He’d been the one to pull me into that corner, to offer to explore with me, to kiss me and blow my mind. He’d gotten hard, almost immediately turned on from kissing me, and he’d responded to my every touch.

Maybe it was okay to be brave. It was overdue, really. I’d shied away from making myself vulnerable to strangers. But I trusted Dawson. I felt closer to him than anyone—even Calista. He’d become my very best friend.

“Okay.” My voice quivered with nerves, but I took a breath and spoke again, injecting more confidence. “Yes. You can see me too.”

Dawson rewarded my bravery with another kiss.



## DAWSON

*I'M REALLY DOING THIS. Sex with a man.*

Despite being new, it felt natural. My stomach fluttered with nerves now and then, but with each touch from Evan, each flicker of need, that feeling receded. My body responded, tightening and trembling, as he explored my chest and stomach. We'd barely gotten started, and already, I was desperate to unleash the desire building inside me.

My initial hesitance about getting intimate with a guy was long gone, washed away by a tide of want.

Yes, this was new. Yes, it was different. But I was one hundred percent here for it.

I drew Evan into a kiss, focusing on easing his nerves. He was the virgin. He needed me to be the confident partner I'd promised him—and I wasn't about to let him down.

With flicks of my tongue, I quickly had him leaning into me for more. He made delicious little sounds of pleasure that only ramped up my lust further.

My cock ached, confined in my jeans as it was, but I forced myself to be patient. This was ultimately about Evan's pleasure. I intended to give him everything he'd denied himself for so long.

I moved my mouth to Evan's neck, kissing creamy skin only a little prickly with hair. That was a new sensation, but kind of nice. I rubbed my stubbly jaw under his and he shuddered hard.

“Can I take off your shirt?”

“What about...” He shivered as I nibbled at his skin. “What about your, um, your...situation in your pants.”

I couldn't hold back my laugh. He groaned, this time with embarrassment.

“You can say cock, Ev.”

“I know.” He huffed as I drew back, still smiling at him. “Fine. What about your cock? You wanted me to...”

He trailed off again, but I didn’t push him this time.

“Let’s just see what happens,” I said. “No need to overthink it, right?”

“Easy for you to say,” he grumbled.

I kissed him again, because I’d already discovered how much he loved it. When Evan got too much in his head, a kiss unraveled the tangled thoughts. He responded, eager and sweet. His inexperience was obvious, but there was something heady about being his first. Already, he’d begun to pick up on my cues, tentatively stroking my tongue with his.

I unbuttoned his indigo shirt, which brought out the color of his eyes, and dropped kisses along his collar bone as I bared his chest. Evan trembled under my hands, nervous or excited. I couldn’t tell which. But when I flicked his nipple with my tongue, he gasped and gripped my tightly. I rumbled an appreciative sound as I nibbled his tender flesh.

I moved across his chest to the other nipple, biting gently, and he moaned so nicely that a pulse of want thudded through my cock. I loved the sounds of his pleasure. Loved that they were a mix of higher-pitched whimpers and deep, raspy moans. I realized I loved the feel of his body too, all sharp angles and planes rather than curves.

I shoved his shirt down his arms and reached for his jeans, pulling open the button. “Are you hard for me, Ev?”

Another of those whimpers, followed by a breathy word. “Yes.”

“Beautiful,” I murmured.

I didn’t even know if I meant him or the situation, but either applied. Evan’s body was slim, without an ounce of fat, but soft. His skin felt like satin compared to my body’s rougher, hairier texture. His eyes were so wide and so blue, I could just sink into them.

I hadn't been sure what to expect from tonight. I'd known I wanted to be with Evan, to be the one to help him explore his sensuality. But now, with him trembling in my arms, I realized that I wanted this—wanted him, a man—every bit as much as I'd ever wanted anyone else. Maybe more.

It was just sex, yeah. But it was incredible sex.

I kissed those full lips again, reveling in how damn sweet he tasted, as I delved my hand into his open jeans. I felt velvety skin beneath my fingertips before I wrapped my hand around his hot, hard length. We both gasped into the kiss at the same time. The feeling of a cock that wasn't my own was... strange but erotic. My lust only ran hotter as I squeezed and stroked. Evan groaned into my mouth, shaking. His cock pulsed, and I felt the warm spurts of his cum. Damn, that was sexy, feeling how hard he was coming for me.

I broke the kiss to look at him, his face twisted with pleasure before going slack with shock. Then quickly transitioning to horror.

“Oh no.”

“It's okay,” I said.

“No, no, no.”

“Evan, really...”

He lifted his hands to hide his face. “I came in my pants.”

I thought fast, trying to think of how to salvage this situation. I didn't think it would be a good idea to point out it wasn't a total surprise, given he was so inexperienced. So instead, I got creative.

“Well...now, I've got a handful of lube to jerk-off with.”

He dropped his hands, revealing eyes wide with shock. “*What?*”

I withdrew my right hand, slippery with essence de Evan, and ripped open my pants with my left. Finally, I'd get some relief. With Evan watching, I pulled out my cock and fisted it with my cum-covered hand.

I groaned, body tightly strung from what felt like an hour's worth of teasing, though surely it hadn't been that long. Using Evan's cum was messy and a little weird, but it felt good.

Evan watched me avidly, his embarrassment forgotten. "Your cock is so big."

I grunted, his words intensifying my pleasure. What man didn't like to hear that?

"Can I..." Evan reached toward me, and I released myself, even as I was nearly there, so that he could wrap slim fingers around me.

I closed my hand around his, tightening his fist on my shaft. "Just like that. I like a firm grip."

"Got it," he said, as if there would be a test later. I had no doubt he'd pass with flying colors.

I leaned back onto my arms so that I could pump my hips, fucking his fist, desperate to come now. Evan's gaze raked over my body, watching my abs tense and release, my cock surge forward and back.

"Can I put my mouth on you?" he asked suddenly.

And that was it. I erupted with a pained shout, cum spraying in an arc and hitting Evan's chest as he leaned over me.

"Sorry, too close." I panted for breath, collapsing onto my back and whacking my head on the arm of the too short love seat.

"At least I'm not the only one who came too fast," Evan said.

"Hey now."

"I mean, I'm the virgin," Evan said. "It was kind of expected of me. But you're this worldly, experienced man. What's your excuse?"

I sat up to grasp Evan and haul him over my lap while he yelled and laughed in protest. "You're going to pay for that, you little—"

*Bang-bang-bang.*

“Mr. Woods! Please keep it down. It’s quite late.”

Evan’s eyes widened, he colored with one of those pretty blushes, and I just didn’t have it in me to feel bad for disrupting Ada’s sleep.

“Sorry, Ma’am!” I called, voice shaking with the urge to laugh again. “Didn’t mean to disturb anyone.”

With a harumph of annoyance, she shuffled away.

I waited a few minutes to be sure she was gone, then smiled at the red-faced Evan. “You’re blushing again.”

“Do you think she knows I’m here?” he asked, sounding worried.

“I don’t know. Does it bother you?”

“Me? No. But this town...there are no secrets, Dawson. Everyone will talk about you. Are you really ready to be gossip?”

I blew out a breath. “I don’t know. I guess I’ll have to deal with it if it happens.”

He frowned, and I really had no choice but to lean forward and kiss the crease in his forehead.

“I’m not a virgin anymore,” he said.

“I guess not. How do you feel?”

He smiled, but there was sadness tinging it, making my gut tighten uneasily. “Pretty great, but... You did what you offered. I had my first time, and it was amazing. It doesn’t have to happen again.”

I tightened my arms around him instinctively. “What do you mean? There’s still so much more we can do together.”

“I know, but...”

“Don’t worry about the gossip, Ev. I’m not going to let the possibility keep me from what I want. Are you?”

He hesitated a moment. “No, but I don’t have anything to lose.”

“Neither do I. Hell, I’ve already lost everything, Evan. So forgive me if I choose to hold on to this for a while, okay? I’m not scared of a little small-town gossip.”

He relented. “I’m not sure you have any idea of what you could be in for, but okay.”

“We’ll do this again, then?”

“Uh, yeah. We’ll do it for as long as you let me,” Evan said. “I’m not dumb enough to turn you down.”

I grinned. “Good. Because my ego really *hates* it when that happens.”

He scoffed. “As if you even know what it feels like. Has anyone ever turned you down?”

I thought for a minute. “Well, yeah. Tania Stevens. My seventh-grade dance. She said, and I quote, ‘Your hair is stupid.’”

Evan laughed quietly as he ran his hands through my hair. “Oh no. I love your stupid hair.” He scratched his fingers against my scalp. “And I can confirm, you have a nicely shaped head.”

“No lumps and bumps?”

Evan felt around a little more. “Hmm. Nope. Should be safe to shave.” He tsked. “Except, of course, I don’t mess around with bald men.”

I gasped. “Harsh, man. So harsh.”

“Sorry. I have to be honest.”

“Uh-huh.” I shifted him off my lap. “Well, in all honesty, we both need to clean up. My hand is sticky as fuck.”

Evan wrinkled his nose adorably, but when I headed to the bathroom, he followed. We cleaned up as best we could with a couple of washcloths. I thought about offering a shower, but I wasn’t sure either of us were ready for that level of intimacy.

I gave him some privacy to do the best he could with the mess in his pants, then dressed and returned to the bathroom to hand him his shirt. Evan put it on, seeming shy once more.

“Guess it’s late,” he said.

I nodded. “According to Ada, it’s *quite* late. I’ll take you home.”

He smiled tentatively. “Thanks. Um, for everything.”

I drew him close once more and kissed him. “No, thank you. Tonight’s been...pretty great for me too.”

His eyes met mine. “I guess it was also your first time. In a different way, I mean.”

“I guess it was. It’ll be a good memory for both of us.”



# CHAPTER 14



## DAWSON

“WHAT DID I MISS?”

“Hmm? Oh.” I blinked out of my thoughts long enough to focus on the large television dominating the far wall of my aunt and uncle’s living room. “Nebraska is up by fourteen.”

“All right!” Uncle Walter returned to his recliner, a can of Budweiser in his hand. He sat a second one on the coffee table before me. “Brought you a cold one.”

“Thanks,” I said, even though I wouldn’t drink it.

I’d learned the hard way that alcohol led me to stupid, life-altering decisions. Of course, last night, I’d managed to make a pretty life-changing choice while stone-cold sober.

Walter grunted as he cranked the lever on the side of his chair to release the footrest. “It doesn’t bother you to watch the game, does it? You seem a little distracted.”

“Nah, just tired,” I lied. I was plenty distracted, but it had nothing to do with football. “Couldn’t do my job very well if it got to me.”

I’d been asked questions like Walter’s more times than I could count since my accident. In those first weeks, I couldn’t so much as look at a football without feeling sick to my stomach. But over time, that pain had dulled. I still couldn’t watch *my* old team without a serious twinge, but for the most part, I was looking forward and not back.

“Your boys ready to take on Riverton?”

“I hope so,” I said fervently, still a little worried about Coach Mayfield’s threat to put my dignity on the line when the time came. Granville hadn’t defeated Riverton in five years, I’d heard, and even then their wins had been more luck than skill. Riverton was a powerhouse of a team. “We’ve been working them hard.”

Aunt Paula stepped into the room. “Ten minutes until we eat.”

Uncle Walter groaned theatrically. “Good. I’m starving.”

“When aren’t you?” she teased, before turning a more serious look on me. “Your mother called last night. She was worried. Said she’d been trying to reach you and there was no answer?”

I winced. “Sorry. I was out with friends.”

*Not to mention getting naked with Evan.*

“I managed to convince her you were fine, but you really shouldn’t make her worry after everything that happened.”

Shame filled me. My mother had done so much for me when I’d been injured, and I’d been like a wounded animal, lashing out in anger over and over. For some reason, her worrying made me feel worse. It wasn’t until she got fed up with my poor treatment and left in tears that I’d finally woken up and realized I couldn’t wallow forever. Part of me was still afraid that if I let my mom get her hooks into me—however well-intentioned she might be—I’d end up right back in that dysfunctional headspace. I had to stand on my own two feet, but Mom deserved better.

“I’ll call her.”

“You do that,” Aunt Paula said. “And sooner rather than later.”

“All right, Paula. The boy said he’d call. Let us watch the game.”

Paula shot me one last reprimanding look before disappearing into the next room.

“Don’t feel bad for living your life,” Uncle Walter said. “It’s good that you’re settling into Granville. Which friends were these? Does Calista still tag along everywhere you go?”

Calista returned from the bathroom, where I was pretty sure she was sneaking a smoke. “Calista does not! In fact, Calista wasn’t even invited.”

“Hey, I saved you from hours of reminiscing about high school with an old teammate of mine. You should be thanking me.”

We’d certainly tested Evan’s patience when we started talking about our high school championship my senior year. Of course, that was after I’d kissed the crap out of Evan, surprising us both. Anticipation for the night ahead had simmered between us, making every minute we had to delay leaving a small torture. Thankfully, Linc had taken the hint after I dragged Evan away caveman-style, and he’d backed off.

Part of me still couldn’t believe it had happened. Me, with a guy. I never would have guessed it could be so good. If someone had asked me a year ago—or hell, even a few weeks ago—if I’d ever be interested in messing around with a guy, I’d have said *not in a million years*.

*Shows how much I know...*

“Was he cute?” Calista asked.

My heart leapt. “Who?”

It was almost as if she were reading my mind.

“The football friend. Duh.”

“Oh. Right. Uh...” I glanced at Uncle Walter. I wasn’t sure what his stance was on sexuality. “Actually, Simon has a boyfriend.”

“Oh, do tell.” Calista came farther into the room and perched on the arm of the sofa by me. “Is the boyfriend an athlete too?”

“Yeah, Parker Reid.”

Uncle Walter spoke up. “Not the same Parker Reid who played wide receiver for the Haymakers, surely?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“And your friend Simon’s last name?” he asked.

“Prentiss.”

Walter slapped his thigh. “Well, I’ll be damned.” He laughed. “That just goes to show, doesn’t it?”

Calista looked as confused as I felt. “Goes to show what?”

“Prentiss and Reid were the two best wide receivers on the Hayworth team in recent years. And they’re gay! It just goes to show that your sexuality doesn’t mean you can’t step up and play a real man’s game.”

“Uh, Dad, there’s no such thing as a *real man*. Every man is a man.”

“That’s what I’m saying, Callie.”

“I’m pretty sure Simon is bi,” I said. “Or maybe pansexual.”

He waved a hand. “You know what I mean, though. Football is a tough sport.”

Calista and I exchanged a look. Uncle Walter wasn’t saying the right words, but his heart seemed to be in the right place. More or less.

It was definitely better than him responding with hate. That would hit too close to home, considering what had happened with Evan. Not that I considered myself gay or bi after one same-sex experience, but I couldn’t abide hate being directed at Evan—or Truman and Lyle, for that matter. They were all good people. But especially Evan.

*Who I had sex with...*

It was surreal, but really, what was the big deal? It was just sex. I was exploring something new with Evan, and it was a little exciting because I was venturing into the unknown. But in the end, I’d come by jerking myself off.

*While using another man's cum as lube.*

I shifted uneasily in my seat, my mind replaying the night before. Evan's shy but eager mouth as he learned to kiss and clearly loved it. His tentative touches as he explored my body. His excitement when I touched him, coming so fast he'd been embarrassed.

I'd liked it. Liked leading him, liked knowing he was untouched by anyone else. I'd slept with a virgin only once before, in high school. But that had been different. I'd been a virgin too, and we'd fumbled our way to an orgasm for me and a disappointing evening for her. Looking back, I felt bad for Sarah. She'd gotten a crappy first time, thanks to my cluelessness. I got better with time, but that probably didn't make Sarah's memories any sweeter.

Evan, though. I'd done right by him. I'd given him an experience worth remembering.

*That's* why I'd loved it. Because Evan deserved the best, and I'd given it to him. Instead of subjecting him to fumbling or cruelty at the hands of some guy he picked up at a bar, he'd had a great time with someone he could trust.

The urge to see him again flared. The urge to touch and taste—and teach him something new. It was just sex, but even I could admit, it'd been *great* sex. Evan might be inexperienced, but he was so...*real* in everything he did. His reactions were so honest that it was impossible for me not to respond to his desire.

Calista nudged me, forcing me back to the present. “Dawson, did you hear Mom? Dinner's ready.”

I glanced up to see that Uncle Walter had already levered himself out of his chair. “Yeah. Sorry. I didn't sleep much last night.”

She wiggled her eyebrows. “You pick up someone at the bar?”

“Uh, maybe.”

“You should have taken me along. I need to meet someone new. I'm so over the men in this town.”

“Eh, pickings would have been slim. We went to a barcade in Riverton. A bunch of gamer guys swearing at machines doesn’t strike me as your idea of fun.”

Her eyes narrowed. “No, but it is right up Truman’s alley. He was talking about going to that bar just the other day.”

“Was he?” I stood and tried to pass her to the dining room. “That’s a funny coincidence.”

She planted herself in my path and crossed her arms. “Uh-huh. Why do you look guilty?”

“Me?” I laughed. “What do I have to feel guilty about?”

“I don’t know,” she mused. “But I’ll find out.”

If what Evan said about small towns was true, I was afraid she was right. But I couldn’t worry about that now. I was still processing what happened between me and Evan. I didn’t regret it, at all, but I wasn’t sure I understood it yet either. Until I did, I wasn’t going to confess to Calista.

Especially when she was Evan’s best friend. Knowing her, she’d cut off my balls first and ask questions second.

No, thank you. If I was going to properly educate Evan, I needed my boys intact.



## EVAN

GRANDPA CHARGED into the hardware store Tuesday afternoon, muttering under his breath. Without so much as a hello, he hurried down an aisle.

I trailed after him, concerned. “What are you doing here?”

Other than Wednesdays when he covered for me to attend Tech Club, Grandpa only worked early mornings. He enjoyed opening the store, and I enjoyed an extra hour of sleep.

Grandpa didn’t answer me. Instead, he grabbed a step ladder and started to drag it across the aisle.

I took it from him. “I got it. Tell me what’s going on.”

He blinked, finally noticing me. “Oh, Evan, I don’t have time to talk. The fall festival is coming up, and the city needs to pick up plywood, paint, and supplies for the displays they’re setting up at the fairgrounds.”

“Oh, that’s cool. What’s the plan?”

“I don’t know the exact details. I think they need to refurbish that old stage they reconstruct for every event. Some of the benches out at the fairgrounds are in sorry shape too. Mayor Michaels was having a fit about it at the last city council meeting.”

Ah. That must have been the business proposition she’d wanted to speak to Grandpa about. I’d asked him about it a couple of days later, but he’d said he had no idea what she’d want from him. When I pressed for more detail, he’d gotten cranky and told me I was interrupting *Wheel of Fortune*. Grandpa took the game show very seriously. He used to watch it every night with Grandma, and he still did as a sort of tribute, so I’d dropped the subject and left him in peace.

“That sounds like a big order then,” I said, feeling a little excited. We could use a little bump in sales, right?”

Grandpa looked around, clearly distracted. “Right. Right.”

“I can gather the supplies if you have a list. I don’t want you to overdo it.”

“You fuss like an old woman.”

I crossed my arms. “Well, I could call Dad to come help you.” Grandpa gave me a sharp look, and I added, “As a favor, not an official job.”

I wanted to call his bluff, not give him a heart attack. Dad hadn’t worked at the store in three years—not since he stormed out during an argument with Grandpa over the store’s future. He would have come back by now, but Grandpa refused, too angry that Dad had taken a job with his competitor.



Grandpa folded like a bad hand of cards when I threatened to call in Dad. “All right, I’ve got a list. Just collect it all and leave it by the storage bay door.”

We had a fourteen-foot garage door that opened into the back of our storage room for inventory deliveries.

“Okay, I’ll do that.”

The door jangled and Dawson came inside, stopping short at the sight of my grandfather. “Bad time?” he asked.

My heart fluttered. “No, Grandpa was just giving me a list of supplies for the fall festival coming up.” I turned to him again. “Who’s picking them up?”

“Fair board volunteers. I imagine Scott Construction will help out. They usually volunteer labor when its needed.”

I nodded. “And billing?”

Grandpa shuffled, glancing at Dawson. “Don’t worry about all that. It’s taken care of.”

He seemed a little shifty, but maybe he didn’t want to talk numbers in front of Dawson.

“Okay, then. I’ll get this stuff gathered up and ready for pickup.”

“You’re the new football coach, huh?” Grandpa said, turning his attention to Dawson. My chest flooded with a strange warmth as Grandpa shook Dawson’s hand. “Coach Mayfield says you’re doing a heck of a job.”

“I’m sure trying,” Dawson said affably.

They talked about the team’s chances against their rival, Riverton, but I couldn’t focus. My body was buzzing with awareness of Dawson and all that had happened Saturday night.

*I kissed him and touched him. That happened.*

I also hadn’t seen him since it happened. Only a couple of days had passed, but it had felt so much longer. Dawson had texted me a couple of times, so I knew he was just busy, not

freaking. If anything, I was probably the one hyperventilating. Dawson seemed to take everything in stride.

With the Riverton game coming up, Dawson was spending extra time preparing. Granville might make it to state competition, but around here, it was the game with Riverton that was the real championship. Whoever won got bragging rights for a year. And it had been a long time since Granville got to brag.

Grandpa cut into my thoughts. “Evan, they’ll want to pick that up soon. I plumb forgot about it until I saw Theo at coffee.”

“Oh, right. I’ll get started.”

I checked the list, then started up the ladder to grab the proper buckets of paint—green and black, Granville High colors. Each year, the fall festival kicked off with a huge bonfire and pep rally to cheer on the football team. We might not win often, but we were overflowing with *spirit* around here. Despite our many losses, Granville people were loyal to their team. Which meant they were loyal to Dawson too.

I just hoped they didn’t give him too hard a time when the team inevitably lost. I was sure Dawson was good at his job, but I really doubted he could magically raise our team above Riverton standards in such a short time.

Dawson excused himself from his conversation with Grandpa and came up behind me. “Pass them to me. I’ll help you gather the materials.”

“That’s a nice gesture,” Grandpa said. “But you must have shopping of your own to do.”

“Oh no. I just popped by to talk to Evan about...”

Dawson trailed off as if he realized he didn’t have a good excuse. My cheeks heated, but I covered by handing down a bucket of paint.

“Dawson is helping me get some of the players to test out the computer program I’m building with the Tech Club.”

“Ah yes. A lot of mumbo jumbo that goes over my head,” Grandpa said.

Dawson took the paint buckets from me without showing any strain while my muscles trembled from lifting them down.

“Ev’s pretty brilliant,” Dawson said, sending pride streaking through me.

“It’s a lot of time to devote to something you don’t even get paid for,” Grandpa groused.

“Because I get paid so much for everything else I do?”

Grandpa colored. Oops. The words had flown out before I could think them through, and I’d no doubt injured his pride. We both knew he paid me far less than I should earn, but I was the one who’d volunteered to take on more hours than my paycheck covered. It had seemed the best way to keep him from overextending himself.

“I’m just saying that school should offer you something,” Grandpa muttered. “You work so hard you barely sleep.”

“The school doesn’t pay you anything?” Dawson said in surprise.

“No, they wouldn’t even have a club if I didn’t volunteer. They might pay me a stipend to maintain the tutoring program if the school board decides to implement it, but there’s no guarantee that’ll happen.”

“Well, you certainly deserve some sort of reward for working so hard.”

“Damn right,” Grandpa said.

I shrugged. “I wouldn’t mind that, of course, but I volunteer so that students can learn things Granville High just can’t provide. I want them to have opportunities I never had.”

Dawson nodded like he understood, his eyes warm. “That’s a pretty good reason.”

Grandpa cleared his throat. “Well, I better get going and let you boys get to work. I don’t want to run into the mayor. She’s been pestering me for weeks.”

“What about?”

“Oh, you know. Bureaucracy nonsense,” he said vaguely, waving a hand.

I remembered the mayor stopping by with some sort of business proposal regarding Moore Hardware. I hadn't given it much thought. Grandpa didn't have the money to invest in any of the town's redevelopment schemes and he was way too attached to the store to entertain any changes to the business.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Moore,” Dawson said before I could press for real answers. But it didn't matter. I knew I'd never get anything out of Grandpa unless he wanted to volunteer it.

“You too, Coach Woods. Don't let us down. We need Riverton heads to roll.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Otherwise yours might.”

“Grandpa!”

My grandfather chuckled as he walked away. “Just kidding!”

I winced, turning to Dawson. “I'm sorry about that.”

Dawson waved away my words. “It's not the worst I've heard this week.”

“Really?”

“Really. But I wouldn't mind a break from football and its fans' enthusiastic threats. Put me to work?”

I smiled, feeling a little shy but incredibly happy to have him near again. “Happy to distract you.”

“You are a great distraction,” he said in a low sexy voice that made me shiver—and wonder when I might distract Dawson with something other than work again.

I didn't ask, not quite confident enough to risk it, but I hoped it would be soon.

# CHAPTER 15



## DAWSON

“WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON?”

I stepped in close behind Evan, where he'd stationed himself at the end of the store checkout counter with his laptop open before him.

“Just the usual,” he answered vaguely as his hands stilled on the keyboard.

I'd helped Evan haul buckets of paint, rollers and paint trays, and even a pallet of plywood to the loading bay at the back of the store's stockroom.

I'd been worried at first that he might strain himself. As fun as it was to watch his chest rise and fall as he breathed heavily—bringing to mind the last time I'd seen him panting—I didn't want him to pull a muscle. He was stronger than I'd expected though, being so slim. I realized biking around town wasn't his only physical activity. He must lug heavy stuff around the store all the time.

Evan seemed to enjoy the display of my strength too. His gaze roved over my chest and biceps as I picked up one of the heaviest crates of supplies, grunting with the exertion. His eyes, which had always seemed so big and innocent, were practically beaming dirty thoughts directly into my mind. It had been two days since we'd hooked up in my room, and it seemed Evan was just as primed as I was to repeat the experience.

When Evan brought out a rolling cart to transport the pallet of plywood, I'd frowned. “Why didn't we just use this for

everything?”

He smiled. “Seemed a waste of good muscle.”

My eyebrows shot up. “You *are* finally getting this flirting thing, aren’t you?”

“Well, I want to impress my teacher.”

“No complaints here.”

I’d had to shift and adjust the semi forming in my pants. And that was damn near an hour ago. The supplies had been picked up, and I’d helped the only customer to come in this late in the day. It was just the two of us now. Alone. With my dirty thoughts, and my semi, and the sweet stretch of Evan’s body as he bent over the laptop on the counter.

Unable to resist, I brushed my lips over the nape of his neck. He shivered in response, making my body tighten with need.

As strange as it was to be attracted to a man, it also wasn’t strange at all. The desire to touch and taste and drown my senses in another person was familiar. Even the things that attracted me to Evan weren’t all that different than usual. I’d never been a breast man. I was all about the lines of a body. The curve of a nice ass, which Evan’s trim body only served to emphasize. The gentle slope of a back, graceful but strong. The slim legs I could so easily imagine wrapped around me. The soft, warm glide of satiny skin under my lips.

Even his smell did it for me, fresh and new like the earth just after it rained.

My hands trembled as I placed them on Evan’s hips, hoping he wouldn’t shut me down, and the intensity of my desire surprised me. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d wanted someone *this* badly.

“How urgent is your deadline?” I asked in a low voice.

Evan glanced back at me. “Why?”

I smiled slowly. “I was wondering if you could take a break.”

“Now?”

“I think I need some help in the back room. With inventory,” I said. “Come show me around?”

Evan looked puzzled. “But you saw it earlier today. Several times.”

I raised an eyebrow. “I thought you’d finally gotten the hang of this. It’s not the stockroom I really want to see. It’s you, in the stockroom, with me.”

He laughed nervously. “Oh.”

“Yeah, oh.” I grinned as I pressed my hips against Evan’s ass, letting him feel the hard prod of my erection. No more semi for me; I was fully hard now. “What do you say? Will you help a guy out?”

Evan glanced nervously toward the door. Business had been slow the entire time I’d been here, though, and it was nearly closing time.

“We’ll hear the bell if anyone comes in,” he said slowly.

“We will,” I agreed as I nuzzled the back of his neck once more. I wasn’t playing fair. Evan sagged back against me with a soft sound of surrender.

“I guess I could take a few minutes to...help you...”

I whirled away before he could change his mind, and he followed me through the door to the stockroom. As soon as we were inside, surrounded by boxes and crates, I drew him close.

“How do you feel about another lesson?”

He hesitated. “Uh, I guess.”

I released him, stepping back. “Sorry, if you’re not interested—”

“No, I am!” Evan clutched at my arm, as if afraid I’d run away. “I was just caught by surprise.” He lowered his voice to a near whisper. “I mean, we’re in *public*.”

I laughed. “It’s been a ghost town out there. And we’re behind a closed door.”



“That’s true.”

“We can do whatever you want though,” I assured him. “If you want to put this on hold and return to work, we will.”

“No, let’s do it.” He wet his lips, making them shine under the lights. “What’s the lesson plan?”

I lifted a finger to trace those lush lips. “We could do a lot of things, but you did mention wanting to get this sweet mouth on me. What do you think?”

He licked his lips *again*, flicking the tip of my index finger as he did. *Fuck*. My cock throbbed with need.

“Y-yeah. I want to try,” Evan said softly.

“Fuck yeah,” I murmured. “You’ll do great.”

No longer able to keep my hands off him, I dragged him into a kiss, licking and nipping at his mouth until he was moaning and thrusting his tongue into mine without reservation. This was what I loved about being with Evan. He was so shy until the moment I kissed him, and then it was as if I’d unleashed a hidden side to him, one he’d repressed for so long it burst out of its cage like a wild thing.

Fuck, he tasted so sweet as he gave in to his lust.

I could spend all day just worshipping his mouth, but my cock was a persistent ache, demanding I follow through on the plan. I pulled back and popped open my jeans. Evan’s gaze followed my every move. The rasp of my zipper was loud and erotic in the small space between us.

“Do you want my cock, Ev?”

His gaze jerked to my face, and he swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat. My cock pulsed in response, and huh, I didn’t know I’d find such a thing so sexy. Such an undeniably male thing.

“Please,” he rasped. “I want it.”

All thoughts about my sexuality fled then, leaving only desperate want.

I drew out my cock and gave myself a couple of strokes to ease the building pressure. Evan made a small, strangled sound of protest. Oh yes, he wanted my cock. Was so greedy he wanted it all for himself.

The thought was enough to send a surge of excitement through me, and precum welled at the tip of my dick.

“Get on your knees,” I ordered, barely recognizing my own hoarse voice.

Evan complied, dropping to the concrete floor as if I’d cut his legs out from under him. I winced as he hit with what must have been a painful thud, but he didn’t so much as flinch, all his focus on me.

“What now?” His eyes were pleading as he looked up at me. “I’ve never done this...”

I brushed my hand over his hair, loving the feel of the soft strands under my palm. “Don’t worry, Ev. I’ll guide you through it. You’ll be perfect. You know how I know that?”

He shook his head, his lips just inches from my dick now. How I wanted to be in that hot, eager mouth. I knew that just like with kissing, once Evan got lost in sensation, I’d be the man blessed by his newly discovered lust. I was certain it would be incredible. But first, I needed Evan to know he could trust me and let go.

“Because you already are, Ev. You’re perfect, and this will be perfect too.”



## EVAN

MY HEART RACED at Dawson’s words. *He thinks I’m perfect?*

That was far from the truth, but I *wanted* it to be. In everything, but especially in this.

I hated to do things that I couldn’t do well, and no matter what Dawson said, I couldn’t give him the perfect blowjob. Though the fact he thought I was perfect was almost as good

as actually being perfect, right? If Dawson said it, it must be true. He wouldn't lie.

I took a breath, marshaling my courage. I could do this. I *would*.

My perfectionistic tendencies had held me back, kept me inexperienced for too long. That was what these moments with Dawson were all about, I reminded myself. Learning with someone I trusted. Experiencing sex and intimacy, so that one day, when I did meet the right guy, I wouldn't shy from the opportunity to fall in love.

I was a little sad Dawson couldn't be that guy. He was gorgeous, kind, funny—the whole package. But I was just thankful he was open to doing this with me at all, considering he'd only dated women. I didn't really understand how that worked for him, sexually. He got hard and came with me—was it all just physical stimulation, or was he truly attracted to me too? I hoped it was the latter. I didn't relish the idea of this being nothing but a chore to Dawson, simply a favor to help a friend out. But I was too afraid to ask in case I didn't like the answer.

With one hand, Dawson guided his cock toward my lips. It looked even larger from this angle, though I was sure it was merely proportionate to his build. Dawson was not a small guy, and neither was his dick. I felt dainty in comparison. Normally, I hated that, but now—like this—it felt sexy to have him towering over me with all his size and strength.

“Love these lips,” he whispered as he pressed his cockhead gently against my mouth. It was soft as velvet, warm and damp. I dared to lick it, salty flavor bursting on my tongue, and Dawson hummed his approval.

“That's it, Ev. Get me wet.”

His low, sexy voice rolled through me, and I shuddered as I bathed the head of his cock with my tongue. Saliva pooled in my mouth, and I let it spill over his flushed skin. Above me, he whispered curses while I slid my lips down the side of his shaft, estimating the distance in my head—nine inches from tip to base—before reaching his balls.

The dark, wiry hair there tickled my face. Tentatively, I opened my mouth over his sac, hair and all, and gently rolled one of his balls with my mouth.

He inhaled sharply, his left thigh tensing under my hand. “Fuck, no one’s ever...”

I released him, sitting back. “Is that wrong?”

“No. It’s amazing.” He caressed my hair. “You’re doing awesome. Just follow your instincts.”

I leaned in again, nuzzling and sucking at his balls, before returning to his cock and licking my way back to the head. When I opened wide and finally plunged down, he hissed and I gagged. His hand tightened in my hair. “Watch the teeth.”

I drew back, gasping for breath, my face wet with a mess of saliva and tears. “Sorry!”

Dawson touched my hair, eyes soft as he looked down at me. “Breathe, babe. It’s okay. You don’t need to swallow me whole. Just go slow and do what feels good.”

“I’m supposed to be making you feel good.”

“You *are*. So fucking good, Ev.” He rocked his hips, thrusting his cock gently through my fist. “If you keep going, I’m gonna come so hard.”

My heart leapt, lust rising up to take over my embarrassment. I wanted that so damn bad. Wanted to drink down Dawson’s pleasure.

I dipped my head, taking more care as I sucked him into my mouth once more. Dawson continued to encourage and guide me as I explored. I couldn’t take him all the way, not even close. And he was so thick he made my jaw ache. But eventually, I found a rhythm of sucking the top third of his cock while using my hand and saliva to stroke his shaft at the same time.

I worked and worked and worked as if it was the last and most important job I’d ever have. My face was still wet and my knees were sore from the concrete, but my carnal soul was flying high with each sound of pleasure I wrung from him.

“So good,” he rasped. “Open your jeans. Touch yourself while you suck me.”

I scrambled to obey, my hard cock aching with desire now that Dawson had called my attention to it. I’d been so focused on him I’d pushed down my own need. I suddenly felt desperate to relieve the pressure.

When I pulled my cock free of my pants, Dawson and I both moaned. I fisted my shaft, and even dry, it felt absolutely amazing. My skin was stretched tight, sensitized by my high state of arousal.

I tugged my shaft roughly, not even caring about the friction, as I sucked Dawson. I continued that way, tugging and sucking, lost in a loop of pleasure that wound me tighter and tighter. I fought my orgasm, not wanting to come so embarrassingly quickly this time, but I couldn’t outlast Dawson.

My body crested, and I moaned around his cock as mine began spurting over my fist. My pulse roared in my ears as pleasure overwhelmed me, my body shaking with the release of all that tension.

Dawson groaned. “Oh fuck, that’s hot, Ev. Coming with me in your mouth.”

His cock grew thicker, pulsed, and I braced myself to swallow, but he pulled out just in time to come in the space between us. A few droplets hit my lips. Dawson crouched down and wiped them away with his thumb. “Sorry for the mess.”

“I could have swallowed.”

He grimaced. “Yeah, but all my girlfriends hated it. I don’t really want you to do it if you don’t enjoy it, you know?”

Feeling defiant, and annoyed with all the women who hadn’t appreciated every single bit of Dawson, I dipped my head down and licked the tip of his softening cock. It was still wet with cum, the taste sharp and bitter, but I moaned as if it was the finest cuisine.

“Fuck,” Dawson whispered. “Do you actually like it?”

I lifted my head. “Kiss me and taste for yourself.”

He hesitated only a moment, then drew me into a deep, wet kiss, the flavor of his cum mingling on our tongues.

He drew back. “You set me up for that, didn’t you?”

“What?” I asked innocently.

“There’s no way you like the taste.”

I laughed. “Maybe I just like the idea of it. Drinking you down. It’s sexy...” I hesitated, face heating. “Isn’t it?”

Dawson kissed me again, stroking his tongue deep into my mouth. “It’s so sexy,” he murmured against my lips.

“It’s not weird?”

“No, Ev. You surprised me, but only in the best ways. Maybe you’re not the only one who’s learning a few things.”

I glowed as his praise seeped under my skin. I hadn’t been *perfect*. I’d made a few mistakes. But Dawson had been patient as he talked me through it, and in the end, I made him come. Perhaps that was why I’d needed to taste him. Bitter or not, I’d wanted the ultimate reward: his pleasure on my tongue.

“Next time, you’ll have to teach me to suck cock,” he whispered in my ear. “I’ve never done that before.”

I shivered, a little shocked that he was offering. If this was truly all about teaching me sexual experience, then surely Dawson didn’t need to venture so far out of his comfort zone. Just letting me use his body as a learning tool was incredibly generous.

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah, why not? This isn’t just about you pleasuring me, Ev. I want you to have the full experience. Besides, sometimes letting someone take you apart is more difficult than focusing on them. I have a feeling that might be the case for you.”

I was skeptical. “If you say so.”

He kissed my lips quickly, then tucked himself away. “I do.”

The unmistakable bell on the front door sounded.

“Shit!”

I scrambled to straighten my clothes, and Dawson snickered as I stumbled over my feet and nearly fell. He grasped my arm to steady me, then pointed toward a roll of paper towels sitting on a shelf next to some Windex. I pulled off a few squares and mopped at my hands and face, then handed the roll to him so I could go out to greet the customer.

Dawson came out a few minutes later carrying a box of something that really didn’t need to be restocked. He shot me a wink and a smile before turning the corner.

“That Coach Woods is awfully nice to help you around the store,” Enola Adams, one of Granville’s infamous grannies, said with a twinkle in her eye. “Such a good-looking man too.”

I took a swig from a water bottle I’d abandoned earlier, trying to look neutral. “The football team is lucky to have him.”

“We all are,” she agreed, looking at me more closely than I’d like. I fervently prayed she couldn’t tell what I’d been doing before she arrived. “You know, Ada mentioned you’d gone with him to see the room when he rented a place in her house.”

I tensed. Was that all Ada had told her, or had she figured out I was with Dawson the other night?

I tried not to sound defensive as I answered. “He asked me to go with him since he’s not real familiar with Granville yet.”

“Well, it’s good to see you both making new friends. Maybe you’ll be good for each other, hm?”

“Maybe...”

She leaned forward, smoothing my hair as if I were one of her own grandchildren. “Your hair is a little mussed, dear. There. That’s better.”

My face flamed as I remembered Dawson's hands in my hair. "Th-thanks," I stuttered.

She merely smiled and glanced toward Dawson, who was bent over pretending to stock shelves already full. She chuckled. "It's going to be a lovely fall around here. I can just feel it in the air." She called out before leaving, "Bye now, Coach Woods! Don't work too hard preparing for that Riverton game. Make sure you take some time to play."

She winked and was gone before either of us answered.

Dawson returned to the checkout. "Is it just me, or did she seem way too full of innuendo for an old lady?"

"It wasn't just you," I said. "The grannies of Granville are a breed of their own, and they are *always* full of innuendo."

What I didn't know was whether she'd just been teasing me as usual or trying to figure out whether something was going on between me and Dawson. Surely, she wouldn't believe that though. I could hardly believe it myself.

"Well, I *am* glad I made time to play," Dawson said in a flirty voice.

I smiled, too content to borrow trouble by worrying about gossip. "Yeah, me too. Though next time we get interrupted like that, I'm going to make *you* face the granny and her many innuendoes."

He laughed. "Deal."



# CHAPTER 16



## EVAN

“AW, LOOK AT DAWSON UP THERE! HE LOOKS SO CUTE AND official.”

I cast a sideways look at Calista, who was beaming at Dawson like a proud mama. “You do realize he’s not six years old, right?”

“I know *you* don’t see him that way,” she teased. “But I grew up with the guy.”

Dawson stood on a raised platform with Coach Mayfield, Alex Rojas, and two other football players I didn’t recognize. The players wore their uniforms, helmets under their arms, and the coaches wore their team jackets—all sporting the Granville mascot, a grasshopper with a menacing grin and creepily long antennae.

Directly in front of the stage, the marching band played a jaunty tune to get the crowd revved up. We stood near the front of the crowd decked out in Granville’s school colors of green and black—thanks to Calista elbowing her way to the front line and dragging me along in her wake.

A cold front had moved in overnight, and Calista’s cheeks were pink and her fingers a bit clumsy as she operated her phone camera with gloved hands.

“Dawson and I are just friends,” I said, perhaps a little too emphatically.

Calista laughed. “Yeah, I know. What else would you be?”

My gut churned. What else, indeed? I'd do well to remember that Dawson couldn't be more than a friend, but my head was full of erotic, intimate memories that made it difficult not to see him as more. Since our interlude in the stockroom at the hardware store, Dawson and I had come together twice more. With little privacy or time, we'd mostly made out and fumbled in his car like teenagers, but as someone who'd never really gotten those experiences in high school, I treasured every second of it. Even when I came in my pants, *again*, while squirming in his lap as Dawson devoured my throat as thoroughly as any vampire might.

God. Just the memory made me flush with embarrassment and need. Thankfully, the cold weather meant my blush would blend in with everyone else's pink cheeks—though my face was suddenly hot rather than cold.

Coach Mayfield spoke into a microphone. "I don't know if you all heard, but we've got a big game coming up!"

The crowd shouted and catcalled, and the horn section of the marching band joined in with a quick flurry of brassy blasts.

"The Riverton Cornjerkers think they can squash the Mighty Grasshoppers! But they're wrong this time!"

I shook my head. "We could have been the Wildcats or the Tigers. But no. The *Mighty Grasshoppers*."

She smirked. "At least our mascot is cute. I'd rather be a Grasshopper than a freaking Cornjerker."

Dawson managed to keep a straight face, though the Mighty Grasshoppers and the Cornjerkers had to be two of the most ridiculous mascots ever. But then his last team *had* been the Alabama Crimson Tide. There were plenty of inappropriate jokes for that one too.

Coach Mayfield was still shouting into the microphone. "We're gonna *swarm* the Cornjerkers on the field, we will *plague* them with our top-notch passing game that they cannot rival, and when we're done... They'll be nothing but *empty husks!*"

Calista snickered. “We’re gonna jerk those cobs sooooo hard.”

Darren came up behind us, shoving his way between bodies. “Damn, Calista, if you’re that hard up, I can help you out.”

She flung her arm back, smacking him in the chest without looking. “I’m never that desperate.”

“Not what you said last August,” he grumbled.

I ignored their banter. Calista and Darren were longtime friends and occasional hookups, but as far as I knew, they’d never had any serious romantic feelings for each other.

“Now, I know you all are hungry to devour our enemies—symbolically, of course. The corn is already roasting, with the proceeds going to the team’s travel fund. But first, I think I should officially introduce our newest member of the coaching staff. You’ve no doubt seen him around town. Maybe you’ve even seen him on the field. Our secret weapon this season, a former quarterback for Alabama, one of the top college football programs in the nation. Say hello to Coach Dawson Woods!”

The crowd cheered as Dawson stepped up to the microphone, and Calista whistled sharply. His gaze darted directly to us. He grinned, a crooked smile that never failed to charm.

“Hello, Granville! I’m honored to be here with you all tonight. I’ve met a lot of you. Been listening to all your wise words about the Riverton playing style. And all your many, *many* coaching tips,” he said jokingly, and the crowd laughed. “We’re working our tails off so we don’t let you down. Let’s give it up for this dedicated team, and especially our quarterback, who has been drilling until he drops, Alex Rojas!”

As the introductions and applause wrapped up, Coach Mayfield retook the microphone. “We’re going to kick off this week’s Pumpkin Spice Fall Ball—you can thank the Granville Senior Coffee Klatch for this year’s festival name, by the way

—with a roaring bonfire to warm us all up and all the corn you can eat. There are games, and vendors to check out, as well, just a taste of what’s to come this week. I, myself, am looking forward to that chili cook-off on Wednesday night.” A few shouts of approval rang out before he continued. “But please be careful around the fire, folks. We don’t want any burns. No roasting your own corn, as much as you’d like to hold Riverton’s feet to the fire, eh?”

As they wrapped up, an orange blaze lit the sky on the other side of the fairgrounds, and a cheer rang out.

Most of the crowd dispersed, heading toward the fire and the food stands, but Dawson was swarmed by people as soon as he stepped off the stage.

“Looks like he’s going to be busy for a while,” Calista said. “Should we head over to the bonfire?”

“I vote yes,” Darren said. “It’s fucking freezing.”

It *was* cold, and Darren wore only a hoodie—no gloves or hat—but I’d kind of hoped to wait and talk to Dawson. The crowd around him didn’t appear to be getting any smaller though.

“You coming, Ev?” Calista asked.

I nodded reluctantly. “Yeah, I want to get a hot chocolate.”

Darren pulled a miniature bottle of whiskey from his pocket. “We can spike them.”

“Ooh, nice!” Calista exclaimed. “That’ll warm you up.”

“I know. I’m tempted to guzzle the damn thing now.”

I’d already spent plenty of time with Dawson at the hardware store today. He’d stopped by to help out as usual. But my heart still sank when I realized he might be too busy to hang out with me tonight.

I didn’t want to drink hot chocolate or eat buttered corn or enjoy the warmth of the bonfire without him. Even with plenty of friends to keep me company, I felt as if something crucial was missing.

It was scary how attached I'd become in such a short time. What would I do when Dawson decided I'd experienced enough? How would I cope when the kisses and the touches and the private smiles had to end?

I didn't want to think about that inevitability. If I did, how could I enjoy all the precious moments we shared—and those yet to come? No. I refused to sacrifice even one kiss to fear of the future.

The future would come, and I'd deal with it. But for now, I would enjoy the present as best I could.

Even if my heart did ache when I had to walk away with my friends, pretending indifference as I crossed the fairgrounds instead of barging through that crowd to claim a spot at Dawson's side.



## DAWSON

“MIND if I jump into line with you?”

The concessions line was intimidatingly long, but Evan stood near the front with Truman and Lyle. Calista and Darren were nowhere to be seen.

Evan's face lit up when he saw me. “Hey, I thought you'd be busy with team stuff all night.”

“Yeah, you're the man of the hour,” Truman teased.

I pulled a face. “I'd gladly give that honor to someone else.”

“Better you than me,” Lyle said.

He wasn't kidding. I had heard through the grapevine that Coach Mayfield had tried repeatedly to recruit him to the coaching staff. Lyle worked construction and apparently loved it. Truman's dad owned the company, so I guess it made sense he would see a better future there. Coaching high school wasn't the best-paying gig out there. Especially being the

assistant coach. Luckily, Granville was a pretty affordable place to live.

The line moved, and Lyle and Truman stepped up to place their order.

“Where’s Calista?” I asked.

I’d seen her and Evan standing together in the crowd during my time onstage. It had made my stomach squirm with guilt. What would Calista think if she found out the truth of my interactions with Evan? She loved me as her cousin, but she adored her best friend. I couldn’t see her supporting the no-strings arrangement we had going.

“She and Darren only wanted drinks, so they hit a shorter line and headed to the fire. They’ll text us so we can find them later.”

“Ah, cool. I was hoping to get some of this amazing corn everyone keeps mentioning too. I’m starving.”

“You came to the right place,” Evan said, pointing to the sign above the food truck. “They’ve got a variety of fair foods.”

“Yeah, I might grab a corndog too. What are you having?”

“The corn. It’s a tradition, and I just can’t not get it, you know? And a hot chocolate because it’s *really* cold tonight.”

I couldn’t argue about the cold, but...

“Hot chocolate and corn? Really?”

“I know.” He laughed. “It sounds so gross, but it works for me. Salty and sweet, like me.”

I leaned in close. “I’ve only ever noticed you tasting sweet.”

Evan’s face, already pink from the cold, hid his blush, but I knew it was there by the way he ducked his head.

“See you guys by the fire!” Truman called.

We waved as he and Lyle took off and stepped forward to place our own orders. But once we got our food, I was in no

hurry to join Evan's friends.

"Want to walk while we eat?" I asked. "I haven't seen much of the festival."

He smiled. "Sure. The fire isn't going anywhere."

I polished off my corndog in a few big bites to free up my hands, then shoved my bottle of water into a pocket. Evan and I meandered past food vendors, spread out in a wide arc around the bonfire, while eating corn dripping with butter.

Evan took dainty bites, alternating with sips of his hot chocolate, while I chowed through mine like a half-starved beast.

"I can carry your drink," I said, once I'd tossed my cob into a trash barrel.

Evan handed over the hot chocolate, using both hands to manage his corn, but he still nibbled daintily, lips slick with butter. I wanted to kiss him—or push him to his knees for a repeat of that incredible blowjob he'd given me. I turned my attention to the booths we passed to distract myself before I was rocking an obvious hard-on.

There was a vendor offering face-painting and another that was selling temporary tattoos.

"You ever consider getting a tattoo?" Evan asked as we looked at the selection, ranging from your typical fiery heart and butterfly designs to sports team logos and mascots.

"How do you know I don't have one already?"

"Well, because—" He stopped short and glanced around guiltily.

I leaned in and murmured, "You haven't seen everything. But maybe tonight."

His eyes widened just a touch. But before he could say anything, someone from the crowd jostled us.

Evan stepped back, and I felt a flash of irritation. This secrecy stuff was bullshit. I just wanted to flirt with Evan a



little, maybe put an arm around him, without worrying about what people might think.

*But you're not his fucking boyfriend, so get a grip.*

A middle-aged man with dishwater-brown hair and a neatly trimmed beard moved in between us. “Evening, Coach Woods.”

My frustration mounted. Even if we could only be friends, I wanted to spend my time with Evan, not every armchair quarterback at the fairgrounds. But this was part of the job. My least favorite part, but unavoidable.

“Evening,” I said, hitching on a smile as I shook his hand. “You enjoying the bonfire?”

“Surely am. Good to meet ya. I’m Nate Livings.”

I ran his last name through my mental log of players. We didn’t have any Livings kids, so he probably wasn’t a parent. But there were many fans who weren’t.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Livings.”

“Call me Nate,” he said as he continued to vigorously pump my hand. “I’m glad we’ve got you on our side. You were a hell of a player for Alabama. Shame what happened.”

My spine stiffened and my lower leg throbbed. I’d been on my feet all day, between working at the hardware store and then coming over to the fairgrounds, but it was the memories he triggered—more than any strain on my body—that started up the familiar ache.

“I’m focused on coaching now,” I said, hoping to redirect him. “Putting my energy into this Riverton game plan.”

He took the bait, thankfully. “Good to hear it. I hope you don’t underestimate those Cornjerks. They know how to run a ball.”

“Luckily, we know how to pass. That’s a strength a lot of high school teams don’t have.”

“It can also be limiting. You’re hanging a hell of a lot of your game on the talent of one or two players.”

Every position on the field was important, but I knew what he meant. With a passing game, you needed a strong quarterback and receivers to complete plays. With a running game, you could pull in a lot more players to make that win happen. Of course, we didn't ignore the running game. We had to make runs as well as passes, but it wasn't our specialty.

"We do our best to prepare and be flexible."

"Do you though? Last game—"

"Hey, Dawson," Evan interrupted. "Calista is expecting us. Should we head over there?"

Nate waved us on, and I sighed with relief as we broke free of what was sure to be a frustrating circular discussion of game strategy.

"Did she text you to come over?" I asked.

"She texted a while ago to let me know where she is," Evan said. "But she's with a bunch of friends. She's not waiting on us. I just said that to get you out of that conversation."

"Thanks."

He hesitated. "We can go hang out with her if you want though? You don't have to spend all your time with me."

"Evan, you're the only reason I haven't ducked out of here already."

He looked concerned. "You don't want to be here?"

"No, I do. I just..."

What was I supposed to say? I wanted to spend time with only Evan? That was dangerous.

"I guess I'm peopled out when it comes to large groups," I said lamely. "How about we keep to ourselves a little longer?"

He smiled uncertainly. "Sure. I don't know how you put up with so many people telling you how to do your job."

I laughed and rolled my eyes. "It's not always fun. But hey, let's talk about something else. How did that Halloween

display we set up work out?”

“Oh, great. We’ve already sold one of the huge inflatable Reapers.”

Evan had coaxed his grandfather into stocking more holiday décor this year—compromising by limiting it to outdoor decorations only. It had been his father’s idea, he said, not that he’d tell his grandpa. There was some sort of family feud regarding the store that Evan hadn’t fully explained to me.

The conversation meandered from the store to the Tech Club to Evan’s passion project, his Study Dates app. I was happy to let Evan’s chatter carry us along—a welcome break from football—and besides, I loved to learn more about him and his work.

“...so I’ve got to work out a couple of bugs before the end of the month,” he said. “That’s the deadline to enter the Innovative App Spotlight contest as part of *Gadget* magazine’s National Tech Convention.”

My mind screeched to a halt. “Wait. You’re going to enter your app in a national contest? How did I not know this?”

Evan ducked his head, looking bashful. “Oh, well. I haven’t told anyone.”

I came to a stop a few feet from the next game booth. “Why not?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe I don’t want the pressure of everyone knowing. I mean, the likelihood I’ll win is super slim.”

“Still, the fact you’re competing at all is amazing.”

Evan smiled shyly. “I know. They review your app design and planned features, and only a select few are allowed into the actual competition.”

“And you made it!”

“I did, yeah,” he said with a pleased little laugh.

Oh hell. Now, I wanted to kiss him, and we were surrounded by people.

“That deserves a reward. I’m going to win you a prize.”

He grinned, still beaming with pride. “You are, huh?”

“Yep.”

I led him toward a booth with balloons and darts. “Tell me which prize you want, and it’s all yours.”

Evan scanned the cheap carnival toys hanging from the hooks all around the booth. “Uh, well, I’ve always liked turtles.”

Evan nodded toward a cute little stuffed toy—not the smallest prize on offer, but not one of the big fuckers you had to drag around either. Perfect.

“All right. I got this.”

I tossed a five-dollar bill on the counter and got four darts. I eyed up the target and let fly.

*Pop!*

I nailed a big red balloon.

“Yes, piece of cake!”

I had to hit at least two more to win the prize Evan wanted. I threw the second and missed. *Damn*. I tried for the third and missed by an even wider margin. “What the hell? Is this game rigged?”

Evan laughed. “They’re all rigged, Dawson. It’s fine.”

“No. I’m winning you that turtle.”

I threw down another five. Then another.

Fifteen bucks in, I had to admit defeat. I couldn’t pop enough balloons in one turn to win the prize. Every time I hit a balloon, I went on to miss again. It was infuriating!

Evan stepped up. “How about I play a round?”

“Sure.” I’d already given the guy another ten, so the game was covered. I sighed morosely as Evan lined up the darts and

threw his first one.

*Pop!*

I'd gotten my first balloon too. Clearly, this game was designed to lure you in.

Evan threw a second dart.

*Pop!*

I perked up. "Hey, you got another hit."

He lined up a third.

*Pop!*

"Holy shit, how did you do that?"

Evan grinned at me. "I've played this same game for half of my life, Dawson. I know how the darts are weighted differently. Also the balloons vary in size. You have to target the right balloon with the right dart. It really is rigged. I just figured out how to beat it."

"Fuck, you're so smart."

I'd always found intelligence attractive, and right then, I wanted to drag him into a dark corner and rip off his clothes. But along with the surge of lust was a warm, fuzzy feeling that made my smile widen.

Evan was just...wow.

I'd set out to impress him, but how could I? He was the impressive one.

Evan pointed out the prize he wanted. The carnie pulled down a grasshopper instead of the turtle.

"I thought you wanted the other one?"

Evan held out the little toy. "This is for you. For luck in the game next week, and for all the games to come. I'm glad you chose Granville for your fresh start."

I took it from him, holding it gingerly even though it was made of the cheap fabric and stitching typical of a carnival prize. "Thank you. I might need it, considering how badly I just lost that dart game." I rolled my eyes, embarrassed by my

behavior. “Sorry for going all macho dude bro about winning you a prize.”

Evan laughed. “It’s okay. We’ve all been ensnared by the drive to win. You’re an athlete so it’s probably even worse for you when you can’t do something well.”

“Sad but true.”

“Besides, I kind of liked that you wanted to win me something so bad.”

“Aha. I see how it is. You like seeing me desperate to impress,” I joked, the flirtation as natural as breathing. As much as I knew we needed boundaries, I kept blundering into them.

“You don’t need to win anything to impress me,” Evan said, sounding so sincere that I ached to pull him into my arms. “You already have.”

# CHAPTER 17



## EVAN

“SO, ARE YOU IN A HURRY TO GET HOME, OR...?”

Dawson rested his hand on my thigh as he started up his ice-cold car, the invitation obvious.

After exploring the festival a little, we'd eventually gotten drawn into sitting by the fire with Calista, Darren, and the rest of my friends. It had been a torturous hour as I shared a hay bale with Dawson, close but unable to touch, while watching Lyle and Truman cuddle together happily. Even Darren had picked up a pretty blonde, who sat on his lap and gazed at him adoringly. I couldn't risk looking at Dawson for more than a few seconds at a time. If someone saw that expression on my face, it'd spell trouble.

Calista seemed reluctant to leave, so Dawson had offered to drive me home when I'd said I was ready to go. But it was clear he had other ideas.

My leg tingled beneath his fingers, and despite the cold settling into my bones, heat rolled through me. It didn't take much. I'd been burning with need all night.

“What did you have in mind?” I managed, my voice quivering only a little.

As much as I'd enjoyed our frantic clothed make-outs and dry humping in Dawson's car, I craved something less restricting—and warmer.

The thought crossed my mind to sneak him into the hardware store. I knew the alarm code. Before I could decide



how reckless I wanted to be, Dawson answered.

“Ada’s grandson had a birthday this weekend. She won’t be back until Sunday night.”

My pulse quickened. “You want me to come over?”

“Yeah, Ev. I wouldn’t mind having the time and privacy to make good on my promise.”

“Promise?”

“Never Have I Ever sucked a cock,” he said teasingly.

An embarrassing noise escaped my throat. Dawson laughed. “Is that a yes?”

I nodded mutely, having lost the capacity to speak.

Dawson turned right instead of the left that would have taken me home. I pulled out my phone. “I should text Grandpa. I don’t want him to worry if I get in late.”

“Good idea. Tell him you’re crashing with one of your friends.” He shot me a grin. “Won’t even be a lie.”

He wanted me to stay all night? My astonishment must have shown on my face.

“It’s more convenient for you to stay. We won’t have to worry about going back out into the cold.”

“Okay.”

“Besides, I want to take my time with you.”

Another shiver racked me. This one wasn’t from the cold.

It didn’t occur to me to ask about the residents of Grand House until we were stepping into the darkened living room.

“Marta is early to bed, early to rise,” Dawson said. “She’s at the far end of the hall. And Paolo doesn’t talk to anyone. I can’t imagine him caring what happens so long as we leave him alone.” He grasped my hand and tugged me toward the stairs. “Come on, I’ve got half a dozen lesson plans stored up for you.”

I stumbled on the step in the dark. It had nothing to do with the seductive tone to Dawson’s voice.

“You okay?” he asked, stopping to check on me.

“Yeah, just dark.”

“Very dark,” he agreed. “So no one will see when I do this.”

He pushed me against the wall and kissed me. My heart leapt as his tongue stroked mine. He never failed to draw this response. I felt so silly and inexperienced, unraveling from a kiss, but I couldn't help it. I clung to him, gasping against his mouth as every inch of my body crackled with electric want.

I arched, needing more contact, and Dawson obliged by pinning me to the wall with his body weight. I groaned too loudly, turned on by his strength and my own helpless position. Part of me wanted him to shove me down and fuck me ruthlessly—though that was an unrealistic fantasy. I was still a virgin in that regard. For now. Would Dawson want to fuck me if I asked? Even if he was willing, should I really ask that of him if it wasn't one hundred percent his idea? We'd started all this to help me, but I didn't want to push Dawson's boundaries too far.

He pulled back. “Let's get to my room before I rip off your clothes right here.”

Then again, maybe I was underestimating Dawson's limits. He certainly seemed as turned on as I was.

He led me into his room, pausing only to hit the light switch before shoving my coat off my shoulders.

“Finally,” he said with satisfaction. “This bulky coat was hiding you from me all night.”

I chuckled nervously. “Uh, sorry?”

He grinned. “You can make it up to me by getting naked.”

I hesitated. “Um, so what's the lesson plan exactly?”

I wasn't opposed to anything with Dawson. I wanted whatever he'd offer. But I did feel a little unsure of what to expect.

He paused in the act of kicking off his shoes. “Sorry. Am I going too fast?”

“No! It’s not that. I just wasn’t sure what you wanted to do.”

Dawson finished shrugging out of his coat, set aside his shoes, and returned to me. “I thought we’d just explore. Figure out what we like. There’s no ultimate destination.”

“There’s not?” I felt confused. I mean, sex usually led to a very specific destination.

He chuckled. “Well, sure, I want to make you come,” he said, sending a new surge of heat rippling through me. “But there’s no specific way I want to get there. Let’s just play.”

“Uh, okay.”

I didn’t know the rules to this game, and it made me nervous that there wasn’t a plan, but I trusted Dawson. So when he said, “Never Have I Ever had a guy give me a striptease show,” and raised his eyebrow at me, I knew instinctively what he wanted.

This game wouldn’t involve drinking. It was a challenge. I grabbed the hem of my sweater and dragged it over my head, hoping I looked more sexy than awkward as my hair fluffed with static electricity. I wore a button-down shirt beneath the sweater, and I took a moment to smooth my hair before unbuttoning it.

Our eyes met, and it felt as if time stopped while Dawson watched me work my shirt open, slowly revealing my thin chest and flat stomach. When nerves hit, I reminded myself he’d seen me shirtless before.

*And it’s not as if he needs to be impressed by you, I reminded myself. This is just a few sexual favors between friends.*

Dawson sat on the foot of his bed, still watching me, and rubbed his hand over the bulge in his jeans.

A flare of pride warmed my chest. Regardless of Dawson’s motivations, I made him hard.

*Me.* Innocent, naïve, *geeky* Evan Moore. No one would believe it if I told them. Dawson was older, experienced, sexy, and worldly. Yet here he was—with me.

I tore off my shirt and opened my jeans, feeling more confident. After toeing off my shoes, I hooked my fingers into the waistband of my pants and pushed them over my hips. They were too tight to fall to my ankles, so I was forced to bend over to peel them down my legs.

“Turn around,” Dawson said.

I glanced up. He had his pants open now, and his hand was on his thick cock. He stroked slowly as he watched.

“Don’t start without me,” I protested.

“Babe, you’re the main attraction.” He squeezed his dick. “This is all about you. Now, please, turn around for me. Let me see that sweet ass.”

My mouth went dry, his words embarrassing me a little, but my cock grew so hard it was trying to escape from the top of my snug boxer briefs. I spun around, my jeans still a tangled mess around my ankles.

“Bend over,” he said, his voice hoarse.

I hesitantly did as he asked.

“Now, slowly pull your underwear down.”

My whole body flamed as I inched my boxer briefs over my hips—so shamefully turned on I could hardly breathe. I’d never felt more exposed as Dawson watched me from across the room. I remembered, briefly, his comment at the hardware store. *Sometimes letting someone take you apart is more difficult than focusing on them.*

As Dawson crossed the room, still fully clothed while I stood mostly naked, I suddenly knew exactly what he meant. Getting on my knees and blowing him had been easy in comparison. I felt far more vulnerable when I glanced over my shoulder to see him sink to his knees behind me.

Just inches from my ass.

*Oh fuck.*

“Keep going,” he murmured, his breath whispering across my bare cheeks.

I pushed my underwear to my thighs, then bent over a little further to get them to my ankles. Dawson helped me balance as I lifted each foot to disentangle myself from bunched-up material, then kicked it away.

My skin prickled with awareness under his gaze. “Now what?”

“Now, it’s your turn to continue the game,” he said.

I blinked, almost too frazzled to think straight. Then I remembered the game we’d started, and my mind raced with possibilities. What to say? I didn’t want to suggest something Dawson wouldn’t want to do.

“Never Have I Ever...” I gazed over my shoulder at him kneeling behind me, and my breath stuttered.

“Say it,” he whispered, his eyes hot. He didn’t look like a man who would bolt. If anything, he seemed to be daring me to push him further.

“Never Have I Ever had a man’s mouth on my ass,” I said tentatively.

This was an entirely bastardized version of this game. I had no idea what the rules were supposed to be. But it didn’t seem to matter as Dawson leaned in and brushed his lips over my right cheek.

I’d purposely chosen my words so that he wouldn’t have to go any further, but my stomach dropped with disappointment when I felt his mouth on my ass cheek. I burned for something else.

But Dawson wasn’t finished. He grasped my cheeks and spread them, his breath skittering over my exposed hole.

“Oh my god,” I mumbled.

Was he really going to do it? I began to shake even before I felt his lips against the puckered skin between my cheeks.

When the wetness of his tongue stroked me, I jolted hard.

“This isn’t so different,” he said quietly, though I wasn’t sure what he meant.

He licked me again. Then again. My brain seized up as all sensation narrowed down to that one bundle of nerves, lighting up and crackling with electricity under Dawson’s tongue.

My only coherent thought was *please let me taste okay*.

Dawson groaned while using his thumbs to spread my hole and dip his tongue inside. His sounds of pleasure shut down my worries. I’d showered before the festival, and it’d been too cold to sweat. I allowed the pleasure to swallow me, overwhelmed in all the best ways.

He raised his mouth long enough to ask, “Have you ever been fingered by a man?”

“Never Have—” I cut off on a gasp as he pushed his index finger inside me. The only lubrication was saliva, but he was gentle, and I’d fingered myself enough I knew how to relax and accept penetration—even if no one else had been inside me before.

Oh god. Dawson was *inside* me. Even though it was just a finger, it was a part of him. That drove me out of my mind. I began to moan and rock back, wanting more.

He added a second finger. “You’re a natural at this.”

“I fuck myself with a dildo sometimes.” The words flew out, unfiltered, and Dawson stuttered, losing his rhythm for a moment. “Sorry. TMI.”

Dawson chuckled. “I’ve got two fingers buried in your ass. There is no TMI.”

He leaned in, licking around his fingers, sparking pleasure.

I shuddered. “You don’t have to be so careful with me.”

Dawson made a sound that could only be called a growl. He shoved me forward, toward the wall. As I braced myself against it, he curved his left arm around me to fist my cock. With his right, he thrust his fingers deeper inside me. Harder

this time. My body rocked forward and back, overwhelmed with sensation as he worked my pleasure zones with equal intensity.

“Dawson, god—”

“You love this,” he said in an awed tone.

“Yes,” I gasped.

“Which is better: my hand on your cock or my fingers in your ass?”

I floundered for an answer. “It’s all good.”

He started to withdraw his fingers, and I grabbed his wrist. “Don’t stop! My ass, okay? That’s the best. I love your fingers inside me.”

I’d jerked off plenty in my life, like most guys. But there was something about penetration, some deeper urge that it assuaged.

“Fuck, that’s hot.”

Dawson released my cock, which was frustrating, but he increased his focus on my ass. I wasn’t sure I could come just from penetration, but it felt so good I didn’t care. He pulled his fingers out to spit on my hole, then pushed in with three.

I cried out at the burning stretch, but the pleasure as he pegged my prostate overwhelmed any pain.

“Okay?” he asked.

Okay wasn’t the word I’d use. I was strung tight, on the brink of an explosion just out of reach, awash in a riot of sensation. But I didn’t have the brain power to explain that.

“Yes.” My breathing sawed in and out of me. “Don’t stop.”

“Baby, I’m not stopping until your cum is dripping down the wall.”

He fucked me harder with his fingers, and I grew desperate to come. I shoved my right hand down to grasp my cock. My left arm immediately gave out, and I collapsed against the wall, only my shoulder keeping me from face-planting. I

wasn't sure I'd care if I did. The only thing that mattered was chasing the tide of pleasure rising inside me.

"You have no idea how badly I want my cock inside you."

"Do it," I gasped. "I want it."

"I know you do. But not this time. We're both too close."

*Both?* Dawson had given me all his attention. I couldn't imagine how he'd be close at all.

He pressed his lips softly to my hip, a contrast to how forcefully he was fingering me. "Come for me, baby."

That gentleness undid me.

I cried out as my cock erupted in my fist. Dawson wrapped his left hand around mine, helping stroke me through the climax, prolonging it until I was limp in his arms. I was still shaking when he finally withdrew his fingers from my body.

As I caught my breath, my brain slowly came back online. I heard a rhythmic thwacking sound and realized Dawson was beating off with his free hand.

"Wait," I mumbled and turned, half falling over as my limbs failed to support me. Dawson caught me and we both went down, me on top of him, thankfully.

I shimmied down his body and slid my mouth over his cock, determined to catch every drop this time.

"Jesus, your mouth," he rasped.

His hips bucked, forcing his cock deeper, but I managed to relax my throat enough not to gag this time. He thrust only twice before he pulsed on my tongue and came. He really *had* been close. I swallowed and coughed, managing to drink most of him down.

"Fuck. Sorry." Dawson sounded drugged as he spoke, words slurring. "Shoulda warned you."

"I wanted to swallow." I squirmed my way back up his body and kissed him. Dawson let me feed him the taste of his cum on my tongue even though he hadn't seemed to overly enjoy it the last time.



“I still owe you a blowjob,” he said as we parted. “I want you to experience all the sides of sex, not just giving pleasure.”

“What do you think this was?”

“Me greedily indulging in all my fantasies involving your ass?”

I blinked, caught off-guard. “You fantasize about my ass?”

“So much it’s ridiculous.”

I laughed, genuinely pleased, even as I felt confused. “I thought...”

“What?”

I hesitated to finish my thought. I didn’t want to question Dawson’s sexuality, even if I didn’t understand it. “Never mind.”

“You can say anything, Ev. I won’t be upset.”

“I just... kind of thought you weren’t into men.”

“Well, I wasn’t.” He coasted his hands over my naked back to my ass, which he squeezed. “I’m into this though. A whole lot.”

“It’s not just...a favor?” I asked hesitantly. “You’re helping me experience sex so when I meet the right guy, I’ll be confident enough to pursue it, right?”

Dawson tensed beneath me, his hands stilling in their caresses. His silence unnerved me.

“Did I say something wrong?”

“No, I... That is what I offered,” he said. “It’s all I can offer.”

That was what I’d thought all along. It would never be what I wanted to hear, but it was what I had to accept.

Dawson added, “But just because this is a friends-with-benefits situation, it doesn’t mean I don’t like you or that I’m not crazy hot for you.”

I stared down at him. “You’re hot for me?”

He smirked. “Don’t sound so incredulous. You’re crazy sexy when you start whimpering and moaning under my hands.”

I smacked his arm as my body heated. “Shut up!”

He laughed. “And damn, these blushes of yours.” He brushed his fingers over my cheek, then ran them down my throat to the center of my chest. He made a strangled noise. “Full-body blushes, I can see now. I’m gonna get hard every time you blush now that I know that.”

My face blazed hotter at that, and Dawson groaned and yanked me down for another kiss. “You’re irresistible.”

It wasn’t a profession of love, or even an offer to have a real relationship, but knowing that Dawson truly found me attractive and wanted me—not just to help me out, but because I turned him on—was a huge ego boost. I took the win and shoved the rest of my doubts back into Pandora’s box.

For once, I wasn’t going to let my brain hold me back. I would indulge in Dawson. I would wallow in him.

Through every kiss and every touch, I’d absorb every drop of pleasure that I could.



## DAWSON

I WOKE with Evan curled into me, his palm pressed directly over my heart and his head nudged up against my shoulder. I tried to ignore the symbolism and merely enjoy the physical comfort of waking with a warm body next to mine.

I hadn’t felt that since...

I clamped down on the memory hard, not wanting to spoil the satisfaction I felt after a night of amazing sex.

Evan stirred beside me, eyes fluttering. This close, I could see every freckle splashed across his nose. I traced a finger over his eyebrow, and his full lips curved into a smile before

he even opened his eyes. But when he did, that crystal-clear blue drew me right in.

“Hi, there,” he said.

“Morning, sleepyhead.”

He stretched, his body sinuous as his back arched and hips rolled. His morning wood brushed my leg, and he jerked back as if embarrassed. I lowered my hand to grasp him loosely, the skin of his cock like velvet under my fingertips. “Didn’t get enough last night, huh? You’re insatiable.”

He looked down between our bodies where my own thick erection jutted out. “Doesn’t look like you got enough either.” He glanced nervously at me, his bravado faltering. “Right? I mean, you’re hard too...”

“Yeah, but I already knew I was a horny bastard.”

Evan started to laugh but cut off with a gasp as I grabbed a handful of messy hair and yanked his head back. I stroked my tongue over his pulse point, making him shudder, then nibbled over his collar bone to lick one small nipple.

He sucked in a breath. “I have to go soon.”

I lifted my head to take him in. He really was beautiful. All that silky smooth skin stretched over a slim, almost delicate stature, yet with just enough muscle tone to give him some shape. His collar bones jutted sharply above his chest, his nipples already pebbled up. His hard cock curved up, a rose hue against his creamy belly.

“You’re going to hurt my ego.”

Evan lifted a hand to my chest, squeezing my pec. “Not possible. You’re the sexiest man alive.”

“That’s better.” I dragged his body on top of mine.

Evan squeaked a little as I manhandled him.

*Fuck.* He looked even better sitting astride my body. I could imagine him riding me, my cock impaling him so deeply he couldn’t think straight. We’d yet to do that. I was hesitant,

wondering if Evan might want to save something for a more special person. Someone who could be more than a hookup.

After last night, he had more sexual experience. We'd come together two more times after that first frenzy—once in the shower, and then again later in bed. His confidence was growing with each touch.

But there was still one thing I wanted to share with him before he went home.

I grasped his hips and tugged him toward me. "I seem to remember making you a promise," I said. "And I'm a man of my word."

"A promise?"

"Mm-hmm." I flicked out my tongue as I brought him closer, tasting the tip of his cock.

Evan gasped and tilted his hips forward. "*Oh.*"

I grinned at his wide-eyed expression. Evan's reactions were always so honest it was a treat to watch him. I kept my gaze fixed on his face as I fluttered my tongue against his cockhead. He jerked, seeming to fight the urge to shove his cock into my mouth.

"This is a first for me too," I said. "You might need to coach me."

"Oh god."

"Tell me what you want, Ev. I need to hear it."

He took a steadying breath, his gaze locked on my lips and tongue. "I want your mouth."

Evan was always so hesitant with the sex talk. He found the most tactful ways to request what he wanted. But I liked to push him a little.

"You want me to use my mouth on you? Where exactly?" I teased.

He huffed a frustrated breath and bucked his hips forward, bumping his cockhead into my lips. "My cock. Suck my cock, Dawson, *please.*"

I shuddered at that pleading tone, opening my mouth to take him in. He slid over my tongue, hot and silky, tasting of salt and my shower gel. His cock was thick enough to fill my mouth, but not so much that it strained my limits. I ran my tongue along the bottom of his shaft experimentally.

Evan groaned and rocked, pushing in a little deeper, and I tightened my grip on his waist to guide him into a pace and depth I could handle.

Having a cock in my mouth wasn't as strange as I'd expected. It was part of Evan, and every single part of him appealed to me. The sounds he made were delicious, and there was a sense of power in drawing them from him. I began to play with my tongue, teasing at his cockhead, running it forcefully down the underside of his shaft, learning what made him quiver and moan.

He curled forward, clutching at my shoulders. "Daws, I'm gonna—"

I pulled my mouth free. Evan might love swallowing, but I wasn't there yet. I fisted his dick instead, stroking twice. He came with a cry, hot cum splashing over my wrist and raining down onto my neck and chin. Evan shuddered through his climax, face contorted with pleasure, then collapsed against me.

I would have liked to keep him in my bed longer, but Evan had to get home for Sunday breakfast with his family. We took turns in the shower, and I drove him to his parents' house, a modest but well-maintained ranch.

The grasshopper he'd won me the night before swayed with the movement of the car, dangling from the rearview mirror. Every time I caught a glimpse of it, it made me smile.

My mood was high as I parked at the curb, body buzzing with happy endorphins after our night of great sex. Evan leaned over to press a kiss to my cheek. "Thank you for an amazing night."

"Anytime," I said. Despite my reservations, I couldn't resist the idea of having more of Evan. "My door's always

open.”

He smiled. “Good to know. See you later.”

I watched him walk inside, still smiling to myself, when my phone chimed with a text notification. I checked it, half expecting a message from Evan. Maybe to make plans for later. My body, never satisfied when it came to him, tightened at the thought of having him again. Maybe it was silly of me to hold back from fucking him. Maybe I should give Evan every experience—virginity wasn’t something precious that had to be saved up. I could make it good for him. And, really, it should be Evan’s decision who he let into his body the first time.

I pulled out my phone, eager to read Evan’s message—anticipation already simmering—only to be brought up cold when I saw my ex-girlfriend’s name.

***Kelsey: Miss you so much. Everything was so messed up at the end, but it wasn’t always like that. I still love you.***

# CHAPTER 18



## EVAN

“ARE YOU DONE WITH THE ONIONS YET?”

“Almost.” I wiped my teary face carefully on my shoulder, thinking I should have worn my glasses. Maybe they would have offered a little protection from the fumes. “Why did I get stuck on onion duty?”

Calista was determined to win the chili cook-off this year and had enlisted me as her sous chef—who got all the worst jobs, of course. When I finished the onions, she had a huge pile of smoky poblano peppers for me to chop, while she’d gotten to dice tomatoes and mix spices.

“Do I need to remind you that I spent my Sunday evening gutting pumpkins for your Jack O’ Lantern display downtown?”

“Ah, yeah. I guess that’s fair.”

I’d committed to carving Jack O’ Lanterns for the stretch of block in front of Moore Hardware, but I’d been so distracted by Dawson lately that I’d forgotten until the last minute. Without Calista’s help, I might not have gotten them done in time for the lighting ceremony where all the businesses up and down Granville’s main street lit their Jack O’ Lanterns at the same time earlier this evening. Plus, I would have had to touch their slimy innards—*blech*. I’d take onions over pumpkin intestines any day.

Jack O’ Lantern Lane—as Main Street was dubbed during the fall fest—made for a beautiful display, similar to the luminarias we did around the Christmas holidays. We all used



battery-operated tealights rather than candles to minimize fire hazards—but town residents still loved it and some of the shops kept late hours to take advantage of the increased foot traffic.

I should probably be at Moore Hardware doing the same, but I needed a break. I'd be pulling long hours the rest of the week, and with the Riverton game coming up, I couldn't count on Dawson stopping by as he often did. Which made it all the more disappointing that he hadn't answered any calls or texts since he'd dropped me off Sunday morning.

I was trying not to worry about his radio silence. He'd probably just gotten overwhelmed with game prep.

*But surely he could have responded Sunday night, if only to say he was busy...*

I shut down the doubts that tried to creep in. Dawson had seemed happy when he dropped me off. He was the one to suggest his door was always open to me. Even if he did have second thoughts after all we'd done together—I mean, he had my *cock* in his *mouth*; that was a lot for any straight-ish guy to process—I refused to believe he'd cut me off without a word.

Dawson was simply busy, and so was I. The clock was ticking down to finalize my Study Dates app—there was a whole marketing plan I had yet to create to meet the tech competition guidelines—yet here I was chopping onions while Calista scolded me.

“It's no wonder you got behind. All you do is work.”

“That's not all I do,” I protested.

In all honesty, I hadn't been working enough. Anytime Dawson called, I dropped everything to talk or text. If he *had* been available yesterday, I might have bailed on those Jack O' Lanterns altogether.

It was irresponsible, but I'd been responsible for so long. I'd put my family, the hardware store, the Tech Club, and generating freelance income before my own interests.

Didn't I deserve something just for me?

“Name one thing you’ve done that wasn’t for work or family,” Calista said.

“I went to the festival Saturday night.”

“Yeah, and I barely saw you.”

“That’s not the point! I was there, and it wasn’t work, so…”

“Only because I dragged you.”

“Oh my god.” I glared at her over the piles of diced veggies. “You’re lucky you have that massive knife. Otherwise I’d be tempted to hit you.”

She laughed. “That’s cute, Ev, but we both know I don’t need a knife to take you in a fight.”

She wasn’t wrong. I huffed and turned to finish the cursed onions. We were doing the prep work tonight because Calista had to work late tomorrow. She planned to simmer the chili all day Wednesday before the evening cook-off competition.

She wouldn’t tell me exactly what was in her spice mix, but the chili included burger, sausage, bacon bits, chili beans, kidney beans, diced tomato (in addition to tomato sauce), and the onions and peppers we were chopping now.

We worked in companionable silence as we finished and packaged up the veggies into plastic containers to refrigerate. But with Calista, the quiet never lasted long.

“Darren’s dating again,” she said out of nowhere.

“Oh? Like an actual girlfriend?”

She shrugged. “Maybe. Did you see the blonde he was hanging out with at the bonfire? He’s been seeing her a lot.”

“Think he might actually be ready to get serious about someone?”

Calista snorted. “I doubt it. He might never be ready.”

“What about you?”

She scoffed. “Me? What about *you*?”

“That’s different,” I said, even as my heart leapt at the thought of a real relationship with Dawson. I’d give anything for that chance. Meanwhile, Calista treated it like a game. She could have just about anyone she wanted, and she didn’t appreciate it.

“Why is it different?”

“You know why.” I turned on the sink faucet to soap my hands. My eyes were still irritated, and I didn’t want to chance getting pepper or onion juice in them.

My phone buzzed on the counter where I left it.

“I’ll grab it for you,” Calista said since my hands were wet and sudsy. Ordinarily, I wouldn’t mind. But what if it was Dawson?

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” I said, heart skipping.

Calista was already picking it up and tapping in my passcode. She knew it because we’d been friends so long, and I’d never worried about my privacy before. *Crrrrraapp*.

“It’s a notification on your Study Dates app. Are you trying to meet someone on there?” she teased.

I rolled my eyes, relieved as hell she hadn’t seen a text from Dawson, even though I was disappointed he still hadn’t reached out to me.

“I just have it there for testing. Truman is probably sending me more ridiculous ‘Dick’ pics.”

She laughed. “This I have to see.”

I dried my hands while Calista clicked open the app, muttering to herself as she figured out how to navigate to the inbox. Then she stilled, staring at the phone, forehead creased.

“What is it?”

I crossed the kitchen to look over her shoulder. I caught a glimpse of the username HotLincS, and the words “barcade” and “kissing Dawson.” My stomach plummeted, and I grabbed the phone from her hand.

“Who the hell is HotLincS, and why does he think you’re dating Dawson?” Calista demanded.

I looked down at the message, shocked to see it was from Linc. I hadn’t heard from him since that night in Riverton.

*Hey Evan, it took me a while, but I finally remembered your username for this app! Hope it’s okay I messaged. I just wanted to apologize for coming on so strong at the barcade. I saw you and Dawson kiss. Very hot. I didn’t realize you two had hooked up. I would never try to mess with someone’s boyfriend, so, my bad. I hope we can still be friends and hang out when I’m home this summer.*

I read and reread the message, hardly able to process his words beyond the fact he’d seen Dawson kiss me—and written it in black-and-white for Calista to read. Not only that, but Linc had ties to Granville. If he’d told anyone else about this...

“Evan?” Calista prompted. “Who is this message from?”

I swallowed, brain spinning as I searched for a way out of this. Could I convince Calista that Linc was mistaken? She seemed set in her notion that Dawson would never be into guys, so maybe...

“Linc’s just a beta tester at Hayworth College. I met him at a frat party.”

She gaped. “A frat party? You?”

I couldn’t help but snark. “Turns out I do more than work, huh?”

She shook her head. “Like kiss Dawson?”

“Ha. In my dreams, right?”

She raised her eyebrows. “Really? Because This guy seems to think you guys were hot together.”

“Yeah, and you know how likely that is. I mean, you’re always saying how my crush will go nowhere.”

She stared at me as if she could see straight into my brain. “You’re a terrible liar. You can never bring yourself to flat-out lie, so you usually talk around it and give a half-truth instead.”

“So?”

“So. Did something happen between you and Dawson?”

“Define something.”

“Aha!” She pointed a finger at me, triumphant. “It did!”

I had no defense when she asked so directly. The word ‘no’ had been on my tongue, but it just wouldn’t come out.

The full significance of the truth seemed to hit Calista. “Oh my god, Ev. Dawson? Seriously?”

I clamped my mouth shut since my attempts to lie were so transparent.

Calista looked concerned. “How did this happen?”

I shook my head, keeping silent.

“You two spent a lot of time hanging out at the festival.” Her eyes widened. “Did you go home with him? Damn, he’s smooth, offering to save me the trip when I didn’t want to leave to drive you home. I didn’t suspect anything.”

“I think I should head out. We seem to be finished here.” I gazed blankly around the kitchen, searching for something to do. A distraction would be *really handy* right now.

Calista grasped my arms, giving them a gentle shake. “Evan, come on, talk to me. This isn’t like you.”

I jerked away. “I can’t talk about this! Dawson isn’t even... he’s not...”

“Not gay?” She frowned. “I never thought he was. He’s had as many girlfriends as Darren. But he’s not straight if he’s fucking around with you. Maybe he’s bi, or pan, or...who knows? There’s a whole spectrum of sexuality.”

I shrugged. “That’s up to him to decide, not us.”

Her forehead creased with worry. “How far has it gone? Are you still...”

“A virgin?” I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Calista had teased me for so long. I wanted to yell it to the sky the first time Dawson touched me. But now, like this? When it was betraying his confidence? My stomach turned. “No, I’m not.”

“Oh, Ev. I know how long you’ve waited for this, but Dawson is complicated. He’s my cousin and I love him, but he’s not the guy I’d ever pick for you.”

“Because I’m not in his league? Well, sorry, but he likes me.”

“I didn’t mean that.”

“And I like him. He’s the kindest person I’ve ever met. Did you know he works at the hardware store just to give me time to catch up on my other projects?”

“I didn’t realize that, no.”

“He’s become a good friend.”

“Just a friend?”

“It’s not... We’re not dating. He’s only helping me out.”

“Helping you out?”

“With sex,” I whispered. “To experience what everyone else has without throwing myself at some stranger. Dawson is just being a good friend.”

“Oh sweetie, I don’t buy that. You don’t have sex with someone to be a good friend. Whatever Dawson’s reasons, he must be getting something out of it too. But I’m worried you’re going to get hurt. I can tell by the way you talk about him you’re already halfway in love with him.”

I felt my eyes burn, but I was sure it was just the residual onion fumes. “Don’t go there. I like him a lot, but I agreed to keep it casual. It doesn’t matter if I want more. That’s not part of the deal.”

“Aw, honey.” Calista moved as if to hug me, but I sidestepped her. She sighed but dropped her arms. “Of course it matters. Your feelings matter, Ev.”

“He never promised me anything, and I went in with my eyes open. So just let me have this okay? Just let me have this one thing I thought I’d never, ever have.”

Calista looked torn between scolding me and going for another hug.

“Okay, I can see that your mind is made up. I can’t convince you not to do this. But, babe, I don’t see this ending well. You don’t know everything about Dawson. He’s got baggage, and not *just* the accident. Other things too. He might not be good for you.”

I nodded, knowing she might be right. It might *not* end well.

But I was too invested to back out now.



## DAWSON

A PERSISTENT KNOCK drew me out of my cocoon on the bed. Since Sunday, I’d hit the gym three times and watched all the Riverton game footage I could get my hands on, making copious notes. Anything to occupy my time and keep my thoughts in the present.

I’d run out of distractions about an hour ago, though, and fallen into a fugue state, idly staring at the water stains on the ceiling as if they were ink blots.

One sort of looked like a dick...if you squinted just right.

Or maybe my brain was just full of dick lately. Because when it wasn’t trying to pick apart Kelsey’s message, it was drifting to erotic memories of Evan naked in this bed. Would he be just one more regret though? One more person I let down?

Another knock.

I yanked the door open. “Ada, what is—”

“Not Ada. Sorry.”

Evan stood in the hallway in his bulky winter coat, hair mostly hidden under a stocking cap. His face was red from the cold, but even if it hadn't been, I could smell the crisp outdoors on him. It was fresh and cool—sending happier memories swirling through my head. Afternoons spent helping Dad rake fall leaves as a kid, me giggling as he tossed me into a big pile. Evenings on the porch swing with Mom, swaddled in blankets with hot chocolate in hand while we watched the neighbor put up holiday decorations.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, more abruptly than I'd intended.

Evan winced. “Sorry for just showing up like this. You haven't been answering my texts, and I needed to talk to you.”

“I turned off my phone.”

“For two days?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh...” Evan didn't seem to know what to make of that. He glanced over his shoulder, as if checking for eavesdroppers in the hallway. “Can I come in, or is this a bad time?”

*Was there a worse time?* My head was a landmine of triggers I was desperate to avoid, and I didn't have the energy to be the upbeat guy Evan was used to seeing. But at least he'd keep my mind off Kelsey.

I stepped back and waved him in.

Evan stuck close to the door after I shut it, as if he wouldn't be staying, which disappointed me even though it really shouldn't. It wasn't as if I'd invited him here. Sex would make a great distraction, but Evan didn't look like he was hoping for a hookup. He'd barely ogled me, even though I only wore a pair of basketball shorts.

“What's up?” I asked.

Evan wet his lips, seeming nervous as he crossed his arms, then dropped them. “I was just with Calista...”

“And?” I prompted.



Evan drew a breath as if to speak, then stopped, eyes focused on my face. “You look terrible. Are you okay?”

“Way to charm a guy,” I muttered.

Self-consciously, I ran my hands through my hair. It was sweaty and matted from hibernating in bed. I’d expended all my energy at keeping up appearances at work. By the time I got here, I’d wanted to hide from the world.

I glanced down and noticed orange chip dust in my chest hair. *Great.*

“What’s going on with you?” he asked. “Why did you turn off your phone for so long?”

“I’m not fit for company.” I brushed halfheartedly at the crumbs on my chest. “Obviously.”

“Is this about what happened between us last weekend?” Evan asked tentatively. “If you’re freaking out about it, we can stop.”

He looked pained as he said it, but the fact he did sent relief rippling through me. Evan wasn’t pushing for something I couldn’t give him. Even though he’d come over here unannounced, he wasn’t scolding me for hiding out or insisting I needed to pay more attention to him.

In fact, he was giving me an out if I needed it. And for a minute, I considered taking it.

Pushing him away now might be better for both of us. I was messed up. One message from my ex, and I’d suddenly remembered all the ways I came up short as a human being.

But I was too selfish to do it. Now that he was here, I didn’t want to be alone anymore.

“It’s not about us.”

He looked relieved. “Do you want to talk about what *is* bothering you then?”

“I’d rather not.” My voice came out hoarse, and I cleared my throat. “What were you going to tell me? Something about Calista?”

“Oh, uh. Don’t worry about it,” Evan said. “It’ll keep.”

“Okay.” I returned to my bed and slipped under the wrinkled blankets. “Are you leaving, then?”

Evan followed me over, forehead creased. “Do you want me to leave?”

*I should tell him to go. Tell him to find someone worth his time.*

Once again, I was too weak.

“No. You can stay.”

He brushed my hair off my forehead, his gentle touch sending a sweet ache through my chest. “Okay, I’ll hang out a while. Have you had dinner?”

“Didn’t you see it all over my chest?” I joked. “I had a gourmet meal of Spicy Doritos and Mountain Dew.”

Evan snorted. “How you maintain this body with your eating habits...”

“I work out.” Any other day, I would have accompanied those words with an eyebrow waggle or a flirtatious come-on. My heart wasn’t in it tonight.

“I can tell,” Evan said, his gaze tracing over my chest.

I flushed, and not with lust, but pride. I liked how Evan looked at me. I folded my arms under my head, displaying myself for him. I didn’t necessarily want him to jump me, but I was basking in his attention like a flower in sunshine.

“How about I call for takeout while you take a shower?” Evan suggested.

I sniffed at my pit. “Do I smell that bad?”

Evan laughed, eyes crinkling. “No, but I think it’ll make you feel better.”

“Okay, you’re the boss.”

I rolled out of bed, happy to follow orders if it allowed me to shut down my own brain. As I started past him, Evan

touched my arm to stop me, then went up on his tiptoes to press a butterfly-light kiss on my lips.

“Everything will be okay,” he said softly. “Whatever’s going on, you’ll be okay.”

I nodded once, throat too tight to speak as his words sank into me. Evan always told the truth, and even though he didn’t know anything about my past with Kelsey, his words anchored me.

I *was* fine. That chapter of my life was done. I’d moved on, and I couldn’t let Kelsey drag me backward.

By the time I came out of the shower, I did feel better.

Evan had Netflix queued up on his laptop. He’d taken off his coat and shoes and sat in a cross-legged position in the center of my bed. I gazed at him there, looking so comfortable in my space, and couldn’t find it within me to worry about boundaries. Not tonight.

Evan smiled when he saw me. “The food should be here any minute.”

His phone chimed, as if to punctuate his statement, and he checked the screen. “Yep, that’s it. I’ll go downstairs and grab it.”

I pulled on a pair of underwear and returned to bed while Evan took the delivery. He came back with a paper bag filled with foods that smelled so savory my stomach rumbled loudly. Suddenly, I was fucking starving.

We sat on the bed, side by side, with an *Office* rerun playing while we ate eggrolls, Mongolian beef, kung pao chicken, lo mein, and rice.

By the time we were done, I was stuffed to the gills and Evan was groaning as he tugged at his waistband. “Should have stopped before that last eggroll.”

“You ordered us enough carbs to last a week,” I said with a grin.

Evan looked at me, eyes warm. “Did the trick though, didn’t it? You’re smiling.”

“I guess I am. Until I slip into a food coma, anyway.”

Evan closed his laptop and slid it toward the foot of the bed, and I got up to put the leftovers in my minifridge. “It’s pretty late.”

I crawled back into the bed, flopping back against my pillows. “Yeah. Pretty cold out tonight too, huh?”

“Yeah.” Evan snuggled down against me, putting his head on my shoulder. “Not looking forward to going back out.”

“I don’t blame you.” I combed my fingers gently through his hair, strangely content to have his body resting against mine. “No need to rush off.”

“M’kay,” he said, sounding sleepy.

Neither of us commented on the fact that it would only get later and colder while Evan snuggled in my bed. We lay there, breathing quietly together, until one minute melded into the next, and we both fell asleep.

# CHAPTER 19



## EVAN

I JOLTED AWAKE AS AN ALARM BLARED. IT WASN'T COMING from my cell, and I was confused until my eyes popped open and I remembered I was in Dawson's bed.

Wait. *Dawson's bed?*

I sat upright, eyes wide, while beside me Dawson slapped his alarm to silence it. My jeans were in a crumpled pile on the floor, and I had a hazy memory of getting uncomfortable and shoving them off in the night.

*Way to make yourself at home, Evan.*

"Crap."

Dawson rolled to face me. "That's eloquent."

"I didn't mean to stay over. Sorry."

"It's fine." Dawson climbed out of the bed, clad in only his underwear, looking good enough to model for Calvin Klein. "I've got to get ready for work."

I nodded. "Right, yeah. I should go."

Dawson paused by the bathroom door. "Do you need a ride?"

"No, but..." I winced. "Is there any chance I can get out of here without Ada seeing me?"

"Maybe. She'll be in the kitchen preparing breakfast. But there's no guarantee."

"I'm sorry. I should have been more careful."

Dawson leaned back against the bathroom doorjamb. The casual position did wonders for his musculature. My mouth began to water at the sight.

“Don’t worry about it. You crashed with a friend, that’s all. If people talk, they talk.”

*A friend.* Right. I knew our arrangement wasn’t permanent, but somehow being labeled a friend made it feel worse.

“You really don’t mind if we become the subject of gossip?”

“Everyone’s already talking about me. The Riverton game is a big deal. They might even care about it more than my sex life.”

“Football and sex, Granville’s two favorite topics of gossip. You might make their heads explode.”

Dawson smiled tightly. “Lucky me, huh?”

He went into the bathroom, leaving the door open. I hesitated as he used the restroom, then started the shower.

Dawson said all the right words. *It’s fine. Let people talk.* But his eyes had grown distant and his body tense.

I wasn’t sure he was as fine as he pretended—and I’d yet to tell him about Calista finding out about us. I could keep it to myself and save him the worry. But even though Calista agreed to keep quiet, that didn’t feel right. He deserved to know.

I was in no hurry to get to work since Grandpa opened the store in the mornings, so I pulled on my jeans and shoes, then sat on the love seat to wait.

Dawson’s shower was relatively quick, and he walked out of the bathroom entirely naked, steam billowing behind him.

I sucked in a breath at the sheer magnificence of his body. I’d seen him naked, but he’d been pressed up against me and under the covers. Even last night, he’d worn a towel. It didn’t really compare to seeing the man standing in the middle of the room, every inch of damp skin bared, water droplets trickling down his upper chest and back.

He stopped short. “Oh. I thought... Did you—”

“Sorry.” I averted my gaze, feeling like a weird Peeping Tom instead of a guy who’d been in close proximity with Dawson’s body several times. The difference was, those times I’d been given express permission. I hadn’t hung around like some kind of stalker.

“You can look at me.” Dawson sounded amused now. “I don’t have time to fuck around though.”

“Oh, that’s not why I stayed,” I said quickly, though his words made warmth unfurl low in my gut. He looked good enough to eat. But no, now wasn’t the time. I shook myself out of a fantasy that involved me crossing the room and licking every stray drop of water off Dawson’s very fine body. “I, uh, just thought I should tell you why I came over last night.”

Dawson turned from the dresser with a pair of clean underwear, his eyes wary. “You were hesitant to tell me last night. Is this some kind of bad news?”

“Um. Depends on your perspective, I guess. It’s not great, but it’s not terrible or anything. It’s just...not exactly what I’d want to happen...right now. Or maybe ever. But it’s not *awful*.”

Dawson pulled on his boxer briefs and reached for a T-shirt hanging in the closet while I babbled anxiously. He typically dressed casually for work. His uniform was primarily a team jacket and a ballcap.

“Maybe you should just tell me what it is.”

“Yeah.” I exhaled. “Last night, while I was hanging out with Calista, Linc messaged me.”

Dawson yanked up a pair of navy-blue sweats. “Linc?”

“Yeah, the guy from Hayworth, who—”

“I remember.”

“Okay. Anyway, he messaged me, and Calista checked my phone because—”

“Why is he messaging you?”



I paused, taking in Dawson's crossed arms and tight jaw. I hadn't even gotten to the bad part, and he looked ready to snap. Maybe he could guess where this was going.

"He wanted to apologize for coming on so strong."

"I bet," Dawson muttered. "Is this the first time he messaged, or is this a regular thing?"

"It's the first time, but that's not really the important part."

"Then what is?" Dawson asked, sounding impatient even though he was the one who kept interrupting. "If you're thinking you want to date him after all..."

"What? No. *No.*" I shook my head emphatically. "I don't see him that way. The thing is, Calista saw his message, and it sort of...mentioned us."

"Us?"

"Us together. Linc called us a couple."

"Oh. Shit. Calista saw that?"

"Yeah. I mean, I told her we weren't a couple, but Linc also brought up our kiss." I twisted my hands in my lap, growing more anxious as Dawson's expression darkened. "I guess he saw us at the bar."

"Linc should keep his mouth shut about shit that isn't his business," Dawson muttered, uncharacteristically harsh.

"He had no idea anyone would see it but me. It was an apology."

Dawson shifted uneasily. "Okay, so how badly did Calista flip out? Am I going to find twenty messages when I turn my phone back on? Fuck, I've got enough of that in my life already."

At least I could reassure him on that count. Although I had no control over Linc's message, I felt guilty that Dawson had been outed. If I'd been more careful about my privacy, Calista might not have seen Linc's words.

"I asked her not to confront you about it. She also agreed not to tell anyone else."

Dawson nodded. “Okay, well, if she knows, she knows. There’s nothing to be done about it except wait and see what happens.”

“She’ll keep it a secret.” I had no doubts there. “She’s my best friend and your cousin. She doesn’t want to see either of us hurt.”

Dawson nodded, looking troubled. “She must have had a few choice words about it though.”

“Well, she didn’t understand at first, so she was concerned, but I...explained the situation. She knows we’re not a real couple.”

Dawson grimaced. “That hardly makes me look any better.” He turned to me, eyes full of turmoil. “Did she think I was taking advantage of you?”

“Not exactly,” I hedged.

“But she said something that wasn’t great, right? Something you don’t want to tell me. What was it?”

I chewed my lower lip, debating what to say. It was clear that Dawson wasn’t in a great headspace. Maybe I should have kept it from him after all. I didn’t see how repeating Calista’s words would help anything, but he looked committed to grilling me until he got answers.

“Nothing bad. She just said that you’re complicated, and that you’ve got baggage.”

He huffed a humorless laugh. “No lies there.”

“She wasn’t sure you’d be good for me, but I told her it isn’t like that with us. You’re not my boyfriend.”

“No,” Dawson said softly. “I’m not.” His eyes met mine. “You’re cool with that right? Because I’m not in a place where I want to date anyone seriously.”

“I know.”

“I’m still trying to get my life together, and with my track record...” He trailed off with a sigh. “I don’t want to hurt you,

Ev, but I don't see that changing, so if you're unhappy with our arrangement—”

“I'm not,” I said quickly, heart lurching with fear. I didn't want Dawson to cut off things just as they were heating up. Would I *love* to have more with him? Of course. He was amazing. Would I take what I could get either way? *Double yes*. I didn't know when a chance like this would come around again for me, and besides... He was *amazing*. “You were clear about what this was from the start. We're on the same page.”

It sucked to hear him say it outright, of course. My treacherous heart wanted to hope, and I couldn't do that when he spoke in absolutes. But I couldn't just walk away. When the time came, he'd have to make me go. Or maybe Calista would have to drag me kicking and screaming.

Either way, it'd totally be worth it.

He nodded once. “Okay, then. Is that all?”

“Yeah.”

Dawson grabbed his coat. “Then I've got to get going.”

I followed him out, and we managed to evade notice as we hurried down the stairs and crossed to the front door. The clink of silverware and Ada's tinkling laugh drifted from the next room, where her other residents were having breakfast.

“Will I see you later?” I asked when we reached the sidewalk outside.

“Probably not.” Dawson's smile was strained. “Hell week for the football team.”

“Right. Okay. Good luck prepping for the game.”

“Thanks, Ev. Have a good week, okay? Sorry I can't help out at the store.”

“No worries. I'm used to going it alone.”

He looked as if he wanted to say something in response, but after a beat he nodded and headed toward his car. As I watched him go, I felt a piece of myself go with him.

I was in too deep with a guy who didn't want a future with me, but it was far too late to take back the parts of myself I'd given him. They were his forever, whether he wanted them or not.



## DAWSON

“WHERE’S ROJAS?” Coach Mayfield scowled as he scanned the players assembling on the field for afternoon practice.

“Haven’t seen him yet.”

I glanced around too, only half my focus on the field. I’d spent most of the day distracted—not by Kelsey now, but by Evan. I kept seeing that flash of hurt in his eyes as I made it painfully clear I wouldn’t be open to a more serious relationship. He’d tried to hide it, but Evan’s face gave away all his feelings. His sincerity was one of the things I liked about him.

Except now I felt like a jackass.

When I woke with Evan in my bed, it unsettled me just how much I liked having him there. He’d given me so much comfort—and not with sex. Our boundaries were blurring, and that worried me.

I’d decided to experiment with Evan because he was safe. I wasn’t into guys, so there could be no danger of entangling myself in another unhealthy relationship. But after having his naked body under me, after tasting and touching, I couldn’t pretend I was straight anymore. Maybe I’d never felt the stirrings before Evan, but he’d awoken something in me, a latent bisexuality I hadn’t discovered yet.

That meant he wasn’t safe. I *could* fall for him—if I let myself.

But I wouldn’t. I couldn’t. Not after what had happened with Kelsey. I could still see the mascara running down her face with her tears. See her crawling onto that roof, moving closer and closer to the edge. In a way, that horrible night had

embodied our whole relationship—teetering on the edge of disaster and me helpless to stop it.

Evan was worthy of better. I'd had to be honest. Had to warn him before he got hurt. Because I didn't have the willpower to walk away myself.

But I should have done it with more care. I hated the wounded expression I'd put on his face.

Coach Mayfield put out a hand to stop Pete Chafin as he jogged past. "You seen Rojas?"

"Not today, Coach. Sorry."

Mayfield turned to me. "Did you check the excused absence list today?"

"No, but I can look now." Reluctantly I powered on my phone, silencing it so the notifications didn't draw Mayfield's attention. I opened my email to check the list the front office sent out to staff each day.

"He's not out sick," I said, doing my best to focus on work rather than the little red six that glared at me accusingly from my text icon. Surely not all of those were Kelsey. Evan had mentioned trying to text. But I was sure she hadn't stopped at just one, which was why I'd turned off my phone in the first place.

Kelsey wasn't one to be ignored, and I wasn't ready to confront her yet.

Mayfield swore. "I thought we were past this BS."

"What do you mean?"

"Cutting classes, bailing on tests. Have you checked in on his grades lately?"

I winced. I'd talked with Rojas's teachers a couple of weeks ago, but less so in recent days. Once he agreed to use Evan's tutoring app, and his attitude improved at practice, I thought we were in the clear.

"Not in a while. He was doing better..."

Mayfield's jaw clenched, a sure sign he was angry. "Clearly not as much as we'd hoped."

"I'll track him down tomorrow—"

"Better make it tonight," he cut in. "Right after practice. We need to start damage control ASAP if we want him in Friday's game."

"All right. I'll take care of it."

Coach swore colorfully again, gave me another baleful look, and stalked off. He hadn't said the words, but his look was crystal clear. I'd fucked up. After promising to keep Rojas in line, I'd slacked on the job.

"Goddammit," I muttered, repocketing my phone and jogging out onto the field. With Rojas gone, I'd need to work with the backup quarterback. If Rojas continued down this road, Andy Merrill might have to step up for the game against Riverton—and he wasn't even close to ready.

*I should have stayed on top of this.*

My personal bullshit had interfered enough. I refused to let it ruin everything I'd built here. I had to get my shit together and fix *this* mistake.

All the others pushing at the edge of my mind would just have to wait.



AFTER GRILLING Rojas's friends and attempting to call his cell and his parents' landline, I was left with no choice but to drive out to his house. The family lived about ten miles outside of the city, and even with GPS, I nearly missed the turnoff from the highway.

A rusty mailbox was the only sign marking the entrance, but at the end of the rutted dirt lane, an aging farmhouse sat outlined against the darkening sky. It was that hour where it wasn't quite day or evening, but somewhere in between.

I parked in front of the house. There were no other cars, but a bicycle lay on its side, the wheel still spinning, so someone was home. The curtains in the front window twitched, and when I reached the front door, it opened before I could knock.

“Ana! Don’t just open the door!”

Ana was a little girl with a single black braid trailing over her shoulder and curious eyes. The exasperated voice came from her mother, who strode up behind her with a much more guarded expression.

“Can I help you?”

“Hi, Mrs. Rojas. I’m Coach Woods from the high school.”

The look in her eyes shifted from wary to concerned. “Is Alex okay? He didn’t get hurt at practice, did he?”

“No, nothing like that. But he, uh, wasn’t at school today. Any chance he’s here?”

She whispered something under her breath, and Ana piped up. “Mama, you’re not supposed to use *that* word.”

“Ana Marie, didn’t I ask you to clean your room today? Go.”

“But Mama—”

“Go now,” she repeated firmly. “Let the grownups talk.”

Ana sighed heavily, as if she carried all the burdens of the world on her dainty shoulders. “Mama always sends me away when things get interesting.”

“Ana...”

“I’m going,” she said, skipping toward the hall before she could be scolded more seriously. “I want Alex’s room if you kill him!”

Mrs. Rojas winced. “Honestly, what an impression you must have of us.” Her laugh was tinged with embarrassment.

“Kids, huh?”

I didn't have the first clue what it was like to be a parent, but it seemed like the thing to say.

Mrs. Rojas smiled, but I got a closed-off vibe from her. I suspected she wouldn't be inviting me in to have a glass of iced tea anytime soon.

"Alex isn't here. I thought he went to school."

"I'm afraid not. Do you have any idea where he'd go instead?"

She shook her head. "He does this sometimes. When he's upset. He and his father argued last night."

"I hope it wasn't too serious?"

"No. Just arguing about Alex's future. His father wants him to be realistic about his prospects."

"Like college, you mean?"

She looked pained. "Coach, we can't afford college. Even with financial aid, Alex would have to stay close to home... Playing for a big football school? That's just a fairytale."

"It doesn't have to be. Your son is a gifted player."

"Please don't put ideas like that in his head. You wouldn't understand what it's like, working as hard as you can for your kids and knowing it'll never be enough to give them everything they want."

"Maybe you're right. I don't know what that's like. But I do know there are full-ride scholarships for players like your son. This isn't a pipe dream if Alex puts in the work."

She shook her head. "No, that doesn't happen. Not for people like us."

"It could," I insisted. "Football can unlock a lot of opportunities for him."

She smiled sadly, clearly unmoved by my pretty words. "I can see you believe that, but please don't give him hopes that will crush him, okay? Football is fun for Alex, but that's all it will be. He needs to grow up." She started to shut the door, but hesitated. "He sometimes goes to his cousin's when he needs



to get away. If you find him, please send him home so I don't worry."

She gave me the address before shutting the door firmly. A second later, I heard the lock engage.

Okay, message received.

Alex Rojas's mother seemed caring but jaded. I didn't doubt she had good reason, but Alex deserved a chance to dream. Even if he never made it in pro football, a scholarship could get him a degree, an opportunity to do something more with his life.

Of course, it was a moot point if Rojas didn't keep up his grades. He needed playing time if he was ever going to impress college scouts.

I went by the cousin's house, but that was a wild-goose chase. I was sent to another relative's, and then to a friend's place, until finally it was after seven and I was starving.

I dropped my head back against my headrest with a groan.

It was tempting to call it a night. With all the work Evan had done to make that study app useful, Rojas had no good excuse for blowing off his classes. And if he truly was behind, there might not be enough time to catch him up before Friday's game anyway.

*Who knows what his dad said to him in that argument though.*

Rojas deserved to hear *someone* tell him that he could decide his own path forward.

I reluctantly pulled out my phone, carefully ignoring all my notifications, and scoured social media in a last-ditch effort to track him down. Twenty minutes later, just as I was about to give up, a photo popped up. Rojas and another guy in his twenties, both grinning at the camera with glazed eyes. In the background—almost too far away to notice—was a small blue house.

One I'd already been to earlier that night. Goddamn it. I'd been played.

Starting the engine, I backtracked to the cousin's place, one of the first I'd visited, this time driving around the house and parking in a field behind it. A group of people—mostly all adults—sat around a fire pit drinking beers from a cooler and laughing their asses off.

“Rojas,” I bellowed as I jogged toward them. “Get your ass up. It's time to go.”

# CHAPTER 20



## DAWSON

“WHAT CAN I GET Y’ ALL?”

“Two coffees. The kid will have the flapjack special. I’ll take the chorizo omelet.”

“Got it.” The waitress, an older woman whose nametag read Gladys, tucked the order pad into the pocket of a short apron that wrapped around her waist.

“I’m not hungry,” Rojas mumbled, his eyes at half-mast.

“You’ll eat,” I said, not in the mood to argue. “I’m not taking you home to your parents in this state.”

Gladys glanced between me and Rojas. “I’ll bring an extra glass of water for our star quarterback too.” She patted my shoulder. “And a piece of pie for you, Coach Woods. Your night looks like it needs sweetening up.”

She started across the diner, shouting out our order before she was even halfway to the kitchen. Rojas and I sank into a sullen silence while we waited. I wanted him sober before we got into the nitty-gritty of what needed to be said.

Gladys made two trips to bring us a carafe of coffee and mugs, a glass of water for Rojas, and a small bowl full of creamers. She also brought a small plate with two biscuits. “Thought you might want to get food in him sooner rather than later,” she said. “He can eat this while we prepare your orders.”

“Thank you, Gladys.”

She smiled at me. “Don’t thank me. Just stop by here more often. This is the first I’ve seen of the handsome young coach everyone in town has been talking about.”

“Surely not everyone.”

She laughed. “You’d be surprised how fascinating we find new faces around here. With the Riverton game coming up, all eyes are on you, Coach.”

I smiled tightly, feeling a little uncomfortable being under the microscope. “Let’s hope I don’t disappoint, then.”

“I’m sure you won’t. I’ll be back when your orders are ready.”

Gladys flitted from table to table, talking with customers and bringing them bottles of ketchup or drink refills. But I couldn’t shake her words. Granville hadn’t won a rivalry game in so long that this town was starving for a win. Coach Mayfield might be head coach, but I was the new guy that everyone was pinning their hopes on.

I looked at my drunk quarterback across from me and grimaced. How was I going to help Rojas get his shit together in less than a week? It’d taken me months to come out of my own spiral of destruction, and I was a hair’s breadth from getting sucked right back in. Who was I to be helping anyone else?

*Fuck.* Maybe I wasn’t ready to be a coach. Not if it meant guiding people not just in sports, but in life. I’d screwed my own life up. What if I screwed up theirs too?

I picked up my coffee and took a scalding sip. I hissed as it burned my tongue, but it jolted me out of my negative thoughts. This wasn’t the man I wanted to be, so damn defeatist. I’d come to Granville for a new start, to be a new man.

For some reason, Evan popped into my head again. He was so passionate about his work, so kind and considerate with his Tech Club members, so dedicated to his grandfather that he practically ran his store.

I couldn't measure up to someone like him—but I wanted to change that. Helping Rojas would be as good a start as any.

Across from me, the kid wolfed down biscuits slathered in butter. Apparently he was hungrier than he'd thought. I pushed the water glass toward him. "Drink too. You need to hydrate."

He mumbled his thanks through his bite, biscuit bits spraying across the table. I grimaced, but we had more important matters to discuss than table manners.

Gladys delivered our plates of food: a stack of pancakes for Rojas, along with scrambled eggs, sausage and bacon, and my chorizo omelet. We dug in, eating in silence, two brooding presences that seemed fit for each other.

But once I'd had my fill and Rojas seemed a little more sober, I put down my fork. "Okay, we need to have some real talk now. What happened with school today?"

Rojas shrugged. "Didn't feel like going."

"That have anything to do with your argument with your dad?"

He scowled. "What do you know about that?"

"Only that he wants you to think about your future, and maybe you guys don't agree about what it should be."

"Nah, he's right. Why waste my time with school and sports if I'm just going to end up out in the fields or working construction like my brother?"

I raised my eyebrows. "He wants you to drop out of school?"

"He didn't say that," Rojas admitted. "But I might as well if that's where all this is headed."

"It doesn't have to be. You could get a football scholarship."

He groaned and rubbed his eyes. "Nice theory, Coach. But Granville isn't the kind of place that gets scouts' attention, and I suck at school. Kind of surprised you guys haven't already benched me."

“How bad is it?”

“Missed a couple of tests. Blew off a few assignments. I don’t know, man. We were drilling hard, and I was tired when I got home. It wasn’t like I meant to do it. It just kind of snowballed.”

I was no stranger to a destructive spiral, but it wasn’t going to make my job any easier. Then again, focusing on Rojas meant I didn’t have to think about myself. If I could save him from torpedoing everything he’d accomplished this season, maybe I could do the same for me.

“I’ll make you a deal, Rojas. You do the work to get your grades up and your ass on the field, and *I* will make sure you get seen by some college scouts.”

His eyes widened. “Can you do that?”

“I can.” I might have burned my bridges in Alabama, but Simon was connected to two nearby colleges, and I was willing to bet he had contacts at even more in the region. Rojas needed realistic prospects, not big-time scouts. Even a community college would give him more options than manual labor, and his parents might be more willing to accept it as a viable option. “Can you get your head out of your ass and do the work to catch up in classes?”

He grimaced. “It won’t be easy.”

“No, but I’ll help. We’ll do everything we can to get you back on track. But you can’t do this again. No more disappearing acts. No more bailing on classes or the team. You *have* to commit. If you want a future, we’re going to have to make it happen. Are you willing to do that?”

Rojas blinked hard. “Yeah, man. Yeah, I am. Sorry I fucked up.”

“Hey, we all make mistakes. I’ve made a shitload. It’s what you do when the smoke clears that matters. Eat up. You’re gonna need the fuel, because when we leave here, we’re going over *everything* you need to make up, and then we’re gonna make a plan of attack for the rest of the week.”



## EVAN

I FLIPPED the sign at Moore Hardware to closed. I'd kept the store open late to take advantage of fall festival traffic, and I was more than ready to go home.

Grandpa had stopped by, unable to resist socializing with the customers, but I'd convinced him to leave when he'd started coughing every fifteen minutes. After years of smoking, he had a persistent cough, and it wasn't good for him to overdo it.

My phone chimed with a text right as I killed the lights, startling me a little. To my surprise, it was Dawson. The way he'd talked this morning, I hadn't expected to hear from him all week—if ever again.

*Hey, are you free? I need to talk to you.*

Uh-oh. That sounded ominous.

*Everything okay?*

*Yeah, but can I come by your place? It won't take long.*

My heart pounded. Now that he'd reached out, I was almost afraid of what he might want to say. Dawson had already put me firmly in my place this morning. Surely, if he wanted to expand on that, it couldn't be good. But avoiding him would only wind me up further. If this was our last talk, I'd try to make it count.

*I'm still at the store. Fall fest hours.*

*Be there in five.*



I waited in the dark, my mind whirring with worst-case scenarios. Calista's words from last night kept echoing in my head. About Dawson being more complicated than I knew. About how he might be bad for me.

Instead of scaring me away, it only made me want to know him more. To know all the parts of him, the happy and the sad. I didn't need easy. I didn't need simple. I needed *real*.

Of course, we were about as far from real as possible. Our whole relationship had been a game. *Let me teach you to flirt. Let me help you gain experience.*

It had always been more for me, but I couldn't expect Dawson to feel the same. He had so many dating opportunities. The man could have anyone. Me? I felt incredibly lucky to have even a short time with him. No matter how it hurt, I would never regret it.

When Dawson arrived, I opened the door to let him in and then locked it behind him. I'd left the lights off, but the streetlights poured in through the window, illuminating his tense face.

"Sorry to come by so late," he said quietly, his tone subdued.

Shit, this really was bad news, wasn't it? My heart clenched painfully.

"It's fine. I barged in on you last night, so..."

"Right," he said. "I know I said I'd be out of touch this week, but I wanted to talk to you in person."

"Wait," I blurted before he could say something I didn't want to hear. "Just...hold that thought."

Dawson looked thrown. "Okay..."

I grabbed his hand and led him away from the door, toward the small patio furniture display near the back of the store. It was pitch-black as we moved away from the windows, but I knew my way through these aisles like the back of my hand.

I pushed Dawson toward a lounge. He wobbled on his feet, caught off-guard by the plastic frame nudging the back of

his legs, then sat heavily.

I followed him down, placing a knee on each side of his hips and settling in his lap.

“Whoa.” He chuckled. “What are you doing?”

“Taking what I want.”

I cupped his face and found his lips in the dark, just as easily as I’d navigated the store. We might have been together only a handful of times, but he already felt so familiar to me. So right.

Dawson was clearly surprised by my boldness, but he indulged me, letting me deepen the kiss, following my lead for a change.

When I pulled back, I could only make out the shape of his face, the gleam of his eyes.

“Uh, Ev, this isn’t why I came here tonight.”

“I know,” I repeated. “But after this morning, I know where we stand. I want to show you that I’m on board with that, okay? Just give me that much. Please. Let me show you that you don’t have to pull away.”

“I’m not pulling away,” Dawson rasped. “I should. I know I should. That’s why I said what I did. To protect you. I’m sorry if it hurt you to hear it.”

“Did it hurt you to say it?”

I held my breath while I waited for his answer. I couldn’t see his expression, but his tension vibrated from his body to mine.

“Yes,” he whispered, as if it was an admission of guilt.

I slammed my mouth onto his, renewed determination lighting me up inside. I didn’t know why Dawson thought he could never be with me beyond this sexual game we’d created, but I saw it for what it was now. *Permission*.

Dawson needed a reason to allow himself to be with me, and this was it. I wanted more. Of course I did. Dawson was everything I could want in a partner: gorgeous, smart,

generous, and good-natured. But if this was all he could give right now, I'd take it gladly. I wouldn't push him beyond his limits.

Dawson put his arms around me, pulling me closer, and groaned against my mouth as my tongue slid along his. For the first time, I realized the power I had over him. He'd always seemed so in control when we were together, but he was just as affected by me. And tonight, I wanted to unravel *him*.

I grasped his shoulders for balance as he surged into the kiss, my hands sliding over the slick nylon of his team jacket. I moved my hands down, feeling his chest heave, then fumbled for his zipper and pulled it down.

Dawson helped me wrestle him out of his jacket, and then I was shoving his T-shirt up. I slid back a few inches to bend down and run my hands and then my tongue over hard muscle.

“Fuck, baby,” Dawson murmured, and I smiled against his skin. The hard prod of his erection under my chest as I worshiped his abs with my mouth was just what I needed.

Dawson *wanted* me. He was hard, stomach twitching and quivering, breath ragged—all for me.

I shoved his shirt further up his chest, and Dawson took the hint and pulled it off. I coasted my hands over the ridges and valleys, then followed each curve and dip with my mouth. All my worry over the course of the day coalesced into a desperate hunger to touch and taste every inch of this man before he was gone.

I bit down on his pec, and he grunted.

“Too hard?”

“Nah, do your worst. I can take it.”

Dawson's voice was sensual and smug, which I ordinarily loved, but I wanted something different this time. I wanted him to whimper and beg. I wanted him breathless with need and melting with pleasure.

I licked and bit and sucked Dawson's chest and neck until he was moaning and rocking his hips up against me. That was

a good start.

“What do you want tonight?” I asked. “You can have anything you want.”

He groaned. “Anything with you is amazing.”

That was nice to hear, but...I scooted up to bring my mouth close to his ear.

“Tell me your fantasy,” I murmured. “What are you *desperate* for?”

He pushed his hands down the back of my jeans, squeezing my ass and giving me my answer before he spoke.

“I want to fuck you. Can’t stop thinking about how hot and tight you must be.”

“That’s one benefit to being a virgin.”

He exhaled noisily. “To be the first man inside you...”

“It’s sexy, right? Going where no man has gone before. But I don’t know. Do you really want it?” I teased. “I can’t tell.”

His hands clenched tighter, hurting a little, but so clearly communicating his desire that it thrilled me. “Yes, I fucking want it. I’m dying for it, Ev. You’d feel so good around my cock. Jesus, I’d do almost anything to have you like that.”

I kissed him hard, pushing my ass back into his hands to convey my approval. “You *can* have me, Daws. I want you to take me.”

“Fuck yes,” he said breathily, then went still. “Wait, no. We can’t. Not here.”

“Why not?” I was indignant now. “Don’t you have a condom in your wallet? That’s Sexy Guy 101.”

Dawson gave a breathless laugh. “Yeah, I do. But do you really want your first time to be in a hardware store?”

I wasn’t sure there was a better option. I couldn’t imagine taking him home, where Grandpa could hear us. Talk about a mood killer. And I wasn’t sure we should push our luck at his

place. It was a minor miracle that Ada hadn't seen me there this morning.

"I don't care where it is," I said. "I just want it to be with you."

The words were too honest. I bit down on my lip, worried I'd scare him away again. But he growled in his throat and thrust his hips up against me harder. "Fuuccck. You're too much, baby."

"Give it to me," I said urgently. "Fuck me. Please."

So much for making him beg. But I didn't care anymore. He'd unraveled enough to reveal the depths of his desire.

He dropped his head back with a *thunk*. My heart sank. He was going to say no. Maybe he didn't want me as much as I thought because nothing would have stopped me in the moment.

"Daws?" I said uncertainly.

"Get up," he said grimly. "We're going back to my place. I'm not fucking you on a flimsy lounge."

My heart leapt as I scrambled to my feet. "But Ada might see us."

"She might. I don't really care." He stood up, then pulled me to him for a short but fierce kiss. "Callie already knows, so fuck it. If we're going to keep doing this, then let's *do it*. No more worrying about what other people think or say."

I gaped at him. "Really?"

"As long as you're cool with it."

"Okay, but what if someone asks me about us? What do I say?"

He ducked his head to look into my eyes. "You don't have to explain yourself to anyone, but if you want to, it's not a secret. We're friends with benefits. Or hookups. Casual. Whatever term you prefer. Okay?"

I nodded quickly, excitement overshadowing the small disappointment that he wasn't asking for a real relationship. I

hadn't really expected that, and besides, this was more than I could have hoped for a few hours ago.

Not only did I get to fuck Dawson Woods, but soon, everyone would know he was mine—if only for a short time.

# CHAPTER 21



## DAWSON

WE DROVE TO MY PLACE, THE LATE-NIGHT CHILL DOING nothing to cool our desire. I tried to concentrate on the road while Evan tormented me with teasing touches, slipping his hand under my shirt to tickle my lower belly, stroking up to pinch my left nipple and down to squeeze my cock through my jeans.

Thankfully, it was a short drive. Otherwise, Evan might have had his first time in a car on the side of the road. By the time we parked and made it upstairs to my room, I could no longer think of anything but stroking into Evan's tight heat.

I grasped his hips, manhandling him across the room, and full-out threw him into the middle of my bed.

He squealed in shock and laughed, and I was past caring if anyone heard.

"Get naked," I ordered as I stripped off my coat and whipped my shirt over my head. Evan began pulling off his own clothes, squirming in the bed as he got out of his shirt and pants. Keeping my gaze on him, I toed off my shoes and shoved down my sweats and boxer briefs in one move.

Evan froze with his jeans around his thighs, eyes wide and lips parted, as my cock came into view. It was fully hard, jutting out straight before me, too thick and heavy to curve up as Evan's did.

I wondered if Evan was remembering how big I was in his mouth. It was going to be a much tighter squeeze to get into his ass. Was he ready for that?



Fisting my cock, I stroked slowly from root to tip. “Still want this?”

Evan swallowed hard. “Yes.”

“It’ll fill you up. Stretch you. Might hurt.”

Evan’s lust-blown eyes only seemed to dilate further. “I can take it.”

“Yes, you can, but we’ll have to go slow. I can eat you out, then—”

“Actually,” Evan interrupted. “I have another idea. If you don’t mind?”

I shook my head, curious. Usually Evan was happy to let me lead, but he’d been much bolder tonight. And besides, I’d never fucked a man before. Tonight, we were equally inexperienced.

Evan finished stripping and climbed out of my bed, blushing as I watched his ass flex with his movements. He went over to his laptop bag, unzipped a side pocket, and withdrew—holy hell, was that—

“A dildo?” I said, incredulous. “Wait. You keep a *dildo* in your laptop bag?”

Evan reddened. “I had a close call with Grandpa snooping in my room. I couldn’t think of anything more embarrassing than him finding it, so…”

“He travels with dildo,” I said faintly, so turned on I could hardly think.

My mind filled with images of Evan spread out in his bed, legs up and parted, while he worked a dildo in and out of his hole. That beautiful full-body blush would be spreading across his chest, and his cock would be curved up against his belly and leaking precum.

*Fuck.*

“No one looks in my bag,” Evan said. “It’s not because I, you know, use it in weird places or anything.”

I groaned and clamped my hand around the base of my cock as his words sent me spiraling to *more* erotic fantasies. “You’re gonna make me bust before I even get started.”

“You better not,” Evan said, sounding indignant again. I had a feeling he was going to be a demanding lover, and I couldn’t wait to find out.

“Get your cute ass over here then.”

I pulled out my side table drawer and grabbed a condom and lube while Evan clambered back into the bed.

“Love the color,” I teased as I took the dildo from him and ran a hand over the bright teal silicone. It wasn’t as thick or long as me, but it would stretch him more than my fingers. Even if it didn’t, I couldn’t pass up a chance to see it press into his hole, slowly spreading him. To find out what kind of noises he made when using it.

“It was this color or hot pink. Calista bought it for me at one of those sex toy parties for women so—”

I made a buzzer sound. “No talk about my cousin in bed.”

“Sorry.”

My focus returned to the dildo in my hand. “So, do I just... lube it up and go, or...?”

Evan smiled up at me. “It’s cute seeing you at a loss for a change.”

I sputtered. “I’m not. I just wanted to make sure—”

He laughed. “It’s okay. I’m just teasing. Usually I start with a couple of fingers, then move on to that.”

I nodded, feeling oddly nervous. I’d finger fucked Evan before, but it had simply been for pleasure, not to prepare him to take my cock. I wanted to get this right, to spare him any undue pain. There would most likely be some, given my size, but I wanted it to be easily overcome by pleasure.

We’d gotten a little sidetracked talking about mechanics, so I put the dildo aside and kissed Evan again. Immediately, our chemistry sparked to life. My lust surged again as Evan

became more aggressive, tugging my bottom lip between his teeth.

I shuddered as I flattened him to the bed, reveling in the press of our hot flesh. He felt almost fragile beneath me, but I knew from our other times together that his body was stronger than it looked.

He parted his thighs, cradling me, and our cocks bumped and dragged. Evan hissed and pushed into the sensation. It was almost too much friction on sensitive skin, but damn, it jolted me into the next gear.

I lubed my fingers and slipped first one and then two inside him. He breathed through the intrusion, seeming to know just how to relax to let me in. When I slid them deeper, crooking them to hit his prostate, he jerked with a little gasp.

“Give me more.”

I added a third finger, but after a couple of thrusts, Evan picked up the dildo and handed it to me.

I got onto my knees, with my legs folded beneath me, and lifted Evan’s ass onto my thighs. This tilted his hips, making the angle easier to breach him. Evan was already blushing, and I could tell from his expression that he felt vulnerable. I turned my head, placing a gentle kiss on his ankle.

“You’re perfect, baby. Now, pull back your legs for me, okay?”

Evan grasped each of his slender thighs, pulling them up and back. It opened him up, and I could see his hole, still wet and loose. I added more lube to the dildo, then gently pressed its tip against Evan’s rim. It would stretch him further, and yet it came nowhere close to how much my cock would test him.

*Damn.* Had we rushed this? Maybe we should have built up to this moment, slowly training Evan’s body to handle me.

“I’m ready,” Evan said. “Please, Daws. Don’t make me wait anymore.”

Well, fuck. I guess we’d find out together.

I pushed the dildo gently, tentatively. Evan's body put up more resistance than with my fingers.

"Go harder," he said.

I hesitated. "I don't want to hurt you."

Evan locked eyes with me. "I won't let you."

Why did it feel as if our words took on deeper meaning than the physical? Evan released one thigh and grasped my wrist. With his grip, he helped guide me forward, pushing steadily until his body gave and the head of the dildo slid in.

Evan and I gasped simultaneously.

"Fuck," I murmured. "So hot."

Evan continued guiding me, rocking my hand forward and back, until he'd taken the full six inches of the toy. I watched it enter him, stretching his tight ring of muscle. Watched it sink deeper, then deeper still, before Evan and I slid it back out, glistening with lube.

It was like a live porn show—but so much better because Evan was real, and every sound he made, the small grunts as he pushed his body, were one hundred percent genuine.

I'd tried watching a little gay porn after I started hooking up with Ev. It was...interesting. Definitely hot in a detached way. Bodies were doing erotic things I could appreciate, but there was no intimacy to it. But this with Evan...

I wasn't even fucking him yet, and I felt as if I'd never look at sex the same way.

"Okay, you won't hurt me now," Evan said confidently. "Use it to loosen me up so I can handle you."

"And the student becomes the teacher."

Evan gave an embarrassed laugh. "For now. I don't know much about real fucking."

A shot of lust streaked through me at those words and my hips bucked, my cock making its presence known again now that I wasn't so focused on Evan's comfort. A throb of want

that insisted I hurry the hell up so I could get into that perfect little hole in front of me.

I fucked him with the dildo, moving faster and harder now that Evan's body had adjusted. He was quiet at first, but soon enough, I began punching small sounds of pleasure from him. He rocked his hips up to meet my thrusts and take the toy deeper. I traced my index finger around his rim, then carefully slid it in alongside the dildo on a return thrust, and he cried out in shock.

I stretched him, my finger crammed tightly between hot, rippling muscle and hard silicone, until Evan started moaning in earnest.

“Fuck, baby, I can't wait much longer,” I said.

Watching him come apart was a lot to handle. My body was shaking with need.

“Yeah, do it,” he panted. “Want you inside me.”

I carefully withdrew the dildo and lubed my sheathed dick. Then I pressed the head of my cock against his hole. He was slick and stretched, but damn, it still looked like a hell of a tight fit.

Tilting my hips forward, I applied pressure. Evan's lust-soaked body was relaxed, and I slid in easier than expected.

I groaned raggedly as my cockhead was swallowed by tight heat before Evan's body clamped down, squeezing me so tightly I couldn't go any further. This was more intense than anything I'd felt before, so I could only imagine how Evan felt.

“You okay?” I checked, my voice strained as I tensed all my muscles against the urge to rut into him like a wild beast. I couldn't rush this. I had to be patient, but it was so fucking hard after all the buildup and teasing I'd been through tonight.

“I'm good,” Evan said softly.

His eyes were hazy, as if he was already in the afterglow of an amazing climax, and as he spoke, his body relaxed. The endorphins must have been doing their job.

I rocked my hips a tiny fraction, sliding in another inch. Evan squirmed beneath me, trembling as I worked my way inside, slowly pushing deeper until every inch of me was filling him.

“God, it’s so much,” he said, panting a little. “You feel so huge.”

“Is it too much for you?”

“Never.” His eyes met mine, looking fierce. “You’ll never be more than I can handle.”

I wanted to kiss him, but it was impossible with our height difference in this position. I settled for stroking his thigh. “You’re amazing. You know that?”

“You too.” His smile was wide and beautiful. “Now, fuck me. *Please*. I’m ready.”

“Fuck yes.” I shifted up onto my knees, looming over Evan, and thrust with a little more force.

Evan cried out, but it was a blissful sound, not a pained one, so I kept going. Folding him in half, grasping his thighs for leverage, I fucked him with all the urgency I’d been holding back.

Heat and pressure swamped me, all my senses narrowing to the tight grip of his body rippling up and down my cock. His delicious sounds, needy whimpers and joyful cries, goaded me to go faster, harder, until the bed was slamming into the wall.

Evan braced both hands against the headboard above him, stretching out his upper body. His cock slapped against his belly with our movements, oozing precum. He made such a fucking sexy sight that my balls tightened, and my climax barreled toward me.

“Gonna come,” I rasped.

“Wait for me,” Evan said, lowering his right hand between our heaving bodies to grasp his dick. He jerked it only twice before he came with a hoarse groan, body arching, insides clamping down tight on me, then releasing, as the orgasm

swept through him in waves. His cock shot streamers of cum onto his belly.

The eroticism of it was too much. I detonated inside him, climaxing so hard my vision whited out and I didn't come to until I had already flattened him to the mattress, grinding my cock in as deep as it would go.

We were both gasping, me from the aftershock and Evan because I was suffocating him.

"Fuck," I groaned as I levered myself onto my elbows to lift my weight from his chest. "You've ruined me."

Evan's hole tightened around my softening cock, as if he liked that.

"Mission accomplished," he said with a breathless laugh.

Then, confusingly, he started to cry.

My stomach dropped. *What the fuck did I just do?*



## EVAN

ELATION SWEEPED through me at Dawson's words—*you've ruined me*—the sweet afterglow of pleasure and pain and sheer vulnerability making my heart contract. To my horror, tears welled in my eyes.

I turned my head as they spilled, hoping Dawson wouldn't see. But of course he did.

"Ev, baby, did I hurt you?"

"No."

Dawson used his thumbs to rub away the tears, cradling my face so that I couldn't hide. "What is it then? Are you sorry we did this?"

"No! I don't know why... When I came, it released all kinds of tension, and I guess I had some tears stored up."

He frowned, looking unconvinced. “Are you sure I didn’t do something wrong? This was your first time. If you’re disappointed...”

“God, no.” I cupped his jaw with one hand, his stubble tickling my palm. “This was everything I wanted. You were perfect.”

He dropped his forehead to my shoulder and sighed with relief. When he spoke again, his voice croaked. “I need you to be okay. I need you to always be okay, Evan.”

He seemed oddly emotional, almost on the verge of tears himself. I didn’t entirely understand his reaction, but it touched me deeply. No matter what words Dawson used to define our relationship, I saw how much he cared. He might not be as transparent as I was, but Dawson couldn’t hide his feelings in his most emotional moments.

I reassured him. “I’m okay. I’m better than okay. I feel great... Other than the fact that you’re still kind of crushing me again.”

He cursed under his breath and carefully withdrew from my body. It was weird to think we’d had that whole conversation with his cock still inside me. He disposed of the condom and returned with a wet washcloth, which he began sweeping over my abs, cleaning up sticky cum.

He was gentle but thorough, and when he pushed my legs back to clean between my cheeks, I wanted to die. “Dawson!” I protested. “I can do that.”

He brushed his thumb over the edges of my rim, which felt puffy and sore, and I hissed. His gaze flicked up to mine. “I don’t see any tearing, but you’ll probably be sore a while.”

“Great,” I muttered. “Can you please stop...Oh my god.”

Dawson had spread my cheeks further and pressed a kiss directly to my asshole. He flicked his tongue out, wet and soothing—but also shocking because I wasn’t expecting it—and I yelped and squirmed away.

He raised up, laughing. “Your shyness is adorable. I’ve already seen it all.”



I huffed. “Good, so you’ve seen enough for a while. Let’s give it a rest.”

He grinned but released my legs, which I immediately clamped together. Like a gentleman, he grabbed the tangled sheets and drew them up over me. “Better?”

“Yes.”

He settled into the bed beside me and propped a pillow behind his head. “So, I really did want to talk to you about something when I came by the store.”

I was less wary now. Given everything that had happened—and Dawson’s light tone—I was certain I’d overreacted earlier tonight. Not that I could really regret my decision to seduce Dawson. It had worked out in my favor, after all.

“I suppose you’re free to speak now that you’ve seen to my needs,” I joked.

He turned on his side, playfully nuzzling my neck. “I’m your humble servant.”

“Mmm.” I purred a little as his stubble rasped over my throat, prickling deliciously. “What, uh... What did you want to tell me?”

Dawson drew back, filling me in on what had happened with Alex Rojas that night.

“Holy crap. You need him to play, don’t you?”

“Well, yeah. We’ve got a backup quarterback, but he’s not ready. More than that, though, I really don’t want Rojas to miss this opportunity. I think he’ll regret it.”

“Aw, you’re a good coach.”

Dawson’s smile was pained. “A better coach would’ve caught this before it was a huge problem.”

“Cut yourself some slack. You got him involved with the tutoring app. I haven’t personally read all the feedback reports, but Crystal checks them every week and hasn’t raised any red flags. You had every reason to think he was keeping up.”

“Still. I should have made sure.”

Dawson was so generous with other people, but it was pretty clear that he was hard on himself. I doubted I could change his mind, so I tried another tack. “So, what now? Can Alex make up his work in such a short time?”

“That’s where I’m hoping you come in. Well, you and the Tech Club.”

“Okay...”

“I made some calls tonight. I got Rojas set up with a room normally used for in-school suspensions. Over the next three days, while I supervise, he’s going to skip all his classes and make up every assignment and test he’s missed.”

“What about the new stuff he’ll be missing?”

“I’ve gotten his teachers’ okay to make up all of *that* over the weekend. So, in theory this can work. But he’s going to need help understanding all the material. It’s important that he not only make up the work, but obtain good scores, so we have to do this right. Until he’s off academic probation, he can’t even practice with the team.”

“Wow. So, he’ll miss all the practices leading up to the game, even if he gets on track?”

Dawson grimaced. “Not ideal, and I’ll have to be at team practices, so...I was hoping you could help organize some study groups and compile some good study guides or other resources to help him, but there’s pretty much no time to spare.”

“Whatever you need,” I said without hesitation. “Get me a list of his make-up work—especially tests or larger projects—and send him to Tech Club right after school tomorrow. I’ll get the club members on board, and we’ll do everything we can to help.”

“Thank you, Ev. Seriously. I know how much you have on your plate, and this is not your problem...”

I patted his chest. “This isn’t a problem. It’s a challenge. And I’m confident that we will all meet it together. Okay?”

“Yeah.”

I threw back the covers and sat up, scanning the floor for my clothes. “If I had known this is what you wanted to talk about, I wouldn’t have stopped you.”

“Well, I’m really fucking glad you did.” His smile was slow and satisfied. “You’re hardly the innocent virgin now, huh?”

I froze in the act of gathering my jeans from the floor. Dawson had seemed so into me, but would he decide the experiment was done now that we’d fucked?

“Hey,” he said softly, scooting up behind me and kissing my neck. “I was just teasing.”

“I think there’s still more you can teach me, don’t you?” I asked quietly, unable to turn and meet his gaze. If he wanted to end this now, I didn’t think I could bear it.

Dawson wrapped his arms around me, lips still brushing the nape of my neck. “There’s a lot more we can teach each other,” he countered. “We’re in this together, right?”

“Right...”

He squeezed me gently. “I had to be honest about where I stood in case you wanted to cut me loose, but you didn’t. So, now let me be clear: I’m not even close to done with this, as long as you’re on board too.”

I exhaled. “I am.”

“Good.” He nudged my hand, still holding my jeans. “Then put those down and come back to bed.”

My eyes widened. “Just for a little while, or...”

“Just stay,” he said. Then smirked. “I cannot send you out of this hot, hot bed into the cold night. It wouldn’t be gentlemanly.”

I snorted. “Pretty sure you’re already a rake by romance book standards.”

“All lies. I am far too noble for that.”

“Oh, so you’re being noble by inviting me to stay.”

“Yup.” He tugged me down, urging me to curl up against him and rest my head on his chest. “It has absolutely nothing to do with the fact that I drove you here, and I really don’t want to get dressed and go back out.”

I snorted. “Oh, yeah, you’re a real hero.”

“Nah, I learned a long time ago that I’m not a hero, Ev.” There was a sadness tinging his voice, but when I looked up, he smiled and winked. “You’re the real hero here. I doubt I could make this plan work for Rojas without you.”

“That’s me. Geek to the rescue.”

“Mm. Sexy geek.” He waggled his eyebrows. “I’m happy to be your dude in distress anytime.”

I rolled my eyes, sure we were being absolute idiots and loving every second of it. If Dawson could admit he needed a rescue, maybe he could eventually admit he needed other things too.

Like an emotional connection that went beyond sex. Because whatever we were doing, it had stopped being merely physical a long time ago for me. Dawson might not be ready to see that yet, but I was patient. I could wait for him to come to terms in his own time. And if he didn’t?

Well, as long as I had these moments with him, I could wait forever if need be.

## CHAPTER 22



EVAN

**Truman:** *Do you have something to tell us, Ev?*

**Darren:** *Is it true you're a MAN now?*

**Kevin:** *Don't be gross, Darren. Sex doesn't define manhood. The entire idea of manhood is a ridiculous social construct, anyway so...*

**Calista:** *I just want to state for the record that I did not let the cat out of the bag.*

**Truman:** *You KNEW?*

**Lyle:** *Come on. Didn't we all know at some level?*

**Truman:** *Gasp. What do you mean by THAT, Lyle? You knew and kept it from me?*

**Lyle:** *Truman, I have one word for you: Bonergate.*

**Darren:** *Wait, what's Bonergate?*

**Evan:** *Omg, you're all blowing up my phone. I'm going to turn it off. YES, Dawson and I are hooking up. NO, it's not serious. It's casual only. I've got a ton to do, so GOODBYE!*

I POWERED OFF MY PHONE, SUDDENLY EMPATHIZING WITH Dawson's need to shut out the world last weekend.

The gossip about our involvement hadn't taken long to spread. Once Ada spotted me on the stairs, Dawson invited me to stay for breakfast—apparently he'd really meant it when he

said he wanted to stop sneaking around. In a matter of hours, I'd fielded questions from my parents, Grandpa, and—strangely—Alex Rojas's history teacher, Mr. Calhoun. I'd emailed him to seek out a study guide for Alex, but it was still surreal to have a teacher ask me about my love life.

Grandpa hadn't been too surprised, given that I'd "crashed with a friend" three times in a week. Ultimately, everyone had been happy and supportive—though they obviously didn't understand the concept of casual as they clamored for me to invite Dawson over for dinner. I'd put them off with the excuse I had to work, a refrain they were all familiar with, but it was no less true.

I'd been compiling study materials and scouring the tutoring app for beta testers who shared courses with Alex. It was short notice, though, so I could only go through the motions of setting up study group times and peer tutoring sessions while crossing my fingers that someone would take the bait. If not, I'd help Alex myself by using study guides, shared notes on the app, and any other review materials I could get my hands on.

To make matters worse, the store had been busier than ever as the nosy grannies in town all suddenly needed something for their homes. Lula Miller was by far the most embarrassing. She'd picked up a small package of sheet metal screws and dropped it on the counter.

"Is that all for today?" I'd asked politely.

"I think so," she said cheerily. "I was hoping to see the handsome coach everyone's been talking about. He helps out here sometimes, doesn't he?"

I smiled as politely as I could. The residents of Granville could be incredibly nosy, but they were generally nice people who'd show up with a casserole the second something went wrong. "He coaches at the high school, and this week they're especially busy preparing for the Riverton game."

"Ah yes." Lula looked dreamy-eyed. "I have good memories of the Cornjerkers from my high school days. Those strong arms..." She fanned herself.

“Oh, were they still jerking the corn without a machine back then?”

Lula looked offended. “Of course not! Do I look like I’m in my nineties?”

I mumbled an apology. “I wasn’t sure of the timeline.”

She huffed. “Didn’t mean they weren’t big strong farm boys who could lift me like I weighed no more than a feather!” She gave me a saucy look. “Well, I’m sure you can relate. Your coach could easily manhandle a little guy like you from what I’ve heard.”

My cheeks flamed with mortification, though I couldn’t help remembering the way Dawson had thrown me onto his bed. I hurriedly changed the subject as I finished the transaction and gave Lula her change.

“So, what are the screws for? Do you have a project under way at home?”

“Nothing particular,” she said with a big smile. “Sometimes you just need a good screw, but I guess I don’t need to tell you that.”

I palmed my face as she left, knowing that I’d walked right into that one.

Once the shop was empty again, I’d returned to my emails with Rojas’s teachers, crossing my fingers that Dawson was faring better than me. If the gossip got too intense, he might decide our not-so-secret fling wasn’t worth it.

The next three days played out pretty much the same way in a whirlwind of helping Rojas study, fending off gossip-seekers, and intimate dinners and incredible sex with Dawson. He’d stopped giving me reasons why I could stay overnight, and it’d become routine. I’d even begun packing a toothbrush and razor in my laptop bag.

Luckily, Dawson was so focused on getting Rojas up to speed and preparing for the Riverton game that most of the gossip bounced right off him. For the first time, I saw the intensity that must have made him such a great player. Even though he met me for dinner each night—and was always



eager to end our night in bed together—he would spend hours watching video footage he’d shot at practice and making notes about areas the players needed to shore up their strengths.

“You’d think this was the Super Bowl for how hard you’re working,” I teased Thursday evening.

“Might as well be.” He laughed nervously. “The whole town is watching, and this is my chance to impress them.”

“Well, you’ve already impressed me.”

“Good to know.” He flashed me a distracted smile before refocusing on his notes. “I just hope Merrill can get this play locked down. If Rojas doesn’t make it off the bench...”

“He *will*. He’s been working really hard too.”

“I know he’s trying,” Dawson said. “But sometimes you give it everything, and you still come up short.”

“Nice pep talk, Coach.”

He groaned and ran his hands over his face. “Sorry. I’m feeling the pressure.”

“That’s okay. You’re right. Sometimes things don’t go your way no matter how hard you try.” I nudged him. “But you know that whatever happens, it’ll be okay, right?”

He snorted. “You mean the townspeople won’t tar and feather me if we lose?”

“Nope.” I smiled. “That’s what the coaches’ bet is all about right? Paying penance so we don’t come after you with pitchforks?”

“Probably.” He groaned. “I don’t want to be bald.”

I laughed as I sank my hands into his thick head of dark hair. “It *would* be a shame. I might not be able to sleep with you anymore.”

He gaped for a second, before laughing. “Oh, you’re gonna pay for that. You know you can’t resist me.”

“Well, I can’t resist your *hair*...”

Dawson tackled me to the bed, relentless in his desire to show me exactly all the ways he could drive me wild. By the time we came up for air, he was smug and smiling, and I figured my work was done.

After showering and settling into the bed for the night, he nuzzled my neck. “I know what you were doing, distracting me from my worry.”

“Hmm. I guess I’m not as sneaky as I thought.”

“Nope. But thank you. Sometimes I get in my head, and I need to be pulled out.”

“Well, I’m always here when you need something,” I said lightly. “We can talk, or we can...”

“Fuck?” he said bluntly.

I snickered. “Yeah. I’m at your service.”

He tightened his arms around me, voice sleepy as he said, “I’m a lucky guy.”

I just hoped that luck held out the next day, when Alex Rojas got his test scores. After my insistence he’d make it off the bench, I didn’t want to disappoint Dawson. The team would move on after this game, win or lose, but I knew Dawson would take the outcome much more personally.



## DAWSON

I PROWLED the aisles of the empty history classroom Friday afternoon while Rojas sat in one of the small desks, jiggling his knees so much the frame rattled against the floor. I was about to tell him to knock it off when Mr. Calhoun, a man with salt-and-pepper hair and a neatly trimmed beard, capped his pen.

I stopped in my tracks. “Well?”

Mr. Calhoun tsked. “I know you’re capable of better than this, Mr. Rojas.”

My heart sank as Rojas groaned. “I’m sorry. I studied so hard, but there just wasn’t enough time. My mind went blank on one of the essay questions. Fuck!”

“Watch your language, please,” Mr. Calhoun said as he lifted the test and turned it to display. “I said you were capable of more. I didn’t say you failed.”

A red C+ was displayed at the top of the page.

Rojas jumped from his chair, eyes wide. “Really, Mr. Calhoun? That was a dirty trick.”

“Oh no, I meant it. I expect more from you going forward. I won’t make these allowances again. We’d all love to see you shuck the heck out of these Cornjerkers, but your academics have to come first.”

Mr. Calhoun included me in his look of warning. I nodded. “Understood. Rojas is not going to cut it this close again. Right, Rojas?”

“Right,” Rojas said quickly. “I’ll do better. I swear. Thank you. Thank you so much!”

As soon as Rojas and I parted ways outside the classroom door, I pulled out my phone and called Evan. He answered on the first ring.

“Well?” he said impatiently.

“Rojas is suiting up tonight!”

“Yessssss!” Evan sounded as excited as Rojas had, and I knew sports weren’t even his thing. “I knew he could do it!”

“Thank you for your help. I don’t think we could have done it without you.”

“Well, you’re on your own at the game,” Evan said. “I don’t know the first thing about football.”

I laughed. “Yeah, that’s fair. You’ve done your part.”

“But I’ll be there to cheer you on.”

“Yeah?” I hesitated. “I know how crammed your schedule usually is, so if you can’t make it...”

“Shut up, I’m going. It’s already done. Calista is picking me up. All our friends will be there.”

*Our friends.* That was awfully generous, considering I’d barely seen most of them since I’d been back. It also sounded like something a boyfriend would say, but I shoved that thought away. We weren’t a real couple.

“They hardly know me, Ev. They’re your friends.”

“For now, maybe. But when they get to know you better, they’ll love you. It’s inevitable.”

My stomach squirmed with guilt, as it always did when Evan failed to hide that he wanted more from our relationship. I wasn’t exactly helping the situation either with all the mixed signals I was sending. I invited him into my bed every night. I called and texted him every day. I asked him for help with Rojas when I could have tried to handle it on my own.

*Inevitable,* Evan had said about his friends loving me.

Maybe that wasn’t the only thing that was inevitable. The question was: What to do about the inevitable choices I would eventually have to make? I couldn’t be something I wasn’t, and I couldn’t ask Evan to accept less than he deserved.

Would hurting him be inevitable? Would my own heartbreak?

“Speaking of friends, I need to call Simon.”

“Okay,” Evan said happily. “Go break a leg tonight!”

“Pretty sure you only say that in theater, baby, but thanks.”

I’d hung up before I even noticed my endearment. Rojas was standing just down the hall, grinning at me.

“What?” I asked.

“That was Mr. Moore, wasn’t it?”

“So?”

He shrugged, looking smug. “So, I guess the rumors about you two are true, huh? You called him baby.”

I crossed the distance between us, grasping the nape of his neck to steer him toward the athletic wing. “Aren’t you supposed to be telling Coach Mayfield the good news?”

“I wanted to wait for you,” he said hesitantly. “Sorry I eavesdropped. Mr. Moore is cool though. He helped me a lot. So did all his geeky club members.”

I shook my head. “Don’t call them geeky.”

“Why? It’s not an insult.” At my raised eyebrow, he said, “They all call me a jock!”

Eh. Probably true. I decided not to worry about that battle. There were plenty of other things clamoring for attention in my brain.

*Everyone thinks Evan is my boyfriend.*

The thought bothered me less than it should. Why was it that I didn’t mind anyone else thinking it, but the idea of Evan expecting more from me made me break into a sweat? I had a fucked-up history with Kelsey, and I still felt sick about how things ended between us, but Evan wasn’t like her at all. Still, I couldn’t seem to get past my fear that if I made things official, it would somehow be the death knell for us. The arguing would start, the accusations and criticisms, the shouting and the tears.

Anytime I was tempted to hope—

*Buzz.* My phone vibrated with a text from Kelsey.

The universe seemed to send me signs that I needed to be careful, or I’d only repeat the past. If I failed Evan like I’d failed Kelsey I wouldn’t be able to look myself in the mirror.

When Rojas and I made it to the coaching offices, Mayfield was waiting. “What’s the game plan tonight, boys?”

“I’m good to go!” Rojas crowed.

Mayfield gave his trademark understated smile. When the man was angry, he was hella expressive. When he was proud, you had to squint to see it. Still, his tone was warm as he said, “Well, all right. Good work. I wasn’t sure you two could pull it off.”

“Me either,” Rojas said, giddy relief coming through in his voice. “Mr. Moore was a huge help too.”

“Mr. Moore?”

“The Tech Club sponsor,” I said.

“And Coach Woods’s boyfriend,” Rojas added. When I shot him a quelling look, he said, “What? Everyone in town knows already.”

“Not everyone,” Mayfield grumbled.

I met his sharp blue eyes. “Is that a problem?”

“No.” He snorted. “If Mr. Moore helped get Rojas off the bench so we can win this game, then it’s fine by me. Your personal life doesn’t interest me a whole lot, Coach Woods.”

I nodded once. “Ditto, Coach. My head is in the game, not gossip.”

“Right where it should be,” Mayfield agreed.

We both looked at Rojas pointedly, who had the good grace to look ashamed.

“Sorry, Coach...es. I swear my head is in the game too. I’m gonna play harder than I’ve *ever* played before. I’ll make sure we win, so you know I’m worth all the trouble.”

“Rojas, I hope we win, but you’re worth the trouble either way, okay?”

He smiled tentatively. “Yeah. Okay.” He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “I’m gonna grab some food before we have to get ready.”

Once he was gone, Mayfield shook his head. “I’m impressed, Woods. You took a kid who was struggling, and you not only helped him get his act together, you became a damn good role model.”

“Thanks, Coach,” I said, feeling a little flustered. “I guess we’ll see if it all pays off.”

“For Rojas, it’s bound to. The rest of us? Time will tell. All we can do is go out there and hope the football gods decide to

shine on us tonight.”

# CHAPTER 23





## EVAN

THERE WAS SUCH A PALPABLE ENERGY AT THE FOOTBALL FIELD that even a sports-clueless guy like me could feel it. The crowd tittered with nervous excitement as we took our seats—after loading our arms with sodas, hotdogs, and popcorn, of course. Lyle and Darren fought for the seat on the aisle to stretch out their longer legs. Lyle won because despite being quiet, he was authoritative enough to make people take his side most of the time. Truman squeezed in beside him, relegating Darren, Calista, and Kevin to the middle. Which left me practically in Kevin’s lap so that I didn’t have to press too close to the glowering man next to me.

I recognized Elmer Boyd as the sour-faced antique shop owner who was regularly feuding with Agatha, the *other* antique shop owner—who also happened to be his ex-wife.

“Evan, I had no idea you liked me so much,” Kevin said as he tossed his bangs out of his eyes.

In a sea of Mighty Grasshopper green and black, Kevin stood out in his hip-hugging purple jeans, white denim jacket, and floral paisley scarf. Alongside that, the dusting of violet over his eyelids was hardly notable.

“Sorry,” I muttered. “Not much room over here, and I’d rather be all over you than the other guy.”

Kevin glanced past me to Elmer and smirked. “You could always sit on Darren’s lap instead.”

Darren barked a laugh. “Yeah, I don’t think so. Don’t wanna make Evan’s new man jealous.”

Truman snorted. “Yeah, he’s got you beat on muscle mass.”

“Maybe, but I’m still hotter.” Darren glanced down toward me. “Right, Ev?”

“Do you really want me to answer that question?”

“Aw, honey, it’s not a competition,” Calista said as she patted Darren’s arm. “But if it was, Dawson would win.”

“Burn!” Truman crowed.

“And that’s her cousin,” Lyle said with a sly smile. “If you can’t even compete with her cousin...”

“Incest can be hot,” Truman said.

Calista shuddered. “Gross, no. I can appreciate he’s attractive without wanting to bone him, thanks. It’s weird enough that Evan’s doing it.”

“Weirdly awesome,” Truman said, always a positive force when our group got going. “I wouldn’t mind a piece of that man myself.”

“Hey, should I be jealous?” Lyle asked.

“*Never.*” Truman kissed Lyle’s cheek because they were disgustingly sweet. But it bothered me less than it used to. Maybe because I could relate a bit more. If Dawson were beside me, I’d want to snuggle into his side and kiss on him too. Not that I *would*. Because we weren’t a couple in the same way as Truman and Lyle, no matter how hard I wished for that.

“I still can’t believe you’re dating a *football coach*,” Kevin said as if the very idea was horrifying. But then, high school football wasn’t really his scene.

Not that it was mine. I’d only started coming to the games after I’d gotten to know Dawson, and I still didn’t know what was going on half the time. I just watched the scores and congratulated or commiserated with Dawson at the end of the game. Luckily, they’d won more than they’d lost, a pattern that I hoped held tonight.

“Dawson is a lot more than a football coach,” I said, aware I sounded a little dreamy. “But dating probably isn’t the right word to describe what we’re doing.”

“That’s Evan, honest as always.” Darren leaned over to tap my knuckles. “Hey, nothing wrong with sex without all the messy emotions that go along.”

“Says the manwhore,” Kevin muttered.

“I heard that,” Darren said. “Don’t slut shame me!”

My friends continued razzing each other, but I was stuck on Darren’s comments. Sex without the messy emotions. *If only*. All I had were emotions. No matter how I pushed them down, they boiled up until I was brimming with them, afraid they’d spill all over Dawson and drive him away. Like my tears almost did the first time I’d bottomed for him. He’d been so good to me though. So sweet and concerned. That didn’t feel emotionless, either.

Elmer Boyd scowled at us. “You should all be ashamed, carrying on like this at a football game. Mind your manners!”

Kevin’s eyes narrowed. “We’re talking amongst ourselves. You don’t have to listen.”

“This is hardly the place for it,” he said stiffly.

Calista leaned forward. “Stop eavesdropping, Elmer, or I’ll tell my parents to shop at Agatha’s for their anniversary gifts next week.”

Elmer looked fit to explode, but luckily the game started just then, the crowd surging to its feet and cheering as the teams took to the field. I watched the players line up, craning my head to see over the tall guy in front of me.

They hiked the ball, and then—chaos. To me, anyway. There were figures swarming all over the field, but where did the football go? The crowd cheered, so I clapped along.

“What happened?” I asked Kevin.

He shrugged and turned to ask Calista, who asked Darren.

“We got a first down,” he said. “Good start.”

The game continued this way, with me asking for updates, and my friends playing the telephone game as they passed along messages from either Darren or Lyle, the two among us who understood the game the best.

For the first half, all was going well. The audience was upbeat, people surging to their feet and cheering. Snippets of conversation filtered to me from nearby fans.

*“This has got to be our year!”*

*“That new coach must know what he’s doing. I haven’t ever seen them play this well.”*

*“I don’t know. Riverton is sure making us work for it.”*

But late in the second half, the tide seemed to turn. There were audible groans. I had to ask again. “What did I miss? What went wrong?”

First, it was an interception that led to a touchdown for the other team.

Then it was an incomplete pass. Then Rojas got sacked.

Time and again, the Grasshoppers were stymied as they tried to make progress down the field.

“They need to run the fucking ball,” Darren muttered.

“Nah, that won’t work against Riverton. They’re too fast.”

“Well, we need to do *something*. We’re losing our momentum.”

Lyle grimaced. “Yeah, Riverton’s defense is putting too much pressure on the pocket. Rojas doesn’t have enough time to get a good read on the field before he’s forced to throw the ball away.”

Despite what Lyle said, the team *did* try to adapt. After Riverton scored another touchdown, shrinking our lead, Rojas faked a hand-off and made a run for it. We jumped to our feet, shouting as he picked up a few yards before getting slammed to the ground by a linebacker.

“Ouch,” I said. “Hope he’s okay.”

“He’s got pads and a helmet. He’s fine.”

“This sport is so violent,” Calista said, shaking her head. “I’m glad I never had to watch Dawson in a game.”

I shuddered at the thought, silently agreeing. It was hard enough watching Dawson pace the sidelines, occasionally stopping to confer with Coach Mayfield and talk to players during time-outs. He looked tense and restless, and every time a play went wrong, I watched his fists clench at his side.

I was afraid of how hard he might take it if they lost. He felt the pressure of the entire town bearing down on him. I knew he’d played intense games—probably far more important games—in college. But now he was a coach responsible for the choices they made on the field. Would he be able to handle the scrutiny of a small town full of loud-mouthed boosters who thought they knew best?



## DAWSON

OUR WIN WAS CIRCLING the drain.

All the drilling I’d done with Rojas, all the scrambling he’d done to play in this game, and it was all going to come down to a skinny kicker named Shane Ellis. Forty yards. It wasn’t a chip shot, but he *could* make it.

I prowled the sidelines, watching as they set up the play. Ellis took three steps, kicked the ball, and—

I held my breath—the whole crowd seemed to hold its breath—as the ball rocketed toward the endzone. There was a gusty easterly wind doing us no favors. The ball angled to the right instead of staying dead center, but it *looked* like it could still be good.

*Come on. Give us this one,* I prayed.

The football gods didn’t listen. The ball hit the upright and bounced off, just inches off course.

We’d lost.

“No!” I shouted. “Fucking fuck!”

There was a collective groan from the home stands, the crowd voicing its displeasure just in case I wasn't aware of how damn much Granville wanted this win. Fans on the other side of the stadium, a sea of the Riverton colors of yellow and green, were shouting in triumph.

It all washed over me, white noise as I watched the Riverton team converge on the field to celebrate. Coach Mayfield was cursing up a streak next to me, clipboard in hand, staring down at scribbled plays and last-minute adjustments as if they'd betrayed him.

“Maybe we should have rushed more,” I said numbly.

“No. We're no match against their running game.” Mayfield shook his head. “We did all the right things. But Rojas needs to read the field better and faster to perform against a strong defense.”

Our own players straggled off the field, shoulders slumped. Rojas came directly to me.

“Nothing I tried would work. All week, I busted my ass to get out there, and I fucked it all up. You would have been better off without me.”

I was frustrated and disappointed, and no doubt Mayfield would hit the team hard with a recitation of mistakes and areas to improve at our next practice. But right now, seeing how broken up Rojas was, I had to set that all aside. I remembered what it was like to be in his shoes. There was a lot of pressure on the quarterback to lead the team on the field.

“We wouldn't be better off without our starting QB, guaranteed.”

He scoffed. “Merrill probably could have done as well as me.”

That definitely wasn't true.

“Cut the shit, Rojas. This one didn't go our way. It sucks balls. But we pick ourselves up, we get back out there next week, and we *win* next time.”

“I worked my ass off to play in *this* game, though. What was the point?”

“Hey, I hate losing too, but we came within a field goal’s reach against a very tough team. I know the rivalry amps everything up, but Riverton is a powerhouse, and we gave them a battle. It might seem easier to ride the bench. The loss wouldn’t be on your shoulders, right? But I’d rather play my best game and lose than watch from the sidelines. Wouldn’t you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, figure it out. In life, you have to weather the losses along with the wins. You learn from your mistakes; you don’t run from them. Avoiding hard things will only keep you from living...”

I trailed off as my words registered with me. Who was I to be lecturing Rojas right now? I’d done nothing but avoid hard things lately. I’d dodged Kelsey’s attempts to reach out, which could offer us both closure—possibly messy and painful, but a proper end that could help us move on. I’d let my fears keep me from acknowledging my growing feelings for Evan. My relationship with Kelsey had ended horribly, a humiliating loss. But did I really want to ride the bench for the rest of my life?

“Coach?” Rojas said. “Are you coming?”

I blinked and realized that most of the team members were already making their way to the locker rooms. The crowd flowed from the bleachers, disheartened fans dragging hopeful signs and Styrofoam fingers on the ground. I scanned the stands for signs of Evan—but he wasn’t there.

Then I saw him, already on the sidelines a few feet away. He watched me and Rojas as if he wasn’t sure he should interrupt.

“Go ahead, Rojas. I’ll catch up.”

Rojas followed my gaze to Evan, then nodded. “Okay. Sorry I lost my shit.”

I patted his shoulder pad. “Happens to the best of us.”

While Rojas jogged off, Evan cautiously approached. “Hey. Tough game.”

I sighed, the disappointment flooding in again now that I didn’t have to give my coach pep talk. “I really wanted this one,” I said hoarsely.

Evan opened his arms, and I didn’t hesitate to pull him into a tight hug. I squeezed him too hard, and he gave a pained wheeze. “Sorry,” I muttered into his shoulder.

“S’okay,” he said. “I know how much this game meant to you.”

His words poked and prodded at me. How fucked up was it that he knew how much this game meant to me while remaining in the dark about how important *he* was? My breath stuttered, and my palms grew clammy.

I wanted to tell him everything. Explain my fears, why I’d kept him at arm’s length—metaphorically at least; I’d done a piss-poor job of maintaining any physical distance. But I needed to face Kelsey first.

When I came to Granville, I thought I was starting over. But the reality was, I’d taken myself out of the game. I hadn’t dealt with my losses, not properly. I needed to stop hiding from my mistakes. Before I could move forward, I had to look back.

I reluctantly released my death grip on Evan. “I’ve got to get to the locker room. Coach is probably pissed I’m not already there.”

Evan nodded. “Should I wait for you?”

“No. I don’t know how long I’ll be.”

“Okay.”

“Simon and Parker came to the game. I might, uh, go blow off some steam with them. Vent my frustrations over the game, you know?”

Evan looked disappointed. “I guess they’d understand better than me.”



“It’s not that. I just don’t want to bring this negative crap home to you.”

His eyes widened, and I realized I’d said *home*, as if Evan already lived with me. Then again, he was in my bed just about every night. We’d fallen into a routine that was almost effortless.

“You still want me to sleep over at your place?”

“Well, unless you’d rather not,” I said, suddenly aware of how presumptuous I’d been. “I don’t know when I’ll be back.”

Evan smiled. “That’s all right. I’ve got plenty of things to keep me busy.”

I snorted. That was an understatement considering Evan was pulled in about five directions at all times. “Don’t work too hard. I’ll see you later.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

There was no impatience to his tone, just direct honesty. I had the feeling Evan would wait for me indefinitely, but he deserved someone who could be everything he needed, not just a casual fuck buddy.

I just had to figure out if I could be that man.

# CHAPTER 24



## DAWSON

I LIMPED UP THE STAIRS, GRIMACING WITH EACH STEP AS MY body throbbed in pain. I'd have to think twice before taking Simon and Parker up on an offer to blow off steam. They'd driven us out to a cornfield and set off a bunch of fireworks. Blowing shit up was cathartic as hell, and I'd been on board until the two madmen started a bottle rocket war and I thought I was going to lose a body part. I'd tripped while running in the dark and fallen hard. Pretty sure I had a rock-shaped bruise on my hip, and my lower leg was throbbing like hell.

They had questionable methods—but they'd definitely burned out some of the immediate anger I'd felt over losing the game. I'd stayed positive for Rojas's sake. I even believed my words. But the talk was always easier than the walk. I was still fucking wrecked over it, and now I wanted nothing more than the comfort of my warm bed.

*And Evan, a little voice whispered in my subconscious. Assuming he bothered to wait for you. Eventually, he won't...*

I let myself inside, relief sweeping through me when I caught a glimpse of him sprawled in the bed. The lamp was still on, casting a faint rose glow to his skin and hair. He was still fully dressed and dark-rimmed glasses sat on his face—he only ever wore them late at night, and they were freaking nerdy as hell. I loved the way he looked in them. A spiral notebook lay open over his chest as if he'd fallen asleep while working. I carefully picked it up, surprised to see it was an early playbook Coach Mayfield had given to me. What on earth would Evan be doing with that?

Evan blinked and stretched, eyes fluttering. “You’re back.”

“I am.”

“Do you feel better?”

“For now.”

I’d burned off some adrenaline from the game, but the disappointment wouldn’t fade that quickly. We’d worked too hard, and we’d be getting “feedback” about our choices for weeks to come. Plus, I had my hair to think about. Coach was taking me to a local salon late Monday morning to pay for our loss.

“Coming to bed?”

I nodded. “Gonna shower real quick. I probably smell like a powder keg.”

“Do I want to know?”

“Let’s just say, if Simon and Parker ever offer to shoot off fireworks with you? Politely turn them down. They’re lunatics.”

Evan chuckled. “Okay.”

I turned, pulling my shirt over my head as I shuffled toward the bathroom. Behind me, the blankets rustled as Evan moved. “Hey, can I wear something of yours? I don’t want to sleep in my clothes but it’s a little chilly.”

“Sure. Grab something out of my dresser.”

The heat of the shower spray went a long way to soothing my sore muscles, but I popped a couple of Ibuprofen for good measure. I knew from experience the pain in my lower leg was bone-deep and would likely keep me awake if I didn’t take the edge off. It didn’t hurt often, but when it did, it was a bitch.

With each throb, it reminded me of the night on the rooftop. The fall. The agony as my leg fractured in three places. I barely felt the injury to my neck in comparison, yet it was the one that sidelined me for good. Funny how life worked sometimes.

I dried and walked out of the bathroom naked. Unlike Evan, I ran hot, and I had no desire to sleep in anything more than a pair of clean underwear.

I stopped short when I saw Evan, sitting on the edge of the bed. He was hunched over as he rolled up the pantlegs of a pair of gray sweats while the maroon T-shirt hung on him like a sack. He looked ridiculous, like a child playing dress up, and yet there was a part of me that really, really liked seeing him in my clothes.

Then he straightened and I caught sight of the logo, a big, stylized A on his chest. My leg gave an extra-painful throb, and my heart pounded too hard. When I spoke, my voice sounded far away. “You’re wearing one of my Alabama tees.”

“What?” He glanced down at his chest. “Oh.”

He caught sight of my face. I don’t know what he saw, but judging by his widening eyes, it wasn’t good. “*Oh, god.* Sorry. I didn’t even pay attention to what I pulled out. I just...” He grabbed the hem and began pulling it up. “I’ll take it off, okay?”

His strong reaction had the opposite effect on me, and I calmed. “No, it’s okay. You can wear it.”

Evan paused, the shirt raised to his chest. “I can change. I didn’t mean to—”

“I know.” I gently grasped his wrist and tugged down, pulling the shirt back into place. “My memories are improving every second I see you in the shirt, Ev. Keep it on.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” I dropped a kiss to his head. “Come on, let’s get into bed.”

Evan let me turn off the lamp and herd him under the covers, but once we were settled, he turned onto his side. I couldn’t make out his expression, but I could practically feel his worry thrumming between us in the dark.

I opened my mouth to reassure him once again that I was fine. Instead, I whispered a truth I’d never told anyone.

“I really thought I was going to die. In that brief second I was airborne, my life flashed before my eyes.”

Evan made a pained sound and rolled close, wrapping his arms around me in a tight hug.

“It was just a stupid accident, but that makes it worse somehow. Because it didn’t have to happen,” I said. “And Kelsey... She could have—”

Evan drew back a fraction, just enough to speak, his body still pressed tight to mine. “Kelsey?”

“My girlfriend at the time. We were fighting.”

“On the roof?”

“Yeah. It sounds ridiculous, but things just kept escalating. I’d been trying to break it off, and she was crying and saying scary things. She went out on the roof, and she was too close to the edge. I was afraid she was going to fall, or...”

“Jump?” Evan asked gently.

“Maybe. I don’t know. We were both drunk. Our judgment was shitty.” I laughed jaggedly. “To say the least.”

“I’m so sorry.”

I chewed on my lip. “She’s been texting me all week.”

Evan was quiet long enough I worried I’d given him the wrong idea. “I haven’t been talking to her. I never answered. I’ve been trying to ignore her, but that won’t work forever. She’s determined.”

“She’s the reason you turned your phone off for two days?”

“Yeah.” Evan’s breath tickled my neck as he sighed, and I tightened my arms around him on reflex. “I know I could block her, but...”

“You want to talk to her?”

He didn’t sound accusing. That wasn’t Evan’s way. He was endlessly understanding.

I squeezed my eyes tight, the urge to hold him closer warring with the feeling that he deserved so much better than someone who nearly drove their girlfriend off a roof.

“No, but I probably owe it to her.”

“You don’t owe her anything,” Evan said firmly. “I know I don’t know all the details of the situation, but you don’t owe *anyone* anything, okay? If you talk to her, do it for yourself.”

“I just think about what almost happened that night, and I feel sick.”

Evan grasped my face, pressing his forehead to mine. “I think about what *did* happen, and I feel sick.” His voice shook a little when he spoke. “You must have been so devastated. I hate that you ever had to go through that.”

My eyes burned as Evan whispered in my ear. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry you were hurt.”

“My fault,” I rasped. “Probably deserved it.”

“No,” he murmured. “Fuck that. Sometimes bad shit happens, but that doesn’t make it fair. You didn’t deserve it. No one deserves that.”

Evan continued to reassure me, a steady stream of words in my defense. They curled around me, holding me as tightly as I held him. He wasn’t saying anything that other people hadn’t said at one time or another: my mother, my coaches, even Calista. Maybe it was different because he was the first one I actually believed.

The guilt that had made my chest tight, heavy as concrete, cracked a little. I felt as if I could breathe.

I drifted to sleep with his gentle voice in my ear, telling me how much he loved me without once saying the word. And I realized...

I loved him too.



## EVAN

“HEY, I brought you some dinner. You hungry?”

Dawson was still in the bed, propped up against the headboard, though he'd gotten dressed at some point that day and remained on top of the blankets. His phone was in his hand, and I knew without looking that he must be studying game footage again. He was obsessive about analyzing game play and making notes for the team. But if it distracted him from his worries, I was all for it.

After the rivalry loss and the emotional outpouring last night, the poor guy had been through the wringer.

“I guess I could eat,” he said.

“You guess?” I teased, intentionally keeping my voice playful. “How much junk food did you have today?”

His smile was a little sheepish. “I needed comfort, and you weren't here.”

Dawson had been uncharacteristically quiet this morning, not even offering to come by the store, and I was worried about him. The injuries he'd sustained in that fall weren't only physical. But if he could joke around, that was a good sign, right? You didn't get over a tragedy in a day—or a year. But Dawson was still one of the most well-adjusted people I'd met. Kind, considerate, generous. A good friend. He had so much love to give—if only he didn't hold back.

I couldn't ask him, but part of me wondered if he still loved Kelsey. If that might be why he didn't want a relationship. Clearly, things with her had ended traumatically—but that didn't negate the very real feelings he'd had for her at one time. If anything, it might sear them into him, a lasting impression that didn't easily fade, intertwined as it must be with a sense of grief and loss.

The possibility pained me, but I pushed it down, and smiled for Dawson. He needed comfort, and now was not the time to dwell on what-ifs. For all I knew, he'd never loved her. Maybe he was madly in love with me and ready to confess any day.



*A guy can dream...*

“Sorry I had to work, but I brought you Grandpa’s hearty beef stew, sure to cure anything that ails ya.”

“Stew, huh?”

“Mm-hmm. It’s delicious, and full of chunky steak and potatoes so you won’t waste away to nothing while you single-handedly plan out how you guys are going to win next week.”

Dawson smiled. It was fleeting, there and gone, but I took it as a win. “Guess I’m busted. You know me too well.”

“Nah. I’ve barely scratched the surface of Dawson Woods,” I said easily as I unloaded the container of soup and unearthed a spoon from a cluttered cabinet—the storage space was negligible in this small room—and carried it to the coffee table. “Come over here. The last thing you want is beef broth all over your sheets.”

“Because they’re so clean,” he muttered.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.” He rolled off the bed and came around the other end of the coffee table. Before sitting, he kissed my cheek. “You’re too good to me.”

“No such thing.” I sat down beside him and kicked off my shoes so I could shift onto my hip and pull my legs onto the sofa.

Dawson took a tentative bite, then hummed appreciatively. “Been a while since I had anything homemade that wasn’t breakfast.”

“Thank goodness for Ada or you’d be a french fry by now.”

He snorted before taking another large spoonful. For a guy who wasn’t all that hungry—with the empty carton of salted nuts to prove his snacking had been on point—Dawson wolfed down the soup gratifyingly fast. I watched, my chest swelling with pride even though I hadn’t made it. Grandpa still enjoyed cooking some of his favorite family recipes and this was one.

Still, I'd *brought* it to Dawson. I'd taken care of him, if only in this one small way.

I wish I could solve all his problems as easily as I could solve his need for a good meal.

He set the mostly empty container down on the coffee table with a groan. "Can't eat another bite." He glanced from it to me. "Uh, you weren't planning to eat some of that, were you?"

I smirked. "I'd be out of luck if I was."

He palmed his face. "I should have asked. Sorry..."

I nudged him. "Don't be silly. I already ate with Grandpa. It would have been rude to take his food otherwise."

"I guess so." He fidgeted, struggling to make eye contact with me. That was unusual for Dawson.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, uh..." He cleared his throat. "Just wanted to say thank you. For last night."

"You don't need to thank me."

"Well, still..." He finally met my gaze. "You were a great listener. I've never talked much about my accident or the situation with Kelsey with anyone. I guess my head's been more messed up about it all than I wanted to admit."

"It's not an easy thing."

"I came here to start over, and I've been trying so hard to focus on the future," he said. "I didn't want to think about any of it, you know? But I can't avoid it forever."

"No," I mused. "But it's up to you how you face it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you can face it by texting Kelsey back, but if that's not what you want, if it doesn't feel right, there's nothing wrong with blocking Kelsey for your own peace of mind. You need to deal with your feelings, but there's a lot of ways that can be done. It's up to you how you move forward."

“Assuming I even *can* move forward,” he muttered.

I leaned against him, resting my head on his shoulder. “I have faith in you, Daws. You can do anything you want to do.”

He shifted to wrap his arm around me and pull me tighter against him. “Let’s say you’re right, and I do find a way to deal with my shit. Do you think I’ll still have a job with the Grasshoppers when the dust settles, or has this rivalry loss sealed my fate?”

“You don’t know us Granvillians at all, do you?”

“Gran-villians?” he said, a hint of laughter in his voice.

“Yeah. Granvillians talk a big game, but their bark is worse than their bite. They’re the type to threaten you with bodily harm, then make you stew.” I nudged the coffee table next to his bowl with a sock-clad toe. “Case in point.”

He straightened a little, peering down at me. “Are you saying your grandpa made that stew for *me*?”

“He knew you’d take the loss hard.”

“I...don’t know what to say.”

“I’d start with ‘Thank you’ and follow it up with, ‘I’ll kick the Cornjerkers’ asses next season.’”

Dawson’s body shook under mine as he laughed. “Oh my god, you’re all insane.”

“We are.”

“I love it.”

He chuckled a few more times, his entertainment priceless after his moody silences this morning. Then he put a finger under my chin and lifted it. “Want to wear my clothes again?”

“Uh, sure?” I said, puzzled by the change in subject. “Did you want to go to bed?”

He tilted his head. “Only if going to bed means I get to peel you out of my clothes and do dirty, dirty things to you. I feel the need to express my gratitude.”

I shivered. “That sounds...perfect, except for the gratitude part. You know that’s not necessary, right?”

“Fine, I don’t need gratitude to want you naked in bed with my tongue in your ass making you whimper and beg.”

“Oh, Jesus.”

“Give me this, Ev. It could be my last night with my hair.”

I reached up for him, sinking my fingers into his silky locks, and legitimately whimpered. “I love your hair. What will I grab and pull when you’re making me desperate to come?”

“Ooh, not bad. You’ve been practicing your dirty talk, huh?”

I laughed. “Well, I know you’ve had a tough couple of days. I just want to do my part in making you feel better.”

He drew me into a kiss, wasting no time in taking it wet and filthy. When we parted, he smacked my ass. “Go get changed.”

I ran to his dresser, giggling as he stripped behind me.

I knew this was a fun distraction—not an end to his pain—but I was more than happy to comfort him in any way I could. Even with incredible sex, which would end with a mind-blowing orgasm.

*Such a sacrifice.*

# CHAPTER 25



## EVAN

DAWSON DROPPED ME BY THE HARDWARE STORE ON HIS WAY TO school, giving me puppy dog eyes as he left. Today, he would be subjected to the coaches' bet on the Riverton game, and he wasn't looking forward to it.

Not that I blamed him. It was like salt in the wound when I knew the Riverton loss already weighed heavily on him. He was far too hard on himself.

The door chimed merrily as I stepped in. The checkout counter was empty, so Grandpa must be busy somewhere else in the store. I unloaded my laptop and plastic container of cinnamon rolls that Ada had insisted on sending, expecting him to emerge any moment to see if I was a customer. When he didn't, a sense of unease skittered down my spine.

It was possible he didn't hear the door, even with the bell we'd installed a few years ago. His hearing wasn't as sharp as it once was, not that he'd admit it. Or, he could be in the middle of stocking inventory—maybe on a ladder and unable to move as quickly as he once did.

“Hey, where are you?” I called casually, determined not to overreact. “Dawson gave me a ride, so I'm here a little early. And Ada sent you a present. I didn't know she was so sweet on you.”

I checked the stockroom to see it empty, then started to wander toward the back of the store.

“Evan?” Grandpa's voice was faint and shaky.

I sped up, veering to the right. “Are you okay?”

“Just... a little... tired.”

I found him leaning against the shelves of paint supplies, a few paint rollers on the floor as if he’d knocked them down in his attempt to stay upright. He was pale and trembling.

Suddenly, I remembered the tickle in his throat and the insistence he was fine. Distracted by Dawson, and the game, and my own hectic schedule, I’d taken him at his word when I knew better. I should have insisted he go to the doctor.

“Oh god, I’m so sorry,” I said as I hurried to his side. “I should have checked on you more. I knew you weren’t feeling well.”

I’d seen him Saturday—just briefly—as I arrived at the store and he left. He’d seemed all right. Quieter than usual, maybe. I’d been too preoccupied to notice. Too worried about how Dawson was handling the fallout from the game. I’d missed family breakfast Sunday too, wanting to be there for Dawson. We’d hibernated in his room for the whole weekend, binging television and having sex. Pretending the world didn’t exist.

Guilt swamped me. If I’d returned home, I would have surely seen what Grandpa was hiding.

“I’m not...an...invalid,” he panted.

I didn’t like how short of breath he seemed. “You probably have pneumonia again. I should have pushed you to see your doctor.”

“Bah. It’s just a little cold.”

I began walking him toward the checkout. “Stop being stubborn. We’ve got to get you to urgent care.”

“But the store...”

“I’ll lock up and drive you in your car, and then—”

“No,” he snapped. “Need the store...open.”

“I could call an ambulance,” I said dubiously, “but someone should really be with you. Please let me take you.”

“No. I’ll just go...rest. It’s...fine.”

“It’s not fine! You look like death warmed over.” I touched his forehead. “God, you’re burning up.” Grandpa pulled away from me, swaying slightly on his feet, a mulish set to his chin. Damn this stubborn old man. I thought fast. “Okay, I’ll call Dad.”

“I don’t want him in my store!” Grandpa bellowed, then blanched, as if he’d strained his low oxygen levels with that exclamation.

He slumped against the counter, barely able to keep on his feet.

“I’ll have him take you to the doctor, and *I’ll* stay at the store. Okay? But you’re going!”

Grandpa muttered something under his breath, but he nodded agreement. Even he couldn’t deny he wasn’t well when he could barely stand under his own power. He shouldn’t be in this state. He should have seen a doctor days ago. He wasn’t a young man anymore. This was precisely why I’d taken on so many hours at the store—but I should have done more. I’d let him open each day, selfishly wanting the extra sleep after late nights coding, when it was well past time for him to fully retire.

I dialed Dad on my cell.

“Hey, Evan. What’s up?”

“You working today?”

“Nope. Went in over the weekend.”

Finally, something was going right. “Grandpa needs to go to the doctor. I found him at the store, and he’s in bad shape.”

“Found him?” Dad’s voice went tight. “Is he conscious?”

“Yeah, but he can’t seem to catch his breath and he’s feverish. Weak.”

Grandpa grumbled as I described his symptoms. “Tell ’im I’m not dead yet. He better not get any ideas about taking my store.”



I rolled my eyes. This feud was so ridiculous. Dad was the *best* person to take over his store, and because they'd had a few differences of opinion, he refused to even consider passing it on. If it were up to him, he'd probably take it to the grave with him.

"Can you come drive him?" I said to Dad, ignoring Grandpa. "He doesn't want me to close the store, or I'd do it myself."

"For fuck's sake." He sounded exasperated, but I knew it was about Grandpa's stubbornness, rather than any inconvenience. "I'll be right there."

After Dad collected Grandpa, I was too worried to focus, so I was leaning over the counter, staring blankly at the aisle of kitchen hardware, when Mayor Michaels came in. She paused, frowning when she spotted me behind the counter, then continued forward.

"Is Tom here?"

"He's not," I said.

She huffed. "That man. I *swear* he's harder to pin down than an oiled pig!"

That wasn't an expression I'd heard before. I laughed. "He's at the store and coffee shop almost every day. How hard could it be?"

She shook her head. "He always squirms away. Where is he this time?"

"He's not feeling well."

"Oh, I'm sorry." She looked circumspect. "You spend a lot of time at the store."

"About thirty-six hours a week, give or take."

She nodded. "So, the future of the store must concern you?"

I wasn't sure where she was going with this. "I'm more concerned about my grandfather's well-being, but he loves this store, so yes."

“Of course. Is he seriously ill?”

I shifted, aware of how gossip spread in this town. Grandpa wouldn't appreciate it if his eminent demise was predicted before he'd even seen the doctor. “Just a cold,” I said. “Maybe you can see him later this week.”

She hesitated. “Well, Evan, now that I'm here, I'm wondering if maybe I should talk to you. You're...how old, exactly?”

“Nineteen.”

She nodded. “Good. You're an adult, and obviously a responsible one, considering you run this store.”

I'd gone from *spending a lot of time* at the store to *running the store*. “What is this about, Mayor Michaels? I really should get back to work.”

As usual, I had a pile of things to do that were more important than this cryptic conversation. But the mayor suddenly seemed to make up her mind.

“The store is in some trouble. Tom hasn't kept up with his property taxes.”

“Oh. How much...”

“Twelve thousand,” she said. “He's about six years behind.”

I staggered a bit. “*What?*”

She nodded. “The county is planning to claim this property for a tax sale.”

“B-but, the store is worth a lot more than twelve thousand dollars!”

She nodded, eyes sympathetic. “That's why I've advised your grandfather to accept an offer to buy his store at a market price.”

“Someone wants to buy the store?”

“Yes. Gerald Mann. He owns a chain of stores called PennyMan.”

“Those awful general stores where everything costs a buck or less because it falls apart in a week?”

She winced. “Mr. Mann could bring much-needed revenue to the city. He wants to remodel, which means paying for permits. The county will collect the back taxes your grandfather owes, and we’ll be positioned to reassess the property once Mr. Mann finishes his work on the place.”

“This is already a store. What could he possibly need to do to it?”

“Well, he’s wanting to buy the flower shop, and the bookstore too if possible, so that he can convert them into one place. He wants to create a little marketplace. Isn’t that nice?”

I pictured our quaint small town, with its cute awnings and large plate-glass windows, marred by a big department-style store in the middle of the block and cringed.

“What has my grandfather said about all this?”

“Oh, he’s been cagey,” she said. A good description. He’d been cagey with me too—about what all these meetings with the mayor were about. Clearly he’d been stalling, avoiding, or both. “He knows of Mr. Mann’s interest, and he knows the county cannot continue to grant tax extensions. He’s asked for time to consider his offers, but the deadline on *that* is quickly running out. Your grandfather needs to take this deal or he *will* lose Moore Hardware entirely.”

“The store has been on Main Street since Granville became a city. You know PennyMan is going to be a sad imitation. It’ll spoil our downtown charm.”

“I really don’t have any choice. I like and respect Tom. I don’t want him to lose everything, but we need our tax revenues. They help support our county budget, which means they help pay for needed services. Losing those services would damage Granville a lot more than trading in a few shops for a chain store. I’m sorry.”



## DAWSON

IT WAS JUST after noon when Coach Mayfield drove me to the Shear Brilliance salon to make good on our lost coaching bet—presumably so I couldn't duck out and leave him to pay the piper. Judging by his grin, he was extremely happy not to be in the hot seat this year.

I walked in, dread tying my stomach in knots. I'd never considered myself to be vain, but my hair was one of my best features. A young stylist squealed when she saw us. "Yay! Y'all are finally here! Take a seat, Coach Woods."

She patted the salon seat, and I walked over with all the enthusiasm of a man on death row. Nearby, an older, more sophisticated woman watched.

"Not doing the honors this year?" Coach Mayfield said.

"I thought it'd be a perfect time to let Abby practice what she's learned. She's fresh from beauty school. Coach Woods will only be her third client."

Mayfield laughed as my stomach dropped. So now I was a guinea pig. *Great!*

I suppose you couldn't screw up shaving someone too badly. One bald head was pretty much like another, right?

"Don't look so worried," Abby said as she swung a cape around me and fastened the Velcro on the back. "I'll be gentle with you since it's your first time."

*Oh, the irony.*

She laughed at my expression. "I'll go get the supplies. Don't let him run off."

While we waited, the door opened, admitting three members of the Riverton High coaching staff. "Fuck me, there's an audience?"

I scanned the green-and-yellow hats with their dorky corncob logos and couldn't feel even a tiny bit superior in this moment.

Coach Haskins, a wiry older man with fully white hair, laughed. “Hell, son, you’re lucky. The year I lost the bet, the whole damn Granville team got to throw pies at my face.”

I winced. That would be unpleasant, but at least it would end quickly—and without the weeks it would take to regrow my hair.

“In the town square,” he added.

“Damn,” I muttered. I’d taken a look at some of my baby photos the night before, and despite Evan’s assurances, I did not have a shapely head. “I guess I can wear hats.”

“That wouldn’t be very sporting of you,” Mayfield said cheerfully.

There were rumbles of agreement as the coaches relived past horror stories of public humiliation. Coach Mayfield had been shaved, covered in paint with the opposing school colors, and made the victim of a dunking booth at the fair. Assistant Coach Krantz once had to kiss a pig in front of a cheering crowd. When I wrinkled my nose in disgust, he added, “There was some talk about making me eat a grasshopper, so I was happy to lay one on that pig!”

While the guys laughed, I was less amused.

“It sounds like a shaved head is getting off easy, but isn’t it a little ridiculous we’re forced to humiliate ourselves? The kids played their hearts out. It was a close game. I hate to lose, and I really don’t love the...attention from the displeased fans, but it’s not as if we didn’t both play a good game.”

My email inbox and office voicemail box had been jammed with ranting messages about my poor decision-making Friday night. One parent had even jumped out of their running car to approach me in the parking lot and publicly read me the riot act.

Losing sucked. I never wanted to lose. But I was learning it sucked a whole lot more when you had to remain professional and mature while screaming on the inside, *I’m freaking mad we lost too so back the hell off!*

Haskins guffawed. “Got yourself a naive one, eh?”

Mayfield just chuckled. “He’ll learn.”

I glanced between them, not certain what that was supposed to mean, but the stylist returned before I could ask them to elaborate. Abby held a tray of what looked like paste and foil wrappers.

“What is all that?”

Mayfield clapped a hand on my shoulder. “Good news, Woods. You get to keep this head of hair you’ve been fretting about.”

I brightened. “Really?”

“Bad news is you’re getting a dye job,” Haskins said. “Yellow and green, Riverton school colors.”

“Yellow as in blond?” I asked hopefully.

As a brunet, I doubted it’d look great with my skin tone, but at least it was a more natural color than orange, blue, or purple.

“Well, your yellow will be a bit more intense than a natural blond, and it’ll be accented with the green.”

“Great,” I said glumly. “How long till I can correct it?”

“End of the season.”

I nodded, unsurprised. “If I accidentally wash with super-hot water and it rinses out?”

The proprietor, the evil woman known as Helen who’d sicced her newbie stylist on me, laughed. “Oh, sweetie, it won’t wash out that easy. It’ll possibly fade and look even worse.” She patted my arm. “Best to just accept your fate. We’ll make it look as good as possible.”

I was skeptical. Abby could give me the best dye job in the world and I’d still be walking around with Riverton colors on my head. If I was a target of the town now, no one would miss me once this was done.

Still, at least it wasn’t on a stage during a town festival. The coaches had convinced me that it could be worse.

“I guess I should be glad I’m not being publicly humiliated.”

“Actually...” Coach Mayfield’s tone warned me I’d once again underestimated my fate. He reached for the door, opening it for Warren, the senior member of Tech Club. “*Now* we can get started.”

Warren held up his smartphone. “Sorry, Coach, but we’re going to stream this online. Granville and Riverton football fans will be watching.”

I cast a sour look at Mayfield. The asshole could have warned me. “So much for not being embarrassed in the town square, huh?”

He smiled brightly. “Well, think of it this way... You don’t have to see their faces or hear them laughing.”

I groaned and dropped my head back.

Mayfield continued, unaffected by my dramatics. “Time to pay your dues, Woods. With any luck, Granville folks will forgive you the loss against Riverton... in about, oh, five years?”

“I’d say ten,” Haskins said.

“Will I still have a job in five years?” I asked dubiously.

“Well, that’s up to you,” Mayfield said. “You’re not infallible, but who is? You’ve done a hell of a lot for the team. Rojas has really leveled up.”

“For all the good it did.”

“Well, coaching is about more than what happens on the field. You lost sight of that. I did too, to be fair. Do better.”

“I will.”

“Good, because you’re on the hook for this bet every year until we win.”

A new determination flared to life in my gut. “Then we *will* win next season.”

“Hear that, Haskins!” Mayfield goaded. “Better watch out next season.”

“Oh, I will. Have no doubt.”

“I’m ready to start filming whenever you guys are,” Warren said.

“One second,” Mayfield said as he bent to look me in the eye. “I know this is not fun, but we do these humiliating things because they help the town move on. We need to focus on the next game. The season isn’t over. Can I count on you to keep your head in the game?”

“Yes, Coach.”

“Good man. You know what else this means?”

“What?”

“You’re one of us now.”

He stepped back, letting Abby get to work. She placed foils in my hair, painted them with cold goop, and stuck me under a heater for a half hour. It had to be dull video feed because I might have accepted my fate, but not so much that I’d ham it up for the camera.

The other coaches did that part for me, joking amongst themselves and throwing good-natured threats back and forth about what next year’s bet should be. But I was still stuck on what Mayfield had said to me.

Like my hazing at Alabama, this wasn’t enjoyable, but it was a rite of membership in a way. Into the coaching world of rural Nebraska. Into the fabric of Granville’s small-town life. I’d let them down with this loss, but I was paying my dues, and they would respect me more for it in the end.

Most importantly, it made me realize—green and yellow hair or not—I belonged here. Granville wasn’t some idealized “fresh start.” It was home.



# CHAPTER 26



## EVAN

WORRIED AND DISTRACTED BY GRANDPA'S ILLNESS AND THE store's financial trouble, I'd forgotten about Dawson's bet until he showed up near closing time with a head full of hair that was bright yellow and green. The stylist hadn't tried to blend the colors at all, so there were chunky stripes that were jarring to the eye.

"Oh my god!" I clapped my hands over my mouth as he came in.

He nodded. "Yup. I'm a walking Cornjerker."

I tried to muffle a laugh, but with everything that had happened today, it was the straw that broke my composure. Tears sprang to my eyes as I giggled almost hysterically.

"Wow. Don't hold back on my account," he said drily. "Go ahead and get it out of your system."

"I'm s-so-sorry," I said, my speech interrupted by stray giggles and wheezes as I tried to catch my breath. "I-I-I've just had such an awful day."

Dawson's indulgent smile slipped. "What happened?"

I filled him in with the latest update I'd gotten on Grandpa. He'd seen his doctor, been examined and scolded thoroughly, and sent home with a prescription for antibiotics, steroids, and a nebulizer for a bad case of bronchitis. He was also admonished to eat better, since he was underweight, and to stay home for the rest of the week.

“You could have called me,” Dawson said when I’d finished.

“Today was stressful enough for you.”

He ran a hand over his hair. “Feels trivial in comparison.”

“That’s not even everything that happened. Turns out, the store’s in trouble too.”

After the mayor came by, I’d taken a look at the store’s records in Grandpa’s office. He still managed the business side of the business—other than bringing in an accountant during tax season—so it wasn’t something I generally did. But those back taxes had me wondering: *Why* couldn’t Grandpa pay? The store wasn’t doing great, sure, but I was cheap labor, and we’d just had that big order for supplies for the fall festival—not to mention other town festivals.

“He donated all those festival supplies. Can you imagine? He owes twelve thousand in taxes—and instead of charging a fair price and using the money to pay down taxes, he’s *giving* the city supplies every year! He gives to the county too. I know he does. And they still want to take his store!”

“Shit, Ev. That’s such a raw deal.” Dawson drew me close, giving me a hug I desperately needed. I knew I was getting too worked up, but how *dare* they take advantage of my grandfather that way?

“Moore Hardware has been here for almost one hundred and fifty years,” I said into his chest, where I’d buried my face while Dawson stroked my hair. I pulled back with a trembling breath. “Grandpa has been an upstanding business citizen of this town and county his entire life. I’m not going to let them take that away.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know.” I sighed. “Don’t suppose you have twelve grand lying around?”

“Sorry. Assistant coaching is a great gig, but we do it for the love of humiliating ourselves publicly”—he waved a hand at his hair—“not money.”

I smiled. “You don’t look so bad. Kind of like an anime character.”

“Just what I always wanted.”

“Are you wishing they’d shaved you bald like you feared?”

“Nah. I’d rather have wild hair than no hair. As long as...”

“What?”

He looked abashed. “As long as you’re not embarrassed to be seen with me?”

“Never. But, uh, I do think I should spend a night at home.”

He winced. “That was fast.”

I grinned. “Sorry. I’ve got a date with a stubborn man who might not take his meds or stay in bed without a babysitter. Mom’s been on duty all day, and I promised to relieve her when the store closed.”

“Ah, I see how it is.” He paused. “How about I drive you home? We could get some takeout, and I could make sure this other man isn’t a threat to my...colorful appeal?”

I tipped my head back to kiss him. “No one could be a threat to your appeal.” I smirked. “Besides, I can’t miss the chance to have sex with you like this. I can pretend I’m with some sexy punk rock star.”

“Hey now. Jock trumps punk every time.”

I waved my hand in a so-so gesture. “Bad boys have their appeal.”

Dawson picked me up and placed me on the checkout counter, then kissed me hard as he pressed between my thighs. “I can be a bad boy.”

“Anyone could see us through the windows,” I protested.

“Want me to stop?”

“No.” I pulled his head back down into another kiss. After the day I had, anyone who didn’t like it could take a hike. I

needed out of my head, and when Dawson urged me into the stockroom and fell to his knees, I didn't argue even a little.



## DAWSON

AFTER STOPPING FOR TAKEOUT, I drove Evan to his grandfather's house, a little nervous as we stepped inside. I'd met Tom at the store, but this felt more significant—and that was before I remembered that Evan's mother would be there.

Lora Moore was petite, like Evan, with bright coppery curls and blue eyes that lit up when she caught sight of me.

"Finally, I get to meet the elusive Coach Woods," she said.

"Uh..." I ran a hand through my hair, a little self-conscious. "I don't think I'm too hard to find."

"Especially with that godawful dye job," she agreed.

Guess I knew where Evan got his directness.

"Mom, be nice."

"What?" she said. "I'm perfectly nice. I watched the livestream. Coach Woods thinks his hair looks awful too."

"Doesn't mean you have to *say* it," Evan said.

I couldn't help interjecting. "At least she didn't bust out laughing when she saw me."

She chuckled. "Oh, Evan. You didn't."

He looked guilty. "It's been a weird day. It was just stress." He grimaced. "I'm sorry, Dawson."

"It's okay. The whole team lost it when they saw me. I'll just have to get used to making people laugh everywhere I go."

"A good lesson in humility," Lora said.

"That's one way to look at it." I hefted the plastic bag full of Squealin' Pig Barbecue. The name was atrocious, but the food delicious. We'd ordered a family meal, which included

brisket, smoked pork, coleslaw, and mashed potatoes and gravy. “Where should I unload this?”

“The dining room is this way.” Lora led me into the next room. The house was fairly small in size, and the oak table filled pretty much the entire room, but it could easily seat four to six people. On the far wall was a beautiful set of built-in cabinets.

“How’s Grandpa?” Evan asked as I began unloading plastic containers onto the table. “Is he up to eating out here?”

“He should stay in bed for today,” Lora said. “He’s propped up with pillows, and we’ve got a tray he can use to eat.”

“I’ll make him up a plate,” Evan said. “I’d like to see how he’s doing.” He glanced at me. “Do you mind?”

“Of course not.”

I felt awkward as he left the room, not entirely sure if I should have intruded into this family time. Maybe I’d been greedy, not quite ready to let go of Evan when he had other priorities. I noticed he hadn’t mentioned any of his worries about the store to his mother, either—but I wasn’t going to open my mouth about that, knowing that Ev’s family was a bit divided about business matters.

Lora took a seat across the table from me. “We’ve been asking Evan to introduce you, maybe bring you by for family breakfast.”

“Oh. He didn’t mention that.”

She nodded. “Maybe it’s a bit soon for a meet-the-parents moment. I know you haven’t been dating long.”

My heart accelerated at the implication. I was meeting Evan’s mother, and I hadn’t even figured out how to talk to him about what he meant to me. It was a little backwards. I made an unintelligible noise and crammed a bite of mashed potatoes into my mouth.

“I’m not going to grill you about your intentions. Evan’s happy. We haven’t seen him much, but when we do, we can

see the difference.” She shrugged. “If you screw that up, it’ll be your loss, not his. He’ll still be the wonderful Evan he always is.”

I swallowed my food with difficulty, my throat tight. “You’re right,” I rasped, the closest I could come to sharing my feelings.

I’d been trying to get up the nerve to call Kelsey and finally end that chapter of my life definitively. I wanted to be clear of my hang-ups and ready to commit fully to a future with Evan. But each time I saw the lengthening stream of messages from her, my stomach knotted up and I found myself putting it off.

*I just want to talk.*

*Stop ignoring me, Dawson.*

*God, you always were all about avoiding difficult talks. Why am I surprised?*

*I deserve better than this! You said you loved me. Was that all a lie?*

*We were so good together! I know there were bad times, but there were so many good ones...*

*Dawson, I’m not going away.*

***TALK TO ME!!!***

Just reading the messages reminded me of all the times we’d argued, all the times she’d been frustrated and angry and sad over me. I hated that feeling. Like I could never do anything right. Like I was a terrible boyfriend, no matter how much I tried.

Dread filled me when I looked at those messages, and I couldn’t seem to make myself hit the call button—and then I felt like shit because every minute I failed to resolve my baggage with Kelsey was a minute I put off telling Evan how I really felt.

I knew I didn't *have* to face Kelsey, as Evan pointed out, but that felt like using a cheat card. If I couldn't face my past, then maybe I really wasn't ready to be the guy Evan deserved.

Someone stronger. Someone who could face their mistakes head-on. Who could do difficult things if it meant being there for him in the way he needed.

Evan's voice interrupted my internal spiral. "Everyone good here?"

Lora smiled and stood, clearing her plate. She'd only taken a small portion, probably so I wouldn't have to eat alone. "I'm going to head home. Your Dad will want an update."

"Why didn't he come over?" Evan asked.

She shook her head. "You know those two. While they were at the pharmacy, they got into another argument about the business."

Evan tensed. "You're kidding. What do they have to argue about now? Dad's never there. He has no idea how the store is doing."

Her lips went tight and flat, and she glanced at me, before pulling Evan aside and whispering to him. After they finished talking in hushed tones, she waved and left. Evan returned to the table and slumped into a chair.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Yeah. Mom just told me that Grandpa hasn't been filling all his prescriptions. He has blood pressure medication that's important, and he's just...not been taking it. Dad found out during their visit to the doctor and pharmacy today." Evan's voice sounded lifeless as he added, "When Dad pressed him, he admitted that times were tough and he'd needed to save money, but he refused to let Dad take a look at the books to help. That's why they argued."

I reached across the table for Evan's hand. "I'm sorry. Anything I can do?"

He smiled wanly. "No. Grandpa is mad we're all coddling him, though the coughing and wheezing keeps him from



getting out the worst of his insults, at least.”

“How about I make you a plate? You still haven’t eaten.”

Evan glanced at the food spread over the table, clearly uninterested. “I’m not that hungry.”

“Ev, you should eat something. Even if it isn’t much.”

He sighed. “Okay. Sorry, I don’t think I’m going to be good company tonight. You can take off whenever you want.”

I grabbed one of the flimsy paper plates that came with our takeout order and added a small pile of meat, potatoes, and slaw for Evan, taking the time to think through my answer. I hadn’t had the courage to face my past and give Evan everything, but I *could* make sure he wasn’t alone with this.

“What if I don’t want to leave?”

He looked confused. “Huh?”

“What if I want to stay?” I asked. “Here with you. I know your grandpa is your priority, but I can clean up dinner and help you check in on him, and I don’t know...just be here for you.”

He bit his lip, looking torn. “You don’t have to do that.”

“And if I want to?”

He smiled tentatively. “Then that would be really nice, thanks.”

I stood and bent to kiss him—just a soft, comforting kiss—but was interrupted by his grandpa managing to bellow, “Where’s my remote?!” His words were followed by a painful-sounding cough, deep and congested. “Goddamn it all!”

Evan started to get up, but I stopped him. “I’ll get it for him. You eat.”

I headed for the back of the house, easily following the sound of his coughing. I peeked into a bedroom with olive-green carpeting and matching drapes. It was cast in long shadows, with only one small lamp illuminating the space around the bed.

Evan's grandfather did a double-take when he saw me. "Good god, man. Trying to give me a heart attack?"

"Sorry. Evan is eating dinner, so I offered to find the remote for you."

He flapped a hand. "Go ahead. I left it right here, and it grew legs and walked away," he grumbled. "Probably Lora took it just to torture me."

"I'm sure she wouldn't do that to you when you're sick."

He harrumphed. "Bill, my son, is mad enough he'd put her up to it."

I laughed as I searched on his bedside table, on his dresser, and the floor. I eventually found it under the bed, as if it'd fallen and been kicked under a few inches. "I really think if they want revenge, there are better ways than stealing your remote."

I stood and handed it to him. "Here you go."

He sniffed as he took the remote from me. "You're right. They're more devious than this."

"Do you need anything else before I leave?"

"Well, no." He turned on the television. "How do you feel about *Wheel of Fortune*?"

"I like word games."

"You should stay and watch. Evan is always too busy with his computer gobbledygook."

As if sensing him, I glanced toward the doorway. Evan stood there, a small smile on his face.

"That's a great idea," Evan said. "I need to get some work done."

His grandfather rolled his eyes. "See what I mean?"

I chuckled. "I'm well-acquainted with Evan's crazy workload."

Evan shook his head, looking fond. "I'll be in the dining room if either of you need me. Dawson, my room is just across

the hall if you decide you've had enough of his abuse. He's a terrible sport about this game show."

His grandfather scowled. "I'm sure a coach can handle a little competition," he said. Apparently he took *Wheel of Fortune* very seriously. "If he can handle that hair, he can handle anything."

I snorted, wishing that were true. But even if I couldn't handle everything I wanted yet, I was determined to eventually get there. These moments with Evan made me see the life I could have...if I were just brave enough to reach out and grab it.

# CHAPTER 27



## EVAN

“WHAT’RE YOU DOING?”

Dawson’s voice was sleepy and his limbs uncoordinated as he reached for me and bumped my laptop with his knuckles. He blinked, bleary-eyed. “Are you *working?*”

“Just a little.”

“What time is it?”

“Um...three-thirty.”

His eyes widened and he sat up. “Ev, you’ve got to be up early to open the hardware store.”

“I know. I’m just trying to catch up on a few things,” I said tensely. “I found a security vulnerability in the app I have to correct, and time is running short. My deadline to finish is next week.”

Grandpa had only been out of commission for two days, but between taking on the work he normally covered in the office and diving deeper into the store’s financials at my parents’ suggestion, I was feeling the strain.

Grandpa would never tolerate Dad poking into his business, so it was up to me to protect his interests. I hadn’t told my parents about the property taxes or sale offer—it hadn’t felt right to betray Grandpa’s confidence—but they were worried that if he was skimping on his health expenses, he might be cutting other corners.

“You’re working too hard,” Dawson said. “Maybe you should just limit the store hours until your grandfather is better.”

I shook my head, immediately dismissing that idea. “No, I’d never get him to stay home, then. Besides, that’ll only encourage the mayor to press even harder for Grandpa to sell to that rich asshole.”

“Maybe he should.”

I went rigid. “*What?*”

Dawson sat up, still knuckling the blariness from his eyes. “You work so hard to keep this store going, Ev. But where does it end? This isn’t what you want from your life, and you shouldn’t keep sacrificing your happiness for everyone else’s.”

“You didn’t mind when I was sacrificing my time to help you.”

Dawson flinched, and I regretted my words instantly. I was just stressed and taking it out on the one person who was an easy target.

“You’re right,” Dawson said quietly. “I’m sorry. At the time, I knew you were busy, but I didn’t know it would lead to this.” He gestured toward me working in bed. “It’s the middle of the night, and every day you look a little more drained. I’m worried about you.”

I sighed and exited out of my programs before closing the laptop. I couldn’t focus enough to properly work anyway. My eyes felt as if they were full of sand, and my headache had been worsening for the past hour.

“I shouldn’t have said that. I was happy to help when Rojas needed it, and that’s not why I’m so far behind. I discovered this new problem with the app today, and I’ve still got the marketing package to make, and there’s just not enough hours in the day.”

My voice was getting more strained with each word, anxiety thrumming through me. “What if I can’t get it done? I’ll miss my shot. Maybe I’ll never qualify for this competition again.”

“Hey, hey,” Dawson said gently, as he tugged me down to lie beside him. “You’re going to submit that app. It’s going to be great, and you’ll probably win because you’re brilliant.”

“I’m not,” I mumbled, even though my insides glowed from the praise. “It’s just a chance at exposure and funding. I need that.”

“And you’ll get it.” Dawson’s eyes were steady on mine. “We’ll find the time you need to work.”

“I can’t cut back the hardware store hours,” I said. “I know it doesn’t make sense, but I’ve been working in the store for *years*. If Grandpa sells to some outsider, it’ll feel like...it was all pointless, you know? I may not want Moore Hardware to be my future, but it *is* my family legacy. One of my sisters could run it one day, or one of their kids. But with all those back taxes, I don’t know. Maybe it’s too late. I wish he’d just pass it on to my dad, so he could at least *try* to find a way to keep it in the family.”

“Why won’t he?”

I sighed, closing my burning eyes. “He’s stubborn. His pride was hurt when Dad walked out after they argued over the business. He might have gotten over it, but he views Dad taking the manager job at the new hardware store in Riverton as a huge betrayal. I mean, Dad didn’t have a lot of other employment options but that’s our strongest competition, you know? Bigger selection, better prices. Most folks don’t mind driving forty minutes if it means saving money on their remodel plans.” I laughed tiredly. “It sounds ridiculous, but the store means so much to Grandpa. I don’t want him to lose it.”

Dawson ran his hand gently over my hair, petting me, and I let my eyes fall closed again. “You give so much of yourself,” he murmured.

“They’re my family.”

“Not just with them.” He kissed my temple. “With the Tech Club, with me. With your friends. I love that about you.”

I kept my eyes shut, though my heart skipped a beat. Dawson wasn’t saying he loved *me*, but it was the closest he’d

come to admitting his feelings went beyond friendship and sexual attraction. Despite spending nearly every night together, he hadn't acknowledged our relationship as something that could have a future.

He didn't seem to notice he'd said anything out of the ordinary. He continued to stroke my hair, soothing me. "Sleep, Ev. I'll help you, and everything will work out."

"M'kay."

I wasn't sure how Dawson could help, but just then, I was too tired to do anything but let sleep take me.

When I woke, sunlight poured through the windows, and I was alone in the bed. Bewildered, I called out, "Dawson?" But even if the room hadn't been small enough to see every corner, I would have known that he wasn't there. There was a feeling of stillness to the room that I never felt when Dawson was there. He brought such energy into the space around him.

I sat up and retrieved my phone from the charger. Then I saw the time, and my heart tried to exit my chest. "Fuck, I'm late!"

*Why didn't Dawson wake me?* I rushed into the bathroom to splash water on my face and brush my teeth. Our conversation about cutting back store hours came back to me as my sleep fog receded. *Had he intentionally let me oversleep, even though it meant the store would be closed?*

I snatched up my phone, ready to fire off a text to him that he'd majorly overstepped—only to find one from him.

***Don't panic. I told your family to let you rest. Calista is minding the store until you're ready to go in.***

I blinked. *Calista?* She hated even hanging out with me while I worked at the store. She was generally bored out of her mind. I replied to Dawson's message:

***You shouldn't have done that without my knowledge.***



My anger and confusion had evaporated though. Dawson was worried about me, and he was trying to help. It was difficult to be upset about that. I was tired. Even with the extra sleep, I felt drained once my panicky adrenaline eased.

I sent a text to Calista.

*I'm up. I can come rescue you soon.*

*Take your time. I'm playing online poker, and I'm up twenty bucks.*

*Isn't that illegal?*

*Twenty fictional bucks. Whatever. I'm winning!*

I laughed and shook my head. Good thing this wasn't Vegas. Calista would totally be the type to develop a gambling addiction. The woman was a risk-taker. I got dressed, packed up my laptop, scolded Mom for her part in Dawson's scheme—she waved off my objections with a roll of her eyes—and headed over to the store.

“You can take off,” I told Calista. “Thanks for opening for me.”

She shrugged. “What are friends for, right? But I might as well stay until Truman gets here after lunch.”

“Why is Truman...” I trailed off. “I thought Dawson just arranged for you to open so I could catch up on sleep. Is it more than that?”

She shrugged. “You should probably ask your boyfriend that question.”

“He's not really my boyfriend.”

“It doesn't look that way from here,” she said.

I frowned. “But you're the one who warned me about getting involved with him because he was complicated, and you weren't wrong. Dawson doesn't want a relationship. He's made that really clear.”

“I think he doth protest too much.” At my huff of exasperation, Calista turned serious. “Evan, you guys spend every night together. Everyone in town knows you’re together, which was his idea. And now, he’s actively organizing half the town to help you meet your goals.”

“Half the town,” I said faintly.

“My point is, it’d be nice to have the words. I wish Dawson could say them. But even if he can’t...he loves you. It’s obvious.”

I felt my eyes burn and turned away to hide my expression. “Shit.”

Calista wrapped me up in a hug from behind. “Guys are stupid sometimes, but you’ve got a good one. Eventually he’ll get his head out of his ass and tell you everything you need to hear.”

I nodded. “I know. I’ve been telling myself to just wait and be patient. I know he’s got some stuff in his past that makes it hard. I just wish I could fix it for him.”

“Knowing Dawson, he wants to be all strong and perfect for you, not the wounded bird you nurse to health.” She squeezed me once before releasing me with a small laugh. “Did you know I cornered him once the news came out about you two hooking up? I figured I was released from my promise not to confront him.”

“He didn’t tell me.”

“He tripped all over himself to assure me that the last thing he wanted was to ever hurt you. He implied he had some shit to deal with before he could go any further with you, and I believe him. Dawson isn’t just fucking you around, Ev. He sincerely cares.”

I nodded, knowing deep down that it was true. He didn’t have to spend his nights watching Wheel of Fortune with my grandfather, making sure we both ate, and then sleeping in my too-small bed without even a hope for sex because even if I wasn’t too exhausted to think about it, the idea of Grandpa hearing weirded me out.

“I know he does,” I said. “I’m just so tired right now, and grumpy, and kinda feeling hopeless about everything.”

Calista patted my arm, about as sympathetic as I’d ever seen her. Usually, she’d tell me to suck it up and get on with things. I really must look like crap to get this version of my best friend.

“You’re just overwhelmed right now. Which is why Dawson called us in. Let us help you, babe. Go home and sleep more, if you need it. You can’t do anything if you’re burning your candle at both ends.”

“I can’t sleep. I’ve got too much to do.”

“Well, get cracking, then, so you can sleep properly tonight. Assuming your not-boyfriend isn’t keeping you too busy to rest.”

“You realize you’re making innuendoes about your own cousin, right?”

She wrinkled up her nose. “Yeah, it’s weird. You dating my cousin is really infringing on my ability to tease you about your sex life.”

“Well, don’t worry. There isn’t much of a sex life when Grandpa is in the next room.”

She shuddered. “Yeah, that’s a mood killer.”

“Definitely. I’ll be in the office.”

With any luck, I could resolve the security bug by the end of the day. Although I hadn’t analyzed all of Grandpa’s record-keeping, I’d reviewed enough to see that in addition to donating supplies to regional events, he’d been cutting huge discounts on some of our most expensive inventory. I wasn’t sure yet if he was doing it just to move inventory—and if so, it might be a sign we shouldn’t be stocking such big-ticket items—or if he was simply giving his friends a break. I’d definitely seen him work out a number of “handshake” deals over the years. I’d never worried because at the time, the store had seemed successful.

Now it was beginning to seem as if Grandpa had only maintained the illusion of profitability. As much as I wanted to pursue my own dreams, as Dawson said, the idea of watching my grandfather's dreams die made me want to cry.



## DAWSON

MOST OF MY attention was on my cellphone as I headed into the locker room, preoccupied with my text stream with Evan. We'd been chatting back and forth most of the day, mostly so I could apologize for my heavy-handed approach to helping him and make sure he was coping okay. He was still torn up over what he'd found in the store bookkeeping this week and unsure what to do about it. But while Evan worried about everyone else, I worried about *him*. I didn't want him to lose everything he'd been working for because he was trying to single-handedly save his family business.

His latest text had me smiling though.

*Grandpa says you're allowed to miss Wheel of Fortune on Friday, but only if you win the game.*

I tapped out a quick response before pocketing my phone and going inside.

*The pressure's on. Tell him I'll win my game if he refrains from using up all his oxygen shouting at the TV.*

The final bell had rung, and the locker room was a racket of opening and closing lockers, stomping feet, and guys talking and laughing as they changed for practice. There was one particularly loud conversation that drew my attention though.

"I've heard of kissing ass, man, but this is taking it too far," Tyrone James said with a snicker.

“Fuck off.” That was Rojas. “I’m not sucking up, I’m showing respect. There’s a difference.”

“Still looks a lot like your lips on Coach Woods’s ass,” Merrill sniped.

He was a younger player and didn’t usually trash talk with the others, but he was probably frustrated that he didn’t get his chance to go out on the field and win us rivalry bragging rights. Not that he *would* have, but I imagined that was how it happened in his fantasies.

We’d all wanted that win. Part of me still wished I could go out on the field and make it happen. Coming so close to a win was almost more painful than a slaughter. Our hopes had risen high before crashing, but despite the haranguing I was getting from fanatics in town, most folks had a good laugh when they saw me and then told me that I’d gotten them closer to a win than they’d expected. Small-town people were weird, but I was pretty sure I loved them.

“Better watch out,” someone else sniped. “You might make his boyfriend jealous.”

*What the fuck?*

Turning the corner, I spotted Rojas at the center of a small throng of players.

“What’s going on here?” I barked. “You should be getting ready for practice.”

The guys shifted to turn at my approach, and I got a good look at Rojas. His hair was dyed in green-and-yellow zigzags.

“Whoa.” I blinked my eyes at the almost painful brightness of it. “Is that how bad my hair looks?”

James cackled. “You make it look better than he does, Coach. What the fuck were you *thinking*, Rojas?”

Against Rojas’s complexion, the colors must seem even more garish. But I was with James. Why had he done it?

Rojas shifted uncomfortably, but he looked me in the eye. “It’s as much my fault we lost as yours. More, really. If I hadn’t fucked around, we wouldn’t have spent our last week

before the game cramming for tests instead of focusing on winning. It just doesn't seem fair to make you parade around like that alone, so..."

Aw, shit. The kid hit me right in the feels.

"I appreciate what you're doing, Rojas. Really." I held out a fist, and he tapped my knuckles. "You're a leader on this team, and you stepping up to shoulder responsibility means you're a *good* leader. But it wasn't your fault we lost. It's a team sport."

"Do I need to cite my stats? I was the one throwing incomplete passes and interceptions."

"Riverton's defense was tough," I said. "We've got work to do, but we're going to have a hell of a good season overall, and then we're going to beat them next year. This is a team effort, though. We rise and fall together."

"Fine, then we can wear our ugly hair together," Rojas said, sounding defiant.

"Speak for yourself," Merrill said. "I was riding the bench."

James nodded. "Solidarity is cool. Y'all have fun with that. My girlfriend would cry if I did that shit to my head."

One by one, guys made themselves scarce.

I laughed. "Looks like you're on your own with this one, Rojas."

"That's okay. It wasn't about them. I meant what I said. I'm sorry I let the team down. I worked hard to get it together, but it was a distraction we didn't need."

I nodded, impressed by his willingness to step up and face his mistakes. That was something I'd struggled with for a long time.

He continued. "My parents still aren't sold on this college scholarship thing, but sabotaging myself isn't the way to prove myself to them. I see that now. I have to go after what I want."

“You know, Rojas, you’re pretty smart for a sixteen-year-old punk,” I said.

“I’ll be seventeen soon.”

“Oh, well then. Not that smart after all.”

“Hey!” He laughed. “I’m smart.”

“Yeah, you are. Facing up to your mistakes takes guts. You could have pretended you didn’t mess up or avoided thinking about it. Instead, you came in here and laid it all out. I respect that. No, I’ll go one better. I *admire* that.”

He beamed. “Thanks, Coach.”

“Now, go get changed before Mayfield comes out here and kicks both our asses. If we want you impressing college scouts next year, we’ve got work to do.”

His eyes lit up. “Yes, Coach!”

While Rojas hustled to finish changing, I pulled out my phone. I flipped from Evan’s message stream to Kelsey’s. I’d been reluctant to revisit my past, fearing I’d be sucked back into the anger and desperation I’d felt in the days after I fell off that roof and Kelsey disappeared from my life. But maybe Rojas had the right of it. He still had issues at home, but he wasn’t going to let it hold him back or self-destruct.

He was going after the future he wanted.

I needed to do the same.

I clicked open the stream of messages from Kelsey that I’d been ignoring.

*I’m ready to talk.*

# CHAPTER 28





## EVAN

ALEX ROJAS THREW THE BALL IN A LONG PASS. MANNING dodged two linebackers, twisted, and—caught it in the endzone. I surged to my feet with the crowd, cheering, while Calista grabbed my arm and shook me like a ragdoll. “We won!”

“I know!”

“That means if we win next week, we’ll go to the playoffs!”

“Wow. Really? I didn’t know that.”

Despite studying up on football when I could spare the time, I was still learning. I’d understood at least thirty percent of the plays happening on the field today, so it was progress.

Calista pulled me toward the aisle. “Let’s go congratulate Dawson!”

“He doesn’t know I’m here,” I protested but Calista wasn’t deterred.

“Then we’ll surprise him!”

Dawson knew how chaotic my life was right now, and he’d told me I should use the time to catch my breath. He worried about me so much that I’d agreed. But honestly, I didn’t want to be anywhere else, so I’d changed my plans at the last minute.

My gaze locked on him as Calista plowed a path down the bleachers, pulling me along in her wake.

Dawson stood on the sidelines, a huge grin on his face as he watched the players pump their fists in victory and form a line to shake hands with the opposing team in a show of good sportsmanship. Even with his gaudy dyed hair, he was the most gorgeous man I'd ever seen.

He turned in our direction as we approached. His eyes lit up, smile widening even more as he spread his arms, as if to invite me into a hug. "Hey!"

A beautiful brunette ran into his embrace.

I faltered to a stop, shocked, as she grabbed Dawson's face and kissed him. "You guys rocked it!" she said. "I'm so glad you wanted to see me this weekend."

"Kelsey..." Dawson stared down at her, seemingly speechless. I could relate, because while dozens of thoughts crowded my head, I couldn't think of a single word to say.

Kelsey wasn't speechless though. She laughed and slapped his chest playfully. "I know you were expecting me Saturday, but I couldn't miss your game! I'm so glad you finally texted me back." She put her hand on his hair. "Only you could make such an awful dye job look good."

*He texted her back. When?*

"What the fuck?" Calista said beside me. She started to take a step forward. "Who does this bitch think she is?"

I grabbed Calista, pulling her back. "Don't."

She swung her head to look at me, eyes wide. "What? You're gonna just let her paw Dawson like that? He's not hers anymore!"

My throat tightened. "He's not mine either. He hasn't promised me anything."

"Evan, come on. *Everyone* knows you guys are head over heels for each other."

*He texted her and didn't tell me. He invited her here. Maybe he does still love her.*

A scary-sounding brittle laugh escaped me. “Rumors don’t equal truth.”

“Evan...”

I shook my head, backing away, as Kelsey clung to Dawson. They looked like two people who belonged together, unlike us. I was just a geeky tech guy, and Dawson had always been out of my league. Kelsey was beautiful, like him. She looked sophisticated and put together, while my life was a mess of a failing business, too many projects to juggle, and an overload of stress.

My heart felt as if it were cracking in two. My eyes burned. I had to get out of there before I embarrassed myself. I’d promised Dawson we were on the same page about being friends with benefits. He’d been upfront with me all along, and I didn’t want him to feel guilty if he decided to reconcile with Kelsey.

But I couldn’t stay and watch it happen either.

“I have to go.”

I spun on my heel and headed for the crowd streaming toward the parking lot. Calista had driven me, but I’d run all the way home on foot if needed. The urge to break into a sprint nearly overcame me now, as if I could run away from the truth. But there was no escaping the reality that Dawson’s ex had shown up and kissed him as if they’d pick up exactly where they left off.



## DAWSON

I PUSHED KELSEY BACK, so shocked by her appearance that the kiss she laid on me barely registered. One minute, I’d spotted Evan in the crowd, a happy thrill shooting through me that he’d shown up to share this win with me, and the next, I had an armful of my ex-girlfriend.

“Kelsey...”

I struggled to find words. What the fuck was she doing here?

She laughed and slapped my chest. “I know you were expecting me Saturday, but I couldn’t miss your game! I’m so glad you finally texted me back.” She put her hand on my hair, but her words were lost in the white noise filling my brain.

I pulled her wrist down. “I texted you to *talk*,” I finally spit out, flustered. “Not—”

“Aren’t you happy to see me?” She looked up at me, pushing out her lip in a pout. “I drove a long way to be here!”

Typical Kelsey. She invited herself here, and now she was put out that I wasn’t welcoming. Over the months we’d been apart, I’d forgotten how presumptuous she could be sometimes.

I disentangled myself, but when I raised my gaze, I only saw Calista. *Fuck*. Evan just witnessed that whole display. I looked around, heart racing. Kelsey was still talking but I pushed past her, too frantic to process her words.

“Evan?” I said to Calista.

“He took off toward the parking lot. So help me, Dawson, if you take back this *bitch* who left you while you were in the *hospital*—”

“Not happening,” I said grimly, turning and scouring the crowd. I couldn’t see Evan right away, but that was okay. I could catch up with him. My shoulders were wide, and I knew how to get a crowd to part for me. Evan was so polite he’d be caught up in the slow flow of traffic.

“What’s going on, Coach?” Rojas stopped at my side, taking off the helmet. “Who’s the hot girl?”

“Tell Mayfield I had to do something important,” I said, breaking into a jog without waiting for a reply. No doubt Mayfield would ream my ass for disappearing on the team, but I’d deal with that Monday. We’d won, so I didn’t think he’d be too angry. Catching Evan was way more important.

Behind me, I heard Calista shouting, “Go get your man!”

Kelsey's befuddled, "His *man*?"

Calista's snarky reply: "No one's talking to you."

Then their voices fell away, swallowed by the chatter of fans making their way home, several of them cheering at the sight of me, or trying to stop me to talk. I shook them off as politely as I could.

"Sorry, in a hurry."

"Sorry, trying to catch someone."

Just when I thought I wouldn't catch up, I spotted Evan shuffling behind two slow-moving parents, one of whom was pushing a stroller and the other who held a sleeping preschooler. They looked exhausted, as if attending the game had been more of a workout than an hour at the gym.

"Evan!" I called loudly.

He turned, stumbling to a stop as he saw me.

"It's okay," he croaked as I jogged up to him, heart still pounding. "If you still have feelings for her, it's—"

"Don't say that's okay," I said harshly. "You deserve better than that."

His eyes flared with anger. "Yeah, I do. But I can't *make* you choose me over her."

"You don't need to make me do anything, babe. I'm already yours."

Evan blinked. Cleared his throat. "W-what? But you're not. You've always said—"

"I was an idiot," I cut in. "I choose you, Ev. If you'll have me. You're the one I want. You're the only one I've wanted since the first night we kissed. Hell, maybe even before that."

"But I heard her say you texted her. You invited her here."

"I told Kelsey I wanted to talk to her this weekend. For closure. I thought she would call, not show up. I wanted to come to you with a clear mind and heart, baggage-free, so I could tell you that I love you."

Evan sucked in a sharp breath, but I kept going. Now that I was speaking, the words were flowing like a river that couldn't be dammed.

“I'm in love with you, Evan, and I'm sorry I said I didn't want more with you. I think, deep down, I always knew I was full of shit. I was trying so hard not to fall for you, out of fear, that I failed to see the obvious.”

“What was obvious?”

“That you're nothing like Kelsey. That our relationship has made my life *better*, not worse. Everything about the way you make me feel is different. I admire you so damn much. I feel like a better person when I'm around you. I want to be the guy you trust with your heart and your life. I didn't think I could be that person for anyone ever again—but you trusted and accepted me in a way no one else ever has—even when what I was willing to give you wasn't nearly enough. Let me give you everything. Please, babe. I don't want to be your warm-up for the love of your life. I want to *be* the one.”

“You are,” Evan blurted, eyes shiny. “You're the one, Dawson. How can you even doubt it?”

“Thank fuck,” I said. “You let me blather on long enough.”

Evan laughed. “Sorry. I kind of like hearing how much you love me.”

I couldn't wait any longer then. I yanked him into a hard kiss. A few catcalls went up. Apparently we'd drawn a crowd. The news would be all over town, but I didn't care. I wanted everyone to know I belonged to Evan Moore.

The kiss softened and lingered, the crowd noise disappearing as my heart swelled with all the emotion I'd been suppressing for so long. Evan tucked his face into my neck, his breathing jagged with emotion. “I love you,” he whispered. “So much.”

I squeezed him against me. “I'm sorry it took me so long.”

He tilted his head up, smiling. “I would have waited forever. But Kelsey...” His smile faded. “She's so beautiful. Her life can't be as much of a mess as mine.”

I snorted. “Oh, Ev. You have no idea what kind of hot mess that woman is. She’s beautiful, yeah, but so are you. The difference is, her beauty only runs skin deep. You’re so much more. You’re everything I want.”

“Wow,” he said quietly. “I never knew you’d be so good at making speeches. Must be the coach in you.”

I retaliated by poking him in the ribs, and he squealed and jerked away, laughing. His eyes were bright when he looked at me, the stress I’d seen riding heavy on him lifted for the moment. We both still had a lot on our plates. The hardware store was still in trouble, and Evan still had to finish and submit his app while under pressure. I still had to talk to Kelsey, honestly, about everything that happened to fully close the chapter on my past.

But my heart was lighter than it had been since I’d arrived in Granville. I’d come to this place I’d once loved in the hopes of starting over. But it wasn’t until this very moment that I knew, without a doubt, that I had.

With Evan by my side, my future stretched out brightly, full of possibility. It wasn’t NFL fame or a flashy sports management gig. It was something even better.

Happiness. Fulfillment. Love.

And the support of a quirky town that felt like family.



I WALKED hand-in-hand with Evan back to the sidelines where I’d left Kelsey under Calista’s malevolent eye. As much as I wanted to take Evan back to my place and consecrate our new relationship status, *thoroughly*, I still needed to face what happened with Kelsey to move past it properly.

I knew it wouldn’t be pleasant, but I finally felt ready.

Kelsey’s gaze locked on our hands, but she didn’t look surprised as much as irritated. I suspected Calista had happily explained why I went after Evan. She stood nearby, glaring Kelsey down. She didn’t know the whole story though. Calista

believed Kelsey left me high and dry while I was injured in the hospital. She didn't know I'd been trying to leave Kelsey for weeks before my fall.

"There you are," Kelsey said. "Are we going to talk, or did I waste my gas money?"

"We're going to talk," I said easily. I drew Evan forward. "I want you to meet my boyfriend, Evan."

Calista threw up her hands. "Hallelujah, I've witnessed a miracle. Two men have pulled their heads out of their asses."

"Hey, my head wasn't..." Evan huffed. "I was just waiting patiently."

Calista rolled her eyes and mumbled, "More like running scared."

I ignored Calista's antics. I absolutely owned that my head had been up my ass. Maybe Evan had been scared, but his patient acceptance gave me the time and courage to realize my feelings. I squeezed his hand to reassure him. "Evan, this is Kelsey, my ex from down in Alabama."

"Hi, Kelsey."

Kelsey gave him a long look, as if trying to see what I did. She pasted on a huge fake smile.

"Dawson, if you wanted to play games, you could have saved us both some time. I know you're not gay." She rolled her eyes. "Remember spring break our sophomore year? Our friends thought we went missing we were in bed so long." She gave a trilling laugh. "It was worth every minute too. Nothing and no one has ever compared. Right, sweetie?"

Evan looked mortified, and exasperation swept through me.

"Playing games isn't my style." More like *her* style, though I resisted speaking the uncharitable thought. "Evan is my boyfriend."

She looked uncertain as her gaze flicked between us. "I don't understand."



“There’s nothing to understand. I love him.”

Evan let out a little breath of surprise, even though I’d already given him my heart on a platter. It was still new, though, so I understood. It felt a bit surreal to say it out loud after so long spent trying to hold it inside. But it also felt really fucking good.

Calista smirked at Kelsey, clearly pleased with events. My aim was not to upset Kelsey, though. I just wanted all my cards on the table. Most importantly, Evan needed to know she wasn’t a threat to our relationship.

“Fine. Whatever,” Kelsey said. “Can we talk alone, at least? I’d rather not air my private business in front of your...” She couldn’t seem to bring herself to say boyfriend. I’d had no idea Kelsey was so homophobic. “All your friends.”

I glanced at Evan, who nodded. “Calista can take me home.”

I drew Evan aside so we could have a little privacy. “I’m going to meet her at Glazed. If you want to be there, I understand. It might get ugly, and I don’t want to drag you into drama, but I also don’t want you to worry.”

Evan smiled tentatively. “It’s okay. I trust you. I’ll just go by Grandpa’s to check up on him. Then, um...” He bit his lip. “Maybe I could go to your place to wait for you?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Mr. Moore, are you looking to seduce me again?”

He blushed prettily. “I’d like to be alone with my boyfriend. Is that so wrong?”

“Hell no. It’s all kinds of right.”

He hesitated. “If you don’t think you’ll be in the mood...” He glanced over toward Kelsey, who was pacing impatiently. “I’ll understand.”

“Baby, I’ll always be in the mood for you.” I grasped his face and kissed him.

I could feel Kelsey watching, which was awkward, so I kept it short. Still, it wouldn’t hurt my ex to see just how real

my relationship with Evan was. The last thing I wanted was to fend off any more advances from her.

I turned back to Kelsey. “I’ll text you the address where we can meet.”

# CHAPTER 29



## DAWSON

I LEFT WITHOUT WAITING FOR KELSEY, GLAD FOR A BREATHER on the drive over. I was tense, clenching the steering wheel, dread tightening my stomach into a knot. I glanced up at the little grasshopper Evan had given me, still dangling from my rearview mirror, and took a deep breath.

*It'll be okay. Evan's waiting for me when this is over.*

That, more than anything, gave me the strength to get out of the car, order a couple of coffees, and face Kelsey when she came in.

“Wow, this place is kind of a dump,” she said, glancing around at the smattering of plastic tables. Glazed was a little bit of a hole in the wall, but I’d never paid much attention to the décor, always more focused on Evan than the scuffed floors and lack of art on the walls. “You never did take me on nice dates. We’ll have to work on that.”

“This is not a date,” I said, my jaw clenching and all of my peace fleeing.

“It was a joke.” Kelsey rolled her eyes as she picked up her coffee and took a sip, then grimaced and shoved it away. “Ugh, why didn’t you get me a mocha? You know I hate black coffee.”

I shrugged. Glazed wasn’t known for their skill with fancier coffee drinks, but I couldn’t muster up the energy to explain.

“Wow. You’re a barrel of laughs today. Your team just won. Shouldn’t you be in the mood to celebrate?”

“I will. With Evan.”

“This again.” She shook her head. “How can you just move on so easily? You loved me. That doesn’t just go away. It hasn’t for me. No one else compares to you, Dawson. That’s why I’m here.” Her voice quivered. “I need us to try again.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Don’t you feel anything for me? Even a little?” Her voice was small and sad, and guilt slithered through me, but I resisted the urge to apologize. This was what Kelsey did. She played my emotions like a skilled musician. I didn’t know if it was intentional or a byproduct of her own emotional responses and my empathy, but it had always made it hard for me to stand my ground.

But I couldn’t give in to it. Not this time.

*Evan has never guilted me. He only ever accepts what I can give.*

I drew strength from that realization. I didn’t know what a healthy relationship looked like when I dated Kelsey. My own parents had fought like cats and dogs before divorcing. The best role models I had were Calista’s parents, and I hadn’t seen them after the age of eleven. But *now* I knew the difference between healthy and dysfunctional.

I could finally see that the problem wasn’t me—or, at least, it wasn’t just me. Kelsey and I were a toxic combination. But Evan and me? We worked. From the very beginning, we’d been right for each other. I’d been afraid of having another relationship, but label or not, I’d been in one for a long time.

And it was healthy, full of kindness and support and...real love.

So I answered Kelsey honestly, though I knew she wouldn’t take it well.

“I thought at the time that I loved you, but I was wrong. I didn’t know what real love was until I fell for Evan.”

She jerked back, paling. “You don’t mean that.”

“I do. I’m sorry for how things ended between us. I’m deeply sorry I drank too much and let things escalate like they did. You never should have been on that roof, and if something had happened to you, I’d have never forgiven myself.”

She pressed her lips together, tears filling her eyes. “And what about me? Am I supposed to never forgive myself for leading you out there? You’re the one who got hurt.”

“Hey, I don’t blame you for that,” I said softly. “We both made bad choices that night. But me falling? That’s on me. You don’t need my forgiveness, but you have it. All right?”

She choked on a small sob and brushed tears from the corners of her eyes. “I should have been there for you afterward, but I thought you’d be so angry with me.”

“I didn’t expect you to be. We broke up before I ever fell.”

Our fight had been largely about our final breakup. We’d had many fights, many breakups. But I’d been trying to make this one stick. Kelsey had cornered me outside the upstairs bathroom, trying once again to cajole me into making up. When it hadn’t worked, things had gotten heated. I’d taken the fight into a bedroom for some semblance of privacy, though half of the party could probably hear every word. In that bedroom, there was a window with a broken screen, which gave Kelsey an opening to the roof.

It was just as much my fault that she’d gone out that window. I’d enclosed us in a room while we both spiraled out of control. She’d wanted an escape. And yeah, she’d thrown around threats about ending everything, and I’d been worried for her safety. But surely I could have done something different, made a better choice somewhere. Maybe if I’d retreated instead of pursuing her, she’d have calmed and come inside on her own.

But there was no changing the past. We’d both had shitty judgment that night, and it’d changed my life forever. But that change didn’t hurt as much as it once had. I’d made peace with my new path forward. I wasn’t a football star for the NFL, but

that was okay. I kind of liked the slower pace of small-town life.

“I still should have tried to be a friend to you,” Kelsey said.

For a second, I thought I’d misjudged her. That she felt as much regret as I did, as much responsibility. But then she added, “If I’d been there, we’d have gotten back together. But it’s not too late for us. We can still fix this. It’d be better this time. We were just young and partying too much, that’s all. I could move here to Granville, live with you, and we could have everything.” Her eyes were bright, the tears all dried up as she grew excited. “We’re meant to be. I know we are!”

I pushed back my chair, shaking my head. “No. I’ve moved on.”

She made a sound of frustration. “You’re not in love with some guy. You’re not gay!”

“No, I’m pansexual,” I said tightly. “You can look it up. I’m done here.”

I’d been dreading this conversation for so long, feeling guilty for so long. But looking at Kelsey now, I felt...nothing. No, that wasn’t true. I still felt twisted up and uncomfortable to be here, but all the little things that had led me to end our relationship were resurfacing now that distance wasn’t muting them.

Our relationship was over long before I fell off that rooftop—even if Kelsey had never wanted to acknowledge it.

I grabbed both our coffee cups and headed for the trash bin. She followed me. “Are you serious? You’re just going to walk away from me.”

“I don’t know what else to say to convince you. I love Evan.”

I turned toward the door, but she grasped my arm. I tensed, resisting the urge to shove her away. I refused to be drawn into the kind of fight that sent me out onto a rooftop.

“Please, Dawson,” she said. “I can’t stand the idea of you hating me.”

“I don’t hate you,” I said honestly. “But I can’t go back to what we had. I don’t want to. I’ve found something better, and I really hope you can do the same.”

I left her there, still protesting weakly as I walked out.

Kelsey belonged in my past, left behind with my mistakes and regrets. I had something better waiting ahead—and I refused to be held back from it a minute longer.



## EVAN

DAWSON RETURNED SOONER than I expected, charging through the door and across the room without a word. I just had time to pop up from the love seat, where I’d stationed myself with my laptop—not that I’d been getting any work done. I was too worried about him. Not for my sake; I trusted him when he said he loved me. But for his. What kind of shadow would this conversation with Kelsey cast over him?

“Are you okay?”

Dawson didn’t answer, his eyes full of fire as he grasped my face and bent to kiss me hard.

I clung to his forearms, a thrill shooting through me as he swept his tongue into my mouth. He was always passionate, but there was a fierceness to this kiss that caused my pulse to race. I responded. How could I not? All that intensity unleashed was a powerful aphrodisiac.

“I need you,” he rasped when he broke the kiss.

“Yes, anything, but—”

I broke into a startled yelp as he hooked his arms beneath my thighs and lifted me. I wrapped my legs around his waist instinctively and locked my arms behind his neck as he kissed me again.



Dawson walked toward the bed, stumbling into the wall next to the bathroom. He pressed me there, grinding into me, as if he couldn't wait to get inside me.

“Daws...” I lost any coherent thought as he latched his mouth onto my throat. He nibbled and sucked my skin—seeming determined to mark me. I writhed in his arms, suddenly as desperate for it as him.

He lifted his head. “You are the sexiest thing ever.”

“Me?” I laughed breathlessly. “You're the one picking me up and carrying me around. Fuck.”

Dawson grinned. “You like my muscle, baby?”

“You know I do.”

He flexed his arms, lifting me away from the wall. This time we made it to the bed. I thought he'd toss me onto it, but he set me on my feet instead, letting me slide down the front of his body and feel every hard plane of muscle.

Dawson sucked his bottom lip into his mouth as he gazed at me hotly, as if I were the one worth drooling over. “Do you know how lucky I feel to have you?”

I shook my head, throat tight.

“Fucking immeasurably lucky, Ev. Like I won the lottery lucky.”

“Like you just won the playoffs lucky?” I teased, mostly because I didn't know how to handle all the intense honesty focused on me.

“You're the Super Bowl, baby.”

“Wow.” I chuckled. “Maybe I should invite Kelsey to visit more often.”

“Don't even joke.”

“Sorry.” I placed my hand over his heart, rubbing a little to soothe. “Was it awful?”

“It wasn't fun, no.”

I hesitated. “Do you want to talk—”

“No.” His tone was brusque. He winced. “Later, I will. Right now I just want...to focus on my future. Which is you.” His lips twitched. “Hopefully naked with me.”

“I like the sound of this future,” I said easily.

If Dawson wanted to tell me the nitty gritty details of his conversation with Kelsey, I’d listen. If he didn’t, that was okay too. Kelsey was his past. His experiences with her might be part of him, but they didn’t define him. I only needed the man who I’d come to know and love here in Granville.

Dawson undressed me, shifting from the heated urgency of earlier to something gentler. He worked open my buttons, then pushed my shirt off my shoulders as he dipped forward to brush his lips over my collar bone.

I shivered and arched my chest out, my body begging for more of his mouth. Instead, he dropped to his knees and kissed across my navel while he unfastened my jeans. When he got them open, he pushed them down, then patiently helped me remove shoes and socks before stepping out of each pantleg—until I was entirely naked before him.

Dawson sat back on his heels as he looked up at me, hands coasting up and down my calves. If I’d ever had any doubts about his attraction to me, they were long gone. He always showed such appreciation for me, his gaze sweeping over me and drinking in the details.

“Tonight, I want to swallow,” he said.

I parted my lips in surprise, but before I could form a complete thought, wet heat engulfed my cock. I curled forward, one hand clutching his shoulder and the other his hair as pleasure streaked through me.

“God, Daws...” I trailed off into a groan as he took me deeper, working me with tongue and lips.

His arms circled my hips, big hands cupping my cheeks. He squeezed them rhythmically, parting them when he drew up my cock, then pushing them together as he lowered his head to take more of me in. The brush of air that swept in each

time he exposed my hole to the room was a maddening tease. I clenched, desire flaring to be stretched and filled.

“I want you in me.”

He pulled off long enough to suck two fingers. “I’ll fuck you, but you have to save your cum for my mouth.”

My body flamed with heat. “You sound so dirty.”

Dawson smirked as he worked his fingers into my ass. “You like it.”

I shuddered as he twisted his fingers, unable to deny it. I pushed back, urging him to go deeper, but it wasn’t good enough. I huffed impatiently. “Hurry.”

“What? My fingers not long enough?”

“No.” I whined a little. “Give me your cock. I need it so bad. Need you.”

“Fuck, okay. I’ve got you.”

Dawson spun me around and bent me over the bed. My cock rubbed up against the mattress, making me jolt. Behind me, Dawson tore off his clothes in a frenzy and grabbed supplies from the side table.

“I don’t know if I prepped you enough.”

“It’s fine. I can’t wait—”

“Me either.”

I gasped as his cockhead pressed against me, rubbing and prodding at my rim until Dawson found the right angle and shoved inside.

A sharp burn lanced through me, and my body tensed.

“Okay?” he murmured, stilling to give me time to relax and let him in. “You’re still so tight.”

“You’re still so big,” I mumbled, my arms straining to support my weight and Dawson’s as he leaned over me. “But I’m okay.”

“You’re good for my ego.”

My body eased further, letting him sink deeper, the first tendrils of pleasure beginning to override the discomfort. He kept going, slowly and inexorably inching forward until I'd taken all of him.

"There we go," he murmured in my ear as I trembled, my body caught at the crossroads where it wanted away from the intrusion but also wanted more of it. "I'm going to fuck you now. It's gonna be hard and fast and so, so good. But remember, you don't come until I can drink you down."

I groaned, cock throbbing, on the edge of shooting off already. "Better hold the dirty talk then."

Dawson snorted. "Knew you loved it."

Then he was moving, thrusting hard. My arms collapsed immediately, sending me chest-first against the mattress. I turned my head, resting my cheek on the bed, as Dawson held up my hips with brute strength as he pumped into me.

It was intense and fast, and I could only hold on for the ride, wailing loud enough to disturb the whole house.

Dawson tried to shush me, laughing, then groaned loudly when I tightened my ass around him in retribution. "Fuck."

It was over astonishingly fast. I clenched the bedsheets in my hands, trying to hold off my orgasm and fearing I was about to disappoint him. My cock kept rubbing against the bed with Dawson's every thrust. "Daws, I can't— I need to—"

"No, wait," he ordered, sounding desperate himself. Seconds later he muffled his cry into my shoulder as he jerked inside me.

I wanted to come so badly I was shaking, and when he carefully pulled out, I felt empty and unsatisfied.

"Dawson," I moaned pitifully.

He flipped me over and fell on my cock, sucking hard. I tipped into my climax before I could even shout a warning, coming so hard I couldn't breathe, much less make a sound.

Dawson coughed, bringing me back to my senses, then swiped a hand over his lips to catch the cum that had dribbled

free.

I reached for him, wanting a kiss, but he grabbed me and shoved me further up the bed, then collapsed beside me, chest heaving.

“Thighs are burning.” He gulped a few more breaths. “Haven’t done enough squats for that position.”

He was so tall that he’d had to crouch, and I hadn’t helped by collapsing to my chest. “Sorry.”

He rolled onto his side and grinned. “Don’t apologize. Totally worth it. You’re so gorgeous when you come apart like that. Loud, though.”

I slapped his stomach. “Yeah, well, you try to be quiet with a cock ramming your prostate.”

“Okay.”

I blinked, jerking my head to look at him. “What?”

He smiled almost shyly as he shrugged a shoulder. “I want to try everything with you.”

“Oh, I... I was just kidding. I didn’t mean I *wanted* to top.”

“Do you not want to?”

He seemed serious, so I bit down on my immediate instinct to say no. I thought about it. It would feel strange, fucking Dawson instead of the other way around, but I could see how it would be...interesting. “I don’t know,” I said at last. “I mean, I’d be willing to try...”

“But?”

I wrinkled up my nose. “What if you like it so much you don’t want to fuck me anymore?”

Dawson laughed. “Oh, I see. You’re worried you’ll lose cock privileges.”

“Something like that.”

He shook his head, smiling. “You’re adorable. I’ll always want to fuck this ass.” He slapped my bare cheek hard enough

it stung, and I jolted. Then he kissed the protest right off my lips. Our tongues mingled, and I tasted my cum.

“Why did you swallow? I know you don’t love the taste.”

He hummed. “You taste better than me at least, but I don’t know. I had this craving to have every part of you. Does that sound creepy?”

“No. That’s why I do it. It’s kind of symbolic. I’m taking a part of you into me forever. Your pleasure, your essence.”

“Waxing poetic about cum. Impressive.”

I laughed, flushing. “Shut up.”

“Aw, these blushes.” Dawson stroked a knuckle over my cheek. “I think I fell in love with these blushes first.”

“I’m glad they’re good for something,” I muttered ungraciously.

“They’re beautiful, like you.” He hesitated. “I’m so sorry I made you worry, for even a second, today. I should have told you how I felt sooner.”

“It’s okay.” I searched his face, trying to gauge how he felt now that the sex endorphins were settling. “I knew things ended badly with Kelsey. It was silly of me to be insecure, but she kissed you and made it sound like...”

“I didn’t ask her to come here.”

“I know that now. Part of me didn’t even believe it then. I was just afraid.”

Dawson traced a fingertip over my eyebrow. “Well, you’ve got me now, Ev. You’re not gonna get rid of me easily.”

“Good.”

“And...I’m glad Kelsey showed up. It wasn’t an easy conversation, but being able to see her face helped. I could tell when she was sincere and when she was trying to manipulate me.”

“Did she do that a lot?”

“Yeah. Not to sound harsh, but...sometimes she was so good at it that I questioned my own sanity, you know? Like she'd convince me I was wrong about my own feelings. I felt so guilty when it ended too.”

“Why? If she made you feel so bad...”

“Because it felt like I'd failed. I couldn't be what she needed no matter how hard I tried. And then the night on the rooftop...”

“You shouldn't blame yourself for what happened. She scared you, going out there, and you're not the kind of person to walk away when someone is hurting.”

“Maybe. It was still reckless. I should have called for help, or gotten someone more clear-headed to get her to come in.” He rubbed at his lower leg, as if remembering made an ache flare. “I'll never know now. I fell, and there's no changing that.”

“Did you just slip, or...?”

He huffed. “Worse than that. I tried to *save* her like some ridiculous white knight. She was near the edge, so close, swaying on her feet. I was afraid, and I made a grab for her right as she moved. Overbalanced and pitched over the edge like an idiot. I'm seriously lucky I didn't end up paralyzed.”

*Or worse.* I shut that thought down, unable to fathom my life without Dawson in it. I wished I could bundle him up in blankets to keep him safe, but it was too late.

“It's not ridiculous to try to protect someone, even if it all went wrong. I'm so sorry you went through that.”

“Yeah.” Dawson kissed my temple. “The months afterward got pretty dark. But you are the light at the end of the tunnel. You and Granville and the coaching gig. You all saved me.”

“No. You saved yourself,” I said, so damn proud of him for finding the strength to start over. “I never would have met you if you hadn't put yourself on the path here.”

Dawson smiled. “I guess that's true. Best decision I ever made.” He pushed himself off the bed with a grunt and held

out a hand. “Come on, let’s shower. I don’t want to dwell on this anymore. We can get in a little more naked time before we head to your Grandpa’s place.”

I took his hand. “If you want to sleep here, I’ll understand. My bed over there is so small.”

“Nope. I am not letting you out of my sight. If I do, you’ll probably find a way to take on another job.”

I laughed. “I’m not that bad. And hopefully, my schedule is about to open up.”

“Do tell.”

“Well...I think we need to have an intervention with Grandpa about the store, but pretty much no matter what happens, my work there will be done soon.”

Dawson wrapped his arms around me. “Will you miss it?”

I glanced up at him. “No. If we lose the store, I’ll be sad, but I won’t miss all the demands working there put on me. I *might* miss the sexy stock boy who flexed his muscles before letting me blow him in the stockroom though.”

“Well, you’re in luck. He works in bathrooms too.” With a wink, Dawson guided me into the shower and onto my knees.



# CHAPTER 30



## EVAN

I WATCHED THROUGH THE FRONT WINDOW AS MY PARENTS made their way up the sidewalk to Grandpa's house with my two sisters trailing behind. Dad looked grimly determined, a stubborn man about to do battle. Mom was watching him with a furrowed brow. Like me, she preferred peace to war. My youngest sister, Maisie, seemed oblivious as she skipped up the walk, but Bekah was thirteen and seemed a little more aware of the tension in the air, her gaze shifting from Mom to Dad as if she were trying to suss out what was going on.

“Are they here yet?” Grandpa called from the dining room. “I'm starving!”

We'd decided to hold family brunch at Grandpa's so he wouldn't have to leave home. He'd grumbled that he wasn't an invalid, but he hadn't put up too much of a fight so I knew he really was tired and run-down. At seventy-one years old, with thirty-plus years as a smoker, he couldn't bounce back from illness as quickly as he wanted.

But at this brunch, unlike all the others, we wouldn't bend over backwards to avoid talk about the hardware store. We'd be confronting the elephant in the room.

“They're here,” I called, injecting my voice with false cheer. Turning to Dawson, I murmured, “I hope this isn't a disaster. Grandpa is going to be furious.”

I'd spent the week searching for solutions that wouldn't end in Grandpa losing his store. I'd come to only one conclusion: He and Dad needed to heal their breach so my

parents could take over, as originally intended, and pay the back taxes. Anything else would end in Grandpa losing his family legacy—either to an outside developer who'd honor his wishes way less than Dad, or to the county, who'd simply sell it to the highest bidder and keep the proceeds.

It was actually Dawson's intervention of sorts—arranging volunteer help for me—that made me realize we should do the same for Grandpa.

Dawson placed his hand in the center of my back, rubbing soothingly. "You're doing it out of love."

"I don't think he'll see it that way."

My family came through the front door before Dawson could answer, but he didn't need to tell me that I was out of options. Protecting Grandpa's pride would ultimately hurt him more in the long run. This wasn't just about the store. It was also about his health and his personal finances. It was about the future for our whole family.

Mom was first through the door. "I hope you all are hungry because we went all out this week."

Grandpa peeked around the corner, eyeing the Dutch oven in her arms. "Did you make my favorite?"

"I sure did!" she said cheerfully.

"You only make that at Christmas," Grandpa said.

"Well, you deserve a reward for being cooped up in the house all week."

Grandpa grinned, rubbing his hands together. "Well, hurry up, let's eat. I hope you brought a second one for everyone else."

Mom chuckled good-naturedly, not pointing out that Grandpa was so rail thin he'd barely put away a quarter of the massive deep-dish, oven-baked pancake filled with apples.

Dad followed her in with a crockpot. He hefted it. "Sausage and gravy. Bekah has the biscuits."

"It all looks great," Dawson said, hovering at my side.

He'd met everyone in my family, even my sisters, during the week as they took turns visiting with Grandpa. But it occurred to me that he hadn't been my boyfriend then.

I swallowed nervously. "You all remember Dawson."

"Of course," Mom chirped.

"My boyfriend," I added.

Mom and Dad exchanged a quick look, but they didn't seem too surprised.

"Good game on Friday," Dad said.

"Thanks," Dawson said, shifting to tuck his hands in his pockets. "The kids worked hard."

I nudged him. "So did you."

"So is Dawson my brother too now?" Maisie asked hopefully.

"They're dating, not married," Bekah said with the disgust of a know-it-all teen.

"I'd love for you guys to think of me as a big brother," Dawson said.

My heart melted, and Mom laughed. "Watch out. I'll put you on baby-sitting duty."

"Bring it on," Dawson said. "I can take it."

Maisie gazed up at him. "Big brothers give piggyback rides."

"Do they?" Dawson glanced at me. "Evan, can you verify this brother duty?"

I snorted. "Yeah, but only one per weekend. Right, Maisie?"

"Right!" She reached up as Dawson crouched to let her leap aboard. Considering I hadn't been able to give her a piggyback ride since she was six, she was more than happy to agree to my terms. Having a big strong boyfriend had to be good for something. Besides hot, aggressive sex where he

threw me into the middle of the bed or held me against a wall, anyway.

I tucked those thoughts away for later while Dawson carried my sister into the next room. Grandpa was already digging into his apple pancake before we'd all even taken our seats. As we filled our plates, we made conversation about the girls' plans for Halloween night, the football team's prospects at state, and how soon we could expect a freeze. Despite a few cold weeks, the weather hadn't truly turned wintry yet.

"This is great," Dawson said between bites of apple pancake. He seemed as enthusiastic as Grandpa as he tackled a huge portion alongside a healthy helping of biscuits and gravy, a cup of coffee, and a glass of OJ.

I leaned into him a little, catching my mother's smiling gaze as she watched us. "Yeah, it is."

Too bad it was just the calm before the storm. As soon as we finished eating and clearing the dishes, Dad cleared his throat.

"Time for a family meeting."

Grandpa scowled. "What the hell are you talking about? You can have a family meeting at your own house."

"Not this time," Dad said. "This involves you."

"Me?"

"And the store."

"Oh, here we go. Sticking your nose in a business that's *not* yours," Grandpa said. "Evan has more right to talk to me about the store than you do!"

"Well, it was Evan's idea," Dad snapped back.

Grandpa swung his head toward me. "Is that true? You know how I feel about this."

My heart sank at the betrayal in his tone. I hated this. I was tired of always being caught in the middle. "I'm sorry. I didn't know what else to do."

He glared. "What do you mean? Do about *what*?"

“The store’s in trouble,” my father said brusquely. “We all know it.”

Grandpa’s face reddened. “That has nothing to do with you.”

“Come on, Grandpa,” I pleaded. “Would you really let the county take the store or sell to some developer just to spite Dad? I know you guys have your differences, and feelings were hurt. But hasn’t it gone on long enough?”

“Evan’s right,” my mother said. “This family has been fractured too long.”

Grandpa huffed. “Well, you would say that. He’s your husband.”

“He’s *your* son,” she shot back.

Grandpa pushed back his chair and rose on shaky legs. He braced one hand on the table, his voice quivering—not with sadness, but fury.

“That is my goddamn store, and I’ll do whatever the hell I like with it.” He started toward the hall, wheezing slightly with exertion. “You all can get the hell out of my house.”

“Grandpa?” Maisie said with a trembling voice, eyes filling with tears.

Grandpa hesitated, turning around. “Not you, baby girls. Grandpa’s not mad at you. I’m sorry.”

I didn’t know what to say. Mom and Dad also seemed at a loss. It was Dawson who spoke up. “All due respect, Mr. Moore, but Evan’s told me how important the store is to you. That it’s your family legacy.”

“It is,” he said begrudgingly, as if he sensed a trap.

“Then, it isn’t just about you and your business decisions. It’s about your whole family. Not just Bill and Lora, but Evan and the girls too.”

Grandpa flicked his gaze to my parents, the girls, then me. He sighed, looking tired.

“I wish you had come to me, Evan.”

I hated to hear his disappointment, but I had a share of my own. “I wish you’d told me about the back taxes and the offer the city was pushing at you. I’ve put a lot of myself into the store. And I know you didn’t ask me to, but I did it for you. For the family. Because I didn’t want to watch you kill yourself running it on your own. I hoped that you and Dad would make peace and that one day the store could pass on to another Moore who wants it.”

“But not you,” Grandpa said.

“No,” I said quietly. “I’ve got my own life to live. I can’t keep managing the store on my own, and even if I could... Dad’s the only one who can afford to invest enough to save the store.”

Grandpa made his way slowly back to his abandoned chair and sat down. “All right. I’m willing to listen.”

My father seemed sheepish as he said, “Thanks, Dad. I know we don’t see eye to eye, but I’ve loved that store my whole life.”

Grandpa rubbed at a spot on the table, then mumbled, “Well, I s’pose that’s worth something.”

I exhaled in relief, reaching for Dawson’s hand and squeezing hard. I knew this wouldn’t be the end to Grandpa and Dad’s clashes over the store. It would take careful compromise on both sides to truly repair the chasm between them, not to mention their diverging ideas about how to run the business, but at least now there was a chance that Moore Hardware could live on to see another year.



## DAWSON

EVAN CLOSED HIS LAPTOP, rolling his shoulders with a groan. “God, I can barely move.”

I climbed off the bed—where I’d been dicking around on my phone to kill time while Evan worked—and leaned over the back of the love seat to rub his tense muscles. He sighed as

I worked my thumbs in circles, attempting to loosen the knots in his trapezius muscles.

He'd been sitting hunched over my coffee table for the better part of six hours. Ever since we'd left his parents and grandfather haggling over the details of how the store purchase would work. It wasn't likely to be the smoothest of transitions considering how long they'd been at odds over the store, but at least it would stay in the family. Better yet, Evan would be freed from his obligation to work there.

“Are you finally ready for a break that lasts longer than five minutes?”

“I can't believe I'm saying this, but I'm done.” He sounded bemused. “I just sent my app entry over. Now, all I have to do is wait and see what happens.”

“Holy shit, baby, you finished it?” I bent down, wrapping my arms around his shoulders in a hug. “That's amazing. I'm so fucking proud of you.”

Evan tipped his head back to look at me, a wide smile on his face. “I'm really done. I thought I'd never finish it, especially with everything with the store, but...that's it. Signed, sealed, and delivered.” He gave a little laugh of disbelief. “Wow.”

I turned his head so I could kiss him, the love seat frame pressing into my stomach. When we parted, I climbed over the back and plopped onto the cushion beside him. “What will you do with all your free time now?”

He grinned. “Free time? That's cute. I have to create the presentation on the tutoring app for Tech Club. The school board meeting got bumped up to this week.”

“I thought Warren was going to do that?”

When Evan was overwhelmed with running the store single-handedly last week, I'd gotten a little overzealous in my initial attempts to help him. Before he reined me in, I'd talked to the Tech Club members about doing what they could to help Evan make his app deadline. They couldn't help with the actual app project—that was against the rules—but Warren



had volunteered to take on the tutoring program presentation. He'd needed a senior project after another fell through, and he'd devoted most of two years to the project, so Evan had agreed.

"Well, yes, but only because I didn't have time. Now, I could—"

I pressed a finger over his lips. "Ev, take a beat. I know you're used to running ninety miles a minute, but you can relax. Warren can handle the presentation, and the school board loves it when students take on leadership. It might even go over better this way, right?"

"Maybe," he said reluctantly.

I combed my fingers through his hair, gently massaging his head. "You need to learn how to slow down. With your parents buying the store, you're going to have a lot more leisure time."

"Oh, am I?" Evan said. "How should I spend it?"

"I've got a few ideas," I said, waggling my eyebrows. "Maybe you need a tutor? I'm really *experienced*."

"I don't know," Evan mused. "I kind of just want to spend time with my boyfriend without any games."

I smiled. "That sounds like a great plan."

"And then I'll probably build another app..." he mused. "Oh, and once the contest ends, I'll want to launch Study Dates into the marketplace. Depending on what happens, that could tie up a lot of time. And, of course, I have the Tech Club. If the school board approves our project, we'll be implementing the tutoring program and that will be a *big* undertaking. And if it doesn't..."

"What then?" I asked, almost afraid of the answer.

He shrugged. "We'll start a whole new project."

I couldn't help the smile tugging at my lips. Evan wouldn't be Evan if he wasn't an overachiever. "You're going to be a handful, aren't you? Always diving into the next project."

His eyes sparkled. “I’ve already got ideas for the next app I want to build. It involves teaching normal people how to understand football—”

I cut him off with a kiss, my heart swelling with emotion. That Evan wanted to understand the game better for my sake was incredibly sweet and supportive. But that it would inspire an app... Hell, I felt a little like a muse to a great artist.

Evan kissed me eagerly, as he always did. When we parted, his face was rosy with one of those blushes I couldn’t resist.

Then a thought hit me. “What do you mean, *normal* people?”

Evan laughed. “You know, those of us with other interests.”

“I have other interests.”

“Like what?”

“Like my cute boyfriend who clearly needs a reward after all the hard work he’s put in.” I tugged his shirt up and off, then coasted my hands over his warm skin. “Turn around.”

“Uh, okay...” Evan seemed confused until I set my hands back on his shoulders and began to rub. “Ahh, fuck. That feels so good.”

I leaned forward, speaking into his ear. “I have three words for you.”

“Yeah?”

“Full body massage.”

Evan groaned. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” I pressed a soft kiss to the nape of his neck. “Which is why this massage comes with a happy ending.”

He sounded thoughtful. “How long until this ending?”

I sensed that he was asking about more than a massage. Encircling him in my arms, I hugged him tightly from behind.

“As long as you like. I’m not going anywhere.”

A breath shuddered out of him. “Good. Me either.” He glanced over his shoulder at me, meeting my gaze. “We both deserve a long-lasting happiness, don’t you think?”

For the first time, I really did. Thanks to Evan’s love and acceptance, I felt whole again.

“I do,” I whispered. Then I kissed him and dragged him to the bed, where I could shower him with all the love I had to give.

# EPILOGUE



## EVAN

EIGHT MONTHS LATER ...

“DUDE, this is your party. That means, have fun!”

Darren had busted me talking about my app, but in my defense, this party was to celebrate my app’s launch into the marketplace. It had come in third in the *Gadget* magazine national Innovative App Spotlight, gaining me a ton of exposure. Two companies had offered to buy it outright, but I’d opted to find an investor who would help me launch it and allow me to keep a portion of the profits—not to mention creative control over how the app was implemented. It was a riskier choice, but it wasn’t as if I needed to become rich. I was living in a small rental with Dawson, and between the two of us, we could handle the bills.

“I *am* having fun,” I protested. “This is what fun looks like on me.”

He snorted, waving to the room, where small clusters of people stood talking while sipping beer or wine—or soda. Dawson still didn’t drink, and though he didn’t mind the occasional party where others did, we stocked plenty of other beverages.

“We need to liven up this shit with a game,” Darren said. “Preferably one with shots of tequila.”

“You never change, do you?”

“Nope.” He grinned, eyes glazed over and his voice too loud as the beer did the talking for him. “Come on. It’s like tradition.”

I snorted. “Just because you like tormenting your friends with these games doesn’t mean it’s a *tradition*. It’s a poor choice is what it is, and eventually it’s going to come back to bite you in the ass.”

“Oh, I see. You’re too important for your small-town friends now that you’re some big app developer with a hot boyfriend.”

That was so ridiculous I didn’t know where to start. Luckily, Dawson saved me the trouble by butting in. “Sorry, Darren, but you’re not my type. I like them smart.”

He kissed my cheek as Darren spluttered, half-choking on his last gulp of beer. “I didn’t mean— Hey! I’m smart.”

I smirked. “Are you trying to convince Dawson that you’re his type?”

“No! That’s— You’re both...ugh!” Darren whirled away toward the room. “Hey, all! We’re gonna start up a game of Truth or Dare for anyone who’s interested.”

“Who decided that?” I muttered.

“Is he always like this?” Dawson asked, amusement lacing his voice as he watched Darren work the room to collect reluctant participants to the game.

“You mean a big child? Yep.”

“Oh, great,” Dawson muttered under his breath with a dark look off to the right. I followed his gaze, surprised to see Linc approaching with a big smile on his face. I hadn’t seen him since that night at the barcade in Riverton, but we’d messaged a few times since he made his apology that inadvertently outed Dawson to Calista. I hoped Dawson wasn’t holding that against him. Linc could hardly be expected to know that a message to me would be seen by someone else.

“Hey, Evan!” Linc leaned in to hug me. “Congrats on your app, man.”

“Thanks,” I said. “And thanks for beta testing it. Your feedback was a huge help.”

“No problem. It was fun. I even made a study buddy or two.” His smile slipped. “Not that it’ll do me much good now.”

Before I could ask what that meant, Dawson cleared his throat. “They’re starting up a game of Truth or Dare. You should join.”

“I should?” Linc looked dubious. “Are you guys playing?”

“We’ll be there in a minute. We’ve got something to do first.”

That was news to me. Linc nodded and excused himself, joining the cluster of people positioning themselves on the couch and matching armchairs.

“What do we need to—mmph.” Dawson kissed me, long and hard enough that we drew some attention from the party guests. A few laughs and hooting catcalls went up. I gazed at him, stunned stupid and reeling. “Hi.”

He grinned smugly. “Yeah, I still got it.”

I blinked, trying to clear the pheromones fogging my brain. “Got what?”

“You, babe. I just needed everyone here to see that you’re satisfied with a small-town coach even though you’re a fancy-pants developer now.” Dawson winked playfully, and I snorted and shook my head.

“You’re not seriously worried about Linc, are you?”

He cast a glance toward the Truth or Dare group, then did a double-take. “Uh, no, but maybe Darren should be.”

I followed his gaze, my jaw dropping.

My straight-as-an-arrow friend was in a lip-lock. With Linc. And not any chaste “I only kissed you for a dare” peck either. They were kissing as deeply as Dawson had kissed me moments before.

Calista sidled over. “Are you guys seeing this?”

“I might be hallucinating,” I said.

“Nope,” Dawson said cheerfully. “I’m seeing it too.”

“Come on,” Calista said. “Let’s go hide out in the kitchen. I do *not* want to be here for the aftermath of this game. I swear, that man was never going to learn until one of these games backfired on him.”

“I warned him,” I said, feeling a little smug myself.

We ducked out of the room, making ourselves scarce, and Dawson pulled me into his arms. I rested back against him, feeling utterly content—despite the fireworks that were probably about to erupt in my living room.

The past eight months had been the best in my life. My parents had finally taken over the store, relieving me of a job I didn’t really want along with the worry over Grandpa’s health. Though Grandpa hadn’t been entirely happy to sell to them, given the conflict between him and Dad, even he had to admit it was a better alternative to letting the store be sold out from under the Moores altogether. He’d taken up bowling of all things and joined a league, taking to full retirement better than any of us expected.

Dawson had been great through all the transitions—as I went through the amazing high of seeing my app perform so well to the stress of making life-changing decisions about how to move forward—and dealt with some of his own as he’d ventured into teaching alongside coaching once his probation period was up. He’d also shared more about his relationship with Kelsey and the feelings of guilt and failure it had engendered in him, as time went by. After talking to his ex, he’d started sorting through the wreckage of his past, finally confronting everything that had happened instead of hiding from it.

We supported one another through the hard times, but more and more there were just good times. Dawson had settled into our relationship so comfortably I sometimes forgot how uncertain I’d once been that he’d never be more than a sexy friend doing me a huge favor.



“You’re the best boyfriend ever,” I murmured.

He chuckled, breath gusting against my throat. “Why, because I sent Linc into that game and inadvertently gave Darren a dose of his own medicine?”

I smiled. “No, because you’re still here with me, despite my chaotic life, my crazy friends, and—”

Darren burst into the kitchen, wild-eyed. “Who the fuck invited Lincoln Tate to this party!”

Tentatively, I raised my hand. “He’s a friend.”

“He’s my ex-girlfriend’s brother!” Darren growled before swiping a wrist over his mouth. “Who fucking tongue kissed me.”

I pressed my lips together, fighting the laugh at his affronted attitude when he’d started the damn game in the first place. Behind me, Dawson’s chest vibrated with quiet laughter. Calista cackled loudly, not even trying to hold back.

“You reap what you sow, Darren!”

“Fuck that,” he said, reaching for her. “I need you to kiss me.”

“What?” She pulled away. “No.”

“Please? I need to overwrite that memory pronto.”

“Don’t think it works that way,” Dawson said easily. “Besides, it’s okay if you liked it. We’re all open-minded here, right?”

Darren scowled in our direction. “I didn’t *like* it.”

“Then there’s no need to flip out,” Calista said, her voice challenging. “Not like you’re a homophobe, right?”

“Fuck!” Darren dragged his hands through his hair. “I need some air.”

He stormed out the back door of the kitchen, and we all exchanged bemused glances. “Think we were too hard on him?” I asked.

Calista and Dawson exchanged a look.

“Nah,” they said at the same time, making us all laugh.

Poor Darren. If he didn't enjoy that kiss, I kind of felt bad for him, even if he *had* instigated the whole thing by insisting on these silly games. I wouldn't wish that on anyone. But if he *did*... Well, his head must be spinning. I'd never seen him so much as look at a guy twice. But then again, neither had Dawson before we met.

A flush of pleasure crept through me as I remembered again the shock and awe I felt the first time he kissed me. Dawson's mind must have been on a similar track. He spoke close to my ear. “How about we herd these people out of here and relive our first night together?”

I shivered. “Best idea I've heard all night.”



**Up Next!**

**Truth or Darren**

***TRUTH OR...WHOA, you weren't supposed to take that dare!***

What happens when my big mouth writes a check it can't cash while taunting my ex's brother in a game of Truth or Dare? I end up with his tongue in my mouth. In my very straight, totally uninterested mouth.

While I don't feel anything.

Nothing at all.

In fact, I barely noticed.

So, why can't I stop thinking about it?

***Order your copy of Darren and Linc's story now!***



*Did you miss Truman and Lyle's story, Two Truths and a Lyle? You can grab it free as part of the [Your Book Boyfriend's Boyfriend giveaway!](#)*



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# THANK YOU FOR READING!

Thank you for reading *Never Have I Ever!*

The inspiration for the Games We Play series is twofold. I wanted to write something that I believed my fans of my Thrust into Love and Loves Notes series would enjoy, but I was also quite enamored by small-town romance, having recently binge-read quite a few books by May Archer.

I'd written several series set in small towns. I grew up in central Kansas, and small towns are generally what I know best. But I'd never written small-town romance in the sense that the town is as much of a character as the people. I underestimated just how much creativity and time goes into small-town romances. Every business name suddenly needed to be clever. The people needed to be colorful. The town traditions funny or meaningful.

It was a whole new challenge that I really enjoyed, and I hope you all loved the world of Granville as much as I did!

As usual, I must thank my beta readers, Susan and Michael, for their input, as well as my editor, Rebecca. Special thanks also to fellow authors Brigham Vaughn and Jacki James who helped talk me out of self-doubt spirals during the writing process.

Credit for the amazing title belongs solely to my husband, Lucas. When he came up with it, along with two others, I knew I had to write the series!

# ABOUT DJ

DJ Jamison writes romances about everyday life and extraordinary love featuring a variety of queer characters, from gay to bisexual to asexual. DJ grew up in the Midwest in a working-class family, and those influences can be found in her writing through characters coping with real-life problems. DJ spent more than a decade in the newspaper industry before chasing her first dream to write fiction. She's spent a lifetime reading and continues to avidly devour her fellow authors' books each night. She lives in Kansas with her husband, two sons, one snake, and a sadistic cat named Birdie.

DJ is active in her Facebook group, [DJ and Company](#), as well as [Queer Romance Fab Club](#).

You can also connect with her on other social media platforms.



## OTHER BOOKS BY DJ

### Games We Play

Never Have I Ever: When a party game reveals I still have my V-card, it's embarrassing. But when the sexy new guy in town wants to coach me in the art of flirtation, it's game on.

Truth or Darren: When I push my ex-girlfriend's brother too far with a dare, I'm the one to pay the price. A very sexy but utterly confusing tongue kiss with a guy.

### Thrust Into Love

Swiped By My Dad's Best Friend: Cooper is a frat boy, general screwup, and... Daddy's boy?

Matched By My Rival: Simon is an ex-football star, a bitter rival, and... falling for the enemy?

Tapped By My Roommate: Ethan is a shy geek, newly bi-curious, and... propositioning his gay roommate?

Sexted By Santa: Christian Kringle is a college professor, reluctant Santa, and... fake dating his neighbor?

### Love Notes

Secret Admirer: I'm his brother's best friend. He doesn't know I'm also his secret admirer...

Naughty & Nice: He's my ex-stepbrother, he's never liked me, and now we're snowed in together. Good thing he doesn't know I'm in love with him...

Boyfriend Freeze: I've sworn off men for sixty days. I can't possibly have him. But a cute geeky librarian has never been so tempting...

### Marital Bliss

Surprise Groom: Caleb is shocked to learn his family could lose Bliss Island Resort—unless he can pull off a marriage of convenience with an investor's gay, go-go dancing son.

Wrangling a Groom: Wyatt and Diego made a childhood pact to get married one day. But they grew up, life got messy, and young love wasn't enough. When Diego visits the ranch, they have one more chance... Can they get it right in time to fulfill that marriage pact after all?

Nobody's Groom: A sexy ranch hand and a naïve country boy ignite each other's tempers—and passions—in this bisexual awakening, cowboy romance.

Faking a Groom: Avery Kinkaid has been repressing his deepest urges for as long as he can remember. But when his father pushes him too far, he's ready to call his bluff. All he needs is a groom, and his first love is the perfect man for the role of fake fiancé.

### Hearts and Health

Heart Trouble: Nurse Ben Griggs is leery of trusting his heart to anyone, let alone a thrill-seeking patient, but he agrees to a series of dates, if only to prevent more injuries!

Bedside Manner: Zane Kavanaugh is still recovering from a traumatic coming out, but he finds himself drawn to the calm, collected, much *older* ER doctor who treated him.

Urgent Care: Surgeon Trent Cavendish returns to his hometown—and his first love. Xavier isn't the kid he remembers, but a sexy man in lace *and* a competent nursing student. And neither version of the man is going to make it easy for Trent to find his second chance at love.

Room for Recovery: When Beau is bullied, teen heartthrob Wade comes heroically to his rescue. But their growing attraction won't come without painful truths.

Surprise Delivery: A thrill-seeking doctor teaches a workaholic administrator how to live in the moment before the responsibility of a baby arrives, and in return he finds love after loss.

Orderly Affair: A bi-curious orderly explores with a geeky lab tech, but between Ian's reluctance to come out and Callum's annoying ex, they'll have to work for their HEA in this hookups-to-lovers romance.

Operation Makeover: A cute but insecure X-ray tech and a gorgeous hairdresser join forces for a makeover that brings them both a love they never saw coming.

Rapid Response: A firefighter discovers a new side to his sexuality with a bossy male paramedic. Their chemistry is red-hot, but Sean will have to come to terms—not just with his attraction to a man, but with his desperate need to please.

### **Standalone Romances**

Yours for the Holiday: Remy loves to hate his brother's best friend. Or maybe he hates to love him. Either way, sparks fly when the two share a room during a holiday vacation.

All I Want is You: One kiss under the mistletoe destroyed a friendship. Will another Christmas kiss remake it into something better?

Five Fake Dates: How many fake dates will it take to decide if your best friend should be your boyfriend, and whether one kiss was a fluke or only the beginning of a bisexual discovery? Five, obviously!

Love by Number: Aidan doesn't have the best record with relationships, but he's had a lifelong love affair with baseball. When he needs a ride to the World Series, though, he must rely on a sexy artist who is as spontaneous as Aidan is rigid. Will their differences add up to love?

### **Want more?**

This is just a sampling of my books. See my [full catalogue](#) on my Amazon author page.