

AN  
*Out to Sea*  
NOVEL

*Nothing*  
TO LOSE

E.M. LINDSEY

# NOTHING TO LOSE

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Nothing To Lose

E.M. Lindsey

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*Content warning: this book contains the realistic portrayal of living with Crohn's disease and stoma management, racism, emotional abuse by narcissistic parents, ableism, and implied stalking by an online date. Please take care if these issues are triggering for you.*

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TO LOSE

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# CHAPTER ONE

PEYTON WAS DOING his best to convince himself that the sheer and vast amount of sweat pouring from his body was from the humidity and heat, and totally—*not at all*—from the fact that he was desperately out of shape and still currently unable to lift anything.

Though, to be fair, he'd had surgery and was still three weeks away from being medically cleared to do any sort of manual labor. His disease—the one that appeared out of nowhere and started ravaging his life—had laid him down and out for the last two years.

He was only just now starting to feel human since he'd gone under the knife, and to accomplish that feeling, the price had been the use of his asshole.

Literally.

Not exactly what a gay man wanted to hear from his doctor when he'd been rushed into the ER, but he supposed it was a worthy sacrifice if it meant being able to move around, and eat, and shit, and goddamn *live* without excruciating pain. Now, everything collected neatly in a bag attached to his



stomach, covered by an adorable little flower-patterned cloth one of the nurses had made and sold on Etsy.

He probably should mind that she was a GI nurse and making a sudden mint on stoma bag covers of all things, but his own business was thriving again so he couldn't find it in him to complain. In fact, he wished her well and made sure to buy at least one a month to support her endeavor.

Unfortunately, the cute little bags didn't make dealing with the rest of having a newly rerouted colon easier. Like how his colon could still get all blocked up and he still ended up in the ER from time to time to get it flushed. Or, even worse, the bags leaked a *lot* more than the doctor and his nurses had warned him. He was told there was a learning curve. He was told it just took time.

He was told to expect heavy grief with the adjustment period of his body changing permanently.

He was *not* told he'd wake up in the middle of the night like a newborn baby who had blown-out a diaper.

But it did. It was happening to him, and it was yet another reason he decided to write off the idea of dating because that was just...

Well, it was *gross*.

And Peyton didn't want to hunt down someone with a scat fetish just to feel loved. If that was the case, he'd rather die single and alone with maybe a cat or two. Or a fish, since a fish wouldn't eat him when he expired.

It didn't sound so bad, really. He was still young and attractive. Once he was cleared by his doctor, he could do what he always did and hit up the clubs for quick one-night stands and weekend flings. No strings, no last names, just fun.

Of course, that meant he'd have to figure out the fucking part because he had no intention of living like a monk. It was just more complicated now because Peyton had always been a very enthusiastic bottom and that wasn't possible, like, ever again.

Logically, he knew there was more than just one way to get off, but he wasn't sure how to feel sexy yet. Not with that bag hanging off his stomach and his ass all sewed up like a damn Ken doll. Not to mention he hadn't been able to get hard since his surgery. He'd been too mortified to bring that up during his last exam, so he chalked it up to the stress of what his body had just gone through, and he'd panic in a few months if his dick still wouldn't get on board.

For now, he'd set that aside, because he had a lot going on that had nothing to do with where strangers might want to stick their cocks.

His brick-and-mortar bakery had closed after his longest flare which kept him stuck in bed for weeks on end. He'd spent the weeks leading up to his surgery mourning the loss because he'd worked so hard on building his brand and becoming a fixture with the neighborhood locals.

Peyton had gone to culinary school, to the extreme disappointment of his parents, but it had paid off. He was a damn genius when it came to baking and if it wasn't for his Crohn's, he would have swept the city by storm.

But it all fell apart, and aside from his brother and his best friend comforting him daily and promising it would get better, he had nothing.

Then Taylor, his sometimes-helpful best friend, suggested that he start baking at home as part of his recovery. He insisted Peyton's Instagram followers were missing him and they worried since he'd vanished off the face of social media. Peyton hadn't really considered that nameless, faceless strangers would give a shit about him, but apparently, they did.

There were floods of comments on his old posts asking where he was and if he was okay, and the moment he started answering them, the damn account lit up like a firecracker.

So, he took Taylor's advice. For his first return post, he baked a batch of oatmeal cream pies, and in the caption, he sort of...unloaded. He hadn't really meant to, but the reality of losing everything he'd built and the exhaustion of his recovery had gotten to him.



TheBakerByTheSea: I never know what to say in these captions, as you can see from my old posts. I'm not really a talker. I'm a baker. This post was harder than most though, because everything has felt like an incredible loss. Three years ago, I was diagnosed with Crohn's disease. At the time, my doctor promised that as long as I was careful with myself, I could manage it. But he was wrong—and that's not on him. Sometimes doctors don't have all the answers. A year ago, things took a turn for the worst. And seven months after that, I was told that my life was going to change. While the surgery would make me feel better, great loss came with it, including my bakery. Closing those doors for the last time was one of the hardest days of my life, and that hasn't changed. I miss waking up early every day and standing in that kitchen for sunrise while I set out pastries for the day. I miss giving free cookies to little kids. I miss that look on people's faces when they try stuff like these oatmeal cream pies because not to toot my own horn, but they're amazing. More than that, I miss what baking was to me. But I'm working on loving it again, and the fact that you're all still looking at this account means something. So thank you. I don't know what my future will look like, but I feel like this might be the start to getting back one of the things I loved most and thought I had lost.

The likes started pouring in, and the comments. Then the DMs from people asking if he was willing to ship baked goods, which wasn't something he'd considered at the time. It was a simple yes, but that yes turned into a literal forest-fire which spread across the online baking community and suddenly he was flooded with requests from across the country for delivery.

He and Taylor—when he could take time from his diaper duties—sat down together, and Peyton realized, after making a rather detailed graph, he actually could make an at-home bakery work.

He could get certified, bake from his own kitchen, and ship things. It would save him on the rent of brick and mortar, and

his equipment fit in his dining room.

Mostly.

Kind of.

So long as he did some rearranging and traded in his nice kitchen table that his mom bought him as a housewarming gift. But it was a worthy gift to the baking gods if it meant that he could have this back.

He owned a large townhouse he'd gotten from a foreclosure which meant his mortgage was disgustingly affordable compared to what he'd been paying in rent, and if his sales remained steady the way they were now, he'd be able to save enough money to renovate and expand a bit.

And maybe, just maybe, revisit the idea of his own shop again once he was ready to take that risk.

He didn't want to get too ahead of himself though. He'd invested in a smaller industrial mixer, which Taylor was currently heaving into the little nook where a kitchen table was supposed to go, and his brother, Linden, was fixing the last of the brackets onto his fairly decent DIY baking counter.

Peyton was pretending to help while lying on the couch pressing an ice pack to his stoma site, which was starting to ache again. He reminded himself it had only been two months since having part of his insides now on the outside, and it was normal to not feel, well, *normal*.

"You need meds?" Linden's voice interrupted his melancholy pain spiral, and he glanced over at his brother. Like Linden, Peyton had been adopted by their kind but WASPy parents, and every now and again he still felt a bit weird when he thought of the tall, strawberry-blond, freckly white dude as his brother.

Linden had always fit in with the family where Peyton had looked like some sad TV orphan: super skinny and brown-skinned. He'd described himself growing up as vaguely Asian since all he had to go by were his eyes and nose. He'd brought up the idea of a DNA swab once, which had sent his mother into a hysterical melt-down about how her love should be

enough for him, and she *chose* him, so he didn't need to know about his birth family.

He never bothered to explain to her the weird pain he felt not knowing where the hell he came from, or if there were other people out there who looked like him. She wouldn't let herself believe that he could want to know and still love her just the same.

Luckily, his brother had understood and bought them each matching kits for Peyton's twenty-second birthday. Linden's came out exactly as everyone expected—mostly Scottish with a few drops of Swedish and French.

Peyton nearly choked on his own tongue when half of his came out Japanese, and the second half was split down the middle between Scottish and Ashkenazi.

“Shit,” was all Linden had said as they stared at their laptops. “Maybe we're related, like, for real.”

Peyton very much doubted it considering they didn't register as any sort of relation on the site, but it didn't really matter. He couldn't find anyone closely related to him at all—just a bunch of random fourth cousins spread across the globe.

Either way, it was nice knowing, even if it didn't answer a single damn question he had about himself.

He didn't think about it all the time, though. Especially not lately. For the moment, he was hyper-fixated on getting his house together so he could get himself and his now-online bakery up and running. His savings was starting to dwindle, and it was the very last year he was allowed to get any sort of medical procedure on his dad's insurance. That magic number twenty-five was coming up and even though the man was a GP, he didn't have sway with the blood sucking insurance vampires reading to pounce on Peyton's chronic illness.

Frankly, he needed to get rich so he could stay alive.

Peyton blinked back to reality when his brother dropped into a crouch and pressed the inside of his wrist to Peyton's forehead. He quickly batted him away with a scowl. “What the hell?”

“You’ve been out of it all morning,” Linden said, frowning.

Peyton sighed, then eyed the water in Linden’s hand before snatching it out of his grip and taking a long drink. “I’m not running a fever. I just slept like crap, and the whole bakery set up is stressing me out. I *need* this to go well.”

He knew he didn’t need to remind his brother how shitty it had gotten after his brick-and-mortar shop had closed. Linden hadn’t been around for it much—something his brother had daily panic attacks about after deciding that his lack of involvement caused Peyton’s surgery. No amount of trying to convince the man that Crohn’s didn’t work that way helped.

Peyton had been kind of close-lipped about his diagnosis, anyway. The earliest symptoms had started out in his late teens as chronic stomach aches which his parents said was just anxiety. That morphed into bloating and pain after his twentieth birthday, then weird outbreaks of cold sores first in his mouth—then moving to his eyes of all places.

It was when the bleeding started that Peyton started to really panic.

Test after test, probe after probe making his asshole feel the same way it did after the one weekend he went to a festival when he was nineteen, finally gave him answers. Answers led to medication and steroids and weight gain and misery.

That led to stress which in turn started the cycle all over again, and the next thing he knew, he was crying in his brother’s arms trying to take his first steps after having his entire insides moved around, and a hole carved in his stomach.

Peyton tried to be patient with his brother too, because Linden had a bad habit of assuming responsibility for everything—something he blamed their parents for. But he didn’t have the spoons to hold his brother’s hand over this. Not anymore. He was barely surviving on his own.

With a sigh, Linden turned, flopping over next to his brother. “We’ve got your back.” He left the ‘*this time*’ unsaid. And it wasn’t like Peyton had expected his best friend and

brother to drop everything else they had going on to pull his ass out of the fire or anything, but he had felt a bit like an island before everything had come crashing down.

He was grateful for their help now though, especially since half the shit that needed to get done he still couldn't do.

He sipped more water, then surreptitiously touched his bag, breathing out a sigh of relief when it felt mostly empty. Linden had been there for a few of his spill-over accidents and handled it all with the grace, seeing as he was a highly trained EMT who had done a lot worse.

But it was still vaguely humiliating.

"We should do Thai tonight," Taylor said, walking into the living room and dropping onto Peyton's right. He kicked his foot up onto the coffee table, then promptly pulled Peyton's shirt up and poked at his stomach like he was searching for swelling.

"*Dude*. Do you mind?"

"I'm just checking on you. You're the only one in this room without medical training, so when you say you're fine, I can't trust you," Taylor said with a sniff.

"You're a pediatric nurse," Peyton grumbled, then he turned to his brother. "And *you* drive an ambulance. Neither one of you are qualified to deal with my insides."

Both of them shrugged and settled in a little closer, and though he had no plans to say it aloud, he appreciated the contact. There were times he felt a bit like a gross little bed goblin that no one would ever want to touch again. And although his brother and his married best friend weren't the demographic he was shooting for, it was still nice.

"I'm down for Thai," he finally said.

Taylor let out a small happy noise. "I'll call that place with the delivery driver that loves you. Then we can feast."

"And bake," Peyton said, determined to get at least one batch of something done before the end of the night. He would be *goddamned* if he didn't get his shit together, and soon.

# CHAPTER TWO

BY NINE THAT NIGHT, Peyton was alone. He was full to the brim with noodles and vegetables, freshly showered, bag change done, and standing in his newly rearranged kitchen. Linden had taken off first since working his three-day shift meant he'd be sleeping at the station. And eventually Taylor followed, after his wife had sent him several annoyed texts about the baby forgetting his face.

Peyton wallowed in guilt for that one. The last thing he wanted to do was take Taylor away from his family with the new baby only a few months old. Taylor insisted it was fine, but Peyton could see tension in his eyes he knew his friend was refusing to talk about.

He also knew he should probably press Taylor on the issue and get him to open up, but he was still in recovery, and he just didn't have the energy to take on anyone else's burden. He missed his old self. He missed being happy just for the sake of being happy. Even when he was at his sickest, he still felt alive.

And he knew he'd get back there. He just needed to reach out and reclaim what he loved most—and what he did best.

Which was baking.

Cracking his knuckles, Peyton began working on his cinnamon toast crunch muffin recipe. It had been a fan favorite, a Saturday and Sunday bake that always sold out before nine at the shop. He already had several dozen emails asking if he was going to add them to the website, so he figured it was a good place to start.

He'd taken several impossibly long months off baking, but he knew he hadn't lost his touch. There was no way. He'd been baking since he was tall enough to see over the counter on a step stool. There were days he was sure butter and sugar and flour made up his body instead of bones, and muscle, and blood.

He remembered losing track of taking notes in school and coming to, only to find three brand new recipes scribbled out where his math formulas were supposed to be. The thought made him grin as he dragged his little stool over to the counter where his old, trusty stand-mixer was sitting and waiting for him.

It had been his grandma's, passed to him when her arthritis had made it impossible for her to use it anymore.

It was a gift he treasured, considering he'd never been particularly close to either side of his family. His grandparents liked to use him to brag about what a wonderful, giving, *selfless* soul his dad was.

“Did you hear, Maryanne,” he heard his grandmother saying on the phone once, “Chuck has adopted a little *Asian* boy. Probably right off the streets of China. You know how it is there.”

He'd only been five at the time, but for some reason, he remembered those words like it was yesterday. He remembered the way she'd looked at him, like he was some knick-knack sitting on the shelf. Of course, his dad heard too,



and had swept Peyton up into his arms and marched out of the room.

“Don’t listen to that old bat,” he’d murmured, holding Peyton tight.

He had no idea what was going on, but he remembered his dad’s reaction more than anything. He remembered the fear in his eyes, like somehow those words were going to infect him.

All they really did was create a stronger bond between Peyton and his dad. And they also didn’t go back to see that side of his grandparents for a long, long time and he was fine with that because their house always smelled like mothballs and lavender, and their food never had any salt in it.

He was seventeen, the day she’d given him the mixer. He remembered the way she smiled at him, with actual affection in her eyes which surprised him. “I’ve seen the way you look at it,” she said with a wink. “I’ve always known it was meant for you.”

He was freshly out of the closet and not sure how many other people knew he was a queer baker with no aspirations for a “real job”. If she did know in that moment, she didn’t seem to mind. She had Peyton’s grandpa dig a box out of the attic. It barely fit in the backseat of the little beater car his dad had given him as a graduation present. And the moment he hauled it through his front door, he felt...something.

Not quite healed, maybe, but close. Like maybe one of the cracks he always felt between him and his family had sealed up.

The first thing he baked in that mixer was a batch of Nutella and banana muffins that his grandpa loved. He delivered them two days later, sat down and had a cup of coffee with him, and felt like a real adult for the first time ever.

His grandpa died three months later, but he remembered that afternoon in detail.

It was strange, he thought as he added a brick of butter into the mixer, how some memories felt like they lived behind an opaque veil, and others felt like a movie replaying in his head.

He couldn't remember what he'd eaten for breakfast last Tuesday, but he could recall the grin on his grandpa's face over that cup of coffee like it happened two minutes before.

Smiling to himself, Peyton worked his way through the recipe as the oven heated. He tapped his little batter scoop on the counter in a melodic ditty, humming to himself as he watched the paddle whip through the lightly browned muffin dough. The scent of sugar and cinnamon was powerful, coming from the little pot of toasted bread crumbs next to him.

When the batter was almost finished, he used his little flour-in-a-can spray on the muffin tin, then pushed his stool back to work the rest of the tasks on his feet.

His guts were sore—the small incisions on his stomach from the laparoscopy were healed but the scar tissue was strangely tender. He fought an urge to run his hand down his backside and once-again feel around his—as his nurse so elegantly called it—Barbie butt.

He'd been a little horrified the first time he looked in the mirror, but now it just made him laugh. That was easier than feeling like his gay as hell body was betraying him by taking away the one thing he enjoyed most about fucking. That was something he didn't like to think about often. He knew he'd have to face the grief soon enough, but for now, he just wanted to enjoy living.

After all, it had been months since he'd felt that gut-wrenching Crohn's pain in his intestines, and he was ready to live again, goddamn it.

Squaring his shoulders, Peyton set the trays on the stove and carefully began to scoop thick dollops into each little divot. This was something he could have done blindfolded and drugged without fucking up, but it still felt like a triumph that he hadn't lost a single ounce of his muscle memory.

He scooped and dropped until the pan was full and the mixing bowl was empty. Setting it aside, he grabbed the bread crumble from the bowl and sprinkled them over the top of the muffins.

When the tin was finally ready, he set the tray on the rack, closed the door, and stared at the remnants of his first bake in his new kitchen.

It was a mess, but it was a gorgeous mess.

Picking up his phone, he snapped a few shots, posting them to his Instagram account. His phone immediately began to buzz, so he set it aside and grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge, making his way to the side door that led into his yard.

It was a nice night—humid from the ocean breeze, the waves crashing not far in the distance—spring in the air promising a temperate summer. He hoped for rain, even though the west coast had been horrifically dry for so long, but he wasn't going to complain.

He lived comfortably. He lived happily.

He *lived*—and that was the most important part.

He didn't like to think about how close he'd come to disaster when he was rushed to the hospital. He didn't like to think about the doctor's face when he said emergency surgery, or that Peyton's life would never be the same when he came out of it.

He just liked to think that it was finally over, and he was free.

He wished his water was beer—or something a little stronger. Maybe a nice glass of Malbec and a cute guy to share it with. They could take their time between muffin batches, exploring each other's bodies on the sofa. It had been such a damn long time since Peyton had been touched like that, and with each passing minute, he felt how absolutely starved he was for that kind of attention.

It made him feel a little pathetic, but he couldn't help it. When he was alone like this, the insecurities crept up on him like a goddamn sniper.

Before he could get too far down the rabbit hole of self-pity and desperation, there was a loud rumble of a truck engine. For a second, he thought it was the garbage service,

then he remembered it was nine p.m. on a Tuesday. The rumble came to a stop, and it sounded like it was at his front door, so he jumped down into the grass and hurried to his low fence.

It was just short enough for him to see over, and pushing up onto his toes, he caught a glimpse of a moving truck. It was struggling to back up into the driveway, and it took Peyton a second to realize that the townhouse next door must have sold.

It had been on the market a while after the old man who lived there had died in his bathroom. Taylor liked to make up stories about how the old, crotchety bastard was now haunting the place, but Peyton could only hope that miserable man had been able to move on.

Not that he believed in ghosts, but just in case...

He got lost watching the truck finally come to a stop, then a group of beefy men jump out and wrenched the back open. His mouth went a little dry at the sight of flexing biceps and perfectly round asses. And okay, maybe that was just proof it had been too long since he'd been on a date, but he doubted he would have minded the view at any point in his life.

As he stared at a particularly nice looking, very bearded man lift a sitting chair up on one shoulder like some kind of Norse god, Peyton felt something brush along his foot. He jumped in the air, then looked down and saw a wide-eyed, small cat with wiry fur staring up at him.

Without really thinking, Peyton knelt down and swept the cat into his arms. Instead of clawing his face, it began to purr and nudge him, so he gave it a few scratches as he went back to watching the movers.

He had no idea if any of them were his new neighbor—or neighbors, really—but he figured he'd know soon enough. Maybe he'd share his muffins as a welcome gift. After all, it was the kind and neighborly thing to do.

Dropping the cat back down to his feet, Peyton made his way toward the side door just as his oven timer went off. He hurried to the kitchen and gave the muffins a little shake. They

were fluffy and tall and perfect, so he set them on the counter to cool, and stood back to marvel at his work.

He hadn't lost his touch.

Picking up his phone again, he hit record on the camera, and panned forward slowly. "You all asked for it, so here's the first little tease of what I'll be putting up for order in my shop in a couple of weeks. Cinnamon Toast muffins. You've been very patient with me, so I just wanted to share my moment of triumph with you all. I'm back in the game, baby, and better than ever. Can't wait to bake you all little pieces of my heart."

He ended the recording, then after a beat, began to move six of the twelve muffins into a little plate with a flower pattern his mom bought for him from one of those big-box stores. He arranged them into a little cluster like a muffin bouquet, then grabbed a post-it from the counter.

*Hey! I just wanted to welcome you into the neighborhood. I'm a baker, so this is my way of saying hi and if you need to borrow a cup of sugar, you know where to find it. Hope the move in went smoothly, and if you need to know where all the good stores are, I'm your man. Take care. -P*

Yeah. That would do. He smiled to himself and felt like his life was finally getting back to the way it should be. Not just content, but happy, and successful.

And, more importantly, *his*.

# CHAPTER THREE

IT WASN'T until the torture sessions three times a week that Hudson understood the meaning of the phrase, 'muscles were screaming in pain.' He was half-convinced that he actually *could* hear a faint, high-pitched shriek every time he forced his legs apart, stretching the band around his calves. His thighs were trembling, and his brow was sweating like he'd been running a marathon.

The irony just happened to be that he wasn't running a marathon because he couldn't. He never would, in fact. Not that it had ever been something he'd ever planned on doing. Hudson had done the bare minimum exercise weekly just to tell himself he was trying. Prior to everything falling to pieces three years before, he'd been one of the corporate engineer cogs for a multi-billion-dollar company with its own restaurant and gym.

He'd have a sandwich, then walk on a treadmill for fifteen minutes and call it a day.

When he noticed his feet starting to go a little numb and his muscles feeling weak, he blamed it on his desk chair.

When he'd collapsed in his shower and had to call his husband to haul him out and take him to the ER, he blamed sleeping wrong.

Then the scan came back with a huge mass on the base of his spine.

Hudson tried to ignore the onslaught of memories as he continued to stretch the resistance band, the voice of his physical therapist kind of a low drone in the back of his head. But this was trauma—or so his therapist had told him. It wasn't something he'd ever just get over, no matter what his life eventually looked like.

He could recall, with annoying clarity, the punch of relief when the biopsy came back benign. But his joy was quickly punctured by the doctor telling him that it was likely he wouldn't walk away from the removal surgery without consequences.

It wasn't likely he'd *walk* away from the surgery at all.

“The mass is, unfortunately, pressed against your spinal cord and there's very little chance we can remove it all without causing some damage.” The rest had been a mumbling blur of medical jargon that amounted to, we're basically going to have to paralyze you in order to get rid of this thing, but this thing is paralyzing you now so we might as well take the option that comes with some hope of being on your feet again.

Three years later and he *could* walk—but very short distances, and with assistance. He had some feeling in his lower extremities, and he could control his bladder and bowels—mostly. His doctors considered it a triumph, but for a long while after, Hudson considered it a tragedy.

He didn't regret the surgery, of course. He didn't regret saying yes because saying no would have probably been worse. He lived—he survived—even when his marriage didn't. His husband had taken the whole thing just too hard, and it wasn't like Hudson blamed the man.

Well, that wasn't true.

He *did*.



He blamed Austin for being so goddamn fixated on whether or not Hudson could get his dick hard, and whether or not Hudson would be able to pound his ass the way he used to. And when the answer wasn't satisfactory enough, Austin cracked.

Austin was also six years younger than him, with lofty aspirations and a fixation on what a healthy marriage was *supposed* to look like. And apparently, getting railed nightly by a human penis instead of an impressive dildo was high on that list.

To his credit, Austin did try, but Hudson was unsurprised the night he came home and found his ex sobbing into his hands, the room reeking of a stranger's cologne. Hudson had started suspecting Austin was stepping out on him a few months after the surgery, so in that moment, all he felt was vindication that he wasn't losing his mind to paranoia.

"He didn't mean anything," was how Austin, in the end, confessed to the cheating. "I just needed something you can't give me anymore. I swear I won't see him again. All you have to do is say the word."

Hudson wasn't sure he believed him, and he wasn't willing to debase himself by trying to work things out with a man who found him lacking because of something entirely outside of his control. He remembered Austin balking at traditional wedding vows, and it almost made Hudson laugh when he thought back on it.

For Austin, it was all better, no worse. It was all health, no sickness. Hudson had just been too caught up in the fantasy to realize who he was marrying.

It also didn't help that Austin's cheating brought all of Hudson's fears to life. That no matter how much he loved or how hard he tried, people always left him...in the end.

The divorce went through quietly, their assets split neatly, and Austin didn't bother asking for alimony. The very last thing to sell was the house, and only because the judge granted Hudson time to find a place that was accessible for his new needs.

Hudson wanted to be bitter. There were nights he missed Austin because he was gorgeous and he was funny, even if his humor was a little but cruel at times. But he was one of the few people who'd been able to make Hudson smile even on the days he didn't want to. Austin had been around and had supported Hudson through dealing with his narcissistic mother, and through the diagnosis, and all the fears that came with not knowing what was wrong with him.

And losing Austin made Hudson realize all the other things he missed about his former life—because he couldn't go back to being single the way he was before.

If it had happened before the surgery, he would have chased his feelings down with a bottle of whiskey, then held a stranger against the wall and fucked him into oblivion. Hudson was a big man—tall, broad, strong, thick. He had a cock to match and a sex drive that didn't ever let up. Austin had loved it—all of Hudson's past lovers had adored him for it.

It was the one thing he didn't like to think about losing.

It was also the one thing he was working on reclaiming.

Of course, it took therapy and mourning and anger and the desire to burn his life to the ground to figure out what he needed. His therapist had been the one to make the suggestion—a simple, flippant, “You're an engineer. Why don't you figure out a way to take the control over your body back? So your dick doesn't work the way it used to, right? Why not invent something that gives you that same feeling of power? Think about it. How many men just like you are out there wondering if there's a way to feel like they can regain a part of themselves they should have never lost?”

Hudson had been frustrated with himself for not coming up with it first. And a few nights after that session, he'd rolled up to his little design table and started thinking about what might work.

He knew a lot about the science of his own body now—more than he ever wanted to. He learned that orgasms and ejaculation came from the spine which was why he couldn't connect to orgasms the way he used to. And sure, he'd tried all

the shit his PT had suggested, and he could come with light touches and hard scratches right along his sensation line, but he wanted more.

He wanted to feel overwhelmed with pleasure and with power the way he used to. Maybe it was a tall order, but Hudson was goddamn determined to rewrite his reality so he could have that back.

At first, he researched online, trying to find toys for men like him—or anyone in situations like him.

Disabled.

Bodies that didn't react or feel or function the same way everyone else's did.

And there were a few, but there weren't enough.

Now, two years later, he had an entire line of toys, a profit that made his previous job look like a hobby, and satisfied customers from all walks of life that were clamoring for more. His personal life had remained unchanged, but he hadn't really expected it to be any different. Hudson had never been the friendliest person in the world, and his inability to bend to the whims of someone else made him difficult to date.

He and Austin had worked because Austin seemed immune to his storm-cloud bad days and blunt truth he refused to soften for anyone. In fact, Austin almost seemed to like it—to crave it. Hudson couldn't say they were in love, not the way most people fell in love, but that worked for them. They were satisfied in other ways, and it was enough.

Still, Hudson couldn't say he wasn't lonely. Every so often when he made progress in PT, or came up with a particularly clever design, it was hard coming home to an empty place with no one to crawl into his lap and tell him how proud they were before letting him ravage their body.

It felt sad and pathetic, cracking open a bottle of wine to share with no one but himself and his little whistling conure parrot who—in all reality—couldn't give a shit if he lived or died.

But he wasn't going to twist himself into shapes to make other people happy either. He'd meet someone who took him as he was, or he'd die alone.

And with his vast array of toys, at least he wouldn't die unsatisfied.

Pushing up onto his elbows, Hudson wriggled his legs beneath him until he was in a table position. He sat up in a kneel, his balance better than he thought it ever might be, and he was happy with it. He wasn't going to show it on his face the way Dan was grinning at him like he'd just won a fucking marathon, but it felt nice.

"You want a hand up?" Dan asked.

Hudson considered the question honestly. He was always weaker in the hours after a long PT session, but today had been a lighter work-out.

"I think I've got it." His walker was within reach, and he was using it as much as he was using his chair now at home. It made him feel old—not that he was some young spring chicken or anything at forty-two—but he had been hoping to prolong the whole metal contraption and tennis balls look for a few more years.

His was nice though—a sleek design with a bench that went through doors without problems. And the townhouse he'd just purchased was even nicer with its very even wood floors and accessible shower, which had been the selling point. The person who'd lived there before had been in his nineties, and Hudson planned to take advantage of everything he'd left behind.

The man had also died in the shower, or so his agent had told him, but Hudson had never been squeamish about the realities of human mortality. In the ten days it took to get his biopsy results back from his tumor, he'd checked over his will, planned his funeral, and even picked out a memorial play-list, and all with a straight face.

He was fairly sure that's one of the things that tipped Austin over the edge. His ex had spent those ten days pacing

and crying and raging at Hudson for not being more upset that he was about to make the man a widower.

Hudson found it almost amusing that Austin had already written him off, but it was likely the stress which had eclipsed the big, bright red flag Austin had been waving. He felt a little foolish about the whole thing now.

With a sigh, Hudson heaved himself up to his feet. After all these years of recovery, he could finally feel the blood rushing to his toes, which was always uncomfortable because the pins and needles sensation could take hours to go away. His legs still moved like he was walking through deep water, but the important part for him was that they were moving.

He was never going to run again, but he'd always fucking hated running anyway. There were better ways to get his cardio—even if he couldn't hoist twinkles up by their asses anymore.

“Hudson?”

Gripping the handles of his walker, he turned his head to face Dan because his tone was hesitant. Any unspoken question about what was going on was immediately answered when his gaze hit the window and he spotted her.

His mother.

She was walking around Hudson's car like she was making sure it was his.

“Oh, fuck me. Get me my wheelchair,” Hudson hissed. Okay, he might have appreciated the ability to run now. He'd been no-contact with his mother for the last eight months, but she wasn't taking it well—just like any narcissist. She'd taken to hovering in the parking lot while he was working late and filling up his voicemail inbox with screaming and sobbing and threats.

The week before, she'd trapped him in his office building until one in the morning, and he was on the verge of calling the cops before she finally got tired and left. When she'd popped into the PT's office before, she had always just missed him.

Until now.

As he dropped into his chair and settled his legs, he fought the urge to roll out there and run her down with his wheels. This was the third time in as many months, and he was goddamn over it.

“She’s at it again?” Dan asked. His face paled and he made a quick shooing motion with his hand. “Go. She’s heading for the doors.”

Hudson could have won a gold in the fucking Paralympic games with how fast he made it from the floor to the changing rooms. His heart was thrashing in his chest and his lungs were heaving with panic and exertion as he rolled to a stop in the middle of the floor.

He hadn’t sweat half as much during his session and his plans for being able to escape quickly went right down the drain. Originally, he had no plans to take a shower, but now he needed to take up time, so he rolled into the stall and started the water before parking his chair, stripping, and moving onto the bench.

The grapefruit scent of the bulk soap the office stocked was a little bit of a trigger for him. It reminded him of early days where he’d sweat buckets like he’d run fifty miles in one go just trying to push against a two-pound resistance band. He was no longer that nervous man who had no idea what his future was going to look like—the man whose life had fallen apart and whose marriage was quickly crumbling—but he could remember what it was like as though it were yesterday.

And he never wanted to be that person again. He never wanted to feel so fucking defeated ever again.

He rinsed quickly, then sat under the spray for another two minutes before finally turning the water off and getting dressed into his work clothes. The polo felt itchy on his skin, and he made a mental note to have Aspen look into it since she insisted on being in charge of the merch, and they were selling them on their website.

He didn't want people to be distracted from buying dildos because their t-shirts were scratchy.

Rolling up to the short mirror, Hudson combed his hair, then put on a couple swipes of deodorant before packing his bag. He was just zipping up when the door opened, and his heart gave a little thud before he saw Dan's head poking around the corner.

"She's gone?" Hudson asked.

"She's still in the parking lot," he admitted. "I'm not sure she's going to leave unless you go out there."

Hudson groaned and slapped a hand over his face. He didn't have time to hide in a locker room until one in the fucking morning. He was going to have to face her. "Thanks for trying," he said. "I'll pick up the walker next week. I need to be able to get the hell out fast." He was a goddam expert now at transferring to his SUV, his upper body strength enough that he could probably take on The Rock if they were both sitting down.

He'd just have to put up with her incessant bitching until he got the door shut and the engine started.

Dragging a hand down his face, he hitched his bag over his shoulder and shot a wave at Dan as he rolled through the door. "See you next week." He normally hated PT, but he'd take a hundred hour-long sessions over dealing with his goddamn mother.

She spotted him the moment he came out of the doors, and he was halfway to his car when she started walking toward him. "Hudson."

He kept going, pausing by the back door to throw his bag inside. It would be tricky getting around her so he could lift up onto the seat, but he could do it.

"Hudson. Don't you ignore me. This is serious. I've been beside myself all week. The doctor is worried about my heart now thanks to all the stress you've put me through. And I realize you don't care whether or not I live or die, but you could try showing some compassion."



He laughed. He didn't mean to. His therapist had told him it was important not to react or engage when she tried emotional blackmail, but the thought of her keeling over because he wouldn't talk to her was hilarious.

“Oh? You think my condition is *funny*?”

He got the door open and was up on the driver's seat in seconds. She appeared at his side like he expected her to, but when he reached down for his chair, she put both hands on it. She hadn't been brave enough to touch any of his mobility devices since his surgery, so it startled him enough that he pulled back.

“You're not leaving until you listen to me,” she spat.

He pulled his phone out of his pocket, then looked her dead in the eye. “Yes, I am. And I will leave my wheelchair here. I will record you holding it, then record myself dragging my body into my office, and I'll post it on the fucking internet for the entire world to see what an absolute monster you are.”

“I'm the monster?” she asked, her mouth twisting. “When you live a life of...of...”

“Happiness? Contentment? Or did you mean debauchery and gay sex?” he added with a grin.

She snatched her hands away like the chair was made of hot coals. “Do you think going hell for all eternity is funny, Hudson?”

“I think it's hilarious,” he said dryly. “You've been threatening me with it since I married Austin.”

“You're divorced,” she said, lunging for the door so he couldn't close it after he got his chair inside. It was upside down and haphazard—probably bending the frame a little, but he could fix that. It was better than taking the time to pull the wheels off. “Surely you've come to understand—”

“I've come to understand,” he interrupted sharply, “that I'm a gay man with a spinal injury whose husband left him because being married to a disabled man was too much for him. Just like having a queer disabled son was too much for you.”

“You know I pray for you every day,” she said. “The entire congregation prays for you. We’re trying to help you.”

He scoffed. “Right. Yes. Because it’s done wonders so far. Thank you, Mother, but I don’t need your version of help.”

“Hudson, will you just listen—”

Hudson took his phone and used it to pry her hands off his door without having to actually touch her. “I have to go. We’re having a meeting about ten-inch dildos today and I need to pick out my product testers.”

“Hudson!”

He managed to get the door shut, the car started, and he rolled forward over the cement parking bump, not giving a shit if it scraped the undercarriage. He watched her continue to stand there, looking like she was crying, though there were no tears on her cheeks. Then, he pulled out onto the main road, and only after that did he let the nerves hit him and his body start to shake apart.

# CHAPTER FOUR

HUDSON SKIPPED the office parking lot and instead went through the drive-thru to grab a burrito and a drink. With his straw clenched between his teeth, he told his phone to call his second in command, and he sucked on his fizzy soda until Eli picked up.

“Code bitch,” he said when Eli answered.

Eli sighed. “Where’d she get you today?”

“PT. She waited by my car, then she tried to grab my chair,” Hudson complained. He let go of the wheel for a second to set his drink down, then used his left hand to press harder on the gas. All he wanted was to be home, even if his new place was still in disarray. “I had to leave my walker with Dan.”

“Want me to swing by and pick it up?” Eli asked.

Hudson breathed out a small sigh of relief because he wasn’t ever the kind of man who would ask, but he also wasn’t going to tell his friend no. “It’ll be helpful when I start unpacking my kitchen. Half the cupboards are way too high for me to reach with the chair.”

“Can do. I’ll stop by on my way over.”

Hudson let himself feel the pulse of gratitude for his best friend, even as he felt a small surge of humiliation that he couldn’t handle his own shit. “Sorry I called for this. I could probably just swing back myself.”

“Dude, no. It’s no worries. I was going to call you anyway. We got a shipment delay, so I sent Aspen and Rain home. Everything’s tied up in this delivery so there’s no point in hanging around the office doing nothing.”

Aspen and Rain were siblings with a best friend who had passed from ALS. Prior to him passing on, they’d concocted a few ideas for kink toys and had run into Hudson on an online forum. Before Hudson’s surgery and subsequent bitterness after his divorce, Rain had been the kind of man who could have used his big Bambi eyes and thick hips to get a man like Hudson to do anything.

As it was, Hudson still had trouble telling him no. It was just lucky that both twins had a good eye for both business and design.

“I think I’d be annoyed by this if my fucking mother hadn’t just ambushed me,” Hudson admitted as he took the turn that led toward his new place. “I’m going to go eat a burrito and pretend like I don’t have a whole house to unpack.”

Eli snorted. “Sounds good. You meet your neighbors yet?”

“As far as I’m concerned, I don’t have neighbors,” Hudson said simply. He had no idea who the person was living next door, but if he could wager a guess, it was some lonely old granny. The air constantly smelled like baked goods and cinnamon the way his gran’s house always used to.

The last thing he needed was someone fussing, so he planned to keep his whole situation as private as possible. The first time he had to explain what he did for a living, the whole HOA would start calling him a deviant.

Or worse—they’d start calling him *brave*.

He couldn’t stomach either.

“I’ll be by in a couple hours,” Eli said. “I’m going to finish up this pile of invoices, then forward everything to Rain so he can get on the shipments.”

“Put another ad up for shippers,” Hudson said. They were making enough now they could afford a couple more employees. “With the new line going out, and with that fucking viral TikTok video, we’re going to be overwhelmed.”

“You got it. See you soon.”

Hudson hung up, appreciating that Eli rarely ever argued with him, and when he did, it was always for a reason. He also took Hudson’s moods with a grain of salt—one of the few people who never took his snark personally. Hudson knew he should be better to the few people in his life who cared about him without toxic love involved, but well, a tiger couldn’t change its stripes.

Maybe that was a shitty excuse, but he was sticking to it.

Pulling onto his street, he eyed the shared driveway, but there was no sign of another car. The neighbor’s garage was closed, and he quickly opened his own, pulling in and shutting the door seconds after he turned the car off. His SUV filled the room with exhaust, but he was out of the car and in his chair, rolling toward the door with his burrito bag clenched between his teeth.

Eli had helped him install the ramp up, so he wheeled inside without having to tip backward, and when the door shut behind him, he let out a breath of relief. His place was still a little bit like an obstacle course, but he maneuvered around boxes until he was in his living room, and he set his drink and burrito down.

Before he could get comfortable, he noticed that the alert for his doorbell cam was blinking, so he pulled out his phone and turned on his app. He’d silenced notifications because he really didn’t give a fuck about people coming by to welcome him during the day, and all of his mail either went to his PO Box or the office.

He pulled up the recorded video and watched a grainy image of a younger man—thin, maybe tall, Asian, long dark hair pulled into a bun—ring the bell, then set something down on his porch.

A flaming bag of dog shit maybe, or a package for the former dead owner?

His curiosity overwhelmed him, so he pulled the front door open and blinked in surprise when he saw a large white plate holding cling-film-wrapped muffins to the side of his ramp. He had just enough reach to lean over and snag them, and he noticed there was a large post-it hanging off the side, slightly soggy from the rain earlier that morning.

He squinted, wishing he had his reading glasses, though the black ink was in neat lines.

*Hey!. I just wanted to welcome you to the neighborhood. I'm a baker, so this is my way of saying hi and if you need to borrow a cup of sugar, you know where to find it. Hope the move in went smoothly, and if you need to know where all the good stores are, I'm your man. Take care. -P*

Hudson reared back. This was a hard no. A hard *hell* no. He wasn't going to become besties with some baker who wanted to give a fucking muffin basket to strangers. That was the exact kind of person he wanted to avoid.

Rolling back in, Hudson went to the nearest box labeled office and began to rummage through it. He crumpled up the post-it, then found a sticky note pad and a sharpie, and quickly scribbled back a response.

*Not interested.*

Simple and to the point. He attached his note to the muffin plate, then set it on the side table and moved to the sofa so he

could enjoy his meal. He did everything in his power not to think about the neighbor—and how he was young, and good looking, and normally Hudson’s type.

He was in no position now to be any kind of anything to a person like that. Someone kind for the sake of being kind. Or maybe a creepy stalker, he reminded himself. He knew better than to assume these days.

The burrito quickly distracted him from the rest of his thoughts, and then the show on ice fishing did the rest. He had his legs propped up and his heavy blanket on, and it wasn’t long before he found himself slipping into a much-needed nap.

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A loud thudding noise of something heavy hitting the wall dragged Hudson from his sleep. He sat up with a startled gasp and threw his legs over the sofa to stand up. Or, well, he tried. It had been years now, but every now and again he still attempted to fly out of bed when something scared him, and it almost always ended with him landing in a huge heap on the floor.

This time, he managed to catch himself with a string of nasty swears, glancing up through his shaggy hair that badly needed a cut. Eli stood there—in all his broad-shouldered, sharp-jawed glory—arms over his chest, his expression vaguely amused.

“What the hell?” Hudson growled, pushing himself up to sit. He wriggled his toes and turned his ankles in a circle to try and get as much feeling to return as possible. “Jesus, I thought you were breaking into my house. I almost floored you!”

Eli snorted. “The fuck did you think you were going to actually do to me, bud?”

“Tackle you, sit on your face, and suffocate you with my ass cheeks,” Hudson muttered. He shifted to the edge of the sofa cushion and attempted to rub the sleep from his eyes. “What time is it?”

“Four,” Eli told him.

That checked out with the way the street was kind of pale from the late afternoon fog. They never got it as bad as Fog Alley in San Francisco, but they got the edges of it nearly every day in Seaport. Hudson had moved there with his family when he was sixteen, but almost three decades later, he still hadn't adjusted to the dim afternoons.

Rolling his neck on his shoulders, he gave his cheeks a quick slap as Eli began to wander around the room. He felt silently judged, though he knew his friend wouldn't be that much of an asshole about how long it was taking him to unpack.

Eli had tried to convince Hudson to let the moving company unpack things since they had the service and he could afford it, but he wasn't ready to give up that much of his independence. Maybe when he was old and every one of his bones were arthritic and weak, he'd consider it.

But for now, he could damn-well do it himself. Even if it took a month.

"Stop," he said, groping for the watery soda he had left from his meal. It tasted like shit, but it soothed his dry throat. "I'll get to it eventually."

Eli rolled his eyes, then passed the little curio table where he stopped and stared down at the plate of muffins. "What the fuck are these? Did you bake?"

"*Hell* no. Those are from my neighbor," Hudson grumbled. He sat back and lolled his head against the cushion so he could see out the window. The fog was heavier than usual, and he was glad he'd gone home early.

Eli frowned down at the plate. "Your neighbor sent you muffins with a note that says not interested? What the hell did you offer him?"

Hudson sat up straight. "No. That's what *I* wrote. That fucker thinks he can just leave muffins on my doorstep like it's nineteen-fifty-seven. He even told me I could borrow a cup of sugar."

"Wow," Eli said dryly, "what a sociopath."



Hudson flipped him off, then eyed his walker and quickly grabbed it, tugging it close. It slammed against the edge of the table, but he didn't care. The rubber grips were firm under his hands, and he stood up with an eager desperation. He'd need to piss soon, and he wanted to be up on his feet.

His body ached as it stretched properly, and he could immediately feel his feet start to plump up, but he didn't care. It was heaven. "You don't have to hang out," he said as he took his slow, shuffling steps toward the little hallway. "I'm not exactly great company right now."

Eli sighed. "When are you ever? But I actually have a fuckton of work to get done, so I might take off."

Hudson nodded and waved him off, pausing when he reached the hall arch, and looked over his shoulder. "Could you drop that plate back off next door?"

Eli frowned. "You want *me* to return your neighbor's gift with that asshole note?"

Hudson shrugged. "Why not? I'm not going to eat them, and I don't want him to think we're going to be friends."

"God, you are a fucking curmudgeon."

"I wear the badge proudly, and you promised to love me for exactly as I am," Hudson reminded him, echoing one very drunk night where Eli was feeling affectionate.

His friend shot him a middle finger, making Hudson smirk. "Mm, except I get to be the asshole and knock on that poor person's door. It's probably someone's grandma."

"Nope. It's this really fucking hot guy at least ten years younger than us," Hudson told him as he turned the corner. His legs were stiff, likely from the tension because of his mother, but he forced himself to keep going. "But don't get any ideas. He's not welcome in my life."

"Oh, you're a dick. I'm going to ask him out and then marry him," Eli called after him. "Then you'll have to put up with his muffin ways the rest of your life."

“I will fire and disown you. Lock up before you go,” Hudson called, then closed the bathroom door and all but collapsed on the toilet just before he pissed himself.

Living was messier now. It was complicated and it was slow and it was frustrating.

But he was...maybe not happier with his new career, but he felt better. He didn't feel like some cog in a wheel, turning until his eventual retirement and death. He didn't feel the compulsion to flee his office at the end of every workday and lose himself in booze and sex just to distract himself from how utterly bland it all felt.

Washing up, Hudson moved into his office where Pancake was perched on his little wooden swing. The bird eyed him, then opened his beak and began to squawk until Hudson opened the door to the cage. They weren't exactly friends. The damn thing had been a parting gift from Austin—which was where the ridiculous name had come from. Austin had dropped him off, saying he hadn't wanted Hudson to be lonely.

It was a pity pet because Austin had the balls to assume Hudson would never meet anyone else.

And now Hudson just had another reason to want to murder the man. Luckily, Pancake was quiet and happy so long as he had access to the top of his cage so he could shit on everything below, and frankly, Hudson wished he could swap places with him sometimes.

“You wanna hang out?” Hudson asked.

The bird wolf-whistled. Hudson knew if he came any closer, the bird would fly at him and bite his face, so he kept his distance and when he was sure Pancake was happy with his top of the cage situation, he turned and walked out, leaving the door open a crack so the thing could waddle into the living room if it wanted.

Hudson moved back toward his sea of boxes in the front room and was relieved to find the plate of muffins and Eli both gone. He really did love his best friend, even if Hudson was not the kind of man who would ever say that aloud no matter

how drunk he got. Eli put up with a lot of shit from him, and he was pretty sure the man meant what he said when he told Hudson that he cared about him no matter what a grouchy piece of shit he was.

It was one of the few things that could make his insides go soft, even if no one ever got to see that side of him.

Glancing around, he sighed at the mountain of work he had to do. Luckily his business was running smoothly, and he wouldn't have products to test and tweak until the shipment came in, but unluckily it meant he would have to focus on his home.

He moved back to his chair since his walker would be no help in getting around with any kind of hustle, then he pried open the office box he'd already started unpacking. Everything was on flat dollies, so he pushed his knees against it, then slowly began to wheel toward the office.

It was endless, agonizing, impossible Herculean tasks, but he would be damned if he didn't get them all done eventually. After all, he planned to make this home forever. A little lonely, entirely alone, and apparently with a hot neighbor who could bake that he was sure would hate him once he got the plate of muffins back.

All in all, it was livable. It was survivable. And that was all he could possibly ask for.

# CHAPTER FIVE

PEYTON FOUND HIMSELF PACING, muttering under his breath, and ignoring his brother's pointed stare because he knew the moment he caught Linden's gaze, he'd spill his guts. He didn't want to admit to his brother—or to anyone—how humiliating it had been to assume the attractive guy bending over on his front stoop was his dinner delivery. Or how humiliating it was to realize he was returning the plate of muffins, untouched, with nothing but a short note attached to the side.

The guy was kind enough to give him an apologetic smile, but it was full of pity which Peyton hated. “Your neighbor, uh, wanted to drop these back off. He's...not a muffin guy.”

Peyton had been in the middle of feeling sorry for himself after a bag-leak issue and second shower. He was frustrated and in pain and wondering if he really had made the right choice with the surgery because fuck, it was so hard sometimes.

They were moments of, well, not quite weakness, but of *feeling* weak, which were getting fewer and farther between. But they weren't entirely gone.

“It’s fine,” Peyton had managed, but his hurt was clearly obvious in his tone from the way the guy looked at him like he was some kid having his macaroni art rejected.

“See you around?” the guy offered.

Peyton had no idea who he was. Maybe he was the neighbor’s boyfriend, or husband. He wasn’t about to risk further humiliation and ask, only to be told it was none of his business. So instead, he took the plate back inside and stared down at the block writing on the little sticky note.

*Not interested.*

Peyton wasn’t used to having his bakes rejected. At least, not since he was younger and more experimental with flavors. He’d won local competitions, and had even been on TV once for a little week-long baking contest. He’d come runner-up in that at nineteen. And granted, he knew he wasn’t the best baker in the world, but he also knew he had an unusual talent.

The asshole next door hadn’t even tried them. He probably hadn’t even taken a sniff. The plate was wrapped exactly as Peyton had left it.

Of course, he might have been gluten-free, Peyton realized. Or maybe vegan. Maybe one of those militant vegans who wanted to veganize the entire world? He hadn’t really taken into consideration that his neighbor could have restrictions.

It was almost ironic considering his own. No nuts, no eggs, no legumes, no seeds, no citrus. He felt like an immediate fool for not only sending over a random plate of muffins to a man he’d never met, but then also for being upset when they were rejected.

His pacing ceased and his shoulders sagged, and he heard his brother walk a few steps closer. “Whose ass am I kicking?”

Peyton scoffed. “Mine. I was being a dipshit.” He finally looked up at Linden who had his head cocked to the side, an icy look of determination in his eyes. It was the same one he used to wear in high school when he’d get suspended for beating down kids who thought their racist jokes were funny.

“I brought the neighbor muffins and he sent them back,” Peyton confessed.

Linden’s eyes immediately began to scan the kitchen, and his gaze locked onto the plate that still had the note attached. Marching over, he picked it up, then let out a small growl. “What the fuck?”

Peyton held up both hands. “Dude, no. It’s fine. He’s probably gluten-intolerant or something. I didn’t even ask.”

“He could have said that instead of leaving this note,” Linden insisted, shaking the little piece of paper so hard, Peyton was surprised it didn’t rip.

Walking over, Peyton plucked the note from his brother’s hand and set it back on the counter. He should have thrown it away. He wasn’t quite sure why he didn’t. Maybe it was just a reminder that not everyone was going to be charmed by his own unique love language.

“I don’t care about him,” Peyton said—a slight lie. He was, by nature, a people pleaser and it got under his skin when strangers disliked him. His brother knew it but didn’t call him out. “So far he’s quiet and...”

It was almost as if the universe was trying to test him because in the pause during his sentence, there was a sudden, loud squawking. It was muffled through the wall, but still loud enough to cut through their conversation.

“What the actual fuck?” Linden demanded.

Peyton could have sworn he’d heard the bird the night before, but it had been three in the morning, and he was high as a kite on painkillers, so he thought it was just a dream. Apparently not.

Apparently, the new neighbor had a bird.

“Just ignore it,” Peyton said. The noise went on though, so eventually he led the way into the living room where the sound was more muffled.

“You can’t live like that,” Linden insisted. “Go next door and tell that fucker to shut it up.”

Peyton waved him off. “I’m pretty sure the guy works during the day. He wasn’t home when I dropped off the muffins. It’s probably why the bird’s bitching.”

“So he neglects animals, too? He sounds like a real winner.”

Peyton sighed. “Will you please drop it. Your anger isn’t helping my stress levels.”

“Fine.” Linden didn’t look satisfied, but he also seemed like he wasn’t going to push the issue. He dropped onto the couch and rested his head against Peyton’s shoulder. It was a familiar position from when they were younger and feeling strange, emotional pain their parents could never understand.

“Are you happy here?”

Peyton sighed. “You ask me that a lot.”

“Because you don’t seem happy,” Linden said. He pushed up and turned to face his brother. “You were always so... bright. You were always laughing and no matter how bad things were feeling, you could always find... God, I’m going to sound like such a fucking jackass, but you could always find the light at the end of the tunnel.”

Peyton’s gut twisted with a new but familiar ache, even as he managed a tight grin. “I know. I mean, I know that’s what everyone thought. And I *was* happy,” he added, because saying he wasn’t would have been a lie. “Everyone just counted on me to be that guy, you know? I think after losing control over my body, something just cracked.” Peyton’s voice went small and soft as he prepared to admit something aloud he’d only been saying to himself—and one time his therapist. “How am I supposed to live like this, Lin? How can I meet a guy and be like hey, I’m super fucking gay but we can never do anal, and I can barely get my dick hard these days because I shit into a bag and don’t know how to be sexy anymore.”

Linden looked at him a long time before he spoke. “How long have you felt this way?”

Peyton let out a slightly bitter laugh. “I don’t know. Months. Since the doctor told me what he had to do.” He ran a

hand down his face then shrugged.

Linden elbowed him gently. “You could have told me before. I would have listened.”

“I know,” Peyton said with a bitter laugh, dragging a hand down his face. “But I can barely talk about this whole thing to my therapist who is being paid for it. I still feel like myself. Nothing makes me happier than baking and watching people smile when they eat my food. I still sing in the morning, and I think I’ve half-adopted a stray cat. But right now, it feels like there’s a piece of me missing and I don’t know how to get it back. I don’t know if I *can*.”

Linden looked slightly uncomfortable. “I don’t...I’ve never...”

Peyton reached for him, squeezing his arm. “I know your first reaction is to fix it for me, but this time you can’t. This time, there’s nothing you can say. I don’t need saving, okay? I just need time to mourn this fucking massive loss.”

Linden instantly deflated. “Wow. I’ve been a huge asshole, haven’t I?”

“Well, that’s nothing new,” Peyton told him, his old smile coming back. “If you weren’t being one, that’s when I’d start to worry.”

“Dick.”

Peyton laughed and shrugged. “Same me, no anus.”

“Holy fuck,” Linden whispered.

“Barbie butt,” Peyton added, and he was smiling, but there was a twinge inside him because well...that was the case. There was nothing actually there anymore. The first time he saw it in the mirror, he laughed his ass off. The nurse was with him, and he’d cracked a few jokes to make her smile.

The second time, he was alone, and he sobbed into a pillow until his lungs hurt.

Now he just sort of washed himself and put a new bag on and tried not to think about what it would be like the first time he went on a date—assuming that ever happened again. He



couldn't get a Grindr match half the time because he didn't have the right color eyes or ideal height. God knows what they'd say if they found out the bottom half of him looked the way it did.

His therapist told him to mourn however his mind and body wanted to mourn—and this was apparently it.

“We should get to work,” Peyton said, shaking himself out of his head. This wasn't the time. It was his first week back with the online store, and he was starting up the shop with cookies. “Do you have that list printed out?”

“Yep.” Linden pointed to the small stack of papers on the coffee table. “I'm also going to set up the printer before I take off. Are you *sure* you don't want me to go punch your neighbor in the face?”

“Positive,” Peyton said. He hadn't even met the guy yet, so it only seemed fair to give him a chance. “But if that changes, you'll be the first one I call.”

Linden smiled at him. “That's why you're the best brother in the world.”

Peyton grinned back at how easy to please his big brother was, and how easy it had become to accept his place in their relationship. He wanted to be happy again, and Linden's concern had just given him reason to start moving on.

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It was ten that night by the time Peyton finished the last of his orders. Four-hundred and eighty cookies total that week. Forty dozen orders, and only because he'd put a limit. His waitlist was already full, his email pages and pages of unread requests for invoice. His Instagram page had been blowing up all day since he'd been posting progress photos, and he knew that while he was going to be making plenty of money to survive, he was going to have to take it slow.

His entire midsection was aching, and he couldn't bake on painkillers, so he was muscling his way through the final batch.

It was an allergen-free pudding cookie recipe with vegan chocolate chips, made with an extra pop of cornstarch and vanilla pod to make them extra soft and full of flavor. They were his most popular order, even from people who didn't need allergen-free cookies.

He was limiting those though, because the recipe was that much more expensive, but he had overestimated his dough amount and when he was finished cooling the final batch, he realized he had eleven left over.

For a moment he contemplated just adding the extras as a little thank you gift, but then he thought about his neighbor and figured he could maybe try one more time. He wouldn't offer a cup of sugar or directions to the supermarket which probably had come off a bit patronizing. The person was probably stressed as hell with all the move-in shit, and Peyton couldn't blame him for being irritated.

He carefully packed up the cookies in a plastic container, then added a second note which he pinned to the top.

*Hi, sorry about the assumption earlier. I didn't ask about allergies, and I know better than that since I have plenty of them. These are my allergen-free pudding cookies, which I promise are the most delicious things you'll ever eat. They're gluten-free, nut-free, dairy-free, and egg-free. The flour is rice, oat, and potato, and all the mix-ins are vegan. Please enjoy these on me and I look forward to getting to know you. Hope the move in is going well. Don't hesitate to pop by if you need anything.*

*Your neighbor, -P*

He felt fairly satisfied by it, then he walked them over and knocked on the door. When there was no answer again, he rang the bell—but still, nothing. With a sigh, he set them to the side of the ramp and headed back to his place, wondering what kind of person he was.

Did he live alone? Was there a small family involved?

The person hadn't taken down the former resident's ramp which had been necessary as he'd gotten along in his years. Peyton remembered more than a handful of times walking over to help him up with his groceries while he pushed his walker inside.

Peyton also remembered knowing the man was going to pass soon. He could see it in his eyes—the fatigue of just living every day at his age. It made him ache, but more than mourning, he'd been relieved for Barry when his grandson came over to tell Peyton he was gone.

He hadn't been the most pleasant person in the world to get along with, but most people liked Peyton, and Barry was no exception.

After his death, there'd been a short period where Peyton felt the absence of something to do every Thursday when the grocery order never arrived, but then his intestine had perforated and the surgery had happened, and his life had changed.

One grief took over another, and Barry was relegated to a quiet memory.

It was probably the way it should be, he thought as he finished cleaning up the kitchen. He set an alarm on his phone to get up early and order the package pick-up, then he left the rest of the food to cool as he stepped outside.

There was a quiet little *mrow* not far, then the sound of paws rushing through the grass. Peyton flopped down on the edge of his patio and within seconds, a tiny furry body was rubbing itself all over his legs. He laughed, giving the kitten a

scritch. It was thin, but not dangerously so, though he still debated about going in to get it a can of tuna.

He was just about to stand when the sound of the bird started going off again, and the kitten took off like a rocket before Peyton could stop it. *RIP bird*, he thought, hoping a window wasn't open. He didn't want to think about what would happen if his neighbor came home to find their bird dead and the little stray licking its paws.

With a wince, Peyton pushed to his feet and went back in, feeling a little bit lost. There was little to do now, and it was barely eleven. He was still young, but the idea of going out was laughable. He didn't have the energy for it, and when that eventually came back, he didn't know if he'd have the courage.

Normally he'd crawl into bed, find some nice porn, then rub one out until he got tired. His favorite thing was slipping a small little bullet vibe into his hole and letting the pleasure rocket through him.

His doctor had suggested external prostate stimulation, but he could never get it quite right, and the first time he tried to use a toy, he kept fumbling with it—unable to get the angle right. Then his balls kept getting in the way, and his dick refused to get hard, and...

Well.

It threw him into a fit of anger, which dissolved into an anxiety attack leaving him near tears.

He hadn't tried since then, and he wasn't sure he wanted to now. His orgasms weren't as satisfying just by stroking himself, which was why he hadn't spent a lot of time masturbating when he was younger. His world had been changed the first time a man in a club rolled a condom on, then pounded his prostate until he was sobbing into the crook of his arm.

He didn't know he could come that hard, and the thrill and pleasure of it had never worn off.

Squeezing his eyes shut, he decided crashing in front of the TV was a better option. There was no sense in lying in bed, letting his brain run in circles that wouldn't stop. It felt a little pathetic and a lot lonely, but Peyton knew it would be a slow climb to his new normal.

He drifted to the sounds of the soothing time-keeping music of the baking show, then jolted wide awake sometime later when something rattled at his front door. Unsure what time it was, Peyton dropped his feet to the floor, but when he stood, he felt a familiar tug on his bag.

It was full—close to bursting. He paused to listen, making sure there wasn't some rando criminal trying to break in, and when he was met with silence, he hurried off to the bathroom and dug his supplies out to make the change.

It was the longest process now—carefully detaching the bag so nothing spilled, wiping away the adhesive that was leaving a permanent red ring around the opening, ignoring the strange sort of zing he felt every time his intestine was exposed to air. It had no feeling, but the hole around it was still tender.

He tried not to look too closely at it—how alien it was, how unnatural.

He knew eventually it would just become like another appendage, but it was still early days.

He swallowed thickly, then attached a new bag, slipped on the cover, then gave it a gentle tug to make sure it was properly stuck in place. Ten minutes had gone by, and he wondered if he was ever going to get faster.

God—if he had been on a date and had to excuse himself for this...?

He shoved that thought out of his head and walked back into the living room. The time on the wall clock read just after one in the morning, and he listened carefully again, but there was still no sound other than his own breathing, and the soft hum of his fridge.

Something was nagging at him though, so he walked to his door and peered out the little peephole. The street was awash with the yellow glow of the ugly streetlights, the sky pitch black, and all the other townhouses dark. His own porch light was off, and he regretted not installing one of those doorbell cameras because it just seemed the safe thing to do these days.

Hesitating, he gripped the knob, then pulled the door open a crack. Still nothing. He turned to shut it when something fluttering in the faint late-night breeze caught his eye, and Peyton glanced down to see something sitting on his stoop. It was a bag—one of those small black kitchen bags for trash. The ends were loosely tied, and there was something attached to the knot.

Pulling the door open all the way, Peyton knelt down and plucked it off the little bundle.

*What part of NOT INTERESTED is confusing for you?*

The note was in the same hand as the previous one—from his neighbor. It took him a second to realize what it was, then he lifted the bag and knew the cookies were inside it. Beneath it was the little container he'd sent them in.

His stomach burned hotly with shame and rejection. How could someone be so unkind? If there was an issue with baked goods, they could have at least knocked on his damn door and told him instead of trashing them and leaving them on his doorstep.

What kind of fucking monster was living next door?

Peyton snatched up the container, then stepped back and slammed the door shut. It wasn't as satisfying knowing he was the only one who could hear it, but it still felt good to release some of his anger. He marched to the kitchen and dropped the bag, then ripped it open. The cookies were at the bottom, a crumbled mess of soft dough.

Sneering, Peyton stuck the note on top of them, then grabbed his phone off the charger and snapped a photo. He didn't think twice before posting it to his Instagram as he walked back to the sofa and crawled beneath his blankets.

**TheBakerByTheSea: This is what my neighbor thought of the welcome basket of pudding cookies I left him. Guess you can't please everyone, right?**

He set his phone down and turned his attention back to the TV. There was no way in hell he'd be sleeping tonight, but he knew people would see his post and maybe their love of his bakes would soothe some of the white-hot sting that was simmering just under his skin.

He was a simple man, after all, and a little validation went a long way.

# CHAPTER SIX

THREE DAYS after his viral post, Peyton was in the kitchen when his brother and Taylor came bursting in. He was covered in a thin layer of flour from a small mixer incident with an air pocket, but he had boxes packed up and stacked high behind him, and he was just wiping down his station.

Taylor gave him an amused head shake as he walked over to the wall of cookies, then turned back to his friend. “Pity orders?”

“Fuck off,” Peyton said, though he couldn’t exactly deny it. His email was full to bursting since he’d posted his little pity-party photo, and he had only himself to blame. He’d been looking for a little validation and he was secretly hoping he might get a pop in sales.

But nothing like this.

He’d forgotten the power of a well-timed re-post from a semi-celebrity who had ordered from him before. Of course, Peyton had quickly bumped the TikTok star’s order to the front of the queue, but that didn’t really matter in the literal flood of people who followed suit.



Peyton was now out of supplies, waiting on a massive delivery, and he put his shop on hold until he could catch up. And this was all before he started introducing the rest of his menu. He knew he couldn't pay bills on cookies alone, but it was damn tempting to try if it kept up at this rate.

"I'm starting to think I need a PA," he said as he started to wipe his face down with a wet kitchen towel. "I've got people overseas asking me about shipping."

"Don't do it," Taylor warned as he began to divide the boxes by location. They were all labeled, and he'd agreed to organize them for the shipping service Peyton had called for pick-up. "It's a massive pain in the ass."

Peyton knew that—and he knew better—but he struggled with telling people no. He liked it when he made people happy. He liked seeing the photos they tagged him in with big grins holding his bakes like they were the best part of their day.

And the very thought that someone might dislike him—hate him even—because he told them he couldn't provide...

"Stop." Linden's voice cut through Peyton's spiral, and a warm hand landed on his shoulder. "I know what you're thinking, so don't. How long have you been on your feet?"

Peyton sighed. "Too long. I know." He grumbled a little to himself, but he realized his brother was holding a massive bag of take-out and he wanted to cry with relief. "Are you staying?"

"I have a shift," Linden said, dragging Peyton into the living room. He set the bag down on the coffee table, then pointed toward the little hallway. "Go shower. Let Taylor do his job and you get the hell off your feet."

The ache around his middle was a little more pronounced than it had been when he was distracted by work, and Peyton knew his brother was right. He just hated admitting it. He really was happiest when he was nose-deep in bags of sugar and flour. It made all the pain and loneliness fade into the background.

But, if Taylor was staying for the evening, he might be able to take a load off and not want to crawl under a weighted blanket and sleep the early evening away.

“Thanks for that,” Peyton told him, rubbing at his eye. He tried to swallow back a yawn but failed, and he laughed a bit when his brother took him by the shoulders and frog-marched him toward his bedroom door. “God. Yes, *Dad*, I’m going.”

Linden cuffed him upside the head. “You’d be so fucking lucky to have me as a dad.” Squeezing his arm, Linden let Peyton go the moment he was past the doorway, and then he was gone. He could hear the rise and fall of the voices in the front room, and it was a small comfort as he stripped out of his baking clothes and gathered up some sweats, heading for a shower.

It took him longer now to clean up with his bag, but every day he seemed to get a little faster—hands a little steadier. His body looked less foreign now, too, the more he stared at himself. He liked to think he was still a good-looking man. Very little had changed about him except a bit of weight loss and a slight pouch to his stomach.

And, okay, yes. The Barbie Butt was strange, but he tried not to focus on that too much. He supposed if—*when*—the right person came along, it wouldn’t be their focus either. And there had to be someone out there like that.

He was unwilling to lose hope entirely.

Mostly he just wanted to figure out his own shit before he started looking for a partner. He wanted to be able to get off—to touch himself and feel pleasure again. He wanted to figure out this new normal before inviting another man into his personal space because he had always been a take-charge kind of guy. A bossy bottom, his former hookups had liked to call him.

He wore the badge proudly and he was damn determined to figure out how he could be that again.

Drying his hair, Peyton twisted his coarse waves into a messy bun and stared at himself a little bit longer. His skin was

normally a rich tan, but he was looking sallow from how long he'd been trapped in his house—first in bed, and now by the massive amount of orders he had to fill.

He pulled his bottom eyelids down—not that he knew what he was looking for in his eyeballs—but he'd always seen people do that in movies when they were over-worked, over-stressed, and ready to crack.

Stepping away, he changed his bag, then pulled his hoodie over his head and wandered into the front room, feet bare and tapping gently on the wood floors.

Taylor was finished in the kitchen, now setting out the massive pile of makeshift taco bar food that Linden had known would make Peyton feel better after a long day. His mouth watered as he sat down and quickly pulled the container of fresh tortillas toward him.

“Remind me to send Lin a muffin basket,” Peyton said, stuffing a huge bite into his mouth.

Taylor snorted and flopped onto the cushion, holding a small container of guac and a bag of chips. He had crumbs on his mouth, and a little cilantro on his front tooth as he grinned. “You know he likes those lemon tarts. But if he gets a gift, *I* should get one too.”

“You can have anything you want,” Peyton said, scooping up some chicken and peppers to make a little mini taco. “Money, marriage, my first born. I can assassinate someone if you want.”

“There is this asshole who started my shift last week, and I would not mind if he accidentally found himself tripping and falling off a cliff,” Taylor grumbled.

Peyton blinked at him in surprise. Taylor had always been a little bit rough around the edges—hard corners where Peyton was soft lines—but it was rare to see him worked up. “You wanna talk about it?”

Taylor shook his head. “Nah. It's not important. He just...” Taylor licked his lips, then shrugged. “He made some joke about how I'm neutered and whipped because I want to hang

out with my wife and kid. I was talking with one of the other nurses about diaper stuff and he laughed in my face when I told him that I changed the baby without my wife nagging me.”

Peyton winced. Taylor and his brother Ethan, who had finally left town, struggled growing up with an emotionally unavailable father. At least, that’s what Taylor and Ethan called it. When Peyton listened to the story, he called it emotionally abusive.

He’d said that once to Taylor though who turned red, got furious, and didn’t talk to Peyton for a week. He realized he’d over-stepped, but he was the kind of person who was used to confronting the difficult parts of his past, so it just made sense to him that Taylor would want to embrace what was instead of what could be.

But his best friend had grown up bound and determined to be nothing like his old man. Peyton would watch Taylor with his wife and daughter and feel bursts of envy because God, what’s he’d give to be in love like that. To have a partner who thought the sun shone out his ass? Who loved him beyond reason?

He knew men like Taylor were generally the exception to the rule, but a small part of him still hoped there was one more out there who was a bit more queer and a lot more available.

“Alright, enough about me,” Taylor said, nudging Peyton gently in the side.

Peyton sighed. “Nothing to report, sergeant.”

Taylor rolled his eyes and elbowed Peyton again, hard enough to make him grunt. “Now, do I need to call you a liar to your face, or…”

Peyton threw his hands up in an exaggerated shrug. “What do you want from me? Like, the bag still kind of sucks, but not being in constant pain is amazing. My therapist is really happy with my progress, but I think she’s secretly waiting for me to have some sort of grief breakdown.”

Taylor shifted around so he could face Peyton. “Do you think that’s going to happen?”

Peyton stared down at his hands. There were clumps of flour sticking to his nails and in between the wrinkles on his knuckles. He started to pick at them until Taylor smacked his hands down. “I don’t know, dude. I want to say no because the good outweighs the bad. Like, even more than I was prepared for.” He found the courage to look up and saw Taylor watching him with more concern than anything else which helped. At least it wasn’t pity. “I still can’t...” He swallowed thickly and fought back a half-hysterical laugh. “I can’t get hard. I can’t seem to connect to my body like that anymore, and I just...” He trailed off and looked away.

Taylor’s hand dropped to his knee, giving it a tentative squeeze. He very much appreciated that he could talk to his very married friend about shit like this and Taylor wouldn’t have some sort of gay panic. “What have you tried?”

“Jerking off,” Peyton said, rolling his eyes as he glanced up again. “Since I have my Ken doll ass now, there’s not much more I can do.”

“Bullshit.”

Peyton blinked at his friend. “Uh. Dude, you saw it.”

“Yes, but that’s still bullshit,” Taylor said. “Remember that guy Booker from my office?”

Peyton frowned. The name sounded familiar.

“He had that accident two years ago—a spinal injury. His dick doesn’t work, like, at all. He has to use a catheter. You know what that is?”

Peyton rolled his eyes. “No, I definitely haven’t had one in the hospital while the doctor was removing my literal asshole. That’s,” he said with an exaggerated ignorant tone, “one of those pee-hole tube thingies, right?”

Taylor slapped his leg with the back of his hand. “Okay fine, I get it. But my point still stands. He has no feeling below his injury line, but the fuckin’ stories this guy tells.” Taylor let out a low whistle. “Trust me, he gets his.”

“It’s not the same, Tay. I don’t have a spinal injury,” Peyton said flatly. He didn’t have the energy to explain to Taylor how the differences worked. He wasn’t lacking in sensation—he’d just lost the one thing that ever really got him off.

“I’m not saying that. I’m saying that there are other ways to feel good. You just need to give yourself time and maybe stop tugging on your poor dick since, you know, that’s not working.”

Peyton flopped backward and covered his face with one hand. “I hate you.”

“No you don’t. Anyway, I’m gonna talk to him and see if he has any suggestions.”

“Please don’t,” Peyton begged in a whisper.

“I’m doing it. You can’t keep going on like this,” Taylor said. “I know you, okay? You’re a sexual guy.”

Peyton wanted to argue, but he couldn’t. Taylor was right. Peyton could distract himself by baking, and even by basking in how human he felt again. But at the end of the day, he was struggling to get back pieces of himself the surgeon had carved away, and he wasn’t sure he could.

“Fine. Whatever. It’s not like I ever have to meet the guy,” Peyton eventually grumbled.

Taylor smiled without looking up. “That’s the spirit.”

Peyton wanted to strangle him. Instead, he satisfied himself by just trying to smother him with a couch pillow.

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An hour later found Peyton back on the sofa with a decent dinner spread half-gone and feeling better than before. Taylor was lying on the floor in front of the coffee table, rubbing his full stomach.

“Why do we do this to ourselves?”

Peyton snorted and sipped on his water. “A mild form of sadism? Or wait...masochism?”

“You’re so vanilla,” Taylor said, then propped up on his elbows. “Speaking of. Linden and I had an idea.”

“You do realize you and my brother talking about my kinks is super creepy,” Peyton pointed out.

Taylor waved him off. “It’s not about your kinks. And actually, it was Allie’s idea but I went to Linden for help.” He shifted up onto his knees, then shuffled over as he dug his phone out of his pocket and tapped on the screen. “Don’t be pissed.”

“That pretty much guarantees I’m going to be pissed,” Peyton warned.

Taylor scoffed as he stared down, navigating through a page Peyton couldn’t quite see. “Yeah, well. Anyway, we signed you up for a dating website.”

Peyton almost ascended into another realm of being, because what? “You did *what?*”

“Relax, I didn’t publish it,” Taylor said. “Yet.”

He turned the phone around and the first thing Peyton saw was a photo of himself. It was surprisingly a good one—probably one that Allie had taken since she was a wedding photographer and had a keen eye. But that wasn’t enough to take the edge off his shock.

“What were you thinking?” Peyton asked, his voice low.

Taylor shrugged and let the phone go when Peyton reached for it. “That you’re lonely and feeling some type of way. I thought a few dates might not be the worst way to get your feet wet, you know? It’s not like you have to fuck these guys. It’s not Grindr.”

Peyton felt his cheeks redden as he read over the bio, which was a little too flattering, and then his likes and dislikes which were annoyingly accurate. “The Baker’s Man?”

“It’s cute. And it works. And it’s kind of like your Instagram,” Taylor said.

Peyton pursed his lips in annoyance. “Anyone who I pick up on this app is going to expect sex.” He kept reading and

noticed the distinct lack of mention about his stoma, and he didn't know how to feel about that. It wasn't something he wanted to hide, but it also wasn't something he wanted to constantly talk about.

“You're not looking for your prince charming, bro,” Taylor said, dropping down onto his ass and reaching out to squeeze Peyton's ankle. “You don't need to impress anyone. And you sure as shit don't have to fuck them just because they expect it.”

Peyton knew that. Of course he knew that. He just tended to get into awkward spots because he had a hard time telling people no. That was also back before the stoma when the worst that could happen was mediocre anal in a bathroom stall with not enough lube in the tiny condom box packets.

He hated himself for missing that, suddenly.

“I don't think I can.”

Taylor sighed but he didn't relent. “You need to get back out there and practice. Are all the guys on here probably douche bags? Yes. But it's also going to give you a taste of what it's like when you're finally ready to date for real.”

Peyton stared down at the screen, but he wasn't really seeing it. He was picturing some random date's face when they heard about his body.

“It's not doing you any good to sit around with all these scenarios in your head. The truth is, you don't know how people are going to react. You have no idea. And chances are, most people won't care nearly as much as you think they will.”

Taylor was right on one thing—Peyton didn't know how people were going to react until they found out about him. But what Taylor failed to understand was dating as a gay man. Taylor was bi, but he'd been with Allie since his freshman year of college. He didn't understand the constantly pressing need to be perfect. Taylor had never shown up to a date only to see disappointment and rejection on the guy's face because he



was missing a six-pack, or he didn't look like fucking Channing Tatum.

And granted, there were people in the world who wouldn't care. He wasn't foolish enough to think there weren't. He knew somewhere out there were maybe half a dozen guys who would love him just as he was. But finding them was like finding a needle in a big pit full of other needles that were all slightly longer, and sharper, and could cut deeper.

He just wasn't sure if he had the strength to let himself be hurt while he was searching.

"I get what you're saying, but I don't know how I'm supposed to date someone when I can't even connect with my own body." He stared at his hands when he spoke, but at Taylor's pointed silence, he glanced up and saw a strange expression on his friend's face.

It took him a second to recognize it for what it was: guilt.

"What did you do?" he asked in a low voice.

"Nothing," Taylor blurted out. "I...mostly nothing."

Peyton narrowed his eyes. "Explain."

Taylor heaved a sigh, then flopped back further into the cushions. "Okay, during dinner, I texted my friend about your problem. Not that I told him about your masturbation habits in detail or anything," he added in a rush.

Peyton glowered. "Tell me why I shouldn't punch you right now."

"Because this is important," Taylor said, a hint of a whine in his voice. "You're miserable and I hate it for you. I fucking hate that the surgery took your pain but it also took something else."

Peyton's throat went a little hot and tight. "Okay..."

"While we were eating, he sent me a link, and I kind of just fell down the TikTok rabbit hole of sex toys."

"Jesus," Peyton groaned.

“Hear me out.” Taylor shoved his hand into his pocket and grabbed his phone, swiping on the screen. “There’s this company that makes adaptive sex toys. Like, a huge line of them for people with all kinds of needs. Their website has one of those little histories, you know? Like a cooking blog, but less annoying.”

Peyton snorted and rolled his eyes. He was still feeling vague humiliation that Taylor was looking up adaptive sex toys thanks to Peyton’s orgasm issue, but Taylor seemed genuinely concerned for him. And maybe he could admit to himself that if their positions had been reversed, he’d have done the same thing.

“Anyway,” Taylor went on, his eyes on the screen as he scrolled, “the person who started it had some sort of spine injury and decided that there wasn’t enough sex tech out there for disabled people.”

“I’m not,” Peyton started, but he stopped because maybe he wasn’t society’s definition of disabled—but hell, maybe he *was*. His body wasn’t the same as it had been. Biting his lip, he took a huge breath, then asked, “So there are toys out there for people who had their assholes sewed shut?” God, his life sounded like one of those body horror movies.

Taylor’s look was soft though, and he shrugged. “I honestly don’t know. But he thought maybe you could look and see if there’s something that might help.”

Peyton’s fingers were faintly trembling as he reached for the phone, hating he was doing this, but also curious. He hadn’t even considered that there could be a company like this, but he also had no faith there was something out there for him.

The videos on the account were mostly trending TikTok sounds and people wagging their eyebrows at the screen with a *Look* on their faces to imply it was about sex without triggering a ban. And all of the devices looked horrifically complicated.

“I don’t know,” Peyton said quietly as he kept scrolling. He wondered who the founder was, but none of the videos gave any indication.

“Just keep scrolling,” Taylor said. He leaned forward and snatched Peyton’s phone off the table and put in the password Peyton immediately regretted giving him. “Let me follow them on your shit so you can check it out after I leave.”

Peyton didn’t look up at his friend. Embarrassment was creeping back up his spine and he knew it was just going to take time for him to deal with it all.

“Promise me you’ll actually give this a shot,” Taylor murmured very quietly. His long-fingered hand reached out and pulled his phone away from Peyton, and their gazes connected.

After a long beat and a heavy sigh, Peyton nodded. “I promise.” And he meant it. After all, he had nothing else to lose, and everything to gain.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

“...AND then he just sends *my* ass to the poor man’s house to give them back.”

Hudson only looked up from his design table when he realized that his asshole so-called best friend was talking about him and his neighbor. He pushed his chair back and spun toward the little group who were at the meeting table doing absolutely no work.

“He was cute as a fucking button, too,” Eli went on. “He gave me the worst puppy dog eyes ever.”

“You could have eaten them,” Hudson bit out.

Eli scoffed and waved his hand dismissively. “And ruin my figure? Bitch, no thank you. But if he’d made them for me, I might have at least taken a nibble.”

“That’s because you’re a goddamn doormat,” Hudson snapped. “I’m not a monster because I don’t want some guy’s pity muffins.”

“They were welcome to the neighborhood muffins,” Eli corrected. “And then he what? Made you cookies. And you...”

“Threw them in a fucking trash bag and tossed them on his porch so he’d get the message that I don’t want anything from him,” Hudson said without feeling a scrap of guilt. He hadn’t asked for any of that. He didn’t want his neighbor’s kindness or pity or well wishes...or a goddamn neighborhood welcome.

He just wanted to be left alone.

“Anyway,” Eli went on with a shit-eating grin. “Yesterday morning, I found him on Instagram.”

At that, Hudson gripped his wheels and gave one hard push, rolling to the table. “Wait, so *I’m* the monster for throwing out cookies, but you stalked him, and that’s fine?”

“I didn’t stalk him. He’s got some famous online bakery and he was all over my recommended page.” Eli grinned as he sipped his coffee, his gaze locked onto Hudson’s. “He had a video about you.”

“Fuck,” Hudson breathed out. “Does he know who I am? Who we are?”

“Not that I could tell,” Eli said with a shrug. “You don’t show your face on media, so how could he?”

It was Hudson’s hard limit with the twins and their media campaigns, and he had no regrets considering it didn’t seem to be hurting their business at all. He let out a small breath of relief as he sat back and listened to Eli continue to tell his annoying neighbor’s story.

“I guess he had some shop which he lost after a major surgery. He hasn’t gone into detail but I’m pretty sure it was a gut thing because I caught a glimpse of a stoma bag in one of his vids. Some people asked, but he didn’t answer those comments.”

Hudson squeezed his eyes shut and told himself he would not be feeling sympathy for this nosy guy. “So?”

“So nothing,” Eli said primly. “He just seems like a genuinely kind person. And of *course* my loyalty is with you,” he drawled, leaning toward him. “I’m not gonna go be his best friend and pet the new stray cat he seems to have adopted...”

Fucking wonderful. A stray cat.

“...but at some point, you two will probably cross paths, and you might want to consider what a dick you’ve been.”

Hudson spluttered. “I returned the first plate fully intact with a very clear note about no thanks and he ignored it. *I’m* not the dick in this situation.”

Mostly. He knew he was a dick in general and he was fine with it. But he wasn’t going to be painted as some monster for setting boundaries and then enforcing them.

Eli sighed again. “Anyway, whatever. I don’t think he’d drag our company even if he did figure out who you were. And I know people tend show one face to the internet, but he genuinely seems like someone who’s kind for no reason.”

“That won’t last,” Hudson scoffed, and he felt Aspen and Rain both staring at him hard. They were younger and still wildly optimistic about life and love, and he didn’t want to crush that. But he also didn’t have it in him to lie.

“Is this about Austin?” Rain asked.

Hudson’s jaw clenched. “This is about reality. People will promise you anything under the sun because they don’t think anything will change. Then shit happens. You age, you mature. Sometimes you gain weight, or you lose it. Sometimes you become disabled. And then suddenly all those promises are too much of a burden to keep.”

“Not every man would have left you,” Eli pointed out.

Hudson’s face fell and his eyes narrowed, but he kept his mouth shut until Aspen and Rain escaped the room. When the door shut, he cracked. “Fuck you.”

“I’m not trying to—”

“Fuck you,” Hudson said again. “Why do you think it matters to me that someone else might not have left me? I wasn’t dating someone else. I was married to *him*, and *he* decided that getting his ass railed every night by a human penis—his words,” Hudson added, thinking of the last major

fight he had with Austin, “was more important. He said what I could give him wasn’t enough.”

“I know,” Eli said quietly. “But you don’t have to be pissed at the whole world because he’s a superficial asshole.”

“I was born pissed at the world,” Hudson muttered, running a hand down his face. “Being paralyzed by a fucking spinal tumor didn’t change my personality. It just took away a few more fucks.”

After a second, Eli laughed so hard, it made Hudson’s own lips twitch upward. “God, Hudson, I hate you.”

Hudson just shrugged, mostly because he knew Eli didn’t.

“I’m not saying you should be your neighbor’s best friend. And I’m not saying that he should keep sending you baked gifts. But it wouldn’t kill you to talk to him.”

“Might kill him,” Hudson said, mostly because he was irritated that Eli was making sense.

Eli stood up and walked around the table, dropping into the chair next to his friend. “It won’t. Just like getting back out there to remind yourself that not everyone is going to be a massive, cheating shitweasel like Austin won’t kill you.”

Hudson squeezed his eyes shut. “Maybe it’s time we both admit that I’m just not a good partner, Eli. Austin liked it when I was an asshole because he got off on it. Take that away and what’s left of my personality?”

Eli bit his lip and shook his head. “Are you perhaps not considering that Austin was an asshole too and that you both brought out the worst in each other?”

Hudson grimaced because his therapist had said the same damn thing. But it was easier to just take responsibility for it all and hold the weight of being the man who drove his husband to cheat. “Maybe it was just me.” He swallowed thickly, feeling a confession rising in his throat. “Right before Austin left, he told me that it was the pressure of the marriage. He said that if we’d been open, he could have loved me forever.”

“Bullshit,” Eli spat. “I’m all for polyamory when it fits, but...”

Hudson shook his head quickly. “No, I know. But I think I believed him for a minute. Right before he moved out, he told me he was never getting married again because he knew it was a mistake. Not because of me, but because it wasn’t right for him. I was pissed and I wanted to rebound, so I downloaded one of those fucking apps and guess who the first person was that popped up on my matches?”

“Shit,” Eli breathed out.

Hudson let out a bitter laugh. He hadn’t told anyone about it. In fact, after reading Austin’s profile, he immediately deleted the entire thing and tried to forget he’d ever seen it. Unfortunately, his memory was too good, and it was one of the few moments he hadn’t been able to turn off the hurt.

“His profile name was MarriageMan.”

“Gross,” Eli said.

Hudson snorted a laugh. “Yeah. His entire bio was going on and on about how he was just waiting to meet the right one, and he was looking for long term commitment. I...I don’t know,” he added on a sigh. “I felt like an idiot.”

“That’s on him,” Eli said through clenched teeth.

Hudson rolled his eyes. “I know that, but maybe it was me. Maybe I drove him to this. Maybe he spent a few weeks away from me and realized that he wanted someone...better than me. Kinder. Softer.”

Eli stared at him for a long, long moment. “Maybe.”

Hudson winced, but he truly had wanted brutal honesty.

“That doesn’t give him the right to do what he did, and to tell you the truth—I don’t believe that. He was always a sketchy little shit.”

“You’re just saying that because he hurt me,” Hudson pointed out.



Eli shook his head. “No. I’m saying that because when you two first met, he came on to me. When I called him out on it, he waved it off like it was a joke, and I didn’t know him enough to decide whether or not he was lying.”

Hudson’s throat went hot. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because you seemed happy,” Eli confessed, staring down at his hands. “It was a mistake—I get that now. I hate myself for it, trust me. But you finally seemed happy for once, and I thought maybe you really loved him.”

“I don’t know if I did,” Hudson confessed. There was a tightness in his chest he didn’t know what to do with. “I don’t have anyone to compare it to.” And my God, if that didn’t make him sound pathetic, he didn’t know what would.

Eli reached over and took his hand, squeezing tight. “I swore to myself I would never lie to you again about whoever you ended up with.”

“Bold of you to assume it would be anyone,” Hudson said with a wry grin. He thought maybe he should be pissed at his friend, but he knew Eli had only been trying to help, and he just didn’t have the strength to care.

“It will be. But you have to give it a shot, okay? You took control of your body back, right? So maybe it’s time to be a little vulnerable.”

Hudson’s mouth fell open, then shut again because he didn’t know what to say. He had no idea what could possibly motivate him to trust anyone, and he didn’t think Eli had the answer. “I just need to do everything in my own time.”

Eli gave him a look, but when he withdrew his hand, it was obvious he was going to give Hudson a reprieve. Maybe not forever, but for now.

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Hudson half-expected to find another plate of bakes waiting for him on his front doorstep, and he felt the strangest little pang when there wasn’t one. He was desperately trying to

avoid admitting that Eli was right—that he could have handled his neighbor better—but it was getting harder by the moment.

He headed inside and wheeled into his room to change, swapping to his walker. It was the same, painfully slow journey to the kitchen that it was every night, but he was starting to forget what it felt like to just hop up and walk somewhere without thinking about it. That was strange and a little sad, but a part of him was relieved because for a while there, he started to wonder if he'd ever feel comfortable in his present rather than waiting for the future or wallowing in the past.

Pulling open his freezer, he grabbed one of the pre-cooked meals from the service Eli had hired for his last birthday gift. They weren't the best, but they also weren't the worst, and they saved his life during long nights where he was stuck at the office working on designs.

The kitchen immediately began to smell like garlic, and he heard a quiet tweep, glancing down to see Pancake wandering in. Sitting on his bench, Hudson grabbed a jar of freeze-dried fruit and threw a few pieces down to the bird who began to peck at them. He watched as the thing wandered a little closer and nipped at his toes.

He could feel it—barely, but it was there—and it almost made him laugh that the obnoxious parting gift Austin had given him was the one thing to keep him aware of his current sensation levels.

Leaning over, he held his finger out and for a moment, he thought Pancake might actually hop on. Then the little beast flapped its wings, screeched, and bit him hard.

“You fucker,” Hudson gasped, pulling away.

The bird gave him a smug look before wandering off again, and he sighed quietly to himself, wondering why he didn't just re-home the thing. He'd considered it once or twice. He'd even gone as far as to look up the number for a rescue sanctuary.

Then Pancake had wandered into his room, climbed up on the bed, and spent fifteen minutes grooming his hair. He'd cracked and changed his mind, and Pancake had thanked him by trying to pierce his earlobe.

"It's because I hate myself," he said aloud, grabbing his little dish from the microwave. He shoveled down his mediocre food, then headed back toward the office to check on Pancake's supplies. He changed out the water dish, refilled his food, then swapped the bedding at the bottom.

The bird was perched on the back of a chair, watching him, and Hudson eyed it.

"This is Austin's last revenge, isn't it?"

*Hnawwk!*

Hudson rolled his eyes. "A constant reminder that I was some epic asshole and deserve to be tortured until I die, sad and alone."

Pancake had nothing to say to that, which Hudson knew was probably an answer in itself. He held his hand out again to the bird, and this time it hopped on, walking up to his shoulder. He kept his steps as steady as he could manage as he approached the cage, and the bird gave him a tiny nibble on his jaw before flapping down to the top and settling in.

"After these designs are finished, I'll be around more," he promised.

The bird eyed him sleepily, then settled into its feathers.

Making his way to his bedroom, Hudson went through the long slog of his nighttime routine—a sitting shower, teeth, hair, a few of his foot and calf exercises before popping a stool softener, a muscle relaxer, and then some Tylenol so he didn't feel like he'd been hit by a bus come morning.

He went to bed naked because he had no one to hide from and no one to impress, and once the darkness hit, the restlessness began. He fought it for a handful of minutes, then rolled over and opened the little drawer in his nightstand, pulling out the very first toy he'd ever created. This one was slightly newer, but the mechanics were the same.

It was soft in his hands—the silicone almost slick on its own. There was a circle where he could tuck his dick in—hard or soft, and his balls. A knob at the base would roll against his perineum, stimulating his prostate, and the curved end would slip into his hole and pulse and vibrate, stimulating what sensation he had below the spot where they'd removed his tumor.

It didn't always work, and he rarely got all the way hard, but he could feel it. It sent zings of pleasure from his stomach, through his limbs, and into his chest. His orgasms were different now—intense and all over his body instead of concentrated at his core.

And it reminded him, every now and again, how much better it would be with a partner. To have warm, strong hands petting him and clawing him in all the spots where it felt good? To be held tight and warm and wanted as he shook apart?

Slicking his hand with lube, Hudson tucked himself inside the circle, then used his hand to spread his legs so he could push the toy inside. He felt it—the barest pressure, then his thumb found the button and gave it a little tap. It was created for people without much hand strength to use, so it immediately flared to life.

He hadn't done this in a while, and his breathing instantly picked up as sparks began to dance along his darkened vision. One hand fisted the sheets beneath him, the other holding his legs spread so he could rock his hips gently downward. The pulsing in his ass, the rubbing on his prostate—it was so much.

He sucked in a breath, then suddenly a face appeared behind his closed lids. The long, thick hair in a topknot, the gentle, shy smile, the hope in those dark eyes.

The one person he shouldn't be thinking of right then was his neighbor, and yet—there he was.

P.

Shit, he didn't even know the man's full name.

Hudson tried to chase the vision off, but the pleasure began to spiral, and the image got clearer, and he found himself trembling with his orgasm to the face of the man he had been determined to shut out.

“God,” he gasped when it was over. He tapped the button to stop the motion, and it took him several long moments to get the toy off. He flung it to the end of the bed, then covered his face and let out a muffled cry. What the fuck was wrong with him? That was the worst thing he could have done.

Not just because he had no business fantasizing about his neighbor, but also because—in that moment—he realized he wanted to do it again.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

PEYTON SIGHED as he stared down at his phone. He had half a dozen messages waiting for him, all of them from good-looking men who had no idea how...*complicated*...Peyton's body was now. He regretted letting Taylor and Linden take the lead on controlling his reentry into the dating world.

They may have existed on the periphery of chronic illness and disability, but they didn't understand what it was like to live it. They'd seen him in pain—seen him struggle and break down and grow a little hateful sometimes—but they didn't know how that felt deep down in the core of who they were.

They never had to face themselves in the mirror and say aloud, “This is never going to change. This is your reality now,” just to let those words sink in.

Sitting outside as the sun slowly crept toward its midmorning position, Peyton scrolled through the messages as the little stray cat that wasn't very stray anymore rubbed along his shins. He scratched at her ears gently as his gaze fixed on one man in particular.

According to his profile, his name was Austin, he was in graphic design, he lived locally, and he was single but looking for a long term relationship.

*I'm divorced, and I know most people are ashamed of admitting that, but I'm not. Sometimes in life you win, and sometimes you don't, but there's no point denying when you get it wrong. I'm a monogamous, family-oriented man who wants to come home to the love of my life every night, and I'm willing to be patient until I find him.*

It sounded good. It sounded great, in fact. It was exactly what Peyton might have written. Or at least, close to it. He probably would have talked about his body and his disease and how he was tired of letting it control him.

He wished he could be that honest.

They were a match, so he tapped on the guy's message icon, then drummed his fingers on the side of his phone before finally going with:

*Hey, I'm Peyton. I saw we matched, and you sound like an interesting guy. Let me know if you want to chat.*

God, it sounded pathetic. He fought the urge to groan loudly as he pushed to his feet, then gently prodded at his bag to see if it was ready for a change. As he turned toward the house, he heard a sudden and quiet string of swearing coming from his neighbor's house, and his curiosity took control of his body.

Tiptoeing over the soft grass, he peered through a small gap in the fence for his first glimpse of the man who had been so unkindly returning Peyton's bakes. He expected some old, gnarled curmudgeon of a man—or woman—hell if he knew for sure.

Instead, he found a gorgeous, middle-aged guy with short brown hair, olive skin, and rippling biceps. He was stretched out on a yoga mat with one knee pressed to his chest, his eyes closed. Peyton had no idea why the man was cursing, but after another second of watching—he realized what it was.

The man dropped his leg, but it didn't lie flat or straight. It just kind of flopped over, and then the guy had to push himself to sit, manually adjusting his legs. Peyton watched as the man's calves began to tremble like he was freezing, and the neighbor started cursing again as he massaged over his thighs.

Peyton's gaze roamed the yard, and a few feet away he saw a wheelchair—and then, on the covered patio, a walker.

The disability issue didn't make him feel sorry for the guy or excuse the fact that he was a raging dick. And it was even worse learning that he was closer to Peyton's age, because he should have fucking known how to use common courtesy and just gone over and told Peyton he wasn't interested in baked goods or whatever the fuck his problem was.

Peyton started to bristle with irritation, and he was seconds away from popping up over the fence to give the guy a piece of his mind, but the neighbor's phone started to ring.

"Walk away," Peyton whispered to himself. "Walk away. Just fucking *walk away*..."

"What's up?" the guy asked. His voice was a delicious rumble, matching his face and body, though at most he was objectively attractive. Peyton was most definitely the kind of guy who wasn't attracted to assholes.

There was a long silence, and Peyton was about to turn, but the guy spoke again.

"Okay. Is she..." The guy stopped and sighed. "No. I'm not going to talk to her just because she gave you some sob story about a made-up health condition."

Peyton grimaced, then looked down to find the kitten nudging his legs. He reached for her, cuddling her to his chest. "I bet he treats everyone like..."

"Do you know what she did last week? She stalked me at my rehab center and waited for me in the parking lot. Then she tried to take my fucking wheelchair so I'd have to sit there and talk to her."

"Oh shit," Peyton whispered.



“The most I can say is she gave birth to me, and after weeks like this one,” the neighbor said, sounding more tired than anything now, “I wonder if it would have been better that she didn’t.”

Peyton winced. He’d felt that way once or twice about his own birth mother when his depression was raging, and he didn’t want to get out of bed, and his parents were pressuring him to be more grateful that they’d taken him in. It had taken a lot of strength to move past it without any kind of support, and by the sound of his neighbor’s voice, he was right there in the worst of it.

“Jesus Christ,” the neighbor sighed out after a long moment. “I’m not telling you I want to kill myself, Eli. I’m telling you that it’s been a hard week and you know what a shitty person she is. Do you really think I should go down there and...”

Peyton held the kitten closer.

“Okay. Thank you. Tell the twins I won’t be in today, okay? My legs aren’t cooperating with me at all, and I’m just fucking tired. I just want...” The man stopped, then let out a defeated laugh. “I don’t know what I want. Some comfort food and like six naps.”

There was a silence, broken suddenly by the cat letting out an impossibly loud meow for its size, and Peyton froze. There was a shuffling sound, and out of fear that the man would get into his chair and roll toward the fence, Peyton darted for his patio door and slipped in. He shut it as quietly as he could manage, then stared down at the kitten in his arms.

“Well, I’m *definitely* not going to name you stealth.”

“*Mrow.*”

He rolled his eyes, then moved to the counter where he had two kitten food in cans he’d grabbed from the supermarket, and he opened the lid on one. Definitely-Not-Stealth happily rushed over to help herself, and Peyton moved into the kitchen, staring into his cupboards.

He should have learned his lesson the first two times he tried to win his neighbor over, but no one ever accused him of being a reasonable man.

“There has to be something,” Peyton mused. He glanced over at the kitten and shrugged. “Brownies? Everyone loves brownies when they’re sad.”

He would have kept musing, but he had to change his bag before he had an accident in the last place a health inspector would thank him for.

Moving to the bathroom, he opened up his cabinet and pulled out his supply of wipes, and a fresh bag, and a bag cover with stars and moons on it. It only took him a second to get the bag off and emptied, and he wasn’t quite sure how he felt about the fact that he was getting good at his little routine.

There was some pride, of course. Peyton was the kind of person who had always wanted to be good at everything, but this was a new level. He dropped the used bag in the trash, then began to wipe himself clean, staring down at the angry red bit of his insides that now existed outside.

There was no feeling in it—no pain now that it was healed up from the surgery. It was just this part of him that only felt real whenever he looked down at it.

His free hand absently rubbed behind him—at his ass, and the hole that no longer existed. His body shuddered and he felt a heaviness in his chest again. He thought about the random sex-toy he had in his online shopping cart—complicated but promising the stimulation he was craving.

His hand moved to his cock, lifting up his balls, pressing on his perineum. A little zing of something shot through his limbs, but his dick remained as limp as ever. “Fucking stubborn, useless...” he started to mumble. Of course, it wasn’t fair to take his frustration out on his cock. It was his brain that was the problem—and his fears.

And his grief.

Moving to the toilet, he emptied his bladder, then washed his hands, swiping off his stoma one more time before drying

the skin and attaching the bag. Tucking it into the cute little cover, he pulled his sweats back over his waist, then his shirt down. He washed up one last time, then grabbed the trash bag and ran it out to the curb before returning to the kitchen.

Brownies were back on his mind again. Comfort brownies. *S'mores* brownies. They were his best recipe, and they were also his last shot. If the sad neighbor—whose life sounded just as complicated as Peyton's—rejected those, there was no hope for him.

But Peyton was also the kind of man who did not like to give up. Not even on grumpy assholes like him.

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Peyton was pretty sure the smell of baking chocolate had permeated at least a five-mile radius from his house by the time he was pulling the brownies out of the oven and sprinkling on a last little bit of the graham cracker crumble.

The bake was tricky because the marshmallows had to be treated delicately. Adding them right from the bag meant they'd turn to goo and ruin the bake. So, he'd freeze a few and mix them in. Then, when there was five minutes left, he'd pull the tray, add more to the top, and let them get perfectly browned by the time the brownies were done.

The recipe didn't work out every time, but Peyton had spent years perfecting it. He still couldn't get the vegan recipe to cooperate, but he was working on it.

Once he was finished and they were left out to cool, Peyton finally picked up his phone. There was an alert on the screen, and his heart gave a soft little thud when he realized that Austin from the app had written back.

His stomach was in his throat a bit when he swiped open the screen.

MarriageMan: Hey, cutie! I saw you match with me when you created your profile. How are you liking it so far? Any hot dates I can be jealous over? I'd love to chat if you have time.

Peyton looked away with a frown. Jealousy seemed cute and coy at first, but he'd never had great luck with men who wanted to get possessive outside of dirty talk when they were fucking the breath out of him.

Still, he couldn't let one word throw him.

MarriageMan: I'm more than happy to chat. We can even exchange numbers if you want. I don't really love the app system, and I'm much more responsive over text. Here's my number if you do.

Peyton absently saved it into his phone, but he wasn't brave enough to use it just yet. Instead, he pulled over a stack of paper and grabbed one of his gel pens from his little cup and began to scratch out a note for his neighbor.

*Hi. I know this makes me seem like I can't take no for an answer- which might be true but only when it comes to baked goods. I'm not offering these because I want you to owe me something, or that I think it'll make us friends. I'm offering these because they're amazingly delicious and sometimes bad days call for a brownie.  
-P*

Short, to the point. Simple and maybe a little sweet. It was exactly the way he thought of his personality most days.

He tapped his finger on the brownies and decided they were good enough. They wouldn't cut neatly, but messy and gooey was better than that store-bought look. Grabbing his little rolling slicer, he took his time, slicing them into even rows. The crumbs made it even more appealing, and he was careful not to brush too many away as he packed them into a little bento box he used to use for work lunches. It would

preserve the heat and keep them warm. It was black with a hand-painted flower on the side, and he murmured a quiet prayer that the grumpy man wouldn't toss it into the bin because he liked it.

It was one of the nicer reminders of his life before.

With a deep breath, Peyton left his phone on the counter and headed out the front door. A small part of him started to panic when he noticed movement in his neighbor's front window. The blinds were closed, but there was a small crack, and Peyton almost turned around to flee.

"Be brave, dipshit," he cursed at himself. "You've survived worse than a bad attitude and a sharp tongue."

He sucked in a deep breath, then made his way up the ramp, which he realized *was* for this man and not still there because the guy couldn't be assed to remove it. Hell, it was probably why his neighbor bought the house in the first place.

With trembling fingers, he hovered a touch by the doorbell before pushing down, then he waited with his breath stuck in his throat for someone to answer.

A minute ticked by—nearly two before he almost lost his bravery and turned to run away. But just as he started took three steps down the ramp, the lock snicked open and the man from the back yard appeared. Sitting in his wheelchair, his head came to Peyton's shoulder which probably meant standing up, he was massive.

He was all bulk and hotness—dark haired, olive skinned, a chiseled jaw with broad shoulders and biceps that were threatening to tear free of his sleeves. He was exactly the man that would have sent Peyton to his knees in a club if they'd met one night—anonymous, and without the ugliness of rejected bakes between them.

"What the fuck do you want?" the man barked.

Peyton tried not to flinch as he got flashbacks of high school bullies who used to torment him. "I...I know I'm a huge asshole—actually, the note says it all." Peyton thrust the bento box out, and the man just stared at it. "I live next door."

“Figured that one out all on my own,” the man said, his voice a little huskier than it had been earlier when he was on the phone. “The nosy fucking baker.”

Peyton swallowed thickly. “Will you just... Look, I promise this is the last time I bring you anything, okay? But these are the best things I can do in the kitchen. They’re the most expensive item in my shop.”

The man’s eyes narrowed. “Why are you giving them to *me*, then? If this is some kind of ploy to get me to shop at your —”

“It’s not! Sometimes people just need a fucking brownie.” Peyton all-but shouted. He felt his cheeks heat, and he glanced away, his voice dropping. “I don’t actually want anything from you. I was just trying to be nice.”

In the long silence that followed his outburst, Peyton was sure the man was going to reject him. His body tensed, preparing to power walk home to try and save some dignity, but then the bento box was snatched from his hand and before he could look up, the door slammed shut.

Letting out a hard breath, he turned on his heel and headed home, not quite sure what the hell happened. He knew there was every chance he’d wake up tomorrow with a smashed container on his front porch and the door covered in smeared barely done batter that looked like dog shit.

But there was every chance that the angry—and frankly sad—man would indulge. And Peyton damn-well knew those brownies could take the edge off everything bad, even if it was only for a moment.

## CHAPTER NINE

“DUDE. *SHARE!*”

“No,” Hudson said quickly, but he wasn’t fast enough or able-bodied enough to keep the last of the brownies away from Eli’s wandering hands.

From his spot on the sofa, the most he could do was throw an elbow as Eli managed to wrest the box away, and he was forced to lie there helplessly as his friend dug in. It was almost worth it to see the look of surprised ecstasy on Eli’s face though. Hudson wanted someone to understand the pleasure-pain he’d been feeling since he finally gave in and tried his neighbor’s damned bakes.

He was full of regret, and yet... he couldn’t stop eating them.

“Holy shit. Marry this man,” Eli said, his words sticky with chocolate and marshmallow. “I’m serious. Drive down to the courthouse right now. I’ll be a witness. I need these in my life every single day.”

Hudson pulled a face as he grabbed the box back and stared down forlornly at what was left. Two center pieces and

some graham cracker crumbs. He licked his finger and pressed it against the graham, trying not to think about how even *that* tasted homemade. “I’m not marrying someone so you can have brownies.”

“I hate you,” Eli complained.

Hudson rolled his eyes. “No, you really don’t.”

“*Anyway...* I saw these on his Instagram,” Eli said, leaning back as he savored the last few bites. “I had a feeling they were for you.”

“Is that why you showed up? To tell me to play nice with him?” Hudson grumbled. He stuck the lid back on and leaned over to toss the box on the table. Carefully. Mostly. It was a very nice, expensive looking container which Hudson suspected was the reason the neighbor had used it—to encourage him not to destroy anything.

And hell, it had worked. Hudson wasn’t the nicest man in the world, but he wasn’t a monster. At least, not on his better days.

Of course, this was also not one of his better days. He’d been dealing with a production issue, he was on the verge of firing his PR company because they were giving both him and the twins anxiety every time they called a phone meeting to discuss their social media, and then he had to deal with his mother. Again. Because she was haunting both his work building and his PT’s office.

*Again.*

After his workout and unloading all of his frustrations and depression spiral on Eli, he’d called his lawyer, who suggested it might be time for a protective order. It wasn’t something he was looking forward to, but he knew he had enough evidence to get one.

“Hudson?”

He blinked and realized he’d fallen into one of his thought spirals. Clearing his throat, he settled back and shook his head. “Sorry, what did you say?”



Eli sighed and swiped his hands on his jeans before leaning back and cuddling in close. Hudson wasn't the kind of guy who needed or wanted physical contact very much. Since his tumor, his body was a strange mess of sensations—dull and numb in so many places, then hypersensitive in others. One time, he'd brushed the side of his hip against the spin cycle of his washing machine and he'd been seconds away from coming.

Granted, his therapist had explained to him that after his paralysis, arousal would be far more of a mental state than a physical one which meant he wasn't going to have spontaneous orgasms when someone brushed up against him at the supermarket. But it still made him feel out of control.

However, Eli's side-hug was a welcome one after his day, and he sighed and settled into it.

"I said," Eli repeated after he got comfortable, "I'm here because my best friend was having a rough day. And I was kind of hoping you didn't throw the brownies in Peyton's face."

"Peyton," Hudson repeated. He hadn't known the neighbor's name until that moment. He wasn't sure why it mattered. A person was a person no matter what they were called, and in Hudson's experience, most people were shit.

"Did you actually speak with him today?" Eli asked. "As in made words with your mouth in close enough proximity for him to hear them?"

Hudson dragged a hand down his face, then shook his head. "I might have." He wasn't eager to admit that he'd been completely taken aback by how absurdly gorgeous the man was in person.

Hudson had been just out of the shower when his doorbell rang. He hadn't bothered rushing since he couldn't give a single fuck about solicitors, and he had no intentions of ever speaking to any of his neighbors.

And if it was Eli, he'd just let himself in. If it was the delivery of their new product, that could sit until he was

finished.

So he'd taken his time getting dressed and fixing his hair, then wheeled to the front door. Somehow, he was both surprised and unsurprised to see the neighbor still waiting for him with the little box and a familiar post-it note in his nervous, trembling hands.

But it wasn't the poor fucker's nerves that shook Hudson and had him rolling back on his earlier declaration that he would never speak to that man. No, what really got him was that Eli was right: Peyton was sweet. He was very obviously exasperated by Hudson's attitude, which was only fair, but he was patient. And God help him, but he was so painfully good looking it made Hudson feel things. It was all he could do to just take the fucking brownies and shut the door in Peyton's face, because if he hadn't, he might have said something he'd regret.

Like—God forbid—inviting him in for coffee or beer or... whatever the hell he had in his fridge.

“And?” Eli pressed, interrupting his inner spiral. “How did it go?”

Hudson groaned and shoved at his friend who refused to be moved. “It was fine.”

“Liar,” Eli countered.

Hudson growled at him. “Okay, I was an asshole, is that what you want to hear? He was nice and waited for me as I took my sweet fucking time to answer the door. He still offered me brownies after I was rude as hell, and he did it with a smile. And yes, the brownies are delicious, and I regret throwing the other stuff away. But I'm still not interested in making friends.”

Eli turned his head and groaned into Hudson's bicep. “But his food is so *good*. Imagine what your life would be like if you could have this all the time!”

And that thought was terrifying because Hudson knew what it was like to have, and he also knew what it was like to lose. He had no room for that kind of pain anymore.

“Then you go make friends with him,” Hudson said irritably. His frustration was rising again and he knew it was mostly the fault of his bad day, but it was easy to latch on to this whole Peyton thing. “In fact, why don’t you ask him out since you seem so goddamn obsessed.”

Eli lifted his head up and fixed Hudson with a glare. “Don’t be a dick just because...” He stopped abruptly, knowing he was about to cross a line.

“Because?” Hudson pressed because he really *was* an asshole.

Eli sagged back. “I’m sorry. It’s hard watching you go through all this shit because of her.”

Hudson immediately deflated. His best friend had been one of the first people to point out what a horrible narcissist his mother was. When Eli first brought it up, Hudson had gotten angry—defensive. But that was the moment the glass had shattered and there was no way for him to unsee it. There was no way for him to stop his brain from removing the veil and forcing him to look back at his childhood, and everything she’d put him through as an adult. And there was only one way to describe it: toxic.

And abusive.

Eli had been there when he finally cut her off and had to pick up the pieces when he was forced to confront his trauma. In fact, Eli was there every time Hudson needed him, and it wasn’t fair to be an asshole to him just because his neighbor forced him to confront uncomfortable feelings.

“I don’t want to play nice with him,” Hudson said very quietly. “I don’t need any new friends. What I have right now is enough.”

“I know you think that.” Eli reached over and took Hudson’s hand. “But it might not be the worst thing. You can’t just have me and work and nothing else.”

“I have other people,” Hudson grumbled.

Eli snorted. “Other people are work people. They don’t count.”

Hudson tried not to flinch at Eli's stark honesty, pursing his lips in irritation before letting out a heavy sigh. "Why the fuck not? Why can't a man be happy with work friends?"

Eli laughed very softly. "Some men can, but you forget how well I know you. You're angry and you're hurt." He held up his hand when Hudson's mouth fell open to argue with him. "You've been hurt enough that it ruined your trust in most people, and it's understandable. But it doesn't change who you are at your core. You're a good man."

"You may be the first and only person who has ever said that to me," Hudson said, ignoring yet another sting of truth. He had never, ever been a kind man, but he supposed Eli wasn't talking about kindness.

"I won't be the last." Eli reached for his hand again, squeezing it gently when Hudson gave over. "You just have to start giving people a chance."

"Who? The fucking baker?" Hudson grumbled.

Eli laughed and shook his head. "Doesn't have to be him, but it needs to be someone. Not everyone is out to get you."

Logically, Hudson knew that. He had a team of people he trusted with his life. But he was also a man who had seen the worst of the worst humanity could offer. He had a mother who never really loved him, a father who walked away when he was a toddler, and an ex-husband who proved that in sickness and in health was just lip service.

Why would he open himself up to feel all that shit again?

His gaze fell on the little floral box of brownies, and he tried not to let himself soften. He had no time for it, and this Peyton person had no business inserting himself in his life.

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Eli didn't stick around long, and Hudson appreciated it. On days he wasn't feeling his best, he preferred to be alone. It was the only time he could be openly vulnerable and not constantly stress about what people were thinking when they looked at him.

He spent the evening working on his laptop, the latest toy unpacked and on his lap as he went over the schematics. He wasn't thrilled with the button placement or the sensitivity, so he started a list of adjustments that had to be made.

Although he didn't talk openly about it, the team knew he was one of the product testers, and it was both the best and worst part of the job. He knew it was hypocritical to be embarrassed about using a sex toy for disabled men as the disabled owner of their sex toy company, but since his tumor, he felt flayed open more than not.

His doctors had seen him shaking and crying in pain. His nurses had seen him piss and shit the bed. His physical therapists had seen him hit the ground, unable to get back up on his own. Eli had seen him fall apart, screaming into the hands he pressed against his face, convinced he'd never be able to dig himself out of his hole.

The addition of people looking at him and knowing that he was trying to find a way to feel pleasure with his level of paralysis—knowing exactly what the toys were for and how he'd use them, just added to that pile of never having any sort of privacy.

So, it was in those quiet moments at home where he knew he wasn't going to be interrupted that he could connect with his body. He didn't need to think about his friends, or his family, or his medical team. He didn't need to think about all the ways he was different, and how nothing would ever be the same again.

After the paperwork, Hudson grabbed the toy he'd unpacked and sanitized, then dropped it into his lap as he wheeled to his bedroom. His nightly routine was already finished so all that was left was to slide under the covers and grab his lube.

When Hudson was younger, even before he was married, he rarely masturbated. He saw it as a means of scratching an itch. It wasn't something that ever gave him the feeling of control or freedom. That all changed after his illness, of course

—and after his husband crumpled under the weight of their new reality.

After his surgery, the first time he'd come by his own hand felt like an absolute triumph. Then he'd collapsed into his pillow and let himself cry until he was sure his ability to produce tears had completely dried up. It got easier every time he touched himself after that, though. He grew bold and a little needy, and he allowed himself time and patience as he discovered all the new ways his body could feel good.

He just wished—a small, quiet wish he wasn't about to say aloud to anyone—that he'd crack down that final wall built of fear that the first person who tried to touch him would be like his ex.

Lying on the bed, flat on his back, he turned the vibrator on, running it at full speed. His sensations were dulled below the surgery spot, enough that he felt numb in his asshole, and his body didn't bend the way it used to, so getting to his prostate was harder now if he tried to go for it that way.

But if he let the nubs on the end of the vibrator scrape against his skin as he tucked his dick through the hole and let the round, rolling knob press right behind his balls, he could feel it. It shot white-hot sparks of pleasure through his body, making his face heat up and his mouth drop open.

His dick was still half-soft, but that didn't matter because it was good. It was *so* fucking good. He pressed the button on the side, the lightest touch changing the pulsing patterns to something more erratic. It worked him up without ever tipping him over.

He kept at it until he couldn't take it anymore, then he hit the button again. The pulsing changed to a sharp, staccato heartbeat, the vibrations ticking up a notch, and he could feel his orgasm cresting.

With his free hand, he cupped his dick and rubbed the heel of his palm over it. It gave a valiant twitch, and a little precome dribbled from the tip. Finally, when he was ready, he moved his hand up to his nipple. With a single pinch, sending white-hot sparks of pleasure rushing up his neck and beating

like a pulse in his temples, he let go. He squeezed his eyes shut, chasing his orgasm and forcing it to ripple through him, gasping as he tumbled over the edge.

He didn't ejaculate much, but small spurts of white landed on his stomach, and that always felt like a win. He just barely managed to hit the off switch before his arms gave out, and he laid back hard, his breathing a little uneven. He took extra care in studying his body, making sure his blood pressure hadn't skyrocketed, but he wasn't dizzy—just satisfied.

Rolling over, he carefully eased the toy off, then dropped it into his drawer to deal with in the morning. He had a couple of wet wipes at the ready, and he cleaned up the bits of lube and small smear of come before tossing them in the little bin.

Flopping back over, Hudson's eyes started to drift, then he heard it. The smallest little tweep before his bedroom door creaked open. He let out a sigh, then pushed himself on his elbow and listened for the little *tap tap tap* of bird claws on his hardwood floors.

After that was a quiet *shfft* of a beak tugging at sheets, and then a little head poking up over the mattress. Pancake stared at him with that creepy bird look, all wide eyes and no blinking. Hudson debated on a staring contest before his body reminded him that he hadn't just been physically busy, his emotions had also been put through the wringer and he needed some damn shuteye.

“Get comfy or get out,” he muttered irritably.

Pancake stared another minute before hopping up onto the bed, walking across his naked torso, then settling in the crook of his neck. He wanted the hate the thing—mostly because it had come from his ex—but in the late night moments of being profoundly alone, he couldn't.

As Pancake fluffed up, then nestled down, Hudson closed his eyes and let the gentle breathing lull him to sleep.

# CHAPTER TEN

PEYTON'S RELATIONSHIP with coffee improved after his surgery. Or, well, the list of pros now far outweighed the list of cons anyway. Before having his guts rearranged, on his good days, Peyton had to be three feet from a bathroom if he ever decided to indulge, because the moment the last sip went down, he wouldn't see any other room for the next long while.

And if he indulged on his bad days, it was agony for hours—to the point he'd be gasping, sweating, and swearing he'd never touch a cup again, ever in his life. Not that he ever held up that vow, but when the doctor had told him he could go back to enjoying his morning brew, Peyton was ready to sign his soul, his voice, his first born on the dotted line right then and there.

This morning, however, he was feeling...complicated. The weather was nice—a soft breeze carrying brine from the ocean, gulls flying overhead, the sun barely warm enough to heat his bare toes.

It was normally his most favorite time of the day.



Except he could hear his neighbor moving around, and he was fighting off a blush because he now knew just how thin townhouse walls were. He hadn't ever really thought about it because his former neighbor was almost completely deaf, and he was a widow, so it wasn't like Peyton was going to be subjected to any sort of awkward, unintentional eavesdropping.

That couldn't be said for the new guy. Not now, anyway.

Peyton had been half asleep when he first heard the uptick of a vibrator. In his haze, he told himself it was just a sonic toothbrush and to ignore it. And then the *noises* started. Quiet moans, soft gasps, a few muttered words. His neighbor had a guest—a *sex* guest.

A few minutes later, the vibrating noise got louder, and the gasps turned into loud groans, then babbling and begging before an orgasm hit. Afterward, there wasn't much pillow talk, but he heard his neighbor's voice rumbling through the wall—soft and sort of sleepy.

Peyton was awake long after the noises stopped, trying to control his imagination because he had no right to be perving on the guy who clearly couldn't stand him. And okay, sure, there was some triumph that Peyton didn't find his brownie container crushed beneath the wheel of a power chair and left in pieces, but that didn't mean anything. Only that the guy could appreciate a good brownie where he saw one.

And now Peyton had animosity and unintentional sex noises living rent-free in his head—which he most definitely did not ask for.

Fuck his *life*.

Pulling out his phone, he did his best not to think about it as he opened up the app and stared down at the last message had Austin sent.

Austin: So, any chance you want to move this to talking? Facetime? Maybe coffee?

Peyton wasn't ready to answer yet. It was one thing to have conversations with people, but it was quite another to put himself out there so he could be rejected to his face. He backed out of the message, then blinked in surprise when he saw four more messages from the app waiting for him.

He noticed a faint tremble in his thumb as he scrolled, and he told himself it was just the coffee and absolutely not nerves, because he was a grown-ass man who could handle the concept of dating after having his asshole sewed shut.

The thought made him laugh so hard he had to clap a hand over his mouth, and it took him a moment to recover. Leaning his forehead against the patio awning post, he breathed slowly. "Stop being a jackass, Peyton."

*"Mrow."*

Peyton glanced over to see the tiny kitten body bouncing through the unkempt grass, and he wriggled his fingers until the little creature body-slammed his hand. He gathered her to his chest, stroking fingers through her fur, which still had that baby kitten feel to it.

"You seriously need a name," he told her.

*"Mrow."*

"I feel like you're mine now." She nudged his hand harder, and he made a mental note to head over to the pet supply store and pick up what she needed. Maybe she was someone else's, but even if that was the case, they let the smallest kitten loose in the neighborhood. It was a miracle she hadn't been snatched by a hawk or flattened by some car. "You want to stay with me?"

She vibrated with purrs against him, and he leaned back on his elbow as she settled in the crook of his neck. The sunlight glinted off her fur, which was mostly black, but he could see flecks of red glowing like little sprinkles.

"Ginger," he said.

The kitten nudged his chin and he decided she was approving.

With a grunt, Peyton held her tight as he pushed to his feet, then he looked down to see his stoma bag was inflated. With a quiet sigh at his new routine, he made his way back inside and did his level best not to think about while he was emptying literal shit from his body, he had messages waiting, and the reality of dating to face.

What a weird fucking world.

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Peyton's attention span lasted just long enough to get through his morning hours of baking and packing orders. He set the boxes aside for his brother to pick up since Linden promised to do a post office run, and Peyton made sure that Ginger was comfy in the guest room before heading over to the crunchy-granola pet store in the strip mall a few blocks from his house.

Now that he was keeping her, she'd need supplies, and it made him feel good to have something in his house he could spoil for a bit. His bank account wouldn't thank him, but his heart would.

Pulling into the parking lot, he reached for his phone, and it began to buzz against his fingers. He startled, then glanced down and saw a message from Austin waiting for him.

Austin: I hope I didn't overstep. I just think you're really cute and I'd like to show you a good time.

Peyton's stomach dropped somewhere around his feet. He knew what those words were saying without actually saying it. Bile rose in his throat, and he swallowed against the bitter taste. He knew the smart thing to do would be to tell Austin that he wanted to take things slow—very slow. But he could hear his brother's voice in his head telling him he needed to start taking steps forward.

Maybe even leaps.

Yes, he wasn't ready to jump in bed with a stranger, but he could probably let a guy show him a good time. And maybe it was time to confront this issue head on. But he'd deal with it later. Much later.

Tucking his phone into his pocket, he hurried into the store and quickly began to grab everything he needed for Ginger. He tapped his foot on the polished floor at the cat treat aisle, then snapped a photo and opened up his Instagram to upload it.

**TheBakerByTheSea:** What kind of treats do cats like best? In fact, if you all know something I can bake for my new baby, let me know.

He hit post, then slipped the phone into his pocket and instead headed for the kitten food, then loaded up on toys, litter, a fancy self-scooping box, and a little hooded bed that the cat probably wouldn't use but looked cute anyway.

At the check-out, he tried not to cringe as the total continued to climb, and he reminded himself he was finally on the other side of broke now that his shop was picking up orders again. He didn't need to stress too much. He could spoil his new pet a little bit.

“...you, don't I?”

Peyton glanced up and realized the cashier was talking to him. He was a younger guy, probably not much older than twenty-one, skinny with ripped jeans and a flannel since all that nineties shit was making a comeback. He was very attractive, and Peyton definitely didn't miss the look the guy was giving him.

“Sorry,” he offered, fighting the urge to tug the hair tie out of his hair to remake his bun. “I was in a world of my own.”

The guy—Chris, his name tag read—shook his head and grinned back. “Totally fine. But uh, you're that guy from Instagram, right? The baker with the asshole neighbor?”

Peyton immediately flushed, rubbing the back of his neck. “*Ha*. Yeahhh, that would be me.”

Chris leaned toward him and winked. “You know, I'd never turn you down if you left cookies on my porch.”

Peyton flushed harder and glanced off to the side. “That's...”

“Whoa, sorry, that wasn’t a euphemism, I swear. I’m not trying to be a creep,” Chris said in a rush. “Just...you’re so hot, bro. You deserve better. And your bakes look amazing.”

*Bro?* Fucking kids these days.

Peyton managed to conjure up a smile as he swiped his card and tapped the button to add on a donation for the pet store charity. “Well, to be fair, I’m not trying to date the guy. I was just sending him a welcome to the neighborhood gift, which is totally my fault. Not everyone likes baked goods.”

Chris stared at him another moment, and Peyton hoped the look on his face meant he was getting it: Peyton’s flat tone meant he wasn’t interested. “Is this stuff for that stray kitten you adopted?”

Peyton knew he had no right to feel a little creeped out that the guy was just talking about his personal life, especially considering he was the one posting it to his social media account which had recently gone viral. But it was still a weird feeling.

“Yep. I’ve decided to name her Ginger.”

Chris’ mouth softened into a smile. “That’s sweet. I hope I can meet her someday. Maybe you can bring her in with you next time?”

Peyton just gave a noncommittal hum and gathered his things, setting them back into the basket so he could hurry out to his car. He swore he could feel Chris’ eyes on him as he loaded up his stuff, so he left the cart in the outdoor corral and then jumped behind the wheel.

His phone began to buzz again as he sat, but instead of opening his messages, he connected his phone to the car speaker and called his brother.

“Tell me there’s not a crisis. I’m almost at the post office right now.”

Peyton gripped the wheel tight, then turned left instead of right in hopes of finding a café not too far off. For as long as he’d lived in the neighborhood, he’d been either consumed

with his shop which was ten miles to the north, or he'd been trapped in his home, recovering.

“Hello?” Linden pressed.

Peyton cleared his throat. “Yeah, yes. Sorry. Some guy at the pet store knew me.”

“What, like an ex?” Linden asked.

Peyton scoffed. “Yeah sure, all those exes I have hidden. No, I mean from Instagram. And I think he was hitting on me.”

“Was he hot?”

“He was a baby,” Peyton shot back. “He was like...twenty. Anyway, that's not really my crisis.”

“Okay,” Linden said slowly. “Do I need to hold your hand through this?”

Letting out a frustrated growl, Peyton glanced up at a little strip mall with a café whose only sign was a hanging wooden cup of coffee on its side. It was cute—a little kitsch—but the mom-and-pop shops always had the best brews, so he pulled in and put his car in park.

“So, I've been...talking to this guy. Um. On the dating app.”

“Oh shit,” Linden breathed out. “You really did it? Have you told Taylor?”

“No,” Peyton snapped. “It was awkward as fuck to know that my best friend and my brother have been discussing my sex life.”

“Love life,” Linden corrected with a sniff. “Whatever Taylor wants to know about your dick is his business, not mine.”

“God, I hate you,” Peyton breathed out. He pinched the bridge of his nose, then shook his head. “Anyway, so I think I'm having a panic attack because I started talking to one guy who seemed nice, but now I have all these...these...”

“Other messages now?” Linden asked, sounding like he was smiling. “My hot baby bro is popular?”

“Please stop. I don’t...” He stopped when his voice cracked, and Linden met him with heavy silence. “I don’t know how to feel ready for this. I don’t know if I’m strong enough to deal with people’s...disgust when they find out about my bag.”

“Hey,” Linden said after a beat, his voice softer. “I don’t have some magic answer because you know I suck at relationships. I don’t think I’ve had anything go past a week and a half in years.”

Peyton felt a sudden pop of guilt because that was true. His love life was never particularly stable, but he’d preferred it that way. Linden on the other hand was the kind of person who wanted something long term. He wanted the whole marriage and kids thing that their gay friends gave them shit about because it was so normative or whatever.

Linden always laughed it off, but Peyton knew that made him self-conscious and afraid he’d never really belong.

“I’m not asking you to solve my problems,” Peyton said after a beat. “I just...I don’t know. I think I need you to tell me I’m not doing it wrong if I choose to talk to one person instead of all those strangers.”

“Is it one that makes you feel safe?”

Peyton laughed because he wasn’t quite sure he’d met that guy yet. But Austin’s name was MarriageMan on the app, which made him feel kind of itchy, and he’d immediately implied he was the jealous sort which wasn’t Peyton’s usual type. But maybe that’s what he needed. In his former life, he would have gone with some grumpy asshole like his neighbor because the sex would have been amazing and there wouldn’t have been expectations for more.

But now, with his illness and getting older, maybe it was time to rethink who his type really was.

And to be fair, he hadn’t really explored the other profiles yet.

“Look,” his brother said when Peyton was quiet for a long while, “there’s no right or wrong way to do this. You need to go with whatever feels most comfortable to you.”

“Yeah. Shit,” Peyton said. He rubbed his hand down his face, then glanced at the café door. “Look, I’m gonna get some coffee, then head back home to start on tomorrow’s orders.”

“Sounds good. Call if you need help, okay? Taylor and I will be there the second we have free time.”

“I know. Thanks,” Peyton told him, reaching for the button to shut his car off.

“I love you.”

Peyton froze, then smiled. Both brothers knew they loved each other, but it was rare when they said it, and he hadn’t realized how badly he needed to hear it right then. “I love you too.”

He hung up before either of them could make it awkward, then he grabbed his wallet and headed inside.

The café was cute—bright cream walls with coffee beans painted like they were being thrown into the air. On the far wall was the café name, BrewBiz, in red letters—the shade matching the tops of the tables.

There was faint music playing on the speakers, and a barista with his back to the counter, cleaning the espresso machine. Otherwise, it was completely empty.

Peyton glanced up at the chalk menu, then walked to the counter and waited until the man turned around. He was very tall with dark hair, and when he finally spun toward Peyton, he let out a gasp and grasped the front of his chest.

“Sorry,” Peyton began.

The man’s hands lifted, and it took Peyton a second of his rusty college language courses to realize that he was signing, though Peyton could only pick up a couple of words.

‘Surprise...today.’



Peyton looked at the man's apron. Normally when cafés hired Deaf workers, they had a pin on their shirt, but there was only the ASL hand-shape for coffee embroidered on the front. Which...oh.

*Oh.*

BrewBiz...true biz.

It made sense.

Peyton licked his lips, then curled his hand into a fist. 'Sorry. I learned ASL in college, but it's been a long time.' He was a thousand percent sure his grammar was shit, but the man just smiled at him and waved him off.

'You're fine. What do you want?'

When Peyton hesitated, the man grabbed a printed menu from the side of the register and Peyton glanced down to find the names of all the drinks and the corresponding signs in surprisingly well drawn ASL instructions.

He grinned and looked up at the man again, finally settling on his name, which was also embroidered on the apron. *Caleb.*

He pointed at the man's name. 'What's your name sign?'

Caleb's smile widened even further, and he lifted his hand to show Peyton, who quickly copied it, then got a thumb's up in response.

'P E Y T O N,' he spelled for himself. 'I'd like a...' he glanced down at the paper to make sure he was going to get it right. 'Vanilla latte, double shot.'

Caleb winked at him then very slowly signed the total. Peyton mouthed along with the numbers, then tapped his card on the machine before taking a step back.

'Three minutes,' Caleb told him.

Peyton lifted flat hands, palms forward. 'Great, thanks.' When Caleb turned away again, Peyton wandered over to the bakery display to find three very empty racks. What was there looked like it was well baked and delicious, but apart from some cookies and a row of muffins, there wasn't anything else.

His brow furrowed and he told himself not to even go there because he didn't have time to add in baking for a café to his current to-do list, but something was telling him he should.

When Caleb turned back around with the coffee and walked over to meet Peyton, he knew his resolve had snapped.

‘Do you bake here?’

Caleb frowned, then glanced down and rolled his eyes before lifting his fist. ‘Yes. Not a lot though. Obviously.’ He spelled the last word which Peyton appreciated, and it made him laugh.

‘They look good.’

‘They are good,’ Caleb answered, mouthing the word ‘are’ for emphasis. ‘But our baker...it’s...’ he signed another word that Peyton was pretty sure meant complicated.

Digging into his pocket, Peyton pulled out his wallet again and snatched one of the few business cards he kept. It had his old brick and mortar address on it, so he lifted his hand and asked, ‘Pen?’

Caleb quickly dug into his apron pocket and produced a black sharpie which was perfect. Peyton snatched it up and circled his Instagram handle, then wrote his number on the back before scratching off the former address.

He handed the pen back, then set the card on the counter. ‘I bake. I have a bakery online.’

Caleb’s brows shot up. ‘Bakery?’

Peyton nodded. ‘It’s just me alone, but maybe we can talk later and discuss what you need? Maybe I can help? Wholesale,’ he spelled, because that was definitely not a word he’d ever learned before.

Caleb’s entire face brightened. ‘You sure?’

‘Yes,’ Peyton insisted. ‘I can’t do anything complicated, but I can do cookies, muffins, scones. I can make a sample of things and deliver it this week so you can taste.’

Caleb held up a finger again, and before Peyton could do anything, the gangly man leapt over the short counter door, then grabbed Peyton in a hug. Peyton let out a grunt at the impact, then he started laughing as the man's joy began to infect him.

'Sorry,' Caleb signed quickly as he stepped back. 'Sorry. Even for Deaf, I'm too...' Peyton was pretty sure the word he missed was touchy.

He waved the barista off. 'I don't mind.' And really, he didn't. It had been so long since someone other than his brother or Taylor hugged him, and it felt kind and warm. 'Your boss will be okay with this?'

Caleb's grin turned into a smirk. 'I'm the owner.'

"Oh shit," Peyton said, then quickly lifted his hand. 'Sorry.'

'I can read lips...a little. And I know all the swear words,' Caleb bragged with a wink. 'It's so nice to meet you. Can I text you later?'

'Any time,' Peyton assured him.

Caleb hesitated, then darted forward again and dragged Peyton into another hug before letting him go. This time he didn't apologize, and Peyton grinned before grabbing his coffee.

'Sorry, I have a kitten at home or I'd stay longer.'

Caleb waved him off. 'Go, go. We'll talk soon.'

Peyton *really* didn't have time or space in his life to take on bakery orders for a café, but he couldn't deny that something about the partnership seemed like maybe—at least in his professional life—things were starting to make sense again.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

Austin: Tell me if I'm way off base here. I totally understand if you're busy, but I know what it's like to regret giving your number out.

Austin: I won't keep bothering you, I promise.

Austin: Just tell me to fuck off if that's what you need to do. No hard feelings.

THE MESSAGES SEEMED KIND, but a small part of Peyton wondered if the guy was actually being pushy and passive aggressive. This was what he got for never having bothered to actually date someone before his illness.

He also had a long DM thread with Caleb from BrewBiz and a tentative list of things to bake for their café. Caleb was sweet and understood that Peyton was a one-man army and could only do so much, but it turned out the shop's baker had become a sudden single caregiver—and Peyton had a feeling there was a bit more to it, though he didn't pry.

But according to Caleb, anything was better than nothing, and Peyton had a long list of cookies and batch bakes he could prepare in bulk without throwing off his timetable too much. Then all the shop baker would have to do was throw them in the oven and serve them hot. Anyone could manage it.

At least, he hoped.

Worse came to worst, he could probably put an ad out for a part-time assistant since a new contract with BrewBiz meant he could probably afford it. As it was, his order queue was completely full again and his bank account was heavy with profit.

After checking on Ginger, who wasn't interested in sleeping in her new bed but *was* interested in sleeping in the box the litter pan came in, Peyton took his cup of decaf and wandered outside. It was late, so the neighborhood was dark and quiet, and he took in a long breath of the thick sea air.

“Working late?”

Peyton jumped so hard he spilled coffee on himself, letting out a long string of swears.

“Sorry.” It was the neighbor with that rich, cinnamon voice Peyton could have listened to for hours. “Didn't mean to startle you.”

The man sounded as tired as before, but a little less hostile, so Peyton relaxed a fraction. “It's fine,” he said after a beat. “I didn't realize anyone was out here.”

There was another long pause, then the neighbor cleared his throat. “Do you want your, uh, container thing back?”

Peyton frowned, then his brows shot up. “Oh. Yeah, sure. Uh...I can run over or whatever.”

“Back gate's open,” the guy said. His tone was sharp and short again, but Peyton was starting to think that maybe that was just how he talked. Like a resting bitch voice.

He could live with that, and he sure as shit wasn't turning the guy down for the chance to see him again, and maybe wear

him down a bit. “Are the brownies still in there?” he asked as he set his cup down and headed for his own gate.

The guy huffed, but Peyton was pretty sure it was more laughter than anything. “No. There was no way I could have eaten all that by myself, but my business partner came by, and he’s obsessed with your bakes.”

Peyton flushed lightly as he pulled the latch on the wooden door, then slipped out and gently pushed on his neighbor’s fence. For a second it stuck, and he felt a surge of panic like maybe the guy was fucking with him. But he gave it a second nudge and the hinges creaked as it swung inward, and he almost tripped over himself as he stumbled onto the grass.

“You’d think people with two functional legs would have the whole walking thing down a little better than you,” the guy said dryly.

Peyton rolled his eyes. “Hilarious. Tell that to the fourteen-year-old me who hit his first growth spurt.”

“You too?” The guy pushed forward in his chair, coming to the end of his concrete patio, and he had the box on his lap. “I was sixteen, though. I think my mom was convinced I wasn’t gonna get taller than five nine.”

“What’d you end up at?” Peyton asked, leaning against the patio support beam. He crossed his arms and studied the neighbor’s wide shoulders, trying to make an educated guess.

The guy smiled—actually smiled—and fuck, he was even more gorgeous than before. “Six two. Wouldn’t know it from here.”

“I think I had a pretty good guess,” Peyton said. He stood still a moment, then stepped up onto the concrete and offered his hand. “I’m Peyton, by the way. I don’t think we were officially introduced.”

The guy hesitated, then swiped his right hand on his thigh before pressing his palm to Peyton’s. It was calloused, dry, and very warm. “Hudson.”

*Hudson.*

It definitely fit. Peyton drew back, fighting the urge to find another excuse to touch him, and he turned his gaze out past the tall fence. Not for the first time, he wished he'd been rich enough to afford an ocean view, but the fact that he could hear the waves was good enough.

“How do you like it here?”

“I was hoping for peace and quiet,” Hudson told him, and when Peyton’s gaze darted over, Hudson had the smallest smirk playing at his lips. “I know, I know. I’m an asshole. Trust me, no one lets me go very long without being reminded.”

Peyton damn-well knew that was meant to be a joke, but there was the slightest tinge of hurt in Hudson’s voice that told Peyton there was more to his story. “I don’t think you’re an asshole. I know I can be...overbearing.”

“Eli—the guy you met—he wouldn’t agree. He’s been on my ass about being nice to you.”

Peyton bit his lower lip, then shrugged. “You ever get the feeling that there are too many people-pleasers in the world?”

Hudson made a soft choking sound, then pushed his wheels and rolled closer to Peyton. “Are you saying you’re not one of them?”

“Oh,” Peyton said with a laugh, then dropped down in spite of not being invited to sit, “hell no. I *definitely* am.”

He stretched his legs out into the grass, then patted the concrete next to him. Out of the corner of his eye, in the dim porch light, he saw Hudson’s face journey. The guy looked like he wanted to tell Peyton to fuck off, but then to his immediate surprise, Hudson set his brake, used his hands to shift his legs past the footrests, and eased himself down in front of his chair.

Peyton was almost giddy, but he did his absolute best to try and keep his cool. “My brother and I were adopted,” he said, and almost laughed when Hudson’s brows flew up. “I know, I over-share. It’s a tragic flaw. Anyway, he’s super white. Like

he fits right into their whole WASP thing they have going on, so no one ever assumed he had a tragic backstory.”

“Does he?”

“He was born HIV positive, but he tested negative by the time he was like six months old, I think? It was way before my time.” It was also something Linden wasn’t shy about, but rarely brought up. But it had sparked an almost obsession with health care which, coupled with his hero complex, set him right into the field as an EMT.

“And your backstory?” Hudson asked, sounding a bit more cautious.

“Normal, I guess. Though, I think every adoptee feels a little tragic from time to time.” He rubbed the back of his neck, toying with his bun, then shrugged. “My adoption was closed so I never did get to find out why I was given up. I didn’t even know what ethnicity I was until I was old enough to buy one of those DNA kits.” He reached between his knees and tugged at some of the grass absently.

“And that made you a people pleaser?”

Peyton snorted a laugh. “No, but being raised by the kind of people my parents were did. People have literally asked if I was, like, abandoned on the streets of Shanghai or something.” He turned to face Hudson with a grimace. “I had all this pressure to be grateful to my parents for ‘saving me’ from some tragic third world fate.”

“Yeah, like it’s so much better here,” Hudson said bitterly. “Where you can develop a tumor, lose the use of your legs, and all you get is a hospital bill big enough to bankrupt you, and divorce papers.” He seemed to realize he’d overshared because his face immediately went blank, and he looked away. “Please don’t ask.”

Peyton put up his hands in surrender. “Not a word.”

Hudson relaxed after a beat. “Sorry your parents were shitty.”

Waving him off, Peyton shifted and leaned his shoulder against the post. “They weren’t shitty. They were just woefully



uneducated in how to handle adopted kids who'd eventually become adults with questions and, you know, trauma. Then you throw in a chronic illness and life-altering surgery..." He saw Hudson's eyes flicker to his waist, and without really thinking, he pressed his hand over his bag, which was still empty. "...and shit gets complicated. And you forget how to react to things like a normal person."

Hudson glanced away again. "My...um. Eli—my business partner—he follows you on social media. He mentioned he saw something about your illness."

"It's a stoma," Peyton said, resigned. Not that it really mattered. A guy like Hudson wasn't ever someone who'd take interest in Peyton, anyway. And maybe not having to do the whole big reveal thing with his neighbor was a blessing. "I developed Crohn's about five years ago, and it was fine for a while. Then I got all this scar tissue and things came close to bursting. It's not a pretty story."

Hudson chuckled softly. "Yeah, I get that."

Peyton realized he probably did get it. "Cancer?"

Hudson looked like he was debating about answering, then he shook his head. "It was a tumor, but it was benign. It was big enough that it was causing paralysis though—which ironically was also the risk of the surgery."

Peyton didn't need to ask what happened. That much was obvious. "It sucks, right?" He hadn't meant to say that aloud, but when Hudson fixed sharp eyes on him, he just couldn't stop talking. "It's like, you finally get used to being alive—to figuring out all this adult shit in your professional and personal life. Then this big thing comes along and changes your entire body. And you think, whatever, I'll just go to the club like before and it'll be different, but it won't matter."

"Except it does," Hudson murmured quietly.

Peyton smiled a little sadly. "I haven't actually been brave enough to try yet. I don't know how to make my body work the way it used to. And I'm on this app, right, that my best friend and brother signed me up for? They want me to get

back out there, and they don't fucking realize that there's not some switch I can hit in my brain that'll make it all feel okay again." He stopped, realizing that he was breathing a little fast, and that Hudson was watching him with dark eyes. "Sorry."

"No. No, I...yeah. It's like that," Hudson said.

Peyton bit his lip and wrapped his arms tight around his middle. "I'm sort of talking to this guy—I'm gay by the way. I feel like I don't need to explain myself considering you live here, but just in case..."

Hudson lifted up one hand. "I've been out since I was nineteen."

Peyton breathed out a sigh of relief, then tension raced up his spine because that was one more barrier removed. It didn't change the fact that Hudson was hotter than the sun, with that sort of salt and pepper bear vibe going on—and probably way out of his league—but still.

He didn't do well with little scraps of hope. They tended to start wildfires of fantasy in his mind.

"Anyway, I'm talking to this guy, and he seems nice. He says all the right things, but then I start to wonder if he's just full of shit. Like, what happens when I have to take my pants off and he sees this literal shit bag hanging off my stomach. Or he reaches around to find that they stitched up my asshole like a goddamn Ken doll?"

Hudson stared, then after a beat, he threw back his head and burst into laughter. Peyton thought maybe he should be offended, but it was impossible at the sound of the man's chuckles. They were low and infectious, and after a couple of seconds, Peyton was joining him.

"I'm sorry," Hudson said, waving him off. "I'm so sorry. I haven't laughed in a long fucking time, and I didn't expect you to just say all that out loud."

Peyton offered a crooked smile. "Yeah. I guess I kind of do that."

Hudson's laughter died down, and his face went back to serious, though there was more light in his eyes now. "You're

not that old, are you?”

Peyton shrugged. “Old enough that I can’t deal with guys in their early twenties, but I haven’t hit the magic age where I pull a muscle in my sleep.”

Hudson snorted and shook his head. “Right. Then you’ve got time. Hell, even us old gays have time. My friend keeps telling me that at some point, someone will come along who doesn’t give a shit that I need things done a little differently.”

“And do you believe him?” Peyton challenged.

Hudson’s lip quirked. “No. But I’ve always been a pessimistic asshole. I have a feeling you have a little bit more hope than me.”

“I did. I...I think I still do,” Peyton admitted. “I’d like to.”

Hudson nodded, then reached behind him for his chair and pulled the bento box down. He stared at it for another minute, then handed it out. “You should try and find it. After all, one of us needs to, right?”

Peyton turned the box over in his hands. “What’s your favorite cookie, Hudson?”

The man groaned. “Please don’t get ideas.”

Peyton grinned and shook his head. “Now I know you don’t mean that, so just answer the question and save us the trouble of playing this little will-he-won’t-he eat the bakes game. Come on, just tell me one flavor you can’t get enough of.”

Hudson groaned, then finally let out a slow sigh. “Peanut butter—with bits in it.”

Peyton grinned widely and held the box tight to his chest, making no move to get up, and Hudson didn’t seem like he was going to tell him to go any time soon. “I’m gonna knock your socks off,” he said after a beat.

Hudson let out one more, very soft chuckle. “I wouldn’t bet against you.”

Peyton's heart gave a single stuttered beat, and he knew in that moment, he was in big trouble.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

“I KNOW THAT FACE.”

Hudson didn't look up from his phone, but only because he didn't want to appear guilty. His instinct had been to quickly turn off the screen and throw the fucking thing across the room because the last thing in the world he needed was to get caught staring at Peyton's bakery page.

Not that Rain would have known what he was up to, but Rain was also a nosy little shit and would have been able to tell that Hudson was acting suspicious.

“This is my regular face,” Hudson said, slowly setting his phone down and affecting a look of pure and utter boredom. He set his elbow on the desk, propping his chin up as he looked over at the smaller man. “Is there something you need?”

“No, it isn't. But yes. There's a problem with what you sent me last night.” Rain sauntered over to the desk and dropped into a chair, kicking the edge of his Converse up on the wood.

“Get your fucking shoes off my...”

Rain dropped his foot before Hudson could finish his sentence. “You sent a blank document instead of product notes.”

Hudson blinked, then swore quietly under his breath as he flipped his laptop open and pulled up the document. There it was—filled out but unsaved, so the file that had sent out was still blank. He rectified the situation with a couple of keystrokes, then sent it off to Rain’s inbox.

“Sorry. Long night.”

The look Rain gave him was pure pity which made Hudson want to put his fist through a concrete wall. Rain had obviously overheard Eli talking about his damn mother and her antics, so not only was he forced to put up with her narcissistic bullshit, but also people feeling sorry for him because of it.

“Please don’t,” Hudson said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “It’s not a big deal.”

“I just know you—”

“I’m being serious,” Hudson said, trying not to snap. He was attempting the whole “being nice” thing that Eli was always bitching at him about. Which...was fair. He wasn’t the kindest boss, and it was only the fact that his employees didn’t mind being bossed around and bitched at that they didn’t slap him with a two week notice and leave him hanging.

But he knew damn well Rain and Aspen didn’t deserve his bad attitude.

Checking his phone, Rain looked up with a grin after he finished reading. “New product is that good, huh?” His sarcastic tone could almost be described as adorable.

Hudson shrugged, feeling oddly defensive and vulnerable after Rain could see his genuine reaction to using sex toys. It was the one part of the job he truly hated. “I’ve had better. I’ve created better.” It wasn’t a lie—the new toy was good. There was just more truth involved, and part of that was the reason he’d been looking at Peyton’s Instagram.

He wasn't looking just because Peyton was hot—which he was. Hudson was a recluse, but he wasn't dead. But it was the fact that he understood Peyton's frustrations better than anyone could—and the lack of resources to fix them.

And granted, Hudson had no experience with what Peyton was going through in regards to his body, but he knew what it felt like to lose control with no idea how to regain it. After his own surgery, he was given all of the medical literature regarding his recovery, his paralysis, and the complications that would cause in his sex life which had terrified him.

And he imagined that when Peyton's doctors went over the changes to his body, and what it would mean for him, he went through the same.

Hudson recognized the notes of resentment and frustration and anger in Peyton's voice when he talked about it. And that had been on his mind when he'd been writing up his notes for the new toy. Would this work for someone in Peyton's position? Would anything on their line offer him the ability to reclaim pleasure in his body, and the control he'd lost?

The conclusion he'd come to that night was a definitive 'no'. Or well, a definitive 'he didn't think so'.

“What are you thinking?” Rain asked, leaning forward.

Hudson let out a soft breath. “Do we have uh...anything on the line for someone with...” He trailed off and for the first time that morning, flushed a bit. He'd been researching Peyton's condition and apparently the common term for it actually was Barbie Butt. Hudson wasn't quite sure he could actually say those words.

“Someone with what?” Rain pressed.

Hudson ran a hand down his face. “Don't fuckin' laugh because it's not funny, okay?” He sat back and tapped his fingers on his knee, feeling the dull pressure over his jeans. “You ever heard of Crohn's?”

“Yes. I don't live under a bridge,” Rain said with an eye roll. “And why the hell would I laugh at Crohn's?”

Hudson stared at him with a flat expression. “Excuse me for not assuming. I didn’t know this was a thing until last night, okay?”

Rain held up his hands in surrender. “Okay, fair. I mean, a lot of people *do* kind of make fun of it since you know, it’s like...the whole shitting thing.”

Hudson let out a frustrated sigh and wished he could be a little less awkward when it came to conversations like that. “Just...I mean.” He cleared his throat. “Say a person who has a penis doesn’t ah...can’t. Say that their asshole got sewn up.”

Rain stared at him with a vague look of horror. “What?”

“It’s a thing that happens,” Hudson quickly defended. “Crohn’s complications.”

Rain, to his credit, quickly collected himself. “Is it you? Is that something you have going on?”

Hudson shook his head. “No. I met someone last night...”

“Oh fuck. Oh shit. Your neighbor,” Rain said, his eyes lighting up. “Eli was saying the dude has a stoma. The hottie baker.”

Hudson groaned but he knew there was no point in denying it now. “Yes, okay. Fine. I spoke to the neighbor and acted like a person, and he talked to me a little bit about his whole...situation.”

“*Situation*,” Rain echoed with a laugh. “God, you sound like someone from the fuckin’ fifties.”

“His asshole was sealed shut. Is that better?” Hudson snapped. “He didn’t get into detail, but I looked it up online and I was thinking maybe we should start working on a prototype that has both penis and external prostate stimulation.”

Rain’s brows furrowed as his face fell into his thinking expression. “We sort of have something like that. It’s kind of...we’ve had complaints because it’s needlessly complicated. It was something Aspen was working on with that intern design team.”



Hudson frowned. He vaguely remembered Eli setting something up a year before, and he wasn't quite sure what it said about him as a boss that he didn't remember what the outcome was. "Alright? That was a while ago, though. Was there any progress?"

"I'm not sure. It wasn't at the top of our priority list, so I think it went to market as-is. Let me talk to my brother and ask," Rain said. "If it's still fucked, I'll get the design team back on it and maybe put a call out to a couple people who'd use it."

Hudson breathed out a sigh of part frustration and part relief, and he nodded. "Great. And when you've got something, let me know? I think we should send him one since it would be the neighborly thing to do."

"Yeah, sure. Sending your neighbor a sex toy? That's totally normal," Rain said.

Hudson's lips thinned. "He made me fuckin' brownies and cookies and shit to welcome me to the neighborhood."

"And you respond with sex toys," Rain said with a shit-eating grin. "Have I told you lately how much I goddamn love working for you?"

Hudson folded his arms. "Get out."

With a salute, Rain hopped to his feet and started toward the door. "I'll get back to you by the end of the week."

Hudson said nothing, only because he wasn't ready to let it show that he was more than just pleased—he was actually eager to do something that might help his neighbor.

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Hudson was just getting ready to shove a bite of his massive sandwich into his face when Eli strolled into his office and flopped down on the chair, hooking one leg over the arm. Hudson grimaced and appreciated that even when he'd had the ability to sit like that, he didn't.

"Stop judging the way I sit. It's bi culture," Eli complained.

Hudson rolled his eyes and finally took a bite of his sandwich, chewing and swallowing before addressing his friend. “What do you want?”

“Are you ever happy to see me? Genuine question,” Eli said.

Hudson scoffed and almost choked on a few crumbs of bread that hadn’t made it down yet. “Are you ever going to give me a reason to be?”

Eli sat up properly and leaned toward him. “Undying love? Loyalty? Years of friendship based off sarcasm and judgment?”

Hudson raised a brow.

Eli sighed and crossed his arms, sitting back. “I found a product tester for your newest toy idea that is absolutely not at all about your massive crush on Peyton.”

Hudson felt his cheeks heat up, even as denial rushed to the tip of his tongue. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Save it. Rain told everyone. Anyway, this new guy’s name is Hendrix, and he’s more than willing to test out a few ideas,” Eli went on, like Hudson hadn’t full-on tried to lie.

Hudson set his sandwich down and swiped a napkin over his fingers to clean up any stray mustard. “How do you know him?”

“Friend of a friend,” Eli said, waving Hudson off. “He’s a former marine.”

“And that qualifies him...how?”

Eli shrugged. “He was discharged after his injuries. I didn’t get the full extent apart from the fact that he’s a double amputee. But he mentioned that he can only get off with external prostate stimulation. I didn’t dig too much deeper than that.”

Which was fair, Hudson knew. He didn’t ask any of their product testers to disclose the nature of their needs or disabilities. All he wanted was genuine feedback. He folded

his arms over his chest and only pretended to consider Eli's offer because he already knew he'd trust anyone who Eli brought through the door.

"Don't be a dick," Eli said, giving him a pointed stare.

Hudson's lip twitched. "Fine. Bring him in this week?"

Eli grinned, then his face fell a bit. "How's your ASL?"

"Uh...?"

"He's also deaf from the whole," Eli made a gesture with his hand that Hudson couldn't decipher.

Hudson shook his head. "Like, bare bones. I think most of the alphabet?"

"I'll call an interpreter service."

"One that isn't going to send some pearl-clutcher," Hudson warned. "I don't need some religious freak bailing on the meeting because of what we do." He hadn't worked with a deaf client before, but he'd heard stories during his inclusivity research, and he wasn't in the mood to deal with any more hassle.

"Leave it to me," Eli said, then his grin returned. "With any luck, we'll get this off the ground by next week, and in two months, you'll be able to sweep Peyton off his feet. Metaphorically, unless you two are into that sort of thing."

Hudson dropped his forehead to the desk with a loud thud. "Fuck off. This isn't about..."

"We both know what it is and isn't about," Eli said. His voice had gentled but that didn't take the edge off. "I'm not going to harass you about it, but you know I'm happy for you, right?"

Hudson lifted his face and shook his head. "Even if I did like Peyton, I would never date him. Ever. He's my neighbor."

Eli scoffed. "Easy access..."

"And when we break up because I don't know how to stop being an asshole?" Hudson challenged.

Eli sighed and sat back. “You know you’re not actually an asshole, right?”

Hudson couldn’t help his laugh. “You’ve known me way too long to lie to my face like that.”

Eli didn’t relent. His eyes got darker and more intense—the way he always did when he started coming for Hudson’s low self-esteem. “You’ve had a lot of terrible people in your life who have convinced you that you’re something you’re not. You’re strong...”

“Stop,” he begged in a whisper.

Eli laid his palms to the top of Hudson’s desk. “You’re brave, and you have a lot of powerful feelings. You don’t like bullshit, and you’re not afraid to call it out. But somewhere along the line...”

“*Eli*,” he growled in warning.

Eli squared his shoulders. “...someone convinced you that those traits—those decent and good traits—made you a bad man. And they kept saying it until you believed it about yourself.”

“I think my track record speaks for itself.”

Eli laughed, but he didn’t sound amused. “I think the fact that you’re hiring someone to make a new sex toy because your neighbor—who has done nothing but irritate the shit out of you—needs help, would disagree with your so-called track record. And people like Peyton?” Eli shrugged. “I don’t know him very well, but I feel like it’s safe to say that he’s one of the people in this world who will see you for who you are.”

“Yeah, a—”

“Man who deserves to be loved,” Eli cut in before Hudson could finish his sentence.

Hudson’s jaw snapped shut, all the wind taken out of his sails. Eli did this every so often, and sometimes, Hudson started to believe him. Sometimes, he looked in the mirror and saw a man who was worthy of all those things.

Then real life—the real world—would remind him that Eli was wrong.

“I’m not saying I won’t eventually—maybe—” he added, just to be clear, “*might* become friends with Peyton. But if we date, it would be a goddamn disaster. I just moved in, and I like it there. I want to stay.”

Eli stared at him another long while, then stood up and walked over, dropping a kiss to the center of Hudson’s forehead. Eli was one of the few brave enough to touch him, but even when he did, it was never enough. It never lasted for as long as Hudson needed to feel it.

But he’d take what he could get.

“I love you.”

“Fuck off,” Hudson said, and Eli just grinned because he knew that was his best friend’s way of saying I love you too.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

REACHING for the door handle to the little restaurant, Peyton momentarily wished he'd taken Taylor up on his offer for a bite of his edible. The last thing Peyton needed was to be stoned out of his mind on his first date in God only really knew how long, but with the way his stomach was churning, he wasn't sure he'd manage to get a single bite of food down, let alone make coherent conversation.

Austin had been sweet, if not a little pushy, when Peyton finally started cracking on the idea of meeting up. They had a long phone conversation where Peyton got to listen to Austin's low rumble tell him there was nothing to worry about because he wasn't interested in just a hook-up. Peyton had waffled between keeping his stoma a secret and just having it out right then, but Taylor and Linden had both reminded him that only he got to choose when he was comfortable enough to tell someone he didn't know.

And if his date couldn't understand why he didn't tell him right away, he wasn't the right man.

It all sounded good. It was all the right words and all the right actions, but Peyton wasn't a fool. He knew life was more complicated than a set of black and white standards.

But he did keep it to himself.

Now, he wasn't sure he was regretting that or not as he walked to the host stand and gave a tense smile at the young woman behind a little computer screen. "Hi. I'm...I have a date? It's kind of a blind date, and..."

"He's already here," she said with a kind smile. She leaned in close and dropped her voice. "He's pretty hot, so whoever set you up did a good job."

It was mostly nerves that made Peyton laugh as hard as he did, but he still appreciated her for her words and the little wink she gave him after. She kept her pace slow as they made their way through the busy dining room, and Peyton saw Austin before the hostess pointed him out.

He was attractive, his face matching the little profile pic from the app. Even seated he could tell the man was tall. His shoulders were broad, his hair was a light brown and expertly styled. He looked like some sort of high-powered CEO or attorney or something so far above Peyton's little baker status that he had no business being there.

When Austin looked up at him, his face was unreadable. There wasn't a twitch in his lips, or a flicker of his brow. He just gave him a steady stare and then rose when Peyton was close enough. He extended a hand with thick fingers and a tight grip, and he squeezed gently when Peyton offered his own.

"Glad you could make it," Austin said. His voice didn't entirely match his face. It was deeper on the phone, and Peyton had to wonder if maybe the guy was using an affect. Not that it mattered, but it was a little odd.

He smiled anyway and took his seat as Austin dropped back down into his chair. "Sorry I'm late."

Austin quickly waved him off. "No. I was early. I got nervous so I decided to come in and have a drink." At that, he

lifted his hand and made a sharp gesture in the air which Peyton realized was him calling their server over.

It wasn't...rude, necessarily, but it still made Peyton's skin crawl a bit because who did that? Why not just be patient?

Before he could decide whether or not he wanted to say something about it, the server appeared. He looked barely nineteen with clear braces that wouldn't let his lips close all the way, and an ill-fitting button up.

"Good evening, sir. What can I get you to drink?"

Peyton hadn't been called sir in a goddamn long while, and he almost laughed, but the serious look on Austin's face had him holding it back. "Uh...water's fine for me."

Austin finally reacted. He lifted a brow and leaned in toward him. "Order a drink."

Peyton shook his head. "I don't drink."

Sitting back, Austin gave him a look, then turned to the server. "Surprise him with something non-alcoholic."

"Water," Peyton cut in, then smiled at the server who now looked terrified. "Seriously, please. Just water. And some lemon on the side if you don't mind."

"Of course." The kid gave Austin a terrified look, but when Austin didn't argue further, he hurried off.

Peyton turned his irritated gaze on the man. "I can order for myself, you know."

At that, Austin laughed, totally unfazed. "I know. But you should treat yourself tonight. I asked you out so it's on me."

Peyton choked a little, then cleared his throat. "I didn't order water because I'm broke." Austin pinned him with a look of disbelief, and Peyton fought the urge to defend himself because this man had no business making any kind of assumptions about him. He let himself crack just a little bit—not enough to give anything away, but at least he could set the tone because it was already obvious Austin was the kind of man who wasn't going to deal well with Peyton shitting into a



bag. “I have a medical condition and I have to be careful with what I eat and drink.”

Something flashed in Austin’s eyes, but it was gone before Peyton could get a good read on it. He sat back and crossed his arms, but the tension in his shoulders had melted away. “You should have said something.”

“Normally my dates don’t try and order for me,” Peyton fired back. “I didn’t think it was going to be an issue.”

At that, Austin laughed like what he’d said was a joke. “What can I say? I’m a little old school.”

*Not as charming as you think it is, bud,* he thought to himself, but he decided not to voice that. The date was already going weird, and he wasn’t sure there was anything to be saved.

But...he owed it to himself to try.

Didn’t he?

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Austin kept his mouth shut while Peyton was ordering his food—choosing the special that night with chicken and potatoes because he wouldn’t have to worry about that fucking with his digestion and causing a blockage. He caught Austin watching him with a little frown once or twice, but the conversation eventually turned to normal things like hobbies, and Peyton’s baking, and Austin’s job.

They were reaching the end, Peyton turning down dessert when Austin suggested they share something. “It’s nothing personal,” Peyton insisted. “It’s just...ever since I started my bakery, I’ve turned into a total snob.”

Austin blinked, then threw his head back and laughed, holding up his hands in surrender. “Alright, I’ll give you that one. I’m having fun though, so do you mind if I order a coffee?”

Peyton was a little surprised the guy wanted to extend the date. Yes, the weirdness from earlier had passed, but he wasn’t feeling any kind of spark. And maybe that was just him being

some kind of pathetic, hopeless romantic, but he wanted more than pleasant conversation.

Still, he wasn't going to tell the guy no. It wasn't like he had to rush home and it was nice being out of the house again—with a guy who seemed somewhat interested in him.

“Go for it,” Peyton said just as the server approached with the dessert menu.

Austin ordered his drink, then when the server walked off again, he leaned back, and Peyton felt a shoe touch his calf for a brief second as the man stretched his legs out. Austin grinned and didn't apologize or even acknowledge that he'd done it.

“So, should we get into all the taboo stuff now?” Austin suggested.

Peyton felt his cheeks pink. “Taboo stuff?”

“You know, awkward relationships with family, exes...” He trailed off with a dark stare. “Unless you had other ideas in mind?”

Peyton tried not to choke. “Oh. Ah. I mean, my relationship with my family is pretty average. I don't talk to my parents much, but I'm really close with my brother.”

Austin's brow quirked. “Is it the cultural homophobic thing?”

At that, Peyton couldn't decide if he wanted to laugh or scream because this man assuming that Peyton's Asian parents would be homophobic was way too typical, and so damn frustrating. But he had no idea how his birth parents would have reacted to him—to the person he was now, because he'd never gotten the chance to know them.

He shook his head and thumbed the rim of his now-empty water glass. “My brother and I were adopted.”

Austin's eyes widened. “Oh! One of those...Chinese baby international things?”

Peyton had been asked that before—in more ways than one. Usually with the person assuming the pair of them were

found naked and screaming in some remote village or something.

As far as invasive questions went, Austin's was on the milder side. He just felt a pulse of disappointment because he'd been hoping the guy would be different.

"I'm not Chinese," he said quietly.

Austin shrugged. "So, what are you?"

*Fuck's sake. Never mind.*

"I'm a baker," he shot back. His palms were sweaty, but his frustration had been higher than he realized because normally he didn't snap that quick.

"I didn't mean it that way..."

"Yeah," he interrupted. "No one ever means it that way." He pushed his chair back and stood up. "Thanks for dinner. I can Venmo you my half if you want." With that, he turned on his heel and hurried out toward the front, his stomach sinking when he heard footsteps behind him.

He had his keys out when a strong arm grabbed his own, and panic with a hefty dose of adrenaline gave him the strength to rip himself away from Austin and take several steps back. "Dude, didn't anyone ever teach you not to be a fucking creep?"

"Didn't anyone ever teach you that you should let people apologize when they fuck up?"

At that, Peyton laughed. He was tired of letting shitty men like Austin get away with being dickheads all for the sake of being polite. He shook his head then turned and started toward his car, freezing when he heard Austin start to follow him again.

"Read the fucking room, man," he shot over his shoulder. "Stop following me."

To his credit, Austin did, and when Peyton finally got to his car, the guy was gone. He slipped in behind the wheel and let out a trembling breath, then realized he was on the verge of crying.

He hated that the asshole had gotten to him that way. He hated that he let everything take him right to that edge. He'd just wanted to have a nice night out with someone who wasn't a total weasel, but apparently it was too much to ask.

Swallowing against the lump in his throat, he started his car and told himself that while the night was totally shot, he did have a cute kitten to come home to, and a ton of bakes that would let him eat deep into his feelings.

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Peyton sat in his driveway long enough that it started to get cold inside his car. Just before he started shivering, he let himself out and started toward the door, going stock-still when he heard a gruff voice call out, "You okay?"

His heart thumped until he realized that the voice was way deeper than Austin's, and it was familiar. He peered around the edge of the sidewalk and saw Hudson in his chair watching with dark eyes. Peyton scrubbed both hands over his face as he walked a little closer.

"Do I look that bad?"

Hudson snorted a laugh without smiling. "You sat in your car and stared at the wall for almost twenty minutes."

"Shit," he breathed out, glancing around like maybe somehow the position of the moon would confirm Hudson's words. "Was it really that long?"

"Near to it. Bad night?"

Peyton's heart gave a little flutter because he definitely didn't expect his neighbor to give a shit enough to ask if he was okay. Yeah, they'd made progress the other night, but this was like alternate universe levels of weird.

"Forget I asked," Hudson grumbled when Peyton was quiet for too long. He grabbed his wheels and started forward toward his ramp, and Peyton's heart sped up.

"Bad date," he blurted.

Hudson froze, then turned slowly. "How bad?"

“Pretty fucking bad,” Peyton said with a shattered laugh. “The guy was an asshole of the epic kind. Like maybe the worst date I’ve ever been on.”

“I have friends, you know. Who are okay with being a little morally grey if you need us to track this guy down,” Hudson offered.

Peyton laughed again, this time a little lighter. “Okay, not that much of an asshole. He just...” Peyton didn’t want to tell Hudson exactly what the guy said because a lot of people didn’t get what the big deal was, and he just didn’t have the energy to explain it one more fucking time. “He said some shit, so I left the date, then he tried to follow me out to the parking lot. I think I’m cursed.”

Hudson stared a good long moment, then jerked his head toward the door. “Wanna come inside? You can meet my bird.”

Peyton blinked in surprise. “You want me to meet your bird?”

Hudson scoffed as he gripped his wheels and rolled up the ramp. “Sure, if you want. He’s a total asshole though, so be warned. It was a parting gift from my ex-husband, who said he didn’t want me to be lonely.”

Peyton grimaced because on the outside, it seemed like a sweet gesture, but he could see it for the dig it was. It was hard to argue, considering that Hudson was abrasive and rude on his best days, but everyone deserved to have people who cared about them. And the more he was getting to know his neighbor, the more he realized that Hudson did have a soft center.

Maybe not like marshmallow fluff, but at least a little bit like saltwater taffy.

He scoffed at his own internal monologue and quickly followed Hudson inside, hoping the man would distract him so he wouldn’t lose his filter and say all that shit aloud.

Hudson’s place was exactly the way Peyton imagined it would be. It was an organized clutter with low tables covered

in papers—some of them printed on, others drawn on. He didn't have any bookshelves or art, but he had plants and in the far corner next to a massive TV was one of those architect drawing tables he saw in the movies.

“What do you do?” he blurted.

Hudson half-spun his chair. “What?”

Peyton slapped his hand over his face and dragged it down. “Sorry. I mean for work.” He gestured weakly at the drafting table. “You design stuff?”

For whatever reason, that made Hudson's cheeks pink and his mouth twitch. “Yeah, you could say I design stuff. Did you really come in here to talk about my job?”

Peyton shrugged and let out a nervous laugh. “Considering you, like, never really talk about yourself, yeah. I guess I kind of did. It sounds better than talking about my crap date.”

There was a flash of something like sympathy in Hudson's eyes and he sighed, gesturing to the sofa. “Beer?”

“Water?” Peyton suggested instead. He could drink more since his surgery, but it still always made him feel like crap.

Hudson shrugged like he didn't care, which was unusual since Peyton's friends usually gave him shit about not drinking, and he wheeled away, leaving Peyton alone. He glanced around the room for another moment, then flopped onto the sofa which was the strangest mixture of stiff and comfortable.

Hudson returned a second later with two bottles of water between his thighs, and he rolled up toward Peyton and held one out. “I'm not really a fan of the bottled stuff, but I'm still working on mastering multiple drink transport without making it look like I pissed myself.”

Peyton snorted a laugh, then flushed lightly. “Sorry. That's not funny.”

“It doesn't bother me,” Hudson said, waving his hand at him before setting his own bottle down on the table. Peyton tried not to stare as Hudson locked the brake on his chair, then

deftly transferred himself to the sofa. “You can ask,” Hudson said gruffly after a beat.

Peyton shook his head. “No. I mean, not that I don’t...I’m not saying I don’t care. I just...that’s not...”

“Breathe,” Hudson ordered.

Peyton sucked in a lungful of air, then let it out slowly. His pulse started to normalize as his anxiety dropped into its usual quiet simmer. “This is probably why that guy was kind of a douche. I just can’t seem to fucking function in social situations.”

“You were fine before. Obviously he got you worked up,” Hudson pointed out.

Peyton licked his lips, then cracked the top of his water and took a long drink. The last thing he wanted to do was give this man ammunition to use against Peyton the next time he fell into a bad mood. But there was also something about Hudson that felt inherently safe.

He had no idea why, but his gut rarely ever steered him wrong.

At least, not when it came to trusting friends.

Relationships, well... That was clearly a work in progress.

Peyton finally just breathed out a sigh and sat back. “When I first got to the restaurant, he tried to order for me, like I was a fucking toddler. Then when I told him I had medical issues he got...”

“Weird?” Hudson offered.

Peyton’s mouth twitched at the corners. “Yeah. He kept watching me like he was trying to figure out what it was. The rest of the meal wasn’t so bad, but then he called me Chinese and when I told him I wasn’t, he, uh...”

“Asked what are you?” Hudson asked.

Peyton blinked at him. “Familiar with that?”

“I have enough people of color in my company that I’ve seen it more times than I care to,” Hudson said quietly. “Also,

my mom is one of those people.”

His mom. The one who'd been responsible for that gut-wrenching phone call Peyton had overheard. “Fuck her,” he blurted before really thinking, then he went bright pink because he knew that wasn't his place.

Hudson stared at him for a long moment, then burst into quiet laughter, hanging his head almost like he was trying to hide how amused he was. “Yeah. Pretty much.”

Peyton rubbed at his eyes. “Sorry. I'm usually a lot nicer than that.”

“You don't need to do your whole people pleasing shit in my house, okay?” Hudson told him in a tone that was just shy of harsh. Peyton bristled because while he knew what he was like, being called out on it was always a little hard to hear. “You can call the bitch a bitch.”

He wanted to say that he didn't know her so that might not be a fair assessment, but he could tell whatever the woman had put Hudson through definitely earned her the title. So, he just nodded. “And if you ever need to vent about her, I'm here to listen.”

Hudson looked at him with a raised brow. “Is that what we're doing here tonight?”

Busted. Peyton knew damn well he'd deflected. “It's always been easier for me to let someone else take over and put the focus on whatever they have going on. Every time I get like ten minutes away from a situation—no matter how much it bothered me—it feels like I overreacted.”

Hudson sat forward a little, leaning on his thigh with one of his forearms, and he gave Peyton a serious look. “I get that. Being raised by a person like my mom, I spent a lot of years trying to unlearn all of those bad habits. None of my hurt was ever as important as her feelings or me doing what she wanted. I thought it was normal for a goddamn long time. And I think maybe I went a little too far to the other side because I know what a dickhead I can be...”



“I wouldn’t say that,” Peyton told him with a gentle smile. “More like...grumpy asshole?”

Hudson snorted. “However you want to dress it up, you can rest assured that I know who I am and what I’m like. She’s the reason I tolerated my ex for as long as I did. Why I let him walk all over me and convince me that I wasn’t worth...” Hudson trailed off and glanced away like he hadn’t meant to say any of that.

Peyton wanted to reach for him on instinct, but he knew better. He squeezed his hands tight into fists and waited for Hudson to finish.

“Whatever this fucker said to you tonight, well, I’m not going to tell you not to let it bother you because I know how that shit works. I know that no matter how tough you are, it doesn’t just roll off.”

No, it didn’t, though Peyton had never tried to pretend he was tough. He knew damn-well he was going to lie in bed and over-examine everything Austin had said to him, and all the things he’d done to make Austin feel like he *could* say the things he did.

Eventually he’d come to the conclusion that nothing was his fault, but not until he’d worked his emotions into the ground.

Still, talking with Hudson was helping in ways that he wasn’t expecting. He kind of thought Hudson might just call him a moron for letting a guy like Austin get to him. He wasn’t expecting Hudson to validate how he felt. He wasn’t expecting Hudson to understand.

“How long have you been divorced?” Peyton asked.

Hudson bit his lip and shrugged, glancing away again. It was obvious the topic of his ex made him uncomfortable, but he also wasn’t refusing to answer, and Peyton had no doubt Hudson couldn’t be bullied into revealing anything.

“It’s been a good long while. Long enough that I’m starting to feel like a class-A moron for not being able to move on.”

“Are you still...”

“No,” Hudson said in a rush, his bark of laughter bitter. “Uh, if you were gonna ask me if I’m still in love with him, then the answer is fuck no.”

Peyton smiled gently. “I was going to ask if you’re still talking to him.”

“He knows me better than to assume we’ll ever speak again. I’m a burn the bridge kind and the town on the other side of it kind of guy,” Hudson said. He paused to take a long drink, and he rubbed his right eye so hard it looked painful. “That’s why he got me the fucking bird.”

Right, the bird.

“I have to say, that might be the weirdest divorce gift I’ve ever heard of,” Peyton admitted.

Hudson laughed and shrugged. “Nah. Not when you understand what he meant by it.” When Peyton lifted a brow, Hudson actually blushed and stared down at his hands. “It was to point out that chances were, after he was gone, the only thing I’d have left to talk to was the animal.”

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

PEYTON LEFT Hudson's that night hating his ex with a passion he didn't think he could feel for a total nameless stranger. The more Peyton talked about the details of his date, the more Hudson shared about his ex, and none of it was pretty.

The guy was a self-centered prick, and although Peyton wasn't surprised that someone would behave that way after their spouse became disabled because he'd seen it more than once, he was struggling to figure out why someone would leave Hudson. Yes, he was prickly. Yes, he was an asshole.

But he was also kind in ways that most people weren't. He wasn't a people-pleaser, which meant every word out of his mouth was genuine. Every drop of attention he paid was because he wanted to. He didn't invite Peyton over because he felt sorry for him and decided to endure his company for a while.

He had Peyton over because they were something like friends now and he was trying to make him feel better.

Peyton had managed to drag a few niblets of information out of Hudson when the night was over too. Like how his

favorite spice was cinnamon, and how he loved maple and peanut butter together, and how he had a love-hate relationship with marshmallow fluff because it was his favorite as a kid and his mom used it to manipulate him.

“She used to buy it for me whenever she wanted me to perform as the perfect son,” Hudson had said a short while before Peyton left. The bird, Pancake, had finally come out and had taken to Peyton, so he was stroking his feathers as the bird groomed his temple. “I want to hate it, you know? But the taste of it reminds me of the only parts of my childhood that actually felt good. Even if that was all a lie.”

“Do you eat it now?” Peyton had asked.

Hudson had given him a look to make it obvious he could tell Peyton was fishing, but he answered anyway. “No. I never buy it for myself anymore.”

“Would you though? Like, say a baker moved in next door and wanted to make something nice for his new friend. Would you eat it then?”

Hudson had rolled his eyes and grimaced, but eventually he gave a grudging shrug and Peyton took that for the yes that it was.

And the next morning, he got to work. He decided on maple and peanut butter cookies with a marshmallow fluff center. They were easy and would hold their shape, and he was partway through mixing the dough when he heard Hudson’s back door slide open.

A small part of him wanted to run out because he felt almost addicted now, but he also didn’t want to impose on Hudson’s morning routine, or his private time, because it was just that: private. The man had shared, but nothing current about his life. He’d mentioned his ex, but not the person he was fucking all hours into the night.

He mentioned his mom but hadn’t said a word about his best friend or his job or what he did for fun.

Peyton wasn’t going to pry, but he was going to use what little wiles he had in order to crack the man open like a

stubborn walnut. After all, that's what he was best at.

*Ping!*

Glancing over, Peyton realized his phone was ringing with a text, not an order, so he snatched it off the counter and his heart thudded hard in his chest when he saw a name he didn't expect on the screen.

Austin: I fucked up. I know I did. Can we talk?

Peyton: I feel like last night was a pretty big clue that you and I aren't meant to be together.

Austin: Maybe, but I'd still like to talk if you're willing to hear me out. I'm not making excuses, but I do have a reason for what happened.

Peyton struggled to come up with any reason on the planet that would excuse the guy's behavior. Even if he was unlearning bad habits and casual racism, the guy should have checked himself after Peyton's reactions. But he also struggled with telling anyone no, as much as he wanted to.

He chewed on his lower lip and there was a voice in his head that sounded suspiciously like Hudson's telling him that this guy wasn't owed his time. That Peyton's gut instinct was right, and that he should just say no.

But then the panic set in, with the cold sweats. He knew he should just work through it, but instinct took over and he found himself typing: *Fine. Give me a call if you want.*

His phone rang half a second later, and Peyton forced himself to take a long breath before answering, trying to hear over the sound of his own heartbeat hammering in his ear.

"Hey."

"Hey," Austin said with a breath of relief. "I thought you were going to tell me to go fuck myself."

"I'm not that mean," Peyton said, and he regretted that it was the truth because sometimes he wished he could be. Just

every now and again, when the person deserved it.

Austin laughed softly. “Look, I didn’t want to say this on the date, but you’re the first person I’ve been with since my ex and...I panicked. You kind of reminded me of him—like, in a good way,” Austin added quickly. “All the things I will always love about him. And I don’t know. I just came down with a bad case of foot-in-mouth.”

Peyton chewed on his lower lip and hesitated because his gut was telling him that Austin was full of shit, but the rest of him was saying that everyone deserved a second chance. It wasn’t like he hadn’t made an ass out of himself when things got awkward from time to time.

He wished he knew where to draw the line sometimes.

“But you can still tell me to go fuck myself and I’ll totally understand,” Austin said into the tense silence. “I know I deserve it.” There was a hint of a whine in his voice that set Peyton on edge, but he shook it off.

“I’m not really sure this is going to work out,” he admitted slowly, “but if you really think there might be something here, I’d be willing to accept a do-over.”

Austin let out a relieved laugh. “Yeah?”

*No*, Peyton’s head supplied. “Yes,” his mouth said, betraying him. God, why was he like this. “I can make some time.”

“How about tomorrow night? We’ll keep it casual. Those upscale restaurants always make me a little nervous.”

Peyton managed a smile in spite of himself. “Yeah, me too.”

“Can I pick you up this time?” Austin asked.

Peyton immediately bristled. “Uh, no. No, but...” He searched for a compromise. “If things go well, maybe you can pick me up next time.”

Austin laughed again. “Okay, yeah. I’ll take it. Thanks, Pay.”

Peyton bristled again because he fucking hated that nickname. His brother and best friend called him Peyt, which he always kind of liked, but that was reserved for the people in his life who loved him. Pay was the thing all the horrible jocks used to call him in school when they thought he was the “smart Asian kid” and they were trying to butter him up so he’d do their homework for them. Of course, that quickly fizzled into insults when they found out that while he was smart, he was also an executive-functioning disaster who couldn’t even get his own shit turned in on time.

So yeah. It was a no on Pay.

He took a breath and found his courage. “It’s Peyton.”

“Oh,” Austin said, sounding surprised. “You don’t think Pey’s cute?”

“It’s not my favorite,” he answered, leaning against the counter and staring at his cookie dough.

“Well, maybe you can make an exception for me,” Austin wheedled, then laughed again. “Anyway, I have to go, but I’ll text you details, yeah?”

“Uh...yeah,” Peyton said quietly.

The line went dead, and his heart sank toward his feet because he had a feeling the second date wasn’t going to go half as well as the first.

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That evening, Peyton found himself heaving several boxes of expertly portioned and packed cookie dough through the door of BrewBiz. He’d texted with Caleb a couple of times who wasn’t in, but his assistant manager, Wren was handling the front of house business.

Peyton felt a little pulse of nerves rushing through his veins, even though Caleb had assured him that everyone had adored the samples he’d sent in. He still felt a bit like he was stepping on their head baker’s toes, and the last thing he wanted was to get reamed out by some total stranger.

Trying to hip-check the door open, Peyton almost fell flat on his face when it suddenly swung away from him, and there was a sharp, barking laughter before hands caught him. He looked up into the dark eyes of a grinning man who was clearly trying to seem apologetic.

“Sorry,” the guy said, lifting a hand up in surrender once Peyton was secured on his feet. “I didn’t realize you hadn’t seen me.”

Peyton shook his head, mortified that his hands were full so he couldn’t sign since he knew everyone employed there was Deaf. But then his gaze caught the implant on the side of the guy’s head. “Talking’s okay?”

The guy frowned, then he smiled again and nodded, gesturing for him to put his things down on the nearest table. “Yeah. I’ve had my CI since I was a baby. You’re all good.”

Peyton dropped the boxes of dough on the table with a quiet sigh of relief, then glanced back at his car because he had another two loads to carry. “Great. So this is uh...well. Not all of it?”

The guy laughed again and straightened the front of his apron where Peyton was able to catch the name. So this was Wren. He was definitely personable which probably made him great for the front of house, something Peyton could never be. He had always been a disaster trying to work the counter of his bakery.

“You good, man?” Wren asked.

Peyton shook himself out of his head. “Yeah, shit. Sorry. It’s been kind of a weird day.”

That wasn’t a lie. He was still a little upside down over agreeing to go on another date with Austin who straight up ignored him when he said he didn’t want to be called Pay. Then he tried to go over and deliver cookies to Hudson, but either the guy wasn’t home, or he was ignoring Peyton. He also knew he wasn’t going to be able to sleep soundly until he found out if he’d done something to upset Hudson. Again.



“Here, let me grab the dolly and I can help you,” Wren told him, holding up a hand.

He disappeared through the swinging door, then appeared a second later dragging the tiny moving dolly behind him. He loaded up the first boxes, then Peyton led the way to his car where they got the rest stacked up.

“You mind going into the back and explaining all of this to Jori?” Wren asked as soon as they were through the doors. “I’m technically not allowed to touch the ovens because I keep breaking things.”

“He’s the baker?”

Wren nodded. “Yeah. He’s a little neurotic about his kitchen, but he won’t mind you back there.”

Peyton quickly nodded. “Yeah, that’s not a problem. Caleb asked me to print everything out in extra large, font which I did, but I’m happy to go over everything with him.”

Wren’s face brightened. “Awesome. Hey...you’re not single, are you?”

Peyton almost choked on his own tongue. “Uh...”

“Not for me,” Wren said in a rush, then looked immediately apologetic and circled his fist over his chest. “Sorry, that was...I mean, not that you’re not hot. It’s just, I’m seeing someone right now. But I have this friend who...”

“I’m kind of taken,” Peyton interrupted quickly, then bit his lip because he wasn’t taken and he sure as hell didn’t want to be. Not by Austin. But it only took a second to realize he wasn’t talking about his bad date. He was thinking about the neighbor who most definitely didn’t want him. “Well. It’s... complicated.”

“Say no more,” Wren told him. “Or tell me to shut the fuck up because I do this a lot. Caleb would probably can my ass if I wasn’t his brother.”

Peyton was startled for a second that the two were related since they couldn’t have been more different, but after a moment, he could see the resemblance. Of course, he was used

to looking nothing like his sibling and he didn't want to assume the two were even blood related. Not that it mattered.

"I'm not offended," Peyton assured him. "Can I ask you something, though?"

"You want to know why I'm not sign only like Caleb?" Wren offered.

Peyton flushed lightly and shrugged. "If it's not rude."

"Some people might get pissed about it, but I don't really care." He offered Peyton a sheepish smile and rubbed the back of his neck. "Caleb and I both got implants when we were babies. We're twins."

Peyton's eyes widened. "But..."

"Fraternal," Wren offers with a slight laugh. "Anyway, mine worked pretty well, but Caleb's kept failing. My parents eventually caved when we were like nine and Caleb was failing out of all his classes, and they let him go to the deaf school."

Peyton blinked, then frowned. "Just him?"

There was hurt in Wren's eyes that Peyton would never understand, but he could empathize with that feeling of betrayal. "I don't really blame them. I blame our shitty therapists that kept telling them the only way for us to be normal or happy was to learn how to function in the hearing world."

"That's bullshit," Peyton blurted, and Wren barked out a sharp laugh.

"Yeah, preaching to the choir, my friend. But it's all good now. We got this place and my mom kind of gets it now." Wren glanced over his shoulder, then suddenly darted past Peyton and clicked the lock on the door. When he turned around and saw the slightly wary look on Peyton's face, he slapped a hand over his eyes and dragged it down. "Oh my god I'm sorry. I'm not like trying to trap you in here like some serial killer. We're closed and I think I might lose my mind if someone tried to come in and order coffee right now."

Peyton relaxed a fraction. ‘We’re good,’ he signed now that his hands were free. ‘And please use sign if you want. I took it in college and I’d like to get it back.’

Wren lit up and Peyton resolved not to use his voice as much as possible since it was clear Wren had been robbed of his language for way too long. ‘Great. If you want to push that through the doors, Jori is in the back.’

Peyton nodded, mostly following along with Wren’s signing speed, and he gripped the handle on the dolly and headed toward the swinging kitchen doors. When he pushed through, he was startled at just how dark it was back there. There were only a couple of lamps on the baking counter along the corner, dimly lit with soft reddish light.

It cast an eerie glow around the kitchen, but the man in the corner was moving effortlessly through his task of stacking baking sheets. He was very tall and very thin, his white t-shirt hanging off his shoulders like it was two sizes too big. He had very pale hair, and when he turned Peyton got a glimpse of a sharp nose and chiseled jawline.

The man froze and sucked in a breath when his gaze landed on Peyton, his eyes narrowing behind very thick, red-tinted lenses that were sitting low, making him look like an old timey librarian. Peyton started to lift his hands, but the guy—Jori, it had to be—beat him to it.

‘Cookie guy.’

He spelled the word so fast, Peyton only got O-O-I, U-Y, but his mind filled in the blanks, and he raised his fist. ‘Yes.’

Jori relaxed and crossed the room, offering a hand which Peyton took quickly. When they parted, Jori rubbed his palm on his apron, an almost absent gesture. ‘You understand ASL?’

Peyton’s gut sank a little, and his cheeks pinked with a flush. ‘I’m okay. I took ASL in school, but I forgot a lot.’

Jori took pity on him—at least, that’s what the expression on his face said—and he smiled. ‘Remind me to slow down if you need me to.’

Some of the tension left Peyton's shoulders. 'You're fine. Wren said you wanted me to walk you through some of the instructions?'

Jori nodded, grabbing the top box from the stack and heaving it onto the big table in the center of the room. His thin body betrayed his now-obvious strength, and Peyton couldn't help but think that if he hadn't been enamored with his neighbor like a love-sick fool, and in some sort of weird carousel of uncertainty with Austin, he might want to get this guy's number.

He snapped back to the present just as Jori was grabbing the instructions off the box, and Peyton saw his eyes widen, then his mouth settle into a relaxed smile when he looked up. He signed something, but Peyton didn't know the words.

'Sorry. I don't understand.'

'Large print,' Jori spelled patiently. 'Did Caleb tell you to do this?'

'Yes,' Peyton signed. 'He said it was easier for you.'

Jori nodded and set the page down before adjusting his glasses. 'Blind,' he offered, then signed the word color. Then he spelled, 'Legally.'

He was colorblind and legally blind, Peyton's mind put together. 'Did you want me to use braille?'

Jori laughed, the sound rich in his chest as he shook his head. 'I suck at braille. I can read just fine as long as it's big and heavy contrast. But this is just dough anyway, right? All ready to bake?'

Peyton walked over and tore the tape off the top box before showing him the little dough balls sitting neatly in their rows. 'Caleb told me you needed some extra help right now.'

At that, Jori's face fell, and he glanced off to the side before shrugging. 'Life got...'

Peyton didn't know the last sign Jori made, but he was pretty sure it was something like complicated. Or probably fucked beyond all reason. Which he understood better than

anyone. He absently touched his hand over his bag, which was still empty, then he looked up at Jori.

‘I know how that goes.’

Jori studied him for a moment, and Peyton watched the way his eyes danced back and forth—just a subtle movement, and only obvious when someone was watching closely. ‘I appreciate this.’

Peyton quickly waved him off. ‘Don’t worry about it. If you want me to help with other stuff, I can. I have an online bakery and I can throw together batches of dough. The only thing I can’t do is bake it.’

‘This is enough,’ Jori told him, then reached out and grabbed Peyton by the shoulder and gave him a firm squeeze. ‘Thank you.’

Peyton smiled, and as he looked up into Jori’s gaze, then around at the kitchen, he had a feeling this was going to end up more than a business transaction. He felt warm there, and welcome, and he knew better than to throw something like that away.

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“I’M glad we’re doing this again.”

Peyton’s head snapped up from where he was staring at the food on his plate. They were at a little Korean barbeque place, which made Peyton wonder if Austin thought he was Korean. He didn’t necessarily mind because in spite of the fact that the date was killing his appetite, the food was amazing.

He pushed a little bundle of enoki mushrooms through a thick drizzle of black bean sauce, but didn’t take a bite. “It’s good.”

“I fucked up again, didn’t I?” Austin asked.

Peyton let out a tiny sigh and glanced up at him. He felt a little bit like a hypocrite because he did that all the time—seeking validation out of fear that he wasn’t making people happy with how hard he tried. But the tone in Austin’s voice crept under his skin and sat there, uncomfortable and itchy.

“This is fine,” he finally said.

Austin shook his head and leaned on his elbow, tipping his head closer. “I didn’t choose this place because you’re Asian.”

Peyton blinked at him, not sure if he should be annoyed or not. Either Austin was perceptive, or he'd known what Peyton was going to think.

“This is my favorite spot. It got me through my divorce,” Austin went on. He reached for his glass—a tall draft beer that still had a ton of foam—and sipped on it. He swiped a thumb over his top lip and Peyton noticed that he wore a delicate, thin band on his middle finger. “I begged my ex for weeks—hell, months,” Austin corrected with a bitter laugh, “to try counseling before we just signed the papers and called it a day. But he was such a stubborn asshole and it made me feel like I wasn't worthy of a fight.”

In spite of himself, Peyton found himself softening. “I'm sorry.”

Austin shrugged. “It's fine. I mean, in the end, it was for the best. It's just hard to see that in the thick of it, you know?”

Peyton knew—sort of. He'd never been in love like that before. Not enough to get married and commit himself to someone. But Austin was the second person he'd met in the last few weeks who'd been through it. Of course, Hudson's story was a little worse than that. It was harsh and full of all the cruelties that terrified Peyton about getting back into the dating world now that his body was...different.

And the idea that not even a spouse would stick by someone when the worst happened?

He couldn't get a good enough read on Austin to tell whether or not the guy would run or stay, but he was leaning toward the latter. His screen name was MarriageMan after all.

But his meal was sitting heavy in his gut because of that too. He still hadn't told Austin about his disease, or his stoma, or his surgery.

But it was time, he realized. He didn't want to go on a third date without at least seeing the look on Austin's face.

“I've never been in a serious relationship before,” Peyton admitted, setting his chopsticks down. There was no chance in hell he was eating now, but if this went badly, he could pack

all the food up and share it with Linden while his brother swore vengeance against Peyton's bad date.

Or...maybe he could take it to Hudson and...

"You know that's not really a turn off in spite of what a lot of people say, right?" Austin's voice cut through Peyton's thoughts, and he blinked rapidly for a second.

"No, I know. I mean, that's not what um...what I was getting at." He cleared his throat and rolled his shoulders. "By the time my business was successful enough that I had time to date, I uh...I got sick."

He saw the way Austin pulled back just slightly, but otherwise his face was open and patient. "What happened?"

Peyton took a breath and glanced away. "Nothing catching. Or terminal. It's not," he stopped and laughed because it wasn't exactly easy to talk about this thing that everyone saw as the shitting-your-pants disease. Which yeah, that was fair. He didn't know anyone with a diagnosis who hadn't been come at least close to it.

But it was so much more.

It was the fatigue, and the body aches, and the scarring. It was the cold sores that made eating hell, and the pain in his guts that was with him every waking second. It was the medication that made him swell up and lose the sight of the body he once had. It was never, ever feeling like he had control and knowing there was no cure—there was only management.

And then there was that choice he was given which, in the end, was no real choice at all.

"Peyton?"

He bit his lip and looked back at Austin. "I have Crohn's."

Austin's brow furrowed before his eyes went wide with realization. No doubt he'd known some gut-health warrior on Instagram who claimed they'd healed their body with oils and salts and exercise or whatever. Peyton was plagued by them constantly. Every time he tagged his disease on social media,



some rando would end up in his DMs touting their CBD MLM promising to cure him.

Right then, Peyton could see the war on Austin's face as he waited for him to speak. It was clear Austin couldn't tell if it was serious or just something kind of...gross.

"At first, it was just pain. Then fatigue," Peyton went on, putting the man out of his misery. "It was being managed by medication for a while, but it just kept getting worse, no matter what I did. Then I had scar tissue build up so badly I almost died."

Austin sat back. "Shit."

Peyton let out a small laugh. "Yeah. And, um." He cleared his throat, then shrugged. "So you're the first person besides my friends and family I've told about this."

Austin softened. "Yeah?"

"It's not pretty," Peyton defended. He didn't want this moment to be soft or sweet. "They had to take a ton of my lower intestine, and...uh. And my colon."

Austin's face was unreadable, but he knew the man was just trying to figure out what that meant.

"I have a stoma now." His hand moved reflexively to his stomach. "It's not reversible...and it's not very pretty."

Austin gave him a look and said in a tone that settled on his nerves, "I'm sure that's not true."

Peyton raised a brow at him. "Have you ever seen one?"

Austin looked a bit contrite, and he shrugged. "No, but I have a hard time imagining something on you that isn't pretty."

The words should have been flattering, but Peyton had never been the sort of person who was impressed by empty compliments. The reality was, his stoma was messy and kind of terrible to look at. And there really was no dressing it up to make it more palatable. The fact remained, he had an inch and a half of intestine now protruding from his stomach.

It saved his life, of course. It reduced his pain and made it so he could bake again, and run his business again, and he felt human. Linden and Taylor never hesitated to remind him of that, whenever he felt low, and it was those words which took the edge off how different his body was now.

“Well, you haven’t seen it,” Peyton shot back.

Austin cocked his head to the side. “May I?”

Blinking in shock, Peyton cleared his throat. “That... I’m...”

“Look, maybe that’s like a fifth date sort of thing, but you’re clearly worried about it. And I might have some experience in that,” Austin told him.

Peyton bit his lower lip. “How’s that?”

“My ex,” Austin said, then laughed and shook his head. “I know that’s the mark of a bad date—when the other person can’t stop bringing up their ex, but he was a huge part of my life for a long time. He uh...he got sick,” Austin said, lowering his gaze to the table. Peyton tried to read his tone because he still didn’t trust that Austin was being genuine. “The treatment left him disabled and that’s what led to the end of our marriage.” Austin lifted his gaze and though his mouth was turned down, Peyton couldn’t get a read on what was in his eyes. “He was angry at what happened and no matter what I did...” He trailed off and shrugged. “I could never get through to him. Our needs changed and he wasn’t willing to compromise. So it ruined us.”

Peyton wasn’t sure what to say. He’d heard this before—people claiming they knew what it was like because they were in the proximity of someone who was going through an illness or disability. And he could understand how a marriage could end that way. If he’d been with a partner, there was every chance he would have driven them screaming into the night, never to be heard from again because he had been bitter, and he had been angry.

And while Austin had blamed his ex for their lack of counseling, he didn’t seem angry about it. Just resigned.

“Anyway, you’re not him,” Austin finally finished with a small laugh. “And I’m not comparing the two. But I have been there before, and I can promise you I will get it right this time.”

The words didn’t sit well. Get it right this time? Like he was some kind of experiment?

What Peyton needed was an outside perspective. He couldn’t call his brother or Taylor because they wouldn’t understand, but he did have a neighbor that would understand better than anyone. Hudson wasn’t exactly in the dating game—at least, according to him he wasn’t—but he’d still know where Peyton was coming from. He’d understand the questions deeper than anyone else Peyton knew.

“I fucked up, didn’t I?” Austin finally asked.

Peyton realized he hadn’t spoken in a good long while, and he cleared his throat. “This is just new for me,” he said. “I didn’t date a lot before my surgery, and I think I’m still adjusting. I’m not calling it off. I just need some time.”

“Hey, I can do that,” Austin said. He signaled for the bill, then passed over his card while he boxed up their leftovers in the containers the server dropped off. Peyton didn’t help, and he shook his head when Austin offered him the bags.

“I won’t eat them,” he admitted. “Leftovers tend to sit in my fridge until they start growing new life.”

Austin laughed. “Same. But I can probably leave them in my office and lunch thieves will feast.”

Peyton chuckled as he pushed up from his chair, but his humor died when he saw Austin’s gaze hunting over his body, probably for some sign of his stoma bag. He fought the urge to cover his waist, and instead turned around to push his chair in.

When he moved back, Austin was hooking the bag over his wrist, looking unbothered. Peyton knew he was probably being too hard on him. Of course the man wanted to see what he looked like. That was natural.

Peyton just couldn’t stand the idea of being on display. It was why he wasn’t the Stoma Guy online. It was why he

didn't advocate. Living as some sort of public figure, reduced down to his disease, his successes, and his failures was too goddamn much pressure.

He just wanted to bake his sweets and kiss cute men and move on from all of his pain.

And right then, with Austin behind him as they headed out to the car at the end of another failed date, he wondered if it was too much to ask.

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

HUDSON WAS beyond surprised that the design team had come through so quickly. He had a prototype on his desk by the end of the week, which looked like two particular toys they already had a line for, combined into one. Just like every line they had, the toy's handle was soft and had the option to increase the button sensitivity for people who had issues with their grip. It also had a remote option, as well as app sync.

The toy itself was simple. There was a sleeve for the penis, a ring for the testicles, then a rolling knob at the base which would move back and forth with button-controlled pressure to stimulate the prostate. The person could manually thrust into the sleeve, or they could activate the option which would allow the sleeve to ripple back and forth at various speeds.

He tested out some of the mechanics, then went over the notes Eli had left him on the desk.

My initial product tester could only give feedback on the prostate stimulation as it turns out he had a penile amputation and phalloplasty, and with the nerve damage was unable to give a review on that function. However, I

was able to secure two additional test subjects and I've attached their feedback in separate documents. -E

Hudson read through everything, made a few notes, then packed two of the boxes in his bag. He wasn't sure he was going to bother playing with it much. His sensation was decreased enough that he'd only be able to feel it on his prostate. However, he could at least test that it was easy to use because the damn thing looked like some sort of alien tech and that was only sexy to a small subset of their customers.

Not to mention that the more complicated something was, the quicker his customers gave up using it, and that was the opposite point he was trying to make with his company. Sexual gratification for people who wanted it was not supposed to be any kind of struggle.

Saying a little prayer that nearly everyone was gone as he wheeled toward his office door, Hudson braced himself for more conversation, but the corridor was quiet. He readjusted his bag on his lap, then made his way out the side exit and to his car. He was exhausted so it took him a little longer than usual to get the wheels off his chair, but he managed it without being seen, and he drove off feeling a huge measure of relief.

The journey home was long thanks to the evening traffic, and by the time he pulled up to the entrance of his street, he almost wanted to cry. Most of his neighbors were old, so they were safely tucked away for the night, and he pulled into his driveway, easing his car into the garage.

He stared at his bag with the new prototypes, and while he knew that he should bring them in and at least give them a little test, he wasn't in the mood. Instead, he left them sitting on the seat as he reassembled his chair and eased into it.

He cursed softly to himself for not having his garage door entrance modified yet, then he spun his chair and headed for his front door when he saw headlights in the distance. He picked up the pace, but as he approached his door, he heard a couple of cars slow, then come to a stop just a few feet away in Peyton's driveway.

His hands gripped his wheels, coming to a complete stop as his heart twisted in his chest. It wasn't Peyton's car—the garage never opened, which meant he was out with friends.

Or on a date.

“Just go in, you stupid fuck,” he whispered to himself, but he couldn't seem to make his hands move.

A few feet away, Hudson heard one car door shut...then another. Then two sets of feet.

“Oh, hey?” That was Peyton, and he sounded...nervous, maybe. Not quite scared, but definitely not safe.

Hudson's heart hammered harder in his chest.

“You really didn't have to follow me home.” Shit, Peyton sounded *scared*.

And then Hudson's world flipped because he recognized the second voice too—more than he ever wanted to. “I don't mind. You did so well at dinner you at least earned a little kiss, and you took off too fast for me to give it to you at the restaurant.”

“I...*what?*” Peyton said.

Hudson's hearing went in and out against the drumbeat of his heart. What the fuck? He turned his chair without really thinking about it and began to wheel back down the ramp.

“Really, it's...fine. No, it's *fine*. I'd rather—oh.”

Hudson came around the corner in time to see Austin pinning Peyton to the side of the wall. But instead of kissing him on the lips, he was kissing his forehead, holding him tightly by the face. His body was blocking most of Hudson's view, but he could see the way Peyton's fingers were flexing.

“Seriously?” Hudson said without thinking. “You don't have any fucking manners at all, do you?”

Austin spun, his eyes going wide, and any question Hudson had about whether or not Austin knew where he lived now was gone. He took a startled step back away from Peyton, his gaze flickering back and forth between both men.

Hudson ignored him in favor of taking in Peyton's expression, and the guy looked mortified and almost afraid, though fear wasn't quite right.

"I should, uh...yeah. I'll call you later, okay?" Austin didn't wait for Peyton to reply. He just hurried off and got into his car.

It wasn't until he pulled out of the driveway that either of them moved—almost like a switch had been flipped. Hudson backed his chair up and Peyton took a step forward, clearing his throat.

"Sorry. Sorry he was...that was uh..." Peyton shrugged and bit his lip. "I didn't think he was going to do that."

Hudson wanted to rage. He'd worked his ass off to escape his ex and all the shit Austin put him through, only for *this* fucker to bring him back into his life? But the thought only lasted a minute because he could see Peyton was either on the verge of screaming or crying. Or maybe both.

"I have beer," he eventually said. "Shitty dates usually feel better after some beer."

Peyton laughed. "Yeah, not for me. Um. But I have brownies?"

Hudson groaned in spite of himself. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." Peyton looked a little less like he was on the verge of collapse. "You want to share?"

"I'll leave my door open," Hudson said, then he spun his chair and hurried inside so he could take a second to process what the fuck he'd just seen.

Throwing his keys on the table, he wheeled into the back room to open the office door and check on Pancake who was sitting on the top of the cage preening. The bird didn't acknowledge his existence, which was probably for the best. Although Pancake had no say in where he came from, Hudson still struggled to look at the thing some days, and tonight would be rough.



He took a deep breath, then headed for his room when he heard a hesitant knock on his door. “I’m just changing,” he called out. “Make yourself comfortable.”

He hoped Peyton understood that changing wasn’t a quick thing for him, though he did his best to rush it. He slung sweats over his arm, then headed into the bathroom and grabbed a catheter so he could take a quick piss. He was more profoundly aware of the clock than ever as he wiped himself off, then braced himself on the end of the toilet so he could switch from his trousers to his sweats.

By the time he was dressed and back in his chair, he was a little calmer. His head was still racing because seeing his ex after a hundred years would be too fucking soon, let alone a few months, but he had to remind himself it wasn’t Peyton’s fault.

Probably.

There was very little chance Peyton knew who Austin was. And he liked to think Peyton was the sort of guy who wouldn’t have dated a man like Austin if he knew what his ex had put him through.

His hands felt a little sweaty as he pushed himself into the living room, and he found Peyton on the sofa, hunched over one of his little bento-like boxes, picking at the brownies. His entire body was still tense, and Hudson fought back the irrational urge to put his arms around him.

“Do you want to talk about it? Or do you want to eat and forget?”

Peyton looked up as Hudson set his brake and carefully slid from his chair to the cushion one space away from where Peyton was perched. He licked his lips, then sighed. “Have you dated since you became disabled?”

Hudson startled at the question, but he shook his head. “No. But to be fair, it’s not really about the disability. My ex did a pretty big fucking number on me.”

Peyton looked devastated. “Yeah. After those two dates with him, I can see how that’s possible. He um.” Peyton bit his

lips between his teeth and shook his head. “I guess I don’t really need to explain that to you, do I?”

Hudson almost laughed. “No, but if you want to, I’m here to listen. At the very least I get it.”

Peyton nodded, his gaze going back to the brownies. After a beat and a deep breath, he passed the box over. Hudson told himself not to indulge—to be a good friend and pay attention to Peyton’s pain—but they looked too good. He broke off a corner and groaned at the taste.

“What the fuck? They’re amazing. What flavor is this?”

“Thin Mint,” Peyton said, “though I can’t call it that because, you know, trademark shit. Mint wafer inspired, I guess?” He huffed a soft laugh, but he looked like he was genuinely pleased with Hudson’s reaction. “I haven’t gotten to the naming process yet. They’re new.”

“How about heaven, because I think I’ve just been transported,” Hudson said, taking another bite, then he grimaced. “God, was that corny as fuck or what?”

Peyton just laughed and shook his head, settling back. His fingers were still twisting together, though, which told Hudson that he had more to say besides his bad date. “So, I went to this really brief group therapy after my surgery. It was during the afternoons, and they served bad coffee and knock-off Oreos. My therapist suggested it, and it took me a while to get the courage to show up. It felt kind of pointless for me to be there because it was just some general—so your life has changed—kind of thing. My therapist told me not to compare our situations, you know? Like there were people who had spinal injuries, or who had just gone blind, or lost limbs. And I was just sitting there with my colon shitting into a bag, which in hindsight, was making me *more* able to live my life.”

Hudson set the brownies down and turned to face him. “Your life still changed, though. And so did your body.”

Peyton blew out a puff of air. “Yeah. At the time, I felt like all the stuff they said wouldn’t apply to me. I mean, I knew dating would be weird when I started seeing people who didn’t

know me. But I didn't think—" His voice cracked and he cleared his throat before looking up at Hudson with pained eyes. "He kissed my *forehead*. Like, he got out of the car and pinned me to the wall and kissed my forehead after telling me what a good job I did at dinner."

Hudson swallowed thickly. "What did you do that was so good?"

Peyton's laugh was harsh and bitter. "I don't know. I ate my fucking food? I drank some water? I made conversation like a normal goddamn human being? We just went out to eat," he said, throwing his hands up. "Then I told him about my stoma and suddenly I became some infant to him that..." He trailed off, and Hudson realized he wasn't going to finish that thought.

Bowing his head, he knew he had to come clean. He dug into his pocket, pulling out his phone, and he opened up his photos. He had exactly four photos of Austin saved, and he wasn't really sure why, but they served a purpose now.

"Remember how I told you about my shit ex?"

Peyton scoffed. "Yeah. And *fuck* that guy."

Hudson bit the inside of his cheek, then turned the phone to face Peyton. "His name is Austin. He lives on the north side of the city—we both used to. We sold our house and split the cash, and I think he bought a condo in our old neighborhood while I moved across the city."

Peyton's face was unreadable apart from his wide eyes which looked full of something. Hurt, maybe? Fear? He glanced up at Hudson. "*He's* your..."

"Yeah. *That* Austin is my ex. We were married for two years before I collapsed in the shower. He lasted three years with me in my recovery, but when the doctors told me that this was about the best I was going to get, he cheated on me. Then he cried and told me he wasn't sure he was strong enough to be with a man who couldn't fuck him the way he wanted to be fucked." Hudson turned the phone back toward himself and stared down at the photo. They were both younger then,

though Hudson could see his unhappiness even back then, before he knew anything was wrong. They were on a boat, and Austin was smiling like he had the world cupped in his hands, and Hudson looked...

Well, he just looked tired. For a long time, he hadn't realized just how demanding Austin was. How expensive and time consuming, and how he never let Hudson take priority in their marriage. Ever. Even when he got sick.

"I didn't know," Peyton whispered. "I swear I didn't know it was the same guy."

Hudson set the phone down on the table, then looked back over at his new friend. "Peyton, I know you didn't. And I don't know if he's changed, so I'm not going to be some posturing dickhead and tell you to stay away from him. But I do think you should be careful."

Peyton shifted uncomfortably. "When we started talking, he made me feel sexy. I wasn't sure I could, you know, feel that way again? I mean, logically I knew I'd get used to the changes, but yeah." He pulled his hair tie out and let his hair flop over his shoulders—thick and curly from the bun—before twisting it back up again. "Our first date sucked, but he promised me he'd make the second one better."

"And then he kissed you on the forehead," Hudson said.

Peyton laughed, rolling his eyes as he flopped backward. That position left his shirt tight over his stomach, and Hudson could just make out the shape of his bag, but he didn't let himself stare at it. "I actually like forehead kisses. I mean, call me whatever you want, but I like them. I like cuddling and being sweet. But I also like fucking. I used to like getting fucked, and I wanted to find a way to feel like that again, you know?"

"Yes," Hudson said, meeting Peyton's gaze. "I do."

"Yeah." Peyton rubbed at his eyes. "I'm sorry for coming over and getting my feelings all over your couch."

Hudson couldn't stop the smallest laugh. "I invited you. And you brought brownies."

“The one thing I’m really good at, apparently.”

Hudson wanted to argue, but it felt unfair to Peyton’s obvious need to wallow. Hudson knew what that was like too, and he understood that sometimes people needed a moment to just feel sorry for themselves.

“Well, if it helps, I think he’s still an asshole. Like a total and complete asshole, and…” Hudson’s words cut off when his phone began go buzz, and he didn’t need to look down to know who it was. Shit. Fucking shit.

“That’s him, isn’t it?” Peyton asked quietly.

Hudson pursed his lips. “Probably, yeah. But he doesn’t want me back if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“Are you serious?” Peyton snapped, sounding genuinely angry. “Even if the date had been amazing, you seriously think I’d go out with him again? You think I’d care about any of that after what he did to you?”

Hudson shrugged, giving his honest answer. “You barely know me, Peyton.”

“You could be a literal stranger on the street and I wouldn’t —” he stopped abruptly and took a breath. “I get that you don’t know me very well, either. But you will, and someday you’re going to feel like a real jackass for thinking I would date a man like that after what he did.”

Hudson tried to ignore the warmth in his chest as he tossed his phone onto the table. “I don’t give a fuck about him either. By the time the divorce was final, all that was left was apathy and some trauma. Part of me wishes that I could care how he feels, only to prove that I’d once had any feelings for him at all, but I don’t. He can live, he can die. He can be a failure or a success. I honestly don’t care.”

Peyton said nothing for a long while. “But we’re good?”

“We’re good.” Hudson started to settle back down, then leaned forward to grab the brownies again, stuffing one into his mouth. “You should call them Hudson’s Heaven.”

Peyton laughed. “And you shouldn’t quit your day job. You’re not great at naming things.”

“No, but I am good at listening,” he said thickly, swallowing through chocolate. He turned his head to look at Peyton. “You’ll find that feeling again, you know. That power over yourself, and your body, and your sexuality. It might not come in the form you expect, but it will.”

“It happened for you?” Peyton asked.

Not for the first time, he considered telling Peyton about his company, but right then he didn’t want the questions. He just wanted to be there—as a man, and a friend—for his neighbor. He wanted to see Peyton smile more, and avoid thinking about the warm, wanting feeling in the pit of his gut because he knew it was more than just friendship. But he was terrified.

“It did,” he said eventually. “And a guy like you? I doubt you’ll have to wait long.”

Hudson wasn’t entirely sure, but in that moment, he thought he might have caught a faint blush dusting Peyton’s cheeks. God help him, but that made him want even more.

He had no idea what to do with that feeling. But what he did know was that he had a small box in his car, and at the very least, he could help Peyton work on finding pleasure in himself again.

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

TheBakerByTheSea: Morning everyone. New product going up soon. A minty, rich, dark chocolate brownie, available gluten-free. I think I'm going to call them Hudson's Heaven, and if my product tester was right, they will transport you to paradise.

PEYTON WAS plenty used to finding random boxes on his doorstep. Half the time he ordered supplies online, then forgot until they showed up a few days later. But this was... unfamiliar. The company logo wasn't a business he'd worked with before, and it was small and a little unobtrusive. It was also lacking a shipping label, though the rest of it looked pretty official.

He supposed.

Looking left and right, Peyton tried to quash the fear that maybe it was from Austin considering the guy hadn't stopped texting him since Hudson had stepped in a week and a half ago, the night Austin not only crossed the line, but obliterated it.

The texts were all pretty much the same bullshit, too.

*I know what you're thinking...*

*I know what Hudson must have said about me...*

*There are two sides to every story...*

*I promise you this isn't like me...*

It was a tale as old as time, and while Peyton had been lucky he'd mostly avoided dating men like Austin in his past, he knew enough of them. And he'd seen the pain in Hudson's eyes when he confessed who Austin was, and what he'd done. All it had really accomplished was validating all the red flags Peyton had seen.

He was no longer afraid he was imagining things in order to prolong his self-imposed celibacy. Austin really was just a shit person.

With a sigh, Peyton took the box over to his kitchen table and snatched up his letter opener. The tape was brown paper so it tore easily, and he pulled the sides apart. Nestled in a small collection of cushioning was a box with a discrete logo in navy blue and white. He knew that kind of packaging well.

He was a young, gay, single man after all. He'd seen more than one sex toy.

His heart began to thud because if this was some kind of dildo, he was going to lose it. He was already on the verge of just giving up for good—though he knew Linden and Taylor would throw him in the metaphorical stocks if they thought he was going to call it quits after one bad date.

But this would just be insult to injury.

He shook out the tension in his fingers, then finally pulled the box out and grabbed the little note that started to flutter down toward the table. Setting it aside, he pulled the tab and the whole box dropped its sides and opened.

It was...interesting. It looked like some weird weapon on Star Trek with the round hole, and the finger grips and the little knob at the base. But the longer he stared, the more he realized it was making sense.



“Fucking Taylor,” he whispered, because the only person he could think of that would send him a sex toy would be his best friend. A small part of him wanted to call up Taylor and ask him what the fuck he was thinking, but he knew it had been done with the best intentions.

Turning the toy in his hands, he dropped it in the box and started to walk away, stopping halfway down the hall as a sudden and burning need rushed through him.

*Fuck it*, he thought.

Snatching the box up, he marched into the bedroom and dropped it on the end of the bed. He sifted through all the packaging and eventually came up with a little bottle of cleanser which fit in the palm of his hand.

It was a nice little squeeze bottle that popped right open, and he let the water run until it was hot before giving it a thorough scrub. Cleaning was almost hypnotic in a way, and he lost himself in watching the bubbles flow down the drain as he rinsed.

Oddly, he was calmer, even if a warm, pulsing thread of desire was burning in his gut. He wasn't hard, but he wasn't entirely soft, either. Running his hand over his bag to make sure it was still empty, he moved down to cup his crotch and let his dick plump up a little against his palm.

Moving into the bedroom, Peyton shed his pants, then slipped under the covers and settled against his pillow. He felt foolish, but since his surgery he'd only been able to touch himself while he couldn't see what was below his chest. It was a little hypocritical, he knew, asking someone to want him when he couldn't even stare at himself.

But he wasn't in the mood to psychoanalyze shit. He just wanted to get off.

Taking a breath, he fumbled in his nightstand for his lube which was barely touched, and he squirted some on his palm.

His dick remained stubbornly half-hard as he slipped it through the sleeve—loose enough not to feel intense, but tight

enough that he could see how good it would feel once his cock got with the program.

Closing his eyes, he pressed the little knob against him, but instead of resting against his taint, it squished against his balls instead. He hissed and tried to figure out what the fuck to do about it, but his finger slipped and hit a button, and the knob flared to life. It hit him in the balls with just enough blunt pressure to make him lose his breath, and out of sheer frustration, he sat up and tossed the damned thing across the room.

It hit the wall with a dull thud, then he pressed his hands over his face. His left one reeked of lube, the right of sugar and flour, and he started to laugh...before he started to cry. Why was everything such a goddamn failure all the time?

He couldn't find the patience to figure out a fucking sex toy, for Christ's sake. How much worse was it going to get?

He felt emotionally castrated, which maybe was a bit dramatic, but staring down at his limp dick sitting in his thick curls, he wasn't sure it was inaccurate, either. His bag had saved his life—literally. It had given him hope of living again. He just hadn't realized how deep the cost was going to be, and he wasn't sure he was strong enough to pay that price.

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Peyton eventually cleaned up, went back to work, and resolutely ignored the box he'd left on his bed. He told himself he wasn't going to think about it at all for the rest of the day, but that all cracked when Taylor showed up to pick up some of the shipments.

“Thanks for the useless gift,” Peyton snapped. A small part of him was mortified that he'd be so passive aggressive with his best friend, but he was feeling hurt and defeated.

Taylor froze in the entryway to the kitchen, his brows furrowed. “Uh. Okay? I can tell you're pissed, so let me start by asking what gift? I mean, I love you, but we don't do random gifts.”

Peyton cleared his throat, then shrugged and turned away. “I get you were trying to help, but did you even look at reviews for that thing? I almost lost a nut.”

“Yeeeeeah,” Taylor said slowly, and Peyton could hear him walking closer. “Again... *What?*”

Peyton spun. “I get that it’s embarrassing. You don’t think it was humiliating for me to open that and see my best friend had to send me some shit like that just because I’m a pathetic loser who can’t...”

“Stop.”

Peyton’s jaw snapped at Taylor’s soft command, but only for a second. “You should have *asked* first. You should have *asked* me if I wanted—”

Taylor met his gaze and held up both hands in surrender, speaking in halted, short sentences. “Babe. I don’t know. What the fuck. You’re talking. About.”

Peyton searched his face and realized he was telling the truth. “Shit. So was it...no. No. Linden would never...but oh God, what if he *did?*”

“You’re still not making any sense, Peyt,” Taylor cautioned.

Peyton looked up, sure his face was showing every scrap of mortification he felt. “The uh...the toy.”

‘Toy,’ Taylor mouthed, then realization dawned on his features. “Oh. Like. A *toy?*”

“Yes,” Peyton groaned. “It was on my doorstep. I just...I don’t know. I assumed it was you, since we’d talked about them from that one company and everything.”

Taylor was finally close enough to touch, and he brushed a lock of fallen hair behind Peyton’s ear. The gesture was oddly soothing. “Babe. Are you sure you didn’t order it when you were feeling—”

“I’m sure,” Peyton snapped, then took another breath. “Sorry. Trust me, I’m sure.”

Taylor bit his lip, then took a step back. “Can I see it?”

*Yeah, kick a man while he’s down,* Peyton thought, but he shrugged because he’d already humiliated himself enough as it was. Might as well bring it full circle. He turned on his heel and he heard Taylor right behind him. His hand reached for the light switch, and the dome from his ceiling fan seemed almost too bright with the damn box all lit up.

Peyton glanced across the room where the toy was sitting on the floor, then he shrugged and pointed. “So. It’s that.”

“And you tried it out?” Taylor asked as he walked toward the bed.

Peyton’s cheeks went hot. “Yeah. I mean. I...um.”

“I’m not judging,” Taylor said in a rush. He sat down and looked up at Peyton as he pulled the instruction booklet out of the box. He frowned at the image, then at the text. “This isn’t written professionally.”

Peyton flushed again, only because he hadn’t read it. He’d just tried to figure it out on his own. “I guess.”

Taylor turned the little booklet and Peyton’s eyes widened when he saw it written in Sharpie pen. “Who sent this to you?”

For a hot, terrifying, mortifying second, he thought maybe it *was* some fucked up gift from Austin. Like maybe his way of humiliating Peyton after the rejection. After hearing what Hudson had said about his ex, he wouldn’t put it past the guy.

But something in his gut told him this gift wasn’t supposed to be embarrassing. Even if he struggled to figure out how to use it properly, he didn’t think it was meant to be a source of frustration or a way to show him he was inadequate.

“This is from that company,” Taylor said after a beat, startling Peyton out of his thoughts.

Peyton’s gaze snapped over to him. “What company?”

“The one we were looking at before. For people with disabilities.” Taylor turned the box over in his hands, his brow furrowed. “I don’t remember seeing this on the website.”

Peyton snorted a little. “Yeah. I’m pretty sure I would have remembered some sci-fi dick sleeve.”

Taylor’s mouth stretched into a long grin. “So would I.”

Flushing, Peyton backed up toward the bed and sat down hard, dragging a hand down his face. “Who the hell sent it? This is so embarrassing.”

Taylor shifted a little closer and reached for his hand, giving it a squeeze. “There’s nothing embarrassing about taking charge of yourself. You know this. But,” he added, then hesitated for a second, “it’s kind of a weird gift.”

Peyton swallowed thickly and looked at the note in Taylor’s hand. “Yeah. Is it signed or anything?”

Taylor shook his head and handed it over, and Peyton stared at the writing. Something about the letters triggered something in him like *déjà vu*. Almost like he’d seen it before. It didn’t have anything on the note that gave away anything personal though. It was just basic instructions.

*Please sanitize thoroughly before use. Do not submerge in over five feet of water. For any questions, comments, or concerns, please call the customer service number on the back of the box.*

And yet...

And yet.

Peyton’s thumb ran over the words as something warm settled in his chest.

Honestly, in the end, he felt like a fool for how long it took him considering the amount of time he spent staring at those block letters. Taylor was busy messing with the box when it hit Peyton, and it was the sheer shock of it all that had him jumping to his feet.

“Peyt...”

“I need to get to work,” he said in a rush. A lie.

Taylor’s brows furrowed. “Okay? Well...I’ll get those boxes, and I can come back if you want company or—”

“I’m good,” he said, trying and failing to sound casual. His chest was thrumming with the need to get Taylor the fuck out of his house, but he didn’t want to be any more obvious than he already was. He made himself take several deep breaths as he and Taylor left the toy behind on his bed and headed for the kitchen.

Peyton pasted on a grimacing smile as he loaded his best friend up, then he promised to call him later.

“If you figure out who the hell sent it,” Taylor started.

Peyton nodded. “For sure.” Another lie.

He waited with his ear pressed to the door until he heard the sounds of total silence, then he rushed back to his kitchen and pulled open his utility drawer. Amongst old sauce packets, random wall screws, and some paper-wrapped chopsticks—he found it.

He found the note that he told himself to throw away a thousand times. The note with that exact same handwriting on it.

*What part of NOT INTERESTED is confusing for you?*

Dear God, it couldn’t be. It could not be.

Except it was. It was most definitely the exact same handwriting as Hudson. It was the same sharp edge in the E, and the fierce line in the T, and...and hell. It was possible that two total strangers had identical handwriting, but he knew better.

His throat burned and he refused to believe that Hudson had done this as a way of shaming him, but he also didn’t understand. He couldn’t *possibly* understand why Hudson had sent him that thing. Not just that it was goddamn confusing, but who the *hell* sent their neighbor a dildo? Was that really the takeaway that Hudson had gotten from their conversations?

Without really thinking, Peyton marched into his room, shoved the toy back into the box, then stepped out of his front door and into the late evening air. His feet made a loud thud

on Hudson's ramp as he approached the door, and his finger shook as it smashed the bell.

There was a long, empty silence as he waited for any sort of noise. Then the doorbell started speaking.

"Peyton? Is everything okay?"

Peyton startled, always forgetting people had those talking camera doorbells. "Are you home?" he asked, tucking the box higher into his armpit to shield it from view.

"I'm literally around the corner. Are you in danger? I can unlock my door if you—"

"No. We need to talk," he snapped. "I'll wait."

There was no answer after that, but not two minutes later, he heard the garage start to rumble, and then headlights flashed. Peyton took a breath as Hudson's SUV rolled up the driveway, then he startled when the doorbell spoke again.

"Go inside. I'll be right there."

Hudson's voice was followed by the click of his deadbolt, and Peyton dug deep for courage as he let himself in. Not quite sure what to do with himself, he dropped the box on the table, then shoved his hands into his pockets.

It felt strange to be in Hudson's house on his own. He couldn't seem to calm down, so he paced the length of the floor, trying not to really think before Hudson's car pulled up.

If he did that, he'd lose his nerve. He'd come up with a thousand ways to ask what the fuck was happening, then he'd get tongue tied and embarrass himself and...

His thoughts cut off with an abrupt crash as he heard the door to the garage open through the kitchen. His heart began to hammer in his ear and he backed up until he fell onto the sofa. His knee bounced with his nerves as he waited, knowing it would take Hudson a while to put his chair together and wheel into the house.

It felt like time was going backward, but eventually he heard the garage door close, then the door in the kitchen opened and slammed shut.

Between one breath and the next, Hudson appeared, leaning heavily on a walker. Shit, he was so tall. His face was impassive as he looked at Peyton, though his eyes were soft with worry.

“Was it Austin?”

Peyton blinked, then quickly shook his head. “No. Um... no. It’s.” He licked his lips as Hudson walked closer. “You. It’s *you*.”

He was just brave enough to look at Hudson’s face, who was scanning Peyton like he was trying to read him. “You’re going to need to be more specific.”

Peyton’s gaze dropped to the toy where he’d left it, and Hudson’s eyes followed his. There was a beat, then Hudson cursed quietly under his breath.

“Ah. Right.”

“Was...were you,” Peyton tried, desperate to control his fumbling tongue. He cleared his throat. “Are you trying to make fun of me or something?”

Hudson’s face immediately fell into an expression of horror, his hands gripping the walker handles so tight, his knuckles were white. “*What?*”

“It’s just,” Peyton said, dragging his hand through his hair. His bun came loose, and he gathered it back up, grateful to have something to do with his hands. “It doesn’t make any sense. It looks like some Star Trek weapon and there’s no instructions, and trying to figure out what the hell it was was mortifying. It almost knocked one of my balls off. I felt like an idiot.”

Hudson’s cheeks were bright pink, and he couldn’t seem to meet Peyton’s gaze. “I’m so sorry. Peyton, Jesus.” He took a breath which trembled in his chest. “I was trying to help. You seemed so sad.” He finally looked over and Peyton could see he was absolutely serious. “And I understood. That’s why I started my company.”

“Your company?” Peyton swallowed heavily.



Hudson carefully and slowly made his way around the table. “Yeah. The company that makes those toys. I started it.”

“I...oh,” Peyton breathed out. My God, he had no idea. He’d seen all of Hudson’s design papers and his architect table, but he hadn’t even begun to assume it was for something like that. “I saw your website.”

Hudson gave him a soft smile and shrugged as he shifted his walker to the side, using his grip on the handle to lower himself down to the cushion next to Peyton. “It was so hard after my surgery. And Austin made me feel like I was half a person. He seemed to get off on taking care of me, but he was obviously disgusted by what my body couldn’t do anymore. And I was in such a fucking dark place.”

“I hate him,” Peyton growled. “I’m so sorry I ever gave him the time of day.”

Hudson’s hands flexed in his lap, then he turned and shifted over, close enough their knees bumped. “Don’t,” he said, his tone on the edge of harsh. “You couldn’t have known. And I want to kill him for what he did to you.”

“He’s definitely not worth going to jail over,” Peyton murmured quietly, and he felt a small thrill when Hudson smiled.

Hudson let out a soft sigh, then very carefully reached out, but he didn’t touch. At his hesitance, Peyton shifted closer, and Hudson dropped his hand to Peyton’s knee. His soft grip sent warm sparks under his skin like flashes of lightning.

“He’s not worth a single thought. But *you* are, and I wanted to help. I remember the first time I was able to make myself come. It was my first toy design, and it was...it was different than the stuff I’d used in the past. It was nice. And it didn’t make up for what I lost, but it was the first time I realized that I could have new things that were just as good.

So I’ve been working the last couple of weeks with people who have similar limitations that you do. I want you to be able to reclaim your body. Your pleasure.”

“Oh.” Jesus, he didn’t know what to say. Peyton glanced at the toy and felt his mouth twitch. “I get it. But um...you might want to include how to use shit like that because it’s kind of intimidating. I feel like if I do the wrong thing it’s going to squeeze my dick off.”

Hudson burst into laughter and his face was so light, so beautiful that in spite of his embarrassment, Peyton wanted to kiss him.

God help him, he was so screwed.

“I can show you how to use it. If you want.”

Peyton’s breath caught in his chest. “Oh...you...” It was like his deepest, quietest fantasies coming to life which was dangerous because he wanted Hudson so much, but he knew Hudson didn’t want him back. It was a miracle they were friends. But God, the way Hudson was looking at him? Hope flared, bright and dangerous in his chest.

Hudson glanced away. “I didn’t mean...” Hudson fumbled, then cleared his throat. “I can explain it, so the next person you go on a date with can use it on you.”

A moment passed, and Peyton didn’t really understand what his heart or his head were doing, but he suddenly felt desperate to make sure Hudson understood that he didn’t care about future lovers. He wanted Hudson.

Hudson had done this for *him*. He’d designed something for him.

“I’d like it to be you.”

Hudson froze, blinking rapidly, and the barest hint of a smile played at his lips, almost like he was afraid to believe Peyton’s words. “Why?”

Peyton grinned at the sound of his short name on Hudson’s lips. “Because I like you. I’m probably obvious, and you probably think I’m some annoying asshole who keeps imposing on you, but—”

“Kiss me,” Hudson interrupted.

In that moment, it felt like time stopped, and Peyton thought maybe he'd forgotten how to breathe.

"I'm sorry," Hudson said quickly, and Peyton deflated. He tried to pull back and stand up, but Hudson didn't let him get far. He twisted their fingers together, holding Peyton in a tight grip, and he waited in silence until Peyton met his gaze. "I've been afraid of how you make me feel since we met. You were gorgeous and so nice, and it was everything I had been craving for so long. But the idea that I could be vulnerable again, only to be crushed? It was too much."

Peyton didn't really understand. Not with any experience. But still knew exactly what Hudson was saying. He knew what the fear was like of putting himself out there only to be rejected for something he couldn't control.

But enough was enough. He was done second guessing. Hudson wanted him, and while he could acknowledge Hudson's fear, he was done letting it rule the moment.

"Say it again," he murmured.

Hudson was staring at where they were touching, and he took a breath, then looked up. "Kiss me."

So Peyton did. He surged forward and closed the gap between them. It wasn't the easiest kiss sitting sideways on the sofa and their knees in the way, but Hudson gave as good as he got. He gathered Peyton as close as he could, opening his mouth, tasting him with a sweet, coffee-flavored tongue.

With a measure of shock, Peyton felt his dick starting to harden. His face went warm, his hands trembling as he dug his fingers into the front of Hudson's shirt. A small voice told him that he should take it slow, but a louder voice reminded him they'd been taking it slow for ages.

This had been a slow burn of resentment which had turned into something so much more—so much deeper and beautiful, and Peyton realized he was absolutely ready to give himself over.

"Fuck. Hudson...I'm hard."

"I know, darling," Hudson murmured.

A rush of heat raced under Peyton's skin at the soft term of endearment. God, how many times had he fantasized about a big, gorgeous man who loved him enough to call him something so sweet? And he had been utterly convinced until this moment that it would never happen to him.

"You don't understand. I haven't gotten hard since my surgery. I-I need you," he said, letting instinct take over. "*Please...*"

"Yes," Hudson said. His fingers flexed on Peyton's hips, then he let go. "My bedroom. Second door on the right. Bring the toy. I'll meet you there."

Peyton moved before he could really let himself think about what he was doing. His shaking hands swept the toy into his arms, then he hurried down the hall. He could hear the muffled parrot scream behind the first closed door, but he ignored it and slipped inside, glancing around. Hudson's room was tidy and sparsely decorated with a short dresser, a bed low to the ground, and a bathroom without a door. There was a lamp in the corner that was turned off, and all the blinds were half-drawn, so it was dark and moody.

In short, it was very Hudson.

Peyton wasn't quite sure what to do with himself, so he tossed the toy on the edge of the bed, then sat down. He couldn't hear anything happening and for a brief, wild moment he thought maybe Hudson had abandoned him. Maybe it was pity. Maybe he panicked and left and was waiting for Peyton to figure it out.

He stopped himself, wanting to shout at his ugly little voice of anxiety that wouldn't leave him alone. There was no need to panic like this. No need to believe anything his inner voice was saying. Hudson liked him. Hudson wanted him.

He wasn't lying.

Several minutes passed before Hudson appeared, now in his wheelchair, his face still a little flushed. He had his lower lip between his teeth and when he let it go, it was plump and red, and Peyton wanted to taste it.

“Sorry. I had uh...body stuff to deal with.”

Peyton gave his bag a slight pat, relieved to find it still empty. “You don’t have to explain any of that to me.”

Hudson let out a small sigh, but he grinned as he wheeled closer. “At the risk of killing the mood, it’ll be easier if you get yourself undressed. I want to take my time with you. And not to bring him up in this moment, but I haven’t really done this since Austin, and I just...I need to get my hands on you. I don’t want to fuck this up.”

“Trust me, it won’t kill the mood as long as you promise to watch,” Peyton said, searching for his old courage that had once allowed him to be sexy and free with himself.

Hudson let out a sharp breath and he wheeled back away from the bed as Peyton stood. His nerves were on fire because although it wasn’t the first time someone had seen him mostly naked since his surgery, this was the first time someone he wanted had.

Hudson was a good man who believed people like them should be sexy and desirable, but there was always that chance Hudson would change his mind, and Peyton wasn’t sure he’d be able to take the rejection. He was brave, but he was still fragile and uncertain.

“Hey,” Hudson said, holding out a hand.

Peyton walked into his grasp and allowed Hudson to yank him down to his lap. His thighs were thin and a little bony, and his body was warm as he wrapped his arms around Peyton’s middle.

“I want you,” Hudson said, his tone a little bit like he was answering Peyton’s silent insecurities. “And I promise you, I get it.”

Peyton laughed, ducking his head. “Was I that obvious?”

“Only because I’ve seen that face more than a dozen times in my own reflection,” Hudson said. He hooked a finger under Peyton’s chin, and when their gazes connected, Hudson leaned in and kissed him. It was wetter this time. Hotter. Filthier. It was on the edge of desperate with biting teeth against Peyton’s

lower lip, and he found himself shifting on Hudson's lap, desperate for friction.

"I'm ready," Peyton finally whispered after Hudson broke away. "And if you don't like what you see, just...just be honest, okay?"

"Okay," Hudson said, and Peyton felt a rush of gratitude that Hudson didn't make some bullshit empty promise about how that wasn't possible.

Sliding off his lover's lap, Peyton took a few steps away, his skin flushed from feeling Hudson's eyes on him. It was hard being under his attentive gaze. Everything he did was intense, and this added a whole new level.

Peyton's fingers felt a little weak and unsure as he reached for the hem of his shirt, but eventually he forced it over his head and let it fall to the foot of the bed. He wasn't brave enough to look at Hudson's face as he stared at his feet and began to undo the button and zipper on his jeans. It took him a little longer than usual, but as it slid down, his gaze remained fixed on the lump that was his stoma under the waistband of his boxer briefs.

This was it. This was the moment.

There was no turning back.

Peyton took a fortifying breath, then turned so he could face Hudson. He was only half-hard now, his nerves getting the better of him, but he still fixed his gaze on Hudson's face as his fingers hooked in his waistband and tugged. Hudson wasn't looking in his eyes. No, he was tracking the motion of his arms.

Peyton watched him lick his lips as the boxer-briefs slipped to the floor. He saw Hudson's fingers flex, then grip his wheels so tight his knuckles went pale. Before Peyton could shy away, Hudson was rolling forward, one hand out, grabbing Peyton by the hip. His other hand immediately took Peyton's dick against his rough palm and gave it a few strokes.

"You're so fucking beautiful," Hudson rumbled.

Peyton's dick plumped with each throb of his pulse. He'd never felt so wanted in his life. He'd never felt so seen and desired as he did right then as Hudson couldn't seem to stop touching.

"Can I taste you?"

Peyton swallowed against his aching throat because he wasn't sure anyone would want to do that ever again. "Yeah. Yes. Please."

Hudson groaned like Peyton had given him a gift, and then he was bending over, and a hot tongue toyed with his slit.

Peyton gripped Hudson's shoulders so he could keep his balance because the world suddenly swam, overwhelmed with pleasure and anticipation and need. He did his best to keep his hips still as Hudson's mouth explored him, and he bit his cheek to keep from spilling right there because this was everything he'd wanted.

No. It wasn't everything.

It was *more*.

"I'm close," Peyton finally gasped.

Hudson pulled his mouth away, swiping the back of his hand over his wet lips, and his heated gaze met Peyton's. "Go into the top drawer of my dresser and pull out the box on the top. It's black and purple."

Peyton took a breath to calm himself, then he quickly walked over and found what Hudson was talking about. It was about as large as the dildo box, but lighter, and he brought it over to the bed just in time to see Hudson shedding his shirt.

From the top of his belly button to his shoulders, he was ripped. Peyton had seen it before, had admired the shape of him before, but there was a new level to it. Now, he was allowed to touch.

So he did.

He set the box down, then turned and dragged his fingers over the tops of Hudson's shoulders, then down the front of his

chest. When he reached his nipples, Hudson grunted and bent forward.

“Fuck. Sorry, I’m really sensitive there.”

Peyton pulled back. “In a bad way?”

“Hell no,” Hudson said, his voice ragged. “But I don’t want to shoot off yet. Just...wait for me on the bed, okay? I want this to last.”

Peyton felt a renewed sense of self-worth, the way he’d driven Hudson to the edge just by touching him. He backed up and sat down, then scooted to the side as he watched Hudson transfer to the mattress, then lean back to take his trousers off.

It didn’t take him long, and Peyton almost laughed at the hurried way he tossed his pants to the floor and shuffled up close. He didn’t bother with his briefs, and Peyton could see he wasn’t hard.

Hudson’s gaze followed his, and he sighed. “I probably won’t get an erection tonight. They’re kind of rare for me.”

“As long as it’s good for you,” Peyton said quickly, reaching for Hudson once he was within reach, “that’s all I care about.”

“It’s already amazing,” Hudson murmured, reaching for Peyton’s hip. He tugged him closer, pressing their mouths together, and Peyton let his hands roam over Hudson’s exposed skin. He drank in every gasp, every quiet moan, every twitch.

“Tell me where to touch you,” Peyton said.

“Anywhere,” Hudson murmured, stealing a last kiss before pulling back. “But we can worry about that after I’m done with you.” Peyton’s mouth fell open to protest, but Hudson kissed him again until he fell prey to his need. “Don’t argue,” Hudson said, stroking the backs of his fingers over Peyton’s cheek. “I’ve been dying to get my hands on you for longer than I was willing to admit that I wanted this. Let me make you feel good.”



Peyton had no real argument. He wanted to make sure he made Hudson feel good, but a small, selfish part of him wanted to be doted on. It was rarely like that during his hookups. They weren't always short or dirty or pointless, but they were always rough and emotionless.

They were scratching an itch, and for a long time, that was all he needed. All he wanted.

Now, he had feelings. He was caught up in wanting so much more than something just physical with Hudson, and he realized he needed this to go right.

"I'm all yours," he said as Hudson pushed himself up to sit and reached for the two boxes. He immediately got lost in Hudson's grin, which lit up his whole face. It didn't change him, not really. It just unlocked a man that had been hiding behind his trauma.

He waited patiently as Hudson opened the box from his dresser and pulled out a long, thin tube out that Peyton recognized as the lube from the company's website. His heart picked up a bit as Hudson set the box aside, then reached for the toy Peyton left on the bed.

"Are you okay with this?" Hudson asked. "I don't want to overwhelm you."

Peyton's laugh was high and reedy. "I feel like if you don't make me come, I might actually die."

Hudson's cheek darkened. "Baby, you need to be careful what you say to me right now. I'm so close to losing control."

Peyton wanted that. He wanted it to linger, and be tender, but he wanted Hudson's power and possession too. And he had a feeling Hudson could deliver. "Where do you want me?"

Hudson glanced around the bed, then used his hands to spread his legs wide and gave the space in the v a pat. "Put your ass here. Hook your legs over my thighs and lie on your back."

The position was...maybe not awkward, but it was new. And it was a reminder that whatever this was would be

different than Peyton had ever experienced. He had known full well after surgery that his sex life would ever be the same, but it hadn't looked like this in his head.

He realized he loved it, because it was with Hudson.

He turned to his hands and knees, crawling over to straddle Hudson. With a groan, Hudson tugged him into a kiss, then gently lowered him back and scooted Peyton's ass close to his soft dick.

"I know. My ass looks weird," Peyton said, suddenly self-conscious.

"It doesn't. It looks like you," Hudson told him, dragging his fingers lightly over the insides of Peyton's thighs. He turned his face toward Hudson's knee and kissed it, not sure if the man could feel it, but he knew Hudson could see the gesture. He heard a soft sigh, then Hudson said, "I've only ever known you like this. And I really like you this way."

Peyton hadn't thought about it like that, and it made heat rush through his chest. "Touch me?"

"Yes, baby. I'm going to touch you." Hudson quickly wrapped a lube-coated hand around Peyton's dick, giving it a firm stroke and bringing it back to fully hard. Peyton let out a satisfied groan as Hudson's strokes picked up, which was followed by a noise of protest when the touch disappeared. "Shh. I've got you. And I'm going to make sure you know how this works, so when you're not with me, you can use it."

"Okay," Peyton murmured, not quite sure he could pay attention, but he was going to try.

Hudson held the toy up, then pushed a button on the handle and the knob pulled back. "Slide your dick in the sleeve, then hit the top button." He demonstrated and Peyton sucked in a breath as Hudson fit the hole over the tip of his dick. "Hit the bottom button, and the prostate massager will curve around your balls. You just need to make sure your cock is fully inside."

He demonstrated and suddenly the sleeve was pulsing along his shaft while the prostate massager began to rub at his

taint.

“Oh...oh shit. Oh my God,” he gasped.

Peyton couldn't hold back his noises. They seemed to be ripped from his chest as Hudson's powerful hand worked the toy over his cock. His free hand cupped Peyton's balls and kneaded his ass and Peyton was too overwhelmed with pleasure to give a shit that he looked ridiculous.

Hudson worked him up and up with powerful strokes, playing with the speed and strength of the vibration until he felt like he was about to lose his goddamn mind. His orgasm was pulled from him in spite of trying to hold back, his back arching, his mouth dropping open in a sharp cry.

His entire body felt almost numb with ecstasy as he felt his dick pulse and pulse, and it took him a long moment to realize that the toy was gone, and Hudson was simply holding his softening cock and rubbing at the head with his thumb.

Peyton shivered, overstimulated, and Hudson quickly let go. “Help me sit up,” he begged.

Hudson's strong arms tugged at him until he was astride Hudson's thighs, and he leaned in for a sloppy kiss, his mouth not totally functional.

“Let me...what do I...” he tried to get out. “I want to make you come. Where do I touch you?”

Hudson didn't let him break the kiss, but Peyton could feel him fumbling behind him. After a beat, he pressed something made of thick, soft silicone into his hand. “For my nipples,” he said. “Sometimes I can come from below the waist, but this is better for me now. Just turn them on and pinch them.”

Peyton pulled back to look down and realized they were almost like clothes pins, but they were softer and they had a button on the top. When he pressed down, they began a low vibration. He pinched the ends, then clamped them over Hudson's nipples and he grunted.

Hard.

And loud.

“Jesus, fuck. Fuck, baby. Rub your dick on mine, okay? Can...can you? If it's not too much?”

It was not too much. He began to rock his hips, and Hudson's hands flew to his waist, pressing down and increasing the pressure of Peyton's body.

“Harder. I can...I can almost feel you,” Hudson said, his voice wavering.

Peyton bore down as hard as he could, rutting against his lover's soft cock while he tugged and pulled on the nipple clamps. Hudson's skin was turning a faint, dusky shade of rose, and Peyton knew he was close. He'd heard about full body orgasms before, but he'd never witnessed one.

Until right then.

Until Hudson's head fell back, thumping hard against the headboard. His torso heaved and his legs began to spasm, and for a moment, Peyton thought something was wrong. Then Hudson dug both hands into his hair and kissed him furious and messy—nearly all teeth that dug into his lower lip.

When they finally broke apart, Hudson gave a strained laugh as his trembling hands pulled the nipple clamps off, then he eased Peyton to the side and used his hands to help him shuffle down.

“Jesus. *Jesus*,” Hudson breathed. “I'm a staunch atheist but I think I might have just seen God.”

Peyton couldn't help his laugh, his eyes a little hot and his head spinning from the praise. He was nervous for a second, worried that Hudson was just playing it up, but he could see the euphoria lingering on the man's face.

“I knew it would be you,” Hudson said, reaching over to cradle Peyton's cheek with his hand. “I don't know how, but I knew. I was just too afraid to admit it until now.”

Peyton said nothing for a long time, and as the minutes ticked by, fatigue took over, and all the stress of the afternoon began to bleed away. He wanted to stay awake, but he found himself lost in warm arms with the promise of being able to do this again. And again.

For as long as Hudson would have him.

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE ONLY THING surprising about waking up curled around Peyton was the fact that Hudson slept at all. Even after years of being married to his ex, he still struggled to get a full night with Austin next to him. And to his credit—which Austin didn't have a lot of—he was a still sleeper.

The problem was with Hudson and the fact that his trust issues were the size of a small country. And Austin's attitude toward him, especially after his illness, didn't do much to help.

Rolling onto his back, he stretched his arms above his head, then carefully scooted himself to the headboard so he could prop himself up. Peyton made a small noise of protest, then rolled toward him and nuzzled his face against Hudson's thigh.

The pressure wasn't enough for Hudson to really feel it, just like the kisses Peyton had laid against him after Hudson had fucked him into oblivion, but watching was just as good.

Peyton had not only met all of Hudson's expectations when it came to getting intimate after his surgery, but it had been so much better.

It was so good, it terrified him a little because the thought of losing it was almost too much.

But he was determined not to be defeatist this time. Peyton deserved better. He'd put up with so much of Hudson's bullshit, and he was now shouldering the misfortune of being under Austin's attentions, even if it had only been for a moment.

Hudson felt a small ache in his chest, and he couldn't stop himself from reaching over and brushing a few stray pieces of hair from Peyton's forehead. The motion caused his eyebrows to twitch, and after a beat, he squinted against the early morning light.

There was an obvious moment of confusion playing out on Peyton's face that made Hudson want to laugh, and then recognition hit him, and he gave a sheepish smile. "Hey. God, please tell me I wasn't snoring."

"If you were, I didn't hear it," Hudson answered him.

Peyton yawned, his mouth stretching so wide, his jaw cracked. "Shit. We slept the whole night?"

Hudson laughed, shrugging because it was just as much of a surprise to him. He'd been at work late, ate a cold sandwich at his desk, and anticipated spending the evening avoiding his mother's calls and doing his best not to think about Peyton. Most of his afternoon had been consumed with what Peyton would think of the gift he'd left him, and it had stressed him to the point of exhaustion.

The one thing he hadn't considered was this. Was Peyton wanting him. Was Peyton in his bed after giving Hudson the most intense orgasm he'd ever experienced in his life.

"I want to make you breakfast," he said suddenly.

Peyton grinned, but that quickly turned to a grimace. "I, uh...I have to go home."

Reality crashed hard and Hudson felt his face tingle with shame. "Right. Yeah. No...I get it. We can just—"

“I didn’t bring my supplies,” Peyton went on, scrambling off the bed like he wasn’t even listening to Hudson. He had one hand clamped over his bag and his face was tinged bright red.

It took Hudson a second to realize what was happening. “Peyt?”

Peyton looked over his shoulder. “I swear it didn’t leak. But it’s going to if I don’t get to the bathroom soon.”

Hudson tried not to look relieved because it was obvious Peyton didn’t know Hudson was freaking out for the last ten seconds. “Baby, I don’t care if it leaks. Just grab a pair of my sweats from the second drawer there.” He nodded toward his dresser. “I’ll start putting something together for food, okay? Just let yourself in when you get back.”

Peyton scrambled for the dresser, but before he hurried through the bedroom door, he turned and offered Hudson a smile. “Um. Thanks. I’m sorry this is—”

“Go, baby,” Hudson said with a laugh, and Peyton’s blush got a little darker as he nodded, then hurried out.

Hudson had no idea how long it would take for him to change his bag. He didn’t imagine it was difficult or as tedious as his own care was just after his surgery when he had no muscle control. Peyton had been dealing with his new body for a while now, just like Hudson had.

It meant he didn’t have a lot of time if he wanted to surprise him, so he transferred to his chair as quick as he could, then rushed through his morning routine before wheeling into the kitchen. There was still no sign of Peyton, so Hudson threw one of the tofu scramble meals he’d pre-frozen into a pan, then pulled a couple of tortillas out of his breadbox for breakfast burritos.

While it was heating, he slipped into the office to check on his damn bird, who had been surprisingly quiet most of the night. Pancake gave him an unimpressed look, but he remained quiet as Hudson refilled his food and refreshed his



water. And to be kind, he didn't protest when the feathery beast perched on his shoulder for the ride to the kitchen.

He grabbed a handful of dried fruit and set it on the counter, then went back to putting their breakfast together.

He was nearly done wrapping the second burrito when the front door opened, and he heard a hesitant voice call out. "Hey?"

Hudson laughed quietly to himself. "In the kitchen."

Peyton appeared a minute later, making Hudson's core go hot because Peyton was still in the borrowed sweats, though he'd added a t-shirt that was so form fitting, Hudson was having a hard time not peeling it up and licking the man's soft belly.

Fuck, he was so beautiful.

"You okay?" Peyton asked, a genuine frown of concern marring his brow.

Hudson slapped a hand over his face and groaned. "Yeah. You're just really hot in the morning."

Peyton's mouth dropped open, then he rolled his eyes. "Yeah well, payback for *you* working out every morning in your back yard."

Hudson blinked, then laughed. "Did you watch me?" He rolled close enough that he could snag Peyton's waistband and tug him into his lap. He cupped his jaw and met his gaze. "Did you like what you saw?"

"I fucking loved it," Peyton whispered.

Hudson cracked and kissed him until Pancake started screaming, ruining the moment. They broke apart and he dropped his forehead to Peyton's shoulder. "He's such an asshole."

Peyton laughed, then carefully slipped off Hudson's lap. "Let me carry the plates. Where do you want to eat?"

"Bed," Hudson answered honestly, his voice thick with need. He wasn't even hungry anymore, though he knew

calories were a good idea.

Peyton licked his lips, then nodded, snatching the plates from the counter and hurrying down the hall. Hudson took his time, coaxing Pancake back onto his shoulder, then he took him back to the office and shut the door, promising to make it up to him later. Knowing his vicious bird, the little shit would end up biting one of them in the balls if he let him have free rein while they were fooling around.

When he made it back to the bedroom, Peyton was sitting cross-legged near the headboard, leaving a wide space for Hudson. The covers were pulled back and the plates were arranged carefully so he could slide into the bed without tipping anything over.

It was a small, easy thing that most people wouldn't have thought twice about, but it made Hudson warm all over. Maybe it was just because Peyton lived the kind of life where he was never allowed to go about his day without thinking of his body. Or maybe he'd always been that kind of person.

But for all that Hudson had been running from his feelings, he was starting to realize he never had any chance of escaping the profound impact Peyton was about to make on his life.

*Bzzt! Bzzt!*

Hudson's hands froze where he was pressing them to the seat of his chair, and he bowed his head.

"Do you need to get that?" Peyton asked.

Hudson let out a breath, then shook his head. "No. It's either fuck-face or it's my mom, and you couldn't pay me to deal with either one of them right now."

Peyton let out a short laugh as Hudson finally transferred to the bed, then used his hands to fold his legs so he could get to his plate. He really did want to fuck Peyton again. He wanted to make him repeat all those gorgeous noises from the night before.

But his stomach was reminding him he had other needs.

“Has, uh...has Austin been bothering you?” Peyton asked quietly as Hudson pulled his plate close.

He glanced over at his lover and saw the troubled frown on Peyton’s brow. “He can’t bother me if I don’t give a fuck about him,” he answered honestly. “He’s sent a few texts I think, but I blocked his number. There’s nothing he could say that would make me speak to him ever again.” He brought the burrito up to his lips, then paused. “Has he tried to contact you?”

“A few texts, but I ignored them. I also deleted my dating profile,” Peyton said in a rush. “That’s um. That’s why I took a little longer to get back.”

Hudson’s brows flew up and he felt his chest constrict. He wasn’t really sure how that made him feel. Terrified, maybe, because he didn’t want Peyton to torpedo his life for something this new. And yet he was thrilled because he wanted to be possessive and force Peyton to promise that there was hope for a future, even if they were still barely out of the stranger phase.

“Sorry if that’s too forward,” Peyton said softly.

Hudson shook his head then shoved a bite into his mouth because if he didn’t, he was going to give up eating and make sure Peyton stopped making that sad face. “It’s not,” he said, tucking the bite into his cheek. “I really like you. And I like this. I want to see where it goes.”

Peyton’s smile was so soft and sweet, Hudson felt his whole body hum. “Thanks. Me too.”

With a slight laugh, Hudson forced himself to eat half his food before he was satisfied, then he took both plates and set them on the nightstand. He still had the faint hum of desire under his skin, but when he leaned back, Peyton quickly curled against his side, and he realized this was good too.

No. Fuck that. It was even better.

He remembered the way Peyton had said he liked this. He liked cuddles and forehead kisses, and he wanted those things without taking away from the fact that he was a sexual being,

and it made Hudson want. Austin had never wanted any of those things. He'd never wanted anything but rough, powerful sex.

He never wanted affection.

He never wanted Hudson to indulge in his softer side.

He got off on Hudson being a cold asshole, and Hudson realized he'd spent far too long buying into that idea of himself.

Turning his head, he buried his nose in the top of Peyton's hair and breathed in the sweet bakery scent of him. "I'm sorry he hurt you."

His lover quickly shook his head. "He bruised my pride and my ego. He reminded me that some of my fears about dating were real." Peyton pulled back and looked Hudson in the face. "But that doesn't really matter now, does it?"

Hudson tried to laugh, but the sound was more strangled than anything because fuck, he wanted this man. He knew it was just early days—that eventually they'd settle into something easier where he didn't want to rip Peyton's clothes off every two minutes. But this was nice, because before that moment, he wasn't sure that feeling would ever come again.

"No. It doesn't matter. Now kiss me."

Peyton obeyed without a second of hesitation, turning to face Hudson and pressing their parted lips together. At first, it was just sharing breath, but after a moment, Peyton's tongue teased at his lips, then slid in past his own.

He tasted spicy and warm like his breakfast, and his skin under Hudson's palms was smooth and perfect. "God, I love your body," Hudson murmured, his hand slipping under the back of Peyton's shirt.

Peyton laughed softly into the kiss, then pulled back. "Yeah? I'm not, like, super fit or anything."

Hudson's head tilted to the side as he read the rush of insecurity in Peyton's tone. "Do you want to be?"

Peyton shrugged. “Sometimes, but I don’t know if it’s just because of the way people look at me in public. I never bothered when I was just doing casual hookups because I never really thought I was the kind of guy someone would want to settle down with.”

“What kind of guy is that? A sweeter than sunshine baker who adopts stray cats and bakes the most amazing desserts I’ve ever tasted?” Hudson asked, curling his fingers into Peyton’s hair and pulling him close. He kissed his pulse, his jaw, his shoulder. “A guy so responsive, he can’t hold back noises just from being caressed?” He proved his point by dragging fingertips over the back of Peyton’s neck and making him groan.

Peyton took a shaking breath and shrugged as he pulled back. “I didn’t say it was logical.”

Hudson offered him a smile, stroking the edge of Peyton’s chin with his thumb. “I work out a lot.”

Peyton gave Hudson’s bicep a squeeze and waggled his eyebrows. “Yeah. I can tell.”

Rolling his eyes, Hudson leaned in and nipped at his jaw. “It’s not to impress you. It’s for my core.”

“I get it,” Peyton said quietly. His hands moved lower until Hudson couldn’t feel them anymore, so he looked down to see Peyton stroking fingers over his hip. “And for what it’s worth, I’d be attracted to *you* no matter what your body looked like.”

Hudson couldn’t help but doubt him, but it didn’t matter. He kissed Peyton again, slowing them down, taking his time to just bask in this moment. “If you want to go to the gym with me, you’re more than welcome. It’s adaptive, so whatever your body needs, there’s something for you to use.”

He ducked his head so he could meet Peyton’s gaze. “But you don’t need to. I like you exactly as you are now, and I’ll like you however you become.”

Peyton blew out a puff of air, his gaze darting away. “Can um.” He stopped and Hudson waited a long moment.

“Can what?” he pressed when it was clear Peyton was struggling.

“Can we just do this for a little bit?” The words came out in a rush, like Peyton was embarrassed. “I know you wanted to—ah—do more, but...”

Hudson didn't let him finish, he just shifted himself down further and pulled Peyton until they were curled up together. “Like this?”

Peyton shrugged and huffed a quiet laugh that he tried to muffle against Hudson's shirt. “It's ridiculous, I know. I just...this morning when I went home, I kept thinking about how amazing it was last night. But it was also kind of overwhelming. It took me so long to feel brave enough to let someone see me—touch me. And...” He trailed off with a quiet, frustrated growl. “You're so sex positive and making all these amazing sex toys, and I'm afraid I won't be able to keep up. I wasn't even able to get an erection until last night.”

Hudson laughed. He couldn't help it. The idea that Peyton was worried he wouldn't have a strong enough sex drive for a man who most of the time couldn't even feel his dick was...well, he was pretty sure that was irony.

When Peyton tried to pull away, Hudson held him tighter. “I'm not laughing at you, baby,” he said roughly, fingers clinging to Peyton's waist. “I'm laughing because I never thought I'd find anyone like you. I'm not here because I want to spend every waking hour getting off. You're the first person I've let close to my body since Austin, and it was amazing. But this is good too. This is *everything*.”

Peyton relaxed and turned his face up, still looking uncertain. “Are you sure?”

Hudson let out a small huff and stroked his lover's cheek. “I don't make sex toys because it's the only thing I think about. I make them because after my illness, I came face to face with a whole fucking society of people who felt more comfortable neutering people like me, and making us believe that was the only way anyone would be comfortable. It's

bullshit. But I like *you*. Not just your dick. Even though it is a really pretty dick.”

Peyton flushed and buried his face again, laughing hard. “Okay, yeah. I get it. I’m being a dumbass.”

Hudson stroked fingers through his hair, scratching his scalp and making him groan. “You’re not.” He understood. It would take time for both of them to accept whatever it was they were moving toward.

He could see the future if he tried hard enough. He could see them together—Peyton’s cat, his bird, a kitchen full of baked goods, a long day at the office followed by a quiet evening on the sofa. He could see Peyton in his bed, waking up to him every morning, loving the hell out of him as they got older, and greyer, and softer.

He could see Peyton beside him during all the triumphant moments, and all the times when shit hit the fan.

He could see himself standing strong against his mother and having the strength never to speak to her again because he had his own family, and he was loved.

All of this was an image behind a stained-glass window. He just needed time, and the right number of steps to break through it.

“I know this is new,” he said after a long beat, “but it feels important. I want to do this right.”

“So do I,” Peyton murmured. He pressed another kiss to Hudson’s ribs, right at the spot he was most sensitive. “We just need some patience, don’t we?”

“If my life has taught me anything, it’s that I know how easy it is to wait for the important things.”

“Like what?” Peyton asked, lifting his head. He was fishing and fuck if Hudson cared.

He grinned, then urged Peyton up higher so he could lay a soft, delicate kiss to his lips. “Like you. Like us.”

Peyton smiled, the kiss becoming more teeth, and then sharing the breath of a laugh. “Like us,” he repeated.

Hudson's heart beat to the rhythm of his certainty that this was absolutely it.



# CHAPTER NINETEEN

HUDSON'S EYES narrowed at the look on Rain's face. Something was up. Eli had been laughing into the sleeve of his sweater earlier, and Hudson didn't like it. The last time they'd been giggling like this, his office had been rigged with canisters of silly string.

And granted, he *was* a more forgiving guy now that his future was looking up and he'd cut out as much of the toxic rot as he'd been able to. Plus, he was getting good sex on the regular, and Peyton had practically moved in, using his own place mostly for baking.

Hudson couldn't remember the last time he'd woken up alone that year, and while there were still moments he was petrified to open his eyes and find out it was all some sort of fever dream, he was starting to feel secure.

He was starting to believe in their future together.

So yeah. He was in no mood to clean up a mess in his office, but he wouldn't *fire* them over it.

Probably.

“Think very carefully about what’s going to happen when I go through my office door,” Hudson warned as he wheeled closer. “Think very hard about how many hours you want to spend here tonight doing inventory.”

Rain snorted. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I left you lunch on your desk, so you should hurry up and get inside there and eat it.”

Yeah, he wasn’t doing that. Whatever the fuck Rain left him wasn’t going in his mouth. He’d made that mistake once, too. A sandwich with strawberry edible lube instead of jam.

Rain had to grovel for two weeks before Hudson forgave him for that one.

Feeling a small pulse of trepidation as he headed toward his office, he eyed the fact that his blinds were closed and he stopped, pulling out his phone.

Hudson: I think the guys fucked with my office. They’re acting so weird.

Peyton: Wouldn’t surprise me. But you can’t let them win. Be brave, go in, and then make them pay for it later.

God, he loved that man. They’d been together a year—their anniversary having come and gone in the last week. Peyton had been in Portland for a Food and Wine festival thing, so they’d missed celebrating it, but Hudson promised him it was fine. Told him he wasn’t really big into holidays anyway. He wasn’t the kind of person with very fond memories of getting gifts or being remembered.

His mother had always made everything about her, leaving him wallowing in some sort of misplaced guilt, and Austin had always demanded extravagant gifts, but never acknowledged that those days were for Hudson too.

God, how had he put up with that for so many years?

How had it taken him this long to know what real love felt like?

And he knew Peyton meant it when he said he understood that anniversaries made Hudson uncomfortable, but the truth was—it was a ruse. Hudson *had* bought something for Peyton, but he'd done that months ago, and it was sitting in his desk in a small box waiting for the right time.

Whenever the fuck that was.

He'd had several opportunities to pull out the ring, but every time, he panicked. Every time, the voice in his head would laugh and say, 'Why the fuck would he want to marry *you*?' So, he'd slip it back into his desk until his head went quiet again.

Not that it mattered, really. He wasn't going anywhere, and he could see from the look in Peyton's eyes every time the man met his gaze, he wasn't leaving either. They were an eclectic home of sex toy blueprints, baked goods, a bird with an attitude, a cat who never outgrew the kitten phase, and the two of them who were ridiculously in love.

It didn't get better than that.

Wheeling close to the door, he held his breath in case of something as bad as a stink bomb, and he pushed it open.

And at first, he saw nothing.

There was no attack, no silly string, no bucket of water falling on his head.

It was just a dark space, which was odd because he was pretty sure he hadn't turned his lights off, but...whatever. He wheeled in further and let the door shut, and then there was the sound of a striking match. His heart leapt in his chest and when he turned, he saw a figure he recognized.

Peyton was holding a long match, touching the flame to wick after wick. The room began to glow, and Hudson could see the nerves playing out over Peyton's features.

"Baby?" he asked.

Peyton held up a finger as he struck another match and finished lighting all the candles he'd set up on the shelf. When he was done, Hudson was able to see his sofa and the low

coffee table laid out with pillows, flowers, and a bottle of wine.

Shit.

Fuck.

Oh God...he knew what this was. He'd created a scenario in his head far too similar to this one all the time before panicking and shutting it down. And Peyton had beat him to the punch?

Hudson lucked his lips. "Baby, what—"

"I know you don't like celebrating anniversaries. I know it makes you nervous," Peyton interrupted softly as he took a few steps closer. "And I know this is a few days late. But this year has been the best thing that ever happened to me. *You* are the best thing that ever happened to me."

Jesus Christ, this was almost like Peyton was reading off the mental script Hudson had written for his own proposal.

"If this is what I think it is," he started, his voice choked.

Peyton shrugged and offered a sheepish grin. "You always tell me I have zero ability to hide my intentions, so... yeah. It probably is what you think it is." He worried his bottom lip between his teeth, his fingers twisting together in front of his body. "Will you sit? Um...on the sofa, I mean."

Hudson hesitated, then held up a finger before giving his wheels a hard push and gliding across the floor toward his desk. It took him all of ten seconds to find the box and tuck it into his pocket. He was also being pretty fucking obvious, but a small part of him was hoping that Peyton was too caught up in his own nerves to notice.

He almost laughed when he realized his hands were shaking. And then again when he realized that he'd tried to wait for the perfect moment, and Peyton was creating it for him.

God, Hudson loved him so damn much.

He gave his wheels another hard push and headed to the sofa. He made the transfer in seconds, shoving his chair over

so there was room for Peyton, who looked at the space next to Hudson, then at the floor.

Hudson said a silent prayer Peyton wouldn't kneel. He didn't want that kind of proposal between them. He wanted them to look each other in the eye, face to face, on equal ground.

Peyton chose to sit, and Hudson's eyes got hot.

"I don't have a speech," Peyton blurted, then let out a quiet laugh and shook his head. "I mean, I did have one, but I kept forgetting to write it down, and now the only thing in my head is jumbled words. I'm sorry. I—I think—"

"Peyt," Hudson murmured softly, reaching for him. "My love."

Peyton's face bloomed pink. He flourished under soft terms of endearment and praise the way plants did under a warm spring sun, and Hudson wanted to spend the rest of his life being that for him.

"I love you," Peyton said, and he reached for something on the table. Hudson noticed his hands shaking too and he almost laughed because they were such jackasses, but in the best fucking way possible. "I love you so much and I'm just going to ask."

"Yes," Hudson said.

Peyton blinked, then rolled his eyes but surged forward, grabbing one of Hudson's hands while kissing him furiously. "At least let me get through the question," he said against Hudson's lips.

"Fine. But um. But only if you let me ask one of my own," Hudson whispered.

Peyton's whole body froze, and he only pulled back enough to be understood clearly. "How long were you planning that?"

"A few months," Hudson grumbled, feeling suddenly embarrassed. "Five. Six," he corrected after a beat, because yeah. He had no fucking chill and it had definitely been six.

In fact, he'd started ring shopping the day Peyton picked him up from PT and his mom was waiting for him for the first time. Hudson was sure the drama of it all would send Peyton running for the hills. Especially when his mom got racist and loud.

Instead, Peyton had just laughed in her face—literally—bought them both burritos to take home, then spent the afternoon helping Hudson make sure that his mom was blocked on everything so she couldn't access him again.

Hudson had shown his appreciation that night by laying Peyton out and fucking him until he swore he saw the man's soul try to leave his body. Peyton did not complain.

Hudson wondered if maybe he'd complain now, though, knowing that Hudson had been ready to leap so damn early.

"I would have said yes six months ago," Peyton told him, shattering the wall of anxiety that had risen in front of Hudson's heart. "Why did you wait?"

"Because I'm a coward and the idea of ruining this got to me," Hudson told him, pulling back more and shrugging. He looked in Peyton's eyes for disgust or even maybe a slight change of heart. Instead, he just found fond exasperation.

"God, I love you," Peyton murmured, then held up his curled fist. One by one, his fingers spread until his hand was open. "Will you marry me?"

Hudson could see a ring sitting in the center of his palm.

It wasn't shining. It wasn't gold or platinum. It was black and almost seemed to absorb light rather than give it.

Hudson couldn't stop staring.

Peyton shifted after a beat, the only real sign of his uncertainty. "I did a bunch of research, and eventually I talked to Chase—that product tester guy you hired a few months ago. He said he upgraded his ring to this silicon band after his injury since he doesn't wear gloves very often. Like you. He said it doesn't pinch, and when his fingers swell, there's some give."

Hudson realized Peyton was afraid he'd fucked up. He didn't realize the look on Hudson's face was one of profound... well... he wasn't sure there was a name for what he was feeling. It was like a brand-new emotion that transcended language.

All he could do was curl his hand around Peyton's wrist and kiss him until both of them were desperate to breathe.

"Yours doesn't match," he blurted. Fuck, that was not what he'd meant to say.

Peyton pulled back with a frown. "What?"

Hudson dragged a hand down his face with a groan. "I mean yes, first of all. Fuck yes, Peyton. I love you so much. And...and also..." He leaned back and twisted to the side, swearing a little as he struggled to get the box out of his pocket. He managed it after a beat, ignoring the look of amusement in Peyton's eyes.

His fingers were still shaking with nerves, but he managed to get the lid popped open to show Peyton the thick rose gold band. It was one he'd eyed in a shop window when they'd gone to Seattle together for a baking convention.

Peyton's gaze had lingered on it for just long enough to tell Hudson it was the one.

"You," Peyton said, licking his lips. "How? How the hell did you remember this?"

Hudson used his free hand to cup Peyton's cheek. "Because I pay attention. Because I want to spend every single day of my life making you happy." He licked his lips, then breathed out hard through his nose before he could speak again. "I won't make a speech either. I'll just tell you that I have never loved anyone or anything as much as I love you."

Peyton just stared, his eyes red and watery.

Hudson let out a soft laugh. "Will you marry me?"

Peyton swallowed thickly, then nodded. It was obvious he wasn't going to be able to say the word Hudson wanted to hear

for a little bit, but Hudson didn't need him to. Like he just said, he knew his lover.

His boyfriend.

His fiancé.

He held up his left hand and Peyton quickly realized what he was doing, so he took his own ring and slid it over Hudson's knuckle. It fit soft and comfortable—the texture bit like his favorite nipple clamps, though he wasn't going to say that aloud or every time he thought about his ring, he'd get all worked up.

He flexed his fingers and looked at his hand and felt a rush in his chest at the sight of it. He'd never in his life thought he'd get married again. He thought maybe he'd date. Maybe he'd find someone he trusted enough with his heart.

But with everything else?

He couldn't have fathomed it in a thousand years with a billion people who might make the offer.

But Peyton had come through and destroyed all of his fears.

Hudson gathered himself just long enough to slide Peyton's ring on his hand, and he took a second to marvel at the glint of rose gold against his olive skin before curling both hands into Peyton's shirt and pulling him onto his lap.

"They all knew what you were doing, didn't they?" Hudson asked.

Peyton laughed. "They might have had some clue when they saw me hauling in all those damn candles."

Hudson growled, then kissed him. The door wasn't locked, but he was pretty sure no one would be brave enough to come in for a long, long while. Exactly what Hudson needed. He held Peyton by the hips, pulling him down hard so he could feel the weight of him, and Peyton began to rock his hips as his fingers went for the spots on Hudson's ribs that made him groan.



“Take your dick out,” Hudson begged. “Please, baby. Please.”

Peyton didn’t need the begging, but it obviously worked him up. He still struggled sometimes with getting hard and with feeling sexy, but right now, he was thick and leaking at the tip as he unzipped his jeans and pulled his cock out through the slit in his boxers.

Hudson stared at it, a soul-deep hunger, and after a second, he lifted Peyton off his lap and set him on the edge of the coffee table. Peyton let out a surprised moan, though he obviously knew what Hudson was asking for because his legs spread, and it allowed just enough room for Hudson to drop to his knees.

He still didn’t have the core strength to hold himself in a kneeling position for long, but he was the right height to balance his ass on his heels. He gripped the tops of Peyton’s thighs and looked up at him. “I guess I did get into the traditional position tonight after all.”

Peyton rolled his eyes with a laugh. “Romantic.”

“I’ll give you romantic,” Hudson grumbled, but he was smiling when he leaned forward and took Peyton all the way down to the hilt. His hands moved up as he sank over his fiancé’s cock, riding up his shirt, fingers brushing along smooth skin.

Peyton let out a soft grunt and moved his hips gently, just a careful roll as Hudson pulled up, swirling his tongue around the thick head to taste the beads of precome. He savored it for a moment, then sank back down again. Hudson knew his lover liked it slow and hard. He used his hand to squeeze against the base of his cock and felt the ripples of pleasure rush through Peyton’s body.

He drank in the soft moans and the quiet, wordless begging under Peyton’s breath. He was worked up and feeling close to his own orgasm. If Peyton touched him anywhere that he was sensitive—anywhere at all—he’d go off like a goddamn faulty firework.

“Hudson,” Peyton said. The thready tone in his voice and the shaking in his limbs told him he was close. It usually took a lot more to work him up. Hudson would play with his body for hours before Peyton finally let go.

But he understood these were different circumstances. Every single nerve in their bodies were riding high. They’d leave this room exactly the same, yet wholly changed in ways that Hudson wanted to revel in for the rest of his natural life.

And then for an eternity after.

He grunted hard when Peyton’s fingers found his neck, and then he sucked in a breath and almost choked on Peyton’s dick when those fingers began to play with his ears. That warm, rushing feeling began to pop and fizz under his skin, and he only just managed to keep his focus as he began to knead gently over Peyton’s clothed balls.

Peyton let out a soft cry as his dick gave a final throb, then he began to spill as Hudson sucked him down. His fingers gripped the top of Hudson’s shoulders, and for whatever reason—in that moment—it was enough. It sent waves of rippling pleasure through him, and he let Peyton’s dick fall away from his lips as he panted hard and shuddered through his pleasure.

When he finally had some control, he braced his hands on the table and pushed. Peyton’s arms came around his waist to help him, and Hudson tumbled back onto the sofa with Peyton swiftly following, straddling his thighs and kissing the taste of come out of his mouth.

“I love you,” Peyton said when he pulled back. He nuzzled their noses together and hesitated before he took a fortifying breath and said, “Husband.”

For the first time ever, the word husband brought him endless joy instead of fear, or worry, or anger. For the first time ever, the word sounded right.

He cupped Peyton’s cheeks between both hands and just looked at him. His present. His future. His forever.

“I love you too.”

# EPILOGUE

“WHAT IS THAT?”

Hudson grinned, his teeth looking almost predatory and sharp. He was sitting on the edge of the massive hotel bed which was definitely larger than a king, his fingers toying with the edge of a wooden tray. It was heavy with what looked like a dessert fondu spread.

“What do you think it is?”

Peyton’s mouth went a little dry. Before the wedding, Peyton had been ready to completely melt down. Everything was stressful—from event planning to fending off Hudson’s mother who somehow found out about their nuptials, to their caterer shutting their doors six weeks before the ceremony.

And the icing on the cake? Austin showing up in the middle of the afternoon one Saturday nine days before the wedding. Peyton had been napping and heard the doorbell. For a moment, he’d considered just lying in bed all wrapped up in Hudson’s thick blankets, but he recognized the sound of Austin’s voice.

He crept down the corridor, his back pressed to the wall as he listened.

“...mistake. I mean, you know how I get, and I’m sorry.”

Hudson’s voice was flat when he replied. “Why are you here, Austin?”

“I heard you were getting married, and I couldn’t let that happen without telling you how I felt. I was an idiot for letting you go.”

Hudson just laughed, and Peyton’s heart felt like it was going to beat out of his chest because was it a good laugh? A happy one? Incredulous?

“*You let me go? You have some fucking nerve.*”

Austin scoffed. “You can’t tell me that sickening little ray of sunshine with his shit bag does it for you, Hudson. I know you. I know what you like. I know who you *are*.”

“Except you don’t, and that was always the problem. You never looked deeper than what was on the surface, and when you realized there was more to me, you gave up. Why the hell do you think I’d be remotely interested in even considering what you have to say?”

“Because you let me in the door,” Austin said—all smug and confident, and shit, he was right. Hudson had let him in.

Hudson just laughed again. “I thought maybe you’d grown a scrap of conscience and came here with an actual apology for me and Peyton. Not some bullshit about making a mistake because you don’t want me to move on and be happy.”

“Please don’t—”

“No. That’s enough. I mean, this is on me for ever thinking you’d be anything other than a raging narcissist. God, it’s no wonder you always wanted me to make amends with my mother. Fuck, you two are the same person in different bodies.”

“Kinky.” Peyton could swear he heard the smirk on Austin’s face.

“Proving my point again,” Hudson said, sounding exhausted. “You need to leave. You need to move on. Don’t contact me anymore. Don’t show up here. Don’t look me up online. Figure out another way to get on with your life that doesn’t involve me or my husband.”

“You’re not married yet,” Austin spat savagely.

Hudson snorted. “Yes, I am. It doesn’t matter that we haven’t said the words or signed the damn paper. He was mine and I was his the moment we met.”

“Yeah, and I’m sure that’s going to last. Just wait until he gets tired of your shit.”

Peyton wanted to burst into the room and punch the fucker in the face, but he knew better. He sat and waited for Hudson to speak again.

“And that’s why I’ll always pity you, Austin. Because you’ll never understand how lucky I am to have found someone like Peyton. Now, get the fuck out of my house before I make you.”

“Is that a threat?”

“No. It’s a promise.”

Peyton closed his eyes, letting his head thud back against the wall before realizing Hudson probably heard him. He turned and raced back into the bedroom, and a few minutes later, Hudson was there in the door, leaning on his walker.

“Heard that, did you?”

Peyton shuddered but he didn’t protest when Hudson carefully and slowly made his way to the bed, then let himself under the covers. He dragged Peyton close to him, pressing lips to the back of his neck as he held him as tight as Peyton could stand.

“I know that was hard for you. Tell me what you need.”

“Our wedding to be here,” Peyton said with a soft sigh. “And maybe a big ass tray of dessert fondu with, like, brownies, and fudge, and marshmallow fluff that you can lick

off my dick. Also maybe Austin to find his way off a cliff. You know. By accident.”

Nine days later, Peyton had gotten two of those three things, and his throat was all hot. He was already emotional from standing in front of their friends and family and speaking vows—and not just that, but listening to the heartfelt, impossibly tender words Hudson had written himself.

He sniffed and glanced away, making Hudson laugh.

“Come over here, damn it. I couldn’t throw Austin off a cliff and make it look like an accident, but I could do the damn fondu.”

Peyton shuffled over and sat a space away, but Hudson wasn’t having it. He grabbed Peyton by the wrist and tugged and rearranged until his back was to the headboard and Peyton was straddling him. They kissed, long and slow, and when Peyton pulled back, a brownie dipped in marshmallow fluff was waiting for him.

He took a bite of half, then Hudson ate the other.

“These are mine,” Peyton said, his eyes wide.

Hudson laughed. “Technically they’re mine. Hudson’s Heaven. I had Rain order some in secret.”

Peyton lost track of how many Hudson’s Heaven orders he’d shipped over the last week, but it didn’t matter. His heart was full to bursting...and hell, so was his dick. He rocked forward against Hudson, who glanced down, then grinned.

“Feeding and fucking. Isn’t that a fetish?” Hudson asked as one hand began to slowly unzip Peyton’s tuxedo trousers.

Peyton gasped as warm fingers circled him and began a careful stroke upward. “I...think so. It’s only sexy with you, though.”

Hudson grinned, the look a little feral as he reached behind Peyton, and brought his fingers back. They were coated in thick ganache, and Peyton wasted no time taking them deep into his throat.

“That’s right,” Hudson said quietly. “Suck me, sweetheart.”

Peyton swirled his tongue around Hudson’s thick digits.

Hudson groaned, his hand speeding up over Peyton’s cock until he was ready to come...

And then it was gone.

“Fuck! Come *on*,” he gasped.

Hudson just grinned and shook his head before tipping Peyton carefully to the side. He maneuvered so he was kneeling on the floor, then he quickly pulled Peyton’s trousers down, tossing them to the side.

“Take your shirt off, gorgeous,” Hudson ordered.

Peyton’s hands were trembling a little, but he managed it. The sides fell open and he wriggled out of the stiff, starchy fabric, throwing it behind him and basking in Hudson’s low, infectious chuckle.

“Happy?”

“Will be in a minute,” Hudson murmured. “Sit up. Come closer to the edge of the bed. And bring that tray with you.”

Peyton had a feeling what was coming, and his heart was hammering as he obeyed his husband. Shit, his *husband*. Hudson had been right during his conversation with Austin when he said that they were already married in everything but name.

But it felt profound now.

Official.

Forever.

“God,” Hudson growled, running his hands up Peyton’s thighs and spreading them wide. “Fucking look at you.”

Peyton still didn’t see anything particularly special about himself. He was soft around the middle and his dick didn’t always get with the program, even when he was super horny. He was an anxious mess more often than not, and still

struggling to have confidence in himself to prioritize his own wants and his own needs.

But he was also happy. He was loved beyond reason and wanted beyond measure, and he believed Hudson when he looked at Peyton like a starving man.

Hudson met his gaze as he pushed up as far as he could, and his fingers swiped through the bowl of marshmallow fluff. It was going to be a disgusting sticky mess when it was over, but that just meant showering together, which was one of Peyton's favorite things.

And this...well, he couldn't deny it was a fantasy of his. After all, didn't every baker want to be slathered in his own cake batter and eaten into oblivion?

Maybe not, but that ceased to matter when the soft fluff coated his dick, then Hudson leaned in and took him all the way into the back of his throat. Peyton's eyes slammed shut as he rocked his hips forward, doing it again after a groan of encouragement. Hudson reached between his legs, running gentle fingers over his balls before pressing against his taint.

The pleasure damn-near blinded him and he lost his balance, falling back onto his elbows. Hudson just sucked harder, deeper, faster, and it wasn't long before Peyton was crying out and spilling down his husband's throat.

His body shook with small tremors as Hudson continued to lick him clean, and as he gathered himself, an idea began to form. He pushed himself up, carefully dragging his fingers through the ganache, and before Hudson realized what was happening, Peyton was pushing him onto his back, arranging his legs before his clean hand began to attack his buttons.

"Off. Now," he demanded.

Hudson managed to follow his command, and the moment his chest was exposed, Peyton smeared the chocolate over his nipples. Hudson said nothing, but the sound of his breath filling his lungs was powerful.

Peyton just smiled down at him and then straddled him, putting all of his weight onto Hudson's soft cock. "I love you



so fucking much. You are the best thing that ever happened to me.” Then he applied his mouth—hard, fast, teeth biting and scraping until Hudson was crying out, and shaking, and falling apart.

When it was over, Peyton toppled onto his side, the floor hard beneath them, and a little cold, but it was also perfect.

“I can’t believe we just did that,” Peyton said.

Hudson laughed and rolled over, using a sticky hand to cup Peyton’s cheek. “I can. And I definitely want to add that to the list of anniversary sex ideas.”

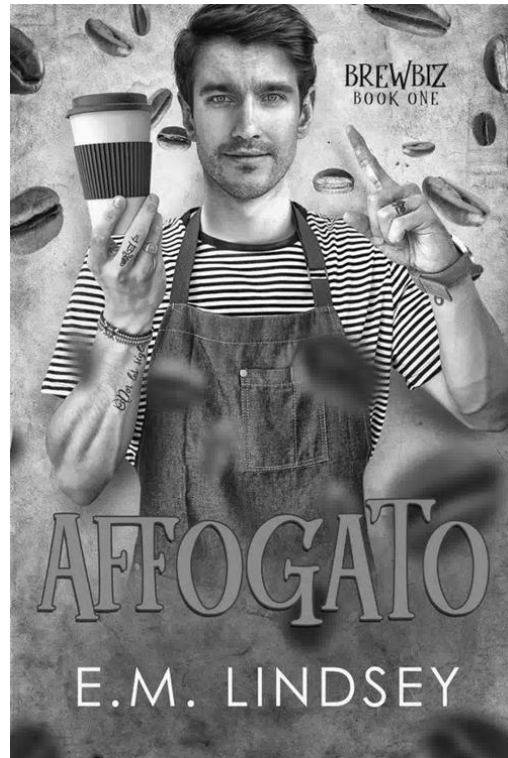
Peyton grinned, then he realized that they’d have a lifetime of this. Maybe there would be more mundane days than wild ones, and maybe he’d never be thrown against the wall and have his ass railed like he had in his former life.

But this was so much better because every moment with Hudson was perfect.

And it would be like that for the rest of their happily ever after.

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If you’d like to read more about Caleb, Wren, Jori and the others from BrewBiz cafe, you can join my [Patreon](#) for as little as \$1 a month and read the serial novel, Affogato starting this February.



The only things Caleb needs in life are five hours of sleep a night, enough caffeine to keep him trembling through his shift, and enough profit that he doesn't cry when he pays his accountant every month.

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*Affogato is a small town romance featuring a tired cafe owner, a soft, anxious barista, loose tongues, red wine, back office liaisons, and a steamy happily ever after. Chapters post one to two times monthly for all Patrons starting February 14th.*

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

E.M. Lindsey is a non-binary writer who lives in the southeast United States, close to the water where their heart lies.

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