



HEROES AT HOME

*Straight
Battle*

WILLOW DIXON

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Heroes at Home

Willow Dixon

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Chapter 1

Gage

I glanced down at my phone and checked the time. I had a notification. Doc had texted about twenty minutes ago.

I shoved my phone back into my pocket before anyone could notice I was looking at it while I was supposed to be paying attention to the meeting.

It was our monthly report meeting, where we all sat around in the stuffy conference room and listened as each department head read their status reports. Then we were encouraged to talk about the reports, ask about them, and brainstorm ways to have even nicer reports next month.

My gaze landed on Lachlan as he droned on about projected numbers and interest rates.

I wasn't in charge of anything and didn't have enough responsibility to make a difference in our numbers, so my only purpose at these meetings was as a seat warmer.

At least we got paid overtime. Not time and half, but overtime, which at my bank was harder to come by than leprechaun gold.

My phone vibrated in my pocket, alerting me I had another text. Was it from Doc again? It had been a few weeks since we'd talked, which wasn't usual for us. Not since he'd come home, at least.

I reached into my pocket and grab my phone on autopilot. Damn, I was in a meeting and couldn't text with my friends.

I sat up straighter in my chair. Hopefully shifting around would get the blood flowing in my legs again. I was half tempted to go stand at the back of the room and finish the meeting like that. That would get people talking.

Getting up and standing during lectures had been a trick we'd used at boot camp to avoid falling asleep at our desks.

Well, it wasn't exactly a trick, since the staff told us to do it, but it worked.

Falling asleep while standing wasn't impossible, but it was hard to do. I'd learned I could fall asleep in all sorts of weird positions in my five years in the army. It was amazing how adaptive the human body could be when you were battling extreme sleep deprivation and exhaustion.

Falling asleep at your desk during a lecture was the *worst* thing you could do during class. The entire group would be punished and you'd be singled out and punished on top of the group punishment. Then you had to deal with your platoon mates ire because the staff was in a bad mood and would be extra picky during inspection.

The consequences of falling asleep in a report meeting weren't as dire as public humiliation, verbal abuse, and physical punishments, but I would get chewed out, and it could affect my job. I needed that to pay my bills, so it looked like I would have to find another way to stay awake.

I dug around in my pocket and pulled out a small, wrapped candy I'd grabbed from the jar on my desk before the meeting. It wasn't much, but the little bit of sugar should help; so would concentrating on sucking it. That would at least occupy my mind and help me wake up.

Being as covert as possible, I unwrapped the candy and popped it into my mouth. It clicked against my teeth as I moved it around, and I sighed as sweetness coated my tongue.

It perked me up enough I could focus on Valerie, who had taken over from Lachlan and was pointing to a chart on the smartboard. I studied the board as I tried to catch up. I might not care about the reports, but I did care about keeping my job. I could fake interest for another forty-five minutes, then go home and decompress.

....

Gage: What's up, Doc?

Doc: That gets funnier every time

He added an eye roll emoji, and I chuckled.

I was on my couch with a beer in one hand, my phone in the other, and the congealed remnants of a TV dinner on the coffee table in front of me.

I'd been home for twenty minutes. Just enough time to strip off my work clothes, heat up the dinner, scarf it down, and text Doc back.

He'd asked how I was doing and if I'd figured out how to fix warped hardwood floors.

Doc: I'm switching to video. This is ridiculous.

I laughed as I waited for him to FaceTime me.

"You're such an elder millennial," I teased as I answered his call.

"You're only five years younger than me, asshole. You're a millennial too."

"Yeah, but it's an important five years, tech-wise. How old were you when the internet became a thing?"

"Shut up." He rolled his eyes.

"I mean, you were, what, sixteen when Google was launched. Google!"

"And you were eleven, asshat." He gave me his trademark smirk.

"Texting," I said pointedly. "How old were you when you sent your first text? Or got your first phone?"

"Point taken. You done verbally accosting me?"

"For now." I leaned back against the couch and adjusted the phone so I was centered in the video.

As much as I teased Doc about his aversion to having long conversations over text, I did appreciate doing this over video call. Texting was fine, but it was so impersonal, and there were some things you just couldn't talk about over text.

"How's Tanner doing?" I asked.

"He's good. Throwing himself into this training thing." Doc's voice went gentle as his eyes softened.

He always got that dreamy look on his face when he was talking about his boyfriend.

I'd known Doc for fifteen years, ever since I was a scared eighteen-year-old thrust into the middle of a war. He might have only been a few years older than me and our medic, but he'd been my savior that tour.

If you asked him now, Doc would say he'd just been looking out for me. But to my terrified teenage self, Doc had been the one thing I could cling to. The one person who'd made me feel safe in a time when being shot at was just another Tuesday.

In all that time, I'd never seen Doc get soft for anyone. He'd dated, even been engaged for years, but something had been missing from those relationships, and he'd found it with Tanner.

"That's a good sign for a business partner," I said.

"I still can't believe I own a business. Well, half of one."

"You made a good investment."

"Of course you'd say that." Doc's voice was affectionate. "But enough about me. How're you? How's the reno going?"

"There aren't enough YouTube videos or TikToks to make me handy."

"That bad?"

"I forgot to turn the power off while I was changing a light switch to a dimmer. Now the switch doesn't work, the wires are a mess, and I'm pretty sure my heart has been reset to factory settings after that jolt."

"Damn. That's bad."

"Yeah. I don't know why I picked a fixer-upper when I have no practical skills outside of erecting tents and cleaning weapons."

"Don't forget taking inventory of supply closets."

"Definitely can't forget that. I'm a master at that one."

“You bought a fixer-upper because you’re a cheap bastard and didn’t want to shell out the big bucks for a modern house and decided that you’d rather do it alone, just like you do everything else.”

“Damn, Doc. Shots fired. Remind me not to make fun of your millennialness again.”

“Am I wrong?”

“You can go fuck yourself.”

“Nah, I’ve got Tanner to do that. Although—”

“I love you, Doc, but I do not need to know your preferences, especially not when Tanner and I are having coffee later this week.”

“What, you don’t want to know about how we—”

“Nope! Nope nope nope.” I shook my head, biting back a laugh at Doc’s teasing. “I’ve seen you have sex, asshole. I know exactly what your preference is. I like Tanner, and I don’t need to be picturing you plowing him as we have lattes.”

Doc let out a bark of laughter, his eyes glittering. “Your fault for coming into the room when the door was closed.”

“We were at a party, and you were fucking on my coat, which was with all the other coats in the *coat room*. That sounds like a *you* issue.”

“We closed the door.”

“It was barely closed. It wasn’t even latched!”

“You still had to open it.”

“And I got to see more of you than I ever wanted to see.”

“You weren’t impressed by my big dick and awesome sexual prowess?”

“First, never say sexual prowess again. And your dick isn’t any bigger than mine, so.” I rolled one shoulder in a casual shrug as Doc burst out laughing.

“Touché. You’re pretty chill for a straight dude.”

“I mean, my three best friends are all gay. It would be weird if I wasn’t chill with you guys and your dicks.”

“What are you going to do about the house?”

I paused as I had to switch gears. Doc had a habit of abruptly moving from one subject to another, and the segues never made any sense.

“Um, spend a fortune on home improvement supplies and fail spectacularly at everything I try?”

“Good plan. And what are you going to do when your house is a mess of half-done projects?”

“Burn it down and collect the insurance. Then maybe get a luxury condo downtown.”

“You’ve put a lot of thought into this. Should I be worried?”

“Nah. I hate the traffic downtown. I’d never move there.”

“I may have a solution for you.”

“About living downtown?”

“No, for your house, numb nuts.”

“You’re the one who doesn’t know what a segue is.” I paused. “Well? What’s the solution?”

“Have you ever met my friend Trevor?”

“He’s the accountant, right?”

“Right.”

I might have lived in Doc’s hometown for the last ten years, but I didn’t know too many people from his life. I’d met Trevor a few times when Doc had brought me to different events over the years, but I’d never had a conversation with the man.

“He has a twin brother named Tyler.”

“Okay.” I nodded slowly.

“Tyler’s had a rough go of it.”

“Oo-kaaay.”

“I don’t want to give his whole backstory, but he’s recently divorced, and he got screwed big-time. He’s having some financial issues.”

“And how does my house factor into this story?”

“He’s a handyman.”

“A handyman?”

“He’s sort of a jack-of-all-trades. He’s been working in construction and maintenance his entire life. He’s got experience with masonry, electrical shit, plumbing, carpentry. Everything.”

“And he’s looking for work? I don’t have the money to pay someone at his skill level. I could afford minimum wage, but that would just be insulting to anyone, especially someone with that much experience.”

“Well, you’re both in luck. Tyler needs somewhere to stay, and you need someone who can fix your house.”

“Are you suggesting that I ask a complete stranger to move into my house and fix it while I’m at work?”

“Yeah, but you don’t have to make it sound like the opening to a 60 Minutes episode. I’ve known Tyler my entire life. He’s good people. He’s having a tough time right now, but he’s hard working and trustworthy, and he’s easy to get along with. I think this could help both of you.”

“I need to meet him first. Have you even talked to him about this?”

“Trevor was going to. I wanted to run it by you before we got his hopes up.”

“I mean, it sounds kinda perfect. But I need to talk to him first. I can’t have a stranger living in my house.”

“Of course not. I’ll talk to Trev, and we can set up a meeting if Tyler agrees.”

“This feels like you’re setting us up on an adult playdate.”

“More like a job interview, but yeah, it would be nice if you could play well together.”

“When am I not nice?”

Doc chuckled as I bristled.

He turned his attention away from the phone, his eyes lighting up.

“Tanner home?”

“He just walked in.”

“Go. I’ll talk to you later.”

I ended the call, tossed my phone onto the couch next to me, and took a pull from my now warm beer.

My house wasn’t huge, but it wasn’t small either. It had three bedrooms upstairs, along with two bathrooms and the entry to the attic. The first floor had a half bath, a big country kitchen, a huge dining and living area, and a tiny bedroom with a small bathroom in the back of the kitchen that my Realtor had said was servant’s quarters. The basement was unfinished and only good for storage. The attic had been converted into a library and was my favorite room in the house.

It was a lot of space for one person, but I’d only bought it as an investment. Considering the condition of the house, I’d paid way under market value for it. I’d planned to fix it up, then sell it and use the profits to find my dream home, or at least as close to it as I could find.

This year had been a tough one in terms of real estate. It had been a seller’s market, and the only reason I’d been able to afford this place was the laundry list of issues the home inspector had found. I’d been the only idiot not to rescind my offer, so I was now the proud owner of a house I had no idea how to fix or maintain.

Having someone in the house wouldn’t be the worst thing, especially if he was quiet and did his own thing. And it would be nice not to spend myself in the poorhouse wasting supplies and making things worse like I’d been doing so far.

Damn, Doc was always solving my issues. Too bad he wouldn’t let anyone other than Tanner help him.

Chapter 2

Tyler

“S up,” I said through a mouthful of protein bar as my brother came into our parents’ living room and plopped down onto the couch next to me. He grabbed the remote and turned the TV off. “Fuck off.”

“Were you actually watching that?”

“No, but that’s beside the point.” I rolled my eyes. “What do you want?”

“Mom and Dad home?”

“They went to Ben and Carla’s.”

“Good. Now we can talk without Mom listening at the door.”

I snorted. Our mother was a kind woman, but she was nosy as all hell and was always in our business. If someone said it in the house, she wanted to hear it. We’d had plenty of whispered conversations with music playing over the years to try and avoid her eavesdropping.

“Well?” I asked when Trevor didn’t say anything.

My brother and I might be twins, but we looked nothing alike. We had the same build, and our features were similar, but he was blond while I had dark hair, and his eyes were brown while mine were green. He’d also been blessed with a rugged complexion that tanned dark in the sun. Me, I burned if I so much as thought about going outside when the UV rays were at maximum. I was so pale I regularly got sunburned in the winter because I always forgot to put sunscreen on.

“How’s the job hunt going?”

“It’s going.” I bit my lip, not wanting to snap at him that I was *trying* to find work.

It had been almost seven months since I’d had an over-the-table gig. I’d done work for friends and family for cash, but

that wasn't enough to pay my bills, especially now that my benefits were a thing of the past and my account was in the negative after my divorce had been finalized.

I always got defensive when people brought up my lack of work. It wasn't that I didn't want to work; it was that no one would hire a thirty-eight-year-old handyman who could do everything but specialized in nothing. My last job had been installing drywall, which had taken a toll on my back and knees. To be honest, I hadn't been all that broken up when my contract hadn't been renewed.

The truth was, I was getting older, and a life of manual labor had aged me beyond my years. I was a liability, and there were only so many blinds that needed to be hung or firepits that needed to be put together.

"Remember how you and Chrissy used to talk about flipping a house?"

"Yeah?" I blinked at him. My ex-wife and I had had plenty of dreams, including flipping a house, but that had never happened because she'd decided to jump into bed with her boss rather than stick things out with a loser like me.

"I know someone, well, my friend knows someone, who's flipping a house."

"Um, cool?"

"You remember Keaton?"

"The soldier?"

"Yeah. He has a buddy who used to be in the military with him. He lives here now and bought a house. Apparently, it's a mess, and he has zero fixer-upper skills."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"He needs a handyman, and you need work,"

"Really? Like how much work are we talking?"

"There's one catch."

"What?"

“He can’t pay your rates.”

“So why are we talking about this if he can’t pay?”

“Because he has something else to offer.”

“That sounds ominous.”

“A place to stay, jackass.” Trevor rolled his eyes. “He’s got a big house, and he lives alone. He’d pay for all the materials, you’d do the work while he’s at his job all day, and you get a place to live, utilities included, for free. Keaton said his buddy is able to pay you minimum wage for the hours you work, and the room and board would be on top of that to compensate for what he can’t pay in cash.”

“That’s not a horrible arrangement. But what do you know about this friend of his?”

“Not much. I’ve met him a few times. He’s friendly. A bit younger. He lives over near Maple.”

“Wow.” That entire area was full of craftsman houses, older but beautifully made.

“Thought you’d like that.” Trevor grinned. “He’s ex-army. He and Keaton are super close. Keaton wouldn’t be friends with an asshole.”

That was true. Keaton Chambers was the quintessential nice guy. He was friendly and open with everyone, and he had zero time for bullies or jerks.

“And this guy wants a stranger to move into his house?”

“He needs the work done.” Trevor shrugged. “I’m sure it’s not his first choice, but it helps both of you. He gets his house fixed, you get out of here, and you get a chance to save some money.”

I wouldn’t get rich working for Keaton’s friend, but not having to pay for room and board would help me out. The free accommodations were the only reason I was back in my old room at our parents’ house. I needed a place to stay, but without a steady income, I couldn’t afford one.

I loved my parents, and we were a close-knit family, but after being on my own for twenty years, living under their roof again wasn't an easy adjustment.

The free dinners were a nice perk, but the constant stream of advice and questions about what I was doing with my life, what my plans were, and when I was going to start dating again were getting old.

"I mean, I'd have to meet him first. I can't just move into a guy's house without talking to him."

"For sure." Trevor nodded. "He said the same thing. How about Friday after work?"

"Friday?"

That was the day after tomorrow.

"Yeah. He's off work at six and should be home by seven. You could stop by around then."

"Um, that works."

It wasn't like I had any exciting Friday night plans. My social life consisted of hanging out with my brother and his family, my parents, or going to Glenn's, a bar nearby, to grab a beer and be alone for a little bit.

"I gave your number to Keaton. He'll pass it onto his friend, and you guys can finalize a time."

"This is weird, right? I'm too old to have my brother passing my number onto people."

"Well, if I was passing it onto him to set you up, that would be stupid, since you're both straight." He rolled his eyes. "I'm trying to help you get back on your feet."

"I know. And thanks." I sighed.

Trevor leaned back against the couch, looking at me with an unreadable expression on his face.

"What?"

"Nothing. Want to come over for dinner tomorrow?"

“Is Marianne going to be working late?” I asked knowingly.

“Yeah.” He grinned sheepishly. “The kids have been begging me to have Uncle Tyler make them his famous shepherd’s pie again.”

“Around five good? That way I’ll have time to cook before the rugrats get hungry.”

My brother was a good dad and a dedicated husband, but he couldn’t cook worth shit. He was the type who could burn water, and the last time he’d made pasta the noodles had been so overcooked they’d been mushy and shapeless.

I enjoyed cooking. I wasn’t the greatest at it, but I liked to try new recipes and perfect old favorites, and my brother’s family was my preferred taste-testing team.

“That’s perfect.” He patted my knee. “See you tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow.” I nodded as stood and headed out of the living room.

I turned the TV back on but didn’t really see what was on the screen.

Being at home wasn’t ideal, but would living in a stranger’s house be any better? It was true it would be the same as staying with a roommate, which I’d done before. But there was something fundamentally different about having a roommate at twenty-one while you’re trying to establish your adult life and having one at nearly forty because your life was a mess and you had nothing and no one.

I sighed as a wave of melancholy washed over me. I was a failure in every sense of the word. I was lucky I had such an awesome family, and hated to think of where I’d be if I didn’t have their support. If my brother said this was a good idea and this friend of Keaton’s was a good guy, then who was I to look a gift horse in the mouth?

I’d meet with him and see what he had to say. The worst that could happen was that we weren’t compatible, and it wouldn’t work. But then again, we might be, and it could be the opportunity I’d been waiting for.

••••

I flopped down onto my bed—well, the bed I'd had since high school—and let out a deep sigh.

Dinner at my brother's had been a roaring success. The kids had loved my food, Trevor had gotten a night off from cooking, and Marianne had come home to a plate in the oven and a glass of wine so she could decompress while Trevor and I occupied the kids.

It had been perfect, other than the fact that I was piggybacking off my brother's life. I'd had some of that: the wife, the house, someone to cook for. Now I had nothing.

My phone chirped with an incoming text, knocking me out of my spiral of self-deprecation.

Unknown: Hi, this is Gage. Keaton's friend. Is this Tyler?

Tyler: Hi. Yes, it is.

Gage: Hi.

Tyler: Hi.

I chuckled as the conversation stalled. I didn't blame this Gage guy because I had no idea what to say either.

Gage: Did your brother tell you about my situation?

Tyler: Not all of it. Just that you need someone to fix your house and you're offering room and board as part of the deal.

Gage: That's the gist of it. You interested?

Tyler: I am. But I need more info before I can commit.

Gage: Of course.

Tyler: Did Keaton tell you about my situation?

Gage: Not in too much detail. Just that you're a tradesman and you're looking for work.

Tyler: I am.

Gage: Want to come over tomorrow, and we can talk about the job? I can show you the house, and we can see if this will work.

Tyler: Sure. Around 7:30 good for you?

Gage: Yup. 132 Birch Street.

Tyler: I'll see you then.

Gage: See you.

The screen went dark as I stared at it.

It looked like this was happening, and I didn't know what to do with the flutter of nerves that ran through me.

....

I sat in my car in the driveway of 132 Birch Street, staring up at the house in front of me.

The lawn was overgrown, full of weeds, and had multiple bare patches. The porch was in good shape but it could use a few coats of stain. The house itself was beautiful, built in a traditional craftsman-style, square with a peaked roof and big windows in the front. The siding looked original to the house and could use some power washing, but the windows seemed new.

I climbed out of my car and closed the door, my stomach fluttering and my palms damp.

I wasn't nervous per se, but I was apprehensive. I was naturally shy and introverted, and I wasn't the most outgoing person. Meeting new people was always a bit of struggle, and there was a lot riding on this meeting.

I made my way up the porch and knocked on the screen door.

The actual front door was ornately carved and had a beautiful stained-glass rose inlaid in the window. The glass was in good shape, but the door needed some TLC to smooth out the nicks and dents in it.

The door swung open. The guy on the other side was the opposite of what I'd imagined.

I had no idea why, but I'd thought Gage would look like most people I knew: a little doughy, a lot tired, and a kinda weathered.

He was none of those things.

Trevor had told me he was younger, but I'd pictured someone who was only a few years my junior. Gage looked like he was thirty, tops.

He was also huge. I wasn't a small guy at six feet and around two hundred pounds. I was the first to admit I had a dad bod, and I was used to being one of the biggest guys in any given situation.

Gage was about an inch taller than me, but his width put me to shame. His arms were corded with muscles, his biceps bulging and stretching the fabric of his white T-shirt until it was almost transparent. A tribal-looking tattoo adorned his right pec and collarbone, peeking out of the neckline of his shirt, and another circled those huge biceps. His chest was a massive wall of muscles, and his waist was small and trim, giving him that inverted V-shape I'd never been able to achieve, even in my heyday when I'd been hitting the gym daily.

He looked me up and down with dark, piercing eyes. He was a good-looking man, his features classically handsome. His nose was straight, his lips were full, and his skin was tanned and smooth. Wait, why had I noticed all that?

I had no problem acknowledging when a man was handsome, but it was usually in response to something. Like hearing someone talk about an actor or model. To just look at a random guy and think he was good looking was weird.

"Tyler?" he asked after a long pause.

"Yeah. Gage?" I asked stupidly. Of course it was him.

"Yeah. Come in." He pushed the screen open, and I stepped inside the hallway.

"This is a nice neighborhood," I said as he closed the door behind me. "You don't find this level of craftsmanship anymore."

I glanced around the hallway, my eyes lingering on the wainscoting and the small details carved into the door frames and around the floorboards.

The hardwood floor had seen better days, but the wood itself was in good shape. The walls were dull white, and the accents were all in dark hardwood as well. The contrast was striking.

“You don’t,” he agreed. “Too bad I didn’t realize how hard it would be to restore a house like this compared to your usual cookie-cutter subdivision ones.”

“Yeah, a place like this needs a special touch. Especially if you’re restoring things rather than replacing them, which is a lot harder to do.”

“How about I take you on a tour. Then we can talk about details.”

“Sounds good.” I nodded and fell into step behind Gage as he brought me through the main floor.

The first thing I noticed was how sparse the place was. The only room that seemed to have been fully furnished was the living room with a couch, a huge TV on a stand, and a small coffee table.

I didn’t see any personalization anywhere. No pictures or art or knickknacks of any kind. Everything was utilitarian, including his bedroom, which only had a king bed, a dresser, and a lamp and clock on a table on one side of the bed.

The house was well maintained. The bones were good, and there didn’t seem to be any major renovations that needed to be done unless Gage wanted to upgrade things. The kitchen looked like it was original to the house, but the bathrooms had gone through several rounds of renos and were quite luxurious compared to the rest of the house.

The upstairs was in better shape than the downstairs. The master bedroom and ensuite, which was rare in a house this age, were modern and had been meticulously restored, but the other bedrooms needed work. The hall bathroom was nice,

especially compared to the rest of the house, but it could use a coat of paint.

The attic was a thing of beauty. The bookshelves were all custom built with gorgeous detailing and carvings. He had a decent amount of books, which was surprising considering how bare the rest of the house was. The entire room could use some freshening up and some new area rugs, maybe a few squashy chairs.

The basement was a disaster. It was unfinished with exposed pipes and weird beams that didn't make sense. It needed a complete overhaul, even if Gage just wanted to keep it for storage. If he wanted it to be a livable space, it would take a metric crap ton of work.

“What do you think?” he asked when we were back in his dining room. He pointed to one of the two chairs at his table, and I slid into it.

“The house has good bones. Most of the issues are superficial. Without opening up walls, I can't tell if the electrical is good or if it's knob-and-tube wiring and needs to be replaced. But the fuse box gives me hope it was already done.”

“Here, this might help.”

Gage stood and went to a small table in the corner of the room. He pulled a binder out of the drawer and handed it to me.

I opened it and found page after page of receipts and detailed breakdowns of all the work that had been done on the house in the last fourteen years, and a recent report from a home inspector.

“The sellers left you this?” I asked as I flipped through the binder.

“Yup. I don't have any history for before they lived here, but it seems like they did a bunch of work.”

“They did. And they did the expensive jobs. New electrical, so we don't have to worry about that. New energy-efficient windows, and the roof is only five years old. The

furnace and water heater are ten years old, so that's good." I skimmed the home inspection report. "New plumbing too. That'll save you a ton. Plumbing gets expensive pretty quick."

"How much do you think it'll cost in materials to fix it up?"

"Without knowing exactly what you want, I can't be sure." I closed the book and leaned back in my chair. "But we're not looking at anything major, other than the warped floorboards in the kitchen bedroom. That won't be an easy fix if you're looking to keep the original hardwood."

"How do you feel about your ability to fix all these issues?"

"I'm confident that I can do it. It's all stuff I've done countless times before. I can get you references from some of my old bosses if need be."

"It's fine. If Doc says you're good people, then I believe him."

"Doc?"

"Keaton."

"You're close?"

"He's been one of my best friends for fifteen years." Gage nodded, his cheeks flushing a soft pink.

"I don't know him as well as you, but Keaton's a good guy. He and my brother have been friends since they were toddlers."

"Not you, though?"

"I was friendly with him because that's just who Keaton is, but no. He and I didn't run in the same circles."

"You and Trevor are twins, right?"

"Fraternal twins, yeah. That's why we don't look alike."

"You do." He studied me carefully. "You have the same face and physique. Just your coloring is different."

I resisted the urge to squirm under his scrutiny. His eyes were sharp, and he seemed to be taking everything in, like he was truly looking at and seeing all of me. It was a bit disconcerting.

“Most people don’t see that.”

“I notice things.” He shrugged. “Um, do you have any questions about the job?”

“Just what my responsibilities will be.”

“Basically, fixing my house. I’ll give you one of my credit cards so you can buy the materials, and I’ll need you to log your hours and submit them to me at the end of every week. I’ll pay you every two weeks, on Friday, and we can do Venmo or cash. It’s up to you.”

“Venmo will be easier.”

“That works.” He nodded. “You’ll have free rein of the house, but the master bedroom and bath are mine. You can pick one of the other rooms to be yours.”

“Upstairs?”

“Unless you want to sleep in a glorified closet with warped floors.” He quirked his eyebrow at me, and I rolled my eyes as I grinned.

“No thanks. Upstairs works for me.”

“I’ll clean out half the fridge and some cupboards so you can keep your food. You can use whatever is in the house, but dirty dishes drive me crazy, so please don’t leave them lying around.”

“No problem.” I was a clean person by nature, so that wouldn’t be hard. “What about outside work?”

“Do you, by chance, do landscaping too?” he asked, perking up.

“Some landscaping. Mowing, gardening, that sort of thing.”

“My garden is a mess. It’s so overgrown. If you could tame that or even just yank everything out so I can start fresh next

year, that would be awesome. Here.” He stood, motioning for me to follow him.

We made our way through the kitchen to the back door. He flung it open, and we stepped out onto the back deck.

It was big but in rough shape. Half the boards were dotted with bare patches where the stain had rubbed off them. Lots were split, some were dark with mold, and others were so full of knotholes I worried about their stability. The railings were in decent condition, so were the uprights, but the stairs were falling apart.

“Can you fix this, or do I need to tear it down and start fresh?” he asked as I walked around the deck, testing the boards.

Several of them were bendy, a few were squishy. Some cracked as I stepped on them. At least half of them would need to be replaced immediately.

“I can fix this, but it’ll be a long-term project. I can pop out the rotten boards and replace them. And I can strip the old boards and restrain them to prolong their life, but the new boards will have to weather before you can stain them, so it’ll look weird for the next year.”

“As long as I don’t have to rebuild it from scratch, I’m good with it looking weird. I’m the only one who sees it.”

“I can probably get you another five years out of it, but I can’t guarantee anything beyond that. And that’s only if it’s structurally sound once I get under it and check.”

“Five years is better than doing it all now, so I’m fine with that.”

I leaned against the railing and looked at his yard. It was small considering the size of the lots around him, but it was level, while most places around here had sloped yards. One giant tree in the middle of the yard could use some trimming. Several stumps littering the landscape told me the other trees that had been on the property had either fallen over or been removed.

The lawn was a mess. Half of it was pure weeds with patches of grass and bare spots covering the rest. The shed looked like it was structurally sound, but I'd need to check out the inside to be sure, since the siding could hide rot.

"I can mow, but I don't know anything about weeds or growing grass." He shrugged sheepishly.

"I'm no expert, but prepping the ground and putting down grass seed isn't too hard. The weeds will be another story because it looks like they've been slowly taking over the grass for years. It'll take a few seasons to get rid of them. It's not the right time for growing grass yet, but I could get some of this under control in the fall."

"And the front?"

"The porch is in good shape. A few coats of stain after getting the wood prepped will be all it needs. The door can be restored, and the siding just needs a good washing. The lawn is better, but again, it'll take a few seasons to get a nice full lawn of grass, considering how bad the weeds are."

"That's better than I thought. I figured the porch needed to be replaced, since it's bare wood."

"Nope. They used pressure-treated wood, so even though it's bare, it's durable. Your back deck needs some major work because they didn't use as good a quality of wood, but the front is good."

"Phew, at least something is going my way." He grinned at me. "What about the fence?"

"I'll have to inspect it, but it looks fine." I traced my eyes over the wooden fence surrounding his property. "The binder said it was put in nine years ago, and it looks like it's held up well."

"So do you think this is something you'd be interested in?"

I followed him back into the house, my mind spinning with all the things that needed to be done. Several rooms had carpeting I'd have to rip up, and while there was a chance the hardwood underneath was in good condition, it might not be. There was some minor electrical work, and he'd mentioned

upgrading the kitchen, which could lead to plumbing issues, even with the work the previous owners had already done.

But most of the jobs were easy fixes. It wouldn't be quick work, but none of it was above my skill set.

"I think so. It's not every day I get to work on a place like this. Usually, I'm putting furniture together or hanging blinds. Or painting walls."

"And you've done all this stuff before?"

"I have."

"And you think you could live here?"

"I think it'll be fine. You seem like a quiet guy."

"I am. I'm at work all day, so I figure that's when you can do the bulk of the work, and you don't have to work weekends either. I know it's going to take time. You can go at your own pace instead of trying to do everything as quickly as possible. Quality over speed."

"You're not worried I'm going to fleece you and log all sorts of extra hours?"

"Are you?" He tilted his head as he studied me.

"No. That's not my style."

"Good. So should I have a contract drawn up?"

"A contract?"

"Yeah, to protect you."

"Sure. I mean, you can, but I'm good with an old-fashioned agreement and a handshake. I promise not to rip you off, and you promise not to be a dick and make me work all the time. Seems pretty straightforward to me."

Gage grinned, some of the tension leaking out of his body.

"Sounds like a good deal to me."

I put out my hand, and Gage shook it. His grip was tight, and his skin was hot. A prickle of awareness ticked the back of my neck that I didn't know what to do with, so I ignored it.

“When do you want to start?” he asked as he dropped my hand.

“Monday?”

“You can get out of your lease that quick?”

“I’m staying with family, so I can leave whenever I want,” I said evasively, not wanting to tell him I was living with my parents again.

“Oh. Okay. That makes things easier for sure. I’ll get you the spare key, and you can move your stuff in this weekend. Just text me you’re coming so I don’t freak out if I’m home. I’ve lived alone for so long it’ll be an adjustment to having someone here, and random doors opening will legit scare me.”

“I’m so used to being surrounded by people it’s going to be the opposite for me.” I snorted. “Only living with one person, who seems quiet and keeps to themselves, will be a major step up from where I’m at.”

“It looks like Doc was right.” He sighed. “He always knows how to fix my problems.”

“Why do you call him Doc?”

“We met when I was posted to his unit. He was our medic, and since Doc is the universal nickname for medics, that’s what I’ve always called him.” Gage shrugged. “It’s weird calling him Keaton, even though we haven’t worked together in almost thirteen years now. He’ll always be Doc to me.”

I didn’t know what to say to that and bobbed my head like one of those dashboard figures.

The only things I knew about the army were from movies, and I was pretty sure those didn’t show the most accurate representation of life in the armed forces.

Keaton, and now Gage, were the only veterans I’d met, the only people who’d served, and I hoped I didn’t say anything stupid to either of them because of my ignorance.

“Let me grab the key for you.”

I waited in the living room as Gage hurried into the kitchen. He came back, holding out a key.

I took it, then pulled my keychain out of my pocket so I could slip the new key on it and tucked my keys back into my pocket.

“So I guess I’ll see you this weekend?” Gage asked, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Yeah. I’ll be sure to text first.”

“Cool.” Gage bit his lip. “It was nice to meet you.”

“You too.”

This was awkward as all hell. I gave him a little wave and headed to the front door.

Something about Gage felt familiar. He seemed like a nice guy, and he’d been easy to talk to. I wasn’t expecting us to become besties or anything, but I could see us becoming friends, and god knew I needed more of those in my life.

I started my car and gave the house one more look. I was going to enjoy working for Gage. The house was gorgeous, and it was exactly the kind of work I loved to do. And having my own space was the best part. I loved my parents, but I needed to get out of their house.

I might be thirty-eight, but to my parents, I would always be sixteen, and while I knew their concern came from a good place, I was way too old to be treated like a kid.

My life might be a mess, and I might have lost everything when Chrissy left me, but I was a grown-ass man. I could rebuild my life, but I needed the space to do it. And living here would hopefully help me pad my bank account while giving me the freedom to figure out who I was now that I was single again.

Chapter 3

Gage

Tyler was turning out to be the perfect roommate.

He, his brother, and a few guys I didn't know had moved his stuff into my house over the weekend. Doc and Tanner had come by to "help." And by help, I mean Doc and their dog, Loki, had played in the backyard, distracting the guys who were hauling shit around while Tanner helped me rearrange the kitchen to accommodate Tyler's stuff.

He'd taken the smaller of the upstairs bedrooms, the one next to the hall bathroom, but other than his bedroom set, he didn't have any furniture.

How pathetic was it that two grown men didn't even have enough furniture to fill a house? I'd lived in a small condo near the bank where I worked before I'd bought this place, so the aesthetic wasn't only minimalist; it was downright sparse.

From what I'd gleaned, Tyler had gone through a nasty divorce and had moved back in with his parents. That would explain his lack of furnishings.

He was quiet, courteous, and clean, three qualities I appreciated in a roommate.

The first week with him in the house had been an adjustment, mostly since I wasn't used to having another person in my space. I'd never had to worry about someone using the hot water, planning my showers around theirs, or having my kitchen occupied when I was hungry.

We didn't see much of each other that first week. Tyler spent most of his time in his room when I was home, but it was comforting having someone else in the house. It made things less lonely.

I'd never lived with a partner or had a roommate once I released from the army. I'd spent enough time crammed into a room with a bunch of other guys, dealing with their messes

and snoring and always having someone in my face so I couldn't even get a minute to myself to decompress or refill my people meter after a long day.

I'd sworn I'd never live like that again and had rented some sketchy places over the years, but always alone.

I walked into the kitchen, where Tyler was stirring in a pot on the stove.

"I emailed you my hours," Tyler said.

"I got it. I'll transfer your money later tonight."

"Thanks." He turned back to the stove.

"What is that?" I sniffed the air, the most interesting blend of spices tickling my nose.

They were savory and spicy but still had a note of sweetness.

"Butter chicken. Ever had it?"

I shook my head as I walked over and peeked into the pot. There were big chunks of chicken in a thick, orange sauce.

"Is that a rice cooker?" I gestured at a round pot type appliance plugged into one of the outlets on the counter.

"It is. You're not much of a cook, are you?"

"How could you tell?" I leaned against the counter, my hip on the wooden lip, and crossed my arms over my chest.

"I've lived here for six days, and I've never seen you use more than the microwave. And there are more TV dinners in your freezer than is remotely healthy."

"I never learned how to cook, and the few times I've tried have been a disaster. I can fuck up pasta. Hell, I can barely make a decent cup of tea."

"But you're good with coffee?" He grinned and pointed the wooden spoon at my coffee machine. It was the one thing in my kitchen I'd splurged on, and it had all the bells and whistles you'd find in a coffee shop machine.

“Coffee is life.” I shrugged. “And it’s hard to mess it up when the machine does all the work.”

“Have you eaten yet?” He pushed some of the chicken around, coating it in the sauce.

“Not yet.”

“Want some?”

“Really?”

“Sure. I always make lots. It’s easier to cook for two than it is for one.”

I eyed the pot, a little unsure if I’d like it, and Tyler nudged me with his elbow.

“Grab a spoon.”

I took a spoon out of the drawer and gave it to him. He dipped it into the sauce, then held it out to me.

“Taste.”

I took the spoon and put it to my lips, taking a taste of the sauce.

“You like?” he asked.

I shoved the spoon into my mouth and sucked off the rest of the sauce. It was delicious. Creamy and spicy and a little sweet while having some lingering heat.

“I like.”

“Grab two of the big bowls, and I’ll plate some for us.”

I opened the cupboard and put the bowls on the counter, then stood back as he scooped some of the rice out of the cooker and put it in the bowls. He then added some of the chicken and spooned extra sauce on top.

It looked good, like something you’d get at a restaurant.

“Want a beer or wine?” I went to the fridge to get us something to drink.

“I don’t have any booze. Water is fine.”

“You’re sharing your food with me. The least I can do is share my alcohol.”

“Wine would probably go better with the meal. Do you have white?”

“You’re in luck.” I pulled out a nearly full bottle of chardonnay. “I don’t drink red because the sulfites give me a headache.”

“I usually only drink red, but I like white with meals.”

I poured two glasses of wine and brought them to the dining room.

The detailed woodwork was incredible. The walls were a deep crimson, which worked, even with how dark the room was. It was big enough to fit a table for at least eight, and the rickety two-person set I’d shoved in looked out of place in such an ornate and fancy room.

Tyler was a few steps behind me, and he put the bowls at our places. I hurried back into the kitchen and grabbed some utensils. When I came back, Tyler sat at the table, waiting for me.

I handed him a spoon, fork, and a napkin, then slid into my chair.

“When did you get into cooking?” I loaded up my spoon with meat and rice.

“About ten years ago, maybe a little longer. I started watching cooking shows when I got married because Chrissy hated cooking, and I realized I enjoyed it.”

“And Chrissy is your ex-wife?” I asked, then shoved a spoonful of food into my mouth. “Oh my god, this is good.” The flavors hit my mouth and I bit back a moan.

I chewed quickly and scooped up some more food and shoveled it into my mouth. It had been so long since I had a meal like this, something that wasn’t cooked in a microwave and had actual fresh ingredients in it. It was the best meal I’d had in months.

“She is.” He sighed. “You’ve never been married?”

I swallowed. “Nah. Never found a girl I wanted to settle with.”

“How old are you?” he asked.

“Thirty-three.”

“Oh. I thought you were younger.”

“I get that a lot. Baby face and all.” I grinned as I picked up my wine glass. “And you’re the same age as Doc?”

“Yup.”

I took a sip of my wine. It had been the right choice over beer. I liked beer, but it wouldn’t taste right with the meal.

“Have you dated much since your divorce,” I asked.

“Not a lot.” He sipped his wine, and my eyes were drawn to his Adam’s apple as it bobbed and worked as he swallowed. “Or at all if I’m being honest.”

A little prickle of... something moved up my spine, and I tore my eyes from his throat, unsettled and uncomfortable all of a sudden.

“Have you wanted to?” I asked. I didn’t know why, I was still talking about this. It was a little personal for our first real conversation, but Tyler didn’t seem put out by my question.

“Sort of?” He rolled one shoulder and took another sip of his wine. “The last few years of my marriage weren’t great. We were distant, didn’t really talk, definitely didn’t make time for each other. I didn’t realize it at the time, but she was getting her needs met elsewhere. That’s why she didn’t seem to want anything to do with me.”

“That’s horrible. I don’t understand cheating. If you’re not happy with your partner, why stay? Life is too short to jerk people around like that.”

“I guess she needed to make sure he was the one before she broke things off with me.”

“I’m sorry, man. That’s rough.”

He shrugged again. “It could have been worse. We were both already emotionally checked out by the time she left. I was angry, still am, at the cheating, but it didn’t devastate me. I was only going through the motions of being married at that point.”

“I guess that would make it easier to move on,” I said as Tyler took a big bite of his dinner.

“It did,” he said when he’d swallowed.

“So are you looking for a date or a girlfriend?”

“Honestly, I think a casual thing would be best for me. I’m over Chrissy, but I’m not looking for anything serious, not yet. What about you?” he asked just as I shoveled a huge bite into my mouth.

It took a moment to chew and swallow, and Tyler grinned.

“It’s like when you’re at a restaurant and the server comes and asks if you need anything while your mouth is full.”

“I swear they do that on purpose.” I chuckled and took a sip of my wine.

“So are you single, or...”

“Single.” I scraped my spoon against the side of my bowl, pushing some of the rice around so I could better scoop it up. “Pretty much the same boat as you. Casual and fun. I’m not ready to settle down.”

I didn’t add that I probably never would be. I was lucky that I could usually get laid when I wanted to and never had a problem meeting women. The issue was that all the women I met were looking to settle down and start families or settle down and get dogs, but that wasn’t what I wanted.

Family wasn’t in the cards for me, and while I liked dogs, I probably needed to get better at taking care of myself before trying to keep something else alive. I’d brutally murdered every plant I’d ever owned, so pets were definitely off the table for now.

“Dating now is weird anyway.” Tyler finished his wine and put the glass down with a gentle *clink*.

“What do you mean?”

“I tried the online dating thing, and it’s... different from what I’m used to.” He gave a one-shouldered shrug.

“How so?”

“Chrissy and I met twelve years ago, so I’ve been out of the dating scene for just as long. Back then, online dating wasn’t a thing, not really. There was, like, one site, and it was mostly for hookups. We met through a mutual friend and got to know each other on dates. Now, it’s so different. I’ve talked to a few women online, but nothing ever came of it. No dates, no connections.”

“How long have you been divorced?”

“Six months. We separated about a year before the divorce was finalized.”

“Damn, that was quick.”

“She had a deadline,” he said wryly. “Didn’t want to risk being married to me when she had her boyfriend’s baby.”

“Holy shit.” I blinked. “That’s... wow.”

“Yeah.” He swirled the little bit of wine left in his glass around. “It’s funny because she always told me she didn’t want kids. Guess she just didn’t want my kids.”

I had no idea what to say to that. My friends were amazing men, but other than Keaton, they weren’t relationship people, and honestly, neither was I. I went out, hooked up, sometimes found a short-term thing, but it was never serious.

“That got dark.” He raked his hand through his hair. “Aren’t I just a ray of sunshine tonight?”

“We should go out.”

He looked up at me, surprise on his face.

“Tomorrow. We should go to a bar and see if we can find someone for you.”

“Not you?” He tilted his head as he studied me.

“I mean, I’m not against it.” I grinned. “But my skills as a wingman are legendary, so I’m good with focusing on you.”

He chuckled as he stuck his spoon into his bowl and stirred his food around. “I’ll never say no to a night at the bar. But I have a feeling your wingman skills won’t be enough.”

“Why not?” I looked at him.

He was a handsome guy. He wasn’t some cute, pretty boy, but he had a ruggedness to him that a lot of women found attractive. He worked with his hands, so he most likely had some skills in that department, and he seemed like a nice, genuine person.

“Because no woman would want to be tied to a thirty-eight-year-old unemployed handyman. Not even Tom Hiddleston *and* Chris Hemsworth could help me there.”

“I think you need a refresher course on what a wingman is for,” I teased, trying to brighten the tone of the conversation.

Tyler had been through some shit, that was true, but I didn’t like him talking himself down like that. I had no idea why I gave a shit in the first place. We were basically strangers, but I cared.

“Oh, and why’s that?” He quirked his eyebrow at me.

“A wingman is supposed to help you find a woman. I don’t care who you are. If you walked into a bar with Loki *and* Thor, no one in the place would even look twice at you.”

“Fair point. But then you probably wouldn’t be the best choice either.”

“And why not?”

“Because who in their right mind would choose me over you?”

I flushed hot at the implied compliment. That was weird. I knew I looked good. I’d been blessed with good genes and a love of working out. I put effort into my body, and I wasn’t above using my looks to get what I wanted.

That being said, I didn't brush compliments off or pretend they were owed to me, but they didn't usually make me feel a flutter of... something, especially not from another guy.

I shook my head and shoved the last bite of my dinner into my mouth, trying to distract myself from that train of thinking. It had been a long week, and I was reading into things that weren't there. Simple as that.

"We'll tell them I'm married," I said when I'd swallowed my food. "If I'm unavailable, then you're the only option."

"I don't know if I should be insulted by that or not." The corner of his mouth curled up in a half grin, half smirk.

"That didn't come out right, but you get what I mean."

"I get it." He studied me. "You're serious about this?"

"Why not? It's the weekend, and I had a long-ass week. Going out and having a few drinks, just chilling, sounds like a good time to me."

"You don't want to go out with your friends?"

"My friends aren't the go-out types." I pushed my empty bowl forward and crossed my arms on the table, leaning on them. "Doc and Tanner are the biggest homebodies I've ever met, and Luke and Sarge don't do crowds, not anymore. I usually meet up with some of the guys from work when I want to go out, but I don't have plans with them this weekend."

"Yeah, Okay." Tyler smiled shyly, his gaze flicking to the table. "Sounds like fun."

"Want me to drive?" I grabbed my wine glass and gulped down the rest.

Tyler pushed his chair back and stood, grabbed his empty bowl and glass and shoved the chair back in with his hip.

I followed him into the kitchen, my empty bowl and glass in hand.

"Sure, if you don't mind," he said over his shoulder.

"I'll pick you up at eight, then."

He put his dishes on the counter and laughed as he turned to me. "I'll be sure to wear my prettiest dress."

"You better." I chuckled at his joke. "I'll clean up," I said when he went to put his glass in the dishwasher.

"Are you sure?"

"You cooked. The least I can do is clean."

He stepped back from the dishwasher. "Thanks."

We stared at each other. I wasn't sure what to say, what else there was to say, but at the same time, I wasn't ready for the conversation to end.

"You're more than welcome to use the TV in the living room if you want."

He blinked at me. I really needed to work on my segues.

"I noticed you spend most of your time in your room. I meant it when I said you could have free rein of the house."

"Thanks." He gave me another of those shy grins. "I didn't want to impose."

"You won't. I don't watch a lot of TV."

"No?"

"Nope. I prefer to read."

"The library must have been a huge selling feature for you."

"It's every bookworm's dream to have an actual library in their house." I grinned wistfully as I closed the dishwasher, then moved to the sink so I could take care of the pots. "I used to live in a condo and didn't have a lot of space to collect books. I have a Kindle full of them, but not many pretty ones to put up on my shelves."

"Sounds like you need to go on a book-buying spree."

"Ugh, don't tempt me. I have zero self-control when I see first or limited editions."

"What do you read?"

“A little of everything, but my favorites are sci-fi and high fantasy. If it’s weird, I’ll probably like it.”

He chuckled and leaned against the counter as I filled the sink with water.

“You read?” I asked.

“Not really. I don’t mind the odd mystery here and there, but I’m more of a TV and movies kind of guy.”

“Then you can happily make use of the TV and indulge in some binge-watching whenever you want.”

He looked relaxed and like he belonged there.

Of all the roommates Doc could have hooked me up with, Tyler was a good one, and I was glad things had worked out this way.

Chapter 4

Tyler

“Have you been here before?” Gage asked as we walked up to a place called “The Honest Lawyer.”

“I didn’t even know this place existed.” I waited as he pulled the door open. “It’s been a while since I’ve been downtown.”

“I like it here. It’s chill, good drinks, and it’s usually an older crowd.”

I paused at the “please seat yourself” sign and glanced back at Gage. “Bar or booth?”

“Bar,” he answered, his eyes cutting around the room. “There’s good.” He pointed to a couple of empty seats at the bar.

The place was nice. The décor was subdued, lots of dark wood and deep colors. The bar itself was a U-shape in the middle of the room with tables and booths scattered around it on three sides.

Gage had been right. It was busy, but it wasn’t packed, and most of the patrons seemed to be in their thirties or older.

“What can I get you guys?” the bartender asked as we slid onto our stools.

“Whatever IPA you have on special for tonight,” Gage ordered.

“Same.”

“Coming right up.”

He poured two glasses of beer, put them on the bartop, and slid them toward us.

“Are you looking to pay now or start a tab?” he asked.

“Tab, please,” Gage answered before I could say anything.

The bartender nodded and with a final “enjoy,” he swept down to the other end of the bar.

“Anyone catch your eye?” Gage picked up his glass and took a pull from it. “Oh, this is good.”

I took a sip of my beer. The crisp flavors burst over my tongue, quenching a thirst I hadn’t even realized I had.

“It is.” I put my glass down and looked around the bar.

I needed to pace myself. I wasn’t a big drinker, not anymore. There’d been a time when I’d have a few drinks every night, back when my marriage had started to fall apart. I’d gone through a bit of a phase when Chrissy left, drowning my sorrows, so to speak, but had gotten over that when the hangovers and the strain on my bank account had been too much to handle.

“I just realized I don’t even know your type,” Gage said.

“My type is female.”

Gage laughed and took another pull off his beer. He was already halfway done.

“Good to know, but which specific females?”

“I’m not picky. Over thirty, for sure. But height, size, coloring, ethnicity, none of that matters to me. I find all sorts of people attractive.”

“That’s kinda cool.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I’m sort of the same. I usually end up with brunettes, but that’s just because there are more of them, not because that’s my type. I find people tend to get more attractive the better I get to know them.”

“Oh yeah?” I toyed with my glass. Hopefully he’d elaborate because I could relate.

“Yeah. Like I could be talking to someone who’s gorgeous, but if they’re rude or bigoted or even just unfriendly, their attractiveness fades. Same when I’m talking to someone

people might call plain. If she's sweet or kind or nice or funny, then she's hot to me."

Gage drained his beer and put the empty glass on the bartop, his eyes searching out the bartender.

"I get that. I'm kind of the same way. There has to be something about them that catches my eye, but I'm not so hung up on the little things. A nice smile, beautiful hair, even a good laugh is enough for me to be interested."

"So there are a lot of women over thirty here. See any smiles or hair that catch your eye?"

The bartender grabbed Gage's empty glass. "Another?"

Gage nodded, and I looked around the room.

The place was filled with attractive women, but none that seemed like they were on the lookout. They were in groups with friends, engaged in whatever was going on at their table.

Most of the people sitting at the bar were men, and almost all of them were watching the one TV in the corner of the room playing a baseball game.

"Nah."

"All these women and you don't find any of them attractive?" He quirked his eyebrow.

"Oh, I find a ton of them attractive, but none of them look like they want to be interrupted."

Gage picked up his fresh glass. "You really are a gentleman, aren't you?"

"What do you mean by that?" I took another drink of my half empty beer.

"Just that most of the time when I come here with the guys from work, they don't give a fuck if the women they want to talk to seem open to conversation. They just go over and start chatting them up to see if they get shot down or not."

"I used to be like that, but the older I got, the more I realized that women just want to exist and not always have to worry about men and being bothered by us. Just because a

woman is out at a bar doesn't mean she wants to be chatted up. I can respect that. I don't like talking to random people when I'm not in the mood either."

"But what if she is looking but just looks like she doesn't?"

"Then I miss my opportunity."

Gage smirked.

"What?" I asked warily.

I already felt like a giant square for my speech about not approaching women who weren't giving off vibes. Gage was young, single, and he wasn't just handsome; he was hot. He probably had zero trouble finding women willing to talk to him.

"Nothing. You're just full of surprises."

"You mean I'm lame."

"No. Respecting boundaries is a good thing. It's refreshing to be around someone who thinks that way."

My face and neck heated as he stared at me with those piercing eyes. They were so dark the iris nearly blended in with his pupil, and it felt like he wasn't just looking at me but could see right into me as well.

I looked away, breaking our eye contact, as a flutter of awareness shot up my spine. That was weird, and I was still on my first drink, so it wasn't like I could blame the beer for anything that was happening.

"So you and Keaton served together?" I asked, trying to steer the conversation off me and onto him for a change.

Gage had this ability to make me open up. He asked a question, and the answers spilled out of me. I was usually more reserved and closed off, especially around people I didn't know well, but Gage was different.

Maybe it was because he seemed genuinely interested in my answers, but I was comfortable with him.

He listened. He kept eye contact while he spoke, and he always had this look about him like he was trying to read the deeper meaning of my words. It was disconcerting, but at the same time, it felt good. I wasn't used to people paying attention to me. I tended to blend in with the background, the perpetual wallflower. It was nice to have his undivided attention.

“Yup.” He ran his finger over the rim of his glass.

My eyes tracked that finger, then snapped up to his face when he spoke again.

“He was the medic for the unit I was assigned to after I finished my infantry training.”

“How old were you when you joined?”

“Eighteen.” He sighed.

That had sounded loaded, and while I was curious, I kept quiet, letting him decide what he wanted to tell me.

“We deployed about five months after I was transferred.”

“Deployed, like overseas?”

“Iraq.” He stared into his glass. “That was my first tour.”

“You did more than one?”

“Two.” He nodded, trailing his finger over the rim of the glass in a slow circle “One at eighteen and one just before I turned twenty-two.”

I had no idea what to say to that. What was appropriate to say to that.

“Doc took me under his wing. He, Luke, and Sarge all did. And we became a unit. We looked out for each other, after each other, and fifteen years later, they're still my best friends. Hell, they're my brothers, plain and simple. Doesn't matter we're not blood. They're my family. Always will be.”

He looked up at me when I stayed silent. “You know Doc is gay, right?”

“Yeah. I knew before he and Tanner hooked up.”

“Doc, Luke, and Sarge are all gay, and they served in a time when Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell was still very much a thing. Having to hide a huge part of themselves from the rest of our unit was hard on them, and it isolated them. But it also bonded them in a way that only war and secrets can.”

“But where do you fit in?”

“The token straight guy?” He chuckled. “I was kind of the group pet.”

I choked on my beer and coughed a few times before I was able to speak. “Come again?”

“That came out wrong.” He laughed and took a healthy pull of his beer. “I just mean that I’m the youngest. Only by a few years, but they all sort of became like big brothers to me. They had my back when it mattered. They got me through that tour.”

Again, I had no idea what to say to that. Gage was obviously still dealing with some lingering trauma, and I didn’t want to make it worse by pushing and triggering him.

“I was a much different person back then. Obstinate, full of attitude, and scared shitless, so I covered it up with being a dick to people. Doc saw through me. He saw the scared kid I was, and he took me under his wing, kind of adopted me as a little brother of sorts. He was there for me when no one else was.”

“That sounds like Keaton. He has a big heart.”

“He does.” Gage looked over at me, a smile on his lips. “Every person I talk to about him says the same thing. He has a big heart. And it’s true. He’s the kindest, most loyal person I’ve ever met.”

“I didn’t really know him back when we were kids, and we’re really nothing more than passing acquaintances now, but I’ve heard all about him for decades.”

“You weren’t friends with Doc in school?” Gage cocked his head.

“Not really. He and Trevor were close, still are, but I wasn’t really friends with him.”

“Why not? I mean, if Trevor was his friend...”

“You realize my brother and I are fraternal twins? Basically, we’re brothers born at the same time. We’re not the kind of twins who share everything. Including friends.”

“Sorry, didn’t realize that’s such a touchy subject.” Gage looked genuinely sorry, and the anger rushed out of me. I was being a dick.

“It’s not you.” I finished my beer and put the glass on the bartop.

Before I could say anything more, the bartender swooped in, pointing at my glass.

“Yes, please.”

Gage chugged the rest of his beer, and the bartender got Gage another as well.

“Trevor and I are close now, but our childhoods are a different story. Trev was always the golden boy, literally. He’s even got the blond hair to go with his halo.”

“Ouch.” Gage winced.

“Yeah, that was harsh, and it really wasn’t his fault. I see that now, but I didn’t understand it as a kid. He’s outgoing and friendly and the biggest extrovert I know. He’s one of those guys who goes stir crazy if they aren’t around people for more than a few hours. Then there’s me, the quiet one who lived in his brother’s shadow. He played sports, while I got benched for nearly every little league game I played. Because if Trevor did something, then I had to do it too. He was on student council and yearbook, and I didn’t even go to school dances. It was easy for people to forget about me.”

Gage gave me an understanding look. “I’m an only child, so I don’t really get sibling dynamics, but that would be hard. I imagine you felt invisible.”

“Still do half the time.” I shook my head and looked down at my beer.. “Wow. I really know how to kill the vibe.”

“Nah.” Gage waved dismissively. “You can be real with me. We’re friends, right?”

“Yeah.” My neck and chest heated. I hated that I was probably blushing.

I considered Gage a friend, and it was nice to have him acknowledge it first. I didn’t have a lot of friends. Being an introvert, I was okay with that, but was rare to find someone I clicked with like Gage and I did.

“Friends talk about the real shit. They’re the only people you can be real with. So don’t worry about being a downer or shit being too heavy or anything like that.”

I nodded, resisting the urge to look away as my cheeks heated.

The beer was getting to me. I’d thought my tolerance was better than this. I’d only had one and a half glasses, but I’d skipped dinner because I’d gotten caught up pulling the carpet in the attic, so my empty stomach could account for why I was already feeling the alcohol.

“Excuse me.”

Gage and I turned toward the sultry feminine voice. Three women stood behind us, their eyes zeroed in on Gage.

They were wearing business clothes and insanely high heels. All three were gorgeous, and none of them even glanced my way.

“Hi.” Gage grinned as he shifted in his chair, and I didn’t miss how he flexed his arms slightly, making his muscles pop more than usual.

“We’re celebrating something tonight and wondered if you wanted to do some shots with us?” the one in the middle asked.

Gage blinked, his smile faltering for a second. “Thanks for the offer, but I don’t think my wife would appreciate me coming home drunk.”

“Wife?” another of the women asked. All three of them dropped their gazes to his left hand, but Gage kept it out of

view.

“Oh. Well, have a good evening,” the first woman said, and a moment later all three walked off.

“Wow. That was bold.” Gage turned back toward me. “I usually get a name before offering drinks to someone.”

“They knew what they wanted, and they went after it.” I smirked at him. “You’re fired as my wingman.”

“Shit.” He dropped his head and smacked himself on the forehead. “That was a major fail on my part. I just...”

“They didn’t even look at me once. I doubt you could have done anything. That invite was clearly only for you.”

“Give me another chance? I’ll bring out my A game next time.”

“Fine.” I drained what was left in my glass. “You’re rehired”

The bartender appeared a moment later, asking if I’d like another.

I hesitated. I was already feeling it; another one would only make things worse.

As I opened my mouth to say I was good, my stomach growled, and I snapped my jaw shut as my neck heated.

“Can we get a menu?” Gage asked.

The bartender reached under the bar and handed them to us.

“Another?” Gage asked. “We can get something to eat and pace ourselves.”

“Sure.” I nodded as he opened his menu.

I did the same, scanning the pages.

“Want to split an app platter?” Gage asked after a few moments of perusing the menu. “I don’t really feel like a full meal. Or eating healthy.”

“You read my mind.”

Gage waved the bartender down and put in our food order.

We fell into easy conversation, staying away from heavy topics and subjects. We ate greasy bar food and nursed our beers. It was the most fun I'd had in a long time.

"Holy shit."

"What?" I drained the last of my beer.

I was full, content, and slightly buzzed. It was a nice place to be.

"It's already eleven, and we haven't found you anyone."

"I think it's a lost cause at this point. Besides, the food coma is going to kick in soon. I don't have the energy to pick up."

"I hear you on the food coma." Gage patted his washboard stomach. "I'm right on that line between full and *oof*, too much."

"You good to drive?"

Gage had slowed down his drinking and had paced with me when we'd gotten our food, so he was only one beer ahead of me.

"I'm good." He looked down the bar and flagged down the bartender.

"Anything else tonight?" the bartender asked.

"Just the bill, thanks," Gage answered.

The bartender went to the cash to print up our bill.

"I've got it." He waved me off as I reached into my back pocket.

"Are you sure? I don't mind splitting it."

"Yeah. You can get it next time."

I didn't like the little flutter of excitement that went through me at the prospect of doing this again.

I'd had fun. I liked hanging out with Gage, and I wasn't all that broken up about not spending the night striking out with

women. It had been a long time since I hung out with someone like this, other than Trevor, that is. I hadn't had a conversation this good in what felt like forever.

That was one of the few things I truly missed from my marriage, just having someone to talk to about anything and everything. Before things had gone sideways with us, Chrissy and I had spent hours discussing the most random things, lying in bed as we chatted for hours. I'd never felt closer to another person than when we'd fall asleep wrapped up in each other's arms after talking into the morning.

Now I didn't even have someone to text when something funny happened or I had news to share. I could always text my brother, and I did have friends, we just weren't "chat every day" friends. We got together every couple of months, but they were busy with work and their families, two things I didn't have, so it was harder for them to get away for a night.

I shook off those thoughts and focused on Gage. He was tucking his card into his pocket. He'd paid while I'd zoned out and wallowed.

"Want to try again next week?" Gage asked as we slid out of our chairs. "Give me another shot at being a wingman?"

"Yeah. Okay." I ignored the trill of excitement that went through me as we headed out of the bar. "I should lend you my wedding ring, make your *I'm married* ruse a little more believable."

"Might be a good idea." He chuckled. "You still have your ring?"

"I'm waiting for the price of gold to go up before I sell it."

"Smart man. Maximizing your profits, I like it."

We left the bar and headed to Gage's car, talking about the cost of living versus the cost of inflation.

I might not have gotten a phone number or a hookup, but I got to hang out with a friend, and that made tonight a win in my book.

Chapter 5

Gage

Tyler was turning out to be the perfect roommate. We'd fallen into a routine in the three weeks since he'd moved in.

He was a good worker, putting in full days. Every night I'd come home and he'd have a new project on the go. It was amazing to see my house slowly being restored to its former glory.

He was also quiet, considerate, and a hell of a cook.

He'd taken to making dinner for both of us, usually timing the meal so it was ready when I got home from work.

My hours were set, and I didn't have to work overtime unless I had to attend a report meeting, so my schedule was as predictable as Old Faithful. I left the house at the same time every day, and came home around the same time, depending on traffic or if I needed to stop and pick something up.

I'd been raised on casseroles and meat and potatoes. My father would rather starve than cook a meal. My mother cooked, but she pretty much made the same five things every night, and all of it was bland and overcooked.

I could have learned when I left home, I knew that, but the army had taken care of feeding me, and I hadn't had the spoons to learn when I'd gotten out.

I'd tried to learn a few times by watching YouTube videos and cooking shows, but those had just intimidated me, and to this day I'd never been able to re-create anything those chefs made.

Ready-made food was my friend, and I'd managed to keep myself alive this long, so I hadn't seen the point of changing.

Now that Tyler had introduced me to flavors and tastes I hadn't known existed, I looked forward to coming home after work and seeing what he'd cooked for us.

Tonight, he'd made something called jambalaya, and it had been delicious. So many flavors, lots of heat, and a touch of something savory. I'd gobbled my portion down as soon as I'd had my first bite.

"Will it bug you if I put Netflix on?" Tyler asked as he sat down on the other side of the couch.

He didn't have much choice. I had a couch and my dinette chairs. That was all.

Therefore, we usually spent a few hours in the evening in the living room, me with a book and him watching something on the TV.

I was used to reading with background noise, so the TV never bothered me, and truth be told, it was nice to have some company, even if we were doing our own thing.

I liked having my own space, but I was quickly learning that I also enjoyed having someone around. It was comforting to hear him walking around after I'd gone to bed, and there was nothing better than getting up to a fresh pot of coffee.

Tyler seemed incapable of sleeping in.

I was up at six thirty and hit the gym before I went to work, and he was always up and sitting at the dinette set, reading the news on his iPad as he drank his coffee.

It was the same on weekends. It didn't matter what time I got up, he was already awake and enjoying the day when I dragged my ass downstairs.

"Not at all." I picked up my Kindle and opened the case to wake it up. "I'm at a good part, so I'll be in my own little world soon."

"What's happening now?" He turned the TV on and navigated to Netflix.

"The fae are planning their counter strike."

"Did the Unseelie attack already?"

"Yeah, I read that part last night. It was epic. I have to reread it because so much happened, and I want to make sure I

didn't miss any crucial details. Next, they're planning their revenge because the Unseelie captured two of their warlords."

This was a typical conversation for us. Last week, Tyler had asked what I was reading. I'd told him the plot up until that point, and he'd asked me for an update every night.

It was fun to talk about my book with someone. Doc read a lot, but mostly nonfiction. Luke liked true crime, but no one I knew read the same things I did, so I never had anyone to geek out over plots with.

"How far into the book are you?" He scrolled through the menu as I checked the counter on my Kindle screen.

"Forty-six percent."

"Damn. Not even halfway and there's already been an epic battle? You're in for quite the ride." He grinned and paused his scrolling.

"Right?" I sighed dramatically. "As long as the author doesn't kill off any of my favorites, we're cool. I'm way too invested in this series to recover from that."

"What book is this?"

"Seven, out of nine."

"Yikes, two and a half more books? Let's hope they leave your book boyfriends alone."

"Not sure I'd call them book boyfriends." I chuckled. "More like book hobbits. They're on an adventure, and I'm tagging along."

He smiled and resumed scrolling.

I turned my attention to my Kindle, immediately getting sucked into the fantasy world the author had created.

A long while later, something hit my shoulder, jarring me out of the zone and back into reality.

It took a second to shake off the brain fog, and I blinked myself back to awareness. Tyler was asleep and had fallen over onto my shoulder.

He'd slid across the middle cushion, his temple on the upper part of my biceps and his head tilted at an unnatural angle.

He must either be an incredibly deep sleeper, or he was exhausted. He didn't even stir as I shifted my shoulder so his neck wasn't bent and he was leaning a little more naturally.

The contact, while surprising, wasn't uncomfortable. I'd been in plenty of tight spaces with men in my years in the army. Huddling together while we slept to either keep warm or because we had no space to stretch out had been a regular occurrence.

I was used to physical contact with men, but this felt different. A zing of awareness shooting through me that I wasn't sure what to do with or what it meant.

He was way more solid than any woman I'd been with, and he wore either cologne or aftershave with a spicy undertone that mixed well with the apple scent of his shampoo. Nothing about him was feminine: he was all man.

I knocked those thoughts out of my head, then gently shook him awake.

"Huh," he mumbled, blinking a few times. "Shit, sorry, man." His words came out gravelly. He sat up, his cheeks bright red.

"No worries." I swallowed. Why was my shoulder was still warm? Like I could still feel him against it. "Tired?"

"Yeah. Didn't realize how tired. I should get to bed."

"I'm going to read for a bit longer."

"Have a good night."

"You too." He stood and stretched, the material of his T-shirt bunching up around his waist, exposing a stripe of skin.

My gaze zeroed in on that patch of exposed skin. His jeans had ridden down, exposing the little dimples at the apex of his butt.

I'd never really looked at that spot on a guy before. It was sexy. Like a peek behind the curtain.

Tyler lowered his arms, his shirt falling into place. I tore my eyes from his back, looking back down at my Kindle but not registering any of the words I was seeing.

What the fuck was that?

I'd never checked out a guy's ass before, not once in years of communal showers and going to clubs around the world.

Tyler's body was average. He had broad shoulders, carried some extra weight around his belly, but his hips were trim, and his legs and arms were muscular, most likely from his years of hard labor.

I hated the term "dad bod," but most people would agree that was Tyler's build.

Why was I noticing any of this? It must be because we were spending so much time together.

We not only lived together, but we also hung out when we were at home, and we'd gone out every Friday, looking for a possible date for Tyler. He'd lent me his wedding ring to help with my cover, but we usually chatted and drank and forgot to scope out the place or get up off our asses and talk to anyone.

I felt bad about that. I'd told him I'd be his wingman, and all I managed to do was monopolize his time because I enjoyed hanging out with him. He'd waved off my apologies, telling me he didn't mind and was having fun, even without finding a woman.

Maybe we needed to change bars, go to one that was a little livelier and made for mingling, as opposed to a quiet bar where people went to enjoy an evening with friends or partners.

I focused my attention on my Kindle. It was only Tuesday. I had lots of time before I needed to figure out our weekend plans. Right now, I wanted to finish this chapter, then go to bed at a normal time for once and not get caught up reading until after midnight like I had for the last few nights.

Chapter 6

Tyler

I looked around the attic with a critical eye, taking in every detail.

I'd been working on it for almost a month, but the library was finished.

Gage hadn't been specific when he'd told me what he wanted done with the library. He'd just asked for it to be comfortable.

The previous owners had put down a thick carpet and painted the shelves and all the wooden accents white. It had brightened up the room, but it had also made it look sterile and out of place in the house.

I'd been lucky to find the original hardwood under the carpet. It had needed to be refinished, but it had been in good shape. I'd stripped all the paint off the woodwork and stained it so everything was a deep mahogany with a hint of red highlights. I'd repainted the walls an off white to keep some of the brightness in the room, and the contrast between the walls and the wood was striking.

Gage had ordered two chairs, one wingback and one that was round and squashy. He'd lamented about the house not having a fireplace in the attic because he loved to read by a fire. I'd bought him a portable fireplace, and put his books back on the shelf. He had mostly worn paperbacks, but he had some nice hardcovers too, and while I didn't know his system for his bookshelves, I put them in alphabetically by author and made sure the series were in order. I'd also installed light-filtering cordless blinds on the windows to keep the space bright, even when he wanted privacy.

Now the room had a rich, dark feel to it. I hoped he liked it.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and opened my texts. It was incredibly lazy to send a text to someone who was in

the same house, but I didn't feel like walking down three flights of stairs, then coming back up again.

Tyler: the attic is done

Gage: I'll be right up

Gage: did you seriously text me from the attic?

Tyler: yes

Gage: you know that's like next-level lazy

Tyler: I'm fully aware of that, and I embrace it

Gage didn't text back, and a few moments later, his heavy footfalls pounded up the stairs.

"Holy goddamn shit."

He was at the top of the stairs, staring around the room with wide eyes.

"You like it?" A flutter of nerves exploded in my stomach.

I hadn't realized just how much I wanted him to like it. To know that I'd given him his dream space.

"This is amazing." He walked around the room. "This looks like something out of a movie. I had no idea it could look like this."

"It had good bones. It just needed a little TLC," I said thickly, unsure of why his gaze on me was doing funny things to my stomach.

I was happy he was happy, but there was something more there, something primal, needy.

Gage turned his attention to the bookshelves, his eyes lighting up as he trailed his fingers over the spines of his books.

"You use the same system I do." He turned to me

"Yeah?" I flushed as a shiver ran through me. I was absurdly pleased I'd gotten that right.

"And the fireplace is awesome." He hurried over to the unit I'd put in. "Is there a remote?"

“It’s hanging on the left side.”

He got the remote and switched the fireplace on. It was made to look like a real fire, with fake logs and orange flames. One button turned just the flames on, and the other the heat function.

Gage played with the buttons for a moment, that big smile on his face. He shut it off and put the remote back on its hook, then leaned against the wall next to the fireplace, using his hip for balance and crossed his big arms over his chest.

“This is truly amazing, thank you.”

“I’m just glad you like it.” My cheeks flushed hot, and I wanted to die of embarrassment. What the fuck was going on with me?

I always felt good when my clients liked my work, but I’d never been this invested in a project before. It was as though I *needed* him to like it.

We stared at each other, frozen in time. I couldn’t read his expression, but that wasn’t surprising since Gage was a master at keeping his emotions and thoughts off his face. He would be an incredible poker player.

Me, on the other hand, had never learned the art of the neutral face, and I hated to think about what Gage saw as he stared at me.

I didn’t even know what I was feeling, not really. A jumble of emotions were floating around inside me, but pinpointing them was hard. They kept shifting, one coming to the foreground for a second, then retreating again.

I was unsettled, unbalanced, and unsure. My physical reactions were confusing the hell out of me. My skin felt tight, like it was suddenly a size too small for my body, and my chest zinged with awareness. It was as though every part of me was zeroed in on Gage, and I had no idea why.

“I’m heading to Trevor’s tonight,” I blurted, my flight instinct kicking in.

What was going on with me? Why was I thinking these things? I needed to leave. I needed to go to my brother's house, hang out with my niece and nephew, and remind myself that Gage was not only my friend but also my roommate and my employer. I needed to get over... whatever this was before I fucked up our friendship.

"I'm going to Luke's." His answer was clipped, as if he was angry, but his face was still completely blank.

Shit, had I already fucked things up between us with my weirdness? Had he noticed my reactions to him?

"I'll see you later." I gave him a half-assed wave and rushed down the stairs, grabbed my keys and wallet from my room, then booked it out of the house.

I hurried into my car, locked the doors for good measure, and pulled out my phone, and texted my brother.

Tyler: I'm coming over

I didn't bother waiting for an answer. It was Tuesday, the one day of the week when Lucy and Tate, my niece and nephew, didn't have any activities going on, so the whole family would be home.

....

Hanging out with my brother's family had been exactly what I'd needed. I'd arrived just as Marianne was starting dinner, and I was promptly put to work, helping her cook. Well, I cooked, and she sat at the table with a glass of wine, keeping me company. It was our routine, and I enjoyed the time with her while everyone else was doing their thing.

Dinner had been a hit, and after everything had been cleaned up, I sat in the living room with Marianne and Trevor, sipping tea and chatting.

"Why are you here?" Trevor asked.

"Honey, you could find a better way to phrase that." Marianne rolled her eyes at her husband. "He means are you okay? Did something happen, and is that why you're here on a

random Tuesday after not talking to us for the last two weeks?”

I sighed. “Sort of.”

“Something sort of happened?” Trevor cocked his head to the side as he studied me.

“Yeah. I mean. Something sort of *is* happening.”

“You’re going to have to give us some details, dude.”

“I don’t know how to explain it.” I looked up at the ceiling. If only the answers could just fall out of the sky and put me out of my misery.

They both stayed silent, giving me a chance to gather my thoughts.

“You know how I’ve been working for Gage, Keaton’s friend?”

“Considering I’m the one who told you about the job and helped you move your shit into his house, yeah, I’m aware.” Trevor was staring at me like I’d sprouted a second head.

“We’ve become friends.”

“That’s good.” Marianne exchanged a look with Trevor, one of those married couple looks where they had a silent conversation in only a few seconds.

“He’s a great guy,” I said lamely.

No way could I tell my brother I’d been having these weird thoughts about Gage. That my body was doing things I wasn’t comfortable with when he was around.

For one, I was low-key worried he’d laugh at me because that’s what brothers do. But this wasn’t something I wanted him to laugh at. It was confusing. While I didn’t like feeling this way, I disliked the idea of it being a joke and dismissed.

How could I articulate what was going on with me? How I’d even begin to describe it? I shrugged and pushed all thoughts of Gage out of my head.

“Living and working in the same house was making me stir-crazy, so I thought I’d hang out with my family.”

Trevor gave me a look that said he didn’t believe me, but he didn’t push. “You know you’re always welcome.”

“Especially if you’re going to do the cooking,” Marianne said with a grin.

We fell into easy conversation, with me mostly listening as Marianne and my brother told me about what was going on with them, their jobs, and the kids. The more we talked, the more I relaxed.

This weirdness with Gage was just confusion and happenstance.

I was lonely. I’d been lonely since my divorce. After being with someone for so long, even when things weren’t great between us, I’d become accustomed to having company.

The six months I’d lived with my parents had been busy, and I hadn’t been able to get any peace unless I was in my childhood bedroom. That had been an adjustment. Living with my parents and living with a partner were completely different scenarios, especially since my mother still treated me like a teenager.

Then I’d moved into Gage’s house, and I must have imprinted on him or something. He was the first friend I’d made since long before my divorce. I’d met plenty of people, but he was the first actual friend who was only mine and had nothing to do with Chrissy in years.

Most of the friends I’d made in the last decade had chosen her side when we’d divorced because she’d been the one to do all our social scheduling. Gage was the first friend who was just mine.

That had to be what was fucking with me. I felt possessive of him because of what he represented, and these weird feelings and thoughts were just by-products of that.

They would fade as I got used to having a friend again. That was all this was.

Chapter 7

Gage

“What’s going on?” Luke asked as we walked into his living room.

I’d texted him after Tyler had double-timed it out of the house after showing me the finished attic.

That experience had been... strange, and I needed to talk it out with someone.

“You working tonight?”

“In a few hours.” He flopped into his easy chair and leaned back. “What’s going on?”

“I’m not sure.” I sat on the couch and leaned my elbows on my knees, my chin in my hands.

“How about you start at the beginning?”

As obvious as that advice was, it helped.

Luke has a unique ability to guide a conversation without influencing it. He had a talent for helping people talk out their problems and letting them come to their own conclusions or epiphanies.

“Things have gotten weird since Tyler moved in.”

“How so?”

“I don’t know exactly. It’s nice to have him there. I’ve spent so much time alone since I got out that I forgot how comforting it is to have someone else around, even if it’s just their presence.”

“That’s normal. Humans are social creatures. It makes sense that you’d like having a roommate, especially considering how much of an extrovert you are.” He gave me a knowing look. “What else?”

“We’ve become friends. Good friends.”

“And that’s a bad thing?”

“No. But I’ve been... feeling things.”

“Feeling things? Like what?”

“Just this weird awareness of him. Like I’m tuned into him. I can feel when he’s around.”

“Is it more than just situational awareness? We were all trained to be constantly vigilant of our surroundings. That habit doesn’t just go away.”

“Maybe. But it feels like more than that.” I let out a frustrated sigh. “I just like being around him. And it feels deeper than friendship, but I have no idea what it is or why it does.”

“It’s been a long time since you’ve made a real friend.”

“What do you mean?” I asked defensively.

“I mean you’re good at making casual friends, but you suck at making deep connections with people.”

“Fuck you, asshole. I connect with people.”

“I’m not talking about fucking some woman for a few weeks, then moving on. Or going out for drinks with your coworkers when you’re barely more than acquaintances. I mean an actual connection with someone, where you share more than just the surface parts of yourself with them.”

“You’re one to talk,” I muttered.

Luke wasn’t wrong, and my natural defense when I felt cornered was to lash out.

“No, I’m not. But we’re not talking about me. We’re talking about you,” he said patiently.

“So what are you saying? That I’m being weird because he’s my new bestie?”

“I’m saying that he obviously means something to you, and you need to figure out what that is. If you don’t, things are going to keep getting confusing.”

“But how can I figure it out when I don’t understand it?”

“I wish I knew.” He smiled wryly. “Introspection seems to be the leading advice.”

“I suck at introspection.”

“No shit.” Luke chuckled, but something flashed in his eyes.

“You have a theory, don’t you?” I asked.

“It’s stupid.”

“No, tell me. I’m going nuts here. I’ll take any theories at this point.”

“We haven’t hung out all that much since Tyler moved in, but the times we have, I’ve noticed things.”

“Like what?”

“You talk about him a lot.”

“I do?”

“You do. You find a way to work him into every conversation. You’ve never been like that with anyone else. Hell, I didn’t even know you and Emma were dating until what, four months in? You literally never mentioned her.”

“We were casual at the start. That’s why I didn’t bother talking about her.”

“Okay, but even after you were a couple, you still didn’t really talk about her to us.”

“I... I don’t know. She just never came up.” I raked my hand through my hair.

Emma and I had dated for about six months, but the first four months had been nothing more than hooking up. I’d tried to do the exclusive thing while still keeping it casual, but it hadn’t worked, and we’d broken up about four months ago. “And that whole relationship with her was... I don’t know. It started good. We were on the same page, we wanted the same things, but then she started demanding more when that wasn’t our agreement.”

“I get it,” Luke said gently. “And I didn’t mean it like there was something wrong with your relationship. I was just using it as a comparison.”

“You’re not wrong. I guess I do talk about Tyler more. But what does that have to do with anything?”

“It was just an observation.”

“No, there’s more to it. I can tell.”

“I just think that you might have some deeper feelings for Tyler than you’re used to.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“It sounds like you have a crush on him.”

I gaped at Luke, my jaw hanging open. “What?”

Luke put up his hands in a gesture of surrender. “It’s just an observation.”

“Did you forget that I’m straight?” My stomach roiled for some reason. “I like women.”

“You can like women and also like men.”

“Sure, but I’m not bi. It’s impossible. How could I go thirty-three years, spend five years in the fucking army, and not realize I like men?” I ignored the voice in my head that was reminding me about the times I’d admired Tyler’s body in the past few weeks.

“I don’t know. But like I said, it was just a theory. There are plenty of other reasons you might be feeling all out of sorts.”

“Yeah. It has to be something else.” I leaned back against the couch, relaxing now that we weren’t talking about crushes anymore.

“You’ve been under a lot of stress with the renos. You know how much you hate spending money.”

“That’s true. A part of me cries every time I need to buy something to fix something I didn’t even know was broken.”

“It could be stress, it could just be a reaction to having a new friend, or it could be more. This is where that introspection thing would kick in.”

“Yeah. I’ll get right on that.” I rolled my eyes, pulled my phone out of my pocket, and checked the time. After five. No wonder I was hungry.

“Have you eaten?” I asked.

“Not yet.”

“Want to order something before you go to work?”

Luke was a security guard and currently worked nights at some office building that was under construction. He usually worked days, but every once in a while he’d take a short-term night contract because they paid more than the daytime ones.

“Sure. Pizza or Chinese?”

“Pizza?”

He nodded, and I opened the app on my phone. “The usual?”

“Yep.”

I placed the order as Luke got up and went to his kitchen. He came back just as I was putting my phone down, handed me a can, and settled back in his chair.

It was a zero alcohol beer, or a near beer, as we called them. Luke didn’t drink, not anymore, but he still enjoyed the taste of beer, so we all kept a few cans of his favorite in our fridges for when he was over.

I popped the top on the can and took a sip. “How’s the job going?”

“It’s good.” He used his thumb to pop the tab.

“You’re working with someone this time, right?”

“Yeah. The site needs two of us for safety reasons.”

“How’s that going?”

Luke liked to work alone. He wasn’t so much an introvert as he was a loner. He had a hard time letting people in or

trusting them, and he preferred to be by himself. He was a lot like me. Only I spent my time alone to escape; he did it as a way to survive.

“It’s okay.” He shrugged. “It’s been rough adjusting to working nights again, but the extra four bucks an hour helps.”

“And what about your partner?”

“He’s okay. Talks a lot, but he’s cool.”

Something in Luke’s eyes set off my alarm bells.

Luke was a master at saying a lot without saying anything at all. The only way to really know what he was thinking or feeling was to look into his eyes. As much as he tried, he couldn’t hide the truth from those who knew him.

Something was there, something he wasn’t saying, but I didn’t push. I filed it away for later. He’d come to one of us when he was ready to talk about it.

••••

Two days later, I was a wreck.

Now that Luke had put that stupid idea that I had a crush on Tyler in my head, I couldn’t stop thinking about it.

I’d meant what I’d told him. I was straight. I’d only ever been attracted to women. The thought of touching another man, kissing them, did nothing for me.

I’d even watched some gay porn to see if maybe there was some latent bisexuality in me, but it had been about as interesting as a nature documentary.

The mechanics of gay sex didn’t turn me off, but they didn’t turn me on either. Thinking about two men together or picturing myself with another guy had zero effect.

I had no idea what was going on with me, but Luke’s crush theory was seeming less and less likely.

I lay back on my bed, staring up at the ceiling as I tried to shut my brain down so I could go to sleep.

I'd been acting weird around the house the past few days, spending most of my time either in my room or in the library. Not that I wanted to avoid Tyler; it was more that I didn't know how to act around him while I was so worked up.

I needed to get over this. We had plans to go out tomorrow night, and I needed to stop being weird around him.

Damn Luke and his stupid theories. He had me all twisted up.

I sighed and closed my eyes. I'd been very careful to not think about Tyler when I'd been doing my experiments with gay porn and gay fantasies. Why was I avoiding thinking about him? Maybe because I was afraid I'd start acting different or look at him different, and he'd somehow figure out that I was in the middle of a full-blown sexual identity crisis.

The only way to find out if I was attracted to Tyler was to think about him while I was doing this introspection shit.

I thought about the two of us lying on my bed together. We were both on our backs, in sweatpants and T-shirts, staring up at the ceiling.

I pictured us turning toward each other, onto our sides, him leaning in close.

I already knew how his body felt and how he smelled, and those details invaded my thoughts. My dick twitched as fantasy Tyler shifted even closer and pressed his body against mine, then kissed me.

What. The. Ever-loving. Fuck?

Keeping my eyes closed, I thought about rolling over on top of him, his legs around my thighs as I took over the kiss.

My cock chubbed up, and my eyes flew open as I sat up.

Jesus fucking Christ. What the hell was going on with me?

Had Luke been right? Did I have a crush on Tyler?

I had to be feeling something for him. Otherwise my body wouldn't have reacted that way, right?

But how could that be? I was straight. Had always been straight. And more than that, so was he.

I threw the covers off, slid out of bed, and padded to the kitchen to get a glass of water. Or maybe a whiskey.

The floor was cold under my feet as I made my way downstairs, then promptly stopped dead in my tracks. Tyler was in the kitchen rinsing out a glass in the sink.

“Hey,” he greeted.

He was wearing a pair of worn pajama pants and a white tee that was so thin it showed off the shadows of his chest hair. His expression was a bit sleepy, and his hair was a mess, like he’d just rolled out of bed, and considering the hour, he most likely had.

He looked... good. And I couldn’t stop staring at him.

“What?” he asked.

“Can I ask something without you punching me?” I said in a daze.

The urge to kiss him, to see if there was anything there, was overwhelming. I never would have said anything or done anything if it wasn’t one in the morning and I hadn’t spent the last two days freaking the fuck out and working myself up into a state of pure confusion.

“That’s a loaded question.” He gave me a quizzical look. “But okay. Sure. Go ahead, and I’ll try not to punch you.”

“Can I kiss you?” I asked in a rush, the words bleeding together.

“What?” Tyler gaped at me. “Come again?”

“Can I kiss you?” I asked, a little more slowly this time.

He blinked. “Are you fucking with me right now? Or are you serious?”

“I’m serious.”

He was reacting way better than I’d thought he would. I hadn’t really expected him to hit me because he wasn’t a

violent person, but I had thought he'd call me a few choice names and storm out of the kitchen.

He dropped his gaze to my mouth and ran his tongue over his full bottom lip, wetting it in a way that was both sexy and nervous.

“Okay,” he whispered, lifting his eyes to mine.

I took a step toward him as he put the glass in the drying rack, then turned so he was fully facing me.

I took another step, shaking with adrenaline and nerves.

Was I really going to do this? Was I going to kiss Tyler in my kitchen at one in the morning?

The answer was yes. Yes, I was. I was going to regret it, but I couldn't stop now that I'd started.

I moved into his space and stopped when our chests were only inches apart, my eyes on his lips.

“Gage?”

His voice was breathy and unsure.

My heart was racing, my hands were sweaty and shaking, and blood pounded in my ears as I breathed him in.

Something about the slightly spicy, slightly sweet scent surrounding him just did it for me, and my dick thickened in my boxers.

I almost turned and ran. He couldn't be into me, no way. Kissing my straight roommate with a boner was the worst idea I'd ever had.

Tyler's breathing hitched, and his eyes fell to my mouth again. His tongue peeked out, running over his bottom lip.

I let out a groan, and Tyler's eyes flashed with something like... heat.

“Fuck it,” I muttered, then leaned forward and pressed my lips to his.

The contact only lasted for a second. Then we both jumped back.

“Gage?” he asked, his voice shaking as he lifted one hand to his lips. “What...”

“I don’t know,” I said hoarsely.

“What’s happening here?” His breathing hitched as I wet my lips.

“No idea.” I swallowed hard, my throat tight and my mouth dry. “I just... I don’t fucking know.”

“I’m straight.”

“So am I.” I laughed, motioning to my midsection. “But my dick doesn’t seem to remember that.”

His eyes dropped to my crotch and the bulge in my pajama pants.

He gasped, just a soft and quick intake of breath. My eyes were drawn to his dick, which grew as I stared at it.

“What the fuck is happening?” he asked again.

“I have no fucking clue. But there’s something, right? I’m not crazy? I’m not imagining things?”

“No.” He pulled in a deep breath. “No, you’re not crazy. I don’t get it, but yeah. There’s something.”

His eyes dropped to my mouth again, but before I could figure out my next move, he leaned in and pressed his lips to mine.

This time neither of us moved away.

The kiss was awkward at first, but it wasn’t bad.

His lips were soft but still firm, and he wasn’t shy or coy as he took a tiny step forward so his chest brushed mine. His warm, solid body was doing things to me. My stomach swooped, and my chest and neck flushed hot.

I tilted my head and deepened the kiss, half expecting him to push me away and tell me to stop, but he didn’t.

He moved with me, letting out a little sigh as I stepped closer to him, until our bodies were flush.

It was strange to feel a broad, flat chest against mine. And it was really weird to be kissing someone the same size as me.

At six one, I was used to bending down to kiss my partners, but Tyler was only an inch shorter than me, and he was just as big and bulky. It was true I had more muscles and was thicker, but he was strong and solid in his own right.

The thought that I didn't have to be careful with him sent a shiver of arousal up my spine. I'd never thought I was into rough sex, but the idea of using my strength with Tyler, and having him use his on me made my dick chub up until I had a full-blown hard on.

Instead of pulling away, I waited to see what he would do when he felt it. I slowly teased my tongue over his bottom lip, encouraging him to open to me.

He made a surprised sound as he parted his lips, his tongue coming out to meet mine. Every stroke of his tongue sent another wave of pleasure through me, and I grabbed him by the hips to not only hold him in place but to anchor myself as I was overcome with desire.

I wanted him. I wasn't one hundred percent sure what I wanted to happen right now, but I couldn't deny I was attracted to Tyler and I liked kissing him.

His hard cock poked into my hip, and I shifted so our dicks were pressed together. Go big or go home, right?

He let out a little *oh*, and I groaned against his mouth. He gripped my shoulders with his big hands, holding me in place as our kiss went from soft and exploratory to deeper, needier.

After what felt like hours, I turned my head, breaking the kiss because I desperately needed to take a breath. Tyler rested his temple against my cheekbone as we panted and sucked in deep breaths. We were still holding each other, our hard cocks trapped between our bodies, as we struggled to regain our composure.

I had no idea what the fuck was happening, but that had been one of the hottest kisses I'd ever had.

Something about being able to feel his arousal, feel that hard dick against mine, telling me just how into it he was, just did it for me.

And sounds he'd made, so desperate, so needy, so masculine.

Nothing about Tyler reminded me of a woman or being with one. He was all male, and apparently, I was into that. At least with him.

"What's happening here?" he asked softly, sliding his hands from my shoulders to just above my elbows. "We're both straight men. Why does this feel good?"

"I don't know." I pressed a kiss against his cheek, needing the extra contact. "But it does."

"Yeah. It does," he whispered. "Have you ever done this before?"

"No. Never even thought about it." I let go of his hips and stepped back.

We needed to talk about this, and I was afraid I was going to get lost in kissing him again if I didn't put some space between us.

"Me either." He moved until he was propped against the counter. "Never. How did you know I'd be okay with that?"

"I didn't. That's why I asked you not to punch me."

"So why did you risk it?"

"That's a good question." I sighed and leaned against the wall, putting about four feet of space between us. "I went to Luke's a few days ago, and he suggested that I might have a crush on you. I thought he was talking crazy, but then the idea got in my head..."

"And that's why you've been avoiding me?"

"Yeah. I was all worked up, trying to figure it out, and I didn't know how to act around you."

"I've been feeling things too. Things I couldn't explain or understand," he said softly, his eyes on my mouth again. "I

didn't know what to do about it, but it's not just you."

"This is so fucked up." I raked a hand through my hair, tugging on the strands to expel some excess energy.

"What do you mean?" he asked, his eyes guarded.

"This. Me being into a guy. You have no idea how many dudes I've been around. How many gay men. I spent five years in the army, living in shacks where open showers were the norm. I spent the equivalent of two years overseas living in tents with a group of guys. There's no such thing as privacy in shacks or in tents. I've heard more guys jerking off than I can remember, seen more dicks in my life than I can count. Not to mention my three best friends are all gay. I've been to more gay clubs in more cities, more *countries*, than most gay people, and not once did I look at a man and think, yeah, I'd hit that."

Tyler's cheeks pinked in a way that was too adorable. "Did you think that about me right away?"

"No. It was gradual. I honestly didn't think about us being physical together until tonight. Until now, I was trying to figure out why I was feeling the way I did. I even watched gay porn."

"So did I," he said with a shy smile.

"What did you think?"

"I was intrigued."

"How so?"

"I'm not sure. Watching it didn't awaken something in me or anything. And it was a little strange, but it was interesting if that makes sense."

"Like a nature documentary?"

"Yes, exactly like that. But at the same time, I didn't hate the idea of it."

I kept quiet, hoping he'd keep talking.

"It made me curious if I'd like it, but it's not like it made me all hot and bothered to watch, you know?"

“Yes. That’s exactly how I felt.”

“I don’t know what to do with this.” He crossed his arms. “We live in the same house, you’re technically my boss, and we’re both straight. What the fuck are we doing?”

“No clue. Do you want to stop?”

He opened his mouth to say something, then closed it and shook his head.

I took that as an invitation and walked into his space, crowding him against the counter with my bigger body.

“This is fucked up,” I whispered as I slid my arms around his middle and tugged him against me.

He came willingly, splaying his hands over my back and tilting his hips until his semi brushed against me.

My cock thickened in response. I’d lost my erection during our talk, but it was back in full force now that I was in Tyler’s space and surrounded by him. I groaned softly when he leaned in, stopping when his mouth was only millimeters from mine.

“This is so fucked up,” he echoed, his breath ghosting over my lips.

This time I waited for him to close the distance between us, waited for him to kiss me.

I didn’t have to wait long.

Our lips slotted together like we’d always done this. Like we were meant to be kissing and should have been this entire time.

He sighed against my lips, then let out the cutest little moan when I swept my tongue between his lips to taste him.

Now that I was able to focus on the kiss and not on my confusion, I noticed things I’d missed the first time. Little things like how his big, strong hands squeezed my back as he held me. How his hard body, so solid and warm, seemed to fit against mine, even though we were close to the same size.

The way he kissed was driving me crazy. Gone were the hesitant, shy kisses from before. Tyler met my force with his

own, our lips battling as we fell deeper into the kiss.

I'd never felt such a consuming need before. Every touch, taste, and sound was a gift, one I wanted to hold on to as I kissed him with everything I had.

I didn't have to be gentle or soft with him. I could tease and taste him, use my body and strength to hold him tighter, closer. He not only accepted it but dished it right back out at me.

I'd never been kissed like this before, and I pulled away when the urge to frot against him got too strong to ignore.

I wasn't sure what I was ready for, what he wanted, and as much as I liked kissing him, I didn't think that my kitchen in the middle of the night was the appropriate place for us to orgasm together for the first time.

"This could get messy," he whispered as we caught our breaths, still holding each other.

"It could," I agreed. "Is it worth it to see where this goes?"

"You mean, like keep messing around?" he asked, his voice breathy again.

"Yeah. I mean, if you want to."

"But what about..."

"No one has to know," I said quickly, grateful he'd been the one to bring this up.

As much as I wanted to explore things with him and see if this was just a fluke of happenstance or if there really was something between us, I wasn't ready for anyone to know about it.

"Yeah, that's for the best." He swallowed and looked down at my mouth. "I'm not ready to deal with people yet. Not when I'm still trying to wrap my head around this."

I nodded and reluctantly stepped back, dropping my arms.

It was too new, too confusing, to bring other people into this yet. We needed time to figure this out on our own.

He did the same, and we stood there, staring at each other.

“I should get back to bed. I need to get up in a few hours.”

“Same.” Tyler’s gaze dropped to my mouth one last time, and I resisted the urge to lean in and give him one more kiss.

“Sleep well.” God, could I be any more awkward?

“You too.”

With a final look at him, I turned on my heel and hurried up to my room.

I closed my door with more force than was necessary and climbed into bed, diving under the covers.

I’d kissed a man, and I’d liked it.

This was ten levels of fucked up, and not just because my sexuality seemed to have done a one-eighty overnight. Nope. It was the fact that I’d made out with my roommate, who was on my payroll. And not only that, we’d decided to keep doing it.

My dick was still hard from our kiss. Groaning, I slipped my hand under the waistband of my pajama pants and rubbed my shaft.

I tried not to think about Tyler as I fisted my cock, but of course, he was all I could think about.

I pictured us on my couch, watching something on the TV. Instead of being on opposite ends of it, we were crowded in the middle, pressed together, our sides touching. We were looking at each other, ignoring what was on the screen.

Tyler’s lips were parted, his cheeks that adorable shade of pink, as I slid my hand under the waistband of my sweats.

I squeezed my dick harder as fantasy Tyler did the same. I stroked my hand up and down my shaft, twisting at the head the way I liked.

Did Tyler like that too? Or was he more into a gentle touch?

The visual of us jerking it together faded, replaced with an image of Tyler lying on my bed, his big hand moving up and down his hard cock as I watched him.

I'd never thought about another man's dick before. What did he look like? Was he cut, uncut? What about length or girth? He seemed to be a good sized based on what I'd seen and felt. My lower body tightened as I continued to picture him stroking for me.

How would he smell if I pressed my nose into his pubes? Would it be a heavier, stronger musk than his natural scent?

What did he taste like?

I pictured a drop of pearly liquid on his tip. My mouth watered as my entire body tightened, and a starburst of pleasure exploded deep inside me.

Fuck. I'd never thought about tasting cum before, not even my own, but the thought of tasting Tyler intrigued me. Would he be salty, bitter, or maybe a little sweet?

My breathing hitched, and I gripped my balls with my free hand, tugging them away from my body as I stroked faster, harder.

I was so fucking close. My thighs tensed, and my body clenched hard.

Fantasy Tyler gasped my name, shooting over his hand and onto his chest as he came.

That was enough to trigger my release, and I came with a cry as my orgasm ripped through me.

I kept stroking, prolonging the pleasure as long as I could, picturing Tyler doing the same.

When the pleasure finally ebbed away, I was a panting, cum-covered mess.

"Fuck me," I whispered and stared up at the ceiling.

Whatever I was feeling for Tyler wasn't just a fluke or some combination of loneliness mixed with excitement over a new friendship.

I was into him, and I wanted him.

I sat up with a sigh, throwing my legs over the side of the mattress so I could stand.

I needed to clean up.

Thank God I had my own bathroom and Tyler's room was down the hall I didn't have to worry about him hearing me jack off.

We might have kissed and decided to see where this went, but that didn't mean I was ready for him to know I'd just had one of the most intense orgasms I could remember while fantasizing about his dick.

Chapter 8

Tyler

I was in a strange sort of limbo over what had happened between Gage and me in the kitchen last night.

To say it had been unexpected was an understatement.

I'd thought he was playing some sort of prank on me right up until the moment he'd crowded my space and looked at my mouth with equal parts fascination and confusion.

That look had mirrored what I'd been feeling.

I was still confused as fuck as to why having Gage's hard, muscular body against mine had sent a thrill up my spine. How I'd been just as fascinated with his mouth as I'd wondered how he would kiss.

I'd thought he'd be rough and dominating, but he'd been a satisfying mixture of commanding and gentle. He'd taken charge but hadn't pushed or forced me.

I'd had every opportunity to stop him, and a part of me was still shocked that I hadn't.

Kissing him had felt good. I didn't understand why, but it had. There was no denying the way my body had responded to his, how we'd both gotten hard.

That had been a bit of a mind fuck. Unlike Gage, I hadn't spent my life surrounded by gay and naked men. I'd never played sports, I'd barely managed to get a C in PE, and I'd avoided showers at public gyms like the plague. Not because I didn't want to see naked men, but because I was insecure about my body and didn't want others looking at me.

That was another thing that was messing with me.

Gage was gorgeous. He was young, fit, and classically handsome. If he was going to be into a guy, why in the hell would he be interested in me?

Once upon a time I'd been fit and had a flat stomach, but not anymore. I carried extra weight around my middle, I was big but doughy as opposed to hard and muscled like him, and I was five years older but looked like our age gap could be as big as ten or more years.

I had gray hair, not a lot, but enough I noticed them when I looked in the mirror. The worst was the gray in my beard. I'd been prepared for the ones on my head, but the beard gray made me look ancient. I was lucky that I didn't have pronounced wrinkles thanks to the massive amounts of sunscreen I used in the summer, but I had crow's feet and laugh lines that aged me.

Even if I took the physical aspects away, we were still completely unsuited. He was young, outgoing and confident. I was old, introverted, and my self-esteem was on par with my bank balance. I had nothing to offer anyone other than maintenance tips and conversation, and I just couldn't wrap my head around how someone like Gage could be into someone like me.

Besides that, I couldn't understand why my body had reacted to him the way it had. Why did kissing him feel so good?

The first kiss had been a shock. It had only lasted a few seconds but had sent a ripple of confusion through me I was still dealing with. It had felt good, but at the same time, my brain had been screaming at me that kissing my straight, *male* roommate was a bad idea and I needed to either wake up because this was a fucked-up dream, or jump away to make sure he wasn't pulling some messed-up prank on me.

The second kiss had rocked me to my very core. Gage's big, strong body against mine was sexy as hell. I didn't know if he ran naturally hot or if he'd just been worked up, but the heat of his body against mine, of his skin against mine, had sent a bolt of desire through me that had overridden any sort of shock I'd been feeling.

I'd *wanted* to kiss him. Loved feeling his big hands on my hips, his firm yet soft lips against mine, and all those miles of

hot skin I'd explored with my hands had only sent my arousal skyrocketing.

If that wasn't enough, we'd also decided to *keep* messing around.

I didn't do well with vague, and arbitrary drove me crazy. I liked limits and boundaries and clear-cut directions. I needed those to feel like I had control in any given situation, but with Gage, I had no control.

Were we kissing friends now? Or did he want more? More importantly, did *I* want more?

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't intrigued. If kissing him had felt that good, then doing more should feel even better, right? I'd never once thought about touching another man's dick, but the thought of touching Gage's didn't put me off. If anything, it made me nervous. I had no idea what I was supposed to do with it once I got my hands on it, but the actual touching him part didn't weird me out.

I hadn't let myself think too closely about him touching me for two reasons. One, I wasn't sure he wanted that. We'd agreed to see where this went, but maybe he just meant kissing. Second, I was afraid. It was cowardly but true. I was afraid of what I'd feel, what I'd want, if I let myself think about Gage putting his hands on me.

I wanted it. But I wasn't sure I wanted to want it.

I dropped my head in my hands, abandoning the cabinet I'd been in the process of putting together. I'd already had to take it apart twice because my distracted ass had put one or more of the boards on backward. It was an easy job that should have taken me twenty minutes, tops. I'd been at it for over an hour.

I patted the floor around me, my eyes still closed, and fisted one hand in my hair, trying to distract myself with a little pain. My free hand closed over my phone. I picked it up, cracked one eye open, and checked the time.

Gage would be home in about an hour. Now was usually when I started cooking dinner for us.

Should I still do that? He'd spent the last few nights hiding and hadn't eaten with me, but that was before the kissing thing, when he'd been trying to figure things out.

Were we back to being dinner buddies? Was it too much of a date thing if I cooked for him now that we'd started... whatever this was?

"Ugh," I muttered, shoving my phone back into my pocket as I dropped my other hand from my hair.

I needed to finish this stupid cabinet before I did anything else.

It took another thirty minutes, but I managed to get the damn thing built and pushed up against the wall in the living room. I didn't know where Gage wanted it, and that was as good a place as any.

I put my tools away, cleaned up all the cardboard and crap that had come in the box, and went to wash my hands.

Either way, I needed to eat, and I'd been telling the truth when I'd said that cooking for two was easier than cooking for one. If Gage didn't want to eat with me, then I'd just have the leftovers tomorrow.

Resolved and feeling a little more settled, I went to the fridge and pulled out the ingredients to make paella.

I put them on the counter, then grabbed the dry ingredients I'd need from the pantry.

When I had everything I needed ready, I set to prepping the meal.

One thing I loved about cooking was the routine of it. I found following directions relaxing, and I enjoyed watching a meal come together. I could concentrate on the steps and not have to think about anything else.

"Hey."

I jumped a mile as a voice rang out behind me, knocking me out of the daze I'd fallen into.

“Sorry.” Gage walked into the kitchen, a sheepish look on his face. “I didn’t realize you were in the zone.”

“Yeah. I was in my own world,” I said with a strained chuckle, trying not to ogle him as he came to stand near me.

He looked good in his work clothes. His dress pants pulled tight around his thick, muscular thighs and hugged his full ass.

His dress shirts were all tailored to him, emphasizing his strong chest, big arms, and trim waist. Add in a tie, and I understood why suit porn was a thing.

The crazy thing was that it wasn’t like I wasn’t used to seeing guys dressed up. Most of my friends worked office jobs and wore suits on the regular, and my brother was an accountant, so he spent his life in suits.

Nope. I apparently only had a suit fetish when Gage was the one wearing the suit.

Fuck. My. Life.

“You okay?” he asked, studying me closely.

“Fine.” I snapped back to reality, grabbing the salt off the counter and sprinkling some over the mixture in my pot. I’d already added all the salt the recipe called for, but I needed to do something with my hands, and that was the first thing that came to mind.

“How was your day?” I asked when the silence between us stretched.

“Long.” He sighed. “I had three people cancel meetings back-to-back, so I spent most of my afternoon doing busy work and trying not to fall asleep at my desk.”

“Didn’t sleep well?” I asked softly.

“Nope. I think I got maybe an hour of real sleep. What about you?” he asked, his voice unsure.

That was weird. Gage was the most confident person I knew, and him sounding shy didn’t sit right with me.

“Same. I passed out around dawn and dragged my ass out of bed a few hours later.”

I looked up at him and immediately regretted it. He was staring at me in that deep, intense way, and I felt stripped bare. Like he could see into my chaotic thoughts and confused body and know just how messed up I was.

“Any second thoughts about what we talked about?” he asked, his voice still soft and unsure.

“No.” I moved the pot onto a cold burner, then turned the stove off. “I mean, lots of thoughts about what happened, but no, I’m not going to take it back and say we should end things now.”

“Good.” He scrubbed a hand over his face. “Fuck. You have no idea how twisted up I am right now.”

“I think I have an idea.” I moved away from the stove and leaned against the counter near the sink. We needed to talk this out.

“I spent most of my day worrying you were going to be gone when I got home.”

“What?” I blinked.

“I don’t know.” He sighed. “It was so late when we... I guess I was worried I pushed you or coerced you somehow and chased you away.”

“I seem to recall being the one to kiss you that second time, so you don’t have to worry about pushing or coercing me. You surprised me, but you didn’t make me do anything I didn’t want to do.”

He blew out another breath and nodded, his eyes on the floor.

I didn’t know how to handle an unsure Gage. It was so unlike him. I needed to let him know that even though I was confused as all hell, we were cool.

I stepped closer to him, trying not to think too hard about what I was doing. Gage looked up, watching me with those dark eyes as I moved right into his space.

He lifted his hands and circled my waist, and while a part of me wanted to shake him off because he was holding my

muffin top and it was embarrassing, the other part of me loved how tight and possessive his grip was.

“I have no idea what I’m doing,” I confessed, my eyes on his lips.

Gage swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing invitingly. I didn’t know why that was sexy, watching him swallow and seeing his throat work, but it was.

“Me either,” he said, his voice breathy and soft. “But I like it.”

“Same.”

I leaned in, ignoring the part of my brain that was telling me this was a bad idea and I was misreading the room.

My lips brushed his, and Gage let out pleased hum. My skin flushed hot as he slid his hands from my waist to my back, tugging me against his body. His cock was half hard and hot, even through the layers of our clothes.

Mine thickened in response, and I pressed against it, wanting to feel more of him.

A low rumble from deep in his chest sent a flutter of nerves and need through me.

Fuck. It was crazy how much a single kiss from him was affecting me.

I liked kissing and was never shy with my affection when I was with a partner, but I’d never felt this savage need to not only consume but *be* consumed.

I wasn’t a passive lover. I wasn’t into bossing women around or anything, but I always fell into the dominant role. I was the one who undressed them, who made them feel good and prepped them to take me, and that had worked for me. That was my natural default.

With Gage, things were completely different. I wanted to do all of that to him, but I also wanted him to take care of me. To undress and tease me as he got me off.

It was messed up, but it was true.

Gage swept his tongue into my mouth in that dominating and commanding way of his, and the moan I let out would have embarrassed me if I were capable of being embarrassed. Right then, the only thing I could think about was how good this felt, how much I wanted this while simultaneously trying to understand why I did.

Gage slid his hands up my back, fisting my T-shirt as he used his stronger, slightly bigger body to spin us around so I was pressed against the counter.

That little show of strength excited me, and I let out another one of those embarrassing moans.

“Fuck,” he whispered against my mouth and pulled in a deep breath.

I did the same, desperately trying to get my heart to calm down.

I didn't know if it was his shampoo, cologne, or just simply him, but the spicy, musky scent surrounding Gage was sexy as hell. It was heady and a little dark and very masculine. I liked it.

He pecked another sweet kiss against my lips, then stepped back.

I gripped the counter behind me with one hand, trying to get my bearings as he studied me.

“Still feel good?” I asked, my voice cracking embarrassingly.

He pursed his lips, like he was trying to stop a smile, and motioned to his crotch.

His dick was as hard as mine. We both had ridiculous bulges in the front of our pants.

I licked my lips, a little thrill going through me when his gaze tracked the movement and a flare of heat lit up his eyes. “Hungry?” I asked, needing to break the tension that had fallen over us.

“Starving.”

“How about you go change and I’ll get dinner plated?”

“Yeah. Okay.” His eyes fell to my lips again. “Be down soon.”

“Kay.”

He turned on his heel, tugging his tie loose with one hand. I blatantly checked him out, running my eyes over his strong back, powerful legs, and full ass as he strode out of the kitchen.

I had no idea why, but Gage’s body was fucking sexy. Everything about him turned me on, and even though I was still confused as all hell, I couldn’t deny it.

I was attracted to Gage. I liked kissing him, and I wanted more.

Maybe it was time to shut my brain down and just let myself feel for once.

My attraction to Gage was unexpected, but it wasn’t exactly unwelcome, not now that I knew he was feeling the same. We were both fish out of water here, out of our elements and floundering, but that actually made it easier.

Knowing that he was struggling and just as confused helped put me at ease. We’d figure this out, and I was only going to drive myself crazy if I kept going in circles.

Right now, we had food to eat, and that was what I was going to focus on. Whatever was going to happen, would, and working myself up into an even bigger tizzy freaking out about it wouldn’t help things.

I grabbed two bowls out of the cupboard and scooped two portions into them, and brought them to the dining room.

Water moved through the pipes, and a few moments later heavy footfalls pounded down the stairs.

I pulled in a deep breath and forced myself to calm down as I sat in my chair.

Having dinner together wasn’t a new thing, so I shouldn’t be freaking out. I could do that later when I was alone. Right

now, I was going to eat my food and hang out with my roommate.

“This looks good.” Gage slid into his seat, an appreciative smile on his lips as he stared down at his place. “I feel like I should be paying you to cook for me.”

“You already pitch in for the ingredients, so it’s fine.” I waved him off, a little niggle of... something going through me at the reminder that I was technically his employee.

He loaded up his fork and took a big bite.

He closed his eyes, scrunching up his face in the cutest way as he let out a tiny moan that went straight to my dick.

Jesus. Did he always react that way when he ate something he liked and I just hadn’t noticed, or was this a new thing?

It seemed I had a “Gage enjoys my cooking” fetish. I’d always liked it when people enjoyed my cooking, but those reactions had never been sexual. Not like my reaction to Gage’s yummy face, which was definitely sexual.

“Oh my god.” He opened his eyes and grinned at me. “This is fucking amazing.”

I looked down at my bowl, cursing my fair complexion as my cheeks heated. “Thanks.”

“Have you thought about what you want to do when you’re done fixing up this place?” He took another bite of his food.

“Um, not really. I guess try to find someone willing to hire me.”

“What kind of marketing are you doing?”

“Marketing? Like my résumé?”

“No, I mean marketing yourself.”

I blinked at him. What was he was talking about?

“I was thinking about the work you did in the attic. You said you like restoring things better than renovating.”

“That’s true.”

“Maybe you could focus on that. Build a business specializing in restoration instead of being a jack-of-all-trades handyman.”

“I’ve thought about it, but it’s pretty specific work. I wouldn’t even know where to look for a company that specializes in that and is hiring.”

“Have you thought about working for yourself?”

“Yeah. Plenty of times. But I also like having a place to live and food to eat, so that’s not really an option.”

“This is where we circle back to marketing. Have you thought about starting an Instagram or a TikTok where you show your work?”

“Pretty sure no one wants to see this”—I motioned to myself—“on the internet.”

“You wouldn’t be posting thirst traps.” He rolled his eyes. “I was thinking like informative videos, before and after pics of your work. You could use this place as your portfolio.”

“You’d be okay with that?”

“Yeah, as long as we didn’t show *where* I live or any personal details. I wouldn’t have offered if I wasn’t.”

“We?” I quirked my eyebrow.

“Yeah. I could help you. Something tells me you’re not the most tech-savy person.”

“Not at all.” I chuckled. “I have Facebook, but I pretty much only use it to keep up with other people’s lives and look at their posts.”

“It’s just a suggestion, but it could help get your name out there. And it could be fun.”

I mulled over what he said as he resumed eating.

I wasn’t the most confident person, but he did have a point. If I was posting informative and work-related stuff, then maybe people wouldn’t judge me based on my looks.

And the thought of having Gage help me, doing this with him, made it all the more appealing. It would give us something to do together that had nothing to do with making out.

I was still daydreaming when Gage shoveled the last bite of his food into his mouth, then put his fork down.

Gage ate faster than anyone I'd ever met. The crazy part was he didn't even seem like he was rushing. He was just quick, like that was his natural default. I was only half-done.

"Why do you eat so fast?" I asked, changing the subject away from me and social media.

"The army."

"The army?"

"Yeah. In boot camp, we never knew how much time we'd have to eat because timings could change on a dime. We either learned to eat fast without making ourselves sick, or we went hungry."

"That sounds... unpleasant," I said carefully. It sounded horrible to me and a great way to cause digestive issues.

"You get used to it." He shrugged. "It wasn't so bad when I was stateside because I was on a regular schedule and mealtimes were set. Training and exercises were a different story. Then I spent the equivalent of two years on a base in the middle of a warzone. Eating fast became a habit again, and I guess it never fully went away."

I took a bite of my food, letting him decide if he wanted to say more. I'd noticed that talking about his time in the service was a difficult topic for him.

"It's been ten years, but some habits are hard to break. Especially since I've always lived alone. I never realize how fast I'm eating unless I have someone to judge myself against."

He rubbed his hands together in an agitated way, then abruptly stood. "I'll get a head start on cleaning up."

He scooped up his bowl and cutlery, then balanced his empty glass in the bowl. He hurried out of the dining room, not sparing me a second glance.

Shit. I shouldn't have asked about his time in the army. It was obvious he had unresolved trauma associated with it, especially his tours.

I quickly finished my meal, feeling like shit as I brought my dishes into the kitchen.

Gage was emptying the sink as I put my dishes into the dishwasher.

"That was really good as usual." He turned away from the sink, an easy smile on his handsome face.

That was a good sign. Hopefully he was feeling better after our conversation.

"I'm glad you liked it. How much longer do you have in your book?" I closed the door to the dishwasher.

"I'm at seventy percent, and it's getting intense." He grinned as he pushed off the counter and walked out of the kitchen. "They're planning their big assault."

"Isn't there another book left in the series?" I followed him to the living room.

"Yeah, I know it's not the end, but the buildup is just so good that I don't really care that they're not going to win. At this point, I'm curious how the author is going to set up the last book."

He flopped down onto the couch and smiled up at me. I sat as well, albeit a little more gingerly.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure." He blinked at me. "I might not answer, but you're free to ask."

"Does talking about your time in the army... I don't know how to say it. But I guess, trigger you?"

"Not really." He bit his lip, his eyes flitting around the room. I knew that move. He was thinking and choosing his

words carefully. “There are some things I’m not ready to talk about, but most things are fine.”

“Okay. I just noticed that you kind of shut down there.”

“Yeah.” He sighed. “Mostly because I’m not used to talking about it if that makes sense. It’s hard to know what I *can* tell people. What they’ll be able to handle. Some people want to know everything, every little detail like I’m some action hero. I don’t like talking to those people because it feels like they’re romanticizing war and what soldiers go through. They want to hear all about how we’re kicking ass and taking names and making the *bad guys* pay.” He put little air quotes around *bad guys*. “But they don’t want to hear about what it’s actually like to be at war.”

“I can see how that would be uncomfortable.”

“It is. Then you have the people who hate me because of my time in. They think I’m a monster, and they call me that to my face.”

“What?” I yelped. “You’ve had people call you a monster to your face?”

“Among other things.” He let out a bitter laugh. “I got spit on in uniform once. Right after I came back from my first tour.”

“What?” I couldn’t fathom what that felt like. To serve your country, then get spit on for it.

“Yup. That was a fun day. I was just walking along and passed someone who must have had an issue with soldiers because they spit on my shoes and called me a murderer as I walked by.”

“What did you do?”

“Nothing. I was in uniform, so I couldn’t do anything.” He shrugged.

“Shit. I’m sorry.”

“It was a long time ago.” He shrugged again, and I was beginning to see that was a tell for him being uncomfortable.

“Anyway, like I was saying. I never know how much to say to people because I don’t know how they’re going to react or why they want to know if that makes sense.”

“It does.” I studied him. His shoulders were tight, and his neck was tense. “We don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

“It’s not you.” He rolled his neck, like he was trying to dispel some of the tension. “It’s just been a long time since I talked about any of this to a civilian.”

I kept quiet, waiting to see if he’d keep talking or if he was done.

“I saw a lot of shit when I was on tour,” he said softly, his gaze on the floor in front of him. “A lot of shit. That’s the stuff I’m not ready to talk about. And I don’t know if I ever will be.”

“Did you see someone about that?” I asked gently when he finally lifted his eyes and glanced at me. “Like a therapist?”

He snorted. “Like they give a shit about us once we get out. I chose to leave so there wasn’t a lot of support available to me. I used my benefits to go to school, but that’s about all I had access to. It helped set me up and got me a good job, so I can’t really complain.” He shrugged again, belying his true feelings. “I’m lucky. I know that. I did two tours, and I walked away. A lot of guys weren’t so lucky. A lot of guys never made it home. And a lot of guys came home different from when they left.”

A chill ran up my spine at not only his words but also his tone. It was empty, completely devoid of any emotion.

“But enough about that,” he said, his voice a little hollow. “How was your day?”

I had to blink a few times to switch conversation gears.

“Um, it was okay. Spent most of it in knots, and it took me over an hour to put a cabinet together that should have taken twenty minutes.”

“So pretty much the same as me.” He grinned, a real and true smile that lit up his face and eyes. “You have no idea how many times I had to go over my numbers to make sure I had them right.”

“This is fucked up, right?” I asked before I could stop myself. “We’re both straight men, and we’re all twisted up over another guy?”

“It is fucked up.” His gaze fell to my lips. “But it’s happening. We can either ignore it and hope it goes away, or we can figure it out.”

“I don’t want to lose you as a friend,” I said softly, finally verbalizing one of the main fears I’d had since he kissed me.

Gage was the first friend who was only mine, who hadn’t met me when I was part of a couple with my ex-wife or had known me since I was a kid.

That meant something to me, and I was terrified he’d stop being my friend when whatever the fuck was going on between us fizzled out.

“That’s not going to happen.” Gage gave me a lazy smile. “Not if you don’t want it to. I won’t let sex get in the way of our friendship.”

I wet my lips, desperately wanting to believe him. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

His confidence made me feel better, and the tightness in my chest lessened as I pulled in a deep breath.

“Can I ask you something?”

“How about you just go ahead and ask whatever you want, and I’ll decide if I’m going to answer you or not,” he said after a brief pause. “You don’t have to keep asking permission.”

“I don’t like to pry.”

“Asking a question isn’t prying. Asking questions when a subject is closed is prying.”

“Which high school did you go to? I know you didn’t go to same one I did.”

“I didn’t grow up here.”

“No?”

“Nope. My dad is in the army. Or at least he was. He’s retired now. Because of that, I grew up everywhere and nowhere. I think the longest we stayed in one place was three years. At least that was the longest I can remember.”

“That had to be hard.”

“You have no idea how hard.” He leaned back against the couch and crossed his arms over his chest. “Being the new kid over and over again. Having to stand in front of a new class every few years and tell them a bit about myself. I fucking hated that. It made making friends hard because I was always trying to break into a new social hierarchy. Once I got settled, my dad would announce that we were moving again, and I’d have to start over from zero.”

“That really sucks.”

“It wasn’t too bad when I was little. Kids are resilient. And it was kind of cool getting to see different parts of the country. And the world.”

“The world?”

“We spent a year in Japan when I was young and two years in Hawaii. That was pretty awesome.”

“Wow. I’ve never traveled outside of the state.”

“It got old, especially once I was in middle school. That’s when it started getting harder to make friends. High school was even worse. Teenagers can be assholes to each other.”

“That sounds really isolating.”

“It was. It wouldn’t have been so bad if I had a sibling, but it was always just me, so I had to fend for myself. It’s why I was such a surly bastard when I was young. Why I was such a dick to everyone. I figured if I pushed them away, then they couldn’t hurt me.”

“What changed?”

“Doc.” He chuckled. “I was such an asshole to him, to everyone. He was the first person to call me out on my behavior. To make me think about why I was acting that way. He helped me break down those walls, and I gained a best friend for life. I would never have become friends with Luke and Sarge either if it wasn’t for him. We might not be related, but we’re brothers. Always will be.”

I smiled, even as a wave of wistful wanting washed over me. My heart broke for young Gage, the kid who never felt like he belonged, but a part of me wished I had the kind of connections he did.

I didn’t have a best friend other than my brother. I had friends, but I’d never had someone who I’d call a best friend.

“Why did you settle here if you didn’t grow up here?”

“Doc.” He uncrossed his arms and let them fall to his sides. “He brought me home a few times when we were on leave, and I spent a couple of holidays with him and his family because I had nowhere else to go. I liked it, and I knew Doc was going to be retiring here when he was done, so I figured it was as good a place as anywhere to live. It just worked out that Luke and Sarge settled here too.”

“So you were kind of like the trailblazer?” I teased. “You moved here, and everyone else followed.”

He grinned. “Yup. I was the trendsetter for once.”

I wanted to ask about his family, why he’d had nowhere to go when he’d had leave, but I didn’t want to push. He’d shared a lot, and he was finally smiling again. The last thing I wanted was to bring him down again.

“You’re easy to talk to.” Gage studied me. “You have a unique gift for making me talk.”

“It’s because I’m so unassuming.” I grinned, trying to lighten the mood. “Nonthreatening, either works.”

“You’re a lot of things, but unassuming isn’t one of them.” He shifted closer to me on the couch, and my breath caught,

making me choke on nothing. “And you’re definitely not nonthreatening.”

“Really? Me?” I looked him up and down in an exaggerated way. “Compared to you, I’m a kitten.”

“I’m all bark, no bite. Not unless you want me to.”

My cheeks and neck flushed hot as I pictured him marking me while we made out. Maybe give me a few hickeys or bite marks. I’d never been into that before but wasn’t shocked I wanted it with him.

Gage had a singular talent for making me want things I’d never thought about, never considered. It made me feel out of control, but not necessarily in a bad way.

I pursed my lips my cheeks and neck heated. I hated how I wasn’t able to hide my reactions, my embarrassment probably written all over my face.

“Do you like the sound of that? Me biting you?” he asked, his voice husky as he shifted so his leg was pressed up against mine.

“Maybe.” I swallowed the lump in my throat. “Never realized I was into that but...” I waved at the bulge my semi had created in my pants.

“Mmmmm,” he murmured, the deep tone sending a jolt of heat up my spine as tingles exploded in my chest.

“Jesus.”

“What?” he asked, a playful look in his dark eyes.

“I can’t control my reactions to you. One look, one *mmmm* and I’m popping wood. I’m almost forty, for fuck’s sake. I can usually control myself better than this.”

He grinned wolfishly. “I mean, you’re not the only one affected here.” He dropped his eyes to his crotch, and my gaze followed.

He was hard—not just rocking a semi but a full erection. My dick stood at attention and saluted the room in response.

I looked up at him, my damn cheeks flushing even hotter.

“Stop me if you don’t want this.”

I didn’t ask what he meant because my brain shut down as he leaned toward me, a feeling of *yes-right-mine* blooming out from my chest as I closed my eyes, anticipating his kiss.

It was soft and sweet, just a gentle brushing of lips. That was so much more erotic than if he’d gone in with savage need like before. This was calculated and meant to tease, and it worked.

I let out a soft moan as he threaded his hand through my hair, gently tugging on the short strands.

Fuck, I *liked* kissing Gage, and instead of trying to understand why, I shut off the last of my higher brain function so I could just feel for once.

I leaned back on the couch, wrapped one arm around Gage’s middle, and tugged him down with me.

We had to break apart to shuffle around and get comfortable on the small sofa, but when we were settled, I was on my back with Gage on top of me, my legs spread to accommodate his hips as he pressed our erections together.

“Oh fuck,” I muttered when he undulated against me, scraping his dick against mine as he moved in a sort of circle.

Stars exploded behind my eyelids as he ground down on me. He wasn’t being gentle, and I didn’t want him to be. The roughness of his frotting, the need and desire that was radiating off him, was affecting me almost as much as the act itself.

I sighed against his mouth, opening to him so he could sweep his tongue between my lips, teasing and tasting me as he held himself up with one arm, running the other hand over my chest.

He cupped my pec like it was a breast, but before I could feel uncomfortable or like he’d forgotten I wasn’t a woman, he flattened his hand and rubbed the tips of his fingers over my nipple.

I arched into him as a spark of pleasure ignited deep inside me. My nipples had always been incredibly sensitive, and I shivered as he did it again.

“That feels good?” he asked against my lips.

“Yeah. Really good,” I rasped, then leaned up and kissed him again, needing to feel his lips on mine.

The kiss went from soft and sweet to hard and greedy, our mouths slotting together, our tongues battling for dominance.

A part of me wanted to submit to him, but another part of me that wanted to see how far I could push him. To tease him the way he was teasing me.

I lifted one hand and gently cupped his ass. I didn't move my hand or do anything, just let it rest on the full globe as I got used to it.

I was touching another man's ass, and I liked it. Really liked it.

He moaned into my mouth when I slowly kneaded his firm cheek, squeezing it in my hand as I pushed my hips up to bump our dicks together.

“What are you ready for?” he asked, or rather rasped, as he pulled away from our kiss and looked down at me.

“This feels pretty good,” I managed, my eyes on his mouth and his kiss-swollen lips.

“Can you come like this?”

“Not sure.” I licked my lips, his eyes hungrily tracking the move. “It's been a while since I dry-humped someone.”

“Same.” He chuckled, moving his hand from my hair and resting his palm against my temple. He traced his thumb over my forehead tenderly as he studied me.

I expected him to kiss me, but he didn't. He shifted over me and picked up where we left off, rubbing our erections together.

Having him watch me as we rubbed off was as intimate as it was unsettling. The scrutiny did weird things to my insides.

A distant part of me was mortified, convinced I was making weird faces, or he was seeing me at an unflattering angle. Another part of me was thrilled to have his undivided attention, and most of me was so busy trying not to lose my ever-loving mind I couldn't be bothered to care about anything other than how good it felt.

The friction was incredible, and I had the added layer of Gage's bigger body on top of me, so warm and solid. I felt safe and protected and so damn turned on my head was spinning. It kind of freaked me out how much I was enjoying his strength and size.

Gage's stare was intense, his eyes boring into mine like they were searching for some sort of answer. His movements were fluid and practiced, and I clung to his hips as he took me along for the ride. We were both panting, and every once in a while, Gage would let out the sexiest grunt, like he was holding back and not being as loud or as rough as he wanted.

"Harder," I gritted out, shifting my hips so he was rubbing against me at the perfect angle. "I can take it."

"Fuck." His nostrils flared, and a flash of heat darkened his already impossibly dark eyes. "I want to try something. Don't freak out."

"What do you mean fr—"

I gasped as he lifted his hips, pulling our bodies apart. He reached down with one hand, and I groaned as he started undoing his pants.

I reached between us and yanked down the zipper and ripped open the button of my pants, shoving them down so they were under my ass and out of the way.

"Definitely not freaking out," I rasped. He pulled his dick out and wriggled so his pants fell around his upper thighs.

With one last predatory look, he glanced between us. Drawing in a shaky breath, he pushed my hand away from where I'd been cupping my erection through my underwear and slipped his hand into my boxer briefs to grasp my cock.

"Holy shit," I murmured. "Fuck."

Gage lifted his eyes to meet mine as he pulled my cock free from my underwear and gave it a long, slow stroke.

“Shit” I gasped and arched into his touch.

“Can you jerk us off?” he asked in that raspy, desperate voice that was way too sexy.

“Yeah. Okay.” I reached down, my heart fluttering with both nerves and anticipation. He shifted so he was holding himself above me, his upper body a few inches above mine in a sort of push-up/plank and giving me room to work.

His strength was impressive, and the way his muscles bunched and tightened as he held the position made my mouth water as I pictured running my tongue over every dip and curve of his abdomen.

Jesus. Where the fuck had that come from?

Gage pulled his shirt up, exposing his stomach, then did the same with mine. Before I could ask what he was planning, he shifted so our dicks were pressed against each other, our bare skin rubbing and sending a shockwave of pleasure through my entire body. The heat from his body, the silky feel of his flesh against mine, made my head spin.

I guess that answered the question whether I’d like touching another man’s dick. It would seem I did as long as that dick belonged to Gage.

I tentatively wrapped my hand around our shafts, then squeezed.

“Holy shit,” he choked out, his upper body trembling. I stroked my hand up our lengths, giving the head a little extra attention, then slid back down. “Fuck, that’s good.”

I looked down between our bodies, watching as I stroked us off.

His dick was a bit bigger than mine, a little longer and slightly thicker, but we were pretty evenly matched.

His skin was hot and silky smooth, tacky with precum and glistening in the light as I fisted it with mine. It was one of the sexiest things I’d ever seen.

A bead of precum appeared on his tip. I stared at it, transfixed, and stroked back up, squeezing our cockheads to see if I could get some more precum out of him.

He groaned, low and deep, and I shivered against him, under him. He buried his face in my neck and sucked on the skin where my throat met my shoulder.

That little bit of pain, of pulling skin and nibbling teeth, sent my arousal soaring, and I jerked us in earnest. My hand flew up and down our leaking cocks, spreading our precum around, mixing them, and creating a slick, hot passage that felt so good. Too good.

“Fuck.” I let go of our cocks, not ready for it to be over yet. “I’m close,” I panted.

“Me too,” he said in a strained voice and lifted his face from my neck. “Let’s try it this way.”

I waited as he shifted, lowering his body so it was pressing mine into the couch. I tugged my hand free from where it got caught between our bodies, sighing at the feeling of having all of him against me.

He rolled his hips, dragging his cock against mine.

“Holy fuck. That’s good,” I bit out, wrapping my ankles around his legs, sealing our bodies together.

He let out a pleased hum and hooked his arms under my shoulders, holding me close as he thrust against me.

His lips crushed mine in a harsh, demanding kiss. I closed my eyes, holding him tight, kissing him back as I rolled my hips to meet his thrusts with my own.

My stomach was wet with precum, my lips were bruised and swollen, and my balls were high and tight, hugging my body as I desperately fought back the waves of pleasure washing over me as he brought me higher and higher.

“Shit, Gage. I’m gonna—”

I didn’t get a chance to finish because I was coming, shooting between our bodies, arching up into him.

He stared down at me, his eyes wide and filled with wonder, thrusting against me and keeping my orgasm going as I shot spurt after spurt between us.

“Jesus, that’s hot.” He blinked, looking as confused as I felt.

That had been one of the best orgasms of my life, and it had been from rubbing off on my male roommate.

“You okay if I...”

“Yeah, keep going,” I said.

He leaned down and kissed me, the savage need from before gone and replaced with deep, sensual passion. I liked kissing, was a fan of making out with my partner, but I’d never been kissed like this before. Like kissing me wasn’t just a want but a need. It was beyond intimate, but before I could think too much about it, Gage’s rhythm faltered, getting jerky and uncoordinated, and he came with a low grunt.

Fuck, that was a sexy sound, and the feeling of his cum mixing with mine as he shot between us was way more erotic than I’d thought it would be.

I’d worried that his cum would gross me out or that I wouldn’t be able to handle touching it. It looked like that wasn’t a problem.

Gage collapsed onto me, his body heavy. We both struggled to catch our breath, our cum and spent dicks caught between us.

I’d had sex with my male roommate. And I wasn’t freaking out. Maybe I would later, when I was alone, but at that moment, all I felt was satiated and comfortable.

Gage’s weight on me was comforting and reassuring, even though it was bordering on crushing. I liked knowing he was just as spent and out of it as I was.

“Am I too heavy?” he mumbled, his lips next to my ear. I shivered as his breath tickled the sensitive skin.

“No. You’re fine.”

I couldn't tell him how good he felt, which was ridiculous when I thought about how we'd just cum all over each other, but that was a step I wasn't ready to take yet.

We lay like that for another minute or so. Then Gage pushed himself up so he was holding his body over mine again.

"We need to clean up." He looked at the mess between us, then into my eyes.

His were guarded like he was bracing himself for some sort of negative reaction.

Gage had said he pushed people away so they couldn't hurt him. If I was feeling vulnerable and a bit raw, then he was probably feeling the same.

"We do. Smart getting our shirts out of the way," I said, making sure to keep my voice light. Hopefully it would break through whatever he was thinking about.

I wasn't sure what he needed from me, but I figured that acting like this wasn't a big deal might help him feel a little less vulnerable.

He chuckled as he shifted around until he was kneeling between my still spread legs.

We were both fully dressed other than our shirts being up and our cocks sticking out of our pants. I didn't know why, but that sent a little jolt of arousal through me. It was as sexy as it was indecent.

"Less laundry this way." He grinned crookedly and climbed off me, then tucked himself away. "In theory." He motioned to his chest.

One or both of us had shot far enough our shirts were streaked with cum, even after being moved out of the way.

I put my dick back in my underwear, then took his proffered hand.

He hauled me to my feet, throwing me off-balance.

We laughed as he helped me regain my footing.

I was glad we were able to laugh after what had just happened between us. I'd worried things would get weird, but they weren't.

I'd just had sex with Gage. He'd come on me, and I wasn't freaking out. I had no idea what it meant, but I was taking this as a good sign. Maybe we could figure out what was going on between us without it affecting our friendship.

Chapter 9

Gage

I stepped out of the shower, grabbed a towel off the rack, and wrapped it around my waist.

It was Friday night, two days after I'd dry-humped the fuck out of Tyler and come all over him.

Things hadn't been weird, not really. We'd had dinner together last night and hung out in the living room after. We hadn't messed around, but we'd sat pressed up against each other on the couch like a couple of teenagers waiting for the other to make the first move.

I'd had to sit through another monthly report meeting tonight and hadn't gotten home until almost eight. Before I'd gotten in the shower, I'd texted Doc, asking if he and Tanner minded if I came over and stayed for a few days.

I grabbed my phone off the counter and checked my texts.

Doc: come over any time.

Gage: be there in an hour.

Normally Tyler and I would be heading to a bar where we'd ignore everyone else while pretending we were looking to hook him up with someone.

I didn't even know when that had started or if it had been like that from the beginning. I'd thought I was being a good friend and wingman, but looking back, I'd just monopolized his time like we were on a date or something.

I put my phone back on the counter and focused on drying off, rubbing my towel over my body.

I was worried that whatever was going on between Tyler and me was being amplified by the fact that we lived together. We were in each other's pockets, and while I got to leave every day to go to work, Tyler spent his days and nights in my house.

Would I still have this burning, confusing need to be close to him if we spent some time apart? Was the proximity making things more intense?

I wasn't used to craving, needing, someone the way I did Tyler. I'd had girlfriends, and more than enough short-term flings, friends with benefits, and one-night stands. In all that time of hooking up, I'd never once felt a burning need to rush home to someone.

I thought about Tyler when I was at the gym, at work, all the freaking time. I wondered how he was doing, what he was doing. If he was thinking about me too.

It was fucking with me, more than what had happened between us. I'd come to terms with the fact that I was attracted to Tyler and touching him, having him touch me, felt good. I was usually all about easy, convenient orgasms and sex, but it was the emotional stuff that was clouding my judgment.

I liked him, and being around him made me happy. I'd never had that before, and I didn't know what to do with it.

I finished drying off, hung up my towel, and got dressed.

"Tyler?" I shouted as I came out of the bathroom.

"Yeah?" he called back from downstairs.

I hurried down the steps and entered the living room, my socked feet whisper-soft on the hardwood floors.

"I'm going to Doc and Tanner's for a few days."

He blinked at me, whatever show he was watching forgotten on the TV screen. "What?"

"I'm going to go stay with Doc and Tanner for a few days."

"Oh. Okay." He nodded, his eyes clouding over as he gave me a tight smile.

Tyler was good at masking his expressions, but his eyes and his blushes always gave him away.

"It's nothing bad." I sighed. How could I explain this to him so it made sense? "I just need a few days to try and sort

out what's going on in my head.”

“And you need to leave to do that?”

“If I do it here, I'll end up balls deep in you, and that's not going to help the situation up here.” I tapped my temple.

He smirked. “And who says it won't be me balls deep in you? I don't remember deciding that I'm going to be the bottom.”

My cheeks burned. I wasn't ready to admit it out loud, but I'd thought about having sex with Tyler, and I'd imagined myself in both roles.

A part of me that felt like I should be the top, that it would make sense for me to be the dominant one, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious as to how it would feel to be the one being fucked. The guys in porn seemed to enjoy it, and while I knew my friends were all tops, they never seemed to lack enthusiastic partners.

“Fair point.” I swallowed. Hopefully he hadn't noticed my reaction. “You can't tell me you're not all twisted up about this. I mean, we're both straight men, and we're messing around with each other.”

“Yeah, not going to lie, that's been a huge mind fuck.” He glanced down at his hands. “But whatever. If you need to leave to figure shit out, that's fine.”

“It's not that I want to leave. It's more I think we need some space from each other.”

He looked up and quirked his eyebrow curiously.

“We live together and spend all our free time together. I'm just worried that's one of the reasons this”——I motioned between us——“is as strong as it is.”

“You think that we're fucking around because there are no other options?”

“No, not like that.” I shook my head. “I mean that living together has created a sense of intimacy that wouldn't be there if we weren't roommates.”

He nodded slowly, his eyes thoughtful. “You have a good point. I never thought of that.”

“I’ve never lived with a partner before. I’ve had women stay over for a few days or whatever, but I’ve lived on my own since I got out of the army. I like having you as a roommate, but this is just a lot all at once.”

“I get it.” He gave me a shy smile, one that reached his eyes. “I’m so used to living with someone that it never occurred to me that this would be an adjustment for you. But you don’t have to leave. I can always go to my brother’s house or whatever.”

“Yeah, I mean, you can do that if you want. But I need some distance from the house too.”

“When are you leaving?”

“In a few minutes. I’ll be back on Sunday.”

“Okay. Have fun.”

He turned back to the TV, and I didn’t like that.

I wasn’t trying to hurt him or say that I needed space from *him*. It was more that I needed space in general so I could figure shit out. To me, difference was obvious, but I didn’t know how to articulate it to him.

Instead of trying, I went upstairs and grabbed a hoodie and my wallet. I slipped my feet into a pair of worn sneakers, then tucked my phone into my hoodie pocket and scooped up my keys.

Forty-five minutes later, I pulled into the driveway of Doc and Tanner’s new place and turned off the engine. They’d bought a farmhouse in a neighboring township. The house was big and a little run down, but unlike me, Doc was handy, and he and Tanner were tackling the repairs together as a couples project.

I was halfway up the steps when the front door opened.

“Hi,” Tanner said and held the door open for me.

“Hi.” I stepped into the house and looked around for Loki.

Both Loki and Doc came ambling into the hallway as I was putting my wallet and keys on the little table they kept next to the front door.

“Hey, buddy,” I greeted Loki, their massive German Shepherd, as he came up to me and pressed his nose into my hand. “How are you doing? Your dad’s treating you good?”

“He’s still horribly spoiled.” Doc grinned as I patted Loki’s giant head. “Have you eaten?”

“Sort of.”

“Sort of?” He motioned for me to follow him into the kitchen. “You mean you ate a protein bar and you’re calling it a meal.”

“You know me so well.”

He went to the cupboard and pulled out a plate. “We had pizza tonight. There are a few slices left in the fridge. Help yourself.”

I took the plate from him and opened the fridge. I found half of what looked like a Hawaiian pizza in a box on the top shelf of the fridge. I grabbed two slices and slid them onto my plate, then pulled out a beer.

“Need one?” I asked, shaking the bottle at Doc.

“All good.” He shook his head. “Babe, need a refill?” he called to Tanner.

“I’m good,” he shouted back.

We went into the living room. I sat in the wingback chair across from the couch while Tanner and Doc snuggled up together, with Tanner curled up against Doc.

Loki lay down at their feet, putting his head on his front paws and closing his eyes.

“What’s going on?” Doc asked as I took a bite of my cold pizza. “We have a stove and a microwave if you want to heat that up.”

“Nah. Might as well eat it cold if you’re going to put pineapple on pizza.”

“Pineapple belongs on pizza. End of discussion,” Tanner teased. “Do you want me to make myself scarce while you talk?”

“Do you mind?” I asked, feeling like an asshole for kicking him out of his living room.

“Not at all. I’ll go upstairs.” He leaned over and pecked a quick kiss on Doc’s lips.

Tanner stood and walked out of the room with Loki following close behind.

“What’s going on?” Doc asked.

I chewed and swallowed the last bite of pizza crust.

“I’m... I don’t even know what I am.”

“What happened?” He leaned forward, his eyes piercing as he studied me.

“Nothing serious,” I said quickly, realizing how dramatic I was being. “Just something weird.”

“You going to tell me what it is, or do you want me to guess?”

“I talked to Luke a few weeks ago, and he put an idea in my head, and now it’s taking over.”

“Okay...” he said slowly. “That makes no sense. Maybe give me a little context?”

“Luke said I have a crush on Tyler.”

I thought Doc would look surprised, or at least curious, but the fucker just smiled. Like he fully expected me to say that.

“What? You too?”

“I mean, it’s pretty obvious there’s something there. You talk about him nonstop, and you get this happy look on your face when you do. I’ve never seen you look like that when you’ve been talking about a girlfriend or a woman.”

“Seriously?” I shoved another bite of pizza into my mouth as I processed what he’d just said.

“There’s nothing wrong with having a crush on someone.”

“Not even a dude when I’m not into dick?” I asked around my mouthful of pizza.

“Even then. Crushes don’t have to mean anything. You could just be confusing your feelings for him because it’s been so long since you made a friend.”

I swallowed my pizza. “That’s what Luke said.” I took a long pull off my beer, partly to wet my dry throat and partly to stall for a few seconds. “Didn’t realize I was such a loner.”

“It has nothing to do with being a loner. You’re good at making friends, but they’re always superficial relationships. You’re a master at networking and making connections, but none of them are more than skin deep. Tyler is the first friend you’ve made in years you truly seem to click with. It’s understandable that you’d confuse those feelings with something more.”

I bit my lip, then gulped down some more beer.

“Wait. What aren’t you telling me?” Doc studied me, his expression shrewd.

“We’ve been hooking up,” I said in a rush.

Doc blinked, his jaw dropping open. “Really?”

“Yeah. Now how do you explain that?”

“I... I wasn’t expecting that at all. What do you mean you’ve been hooking up?”

I rolled my eyes. I knew I’d have to tell Doc details to get his opinion, but I felt like I was eighteen again, explaining to Doc why I was being an asshole to everyone. We might be grown-ass adults, but Doc would always feel like a big brother to me.

“We haven’t fucked, like penetration or anything, but we’ve been messing around.”

“And you’ve enjoyed it?”

“Obviously,” I snapped.

Doc gave me a look, and my defensiveness melted away. I was being a dick. It wasn’t his fault I was messed up over this.

“Yeah. I’ve enjoyed it.” I pulled in a deep breath, then blew it out loudly. “He has too.”

“I always thought Tyler was straight.”

“He is.” I snorted. “But then again, so am I, so that means shit.”

“Are you ashamed of liking it?” he asked softly.

“No,” I said quickly. “Just confused as to *why* I like it. I’ve never even thought about being with a guy before, but two days ago, I rubbed off against my very male roommate, and I have no idea *why*.”

“Do you remember when you found out I’m gay?” he asked after a few beats of silence.

I nodded.

It had been an accident. Doc had asked me to put something on his rack, and I’d tucked it under his pillow to make sure it didn’t get lost. I’d felt something in his pillowcase, and my eighteen-year-old self hadn’t thought about giving him privacy and had reached into the case to see what it was.

It was a European sports magazine I didn’t recognize. It hadn’t made sense at the time because as far as I’d known, Doc didn’t follow sports. I’d flipped through the magazine, noticing that most of the athletes had been dressed rather provocatively. That was when I’d realized what it was.

That magazine had been Doc’s spank bank. Most of the guys kept nude pictures or magazines filled with women in their racks, but not Doc. He never took part in the discussions about women, only glanced at the nudes or porn the guys would proudly show off when they had either bought it or had it sent to them. Sharing porn was a thing in the army, especially on deployment.

It had taken me almost a week to build the courage to ask Doc if he was into men. He’d answered honestly, and I’d promised to keep it to myself because of the repercussions that could happen if anyone found out he was gay.

“Do you remember what I told you when you asked me why I liked men?”

“You said you didn’t know. It’s just how you’re wired, and it had always been like that.”

“Maybe this is how you’re wired.”

“But how could I go this long, be around so many available men, and suddenly want my roommate? I obviously have nothing against being gay or bi, but why am I only now feeling something for another man?”

“I think the real question isn’t why you’re feeling something for a man but why you’re feeling something for Tyler, who happens to be a man.”

Now it was my turn to blink at him. “Huh?”

“When did the physical reactions to him start?”

“You mean when did I first think about boning him? After Luke told me I had a crush on him.”

“And before that, what did you feel?”

“I don’t know. I liked him as a person. Liked hanging out with him, talking, that sort of thing. We’re friends, good friends.”

“It sounds like your feelings for him developed as you got to know him.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“So why it so unbelievable that it’s not Tyler’s gender you’re attracted to but him as a person, and his gender doesn’t really matter.”

“I’m not sure what you’re trying to say,” I said, playing dumb, and chugged the rest of my beer.

I did understand what he was saying, and the accuracy of it was freaking me out.

“Have you had any feelings for anyone else? Have you looked at another guy and thought he was attractive?”

“I’ve never had issues with that. But there’s a difference between finding someone attractive and being attracted to them.”

“That’s true. So have you found yourself attracted to any other men since you realized you like Tyler?”

“No.” I put my empty bottle down. “I watched gay porn a few times.”

“And?”

“It was interesting.”

“Interesting?”

“It was different. I can’t imagine tossing a woman around like that or having her do that to me, but the thought of being with someone as strong as me, as big as me, is a bit of a turn-on.”

“And when you picture the models or someone else you find attractive in that role with you, how do you feel?”

“Indifferent.” I shrugged. “I mean, it’s not like it turns me off, but it doesn’t turn me on.”

“And when you think about Tyler in that role?”

What happened when we’d been on the couch a few nights ago flashed in my mind. My cock thickened, and my pulse sped up.

“My dick is a fan,” I said wryly, ignoring my semi.

“And what about your brain?”

“Confused but also a fan.” I sighed.

“I think you need to stop thinking about this as a black-and-white issue. Sexuality is a spectrum. You can still identify as straight, even if you’re having feelings for another man.”

“Really?”

“Why not?” He shrugged. “Only you know what label fits. If you even want to label yourself, that is. You like Tyler, and he obviously likes you too if he’s down with whatever

arrangement you have, so maybe stop trying to figure out your sexuality and instead focus on him.”

“I think I need another beer.” I rubbed my hand over my face.

“I’ll grab it. I need a refill too.”

My head was spinning.

Maybe Doc was right, and I was letting my head get in the way. I was focusing too much on myself and not enough on the situation I was in.

The facts were simple. I liked Tyler, I enjoyed everything we’d done together, and I wanted more.

“Here.” Doc handed me a fresh beer, and I took a small pull as he sat back down on the couch.

“I think you might be right,” I said slowly.

“I’m going to ask you a few things, and I want you to answer honestly.”

“Okay.”

“Can you picture yourself having sex with Tyler? And I mean penetrative sex.”

I paused but only for a moment. “Yes.”

“And what about cuddling with him?”

“We’ve done that.”

“I don’t mean superficial cuddling. I mean the naked kind where you hold each other after sex and talk about everything and nothing. When it’s not about the words but about spending time with the person you care about.”

I could picture that, and what was even weirder was that I wanted it. I usually wasn’t into cuddling. I liked a little contact while I was riding the high of an orgasm, but then I needed my own space.

“Yeah. I can picture that.”

“And that’s not normal for you, is it?” he asked, a knowing smile on his lips

“No.” I shook my head and brought my beer bottle to my lips and took a slow drink.

“What else is bothering you?” he asked after a full minute of silence had passed between us.

“I don’t know how to talk to him about my time in.”

Doc nodded slowly. “I figured it was something like that.”

“How did you know what to tell Tanner?” I asked softly. “About what we did, what we saw?”

“I didn’t,” he said simply. “In fact, I struggled with what to tell him, how much. Still do some days.”

I sighed and took another pull off my beer. “Tyler’s a good person. He’s kind and sweet and gentle, and I don’t know how he’s going to feel about me when he knows the truth.”

“What do you mean?”

Doc was only asking that to get me to talk out my issues, and I appreciated it. He seemed to have a gift for knowing when to help someone figure shit out and when to step back and let them do it on their own.

“How do I tell him I’ve killed people?”

“You don’t. I’m sure he’s figured that out, knowing that you did two tours.”

“Maybe, but what if he looks at me differently when he realizes that?” My stomach clenched at the thought.

“I don’t know him as well as his brother, but one thing that’s never changed with Tyler is that he’s a compassionate person. I’m sure he can separate Gage the soldier from Gage his... friend,” he said.

“Have you told Tanner about your tours?”

“Not really.” He sighed. “I’ve told him a few things, some of the shit I needed to get off my chest or stuff that would help him understand why I was acting the way I was. But no, I haven’t told him any of the gritty details.”

“Are you going to?”

“Maybe.” He put his beer bottle down on the coffee table. “I’m still not okay with a lot of what went down. Just like you and Luke and Hunter all have things that haunt you. I might tell him in the future, when I’m ready to talk about it, but he understands that I have trauma I’m still dealing with.”

“It’s been ten years since I got out. I should be over this shit.” I put my beer bottle on the coffee table with more force than was necessary.

“You can’t put a timeline on healing,” he said gently. “Going to war changes you. It changes everyone. For some people, the change is minimal, but for others, the scars run deep.”

“But *I* should be over it.”

“Why? Why should you be over it?”

“Because I’m...”

“What?” He tilted his head as he studied me. “Because you’re tough? Because you’re strong? Because that’s what your dad always told you?”

“This has nothing to do with him.”

“Doesn’t it?”

“No.”

He didn’t say anything, just let that hang in the air, and my resolve waned.

My father was a man’s man. An old school soldier who thought emotions were for the weak and real men buried their shit and pretended nothing was wrong no matter how bad it got.

I knew he was a product of his environment. That he’d been raised in a different time and that even the army had been different when he’d joined. No one talked about mental health or PTSD, and men were expected to compartmentalize everything and soldier on.

It was why he’d told me to stop being a crybaby when I’d found a cat that had been hit by a car when I was ten and asked

him if he could help me bury it because I hated the thought of it lying on the side of the road like trash.

Why he'd ordered me to not cry and make a scene at my grandfather's funeral when I was eleven and dealing with death for the first time. Or why he'd called me a sissy when I'd been crushed that my first girlfriend had cheated on me with my then closest friend.

"Have you talked to him lately?" Doc asked, breaking me free of my thoughts.

"Nope. Not since I told him I was leaving the army, and he called me a sissy and told me to call him when I found my balls and became a real man again."

Doc nodded. "I understand how hard that must have been. It took me a long-ass time to realize this, but it's okay to not be okay, Gage. It doesn't matter how strong you are, physically or mentally. Trauma takes time to heal."

"But that's what I don't understand. I'm one of the lucky ones. I walked away. I did two fucking tours but didn't even get so much as a papercut when we were outside the wire. Why am I still messed up about shit that wasn't a big deal, that happened over a decade ago?"

"You don't have to be physically injured to be affected by war. The mental and emotional toll of it can be just as crippling."

"I guess." I sighed. "But I still don't get why I'm not over it."

"You were eighteen the first time you deployed, Gage. You were still a kid. That sticks with a person."

"You were twenty."

"Yes, I was twenty, and I had two years in at that point. You went from being a high school senior to a soldier in a warzone in less than a year. That's a lot for anyone to handle, especially a kid."

"Maybe," I conceded.

“There’s no maybe about it.” He paused. “What happened on your second tour?”

“What do you mean?” My chest tightened at his question.

Doc had never asked for specifics, not once in the eleven years since I came home from that tour. He’d asked general questions and had always been there to listen when things got so bad I felt like I would lose my mind if I didn’t talk about it. But he’d never once asked me any direct questions about what I’d been through.

“What happened?” he repeated. “You came home different.”

I picked up my beer, more to have something to do with my hands than because I wanted a drink.

Doc didn’t say anything. He just sat there and let me gather my thoughts.

“On that first tour, I had you and Luke and Sarge. We were a team. We had each other’s backs. I didn’t have that the second time. I was friends with the guys, but it was all superficial. We were friends because of what we were going through, where we were, but it wasn’t real. I haven’t spoken to a single one of them since I got out.”

“That’s hard,” Doc said, his voice low and understanding. “But what happened, Gage? What haven’t you told me?”

“That’s the thing. There’s not *one* thing. You were over there. You know the kind of shit we saw on the daily.”

Doc nodded.

“A lot of shit happened on my second tour. We went on more missions, did more supply runs. We spent so much time outside the wire it became normal. Death, fighting, fear... it was just how it was.” I glanced away. “I don’t understand why I survived when so many guys didn’t,” I said, looking back at him.

“I can say the same thing. So can Luke, and Sarge and every other soldier who came home. Survivor’s guilt is a real thing.”

“I hate it.” I raked my hand through my hair. “I fucking hate feeling like this. I’ll go months, longer, without thinking about anything, then something will happen, and it’s like I’m right back in the shit, reliving all those moments over and over.”

Doc stayed quiet, giving me a chance to collect myself as I scrubbed my hands over my face, trying to wipe away the memories as I wiped my skin.

“That happens to me too. It happens to a lot of us.”

“It fucking sucks.”

“It does.”

I picked at the label on my beer bottle with my nail. “I’m afraid he’s going to see who I really am, see the whole me, and run in the opposite direction.”

“I see the real you, and I’ve never once been tempted to run. Not even when you were being a little shit and doing everything in your power to push me away.”

I pressed my lips together. I wasn’t proud of the way I’d acted when I’d first met Doc. I really had been an asshole to him, to everyone.

“You’re a good person, Gage. You’ve done things, seen things, but they didn’t change who you are deep down. You told me once that my past didn’t define me. That the things that happened to me, the things I’ve been through, were only part of my story. The same goes for you.”

“Most days I know that, but then there are times when it just gets to be too much.”

“Is what’s going on with Tyler bringing all this to the surface?”

“I think so. He asked me a few questions about my time in, and it just kind of snowballed when I started wondering how much I should tell him, what I *could* tell him.”

“You need to trust yourself. You and Tyler have a connection. It might be confusing and undefined, but you’re friends first, right?”

I nodded.

“Then you need to trust your friendship and instincts. Tyler’s good people, and he’s not some delicate little flower that needs to be protected. I’m not saying you should tell him everything, but I think you’ll be surprised by how strong he is, how supportive he can be.”

“I know you’re right.” I sighed and chugged the rest of my beer. If only my tolerance wasn’t so high because I was barely feeling the alcohol.

“I think we need to switch to something stronger,” Doc said.

“You read my mind.” I handed him my empty bottle. “And you can call your man back in if he’s in the mood to join us.”

“You’re good?”

“Nope.” I grinned sardonically. “But I’m better.”

He gave me an exasperated look and headed to the kitchen.

I had a hell of a lot to think about, but right then, I needed to hang out with my friends and have a few drinks while talking about anything other than my messed-up brain and confused body.

Chapter 10

Tyler

I lasted three hours before the silence in the house became too much and I needed to get out of there.

I thought about talking to my brother about what was going on but ended up texting Marianne and asking if she wanted to meet for a drink while Trevor stayed home with the kids.

That had been an hour ago, and now I was sitting in a booth at a jazz bar she liked, sipping a whiskey and listening to a string quartet play a song I vaguely recognized.

“Hi, waiting long?” she asked as she slid onto the bench across from me.

“Not too long.” I looked around for our server and subtly raised my hand.

He hurried over to our table, a smile on his face. “Can I get you anything?”

“A white wine spritzer,” she ordered.

“You’re the only person I know who drinks those.” I grinned.

“I like being different.” She pulled her purse strap off and placed the oversized bag on the seat next to her. “What’s going on? You look troubled.”

“I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Okay.” She looked at me curiously.

“I don’t know how to say this.” I blew out a breath, my chest tight.

“It’s about Gage.”

“Are you two not getting along? I thought you’d become friends.”

“We’re getting along. Maybe a little too well.”

She blinked. “I don’t get it.”

“We... we’ve kinda...”

“Ty?” she asked.

“I think I like him.”

“You think you like him?” she repeated slowly.

“We messed around.”

“You did?”

“We did. We kinda still are.” I rubbed my hand over my face. “It happened more than once.”

She pursed her lips. “Is this the first time you’ve been interested in a man?”

I nodded.

“I’m surprised, but I’m not shocked.”

“What?”

“I mean, I’m surprised because I’ve only ever known you to be into women, but I’m not shocked you and Gage have something between you.”

“Why not?” I spluttered.

Our server came by with Marianne’s drink, and we both stopped talking as she thanked him.

“Why not?” I said when he was out of earshot.

“It’s the way you talked about him.” She took a sip of her drink. “It felt like there was something more than just friendship going on. I hate to call it a man crush because that’s condescending, but that’s what it sounded like when you talked about him. You light up, and it’s been a long time since I’ve seen you so happy about anything.”

I digested what she’d said, staring into the amber liquid in my glass. The last time I’d talked with her and my brother playing in my mind.

She was right. I'd gone on about Gage and what a great guy he was, and I'd somehow managed to work him into pretty much every part of the conversation.

"Well shit." I shot back the rest of my drink and put the glass on the table a little harder than I meant to.

"There's nothing wrong with being with a man."

"I know that. It's not the fact that we're men that's messing with me. It's the fact that we're both *straight* men."

"I was straight too," she mused. "Then I met Laura."

One of the reasons I'd wanted to talk to Marianne about this was that she was bisexual and never hid it, even though she'd been married to my brother for the past sixteen years. I'd figured if anyone could understand, it would be her.

"But it's not like she's the only woman you've been attracted to, right?"

"No. She was the first, but there have been others."

"That's the thing. There's no one else who makes me feel the way he does. No other men affect me like him. I've tried thinking about being with other guys, and it does nothing for me."

"So maybe bisexual or even bicurious aren't the right labels for you." She sipped her drink. "It's possible you're attracted to him because of who he is and not because of what's between his legs."

"You mean like I'm Gagesexual?"

She snickered. "If that's what you want to call it, sure. But what I was trying to say was it sounds like you fell for him as a person. Not because he's a guy but *despite* him being male."

"But how is that possible?"

"Attraction is a weird thing." She shrugged. "Sometimes it makes sense. Sometimes it doesn't. Is he okay with what's going on between you?"

"I think so. I mean, he was. Then he decided he needed some distance from me, and he went to Keaton's for a few

days.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah. I guess I get it. He’s not used to living with someone, so it must be weird for him to have me around all the time.”

“Do you think living together has, I don’t know, exasperated your feelings for him?”

“Maybe.” I clammed up when our server came back to the table, asking if I’d like a refill. I nodded and waited until he was gone. “I know he’s worried about that. I’m sure it’s part of it.”

“Can I be frank with you?” She put her glass down on the table.

“Sure.”

“One thing I’ve noticed about you over the years is that you don’t like being alone.”

“What do you mean? I’ve been alone for months, years if you count when my marriage was going to hell.”

“Emotionally, sure. But I mean you don’t like to be physically alone. You lived at home, then bounced around from roommate to roommate until you moved in with Chrissy. You stayed with her for years after you knew it was over. Then you went from being in your parents’ house again to living with Gage.”

I blinked at her. “Shit. I never thought about it that way, but you’re right. I’ve never lived alone.”

“No, you haven’t.” She picked up her glass. “It’s not a bad thing, but I think it’s made you almost afraid of being by yourself.”

Our server walked up with my drink, and I thanked him. I turned my attention back to Marianne.

“It’s not that I’m afraid of being alone.” I ran the tip of my finger over the rim of my glass. “It’s more that I don’t like being alone. I’m a twin. I’ve had someone with me my entire

life. Trev and I did everything together as kids because our parents always treated us like we were a single unit. When we got older and he started getting more popular and left me behind, it felt like he was, I don't know, abandoning me?"

"Tyler—"

"I know that's not what he was doing. I get it now, but when I was a teenager and watching my perfect twin brother living the life I wished I had, I resented him. Being alone makes me feel invisible." I sighed as I finally articulated something that had been bothering me for years, decades if I was being honest. "It makes me feel like I've been left behind and no one loves me."

"Ty." Marianne reached across the table and took my hand. "I understand how you'd feel that way, but you know that's not true, right? You have people who love you, and there are others out there who just need to get to know you, and they'll love you too."

I squeezed her hand, grateful for her friendship and support. Trevor had done well when they'd gotten together, and I would be lying if I said I wasn't a bit envious of their relationship.

They worked on their marriage. They talked and made all the big decisions related to their family together. They were a team.

I'd wanted that, but that hadn't been my marriage. I'd always thought Chrissy was independent, that she was strong and used to taking charge, so I fell in line as she made most of the decisions in our marriage. Everything from which car we'd lease to where we were going to go for dinner.

My passivity had made it easy for her to walk all over me, and while I'd thought I was being agreeable, in reality, I'd been spineless.

"Ty?" Marianne asked when I was silent for longer than was comfortable.

"Just thinking." I gave her hand one last squeeze, then let it go. "I'm only now realizing how different I was when I was

married. How I lost myself in that relationship.”

“You did,” she said softly. “But you’re in a much better place now. And I can see the old you peeking out again. That’s good. It means you’re healing.”

I picked up my drink and took a sip, the amber liquid burning a trail down my throat.

“If you like Gage, then you should explore things. Maybe it won’t work out, and you’ll go back to being just friends, or maybe there’s something real between you.”

I put my glass back on the table. “I don’t know what’s there, what he’s feeling, but I don’t want to end things, not yet.”

“Are you worried about what will happen if there is something real?”

“A little.” I swirled the whiskey around in my glass as I stared into it. “I can’t imagine telling my parents I’m suddenly into a man. Trev will never let me live it down if it does turn out to be a phase or whatever.”

“Yeah, he’s kind of a dick like that.”

I snorted with laughter as Marianne shot back the last of her drink. “You married him.”

“I did.” She grinned. “He may be a dick, but he certainly knows what to do with his, so I can look past it.”

“Ew.” I made a face at her. “Thanks for that.”

“Anytime,” she teased. “Now, are you done with your identity crisis?”

“For now.”

“Good. Let’s drink. I’m going to enjoy every second of being out on a Friday night for the first time in... forever.”

“Hear, hear.” I lifted my glass, and she clinked it with her empty one.

Our server appeared next to the table again, and I smiled as she ordered another drink.

She was right. I wasn't going to figure anything else out tonight. It was time to have a few drinks with my sister-in-law and enjoy a night out.

••••

Ping.

I jumped as my phone went off, the notification telling me I had a text. I grabbed it off the bedside table and looked at the time. It was just after one in the morning.

I swiped the screen to see who'd texted and Gage's name flashed in front of my eyes.

A few hours ago, I'd gotten home from my night out with Marianne. I'd tried to watch TV, put on a movie, but I hadn't been able to focus for more than a few minutes at a time.

It was pathetic, but I missed Gage.

I was used to us spending our Friday nights together, and even though I'd had fun with Marianne, a part of me wished Gage had never gone to Keaton's.

The house was so quiet when he wasn't here. Gage wasn't particularly loud, but I liked knowing he was in the house. His footsteps, water running in the pipes, catching a glimpse of him.

I'd spent the last hour lying in bed, staring at the ceiling as I thought about what Marianne and I had talked about.

I didn't like being alone because I equated it with being lonely. I didn't know when it had happened, but I'd learned to associate attention with love and proximity with affection.

It was beyond pitiful that I was only just realizing this about myself at my age. I hated how needy it made me and how it had been a major factor in why I'd stayed in so many unhealthy situations. Every woman I'd dated had either cheated on me or left me for someone else. In the moment I'd been devastated and wondering how it could have happened, how I'd been blindsided by their betrayals.

The truth was the signs had always been there. I'd just stuck it out because I'd told myself I was putting in the effort

to make it work. That wasn't the truth. I'd stayed so I wouldn't be alone.

Now I was alone in Gage's house, and I missed him. It was pathetic. *I was pathetic.*

I unlocked my phone and opened my texts.

Gage: You awake?

Tyler: Yep.

Gage: Can't sleep?

Tyler: No. I'm guessing you can't either?

Gage: No.

Gage: Are you in bed?

Tyler: I am. That's usually where I go when I'm trying to sleep

Gage: I might have had a few drinks tonight

Tyler: Yeah? You buzzing?

Gage: Nah. I've sobered up. Doc is a lightweight now.

Tyler: I was buzzing for a bit there too. Now I'm fully sober.

Gage: You went out?

Tyler: Yeah

Before I could type in that I'd met my sister-in-law for a drink, a message came through so fast Gage must have started typing before I'd even answered him.

Gage: With who?

Tyler: Does it matter?

I didn't know why I was goading him like this and not just telling him the truth. His jealousy was hot. It felt possessive, and I liked it.

Gage: No.

Gage: Fuck. Yes it does. Who did you meet?

Gage: I'm being an ass.

Gage: You've got me all twisted up

Tyler: I met Marianne.

Gage: Now I feel like an asshole.

Tyler: Did you think I'd gone out with someone?

Gage: I don't know. Maybe?

Gage: Fuck. This isn't like me. I'm not a jealous person.

Tyler: I would have been jealous if you'd gone out with someone other than Keaton tonight. I get it.

Gage: That makes me feel a bit better. But this isn't me. I usually don't give a fuck what my girlfriends do.

Tyler: I'm not your girlfriend...

Gage: Shit. I didn't mean it like that.

Gage: Can I call you? there's too much ambiguity in text.

Tyler: Sure.

A few seconds later, my phone rang. I swiped to answer the call and put the phone to my ear.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

“You must be sober if you used the word *ambiguity* in casual conversation.”

He laughed. “That was purely an accident, I assure you. Did you have fun tonight?”

“I did. We went to a bar and had a few drinks. What about you? Did you have a good night?”

“Yeah. I talked with Doc and Tanner, and I think I'm seeing things more clearly.”

“That's good.” I couldn't keep the uncertainty out of my voice. Had he called to tell me he was actually straight and this

little experiment was over?

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I said.

“Ty.”

It was the first time Gage had called me by my nickname. I usually only let my family call me that because I didn’t particularly like it, but Gage saying it was different. Intimate, as silly as that was.

“You’re still mad I left.”

“Not mad, just... conflicted.”

“I don’t have a brother, but I imagine you and Trevor are close, right?” he said, his voice hesitant.

“We are. Now. Not so much when we were younger, but yeah, we’re close.”

“Doc is like the brother I never had. He’s been my rock since I was a scared eighteen-year-old. He’s my person if that makes sense.”

“It does.”

“I guess I’m still that eighteen-year-old, even though it’s been fifteen years. Whenever things get tough or I can’t deal with something, I go to Doc, and he helps me.”

“It’s amazing you have someone like that. And I get it. You don’t have to justify your actions to me.”

A pause stretched so long I pulled my phone from my ear to make sure the call was still connected.

“Do you want to talk about whatever is going on between us?” he asked, his voice soft and shy.

“Um, sure. Yeah. We probably should.” I swallowed the lump that had formed in my throat. “Are we still doing this?”

“I want to.”

“Me too.”

“What do you think you’re ready for?”

“Um, not sure exactly.” I cleared my throat again. It was like I was back to being a teenager and fumbling over my words while trying to talk to whoever my latest crush had been. “More than what we’ve done, but not...”

“Not anal sex?” he filled in.

“Yeah. I don’t think I’m there yet.”

“Me either. But maybe we could try blow jobs?”

My entire body tightened at his words.

I’d spent more than a few moments wondering how it would feel to have Gage’s mouth on my dick, and I’d also wondered the flip side and thought about sucking him.

“I’d be down for that.”

Really, brain? I’d be down for that?

Could I be any more awkward?

I was thirty-eight years old. I’d been married and divorced. I shouldn’t be so embarrassed while talking to Gage about sex or what we wanted. If I couldn’t say it, then I probably shouldn’t be doing it.

Steeling my resolve, I sat up a little straighter.

“I’d be okay with doing you, even if you’re not ready to reciprocate.”

“Oh, I’m ready to reciprocate.” Gage’s voice was husky and low and my insides wobbled.

“Good,” I breathed. “I mean. Good. We’re on the same page.”

“We are,” he agreed, putting me at ease and helping me relax

This was Gage. We might be new to this whole physical relationship thing, but he was my friend. We could talk about this.

“Now that we’ve decided on that, I really want to do it.” Gage’s voice went husky, but now there was a bit of a rumble to it.

Jesus. Something about that voice that just pushed all my buttons.

“Then why don’t you come home?” I asked before I could think twice about it. “Unless you need more time.”

“I’ll be home in forty-five minutes.”

“I’ll be awake.”

Gage ended the call, and I stared at my phone.

Somehow we’d gone from talking about what we’d done tonight to agreeing to blow each other. And not only that. Gage was driving back from Colton so we could do it now.

I tossed my phone onto the bed next to me and swung my legs over the side of the bed. I needed a drink of water and a quick shower, and not necessarily in that order.

Chapter 11

Gage

I tried not to think too hard about the fact that I was driving forty-five minutes home in the middle of the night for what was essentially a booty call. As I'd gotten dressed, I'd texted Doc to tell him I was going home, and I knew I was in for a world of teasing the next time we met up.

The drive, which should have taken forty-five minutes, had only taken thirty. I'd neglected to factor in that there would be next to no traffic on the highway at this hour, and I made it home faster than I'd thought I would.

After Doc had talked me through my identity crisis, he, Tanner, and I had sat around talking and sipping on whiskeys. I hadn't gotten drunk, but Tanner had, and he'd decided I needed a crash course in gay sex and had given me pointers on the different facets of sex between men.

That would have been fine, but in his drunken state, he'd referenced Doc. So instead of telling me how to blow a guy, he'd told me what Doc liked in bed.

Doc had shut that conversation down multiple times, but Tanner would forget a few minutes later and dive right back into the conversation like it had never ended.

Picturing my best friend getting his dick sucked did nothing for me, but Tanner's descriptions had piqued my interest, and I'd thought about what it would be like to blow Tyler. To taste him, feel him in my mouth.

It wasn't something I'd ever thought about before, but with Tyler, I wanted to try it.

I wanted to give him pleasure, which wasn't usual for me.

Not that I was some selfish asshole in bed. I made sure that my partners enjoyed it and that we both got off, but that had been where my desires ended.

But I wanted to give Tyler more than that. I wanted to give him pleasure, and I would have been okay if he wasn't ready to reciprocate. I didn't need to get off in order to enjoy being with him. That was the strange part.

I hated to admit it, but my relationships and hookups had all been sex-centric. We messed around, we got off, but that was it. No intimacy or deep feelings. I'd liked them, and they'd been fond of me, but I'd always ended things when it seemed like they might want more.

I pulled into my driveway and cut the engine. The house was dark save for the light in Tyler's bedroom.

I climbed out of the car, hoping Tyler was still awake, and headed into the house.

The first floor was quiet, but I heard something coming from the second floor. It sounded like the fan in the hall bathroom.

I took the stairs two at a time and stepped into the hallway at the same moment the bathroom door opened.

Tyler stopped dead in his tracks, a towel wrapped around his waist, his eyes wide and filled with surprise.

I dropped my gaze to his legs, taking in his strong calves and the dark hair that covered them. I tracked my eyes up, over the terrycloth of the towel until I was looking at his torso.

His skin was still wet, little beads of moisture trailing down his fair skin and dark hair. He was holding the towel closed with one hand, his arm muscles bunched together with the effort. I traced my eyes over his chest, as a few drops of water slid down his perfect skin, getting trapped in his chest hair.

Something about Tyler being all wet just made everything seem dirtier, and I swallowed hard as I imagined licking those water droplets off his body.

"Did I lose track of time, or are you early?" he asked, knocking me out of my stupor.

"I'm early. I forgot there'd be no traffic now."

“Yeah, all the sane people are in bed.”

“We don’t have to do this—”

“I want to.” He let out a choked laugh. “More than I thought I would.”

“My room?” As much as I was enjoying the view, I had a feeling Tyler would appreciate us not being in the hallway while he was half-naked.

“Yeah. Just let me grab some sleep pants.”

I wanted to tell him the towel was fine, but understood he needed to feel a little less vulnerable right now.

“Okay.”

I headed into my room, leaving the door open so Tyler could come in when he was ready. I went to my dresser and grabbed a clean pair of sleep pants.

Deciding against underwear, I stripped off my clothes and tugged on the sleep pants. I ducked into the bathroom, brushed my teeth, and rolled on some deodorant. I was still relatively fresh from my shower after work, so I didn’t bother jumping into another one.

I came out of the bathroom at the same time Tyler walked into my room.

He’d put on a pair of worn flannel pants and a white T-shirt.

“This is awkward, right? It’s not just me?” He closed the door behind him, then stood there, shifting from foot to foot.

“It’s not just you.” I raked a hand through my hair. “It’s been a long-ass time since I was this keyed up over sex.”

“Same.” Tyler smiled shyly, blushing adorably as he glanced between me and my bed. “I guess we should...”

“Yeah.” I wet my suddenly dry lips as I followed his gaze..

Making the first move, I walked over to it and climbed in.

Tyler cut across the room, getting in after me.

We stared at each other, both of us up on our knees and about three feet apart.

“Come here,” I said softly, reaching out to him.

He came, taking my hand and knee-walking into my space. I wrapped my other arm around him.

He made a soft sound, halfway between a sigh and a moan. I shuddered against him, holding him tighter as I tilted my head and leaned in.

Tyler met me partway, his lips brushing against mine in a soft kiss.

All my doubts and insecurities melted away as Tyler pushed his chest against mine, his tongue tracing over the seam of my mouth, urging me to open to him.

I wasn't used to being the submissive one. I was naturally dominant, both in and out of bed, but there was something to be said about letting Tyler take over and lead things.

I opened to him, sighing as he deepened the kiss, his tongue moving against mine in slow, sensual strokes.

He shook off my hand and wrapped both arms around me, one hand on the small of my back, the other holding my ass.

“Shit,” I muttered against his mouth when he squeezed my ass cheek with his big hand, his grip hard.

“Like that?” Tyler asked softly, moving his lips to my ear.

“I like that.”

Tyler kissed my neck, right under my ear, and I moaned as my entire body relaxed.

“Lie down. I want to do you first,” he said huskily, pressing another kiss against the sensitive skin of my neck.

We had to untangle ourselves to lie down without falling, and I was glad when Tyler lay on top of me, his big body pressing me into the mattress.

It was so different from being with a woman. He was big and hard and undeniably male, and I loved how he wasn't

afraid to take charge and show me how much he wanted me.

It made me feel cherished, like I could just relax and let him take care of me.

Control was something I rarely gave up, but I wanted Tyler to take charge. I wanted to lie beneath him and let him do whatever he was planning. It was such a foreign feeling, but instead of fighting it, I went with it.

Tyler trailed his lips down my neck, kissing and nibbling at my skin as he made his way to my chest, then lower until he was kissing my stomach.

I spread my legs wider to accommodate his body, arching into him as he ran his tongue down my treasure trail, stopping at the waistband of my pants.

“Holy shit. You sure you haven’t done this before?” I asked breathlessly, propping myself up on my elbows so I could look down at him.

“No.” He chuckled. “Helps that I have a dick too and know what I like. Figured you’d like it too.”

“I do. I definitely do.”

He grinned mischievously and dropped a kiss on the tip of my dick, right through my pajama pants.

“Fuck,” I muttered as a little wet spot appeared on the material.

Tyler leaned down and pressed his tongue to that spot, rumbling deep in his throat.

“Damn, Ty.” I fell back on the bed, staring up at the ceiling as I tried to get my libido under control.

He’d barely touched me, and I was already right there on the edge. I breathed deep, trying to calm the fuck down so I didn’t blow as soon as he put his mouth on me.

“Can you take these off?” he asked, his voice soft.

He plucked at the waistband of my pants. He looked up at me with both fear and anticipation in his eyes, and the fact that he not only wanted to do this for me but seemed to be enjoying

it was so hot. My breath caught as affection and warmth spread through me.

“Yeah, sure.”

He sat up as I pushed my pants down so they were hooked under my ass, my cock bobbing free in a comical way. He helped me wiggle out of them, then tossed them over the side of the bed.

“Still want to do this?” I asked when he’d settled between my legs again, his eyes on my cock.

“Yeah.” He looked up at me, his eyes filled with what looked like determination and wonder.

I gently threaded my fingers through his hair. He closed his eyes, leaning into my touch. Smiling, I lightly scratched my nails over his scalp.

He shivered and opened his eyes, looking up at me with lust filled eyes as I did it again.

“That feels nice,” he said softly, dropping his eyes back to my dick.

“Shit,” I breathed as he circled his big hand around the base of my shaft.

I stopped moving my hand in his hair and instead cupped the back of his head, just holding him as he worked my cock.

Tyler squeezed my shaft, dragging his hand up my length. A bead of precum appeared at the tip, and after a moment of hesitation, Tyler leaned down and licked up the pearly drop.

“Mmmmmm,” he groaned softly, then did it again.

“God damn,” I muttered as he pressed his tongue to my crown, then carefully licked around the head.

The way Tyler was looking at me was so sexy. Like he was trying to figure out a puzzle and memorize every detail at the same time.

The fact that he not only wanted to do this for me but was enjoying it sent my arousal soaring.

“Fuck,” I panted as he kissed the tip of my dick. “Tease.”

He grinned up at me, his hand still wrapped around my shaft.

He lowered his head, his eyes still on mine, gently took my cockhead into his mouth, and gave a tentative suck.

“Fuck, that feels good,” I muttered in encouragement.

He sucked a bit harder, slowly taking me deeper until about half of my length was in his mouth.

“Tyler,” I moaned as he sucked hard, then popped off me.

I wasn't a small guy, and my dick was proportionate to the rest of me. Tyler was definitely putting in his A game if he'd been able to take that much of me on the first try.

“You taste good,” he said, his voice tinged with both hunger and wonder.

“Yeah?” I asked breathlessly, rubbing my hand through the short hairs at the back of his neck. I'd never thought hearing that would be a turn-on, but my dick appreciated it.

“Yeah.” He blushed, then bent his head again.

This time he didn't hesitate to suck me into his mouth, closing his lips around my shaft to create a tight seal as he moved over me. He didn't go fast or deep, but he didn't have to.

Knowing I was the first man he'd ever done this for was doing strange things to my insides. I was hot and cold at the same time. My toes tingled as my entire body tightened.

“Can you finish like this?” he asked softly and pulled off my dick.

“Yeah. Not too much longer and I'm there.” My voice was harsh, my throat tight.

He licked his lips, and another flare of arousal shot through me, as he bent his head to suck me.

This time he moved his hand up and down the part of my cock he couldn't reach with his mouth, and I saw stars.

His rhythm was off, and the suction wasn't as tight as I normally liked, but it was perfect. Goddamn perfect, and I found myself hurtling toward my release after only a few minutes.

"I'm gonna come," I warned him, my voice strained and my body tense.

Tyler popped off my dick but kept stroking me, his eyes on my cock as I gave in and thrust my hips in time with his strokes, needing just that little bit more.

"Fuck!" I choked out as my entire body tensed until my muscles were so tight it felt as though they could snap at any second.

Then I was coming, shooting my load over his hand and onto my stomach and chest.

Tyler stroked me through my orgasm, watching my face as I panted and shook, my hands fisted in the sheets as I gave in to the overwhelming pleasure spiraling through me.

It took a few moments for my brain to start working again after my orgasm, and I opened my eyes. An anxious-looking Tyler knelt between my legs, his hands on his thighs.

"Good?" he asked nervously when our eyes connected.

"Too good," I assured him. I pulled in a deep breath, then sat up and tugged him to me.

Tyler fell against me, and I braced myself to catch his weight as our chests bumped.

He let out a little *oof* that melted into a soft moan as I held him tight, slotting my mouth against his.

I tasted myself, just a hint of salt and musk, and groaned as my dick twitched. It was down for the count, but that didn't mean I was done.

"Get on your back," I murmured against his lips.

Tyler let out a low hum, and I let go of him so we could switch positions.

“Can you take your shirt off?” I asked as he settled on the bed.

He hesitated, some of the arousal leaving his eyes.

“What’s going on?” I asked as I settled over him, blanketing his body with mine.

“I just... I don’t look like you.” He blushed and glanced away.

“Hey, look at me.” I reached up with one hand and gently held his chin and tipped his face until he was looking at me again.

His cock had gone soft, and he wet his lips, his troubled eyes looking anywhere but at me.

“Babe, look at me.”

The endearment slipped out. Tyler’s eyes flicked to mine, wide with surprise and a bit of confusion.

Well, that made two of us. I didn’t usually use endearments with the women I slept with. Terms like *babe* and *sweetheart* and *honey* didn’t come naturally to me.

But somehow, it felt right to use them with Tyler. He meant something to me, and I wanted him to know that.

“I think you’re sexy as fuck. Don’t you remember how I was ogling you in your towel just a few minutes ago?”

“Yeah, but...”

“No buts.” I leaned down and pecked a kiss against his lips. “You’re perfect just the way you are, okay? Couldn’t you feel how much you turn me on?”

He nodded shyly, some of the anxiety leaving his gaze as I ground my pelvis against his. I was still soft, but the contact felt incredible, so I did it again.

His dick came back to life, chubbing up as I pressed against it.

“You don’t have to take your clothes off if you don’t want to.” I dropped another kiss on his lips, smiling to myself when

he chased my mouth for a few inches, letting out a little whine when I broke the contact. “I want you to enjoy this. Tell me what you need.”

“Maybe I could leave my shirt on and just push my pants down?” He blushed adorably, his eyes on my mouth.

“Of course. If that’s what you want.”

He nodded, his gaze returning to my eyes.

He looked more settled, but I could still see some uncertainty in his eyes.

I wasn’t blind. I knew Tyler didn’t have abs or bulging muscles, but that only made him more attractive to me. He was soft and bulky but hard in all the right places. He felt good over me and even better under me.

Instead of trying to convince him of how hot I found him, I was going to show him.

He sighed as I kissed his neck, gently nibbling the skin, as I pressed him into the mattress with my body. He wrapped his legs around my thighs, gripping my biceps, and tilting his head back, giving me better access.

With one hand, I pulled the neckline of his shirt down and sucked a hickey into his skin below where his shirt naturally fell so he could hide it until it healed.

He moaned loudly, arching his hips up into mine.

“Is that okay?” I asked against his neck, belatedly realizing that I hadn’t gotten his consent to mark him.

“Yeah. That’s okay,” he said breathlessly, wrapping his arms around my body and tugging me closer.

He was fully hard now, and I rolled my hips against his. He let out another moan that went straight to my dick, and I shifted my body so I could slide down him.

He let his legs fall apart, opening wide to make room for me between them.

I settled over him, my mouth only inches from where his dick was tenting his pajama pants.

He was staring down at me, propped up on his elbows, his eyes filled with heat, his lips parted, his breathing fast and shallow.

Keeping my eyes on his, I leaned down and pressed my mouth against his shaft through the soft material of his pants.

His breathing hitched, his hips bucking ever so slightly. I wanted more of those reactions, so I did it again, then again until I was mouthing his cock through his pants.

“Gage,” he moaned after a few moments of letting me have my fun.

I didn’t understand why, but his hard shaft against my lips, my tongue, even through his pants, was turning me on like nothing else.

I wanted to make him come and pushed up on my elbows to give him some room to maneuver.

“Can I pull these down?” I asked, my voice coming out tight and husky.

“Yeah. I’ve got it.”

He hooked his thumbs under the waistband and shoved them down, lifting his hips so they were tucked under his ass.

His cock was hard and ready, the head glistening with precum.

“You have a really nice dick,” I said without thinking.

“You do too.” He let out a breathy laugh. “That’s not something I’d ever thought I’d say.”

“Same.” I wrapped my hand around the base of his shaft, the wiry dark hairs of his pubes tickling my skin as I gave him a gentle squeeze. “Does that feel good?” I stroked my hand up, twisting a little at the head the way I liked to do to myself.

“Yeah.” His voice cracked and he cleared his throat.

I gave him a few more strokes, getting used to the feel of having another man’s dick in my hand.

It was familiar and foreign all at the same time. He wasn't as long as me, but he had some girth to him. His cockhead was shiny and red, and my mouth watered as I leaned down and pressed my tongue against his slit.

He didn't taste bad. It was actually nice, salty and dark with a touch of something I couldn't place.

Encouraged by the little moan he let out, I did it again, then sucked him into my mouth.

And promptly popped off him when he triggered my gag reflex.

"Shit, sorry." I looked up at him, my eyes watering. "Might have gotten a bit too ambitious there."

He smiled, reaching down and wiping his thumb over my cheekbone. "Maybe just a little. Go slow. It's been so long since anyone has done this for me. I'm likely to blow just from you breathing on it."

His words sent a bolt of possessiveness through me. I didn't want him thinking about the women he'd bedded or the ones who'd blown him. I wanted him to think of me and only me from now on.

The force and speed with which my thoughts hit were a bit scary. I'd been telling him the truth when I'd said I wasn't a jealous person. I didn't get possessive over my bed partners.

Shaking my head to clear those thoughts, I leaned down and sucked just his cockhead into my mouth, swirling my tongue over it to make up for my lack of deep-throating skills.

He moaned and fell back against the bed, his chest heaving as he fisted his hands in the sheets.

That was more like it, and a little flare of happiness hit as I drew a little bit more of him into my mouth.

It was a strange feeling to be blowing another guy. My lips stretched around his girth. My jaw twinged from the unnatural way I was clenching it. It didn't hurt and wasn't bad, just different.

Ignoring everything other than the man under me, I stroked my hand up his shaft, twisting gently, testing to see if he liked that.

He bucked his hips up, gasping. He let go of the sheets with one hand and carded his fingers through my hair, holding on tight as I went faster, moving my hand and mouth in tandem.

“Fuck, Gage,” he croaked, his fist tightening in my hair to the point of pain.

I gave him one last hard suck, taking as much of him into my mouth as I could.

“I’m gonna—”

I pulled off him, watching his cock as I continued to stroke him. I wanted his orgasm. I wanted to see it, knowing I was the one who’d done that for him.

Tyler let go of my hair and yanked his shirt up, his dick pulsing in my hand.

“Fuck,” we said in unison as he came, shooting over my hand and onto his stomach.

His body tensed then relaxed as he panted and cried out, the sounds muted, as though he was holding back. His cum slicked his skin, and I leaned down and pressed my tongue into some of it, curious.

“Fuck,” Tyler breathed as our eyes met.

“You taste good too.”

He shuddered as I climbed up over him and kissed him.

He met my mouth eagerly, sweeping his tongue against my mine, and wrapped his arms and legs around me.

I loved when he did that. I couldn’t pinpoint why. It was so so sexy having him wrapped around my body, showing me how much he wanted to feel me.

It didn’t escape me that he was still fully clothed while I was naked. The imbalance did things to my insides, and I thought about how it would feel if the roles were reversed, and

I was the one who was clothed while he lay over me, naked and sated.

The desperation was gone from our kisses, but it was no less intense. Tyler was an incredible kisser. His rough stubble against my lips and skin was amazing, and I loved how big and strong he was. How I didn't have to worry about crushing him as I slipped my arms under his body to hold him close.

His lips were strong and commanding while still being soft and sweet, and my head was spinning as he finally moved away, turning his head as he pulled in a gasping breath.

I pressed our temples together, my heart thudding in my chest as I fought to get my breathing under control.

That had been one of the hottest sexual experiences of my life. I liked blow jobs as much as the next guy, and while I'd never thought about giving one before, I couldn't deny that I'd enjoyed it almost as much as getting one.

"We should clean up." I pressed a quick kiss to his stubbled cheek.

"Yeah. And I need to change."

I wanted to tell him he didn't have to cover up, that I wanted to see all of him, but I didn't push. Hopefully, he'd feel more comfortable the next time we hooked up, and I'd get to enjoy all of him then.

My brain stuttered at that thought. I was still coming down from my orgasm, and I was already thinking about next time.

"I usually have better control than that," he said softly, his arms and legs still around me as I lay over him.

"Me too." I chuckled against his neck. "I can usually hold out for more than a few minutes."

"Same." His chest rumbled under me as he laughed.

We lay like that for a few more moments. Then Tyler slowly let his arms and legs fall from around me.

I pressed one last kiss into his skin, then pushed myself off him.

I helped him sit up, and we stared at each other for a moment.

“Want to go first? You can use my bathroom.”

He nodded, smiling shyly.

“Want to wear a pair of my pajamas?” I asked impulsively as he stood. “That way you don’t have to go all the way to your room?”

He blinked at me as he tucked himself away.

“If you want to stay, that is...” I looked down, a pang of unease washing over me.

I wasn’t a bashful person, but something about Tyler lowered my defenses, and I found myself questioning things, wondering if maybe I was being too forward.

“You want me to?”

“Yeah, I mean, if you want to.”

A smile slowly stretched across his lips. “Yeah. I’d like that. But I don’t think anything of yours will fit me.”

“You’d be surprised.” I stood and went over to my dresser. I tugged open one of the drawers and rooted around until I found a pair of worn sleep pants and an old T-shirt that was loose on me.

“Give these a try. If they don’t work, you can grab something from your room while I shower.”

I tossed him the clothes, and he caught them, needing to use both hands as the pants and shirt separated in midair and came at him in two different directions.

“Nice catch.”

“Shitty throw,” he teased.

I laughed as he turned and headed into my bathroom. It wasn’t until the door closed behind him that I remembered that I was still buckass naked.

I scooped my sleep pants off the floor and tugged them on, belatedly remembering the cum that was drying on my skin.

Shaking my head, I went to my dresser and pulled another pair of sleep pants out of it. I was going to have to do laundry soon.

I sat on the edge of the bed as the water turned on.

I'd put my mouth on another man's dick, and I'd liked it.

Something inside me shifted, and a sense of calm settled over me.

I was done worrying about what my attraction to Tyler meant. I might not have ever wanted to be with a man before, but I wanted him, and I was done fighting it. Him being male didn't turn me off, and my stomach clenched as I thought about fucking him and him fucking me.

I wasn't ignorant as to the mechanics of sex between men, and my friends had raved about the wonders of the prostate. I'd never thought much about doing any sort of backdoor play, but now I was curious.

It had to feel good if so many people did it, and my friends were all in agreement that the prostate was one of the best things about sex with men. Would Tyler like it if I fingered him? Would I like it if he did it to me?

My brain cycled through all the things I knew about gay sex from both my friends and the few times I'd watched gay porn.

I already knew I liked hand jobs and blow jobs, and frotting and kissing were high on my list of new favorite things to do. I was definitely down for fingering and, eventually, fucking. But what about rimming?

I had to admit that the thought of doing it was weird and receiving it was even weirder. That might be something we'd have to work toward.

"You okay?"

I looked up. Tyler standing in the door to my bathroom, looking adorably shy again.

"Yeah. Just thinking." I raked my eyes up and down his frame, taking in how he looked in my pajamas.

The shirt was tight on him, the thin material pulling around his chest and showing the outline of his nipples and body hair. The pants were also a bit snug, and they hugged his thick thighs and waist in the most delicious way.

“You look good in my clothes,” I said softly. A wave of possessiveness and pleasure shot through me.

I liked that he was wearing my clothes. It was like when a woman put on one of my hoodies or dress shirts. It made me feel like he was mine.

Shaking my head, I stood and headed toward him, the clean pajama pants clutched in my hand.

“I’ll be out in a minute.” I stopped in front of him and leaned in to give him a kiss.

He made a sound low in his throat as he kissed me back, and my stomach wobbled. I loved the sounds he made. They were so pure, and the way he always seemed to hold back made my still spent dick twitch. I couldn’t wait until he felt comfortable enough to let go.

We pulled apart, and I smacked him on the ass playfully. He laughed as I headed into the bathroom to clean up.

I took a quick shower, washing off the dried cum and giving myself a good scrub, then turned off the water and grabbed the towel Tyler had left on the rack for me.

I rubbed the towel over my skin a few times, then stepped out of the shower and grabbed my pajamas. I was still a bit damp but ignored it as I tugged on my pants.

Tyler was lying in my bed, his back against the headboard as I came out of the bathroom.

“You look good in my bed.” I turned off the light, shrouding the room in darkness, and walked toward him. I climbed into the bed and slid closer to him. The room had enough ambient light I could still make out the details of his face.

His eyes widened, and his nostrils flared at my words. “I bet you’d look good in mine too.”

Tyler shimmied down until he was lying against my pillow, his eyes a bit guarded as he turned to me.

“This okay?” I held out my arm.

He nodded, that adorable blush painting his cheeks as he shifted closer until his head was on my chest and his body was pressed against mine.

I wrapped my arm around him and held him close, breathing him in.

The scent of my soap and laundry detergent, with a hint of something spicy and a bit musky, filled my senses, sending a ripple of calm through me.

“This feels good,” I said softly as the events of the day suddenly caught up to me.

It was almost three in the morning, and I’d put in a full day at work and hit the gym twice to try and clear my head.

“It does,” he said quietly, almost dreamily, as he snuggled into my chest.

The silence between us stretched, but I could tell he was still awake by his breathing.

“You tired?”

“Yeah.” He sighed, the sound happy and settled. “I was installing flooring in the spare room, and that’s always hard on the back and knees.”

A vision of Tyler lying on my bed while I massaged his sore muscles flashed in front of my eyes, and my dick pulsed in response.

Luckily I was too tired to get hard, and Tyler didn’t notice my momentary distraction.

“Do you need me to set an alarm?” I kissed the top of his head just because I could.

“No. Not unless the guy I work for decides he wants me to put in some extra hours this weekend.”

“Nah. He said you deserve a break and should take the weekend off.”

Tyler chuckled and cuddled closer to me. “I knew he was a cool guy.”

“He’s pretty awesome.”

Tyler shook his head against my chest. “Night, Gage.”

“Night, Tyler.”

I closed my eyes, fatigue and happiness washing over me as Tyler snuggled into me again, his cheek pressing into my chest like a needy kitten.

I could get used to this.

Chapter 12

Tyler

I'd woken up that morning on one side of Gage's bed and him on the other.

That in itself wasn't surprising. I wasn't a cuddle-all-night kind of person. I liked to snuggle with my partner as we fell asleep, but always migrated over to my side of the bed sometime during the night.

I tended to run hot when I slept, and having someone touching me while I was burning up just wasn't comfortable.

Gage hadn't seemed put out by our lack of contact. And things hadn't been weird, considering we'd blown each other, and this was our first time sharing a bed.

We'd gotten up, and I'd made us some breakfast. After we'd finished eating, Gage had said he had a few things to do and would be around if I needed him.

That had been six hours ago, and all the insecurities and fears I'd thought I'd have to deal with that morning had come bubbling to the surface the longer I didn't see him.

I didn't know if it was the sex or my talk with Marianne, but I felt oddly settled with the entire situation. I liked Gage a lot. I enjoyed his company, and he was quickly becoming my closest friend. I was also attracted to him. I'd enjoyed everything we'd done together, and couldn't help wondering about doing more.

Gage may be male, but that no longer mattered to me. Maybe I was bi, or maybe it was just him who did it for me. Either way, he was who I wanted, and I was done questioning why.

Of course, that epiphany didn't erase my self-consciousness or my anxiety over having a new partner.

Gage was fucking gorgeous. He was ripped and handsome and a nice guy. He was also younger than me.

I didn't think of myself as some sort of unattractive troll. I was generally happy with the way I looked. I wasn't the best-looking guy around, but I wasn't ugly. My body could use some work, but my job kept me in decent enough shape, so while I was soft, I was still strong.

But compared to Gage, I felt like a frumpy mess.

I knew he found me attractive—his words and his body didn't lie—but that didn't help quash my issues, and while I was trying to remind myself that Gage wanted me, a part of me wondered how long that would last.

One of my biggest fears was being replaced, and I worried that Gage would suddenly realize he not only liked me but liked men in general, and he'd realize there were much better catches out there for him.

How long would it be before he got tired of fact that I was a thirty-eight-year-old broke handyman who couldn't find steady work while he had a good job, a savings account, and owned his own house.

Money had always been an issue in my marriage. The biggest problem had been my lack of earning power. Some years I'd managed to get steady work and had done well, but then other years I'd only been able to find seasonal work and we'd struggled.

That had only added to our issues, mainly because Chrissy had started earning significantly more than I did, and she resented having to support me.

Now I was in a similar situation. Only I was dead broke and working for my lover, so he knew exactly how little I had. Gage wasn't a materialistic asshole. He was actually one of the most frugal people I'd ever met, but he still had assets and investments, while I had some bedroom furniture and a couple of thousand bucks worth of tools to my name.

I tried not to let that bother me, but it was right there in the back of my mind as I prepared dinner.

“What's that smell?” Gage asked, coming into the kitchen and sniffing the air.

“Mac and cheese.” I glanced up from the sauce I was stirring.

“It smells amazing. I’m guessing it’s not from a box?” He came to stand next to me and peered into the saucepan.

“The noodles came in a box, but no. Real mac and cheese never comes from a box.” I added a handful of shredded cheese to the mix and stirred, watching as it melted into the sauce. “This was my grandmother’s recipe. It’s got enough cheese in it to block your arteries, but it’s so worth it.”

“I can’t wait.” He rubbed his stomach just as it growled. “How much longer until it’s done?” He stole some of the cheese from the bowl on the counter in front of him and popped it into his mouth.

“About thirty minutes once I get it in the oven.”

“Want a beer while we wait?”

“Sure.”

I glanced over as he walked to the fridge, my eyes on his ass.

It was insane how much seeing his tight, firm ass turned me on. I’d never been an ass man before, but Gage’s ass did it for me.

He opened the fridge and bent over to grab two beers off the bottom shelf, and I quickly turned my attention back to the saucepan in front of me so he didn’t catch me staring.

Gage came back to stand with me, a few feet away to give me room to work, as I finished mixing the cheese into the sauce.

He watched as I poured the mixture over the noodles I’d already lined a pan with, then added more cheese to the top, then layered more noodles and sauce.

“That’s a lot of cheese,” he said as I added a final layer of shredded cheese on the top layer of sauce.

“Three different kinds, not to mention cream, butter, and milk too.”

“I can’t remember the last time I had homemade mac and cheese,” he said as he cracked one of the beers open. “Probably in the chow hall.”

“The what? Is that a restaurant?” I put the dish in the preheated oven, then set the timer.

He handed me the beer he’d opened.

“It’s what we call the dining hall in the army.” He cracked the second beer open and tossed both lids into the recycling bin. “The cooks on my first tour were incredible.”

“You got homemade mac and cheese while you were at war?” I asked, and immediately wanted to call the words back.

I’d noticed how twitchy Gage got when he talked about his service, especially his tours. I’d tried to keep my questions to a minimum, but this one had slipped out.

“Crazy, huh? I guess they figure if you’re going to make thousands of soldiers go to war, you might as well feed them well. The food we had on the FOB was amazing. Big portions, fresh ingredients. It was seriously one of the few times during the day when things felt normal.”

“Oh yeah?” I took a sip of my beer, giving him a chance to elaborate or not.

“Yeah. Military food isn’t always the greatest. In the field, we’d eat MREs, and they were edible but nothing to write home about. A few were okay, but others were kinda gross.”

“What’s an MRE?”

“Sorry, I keep forgetting that not everyone speaks in military acronyms. Want to sit while we wait?”

I nodded and followed him into the living room. We sat on the couch, each on our own side.

“MRE literally stands for meal ready to eat. They’re the food packs they give us when dining halls or fresh food isn’t available.”

“Like those things survivalists have?”

“Basically.” He took a pull from his beer.

“And you only got good food on your first tour?” I asked carefully, hoping he’d share a little bit more of his past with me.

“Yeah. That tour was hard, but it wasn’t as hard as my second one.”

I kept quiet and sipped my beer, giving him a chance to collect himself as he looked at the far wall for a moment.

“My first tour was hard because I was so young. I was eighteen, just out of high school, and I never wanted to be there in the first place. We were busy all the time. We worked every day, all day, and a lot of nights. The busy schedule helped the time pass, but the thing that saved me was being over there with Doc, Luke, and Sarge. They were the reason I made it through that tour. Doc was there to listen to me when it got to be too much. Luke never left my side, not once, anytime we went outside the wire. Sarge, he kept us all safe and sane. It was hell, but I had my brothers, so I was okay.”

I waited as he swallowed some beer and looked down at his hands.

“My second tour was... different. For one, we were on a COP and not a FOB.”

“I don’t know what those are,” I cut in.

“Right, acronyms. Can you tell I don’t talk to a lot of civilians about this stuff? A FOB is a forward operating base. Basically a larger, more established base with amenities. A COP is a combat outpost. Smaller. Very few amenities, more missions, lots more action.”

“Like what kind of amenities?”

“Regular showers, laundry. A PX, or a store, where we could buy more than socks or soap. An actual chow hall. A combat outpost doesn’t have those things.”

“So that’s what you had the second time around?”

He nodded, “And I didn’t have the same kind of support in my unit. I was close with the guys because we trained and lived together, but I didn’t have anyone I clicked with. We also

saw a lot more action and suffered way more casualties that tour, just by the nature of where we were. It was a lot.”

“You don’t have to tell me,” I said as he rolled his shoulders like he was trying to loosen up.

“There’s a lot I can’t talk about. And you don’t want to hear it. You don’t need to hear it. But I’ve done stuff, seen things... they change someone, especially a twenty-two-year-old kid who never wanted to be there in the first place.”

“You’ve said that twice. What do you mean?”

He turned his body toward mine. “Remember I told you my dad was in?”

I nodded.

“He was an old-school soldier. Loved everything about it and truly believed that any able-bodied man who didn’t enlist was, his words, an unpatriotic sissy.”

“That’s harsh.”

“Yeah. That’s what I grew up hearing. And I turned out to be an able-bodied man, so it was always a given that I would enlist too. It didn’t matter that I didn’t want to, that I wasn’t interested in being a soldier. I still had to join.”

“What would have happened if you hadn’t?” I asked. “Couldn’t you have said no? You were a legal adult.”

“You don’t understand how my family works. My dad’s word was law. If he said I was enlisting, I was enlisting. I didn’t have a choice. Well, I did. I could enlist or get kicked out.”

“What?” I sat up straighter.

“My choice was to enlist or be homeless at eighteen with no one.”

“I get why you enlisted.” I bit my lip, not sure I should ask what I was thinking.

“What? You look like you’re holding back.”

“What about your mom? Why didn’t she stand up for you?”

“My mom was raised in the military. Her father, brother, uncles, grandfather... you get the picture. She always deferred to Dad, and she loved being a military wife. It was all she’d ever known.”

“You really didn’t have a choice.”

“Nope. It’s why I was such an asshole to everyone.” He chuckled and took another pull off his beer. “I was pissed at my dad, my mom, life, the universe. I wanted to go to college, but my parents told me they wouldn’t support me unless it was West Point. So it was either enlist or lose the only family I had.”

“That’s... wow.”

“That was how shit worked in the Andersen house.”

“My parents were the opposite. Trevor went to college, but I didn’t. Our parents did everything to try and get me to apply too. Offered to pay for it, tried to guilt me into it. And of course, used the whole ‘your brother is going so you should too’ line when everything else failed.”

“Wasn’t your thing?” Gage shifted his legs so they were spread wide, his posture finally relaxed.

“Nope. I wasn’t great at school. I did okay, but there were no degrees that interested me, and the thought of spending four more years studying just to work in an office held no appeal. I thought about trade school, looked at carpentry, but ended up going into construction when I graduated, moved into maintenance, then did a little bit of everything.”

“Nothing wrong with trades or working with your hands. In fact, more people should consider trades. College is great if you have a specialized career you want to get into, but there are a lot of grads out there working for minimum wage because the jobs just aren’t there.”

“Yup.” I took a long drink of my beer. “That whole notion that college guarantees a good job just isn’t true anymore. It was at one time, but the economy is different now.”

“Did you ever think about going back to school and doing a trade?”

“For a while, I did.” I finished my beer and put the bottle on the coffee table. “But it didn’t work out.”

“Why not?”

“Back when we first got married, Chrissy and I were both struggling financially. She worked as a hairdresser, and while she liked her job, she’d only gone into it because her parents couldn’t afford to help her go to nursing school. We saved for a few years so she could go to college and get her degree, but we had to take out a lot of loans to bridge the gaps because I didn’t make enough to support us and pay for her schooling. By the time we paid off her student loans, she was already dating her new boyfriend, so I never got a chance to go.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah.”

He finished his beer, his throat working as he drank.

I had no idea why that was so sexy, but it was.

He caught me watching him, a sly grin curling his lips as he put the empty bottle on the coffee table next to mine.

“What about now?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why not go back now?”

“Because I’m thirty-eight and broke?”

“I’m not saying you need to apply today.” Gage rolled his eyes. “But maybe that’s something you could look into later.”

“Maybe.”

I didn’t tell him that school held no interest for me anymore. It had been a nice thought when I was younger, but at my age, it just didn’t make sense.

“Is there anything else you want to do?” He crossed his big arms over his chest. The sleeves of his shirt shifted up, revealing the bottom of his tattoo.

“I don’t know.” I sighed. “There’s not a lot I *can* do.”

“That’s not what I asked. I asked if there was anything you *wanted* to do.”

“Not really. I like restoring houses, obviously.”

“Have you thought about what I said before, about working for yourself? I mean, this place already looks a million times better, and you’re not even halfway done with the work.”

I flushed at his compliment, cursing as my cheeks heated. I hated that I couldn’t hide my blushes from him.

Gage wasn’t stingy with his compliments and always made a point to tell me how good things were looking or what a good job I’d been doing, but it did funny things to my insides when he brought it up in a random conversation.

“It was a nice pipe dream.” I shrugged.

“You could make it a reality.”

“I don’t really understand how the internet works. I mean, I still call a hashtag *the pound sign*.”

Gage grinned. “You elder millennials. So clueless.”

“Careful, youngin, you’re a millennial too.”

“Yeah, but I’m a millennial with an Instagram and a TikTok.”

“What do you post on there?”

Gage pulled out his phone and swiped the screen a few times. Then he handed it to me.

It was some sort of gallery. I scanned the pictures. Most of them were him in the gym, sweaty and wearing sexy workout gear, and more than a few were shirtless.

“Are these thirst traps?” I handed him back the phone, my body flushing hot. Those pictures were way too sexy.

“Pretty much. But they’re under the guise of sharing workout tips.”

“No one wants to see me half-naked on the internet.”

“You said that, but I’m not suggesting you strip down and pose. Show pics of your work here. Show off your skills. That way when someone wants to hire you, they have a visual reference to what you can do.”

“That does sound like a good idea,” I said slowly. “But isn’t TikTok videos?”

“It is. But you don’t have to show your face if you don’t want to. You could just set up a camera and film as you work, showing people how to do things. You have no idea how many videos I watched on YouTube and TikTok, trying to find some sort of roadmap of what to do to fix this place.”

“You really think there’s a market for that?”

“I do.” He lifted his phone and tapped the screen. “I’m going to send you the link to some of the TikTok channels I follow, so you can see what I mean.”

“But don’t people edit those videos, add effects and whatnot?”

“They do.”

“I can take a picture, but that’s about it.”

“That’s why you have me.” He grinned. “I like playing around with that kind of stuff. I can even help you film. And I came up with some hashtags you could use.”

“You did?” I blinked. Wow, he’d put a lot of thought into this.

My phone chirped in my pocket, then chirped a few more times.

“There, check those out later. See what I mean. And yeah, I like having you here, but I don’t want you to feel like you’re only staying because of the work you’re doing.”

“But that’s the reason I moved in?”

“Yeah, but that’s not the reason I want you here. You’re my friend. Even if things between us don’t go anywhere, you’re going to stay my friend. You need a place to stay, and I

have more room than I could ever use. It's a no-brainer for me."

"But when I'm done working, I won't be able to pay you."

"You will when you start your business and get jobs."

"You've put a lot of thought into this."

He flushed, which wasn't usual for him, and I realized how dismissive I was being.

"I like that you have," I said quickly. "I'm just so out of my element here."

"You've got me."

"Yeah, I do," I said softly, hoping he caught my double meaning.

The flare of heat in his gaze told me he did.

"So what sort of hashtags have you thought of?" I asked, needing to get back to our talk so I didn't jump him.

"Well, I thought you could call your channel *Tyler's Tips*."

I snorted. "That could be taken multiple ways."

"People love alliteration. I mean, you could always go *Tool Time with Tyler*."

"I feel like that's a copyright infringement."

"What do you mean?"

"There was an old sitcom that had a show called *Tool Time* in it."

"Oh. Didn't know that."

"*Tyler's Tips* is growing on me," I admitted. "Is that a hashtag?"

He chuckled, his eyes full of affection. "No. But how about just *The Tip with Tyler*? Or *Tyler Nails It*. Or *Drilled by Tyler*."

"All those sound sexual." I grinned, still not understanding how those could be hashtags, but they were entertaining.

“Sex sells. If you market it right, you could have a mostly female and queer audience. It’s a market that is grossly ignored when it comes to repair and maintenance work.”

“That’s true, and I like sharing tips with people who might not have anyone else to learn from. There are tons of stuff marketed toward pros or people who have experience. I’d rather help regular people.”

“Like me. People with the will but not the skill.”

“Exactly.”

“Here, let me write those out for you so you can see what I mean.”

He started typing, and I pulled out my phone and opened my texts.

Gage: #justthetipwithtyler

Gage: #drilledbytyler

Gage: #tylernailsit

Gage: #tylerstools

Gage: nope, scratch that one because it looks like Tyler’s stools.

I snorted, looking up at Gage to find him smiling at me.

“That’s just the start. I’m sure we can come up with more.”

“And do these work on Instagram too?”

“Yup. And I understand the platforms, so I can help with the topic-specific ones to give you more visibility.”

His enthusiasm was contagious, and the idea was starting to grow on me.

Doing this with Gage would be fun, and it would help me achieve my goal of becoming financially independent again. It would be stupid to say no just because it was out of my comfort zone.

“So you think this is something you want to do?”

“Yeah, I do. And I like that you want to help me.”

“It’ll be fun for me too.” He grinned. “And I’ll actually get to learn about what you’re doing too. It would be nice if I could do some of my own shit in the future and not have to keep relying on you.”

I flushed. It was nice to know he was thinking about us being friends or more in the future.

I opened my mouth, not sure what I was about to say, but was saved when the timer on the stove went off.

“Dinner?” Gage perked up like a kitten hearing the *pop* of a can being opened.

“Dinner.” I put my hands on my thighs and stood. “Want to set the table? I’ll finish up.”

“Hell yeah.” Gage jumped up, a big smile on his face, and grabbed the beer bottles off the table. “Want another?”

“Sure.”

I followed him into the kitchen, cracked the oven open, and peeked inside. It looked good, with little bubbles in the top of the sauce. The cheese had melted but hadn’t burned. It was time for the last step.

I closed the door, turned on the interior light, and set the oven to broil to give the top a nice crust. I waited, my eyes on the window to make sure it didn’t burn.

It only took a few minutes, and when it was a nice, golden brown, I turned off the oven and pulled the casserole dish out.

“Holy fuck, that smells good.” Gage came into the kitchen, sniffing like a drug dog in the middle of a raid.

“Big serving?” I grabbed a knife out of the block.

“Yeah. Just cut yourself a piece, and I’ll take the rest.”

I chuckled as I cut two big portions. I should have waited for it to set, but I was starving, and I figured Gage wouldn’t mind if the sauce was a little runny at first.

Gage put two giant bowls on the counter, and I scooped our portions into them.

He brought them into the dining room for us and put one at each of our places.

“Careful, it’s hot,” I warned after we’d settled in our seats and Gage had loaded up his spoon with a big bite.

Gage blew on his spoon, then shoved it into his mouth.

“Hot!” he yelped around the food, his mouth open as he waved his hand in front of it, trying to fan some of the heat away.

I laughed and pushed his beer closer to him.

He quickly chewed and swallowed, still fanning his mouth, picked up his beer, and drank about half of it.

“Better?”

“Yeah.” He put his beer down and stirred the pasta around in his bowl, grinning at me. “That was hot.”

“I imagine it was. That’s kinda what happens when stuff comes out of the oven.”

“Smartass.” He scooped up a small bite and delicately blew on it.

He put the spoon in his mouth, then slowly slid it out. My body tightened as I dropped my eyes to my bowl, my thoughts drifting to how that mouth had been on my dick last night.

“You okay?”

I jerked my head up. “Fine.”

Gage smirked at me. “It’s really good. Now that I can actually taste it and not just the burning.”

“Thanks.” I flushed as he shovelled another bite into his mouth and looked down at my bowl so I could take a bite too.

It was good. Creamy and rich with a hint of sharpness from the cheddar.

“I’m going to have to hit the gym extra hard next week to burn this off.”

“Or we could find another way to burn it off,” I said.

Gage's look went from thoughtful to heated. "Yeah?"

"I mean, it's an option, since I don't do the gym."

"Fair point. I'm sure we can think of something."

Warmth spread out from my cheeks to my ears.

"You're cute when you blush," Gage said as I put one hand to my cheek to feel how hot it was.

"Glad you think so because tomato red seems to be my default color."

We ate the rest of our meal in silence, mostly because we were too busy shoveling food down our gullets to talk.

I'd noticed that Gage was eating slower now, putting down his spoon every few bites to pace himself, and we ended up finishing around the same time.

Gage cleaned up while I went to the couch and flipped through Netflix.

I wasn't really looking for something to watch. It was more to distract myself from my thoughts.

Gage and I had messed around last night, we'd shared a bed, but I had no idea what that meant for tonight. Did he want to do it again? Do more? Was he ready for more? Was I?

My mind was still spinning when Gage came into the living room. He sat down on middle cushion of the couch so his big body pressed up against mine. I lowered the remote and looked at him.

"I want to try something if you're okay with it."

"What's that?" I turned the TV off and gave him my full attention.

"Have you heard of the prostate?"

"Yeah." My heart rate sped up a bit.

I'd done some research about how two men have sex. Porn was fine for a visual representation of what it *could* look like, but porn wasn't real.

From what I'd read, the prostate was supposed to be a sensitive gland inside the body that could trigger orgasms if it was stimulated.

That had intrigued me, but I hadn't been brave enough to do more than poke around the outside of my asshole a few times in the shower.

"I want to finger you while I suck you."

My breath caught, and I choked on nothing.

"Or not," he said, his eyes wide .

"No, that's not what... I just. That was blunt." I cleared my throat. "You want to?"

"Yeah. If you want to."

"Um, yeah. But what about you?"

"I mean, I'm game if you want to return the favor. But you don't have to if you're not ready."

"I-I think I am."

"Yeah?" He quirked his eyebrow, that damn sexy smirk sliding over his lips.

"Yeah." I sat up a little straighter. "But I'm not really sure how... what would feel good. I read about it, but it just said 'stimulate,' and that could mean anything."

"Well, Tanner got a little drunk the other night and told me all about the wonders of the prostate and how to *stimulate* it." He grinned. "But I did my research, and I think I've got a handle on it."

"Porn?"

"No. Gay romance."

"What?"

"I read a gay romance book."

"Isn't that fiction?"

"Yeah. But it has to at least be a little realistic. Otherwise, people wouldn't read it."

“I suppose. I didn’t know you read that kind of stuff.”

“I’ll read pretty much anything.” He put his hand on my thigh, the movement almost unconscious as he looked between my eyes and my lips, then back again. “I went to the top one hundred and read through the blurbs until I found one that sounded good.”

“Was it?”

“Surprisingly, yeah. The story was well crafted, and it was descriptive, like *incredibly* descriptive. I learned more about gay sex from the first sex scene than I did watching all that porn.”

I looked down at his hand as he gently stroked my thigh. “Maybe I should read one.”

“You can use my Kindle, find one you think you’d like, and buy it.”

“I’m a slow reader.” I glanced up at him. “You don’t want to lend me your Kindle. It would be weeks before you see it again.”

“Yeah, that won’t work.” He squeezed my thigh. “Want to go upstairs?”

“Yeah.” I swallowed as a shiver of anticipation and nerves went through me. “I do.”

He gave my thigh one last squeeze, then let go and rose to his feet.

I stood as well, feeling awkward and a little off-balance as he looked me up and down.

It still amazed me that this young, fit, tattooed, and incredibly hot man found me attractive.

I wasn’t ugly, but I wasn’t anything special. Between my dad bod and my plain features, I was his opposite, yet he still wanted me.

A little thrill shot up my spine as he licked his lips, his eyes on my chest.

I appreciated how he hadn't pushed me to undress last night. It had been a long time since I'd been naked in front of anyone, especially a new partner, and stripping down for him had been harder than I'd thought. Every insecurity I'd ever experienced had bubbled up to the surface when I'd looked down at him, lying naked and perfect for me.

I shook off those thoughts and followed Gage up the stairs and into his room.

I closed the door behind me, stopping in my tracks when Gage turned to me. His pupils were blown, his eyes full of heat and need, as he raked his gaze up and down my frame.

Then he did this thing with his lip, where he bit it gently, then let out the tiniest little groan.

That sound, combined with that look, set my blood on fire, and every worry and insecurity I'd been wrestling with flew from my mind.

"Come here," he said softly, holding his arms out to me.

I stepped into his embrace, our chests bumping as he pulled me close.

His lips were on mine, seeking, searching, and I sighed under the assault, giving myself over to the sensations.

Gage felt amazing against me. His strong, warm body was so sexy. I loved how it made me feel: protected and safe, not just aroused.

He groaned against my lips, swiping his tongue across my lower one. I opened to him, wanting more, and he didn't disappoint.

The kiss quickly turned into something hot and hard, a mashing of lips and tongues and teeth. He ran his strong hands over my back, my ass, smoothing and gripping my skin and clothes as he explored me.

"You can take it off," I whispered against his lips when he slid his hands under the back of my shirt.

"Yeah?" he answered breathlessly.

“You can take it all off.”

He groaned, his lips meeting mine again.

This time his kiss was slow, deep, sensual. The kind of kiss that only comes from familiarity and caring about the person you’re kissing.

That kiss melted something inside me, opening up a chasm of need and want so strong I shuddered, moaning loudly as he tugged my shirt up.

We had to break the kiss for him to get it off, and I didn’t miss the way his eyes raked over my chest and torso, fire and need flaring as he licked his lips.

He whipped off his shirt, giving me a view of his incredible body and those sexy tats

“Fuck,” I said breathlessly.

He reached for me, and I went to him willingly. I ran my hands over his body, rubbing and scratching his skin as we kissed like we never wanted to let go.

And I didn’t.

It might not make sense, but being with Gage felt right. It *felt* like this was what we should have been doing this entire time.

Like we’d been made for each other.

He groaned against my mouth, bringing me back to the present, as he slipped the tips of his fingers under the back of my waistband. My jeans were too tight for him to go any farther, and I let go of him so I could rip my pants open. I wanted more of those touches, more kisses, more of whatever he was ready to give me.

Gage pulled his pants open. It was awkward trying to kiss while we both shoved our pants down around our thighs, but we managed it.

“You’re so fucking sexy,” he growled against my lips, the sound sending a shockwave of pleasure and arousal through me.

I had to break the kiss to pull in a breath, and he dropped his eyes, staring at my cock with a look of pure hunger mixed with some eager anticipation. I had a feeling my expression mirrored his as I stared right back at him.

His cock was perfect. I'd never thought about another man's dick before, but his made my mouth water. It was long and thick with a few visible veins. The head was glistening with precum, and I swallowed as I remembered just how good he'd tasted.

"You too," I panted, then gasped as he grabbed me by the hips and dragged me toward the bed.

I let him, moving with him as he angled me, then shoved me back. I landed on the bed, on my back, bouncing on the soft mattress a few times as he stood over me like some sort of marble statue brought to life.

I watched with hungry eyes as he stripped off the rest of his clothes. I wanted to do the same, but he shook his head as I moved to push down my pants.

"No. Let me."

I stopped, my breath catching as I let my hands fall to my sides.

He descended on me, caging me in with his bigger body. I shuddered under him, loving how it felt to be completely surrounded by him.

His unique smell, a mix between his soap and deodorant, with a hint of something spicy and slightly musky, tickled my nostrils.

He leaned down, but instead of kissing me, he latched his mouth onto my neck, kissing and sucking the sensitive skin. I arched into him, tilting my head to give him better access.

Strong hands ran over my body, sliding over my skin as he took his time exploring me.

I wrapped my arms and legs around him, hooking my ankles together around his thighs, and I held him close. He

groaned against my lips, then let out another one of those sexy growls as he rubbed our cocks together.

I was hard and leaking, and the sensation of his shaft rubbing against mine made my eyes roll back in my head.

He pulled away from our kiss, sitting back on his heels as he gripped my jeans, and tugged on them.

I lifted my hips to help him pull them down, then raised each foot as he yanked off my socks.

Then I was naked.

He tossed my clothes aside, and a slight frisson of fear went through me, but that was replaced by one of desire when he stared at me, his skin flushed, his pupils blown.

He liked what he saw.

“You too. I want to see you.”

His nostrils flared, and he bent down and gave me a quick yet deep kiss. Before I could get lost in it, he pulled back, rolled onto his butt, and tugged off the rest of his clothes.

I watched, transfixed, as all of him was revealed. When he was naked, he leaned over me, bracing himself on the bed with one hand. He reached over to yank open the drawer of his nightstand. He rummaged around, then pulled out a bottle of lube.

Seeing that little bottle made my heart rate spike as the reality of what was going to happen hit me.

Gage was going to suck my dick and finger my ass. And I was going to do the same to him.

Instead of being afraid, like I'd thought I would be, all I felt was eager anticipation and want. I wanted this, wanted him.

“Ready?” Gage asked as he settled back on his heels, looking down at me.

“Yeah,” I rasped, spreading my legs for him.

He groaned, the deep sound doing things to my body, then moved to settle between them.

His thick legs pressed against mine, the wiry hairs tickling my skin as he ran one hand down the center of my chest, then down my treasure trail.

My cock was rock hard; my balls were high and hugging my body. I was so ready I was worried I'd blow the second he put his mouth on me.

Gage tossed the lube aside and shimmied down until he lay between my legs, his head right over my straining cock.

I held my breath as he bent closer and sucked the head of my dick between his lips.

The wet heat of his mouth enveloping my cock was incredible, and I had to lock my thighs to stop from thrusting up into him.

One big hand circled the base of my cock as he kept moving until he had half of my length in his mouth. He did this thing with his tongue, rubbing it against the underside of my shaft as he stroked his hand up, twisting it.

“Oh fuck!” I grabbed the sheets in my fists and squeezed tight.

He did it again, then again, and I couldn't look away.

His eyes were closed, and he was making the softest sounds, little slurps and sighs that were so damn sexy they made my head spin. Not only was he doing this for me, but he was enjoying it.

He slowly sucked his way up my dick, then let it fall from between his lips with a lewd *pop*.

“Ready?” He grabbed the discarded lube.

Instead of answering, I lifted my knees, spreading my legs even farther apart as I tilted my hips up.

He groaned, his eyes on my ass as he flipped the lube cap open, and coated his finger with the slippery liquid.

It was little strange to be on display like this, to have someone staring at my asshole, but at the same time, it felt completely natural.

I was still contemplating how contradictory my feelings were when Gage ran the pad of his finger over my hole.

“Oh shit,” I breathed.

“That okay?” He looked up at me, his eyes full of concern.

“Yeah. A bit weird, but not bad.”

He returned his attention to where our bodies were joined, a mask of concentration falling over his features.

I drew in a deep breath and forced myself to relax. I wanted this. I just needed to remind my body of that.

He rubbed his finger over my hole again, letting me get used to the sensation. After a moment of teasing, he gently pressed just the tip of his finger inside me.

“Oh!”

“That okay?” He looked up at me.

“Yeah. Feels... I’m not sure. Not bad. Just weird.”

“Try breathing out and bearing down.”

“Okay.”

I did as he suggested, and his finger slipped in a bit deeper.

It didn’t hurt, but it was uncomfortable. He must have been able to read that on my face because he ran his other hand over my stomach, gently petting me.

“Do it again.”

I did, forcing my body to relax even more. I had no idea how deep inside me he was, but now there was a feeling of fullness I wasn’t sure I liked.

I gritted my teeth, pulling in slow, even breaths as he leaned down and sucked the head of my dick back into his mouth.

Okay, that felt better. Little tendrils of pleasure shot through me, breaking through the fullness and turning it into something nice, pleasurable.

Gage continued to work me with his mouth as he gently eased his finger inside me. The combination of sensations felt good, and I relaxed even more, allowing him to slide all the way inside me.

Then he moved.

“Oh shit,” I breathed, my legs shaking as he hit something inside me that sent a spiral of pure desire and pleasure through me.

Gage kept sucking me, keeping his movements steady and slow as he pushed that wicked finger in and out of me.

Then he did something, crooked his finger, maybe, and my entire body lit up as nerves deep inside my body, nerves I didn't even know I had, came to life.

“Fuck,” I panted, threading one hand through his hair, needing that extra connection as he brought me higher and higher.

It took an embarrassingly short time for me to come. One moment I was lying under him, enjoying his attention, and the next my body was releasing, pleasure taking over so fast I didn't even have a chance to warn him.

Gage made a surprised sound but didn't stop sucking me, taking everything I gave him as my orgasm went on and on.

When I'd finally stopped spurting, he slowly eased his finger out of me, then popped off my dick, licked the tip one final time, and sat up on his heels.

“Good?” he asked, a smile on his lips.

“Holy fuck.” I blinked up at the ceiling as my brain came back online. “Fuck,” I repeated, unable to be any more eloquent than that.

He grinned and pressed his lips against mine. I could taste myself on his tongue, and I moaned into the kiss. That was surprisingly hot.

“Sorry. Meant to warn you,” I said as he pulled away.

“Don’t worry about it.” He waved his hand dismissively as he sat up. “You taste good.”

That comment sent another pulse of pleasure through me, and I propped myself up on my elbows.

“Your turn.”

He gave me a heated look and shifted so he was beside me on the bed.

“Lie back.”

He flopped over and spread his legs apart so I could settle between them.

“This feels weird.” He chuckled. “I’m not used to being the one in this position.”

“It does. Do you want to switch to a different way?”

“No, it’s fine.” He spread his legs a little farther apart. “I’m ready.”

I leaned down and sucked the head of his dick into my mouth, ignoring his ass for the time being. He was hard, but I wanted him writhing and needy when I got inside him.

Gage moaned. I loved that sound and sucked harder, using my hand to stroke the parts of his shaft that I couldn’t get in my mouth.

“Fuck, Tyler.” He ran his hand through my hair, his touch soft like a caress.

I sucked him for a few more minutes, enjoying the taste and feel of him now that I was used to it.

“Ready?” I popped off his dick when he let out a strangled cry, his body tensing.

“Yeah,” he panted.

I sat back on my heels and stared at his hole. I’d never done any sort of assplay with the women I’d been with. It hadn’t been something I’d had any interest in, and they’d

never mentioned it, so I was an ass virgin in every sense of the word.

Gage's ass looked good. His cheeks were full and plump, not square or flat like some guys who worked out a lot, and his hole was inviting in the strangest way.

I ran my finger over his pleated skin. He jumped, and I pulled my hand back.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, just not used to it.”

“Want me to stop?”

“No, keep going.”

I did it again, and this time he held still. Well, his body did. His hole clenched. I found that incredibly sexy.

I pulled my hand away and grabbed the lube off the bed. Gage watched as I slicked up my finger, then tossed the bottle aside and reached back down.

I didn't push in, just rubbed my slippery finger over his hole, getting him nice and wet.

“That feels good,” he said, his voice breathy and his hands fisting the sheets as he spread his legs a little wider.

“Yeah? Can you take more?”

He nodded.

“Bear down. It helps.”

He nodded again, then breathed out.

I pushed the tip of my finger inside him. His hole clenched around my finger as he let out a little grunt.

“Okay?” I asked, needing to check in with him.

“Weird, but yeah. Keep going.”

I pushed in a little farther, surprised at how much force I had to use to breach him until I was in to the first knuckle.

“That's...” He breathed out. “Strange.”

“I can stop.”

“No. Keep going. Just go slow.”

I sucked the head of his dick back into my mouth. It had felt much better when he'd done that for me.

“Oh, that's good,” he moaned.

I slowly worked my finger inside him, taking my time until it was in as far as it could go.

“Ready for me to move?” I asked, letting his cock fall out of my mouth so I could speak.

He nodded, his eyes filled with both hunger and weariness. I understood that look because it was the same as I'd felt when he'd done this for me.

I drew him back into my mouth and moved my finger inside him, using little pulses to get him used to it.

His breathing hitched. Then he groaned, spreading his legs a bit more as he angled his hips up.

I felt around, searching for that magic spot. I found something inside him that was spongy and stroked my finger over it.

“Oh shit.” He arched his hips, seeking my touch.

Encouraged, I did it again, then tried what he'd done for me, crooking my finger so I could rub it.

“That's good.” He opened his eyes and looked down at me, his expression full of wonder and heat.

“Yeah?”

I sucked him back into my mouth, wanting to make him come.

His breathing hitched, then changed completely until he was panting and letting out the softest, hottest, little moans as I worked his ass and sucked him.

“I'm—fuck!”

He didn't have a chance to finish before he erupted in my mouth. I hadn't been expecting it, and the first spurt hit the

back of my throat.

I fought through my gag reflex, wanting to swallow him the way he'd done for me. I kept stroking his prostate, trying to prolong his orgasm as he gasped and writhed under me.

“Holy shit.” He blinked his eyes open and looked down at me. I gently withdrew my finger and sucked my way off his cock. “That was... wow.”

“Right?” I wiped my mouth and kissed him.

His arms came around me, holding me tight and pulling me so I fell on top of him. He wrapped his legs around me, hooking them under my ass, as he held me close.

Usually, I was the clingy one. I liked that he didn't hide how much he wanted to feel me.

Our kisses slowed, then stopped altogether. He didn't let go of me, and I tucked my face into the crook of his neck as I rode the leftover waves of pleasure and calm.

He shifted us so we were on our sides, still holding me close.

Cuddling with him felt natural, and I snuggled into him, enjoying every second of our contact.

I'd missed this almost as much as sex. Orgasms were awesome, and there was nothing like connecting with someone by sharing intimacy, but cuddling, especially after sex, was one of my favorite things to do.

Gage seemed to be comfortable with it because he shifted me around until he was snuggled up to me, his head on my shoulder, his arm slung over my middle.

I pressed a kiss into his hair, tightened my arm around him, and sighed in contentment.

It might not make sense, but being with Gage was as natural as breathing. I liked him, liked everything we'd done together. We might not have a label for what we were doing or what we were, but that was okay. We'd figure it out later. Together.

Chapter 13

Gage

I lay against Tyler's shoulder, my mind calm and my body sated.

That had been one of the most intense orgasms I'd ever had, even more intense than when he'd blown me.

"Tanner was right," I mumbled, rubbing my cheek against his shoulder.

"What was that?"

"I just said that Tanner was right."

"About what?"

"He said the prostate is an orgasm trigger. I thought he was exaggerating because he was drunk and babbling, but he was right."

Tyler laughed softly and pressed another kiss into my hair. "It really is. I feel cheated not knowing about it until now."

"Same. And I totally get what my friends were saying when they'd rave about it." I gave Tyler a little squeeze, then pulled away. "Stay here. I'll be right back."

He watched warily, dropping his arms so I could sit up.

I shivered as I went into my bathroom to wipe down and wash my hands. When I was relatively clean, I wet a new cloth and brought it to the bed.

Tyler was sitting up, the comforter puddled around his waist. His expression softened when as I walked toward him. He held out his hand for the cloth. I handed it to him and sat on the edge of the bed.

"We should have had this conversation when we first started this, but when was your last round of tests?" I asked.

"After Chrissy left me. What about you?"

“When I ended things with my last girlfriend. Maybe we should get tested again?”

“No need for me. There hasn’t been anyone else.”

I stared at him. His wife had left him more than a year and a half ago, and he hadn’t been with anyone between then and now?

“I told you I was having trouble finding someone,” He blushed and dropped his gaze to his hands.

“Yeah, but I thought you’d...”

“Nope.” He looked up at me, his eyes wary. “I’ve only been with one person in the last twelve, almost thirteen years.”

“I...”

“If you need to get tested, that’s fine. You’re not me. I imagine you have zero trouble getting women.”

“Here, I’ll take that.”

He handed me the cloth, and I tossed it onto the pile of dirty clothes I’d stashed in the corner. I really needed to get a hamper or a basket or something.

“Can we...” I motioned to the bed.

“Um, yeah.”

He lay down, and I moved next to him, putting my head back on his shoulder.

“I want to be honest with you,” I slung my arm around his middle. “You’re right. I don’t have trouble finding women when I want sex. I don’t do relationships. I didn’t want to settle down. Most of the women I’ve been with have been casual. Some have only been for a night, some for a short time. Emma was the first woman I actually dated in years, but that went belly up in a matter of months.”

He stiffened but didn’t say anything.

“I thought that’s what I wanted, but what we have, this thing between us, is more than just sex. I’ve never had this,

where I wanted to hang out with the person I'm sleeping with outside the bedroom.”

Tyler's grip on me tightened.

“But no, I don't need to be tested. There wasn't anyone between her and you.”

“I'm the opposite. Always have been.” Tyler sighed heavily. “I like being part of a couple. I like the emotional intimacy as much as the physical. It's why I'm serial monogamous. Why I didn't hook up with any of the women I talked to online after my marriage imploded, and why I don't do fuck buddies.”

“I thought you were looking for something casual?”

“I said that, but it wasn't the truth. I was still hurting from the betrayal of being cheated on. Not only did she cheat on me, but she also lied to me for months, if not years. She knew she was done with me but stayed because I was her backup. The divorce was messy, and I ended up losing more than just my marriage and my future. I lost most of my possessions and all my savings. We didn't have a lot, and by the time our debts were paid, there was nothing left. She had her boyfriend to support her, and I ended up in my old bedroom in my parents' house.”

Tyler had never told me the specifics of what had happened. I'd known that his ex had cheated and that she'd gotten pregnant by her lover, but I hadn't realized just how much he'd lost.

“I'm sorry. I had no idea it was so bad.”

“I didn't tell you. It's not something I like to broadcast.”

“I'm still sorry. And you know that shit doesn't matter to me, right?”

“Maybe not now, but what about later?”

I shifted so I could lie on him, our bodies flush as I looked down at the man who was quickly becoming my everything.

“Ty, babe.” I brushed a kiss against his lips. “Nothing about your situation could ever change the way I see you, the

way I feel about you. You've been through a lot. You've lost a lot, and you're healing. Things might seem dire now, but this is only a footnote in your story. You'll rebuild your life into something new and amazing, and I'm going to be there to help you every step of the way. Okay?"

"Okay." He smiled, a real and true smile that reached his eyes.

I kissed him again, pouring everything I could into the kiss because I wasn't ready to tell him.

I liked him, and I could see myself falling for him. I'd never been in love, but what I felt for Tyler went beyond affection and lust. Whatever was between us was real, and I hoped he knew just how much he meant to me.

The kiss was soft and sweet, sensual in a way I'd never experienced before. My body was sated, and my dick was down for the count, so the needy undercurrent that was usually between us was missing, leaving room for something deep and meaningful.

I eased out of the kiss, nibbling at his lower lip for a second, then pulled away.

He was smiling up at me, his eyes shining and happy, his cheeks flushed that adorable pink, and it was in that moment I knew he was always going to be part of my life. That there was no way I was ever going to let this incredible man go, whether it was as a lover or a friend.

I shifted off him, but before I could cuddle up to him, Tyler rolled over and put his head on my chest, threading one leg through mine and wrapping his arm around my middle.

"You mean a lot to me too," he whispered. "I don't know what's going on. Don't know exactly what this is, but it's real."

"Yeah, it is." I hugged him tighter. "And we don't need to label it. This can be whatever we want it to be."

He pressed a kiss into my neck, then licked my skin, right over my tattoo. I shivered at the contact.

“What do your tattoos mean?” he asked after a pause.

“Nothing.”

He lifted his head and raised one eyebrow in an unspoken question.

“I picked the designs out of a book because I liked them. I got the chest piece when I was eighteen and feeling rebellious. It was right after I learned my unit was being deployed. I got the armband when my second set of orders came in I had to go back to that hell hole.”

“I never had the guts to get one. I’m a big baby and don’t handle needles well. It takes me days to work up the courage to get my flu shot. A tattoo would be torture for me.”

“I don’t mind it. The pain was actually part of the reason I got them. It reminded me I was still alive. That I could still feel. And seeing them reminds me I survived.”

“Are you going to get more?”

“I might. I’ve thought about it, but if I do, I want it to mean something. To represent something good, something that made me happy, not just something I survived.”

He made an understanding sound and nuzzled his cheek against my skin.

“I like this, whatever it is,” he said softly, breaking the silence that had fallen over us.

“So do I.” I hugged him tighter against me.

“I’m not ready to tell people,” he said softly. “Not beyond my family. And even then, only Marianne and Trevor.”

“You’re going to tell him?”

“I have to. I know Marianne will keep my confidence, but I don’t like asking her to keep things from him. It’s not fair to her.”

“I told Doc and Tanner, and Luke knows. I can keep it from Sarge if you want.”

“You don’t have to hide anything from them. They’re your family. You decide what you want them to know.”

Relief washed over me. I’d hated the thought of the three of us knowing this huge thing and keeping Sarge in the dark, but I would have done it for Tyler if he’d asked me to.

My conversation with Doc popped into my head. He’d asked if I could see myself cuddling with Tyler after sex.

I’d wanted it, and now that it was happening, I knew it was something I’d keep on wanting.

“I’m not usually a cuddler.” I nuzzled his hair, breathing in his familiar scent.

“No?”

“No. I don’t mind a little contact when I’m coming down, but to just lie in bed like this talking... I’ve never wanted it before.”

“And now?” he asked, his voice hesitant.

“I like it.”

“I’ve missed this. I like cuddling. One of my favorite things to do was to just hold someone and talk about everything and nothing.”

“I guess it makes sense this wasn’t my thing. It’s intimate, but in a different way from sex. Is it different doing it with a guy?”

“Pretty different.” He chuckled and rubbed his hand over my happy trail. “More body hair and I’m not usually the little spoon with women.”

“I imagine that’s different.” I grinned, surprised that I didn’t feel any sort of jealousy at his mention of his past partners.

“It’s nice, though. I like that you’re bigger than me. It makes me feel safe.”

He’d said the last part so softly I almost didn’t hear him. Something inside me melted. I liked that I made him feel safe.

“You make me feel safe too,” I whispered. “I feel like I can be me around you.”

“You can. But you didn’t feel that way with the women you’ve been with?”

“Not really. I always held part of myself back. The women I was with only saw one side of me. They only saw fun time Gage. The playboy, the guy who was all about having a good time.”

“I see more of you than that.”

“You see all of me. I’ve never hidden any part of myself from you. Even when we were just getting to be friends, you made me comfortable in a way that no one outside my brothers has.”

He slid his hand from my stomach to my hip as he hugged me tight. “I’m glad you feel that way. I like every part of you I’ve seen.”

My stomach wobbled. His words were so simple, but they meant everything to me.

“You’ve seen all of me too,” he said, his voice dropping to a whisper. “I’ve never felt a connection with anyone like I felt with you.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat and held him closer.

I didn’t understand it, but Tyler and I fit. Doc had been right. It wasn’t about him being a guy or having a dick. I was attracted to him as a person. Everything else was just window dressing.

We lay in silence for a long while. It was nice, but I wasn’t tired. Not yet.

“I’m so comfortable, but it’s too early to go to bed.” I sighed and pressed a kiss into his soft hair.

“It is.” He turned his face and dropped a quick kiss on my chest. “I’ll bet you’ve got some reading you want to do.”

“I do.” I chuckled. “And you’re in the middle of that show you’ve been bingeing.”

“I am.” He pushed himself up on his elbows. “Want to relocate to the couch?”

“I should get a TV in here.” I waited as he sat up, then did the same. “It would be so much nicer to stay under the covers right now.”

“It would. I have a big, fuzzy blanket in my room we can use if you want.”

It wasn't particularly cold in the house, but the thought of being under a blanket with Tyler as we did our own thing was appealing.

“Definitely down for some blanket time.” I grinned when he flushed. “Meet you downstairs?”

He nodded, still blushing that adorable pink.

We climbed out of my bed, and I gave him one last kiss, needing to prolong the intimacy just a little bit longer, then pulled away.

He smiled, his eyes bright and his body relaxed.

We stared at each other. Then he turned and walked out the door.

I watched him, my eyes on his ass. It was nice, round, and full and felt so good under my hands. How would it would feel to slip inside him, to fuck him? I wanted to, and I wanted him to do the same to me. But were we ready for that? We might need to work up to that one.

Chapter 14

Tyler

The next few weeks melted together in a routine of blow jobs, hand jobs, and just hanging out together.

During the week, I worked on the house while Gage was at his job. We had dinner together, then retired to the living room, where he read, and I watched a few episodes of whatever show I was currently bingeing.

It was a nice routine, utterly domestic, which I loved, and he seemed to enjoy it as well.

On the weekends, Gage and I put videos together for the TikTok channel he'd set up for me.

I'd been a stuttering, awkward mess the first few times we'd tried to film. I wasn't used to being in front of a camera, and I'd always been self-conscious about my looks, so I spent the entire time fumbling over my words as I worried about how I looked.

We'd started small, doing simple repairs around the house, the kinds of things people could easily learn to do at home. Converting switches to dimmer ones, adding a timer for the bathroom fan, and simple plumbing, like how to safely unclog a drain that had grease build up or was clogged with hair.

Gage had written me a little intro speech, and he'd made me practice it in front of a mirror before he'd watched me recite it over and over again until he'd said it looked natural.

I still felt like a giant fraud, but Gage's excitement was contagious, and we'd both done little happy dances and celebrated with some kissing when I'd reached one hundred followers, then again when I hit one thousand.

Gage not only edited my videos, but he also went through the comments to see if people asked questions we could answer with other how-to videos. He scripted things called

stiches where I would answer or react to other videos, showed me other creator videos to comment on.

He'd shown me how to set up an Instagram account, but he'd taken over managing it as well. He uploaded the pictures I took and had me dictate the captions. He added tags to them, which I still didn't completely understand, and followed other relevant accounts.

He refused to tell me if anyone trolled me or said anything mean or cruel about me.

I loved how protective he was. It made it easier to step outside my comfort zone. I didn't think I'd ever be completely comfortable in front of the camera, but at least the nearly crippling anxiety I'd experienced every time he'd pointed his phone at me had waned to a mild case of the butterflies.

Having a project to do together was something I hadn't realized I'd been missing. Chrissy and I hadn't had many shared interests, and we hadn't had any hobbies we'd done together. She'd been into the idea of flipping houses but more in an administrative capacity. She'd been fine with me doing the work while she did the budgeting, décor choices, and all the legal stuff.

Gage wasn't very handy, but he was eager to learn. It was nice to have the company, and I enjoyed passing my knowledge onto him.

I was so used to people looking down at what I did, thinking it was just menial labor. That might have been true for some of the more mundane parts of handiwork, like painting or hanging blinds, but things like wood restoration, redoing and refinishing floors, and any sort of electrical work or plumbing was skilled work that took years to master.

“Hey,” Gage popped his head into the living room.

He'd gone over to Luke's for the afternoon, and I'd hung out with my niece and nephew while Trevor and Marianne went to brunch.

We tried not to spend our entire weekends together, not wanting to get lost in a little bubble where we became each

other's worlds. That wasn't healthy, and as much as I missed him when we were apart, it made me appreciate the time we were together so much more.

"Hey. Why are you wet?" I turned off the TV.

His cheeks were slightly red, and his hair was damp as if he'd just gotten out of the shower.

"We went for a run, and I showered at his place so I didn't stink up my car."

"I'm pretty sure the only way you'd ever find me running was if something was chasing me."

Gage laughed and came into the room. I appreciated how he never made comments about my relative laziness. My job was physical, but I could stand to start doing some cardio to build my stamina.

Once upon a time I'd enjoyed working out, but then my life had fallen apart, and it had just been too much.

Now that I was in a better place, I felt the urge to get more active. I couldn't see myself hitting the gym, but going for walks, maybe even taking up running again, was something I'd been considering.

Gage was next level, though. He hit the gym five days a week, and he went running at least once on the weekend, either with one of his friends or alone. He worked hard, and he had the body to show for it.

"You told me you used to enjoy running."

"Yeah, when I was young and dumb." I grinned at him. "But you never know. Maybe I'll get back into it."

He held out his hand. I took it, allowing him to haul me to my feet.

"Let's make a video." He wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me close for a quick kiss. "Missed you."

"Yeah?" I pecked another kiss against his lips. "I missed you too."

Gage lowered his head and nuzzled my neck. I loved it when he did that. It was sweet and intimate, and it turned me on like nothing else.

“Keep that up, and we’ll be making a video that can’t be uploaded to TikTok,” I mumbled when he nibbled on my neck.

“Mmmmmm,” he rumbled against my skin. “Not sure I’m ready to be uploading amateur porn, but I’m not opposed to making it.”

My breath stuttered.

I’d never been particularly adventurous in bed. I liked to try new things and mix it up with different positions and whatnot, but role-play, videos, costumes, none of that had been my thing.

Gage, as I was learning, had a kinky side. He’d never indulged in those fantasies with his casual hookups, but he’d played around a bit in the past with some of his more regular partners.

He’d bought me a jockstrap and asked me to wear it to bed one night. I’d done it, feeling incredibly self-conscious because I’d never worn one before, but the heat in his eyes as he’d drank me in had erased my fears, and I’d enjoyed it.

We hadn’t done much else on his kinky list, but maybe filming was something we could work up to.

“We don’t have to,” he said against my neck and kissed the skin. “You know I don’t need all that extra stuff. I’m happy with what we have.” He lifted his head, his expression sincere.

“I know.” I appreciated how understanding he was. He never pushed for more than I was ready to give. “I’m not against it, but maybe not yet.”

“I totally understand.” He stepped back, a reluctant look on his face. “Now, about that video,”

“What did you have in mind?”

“I thought we could put up the magnetic knife holder in the kitchen. You bought that nice new one, and it’s just sitting in a bag upstairs.”

“Sure. That’s a good project for right now. Want me to get it while you set up?”

He nodded, a big smile splitting his face.

I hurried up the stairs, taking them two at a time, and went into the spare room to get the holder and my tools.

When I came into the kitchen, Gage had set up two ring lights and a tripod for his phone.

I hadn’t realized that making internet content was such a process. You had to worry about lighting, and it was easier to film with a tripod than to try and hold the phone steady.

“All set?” I put my tools down and handed him the package with the magnetic strip.

“Yup.” He grabbed a pair of scissors out of the knife block and opened it, making sure to keep all the hardware together.

We took a minute to prep the wall, Gage taking a video of just my hands as I worked. When it was ready, he put the phone in the tripod and got me situated in front of the spot he wanted it mounted.

“Ready?” he asked.

I nodded, that familiar flutter of nerves going through me.

I waited until he gave me the thumbs-up—our signal that it was go time—and smiled at the phone.

“Hi, everyone. It’s Tyler again from *Tyler’s Tips*. If you’re new to my channel, I share videos about simple home renovations that anyone can do. I have twenty years of maintenance and construction experience and over ten in restoration. If you like what you see, leave a comment, ask a question, or give me a follow. Today we’re going to be mounting a magnetic strip for holding kitchen knives.

“This is an easy process that anyone can do if you have a level, a drill, and a magnetic strip. You can find all those items at any home improvement store and at most big box stores in the home section. Let’s get to it.”

I stopped talking, and Gage tapped the screen of his phone, giving me a big smile.

“That was good. Ready to start the work?”

I nodded. This was the tricky part of making the videos. Since they couldn't be more than three minutes, I had to explain what I was doing as I did it. Gage spent a lot of time editing and cropping the takes so he could make them fit in the time restraints.

It didn't take long to get the strip mounted, with Gage pausing me every once in a while to either shift the camera around or to check the last clip we'd filmed.

“How do you think that went?” I helped him clean up the ring lights and tripod, putting them in the small bedroom off the kitchen.

“I think we got some good footage. I'll edit it on my lunch break on Monday and get it uploaded.”

“I hate that you waste your lunch break doing this,” I said as I closed the door to the kitchen bedroom.

“It's not a waste. I enjoy it. And I'd just be sitting and dicking around on my phone while I ate anyway.” He brushed a kiss against my lips. “I like doing this with you. It's not a chore, okay?”

“Okay.” My cheeks heated as he brushed another soft kiss against my mouth.

“Oh.” He pulled away, his eyes lighting up. “I almost forgot. A house on the next block went up for sale.”

“You looking to move already?” I raised my eyebrows.

“No.” He chuckled. “But the house is similar to mine. I thought we could go to the open house tomorrow and scope out what they've done to the interior.”

He pulled his phone out of his pocket, tapped the screen a few times, and extended the phone to me.

The price almost made me choke. I knew Gage's house was worth a lot of money, but seeing a comparable place in the

same neighborhood was eye-opening.

I went to the pictures and flipped through them.

The owners had done a good job maintaining it. The house wasn't in pristine condition or anything, but it was well looked after. It had a few details that Gage's house didn't have, like a fireplace in the living room, but it was comparable.

"What do you think?" he asked when I handed him the phone back.

"Sure. It sounds fun. I'd like to see some of the handiwork up close, see if I can figure out what they did."

"Great!" He grinned. "It's from two until four tomorrow. Maybe we could go early, see it before too many people have been there?"

"Yeah. Sounds good."

"Now, how about we practice for that *other* video we might be making in the future." He'd dropped his voice to that sexy purr that drove me wild, and I had to stifle a groan as my dick perked up.

"I'll never say no to that."

"Your room or mine?"

"Yours."

We spent most of our time in his room, but he always gave me the choice. He had a bigger bed and a better mattress than I did, and the bathroom was right there. I liked being in his space, and I really liked how soft his mattress was.

He grinned wolfishly. My pulse picked up, and my breathing hitched. I knew that look—his dominant look.

There was nothing hotter than having Gage focus all his attention on me, teasing me before he let me come.

Instead of saying anything, I turned on my heel and raced through the kitchen and up the stairs, Gage's laughter and heavy footsteps following as he chased me.

••••

“This is the kind of yard I wish I had,” Gage said as we stood on the sidewalk in front of the house we were about to tour.

It was beautiful, with a manicured lawn, multiple flower beds, and some gorgeous bushes dotting the property.

“Either, they’re really into gardening, or they used a landscaping company to maintain this,” I said.

“Yeah.” Gage sighed. “I looked into one, but holy shit, they cost a lot.”

“They do,” I agreed. The porch had been stained a dark espresso color, and the contrast between the dark wood and the cream siding was striking. The shutters had been painted the same color, and the trim was all dark brown as well. “But when you price out the cost of materials, plus the number of hours it would take you to do the actual work, it’s actually pretty cost-effective.”

“Really?”

“Hmm-mm.”

They had a swing on one side of the porch, under what I assumed was the living room window. All the windows had matching white blinds on them.

“I’ll write up a comparison chart for you so you can decide if you want to hire someone or do the work ourselves.” I tore my eyes away from the porch. Gage was biting his lip.

“Curb appeal can really affect the price of a house,” I said when he didn’t say anything. “It can add up to twenty percent to the asking price, depending on the season and the area. With a house like yours, it would add a lot of value because people buy craftsmen houses for the aesthetic look of them.”

“Shit, really?” He blinked. “Is that why I got my place so cheap?”

“That was a factor. That and the amount of work the inside needed.”

He’d never told me how much he’d paid for his house, but he’d mentioned more than once that he’d gotten it way under market value. Even then, I’d been wondering how Gage had

been able to afford the house and the repairs that needed to be done on it, but I had never asked.

He'd told me he'd bought the place as an investment and wasn't sure it would be his forever home. It would be a lot of work to maintain, and it was a lot of space for just one person.

It made sense that he'd fix it up and sell it, taking the equity to buy a smaller, easier-to-maintain property.

"Ready to check it out?" he asked.

"Yup."

"Oh." He perked up and pulled his phone out of his pocket. "We should make a video about this."

"We can't take video inside someone else's house."

He rolled his eyes. "I know that. I mean, just say you're going to an open house to see a place that looks like the one you've been fixing up to get some ideas, maybe mention what kinds of new videos people can expect in the next few weeks."

"Oh. Yeah. That's a good idea." I froze. I'd have to do the video without a script.

"You want me to do the talking this time?"

"Please." The knot in my stomach eased. Gage could read me like a book, and I loved how in tune with me he was.

Every once in a while, when I'd needed an extra pair of hands for a particular project, Gage had set the camera up on the tripod and helped me. It was no secret I had someone working with me, but he'd never spoken or shown his face. I'd gotten plenty of comments asking who my camera person was.

"I could be in it too," he added, his voice uncharacteristically shy.

"Yeah?"

I hated how breathy and eager my voice was, but the smile that curled Gage's lips warmed my belly.

"Yeah."

I couldn't stop my grin.

“Here, turn away from the house so we have the street as our background. That way, it’ll make it impossible for anyone to figure out where we are.”

He stood next to me and held his phone up. It took a second to situate us in the frame and make sure we couldn’t see an identifying properties behind us.

“Ready?” he asked.

I nodded, my eyes on the screen.

We looked good together. It was the first time I’d seen us like this, since we hadn’t taken any pictures or videos together.

“Hey, everyone. It’s Tyler and Gage.” He grinned at the camera, looking as relaxed as could be. His calm energy soothed my nerves, and I found myself relaxing and smiling along with him.

“We’re doing something a little different today on *Tyler’s Tips*. You might be wondering who I am. I’m the guy who’s usually behind the camera. Today we’re going to an open house to see a house that’s the same style as the place Tyler has been fixing up to get ideas and check out the restoration techniques they used and the upgrades they’ve done. Maybe we’ll get some inspiration for ways Tyler can make my place look even better than he has.”

He looked at me, and the last of my nerves disappeared.

“That’s right.” I turned to the camera. “And I’ll be talking a bit about the kind of videos you can expect from me in the future. Hopefully, we’ll get some good ideas.”

Gage ended the video and tucked his phone back in his pocket.

“How was that?” I asked, my nerves coming back.

“Awesome.” He glanced around, then pecked a quick kiss against my cheek. “You’re becoming a natural.”

A little thrill rushed through me as my cheeks heated.

“Was that okay?” he asked.

“Yeah.” I didn’t even care I was blushing.

I might not be ready to tell my family or friends about us, but we were alone and far away from anyone we knew. It was nice to be out together and not pretend to just be friends.

He gave me a look that was a bit heated and a lot soft. My stomach swooped as a rush of affection hit me right in the chest.

We headed up the walkway, and the door opened before we'd even gotten to the porch.

"Hello, welcome," a young man greeted us. "You're our first visitors."

I bit my lip. He'd probably watched us take the video through the window and had seen Gage kiss my cheek.

I waited for the panic to hit, but it didn't. This guy was a stranger, and I found I didn't care if he thought we were a couple because we were.

We might not have put a label on what we had, but we were a couple in every sense of the word.

"Always nice to be the first ones in." Gage grinned and held out his hand. "Gage Andersen and this is Tyler James."

"Ken McAdams." He shook both of our hands.

He was a good-looking man, with dark hair, friendly brown eyes, and a tanned complexion. He was probably in his midtwenties, and was nearly half a head shorter than us.

He handed Gage a sheet of paper with the listing info on it. Gage passed it to me, and I looked it over. It was pretty clear cut, so I folded it and tucked it into my pocket.

"How about you and your partner take a look around," Ken suggested, a friendly smile on his face. "I'll be here if you have any questions."

"Thanks." Gage looked over at me. "Ready?"

I grasped Gage's hand without thinking about it.

He gave me a bright smile as he entwined our fingers together.

Ken glanced down at our hands, but his smile never wavered.

We started in the living room, talking in hushed voices as we pointed out different things that caught our eyes.

Gage didn't drop my hand, and it felt ridiculously good to touch him like this in public.

When we'd finished touring the first floor, we headed up to the second.

A door opening and voices broke through the silence as we came to the top of the stairs. I glanced at Gage, but he just smiled and tugged me along as we walked into the first room.

They'd turned it into an office. Bookcases crammed with books stood against one wall, and a huge desk dominated the room. An old-style Tiffany lamp sat on the desk, and a few art prints on the walls dotted the room. Other than that, it was bare.

"It's crazy that people actually live like this." Gage pulled me toward the bookshelves.

"You live like this."

"Not the house, the furniture. Everything is so perfect, so matchy-matchy. I feel like I'm in a museum."

"It's definitely been staged." I smiled as he kept his eyes on the book spines, checking them out. He was such a bookworm, and I found it incredibly endearing.

"You think?"

"Most places nowadays are. I mean, it's possible they do live like this, but most people use staging when they sell a place. Notice how there's nothing personal around? No pictures other than neutral prints. The walls are neutral colors, and the furniture is all small for the space, making it seem bigger. Even the closets have been emptied so there are only a few things in them. It makes it easier for people to imagine their stuff in a place if you keep it sparse and neutral."

"You must be in real estate."

We both jumped at the voice behind us, whipping our heads around.

An attractive young woman dressed in tailored business clothes was standing in the doorway. She had curly blond hair and an easy smile. Her makeup was soft, making her features look delicate.

“I’m Julia McAdams.” She held out her hand, smiling at us brightly.

“Hi.” Gage let go of my hand and shook hers. “Gage Andersen.”

That was right. There were two Realtors on the listing. A husband and wife team based on their names and the rings on their fingers. I’d forgotten that.

“Tyler James,” I introduced and stepped closer to shake her hand as well. “And no, I’m not in real estate.”

“Ty does restoration.” Gage beamed at me, and I flushed at the proud look on his face.

“No wonder you’ve come to look at this place.” She gave us another easy smile, then launched into a practiced spiel about all the work that had been done on the place in the last ten years.

Gage slipped his hand into mine, lacing our fingers together. The owners had sunk a lot of money into the place, and I made a mental note of all the things I wanted to check out now that I knew where the improvements had been done.

“Are you looking to buy together?” she asked when she finished her speech.

“We’re considering it,” Gage said, that easy smile still on his lips. “We’re in the early phases of our plans, but we saw this place and just had to see it.”

“It’s an excellent investment. This neighborhood is incredibly sought after, and houses like this don’t go on the market often.”

“It is.” Gage squeezed my hand in an affectionate way. “We love what we’ve seen already.”

I watched the easy banter between them as Julia mentioned different points of interest in the room. I interjected the odd answer when she said something about the workmanship that had been done or told us about an upgrade.

A part of me was in awe of how easily Gage slipped into conversation with her. I'd known he was friendly and conversational, but to see him talking to a stranger like they were old buddies, laughing and joking as she brought us through the rooms on the second floor, made me ridiculously proud to be with him.

The rest of the second floor looked identical to Gage's, outside of the décor and furniture, which Gage's house sorely lacked. The attic had been converted into a second living room, this one dominated by a television, a neatly organized entertainment unit, and a massive sectional.

Julia escorted us back downstairs, still chatting away, when Gage stopped dead in his tracks and yanked me to a stop, almost causing me to trip.

I caught myself on the railing and glanced at Gage. What had spooked him?

He was staring at a man and woman, a couple by the way he had his arm around her waist, in the main entryway. Gage's eyes were wide with shock.

"Gage?" the man asked, his eyes dropping to our joined hands.

I expected Gage to let go of my hand, but he didn't. He just gripped it tighter and plastered a smile on his face.

"Anthony," he said, his bright tone as fake as his smile. "Fancy meeting you here."

"Yes. It's quite unexpected." Anthony's gaze dropped to our hands again.

"You know each other?" the woman with Anthony asked.

"Honey, this is Gage, one of my employees, and his..."

My heart skipped a few beats when Gage stiffened beside me.

“This is Tyler, my boyfriend.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Gage and Tyler,” the woman said warmly when Anthony stayed silent. “I’m Katie, Anthony’s wife.”

Gage let go of my hand and descended the steps, that fake smile still on his face as he shook Katie’s hand.

“You’re looking to buy?” Anthony tilted his head to the side. “I thought you recently bought a house.”

“I did, but a place like this is just too much of a gem not to check out.” He slipped his hand into mine again, his grip so tight it bordered on painful.

I squeezed back, hoping to give him some support. This entire situation was awkward as fuck, and I didn’t know what to say that wouldn’t make things worse.

“Thank you for your time, Julia. We need to talk some things over,” Gage said, breaking eye contact with Anthony and looking back at Julia.

She smiled brightly at us, but even her expression was a bit pained. “Of course. It was lovely to meet you.”

“You too.” Gage tugged on my hand, pulling me toward the door. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Anthony. It was nice to meet you, Katie.”

“You too.” She glanced at her husband, then looked back at us.

Gage practically dragged me out of the house and didn’t stop until we were halfway down the block.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to call you my boyfriend. I just got flustered, and it popped out and—”

“Don’t worry about that. We are, right?”

“Yeah. I mean, I’ve kind of been thinking of you as my boyfriend for a while. I just forgot to tell you that.”

“It’s fine, babe. I’ve thought the same thing.”

We grinned at each other like fools for a moment. It felt good to get that out in the open.

I wouldn't have faulted him if he'd somehow found a way to convince whoever Anthony was that we were just friends, but the fact that he hadn't even hesitated meant a lot to me. It told me he was just as invested in our relationship as I was.

“But who was that?”

“That was the bank manager.”

“Your boss?”

“Yup. And he's a huge gossip. There's no way in hell he's not going to tell everyone about this.”

“Are you okay with that?”

“Yeah. I mean, I would have preferred to tell people myself, especially considering I still have no idea what I am. But whatever. You're mine. I'm not going to pretend like you aren't.”

My stomach wobbled. I liked being his.

“Are you okay?” I asked when he pulled in a deep breath, then blew it out.

“Yeah. The shock's fading. It was more seeing him when I wasn't expecting it. I keep my private life quiet at work. I've never brought anyone to a work event, and I don't talk about personal shit. I didn't even tell anyone I'd bought a house.”

“Then how did he know you did?”

“Because my mortgage is with the bank. I went through a different branch to make sure there were no conflicts of interest, but he could have easily found out when they were checking my finances.”

“And you're sure you're okay?”

“Fine.” He waved his hand dismissively. “Let's go home and finish this video. I'll get it uploaded tonight.”

“Okay. If you're sure.”

“I’m sure.” He gave me a smile, a real one that reached his eyes, and I felt better.

The entire walk back to the house, I thought about Gage getting outed at work. He’d told his friends, and now his colleagues would know about us.

It didn’t seem fair that I was keeping him a secret. I still hadn’t told my brother, and even though Marianne had insisted that she didn’t mind keeping my confidence until I was ready to tell him, I still felt like a coward.

I was falling for Gage. Hell, I was already there if I was being honest.

He understood me in a way that no one ever had. He made me happier than I’d ever been, and he’d shown me what unconditional acceptance felt like.

He was my best friend, and I was in love with him.

We walked the rest of the way in silence, and I vowed that I’d tell my family the next time I saw them.

Hiding Gage or our relationship felt wrong. I loved him, and while I wasn’t sure he was there with me yet, I was okay with that. Gage wasn’t like me. He hadn’t wanted a partner, but he’d pushed through that to be with me.

Gage was my future. He was the person I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. I could wait until he figured out if he wanted me the same way.

Chapter 15

Gage

After we'd gotten home from the open house, Tyler and I had talked about what had happened. Not the fact that my boss had seen us and was most likely going to out me to my coworkers but about the house itself.

We'd talked about some new things he wanted to try, and we'd gone over my budget sheet to make sure I could plan accordingly for the added costs.

We'd also finished the video we'd started, and I'd edited and uploaded it while Tyler had made us dinner.

I wasn't looking forward to tomorrow. Not because I was ashamed to be with Tyler or that people would be questioning my sexuality. The guys I used to go to the bar with occasionally knew I was into women, but other than that, I'd never talked about my sexuality with anyone. Now that I was dating a man, people would gossip.

It didn't matter that we were all grown-ass adults, gossip ran rampant at the bank. It was a small group, and most of us had worked there for years. Dating each other, while frowned upon, wasn't against the rules, so everyone was always in everyone else's pocket.

I didn't care that people might think I was gay or bi. I just hated that they were talking about me at all.

I was a private person by nature, and I hated being the center of gossip. A lot of it came from my childhood. Always being the new kid had made me a target for rumors at every school I'd gone to, and things hadn't been that much better in the army.

Soldiers talked, and they loved to gossip. There were a hell of a lot of people in the military, but it was still a closed-knit community. Word traveled between duty stations, so it was impossible to escape rumors once they started.

At least one good thing had come out of this clusterfuck. Tyler and I had finally put a label on our relationship.

I'd been telling him the truth when I'd said I already thought of him as my boyfriend. He was mine, and I was his, simple as that. I'd wanted to tell him so many times, but for some reason, I'd held back.

Maybe it was my inability to talk about my feelings, or it was something else entirely, but a part of me had been worried he'd balk at putting a title on things.

He'd told me he was serial monogamous and that he liked being part of a couple. I was learning that I did too, but I still wasn't one hundred percent sure he was okay with the other half of his couple being a man.

Now that I knew he felt the same, that he wanted me the way I wanted him, as a partner and not just as a lover, it put all my irrational fears at ease.

It also pushed me past the last mental block I'd had about being with him.

Up until now, we'd stuck to using our mouths or hands to get each other off. I'd wanted more for a while, but I hadn't been ready to tell him in case he wasn't there yet.

Now I was ready to take that last step. I waited until we'd finished dinner before speaking up.

"I wanted to talk to you about something," I said when he'd polished off the last of his beer.

"Uh-oh, this sounds ominous."

"No, nothing like that." I smiled, even as my stomach exploded with nerves.

"What's up?" he asked.

How could I say this other than to just blurt it out?

"I want you to fuck me tonight."

He froze, his eyes comically wide. I would have laughed it was any other situation. Instead, I sat there slowly panicking the longer he took to answer.

“You do?” he finally asked, blinking as his posture relaxed.

“Yeah. I do. You don’t want to?”

“No, I do. I just thought that you’d want to—I mean, I assumed you’d...”

“What?”

“That you’d want to fuck me.”

“Oh, I want to,” I said, heat creeping into my voice. “Don’t you worry about that. But tonight, I want you to fuck me.”

“I... I really want to.”

“Good. How about you clean up, and I’ll go take a shower.”

He nodded, swallowing hard as he stared at me, his eyes dark with lust.

I stood and came around the table. He tilted his head up so I could kiss him.

I wasn’t nervous as I made my way to my bedroom. I wanted to share this with Tyler.

As dumb as it was, I wanted to give myself to him first. So many of my sexual encounters had been meaningless, but this, he, meant everything to me. I wanted to experience him in a way I’d never experienced anyone else.

I didn’t rush through my shower, even though I was beyond excited and yes, a little nervous. Not because I was afraid he was going to hurt me or it would be weird, but because I’d never taken more than two fingers before, and the unknown was a little daunting.

By the time I was ready, making sure to take care of everything, I wrapped a towel around my waist and headed into my room.

Tyler was already there, sitting on my bed. He rubbed his hands on his legs in a decidedly nervous way.

“You look good wet.” He licked his bottom lip as he stared at my chest.

That move made my cock twitch, then grow to half-mast as he dropped his gaze to the bulge under my towel.

He stood, holding his arms out.

I stepped into them, letting him pull me close so he could kiss me.

I wasn't used to being in the submissive role, but I couldn't deny that I liked it when Tyler took charge.

He pressed soft kisses against my lips, then buried his face in my neck and held me close, breathing me in.

I gripped him tighter, giving him a chance to get his thoughts together.

A few moments later, he let go of me, then stepped back. He stripped off his shirt. He'd already taken off his shoes and socks, and I groaned when he pulled open his pants, exposing a V of skin.

He wasn't wearing underwear, and as he pushed his jeans down, his cock sprang up and slapped him in the belly.

I pulled the towel from my waist and tossed it onto the floor with his clothes. We stood there, both of us naked and hard.

I had no idea which one of us moved first or if we moved at the same time, but a second later, we were tangled in each other's arms, our kisses deep and hungry.

We ran our hands over each other, grabbing and pulling at skin as we mashed our dicks together.

Our kisses were frantic now, a battle of tongues and teeth and lips. We were as close as we could be physically, but I needed more. I needed him.

He must have sensed my desperation because he spun us around until the backs of my knees were against the mattress. Still kissing me, he pushed me down onto the bed. I went willingly.

We had to break the kiss to scoot up so we were up by the pillows. When I was lying on my back, I opened my arms to him, but he just grinned, bent his head, and pressed a kiss against my chest.

I sighed, tangling my fingers in his hair as he kissed his way down my chest, over my happy trail, then sucked the head of my dick into his mouth.

“Fuck,” I moaned as the wet heat of his mouth surrounded me.

I relaxed into the mattress, carding my fingers through his soft hair as he gently sucked me.

A few moments later, he sucked his way off my dick, kissed my tip, then licked his way down my shaft until he was nuzzling my balls.

“Tyler,” I breathed as he sucked one, then the other into his mouth.

“Spread your legs for me, and lift them,” he said softly, dropping little kisses on my thigh.

I did as he said, opening myself up to him.

He stared down at my ass, his eyes hungry.

“Tell me if you don’t like this.”

I was about to ask what he was talking about when he bent down and licked a stripe over my hole.

“Holy fuck!” I jerked on the bed, my breath coming out in a gasp as he did it again.

“You like that?” he teased when I panted, tugging my legs up as high as I could get them.

“Fuck yeah, I like it.”

He dipped his head down, and I closed my eyes as the most intense, incredible sensations washed over me.

It felt amazing when he used his fingers on me, but his tongue was next level. It was hot and wet and nimble as he flicked it over my hole, then gently pushed the tip inside me.

My cock was rock hard and dripping precum, the thin stream connecting the head of my dick to my stomach as he continued to lick and tease me.

“Fuck, babe.” I moaned. “More, please.”

He gave my hole one last sucking kiss, then sat up on his knees.

I tracked him with my eyes as he went to the bedside table and pulled out my bottle of lube.

“Should I get a condom?” he asked, hesitating.

“No.”

I didn’t want any barriers between us. I wanted to feel all of him.

He blew out a shaky breath and settled back between my legs. He coated his fingers in lube, then tossed the bottle aside and leaned over me.

Our mouths met in a deep kiss as he pressed one finger against my hole.

I was so impatient, so eager, I was tempted to tell him to skip the prep and get inside me but didn’t. That would hurt, and the last thing I wanted was for Tyler to feel bad.

Instead, I went pliant under him, letting him set the pace as he prepped me. First with one finger, then two. He kept on kissing me, helping me focus on something other than the fact that I was about to have a dick in my ass for the first time.

“You want three?” he asked against my lips when I pushed back on his fingers, needing more.

“Yeah,” I said breathlessly, grateful he was taking his time,

We’d never done more than two fingers, and the stretch of having a third pressing at my entrance made me wince.

He pulled away from our kiss and slowly eased his third finger inside me, his eyes on my face.

I concentrated on my breathing, forcing my body to relax. It didn’t hurt, but it was uncomfortable.

He shifted his fingers around until he pressed against my prostate.

A shiver of pleasure shot up my spine, and I gasped, my body relaxing around his fingers.

He took his time, slowly pumping them in and out of me until I was a panting, shaking mess.

“You ready for me?” he asked.

“Yeah. Do it.”

“How do you want it?”

“Like this.”

“Good. I want to see you.” He slowly pulled his fingers out of me.

I waited, my body on fire and my breathing shallow, as he slicked himself up with a generous amount of lube. When he was done, he leaned forward and lined himself up with my hole.

“Ready for me?”

“I’m ready.”

He slowly pushed in.

My body wasn’t sure what to do with that, and I tensed.

“You want me to stop?” He stroked one hand over the inside of my thigh.

“No. Keep going. I want this. Want you.”

His eyes darkened, and his nostrils flared. He spread my thighs wider, then slowly pushed into me until the head of his cock slipped past my outer ring of muscles.

“Oh shit.” I winced.

It hurt. The burn was there, so was an uncomfortable fullness, and under that was a sting of pain I wasn’t a fan of.

“You look so hot right now, babe. Taking me like that,” he purred, gripping my cock and stroking it as he rocked his hips, pushing in a little more.

The dirty talk, along with the hand on my cock, helped ease some of the initial resistance, and I was able to bear down and let more of him into me.

It didn't feel good. I knew it would take time and I needed to get used to it, and I tried to hide the pain as he pushed even deeper.

"That's it, baby. I know it hurts now. But it's going to feel so good when I'm in."

"Fuck," I gritted out, my legs shaking from the effort of keeping them up.

"I can stop."

"No. I want this. Just keep talking to me."

"You're so hot, Gage. You have no idea how sexy you look right now."

The use of my name quieted some of the noise in my head, and I was able to relax a bit more.

"There we go. I'm halfway in. Fuck. You're so tight. So fucking tight."

He shuddered, and a shiver of pride went through me at how wrecked he sounded.

I let go of my knees and held out my arms, needing more contact with him. He leaned over me, his hand still stroking my cock, and I wrapped my arms around him.

"There, that's all of me. You've got all of me in you, babe."

I let out a shuddering breath. The pain was still there, but the stretching wasn't so bad anymore, and the feeling of fullness was gone.

He held still, gently stroking my dick as he lay on me and let me get used to it.

"You can move," I said a few moments later.

I expected him to fuck me, but instead, he ground his hips against my ass.

“Holy fuck!”

The feeling of his cock circling inside me sent a wave of pleasure through me, opening me up as the pain faded completely.

“There we go. You’re ready for me.”

He sounded absurdly pleased with himself, and I couldn’t even fault him for it. I would have reacted the same way in his position.

He pulled halfway out of me, then pushed back in.

I dropped my legs and wrapped them around his thighs, clinging to him as he continued to fuck me with long, even strokes.

It felt good, so good. I was groaning and panting against him, my face in his neck as he sped up.

He didn’t go harder, just faster. I shifted my hips and fucking saw stars as he brushed against my prostate.

“Oh fuck. There. Right fucking there.”

He let out a sexy-as-hell grunt, snapping his hips forward, nailing my prostate with deadly accuracy.

I’d never felt anything like it before. Pleasure spread from my ass to the rest of my body, pinging between my cock and my hole as he continued to fuck and stroke me.

I was a mess, completely lost to the sensations, as my body tightened.

“Fuck,” he ground out, speeding up the slightest bit. “I’m close. Can you come like this?”

“I think so,” I panted.

He grunted against my neck, his hand on my cock speeding up as he slung into me.

I was shaking under him, my body so tight, so ready. I was nearly there; I just needed a little bit more.

“I love you.”

His words sent me into a spiral of pleasure, my orgasm hitting hard and fast, and I shot between our bodies.

He grunted against my skin, humping into me a few more times. Then he was coming too, filling me with his release.

I hadn't realized how hot that would be, and my cock gave another little spurt as he coated my oversensitive insides.

We lay together, our breathing ragged and our bodies slick with sweat.

"I love you too," I whispered against his neck. He went rigid on top of me, most likely realizing what he'd said.

He relaxed and let go of my dick to hold me tighter.

I floated on a cloud of pleasure and contentment, basking in not only the sex but also the fact that Tyler loved me.

We didn't move until his cock had softened and slipped out of me. I wasn't ready to let go of him and rolled us so we were on our sides, still clinging to each other.

"Let me get something to clean you off with," he whispered against my neck.

Reluctantly, I let him go, my entire body oversensitive and tingling.

I'd never felt anything like that before, and I took stock of my body as he headed into my bathroom. My ass was sore now that the haze of pleasure had faded, and my legs felt stretched from how I'd been holding them.

He came back a moment later, a washcloth in his hands. He sat on the bed next to me, gently wiped me clean, then tossed the cloth aside.

"Come here," I said roughly.

He came to me, snuggling right into my side so I could hold him close.

"I didn't mean for it to come out," he said softly.

"I know. But I'm glad it did."

"You are?"

“Yeah.” I kissed his temple and rubbed my hand over his damp back. “I love you, Tyler... I’ve never said that to anyone before. No one other than my brothers.”

“I love you too, Gage.” He turned his face until it was pressing into my skin. “So much.”

I held him tighter as a wave of possessive happiness went through me.

I knew he’d been in love before, but that didn’t bother me. The past didn’t matter.

“Was that good?” he asked, his voice small and muffled against my skin.

“Amazing. So amazing,” I assured him, kissing his hair. “I can’t wait to do it again.”

“Did I hurt you?”

“Not too bad. Less than I expected.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Shhh, none of that. It hurt because it was new. You did everything right.”

“So are you going to fuck me next time?” He turned his face and looked up at me.

“If you want me to.”

“I want you to.”

He smiled shyly, looking so endearing I had to kiss him.

“I don’t want to move.”

“Then don’t.” I kissed his temple again. “I don’t want to move either.”

“I’m going to tell my family about us.”

“You are?” I asked.

“Yeah. There’s no point hiding it now. The only reason I was hesitant was that I didn’t want to announce I was with a man, just to have to tell them it was over. Now that this is real, that we’re together, there’s no reason to keep it quiet.”

“As long as you’re doing it because you want to.”

“I do. I don’t want to hide this, hide you.”

I smiled, absurdly pleased at his words. Tyler had accepted all of me from day one. He was one of the only people who’d ever seen all of me, and he not only accepted me, but he loved me as well despite my flaws and issues.

He was it for me.

“It’s kind of crazy to think you moved in to fix up my house, and now we’re boyfriends.”

“What are we going to do when the work is done?” he asked in a small voice.

“What do you mean?”

“I only have about three weeks worth of full-time work to do. There’s still all the outside stuff, but it’s not the right season for a lot of that work.”

I paused. I’d known there was a timeline on our agreement, but I hadn’t thought it would be so soon.

“What do you want to do?” I asked.

“I... I guess I can move back in with my parents.”

That didn’t sit right with me. He’d done so much to move forward, to get back on his feet. A setback like that would be hard on him.

Plus, there was the selfish part of me that liked what we had. I *liked* having him in my house, seeing him every day, sharing meals, and spending our downtime together. The thought of only getting to see him for a few hours a day and on the weekends made me feel slightly panicked.

“You could, or you could stay here.”

“What?” He lifted his head. “I don’t want to live off your charity.”

“It wouldn’t be charity.” I wrapped my arms around him and tugged him back down on my chest. “I know I haven’t

paid you a lot, but we could go over your budget and see what you could afford for rent.”

“But without a job, it won’t be enough.”

“I don’t care how much it is. And it’s not like you’ll be without work forever.”

“I don’t want to be a burden. I’m always a burden.”

“Ty, babe. You’re never a burden. Having you here makes me happy. Seeing you every day, sharing my life with you, that’s what I want. I don’t want you to leave.”

“I don’t want to go either.” He sighed. “But I feel like I’m taking advantage of you.”

“I’m in a place where I can maintain the house alone. Having you here doesn’t put any extra financial burdens on me other than a slight increase in my utilities and a higher grocery bill. Whatever you’ll pay in rent will offset those costs. I don’t want to make money off having you here. That’s not what a partnership is.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. And once you get steady work again, we can revisit things, adjust them if that will make you feel better.” I pressed a kiss against his temple. “This isn’t a handout. It’s a hand-up. And I want you to stay, rent or no rent. I love you, and I want to share my life with you.”

He rolled on top of me, chest to chest, as he looked into my eyes, his expression searching.

I lay passively beneath him, hoping he’d find whatever he was looking for in my eyes.

“Okay. I want to stay too.”

I beamed at him, my heart and body singing with elation. His answering smile was just as bright.

“I love you,” he whispered.

“I love you too.”

I pressed my lips to his in a soft kiss.

Tyler was mine, and I was his, and the knowledge that he felt the same made me feel ten feet tall.

Things wouldn't be easy, but they would be worth it to keep the man I loved by my side.

Chapter 16

Tyler

I stared into my plate, my thoughts a million miles away, while Marianne and Trevor bantered back and forth about something.

Tonight was the night I was going to tell my family about Gage.

I'd originally planned to tell my parents and brother separately, but Marianne had gotten a promotion at work and invited everyone over for Sunday dinner to celebrate.

I'd talked to her about my plan before I'd come, not wanting to take the spotlight off her and her accomplishments. She'd assured me she had no problem with it and agreed it was the ideal time as well.

Now dinner was almost over. We'd had an amazing meal Trevor had ordered from a local deli, topped off with a cake our mother had baked and brought over.

Now we were all sitting around chatting and sipping tea. My niece and nephew were getting bored. It was now or never.

"Um, I have a bit of an announcement as well."

Two sets of eyes turned to me. Marianne and Lucy were sitting closest to me. The others kept on chatting, while Tate checked out his phone in the most unsubtle way possible.

"Honey, Ty has something he wants to say," Marianna said loudly, interrupting Trevor in the middle of whatever he and our father had been talking about.

Trevor turned to me, as did our parents. The only person not looking at me was Tate, and that was fine. He was fourteen. He had better things to worry about than his uncle's random announcement.

I opened my mouth, then closed it without saying a word.

"Tyler?" our mother prompted.

My eyes darted over to Marianne, who gave me an encouraging smile.

“Um. I’ve started dating someone,” I blurted out, then cleared my throat.

“That’s wonderful!” Mom beamed, clapping her hands. “We were worried you’d never find someone.”

“It hasn’t even been a year since the divorce was finalized.”

“Yes, but if Chrissy could move on, why couldn’t you? Besides, it’s about time you settled down with a nice girl. Maybe give me a few more grandbabies.”

“Mom.” Trevor rolled his eyes. “He said he was dating someone, not that he was engaged.”

“A mother can hope.” She turned her attention to our father. “Isn’t this good news?”

“Wonderful news, son,” Dad said gruffly.

“So when do we meet her? What’s her name? What does she do?” Mom asked.

I sat there, my throat as dry as the Sahara.

A warm hand covered mine where it rested on my lap, and I glanced over at Marianne. She squeezed my hand, her expression understanding and encouraging.

I turned back to Trevor and my parents. “Um, his name is Gage.”

“The fuck?” Trevor spit out.

“Language,” Marianne chided, turning to my brother.

“Wait, what?” Tate’s head shot up.

“Really?” Lucy exclaimed, a big smile on her face.

Dad stared at me, his face blank and his eyes unreadable.

“But... how...” Mom clutched at the neckline of her blouse. “What?”

I swallowed the lump in my throat.

“His name is Gage. He’s a financial advisor. And Trev introduced us,” I added, hoping it would distract Mom for a moment so I could collect myself.

“You’re gay?” Tate asked.

“Tate!” Marianne chided.

“He was married to a girl, dumbass. He’s obviously bi or pan.” Lucy punched her brother in the shoulder.

“Ow! Mom!”

“Lucy, don’t hit your brother.”

“She called me a dumbass!” Tate glared at his sister.

“Because you are one!” Lucy shot back.

“You did this?” Mom turned on Trevor.

“I didn’t do anything!” Trevor gaped at me, then raised his hands in a show of surrender. “I just hooked him up with some under-the-table work.”

“You *work* for him?” Mom whipped her head back to me.

“I’m fixing up his house.”

The chaos around my announcement wasn’t unexpected. I’d hoped that maybe they’d take it without the theatrics, but that wasn’t my family.

“But you’re... you’ve never...” Mom ran out of steam and sat there staring at me.

“Dad?” I asked, fear lancing my heart.

Mom was dramatic, and my announcement had taken her by surprise. I knew she needed a moment to process and that her reaction now wasn’t indicative of her actual feelings on the situation.

Dad was different. He was a go-with-the-flow kind of person. He had to be to balance out our slightly high-strung mother. The fact that he was sitting there in silence, staring at me like I was a stranger, made me fear the worst.

“It’s serious with this man?” he asked, breaking the silence.

“It is.” I swallowed again. “I love him.”

“Awwww.” Lucy sighed, her expression soft as she put her hands over her heart. “That’s so romantic.”

Tate glanced around the table, then looked back at me. “So does that mean he’d be my uncle too if you got married?”

“Obviously. How are you so stupid?” Lucy glowered at her brother.

“Lucy, don’t call your brother stupid,” Marianne said automatically.

Tate smirked at his sister, then looked down at his lap again, apparently done with the conversation.

“How long have you been gay?” Mom asked.

“I’m not gay. I’m not sure what I am. But I’m with Gage. I love him,” I repeated.

“I’m happy for you, son. You’ll have to bring him around the house so we can meet him.”

Relief washed over me at my father’s words.

“But…” Mom was still staring at me.

“I know this is a shock. It was to me too. But he’s who I’m with. I hope you can accept that.”

“Of course I can,” she huffed out, her expression changing on a dime. “You just surprised me. And you can always adopt.”

“Mom,” I groaned.

“Let the boy be.” Dad patted her hand. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

“You and Gage?” Trevor asked, his expression unreadable.

“Yeah.” I held his gaze.

“Huh. I wonder what he sees in you.”

“Trevor!” Marianne shot him an exasperated look.

I grinned. That was the kind of answer I’d expected from him. It was the perfect brother answer.

“What? Have you met Gage? He’s a catch!” Trevor turned to his wife.

“And so’s our Tyler,” Mom cut in. “Be nice to your brother.”

Tate and Lucy snickered as Trevor grinned at me.

“I’m happy for you,” he said, serious now. “You’ve been happier, more settled the last few months. I thought it was because you were getting used to being single, but it was him, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah. He makes me happy. Happier than I’ve ever been.”

“Awwww.” Lucy sighed.

“Gag.” Tate looked back at his phone.

“Tate!” Trevor and Marianne said in unison.

“It’s fine,” I said. I knew he’d been reacting to me being cheesy and not because I was talking about a man.

“If he makes you happy, then we’re happy for you.” Mom smiled at me, holding Dad’s hand. “And your father is right. We’d love to have you both over for dinner soon.”

“Thanks. I’ll let him know.” My entire body relaxed at her words and acceptance.

“Wait, how were you not surprised?” Trevor asked Marianne.

“I already knew.” She winked at me.

“Wow, whatever happened to the bro code?”

“Pretty sure not telling you was bro code. I know you, ass —, Trev,” I corrected quickly. “You wouldn’t have let me live it down if I’d talked to you about falling for a guy.”

“True. But you have to tell me first if you guys move in together.”

“About that—”

“For fuck’s sake.” He threw up his hands.

“Language!” Marianne and Mom said together.

Lucy and Tate laughed.

“I just meant I should have seen that one coming.” He pointed at me. “Then you have to tell me first if you get engaged.”

Everyone sobered up and stared at me.

“Whoa, it’s been, like, a month. We’re so not there yet,” I protested

“Yet?” Lucy perked up.

“I…” I glanced at Marianne for help.

“How about we all move to the living room. Kids, you can be excused if you want.”

“Congrats, Uncle Ty.” Tate jumped up, his eyes on his phone as he headed out of the dining room.

“Yeah, congrats, Uncle Ty.” Lucy stood and kissed my cheek. “I’m happy you found someone.”

“Thanks, kiddo.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m almost thirteen!”

“You’ll always be kiddo to me.” I grinned at her exasperated expression.

“Does anyone want more tea?” Marianne asked as Lucy hurried after her brother.

I pushed back my chair, the adrenaline from the last few minutes slowly leaving my body as I finally relaxed.

I’d told them, and the world hadn’t imploded. I hadn’t expected them to be homophobic or cruel, but a part of me had worried that they might have trouble accepting it.

Now that everything was out in the open, I felt more settled and calmer than I had in a long time. I hadn’t realized just how much of a toll keeping such a huge secret from the people I loved had taken on me.

Gage was my future. I loved him, and I knew they would too.

••••

“Hey, how did it go?” Gage lowered his Kindle as I came into the living room.

“Good. They took it well.”

“I’m glad. I know how stressed you were.”

He closed his Kindle and put it on the coffee table.

“I hate being the center of attention, but it’s done. Mom and Dad invited us over for dinner this weekend, and Trevor and Marianne want to meet us for drinks this week.”

“Really?”

I sat on the couch next to him. “Yeah, of course. Why wouldn’t they?”

“I just thought... I mean...”

“I know you don’t talk to your family. But mine is different. If you’re with me, you’re one of us.”

“I... I’ve never had that before. I mean, Doc’s family adopted me as one of theirs, but that was different. I was a kid with nowhere to go. Not a grown-ass man.”

“Yeah, but you’re my grown-ass man.”

He chuckled at my attempt at humor. “I was thinking we should have the guys over at some point, maybe on Friday? I’ll have to check with Luke to see what his schedule is like. But I want you to meet them.”

“All of them at once?”

“They’re all bark, no bite.” He grinned. “We can get a bit crazy, but I’m sure Tanner will be able to come so you’ll have another nonmilitary person there.”

“That sounds good.”

It meant a lot to me that Gage wanted to introduce me to his friends. I knew they were his family, and while I was a bit nervous, I was looking forward to it.

Gage leaned forward, but before his lips could touch mine, his phone pinged in his pocket.

“What was that?”

“An email.” He tugged his phone out of his jeans and unlocked it, a puzzled look on his face.

“What?” I asked when his face fell, then went hard.

“Anthony’s calling a staff meeting tomorrow morning.”

“Your boss?”

“Yeah.” He typed something out with his thumbs, then tossed his phone onto the coffee table.

“Did he say what it was about?” I asked.

“No. Just that attendance was mandatory.”

“What time do you have to go in tomorrow?”

“An hour early.”

I glanced down at his phone, which hadn’t gone to sleep yet. It was nearly eleven.

“You should go to bed if you’re going to make it to the gym first.”

“Yeah.” He rubbed a hand through his hair. “I wanted spend some more time together.”

“I lost track of time after my parents left.”

“I didn’t mean it like that. I’m glad you had a good time. I was just hoping to stay up a bit longer.”

“I’m tired too. Maybe we could go to bed together?” I asked, hating how my stomach fluttered with nerves

We’d started sleeping together after that first night, but we didn’t do it all the time. It was usually after some sort of sexy times.

“Yeah?” He grinned, all traces of his bad mood gone. “I’d like that. My room?”

“It’s always your room.” I smiled as he stood, then tugged me up. “Your mattress is way more comfortable than mine.”

“Maybe we should start calling it our room.”

“You want to?”

The thought of moving into his room and sharing his space sent a thrill up my spine. We’d already agreed to continue living together, but doing it in separate rooms hadn’t felt right to me.

“I do.” He pecked a quick kiss against my lips. “Would you like that?”

“Yeah.” My cheeks heated as I beamed at him. I was happy, ridiculously so, and I couldn’t hide it.

Gage slipped his hand into mine, lacing our fingers together. “Maybe we can take a shower together before we go to bed?”

“Hmmm, I think I can get behind that.” The last time we’d showered together played in my mind. Gage had stroked us off as we’d stood under the spray, kissing me like he’d never wanted to let me go.

I was definitely down for a repeat tonight.

Chapter 17

Gage

A part of me had been hoping that Anthony would keep his mouth shut about seeing me with Tyler at the open house, but I'd known that was only wishful thinking when I ran into Jon in the parking lot.

Jon was one of the few coworkers I had any sort of relationship with. He was part of the group that would sometimes go out and grab a drink together after work.

Normally he would have greeted me, made a few comments about the stupidity of early morning meetings, and come to the break room to get a coffee.

This morning, we pulled into the parking lot one after the other, and I was just getting out of my car as he was locking his.

He looked at me over the roof of his car, his eyes unreadable and his demeanor tense.

No friendly smile, no banter, just him staring at me like he had no idea who I was.

"Hey," I greeted lamely, trying to break the awkward silence.

"Hey," he grunted, his voice and body language hostile.

Instead of prolonging the moment, I ducked my head and pulled open the door of my car, pretending to look for something.

Great. I'd already figured things would be awkward, but that had been downright uncomfortable.

Jon was gone when I stood up. I closed the car door, locked it, then headed into the bank. I dropped my stuff off in my office and walked into the break room to refill my coffee.

"Morning," Angela, one of the tellers, greeted me.

About half the staff was mingling around the counter, checking out whatever goodies had been brought in for the meeting.

“Morning.” I went to the coffee machine first and filled my cup. “Any idea what this is about?” I asked when she came to stand next to me.

“No clue. But there are muffins.”

“Uh-oh.” I grimaced and dumped sugar into my cup.

“My thoughts exactly.” She sipped her coffee.

The last time the bank had provided muffins for us during a meeting, it had been to soften the blow that we were no longer allowed to claim overtime unless it was pre-approved by management.

“I heard there was an attempted robbery,” Clara, another teller, walked over, a chocolate chip muffin in one hand and a coffee in the other.

“What?” We both turned to her.

“Lachlan told me someone tried to steal money out of the safe,” she whispered.

“No shit,” Matt, another coworker, piped up, a muffin in each hand.

“Save some for the rest of us, Matt,” Jon grumbled from where he was standing at the counter.

Matt flushed.

“You can have mine.” I winked at him, hoping to defuse the situation.

I wasn’t a big fan of muffins, especially after a workout. They were basically like eating cake, and they didn’t mix well with the protein shake I’d already guzzled down.

“Does your boyfriend know you’re sharing muffins with other men?” Jon shot back.

Matt dropped his eyes, his cheeks red.

Matt was gay, and he was open about his sexuality. As far as I knew, Jon had never had an issue with him, so this behavior really was out of left field.

“What the hell, Jon?” I snapped. “Why do you care who eats what? It’s a muffin. And don’t talk about my boyfriend. Not if you’re being an asshole about it for no reason.”

Everyone in the break room was staring at us. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Angela wrap her arm around Matt and tug him closer to her, her chin lifted as she stared Jon down.

“No reason?” he burst out.

“Yeah, no reason. What the hell is your problem?”

“Maybe the fact that you lied to me for years!”

“I never lied to you.”

“You kept going out with us, pretending to pick up women. What was that about? Were you trying to get with us? That your way of trying to turn the straight guys?”

My mouth fell open as rage filled me. The adrenaline drop was so quick my hands started shaking, and I had to put my coffee down to make sure I didn’t spill it.

“First of all, my sexuality is none of your damn business. And newsflash, asshole. People can be attracted to more than one gender.” I took a deep breath.

“Sure,” he scoffed.

“And furthermore, you’re not my type. None of you are my type, so no. I wasn’t going out with you to try and trick you into going gay or whatever the fuck you’re thinking.”

“Like I’m going to fucking believe that—”

“Jon, in my office. Now!”

Everyone turned toward the door in unison like a choreographed dance.

Suzy, our HR rep, stood in the doorway, glowering at Jon.

“But—”

“Now!” she repeated, staring him down until he looked away.

He glared at me, like it was my fault he’d been caught being an asshole, and slammed his coffee down on the counter.

Thankfully, he’d put the lid on his travel mug so only a few drops spilled out, but the entire move was wholly unnecessary and childish.

He stomped out of the breakroom, and my coworkers whirled around to stare at me.

“Anyone else have something to say to me?” I asked, my hands shaking.

I was in fight mode, and I was this close to throwing down with the next person who talked shit about Tyler or me, consequences be damned.

On cue, everyone shook their heads and went back to whatever they were doing before the little scene broke out.

“Thanks,” Matt said softly.

“He was being an asshole.” I took a deep breath, trying to cleanse the last of my anger. “I’m sorry you got caught in the crosshairs there.”

“Not the first time he’s said shit about me.” Matt shrugged and put one of the muffins down on the table.

“Don’t listen to that asshole. If you want a muffin, have the muffin. No one else cares,” Angela said.

Matt was a bit on the bigger side, and I knew he was self-conscious about his weight. I hated that Jon had made him feel bad about himself for wanting a snack.

“She’s right. You do you, man. It’s no one’s business what you eat.”

Matt flushed and picked up the second muffin, shooting us both grateful looks.

“Come on, let’s head inside.” Angela picked up her coffee and gave Matt an encouraging smile.

They headed out of the breakroom, my faith in my coworkers renewed.

Someone cleared their throat behind me. “Gage?”

I turned and found Jerome, another one of the guys I would occasionally go out with, standing behind me.

“Yeah?” A wave of dread washed over me. I didn’t have it in me to go through that again.

“I just wanted to let you know Jon doesn’t speak for all of us.”

“Thanks, man. That means a lot.”

“We should head in,” Clara spoke up when the silence stretched for a few beats.

I glanced up at the clock on the wall. She was right. The meeting was about to start.

We all picked up our drinks and snacks and filed out of the breakroom.

I didn’t miss how Jerome made a point to sit next to me, and Clara quickly sat in the seat on my other side.

Most of my coworkers were giving me looks, trying to be covert as they kept sliding their gazes back to me. I ignored them as best I could.

I understood their curiosity. Between the news of my same-sex relationship and Jon’s outburst, there was a lot to talk about.

Anthony strode into the room, a tight look on his face.

The meeting lasted for over an hour. It seemed that Kris, one of our security guards, had tried to take money out of the safe. He’d stolen several people’s keycards and cloned them to gain access to the safe room but had been caught on camera.

He’d been arrested, and the rest of us had to sit through a lecture on the responsibility of keeping our cards safe at all times and a breakdown of the new security measures.

It wasn't exactly a shock to me, hearing that Kris had been the culprit. He'd never been particularly friendly, and he took his job a little too seriously, staring customers down and marching around like he was guarding Buckingham Palace and not a small bank in the middle of the city.

I listened with one ear as Anthony droned on and on about the new security measures. I should pay closer attention, but Anthony had a tendency to repeat himself when he was worked up, and it was the third time he'd gone over the rules.

Instead, I sipped my coffee and thought about the confrontation with Jon. I'd never realized he was such an asshole and homophobic at that. I felt bad that Matt had been dragged into the drama, but I wasn't upset that Jon had shown his true colors. Now I knew to avoid him at all costs.

It didn't look like anyone else had an issue with my big revelation other than being curious, and I hoped that was the last of the drama.

No one would have blinked twice if I was dating a woman, but because we were both men, it was an issue.

That was something I'd have to get used to. I wasn't straight, not anymore, but I'd lived as a straight man for thirty-odd years. I'd seen the shit my brothers had had to put with, had witnessed more than one moment when they'd had to defend themselves against some asshole who thought that just because a guy liked dick, that meant he liked everyone with a dick.

Seeing it and experiencing it were two different things, and even though I tried to brush it off, I was on edge the entire day, waiting for someone else to come at me or say something that would set me off.

By the time my workday was over, I was so agitated I couldn't sit still. I needed to talk to someone, and I pulled out my phone and pulled up Sarge's contact info.

Gage: are you done for the day?

Sarge: just finished. You okay?

Gage: something happened today.

Sarge: want me to come to your place?

Gage: I'll meet you at yours.

Sarge: give me 30, and I'll head home.

Gage: k. see you then.

I tucked my phone back into my pocket and went through my nightly routine of shutting down my office.

Sarge lived about twenty minutes from my work when it wasn't rush hour. Traffic was especially bad today, and it was almost an hour before I pulled into his driveway.

I knew it would take him a while longer to get here, so I shot Tyler a text, telling him I was going to be late and to go ahead and eat without me.

He asked if I was going to grab dinner or if he should put a plate in the oven for me.

That calmed some of my nerves, and I was smiling like a fool at my phone as I answered I'd love it if he kept a plate for me.

With that done, I climbed out of my car, separated Sarge's key from the others on my ring, and headed into his house.

We all had keys to each other's places, and he'd expect me to wait for him inside rather than sit in my car staring at the place.

His house was small, nearly as sparse as mine, but still felt lived in.

Sarge was a minimalist, partly because of his time in the military but also because he didn't like clutter. He'd grown up with a hoarder for a father, and messiness made his already high anxiety spike.

I sat on the couch in his living room and pulled up the Kindle app on my phone so I could read while I waited.

I had no idea how much time had passed when the front door opened. Sarge came into the living room, stripped off his suit jacket, then tossed it and his briefcase onto the table in the adjacent dining room.

“Hey,” I greeted

“You okay?” He tugged his tie loose with one hand as he sat on the other end of the couch.

“Yes and no.”

“What’s going on?” Sarge asked, his handsome features patient.

“I started seeing someone,” I said.

Shit, I’d never told Sarge about Tyler.

“Oh?” He raised his eyebrows.

“And it’s a guy.”

“Oh... That’s unexpected.”

“Tell me about it.” I chuckled mirthlessly. “It took me by surprise too.”

“I’m happy for you,” he said simply. “But what happened? You look like you’re about to jump out of your skin.”

There he went, being incredibly insightful and reading me like a book.

Doc might have been my person, the one I went to when I needed help or was feeling emotionally needy, and Luke and I had a more brotherly relationship where we ribbed each other but would throw down in an instant if the other was in trouble. My relationship with Sarge was different. Maybe it had to do with the fact that his rank had made it impossible for him to be one of the guys, how he’d been in charge of us, and because of that, he’d had to step into a fatherly role, despite only being seven years older than me and nearly the same age as Doc.

Sarge had always been able to calm me down. He’d spent many nights sitting up with me, listening to me ramble as I’d dumped all my fears and issues on him.

And other nights we’d sit in silence for hours when things had gotten to be too much. When I’d been scared and missing home and trying to deal with what I’d seen and done while in theater.

He was a rock for all of us. I just wished he'd lean on us the way we leaned on him. Sarge was a giver, so much so it was to his own detriment. He never asked for anything, never took anything in return, and I was worried about what would happen when he had nothing left to give.

Hopefully, he let us help him the way he'd done for us for the past fifteen years.

"I got outed at work, and there was an incident this morning that I just can't shake." I sighed and ran a hand through my hair, trying to dispel some of my excess energy.

"Tell me what happened," he repeated patiently.

"My boss saw me and Tyler, that's my boyfriend, at an open house, and he told everyone at work about me being with a man."

"That's highly unethical."

"Yeah, but that's the bank for you. News travels fast, and gossip takes on a life of its own if it's juicy enough."

"And I'm guessing the news of your relationship made for good gossip fodder?"

"Yup. I expected it. But one of my coworkers, someone I actually considered a friend, turned on me. Started talking shit about how I'd lied to him by not telling him I was gay when I'm not. And he even went after one of our other coworkers who *is* gay, dragging him into the drama to talk shit about Tyler and me."

"Were you alone when this happened?"

"No. It was in the breakroom before a meeting. HR was there and caught the tail end and called Jon into her office. So it was dealt with. But still..."

"It's the first time you've dealt with any sort of confrontation about your personal life," he said.

"Yeah. I figured I'd be able to take it in stride. It's not like I care what that asshole thinks of me, and no one else seems to have an issue. A few people even came to me to explicitly tell

me they supported me and *didn't* have an issue with me being... whatever I am.”

“That’s almost as hard as the opposite, isn’t it?” Sarge gave me a sad smile.

“Yeah. I mean, I appreciated the support, especially after that scene with Jon. But it still felt weird for everyone to be talking about my relationship, making a point to tell me they didn’t care. If I was dating a woman, this wouldn’t be an issue. No one would have cared.”

“You’re a private person, Gage. You’ve always kept your personal life close to your chest. But you’ve also never lived a life that invited this level of scrutiny.”

“No, I haven’t. I thought it was bad enough when people find out about my time in and start asking stupid questions or get all horned up, wanting to hear about my kill list or whatever other shit they think is awesome. That I can deal with, but this... it’s been nine hours, and I’m still so edgy I feel like I’m vibrating.”

“The first time someone confronted me about being gay, I froze. I let them verbally abuse me. I felt like shit after, weak, and I blamed myself for years. That started a pattern of being extra cautious about making sure it never happened again and not stirring shit up when people eventually did find out and had issues.”

I processed what he’d just said.

I’d known he wasn’t one for confrontation, which most people found ironic, considering he’d made the military his career, but I hadn’t realized it had been that bad.

“Back then, talking back could get you beaten or killed. It still can, but things are different now. You’ve never been one to let people attack you or someone you care about.”

“No, and I didn’t let him. I put him in his place.”

“That’s good. And it sounds like you’re in a good environment. But you’re worried about what will happen if your man is with you the next time or if he’s alone, right?”

I blew out a breath. “Yeah.”

I hadn’t realized it until then, but he was right.

I was a big guy, I was strong, and I could be intimidating when I wanted to be. Tyler was different. Physically he could hold his own, but he was a gentle soul, and the thought of someone hurting him because of me, because he’d fallen in love with me, was weighing on me.

“I wish I could tell you it doesn’t happen. That you won’t get looks being out together. That you won’t have to deal with hate speech or harassment. The truth is that most people don’t care about who someone else chooses to love, but the ones who do are loud and belligerent about it.”

“I guess I never realized just how bad it can be.”

“I’ve dealt with this shit since I was a kid, when I realized I was gay, back in the early nineties. While the world around us is getting better, it never stops hurting. The fear never completely goes away. But you can use it to make yourself stronger. Use your training to protect yourself.”

“What do you mean?”

I couldn’t see Sarge telling me to use the hand-to-hand combat skills I’d learned while in the army to beat up people who talked shit about me, not unless they threw the first punch. So what did he mean?

“We’re trained to be observant, to see everything in a particular situation. That will serve you well, keep you prepared to deal with any shit you might have to deal with.”

“That’s true.” I nodded slowly.

“The next step is to learn how to let it go once the situation is over. It takes time and, unfortunately, practice, but you’ll learn that holding on to that anger is only hurting yourself. You can’t control what others will do or say, but you can control how you react. Don’t let that asshole ruin your night. Don’t internalize his issues and take them into yourself. You know there’s nothing wrong with your relationship, so don’t let him convince you that there is.”

I blinked at Sarge.

He wasn't one to talk, preferring to blend into the background when he wasn't leading troops, but he always had incredible insight when he did speak up.

"You're right. I can't let him or people like him drag me down. And I can't control what's going to happen in the future. All I can do is prepare for it and let it go so it doesn't poison what I have."

Sarge nodded, his eyes shining with pride.

That look made me feel like I was that eighteen-year-old kid again, desperate for a father figure and looking up to Sarge like he'd hung the moon.

"Thanks, Sarge. For everything."

He nodded, understanding that I wasn't just talking about tonight.

"I was thinking of having everyone over on Friday, depending on Luke's schedule, to meet Tyler. Think you can make it?"

"I wouldn't miss it." He smiled, standing as I pushed up off the couch.

"I should head out," I said reluctantly.

"You've got a man to get home to," he said knowingly.

"That I do." I held out my arms and stepped closer to him.

He met me halfway and pulled me into a hug, squeezing me tight, then letting me go.

"I'm happy for you. It's about time you found someone you wanted to spend more than a night with."

"I never thought it would happen. I can't explain it. We just... fit."

Sarge smiled sadly.

He was even worse than Luke was when it came to relationships. Luke fucked around and hooked up, but he didn't date. He'd never had a boyfriend that I knew of, and he

didn't even do fuck buddies. He was a one-and-done kind of guy.

Sarge didn't hook up anymore, and as far as I knew, he hadn't had a boyfriend in years. I had no idea if he was celibate, but I knew he didn't handle being around strangers well, so meeting guys was hard for him.

"Friday?" I was reluctant to leave him alone but anxious to get home to Tyler.

"Friday," he confirmed. "Text me the time, and I'll be there."

We said another quick good-bye, then I headed to my car and drove home so I could spend the evening with my man.

Chapter 18

Tyler

Gage recounted the incident at work as he ate his dinner.

“Shit... I’m sorry you had to deal with that.”

He waved his hand dismissively as he shoveled another bite of food into his mouth, pausing his talking as he chewed and swallowed.

“It’s not your fault,” he said. “And HR dealt with it, so it’s not a big deal.”

I wanted to argue that it was obviously a big deal if he’d had to go see his old sergeant after.

I was glad he’d had someone to talk to, but a part of me was worried about the next time it happened because I knew it would.

I didn’t like being the reason Gage had to deal with shit talk, even if he was able to handle it. I also wasn’t looking forward to when it happened to me because I wasn’t nearly as good at handling conflict as he was.

“Sarge told me it’s okay to get mad in the moment, to do what I have to do to diffuse or deal with a situation, but then I needed to let it go. That internalizing other people’s prejudice would eat me alive.”

“That makes sense. And it’s good advice.” I nodded and mulled that around in my head.

“It is. He’s dealt with this kind of shit for almost as long as I’ve been alive. I hate that it’s still an issue, that it’s ever been an issue. But it is, and I’d rather deal with it constructively than let assholes win by carrying it around.”

“I hope I can remember that when it happens to me.” I sighed.

“You will. And if you can’t, then I’ll be here to remind you.” He reached across the table, and I took his hand, lacing

our fingers together. “And you can do the same for me when I forget.”

“Deal.”

He squeezed my hand, then let it go.

I waited, my mind a million miles away as he ate the rest of the meal I’d put aside for him.

I’d been thinking about being with him all day, to the point where I’d had to put on some music while I’d been working on the kitchen bedroom to distract myself from my thoughts so I didn’t screw up or hurt myself.

I wanted him, and I was ready for him to fuck me. I just needed the courage to tell him so.

He finished eating and took his plate into the kitchen. I’d cleaned up while I’d been waiting for him to come home, so all he had to do was put his dishes in the dishwasher.

When he was done, we went into the living room, and I sat on the couch.

Gage surprised me by lying down and putting his head on my lap, his feet hanging over the edge.

I tangled my fingers in his soft hair, smiling down at him fondly when he closed his eyes and let out a happy sigh.

The tension left his body as I played with his hair, my eyes tracing down his strong body.

It still amazed me that this gorgeous, wonderful man loved me. It wasn’t even just his physical appearance. Outwardly, he was beautiful, but it was who he was on the inside that I’d fallen in love with: his unfailing faith in me, the care and compassion he showed to those he loved. How he built me up while letting me do the same for him, how he’d accepted all of me with no questions asked.

“That feels nice,” he whispered when I stroked his scalp, giving him a mini massage.

“It does,” I answered softly.

He opened his eyes and looked up at me, his expression soft and full of affection.

I'd never get tired of that look.

"You seem distracted."

"Just thinking." I carded my fingers through his hair.

"What about?"

"Um..." I hated that I was so bad at asking for what I wanted. It wasn't like I thought Gage would say no or be an ass about it. The words were just hard for me to get out.

"What is it, babe?"

"Will you fuck me tonight?" I asked in a rush.

My hands stilled in his hair as his eyes darkened and his cheeks flushed pink.

I waited, holding my breath and staying completely still. He slowly sat up and turned his body toward me.

"Yeah, I will," he said, his voice a husky purr. "If you want me to."

"I do."

He leaned in and kissed me, his lips soft and teasing.

I sighed and leaned into the kiss, scooting closer so our bodies were pressed together on the couch.

"Let's go upstairs," he said against my lips.

"Yeah."

As much as I wanted him, I didn't want my first time to be a quickie on the couch.

He swung his body around and stood, then helped me up.

Holding my hand, he led me out of the living room and up the stairs. Wordlessly, he brought me into our room and closed the door behind us.

"I took a shower while I was waiting for you," I said shyly.

“Yeah?” He raked his gaze up and down my frame, his nostrils flaring. “Too bad I missed it. I like you wet.”

I shuddered at both his words and his tone.

He pressed a kiss against my lips. “Take your socks and shoes off and go lie on our bed.”

His tone was commanding while still being gentle. It pushed all my buttons, and I stepped back to obey.

When I was lying on the bed, he came to the edge of the mattress and looked down at me.

“You’re so beautiful,” he murmured. He stripped off his dress shirt, his fingers working the buttons with practiced ease.

He’d taken off his tie when he’d come home but hadn’t bothered to change out of his dress shirt or slacks. I wasn’t complaining because I loved seeing him in business wear.

I grabbed the hem of my T-shirt, but he shook his head, tossing his shirt on the floor.

“I want to undress you.”

I dropped my hands, a shiver of anticipation rushing up my spine. I loved it when he took charge. It made me feel cared for, loved.

He opened his belt, his eyes falling to my chest, then my cock, which thickened in response and tented my sweats.

“Mmmmm,” he rumbled, licking his lips. “So fucking sexy.”

I shuddered, fisting the comforter to stop myself from stroking my dick. It was hard and aching. Wetness gathered at the tip, tickling the sensitive head as it rubbed against my boxers.

Gage yanked his belt free of the loops, dropped the leather on the floor, then climbed over me.

He settled his big body over mine, pressing me into the mattress. I wrapped my arms around him, holding him close.

Our lips met in a hard kiss, our tongues tangling together as we became almost frantic.

Gage pulled away from my lips and kissed his way down my neck, tugging the neckline of my shirt down so he could suck a hickey into my skin just under my collarbone.

“Fuck,” I moaned, arching into him.

He gripped the hem of my shirt and shoved it up. I had to wiggle a bit and lift my shoulders so he could get it off. Then he was on me again. Kissing and sucking on my chest, then down my stomach, across the waistband of my sweatpants.

“Fuck, Gage,” I moaned, tangling my fingers in his hair. He hooked his thumbs in my waistband and tugged my pants down.

I lifted my hips to help him, groaning as he sat up so he could strip them, and my boxers, right off.

He stared down at me with so much hunger and need it made my breath catch. No one had ever looked at me like that.

Pushing my knees apart, he settled between my legs and bent down, sucking the head of my dick into his mouth.

“Fuck!” I slid one hand through his hair, needing that extra contact, and gripped the comforter with the other.

Gage didn't start slow or soft. Instead, he sucked me right down until I was pressing down his throat. He'd gotten better at taking my length, and it never failed to send me into a spiral of pure bliss when he swallowed around my head, his throat flexing and squeezing me in the most perfect way.

He sucked me for what felt like forever, and I sank into the pleasure, riding on the haze until he kissed his way off my cock.

“Spread your legs for me,” he said softly, looking up at me from between my knees.

I did as he asked, then gasped as he slid his hands over my knees, cupping the backs of them to push my legs even higher, spreading them wide.

I took them from him, holding myself open to him. I felt vulnerable, but not in a bad way. This was Gage, and I relaxed as he stared down at my hole, his eyes hungry and dark.

He pressed his tongue against my entrance, flicking it lightly.

“Holy fuck,” I panted as the most intense, amazing pleasure washed over me. It felt so different from his fingers. His hot breath ghosted over my skin, making me shiver at the added dimension of pleasure.

“Mmmmm,” Gage rumbled against my skin, pressing his tongue against me until it slipped inside, teasing my oversensitive walls.

“Jesus, fuck. Babe,” I babbled, unable to keep quiet as he rimmed me.

I’d assumed it felt good, considering how much he’d enjoyed it, but I’d had no idea it could feel like this.

Gage spread my cheeks with his hands, pressing his face against me as he pushed his tongue deeper, thrusting it inside me over and over again.

“Fuck, I’m gonna come if you keep that up,” I warned, my voice breathy and broken.

He gave me one last teasing lick, then sat up, a grin on his full lips. “Can’t have that.”

I chuckled, trying to bring my brain back to reality as my body settled a bit.

“Ready for more?” He rubbed one hand over my stomach.

“Yeah. Want it.”

He let out a little groan and crawled up my body so he could reach into the night table to grab the lube.

He slicked up his fingers, then tossed the bottle onto the bed next to me.

“There you go, just like that, babe,” he praised and slid one finger inside me. I was so ready he barely met any resistance.

He pumped that finger inside me a few times, stroking it against my prostate with each thrust.

My cock jumped between us, a thin stream of precum leaking out of the tip and pooling onto my stomach.

He slipped a second finger inside me, going slow as he stretched me past my limit.

“That’s it. Just like that. Bear down on me, babe.”

I did, breathing out as I forced my body to relax.

He kept his eyes on my face as he stretched me with two, then three fingers.

“Ready for me?” he asked when I pushed back on his hand, demanding more.

“Yeah. So ready.” I tried to quell the spark of fear that went through me.

I knew this would hurt, and as much as I wanted him, I wasn’t looking forward to that.

He gently pulled his fingers out of my body and wiped them on the comforter, then grabbed the lube and prepped himself.

I concentrated on my breathing, trying to will my body to stay relaxed.

“You want to stay like this or flip over?” he asked, holding the base of his cock with one hand.

“Like this.”

I wanted to see him the first time. We could experiment with positions later. Right now, I needed that extra connection.

He moved closer, leaning over me and holding his body up with one hand as he lined himself up with my hole.

A moment later, the broad head of his dick pressing against me.

I was loosened up from his teasing, but the moment he tried to breach me, my body locked up tight.

“Fuck,” I muttered, staring up at the ceiling as pain lanced through me.

Gage pulled back.

“No, keep going. I want it,” I protested, dropping my gaze to his.

“I will, but I’m not going to hurt you,” he said softly. “Let me try something.”

He rubbed the head of his cock over my hole, teasing it. The sparks of pleasure helped me relax, and I shifted so he slid inside me on the next pass.

This time I was able to bear down as he breached me, but it was a bit of a struggle.

“That’s it, sweetheart. Just like that. Bear down and let me in,” Gage purred. He let go of his cock and gripped mine.

He stroked me slowly, twisting at the head the way I liked as he pushed in a little bit more.

It hurt, and a feeling of fullness made me want to push him out. I wasn’t sure I liked it, not yet, but I pulled in a deep breath and concentrated on his hand as he stroked me.

“There you go, babe. So good. You feel so fucking good,” he gritted out and rocked his hips, pushing in a little bit at a time.

I breathed deeply, trying to ignore the stinging sensation as he tunneled deeper.

“There, that’s all of me.” He leaned down and pressed a kiss against my lips as he held still, giving me a chance to adjust.

“Fuck, that’s tight,” I muttered.

He chuckled. “You have no idea.”

“I think I do.” I wrapped my arms around him, needing to keep him close.

“Fuck, you feel good.” He pressed his face against my neck, his hot breath teasing my oversensitive skin. “Do you

want me to stop?”

“No. I just need a second.”

“Hook your legs around me,” he suggested, shifting his body around so he could still stroke me off as he lay over me.

I did as he said, and the angle changed, opening me up the slightest bit.

“Oh, that’s better,” I said with a sigh. My body relaxed, and the pain faded. “You can move.”

He did, carefully rocking his hips against me so he was only pulling out a few inches before he was sliding back in.

The slow pace and the sensation of finally having him inside me helped me relax until he was able to move faster, pushing in a bit deeper with each pass.

“Oh!” I gasped as the head of his dick slid over my prostate. “That’s good.”

He let out a huff that was half-amused, half-pleased and picked up the pace, stroking me in time with his thrusts.

The pleasure was unlike anything I’d experienced before, the twin sensations of being fucked and jerked off working in tandem until my entire body was tight as a drum, ready to snap.

“Fuck,” I gritted out, turning my head to kiss him.

Gage met me halfway, his kiss hungry and demanding as he owned my body.

One moment I was kissing him, floating on the pleasure, and the next I was coming with a cry, my body releasing as I shot over his fist, slicking our torsos.

Gage groaned against my lips, his pace stuttering. Then he was coming too, his release filling me in a way that was both filthy and intimate.

“Fuck.” He let go of my cock and collapsed on top of me, his body twitching slightly as he pressed kiss after kiss into my neck.

I lay under him, my mind blank, as pleasure continued to rock through me, prolonging my orgasm as I held him tight, my body wrapped around his.

After a few moments, Gage shifted and slipped out of me, the feeling of loss making me wince. Then he was rolling us over so we were on our sides, still holding each other.

“That was...”

“Yeah,” I agreed, also at a loss for words.

We held each other as our breathing slowed. After a moment, he kissed my neck and nuzzled my ear.

“Let me get a cloth,”

I let go of him reluctantly, rolling onto my back as he climbed off the bed and padded into the bathroom. I heard water running. Then a moment later, he came back with a cloth in one hand, his stomach shiny where he’d wiped himself down.

He sat on the edge of the mattress, his touch gentle as he cleaned me. He tossed the cloth aside, lay down next to me, and pulled me back into his arms.

“Did I hurt you?”

“Not too bad. Not once I got used to it,” I said honestly, nuzzling into his chest like a needy kitten.

“That was really hot,”

“It was.”

“I love you so fucking much.” He tightened his arms around me, his grip a little painful, but I sank into the embrace. “I don’t care what anyone says. You’re mine. What we have is real, so fucking real.”

“I love you too,” I said simply. I knew he wasn’t looking for a long answer. He was still processing what had happened at work.

“That’s it. I’m ordering a TV tonight. No more of this getting out of bed after sex bullshit. I want blanket cuddles.”

I chuckled against his skin. “No complaints here. You’ll just have to remember to bring your Kindle upstairs.”

He kissed the top of my head. “I can access my library on my phone if I forget.”

“Handy.”

He sighed. “We’re lying on the blankets, and I’m getting cold.”

“Yeah. Same.” I turned my head and pressed a kiss against his chest. “Want to go downstairs? I’ll grab my fuzzy blanket.”

“Yeah. Might as well. But I’m ordering that TV as soon as I get to my phone. You’ve turned me into a cuddle whore, and I must be satisfied.”

Laughing, we untangled ourselves.

“I don’t know. You seemed pretty satisfied a few minutes ago.”

“I was—am—but the cuddle whore in me demands more.”

“Good thing mine does too. Get dressed, and I’ll go grab the blanket.”

As I stood, he caught my arm and tugged me close for a kiss.

“I love you,” he whispered against my lips.

“Love you too.”

He gave me one last nipping kiss, nibbling on my lower lip, then let go of my arm.

I stood, a smile on my face as I tracked down my sweats and tee.

I was under no delusions that things would be easy. There would be assholes with opinions on our relationship, but it was like Gage had said. He was mine, and I was his. We’d deal with whatever came at us together, the way it was supposed to be.

He was my future, and I was so glad I’d found him. I might not have thought I’d be in a relationship with a man, but

now that I was, I couldn't imagine my life any other way.

••••

“Babe!”

I looked up from the trim I was painting. Gage was standing in the doorway to the kitchen bedroom, a big smile on his face.

It was just after five. I hadn't expected him home for at least a few hours.

“What's up?” I put my paintbrush into the paint tray.

“Look at this!” He waved the phone at me, coming into the room where I was kneeling.

I wiped my hands on my pants just in case I had any residual paint on them, then stood. My knee cracked embarrassingly loud, but Gage ignored it and handed me his phone.

It was an email addressed to me.

“What the...” I looked at him, not bothering to read it yet.

“I got a few DMs on your Insta account, wanting more info about your services, where you are, that kind of thing. I set up this email after giving them some basic details in case they wanted to contact you further.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” He beamed at me. “This guy contacted me at lunch. I answered. Then an hour later, he sent this.”

I turned my attention to the phone and scanned the email.

“No fucking way.” I read it again, just to be sure that I'd read it right.

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Dear Tyler,

Hi, it's Dennis from our earlier messages. As I previously mentioned, my husband and I just purchased a B&B that's seen better days. We saw your account and were impressed

with your skills. The house you're currently working on is the aesthetic we're looking to have done, and when we realized you were local, we just had to contact you.

Attached are some photos of the state of our building. As you can see, it needs a lot of work to restore it to its former glory. We were hoping to set up a meeting with you to discuss your availability, as well as your rates, any ideas you might have for us, and the possibility of getting a team together for you to oversee.

Looking forward to hearing from you!

Best,

Dennis and Kyle Harrison

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They'd listed their phone numbers and the address to the B&B.

The pictures had confirmed what they said. The place did need a lot of work. It looked like the previous owners had tried to modernize it and had attempted to cover up the intricacies of the craftsmanship while half assing the few upgrades they had done. The place was a mishmash of styles and looked unfinished.

"Isn't that amazing!" Gage was almost bouncing with enthusiasm, and a huge smile broke out on my face as I tore my eyes away from the screen.

"I looked up the address. It's only about thirty minutes from here, right on the border with Colton. You could easily commute."

"I... I don't know what to say." I blinked at him, handing him back the phone. "I mean, you said this could happen, but I honestly never thought it would."

"I sent them a link to your TikTok too. I don't know if they looked at it, but your work speaks for itself, babe. You're good at what you do. You just needed the right people to see that."

"Should I call them? Text? Email them back? How do people communicate nowadays?" I asked, jittery and excited at

the same time, but mostly jittery.

“Call them.” He chuckled affectionately and wrapped his arms around my waist and tugged me closer. “I’m so proud of you.”

He kissed me, long and deep, and I melted against him, the nerves from before leaving my body as he held me.

“This was all you. You set up the accounts. You did this,” I pressed my forehead against his as I breathed him in.

“No, Tyler. You did. I just put your work out there. All this is because of your talent. Your work. Your skill. Don’t diminish that, okay? Be proud of yourself. I sure as fuck am.”

“Thank you,” I said softly. “For believing in me. For pushing me to put myself out there.”

“I’ll always believe in you, babe.” He dropped a kiss on the tip of my nose, making me smile like a besotted fool. “Now, how about you call them? Then we can go upstairs and celebrate.”

“Ugh, my first business call in months and I have to do it with a hard-on,” I grumbled.

Gage grinned and squeezed my ass. “Maybe we can try flipping today?”

“So not helping.” I moaned, pressing my erection against him. At least he was just as hard as I was.

The other night, we’d watched some porn together to get some inspiration of how we could spice things up and had seen a couple flip-fuck.

We’d been too horny to do it then, settling for a quick sixty-nine, but had vowed to try it.

Gage pressed another kiss against my lips, then gave my ass a little smack as he stepped back.

“Call them, and I’ll wait in the bedroom so I don’t distract you.”

“I need to shower.”

“So do I. Want me to wait for you?” He handed me his phone.

“No, go ahead. You know we’ll just get off in the shower and we won’t be able to fuck.”

“True.” He leaned forward and kissed me again. “Meet you upstairs.”

“Upstairs.”

He turned on his heel and hurried out of the room.

Still grinning like a lovesick fool, I woke the screen up and read the email one more time.

Something about this moment was bigger than just getting a job after months of being unemployed. It felt like a new beginning, like the next chapter of my life was finally and truly starting.

I had my man by my side, a new career doing what I loved, and I had the unwavering acceptance of my family.

I finally had the life I’d always wanted, and I got to share it with my best friend and the love of my life. How had I gotten this lucky?

Epilogue

Gage

6 months later

“**B**abe!”
“What?” Tyler called from the bathroom, his voice muffled by the closed door.

“You hit one hundred thousand followers!”

“I what?”

Tyler shoved the door to the bathroom open and stepped into my room in only a towel.

“You just hit one hundred thousand followers.” I waved my phone at him.

“Holy shit.” He hurried over to where I was sitting on the edge of the bed, my legs hanging over the side and kicking restlessly as I grinned at him. “Are you sure?”

I handed him my phone and his face lit up when he saw it for himself.

The last six months had been a whirlwind. Tyler was just wrapping up working on Dennis and Kyle’s B&B, and he had a year’s worth of jobs lined up back-to-back.

I was so proud of him not only for his success but also because of how hard he worked. He put everything into each job, and we’d stuck to a strict schedule in order to keep his social media up to date.

People loved his channel, and he’d successfully cornered the amateur and queer markets. The majority of his followers were women, but he had his share of male followers too.

Watching my introverted and shy boyfriend flourish and gain not only his confidence but also find his place was incredible, and I was so thankful I got to be part of his journey.

“This is...” He stared at my phone, a big grin on his face. “I’m speechless.”

“I’m so proud of you.” I gripped his hips and guided him down so he was straddling my knees.

“Thank you for believing in me. For pushing me to do this.” He tossed my phone onto the bed and tugged his towel off.

I let out a little growl as he straddled me and pressed our bodies together.

“This was all you, babe. I just edited and uploaded the videos. Your talent made this possible.”

He pressed his lips to mine in a soft kiss, wrapping his arms around me as he shifted closer so there wasn’t an inch of space between us.

“We’re going to be so late,” I mumbled against his lips, shifting my weight so he was lying on top of me.

“We’ll just tell them we had car trouble.” He grinned down at me, trailing one hand down my chest, over my happy trail, until he was gripping my cock through my pajama pants.

“Pretty sure we used that excuse last time,” I managed as he squeezed my base just hard enough to send a sliver of pleasure through me.

“Alarm didn’t go off?”

“Can’t really use that excuse for brunch. Fuck, babe.” I groaned and arched into him as he kissed my neck, right under my ear. “That feels good.”

Tyler smiled against my skin, slid his hand under my waistband, and grasped my shaft in his hand. “Lost track of time?”

“Yeah, let’s go with that.” I sighed, running my hands up and down his back. “Besides, Doc really can’t say anything to us, considering he was an hour late to our last poker night.”

“What was his excuse again?” Tyler kissed my neck as he stroked me agonizingly slow.

“Training went overtime.” I snorted. “I might have believed him if he hadn’t shown up covered in hickeys and looking like he’d just rolled out of bed.”

I slid my hands down until I was cupping Tyler’s ass, squeezing the full globes as he nibbled at the sensitive skin of my neck.

I was quickly losing brain power as Tyler continued to tease me, rocking his hips against mine so his hard-on rubbed against my thigh.

Needing more, I rolled us over, grinning when Tyler let out a little yelp.

“You want to drive, or should I?” I pecked a kiss against the tip of his nose as he wrapped his legs around my middle.

“You can drive. Then it’s my turn,” he said, a gleam in his eye.

I wet my lips, staring down at the man who’d become my everything.

“You wanna flip, huh?” I teased, my cock pulsing at the thought.

“Yup.”

“Then get your legs up so I can prep you with my tongue.”

Tyler groaned as I moved down his body, dutifully lifting his legs and holding them by the backs of his knees.

A small part of me felt bad for being late to Doc and Tanner’s big brunch, but the bigger part of me knew they’d understand.

Things between Tyler and me were as good as they’d ever been. The attraction between us had only grown, and he’d become not only my best friend but also my home.

A year ago, if someone had told me I’d be happy and in a committed relationship with a man, I would have either laughed at them or told them to fuck off.

Now that it had happened, I couldn’t imagine my life any other way. Not only did I have my best friend and the love of

my life by my side, but I'd been welcomed into his family with open arms.

Life might not be perfect, but it was damn close, and I was happier than I'd ever been. I had my brothers, my boyfriend, and a family who not only chose to love me but also accepted me just the way I was.

How the fuck did I get this lucky?

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Interested in reading Doc, Luke, and Hunter's stories? You can find them at the following links.

Doc's story - Battle to Belong (you can get it for free [HERE](#))

Luke's story - Battle for the Top (you can get it [HERE](#))

Hunter's story - Battle to Surrender (coming spring 2022)

Books By Willow Dixon

Heroes at Home

A sweet and steamy series following four veterans and best friends as they adjust to life as civilians and find love along the way. The books are connected but can be read as standalones.

Battle To Belong - An opposites attract, hurt/comfort story featuring a retired army medic finding his way, a sweet doggy day care owner from his past, a found family, and all the feels. (get it free [HERE](#))

Straight Battle- An opposites attract, hurt/comfort story featuring a former soldier with trust issues, a divorced handyman looking for a connection, a found family, and accidental feels. Available February 24th (get it [HERE](#))

Battle For The Top - An opposites attract, grumpy/sunshine, hurt/comfort story featuring a jaded former soldier turned security guard, his friendly and confident co-worker, a found family, and accidental feels. Available March 23rd (get it [HERE](#))

Battle To Surrender - An opposites attract, grumpy/sunshine, hurt/comfort story featuring a retired soldier suffering from PTSD, his sweet but dominating younger co-worker, a found family, and all the feels. Available spring 2022

About the Author

What can I say about myself? It's kind of like being the new kid in school and being asked to tell everyone a bit about yourself. Anyone else forget everything they've ever liked, thought of, and even their name in those moments?

A few facts about me; I'm a veteran, I'm Canadian, and I love books! I've been writing my own stories since I was eight and wrote my first novel at sixteen. I'm the first to admit those attempts weren't my best work, but they started me on a journey of creating stories that has led me to fulfilling my dream of becoming an author. I've written and published in several genres under different names, but MM is by far my favorite, and I'm so happy to be able to share my stories with people today.

I currently live on Canada's east coast with my kiddo and my cats. I have a shoe collecting addiction, and I enjoy taking long walks, discussions with friends, and reading anything and everything I can get my hands on.

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If you're interested in connecting with me, you can do so at the following links.

You can join my reader group - [Dixon's Den](#)

You can join my newsletter [HERE](#)

You can go to my website - www.willowdixon.com

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