

RELIEF

pitcher

TAP THAT



BOOK THREE

LEE BLAIR

RELIEF PITCHER

TAP THAT BREWERY SERIES

BOOK 3

LEE BLAIR

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Published by Bosta Books.

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To the Sparrows,

Thank you for welcoming me into your flock. I'm so grateful to know you all. Shame we're not named after Bushtits, though.

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ABOUT THE BOOK

I thought I was helping him get his groove back. Turns out, he's helping me fall in love.

Tyler

I have one rule when it comes to matters of my hormones: one and done. Consensually, of course. Fun with no complicated romantic feelings. Not that I'm built to experience those, anyway.

After my car breaks down on a remote road, I follow a lumbersnack back to his creepy cabin for the cell service. When a tree falls and blocks my car, I make the most of it. What's more casual than riding out a storm in bed?

Except it stops being casual when I get hit with Big Feelings™ that equally terrify and thrill me. I'm a sure bet as a good time but high risk when it comes to caring for someone's heart.

Cooper

I've been kind of a hermit since my husband died. Lately, though, I've been toying with the idea of putting myself out there again.

So when a hot guy with a fondness for d1ck jokes and a heart of gold offers to "clean out my pipes," I grab it—and him—with both hands.

I know Ty doesn't sleep with the same guy twice. So, after our unexpected weekend together, I focus on being grateful and moving on. But when he ends up as the relief pitcher for my

rec softball team, the time we start spending together makes me want him even more.

Except after living through one massive loss, I'm not sure I'm brave enough to risk my heart again.

Relief Pitcher is a low angst, sweet and steamy MM contemporary romance with a demiromantic awakening, lacy underthings, unintentional arborist slander, and crows. A *lot* of crows. It's book three in the Tap That Brewery series, which follows best friends who run a brewery together in a small town you'll wish you could visit. Each book can be read as a stand-alone, but the jokes hit better if you read them in order.

CAST LIST AND TOWN MAP

TAP THAT BREWERY (TTB) GUYS

Austin

Brewery role: Brewer

Boy band archetype: The older brother

Golden Girl: Sophia

Romantic status: Caleb's boyfriend

Dom(inic)

Brewery role: Finance and operations

Boy band archetype: The bad boy

Golden Girl: Dorothy

Romantic status: Single and none of your business

Ethan

Brewery role: Taproom manager and bartender

Boy band archetype: The cute one

Golden Girl: Rose

Romantic status: Parker's boyfriend, swoon!

Ty(ler)

Brewery role: Marketing and sales

Boy band archetype: The heartthrob

Golden Girl: Blanche

Romantic status: One-and-done

Seth

Brewery role: Bartender and assistant brewer

Boy band archetype: The shy one

Group connection: Ty's younger brother

TTB PARTNERS

Caleb

Occupation: Chef and restaurateur

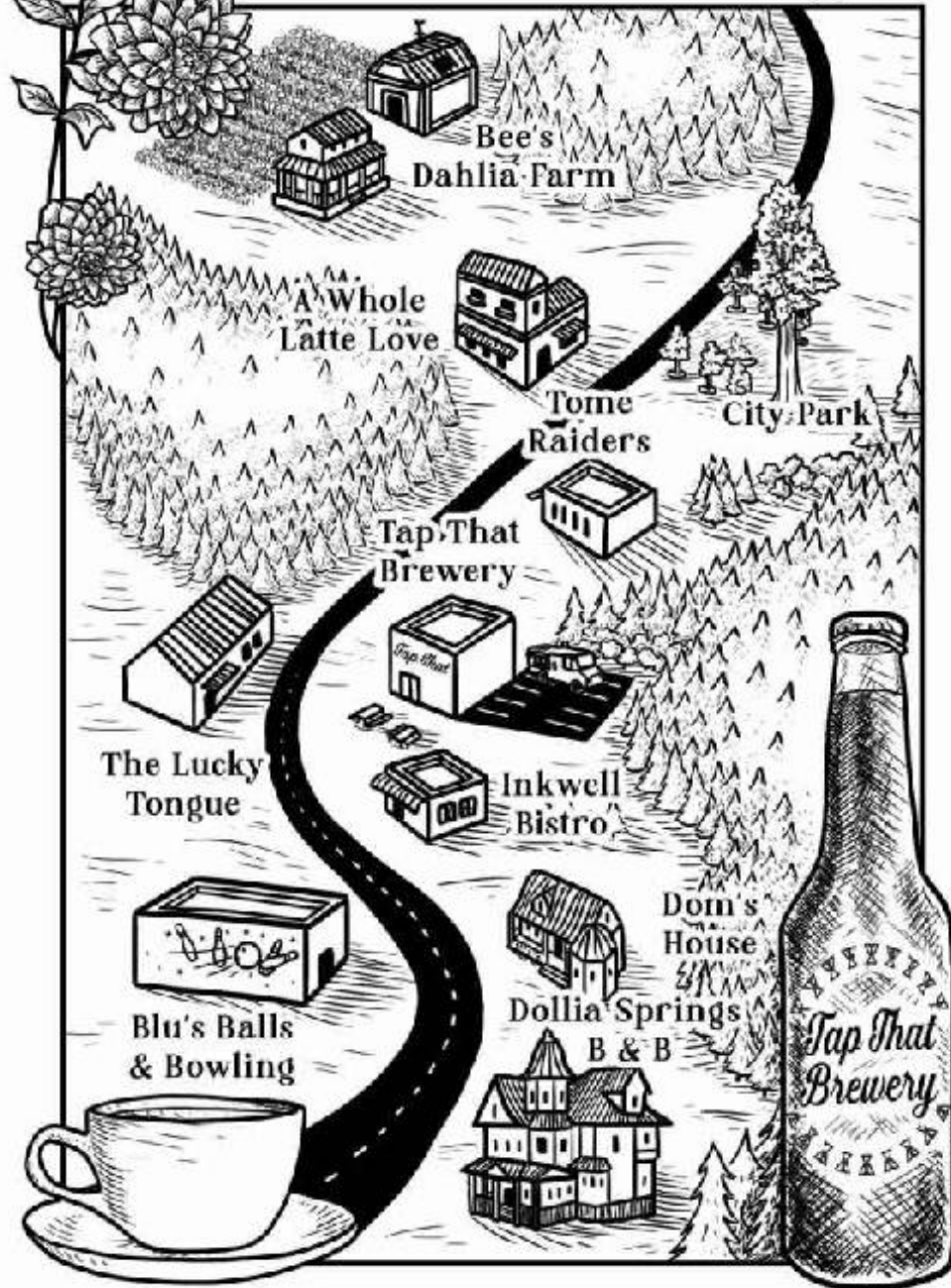
Romantic status: Austin's boyfriend

Parker

Occupation: Real estate attorney

Romantic status: Ethan's boyfriend

Dahlia Springs



CHAPTER 1

TYLER

Team Tap That Group Text

Ty: I've got a surprise for my favorite people.
Made a detour while at the coast. [angel emoji]
[photo of a bag full of Tillamook cheese]

Austin: Did you get me squeaky cheese???

Ty: You have your own package of it.

Ethan: Thanks for preventing a repeat of the
Squeaky Cheese Incident of 2008.

Austin: How many times do I have to apologize
for that? I get hangry sometimes!

Dom: You should've come straight home. The
storm is picking up steam.

Ethan: No cheese for Dom!



THE RAIN PELTED my car roof like a troupe of angry tap dancers. The accompanying clicking sound from my engine ratcheted my stress level past eleven. I clenched the steering wheel as Dom's words from earlier echoed in my mind. *Reschedule your coastal meetings to next week. It's not worth*

driving in the storm. He'd been right, but I wasn't about to admit it. He didn't need an ego boost.

Rescheduling to next week wouldn't work since one of our biggest customers on the Oregon Coast was about to leave on an extended vacation, and he'd wanted to get his order in for fall. The guy was old school and expected his sales meetings to be in person, which was how I'd ended up driving to the beach on a Saturday in shit weather.

At least I had procured a bag of treasure from the Tillamook Cheese Factory for my troubles after securing a huge order at the meeting. Four kinds of cheese—including squeaky cheese because it was the best—cheesy popcorn, saltwater taffy, and some peanut butter fudge because my brother couldn't get enough of the stuff.

The bag rolled off the passenger seat and onto the floorboard as I slowed to take a sharp curve over the mountain pass. I should've buckled my precious cargo in. Thankfully, it was early enough in the afternoon that I still had light to help me navigate.

I couldn't remember if Punxsutawney Phil had seen his shadow last month or what seeing his shadow even meant. With the gloomy overcast sky pissing down, I could take a guess. When our civilization collapsed, what would future archaeologists think about using a groundhog to predict the weather?

Between the wind picking up speed and the clicking sound in my car growing more ominous, worry inched up my spine. I'd meant to take my car in to get checked out after the check engine light came on last week—or was that a couple of weeks ago?—but it never reached the top of my to-do list.

“You can do it. If you get me home safely, I'll get you detailed.” I patted the steering wheel on Carla, my trusty Toyota Corolla.

I turned up the radio to tune out the threatening sounds and sang along to the Backstreet Boys while I slowed to take another curve. Top 40 from any era was my genre of choice.

Out of my three best friends and brother, how were none of us car guys? There should be a rule that every friend group have a car guy. If the Tap That Brewery crew had one, or if my car warranty hadn't expired six months ago, I wouldn't have had to drive a clicking car to the coast. We needed a lesbian mechanic in our squad.

Breaking news. The clicking graduated to more of a groan. *That doesn't sound good.*

Sideways rain splashed across my windshield in buckets and the wind howled as I white-knuckled the steering wheel. At least I'd made it through the worst of the pass. The road had leveled out, but there was no shoulder to pull onto if needed.

I clutched the steering wheel hard enough to cut off blood flow, which wasn't a good idea, given I had a Grindr hookup in a few hours. Functioning fingers were a prerequisite for what I had in mind. My dick twitched at the prospect of blowing my load onto the abs in the profile pic of the guy I'd messaged with earlier. Assuming he didn't cancel at the last minute like guys did half the time anymore.

Smoke began to snake out from the edges of my hood. "Fuck!" I slowed even more while searching for a place to pull off, but there weren't many options on the two-lane road. I needed to keep driving until I found a spot or my car decided for me.

I squinted at something colorful ahead. The overworked windshield wipers let me catch glimpses until the shape became clear. A carved tree stump with attached wooden address and surname signs stood next to the entrance of a narrow drive. It was either take my chances with the sketchy driveway or risk breaking down somewhere dangerous. I turned onto the gravel drive and followed it between tall trees that were blocking the worst of the rain. The tendrils of smoke grew thicker as I pushed Carla to her limits, hoping to find help or a safe place to park while I waited for AAA.

Maybe I should call one of the guys for help. None of them might have the desired vehicular expertise, but Dom would

have some ideas and say them with enough confidence that I'd believe him. Seth was a good problem-solver, Austin worked quick, and Ethan would cheer me up.

The road split ahead. As a lefty, I veered in that direction and followed the road around a curve until Carla sputtered to a stop.

On a desolate road.

In a storm.

At least I could call for help. I picked up my phone from the passenger seat and spotted the dreaded words: *No Service*. I was lost and surely about to get murdered by some forest-dwelling, axe-wielding murderer. *What the hell am I gonna do now?*

The ceaseless pounding of rain on my roof served as the soundtrack to my blood pressure reaching emergency levels. I squeezed my eyes closed and blew out a breath.

WWDD? As I channeled my inner confident asshole to speculate what Dom would do, I surveyed what was available in my car. My survival supplies consisted of a granola bar, my cheese factory treats, and a Hydro Flask half-full of water that could double as a urinal if things got dire. I wasn't about to get drenched in a torrential downpour to take a leak outside since my rain jacket was more fashion than function. It was *probably* water-resistant, depending on how loose the definition of "resistant" went. There might be an umbrella in my trunk. Schrödinger's umbrella.

I'd never been a Boy Scout. That was more my brother Seth's thing, but I knew hypothermia was bad news. Was it cold enough for hypothermia? How fast did that set in? If only I could Google the answers. I could hustle to the trunk, check for an umbrella, then pop the hood. I might figure out whatever was wrong. It could be something as simple as plugging a thing back into another thing.

I could send a pigeon with a note to AAA to come rescue my ass so I could make it to my hookup with the sexy otter in McMinnville for a bachelor party weekend. The perfect

opportunity to fuck and never talk again. Exactly how I liked it when it came to matters of my dick.

I'd been so busy the last few weeks that it would be my first hookup all month. I shivered, but it had nothing to do with the cold creeping into my car, only the blueness of my balls. Between Caleb's restaurant opening, Ethan and Parker getting their heads out of their asses and finally defining their relationship, and the brewery busier than ever, it had become increasingly difficult to get out of Dahlia Springs for sex. Despite what the movies of my teenage years claimed, sitting on my right hand until it went numb didn't *actually* feel like someone else was touching me. Go figure.

I slapped my hand against the steering wheel to release tension and accidentally hit the horn. I pounded my fist against it several more times because it felt good. Apologies to the woodland creatures.

As I thought through my options, I idly munched my granola bar and chugged the rest of the water. I never claimed to be good in a crisis. Maybe the carbs would help me develop a foolproof plan to get me from my dead car to my warm bed. Or someone else's warm bed. *Hell, I'd take a dry floor at this point.*

Something flashed between the trees ahead that caught my attention, and I heard the rumble of an engine growing closer. It didn't sound like a car though. Moments later, an ATV came around the bend. I supposed I could've gotten out of my car and walked until I reached a house, but I wasn't equipped for wet hiking. It was part of my DNA as a Western Oregonian to persevere in damp conditions like a fern, but I didn't want to.

A broad figure wrapped in rubber—not in the sexy way—stopped the ATV in front of my car and turned off its headlights. Rain clobbered my windshield, preventing me from getting a clear view, but the person appeared tall and big.

Who knew that your car needed the engine for the windshield wipers to work? Probably most people. Even if my knight in shining rubber was there to save me, I wasn't stoked

to open the door and let in the sideways rain to speak with them.

The hulking figure strode toward me in a dark-green sensible jacket and rain pants. They belonged on the cover of *Bass Fishing Unlimited*.

When the person tapped their knuckles on the driver's window, I braced myself for the rain. I opened the door, not expecting to find vibrant green eyes staring back at me. Dark stubble covered a broad sharp jaw and full kissable lips were pursed.

I've never had sex on an ATV before, but I'll try anything once.

CHAPTER 2

COOPER

I scratched out the tenth sketch I'd started in my notebook. That stellar piece of oak I'd snagged on a job last month was rotting away in my studio because I couldn't decide what to do with it. Not that anyone would ever see the finished product or know it was mine if they did. I was only a couple of years away from turning forty, and if I hadn't yet worked up the nerve to share my art, I wasn't sure I ever would.

I glanced at the time on my phone. If I'd accepted my coworker's invitation to go to his wife's birthday party, I would've had to start getting ready. However, that required actually being social and not continuing to hide away. After three years of declining invites, it felt more habit than necessity. Next time, I should say yes.

I closed my notebook and turned my attention to the true-crime documentary on my TV. Over the soundtrack of someone telling a beautiful story about their sister and the unforgiving rain pelting the roof, I could've sworn I heard a car horn. I wasn't close enough to the highway to notice most traffic noise over the sound of the rain and the closest neighbor to me, a half mile down the road, was still in Phoenix for the winter.

Shit. That meant one thing. A visitor headed my way. Wasn't a benefit of living in the middle of nowhere not having visitors pop in? It was probably Danita. As my best friend and—former?—sister-in-law, she was the only person who visited me anymore, but she never honked to mark her arrival. Danita preferred the element of surprise.

I tried to ignore the sound, but I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if someone was in trouble. With a labored sigh, I stood from my well-worn recliner and pulled on my rain gear.

I hopped on my ATV to quickly cover more ground and drove toward the highway. About halfway between my house and Highway 26, I encountered a gray sedan with wisps of smoke crawling out of the hood. *Bingo.*

After parking the ATV and climbing off, I squared my shoulders and approached the car. I was a big guy, and it couldn't hurt to use my size to intimidate as a defense mechanism if needed. Unfortunately, the rain made it impossible to make out the person in the car. I doubted it was anyone planning to try something funny, but I'd watched enough true crime to be skeptical.

When the person in the driver's seat made no move to open the door, I tapped on the window. Maybe they were hurt or ill? I'd taken CPR years ago but didn't remember it well enough to use it in a life-or-death situation. With their car blocking my driveway, I couldn't even use my truck to get them help.

When the door cracked open, I stepped back.

“Jesus Christ, it's pissing down. Never thought I'd say this, but I miss hand-crank windows. It's so fucking wet.”

I got a good look at the guy in the driver's seat. He was attractive—that was impossible to deny. Objectively so, and not only because I was basically a born-again virgin. He had dark hair, bright eyes, the right amount of beard to feel good, and a gorgeous smile with a playful tilt.

His smirk deepened as he caught me checking him out.

I cleared my throat. “Are you okay?”

His smile turned sheepish as he scooted as far from the door as possible. I half expected him to climb over the console into the passenger seat to distance himself from the sideways rain. I moved to block him from the worst of it.

His face lit up as I did it, which made my stomach do an annoying flip. “My car broke down. I was trying to find a place to pull over when things got dire. The driveway was the first thing I saw, and then my car just stopped. I don’t have any service to call AAA.”

“Yeah, there’s some dead spots in these woods.”

“I swear I’m not a serial killer or anything threatening. You probably don’t get a lot of randoms coming up your creepy driveway on a Saturday afternoon.”

I chuckled. To be fair, the driveway was creepy. I’d argued that when Aleck first showed me the house. He’d called it moody and gothic.

“I don’t. This could be your elaborate ruse. There must be easier ways to attempt to murder someone.” Something about his demeanor put me immediately into a teasing mood.

“I don’t have any weapons in my car except for my empty water bottle and several pounds of cheese. I’d suck at being a serial killer. I like people too much, and it sounds messy.” He angled his head and looked thoughtful. “But I would crush it at the branding. I could do that in my sleep. I could be the Brewery Basher.”

As rain dripped down my neck into my clothes, I realized what a surreal moment this was. Talking to a gorgeous guy on the road to my house while he said weird things about not being a serial killer. Had I passed out in my chair and was having a weird true-crime documentary-induced fever dream? I should cut back my watch time on those.

“You know, the more you insist you’re not a serial killer, the more suspicious I am of you.”

“That’s a fair assessment. If it makes you feel better, my name is Tyler McNeill. I’m one of the owners of Tap That Brewery in Dahlia Springs.” His smile was like a flashlight in a dark room. “Now that you know who I am, I’m far less likely to kill you.”

Is this flirting? Are we flirting? Really morbid flirting.

I'd been to Dahlia Springs quite a few times for work and had been to the brewery before. The place was great. It was nice to see a place so openly queer-friendly.

I draped my forearm on the roof of the car and leaned in. "Unless you lure your victims into a false sense of security with that info. If you killed me, I wouldn't have anyone to tell that the owner of Tap That Brewery is a murderer."

His assessing gaze sent heat licking up my spine. "Again, fair point."

When Tyler shivered, I remembered I was wearing insulated rain gear. He wasn't. "I've got cell service at my house. If you want, I'll take you on my ATV, and you can call AAA from there. Or if you want to stay here, I can call for you."

Despite trying to hold his cool composure, his shoulders relaxed. "A dry house? That would be great, thanks. Please don't kill me. I have way too much work to do next week." He reached for a bag on the floorboards, then paused. The flimsy jacket pulled taut against his biceps and shoulders, showing nice curves of muscle.

"I'll come back for you. Stay dry." He patted the bag with the Tillamook Cheese Factory logo on it.

I shook my head and walked back to the ATV. I heard his door close and wet footsteps behind me. When I turned over the ignition, Tyler stared at me with a flirty smile as he studied the seat.

"Are you waiting for an engraved invitation, or would you prefer to let the water soak into your skin?"

The smirk slipped from his face as he scrambled onto the seat behind me. I chuckled as he muttered about the rain and ATVs not having a roof like a golf cart. My breath hitched when Tyler's warm thighs hugged my hips and his arms wrapped around my waist. There were mounted sidebars he could've gripped to stay upright at our modest pace. The man wasn't shy. I had to give him that.

As I turned the ATV around and pointed us toward home, I focused on a smooth ride, not how good it felt to have his warm body pressed against mine.

Aside from condolence hugs, it'd been way too damn long since I'd touched anyone but myself. Three long, devastating years.

CHAPTER 3

COOPER

I pulled under the carport next to the mudroom. “It’s unlocked. Go ahead.” I shook off my wet gear before following him inside. My attention snagged on the flash of belly skin revealed as he shrugged off his jacket and hung it on an open hook next to the kitchen door.

Three very, very long years.

“This is incredible.” Tyler stopped in front of a large slab of wood carved with a murder of crows flying over a grove that I’d placed on top of a short bookcase.

I could’ve said it was mine, described the process I used to create it, thanked him for his kind words, but instead, I froze and prayed he wouldn’t ask me who the artist was.

“I’ll make us some coffee to warm up,” I said to distract him before he could.

He beamed at me. “You sure you’re not an angel? Because that sounds heavenly.”

I snickered at his ridiculous line. The man was hot as sin and had a boyish, frat-dude vibe. That wasn’t usually my thing, but there was something about him. *Something a lot like I’m lonely and he’s here.*

“I’d better get this started.” Tyler pulled the AAA card out of his wallet and dialed.

I walked to the kitchen to start the coffee. I heard him follow within minutes while talking to someone on the other

end of the phone. I busied myself and tried not to eavesdrop, which was difficult to avoid in the small space.

“Hours *plural*? Does that mean like two or five?” He dropped his head in his hand and his long fingers slid through his short hair, clutching the strands.

I itched to rub his back. *I must be lonelier than I realized.* Danita had warned me that staying holed up in the house would make me a lonely hermit. I hadn’t believed her until that moment.

“No, I totally understand. I know. Yup, bad storm. Sure, that’s great. Thank you. Yes, at this number. Okay, bye.”

I walked over and handed him a mug. “Are they backed up?”

Tyler wrapped his long fingers around the ceramic mug. “They said the tow trucks in the area have lots of tows lined up already and that with how remote this is, it’s gonna take a while.”

“You’re welcome to stay until they can get you this evening. At least I’ve got cell service here so they can call you.” I ignored the flutter in my belly at the prospect of this charming guy sticking around for a while. There was something about his smile that got under my skin. Sort of knowing, but knowing what, I wasn’t sure.

“Thank you so much. This is way better than freezing my balls off in my car. They’re very important to me.”

I choked as my sip of coffee burned the back of my throat. “Do you want to check out your car? I’ve got a pop-up canopy I could place over your hood.”

“I don’t know shit about cars. Are you a car guy? My friend group needs one, it turns out.”

I shook my head. “I can check my oil and change a tire, but not much beyond that, I’m afraid.”

Tyler sighed as he studied the painted crow on his ceramic mug. “I would probably make it worse if I tried anything,

anyway. I pay for the big AAA package so they could tow my ass to Alaska if need be. I'll wait it out."

"Do you want some pants to wear? You must be uncomfortable as hell in wet jeans."

"You don't mind? That would be amazing."

"No problem. I'll show you where the bathroom is."

He followed me.

"You know, I told you my name, but you haven't told me yours...yet you're letting me in your pants. That's kind of sketchy."

Tyler startled another laugh out of me. "Cooper Martin."

Tyler held out his hand, and I shook it. Small jolts raced from where our palms and fingers connected to all the way up my arm. Probably a static electricity thing from the storm.

I showed him to the bathroom and then brought him a pair of sweatpants. I busied myself with closing my bedroom door since it was a mess and trying not to think about a half-naked man being on the other side of the bathroom door. After he changed, I took his jeans to the mudroom to throw in the dryer.

"Is that your living room?"

Before I could answer, he was already walking in there. I grabbed my coffee and followed. He looked around and stopped at one of my first major pieces hanging on the wall. A dozen or so carved trees mounted to a frame to form a three-dimensional forest.

"You really have great taste. I would love something like this for the brewery."

"You're sticking to the brewery cover story, huh?" I wasn't sure where my playfulness came from. It wasn't like I'd been a complete curmudgeon, but I'd been...muted for a while.

"Peculiar enough to make you believe it." Tyler winked and then dropped onto the couch. He settled back against the pillows in one corner and made himself at home. "This is

comfy.” He tested the couch by bouncing a little, like a kid jumping on a mattress.

I chuckled again. The guy was something else. When he turned his attention to the TV, his mouth dropped open. It took me a moment to realize I’d paused it on a reenactment of a crime scene with fake blood everywhere. At least it was a show that didn’t use actual crime scene photos. That was a step too far, even for me.

“Are you watching a murder show?”

“A true-crime documentary, yes.”

His lips curled into a teasing smirk. “Who’s the serial killer now?”

“Do you think a serial killer would watch true crime?”

He shrugged. “Professional development?”

A laugh rumbled through my chest as I flipped over to the guide and scrolled for something to watch while periodically glancing at Tyler. It was weird having another man in my space.

“What do you usually watch on TV?” I expected him to say something like *American Pie*. He gave me adult Stiffler vibes.

He studied me over the rim of his cup. “Can I tell you a secret?”

“Sure.”

“Promise that what’s said in the spooky forest cabin stays in the spooky forest cabin?”

I stared at him incredulously. “Did you call my house a spooky forest cabin?”

Tyler gestured around us. “We’re in the forest, we’re in a cabin, and it’s spooky.”

“I beg your pardon, sir. There’s at least one *Live, Laugh, Love* sign in this house. There’s nothing spooky about it.”
Look at me cracking jokes.

Tyler gaped at me before his lips curved into another grin. I was quite enjoying those. Might as well get my fill before AAA arrived.

“No one knows this about me, but I have a weird obsession with Hallmark movies. I have my own subscription to the channel and only watch it on my iPad when I’m alone. Pathetic, right?”

“Why haven’t you told anyone?”

“If you knew me, you’d know how ridiculous it is that I watch romantic movies. I view it as a scientific endeavor. Like watching bees get it on and trying to figure out how it all works. It’s fascinating to me.”

I laughed while navigating to my DVR and launching a winter Hallmark movie I’d recorded. I couldn’t claim it was scientific for me. I was just a sap who enjoyed watching people fall in love.

Tyler lit up when the movie started. “Oh my god. You’re amazing!”

My cheeks heated as I hid my smile with my coffee cup. While the movie played, I kept my face forward but darted glances to the side out of the corner of my eye. Tyler seemed enthralled with the movie, commenting on how absurd everything was, but I could’ve sworn I heard a swooning sigh at least three times.

“But why is he acting like that? She’s going to go back to the city at the end of the month,” he asked after a while.

“Because he knows he’s found something special and doesn’t want to let it go.”

His eyebrows bunched together. “I don’t get it. There are a dozen other hot chicks in that town he could get with.”

“I’m starting to get what you meant about not understanding romance.”

Tyler smiled sheepishly and shrugged.

Instead of focusing on the plot with the big-city business guy sent to buy the small-town flower farm and the woman

trying to save said flower farm, I mused over why I felt so immediately comfortable around Tyler. Not that most people made me uncomfortable, but I would've expected having a guy in the house would have me at least a little on edge. Maybe because Tyler didn't treat me as fragile or broken. He didn't know that my husband had died of a brain aneurysm three years ago. He didn't look at me with sadness or ask how I was doing in that certain way that implied surely I couldn't be anything but devastated every second of every day.

The pang in my chest was no longer as devastatingly sharp. The pain from losing Aleck so suddenly still hurt, and it probably would forever, but the ache had somewhat dulled. Morphing from an open wound to a chronic ailment I'd learned to live with. Now, I tried to focus on memories that brought me joy and laughter.

Tyler chuckled. I glanced at him again, all comfortable on my couch. Aleck would've thought Tyler's car issues were a perfect setup for a porn movie. He would've made an excuse to get me alone in the kitchen and pitched having a threesome. I was a monogamous guy, but Aleck had been more open. We'd agreed to occasionally invite someone into bed with us, and it had worked. I had the feeling he would've loved Tyler.

I'd been loosely toying with the idea of getting back out there and dating or at least finding something casual, but I hadn't been sure if that was something I actually wanted or if it was only Danita's voice in my head urging me. Telling me her brother would haunt me if I didn't get my ass out there.

As Tyler laughed at something from the movie, I wondered if it might be my voice in my head pushing me to date, not Danita's. Maybe it was time to listen.

CHAPTER 4

TYLER

“You’ve got to be kidding. They have a festival event all about making snowpeople? That’s a bit of a stretch, even for a silly Christmas movie. There’s no way those kinds of festivals happen in real life.” I glanced over at Cooper, who had a small smile as he watched the couple on the screen get into a snowball fight.

Cooper was seriously hot. He was tall and thick with a soft belly and meat on his bones. His long light-brown hair was pulled back into a bun. Guys with long hair were catnip for me. Especially sweaty long hair after great sex. *Stop thinking sexy thoughts. It’s not the time or place for it.* I didn’t want to get tossed back into the rain for being a creep.

“You’re right, they don’t. The Dahlia Springs Pumpkin Regatta with people hollowing out giant pumpkins and racing them in water isn’t like that at all.” Cooper’s tone dripped with sarcasm. *Don’t get a boner. Don’t get a boner. Do. Not. Get. A. Boner.*

One side of my mouth tilted up. Outside of my best friends and brother, I wasn’t used to people dishing my shit back to me. I opened my mouth to argue, but he was right. I huffed and turned back to the movie.

The couple on screen frantically worked to finish the top piece of the snowperson. The man used his late grandmother’s antique hat and scarf to decorate it, which clinched the win. Why he would want to get family heirlooms wet was beyond me.

I watched in fascination as the couple stared at each other over the top of the old hat and leaned in for an almost kiss. I didn't get why people wanted all of that. All those big emotions and having someone else holding so much power over your happiness. I kept watching the movies, though, because I *wanted* to understand. I wanted my parents' long and loving marriage to make sense. I wanted to get why Ethan had continued throwing himself into relationships even though they'd never worked out for long. Hopefully, Parker would be the exception to that. I wanted to know why Austin had been a workaholic for as long as I'd known him until he'd met Caleb and found something more important than his job. Despite the extensive nature of my research through endless hours of movie-watching, it never became any clearer.

I was happy to get an orgasm, give an orgasm, and mutually agree to part ways with a high five. I didn't want anything else.

The couple on screen cuddled together in a cabin in front of a warm fire. I could concede the merits of that particular activity as I watched from a log cabin. It was a shame Cooper didn't have a fireplace because that man was a lumbersnack who deserved to be laid down in front of a fire and fucked until we both earned rug burns.

I *seriously* needed to get laid. I pulled my phone from my pocket and launched Grindr. Even if AAA magically arrived in time to get to my dick appointment, I wasn't feeling it. It'd been a stressful day, and the Hallmark vibes fucked with my calibration. It was dangerous trying to get my dick sucked with that sappy shit running through my head. Maybe we could hook up tomorrow night. I shot off a quick message to cancel.

Then I texted the guys to let them know what happened and that I would be delayed in getting home. Ethan chimed in immediately and peppered me with questions about my whereabouts and who I was with. Always the mother hen.

My attention wandered back to the piece that had caught my eye earlier. Cooper had a great eye for art. He also had a thing for crows, which was an interesting choice. Crow mugs, crow paintings, and little crow figurines by the TV. While

looking at them, I realized the room had grown significantly darker.

I looked over my shoulder out the living room window. It was getting dark. The bay window lightened up the room during the day, but as darkness crept in, it became decidedly spooky. What if a creepy murderer *was* lurking between the trees and judging our taste in movies? At least the murderer would be getting soaked. As the rain hammered the roof, I imagined the sound would soothe under other circumstances, but each aggressive raindrop made my getting home soon a more distant possibility.

“But you’ve got to admit that crowning a princess for a snowperson festival is silly.”

Cooper hummed. “It’s silly that it’s gendered. They’re thoughtful in calling it snowpeople instead of snowmen, but they’re crowning a princess instead of calling it royalty.”

“Exactly! These movies—” A booming crack filled the room. I damn near levitated off the couch like a startled cat. “The fuck was that?”

Cooper was already on his feet. “Tree came down.”

“On the house?” My voice reverted to its pre-puberty pitch.

“If it came down on the house, pretty sure you’d see it. The house isn’t that big.”

“Good point.” Cooper must be cool in a crisis. He strode toward the mudroom we entered earlier, and I allowed myself a hot sec to ogle his ass. Danger made me horny.

“Where are you going?”

“To make sure the house is safe before it gets completely dark.”

I trailed behind him. “Are we not safe here?”

“We live in the Cascadia Subduction Zone, and there’s supposed to be an earthquake in the next hundred years that takes out the West Coast. Are we ever truly safe?”

“Well, thanks a fucking lot for that cheery thought. Guess I’m never sleeping again.” I glared at him.

He shook his head and smiled. “Stay put. I’ll be back.”

I looked between the ominous forest through the kitchen window and the wood paneling. Wood paneling gave me the creeps. I’d been begging my parents to remodel theirs for years, but I was pretty sure they’d kept it to troll me at this point. “I’m going with you.”

When he frowned and opened his mouth, I cut him off. “People who split up are the first to die in horror movies.”

He gave me a *seriously?* look but didn’t say no. “You’ll get soaked. Your shoes aren’t waterproof.”

I batted my eyelashes at him. They were long, and I knew how to work them to my advantage. “That’s why you’re going to let me borrow some clothes. Pretty sure I saw more rain gear hanging in the mudroom.”

His resigned sigh was music to my ears. My feet weren’t small by any means. I was six feet tall, but Cooper’s rain boots were loose on me. Good for him if he was proportional. He handed me a headlamp and told me to stay close.

“That won’t be a problem.” I couldn’t help the flirtatiousness in my tone. It wasn’t my fault it came naturally.

We walked the perimeter of his house and couldn’t find the tree. If Cooper hadn’t rescued me, I probably wouldn’t have been doing well. It got hella dark hella fucking fast as the rain attacked us from every direction, but at least Cooper’s fugly rubber clothes kept me dry.

I snorted at a random thought. I got a lot of those.

“What’s so funny?”

“I was just thinking about how these rubbery clothes keep us dry. Sort of like a reverse condom, but the liquids stay on the outside.” *Seriously, Ty? You couldn’t stop that one with a filter? First, you accuse him of being a serial killer, then you admit your dirty Hallmark secret, and now you’re showing*

him how fucking weird you are. I waited for him to roll his eyes, but he laughed. A rich, warm sound.

“Thank you for that visual. I’ll carry it with me every time I have to wear my rain gear. You’ve given me a great gift.”

His flat tone *did* things to me, but I dismissed the flutter in my stomach as hunger. That granola bar hadn’t lasted long.

“I want to check the driveway. Coming with or going back inside?”

If I wasn’t getting off with Grindr guy later, I had to take action where I could get it. And pressing myself against him on an ATV was the best I’d get. “Can I drive this time?”

“Absolutely not.”

His immediate and firm dismissal made me laugh. “You’re no fun.” A thought occurred to me. “Do you have a plastic bag? I need to rescue my snacks, and I want to put a bag over the opening of the bag they’re in. Wet cheesy popcorn sounds disgusting.”

He shook his head and went inside, then returned a minute later with a cooler that he strapped to the back of the rig. “You’d better share your snacks with me.”

“I wouldn’t dream of anything else.”

Cooper pulled the keys from his pocket and climbed on. I slid behind him and wrapped my arms around his waist. Completely unnecessary, but I was cold, it was wet, he was hot, and I was pretty sure I’d caught him checking me out earlier. So, whatever.

“Can you teach me how to drive it on the way back?”

“Maybe if it wasn’t dark and raining hard enough to flood the creek, I might.”

“Raincheck? Nice.”

Cooper chuckled and took off. I gripped him tighter because I could.

Cooper expertly navigated us along the driveway in the dark. Clearly, he knew the land like the back of his hand. After

a few minutes, he came to an abrupt stop. “Found the tree.”

I looked over his broad shoulder. “Well, fuck.” The ATV’s headlights illuminated a tree sprawled across the driveway. I swallowed.

“At least it didn’t land *on* my car.” Instead, it had fallen right behind it, blocking my car and my way home.

CHAPTER 5

TYLER

“Do you think if I offered to tip the tow truck driver with a blowjob, he’d clear the tree too? I don’t have cash.”

Cooper’s mouth curved into a smile. The more I looked at it, the more I wanted to put things in it. “Pretty presumptuous to assume the driver will have a dick.”

“That’s a damn good point. Shame on me.”

We held each other’s stare for a long, heated moment.

Cooper cleared his throat. “You can crash here tonight. The couch pulls out into a bed. I’ve got a chainsaw, so we can move the tree in the morning.”

“Guess that tip is yours.” *Mouth, seriously? Can you chill for once before the guy makes me sleep in the mudroom?*

Cooper’s eyes widened, but he didn’t say no. Interesting...

I didn’t love the idea of sleeping on a couch when I had a comfortable mattress at home, but I didn’t have many options. It’d be a dick move to ask one of the guys to venture out in the storm and get my ass, especially after Dom had urged me to reschedule. If the weather was bad enough for trees to fall, I couldn’t risk their safety on a rescue mission to save me from Cooper’s couch.

“You sure?” We both knew I didn’t have a choice other than freezing in the car, but I could at least be polite.

“I don’t mind the company while clearing these Hallmark movies off my DVR.”

I tucked my bottom lip between my teeth. “All right. Thank you.” I called AAA to update them on the situation and asked about scheduling the tow for tomorrow. Then I shot a text off to my brother, Seth, because he’d be worried if I didn’t come back to the house tonight.

Seth: Offer to suck his dick yet?

Ty: Not technically.

Seth: [facepalm emoji] You’re ridiculous. I was kidding, but I should know better from you.

Ty: Hey, I don’t judge your demisexual ways. So don’t judge my... Wait, what’s the opposite of demisexual?

Seth: You.

Ty: LOL, fair enough.

I should probably tell the other guys too so they didn’t blow up my phone later. I opened the Tap That Brewery group chat.

Ty: I’m not going to make it home tonight.

Austin: Did the sexy lumberjack kidnap you? Or are you holding him hostage?

Dom: Definitely the last one.

Ethan: How do we even know this guy’s hot? He could be some really old guy wanting to spend his last years in the woods. Ty might be the first person he’s seen in months, and they’ll form a friendship and the guy will leave everything to Ty for showing him kindness in his old age. I can already picture the buddy-style movie montage.

Austin: Dude. What the fuck kind of movies have you been watching?

Ethan: I...don’t even know where that came from.

Dom: Jesus. You're such a fucking romantic, E.

I aimed my phone at Cooper and snapped a picture of him watching TV. I forgot I'd turned my ringer on earlier while driving and it made a shutter sound. Hopefully, the movie's Christmas music covered it.

"Did you take a picture of me? Is this 2005? Do you have ringtones assigned to people too?"

Why is him teasing me so hot? "My best friends—the other brewery owners—were debating how hot you are. And, you know, for security. This way, if you kill me, they'll know your face."

Cooper's cheeks reddened.

I sent the photo.

Ty: The "I'm sorry, you were right" comments can commence.

Ethan: Forget everything I said. He's gorgeous. Have you seen him with his hair down? How long is it? Is it curly?

Austin: Damn. Love long hair on a guy.

Dom: \$20 says you'll be calling him Daddy by morning.

Ty: Don't be jealous, Daddy. No one will ever take your place.

Dom: [middle finger emoji]

Ty: What time is brunch with Parker? I'll try to get AAA out here by then, and maybe Cooper can cut the tree first thing.

Ethan: 10 so we can open by noon, but don't worry if you can't make it. If I were crashing with a hottie like that bear of a man, I wouldn't give a fuck about brunch with my friend and his boyfriend.

Ty: But the yummy food. Caleb is cooking.

Ethan: We'll eat your share of Caleb's food and thoroughly enjoy it.

I texted the guys for a couple more minutes about Ethan's boyfriend, Parker, having an important meeting before our brunch tomorrow that would hopefully mean he could relocate from Portland to Dahlia Springs. Though they were only an hour apart, it was tough on Ethan to make their schedules work since he usually worked during Parker's off hours.

When I slid the phone back into my pocket, it dawned on me that I might be cramping Cooper's style. What if he'd had his own hookup planned? Or a date with a partner?

"You don't have to entertain me. Pretend like I'm not here and do whatever you normally would."

Cooper laughed drily. "This is usually what I'm up to on a Saturday night. Thrilling, I know."

"You're right. It *is* thrilling to have a handsome and mysterious stranger land on your doorstep and have to deal with him asking annoying questions and making obnoxious commentary during movies all evening. Want some more cheesy popcorn?"

Cooper held out his hand. I'd made a convert of him. "It's my day off, so having you here isn't stopping me from doing anything."

I sensed there was something he wasn't saying, but it wasn't my business. "Day off from work? What do you do?" That seemed like a neutral conversation topic.

"I'm an arborist."

"A what-ist?"

"I work with trees and shrubs. I help maintain them, diagnose issues, cut them down if need be."

"Like a tree doctor?"

"Tree surgeon is used more often." There was a teasing hint to his smile.

I pulled a piece of saltwater taffy out of my goodie bag and untwisted the wrapper. “How do the trees reach out when they’re sick? Do you have a clinic that they visit? How does insurance work for that?”

Cooper chuckled and leaned back in his recliner. His thick thighs fell open wider with the movement.

“They all have insurance cards with the phone number of the company I work for on the back. You’ve never noticed the card pockets on tree trunks before?”

“Giving a tree a piece of dead tree with a phone number on it is morbid as fuck. You arborists are freaks.” I tossed a piece of taffy at him. “Is that why you live out here around all these trees? Do you like to live among your patients?”

A pained look passed through his eyes, but it was gone in a moment. “It’s convenient to be close to where lots of trees are.” He picked at a string on the arm of his recliner. “According to your babbling earlier, you co-own a brewery?”

Not only was the guy like a sexy tree I wanted to climb, but he also volleyed back my teasing. That was turning me on as much as his thick body.

“I wasn’t babbling.”

He leveled an unamused stare in my direction. “You were totally babbling.”

“Fine. I suppose there was some light, babbling-adjacent talk happening, but I was stressed and it was raining really hard. My three best friends and I run the brewery together. We opened it a couple of years ago.”

“How did that come about?”

I settled back onto the couch. I could talk about the brewery for ages. “One of the guys, Austin, is my cousin, and we met the other two, Ethan and Dom, our first year of college. Ethan and Dom had the room next to me and Austin. We hit it off and hung out all the time. Eventually, we discovered we loved beer. Austin taught himself how to make it, and for years, we joked about how fun it would be to open a

brewery together.” Sometimes, I still couldn’t believe we’d made it happen.

“When Ethan inherited a hefty chunk of change, he pitched the idea of quitting our jobs and making the brewery a reality. How could I say no to that? It’s the best job in the world.”

Ethan’s inheritance had covered most of the startup. Dom had sold his house in Gresham and bought a Victorian fixer-upper in Dahlia Springs that the rest of us lived in rent-free. We each used our skills from our own careers to make it happen. Fortunately, it’d been easy for me to transition from marketing for a restaurant group to marketing and sales for our brewery.

Dom’s previous jobs had all involved managing budgets, which made him a perfect fit for handling the brewery business stuff. Ethan had been a bartender for years, so he slipped easily into managing our taproom and being our main server. With Austin home-brewing for years, we counted on him to brew our product after he’d learned how to scale up his home operation to a professional one. And since Seth returned to town last year, he’d been helping us in the taproom and learning how to brew with Austin. The extra support was overdue and much appreciated.

Cooper’s smile was genuine. “It’s amazing how that worked out for you all. I’ve been there before. It’s great.”

It sent a thrill through me every time someone said that. It would never get old. I idly wondered if I’d seen him when he’d come in. I made it a practice to not hit on customers—I needed *some* standards, but Cooper would’ve stood out.

“Yeah, it’s worked out well. We’ve all contributed in our own ways and made it happen. It’s taking a lot of sacrifice, but it’s been worth it.”

I told him about how we lived in Dom’s place. Most of us, anyway, since Austin had moved out earlier this year to live with his boyfriend, Caleb. It was awesome having Seth move into his room so I could keep an eye on him again. I’d struggled with having my brother away for years while he traveled the world working on cruise ships. We were earning

enough now that I could probably move out, but I enjoyed living with the guys.

The countdown had begun for Ethan to move in with Parker. I dreaded the changes happening, all of us starting to split off, but I wouldn't miss the sappy puppy-love faces he and Parker made at each other.

Cooper asked thoughtful questions about work. I enjoyed talking to him about the brewery and the guys. I talked about the business every day when trying to sell to wholesale customers or storytelling on the brewery's social media channels, but I couldn't remember the last time I casually talked about my life with someone outside of work. Or, hell, outside of town. The downside of running a prominent business in the small town I grew up in was that everyone knew my life or thought they did. That made my trips to bigger cities critical for my sex life.

I sure as hell never spent time getting to know the guys I fucked beyond whatever natural conversation happened leading up to the fucking. It was never anything deep.

“Our little group is growing. Two of the four of us have paired off, and my brother moved home and has been working with us.”

Cooper frowned. “Do you not like the people your friends are with?”

I tilted my head. “They're great. Why?”

“Because you scowled when you said it.”

I laughed. “That's just my body's natural response to relationships. I'm happy for them, glad they found love, yada-yada.”

“Not your thing?”

I held Cooper's stare and gave him a meaningful look. “I'm more of a one-and-done guy.” I didn't know if he was single or liked dudes, but in case he was game, I wouldn't be shy about putting an offer on the table.

Cooper glanced away and then back at me before licking his lips. I caught him giving me a quick once-over, so I decided to do a test. I stretched back on the couch and let my legs fall open, then draped one arm over the back of the couch and placed my other hand high on my thigh, fingers splayed and thumb pointing to my dick.

Cooper's attention followed where my thumb pointed. He licked his lips again, held my stare for a moment, then looked away.

Game on.

CHAPTER 6

COOPER

“I’m a sucker for the high school crush ones. You know, where the nerdy kid from school comes back as a hottie. Bow chicka bow wow.” Tyler popped another piece of taffy in his mouth.

“Mm. Solid choice. I prefer the classics though. Someone from the big city heads to a small town for some corporate takeover, but instead of buying out the small business, they find love.”

Tyler shook his head but didn’t take his eyes off the Hallmark movie playing. “I don’t get that. If someone has a successful life and career in the big city, why would they make a big change and go small town?”

I stared at him. It took him a few moments to notice.

“What?”

I kept staring. He’d told me enough about his start with the brewery over the hours we’d known each other that I caught the irony there.

“Oh. You mean me.”

I laughed. “Except for the finding love thing, you’ve got some Hallmark movie tropes in your life.”

Before turning back to the movie, I shot a quick glance at his lap. *Again*. Ever since he’d basically air traffic controlled my attention to it, I couldn’t stop.

When I fast-forwarded through a commercial break, I heard Tyler’s stomach growl in the silence.

“Hungry?” I was such an asshole. I should’ve offered food ages ago.

“Fucking starving. Turns out cheesy popcorn isn’t filling.” He licked the orange powder from his fingertips. Each flick of his tongue triggered another dirty thought.

His honesty was refreshing. It reminded me of Danita. Of all the unexpected things about being a widower, one of the oddest was people’s reluctance to be candid with me. Something as simple as asking how someone was doing. It was like people couldn’t let themselves gripe about minor inconveniences because how could that compare to losing a spouse? I wanted to know about someone accidentally spilling their coffee and triggering a series of unfortunate events. Being the husband of someone who died shouldn’t prevent me from knowing the mundane parts of people’s lives.

“I can cook us something. Any allergies?”

Tyler shook his head. “Want help?”

I stood. “You a good cook?”

One side of Tyler’s mouth tilted into a grin I admired for a few moments too long.

“If you ask my roommates, they’d emphatically argue that I barely know how to boil water.”

“Want to learn some things?” I wasn’t sure why I invited him to join me in cooking, but I supposed I was making the most of having someone in the house who wasn’t Danita. With Tyler I could pretend I wasn’t some lonely guy withering away in the woods, terrified to put himself out there.

I decided to make spaghetti with a homemade sauce. It was simple enough and didn’t require a ton of attention, but I could show off with a few tricks. Not that I had any reason to.

After I demonstrated how to cut a bell pepper, he popped another piece of sliced bell pepper into his mouth.

“I can’t believe I cut these up. That trick you showed me of pushing down the stem and prying it open with my hands made them a hell of a lot less intimidating. I thought all those

curves meant it would be hell to cut.” Tyler eagerly stared down at the cutting board full of uneven pieces of red, green, and yellow bell peppers.

“You did good. Now that you know how to open them and remove the seeds, you could fill each half with ground meat and spices to make a stuffed bell pepper. It’s pretty easy.” I wasn’t a chef by any stretch of the imagination, but Tyler seemed impressed by my cooking skills. Shamelessly, I wanted to keep impressing him. I’d forgotten what that felt like. The only people I’d impressed were customers at work.

Tyler turned and leaned his hip against the counter. “Don’t tell my roommates, or they’ll expect me to cook stuff.” He winked, which made my stomach flip. “What’s it like to live all the way out here?”

I stirred the vegetable mixture as it sautéed. “Quiet.”

He snorted. “Shocking. Are you one of those people who gets off on trees? Is that why you’re a tree doctor and live in the forest? Is there an A&E episode about you and your forbidden, misunderstood love?”

“Are you one of those people who gets off on beer? Do you roll around naked in a vat of hops?” I arched my eyebrow at him while trying not to picture the fictional scene.

He hooked his bottom lip with his teeth. “No, but now I kind of want to try it. Austin would kill me, but I bet we could go viral on social media. Or do some sort of charity calendar and raise money for the queer youth shelter in Portland.”

He scratched his face and stared at the ceiling. I could practically see the wheels turning in his head. There was a focused seriousness there that I hadn’t seen in the hours we’d spent together. He’d gone from frat boy to professional in a moment.

We continued chatting as the sauce cooked.

“How many plates should I grab? You expecting anyone home for dinner?” Tyler asked as he opened the cupboard I directed him to when he offered to set the table.

The breezy question nearly floated on by, but it stung. A stark reminder of who used to live here. “Nope. I live alone.” I didn’t exactly want to declare that I was a single hermit who hadn’t been with anyone in years.

I watched the pot of water inch toward boiling. Tyler was putting out some pretty clear signals. I knew enough about his brewery to know each owner was queer. Not that his being queer equaled interest in me, but his flirting made that pretty obvious.

Tyler might be a great person to hook up with to get over whatever block was preventing me from “getting back out there,” as Danita liked to call it. She’d been trying to get me on the dating apps for a long time.

It was hard to imagine getting over the initial hump of being intimate with someone for the first time since Aleck had died. It felt like a big deal, but I didn’t want it to be. Part of me wanted to get it over with, but something kept stopping me from ripping the bandage off.

Then again, being around Tyler was the first time I’d experienced something stirring that wasn’t from watching porn. It had to mean I was ready for...something, right?

As Tyler rummaged through my wine rack and held up a red blend, I let myself imagine what it would be like to take his flirting seriously. Honestly, it was the perfect situation. One night under the same roof. A guy who openly said he wasn’t looking for a relationship. Someone who would probably be a hell of a lot of fun and wouldn’t laugh at my being rusty.

But doing that under the same roof I’d shared with Aleck? I wasn’t sure I could. Then again, if his spirit was hanging around, he sure as hell would love the show.

The conversation stayed light through dinner and a few episodes of a workplace comedy. After his third jaw-splitting yawn, I suggested I get the couch and him set up for bed.

I grabbed a toothbrush from my dentist swag stash and a clean shirt for him to sleep in. He returned to the living room

fully in my clothes while I was getting the sofa bed ready.

“This shirt is soft as hell. Where’d you get it?”

“Costco.”

“Haute couture.”

I laughed, but I hadn’t seen anyone in my clothes since Aleck. Ever since Tyler practically landed on my doorstep, Aleck had been at the forefront of my mind, but I supposed having another man in my space for the first time would do that. A good night’s sleep would sort me out. Time to process was all I needed to get my equilibrium back.

TEAM TAP THAT GROUP TEXT

Ethan: Do you think Ty's running around naked in the woods by now? I always thought there was a hippie streak to him.

Austin: I bet he's trying desperately to make a fire so he can cook s'mores but can't get it to take because all the wood's wet.

Dom: I bet he's sleeping in his car and was too proud to tell us he's stranded and made the lumberjack up. Anyone do a reverse image search to make sure he didn't steal that guy's photo from the internet?

Ty: You guys realize I can read what you're writing, right?

Ethan: Definitely.

Austin: Yup.

Dom: That's the fun part.

Ty: He's very much real. I'd go take another picture, but he's in bed, and that would be creepy.

Austin: Since when aren't you creepy?

Ty: Fair point, but I do have standards. And that's a step too far.

Ethan: Get a photo of him holding a mug of coffee tomorrow morning while flashing a peace sign, and we'll know it's real.

Ty: Want me to get a copy of tomorrow's newspaper to go with it too? [eyeroll emoji]

Austin: Great idea!

Ty: If I can't get out, do you think any newspaper delivery could get in?

Dom: It makes me uncomfortable when Ty is the logical one. I need a shower.

CHAPTER 7

TYLER

Not a surprising discovery, but it turned out I wasn't cut out for forest life. As I stared at the lights from various electronics hitting the ceiling, I couldn't shake the creepy sensation that someone or, even worse, *something* was lurking on the other side of the window mere feet from me. Probably Bigfoot's more dangerous cousin with a taste for blood.

I carefully rolled to my other side but sank into the middle of the bed. Again. Between a spring poking me and a support bar in the sofa bed breaking an hour into lying on it, I was probably better off trying to sleep on the couch cushions despite being too long for them. I missed my bed at home and the familiar sounds of Dom's house. Creaks and groans that didn't leave me imagining a pack of feral cougars waiting to devour me as soon as I fell asleep. Not the fun type of cougars either.

After tossing and turning for hours, I'd given up any hope of falling asleep. I climbed off the bed, tried to stretch the ache in my back, and settled into Cooper's worn recliner. It wasn't much better than the couch, but hopefully good enough to doze off in.

Except I couldn't. The howling wind kept my consciousness on edge enough that the relocation did nothing except ease the growing back pain. Eventually, I turned on the TV and turned off the volume since Cooper had had captions on earlier. After a few minutes of channel surfing, I landed on a true-crime channel. I'd never understood the appeal. Wasn't it like intentionally scaring yourself or enjoying the suffering

of others? But as the episode continued, I kind of got why people were interested. The bad guy got what he deserved and the victim's family got justice. As much as they could in a legal sense, anyway.

I pulled another blanket off the sofa bed and tucked it around myself to fight the chill. A chill that had *nothing* to do with the episode about a woman trying to escape some creep she'd dated who'd tracked her down to a log cabin where she was hiding out. I was too invested in the story to change the channel. I jumped when I heard a creak from the back of the house and pulled the blanket higher up my body like a shield. The next creak was closer.

If I got murdered in the creepy forest cabin, what would the guys say about me on the true-crime show made about my case? That I lit up a room? That I had a smile and a joke for everyone? That I knew how to suck a mean dick? Nah, they would probably roast the shit out of me. *Ty loved to crochet sweaters for rocks. The silly guy left them all over town to make people smile.* I couldn't let them get the last word, so I grabbed a remote control as a weapon.

I gripped the remote so hard my fingers ached as a dark figure filled the doorway. "I'm too pretty to die!" I threw the remote at the intruder.

"Were you hoping this would knock me out or that I would change the channel for you?" Cooper's voice was rough with sleep.

My logical brain caught up with me. "Sorry. Heard some sounds and freaked myself out with the shows." I gestured to the TV.

He stepped farther into the room, and I could see him in the light from the TV. His sexy hair was down and wild with waves.

"Thought you didn't watch true crime."

"I don't, but I was curious."

"So you decided to watch it in the middle of the night, in the dark, during a storm, somewhere you've never been

before?”

I ran my hand through my hair. “Not my finest decision. What are you doing up?”

He gathered his hair and twisted it into a spiral like a nervous habit. “I rarely sleep through the night. At least not over the last few years.”

Something about his voice made me sad, and I wanted to ask about it, but I didn’t want to force him into a potentially awkward conversation in the middle of the night.

“Forgot to refill my water bottle before bed, so I got up to get some. Sorry if I woke you.”

“I was already awake. Unfamiliar environment.” If I’d been crashing with one of the guys before we moved in together in Dahlia Springs and their sofa bed broke, I would’ve climbed into their bed as a punishment for having such a shitty couch. But Cooper had been exceedingly generous, and I didn’t want to kick a gift horse in the nuts.

He flicked on the lamp on the side table and stared at the sofa bed, frowning. “Is the bed angled weird?”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “Yeah, I think there’s something broken.”

His eyes went wide. “Shit, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you sleep on a broken bed. I used to have a guestroom, but after... There’s no bed in there now. Full of stuff.” His voice was rough.

“No worries. I can snooze in the recliner.” I wouldn’t because the thing had seen better days at least a decade ago, but I didn’t want to add to his stress. His shoulders nearly reached his ears.

“That thing is barely comfortable for sitting, definitely not for sleeping.” Cooper scratched the back of his neck and glanced everywhere but at me. “I’ve got a king-sized bed, and you’re welcome to half. You can bring these blankets with you.”

I opened my mouth to turn him down, but there was something in the way he asked, the way he held tension in his body and stared at the shitty couch that made me change my mind. He didn't seem like the kind of guy to make offers he didn't mean, and a teensy-weensy part of me didn't totally *hate* the idea of sharing a bed with a warm body.

I shut my mouth and smiled. "I like big beds and I cannot lie."

Cooper laughed, and the tension leaked out of the room.

I followed Cooper, and he paused awkwardly at the foot of the bed. It was too dark for me to make out any details, but it felt cozy. At least enough for a few hours of sleep.

"Which side do you want me on?"

"The left." His voice cracked slightly.

I kept my voice quiet, almost a whisper. "Alrighty."

Cooper moved stiffly to get back in bed as I untucked the blankets on the side I was taking, then laid down the blankets from the couch. Something was nagging me about sharing the bed with him, but I didn't know what it was. He'd been extremely generous to me, so I wanted to minimize my disruption, at least on this.

Honestly, I needed the distance as much as he likely did. I never shared beds with men unless traveling with my best friends and we bunked together. I sure as hell hadn't shared with anyone I'd slept with. I didn't stick around long enough after orgasms.

It unnerved me to lie only a couple of feet from him. We rolled onto our sides with our backs facing each other, and I hugged the edge of the bed. I had a feeling there was something more going on with Cooper, and for once, I decided not to make a joke.

"Thanks, Cooper," I said quietly.

"You're welcome. Night."

His bed was soft as a cloud. Instead of thinking about trying to make my next dick appointment, I fell asleep to

thoughts of Cooper laughing at my Hallmark commentary and the slow, rhythmic breaths of the man next to me.

CHAPTER 8

TYLER

Team Tap That Group Text

Ty: If I got murdered, what would you guys say about me on a true-crime show?

Ty: Do you think Bigfoot's real?

Ty: If the Bigfoot lurking outside gets me, I love you guys. Name a beer after me but in a flattering way. No beer trolling.

Ty: It's really hard to sleep in a cabin with a lot of weird sounds. Wind is fucking creepy. I'm jealous you guys are sleeping.



I WAS SWIMMING IN SWEAT. Had Ethan cranked the heat last night? The reptile in a flesh suit should sleep in a onesie and stop making the rest of us suffer. I scrunched my face as my brain struggled to boot. It was borderline sweltering, but I had to admit I was cozy. I snuggled more deeply into the warmth and hummed happily.

It took a few moments before I realized where I was. Not my bedroom. Not my bed. Not alone. A furnace was attached to my back. A furnace with an arm draped over my hip. *Oh god, I'm using his arm as a pillow. Kill me now.*

I didn't share beds with guys and sure as hell didn't cuddle with them. Maybe he was a heavy sleeper and wouldn't notice me sneaking out of bed. While debating my move, I soaked up the warmth for a minute longer.

Cooper's arms stiffened as his even breathing stopped. He yanked back his arm like he'd been burned, and I tried not to take it personally. We'd migrated to the middle of the bed, so I rolled onto my back, closer to the other side, and rubbed my hands over my face to wipe the sleep from my eyes.

"Morning," I said as cheerily as I could before coffee. Cooper stared at the ceiling with eyes open wide. I bit back the remark on the tip of my tongue about how convenient it was that we were both already in bed and decided against a morning wood joke to break the ice. I deserved a Nobel Peace Prize for my restraint.

"Mornin'," Cooper mumbled as he sat up. The blankets pooled at his waist, and I bemoaned that he'd slept in a shirt. It would only take rolling over to faceplant in his lap to take care of his *impressive* morning wood. My own saluted him from the confines of my snug underwear.

I scooted to a sitting position. It was a shame Cooper wasn't taking me up on what I'd clearly offered, but there was something deeper going on than two dudes trapped together and having fun with their dicks, each other's dicks, all the dicks. I wouldn't have gotten so far in my career if I wasn't good at reading people. A war waged behind Cooper's eyes. The man was clearly attracted to me, but something had him holding back, and I wasn't invested enough to find out what it was. Especially with me likely getting out of there in the next couple of hours.

"Mind if I make some coffee?" Surely that would break the ice.

"Of course. Help yourself to anything. I can fix us something for breakfast." He pulled on a sweatshirt as he avoided eye contact. An awkward morning after without the sex.

“I can whip something up since you’ve been generous enough to let me leech off you for another meal. I think I saw eggs in your fridge?”

“Yeah.” He ran his big hand through his long hair that was begging to be gripped while directing his open mouth where I wanted it.

One corner of his mouth turned up in a small smile, almost like he could read my mind. “It sounds like the rain has died down a bit. I’ll head out and assess the tree in the light, then get the chainsaw out after breakfast.”

I checked my phone while Cooper was in the bathroom, then did my business while he geared up to check on the tree. I started a cup of coffee for myself while scoping out his fridge and finding eggs, bacon, and bread. Eggs and toast, I could handle, but I was clueless about cooking bacon. Chef Google suggested I bake it in the oven. Fortunately, Cooper had an oven like Dom’s, so I managed to set it to preheat, then found tinfoil and a cooking sheet.

I heard the ATV coming back when the bacon was nearly done and was starting the scrambled eggs, so I began brewing his coffee so it was ready for him. It was domestic as fuck and made my stomach flop around like the fish in that *Faith No More* video.

I stirred the scrambled eggs with one hand and sipped from the coffee in my other as the mudroom door opened.

“Smells good. I half expected to come back and find the place on fire.”

“Oh ye of little faith.” I watched him peel the wet pants and jacket off with far too much attention. When he entered the kitchen, I turned back to the eggs and caught them before they started sticking.

“I thought you said you don’t know how to cook.”

“I can feed myself and use Google in a pinch, but that’s about it. My roommates suspect I barely know how to make cereal.”

“Hallmark and cooking skills. What else are you hiding from them?”

I pulled his pajamas higher on my waist and swallowed thickly under his teasing stare before scooping the eggs onto our plates. I was basically an open book, but I did keep a secret or two to myself.

He pointed at the steaming cup under his coffee maker. “That for me?”

I nodded. “Weird request, but can you flash a peace sign and hold up the mug?”

“For your friends or your spank bank?”

I sputtered at how easily he teased me back. “Both?”

He laughed and did as I asked.

After I sent them the picture with the caption, “Eat this, assholes,” I went to save the photo as his contact icon and realized I didn’t have his number. Why would I? I didn’t need it, but I wanted it.

“This would be the perfect contact photo. I need your number to save it, and then if someone tries to kidnap me while you’re cutting down the tree, I can call you for help.”

“Because there’s always time to call for help during a surprise kidnapping.” He gave me his number anyway.

I texted him the knife emoji. Vaguely threatening or adorable inside joke?

“How come your roommates think you don’t know how to cook?” He leaned against the counter and crossed one leg over the other. Something about the pose was hot as hell.

“Some people need food and water to survive and vampires need blood, but I live off their exasperated sighs.”

Cooper chuckled.

“We’re only open for half-days on Sundays, so we can have a team meeting after we close. Part of the tradition is taking turns picking a theme for our next potluck dinner at the meeting. I find increasingly inventive ways to fuck with them

through my food choices, and if I knew how to cook or they knew I could Google, I'd have to actually put work into what I brought."

I consistently impressed myself with how I could connect nearly any theme to mac and cheese or something microwavable.

Cooper assessed me. His attention had me squirming. "You like to tease, don't you?"

If he only knew. "Some might say it's my love language."

The oven timer went off.

"I've got it." Cooper slid the oven mitt on and reached over to tug my hips back away from the stove with one hand as he pulled down the oven door with the other. I wasn't sure he realized he'd done it with how apprehensive he had been, but I had to admit I liked being manhandled by him.

He wrapped the crispy bacon in paper towels while I plated the scrambled eggs, then popped the toaster button down with the bread I'd pre-placed. I was impressed with myself. Three different foods were ready at approximately the same time. My chest swelled, watching him dish up something I'd cooked.

"How's it looking out there?" I asked once we settled at the dining table with our food.

"It's a big tree. Might take a while." He looked at me, and then his glance darted away.

"That's no problem as long as you don't mind being stuck with me. I've got to hop on a FaceTime with my roommates for a bit since I'm missing a special brunch before a couple of them have to open the brewery, but otherwise, no plans today."

"Oh shit. Sorry about that. I can call a friend to bring another chainsaw over."

"This is much better than helping Austin deep clean our production area after brunch. Take your time." I gave him a genuine smile.

It was a nice getaway to hang out with a hot guy for a few hours. Even if I wasn't getting sex out of the deal. Sharpening my flirting skills was never a waste of time. I liked Cooper the mountain man.

I licked my lips as I gave him a lingering look. "Mind if I use your shower?"

"Yeah, of course. I'll get you a towel."

"Thanks."

Cooper collected our dishes and offered to do them since I'd cooked.

"Thanks. I'll go brush my teeth."

I stripped out of habit before brushing my teeth. My turquoise panties were jarring in the log cabin bathroom. I wasn't used to seeing myself in them anywhere but at home. When I decided to wear them yesterday, I thought they would give me a confidence boost for my meeting at the coast and get me excited for the guy I was supposed to meet up with last night. I didn't expect to be wearing them while stranded with some stranger in the woods.

There was a knock at the door a second before Cooper's voice. "Here's a towel—"

I dropped the toothbrush in the sink as I caught Cooper's eyes in the mirror. I'd picked up some vibes from Cooper that he might not hate the idea of finding men attractive, but seeing a man in lace panties was entirely different.

I squared my shoulders and waited for the laugh or disgust. I never let people see me in the panties except on the extremely rare occasion I hooked up with someone who'd explicitly mentioned they were seeking someone with that interest. After wearing them to a generic hookup and having the guy kick me out because of it, I'd learned to be more careful. Fucking toxic masculinity.

I braced for one of many possible reactions from Cooper but never expected the hunger in his eyes.

"Expecting a jockstrap?" I asked.

CHAPTER 9

COOPER

When my brain processed what my eyes were taking in, my mouth fell open wide enough for a train to drive through. It wasn't the miles of bare flesh and toned muscle that had my nervous system in overdrive. No, my attention had latched onto the lacy turquoise fabric covering Tyler's pert ass. The underwear—panties?—were cut high on his long, muscular thighs and a pouch cupped him snugly in the front.

I had no idea how much time had passed. It could've been years for as aware I was of anything but that gorgeous man standing there in the sexiest underwear I'd ever seen. He shifted on his feet, which broke me out of my lust-addled haze.

I expected him to make a joke to break the tension. From the little I knew of him, that seemed to be his go-to, but I sure as hell didn't expect his jaw to clench, the defiant square to his shoulders, or the flash of vulnerability in his eyes. The expression was all wrong. He should stand proudly in his undeniable sex appeal. He held my stare in the mirror like he dared me to make fun of him.

“Expecting a jockstrap?”

The defensiveness in his tone made me wince. My gut said to be careful with my next words—that whatever I said mattered in a way I didn't fully understand.

“Not at all. I'm just surprised to see turquoise because you seem like more of a green guy, but I gotta admit that might be your color. It's definitely the right cut.” I gave his body a slow once-over so he could read the truth on my face. “And fabric.”

I found his stare in the mirror and held it. I didn't try to hide my growing erection or walk away and pretend I hadn't accidentally walked in on him. I should've knocked. What the hell had I been thinking?

Tyler let out a shaky breath. "You're right. Green is my favorite color. I've got a green pair that's solid lace." He sounded more confident, and the look he gave me could melt steel.

I wanted to see not only the green ones but every pair he owned. It would give me jerk-off fodder for months. I wanted to hook my fingertips into the waistband of the panties and slowly slide them down his thighs, letting the hair catch the lace. I wanted to kiss his neck and lick his nipples until a wet spot marred the silky material from how turned on he was.

Tyler turned and stepped toward me, prowling, clearly falling back into the air of confidence that had surrounded him since we'd met. I let out a breath that was half-relief, half-terror. I glanced at his lips and watched the corner of them tilt.

His hand brushed mine, sending a shock wave through my veins, as he took the towel from my arms and turned to place it on the bathroom counter. I took the opportunity to stare at his ass before finding him smirking at me. The pheromones poured out of him. Every look, every calculated move he made screamed that he wanted to fuck me.

Jesus, I wanted to fuck him. I wanted to push the panties far enough down his thighs to reveal his cock and suck on it until he shook underneath me, in front of me, and on top of me. Anywhere.

I'd wanted to get back out there, and the universe had handed me a present wrapped in lace. The only thing missing was a big red bow on his dick. I chuckled when I noticed the bow on the waistband of his panties right above his growing bulge.

Screw it. I have this gorgeous guy in my house who I'll probably never see again. It's time.

I reached out and gripped his hips, pulling him against me.

“Oh, fuck yeah,” Tyler managed before my lips slammed against his, hungry.

I kissed like I was starved. Tyler was a juicy steak dangled in front of a lion that hadn't eaten in days. Technically, three years. I was fucking famished, and Tyler tasted like a perfectly prepared filet mignon.

He wrapped his arms around my shoulders, slid his fingers into my hair, tugging gently, and angled my head exactly where he wanted. Despite how badly I wanted to manhandle him, I let it happen. I loved the show of power.

My dick was hard enough to pound nails. His earthy scent, the warmth of his body, the bulk of a man in my arms again had all my nerve endings firing.

“Well, that confirms it,” he said as he kissed down my jaw.

“Huh?” I blinked.

“That you're into men.”

My fingers itched to slide around Tyler's back and slip beneath the waistband of his panties, but the heat had started to clear. My desperate need scared the hell out of me, so I pulled back, breathing hard.

I'd kissed someone else. I'd touched another man without Aleck watching with his hungry, approving stare. Kissing Tyler hit as right as it did wrong. A dam in me broke. Guilt and freedom crashed in alternating waves.

Tyler's lips were puffy. “Everything okay?”

I ran my fingers through my hair. *What the hell should I tell him?* I could be honest and dredge up the death of my husband while killing every boner within a five-mile radius, or I could brush it off. That was a dick move. Or come up with some excuse, but I was a shit liar. The longer I thought about it, the faster I could see Tyler's expression shuttering. It wasn't his fault I was a mess.

“My husband's dead,” I blurted.

He blinked a few times. I could've done better with the delivery.

“That really fucking sucks.”

A laugh burst out of me. That wasn't the usual response I got. “Yeah, it does.” I cleared my throat and pushed on. “And I haven't been with anyone. In a while.”

Understanding dawned in Tyler's bright-blue eyes, but not pity. I was grateful. Tyler cupped my cheek and brushed his lips softly against mine in a gesture so gentle and unexpected that it took my breath away.

“I'm gonna shower, then maybe we can talk over coffee?”

My dick practically growled in frustration. It wanted to do the talking. I licked my lips again and tasted a hint of his toothpaste.

“I'll leave you to it.” I turned before I made a fool of myself, but I wasn't perfect, so I looked over my shoulder and saw Tyler slowly lowering the panties over the top of his ass to reveal a tantalizing new landscape. And the top of a tattoo that looked like Princess Peach?

When I caught his eyes in the mirror, he winked. I groaned and closed the door behind me, walking down the hallway to the soundtrack of his laughter.

CHAPTER 10

TYLER

Once the door closed behind Cooper and my laughter faded, I leaned forward, clutched the edge of the counter, and let out a long breath. I hadn't expected Cooper's reaction. My dick thickened as I remembered the unfiltered desire on his face.

I supposed as far as first reactions went, I couldn't have asked for a better one. That kiss had been fucking *hot*. The only thing that would've made it hotter was if he'd grabbed my ass and lifted me onto the counter. Yum.

As I hopped in the shower, my brain continued along that path. What if Cooper had teased his fingertips under the lace? With my dick fully on board with the scenario, I figured it couldn't hurt to take the edge off, especially if I would be around Cooper for a little while longer. Empty balls led to a clear mind, and I needed that for our conversation.

I pumped a squirt of body wash into my palm and gripped myself exactly how I liked. My strokes inched toward frantic as I imagined Cooper ripping the lace from my body and quieting my grumble about the wasted money on ruined panties as he swallowed me to the root. It didn't take long before my cum followed the suds swirling down the drain.

I took longer than necessary to wash my body. On a scale of one to as awkward as an elephant driving a convertible, I worried how things would be post-kiss. Especially after jerking off with his face in the forefront of my mind. I shook my head. I'd jerked off thinking about plenty of other guys before. Being trapped in a cabin with a guy I'd fantasized over

wasn't anywhere near the top of the list of the most embarrassing things I'd done.

I got out of the shower and pulled on the pajamas again. I'd stolen Dom's sweatshirts a few times on camping trips when I hadn't packed enough, but it was different wearing Cooper's clothes. As I left the bathroom, I heard him putzing around the kitchen. Maybe we could ignore the whole thing, though I wasn't sure how either of us could deny the chemistry in that kiss.

"Great water pressure. I didn't expect it for a cabin in the woods."

Cooper glanced over his shoulder and smiled. There was apprehension behind it. "Did you expect something like a slow drool?"

"More like taking a piss."

"Not to shame water sports, but I prefer a stronger stream."

I snorted. Cooper handed me a mug of coffee, and I sat.

"Mind if I join my friends' brunch for a bit before we talk? I lost track of time."

"Not at all. I'll get out of your hair."

"No need. You can get a glimpse of the zoo animals I call friends." I winked and called them on FaceTime.

Cooper sat off-screen and silently laughed at the usual chaos that descended when all of us got together. I was glad to learn that everything had gone well with Parker's meeting and the possible new job, so now he could relocate to Dahlia Springs and be closer to Ethan. It brought me joy to see my friends happy.

Despite the guys angling for me to put Cooper on camera, I ignored them and hung out for half an hour.

A tense silence stretched after I hung up. Cooper's gaze had darted to my lap at least a dozen times during the call.

"I actually have several green pairs." So much for ignoring it. It wouldn't be a day that ended in *Y* if I kept my mouth shut.

Cooper choked as he took a drink of his coffee.

“Easy there, big guy.”

“Do you have a lot of pairs?”

“Every color of the rainbow is represented.”

One corner of his mouth quirked up. “Did I catch a Princess Peach from Mario Bros tattoo?”

I beamed. “Yes! It’s a friendship tattoo.”

He looked puzzled. “That’s a new one.”

“Me and the brewery guys each got our go-to Mario Kart character tattooed back in college.”

“On your asses?”

“Nah. Just me. How could I not put Princess Peach on my perfect peach?”

A gust of air left his nose with his startled chuckle. “How indeed.”

I didn’t want the conversation to veer back toward dissecting my underwear interests, so I scrambled for another conversation topic. The nice thing to do would be to ask about Cooper’s husband. I enjoyed learning about people, but it was also a lot. Weighted. I should be running for the hills with all that baggage, but I was curious.

“So, you were married? Which of you had the horror movie obsession? The whole cabin in the woods murder vibe.”

Cooper smiled fondly. “That was all Aleck. He thought moving to the woods would bring us closer to nature or cleanse our chakras or make us better people. I don’t know.”

“Yikes.” I inwardly punched myself as his eyes widened. *Way to put your foot in it, dumbass.*

“Aleck would’ve liked you.” He looked lost in thought for a moment, then smiled. “If he were here, he would’ve suggested a threesome.”

My eyes widened. I knew a lot of queer married folks who practiced ethical nonmonogamy, but I hadn’t gotten that sense

from Cooper.

“You guys lure a lot of unsuspecting victims out here for threesomes?” I asked the last while making air quotes. I half expected Cooper to roll his eyes or for it to be the joke that pushed too far, which was usually what happened. I was a fun guy to be around for a limited time, but my personality could be a lot. It was amazing I’d found friends who’d stuck with me for so long.

Cooper laughed. “Occasionally. I was the monogamous one in the marriage. He was happy to practice monogamy for me, and I agreed to something different with him every once in a while. We found a way to make it work for us.”

“That’s actually kind of sweet.” I sat straighter at a passing thought, wondering if his late husband would’ve liked the panties too. “I would’ve been his type, huh?”

Cooper caught my eye, and I saw a spark there. A flame arced between us.

“You would’ve been. For both of us.”

Yes! Here we go.

“Tell me more about how hot I am.” I dropped my chin onto my hand and batted my lashes.

“Oh yeah. Definitely would’ve liked you.” He traced the rim of his mug with his fingertip. “It’s been hard to get back out there. He passed suddenly from a brain aneurysm, and it took me a long time to even wrap my head around that, let alone imagine worrying about someone else.”

I read between the lines. “You haven’t been with anyone since he passed?”

He shook his head.

It might’ve been my dick thinking, but we were on the same page ninety-nine percent of the time. So was my mouth because it usually began talking before my brain joined the party. It was the perfect scenario. Hot sex before I happily returned home. I wouldn’t have to worry about having the

whole no-repeats conversation, and he could get over the hurdle without anyone demanding more.

“I have an idea.” There went my mouth again. Cooper arched his eyebrow. “I’m better at casual sex than I am at selling beer, and I’m *great* at selling beer. So...I could help you rip off that bandage. The bandage being your dry spell if that wasn’t clear.”

Cooper stared at me. If he said no, I could find someone else when I got home, but if he said yes, it was a hell of a way to spice up a morning.

Cooper abruptly stood, leaving his chair scraping against the floor and rocking on its legs. He grabbed my hand and yanked me up, pulling me to his bedroom. Less mountain man and more caveman. I liked it.



COOPER STOPPED at the foot of his bed. I couldn’t tell if he was about to lose his nerve, but I didn’t want to be the one to make the first move. Given the circumstances, that needed to come from him.

Before I could even think of something flippant to say to break the ice or give him an out, he stepped into my space, curled his fingers around the back of my neck, gripped my hip with his other hand, and pulled me in for a kiss. It was tentative at first but eager.

I lost myself to the battle of our tongues. As much as I liked to get my dick touched or touch somebody else’s, I really enjoyed kissing. But the rules I set for myself with sex didn’t always support that. No repeats usually meant quick hookups, and most guys didn’t worry about kissing during a quick fuck in a club restroom. Especially when mouths were often full with something else.

Cooper kissed me like he had nothing better to do. Like we were teenagers and kissing was the journey and the

destination. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been kissed like that, if ever. Being a gay teen in small-town Dahlia Springs hadn't left room for much. Most people weren't out back then, so quick hand jobs in the locker room had been my sexual bread and butter for a couple of years.

Cooper kissed a path down my neck, and I wrapped my arms around him and tugged him close.

"I got off in the shower, but I don't think it'll be an issue going again." *Seriously, brain?*

Cooper aimed a mischievous smile at me. "That makes two of us."

"Okay, that's hot." I pulled him in for another wet kiss as we stood there groping each other, our dicks doing their best to get hard, pressed between our bodies. I was ready to get to the sex, but each time I tried to strip off a piece of Cooper's clothing, he grabbed my hands and kissed me deeply, trailing his fingertips down my side.

I wasn't sure if my urge to move forward had more to do with habit or avoiding the intensity of whatever was happening between us. I reminded myself it wasn't some quick hookup with someone I met off an app. I was helping Cooper get his groove back, and if that meant being thorough, I could be patient. I was used to hurried sex, but there was nothing hurried about Cooper's movements.

Cooper must've had his fill of making out because he lifted my shirt—well, *his* shirt—over my head and gently pushed me onto the bed. He teased my nipples with his tongue and fingers before moving to take the pajamas off me. He hissed when he discovered I was going commando.

"Didn't want to put dirty underwear back on. Even pretty ones."

"Lucky me." He kissed across my stomach.

"I was tested last month and am on PrEP."

"I've been tested since...and...no one." He swallowed.

I leaned up and teased my fingers along his side to keep him in the moment. He locked eyes with me and pushed me back on the bed with a hungry kiss. Before I could flip him on his back, he kissed down my body.

He had me writhing on the bed by the time he stood and removed his clothes.

“Jesus.”

“Name’s Cooper, in case you forgot.”

“Smart-ass,” I said, laughing.

“You look surprised,” he said before staring at my dick like it was a four-scoop cone of his favorite flavor.

“I wasn’t sure what to expect.” I had to admit the way he eyed my dick made me feel good. Real good.

“It might’ve been a few years, but this isn’t my first time. I know my way around a man’s body.”

My lips slowly curled into a grin as I tucked my hands behind my head. “All right then. Show me what you got.”

“Gladly.”

I expected him to take the head of my dick in his mouth or lick me from root to tip, but he surprised me again by going straight for my balls. He nuzzled them, played with them, made me wish I stretched regularly so I could spread my legs even wider. I’d forgotten how much I loved having my balls played with. Guys usually went for the kielbasa and left the peanuts alone.

Cooper took his time mouthing his way up my shaft, licking the precum pooling on my tip. He was slow and sure, almost forceful. No, that wasn’t right. Intense. He treated my body more like a temple than I did. He gave me head in a way that was slow and leisurely. A way I hadn’t experienced. I wasn’t used to people taking their time with me.

Alarm bells pinged in my head, but my dick told them to shut up and enjoy it. I wanted Cooper to do whatever he needed to find his groove again because anyone who wanted sex deserved to have it. Not languish away in a remote cabin.

And if that meant I had to endure an A+ blowjob, I would happily make the sacrifice.

The pressure built slowly in my gut, pushing outward through my body. Cooper jerked me with sure strokes as he mouthed my balls again.

“So close. Fuck.”

Cooper watched, enraptured, as he jerked the cum from me and it spilled onto my stomach. I arched forward as I succumbed to the pleasure. My muscles contracted better than my last ab workout as my toes curled. I wasn't sure if the relaxed sigh came from him or me. Jesus, I'd come so hard I would've sworn in court that I left my body. That was the only thing that could explain why my first thought was that I wanted to do it again. That wasn't a line of thinking I was interested in entertaining, so I needed to distract myself.

I sat up and gripped Cooper's stiff cock. He wrapped his hand around mine, and together, we jerked him until he spilled over our fists.

“That's a lot of cum,” he said as he looked between us.

“Congratulations, champ. The pipes are cleared.”

CHAPTER 11

COOPER

With Tyler softly snoring, I carefully extricated myself from the bed without waking him from his post-orgasm snooze. I'd tried falling asleep, but I couldn't do it. There was too much on my mind. Thoughts had crowded in, taking up all the space as soon as the blissful haze cleared. Sharing the bed with him last night had been a kindness, but doing it now would be intimate in a way I craved too much. I couldn't do that to myself.

I needed to think. I needed to go to my spot, weather be damned. On my way out, I passed the folded pile of Tyler's clothes with his panties on top. The memory of discovering him naked underneath my pajama pants sent fire racing through my veins. He might not want to free-ball it in jeans back to his place. I could at least wash his clothes so he was comfortable later. Underwear like that probably couldn't go into the washing machine. I quickly googled and learned how to hand-wash them. It only took a few minutes before I had them drying by a heat vent. As soon as I did it, I panicked. Washing his underwear was weird. *Shit. I need to get myself sorted.*

Definitely time for a visit to my spot. I was already liking the guy enough to want to make sure he was comfortable in his underwear on the drive home.

I bundled in my rain gear and walked through the trees to the creek where I often went to feel close to Aleck. While walking, I texted Danita to let her know I'd survived the

storm, hoping to cut her off from an impromptu visit while Tyler was here.

I sat on the stump from a dying tree I'd cut for one of my pieces as I watched the creek flow more like a river after the storm. I'd carved the stump into a throne for Aleck because of how much time he'd spent out here. Good thing I'd made it comfortable since I'd taken up residence there after he passed. I loved being able to give new life to dying trees. Aleck always called me a softie.

Rain dripped from the bill of my hood as I rubbed my palms on my thighs. Some times more than others, it was tough to start conversations with him. Sucking the dick of a guy surely qualified as a legit tough conversation. But even on the harder days, I always felt better after I did.

"I bet you're jealous from wherever you are. You probably watched this morning and got a good show, huh?" I chuckled. It sounded rusty. "Don't make a habit of watching, you perv."

I could almost hear Aleck's laughter while telling me he was my favorite perv. He'd never been wrong about that. I relaxed into the conversation, grateful I could talk to him without sobbing these days. I spoke not like he was the husband I still had—I understood he was gone, and he wouldn't want me to stop my life to pine for him—but he'd been my best friend. The person I'd cared about most in the world. So I tried to talk to him like I would my best friend.

"I'm thinking about dating again. Can you imagine? My skills have gotten rusty since college. If you had your way, I would've brought a date to your funeral. But I always moved slower than you. You just had to race me to the afterlife, didn't you?"

The sharp shrill of a crow's call pierced the wind rustling the surrounding branches. I closed my eyes and swallowed the lump in my throat. The crows had become my company in my loneliest moments, but I should have expected nothing less with how much Aleck had loved those things.

Once I lost feeling in my face from the whipping wind, I walked back to the house. I wanted more time with Tyler but

wasn't deluded enough to expect anything from our brief time together. He'd made it clear he wasn't interested in anything more than some fun and, frankly, sexual charity. Despite how well we got along and my wanting to know more about the enigma of a man who secretly watched Hallmark movies, said the goofiest things, was great in bed, and loved to wear lacy panties, I needed to be grateful to him for helping me through a tough spot. He'd gotten me over the initial hurdle of being with someone new without Aleck there.

Rain dripped down my hood while the wind pushed it into my face as I walked back. I'd expected more internal struggle when I'd practically dragged Tyler to my bedroom, but I supposed my dick overrode my brain. When I'd let myself imagine having sex with some faceless stranger before, I had worried about being unable to keep it up or sobbing in the middle of it when I saw someone other than Aleck. That hadn't happened with Tyler. He'd completely consumed me and kept me fully immersed in the moment.

Maybe I wasn't beyond repair after all.

I reached the shed I used as my studio and unlocked it to grab a chainsaw. My mind wandered to him sleeping in my bed as I hovered in the doorway, staring at the chainsaw, knowing I needed to cut down the tree and give him the freedom to leave. But I wanted a little more time with him. Just a tiny bit more. Enough for another orgasm?

The irrational part of my brain won and had me shutting and locking the door. I could test the waters. I wasn't a kidnapper or the forest-dwelling creep he joked about, but I was acting impulsively. Needing to stay in the bubble longer.

When I reached the house, I removed my rain gear and quietly moved to the bedroom in case Tyler was still sleeping. I found him lying on his side in bed, blanket around his waist, bare chest on display, as he swiped his phone screen. I took the moment to watch him before he realized I was there. Only a moment because, again, *not* creepy.

When Aleck and I had had the occasional threesome, part of the rules we'd set for ourselves was that we'd never bring

someone back to our home. This had been our space. So we'd always gone to hotels or the other person's house.

Seeing Tyler there did something funny to my insides. How could a guy have me so wrecked in less than a day?

He looked up and smiled. Deep lines formed around his eyes. The marks of a man who smiled often.

"How is it outside?" he asked.

"Wet and windy, but better than yesterday."

We stared at each other, neither of us mentioning being stranded. I hoped he wanted to stay longer, but I needed to gauge the situation, so I lied. I *never* lied. It was a white lie—still, I didn't know what came over me.

"There's an issue with my chainsaw. I'll need to spend some time working on it." I paused and waited for Tyler to look disappointed, but he smiled and seemed to bite the inside of his cheek. "I could ask that friend to swing by with one now or..."

"Or you could work on it later or tomorrow?"

I grinned. "I could definitely do that."

"Aw, shucks. How are we going to fill the time?" He tossed his phone on the bed and patted the space next to him.

There was nothing sexy about the way I hurled myself onto the bed, but the way Tyler's laughter filled the room made me feel like I could do no wrong.

TEAM TAP THAT GROUP TEXT

Ty: I'm going to stay another night.

Ethan: Yeah, you are. [heart eyes emoji]

Ty: It's not like that. He's having issues with his chainsaw.

Dom: There's medication for that.

Ty: I want to flip you off, but that was actually a good one.

Dom: [GIF of a man taking a bow]

Austin: How bad is the weather there?

Ty: It's still raining pretty hard. The forest is creepy AF.

Ethan: Good thing you have a sexy lumberjack to protect you.

Ty: I've had to break into the cheese stash.

Austin: You better not eat all the squeaky cheese.

Ty: *crackle sounds* Sorry, I can't hear you. The reception is awful in this storm. *more crackle sounds*

Austin: I still have a key to Dom's house. Good luck finding the dead fish I'm going to leave in there.

Ty: [photo of unopened cheese curds]

Austin: That's what I thought. You don't promise a man squeaky cheese, then deny him.

Dom: Want me to come get you? My truck can handle rain.

Ty: Did you forget there's a tree between me and the road?

Dom: Is the land on each side of the road lava? Can you not walk on it or, gasp, step over the tree?

Ty: But there're spiders on the tree!

Dom: [eyeroll emoji] You're so fucking ridiculous.

Ty: That's why you love me. [angel emoji]

CHAPTER 12

TYLER

Cooper—no, Coop. We'd touched each other's dicks, so I was going with a nickname. Coop winked and said something about going to make us some coffee. As soon as he left the bedroom, I flopped back onto the pillow and stared at the ceiling, stunned.

I had insinuated that not only was I okay with staying there longer, but overnight. Again. Voluntarily. Mr. Allergic to Repeat Performances was down for a fuck fest with the same person. Sleeping together and then *sleeping* together. I shuddered.

I knew Dom had a chainsaw, and I could've asked him to bring it out today. For some incomprehensible reason, those words didn't come out of my mouth. I didn't *hate* the idea of staying another night, so clearly, there was something wrong with me. Some sort of tree disease? Spores in the air that made me make ridiculous decisions? Or simply dick-desperate and Coop was more of a sure thing than anyone I'd meet on an app.

I scrubbed my hands down my face. Maybe it didn't technically count as a repeat because we were still trapped in the house. It wasn't like we'd had sex, parted ways, then gotten together to do it again. Technically, it was still the same "time," right? Yeah, that made sense.

I groaned. Once or twice, I'd let a guy blow me, or I'd blown him in a club restroom when we'd had sex during a previous encounter, but that was only when a lot of time had passed, so we were both clear there wasn't something more. I

was diligent in my no-repeat rule and openly communicated that to the person or persons I was about to get busy with. No shame, no messiness. But staying at Coop's house all weekend, possibly spending the rest of our day fucking, skirted the edge of messy.

A few minutes later, after I'd called AAA, Coop returned with coffee and the glow of a satisfied man. He handed me one, then sat in the armchair in the corner instead of getting cozy on the bed. I appreciated the space.

"While you were out, I called AAA to cancel the pickup," I said while staring at the comforter. "I wasn't sure how long it would take to clear the tree, so I told them I would call back when it was done." I looked up at Coop and caught a quick, sweet smile on his face. A smile that triggered one of my own.

"Yeah, that makes sense."

"What would you normally do on a stormy Sunday in the murder forest? Polish your tree stethoscope?"

"I only do that every third Wednesday," he deadpanned.

I laughed. Maybe that was why I wanted to stick around. I enjoyed hanging out with people who could keep up with—or at least tolerate—my humor.

"Probably dozing off while watching TV. It's a thrilling life I lead."

I ignored his self-deprecating tone. "Well, since you've got a day off, what do you want to do?"

I licked my lips at the heat in Coop's gaze. He popped up from his chair, and instead of striding toward me, he left the bedroom again.

"I want to check something. Be right back."

"Sure. I'll just lie here looking hot then." I reached under the blanket and gave my dick a stroke.

Coop came back with folded material in his hand. He walked over and handed it to me, then rubbed the back of his neck.

“I hand-washed them earlier and laid them in front of the heater to dry, in case you’d be more comfortable in your own underwear. Your other clothes are in the dryer. I googled how to wash these and read not to put them in the machine.”

I stared at my clean and pristine panties, then looked at Coop. “You washed these for me?” I struggled to process the gesture.

He frowned. “Is that weird? That’s probably weird. I shouldn’t have touched your underwear. I didn’t *touch them* touch them, but—” He let out a resigned groan.

I grinned. Coop not only accepted that part of me but encouraged it. There was an unfamiliar and uncomfortable sensation in my chest. Probably heartburn from too much coffee. The doubt on his face made that feeling in my chest sharpen. I yanked the blanket off to reveal my naked body. “How about you put these on me so we can get them all dirty again?”



“OF COURSE THE husband did it. He was ‘conveniently’ out of town on a ‘business trip’ when she was killed.” I shoved a handful of popcorn in my mouth.

“But it could be that creepy guy at her work. See? He’s got a murder look about him.”

Our fuck fest had turned into true-crime time when neither of us could get it up again. But if Coop wanted to try again, I would do my best to rally. A piece of him seemed to unwind with each orgasm.

I hadn’t expected to lounge on his couch in our underwear with a giant bowl of popcorn between us, but I didn’t hate it. Turned out to be a relaxing evening, which I needed after a stressful few weeks at work.

“My husband and I used to place bets on who the killer was. A couple of shows are written to keep you guessing until the end.”

I might have to ask and make a note of them for later.

Coop tensed next to me. “Sorry.”

“For what?”

He frowned. “Bringing up Aleck.”

I frowned. “Why are you apologizing for that?”

“Because it makes people sad when I talk about my dead husband.”

“Not me. I didn’t know him.” I replayed the words in my head at Coop’s wide eyes. “Okay, that sounds like something a heartless murderer on these shows would say. I mean, since I didn’t know him, it doesn’t hurt me the same way. I’d like to hear about him.” Which was true. I had to admit I was curious about the guy who had lived with Coop in the middle of nowhere.

Coop tilted his head and studied me before turning back to the television. “Aleck was the reason I watched this stuff initially. Well, his sister, my best friend, Danita. She made us watch true crime and Hallmark movies. She says she needs the balance of good and evil. He started liking them, and then I was outnumbered.”

“Majority rules will get ya every time.”

A corner of his mouth curled up in a faint smile. “He was obsessed with crows too.”

“That explains all...that.” I vaguely gestured around the room. There were at least ten crow-related knick-knacks or art pieces within sight. “What did he like so much about crows? That a group of them is called a murder?”

Coop let out a shaky laugh. He still held his body tense, but his shoulders seemed to relax some. “It’s almost like you knew him.”

“Is that really why?”

“It started as a kid and continued into college. He was part of a research project that involved crows, then he volunteered at a bird sanctuary, where he befriended a few crows.”

“A bird sanctuary sounds like a cool place to volunteer.” I shifted toward him, tossed a piece of popcorn in the air, and caught it on my tongue.

“He loved it. But when it closed down, he started volunteering at other places, like a queer youth shelter.”

“The one in Newburg? We regularly fundraise for several nonprofits at the brewery, and that’s one we work with often.” We must’ve started working with them after Aleck had already passed.

As I thought about it, I vaguely remembered someone mentioning a beloved volunteer who’d unexpectedly died. I sat up straight when I recalled something. “The crow memorial! That’s for Aleck?”

Cooper’s eyes filled with tears, but he smiled. “They put up a memorial for him?”

“Yeah. I see it when I drop off our donation check each month.” I told him about the framed illustration of a crow with pinned notes of love all around it.

Coop squeezed my wrist. “Thank you for telling me.” He stared off into the distance. “I might need to consider paying the shelter a visit.”

“I’m sure they would lose their shit over that. Aleck is a fucking legend in that place.”

Coop beamed and began peppering me with questions about the charity work we did at the brewery. I told him how I’d started volunteering in high school with Austin and my best friend, Gavin, to boost our college applications. It turned out we liked it, so we’d kept up with it ever since.

We continued swapping stories about our lives. Light, easy talk as shows played in the background and the popcorn bowl emptied. I was glad I’d stayed. It was fun hanging out with Cooper for more than the sex.

CHAPTER 13

COOPER

Danita: Still surviving the storm?

Cooper: Yup. You still doing good? I'm glad you escaped the bulk of it.

Danita: The power surge knocked out a freezer at the market. Mother nature's cranky.

Cooper: Shit. Lose a lot of stuff?

Danita: Thankfully, no. What are you up to today? Working?

Cooper: Nope. Front office rescheduled today's clients since the weather is still bad enough to be unsafe.



“You sure you don’t mind giving me a ride?” Tyler paused with his hand on the passenger-side door handle of my truck. A steady rain fell onto his jacket and absorbed into the material. The man needed an actual rain jacket.

“No problem at all. I’ve got to go grocery shopping anyway.” No way in hell would I admit wanting to drive him home to get more time with him.

The tow truck had come and gone twenty minutes ago, and there was no reason to put it off any longer. We'd had a leisurely morning of breakfast and blowjobs. I'd taught Tyler how to make omelets before I'd gone out to finally cut the tree up. He'd joined me, calling out lewd comments about my muscles while I worked, interspersed with serious questions about being a "tree doctor." The guy cracked me up. I'd never met anyone like him. I'd probably think about him while felling trees for the next several months at least.

He'd brought light into my home over the past two days, and I wasn't ready to descend back into darkness. Maybe I didn't need to. Tyler had shown me that some people weren't freaked out when I talked about Aleck. I might get lucky enough to meet more guys like Tyler.

I genuinely liked the guy. A current pulsed through me, wanting me to ask him to hang out, but it was a bad idea for so many reasons. I'd always been a relationship guy, but this wasn't a relationship situation. He'd made it clear he wasn't interested in pursuing anything with anyone, and even if he was, it was too soon for me. If—a big if—and when I was ready to date again, I needed to go slow.

He'd landed in my life like a guardian angel with a great dick to ferry me back into the land of people-ing. I embraced gratitude for what he'd given me as I drove us toward Dahlia Springs, and I hoped we would become friends. I could do with more of those, especially given how many faded after my life became about surviving grief.

"Got a busy week ahead?" I wanted to avoid any awkward silences. It didn't need to be awkward.

"Yup. I'm trying to line up some meetings for the next few weeks."

"What kind of meetings?"

Tyler grew even more animated when he talked about the brewery. "My focus this year is on placing our beers in niche and community markets. We've been focused on selling to taprooms, grocery chains, and restaurants, but it's time we deepen our reach. It'll help with brand recognition."

I listened to him talk about marketing things I didn't fully comprehend since marketing was never part of my job. The boss had someone else at work doing that, thank god. And my art? Marketing required showing it to people.

I considered offering to connect him with Danita since she owned a popular market, but that was too much. Tyler didn't need my help when it came to his business, and doing that would probably come off as a clingy attempt to entangle us when all he probably wanted to do was wish me well and move on to the next guy. No hard feelings. Thanks for the great sex.

Tyler asked me about my upcoming "tree patients" as we rolled into Dahlia Springs. It was a charming town with its Victorian homes and brick downtown buildings. I liked that it was rural but close enough to go to Portland for a better selection of activities and shopping.

After growing up in Houston and moving to Portland for a football scholarship, I'd expected I would want to stick to cities. A place like Dahlia Springs would've been too small to consider back then, let alone where I lived now, which wasn't even a town but a series of addresses assigned to a zip code at the base of the Oregon Coast Range.

Tyler navigated me to a cute neighborhood filled with personality homes from historic Victorians to seventies ranch style to modern two-levels. He had me park in front of a two-story Victorian home painted light blue with white trim and a red door. It was in decent shape but could use some cosmetic work. I itched to work on the wooden railing around the porch.

"Jesus Christ," he muttered.

Four men stood on the porch with expressions ranging from dour to eager.

"I take it those are your friends and co-owners?" I tried to keep the laughter from my voice, but I'd clearly failed, given the glare Tyler shot my way.

"And *former* brother who's got one hell of a noogie coming his way."

A laugh burst out of me as I parked along the curb in front of the house. “What are you? Twelve?”

“Hey, don’t knock my sibling torture techniques.”

“I’m nearly a decade older than my brother, so I missed out on my sibling torture education.” And he was in the middle of a Peace Corps stint, so we weren’t in contact often. My family had been there when I lost Aleck, but we weren’t particularly close.

“Assholes. We’re closed Mondays, and they’re usually scattered.” He stared at his phone as it buzzed again in his hand.

“Your friends?”

“Not for long,” he muttered. “They want to meet the infamous Cooper, and they’re going to be obnoxious. Fair warning. You can back out now.”

“I’m infamous after two days?” That pleased me more than I cared to admit. A selfish, dark part of me wanted to leave a mark on Tyler’s life.

“Took one photo.” He winked.

I laughed. “Let’s go. You promised me beer.”

Tyler’s mouth curved into a teasing smile. “And I always deliver on my promises. Let’s go.”

After everything Tyler had told me about his best friends-turned-business partners, I wanted to meet them.

Four very different men greeted us as we stepped onto the porch. One wore a flannel shirt, was average height, with dark hair and bright-blue eyes that studied me shrewdly. Next to him was a smiling, shorter man with lighter brown hair. He looked like the friendliest of the motley crew. A guy with hair the same color as Tyler’s was next. He was shorter and wore a bow tie and snug vest over his thicker torso. Last was a guy who looked like he wouldn’t entertain an ounce of anyone’s shit. He also wore flannel and his arms were crossed over his chest.

Tyler sighed. “Seriously, guys?” He turned to me. “This is Austin, my cousin and head brewer. You can thank him for the great beer.” He pointed at the first guy as he spoke, then went down the line. “Ethan runs our taproom. Seth, my brother, used to eat crayons. Might still eat crayons. My parents put up with a lot,” he stage-whispered.

“Our parents wanted to try again when they didn’t get perfection on the first attempt. Then they had me and stopped.”

Tyler laughed. “Well played, bro. And this is Dom. He’s not as much of an asshole as he looks.”

“Debatable,” Austin said.

“Fuck you,” Dom said gruffly.

“How the hell did you guys know I was so close? Or were you creeping out the windows for the last hour?”

Austin held up his phone. “Find My Friends.”

“Oh god. I forgot you set that up.”

“I didn’t want another Forest Park incident,” Austin said.

I looked at Tyler and raised my eyebrow. “Forest Park incident?”

“Don’t worry about it. Shall we? I promised Coop some beer.”

Coop? I caught my smile before it ran away from me.

“He disappeared from a bar and called us, drunk off his ass, to say he was stranded in the woods without his pants,” Ethan supplied cheerfully.

I stared at him, wide-eyed.

“What? I was in my twenties. I did dumb shit back then.”

“Back then?” Dom snorted.

“Find My Friends will come in handy if we need a way to collect your body in case you pull that shit again,” Austin said.

Tyler nodded sagely. “This pretty face deserves an open casket.”

“Sorry about these morbid weirdos. Good to meet you.” Seth held out his hand and shook mine. The rest of the guys followed suit with handshakes and friendly smiles. There wasn’t a huge family resemblance beyond the hair color until Seth smiled. Then I saw it. I wondered if Seth always wore bow ties. My brain attempted to conjure an image of Tyler in nothing but panties and a matching bow tie, but I shut it down. That was over.

“Dom’s the only one who doesn’t have to have that feature turned on because ‘he’s the boss.’” I’d never seen more sarcastic air quotes.

Dom’s lips twitched. “Don’t need you nosy nellies all in my business.”

“Nosy nellies? My goodness, Esther. We wouldn’t dare.” Ethan pretended to clutch his pearls.

“How did you survive a weekend with my brother? I don’t know if I should give you an award or pray for your well-being. Are you okay?”

I laughed as Tyler swatted the back of Seth’s head, but he ducked just in time. Clearly, it was a move that happened often. Their quick banter made my head spin in the best way. I loved it.

Tyler took me into the house and to what he called the War Room. It looked like a repurposed formal living room with four matching armchairs and a fifth mismatched chair forming a circle. And a pink dildo with two heads lying on the floor?

“Do I want to know?”

“It’s our talking dick. If things get heated, we bust it out.”

I stared at him as a dozen possibilities sprang to mind.

“Not sex! Fucking gross. Brother and cousin in the brewery, remember?” Tyler faked retching.

“It’s like summer camp. When people argue and someone gets a talking stick to take turns,” Ethan supplied with a cheerful smile.

“Instead, you chose a dildo.” They all nodded like it was the most normal thing in the world. Their world seemed fun.

The tour ended in the dining room as Austin and Seth bustled around to grab beers from the fridge and a closet. They talked me through the beers from their stock at the brewery and a growler of Austin’s latest home-brew experiment.

“What do you do for a living way out in the middle of nowhere?” Ethan asked.

“He’s a tree doctor. Wears a stethoscope and a white coat, but it gets muddy working outside,” Tyler said.

I looked at him, and we shared a smile. I was pretty sure he was also thinking about last night when he suggested I “wear my stethoscope” while he sucked me off.

“I’m an arborist.”

“Latin for tree doctor,” Tyler added.

The guys looked between me and Tyler like they were trying to figure something out.

Dom scratched his beard. “I’ve got a couple of sketchy trees out back. I might give you a call sometime. You got a card?”

I tried to subtly gauge Tyler’s reaction, but his back was to me as he grabbed a couple more bottles of beer from the pantry. I caught Seth waggling his eyebrows at him. Though I was tempted to offer to take a look now, I didn’t want to overstay my welcome. Instead, I pulled a card out of my wallet.

“Yeah, call us anytime. We can usually send an arborist out within a week.” I emphasized the *we* since I wasn’t the only employee at the company. In case that made Tyler feel better. We hadn’t talked about staying in touch, and the idea of approaching that conversation in front of his friends made my stomach clench. If he wanted to keep in touch, he would’ve said so. Anyway, he had my number.

We stood there, hovering near the dining table. I wanted to stay and soak up more time with Tyler and his friends, but

with their generous gift of beer now bagged and the tour over, I didn't have an excuse to linger longer.

As if sensing I was about to leave, all the guys took turns shaking my hand again and making excuses about stuff they needed to do. Austin parted with an invitation to refill the growler he'd packed for me anytime. As soon as they were gone, Tyler offered to walk me out.

I put the beer in my passenger seat and held back the words threatening to fall out of my mouth. Words he didn't want to hear, and I had no reason to say. It'd been a weekend. A convenient bit of fun. He didn't need a lonely widower attaching to him like a barnacle, nor was I ready.

Tyler pulled me in for a hug, and I inhaled the scent of my woody body wash on him.

"For what it's worth, you give great head. It'll be easy for you to get back out there. You'll have the guys lining up with their dicks out."

His words brought much-needed levity to the moment. Laughter rumbled in my chest alongside a sharp sting.

I squeezed him tight and let my lips brush his ear as I spoke. "For what it's worth, I really enjoyed spending time with you." I kissed his cheek, took in his stunned expression, then got in my truck and drove back to my dull life.

CHAPTER 14

TYLER

After dusting my furniture, I looked around my bedroom and tried to figure out what to work on next. Since Coop had dropped me off, I'd effectively dodged the guys before they could stage an interrogation. I'd kept busy taking care of a few work things to get ahead for the week, which was always part of my Monday routine. I should use our closed day to take a day off, but sometimes, it was the only quiet day I could knock things off my to-do list.

Then I'd borrowed Austin's car and visited the mechanic, did laundry, grocery shopping, and about a half dozen other tasks I'd been putting off. Anything to distract my brain from thinking about Cooper.

Thankfully, none of the guys were home when I returned, so I hid in my room to watch movies until I got tired enough to pass out for the night. I had a feeling that wouldn't come anytime soon though. I flipped through some action movies, but only one kind of movie called to me. I launched the Hallmark app on my iPad and got comfortable.

I chuckled while imagining Cooper's commentary about the quirky grandma character, then quickly shut down those thoughts. I didn't need him all in my head while watching my relaxing stories.

About halfway through the movie, I heard what sounded like a herd of elephants stomping around downstairs. I'd planned ahead and closed my door earlier, which they usually respected.

Minutes later, my door burst open, and four guys barged in. I scrambled to close the app and shove my iPad under my pillow.

“Ew. Are you watching porn?” My brother mimed retching and sat on my desk chair.

“If I was, that’d teach you to enter without knocking.”

Austin and Ethan piled on the bed and laid on each side of me. It reminded me of college when we’d comfort Ethan after his breakup du jour or the time they comforted me after my one brief relationship ended.

Dom hulked in the doorway.

“Cuddle pile!” Ethan said as he tucked his head next to my shoulder. “Join us.”

Dom snorted. He wasn’t a touchy-feely guy.

Seth wrinkled his nose. “We shared a bed for several years as young kids. I’ve had my fill, thanks.”

I laughed as I remembered times I’d Dutch-ovened him. He glared at me like he remembered the same thing.

I braced myself for what was coming. If the four of them barging in wasn’t an intervention, I was Bon Jovi.

“Seems like you had an interesting weekend,” Austin said far too casually. My cousin was always the sensible one of the group.

“That it was, but at least I didn’t get murdered in the woods. Have you ever heard a tree fall? That shit’s terrifying.”

“Cooper seems cool,” Seth said.

“He is. So is ice cream.”

Ethan, the touchy-feelyist of our group, snaked his arm around mine. “It’s okay if you want to see him again,” he hedged.

I was trapped by well-intentioned busybodies. I wanted to bolt.

My stomach twisted. “There’s no reason to see him again. We hung out for a weekend while I was stuck there. No big deal.”

“Just hung out?” Dom’s thick eyebrows arched.

“Yeah. Watched TV. Shot the shit.” For a reason I didn’t want to explore, I didn’t want to admit to sleeping with Cooper. I’d never been shy about sharing sex details with them. What the hell did that mean?

“Anyone who can put up with you for a whole weekend must be decent,” Seth said.

“There’s a difference between hanging out for a weekend and having to grin and bear my presence. I can be good company.”

“I bet you can.” Ethan waggled his eyebrows.

“Gross. Aim that look at your boyfriend.”

Austin dropped his head on his hand and looked at me. “Are you going to see him again?”

“For what?”

“Hang out, go on a date, fuck. I don’t know.”

“You all know I don’t date.”

“But you could,” he insisted.

I had no interest in dating Cooper, but fucking him again? That idea intrigued me, but nothing more than that did.

“He’s a widower. The guy has enough shit to deal with.”

“That’s tragic.” Ethan’s face fell. “But probably a good idea. If he’s a widower, he doesn’t need to get fucked around. No offense.”

“Um, a hundred percent offense taken. I don’t ‘fuck around.’ I have consensual one-time sex with men.”

Ethan patted my shoulder. “I’m sorry. You’re right.”

“Thank you.”

“What if you set him up with Seth?” Ethan waggled his eyebrows at my brother.

Why did that idea make me want to throw something? The idea of double-dipping with Seth was gross. That had to be it.

Time for a foolproof subject change. I turned and looked at Ethan. “Big news about Parker, huh? Moving back to town. That’s exciting.” Ethan smiled so widely that his jaw nearly unhinged.

Ethan caught me up on what I’d missed after I disconnected from yesterday’s brunch on FaceTime. I was glad Ethan had found someone he seemed to fit with well, and Parker could hang with the rest of us. It wasn’t awkward, which was a relief. It could have been much worse with Austin’s and Ethan’s boyfriends, but they’d found guys who didn’t alter our group dynamic. I’d known Parker peripherally in high school since I’d played baseball with his brother, and he’d always been a good guy.

“Should we place bets on how long it’ll be until Ethan moves in with Parker?” I suggested.

“Maybe I can turn his room into a gym.” We knew Dom well enough to tell his gruff-serious tone from his gruff-joking one, and he was joking, but something in his eyes perked up at that prospect.

“Now there’s an idea. I want one of those yoga swings,” I said.

The guys started riffing off what they could turn Ethan’s room into. Even Ethan threw out some ideas, like a sauna. They weren’t interested in my suggestion of a sex room.

I relaxed into the bed as our conversation shifted away from me. I needed to sleep off the funk and get back to normal tomorrow. Put Cooper in my rearview mirror and try not to think of him every time I watched a Hallmark movie or saw a tree. In Western Oregon, that would mean he’d be on my mind constantly. Coop would be a great memory and possibly a new friend after some time had passed so he didn’t get the wrong idea. I had a process, and it’d never let me down.

Even as I had the thoughts, the text thread with him burned a hole in my pocket, calling me a liar.

CHAPTER 15

COOPER

Cooper: Did you watch that new movie set at the toy festival?

Ty: Oh my god. That toy soldier parade was a bit much. Don't you think?

Cooper: Again, two words: Pumpkin. Regatta.

Ty: LOL! Okay, okay, fair. Are you still planning to watch the bookstore one? That looks good. I like it when there are dual storylines.

Cooper: Definitely. Got it all set to record on my DVR.

Ty: As if your ass won't be at home watching it with a bowl of popcorn ready.

Cooper: Ha-ha, busted. Speaking of food, did you realize you left some cheese behind?

Ty: Yup. A thank you for saving my ass and being great company.

Cooper: I'll enjoy it immensely.



The Pitted Olive's parking lot was full. It wasn't even my store, and I got an immense sense of pride seeing Danita's business thriving. Since my dentist wasn't too far from the market, I figured I would stop in after my cleaning. Danita always encouraged me to do my shopping in her bougie store and tried to get me to accept her employee discount, which I never took her up on. I wanted to support her.

As soon as I grabbed a cart, Danita was on me like a fruit fly.

"Been a while since you stopped in." Danita got on her tiptoes to give me a big hug.

She came to visit me more often than I visited her, which I felt terrible about. But I was trying to do better. With spring in full effect, I'd shaken off the winter funk. I'd been leaving my house more over the last few weeks, ever since... Well, I'd only driven through Dahlia Springs twice, which I thought showed incredible restraint.

"I'll come in more often. I promise. How's it going this week?"

She filled me in on things as she followed me around and tossed more in the cart than I did. A new chutney I just *had* to try and a local bread that was "out of this world."

"So, how are you doing?"

I shook my head. "How do you manage to make the most innocuous question sound ominous as hell? You should add that as a skill on LinkedIn." I pulled a box of colorful rotini pasta off the shelf, and she grabbed a jarred vodka sauce and placed it in the cart.

"It's a gift." She dramatically flipped her curly, onyx hair over her shoulder. She was the spitting image of Aleck but with more feminine features. They both had the same bright-blue eyes, straight Greek nose, and olive skin.

"I'm good."

"Verbose as always. I've been striking out on the dating apps, per usual." She rolled her eyes. "The men around here are man-babies."

“This is my surprised face.” I kept my expression neutral.

“How are the dating apps going for you?” She dropped a package of coconut macaroons in the cart.

“Smooth.”

She grinned. Score one for Danita.

“I haven’t made a profile yet. Still debating my app options.”

Danita rolled her eyes. “Sure you are. More like debating between options for the next excuse you’ll give me.”

“I *did* pick out a photo for my profile.”

Her hair bounced as she whipped her head back and studied me. “The one of you on the boat?”

“No. A recent one.” I didn’t tell her it was one Tyler had taken of me while cutting up the fallen tree.

“Hmm,” she said. That *hmm* meant trouble.

She’d made the sound several times in the past few weeks. Each time, it had something to do with Tyler.

As though she’d sensed an upset in my equilibrium, she’d shown up out of the blue hours after I’d returned from dropping Tyler off at his place several weeks ago. She’d found me watching Hallmark movies and eating the cheese he’d left in my fridge. Understandably, she’d pestered me until I told her about the weekend. I left out the more salacious details, to her disappointment, and didn’t tell her he was an owner of Tap That Brewery. I didn’t need her meddling. Danita was a meddler. Aleck had been too. A Papadakis family trait.

I’d opened up to her about how I’d really liked Tyler. But with some distance, I’d begun to question whether it was him I’d really liked or more having someone there. Nah, that was bullshit. It was Tyler. With the texting we’d been doing, it was clear we’d clicked.

She sighed. “You should text him and ask him out. It doesn’t have to be a date. Clearly, you guys got along. Why not be friends?” She’d suggested I invite him out several times

already. Easy for her to say when she hadn't heard how earnest he'd been when he'd explained to me how he didn't date people, let alone have fuck buddies. I knew he'd stretched his rules even for that weekend, and I didn't want to push.

“We *have* been texting.”

Danita gripped the end of the shopping cart and stopped us in our tracks in the middle of the aisle, which nearly caused a collision with two other customers. “You’ve been texting him and *you didn’t tell me?* Do you not comprehend how best friend privileges work?”

“It’s not a big deal. We’re not having real conversations. Just talking about movies we like and stuff.” The conversations had started as commentary over the Hallmark movies we both watched, and it’d mostly stuck to that. But occasionally, we moved beyond the safe box we’d created. I hadn’t told her about it because she would push for details, and what could I say? That we were texting about silly stuff to ride out our chemistry until it fizzled?

Though random texts with Tyler about television had awoken something in me. Butterflies fluttered in my stomach anytime my phone buzzed. I hadn’t thought I could get that rush anymore.

“Texting about movies? Seriously?” Danita cocked her head like there was a piece of the puzzle missing, like a damn bloodhound with a whiff of their target.

One of her employees approached. “Sorry to interrupt, Danita. There’s someone here hoping to meet you. I think it’s a sales visit. Would you like to talk to them, or should I tell them you’re busy?”

“I’ll talk to them. Thank you.” She turned to me and grinned. “Saved by the bell. We’ll talk more later.” She tossed a bag of jalapeño-cheddar popcorn into my cart before following the employee.

I waved her off and finished grabbing the few things I’d *actually* planned to buy.

Sure, part of me had hoped Dom would call and ask me to check out his trees and maybe Tyler would be there. God, but what if Dom called and asked for a different arborist from the company, or it was obvious Tyler made a point *not* to be there? My gut told me Tyler wanted to keep our budding friendship light and restricted to the phone, which was fine with me. With each text we swapped, I became a tiny bit more confident that I might be able to try dating again.

Once I finished my shopping, I made my way to the checkout. I stopped dead when I saw the man himself, as though my thoughts had conjured him. He looked great in a light-blue button-up with the sleeves rolled to reveal forearms I'd seen flex as he'd jerked me off. He held a drink tray with one coffee cup left on it.

Danita glanced at me and smiled—a casual acknowledgment of my presence—before she turned back to him and continued their conversation. Why was he there? And bringing coffee? Did they know each other? Then I remembered something he'd said about trying to expand to small markets to carry the beer. Of course Danita's market would be a target for them.

Tyler followed where she'd looked and stopped talking mid-sentence when he saw me. He stared, mouth gaping open.

“Coop?” Tyler finally said.

“Ty? Hi.”

She looked between us. “You two know each other?”

Tyler shook off the shock and donned his charm. It was obvious why he excelled at his job. The charm wasn't false—just different from the charm I'd seen. A new one to categorize and add to the mental file I'd been unintentionally building about him. I'd collected bits here and there while we'd texted. Innocuous things I didn't think he realized he'd let slip, but I'd hoarded like treasure.

Tyler's smile disarmed me. “This man saved me from certain death during a storm a few weeks back.”

Her head whipped toward me, and she mouthed *oh my god!* Then she turned back to Tyler. “You’re the guy who stayed with Coop?”

It was Tyler’s turn to look shocked as his eyes volleyed back and forth between us. “Wait, *you two* know each other?”

“Best friends.”

I could see the pieces clicking into place in his head. “Oh! Aleck’s sister? You’ve got your hands full with this guy.” His teasing smile heated me up as quick as his kisses had.

Her mouth fell open before giving me a stern look that said I’d be filling in some gaps later. Oops. I hadn’t mentioned to her that I’d told Ty about Aleck. I knew she’d read too much into that.

All I could do was nod. I couldn’t believe he was there.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“Hoping to talk to Danita about our beers.”

“And he brought us coffee. Isn’t that sweet?” She looked like she was already mentally planning our wedding. Jesus.

“I’ve got one left. Black, as you like it.” He shook his head and smiled boyishly. “This is such a wild coincidence.”

Danita aimed a calculating grin at me.

“Tyler was just asking if I had time for a meeting to talk about a possible partnership with Tap That Brewery. But, gosh, you know I’m just so busy this time of year with the softball team.”

Had she suffered head damage in the past few minutes? What the hell was she talking about? Tyler looked as confused as me at her weird segue. But then my brain used knowledge gathered over two decades of friendship to figure it out. That clever little shit. She stared at me, daring me to stop her.

“That’s awesome! I played pitcher on my college team. What’s your softball team? A rec league?” Tyler sounded genuinely interested. Bless him.

Danita's smile ratcheted up a few notches. She turned to him. "The market sponsors a team for the Portland Metro Queer Softball League."

"No way! That's amazing. I've heard great things about the league. I've been meaning to check it out." He was falling right into her trap.

I stood helpless, transfixed by the train wreck unfolding.

"I can do you one better. Our season starts next week, and our pitcher is out this season with an injury. My professional nemesis sponsors the team that beat us in the championship last year, and I need his smarmy ass to get knocked down a peg or two. I'd really like to shove us winning the championship in his face. Want to join us? I'm sure the coach would kiss my feet if I found him someone who played in college."

Tyler looked at me and his eyebrows scrunched together. He was probably just as confused about whether he should do it as I was.

She glanced at me and smiled sweetly. "Coop is the catcher."



TYLER

I STARED AT COOP, trying to read his mind. Danita's idea had come out of left field—pun always intended—so I was trying to process it while gauging his reaction. I shouldn't *want* to spend more time with him, but dammit, I liked the guy. Texting with him the past few weeks had been a fun change in my routine.

We'd only texted and had never talked about meeting up again. Digital conversations were the small bit of allowance I gave myself while following my rules. It couldn't hurt to have

another friend, except I wanted to fuck Coop, and I rarely wanted to fuck my friends. Acquaintances though? They could hop right on my dick.

Spending time with him would be playing with fire, which was exactly why I should turn down Danita's offer.

But the brewery. Danita's market was one of the best options in the area to reach a new customer base and brand saturation. The Pitted Olive was consistently applauded as a leader for a top-notch selection of local goods, and placement in the store had helped launch several businesses to the next level. Which also meant a lot of people competed for her limited shelf space. And I was competitive as fuck.

When we created Tap That Brewery, I swore that I would never let sex get in the way of business. People who didn't know me well assumed I wanted to join the brewery as access to a steady stream of hookups. No way. Sure, I flirted, but I never hit on people at work. Work was work and sex was sex. Why risk things getting messy when I could find someone to fuck elsewhere?

It wasn't like I was searching for something serious. If I were, meeting someone through work would make sense, like Austin and Caleb. For me? Sex was plenty. Give me an orgasm and time with my best friends—at separate times, obviously—and I was a happy man. I didn't want to risk the brewery getting a bad reputation because of my sexual appetite.

I wasn't sure whether joining Danita's team would mean a win for my horny dick or business brain. More time with Coop got my blood pulsing, but the prospect of earning major brownie points with Danita would be great for the brewery. If she stocked us, I knew others would follow. And I *had* actually been meaning to check out that softball league for a while.

I'd been toying with the idea of proposing to the guys that we sponsor a team for one of the queer sports leagues in the Portland Metro area. Queer brewery and queer sports? Match made in heaven. But we weren't quite at the point where we

had the discretionary business funds for it. But playing was a great way to scope out an opportunity.

And I fucking missed playing baseball. Softball would scratch that itch. The prospect of showing off in front of Cooper? Cherry on top.

“I’m in,” I said before I could talk myself out of it.

Danita’s smile was frighteningly wide. “Great! Cooper will get you the schedule and all the details. In June, I’ll be considering new products for the fall. I always prioritize giving time to those who support the team and crushing Nick’s nuts. He’s the sponsor of last year’s league champion. Let’s chat then?”

“That sounds great.” I admired what a shark she was making that kind of deal to help her team, but when she winked at Cooper, I wondered about her other motives.

“You’d better be good, or Danita’s gonna have your ass. She *hates* the sponsor of that team. Like if he’s ever found dead, I’d have to turn Danita in to the cops.” Coop mimed a stabbing motion.

“Good thing our buddy, Tyler, here played college ball.” Danita clapped my shoulder.

As the sales manager for the brewery, I’d tried numerous tactics to close a deal. Joining a softball team for the next two months was a first.

The employee rang up Coop while he and Danita told me more about the league. It sounded like the perfect balance of competition and fun. The guys would be stoked. They’d encouraged me to find a league to play in. Then it hit me that they might come to a game and see Coop there.

Pros: Get an edge in pitching our beer to Danita and seeing Coop’s thick thighs flexing in his catcher’s squat.

Cons: Relentless harassment from my best friends and risking things getting awkward with Coop.

And the pros have it.

“It’s great because there’s a different charity we fundraise for each game, and all ticket donations and merch proceeds go to them.”

That made me even more excited. I opened my mouth to ask a question, but Cooper spoke.

“Tap That Brewery does something similar. They regularly fundraise for queer charities and have dedicated nights where a percentage of the profits get donated. It’s pretty amazing to see a business give back so regularly.”

Her smile turned sweet as she stared at him for a long moment, then refocused on me. I needed to be careful. They both had lost someone incredibly special to them, and I didn’t want to give anyone the wrong impression.

“Is that so? Sounds like you’re going to be the perfect relief pitcher. Right, Coop?”

I caught a meaningful look between them. “I need to know the important stuff like team chants, inside jokes, the tea about the other teams.”

Coop shook his head, but there was a warm smile on his face. “You sound like Danita. You’re going to be trouble together.”

She winked at me.

Another customer came up to the checkout, so I said goodbye to Danita and thanked her for her time. She hugged Coop and whispered something in his ear before giving him a meaningful look.

I grabbed two of his bags and followed Cooper to his car in silence. When he opened the passenger door of his truck, I loaded his bags up.

“Are you okay with me joining the team? I probably should’ve asked you before I said yes.”

He dropped his bag onto the floorboard and leaned against the truck bed. His hair was frizzy in the early-spring drizzle. I itched to smooth it out. Simply a reflex from having fucked

and a lingering intimacy with his body. It didn't mean anything. And I had a thing for long hair. Sue me.

“Of course I am. We really *do* need to kick the other team's ass. They're cocky as hell.” He studied me in a slow once-over that sent my pulse racing. “If you played in college, you must be pretty good.”

I was living for Cooper's competitive side. “I'm ready to kick some ass.”

He grinned. “We'll figure out the details later. You good with practices on Tuesdays and Thursdays and games on Sundays?”

“I'll talk to the guys, and we'll work it out. No problem.” I helped cover on busy weeknights sometimes or if we had a Sunday event, but with Seth around, we had more flexibility.

I pulled my keys out of my pocket and stared at the toolbox in his truck bed. I meant to mention something casual, softball-related, to put some distance there before I got too excited about pitching to Coop.

“Are you gonna watch that new Hallmark movie this weekend?”

“Yeah.”

“Cool.” I smiled.

“Cool.”

“Catch you at practice.” As I walked back to my car, I fought the urge to look over my shoulder at Cooper. I repeated the mantra, *we can be friends*. I might be broken when it came to anything more than great sex, but I could handle friendship. I'd always been good at that, at least.

CHAPTER 16

TYLER

Ty: What's your favorite baseball movie?

Coop: Torn between A Field of Dreams and A League of Their Own. What's yours? Major League: Back to the Minors?

Ty: Oh ye of little faith. The Sandlot, obvs. It's a classic!

Coop: Damn, that one's so good. One of my favorite movies as a kid. What movies did you love growing up?

Ty: Labyrinth.

Coop: David Bowie's codpiece is legendary. What are your thoughts on The Dark Crystal?



“Remind me when Hayden starts construction?” Austin leaned forward in his armchair and stuffed the rest of his carnitas taco into his mouth. Juice dripped down the edge of his hand.

Dom had nailed his contribution to our tortilla-themed dinner for our Sunday meeting. His carnitas was juicy and cooked to perfection with crispy edges. Honestly, he nailed anything he cooked. The guys hadn't appreciated the peanut

butter and jelly tortilla roll-ups I'd made, but I'd sure as hell appreciated the way Dom's forehead vein had twitched when I'd set them on the table.

"I don't want him to start work at all," Dom grumbled. In an instant, the tension in our meeting room grew thick.

Ethan rolled his eyes and slumped back in his armchair. "Here we go."

Too bad we hadn't gone with a popcorn theme tonight because I was about to need it for the show.

Ever since we'd met Hayden a few months ago while helping Austin move in with Caleb and learned Hayden and Dom knew each other, Dom had been even pricklier than usual. He hadn't shared much beyond the fact that they'd known each other back in high school. Odd for them both to land in a small town in a different part of the state than where they'd grown up. I didn't believe in fate, but I liked the idea of the universe giving Dom some shit.

I wanted to know what the hell had happened between them, but Dom was by far the most private in our group. He sure as hell wasn't someone you could push. *If* he chose to open up to us, he knew we would be there for him. In the meantime, patience was the name of the game.

Seth quietly escaped to the kitchen with his empty plate. I didn't blame him.

"I went to the building supply store in McMinnville and asked around about some contractors," Dom said in the voice he used when he got particularly bossy and didn't want anyone to argue with him. It never worked on us.

Austin sighed, I shook my head, and Ethan stared at the ceiling while clenching his fists.

"We already voted on this, man," Austin said.

"He starts in two weeks and has already ordered supplies," Ethan added.

"He could use them for another project." Dom leaned forward in his chair and dropped his elbows onto his knees.

Ethan mirrored his posture. “We’re not going to get a reputation for screwing over local businesses. What would that do to our reputation?”

Dom huffed. “He’s not a local. No one will care.”

“Me and you aren’t local.” Ethan arched his eyebrow.

“That’s different.”

Ethan reached for the talking dick. “You had the chance to veto this and didn’t. I agreed to run point on this project to keep you out of it. Hayden is the cheapest guy we found, has great references, and can construct the outdoor seating area months before the other contractors in town, so we can actually put it to use this summer. Please, for the love of god, shut the fuck up about it.” Ethan launched the dildo at Dom, and it slapped him on the cheek as he caught it.

Seth snapped a photo as he returned to his chair with more tacos. I’d need to get that one from him later. Dom’s contact photo was overdue for an update.

Austin caught my eye and shook his head. I wondered how Hayden had won Ethan over. Hayden seemed like a nice enough guy the couple of times I’d met him, but it took a lot for Ethan to push back like that on one of us. To be fair, Dom was unusually pissy about the whole thing without explaining why, and Ethan wasn’t the type to hate someone because he was told to.

Dom stood and marched to the kitchen, grumbling something about us trying to make his life a living hell.

As I finished my tacos, I thought about how fun it would be to watch everything unfold once Hayden started the project. I bet Dom would make up excuses to work from the house more than the brewery while Hayden was there. Ethan, Austin, and I had already chatted with Seth, and the four of us had agreed to mediate if things got heated.

This outdoor addition to the brewery was critical to our business goals, which included being able to support Caleb parking his food truck at the brewery. Our growth supported the expansion of his restaurant empire. I wanted it to happen

for all of us because, ultimately, if we succeeded, it benefited Dahlia Springs.

The covered seating area would be a year-round way to get even more people to spend their time and money at the brewery and, hopefully, other downtown businesses. The extra income should pay off the construction fairly quickly and help us save toward our goal of upgrading our equipment and then someday leasing a warehouse to grow our production. If we continued successfully getting placed in restaurants, stores, and eventually markets, our only option would be to increase production until we hit our legal cap or plateau.

Once Dom returned with seconds that didn't include any PB&J roll-ups—rude—the meeting resumed as though nothing had happened. I loved that part of our dynamic. We had our tiffs, as my mom would say, but we always moved on quickly. It was the only way we could survive being best friends, roommates, and business partners. It was a lot of time to spend together if you didn't know how to work through shit.

“How did the visit to The Pitted Olive go the other day?” Dom asked.

I'd expected the question since we were going over our Q2 goals tonight. We were already several months into the year, and I needed to keep the momentum going on getting beer placed in new locations. No rest for the wicked...ly handsome.

“I think we've got a good shot, but it's going to take some time.”

Austin nodded. “Is she receptive to a pitch meeting?”

“She is. In June.”

“Not for two months? Why?” Dom frowned.

“She said she's doing her planning for fall at that time. Something else cool happened though.”

The guys stared at me expectantly.

I'd already planned how to mention the softball league to position it in the best way possible. “We've got a great shot at it. We got to chatting, and she needs a pitcher for the team she

sponsors in the Portland Metro Queer Softball League. I told her I'd be happy to help out. Gotta do what you gotta do for a deal, you know?" I mimed brushing dirt off my shoulder.

"That sounds great! I know you've been wanting to play for a while. She has to carry our beer after that." Ethan's smile was encouraging.

"Good strategy," Dom said simply.

Austin stared at me and narrowed his eyes. "There's something you're not telling us." Seth nodded and looked equally suspicious.

I squared my shoulders. "What do you mean?"

"You forget we're cousins, and I've known you since you shit in diapers. You're holding something back. You've got a tell."

"What do you mean I've got a tell?"

"You've totally got a tell," Dom said.

"What is it?"

"If we say, you'll stop doing it," Ethan said.

"You guys fucking suck." I crossed my arms and collapsed in the chair.

Dom smirked. "Got to take the advantages where you can."

I huffed. "Okay, fine. The owner, Danita, is Cooper's best friend. Coop's on the team."

"Ah," the guys said in unison.

"What the hell does that mean?"

Austin shrugged. "It all makes sense now."

"What makes sense?" I glared at each one of the smug, smirking fuckers, but none of them said anything. "What?"

"This is good progress. Nice work, Ty." Dom leaned back in his chair.

I tried to read him, but he gave me nothing. “What the hell are you guys not saying?”

“Nothing,” Ethan said.

“Well, you’ve got an in now. So that’s good.” Austin gave me a thumbs-up. A fucking thumbs-up.

“I don’t need an ‘in’ to sell our beer. I can sell it fine on my own.”

The assholes shot each other looks.

“What? It’ll be fine.” It would. Coop and I had sex that one time, okay, that one weekend. We were buds, pals, amigos. I was the pitcher, and he was the catcher. Literally. No sexy metaphors. I could keep it light and friendly. Easy. He wouldn’t be at all tempting in his uniform while squatting and catching my balls.

Shit. I’m in so much trouble.

CHAPTER 17

COOPER

Danita: So...are you planning to kill me or buy me roses?

Cooper: Undecided. I can't believe you invited him to play on the team. Way to corner the guy while he was just trying to sell his beer.

Danita: It's a mutually beneficial arrangement. I get a player who will help us kick Nick's ass. Ty gets a chance to pitch his beer. You get to stare at Ty every game and practice. It's a win-win all around.

Cooper: Your brain scares me.

Danita: That's the nicest thing you've ever said to me.



The scent of fresh sawdust permeated the air as I set the chainsaw on the ground and removed my harness. That wasn't enough. I took off my hard hat, pulled a bandana from my pocket, and wiped the sweat dripping down my brow. Hard hats and chainsaw chaps weren't exactly breathable.

We'd finished felling the two black cottonwoods, but the most strenuous work was still ahead with cutting up the tree, raking, and the rest of the cleanup. At least it was overcast and

not pouring rain like yesterday. The rain was great for tulips and daffodils but not for arborists working outside.

By the time my coworker Jake and I finished cutting what we could into firewood and running the rest through the chipper, my body ached something fierce. Might need an Epsom salt bath later.

“Hey, Coop? Are you going to see that Broadway musical coming to Portland this summer? My wife and I just got tickets.”

I glanced over at Jake. He had about five years on me and a gay brother, so Jake often tried to connect with me on all things queer. It was sweet in an awkward way.

“Nah. I’m not really into musicals.”

His eyes went wide. “Seriously?”

“Not all gay men like them.”

His mouth opened and closed a few times. Talking to Jake was like playing a game of Gay Stereotype Bingo. I was one cringy “yass, queen” on B6 and him asking for interior decor advice on O69 away from a Bingo blackout. I didn’t take offense though. I appreciated that he always tried to meet me at my level. At least he hadn’t tried to set me up with his brother. Yet. Although, come to think of it, he *had* been talking about his brother more lately.

Jake was always good to me. Sometimes, he even brought in leftovers from the amazing food his wife cooked. I was overdue to put in some effort and invite him for a drink after work. It wouldn’t kill me to be less of a social hermit. Our job for the day wasn’t too far from Dahlia Springs. We could swing by the brewery. By the time I’d raked a pile of debris, I’d worked up the nerve to suggest it.

“Did I tell you what my wife’s making for dinner tonight? We bought a smoker, and she’s had a brisket going all day. Been drooling since we got here. If I don’t eat it all tonight, I’ll bring you some tomorrow.”

Never mind about the brewery visit. Better off anyway. I would see Tyler at softball practice tomorrow. Going to the

brewery just a few days after running into Ty would come off as too eager.

“Sounds great. Hey, we should get a drink after our next job.”

Jake stopped raking and looked at me, a smile growing with each second. “Yeah? That’d be great!”

By the time we finished the cleanup, Jake was whistling, and I felt lighter for having made an effort. The only thing left to do was go check in with the client to give her a tour of what we’d done. I wiped my face again to look a bit more presentable.

She came to the door quickly after I knocked. Ginny had long gray hair in a thick braid draped along her spine. Looking down at her barely five-foot frame gave the back of my neck a much-needed stretch.

“We’re all done. We stacked the firewood in your shed as you requested and ran other pieces through the chipper. We’ll take those to a landscaping company we partner with who will reuse it.”

The woman patted my arm. “Thank you so much! I would’ve asked my son to move the firewood, but by the time he got around to it, I’d be worm food.”

I barked out a laugh. “Morbid.”

“And accurate. You’d get it if you met my son. Bless his lazy ass.”

The woman cracked me up. My laughter faded as I remembered what I’d planned to ask her. Cottonwood was great for carving, and ideas for those trunks were forming in my mind.

“Normally, we would dispose of the trunks, but I was wondering if you would be comfortable with me taking them for personal use. It’s totally fine if you’d prefer we mulch them.”

She aimed her inquisitive stare at me. “What would you do with them?”

I was embarrassed to admit what I'd use them for, but I didn't want to lie. I didn't often make this request, but the stumps had a pattern that had gotten ideas flowing.

"I do wood carving."

Her eyes lit up. "You're an artist?"

"Not sure I'd go that far."

"If you make things, you're an artist. Got any photos of your work?" Ginny held out her hand, arthritic fingers curled and palm up.

The kind woman had supplied us with ice-cold lemonade and water all day. There was no way I could say no, especially if she was about to gift me workable wood. I pulled my phone out of my pocket, found the album where I saved photos of pieces I'd made for friends and family, and then handed it to her.

"I just do this casually. Make stuff for myself or friends."

She gasped as she zoomed in on the screen. "This is stunning. Is that fox carving from a tree stump?"

I nodded.

"Could you do something like this with one of mine?"

"I can. Yeah." It was a fair trade for the raw materials.

She handed me back my phone after a couple more minutes of swiping.

"I know you said you haven't sold a piece, but do you know what you would charge?"

"I have no idea."

"Well then. Sounds like you have some research to do. Figure it out and let me know. I want to pay full value. Your work is beautiful, and I would love to have one of your pieces to keep as a memory of the beautiful trees that have been a part of my home for decades."

After promising to research pricing—and not give her a discount—and making arrangements to come back and grab

the wood, I went back to touch base with Jake before heading home.

My mind raced the entire drive. She was the first stranger to want to buy my work. I guessed I'd always assumed my loved ones were simply being supportive when they said how great it was. Aleck would've supported me even if I'd told him my greatest passion in life was writing chain letters to my enemies and selling finger paintings made with my toes.

After he died, all the hours I spent in my studio became bittersweet. Losing myself to working with wood had been the only way I'd coped many days, but it was a regular reminder that I'd never done the one thing he'd asked of me. To make a real effort to share my art. How could I after that asshole college professor had laughed at the squirrel I'd carved? He'd told me art was about emotion and not "craft fair chic."

As I left the job site in McMinnville, Ty's face flashed in my head, and I remembered all the kind things he'd said about my work without knowing who had made it. He'd had no reason to be so complimentary. His enthusiasm gave me courage.

My thoughts hovered around him as they all too often did since we'd met. It'd grown exponentially worse since I'd learned we'd see each other several times per week over the next two months. The best kind of torture.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't nervous. Our time together had busted through the rut I'd settled into, but that weekend existed in a bubble—a blip in time owed entirely to miraculous circumstances. Seeing him in the real world? I wasn't sure how it would go. Would we act like friends? Strangers? Awkward acquaintances who knew how each other's cum and morning breath tasted?

Not to mention, he'd made it abundantly clear that he never had repeat sex partners. I gripped the steering wheel until my knuckles turned white as a thought crashed into my brain like a redwood tumbling to the earth. Would he find someone else on the team to fuck? Multiple someones? Would I become a meaningless blip in his thrilling sex life? The idea

of becoming a faded memory from his escapades made my lunch churn in my gut.

TEAM TAP THAT GROUP TEXT

Ethan: Good luck! [GIF of someone getting hit with a softball while batting]

Austin: Say hi to Coop! [wink emoji]

Dom: Wanna place bets on how many people on the team Ty's fucked?

Ethan: Oooh! Fun game! My guess is 3.

Ty: 3?! Seriously? How much do you think I get around?

Ethan: It's simply a statistical probability. The players are queer adults, which decreases the possible pool of past sex partners. A good portion of them are probably men, and you've fucked a lot of queer men in Oregon.
#MathIsSexy

Ty: Use your evil logic on someone else.

Dom: I bet 4. Ty's a slut. No shame, but it's true.

Austin: 1 [questioning emoji]

Ethan: [GIF of Sherlock]

Ty: I can't believe none of you have said zero!

Dom: You can bet zero.

Ty: Ugh. I bet 1. Can't argue with sex math.

Austin: I change my bet to 2 to make it interesting.

Dom: Everyone buys the winner a round the next time we go out.

Ethan: I'm in.

Austin: Me too.

Ty: Fine.

Dom: You better not lie about the number.

Ty: When have I ever lied about who I've slept with? You guys accuse me of oversharing all the time.

CHAPTER 18

TYLER

I stared at the phone in my hand and ignored the twist in my gut. I wasn't *technically* lying to the guys because I already knew I'd slept with at least one person on the team. I might not provide the name, but I'd admit to the number.

I'd been sitting in my car at a McMinnville city park for twenty minutes, watching people filter into the parking lot and head into practice. I wasn't nervous about meeting my new teammates. Meeting people and building rapport was part of my job, and I was damn good at it.

Cooper, or rather waiting for him, had me scrolling Instagram longer than I needed to. I was excited to see him and wanted to touch base before practice. We'd been texting more and more since I'd run into him at The Pitted Olive. Small talk about saccharine movies, details about the team, and then innocent chatter about our days. I could safely say Coop had become my friend. I hadn't expected to get a friend out of the storm last month, but I could always use more friends.

Coop's familiar truck pulled up. My stomach fluttered. Time to get out of the car and get out of my head. Since when did I get in my head about a guy? Being around Austin and Ethan and their boyfriends was fucking with my mojo.

It made sense to walk in with him so he could introduce me to people since he was the only person I knew, and Danita didn't go to practices. Coop waved through the windshield when he caught me approaching. His wide, easy smile triggered my own.

He walked around the front of his truck wearing snug sweats and a college T-shirt, showing off his sexy curvy frame. My brain decided to be an asshole and began flipping through mental pictures of a naked Coop like a porn Rolodex. The more I told myself not to think about him, the more vivid the memories became. I damn near hopped back in my car and took off when my stomach swooped again in a way it usually only did when I played fast and loose with food expiration dates.

“Hey, Ty. Glad you made it.”

Ty? Ty. Ty. Jesus Christ. Of course he had to come in with the nickname in his gravelly voice, all hot with his hair pulled back in a loose bun.

When he smiled at me, I damn near suggested we skip practice and fool around in his truck instead. *What the hell is wrong with me? We've already fucked. Move on.* It would be a long couple of months if my libido didn't cool it. I should find some fresh prospects to distract me and my dick.

“I'm excited to meet everyone.” I was about to ask Cooper if he had saved any trees from certain death this week when a familiar guy approached with a knowing smile. The *I've seen your dick up close and personal* smile.

Oh shit.

“Tyler?”

“Hey, Sonny.” God, I hoped it was Sonny. I was usually pretty good with names and faces, but sometimes, in dark bars or with alcohol, the alphabet and facial features got a bit fuzzy. “You're on the team? Cool.” Austin might win the bet, after all. I sure as hell hoped Dom didn't. Two guys on the team's roster were more than plenty.

“Yeah. My third year. This is quite the surprise.” He gave me a blatant once-over.

Okay, chill, dude. Don't need to lay it on so thick.

Pretty sure I'd met Sonny on Grindr last fall. He'd been cool about my one-time-only rule—I never messed around with anyone who wasn't—but messaged the next day to say

that if I ever changed my mind, he'd be down to do it again. I hoped he wasn't getting any bright ideas, but the way he took in my form-fitting joggers said otherwise.

Sonny looked good in the late-afternoon sun. Sharp cheekbones, black hair slicked back, and alluring dark eyes. But I felt nothing. No urge to revisit anything with him. Not that I ever felt that pull, which led to the only logical conclusion that something in me had to be broken. Except a part of me was down to go for round two with Coop.

I caught Coop looking between us. He playfully arched his eyebrow when we made eye contact. I shrugged and grinned. He shook his head and smiled. At least he wasn't judging me for it.

“Good to see you, Sonny.” Cooper shook his hand. “Shall we?”

About fifteen people were stretching and chatting. People rocked rainbow clothes: crop tops, booty shorts, and shirts seemingly from previous Backdoor Sliders seasons. Best team name ever. Coop took me around and introduced me to the players standing where we dropped our gear. The team was a diverse blend of people seemingly all over the gender, race, body shape and size, age, and even hair color spectrums.

A person with a septum piercing and a rainbow mullet approached. “Hi, I'm River. They/them pronouns. You play softball before?”

“Tyler, he/him, and I pitched for my D1 college team. So basically, yeah.”

They snorted. “So, no softball.”

A few people snickered. It couldn't be that hard.

“Hopefully, you know how to handle big balls. I'm Topher, he/him. Good to meet you.” Topher was short with purple hair buzzed on the sides and bangs swooping to cover half their forehead.

“Let's take it easy on the fresh meat, okay? I'm Coach Gurtner. Pronouns are he/him. Good to meet you.” The coach

was bald, broad-shouldered, and looked like he didn't take shit from anyone.

"Tyler McNeill. Stoked to join the team this season." I shook his hand.

"Danita said you played D1? We need a good arm to beat Coach Sandoval's team into the ground."

I loved a good, established rivalry.

Coop snorted. "They're who won the championship last year. The one the infamous Nick sponsors."

"On a bad call," Coach grumbled. He shook his head. "Sorry. Probably shouldn't be talking shit about another team during our first conversation."

Coop clapped him on the shoulder. "Might as well let him know how much you hate Sandoval from the get-go. Light a fire in him." He winked at me.

"Officially, this is a rec league, and we're just here to have fun," he said in a loud voice. "Unofficially? I want to shove a bat right up—"

"Hey, Coach, shall we get started?" River said, then flashed an apologetic grimace over their shoulder as they steered Coach away.

"Sorry about that." Coop chuckled.

"Don't be. It's always fun to have a rival." And if I helped kick their ass, I would score some points with Danita.

I followed the group to the bleachers, where we listened to Coach talk about his plan for the day and the season. I tried to pay close attention to learn about the team since I was the only newbie, but Coop kept drawing my attention from where he sat next to me, our thighs touching.

I'd always been able to compartmentalize when it came to men. When I was horny, I fucked. Otherwise, I focused on other shit going on in my life. I didn't understand craving more than that. So I did what I'd perfected over a decade ago: shut my brain off, shut the real world out, and moved my body.

Coach took us through a few warm-up drills before getting us going in a light scrimmage. Since I was there to fill in for their usual pitcher, they threw me right into the deep end.

I palmed the ball that was larger than I was used to and had to remind myself to throw underhand and not as fast as I could. I misjudged the release, and it went too low. Okay, so I might've been *a bit* cocky about how well my baseball skills translated to the softball field. I might have to convince Dom to practice with me. Or I could ask Cooper.

I shook my head and threw again. Closer to the target but far enough away that mortification lurked in the wings. I ignored Coach rubbing his temple while mumbling to himself. The woman on first base jogged over and gave me a few pointers, which I appreciated.

My pitching could use some work, but by the time it was my turn to bat, I'd warmed up.

"Nice hit." Coop swatted my ass after I ran home to score the fourth point for our team.

"I always get to home base." I winked. The flirting came as naturally as breathing.

The heat in Coop's eyes was unmistakable. I panicked. Not because of said heat—I'd been eye-fucked like that countless times—but it was the fire licking up my spine that unsettled me. *The fuck?*

Despite that, after the game ended and we packed up, I found myself walking back to the parking lot with Coop. I should've made my excuses and bolted out of there, but my legs kept pace with him.

"I'm not ready to head back to the woods yet. Up for grabbing a drink?"

I shouldn't. I needed to create distance, given how I was reacting to him. "Yeah. I know just the place."



COOPER

THE BEST PART about sitting across from Ty at a high-top table was that the chances of me getting caught checking out his ass and wondering what kind of underwear he was wearing were slim to none. I'd been distracted nearly the entire practice because my attention kept wandering to him. He might not have caught me, but I figured others had.

"You'll like this place," Ty said as he pushed a beer menu my way.

A U-shaped bar dominated the taproom at the center, with high tops full of people scattered around the rest of the space. There were a lot of warm tones between the furniture and decor, and classic rock played over the sound system. My favorite part was the scent of something charbroiled. Yum. The protein bar I'd scarfed on the way over might not last long.

"Do you know a lot of brewers in the area?" I glanced over the menu but would probably ask for Ty's recommendation. I liked beer well enough, but I was far from a connoisseur.

"Yeah, it's a small industry. We've tried to get to know folks who run the breweries close to Dahlia Springs. It's good to have the professional connections."

I glanced at Ty while he looked at the beer list and tried to gauge whether he was happy to be there with me or had accepted out of politeness. I doubted Ty did much he didn't want to, but I couldn't help but wonder. I'd waded into new territory. The invitation had spilled from my mouth with no forethought. I wasn't sure it was a good idea to be alone together, given how I still reacted to him, but I was a glutton for punishment.

“Tyler McNeill. To what do I owe the pleasure?” An attractive, tall silver fox with russet skin approached.

“Darrell! Good to see you, man. Looks like business is going well.” Ty was so damn gregarious. It was intoxicating being the center of his attention.

“We got a nice write-up in an online brewery publication, and we’ve seen increased foot traffic.”

“I saw that one. Great piece. You got some good quotes in there about your summer brews.”

He leaned against the table. “How are things going over at Tap That?”

“Fantastic. We just locked down a deal to expand to a few more Fred Meyer locations and are gearing up to do a circuit of a few summer festivals.”

Darrell whistled and rocked back on his heels. “Impressive. You guys are really taking the scene by storm.”

Tyler’s smile conveyed the perfect balance of humility and pride.

My respect for Ty grew as I witnessed his professionalism and magnetism in action. Brewery Ty differed from the goofy, funny guy I’d been getting to know. There was a lot more to Ty that I wanted to learn.

“I’m sorry. We’ve been standing here talking shop, and Ty is being rude and hasn’t introduced us.” Darrell held out his hand. I shook it, and his grasp lingered.

“This is Cooper. We’re playing on the Portland Metro Queer Softball League together.”

“Softball is a fun game.” He gave me a once-over.

The back of my neck heated. It’d been a while since I’d been so blatantly flirted with. Well, other than Ty. I preferred Ty’s less intense approach to flirting.

“In honor of seeing friends and possibly making new ones, I’m going to bring you guys something special to try. We just

pulled the first batch of our seasonal Saison.” He knocked his knuckles on the table, winked at me, and strode away.

“Wow,” was all I could manage.

“Yeah. We’re getting the *special* treatment.” Ty barely held back a laugh.

“I should visit breweries with you more often.”

“Pretty sure it’s not because of me. Darrell would happily take you to the storage room and bend you over a keg if you asked him to.”

Good thing I wasn’t drinking anything because it would’ve ended up on Ty’s face after a spit-take.

“That’s quite the picture you’ve painted.” I glanced over at the door that said employees only. The only person I wanted to imagine bending me over a keg of beer was Ty.

He looked at the same door, and a deep wrinkle creased his forehead. After a few moments, he looked back at me, and his entire demeanor shifted. The teasing, casual guy returned, but there was something false about it.

“I can be your wingperson.”

I blinked. “My wingperson?”

He sat up straighter in his chair. “Finish the job I started last month to help you re-enter the dating scene. I’m the perfect person to do it because I know you’re great in bed, and I won’t get in the way of you meeting someone. Frankly, I’m the ideal candidate.”

Help me start dating? That wasn’t the direction I imagined grabbing a drink with Ty would go. Not that I’d pictured anything specific, but him setting me up with someone else definitely wasn’t it. I wasn’t delusional enough to think he would want to date me. He’d made that clear from the day we’d met, but something about the idea twisted my insides.

I didn’t love the idea, but how bad could it be? Surely, he wouldn’t be as aggressive as Danita if I’d let her do that. I wasn’t ready to rush into a relationship, and maybe if Ty thought he was helping me get back out there, it might keep

him from putting distance as wide as the Columbia Gorge between us. I needed to figure out how to seem open to setups without *actually* being set up.

“How would you go about doing that?”

“I know tons of queer guys. I could set you up on dates. Oh! Or someone on the team mentioned everyone usually goes out after the games. I’m great at being a bar wingperson.” An animated and excited Ty was an adorable Ty.

Ty glanced back at the staff door. “But not Darrell. He’s not a good choice for you.” He firmly shook his head once.

I bit back a smile and looked back down at the menu to hide it. Maybe Ty wasn’t as indifferent as he claimed. A small part of me hoped he might be interested in me but not ready to admit it. I could be patient. I wasn’t in any hurry to do anything else.

“Let’s ease into it, yeah?”

Ty’s expression grew serious. “Of course. I would never want to make you uncomfortable. We’ll figure out hand signals. Pitcher-catcher bonding, you know?”

I laughed.

“Actually, on that topic.” Ty blew out a breath. “I was rough today.”

“You need to learn how to handle big balls. There’s nothing wrong with lacking certain skills.”

“Excuse me, sir, I know how to handle balls of all sizes.”

“Practice would suggest otherwise.” I grinned, eating up how easy the banter came with him.

“Fuck you,” he said, laughing. “Anyway, what do you think about getting together a time or two this week to practice? We gotta sort our chemistry on the field. And, okay, it *couldn’t hurt* if I recalibrated my baseball skills to softball.”

“Ty, there’s nothing wrong with our chemistry.” The words fell out of my mouth, and he jerked like he’d been electrocuted. Good. I wanted to know that I affected him even

a fraction of the amount he affected me. God, it was so damn confusing. Hopefully, the tension between us would ease as we moved into our new dynamic as teammates.

Keep telling yourself that, bud.

CHAPTER 19

TYLER

Team Tap That Group Text

Austin: Anyone want to come over for dinner tonight? Caleb's cooking salmon. E, I'll save you leftovers since you're working.

Ethan: You are an angel.

Dom: Hell yeah. Caleb is so good with fish.

Ty: Can me and Seth get in on those leftovers? We're having dinner with my parents tonight.

Austin: Trade you salmon for a pack of sugar cookies out of her freezer.

Ty: [GIF of two people in trench coats stealthily exchanging packages]

Ty: Deal.



“MOM, come on. I don't want to go through the shit in the garage.” I leaned back in the wooden dining chair. The set with the oval backs had been a staple in our dining room for as long as I could remember.

Not much had changed about my parents' house over the years beyond finally getting rid of that seventies harvest gold carpet. Half the time I wanted to hire an interior designer to help them bring their home into the twenty-first century, and the other half, I basked in the nostalgia.

A napkin hit me in the face. "Language, Tyler Ray McNeill! I worked for *you* by cooking dinner. Now you and your brother work for *me* by clearing your shit out of the garage."

"How come you get to cuss and I don't? I'm an adult." I pouted.

Mom reached over and swatted my ear as Seth chuckled. Traitor. "Because this is my house. Let's go." She stood from the dining table. Seth and I dutifully followed her through the kitchen and utility room to the garage.

Dad had the walls lined with utility shelves full of plastic tubs. Wreaths and other odd-shaped Christmas decorations hung from hooks in the ceiling. The place was organized but packed. A minimalist's nightmare. Like the house, the garage was a shrine to our lives over the decades.

"Your father and I want to start kayaking, and we need to make some room. That means your shit has to go."

It was hilarious that she acted like our stuff was such an inconvenience given the constant battle Seth and I had waged as kids to get her to let us throw away anything—even old book reports and terrible art. She kept *everything*.

"I especially want it done since this one has been sticking around." She jerked her thumb toward Seth, who eyed the teetering stack of boxes with increasing horror.

Only my mom could get away with saying that out loud. Dad and I had been tiptoeing around the topic of Seth staying in town. The guys at the brewery had too. None of us had point-blank asked Seth how long he planned to stay in Dahlia Springs. No one wanted to spook him and send him back to work on another cruise ship for several more years.

I really hoped he'd stick around because we'd grown closer than ever before. Our new relationship was young enough that I worried we'd revert to being less close if he moved away again. Never in a million years would I have expected Seth to be one of *the guys*. Austin, Ethan, and Dom had become like family years ago—well, Austin was actual family—and Seth had become my friend. A good friend. I was so damn lucky in the friend department.

He fit in great with our group now. As kids, though, he'd been the annoying little squirt, always trying to follow me, Austin, and my childhood best friend, Gavin, around. The three years between us were nothing as adults, but back then, it might as well have been a decade with the social divide between us. His brainiac ass having skipped a grade hadn't helped either. I appreciated him now though. Maybe distance really did make the heart grow fonder.

Mom pulled a box off a shelf taller than her and dropped it onto a folding table already set up. A premeditated murder of my free evening. I sighed and Seth shrugged.

I unfolded the top of the box and spotted a familiar blue-and-white material. I pulled my high school letterman jacket out of the dusty box.

“Wow. This takes me back.” I pulled it on. It was snugger than it had been all those years ago. Good thing my guns had grown.

“Me too. Endless weekends of haulin' your ass around to baseball practices and games. You outgrowing your Nikes every other week,” she grumbled.

I tried to wrap my arm around her shoulder but didn't have enough give in the fabric. “But you love me.”

She pinched the tip of my nose. “Your giant stinky feet and all.”

Seth laughed. “Your feet seriously stank. Bad enough that you should've gone to a doctor.”

I tugged the jacket off and tossed it back on the box. “I was a teenage boy. Hormones and puberty and shit. What do

you expect?”

“For you to put a little baking soda on the soles of your shoes. I was a teenage boy with the same hormones and didn’t have feet that could clear a room.” Seth pulled a photo album from the box and studied a page of photos of me and Gavin goofing off at the hot springs.

Those had been such fun times. Gavin had been the best friend I could’ve asked for growing up. Like Seth, he’d taken jobs all over the world, but we’d worked hard to stay close. Small-town life wasn’t for everyone.

“Sure, let me just hop in my DeLorean and travel back to tell Young Ty about the wonders of baking soda.”

“That would be great. Could you tell Young Seth to invest in Apple?”

I laughed. “I should wear that jacket to my softball practices.”

“I’d pay to see that.” Seth didn’t look up from the album as he flipped another page.

A pang knocked around my chest. I shouldn’t have been such an asshole to him in high school by keeping my nerdy little brother from hanging out with me and my friends. I wanted to make up for it now.

“You’re playing softball?” Mom asked.

“Yeah. Part of the queer rec league. I might get a deal for the brewery out of it.”

“Let me know if you’d like any pointers.” She aimed her devilish grin at me.

That actually wasn’t a bad idea, but I’d never admit it. Mom had been a top softball athlete in college and was so proud of me when I got a full ride to play baseball.

“I think I’ve got it,” I teased.

Mom smirked. “Looks like that letter on your jacket says *baseball*, not *softball*. If it weren’t for the goddamn patriarchy, I would’ve lettered in high school.”

“Are the athletes talking sporty things again?” Dad asked Seth as he joined us.

“Ugh. Yes. I’ll never get it. The marching band was so much more entertaining.”

Dad gave Seth a high five. “Damn right.”

I pulled a pair of tattered and dirty Nike Air Force Ones from the box, then caught a whiff and held them at arm’s length. “Jesus. Who’s got the baking soda?”

Mom pinched her nose as Dad pulled over a trash can and lifted the lid. I tossed them in, and he slammed it closed again.

“Might need to burn them,” he said.

Seth kept flipping through the album. “You two were so different. I don’t get how you ended up together.”

“It was written in the stars,” Dad said dreamily as he kissed Mom on the cheek.

“Sometimes things find a way of working out.” She patted him on the cheek. They shared a look I didn’t quite understand.

“Forty years is pretty amazing.” I couldn’t imagine being with someone for forty days, let alone forty years.

“Doesn’t feel like it’s been a day over ten.”

“And you don’t look any older than you did then either.” Dad winked at her.

“Suck up,” Mom teased.

I tried to think of another way to stall because Dom sure as hell didn’t have room at his place for me to bring these boxes home. “We got all the beer and food set for the anniversary party.” Their party was sneaking up fast, in just over a month. Their thirtieth seemed like it’d only been a year or two ago.

Mom peeked in a box. “I can’t believe it’s that close. There’s still so much to do. Grandpa is going to stay in Arizona until the party, but he said we can do whatever we need to so his place is ready.”

“Gramps is giving us free rein? But he’s so prickly about his place.” I loved Grandpa’s house and land. It was full of childhood memories. I’d spent nearly all my free time there as a kid, running among the trees, playing hide-and-seek in the barn, and rolling around the field. Before I’d discovered video games, anyway.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if he decided to stay in Arizona full-time in the coming years. He sure loves that sunshine,” Dad said.

Mom gave Dad a sad smile. “Your father discovered our tree isn’t doing well.”

Seth looked up. “What do you mean?”

“I was out there last week with the landscaper to get some things started on your grandfather’s property before the party. It looks like the tree is sick. Maybe worse.”

I couldn’t imagine the tree not being there any longer. It’d always been an important and ever-present part of our lives. Lurking at the edge of the forest like a sentinel protecting Grandpa’s house. Dad had carved his initials in it when he was a kid, then added Mom’s after their first date. He’d proposed to her under that tree, and they’d gotten married under it too. They were supposed to renew their vows in the same spot.

Seth and I used to climb it when we were young. Austin and I would build unlit fires and make up ghost stories to scare the shit out of Seth. When we were a little older, Austin and I would escape there, and he would tell me about all the shit going on with his parents. Gavin and I climbed it and admitted to each other that we liked boys.

“That’s terrible. I’m so sorry.” I pulled Mom into a hug, and Seth hugged her from behind. Nothing like a McNeill hug sandwich.

“Thanks, sweethearts.” She cupped both of our cheeks after we let her go.

Dad hugged her next.

“I know a tree doctor. I mean an arborist. I could ask if he could take a look.”

“I’m sure you can.” Seth flashed a knowing smirk.

I flipped him off as any mature, stable older brother would do.

“That would be great, kiddo. Go ahead and give him my number, and I’ll set something up.”

Mom’s eyes narrowed. “Since when do you know an arborist? Who is this guy?”

“His name is Cooper,” Seth singsonged as he linked his arm through Mom’s. Clearly trying to distract her from being forced to unpack any more of the box. That put me in a tough spot. Talk about something I didn’t want to or go through shit from my childhood.

“Cooper, huh?” Her smile was mischievous.

Before I could butt in and defuse any grand ideas, my phone buzzed in my pocket with a text.

“It’s Dom. He’s got a question about a contract. I’d better take this.”

“You’d better be right back!” she called after me.

I quietly slipped out the door and headed to my car as I called Dom back. Mom and Seth would kick my ass later, but that was Future Me’s problem.

CHAPTER 20

COOPER

Ty: Any chance you're free to practice some more tonight? I want to make sure my pitching's solid so Danita doesn't try to shove a bat down my throat if I fuck up at the game on Sunday.

Coop: She'd never do that. It's far too obvious. Danita is more likely to hire someone else to do it while she's got a solid alibi.

Ty: That's...frightening. But yeah, I can see that.

Coop: I've got time tonight. I could use the practice too. Six?

Ty: Perfect. Thanks! See you tonight [smile emoji]

Coop: Looking forward to it [smile emoji]



“See that batter at that plate. They’re the best in all the state! They’ve got spirit, they’ve got pride. Ha, ha, ha, they’re on our side.” The other team chanted in unison like they’d been practicing. I wouldn’t be surprised if their coach made them have chant practices on top of softball ones.

Our opponents, Umpire Strikes Back, brought an intense energy to the first game of the season, but I’d expected it after

our tense championship game last year, where they beat us by one. I swore that still gave Danita nightmares.

There was a good crowd in the bleachers and clusters of folks spilling onto the grass surrounding the field in camping chairs and hanging out on blankets. It didn't hurt that it was an unusually sunny and warm April afternoon.

I ignored the burn in my thighs as I squatted and scanned the field to decide what to signal to Ty. We were tied and closing in on the game's time limit. Thankfully, Ty was already pitching significantly better than his first practice only days ago, so we had a chance.

We'd stayed after practice on Thursday to work together, and he found his groove quickly. Eventually, it rained us out, so we went out for beer and wings. After I got home, I texted Ty about a movie until I fell asleep. Thank god things weren't awkward between us on the team, given how we'd met.

One thing was for sure: the pitcher and catcher having had sex before definitely fast-forwarded our rapport building on the field. Maybe if I'd slept with our pitcher last year, we would've won the championship. Not sure their husband would've liked that though.

Ty nodded and rolled his shoulders. His focused expression turned me on. Probably because I'd experienced that level of focus up close and personal when we were both naked. I'd nearly gotten wood the first time we'd practiced when he'd looked at a bat the same way he'd looked at my bat only weeks ago. If I didn't stop thinking about Ty naked, I'd never survive the season.

Ty pulled his arm back and threw the ball. The batter swung and missed. Third strike. Two outs. One more and we'd win. Not that the first game meant a ton for the season's outcome, but it would be nice to get a taste of vindication.

He winked at me, and my traitorous stomach swooped.

Then Coach got into *another* yelling match with the other coach. I groaned internally. The ump had already warned them

to cool it. The betting pool would probably start up before the next game of whether they would kill each other or fuck it out.

While the ump went to mediate again, the next batter strolled toward me, walking like the bat between his legs was as big as the one casually perched on his shoulder. Going by the unmistakable bulge in his pants, it might be.

“Eyes up here, handsome.”

I nearly choked on my gum. So, I’d *maybe* gotten a glimpse when he batted before, but it was impossible not to look. The guy had a dick big enough that it made me want to tattoo “exit only” on my ass.

When I looked back at Ty, he was watching me. He started laughing and turned around, but his shoulders visibly shook. The shit.

“I didn’t expect the opposing catcher to be so distracting.” The guy hooked his front teeth over his lip and gave me a once-over.

“Are you new to the league?” Surely, I would’ve remembered the size of that jock...strap if I’d seen it before.

“Yeah, first game. You been involved for a while?”

“Couple years.”

“Maybe we can get a drink, and you can give me the league scoop.”

The guy was hot. Tall, broad, onyx eyes. I *could* go for it. He seemed like the perfect guy to have some fun with. I certainly had no reason not to agree, but when I glanced back at Ty and caught him laughing with our first baseperson, I knew I didn’t want a quick hookup. I’d barely accepted the idea of wanting sex or dating before I met Ty, and ever since the whirlwind of Tyler McNeill exploded into my life, it was hard to think about anything else. *Anyone* else.

Ridiculous. I’d had a great time with Ty, and it muddied my thoughts. Having platonic fun with Ty was more appealing than risking a dud hookup. I’d done enough fucking around in college with disappointing guys to last a lifetime. But I needed

to get over it because Ty and I would be nothing but friends. At the end of the day, that was really what I wanted from him, but damn, it was hard not to imagine more when I couldn't stop wondering what he wore under his joggers.

Danita would call me a chickenshit. Jonesing for a guy I couldn't have to protect myself from taking a risk, but she and her armchair psychology could take a hike.

The umpire resumed the game before I could answer Flirty McBig Bat.

“Saved by the ump,” he said in a low, sexy voice and chuckled. A chuckle that oozed the confidence of a guy who took a lot of shots and didn't mind missing a few because it rarely happened.

I refocused on Ty—on the game—and fired off a signal. Ty managed a strike, then a ball. The fourth pitch connected with the bat in a clear home run. Flirty McBig Bat pumped his arm as he jogged to first base. Ty hung his head for a moment but quickly shook it off.

Ty and I gravitated to each other as we lined up to shake the other teams' hands. He slapped me on the shoulder before starting the line. Flirty McBig Bat held my hand a beat too long when he passed. After we finished the line, he circled back to me.

“Are you going out after this?” he asked.

Ty clocked the guy's grip on my hand and arched his eyebrow. I saw right through it. It was the same attitude he'd had when he'd suggested being my wingman the other night. All confident bluster.

I stared at Ty instead of the other guy. “Yeah. I haven't been to that bar yet.” I liked our tradition of trying out a new bar after each game and was excited to check out the new queer bar.

Before I could say anything else, our coaches called us in for a huddle.

“You going out?” I asked Ty after glancing over to where his brother and Dom sat in the bleachers.

“Yeah, I think I’ll hang out for a bit before heading home for our brewery meeting.” He held my eyes and smiled before returning his attention to Coach.

Lord, give me the strength to get through this season.

CHAPTER 21

TYLER

“If you stare any harder, you’ll burn a hole in the back of his head.”

“Huh?” I turned toward Seth, who made a poor attempt at covering his shit-eating grin by sipping his beer.

“I didn’t invite you here to give me shit.” I hadn’t invited them to the bar after the game at all. I appreciated that Seth and Dom came to the game while Austin and Ethan held down the fort. That was the hardest part about running a business with my best friends—it was complicated when we wanted to do something as a group.

I had figured they’d head home after, not join me at the bar like chaperones. Hell, I hadn’t expected to go to the bar after. Who was I kidding? When did I ever turn down the chance to check out a new bar? Especially a hot new queer one in Portland.

“I’m not staring at him.”

Dom snorted.

“Staring at who, oh brother mine?”

“Fuck off.”

The walls were painted a bright off-white with enough lighting to feel open without being too bright for a bar. The bar was at the far end, with a mix of tall tables and booths placed around the rest of the space.

“Why aren’t you hanging out with Cooper over there?” Seth asked.

“Yeah, go claim your man.”

I expected the shit from Seth but not Dom. We had a silent agreement that we wouldn't give each other shit for our lack of interest in romantic bullshit.

“Et tu, Brute? He's not my man.” I should call the Guinness Book of World Records with how synchronous Seth's and Dom's eye rolls were.

“Why don't you two find your hookups and leave my ass alone?”

Dom said nothing as he quickly typed on his phone like he often did when we hit the bars in Portland. Usually, he dipped without word and never told us where he went, but we suspected he had a stable of booty calls. Seth gave me an unimpressed look. Right. My demisexual little brother didn't do bar hookups.

I turned my attention back to Cooper, who sat at the bar waiting for a drink. We'd only been there about twenty minutes, but several people had approached him with smiles and handshakes. Of course he was well-liked in the league.

That big-dicked player who got the last run—not that I would hold a grudge, okay, fine, I would hold a grudge—sidled up to Coop and flashed his pearly whites. The guy placed his hand on Coop's shoulder, and Coop didn't shake it off, which was fine. Totally fine.

Cooper was supposed to be getting out there and meeting some new dicks, and I was supposed to be his wingperson. Instead, I creepily watched some guy flirt with him. I respected the man's game, but couldn't he take his showboating to another target? Coop deserved a down-to-earth guy like him. Someone who cared what he had to say while also giving him a top-shelf blowjob.

Wingperson mode: activate. I'd never been someone to shirk my duties. I rolled my shoulders and zeroed in on my destination. “Gonna go get us drinks,” I said to the guys without checking if they heard me.

As I marched through the crowd, I heard Seth call out something about still having a full beer. I ignored him and approached the bar, squeezing into the narrow space on Coop's other side. Sure, there was a gap at the other end of the bar, but I needed to be close for proper wingpersoning.

"Your thighs must be so strong. Being able to hold a squat through the game." The guy looked down at Cooper's thick thighs. Yeah, they *were* strong. I'd felt their strength wrapped around me as I'd sucked him off.

"Hey there."

I turned to my other side to look at the owner of the deep voice. The kind that reverberated in your chest when they spoke. He was attractive with a wide smile, dark cornrows down his neck, and stood a few inches taller than me. A guy I would happily take to a dark corner on any other occasion, but I didn't want to sneak off with a hookup my first time out with the team.

"Hey, man. Sorry, I'm not looking today." I said it with a smile, so he knew it was simply the wrong place, wrong time. *But is it? Just say yes.* I could've suggested we take things to another bar and used him to put a dick between me and Cooper. I hadn't fucked anyone since, and I was getting itchy. I'd been busy as hell at work, and now, with the softball league, I had even less free time. And I found myself more interested in texting with Cooper than working up the energy to suck a stranger's cock. Or, more likely, making arrangements, getting ready, and then getting blown off. And not in the fun way.

He saluted me with his beer. "If you change your mind."

I returned my attention to Coop's conversation while waiting for the bartender to take my order.

"The first evidence of beer was found in England. Isn't that cool? Probably a bunch of Vikings getting drunk." The guy had been spouting random shit about alcohol for several minutes.

I ground my teeth at the horrific historical inaccuracy, unable to fight my agitation. “That’s not true.” I leaned over the bar to look around Cooper. “There’s evidence dating as far back as Mesopotamia. Beer was brewed all over the world for a long time.”

The guy gave me a dismissive look. “Pretty sure you’re wrong, man. I saw something online about it.”

“I own a brewery, *man*.” I took way too much pleasure from the way his eyes widened.

Not the best idea to make league enemies off the field on day one. I flashed my charming but professional smile. “Sorry. Whenever I hear someone talking about beer, I turn into an asshole fact-checking robot. Hazard of the job. I’m an owner of Tap That Brewery in Dahlia Springs.”

“Oh. That’s cool. Will have to check out the brewery sometime.” He looked between me and Coop, and one side of his mouth curved into a resigned smile. “Nice to meet you guys. I’m gonna go check in with my team and celebrate. Catch you next time we play against each other.”

“See ya.” That might’ve come out a skosh too cheerful. I knocked my smug smile down to neutral when Cooper turned to me.

His eyes danced with laughter. “I was wondering how long it would take you to say something.”

“You knew I was standing here?”

Cooper leaned forward until his nose brushed my ear. I fought a shiver. “I know what you smell like.” I couldn’t stop that shiver.

I cleared my throat. I wasn’t supposed to get a hard-on from Cooper. I was *supposed* to be moving on to the next guy and appreciating the fun we had for what it was while helping him find someone else.

“Oops. Wingperson fail.” My voice was thready.

Cooper lifted his eyebrows as he seemed to hold back a laugh. Something was lurking behind his charmed and slightly

exasperated smile. Something that made me lean toward him.

“There’re a ton of guys in here though. I’ll help you find someone who isn’t packing a beast big enough to require reconstructive jaw surgery.”

Cooper busted out laughing. “Can you even imagine? That guy needs his own OnlyFans.”

“I’d subscribe.”

“Honestly? Same. Getting to see the dick without hearing him butcher the prestigious adult beverage industry is a win for us all.”

I bit the inside of my cheek as I turned so my back was against the bar. Coop spun around on his stool to face the same way.

“We need a game sign for it.”

“For what?” He had a curious smile.

“For people packing heat. It was killing me not being able to acknowledge it during the game. If I could see it clearly, I can’t imagine the front-row seat you got.”

Coop let out a hearty laugh, which shook his thick belly. I’d spent some quality time with that belly. “If I looked hard enough, I could see it twitch.”

“How about this?” I curved my fingers to form a C, like gripping a thick shaft, and then I waved my fingertips from pinky to thumb. “Like playing a skin flute. Get it?”

He snorted. “I hate to say it, but yeah, I get it. And it works. Skin flute signal is going in the books.”

“All right.” I grinned and juted my chin toward the digital jukebox. “What about that guy over there with the Mariners hat? Would you go for him?”

“He looks like he loves to talk about Bitcoin.”

I chuckled. “The twink over there wearing turquoise? He’s cute.”

“He ordered a Cosmo with cotton candy in it. I hate cotton candy. Thoughts on him?” He gestured to a decent-looking guy with a receding hairline who wore a jersey for one of the other teams in the league.

“Did you see how he was checking his phone while he was in the outfield? No way. You need someone who’s going to give you and your body all their attention.”

“And him? Heading to the stairs?” Coop asked.

I clocked the guy in question. He had thick blond hair that reached the top of shoulders broad enough to make a Greek sculptor cry. I tried to find a flaw as the guy descended the stairs to the lower part of the bar, where there was music and dancing, but I couldn’t come up with anything.

“I’ve got an idea. Come with me.” I worked my way to the stairs with Coop on my heels.

We would dance near the guy, and then I’d push Coop in his direction and leave them to it. It would be time to head home for our team meeting in a little bit anyway. I *needed* that to dispel whatever lingering effects my time with Coop had on me.

I ignored the part of the bar where I left Seth and Dom as we descended the stairs, but I felt their weighted stares on my back. Bass from a remixed pop tune thumped in my chest as we navigated the low red-hued lights.

Once we reached the dance floor, I turned to face Coop. I didn’t think to ask him if he enjoyed dancing, but he didn’t stop me. I moved my hips to the beat as I glanced around to clock where Blondie was. He looked appreciatively at me and Cooper. Nice. He was interested. But then a small guy sidled up to him, grinding his ass against Blondie’s crotch. He clutched Shortie’s hip.

Blondie would be busy for at least a song, so I might as well keep Coop company in the meantime. I hooked my arm around Cooper’s neck. I could show him off since I was trying to get him laid. My dance moves were strong, and I was certain I could make Coop look good, even if his weren’t.

Coop wrapped his large hands around my waist as he tugged me against him. Our bodies moved in sync with the music, and my dick perked up each time our groins brushed together. Cooper was getting hard too, and I couldn't stop the flashes of a naked, hard, panting Coop on the verge of coming. It was a vision burned into the back of my eyelids.

The song transitioned into another and another as sweat dripped down the small of my back where Cooper's hand pressed tightly, possessively. I couldn't even remember my plan when he touched me like that. We might as well have been the only two people in the bar with how little awareness I had of our surroundings.

Welp. My plan had backfired.

I wanted Cooper.

Our faces were millimeters apart. Breathing each other in while staring into each other's eyes. There was something about it that was even more intimate than when he'd had my dick in his mouth.

Fuck my rules. Fuck setting him up with Blondie.

I wanted to fuck Cooper.

"Let's find a restroom." I grabbed his hand and tugged him toward the restroom sign. He went willingly.



COOPER

IT TOOK TRYING the handles on three gender-inclusive restroom doors before one opened. Ty had barely cleared the threshold before I slammed the door behind him. I turned on the lights because I *needed* to see him. I needed to watch how he responded to my touch. I craved it. The urge to touch him

again had lurked under my consciousness, patiently waiting for an opportunity to pounce.

I had about a second to notice and appreciate how clean the restroom was, which I should've expected from a new place that already had such a good reputation in the city. Before I could give much thought to the bar, Ty's lips were on mine. I groaned into the kiss. How the hell had I gone weeks without tasting him?

I was under no illusion that Ty would allow this to happen again, so I was determined to make the most of it. I was about to drop into my catcher squat, but Ty beat me to it. He stared up at me and winked.

"You're not the only one with the thigh strength to hold this position."

A broken laugh shifted into a moan as Ty yanked my pants down like he was as ravenous as me.

The pulsing thump of the bass kept tempo with my pounding heart as the music washed over me. I lost myself to Ty's perfect mouth. The way he licked around my head and sucked with the right amount of pressure, cupped my balls, gave me firm strokes, and brought me to the edge faster than I wanted. I needed it to last, to savor our lapse in judgment. But someone would probably knock soon, and I needed to get my mouth around him before that happened.

"Yes. Fuck, Ty. Feels so good. You know just how to work me over." I felt the vibrations of his groan through my dick. I dragged my fingers over his bulging cheek and soaked up being able to touch him in case it was the last time I ever got the chance. The man was magnetic, and I was hard as steel.

Once Ty pressed against the sensitive skin behind my balls, I lost it. My body tensed, and I warned him, but he didn't pull off, so I shot into his mouth. He stroked me through the aftershocks as my legs jerked involuntarily. It was the hardest and fastest orgasm I'd had in a long time.

He pulled back and looked up at me with fire blazing in his eyes. I cupped his cheek and swiped cum from the corner of

his mouth with my thumb. The pupils eclipsed his irises as he sucked my thumb between his lips.

“My turn,” I growled.

He stood, and before I could crouch, there was a knock at the door. *Fuck!* I wanted my shot at Ty’s dick, to make him come, to feel myself let go one more time. It would be enough. It would *have* to be enough.

Ty let out the most put-upon sigh that I felt in the depths of my soul and shot me a lopsided smile.

I tucked myself away as Ty checked himself in the mirror. He turned and closed the distance between us, leaning into my ear.

“You owe me one.”

My breath hitched as I memorized his cocky smile. I caught a hint of uncertainty behind it.

“Name the time and place, and I’ll have your dick in my mouth and hard as hell in less than a minute.”

“Then I’ll have to wear my complicated panties with the ties to make you work for it.”

I groaned and cupped myself as my spent dick valiantly twitched. I’d come so hard it might not get hard again for days. “You’re killing me. Are you wearing panties now?” Had I gotten hit with a ball and landed in an alternate dimension? Because I hadn’t thought I’d get another chance to freely ask about his underwear outside of my daydreams. He might shut down after the adrenaline faded and blood left his dick, and I didn’t want to miss my chance.

Ty teased me with the barest dip of his waistband. “We shouldn’t keep the other restroom patrons waiting.”

“You make this sound like a glory hole.”

He bit his bottom lip. “Now that would be a good time.”

I was already mentally Googling nearby glory holes and developing a fantasy I would definitely jerk off to later.

He walked to the door, put his hand on the handle, and looked over his shoulder. “My jock collection is almost as good as my panty collection.”

Ty opened the door to reveal Dom with his arms crossed, wearing the biggest shit-eating grin.

“Don’t you say a single goddamn word, Dominic.”

Dom mimed zipping his lips with his middle finger. Ty stormed out of the restroom, and Dom grinned at me. I glanced back at the restroom and saw a guy slide in after Dom right before the door closed. Huh. The million times I’d looked over at Ty earlier, it had seemed Dom had only been talking to Ty and Seth. I hadn’t noticed him talking to a guy earlier. I decided not to say anything to Ty. Dom deserved his secrets too, even if he now knew ours.

Ty scowled as he waited in line at the bar for a drink. It was adorable. I couldn’t stop grinning because the voice in my head kept chanting over and over *next time, next time, he wants a next time!* For the first time in a long time, I almost regretted living so far away in the country. Otherwise, I would invite Ty over now to make sure that next time actually happened.

But having more time with a naked Ty as the prize? I could be patient.

CHAPTER 22

TYLER

Ty: How pissed is Danita that we lost?

Coop: Not pissed at all. She's glad we made a good showing.

Ty: No hired assassin to knock me off? Phew.

Coop: Not until after the season ends, at least. She needs a pitcher still.

Ty: LOL true.



I stacked the cans at a different angle to try and capture light coming through a window in our production area. Ugh, I should've invested in a professional photography setup with lights and all the good shit for our product pictures ages ago, but there were always a dozen priorities competing for our money. I flipped through the photos and frowned. Not there yet.

The more I focused on work, the less space I gave my brain to dwell on what had happened at the bar on Sunday. I needed to get it out of my head before I saw Coop at practice tonight.

I had one rule—*one rule*—when it came to sex: no repeats. I'd let myself get away with that weekend with Coop, but a bar slip-up? Come on. I had more self-control than that. At least, I used to. With how slammed I'd been at work, I'd begun to toy with the idea of a friends-with-benefits situation. Purely a coincidence that it timed with reconnecting with Coop. It might fit for the time being. Not to mention that sex with Coop got better each time. If it'd been a flop at the bar, it would've been easier to walk away, but our chemistry was fucking explosive. Addicting.

“How are the photos coming?” Austin asked. He wiped his hands on a rag and tossed it over his shoulder.

“Still trying to get solid photos for our fall ads.” I adjusted the cans again.

“So you'll be here the rest of the day then?” He smirked before returning to his brewing wizardry.

He wasn't wrong. I was a chill guy in most parts of my life, but when it came to work, I was focused, controlled, and organized. Running Tap That with my best friends was a dream come true, and I would do everything I could to ensure it succeeded. I wanted to work with my chosen family until I retired or croaked.

The low battery warning flashed, so I had to call it quits before I had exactly what I needed. A replacement backup battery for the one that croaked a couple of weeks ago was still in our business Amazon cart. Competition was fierce in the industry, and half-assing our visual content with poor lighting and bad angles wouldn't cut it. People expected a lot more than they used to.

If I went through the pictures and pulled a few into Photoshop to mess with, I might be able to fix the issue. I walked toward the office and passed the kitchen, where Ethan and Seth whispered to each other while prepping vegetables for the charcuterie trays. Those two were trouble together. As soon as they spotted me, they stopped. I would bet the sales of the summer ale that they'd been gossiping about Cooper and me. If Dom had seen us head downstairs or to the restroom,

Seth might've too. The difference was Seth would say something and Dom wouldn't. A youth spent torturing my little brother was coming back to bite me in the ass. I'd learned long ago that the best defense was to act oblivious.

"What are you knuckleheads up to?" I leaned against the doorway.

I caught a flash of guilt on Seth's face.

"Just chatting." Ethan smiled at me too sweetly before shooting Seth a look.

"About what?"

I tried to ignore my annoyance and appreciate that Seth was getting along so well with my friends. Well, his friends now too.

Since Seth had returned to Dahlia Springs, he'd acted like he had a lifetime of giving me shit to make up for. Which was fair. As the older brother, I'd fulfilled my duty of loving sibling torture while growing up. And, okay, fine, a little into college and adulthood too. I wasn't a saint.

I'd gone off to college in a different city and had been busy enjoying my independence. Then Seth got into some nerdy Portland college and spent all his time studying. Well, most of it. There was a persistent rumor that each spring, all the students at his college got high as fuck on a variety of drugs to burn off steam before finals. I didn't understand the hardcore academic types, but whatever worked for them and their sexy brains.

Since Seth had moved around after college, living in different cities and traveling before starting a cruise ship work stint, the most substantial time we'd had around each other had been small chunks at the holidays or when Seth was between jobs. I was grateful to make up for lost time. Though less glad that it involved him gossiping about my sex life. *Since when did I care if people talked about my sex life?*

Seth had turned out differently than I'd expected when we were young. Gone was the dweebie kid who followed me, Austin, and Gavin around. He wasn't as shy as he used to be.

His travels and cruise ship jobs had done wonders for him and his comfort around people. I liked the man my brother had become.

“About how your cologne should be classified as a biohazard.” Seth dropped a handful of chopped radishes onto several trays.

Okay, maybe not.

“How did it go after the game last night?” Ethan’s smile reminded me of an angel taking their lunch break in hell, intent on causing trouble.

Asking about *after* the game, not the game itself, was a horrible tell.

“Seth mentioned you lost the game. Sorry about that. Was the new queer bar cool?”

Ooh, he’s good.

I crossed my arms and leaned against the doorway. “It was great. Their beer selection was lackluster, but they had a great cocktail menu. I’ll reach out to set up a pitch to carry ours.” It would throw him off if I kept things focused on business. I adopted my best innocent expression.

Ethan narrowed his eyes as Seth popped a chunk of radish into his mouth.

“That’s great. Keep me posted. How were the restrooms? Clean?” Ethan’s tone oozed sweetness.

Seth turned around, but his shoulders shook. I was going to murder him after shoving my foot into his big mouth. Even worse were the lethal heart eyes Ethan pointed at me. Oh no. I didn’t need him getting his hopes up and meddling with his romantic bullshit.

Ethan had always been good about not pushing his lovey-dovey agenda with Dom and me. He’d always accepted I was wired differently and didn’t care about it like he did. But ever since I’d come back from the weekend with Cooper, and especially since softball had started, there’d been little comments. An innocent “How’s Cooper?” An innocuous “You

should tell Cooper to stop by.” A quick “What’s Cooper up to today?” It smelled fishy.

Ethan was quickly becoming as annoying as a stinkbug infestation with his knowing looks and, Jesus, patient smiles. Those were the *worst*.

“Coop have fun last night?” Ethan aimed his eager puppy look my way.

“Yup. I was playing wingperson.” The words were sour on my tongue. It wasn’t exactly a lie since I’d wingpersoned myself into another hookup with Cooper. The one thing I’d told myself I wouldn’t do. It was like I’d told myself to cut back on processed sugar and Coop was a delicious piece of peanut butter fudge.

My dick was all too happy to produce a litany of excuses for why Cooper made a reasonable exception to my rules. I was helping him get back out there. He knew the score and wouldn’t expect more from me. He was hot. He was great at sucking dick. I liked spending time with him. His laughter made my stomach swan dive.

“Wingperson, huh? I get the feeling we’re missing some important information.” Ethan crossed his arms. The kitchen nitrile gloves on his hands took away from his sternness.

He opened his mouth, but then a knocking pounded from the brewery’s front door. I glanced at the security camera Dom had set up in the kitchen to help us keep an eye on the taproom and saw Hayden standing there. I looked at the clock.

“He’s five minutes early.”

Ethan grinned. “Bet Dom was hoping he’d be late so he’d have an excuse to fire him.”

Ethan took off his gloves and followed me to the front. I let Hayden in and shook his hand. I was eager for the lifeline to escape Ethan’s interrogation.

“Good to see you, Hayden.”

“Likewise. I hope it’s not a problem that I’m a bit early.”

I smiled. “Not at all. To be early is to be on time.”

“My thoughts exactly.” He smirked. *Oh, this is going to be fun.*

“Ethan, I’ve got a question about this invoice for new glassware.” Dom’s gruff voice preceded him as soon as he rounded the corner from the hallway where the office was located. His attention snapped to Hayden like his body knew he was there before his eyes spotted him. He mumbled something about talking to Ethan later and stormed off back to the office.

Hayden sniffed his armpit. “I showered today.” He shrugged.

The three of us chuckled.

Hayden was an interesting mix of jolly and motorcycle guy. Friendly with an edge. He had a wide smile and shrewd blue eyes.

I really wanted him to spill the details about whatever had happened between him and Dom since Dom sure as hell wasn’t letting anything slip. But I needed to respect Dom’s privacy. Even if it killed me, and it just might.

Ethan and I led Hayden down the hallway to the production area at the back of the building and past the office with the door firmly closed. Ethan chatted happily with Hayden about his weekend as we walked. That was one thing I loved about him. He could talk to anyone.

As we neared the exit in our brewing area that led to the employee parking lot behind the building, Hayden spotted our special board. A whiteboard we used to give each other shit and keep it fun at work. It used to have electrical tape dividing it into four chunks, but it had five now that Seth worked for us regularly. I was proud that my section showed it had been over a week since I’d said “Epic.” Unfortunately for all of us, it had only been three days since Austin was caught making out with Caleb at work. We needed to change Ethan’s since it wasn’t any fun tracking how long it’d been since he’d gotten a customer’s phone number now that he had a boyfriend. It had been zero days since someone had commented on Seth’s bow ties.

A hearty laugh rumbled out of Hayden. “Of course it’s been zero days since Dom acted like the boss.” He shook his head, but it appeared more fond than exasperated. “He needs someone to boss him right back.” There was a hint of heat in his words.

My attention snapped to Ethan as his eyes widened. He mouthed, “Oh my god,” as Hayden continued studying the board.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. When I saw Coop’s name on the notification, I fell back while Ethan continued with Hayden.

Cooper: There’s officially a betting pool going over when Coach Gurtner will fuck Coach Sandoval. Want in?

Tyler: You know it. Speaking of fucking. How do you feel about us continuing to do that? *puts on sexy lawyer hat* I’m proposing a casual situation of sex only. We’ve got great sexual chemistry, so why deny each other orgasms during the season? I’ll still be your wingperson though.

Cooper: That took a turn I wasn’t expecting, but I won’t turn down regular sex. Lawyer hats are fine, but I prefer those white lawyer wigs. Hubba hubba.

Tyler: LOL dork. Thoughts on car sex?

Cooper: Favorable thoughts.

Tyler: Good. Got any plans after practice?

Cooper: You, it sounds like.

Tyler: [smirk emoji]

CHAPTER 23

COOPER

Danita: When you have time, could you build me a shelf?

Cooper: Like an IKEA thing or from scratch?

Danita: Scratch, obviously. Why buy IKEA when I have you?

Cooper: You owe me dinner, and you're helping me mount it to the wall.

Danita: Dammit. You drive a hard bargain. Okay, sold.



My heart rate kicked up as I reached a familiar turnaround driveway. It'd only been a few weeks since I'd been at the house to fell some black cottonwoods, and I was back to fulfill my first official art commission. I'd been creating art on some level for nearly thirty years, but never for someone I wasn't close to. I knew the people who cared about me wouldn't put down my work, but a stranger had no reason to blow smoke up my ass. I'd sure learned that in college.

I angled my truck so the edge of the bed cleared the gate to the gigantic backyard in case she wanted me to haul it back

there. Before exiting the truck, I tried a deep breathing exercise I'd learned in a grief support group.

All the worst remarks about my work being unoriginal and homey in a derogatory way hovered at the edges of my mind like hungry sharks waiting for chum. Art class critiques were brutal. What if Ginny didn't like what I'd made for her? I'd spent a lot of my free time since the job on her property working on the piece. Time when I wasn't at softball or texting with Ty, which was becoming a regular thing. I smiled. Thinking of him helped lower my blood pressure.

Movement caught my eye, and I saw Ginny waving as she walked toward my truck. The tiny woman had to be at least double my age and could probably kick my ass.

Now or never. I greeted her with as happy a smile as possible, with my nerves firing on all cylinders.

Ginny wore a sunshine-yellow shirt and white linen pants that danced in the light breeze. She rubbed her hands together and did a happy wiggle. "I'm so excited to see what you've created."

"I hope you like it." I tried to convey confidence, but I hadn't been so nervous since I'd presented my art portfolio in college right before I'd faced the fact that I wasn't cut out to be an artist and changed majors.

I rubbed my damp palms on my jeans before pulling on my gloves and popping open the back of the truck. I pulled the bundle out, stood the piece upright, and carefully unwrapped the blanket. "Animals are my favorite thing to create."

She gasped, then covered her mouth with her weathered hand. I tried to look at the piece through her eyes instead of my critical ones. Where I saw sections I'd cut too deep or detail I could've finessed with more skill, maybe she saw something pleasant. I'd retained part of the trunk's curve by carving the owl in only half of the wood, so there was a backdrop. Almost like the owl was hanging out inside the stump. My style edged toward rough, almost rushed, sharp angles rather than careful and meticulously detailed. The owl

looked almost windswept and grumpy while waiting out a storm in the stump.

Tears spilled out of Ginny's eyes. "My late husband loved owls. What a beautiful way to honor that grump of a man." She looked out to where the trees once stood. "He adored it here. The trees were one of his favorite parts of the property, and he spent so much time fussing over them. I'm sad they had to go, but he would've loved the raised garden bed I plan to put there. Anything to keep him outside."

I looked over at the same spot. "My late husband had an obsession with crows. Now the damn things won't leave me alone." The admission tumbled from my mouth. Every time I spoke of Aleck in fondness instead of pain, I felt lighter.

She let out a wet laugh. "Men and their birds."

"You're telling me." I smiled at her, grateful to the tiny woman for helping me heal the slightest bit more.

After several minutes of looking at the piece, she cleared her throat and collected herself. "I have a check for you inside."

I let out a shaky breath as my shoulders relaxed. I followed her into her warm and inviting home full of photos from what seemed to have been a long and fulfilling life. Owl tchotchkes stood in clusters on several surfaces.

Ginny picked up a foil container with a plastic lid that had an envelope on top. "Thank you so much, Cooper. I'll treasure what you created for the rest of my days. Now open the envelope and make sure it's the right amount."

I peeked into the container. "What's this?"

"A treat for all your hard work. I've won several county blue ribbons for my snickerdoodles."

I *loved* snickerdoodles. My mouth watered at the stack of thick cookies covered with cinnamon and sugar. I set the container on the dining table to open the envelope and had to do a double take at the amount. She'd not only paid me what I'd quoted her after extensive research and her negotiating a higher rate because she'd called me out on underpricing

myself, but she'd added a sizable tip. Behind the check was a paper with names and phone numbers in a tidy cursive.

“What’s this paper?”

She beamed. “The names of several friends who want to hire you.”

“I’ll be sure to pass these names on to our front office. They do all the scheduling for consultations.”

Ginny clucked her tongue. “Not trees, for your *art*.”

I was stunned. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Say you have time to do work for them because as soon as I hit the group chat with pictures of what you made for me, they’ll be clamoring for your time.”

I laughed. “Absolutely. Thank you.” Tears stung the back of my eyes.

Ginny pulled me into a hug and then invited me to stay for a cup of coffee, and we chatted about our late husbands. It was the best finale to dropping off my first commission. Aleck had been hovering on my mind while I’d worked on it because I knew how proud he would’ve been. It felt like he’d been a part of the process.

After we finished our drinks, I said goodbye and promised to call the people on the list. I was light enough to float on my way back to my truck. Ginny had liked it. Truly appreciated and enjoyed my work. Someone who didn’t have to support me not only did so but was trying to help me get more of my art out there.

Could I do it? Could I actually share my art with more people? Maybe that professor had been wrong after all. I could hear Aleck saying *I told you so* in a singsong.

I climbed into my truck, and before I turned the ignition, I looked at the sky and spotted a crow flying by. “Thanks for always pushing me to do this, Al.”

As I drove home, my mind wandered to Ty again. Usually, it was because I was curious about what he was up to or simply wanted to chat. This time, I wanted to tell him about

my art. I wanted to tell him I'd done something big and scary that I'd been avoiding most of my adult life, and it'd gone okay. Better than okay. I wanted him to smile and give me a high five.

The fact I wanted to share that part of my life with him scared the hell out of me. Despite trying to keep my feelings in check, they'd gotten away from me. If I didn't sort my shit out, I'd be in trouble because Ty hadn't given any indication that he'd changed his mind on his no-dating rule, and the last thing I wanted to do was pressure him into something he didn't want. No matter how much I wanted him.

CHAPTER 24

TYLER

Team Tap That Group Text

Dom: Who left a bottle of lube in the office?

Ty: Not it. I don't fuck at work. [GIF of someone touching their nose]

Ty: But pretty sure half of the members of this group chat can't say the same. [GIF of someone narrowing their eyes suspiciously]

Austin: Not me! I keep my brewery shenanigans to lube-free activities.

Dom: Jesus Christ, Ethan. Again?

Ethan: Ethan is not available to take your call right now. Please leave a message after the beep.



“HAVE you tried Gigantic’s new seasonal?” River pulled out a weed along the third base line.

“I haven’t. Is it good?” I asked as I scanned a section of the infield for debris.

As they described the beer, my attention wandered to Cooper again, who was raking the first base line. I refused to count how many times it had happened at practice.

River chuckled, and I snapped my head back in their direction.

“What?”

They looked pointedly toward Coop, who looked delicious in his gray sweats, by the way, then back to me. “Cooper’s been extra happy this season. It’s nice to see.”

Their insinuation wasn’t lost on me, and I waited for the panic to come. I’d never been accused of having anything to do with a man’s happiness before. That waded too deep into relationship territory. The panic didn’t come. I was glad Coop had been happier because he damn well deserved to be after everything he’d been through. If I contributed to that, even in a small way, I was proud of it.

Before I could think of a response, Coach came over and asked River to help with something in the outfield.

After finishing my part of field maintenance, I slowly made my way toward my car. While walking, I caught up on the texting thread with the guys. As usual, we had about three conversations going simultaneously. One about whether we wanted to participate in a Halloween beer festival, another with an update on construction at the brewery where Dom was frustratingly quiet on the topic, and a third where Ethan was giving Austin shit for catching him and Caleb making out in the storage room. Again.

Familiar steps soon followed.

“Good practice tonight. You’re starting to throw like an actual softball player.”

I huffed out a laugh. “Fuck you. Softballs are a lot bigger than baseballs. Takes a while to adjust my grip after years of muscle memory.”

Coop smirked. “From what I hear, you’ve had plenty of practice in gripping things of various sizes.”

I laughed. His combination of flirting and teasing was exactly why I wanted to wait for him. Well, that and the prospect of getting off somewhere before heading back to our respective homes.

Coop glanced around before leaning in. “What color today?”

I gave a quick tug at my waistband to show him the strap of the yellow jock. Wearing them for an audience gave me a thrill I’d never expected because my panties had always been for me, no one else. Certainly not something I wanted to share with a twenty-minute hookup. Thirty if things went well.

“Still want to go somewhere?” Coop hooked a tooth over his bottom lip and released it slowly.

“Hell yeah.” It surprised me how easily I agreed. For whatever reason, I hadn’t gotten my fill of Cooper yet. I kept waiting for the interest in his dick to fade into platonic friendship. Where was that familiar buzz pulsing under my skin at the prospect of meeting someone new and getting off? Instead, I was buzzing over getting to hear the sounds Coop made when he came since the loud music at the bar had taken that from me the other day. And I wanted to hear his happy laughter as he came down. Plus, getting off in a car? Public enough to be thrilling, but not enough to actually risk getting caught? Yes, please.

We reached my car, and I shifted on my feet as I remembered there was something I wanted to ask him. Something I should’ve asked already.

“I’ve got a favor to ask you.”

Cooper waggled his eyebrows. “A sexy favor?”

“Okay, two favors.”

Cooper’s expression softened, and it made my chest flush warm. “Anything.”

Anything. He gave of himself so freely, like it brought him happiness to help me without being promised anything in return.

“Any chance you have time in your work schedule to evaluate a tree on my grandpa’s property?” Before I even finished the sentence, Cooper replied with an enthusiastic yes.

“You really are a tree nerd.”

“Ha. Ha.” He barely contained his eye roll. Something about him rolling his eyes at me and knowing there was no actual annoyance there sent my stomach free-falling over the edge of a cliff.

“It’s the tree my parents got married under, and they’re planning a vow renewal in the same spot next month for their fortieth anniversary. There’s something wrong with it.”

“Hopefully, it’s nothing major. I’d be happy to assess it.”

I glanced at a passing car for a break from his earnest expression.

“Do you want me to send you my availability or give me your dad’s number so I can arrange it directly with him?”

“Text me so I can be there too to keep my parents in line. Otherwise, they would regale you with embarrassing stories. Actually, just ignore most of what they say. Especially my mom.”

Coop laughed. “Got it.”

I expected him to make some sort of comment about getting to meet my parents. I braced for it as my mind ran through possible dismissive quips that would keep the tone firmly in the friendship camp, but Coop didn’t go for the obvious joke. His eyes were thoughtful, which left me raw.

“Where are we going so I can suck your dick?” he asked instead.

At that moment, I realized Cooper might understand me better than I gave him credit for. I opened my mouth to suggest a place, but a honk startled me. Danita rolled up, driving a Jeep Wrangler.

“What’s this I see? My players standing around and slacking off. You’re supposed to be making me money.” She pretended to take a puff from a cigar.

I laughed.

“Don’t encourage her.”

She flipped him off. I was so glad Cooper had her in his life. I could imagine how hard the loss of his husband must’ve been for them both. It was great that they had stayed close and supported each other.

“I’m kidnapping you for drinks.” She pointed to Cooper. “And you’re coming too.” She aimed her finger at me.

I opened my mouth to politely decline and say I had work to do. Going out with the guy I was sleeping with and his best friend was a lot more than the car quickie I’d counted on.

“He’s buying,” was what came out of my mouth.

As we got into her Jeep, I told myself it was because it was a chance to get to know her better and increase the odds of her carrying our beers when I finally gave the presentation at the end of the season. Having drinks with them was about business and not wanting to get to know Coops’ favorite person. I wasn’t sure if I believed myself.



DANITA TOOK a swig of her beer and then leaned forward. “So then Coop and I went back to my place to work on our group project. Keep in mind I shared an apartment with my brother that year. We’re a couple of hours and beers in when the front door opens. My tipsy-ass brother stumbles in with a man on his heels. They’re pawing at each other because my brother had absolutely no chill.”

Coop snorted and shook his head with a soft smile on his face. “You’re not wrong.”

Danita was a hilariously animated storyteller. I loved all the dirt she was spilling about Coop.

“Sounds like Aleck had some game.” I saluted with my beer.

Danita shot Coop an evil grin. “Except the guy was Coop’s boyfriend. You should’ve seen the look on his face.”

My mouth dropped open. “That’s how you found out? Oh shit. I’m so sorry. What happened next?”

“I dumped his ass and left. Then I felt bad and met Danita at the library the next day to finish our project.”

“Puffy eyes and all.” She made an Alexis Rose-esque pouty face and booped his nose.

“How did it go from that to you getting with Aleck?” I wanted to know more about Coop’s past. I ate each story up like my favorite chocolate-covered almonds.

“Aleck was a persistent little shit. It started with him trying to track me down to apologize and swear he didn’t know I was in a relationship with the guy.”

Danita laughed. “He followed me to the classes I had with Coop. Even sat in on a few until Coop would talk to him. Which was hilarious since my brother *hated* history class. He must’ve *really* wanted to talk to Coop to double up on those each week.”

“Persistent was his middle name. He still wouldn’t leave me alone after I heard his explanation and apology. He wasn’t the one who owed me an apology anyway.”

“Then you fell in love?” I still wasn’t piecing together how it happened. The mechanics of the falling baffled me. One moment, a person is a stranger, then a shake of a magic wand, and they can’t live without each other?

Danita shook her head. “Coop and I became good friends over the term, and Aleck kept pestering me to set him up with Coop. I wasn’t about to ruin my friendship with Coop because my brother couldn’t keep it in his pants. Do you know how nice it was to have a big guy to go to the bar with? Guys didn’t fuck with me after they got one look at him. Especially since he was on the football team. Couldn’t let Aleck ruin that for me.” Coop lovingly rolled his eyes.

“But he kept trying, then enrolled in a history class I was signed up for the next term and sat by me every day. Once he stopped trying so hard, I started talking to him and found out he was actually cool. I eventually asked him out for coffee, and he told me he knew I was special because I could deal with his sister.”

I sat back in my chair. “That’s one hell of an origin story.”

Coop smiled absently and stared at his beer as he twisted it in circles. Danita shot me a kind smile.

“I thought he was going to float away after that first date. He told me he was going to marry Coop. I told him he should see a doctor for his delusions. Have we mentioned how persistent he was?”

Danita was a riot as she shared more stories that had Coop groaning and covering his face. Seeing her and Coop together was a blast, and I liked getting to see a different side of him. The relaxed way a person could be when with someone they’d been close to for decades. Did that mean he felt relaxed around me too? Someone he could be himself with?

Is this what it’s like to care about someone? Was that what Austin and Ethan experienced with their guys? The thought of getting closer to Cooper in a new way made me curious and terrified. But the mix was closer to even than I ever would’ve expected.

I couldn’t help but wonder if that was what Caleb and Parker felt like as the boyfriends when they hung out with our group. Enjoying being around the person you cared about while also liking to hang out with their people—all while getting great sex. I still didn’t understand why most people so desperately wanted relationships, but some aspects of them weren’t as puzzling anymore.

“Do you want another one?” Cooper asked.

Danita shook her head. “I better head back. I’ve got a long day at the store tomorrow.”

I glanced at my phone and realized we’d been there for over an hour. I’d had so much fun with them that I hadn’t even

thought to mention the brewery. For that hour, Danita hadn't been the lead I was targeting for work but Coop's best friend. Someone I wanted to get to know to learn a new side to Coop.

We went to the front to pay, and Coop insisted on buying our drinks. While he and Danita talked about something going on with her parents, I moved out of the way and over to a wall of framed photos of people I didn't recognize. While the faces washed over me, my mind kicked into overdrive as it really sank in that I'd missed an opportunity to talk up the brewery. I never let sex get between me and work. But whatever was going on with Coop felt like more than sex. Sex and friendship?

At the very least, I had to hope she liked me enough from our bullshitting tonight that I'd made a good impression on behalf of the brewery and maybe scored some brownie points before our pitch meeting at the end of the season.

I followed Danita and Coop out to the parking lot.

"I got a text from that shithead trying to place a bet on the championship game. Can you believe the nerve to assume his team will get into the championship again? What an absolute douche canoe. He's got an ego the size of Texas," Danita said as she drove out of the parking lot.

Coop and I shared a smile. She continued bitching about that sponsor on the drive back to the ball field parking lot. I didn't know the rivalry origin between them, but it was hilarious to listen to.

After hugging Danita and sending her off, I noticed the empty parking lot beside us and turned to Coop. "You gotta head home now or...?"

He opened his passenger door for me. I mimed a curtsy and climbed into Coop's truck without a word. We'd talked about fooling around, and I wanted my orgasm, dammit. Just because we'd hung out with his best friend and Coop had been aiming his fuck-me eyes in my direction all evening didn't mean it had to be *a thing*. We could be teammates, friends, and fuck buddies. I'd always been good at multitasking.

TEAM TAP THAT GROUP TEXT

Dom: We need a new contractor. It's unacceptable that he won't be done on time.

Ethan: There's a backorder on supplies. Hayden can't control the supply chain! JFC, Dom.

Dom: Tell him that he should've planned better.

Ethan: Hayden says he did plan for it, but sometimes supplies for small jobs like this get gobbled up by bigger ones.

Dom: Tell him that's unacceptable.

Austin: We can push back the opening. It's fine.

Dom: It's not fine. He made a promise, and he's failing to deliver.

Ty: ...has that happened before?

[thread goes silent for twenty minutes]

Ethan: Hayden says you're welcome to call any other contractor in town, and they'll tell you the same thing about certain items being unavailable. Dom, we'll figure it out. Changing contractors now will only put us further behind and cost us way more.

Dom: Fine.

Ty: We done with the grumpy game of telephone now? If so, can we talk about our routine for the Pride Fest drag show? We need to up our game this year.

Austin: I don't think we should do Lady Marmalade again.

Dom: But we already have the costumes and the lip-syncing down.

Ethan: We need to show our versatility. Hee-hee get it.

Ty: We need emotion, theater, energy, and fake breasts! The Dahlia Springs Pride Festival is an institution, and amateur drag night is a big fucking deal. We need to be even better than last year. Last year, we bumbled around that stage, but everyone loved it because we were new in town with our brewery. This year, we're established, so we need to bring it.

Ethan: I didn't realize you felt so strongly. Anyone else feel like we just got a Braveheart speech?

Austin: [Braveheart GIF] Freeeeedom!

CHAPTER 25

COOPER

Danita: What are you up to tonight? Want to hang out?

Cooper: I've got plans. Raincheck?

Danita: You? Have plans? On a Saturday night? That don't involve me?

Cooper: Yup! Gotta get in the car. Have a good night.

Danita: I'd better get details later.



I drummed my fingers against my thigh, then shoved them in my pockets. After another minute, I crossed them over my chest, which made my elbows brush the sides of the narrow restroom stall.

Suggesting to meet Ty at a truck stop off I-5 to have some glory hole fun topped the list of my more absurd ideas. Ty made me want to do all sorts of ridiculous things. It was one hell of a way to spend a Saturday night though. It was either that or channel surfing until I passed out.

I couldn't believe Ty actually wanted to. Over the time we'd been...fucking around? Been friends with benefits? Him

“wingperson-ing” me into an addiction to his dick?...we’d never broached the topic of sleeping with other people. He’d said he wanted to help launch me into the dating market, but he hadn’t brought it up in a while. I sure as hell hadn’t either.

But Ty suggesting meeting up on a weekend night had to mean something, right? The bulk of our time together happened after Tuesday and Thursday practices and the post-game drinks on Sundays before he went home for his team meeting. We chatted via text on most other days and often talked about what we were up to, but Ty never mentioned going out to get his rocks off. Did that mean something?

The restroom door opened, and I held my breath while waiting for movement in the stall next to mine. Instead, someone started whistling as the faucet turned on. The door opened again, and moments later, the stall door next to me latched closed. My heart lurched into my throat at what was to come.

Meeting at a glory hole was getting me hotter than I’d expected. The blood coursing through my body had already gotten the orders to migrate south. Knowing Ty was on the other side of the divider but not being able to see him? Jesus. I licked my drying lips as I tried to calculate my next move.

The restroom door opened and closed again, and the whistling disappeared. A hand appeared under the stall divider, and I immediately recognized our “this guy has a big dick” hand signal. I let out a sharp laugh.

“No laughing at glory holes,” Ty said sternly.

I cleared my throat. “Sorry.”

“No talking either.”

“You’re talking too.”

“You started it.”

I grinned. “Technically, I laughed. You’re the first one who talked.” *Yup. Definitely getting hard.*

Ty huffed, then passed a wet wipe packet through the hole. I bit back another laugh. Ty was such a peculiar mix of goofy

and practical. I wiped everything down on my side, then sucked in a breath when the tip of Ty's tongue poked through the hole and wiggled around. With each movement, I could practically feel it against my skin. Teasing around the head of my dick, even lapping at my hole. I craved his tongue all over my body. The downside to fucking around in cars after practices meant little room to explore each other's bodies. We hadn't had sex in a bed since we'd met.

I pulled out my dick and began stroking, and it didn't take long for me to get fully hard from the sound of skin rubbing against skin in the other stall. I itched to peek over and watch him touch himself.

Once I was hard enough, I pushed my dick through the hole and into the warm, wet heat of Ty's mouth. It wasn't the easiest position since my belly prevented me from getting flat up against it and through the hole as much as I wanted, but it didn't matter because Ty lavished attention over every millimeter of skin he had access to. He tongued around my head, pressed the tip against my frenulum, greedily lapped at the precum beading at the tip, all while expertly stroking me. He played me better than Elton John could play a piano.

Despite my attention zeroing in on him, part of my awareness listened for people entering the restroom. The possibility of someone coming in at any moment and hearing us getting off had me barreling toward releasing into Ty's eager mouth. I balled my fists and pressed them against the stall divider, dropping my head back between my shoulders as I pushed and pushed and pushed to get my aching cock deeper into Ty's mouth. But it was Ty's moans that finally pushed me to the edge. The vibration of his throat was in symphony with the skin slapping as his jerking off increased in intensity.

"Save that for me." I damn near panted the words with how close I was. Ty applied the exact pressure I needed with his mouth and hand, and set me off. He moaned through taking my load. I pulled back and leaned against the other stall for a moment as I caught my breath. I hadn't even been the one doing the work, but damn, that orgasm had taken it out of me.

If I'd worn a smartwatch, it probably would've alerted me to call 9-1-1.

It only took a minute to catch my bearings because the need to get my mouth on Ty took over my focus. He had a flatter stomach and his dick was longer while mine was wider—so I got access to the bulk of his cock. Crouching in my catcher's squat in a restroom, mouth around Ty's dick, had mine valiantly attempting to rally. I'd be mortified if I got wood at our next practice from the muscle memory of sucking him off in that position. Might be worth it though. Ty would love it.

The restroom door opened, and I froze, expecting Ty to pull back. Instead, he pushed his dick even farther into my mouth. *Oh, fuck yeah.* I didn't hold back as I did all the things I'd learned he liked. No one turned on the sink, closed a restroom stall, or started pissing at a urinal. But I heard heavy breathing that wasn't coming from me or Ty. If they wanted a show, I'd give them one.

Ty's moans grew louder as I worked my tongue overtime to get him off. I wanted the reward of his release. I felt reckless, and I loved it.

"Fuck yeah. That's it." I could almost feel him gripping my hair and petting my head like he usually did when I went down on him.

I nearly pulled off to say, "No talking at glory holes," but he was too close. I wouldn't do that to him. Not with how desperate he sounded.

"Yeah, get it," the other person in the restroom said before their cell phone rang. "Cockblocking sonofabitch." The restroom door quickly opened and closed as the person took a phone call.

Then Ty unloaded in my throat with a grunt and a thump against the stall divider. I eagerly swallowed and licked him clean until he pulled back.

"Jesus Christ. You damn near sucked me dry."

I laughed as I stood and zipped myself up. “I could say the same. You might’ve gotten my last few brain cells pinging around too.”

His stall door opened, and I followed. He shot me a playful grin before washing his hands. As I pounded the lever for paper towels, I turned to him, unsure what came next. Usually, after getting off post-practice, we went home. But a Saturday night hookup? We were out of our routine.

Ty tossed his paper towels in the trash and looked uncertain, but it was gone in a heartbeat. “Want to get some food? There’s a place near here that has amazing birria tacos. I worked up a fucking appetite.”

“Sounds delicious. I’m in.”

I couldn’t help but wonder if Ty wanting to hang out after fooling around meant he was feeling something for me. I was feeling things for him that scared the hell out of me. Falling for Ty was like unlocking the first latch protecting the box around my heart. I wasn’t sure I could live through that kind of pain a second time, but I couldn’t walk away from Tyler McNeill. Not yet. He had me wrapped around his finger, and there was nowhere else I wanted to be.

CHAPTER 26

TYLER

Team Tap That Group Text

Austin: What is Aunt Carolyn making for you guys for dinner tonight?

Ty: Meatloaf [drool emoji]

Austin: Aww man. Can you bring me some?

Ethan: You literally live with a professional chef. Have him make you some.

Austin: But he doesn't make it like Aunt Carolyn.

Ty: I'm so telling Caleb that.

Dom: Can I get in on the meatloaf train? I don't care who makes it.



DAD FOLLOWED Cooper around as he assessed the tree at Grandpa's house. He was like a kid getting attention from a new visitor—all full of questions and excitement. The May sunshine was out, which boded well for a successful upcoming Memorial Day weekend. The field at Grandpa's house had recently been mowed, and the scent of fresh-cut grass lingered in the air.

“Have you ever seen a silver birch in the snow? I’d love to go to Scandinavia and see them in winter. I read that their bark evolved to be white so it reflects light.” Dad was obsessed with Scandinavia. I was glad my parents were finally planning a trip there. They deserved it.

“I haven’t in person, but I’d love to. I’m especially interested to see the fly agaric toadstool that can sometimes be found around them there. They look unreal.” Coop described the mushroom, which got Dad talking about where to find the best mushrooms at the coast.

“Aren’t our guys so adorable nerding out together?” Mom hooked her arm through mine.

“Don’t start trouble,” I said quietly so Coop didn’t hear.

“What? It’s the first time you’ve brought a man home.” She blinked innocently at me. There wasn’t an innocent bone in my mom’s body when it came to her love for meddling in her sons’ lives.

“I didn’t ‘bring a man home.’ I invited a professional with a very specific set of skills over to fix your tree issue.”

Mom laughed. “What, is he Liam Neeson? He seems good with his hands.”

“*Mother.*”

“*Son.*”

“Wicked, wicked woman.” I would’ve teased back, but I was distracted by Coop’s smile as he looked over at us. A little indulgent, a little curious. Oh god. Just like Dad’s whenever he looked at Mom.

I needed to stop that line of thinking immediately. My parents had a wildly successful marriage that spanned forty percent of a century. Meanwhile, I’d never had a successful relationship or wanted one.

How were we already halfway through softball season? I couldn’t believe Coop and I hadn’t grown sick of each other yet. We’d been hooking up a couple of times per week and hanging out almost as much. And now the guy who’d rescued

me in the storm back in March was building a bromance with my dad. And I didn't hate it. What the fuck?

I'd only messed around with one guy all spring. The same guy. Over and over. I wasn't sure if I still believed that being busy between work and softball was the only reason I kept going back to him. My interest in wanting to fuck Coop had to fade soon, so the only thing between us was the strong friendship we'd been developing. Any day. Because no one had held my interest for more before. It was a statistical inevitability, but even as I thought that, I watched him take my parents' concern over their tree seriously, and it made me want to suck his dick and hang out afterward.

They stopped chatting and walked over to us. Coop shifted into professional mode and began asking my parents questions about the tree's history before going into a close examination. I admired Coop in his element. His serious expression as he peeled back some bark, scratched at a twig with his pocketknife, and crouched to study the trunk turned me on. Competency was fucking hot.

Then he dragged his fingers across the spot I'd carved my initials on when I was little. I wasn't sure he even realized he'd done it. My heart lurched into my throat, and I felt Mom's eyes on me. I didn't dare look her way because I was more afraid I'd see softness than teasing on her face.

After a few minutes, Coop turned toward us with his lips pursed and an expression more serious than I had seen on him since he first told me about his late husband.

“Mr. and Mrs. McNeill—”

“Oh lord, that makes us sound old.” Mom turned and narrowed her eyes at me. “Don't say a word.” She turned back to Coop. “Call us Larry and Carolyn. What's going on with it? We can take the news.” She squared her shoulders.

Dad gripped Mom's hand, and I wrapped my arm around her shoulder.

Coop's mouth lifted in a small smile as he took us in. “Larry and Carolyn, I'm sorry to say your Oregon white oak is

dead. The cracks in the trunk, peeling bark, dead limbs, no foliage, and other signs point me to that conclusion. Since a branch recently came down, the tree is a safety hazard. In my opinion, the safest course of action is to fell the tree before it causes damage. There are several other trees that should be checked out too.”

I kissed the top of Mom’s head, and she patted my hand hooked over her shoulder.

“If you want a second opinion, I’d be happy to give you the names of other arborists in the area who do good work. That’s never a bad idea.”

Dad shook his head. “No need for that. Is this urgent? Should we schedule for you to take it down as soon as possible?”

“You could do it either before or after the anniversary party. Though if you want to wait, I’d encourage you to keep guests away at the party. That last storm seems to have caused some serious damage, and there are a couple of large branches that have significant cracks. See those?” He gestured to multiple spots.

My parents looked at each other and had an entire conversation with their eyes, which was something I’d never understood. As an outsider, I’d seen it with my parents and watched Austin and Caleb develop that skill. It was happening with Ethan and Parker too. I had that with the guys to an extent, but it seemed different in a romantic relationship.

I remembered being out with Danita and Coop a few weeks ago and how Coop and I had looked at each other and blurted out, “Hard-boiled eggs!” when she was trying to convince Coop to try a salad at a trendy new bistro in McMinnville. Something she said must’ve made us both think of the TikToks we’d swapped of a chef who’d found a way to add hard-boiled eggs to every recipe.

One inside joke didn’t mean we’d developed our own special communication. That kind of connection required a level of intimacy I wasn’t built for. If I was, surely I would’ve encountered it before my mid-thirties. People didn’t ask to

date me. They asked if they could fuck me again, sure, but no one ever said, “Hey, you did an incredible job sucking my dick in the restroom at this club. I’d really like to take you on a date and get to know you better.”

I let go of Mom’s arm, and she turned and hugged Dad. I’d expected that tree to always be there. It had survived over forty years of my parents knowing each other, me and Seth climbing all over it, storms and heatwaves, and holding nests where countless birds began their lives. Grandpa had planted it when he’d bought the place when Dad was a kid. That tree had watched over three generations of McNeills.

I supposed I’d expected it to be there for more generations of McNeills, even though I never planned to contribute to the bloodline. I could picture Seth with a family someday. His kids should be able to add their initials to the tree. Damn. I didn’t expect a hunk of wood and leaves to hit me in the feels so hard.

But it was a fucking tree! Trees were supposed to outlive humans. I always thought Seth or I would take over Grandpa’s house someday. He was spending longer and longer periods at his place in Arizona, and we all knew he would make it permanent eventually. With all the memories there, the home should stay in the family. We could have barbecues and celebrate birthdays and hold gatherings at the holidays. Austin and Ethan could bring their guys. Dom could cook. Seth could teach Coop how to play our family’s version of cornhole.

Coop? What the hell? I gave my head a startled shake. My brain must’ve dropped him in because he was standing there. I wasn’t sure I bought that, but it was the only explanation that made sense. Any other explanations moved into feelings territory, which was a big ole nope.

I walked over to the tree with Coop to give my parents some privacy to talk.

Coop gave me a sad smile. “I’m sorry, Ty. I know that’s not the answer you hoped for.”

“I didn’t ask you to help to get some bullshit answer. I asked you to help because I trusted your expertise and knew

you'd advise us on what was best. I just want my parents to have a special anniversary, and worrying about their tree collapsing on someone won't be a good time. Maybe memorable, but not in a good way."

Cooper subtly squeezed the back of my arm. As I watched my parents talk and lean into each other, I started leaning into Coop but stopped myself before I made contact.

What we had was about sex. I was helping Cooper get his groove back while fulfilling my own needs. My mind produced the explanation out of habit, but it didn't ring true as it once had.

"Do you want to come over to my place after this? I don't think anyone's home." Jesus. My mouth and brain had officially stopped communicating. I leaned in and whispered, "I can show you my jock and panty collection."

I couldn't believe I was inviting him over. Keeping our sex to neutral territory was part of how I'd convinced myself to keep doing it. Less emotional, but clearly, I'd been fooling myself. What was so different about Coop that I was doing and saying things I never thought I would? What made me break over a decade of self-imposed one-and-dones to keep messing around with him?

I'd become a master at skirting my own rules and habits to justify whatever was going on with Cooper. Maybe it was time I stopped worrying about it because nothing about what we were doing felt wrong. It was new and different but not wrong, and maybe that was okay.

It had always been more fun to keep chasing new people, but Coop was the first guy I'd wanted to hold on to more than chase someone else.

"Best idea you've had all day." He winked.

My parents walked over to us. "Thank you for telling us what's going on, Cooper," Dad said. He looked at Mom, and she smiled at him before he turned back to us. "This anniversary and vow renewal marks a fresh start. Maybe we can find a new tree to make our special one."

I'd never stopped to *really* think about my parents' relationship before. It had always been a constant in my life. Even if I didn't understand or crave it for myself, I could appreciate it. It was pretty damn amazing, though, because they always had each other's backs. When one had a hard day, the other supported them. How had I been lucky enough to grow up with parents who were in a loving relationship but be someone who had zero interest in finding that for myself?

Having an incredible example of a good relationship wasn't enough to help me figure that out for myself. I'd had friends who'd said watching their parents in shitty relationships meant they hadn't seen an example of how to do it right. I'd had the best example, but it hadn't made a damn difference in teaching me to do it. Even if the world spun on its head and I ended up in one, I wouldn't know the first thing about how to maintain it. Whoever attached themselves to me in that fictional dimension would end up hurt.

Coop smiled at me, and the hard thinky thoughts faded. Sex first. Thinking later.

“Cooper, please stay for dinner. It's the least we can do.”

Coop looked at me for direction. Like it was up to me if I was comfortable with him spending time with my parents beyond his professional capacity. Once again anticipating what I hadn't known I needed. How did he know to do that? Was that a skill he'd picked up in his past relationships? I could tell he was as anxious to see my underthings collection as I wanted to show him, but it was next to impossible to turn down a dinner invite from my mom.

I smiled at Coop. “You haven't lived until you've tried Mom's meatloaf. She uses curry ketchup.”

CHAPTER 27

COOPER

I dragged my fingertips across the carefully stacked and folded jocks and panties in Tyler's drawer. He hadn't exaggerated when he told me he had every color of the rainbow. Lace, silk, even sexy cotton. Thongs, tiny shorts, ones with strings on the side. Nearly any variation I could think of.

"I want to see you in each of these."

Ty leaned his shoulder against the wall next to me. His muscular arms were folded across his chest and his pecs flexed under his snug T-shirt. I wanted to kiss the knowing smirk off his face.

"Which one first?"

How was I supposed to choose? I was more overwhelmed than when I'd gone to a saltwater taffy store on the Oregon Coast and had to pick a bag of one flavor with over one hundred and fifty to choose from.

The peach panties with the three strings on each hip drew my attention. I worried that if I grabbed for them, I'd mess up his careful organization, so I pointed instead.

Ty pulled them from the drawer and undid his jeans. I didn't take my eyes off him as he pulled them down his muscular hairy thighs. His snug, black boxer briefs immediately followed. While holding eye contact, he dragged the panties up each leg. The pouch cupped his soft bulge and the strings pulled taut across his bitable hips.

I dropped to my knees in front of him, ready to worship Ty in a leisurely way we hadn't enjoyed since the weekend we'd

met. It'd been quick blowjobs and hand jobs in our cars after practices or in bar restrooms after games.

Every day I fought the urge to ask him back to my place. Whenever he'd complain about awkward angles or wanting more space, I'd nearly blurt out an invitation to my bed. But my gut knew that would've been too much. I needed to let him lead because Ty had broken his rules to keep having sex with me, and I didn't want to jeopardize that. I was having a damn great time with him. Though I couldn't shake the hope he was slowly warming up to more.

And if I were being honest with myself, the slowness of whatever was happening between us worked for me too. I was getting reacquainted with having feelings for someone new. Things like the persistent butterflies anytime you thought of them, wanting to hang out all the time, wondering what they were up to when you weren't talking, hoping they were having a good day.

I was in no hurry. Ty's pace worked for me as long as it meant I got time with him.

My attention was torn in two directions. A gorgeous, mostly naked man giving me naughty looks right in front of me competed with my desire to peek at Ty's room. I wanted to know what he kept close to him in his small space, what his decor told me about him, whether he made his bed, and if he had one pillow or two. But there was no way in hell I would take my eyes off him. All that flesh on display, his confident smirk, those panties—system overload.

Ty slid his fingers into my hair and tugged my mouth toward his growing bulge. I wrapped my hands around the backs of his thighs for stability. As soon as I made contact with the lacy pouch between me and my prize, a door in the distance slammed hard enough to shake the wall.

“You home? I've got dirt for you.” I recognized Seth's voice.

Ty's thighs tensed under my fingers. “I'm about to become an only child. We don't need help at the brewery that bad, and I'm sure my parents will forgive me eventually.” He tilted his

face toward the ceiling and sighed. After a moment, he looked down at me and tenderly smoothed my hair. “I swear the shithead has a sixth sense for interrupting my fun. He pulled the same crap when we were kids.”

As soon as I stood, Ty apologized and pressed a quick kiss to my lips. It was the kind of kiss that promised another time. Not the kind that happened before pushing me toward the back door so his brother didn’t see me.

“What do you want me to do?”

Ty grinned and gave my ass a swift slap. “Let’s go hear the townie tea.”

While Ty quickly dressed, I glanced around his room. There were several framed photos of his friends and family on a small desk next to a laptop. A navy comforter covered his full-sized bed with two pillows on top. I smiled at the second pillow.

I followed him to the dining room, which flowed into the kitchen where Seth’s back was to us as he rummaged in the fridge.

“Mrs. Pullman filed a complaint to the city council again about the smell of the goats at the goat farm. The woman lives five miles from it! She’s on a crusade against those adorable creatures.”

Seth turned around with a brick of cheese and a bag of deli meat in his hands, and his mouth fell open when he spotted me. “Coop! Hi. Didn’t realize you were here.” He turned his wide eyes toward Ty.

“I invited him over to hang out after we had dinner with Mom and Dad.”

Did Ty realize what he was insinuating? It looked like we might need a defibrillator to restart Seth’s heart.

“The tree’s in bad shape, bro.”

Seth’s shoulders dropped. “Seriously?” He turned his puppy-dog eyes in my direction.

“Yeah. I’m sorry, Seth. It’s been dying for a while, I imagine. Your parents want me to take it down.”

“That seriously sucks.”

Ty walked over, wrapped his arm around Seth’s shoulder, and kissed the side of his head. Then he grabbed the deli meat from Seth’s hand and pulled a slice from it before Seth could grab it back. I chuckled at their brotherly display. It reminded me of Aleck and Danita.

“Mrs. Pullman needs to pull the stick out of her ass and focus on the pile of trash rusting next to her garage,” Ty said.

Ty grabbed us beers, and we sat at the dining table while Seth made himself dinner and told us about the other small-town shenanigans he’d overheard at the brewery.

I was still nursing the same home-brewed Saison when the front door swung open a short while later.

“Honey, I’m home.”

Ty groaned. “What the hell is Austin doing here?” he asked Seth while glaring. “Don’t you have your own home?” He called toward the steps moving toward us.

Moments later, the other three brewery men strode into the dining room. Dom went to the fridge and pulled out three beers. Ethan placed a couple of to-go containers in the middle of the table while Austin mussed Ty’s hair.

“Why go home when I heard we have company?” Austin dodged Ty’s attempt to hit him in the leg and smiled at me. “Good to see you, Cooper.”

“That explains why Seth was grinning maniacally at his phone earlier.” He huffed and settled back in his chair but sent me a sweet, little smile. Pink colored his cheeks.

At that moment, I fell even deeper for him. He could’ve made a million excuses about why I was there. I was helping his parents out, or he needed my help with something at the house, or I asked to use his bathroom before driving back to the boonies. But he let them tease him. Did they know we were fooling around?

“Eat up. This is leftover charcuterie board stuff we couldn’t use,” Ethan said as he dumped a handful of forks next to the containers.

“How was the city council meeting?” Ty asked Dom after he’d finished half his beer in one gulp.

Dom and Austin filled him in on the latest drama. All six of us sat around the table chatting. They swapped stories about Mrs. Pullman’s city council gripes over the past couple of years. It was a great time, and they treated me like part of the group.

I was glad Ty had such wonderful people around him. While sitting in the cozy dining room, it finally sank in, *really* sank in, that I’d been hermiting too much out in the forest. I missed bullshitting with people outside of work. Invites had come less and less frequently after Aleck died, and I couldn’t blame anyone but myself. After three years of turning them down, I wouldn’t invite me out either. But the grief wasn’t as debilitating as it had been. It was time I said yes more often. I could even find something to do between softball seasons. A bowling league would be fun.

“Do you remember that time Mrs. Pullman called the cops because someone drove an ATV in their own yard? The woman needs a hobby.” Austin shook his head.

Ty turned and swatted my arm with the back of his hand. “You still owe me an ATV lesson.”

The room went silent. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ethan mouth “ATV lesson” to Austin, but I ignored it and held Ty’s eye contact. His eyes widened momentarily, but he didn’t backtrack his comment. I wouldn’t let him flounder.

“Come over any time.”

Ty’s smile filled me like a solar charge.

We BS’d for a while longer, then Seth eventually peeled off to his room, and Austin said he should get home to Caleb.

“I should head out too. I’ve got an early day tomorrow,” I said.

Ty stood and offered to walk me out. When we reached the front door, Ty bit his lip and glanced back at the dining room. I could tell he was on the edge of something. When it came to the thing happening between us, it was like he was trying to move forward but kept stumbling back. Something had shifted tonight, and he had to feel it too. He'd let me in more than ever before. Dinner with his parents, hanging out with his brother, and letting his crew see us together. But I couldn't help but wonder if he'd meant to do it, and if he hadn't, would he pull back if I said anything?

I decided to keep things light and sexy. His safe space. I leaned in until my lips brushed his jaw beneath his ear. "Wear the green jock to the game this weekend for me."

Ty's breath hitched as I dragged my lips across the skin above his beard line on his cheek. I winked at him, then turned and strode to my car before I pulled him in for something more affectionate.

I spent the entire drive home thinking about how badly I wanted to be a part of Ty's life, his friend group, and this town. Though with every part of me starting to crave more with Ty, the guilt grew. Starting something with Ty—if Ty ever became open to it—meant putting Aleck even more firmly in the past. How could I move on with someone new when I was still so intensely grieving someone else? I'd been told I had a big heart, but I wasn't sure it was big enough for two without someone getting hurt.

CHAPTER 28

TYLER

Ty: Thanks again for checking out my parents' tree. I really appreciate it. They do too.

Coop: Happy to. I feel bad that it's in such bad shape. I wish there was something more I could do.

Ty: You've done more than enough. They talked about taking some photos and getting them professionally framed.

Coop: That's a great idea. Are you doing okay with it? I know the tree means a lot to you.

Ty: Yeah. I feel silly being upset over a tree, but if anyone understands, it's a tree doctor. [wink emoji]

Ty: But seriously, I'm okay. Thanks for asking.



“Will you make me some nachos too?” I called to Seth in the kitchen from my comfy spot on the couch in the TV room.

“Make your own nachos, you lazy asshole.”

“But yours are so good. Are you going to deprive me of your superior nachos?” I repositioned myself on the couch and

flipped through the channels until I found a baseball game and waited for Seth to cave. I knew he would.

“Fine. But I don’t want to hear a single complaint about the number of olives.”

“Would I complain about that? Pssh.”

Seth was mumbling something, but I couldn’t make it out.

My stomach rumbled at the prospect of Seth’s nachos. It was a low-key evening with Ethan working and Dom doing who knows what. Seth had spent the day helping Austin brew. No practice, so there was no reason to see Cooper.

You don’t need baseball practice as an excuse to see him. The angel on my shoulder clearly didn’t know me at all. The devil voice, which sounded a lot like Dom, suggested I hop on Grindr. Meh.

Meh? I shook my head. What the fuck was happening to me?

I could text Cooper and ask what he was up to. After fixing dinner, Seth would probably head to his room anyway. It was where he spent most of his free time, like when we were kids. He was probably playing video games or absorbed in his fan fiction.

It wouldn’t kill me to suggest watching a Hallmark movie with Coop in person instead of texting about it. I’d kinda missed that since the weekend we’d spent together. It would be nice to decompress with him since the softball season had turned out more intense than I’d expected. We were championship-bound, and Danita was chomping at the bit. The team was starting to get its hopes up because Coop and I clicked as well on the field as off.

Cooper was so damn easy to be around. I still couldn’t believe I’d invited him over last week and let him hang out with me and the guys. Though they’d teased a little, the guys had been oddly quiet on the topic. I’d expected a grilling after Coop left, but everyone but Dom dispersed, and he wasn’t about to start a conversation with me about it.

My phone buzzed, and I smiled. Maybe Cooper was thinking of me too.

Not Coop, but just as good. Gavin's name popped up on my screen. It'd been far too long since I'd had a substantial conversation with my best friend. He'd been wrapped up in a big project overseas, and with the massive time zone difference, it'd been hard to talk beyond passing check-in texts.

Gavin: Hey, man. How's it going?

Ty: G-spot! How about you? What time is it there?

Gavin: Can't you stop with that horrible nickname?! I've begged for years. Literal decades.

Ty: Can't teach an old dog new tricks.

Gavin: Can I call?

I frowned at my phone. That was unusual. Instead of responding, I called.

"Everything okay?" I asked as soon as Gavin answered.

"Hello to you too. Long time no chat."

"Don't give me that shit. We never talk on the phone. Are you dying? Need an organ? On the run from the law? Rip off the Band-Aid."

Gavin's husky laugh was comforting. "Aren't we all dying?"

"Jesus Christ, Aristotle."

"I saw you liking my Instagram stories and figured you might be free. It was either you're bored or taking a shit. I figured it was worth the risk."

I snorted. "Fifty-fifty on that one." There was something off with his voice. We'd been best friends since the first day of third grade when we'd worn the same *Beavis and Butthead* T-

shirt. He'd traded me his chocolate pudding at lunch for my butterscotch one. Meeting someone who actually liked the nasty butterscotch ones *and Beavis and Butthead* was like winning the lottery.

Gavin had been great with Austin too, and when things went to shit with Austin's parents and he moved in with us, Gavin had been there for him like he was family. But then Gavin got into an Ivy League school and eventually an internship overseas while Austin and I stayed in state. Gavin had been living abroad and traveling for work ever since, sorta like Seth.

Despite his traveling and my lack of it, we'd worked hard to stay close over the years. I was grateful for him. It helped to have someone in my corner who wasn't here in person all the time like the other guys. Gavin was a great sounding board. He'd talked me through choosing between grad school and a corporate marketing job. And when the guys and I had started talking about opening the brewery, I'd relied on Gavin as an impartial person.

"Where are you now? Are you still in Australia?"

"No, I'm taking a breather in New Zealand while some stuff cools off with the last project."

I kept my snarky comments to myself. Gavin knew how I felt about the guy who only kept Gavin on as a contractor but expected him to be on-call twenty-four seven like a salaried employee. Gave him the workload of one too, without the pay. I didn't understand why Gavin felt so beholden to him.

"You know, if you ever need a place to land, you're always welcome here. I'm sure Dom wouldn't mind."

There was a crash in the kitchen that sounded like a plate breaking.

"I'm fine," Seth called in an oddly strangled voice.

"But are my nachos okay?"

It sounded like Seth mumbled, "So thoughtful."

“Is that Seth? What’s he up to? How’s he doing?” Gavin asked.

I got off the couch to check on Seth. “Other than getting glass in my dinner? Fine.”

“Still convincing him to cook for you, huh?”

“It’s a gift.”

A glass dish full of nachos was broken on the floor, and Seth, red-faced, was already halfway through cleaning it up.

“Seriously. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Fine,” he snapped.

I wasn’t sure what was going on, but I’d leave him alone to collect himself. “I’ll order pizza. Sausage with green peppers and extra olives?”

Seth sighed and looked up at me, expression softening. “Sure. Thanks.”

“No prob.” I ruffled his hair before heading to my room upstairs to grab my wallet.

“He’s good. He’s been doing more at the brewery. Austin trained him to be an assistant brewer, which has been great because now it takes some pressure off Austin.”

“Brewing, huh? That’s great.” Gavin sounded impressed.

“He’s great at it. I can’t believe it, but I like working with him. He does a stellar fucking job and fits in with the guys.” I closed the bedroom door behind me.

“Do you think he’s going to stick around?”

“I do. At least for a while. I haven’t heard him say anything about getting back to the cruise ships.”

“Good for him. And what about you? I haven’t heard any good hookup stories from you in a while.”

Gavin and I had swapped sex wins ever since college. We’d quickly learned that posh Ivy League school guys and brotastic state school guys weren’t that different.

My skin warmed at a particular memory. “I’ve been hooking up with a guy on my softball team. It’s pretty hot finding rural roads to park at, but that’s getting trickier now that the days are getting longer.”

Gavin went quiet. “*Been* hooking up with? As in more than once?”

Oh shit.

“Nothing to worry about, Gav. Still single. No relationships for us, right?” Why did saying those words that had come easily for me for so long now leave a sour taste in my mouth?

“There’s nothing wrong with relationships,” Gavin said cautiously. “Endless hookups worked fine in our twenties, but I wouldn’t mind meeting someone. The only reason I haven’t is because I never know how long I’m staying in one place before I have to move.”

I was stunned silent for several moments. I didn’t know that was the case for Gavin. “You want a relationship?”

“Absolutely, yeah. Of course I didn’t when I was younger because fucking around was too much fun, but I’m ready for something more. Someone I can bring with me to a boring work function, can give them a look, and they’ll make excuses for us to leave. Hookups are fucking *exhausting*. All the posturing and people bailing half the time. Don’t you get tired of that?”

“Get tired of sex? You okay, man?”

“Tyler, be serious for once.” Gavin was one of the few people who would call me out like that.

I sighed. “I’m not sure.”

Gavin waited me out.

“Is it weird that I’ve gotten into my mid-thirties without having had a real relationship?”

“No. We have different goals at different times in our lives.”

“But I’ve never even been interested in it. It’s not like I’ve wanted something more and forced myself to ignore the urge or whatever. It’s like that part of me doesn’t exist.” Which wasn’t completely true anymore. The more time I spent with Coop, the more I wondered whether I had the capacity for more.

“What about that guy you dated in college?”

I scoffed. “You mean the prick I caught cheating on me at a party? That was a lapse in judgment.” I’d made myself feel better by getting my dick sucked by his *much hotter* roommate and had never looked back. I hadn’t had an urge to date anyone again. I enjoyed keeping things easy and fun and meeting new people. Getting to do that and have sex? Perfect combination.

“You never know. Something might change for you someday. Weirder things have happened.”

“Weird things like you moving back home?”

Gavin laughed. “You never know.”

CHAPTER 29

COOPER

Ty: ATV lesson tomorrow? [GIF of excited puppy]

Cooper: Sounds good to me. Come over whenever you want.

Ty: Yay! [GIF of ATV doing wheelies]

Cooper: We will not be doing wheelies.

Ty: Oh, definitely not. No wheelies.

Cooper: Ty.

Ty: Coop.

Cooper: Bring some beer. I might need it.

Ty: You got it, Teacher Martin.



“Now shift it into gear, but be careful of the throat—” The ATV lurched forward. I gripped Ty’s waist and slammed into his back when he braked.

“Oops.”

“You did that on purpose,” I said against his neck before kissing the soft skin behind his ear.

Ty looked over his shoulder and grinned. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m learning.”

I snorted as he deftly pulled out of my driveway and onto the road leading deeper into the forest. Dappled sunlight lit our path as we followed the packed gravel roads. I knew the roads and paths well enough to let Ty go where he wanted, and I could get us back. As we explored, I talked about tree species in the area. I wasn’t sure Ty could hear me over the engine’s rumble, but I never tired of talking about trees.

A light drizzle fell around us as the sky shifted toward gray. Ty was a good driver despite taking the corners a bit too sharp. I suspected he was trying to get me to hang on tighter.

“Stick to the left at the fork ahead. You’ll love this.” I squeezed his hip.

He followed my directions. “Holy shit,” he said when he saw it.

Ty turned off the engine, and I hooked my chin over his shoulder to take in the sight before us. In the distance was a hill covered with towering Douglas Firs. It was a dense patch of green, except for the edge that had been taken by a wildfire before we’d bought the house. The rolling hills of trees were one thing I loved most about Oregon.

“Right? It’s breathtaking.”

We sat in silence for several minutes. Birds flew overhead and a trio of deer scampered across the path about fifty feet in front of us.

Ty reached back and gripped my thigh. “Have you ever fucked out here?”

I scooted closer until my thighs cupped him. I reached around and gripped the tops of his thighs. “Not with you.”

Ty chuckled. “Of course you two got it on out here with your kink for trees and Aleck’s kink for murder forests. I would be disappointed if you hadn’t. So, you into it?”

With Ty? Always. “Yeah, I’m into it.”

Ty somehow turned around in the seat. Tight squeeze was an understatement, but when Ty was horny, he always figured it out. We’d gotten inventive in his Toyota.

His lips crashed against mine as his hands slid under my coat and hoodie to my stomach. I sucked it in at the cold touch, but his skin quickly warmed to my now overheating temperature. Ty turned me on something fierce. I pulled him until he was basically on my lap. Our kisses grew needy and sloppy as the rain began. As I was about to reach for his zipper, the rain fell even harder, like a faucet had been turned on. It was always a risk heading outside in an Oregon spring.

Ty pulled back and pressed his forehead against mine, breathing hard. “Cockblocked by the rain. We could be boring and head back to your bed?”

“I don’t mind boring.” I gave him a quick kiss. The uncontrollable need to do it had bubbled out of me. I was elated that he was not only at my place again for the first time in over two months, but that *he’d* suggested it. Honestly, I was shocked Ty kept spending time with me at all. I’d believed him when he’d said that he never messed around with the same person more than once, and I’d heard stories from people on the team who were familiar with him. But he showed no signs of getting tired of our friends-with-benefits arrangement.

The more time we spent with each other, the more it felt like the friendship was shifting into something deeper. Especially as he stared at me, smiling wide, raindrops catching on his long eyelashes. He looked up at the sky and laughed, then shook the rain from his head like a dog. *I can’t get enough of this man.* I wanted to tell him I was developing feelings for him, but it would likely scare him away. The selfish part of me wanted to hold on to him for as long as I could. Our current situation might end when the season did and Ty found something, or someone, to move on to. Why expedite the process when he was the part of my life bringing me the most joy?

He stood and adjusted himself. “I gotta say, this place isn’t too bad for a creepy murder forest.”

I pinched his hip. “High praise.”

He tilted his head and looked at me. “This is giving me sexy flashbacks to the day we met. You all big and rugged and covered in wet rubber rescuing me and my cheese from certain death.” He pulled out my hair tie. “Your hair is unbelievably sexy when it’s wet.”

I could deal with hypothermia if it kept Ty looking at me like I was the cherry on top of his sundae.

Ty navigated the ATV back under the carport a bit too close to my truck. He hopped off, wiped the rain from his forehead with the back of his hand, and beamed at me. There was something about the way Ty smiled at me that made me reckless. Craving more from him than I had a right to. When he gave an inch, I wanted a mile.

“I want to show you something.” I led Ty away from the house to my studio. It was time he knew about that part of my life.

“Ooh, are you finally going to show me the secret building where you keep your dead bodies?”

“That’s in the cellar under the house, obviously. Hides the smell better. This is my art studio.” I unlocked the padlock and gestured for him to go in ahead of me.

“Art studio?” His eyebrows pushed together.

I wanted to tell him how connected I was to him, how I wanted to flay myself open and show him every part of me, how the way he made me feel was an addiction. Instead, I went simple. “All the people I’m close to know about it. I want you to be among them.”

As Ty turned toward the door, I caught his surprised smile. He moved slowly through the space where I had a half dozen projects in various stages of completion. He peeked inside the toolbox that held my carving knives, chisels, gouges, and other odds and ends. He smiled at a photo of Aleck wearing a crown

while sitting on the stump by the creek I'd carved into a throne.

"Can you tell me about what you create?" His voice was unusually soft.

I cleared the lump from my throat and took a deep breath to calm my pulse. "I carve wood, but I suppose that's obvious. I do small pieces, but I especially enjoy working with large pieces and tree trunks."

"Did you make the piece holding the address signs at the highway?"

"I did."

The corner of Ty's mouth turned up in a soft, closed-mouth smile. "That's what made me turn down the road when my car was acting up."

"Aleck asked me to make that. Said it would help us make friends with the neighbors. You should've seen the stash of canned and baked goods we were given after that. We had a year's worth of pickles." I smiled at the memory of Aleck and me arguing over who got the last dill pickle. Then he'd stuck it in his mouth and leaned in for me to bite half of it off. I shook my head to clear the vision and found Ty looking at me with such care it took my breath away.

"Aleck was a clever man. I bet he made friends with them all, and you got canned goods the next year too."

A loud laugh burst out of me. "How'd you guess?"

Ty reached out and touched a piece from the black cottonwood project that I'd been carving into a fox. "This is incredible. Do you sell your work?"

I shook my head. "Well, I guess that's not technically true anymore. I sold one after a recent project at work. Sometimes, I get the materials from customers."

Ty turned toward me, excitement radiating off him. "If you want to sell more, I could make you a website and take photos of your work. I bet Bee's Dahlia Farm would hire you to make wooden dahlias for their upcoming festival."

Ty's enthusiasm was contagious but also overwhelming. I grabbed his shoulders, chuckling. "Let's slow down. I barely show anyone my art, let alone try to get people to buy it."

Ty scratched his beard in an unusually sheepish gesture. "Sorry. When it comes to marketing, I can get carried away with ideas."

"There's no reason to apologize. I bet you have a ton of great ideas. I promise, when I'm ready, I'll come to you and have a notebook ready." I kissed his cheek.

He bit his lip and nodded.

"I want to show you something else." I took him to the far corner, where my current project sat on a workbench. I'd wrapped the most precious pieces in a sheet.

"What's this going to be?"

"Something for your parents. It's from your tree." I unwrapped the sheet, and Ty gasped. I studied him closely as he ran his fingers along the spot on the tree where he'd carved his initials as a kid.

"I didn't even think about asking you to preserve these bits. I guess we figured that since the tree was dead, the wood would go bad."

"I'm building a frame from scraps of the wood to attach them to. I thought you could give this to your parents for their anniversary."

Ty stared at it as a crease formed on his forehead. At least a minute passed before he turned and studied me with his head cocked like a scientist might study a species of tap-dancing cockroaches.

"You're a busy guy with work and softball. Why would you spend your free time doing this?" He looked genuinely confused. I ached to run my finger down the wrinkle between his eyebrows.

It broke me that he couldn't comprehend why I would do that for him. It felt like a fork in the road moment. I didn't want to push Ty too hard, but I needed to give him a clue that I

felt something more than horny for him. I took a deep breath before stepping into Ty's space. "Because I care about you. This tree is special to you and your family, and you're special to me. I have skills to help preserve it, and I wanted to do it."

"You care about me?" I didn't miss the flicker of hope in his eyes, even if it was shrouded with doubt.

I bit back the usual sarcasm I would reply with to keep things light between us and leaned into sincerity. "It turns out you're pretty great." My heart lodged in my throat as he wordlessly stared at me. Just as the thought formed to say something to break the tension, Ty tackled me.

"Let's fuck."

I laughed into his urgent kiss. I was becoming fluent in Ty. That was basically his version of telling me he cared about me too.



TYLER

THE SILENCE WAS thick as my heart pounded. I stared into Coop's eyes while slowly stripping off my shirt and pants. He leaned against the doorframe of his bedroom and didn't take his attention off me.

The mood differed from the other times we'd had sex. Those times were fun and frenetic while seizing opportunities to get off quickly. This wasn't like that at all. I was playing with fire and ready to get burned.

Coop had been there without pushing me, instead letting me come to him on my own. Luring me like a feral cat through bowls of milk moved closer and closer to his door. He couldn't have handled me any more perfectly. *I* hadn't even known how I'd needed to be handled, but he instinctively understood me

on a level I couldn't wrap my head around. Coop, the unicorn among men, got me.

I slid my pants down my thighs and reveled in the way Coop watched me hungrily. As soon as they dropped to the floor and I kicked out of them, he strode toward me and ran his knuckles down my sternum. Goosebumps erupted in their wake.

Coop circled me and slid his fingertips under the narrow waistband of my black lace thong. He hooked his finger under the fabric resting between my cheeks and traced the length of my crack. A shiver raced down my spine at his scorching touch.

I wasn't sure what I was ready for with him—emotionally or whatever—but I knew I wanted to show Cooper I was willing to try. I couldn't guarantee him anything, but I wouldn't run. I wanted to give us a chance, to give *me* a chance to let this unfold. I didn't want labels, I didn't want declarations, but I wanted Coop.

When he completed his orbit, he moved in to stand chest-to-chest against me. His flannel shirt scratched my hard nipples.

“I want you inside me,” I whispered.

Coop sucked in a breath. He dragged his work-rough palms across my shoulders, down my back, until he cupped my ass. “I can't wait to be inside you,” he said against my lips.

The first brush was soft, but each pass grew firmer. Heat built between us as his tongue slid into my mouth. I wrapped my arms around his body, and my scrap of barely there clothing against his full outfit left me a wanton puddle of hormones. I was ready to give him control in a way I hadn't before. We hadn't gone further than blowjobs and some light fingering action. My mouth and hands were intimately familiar with his dick, and my hole felt left out of the party.

While kneading my ass with his strong hands—ones I couldn't fucking wait to have stretching me open for his cock—he walked me back to his bed. After one more deep kiss, he

spun me around and pushed on my shoulder until I hinged at the waist and pressed my forearms against the mattress. I heard shuffling and looked over my shoulder to find Coop dropping to his knees. My hole clenched. I needed him there. I was desperate, aching for his touch all over me, in me. The anticipation sent me from growing to hard as steel.

Cooper dragged the thong to the side. The heat of his breath warmed me moments before his tongue skated across my furled skin. A choked whimper escaped me as Coop tongued me in earnest, the wet slide pushing in, teasing around the edges, coaxing me to relax for him. Soon, a finger joined his tongue as they worked in tandem to stretch me open. Coop didn't half-ass tonguing my ass. He put everything into thoroughly taking me apart in a way no one had before. I'd never gotten close enough to anyone to let them.

“Ready! Jesus fucking Christ, I'm ready. Need you in me. Now. Right—fuck, there, *right there*. Nngh. Now!”

“Pretty sure I'm already in you.” He slowly dragged his tongue across my hole and then pressed it inside.

“Your *dick*, you dick!”

He playfully smacked my ass, and I pushed back against him like a wanton slut.

“Like that, did you?”

“Harder.”

He smacked me again before moving around to the nightstand and retrieving supplies. I appreciated that he grabbed a condom without having a conversation about going bare and recent partners. I wasn't ready to admit there hadn't been anyone but him since we'd met, and I wasn't ready to face what that could mean.

I stayed bent over as I watched Coop stand on the side of the bed and strip before sliding on the condom. The intimacy in his stare rocked me as much as his gentle yet demanding touch.

He climbed onto the bed and leaned back against the headboard, then patted his thigh. I climbed onto the bed until I

straddled his legs and settled on his lap. I dropped my arms around his shoulders and squirmed against his hard dick until it snagged against my hole. I damn near impaled myself on him in a rush of reckless need, but I held back. I knew I needed more prep if I didn't want to regret it tomorrow, and I didn't want to regret a thing when it came to Coop.

He fingered me open while pressing wet kisses along my collarbone. Every nerve in my body fired with need. When I couldn't take the torture any longer, I lowered myself onto him and reveled in the delicious stretch. Each inch pulled a guttural moan from my chest.

“That's it. Mm, perfect. So good, baby.”

I barely bit back a whimper at the endearment. I was accustomed to a stranger in a restroom stall telling me, “*You suck cock so good, baby. That's it. Take my load, sweetheart.*” But the way Cooper said it? The man could tear me apart with a word.

Coop's wild hair dripped rain onto his shoulders. His earnest eyes stared into my soul as he rubbed circles on my hips. It was the kind of shit seen in movies or my friends experienced with their boyfriends. I'd never known I was capable of feeling so much while getting fucked. What was it about him that was so different—that made me different?

My heart pounded more than it usually did during sex, and it had nothing to do with the exertion of riding him. My stomach fluttering as I stared into Coop's eyes didn't help. I braced myself on his delicious round belly as I picked up speed. I loved the cushion of his thick body under my thighs.

“*Tyler. Ty, Ty, Ty.*” Coop dropped his head back against the headboard and groaned. I licked his Adam's apple and clenched against his perfect cock.

He thrust up, gripping me tightly, as he met me move for move. I rode him with increasing fervor and watched with rapture as Coop went feral underneath me. Dirty praise fell from his lips, and I couldn't get enough.

It was like he'd unlocked something inside me, heightening my senses. I felt every drag of his skin against mine, the heat from his quickened breath, the scratch of his nails across my hips.

Why him? Why now?

His mouth fell open in a silent cry while his body seized. As he came, he gripped my dick, giving it sure strokes until my body gave up to his demands and I followed. I collapsed against his chest. He wrapped his sturdy arms around me as his hands returned to my ass. I cuddled against him while coming down from the high. I waited for the urge to bolt, but it never came. I was too warm and comfy to move.

“My dick is quite fond of your ass.”

“My ass enthusiastically returns your dick’s affections. It could pen longhand letters of admiration.” I looked up at him and smiled before kissing a bead of sweat trickling down his neck. His chest hair stuck to my skin.

We lay there for a while. He rubbed soft circles on my back, and a sound similar to a purr rumbled from my chest. I knew I should clean up, but I wasn’t ready for the real world—and my brain—to crash the moment.

Instead, my brain decided to throw a landmine into the mix. “Hey, there’s a drag show coming up that the guys and I are performing in. It’s for charity. Want to come? Seth, Caleb, and Parker will be watching too.”

Where the fuck had that come from? I supposed I’d been subconsciously considering inviting him, but there was probably a better moment to do it than after emotionally charged sex that had left me raw. But if Coop was actually interested in me, for real, he had to know I would bring up random shit at weird times.

I’d nearly called it a date but held back. Baby steps.

CHAPTER 30

COOPER

Danita: I'm about to head out to run some errands. Late morning coffee delivery?

Danita: Just got to the coffee shop. There's a line, so you've got about five minutes if you want something. There are cardamom rolls in the pastry case. [drool emoji]

Danita: I picked you up a roll. OMW!



I placed the unsalted peanuts on a flat rock near the creek's edge, then sat on Aleck's throne stump. My body relaxed as soon as I settled and took in the landscape. I never knew how the spot would hit me until I got there, but the ritual of giving treats to the crows always grounded me to the moment.

I couldn't visit the creek and not think of Aleck. As the sun's rays fought through the tall trees, I remembered the day we toured the house and explored the grounds. As soon as he'd seen the creek, the only way he would've walked away from the house was if it had had an abysmal inspection. I'd been all too happy to make him happy, despite the house not really being my style. It was more remote than I wanted, but with him there, it was perfect. After he died? It had felt like a mausoleum. A memorial to the life we were supposed to have.

Rushing water tumbled over rocks while birds chirped from the branches. It used to be the relaxing place where we had weekend picnics or shared a bottle of wine at twilight. Now, it was my place to grieve. Aleck was only ever a thought away, but I felt closest to him in this spot. It had an extra-light feeling today, which I hadn't expected. After Ty had slept over and left this morning, I'd expected the guilt to crush me. Things were different between us, and I needed to clear my head and process it all.

“Our softball team is doing pretty good this season. We'll probably have a shot at the championship again. Danita is champing at the bit to have bragging rights for a year and rub it in Nick's face. Pretty sure she wants to fuck him.”

Talking to Aleck had become easier over the years. It didn't hurt as much to tell him about things he would never experience.

“I managed not to hurt my back this season, and my thighs are as big as ever. Just how you liked them.” I chuckled. He'd always had a thing for my thighs.

“Danita's store is doing great. She got a big write-up last winter in one of those airline magazines, and then a Portland TV crew came out and did a segment.”

A sharp caw cut through the ambiance of rushing water.

I rolled my eyes. “Fine. I'll talk about Ty.”

The crow's next caw sounded like an encouraging rattle.

“I bet you're laughing your ass off, watching me fumble through this.” I rubbed my chest. What had been a sharp pain for so long had morphed into a constant, dull ache. Ever-present but manageable and no longer debilitating. It was a welcome reminder of him and the life we'd shared for so many years.

“You'd adore Ty. He's goofy and funny, has a huge heart, and one hell of an underwear collection.” A crow landed on the stump and eyed me before turning its attention to the peanuts.

“I really like him.” The words came out barely above a whisper. I rested my elbows on my knees and clasped my hands together. “I really like him,” I said more firmly while staring at my feet.

Another crow landed and let out a series of happy caws.

“Did you train these birds? When you told me you liked crows, I never expected it would become this level of creepy.”

The birds stared at me silently. Blinking in unison.

“Not creepy. Um, intense.”

They turned back to their food.

I watched them for a few minutes as I tried to sort through the torrent of emotions racing through me. “I didn’t think I’d fall for someone again, Aleck. I didn’t think I’d ever want to put myself through the hurt. I guess the idea of sharing my life with someone again intrigues the lonely hermit in me, but lightning doesn’t strike twice in the same spot, does it?” I shook my head and then laughed. Lightning had brought Ty to my door. Literally. I looked up at the sky. “Was that your doing?”

Several more crows landed to check out the plate I’d brought.

“He’s skittish, but I’m patient. I learned that from you. For some reason, he seems to think he doesn’t have the capacity to love, but he’s got so much love in his life. He has incredible friends and family he’d take a bullet for, and they love him just as fiercely. He thinks he’s not built for anything serious, but he’s wrong. He’d be great in a relationship. Ty’s supportive, silly, caring, and endlessly entertaining.” I wanted him to want a relationship. With me. I really did. Accepting that nearly knocked me on my ass.

“There’s so much potential there, but I’m terrified of making the wrong move.”

A crow cautiously moved toward me. We stared at each other as I slowly reached into my pocket and grabbed a handful of cat kibble I kept on hand as a special treat for them.

I held out my hand and watched the bird approach and take a few pieces before bouncing back to its friends.

“I’m not gonna give up. I’ve been telling myself to be patient for him, but I needed it for myself too. I never thought I would fall for the first person I had sex with after you, that’s for damn sure. Wasn’t I supposed to suffer through a long string of creeps and guys who ghost me before finding a mediocre relationship like everyone else?” I drummed my thumb against my leg. “Even if it doesn’t work out, I’ll always be grateful to Ty.”

I looked up at the tree canopy and squinted at the sunlight. “So, do I get your stamp of approval?”

After a tense silence, one crow called out. Then another and another until all I heard was a riotous cacophony of crows encouraging me. There was such beauty to the chaos of their call, like the beauty to the chaos of Aleck. I soaked up the momentary connection to him as much as his approval. It might be silly to think I was getting signs from birds, but it didn’t hurt anyone to believe it.

“Hi, Aleck.”

I was startled by Danita’s voice. She waved at the crows as she sat on a big rock to my right.

“Of course he couldn’t have picked a bird with a prettier call to become obsessed with. Why couldn’t he love bushtits? Those things are fucking adorable. Crows are worse than listening to an elementary class learning to play the recorder.”

A crow near the peanuts honked at her, and then a pile of bird shit landed next to her foot. She raised her hands in defeat.

“I mean, he had the best taste in birds. Crows are the superior bird. Only the coolest group of birds is called a murder. Can you stop threatening to shit on me now?”

I shook my head and laughed.

“Due for a talk?” she asked gently.

“Yeah.”

“If you want a human response, you can talk to me. I promise not to be snarky.”

I stared at her.

“Fine. Not *too* snarky.”

I stayed silent for a couple of minutes and appreciated that she didn't push.

“Do you think it's too soon?” I eventually asked.

“You're asking moi? The woman who's been threatening to sign you up with a matchmaker for over a year? No, I honestly don't.”

“Do you think it's disrespectful to his memory?”

She threw a rock at my leg. “He'd be pissed if he thought you were being some sort of heartache martyr. If you're genuinely not ready, that's one thing. But he'd hate to see you forcing yourself into some lonely existence to honor his memory.”

I inhaled a deep breath that rattled my bones and worked up the courage to look at her. She smiled at me.

“But you haven't seemed lonely for a couple of months now.”

My cheeks heated. “You're right.”

“I usually am. How's it going with Tyler?”

“Good, I think.” She'd asked me about Ty several times, but I hadn't fully opened up to her. I hadn't even opened up to myself until recently.

“You *think*?”

“It's complicated,” I said as I stared at a small bird bouncing between rocks next to the water.

“Then un-complicate it for me.”

“He stayed over last night.”

“Yeah, boiii. Get it.”

That pulled a laugh out of me. “I don’t know if it’s going anywhere, but I want it to. I’m moving slow though. We both need it.”

“As long as it’s moving, slow is good.”

“Ty doesn’t date. He prefers to sleep with someone once and move on.”

She snorted. “Broke that rule.”

I couldn’t help but grin. It might be childish, but I got a thrill out of the fact that he’d made an exception for me.

“He’s sticking around for some reason, and I don’t know what to do.”

“Do you need to know what to do?”

I looked at her questioningly.

“Why do you need to know what’s going to happen? You wouldn’t in any other relationship. You sure as hell didn’t with Aleck. That man was a chaos gremlin who was impossible to pin down.”

We both laughed, and some of the tension left my body as I considered her words.

“Why don’t you take it day by day? As long as one of you isn’t leading the other one on or lying, then just keep rolling with it.” She kept darting glances toward the crows as the breeze blew her curls around.

“That’s a good point.”

“He might need to learn to trust that you won’t run at the first sign of trouble. If he doesn’t usually date, he’s probably going to fuck up. Be patient with him. If he’s worth it—”

“He is,” I said with conviction.

“Then it’s worth giving him a chance. As long as he knows that Aleck will always be a part of your life.”

I understood her concern. I couldn’t imagine letting someone in who wanted me to close off that part of my life.

“He asks me about Aleck. He wants to know about him and our life together. I’ve never felt like I needed to censor myself around him. Not once.” I smiled as I thought about the casual ways Ty included Aleck in conversation. “Actually, since I met Ty, I’ve reached a point where I can talk about him more casually without breaking down.”

The tension drained from her body, and she smiled widely. “I’m so damn glad to hear it. When we all grabbed drinks early in the season, he seemed interested. I didn’t know if that was for my benefit because he wants my business or if that’s just him.”

“It’s just him.”

“Then see where it goes.”

“You don’t give terrible advice for a pain in the ass.”

“Obviously. I told you to date my brother. You’ve known since college that I give superior advice.”

We silently watched the crows finish the peanuts. She was right. I didn’t need to know anything other than Ty was worth the risk, and I was ready to be happy again.

“Want to go to brunch before the game? I want to get out of the house.”

She walked over and pressed her hand to my forehead. “You? Want to leave the house? Ty really *is* good for you. I’ll go if you’re buying.”

TEAM TAP THAT GROUP TEXT

Ethan: Has anyone asked Seth if he knows how long he's planning to stick around?

Austin: Nope, but I'm curious as hell. Ty? You heard anything from him or your parents?

Ty: No, but it's killing me not to ask. If I do, I might accidentally push him out.

Dom: I haven't either. Why are you asking?

Ethan: I think we should get him more involved with the brewery. He's been doing a great job working with me in the taproom, and it sounds like he's doing great supporting Austin. But I think we could ask him to do more.

Austin: What do you have in mind?

Ethan: Event planning. None of us have the spare time to plan the grand opening of our outdoor seating to the level it deserves. He did event planning for the cruise ships. We should totally ask him for help.

Ty: That's such a great idea! He would be so fucking good at that. Definitely better than any of us. I'd love to see him have more ownership in the business, but I'm biased. It's easy for me to want to keep my brother around, but I don't want to pressure you guys into it.

Austin: It would be incredible to have someone focused on events. Even growing our current themed nights and fundraisers.

Dom: I'm totally on board. We're damn lucky to have gotten Seth to work with us. He has skills that complement ours, and we have the budget for it. Let's do it.

CHAPTER 31

TYLER

Ty: What makes you feel better when you're sick?

Dom: Not being sick anymore.

Ty: Wow. So helpful. [eyeroll emoji]

Ethan: Broth soup with thick noodles.

Austin: Caleb makes the best sick-day soup.

Dom: Tissues with stuff on them that don't make your nose raw.



I parked behind Coop's truck and sat in my car as I stared at his welcoming porch with the wooden railing that matched the house's exterior. Somehow, his cabin had gone from creepy to homey. *What the fuck am I doing here?* I wasn't someone to show up unannounced with sick-day supplies. I was the put a towel over my mouth and nose, open a door, chuck a box of tissues inside, then put up a sign outside the door that read "hazardous containment unit" kind of guy. At least, that was what I'd done when Austin had gotten a bad flu in college. I'd crashed on the floor of Ethan and Dom's dorm room to stay away from the cooties.

It had been over a week since I'd been at Coop's to learn how to drive the ATV and we'd had incredible sex. Sex that still got me hard from memory alone and made my stomach feel all swirly. Things had changed between us after that, but not in a tangible way I could pinpoint. We still texted periodically throughout most days, flirted during practice, and released steam by fucking around after.

One thing that hadn't changed was me wanting to spend time with Cooper. I wouldn't have been surprised if anyone who knew me put money on me ghosting him after the sex that skirted the line way the fuck too close to making love. Instead, I came up with more excuses to return to Coop's house for a visit. I hadn't acted on them though.

Until now...with a giant pot of soup and a bag full of meds on my passenger seat. At first glance, it could be perceived as a thoughtful gesture, except I'd had to talk to three different people to make it happen because I was too inept to figure out how to take care of someone on my own. People built for relationships could figure that shit out. My figure-romantic-shit-out-o-meter was missing a critical part on permanent backorder. I felt like I was one wrong move away from ruining everything with Cooper while still not understanding why I was even playing with the thoughts of having something with him in the first place. What was that saying? A riddle inside a mystery inside an enigma or something? That. That was me trying to figure out how I felt about Coop and *why* I felt anything for him after a lifetime of flatlining on the romance front.

I let out a rough breath. I'd come all this way, and it would be a dick move to turn around now. Preventing anyone from accessing Caleb's food was a crime against humanity. Coop had probably heard me drive up anyway.

When he'd texted this morning that he wasn't going to make it to practice because he had a sinus infection and was holed up in bed, miserable, I couldn't stop thinking about it. It wasn't like he could Instacart whatever he needed out in the boonies. After he'd mentioned he'd gotten a telehealth appointment and a prescription Danita was going to bring to

him, I'd texted her and arranged to pick it up instead after moving an afternoon meeting around. And gathered everything else like a total dweeb.

I didn't recognize myself as I hooked the bag of medications and supplies over my wrist and picked up the warm Dutch oven. For a guy I only wanted to fuck, I couldn't imagine doing more than a "text me when you're not contagious and we'll fuck" message, but I wanted to ensure Coop was okay beyond a text message. I needed to see him with my own eyes. That level of concern over someone who wasn't family or the guys was unfamiliar, but I didn't hate it.

What if he thought I was a weirdo for showing up like this? I squared my shoulders and shook the doubt off. I'd faced much more nerve-racking situations, like pitching clients on multimillion-dollar marketing campaigns. I could deliver some fucking soup to a guy I liked. *Oh god, I like him, don't I?*

I stared at his door, unblinking. I liked him. A lot. I wasn't sure when it had happened, or maybe it had happened slowly, like the tide rolling in. It wasn't the time to process that bombshell, so I knocked on the door with my elbow and waited with no response. After a minute, I tried again with my foot. When that didn't work, I tried to shift the giant pot to one hand so I could grab my phone, but I nearly dumped the thing, so I gave up.

The door opened after a couple of minutes, and Coop looked fucking wrecked. He wore full flannel pajamas, his damp hair was stuck to his head, his skin was flushed, and his nose was red and raw.

"You look like you're on death's door."

"Sweet of you to say." His voice was raspy. "You're not Danita."

"Nope. She has way better hair."

He snorted. "The baseball pants are a nice touch."

I grinned. "It was that or scrubs. Thought you'd like this nursing uniform better since you missed practice. I'm wearing a jock too." I wagged my eyebrows.

“Tease.” Coop laughed, which morphed into a hacking cough as he shoved his face into the crook of his elbow. He pulled a tissue from his pocket and blew his nose.

“Go sit down.”

“Sir, yes, sir.” He attempted to salute but started coughing again.

When he went into the living room, I moved into the kitchen, placed the Dutch oven on the stove, and turned it on to simmer as Caleb had instructed. Then I set the oven to preheat for the bread he’d sent with me.

“You made soup?” Cooper called.

I clucked my tongue at the note of skepticism in his voice. “No. Caleb did, so it’ll actually taste good.”

“I can’t taste anything anyway, so yours probably would’ve been fine.”

I walked into the living room and took in the sight of Coop sprawled out like a lump on his recliner. His long legs hung over the edge of the footrest.

“That sucks for you because I’m sure it’ll be delicious. I’ll describe in detail how good it tastes.”

Cooper managed a halfhearted middle finger before he coughed again, then pressed his fingertips against his temple.

“Your head hurt?”

“No, I’m trying to telepathically tell you to show me your jock.”

“Still got a sense of humor with a nasty sinus infection. Impressive. Eat now, jock later.”

“Promise?”

“We’ll see.” I winked.

There was more color in his cheeks as he smiled, but then it shifted into a wince.

“Yeah, I’ve got an awful headache. The pounding behind my eyes and at the top of my head won’t quit.”

I pulled out my phone and shot Seth a quick text to ask him for the medication instructions again. He'd given me suggestions on what to get beyond the prescriptions I'd picked up.

Seth: There's a really cool feature with medications called instructions. They're even right there on the box and more in the box! Magic. Read them.

I sent back a middle finger emoji.

"All right. Let's get you nice and drugged up." Duh. Of course there were instructions on the box. Not wanting to screw up had me way too rattled.

I dug through the bag and placed the antibiotics and cough suppressant on the coffee table, then the nasal spray, throat spray, two boxes of tissues, headache medicine, and cough drops next to them.

"Did you rob a pharmacy?" Coop's red, watery eyes looked fond as he stared at the medicinal bounty I'd brought him.

"I had some help. Seth's prone to sinus infections and Danita told me about your prescription." I ignored his stare as I read the instructions on each box and mentally calculated a schedule I would write down for him. Most of the pills suggested taking them on a full stomach.

"Will you be able to eat a little?" I winced at his rough coughing fit.

"Yeah. Thanks." He smiled and melted further into the recliner.

I returned to the kitchen and filled the kettle with water, then grabbed the box of honey ginger tea I'd bought. Once the soup was back to optimal temperature and the bread was crispy how I liked it, I fixed Coop some food, brought it out, and set it on a TV tray. I avoided eye contact to not make it weird and went back in to grab some for myself.

I sat on the couch, turned on the TV, and switched it to the Hallmark channel before digging in. The soup was amazing,

but of course it would be. Caleb was a whiz in the kitchen. The chicken was tender and seasoned perfectly, the vegetables were soft but not mushy, and the flavorful broth tasted like herbs instead of just liquid sodium. The thick-crust bread with a slab of butter was a perfect addition. Cooper ate a few bites of bread and half the soup, which I declared sufficient for his medication.

I carefully double-checked the instructions for each pill and dosed them out to him. I was probably being too fussy, but I wanted him to get better soon. Softball wasn't the same without him. I needed my eye candy, and Rick wasn't as good of a catcher.

Coop grabbed my wrist and gently squeezed when I refilled his water. "Thank you," he said sincerely while holding eye contact.

My cheeks burned, and I nodded, then retreated to the kitchen to do dishes before I jumped on his lap and snuggled him until he fell asleep.

Cooper must've dozed off while I was in the kitchen because he slowly opened his eyes when I came back into the living room.

"Caleb made the soup and Seth helped with the meds?"

I nodded as I dropped onto the couch. "It was a group effort."

"You've got great friends."

A smile tugged at my lips. "I do."

"Thanks for taking care of me, Ty." His eyes fell closed.

He would sleep much better in his bed. I walked to the recliner and pulled him to his feet. "That's it. We're going to lie down." I stacked two pillows to help with his breathing and tucked him in before refilling his water and getting a cool rag.

I settled next to him on top of the covers, leaning back against the headboard. My cheeks burned at the memory of him in the same spot and what we'd done. How hard I'd come

on his dick. Now I was wiping sweat from his forehead and snot from his nose.

He sighed happily. “Will you stay with me until I fall asleep?”

“Of course.” I let him use my lap as a pillow.

After creepily staring at him for a few minutes, I started fucking around on my phone. Somehow, I ended up googling articles about dating for the first time in your thirties. I read an essay by someone who said he was never interested in dating and had just messed around through his twenties and half his thirties. But then he’d met someone and settled down. It’d worked for him. Could it for me? It made me feel better to know someone else had been successful. The last thing I wanted to do was risk hurting Cooper with my inexperience, but even knowing that some people had managed it didn’t fill me with confidence. I’d needed to call in a team to help him while he was sick. How could I manage a relationship twenty-four seven?

He coughed, and I smoothed his hair back. He snuggled closer and relaxed into his sleep. *I would do anything not to hurt this man.*

CHAPTER 32

TYLER

Team Tap That Group Text

Dom: Did you kill Cooper yet?

Ty: He's very much alive. Thank you very much.

Austin: The real question is whether you helped or made him feel worse.

Ty: Rude!

Austin: Do I need to remind you of the "hazardous containment unit" sign?

Ty: Ha! I was just thinking about that. I thought the toxic barrel clipart added a great touch.

Ethan: It was pretty funny. The RA was so concerned. [laugh-cry emoji]



I PICKED up the empty Dutch oven from the passenger seat and yawned as I trudged into the house. Between Cooper's consistent coughing, nose blowing, and my worrying about him, I'd barely slept. I needed to shower and change before heading to the brewery. Spending the night hadn't been part of my plan, but I couldn't leave him.

I passed the TV room on my way to drop the pot in the kitchen and spotted Seth lying on the couch and smiling at his phone. He looked relaxed in sweats and a T-shirt instead of his usual vests and bow ties.

“How’d it go? Manage not to kill him?” Seth raised an eyebrow at my baseball pants.

I opened my mouth to make a joke but stopped. Seth studied me, then sat up.

“Everything okay?”

He wasn’t making a joke about me having a neurological event, so I must’ve looked as serious as I felt. I dropped the stuff onto the coffee table and plopped on the couch, knocking his feet out of the way.

“I’m confused.”

“You’re leaving it wide open for a lot of jokes, but I sense this isn’t a joking conversation.”

“Your senses are correct.”

Given how close Seth and I had become since he’d moved back, I felt comfortable confiding in him. I hadn’t had that with him since we were little and our secrets were the hiding-junk-food-from-our-parents variety or staying up too late to read comic books. Things had changed—*I’d* changed—when I’d gone off to middle school and became too cool for my brother.

“I was doing some reading online last night about dating and why I haven’t done it.”

“Because you’re a connoisseur of dicks.”

“Damn right. Innies too. I appreciate men in all their forms. But I can’t stop thinking that it’s weird I haven’t wanted to date anyone. It’s not that I talk myself out of it because I’m scared or busy or whatever. The urge literally doesn’t come for me to push for more. With anyone.”

“Until Cooper?” he asked gently.

“Yeah. It’s different with him.”

“Do you ever get *any* romantic urges with people? Like crushes?”

“Crushes? On their hairy chests or bossy attitudes? Sure.”

“No, like on their personalities or how they make you feel, you superficial asshole.”

I flashed a teasing smile. “Not really.”

“What about that guy you dated in college? How did that happen?”

I thought back to all those years ago. The memories had grown fuzzier as I aged, but I remembered enough. “We were pretty good friends. Met in a marketing class, started studying together, and then hanging out. He eventually invited me to a party at his frat, and one thing led to another. The next time we had class after that, he asked me to grab drinks. Then dinner, and then we fooled around. I guess we started dating from there.”

“Ah.”

I frowned. “Care to elaborate?”

Seth adjusted his glasses. “Nah.”

I chucked a throw pillow at his head, but he blocked it with his forearm.

He held up a please-hold finger as he used his other hand to do something on his phone. I glared impatiently at him.

Seth sat up straighter. “Answer some questions for me. When you see someone attractive, do you want to get to know them, get naked, or get romantically involved?”

“Naked. Obviously.” I didn’t know where he was going, but I’d play along.

“How often do you hook up? Frequently, sometimes, or rarely?”

I stared at him deadpan.

His nose wrinkled. “Right. Frequently. TMI. Who do you see yourself spending your future with? Someone who started

as a strong emotional connection, then later a sexual connection. Or the love of your life, who you likely met first as a friend. Or a long-term sexual partner, not a romantic one.”

My brain tripped over those options. It would’ve been a no-brainer before meeting Cooper. Just sex, no romance. But then I remembered how tightly he clutched me as he slept with his head on my lap last night.

“Pretend you never met Cooper.”

I scowled. “I guess the long-term sex partner.”

Seth asked me a few more questions along the same lines, and my curiosity grew with each one.

He put his phone face down on his lap and gave me all his attention. “Are you familiar with the term *demiromantic*?”

I rolled my eyes. “Pretty sure you and I don’t operate the same when it comes to this shit.”

Seth rolled his eyes right back. “You’re such a shit listener. I’m *demisexual*. I asked about *demiromantic*.”

“Oops.” I smiled sheepishly. I considered it for a minute. “I’ve probably heard of it but never thought about it before. I can guess what it means, but in case I’m wrong, what is it?”

“The way I like to think about it is both *demisexual* and *demiromantic* people need an emotional connection with someone, but the difference is *demisexual* people need it for satisfying sex and *demiromantic* people need it for romantic interest.”

“Huh.”

He turned more toward me and crossed his legs as his enthusiasm grew. “If you think this idea fits you, then you would probably need an emotional connection to have romantic feelings for someone. The sex comes much easier.”

“That’s what he said.”

He pelted me with a pillow. “You’re such a dickhead.”

I wrapped my arm around his neck and pulled him close until I could reach the top of his head for a loud, smacking

kiss. “Sorry. I know I’m an asshole.” I let him go and caught his smile before he stared down at his phone.

I leaned back on the couch and stared at the ceiling while I worked through what he’d suggested. It made a hell of a lot of sense. Sex *was* easy for me, and I never felt like I was missing out on the romance or love with people. I enjoyed using our bodies to make each other feel good and then moving on. But with my ex in college, we were really tight before I started feeling something beyond sexual attraction.

Does this mean I’m not broken?

“This is making sense to me, but I don’t get why it’s only been two guys.”

Seth put his phone down. “You’ve gotten to know lots of guys, but that doesn’t automatically mean you feel romantic attraction to them. Just like you don’t want to fuck literally every guy you see. Don’t give me that face. I know I’m right.”

“Okay, not *every* guy.”

“You never had a thing for Ethan or Dom, right?”

“Ew, no.”

“But they’re your best friends.” Seth looked back at his phone. “What about Gavin?”

“Fuck no.”

His mouth twitched. “So it’s not only about getting to know someone that makes you like them. There has to be something more there, which is the same for me. Clicking with someone emotionally doesn’t mean I automatically want to screw them. It takes a special mix, but an emotional connection is at the top of the list.”

I followed what he was saying. Maybe Coop *was* special. There was no maybe about that, he absolutely fucking was. One of the most special people I’d ever met in my life.

In a ten-minute conversation, Seth blew what I thought I knew about myself to smithereens. Demiromantic. Huh. I tried the label on in my head and didn’t hate it. It actually relieved a lot of pressure I didn’t realize I’d been carrying by giving me a

label that made me feel normal. That there actually were other people like me—enough to require a name.

A thought crossed my mind, and I sat up. “We’re both demi! We should get T-shirts made! The McNeill Demi Bros.”

Seth’s eyes went wide as dinner plates. “No. God, no.”

“Come on. It could be so fun! A marketing angle for the brewery. We can make a special demi-edition beer.”

He stood and hurried out of the room. “Nope.”

I followed him up the stairs. “It could be a fundraiser. This is part of the ace spectrum, right? There’s got to be an ace awareness day. We could do a demi-representation event in town. Demi in Dahlia Springs. Seth, come on. The alliteration is so sexy.”

Seth strode into his room and slammed the door in my face.

“You’re no fun.”

Instead of harassing him more, I needed to get ready for work. While I waited for the shitty water heater to warm my shower, I googled demiromantic. Everything I read made a hell of a lot of sense. I liked having a reason for why I’d always felt different from my friends, and it helped ease some worry about trying things with Coop. At the very least, it gave me ideas for search terms like “I’m demiromantic and like a guy but have no idea what the fuck I’m doing. Help.”

But a label didn’t erase the fact that I didn’t know shit about how to be in a relationship and stop myself from eventually hurting Cooper.

CHAPTER 33

TYLER

Ty: Guess what? Hayden finished construction!
We get to check it out today.

Coop: Congrats! Pics or it didn't happen.

Ty: If you want dick pics, you only need to ask.

Coop: Not the pics I was referring to, but I won't
say no to those too.

Ty: Perv. [smirk emoji]

Coop: You love it.



Rain pissed down from the sky as it did often during spring in Oregon, but not a single drop touched me as I stood outside the brewery. Why? Because Hayden was a fucking beautiful construction wizard.

“I know I said adding electrical might need to be a phase two addition, but I bartered with an electrician buddy who ended up with a gap in his schedule. He put outlets in the posts like you wanted.” Hayden pointed to an outlet at the base of a post with a cover over it.

“Bartering with a ‘buddy?’ Do they even have an electrical license?” Dom scowled at the outlet.

Hayden didn’t even flinch. “It’s the same guy the insurance company hired to rewire the elementary school after last year’s fire. If they trusted him with a building for little squirts, pretty sure he’s reliable.”

I loved watching Dom and Hayden go at it. For the most part, Dom had steered clear of Hayden when he’d been here working, but once in a while, we got a good show of Dom being an asshole and Hayden taking it with a smile. Dom still hadn’t spilled anything about their history, but the rest of us were pretty sure they’d been an item in high school, or it was some sort of unrequited love situation that had blown up.

“Can I finish the rest of the tour, Your Highness?”

Dom rolled his eyes and crossed his arms. I was impressed he didn’t storm off.

“I want to show you something else.”

We followed Hayden around to the back of the brewery. We’d asked him to make a dog waste area back there. It was important to create a comfortable, stay-a-while vibe, and if we wanted to welcome dog owners, we needed to make sure the pooches had a place to do their business. Dom trailed slowly behind us.

Hayden had added some cool features to the waste area that were above and beyond what we’d asked for. He then took us through the rest of the work he’d completed. The covered area fit ten four-top tables and a firepit with several chairs around it. The tables were spread apart far enough for dogs to hang at the tables without being a trip hazard. We could easily add more tables if we needed to or move them for an event.

The firepit was perfect. I couldn’t wait to fire—hehe—that up on a cool night and sit around it BSing with the guys. But the best part was the retractable solar roof we’d splurged on. The only way we’d been able to afford it was because Hayden had given us such an incredible deal on his labor. All the extra money went toward the roof.

We'd debated endlessly over the options for how to cover the patio. Originally, we'd planned to go with clear, corrugated roofing panels to capture natural light, which would be critical in the gloomier months. But during summer, it could get hot as a sweaty taint under those. Instead, we'd upgraded to a clear, retractable roof that we could open or close depending on the weather.

"I think that's everything." Hayden stood proudly. Even Dom's glare couldn't wipe the smile from his face. And he should be proud. It was even better than we could've hoped for.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't tear up at seeing it all finished. We'd not only opened our dream brewery, we'd not only been successful, but we'd hit stretch goals that allowed us to create our outdoor expansion over a year ahead of our original timeline. And thanks to Austin's great taste in boyfriends, we would soon have a food truck permanently parked at the brewery to make it even more enticing to visit.

"'Bout time you finished," Dom grumbled.

I looked toward the heavens to give me strength. I understood Dom and Hayden had a history, but the guy had done us one hell of a solid. If there was one time to not be a dick, it was that moment. I opened my mouth to step in, but Hayden beat me to it.

Hayden's proud smile turned into a teasing grin. "Aww. Dominic gets so grumpy when he doesn't get his way."

My mouth fell open, and I looked at the other guys. Dom mumbled something I didn't catch and stormed off.

Ethan schooled his surprise, then held out his hand to Hayden. "Thank you for this. Not only did you do an even better job than we hoped for, I know what you sacrificed for us. If there's anything we can do—client references, free beer —"

"Crop dust Dom once in a while," I added. Once a teenage boy, forever the humor of one.

“Might take you up on the free beer once in a while.” Hayden’s easy smile shifted to an earnest expression. “And I’d appreciate using you as a reference. Even telling potential clients I was doing a project for the brewery has given me credibility. I’m grateful for that.”

“Does that mean you’re planning to stick around?” I might like it when Dom got his panties in a bunch, but he was still one of my best friends. I didn’t want him to get hurt. The thing was, I didn’t know whether Hayden staying or leaving would hurt.

Hayden held eye contact. “Staying.” He looked back toward the office window. “For now, at least. Anyway, I’ll leave you guys to it. If you ever need more work, you know where to find me.”

“Swing by the kitchen before you go. Caleb made you some burek to try. He wants to know if it’s closer to your mom’s recipe.”

Hayden smiled genuinely at Austin, nodded, saluted us, and walked off.

I looked around us to take it all in.

“I can’t believe we made it happen,” Ethan said.

“Me too. We’re not only sustaining but expanding. Pretty damn incredible.” Austin looked around in awe.

Ethan’s eyes grew glassy, and Austin wrapped his arm around Ethan’s shoulder and kissed the side of his head. I moved to Ethan’s other side and wrapped my arm around his waist. We remained silent for several minutes. I smiled at my brother, who stood nearby. Seth hadn’t been a part of our dream coming together or opening it, but he’d been a major presence at the brewery since he’d started working with us last year.

It meant a lot to me that he was part of the most important thing in my life.

Dom joined us with open beers and passed them out. “It’s been a wild ride.”

We sat in the Adirondack chairs perched around the firepit as Dom got it going and moved two heaters closer to us. The rain had dropped the temperature significantly since yesterday.

“Guess it’s time to plan the grand opening.” Austin leaned back and braced his beer on his thigh.

I caught Dom’s eyes and nodded.

Dom cleared his throat. “Seth, what do you think about planning it?”

Seth froze with his beer on his way to his mouth. “Me? Why?”

Dom leaned forward and dropped his elbows on his knees. It wasn’t easy to look serious with an Adirondack’s angle, but he managed it.

“Because you’re by far the most skilled in that area out of all of us. We’d benefit from your expertise.”

We’d all talked about giving Seth that project to bring him into the brewery even more, but I knew the idea would have to come from someone else. We were closer than ever but were still brothers. Anything I suggested would be suspect.

He was quiet for a moment. We’d all learned that he had a thinking look, and he was definitely thinking. “How about a pints and pooches party? Bring your dog and we’ve got the beer? Could be a fundraiser for the local pet rescue.”

Ethan beamed. “That’s *exactly* why we wanted you to plan this.”

I was so damn proud of my brother. He’d gone from playing saxophone and wearing a dorky band outfit throughout high school to a dapper bow tie-wearing guy with a knack for event planning.

We kicked around ideas for a while, then moved on to discussing practice time for our upcoming drag performance for Pride. It was easy to pass the time in the space, which was exactly what we’d wanted. I hoped our customers would dig it as much as we did. It was definitely a great way to spend the afternoon on a day we were closed.

Eventually, the conversation shifted to the latest about Caleb and Parker. Cute things they'd done, recent dates, other schmoopy shit. Then the guys looked at me expectantly. Did they think I had a "boyfriend update" too? The fuck? I didn't have a boyfriend.

Though, I hadn't stopped thinking about what I'd learned about the demiromantic umbrella. I caught Seth's eyes, and he smiled at me. A genuine, supportive one. That gave me the courage to open up. God, I hadn't had to come out to anyone for a long fucking time. That was a perk to owning a blatantly queer-owned brewery. I didn't have to find new and inventive ways to let people know I was gay.

"So...had a bit of a discovery."

"Finally figure out how to wash your stank ass?" Austin gave me a sarcastic thumbs-up.

"My ass is clean as a whistle. You can ask all the guys who have happily feasted on it." I flicked my tongue back and forth a few times in his direction.

"Fucking gross." His face scrunched like he'd tasted something sour.

"Don't ever let them tell you old dogs can't learn new tricks. Or, uh, new queer identities." I scratched the back of my neck as everyone grew quiet. "Turns out I might be demiromantic."

There was a beat of silence, then a chorus of "oh" and "yeah, that tracks."

I stared incredulously at them. "Really? No surprise? No applause? No heartfelt congratulations?"

The guys shook their heads. Seth's shoulders shook in silent laughter.

"Honestly, it makes sense. It's like demisexual, except you don't feel romance often, right? Instead of sexual attraction? Like, that's why you're down to bone but not down to cuddle?" Ethan nodded. "Totally makes sense."

As a matter of fact, I quite liked cuddling, but admitting that would mean admitting a lot of stuff about Coop I didn't even want to confess to myself yet. Things that were getting hard to ignore.

Surprisingly, the guys didn't push me on Coop. They probably sensed I'd shared enough for one day, though a small, reckless part of me wanted them to push me for answers. Maybe if they did, I'd figure some stuff out.

CHAPTER 34

COOPER

Danita: What are you up to tonight? I've got a date. Here's his photo and phone number in case I disappear.

Cooper: Thanks. I appreciate you being safe. I'm going to an amateur drag show.

Danita: OMG! That sounds so fun! Where is it?

Cooper: Dahlia Springs.

Danita: Of course [smiley face emoji]. I hope you have a great time, babe!

Cooper: You too. Be safe, and text me if you need me to call with an excuse to get you out of there or come pick you up.

Danita: Love you.

Cooper: Love you too.



I pulled up to The Lucky Tongue extra early for the drag show to get a table and give Ty the gift I'd bought him after he'd invited me. I'd worried it wouldn't arrive on time, but fortunately, the package showed up today.

After parking, I pulled out my phone.

Cooper: Do you have a minute to meet me? I've got a surprise for you.

Ty: You're here?

Cooper: Yup. Just pulled up.

Ty: Head inside and to the door near the stage area. I'll meet you there.

Cooper: See you soon [wink emoji].

I paid my cover charge and went in search of the stage. I'd never been there, but I'd been wanting to check it out. The long bar was positioned against one wall, with lots of short tables and chairs filling the empty space in the middle and tall bistro tables along the edges. A stage that looked temporary sat on the opposite side of the room. There were already at least a dozen people there.

It wasn't that big of a place, so it didn't take long to find the door Ty was talking about. It helped that the man himself stood there in a white tank top and gray sweats, smiling through a partially completed face of makeup. I couldn't wait to see the full look when he got both eyes finished. He spotted the small gift bag in my hand and did a little shimmy with grabby hands.

"What did you bring me?"

I glanced around to ensure we were alone and handed it to him. He opened the sky-blue bag, lifted out the matching piece of tissue paper, and peeked inside.

Ty looked up at me, back at the bag, then leaned in. "Are these what I think they are?"

"Lace-trimmed tucking panties."

His eyes rolled back as his teeth hooked on his bottom lip. "These are so much better than the skin-toned utilitarian ones I got after last year's tape fiasco. You really got these for me?"

"They're sure as hell not Dom's size."

He swatted my arm and grinned.

I rubbed the back of my neck. “I know you have to do special stuff to your junk, but I thought you deserved to wear something pretty while you did it since I know the rest of you will look pretty.”

Ty’s mouth fell slack as he stared at me. Then he gave his head a little shake. “Thank you.” He leaned in, wrapped his free hand around the back of my neck, and pressed his lips to mine. The quickness of his kiss did nothing to soften the impact of it. Kissing me where anyone could see? I wanted to do a cartwheel.

He pulled back and stared at me with awe in his eyes. I was sure the same reflected back at him.

“Break a leg.” I squeezed his bicep, then turned to find a seat before I wrapped my arms around him and dipped him in a movie-quality kiss.

“Cooper, over here!”

I turned toward the voice and found Seth calling my name. He sat at a table with two guys I assumed were Caleb and Parker. I’d seen pictures of them on Ty’s Instagram after we followed each other last month. Not that I’d gone through his photos as soon as I got a notification that he’d followed me or anything.

“Join us,” he said when I got closer. There was an empty seat next to him.

“Waiting for someone?” I gestured to the chair.

“You.” He had the same wily smirk as his brother. “Ty said he invited you, and we wanted front-row seats to the shit show.”

“There will not be any shit in this show. Austin’s been practicing his ass off.” There was pride in Caleb’s eyes.

Caleb and Parker introduced themselves, and then the server came right over and took my drink order. While I listened to Parker and Caleb share stories of Ethan and Austin practicing their routine, my mind—still buzzing from Ty’s kiss

—couldn't help but wonder if there was a chance that could be me next year. Tossing in my own hilarious bloopers of Ty trying to learn a new dance.

The prospect of being a part of Ty's life, of all their lives, at Pride next year sent a flicker of hope through me. I yearned for that. I wanted to shed my baggage and be someone who wasn't terrified that I was too damaged to be who Ty deserved.

The reality was that I was getting pretty attached to Ty and his crew. I should make it clear to him that we could go at his pace and that I didn't want anything from him other than us trying this thing out for real.

While the bar filled up, I had a great time chatting with the guys. I forgot how nice it was to have a group to hang out with without pressure. No awkward smiles when they asked how I'd been holding up.

After a while, another guy walked up. He had the sides of his hair shaved and the rest pulled back, revealing a round face and a big smile.

“Coop, this is Hayden,” Seth said.

I stood and shook Hayden's hand. “The guy who built the outdoor area? It looks amazing.”

“Thanks. I'm glad it turned out well. Mind if I join you guys?” Caleb hopped up and grabbed a chair from a group that had an extra and squeezed in next to us.

“Want another round before it starts?” Seth asked. He stood when the other guys agreed.

“I'll help you carry.” We wove our way through the crowd and tables to the bar. It was busy enough that we didn't expect to see the server back through for a while.

“Were you at their performance last year?” I asked him when we reached the bar.

“No. I was still working on the cruise ship.” A dark look passed over his face.

“I'm sure it will be great, but I can't picture Dom in drag. I was half convinced last year's photos were AI-generated.”

Seth laughed. “That gives me an idea.”

“How are things going at the brewery?” I hadn’t had alone time with Seth before, and I wanted to be on good terms with him. Not only because he was Ty’s brother but he could be a friend.

“It’s going well. I didn’t expect to like the brewing side of things so much, but I really enjoy it.”

“Brewing seems complicated as hell.”

“No more complicated than being a tree doctor.”

I groaned. “Not you too.”

Seth smiled cheekily and adjusted his trendy, thick-rimmed glasses. There was something endearingly snarky about him. “We do share DNA, so I suppose, occasionally, we might have some similarities. For better or worse.”

The bartender took our orders, and when she left, Seth cleared his throat.

“I’ve got to say, you being around has made Ty a lot more tolerable. I want to murder him about fifty percent less often now.”

I tilted my head back and laughed. “I’m sure my best friend, Danita, would say the same about Ty.”

We were silent for a bit, and I bobbed my head to the upbeat song playing over the speakers.

Seth turned to me. “Are you bothered by my brother’s reputation?”

“Of course not. I get to benefit from all the tricks he’s picked up.”

He laughed. “Gross.”

“But seriously, I’m not bothered because it doesn’t matter. He’s been upfront about his past and preferences since I met him. He doesn’t seem bothered that I’m a widower who gets more than my fair share of pity, and I’m not upset that he’s touched more dicks than I’ve seen in porn.”

Seth's mouth twitched. He looked deep in thought for a moment. "Okay." A lot went unsaid in that "okay," but he didn't need words for me to capture what he'd left out.

I nodded once because there wasn't anything for me to say. I wouldn't say anything to Seth that I hadn't already said to Ty. And there wasn't much I'd said to Ty when it came to how I felt about him. I might need to fix that soon. Fortunately, the bartender returned with our drinks, and we went back to the table.

We'd barely sat when the Chamber of Commerce director, Mabel, went on stage and introduced the first act. She talked about the charities that would receive the proceeds for the night, then introduced the first act: a drag queen dressed in leather.

We had a great time cheering on the acts. There was a mix of drag queens and kings, solo performers, duets, and groups. Despite being an amateur show, it was clear some people had done it before, while others seemed brand new. Every act was amazing in its own way. It was incredible to see a community come together to watch people bravely put themselves out there like that.

Mabel returned to the stage. "Next up, we have the owners of Tap That Brewery here in town returning for their second year. Their beers are available on tap tonight. I'm especially fond of the Lipstick Lesbi-lager. Please don't forget to tip your server. Now let's give it up for Sporty Stout, Posh Pilsner, Scary Saison, and Baby Bock."

"Wannabe" by the Spice Girls blared over the sound system, and the crowd went wild. Ty, Austin, Ethan, and Dom strutted—literally strutted—onto the stage. They each wore dresses that barely covered their asses and wigs that were reminiscent of the Spice Girl each represented. My attention immediately went to Ty. His dress was royal blue with white tracksuit stripes going down both sides, and his wig was pulled back into a tight and high ponytail. The makeup around his eyes was dark and shimmery when the stage lights caught it. He looked incredible.

I jumped to my feet and pulled the wad of cash from my pocket that I'd saved specifically for their performance.

Their performance started with each of them moving freestyle as they lip-synced their verses, but they eventually moved into group choreography I vaguely remembered from the music video. I tried to spread my attention among everyone, but it was impossible to take my eyes off Ty. He oozed confidence and sex appeal. I had a feeling I would find Ty attractive in any form. Knowing he wore panties that I bought for him? That thought alone sent my blood rushing south. Maybe he'd let me buy more for him. And damn, the man could walk in heels. New kink unlocked.

People approached the stage, waving their cash. Ty and Ethan were the most gregarious and took tips down the fronts of their dresses. Austin seemed more focused on not messing up the choreography while Dom was, well, doing his best. It was probably impossible to make that man appear at ease in heels. He was closer to the lumbering end of the spectrum than graceful.

Hayden waved a bill at Dom, who promptly ignored him as he marched with a wobble to the other end of the stage. Broad-shouldered marching in sequins and a red wig was a sight to behold. It took skill to look grumpy while lip-synching to an upbeat Spice Girls song.

Hayden wouldn't take no for an answer. He moved through the crowd toward Dom's new spot. When he passed me, I noticed the bill in his hand was a hundred. Ethan spotted Hayden, winked, and then pushed Dom toward him without missing a word.

Dom glared at Hayden while accepting the money, but he didn't miss a word either. Hayden slid it under the strap of Dom's dress, then winked at him. He held Dom's stare for a long beat before Dom seemed to snap out of it and finish the song. Hayden shrugged at us when he came back to the table.

The energy was electric. Were all the Dahlia Springs Pride events so fun? I wanted to attend more of them next year. It felt like the entire town of Dahlia Springs was crammed into

the bar, cheering on the brewery boys. We had to be breaking a fire code, but I loved every second. The high energy, the fun, the laughter. I wanted more of it. I wanted to be a part of it and the community right by Ty's side.



TYLER

“THAT WAS AMAZING!” I walked around and gave the other performers high fives. Most were enthusiastic, including Ethan, but Austin winced before I even went in for the contact. I had a reputation for going hard with the high fives. Dom indulged me with a sigh. A drag king I didn't know had a high five so perfect the sound of the slap reverberated around the room. “Epic!”

Ethan, Austin, and Dom all pointed at me, grinning wide. “Dammit. I'll change the board to zero next time I'm at the brewery.” I'd worked up a streak of over three weeks without saying that word.

Adrenaline coursed through my veins as I chugged another bottle of water. It hadn't let up since our performance ended about twenty minutes ago. Most people were still in drag and touching up their makeup before heading out to mingle with the audience. Last year, I hadn't understood why people wanted to stay in the uncomfortable clothes and itchy wigs, but after going through it, I got the appeal. Putting in that much effort and money to look good? I sure as hell wanted to milk it as long as possible. And maybe a *tiny* part of me wanted to gauge Coop's reaction up close.

The performance had been a blur. I'd noticed Coop and his perma-grin, but with the flashing lights and cheers, I hadn't gotten as much of his reaction as I'd hoped for. Wearing the special panties Coop had bought me had made the night even better. Moving on stage with his eyes on me, both of us

knowing what I had on under my dress, had made me so fucking hot. If I didn't know at least a quarter of the people in the building, I would drag him to the nearest dark corner.

“Want to grab a drink?” I asked the guys.

Dom nodded and followed me out. He kept everything on but swapped the kitten heels for his work boots. A look only Dom could pull off.

I'd damn near tripped over myself and twisted my ankle when I'd spotted Cooper beaming at me from the front row next to my brother. That had spurred me to put on the best show I could. I'd never considered myself a performer by any stretch of the imagination, but he'd pulled magic out of me. I'd lip-synched like my life depended on it.

I thanked the person working the door and moved into the crowd. The Lucky Tongue hadn't been this packed since the drag show last year. It wasn't a huge bar, but it was a great venue for an intimate show.

As I moved toward the bar, I kept an eye out for Cooper.

“He's over there.”

I was startled by Dom's gruff voice in my ear. Sure enough, Coop was where Dom pointed. His thick hair hung over his shoulders. He didn't wear it down often, and I hoped he'd done that for me. He tilted his head back and laughed at something Seth said. My chest grew uncomfortably tight seeing him and my brother together. I hadn't known I was capable of all these feelings, but at least now it made sense why I hadn't experienced them fully before.

As though he'd sensed my thoughts, his attention snapped to me with a smile brighter than the stage lights. I didn't realize I'd consciously decided to go to him until he was standing before me.

“You're incredible.” He gave me a heated once-over and not so subtly licked his lips.

I curtsied. “Why thank you, good sir.”

Seth shoved my shoulder playfully. “Nice job, bro. You’re way hotter like this. The makeup does your ugly mug some good.” Seth gave me a lot more shit these days than he ever had before. I took it as a sign that our friendship was stronger than ever, which made him feel safe to be a dickhead.

“Fuck you.” Laughing, I pulled him in for a hug. He squirmed out of my grasp before I could mess up his perfectly styled hair.

Parker and Caleb greeted their boyfriends with NSFW kisses.

“Never thought I’d see you in a dress.”

I tensed at Hayden’s voice.

“Life would’ve continued on just as well if you hadn’t,” Dom snapped back.

Austin and Ethan pulled back from their guys to either watch or join in if a fight went down. I wasn’t sure what any of us would do if it happened.

“It’s for charity. I couldn’t miss it.”

“You not missing something? That’s a first.” Dom’s voice was rougher than usual.

Hayden winced, opened his mouth, and then gave his head a small shake. He smiled, but it looked forced.

Dom stormed off toward the bar.

“Great show, guys. I’m gonna head out. Got an early morning tomorrow.” Hayden shot a look toward the bar, then disappeared through the crowd.

I grimaced at Austin, who shrugged. It was awkward because, obviously, we had Dom’s back. None of us knew exactly what had happened between them, but Hayden was becoming a friend.

“You guys were great,” Dave said as he approached, hand-in-hand with Mikey. I didn’t see Dave outside of his coffee shop often enough. I should fix that.

They had the dictionary definition of heart eyes even a year after getting engaged on this stage last year. It tugged the strings on my cold, dead heart to have been a part of that moment for them. Mikey had cried so hard his mascara had run down his face.

“I think we were a lot better than last year,” Austin said.

“Oh, definitely. Much better,” I agreed.

More people approached and congratulated us on our performance, and I was swept away from Cooper to take photos with people. It hit me after a while how much had changed in the past year. During last year’s Pride Fest, we were the new kids on the block. The brewery had been open for less than a year, and we were trying to make a name for ourselves in town. We’d wanted to show the people of Dahlia Springs that we were a part of the community, which was why we’d decided to participate in the drag show.

This year, we were a major sponsor for the festival and had volunteered to help organize it. We *were* part of the community. We’d gone from praying people would fill growlers or stop in for a drink after work to being an established brand served all over the state.

I took in my family, both blood and chosen. My parents sat at a table chatting with a couple of their friends. Austin and Caleb huddled with Ethan and Parker in a conversation, and Ethan yawned and rested his head on Parker’s shoulder. Ethan’s wig was right in Parker’s face, and he wrinkled his nose. He didn’t try to move Ethan and instead rubbed his back. Seth chatted with one of the bartenders who had been in his year in school. We’d all made connections in town, whether we were from Dahlia Springs or had moved there.

I couldn’t wait to discover what we could accomplish before the next Pride. If things kept going well with trying to get into the smaller markets, our presence in the state could grow exponentially. I’d locked down contracts with three other stores, but Danita’s market would make a big difference since so many viewed her as a trendsetter. I had a feeling we had a

solid shot at that one. I'd done the softball thing, and even without that, our beer was fantastic.

Thoughts of baseball and Danita reminded me that this season was about to end. We only had one more game. Did that mean my time with Coop would end too? Without that activity keeping us around each other, I wasn't sure we would make the time to hang out. I rubbed my stomach like I'd been punched.

But he'd made the effort to come and watch me tonight.

I searched the bar until I spotted Coop chatting with someone I didn't know. He pulled a hairband off his wrist and tied his hair back. Jesus, he was so fucking sexy.

I watched as Coop waved the person off and headed to the restroom. I set my empty glass on the bar and followed him. Before he could get the door to the single gender-inclusive restroom closed, I pushed it open and slid inside, spectators be damned. I pulled him against me, kissing him until I ran out of breath.

“Wow. What was that for?”

A curl of hair hung at his temple. I teased it back into place with my fingers. “For you being you and you letting me be me.”

Because he had. He hadn't hovered all night trying to take my attention or turned down my invitation to come tonight. Instead, he'd periodically caught my eye and smiled while doing his own thing and letting me do mine. I hadn't felt restricted. I supposed I'd assumed that many relationships resulted in people smothering each other and possibly not even realizing it was happening until it was too late. But maybe I'd been wrong about that, like I'd been wrong about a lot of other assumptions I'd made. My parents never acted smothered by each other. If anything, they uplifted each other.

He smiled softly at me.

“Wanna spend the night? The guys will be obnoxious in the morning, but we're stocked with good coffee from Dave.”

“I’d love to as long as I get to see you in this.” He slid his hand up my thigh and under the dress.

I shivered. “You can see me in anything you want.”

CHAPTER 35

COOPER

Danita: Good luck at the party!! Ty's parents are going to LOVE what you made.

Cooper: You think so?

Danita: I know so. And if that doesn't get you laid, I don't know what will.

Cooper: Not interested in a 4way with the McNeills.

Danita: You're ridiculous.

Danita: Let me know how it goes!



After placing the piece I'd made for Ty's parents next to the trellis where he'd directed, I draped a light-blue sheet over it. Ty had mentioned offhandedly the other day that his mom had uncovered some of the baby-blue napkins they'd had printed for their wedding, and I thought it would be a nice nod to their wedding to go with that color scheme.

The June afternoon sun beat down on me as I stood at the edge of the tree line on Ty's grandpa's property. It took a minute to adjust to the landscape without that beautiful oak,

but I was happy to return it in some form. Even if the idea of so many people seeing my work made me want to empty my stomach into the bushes.

A trellis covered with white, peach, and lavender flowers stood where the tree had been. Rows of chairs stood on the freshly mowed grass facing the spot. Stepping back, I wiped my clammy hands on my dress pants to check the placement. Dammit. I should've ironed the sheet instead of bringing it over in the packaging. I could ask Ty if there was an iron inside his grandpa's house.

I puffed my cheeks and blew out a breath. Ty had better things to do than wrangle an iron for me. It didn't need to be perfect. *Stop stressing. It'll be fine.* I needed to get myself under control. I'd been spinning out to varying degrees since I'd asked Ty what time I should drop off the piece and he'd informed me I would be staying at the party as a guest. Though I wasn't sure if I was invited to the party as the guy who'd repurposed the important tree or as Ty's date. I'd nearly asked him several times but hadn't worked up the nerve. What if he freaked at the D-word?

Though, after he'd invited me to stay at his place post-drag show last weekend, I wasn't as convinced he might pull back if I brought the topic up. I smiled at the memory of waking up in Ty's bed with him cuddled against me last weekend—staying there with our arms wrapped around each other and trading soft kisses and hand jobs until his need for coffee won out. How he'd dropped a quick kiss on the back of my neck while I'd fixed myself coffee in their kitchen. Casual and domestic and in front of both Dom and his brother.

I didn't need a label to be at the party to support him. There wasn't room for hesitation any longer. I wanted to find out where things could go between us, and I suspected Ty was getting there too. I couldn't help but feel a time crunch. With the championship game next weekend, the easy reasons for us to hang out were about to dry up.

I turned back to the McNeill patriarch's house to find out if there was anything else I could help with since the party was due to start in an hour or so. The brewery guys had been there

helping set up and delivering an alarming number of kegs. How much beer would these people drink? It was sweet how family—blood and otherwise—rallied to show love to Ty’s parents for their anniversary.

“Hey, man. Cooper, right?” I turned toward the voice and found a vaguely familiar man, probably a couple of years younger, approaching. He was taller than Ty with short blond hair and a lean swimmer’s build. His smile was disarming.

“Hi.” I tried to place him.

He held out his hand, and I shook it while he gave me a discreet once-over. “I’m Gavin.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Best friend Gavin? I thought you were on the other side of the globe.” Surely, I would’ve heard about it if Gavin was going to be there. Did Ty know?

Ty had told me several hilarious stories about Gavin and the shit they’d gotten up to when they were young. He’d mentioned how hard it was with Gavin living so far away, and I’d made myself scarce when we were hanging out and Gavin called so they could have time to chat.

Gavin looked toward the house and back. “It’s a surprise.”

“Ty’s going to lose it.”

Gavin’s eyes twinkled. He looked around and whistled. “Damn. I haven’t been here in a long time. We got into a lot of trouble in those woods. Different without the tree here.”

“Legend says the banana and condom still haunt these woods to this day.” I chuckled, thinking about the story Ty had told me about him and Gavin trying to learn how to put condoms on when they were in middle school.

Gavin’s eyes went wide. “He told you about that? Interesting. I’ve got to say I’m surprised he talks about me, but everything about you has been surprising.”

I looked down at my shoes and tried to bite back the smile fighting to break out over my face, but I gave up and let it happen.

Gavin smiled and cleared his throat. “Is this where I’m supposed to give the shovel talk?”

I laughed and opened my mouth to crack a joke, but movement caught my eye from across the field. I spotted Ty talking to someone over at the barn that was prepped for the anniversary party. It was like an antenna in my head was tuned to Ty’s movements. “Consider me warned. I think it’s showtime.”

Gavin’s grin widened.

“Ty!” I called.

He looked over at me, smiled, gave me a cute little wave, and turned back to the person, but then did a double take. “Gavs!” Ty took off, sprinting toward us. His khakis pulled tight against his muscular thighs with each step. What was he wearing underneath them? That question had become my obsession.

Ty leaped onto Gavin when he reached us, and somehow Gavin kept them both upright.

“How the fuck are you here right now?”

Gavin laughed as Ty peppered his cheeks and forehead with kisses. “A ship would take too long, so I flew. The government hasn’t released the teleportation tech to us peons yet.”

I was feeling some kind of way about witnessing Ty being so openly affectionate. It wasn’t jealousy. A lightness filled me to watch Tyler so unabashedly happy and express love for someone he cared for. I was grateful to witness such a special moment because it had been so long since the two of them had been together in person.

Ty turned to me. “Gavin’s here!”

I laughed. “He is. That’s one hell of a surprise.”

His attention lingered on me as his smile grew. Like he was happy to share the moment with me too.

I was so head over heels for that man. Tyler was a fascinating mix of a jock with the sense of humor of a teen

going through puberty, a mouth that could suck my nuts dry after vehemently denying he teared up at a Hallmark movie, and the skill to come up with a complex marketing strategy at the drop of a hat.

He let his legs drop from Gavin's waist and stood on the ground. "You two already met?"

"We did." Gavin watched me carefully. I got the sense he expected me to bristle at Ty's affection for him. Why? Ty had enough affection to go around. Their friendship didn't threaten me, but I understood his concern. A part of me worried Danita would meet someone who would be intimidated by our friendship, and it would cause issues. I supposed the best we could do was trust our friends would kick assholes like that to the curb.

I wanted to be the guy who helped Gavin plan a surprise to send Ty to visit Gavin wherever he was living so they could take a trip together. Not get jealous that Ty was going to see him instead of spending time with me.

I smiled, and Gavin's shoulders relaxed.

Ty turned his attention back to his best friend. "How the hell are you here?"

"Did you not hear me mention this awesome technology called an airplane?"

"Smart-ass. *Why* are you here? Is this why you haven't texted me back for two days?"

Gavin patted Ty's cheek. "Calm down, Mom. I thought I'd take a break from everything and let the dust settle."

Ty squeezed his shoulder. "If you need a place to stay, you can crash at Dom's."

Gavin shook his head. "I'm staying at a friend's place in Seattle while he's out of town. I wanted to drive down to the party and wish my second parents the best for their fortieth anniversary."

"Ty, the deejay wants to talk to you," one of Ty's older relatives called from the barn.

“Be right there!” Ty called. “We’ll catch up later, yeah? Will you at least stay at Dom’s tonight?” Ty sounded so hopeful. I imagined that was what he was like as a kid, begging his mom to let Gavin stay for a sleepover.

“Shit. Wait.” He looked at me and bit his lip.

Before he could cancel the offer, I interrupted. “Of course Gavin should stay with you tonight. We’ll hang out later.” I could drive home instead of staying at Ty’s again tonight. I wouldn’t feel right about keeping him from Gavin.

Ty’s eyes widened. “Are you sure?”

“Of course. You two have a lot of catching up to do.”

He smiled, gave Gavin another hug, then rushed off.

“I’d better start making my rounds. It’s great to meet you, Cooper. I get why Ty likes you. You’re good for him.”

“He’s good for me too.”

Gavin turned toward the house where Seth, Dom, and Ethan were unloading the kegs.

“Well, if it isn’t little Sethy.”

Seth had lifted a keg off the bed of the truck and was in the middle of lowering it onto the hand truck when he glanced up. The keg slid through his arms and seemed to land on his foot.

Gavin and I rushed over.

“Jesus, are you okay?” Gavin crouched and examined Seth’s Chucks-clad foot.

Seth stared at Gavin, his mouth hanging open, and then he tried to pick the keg back up but hissed. “I’m fine.”

“You’re still a klutz.”

Seth mumbled something I couldn’t make out.

“I’ll check out his foot. Summer camp counselor first aid training is still up here.” Gavin tapped his temple before wrapping his arm around Seth’s waist. “Let’s go.”

Seth made a strangled sound but let Gavin walk him to the house.

“That was weird. He deals with glass and heavy stuff every day, and I’ve never seen him drop something,” Ethan said.

Dom shrugged, then lifted the keg like it weighed barely more than a bowling ball and wheeled it to the barn.

I wasn’t sure what to help with, so I headed toward the barn to check in when I ran into Larry and Carolyn.

“Who was that helping Seth?”

“Gavin.”

She gasped. “Gavin’s here?”

I made a jazz-hands motion. “Surprise!”

She pressed a hand against her chest. “Surprise indeed. I’m sure the boys will be quite happy.” She looked at Larry, and they shared a smile.

“Speaking of surprises, do you two have a minute? I’d like to show you something.” This was much harder than when I’d delivered the piece to Ginny because this project meant something to me. I desperately wanted them to like it.

Ty had suggested we do a big reveal during the party, but I didn’t want the attention. It was difficult enough that Ty insisted I be the one to give it to them. I would’ve been happy for Ty to do it on his own and take credit for the idea, but he’d insisted while looking at me with puppy-dog eyes I couldn’t say no to. I was always at my weakest after an orgasm, and Ty had learned that quickly.

I made small talk with them about the food Caleb’s crew had catered for the party while we walked over to the spot. The sheet looked like a mess. I totally should’ve ironed it.

Larry and Carolyn held hands and looked at me with kind smiles. “What’s this?” she asked.

I cleared my throat and gripped the sheet while my pulse thundered. “In my spare time, I’m a wood artist.” I imagined Ty giggling at that and nearly laughed myself. “I carve wood and wanted to make sure you still had your tree in some form.”

When I turned back to the sheet, I caught sight of Ty walking toward us with a soft, encouraging smile. I smiled back and took a steadying breath. His presence gave me the strength to continue with the reveal. Hell, Ty gave me the strength to continue, period. He'd made life worth living again.

"I knew there were important things on that tree, and I did my best to save them." I carefully pulled off the creased sheet to reveal the abstract trunk I'd carved and assembled from pieces of the original tree. I'd carefully cut hearts around each of the initials and attached those to the trunk in an approximation of the original tree.

Carolyn gasped. "It's beautiful."

Before I could say anything else, she barreled into me and wrapped her arms around my neck, giving me the biggest bear hug I'd had in as long as I could remember. The last time I'd had a hug like that was from my own mom at Aleck's funeral.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you so much."

My skin grew damp where her cheek pressed against my neck. "You're welcome. Glad I could do it."

She pulled back, gripped my arms, and stared up at me. "I'm so happy we have you in our lives. For all of us." She cupped my cheek, glanced at Ty, then stepped back and wiped her eyes.

Larry soon took her place and shook my hand. "Incredible work, son. Thank you. This means a lot to us." His eyes were glassy. He wrapped his arm around Carolyn's shoulder as they walked over to the piece and murmured to each other.

"Gold star for impressing the parents."

I turned to Ty and smiled. "What can I say? Parents love me."

He hooked his pinky around mine and turned back to watch his parents. "I bet lots of people do."

CHAPTER 36

TYLER

“I agree. A lovely ceremony.” I nodded at my uncle and said the words with feeling, which was impressive after uttering the line a dozen times already to relatives and friends of my parents who had approached me since the vow renewal had ended an hour ago.

“Anyone special in your life?” He raised eyebrows that resembled electrocuted caterpillars.

I wasn’t sure why I hadn’t anticipated getting asked that repeatedly. I’d let my guard down and hadn’t prepped a response. Normally, I would jovially laugh and say I was having too much fun to settle down or too busy with work—depending on whoever I was talking to—but Coop’s smiling face flashed to the forefront of my mind. He was special, but was he *someone* in my life?

Before I figured out an answer, someone interrupted and grabbed my uncle’s attention. I seized the opportunity to escape and refill my beer. While moving through the crowded barn, people smiled everywhere I looked. Nearly a hundred people had shown up to celebrate my parents. It was incredible to see the love for them from people I’d known all my life, some I’d seen around town, and some I’d never met.

Everywhere I looked, people held cups of beer from our brewery or plates full of Caleb’s delicious cooking. Loved ones had pitched in to decorate Grandpa’s property and barn, an old high school friend of Mom’s offered to take photos, and one of Dad’s coworkers with a side cake business recreated their wedding cake. Even the guys had suggested we close the

brewery for the evening so they could join the party. Ethan and Dom said my parents were like parents to them too, and they didn't want to miss it. The community had come together to celebrate my parents and their forty years of marriage.

Whenever someone would ask me in high school whether I thought I would return to Dahlia Springs, I'd laugh. No chance in hell. But now that I'd built a life with my favorite people, I couldn't imagine being as happy anywhere else.

My gaze found Cooper as it had all evening. That man had wormed his way into my heart. I'd never expected to see him again after that first weekend, let alone fall for him, but he'd ended up among my favorite people. Cooper had even earned Gavin's stamp of approval. My chest had swelled when he'd pulled me aside earlier and said it was a good thing I'd met Cooper first. Otherwise, he'd go after him.

Literally, all my favorite people were in one place. I couldn't believe Gavin had come to town without telling me. Sneaky fucker.

Coop turned toward me from where he was chatting with one of my dad's golf buddies. They seemed familiar with each other. Must be a client of his. Coop and I had found a few moments to chat when happy hour started, but he'd done his own thing, knew his own people. Neither of us needed to be babysat, which helped me enjoy the evening without having to worry about him. Between knowing people in the area from his work and the guys making sure to talk to him, I was free to fulfill my son duties.

The brewery crew had fully embraced Coop. Knowing I didn't have to worry about how they felt about him helped me focus on sorting my own feelings. Which I needed to do sooner rather than later. They sat there like an unlabeled box on the front porch. It could be the most exciting gift I'd ever received or a glitter bomb filled with the finest and hardest to remove glitter available.

Seth approached with a limp and filled his cup, then promptly chugged it like we were at a frat party instead of a soiree full of boomers. He tugged on his bow tie and collar.

“Everything okay?”

“Yup.” His attention darted to the side, but I couldn’t tell what he was looking at.

“Oh, is it time for speeches?” Seth had been anxious about that since I suggested we give one.

“Uh, yeah.”

I clapped his back between the shoulder blades. “Why are you nervous? You’re not the one talking.” We agreed that we would co-write the speech, I would do all the talking, and he would cook me dinner five times next month.

We made our way to the deejay booth in the corner to grab a microphone.

“Hello, everyone. Can I have your attention? It’s time to embarrass our parents.”

I heard chuckling as the din in the room quieted.

“I’m sure most of you know us: Tyler and Seth. Especially if you’ve been to our parents’ home since it’s basically a shrine to our childhoods. There’re far too many naked baby photos for my liking. I’d rather not think of how many of you have seen our butts.” I paused and scrunched my face. “Too late.”

“Christ,” Seth muttered while laughter erupted around us.

Had he seriously not expected me to go off-script? Had he met me?

“Half the gay men in Portland have seen your ass.”

More laughter, but some of it had definitely shifted to awkward chuckles. That sounded an awful lot like my cousin, who was stuck in a miserable marriage. He’d given me serious shit in the past for sleeping around, but he could continue being jealous while I had a hell of a lot of fun.

“Lucky them,” I said, earning more genuine laughs. *Score one for Ty.* “But enough about my perfect butt because we’re here to talk about the perfect marriage.” A smooth transition if I said so myself.

“My parents have been married longer than we’ve been alive. I don’t think I’ve liked anything my entire life except for licorice, and I’m not sure I’d marry that. My brother and I grew up in a home that prioritized showing love. We were taught that there’s nothing shameful about showing people you care for them and that love can come in many forms.”

As I spoke, my eyes kept doing this annoying thing where they searched for Cooper, which was uncomfortable as hell. Looking at him while I was talking about love. *Jesus Christ, brain. Can you chill for a minute?*

“The strongest love I’ve seen is the love between my parents. They’ve supported each other without question during the ups and downs. Ups, like my birth, downs, like his birth.” I jerked my thumb to my brother, who was definitely going to try to kick my ass later. Mom attempted a stern look, but her laughter cut through.

“Mom and Dad, Seth and I are eternally grateful for having been raised by you. You showed us that arguments can be resolved, troubles can be overcome if we support each other, and that surrounding yourself with people you care about makes life worth living.”

Tears shone in Mom’s eyes as Dad pulled her closer.

“For so many of us, you have modeled how amazing a strong marriage can be.” I smiled at them and squeezed Seth’s shoulder.

“Too bad the marriage gene skipped a generation.” Jim, a rowdy old friend of my dad’s, laughed at his own comment. People around him turned toward him with shocked expressions.

“Touché.” I forced a convincing laugh. “I think someone needs to be cut off,” I stage-whispered to Seth and winked toward the crowd. The way Jim’s face turned red was satisfying as hell.

I involuntarily glanced at Coop, and his jaw was tight as he glared daggers at the old man. A downside of being the jokester was people thought they could toss it back without it

affecting me. But laughing after saying something cruel didn't make it a joke.

Seth tensed next to me, but I continued, refusing to let the comment interfere with my parents' day. It stung. Surprisingly so. Before meeting Coop, I would've replied with something like "Damn right!" I used to wear my lack of relationship experience like a badge of honor, but now I felt inadequate. I'd always prided myself on being competent at things. My job, maintaining close friendships, sex. But being in my thirties and falling hard for someone for the first time? I was the furthest from competent possible.

"I may not have much experience with love, but I can understand how important it is and that when you find it, you don't let it go." There was a round of awws.

Meeting Cooper had turned my life upside down. I hadn't gone to a bar, gotten on Grindr, or fucked a single guy other than Coop in months. It wasn't out of some sense of obligation to him either, but because navigating a mediocre hookup with a stranger didn't hold half the appeal of the time I spent with Cooper. Our sex was full of fun and laughter, and we'd gotten to know each other's bodies in a way I'd never experienced before. All the things Austin and Ethan had said they felt when they were falling for Caleb and Parker? I understood now.

I was falling in love with Cooper. Me. Falling in romantic love with someone. The realization hit me like I was rolling up the roller-coaster track, but then the drop hit. The regret. Not regret over how I felt for Cooper—because I would never regret that—but regret that I'd gotten him tangled up with me and my laughable lack of relationship experience. I rubbed my chest and forced the thought away to examine when there weren't a hundred people staring at me.

I wrapped my arm around Seth's shoulders. "My parents never let each other go, and now we're here to celebrate their forty amazing years together. Congratulations to our marvelous parents who show love to each other and to everyone in this room every day. We love you."

While people cheered, I handed the mic back to the deejay and welcomed tearful hugs from my parents before moving to the side so they could give their remarks. I was a fucking mess on the inside, but I refused to let that show. Not on Mom and Dad's big day.

As I listened to my parents talk about their love for each other, I tried to stay in the moment. It was nearly impossible because my mind kept wandering to the comment. Was that how people saw me? Some fuck-up who couldn't hack a relationship? They weren't wrong. What if I messed it up? What if I hurt the man I cared so deeply for?

I looked for Cooper again and found him smiling at me. The man who'd soothed me was also the source of my turmoil. I smiled back, and while my shoulders relaxed, my heart hurt. He was perfect. Caring. The gesture he made for my parents? A man as good as Cooper deserved the world. Deserved someone who could take care of his heart. I wanted the honor of that job but didn't know how.

It was like I was up to bat, bottom of the ninth, bases loaded in a tied game, all eyes on me. But I didn't have a bat or my cleats. All the pressure was on my shoulders, but I wasn't equipped to win.

Cooper deserved to stand in a barn like this after forty years of marriage. Fuck, he'd been on that path, and he should've had that with Aleck. I heard a crow caw outside the barn doors. I wasn't a mathematician, but I knew the odds sided with most relationships failing. I didn't want my ineptitude to be the reason Cooper got hurt, but I also didn't want to let him go. God, was there a class or something I could take? How to Not Fuck Up Relationships 101.

When I noticed people clapping, I joined in and tried to shake off the moody thoughts. I shouldn't let some asshole old man get the better of me. Coop had known my track record, or lack thereof, from day one and hadn't run. So, why should I?

"Want another drink?" I asked Seth.

"God, yes."

I wasn't sure what had him all rattled. Usually, he didn't have more than one or two. I went back to the keg and began filling our cups.

"Nice speeches." I recognized the voice of one of my mom's cousins.

"They were. Tyler's was surprisingly lovely." His wife let out a tinkle of laughter.

"It's a funny thing that a couple can make it for forty years together and raise two kids who never settled down. What are the odds of that? Bad form for Jim to call it out, but he's not wrong."

"Have neither of them dated anyone seriously? I don't remember Carolyn mentioning it. They must be aching for grandbabies."

He tsked. "It's these millennials and the Internet. They don't know how to have real relationships in person. Everything is online."

Beer spilled over the full cup and onto my hand. "Shit." I stepped back before it got on me.

I found Seth and shoved the cup into his hand, then drank half of mine down.

"It's gonna be over soon, right?"

"I fucking hope so," I said. I needed to talk to Coop. I always felt better around him.

I nodded at Seth and took off toward the restroom before finding Coop. There was a line since people had scattered after the speeches and before dinner started. I scrolled Instagram in the hope I would look busy so no one would approach me.

"I'm glad work's going good." I recognized Coop's voice and spotted him a few people ahead of me in line and chatting with someone I didn't recognize.

"And you're doing well?" I overheard the man ask. He was older than Cooper. Probably mid-forties.

“I am. It’s been a hard few years, which I know you understand. Things have been good lately though.”

The man nodded. “Getting back out there is so hard. I’m still struggling because I can’t stop worrying that I’m going to meet someone, fall for them, and they’re going to die. Morbid, but I’m sure you get it. Like we always talked about in group—I’m not sure it’s worth the possibility of more loss. And coping with the normal dating and breakups? Having to tell people you’re a widower? It’s exhausting.”

Coop squeezed his shoulder. “It’s not easy, but it’s a risk worth taking. Are you still going to the support group meetings?”

Eavesdropping made me itchy. My bladder could hold it. I walked past the restroom line and waved at Cooper so he would see that I’d been there. I’d head to Grandpa’s house and collect myself in the bathroom in there. Unfortunately, I was intercepted by another family member who wanted to catch up and ask me about my love life.

CHAPTER 37

COOPER

I tied off a trash bag and hauled it to the dumpster behind the detached garage.

“Thanks,” Ty said when I returned. He smiled at me while stacking folding chairs onto a wheeled cart, but it didn’t reach his eyes.

Something had changed after that dickhead called out a bullshit comment about Ty being single. It’d obviously struck a chord. I’d been trying to figure out how to reassure him but had kept getting pulled into conversations. I’d sat by him at dinner, and he’d seemed fine as he entertained the table, but I could see the shaken confidence behind his eyes. I’d jumped in to help with cleanup after the party ended, and with Gavin in town, I wasn’t sure when we’d have a chance to talk.

I had to trust that we would get that chance and *could* talk through whatever was going on in his head. I’d gotten to know him well enough to have some ideas of what it was, but he might need time to process before that conversation happened.

One thing I’d learned from my marriage was I couldn’t always communicate on *my* timeline. I was usually quicker to want to talk about things that were bothering me, but Aleck had always needed time to collect his thoughts before he was ready to express them. Ty might be the same way, and I could respect that.

The brewery guys loaded up the empty kegs and the rest of the helpers took the leftover food to the house, which left Ty

and me alone among the party's detritus. I grabbed a few chairs under each arm and carried them to the rack.

"Are you okay?" I figured that would be a safe way to show him I'd noticed something was off and give him a chance to talk if he wanted, but I wouldn't push. Not yet.

Ty dropped three chairs onto the rack with more force than necessary, then shook his head. He turned to me with an expression so pained it took my breath away.

"I'm going to hurt you."

I pretended to peek around him. "Do you have a weapon?" He didn't laugh at my attempt to make him smile. Seeing Ty so shaken unnerved me, but the fact he was so worried about hurting me made me want to pull him into my arms and never let go. "Ty, you don't know that."

He scoffed. "My dating life, or lack thereof, was the joke of the night. How can a perfect married couple raise a kid who's romantically stunted? I actually overheard people talking about it, Coop. With my ears." He pointed to the side of his head, then crossed his arms over his chest as his face crumpled into a grumpy pout.

I pulled him into a hug and felt him instantaneously relax as he loosened his arms and wrapped them around me.

"I'll mess it up, and I don't want to be the one to hurt you. I don't want to be the person to cause you pain again." He squeezed me tight before pulling back and scratching his beard.

"The fact that you're worried about hurting me makes me not worried at all." Tyler talking about an us at all made me want to jump on the tables and dance.

Ty frowned. It was adorable. He looked like a GIF of someone trying to solve a complex math equation.

I cupped his cheek. "I sure as hell learned the hard way that we can't guarantee anything, but I want to try. I care about you a lot, Ty." I swallowed the lump in my throat.

Ty looked outside the barn for several long moments as I held my breath.

He squeezed his eyes closed. “Is this what romantic emotions are like? Jesus, why do people do this to themselves over and over again?”

I barked out a laugh. That was such a Ty thing to say and one of the many reasons I was falling in love with him. Didn’t he realize that by being so worried about hurting me, he was showing me he was the safest person to give my heart to?

“I care about you too. More than I ever thought possible, but I don’t know how to stop worrying that I’m going to hurt you.”

This sweet, sweet man. “Aren’t you worried that I’ll hurt you?”

Ty shook his head.

“I’m terrified I’ll hurt you too. That’s all part of that messy romantic feelings shit. When we care about people, we don’t want to cause them pain.”

We hadn’t talked about being exclusive or even acknowledged what was happening between us, but the pain in his eyes broke my heart. The affection I felt from him, *for him*, consumed me like a tidal wave.

“How do I stop worrying about this?”

“How do you stop the rain from falling? It just is. I imagine it’s not that different from things you probably worry about with your brewery. There are problems we can try to avoid and things we can’t plan for, but shit still happens. It’s still worth the risk. You decide to deal with the unknown and the stress it brings because everything else makes it worth it.”

Ty groaned and buried his face in my chest. “I need to sort my shit out.”

I wrapped my arm around his shoulders and pressed my cheek to the top of his head. “I’m not going anywhere. Figure out whatever you’ve got to figure out, and I’ll be here. This isn’t something you have to do alone.”

He nodded, then pressed his lips softly against mine.

I could see in his eyes that he needed to move on to something else. “Well, looks like that’s it for the chairs. What else can I help with?”

Ty shook his head. “You’ve done more than enough. Thank you for everything you did for my family today. And that gift is incredible. God, you’re so talented.” He smiled, and it reached his eyes that time. “I’m going to grab Gavin and head home. I’ll text you, okay?”

The determination in his eyes soothed the anxiety creeping through my veins.

“Don’t forget to bring maple bars for Danita on Monday. She can’t say no to you if you bring her favorite form of sugar.”

Ty laughed. “Already placed an order with her favorite place. I still can’t believe she’s not making me wait until after the championship for the pitch.”

“When she’s ready for her next season planning, she doesn’t fuck around. I know you don’t need it, but good luck.”

“Thanks, Coop. For everything. Drive safe.”

I looked at him once more on my way out of the barn and waved. Several people stopped me on my way to my car to tell me how much they loved the piece I’d made. Seth had even pulled me into a hug and whispered his thanks.

As I put more distance between Ty and me, a sour feeling rolled through my gut. I was scared too. Scared that I was damaged goods after losing my husband. What if things got really serious with Ty and I freaked out if he got sick? Could I really be there for him if I was consumed with worry that I’d lose him too? But then imagining Ty ever being sick and me not being by his side to take care of him hurt more than anything.

I might be terrified, but I had to see it through. I’d had true love once, and I knew how incredible it was. I wanted it again. I wanted that with Ty. I wanted the opportunity to show him he

could be in a relationship with someone and it would be incredible. I would put in the work.

I *really* wanted to turn around and beg him to talk it out with me now, but more than that, I wanted Ty to know I wasn't easily rattled. That when he said he needed to get his shit together, I respected that.

I needed a distraction to stop myself from making any rash decisions.

“Hey, Siri, call Danita.”

CHAPTER 38

TYLER

Coop: Good luck today! You're going to kill it. And if she has the baked white cheddar popcorn in the blue bag, you should totally try it. You'll thank me later.

Ty: Thank you! I'm looking forward to some celebratory popcorn in my future [smile emoji]

Coop: Let me know how it goes?

Ty: Of course. Hope you have a great day.



“As you can see on this chart, our sales at these grocery retailers are consistently high. We’ve been profitable for Fred Meyer, Safeway, and Roth’s, and we have every reason to believe this trend would continue in your store. We’ve also placed our beers in two other markets of similar size to yours in Portland and have seen steady sales, though we only have one month of data. I’m confident the trends from the large grocers would carry through to The Pitted Olive.” I made brief eye contact with Danita, who glared me down.

“Stop being a chickenshit.”

I ignored her and flipped to the next slide. “Since we’re in June, we’re in the midst of marketing our summer seasonal

ales. As we move into fall, our marketing will shift toward our fall and then winter seasonals.”

Danita bocked like a chicken, and Dom snorted as he reached for another maple bar. I shot him a dirty look. Danita added her arms to the mix and began flapping them like wings while continuing to make chicken noises at me. I had to admire her commitment to the bit. She’d been on my ass about Coop since I’d come in for our pitch meeting, but I wasn’t there to talk about him or us. I was there for business.

I tugged at the collar of my button-up. The small office at the back of her store was toasty.

“She’s not wrong. You’re a chickenshit.” Dom leaned back in his chair and licked his fingers clean.

“You too? You’re supposed to have my back.”

“Pretty sure in this situation, calling you out is having your back.”

Danita pointed at Dom. “He’s the brains between you two.”

“No, he’s the asshole,” I grumbled.

“We’re not talking about me. We’re talking about how you’re being a chicken,” Dom said.

When the guys had brought up Coop last night after our team meeting, I’d dodged their questions. Ethan’s and Austin’s heart eyes were more than I could take while trying to sort my shit out. They’d both lost it when they saw what Coop had created for my parents. I figured of all the guys, Dom would be the one to leave it alone. I hated being wrong.

I clasped my hands in front of me on the table and turned toward him. “I wonder what Hayden is up to today. I should invite him over for dinner to thank him for all his work.” I narrowed my eyes.

Dom narrowed his right back and crossed his arms over his chest. “Do that and you’ll be sleeping on the back porch. Have you seen all the spider webs back there?”

“Who the hell is Hayden?” Danita looked between the two of us.

“Ask him.” I jerked my thumb toward Dom, then groaned and dropped my head into my hands.

“What’s wrong?” Danita pulled my hands from my face.

I squeezed my eyes closed and sighed before looking at her. “I don’t know what I’m doing.”

She smiled softly. “Well, that’s not completely true. You’ve been doing a damn great job on the team, and you know what you’re doing with the brewery. It’s a damn good pitch.”

“What are you saying?”

Danita grabbed a donut. “Nice touch, by the way. I’ll have to thank Cooper for this. You made a compelling pitch. I’ll carry your beers if you fix shit with Coop.”

“Are you trying to extort me?”

“Do I need to?”

I deflated. “No, but before we talk about him, can we finish the business part? I don’t want my personal stuff affecting our business,” I said with conviction.

Dom clapped me on the shoulder.

Danita nodded. “You’re right. No matter what happens between you and my favorite person in the world, who’s the absolute best man I know, and any man would be lucky—”

“*Danita.*” I had to laugh at her audacity. Coop lucked out having her as a best friend.

“I’ll happily carry your beers. You guys have quite the reputation already, and it would be ridiculous not to. I would’ve started carrying them months ago, but timing is everything.” She sported an angelic smile.

“And you needed a boy toy for your best friend.”

“I like her.” Dom grinned, then took over the conversation as we worked out the money stuff and came to an agreement

where she would carry two of our most popular regular beers for a three-month trial.

I'd wanted our beers and reputation to stand for themselves to land us the deal. Not my thing—relationship?—with Cooper.

“Right. Deal done. I'll sign the paperwork. Yadda yadda.” She shook our hands, then turned to me with a calculating expression. “Why did Cooper call me on Saturday sounding like a kicked puppy?”

I grimaced. I could've handled things better than blurting out the stream of consciousness of my worries when he'd harmlessly asked me if I was okay. I'd felt like shit the rest of the night and all day yesterday and had wanted to go see him, but between catching up with Gavin, finalizing the presentation for today since we had a bye week for the league, and our weekly team meeting last night, I hadn't had the time. Whatever conversation we needed to have deserved my full attention and more than a quick chat.

If I thought I could get away with keeping things going as they'd been with him, I was naïve. Coop wasn't the guy I fucked around with after practice any longer. He'd become an important part of my life, an important person in my life, and deserved to be treated as such. I might not know dick about relationships, but I could figure out that a conversation needed to happen. As far as he knew, based on what I'd told him before, I was Mr. Casual and had no interest in anything serious with him. I hadn't even told him about the whole demiromantic thing. But I *did* want something serious with him, and it was up to me to tell him that.

The only thing I could do was believe Coop when he said he'd be there. If he ran the first time I fumbled, then we didn't have a chance, anyway.

“Because I probably scared him with my bullshit.” I deflated into the uncomfortable chair.

“He's not scared. He's worried. You need to talk to him about it though, not me.”

“I know. I told him I’m worried I’m going to hurt him, and I need to figure out how not to.”

“Pretty sure that’s something you work with him on. Cooper is a grown-ass man who can make his own decisions about whether he thinks you’re a worthy bet. The only way you’d hurt him was if you didn’t give him or yourself a chance. You two are good together.” She paused and tilted her head as an unusually soft smile curved her lips. “His relationship with my brother was different, but Coop is as happy now as he was with Aleck. I’ve known him for over twenty years. I can tell when he’s head over heels for someone.”

I studied every inch of her face to find the truth in her words. I wanted to believe her.

“Damn,” Dom said under his breath.

Danita sat back and looked like she’d just pulled an ace from her sleeve.

“I don’t want to lose him, but I feel so fucking out of sorts. Is this what relationships are like? Why do people do this?” I looked at Dom.

“Fuck if I know. I sure as hell don’t mess with them, but you’ve been happy. Figure it out.”

Dom could say a lot with few words.

I wanted Cooper to know that even though I was scared and didn’t know what the hell I was doing, I would try. I hadn’t known how to run a brewery before I’d jumped into that, but I had figured it out. I could do the same with a relationship.

“I need a romantic gesture worthy of a Hallmark movie.”

“A what?” Dom frowned.

Danita stood and high-fived me. “Damn right you do. I’m gonna go grab us some snacks from the floor because it’s time for a brainstorm session. My ideas are always better when there’s food involved.”

Dom followed her out. “Can we have some of those Sriracha chips? I’ve been wanting to try those.”

CHAPTER 39

COOPER

Danita: Good luck today! It's going to be a great game!

Cooper: Over text, I can't tell if this is genuine enthusiasm or a form of cheerful threatening.

Danita: Both?

Cooper: Why haven't you returned my calls?

Danita: Sorry. It's been a wild week at work. Let's catch up at the after-party?

Cooper: Sure. Don't kill Nick, okay? I don't want to be on the news for anything but winning the game.

Danita: Fair enough. I'm more of a slow-acting poison kind of person anyway.



I hadn't seen the field this packed all season. The other teams were there to show support, along with tons of spectators filling the bleachers and sitting on the fences surrounding the field.

The sun beat down from a cloudless sky as beads of sweat dripped along the back of my neck. I leaned against the fence at our dugout, doing my best to keep my attention on the game, but it was hard to focus when my mind kept wandering to Ty. I wanted to know how he was—how he *truly* was, no superficial bullshit—where we stood, if we could go somewhere and talk. Unfortunately, we still had a few minutes left in the game and were down by one. And there was the after-party to get through.

Ty didn't seem to have the same focusing problem as me. He'd been playing great all game while I'd made rookie mistakes. *Focus, asshole. Danita will kill me if I'm the reason we lose.* Then again, if she knew I was distracted because of Ty, she might go easy on me.

River was heading to bat with Topher on third. Then Ty was at bat, then me. No pressure.

People chanted for River, but my brain let the words pass without a second thought. Instead, I mentally pulled up the texts from the past week between Ty and me and analyzed them for the hundredth time. We'd texted like usual since the anniversary party last weekend, and things had seemed fine at practices. Except we hadn't fooled around because teammates had invited us out after each practice, and Ty had gone home from there. It was normal for our team to do that as the season wound down, but it also interfered with my time with Ty. *I don't want our time to wind down too.* I hoped his leaving after those outings wasn't a sign he was pulling away. God, I was twisting myself up with the what-ifs.

We hadn't texted about anything he'd said at the party. When I told him I'd give him time and space, I'd meant it, but it wasn't easy.

Cheers pulled my attention back to the field, where I saw River make it to first base and Topher reach home. Tied. *Focus!*

I needed to tell Ty how I felt about him, about us. I knew he was skittish about dating and relationships, and the last thing I wanted to do was pressure him, but it wasn't fair to

either of us if I held myself back. I was trying to find the line between respecting his boundaries and respecting my needs. We'd reached a point where I was starting to feel the urge to censor my feelings toward him to avoid scaring him off. That wasn't okay.

I'd told myself several times this week that *part of Ty is better than no Ty. Fucking around after practices is enough.* But it was more than fucking around. I knew he felt something for me too, but the question was whether he wanted to act on it.

I knew better than to hide my feelings. I'd worked through too much shit in my relationship with Aleck to let that happen. I couldn't disrespect the work we'd put in by regressing to immature communication.

I didn't expect a big commitment from Ty, but I needed him to know I was all in on working toward *something*. I wanted to know if we were on the same page or, hell, even reading the same book. Most of all, I wanted Ty to know that despite being scared out of my goddamn mind that I'd get hurt again, he was worth any chance of that happening.

Right. Decided. I would ask him to talk after the post-game party. My stomach rolled at the thought of how it might go.

Trust that it will go okay. Signs pointed to Ty having feelings for me. He'd invited me to his parents' anniversary party, taken care of me when I was sick as a dog, and spent time with me without orgasms. Even *after* the orgasms. Historically the least likely time a guy stuck around. It had to mean something.

"This one's for you, Big Guy," Ty whispered in my ear, then slapped my ass. In front of the entire team. And the spectators. And Danita.

I stared at him, mouth wide open, as he strode confidently through the dugout with a bat over his shoulder. His swagger hit me as hard as his pheromones.

"You owe me twenty bucks."

“I bet they’ve been fucking all season.”

“You didn’t notice that one of their cars was always left here after practice?”

“Aww! So cute!! But seriously, Ty better get us this win.”

“No pressure. Right, Coop?”

The support and taunts of my teammates washed over me as I replayed the scene in my head. Ty slapped my ass in a moment that was obviously not for regulation ass-slapping. Was he feeling extra cocky? But he said the win was for me. Could it maybe mean...?

Ty looked over his shoulder and shot me the most brilliant smile I’d ever seen from him before blowing. Me. A. Kiss.

If I’d been wearing a tutu, I would’ve fucking twirled like a Disney princess.

As the team cheered, Ty dragged his left foot over the plate twice, tilted his head from side to side twice, then rolled his shoulders twice to complete his batting routine.

The pitcher tossed the ball, and a loud crack sounded when Ty’s bat made contact with it. The ball flew into deep left field and over the fence.

“Home run! He fucking did it! We won!”

Bodies crowded around me, jumping up and down, cheering into my ears, but I was frozen. Transfixed by Ty’s victory trot around the bases.

As he rounded third, the team began spilling onto the field and people pulled me with them. My body moved toward his as we locked eyes, neither of us looking away as the crowd engulfed us.

Ty ran to me and jumped in my arms as I wrapped them around him. He cradled my cheeks and kissed me like it was the start of something special.

He kissed me like he was falling in love with me too.

The team crowded around us, making lewd comments. I barely noticed them. How could I with Ty staring down at me,

grinning, looking happier than I'd ever seen him. In my arms, in front of everyone. It was the best moment of my time with Ty so far, and I hoped there would be many more to come. The unfiltered affection in his eyes promised there would be.



TYLER

I WORRIED my heart would pound out of my chest as I stared down at Coop and the mega feelings shining back at me in his eyes. Thank god he seemed to understand the meaning behind my gesture.

Showing not only Coop but damn near everyone in the league that I was serious about him made my stomach swoop like I'd hurtled myself over a cliff and trusted the measly bungee rope. I'd been second-guessing the idea all week, but my gut said publicly showing him how I felt would mean as much, if not more, than words said privately. But the words were important too, and I planned to tell him as soon as we had a moment alone.

I barely registered the people celebrating around us. How could I with Coop holding me like I was more precious than the Crown Jewels?

"You hit a home run for me and won us the game. Definitely saved me from losing it."

I laughed. "I did."

"Does that mean I get a home run later?"

More cheers and loving taunts erupted around us as we kissed again.

"Oh, thank god! Someone *please* tell me I'm not hallucinating that we won the championship and my best friend got the guy?"

I looked toward Danita's voice and grinned at her.

"Thank you," she mouthed. Her attention was quickly snagged by a smarmy-looking dude-bro who approached her. She squared her shoulders and stood taller but also quickly fluffed her hair. Interesting.

"Is that the other team's sponsor?" I slid out of Coop's grip and onto the ground.

He looked over and nodded. I couldn't make out what they were saying, but judging by the wild gestures, they were tossing verbal grenades in each other's direction. I couldn't quite get a read on whether it was true hate or the kind that led to a good fuck.

Our other teammates pulled me into hugs and high fives as the on-field celebration continued. The other teams in the league followed, and we lined up to do the good sportspersonship thing and shake the hands of the losers. *God, I love winning.* Coop and I didn't leave each other's sides.

Mr. Big Bat, who didn't know shit about brewing, approached with a grin almost as large as his pornographic dick imprint in his sweats. Though, if I were rocking a monster schlong like that, I would sport a cocky grin all the time too.

I grabbed Coop's hand and ignored his chuckle. He said something along the lines of "this is gonna be good" under his breath.

"I knew you two were a thing! The sexual tension between you that first game was suffocating. Also kinda hot. Congrats."

"Thanks?"

He leaned in. Damn. The guy even wore sexy cologne. "If you ever want a third, you know where to find me."

"Sure, man."

He strode off as I turned to Coop. "No fucking way. I couldn't bang a guy who was so confidently misinformed about beer."

Coop shook his head and gave me an adoring smile, then wrapped his arm around my neck and pulled me in for a kiss. I fucking swooned. Who knew feelings could be so great? I sure as hell never had, but thank fuck for them.

“Please never change,” he said when he pulled back too soon for my liking.

As the crowd began to disperse, I caught a ride with Coop back to the brewery for the end-of-season party we’d volunteered to host for the league. I wanted to talk before the party, or else I would explode. I’d worry about my car later.

“So,” Coop said as he buckled his seat belt.

“So.” It was time to do the words and feelings thing.

“Who’s starting?” he asked as he navigated out of the parking lot.

I admired how casual he sounded. Me? I was on the verge of hurling.

“I’ll go.” I reached over and rested my hand on his leg. The contact helped calm me. He wrapped one of his hands over mine.

“I like you so damn much.” I squeezed my eyes closed. I’d practiced far more eloquent ways to say it, but the words abandoned me in my time of need. Bastards.

Coop turned to me and smiled. “Bet I like you more.”

I melted back into the seat. How did the man always know exactly how to put me at ease? It was like he had a user manual for my wild brain and heart.

“I didn’t understand it for a long time. No offense. But I’ve never had feelings for someone like this before. There was a guy in college, but even that pales in comparison to these fucking big, gooey feelings I have for you.” I scrunched my nose.

“None taken?”

“I couldn’t figure it out. Then my beautiful asshole of a brother helped me discover that I’m demiromantic.”

Coop's eyebrows shot up. "Oh shit. That makes a lot of sense."

"I know! I guess spending all that time getting to know you—"

"On top of the great sex." He grinned.

My smile burst free. "Yes. You used your sex appeal like a honey trap to lure me in until I caught feelings."

"I caught your balls all season, and you caught feelings. Aww."

I let out a loud laugh. He was making this too easy on me. "You never made me feel bad for not wanting what other people did. I'm grateful for that. I think your patience was ultimately what sucked me in."

"And my hair. You're such a slut for it."

I swatted his arm.

He glanced at me and smiled. "That's what worked for me too. I wasn't looking for anything serious when we met. You know how it ended the last time things got serious with someone."

I squeezed his leg, and he squeezed my hand in return.

"Telling myself that there was no destination, no rush, no end goal with our time together helped me ease into it. I went from being scared to fall for anyone to being terrified to lose *you* to being petrified I'd let fear win and miss out on as much time with you as I could get. Being with you is worth any pain that might come."

His words punched a sharp breath out of me. "Damn, Coop. You sure know how to make a guy feel special."

We stopped at a red light, and he turned to me. "And you don't? You kissed me in front of everyone."

I quickly pressed my lips against his. "The idea was Danita approved."

His mouth fell open. "No wonder she's been dodging my calls all week. The woman is terrible at keeping secrets."

“Jesus. She should’ve told me that!” I shook my head. “At least she managed it this time.”

He turned my hand over so our palms touched as he intertwined our fingers. “I was stressing all week and made a deal with myself to talk with you after the game. I was worried you wouldn’t know how important you are to me and that it would be easy for you to walk away.”

I bit my lip. “Good thing neither of us chickened out, huh?”

“You sure you want this? I’ve got enough baggage to fill a 747, and I haven’t had a new relationship in well over a decade. I know I’ll screw up sometimes.”

I stared at him. “You’re worried *you’ll* screw up? The guy who maintained a happy marriage far longer than most people do? You realize your marriage didn’t end because you failed at it, right? You’re not the one I’m worried about in this scenario. I’m the one whose relationship experience is the sum total of a college boyfriend who lasted less than a month before he decided some drunk guy at a party was a better prospect. I’m the risky proposition.”

“Tyler, you’re the only proposition I want. We’re both going to screw up, but we’ll figure it out together. Yeah?”

“Yeah.” He was right. If I ever had a chance of making it work with someone, Coop was it. He never made me feel ashamed of my sexual history, embarrassed about being a goof, or guilty for spending time with the guys and investing in our business. Coop liked me as I was.

I scrunched my face. “God, I feel so fucking high school for saying this, but will you be my boyfriend?”

“Only if I get to wear your letterman jacket.”

My mind raced with possibilities. “Now that’s some roleplay I can get into.”

During the rest of the drive, we chatted about what officially dating might look like for us—basically what we were already doing—and what we wanted from a relationship

—basically what we were already getting but being more open about it.

Funny how the transition to an official relationship was so easy. Just like everything else with Coop, it was natural, and when it wasn't, it was worth the work.

When he parked at the brewery, he turned to me. “Thank you for taking a risk and choosing me. I know it wasn't easy.”

I let out a long breath. “It wasn't, but then I remembered how many pairs of my panties and jocks you haven't seen yet, and that made it easy.”

He shook his head, an adoring smile on his face as he leaned in for a kiss. I was getting addicted to all the extra kissing already. I wondered what other fun things I would get from a relationship besides access rights to his functional raincoats. A guy has priorities, you know?

CHAPTER 40

TYLER

Team Tap That Group Text

Dom: What's everyone doing tonight?

Austin: Going to a new restaurant with Caleb. One of his chef friends.

Ethan: Attending some boring ass event with Parker.

Ty: Fucking my boyfriend.

Dom: Good thing I have Seth now. He'll watch a shitty action movie with me and eat too much junk food.



ON A SCALE of one to call the cops, how creepy was it to watch my boyfriend sleep? I probably didn't want to know the answer because it was hard for him to consent to me being creepy while he was snoring and drooling next to me. The cute snores, not the chainsaw kind. I loved this man enough that I found his snores cute?

Whoa. Big thoughts for a Saturday morning.

I rolled onto my back and stared at the ceiling in Cooper's bedroom. It'd been almost a week since we'd officially

become a couple, stated our intentions, decided to go steady, or whatever Jane Austen-type shit it was.

It'd been a great week and, frankly, not that different from the weeks before. It was dawning on me that some part of me had worried everything would change if I were to tell him I wanted to be with him, but it hadn't. We'd seen each other a couple of nights, texted like usual, sexted once or twice. It was easy. Bonus? I hadn't fucked it up and hopefully never would.

Damn. Thinking long-term already? Imagining a future with Coop came as easy as falling asleep next to him.

I'd read some Reddit posts from demiromantic people who'd talked about experiences similar to mine. No one caught their attention romantically until someone finally did, and then they were all in.

Cooper rolled over, brushed his knee against my thigh, and made an adorable snuffling sound. I'd tucked the poor guy out after waking him up in the middle of the night and sucking his brains out through his dick. I couldn't blame him for sleeping in on a Saturday.

I might as well get up and make coffee. I carefully extricated myself from him and made my way to the kitchen. Without second-guessing it, I made myself at home. It surprised me how comfortable I was in his space. I'd been here several times, and he'd always told me to make myself at home, but I'd finally allowed myself to *feel* at home.

I smiled as I passed the couch where we'd spent last night binging a wedding-themed Hallmark marathon. I couldn't believe it, but an evening doing that with Cooper was more fun than getting my dick sucked by a stranger off a hookup app. Quality time with one of my favorite people *and* dick-sucking? I didn't understand the magic or science behind how emotions made sex better for me, but I was pro anything that made orgasms more potent than a drug.

It wasn't like I suddenly didn't care about sex anymore and didn't want to go out or that I'd "seen the light" and thought fucking around was a waste of time. I was excited to learn how

to have fun with the same person in different ways instead of different people in the same way.

Maybe Coop and I could hit the bars and get off in a dark corner sometime soon. Best of both worlds.

I pulled two mugs from the cupboard and looked out the kitchen window. A crow stood on top of the suet and stared at me. The longer we watched each other, the harder a particular thought pushed to the forefront of my mind. I glanced back toward the bedroom and back at the crow. No better time than while Coop was sleeping.

After pulling on a pair of his pajama pants and a T-shirt from his dryer and sliding on my shoes, I walked out to the special place Coop had pointed out recently when he'd given me a walking tour of places we hadn't reached by ATV. Hopefully I didn't get lost.

I welcomed the chill in the air before the July heat. Everything had a dewy glow in the soft sunlight. After a few wrong turns and a near trip over a giant rock, I found the spot.

I sat on the tree stump throne. "Hello, Aleck." I cleared my throat to dispel the morning rasp. "I'm Tyler. Um, Cooper's boyfriend. Though you probably know that already. Now that I'm thinking about it, you've probably seen me naked. Coop said you were a bit of a perv. Have you watched us get it on?"

I winced and squeezed my eyes closed. Of course that had spilled out of my mouth while attempting to commune with the spirit of my boyfriend's dead husband. *What the fuck is wrong with me?*

"I'm a perv too. Maybe Coop has a type." I chuckled. "You can watch once in a while, but don't be weird."

A crow cawed loudly.

"You're so right! Coop *is* a very lucky man."

A crow landed a few feet from me. It opened its wings and flapped them.

What the hell had I come out there to say to him? I wasn't even sure I believed he could hear me, but just in case he

could, he deserved to know my intentions.

“I assume you’re all-knowing and familiar with my past. I’m sure if I came across you and Coop in a bar, I would’ve offered to be the salami in your sandwich. Shame we didn’t get that opportunity.” I chuckled. “Despite being a horny bastard, I want you to know how serious I am about him. I promise to do everything I can not to hurt him.”

I licked my dry lips. “He’s stronger than I realized. Definitely stronger than me. Brave enough to put himself out there again. I care a lot about him, but I’m also sorry that your time together was cut too short. There’s a part of me that would’ve happily never met him if it meant he could’ve had you longer.” I let out a long breath. “But those are the cards you both got, I guess. I’m sure as hell grateful I’m getting dealt into his second hand.”

My throat burned as I sat in silence, collecting myself. Two more crows landed and stared expectantly at me. I should’ve brought them food.

“I guess that’s all I wanted to say. I hope you’re getting lots of dick up in heaven or another dimension or wherever you are. Swimming in all the DPs you can dream of if you’re into that. May the orgasms and lube be plentiful. Or do you not need lube where you are?”

I slapped my hands against my thighs and stood, feeling lighter than I had ten minutes ago. I took another look at the tranquil creek flowing freely after several rainy June days.

Maybe Coop and I could visit the spot together sometime. I’d never pressure him to share his husband with me, but I wanted him to know he could. I was ready to receive any part of Coop he wanted to show me.

Crows flew from branch to branch ahead of me as I strolled leisurely behind them. Either my internal sense of direction finally clicked, or I had feathery tour guides. Either way, I made it back to the house without getting lost.

I smiled up at the birds and nodded my thanks. When I looked over at the house, I saw Coop sitting on the front porch

in a wooden chair he'd built.

“Morning.” There was a soft, knowing smile on his face.

“Morning. Get some good sleep?”

“You made sure of that.” He grinned.

“Wore your ass out last night.” My dick twitched at the memory of thrusting into him on the couch as a movie played in the background.

He shifted in the chair. “Sure did.”

There was a steaming mug on the porch railing and another in his hand.

“Hanging out with the crows?” Coop smiled up at the crows chattering away in the trees next to his carport.

“Yup. I think we're becoming friends.” I climbed the two steps onto the porch and unceremoniously dropped onto Cooper's lap.

“Oof.”

I kissed his cheek in apology for my rough landing.

He caught my chin and tilted my head to kiss my lips. “Come to any other agreements?”

“I told Aleck he can watch us have sex sometimes, but we need private time too.” I dropped a kiss under his ear. “And I promised to do everything I can to be good to you.”

His smile was radiant. “Does that start with you letting me buy you some panties?”

“Are you kidding? I literally never say no to gifts, even ones that aren't for me. Did I tell you about the time I opened all of Seth's birthday gifts while he was out playing with his friends at his birthday party? I think I was eight.”

“I should buy your brother a drink. I'm sure he could use it.” Coop bit his lip and looked away. “What if I bought some for myself?”

My heart thundered in my chest. “You want to wear them? God, that's so hot.”

He turned back to me. “You think so?”

I put his hand on my hardening dick. “Let me show you how hot I think it is.”

Coop gripped it. “You’re so sexy in my clothes.”

“Not as sexy as you’ll look in a mesh thong. I have a few pairs on a wish list that would look incredible on you. I’ll show you.”

Coop stared at me with his mouth slack. “You saved ones for me?”

“I did. Wishful thinking, I guess?”

Coop placed his mug on the ground, then slid his hands inside the pajamas to cup my ass. “You’re incredible. Show me later. Sex first.”

I sighed happily. “You know me so well.”



COOPER

I’D WORRIED FOR NOTHING. I should’ve known Ty would be as eager as a puppy promised a walk at the prospect of my interest in wearing panties. We could cuddle on the couch and shop together over a growler of Austin’s test home brew.

Ty climbed off me and onto his knees between my legs. He looked up at me, hunger flaring in his eyes as he rubbed his palms over my thighs.

“I can’t fucking wait to see you in a thong.” Ty closed his eyes, tilted his head back, and bit his bottom lip as he let out a satisfied sigh.

The man could get me hard with a glance.

He tugged on the waistband of my pajamas, and I lifted so he could pull them off. Ty nuzzled my bare crotch, inhaling audibly.

“God, I love how you smell. You’re going to look delicious in satin. Rubbing you until you’re hard and your cock pokes above the lace waistband where I can lick it. Mmm.”

I squirmed as he licked my cockhead. I relaxed and let my man take care of me.

So much had changed since I’d heard his honk nearly four months ago. I had no clue what was special about me that made Ty change his rules, but I would be grateful every day for it.

Ty stroked, licked, and sucked me to hardness. He coaxed it out of me with the ways he knew I loved to be touched.

“Oh fuck.” I let out a startled laugh as Ty gripped my ass and pulled me forward in the chair to reach more of me. As he teased the skin behind my balls, I lifted my legs until my feet rested on the railing. I curled my toes to grip the air as he lavished attention on my most sensitive parts.

Patches of beautiful clear blue sky were visible through the tree cover and a crow perched on a branch above, watching us. I could’ve sworn it winked before flying away.

When Ty fingered around my hole, I groaned. “You treat me so good. Mm.”

He moaned around my cock down his throat. He loved it when I talked during sex.

“Take out your dick. I wanna see you stroke it. Make yourself feel as good as you’re making me feel. Yeah, that’s it, baby.”

Ty’s arm moved with quick, sure strokes as he let out a broken groan. I was stuck in a feedback loop of pleasure, and I never wanted it to end, but when he teased the tip of his finger inside me, I had no choice. I shot into his mouth, and Ty moaned as he swallowed every drop. He licked me clean until I jerked back.

“Show me. Want to see you come.”

Ty leaned back and put on a show, tugging his balls with one hand while stroking with the other. He caught a bead of precum with his finger and brought it to his mouth. It pulled a wanton moan from me. With his front teeth hooked over his bottom lip, Ty grinned. His body tensed, and he shot at my feet.

I handed Ty his coffee before he moved to put himself away.

“Yummy. Just how I like it.”

As soon as I pulled my pants up, Ty crawled back onto my lap. Good thing I'd built sturdy chairs because our combined weight wasn't slight. He'd been extra cuddly since we'd officially become a couple, and I couldn't get enough of it. I would happily receive all of Ty's affection and give it right back.

We cuddled while finishing our coffee and commenting quietly about the bird calls. Ty said he wanted to find an app that would identify the birds by their calls and the plant species by photo so he could learn more about the area.

How the hell had I gotten so lucky? I'd found Aleck and had had an incredible life with him for over a decade. Now I'd found Ty and hoped to have a long life with him. Not everyone was fortunate enough to find one great love, but somehow, I'd gotten a golden ticket for two.

CHAPTER 41

TYLER

Ty: I saw a new place in McMinnville with bottomless mimosas with five different juice options. Who's in?

Danita: Oh, you fucking know it. Not driving.

Ty: Not driving. Coop? [GIF of woman batting her eyelashes]

Coop: I'll be DD, but no stealing bacon from me. You both are bacon thieves, and if you pull those shenanigans, you'll be calling for a Lyft.

Danita: [GIF of man saluting]

Ty: [GIF of a person eating a plate full of bacon]

Coop: [GIF of a person sighing]



“Why are you looking at me like that? It’s a vegetable tray, not a bomb. I can cut vegetables, so what?” Before I could mouth off more, the oven timer went off. While heading to the kitchen, I shot a *can you believe these guys* look at Coop as he carried some plates and napkins to Dom’s TV room.

I pulled the empanadas from the oven and arranged them on the platter. In a moment of whimsy, I added a few sprigs of leftover parsley to the tray. The empanadas were misshapen and nearly overcooked, but I'd made them under Coop's tutelage. I was proud as fuck that we'd prepared a meal for the guys.

Smiling wide, I carried them to the coffee table and placed them next to the veggies. "Ta-da!"

Austin, Ethan, Dom, and Seth leaned forward and studied the food suspiciously. Caleb and Parker weren't as skeptical.

Austin poked at one. "They filled with mac and cheese or PB&J?"

"Spicy chicken and black bean filling, dickhead." I put two onto a plate and handed it to Coop, then grabbed two for myself since no one else had dived in.

"Where'd you buy them?" Dom sniffed one.

I huffed and sat next to Coop on the couch. He squeezed my thigh as he held back his laughter. "We *made* them. If we'd bought them, don't you think they'd look more uniform?" I'd struggled to get the hang of sealing the edges. Each one had... character.

"What is wrong with you guys? They're empanadas. Of course they're going to be delicious." Caleb grabbed two.

"*Thank you*, Caleb. At least one of you isn't a hater. If the rest of you don't stop staring at them like they're filled with arsenic, you won't get the strawberry and rhubarb ones for dessert."

"It's not our fault you've trained us to be skeptical," Ethan said before grabbing a couple and sharing a plate with Parker.

"That's fair," I conceded.

"Where'd you learn how to cook them?" Dom asked before cutting his open. Steam poured out. I hoped that meant they were warm in the middle.

"Coop's been teaching me some stuff." I waggled my eyebrows at my boyfriend.

“Gross.” Seth made a sour face.

“Does that mean no more toddler food contributions to Sunday dinners?” Austin asked hopefully.

“I wouldn’t go that far. Tradition is tradition.” I cut off the end and blew on it until it was cool enough to eat. I knew the filling was good because I’d kept eating it while making them, and Coop had to slap my hand away. But I’d worried it might dry out in the dough pouch while cooking in the oven. Thank god they were still decent. I finally understood the satisfied feeling he got from feeding us each week.

They complimented the food in tones ranging from surprised to begrudging as we sat around. They also swapped “horror stories” about various foods I’d brought to team dinners. Assholes.

“I think that’s enough of the embarrassing me in front of Coop portion of the evening. Movie time!” Despite the burn in my cheeks, it was awesome to have everyone together. Our little foursome had doubled. Watching our family grow gave me the warm and fuzzies.

“Are you seriously making us watch a Hallmark movie? I can’t believe you like this shit.” Dom shook his head and took another empanada.

“I’m so sorry that I’m trying to share my life with my best friends.” I dramatically pretended like I was on the verge of crying.

Ethan, always the peacemaker, stepped in. “When did you start watching them?”

“Last year, when there was nothing else on, I landed on the Hallmark Channel.” I felt Coop’s stare.

“Liar.”

I turned to him and gasped. “Are you seriously calling me a liar? Your adoring boyfriend? The nerve of you.”

Coop booped my nose. “You have a tell.”

The guys erupted in a chorus of “told you!”

“Traitor,” I hissed as I pinched his side. “Boyfriend rules dictate you have to tell me what it is.”

“No way. You won’t use that information for good.”

I stole the rest of his empanada and took a bite to hide my smile as the guys cheered Coop on.

While I navigated to our DVR, I remembered something I’d forgotten to ask Dom earlier.

“Oh, Dom, I’ve been meaning to talk to you. Mind if Gavin crashes with us for a bit? He needs to vacate his place in Seattle.”

“Of course. He’s welcome anytime, as long as he cleans up after himself.”

“Awesome. Thanks, man. I’ll let him know.”

Seth excused himself to get another drink.

I started the movie that was set in a harbor town. I figured it was a good gateway Hallmark movie for the guys. I felt silly sharing it with them, but Coop and I’d had a conversation about it last week, and I’d realized there was no reason to hide it.

The guys cracked good-natured jokes throughout the movie, but they also seemed into it. About three-quarters of the way through, the main characters were out on a boat when the weather turned. The woman fell overboard, and the hero jumped in to rescue her.

“Just like *Titanic!*” Ethan and Dom groaned as soon as Austin shouted the words. It’d been an ongoing argument between us since the movie had come out when we were kids.

“There was plenty of room for both of them,” I insisted.

Austin rolled his eyes. “We’ve gone over this countless times. The door didn’t have the buoyancy. There was no way it would’ve kept them both afloat.”

Austin and I went back and forth, talking over each other.

“You both are kinda right,” Coop said. We shut up and turned to him. “There was a *MythBusters* episode where they

did an experiment about this. If they had attached Rose's life vest underneath it, that would've fixed the buoyancy issue, but they might've gotten hypothermia from the water trying to do it." Coop shrugged and popped a carrot into his mouth.

"God, your brain is so sexy. That's why I love you."

The room went silent. As I replayed my words, my eyes grew wide.

Dom stood. "Lost another one to the dark side. Just you and me, Seth."

Seth stood too. "I, um, have fanfic to read."

"Parker, I need your help to check the light that burned out in the garage." Ethan and Parker made a hasty exit.

"Uh, Caleb, can you keep me company while I vacuum the bathtub?" Austin made a helpless gesture at Caleb as they hurried out.

I turned back to Coop to face the music. The feels from the Hallmark movie had gotten the best of me, and I'd blurted it out at the worst time. Watching them was a completely different experience now that I could empathize with what the characters were experiencing.

Coop grabbed my hand, and I braced for the kind letdown.

He stared intently into my eyes. "You don't have to say it because you feel obligated. There's no playbook we have to follow. I know you're new to this, and I don't expect those words from you on any timeline."

My shoulders dropped from my ears. This sweet, sweet man with his sweet, sweet ass. I climbed onto his lap. It was my new favorite seat.

"I might be new to relationships, but I'm not new to love. I know what that feels like. Well, platonic love, at least. I've never been afraid to acknowledge the love I feel for people. When it comes to you, I experience the same, but it's amplified. I feel the kinds of things my parents, Austin, and Ethan talk about. I know it's romantic love, and I'm not afraid."

Tears welled in Cooper's eyes.

"I love you," I said earnestly while holding Coop's face in my hands so he could see how serious I was. "Falling in love with you was as easy as taking down a bag of Tillamook squeaky cheese."

"I love you too, you absolute weirdo. You're *my* weirdo."

EPILOGUE

TYLER

A COUPLE of years later

“ARE YOU SURE ABOUT THIS?” Coop fixed the collar on my shirt.

“You wore the cologne I love.” I leaned in and sniffed his neck. “You trying to drive me wild?”

“Always.” He kissed my forehead.

I sighed happily. “I’m sure about this. Thought I made it clear I’m not going anywhere.”

Coop kissed me silent. “Not what we’re doing but *how* we’re doing it. Are you sure you don’t want more?”

“This is perfect. It’s us.” I wrapped one of his long waves around my finger. “You look so fucking good with your hair down. Have I told you that before?”

He smiled widely. “A time or two.”

“All right. Off to the gallows then. If someone tries to kill us, I’m using you as a shield.” I swatted Coop’s ass.

We walked hand-in-hand to the backyard where our loved ones waited. The guys and their partners, Danita and her fiancé—though they still acted like enemies when the teams

they sponsored played against each other—my parents and Grandpa chatted in clusters with drinks in their hands.

It was the first time Grandpa had visited from Arizona after he'd sold his house to Coop and me. We'd decided to time our surprise with his visit. He'd insisted on checking to see how we'd "ruined his beautiful home." Good thing the snarky old man loved the work we'd done over the past six months. Coop had won him over with his woodworking skills. He'd won me over with a different set of woodworking skills.

We'd decided to keep Cooper's house and rent it out. We still went to the special spot to talk to Aleck. Sometimes Coop went alone, sometimes we packed a picnic and he told me stories about their lives together while we fed the crows. I'd befriended each and every one of those beautiful bastards. All the research I'd done on crows had paid off.

Coop wasn't ready to sell his house, and that was more than fine with me. We'd gotten a great deal on Grandpa's place since he was thrilled it would stay in the family. Thankfully, Seth had been on board with the plan. He was just as happy for me to get it so he could visit without the responsibility for the upkeep. So there was no hurry to do something else with Coop's place. I'd be good to keep that creepy cabin in the woods forever if it made Coop happy.

My heart thudded as I slid open the door to the back porch. Dom gave me a wary look. *Can't a guy organize a party with his favorite people without it being suspicious? Jeez.*

"Where's the food? I was promised a barbecue." Danita glanced around.

Coop gave my hand an encouraging squeeze. I turned and looked at him, the love shining in his eyes, and released a long breath before turning back to the crowd.

"We're having catered BBQ later, but first, there's going to be a wedding."

It became so quiet you could hear a pin drop on grass before the air exploded with sound.

"I knew it! You owe me twenty bucks!"

“No fucking way. Ty’s getting married? No fucking way!”

“When did they get engaged? When did you get engaged?”

“My baby’s getting married!”

“We’re getting a woodworker in the family. Can you make me a chair?”

I whistled to get everyone’s attention. “You probably have some questions.”

“Bet your fucking ass we do.” Dom crossed his arms over his chest and aimed a stern look at us, but he softened at a squeeze of his shoulder. He was so whipped, but so was I. Things change after falling in love.

“We didn’t want a long engagement or to make a big deal about it with a big ceremony. We nearly eloped but decided we wanted the people closest to us to be here, so doing it at home was perfect.” I looked at my parents and swallowed past the lump in my throat. “Continue the tradition at our special spot.”

When Mom began sobbing, I walked over and pulled her into a hug. I heard Danita murmuring soft words to Coop and caught them hugging from the corner of my eye. After people made the rounds, giving us both hugs, Seth stepped forward.

“Ready? Let’s go.” He grabbed a notebook he must’ve previously tucked under a chair cushion.

“You knew! You are so going to pay for that secret later.”

I laughed at Seth’s blush as he looked away from his boyfriend. I doubted it would be long before Seth was arranging his own wedding.

Coop and I had talked a lot about who we wanted to perform the ceremony. He’d shot down my suggestion of my favorite Portland drag queen doing it and said it should be someone close to us. Snooze. But he had a point. Coop had grown close with all the guys and their partners, and the partners had become a crew in their own right. They even had their own bowling team. Eventually, he’d suggested Seth perform the ceremony. He and Seth had formed their own relationship and grown close, and I knew Seth could keep a

secret. He'd gotten ordained online, which couldn't have been more perfect.

Coop wrapped his arm over my shoulder, and we walked to the special spot where Coop's gift to my parents still stood. Where the tree line met the field had become a sculpture garden for Coop's work. The crow and the beer bottle were two of my favorite pieces. He'd been creating up a storm ever since we'd turned the bulk of the barn into an art studio. Coop could barely keep up with commissions.

When we reached the spot, I noticed something with a nicely ironed sheet over it. Coop was determined to make me cry, and the ceremony hadn't even started.

Seth took the spot we'd decided on during our rehearsal the other day, and our guests gathered around us in a half circle. There was no groom and groom side, only family, full stop. Coop grabbed my hands in his, and I turned to face him.

"No one is more surprised to be standing here to perform my brother's wedding ceremony than me. Can you believe it? Ty's getting married. I think people must be snowboarding in hell." Seth shook his head and shot me a teasing smile.

"I'll never forget when Ty came to me confused about why he had so many feelings for Cooper. That was the moment I realized my brother and I had formed a new kind of bond. A close friendship on top of being brothers."

Tears filled my eyes. "You're such an asshole. Making me cry already?"

Seth's eyes were glassy too. "It's been a gift to watch you learn to trust Coop with your heart. If anyone deserves love, it's you. A man who has always been quick to share his love with others. Even if one of his love languages is pranks."

Cooper's hands shook from his laughter.

"And, Cooper, to watch you let my brother in after you would've had every right to close yourself off to the world has been incredible. You've shown an immense amount of courage to not only love again but to choose my brother of all people. I heard somewhere there's a thin line between courage and

foolishness. You're the one that will have to put up with Tyler for the rest of your lives."

Coop squeezed my hands. "It'll be my pleasure."

"Aww!" Danita sniffled.

"The grooms have their own vows for each other."

Coop cleared his throat. "I've known you were someone special since that first moment I saw you in that piece of crap rain jacket, and you were more worried about your cheese than your car. When you admitted your secret love for Hallmark movies, I knew I was in trouble. Every time I tried to talk myself out of feeling big things for you, I failed."

Coop reached out and wiped the tear falling down my face. "And I've never been happier to fail at something. You make me a better man. You push me to invest in the things I love and invest in myself. You make space for my past alongside our future."

I nearly choked from trying to hold back the sobs.

"But I need to come clean about something before we begin our marriage."

My stomach swooped. It couldn't be bad. He wouldn't mention something heavy at our wedding, right?

"That first weekend? I lied about the chainsaw not working. I'm an arborist and a wood artist. Obviously, I have chainsaws and backup parts. I was angling for you to stay longer."

I smiled so wide it nearly hurt. "Thank you for confessing your crimes. I forgive you for trying to get into my pants. I would've done the same if I were you."

I basked in the laughter of my loved ones.

"I love you, Tyler McNeill, and can't wait to be your husband."

I leaned in to kiss him, and Seth stuck his notebook in front of my face. "You're not married yet."

"Prude."

Seth grinned. He was having way too much fun with all the power.

“Guess that means it’s my turn. For the record, I love you too, Cooper Martin. I’m pretty sure everyone here would agree they never expected me to settle down with anyone. Half the people here are probably still processing that this is even happening right now.”

“Yup,” Austin said.

Others nodded when I looked out at the group. Tears fell down Ethan’s and Austin’s faces. Dammit, that set me off again.

I turned back to my husband-to-be. “But meeting you was like landing on a collision course. There was no way I could’ve walked away from you. I’d planned to, but then I kept coming up with reasons to text you. Then the texting turned to softball practice and hanging out after practice, then—cover your ears, Ma—turned into more. I kept thinking I was in control and our chemistry would fizzle. That we’d get our fill of each other and move on. I’m so glad I was wrong.”

Coop’s eyes glistened as a tear slid down his cheek. I wiped it away with my thumb before returning my hand to his. “I’ll never get enough of you. You embrace me and all my quirks, my sense of humor, which I think is fantastic but have been crudely informed not everyone agrees. You accept my mistakes and never judge me for them. You make me want to be a better person. You let me in, and you show me love.”

I squeezed my eyes closed.

“I want to spend the rest of my life showing you how much I love you. Gotta lock you down before someone else does, you know?” I smiled at his laughter. “Meeting you was the best thing that ever happened to me. And if there’s one thing I’ve learned from all this, it’s don’t listen to Dom. If I had, I never would’ve gone to the coast and met the love of my life.”

“I can’t believe you held on to that remark for over two years,” Dom grumbled.

Seth turned to Coop, who nodded. Coop dropped my hands, moved over to the sheet, and lifted it to reveal a wooden heart sitting on one of our round plant tables.

“I impulsively kept a piece of wood from the tree that kicked off our weekend together. I wasn’t sure why at the time, but when things got serious between us, the reason became clear.” He handed me one of his carving tools. “I thought we could add our initials to it, then I’ll add it to the tree. A marriage of our wood.”

Cooper winced, and I used every ounce of self-control I possessed not to make a remark.

“Definitely could’ve phrased that better.”

“You said it, not me.” I beamed at him.

There was no stopping the tears at that point. Coop wrapped me in his arms until I could pull myself together. Carving into our wood was the perfect gesture. We stood shoulder-to-shoulder as we added our initials and the date. My hand shook the entire time.

“I wish you both a long and happy life together full of love and laughter and forgiveness because I’m sure my brother will need a lot of it,” Seth said.

I laughed and sniffed away the urge to start crying again. I didn’t want the wedding kiss to be a snotty one.

“I now pronounce you husband and husband. You may kiss each other.”

I wrapped my arms around Coop and dipped him while I planted a wet kiss on him. He laughed into my mouth and wrapped his arms around me. After I pulled him back up, I turned toward our family.

“Let’s party! Catering is already set up in the barn.”

Coop and I welcomed hugs from everyone before we moved to the barn.

Coop grabbed my hand and intertwined our fingers. “Ready to begin the rest of our lives, Mr. McNeill-Martin?”

“I was born ready, Mr. McNeill-Martin. God, our names sound so sexy together, don’t they? You know, I never asked. Does alliteration turn you on? I think it’s so sexy.”



WANT a sweet and steamy scene from Ty and Coop’s wedding night? [Grab the bonus epilogue!](#)

LETTER TO READERS

Dear reader,

Thank you so much for reading *Relief Pitcher!* Ty has a special place in my heart, and I had so much fun writing that goofball's story. Seth's story is next, and it has one of my absolute favorite tropes: secret online identity with a fan fiction element thrown in. Don't worry, Dom's story is coming too!

If you have a few moments, please consider leaving a review wherever you bought the book and/or on Goodreads. Reviews help other readers find my stories. Thank you!

Until next time,

Lee

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you so much to each and every person who reads my books. I regularly freak out over the fact that y'all spend your precious time reading my words. I'm so grateful for you! And to everyone who expresses your love for Ty and his antics, you make me smile.

Bix and Beck, thank you for reading this story and providing such helpful feedback. And thank you for the head pats during my more panicky moments.

Abbie and Lori, you two are my dream team! Thank you for helping me tell better stories and the encouragement you provide. I'm so grateful to have the privilege to work with you.

Kim, I'm so grateful for your support and all you do to help me on my publishing journey! Thank you for being so fabulous!

Sparrows, I can't believe it's been over a year since I joined your merry band of misfits. It's hard to remember life before you. <3

Rompire, happy four-year Marco Polo anniversary! I'm so grateful for our friendship and the support we give each other <3

And to Erin, thank you for naming Cooper! He and Ty fit so well together. And thank you for being...simply the best. ;)

ALSO BY LEE BLAIR

Check out Lee's other low angst books!

IN THE DAHLIA SPRINGS UNIVERSE

TAP THAT BREWERY SERIES

[Pitcher Perfect](#) (book 1)

Austin, the Tap That Brewery head brewer, teams up with Caleb, a food truck chef, in a food and beer pairing competition to put both of their businesses on the map. Things heat up between them in and out of the kitchen as they try (and fail) to keep things professional.

Tropes: Workplace romance, food truck, competition

[Eternal Hoptimist](#) (book 2)

Ethan, the brewery bartender and tap room manager, pauses his endless search for love to figure out why he fails every time. He keeps bumping into Parker, a sexy guy who puts his resolution to the test. When he learns Parker is a real estate attorney who needs a fake boyfriend to snag a promotion, he offers to play the role if Parker will help him save his beloved aunt's house.

Tropes: Fake relationship, light kink/kink education



OTHER DAHLIA SPRINGS BOOKS

[Perfect Blend](#)

Dave is moving on after his divorce and throwing himself into his coffee shop, A Whole Latte love, and planning the Dahlia Springs Pride festival. His high school crush, Mikey, comes to town to cover the festival for the national queer publication he works for. Mikey hopes the story will snag him a huge promotion. Dave can't quite figure out why he's as drawn to Mikey as he is the anonymous online friend he's poured his heart out to in an online divorce support group. Sparks fly between the two as they team up for an amateur drag performance, and Mikey is faced with the decision to choose between his dream relationship and his dream career.

Tropes: Secret online identity, friends-to-lovers, amateur drag, Pride

[24 Dares of Christmas](#)

Recently dumped by his girlfriend, Reed wants nothing more than to hibernate through the holly jolly misery of the Christmas season before moving away for a new job. But when his aunt asks him to dogsit her spoiled pooches and leaves him an advent of 24 festive dares to complete, he's forced to face the cheer. Thankfully he has her adorable tenant Warren to help him through the dares.

Tropes: Bisexual awakening, forced proximity, Hallmark vibes

[Mistletoe Kisses](#)

Getting laid off at Thanksgiving is a terrible start to the holidays for Arlo and his best friend Keaton. They get tipsy and decide to use part of their severance pay to send each other on a pre-Christmas vacation. Arlo, the least outgoing person on the planet, ends up in Dahlia Springs where an embarrassing moment leads to a meet-awkward with Lucas—the perfect guy to pull him out of his shell.

Pre-order this book before it releases fall 2023.

Christmas Wishes

When Keaton and his best friend Arlo decide to celebrate their freedom from corporate control by sending each other on a surprise vacation, he expects to escape to sunny pastures. But an oopsie lands him in snowmageddon and renting a room in a homestay. Fortunately, Riggs, his gorgeous host, is keeping Keaton's mind off hideous winter clothes and focused on what's underneath them.

Pre-order this book before it releases fall 2023. This book is not set in Dahlia Springs, but is part of a duology with *Mistletoe Kisses*.



STANDALONES OUTSIDE THE DAHLIA SPRINGS UNIVERSE

Just Watch Me

Jesse doesn't mean to watch his striking neighbor getting it on. It's not his fault the guy leaves his curtains open and the windows in their studio apartments face each other. He thinks he's reached the height of mortification when the neighbor catches him watching—and touching himself—until he shows up to work on Monday and learns how wrong he is.

Tropes: Workplace romance, neighbors-to-lovers, light voyeurism/exhibitionism, nerd/hunk

Good Catch

This free short story is about a Grindr hookup gone awry. Zach is just trying to get a little action while stuck in town taking care of his grandma. He's desperate enough to put up with some guy's sporty innuendos. Gross. He never expects a quick hookup might lead to meeting someone worth keeping around.

Tropes: Mistaken identity, coming out, first time



Sign up for [Lee's email list](#) so you don't miss updates on future books.

ABOUT LEE

Lee Blair is a queer author and screenwriter from Oregon who writes low angst, sweet, steamy, and funny queer contemporary romance. She's constantly amused by the antics of her two ginger cats, considers daydreaming about future trips to Scotland a part-time job, and is obsessed with Schitt's Creek to an alarming degree.

Lee also hosts a podcast for readers of low angst queer romance called the [Low Angst Library](#).

