



BLUE
MOUNTAIN
UNIVERSITY **4**

REIMAGINE

A. E. MADSEN

Reimagine

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Cover Art: Pretty Indie Designs

Beta Readers: Joelle Lynne, Katherine McIntyre, Alex Silver, and Emmy Sanders

Editing: Jen Sharon – Fiction Editing & Proofreading

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Content Warning

This book contains mention of past loss and grief over a parent's death; the death is not on page. There are points where the nonbinary character, Elliot, is referred to as he/him pronouns, but for most of the book they use they/them pronouns.

One

Elliot Pierce

MY NECK TWINGES AS I move to reposition myself, and someone shifts next to me. We must have fallen asleep on the couch. An arm tightens around my waist, pulling me closer. I curl into it, relaxing into the embrace. I can feel the bulge of an erection poking my hip, but it's not until someone kisses my neck that I open my eyes to see what's going on. "Liam, wake up. Hey, wrong person." I shake my roommate's shoulder until he opens his eyes, slowly at first, but then they widen.

Liam pulls away as he realizes what's going on. "Shit, sorry. I didn't—"

"I know," I interrupt. It's not like it's a big deal to wake up curled into my roommates. It's not even the first time it's happened. Though since Liam and Aiden started dating, it's been a little awkward at times. The cuddling is nice, but I'm not dating either of them, and it's stuff like this making it more and more apparent that I'm an unwanted third wheel.

I've been living in an apartment with Aiden, his brother, Ian, and their friend Liam for almost a year now. Aiden was my roommate in the dorms the year before that and we became quick friends. When he and his brother decided to move off campus, Aiden invited me to come along. Liam has known the twins since he was little and while he's been best friends with Ian for years, it wasn't that long ago that he and Aiden got together.

"What's going on?" Aiden yawns as he sits up on my other side. I remember watching TV with both of them last night, but I must have ended up in the middle after we fell asleep.

"Nothing, your boyfriend got confused." I untangle myself from them, then head to the kitchen.

"Confused how?" Aiden asks.

"I kissed Elliot's neck. I was half-awake, and I thought they were you," Liam explains. Someone yawns, then the wet smack of lips against lips hits my ears. I was only half paying attention to Aiden and Liam's conversation, but now I do my best to tune them out. I hit the buttons on the coffee machine as I finish getting everything set up.

The kissing sounds get louder, then Aiden moans. "Can you two take that in another room? No sex on the couch," I raise my voice.

Aiden chuckles, but the kissing noises stop. "Sorry, again," Liam says as he walks into the kitchen.

The line on the coffee carafe reaches two, and I pour it in a cup. I add the creamer, then take a drink and sigh. “It’s fine. I just don’t want to hear it, and you don’t need to apologize for earlier. I know it wasn’t on purpose,” I say. It’s not like Liam did anything more than kiss me, and I can’t really blame him. It’s easy to see how he would get confused and think I was Aiden while he was half asleep. I grab my coffee and take it to the bedroom, not waiting to get a reply.

I sit down at my vanity desk and look over my makeup. My hand trails to a new eyeliner I bought last week on impulse. It’s dark green with glitter. I thought it looked pretty when I saw it, but now I don’t know what I want to do with it. My fingers sort through my eyeshadow options. Eventually I decide on a charcoal gray and another green a few shades lighter than the eyeliner. I take a drink of my coffee and pull out an eyeshadow brush, dipping it in the gray pigment first. A thin base layer over my left eyelid to start, then a highlight of green near the inner portion of my eye. I slowly blend the colors together, then outline my eye with the glittery eyeliner, pulling it carefully out from my eye for a cat-eye effect.

Aiden’s moan from the other room interrupts my train of thought. My hand shifts, fucking up the line. “God damn it,” I cuss. *The apartment walls aren’t thick enough to put up with those two fucking every morning.* I can hear way too much. My confused dick twitches, but I ignore it and grab my earbuds, turning on music in an attempt to drown out the noises.

I grab a makeup wipe and clean the mistake off my face. Liam's moans echo Aiden's, and I clench my teeth. We really need to find a new arrangement because this is only going to get worse when Ian moves out. Currently he shares a room with Liam, but he's been looking for an apartment to rent with his boyfriend. Then Aiden and Liam will share a bedroom.

I'm glad they pulled their heads out of their asses and finally got together, but I could do without having to listen to my roommates' sex life. My phone rings, and I pick it up, glad for the distraction. "Hello Rachel."

"Hey Elliot, any chance you can come in for a couple of hours? Stella called in sick," my manager explains.

"I can be there in twenty minutes," I quickly agree. It's better than sticking around here and listening to Aiden and Liam have sex. I hang up the phone, finish cleaning my face, then find clean clothes that are work appropriate. We don't have to wear uniforms exactly at the café, but we have to wear black shirts and full-length pants. Though some of the female employees wear skirts with leggings at times. I've considered showing up in a similar outfit, but I haven't quite worked up the courage yet.

Wearing femme clothes and makeup isn't new to me, but for the past few years, it was more of something I did in private. It's only been a few months since I came out as nonbinary. First to my roommate Aiden and then publicly, including wearing a pronoun pin at work. Still, after dealing with my dad's strict gender roles growing up, it's hard to build up the

courage to be myself in public. It was only after I moved away to college that I let myself play with makeup more. I don't have time to do any makeup today, but I quickly change my clothes and style my hair.

There's no point in disrupting Aiden and Liam to let them know I'm leaving. I'm sure they'll realize it when they finally leave the room. I lock the front door behind me and head out to my car. The drive to the café isn't long, and I get there just before my twenty minutes are up.

Normally it'd be deserted during the summer, but the room is crowded when I open the door. Most of the customers wear soccer uniforms. With the summer program happening at Blue Mountain University, we've been busier than normal. At least the crowd will clear out within an hour when the soccer players leave for practice.

I see a familiar face as I step behind the counter. "The usual?" I ask with a smile. Hayden laughs and looks over his shoulder at his boyfriend, who's busy talking to another soccer player.

"Sure. I'll take whatever," Hayden comments. "Asher wants a caramel blended iced coffee."

"I'll get that started right away. Flynn will ring you up." Flynn is finishing with another customer at the register, but also listening to our conversation. "Just charge him for two iced coffees," I tell Flynn. He presses buttons on the register, and I grab a blender to mix a drink up for Hayden. He usually lets me surprise him with a drink because he likes to see what I come up with. I get Asher's drink started, then pick white

chocolate and dark chocolate sauces to top Hayden's drink. I mix espresso with heavy cream, ice, and java chips in the blender. Then layer both chocolates into the cup, along with the mixture, and top the drink with whipped cream and a light dusting of cocoa powder. I finish up the quicker assembly of Asher's drink and move both drinks to the counter. "Order up," I call, and Hayden picks them up as Asher puts a tip in our jar.

Flynn hands me an empty cup with the order scrawled on it in his shorthand. I keep up with him, mixing drinks while he runs the register. Most of the soccer players file out within half an hour. Some of them leave without ordering, but we manage to serve most of the crowd. Once I finish one last drink for a student not in a soccer jersey, I wipe my hand across my forehead and sigh.

The crowd from the soccer program is turning out to be just as bad as the usual student rush during the school year. We should get another associate, but Rachel probably won't go for it as soccer kids will leave soon. The program is just for a few more weeks.

I grab a rag and cleaner solution to wipe down tables, leaving Flynn to stock up the workstation and take care of the slower crowd. Then I notice Daniel walking in. He waves at me as he walks to the counter to order. I wave back briefly but keep my focus on my work. Before I finish cleaning up the lobby, Daniel sits down at a table nearby and pulls out his laptop. "Hey," I greet him a little awkwardly. We're friends by association since he's dating my other roommate. Though

Ian's been practically living in the dorms with his boyfriend rather than in the apartment.

"Good morning," Daniel answers with a nod. Ian must already be at soccer practice, and I can't think of anything to say to Daniel. He seems focused on his laptop, anyway.

I head behind the counter again and knock on Rachel's office door. She opens it a minute later and lets out a sigh of relief. "Hey, thanks for coming. I was busy with a meeting call, and I couldn't get away to help out. Is the crowd gone?"

"Yeah, it's past ten. All the soccer players left to get to practice. We have a smaller group in the lobby, but the rush is over. Is there something else you need me to do?" I ask hopefully.

Rachel looks me over for a moment. "Fuck. Today is your birthday, isn't it?" I bite my lip, but before I can answer, she's talking again. "Sorry for calling you in. You can take off if you want. We should be fine now."

I know realistically that Aiden and Liam should be done by now, but I'm not in any rush to go back. Except it'll probably look weird if I tell Rachel I don't want the rest of the day off, considering it is my birthday. "Thanks," I answer slowly. "I'll just make sure everything is stocked and clean before I leave."

Rachel follows me out to the main area of the café and wraps an apron around her waist. "I've got the stocking. When's the last time you wiped down the tables?"

"About five minutes ago," I admit.

“Get out of here, Elliot. Enjoy your birthday. We’ve got this covered here.” Rachel moves to the register and grabs the tip jar. Normally we split it whenever one of us leaves, but I don’t feel like I’ve been here long enough to deserve any tips.

“I’ll just grab a drink.” I wave off the offer of tips and grab a cup to make myself a coffee instead. Rachel shrugs and slides the money back into the tip jar.

Once I finish mixing my drink, I grab my stuff and leave. Instead of walking to my car and heading back to the apartment, I walk to the university campus. The café is right across the street, making it a short walk. I take a sip of my drink and find a bench to sit on. I let the coffee sit in my mouth for a moment, tasting the sweetness from the caramel sauce. It’s sweeter than I usually make my drinks, but I need the pick-me-up. As I drink the sugary concoction, I get a text. I pull out my phone and sigh.

Aiden: Hey where did you disappear to? I thought we were gonna hang out today?

I ignore the message and watch the students that pass by. I know Aiden and Liam weren’t trying to annoy me earlier, but it doesn’t make it any easier to deal with. “Hey Elliot,” I turn to see another one of my coworkers, Hannah. She’s walking toward me, along with her girlfriend.

“Hey,” I say with a wave.

“What are you doing?” Hannah asks, taking a seat on the bench nearby.

“Nothing, really.” I shrug. “I just didn’t feel like going home just yet.”

“You could come hang out with us. We’re meeting up with a few friends in the student lounge,” Natalie offers.

“Sure.” I don’t normally hang out with Hannah and Natalie, but it could be fun. I follow them through the campus until we get to the student lounge. Even though it’s not quite eleven, I smell pizza as we walk in.

A guy waves at us. “Hey Hannah, Natalie, and who’s this?”

“This is Elliot,” Hannah answers. “By the way, Elliot goes by he or they pronouns.” I appreciate her casually adding my pronouns into her introduction, but it still puts me on edge. I never know how someone is gonna react and more and more lately I’ve been thinking of dropping the *he* pronoun. It’s just so hard to keep coming out to everyone and changing pronouns again.

The guy holds out his hand to me as he says, “Dylan, uh, he/him pronouns.” He holds a little tighter than necessary as we shake hands. He looks me over appraisingly, and I give him a once over. The guy has a wider build, complete with well-defined biceps on full display in his tank top. He smiles at me when our eyes meet, showing off straight white teeth. “Nice to meet you, Elliot.”

I know he’s checking me out, but it almost seems like a waste of time. I doubt he’ll stay interested once he finds out I’m asexual. Still, it’s been a while since I’ve flirted with anyone.

“You too,” I say back, tucking my hand into the pocket of my jeans.

Hannah and Natalie have moved across the room to greet another friend, but Dylan stays by me. “You want to play something?” He gestures to the game tables; there are people at the pool table, but the air hockey table and foosball are free.

“Sure,” I agree, heading for the air hockey table.

“So how do you know Hannah and Natalie?” Dylan asks.

“I work with Hannah at the café across the street, Wired and Tired.” I grab the mallet setting up the game as I notice Dylan grinning at me. “Do you have a job, or are you focusing on your classes?” I ask, hitting the plastic puck in his direction.

Dylan hits the disc towards me as he bites his lip and glances around the room. I score a point, using his distraction to my advantage. He looks at the table before looking up and meeting my eyes. “I model for the art department sometimes,” Dylan finally says. That wasn’t the answer I was expecting.

“You model?” I bite my lip, trying to keep the small giggle I feel coming from escaping. “What kind of modeling?” As far as I know the only type of modeling for art classes is usually nude modeling. More people are in the lounge now, but no one has interrupted us just yet.

“It’s a figure drawing class,” Dylan says as he looks me over, clearly checking me out. “Nude modeling,” he adds, like that wasn’t already obvious. “I could show you some drawings if you want. We could go back to my dorm,” Dylan offers, but

judging from the way his eyes light up I don't think the offer is just to see the pictures.. When I don't answer right away, he places the puck back on the table and hits it.

“This is probably the point where I should tell you I'm asexual.” I watch Dylan for a reaction, but instead of the usual confusion or disappointment, he shrugs.

“That's cool. You can still come see the art if you want. I don't expect anything,” Dylan says, veering the other direction in a hurry. Even though he's being cool about it, the sudden change of attitudes is dizzying. From flirty banter to awkward-but-friendly in seconds flat.

I get it, but it still leaves both of us in an awkward situation. It's not that I don't want to be friends or even have a boyfriend, but it's hard figuring out the right time to disclose being ace. Not that I've had a boyfriend in a while, but I still miss having a more intimate connection and the closeness that comes along with being in a relationship. I miss kissing too, but that tends to lead to touching, and that's when it gets weird ...

“Thanks, maybe another time,” I tell him. Dylan is good looking and all, but there's no point in leading him on, just to set us both up for disappointment.

Two

Travis Dawson

“YOU’RE LOOKING FOR A roommate?” Derek asks, snatching the paper from the office printer before I get a chance.

“It’s a big house,” I tell my friend with a shrug. “And I could use the extra money to finish fixing the place up.” When I first bought the place, I thought I’d eventually be settling down with a girlfriend, but I know Derek would give me shit if I told him that.

“When’s the last time you had a roommate?” Derek laughs.

“My last roommate was you, dipshit. Or did you forget?” I joke. Derek and I started rooming together in the college dorms, then shared an apartment afterwards. He even got me a job working at his stepfather’s construction company.

“Did you? All the late nights, the parties, the girls.” Derek smirks, holding the listing out of reach.

“Not much has changed since then, has it? Except now it’s guys and girls,” I roll my eyes.

“Well, for one of us. Unless you have something to tell me?”
Derek waggles his eyebrows suggestively.

“I’m not into guys, Derek. Besides, I’m just looking for a roommate. If I could deal with your bullshit, putting up with someone new won’t be too hard. I already posted it online, but I thought I’d put up some flyers around town. Maybe go to the university or the public library.”

“I can go to the university,” Derek volunteers.

“You just want to check out college students, don’t you?” I ask.

“I can multi-task.” A grin spreads across Derek’s face as he grabs some flyers. He doesn’t even attempt to deny it. “There’s a couple of places on campus that should still have bulletin boards. Besides, you could use the help, right?”

“Why don’t you stick to the library, or other places around town? The university is near my house, anyway.” I sidestep the issue, not wanting to waste my time trying to persuade him against flirting with anyone. It’s been years since we graduated, but I doubt Derek would care about my reasoning. It’d just be a waste of time.

“You want to hang out after work? Maybe hit up a bar? We can have a few drinks, find someone to dance with.” Derek waggles his eyebrows.

“I’d rather spend the night in. If you want to come over and have a beer or two though,” I offer.

“You feeling okay?” Derek changes the subject, staring hard at me.

“I’m fine.” I wave him off. “Don’t you ever get tired of going to bars? It’s nice to spend a night in sometimes.”

“Fine. Drinks at your place after work, then?”

“Sure.” I turn back to my computer, closing out the document and switching to the latest blueprint for a building we’re working on.

“I’ll let you get back to work. See you.” Derek takes the hint, but I wait until I hear his footsteps echoing as he leaves to turn around and get back to work.



I KICK OFF MY shoes as I walk in the front door. Mittens lifts her head from the couch to look at me, but only gives a soft welcome-home bark before relaxing on the couch again. As a St. Bernard she takes up a large portion of the couch, but I don’t mind. I knew she was gonna be a large dog when I got her. “Hey girl,” I rub Mittens’s head on my way to my bedroom. I unbutton my dress shirt, pulling it off as I go through my closet for something more comfortable. I snag an old T-shirt, but as I’m pulling it on, I notice the logo on the front for my old college. The memory makes me sigh. When I first started college, I didn’t want to major in architecture, but it seemed like a more acceptable field of study than what I’d really been interested in. I knew my father never would have supported me going to college for cooking. He’d always had

some old-fashioned ideas of the kitchen being a place for women.

I shake off the thought and pull the shirt off again, tossing it to the floor of the closet. I grab another shirt, pulling it on without bothering to look. As I finish getting on a pair of loose shorts, a sharp rap on the front door gets my attention. Good, Derek's here. I could use a distraction. Derek grins at me when I open the door, holding up a six-pack of beer. "I brought a peace offering. Felt like kind of an ass after this afternoon." He follows me inside, helping himself to the kitchen to find a bottle opener. Derek uncaps two of the beers, passing one to me.

I take it and clink my bottle against his. "There's nothing to forgive. Come on, let's find something to watch," I offer, taking my drink into the living room. Derek trails after me, taking a seat on the couch as I grab the remote and turn on the TV.

"What's the big deal anyway?" Derek asks. "It's not like we don't hang out at other places. Is something on your mind?"

"We're not college students anymore, Derek. Don't you ever think about settling down? Having a serious relationship?"

"Like marriage and kids?" Derek asks. "Sure, maybe one day. We're not that old, though."

"We'll be thirty next year," I remind him.

"Fine. If you aren't planning on meeting someone at a bar. Are you going to join a dating site or something?" Derek laughs,

apparently not even taking the idea seriously as he tips his beer back and takes a swig.

“No, I’d rather meet someone naturally. Besides, I’d want to get to know her and date for a while before it got too serious.” If I really thought I was planning on having a serious relationship anytime soon, I wouldn’t be looking for a roommate. I plop down on the couch, stretching my feet out to rest them on the coffee table as I click through the options of something to watch.

“You really mean that? Can you really see this place with a wife and kids running around?” Derek chuckles.

I know he’s joking, but the thought is more appealing than it used to be. I’m tired of living on my own. “Maybe in a few years,” I shrug. “It’s hardly ready for a roommate at this point. I still need to refinish the master bathroom and the laundry room. At least there’s a usable bathroom and I can still get to the washing machine.”

“How are you planning on making that appealing to a roommate?”

“I’m not asking much for rent. It’s not that big of a deal that we’ll be sharing a bathroom when we’ll be sharing most of the house. It’s still better than our first apartment.” I take a drink of my beer, tipping back the bottle, and Derek grabs the remote out of my hand. He clicks on a show before I can attempt to grab it back.

“I can help with some of the labor if you want. Just let me know when you get the materials. Can we watch something

now?” Derek goes silent, placing his arm at the back of the couch as he relaxes, looking at the TV. I sigh and look at the show he chose.

It’s a cooking contest reality show. Leave it to Derek to pick something he knows I can’t ignore. I watch the chefs on the TV, completely captivated. I never told Derek I had dreams of going to culinary school, but he quickly picked up on my love of cooking shows when we were roommates. He never complained about my cooking, either. I relax and at some point, Derek replaces my empty beer bottle with a new one.

Derek yawns when he finishes his third beer, slouching further into the couch. “You gonna make it home tonight?” I ask. I’m close to passing out myself, but I don’t have to worry about driving home.

“I could crash on the couch.” His foot nudges my leg closer to the edge.

“Feel free, I’m gonna call it a night.” I grab the empty beer bottles and dump them in the recycling bin in the kitchen. “You know where the extra blankets and pillows are.” I stumble on my way to my bedroom. I’m pleasantly warm from the drinks I’ve had. I strip down to my boxers and slip into bed.

Derek is gone by the time I wake up the next morning, but there’s a fresh pot of coffee waiting for me. I pour a cup and add creamer, only to practically spit it out at the first sip. “Ugh, way too strong.” I dump the rest of the cup in the sink. Maybe I should stop by the café near the university. I can get

some decent coffee and see if I can hang a flyer while I'm at it. After I get dressed for work, I feed Mittens and head out.

I pull up to the café and park my car. The café is more packed than I expected. "Welcome to Wired and Tired. What can I get started for you?" the girl at the register asks.

"I'll have a large blended caramel coffee and a blueberry muffin," I put in my order.

"Sure," she finishes ringing me up and writes my name on the cup. "We'll have that ready in just a few minutes." I move out of the way to let the next person order when I remember to ask about somewhere to post the flyer. A new barista calls my name. I go to the counter to get my drink, but when I see who has it, I'm a little confused.

"Caramel coffee and blueberry muffin for TJ?" he asks, not really looking at me as he places everything on the counter. The name tag says Elliot, and the words *he/they*. From his short brown hair and faint shadow of facial hair, I'm pretty sure he's a guy, but he's wearing makeup. I'm so distracted by the bright colors framing his eyes that I don't say anything. "TJ?" he repeats, turning to actually look at me, but when he sees me, his eyebrows scrunch up. "Travis?"

"Do I know you?" I look over Elliot again, but he doesn't look familiar. He has to be around twenty, but he's slender and short. His hair is brown, hanging around his ears. His blueish gray eyes meet mine, but I'm drawing a blank. I have no clue how he knew my name.

Elliot opens his mouth to answer, then bites his lip, hesitating. Instead of talking to me, he turns toward the girl at the register. “Hannah, I’m taking my break.” Elliot pulls off his apron as she nods and waves him off. I grab my coffee and muffin off the counter as Elliot opens the half door and steps out from behind the counter. Now that he’s standing in front of me, he might be even younger than I thought. He’s definitely smaller and shorter than I realized. Elliot gestures toward an empty table, waiting for me to follow. I’m still not sure what’s going on, but I’m curious. “You don’t recognize me, do you?” he asks.

“No, sorry.”

Elliot shrugs and pushes back a lock of hair behind his ear. “It’s fine. It’s been like eight years, and I guess it makes sense. Our sisters hung out more than we did.”

“Wait, Elliot Pierce?” I ask. His comment about our sisters gives me the clue I was missing, but he hardly looks anything like the little kid I remember. I guess that makes sense considering how long it’s been, but *damn*. Talk about a blast from the past. I do a double take, looking over Elliot again as my mind wanders trying to tie the young man in front of me with the scrawny kid from my past. There’s definitely a resemblance, but this Elliot seems more sure of himself. Our moms were best friends, and his family was always around when I was little, but Elliot was seven years younger than me.

“Bingo,” Elliot says softly.

“Wow, sorry I, uh ... I didn’t even know you went to BMU.” I finally manage a full sentence, but I’m not sure where I’m going with it.

“I’m about to start my senior year, actually. What are you doing here?”

I grab the flyer out of my pocket, unfolding it to put on the table between us. “I was hoping to post this.”

Elliot grabs the paper, looking it over before his eyebrows raise. “You’re charging that?”

“Too much?”

“No, too little. I’m paying almost the same amount to share a bedroom in my current apartment, and that’s not including utilities.” Elliot looks up at me again, but I just shrug.

“The house is kind of a fixer upper. I got it for cheap, but it needs a few repairs. Getting a roommate would make it easier to finish the renovations,” I explain, but that’s when the other barista calls out Elliot’s name.

“I need to get back to work, but I can post this for you, if you’re sure.” He stands up from the table, but before he can get too far away, I grab his wrist.

“Wait, would you want to hang out sometime? It’d be nice to catch up and talk.” I don’t know why I’m offering. I haven’t seen Elliot in years, and we didn’t hang out much to begin with. Maybe I feel a little guilty that I didn’t recognize him.

I let go of his wrist, but Elliot hesitates, looking at the line that’s formed at the register before answering me. “Yeah, that

sounds good.”

“Wait, just one more thing, do you prefer *he* or *they* for pronouns?” I ask. I want to make sure I get it right. Elliot’s eyes widen, their jaw dropping slightly at the question. “Your name tag says both. Do you have a preference?” I ask again, pointing at Elliot’s name tag.

“They, but either one is fine,” Elliot says the first word slowly, then hurries to tack on the rest of the sentence. I get the feeling they have more of a preference than they’re letting on.

“My number is on the flyer. Text me and we’ll figure out a time and place. I’ll see you around,” I say, but Elliot is already heading for the counter. My eyes find a clock on the wall, *shit I need to get going*. I grab up my untouched muffin along with my drink and go out to my truck. I must have lost track of time, and now I’ll be lucky if I’m not late to work.

It’s not like I expected to run into Elliot at the café but seeing them again takes me back to thoughts of when I was in high school. Before Elliot’s family moved away. It’s not really anything to do with Elliot, but it’s kinda funny the way that things have turned out after high school. I wouldn’t say I’m in a dead-end job, but it’s not what I thought I’d be doing. I definitely didn’t think I’d be single and living alone at twenty-nine. Derek’s remark about marriage and kids is more what I imagined, but it’s funny how fate has a tendency to change our plans.

Three

Elliot

I LOOK AT THE new contact on my phone, reading the phone number over again. I said I'd text him, but what am I supposed to say to Travis after all these years? It'd be easier to figure out if I could stop thinking about how hot he looks with all the new muscles. His short brown hair was fluffed up, like he kept running his fingers through it. The way his amber eyes lit up when he realized who I was. I couldn't help but notice the hint of five-o'clock shadow on his chin. He was good looking before, but *now* ...

And that's exactly the kind of thoughts I shouldn't focus on when it comes to Travis. He's probably straight, and even if he isn't, it's not like it'd matter. He wouldn't want anything to do with me. He was polite enough when he asked my pronouns, but I saw the way he kept looking at my eyeshadow. Travis kept avoiding eye contact, like he was trying not to look at my makeup, only to then look when he thought I wasn't paying attention. It just made the whole thing more awkward because by trying not to draw attention, it just made me more aware of

how uncomfortable he was. I didn't even have a full face of makeup on today. Maybe I should just count myself lucky that he even wants to meet up and talk.

I can't imagine that'll go smoothly. He's going to ask questions about my family. Questions I've mostly been ignoring the last few years since I started college. It's easier to ignore them when we live in different states.

Maybe it won't be as terrible as I'm imagining. He did ask about my pronouns so he clearly understands something about queer people. Maybe that's a good sign. Maybe he deserves more credit than I'm giving him. The bedroom door shuts with a snap, and I look up to see Aiden. "Hey." He walks past my bed to his, grabs his tablet, then lies down.

"Not that I'm complaining, but I thought you had plans to hang out with Liam this afternoon." I'm definitely not complaining, but I might be a little bitter about it. Those plans usually end in loud moans coming from the other room.

"He's hanging out with Ian," Aiden mutters. His tablet makes noises as he turns on a show. I figured Ian would be in the dorms with his boyfriend, but I don't bother to mention that to Aiden. Instead, my head goes to the stray thought that all of this is only temporary. Soon Ian is going to be getting an apartment with his boyfriend and there will be no stopping Aiden and Liam from having loud sex at all hours of the day.

A random thought pops in my head, but it's probably crazy to even consider it. I pick up my phone and type a message out to Travis.

Me: Hey, this is Elliot. I'm off work tomorrow. Maybe we could meet at your place? If that works for you.

The voices from Aiden's tablet catch my attention, and I look over again, but I'm not at a good angle to see the screen. "What are you watching?"

"Queer eye," Aiden mumbles. I chuckle and walk over to his bed. Aiden scoots over to give me room to lie down next to him without either of us having to talk about it. He sets up the tablet where both of us can see it and Aiden wraps his arm around my waist, pulling me closer to him. That's when my phone buzzes, vibrating into both our hips. I pull it out to look at the new message, trying to keep the screen out of Aiden's view.

Travis: I have work tomorrow, but we could meet up in the afternoon. How about around four?

"Who are you texting?" Aiden asks as I type out a response to Travis.

Me: Four works for me. I can meet you there, just send the address.

"No one, just, um, an old family friend." I send the message and shove my phone back in my pocket.

Aiden is looking at me curiously, with one eyebrow raised. "A family friend? You never talk to your family, or even mention them."

I've got Aiden's full attention now; he even pauses the show on the tablet. "It's not a big deal," I say, but Aiden is right. I

don't talk about my family. Things are a bit uneasy on that front. My phone vibrates in my pocket, but I don't pull it out to check. "We ran into each other earlier today. Haven't seen each other or talked in years and he thought it'd be nice to catch up." I try to shrug, but with how I'm lying on my stomach, it just comes out awkward.

Aiden still looks skeptical, but he turns his gaze back to the tablet. "Sure," he mutters under his breath. He starts up the show again, and I ignore the awkwardness and pull out my phone again. It's just a message with Travis's address. "Getting a message from a *family friend* makes you grin like that?" Aiden teases.

"It's nothing," I insist but I feel my cheeks heat up. I shove my phone in my pocket again and cuddle into Aiden to get a better look at the screen. I'm not really watching the show, but it's nice to just relax with Aiden. It's been different between us since he started dating Liam, and I'm not even sure he realizes it as much.

I still cuddle with him and sometimes with Liam too, but it's not the same. Not when he and Liam are more focused on getting handsy with each other than just relaxing and enjoying the cuddles. I kind of get it, but I still miss this.



I CHECK MY REFLECTION in the rear-view mirror. I debated wearing makeup but went without it in the end. Good enough. I don't really have a reason to sit in the car longer,

anyway. The clock hit four p.m. minutes ago, but I've just been sitting in the driveway. I double checked the address, and it matches what Travis sent me, but the house isn't what I was expecting.

It looks like an older house, but parts of it have obviously been redone recently. The stairs are cracked but hold my weight as I make my way to the door. As soon as I knock on the door, a dog barks. It barks a few more times before I hear Travis telling the dog to settle down. Then the door opens, and he's standing there in just a pair of loose athletic shorts. Water drips from his hair down his bare chest.

Holy fuck. I thought Travis looked good at the café, but it's nothing compared to seeing his muscles without the shirt on. *Shit, I need to get this under control before I say something stupid.* "Hey, come on in. Sorry, I just got out of the shower." He opens the door wider for me to follow him.

"It's fine." *Totally fine.* No apology needed. Nothing like a little eye candy to make this meeting more awkward. Travis shows me to the living room, then disappears into the hall to grab a shirt. The house looks nicer on the inside than it did on the outside, but there isn't much in the way of decoration. There's a couch along with a recliner for seating and a large TV mounted on the wall, but the rest of the room is empty. There's nothing on the walls.

I take a deep breath while Travis is gone. *Get a grip, Elliot.* Flirting with Travis is a bad idea. Especially if I'm trying to talk him into renting out his spare room to me. The idea might

have been random last night, but the more I've thought about it, it could be the perfect solution to my issue with Aiden and Liam. If I move out, I can have my own space and not have to hear them at all. I'll also get an entire room to myself. Travis walks into the living room again, wearing a shirt this time. It's probably for the best, but I can't help being a little disappointed.

I might be asexual, but I definitely have a type, and right now Travis is looking good. *Focus, Elliot.*

"Sorry, this is a little weird. I'm not really sure what to say now that you're here," Travis sits on the couch next to me. "I guess a lot has changed in eight years," he chuckles.

"What kind of job do you do?" I ask, hoping to break the ice with simple small talk.

"I work for a construction company. Currently, I'm a foreman, but I'm apprenticing under the architect. I've gotten to do a couple of projects on my own. That's part of why I got the house so cheap. It needs some remodeling, but I figured I could do most of the fixes myself or with some help from the guys at work." Travis sits further back onto the couch, relaxing as he explains. I nod along in the right places, but then he's asking me questions. "How long have you worked at the café?"

"Since last fall, so almost a year. It's just part time around my classes, but it gives me some extra spending money." My wages from work mostly go towards makeup and clothes my dad wouldn't approve of, but I'm not going to explain that to

Travis. My dad gives me a weekly allowance in my bank account. He doesn't even know I have a job, and I intend to keep it that way.

“What's your major? You said you're a senior, right?”

“Yeah, I'll be starting my senior year in the fall. I'm going towards getting my bachelor's in English.”

“English?” Travis's eyebrows raise. “I figured you'd do something like art.”

I bite my lip, not able to answer right away. It's not like it didn't cross my mind. I thought about majoring in something artistic like fashion design, but I knew my dad wouldn't approve. “I don't know. I've always enjoyed reading.” I shrug. “I'm not really sure what I'll do after school, but I figured it was a good major to get into.” Honestly, I'm not sure what I'll do after I finish college.

“That's cool,” Travis says. “I used to read more, but I kinda fell out of the habit. What kind of books do you like?”

“I mostly read romance books,” I admit. I'm watching Travis's face for some kind of reaction, but he doesn't even flinch.

“Alyssa likes those. I swear she's always reading something on her phone. I've learned to stop asking about it at this point, I always get the weirdest answers.” Travis shakes his head, and I can't help but laugh. What would Travis think of the gay romance books I usually read? Especially some of the monster romance and omegaverse stuff. Those can get *interesting*.

“Okay, so no book discussions then. What do you do when you’re not at work?” I change the subject.

“I work on my house where I can, but I also help babysit my nephew sometimes. Alyssa and her boyfriend both work so I help out where I can.”

“That’s sweet. How old is your nephew?” I know our sisters are the same age, but Cece isn’t looking to settle down anytime soon.

“He’s about six months, I think. It’s hard to keep track. He’s already a handful, though. He can sit up and scoot his way around.” Travis smiles fondly at the thought, and I bite my lip again. It’s so adorable the way he’s clearly in love with his nephew. “How’s Cece? I know Alyssa still keeps in touch, but I’ve never heard her mention if she’s seeing anyone.”

“She’s good. She went to college in Nevada, closer to home. She’s got some job in accounting or something now.” At least she was the last I heard, but it’s been months since I’ve talked to my sister. We never had much in common.

“That’s right, I couldn’t remember exactly where your dad moved after your mom ... What made you want to go to college out here?” Travis asks.

I’m glad he skipped over the mention of my mom, but it still trips me up for a moment. I pick at the hem of my T-shirt, taking a moment to look over Travis again. His hair has dried more now. It’s back to a light brown rather than how dark it looked while wet. It’s cut short, barely touching his ears on the top, and fading shorter on the sides and back. I take a deeper

breath and look into his eyes. Travis smiles at me, patiently waiting for me to answer the question. “My mom went to BMU, and I wanted to come here. It was different finishing high school in another state. I didn’t know anyone.”

“Sorry, that must have been tough.”

I shrug. “It’s okay.” But it’s not. I miss my mom, and talking about her is still hard sometimes. “So, can I get a tour of the place? Where’s the bedroom you’re renting out?” I change the subject again, but Travis grins.

“Sure. You know someone who might be interested?” He asks as he stands up and gestures with a sideways nod for me to follow. Travis leads me into the kitchen first. It’s clearly one of the rooms he’s already remodeled. There’s an island in the middle of the room for extra counter space and a hanging pot rack full of pots and pans. The counters are all black marble, and the oven and fridge look new. It’s way nicer than the little kitchen at my apartment.

“You spend a lot of time in here?” I ask. It looks nice, but it also looks well stocked. I can see a spice rack with more options than we probably have all put together.

“I like to cook sometimes,” Travis says offhandedly. “Come on, let me show you the rest of the place.” He leads me out of the kitchen again and to the hall between it and the living room. There are two doors on one side that are closed and one door that’s open on the other side. That must be Travis’s room because from the glimpse I get before he pulls the door shut, it looks lived in. He pulls open the first door to show the

restroom. Then he opens the door to the other bedroom. “I’ll clear it out and finish repainting before anyone moves in.”

There are a few boxes in the middle of the room and one wall is freshly painted with a light blue color instead of the dull white on the other walls. It might be a little messy, but the room is probably a little bigger than the one I’m sharing with Aiden. The thought of having all this space to myself is almost as tempting as not having to hear Aiden and Liam. There’d be plenty of room for my bed, the desk. I could probably even get another bookshelf. The one I have is overcrowded with books. I notice a window looking into the backyard, but when I get closer, I see the dog that must have been barking earlier. “You have a dog?” I ask. It should have been obvious from earlier, but everything is taking a moment longer to click into place as I debate my options. I keep looking outside, taking in the yard along with a built-in pool and hot tub. That’s a nice bonus.

“Yeah, Mittens. She’s fine once she gets to know people, but she can get excited.” Travis grins fondly as he talks about his dog. That’s another point in his favor. He can’t be a total jerk if he’s an animal person.

I look over the room again, making my final decision. I don’t know how all of this will pan out, but it can’t be much worse than my current situation. “Can I rent the room?”

Four

Travis

MAYBE IT'S A BAD idea. I don't know much about Elliot except our moms were best friends. Growing up, we were around each other all the time, but Elliot was so much younger than me. I wasn't spending time with them. We were just around each other. I'm not sure what we could possibly have in common now. But I'm leaning towards telling them yes. I know them better than anyone else that might be interested in the room.

I know Elliot is already living in an apartment with their friends, but they didn't say why they want to move. They need a room and I have one available. Why shouldn't I rent it out to Elliot? Maybe it won't be so awkward after we get to know each other. I almost want to ask Alyssa or Mom what they think of the idea, but Elliot seemed uncomfortable when I brought up their family. I know I'll have to tell my family eventually if I rent out the room to Elliot, but we'll jump that hurdle when we get there.

I flip the chicken breast over and grab the meat tenderizer. There's something satisfying about the *thunk* it makes as I pound the chicken into a thin layer. Once it's thin enough, I wash my hands and grab the sliced honey ham and Swiss cheese. My hands go through the motions without thinking it through, layering each on the chicken breast. I grab the edge of the chicken and tightly roll it up with the ham and cheese, then tie the bundle with twine to keep it tight. I've probably made chicken cordon bleu too many times if I can do this by memory. I coat the chicken bundle with breadcrumbs and put it in the oven to cook.

My phone rings as I'm working on the sauce. "Hello?" I answer it once I see Alyssa's name on the screen.

"What are you doing right now?" she asks.

"Making dinner." I move the phone between my ear and my shoulder and grab my whisk again.

"We set a date. We're getting married in two months," Alyssa squeals.

"That's great, sis, but I don't really understand why you had to call me right away. It's not really a surprise that you're getting married when you already have a kid together."

"Should I expect you to bring a plus one?" she asks, completely ignoring what I just said. "When's the last time you even had a girlfriend?"

I should have known she had an ulterior motive. "Why not just sit me with the bridesmaids?" I joke.

“I guess I could find someone to match you with if I had to,” Alyssa hums with the thought. Just like that, I’m regretting the joke.

“Why can’t I just come on my own? Or I could bring Derek.”

“Are you dating Derek?” Alyssa almost sounds serious, but I hear a hint of sarcasm. She knows I’m not into guys.

“No. I’ll figure it out. I’ll bring a date. Anything else?” I open the oven to add more sauce on top of the chicken, but my brain is still focused on the conversation with my sister. How am I going to find a date to take to her wedding in two months?

“Nope. I’ll send out invites with the details. Can’t wait to see you pull this off,” she mutters the last part sarcastically.

You and me both. We say our goodbyes and I hang up, then switch over to text Derek.

Me: Alyssa set a date for the wedding. She expects me to bring someone.

Derek: And you thought of me first? I’m flattered.

There’s a heart emoji after the text message, and the ridiculousness of it all makes me laugh.

Me: No asshole. I need to find a girl to take. How am I supposed to find a date to take to my sister’s wedding in two months?

Derek: You wanted a girlfriend. Maybe it’s karma. Try a dating app. You’ve got time to have a few dates and get to know someone.

It's not a terrible idea, but I don't know where to start.

Me: Could you help me set it up?

Derek: Sure. How's this weekend? We can hang out and get it all set up.

I send Derek back a thumbs up and we make loose plans to meet up Saturday night. Then my phone chimes with a new text.

Elliot: Should I start packing my stuff or what?

I can almost hear their teasing tone in the message. After the phone call with Alyssa and now my plans with Derek, I don't want to add interviewing potential roommates to my list of things to do. At least I know Elliot a little.

Me: You can have the room. I'll have it ready by Monday.

I can probably convince Derek to help me finish painting when he comes over this weekend. The oven timer goes off and I set my phone down to grab the oven pads. My phone chimes again as I'm setting the casserole dish on the stove to cool down.

Elliot: I'm working Monday, can I swing by during the weekend?



“YOU NEED A BETTER picture for your profile.” Derek scrolls through the dating profile on my laptop before looking at me, then back at the picture.

“What’s wrong with that one?” I ask. I thought it was a decent picture.

“You’re looking for a date to your sister’s wedding, and you want to use a picture from work? It’s a hot picture, but it doesn’t send the right message. Your picture says *one-night stand*, not boyfriend material.” Derek grabs a chip and dips it into the salsa.

“Whatever, we’ll figure that out. What else is on the profile?” I grab a chip of my own and dip it before bringing it to my mouth. The flavors of the fresh salsa hit my tongue with a spicy sweet tang. Then the doorbell rings, and Mittens barks.

“You expecting someone?” Derek asks, looking at the door.

I ignore his question and head for the door. When I open it, Elliot looks at me with a grin, “Hey.”

“Hey,” Derek’s voice comes from over my shoulder, but he’s looking right at Elliot. Derek has zero subtlety as he checks Elliot out. “And you are?”

“This is Elliot. They’re my new roommate.”

“Elliot,” they answer at the same time as I do.

Elliot is looking at me, but Derek is looking back and forth between us. I probably should have warned him about finding a roommate earlier. “Nice to meet you. I’m Derek, by the way. Are you moving in today?” Derek looks Elliot over, but they aren’t carrying any boxes. I was expecting Elliot to drop off some stuff today.

“About that, most of the boxes I have are kinda heavy. I was hoping you’d help.” Elliot shifts their weight to one foot, setting their hand on their hip.

“Sure, no problem. Derek?” I close my laptop and look at him, but he’s still looking at Elliot.

“Yeah, let’s do it.” Derek takes a step toward the door and Elliot nods before turning around to walk out to their car again. I fall in line with Derek a little behind Elliot. “That’s your new roommate?” Derek asks me in a hushed tone.

“Yeah, why? What’s wrong with Elliot?” I ask, but then I see Elliot stop next to their car. They pop the trunk, and Derek doesn’t answer as we each grab a box. Elliot wasn’t kidding about the boxes being heavy. It’s enough to weigh me down.

“What’s in these? Bricks?” Derek jokes as we haul the boxes to Elliot’s new room.

“Books,” Elliot answers. “I needed to clear my bookshelf before I could bring it over later this week.”

“These are all books?” Derek asks as he sets down a box in the middle of the room. Without waiting for an answer from Elliot, he opens the box. Sure enough, it’s stuffed with books.

“I read a lot.” Elliot moves closer, but not before Derek grabs a book, opening it to a random page. “Uh, you might not want to do that.”

Whatever is on the page, it has Derek’s attention. His eyes widen as he stares at the book. “That is ... *wow*. I was not

expecting that. Where do you find this stuff?” Derek keeps flipping pages and skim reading the book.

“You aren’t ...” Elliot trails off, not finishing their question.

“Straight? No, I’m bi, and *damn*. This stuff is hot.” He closes the book and hands it to Elliot with a smirk. I can’t say I’m surprised that Elliot’s romance books are gay romance, or that Derek is flirting with them. But it leaves me in an awkward situation of not knowing how I fit into this conversation. I’m not sure how I feel about Derek hitting on my new roommate, either.

“I’m gonna go grab another box.” I don’t wait for a response as I leave the room, but Derek catches up to me by the time I get to Elliot’s car.

Derek grabs my shoulder before I can grab a box and looks back at the house to make sure we’re alone. “Okay, what’s going on? How did you two even meet, and why are you inviting adorable little twinks to stay at your house?”

“It’s nothing like that, and please don’t make this awkward by hitting on them. Elliot’s kind of a friend of the family. Our moms used to be good friends.”

“Used to be? What happened?” Derek asks.

“Elliot’s mom died. Then their family moved away. I didn’t even know they were going to the college until we ran into each other when I was putting up flyers. Elliot wasn’t happy with their current living situation, and I was looking for a roommate. I figured we could help each other out.”

“And it seriously doesn’t bother you that Elliot is going to be living with you?” Derek asks, staring me dead in the eyes.

“Why should it? I lived with you for years, and I never had a problem with you being bi and bringing guys around,” I remind him.

“It’s not the same,” he insists.

“How?”

“Travis, did you even notice that the whole time I was flirting with Elliot, they were watching you? They were checking you out. They *like* you.”

“You’re seeing things. Look, I’m fine with Elliot being my new roommate. It doesn’t bother me if they’re into guys or that Elliot is a ... they,” I say, not sure how to phrase it.

“That’s not what I meant. This isn’t about Elliot being nonbinary,” he says. Derek closes his eyes and takes a deep breath before looking at me again. “You know what? Forget it. If you’re happy with it, whatever, but I should probably go. I’ll see you.” He pulls his keys from his pocket, turning to walk off to his car. I grab the next box from the trunk and haul it to Elliot’s new room. They look past me as I set the box in the middle of the room.

“Uh, Derek had to get going. He had some stuff to do,” I say. There’s no point in mentioning Derek’s bullshit theory to Elliot. I don’t need to make things more awkward by telling them that Derek thinks they *like* me.

Elliot's eyebrow raises in suspicion. "Alright, well, uh, we should get the rest of the boxes." We walk together outside to grab the last two boxes, and Elliot grabs theirs with a huff before tightening their grip. Part of me wants to offer to get both boxes, but I hold myself back. "Thank you," they say as we set the last boxes near the others. "I'm gonna get the rest of my stuff packed up this week, and I'll probably move my furniture in next weekend. Does that work for you?"

"Yeah, I made a key for you. You can move the rest of your stuff whenever. Let me know if you need help."

Elliot walks out to the living room, and I follow. My computer chimes and both of us look over as a notification pops up on the screen. "Is that a dating site?" they ask.

I rush over to the laptop to close out the website. "Yeah, Derek was helping me set up a profile. I need to find a date for my sister's wedding."

"You're finding a date for your sister's wedding online?" Elliot asks.

"It can't be any worse than a girl I could meet at a bar," I say defensively.

"That's not what I meant. Shouldn't you be looking for someone you have a connection with?" Elliot looks down, toying with the hem of their shirt.

"You don't think I can form a connection with someone online?" I force a small laugh, but I'm not sure even I believe it.

“When’s the wedding?” Elliot asks instead.

“Two months from now.”

“Okay, can I help? I mean, if you still want help with the profile. Since Derek had to leave. You weren’t done when I showed up, right?”

Derek’s remark that Elliot likes me pops into my head, but if that was true, why would they help me set up a dating account to get a girlfriend? I shake off the thought and pull up the website again. I told Derek I was fine with Elliot, and I meant it. “Sure, why not?”

Elliot sits next to me on the couch, looking at me before turning their attention to the screen. “So, where were you?”

“Uh, Derek thought I should change the picture.” I point out the profile pic, and Elliot’s eyes follow.

“I agree. It’s an alright picture, but I don’t think it says you’re looking for a relationship. You got anything else? Maybe one where you’re wearing a shirt?” Elliot bites their lower lip, but a chuckle still escapes.

Their eyes meet mine, waiting for my response. Elliot’s not biting their lip any longer, but their lips curl up on one side into a small smirk. They lean closer as I drag my finger across the track pad to open my pictures folder. “You can look, see if you can find something better,” I offer.

Elliot looks over the pictures, scrolling right past more of me topless and even a picture of me in the hot tub out back. They don’t hesitate any longer than to give the pictures a brief

glance before moving on to ones where I'm fully clothed. Derek had to be overthinking things. If Elliot was checking me out or something I don't see why they wouldn't be interested in those pictures.

Five

Elliot

I TURNED OFF MY phone while I was at Travis's because I didn't want to worry about Aiden texting or calling me. I've been dragging my feet about telling him I'm moving out, but clearing out my bookshelf is going to be obvious. When I get in the car, I power my phone up. There are a couple of new messages from Aiden and a missed call.

Aiden: What's going on? What's with all the boxes?

Aiden: Do you need to tell me something?

I ignore it and drive back. It'll be easier to explain in person. But as soon as I get back to the apartment, Aiden is waiting up for me on the couch. He gets up and walks toward me with a frown. "There you are. Why is your stuff all boxed up?"

"I'm moving out," I mumble.

"What? Why? Ian and Daniel are getting an apartment any time now. You'll have a room to yourself." Aiden doesn't sound angry or upset exactly. It's more like he's bargaining with me.

“I know, but that doesn’t make living with you and Liam easier. This isn’t working, Aiden. I shouldn’t have to listen to you two having sex all the time.” My voice gets louder. I can’t help it. I knew this conversation wasn’t going to be fun. “I’m glad you and Liam are dating, but I’m not comfortable here anymore.”

Liam walks out of his bedroom, interrupting our standoff. “What’s going on?” he asks his boyfriend.

“Apparently, Elliot’s moving out.” Aiden turns to me again and crosses his arms at his chest. “Were you planning on saying anything before disappearing?”

“Seriously, Aiden? Put yourself in my shoes for a moment, or hell, Ian’s. Would you want to live in an apartment with Ian and Daniel, listening to them have sex all the time?”

Aiden starts to say something, but Liam interrupts. “Is there anything we can do to help you move?” He wraps his arm around Aiden’s waist, holding him tightly to his side, and Aiden sighs.

“Yeah, I need to get my furniture over there. If you could help with Ian’s truck, that would make things a lot easier.”

“We can do that,” Aiden says.

“It’s not that far away. We can still hang out; I just need a break from all the noises.”

Aiden laughs and pulls me in for a hug. “I get it, but you should’ve said something. I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you too, but it’ll be nice to be able to shower in the morning,” I joke, and Aiden shakes his head.

“Where are you moving? Won’t you still have a roommate?” Aiden pulls back from hugging me.

“I’m renting a room in a house. I won’t have to share my bedroom with anyone,” I explain.

“Who do you know that owns a house?” Aiden scoffs.

“Travis,” I answer slowly.

“Travis? Is he the family friend you were talking about?” Aiden’s eyebrow raises in suspicion.

“Yeah, he has an empty room.” I avoid his actual question and snag the TV remote from the coffee table. “Do you want to watch something?”

Luckily, that’s when Ian walks in. He lets out a heavy sigh, slamming the door behind him, and muttering something under his breath. “You okay?” Liam asks. Taking the opportunity, I slip past them to my room, but Aiden follows me.

“What’s going on with Travis?” Aiden asks. “There has to be more to this than an old friend of the family. You wouldn’t agree to live with just anyone.”

Aiden sits on my bed, and I sit down next to him, leaning in, so I don’t have to look at his face while I tell him this. “You know my family lives in Nevada, but we didn’t move there until I was fourteen. Before that ... I grew up near here. My mom and Travis’s mom were best friends.”

“Do you like him?” Aiden asks out of nowhere.

“What?” I turn to get a better look at him and Aiden grins.

“Why would you ask that?”

“Just a guess. You smile when you talk about him and—”

“No. Travis is straight, it’s not anything like that.” I’m talking too fast, so it’s not surprising when Aiden smirks.

“Sure. If you say so.”

“I need to pack my things.” I ignore Aiden’s sarcastic remark, grabbing an empty box and heading to my desk. First, I empty the drawers, packing away the larger makeup sets before more carefully wrapping some of the smaller items.

“When are you leaving?” Aiden comes to my side, grabbing a bottle of nail polish and wrapping it in newspaper along with me.

“I’m trying to get most of my stuff packed up this week so I can move my furniture next weekend.” We work silently for a few minutes until Aiden grabs a bottle of foundation I use more often. “Not that one.”

He chuckles and sets the bottle back on the desk before grabbing an eyeshadow palette. “Does your new roommate know you wear makeup?” Aiden asks.

“Kinda, I’ve worn it around him. I’m sure he noticed—” A knock interrupts my rambling, and I stop packing to call out, “Yeah?”

Liam opens the door. He looks at me and Aiden packing up my desk, then takes a seat on Aiden's bed. "What's going on with Ian?" Aiden asks his boyfriend.

"I guess he and Daniel aren't having much luck finding an apartment." Liam looks at me first. I think I get where he's going, but it takes Aiden a moment.

"No. That's a terrible idea." Aiden crosses his arms over his chest.

"It makes sense. You two can share this room, and Daniel can move in with Ian," I say.

"It doesn't have to be permanent, but Daniel already gave up his dorm for the fall. We can make it work until we can find one-bedroom apartments instead," Liam chimes in.

Aiden groans, closing his eyes. "Fine. I guess we better get you moved out, then." He grabs another empty box and heads for my dresser, pulling open the top drawer. He looks at the clothes, grabbing out a pile of briefs before his forehead scrunches up.

I get next to him, pulling the lacy blue thong out of his hand and tucking it into the drawer before Liam notices. "I can pack my own clothes," I say. My cheeks heat up, no doubt going red.

"Sure." Aiden smirks, pushing his box into my hands before he lowers his voice to a whisper. "We can talk about that later."

“Should we tell Ian that Daniel can move in here, then?” Liam asks, interrupting us. At least he doesn’t seem to care about what Aiden found snooping around in my underwear drawer. Not that I think either of them would have an issue with it, but I don’t really want to talk about it.

“I guess.” Aiden grabs my wrist, pulling me along with him. “Come on. Let’s tell him.” Liam follows us to his room, but Aiden is the one who knocks. “Ian.”

Ian answers the door, looking over the group of us before his eyes settle on his twin. “What?”

“Good news. Daniel has somewhere to move for the fall,” Aiden says.

“What are you talking about?” Ian asks.

“Elliot’s moving out,” Liam interrupts. “I’ll move in with Aiden, meaning Daniel can room with you.”

Ian’s mouth opens, but he doesn’t answer right away as he thinks it through. “And you’re okay with that?” he asks his brother.

“Are you?” Aiden asks back.

“Doesn’t make much of a difference to me. I’ve already been living with you two.” Ian sighs, rubbing his temple. “We can probably make it work. At least Daniel will have somewhere to go.” He pulls out his phone, tapping away on the screen, then he stops and looks at me. “Wait, why are you moving out and to where?”

“I’m moving in with a friend. I didn’t want to be stuck here with Aiden and Liam after you moved out,” I answer. Ian laughs, trying to hide his chuckle under his breath, but Aiden crosses his arms again. “Anyway, I guess it works out. Now there’ll be room for Daniel here.”

“Thanks,” Ian tells me. We’ll see if he still feels that way in a few weeks.



AIDEN WAITS UNTIL WE’RE alone later that night to mention my lingerie. I knew he wasn’t going to let it slide, but part of me was hoping. “They’re cute. The, uh, panties?”

“Lingerie. They’re made for people who have a penis,” I explain. Not because I’d care if they were made for women, but because I know Aiden is probably wondering.

“Do you have others?” he asks.

“Yes, I have a few. I like how they feel. I don’t really want to talk about it.” At least I already packed up my other things before Aiden accidentally found my sex toys. I’ve already been tempting fate by managing to go this long without him finding them. “Are you going to be okay with Daniel being here? Or should I be asking if Ian and Daniel will be okay?” I change the subject.

Aiden laughs. “I don’t get why you’re making such a big deal out of this. Ian is my brother. I’ve lived with him my whole life.”

“There’s a difference when you’re also living with his boyfriend and hearing them moan all the time.” I might be speaking more from experience here, but I think it bugs me more than it bugs Aiden.

“Again, we’re brothers. We shared a room growing up. I’ve heard him before. The only difference is now he’s with a guy. Besides, they’ll have to put up with hearing me and Liam too. We’ll figure it out or work out a plan for date nights or something.” Aiden shrugs.

“You’re taking this surprisingly well. Who are you and what have you done with Aiden?” I joke.

He chuckles, coming over to my bed to lie down next to me. “I get it. Why you’d be uncomfortable here. I’ve been kind of an ass. Sorry.”

“No,” I wrap my arms around Aiden and curl into him. “You’re in love, and that’s great. I just need some space.”

Aiden smiles before hiding his face in the crease of my neck. “Yeah, but being in *love* with Liam isn’t an excuse for being a shitty friend. I’ll miss hanging out with you.”

“I won’t be that far. We’ll still hang out, and you’ll get to annoy Ian and Daniel with your sex noises instead of me.”

He laughs, pulling back, but I can’t see much in the dark. “That’s true. Don’t be a stranger, okay? And I need to meet your new roommate.”

“You can meet him when you help me move my furniture over there,” I remind him. There’s a good chance Travis will be

there.

“Okay.” Aiden gets out of my bed and settles into his own again, and my mind goes back to what Aiden said earlier. I’m not surprised he noticed my crush on Travis, but maybe he has a point. *Should I really be moving in with Travis when I’m into him?* It’s a recipe for disaster. Having a crush on a straight guy. Not to mention he’s seven years older than me and we’ll be roommates. It’s probably best to forget it and focus on trying to be just friends.

Six

Travis

I GLANCE AT THE picture on my phone. She's kinda cute, I guess. Her profile says she likes video games. It should be enough to ask her on a coffee date, at least. It's been so long since I've done this, I feel awkward about it, but I start writing out a message only to delete it when it sounds too much like a cheesy pickup line. The sound of a truck stopping gets my attention, but when I glance out the window, there's a car too. Elliot climbs out of the driver's seat of the car, but a group of other boys around their age spill out of the truck and Elliot's car. They didn't mention bringing friends, but there's four of them crowded around the back of the truck. By the time I open the front door, they're already pulling furniture from the pickup truck.

"Where are we taking this?" a blonde asks.

"Hey, can I help?" I ask, walking toward Elliot.

Another blonde turns around holding a box, and I do a double take looking at the first one again. There are subtle differences, but they must be twins or something. The one holding a box

looks at me, not trying to hide how he's studying me. Elliot walks in front of him carrying a box of their own and holds it out in my direction. "Thanks. I appreciate it." Then they turn to the blonde. "Come on, Aiden." Elliot walks toward the open door, leaving the rest of us to follow them. There's a redhead helping the other twin with the furniture and another guy grabbing boxes. Elliot directs everyone, but with the six of us, it doesn't take long to get everything in their new room.

Elliot is talking to one of the twins, when the other sets down a box. "That's the last one. Did you need us for anything else?"

"I'm good. Thanks for helping," Elliot answers.

"You sure?" the other twin asks.

"Get out of here. You still need to move Liam's stuff into your room before Daniel can move in. Go, I've got this." Elliot hugs him. They hug the redhead next, and then the group clears out, leaving me alone with Elliot. "Thank you for helping out."

"Yeah, of course. Are you sure you got the rest? You still need to set your bed and the rest of the furniture."

"Well, if you wanna help." Elliot shrugs. They grab one side of the bed frame, moving it to the wall. I grab the headboard and line it up.

"Were those your old roommates?" I ask.

"Yeah, the twins are Aiden and Ian. The redhead is Aiden's boyfriend and the other one was Ian's." Elliot grabs the other side of the frame, lining it up as we put the base of their bed

together. I grab the box spring next, setting it on the frame. Elliot grabs the mattress, sliding it closer before I pick up the other end. We get it on top and once everything is in place, they sit on the edge, letting out a heavy sigh.

“You want to order something for dinner? It’s been a long day.” I sit on the bed next to them, and Elliot looks at me as they slide their hand in their pocket and pull out their cell phone.

“What did you have in mind?” They tap the screen of their phone while talking.

“How about Chinese?”

“That sounds good.” Elliot slides their phone in their pocket and grabs a box, pulling it open. They pull out sheets and blankets to make the bed. I look up the nearby restaurant on my phone, but a notification pops up from the Crush app. “What’s that?” Elliot asks, looking over my shoulder.

“A potential match on the dating app.” I open the notification, letting Elliot see the new match on my screen. Between this one and the couple of others that have popped up on my matches I have a few girls I could ask out, but I don’t really know what to say. The whole online thing is new to me and it’s awkward.

“She’s cute. You should message her. Set up a date,” Elliot says.

“Maybe later. What do you want for dinner?” Our conversation turns to debating orange chicken vs sweet and

sour chicken before we finally agree and place the order. Elliot gets their bed made and pulls open another box.

“You should take a break. Come on, let’s watch a show or something while we wait for the food to show.”

Elliot looks in the box, then pauses to think about it. “Yeah, that’s probably a good idea.” We walk toward the living room, but I hear Mittens whining from my room.

“I better take her out. I’ll meet up with you in the living room in a bit. You can pick a movie or something.” I leave Elliot to get my dog and when I open the door, she rushes past me to the yard. By the time we finish up and join Elliot again, they’re sitting on the couch with a beer, looking at the TV.

“You don’t mind, do you?” they ask, holding up the bottle.

“It’s fine.” I head to the fridge and grab a beer of my own. “So, uh, do you have work tomorrow?” I stumble around my words, unsure what to say to Elliot.

“No. I’ll probably spend most of the day getting things unpacked and set up in my room.” They pick at the label on their beer bottle, looking at it rather than me. “What about you? Do you have work?”

“Not until Monday. Let me know if you need any help.” I know Elliot brought some other furniture that needs to be moved into place in their room. There was a large desk with a vanity mirror, a dresser, and a bookshelf.

They glance at me as I take a seat on the other end of the couch. “Thanks. Did you message the girl on the app?”

“Not yet.”

“Why not? Come on, you need a date for your sister’s wedding, right? The first step in that is finding someone you can connect with. How many matches have you gotten so far?”

“A couple,” I admit. I pull out my phone and open the Crush app. The profile I matched with earlier today is still there, but there are a few others from before that. Altogether, a handful of possible matches.

Elliot scoots closer, looking over my shoulder to see my phone. “Well? Don’t overthink it. Who catches your interest?”

My finger hovers over one profile, but before I tap it, I look at Elliot. “Why do you care so much?”

“Just trying to help. You need a date for the wedding, right?”

“Do you have a, uh ... boyfriend?” It’s a pretty good guess Elliot likes guys, but they haven’t come right out and said it either.

“No. I’m not seeing anyone, but yes, I like guys. It’s finding guys that like me back that’s more of the issue. I haven’t dated in a while.”

“That makes two of us,” I try to joke. “I’m usually more of a one-night stand kind of guy. Less complicated, right?”

“Sure.” Elliot’s lips tighten into a wince. “Anyway, *I* didn’t say I’d bring a date to a wedding. Come on, just offer to go out for coffee or something. What do you have to lose?”

I tap a profile at random. Her info says she's twenty-five. She has short blonde hair and is a little on the skinny side. Friendly smile. The doorbell rings, followed by Mittens barking. "It's probably just the food. I'll get it," Elliot offers. "Message her. She's cute." They walk to the door, leaving me still looking at the profile.

TJ: Hey, looks like we're a match.

Elliot says something to the person at the door, then it closes again. When they walk back, they're carrying a bag of food. Elliot sets it on the coffee table and sits down next to me again. That's when a new message pops up on the app.

Rebel: Looks like. You like to cook?

"Here." Elliot hands me a takeout container. "How's it going?"

"She messaged back. I don't know about this. It's weird messaging someone I don't even know." I grab a plastic fork from the bag, spearing a piece of broccoli. Elliot pulls out a pair of chopsticks, breaking them apart before rubbing the sticks together. "I never understood why people do that."

They look at their hands and laugh. "It prevents splinters from the wood. I'm guessing you're not big on chopsticks?"

"I never really learned how to use them," I admit. I take another bite of my beef and broccoli and Elliot leans closer, grabbing a piece of beef from my food.

They smirk as they bring the piece of food to their lips. "I could teach you," they offer.

Derek's warning from earlier that Elliot likes me pops into my head. I can almost see why he'd think Elliot is flirting with me, but I still think he's reading into something that isn't there. They're just being friendly. I grab another set of chopsticks from the takeout bag and break the set into two pieces. I rub the sticks against each other, mirroring Elliot's earlier moves. "Okay, now what?"

Elliot sets their chopsticks down, and then their hand is on mine, repositioning the first stick. "Hold that still." They grab the other stick, rearranging my fingers and thumb until I'm holding it almost like a pencil. They keep their hand over mine, moving it along with mine to show me the motion. With Elliot's help, I manage to pick up a piece of broccoli, then they pull their hand away. The sudden lack of warmth throws me off for a moment. Elliot picks up their chopsticks again, going slower to show me how they hold them.

My food falls to the plate before I make it to my mouth. "Try again," Elliot encourages me. My hand fumbles, but I get a bite this time.

"You make it look easy." I look at my fork, thinking about forgetting the whole thing.

"It just takes practice." Elliot picks up a piece of their orange chicken, moving it to their mouth with ease.

"You want to watch something?" I ask, changing the subject. Elliot grabs the remote, turning on the TV. They pick a romcom movie I've seen before that's heavier on the comedy. I attempt a few more bites with the chopsticks, but after I drop

more food, I huff and pick up my fork again. Elliot's mouth turns up in a slight grin, but they don't say anything as we watch the movie and eat the rest of our dinner. Elliot's been here less than a day, but maybe this is a good sign. I could get used to hanging out like this.

Seven

Elliot

“WELCOME TO WIRED AND Tired, what can I—” I make it halfway through my usual sales pitch before I realize who’s standing in front of me. “Hey, what are you doing here?” I ask.

“I’m meeting up with Rebel, uh, I mean Rebecca, the girl I’ve been messaging,” Travis answers. “You don’t mind that we’re meeting here, do you?”

I wasn’t expecting Travis to meet up with his date at my work when I suggested he ask her out for coffee, but I can’t take it back now. “No, of course not. What can I get you?”

“Tea, maybe? I don’t know if caffeine is a good idea.” Travis drums his fingers on the counter as he looks at the menu behind me. It’s bad enough I’ve had to watch them message through the app over the last couple of days. I didn’t think I’d have to watch the first date too. I grab a cup, filling it with hot water before dropping in a bag of chamomile herbal tea. I snap the lid on, moving on muscle memory as I ring up Travis. “Thanks,” he says when I hand him his change. I watch him walk over to one of the empty tables and pull his phone out.

“What’cha looking at?” Stella leans over my shoulder, looking out in the same direction.

“Nothing.” I take my eyes off Travis and head to the sink. At least if I’m busy washing dishes, I won’t be looking at my new roommate. My hands go on autopilot, grabbing the sponge and a blender and taking it apart to wash.

“You sure it’s nothing?” Stella asks. “You don’t usually slam the dishes around like that.”

My hand tenses on the handle of the blender, and I let out a slow breath. “Nothing that matters. The guy that just walked in is my new roommate. He’s meeting up with some girl from a dating app,” I explain.

“Ah, and let me guess. You have a crush on your straight roommate?” Stella’s jaw tightens with a slight frown as she looks out towards the table where Travis is sitting. I don’t bother to answer. “That sucks, but you never know. Maybe the date will be a flop.”

“Sure, and maybe he’ll realize he’s not as straight as he thought he was.” I roll my eyes, and Stella places her hand on my shoulder.

“It’s possible,” she says slower.

“Are we still talking about Travis? You seem a little over invested here.”

“There’s, uh, a guy in one of my classes. He’s straight and has never been with a girl like me. We kissed, but I don’t know.” She shrugs with a sigh. She doesn’t have to come right out and

say it, but I know what she means. Stella is trans and from what I know, it wasn't that long ago that she came back to college after taking some time off to transition and get gender affirming care. I don't think she's done much dating since coming out.

“Yeah, dating sucks.” It's hard enough being gay, but it's even harder for people like us who don't fit into stereotypical gender norms. Add in being asexual, on my part, and it's practically impossible. Stella walks to the counter to deal with a new customer without another word. I almost feel bad about blowing her off and throwing the guy she's seeing into the same lot as Travis. I know objectively speaking that it's possible and sexuality isn't set in stone, but it's almost easier to take myself out of the running.

I tune out the chatter of the café, fighting the temptation to turn around and see if Travis's date showed up yet. It's not that I thought there was any chance Travis would like me back. I had a bigger crush on him when we were younger, and I didn't yet understand being asexual. At least this way I can still get to know him, and we can be friends. I'm just not eager to watch him fall for some girl right in front of me.

The last couple of days living in his house have been nice, and at the same time, a little awkward. I've gotten a lot of my things unpacked, and I'm more settled in, but it's different living with Travis. I'm not as comfortable around him as I'd gotten being around Aiden and Liam. Even wearing makeup or more feminine clothes has me double guessing about what Travis would say. I'm constantly on edge, being self-conscious

about my choices. Maybe it's better if Travis does get a girlfriend. It might be easier not to worry about what he thinks if he's seeing someone.

"I'm going on break," Stella announces as she unties her apron. Her phone is in her hand and her fingers are tapping on the screen before I get a chance to respond.

"Sure." The dishes are basically done and there's no line of customers. Which makes it easier to pick Travis out of the small crowd. There's a girl at the table with him now and they're smiling at each other over their paper cups. *Looks like it's going well.*

Stella walks closer to the table, still looking at her phone, until she almost bumps into Travis's date, she swerves at the last moment, her hip hitting the table. "Whoops, sorry about that." She laughs, shoving her phone in her pocket. I can't hear what the girl says back, but Stella laughs. "I'll pay more attention next time." She walks away from the table, leaving Travis and his date, and glances at me, then winks. *What is she up to?* Whatever's going on, I don't want to be part of ruining Travis's date. I grab the washcloth to wipe down tables, but it doesn't take long before I end up at a nearby empty table close enough to hear Travis.

"I work at an animal shelter," the girl says. "What do you do?"

"I work in construction. I'm a foreman." I'm not eavesdropping on purpose, but I still slow down to wait for the response.

“You build houses?” she asks slowly. I force a cough to cover up the laugh that escapes. *Maybe it’s not going as well as I thought.*

“I’m also apprenticing under the company architect. Learning how to draw blueprints and schematics. I spend most of my time at my office.” I tune Travis out as I step further away. It’s none of my business. I should focus on work.

“Well, learn anything?” Stella asks. “I don’t think there’s going to be a second date.”

“Stella, how about you stock the display case? I’m not talking about this.”



TRAVIS ISN’T AROUND WHEN I get home. He and his date left the café after an hour or so, but I don’t know if they left together. I keep trying to tell myself it doesn’t matter. It’s not like I have a chance with Travis either way. I head for my room, grabbing the box next to my desk. I’m still unpacking a few things, and I’d put a lower priority on my makeup. I carefully pull out each item, taking the time to set it up in and on the desk. The more I pull out, the more it hits me how long it’s been since I’ve done anything for my blog. I can’t even blame it just on moving. Even before that I hadn’t been updating as much.

I set my phone on the stand and open the camera app, tilting it until there’s a decent view of my face. I look at the different makeup choices, narrowing it down to something resembling a

color scheme. First, I do a quick layer of concealer and foundation, before I outline my eyes in dark green eyeliner. I blend charcoal gray and jade green for eyeshadow, deepening the shadows in the creases. I'm focused on applying mascara when the door opens.

I let out a sigh of relief when it's just Mittens walking in. She barks happily before jumping on my bed and settling down as she looks at me. I turn off the recording, but I'll have to edit out that last bit. While I'm at it, I take a few still shots before grabbing a makeup wipe. Mittens is still lying down on the bed by the time I finish and take a seat next to her. "Well, girl, I guess we should figure out something for dinner." The dog trails me into the kitchen, nudging her food dish with her snout and giving another woof. "Okay, just let me find the ..." I trail off as I see the bin of kibble in the walk-in pantry. I add a scoop to Mitten's bowl, then look around to see what my options are.

Noodles, canned chili, nacho sauce, no chips, but there's frozen French fries ... Within a few minutes, the fries are in the oven, and I have chili warming up on the stove. "All I'm saying is it couldn't have been that bad," the voice carries in from the living room, and when I turn my head, it's not just Travis walking in but Derek, too. I haven't seen him in the past couple of days since I've moved in. After whatever happened that day when he disappeared.

"She had no clue how my job differs from the actual construction crew," Travis answers. Mittens barks, rushing to meet them at the door.

“Something smells good,” Derek comments, walking into the kitchen. Our eyes meet and an easy smile covers his face. “Hey, how’s it going so far? You settling in, okay?” he asks. The question is harmless enough, but Derek doesn’t attempt to hide the way his eyes run over my body taking me in. I can’t say I blame him, considering how he picked up one of the smuttier books in my collection. Besides he was blunt about being bi and checking me out last time. Except, he doesn’t know I’m asexual.

And I’m not planning on saying it when Travis is right in the other room about to walk in. Not that it’s either of their business. I’m not interested in Derek, and I think he’s already getting that hint with the way both of us turn to look at Travis as he walks in. “Hey, I didn’t know when you’d be back or that you’d be inviting someone. I just figured I’d make myself something.”

“Don’t worry about it. I ate before we got here, and Derek isn’t planning on staying long,” he says. Maybe I’m imagining things, but did Travis just look at Derek like that was a warning? No. He has no reason to care if Derek’s hitting on me, right?

“Sure, but uh, do you have a minute?” Derek asks me. The timer on the oven still has a few minutes. I’m not the only one glancing at it. He knows I don’t have a decent excuse to turn him down.

“Yeah, come on.” I head down the hall for my room. Whatever he has to say, I’m not planning on having an audience. “I’m

not interested in a date or anything like that,” I say once we’re alone.

Derek chuckles, taking a seat on my bed. “Am I that obvious?” he asks. “Don’t get me wrong, you’re cute, but that’s actually not why I wanted to talk. I think we got off on the wrong foot. Maybe I wasn’t thinking it through, and I made some assumptions that weren’t fair to you. I assumed you were moving in because you had a crush on Travis, but he said you were the one who pushed him to finish his dating profile and go out today. So, thank you.”

My chest tightens. I know the date was a flop. It doesn’t change anything. “I just gave him a nudge. He was the one who went through with it. I’m just being a good roommate. Trying to be friendly.” It’s all technically true, but it feels hollow.

“Sure. I think maybe we could be friends too. You can tell me where you find those dirty books,” he winks. A shrill beeping breaks our conversation up as the oven timer goes off. The food’s ready. Great timing, too. I’m over this weird conversation.

Eight

Travis

ME: FAVORITE FOOD?

Bailey: Pasta. I know it's full of carbs, but it's comfort food.

A smile stretches over my face. After the last flop of a date, I've been spending more time messaging potential matches. I want to get a better feel for the girl before I ask her out. Maybe that way there will be less chance of disappointment. Most of the girls I've asked that question to have given superficial answers. It's nice to get a more genuine one.

Bailey: What about you?

The new message pops up, and I tap the phone as I write out a response.

Me: I love pasta too, but it's not my favorite. My favorite food is probably biscuits and gravy. There's something special about breakfast.

The music drifting from Elliot's room gets louder. I'm not sure what they're doing in there, but the music has been playing

non-stop since I got home from work a little while ago. It's not that loud, but the fast beat of it is hurting my head. I pocket my phone, making my way down the hall. My fist taps on the door, but Elliot doesn't answer it. "Elliot?" I turn the knob and it gives way easily, the door swinging open. "Elliot, do you mind turning that down?"

They turn around in their desk chair, and Elliot's cheeks go pink. Well, pinker. Some of the color has to be makeup. Their face is done up in various blues and silver. I've noticed Elliot wearing light makeup, but it's nothing compared to seeing them with a full face of it. They grab their phone, fumbling with it until the music softens. "Sorry, I didn't ... I didn't hear you get back."

"It's fine. I'll let you get back to whatever you were doing," I say. It's clear I'm interrupting. Between the way Elliot blushed and how they're mumbling, mixing up words, I don't think I was supposed to see this. I back up, closing the door behind me. My phone buzzes with a notification. I pull it out seeing a new message from the dating app.

Bailey: I've never been big on breakfast. I'm good with just a cup of coffee right when I wake up.

It'd be easy to use this as an opening. Invite her out for coffee or even breakfast. We've been messaging for a couple of days now. I shouldn't be this nervous about meeting up in person. My finger taps the side of my phone, but I don't write anything back. I'm not ready to go there yet. I walk toward the kitchen, opening a cabinet to grab a bag of chips. It's still early

and I might as well veg in front of the TV. I have the feeling Elliot will want to talk to me once the shock wears off. I might as well make it easy for them to find me.

I'm halfway through an episode when Elliot's door opens. They don't say anything as they take a seat on the other side of the couch. I slide the bag of chips closer to the middle, and Elliot sighs, grabbing a chip. A long, mostly silent moment stretches out between us. "Can you not open the door without permission next time?" they say finally.

I wasn't thinking when I did it, but the way Elliot's cheeks went pink. Like I walked in on them doing something else. Not that it would be the first time I've walked in on a roommate in the middle of a personal moment, but ... even walking in on Derek with a hookup didn't feel this awkward. "Right, sorry. I shouldn't have come in. For the record, I don't mind if you wear makeup. I want you to feel comfortable here, too."

Elliot grabs another chip, taking their time before they say anything. "I'll keep that in mind." We watch the show without talking. I have no idea what I'm supposed to say now. They don't seem bothered by the silence, keeping their attention on the TV other than grabbing the occasional chip.

Eventually the show finishes and I can only put off making dinner for so long. I leave the chips on the couch next to Elliot and head for the kitchen. On impulse, I grab a beer when I open the fridge, then I grab a second bottle. "You want a beer?" I offer.

Elliot looks over the back of the couch, their eyes glancing at the bottle before focusing on my face. “Sure. Thanks,” they say. Something gets lost in translation, I walk toward the living room and Elliot heads for the kitchen, leaving us to meet in the middle. They laugh, wrapping their hand around one of the bottles. Elliot grins, lifting the beer to their lips and their eyes meet mine. Their eyes seem to sparkle. A trick of the light, maybe, or maybe they missed some of the makeup when they cleaned it off.

I shake off the thought and turn back to the kitchen. I’m looking in the fridge and pulling out a few things when I realize Elliot followed me. “Can I help?”

I pull out a package of ground beef, setting it on the counter next to the other ingredients. “Sure.” I grab a cutting board and knife, setting it up with the carrots, garlic, and onions. I mince the garlic first, adding it to a pan on the stove. “Can you chop the carrots and onions?” Elliot nods, taking over the knife and carefully cutting up the vegetables.

“What are we making?” they ask.

“Shepherd’s pie, well, sort of. I like to make it as twice-baked potatoes.” I grab the potatoes as I talk, rubbing them with oil, and getting each ready for the oven.

“Sounds good.” We work together unexpectedly well. Elliot follows my lead and somehow it takes away the awkwardness from earlier. Our hands brush against each other as I reach for a hollowed-out potato to fill with the meat mixture. Our eyes meet, and Elliot smiles for a moment before looking away. A

nervous knot forms in my stomach and the way Elliot blushed earlier pops into my head again. They pull their hand back, grabbing another potato half to scoop out the inside. “How are things with, um, Bailey, right?”

It’s obvious Elliot is trying to change the subject on purpose, but I don’t know what else to say to make this easier. “Good. I was thinking about asking her to meet up.”

“You should. You’ve been messaging for a while now.” They keep their eyes down, looking at their hands as they work. Other than directions for cooking, we go silent. Elliot’s phone chimes, and they pull it out, glancing at the screen and tapping something out. I’m not trying to be nosy, but it’s impossible to completely ignore the back and forth between Elliot and whoever they’re messaging. With the chime of each new notification Elliot’s face gets tighter, until they sigh and shove their phone in their pocket again.

“Everything okay?” I ask.

Elliot crosses their arms over their chest, looking down rather than at me as they talk. “Yeah, it’s fine. I was just messaging Aiden. We were supposed to meet up, but he’s busy with his boyfriend. It’s ...” they trail off, and their cheeks darken again. “It’s not a big deal.” Elliot shrugs and leaves the kitchen, going back to the couch and starting the show again.

I take a drink of my beer and put dinner in the oven. Part of me is considering giving Elliot a break and leaving them alone, but maybe that isn’t what they want. They didn’t go into their room, after all. Elliot finishes their beer, setting the

empty bottle on the coffee table as I sit down on the other side of the couch. They're watching the show, but their hand fidgets with the hem of their shirt, tugging on it and twisting the fabric around their fingers. "Can I ask something without it being weird? It's okay if you say no, just don't make it awkward."

"Ask me," I say. It can't be any weirder than it already is at this point.

"Can I hug you?" Elliot finally looks at me, but they're biting their lower lip, waiting for an answer. "Just a hug. Aiden will cuddle with me sometimes and I ... forget it."

I scoot closer to Elliot and wrap my arm around their shoulders. "Is this okay?" I'll admit the whole thing is a bit awkward, but there's a part of me that wants to comfort them.

Elliot clenches their eyes shut and releases a deep breath. They relax into my side, cuddling further into me. It doesn't feel as awkward anymore, but that nervous knot in my stomach from earlier is back again. "Thank you," they say.

It takes me a few moments to relax, but I decide not to overthink the situation. Elliot misses their friend, but I can't imagine cuddling like this with Derek. We're close but ... *nope*. Not overanalyzing this. There's nothing more to it than comforting a friend. I look at the TV and focus on it instead. Or try to.

I don't know if I really tried to get to know Elliot when we were kids. The seven-year gap made them seem so much younger and most of the time they were tagging along with our

sisters. They were such a quiet kid but, come to think of it, I don't remember Cece and Elliot being that close either. I feel like I'm missing something I should remember, but it doesn't add up. Elliot is bold and smiling at me one moment, then withdrawing and in need of comfort the next. We're still curled up together when the oven timer goes off, and Elliot pulls away, jumping out of my arms.

"It's just the food. Do you want another beer?" Maybe that's not the best offer right now. I don't want to make this weird and think there's more to this. Elliot isn't flirting with me or trying to kiss me or something like that. I grab a second beer for myself, not waiting for their answer.

"I'm good, thanks." Elliot sits up, scooting off to their side of the couch by the time I get back with the food.

"Can I ask a maybe weird question?" I ask after a few moments.

Elliot keeps their eyes on their plate, scooting the food around before they answer. "Sure."

"Why don't you wear makeup like earlier in public? I've never seen you all done up like that. You clearly know what you're doing. I don't understand how the whole nonbinary thing works, but it looked good. If you like wearing makeup, you should." I haven't had nearly enough alcohol to blurt that out, but here we are.

"Thank you. I just, I know I shouldn't care what people think, but it's still hard. I like wearing makeup, but I'm not a woman and people look at me weird. The shocked look on your face

earlier.” Elliot grins, the corners of their mouth turning up slightly. “It doesn’t always go over well, but I’ve had worse reactions.”

It seems like for every step forward Elliot and I take in becoming friends, there’s another awkward stumble back. There’s a comfortable silence as we eat our dinner. Elliot doesn’t ask again when we finish eating; they just lean into me. I wrap my arm around them again. It feels nice, almost; a hint of the knot from before is still there, but the easy back and forth of Elliot breathing settles it down.

Nine

Elliot

I'M PUSHING IT. ASKING Travis to hug me is one thing, but cuddling with him is asking to be hurt. Even if he doesn't realize there's more to it, I can't stop thinking about it. Maybe we didn't kiss or anything, but there was something intimate about the way he held me. It didn't make it any easier to get over the shock of him walking in on me when I was doing my makeup. And the way he told me I looked good in the makeup ... it's not like he called me cute or anything, but my mind is twisting this into something it's not.

He's straight.

He's going out on a date tomorrow morning with the girl he's been messaging, and I need to forget about this *crush*.

Maybe it's been too long since I've gone out. I'm not looking to hook up with anyone, but it wouldn't hurt to go out and flirt. Maybe dance a little. I know Aiden would probably go with me, but he hasn't been going to parties as much since he's cut back on drinking. I grab my phone, tapping out a message to Stella instead.

Me: What are you doing tonight? Would you want to hit a club?

We've never hung out like this, but I get the feeling Stella could use an outing, too. She's been weird at work the last few shifts, and I haven't heard anything more about the guy she's been flirting with. We could probably both use a night out. A new message pops up within a couple of minutes.

Stella: Sounds better than homework. Count me in. Where are we going?

I text her the name of a local gay club I've been to once before with Aiden. We've got some time before it's late enough to go out, but I head to my closet to go through my options. I have a few options that don't see much use, but I skip over them for what I'm comfortable with. A pair of dark blue jean shorts and a silky thong that won't show any underwear lines under the tight shorts. I'm looking at shirts when my phone chimes again.

Stella: Can you do my makeup? I've seen some of your blog.

That's news to me, but it could be kinda fun.

Me: Sure. I'll send you my address. You can come over and I'll do your makeup.

I pull a couple of shirts out, debating my options. One is a short sleeve black button up and the other is a tee that's cut off to show my midriff. It's a gay club and it shouldn't be a big deal for me to wear a crop top. Especially being that it's

summer and it'll be hot. Despite all the reasons I tell myself it'll be okay, I grab the button up instead, pulling it on before I head for my desk. I want to wear the crop top, but I just can't work up the courage to do it. I pull out a few different eyeshadow palettes, but I'm not sure which colors will work better with Stella's complexion. Her skin isn't as pale as mine, which brings up a different issue. I grab my phone again.

Me: If you have a foundation that matches your skin tone, bring that.

She sends a thumbs up in response. I grab an eyeshadow brush and one of the palettes. I dip the brush in purple, then drag the pigment slowly over my wrist. It's a deep purple that'll probably look black in a dark club. If I wore it, most people probably wouldn't think much of it. Maybe I shouldn't play it that safe, though. A bright yellow and white in the pallet gives me an idea. I outline my eyes with black before adding the yellow on the inner eyelid and blending it out with white. I layer the purple into a sharp point on the outside for a cat-eye effect. I'm so lost in the whole process that another chime of my phone catches me off guard.

Stella: On my way. See you soon.

I sigh and look in the mirror taking in the bright art on my eyelids. Anyone who knows the nonbinary flag colors should get it, and it might save me from having to explain my pronouns as many times. It's bolder than I'd usually wear going out, but maybe that's a good thing. I leave it.

I should probably head out to the living room and wait for Stella to get here, anyway. The house isn't far from the college, and it shouldn't take her long to show up. Travis isn't in the living room or the kitchen, but I know he's home. He must be in his room, which is all the better. I sit on the couch next to Mittens, waiting for the knock on the door to announce Stella's presence. It only takes a few minutes before the dog hops to her feet with a growl. I pet Mittens's head as I shush her. "It's fine, girl."

Stella knocks again, and I pull open the door. Mittens barks next to me and Stella looks at the dog, taking a step back. "You have a dog?"

"It's my roommate's. Come on in, she's friendly, just easily excited." I grab Mittens's collar pulling her back for Stella to enter. She follows me to my room, and I shut the door on Mittens, keeping her out. Once we're alone, Stella stands still, looking me over.

"The makeup looks great, but is that really what you're wearing?" she asks. Stella is wearing a short black dress with a deep neckline, showing off her cleavage. The skirt is looser than the top, but it barely hits her mid-thigh. Along with a pair of strappy wedges that only make her legs look longer.

"What's wrong with it?" I ask. She walks up to my closet, not asking permission as she pushes hangers to the side, looking at my clothes. She pulls out the T-shirt Aiden got me for my birthday. It's got a bee in the nonbinary flag colors on it and

underneath the picture is the word *non-beenary*. I've tried it on after he gave it to me, but I haven't worn it anywhere.

"Here, it'll go with your makeup, and it's tighter than the shirt you're wearing." She's right about that. The T-shirt has a more feminine cut and shows off how slim I am without showing off my belly like the crop top I was considering earlier. I unbutton my dress shirt and pull the tee on, carefully keeping the fabric away from my face so I don't mess up my makeup. "That's much better." Stella helps herself to my desk next, looking over the makeup I've placed on it. "Damn, I knew you had a lot from all the different stuff you do on your blog, but this is more than I was expecting."

"Did you have anything in mind that you want me to do?" I ask.

She sits in my desk chair and pulls her purse in front of her. She places a bottle of foundation on the desk and looks through the mess I left. "Not really. I can do some basic stuff, but I'm not sure what some of these things are." She picks up an eyelash curler, sliding her fingers into the handle and snapping it shut.

I laugh and lean over her to grab a few options. "Do you like bright colors or darker ones?"

"Hmm," she picks through a few colors. "How about a darker smoky eyeshadow and some lipstick? I have a dusky red that could work." She grabs it from her purse, showing me the tube. I'm glad she thought to bring it because I usually do colored lip gloss or lip liner instead of lipstick.

“We can work with that.” I grab the foundation and a brush, then look at Stella. She closes her eyes, keeping still as I apply the makeup. “So, uh, any update on the guy in your class?” I ask, and Stella laughs.

“Nope. If there was, I’d probably be busy with him in my dorm. Not getting ready to head out to a club with you. Any update with your cute roommate?”

I take my time blending the makeup over Stella’s skin to make sure the layer of foundation is even. “I leaned into him while we were watching TV the other day. We cuddled. It should’ve been weird, and it was kinda, but he didn’t pull away. He held me.”

Stella opens her eyes to look at me. “You *cuddled*?” she asks sarcastically.

“Yeah, he walked in on me putting on makeup, and I freaked out and asked if I could hug him. I don’t think he realizes I like him.” I grab eyeliner, lifting it to Stella’s face. “Look up.” Putting the makeup on her is a decent distraction from what we’re talking about.

“You should’ve kissed him,” she says.

“Because that worked so well for you,” I quip back, and she laughs. “He knows I’m nonbinary, but I’m asexual too. We kiss and then what? Even if by some miracle he was interested in me, eventually he’ll want more than I can offer.”

“You’re asexual? As in no sex at all?” Stella clarifies. Her eyes are closed now as I put on the eyeshadow, but it doesn’t make

the question any easier.

“It’s more complicated than that. I’ve had sex. I even enjoy it sometimes. Most of the time, though, I’m not interested. Even with guys I was dating and into, it just ...” I shrug with a sigh and Stella opens her eyes. “I had a boyfriend my freshman year of college. We’d been dating a few months, and I liked him, but he was constantly pushing me for more.”

“Then he was an asshole. It doesn’t mean you can’t find a guy to date you if you want a boyfriend.”

“Can we not go there? I want to have fun tonight. Dance, maybe drink, and flirt a little.” I finish up with her makeup and take a step back. Stella looks in the mirror and slowly turns her head to get a better look.

“Sure. Sounds good. You want to go together? I’ll drive. I don’t mind skipping out on drinking. I just want to dance.” She uncaps the lipstick tube and smoothly glides it over her lips before smacking them together. “Ready?”

“Yeah, let’s go.” I grab my wallet and keys. We make our way out of the house without running into Travis. Stella leads the way to her car, and I give directions to Sinful.

“What is this place?” she asks as we park.

“Gay club. Come on,” I lead the way to the line near the building. Stella follows me and we wait our turn to pay the bouncer.

I barely have time to look the place over when we get inside before Stella grabs my wrist and pulls me toward the crowd.

“Dance with me,” she yells over the noise. The music is so loud it drowns out my thoughts. Stella dances along to the beat, keeping a grip on my arm and laughing. “Loosen up,” she shouts.

I know she’s right. I didn’t come here to keep overthinking everything with Travis. Dancing with Stella is almost funny. She pushes and leads until I wind up with my ass to her groin and her hands on my hips. “There’s a guy checking you out.” She leans into my neck, tilting her chin out until I follow the direction with my eyes. Sure enough, there’s a guy watching us as he drinks from his glass. Our eyes meet and he lifts the glass in greeting. “He’s not going to come over if you keep dancing with me.” She pushes me forward, leaving me to dance on my own. It only takes a few minutes for the guy to walk up to me once I’m alone.

“Can I buy you a drink?” He yells over the music. He’s decent looking, I guess. Probably a few years older than me, but younger than Travis. Which is the last thing I should be thinking about right now.

“I’d like that, thanks.” I lead the way to the bar, and he follows. When the bartender looks our way, I raise my voice. “Can I get a lemon drop?”

“I’ll take another rum and coke,” the guy says, holding up his glass. Then he looks at me again, “I’m Sam.”

“Elliot,” the bartender returns with our drinks, and Sam pulls out a credit card. “Thanks for the drink.”

Ten

Travis

THERE'S ANOTHER CRASH FOLLOWED by a laugh. I roll over in bed before getting to my feet. Elliot loudly shushes their friend as I enter the room, but from the way they're stumbling, it looks like Elliot's been drinking. We've been living together for a few weeks now, but this is the first time I've seen Elliot drunk. They didn't strike me as a big partier. "Are you okay?" I step into the living room, getting Elliot and the girl's attention.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to wake you," Elliot stumbles as their friend catches them.

"They had too much to drink. I'm just helping Elliot get safely to their room," she explains.

I move to Elliot's other side, wrapping my arm around their waist. "Let me help." Before I can get the words out, Elliot leans on me, sliding their arm around my back.

Elliot laughs and shakes their head, and the girl takes a step back. "You good?" she asks Elliot.

“I’m grreat,” they slur. She bites her lip, holding back a chuckle in response.

“Good luck with that,” she nods with her chin toward Elliot. “I’ll see you later,” she tells them, then she heads for the door, leaving us alone.

“Come on, let’s get you to bed.” I tighten my grip on them as we walk down the hall. Elliot is a little wobbly, but they don’t stumble or trip. Luckily their bedroom door is open a crack, making it easier to nudge wider with my foot. Elliot steps out of my grip and faces the bed before their hands go to their shirt, grabbing the bottom hem and pulling it off in one smooth motion. Their hands are at their fly, pulling open their shorts before I get a chance to think anything through. I should leave and give them some privacy, but I freeze at the first glimpse of Elliot’s underwear. Maybe that’s not the best word for the silky fabric hugging the curves of their hips. It doesn’t even cover their ass. The scrap of *underwear* narrows to a tiny string that disappears in the crack of Elliot’s butt.

The knot in my stomach comes back with a vengeance, but it’s not the only part of my body reacting. My dick chubs up as Elliot bends over, pushing out their butt as they pull off their shorts. I’ve always had a thing for lingerie, but I didn’t think I’d have the same reaction to someone wearing it that isn’t a woman. I wince, closing my eyes hard and rubbing my temple. When I open my eyes again, Elliot is in their bed covered by a blanket and looking up at me.

“G’night,” they roll on their side, curling in on themselves.

“Night,” I echo, closing the door behind me with a soft click. Maybe it’s late, and I’m still half asleep. Maybe it’s just been a long time since I’ve gotten laid, and any ass covered in silky fabric looks appealing. *Maybe* I should get some sleep and forget the whole thing even happened. I have enough on my mind without adding this.

I didn’t stop to think about it earlier, but I’m only wearing a loose pair of sleep pants. The fabric is tented in the front from my confused erection, but I’m not focusing on that as I make my way to my room and lay down. An ass is an ass, and it makes sense that any nice ass covered in lingerie is going to get me going. It’s a good thing I have a date with Bailey tomorrow. Maybe she can take my mind off all of this. I roll over, pressing my hips to the bed and ignoring the friction against my hard on. It doesn’t feel right taking care of my issue when my mind is still on the image of Elliot bent over, the silky line of their thong disappearing into their ass.

I don’t sleep worth a shit. Rolling over and fighting weird dreams mixed with memories. Elliot curled into me on the couch as we watched a show. Seeing them blush and stumble over their words. Then instead of Elliot pulling away, the dream shifts, and we’re kissing. They straddle me, my hands sliding down their back into their pants, feeling the silky fabric underneath. I wake up with a hard on and a headache. I’m in a foul mood as I make my way to the bathroom and start the shower. I know it’s still early, and from how drunk Elliot was last night, I don’t expect them to wake up early.

The hot water running over my neck soothes some of the headache. My hand reaches down, grabbing my dick firmly at the base and giving it a smooth stroke. It was one thing ignoring it last night as I was trying to go to sleep, but now ... my balls draw up tight. It's been too long of a night fighting this to expect any of this to last. I focus on the sensation, fucking into the grip of my hand with the water for lubricant. It feels good, but it's still a far cry from doing this with someone else. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't still thinking about Elliot as I quickly take care of my issue. Watching my cum circle the drain, I let out a sigh of relief as my dick goes down. It only takes a few minutes after that to clean up and finish my shower.

I'm feeling more myself as I walk into the kitchen and get the coffee machine going. Mittens rubs against my leg before looking up at me and giving a playful bark. "Hey girl." I pat her head in greeting.

"Morning," Elliot grumbles as they walk into the kitchen. My eyes snap up to look at them, half expecting Elliot to still be wearing just that scrap of underwear. Instead, they're fully dressed, wearing a loose pair of pj pants and a T-shirt. "Please tell me you made enough coffee for me too."

"Um, yeah." My hand goes for the cabinet, pulling it open to grab a couple of mugs.

"You have your date thing this morning, right?" they ask, grabbing the now full carafe to pour coffee in both of our cups.

“Yeah.” I’m doing great with the one-word answers this morning. Maybe I should call off the date with Bailey and go back to bed. How is Elliot so wide awake after coming home *that* drunk? “How are you feeling? You were a little off when you got back last night.” Finally, a full sentence. I take a sip of my coffee. *Do they remember undressing in front of me?* Maybe I’m making a bigger deal out of this than I should. I’ve been around plenty of guys while they undressed, between roommates and locker rooms, and I’ve never thought twice about it. Except Elliot isn’t a guy and seeing their silky thong ...

“I’m fine, just a little tired. Sorry for waking you up. I’ll try to be quieter next time.” They stir the creamer into their cup, then take a sip. “Hope your date goes well. See you later.” Elliot leaves the room, taking their coffee cup with them. I pull out my phone, going over my last few messages with Bailey. We’re supposed to meet up in about an hour for a brunch date. All the small talk has gone well, and, in theory, we should get along in person, but I’m half dreading this date. Maybe the whole idea of finding a girlfriend just to go with me to Alyssa’s wedding was foolish to begin with. A new message pops up on the app from Bailey.

Bailey: I’m looking forward to meeting you in person.

Along with the message, she sent a picture. I saw pictures on her profile before and Bailey is good looking. She’s trim, with a small chest and a hint of a butt. In this photo, she’s wearing a cute sundress that ties behind her neck and shows off her long legs. Her blonde hair is braided, hanging over one shoulder. I

should consider myself lucky to be on a date with a girl like her.

Me: You look great. I'll see you soon.

I drink the last of my coffee and go back to my room. I threw on clean underwear and some basketball shorts after my shower, but it's not exactly date attire. I find a short sleeve green button-up shirt that isn't too formal and pair it with some jeans. It'll probably be too hot for pants later in the day, but I don't expect the date to last that long. Even if it goes well, a brunch date doesn't easily turn into sex. Bailey even said she's more interested in a relationship than fooling around. I thought that was what I wanted too, since I'm trying to find a girlfriend, but maybe I'm going at this all wrong.

In any case, I owe it to myself and Bailey to at least meet up and keep an open mind. It doesn't take me much longer to be ready to leave, but I still have time to kill before I need to be at the restaurant. I pull my phone out and open it to a puzzle game. It doesn't do much to take my mind off everything, but it dulls the racing thoughts a little.

When I pull into a parking spot thirty minutes later, my hands are sweaty, and my stomach is in knots. From the picture Bailey sent me earlier, I know what she'll be wearing and who to look for, but we didn't discuss if we're going in together or where we're meeting up. I thumb open the app to send out a quick message.

Me: Hey, I just got here. Did you want to meet up outside and we can go in together?

I'm out of the car and walking toward the front door of the restaurant as I wait for an answer.

"Travis," Bailey waves at me as she walks from another corner of the parking lot. She's even cuter in person, but I still feel anxious instead of excited. "I was just about to message you," she says. I instinctively move forward to meet her and when we get closer, Bailey throws her arms around me. "It's great to finally put a face to the person I've been messaging," she tells me when we pull apart.

"I had pictures on my profile," I protest.

"It's not the same." Her eyes sweep over me, slowly checking me out. "You look good."

"Thanks, you too." I brush off the compliment, taking a step toward the door. "Come on, let's head inside." Bailey follows me, but neither of us picks up the conversation until we're seated at our table. "So, uh, you mentioned you're a teacher?"

"Well, not officially yet. I'm student teaching as I work on getting my credentials."

"Oh, that's cool. What grade are you hoping to teach?" It's easy enough to have a simple conversation with Bailey, and from the way she's smiling at me, I must be doing something right. I order breakfast and Bailey orders a burger off the lunch specials. The conversation turns from work to our families. I tell her about my sister, and she tells me about her older brothers. Overall, it's going well, but there just isn't a spark. She's cute, smart, and should be an easy choice for a second date, but I'm not into it.

I make small talk and we eat our food. When the bill comes, I pull out my wallet and insist on paying. “Thanks. Walk me to my car?” Bailey brushes up against me as we leave the restaurant, and she takes the lead. I follow her and eventually she stops in front of a blue sedan. “Well, it was nice meeting you in person. We should do it again sometime.” She takes a step closer and looks up at me, not quite close enough to touch, but close enough to give me a hint. I lean in and press my lips to hers. Bailey licks my lips before opening her mouth, inviting me to deepen the kiss. Her arms go around my neck, holding me there. I pull back first and when our eyes meet, Bailey sighs, “nothing, huh?”

“Sorry. You seem like a great person, but no. I’m just not feeling it,” I admit.

“It’s fine. I’ll see you around, maybe. Bye, Travis.” Bailey steps back and gets into her car.

I walk back to my car and head home. Elliot is in the living room when I open the door, and they turn to look at me. “Date over so soon?”

“Yeah,” I say absently.

“That great, huh?” they ask.

“It was ... fine. Just didn’t feel like more.” *It didn’t feel half as thrilling as being around Elliot.*

“Don’t you still need a date for your sister’s wedding?” they ask.

“Yup, but I guess it’s not the end of the world if I go alone,” I huff.

“Why is it such a big deal, anyway?”

“It’s not. I mean, it shouldn’t be. Alyssa was just messing with me about not being able to find a date on my own. She even mentioned trying to set me up with one of her friends. I thought it’d be better to bring someone than have to deal with all of that,” I explain. Now that I’ve said it out loud, though, it sounds a little foolish.

“If you want, I could go with you,” Elliot offers.

Eleven

Elliot

TRAVIS LOOKS AT ME silently. His jaw dropped like he's trying to think up a response. "You'd go with me to the wedding? As my date?"

I don't know why I offered. Even going as a friend to Alyssa's wedding is a bad idea, but us on a date? Why would Travis even consider that? "I meant as a friend, but if you want to tell your sister we're dating, I could go along with that," I blurt out. I don't know where I'm going with this.

"You'd *pretend* to date me?" Travis crosses his arms at his chest. "Why?"

"You said you'd bring a date. Does it have to be a girl? Taking me can't be any worse than bringing a girl you barely know. And you don't have to worry about things getting awkward after the fact because it's all for show." I really shouldn't be pushing this hard. It's a dumb idea and just because the whole fake-dating thing worked out for Aiden and Liam doesn't mean I have a chance in hell.

“Okay, sure, why not? The wedding is in three weeks. Is that enough time for you to take time off work?”

“I’ll figure it out. Just let me know the date.”

“The tenth through the twelfth. We have to be there for the rehearsal dinner the night before and we’ll leave the morning after the wedding.”

Three days. I don’t know why I expected it to be less than that but, “what do you mean leave? Where is the wedding?”

“A couple of towns away. We’ll drive out there on the tenth and get there in time for dinner. Then spend the night in a hotel, go to the wedding, and head back the next morning. If you’re serious about going. You can change your mind and back out now if you want. It’s not too late.”

“Why would I back out? Three days off work, and I get to relax in a hotel?” I try to sound more confident than I am, and Travis laughs. I get off the couch and walk up to him. “But I’d understand if you’d rather take someone else.” I’m giving him an out. I know Travis is straight, and I can’t blame him for not wanting to bring me to meet his family and having everyone assume he’s bi or something.

Travis licks his lips, his arms tightening before he sighs. “I want to take you.”

That was almost too easy, but I’m not gonna question it. I want a chance to go on a date with Travis even if it is fake. “Okay, I’ll let you know once I get the days off approved.” It’s short notice, but I think I can get Rachel to work it out.

Travis's eyes cast downward, and he takes a step closer. For a moment I think he's going to kiss me, but it's probably just wishful thinking. The TV plays in the background and he glances over. "We'll work out some details when it gets closer. You can go back to watching your show."

"Do you want to join me?" I'm pushing my luck, and I know it.

"I need a moment, but if you're still out here in a bit." He shrugs, leaving it open-ended. Travis heads for his room, and I make my way back to the couch. Signing up to spend multiple days and nights pretending to date Travis. It's like I want to torture myself. It's been hard enough to ignore my crush on him and now I'm volunteering to play happy couple with him for an entire weekend. I focus on the TV, trying to shake off the thoughts.

The wedding isn't for a few weeks, but the thought of spending three whole days as Travis's date? I might have bitten off more than I can chew. My phone vibrates, distracting me from my thoughts as I pull it out to see a new message.

Aiden: What are you doing this weekend?

Aiden: There's a party at one of the frat houses on campus.

I want to hang out with Aiden, but going to a frat party doesn't sound like the greatest idea. I don't need a repeat of last night. Coming home drunk and waking Travis up ... I'm sure it just reminds him of how young and immature I am. Yet another reason all of this is a bad idea.

As I'm typing out a message to Aiden, Travis walks into the living room, taking a seat on the other side of the couch. "Hey, do you have plans for this weekend?" I ask. It's the last weekend before Fall semester starts, but it's not like that means something to Travis.

"Not really, why?" Travis shifts in his spot, settling into the couch.

I delete the message I was about to send and type out a new one. "Could I invite over a few friends?" Aiden might be willing to change his plans to come here for a different kind of party. "School starts up again on Monday and it'd be nice to just hang out by the pool." I've been itching for an excuse to go swimming since I moved in.

"Sure, sounds fun." Travis looks at the TV, keeping his attention there. Even though Travis came out to join me, something feels off. Maybe I shouldn't have offered to go with him to the wedding.

Me: We could hang out here. There's a pool.

I tuck my phone into my pocket again, not waiting for an answer. I'm not paying much attention to the TV, but I don't know what to say to Travis either. I slouch, accidentally leaning closer. He sets his arm on the back of the couch, still not looking at me. "You can scoot closer. I don't mind and it probably wouldn't hurt for us to get used to it. If we want people to believe we're dating."

"Right..." *we need to be okay with casual touching like cuddling to convince people we're dating.* Except there's no

one here right now. No real reason for us to be pressed up next to each other. Not that it stops me from taking him up on the offer; I lie down instead of moving closer, resting my head in Travis's lap. He tenses for a moment, then I feel a hand on my shoulder. It's not completely relaxed, but in a weird way, I feel comforted.



THE SNAP OF A car door shutting draws my attention the moment before the bell rings. When I open the door, I find myself face to face with Derek. “Oh hey, I was expecting Travis,” he says.

“He’s out back, getting the grill ready.” I open the door wider. “Come on in.” I was hoping it’d be Aiden and Liam, but I’m not surprised that Travis invited Derek. They’re clearly close. *Close enough for Travis to confide in about our ploy for the wedding?* I don’t know, but I’m not throwing it out there in case he doesn’t know. My hand is on the door. I’m about to close it, when another car pulls up, but this one I recognize. Even though it’s Liam’s car, Aiden opens the driver’s door and climbs out. Liam steps out of the other side, but then the back door opens and Ian and Daniel get out as well.

“Hey, I figured you wouldn’t mind if I invited a few more people.” Aiden pulls me in for a hug.

“It’s fine. The more the merrier.” I lead the group through the house to the backyard. Travis and Derek are by the grill, getting it ready for later, while Mittens sniffs the air around

them, looking for scraps. “Hey,” I open the cooler next to Travis. “I don’t think you officially met before. This is Aiden and Liam, and that’s Ian and Daniel.” I point out each of them for Travis and Derek before introducing them as well. “This is my roommate Travis and his friend Derek.”

“Twins?” Derek asks, looking over Aiden and Ian, not even trying to be subtle as he checks them both out.

“They’re taken.” I hand Aiden a soda, and he laughs before stripping off his T-shirt, leaving him just in his swim shorts.

“Thanks,” he lifts the can, taking a drink. His eyes look me over when he pauses. “You’re swimming, right? Do you need to go change?”

I shrug a little uneasily. “I can’t find my suit,” I admit.

“Let’s go look, I’ll help.” Aiden walks toward the house, not waiting for me to answer. I have no choice but to follow him or he’ll go through my things anyway. He’s already opening a drawer when I get through the door. “So, Derek’s cute,” he says, not taking his attention off the clothes he’s sorting through.

“Yeah, I guess.” I join him, looking through the dresser.

“Travis looks good too,” he hedges. Maybe I should tell him about the wedding date idea. Knowing Aiden, there’s just as much chance he’ll encourage me to use it as an opportunity to kiss Travis as try to talk me out of the whole thing. The problem is, I don’t know which answer I’m hoping for.

“Aiden, I’m not interested. If I wanted a boyfriend, I could find one.” I pick up a box I haven’t unpacked yet, and dump it on the bed.

“Okay, don’t get all huffy about it. I’m just trying to help.” Aiden walks over to my bed. “You sure you didn’t just overlook it?” He pulls out a scrap of dark blue fabric and holds it up triumphantly. “Found one! You have a speedo? First the sexy lingerie and now this? You’ve been holding out on me.”

“Put it back. I’m not wearing that. I was looking for swim trunks,” I protest.

“What’s wrong with this? Why have a speedo if you aren’t going to wear it?” Aiden asks.

“I don’t wanna draw that kinda attention to myself.” I thought I got rid of those after high school. I snatch it out of Aiden’s hand, and he laughs.

“It’s just a swimsuit. No one is going to care. Come on.” He crosses his arms over his chest, staring me down.

“Oh, fine.” I agree. It’s not like I haven’t worn it in public before and it is a swimsuit. I don’t really want to be the only one not swimming. Aiden smiles, but I give him a shove toward the door rather than undressing in front of him. “I’ll meet you out there. Go bug your boyfriend or something.” A sigh escapes my mouth as the door closes behind him. It really shouldn’t be a big deal to wear the speedo. I used to wear them all the time for swim meets, but after high school I quit competing. It’s easier to blend in wearing swim trunks. Wearing a skimpy speedo tends to draw attention.

But does that really matter here? Derek and Travis are the only ones that are single. Derek is already half interested, and I turned him down. And Travis is ... straight. I strip off my shorts and underwear, replacing them with the snug swimwear. I don't even hesitate before pulling my shorts back on over it. I might have to wear these in the pool, but at least I can cover up a little out of the pool. When I get outside, Daniel and Ian are swimming, and Aiden and Liam are near the shallow end. Aiden is sitting on the edge with his feet in the water. "Can we get you a speedo?" Aiden asks his boyfriend when I step out.

Liam lifts his hand to his forehead, massaging his temple. "How about you get one?"

"Sure, we can match," Aiden smirks without missing a beat.

I roll my eyes, ignoring them as I walk over to the cooler and grab a beer. I'm going to need it to make it through this.

Twelve

Travis

WATCHING THE DARK BLUE fabric stretch over Elliot's ass as they climb out of the pool is a special kind of torture. When they suggested the pool party, I thought it could be fun. A few beers, hanging out. I didn't think I'd be spending the afternoon trying to keep my eyes off them. Elliot is the only one in a speedo, but even if they weren't, I don't think it'd matter. They're the only one I'm having trouble looking away from. Every time I catch myself watching, I'm picturing how they looked in their silky underwear the other night.

Derek takes a drink of his beer next to me, and he isn't even attempting to hide the fact that he's checking Elliot out. "Can you stop checking out my roommate?" I tell him. "It's a little creepy."

"Lighten up, what's the big deal?" He smirks, passing me his mostly full beer and strips off his shirt before jumping into the deep end with a splash. Elliot walks over to where I'm sitting at the patio table, and grabs a towel, drying off.

“Thanks for letting us hang out here. This has been fun,” they say.

“You’re living here. You don’t have to ask to invite friends over.”

“Still, thank you.” Elliot shivers and wraps the towel around themselves. I’m saved from thinking of a response when one of their friends walks over.

“Hey, we’re gonna get going.” The blonde hugs them. “We’ll see you later.”

“Sure. Bye Aiden.” Elliot holds the towel tightly to themselves as they follow the group to the house. I stay back, letting them say goodbye and find Derek cleaning up the beer bottles and soda cans around the yard.

I walk over and place my hand on his shoulder. “You don’t have to clean up. I’ve got this. Why don’t you call it a night?”

Derek sighs, looking at the bottle in his hand. “Yeah, maybe that’s a good idea. And by the way, Elliot’s already made it clear they’re not interested in going on a date with me, so you can stop worrying about it. You know, if I didn’t know better, I’d almost think you were jealous.” He drops the collection in the recycling bin, heading for the house without saying goodbye.

Derek might have a point, but I’m not sure what it means. Whatever is going on with me and Elliot is confusing. I’m almost thirty, and I’ve always thought I was straight. But the thoughts I’ve had for my roommate lately paint a different

picture. It's hard to deny the attraction when I keep picturing them half naked. It doesn't matter though, Elliot was drunk, and I'm pretty sure they didn't mean to give me a show.

I sigh, opening the cooler to see what's left, but all there is soda. I grab a can and pop it open anyway. Elliot walks outside again, now wearing the towel around their waist. "Do you want help cleaning up?" they ask as they gather their clothes from earlier, dropping the towel to step into their shorts.

"I think we're good, actually. Derek helped before he left. Help me bring the cooler in?" I pull the plug on the side, letting the melted ice run off. Elliot grabs the handle on the opposite side, helping me tilt it until the water stops. We haul the cooler into the kitchen with Mittens following along. "You want to watch a show?" I ask.

We've cuddled on the couch a couple of times since the other night. Neither of us are talking about it. "Yeah. Just give me a moment. I need to go change first." Elliot ducks into their room, and I decide to do the same. It only takes a few moments to strip off my wet swim trunks and change into dry clothes. I beat Elliot to the couch and grab the remote as Derek's words from earlier repeat in my head. Maybe I am a *little* jealous.

Elliot plops down on the couch next to me. Without a word, they scoot closer, snuggling into me. I rest my arm on the back of the couch and scroll through the streaming app, looking for something to watch. I settle on a cake decorating contest,

picking something I won't have to think too hard about. But that only makes it harder to ignore the elephant in the room.

Holding Elliot like this is intimate. It only confuses the matter. I glance out of the corner of my eye, looking them over. My arm slides down, wrapping around Elliot's shoulders. They lift their head, and our eyes meet. I'm caught up in staring into their eyes, mesmerized by the varying shades of blue and gray. All I can think of is kissing them, but I'm not sure who closes the distance. I'm too focused on the feel of their lips on mine. Elliot sighs as they open their mouth. My tongue curls around theirs. I hear a soft groan.

Then Elliot pulls back in a rush. "Sorry. I, uh ... we can call that practice for the wedding too, right? Or we can just forget the whole thing." They stand up from the couch. "Sorry," they mumble again, turning toward the hall.

"Elliot, wait." I call after them, but the door slamming shut is the only answer I get. I'm so screwed. That kiss was ... soft, affectionate, and lingering. Not the kind of rushed kisses that lead to sex, but it was sweet. And now I'm even more confused than before. Elliot clearly wanted to kiss me. I'm not sure where I fucked up, but I know we should talk about this.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I pull it out, hoping for a message from Elliot. *Nope, it can't be that easy.*

Alyssa: So, do you have a date? I'm trying to finalize seating for the wedding.

That's an excellent question. One I don't have the answer to at the moment. After what just happened, I wouldn't be surprised

if Elliot calls the whole thing off. There's no way I can ask them that right now. And there's no way I'm letting my sister set me up with one of her friends, either.

Me: I'm bringing a date.

I switch to a new message, pulling up Elliot's number. I haven't had a reason to message them since they moved in, but in this case, the sooner I clear the air, the better. I don't want them to think they did anything wrong when I was just as into that kiss as Elliot was.

Me: If you want to pretend it didn't happen, that's fine, but for the record, I liked the kiss.

I send the message before I can overthink it. It's not the best, but I'm being honest. Before Elliot suddenly pulled away, I was hoping this kiss would mean they liked me too and maybe we could talk about these weird feelings I've been having. My phone chimes with a new notification, but it's an e-invite to Alyssa's wedding with a menu selection for dinner. Including picking options for my date.

Me: I want to take you as my date to the wedding. If you still want to go.

I send the new message to Elliot, but I don't get anything in return. There's no use waiting up all night in the living room. I pause in front of Elliot's door on my way to my room. With a soft knock, I raise my voice. "Goodnight, Elliot. I have work early tomorrow, but if you want to talk, you can text me." I don't know if they hear me because there still isn't an answer.

Elliot's reaction kept me from immediately overthinking my own reaction to the kiss, but lying alone in my bed, it's easier to think about what could've happened if Elliot hadn't pulled away. That kiss was passionate. There was a solid spark between us. It didn't matter in the moment that Elliot wasn't a woman. It didn't matter what my sexual orientation was. I just wanted to keep kissing them.

My dick gives a confused twitch, but I already crossed the line after seeing Elliot in that silky thong. Of course, that was before everything went to shit. Doing anything like that right now would only make matters worse. I adjust myself as I strip down to my boxers and get ready for bed. That's when my phone chimes again.

Elliot: I said I'd go with you. That hasn't changed. I already got the days off approved from work.

It doesn't say where they're at with what just happened, but I'm taking it as a good sign. Even if they're still doing the whole thing as a favor to keep me from having to endure an evening with a blind date, there's still a chance to talk all this out. I settle into bed, but after a few minutes of tossing and turning, I know it won't be that easy. I huff, grabbing my phone from my nightstand. I open a game to play as I lie there. It only takes a couple of minutes before I begin to zone out.

Thirteen

Elliot

FOR THE RECORD, I liked the kiss.

All week I've thought about what those words are supposed to mean. And asking me to go with him to the wedding. Was that just checking in to make sure I'm still on board with being his fake date for the evening or did Travis mean he wants me to be his date for real? Either way, the only way to find out would be talking to him, but we've been missing each other at every step. Our work schedules have been almost completely opposite, and I'm busier now that school is in session again. This isn't a conversation I want to have through texts.

"Where's Stella? She should've been here by now," Flynn complains. It doesn't help that Stella is running late. She should have been here ten minutes ago. I grab another cup, going through the motions of making the order. When I turn around, I spot Stella walking in with a soccer player from BMU.

She wraps her arms around his neck, pulling him in for a kiss before they part ways, and he leaves again. "Who was that?" I

ask as she steps behind the counter.

“That would be Caleb, my boyfriend.” She grabs her apron, wrapping it around her waist as she clocks in.

“Gossip about boys later. We’ve got work to do,” Flynn snaps, pushing a cup with his messy handwriting for an order into Stella’s hand. She laughs, taking the cup to the blender without an argument.

“When did that happen?” I ask, preparing another drink next to Stella.

“It’s recent, kinda. How’s things with your roommate?” Her eyebrow raises in challenge, and I sigh. “That great, huh?”

“It’s complicated.” I finish my drink and call out the customer’s name, then grab the next one.

“Complicated? What happened?” she asks.

Flynn moves to the blender next to me, hitting the button to turn it on and drowning us out with the noise. “Oh, I’m sorry. Am I interrupting?”

“Why are you such a prick this morning? Not getting any?” Stella asks.

“None of your business,” he answers with a scowl.

“So, I’m right then,” Stella taunts.

“Stella, focus, we’ve got orders to fill,” Flynn tells her.

“Oh, fine. But should I find a girl or a guy to pull that stick out of your ass?” Stella asks with a snicker, and I can’t help but laugh. I’ve never seen him show an interest in anyone. Flynn

doesn't take the bait, ignoring us as he makes the order. The rest of my shift passes quickly after that. A blur of coffee, pastries, and pushing buttons on the register. I wipe the back of my hand across my forehead to clear away the sweat as I finish the last order of my shift.

"Elliot, wait. Did you want to hang out after I get off shift?" Stella calls after me. It's tempting. She already knows more about the situation with Travis than Aiden. But I'm hoping to run into Travis when he gets home and get some answers myself.

"Text me when you get off shift." I could use someone to talk to. It wouldn't hurt to figure out what I'm going to say to Travis either, because at the moment I'm lost. I don't know if I should call the whole thing a loss and take Travis up on his offer to forget about it or push for more.

What did he mean he liked the kiss?

And do I really want to know what happens after I explain I'm asexual? Even if Travis liked the kiss and is interested in seeing where this goes, he probably thinks it'll eventually lead to sex. Maybe it could, but ... it's complicated. I wasn't saying that to Stella just to get out of talking about it.

Mittens barks happily when I open the front door, getting off the couch to sniff me and say hello. I pet her head, scratching behind her ear. "Hey girl." I walk into the hall, opening my door and grabbing a clean change of clothes. I need to shower off the smell of coffee. Travis's truck wasn't here when I parked, so I don't bother locking the bathroom door as I strip

off my clothes. When I'm standing naked under the hot water, my thoughts drift to the kiss itself. For a moment, I could've sworn Travis kissed me back, but I pulled away before I could really be sure.

I don't know what prompted me to kiss him. One moment we were cuddling and watching TV and the next my lips were on his. Sure, I'd had a couple of beers, but not enough to affect my judgment. I quit drinking hours before we sat down on the couch. I just had to go and try my luck. Travis never pushed me away after the first time I asked to cuddle with him, and I took that as blanket permission to cuddle whenever I wanted it. It made it all too easy to blur the lines and kiss Travis, and now I'm stuck with the messy aftermath. As nice as the kiss was, I'm not sure it's worth all the drama that comes with it.

I grab the soap, lathering up my washcloth, and washing my body. My dick stays limp despite the vague pictures in my head as I think about Travis. It's not an issue. It's better this way. I have enough to think about without adding *that* to the list. I know from experience that the majority of the time my body is more responsive when I have feelings for someone I know, and while Travis fits that category, thinking about him in the shower isn't the same as being pressed against him as we kissed.

It was my body's reaction that snapped me out of it. Travis's tongue rubbed against mine, and my cock plumped with blood. Not a full-on erection, but enough to tent my pants. Especially when I was wearing skintight leggings that wouldn't hide anything. The last thing I needed was to maul Travis while

he's still figuring things out. Then he sent that message. He liked the kiss, and all I've been able to think about since is maybe we should try it again.

Maybe we both need a second chance to see how we feel about it. Maybe then I can figure out what to say to Travis. I turn off the water and grab my towel. After drying off, I pull on my underwear and jean shorts, but keep my shirt in my hand as I open the door. My phone chimes as I'm shoving it in my pocket. Another message pops up as I'm reading the first one.

Stella: I'll be getting off work in another half hour. Did you want to meet up on campus or your place?

Stella: Or we could get something to eat?

Me: How about I grab pizza and meet you in your dorm? Can you chip in once I get there?

I don't want to hang out here and risk a run in with Travis, but I don't feel like going out somewhere to eat either. Stella responds almost immediately, letting me know she'll pay half and asking about toppings. We debate between pepperoni and Hawaiian until eventually Stella agrees if I'll get wings. The whole time I'm pulling on my shoes, then going through the house out to my car.

Stella's dorm is a single in one of the upperclassmen dorm buildings. I make my way upstairs and down the hall until I find the right number and knock. "There you are," she says, pulling open the door. "Come in before the pizza gets cold." She grabs the boxes out of my hands, leading me in. Stella sits

on her bed, pulling out a wing and dipping it in ranch. She takes a bite. “Okay, now spill. What’s so *complicated* about the roommate?”

I grab a piece of pizza, delaying my answer as I take a seat on the bed. “His sister is getting married, and he needed a date. I offered to go with him.”

“You’re his date for his sister’s wedding?” Stella turns to better face me.

“His *fake* date. Or at least it was supposed to be at first. Now I’m not so sure. We kissed, and I don’t know what’s going on. I’m not sure if we’re going as friends or if it’s a real date.”

“Wait, I thought he was straight?” She grabs a napkin, cleaning her hands from the wings before grabbing a slice of pizza.

“He is, I think, I don’t know. He kissed me back, and he said he liked it, but we’ve barely talked in the last couple of days.”

“When’s the wedding?”

“In a week and half.”

“You need to go over your story for the wedding, right? Figure out what you’re telling his family and all that. Invite him to hang out and go over the details. Maybe flirt a little, then when you go to the wedding, you can use it as an excuse to kiss him again. See what happens,” Stella waggles her eyebrows, and I shake my head at her.

“That’s what I’m afraid of. I’m asexual, remember?”

“Oh fine. You can kiss and cuddle then, or whatever it is you do.” She rolls her eyes, clearly not taking me seriously.

“See *that*,” I point my finger at her. “*That* is exactly why it’s so hard to date being ace. Everyone assumes that having sex is a normal part of dating and not wanting it makes me some kind of weirdo.” I take a big bite of my pizza, staring at Stella.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean anything by it.” She holds up her hands in surrender. She might have a point with me needing to talk to Travis before the wedding, though. We aren’t going to make a very convincing couple if we’re this awkward around each other.

“What about you? What’s going on with you and Caleb?” I deflect, wanting to get off the subject.

A smile stretches across her face as Stella pulls at a strand of hair. “We’re still figuring it out. We kept running into each other in class and at parties. Almost hooked up, but after telling him, Caleb freaked out a little. We talked, and he asked me out.”

Between the goofy smile and how Stella is fidgeting, it seems like it’s going well. I’m happy it worked out for her, and maybe she’s right. I should talk to Travis.



MITTENS BARKS WHEN I walk in, coming up to meet me. I lean down to pet her and say hello, and when I stand up again,

I notice Travis sitting on the couch and our eyes meet. I really can't keep avoiding him. "Hey."

"Hey, I've been meaning to go over a few things for the wedding with you, but I keep missing you. Are you busy?" His words almost echo Stella's from earlier. If I'm going to the wedding, we need to get our story straight.

I take a seat on the other side of the couch, keeping a distance between us. "It's late. Do you really want to do this right now?"

"Well, I haven't seen much of you lately. I'm starting to think you're avoiding me," Travis looks at me out of the corner of his eye, grinning playfully.

"No. It's not that," I lie. I have been avoiding him, but mostly because I don't know what to say. I don't know where we stand. Travis liking the kiss doesn't mean he wants to date me for real. "When are you free? Let's work out a time to go over everything."

"Are you busy tomorrow? I have to be at a site in the morning, but I'll be done by the afternoon."

"I'm working tomorrow morning. I should be done around the same time you get home. We could meet up after?"

"Yeah, we can make that work."

"Great, now that we've got that covered, I'm gonna call it a night." I press a quick kiss to his cheek as I stand up, catching Travis off guard. "I'll see you then. It's a date."

Fourteen

Travis

“WHAT DO YOU WANT to tell people about how long we’ve been dating?” Elliot asks. When I said we needed to go over details for the wedding, I wasn’t expecting to get to the questions like this right away. Maybe it’s a good idea to go over our story to tell my family, though.

“We could say we started dating around the time you moved in? Stick to a story similar to the truth. We met up, you needed somewhere to stay, and I was looking for a roommate. After you moved in, we clicked, and it went from there.” It’s close enough to the truth that we should be able to keep the story straight. Maybe even a little too close to the truth. I still don’t know what’s going on between me and Elliot.

“That works, but if we’ve only been going out a little while like that, isn’t it a bit soon to take me to meet your family?” They lay their hand on my thigh, and it almost seems like Elliot is teasing me.

I tense up, fighting the impulse to lay my hand on top of Elliot’s. “We’re living together. It got serious fast and given

our past history it's not like we're complete strangers. You've already met my family." I stretch my arm over the back of the couch behind Elliot instead of touching them back.

"Are you usually this skittish when you're dating someone? Relax, if we're supposed to be in a serious relationship, you need to be okay with me touching you." Elliot scoots closer, pressing their leg against mine and keeping their hand on my thigh.

I don't think Elliot realizes I'm not tensing because I don't like the touch. The opposite, in fact. I can't stop thinking about that kiss even if we haven't talked about it. I want to touch them, but I'm afraid I might slip and Elliot clearly wants to stick to the fake dating story.

I place my hand on top of theirs, lacing our fingers together. Elliot tenses this time, looking at me questioningly. "What do I call you? Is 'boyfriend' okay or ... how does that work?" I ask.

"Uh, I didn't really think about that. I haven't dated anyone since I came out. You can call me your partner? I guess." Elliot doesn't sound very sure of themself, and now I feel guilty for flipping the tables.

"Sure, feel free to think about it and let me know if you change your answer." I rub my thumb over the back of their hand, gently making circles on their skin.

"How do you feel about PDA? Holding hands, wrapping your arm around me, dancing together, kissing?" their voice raises in pitch, and Elliot leans closer.

This might be a good opening to talk about the kiss we already had. Or a chance to kiss them again. But I chicken out. If Elliot hasn't brought it up since I messaged them, maybe I should take that as a hint. "Yeah, people are probably going to expect some of that. If we need to touch and kiss to sell the story, then sure. Nothing over the top, but if it feels appropriate at the time ..." I trail off as Elliot bites their lip.

"Maybe we should practice?" they ask, turning to face me.

I lean in, closing the distance between us, but waiting for Elliot to make the final decision. "You can kiss me," I say after we stay still for a moment.

Elliot closes their eyes and lets out a breath, then their lips meet mine. It's not like our kiss the other day. Elliot is awkward and tense. Our noses bump and they laugh, pulling back. "Can we try again?" Elliot wraps their arms around my neck. I slide my tongue over their bottom lip and their mouth opens. The kiss deepens. With how we're sitting on the couch, we're both turned sideways. Elliot pushes up onto their knees, scooting closer until they're practically sitting in my lap. I move my hands down their sides, holding their hips. I don't realize I'm getting hard until Elliot whines and rubs into me. "Shit, sorry." They break the kiss, pulling away again. "Got a little carried away."

Their leggings are tented with an obvious bulge, and the sight of it only makes my dick jump. Seeing Elliot get turned on is a huge ego boost knowing it's because of me. "No, don't be

sorry. I think we can safely say that kissing won't be an issue." I try to lighten the mood, and Elliot grins with a small chuckle.

"What about telling everyone you're ... bi?" Elliot asks. It sounds more like they're fishing for how I'm feeling about all of this.

The only problem is I'm not really sure how to label myself. I haven't spent much time thinking about it. I know I'm attracted to Elliot, but I'm not overanalyzing the rest. Maybe I'm bisexual or something, but I don't really see the point of coming out. "I don't see why I need to. I can say we're dating and leave it at that."

"You don't think your family will find it weird you're bringing me when you've never mentioned it and you've only dated women?" Elliot asks.

"A few of them might, but I don't think it'll be an issue. If anything, I think there will be more gossip about the fact we're living together. I wouldn't be surprised if people think we'll be getting married next." I'm trying to joke, but Elliot tenses, looking down at the floor.

"So, where is the wedding exactly?"

"It's at a vineyard about two hours away. The wedding will be outside, but the rehearsal dinner the night before will be in a banquet hall. And I'm supposed to let Alyssa know what we'd prefer for the wedding dinner. The choices are chicken or fish." I almost completely forgot I needed to ask.

“Chicken, I guess. Speaking of food, do you want to pause this talk to figure out dinner? I’m starving. It got busy at work, and I didn’t get a chance to take a lunch.” Elliot fidgets with the hem of their T-shirt, still not looking at me.

“Sure, let’s see what we have.” I get off the couch, heading for the kitchen. When I pull open the fridge, there are some bell peppers and chicken. I can work with that. I pull out ingredients, transferring them to the counter and grabbing a cutting board.

“What are you making?” Elliot asks, leaning against the counter to watch me.

“Fajitas.” We go silent as I prep the vegetables and Elliot watches. I feel a little on edge considering everything that just happened. Elliot wasn’t the only one getting turned on during that kiss. “Do you want to help?”

“I can try, but I don’t do a lot of cooking.”

“It’s fine. I’m sure you’ll pick it up.” I walk Elliot through the steps, and we wash the veggies, then I cut the first bell pepper, carefully avoiding the seeds. Elliot mimics my movements, and I chop up an onion next.

“How did you learn how to cook all this stuff anyway?” they ask.

“I took a cooking class in high school. I thought it’d be an easy A, but I ended up really enjoying it. I also like watching cooking shows on TV.” I get the pan ready for the chicken, waiting until it’s nice and hot to add good color. Cooking with

Elliot is surprisingly comfortable. We work well together, and it's almost fun. After cutting up the chicken, adding it back to the pan along with the veggies, I grab the handle of the pan, giving it a firm jolt to flip all the ingredients together.

"How do you do that without making a total mess?" Elliot asks.

"Want to try? It's not as hard as it looks, I swear."

Elliot looks at the pan full of food skeptically. "I don't want to ruin it and have everything end up on the floor."

"I won't let you, come here. We'll do it together." I move to the side, encouraging Elliot to step closer. They place their hand loosely on the handle of the pan. I step behind Elliot, placing my hand on top of theirs. They tense, taking a step back, but that only puts us closer, their back pressed against my front. With the height difference, I have to lean over a little to keep our hands together as we lift the pan. I go through the motions of making a tiny quick circle to flip the food. A couple of pieces fall out onto the stove, but most of it flips into the air, landing inside like it should. "It'll make more of a mess if you hesitate. Don't go too slow and grip it firmly."

Elliot closes their eyes and bites back a laugh, muttering something under their breath that almost sounds like *that's what he said*. I have to bite my lip to keep from laughing too as I realize how my words might have sounded. Our close proximity isn't helping the matter either; Elliot's ass is right against my thighs.

“Okay. Can we try again?” they ask. We go through the motion again, and Elliot’s hand is tighter on the handle, following my movements.

Their body shifts against mine, rubbing right against my groin. My body is getting the wrong idea about what’s happening here. I need to put some space between us before I embarrass myself. “Ready to try on your own?” I ask, taking a step back. Elliot focuses on the pan, making the movement on their own. A few pieces fall out, but it’s not a total disaster. “That’s good.”

“Thanks.” They turn around, looking up to meet my eyes. I feel the urge to kiss them again. I reach around them to turn off the stove, but that brings us closer, my leg pressing between theirs. Elliot looks at me like they’re having the same thought, but neither of us close the distance.

We don’t say anything as we back away, but Elliot’s cheeks are flushed pink. They aren’t wearing any makeup today, but the bit of color on their cheeks only makes them look prettier. I’m not entirely sure what we’re doing with all of this, but I’m almost afraid to ask and scare Elliot off again.

I grab a couple of plates from the cabinet and the tortillas from the fridge. “Come on, let’s finish this up and eat.”

“Sure.” Elliot grabs a plate and walks to the couch again.

Maybe avoiding the conversation isn’t the smartest, but I don’t know how to talk about this. I don’t know what I’m doing. I don’t know what it means that I’m attracted to Elliot. For as

feminine as they are, Elliot isn't a woman, but seeing how turned on they were after we kissed didn't freak me out.

I'm twenty-nine. I should have my sexuality a little more figured out by this point in my life. *Why does Elliot leave me so confused?* Why does the thought of getting them naked make my dick twitch?

Fifteen

Elliot

I LOOK FROM THE clothes on my bed to the nearly empty suitcase. Travis said it's semi-formal, which leaves me a few options, but he also said a decent shirt and *slacks*. That fits the semi-formal requirement, but would it bug him if I dressed more femme? Travis knocks on the door frame, interrupting my rambling thoughts. "Hey, having issues deciding what to take?" he asks, as he leans against the open door.

"Kinda, I have a few choices, but ..." I look down at the bed, trailing my hand over the blouse in front of me. It's nice enough, a deep green silk tank top that should be dressy without being over the top. But it's also from the women's section.

He walks into the room, grabbing the shirt off the bed and holding it in front of me. "I think it'd look good on you. You can wear whatever you're comfortable in. You don't have to pick certain clothes because you think that's what is expected."

I bite my lip, lifting my head to look at Travis. It's one thing for him to bring me as his date for this. I expect everyone there to assume I'm a guy. If I show up in femme clothes, we're going to be even more of a spectacle. "You sure? People might talk."

"Let them. We're going to draw attention either way. It might as well be for how good you look. If you want to wear makeup or whatever else, go for it." He folds the shirt up, setting it into the suitcase before setting a hand gently on my shoulder. We look at each other for a moment, and I'm torn. I'm glad Travis is okay with me wearing what makes me comfortable, but so far, I've been playing it safe. I might wear a couple of feminine items or clothes that are more ambiguous. Wearing makeup and dressing up for a wedding like *this* unleashes butterflies in my stomach, but I want it.

"Okay, thanks." I grab my phone from where it was plugged in, so I can pack the charge cord. Then I notice the time. "Oh shit, I didn't realize how late it was getting. I better hurry up." I grab a pair of tapered slim fit pants to go with the top and another outfit that's a little more on the masculine side. It'll be better to have a couple of options, and I need something to wear to the rehearsal dinner as well as the wedding.

"You've got time. I need to drop Mittens off with Derek. We can get everything loaded after that and head out," Travis says.

I hum in agreement but keep packing a few more clothes. I leave some of it on the bed, deciding against a few options. Then I head to my desk, pulling out makeup and brushes.

Travis already mentioned being fine with it, and if I'm going to go there, I might as well go all out. I pack a small makeup bag, giving myself a few basic options that should go with both outfits. On impulse, I toss in a brighter eye shadow palette as well. "Elliot," Travis says my name, pulling my attention away from the makeup. "I need to go. I'll see you when I get back. Try to be ready, okay?"

"Yeah, I'll do my best," I agree. I take a step closer before I catch myself and stop. I don't need to keep confusing the matter by kissing Travis again. We've already blurred the lines so far that I don't know what we're doing. "I'll see you when you get back."

He nods, not saying anything as he turns until I hear him call the dog. I let out a deep breath and run through a mental list of all the things I've packed. There's clothes for the rehearsal and the wedding, makeup, my phone charger ... I still need to pack socks and underwear. I open the drawer and hesitate again. At least I waited until Travis left the room to do this. I'm guessing we'll be sharing a hotel room since his family thinks we're dating, but that doesn't mean something is going to happen.

Still I need something that won't show panty lines with the tight pants I packed. Most of my lingerie options might be pushing my luck, but I pull out a thong that's more satin than lace. The pouch in front should hold everything in, and it wouldn't be too obvious under my clothes. I can always change in the hotel bathroom before we go to bed. I shove a

few basic pairs of briefs in along with the thong and add some socks to the pile.

I hear the front door close again as I'm grabbing my last few things. I shove it all into the suitcase and zip it shut. "Ready?" Travis calls. He has a suitcase of his own in the living room near the door.

"I'm good to go," I answer. We roll our suitcases out of the house then split off, each heading for our own vehicles. I notice first and stop. "We should go together, right? Your truck or my car?"

"Your car probably gets better mileage, but I don't want to make you drive the whole trip. It's two hours out," he says.

"What if we take turns driving? We can still go in my car and then we'll both be less tired when we get there."

"Fine, but I'm paying for gas. It's only right, you're only going along because of me."

"Deal." I hit the button on my keys to pop the trunk and load my suitcase. Travis sets his things next to mine and we close the trunk and get in. I turn on the car and get my phone hooked up to the sound system. "Alright, so where are we headed?" I ask.

"Get on the highway and head north for now," he tells me. The music keeps it from being completely quiet in the car, but we don't talk as I drive out of town and get on the right road to hit the highway. It leaves me time to think, but the only thing on my mind is Travis. We haven't talked about the kisses or what

they might mean. At this point, I can still claim that the second kiss was practicing for the sake of the wedding, but I know I felt Travis get hard while we were making out. It's only going to get more awkward once we're there and *pretending* to be a couple.

"Does your sister live closer to where we're going?" I ask to break the silence.

He looks up from his phone. "Yeah, it's outside the city limits, near where she lives."

"I know you told your sister you're bringing a date, but what about your parents? And does anyone know you aren't bringing a *girlfriend*?" I know Travis said he doesn't care if we make a scene, but I still want to know what I'm walking into.

"No, but I can text ahead and let them know if you're worried. I don't think any of my family is going to have an issue with it. They might be a little shocked at first, but they'll adjust and be supportive." Travis's hand lands on my thigh. I'm sure he's trying to be reassuring, but it doesn't help the situation.

"That's good to know, and it's up to you when you want to tell people. This is your family and your call. But it might be easier for everyone to have the conversation in private rather than showing up with me at the rehearsal dinner. Either way, I'll go along with it." I bite my lip, trying to ignore the thumb gently stroking my leg.

"We should have time to check into our room and for me to have a quick talk with my family before dinner. It's probably

better if I tell them in person. Don't worry, it's going to be fine." Travis gives my thigh a quick firm squeeze and my dick twitches. I usually don't have such a hair trigger, but for some strange reason, it doesn't take much from Travis to set me off.

"Travis, I need you to move your hand." I keep my eyes on the road, trying not to make this more awkward, but I still notice Travis turning to look at me from the corner of my eye.

He takes a moment to look at me and think about it before his hand pulls away with a jerk. "Sorry."

A nervous laugh escapes my lips. "Does it bother you?"

"What?"

"You keep saying you don't think it'll bother your family that I'm not a woman. Does it bother you? You're about to announce to your whole family that you're not straight, and all of this is just to avoid some date set up." The word vomit happens all at once, running out before I can stop it.

He doesn't answer right away. "Maybe it started as that, but *maybe* I'm not as straight as I thought I was."

How am I supposed to respond to that?

I agreed to this because fake dating Travis was supposed to be safe. Safe because, as a straight guy, there was zero chance he'd be interested in me. It seemed like a good idea before we kissed, but we've shared a few kisses now. We're beating around the bush avoiding the conversation, but he's dropping all the right hints that he could be into me for real.

“We should pull off for gas soon,” I change the subject. “Maybe grab some snacks while we’re at it.” I don’t want to get into this before the wedding. Talking about what we’re doing and having to explain that I’m ace is only going to complicate things. It might be a bit selfish, but I want to enjoy the kisses and dates while it’s still an option.

“Sure,” he answers. We don’t talk as I pull into the station. Travis pays for the gas like he said he would. I take my time in the store, debating over which junk food to get for the rest of the trip. I’m usually not big on sweets, but I need something to distract me. I wind up buying licorice and a diet soda. “Do you want to keep driving or should I take over?” Travis asks as we walk back to the car.

It probably isn’t halfway yet, but I shrug. “Feel free.” I toss him the keys, and Travis climbs in the driver’s seat.

“How did your family react when you came out?” he asks when we’re a few miles down the road.

“Uh, I didn’t come out exactly. I had a crush when I was younger, and my sister figured it out. It didn’t really seem to surprise her.” I avoid mentioning that he was the one I had a crush on. Telling Travis I thought he was hot when I was twelve probably isn’t the smartest move. The way I feel about him now is nothing like the naïve thoughts of a preteen, and I don’t need to remind him about our age difference.

“And your dad?” he asks.

“He figured it out when I had my first boyfriend. It wasn’t a reaction as much as a *nonreaction*. He didn’t say anything, but

he didn't exactly start waving a pride flag either." I pull out my phone, opening it to a game to keep my hands busy. It's hard talking about my family. It's easier to ignore them completely most days.

"I'm sorry," Travis says.

"Don't be." I tap the screen, going through the motions of the game.

"I didn't know, Elliot. And I get why you're worried about meeting my family. You're just gonna have to trust me though. All they want is for me to be happy."

"Then why go through all the trouble of taking me? You can't show them you're happy by yourself?" I pull out a piece of licorice, biting into it with force.

"I'm almost thirty, and my little sister is getting married before me. Don't get me wrong, I'm happy. I like my job, and I have my own house. It seems like getting married and having kids is the next expected step."

"Expected? Is that what you want?"

"I don't know. Maybe? I'm not looking for it anytime soon. Most of my relationships have been short-lived, but sure, one day it'd be nice to get married. I don't want to rush into anything and regret it later." His eyes are focused on the road, not looking at me.

"And kids?" I should probably shut up while I'm ahead, but part of me hopes it'll bring me back to reality. The married and kids future Travis has in mind would be much easier if he was

with a woman. And that's the kind of reminder I need to tell myself that this is all fake.

“Yeah, eventually. Again, I'm not in any hurry.”

Sixteen

Travis

“HERE YOU ARE, TRAVIS Dawson. One room with a king bed.” The man behind the counter hits a few keys on his keyboard and slides a key card through the reader, but my mind stays focused on what he just said. *One king bed*. It should have been obvious earlier. Alyssa thinks we’re a couple, so why wouldn’t she book us a room with one bed? “Room two hundred and forty-two. Enjoy.” He holds the card in front of him, but I stay there staring at him.

“Thank you.” Elliot reaches past me, grabbing the card and nudges me with their shoulder. “Come on, sweetheart,” they tease. “We should freshen up before dinner.”

I shake off the thought and follow Elliot through the hall until they slide the card into a reader at the door. Sure enough, when I get my first view of the room, the main area has one large bed for us to share. “Are you okay?” Elliot asks. They set their suitcase on the bed, pulling out clothes.

“I’m fine.” I busy myself going through my things to find appropriate clothes for dinner as well.

“It’s not a big deal, we can share a bed for a couple of nights. Fair warning, you’ll probably wake up to me wrapped around you like a parasite. I’m a cuddler,” Elliot’s joke breaks the tension, and I find myself laughing.

“If you’re fine with it, it’s fine.” I don’t have time to overanalyze this. I need to talk to my parents before dinner. It’s one thing not warning Alyssa about my date, but I should at least tell my mom.

“If you want me to sleep on the ...” Elliot trails off, looking around the room. There’s a chair, and it’s not big enough for even someone Elliot’s size to sleep on.

“No. We can share the bed. It’s plenty big enough for both of us. It’s fine.” I pull off my T-shirt, switching it out for a button-down short-sleeve shirt. Elliot is biting their lower lip and staring at me when I look at them again. “Are you okay with it?”

“Yeah. Sharing a bed with my hot boyfriend isn’t exactly a hardship,” they mutter sarcastically.

“You think I’m hot?” I ask, raising an eyebrow. Elliot rolls their eyes.

“While we’re here, I’m supposed to be your date. What kind of partner would I be if I didn’t find you hot?” Elliot takes their clothes into the bathroom to change, ending the conversation. That response was almost too thought out. I don’t buy it, but I’m not calling them out either. I finish changing clothes and grab my phone, typing out a quick message to my mom.

Me: I just got to the hotel. Any chance we can talk before dinner?

I'm stepping into a fresh pair of linen pants when my phone chimes with a new message, but it isn't from my mom.

Dad: Your mom's busy helping with your sister, but I'm free to talk if that works.

I was hoping to tell Mom first and let her help tell Dad, but this is probably all my fault for waiting until the last moment to tell them. Maybe I should have listened to Elliot earlier and told them before we showed up here. As much as I didn't want to face a blind date, bringing Elliot wasn't just to cause a commotion and ruin Alyssa's wedding. Besides, I'm starting to realize that regardless of what happens with Elliot, telling my family I'm not strictly straight won't be a lie.

Me: Sure. Where should I meet you?

I don't want him to show up to my room before I can explain about Elliot. A new message pops up, letting me know Dad will meet me in the bar portion of the restaurant downstairs. Elliot opens the bathroom door and not only is their outfit different, but their face is made up as well. I figured they went in the bathroom for privacy, but maybe it had more to do with there being a large mirror in there. Whatever it is, my brain rambling goes from random thoughts about my family to checking them out. The outfit is a mix of masculine and feminine with slim dark purple pants, a white button-down shirt, and a bowtie the same purple as the pants. Elliot's eyes

are highlighted by lighter shades of purple, enough to make it obvious they're wearing makeup without being over the top.

"Too much?" they ask. Their lips shine with a slightly wet look like they're wearing lip gloss, but the color looks almost the same as usual.

Too much? More like I'm considering kissing them and forgetting about the rehearsal dinner. I'm tempted to pull the clothes off them and find out if they're wearing something sexy underneath. My dick perks up at the thought of Elliot wearing lingerie under their clothes.

"No, you look great. I need to leave. I'm meeting up with my dad to let him and my mom know about you before dinner. I'll be back in a little while, okay?"

"Do you want me to go with you?" Elliot walks over to their suitcase, setting a small, zippered bag inside.

"No, I'll be right back. It'll be fine, I promise." I pull Elliot in; I almost kiss them before I realize what I'm doing. I awkwardly give them a quick hug instead. "I'll see you soon," I mutter, letting myself out the door. I lean back against it, barely keeping myself from slamming my head back into the wood because Elliot would hear that. We've barely been here an hour. I need to stop making such a fool of myself.

When I get to the restaurant, I don't see Dad, but I do see the bar. The bartender notices me as I take a seat and heads my direction. "What can I get for you?"

“Whiskey soda,” I answer. I’m not going to pretend I couldn’t use a drink. Maybe it’ll help loosen me up a little. I pull out my wallet to pay for the drink at the same time my dad’s voice gets my attention.

“A little early for that, isn’t it?” Dad asks, taking a seat next to me.

The bartender finishes my drink, setting it in front of me before he turns his attention to my father. “And what can I get you?”

“I’ll have one of those.” He motions to my drink, and I laugh under my breath, shaking my head.

“Thought it was a little early?” I joke, taking a sip of my drink. The alcohol is strong enough to taste but smooth as it hits my throat.

“If you need it for whatever news you’re telling me, I have a feeling I will too. Now what is it?” He isn’t beating around the bush, but I should have known better.

“It’s nothing to worry about. I wasn’t sure if Alyssa mentioned it, but I wanted to let you know I brought a date.”

“Well, that’s great, son. When do I get to meet her?” Dad’s assumption makes me realize my mistake.

“They’re up in our room getting ready,” I try again.

“They? How many people are you dating?” he asks with a laugh.

Serves me right. I better just come out and say it. “Just one, but Elliot uses they/them pronouns. That’s what I was trying to say.”

Dad goes silent, and I take a bigger drink from my glass. “Alright, well, when do I get to meet them?” he finally asks.

“That’s it? No questions or anything?” I wipe my palm on my pants, but I’m not sure if the moisture is sweat or condensation from my glass. I expected my parents to be cool about it, but I didn’t think it’d be this easy.

“Son, you like this person enough to bring them to your sister’s wedding and be all awkward about it. You don’t need me to be awkward about it too. Do they make you happy?” he asks. For a moment, I consider admitting the whole thing isn’t real. I feel bad about lying to him. My mouth feels dry. I pause to take another sip of my drink.

“Yeah, I like Elliot a lot, and they do make me happy.” And none of that is a lie.

“Then that’s all that matters.” He claps me on the back and takes a large drink from his glass. “Now, was there anything else? I need to finish this up and get back to it.”

“How’s Alyssa?” I ask, changing the subject.

He swirls the glass, peering into it before he answers. “She’s overanalyzing every detail and keeps yelling at everyone. She’s loving it. Your mom, on the other hand, is stressed out and ready to pull her hair out.”

“It’s going to be fun,” I force a chuckle. I’m still a little worried about everything, but Dad’s reaction takes a weight off my shoulders. “I should probably go back to my room and grab Elliot. Thank you, Dad.”

“You got nothing to thank me for,” he adds, finishing the last of his drink. “Help me keep your mom and your sister from yelling at each other and we’ll call it even.”

“I can’t make any promises.” I drink the last of my cocktail and stand up along with him. Dad walks off one way further into the restaurant, and I make my way back to my room. Elliot is sitting on the bed, back against some pillows at the headboard, still dressed and ready but barefoot. They glance up from their phone when I open the door.

“Hey, how did it go?” Elliot asks.

“It went ... good. I didn’t get a chance to talk to my mom, but my dad is looking forward to meeting you. Well, meeting you again. I didn’t mention you’ve already met,” I ramble, and Elliot grins.

“Okay, we can work with that. When do we need to head out for dinner?” They pocket their phone and scoot to the edge of the bed, letting their legs hang over the sides.

“I don’t think it’s supposed to start for another half an hour, but we can leave whenever. I don’t think my family would mind if we were early.”

“Do you want to go now? It was a long drive. I wouldn’t mind a minute to relax first.”

“What were you doing on your phone when I came back?” I ask.

Elliot’s cheeks flush and they slide their hand toward their pocket. “Reading.”

“Do you need to finish the chapter you were on?” I guess.

They nod. “I really want to. It’s at an interesting part. I need to know what happens next.”

“Read your book. Let me know when you’re ready.” I grab my phone out of my pocket, and Elliot scoots back to where they were sitting on the bed. Leaving me two choices of where to sit. The chair off to the side on my own. Or on the bed next to Elliot. Screw it, we’re going to share the bed tonight, anyway. I can sit next to them. I walk around the bed, taking a seat on the other side, next to Elliot.

They look up from their phone, but I open an app on mine, tapping to get to my game. We pretend to ignore each other as we look at our phones. Elliot shifts, settling into the bed and scooting the tiniest bit closer until our legs are touching. Their thumb lifts, swiping at the phone to flip the page. Instead of focusing on my phone, I look at Elliot’s screen, reading along with them. I don’t know what’s already happened in the book, but what I see has my attention.

The words describe a fight scene: *Theo punches forward, his leg following the motion. I grab his fist, twisting it, until both of our arms are wrapped around him. My hand moves higher, pressing the side of my wrist against his neck. A sharp intake of air hits my hand. His back presses against my chest, his ass*

to my crotch, as he stills. His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows hard. "Admit it, you're just fighting because you like me to put you in your place—"

Elliot swipes their finger across the phone, flipping to the next page before I have time to finish reading the screen. I missed something because the start of this screen has the main character forcing Theo to his knees: *I pull out my cock, grabbing it at the base. My dick traces the line of Theo's lower lip. "Open up that mouth of yours. It's time you put it to some good use."*

I bite my lip, clenching my jaw as I move my eyes away from Elliot's phone. My own dick is half hard pushing out my pants a bit, but a quick glance at Elliot's crotch shows they don't share my issue. I don't get it. How can they read that without *any* reaction? I'm not about to admit I was reading over their shoulder to ask.

Seventeen

Elliot

“READY?” TRAVIS ASKS. HIS hand is on the doorknob.

“Yup,” I answer. I’m as ready as I’m gonna be. We step out of the room and make our way to the elevator. The restaurant is on the first floor and there’s a reserved banquet hall for the rehearsal dinner. We aren’t the only ones headed in this direction, but for the moment, no one seems to recognize Travis. His hand hangs next to mine, but we aren’t touching each other. I reach out and lace our fingers together. Travis looks at me, his eyebrows raising as he looks at our hands. I’m sure he’s going to pull away, but instead he squeezes my hand and pulls me closer to him.

The elevator chimes, doors opening before the people in front of us file out. I reluctantly pull my hand away from Travis’s, but he wraps his arm around my shoulders. I look up at him and Travis grins. “Come on, it’s time to meet my family.” I guess the whole fake dating thing is happening now. My gut twists with an empty hollow feeling at what awaits us. I’m not sure I can do this, but there’s no turning back now.

Travis leads me through the main floor to the restaurant, where there are signs redirecting us to the room reserved for the Dawson and Grey wedding party. It's still early enough that the room isn't crowded. While it's been years since I've seen Travis's family, it's not difficult to pick out the bride and groom to be.

People surround Alyssa. She's wearing a white sundress with blue flowers on it and a pair of strappy blue heels. I didn't know what to expect when Travis told me the event was semi-formal, but I've also never been to a wedding. Along with her is a handsome man wearing slacks and a short sleeve button down, his arm around her waist. Travis leads me right toward them. "Alyssa, you look great," he says.

She turns around from the woman she's talking to look at us. "Travis, where's your girlfriend?" Alyssa asks, but I'm staring at the woman next to her.

"Elliot?" Cece stares at me. Her eyebrow raising, like she isn't entirely sure it's me.

All eyes turn to me, and I can't make my mouth work. My throat closes up. No words come out. Travis tightens his grip around my shoulders. "My date is right here. You remember Elliot?" he says to his sister.

"You're dating Travis?" my sister asks, her voice rising higher in disbelief. "And wearing makeup?"

I don't know which one confuses her more. Either way, clearly neither of us expected to run into each other here. I'm not sure which of us is more shocked.

“We’re living together,” I answer. It’s technically true, but I probably shouldn’t have blurted it out like that. It makes our relationship sound more serious than we agreed on.

Alyssa laughs, covering her mouth with her hand, but it doesn’t muffle the noise. My cheeks heat up. The butterflies in my stomach from earlier have morphed into a swarm of bees. Cece glares at Alyssa and slaps her arm. “Oh, come on. It’s a little funny,” Alyssa says, pulling Travis in for a hug. “I’m so glad you weren’t lying about having a date,” she attempts to whisper in his ear, but she’s still laughing. She isn’t as quiet as she thinks. I’m seriously considering running out.

Looking at them together, it’s easy to see the family resemblance. Their hair is the same light shade of brown, and Alyssa is almost as tall as Travis. Which means she’s still taller than me, and when she hugs me next, I feel more out of place. “It’s great to see you again, Elliot, and I like the makeup.” This time she actually manages to whisper the last part.

“I like your dress,” I answer instinctively. “I need a drink. Can you point me in the right direction?”

Alyssa flags over a waiter, holding a tray of champagne flutes. She snags a couple, handing me a glass. “Cheers.”

I clink my glass to hers and drain it in one go. I turn my attention to the waiter, “Do you have anything stronger?”

Eighteen

Travis

ONE MOMENT ELLIOT IS next to me, and the next they're gone. I don't know what Alyssa said. She hugged them and they shared a drink. Then Elliot disappeared. "What did you say to Elliot?" I ask Alyssa.

"Nothing." She takes a sip from her champagne. "All I said was I liked his makeup."

"Their," I correct, and Alyssa raises an eyebrow at me. "Elliot uses they/them pronouns."

"Okay ... well, Elliot said something about needing a drink. You might want to try looking for your date by the bar." She pats my shoulder and nudges me toward the restaurant with her chin. "Try not to let Elliot get too drunk."

I ignore Alyssa and head for the bar. It's a good thing I know where I'm going after meeting my dad there earlier. I really wasn't expecting all of this to blow up quite this fast. I spot Elliot leaning against the bar as they down a shot. Their face screws up in a grimace, and Elliot shakes their head. The shot

is followed by a drink of a colorful cocktail in a tall glass.
“You okay?” I ask, placing my hand on their shoulder.

“Getting there,” Elliot mutters. “Sorry I ran off.”

“It’s okay. I didn’t know your sister was going to be here.”

“Yeah, obviously I didn’t either. But it’s fine.” They take another drink from the cocktail.

“If you want to call the whole thing off ...” I offer.

“No, it’s fine. I was a little surprised, but I’m good. Come on, *sweetie*. We should get back before people realize we’re missing.” Elliot stands up, still holding their drink as they take a step toward the door.

“You’re bringing the drink?” I wrap my arm around Elliot’s shoulders.

“Yup. Is that a problem?” They stand still, looking up into my eyes. Elliot licks their lower lip and my eyes follow the movement. With everything that’s happened, now isn’t the time to kiss them again, but I want to.

“No problem. By now, one of our sisters had to have told my parents. This is only just beginning to get weird.”

“Do you want to go back? You could grab a drink too.” Elliot holds their drink closer to my face, and I lightly place my hand on theirs to lower it.

“I’m good.” Truth be told, I’m more concerned about Elliot freaking out about their sister than what my family thinks right now.

There's less of a crowd when we walk into the room again. People are taking their spots and it's easy to find our seats right next to my mom and dad. On the other side of my parents sit Alyssa and George, her husband-to-be. Their son Hudson sits in a highchair between them, wearing a onesie with a tuxedo design on it. Then there's the bridesmaids. Cece sits across the table from us and neither of the Pierce siblings are making eye contact. I place my hand on Elliot's thigh under the table and they grab my hand, lacing our fingers together.

"So, how did this happen?" my sister asks, using her fork to gesture between Elliot and me.

"We ran into each other at Elliot's job. Elliot was looking for a place to stay, and I was looking for a roommate. After they moved in, we got to know each other better and, well ..." I shrug. We agreed to go with something similar to the truth, but I'm avoiding the details. Elliot's thumb caresses the back of my hand as I talk.

"You have a job?" Cece asks, finally looking at Elliot.

"It's just part-time, I'm a barista at a café near school. It's not interfering with my studies." Elliot's grip tightens on my hand as they talk.

"I wasn't saying it did. I just didn't know." Cece looks down at her plate, pushing the food around idly.

"There's a lot of things you don't know," Elliot mutters under their breath. They take a gulp of their cocktail, but the glass is close to empty.

The clinking starts on the other side of the table. A man next to George stands up, tapping his champagne flute with a butter knife. “A toast, to George and Alyssa. I knew from the moment I saw him after their first date. That awestruck look on George’s face. He was totally and completely smitten. Cheers, to the happy couple!”

When the noise dies down, I notice my mom looking right at us. “Elliot, I almost didn’t recognize you. You look so different from when you were little. How old are you now?” she asks.

“I’m twenty-two.” Elliot scoots closer to me, leaning over to get a better view of my parents. Our legs are pressed together under the table and their hand slips out of my grasp onto my thigh.

“Twenty-two. You’re still in college? What’s your major?”

“Mom,” I complain.

“What dear? I’m just catching up. Elliot doesn’t mind, do you?” she puts them on the spot, and Elliot laughs, taking the last drink from their cocktail.

“It’s fine. My major is English literature, and I just started my senior year. I’m not sure what I’ll do with my degree after I graduate, but I love reading. I’m hoping to get into something that involves books.” Elliot’s comment reminds me of what they were reading before we came to dinner and their finger trails over my inner thigh. I’m suddenly dealing with another issue as the touch sends a jolt right to my cock.

Luckily another person stands, raising her glass as she taps it with her spoon. The dinner conversations turn to speeches. As each increasingly tipsy person stands to talk, it becomes obvious that Elliot wasn't the only one to sneak in a drink from the bar. I'm more focused on Elliot's hand as it continues to tease along my leg. My dick is hard, eagerly awaiting their hand moving higher up. Except Elliot doesn't seem to realize the effect they're having on me. They carry on a conversation with my parents and continue ignoring their sister, who looks over at us a few times but doesn't work up the nerve to talk to Elliot again.

Then Elliot's finger brushes against the tip of my dick. Their hand jerks back to their own lap and Elliot looks at me. A blush spreads across their cheeks. I know it was unintentional, but my erection isn't taking the hint. It's a good thing we're in a room full of people right now because it's keeping me from grabbing Elliot's wrist and pulling them in for a kiss.

"I'm—I'll be right back," Elliot stutters, pushing back their chair, excusing themselves from the table.

My body has time to calm down while Elliot's gone, but when they sit down again, there's a fresh cocktail in Elliot's hand. They sip this drink slower, but there's no denying Elliot is on their way to being drunk. I'm not sure if they're drinking to avoid the situation with their sister or nervous about being alone with me. Either way it's going to make sharing a bed tonight more awkward if Elliot is drunk.

It isn't long before my parents make their way over to us. "We're going to call it a night. See you in the morning, sweetie." My mom hugs me. "And Elliot, it was great to see you again." She pulls them in for a hug next, and Elliot looks at me over her shoulder, their eyes widening. I hold back a laugh as Elliot awkwardly hugs my mom back. My dad hugs us next, and once they're gone, Elliot focuses on me.

"I guess we should probably head to our room soon?" they ask.

We wouldn't be the first ones to leave. The room isn't as crowded as it was half an hour ago. My eyes meet Elliot's, and they bite their lower lip as their gaze drops to my mouth. Leaving means the two of us alone in our hotel room. We've been dancing around it for hours, but there's no hiding how worked up we've both gotten with all the flirting and touching. Elliot leans forward, but I close the gap, pressing our lips together.

What starts as a soft brush of our mouths turns heated. Elliot grabs my shirt, twisting it in their grip to pull me closer. My tongue sweeps against theirs and the flavor of tequila hits me. Elliot whines, grinding their hips into my leg, and I pull back. "Let's go to the room," I agree. If that kiss is anything to go off, I'm eager to get them alone.

Elliot pulls away, glancing at the door to the restaurant, then back at me. Before we can make it out, we run into Cece. "Can I talk to you?" she asks Elliot. They take a step towards her, but once my arm is no longer wrapped around Elliot's waist,

they trip over nothing. *Crap*, they must be drunker than I realized. So much for anything happening tonight.

I catch Elliot, pulling them back to my side. “Sorry, I don’t think this is the greatest time. We’ll see you in the morning?” I ask, and Elliot laughs.

Cece looks at Elliot again and sighs. “Yeah, that’s probably a better idea. I’ll see you tomorrow. Get some sleep.” She leans in, hugging Elliot and whispering something in their ear. “Take care of him,” she says to me.

It was one thing correcting Alyssa, but I don’t know if I should correct Cece. All of this has made me realize I don’t know enough about how close to their family Elliot is or *isn’t*. Cece was clearly surprised to see Elliot wearing makeup and doesn’t seem to know they’re nonbinary. It doesn’t feel like my place to out them to their sister.

“Elliot will be fine. We’ll get some sleep, and you can talk in the morning,” I assure her. We part ways and Elliot nearly collapses into me as we step inside the elevator, laughing again. I look at Elliot’s eyes, and they lay their hand on my chest, leaning in for another kiss. “You’re drunk.”

Elliot closes their eyes with a chuckle. “So drunk,” they agree. They lean into my chest, their fingers lazily tracing circles over my shirt. The elevator chimes as the door opens to our floor.

“Come on, let’s get you to bed.” I keep my arm around Elliot’s waist, pulling them toward the suite. Elliot kicks off their shoes as the door closes behind us. Their hand goes to their

pants, pulling at the button and shoving their pants down. Elliot is still a little unsteady on their feet as they strip down to their underwear. They're standing there wearing just a pair of bright red briefs. It's not the same as the lingerie I saw last time Elliot was drunk, but it's not any less tempting.

"You coming to bed?" Elliot asks. I know they're not talking about going to sleep, but I'm mostly sober. I don't want my first time with Elliot to be with them drunk.

"Yeah," I lead Elliot to the bed, helping them sit down. "I'll be back. I'm just gonna take a shower first."

"Okay," Elliot pulls me in for another quick kiss. When we pull back, they lie down, and I head for the bathroom. I strip off my clothes, taking my time going through the motions of showering. I stay under the hot water, convincing myself that Elliot will be asleep when I finish, and that's for the best. We need to have this talk when they're sober.

Nineteen

Elliot

I SNUGGLE FURTHER INTO the pillow next to me. It's warm and comfy and I don't want to get up just yet. The pillow tightens its grip around my waist ... *wait*. Pillows don't have arms. I blink my eyes open slowly, finding my head on Travis's bare chest. That's not a pillow. My leg is thrown over his, and his hand is on my hip. At least we're not naked. Not that his sleep pants are doing much to hide his morning wood. It doesn't help that I'm only wearing underwear, either. The blankets are a crumpled pile at the foot of the bed, not covering anything. I lie there, listening to him breathe as I debate my options. Is it too late to sneak out of bed without him noticing?

"Morning," Travis's voice is rough and half awake, but he isn't pulling away.

"Hey," I look up at him. "I warned you about the cuddling," I joke, hoping to ease the tension.

Travis runs his fingers through my hair and leans closer before licking his lower lip. I almost think he's going to kiss me, but

he opens his mouth to talk instead. “I don’t mind.”

“I kissed you last night, didn’t I?” The memory from last night hits me. We kissed more than once. I was drunk and not thinking clearly, but it’s coming back to me now. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” He raises a hand and traces his thumb over my lips. “It’s part of the whole dating thing,” Travis teases.

I close the last inch between us, pressing my lips to his. Maybe I shouldn’t have assumed that’s what he meant, but Travis kisses me back. His hand slides from my hip to my ass, pulling my body into his as we make out. His hard length presses into my thigh, and my dick twitches in response. My stomach churns, acid shooting up my throat, and I pull away fast and in a hurry. I shouldn’t have drunk so much last night. I sit on the bed, eyes closed, until the nausea passes.

“You okay?” Travis asks. He’s sitting on the bed watching me when I open my eyes. His lips are swollen from the kisses we just shared.

“Fine, just a little hungover.” Luckily, a chime from my phone interrupts the moment. I don’t know what time it is, but judging from the sun shining in the window, it’s not early. “We should, uh ... We should probably get out of bed. Are we supposed to meet your family for breakfast or anything?” I grab my phone to open the new message, glad for the distraction.

Cece: Can we talk?

That wasn't the distraction I was hoping for. After running into Cece yesterday, I've been dreading this conversation. I know there's no way to avoid it, but the look of shock on her face at seeing me in makeup doesn't bode well. Not to mention how shocked she seemed at the idea of me dating Travis. She knows I liked him when we were younger, but she clearly didn't expect this turn of events. Talking to her is bound to be awkward.

"There's a wine tasting thing at the vineyard before the wedding, but we don't have to go anywhere right now," Travis says. "My parents are probably downstairs eating breakfast." He scoots to the other edge of the bed to get up.

"I need to talk to my sister," I mutter. My stomach is turning again, but it might not be from the booze this time. Still it's probably better for us to have this talk in private, rather than making a scene.

"Yeah, she wanted to talk to you last night, but you weren't doing so great." Travis gets off the bed, opening his suitcase and pulling out a fresh set of clothes. He doesn't go into the bathroom to change, and I don't bother to hide the fact that I'm looking. Travis has to be confused enough, considering he thought he was straight. I'm probably not helping things with the hot and cold routine.

I busy myself with getting clean clothes, but as I pull out pieces from my suitcase, I pause. My outfit for the reception dinner wasn't typically masculine, but it wasn't over the top, either. I can't say the same about this outfit. I took Travis at his

word and packed a more feminine blouse and wide legged capri pants. It's an outfit I've only tried on in my bedroom and haven't worked up the nerve to wear in public. How am I supposed to talk to Cece dressed in this? The shocked look on her face when she realized I was wearing makeup was bad enough.

"Elliot, you okay?" Travis asks. I turn my head to look at him, and he's fully dressed, but his button-up shirt is open, showing his chest.

"Cece doesn't know I'm nonbinary. I haven't told her or my dad," I admit. My hand clenches into a fist around the soft fabric of the shirt.

"Alright, anything I can do to help?" he asks.

I relax my grip and run my fingers over the shirt, then shake my head. I really don't have anything else I can wear to the wedding, so I might as well get dressed and face it. "No, I'm fine. Why don't you go ahead to breakfast, and I'll meet up with you once I'm done talking to Cece." I grab my clothes, going in the bathroom to change and apply fresh makeup, not waiting for Travis's reply.

A knock on the door makes me pause from applying my eyeliner. "Text me when you finish talking with your sister, good luck." Travis calls through the door. I hear the main door of our hotel suite close, then I'm alone. Looking at myself in the mirror, it's easy to think of a more glamorous look to go with the outfit, but I keep my makeup simple, enhancing my natural features. I add a bit of lip gloss, making my lips pink.

A memory hits, *the way Travis's lips felt on mine* ... Maybe I better bring the lip gloss with me to reapply later. Just in case.

I give myself another glance over in the mirror before I decide I've stalled long enough and pull out my phone to text my sister back.

Me: Any chance you could meet me in my hotel room?

I send the message along with our room number and head back to my suitcase to look for my sandals. They might be closer to the casual side of the dress code, but at least the cute straps will go well with the outfit. There's a knock on the door as I'm pulling them on. Even though I'm more prepared this time, the look of confusion on Cece's face when I answer the door still makes me hesitate. "Hey, come on in." I push the door wider, letting Cece inside.

Her eyes move from me to gaze at the single unmade bed and my cheeks heat. Maybe this wasn't the best place to meet up. If she didn't already think we're sleeping together, I'd be rubbing it in her face.

"I wasn't expecting to see you at the wedding. I didn't know you were dating Travis," Cece says, walking further into the room until she takes a seat on the chair in the corner.

"It's recent. We ran into each other, and he was looking for a roommate." I shrug. She was there at dinner yesterday and already heard the basic story.

"I thought you were staying in an apartment with friends. What happened to that?"

I push the blanket over the bed at the bottom corner and take a seat on top of it. “My roommates started dating each other. It got awkward. Is this really what you wanted to talk about?” I’m not looking to beat around the bush, but Cece sighs.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to make a big deal about the makeup yesterday. I was just ... surprised. Alyssa thought Travis was lying about bringing a date and we ...” she trails off. But it doesn’t take much for me to put the pieces together, along with what Travis has told me about needing a date for the wedding.

“You were the bridesmaid she was planning to set him up on a date with. Weren’t you?” I wince. This just got more complicated. Not that I can blame Alyssa and Cece, but I had no clue she liked him too.

“It doesn’t matter,” she shrugs it off, not denying it. “I just didn’t understand why you didn’t tell me about it. Or the makeup. And what else aren’t you telling me?”

“Cece,” I sigh. “Do you remember the makeup set you got for your thirteenth birthday?” Her eyebrows furrow with a confused look, so I keep talking. “It was this cheap bright eye shadow palette. I was messing around with it, trying out the colors while you were gone one day, and Dad caught me. He made me wash it off and told me that makeup was for girls.” I shake my head, clenching my jaw at the memory. It’s a story I haven’t told anyone before. “I didn’t wear makeup again for a long time. Especially after Mom died, it was hard enough being gay, but I’m nonbinary. I didn’t need to give Dad more reasons to disapprove of me.”

Cece gets up, walking over to me and pulling me in for a hug. “I’m sorry; I didn’t know. You should’ve told me. I know we haven’t always been the closest siblings, but you’ll always be my—wait, is it still okay to call you my brother? How does that work?” she asks with a laugh.

“Brother is fine, or sibling. I’m okay with masc titles like that, but I use they/them pronouns.” I keep my eyes on Cece, watching for a reaction, but she doesn’t flinch.

“Okay, got it,” she says with a grin. Her phone chimes, and Cece pulls it out, glancing at the screen. “Sorry, that’s Alyssa. She was just checking in.”

“I guess we should probably get to breakfast. Unless there was anything else?” I’m not sure what else there could be and the whole situation just feels awkward.

“No, you’re right. We should catch up soon, though. I’ll call you?” she asks.

“Yeah, or text. I’m pretty busy with work and school. I’ll get back to you as soon as I can if I miss a text or a call, though.” I’m making excuses, and I think we both know it, but Cece nods and takes a step toward the door.

Her hand lands on my shoulder, stopping me right before I open the door. “You and Travis, is it serious?” Cece asks. I don’t know how to answer. I should say *yes*, that’s the story we agreed on, but I don’t know where we stand. “Are you happy?” she rephrases the question when I don’t answer.

“It’s still new,” I answer honestly, “but yes. I really like him.”

“Good. I’m glad.” Cece grabs the door handle, twisting it and taking the lead. I follow a few steps behind her, thinking about what might have been if I hadn’t come with Travis.

Would he and Cece have hit it off? Was she hoping he’d want to date her or just looking for a one-night stand? I try to shake off the random thoughts, but it leaves a sour taste in my mouth. I don’t want to picture the two of them together.

I find Travis filling a plate with food from a buffet. It’s easy enough to grab a plate of my own and fall into place next to him. He glances at me, nearly doing a double take, before he leans closer and kisses my cheek. “There you are. Is everything good?”

“Yeah...” I hesitate, but it doesn’t seem like the time to tell Travis about our sisters’ plan. “It went fine.” I grab a muffin, placing it on my plate.

“So, no issues with the whole nonbinary thing or the makeup? It looks great, by the way. You’re gorgeous.” He leans closer to whisper the last part in my ear, and it sends a shiver down my spine. He’s laying it on a little thick, but I can’t be sure how much of this is an act.

“She was strangely supportive. We even agreed to catch up on the phone later.” I grab a few pieces of fruit, keeping my hands busy.

“Travis,” a woman approaches him, tapping him on the shoulder. From their similar looks, I’m guessing they’re related, but I’m not sure how. I’ve never met her. Her brownish blonde hair is up in a messy bun, but her dress is

nice, form-fitting until it hits the small, rounded bump of her pregnant belly and flows out. “It’s great to see you. How are you?” She pulls him in for a hug, then seems to notice me.

“I’m good. By the way, this is my partner, Elliot. Elli, this is my cousin, Faith.” Travis wraps his arm around my shoulders, pulling me closer to him.

“Nice to meet you.” The words flow out of my mouth on instinct, but my cheeks heat up at the way Travis shortened my name. The nickname is more femme, which I don’t mind, but it sounds more intimate, like we really are dating. I want him to have a reason to call me a cute pet name.

“You too, but I didn’t know Travis was seeing someone.” She looks at her cousin accusingly. “Just like you to bring a surprise date to a wedding.”

“You’re one to talk. How far along are you? I didn’t even know you were trying. Congratulations.”

Faith places a hand on top of her baby bump. “Thanks, Madalyn wanted us to keep it a secret until I was further along. She’s such a worry wart, didn’t want to get anyone’s hopes up while we were going through the IVF process. Speaking of, I better go find her. It was great seeing you.” She snatches a piece of fruit from Travis’s plate and walks off with a small wave.

“You called me *Elli*,” I blurt out when she’s out of hearing distance.

“Sorry, it just kind of slipped out. I won’t say it again if you don’t want me to,” he says.

“No. That’s not what I meant. It’s fine. I just wasn’t expecting it,” I tell him honestly. It’s not like I want him to take it back. I liked it.

Twenty

Travis

ELLIOT SWIRLS THE WINE in their glass, looking at it and smelling it before looking at me. “I’ve never done a wine tasting before. I’m not big on wine,” they admit.

“You don’t have to drink it. We’re mostly here to see people and socialize.” I take a drink of the white wine in my glass and regret it. The wine is dry and leaves me wanting a real drink. Maybe I should take my own advice. “I’m not much of a wine drinker either,” I say, and Elliot laughs. They set their wineglass on the table and grab my hand lacing our fingers together.

“Good to know. Maybe we can find something else to drink then.” Elliot leads me through the tables until we find one with cheese, fresh fruit, and bottled water. They grab a bottle and twist the cap off, taking a drink. “When is the wedding supposed to start, anyway?”

We arrived at the vineyard a little over half an hour ago. While the wine tasting and the wedding will both be outside, we’re in a different area until it’s time for the big event. I think the

main reason for the wine tasting was to give the guests something to do while Alyssa and her bridesmaids finish getting ready. I haven't seen her since dinner last night. We ran into my parents at breakfast, but they said Alyssa had already come and gone.

“Should be soon.”

“I wasn't expecting it to be so hot out here,” Elliot complains. A stray drop of water runs down Elliot's lip and their tongue follows it, chasing the bead of water. I'm tempted to kiss them and run my tongue over their lips, but I fight the impulse. After the kisses yesterday and this morning, I'm not sure what's going on. Elliot was drunk last night and this morning ... well, neither of us were drunk then. Still, waking up half naked and curled into each other didn't help me think clearly either. I know we need to have a real talk about all of this or it's going to get awkward fast when the wedding is over, and we go back to being roommates.

I grab a grape, popping it into my mouth as I look around. “There's a table over there in the shade. We can sit and wait until it's time to walk over to the wedding seating,” I suggest. Elliot follows me over to the area. It's a small wrought-iron table with only two chairs and a large umbrella to block out the sun. They take a seat, scooting the chair closer to me. I sit in the other chair. “How are classes going?” I ask, trying to break the ice.

“It's okay.” Elliot shrugs.

“And you’re still working too?” I ask. I don’t know how they manage both and still find time for homework.

“Yeah, the café schedules the students around our classes. I’m working a few hours in the morning on days that I have later classes and in the afternoon after my classes on other days. Probably some weekends too.”

“When do you find time to hang out with friends, or go on a date?” I ask, moving my foot to brush against theirs.

Elliot looks up at me, their eyes heating up with interest. “Are you asking—”

“Attention Grey and Dawson wedding party. We will now be seating for the main event. If you will follow me to the west yard,” a man announces.

Elliot doesn’t finish their question, and we get up from the table to follow the crowd. As we walk, I take Elliot’s hand in mine, lacing our fingers together again. They grin at me and even though Elliot didn’t say it, I do want to ask them on a real date. I don’t want to go back to just being roommates when we get home.

I’m seated next to my mom at the front. Hudson is on her lap, moving around a bit. Elliot is on my other side, still holding my hand. I turn to look at my mom, “How’s Alyssa?” I ask.

“Excited and nervous. I can’t believe my little girl is getting married.” She wipes her finger across her eye. Dad pushes his way through the crowd, taking a seat on the other side of Mom. The crowd slowly quiets as music comes over the

speakers. Elliot leans into my side, placing their hand on my thigh. George stands at the altar, eyes focused across the courtyard. Flower girls walk down the aisle first, tossing rose petals. I keep my eyes focused on the rest of the group until Alyssa walks down the aisle.



“DANCE WITH ME?” ALYSSA holds out her hand, raising her eyebrow as she waits for an answer.

I glance at Elliot, only to find them chatting with my mom. “Sure, let’s dance.” I take my sister’s hand and let her lead me to the makeshift dance floor.

“Why aren’t you dancing with Elliot?” she asks.

“Why aren’t you dancing with your husband?” I counter and Alyssa rolls her eyes.

“I have been, but I haven’t seen you dance with your *partner* once. I’m starting to think maybe all of this is a set-up. I was going to seat you with Cece, you know? Imagine our surprise when you showed up with Elliot.” Alyssa laughs, clinging to me as she sways along to the music.

“You were going to set me up on a date with Cece?” I ask. My eyes search the crowd until I find her, but even attempting to think of Cece like *that* feels off. “She’s like a little sister to me.”

“What does that make Elliot?” Alyssa asks with a smirk.

The question throws me for a second. Before they moved in I might have said something similar about Elliot, but I never really got to know them when we were kids. They weren't around as much as Cece. I don't think of Elliot as a family friend from my past. Not when I'm constantly struck by how gorgeous they are. My thoughts about Elliot aren't the kind of affection I'd have toward a sibling.

"It's not the same. You know what, I'm gonna take your advice and go dance with my date." I pull away from Alyssa and make my way back to where Elliot sits. I tap them on the shoulder, and when Elliot turns to look at me, I hold out my hand. "Dance with me?"

Elliot places their hand in mine, standing up from their chair. "I'd love to." A slow song starts as we get to the dance area, and Elliot wraps their arms around my neck, moving closer to me. I place my hands on their hips. Our bodies are so close together that our chests are touching. All it would take is a slight shift for our lips to touch. Elliot leans closer, tucking their head into my chest. "Thank you for taking me here. It's been nice, being your date."

"You don't need to thank me. I want you here, Elliot. I wanted you to come as my date," I tighten my grip on them. I mean it too. It's the *fake* part I wish wasn't part of this. I should've asked them to be my date for real.

They lift their head, looking up at me, and I lower mine, pressing our lips together. Elliot kisses me with a smile on their lips, laughing as our tongues brush. "Is everything okay?"

Should I not have?" I ask. They don't seem upset, but that's not the reaction I was hoping for.

They shake their head. "It's not that. I'm happy. Kiss me again?" Their arms tighten around my neck, pulling me in again. Our lips brush harder, tongues caressing with heated sweeps. They make a half-muffled moan against my lips. My arms go around their waist, pulling our hips together as my cock thickens. Elliot pulls back and bites their lip. "Is it too soon to get out of here and disappear to our room?" they ask.

I glance around, looking for Alyssa, but I can't find her. Screw it. "Let's go." I pull back, taking Elliot's hand in mine as we weave our way through the crowd until we get to the elevator. They kiss me again as the door closes. It's hard and sweet, but it almost feels rushed. It's only moments later when the elevator stops on our floor and Elliot leads me through the hall to our room. I pull out my card key first, slotting it into the door. Elliot pulls me into the room before they take a heavy breath, looking me over as I close the door.

Their tongue sweeps over their lower lip, "Travis, I uh ..."

"Hey, relax. We don't have to do anything you don't want to do," I tell them, but Elliot shakes their head.

"I want to." Their hand goes to my pants, popping the button open. "I want to suck you." Elliot looks at me, watching for a reaction as their hand inches the zipper down. "Do you want me to?"

"Yes."

Elliot drops to their knees, grabbing my pants and underwear and shoving them down. I'm only half hard, but as Elliot wraps their hand around the base of my dick, I know that's not going to be a problem for long. Elliot looks up at me through their eyelashes as they tease the tip of my cock with their tongue. They kiss along the shaft, then take the head into their mouth, wrapping me in tight wet heat.

"Shit." I grab a fistful of Elliot's hair.

They chuckle, pulling back to dip their tongue in the slit. "I don't mind if you pull my hair a little, but I'm not big on much more than that." Elliot doesn't wait for an answer, sealing their lips around me again and sucking me deeper this time. *Shit, they're good at this.* My cock throbs as I fight the impulse to thrust my hips forward. "Elli," I gasp.

They pause, a hand moving to their pants. I hear the sound of a zipper, but my view of what Elliot is doing to themselves is blocked by the way they're sucking on me. A moan escapes Elliot's lips, and the sound sets me off. My balls tighten. "I'm close," I warn.

Elliot picks up speed, bobbing on my dick as they hollow out their cheeks. Their arm moves faster as they touch themselves. Both of us racing toward our release. My body shakes, my hips moving forward as Elliot's grip on my dick tightens, and I hit my peak, spilling my cum into their waiting mouth. Elliot sucks out every last drop, leaving me tingling from the aftershocks. Then they moan, their mouth tightening on me

again as a hot splash hits my leg. “Damn,” Elliot sighs as they pull away, breathing hard.

Damn is right. I wasn’t expecting all that, and now I have no clue what to say.

Elliot fumbles with their pants, and I catch a glimpse of lingerie as they put everything back in place. After all that, I missed the opportunity to even get a decent look. They stand up and wipe their mouth with the back of their hand. “So, uh, that happened,” Elliot says, glancing at the floor.

“We should clean up. You want to take a shower first?” I’m trying not to be awkward about this, but I don’t know how well I’m pulling it off. Would it have been too soon to ask them to shower with me?

“Right, I’ll go ahead.” Elliot goes to their suitcase, pulling out a change of clothes. I’m left alone as Elliot heads for the bathroom. I find a change of clothes for myself, ditching my soiled pants rather than pulling them up. I take a seat on the bed in my underwear as I try to think about everything that just happened. If anything, I’m more confused about the way Elliot reacted after the fact than about the blowjob.

I don’t get it. They weren’t drunk like the night before. What we did was impulsive, but it was consensual. Elliot was into it. They were the one coming onto me. I didn’t even get a chance to touch them.

Elliot’s wearing a pair of sleep shorts and a matching tank top when they walk out of the bathroom. We switch places; I go to shower without a word. I want to tell them I enjoyed what we

just did, but everything already feels so awkward. They're lying in the bed on their stomach, looking at their phone when I finish my shower. I'm only wearing my boxer-briefs as I climb into bed next to Elliot. They look up from their phone for a moment as I settle into place. I turn into Elliot and wrap my arm around their waist, and they stiffen. "Elli, can I take you on a date?"

"You'd want that?" Elliot asks, turning off the screen to look at me. I can't place what they're thinking.

To be fair, I'm not sure where I stand on all of this either. I just know I like Elliot and I don't want this to end when we leave the hotel. "I know we're doing this all out of order, but yes, I'd like to take you on a date."

"Where do you see this going? You're straight and I'm ..."

They sigh, not finishing the sentence.

I lean closer, pressing my lips to their neck. "Gorgeous and smart and funny. I might have thought I was straight before, but I like you, Elliot. If that makes me bisexual, or something, I don't know. I don't really care about the label. I want to take you on a date."

"Yes. I don't know when my schedule will be clear, but yeah. I'd like that." Elliot scoots closer, cuddling into me, and I wrap my arm around them. We should probably talk about it more, but this is a good start.

Twenty-One

Elliot

STELLA SMIRKS AT ME as I walk in the café. Luckily, she's with a customer, so I get a moment to clock in and tie my apron before she can pester me with questions. "So? How did it go?" she asks.

"How did what go?" I ask, playing ignorant.

"The wedding, it was this weekend, wasn't it? How did it go?" Stella waggles her eyebrows, clearly expecting details.

"Don't you have work to do?" I deflect, and she laughs.

"That good, huh?"

The bell over the door chimes, drawing our attention to two people walking in with pastry boxes. They walk closer to the counter until the one in front sets down her boxes, and I realize it's Ashley. She works at the bakery down the street and sometimes we get pastries from there to sell at the café. The second person with her sets down his boxes next to hers, but I don't recognize him. He looks young, probably a freshman.

“Hey Ash, is it delivery day already? Who’s the new face?” Stella asks, grabbing the clipboard off the top of the boxes to sign for the delivery.

“This is Nicholas. He’s new. Just started working at Wake and Bake earlier this week,” Ashley says.

“Cool, well I’m Stella and this is Elliot. Nice to meet you Nicholas,” she waves at him.

“You too, and you can call me Nick.”

The doorbell rings again as Flynn walks in. He’s staring at his phone, tapping at it as he makes his way to the counter. “Hey, Flynn. Get off your phone and meet the newbie. This is—”

“Nicky?” Flynn cuts Stella off as he looks up at the new bakery worker.

“Oh hey, I didn’t know you worked here,” Nick says.

“I didn’t know you were starting school here. I mean, with Levi going to California ...” Flynn shifts his footing, putting his phone in his pocket.

“We can’t all have baseball scholarships. Anyway, we should get back to work,” Nick looks at Ashley for guidance, and she nods telling us a quick goodbye before they leave again.

“Nicky?” Stella asks Flynn. Her attention diverted from me for a moment after what we just saw.

“It’s not like that. He’s my little brother’s best friend,” Flynn says. “Let’s get those baked goods put away,” he changes the topic, ignoring Stella’s prying.

“Oh, come on. Neither of you are any fun,” Stella complains.

“Don’t you have a boyfriend? How are things with Caleb?” Flynn asks, turning the tables on her.

“Things are fine. He’s good and talks *way* too much about soccer. I’m so tired of listening to him go on about defense strategies. Elliot, come on, just give me a little bit of a hint. How are things after the weekend?” she asks.

“He wants to take me on a date,” I admit. The thought of it sets off the butterflies in my stomach.

“You don’t seem excited. That’s a good thing; you’re going on a date,” Stella tells me.

“Leave them alone. Come on, we’ve got work to do.” Flynn clocks in and grabs his apron, tying it at his waist. I take a hint from Flynn, ignoring Stella as a group of customers come in. We’ve been swamped with students searching for their next caffeine hit. It’s almost nice because between classes and work, I’ve been too busy to really think about how things have changed between Travis and me since the wedding.

The drive back was awkward, both of us dancing around saying something. But we’ve barely talked in the past few days since. I agreed to go on a date, but I’m still not seeing a way for all of this to work out. Everything happened so fast that night. I got off on blowing Travis, but I wasn’t ready for him to touch me back. I still have no clue how he’ll respond to that. To tell him I’m asexual, and most of the time it’s more comfortable for me to get myself off. I didn’t think it would

get this far to begin with. Now that it has, I don't know what happens next.

Stella finishes her shift and clocks out first. "See ya, I got to get to class. We should catch up and talk later," she tells me.

I roll my eyes and mostly ignore it. Flynn, for his part, is easier to work with. He's quieter and minds his own business, not asking invasive questions like Stella. He isn't very forthcoming about himself either. We work through the rest of my shift until it's time for me to leave and head to class. "Good luck," I say as I hang up my apron and wave at Flynn on my way out.

With how close the café is to the university, it made more sense to park on campus and walk, which means crossing the street and half the campus to get to my class on time. I pull out my phone, checking for any new messages once I'm on the university grounds. There's no new message from Travis, but there are two unread. One from my sister and one from Aiden. I open Aiden's first, ignoring Cece's for now.

Aiden: Can we meet up for lunch? I'm free from 12:35 to 1:10.

Me: I should finish my class at 12:45. Meet you in the cafeteria?

I send the text but leave my sister's on unread. A new message from Aiden pops up, letting me know we're on for lunch. I shove my phone in my pocket as I get to the building for my class. My focus switches to English class, as I go over the part of the book we had to read in my head. I'll figure out how to

talk to Travis later. We haven't even picked a day for our date yet.



AIDEN IS ALREADY THERE when I walk into the cafeteria. I catch sight of him first, but he's looking at his phone. He's also alone from the looks of it. I half expected him to have Liam with him, so this is a nice surprise. "Hey," I say, tapping Aiden on the shoulder.

He glances up from his phone, then stands up, pulling me in for a hug. "I missed you."

"We saw each other a couple of weeks ago," I laugh. "Is it that bad living with Daniel and Ian?"

"Ugh, don't remind me. It's a mess. There's always loud music playing. Either they're trying to drown us out or vice versa. The funny thing is, I think we're actually having less sex now that we're rooming together. How are things with your new roommate?" He looks me over, but I trip over my response. He isn't assuming I'm having sex with Travis.

"It's good, mostly. No loud music or sex noises, so it's good."

"That sounds nice. Which is another word for good if you're looking for one," Aiden teases. "You sure, you're good?"

"Yeah, I uh, I'm just a little distracted. A guy asked me out on a date, and I like him. But I don't know what I'm doing, I haven't had a first date in years." I dance around the topic, omitting certain details.

“You have a date?” Aiden’s eyes widen. “With who? Your new roommate?”

“I’m not saying. That’s not the point. I don’t know how to tell him I’m ace,” I admit.

“You could tell him you want to take it slow and get to know each other first,” Aiden suggests. I clench my jaw. That might have been good advice if I hadn’t blown Travis at the hotel. That wasn’t taking things slow and now it’s only going to make things more awkward when I explain I’m ace. “Or you could just tell him. It’s the first date. If he’s a jerk about it, you won’t have to wait and get invested before you find out.” Aiden shrugs like it’s not a big deal.

“That sounds surprisingly mature of you to suggest,” I joke.

Aiden shrugs. “The therapy is helpful sometimes. Keeping secrets just leads to more issues.”

I know he’s right, but I’m already invested in dating Travis. I’m afraid of him calling things off when he finds out. “We should get food. Before we run out of time before our next classes,” I attempt to change the subject.

Aiden stands up, walking over to the food line with me. “When’s your date?” he asks. Just when I thought we were done with this topic.

“We haven’t said.”

“What are you doing Friday night?” Aiden’s eyes meet mine as I glare at him. “Come on, you like him. Give it a chance.”

“I’ll figure it out. As soon as I know how to tell him,” I say. Aiden reaches for my pocket, sliding his hand in and grabbing my phone. “Hey, give that back.” I reach for it, but he steps back out of my reach.

“I really hope it’s Travis,” he says as he taps the screen.

“What did you do?” I go to snag my phone again.

“Good news, he’s free Friday night,” Aiden says, tossing the phone back in my direction. The screen is open to a text thread between me and Travis.

Me: What are you doing Friday night?

Travis: I have work until five, but after that nothing.

I look at Aiden, then glance back at my phone. I thought he’d already asked Travis on a date, but this is still vague. I could still call the whole thing off, but ... I shouldn’t. If I chicken out, I’m just delaying the inevitable. My fingers tap out a new message.

Me: I should be home by the time you get off work. Go on a date with me?

“You’re such a brat,” I chide Aiden, but he just smirks at me.

“I’d believe you more if you weren’t smiling at your phone as you wait for a reply.” We get to the front of the line, and Aiden grabs a sandwich. I tuck my phone in my pocket and grab a pre-made salad from the fridge along with a bottle of water. My phone buzzes while I’m paying for my purchase, but I don’t pull out my phone to check for new messages until we sit down again.

Travis: Sounds good. I'm looking forward to it.

“So, you have a date?” Aiden asks. His face is stretched out with a knowing grin.

“When is Ian at soccer practice again? Maybe you can get Daniel out of the apartment then and have some alone time with Liam,” I say, but Aiden just shrugs, not taking the bait.

“Fine, I have a date,” I admit. “And hopefully it all works out because I really don't want to wind up on your couch listening to everyone's sex noises.”

Twenty-Two

Travis

MITTENS BARKS HAPPILY AS I open the door to the house. “Travis? Is that you?” Elliot calls from their room.

“Yeah, I just got home. I’m gonna grab a change of clothes and take a quick shower real quick,” I say as I make my way through the hall to my door.

Elliot steps out of their room, blocking my path. “Before all that, I was hoping to talk to you. I still want to go on a date, but it might be best if we get this out of the way first.” They tug on their T-shirt, glancing down at the floor as they talk.

“Get what out of the way first?” I ask.

Elliot glances up at me like they’re about to say something before they change their mind. “Can we sit down?”

“Sure.” Whatever they want to say must be serious to be going through all this effort. I take a step closer to Elliot’s room, figuring we can talk in there, but Elliot pushes past me, walking to the living room. I change directions, following them until we’re both seated on the couch.

“I don’t really know how to say it without being awkward, so I’m just going to say it. I’m asexual,” Elliot tells me.

I take a moment to think over what they’re saying before I blurt out anything stupid, but I don’t really get it. “What does that mean, exactly? To you?” I ask finally.

“I don’t form sexual attractions like allosexual people. Uh, that’s the term for people that aren’t asexual,” they explain, and I realize I must look as confused as I feel right now.

Still I was hoping for a little more of an explanation than that. “I’m still lost,” I admit. “Is all sex off the table, or ... I thought you were into what happened at the hotel.”

“I was,” Elliot answers quickly. “I’m no good at explaining this. I’m not saying sex won’t happen, but it’s not something I’m interested in very often.” Elliot’s cheeks are bright red and they’re looking at the floor instead of me as they talk. “Mostly I’m bringing this up because I need you to know there are gonna be times where I’m not interested, and I need to know if that’s a deal breaker. I know this is probably a lot to take in, but I want you to know what you’re getting into if we date.”

“Okay,” I say slowly. I’m not sure how I’m supposed to reply to that. Elliot must have had some shitty experiences with guys in the past if they couldn’t take no for an answer. “I don’t really know what to say to all that, but I don’t want to push you into something you don’t want. Now if you want to let me grab a shower, I’d still like to take you on a date.”

“Really?” Elliot asks. “Just like that?”

“Honestly? I’m not sure about any of this,” I admit. “I’ve never had a serious relationship and I’ve only dated women. All of this is new to me. I like you, and I enjoyed what happened the other night, but this isn’t a deal breaker for me. If you’re not into something, just tell me and we can stop and do something else. I still want to take you on a date.”

“Okay,” Elliot repeats the word more firmly than I did. “Go shower and I’ll get ready.” They stand up from the couch, turning towards the hall.

Before Elliot can step away, I lay my hand on their shoulder. “Can I kiss you? Wait, how do you feel about kissing?”

“I like kissing,” Elliot says. They close the distance, pressing our lips together. It’s slow, a brush of lips, before Elliot’s tongue sweeps across my lower lip, deepening the kiss. Their hand grabs my shirt, tightening their grip and pulling me closer. My cock swells, filling with blood, and I break the kiss.

“I’ll, uh, see you in a bit.” I step back and Elliot grins, letting out a little laugh.

“Yeah,” they agree. We split up, heading to our rooms, and I take a deep breath once I’m alone. This might be harder than I thought. I grab a fresh change of clothes and head to the bathroom to shower like I originally planned. I’m still half hard as the water beats down on me. Instead of ignoring it in hopes that Elliot might help me later, I wrap my hand around my dick and quickly stroke myself until I come. Hopefully that will take the edge off, and I can just focus on Elliot during our date without the added pressure.

I change into a pair of dark wash jeans and a short-sleeved black button-down shirt. It doesn't take me long to style my hair, but it's at the point where I should probably get it trimmed soon. My brown hair is just long enough to hang in my eyes and brush against my ears, annoying me. I sweep it back and grab my socks and shoes.

Elliot's door is open as I walk through the hallway. "Hey, you about ready?" I ask. They're dressed almost the same as me, jeans and a button-down, but Elliot's is a light green in color. They're sitting at their desk, looking over makeup when they glance at me instead. There's a bit of color on their face already, but it's minimal, barely even noticeable.

Elliot grabs a tube of lip gloss, twisting the lid open and pulling out the applicator. The gloss is a faint pink that adds more of a shine to their lips than a color. All the same it draws attention to their lips and makes me want to kiss them again. "Yeah, just give me a minute to grab my shoes," they say.

"Where are we going, anyway?" I ask.

"Can I get away with saying it's a surprise or do you really want to know?" they ask. Elliot grabs their keys and wallet, shoving them into a small over the shoulder bag, then turns to look at me for an answer.

"I'm game. Are we going in your car, then?"

"Yeah, come on." Elliot slings their bag over their shoulder, and I follow them out of the house. They pull out their phone and tap the screen a few times before it pops up a map on the GPS, giving out directions. We don't talk as Elliot drives into

town, following the directions of the automated voice. It's not long before Elliot pulls to a stop in front of a large building.

"Bowling?" I ask. "That's the date idea?"

"Yeah. Bowling, pizza, maybe beer, sound fun?" Elliot tenses up, keeping their hand on the ignition switch without turning off the car.

"It sounds great. It's just not what I was expecting." I pull the handle, opening my door and taking a step out. It's later in the evening but still light out. The weather is warm, and the sun hasn't set quite yet. Elliot gets out of the car, and I walk over to their side and take their hand in mine. Elliot looks at our joined hands as their fingers lace with mine, then up at me in surprise.

"Is this okay?" I tighten my grip on their hand and stroke my thumb over their skin.

"You don't have to ask every time you want to touch me. There won't be much time for hand holding while we're here, though." Elliot pulls my hand, dragging me along as we walk into the building. They walk up to the counter, letting go of my hand as they talk to the employee. We tell them our shoe size for the bowling shoes, and the clerk rings up the total on the register. We both pull out our wallets at the same time. "I've got it," Elliot says, placing their card on the counter and sliding it over.

"Okay." I grab my rental shoes as they tell us what lane we're on. "But I'm paying for food." Elliot smiles, grabbing their

shoes. I wait until we're seated at our lane and taking off our shoes to ask, "so, why bowling?"

"Going out to dinner at a restaurant is too much pressure to focus on each other and make small talk, and going to a movie doesn't leave any room for talking. This is a nice in between. We have something to physically do and keep the moment from getting too awkward, but it's still quiet enough to talk and get to know each other." They finish tying their rental shoes and sit at the console to put our names in and set up the game. It's a much more well thought out answer than I was expecting.

"Have you been on a lot of dates?" I ask, but when Elliot looks at me and raises one eyebrow, I reconsider my question. "Never mind, you don't have to answer that."

"I don't know what you'd count as a lot, but I tried to date a bit after my last boyfriend broke up with me a few years ago. It was ... mostly disappointing. Some of the guys were just interested in sex and got frustrated when I didn't move fast enough for them. Some guys tried to let me down easily by telling me we could still be friends, but they didn't see us as more. Eventually I stopped trying." They shrug, picking up a bowling ball and stepping out to the lane before I can respond. It's clear Elliot doesn't want to talk about it, but I'm still a little unsure what to think about them being asexual.

Elliot knocked down seven pins, leaving a gap in the lane with one pin on its own off to the side and the other two next to each other on the other side. On the second throw, they knock

down the two pins grouped together, but not the one by itself. It's my turn, but instead of walking up to the lane, I step closer to Elliot. "I offered you dinner. What do you like on your pizza?" I ask.

Elliot sits down at the computer again and taps the screen until it pulls up a menu and the option to order from the restaurant. They scroll through it to the pizza section. "The chicken bacon artichoke sounds good," they point at the screen for me to look.

"Chicken bacon sounds good, but I'm not sure about artichoke on pizza." I reach over and push the screen to order it. "I'm open to trying it, though. Did you want beer or soda? We probably have time to drink with how long it'll take to finish the game."

"I'll take a beer if you're having one," Elliot agrees.

I add the drinks to the order and pull out my wallet, sliding my debit card into the slot on the machine. An order confirmation pops up, saying they'll get started on our food right away. I grab my bowling ball and walk up to the line, swinging my arm back before the release. Strike. All the pins fall down.

"Damn, I would have picked something else if I knew you were going to make me look bad," Elliot jokes as we trade places, and they grab their ball.

"Just luck," I shrug. "I haven't been bowling since I was a teenager."

Elliot hits five pins this time, but then they pick up the spare. “Since we’re going there, I already know you haven’t dated in a while, but how long has it been?”

“Actual dating? Not just a hookup?” I ask. Elliot nods, and I pause to think about it. “A few years. Three or four maybe. It hasn’t exactly been my priority.”

“Hello, did you order the chicken bacon artichoke pizza and two beers?” An employee steps up to our lane holding the food, but he looks Elliot over, almost doing a double take. “And I’ll need to see IDs.”

Elliot pulls out their wallet, holding their ID out for the employee to verify, and I do the same. I chuckle a little as I’m putting away my wallet again and take a drink of beer. “It’s been a while since I’ve been ID’d,” I say after the employee walks away.

“Benefits of going out with a younger person,” Elliot jokes. They grab their glass and tip it back. “Does it bother you? The age difference?”

“No. It might have when you were eighteen or younger, but we’re both adults. Seven years isn’t that big of a gap. By the time you’re twenty-nine, I’ll only be thirty-six and that doesn’t seem like much of a gap.” I grab a slice of pizza, looking at the artichoke hearts curiously. It smells good at least. I lift the pizza to my lips and take a bite. “Mmm, that’s delicious.”

Elliot follows suit, taking a bite of their pizza. They let out a groan as they close their mouth. The noise goes right to my cock. Just like that, I’m back to being half-hard and wanting to

kiss them again. I bite my lip, willing my erection down. I meant it when I told Elliot that I don't want to push them into anything, but that doesn't mean they don't turn me on. I set my food down on the nearby table and approach the lane again, grabbing my ball as I go. Maybe Elliot was onto something by picking bowling for our date.

It's good having something physical to do to distract me right now. Maybe then my dick will get the reminder why it'd be a bad idea to drag Elliot home and make-out like horny teenagers all night.

"I've been meaning to ask, why Mittens? How did you pick that name?" Elliot asks as I finish my turn, smoothly starting up the conversation again.

"Her front paws when she was a puppy. They were perfectly white, with a line at the ankle before the brown. I knew she'd grow to be a big dog and her cute markings would change with age, but I couldn't help it. I wanted to remember what a cute puppy she was."

"That's adorable." Elliot grins, their eyes meeting mine. I'm glad they've bonded with Mittens since they moved in. It's sweet seeing the two of them together. They tip back their beer, taking another drink before they take their turn.

The more we talk and drink, the more relaxed we become and the less it matters what the score is. It's surprisingly easy to make small talk, and the bowling keeps us moving, not allowing for the conversation to get too deep or us to get

distracted by something like making out. But it doesn't stop me from thinking about it.

We finish out the game with nowhere near perfect scores. I beat Elliot by five points. Not that it matters. But with the game done, I'm not sure what happens next. We've finished eating, and the beers are long gone. Neither of us are drunk. We don't have an excuse to stay any longer, but I'm not ready for the date to be over. "Do you want to watch a movie?" I blurt out. Elliot looks at me, raising one of their eyebrows. "When we get home. Do you want to watch something on the TV together?"

"Yeah, that sounds nice," Elliot agrees. They sit and untie their shoes, pulling off the rentals before putting their own tennis shoes back on. Within minutes, we're leaving the bowling alley, hand in hand. I don't let go of Elliot's hand when we get to their car.

I don't ask for permission this time. I press our lips together, desperate for another taste of them.

Twenty-Three

Elliot

I TURN THE KEY, killing the engine as we arrive at Travis's house again. It's hard to fight the urge to take a deep breath. *Relax Elliot.* The date was fun, and Travis seemed to enjoy himself. He didn't have a problem with me being ace. There's no reason I should be freaking out about something as innocent as us watching a movie together. Even at the hotel, Travis wasn't the one pushing for us to get sexual. He told me we didn't have to do anything before he knew I'm asexual. I'm the one who brought up going down on him. I figured it might be the only chance I got. I didn't think it would lead to Travis wanting to date me.

The click of Travis unbuckling his seat belt snaps me out of my thoughts. I follow him into the house, letting Travis unlock the front door. All of this feels a little off with us living together. I'm not usually the type to go home with someone on the first date. Never mind the fact that I've already had Travis's dick down my throat. All of this is backwards. I bite back a small laugh at the thought, and Travis looks at me.

“It’s nothing,” I shake my head. “You want another beer? I think we have some in the fridge.” We only had one each at the bowling alley and with how long it took us to play the game, any buzz I could’ve gotten is long gone.

“Sure, I’ll grab them. Did you want to watch a show in the living room or in my room?” Travis walks towards the kitchen as he talks. When I don’t answer by the time he closes the fridge, Travis looks over at me again. “Elli, hey, there’s no wrong answer here. All we’re doing is watching a movie.” He sets the beer bottles on the counter and walks over to where I’m still standing in between the kitchen and the living room. Travis wraps his arm around me and leans in to kiss my neck up to my ear. “It’s up to you. I’m fine with sitting on the couch.”

I turn to him and press my lips to Travis’s. It’s a brief kiss, our lips just brushing against each other, neither of us attempting to deepen it. “Let’s go with the living room for tonight,” I say when we break apart.

“Okay,” Travis steps away to grab the beers again, handing one bottle to me. We sit side by side on the couch, and I reach for the remote, turning on the TV.

“Do you care what we watch?” I ask.

Travis scoots closer, wrapping his arm around me and pulling me into him. “You can pick, but I’d rather watch a movie than a show.”

I scroll through the streaming options until I wind up on a recent superhero movie. It’s more of an action flick than a rom

com, but maybe that's a good thing. Watching superheroes fight bad guys is less likely to lead to kissing or something more. "How about this?" I ask.

Travis kisses my head, stroking his fingers through my hair. "That works," he says. I hit the button to start the show and cuddle into Travis. My body is tense as we sit there. I'm only half watching the movie because I'm more preoccupied thinking about Travis.

Does this feel as awkward to him as it does to me? Or am I the only one overthinking all of this? Is he bored just sitting here with me watching the movie?

"Elli, relax," Travis whispers in my ear. My shoulders release their pressure, and I take a deep breath. Something about hearing the way he shortens my name sounds intimate. It's sweet, and endearing. "We don't have to do this if you don't want to. We can call it a night now and go back to our own rooms."

"It's not that. I want to spend time with you. This is nice, but it's ... I wouldn't usually go home with someone on the first date."

"Okay, so what if instead of this being part of the date, we watch the show as roommates? No pressure, we're just hanging out and watching a movie and cuddling, just like we've done before."

I bite back a laugh at Travis's idea. It's not a bad idea, but, "Is it really that easy? Can we be just roommates while also

dating?” Can we be just friends watching a movie together after I’ve had his cock in my mouth?

“Why not? There are no rules to this. We can do whatever makes you comfortable. I meant what I said earlier; I don’t expect anything. If it helps you to think of this as us being roommates and take the possibility of anything but cuddling off the table, then I’m fine with that.”

I sit up, turning to face Travis. Without thinking it through, I press my lips to his. Unlike the last kiss we shared, I slide my tongue past his lips and into his mouth. Travis kisses me back, letting me lead and keeping his hands to himself. That makes it easier to decide because he’s right. I don’t want to do anything sexual tonight. I break the kiss and glance at the TV again. “Okay, sure. Let’s watch the movie as roommates, then.” I snuggle into his side again, but this time I’m relaxed.

Travis’s arm is still wrapped around my shoulders. His fingers lazily trail over the skin on my arm. I grab my beer, taking a drink. A few minutes in, we shift, and I wind up between Travis’s legs with my back to his chest. One of Travis’s legs is stretched out along the couch, the other bent at the knee and hanging off the edge. His hand is resting on my thigh and his thumb strokes over my jeans. The bulge of Travis’s erection nudges my back, but that’s the only hint that I get. The only clue that regardless of what we agreed to, he’s interested in the idea of more.

Travis leans closer, his arm tightening around my waist. Then he kisses my neck. “Is this still okay? Or is the kissing part of

the evening over?”

I hold back a laugh, but his words help me relax further. It's comforting to know Travis meant it about not pushing for more. The weird thing is now that I know it's off the table, I'm getting a bit turned on. My dick is half-hard, and Travis kissing my neck isn't helping the matter. “You can kiss me.” I can't fight the temptation. I want him to keep kissing me and holding me. It helps that we already went over limits for the night, and both know this isn't going further.

I turn back to look at Travis, and his lips meet mine. It starts out slow. His mouth brushes against mine in soft shallow pecks. I slide my tongue over his lips, deepening the kiss. My body turns the rest of the way, my leg going over his, leaving my crotch pressed into his hip. My dick is fully hard now, and I'm fighting the urge to grind my hips into his in search of friction.

Travis breaks the kiss. We're both panting, and I can feel Travis's matching erection poking my thigh. “Thank you. For going out with me tonight. I had a good time,” he tells me.

“Me too,” I say. It's harder to turn around and watch the movie than I thought it'd be, but if I keep making out with Travis, I'm likely to grind into him until I make a mess in my pants. Luckily, the movie is almost over.

When the credits roll, my dick has gone from throbbing hard back to a semi. It doesn't make it any less awkward when I stand up off the couch. Travis gets up as well, but he hesitates to kiss me again. I can't blame him. It can't be easy for him to

ignore his hard-on either. “I should get some sleep. I’ll see you in the morning,” I tell him, placing a quick kiss on Travis’s cheek. “We’ll have to figure out a time soon to have another date.”

“Sounds good. Goodnight,” Travis says.

We go our separate ways. Mittens follows Travis back to his room, and I go to mine alone. My hands go to the buttons of my shirt, undoing them and pulling it off. I adjust my dick in my briefs when I pull my pants down. I debated earlier on if I should wear a pair of lacy panties for our date but settled on a deep purple pair of snug briefs instead. It’s probably a good thing I did. The lace would have made it harder to ignore my erection earlier. Not to mention I don’t know how Travis will feel about my lingerie.

I climb into bed in just my underwear. Travis has been supportive of me wearing makeup and feminine clothes. I think he’ll be fine with the lingerie, but I’m not sure. There’s a difference between Travis supporting what I’m comfortable in and actually liking me in lingerie. Part of me wants him to find it sexy. I reach down again, adjusting myself, but my cock throbs, getting harder. I roll over onto my stomach and try to ignore it.

There’s no point in worrying myself sick over nothing. I’ll cross that bridge when I get to it. Right now, I should probably try to get some sleep, like I said I was going to do. I focus on my breathing, trying to slow it down and take deep breaths. It helps me relax, but it’s not putting me to sleep. I toss and turn

and clench my jaw before sighing in frustration. I grab my phone, opening it up to the eReader app and pulling up my latest read. Maybe it will help me take my mind off Travis and fall asleep.



MY PHONE CHIMING WITH new messages wakes me up. I groan, moving my head off the phone. I must have fallen asleep while reading last night. The screen shows multiple missed messages from Aiden. I tap the phone to pull up the thread.

Aiden: How did the date go?

Aiden: Was it bad? Should I get the couch ready?

I chuckle under my breath while shaking my head. I better send some sort of reply to reassure him.

Me: It was fine. Travis was sweet.

Aiden: So, I don't need to worry about ruining the whole roommate situation you have going on?

Me: We can hold off on getting the couch ready for now.

I hit the button on the side of my phone, turning the screen off. My eyes close and for a moment, I consider going back to sleep. At least until I remember I have work this afternoon and school work to get done before that. *Ugh, even on the weekends, there's always something that needs to get done.* Before any of that, I need some caffeine. I throw the blankets off and make my way over to my dresser. I'm barely paying

attention as I snag a pair of leggings and pull them on along with a loose T-shirt. My eyes are still half closed as I walk to the kitchen. Coffee is already made, meaning Travis must be awake, but he's not in the kitchen.

I don't know if he has work today, so there's a good chance we could run into each other. Mittens barks happily as she walks into the room. She rubs against my leg, looking up at me eagerly. "Hey girl," I say, leaning down to pet her head. That's when I hear footsteps behind me.

"Good morning," Travis says as I turn around.

"Morning. Thanks for making coffee." I busy myself, grabbing a cup and helping myself to some of the coffee.

"So, are we roommates right now or dating?" Travis asks, a playful smile on his face.

"If you want to kiss me, just do it." I take a step closer, and Travis does as well, meeting in the middle of the kitchen. He leans in, pressing his lips softly to mine.

Twenty-Four

Travis

“HEY,” DEREK KNOCKS ON the doorframe of my office. “I’ve been meaning to run into you, but somehow, I just keep missing you. You disappeared so quickly after I dog sat and never gave me any details. What happened with the wedding? Did you ever end up finding a date?”

I reluctantly set the blueprint I was looking at down on my desk, giving Derek my full attention. “Yeah, I found a date. And it went better than expected.”

“That’s it. That’s all the details I get? Are you seeing her again?” He steps further into the office.

I really don’t want to have this conversation here. In fact, I don’t want to get into the details at all because I know Derek is going to rub a big fat *I told you so* in my face. It’s why I have been avoiding him. He isn’t going to go away anytime soon. “Yes, I’m seeing *them* again. We’re dating.” I stress Elliot’s pronouns and Derek’s eyes widen at the moment he gets it.

“You’re dating Elliot? Your cute little femme roommate that you said you weren’t interested in? That *them*?” Derek’s voice gets higher as his jaw tightens pulling his lips together in a tight grin.

“Yes, I’m dating Elliot.”

“Are you serious? Is this all some big joke? Because you got me.” His blunt dismissal of the idea throws me off. I was expecting him to be surprised but he almost seems upset.

“It’s not a joke. Maybe we should get out of here. This isn’t the greatest place for this conversation and clearly, I’m not going to get any work done until we talk. Come on, I’ve got some beers at home, and you can ask Elliot for yourself if you want.” It’s basically the end of the day, anyway. It won’t matter much if we leave now.

“Sure, I’ll meet you there in like fifteen.” Derek turns around, leaving my office. I clear my desk of the last couple of things I was doing and clock out. I’m not entirely sure what I’m going to tell Derek, but I can’t keep avoiding the conversation forever.

Derek’s car pulls in right behind me as I park in the driveway. Elliot’s car is here too. I guess there won’t be any avoiding the topic with both of them in the same room. Derek gets out of his car, coming up next to me as I walk toward the door. “So, tell me, how did it happen? Last I heard, you were clinging to denial and didn’t want to see how Elliot was crushing on you.”

I slide my key into the lock and open the door. Elliot is sitting on the couch, but they’re not alone. Along with them is their

friend Aiden, and the two of them are curled up together very close as they watch TV. Derek comes to a stop, looking at them before one of his eyebrows raises in confusion as he looks at me.

Elliot's told me they sometimes cuddle with Aiden, but this is the first time I'm seeing it since we've started dating. Between the little bit they've told me about their past relationships and how touchy Elliot is, it's easy to see why their close friendship with Aiden led to them cuddling. I don't think Elliot likes Aiden the same way they like me but explaining that to Derek is a little more complicated.

"Oh, hey," Elliot turns to look at us from the couch. "Good to see you again Derek. Did you two have a good day at work?" The whole time they talk, they're still cuddled into Aiden.

"Yeah, I invited Derek over to have a drink. We'll head out to the backyard," I detour toward the kitchen, grabbing Derek's wrist to pull him along with me. He follows along, staying silent until we get outside. Mittens slips through the door as we leave, going to play in the grass.

"It doesn't bother you that your boyfriend is all cuddled up with another guy? On your couch, right in front of you?" Derek asks, grabbing the beer I'm holding out to him.

"No, it doesn't bother me. And Elliot prefers *partner* over boyfriend. They and Aiden are good friends and that's it. I trust them. Besides, Aiden has a boyfriend, too." I open my beer, taking a drink from the bottle.

“So? They’re all in college. Relationships don’t last long, and everyone is sleeping around with everyone. What are you going to do when all this falls apart and Elliot is still living with you?”

“Not all college students are sluts like you were. What’s the big deal? You haven’t been thrilled about Elliot since they moved in. I don’t get it.” The whole thing is starting to piss me off because Derek isn’t usually this invested in my relationships.

He shakes his head, wincing as he rubs his temple. “Yeah, you wouldn’t get it. We only lived together for four years,” he mutters.

Is he really saying what I think he’s saying? “You liked me?” I ask slowly.

“Yes.” Derek takes a drink of his beer before meeting my eyes. “I was into you. Still am. But there wasn’t a point in bringing it up when you were straight and dating girls.”

I don’t know how to feel about his confession. My friendship with Derek has been the longest relationship I’ve ever had, but I never thought of him like that ... We were close when we lived together, and I always wanted to be around him. We weren’t as touchy-feely as Elliot and Aiden, but if Derek would’ve brought it up then would I have considered the idea? I don’t know.

“You could’ve said something,” I tell him.

“You really think it’s that simple?” Derek asks, shaking his head. “How do you see that playing out? If I’d told you I wanted to be more than friends, you’d just drop your pants and tell me *go for it?*”

“No, but we could’ve at least talked about it. You don’t get to be pissed about me dating Elliot when you never told me how you felt. How was I supposed to know?” My voice rises. I drain the last of my beer.

“You know what, forget it. I should get going. I’ll see you at work.” He sets his beer bottle down on the patio table and heads for the house again, not waiting for my answer.

I grab the beer bottle from the table, surprisingly, it’s still mostly full. I let out a whistle for Mittens to come back inside, and she trots up to me with an eager wide mouth pant.

Elliot is still on the couch, but Aiden is gone now, too. “Hey, did you want to watch something?” they ask, turning my direction as I empty what’s left of Derek’s beer in the sink.

I toss the bottles in with the recycling, and for some reason, Derek’s comment about Elliot and Aiden pops up in my head. As pissed as I am, I can see why he’s jealous. Elliot’s only been living with me a few months and right after me telling Derek I’m dating them, we find Elliot on the couch curled up with Aiden. It doesn’t matter that they weren’t doing anything.

“Sure, just give me a moment to change into some more comfortable clothes.” I need a minute to refocus my thoughts without getting caught up on Derek.

Elliot stands up, getting in my way before I can go down the hall. They wrap their arms around my neck. “I didn’t get a chance earlier since we both had people over, but welcome home.” Elliot leans forward, going up on their tiptoes as they pull me in for a kiss. My hands go to their hips as I part my lips, kissing them deeper. The kiss stays slow, but the way Elliot is brushing their tongue against mine is deep and intimate. My dick throbs as it swells, and I pull back.

“I’ll be right back,” I say. Elliot lets me get away this time, and I duck into my bedroom. I strip off my jeans and button-down, changing them out for a pair of sweats and T-shirt. That done, I take a deep breath and give myself a moment to calm down again before heading out of the room.

Elliot isn’t in the living room when I step out of the hall. Before I can wonder where they went, the bedroom door opens, and they step out wearing different clothes than before. They pull at the hem of the T-shirt they’re wearing, but it doesn’t go any lower than their belly button. Along with it, they have on a tight pair of light blue leggings. The pants are so tight I can make out a bulge in the front, even though it’s clear Elliot is soft. “Hope you don’t mind. I figured I’d change clothes, too.”

From the way Elliot is blushing, I think their change of clothes was more for my benefit. As hot as they look right now, my mind is too lost to appreciate it.

“Of course not. You should be comfortable. Come on,” I step closer and lace my fingers with Elliot’s. We walk to the couch

together and sit in a very similar position to how they were curled up with Aiden earlier. “Can I ask a question? You and Aiden, I know you’re close. But is there more to it than that?”

Elliot’s eyebrows raise as they turn to fully face me. “Is this because we were cuddling earlier?” they ask.

“Kinda, Derek thought it was weird,” I admit.

“Derek thought it was weird?” Elliot repeats my question.

“I told him we’re dating,” I say. “Derek ... said he likes me.”

Elliot looks at me, not saying anything. They place their hand on my thigh, lazily tracing over the material of my sweats. “And? How do you feel about that?”

How do I feel? I’m still figuring this whole bi thing out. It would’ve been nice to have someone to talk to about all of this as I figure shit out. Except Derek is the person I want to talk to about it. As my best friend I figured he’d be the one to talk to since he’s bi too.

I place my hand on Elliot’s cheek, tucking a tuft of hair behind their ear. Then I lean in and press my lips softly to theirs. Their tongue licks softly over my bottom lip, deepening the kiss. The spark that shoots right to my heart making it beat faster makes it easier to think of an answer to their question.

“I don’t know. Derek’s my friend. I’m not interested in him like that.”

“And I’m not interested in Aiden like that.” They lean closer until I think Elliot is going to kiss me, but they stop short, leaving a tiny space between our lips. “We’re just friends. I’m

not kissing Aiden.” Elliot pauses to lean in and places a brief kiss on my lips. “We’re not taking our clothes off and doing anything sexual.” Their hand trails up my inner thigh, but not close enough to touch my dick. Just enough to tease.

I wrap my arm around Elliot, pulling them closer for a real kiss. “I know,” I say when we pull apart. “It’s just a lot to take in. So much has changed recently.”

Twenty-Five

Elliot

I CURL INTO TRAVIS'S side, resting my hand on his leg as we watch TV. I know we should both be getting to bed soon, but the time we're spending almost every evening together cuddling has become the highlight of my day. Ever since our date last Friday, the last four nights we've wound up on the couch cuddling and kissing as we watch TV. And true to his word, Travis hasn't pushed me for more.

But he's clearly interested. At least if the way he gets hard when we make out is any clue.

I couldn't say what's on the screen right now. My attention is on Travis. The way he tenses as my hand slides higher on his thigh, and I trail my fingers lightly over his jeans. I turn to look up at him and Travis mirrors my position, his eyes meeting mine. Then we're kissing. A gentle brush of lips that quickly turns deeper as I slide my tongue into his mouth. My body turns, following my head, until I toss my leg over Travis's lap, my crotch pressed into his hip. Travis's arm is

around my shoulders, holding me there when I feel the telltale lump in the front of his pants growing. Then he pulls away.

“It’s getting late. We should probably call it a night,” Travis says.

I reluctantly move my leg off of Travis and scoot back an inch. “Yeah, I’ve got school in the morning, and you should get some sleep before work,” I agree.

Travis grabs my wrist as I stand up. “Do you want to go on another date this weekend? I mean, if you’re free.”

“Maybe we can do something Saturday. I have the day off, but I’ll need to get some homework done.”

“Saturday works for me,” Travis says. Then he kisses me again. A quick brush of lips, and we split up to our separate rooms.

Once I’m alone, I let out a sigh. My hand goes to adjust my dick, even though I’m only half hard. It’s more of an annoyance at this point than something I need to take care of. I strip off my clothes until the only thing I’m wearing is a lacy pair of underwear. I was half hoping Travis might notice.

I grab a pair of cotton briefs from my dresser at random. The lace is pretty, but it’s not the best feeling to sleep in. I’m slipping on the new pair of underwear when I hear it. A low groan from the next room over. I hold still, listening harder. Maybe it wasn’t what I thought it was. Heavy breathing and a soft muffled cuss word follows the moan. Travis is jerking off in his room.

I pull my underwear the rest of the way up and take a step closer to the wall that separates our rooms. From the closer spot I can hear the heavy pants of his breath and almost picture him lying on his bed, fucking into his fist.

Damn. *Why did my brain just go there?* It's all too easy to think about what Travis looks like with his hand around his dick after I sucked him off. The way his face flushed. His hand is probably gripping his cock, like the way he was grabbing my hair.

My hand adjusts my dick again, but this time I'm rapidly approaching full hardness. I can't stand here, listening to Travis and thinking about what he's doing in the other room without getting turned on. My cock is throbbing. There's no ignoring it now.

Maybe I should knock on Travis's door and offer him a hand, I think with a laugh. We could help each other out and solve both our issues. Either way, we clearly need to have a talk about it. Travis seems to have gotten it in his head I'm not interested in more than kissing.

I glance down at myself double guessing if I should toss on a shirt, but maybe it's better if I don't. Showing up at his door in just my tented out underwear should make it obvious I'm turned on too. I take a deep breath and open my door, making my way to Travis's room. His moans stop when I knock, and I hear a muffled cuss word. "Hey Travis?" I call softly. "You want some company?" My cheeks are burning, but there's no

point in beating around the bush. Pretending I didn't hear him isn't going to help matters.

The door opens and Travis stands in front of me. His state of undress mirrors mine as his boxers jut out with his erection. I wrap my arms around his neck and pull him in for a kiss. This time as we make out, I deliberately grind my dick into his thigh. Our tongues brush against each other, neither of us stopping for breath, until I'm dizzy and my cock is throbbing.

When Travis breaks the kiss, I slide a hand down his chest to cup him through his boxers. "You don't have to leave when you get turned on. I wanna help," I tell him. He looks at me, letting out a heavy sigh as he opens his door wider for me to follow him in. I take a seat on his bed, spreading my legs to give him a clear view of how turned on I am. Travis closes the door behind him and walks over to me, standing in front of me as he bites his lip.

"Just help?" Travis asks. "What about you?" He leans closer, cupping my face as he leans in to kiss me again.

"I wouldn't be offering it if I didn't want this," I tell him. "I'm not sex adverse. It doesn't disgust me or anything like that. Sometimes I enjoy doing sexual things because it feels intimate, even if I don't get off."

"How does this work? Is it okay if I touch you too? Do you want that?" Travis asks, letting his hand trail down my side until he gets to the waistband of my briefs.

"You can touch me, but you don't need to worry about getting me off to 'repay the favor.' I'm not being totally selfless here,

I liked sucking you off before. I enjoy the intimacy of us being together, even if I don't have a physical release." I place my hand on his chest, tracing the skin near his nipple, giving it a light pinch. "Lay down with me?"

I scoot further up the bed as he joins me. Travis leans over me, moving his mouth to mine. I slide my hand to Travis's underwear, grabbing ahold and pushing them down his legs. His dick pops out, standing straight up. The smooth skin is slick, like he was using lube as he was jerking off. I don't bother to take my briefs off; I just pull out my dick, lining it up with Travis's to stroke both of us.

My dick throbs, the tip swollen and leaking pre-cum, along with the wetness of Travis's dick it's enough. I break our kiss and move my hand to the base of our cocks, giving us a firm stroke. Travis bites back a moan. "Do you want me to blow you again?" I ask. "Or is this good?"

"This is good," Travis answers. "I want to kiss you and I'm not going to last long." The new string of pre-cum leaking out of me is making it clear that it's not going to take much for me either. I move my hand, my hips thrusting to get more friction from his dick against mine.

"Hang on," Travis pulls back to grab a bottle of lube off his nightstand. He squeezes some of the lube on his hand and caps the bottle again, tossing it off the side of the bed. He strokes himself once before lying down next to me.

A warm, wet hand wraps around me, gliding easier with the addition of lube. He guides our dicks together, his larger hand

doing a better job of holding both of us. “Fuck,” I let out a heavy breath as my balls tighten up. Travis’s hips thrust forward, letting me know he’s close. My hand joins his, jerking him through his orgasm until he bites his lip and groans.

I’m not sure who comes first. With how messy our cocks and hands are it’s impossible to tell. I curl into Travis as I catch my breath. “Just give me a few minutes, then we can get up and clean up.”

“You can shower first, if you want.”

I roll over on my side to look at Travis as I trail my fingers over his chest. “Or we could shower together,” I offer.

His eyes look me over until he’s looking right at my crotch. I’m still wearing my underwear, but they’re tucked under my balls, giving him a clear view of my softening dick. Unlike when I sucked him off at the hotel, I’m not hiding my body from him. From the way he just jerked me off, there really isn’t much of a point.

“Sure. We can do that.” Travis holds out his hand and leads me to the bathroom. He reaches in the shower, getting the water started, and I kick my underwear off. I step into the shower first, and Travis follows. He watches me, not saying a word as I lean into the stream of water, getting my hair wet.

“You okay?” I ask.

“I’ve never showered with someone like this,” he says.

I grab his bottle of body wash, squirting the liquid in my hand. I place my palm on his chest, rubbing over the hair there and deliberately flicking his nipple with a brush of my thumb. Travis bites his lip with a groan. “Relax,” I tell him. “Do what feels comfortable.” I run my soapy hands down his sides. “If you want to wash me back, you can. And if you’d rather, we just quickly wash up and keep to ourselves. That’s fine too.”

He grabs my shampoo, squirting a glob of it into his hand. “Turn around,” he tells me. We take our time in the shower washing each other, enjoying the closeness and swapping lazy wet kisses.

Twenty-Six

Travis

I GLANCE IN ELLIOT’S bedroom, looking at them leaning over their desk as they look at their tablet. I don’t know if I should interrupt, but they left the door wide open. I rap my fist against the doorframe, and Elliot looks over their shoulder at me.

“You want to go to dinner with me?” I ask.

They glance back at their tablet before turning off the screen. “Dinner sounds good. I was just reading a textbook for school. Give me a few minutes to get ready,” they answer.

“Sure.” I turn around, closing the door behind me to let Elliot change. I already switched my own clothes when I got back from work. I take Mittens out and fill her bowl with kibble in the time it takes Elliot to finish up.

They step out of the room wearing a tight pair of jeans along with a button-down shirt that’s snug enough to show off how slim they are. The top couple of buttons are undone, leaving it open at the neck, and the sleeves are rolled up to their elbows.

On Elliot's feet are a pair of black ankle boots that look a little more feminine. The shine of their lips catches my attention along with the fresh coat of light gray eye shadow. "Too much?" Elliot asks.

"No, you look great." I lean in, pressing my lips to theirs for a quick kiss, but pull away before I can get too carried away. "Come on, we should get going."

"Are we in a hurry?" they tease.

I pull out my phone to check the time. I was hoping to make it on time to get a decent table, but I just shrug. "No, not really." This is more about spending time with Elliot.

"Where are we going, anyway?" they ask as we walk out to my car.

"Just a bar and grill place. I figured we'd eat, have a few drinks maybe, keep it casual," I tell them. I place my hand on Elliot's thigh as I drive there. "Does that work?"

"Sure, sounds good."

It doesn't take long before I pull into the parking lot. I wrap my arm around Elliot as we walk to the restaurant, but once we get inside, Elliot tenses.

"Table for two?" the hostess asks, looking at me. Her eyes follow my arm to where it's wrapped around Elliot, and they take a step away.

I look at Elliot, raising my eyebrow, but they don't say anything. "Yes, thank you," I say, turning my attention back to the hostess.

She leads us to a small table that's a little further from the crowds by the bar, but still has a clear view of the hockey game. "Here are your menus. Can I get anything for you to drink to start with or do you need a few minutes?"

Elliot grabs a menu flipping straight to the drinks section. "I'll have a strawberry margarita," they answer. Elliot's posture is stiff and they're still not looking at me.

"Uh, I'll just have beer," I tell her. "Whatever you have on tap."

"Great, we'll get those for you and be back to take your order." The hostess walks away, leaving me alone with Elliot.

"Did I do something wrong?" I ask.

"No. I just didn't think this was what you meant by bar and grill," they say, keeping their eyes on the menu.

I look around the restaurant, but I don't know what I'm supposed to notice. I've been here before to watch the game and have drinks with Derek. "I don't understand," I say.

Elliot sighs and drops their menu, meeting my eyes across the table. "Places like *this* aren't usually the friendliest toward someone like me. I would've toned it down and skipped the makeup if I knew where we were going."

My eyes look over Elliot, taking in their tight clothes and makeup before I look around the room again. Most of the tables are full of guys, wearing T-shirts and jeans or fresh from work. Most of them look more like me than Elliot. I didn't think about it earlier, but the look the hostess gave us makes

more sense now. Of the few couples in the room, I don't see a single one that isn't a man and a woman.

“Sorry, if you want, we can go somewhere else. Just so you know, I meant it earlier when I said you look great. I love seeing you wear makeup and dress up because I can tell how much you enjoy it. I don't want you to hide who you are. You don't need to tone it down for me,” I tell them.

Elliot's leg brushes against mine under the table. “Thank you, but it's fine. We're already here. We might as well get our drinks and try to enjoy it,” they say. A cheer comes up from the crowd by the bar and I look at the TV to see what just happened. “Let me guess, you like hockey,” Elliot laughs.

“Yeah, but if I knew you felt this way about the sports bar, I still wouldn't have taken you here,” I tell them honestly. I don't want to make Elliot uncomfortable just for the sake of watching a game.

The waitress shows up holding a tray with our drinks. “Strawberry margarita?” she asks, looking at Elliot with a raised eyebrow.

“Yup, that's mine,” they confirm.

She sets drinks down, placing the beer in front of me and moving the tray under her arm as she pulls out a notebook.

“Are you ready to order?”

“Actually, we could use a few minutes,” I tell her. She smiles at me and nods before heading off again. Elliot grabs their glass, taking a large swig of the frozen drink. Then their phone

chimes. They pull it out, taking a quick glance at the screen under the table before sliding it back into their pocket. “It’s okay if you need to message someone back,” I say.

“It’s fine. Nothing important,” Elliot says, taking a smaller sip of their drink. “It’s not the game I have an issue with, for the record. I mean hot guys slamming into each other on ice skates is kinda hot. No wonder there’s so many romance novels about hockey players.” Elliot stirs the straw around their glass, trying to make light of the situation.

“Really?” I ask, hoping the topic change will lighten the mood.

“Oh yeah. It’s a very popular sport in romance novels.” Elliot looks at the menu, reading over their choices. I turn my attention to the menu too even though I’ve been here before. “Just curious. Would you have brought a girl here for a date?” they ask.

“Yeah, probably,” I admit. I didn’t really think about it before inviting Elliot out.

“I think I’m starting to understand why you’ve never had a serious relationship,” they joke.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I ask.

“It’s not bad. Most guys, when they’re trying to impress their date, try to do things they think the other person would enjoy. There’s a whole process of getting to know each other and walking on eggshells. You don’t do that. You just jump in. It didn’t even occur to you that someone here might have an

issue with me wearing makeup. It's good, though. I'm glad you don't care what other people might think." Elliot grabs my hand over the table, giving it a squeeze.

"How are you doing? Ready to order?" the waitress asks, choosing that moment to walk up again.

"Yeah, I'll have the steak sandwich with garlic fries," Elliot says, folding the menu, and shifting it to the edge of the table.

She looks at me and I glance at the menu again at the burger I'd usually order. "Actually, that sounds good," I say. "I'll have the steak sandwich too, but make my fries regular. Thanks."

Despite the rough start, Elliot loosens up as the dinner goes on. Despite coming here to watch the game, I have no clue what the score is. My focus is held on Elliot.



"I'M STUFFED," THEY GROAN, rubbing their belly as we walk in the front door.

I hold back a laugh as Elliot stumbles forward to the couch. I follow them to the couch, sitting down next to them. Elliot scoots closer to me, curling into my side. I wrap my arm around them and brush a bit of hair from Elliot's face. "Do you want to watch a show or should we call it a night?" I ask.

"I want to be with you," they mutter, curling into my side. Neither of us ordered a second drink so I know Elliot can't be too drunk, but they still seem a little tipsy.

I lean over kissing Elliot's head. "How strong was that margarita?" I tease.

"I'm not drunk." Elliot turns toward me, pushing up to their knees. Elliot leans forward pressing their lips to mine. It's soft as our lips brush and mingle.

"Elliot," I say their name softly as I pull away. "Do you want this to go further tonight?" It's probably better if I come right out and ask after what happened last time.

"I'm not really in the mood for sex. Can we just cuddle?" Elliot asks.

"Yeah, that's not an issue," I say. Elliot settles into the couch, tossing their leg over mine. It's an answer even if they don't say a word. "Did you have fun tonight?"

"Yeah, it was ... the food was good," they finish slowly. "Maybe next time we could watch the game here."

"Sure, that's a good idea," I agree. "Do you even like hockey?"

Elliot made a joke at the restaurant about hot guys slamming into each other, but it seemed more like a sarcastic attempt to lighten the mood. They shrug. "I'm not big on sports. I did competitive swimming in high school."

"You did?" I ask. That's surprising, but I can almost picture it. Elliot might be skinny, but they have lean muscle and clearly keep in shape.

"Yup. That's where the speedo came from." They go quiet again, then Elliot shifts, pressing their hips into my thigh.

“You should come to my bed. Cuddling would be better on a bed.”

I get to my feet and pull Elliot along with me to stand up. Elliot opens their door when we get there and kicks off their shoes. They lie on the bed, waiting for me. I kick off my shoes too, lying down in the bed next to Elliot. They cuddle into me, tossing their leg over mine as I lie on my back. It takes a moment for Elliot to shift around, trying to get comfortable. “Hang on,” Elliot pulls away and pops the button on their jeans. Elliot pushes their jeans down, revealing a pink lacy pair of panties and my dick jumps to attention.

I’m glad I asked about sex earlier, so I know where they stand, but it doesn’t stop me from being interested. They kick their pants off, and Elliot shifts on the bed, cuddling into me again. They lie their head on my chest and relax into me. I clench my jaw, attempting to ignore my erection.

“Hey Travis?” Elliot asks softly.

“Yeah?”

“Just because I don’t wanna, doesn’t mean you have to suffer in silence. I don’t mind if you want to take care of yourself.”

“In here with you?” I clarify. The thought of it is a little awkward, but so is cuddling them with a boner.

“If you want, or on your own. Whatever you’re more comfortable with,” they say with a slight shrug of their shoulders.

I kiss their forehead and slide out of their bed. “I’ll be right back, okay?” I tell them. Elliot nods, watching me as I leave the room. The flash I got of Elliot’s panties has my dick standing straight up, but I still feel a little awkward about leaving their room to jerk off. I go through the motions, getting myself off in a hurry.

When I open their door, Elliot is still lying in bed where I left them, but they’re no longer wearing a shirt. They must have taken it off after I left. Then I notice the rhythm of Elliot’s breathing. The soft nasally inhale followed by a heavy sigh of an exhale. I think they fell asleep. I’m about to close the door and head back to my room when I hear them mutter a single word, “Stay?”

I strip down to my boxers before climbing into the bed next to Elliot. They cuddle into me again, still half asleep as they whisper. “I didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

“It’s fine. You were tired.” I stroke a hand through Elliot’s hair, and they arch into the touch. This whole thing is new to me, but as awkward as everything is, I’m right where I want to be. Cuddling with Elliot is more intimate than sex.

“You don’t have to stay. I mean, unless you want to ...” they trail off, but I tighten my grip around Elliot’s waist.

“Get some sleep,” I tell them.

Elliot looks up at me and licks their lips. It’s impossible to miss the hint that Elliot wants me to kiss them. I close the distance between us, pressing my lips to theirs. “Goodnight, Travis.”

Twenty-Seven

Elliot

I STARTLE FROM MY dream at the second repeated melody. It doesn't sound right. I could have sworn I had a different ringtone on my phone. Then my eyes open, and I remember. I didn't sleep alone last night. Travis's phone is ringing, not mine. Judging from the light creeping in the window, we should probably be awake by now, anyway. "Hey," I lightly shake Travis's shoulder. "Your phone is ringing."

"It can wait," he mumbles. An arm wraps around my waist, pulling me into Travis. With both of us only in our underwear, there's a lot of bare skin rubbing against each other. Travis presses a kiss to my neck as he snuggles into my back, his morning wood poking between my ass cheeks. "How did you sleep?" he asks.

The phone goes silent, and I relax a little as I think about last night. Travis didn't argue when I said I didn't want sex and he even came back to cuddle with me after he took care of himself. "Good, this is—" I cut off as his phone rings again. "Maybe you should at least see who's calling," I suggest.

Travis rolls over, grabbing his cell phone off the side table. “Hey sis, what’s with the early morning wake up call? Is the honeymoon over already?” he teases as he answers the call. I can’t hear whatever Alyssa says on the other side, but Travis sits up, taking the call more seriously. “Uh, yeah. We’re fine, and Elliot is fine. I’ll talk to them about it and get everything sorted out.” He looks at me as his sister says something else, and I’m thinking our morning just got more serious. “Uh huh, I’ll talk to you soon. Bye, Alyssa.”

Travis hits the end call button and focuses his attention on me. “Have you gotten any missed calls from your sister?” he asks.

I grimace. It started with missed text messages, but over the last few days, she’s tried to call me a few times. I just panicked and didn’t answer. “Sorry, I didn’t think Cece would go through Alyssa and you to get a hold of me. It’s just been a few missed texts, maybe a phone call.” I shrug.

“Are you ignoring her on purpose?” he guesses. Travis’s hand goes to my thigh, gently stroking his thumb over the skin there.

“Kinda, it was awkward at the wedding. Cece let it slip that she was the bridesmaid that Alyssa was trying to set you up with. It keeps bugging me,” I admit.

“Yeah, Alyssa told me that at the wedding. I thought it was kinda funny, all things considered, but weird. I don’t see Cece like that. She and Alyssa were always around each other, like a package deal. It was like having another sister,” he tells me.

An anxious laugh escapes my lips. “That’s good to know. But I don’t know what to say to her. She seemed okay with me being nonbinary, but she kept asking questions about us and at the time ... we were just acting like a couple for the wedding. I think she might realize we were lying.”

“We told everyone it was newer, and we started as roommates. All of that was true. It just happened a little later than what we said. Not that it’s any of their business. It’s true enough now.” Travis lifts his hand from my leg to cup my face, pulling my chin up until our eyes meet. “You should talk to Cece. You can’t avoid her forever.”

“I know. I’ll message her back. Hopefully, that’ll be enough to keep her from bugging your sister again.” I scoot closer to the edge of the bed and grab my phone off the nightstand.

“Before all that,” he grabs my wrist to stop me. Travis leans in, pressing his lips to mine. It’s soft and slow, with no sense of urgency. “I’m gonna go make us coffee, but I liked sleeping with you last night. It was nice cuddling again. I didn’t realize how much I enjoyed it at the hotel until we got back here and slept in our own beds again.”

“I liked it too. I’m always down for snuggles. I’m a bit of a cuddleslut,” I wink at Travis, and he laughs. Travis places another quick kiss on my forehead as we split ways. He goes to the kitchen while I look at my phone.

I’m still only in my underwear, and even though I know she won’t be able to see the pink lace, I grab a pair of black leggings and a T-shirt. With that done and no more excuses, I

grab my phone. Seven missed messages and three missed calls over the past two weeks from the wedding. So maybe it's more than a few. I sigh, opening up the texts first and scrolling down.

Cece: I wanted to say it at the wedding, but your makeup was really good. How did you get that good?

Cece: Is everything okay? Are you getting my messages?

There's a couple more trying to get me to answer, but it's the last text that catches my attention.

Cece: Is this you?

Attached to the text message is a link to my TikTok. I click the link and a clip of me on the screen pops up. I'm already wearing foundation with my hair pushed out of the way. The filter effect casts digital squares on my face or different colors to contour. I made the video months ago, before I moved out of the apartment with Aiden.

Me: I'm fine. Sorry it took so long to get back to you. I've just been busy with school and work.

I send the message. I don't know what else to say, but it gives me a moment to think about everything. Then my phone rings and Cece's name pops up on the screen display. Reluctantly, I lift the phone to my ear. "Hey, morning Cece."

"Morning Cece? Elliot, it's been almost two weeks without a word from you." Her voice rises, and I swallow hard.

"Sorry. I just didn't know what to say," I admit.

“That’s you in the video, right? I’d seen them pop up a few times, but I didn’t realize it was you until after the wedding. God, I feel so foolish now. I can’t believe I didn’t recognize my own sibling, just because you were wearing makeup. When do you find time to do a makeup blog and social media along with school, work, and have a boyfriend?”

“Cece, slow down,” I tell her.

“Sorry, just, it’s weird, okay? I feel like all of a sudden, I’m getting to know you and you just keep surprising me. Why didn’t we ever talk about this stuff?” she asks.

“Honestly? I didn’t know you were going to be this cool about it. I’m glad I was wrong, but this is weird for me, too. It’s part of why I left for college. I needed a chance to get away and figure out who I am without worrying about what you or Dad would think about it.” It didn’t hurt that I grew up nearby and already knew the area, either.

“What are you going to do when you graduate? Aren’t you coming home?” Cece asks.

“I don’t know,” I admit. I don’t know how everything will turn out with Travis. I don’t want to leave the friends I’ve made here. I don’t want to pretend to be someone I’m not to please Dad. “I’m not there yet.”

“College won’t last forever, Elliot. You’re a senior now. Shouldn’t you have some sort of a plan for what happens next?”

“It’s too early for all of this. Look, I’ll talk to you soon, but I have stuff to do.” I deflect from her questioning, but I know she has a point. Graduation is coming up whether I ignore it or not.

“Fine, but answer my texts, at least. Whatever you choose to do, I’ll support you. Don’t pick based on what you think Dad or I want. I get it now, that we haven’t always been the most supportive.” Cece’s voice goes softer.

“I’ll think about it, and I’ll text back. I’ve got to go now. Bye Cece.” I hang up the phone, and let out a deep sigh.

Travis raps on the wood of the door frame, getting my attention. “Coffee?” He’s standing there, now dressed and holding two cups, as he looks at me.

“How long have you been standing there?” I stand up, taking one of the coffee mugs from Travis.

“A minute or two. Is everything okay?” he asks.

“Yeah, mostly.” I take a drink of the coffee. A hint of chocolate and caramel hits my tongue from the creamer Travis likes.

“What’s your plan for today? Do you have more homework to do?”

“Some, and I’ve got work in the afternoon. Just a few hours. We’ve got time to hang out a little this morning if you want to.”

Travis looks from me to the bed and nudges his chin toward the living room, motioning for me to follow him. “You want to

take this to the other room?”

I take another sip of my coffee as we make our way to the couch. I sit down first, and Travis sits next to me, placing his cup on the coffee table in front of us. “That text you got at dinner last night, was it from Cece? She was the one that messaged you last night, right?”

I glance down at my drink. “Yeah.”

Travis tucks a piece of hair behind my ear. “You could’ve told me.”

“Travis, we’ve barely been dating for two weeks. We’ve gone on two dates,” I tell him. Regardless of the technicalities though I know we’re closer than I’m saying. I care about him more than I can admit.

“Two official dates, and we’ve been living together for months. I don’t expect you to tell me everything, but there are some things we should talk about. While we’re at it, can I ask? The lingerie. I’ve noticed you wearing it a few times, and it’s incredibly sexy. Am I allowed to say that?”

My cheeks heat up when Travis calls my panties *sexy*. “I like how it feels. The lace and silk are so soft and ...” I shrug. “It makes me feel pretty, and I like that it’s something less masculine.”

Travis leans closer, pressing a kiss to my neck. “How about for our next date we stay home? I could cook us dinner and we could watch a movie or hang out in the hot tub?”

“I’d like that, but we need to figure out a night we don’t have work. As it is, we should probably get started with breakfast if I want to get anything done before I go to work later.” I stand up. I’m tempted to say fuck it and just spend the day with Travis, but I don’t let myself get carried away. He follows me into the kitchen, grabbing my wrist to stop me as I reach for the bag of cereal.

“Let me make something. You can grab your schoolwork if you need to, but I’ll take care of breakfast.”

I turn around to face Travis and wrap my arms around his neck. It doesn’t take much to close the distance between us, pressing our lips together. “Thank you.” I grab my coffee cup as I pull away. What I really need is a moment to process everything that’s happened in the short time I’ve been awake today. I was hoping to enjoy a lazy morning cuddling and kissing Travis, but now everything feels more complicated.

Dating Travis isn’t what I was expecting. It’s ... nice. Not to have to worry about always being on. I avoided dating in the past because I figured whoever I dated would wind up getting pushy or disappointed by the lack of sex. It’d just end in a disaster. But maybe I was wrong.

Twenty-Eight

Travis

“ARE YOU BUSY TONIGHT?” I ask. Elliot is sitting at the dining table as I walk into the house. They look up from their textbook and notebook, then check their phone.

“I’m planning on doing a video for my blog later. I haven’t done it in a while.” They shrug. “If you want to hang out for a bit before that, though, I just need to finish this assignment, and I’ve still got some time to kill before I’ll need to set everything up.”

“That works. Gives me time to shower and change out of my work clothes.” I walk over to where they’re sitting and lean in for a quick kiss. “I’ll let you finish.”

Elliot turns their attention to their work again, and I walk into my bedroom to grab a change of clothes for the shower. We’ve been eating dinner and cuddling together in the afternoons. We make out, it gets hot and heavy, then Elliot helps out or I go into my room to take care of myself. It’s still a little awkward jerking off to thoughts of Elliot when they’re in their room in the same house. I’ve never lived with someone I was dating,

but it's nice too. Waking up with them curled into me each morning feels right.

I strip my clothes off in the bathroom and turn on the shower, letting the water heat up before I step in. We haven't showered together again since that first time, but the thought is still on my mind every time I've showered since. The way Elliot's wet hands slid over my skin as they washed me was intimate and caring. I shake off the thought as my mind goes to how Elliot looked naked.

I didn't ask how much longer it would take Elliot to do their assignment, but I take my time drying off and getting dressed. My cock is half hard just at being denied a shower jerk session, but it'll go down soon enough. I run my fingers through my hair, pushing it out of my face. A glance in the mirror tells me I'm getting scruffy and need to shave again. I grab the razor and shaving cream, setting up everything I need while the mirror clears from the fog of the shower. That wastes a few more minutes as I carefully shave the stubble off. Hopefully Elliot is just about finished with their work now.

I don't have to wait to find out when I run into Elliot in the hall. They're holding their school bag, but they sling it over their shoulder when they see me. "Hey, I just finished up. You want to come to my room?" they ask.

"Sure," I follow Elliot in, and they drop their bag near their desk. "Can I ask? How does this whole blog thing work?" I ask as I take a seat on the bed.

Elliot walks over to their desk, letting their fingers trail over some of the makeup on top of it. “Usually, I set up my phone to record me while doing my makeup. I’ll edit the footage later, pull a few still frames, and upload it to the blog, along with a list of what products I used in the video,” Elliot explains. At my blank face they add, “There’s more to it, but that’s the basics.”

“Do you always do the makeup on yourself? Wouldn’t it be easier to do it on someone else?”

“Uh, yeah, that’d be easier, but my videos aren’t always on a schedule. Aiden did a couple of videos with me, where he let me do his makeup. It was fun, and it got us some hits. It’s hard to work it out and line everything up with timing. So, unless you know someone who’d want to model?” Elliot looks at me, raising their eyebrow.

I’m pretty sure they’re just teasing. “Are you asking if I’d want to?” I ask.

Elliot turns toward me with a smirk. “I wasn’t, but if you’re open to the idea, it could be fun.”

I don’t say anything. I don’t know what to say to that. Wearing makeup never seriously crossed my mind, but it looks good on Elliot. They walk over to me until Elliot is standing right in front of me between my spread legs. “Uh, maybe.” My eyes meet Elliot’s as they lean closer. “I don’t think it’d look as good on me.”

Elliot raises their hand to my face, trailing their thumb over my cheekbone. “Not the bright, colorful stuff I usually wear. A

more natural look. Even out your skin tone with some foundation, a little contour to highlight the sharpness of your jaw. No eye shadow or lipstick or anything.”

I can't follow what they're saying. I'm too busy staring at Elliot's eyes as their thumb trails down to rub my lip. Then they kiss me. I set my hands on Elliot's hips, pulling them closer. Their tongue teases at the seam of my lips, asking for entrance. I open my mouth, chasing their tongue with mine. Elliot grabs the hem of my shirt, pulling it up and breaking our kiss to take it off all together. Their hand moves lower to my shoulder, then slides through the hair on my chest.

Elliot's shirt scratches against my bare skin. I want more. I grab the back of their shirt and pull it off, too. Elliot kisses me again and our bare chests press together as I drop the shirt. I scoot back until the inside of my knees hit the bed, but Elliot lifts their leg, placing their knee on the mattress as they climb up. Then Elliot is sitting on my lap.

Elliot slides their tongue over my lip, teasing me with the taste as I open my mouth. We're crotch to crotch with the way Elliot is straddling me, but our jeans are in the way. My hand slides over their back, caressing bare skin.

My hand slides down their back, dipping into the waistband of Elliot's jeans. They let out a mumbled groan into our kiss and the noise goes right to my cock, making me harder than I already was. A shrill high-pitched melody bursts from Elliot's phone, interrupting the moment.

“Sorry,” Elliot pulls back, breaking the kiss as they pant. “Shit, I hate to cut this short. I need to set up for my video.”

“It’s fine,” I say. “I know you were looking forward to getting back into your blog.”

Elliot glances at their set-up at their desk then down at where our groins are nestled together. With the way they’re straddling me, there’s no missing either of our erections. Dating Elliot has been a test of my patience, but I look at them, letting Elliot decide what happens next. “If you want me to leave, you have to get off of me,” I joke.

“I’ll do the blog later,” they say before kissing me again. Their hands go to the fly of my jeans, pulling down the zipper. We make quick work of what’s left of our clothes, then Elliot lies back on their bed fully naked with their legs spread open. They wrap a hand around the base of their dick and give it a firm stroke.

Holy hell, that’s hot.

Twenty-Nine

Elliot

I TIGHTEN MY GRIP on my dick, pulling on it slowly until my hand reaches the flared head. Travis watches as I trail a finger over my slit and a groan escapes my lips. “Can I touch you?” he asks.

After our make-out session earlier, I’m already too worked up. I need this to be over quickly if I still plan on doing a video for my blog. “Kiss me?” I ask. My hand strokes my cock as Travis leans down. I use my other hand to pull him closer until our lips meet.

Travis melts into the kiss, opening his mouth for me to deepen it. His hand lands on my thigh, but not close enough to my throbbing dick. “Travis, touch me, please,” I tell him when our lips part.

He kisses me again as his hand slides over my leg, wrapping firmly around my dick. He pulls his head back to look down at what he’s doing and lets out a heavy breath. “Fuck, you look so sexy. I can’t believe—” he shakes off the rest of that sentence. “What do you want? Is this good?” His hand jerks

me off in a smooth, firm stroke and I moan, thrusting my hips into the tunnel of his grip.

“Less talking,” I pant. “More—” my hips thrust up again as Travis tightens his grip, jerking me faster. He leans closer, kissing my neck down to my collarbone until he gets to a nipple. The brush of his lips is followed by a light nibble that has my hips almost jumping off the bed. He sucks hard on the pebbled flesh, all the time continuing those firm steady motions on my dick. “Wait, there’s lube in the top drawer.”

Travis pulls back, opening the drawer of my nightstand. I sit up, getting a better view as Travis’s hand closes around a dildo instead. I bite my lip, trying to hold off a laugh. “That’s uh ...” I trail off for a moment as Travis pulls out the purple tentacle. “We can talk about that later.” A nervous giggle escapes my lips as Travis holds it higher, the tentacle jiggling in his grip.

“Not sure I want to know,” he laughs, setting it down again.

I scoot closer, sticking my hand in the drawer and grabbing the lube bottle before we can get further off track with the contents of my drawer. Travis finding my dildo definitely lightened the mood, though, I think with a smirk. “Come here.” I grab his wrist, pulling Travis closer. My lips press against his for a moment before I trail kisses lower to his neck.

We lie down again, and I instinctively cuddle into Travis as we kiss. His erection pokes into my thigh and mine rises to the occasion again as I get over the momentary awkwardness of Travis finding my fantasy dildo. I break the kiss, grabbing the bottle of lube again as I scoot into a better position, lining up

our dicks. With a quick squirt of lube on my hand, I wrap it around both of us, stroking our erections together. Travis bites back a groan.

He looks down at where our dicks are lined up and his hand joins mine. He kisses me, his tongue licking slowly at my lips. I close my eyes, focusing on the kiss and my hand slows down. Travis's hand slides back, grabbing hold of my ass and holding me closer. He massages and gropes my ass, teasing his fingers down my crack. His hand brushes against my opening and my hole tenses, anticipating the burn of being stretched on his fingers.

I open my eyes, breaking the kiss until I see it. The bottle of lube is still lying nearby. I grab it and hold it out towards Travis. "Finger me," I tell him.

He grabs the bottle, squirting a glob of lube onto his hand. He rubs his fingers together, getting them evenly coated as his eyes meet mine. "If you want to stop at any point, just let me know."

My hand stills on our dicks. Travis places a quick kiss on my cheek. His hand moves again, and a slick finger presses against my entrance. A little pressure, some slight burn, and I bite my lip. I pick up the pace, jerking us off faster. Travis takes the hint, thrusting his finger in at the same rhythm, and I can't hold back my moan when he hits my prostate. I shift, trying to spread my legs and give Travis better access.

His hand picks up the pace, and my balls tighten. My body pulses as my orgasm rolls through me, shooting ropes of cum

all over Travis's abs and his dick. He looks down, watching me as his hand slows to a stop inside of me. I try to keep jerking him off, but it's hard to keep my focus as Travis pulls his finger out. Then his other hand wraps around mine, stroking us tighter. It's almost too much with how over sensitive I am post-orgasm. I kiss Travis's chest and his hand gets faster. He groans and adds to the mess, covering us further with his cum.

Travis pulls me closer to cuddle with him. He's breathing heavily as he husks a question into my ear. "Was that okay? Not too much?"

"No," I kiss Travis's chest again. "Not too much."

His arm tightens around me, holding us together. "Still gonna do your blog?" he asks.

"I don't know," I answer honestly. I'm too blissed out from my orgasm to care right now.

"What was that thing?" he laughs. "In the drawer." Travis looks in the direction of my nightstand again.

I bite my lip, trying to keep from losing it. "It's a fantasy dildo," I answer when I get myself under control. "I was reading a book about a kraken and a merman ... anyway, there were tentacles, and I was curious."

He doesn't answer right away. Travis holds me with his hand lazily stroking my back. Then a single word hits my ear, "Okay."

"That's it? Just okay? No other questions?" I tease.

“Do you want to take a shower?” he changes the subject.

“Might as well. It doesn’t look like I’ll be doing the blog tonight. You want to watch a show or something in your bed afterward?”

“Yeah, sounds good.” Travis shifts, going to sit up, but I hold on tighter, keeping us in place.

“Not yet. Just a few more minutes. Lay with me.” I curl into Travis tighter, and he wraps his arm around me.

His hand tucks a tuft of hair behind my ear. “Come on, we should go shower before all *this* dries and gets crusty.” Travis gestures at the mess on our bellies, and I hold back a laugh. He sits up, scooting to the edge of the bed, and holds out his hand to help me up. I take it, lacing my fingers with Travis’s as we walk naked to the bathroom.

Just like last time, being in the shower with Travis feels comforting. It’s more intimate than the sexual stuff as his hands trail carefully over my body. I press my lips to his, kissing lightly before running my tongue over his lower lip. Travis rubs the soap over my back, trailing lower to my ass. “I’m not pushing, just curious, but are you interested in that kind of sex?” He teases his finger at the crease of my butt, making it easy to guess his meaning.

“Anal?” I ask. “Because all the stuff we’ve been doing still counts as sex.”

“Yeah, anal. Is that something you’d want at some point?”

I shrug a little as I think how to answer. “Maybe. I’ve done it before and ... honestly? Most of the time, I’d rather use toys or fingers. It’s hard for me to enjoy penetrative sex because I’m more focused on getting my partner off and making sure he’s enjoying it. Kinda kills the mood for me.” I’ve never said that to anyone before. Never thought anyone would understand.

“So, you’d rather me use that tentacle thing on you?” Travis asks, raising one of his eyebrows. A grin spreads over his lips, making it clear he’s teasing me.

“Don’t knock it till you try it,” I answer with a laugh. “The suckers on that thing hit all the right spots.”

“Maybe you can show me some time,” Travis says.

I look up at his face, expecting to see a smirk or joking look, but Travis just smiles at me. “As in, use it on you? Seriously?”

“Why do you look so surprised?”

“It’s just most bi-curious guys—” I cut myself off and start again. With how understanding Travis has been about me being ace I shouldn’t be assuming about his sexuality. “I mean, I didn’t expect you to be interested in bottoming.”

“I’m up to trying new things. I don’t know if I’ll like it, but all of this is new to me.” Travis’s hand keeps trailing over my lower back, teasing right above my ass.

“Okay. Maybe we can start with some fingering or rimming and go from there,” I suggest.

“Rimming?” Travis asks, his eyebrow going up again.

“Let’s finish showering,” I change the subject. With how Travis has been distracting me the past few minutes, I’m not sure I want to get into details right now. If we get any further distracted tonight, we might need another shower. Travis doesn’t say anything, but we make quick work of washing off the soap on our bodies. “I’ll meet you in your room in a few minutes,” I say as I’m drying off. “I just need to grab something to sleep in.” I place a quick kiss on his lips and wrap the towel around my waist as I leave.

Once I’m alone in my room again, I go straight for my dresser, ignoring the mess of my bed. I grab a pair of briefs and slip them on along with a T-shirt, but don’t bother with pants. It’s still warm enough that I don’t even really want to bother with the shirt, but we’ve already taken a big step tonight. As it is, I have to figure out how to explain rimming.

Travis is already in his room and wearing boxers when I walk in. Unlike me, he isn’t wearing a shirt, leaving his wet abs on display. “Did you have something in mind you wanted to watch?” he asks, grabbing the remote from his nightstand to turn on the TV mounted on the wall.

“I don’t really care,” I shrug. I make my way across the room and get on his bed, pulling the blanket over me and settling in. Travis turns off the light and joins me in his bed, pulling me to him. He starts the show, but my eyes are already drooping. I know it won’t be long before I’m falling asleep.

“You know, I’m really glad you offered to be my date for Alyssa’s wedding,” he whispers softly, while stroking my hair.

“Even if you only meant for it to be for show at first. I don’t think it was ever really fake.”

Thirty

Travis

I PULL THE SKEWER stick from the water it's soaking in and poke it through the chunks of marinated chicken. Then bell peppers, zucchini, and onion. I repeat the pattern without overthinking it as I load up the wooden sticks. It gives me a chance to think about other things, like my date tonight with Elliot. They're at school right now, but my day at work was light. It made it easier for me to call it a day early and head home to get everything set up for tonight. It's nice weather outside, so I figured I'd get a few things ready for the BBQ and cook outside. I should have time to get the skewers loaded up, and the pasta salad made before Elliot gets home. There might even be time to make brownies and get them in the oven for dessert.

I don't know how everything will play out tonight, but I got the hot tub clean and ready just in case. With the last of the skewers finished, I place it in the tupperware container with the others. It goes into the fridge, and I wash my hands before changing tasks to make the pasta salad. I chop up the pieces of

bell pepper leftover and the onion, dumping it in a pan along with diced tomatoes and black beans while cooking the pasta. It's a taco inspired pasta salad that uses a lot of similar flavors to the skewers.

The door bangs shut as I'm putting the final touches on the salad. "Hey, smells good," Elliot calls as they enter the house. I turn to look as they walk into the kitchen. "Do I have time to switch clothes before everything is ready?" they ask.

"Yeah, there's no rush. I was getting everything ready, but I still need to cook the skewers. I was just about to get dessert started, then head outside and get the BBQ set up."

"Skewers, and ..." Elliot looks at the bowl I've got on the counter. "Pasta salad. What's for dessert?"

"I was planning on making brownies, but there's also some fresh fruit if you want something lighter."

"Brownies sound great. I can help make them. Just give me a couple minutes and I'll be right back." Elliot leans up onto their tiptoes to press a quick kiss to my cheek. I can't fight the smile on my face as they walk to their room. I put the pasta salad in the fridge and grab out the box of brownie mix from the cabinet. A glance at the back tells me which ingredients to grab. I open a cabinet and pull out a baking dish and a mixing bowl while I'm at it.

"You made all of dinner from scratch, but brownies come from a box?" Elliot teases as they walk into the room again. They've changed into a pair of tiny jean shorts that barely cover their ass and a snug tank top. They didn't bother with

makeup, but from the shine on their lips they must have put on some lip gloss.

“I like cooking. Baking is something else.” I shrug. Elliot takes a step closer, but before I get a chance to kiss them, they grab the brownie mix.

“Lucky for you, I like baking. Come on, we’ll make this for tonight. Next time I’ll make dessert.” Elliot opens the box, pulling out the bag inside. “Do you have baking spray or something to grease the tray?” they ask.

“No. I’ve got vegetable oil,” I say, grabbing it from the cabinet along with a paper napkin. I pour a small amount on the napkin and grease the tray as Elliot cracks eggs into the bowl. “What’s the oven temp?”

“Four hundred.” They mix the batter with a wooden spoon, while I preheat the oven. With Elliot helping get the brownies ready and in the oven, it only takes a few minutes. “There,” Elliot says as they place the dish in the oven. “I’ll set a timer on my phone. That way we can hear it while we’re outside.”

“Good idea.” I grab the skewers out of the fridge, and Mittens barks, getting up from where she was sleeping on the floor. “There’s lemonade or beer in the fridge,” I offer.

Elliot opens it, grabbing the pitcher out along with a couple of cups. “Lemonade sounds good.”

“Come on, girl.” I call Mittens. Elliot opens the door to the backyard, and Mittens and I follow them outside. There’s a table set up near the grill that I set the container of skewers on.

I turn the gas on and light the burners, turning the knobs to get everything to temperature.

Elliot sets the pitcher on the patio table and sets up the cups to fill them up. They take both cups, bringing one over to me. “This is nice. Are we eating out here once everything is done, or?”

“We could stay outside. The weather is nice,” I answer. Elliot grabs a tennis ball from the grass, calling Mittens over to them. All of this is almost too comfortable, watching Elliot play with my dog while I cook dinner. It’s what I was missing in this big house before Elliot moved in. I wasn’t looking for a roommate as much as someone to share time with. I wanted to be a part of something. Being with Elliot might not be exactly what I’d had in mind, but maybe I was too focused on the fantasy in my head. I didn’t know it just needed some tweaks and reimagining.

Elliot’s arms wrap around my waist as they hug me from behind. “What has you thinking so hard?” they ask.

“Nothing, I’m glad we stayed here. It feels like less pressure. We’re just hanging out at home like we usually do.”

Elliot presses a kiss to my neck. “Yeah, I like it too. This whole living together as we date has been awkward at times, but it’s kinda fun too. We get to sneak a few minutes together here and there, even when we’re busy.” Their hand trails over my side, toying with the belt loop on my jeans, and my dick twitches. I close the lid of the grill, turning the heat down to give the meat time to cook. Then I turn towards Elliot.

They keep their arms around me as I turn around, anchored to my waist. I raise a hand to Elliot's cheek and push back their hair, letting my fingers trail through it. I lean closer, but Elliot closes the distance and presses their lips to mine. The tartness of the lemonade hits my tongue as we kiss. Elliot hooks their thumbs into my belt loops, pulling my hips closer, until we're firmly pressed against each other. My cock swells again, and I instinctively take a step back. My foot hits the grill, and I break the kiss. "We should move. This isn't the best place."

Elliot releases their hold on my belt loops and glances around me at the grill. "Sorry, you're right. We don't need you to end up getting burned or something. It's probably better if we don't get too carried away while cooking."

"How are things with your sister?" I change the subject. I haven't gotten any new calls from Alyssa, so Elliot must be talking to their sister now.

"We were never that close, but Cece wants to get to know me. She knows about my blog and everything now and she's being open-minded." Elliot talks slowly, grabbing their cup and taking a sip of lemonade. "It's ... a little awkward."

The conversation stays on easier topics as I finish cooking. Elliot grabs the pasta salad from the fridge, and we get everything set up on the table outside. When I take a seat, Elliot sits next to me, their thigh pressing against mine. I didn't pay too much attention to the clothes Elliot changed out of earlier, but I know they weren't wearing those tiny, cut-off jean shorts to school. With how they're sitting, the material

nearly disappears in the crease of their inner thigh, baring all of Elliot's legs. And I need to spend less time looking at Elliot's legs and more time focusing on our date.

"How are classes?" I ask.

"Are we really gonna stick to all these getting-to-know-you questions?" Elliot asks with a smirk.

"Sorry, I'm just a little nervous." I grab my cup and take a sip of lemonade.

Elliot places their hand on my thigh. "Relax, the whole point of doing this here is we don't have to deal with the normal pressure of dating. I know this is all backwards. We live together and we went to your sister's wedding together. We've already seen each other naked. This is our third date, and I have it on good authority you're likely to get lucky tonight as long as you play your cards right." Elliot's eyes sweep over me as they check me out, and when our eyes meet, they wink.

"Okay, fair enough," I chuckle. "Do you have any ideas for something to talk about? What are your plans for after school when you graduate?"

Elliot fidgets beside me, delaying their answer by taking a bite of pasta. "This is really good," they say.

"Elli," I say their name softly, and Elliot squeezes my leg.

"I like it when you call me that," they say. Our eyes meet, but I'm still waiting for an answer to my earlier question. "I don't know yet. Cece asked if I'll move back there, but ..." Their fingers trail over my jeans towards my side as Elliot turns to

better face me. “I like where this is going. I don’t want to leave.”

“You don’t have to. You can keep working at the café until you find something better. If money is an issue, we’ll figure it out,” I tell them. Elliot’s graduation date feels miles away, but I’m sure it’ll be here before we know it.

“That’s sweet, but can we talk about that later? There’s plenty of time to figure all of that out. Did you want to watch a show after we finish eating or should we skip straight to the hot tub?” Elliot changes the subject, looking across the yard to the jacuzzi.

I know Elliot is avoiding the deeper subject, but with how they keep running their hand over my thigh, my dick is only getting harder. I’m tempted to finish the eating portion of the date and move onto a more enjoyable portion. “Hot tub sounds good,” I agree.

“Great, because I’m finished.” Elliot stands up from the table and walks over to the hot tub. They pull off their tank top and kick off their shoes. Then they unbutton their shorts.

“Did you want to go change—” I cut myself off when Elliot pushes down their shorts, revealing a lacy pair of underwear that frames their ass.

“Nope,” Elliot looks at me over their shoulder. “Join me?”

I pull off my shirt in a hurry. It only takes me a few seconds to strip down to my boxers and walk over to where Elliot is already sitting in the hot water. “How’s the water?”

Elliot runs their fingers through the surface then looks up at me. “Travis, get in.” I lower myself into the water and take a seat next to Elliot. Their hand cups my cheek. The wet warmth heats my face, but Elliot doesn’t move to kiss me just yet. “I’m going to say this now, before we get too carried away. I need you to trust me. Don’t overthink this and worry about pushing me too far. I want to take care of you and get you off. I want you to touch me. I’ll tell you if I want to stop.” As Elliot finishes talking, they press their lips to mine.

The kiss is hot and heavy right from the start. Elliot pushes up on their knees to get closer, then they’re straddling me. Elliot’s lace covered crotch presses right against my boxers, and the thin material between us doesn’t hide either of our erections. They roll their hips into mine, and I bite back a moan. Our lips part and Elliot’s hand slides down my chest, dipping under the water.

They push down my boxers, pulling out my cock with a firm grasp. Elliot strokes me in a steady rhythm while they kiss down my neck to my chest. The tip of my dick rubs against Elliot’s lacy panties and my balls tighten. I slide my hands down Elliot’s back and grab their ass, pulling them closer. My hips thrust instinctively, and I fuck into the tight grip of Elliot’s hand. All of this is going so fast. I’m close to coming already, but I’m not ready for it to be over.

“Wait, can we take this inside? I want to blow you,” I blurt out. Elliot pulls back to look at me, their lips parted and swollen from kissing. The thought has been on my mind for a

while. Probably since Elliot first sucked me off in the hotel, if I'm honest.

“My room is closer,” they say. Elliot lifts their hips, tucking my dick away into my boxers again. They stand up, stepping out of the hot tub. Elliot looks at me, waiting for me to follow them. “Let's go.”

I stand up, making my way to the house behind Elliot. Mittens trails us into the house until we get to Elliot's door. They open it, pushing Mittens back gently to keep her from coming into the room as well. Neither of us bothered to dry off, so when I run my hands down Elliot's sides, their body feels wet and slick. Their lacy underwear is darker and sagging now, threatening to fall off Elliot's hips. Or they would fall if it wasn't for the tent in the front where Elliot's cock sticks out. My hands come to rest on their hips, tracing the lace.

“You sure you want to—” Elliot stops talking as I drop to my knees.

“I want to.”

Thirty-One

Elliot

TRAVIS PULLS MY UNDERWEAR down, leaving me naked in front of him. He doesn't hesitate as he wraps his hand around my erection and looks up at me, meeting my eyes as he leans closer. His lips part as he licks the tip of my dick, his tongue sliding barely into my slit. *Fuck*, I bite back a moan. Travis opens his mouth wider, taking the head of my erection into his lips. I honestly can't remember the last time I was on the receiving end of a blow job, but this doesn't compare at all to past experiences. Travis is all in, focused on my face and my pleasure. Watching for each moan or twitch as I fight the urge to thrust into his mouth. Despite how close he was to getting off earlier, he keeps his underwear on, not even attempting to touch himself.

Travis grabs my ass, using that grip to control the rhythm as he bobs on my dick. My knees buckle, and I fight it, doing my best to stay standing. Travis pulls off, licking his lower lip. "Get on the bed," he tells me.

I lie down on my back, not caring that my hair is still wet and now dripping onto my pillow. Travis pulls open the nightstand drawer and grabs out the bottle of lube along with the tentacle dildo, holding it out as he looks at me. “Can I use this on you? I’ve been thinking about it since the other day.”

“You can use it,” I reply automatically. I want Travis to explore and touch me. To get me off however he wants. “You just have to finger me first and get me ready.”

He climbs onto the bed on his knees, moving between my legs. It’s not the first time he’s fingered me, but this feels different even if the dick he’s preparing me for is a silicone tentacle rather than his cock. Travis’s fingers are slick with lube as he breaches my hole, and I bear down to make it easier. I press up on my elbows to kiss Travis. It distracts both of us for a moment as I adjust, but I barely get a moment before his finger is thrusting into me. “More, add another finger. Focus on stretching me, not getting me off. I want to come with the toy in me, not on your fingers.”

“Fuck, if you keep talking that way, I’m going to come before you get a chance,” Travis says. His fingers twist and separate inside of me, opening me wider.

“I’m good. Lube up the toy.” I’m jumping the gun, but the toy has a smaller tip. My body will adjust as he works it into me.

Travis grabs the lube, slicking his hand instead of the dildo. He lifts the base of the tentacle in his other hand as he strokes it with the lube to get it slick. His hand slows as one of the tiny suction cup nubs sticks to his hand, only to pop off with an

audible pop. Travis looks at me and I bite my lip, waiting for his reaction. “I think I’m starting to understand why you like this toy,” he says. He places the tip against my hole and pushes in.

The burn of being stretched is barely noticeable over the sensation of the nubs rubbing along my inner walls. When the movement stops, I look at Travis, but his eyes are focused on my hole. “Damn,” he mutters under his breath.

It only takes a moment for my body to adjust to the intrusion, but my dick is achingly hard. “Move, please. I need you to fuck me.”

Travis leans over me, pressing a quick kiss to my lips. Then he sits back on his knees, getting a better grip on the dildo. The first thrust into me has me biting my lip. Travis slowly works a few inches in and out of me with shallow thrusts. “Damn, that feels good.” I moan.

A wet heat engulfs my dick. With a glance down, I see Travis’s head at my crotch again. *Holy shit*, that feels good. The dual sensations of the dildo and Travis’s tongue sweeping around the tip of my dick have me hurtling towards my orgasm. “I’m close,” I warn him.

Travis’s eyes open, and he looks up, meeting my gaze. He thrusts the tentacle in, and a nub hits my prostate just right. My balls tighten, and next thing I know, I’m coming. Travis doesn’t pull off. He sucks me through my release. When the last tremor finishes, I push up on my elbows again. Travis lifts

off me, releasing my dick while pulling out the toy. Then his hand goes to his underwear, pulling out his cock.

“Wait,” I protest. “I wanna get you off. Lay back.” I sit up and press my lips to his. I can taste the salty aftertaste of my cum on his lips. When we pull apart, we switch positions, Travis lying back on the bed and watching me. I run my hands up his outer thighs until I hit the wet fabric of his boxers. “Let’s get these off,” I tell him. He lifts his hips, helping me strip him so we’re both naked. “Tell me what you want.”

He looks at the dildo that now rests on the bed instead of looking at me. “You know, you never did tell me what *rimming* is.”

“You want me to show you?” I ask. My hand moves along his inner thigh this time, but Travis’s legs aren’t spread wide enough for me to get anywhere near his hole. I’m not sure what answer I’m hoping for. It’s not like I’ve done this before.

He looks at me as he licks his lower lip. His knees lift as he spreads his thighs wider, planting his feet flat on the bed to give me better access. “Sure,” Travis says. “Why not?”

I nod, trying to keep my nerves from being obvious as I lean down, getting closer to Travis’s dick. It’d probably be easier to rim him if he flipped over on his stomach. I wrap my lips around the head of his erection instead. My hand goes to the bottom of Travis’s thigh, pushing his leg higher up to change the position, and when I pull off, I have a better view of what I’m working with. I pepper kisses down Travis’s length to his balls, then lower. I lick his opening, running the flat of my

tongue over his hole. Travis tenses, his body tightening up. “Relax,” I say.

“Sorry,” Travis chuckles. “Just a little surprised. You can keep going.”

I place a kiss right on his hole, licking at the rim. This time Travis relaxes, and I’m able to push my tongue deeper.

“Crap,” he groans. Travis’s hand goes to his dick, grabbing it hard at the base. His hips shake as I work him over and his hole softens. With each thrust of my tongue, I feel Travis relax, letting me further in. A stream of pre-cum leaks out the tip of his dick, but Travis still keeps his hand where it is.

I pull back. “Touch yourself,” I tell him. “I want to see you come.” His hand moves slowly, stroking his erection from root to tip. I press another kiss to his puckered skin and go back to what I was doing. His hand trembles as Travis moans. He cusses under his breath again as he picks up speed. I do my best to match it, spearing my tongue in and out.

“So close, I just need ...” Travis trails off.

I slide my finger in my mouth, getting it as wet as I can with spit before I press it into him. When my digit hits his prostate, Travis comes. His release leaves a sticky trail over his abs. I pull back, removing my finger. “So, uh, what do you think?” I ask.

“Get over here,” he pats the bed next to him. I move around until we’re lying side by side, and Travis wraps his arm around

me. “It was ... different. It felt good.” His hand trails up and down my back. “How was it for you?”

“I’ve never done that before,” I admit.

“Which one?” Travis asks.

“Both, I got that toy after my last boyfriend broke up with me. You’re the only guy to use it on me. And I’ve been rimmed before, but that was my first time being on the other side of it.” I lift my hand to run my fingers through Travis’s hair.

“Do you wanna clean up and we can have dessert? We still have the brownies.”

“I think that was dessert,” I joke. “But brownies sound good too.”

Travis gets up, disappearing into the hall for a few minutes before he comes back with a wet washcloth. He already wiped his abs clean. Instead of handing the cloth to me, Travis leans in, wiping the excess lube from between my legs. It’s a little weird, but I don’t mind it.

I grab a fresh pair of underwear, a regular pair of briefs this time. That along with a pair of pj pants. Travis slips into his own room, and when he enters the living room, he’s wearing a new pair of boxers. Travis pulls the brownies out and grabs a knife to slice them. We take a seat on the couch, and I scoot closer until I’m curled into his side. “Elli,” Travis says his nickname for me, and I turn to look at him. For a moment, neither of us speaks. “Will you sleep with me? I mean, in my bed with me. Not—”

“I’d love to,” I cut him off.



“CAMEL BLENDED COFFEE FOR Robin,” I call out. Flynn took the order, and I didn’t see the customer. I don’t have a mental picture to match with the name. No one makes a move towards the counter. “Robin,” I say again, a little louder this time. A few customers sit around the café, but most of them already have their drinks. My eyes land on a customer seated at a table with his laptop open as he types away. He doesn’t have a drink or any food next to him. “Flynn,” I call over to him. “Is that the customer that ordered the caramel iced coffee?” I gesture at the man on the laptop.

Flynn looks across the room where I’m pointing. “Yeah, that’s him.”

I grab the drink off the counter and make my way over to the table. As I get closer, I notice the customer is wearing earbuds. No wonder he didn’t hear me. I tap his shoulder to get his attention. “Excuse me, are you Robin?”

He turns around, blinking at me in surprise as his hand knocks the drink right out of my grip. “Shit,” I cuss on instinct as the drink spills on the stack of books next to his laptop. “I’m so sorry,” I say as I grab the cup again. I pull napkins from the holder on the table, wiping at the mess.

“No, it was my fault.” The man picks up his laptop, setting it on a chair next to the table before he grabs napkins, wiping the

books clean along with me. We work together to clean up the spill, relocating each of the books to a clean chair.

“I’ll make you another drink,” I tell him. “You are Robin, right?” I just realized I never got his name.

“Yes, that’s me.” Robin sets his laptop down on the now dry table.

“Let me clean that first. You don’t want to get everything sticky,” I offer.

“Right, of course.” He grabs one of his books, flipping through the pages as he looks it over.

I make quick work of grabbing the cleaning cloth and spray, to finish cleaning the mess. When I’m at the table wiping up the sticky residue of the spill, my eyes glance over at the stack of books. All of them have the same author name ... and I’ve read them before. “I love that series,” I blurt out. “I can’t wait for the next book.”

“Thank you. It’s always fun meeting a fan,” Robin sighs, leafing through the book in his hand again. “Tell me, are you rooting for Arthur to get with Lance or Wynn?”

“Is both an option?” I joke, but then the first part of what he said clicks. “Wait, you’re the author? You’re R. D. Ashwood?”

“Call me Robin, please. But yes, I wrote the books. I never thought a gay retelling of Arthur in Camelot would take off the way it did. It’s been a fun distraction from my regular day to day, but it’s more work than I thought it’d be.” He sets the top book down again, lying it on top of the stack.

“You really wrote all those books?” I ask. The series already has two main books as well as a couple of short spin-offs.

“I did, but this book ...” he trails off, looking at the open word document on his laptop. “There’s so much pressure.”

It almost seems like he’s talking to himself more than to me, but I’m tempted to read the words there and get a sneak peek. I pull my eyes away to look at Robin again. “I’ll get you another drink.” I head behind the counter again to make a new drink, but my mind is still firmly on Robin. I can’t believe it’s actually him. Who would’ve guessed that he’d even live close enough to come to the café? And why come here in the first place when most of the customers are college students?

More thoughts and questions cloud my head as I make the drink. This time when I walk to the table, Robin looks up at me before I get too close. “Thank you for that,” he says, taking the drink from my hand.

As I look him over more objectively, I realize he can’t be that much older than me. In fact, he’s probably younger than Travis. “Can I ask a question? How did you get into writing?” I say not waiting for permission.

I love books, but Robin doesn’t quite fit the image in my head of an author. He looks more like a student I’d run into on campus.

Robin takes a sip of his drink as he thinks over his answer. “It started as just something fun to do between classes in high school. I majored in English in college, figuring I’d go into teaching. Then one of my friends read my manuscript. He

encouraged me to look into self-publishing.” He shrugs at the end of his words, looking down at his laptop.

“Self-publishing? You do it all yourself? You don’t have a publisher?” I ask. I know that’s a thing, but I don’t know much about it.

“Well, I don’t do all of it. I still pay a cover designer to make the covers, and I have to get the books edited.” Robin looks me over like he’s just now seeing me. “You look a little young to be ... are you a college student?” he asks.

“Yeah, I’m a senior. I’m an English major too, but I don’t really want to go into teaching,” I admit. I still don’t know what I want to do.

“There are other options. You could look into editing.” Robin veers off again, “I mean if you like reading, it’s something to consider.”

It’s not a bad idea. I don’t know enough to really consider it, but maybe he’s onto something. “Thanks, I’ll think about it.”

Thirty-Two

Travis

ELLIOT IS SITTING ON the couch when I walk in, a thick book in their lap that looks like it might be a textbook. “Hey,” they look up for a moment as the door shuts. “Welcome home.”

I walk closer and lean over the couch to give Elliot a quick kiss. “Is that for school?” I ask.

“Not exactly,” Elliot says, closing the book to give me a glance at the cover. *Intuitive Editing*, the title says. “I had an interesting conversation with a customer at work a few days ago. He graduated a few years ago with a degree in English and went into teaching, but he also writes on the side. He self publishes books, and we got to talking about that.”

“You want to get into writing books?” I guess.

“No, not writing them. Editing,” Elliot taps the book again. “I thought it might be fun, and it gives me a chance to read books all the time. I don’t know,” Elliot backpedals. “Maybe it’s just a pipe dream.”

“Don’t do that.” I take a seat next to them on the couch. “Don’t give up before you’ve even tried. I think you’d be a great editor. You’re always reading, and it’s something you enjoy. Don’t worry so much about the logistics of finding a job or the right company. If you love the job, you’ll figure it out and clearly this is something that interests you.” I place my hand on Elliot’s thigh, and they place their hand on top of mine.

“Why didn’t you get into cooking? For a job, I mean. Clearly that’s something you love.” Elliot’s thumb traces over my skin.

“I do love it, and I thought about going to school to learn more, but I didn’t think my dad would approve. In a way I’m glad things worked out the way they did. I love working construction too, and I still get to cook at home. It’s something I do for me. I don’t know if I’d still love it as much if I was doing it as job.”

We stay like that for a moment, just looking into each other’s eyes and not talking. “I should clean up. Have you eaten dinner yet?” I ask. Work ran a little later than expected today, and I’m starving.

“Not yet. I was going to wait until you got back. I didn’t realize how late it got to be,” they say sheepishly.

“We could order something,” I offer. “We could probably have food here by the time I finish my shower. What sounds good?”

“Tacos? There’s a taqueria nearby that delivers.” Elliot trails a finger over the back of my hand as they look at me, meeting my gaze.

“Sure, that sounds good. You want to order? Just let me know the total and I’ll cover half.” I stand up from my spot and kiss Elliot again, taking the opportunity to slide my tongue into their mouth for a deeper kiss. “Be back soon.” I tell them before I head towards the hall to get what I need to shower.

Lately Elliot has slept in my bed with me more often than not. We haven’t talked about it, but each night I’m sure they will go back to their own room. Then Elliot walks right in and curls up at my side. Having them next to me each night is intimate, and I’m quickly becoming addicted to waking up with their warm body curled into me.

For everything we’ve been through, some of it almost seems fast, but it feels right. Part of me wishes I’d asked Elliot to be my date for real to the wedding, rather than the way we started. Regardless of how we got here, one thing has been nagging at me. Elliot just fits into my life. Like the puzzle piece I didn’t know was missing. I’m falling head over heels for them, and I don’t want Elliot to leave after they graduate.

I finish up with my shower and dry off, wrapping my towel around my waist before I head back to my room for a change of clothes. The doorbell rings as I’m getting a pair of sweats from the dresser. I can hear Elliot in the other room talking to the delivery person, then the snap of the door as it closes. Elliot’s head pops in the door frame a moment later as I’m pulling on my pants. They open their mouth for a moment before smirking and giving me a once over. “Um, food’s here,” Elliot says.

I walk over to them and wrap my arm around Elliot's shoulders, pulling them closer to me. "We better get to it then. Come on." I lead Elliot to the living room, where they left the food on the coffee table. "You want a beer with dinner?" I ask. "I'm good," Elliot says, pulling away from me. When I get to the fridge, I pull out a couple of bottled waters instead. "I don't mind if you drink if you want a beer," they tell me as I sit down next to them.

"It's not that." I fiddle with the label on the water bottle, pulling it with my thumbnail. I offered to get Elliot a beer, so I'd have an excuse to drink one, but now it seems like it might mean more if I can bring up the topic sober. "I wanted to say something."

"Something you thought required liquid courage?" One of Elliot's eyebrows goes up with the question as they pull out a Styrofoam container from the bag.

"Yeah, kinda. I, uh, I—"

"I love you too," Elliot says at the same time that I finish my sentence.

"—I want you to move into my room."

Their cheeks go red, and Elliot covers their mouth. "Sorry, I thought you were gonna say something else."

I place my hand on Elliot's cheek, lifting their chin so I can look them in the eyes. "Hey, don't be sorry. I love you too. It's been on my mind for a while now, but I didn't want to say it and take the risk of scaring you off." I lean in and place a kiss

on Elliot's cheek. Part of me is almost glad they interrupted and misunderstood. It makes this easier.

"Let me try this again. Elliot, I love you." I kiss their other cheek. "And I really want you to move into my room with me." I place a quick peck on Elliot's lips. "I want you in my bed every night. I want to wake up with you in my arms. I know it might be a bit fast, but—" Elliot cuts me off with a kiss. They don't give me a chance to pull away as their arms go around my neck, holding me in place. Elliot slides their tongue in my mouth, teasing me with a sensual deep kiss.

"Yes. I want that too. I don't want to go back to sleeping alone." Elliot places their hand on my thigh, squeezing gently.

My dick twitches, chubbing my pants, but I ignore it. "Glad we got that settled. We should probably eat this food while it's still warm." I grab the other container, opening it up and when the scent of carne asada hits my nose, my mouth waters. "Damn, this smells delicious." I take a bite and savor the flavors of the fresh onions and tomatoes on top. "Mmm," I groan and Elliot laughs. "What?" I ask.

"Nothing. It's just funny how you make the same sounds when you're eating as you do when you're ... uh," Elliot trails off, but I get the point.

"It's good," I protest, taking another bite of my taco.

"It is. I just don't know if it's *that* good," Elliot teases.

"Mmn," I groan again as I chew, overemphasizing the sound.

"I don't know, it tastes soo *good*."

“Oh? Do you want to get a room with your taco?” Elliot asks with a chuckle.

“No,” I drop the teasing and kiss Elliot’s cheek again. “I’m right where I want to be.”

“You’re sweet,” Elliot says, turning their attention to the TV. We eat the rest of our food in silence, but after we’ve finished, Elliot scoots closer and curls into my side. I wrap my arm around their shoulders and settle deeper into the couch. I can’t believe that conversation went as well as it did.

When Elliot yawns, drifting off while leaning on my shoulder, I tighten my grip on them. “Come on, let’s get you to bed,” I say. We stand up from the couch, and I clean up the trash, putting the leftovers in the fridge. I take Mittens out one last time, and Elliot disappears down the hall. When I get to my room, I find them lying down in my bed. Elliot is face down, looking at their phone with the blanket covering them from the waist down. From the shirt and pants that are now on my floor, I’m guessing they still have underwear on, but I’m not entirely sure. “Can I turn off the light?” I ask. “Or do you need to finish your chapter?”

Elliot looks over their shoulder at me. “Can you give me a few minutes?” they ask.

“Sure,” I walk over to the bed and turn on the lamp on my nightstand for Elliot before walking over to the light switch again. Once I turn out the light, I push my sweats down, leaving me in just my underwear, too. Elliot doesn’t move as I crawl into bed beside them, keeping their focus on the book on

their phone. "I talked to Derek," I say once Elliot sets their phone on the nightstand.

"Really? When?"

"At work earlier, we had lunch. It's weird, but I don't know, it wasn't bad. We're working on being friends again."

"That's good. I'm glad you're trying to work it out."

"I've been thinking," I say. "It's not just you. I mean, my attraction to you is more about who you are than what parts you have. If Derek had said something earlier, maybe I would've considered it. Maybe I've always been kinda bi or maybe pansexual, but it took being with you for me to really realize it." I still haven't fully put a label on it, but I've been looking into it more, doing research online.

Elliot doesn't say anything right away. They turn off the lamp and move closer, lacing their fingers in mine. "Either way, I'm glad to help," they say.

"We should get some sleep. You have school in the morning, and I have work," I change the subject.

"You don't want to take care of that first?" Elliot asks, deliberately moving their hand to trace the shape of my hard dick through the material of my boxers.

"Are you offering?" I ask.

"I just noticed you've been hard for the last thirty minutes or so. If you want help, sure, but I'm not really in the mood to be touched like that tonight."

I place a quick kiss on Elliot's cheek. "Okay. That's fine. Do you care if I just take care of myself? You're free to watch and touch if you want." I push the blankets down to give Elliot a better view before I pull out my dick. Their eyes are on me, but Elliot just stays curled into my side kissing my chest as I take care of myself.



I WAKE UP TO the smell of coffee brewing from somewhere in the house. Elliot must already be awake because their side of the bed is empty and cold. When I walk into the kitchen, it's easy to find them. Elliot is standing at the counter mixing up their coffee and wearing one of my shirts. It's so long on them it completely covers their underwear and almost looks like a dress. "Good morning," I say, coming up behind Elliot and wrapping my arms around their waist.

"Morning, hope you don't mind that I borrowed a shirt. Mittens needed to go out when I woke up, and it was easier." Elliot shrugs.

I press a soft kiss to their neck. "I don't mind. It looks cute. I like it. And it's kinda hot to see you in my clothes." I like how my shirt engulfs them. "Why don't you ever wear dresses? Or skirts? I've seen you wear leggings and blouses, but never those."

Elliot shrugs. "I don't know. Sometimes I want to, but it's almost like crossing another line. Even just wearing one in

private, I'm not sure how I feel about it. I might want to at some point."

"It's up to you," I say. "But I think you'd look good in just about anything." I grab my coffee cup, letting Elliot go so I can fill it up.

"See, that's why I love you," Elliot says. "You're so sweet, and you care more about supporting me than being able to just tell me you think it'd be hot. I'll think about it."

"I do think you'd look hot," I admit. "I'd love to see you in a dress with something lacy underneath. But I'd be just as happy with you wearing jeans and T-shirt and a pair of briefs."

"How about just a jockstrap?" Elliot waggles their eyebrows but then laughs, unable to keep their serious expression.

"That works too. I meant it when I said you'd look good either way. I just want you, just as you are."

Epilogue

Elliot

Five Months Later

“WHEN IS FLYNN GETTING here?” Stella complains from where she’s mixing up a drink for an order.

“He’s not scheduled for another hour. You know that. Besides, I’m sure he wants to spend time with his boyfriend, too. It is Valentine’s Day.” I grab a pastry from the case and place it on the counter as Stella finishes what she’s doing.

“I know,” Stella sighs. “You got plans with your boyfriend?”

“We’re going out to dinner,” I answer, but another customer steps up to the counter. We’ve been busy most of the morning.

“Welcome to Wired and Tired. What can I get you?” I ask.

The guy in front of me looks somewhat familiar. I’m sure he’s been here before, but I can’t place his name. “Yeah, can I get a mocha latte and a hot chocolate? Throw in a couple of those red velvet cake pops, too.”

“Can I get a name for the order?” I ring up the total.

“Sure, it’s Seth.” He slides his card into the reader.

Then another guy walks up to the register, cutting in front of the line. “You left,” he tells Seth.

“If you want to order, you need to wait your turn,” I say.

“No. He’s with me,” Seth tells me before he turns to the other guy. “I didn’t leave. I was getting us coffee. Well, getting me coffee, I got you hot chocolate. Come on.” He wraps his arm around the other guy’s shoulder, leading him away as Stella steps up to the register, taking the cups I just wrote on.

“Is that?” she says, looking at the same couple. Then she looks at the cup. “Seth? Seth and Tyler?” she laughs.

“What?” I ask. I knew Seth looked familiar, but I can’t place how I know them, unlike Stella.

“Seth Miller and Tyler Avery. They’re on the soccer team with Caleb and Hayden. I didn’t know they were dating, though. I swear that team just keeps getting gayer,” she says with a laugh, shaking her head as she heads to make the drinks. Well, at least that explains why I recognize them. Aiden has dragged me to a few soccer games, and it’s not unusual to see the players at the café, either.

“Whatever,” I say. “Come on, we need to get these orders out.” I get back to work, but when Stella calls out Seth’s name, I look instinctively over to where they were sitting. Seth has his hand on Tyler’s thigh as they talk, before Seth gets up to grab the food and drinks. He hands Tyler a cup but keeps a hold on

the cake pops, saying something to Tyler as he holds the bag out of his reach. Then Tyler kisses him.

I look away, getting back to work. It's none of my business who's dating who, and on a holiday like this it's almost impossible to look around the café without seeing a couple kiss. I'm eager to get out of here to Travis, and I get why Stella is in a hurry, too. It's my first Valentine's with Travis, and he didn't see what I was wearing before I left the house this morning.

I glance down at my clothes. The red skirt peeks out on the sides of my apron, and my leggings are visible from my knees down. The white fabric is covered in hearts colored red and pink. Normally all the colors would be against our work dress code, but we're allowed to dress up a bit on holidays. Along with the skirt, I'm wearing a snug white T-shirt that has a large rainbow heart on the front. It's not visible under my apron, but I've added a few pins to the straps along with my name tag. There's a rainbow flag, a they/them pronoun pin with stripes for the nonbinary flag colors, and a pin with the asexual colors. I changed the pronouns on my name tag a few months back, but it's nice having the pins too. Stella followed suit, adding a trans pin to her apron, and Flynn even has a pansexual one on his.

Speaking of Flynn, he walks in the door with his boyfriend Nick at his side. I glance at the clock, unsure how an hour has passed already, but it's all been a blur of making drinks and taking orders. The pair walk towards the counter and Nick

gives his boyfriend a quick kiss before he looks at me. “Cute outfit,” he says.

“Thanks. Do you have work today?” I ask, but it doesn’t look like Nick is dressed up to go to work.

“No, but I have a class to get to.” He turns to his boyfriend and gives him a hug. “I’ll see you soon.” They got together a few months ago around Christmas and it’s been almost funny watching Flynn come out of his grumpy shell and interact more.

“Your boyfriend’s here,” Stella tells me as she leans closer to peer over the counter.

Sure enough, I turn my attention to the door and there’s Travis walking into the café with a bouquet of flowers. I can’t completely tell from here, but it looks like a mixture of pink and red. “You brought me flowers?” I ask when he walks up to the counter.

“Aww,” Stella croons sarcastically, and I smack her shoulder.

I clock out, leaving Stella with Flynn for the rest of her shift. Then I take off my apron, hang it up before grabbing my bag and walk over to where Travis is waiting for me. He looks me over, getting a full view of my outfit before he leans in to kiss me. “You look adorable. Happy Valentine’s.” He hands me the bouquet and I get a better look at it now, noticing a few sprigs of white baby’s breath mixed in with the pink and red flowers. “Come on, do you need to head home to drop off your stuff before we go to dinner?”

Even though we've been living together longer than we've been dating, moments like this still hit me hard when Travis says the word home. It's almost surreal to think that even after I finish college in a few months, I'll still be living with him. We even turned the second bedroom into a shared office, with more bookcases and a desk for each of us. It really has become a home, and I'm lucky to share it with such a wonderful boyfriend. "Thank you," I tell him as I look at my flowers. "They're beautiful."

"Not as beautiful as you," he says back.

Fin

Afterword

I hope you enjoyed Elliot and Travis's story. This book took a lot of time and edits to get to where it is now. Elliot was a difficult character for me to write, probably because they're so much like me. I wanted to write them as nonbinary and asexual in a way that felt similar to how I express myself. Book 5 of Blue Mountain University will be Seth and Tyler, soccer teammates, semi-friendly rivals, and some bi-awakening. Look for it next year in 2024.

If you haven't already check out the rest of the series.

Other books by A.E. Madsen

Duplicity Blue Mountain University 1

<http://mybook.to/DuplicityBMU1>

When Daniel's friend sets him up on a date, he accidentally runs into Ian instead of his twin, Aiden. Things get muddled when Ian realizes Daniel's mistake but has also started to develop feelings for him. Ian needs to figure out how to explain he's not who Daniel thinks he is and how to come out

of the closet as bisexual. Meanwhile Daniel has his own troubles, he's on the outs with his family after an ex spread some rumors.

Faux Beau Blue Mountain University 2

<http://mybook.to/FauxBeauBMU2>

Aiden and Liam used to be friends as children when they played on the same soccer team but grew apart in their teenage years. That could've been the end of their story, but Aiden's brother is also Liam's best friend. Liam works at his father's advertising company as an intern, and when the company makes a bid for a gay Pride campaign Liam decides to come out to his father. Only Liam's father mistakenly assumes Liam is dating Aiden. Aiden agrees to go along with the charade, but the lines between fake dating and real flirting quickly start to blur.

Foul Play Blue Mountain University 3

<http://mybook.to/FoulPlayBMU3>

The first time Asher and Hayden met on opposite sides of the soccer field. That night was supposed to be a one-off, until an accidental like on social media. Texting leads to friendship, but it's hard to hope for more when they live in different states. It doesn't help that Asher is dealing with a homophobic teammate either.

Under the Mistletoe Holiday Spin-off

<http://mybook.to/MistletoeAEMadsen>

Nicky has been crushing on his best friend's older brother for years. The only issue is Flynn doesn't seem to notice Nicky in

that way. Will a kiss under the mistletoe change everything, or was it simply not meant to be? Check out this sweet Christmas romance.

Extra Innings Perfect Catch Free Prequel

Get it at my website:
<https://alyxemadsen.wixsite.com/aemadsenqueerromance>

Jude and Tae are best friends. Best friends who happen to wake up naked in the same bed after a night of drinking too much. It's no big deal. These things happen. Except Jude can't stop thinking about it. Maybe he isn't as straight as he thought he was.

Sugar Cookie Merry Elf-Mas

<http://mybook.to/sugarcookie>

Clark never thought the guy he hooked up with would turn out to be his best friend's son. It was supposed to be a one night stand while he was in town visiting his sister for the holidays. Things just got way more complicated, but Nate is a forbidden fruit he can't keep from tasting. Sugar Cookie is part of a multi-author Christmas collab series, featuring mall elves getting their happily-ever-afters.

You can find out more and get updates by joining my reader group on Facebook A. E. Madsen's Reader Group.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my beta readers. Especially Alex Silver helping with some sensitivity reading with Elliot being transgender and nonbinary. I'm thrilled to release my first nonbinary MC and hope to release more to come.

About the Author

A. E. Madsen (He/They) lives in California with their wife and three children. A. is currently a returning college student working on a degree in English. They started writing in an attempt to better understand their gender identity and sexual orientation as a teenager, and it grew as a hobby from there. A. spends most of their time working and going to school, but they'd rather be writing and reading stories about men falling in love with other men. They also have ADHD and are easily distracted by social media and various topics of research that often have little relevance.