

A full-body photograph of a man with a beard and short dark hair, smiling warmly. He is wearing a light blue, short-sleeved polo shirt with the top buttons unbuttoned. He stands with his hands on his hips. The background is a bright sunset or sunrise over a body of water, with the sun low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow. The overall mood is relaxed and positive.

RAY OF  
SUNSHINE

CASEY COX

# **RAY OF SUNSHINE**

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CASEY COX

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

*Sometimes, what you need after a storm is a ray of sunshine...*

Moving back to his hometown of Sunshine at the age of thirty-seven was never in Ray's plans. Neither was raising his beautiful twin girls alone. But after cancer stole his husband and surviving in the big city on a single wage became too expensive, Ray was left with no other choice.

Juggling a bruising divorce, sick parents, and a punishing career as the director of an aged care facility, Paul's life feels like it's been drained of all goodness. He's overworked, over-stressed and lonely. So damn lonely.

Until Ray returns.

Having his best friend back in his life not only brings a smile to Paul's face for the first time in years—it also unlocks something within him. A heart-shaped box that he's kept under lock and key his entire life.

Can Paul find the courage to take a chance and make the boy from his past the man of his future?

*Ray*

“And who’s that?” I ask, pointing to the smallest of the three stick figures Ryan drew and is now proudly showing off.

“It’s me,” he replies with a cheery clap. “Me!”

“It’s a very good drawing,” I comment as Ryan sets about adding a house to the backdrop of his family picture. I smile at the boy. Only six years old and diagnosed with anaplastic large cell lymphoma, a very rare and, unfortunately, very aggressive form of blood cancer. In his short life, he’s probably spent more time inside a hospital than at home.

I’ve always loved kids, and volunteering at Sunshine Hospital every Wednesday night is one of the things I look forward to the most each week. As a Radio Lollipop volunteer, our job is to provide some play and entertainment for kids in the ward. They say that volunteering is its own reward, and that couldn’t be truer in this case. The strength, the resilience, the sheer determination these kids possess makes the few hours I give up each week more than worth it.

Once my shift wraps up at eight, I say goodbye to the team and make my way through the near-empty parking lot. I wind the windows down, letting the muggy evening air fill the car as I drive the short distance from the hospital back to my best friend’s place.

Paul very kindly offered to babysit my four-year-old twins, Chloe and Grace, every Wednesday so that I could do my shift at the hospital. It’s a nice routine we’ve fallen into since I’ve



returned to my hometown of Sunshine. My heart still clenches at the memory of what brought me back here.

It's been three years since my husband, Steven, died of leukemia. We were together for fifteen years. We met at university when we were both nineteen. Steven was my first love. My only love.

A good chunk of our relationship was spent exploring every avenue we could to become parents. It was our ultimate dream. We're that generation that's on the cusp, so close to being able to be both gay and parents, if only the legal system would catch up to the times. When it comes to adoption and surrogacy, Australia is woefully behind many other countries on both fronts.

Chloe and Grace entered our lives due to the incredible generosity of a woman named Lucinda, who lives in Perth. Only altruistic surrogacy is allowed in Australia, meaning no money can be exchanged between the parties involved. Lucinda didn't know us from a bar of soap. We were complete strangers, yet she gave us the most precious gift I've ever received. Our beautiful girls.

It wasn't just bad luck that Steven was diagnosed with an aggressive form of leukemia a week after the girls turned one—it was a cruel twist of fate. Seven short weeks after learning of his diagnosis, we were lowering him into the ground.

Originally, I wanted to stay in Sydney, but as beautiful a place as it is, it's also one of the most expensive cities in the world to live in. I tried to scrape by, but the money I made as a primary school teacher didn't stretch far enough to even cover childcare costs. After a couple of years of draining too much of Steven's life insurance policy, I decided to pack up and head north, back to my hometown of Sunshine.

My parents are still here, and so is my best friend, Paul. The guy I've known since his family moved to town when we were both eight. We've been best friends since the moment we met. As teens fresh out of high school, our lives took us to different parts of the country—him to study medicine in Melbourne, me accepting a partial scholarship in Sydney—but

as men approaching forty, our paths have led both of us back to the place we grew up.

Tires scrape over gravel as I pull up out front of Paul's place. It's what's known as a Queenslander. The house has a wraparound porch, a key feature, and a much-needed one on muggy summer nights like this. In these parts, the temperature barely drops below eighty. Even in winter.

"How was it?" he asks as I let myself in through the unlocked flyscreen door.

"Not too busy tonight," I reply. "Which is nice, means I get to spend more time with each kid." I look around. "How were the girls?"

"Two little angels. I put them down about ten minutes ago."

"Would you like to live with us?" I offer, smiling. "They're always so well behaved with you."

Something flickers behind Paul's eyes, but he blinks it away so fast it makes me think I must have imagined it.

I stopped looking at Paul in a sexual way a long time ago. His friendship means everything to me. There's no way I'd ever do anything to jeopardize it. There's also the minor detail of him being straight, too. But as I take him in in the dim evening light, I can't help the whirring sensation I feel in my gut.

Paul is an obscenely handsome man. Tall, lean, and muscular, he's all hard lines and jagged edges. He's the kind of guy that looks like he belongs in a European fragrance ad for la cologne du parfumeur, or some other fancy-sounding shit most people—including me—can't pronounce.

Topping off a body that's made for sin, he's got thick, jet-black hair, piercing ocean-blue eyes, and the kind of cheekbones that supermodels would kill for.

But yeah, Paul Clarke is my best friend. My *straight* best friend. And completely off-limits.

His dark eyebrows lift, and I realize that maybe I've been staring at him for a smidge longer than intended. Paul motions toward the back door that leads out onto his porch and a view of the Great Dividing Range, the longest stretch of mountains in Australia that spans over two thousand miles along the eastern seaboard.

Wordlessly, I head out while he wanders into the kitchen. I know what he's doing without him having to say a thing.

I hear the fridge opening, then the tops of two bottles being uncapped.

He joins me outside, the air unsettlingly still.

"No rain tonight," I observe as he hands me a beer. "Thanks."

He gazes up into the starry sky. "No relief."

The typical weather pattern in these tropical regions is hot and muggy summer days, where you can work up a sweat just by breathing. The payoff is meant to be the westerly thunderstorms that crash over the range and cool the heat down, making the night times bearable. It doesn't happen every day, though. Looks like it won't be happening tonight.

I take a sip of beer and spit it out almost immediately. "Holy shit. What is this?"

"Four X," he replies. His eyes stay on mine as he takes a long, deliberate sip.

Four X is a local, Queensland-made beer. It's known as being "rough as guts," as they say around here. And that's putting it nicely.

"I know you're straight and everything, but this is some really terrible beer," I tease, hoping to nudge a response from him.

Paul shrugs, a smile seeping into his cheeks.

"You know," I continue. "They have this thing called artisanal beer these days."

“Beer’s not meant to be artisanal,” Paul replies in his usual, matter-of-fact way.

“It’s also not meant to taste like cat piss either,” I mutter under my breath.

He sips away in silence, while I let my eyes sweep over the breathtaking view. The last traces of light illuminate the tips of the mountains in the distance.

“You should stay the night. Why wake the girls up? I’ve finished making the spare room up. I got you—I mean, I got a new bed put in there now, too.”

I smile softly. “Thanks. I appreciate it.”

I really do. Paul comes across as a guy with a hard edge, but he’s really a softy underneath.

I lose track of time after that. We drift in and out of conversation effortlessly. We’ve always stayed in touch through the years. I was there for his graduation when he became a doctor. He came to visit when the girls were born. He and Diana joined Steven and I on a holiday to Bali.

But it’s moments like these, little spaces of time where nothing big seems to happen, that I find myself enjoying the most. Times when we’re with each other because we want to be, not because some outside event has drawn us together. We’ve spent a good chunk of time as guests in each other’s lives. I’m enjoying the feeling of simply *being* in each other’s lives.

Something white and low to the ground glimmers in the moonlight and catches my eye. I point to it. “What’s that over there?”

Paul leans toward it, then squirms uncomfortably in his seat when he sees what I’m pointing at. “It’s an old bathtub.”

“What’s it doing in your backyard?”

I glimpse over at him and notice how his jaw is all bunched up. “Nothing,” he says dismissively. “Just something I was planning for Diana years ago. Thought it might be nice

to have a warm bath under the stars. Never got around to getting rid of it.”

The emotion overwhelms him. I can tell. He gets to his feet, his fingers fidgeting. He points at the beer I’m still nursing in my hand. “Want another?”

I’ve barely touched the cat piss he’s given me. “No. I should get to bed.” I get to my feet, too. “We’ll leave early in the morning so we don’t disturb you.”

“You don’t have to.” His words rush out. He almost seems a little hesitant as he clears his throat. “I like making breakfast for you and the girls.”

We’re standing by the back door facing each other, moonlight striking the tip of his nose. His eyes dip, then deepen as he says, “I’m so happy you and the girls are here.”

That’s when I see it. One glistening tear silently streaking down his cheek.

I reach out and delicately swipe it with my thumb. “Then why are you crying?”

Paul doesn’t stop me from touching him, nor correct me and try to brush the tear away as a bullshit allergy or some other typical macho excuse. “Because I’m happy, believe it or not,” he says around a chuckle. “Ever since you’ve come back, I’ve realized how unhappy I’ve been. My life over these past few years has been consumed with the divorce, my work, and making sure my folks are doing okay after Dad’s stroke and Mum’s hip surgery.”

To say that Paul’s had it rough lately would be an understatement. I run my fingers down his arm. The solid flesh of his bicep feels warm and inviting. I pull my hand back sharply.

“You and the girls have something I so desperately needed,” he adds quietly.

“We haven’t done anything,” I reply, keeping my voice soft to match his.

“You’re here.” His deep blue eyes flick up to me. “And that’s...everything.”

We stay silent for a while.

“Do you believe in forever love?”

The question catches me off guard, but I reply back instantly, almost instinctively. “I do. Of course I do.”

I notice Paul’s chest heaving. The silence between us is interrupted by the screams of cicadas. It jolts me, and I don’t know if I’ve moved closer to him or if he’s moved closer to me, but his palms brace my arms just below my shoulders.

His breath, hot on my face, makes my skin tremble. He brushes his hands down my body, settling on my waist. Before I’m able to compute what’s happening, his lips catch mine in a tender kiss.

It doesn’t last long, and he pulls away quickly. My eyes flutter shut as I run my tongue along my lower lip, tasting him there. I don’t know what just happened or what I’m meant to be feeling, but a coolness rushes through me. I feel relaxed.

“Well, goodnight,” he mutters, disappearing inside before I can manage to reply with a “Goodnight” of my own.

*Paul*

They call me Paul the Punisher, and right now, as I glare at my management team gathered around the boardroom, that's exactly how I feel. The aged care facility I run is going through an unannounced spot audit that the government regulation agency likes to conduct once in a while. The interim report that waited for me on my desk this morning left a lot to be desired.

“Basic food handling procedures inadequate, hygiene care not up to standard, medications not given on time or properly recorded...” My voice rises in anger as I list off some of the particularly glaring highlights. Or lowlights, I should say. I'm beyond seething. I'm fucking pissed. I have sky-high expectations of my staff, and I don't just want them to be met—I expect them to be exceeded. The interim findings paint a bleak picture that we are about as far away from that lofty goal as is possible.

In recent years, the aged care sector has gone through a very damaging royal commission. The federal government put the industry under a microscope in response to allegations of elder abuse and miscare. The findings of patient mistreatment and neglect were horrifying, and Australians were rightfully shocked. As Sunshine's largest aged care provider, we're meant to be better than this. We *are* better than this.

I accepted the directorship of this facility because, like the oath I took when I started in medicine, I want to help people

get better. It says a lot about a society, the way they treat their most vulnerable. I don't mind the Punisher nickname. I'm not ashamed or embarrassed in the slightest that I'll do everything in my power to ensure our elderly residents are treated with respect and dignity and receive the highest levels of care.

I resume my tirade until I actually start to feel a little sorry for my staff. I look out into a sea of slumped shoulders and flushed faces. I end the meeting, demanding action reports from each of them by the end of the day, detailing steps their departments will take to rectify the issues identified in the report, before storming out. People duck and weave out of my way as I march to my office, closing the door behind me with a heavy thud.

Just the morning I needed after last night. I lean against the door, frozen by the memory of that kiss, remembering the taste and the feel of Ray's lips on my own. My anger starts to dissipate, replaced by something else brewing in my belly. A feeling that's both unfamiliar and yet oddly comforting at the same time.

I don't know where it came from—the question or the kiss...or even the goddamn tear. But when Ray returned from his volunteer shift at the hospital, I felt like a can of soda that had been shaken. Something as simple and mundane as sitting out on the back porch and just talking to him—*being* with him—ruffled me in a way that's been bubbling away under the surface for a while now.

I let out a yawn and scrub my face. I barely slept a wink last night, tossing and turning in the insufferable heat. And yeah, maybe the thought of that kiss had something to do with it, too.

Having Ray and the girls under my roof fills me with a happiness I haven't felt in years. Diana and I talked about having children. Now, after she left me for another man, I thank god we never did.

It's been over a year since our divorce, and the sting of betrayal still feels so close, like I can almost reach out and touch it. We moved back to Sunshine three years ago so I



could look after my parents, who were going through health issues. But Diana was a Melbourne girl, through and through. She didn't like the laid-back coastal lifestyle of Sunshine, the lack of cultural events and nightlife, and she couldn't stand the oppressive summer heat. I feared that I wouldn't be enough to keep her here, and in the end, I was proven right.

I'm starting to see that perhaps it's for the best. We weren't giving each other what the other needed. If I'm being honest, there was something missing in the marriage for me, too. Despite heading toward forty, there are still some parts of me I don't understand. Like why I can be happy with a woman but still feel like something's not quite right. Like why I feel a raging attraction to men but have never been able to go further than rushed, hurried, anonymous physical contact. Like why I feel hurt, confused, and fucked up about so many parts of my inner life and how having Ray return and live in the same town as me, for the first time in our adult lives, somehow manages to quell that internal turmoil, even just a little.

I push through the rest of the workday. Just before six, I check my inbox to ensure all managers have submitted the reports I requested. They have. That'll be my light reading material for the evening. But before I make it home, I take a slight detour.

"Hey, Paul," Ray huffs over his shoulder.

He's chasing after the girls. Chloe's infectious giggles bounce off the living room walls, while Grace is doing a terrible job of hiding herself behind the footstool. When she sees me, her eyes light up and she shrieks, "Uncle Paul!" She runs over to me and I scoop her up into my arms.

I smile. Ray's house looks like a cyclone tore through it with toys scattered everywhere. Despite the ceiling fans going at full bolt and every window being open, I can see the sweat beading on Ray's forehead. But he doesn't care. He's lost in whatever make-believe world he's created for his girls. It reminds me of a scene out of a fairy tale...a fairy tale I want to be part of.

The girls go play outside now that the sun is setting and the evening air is filled with the first hint of a cool edge all day. Ray and I plonk ourselves down on the back steps. They're not particularly wide, so our knees jam against each other. He doesn't seem to notice the physical connection, but I do.

"Thanks for breakfast this morning," he says, shooting me a wide smile. "You spoil us."

"It's my pleasure."

His eyes return to the girls, and it's written all over his face how much he adores them. They're his life, and I love seeing the joy they bring him. For as long as I can remember, Ray's always talked about how much he wanted to be a dad. Kinda unusual, I'll admit for a guy in his early twenties, but good on him for pursuing it. Now, it's the most natural thing in the world.

As he's watching over his girls, I take this moment to study him. Ray is shorter than me and has a much stockier build. He's stopped working out since he's become a father, but the form of his muscles is set. He's got clipped, ashy-colored hair, a wide smile with two rows of perfect small teeth, and the kind of eyes that make you do a double take—are they green, light brown, or gray? Now there's a question I wouldn't mind spending the rest of my life answering.

I clear my throat, and Ray casts a glance in my direction. "I owe you an apology," I begin.

"That's the second one in two days," he retorts lightly, eyes glimmering. "I could get used to this."

"Ha. I couldn't." I straighten my legs so that our knees aren't touching anymore. "I didn't mean to kiss you last night."

"You didn't?"

One of the girls screams happily right at that moment, blanketing the hint of dejection I think I caught in his voice.

I leave his question unanswered.

“I put it down to the terrible beer you subjected yourself to. It’ll make a man do crazy things,” Ray says. He’s grinning, but it looks a little tight on his face.

I force a grin, too, wanting to tell him that it wasn’t the beer, that I knew what I was doing. That I’d wanted to kiss him for so, *so* long but that our timing was never right. We weren’t living in the same city. That one—or both—of us had a partner. Not to mention the fact he’s still under the impression that I’m straight, while I’m under the more accurate impression that when it comes to my sexuality, I haven’t figured it out yet.

All of that remains unsaid, though, as Grace trudges up to us, folds her arms across her front, and announces, with the kind of petulance that only an adorable four-year-old can get away with, “I’m hungry.”

I stay at Ray’s place for a few more hours, reading the reports my managers submitted on my laptop while he feeds the girls and then gets them ready for bed. Once he’s finally tucked the girls in, he flops down onto the sofa next to me, his thighs brushing against my bare feet. He smiles. I smile back, and it’s the first time I’ve felt relaxed all day.

He asks me about work and listens intently as I recount the shitshow of the unannounced audit and the interim findings. Wanting to have at least a few hours of the day where I’m not talking or thinking about work, I change the topic. “Have you thought about dating again?”

I see surprise register in Ray’s eyes, but it has been over three years since Steven died, so I don’t think my question is inappropriate in any way. He takes his time gathering his thoughts, and when he speaks again, his voice is lower, huskier than I’ve ever heard it. “I don’t know. I’m not sure if I’ll be able to find what I’m looking for.”

My eyes are glued to him, but for some reason, he’s averting my gaze. We’ve spoken about pretty much everything over the years, shared every part of ourselves with each other. Or at least I thought we had. I know I’ve kept some parts hidden, and I’m starting to think maybe Ray has, too.

“What—what are you looking for?” I hear myself asking.

“Romance. Fireworks. Passion.” He shoots the words out without hesitation. Spotting my reaction, he chuckles. “Did I surprise you?”

I scratch the back of my neck. “A little,” I admit.

I don’t know what I was expecting him to say, but I would’ve guessed it’d be something more along the lines of companionship, stability, trust. All those things he had for so long with Steven. All those things that feel completely foreign to me.

Sensing my reaction, Ray explains, “Steven and I were together for fifteen years. Don’t get me wrong—we loved each other deeply. He will always have a place in my heart. But after fifteen years, even the best relationships fall into patterns, routines, habits. The best relationships survive because the bonds of love run so deep that they can sustain the staleness and boredom that inevitably creeps in over time. We had that solid foundation, so our relationship was able to stay strong as the years went on. But I’m not going to deny it...I long for the feelings that come with a new relationship.”

I nod because I understand what he’s saying theoretically, but I’ve never even come close to a relationship lasting a decade and a half.

“I want that beginning stuff again. Where it’s new and exciting and crazy. As much as I love the girls, you, my family...I want...I want...” He drops his eyes to his fingers. He’s fidgeting, and I can see how shaky his breathing has become. Just as I’m about to say something to change the topic, Ray faces me and says, “I want moments that take me out of my life and make me forget who I am, while reminding me who I am.”

He shakes his head, a rumble of laughter escaping his lips. “God. Did I really just say that?”

I nod again, in even more shock. Not because I’m having trouble understanding anything he’s just said, but because a realization has just slammed into me like a bolt of lightning.

I want to be the one to give Ray all of those things.

## *Ray*

Children's fairy tales are so much more progressive than when I was a kid back in the 1980s. I'm reading the kids one about a girl of color who lives with her two dads. Snow White this ain't, and I couldn't be happier my girls are inheriting a world that, while far from perfect, is heading in the right direction.

The kids have multiplied overnight. I'm reading to five of them. In addition to my two, I've also acquired Lachlan, Sammy, and Maya. When I returned home to Sunshine, I got offered a teaching role at the local primary school. I declined it. Not because I couldn't afford day care costs, as was the case if I'd stayed in Sydney, but for another reason. A simpler one. I didn't want to be away from my girls.

With my degree in early education, I only needed to do a bridging course to become a family day care educator. So not only do I get to stay at home with my girls and be there with them for these incredibly important formative years, but by looking after an additional three children, I generate a bit of an income, too.

I love family day care. My parents both worked, but Mom was adamant about not sending me or my younger brother, Chris, to a regular day care center. She thought they were too impersonal. As it turned out, Mrs. Lammie, who lived down the street from us, was a family day care provider.

Being looked after by Mrs. Lammie turned out to be one of the best experiences of my life, mainly because of the children

who were there. Apart from my brother, there were three other children in our group. I've kept in touch with Sarah and Luke and consider them to be family. And of course, I'm best friends with the other kid who was there—Paul.

I still remember what he was like as a kid so clearly. He's always been taller than me—my growth spurt, when it finally came, was painfully late—but what I remember more clearly than anything was just how fearless he was. He used to hoon around on his bike so fast I was scared he'd fall off, tufts of jet-black hair poking through underneath the bright red helmet. A couple of times, he did crash, bruising and bloodying his knees and elbows. But as soon as he could, he'd get right back on that bike again, pedaling circles around me.

The kids are dozing, so I crank up all four fans to max and quietly retreat from the spare room I've converted into their nap room. I slip into the living room and let out a mighty sigh as I collapse onto the couch. The kids' naptime is the only part of the day I have to myself. I know I should probably spend it cleaning the place up a bit, or getting dinner ready, but thankfully, my phone vibrates, providing me with just the distraction I'd been hoping for to not have to get my ass up and do anything that required effort.

A warmth fills me when I see the text is from Paul.

**Paul:** Would you like to have dinner at my place tonight?

**Me:** On one condition.

**Paul:** What's that?

**Me:** I'll supply the alcohol. You've proven you can't be trusted with that responsibility.

**Paul:** djshfhk

**Me:** ?

**Paul:** Shit. Sorry. I was trying to be cool and stick in one of those yellow smiley face things, but it proved to be a bit too tech savvy for me. I'll stick to this one...

**Paul:** Ready for it?

**Me:** I'm scared...but go on.

**Paul** :-)

**Me**: I don't know what's sadder. Your very 1990s attempt at an emoji or the fact that it actually made me laugh.

**Me**: What time would you like me at yours?

**Paul**: I'll try and get out of work by 6, so 6:30?

**Me**: Sounds good. I'm almost afraid to ask, but how's everything going with the audit?

**Paul**: Still shit, but better. We should avoid getting sanctioned, which is a good thing, and we're already implementing improvements, so we may just skate by with a work order.

I have no idea what any of that means, but I don't think asking him to explain it via text is going to make it any clearer. I sign off and make a note to ask him about it tonight.

I lie down on the couch. I'm smiling, and my toes are wriggling of their own accord. I don't know why... Okay, that's a bit of a white lie. I do know why.

It's Paul.

It's being back here in Sunshine and getting our first proper chance to live our lives as adults with one another. I wasn't sure if it would live up to the expectations I'd set in my mind, but it has. It's gone above and beyond, really.

I tap my fingers across my chest, trying to contain the butterflies flying around inside, as I think back to that kiss at his place. I've spent my whole life reining in my expectations when it comes to Paul. That approach worked when we were kids and I wanted him to slow down and cycle slower. He ignored me and did what he wanted anyway.

It worked when I realized I had feelings for him in our final year of high school. Paul had slept with five girls by that point and was locked firmly in the best friend zone. The *straight* best friend zone. It's the main reason why I accepted the scholarship in Sydney and didn't follow him to Melbourne. It would have made things too hard for me, seeing him sleep with women, fall in love with women. Anyone...but me.



And it worked when I returned to Sunshine and tempered my expectations of what our friendship would be like now. Paul puts his career first. Always has and always will. He's passionate about his work, and I totally get it. He bears responsibility for people's lives. Literally. I can tell he gets no relief from it, that he carries the weight of that burden with him all the time.

So maybe that kiss was just his way of releasing a bit of built-up tension. He hasn't dated since his divorce, and he hasn't mentioned anything about casual hookups, so yeah, he was just probably blowing off some steam. He admitted as much when he'd said he didn't mean to kiss me.

I let out a long, heavy sigh. Paul belongs where he's always been, where I've always kept him. Firmly in the "if he were gay, we'd be perfect together, but he's not" file.

A few hours later, my tires cut across the gravel at Paul's place. Everyone leaves their front doors unlocked around these parts, so I head in, just as the first hit of lightning strikes. Thank god. It's been so sticky I've broken out in a sweat just between walking from the car to Paul's kitchen.

I step inside, and his forehead crinkles in confusion when he sees me. "Where are the girls?"

"I dropped them off at Mom and Dad's," I reply, making a point of unveiling the nice bottle of red I brought over. "Thought it might be nice to have some adult time."

Something dances across his face just as a flash of lightning illuminates the sky outside his window. "What are you making?"

"Wagyu beef on a bed of Asian greens," he replies as I make my way over to the cabinet and take out two wine glasses. "You, uh, look dressed up," he comments without looking up.

"Yeah," I chuckle, beginning to pour. "I'm wearing a shirt that isn't marked with the girl's fingerprints or random dirty marks. Fancy, huh?"

He laughs, his blue eyes sparkling. I throw my gaze down, focusing all my effort and energy on pouring us two glasses of wine. We take the plates onto his back porch to watch the impressive display Mother Nature is putting on for us. For all the rumblings of thunder and cracks of lightning, only a few sporadic drops of rain are falling. I'm hoping that will increase as the night wears on. There's nothing I love more than the sound of rain falling on a tin roof.

The air is still heavy, and it's got nothing to do with the humidity. We eat mostly in silence. I want to ask more about how the audit's going, to clarify some of the points in Paul's text from earlier in the day that I didn't fully understand, but I decide against it. As much as I'm interested in his work, the poor guy needs a break from it, too. I'll wait until he mentions it first. I won't raise the topic myself.

A lightning strike flashes, illuminating the dark purple sky as it spreads out in a spindly horizontal direction. "I've missed this," I say, taking my last bite.

"Me, too." Paul's eyes are glued to the open sky in front of us.

"And I've missed you, Paul."

He finishes his meal, resting his plate on the small wooden table between us. He pulls in a breath as our eyes meet. "I've missed you, too, Ray. So much."

His voice breaks a little, and I can sense that there are more words lodged in his throat. His eyes are dissecting me, but he's the one who's coming undone.

Seemingly out of nowhere, the rain gets heavier. In just a few seconds, it's gone from a few drops to a deafening downpour. Typical Queensland.

"Come on." He takes both plates as he gets to his feet. "Let's go inside. I know how much you love listening to the rain."

*Paul*

My living room isn't very big, and most of it is taken up by one of those massive couches that can pretty much double as a bed. Ray and I find ourselves lying on it, on our sides, me behind him. I wrap my arm around his body, and he shuffles into the touch until we're both comfortable. I close my eyes and exhale. There's nowhere else I'd rather be.

The roar of the rain is deafening, making talking impractical. Yep. That's my excuse, and I'm sticking to it. It may happen to be factually true, but I also know that it makes me a complete chicken shit.

The thing is, there's so much I want to tell Ray. But I'm afraid. And funnily, I'm not worried about losing him. Our friendship is too strong. The bond we have really is unbreakable. I'm more certain of that than I am of anything else in my life.

What I'm afraid of runs deeper than that. I can confess my feelings for him because I'm not ashamed of them. I love him. It's that simple.

But how do I admit to him that there are parts of me that are so broken that I genuinely doubt I'll ever be able to fix them? How do I begin to explain the confusion and shame that has lived inside of me for so long that it now feels like a part of me? That I've resigned myself to just accepting it as always being there?

The truth is that I've only ever had romantic relationships with women. But in the breaks between them, I've pursued men. And that's the perfect word for it because that's exactly what it's been: a pursuit.

My attraction to men doesn't feel like the way I'm drawn to women. It's missing softness and care. I've always thought there was something wrong with me. Maybe it's some internalized hangover from growing up in a town that used to be pretty close-minded and, frankly, homophobic. It's better these days for sure, but growing up in Sunshine, being called "gay" was the worst slur imaginable. And it was an all too common occurrence.

Whatever the reason for it, there's only one type of sex I can have with men. Quick, easy, anonymous. Thank god for Grindr. One time, a guy told me his last name, and it completely blindsided me. I had no problem fucking his brains out, but that was way too personal. Another time, a guy leaned in to kiss me, and I almost bowled over in shock. Fucking, yes, but kissing, no.

*What the hell is wrong with me?*

I couldn't even begin to seriously consider pursuing a relationship with Ray without first telling him all of these things about me that I've kept buried. But where would I even begin? And if somehow—*somehow*—I did manage to find a way to articulate all of that—why the fuck would Ray want me? I wouldn't want him to want me. I hate this part of myself, so how can I expect anyone else to love me? Especially someone as sweet and kind and caring as Ray.

He deserves to be with someone that has this base-level shit sorted. Someone who's a good, decent guy. A person worthy of him. And as I breathe in the smell of his shampoo, I hold on to him even tighter, fighting against the deep-seated fear that that someone isn't me.



I release a deep breath as I shut the door behind the auditors. Their work here is done. We've been issued with two breaches, but they're minor. Bottom line, this was a close call. They're not going to take any major action against us, but we have work to do.

I want this facility to be the best aged care center in the goddamn country, but before I can set about achieving that lofty goal, I have something much more practical to attend to.

The director of admissions called in sick today, so the management team has stepped in to cover her meetings. All except one. Since no one else was free, I'm going to take it. These meetings are pretty standard. It's basically an opportunity for a prospective resident, and usually one or two members of their family, to learn more about the facility, how it works, what they can expect, that sort of thing.

I make my way into the meeting room and find two men already sitting there. "Paul Clarke." I introduce myself, and we shake hands. "I'm the director here at the center. Pleased to meet you."

They give their first names only, Dean and Mark. As I take my seat at the opposite side of the table, I observe them. They both look to be in their late sixties, maybe early seventies, but there's no distinguishable family resemblance. They could be cousins, perhaps.

I begin by going through the information they would have read in the introduction pack we supplied them when they made their initial enquiry. They nod along and give the impression that I'm not covering any new ground for them.

"So." I steeple my fingers, still unsure what their connection to each other is. "Have you got any questions for me?"

They throw a few furtive glances at one another, and I'm picking up on some tension from both of them. They look uncomfortable, but finally, Dean gives a curt nod, and Mark begins to speak. "What's your..." His voice falters.

"Can I get you some water?" I offer.

He nods, and I pour a glass from the jug that's sitting in the middle of the table. I slide it over to him. He takes a few sips, biding his time, his light blue eyes darting around. He finally puts the glass down.

“What’s your policy on same-sex couples?”

The question hangs in the room. My eyes run back and forth between them, catching up to the fact that they’re, most likely, a couple.

I give a warm smile, hoping it will ease some of their tension. “We have a zero-tolerance policy for any kind of discrimination,” I begin. “All of our staff have undergone diversity training, and the management team and I are on a number of government advisory boards and panels which allows us to ensure we keep these sorts of issues front of mind for policy setters and politicians.”

I’m pretty happy with the answer I’ve given. The men, though, have suspicion etched on their faces. “Do you have any same-sex-attracted residents?” Dean asks softly.

I think about it for a moment. “I, uh, can’t recall off the top of my head,” I answer honestly.

“What about LGBTQIA staff members?” Mark presses.

“Well, uh...”

Shit. Normally I’m prepared for anything. Why wasn’t I better equipped to handle this?

Mark and Dean exchange a silent glance, and I can see their expressions have fallen. I realize my last two answers haven’t exactly painted the place in a good light. Mark looks like he’s about to get up to leave.

“Wait.” I raise my hand toward him. “I’m...” My brain searches for the right word, something it’s done a million times before. I have to settle on something. Even if it’s not one hundred percent right, it’ll be better than nothing. “I’m...not straight, myself.” I wince. It doesn’t sound right, but at least it’s somewhere in the ballpark.

Mark arches an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Yes, really. And I’m not just saying that to keep you from leaving. I’m still just...new to all of this.”

The energy in the room changes immediately. Both men relax their shoulders. Mark even cracks a smile. “We know a thing or two about being *new to this*,” he adds with a chuckle.

I angle my head. “What do you mean?”

“I’m seventy-two,” Dean begins. “Mark’s sixty-eight. We’ve been mates for over fifty years. Our wives were best friends. Our kids grew up together. We now have so many grandkids I can’t bloody keep up.”

We all laugh. “And a great-grandchild on the way now, too,” Mark reminds him.

“That’s right. Shit. I almost forgot,” he says with a wide smile.

“So when did you two...?” I don’t know how to finish that question.

“It’s taken a long time for the world to change quickly.” Mark sighs. “Most of the change that’s happened has taken place in the last ten years. Prior to that, the last forty years were...well, they were a hard slog for people like us.”

“We had to hide,” Dean jumps in. “There was no internet. There wasn’t even a gay bar around here. And words like *faggot* and *poofa* got thrown around like you wouldn’t believe. If we wanted to live anything resembling a normal life, we had to hide who we were.”

The sadness in those words breaks my heart. I clench my jaw and try to hold my emotions in. If it was hard growing up around here for my generation, I can’t even begin to imagine how much tougher they had it.

“What were you doing on the seventeenth of December in 2017?” Mark suddenly asks me.

“I don’t remember,” I reply slowly, the date not bearing any significance that I can recall.

“Well, we do.” Mark cups his hand over Dean’s. “That’s the day the Australian parliament legalized same-sex

marriage.”

“That’s also the day that I asked this old fart to marry me.” Dean looks at Mark, and the affection these two men share is so clear to see.

“My wife had passed away, and Mark had been twice married and divorced, so we just decided to fucking go for it. We left it late, but for however long we’ve got left on this green earth, we are never, ever, *ever* going to hide who we are again.”

“That’s why we’re a little picky about where we live next,” Mark explains, and it all makes sense now.

“You’re a young man, Mr. Clarke,” Mark continues. “You’ve still got your whole life ahead of you. Time is precious. Don’t waste it.”

We wrap up the meeting, and I escort them to the taxi waiting for them out the front of the center. As they drive away, I hope they decide to move in.

But more than that, Mark’s words echo in my head. I make a decision right there and then. I’m going to do something I should have done a long time ago.



*Ray*

Paul's been quiet the past few days. He called to let me know that now that the audit is finished, he and his team have really got their work cut out for them. I assume that in typical Paul style, he's thrown himself headfirst into that. I make a note to check in on him tomorrow.

The girls are having a mid-week sleepover at my parent's place, and I'm flicking through the rom-com category on Netflix. Gosh, it's a little scary to realize that I've seen pretty much every movie worth seeing. Looks like it'll have to be a repeat night. I settle on *My Best Friend's Wedding*. It's a stellar cast, and I'm a sucker for anything that's a throwback to the greatest decade of all time... The 1990s, obviously.

Barely a few minutes into the movie, I hear heavy footsteps thundering up the porch. I get up just as Paul ambles through the front door. "Hey, this is a pleasant surpr—" I stop talking when I notice how unsteady he is on his feet.

"Yeah, hope it's okaay," Paul says with a slight slur accenting his speech.

I walk over to him, my eyes scanning him as if that will somehow help me understand his inebriated state. It's completely unlike Paul to be drunk on a weeknight, much less...

"Hey, how did you get over here?"

“Uber,” he replies, giving an unsteady shrug. I brace my hands against his shoulders. Our eyes meet, his head gently bobbing from left to right with every breath he takes.

“Earlier,” he explains, but it still doesn’t really clarify things.

Earlier when? Earlier why? I live in the last house on the street in a quiet suburban neighborhood. I would’ve seen the headlights if Paul’s Uber had arrived after dark. And if for some reason, he’d gotten here earlier than that...well, what the hell’s he been doing outside my house for the past couple of hours? Apart from possibly drinking, that is.

“Are the girls good?” He leans forward to whisper it, the smell of terrible, local beer wafting off his lips as well as... whisky?

I nod. “Yeah. They’re at Mom and Dad’s tonight.”

“Good. That’s good, actually.” He catches my hand in his. “Come with me. I’ve got something to show you.”

His grip is surprisingly firm given his condition. I manage to quickly slip on my flip flops as he drags me out the front door and onto the street. There’s one lamp light showering us in an eternal orange glow. I can hear Mrs. Mangle across the street yelling at her kids. Or her husband. Or possibly all of them.

With our fingers entwined, Paul marches me past the front fence of my house and into the entrance of a small bushland reserve that wraps around the edge of the suburb. It’s a thin patch of scrubs, bordered by some native Eucalyptus trees. There’s a small creek that runs through it about a hundred feet away from the street entrance.

“Paul, why are you taking me here?”

“You said you wanted fireworks,” he mumbles in response over his shoulder.

Fireworks? It takes me a moment to connect the dots, remembering when he asked me what I was wanting when it came to love. Still, what does that have to do with—

“Holy shit.” They’re the last words to leave me before my heart leaps into my throat at the sight before me.

Paul lets go of my hand and gestures grandly toward the creek. “Fireworks are illegal in Queensland. I checked.” He brushes the top of his arm with his fingers. That’s when I notice they’re trembling, and my gut’s telling me it’s not alcohol related. “So I thought this might be the next best thing.”

The whole clearing where Paul and I have come to is lit in candles that sparkle and crackle in the sticky night air. I also spot two red fire extinguishers in the corner. I chuckle to myself. Even when he’s planning a grand romantic gesture, Paul’s still thinking about safety.

“This is beautiful,” I remark, stepping around the space, taking it all in.

It’s like...well, it’s like something out of a rom-com movie. It’s beautiful and thoughtful and so bloody romantic. Paul’s circling behind me. I can hear his footsteps as the leaves crackle underfoot. Even with my back turned to him, I can feel the heat of his gaze on me.

“I want to be the one to give you everything.”

His words stop me in my tracks, pummeling straight in the middle of my chest. I spin around to face him, his blue eyes blazing like I’ve never seen them before. I’ve wanted, I’ve wished, I’ve fantasized about being the subject of just such a stare from him. To feel like I’m the only thing that Paul wants.

And now that the moment has arrived, it feels...fucking fantastic.

I allow myself to experience the fullness of what his look—just his look—is unleashing in me. His gaze penetrates me, and I let myself believe that the fire in his eyes really is for me. All for me.

I break away from the hold he has over me, taking a few measured steps in the surroundings. How is this even possible? Paul is straight, he’s never given me even the slightest indication that he’s not.

We've shared so much of our lives—both outer and inner—with each other. How could something as important as this, as big as this, manage to sneak by us unspoken?

There are so many unexpressed questions tickling the edge of my tongue, just begging to be asked. So many years, so many decades, of suppressed emotions. Have I been blind all this time, or has something shifted in Paul recently? Is this why he and Diana got divorced? My mind is reeling, and as soon as I'm able to form a coherent thought, I intend on getting some answers.

I cast a look over my shoulder. Paul is bent over, away from where he was standing moments ago. As I run up to him, I hear the unmistakable sound of my best friend throwing up in the bushes.

“Are you okay?” I ask, somewhat redundantly. Clearly, he's not, but I just want to make sure it's alcohol induced and nothing else.

“Been drinking since noon,” he replies, swiping the back of his hand across his mouth. “I'm sorry. I wanted this to be perfect for you.”

I'm taken aback. Not by his kindness or generosity. I've been witnessing and experiencing those qualities from him firsthand the whole time we've known each other. It's what he's not saying—the implication of, well, romance, I guess—that's got me floored.

And speechless.

And gaping at him open-mouthed for god knows how long.

A darkness sweeps over his features. “I've fucked things up, haven't I?”

I draw him into my arms. “No.” Wiping my hand across his back, I say it again, “No. You haven't fucked anything up.”

*Paul*

I groan and painfully roll myself over to the side. My head is pounding. Every breath I take feels like a gargantuan effort to wheeze air in and out of my lungs. Can it be called a headache if your whole body is throbbing with pain?

But none of the physical pain I'm experiencing right now holds a candle to the thought dominating everything else.

I fucked up last night.

Big time and royally.

It wasn't meant to happen like that. It was meant to be a touching romantic gesture, like the type I'm sure Ray's seen countless times in those bloody awful rom-coms he's always watching. I guess nerves got the best of me.

I took the day off work. A rare occurrence for me. The last time I took a day off work, George W. Bush was still president. But I wanted to make it special. Something memorable. I suppose I achieved that, although not in the way I'd intended.

Fuck. I let out another beastly groan. I'm not ready to open my eyes, so I allow myself to wallow in my own hungover pity for a few moments longer. I got to Ray's house early, armed with all the supplies I'd need to pull off the romantic scene. The day was hot, and once I'd downed a quarter gallon of water without it quenching my thirst, I started on the beer. I had only brought two bottles in the cooler with me, so I moved

on to whiskey. A few sips of Jack somehow turned into almost two-thirds of the bottle, and urgh, here I am today.

Speaking of, where exactly am I? The last thing I have any vague recollection of was taking a few steps away from Ray so he wouldn't have to bear witness to me chucking my guts up. Then it all went black.

I rub my eyes before opening them. The thumping in my head doesn't relent, not even as I prop myself up and cast my eyes around the darkened room. Thank god for blackout curtains. I remember helping Ray install them. Which means...I'm at Ray's.

Fuck.

Ray.

I swallow. Painfully. I'm too smart to be surprised, but too dumb to care right about now. Memories from last night come gushing back, and combined with the jackhammering going on inside my head, I feel like I'm on the verge of passing out. Preferably into a hole in the ground and disappearing forever.

"Wakey, wakey, hands off snakey." A way-too-chipper-sounding voice precedes the door being opened and Ray sliding into the room gracefully.

He's smiling and carrying a tray. While I can't see what's on it, the freshly brewed coffee wafts welcomingly into my nostrils.

"Here." He smiles, handing me the giant-sized black mug. "This will bring you back to life."

"I'm not sure that's something I actually want," I retort before taking a sip. Then I take a few more.

Ray smiles warmly, placing the tray by my side. Close enough for me to reach for it, far enough away to not make me want to heave, should I be that way inclined. It's a close call at the moment. Could go either way, frankly.

"Do you need anything?" Ray asks, his eyes examining me carefully.

I take a sip of coffee, burning my tongue a little, to stop the one word from flying out my mouth that I so badly want to say.

*You.*

I give a small shake of my head.

Assessing the situation, and knowing me as well as he does, Ray stands. He points to the tray. “Finish your coffee. Try and have some food. I’ve left a spare towel in the bathroom. You might want to have a cold shower.”

“Huh. Why a cold shower?” I ask, not understanding why Ray’s staring at me with a lopsided smile.

And why his eyes are fixated on something a little lower than my face. Oh shit. I almost spill piping-hot coffee all over myself in an attempt to cover my bloody erection. The damn thing is hard as steel and won’t go down.

Ray giggles. Actually giggles. I don’t think I’ve ever heard him do that before. Before he turns to leave—his gaze focused firmly on my face this time—he tells me, “I’ve called work and told them you’re unwell. But don’t think you’re getting off that lightly, Mister.”

“What—what do you mean?” I croak out.

“I’ve got all five kids with me today. And they’re all super excited about spending the day with their favorite Uncle Paul.”

And with nothing more than an evil smirk, Ray turns on his heel and leaves. I don’t even have the energy to throw in a quip asking if there are any other Pauls in contention to be their favorite uncle.

I slurp up the rest of my coffee and stab at the bacon and eggs Ray made just the way I like. Aussies don’t have a clue when it comes to bacon. I spent a year on a medical exchange in the US, and boy, does that country know how to handle its bacon. I taught Ray after I got back one time when he was in town visiting his parents. He’s been making it perfectly ever since. I force myself to slow down, trying to enjoy the streaky, crisp perfection rather than inhaling it all at once.

Once I'm done with the food, I jump into the shower. I smile when I notice the clean clothes Ray left out for me hanging over the edge of the small bathtub. Lukewarm water washes over me, and as much as I'd like to stay in this shower forever, I know I can't. I've got five kids that I don't want to disappoint...

Normally, I'd say a hangover from hell, a balmy-as-fuck day in the triple digits, and five overexcited kids don't mix well. Yet somehow, spending the day with Ray, his two girls, and the three children he provides day care for is actually the tonic I need. He's a natural with kids, and surprisingly, I'm not too shabby myself.

We spent the day playing all sorts of games. Ray's topic of the month is flora and fauna, so I took the kids outside to learn more about some of the native bushes Ray has planted. Chloe let out a happy cry, her entire face lighting up when she spotted a beautiful, blue wing tipped Ulysses butterfly. That was followed by a game of hide and seek, then some reading time. The kids even managed to sneak in a solid hour and a half of naptime, too.

It's funny. Even though Ray and I spent the whole day together, it doesn't feel like too much. Sometimes, you can love someone, but you need your own time and space away from them. It doesn't detract from the love you share—it just is what it is.

With Ray, it's the opposite. It's like the more time we spend together, the more I want to be around him. Once he tucks the girls in that evening, he comes into the living room, crumpling onto the couch next to me in an exhausted heap.

"I'm fucking knackered," he declares, letting out a massive yawn.

"I'm surprisingly perky," I respond with just a hint of cheekiness.

Ray narrows his eyes, the corner of his mouth tipping up. "Care for a drink then?"

"God, no. Never again in my life."



The thought of alcohol sends a shudder through me, making Ray laugh. He tucks his feet under his body and turns so that he's facing me. "Wanna talk?"

He doesn't add "about last night," but he doesn't need to. It's more than implied. I scrub a palm down my face. "Sure."

Adjusting my body so that I'm facing him in return, my mind scrambles, trying to find words that match my feelings. As always, I come up short. But since saying nothing isn't an option, I decide to go with the truth, no matter how awkward and clunky it may be.

"I'm not straight," I say and wince internally at the sound of those words.

It's the same reaction I had when I blurted it out to Dean and Mark during our meeting a few weeks ago. It's not the truth, but it's not *not* the truth either. I haven't been able to find a label that fits, so for now, that's my placeholder.

I cast my eyes up at Ray. He's looking at me, his expression soft but guarded. "What does that mean for you?" he asks in a soft tone.

I scratch my neck. "It means I've had sex with men."

Ray draws his head back, his lips splaying open ever so slightly. "Oh."

"I've never cheated," I hastily tack on. "It's always been between relationships with women. No overlap ever. I would never do that. I couldn't. Just the thought of cheating repulses me."

"Have you...?" Ray opens and shuts his mouth a few times, the question seeming to get stuck in his throat.

"Have I what?" I prompt after a few moments of silence.

"Have you ever..." Ray closes his eyes and puffs out a heavy breath. "Have you ever had a relationship with a man?"

"Never," I shoot back straightaway. "I've never kissed one before, either. Well, not until recently."

Our eyes meet, and I catch a glimmer of light reflecting in his hazel pools. I move closer to him. There's a torrent of emotion swirling between us, almost three decades of friendship, love, being there for each other through all the ups and downs that life has thrown at us.

I stare deep into his eyes. That same face that would be horrified, chasing me on my bike, yelling and pleading for me to slow down. The same hands that would plaster a Band-Aid over my wounds. The same arms that encased me when Diana left me. The same lips I kissed and set off a yearning in me that I haven't been able to quell for even a second since it happened.

Ray is my everything—my past, present and future all rolled into one.

That same feeling that's been brewing in my gut these past few weeks bubbles up my chest and works its way into my throat. The words rise to my lips. I take a final, calming breath in, then out, knowing that my next words will change my life forever.

“I'm in love with you, Ray.”

I close my eyes. I can't bear to see his reaction. Not because I'm scared of it—I mean, fuck, yes, I am—but because something else is going on inside me. Something completely unexpected. Every time I've said, “I'm not straight,” it hasn't settled right within me. It's been like trying to fit into a pair of jeans that are at least two sizes too small.

But saying these words to Ray right now—this admission, confession, or whatever the hell it is—feels so damn right. Whatever his reaction is going to be, I know I've done the right thing. I've followed my heart.

The question now is—where do we go from here?

*Ray*

I wake up the next morning to the smell of scrambled eggs and the sounds of bacon sizzling on the pan filling the entire house. I get up and make my way to the kitchen. The girls are happily eating their cereal, while Paul's at the stove, listening to them chattering away.

Looking over his shoulder, he sees me and smiles. "Hey."

"Hey." I give the girls a kiss as I sit down at the table. Paul plates the food up and brings it over. "Thanks."

We eat breakfast together in a guarded silence. Well, Paul and I are quiet, the girls are talking away, merrily unaware of the simmering...something...between Paul and me.

When everyone's finished their food, Paul gets up and starts clearing the table. "Markets?"

"Yeah," I reply. "Lemme have a shower, and then we can head off."

The Sunshine Farmer's Markets are a well-known and much-loved institution around these parts. People drive for hours and spend the whole day here. Some come for the fresh local produce. Others enjoy supporting the incredible artist community that resides in the region.

I come for the atmosphere. Nothing feels more like home than the smell of sausages and onions on the grill, mingling with the salt-tinged breeze sweeping in from the beach. The

gentle constant whoosh of waves crashing in the distance and just the general laidback and cool vibe of the place.

“Can you imagine two guys walking through these markets twenty years ago like this?” I remark to Paul. He’s walking beside me. Chloe is perched on his shoulders, Grace is on mine, hanging on to my hair to keep her balance.

He shakes his head, smiling wryly. “No. I can’t. Sunshine’s come a long way.”

“It sure has.”

I pat him on the arm without realizing what I’m doing. The second I do, I pull my hand back sharply.

For a moment, I forgot we’re in this new, weird space. I’ve been waiting my whole life to hear the words Paul said to me last night. That he’s in love with me. It makes my heart flutter at the mere recollection of it. I have no doubt he means it, either. Yes, there’s the whole “I’m not entirely straight” admission to deal with, too, but that’s the lesser of the two confusing evils.

Because for all the want and desire I’ve had for him, I’ve also spent almost my entire life suppressing those very emotions. I’ve actively made decisions—big life decisions, such as which city I’d go to university in—based on keeping all of those feelings where they belong. At bay. At a distance. At a place where I couldn’t reach them because I didn’t want to jeopardize the most important friendship in my life.

And now, I’ve been smacked upside the head with it. Shouldn’t I be jumping up and down for joy? Feeling light and elated? Like all my dreams have finally come true? Don’t get me wrong, I do get inklings of happiness, but there’s still so much left unsaid.

“Why hello.”

Paul’s surprised-sounding voice snaps me back to reality.

“Hey there.”

Two older guys are standing in front of us, both of them carrying a box stuffed to the brim with lush green pot plants.

“We’d shake hands, but, you know,” one of them says, sticking the box out in front of him.

“No worries,” Paul says. I can’t help but notice the smile on his face. It’s the most relaxed I’ve seen him all morning. Turning to me, his smile deepens. “Ray, I’d like you to meet Dean and Mark. They are the newest residents at the center.”

“Moving in next week,” Dean adds, beaming. “We can’t wait.”

“And we know a thing or two about waiting,” Mark chips in with a laugh.

I must look confused, so the three of them bring me up to speed, and the story of how Mark and Dean finally found their way to each other moves me. I mean, how can it not? It would move anyone who has a beating heart.

We arrange to have dinner in a few weeks once they’ve settled in before we say our goodbyes. The next few hours slip away. The girls have found their new favorite thing—the jumping castle. Paul picks up a few handmade jams and some produce for dinner tonight, and I’m happy staying lost in my thoughts.

The rest of the day flies by, too. We go back to my place, and I pack a few things since Chloe and Grace will be staying at Mom and Dad’s tonight. Paul went home after the markets, but he invited me over for dinner. I clean the house up and go through the motions of a normal Saturday afternoon, but yeah, it’s impossible to keep my mind from thinking about anything other than him.

And the possibility that, after all these years, there may be an us.

That night, I’m sitting on Paul’s back porch enjoying the delicious lamb and vegetable casserole he’s cooked. We eat in silence. I steal glances in his direction every so often, and I can feel him doing the same. The last slivers of daylight disappear behind the mountains, the dusky air as hot and stifling as ever.

“Fuck, I wish it’d rain.” Paul rests his empty plate on the wooden table between us.

“Same,” I agree, finishing up my last few bites. “Dinner was amazing, by the way. Thank you.”

I place my plate on top of Paul’s and reach for the glass of red wine. I’ll definitely be needing some backup for the conversation we both know is coming.

“So,” we both say at the same time.

Paul lets out a pinched smile, but for some reason, I feel a twinge of anger stab at my chest.

“How are you feeling?” he asks, keeping his eyes trained on the expanse in front of us, and not on me.

“Angry.” I blurt the word out loudly and forcefully, catching us both by surprise.

Paul’s head snaps to me. “Why angry?”

“You’ve had almost thirty bloody years to tell me this...”

I stop myself. Saying the words out loud makes me hear how wrong they are. Not entirely, because I do feel some anger, but it’s also not a true representation of what I’m feeling right now, either.

I pinch my eyes shut. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Paul’s hand brushes my arm. “I wish I’d been honest with you sooner, but I didn’t really know a lot of this stuff myself. Pathetic, right?”

I shake my head. “No, it’s not. But why didn’t you tell me?”

“I’ve been scared.”

My brows pinch together. “Scared of what? You didn’t think I’d have a problem with you being gay, or bi, or anything other than straight, did you?”

Paul stares into my eyes, his are dark and glistening. I can see his throat muscles flex as he struggles to find the right words. “It’s never been clear cut for me. My feelings.” He

gestures with his hand in front of his chest. “I’ve always been attracted to men as much as I am to women, but it’s felt bad. Heavy. Like there was something wrong with me for not being able to figure it out and define it the way everyone else is able to with their sexuality.”

I look at my Paul. I mean, *really* look at him. Going past his insane attractiveness and digging into the good, solid, dependable man underneath. The man who’s been there for all of my ups and downs since I was eight years old. The man who’s welcomed me and my girls into his life like we’re family. I guess...because we are.

It strikes me that in all of this, I’ve been so wrapped up in my own head about it that I haven’t really considered what Paul’s been going through. I huff out an angry puff of air, pissed at myself that I’ve been so selfish and self-centered. “And how are you feeling about last night?”

Paul takes a big pull of his cheap, disgusting Aussie beer. A few moments pass before he repeats, “Scared.”

When he doesn’t say anything else, I prod, “Scared of losing our friendship?”

“No.” His voice is low and sharp, his blue eyes ablaze. “Not for a second.”

“Really?” I push back in my seat. “Because that’s something I’m afraid of. Losing what we have.”

“We could never lose our friendship, Ray. It’s too strong. It’s...it’s the only thing I am certain of. You’re stuck with me for life, whether you like it or not.”

I grin, letting the determination of his words wash over me. I breathe out, relaxing just a fraction. Hearing Paul be so certain about our friendship remaining as it is reassures me. If there is one thing I know about him, it’s that he only says what he means. So he must mean this.

He blows out heavily, and a faint whiff of his beer-tinged breath wafts over to me in the muggy air. “I wish we hadn’t lost all this time. Which I know is stupid because you

wouldn't have had your girls, which is not what I'm saying at all."

I offer him a smile. "It's okay. I know what you mean."

"Do you?"

Paul's deep blue eyes bore into me. I reach out my hand, and he meets it. The tips of our fingers touch, barely, but it's like no other touch we've ever shared before.

"I do." I press slightly more firmly against his fingers. "It's like feeling regret and happiness and confusion all at once."

I see him nodding. "Yeah. Pretty much exactly like that," he hums back quietly. "I want to make it up to you. This isn't about going back in time to change anything because, in a way, everything that's happened in our lives has led us to this moment. I'm talking about the future. I want to spend every day for the rest of my life making this up to you."

"That's not necessary." I smile wryly. "You can have Sundays off."

He breaks out into a laugh. It's a heavy, rumbling sound that harks out loudly into the night air. Once he settles, his fingers move, tracing over the soft skin of my left wrist. I feel myself falling. Every wall I've built, every fantasy I've kept guarded, starts to dissipate into thin air.

Could this be real? Could Paul and I actually have a future together as a...couple?

"So," I begin, and his eyes jolt up to meet mine. "How would this whole thing—me and you—actually work?"



*Paul*

Now that's the million-dollar question, isn't it?

I'm conscious of supplying Ray with an answer quickly. I don't want it to look like I don't have any clue or that I haven't given this a lot of thought. Because I have. It's the only thing that's been playing on my mind. Work, food, driving...all of that's been happening on autopilot in the background.

This, him, us...this is what's been dominating every second of my waking life.

I push past the frog in my throat and start speaking from the heart. "I want a relationship with you. A partnership. I want us to live our lives together. You, me, and the girls. As one unit. I want to adore you, and worship you, and argue over what to watch on Netflix with you. I want to find a million and one different ways to give you something new, something different. I want to give you moments that take you out of your life and make you forget who you are, while reminding you who you are."

Ray smiles at the memory those words invoke, and it lights up his whole face.

"I just..." I blow out a heavy breath. "I just want to be with you. Completely and totally and in every way possible."

Silence falls between us. Somewhere along the way, I pulled away from Ray's touch, and now I'm looking down on my fingers resting in my lap. I'm rubbing the flats of my

thumb and index finger together the way I do whenever I'm shitting myself.

Fuck, that means I'm nervous. Not about losing this friendship—there is no fucking way I would ever let that happen. Saying the words out loud feels surreal, like a bucket list from a fairy tale. But is what I've just said too much for him? Is he wanting all of those things...but with someone else?

We both turn to face one another at the exact same moment. "And what about sex?" he asks, and I can hear the trepidation in his tone.

"What about it?"

He notices the smirk on my face, and I can tell it's tripping him up a little. "I—I like sex," I say, keeping my tone casual, playful even.

Even in the dim light, I can see his cheeks flushing. "I like sex, too."

I get to my feet and extend my hand. As I lead him off the porch and into the yard, the first drops of rain start to fall. We both look up at the blotchy purple sky at the same time. Clouds are sweeping over the range. "Looks like we're in for a soaking," I observe.

"Thank fuck." Ray's still looking up at the sky. "I need some relief. Been sweating like a pig all night."

The rain starts to get heavier as I lead Ray to a little project I've been working on. I called in a few mates to help me lift the heavy bastard, but I'm hoping the lower back pain will be worth it. There's a short path that leads around some native bushes to a clearing that can't be seen from the house.

As we round the corner, Ray stops in his tracks, his hand slipping out of mine.

"Oh my god." His hands are now covering his mouth. Tears well in his eyes as he takes it in. "Is this the...?"

I nod, gently placing my hand in the small of his back. "It is."

I finally got around to cleaning up that old bathtub I had lying around in the yard. With some elbow grease, it's actually come up nice. I've filled it up with warm water and sprinkled rose petals across the top a few minutes before Ray arrived. Oh, and I got some of those twinkle lights strewn between the Eucalyptus trees since I figured he'd like that...

Okay, I admit, I like it, too.

"So." I step in closer to Ray, my fingers sliding down the sleeve of his T-shirt. "To answer your question about sex."

Ray shuffles on his feet, and the blush returns to his face, brighter than before. "I'm all for it," I tell him. And with that, I strip out of my clothes and casually walk over to the bath. I flick a glance in his direction. "You gonna stand there like a flummoxed goose, or would you like to join me?"

Stepping into the deliciously warm bath is heavenly, but it's nothing compared to what's happening right now on Ray's face. I know him well enough that I can practically hear every thought that's racing through his mind. Luckily, he reaches the conclusion I've been hoping for.

With a few quick pulls and shrugs, he's equally as naked as I am, striding over to the bathtub. And while we've spent plenty of time at the beach and seen each other in boardies hundreds of times over the years, I've never witnessed the sight of my best friend's naked body.

And holy shit, what a sight it is. I've always loved how he's so thick-set and manly, but I've never got to witness it like this. The twinkle lights sparkle around us and illuminate the lines, shapes, and fullness of his form. He's stocky and lightly hairy all over, which I really like. I've been with guys who shave and wax themselves into oblivion, and it doesn't do anything for me. It might be old-fashioned, but hair on a man's body is sexy as hell.

He dips his fingers into the water, and his lips bloom into a beautiful smile. "Temperature's perfect," he observes as he gets in.

It's only once he's standing in the bathtub that he realizes his dilemma. Does he sit facing me, or does he want to wrap himself into my body? Sure, that option means we won't be able to see each other, but we'll be so much closer to each other physically. It's completely up to him, whatever he feels most comfortable with, but I'm secretly hoping he goes for the second option.

"How should we do this?" he mutters.

"However you like. Go with what feels right."

Up until this point, I haven't been paying that much attention to his cock, but at my words, it pulses and moves from soft into semi-chub territory, enticing me to look. It's as thick as the rest of his body. Long, too, and getting bigger with every passing second. It's also veiny, and I can't help but wonder what it would feel like to run my tongue over those veins.

"All right then," Ray mumbles more to himself than to anyone else as he twists around and lowers himself down into the water. He eases his back into my chest, stretching his legs out in front him. I can feel the stiffness in his neck as my fingers round the curve of his shoulders. With a gentle pull, I silently urge him to fall back onto me. Closer. Closer, still.

We've spent far too much of our lives apart. I don't just want to be near Ray. I'm craving it. He allows his body to be guided by my touch, finally settling his full body weight against me. He lets out a heavy gasp once we're as close as we can be.

And that's when it happens.

Out in the distance, over the range, a crack of lightning lights up the sky. It's a spindly streak stretching from left to right. "Wow," we both say at the same time as I wrap my hands around Ray's waist. It's the first time I'm touching his body in a *more than a friend* way, and it's even more thrilling and erotic than I could have anticipated. I trail my fingers around his firm, round stomach. It draws out a moan from his lips, as he sinks even further into my body.

Raindrops—big, fat, juicy ones—start pelting down on us. They're hot and heavy and burst on our skin, igniting my senses even more. "Are you okay out here?" I whisper into Ray's ear, my nose nuzzling into his wet hair.

Ray inches forward before turning around to face me. He leaves my question unanswered as he claims my mouth in a kiss. My hands travel up his body until I'm cradling his face, pulling him into me and, at the same time, pushing my tongue deeper into him.

Kissing Ray in the tub with rain falling and lightning in the background is the single hottest, most exciting thing I've ever done in my life. It's what I've always wanted to do—capture passion and lust and a deep, familiar love in a moment like this. I guess I just hadn't found the right person to share it with, and now, rather than rue all the years we spent apart, I'm thankful for them. If we'd done this earlier, say, in our early twenties, there's no way I'd appreciate just how special and magical this moment here, right now, really is.

Between the ever-increasing rain, the lightning, the thunder cracking, and this fucking incredible kiss, my senses are in full-on overload-mode. Ray drops his hand into the water. A few seconds later, I feel his warm fingers encase my cock. He tightens his grip around it, but stays still. No movement up and down, just a tightening and loosening of his grip, creating a throbbing sensation that somehow matches my stuttering heartbeat. It feels...beautiful.

He breaks the kiss and has to shout his words to be heard over the rain that's bucketing down now. "I want you to fuck me."

I give a hurried nod and then start looking around us. It's Ray's turn to look at me and smile, picking up on my uncertainty about how this will all work, the whole "what goes where and how" of it all. Blinking through rain-soaked eyes, he moves back and shuffles his body around to lean over the bathtub.

His firm, round ass is right in front of my face, and if that's not the most appealing invitation in the world, then I don't

know what is. Going on pure instinct alone, I spread his cheeks and push my face up against him. His heat and his taste merge with the rain and my saliva as I press my tongue against his sensitive skin. I close my eyes and inhale him. After a few moments, I drive my tongue as deep into him as I can, my fingers kneading into his meaty ass. It's like something's taken over me, and all I want to do is touch and taste every square inch of Ray's body.

I reach underneath the tub to the two supplies I am so grateful I decided to bring along, just in case the night went how I hoped it would. I open the bottle of lube and pour way too much of the stuff over my fingers. Bringing them to his ass, I carefully slide one finger into Ray.

His back arches momentarily. Then he turns back around, his pupils blown out and a wicked, dirty smile the likes of which I've never seen on him before covering his face. "Yeah. That's good, Paul. Open me up for you."

My heart soars at his words, and with a forceful determination, I work one, two, and finally three fingers into him. Once he's ready, I reach back around and roll a condom over my cock before slathering it with a generous amount of lube.

I press into the small of his back to encourage Ray to lower himself a little so that I can get the angle just perfect. Curving my fingers into the flesh around his hips, I line the head of my cock against his hole.

"I'm ready," he yells out, and I can't help but smile slightly at his impatience. It's endearing and hot as hell at the same time.

I place my thumb over the base of my cock as I gently ease my way into his body. It's warm and tight, but I'm concentrating hard. At the slightest sign of resistance—or, god forbid, pain—I'll stop and pull out immediately. But there's none of that. And as Ray's body opens up to me, with a few inches left, he slams back against me, taking me all the way to the base.

“Fuck,” I cry out. My head falls back, and my face gets pelted with rain. But it’s Ray’s movement that is killing me. I’m standing perfectly still. He’s the one moving, fucking himself up and down on my cock.

I lose track of time, but I do know one thing. As much as I’m enjoying this, I want to take control and fuck Ray. I grip his shoulders, kneading my fingers into his wet flesh, and begin to meet his thrusts with my own. The combined movement forces his back to arch and jolt in response.

“Is this okay?” I yell out. I have to shout to be heard over the thunderous rain. “Too much?”

Ray glances over his shoulder, his pupils blown out. “No such thing when it comes to you.”

And fuck, if I needed any more motivation to drive into him, claim his body, that was it right there. Ray slows until he stills, and then it’s only my movements, my hips snapping furiously against his body, my balls slapping against his ass, that consume us.

I wrap my arms around his body and, with a heave, bring him up so that his back is closer to my chest. He twists around as I lower myself over him and capture his mouth in a kiss. It’s not the most comfortable position for either one of us, but I need this. I need this connection and closeness to him. I need his reassurance and his love and his strength.

“I’m getting close.” His words vibrate against my lips.

“Come for me,” I mutter back. I don’t know if he hears it over the rain until, a few moments later, his eyes widen as his body shakes and rocks beneath me.

I continue driving into him, my own release so close I can almost reach out and touch it.

I feel Ray’s hands cup the sides of my face. He stares me straight in the eyes, and right as I’m on the cusp of coming, he pulls our foreheads together and declares, “I love you so much.”

His words drive me to the most intense orgasm I’ve ever had. I close my eyes, almost blacking out at the intensity

pouring out of me. Each spurt draining me. Releasing me. Forgive me.

I slip out of Ray's body and help him get out of the tub. As wonderful as sex in the rain is, I'm looking forward to a nice hot shower and snuggling in bed.

We make our way to the house, hand in hand, shoulder bumping against shoulder. Before we reach the back porch and go inside, I nudge into him. "Does that answer your question?"

"Question?"

I've never seen Ray post-sex before, and the dazed and dopey look he's got is the most adorable thing ever.

"Yeah. You asked me about sex, remember?"

"Oh, yeah." Faint recognition crosses his face. "I might need another round to really cement your answer."



# EPILOGUE

*Ray*

A lot can change in twelve months.

But also, a lot can stay exactly the same.

And that's kind of how things are with me and Paul. We're together now, officially a couple. The girls and I have moved into his place, and we've spent the better part of the past year extending the house, keeping as much of its original charm and character as we can, while making sure the four of us have enough room to live comfortably.

I've just put the girls to sleep and wander out onto the back porch. Paul's taking a sip of artisanal beer—and they say you shouldn't try to change your partner, pfft—so I sit down next to him.

“Any rain coming?” I ask hopefully.

Paul turns and smirks. “Why? You want to give that bathtub another spin, do ya?”

I chuckle. We've been giving it a spin at least three times a week. “Something like that.”

I settle into the seat and just take it all in. Sometimes, you can get so busy chasing dreams that you don't take the time to enjoy them once they arrive. I'm happier now than I've ever been, and a lot of that has to do with the man sitting beside me.

He took a massive gamble opening up to me about his feelings, but I'm so glad he did. It's taken time, and we've each had to learn to communicate better than we ever had to before, but it's so been worth it. I've always loved Paul. Now, I can be *in love* with him.

It doesn't change or diminish my love for Steven, either. He'll always hold a special place in my heart, and I'll always be thankful for the time we shared, and the beautiful girls we brought into this world together.

Another thing I am grateful for is my fears about ruining my friendship with Paul proving to be totally unfounded. If

anything, I think it's because we have such a strong friendship as our foundation, that it makes us work better as a couple.

“Penny for your thoughts.”

“You.”

Paul smiles. He's been doing a lot more of that lately. “Anything specific?”

I shake my head. “Nope. Just all of it. I still can't believe that it's real. That after all these years, you and I are together.”

Paul takes another swig of beer. “Not about to change your mind on me, are you?”

“Never,” I shoot back instantly. “I didn't know it was possible to feel this happy.”

“Same here.”

He drains the rest of his beer and gets to his feet. I take his outstretched hand as he leads me inside, into our bedroom. Silently, he peppers my body with a thousand kisses. At the same time, I'm noticing how our clothes seem to be ending up on the floor.

Once we've showered, brushed our teeth, and are naked in bed, Paul props himself up onto his elbow, gazing at me with those incredible blue eyes.

“I love moments like this,” I tell him as he traces his fingers over my chest.

“Moments like what?”

“Just this. You and me. We don't need anything big or fancy. When it's just the two of us, everything feels perfect.”

“So, you're saying I should cancel the first-class tickets I bought to Hawaii, then?”

I feel the rumble of his chest on the bed. “No. Keep them.”

In the year since we've been together, not a week has gone by where Paul doesn't do something to surprise me. It can be something as sweet as going for an unplanned walk on the

beach or whisking me away to the Barossa Valley for a weekend of wine-tasting and lovemaking.

It means so much to me that he makes me feel so special and wanted. Long-term relationships are hard. They get stale. Familiar. Even boring. But they don't have to end up like that. With work and determination, they can stay fresh and fun. I'm so glad Paul thinks I'm worth it to make the effort that he does.

I nestle into his chest. "I love you so much."

His hand strokes my back. "I love you, too."

I feel my eyelids get heavy as those words ease me into a blissful night's sleep.

*Paul*

I smile as I feel Ray's warm body wriggle on the bed next to me. Or maybe I've spent the whole night smiling while I've been sleeping. Who knows? All that matters is that I'm finally living the life I was meant to live.

Ray stirs, so I stiffen, not wanting to wake him up just yet. I've always been an early riser, and this is one of my favorite things about him, about us. Waking up a few moments before he does and just savoring the moment. A ray of sunshine swoops in through the blinds, sending a slice of light across the lower half of Ray's face. My smile grows as I gently rake my fingers through his hair.

As much as I wish it hadn't taken me until I was almost forty to start living my truth, I've come to accept that it had to happen this way. I can't imagine a life without Ray's girls in it. I'm even grateful for all of my own ups and downs. They've made me into the man I am today. It's taken me a while to accept all of myself—and it's still an ongoing thing—but for the first time in my life, I don't feel like I'm at war. There's no *good versus bad* thing happening inside me anymore. I am who I am. I love who I love. And it's all good. So very, *very* good.

Ray grinds his ass against me, knowing how much I love the sensation. "Morning," I murmur.

He doesn't say anything, but I can see his cheeks rise in a smile. Ray always talks about little moments mattering, and I can see what he means. As long as I have him, I'm happy. It really is as simple as that.

It's a Saturday morning, and even though the markets are on—we're catching up with Mark and Dean for a spot of lunch there—I'm in no rush to get out of bed.

I've always felt I was broken, like there was something wrong with me. Being with Ray has helped me to begin healing those wounds. I now realize that it's not about being broken or getting fixed—it's just about living your life authentically.

And with him, I can do just that.

I'm going to propose to him. I want to spend the rest of my life with him, and I'm sure he feels the same way. I bought the ring last week. I just don't know when to do it. I've been planning a big romantic getaway but can't seem to settle on a location. Paris, maybe?

But a small voice inside my head keeps whispering to me, telling me that I don't need to do something crazy and grand and expensive. We both like the little things in life, so maybe I'll have to wait for a little moment to come along and...

No. Actually. You know what? I'm done with waiting.

I lurch out of bed, drawing a surprised cry out of Ray. "Are you okay?" he asks, scrubbing his hand over his eyes.

"Never better," I reply over my shoulder. I fish out the little black box from my sock drawer and walk back to the bed. Ray takes forever to wake up, his face still crumpled adorably from the pillow.

"What are you doing?"

I drop to my knee and stick the box in front of me. Ray's mouth falls open as tears well in his eyes. "I don't know if you remember, but a while ago, I asked you if you believed in forever love."

Ray covers his still-flung-open mouth as he nods. “Uh-huh.”

“I’m hoping you still believe in that, and if you do, I’d be honored if you’d be willing to share forever with me.” I suck in a gulp of air. “Ray Bartholomew Wilson, will you do me the honor of being my husband?”

I hear a “yes”—thank god!—before Ray loops his arms around my neck and pulls me in over him. We kiss deeply. I feel his tears splashing on my face, yet I don’t want to pull back. I never want this moment to ever end.

And while I know that this one has to, at least I have a lifetime more of them to look forward to.



*For more from Casey Cox, flip the page for a sneak peek of  
Got Me Hoping (Vet Shop Boys #1).*

# SNEAK PEEK AT GOT ME HOPING

*It's just a one-night stand, they said. It'll be simple, no-strings fun, they said. They. Lied.*

I'm done with love and being broken-hearted. The only dogs I want to deal with are the ones I treat in the veterinary clinic I work at.

But at thirty-four, having my first one-night stand can't hurt. Right? The rules are pretty simple.

1. Don't spend the night.
2. Don't see him again.
3. Don't share anything personal.
4. Don't fall in love with him.

But when Haze, the guy I spent a blazing hot night with and haven't been able to forget about, shows up as our new receptionist, the rules fly out the window.

There's no way one night could lead to anything more. So why has Haze got me hoping this might just last?

***Got Me Hoping*** is book 1 in the ***Vet Shop Boys*** series and can be read as a stand-alone. Expect plenty of humor, found family, a vet who's almost given up on love, a soap-making chameleon, sizzling chemistry, an unexpected office romance, an adorable golden retriever, a foul-mouthed parrot, an eye-popping world first discovery, and a heartwarming happily ever after!

## Chapter 1 - Noah

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Back it up. You’ve never had a one-night stand?”

Three sets of eyes land on me like laser beams. The last thing I expected to be doing tonight is admitting *this* to my friends and colleagues, especially during a drinking game I haven’t played since my days in vet school.

“Why are we even playing Never Have I Ever?” I complain-grumble. “It’s a stupid game that always devolves into sex.”

“Uh, you just answered your own question there.” Gus smirks at me. He’s the boss and owner of Vet Shop Boys, the veterinary clinic Fulton, Chase, and I work at.

“No. I’ve never had a one-night stand,” I admit. I try to play it off casually, like it’s no big deal, but I can feel my cheeks heating up. I’m thirty-four and single, so why haven’t I had one? I scratch the back of my neck. “Is that weird?”

Fulton’s hand lands on my shoulder, his friendly eyes meeting mine. “No, it’s not weird. You’re just not wired that way, that’s all.”

Thankfully, that was our third and final shot for the evening. It’s a Tuesday night, and all four of us are on the other side of thirty, so we know our limits. I downed two out of three drinks, revealing that I’d both skinny-dipped and had sex on a beach. So not a total prude.

“*Should* I have a one-night stand?” My eyes bulge. Dammit. I hadn’t meant to ask that out loud.

“It’s up to you, man.” Chase shrugs before taking a sip of his drink. “I had a few in college before I met Julie and settled down. Some guys need to get that shit outta their system, you know?”

Gus nods. “There’s no harm in trying, right? I mean, you don’t want to be ninety, on your rocking chair with your husband by your side, and wondering what a one-night stand *could* have been like. Besides, it’s just some simple, no-strings fun.”



“Exactly,” Chase chips in. “Nothing more. Nothing less.”

I take a sip of bourbon and let their words settle over me. Gus resumes his conversation with Chase, who’s telling him all about Miles the turtle who was brought in today with a small crack in his shell. Turns out the best thing to patch it up with is epoxy resin. Who knew?

I finish off my bourbon as my eyes sweep around the bar. It’s pretty busy for a weeknight. We’re sitting in what’s become our usual booth, tucked away in the corner behind the pool table. The dance floor in the distance is silhouetted with bodies.

I guess you could say we’re regulars here. Being a vet is the best job in the world, but sometimes it can get tough. It’s not all cute puppies and cuddly kittens. So having a few drinks and socializing with one another is a good way to decompress and blow off some steam at the end of a long day.

“What’s it really like?” I mutter to Fulton, who’s sitting beside me.

He stops scrolling through his phone and squints at me, running the silver, thin-rimmed glasses back up his nose. “What’s *what* really like?”

“A one-night stand.” I reach for a glass of water and drain half of it in one go.

“Meh. Overrated if you ask me. Kinda like jerking off with your non-dominant hand.”

I snort. “What does that mean?”

Fulton places his phone on the table and turns to me. “Well, it’s familiar and feels okay-ish. It’s also not that great and a little awkward, but it gets you the desired outcome.”

“Which is?”

“You tell me.”

I blow out a heavy breath. “It’s been two years.”

Fulton fiddles with his red and yellow polka-dot bow tie. “Two years since...” He stops himself as soon as he realizes

what I'm referring to. "Oh."

"Yeah."

"And there's been no one since?"

"Nope." My voice is small, barely audible over the music.

He adjusts his glasses. "And you're still not on any of the apps, are you?"

"Apps?"

"Yeah. You know, like Grindr, Scruff, Tinder, Woof, Growl, Squawk, Oink, Yay or..." Fulton throws his head back before letting out a very horsey, "Neigggh."

"Okay, now you're just making animal noises."

He lowers his head. "True. But when did you realize?"

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that in two years of being single, you haven't used a single dating app. There's gotta be a reason for that."

My fingers circle the top of my glass as I think it over. Why aren't I on dating apps or having one-night stands? I've had three long-term relationships and been left with a broken heart each time. Fulton says it's because I give too much of myself. I treat my boyfriends too well. But isn't that how love is supposed to work? At their core, aren't relationships based on a foundation of *I treat him well, he treats me well*? That hasn't exactly worked out that great for me so far. It takes two to tango, and I've been left solo on the dance floor more times than I care to remember.

I can't deny that the lonely pull in my heart has been getting stronger lately. A gentle curiosity stirs in my stomach. Maybe some simple, no-strings fun might actually be the thing I need right now.

A pool game is starting up between a bunch of guys in front of us. I notice one of the guys who's just walked in, he's tall and has shoulder-length blond hair. I crane my head a little to get a better look, but one of his friends shoves a pool cue in his hands and blocks my view.

“What if I want to do it?” I say. “Have a one-night stand, that is.”

Fulton sits up a little taller and clears his throat. “Well, then. As your best friend, fashionista with exquisite taste, and one of the best veterinarians in all of Brookhaven, Virginia, let me offer you some sage advice, should you choose to resign from your position as President of the Blue Balls Society.”

I let out a low chuckle. Fulton is quirky as fuck. He likes wearing funky colorful outfits, he celebrates his half-birthday since his actual birthday is on Christmas Day, and he listens to Mariah Carey Christmas carols...in June. He also happens to be the best friend a guy could ever hope to have.

I drain the remaining water. “Lay it on me.”

“First, set your expectations to low.”

“Okay.”

“Once you’ve done that...lower them again.”

“Geez, you’re really selling it.”

Fulton’s mouth slips into a smile. “I’m a realist. Besides, like the guys said, it’s just one night of no-strings fun.”

“Fair enough.”

“Now before I give you the four golden rules for any one-night stand, I’m going to preface this by stating, for the record, that there is nothing wrong with you never having had a one-night stand. That borders on reverse sex shaming, and you know how I feel about any sort of shaming.”

“Roger that.” I tip my fingers in salute, grinning. I love when Fulton goes on one of his mini-rants.

“The rules, like all things to do with men and sex are, unsurprisingly, very simple.”

“I’m all ears.”

Fulton lifts a finger as he spouts each of them off. “Don’t spend the night. Don’t see him again. Don’t share anything personal. Don’t fall in love with him. That’s it. Stick to these four rules, and you’re golden.”

I quirk a cheeky eyebrow. “That’s an awful lot of *don’t-ing* for something that’s meant to be fun.”

“It is what it is.” Fulton shrugs, his face growing more serious. “Ultimately, sex is about connecting. But how you choose to connect, whether it’s with the one and only person you love and want to be with for the rest of your life, or a random stranger whose path crosses yours for a few hours, there’s no right or wrong way.” He takes a breath and looks like he’s about to say something else, when Gus’ voice drifts over to us.

“Has anyone seen my fiancé?” he asks with an exaggerated hand flourish. Even in the dim lighting, it’s hard to miss the dazzling bling on his ring finger. “My fiancé seems to have disappeared. Do you think I should go and look for my fiancé?”

Gus recently got engaged to Marco. He’s just a *teeny* bit excited about it.

“Geez, anyone would think you’re getting married or something,” Fulton teases, but Gus doesn’t bite. He’s got groomzilla written all over him in big bright neon letters, but after what that man’s been through, no one deserves to find true love more than him. I’m happy for the guy, even if it means we’ll no doubt have to endure months of wedding planning torture.

“I haven’t seen him.” Chase cranes his neck on the lookout for said missing fiancé. “He mentioned something about going to the bathroom, but that was a good ten minutes ago.”

Fulton lets out a yawn. “I might take off, you guys.”

Chase nods and reaches for his jacket. “Yeah. Me, too.”

We all get to our feet. Gus is still searching for Marco as we exchange a round of hugs.

“I gotta pee. I’ll see you tomorrow at work. I’ve got the late shift,” I announce to the group as I leave.

As I approach the men’s room, Marco stumbles out. He looks a little disheveled, his shirt’s hanging out, and if I didn’t know any better, I’d say his lips were swollen.

“Hey, Marco. You okay?”

“Uh, yeah.” He averts my gaze.

“We’re all leaving. Gus is looking for you.”

“Oh, okay. Cool.” He ambles past me without so much as a wave. Hmm, that was weird.

I take care of my business and hustle toward the exit when I stumble into a six-foot-plus vision blocking my way. Breath escapes my lungs as two hazel eyes with shards of gray pierce right into me.

“Why, hello.”

A twinge spikes in my chest. “Uh, hi.”

He drags his hand through his wavy shoulder-length blond hair that’s pulled into a messy bun, a few loose strands falling and framing his angular face. A sweet rosy hue fills his cheeks, contrasting nicely with his broody stubble.

A glimmer of a smile plays on his lips. “Having a good night?” His voice is calm despite the flurry of people and sounds around us.

I give a quick nod. Words would be useful at this point, I know, but my mouth seems to have lost its ability to articulate them. My eyes, on the other hand, are in overdrive, roaming up and down this man’s body.

He’s wearing a white crewneck, and the flimsy shirt material is clearly fighting an uphill battle confining all that soft skin and supple muscle, the outline of his strong, well-defined chest and abs clearly visible. Ripped, faded jeans stretch over miles and miles of muscled legs, and the outfit is finished off with a pair of dusty brown cowboy boots, bringing just the right amount of swag to his stance.

Oh, and the man smells good. Damn good. I close my eyes for just a second and inhale the spicy citrus scent wafting off him. It’s not a cologne or an artificial smell. It’s something natural, and it seems to be short-circuiting my brain.

He’s smiling at me, looking all flirty and inviting. He hands back the pool cue to one of his friends. That’s when I

notice he's wearing four or five different colored bands around his left wrist. One silver, a few dark and tan leather, and a couple of bright colors thrown in there, too.

"I'm Haze." He reaches his hand to mine.

"Noah," I reply. We shake hands. "Can I... I'd like to... I mean, would you like..." Oh, fuck. I really suck at this. It's been a while since I've done the whole *talking to a cute guy* thing.

Luckily for me, Haze interjects. With a mischievous twinkle in his eye, he asks, "Drink or dick?"

I blink. Excuse me, but did he just say—

"It seems like you want to ask me something." Haze speaks slowly, measuring me with his deep eyes. "And I'm guessing it's you'd either like to buy me a drink, or you'd like to see my dick."

"Drink," I squeak, before clearing my throat so that I don't sound like a prepubescent teen. "Drink. I'd like to buy you a drink."

He chuckles, his warm breath dancing over my face. "Too bad, Noah." He leans forward, the citrus scent enveloping me. "Because I have a *spectacular* cock."

We make our way to the bar and slide onto a couple of barstools. I order drinks—a beer for him and a soda for me—while trying my best to avoid visualizing his cock. I mean, how great can it really be? A dick's a dick, right? So why is my heart thudding so hard against my ribs every time I think about it?

As our drinks arrive, my brain and mouth both thankfully decide to come back online. "I've never seen you here before," I say, taking a sip.

"My housemate dragged me out. Don't come here a lot, even though we only live a few blocks away. I'm glad I came."

A heat flushes through my chest. "Same."

Haze lifts his glass, his bright eyes measuring me as he takes a sip. “You know, I spotted you the second my friends and I started playing pool. You were sitting in the corner booth, talking to your friends, looking all Henry Cavill-like.”

“Is he the one who plays Batman?”

“Uh, no.” A gentle smile pulls at Haze’s lips. He licks it away and says, “You might be thinking of Ben Affleck.”

“Right.”

“Henry Cavill is way hotter.”

“Uh, thanks.” The heat from my chest rises up my neck. “I noticed you earlier, too, when you walked in and started playing pool with your friends.”

Haze’s smile deepens. “What brings you out on a Tuesday night?”

“After-work drinks,” I explain. “Any reason in particular your housemate dragged you out tonight?”

Haze gives a slight shake of his head and I watch as a few loose golden strands bounce around his face. “Student life.”

“Oh, what are you studying?”

“Acting at the Brookhaven Performing Arts Academy.”

“Very cool. I’ll keep an eye out for you on the big screen.”

He clasps his hand over mine, but says nothing. Our eyes stay locked as we share a comfortable silence. Haze seems nice. And not just because he looks great and smells divine—there’s something else about him. An ease that I can’t help but find appealing. An energy crackles between us. I can feel it.

The conversation I was having with my friends earlier in the night crashes into my mind. Here I am, sitting at a bar with a cute guy who has just told me he’s got a great cock. Is this what perfect one-night stand material looks, talks, and smells like?

I chew down on my lower lip before asking, “Have you ever had a one-night stand?”

Clearly not what Haze was expecting me to say, judging by how high both of his sandy-colored eyebrows shoot up. “Why do I feel like this is a trick question?” he answers with a nervous giggle.

“Not a trick question. I promise. My friends and I were talking about it earlier tonight, and it turns out I’m the only one from my crew who hasn’t had one.”

Haze’s eyes narrow. “I find that hard to believe. You’re freaking gorgeous.” He glides a hand over my bicep, and when he looks up at me, the desire in his eyes is hard to miss. “Is this your way of asking me to be your first one-night stand?”

Haze pulls out his bun and reties his hair as he waits for me to respond. My breathing gets heavy, and I’m overcome with a feeling I haven’t felt in years.

Desire.

I consider his question. Is that what’s happening here? Is this what I want?

Deciding to take a chance, I place my hand on his knee, gently toying with a loose thread below the rip. The warmth of his body radiates through the denim.

“Yeah. I guess it is.”

He runs his fingers down his stubbled jaw. My heart’s beating out of my throat as I wait for his response. God, I hope I haven’t completely misread the situation.

“In that case, I would be honored to be your first time.”

A rush of relief sweeps through me. “First one-night stand,” I clarify. “I’m not a virgin.”

“Good.” Haze leans in even closer and smirks against my ear. “My spectacular cock and I are very happy to hear that.”

He gets to his feet, and I do the same. “So how do we do this? Whose place do we go back to?” I ask.

Haze reaches across the bar and chugs the rest of his beer. He wipes the back of his hand against his lips. “Has your place got walls?”



There's something sleek and graceful about the way he moves, and I find my eyes drifting again to the bracelets that adorn his wrists. I'm so distracted I could have sworn he'd asked me if my place has walls.

I lift my eyes to his face. "Sorry? Missed that."

He blinks and repeats, "Does your place have walls?"

Nope, didn't mishear him. "Uh... Yeah, it does. Doors and windows, too, if that helps," I throw in with a snicker.

"Great. It's settled then." He shrugs his jacket on and flashes me a wide grin. "Your place it is."

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