



the  
*Charmer*

the vers podcast - book four

RILEY HART

# *The Charmer*

The Vers Podcast #4

by

**RILEY HART**

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Kindle Edition

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If you listen to *The Vers*, a queer podcast I host with my three best friends, you know me as The Charmer. I'm always happy, flirting, and trying to win everyone over. I think most people would be surprised to learn I have a lot more going on beneath the surface.

But ever since all my friends have fallen in love, it's getting more difficult not to feel left out...

Cue my fascination with Spencer, my neighbor who hates me. There's something addicting about getting under his skin, and I blame the combination of my confusing emotions and too many drinks for spilling my guts to him about all my insecurities...and about how much I love cuddling.

Turns out, Spencer doesn't hate me, and my word vomit is the catalyst that makes us decide to be cuddle buddies. When I need affection, I go to him, and he just...holds me. Along the way we become friends, and when I fall for him, it's surprising that he feels the same. Spencer's easy to talk to, fun to be around, and did I mention he's hot? I love how confident he is in his full figure, and there's nothing like being in his beefy arms.

Spencer has me wanting *more* for the first time in my life, and he's determined to help with my disordered eating, but if I want a healthy future with him, I need to work toward being healthy for myself too.

*The Charmer is an opposites-attract romance with a body-positive MC and a cuddle fiend learning to love himself.*

\**The Charmer* deals with disordered eating, low self-esteem, and negative talk about weight. While the story is uplifting and none of these are heavy-handed, please see the content warning at the beginning of the book for a full list.

# Table of Contents

Title Page

Copyright Page

About the Book

Content Warning

Special Thanks

Dedication

*Prologue*

*Chapter One*

*Chapter Two*

*Chapter Three*

*Chapter Four*

*Chapter Five*

*Chapter Six*

*Chapter Seven*

*Chapter Eight*

*Chapter Nine*

*Chapter Ten*

*Chapter Eleven*

*Chapter Twelve*

*Chapter Thirteen*

*Chapter Fourteen*

*Chapter Fifteen*

*Chapter Sixteen*

*Chapter Seventeen*

*Chapter Eighteen*

*Chapter Nineteen*

*Chapter Twenty*

*Chapter Twenty-One*

*Chapter Twenty-Two*

*Chapter Twenty-Three*

*Chapter Twenty-Four*

*Chapter Twenty-Five*

*Chapter Twenty-Six*

*Chapter Twenty-Seven*

*Chapter Twenty-Eight*

*Epilogue*

Other Books by Riley Hart

About the Author

## Content Warning

*The Charmer* isn't what I would call an angsty book, but it does deal with some heavy themes I want to warn you about. As always, the most important thing is to protect yourself, so if any of these topics are a trigger for you, please proceed with caution.

Fat/Body shaming. (Two characters recalling things said about them in the past, comments on the internet, a couple of incidents of hurtful things being said in real time.)

Disordered eating. (One MC restricts his calories, skips meals, tries to overcompensate for what he sees as overeating.)

Light Body Dysmorphia.

Low self-esteem/self-worth

Body image concerns.

Toxic diet/exercise culture.

Fatphobia.

Bullying.

Religious parents who struggle with one MC's sexuality.

## Special Thanks

It was important to me to be as authentic as possible while telling Corbin's story. Outside of my own research, I spoke with numerous people who have lived with disordered eating and other similar struggles that Corbin has. This book was read by those people, along with two therapists who have worked with individuals with Corbin's similar struggles. I owe them all a HUGE thank-you for talking with me, reading this book, and helping me tell Corbin's story with respect and sensitivity. Thank you to: Jill, Melinda, Jessica, Kitt, and Mel.



# **Dedication**

For anyone who needs to hear it, you're beautiful and perfect  
the way you are.

## PROLOGUE

### *Spencer*

*Eighteen years old*

“I LIKE YOUR shirt.”

I looked up at the soft voice breaking through the loud beach party going on around us. It was a guy I’d never met before, with dark hair and unique blue eyes. They almost looked icy, if that made sense. Or like a blue flame I had a feeling held all sorts of secrets.

He was gorgeous—a little softer than some of the guys, but I wouldn’t call him chubby like me. He had full lips and a contagious smile that set butterflies loose in my belly.

He frowned, which reminded me he’d said something to me, and there I was, grinning at him like a dopey idiot. I couldn’t imagine why this guy was talking to me, but then I glanced at my old T-shirt and remembered what he’d said. “You like *Power Rangers*?”

“I’m gay. It’s in the handbook,” he replied, making me chuckle.

“Me too, but I didn’t get a handbook. I feel left out.”

The guy shrugged. “I’ll have to let you borrow mine.”

Was he flirting with me? Jesus Christ, if I was sleeping, I didn’t want to wake up. “Can I get you a beer?”

“Sure,” he replied, then followed me over to the keg. I grabbed a Solo cup, filled it and handed it to him, then got one for myself. I had no idea whose party this even was, but word had gotten around the Cal State LA campus that there was a private beach and it was going to be lit.

Someone turned the music up, people dancing and cheering all around us. “Wanna go down the beach where it’s quieter?” I said to him.

“Huh?”

“Down the beach!” I pointed, and the pretty guy nodded.

We walked together while I wondered if I had fallen and hit my head. Maybe I’d gotten drunk, had an accident, and was currently bleeding to death while dreaming about the boy with the most beautiful eyes I’d ever seen.

“You from around here?” I asked, the beach quieting the farther we got from everyone.

“Santa Monica born and raised. You?”

“The Temecula area.” We found a spot and sat on the sand, silhouettes of the party in the distance. “I’m a freshman. You?”

“Same.”

“Bet it’s nice to be so close to home base. You probably still have a lot of friends around.” I did too, but they were more in Riverside County. A lot of them ended up going to school in San Diego.

“My three close friends—Marcus, Declan, and Parker—don’t go to Cal State. I’ve known them since middle school.” He looked down, circling his finger along the rim of the cup, the mood suddenly heavier.

“But they’re close still?”

“Yeah. We’re just all at different schools, and...never mind. It’s dumb. I’ve met a few cool people here, though.”

I felt the sadness of the moment, could tell he was lonely and missed his friends. I couldn’t pretend that didn’t seem a little silly to me since they were close, but college was tough on all of us for different reasons.

“What do you do for fun?” I asked.

“I like to work out. I’ve lost a shit ton of weight and still losing.” Was that why he wasn’t drinking his beer? Too many calories? “What about you?”

I bristled, the butterflies from earlier starting a war with me now. “I don’t care about losing weight. I’m healthy and active. I dance. I like myself the way I am.”

His pupils blew wide. “Oh shit. I didn’t mean... I wasn’t asking you if you were losing weight. I wanted to know what you do for fun.”

We stared at each other, my insides taking flight. Neither of us seemed to know what to do or say, and then we burst into laughter. It went on so long that my cheeks began to hurt. He set his cup down and fell back onto the sand, looking up at the stars. When he quieted, I did the same.

“I miss my family, even though they’re close,” I admitted. College was a whole new experience, and I was still trying to figure it all out.

“I miss Marcus, Park, and Dec. I know that sounds ridiculous. It’s just...”

When he didn’t continue, I asked, “Just what?”

“They’re my people. It’s hard to explain. Shit. I don’t know why I said that. I’m an idiot. Don’t tell anyone I said that.”

I frowned, my chest suddenly feeling slightly heavy. “Why would I tell anyone?” And honestly, why did it matter? There was nothing wrong with missing people.

“I don’t know...just, people talk. I don’t want to look weak or whatever.”

Wow. He seemed to care a lot about what people thought. He also didn’t want anyone to know how he felt, but he clearly needed to talk about it. I didn’t know why he’d chosen me, but I’d never felt so important.

“Who’s your favorite Power Ranger?” I asked, wanting to keep him talking. Maybe if I did, he would eventually feel

more comfortable opening up to me.

We went from *Power Rangers* to other TV shows. He liked true crime but also loved cartoons from the 1990s. We talked about school and majors. We didn't discuss anything emotional, nothing too deep, but it felt like we did, like I was getting a glimpse inside this man, and yet I couldn't really tell who he was. I wasn't sure he knew either.

He shared a lot about his exercising and how much weight he'd lost. His goals and lifting. I told myself it was mostly because he was studying to be a physical therapist, so of course physical activity would be important to him. Not that there was anything wrong with him having lost weight or wanting to lose weight. I just didn't want him to think that's where his worth lay.

I didn't know how much time passed, but I did know I didn't want this night to end. I felt a connection to him, wanted to get to know him more, thought maybe we could become good friends.

He was funny and charming and made me laugh. He talked a lot about his best friends, and I could tell how important they were to him.

I drank my beer, but he didn't. Eventually we sat up again, and I brushed off the specks of sand stuck all over his back and in his hair. "You're a mess."

He shook his head, making sand fly everywhere, and both of us chuckled.

Our eyes met again, and as crazy as it sounded, I felt it in the air, this electric energy I couldn't explain, making something inside me spark.

Well, go big or go home, right? I leaned in, hoping this wasn't a mistake, that I was reading the signs right. He leaned in too, a small smile on his lips that I really craved a taste of.

Just before our mouths touched, I heard, "Yo! Corbin! What the fuck, dude?" in the distance. He jerked away and

scrambled to his feet. Corbin. I hadn't even asked him his name and hadn't given him mine.

"I'm coming," he called back, looking at the group of guys heading our way, and then at me. "I should go, but...this was nice. I had fun. I..." He rubbed a hand over his face, and just like that, turned and jogged toward the guys who totally looked like frat bros. Was he not out? But that didn't make sense. One of the first things he'd said to me was that he was gay.

I watched until their shadows joined the partygoers, wishing I'd told him my name or asked for his number or something. Maybe he didn't want to kiss me and just wanted to be friends. I was okay with that too. I liked him. Not that I knew him well, but that didn't change the connection I'd felt.

I shoved to my feet, deciding this was an opportunity I wasn't going to let slip through my fingers. I'd find him, ask for his number, and see if we could hang out sometime.

It didn't take me long to spot him talking with the guys who'd come looking for him.

"Who was that fat guy you were with?" one of them asked, making me stop dead in my tracks.

"I thought you were going to kiss him," another said.

"Are you a chub chaser?" the third asked, and they cracked up laughing.

"What? No. Fuck that. He was no one, and I wasn't going to kiss him," Corbin replied.

My heart dropped to my gut. My chest, hell, every muscle in my body, tightened. Fuck Corbin. Fuck all of them. I was somebody whether they saw it or not. Clearly, the connection I'd felt was completely one-sided. I didn't want to be friends with someone who didn't see my value and thought it was funny to kiss someone like me anyway.

Over the next few years, I saw Corbin on and off. We didn't talk, and if he'd seen me, he either didn't recognize me

or didn't want to speak to me. I noticed as he lost more weight, gained more muscle. When his face changed slightly—the bump in his nose disappearing—I noticed that as well.

It was better that we weren't friends, that I didn't think there was more to Corbin than met the eye. We were too different, he was too superficial, and what I would never admit to anyone other than myself was that he'd hurt me too much.

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Corbin*

*December 1*

“I LOOK GOOD. Don’t I look good?” I asked my friends, straightening out my tux dramatically. We were at a fundraiser Elliott’s mom, Cat, had organized for World AIDS Day. Elliott was Parker’s husband, and Parker was one of my best friends. I felt like my life started as a preteen when Marcus, Parker, and Declan came into my life. I didn’t know what it felt like to have friends before them—not real ones. They were more than that to me, though. They were my family, the only ones in the world who loved and accepted me completely, despite my flaws. I didn’t know what I would do without them, and I hoped like hell the day never came that I had to find out.

“You look great, cutie.” Kai winked at me. He was Marcus’s boyfriend, and I had never seen my friend happier. Marcus was my person. He always had been and always would be. I couldn’t pretend I wasn’t silently struggling with the fact that he had someone else in his life now. All my friends did, which made it even more difficult. The four of us were now the seven of us, with me being the odd man out. I loved their partners. Kai, Elliott, and Sebastian were great for them. I wanted their happiness more than anything, but what if the time came where they didn’t need me anymore? Because the truth was, I would always need them more than they probably did me.

“I love your boyfriend,” I said cheekily to Marcus, who chuckled.

We talked and laughed, the conversation flowing easily. We joked about Sebastian’s screenplay, which would start filming sometime in the new year, and what roles we hoped



were or weren't in it, depending on how much each of us liked or disliked attention.

I added my thoughts when I should, smiling and teasing because that's who I was. Making people laugh and being playful were a whole lot easier to deal with than sharing the fears that plagued me constantly.

When Elliott said, "Thank you, beautiful," and kissed Parker, I took that as my cue to speak again.

"Anyone else turned on?" I joked, making them all laugh, which again helped fill some of those empty spaces inside me, even if only temporarily. "I think I'm going to find me one of these." I pointed to the group.

"One of what?" Marcus asked. "I'm confused."

"A boyfriend. I'm gonna find one."

"Did you try the Boyfriend Warehouse downtown?" Declan joked.

"Ha-ha." I flipped him off. "I'm serious. I want to try the boyfriend thing too. Anyone have recommendations on where I can get one?" Settling down with someone had never been something I imagined would happen. I figured I was lucky enough to have Marcus, Parker, and Declan. Finding someone else who could handle me and love me for me seemed like asking for too much. And also, I couldn't pretend I ever thought settling down suited me. I still wasn't sure if it did. As shitty as it made me sound, feeling wanted by men, lots of them, made me feel important.

We joked back and forth about how I could find a boyfriend, until Marcus stepped away from Kai, wrapped an arm around me, and kissed my temple. "What the hell is wrong with you, kid?" Part of me felt like shit that he had to comfort me this way, that he had to let go of his boyfriend to give me something he knew I needed, but the other part of me burrowed into him, savoring his warmth and how this made me feel loved. I'd always liked affection, but I hadn't realized how much of a cuddle slut I was until Elliott had called me out

on it. I was lucky that none of the boyfriends felt any kind of jealousy over my relationship with my Beach Bums—a nickname we'd come up with for ourselves when we were kids.

“Strange, right?” I finally replied. “The hard part is how I’m going to deal with missing all the sex,” I joked.

“Um...why would you have to miss sex? Marcus and I fuck all the time,” Kai replied. I didn’t have to look to know Marcus made a face. “What? It’s true. And from what I’ve heard, my boss is a dirty-talking sex machine,” Kai said, referring to Declan—Declan owned a bar called Driftwood, and Kai was one of his employees. “Not to mention Elliott over there, praising Parker and almost making *me* weak in the knees.”

I laughed because Kai was fucking great.

After more back-and-forth, Declan eventually reeled everyone in with, “You guys realize we’re at a fundraiser?” He and Marcus were always the ones who got us back on track.

I couldn’t help letting my eyes wander around the room. I didn’t know what I was looking for exactly...maybe someone who would want to hook up tonight? I could use that, losing myself in sweaty sex, sating desires...

And then I noticed *him*. Spencer Chase. He’d moved into the apartment next door to mine a while back. I didn’t know what his problem was with me, but he definitely had one. I knew he listened to *The Vers*, the queer podcast I hosted with Declan, Marcus, and Parker, because he’d made comments about things I said there.

He definitely thought I was shallow—and keeping it real, I kinda was. I cared about how I looked, wanted people to be attracted to me. Okay, maybe I spent too much time thinking about those things. I could see where people thought that, but I’d spent the first half of my life being the butt of people’s jokes, teased and tortured, being called fat and having them

make fun of my acne-prone skin and anything else they could think of to make me feel like shit about myself.

Why did so many people enjoy making others feel bad? Why did they point out flaws and always have something negative to say?

Spencer thought I perpetuated a negative stereotype about queer men, that I was enabling a dangerous narrative about body image that hurt queer youth.

“Ugh. Spencer’s here,” I said, but I had to admit, I felt a familiar zing beneath my skin. While it didn’t feel good to hear the things he’d told me, I’d found a way to annoy him, and that was fun. We bickered like an old married couple, and for a reason I couldn’t understand, I enjoyed it. Can anyone say masochist? But then, maybe it was also because I wasn’t dead and could see the way Spencer ate me up with his eyes, could see he wanted me, and maybe wanted me even more when I gave him shit.

“The asshole neighbor?” Marcus asked. Uh-oh. He had his daddy pants on.

“I hate him, and I don’t even know him,” Parker said while I still watched Spencer.

He was cute as fuck. His blond hair was styled in a neat crew cut tonight, and there was a fine layer of scruff along his jaw, which wasn’t something he kept consistently. I’d seen him both with and without it. He had this round, cute nose and pretty green eyes. His broad chest and rounder stomach filled out his tux nicely. But my favorite thing about him was his smile. It looked like he belonged in a toothpaste commercial. He had a wide, boy-next-door grin...that was rarely focused on me. “I’m gonna go talk to him.” I could see the confusion on their faces, so I explained, “I’ve made it my mission to annoy the shit out of him.”

Without waiting to hear what the guys had to say about it, I headed straight for Spencer. As I knew they would, they were right behind me.

“Can I help you?” Spencer asked, eyeing me, before his gaze shot to my friends, then landed on me again.

“Came to say hi. I’m just being polite. You should try it sometime,” I teased, and reveled in the scorching heat in his gaze.

“I’m not playing this game with you,” Spencer replied, just as Cat approached.

“Oh, Spencer! Have you met my son?” Cat said, then to us, “Spencer is the outreach coordinator for the LGBTQ center here. He’s also very active in his work on ending the stigma of HIV and AIDS.”

I didn’t know Spencer well, but that fit in perfectly with my general impression about Spencer, and I admired him for it. That was good work and something I was interested in hearing more about, but I also didn’t want him to know I was *really* curious, so I played it off like I just wanted to frustrate him. Also...it gave me a reason to continue talking to him. “Wow. That’s really impressive. I’d love to hear more.”

Spencer gave me a forced smile. “I’m sure you have other things to do.”

“Nope. Not at all. Unless there’s some reason you don’t want to tell me about your work?” A reason like him being attracted to me even though he hated that he was.

“Of course not.”

“Great! Come with me. I’ll get us a drink.”

Spencer dragged his feet, but he did follow. I felt the hot stare of my friends on my back—they must’ve been wondering what the hell I was doing. Eventually, I would have to explain, but the truth was, I didn’t know what I was doing or what I would say.

“You’re annoying,” Spencer said.

“That makes two of us.”

“And immature.”

“I’ve never understood it when people say that. Is there a rule book or etiquette on how you’re supposed to act at each age? Is it a bad thing to be playful? To have fun? As long as you can be responsible and take important things seriously, what’s wrong with being immature? It’s a strange concept.”

He stopped walking, frowned, then looked at me. “Put a lot of thought into this, huh?”

“I might have heard it a time or ten,” I replied playfully. Spencer bit his cheek, I figured to keep from smiling. The thing was, though he’d said some hurtful things to me in the past about body image, it wasn’t as if he said those things all the time. It was one conversation when I called him out on not liking me. Now he was just bristly and grumpy with me.

“You’re ridiculous,” he replied.

“Hey, I might have heard that a time or ten too.”

Call it wishful thinking, but I was fairly certain he had to bite back his smile again. I liked being this for people, the one who could make them chuckle or roll their eyes. Maybe I was a bit of a cliché, but so what?

“Why are your friends giving me the evil eye?” Spencer asked.

“Because you bullied me.”

“I...what? No I didn’t. I spent most of my childhood being bullied. I would never do that.”

*Me too.* But I couldn’t make myself say it. Those memories spent too much time circling my brain and taking up residence inside me for me to set them free.

“Okay,” I replied.

“You’re the one who—” Spencer shook his head. “You know what? Never mind.”

“I’m the one who what?” I gave him shit, but I’d never been hurtful, and the only reason I liked to get under his skin

was because he'd hated me from the moment he'd moved in next door.

“Nothing. One of the guest speakers is about to talk.”

I didn't know why, but I stayed with Spencer while people spoke. I'd find my mind wandering, my gaze landing on his profile. Spencer was riveted on what they were saying, but I was studying him. Something about him had felt familiar from the first time I saw him in the elevator, but I couldn't figure out what it was. I must've been imagining it, though, since he'd never mentioned it.

I was curious about his work, about why he did what he did and how he got into it, but those weren't the things I usually talked to guys about. Normally it was: your place or mine? Top, bottom, or just BJs?

When the speakers were done, I turned to Spencer to ask him something—what, I had no idea—but before I could let any words out, a man approached him.

“Hey, Spence. I didn't know you'd be here.” The guy gave him a hug, and something about the embrace told me they'd fucked...or dated.

Spencer began talking to him, and I was pretty sure he forgot I was there. When I slipped away, he didn't say a word, or didn't notice. Unless I was being Obnoxious Corbin or someone wanted to fuck me, they didn't tend to notice me much. Being pretty helped, but not enough for people to really care.

“Is Asshole Spencer your boyfriend prospect?” Kai asked when I rejoined my friends.

“What? No. Why would you ask that?” Yeah, Spencer was cute, but we'd be a disaster waiting to happen. I didn't want to date him, and he sure as shit wouldn't want to date me. “I just like annoying him. At first he used to get under my skin, but I've managed to turn the tables on him.”

Marcus's caring—and yes, bossy—gaze held mine. “Just make sure you're not trying to prove something to yourself.

You don't need his approval.”

“Totally not what this is.” I wasn't trying to make him like me just so I felt good about myself. *Liar, liar, pants on fire.*

We hung out for a little while before everyone was ready to head home. We said our goodbyes outside, Marcus kissing me on the temple. “You got plans tonight, kid? If not, you can come home with us.”

Ugh. I knew Marcus said shit like that because he loved me, but sometimes it made me feel guilty. He shouldn't have to worry about me that way. He shouldn't have to be responsible for me. None of them should. “Nah, I'm good. I'm gonna call this guy who wanted to hook up earlier.”

“You sure?” Kai asked.

“Oh my God. Go home, Daddy and Stepdaddy. I need my space.”

Everyone laughed.

I pretended to type on my phone as they all walked away, everyone but me going home with someone who loved them.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Spencer*

I COULDN'T STOP thinking about Corbin, and it was annoying as hell. Men didn't usually take up this much space in my head if I didn't want them to. I worked hard to be able to compartmentalize things. I didn't obsess, except when it came to him, apparently, because I'd done the same shit after that one night we spoke in college.

When it had just been us on that beach, there had been an undeniable spark on my end. He'd felt different...special. Then I'd heard what he'd said and realized I was wrong. Years later, when I'd found *The Vers* podcast and realized he was The Charmer, I couldn't pretend I was surprised by his antics. One look at his Instagram page or the one from *The Vers*, and it was clear he was part of a queer community who weren't too welcoming to people who looked like me. Sometimes we could be our own worst enemies.

But then other times, he would say something on the show that surprised me, that sounded like it came from a deeper place, and like maybe Corbin wasn't as superficial as he came off. Like he felt really fucking alone. Typically, he promptly ruined it by saying something ridiculous afterward.

So yeah, this was basically how I'd spent most of my week, and as I sat in my office at work today, it seemed it might be all that was on my agenda for the day. I couldn't figure out why Corbin had disappeared when I started talking to Matt at the fundraiser, and quite frankly, why I gave a shit. I hadn't seen him lately around our apartment building either, but then, it hadn't been long, so that wasn't unusual. It wasn't as if we ran into each other every day and... "Ugh!" I rubbed a hand over my face. What was it about Corbin Fucking Erickson?



“That doesn’t sound good.”

I looked up to see my friend Morgan standing in the doorway, arms crossed, and leaning against the doorjamb with a smirk on his sexy face. Morgan and I had met about five years before, at one of the fundraisers I’d attended, and had connected immediately. He was this cross between confident overachiever and mysterious. The overachieving part likely paid off in his day job as the CEO of a local beverage company.

I didn’t know a whole lot about his past because Morgan didn’t talk about it much, and out of respect, I didn’t push or dig into it. All I knew was he had a dad and two brothers he didn’t have a relationship with, who lived somewhere in Michigan.

Morgan sauntered into my office and took the seat across my desk from me. “Usually, it’s all about work with you, but that sounded very much like the kind of sigh someone gives about a man.”

“No comment. What are you up to today? It’s not like you to stop by in the middle of the day.”

“I had a meeting close by and thought I’d say hi.” He quirked a dark brow at me. “And no comment?”

I waved that off. “It’s not a thing, I swear.” One way or another, I needed to evict Corbin from my thoughts for good.

“If you say so.”

“How’s Rob?” He and Morgan had been together for two years, and they were a shitty match. Rob didn’t deserve my friend, and frankly, I didn’t understand what Morgan saw in him. Rob was the king of empty promises, of making plans and never following through. He spent more time with his friends than with Morgan, and didn’t seem to care much about anything other than himself. Though maybe that was one of the things Morgan liked about him...that Rob didn’t care enough to expect him to share.

“No comment,” Morgan replied, using my own words on me. When I didn’t respond right away, he relented. “Rob is Rob and always will be.”

“You deserve better.”

“Do I?” Morgan asked, surprising me, then shook his head. “Never mind. Pretend I didn’t say that. I really just stopped by to say hi. I need to get going.”

I sighed and stood, knowing there was no way to change Morgan’s mind once he decided something. That was likely why he was still staying with Rob. “I’ll walk out with you. I need to check on some things anyway.”

We chatted a little about this new restaurant that would be opening soon not far from the center, as we headed along the hallway to the main area of the LGBTQ center and then toward the door. I loved working here. I felt thankful for my job every day. It was hard, and we never had enough funding, and there was so much work that needed to be done, but it was important for me to make the world a better place, to be there for queer people and especially queer youth, because not all of us had family like mine.

“Do you have plans tonight?” I asked Morgan. “We can meet up later if you want.”

“I can’t. Unfortunately, I’ll be working late. We’ll talk soon, though.”

“See you later, Mr. Swift,” Rowan, one of the receptionists, said from behind the front desk. Morgan smiled and waved at them.

After Morgan left, Rowan said, “He’s so dreamy.”

I cocked a brow at them. “Also has a boyfriend and is too old for you.”

“Hey, a person can enjoy the view, can’t they?” Rowan said, making me chuckle.

“Yeah, I guess they can. Let me know if you need anything.”

The center was busy today, people walking around, talking, playing games, reading. We had a large collection of queer books, thanks mostly to donations.

A decent number of people spent quite a bit of their days here, especially teens and young adults. We had groups, therapy sessions, medical clinics, book clubs, games clubs, and anything else you could think of.

I headed straight for the library, and like I figured he would be, Gael was sitting in one of the chairs with a book. He was eighteen and would be graduating from high school in June. His dad hadn't been supportive of Gael's sexuality, but he'd been gone for years now. There wasn't anything his mom wouldn't do for him, but she worked like crazy, trying to make ends meet in an area where it was very hard to do that. Gael was smart as shit and had gotten into a private Santa Monica high school for the arts on scholarship, so he bused in every day from Los Angeles, where he and his mom lived. Their hope had been that it would be better for Gael here than at his old school, and while he wasn't tortured and bullied like before, he had struggled to make friends. He liked to pretend he was a loner, but I could tell he'd have preferred things to be different.

We weren't supposed to have favorites, but Gael was mine.

"How's it going today?" I asked, taking a seat beside him.

"Good. Just reading."

"What's the book?"

"*Giovanni's Room*," Gael replied. I cocked a brow and got my first smile.

I wanted good things for Gael so much. He was such a special kid, and I wanted him to know that even though things weren't always easy now, they would get better. People like Gael changed the world. "You don't want to go play games with the other kids?"

"Wouldn't I be in the game room playing games with them if that's what I wanted?" Gael countered.

“Snarky little shit,” I teased but couldn’t help grinning. It was such a Gael response.

“Ask silly questions, and you’ll get sarcastic responses.”

“I guess. I just wanted to make sure. I saw Laken is here. She loves to read too. I think the two of you would get along well.”

Like a mini adult, Gael reached over and squeezed my hand. “I know you want to help. I appreciate you and all you do for us, but if you try to help me make friends one more time, I might murder you in your sleep.”

I barked out a laugh. “Fair enough. I’ll let you get back to your book.”

He smiled, and I got halfway to the door before he said, “Spencer?”

“Yeah?”

“I really do appreciate you.”

My heart swelled, feeling too big for my chest. “I appreciate you too.” Without another word, I went back to my office.

And yet instead of working, I found myself on Corbin’s Instagram page.

His latest photo was of him in a jock, bare ass facing the camera, and he was looking over his shoulder sexily. I couldn’t pretend it wasn’t one of the hottest things I’d ever seen. Corbin had a great ass. No question about it. But that wasn’t what caught my gaze. Okay, well, it *was*, at least at first, but then I noticed the look in his blue eyes. The way they didn’t match his smile. It was like he tried to look happy, but those blue mirrors into his soul couldn’t hide the truth, seemed to say that maybe Corbin was tired. Maybe he was sad. Maybe he felt alone.

I shook my head at myself and closed the app. I needed to stop trying to look for things, stop trying to see more in Corbin than was likely there.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Corbin*

“HELLO AND WELCOME to *The Vers*, where four friends who rarely agree on anything share their versatile opinions about everything. I’m Corbin Erickson, The Charmer,” I recited the opening to our weekly show.

“Marcus Alston, The Realist.”

“Parker Hansley-Weaver, The Romantic.”

“Declan Burns, The Loner.”

We recorded every Sunday at Marcus’s place. His house was where we did most of our gathering. I had more happy memories here than I did at my own place. We’d laughed here together. We’d supported each other here together. Marcus’s house was more my home than anywhere else ever had been because no matter how much they gave me shit, I was not only loved here, but completely accepted for who I was by the three people in this room with me, and now their partners too.

Jesus, I’d been so fucking emotional lately. I didn’t know what was wrong with me, and it was driving me crazy, so I decided to do what I did best and play the game. “Have you guys ever noticed that my nickname fits me more than yours do?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Declan replied.

“But is that anything new?” Marcus asked. “Us not knowing what Corbin is talking about.”

“Yikes...sorry I’m too intelligent for the three of you, but back to my nickname, *The Charmer*, I’m just saying I’m pretty fucking charming. I was sitting around thinking about that earlier, how incredibly charismatic I am. Some might say I’m absolutely captivating.”

“Oh, did you get up to the *c*’s in the dictionary?” Parker teased.

“I remember when you were the nice one.” I winked. “I just think I have the best nickname, and I’m much more charming than the rest of you are with your silly little nicknames.”

I was talking out my ass, of course, but I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“All our nicknames fit us,” Declan replied.

“Much more so before you fell in love—Oh shit. Do you think if I give the boyfriend thing a try, I’ll become less charming? Actually, never mind. That’s not possible.”

“Is that still a plan? You trying to find a boyfriend?” Parker questioned.

“I think so. Though what are my responsibilities if I have an official BF?” I joked.

Marcus ruffled my hair. “Jesus, kid.”

“Every relationship is different,” Parker said. “You and your boyfriend have to decide what works for you.”

“Okay, so maybe I’ll give it a test drive? Give it a go for a week or two and see what happens?”

My friends all laughed, but it was Declan who spoke. “Because that’s something everyone will want to sign up for. *Do you want to be my test boyfriend for a week?*”

“Sounds reasonable to me. Oh my God! This idea is golden! I could start like a test-boyfriend gig, not just for myself, but for others. I’m a genius!”

“You’re not taking applications or looking for a test boyfriend,” Marcus told me.

“Um...thanks for your opinion, Daddy Marcus, but you’re not the boss of me.”

“You’re not doing it,” he reiterated.

“Yes, I am.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Yes I am.”

“Um...maybe we should have this discussion later?” Declan said. “But for the record, I’m on Team Marcus.”

“Of course you are.” I crossed my arms and pretended to pout. “Help me out here, Park.”

“Sorry...I have to agree with them. But that’s just because I love you and you’ll get a bunch of weirdos who have no interest in the real Corb other than being on *The Vers* podcast’s ‘Try a Boyfriend’ segment or whatever it is you’re suggesting. Believe me, I’ve been on a lot of bad dates, and I’d like to spare you that trouble.”

“That,” Marcus concurred.

“Agreed,” Declan added.

I rolled my eyes. “You guys are no fun, but also, I love you too.”

As I knew he would, Marcus wrapped his arm around me, pulled me close, and kept me tucked into his body. I loved it here. Not just with him, but with any of the Beach Bums. I couldn’t pretend that being closer to Marcus didn’t put me at ease more than anyone else, though. Not because of any romantic feelings people thought I harbored for Marcus, which I didn’t. It was because the bond we shared went deeper than that. Marcus said that the first time he felt what it was like to be loved was when we came into his life. His parents loved him, and he’d always had them both in his life, but they hadn’t shown affection easily and had been more about work than anything else. Things were getting better in that regard lately, and I was so happy for my friend.

And I felt the same—my three friends were the first people who’d made me feel loved on that level I was thinking about earlier, where I was completely accepted despite my shenanigans. Marcus was the first person who told me I was

beautiful. When I was a kid and everyone made fun of my looks or my weight, Marcus saw a best friend, and when he told me I was beautiful, I believed him. Now, it didn't matter how many men I fucked or how many thirsty comments I got on posts, telling me I was hot or what they wanted to do to me. Those weren't real. I tried really hard to take those words to heart so I could feel good about myself, but it never worked, not for more than a few minutes anyway.

We continued the show with me wrapped up in Marcus, joking and laughing the way the group of us always did when we were together.

When Marcus ended the recording, he kissed my temple. "You good?"

"I am." I shook my head. "Ugh, Daddy is so annoying." I sat up and pulled away, Park and Dec chuckling. "How's the wedding planning going?" I asked Parker.

He and Elliott had drunk-married in Vegas but were having a second ceremony at Marcus's house in June.

"Really good," Parker said. "I actually wanted to talk to you all about something... I've been thinking about how I want to do the wedding party. Of course, I want you all to be included. You're my brothers and I love you. I thought at first I'd have three groomsmen, and I like that, and I'd love for you all to do that, but also...I don't know. Neither Elliott nor I are very religious, and the idea of someone who is important to me performing the ceremony just feels really special to me. I want someone I love to make us husbands...*again*...and the first person I thought of was you." Parker looked at me.

I sat up straighter, then turned around to see if somehow Declan had magically appeared behind me. Declan was Parker's person, the one he went to in a similar way I did with Marcus. "Me?" I asked.

Marcus squeezed my leg in support.

"Yes, you. You *are* The Charmer, after all. I can't imagine anyone more perfect for it, and it would mean the world to me



to have someone I love participate in such an important way on my big day. Elliott loves the idea too.”

Something was stuck in my throat, making it nearly impossible to speak or, hell, even breathe. Parker and Elliott had chosen me to perform their ceremony. They didn't think I would fuck it up, do something stupid, or ruin their day. They had chosen me not because of how I looked or the attention I got on Instagram, but because they loved me. I hated that these things were often so hard for me to believe. I didn't know what was wrong with me to make me feel that way. I hadn't been abused as a child. I had parents and siblings who loved me. While they had beliefs I didn't when it came to religion and what would happen to me when I died because I was gay, there had never been a day I doubted they loved me. So why was I so fucked up?

“Yes. He will,” Marcus answered for me as I swiped at my eyes. Sometimes I needed a little push, and Marcus was good at sensing that.

“Yeah...I'd love to do it. Can we have a Beach Bums hug now?”

Parker chuckled while Marcus and Declan pretended to grumble, but then all of us were on our feet. Three men had their arms around me as I stood in the center of them. And while things were changing, and they were settling down and all in love, I knew I would always have this. Them.

Why didn't that stop me from feeling lonely?

When the hug ended, we headed into the living room where Elliott and Sebastian were waiting for us. Kai was in the kitchen, making a meal for everyone. He planned to go to culinary school soon and was often practicing on us. But while his cooking was incredible, he tended to make heavy foods I couldn't afford to eat. It was so much easier for me to gain weight than for most people, so I was really cautious about what I ate and how often. I didn't even have to gain weight for people to comment on social media about how I looked like I had. It was a daily struggle.

But I also knew that if I tried to bail, the guys would call me on it. Marcus was always harassing me about eating regular meals. Declan and Parker were cautious about it as well, and now Kai had joined in.

“Mmm. It smells good in here, baby boy,” Marcus said to Kai, wrapping his arms around him.

“I made the best mac and cheese you’ll ever have and a pork roast.” Kai turned to me. “I made something special for you.”

“How many times do I have to tell you I’m not having a threesome with you and Marcus? I don’t care how often you try and bribe me,” I teased, when really, I was thankful he had thought about me. My gaze snagged on Marcus, and I saw how his softened when he looked at Kai...because of how Kai considered me, no doubt. Which sucked, to be honest. I didn’t want people to walk on eggshells for me, but on the other hand, how did I get so lucky to have these people?

“It’s a pesto tilapia with just a little bit of brown rice cooked my special way.”

“Thank you,” I told Kai, giving him a hug.

The group of us sat at the table, eating and visiting. Everyone was laughing and giving each other shit like we always did, but I couldn’t force myself to get into it as much.

I felt off, and feeling that way with the Beach Bums wasn’t something I’d ever experienced. The problem was me. I understood that. They fully immersed me in everything, but...I was the odd man out now. I was still wrapping my head around that. “Oh shit. I didn’t realize it was so late. I have to meet up with someone,” I lied.

“Cancel and stay with us,” Marcus told me.

“Yeah, but I’d kinda like to have an orgasm,” I replied, which was true. Why wouldn’t I want to have one, and it wouldn’t be difficult to find, even if I didn’t really have it all set up like I made it sound.

“It’s early, Corb. Can’t you meet up with them later?” Declan asked. “You didn’t even eat all your food.”

“Says the guy who could slip into one of Marcus’s spare bedrooms with his man if he wanted.” There was a stiffness to my voice I hadn’t intended. Ugh. What was wrong with me? Why was I being so strange? “Seriously, though. I gotta go. Places to go, people to do.”

They didn’t seem convinced, but they didn’t argue with me either.

Marcus said, “We’re going to do something just me and you soon. I won’t take no for an answer.” He cocked a brow.

“I would expect nothing less of my daddy.” I winked. And I wouldn’t say no. Why would I? Even if there was a voice in the back of my head telling me a grown-ass man shouldn’t need his best friend to do that so he felt loved.

When I left, I didn’t get on an app for a hookup or message any regulars. I headed for a bar and ordered myself a drink.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Spencer*

EVEN THOUGH IT was the weekend, I'd just finished up a spreadsheet for work, when there was a knock on my door. I frowned, not sure who it could be. I didn't often have people stopping by out of the blue.

For a second I thought about ignoring it because I was tired and didn't really feel like dealing with people. Money was tight at the center, and I wasn't getting the responses I was hoping for when it came to some of the events I was trying to plan, and that put me in a shitty mood.

When the knock came again, I stood with a sigh, went to open the door—and frowned. Corbin was the last person I'd have expected to see there.

“I was thinking it's been a while since you've seen me, so I figured you must miss me.” Corbin gave me a wide-mouthed smile, likely inspired by what smelled like the whole bar he must have drunk.

“Did you drive home?”

“Of course not. You must really think I'm a shitty person. Can I come in?” Corbin didn't wait for an answer before slipping around me and coming into my apartment. He'd never been inside before. Most of our interactions happened in the hallway or elevator.

“Usually people wait for a response before taking action.”

“Most people aren't me...and you missed me, remember? It's okay to admit it. In fact, if you don't, I'll know it's a lie. Is this your family?” he asked, looking at one of the photographs on my bookshelf, then brushed his fingers over his very light five-o'clock shadow.

Okay, well, that was a quick change of subject. I had no idea what was going on here, but something in my gut told me not to call him on it or ask him to leave.

“Yeah. My parents and my siblings.”

“Are you close?”

“We are. They’re my biggest supporters in everything I do.”

“That’s Marcus, Parker, and Declan for me. They’re my person...my peoples? My people. Drunk-talking is hard. But they’re that. I’m lucky to have them, and their partners are lucky to have them too. It’s kinda perfect. None of them suck. What are the odds?”

I chuckled, walking over to stand beside him. “You don’t have blood family?” I asked because clearly his friends were that for him, and blood wasn’t what made people family.

“I do.”

A heaviness filled my chest, putting pressure on my heart. “Are they not accepting?” It was the story of too many people in the queer community.

“They love me. They just think I’m going to hell. But I don’t want to talk about that. I tried to find a boyfriend tonight, but all anyone wanted was to fuck me.” He walked to my couch and fell onto it, like he’d been here a thousand times.

“Did you randomly ask men if they wanted to be your boyfriend?”

“No, I’m not an idiot. I told them I’d probably be taking applications soon and asked for their contact info.”

My mouth fell open, not quite sure how to respond to that. Corbin winked and grinned. I couldn’t tell if he’d been joking or not. “Really?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know. Why? Would you want to apply?”

I didn't answer that. "I've heard your show. You wanting a boyfriend is new."

He dropped his head back on the couch. "They all have one and I don't, and I miss them even though they're right here. It looks amazing...being loved like that, but even more than that...I've never felt like the odd man out with the Bum Bums...the Beach Bums before, and now I do." He closed his eyes and turned his head away. Damned if my insides didn't start to soften for him even more. Corbin was not what I'd thought, not what I'd expected. I didn't know exactly what it was, but it was clear he was hurting.

I sat down beside him. "It's normal to feel left out. I don't think that means you should start taking boyfriend applications."

"I drank too much," he changed the subject again.

"Yes, I'd say you did."

"Way too many calories. I'm going to have to work out extra hard now."

I frowned. "I was thinking more about how drunk you are." Jesus. He was worried about calories when he felt like this?

"I talk a lot when I'm drunk. I'm gonna be annoyed I said all this to you." He opened one eye, the other squinting while he looked my way. "Someone online called me shallow, and someone else said I'm getting fat."

"Fuck them. Is there something wrong with being fat?"

This time, both his eyes widened. "No. My thoughts are just broken." He gave me another goofy smile that didn't match the mood or situation. "I almost went home with a guy to have sex just because I wanted someone to hold me. It makes me feel safe and wanted. How fucked up is that?"

Who was this man? He was saying so many unexpected things today. I felt like I was on a merry-go-round, my thoughts spinning, getting more and more confusing.

“Corbin...don’t have sex with people just to feel loved. You deserve better.”

“I don’t. I love sex. I do, but today I’m weird. And I’m a cuddle slut. I didn’t realize it until Elliott told me. I just like to be close to people. Sometimes Marcus would cuddle with me when he knew I needed it, or I’d lie with my head in his lap and he would run his fingers through my hair. He would still do it, but I feel like an asshole because of Kai...and then like a loser for putting my friend in that situation. I hate drunk mouth. I need to stop, but I can’t.”

Because he clearly needed to get all this out. Had Corbin ever shared these things with anyone? And why had he chosen me? Someone who hadn’t always been very nice to him. “Are you in love with Marcus?”

“No. People think that, but I’m not. It’s hard to put into words, especially when I drank my weight in alcohol. I think some things just *are*, and that’s us. He can give me things others can’t.” He was quiet for a moment, and I was trying to come up with a reply, when he said, “So...do you have a bathroom because I think I’m gonna be sick.”

“Oh shit.” I shoved to my feet, grabbing Corbin’s hand and tugging him with me. A loud, giddy laughter fell from his lips as he tripped along with me. “It’s not funny,” I told him, but it kind of was.

I didn’t know what made me do it, but I passed the bathroom in the hallway and led him to the one in my bedroom. I guess because it was bigger and more comfortable? The second we got inside the room, Corbin said, “Hey...your apartment is set up almost exactly like mine!” before rushing to the toilet, falling to his knees, and emptying his stomach.

I should have left. The smell wasn’t great, but something I didn’t understand wouldn’t let me walk away. I didn’t want Corbin to feel alone. I didn’t want him to *be* alone. So instead of giving him privacy, I knelt beside him, rubbing his back while he vomited.

“What are you doing?” he asked while flushing.

“I don’t know.” Because I didn’t, and honestly, it was easier not to think about it. The second round of upchucking gave me an excuse not to dwell on that and concentrate instead on massaging his back.

I didn’t realize it was possible for someone to vomit as much as Corbin did, and I couldn’t lie, it was gross, but I stayed with him. When he flushed a third time, I stood up, got a washcloth, and wet it before handing it to him.

“Well...this is embarrassing.” Corbin took it and wiped his mouth. “I should go home.”

“No,” I replied, and the shock in his eyes reflected the same feeling inside me. If Corbin had wanted to be alone, he wouldn’t have come here. We might have a complicated relationship, but I wasn’t an asshole. I didn’t want him to hurt, and it was obvious that Corbin was hurting, that maybe he hurt a lot.

Corbin sighed, leaning against the tub, legs bent and feet flat on the floor. His dark hair was messy, probably from sweat and running his fingers through it. It was the worst time, but I couldn’t help noticing his strong jaw and full lips.

“I’m sorry I ruined your evening, Spencer.”

“You didn’t ruin my evening,” I replied honestly. He’d shown me a different side to him tonight.

“Oh, so you were looking forward to watching a thirtysomething-year-old man puke his guts out like a drunk frat boy?”

I chuckled. “Well, I can’t say that was my favorite part or that I’d like a repeat of the vomiting.”

He was quiet again, and I found myself sitting on the floor and leaning against the wall across from him. Hanging out in the bathroom was weird, right? I should give him some privacy or let him go home, but I didn’t offer, and Corbin didn’t mention it either.



The first time we'd met, I'd wanted to know more about him, and that feeling was amplified after tonight. What was going on in that head of his? And why did I want so fucking much to be the one to help him through it all?

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *Corbin*

WHAT. THE. FUCK. Had I done?

I was still buzzed but starting to come out of it some. Truthfully, I couldn't even remember what had made me come over here except that I'd felt like shit, didn't want to be alone, and something about Spencer kept me coming back for more.

Case in point. Why was I not going home to never talk to him again after all the shit I'd said? He probably thought I was a mess, and I couldn't say he was wrong.

"My mouth tastes like shit," I admitted.

"Fuck. I should have thought about that." Spencer searched under the sink before pulling out an unopened toothbrush.

"Thank God for this." You know...because my apartment was a million miles away and I had no way to get to it.

I stood, getting slightly dizzy when I did. Spencer had pushed to his feet as well, and reached out to steady me.

"I swear I don't usually drink this much."

"I hope not."

"I'm gonna gain five pounds from all the sugar."

He frowned. Words sat at the tip of his tongue. I didn't know Spencer well, but I knew that much. Still, he didn't set them free, just watching me as I opened the package, put toothpaste on the brush, and started dealing with my rank mouth.

"Oh God. This is better than an orgasm," I said around a mouthful. Spencer chuckled, still standing close like he feared

I would fall if he stepped back. He reminded me of Marcus that way. Declan too, actually. They were caretakers, and how Spencer was acting now told me he was one as well.

I finished brushing my teeth, then rinsed with mouthwash. I almost felt alive again, but my head was still swimming and my stomach riding a damn roller coaster. “I need my bed. I’m exhausted.”

“Come here.” Spencer walked out of the bathroom without another word. I followed as he went into the bedroom, stood beside his bed, and motioned to it.

“I’m confused.” Not about why he had asked me to come over, but why he would offer. Because he felt sorry for me, probably.

“Shut up and get into the bed, Corbin.”

Maybe a better man would’ve turned down his offer, but that guy wasn’t me. At least not today. I took my shoes off, tugged my shirt off as well, and fell onto the bed. “It’s a little hard but not too bad.”

Spencer rolled his eyes. They really were pretty eyes—mossy, or like fresh grass on a summer day. Like they were made of kindness he only let me get a glimpse of sometimes.

He stared at me, and I waited to see what he had to say. It was something. There was no doubt in my mind about that. Was he already regretting this? Wishing he didn’t have a drunk, shallow man in his bed?

“Just say it, Spencer. I’m exhausted. I need to get some sleep. If you want me to go, I’ll go, but if you keep staring at me without talking, I’m going to lose my mind.”

“I wasn’t going to tell you to leave. I was trying to figure out how to say that I want to lie down with you without sounding like a creep.”

My heart thudded, brows pulled together. “You want to fuck me? I’m not sure now is a great time to get laid. We can

revisit when I didn't just puke my guts out. Even if I'm topping, I'm not in the mood."

Spencer huffed in annoyance. "I'm not talking about having sex with you. I'm talking about...cuddling. I'm not sure if you've ever done it, but cuddling with bigger boys is nice. I know I'm not one of *The Vers* guys, but I'm here and I'm willing...which is a huge-ass shock to me, the same way I can tell it is to you."

The loud *thump, thump, thump* of my heart made my whole body vibrate, made blood rush through my ears until I wasn't sure I'd actually heard what I thought I had. Spencer wanted to lie down with me? To hold me? "I thought you hated me."

Spencer sighed. "You wouldn't be here right now if I did. I never hated you. I just..." His eyes fell closed as his words trailed off.

"Just what?" Whatever it was looked like it pained him, so I scooted over and patted the mattress beside me. Spencer didn't speak as he climbed into bed with me, and me being the needy little cuddle slut I was, I immediately tried to wrap myself up in him. He lay on his back, then slid an arm under me. My cheek rested against his pec, and damned if I didn't wish Spencer had taken his shirt off. I wanted to feel his skin against mine.

The tips of his fingers danced up and down my arm when he said, "We've met before."

I frowned. "What do you mean, we've met before?"

"At a beach party freshman year of college. I was wearing a *Power Rangers* shirt, and you told me you liked it."

I went stiff, the past playing like a movie in my head. I saw Spencer by the fire, remembered his shirt and talking to him and how comfortable I'd felt. How for a little while, I'd been able to forget that I wasn't going to school with my friends anymore. Marcus hadn't been in high school with us, so him

doing his own program wasn't unfamiliar, but it had still felt different.

"Jesus. That's you! Why didn't you tell me?" I tried to sit up, but Spencer tightened his hold on me so I couldn't.

I could see what I'd missed before, the parts of him that were familiar to me, but I hadn't known where from. But then, it was what, one evening seventeen years ago? I guessed it made sense I didn't remember him. The guys had called my name that night, which was how he'd known mine, but he'd been by himself, so I hadn't heard his.

"I loved talking to you at that party. I looked for you around campus afterward, but I never saw you again. Why didn't you try to find me?" I could have used his friendship back then. I'd wanted it.

"I did." My gut churned at the heaviness in his voice. "I went to look for you a few minutes after you left. I found you with your friends...heard them ask about me...who the fat guy was, if you were going to kiss me. They called you a chub chaser and..."

Jesus, I was going to throw up again, but this time it had nothing to do with alcohol. I couldn't remember the exact words any of us had used, but I knew they hadn't been good. I'd *wanted* to kiss Spencer that night, but I'd been an asshole, worried about what those guys would think of me if they knew. I'd cared more about fitting in and not being the kid who was mercilessly teased than about calling them out on the things they'd said about Spencer.

Christ. He was right. I *was* shallow. No wonder he hadn't liked me. "Fuck," I gritted out, and this time when I tried to pull away, Spencer let me. I sat up, back against the headboard, arms around my knees the way I'd been sitting on the floor earlier. I couldn't meet his eyes, didn't have it in me to see in them the pain I'd caused. "I'm so sorry." The words weren't enough, but I didn't know what else to say.

“I didn’t tell you that so you’d feel bad, but I wanted to explain myself. I know you think highly of yourself, but it’s not like I’ve sat around for years dwelling on something a random guy said to me years ago. It was just interesting when I realized it was you on *The Vers*, and then suddenly we were neighbors. It brought things to the surface again.” Spencer sat up beside me.

I knew he’d been joking about me thinking highly of myself, trying to lighten the mood, but I didn’t feel light at all, and I wasn’t sure I deserved to. “I’m an asshole,” I said without looking at him.

“So am I sometimes. No one’s perfect.”

The past came barreling back, hitting me over and over with memories—the names I was called, the things people said to me. And not just about my weight. Back then my nose was too big and my skin wasn’t clear. How not a day went by that they didn’t tell me I was ugly, and what that did to my brain and heart. No one had stuck up for me until the Beach Bums. Knowing how it felt to be on the other end of comments, you’d think I would have been a better man and stood up for Spencer. “I should have told them you’re not fat.”

I risked a glance at him. He was frowning.

“Why? I *am* overweight, then a little more than I am now. I have a belly. My face is fuller. There’s nothing wrong with being fat or chubby or anything else.”

I cocked my head, studying him, trying to figure out where he was going with this. He was right, of course. I knew there was nothing wrong with being overweight. That wasn’t what I thought of when I saw him, and it wasn’t something that made him less attractive to me, but when I had looked in the mirror when I was younger, my weight, my acne, everything I’d seen as wrong about myself had been all that stood out. Why was that? Why did it matter so much when it was about me, but not when it came to others? How could I get to where Spencer was so that I didn’t care?

“It’s not the names they called me that bothered me. It’s because to them, that meant something was wrong with me, and the way you laughed with them, the tone of your voice when you said you didn’t want to kiss me, told me you felt the way they did.”

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. My vision swam. When I swiped at my eyes, I managed to wipe away the moisture, but it felt like it was right there, ready to come out again. “I didn’t think that. I just don’t know how to be like you,” I admitted. “I...”

Shit, this was hard. I didn’t often talk about my childhood. I sure as shit didn’t tell people about it, but I wanted to share with Spencer. Or hell, maybe it wasn’t want as much as feeling I owed him an explanation.

“I was a heavy kid...not just that, but I was awkward, clumsy, with terrible skin. Kids didn’t...they didn’t make it easy on me.” Another tear sat at the end of my eyelash. I tried to blink it away, but more replaced it. “They were terrible to me. Called me every name you can think of. It was torture. I didn’t even know what it was like to have a friend until I met Marcus online...and then I made myself believe he only liked me because he couldn’t see me.”

“Shit,” Spencer cursed softly. “You don’t have to talk about this. It’s not my place to make you relive your trauma.”

No, it wasn’t, and no, I didn’t, but...but I thought maybe I wanted to. That some part of me wanted to share this with Spencer.

“I need to,” I replied. “Anyway. Marcus and I got closer. He was my whole fucking world. With him was the only time I didn’t feel ugly. I played the trombone in the marching band—my parents made me. One time I fell and caused mayhem. Jesus, I was mocked for that, but then there was Parker and Declan, befriending me, defending me. They did for me what I didn’t do for you.”

“Because you’re still trying to figure out how not to feel like that little boy who was tortured in school.”

“That’s not an excuse.” Why would he even be sitting here in his bed with me right now? “You were right when you called me shallow and said I’m perpetuating dangerous ideals for kids. I weigh myself every fucking day, Spencer. I have issues with food. I obsess over every goddamned comment on Instagram. Negative ones will make me feel like shit for days, but I keep posting because I like the attention of the positive ones. I got work done on my face, all of it so I could feel better about myself.” But really, it didn’t work. Or it did in some respects. It was confusing. I knew I was attractive. I knew people wanted me. But I shouldn’t need that attention. I shouldn’t let my worth lie in it, but I did.

“You’re not shallow, Corbin. I was wrong to say that to you, and I apologize. You’re hurt. You’re a victim of a world who puts unhealthy beauty standards on people. Did your parents...?”

“They weren’t abusive. They didn’t try to make me feel bad, but they were always trying to get me to watch what I ate. They still do.”

“Do you have an eating disorder?”

I chuckled humorlessly. “If you ask Marcus, he would say yes. I would consider it more disordered eating than eating disorder. I’m not sure what it is exactly. I’m not anorexic. I don’t binge and purge. I eat meals, but I have a poor relationship with food and my body. I consistently count calories and macros, and it’s never far from my mind.”

“Do you talk to anyone about it?”

“I’m tired,” I replied, changing the subject. “Weren’t we supposed to be doing some cuddling?” It was easier to try and focus on that right now. “Unless you changed your mind. I would understand if you did.”

“I didn’t,” Spencer replied without hesitation, and pulled me to him. He laid us down the way we had been a little while



ago, his arm around me. I burrowed into his armpit some, smelling the light scent of deodorant and man. It invaded my senses, going straight to my head, comforting me in a way it probably shouldn't. Still, while he was offering, I wiggled myself closer and breathed him in.

I threw an arm and a leg over him, Spencer allowing it, and I said, "I'm an excellent cuddler. You're gonna get addicted."

Spencer snickered. "Oh, am I?"

"It would be understandable if you did."

For the second time, he danced his fingers up and down my arm. "Go to sleep, Corbin."

"But now I kinda want to talk."

"You've had a long day. Get some rest."

"Wow...what's with me and bossy friends?"

"You're still talking."

"Do you know me?" I countered, and smirked playfully. This was nice, lying here with him, joking easily as he held me.

"I'm gonna stuff something in your mouth."

"I already told you we can't have sex tonight."

"You're gonna be a handful." I opened my mouth to joke about my cock size, but Spencer continued before I could. "Don't say a thing about your dick."

"I'm shocked you think I would do such a thing!" A yawn slipped out before I could hold it back.

"Go to sleep, Corbin. I promise I won't go anywhere until you wake up."

And that easily, my body relaxed. I hadn't known that was what I was waiting for, but somehow, Spencer did...and for whatever reason, he was willing to give it to me.

I closed my eyes and let myself drift away.

## CHAPTER SIX

### *Spencer*

I WAS GRATEFUL I had my cell in my pocket because I couldn't sleep. Corbin had been out for hours, but I couldn't make myself leave the bed. I'd lain here awake, alternating between staring at him or the ceiling, not wanting to move and risk disturbing him. He needed the rest.

Eventually, I'd finagled it so I could do some searching on my phone. I didn't know a lot about eating disorders, but from what I saw online, he was right in that there was an official difference between disordered eating and eating disorders. Disordered eaters often didn't cross that threshold into eating disorder territory—they weren't bulimic or anorexic, for example—so they weren't diagnosed as such. Now, that didn't mean Corbin was correct in his assessment of himself. Maybe if he saw a doctor he would be diagnosed, but I was pretty sure he hadn't seen anyone about it, going by his swift change of subject earlier.

It was crazy how your perception of someone could change after one conversation. It made me realize how quick I was to judge people sometimes, and I'd done it with Corbin.

He rolled over, and I set my phone down and followed him, each of us on our side, bodies molded together, my arm around his waist. I had no idea what this was or why I was doing it with him. Clearly, I wanted to support him, and I could tell Corbin needed it, but it wasn't like me to offer to be someone's personal cuddler. Though at eighteen, I also hadn't been the type to try and kiss a random guy the first night I met him, but I'd done that with Corbin too.

Frustrating, annoying, maybe slightly addictive man...

I must have fallen asleep after all because I awoke to the feeling of something pinching my right nipple. My eyes jerked open, and there was Corbin's piercing gaze, just a few inches away from me, having turned to face me at some point while we slept, my arm still around his waist.

"Oh, you're awake," he said.

"Because you pinched me."

"I didn't pinch you," he replied, but I could see laughter sparking in those expressive blue pools of his.

"Yes you did."

"Maybe you were dreaming about wishing I would pinch you and it felt real? I don't know. It's impossible for me to explain what's going on in that head of yours, but I didn't pinch you."

I sighed. Was there anyone in the world more ridiculous than him? "Of course you would be a morning person," was how I replied. "What time is it?"

"Six. I have to be at work in a couple of hours. I wasn't sure what time you went in, so I was about to wake you up when you had that weird pinching dream."

I chuckled because how could I not? "Do you realize you were drunk last night? How are you so...lively." Though Corbin always seemed lively, didn't he? Sometimes it was an act, covering for how he felt about himself, but at his core, I did believe Corbin was a fun-loving person.

"I slept great! Totally refreshed. I'm sure you did too. I'm an excellent cuddler."

"So you've told me," I replied with a smirk, then let him go. "I have to piss, and then I'll make us breakfast." That had come without much thought on my part, but then I started to think about his disordered eating and that maybe it was a good thing I'd offered. I could make sure he had a balanced meal.

"Great. I'm starving. And you totally like spending time with me." Corbin sat on the edge of my bed.

“I do not.”

“You do too.”

“Why do I keep arguing with you?” But I couldn’t seem able to stop myself.

“Don’t be too hard on yourself. Many men have tried to deny my charm, but it’s basically impossible.”

I glanced his way, and he threw me a wink, which made me roll my eyes.

I went into the bathroom, relieved my bladder, washed my hands, and then brushed my teeth. Corbin was looking at his phone when I came back into the room. He immediately exited out of whatever he was doing. Social media, probably.

“You can use that toothbrush again or anything you need.”

*He could also go home. He lives right next door.*

But Corbin just said, “Okay,” so I told him to meet me in the kitchen when he was done.

This behavior one hundred percent wasn’t me, but I didn’t let myself dwell on it because it felt good to be there for him. While I didn’t wish another night on him like he’d had last night, something about being the person he had chosen to go to made me feel...proud? I wasn’t sure that was the right word, but it sure as shit made me feel something.

I was whipping up eggs in a bowl when Corbin came into the kitchen, wearing his shirt and shoes again. “What are we having?”

“Do you really not have a hangover?”

“Nope. I’m good, huh?” He pumped his brows dramatically.

“You’re something all right.” I nodded toward the fridge. “Wanna hand me the ham steak?”

“Sure.” Corbin grabbed it, and while I put it on the stove and started the eggs, he asked about coffee and then made a

pot. When it started to brew, he put bread in the toaster, and a few minutes later, I was sitting at the breakfast bar with Corbin, eating and drinking.

He scooped a bite of eggs into his mouth, his portions a bit smaller than mine, but he seemed to be eating fine. Maybe it was more disordered eating, after all, like he'd said.

“Did you sleep okay?” Corbin asked.

“I had a wiggle worm in my bed, but it was fine.”

He wrinkled his nose cutely. “I’m not a wiggle worm.”

“Have you slept with you?” I asked, and when his brows drew together, I conceded, “Okay, dumb question. Yes, I slept well.”

“It was okay. You’re a little clingy, but I made it work,” he replied, and I playfully swatted his arm.

“Fucker.”

Corbin chuckled before asking, “Do you like your job?”

“I do. It’s hard. There are so many things I want to be able to do that we don’t have the money or resources for, but I’m proud of what we accomplish. I love seeing people feel welcome, the growth in some of the youth, or empowering people when it comes to their sexual health, or just seeing people enjoying themselves at events we plan. I feel lucky that I get to be a part of it.”

“Wow...I think you’re a nice guy, Spence.”

“Spence?”

“Just testing it out.”

I nodded before eating some of my toast. “What about you?”

“I fucking love it. The human body really is amazing. I kinda got obsessed with the body when I lost all my weight. Not in a shaming type of way, but as I became more comfortable in my skin, I tried doing more things and saw

more things my body could accomplish. This has nothing to do with size, but I figured out how to control myself and strengthen certain muscles so I wasn't that same clumsy kid. I wanted to help people learn how to work with their bodies, ease their aches and pains. It's cool." For the first time, I saw Corbin blush. "Sorry. I didn't mean to ramble."

"You don't have anything to apologize for. You help people. That's an amazing thing to be passionate about."

Corbin sent a knockout smile my direction that looked like the definition of happiness.

As we finished eating, we talked about random things and what we expected for our day, before he said, "So...I think we're friends."

"Do you?" I questioned, even though I agreed with him. I shouldn't be surprised. The first night we'd met, I'd almost immediately wanted to be friends with Corbin.

"The signs are there. You really like me. I can tell."

A chuckle fell from my lips. "Oh, can you?"

"Yep. Luckily for you, the feeling is mutual."

"Thank God. I would have been heartbroken had it not been."

"Because you like me so much. You basically just admitted it."

"That's not what I did," I argued, even if I basically had, despite my words having been playful.

Corbin nodded, then surprised me by asking, "Do you have any plans to do the boyfriend thing?"

I sucked air into my lungs, then choked on it, coughing wildly. Corbin laughed so hard, he nearly fell off the stool before patting my back like I was a child.

"Settle down. I'm not asking you to be my boyfriend. We just decided we're friends, and I'd like that. I think we're maybe supposed to be friends, otherwise how else would we

have met at a college party and then reconnected when you stalked me and moved in next door?”

“First, I didn’t stalk you, and second, okay, this is making sense so far.”

“So the boyfriend thing?”

“Oh, God no. I mean, if it ever happens, sure, but I’m not looking. I had a hard breakup about two years ago. I’m not ready to deal with that shit again.”

Corbin frowned. “Are you in love with him?”

“No, but I was when we were dating. DJ meant a lot to me.” But it hadn’t been mutual. He’d gotten a job offer in Seattle, which was fine, I understood, but he told me a week before he was leaving, and he’d had no interest in trying to make it work. He was all... *So, I’m moving. We need to break up.* The end. I’d been crushed.

“I’m sorry.”

I shrugged. “It is what it is.”

“Know how some people are friends with benefits? I was thinking we could do that, only we’d be friends with *cuddle* benefits.” He waggled his brows playfully, but I could see the fear of rejection in his gaze.

“No-strings-attached cuddling?” That was a first. Leave it to Corbin to be the one to ask for it.

“Yes! Exactly! Now, if you want other benefits, I’d be down for that too, but that worries me because I don’t typically fuck friends, and I wouldn’t want anything to get in the way of our friendship...since you like me so much and all.”

“Obviously.” I shook my head but smiled. “And I don’t want to fuck you.” When he looked less than pleased, I laughed. “I mean, *of course* I would want to fuck you. Who wouldn’t?”

“Because I’m so sexy?”

“Because you’re a nice guy,” I replied. Corbin needed to know he was more than his looks.

He rolled his eyes.

“You are, Corbin.”

“I know, but people don’t want to have sex with someone because they’re nice. They want to have sex with them because they’re attracted to them.”

“I wouldn’t want to fuck someone who was hot but a dick.”

Corbin waved his hand as if to say I was ridiculous. “We’re getting off track. You said last night was...nice.” Again, a rare moment of Corbin being bashful.

“It was.”

“So, it would really be a win-win for both of us. We could hang out, and if one of us felt like being close, we could just tell the other. Boom. Cuddling ensues. All are happy.”

I laughed again, something that was nearly impossible not to do when I was around Corbin.

“Also, since we’re just friends and this isn’t sexual, you can hook up with other guys or date or whatever. I might consider trying the boyfriend thing, but obviously, if we meet someone, we’ll reevaluate because it could be a little weird.”

“That’s putting it mildly.” I couldn’t believe he was really suggesting this, and even worse, that I was considering it. But I did like the idea of getting to know Corbin, and if I got more of that feeling from last night out of it, that was even better. And honestly, I liked him and wanted to make sure he was okay. I *needed* to, on a level I didn’t totally understand.

“Yeah, okay, let’s do it. Leave it to you to suggest no-strings-attached cuddling with a side of friendship.”

“I’m basically a genius,” Corbin replied.

On that note... “I should probably start getting ready for work.”



“Shit. Me too. What’s your number?” He rattled off his cell digits.

“I’m sending you a text so you have mine.”

We stood and walked over to the door together, staring at each other awkwardly, like neither of us knew what to do. I hugged friends all the time, but this whole friends-with-cuddling-benefits thing was throwing me for a loop.

It was Corbin who opened his arms and leaned in first. I returned his embrace, tucking him into me, feeling him nuzzle into my chest, hearing him breathe in deeply. He stiffened slightly, then pulled away. I looked into his eyes for any evidence of what had spooked him, but his cheerful mask was back on.

“Don’t miss me too much.” Corbin winked, and then just like that, he was gone.

What in the hell had I done?

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *Corbin*

“TRY TO RELAX. I’m going to push your leg up closer to your body. Let me know if it starts to hurt, and I’ll ease off,” I told my patient, who nodded. She was a teen girl with right hip pain from a basketball injury. I could feel the clicking in her joint when I put the right amount of pressure on her leg. “That’s good. You’re doing great. Think I can go a little more?” I asked her.

“Yes,” Mary replied.

My days and patients were always different. I could have sports injuries, older patients after a fall, strokes, those who were injured in car accidents, and those with lifelong disabilities. I’d helped people learn to walk again. I would forever be grateful that I was able to do what I did, but today I was distracted with thoughts about Spencer. How could I not have realized he was the man I’d met on the beach all those years ago? What were the odds of someone finding their way into your life twice like that?

And last night...Christ, last night and this morning had been...nice. More than nice. I couldn’t even find it in myself to be embarrassed over the things I’d said to him because now I had a cuddle buddy. Maybe to others that would be silly, but I didn’t give a fuck. I thought it was *awesome*.

I did my best to force Spencer out of my mind for the rest of the day, giving all my attention to my patients. My last appointment was at three today, which meant I was done by four. I went to the gym for the second time, figuring that working out twice would help counter all the sugar I’d had the day before, then went home and took a quick shower, snapped a photo of myself in my underwear, and posted on Instagram.

As soon as the hearts and comments started coming in, I felt the familiar buzz of pleasure flush through me, that feeling of being wanted and feeling attractive and like I mattered. It never lasted, but the shot of endorphins it released inside me kept me going for a while.

**Me:** What are you doing tonight? I thought you'd probably want my company.

I sent the text to Spencer without a second thought, then almost regretted it. Not that I didn't want to spend time with him, because I did, but for once I worried about coming on too strong. What if I annoyed him? But then if he wanted to hang out, I could make him some dinner or something. Or take him out. Maybe Spencer would like Nils, the Mediterranean restaurant Marcus and I loved. Afterward, he might be down for another cuddle session.

**Spencer:** I'm going to be at the center until about eight or nine. We're having a party for the teens.

My good mood immediately deflated. Well, shit. There went that idea. I thought about calling one of the Beach Bums, but I knew Dec was working at the bar. Park said he and Elliott were going to a political fundraiser with Elliott's parents. I couldn't push myself on Marcus, even though he'd messaged to see if I wanted to have dinner with him.

I sat on the side of my bed, leg bouncing as I wondered what to do, when I remembered I hadn't replied to Spencer.

**Me:** Have fun. I might head out with this guy who wanted to hook up.

I was a lying liar who lied. Well, not that I couldn't find someone. It was never hard to find men who wanted to fuck, but I didn't already have someone lined up. Flipping out of my texts, I went straight into an app, scanning my messages.

**Show me your ass.**

**Fuck, you're hot.**

**You down?**

I clicked on Craig, this guy I'd been with a few times.

*Me:* Hey. You have plans tonight? We could go have a drink or something.

I didn't know why I told him that. When did I ever just have drinks with these guys? Or a meal? That wasn't what we did. We lost ourselves in each other's bodies and then said goodbye, but if I was going to find a boyfriend, heading straight to sex probably wasn't the best way to go. Plus, Craig was cool. He made me laugh. He'd maybe be good boyfriend material.

*Craig:* Can't really do the drink, but I have about an hour if you can host. I can make you come at least twice in that amount of time. He sent a winky emoji.

The buzz I'd felt after posting the photo was already gone. I was always down to fuck, but for some reason, the thought of it made me feel empty right now. Did anyone just want to spend time with me?

*Spencer:* You should come down. I can't promise how fun it'll be for you, but we always have a good time. The kids are great.

A surprising little party started in my chest.

*Me:* I knew you missed me. Sure, I can come down. It'll be a blast. We'll make sure of it.

*Spencer:* I missed you so much, Corbin. How would I ever enjoy my night without you?

I shoved to my feet.

*Me:* Luckily, you don't have to find out.

*Spencer:* Shut up and get over here.

*Me:* You're really impatient for me. On my way now.

*Spencer:* If that's the case, why are you keeping me waiting?

Wait...was he flirting with me? No. If it were someone else, I would think so, but that didn't fit Spencer...I didn't think.

Who the fuck knew?

I finished getting ready and ordered a car to pick me up. I got outside right as it pulled up, and I jumped in. The drive to the center was short. The windows were dark, and you couldn't see inside, other than the random flash of lights. Two people were at the door when I arrived.

“Do you have a ticket?” one of them asked. I glanced at the pronouns on their name tag and saw she/her. The other said he/him.

And of course I would need a ticket. They had to keep people inside safe. It was sad that this had to be the case. “I don't. I'm friends with Spencer...” Spencer what? I didn't even know his last name. “He works here and invited me. I'm Corbin Erickson. I can call him and—”

“He's with me,” Spencer said, coming outside. He wore a button-up shirt with a bow tie, something I'd noticed he often did when he worked. “I was just about to tell you he was on his way, but he got here too fast.” He glanced my way and winked. “He missed me.”

Wow. I liked Playful Spencer. I hadn't gotten to see this side of him before. Maybe a little bit that night on the beach.

“You're The Charmer!” the guy at the door said. “I listen to your show and follow you on social media.”

I grinned. “I am. What's your name?”

“Mike.” We shook hands, and then I did the same with the woman, whose name was Emily. “I can't believe you're friends with The Charmer,” Mike told Spencer.

“Right? Spencer should totally feel lucky,” I replied.

Spencer shook his head, but a small smile curled his lips. I'd take that as a win. “Let's go, superstar.”

“Nice to meet you both,” I told them before saying to Spencer, “you should definitely keep calling me that. I like it, CB.”

“CB? Do I even want to know?” He cocked a brow as he led me down a hallway, the music getting louder as we went.

“Cuddle Buddy. Cute, isn’t it?”

Spencer chuckled. “It’s something, for sure. Come on.”

“I feel like you’re always saying that to me... It’s something. I’m something.”

“I feel like you’re right.”

“Finally. Someone who admits I’m always right!”

“Pretty sure that’s not what I said.”

“I’m pretty sure it is, and I’m perpetually right. You said so yourself.”

Spencer laughed, deep, contagious, making something spark in my gut. I really liked making him laugh. It was something I tried to do for most people, but it didn’t fill me with the same kind of joy it did with Spencer.

“This is going to be an interesting friendship, Corbin. I’m still trying to figure out how I let it happen.”

“Don’t put yourself through that. There’s nothing you could have done to stop it. I’m The Charmer, remember?” I winked, Spencer shaking his head before ushering me into a large party room filled with a whole bunch of teens and young adults. Pop music pumped from speakers throughout the space, and there were round tables all around the room with different board games at each one, people playing them. Along the back wall were long, rectangular tables with food and drinks.

Some of the kids danced. Some stood around talking. It was clear they were all having fun and felt safe here.

“This is incredible,” I said, taking it all in. When I looked at Spencer, his brows were pulled together, nose wrinkled cutely as if I’d said something to surprise him. “What?” I asked.

“Nothing. Just...come on. I’ll introduce you.”

I moved in step with Spencer as he led me around the room, introducing me to some of the kids and those who worked and volunteered here too. When we got to the charades area, I grabbed ahold of Spencer's hand. "I love charades. We're playing."

"Um...no we're not. Well, I'm not. You can."

"Come on! Don't be boring, CB. Play with me...unless you're afraid you'll lose."

"Ooooh! He called you out, Spencer!" one of the kids said.

"You have to play with us," another added.

I cocked a brow.

"I'm not afraid of losing," Spencer countered.

"I don't know...I kinda think he is. What about you all?" I asked the group of teens around us. I crossed my arms, eyeing him.

"Totally agree!"

"Play with us, Spencer!"

"It'll be fun!" echoed voices around us.

The look in Spencer's gaze changed, his resistance slipping, and maybe a little bit of excitement sparking in his eyes.

"Challenge accepted," he replied, and I couldn't keep myself from smiling. This was going to be fun.

Spencer and I each went to one of the teen teams. I had Liz, Jerome, and Farrah on my team.

We shook up the basket with the slips for the phrases we had to act out.

"I'll keep score," Jerome said.

"I'll take care of the time clock," one of the kids from Spencer's team announced.

We did rock, paper, scissors to see who went first, and Spencer's team won, damn it.

I looked at the name tag for the person who drew the paper, and her name was Erica, pronouns she/her.

"Oh God," she said.

"That's not a good sign," I told my team.

"Keep quiet over there, Erickson!" Spencer said.

"Did you just last-name me? Are we jocks now?"

"Oh God. Gross. Why did I say that?" Spencer asked, making me laugh.

"It's superstar to you." I winked at him and earned myself an eye roll.

We jumped into the game, and unfortunately, they guessed. We got our first one too, so I wasn't too worried. The score stayed tied through two rounds.

"Spencer, can we get your help over here in a minute?" someone called.

"I'll be right there," he replied. "This is it. Last round, everyone. Let's alter the rules a bit so both teams can guess. Whoever gets it, wins."

Of course it was on my time to do the acting. Not that I cared. It would be fun to see if Spencer could guess what I was doing.

"We got this!" I told my team before going up to the bowl and drawing a slip of paper out.

*Power Rangers.*

What the fuck were the odds?

My gaze snapped to Spencer, who was watching me with a concerned look on his face. I tossed a smile his way, which he returned, but I actually wasn't sure if he realized he did it.

"Okay...let's do this!" I told my team as I went to stand in front of the group. My heart was racing. It was silly to be



excited about something so small, but I was. My team was supposed to win. I wanted them to win, but for some strange reason, I wanted Spencer to guess correctly too.

“Ready...set...go!”

I immediately held up two fingers so they knew the answer was two words. I could do this...how in the fuck did I do this?

I pretended to touch where a belt buckle would be, the way they did on the original intro opening. Everyone shouted things at me but none of them right. From there I tried to do a spin-and-kick thing—and keeping it real, a karate star I was not. Spencer let out a loud laugh.

“Hey! That’s not nice,” I told him.

“You can’t talk,” one of the players said.

“It wasn’t part of the clue.” Speaking of, I wasn’t doing any of the acting I needed to do, and the clock was ticking. I tried to remember what each of the rangers had done. Yellow was next, so I tried to act hers out, then the black ranger, then the pink one. Time was running out, and none of the things people yelled at me were even close. Did these kids not know good television anymore? What the fuck?

Just before the timer dinged, my gaze caught Spencer’s again. I didn’t know what he saw in my expression or my movements as I kept trying to be a fucking ranger, but he suddenly grinned and shouted, “*Power Rangers!*”

“Shit! He got it.” Why did that make giddy excitement fill my gut?

Team Spencer jumped up and down, celebrating their win. We weren’t poor sports, so we congratulated them.

“I can’t believe I got *Power Rangers*,” I said when we walked away.

“I can’t believe I guessed it. Come on. Let’s get you something to eat, and then I’ll take care of whatever they need me for and I’ll be back.”

I stumbled, though I didn't know why. It wasn't odd for someone to offer to feed someone else, but for some reason, I really appreciated it from Spencer. Almost like I did with Marcus, which was weird as fuck. "Okay."

Spencer led me to the refreshments table. There was a whole lot of junk food I was definitely not putting into my stomach. He seemed to notice and said, "If there's nothing here you'll eat, I'll find a way to get you something else. I'll order something you like or—"

"You would order something I liked just for me?"

He frowned. "Of course. Why wouldn't I?"

I didn't know. Marcus would. So would Park and Declan, and by extension, I knew Kai, Elliott, and Sebastian would as well, but most people wouldn't. They would expect me to eat something that would make me feel like shit about myself because to them, it wasn't a big deal. People tended to think that about things they didn't have strong feelings about themselves, and didn't understand it wasn't the same for everyone.

I didn't know how to answer Spencer or why I suddenly felt...weird, so I just said, "There's fruits and veggies. I can eat that. Are those turkey cold cuts? I'll eat those too."

"That works. When this is over, we can grab something else too."

I smiled. "Thanks, CB." My hands shook slightly, my throat feeling a little tight. I was losing my shit both last night and tonight and needed to nip it in the bud.

"I'll be back, superstar." He winked at me, then disappeared. Damned if I didn't feel like a superstar in that moment.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### *Spencer*

WAS IT STRANGE that I didn't want to leave Corbin? I was pretty sure it was, so I decided to pretend that nugget of truth didn't exist. Instead, I went to see what they needed my help with. Luckily, it wasn't a big deal and nothing major was wrong. We had an argument between two of the kids, and then a small water-leak disaster, which was the last fucking thing we needed.

As I dealt with finding more towels to help clean up, blocking off the bathroom, then hunting down my notebook with vendors, I couldn't help sneaking in to take a peek at Corbin every few minutes.

He was standing toward the back wall with a plate of food. It didn't look like he'd eaten a lot, but he was eating, so that was good. A couple of people went over and talked to him, Corbin saying something that made them laugh, which in turn made me smile, which I had no reason to do because I didn't even fucking know what they'd said.

I couldn't deny I'd had fun with him tonight. Corbin was a fun-loving guy, and it shouldn't have surprised me that he was so willing to jump in and play a game of charades with the kids, but for whatever reason, it did. He'd been good with them, and I'd had a lot more fun than I'd expected. I was still trying to wrap my head around last night, then inviting him here today, and now the game. I didn't know what to expect from Corbin Erickson, and apparently, I didn't know what to expect of myself when it came to him either.

Once I put out all the fires, I returned to Corbin. He was talking with Jini, who ran the center's library.

The first thing I noticed was he had two pieces of cold cuts on his plate, a few carrots and cucumbers, and some cantaloupe. Of course, I didn't know how much he had before or if I should be paying attention to things like that. Corbin was an adult who knew how to take care of himself. He clearly wasn't starving himself. He had too much tight, firm muscle for that. At the same time, he'd admitted to having struggles with food, something I didn't have experience with.

"Hey, CB." He winked at me. So clearly, we were going with the whole cuddle-buddy thing. I bit back a smile.

"CB?" Jini questioned.

"Don't ask," I replied with a chuckle.

"He pretends he doesn't love it, but he does," Corbin told her, then turned to me. "Anyway, Jini was telling me about the library and that while you have a lot of books, your romance section is lacking. I mentioned how Park likes to read queer romance novels. I'll talk to him about doing a book drive. And I'm sure that if we talk about it on the podcast, we can get a lot of people on board."

I...didn't know what to say to that. There was no doubt in my mind that they could, and damn, it was an amazing offer. Sweet too.

"That's...thank you, Corbin. It's not easy around here to get the things we need." Even being in a city like Santa Monica that had a lot of money.

He frowned. "We'll have to see what we can do about that."

Before I could respond, Tristan, Bailey, and a couple of the other boys ran over. "Spencer! Come and dance!"

A Beyoncé song had just come on and, well, how in the hell did you not dance when Beyoncé was playing? It should be against the law.

"I'll be right back," I told Corbin before heading over with the group.

I'd always loved to dance. It was something that surprised a lot of people. I was this bear-looking man who could get down and move like no one's business.

I immediately started to move my body. The kids didn't really dance with me and usually ended up watching in a circle around me, getting a kick out of seeing the thirtysomething big guy out there.

Like I usually did when I danced, I felt alive. Heart pounding, surges of adrenaline shooting through my body. My gaze caught Corbin's, who was watching me with a huge smile on his face. He'd set his plate down, Jini standing beside him, and he had this amazed look on his face. Every time I spun or made jerky movements where I was going too fast to see his face, I could feel it, feel the hot burn of his stare and the joy he got out of watching me. Because he was surprised, or because it was fun? I didn't know, but it felt good.

When the song ended, the kids tried to keep me out there, but I shook my head. "I can't. I'm gonna go see my friend now."

"Is he your boyfriend?" Bailey asked.

"He's hot," Tristan said.

"And a grown-ass man, which you're not, so be appropriate, please."

"Hey, I'm eighteen!" Tristan countered.

"Not happening," I told him, though I knew he was only teasing. "And no, he's not my boyfriend. We're...friends," I told Bailey, and we were, I realized. In twenty-four hours, Corbin and I had somehow become friends.

I made my way back to him, and noted that one of the pieces of turkey was gone, along with a few of the veggies.

"That was incredible. You can dance."

"Big boys are flexible and can move too." I winked at him.

"I didn't mean... I wasn't..."

“I know. I was giving you shit.”

“I sure as hell can’t move like that.”

“It’s a talent. And also, I took ballet and hip-hop classes as a kid.”

“Damn, CB. I’m impressed.”

The dancing went on, and Corbin hung out with me the whole time. I figured at some point he would get bored or leave so he could hook up with someone, but he didn’t. The party ended at eight, since it was a school night. We made sure all the kids were out of there safely by eight thirty, and then one of the employees said, “You can head out, Spencer. We’ll clean up.”

I was usually the last one out of there and the first to arrive, but after the bad night of sleep last night, and given that I had Corbin with me, I agreed.

“Did you drive?” I asked as we made our way outside.

“I took a car.”

“Mine is here. You can ride home with me.”

Corbin stopped on the sidewalk and looked at me, an expression on his pretty face I couldn’t read. He really was one of the most beautiful men I’d ever seen. I couldn’t imagine anyone telling him differently, or a person who looked like him ever having gotten made fun of. It just went to show that you never knew what someone had been through and shouldn’t make assumptions.

“What?” I finally asked.

“I liked this...tonight. Thank you for inviting me.”

An unexplained warmth filled my gut. “Thanks for coming. It was fun, and the kids liked you.”

“Everyone likes me.” He winked.

“Of course they do, superstar,” I teased as I led him to my car. “You didn’t eat much,” I risked.

He frowned. “Yes, I noticed, considering it’s me and I was there.”

“I’m not trying to be a dick. I think this is the kind of thing CBs do. Plus, I’m hungry. I didn’t eat much today either, so I was thinking we could grab some food before we head home.”

“Well...that depends.”

“On what?”

“First, on what we’re eating. Second, if you’re really hungry or just doing this out of some misplaced worry for me. I eat. I’m just more careful than most about how much and such, and yes, I know it’s not always completely healthy how I choose to do it.”

Before I could respond, my stomach let out a growl, making both of us laugh. “Well, I guess my stomach answered that question for you, but yes, I’m fucking famished. And we can eat whatever you want. I’m easy.”

We got to my car. I went to the driver’s side, and Corbin to the passenger. I looked at him over the top of it as he said, “Salads or wraps? Marcus has gotten me addicted.”

“I know the perfect place.”

He grinned. “Let’s do it, then.”

We went to a smoothie place I loved that was close to our apartment building. They had incredible salad options, wraps, and also flatbreads. I got a chicken pesto flatbread, and Corbin ordered a chicken Caesar salad with light dressing. When I also got a smoothie, he did too.

We took the food to go, and chatted all the way home and as we took the elevator up. When I went to my door, Corbin automatically went with me.

“I’m dead on my feet. Let’s eat on the couch.”

He nodded. I grabbed two bottles of water from the kitchen and joined him. We set the food out on the coffee table and then immediately dug in.

“Fuck, this is good,” Corbin said, chewing and swallowing before he added, “Also, I was serious about the book drive and any other way *The Vers* can help. I don’t know why I never thought of volunteering at the center or anything like that.”

“We can definitely use it. I appreciate that. There’s so much I’d love to be able to do.”

“Like what?”

“I’d love to expand the center, afford more programs, add more medical services. If we could do field trips with the kids, that would be great too.”

Corbin listened and asked questions as I rambled. I could tell he was serious in his interest and not just asking to be nice.

When his phone made a familiar noise, I cocked a playful brow at him. “One of your boyfriend prospects?” I asked, though it was clearly a hookup app.

“Maybe...or maybe someone who just wants to have sex with me.” He chuckled, then grabbed his phone. “Hmm. Nice hole.”

It was my turn to laugh. “You gonna go?” There was no reason why he shouldn’t. I would understand if he wanted to go get laid.

“Nah, I’m good here. Unless you’re trying to get rid of me.”

I should be. I would think I’d want to, but I didn’t. “Nope.” My food was gone now, and Corbin had eaten about three-quarters of his. After we tossed the trash and leftovers in the bag, I leaned back and put my feet up on the coffee table. “Have you considered trying other options than hookup apps if you’re really looking for a boyfriend?”

“Lots of people find partners there. Don’t knock it.”

“I’m not. It’s actually where I met DJ, my ex.”

“Interesting... Well, good to know. I actually signed up for a dating app too. I have a few messages.”



“Let’s check them out.”

Corbin took his shoes off and pulled his legs up, sitting cross-legged on my couch. “Okay...first, we have Johnson.”

“Pass,” I replied automatically.

“Why?”

“That’s not his real name. He’s talking about his dick.”

“Okay, Judgy McJudgerson. How do you know? I’m gonna click his message.” A second later he said, “Oh, dick pic. You were right.”

He went through a few names, telling me about the men or what they’d messaged. We laughed and joked and put some in a maybe category and some straight up no.

I couldn’t pretend I didn’t notice Corbin getting closer and closer to me. I had no doubt that if he just wanted to fuck me, he’d have no qualms about spitting it out. He was honest about shit like that, but I thought maybe the cuddle stuff was different for him. Last night went well, and he joked around and called me CB, but I had a feeling he wanted it today and didn’t know how to ask.

“Come here,” I told him, surprising myself. But what was the point in continuing to feel that way when it was obvious Corbin regularly made me act in ways I couldn’t explain? “Actually, I think I need a shower.”

“Why? I don’t give a shit about that. Hell, I’ll probably like it.”

When I held my arm out, putting it on the back of the couch, Corbin tucked himself right in. I lowered my hand to his shoulder, then his arm, massaging it and holding him close. He put a leg over one of mine, burrowed in deeper, to my chest, keeping his phone in his hand.

“Who’s the next guy?” I asked. Because what Corbin and I were doing wasn’t about being boyfriends or even having sex. It was about...companionship, about this man who was known as The Charmer, who could get anyone to fall in love with him

and had a great group of friends, yet I thought he felt very alone. He needed someone outside *The Vers* guys, someone who just wanted to be his friend and who didn't expect anything else from him. Who enjoyed his company not because he was sexy and charming, but because he was him.

"Hmm. This one doesn't sound too bad. His name is Christopher. He's thirty-five. He works in tech and loves the gym and working on his body."

Well, I wasn't sure that was the healthiest thing for Corbin, but for now I kept it to myself.

"He says he's done the hookup thing all his life, never had a real relationship, and now he's feeling like he's missing out, so basically he's me."

"You should message him," I said seriously.

"Maybe I will," Corbin replied, but then closed the app. "I'm tired."

He turned toward me, wrapping his arm around me, face in my neck, breathing me in.

My dick was definitely getting a little excited as blood began rushing toward my groin. "Do you want to stay?" I mean, we were cuddle buddies and all. Jesus Christ, I couldn't believe I'd even thought that.

"If you insist," he replied with a chuckle.

"I need to take a shower."

"Me too. I'll go home and take one and come back?"

"Perfect."

This was...so fucking weird. What the hell were we doing?

Still, we got up, gathered the dinner trash, and threw it all away. I told Corbin I'd leave the door unlocked, and he headed next door to his apartment. The first thing I did in the shower was jerk off, hoping that would keep me from getting hard the second he was in my bed again.

I washed up, then tugged on a pair of boxer briefs, just as I heard the door open and him say, “You ready, CB?”

“Yep.” I made my way back into the living room. Corbin had on shorts and a tee, his hair wet like mine. He locked the door, and I turned off the lights, like we were a fucking couple or something. When we got to my room, he stripped down to his underwear while I did my best not to stare.

His body was so different from mine—hard where I was soft, six-pack abs while mine were beneath some pudge. His hip bones poked out a bit too much for my comfort, though.

“I brought my charger.” Corbin plugged his phone in and set it on the nightstand on the side of the bed where he would sleep. Each of us set our alarms, I hit the lights, and we climbed into bed together.

“I like the smell of your soap.” He nuzzled his face into my armpit, which was really fucking hot. If it were about sex, I’d expect him to stick his tongue out and lick it. “And I like the way you feel...soft and warm. Comfortable.”

“I like the way you feel too,” I admitted. What was the point in lying?

“Cuddle buddies are the best.”

I chuckled. “Shut up and go to bed, Corbin. We have to get up early for work.”

“Yes, CB,” he replied playfully, threw his leg over my body, and did just as I said.

## CHAPTER NINE

### *Corbin*

I'D SAID IT before, and I would say it again—cuddle buddies were awesome.

I'd slept in Spencer's bed every night this week. Every morning the alarm would go off, he'd get ready for his day while I returned to my apartment and got ready too, and then we'd each go to work. Depending on my schedule, some mornings I woke up earlier than he did to go to the gym before heading to the office. In the afternoon, I'd sometimes hit up the gym, and I'd met with Marcus once—not telling him about me and Spencer yet—but then in the evening, Spencer and I always had dinner together. We'd watch TV or just sit around and talk. Spencer would open up his arms and let me crawl inside, which was the same thing he did when we went to bed every night.

I couldn't pretend I understood it, but I also didn't give a shit about that. All I knew was it made me feel...cared for? Protected? Maybe that sounded dumb since I didn't need to be protected from anything, but it just made me feel special in a way I never had. Deep down I knew Spencer was only doing it for me. I highly doubted he was like, *I can't fucking wait to cuddle Corbin tonight!* But it wasn't how it felt in his arms. There I was wanted, and as shallow as that made me, I needed to feel wanted. Sure, it had been less than a week, but I hadn't even hooked up with a guy since we started this, and yet, I didn't miss it. I loved sex. I loved getting off with someone, but right now if I had the choice of finding a random guy online to have a quickie with or nuzzling into Spencer's body while we watched a true-crime show, I would pick the second one every time.

What I *had* done was message Christopher. We'd spoken a few times, but I just didn't feel that connection. He was nice enough, but nothing screamed out at me to meet up with him. Nothing told me this guy could be my first real boyfriend. Who knew this whole thing would be so hard?

These were the things I was thinking about while Spencer slept behind me, making me the little spoon while I felt a very prominent erection against my ass.

Maybe I could have sex with Spencer. I'd definitely be down for that. There was no doubt that my CB turned me on. I liked the feel of his chest hair against my skin. I liked that he was bigger than I was. His confident smile, broad chest, and... yep. My dick was in the game now, but I worried it would fuck up the cuddling. Like I'd said, the cuddling was more important now.

Also...why was waking up next to him on a Saturday morning when neither of us had to go to work so much more awkward?

When Spencer moaned, his breath skating across my cheek, I couldn't help wiggling back. I mean, sometimes my ass had a mind of its own.

"You did that on purpose," he said, finally waking up.

"I did not." I turned in his arms so we were facing each other. Spencer cocked a brow. "Fine, I did. I haven't had sex in a while, and you're really hot."

"You know you can have sex, right? We're not committed in any way. We're—"

"Friends who cuddle. Yes, I know." But then I'd have to take time away from him, and I didn't want to. I looked at his bulge. "Or *we* could have sex."

"We're not going to hook up," Spencer replied.

Something pinched inside my chest, and the quiet voice in my head, the one that always told me no one would want me, tried to break free. Which was fucked up when you thought

about it because I knew men wanted me all the time. I didn't ever have to spend a night alone if I didn't want to, but they wanted me for what they saw on the outside. Not what was inside. They wouldn't have wanted me if I were the boy I used to be.

“Hey,” Spencer said, hooking his finger beneath my chin and tilting my head up. “Not because I don't want you—I wanted you the first night I saw you, both in college and when I moved in next to you—but because you're my friend and I want to do right by you. I still feel like shit about some of the things I said to you. I don't want you to ever feel used by me.”

“Use me, Spencer. It would be fun.” No matter what he said, it didn't make sense to me that he wouldn't fuck me if he really wanted to—like he was just saying he wanted me because he was a nice guy and didn't want to hurt my feelings.

He frowned. “No.”

“I don't think you would be using me,” I clarified because I thought maybe that was why he was saying no. “It's sex. People hook up.”

“I know. Just, trust me.”

“Ugh. Fine. I was only trying to help you empty your balls.” I tried to pull back, but Spencer tugged me to him, squeezing me in his brawny arms. “Can't...breathe...”

“You love it, you little cuddle slut.”

I did. How had I not found a CB earlier? But then, I wasn't sure I wanted someone other than Spencer to do it. “I think you like it too.” I nuzzled his pecs, rubbed my cheek against the hair on his chest.

“Two weeks ago I thought I hated you, and now...well, now...”

I grinned. “Now what?”

“Nothing.”

“Nope.” I rolled on top of him, which was a mistake on my part because it just made me want him more.

“You’re trying to kill me.”

“Your fault. Now what?”

“You’re my friend. I said that already.”

That couldn’t have been all he was going to say. “I’m not getting off you until you tell me. If you try to stand, I’ll wrap my arms and legs around you. I’ll be attached to you the whole fucking day, and I’m relentless when I want to be.”

Spencer chuckled, his chest and stomach shaking, vibrating me. “Fine. I like this. I haven’t worked out why yet, but I might look forward to it too.”

I was stunned, and Spencer took the chance while I wasn’t expecting it and flipped me, rolling me onto my back. He lingered above me, holding himself up so he wasn’t giving me his weight the way I did him.

I said, “I think you want to be one of my best friends.”

“Ew,” Spencer teased.

“You do. Don’t lie. You want to be my CBBFF.”

“Cuddle Buddy Best Friend Forever?”

I nodded, and Spencer let out another laugh and shook his head, then surprised me by tapping the tip of my nose with one of his fingers. It felt so sweet...so comfortable. Strangely and perfectly intimate. “What am I going to do with you?” he asked, then sat up. I missed the heat of him immediately.

I scooted over and sat beside him. “What are we going to do today?” I was needy. I knew that. Hopefully it didn’t push him away.

“I have to go to the center for a couple of hours. Then we can do anything.”

“Can I go with you? Maybe I can talk to Jini some more before I see Park tomorrow.”

“Sure.”

But then... “Oh shit. I need to go to the gym.”

He opened his mouth like he wanted to argue with me. There was no doubt in my mind that he wanted to tell me I didn't need to go, and he likely thought it was shallow of me that I wanted to, but then he said, “You can do that, and we can meet up later...or you can go with me and skip a day. It won't kill you. And if later tonight you really want to go, you can. I'll even go with you.”

I did that sometimes, went in the evening instead of the afternoon, so I told him, “Okay. I'll go later.”

“Deal. Now go get ready. I'll figure out breakfast.”

I tugged on a pair of sweats. “I'll be back.”

I went home and took a quick shower, not taking the time to jerk off even though I really wanted to come. I put on a pair of jeans and a blue, long-sleeved shirt. I fixed up my hair, brushed my teeth, and snapped a photo for Instagram.

When I knocked on Spencer's door, he called out for me to come in. He was in the kitchen. “I made smoothies.”

“I'm not really hungry.”

“Take it just in case.” He handed one to me and kept the other for himself.

We took his car to the center, and I did end up drinking some of the smoothie.

Everyone greeted Spencer when we arrived, happy to see him. It was pretty busy on a Saturday, people working and others simply spending time together in the different rooms they had, both adults and younger people.

Like earlier in the week, Spencer introduced me to everyone. He pointed toward a hallway. “My office is the third door on the left if you need me. Otherwise, make yourself at home.”



I liked this place. There was something homey about it, and I thought maybe a large part of it had to do with Spencer.

I ignored that thought while I made my way to the library. When my phone buzzed, I tugged it from my pocket to see a text.

**Marcus:** Hey, kid. What are you doing today? Want to spend the day with me and Kai?

Any other time I would've jumped at the opportunity, but today I was too interested in spending the day here and then with Spencer.

**Me:** Nah, I'm good. I'll see you tomorrow. Spend time with your boy.

I wasn't surprised when my phone rang. I answered with, "I'm fine."

"Where are you? With a guy?"

"No...well, yes. I came to the LGBTQ center with Spencer. He's doing some work, and I'm gonna hang before we find something to do later."

He let out a low growl, which made me chuckle. "What in the hell is up with this? He's been a dick to you for months. I don't like you spending time with him. I feel like he's up to no good."

If only Marcus knew the truth. "I'll be fine, Daddy Marcus. He apologized for that."

"And that makes it okay?"

I sighed because he wouldn't get it. His worry came from a good place. Marcus had been trying to take care of me since we first met. That worked for both of us, but I didn't want it to come between me and Spencer.

"I'll explain it all to you tomorrow."

"Okay...I just don't want you to try to make this guy like you only so you can prove him wrong about the shit he said. You don't have to prove him wrong. He *was* wrong, and I'll tell him that next time I see him."

“Simmer down, big guy,” I joked.

“See you tomorrow. Love you, kid.”

“I love you too.” I ended the call.

When I got to the library, I didn’t see Jini, so I decided to browse and wait to see if she showed up. There weren’t very many people in there. A skinny kid who looked about fifteen, wearing black-framed glasses beneath a mop of messy hair, sat in a chair, reading a book. The kid peeked over their book at me and said, “You’re Spencer’s friend from the party.”

“I am. Were you there?” I glanced at the pronouns pin on his shirt. He/him.

“No, but everyone is talking about the guy Spencer was with because he hasn’t brought a guy here since DJ, who was a dick and none of us liked him.”

My chest puffed out a little. I liked the idea of them not liking Spencer’s ex and that he hadn’t brought anyone here but me.

“You also do the podcast.”

“Yeah, but it’s not kid friendly.”

“I’m eighteen.”

“Well, still. I’m Corbin, by the way.”

“No shit.”

He was kind of a brat.

“What’cha reading?”

“*Two Boys Kissing* by David Levithan. I also have a book of poetry by Federico Garcia Lorca.”

“What’s the first one about?” I took the chair beside him. “And holy fuck. I would have loved to read a book called *Two Boys Kissing* when I was eighteen. Shit. I’m probably not supposed to say fuck.”

He laughed, but then tried to frown like he hadn’t wanted to.

“Can we forget I said that?”

He rolled his eyes, but I could see the small smile on his lips. “It’s narrated by a group of queer men who died from AIDS in the 1980s. The men tell stories about queer teens today—what they observe now, through the prism of their own knowledge and experience of having lived during their time. It’s incredible. I’ve read it four times.”

“Wow...that sounds really fucking cool.”

“You said fuck again.”

“So did you,” I countered.

“Yes, but I wasn’t nervous about doing it.”

I chuckled. This kid was awesome. “What’s your name?”

“Gael,” he answered, and then... “Wanna read it?”

“I don’t want to take a book you’re reading.”

“Like I said, I’ve read it four times. It’s okay if you don’t want to. People say shit they don’t mean all the time.”

“No, I do mean it,” I rushed out because it really did sound interesting.

Gael handed me the book. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d read a novel, but I would this one, not just because I wanted to, but because I didn’t want to let Gael down. Something about the kid told me he was lonely. He couldn’t look more different from how I did at his age, but I felt the same sadness in him I’d carried, and damned if I didn’t want to do something about it.

## CHAPTER TEN

### *Spencer*

I'D SPENT TWO and a half hours taking care of loose ends that had cropped up this week. Corbin hadn't popped into my office at all, which had surprised me, especially after I learned that Jini wasn't even in today.

The second I turned into the library, I heard him chuckle. My gaze snapped up to see Corbin in one chair, Gael in another, both with their heads thrown back and laughing.

I'd never heard Gael laugh so passionately, so open and honest, and Corbin spent two hours with him, and this was the result? He really was The Charmer.

But then all I could do was smile because Gael was laughing, and Corbin was laughing, and I wanted that so much for both of them. They hadn't seen me yet, so I stood there watching them chat. Corbin had a book on the arm of the chair, and Gael had one on the side table. I loved reading and wished I had more time for it. Did Corbin read? If so, what kind of books did he like? There was so much I wanted to know about him, and that truth made my pulse speed up. This friendship had come on swiftly, unexpectedly, but in no time at all, I realized how much I wanted it.

Corbin was the one who noticed me first. His gaze snagged on mine, and a smile stretched across his face. "Hey, CB. Gael made me cry."

I walked over to them. "Sounds to me like he made you laugh."

"I cried first," Corbin answered.

"I didn't make him cry," Gael replied. "I just showed him a book, and he started reading it. Blame David Levithan for the

tears.”

“What are you reading?”

“*Two Boys Kissing*, but I think it’s going to slay me.”

Well, then I would just have to cuddle him and make him feel better, wouldn’t I?

Gael patted Corbin’s arm. “You’ll be okay.”

“Who’s the adult here?” I asked.

“You?” Corbin teased, and the three of us shared a laugh.

Gael said, “I should grab the bus home. I have to help Mom with some things today.” He stood, and Corbin did the same.

After we told Gael goodbye, I turned to Corbin with wide eyes. “How in the fuck did you do that?”

“Do what?”

“With Gael. He doesn’t let people in quickly. He’s a great kid but doesn’t make friends easily. He’s had a rough go of it. I’ve never heard him laugh the way he did just now.” Was there anything Corbin couldn’t do? All it took was one conversation with him, one look at his sparkling eyes, and he had people smitten.

“No shit?”

“No shit.”

“He’s great. We just started talking and clicked. I could tell he was lonely, so I wanted to fix it, but then I just enjoyed talking to the kid. Something about him reminds me of myself when I was his age.”

“Jesus. Thank you.” I grabbed Corbin and pulled him into a hug. He immediately buried his face in my neck, returning my embrace, maybe even tighter than I held him.

“What are you thanking me for?”

“I don’t know...befriending him. I want that for Gael so much, and it just...” Just amazed me that somehow Corbin

zeroed in on the one kid I felt a connection with too. How we had these moments and small things that tied us together.

“Well, snuggles are a nice thank-you. I guess my awesomeness comes naturally, and Gael must have seen that.”

Little did he know he was quickly putting a spell on me too.

“So, what are we going to do today?” Corbin asked when he pulled away.

“Something fun.” When was the last time I’d just went out and done something fun? But being around Corbin made it impossible not to want to do exactly that.

“I have the perfect idea!” Corbin took my hand, grabbed the book in the other, then led me out of the building.

We didn’t let go of each other until we got to the car.



WE ENDED UP going to an arcade, which had been a surprise, but one I was on board with. They had a variety of games, bumper cars, race cars, miniature golf, and also served meals and drinks.

“You really are a big kid, aren’t you?” I said when Corbin grabbed my hand and practically dragged me toward the doors.

“No one wants to come here with me. Marcus never knew how to have fun before Kai, and hitting up an arcade definitely wasn’t on his list.”

“Oh, I see, so you bring me because your friends don’t want to go? Now my feelings are hurt.”

“No, they’re not. I know you better than that, but also, that’s not true. I’ve heard CBs are awesome people to go play games with.” I couldn’t help rolling my eyes, which made Corbin grin. “What? It’s a known fact.”

“A minute ago you randomly ‘heard’ this, and now it’s a known fact?”

“You added the randomly. Not me.”

We headed inside and found a table first, so we had a home base to come back to. It was loud because of all the game noises, but luckily, it wasn't as busy as it could be. Maybe people were saving money for the upcoming holidays.

A waitress came by, and we asked for water and ordered a plate of wings to share. She was hardly a step away from the table before Corbin said, “Let's go,” then dragged me out of our booth.

Chuckling, I said, “I don't think the games are going anywhere.”

“You said today is my day, and I intend to have all the fun.”

“Um...I don't recall saying that.”

“You don't? Strange because I do.”

We loaded game cards with money and then were on our way. We shot basketball and played Skee-Ball. I kicked Corbin's ass in a race-car game, but then he took me out in a shooting game. While I enjoyed games, I couldn't deny there was an extra buzz at the base of my spine today. Part of it came from how Corbin made me laugh, but I also just enjoyed seeing him have fun. He was so open, so pure in this way I couldn't really explain. Like Corbin was all feeling, led by his heart and emotions. Everything was big with him, so when he was laughing and having a good time, it was contagious. I felt everything he did, his joy inspiring my own. If this was what he showed, I wondered how much heart he kept hidden. How big was all that hurt I knew he felt.

“Come on. Time to refuel.” I took his hand, and Corbin let me, the two of us returning to the table. The wings were there but had to be cold by now. Corbin fell into his side of the booth, drinking down his whole glass of water in gulp after gulp.

“How many do you want?” I asked, putting a few wings on my plate.

“I’m not hungry,” Corbin replied, then frowned, probably at my look of disbelief. “What? I’m not. This isn’t a thing right now. I’m just not hungry.”

And that might very well be the truth. It wasn’t as if a person had to eat every time someone else did, but it worried me when it came to him. I also didn’t want to push too hard. I had no idea how to handle this situation. “Do you want something else?”

“I’m good, CB.” He winked at me. “So...you suck at games.”

“I won some,” I countered, before eating a bite.

“If by some you mean like one. It’s okay. Just one of the many things I’m good at. I know it’s hard to keep up.”

“You’re a cocky sonofabitch,” I teased.

“You say that like you didn’t already know it.”

When the waitress came by, Corbin asked for more water. He nursed that glass while I ate and we chatted.

“Should we head outside next?” he asked.

“Sure. Whatever you want.”

“If that were the case, we’d end this night naked.” He pumped his brows.

My emotions and thoughts were at war with what he’d said. Part of me was surprised Corbin wanted me, and I hated that because I’d worked hard to be confident in the man I was, to feel comfortable in my skin, and to be proud and feel attractive, but because I knew some of Corbin’s struggles with his own self-image, I couldn’t fit the pieces together. How could he be attracted to me but worry obsessively about his own weight? Stress out if he gained a pound or someone made a comment online? And even though I believed Corbin was attracted to me, or would want to hook up with me, I sometimes thought he made comments like he just had because it was part of the role he played.



“You’re thinking hard over there.” He tapped my ankle with his foot. “I was just giving you shit. I mean, I would definitely get naked with you, but you’ve made it clear you don’t want that. It was a joke. I’m having fun with you, and I want to keep having fun with you.” His gaze darted away.

“I want to keep having fun with you too.”

“It’s different with you. It’s strange as fuck. It almost feels like it did with Marcus, Parker, and Declan. Comfortable and no pressure. Like I can just be.”

Jesus, I didn’t know what to even say to that. How in the fuck did Corbin already have me so twisted up? “Maybe it’s because I’m not trying to fuck you. There are all these men who see how beautiful you are, which makes them want you. Part of you likes that, but you also know it’s surface-level shit. They don’t know the real Corbin. They want you for how you look, and with your past, you seek that out, needing to be wanted any way you can. But I like spending time with you... and snuggling you.” I winked. “Because I enjoy your company. It has nothing to do with how gorgeous you are, and that’s how it is with your friends too.”

“You think I’m beautiful?”

My brows drew together. “Yes. Fuck yes. Jesus, Corbin.” How could he really not know how beautiful he was?

“Why does it feel different hearing it from you than when people say it online? Or when...” When he was hooking up with someone. “You’re messing with my head, CB.”

“Maybe you need that.” And maybe something about being with him made me feel special too. Making him feel good filled something inside me I hadn’t even known was missing.

“Maybe I do...but I also need to ram the fuck out of you in bumper cars, so can we go do that, please?”

I laughed as I began wiping my hands with a napkin. “You’re so fucking spoiled.”

“Hey, maybe you’ll praise-kink me the way Elliott does Parker.”

“Praise-kink you? First you want to be cuddled, and then you want to be praised? You sure ask for a lot.”

“The cuddling is the best,” he replied, and damned if I didn’t feel the same.

We made our way outside and to the bumper cars, where he did, in fact, ram the fuck out of me. I couldn’t remember the last time I laughed so hard. From there we did the racetrack, then ended the day with mini golf.

We were still laughing as we left the arcade later. And when we got home, I automatically unlocked my apartment and signaled for Corbin to go inside.

“I’m sorry I was so much better than you at everything we did today,” he said, taking his shoes off.

“Why do I get the impression you’re not sorry at all?”

“Because you know me.”

I did know him. It had happened incredibly fast. “At least you don’t deny it.”

“Can I get some water?” Corbin asked.

“Of course. Make yourself at home.”

He got himself a drink, and I pulled out some freshly cut veggies and ranch dip. I didn’t mention anything about eating but set the food on the table so it would be there for him if he wanted it. “Want to watch a movie?”

“God. So clingy,” he teased, plopping down on my couch.

I removed my shoes too and joined him. We found a comedy, and Corbin immediately snuggled up against my side as we watched. I’d never realized I liked this so much. I’d been wrapped up in numerous men in my life, been held, held them, but it didn’t have the same weight it did with Corbin. Maybe because I was not only getting that contact, but also the

emotional part of knowing it was giving Corbin something he needed.

He picked at the food, selecting a few pieces, which I was glad for. Cucumbers seemed to be his favorite, so I made a mental note to keep them around the house.

When the movie ended, I was surprised when Corbin asked, “Do you miss DJ? I know you cared about him a lot.”

Why was he asking this? Maybe because he was still considering looking for a boyfriend?

“I do...sometimes more than others. I thought I was going to spend my life with him, so of course there are times when it'll hit me—what I had and what I don't have now. The upcoming holidays are hard. Christmas Eve is actually his birthday.”

“Ugh.” Corbin playfully banged his head against my chest.

“What?”

“I spend Christmas Eve with my family. It's...a lot.”

“Maybe we should run away together on Christmas Eve,” I said jokingly.

“I fucking wish. They wouldn't understand, and I already disappoint them enough.”

Something squeezed in my chest. “You don't do a damn thing to be disappointing.”

“They don't mean any harm.”

“Intent doesn't always matter,” I replied, believing that.

“Damn, why you so smart?”

“Brat.” When he yawned, I asked, “You ready for bed?”

Corbin nodded, paused, then said, “What are we doing?”

I didn't know. I still couldn't wrap my head around it, but whatever it was, I didn't want to stop. “Being cuddle buddies. What else?”

Corbin laughed. “I knew you liked the name!”

He put the dishes in the kitchen while I turned the lights out. We brushed our teeth in my bathroom together, then stripped down to our underwear. When Corbin laid his head on my chest, I breathed out, running my fingers through his hair as I drifted off to sleep.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### *Corbin*

“*How do you deal with being vulnerable and opening up to your partner when you’ve never done that before?*” I read the listener’s question while sitting in the studio with the Beach Bums as we recorded the next episode. “One, two, three, not it!” I said right after. I had no idea how in the fuck to answer this question.

“Why would you do a thing like that?” Marcus asked, and I swatted his arm.

“Please. Your man has you wrapped around his finger. Don’t pretend you’re not vulnerable as shit with Kai.”

“Vulnerable as shit?” Declan teased.

I ignored his comment. “And you shouldn’t pretend you’re not the same with Bastian. Our two stoic besties are all shmoopy now that they’ve fallen in love, while I can’t even find a boyfriend!”

“Are you still doing that, kid?” Marcus asked.

“Wait,” Parker interrupted. “I definitely want to get back on the topic of Corbin and his boyfriend quest, but I feel like we should answer the question first, and since I’m the only one of the four of us who happens to have any emotional maturity, I’ll take it.”

“Hey! I’m totally emotionally mature!” I argued. There was a beat of silence before my friends burst into laughter. “You guys suck,” I grumbled, pretending to pout. I could do emotions in a way they didn’t seem to think I could. I shared shit with Spencer all the time. We talked about everything. He knew more about me than anyone other than the three people in this room with me.

“Can we get back to Parker answering the question now?” Declan asked, making it clear he really wasn’t going to be the one to answer. “Then we can tackle Corbin’s maturity or lack thereof.”

I gave him the finger.

“There’s no guide on vulnerability,” Parker got us on track again, “but my advice is to find the right person and then give that to them. It’ll be easier because they deserve it. Even before I could admit to myself I had feelings for Elliott, I was giving him pieces of myself I never gave anyone else. My fear held me back, and to this day, I thank him for sticking by me and not giving up. I was in denial about what he meant to me, but at the same time, my heart knew, and that’s why I was able to open up to him like I couldn’t with others. In some ways, I think it comes naturally when the person and timing are right, but you also have to allow yourself to believe it’s okay. You have to open up to yourself and admit how you feel, and once you do, it gets easier to be vulnerable with them.”

My skin suddenly grew clammy. Hadn’t I just been thinking about how I shared more with Spencer than I did with anyone other than these guys? And the other night I’d straight up told him that talking with him felt like it did with my Beach Bums. The way Parker made it sound, that meant Spencer was...*more* to me or something. I said, “But people do that with friends too. Look at us.”

“Of course,” Parker replied. “I’ve always known the three of you were my friends and only my friends. But while I found myself opening up to Elliott in a similar way, I knew my feelings for him were different.”

“Yeah, you never wanted to be *our* good boy,” Declan teased.

I breathed out a sigh of relief. Not that I didn’t want Spencer, because I did, but also, the thought of wanting more with him was scary as fuck. He was my friend, my CB, and the last thing I wanted was to ruin that. If I got feelings for him and got all relationship vulnerable with him, that would just

push him away. Spencer might be willing to cuddle me and want to be my friend and, hell, he even said I was beautiful, but I couldn't imagine him wanting to be in a relationship with me. And the first time I tried the boyfriend thing, I wanted it to be with someone where I didn't have as much at stake as I did with him.

"Why you so quiet?" Marcus asked, pulling me out of my thoughts.

"Usually you guys tell me to shut up, and today you're asking me why I'm quiet? What do you people want from me!" I joked, playing it off with enthusiasm.

"Aw, we never really want you to shut up, Corb," Parker said.

"Well, that's good because I don't ever plan to."

"Can I admit I'm glad you haven't been sharing all your hookup stories lately?" Declan said, and...and holy fuck. Because I wasn't hooking up. When was the last time I'd had sex with someone?

Sweat suddenly dripped down the back of my neck. "I'm trying to find a boyfriend, remember? I've been talking to a nice guy online." Whom I still haven't tried to see in person. Christopher was nice, but he wasn't... He just wasn't.

"He's not good enough for you," Marcus said.

I rolled my eyes. "You don't know anything about him."

"I think what Marcus is trying to say is that looking for a boyfriend might mean that you're more willing to accept shitty behavior," Parker said. "Look at me. I wanted love for years, and all I got was heartbreak after heartbreak. It wasn't until I stopped looking that I found Elliott."

"Technically you found him a year earlier, but you refused to go out with him," Declan pointed out.

"No one asked you." Parker winked at him.

Marcus's comment did remind me that I needed to find a way to tell them what I was doing with Spencer. It didn't suit me to keep things like this from them.

"Let's answer another question," I said, changing the subject. I was surprised when it worked.

We went from that to "Mimosas and Man-Talk," where I talked about one of the movies Spencer and I had just watched, and Parker rambled about a new restaurant he and Elliott had tried. Luckily, they forgot to discuss my emotional maturity.

As soon as Marcus stopped the recording, three sets of eyes zeroed in on me, but it was my bossy best friend who asked, "Why have none of us seen much of you lately?"

"I think I'm gonna go talk to Kai, Elliott, and Sebastian." I shoved to my feet and went for the door, and as expected, they all followed. The Poddies were all in the living room and looked up when we walked in.

"Is it the Christopher guy?" Marcus asked. "Is he treating you well?"

"Uh-oh," Kai said. "Daddy is in the building. I repeat, Daddy is in the building."

"God, I love you," I told Kai, before turning to Marcus. "It's not Christopher. He's a possibility on the boyfriend front. The other thing is something different."

Elliott smiled. "Well, this just got interesting."

"Never a dull moment," Sebastian chimed in.

"Are you okay?" Declan asked. "We were planning on talking to you anyway. You've been absent lately, Corb, and I don't know if it's because..." His gaze darted around the room, and I knew he meant because they were all happily in relationships and in love and I wasn't. "We miss you. I can't even remember the last time you were in Driftwood."

My heart felt impossibly mushy. Christ, I was so lucky to have these people in my life. How could I care what anyone



else thought of me when I had them? “It’s not that. I know your lives aren’t complete without me here all the time. I would never deny you the gift of my presence. I’ve just...been hanging out with Spencer a lot lately.”

“A lot? I thought it was only the once,” Marcus said.

“Wait. I thought we hated him?” Elliott asked.

“We do hate him,” Kai concurred. “We named him Asshole Spencer for a reason!”

“He’s not an asshole,” I said, and they all looked at me, confused.

“Are you kidding me right now?” Marcus asked. “The man said shitty things to you.”

Kai put his arms around his boyfriend. Marcus was seething. The thing about Marcus was he needed to be needed. It was one of the things that had connected us. I’d really fucking needed him, and that had given him something he needed in return. I still did in so many ways. Marcus would forever be my person, and because I had depended on him so much, he took his role as my caretaker seriously.

“What Marcus is trying to say is, we worry about you. We don’t want you to put up with someone who treats you badly,” Kai said, trying to smooth things over.

“He doesn’t. He’s my CB.”

“Cock and balls?” Elliott asked, and Parker swatted him on the arm.

“Cuddle Buddy.”

“Excuse me, what?” Declan asked.

I sighed. “We met before. I didn’t recognize him. It was the beginning of college, and I was trying to fit in at school and missing Dec and Parker. I saw Marcus a lot less at the time too, and hadn’t yet found my footing. We met at a beach party and talked for hours. We really connected, but then a group of guys I was trying to impress showed up, and I bailed

on him right when we were about to kiss. He went to find me, heard the guys saying fucked-up things about him and his weight, while I didn't counter or defend him in any way, so he left. He had a lot of feelings about that, which was why he made his assumptions about me. We had a long talk about it and sorted through all that. He's not an asshole. If he's an asshole, so am I. None of us are perfect."

"Well, shit." Marcus pulled me close and kissed my temple the way he did. "You're not an asshole."

"Neither is he. He's my friend."

"Can you fill us in on the cuddle-buddy thing?" Declan asked, making me chuckle. It sounded ridiculous when he said it, but it didn't feel that way when Spencer was holding me.

"The subject came up about me being a cuddle slut. I don't even know how, but he just...hugged me...and held me...and now it's a thing we do...every single night." I squeezed my eyes shut, waiting for a group of voices to chime in with a ton of questions. When it didn't happen, I opened them again.

"What do you mean, every night?" Parker asked.

"I mean, I sleep at his house, in his bed. It's not sexual. We're friends who cuddle, hence cuddle buddies. And that's not all we do. We went to the arcade, and spent time together at the LGBTQ center where he works. I met this great kid who is suggesting books for me to read. His name is Gael...tiny little thing and all heart. Spencer says he doesn't have a lot of friends and was surprised that he connected with me instantly. Apparently, that's not something Gael does often, but it's me and I'm charming, so it makes sense. They need romance books in the library, so I said I'd ask Parker if he'd be willing to do a book drive. Oh! And we went to this party at the center too. We played charades with the kids, and then Spencer danced and—"

"All this happened in a couple of weeks?" Declan interrupted.

"Yeah."

Marcus said, “And the same motherfucker who said fucked-up shit to you is cuddling with you every night out of the goodness of his heart? With no expectations? I don’t trust it.” Marcus’s voice was tight, his eyes narrowed.

“Marcus...”

“I think it’s sweet,” Sebastian said.

“Seems like he’s realized he was wrong about Corb, and clearly, he enjoys spending time with him.” Parker gave me a tender smile. “I think it’s good for you.”

I stepped closer to Marcus. “It’s not like I never hurt him.”

“What you did is completely different from what he did. He had you second-guessing who you are as a person, saying you wouldn’t be into someone who looked like him. I can’t forgive that shit.”

“Baby...” Kai started. “I love you for your fierce loyalty and pure fucking love of your friends, but you’re being a little unfair here. Corbin is an adult, and if he forgives Spencer and says he’s a good guy, it’s our job as his friends to support and believe him.”

“Unless Spencer fucks up again,” Declan said. “Then he’s dead to us.”

God, I loved them all so fucking much. There wasn’t anything in the world they wouldn’t do for me. The people in this room were my family. No one would ever love me the way they did, and I still didn’t understand how they could, but I was so fucking thankful for it—especially Marcus.

I looked over to see Marcus pulling Kai close to him. Their foreheads touched, arms around each other, and I knew Kai was reeling Marcus in, the way no one could, not even me. Kai leaned in, whispering something in Marcus’s ear. Marcus closed his eyes, nodded, kissed Kai’s lips, and then pulled away.

“Come’ere, kid.” Marcus tugged me to him, and I went easily. His strong arms wrapped around me, holding me tight. I

breathed in the familiar scent of him, the first person who made me feel beautiful, the first boy to kiss me, something he had done just for me and not because we were sexually attracted to each other. He was my rock, my biggest supporter, and I needed him to understand what this was with Spencer.

“I don’t really know what this thing is that I’m doing with him. I know it sounds crazy, but I need it. He makes me feel... good.” He did, didn’t he? Spencer made me feel good, his friendship made me feel that way, laughing with him did, and burying my face in his neck, his soft body against mine, made me feel protected and cared for. And for the first time in my life, even if this was something Marcus couldn’t get behind, I would do it because I didn’t want to walk away from it. From Spencer. “I’m not gonna stop...even if you don’t understand. I want your support, but—”

“Since when have I not had your best interests at heart? If you say he makes you feel good, then I got your back and I’m down for it. But I’m not playin’. He fucks up and—”

“We know, baby.” Kai patted Marcus’s shoulder. “Big, tough man will defend best friend.”

Marcus pulled away, and I said, “Beach Bum and Poddy hug.” Some of them laughed, some rolled their eyes and grumbled, but we came together, the seven of us in a group hug with me at the center. My heart squeezed with love for them, but that newer emotion dug in again, the one that made me feel left out and alone. “I really need to find a boyfriend so I have someone here with me too. Plus, I miss sex.”

I *felt* them still around me.

“What?” I asked.

“You’re not having sex?” Parker asked.

“No. I told you the thing with Spencer isn’t sexual. I want it to be, but I also don’t want to ruin what we have, and I’m not sure I’m ready to find a forever person like you guys did.” Or if I would ever be able to find a forever person outside of my friends. Maybe no one would want me that much?

“You always have sex,” Declan said.

“Did you just call me a slut? Thanks!”

Declan rolled his eyes.

Elliott asked, “Did you and Spencer agree not to fuck other people while you do your cuddle-buddy thing?”

Why were they freaking out about this? “No. He knows I’m looking for a boyfriend because of you guys. I talk to him about Christopher, but like I said, I’m not feeling it.”

“Is Spencer having sex with other people?” Kai popped in.

“Not that I know of. When would either of us do that? We’re always together.”

Marcus said, “Jesus, Corbin. You’re not hooking up, which isn’t normal for you. You’re spending all your free time with this guy. You’re going on dates with him and—”

“We didn’t go on a date,” I interrupted him.

Kai grinned. “Yes, you did, sweetie.”

“You sleep in his bed every night, and he cuddles you...” Parker added.

“Congrats, Corbin. You have your first boyfriend!” Elliott’s hand came down on my shoulder and squeezed.

“I...” No, I didn’t. We were CBs. There was a huge difference, right?

“Well,” Declan said, “not without a conversation with Spencer, but you basically know what it’s like to have a boyfriend now.” Declan shook his head like he didn’t understand me.

“Except the sex,” I added.

“Not everyone has sex,” Sebastian told me, which was true. Sex wasn’t a necessity for a romantic relationship.

“We’re not boyfriends.” But I could see why it looked like we were. We were tentative with the friend thing—though it didn’t really feel like we were tentative. It felt right...

natural...and also, maybe he was still hung up on Fuckface DJ...

My gut clenched. I hated that guy and I didn't even know him, and...holy fuck. Was I jealous?

"I'm feeling dizzy. I think I need to sit down."

Everyone laughed but Sebastian, who, being the nice guy, led me to the couch. I thought DJ was a fuckface, but add in the fact that I was jealous of Spencer's ex and... Noooooo. This couldn't mean what I thought it meant.

"You okay?" Marcus sat down beside me.

Christopher was hot, but I didn't want to meet up with him. I wanted to spend all my time with Spencer.

I maybe wanted to have a *specific* boyfriend.

Or at least, I maybe wanted to date him and see if we could be a match.

I'd never ever wanted that in my life.

And he likely didn't want it with me.

And I was a mess to deal with, obsessed with how I looked and with getting attention and had issues with food. Who would want to tie themselves down to that?

I'd lose my cuddle buddy.

My friend.

No, I wasn't okay at all.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### *Spencer*

WAS IT WEIRD that my bed felt empty without Corbin in it? Yes, I was pretty sure it was.

I rolled over, grabbing one of the pillows so I could hug it the way I did him, which was pathetic. We had only been sharing the same bed for a couple of weeks, yet I acted like it had been years...and it was only a day without it, and I seemed to think that was a lifetime too.

It could simply be that my body had adjusted to holding something. The pillow I had was small. A body pillow might help. Lots of people had to sleep that way.

That was it. Body pillow for the win...

But that didn't explain why Corbin hadn't come over. He'd texted and said he wouldn't make it over, and now I was driving myself nuts, thinking about it instead of sleeping.

Had he stayed with Marcus? Maybe Corbin was in bed with him right now—his best friend on one side of him and Kai on the other—Corbin getting what he needed from them instead of me, and...would that be so bad?

Yes, yes it would. Jesus, how had I taken to this so quickly? It was supposed to be for Corbin, not for me. Missing it shouldn't be happening, but evidently, it was.

I grumbled and flipped over again.

Empty beds sucked.

And I'd lost my mind.

Those thoughts plagued me all night, but at some point I did manage to get a bit of sleep.

I was dragging ass the next morning as I got up and got ready for work. I had too many meetings today, as well as budget stuff to go through, which always put me in a shitty mood.

It was noon when I found myself searching Corbin's name on Instagram, which definitely meant I needed to get a life. Apparently, that wasn't happening today.

He'd already posted a couple of times. The first was him at the gym, early that morning. He looked sleepy, his eyes slightly puffy in the video of him doing squats.

The next photo seemed to be post gym and shower, wearing nothing but a jockstrap and a smile. Really fucking hot, but there was something about the smile on his face and the dimness in his eyes that made my chest ache. It wasn't the same as the smile I saw from Corbin in person. His pretty blue eyes didn't have the same sparkle.

I scrolled through the photos, looking at all of them, at his mouth and his gaze, and noticed the same thing. The photos weren't something he was excited to do. They weren't something he felt good about doing. They were something Corbin did because he thought it would make him feel better about himself.

The throbbing in my chest grew as I scrolled through the comments. Hundreds of them, a combination of men saying they wanted to fuck him, wanted Corbin to fuck them, telling him how hot or sexy he was. But then there were the other comments. The ones calling him fake, superficial, full of himself, saying how he's not that hot, others calling him ugly. What the fuck was wrong with people? Did they really have nothing better to do with their time than to say hurtful things to people on the internet? I couldn't wrap my head around what people got out of that, what was inside them that made them want to make others feel bad.

And I wished like hell Corbin didn't open himself up to it. I was at the point in my life where I didn't give a shit if someone said those things to me, but he would, and damned if



I didn't want to take on every single person who had anything negative to say to him.

Which...was an interesting development, one I wasn't sure how to handle.

“Spencer?”

I looked up to see Gael in the doorway. “Hey, you. You're here early.”

“Winter break. And I read this really good book and thought maybe Corbin would like to read it. He probably doesn't give a shit, and it's not like I care, but—”

“He gives a shit,” I interrupted. Even if Corbin didn't want to read it, I knew he would at least try to because Gael had chosen it for him. It was the kind of man Corbin was. “I know he loved *Two Boys Kissing*, and I also know it would mean a lot to him that you thought of him.”

Gael rolled his eyes. “Somehow I doubt that.”

“Well, you shouldn't. He asks about you all the time.” Which was true.

A flare of excitement lit Gael's brown eyes before he turned away to hide it. “Either way, it doesn't really matter. I just thought I'd bring it to you.” He set the book on my desk.

“Thank you. I'll give it to him tonight.”

Gael nodded, opened his mouth like he was going to say something, but then closed it again. He turned and went for the door, stopping with his back to me and said, “Thanks, Spencer...for everything or whatever,” then walked out.

I couldn't hold back my smile, and the first person I thought of to talk to about it was Corbin, not just because Gael had brought him the book, but because of what he'd said to me too. Somehow, I knew Corbin would get it more than anyone else.

Corbin annoyingly filled my thoughts the rest of the day. It was almost time to get off work when my cell buzzed. My

eyes darted toward it, wondering if it would be the man who had twisted my head, but it was Morgan.

“Thank God,” I said to him when I answered.

Morgan chuckled. “I don’t often hear that when I call someone. Want to grab dinner?”

Had Corbin eaten today? If so, how much? “Yes. Fuck yes.” I needed to get my mind off him.

We chose a little hole-in-the-wall, queer restaurant. They served a bit of everything, in a relaxed environment, the walls covered in photos of queer people and articles about queer history and things like that.

Morgan was already there when I arrived. He waved me over.

“I need a drink,” I said.

“Work stuff?”

Usually, it was work stuff, but that was before I’d come down with a case of Corbin Brain. Oh look, that was another form of CB. We were cuddle buddies, but he also left me with Corbin Brain, and had since the first time I met him.

“No.”

“Is everything okay?” Morgan’s brows pinched together in concern.

“Remember Annoying Neighbor?” I asked, having told him a few stories about Corbin before.

“The really beautiful guy you seem to hate for no reason? Yes, I remember him.”

Before I could continue, the waiter showed up. We each ordered a margarita, chips and salsa for an appetizer, and chicken street tacos. It was what we always got when we came here.

The second the waiter was gone, I said, “Yes. God yes. He really is gorgeous.” The thing most people didn’t see was that

Corbin was even more beautiful on the inside than the outside. I hadn't seen it until these past few weeks. I would still never forgive myself for judging him so harshly, and I wished everyone could see what I did in him.

“That sounded very...what's the word?...*swoony*. Looks like I need an update.”

“It wasn't swoony.” Was it? *Corbin Brain strikes again*. But I wanted to talk to someone about it, and Morgan was the person I discussed stuff with, so there was no reason to stall. “What I didn't tell you about him was that I've met him before.”

The waiter brought our drinks and appetizer while I told Morgan about the night I'd met Corbin in college. From there I went into my long-lasting grudge against him, which honestly, wasn't normal for me. I didn't tend to hold grudges.

“And now?” Morgan asked.

Now...now I wasn't sure what to say about him. It was confusing and exciting and, frankly, annoying too. “Now we're friends.”

“A friend you fuck?”

“Umm...no?”

Morgan gave a deep, husky laugh. “Why do you sound unsure about that? It's an easy question.”

Because explaining to him exactly what we did, and doing it without sharing any of Corbin's private struggles, was difficult. “A friend I cuddle.”

Morgan's dark brows rose. “Excuse me, what?”

“You heard me. We...cuddle. He sleeps at my house, in my bed. I haven't even kissed the guy, but we sleep together and snuggle on my couch. I know, I know. It's weird. I can't tell you why we do it, but it's something I started for him, and now I...” Now I liked it. And I missed it. I missed Corbin.

“Now it sounds like it's for you too and you like this guy.”

*Ding! Ding! Ding!* We had a winner. “Not *like* him like him. I just...sorta like him.”

Morgan laughed again, just as the waiter brought our food. He set each plate in front of us, asked if we needed anything else, and when we said no, disappeared again.

“You either like him or you don’t. All this weird code-word crush-talk is bullshit. You’re interested in him. What’s the big deal?”

The big deal was I was supposed to hate him, but I’d never really hated him. And we were an odd couple. I worried about him and wanted to protect and take care of him, but I didn’t know how to do that or if I *should* want to. Corbin said he was looking for a boyfriend, but I wasn’t sure that was something he really wanted. He just didn’t want to be alone, and the thought of getting myself entangled with another man who could easily walk away from me was...really fucking scary. I’d thought DJ and I were in it together forever, and if that couldn’t last, it sure as shit wouldn’t with someone like Corbin.

Not only that, but if Corbin worried about his body so much, how would that translate to being with me? Would he be able to handle it? Would it embarrass him?

But again, I didn’t want to stop this.

“I’m interested,” I admitted. “I don’t know how much or where it would go, but I’m interested.”

“There’s your answer, then.” Morgan shrugged. “You’re literally the most confident, put-together person I know. Whatever you’re afraid of, don’t be. You’ll conquer it like you do everything else in your life.”

I barked out a laugh. “I don’t know about that.”

But what I did know was that I wasn’t going to let Corbin avoid me. Even if he wasn’t interested in me in the way I thought I was with him, I still wanted to be his friend. Being there for Corbin gave me something I didn’t know I needed, and I wasn’t ready to walk away from that yet.

“I do,” Morgan said. “I don’t think you’ve run from a thing in your life. I respect the hell out of you for that.”

There was something in Morgan’s voice, a truth he’d never shared, and maybe a sadness too. He felt like he’d run from something. “Morgan...I really wish you could talk to me.”

“There’s nothing to talk about. You’re worried for no reason. We’re just different people. Not everyone is as comfortable sharing things.”

He was right, but I didn’t ever want him to think I didn’t care. “Please tell me that if you ever need to talk, you’ll come to me.”

“That I can do. Now let’s eat. I can’t believe you’re going to be dating Corbin Erickson from *The Vers*.”

I rolled my eyes. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.” Because the truth was, Corbin might want to fuck me and might like cuddling with me, but that didn’t mean he would want anything else. He cared what people thought, and people were shitty. They would have a whole lot of things to say about someone with a body like mine.



MY SELF-PROCLAIMED CB was avoiding me.

He hadn’t stayed at my house in three nights. When I went to his apartment, he wasn’t home. We didn’t run into each other in the hallway or the elevator, which led me to believe he was keeping strange hours so he wouldn’t run into me.

And he’d been posting on social media a lot. Frequently from the gym.

More than once I’d thought about texting him, but I hadn’t. First I told myself I didn’t want to push and that Corbin was done with the cuddle-buddy thing, but then, why was I standing outside Driftwood? He’d posted a reel from there, and like the stalker I’d turned into, I’d come straight down. Maybe I should be second-guessing myself because one of Corbin’s best friends owned this bar. He had people in his life

and didn't need me, but something about the look in Corbin's eyes, the missing spark in them despite the smile he kept on his face, had all the instincts I'd never had before him shooting into overdrive.

The bar was fairly busy for a weeknight. I hadn't been here before, so I didn't know if that was normal. There was security inside, more than you'd usually see in a bar this size, but then, the owner was dating Sebastian Cole, so that might've been the reason.

The counter was to the left after coming in the front door, so I went that direction first. As soon as I got close, I spotted Corbin. He was sitting toward the end of the bar, turned to the side and talking to a man who looked like he'd stepped out of a queer Instagram page for working out. The body language made it obvious they were flirting, which gave me pause. What had I been thinking, storming down here like...what, like Corbin needed me? Like I could give him something a million other men couldn't? But then, maybe I could because I knew my intentions were real. I gave a shit about Corbin and wanted what was best for him. Maybe this guy did too, but there was a chance he didn't.

"Holy shit. You're the CB!" a voice came from my right, and I looked over to see Marcus's boyfriend, Kai.

"Such a ridiculous name." I shook my head.

"Such a Corbin name," he replied. "I'm glad you're here. Can you go talk to our boy, please? I've decided I like you."

I chuckled. "Thanks, but he looks busy."

"So? I would never let that stop me, and something tells me you wouldn't either. Plus, Corbin has been weird the last couple of days and hanging out with us more again, which makes me think he's going through some stuff and hasn't been with you. We love him and want what's best for him, so please don't fuck with him, otherwise my boyfriend will kill you."

For the second time, Kai made me bark out a laugh. He was a spitfire, that was for sure. "Yeah, I've heard he's

protective of Corbin.”

“He is. And it’s a really beautiful thing, so if you are interested but don’t think you can handle that, please walk out now. They’re the definition of what friendship is supposed to be. Corbin needs a man who can accept that.”

“Who said I’m going to be Corbin’s man?”

I glanced over to see the guy standing between Corbin’s legs step closer. He lifted a hand and cupped Corbin’s cheek. Jealousy set ablaze my insides. Why that happened all of a sudden, I didn’t know. For weeks Corbin had been talking to men he might date, and I hadn’t given a shit, but standing here now? Seeing it? I didn’t want anyone touching him but me.

“The look on your face says it all. Go get him, tiger.” Kai winked at me before walking away.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### *Corbin*

“DO YOU WANT to get out of here with me?” Josh asked...or was it Jake? I couldn’t remember, but then, I didn’t think names were what we were looking for tonight. At least JoshJake wasn’t. He wanted a fuck, and while I’d told myself I was looking for a boyfriend, it had been hard since I stopped going to Spencer’s. I missed the connection, being in someone’s arms, and feeling desired, which strangely, I’d gotten from Spencer even though we hadn’t been having sex. Usually that came from social media or hooking up, but when Spencer held me...it was there. He was—*Stop it! Bad Corbin!* I wasn’t supposed to be thinking about Spencer. He was my friend, and dating him would ruin it all.

“What are you going to do with me if I do?” I flirted with JoshJake. This, I knew how to do. This was easy and gave me that feeling I sought, even if only temporarily.

“Corbin,” Declan said from behind me, warning in his voice. They’d been concerned about me the last couple of days, but I was fine. Not sleeping well and basically living at work, the gym, or with one of the Beach Bums, but I had to keep my distance from Spencer until I figured out how to deal with my annoying crush and not lose my CB.

If I got a boyfriend, would he care if I stayed cuddle buddies with Spencer? Ugh. Why was I still thinking about him?

JoshJake said, “I’ll make you come so hard, you won’t remember your name.”

Which, okay, that was funny as fuck since it was his name I couldn’t seem to remember.



“I think I can work with that,” I replied.

“Corbin!” Declan said again.

I whipped around. “Little busy here!” What was up with the cock block?

Declan motioned toward something on the other side of JoshJake. I looked around him, thinking Marcus was here to be Dec’s cock-block cohort—and saw Spencer approach. My stupid, annoying mouth stretched into a smile. Spencer raised a brow and smirked at me.

“Who the fuck are you?” JoshJake asked him.

“His cuddle buddy and I miss him. It’s frustrating as shit but true.”

I hadn’t thought it was possible, but my smile got even bigger. I felt it in a way I’d never experienced with a basic movement of my mouth before, but it was like it had a direct link into every part of my insides, making them snap and crackle with electricity.

JoshJake frowned. “Cuddle buddy? What the fuck is that? Is it some kind of sex thing?”

“No, it’s a Corbin thing,” I told him, still trying to wrap my head around what was happening.

“Corbin-and-Spencer thing,” Spencer amended.

“Eh. You’re not worth all this,” JoshJake said, making me tense.

“Hey. Don’t say that shit to him.” Spencer put a hand on JoshJake’s arm and pulled him away.

“Don’t touch me.” JoshJake jerked out of Spencer’s grasp and looked back at me. “You’re not that hot.”

Well, shit. He was a dick. I’d dodged a bullet tonight.

“Did you hear what I said? Don’t say stuff like that to him. I won’t tell you again.” Spencer crossed his thick arms.

And that was my cue to step in. I pushed to my feet. “Spencer, it’s not worth it.” I mean, I *had* been flirting with the guy. I was a lover not a fighter, but I wasn’t going to let Spencer get into a fight for me.

“Fuck you both,” JoshJake said just as security stepped up.

“Get him out of here,” Declan told the security guard.

JoshJake jerked back, gave us both the finger, and stormed out.

I was glad nothing went down. I could’ve handled it myself, but...Spencer had come to my defense. He’d had my back.

“What are you doing here, Spencer?”

“Stalking you, apparently.”

I grinned again, my crush on this man attacking me with a vengeance. I felt...I didn’t know. Shaky inside. Light and fluttery. “I like your shirt.”

He looked down. “I forgot I was wearing this.”

His tee said: *I hate to be sexy, but I’m chubby and can’t help it.*

“Are you guys about to make out? Because you look like you are,” Kai said, having approached at some point.

“You brat,” Declan said, reminding me that he was there too.

“I can’t believe Marcus missed out on Asshole Spencer defending your honor.” Kai’s hand smacked against his mouth. “I mean...Cuddle Buddy Spencer? In our defense, we thought of the name when you were a jerk to Corbin.”

Spencer shook his head, but the corners of his mouth curled up in a small smile. “No offense taken,” he told Kai, then to me, “Can we talk?”

Oh God. He was going to tell me he didn’t want to be CBs anymore, which would be my fault as I’d ignored him for days

because of my dumb crush on him. This was all because the Beach Bums had fallen in love. Now I was crushing on people. “No,” I said.

Logically, I knew there was a chance Spencer *wasn't* going to tell me he didn't want to be CBs anymore. He had just defended me, after all. But fear and emotions in general were almost always stronger than logic.

Declan groaned. “Jesus, Corb.”

“He means yes,” Kai added.

“No, I don't.”

“Then I guess I'll just have to keep stalking you,” Spencer replied. “And who will I cuddle if it's not you?”

“What? No. That's our thing. You can't do it with anyone else,” I said because the thought of it made my stomach ache.

“Please don't ask to use my office,” Declan complained. “Every time Marcus and Kai use it, they fuck in there. I swear everyone else has sex in my office more than I do.”

“Sounds like you and Bastian need to get on that,” I said, ignoring the fact that Spencer and I didn't have sex because he didn't want to have sex with me. Not really.

Spencer eyed me, not speaking. It was intense, like he was searching for something, trying to dig deeper inside me than anyone ever did. What was he looking for? And would he like what he found?

“Come on, Corb. Let's go home.” He held his arm out for me, and I couldn't help stepping into his embrace. The second I did, I melted into him, into the comfort of Spencer's warm, soft body and the feel of his strong hold around me.

“So fucking cute. I'm taking a photo for my baby,” Kai said.

I couldn't pull my face out of Spencer's chest to respond. This was...fuck, I'd missed this. I needed this. How could we find a way to make this work?

“I’m going to have security walk you guys out to be safe,” Declan said. “Who knows if that guy has beef with you now or not.”

Spencer nodded.

Neither of us had our car with us, so Spencer ordered a ride from his phone, and then we went out, the car pulling up right away. The second we were in the back seat, I cuddled into Spencer’s side again. “You must have missed me a lot,” I said.

“I did. It’s frustrating as shit. I’ve been driving myself crazy.”

“Me too,” I admitted.

He danced his fingers up and down my arm the way he did when we were in bed. This whole thing was...a lot. I didn’t know how it happened so quickly or what it was, just that it was stressing me the fuck out. I feared losing it, or that he wouldn’t want me in whatever way it was I wanted him.

“This is all your fault,” Spencer added.

“What exactly is this?” I mean, he’d left me an opening, and I needed to figure out what the fuck was going on so I didn’t have to keep avoiding him.

“We’ll talk at home.” Which was likely a good idea.

We were quiet the short drive back to our building, then quiet in the lobby and the elevator up. Like always, we automatically went to Spencer’s apartment, my nerves multiplying with each step of the way.

We took our shoes off, for me just for something to do, but then I couldn’t hold back anymore and blurted out, “I might want to date you!”

Spencer grinned, his forehead wrinkling in a playful way. “Might?”

“Yes. I’m not confirming or denying anything. This is weird as fuck. I’ve never wanted to really date anyone before.

This is all because of Marcus, Parker, and Declan! Well, them and the Poddies too.” I was pacing Spencer’s living room, him not joining the conversation, which made me even more nervous. “First, they fell in love, and then, when I told them we’re CBs and all the things we did, they said we were dating, which made me realize I wanted to date you—might, I mean. Might want to date you, and now it’s all I can think about!”

I took a few breaths, and when Spencer still didn’t say anything, I kept going. “You don’t want to have sex with me, and three weeks ago you thought you hated me, so I’m sure dating me isn’t high on your to-do list, but even if it was, I’m afraid of screwing it up or my issues getting in the way or not being good at it. Oh my God, what if I suck at it, but more than that, I’m freaked out that it’ll ruin our friendship, and I can’t do that. I’m sure you can’t either. You would be lost without me and—*fuck!*” Pain shot through my toe when I stubbed it on the coffee table. “I just broke my fucking toe!” I plopped down on Spencer’s couch, my eyes drifting closed. “And I’m tired...so fucking tired. I’m not used to sleeping alone anymore. How did I get used to sleeping with you so quickly?”

I heard movement before the couch dipped under Spencer’s weight. He grabbed my foot, tugged my sock off, then started examining my toe.

I opened my eyes. “What are you doing?”

“Making sure your toe is okay first, which it is. I don’t think it’s broken.”

He brushed his thumb back and forth over it, leaned forward, and kissed my fucking foot—which was way more swoony than it should be—then lowered it to the floor again. “Second, I do want to have sex with you. I told you that. And our friendship will only get ruined if we let it. We’re in control here, Corb. We can make sure we’re keeping our friendship and CB relationship a priority. And third...I might want to date you too.”

I'd perked up at everything he'd said but nearly jolted out of the seat at that. "Might?"

"Oh, so it's okay for you to say might but not me?"

"I take it back. There's no might. I want to date you."

He smiled. "I want to date you too. But that means you're mine while we're together. I'm not sharing you."

"Fucking swoon. Yes, let's do that. Who knew dating was so hot?"

Spencer laughed, and God, I loved being able to make him do that.

"I'm serious about the friendship thing, though. That's important to me too. I don't want to lose that, so if we're having second thoughts or if we're unsure about something, we need to talk about it."

"Done." Because Spencer wanted to date me. I might not be DJ, the guy he'd been in love with—and maybe still was—but I was something.

"Also, I need to make sure you know it's because I like you, who you are inside. I mean, you're gorgeous too, but you're more than that. I'm dating you and will be having sex with you because I like *you*. You're more than a fuck to me. I would want you even if you weren't as beautiful as you are."

No one had ever said that to me before. When I was younger, no one wanted me because of how I looked, and now as an adult, it was the only reason people did. "Okay."

"Do you believe me?"

"Probably not, but I'll try." It was the best I could do.

"It's a start. I'll have to do everything in my power to convince you. If we're going to do this, I need to make sure we're on the same page. DJ..."

"I would never do that."

“Okay, but just like you have to try to believe me on why I want you, it’s similar for me. I never thought he would just walk away. It still messes with my head. Why was I so easy to walk away from?”

“I would never do that.”

“Good, now I really need to kiss you. I’ve wondered what you taste like since I was eighteen years old,” Spencer said before leaning in and pressing his mouth to mine.

My whole world exploded. I moaned before he even lashed his tongue against my lips. When he did, I opened up for him, needing him inside. Spencer wanted me, and he said it was for *me*. This person who made me feel safe the way only the Beach Bums ever had, he wanted me and was dating me and now was kissing me. He needed to shave, but his stubble scratched against my face in the most delicious way, making me crave him even more.

I climbed into Spencer’s lap, straddling him. My dick was already achingly hard. It had been weeks since I’d been with anyone—even before that night at the fundraiser where I’d spoken to Spencer—and that wasn’t something my body was used to.

“Please,” I begged, kissing my way down Spencer’s throat, wanting his arms around me because I loved the way it felt to be enveloped by him, but I wanted his dick inside me too—not only to feel that connection, or because I loved sex, but to know he wasn’t lying and he really did want me.

“Please what?” Spencer held my chin gently, turning my head so I looked at him.

I grinned. “Please let me ride your dick...or I can fuck you. Either way. I just want to be with my... Okay, I was trying to think of a new name since we’re dating now, but you’re still my CB.”

Something in his expression softened. I didn’t know how to word it other than that. “Jesus, you’re so fucking special.” He held my face again, brushing his big thumb over my cheek

like he wanted to treasure me. It was another way no one had treated me before.

“Clearly,” I teased, heart thudding.

“I’m being serious. Don’t make a joke out of it.”

“Okay.” My chest squeezed in an unfamiliar way.

“And I don’t know if we should have sex...not because I don’t want you. I want you so fucking much, it’s killing me, but—”

“I know you want me for more than how I look. I *feel* it. I can’t always believe it, but I need you, and I promise you’ll love it. I’m very, very good.” I kissed the corner of his mouth. “I don’t want you to do something you don’t want, but if you’re holding back because you think it’s better for me or will show me you want me for more than sex, that’s not going to work. Right now, I just want to know what it’s like to be with someone who makes me feel good on the inside. If you expect me to believe you on what you want and how you feel, then you should believe me too.”



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### *Spencer*

*“I JUST WANT to know what it’s like to be with someone who makes me feel good on the inside. If you expect me to believe you on what you want and how you feel, then you should believe me too.”*

How in the hell did I say no to that logic? To his honesty. Not that I wanted to. My dick had probably never been so hard. I wanted Corbin. I’d always wanted Corbin, but doing right by him was just as important.

To do that, however, I also had to trust him. I didn’t have all the answers. He didn’t have all the answers. We had to have faith in each other. Still, I said, “We do this my way.”

“As long as there’s no cock cages involved.” He winked.

“Why do I feel like there’s a story there?”

“Because you know me.”

I did. “Did you have dinner?”

He frowned. “Weird time to ask. Are we having sex with food?”

I chuckled. “Answer the question.”

“No.”

“Okay, we’re going to go to my bed, where I’m going to show you how much I want you, and you’re going to let me. And then I’m going to feed you, and you’re going to let me do that too. And when we’re done, I’m going to hold you all night because all parts of you intrigue me, and while we might have started this cuddle thing for you, it gives me something too.”

Corbin smiled, all straight teeth, a big toothpaste-commercial smile. I didn't understand how he could come off as so confident and over-the-top when really, he was lost. He didn't see all the incredible things about himself, instead only focusing on what was on the outside.

"Let's get to it." He jumped off my lap, grabbed my hand, and pulled me to my feet.

"Excited, are you?" I joked as we made our way to my room.

"I really love sex. I think I've said that before."

"So, it's just sex? Not because it's with me?" I knew what he'd said earlier, and I believed him, but I could also tell that Corbin was trying to straddle the line of keeping this fun and light while being honest and real, so I wanted to do the same.

"It's you," he said. "I've basically wanted to kiss you for about seventeen years?"

I laughed. "Let's not go overboard. You probably wanted to kiss someone that night, and I was the one who leaned in. I'm sure you forgot me over the years."

"I'm sure you forgot me too until you saw me again, but we're here now, and that has to mean something."

Yeah, yeah it did. I wasn't the kind of guy who usually believed in shit like that, but that was before Corbin came back into my life. Everything changed then.

"Are you gonna start showing me how much you want me now?" he asked, making my dick throb.

"Yes, I am." I stepped closer, pulled Corbin into my arms, and damned if I didn't feel him relax into me. I took his mouth again, slipped my tongue inside. He tasted like mint and something I didn't know how to describe other than sunshine.

He kissed me back hungrily, arms around me, then grabbed my ass. He'd seen me in my underwear, of course, and as comfortable as I was in my body, I couldn't help wondering if he would still be as attracted to me when I was naked. If his

insecurities in his own body would come out in how he responded to mine. So far, the hard length of his erection indicated that wouldn't be a problem, but you never knew. It had happened before. I wasn't proud of it, but I also couldn't help remembering how he'd responded when the guys in college had seen me try to kiss him.

"Let's get you out of these clothes," I said when I pulled away, and he grinned.

"I'm a fan of that idea."

Chuckling, I pulled his shirt over his head and dropped it to the floor.

He kept his chest shaved, not a hair in sight. His nipples were small and pink, begging for my tongue. He was fucking gorgeous, but I couldn't help imagining him with just a little more meat on his bones, if for no other reason than to know he wasn't stressing over what he ate every day.

I bit at his lip while brushing my thumbs over his nipples. Corbin sucked in a breath, then whimpered like the small contact was already making him lose his mind.

"You like that?" I asked.

"Yes...I like it when you touch me. Feels different than when other people do."

Well, shit. Hearing that made my pulse speed up and my whole body pulsate with pride. "Good."

We kissed while I opened his pants, then let my mouth journey down his throat, his chest, kissing and licking, using my teeth on him too. When I did, he groaned. I bit his pec, just enough so he felt a slight burn, before sucking on the skin.

"Fuck yes. Don't stop."

"You want me to mark you up? Leave purple marks all over your pretty skin?"

"Please," Corbin begged. Coming from him, it was the sexiest word I'd ever heard.

I licked his skin before sucking it into my mouth again. Corbin's hand tangled in my hair, and he pulled me closer, like he loved it but it still wasn't enough. "It looks pretty on you," I said, touching the purple mark.

"I like it. Give me more."

"One more, but then that's enough for now."

He groaned again.

"Stop pouting so I can suck your dick."

"Um...why didn't you lead with that?" He chuckled.

I dropped to my knees, giving him another hickey on his lower stomach as I pulled his jeans and underwear down. When they got to his feet, Corbin kicked out of them, while I leaned back, admiring him.

"Fuck, you're beautiful." I stroked his cock. He kept his pubes trimmed short, perfect like the rest of him. His balls were big, heavy with his load, dick long and thick, flushed red.

"My cock?"

"All of you, but especially what's inside." I lapped at his balls. "Here, of course...but also how sweet you are...how funny. The way you love your friends. You care about people, oftentimes more than you do yourself, so I'm gonna put Corbin first and teach you how to do it too."

Before he could respond, I took the head of his erection into my mouth. Corbin's fingers sank into my hair again, holding tight.

"Yes. Me first. All the time. As long as you keep doing that."

I pulled off him, using my hand instead. "You first. All the time."

"You stopped sucking," he whined.

"Because I want to make sure you know you deserve to be put first. Tell me you deserve it."

“I deserve it,” he rushed out. “Now suck my dick.”

“Nope. I don’t believe you. You have to make me believe you if you want my mouth again.”

“Goddamn it, Spencer.”

I kissed his nuts, ran my tongue from the base of his shaft to the tip. “Tell me. Make me believe you think it’s true.”

He hesitated, eyes angled down toward me. “You make me feel like I deserve it.”

Hearing that made my heart swell so big, it scrunched up my lungs and made it hard to breathe. “That’s a good start. Lie on the bed.”

“Fucking finally.”

I rolled my eyes at his impatience, but Christ he was fun too.

Corbin jumped on my bed playfully, all kid at heart. He bounced his way over, then lay down, head on the pillows, naked and beautiful and all fucking mine...at least for now. While we were dating, I got him all to myself.

“Are you going to get naked for me?” Corbin stroked his cock.

Instead of answering, I pulled my T-shirt off, then paused, hoping it would all be okay.

“Pants next. Just take your underwear with them. I want to see your dick.”

“Bossy, aren’t you?”

“I just know what I want,” Corbin replied, and since I wanted to be naked too, I did what he said. Seconds later I was standing at the side of my bed, not wearing a stitch of clothing.

My dick wasn’t quite as long as his, but it was thicker, my balls a little bigger too. Again, my stomach was soft and rounder where his was tight and flat. My thighs were thicker, my chest broader.

Would he still want me? Would he walk away?

“Fuck. I need to taste you.” He leaned toward the edge of the bed, but I shook my head, while breathing out a sigh of relief.

“No. Not tonight.”

“What? That’s not fair.”

“Tonight I’m showing you how much I want you, remember?” I plucked the lube and a condom from the drawer, setting them on the nightstand.

When I was settled on the bed with him, kneeling between his legs, I started at his feet, lifting one leg and kissing the top of his foot. There was a small bruise on his toe where he’d stubbed it earlier. I kissed that, then his foot, then calf, nuzzling behind his knee before making my way up.

“Jesus...”

“Does it feel good? Just to be savored this way?” I asked, then burrowed my face beneath his balls, breathing in his musky scent and kissing him there too.

“Yes...God yes...” When I sat up, he asked, “Where are you going?”

“I’m not fucking you until I feel like you understand how much I want you.”

“I get it!” Corbin nearly shouted.

“Not yet.” I chuckled, then gave the left side of his body the same treatment as I’d done the right—starting at his foot, kissing and licking my way up. This time when I was at his inner thigh, I sucked it the way I’d done his chest, marking him there too. Corbin writhed beneath me, moaning and begging for more.

My dick was painful, I was so hard. This was torturing me as much as it was him, but I wanted to make sure Corbin knew this wasn’t just about getting off. That it was about him and how special he was. Not that I thought I was something special

or could change his way of thinking, but I wanted him to *feel* my desire for him.

When I settled between his thighs, I said, “Show me your hole.”

Immediately Corbin drew his legs back, making his cheeks part and giving me my first glimpse of his pink ring. “It’s so pretty. I can’t wait to stretch it out with my cock.”

“Yes...that...now, please.”

“Mm, you’re a hungry little bottom, aren’t you?”

“Normally I’m vers. I don’t know why I want you to fuck me so bad. It’s all I can think about.”

“Good thing both of us want it.” I licked his crease, then worked my tongue between his cheeks. Corbin pulled his legs back more. He tasted slightly musky, which I fucking loved. It was all sex and desire, this tornado of pleasure that swept me away. I ate him like he was my last meal, urged on by Corbin’s fist in my hair and every hungry, needy sound he made.

His ass was tight on my finger when I pushed it inside, and I sucked his balls while working him open.

“More...please, Spencer. Give me more.”

*My fucking pleasure.* “Lube,” I said, easing my finger out and replacing it with my tongue. I fucked him with that as he tossed the bottle my way.

“Fuck me.”

“Mmm. I like Needy Corbin who knows just how much I want him. You do, don’t you? Can you feel it in the way I eat your hole? In how I kiss you and mark you? I would devour you if I could.”

“That. Yes. Do that.”

After slicking up my fingers, I worked two inside him. The grip was so fucking tight. I was dying to feel him around my cock.

I kissed him—thighs, balls, cock, stomach—everywhere I could reach. I wanted Corbin to feel me everywhere, to feel cherished and sexy and like I couldn't get enough of him.

Because I couldn't.

I bent my fingers, searching for his prostate. When I rubbed it, Corbin nearly lurched off the bed.

“Fuck. Don't do that. You'll make me come. I want you inside me before I do that. I'm ready for you. Take me now.”

I'd hoped to make this last longer, but I didn't have it in me to deny him anymore. His hole closed slightly when I slipped my fingers out. I ripped open the condom wrapper and rolled it down my erection. Once I was slicked up, I lifted Corbin's legs over my shoulders.

His ice-blue gaze was firmly on me, his pretty cock leaking on his stomach.

“Do you know how much I want you?” I asked.

“Yes, fuck yes.”

“What does it feel like?”

He paused like the question surprised him and he wasn't sure how to answer. “Like...like quiet,” he said, those words making my thoughts spin. Was he telling me I kept those negative voices out of his head? If so, I'd do this every day for my whole fucking life.

“That's good?” I had to make sure I was understanding him right.

“It's everything.”

The words had hardly left his mouth before I thrust into him. Corbin's back arched off the bed, legs squeezing my neck. He'd said I felt like everything, but I thought that was him. He was so tight, body so hot, hugging my cock.

“Look how well you're taking me. I think my CB was made for my dick.” I couldn't lie, the nickname still felt weird on my tongue, but I knew Corbin liked it, and that made me



want to use it. I would search for every way I could to find moments of happiness for him, to gather them together and sprinkle him with them so he continuously felt good.

My balls were already high and tight, begging for release, but I'd die before I allowed myself to come before Corbin.

"Yes...God yes. Fuck me." Corbin wrapped a hand around his shaft, jerking himself off. His body shook each time I pumped into him, his eyes still not venturing away from me. Did he like what he saw?

"I want you looking at me when you come. Don't turn away."

"I won't. Come here. Need your mouth." His legs fell off me when I leaned down and kissed him, tongue fucking his mouth along with my dick in his hole. There had been a strange connection to him from the start, but it intensified in this moment, like every meeting between us had been leading up to it. I didn't understand it and thought maybe I was losing it for even thinking that way, but he was The Charmer, wasn't he? Corbin had certainly charmed me.

His body tensed below me, and I could tell his orgasm was building. I leaned back so we could look at each other. He kept stroking, and I kept fucking. "Come for me, Corb. Let me feel your perfect ass spasm around my cock so I can give you my load too."

Those seemed to be the magic words. Looking straight into my eyes, Corbin arched toward me, hole pulsing as his cock shot. Cum landed on his stomach, his neck, his chin, eyes blissed out and a small smile on his face. Something about seeing him right then made my heart stumble in my chest before it picked up again, and my own orgasm took me over. I slammed into him, my dick twitching inside him as I filled the condom.

Leaning down, I licked the cum from his skin, tasting his salty pleasure before collapsing to the bed beside him, pulling

Corbin with me. My cock slipped out of him, Corbin lying on my chest, and he smiled down at me.

“I like your smile,” I admitted. “I want to keep making you do it.”

His pupils blew wide, what I said seeming to give him pause, like no one had said things like this to him, which I couldn't make sense of. But then his lips just stretched wider, Corbin leaning down to kiss me. “That was really fucking good,” Corbin said, changing the subject back to sex again.

“You were really fucking good.”

“Sex is my specialty. My milkshake brings all the boys to the yard,” he joked.

“Don't do that. Don't try and make it sound like that's the only reason you're in this bed or the only thing you're good at. I'll spank your little ass.”

“You say that as if I wouldn't want you to.” He tried to pull away, but I wrapped my arms around him.

“Kiss me again. Then I'm going to take care of you.”

He nodded, didn't speak as he took my mouth. The kiss was slow, languid, but that didn't take away from the hunger of it. There was a whole lot more emotion there than I was expecting, but it didn't make me want to run.

When we parted, I laid Corbin down on the mattress. “Don't move.”

“Yes, sir.”

I rolled my eyes before heading into the bathroom. After disposing of the condom, I cleaned up, then wet a washcloth for him. I sat on the side of the bed and cleaned the sweat and spunk from his skin.

“Still don't move,” I said, and he chuckled.

I went to the kitchen to see what I could find for us to eat. There wasn't a lot, but I grabbed a bowl with fruit, cut some cheese, and added crackers. It would have to work.

When I got back to my room, he was exactly where I left him.

Corbin rolled his eyes. “You expect me to eat after that spectacular fucking?”

“I do, but we’ll do lots of cuddling at the same time. Naked CB time.”

“You like this whole CB thing more than you’re willing to admit.” Corbin sat up. I turned off the lights except for the lamp on the nightstand, then joined him in bed.

I bit into a strawberry, juice leaking down my fingers. “Open.”

Corbin did as I said, and I slid my finger between his lips. He sucked the juice away, and then I fed him the other bite of the strawberry.

“Tell me more about you and Marcus.”

Corbin frowned, the expression on his face changing.

Maybe I’d gotten this wrong. Maybe he had feelings for Marcus after all.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### *Corbin*

“YOU DON’T HAVE to if it’s too personal,” Spencer said.

“What? No. That’s not it at all. I...I’m surprised you want to sit and talk after. I know what you said, but...well, I mean, I guess I shouldn’t be surprised, considering I’m so irresistible.” It wasn’t as if most men wanted to have a conversation with me after sex.

“You are, but you’re also playing a game right now. You don’t have to pretend with me, Corbin.”

No, I didn’t, did I? I wasn’t sure how to do that with anyone who wasn’t Marcus, Parker, or Declan, but Spencer made me want to try.

I curled up next to him, buried myself into his side, throwing one leg over his. Our dicks were both soft, this moment not about sex but about two people getting to know each other.

So I told him about Marcus. “He’s our rock, really, but he would never admit it. He’s been there for all the Beach Bums. We’re all there for each other, of course, but Marcus more than the rest.”

“And you’re sure you don’t have feelings for him?” Spencer fed me a bite of cracker and cheese, which I easily took from him.

“No. God no. He is my absolute favorite person to annoy, though.”

Spencer chuckled. “I thought that was me.” It was said playfully, like he was mostly just trying to say I drove him nuts, but little did he know he was quickly becoming my

favorite person to annoy. I never thought anyone would be able to hold that title except Marcus.

“Maybe you’re coming for him.” I winked, then added, “He was my first kiss, but before you start thinking anything sordid, we were teenagers. I’d been feeling like shit about myself. I’d also secretly been talking to this boy from school. I thought he was gay and liked me, but it was a prank. I went to meet him, thought he was going to kiss me, but there was a bunch of other kids there. They started teasing me, calling me fat and making fun of me. It was...one of the worst moments of my life. I went to Marcus afterward. He told me I was beautiful and he loved me, and like I said before, he was the first person who made me feel like they completely loved me for me, so I knew my first kiss should be him.”

“I’ve never wanted to throat-punch a kid more,” Spencer growled. “I was always heavier. Kids were shits to me too.”

But Spencer didn’t let it affect him the way I did. He didn’t let it control everything he did.

“How...”

“How what?” he asked, offering me another bite, but I shook my head.

“How did you not internalize it? How did it not become something that’s on your mind all the time, even when you pretend it’s not?” Because it was with me. I wasn’t proud of that, but it was true.

“I don’t know. We’re all different. There were times it hurt—a lot—especially when I was younger, but I just don’t see things the same as you. I like my body, and I like who I am. Does my weight bother you?”

“What? No. Fuck no. I love how soft you are, the way it feels to be surrounded by you. And even before that, I thought you were sexy as hell.” I lifted my arm and played with a lock of his blond hair.

“I think the bigger question is, why can you see beauty in me regardless of my size, but not in yourself? I don’t think it’s

just your weight, baby. I think you have a hard time loving all the parts of yourself, but it mostly comes out in body image and beauty for you.”

“So I really am a superficial guy who only cares about looks?” I asked playfully, but the question rang true in my head. *Please tell me it's not true.*

“No. Not at all. You're someone the world made feel bad about themselves. Someone who would never put the same standards or rules on others that you put on yourself. You're so damn hard on yourself, and no one deserves it less. I wish you saw yourself the way I see you.”

How? I wanted to ask, but couldn't make the word come out. “I'm trying.”

“I know.”

This time when he held out a piece of food for me, I took it from his fingers, wanting to make him proud, and I had to admit, I *was* hungry.

“The guys want to meet you again, by the way. We're supposed to plan a day for you to go to Marcus's with everyone.”

Spencer chuckled. “Ah, so I'm getting put through the best-friend test. Should I be worried?”

“I mean, maybe,” I teased. Kinda teased. Marcus would be hard for him to win over. “Does that bother you?”

“No. I'm glad you have people who love you so much. You deserve it, and I'll just have to show them I'm good for you.”

“You are.” I leaned in and kissed him. I liked Spencer so, so much. I'd never liked someone the way I did him. *But can he ever really like me as much? Especially if I can't even find a way to like myself?*

I ignored that voice. Life was much easier that way.

“What about you? Tell me something about you.”

“Hmm. Well, my best friend is Morgan. He’s a good guy. You’ll have to meet him sometime. I grew up in Temecula—I think I told you that part on the beach our first night. My family is still there.” He fed me a strawberry.

Another thing I’d never had a man do? Feed me. It was surprisingly hot.

“You should go with me on Christmas, Corb. They’ll love you.”

I sucked half a strawberry into my throat and started coughing. I sat up, Spencer hitting my back and laughing. “I’m dying, and you think it’s funny.”

“You’re not dying, and you don’t have to go with me.”

But I wanted to. I’d been invited to Kai’s with Marcus, and Marcus’s family. Parker said I could go to Elliott’s with them and his dad. Even Declan said I could go to Idaho to see Sebastian’s family with them, but I wanted to go with Spencer.

“Only if you come to my parents’ on Christmas Eve,” I countered—and I couldn’t believe I’d said the words. I’d never brought a man home except the Beach Bums, and that was different. But spending time with my family was hard, and I knew Spencer would make it easier.

“Okay.”

“Check us out. This is very datey of us.”

“That’s because we’re dating.”

My stupid face split into a stupid smile. He was... I didn’t know how to explain what Spencer was or the way being with him made me feel.

When he fed me another bite of food, I took it.

“I forgot to tell you that Gael brought a book he thinks you’ll like. It’s in the living room.”

“He did? Just out of the blue? He said it’s for me?” It was cool that Gael thought about me. I’d loved *Two Boys Kissing*.

Spencer chuckled. “Yeah. That shouldn’t be hard to believe. You’re The Charmer. You win everyone over.” He cupped my cheek, leaned in, and pressed the softest, sweetest kiss to my lips.

It made my world spin. It was the way you kissed someone who was important to you. Could I really be important to him? For reasons that were more than skin deep?

“I’m going to start it tomorrow.” I didn’t even know what it was, but I would read it because Gael had given it to Spencer for me.

“You’re too sweet for your own good and must be protected at all costs,” Spencer said playfully.

“I’d have to agree with you. I should be considered a national treasure,” I said, which made Spencer smile.

We sat there naked, talking, Spencer eating a bite of the food sometimes, but mostly feeding it to me, and I let him. I liked it.

When we turned off the light, Spencer pulling me into his arms so I could cuddle-slut it up with him, I wasn’t sure I’d ever felt so content.



“So...I GOT RAILED so hard last night, I can still feel it today. Oh, and it just so happens to be with the guy I’m dating,” I told Marcus while spotting him on the bench press. It was early, and we were exercising before work. The gym was fairly empty, giving us the privacy to talk—not that I wouldn’t have said what I had if others had been around. I had no shame like that.

“Jesus, kid.” Marcus put the bar in the cradle and sat up. “You’re dating Asshole Spencer?”

“I told you he’s not an asshole. He’s my...” Did I call him boyfriend? Was that what it meant when you were dating someone? The rules weren’t cut-and-dried, likely because there weren’t any actual rules. Usually, grown-ass adults



talked about expectations. Maybe I should try and do that. I settled on, “He’s my CB, whom I’m now dating.”

*Who is coming to my parents’ house for Christmas Eve in a few days and asked me to go with him to see his parents, and what the fuck had I gotten myself into?* I was going to make a mess of this. There was no question in my mind about that.

“The two of you had a conversation about dating?”

“Yes. He also fucked me better than anyone ever has, and I totally think I want to be a slutty bottom for him.”

“You’re distracting from the important issue with sex. Do you think I don’t know your shit by now? So you have a boyfriend. When is he coming over?”

“Let’s hit the rowers.”

With a sigh, Marcus followed me over. They were in a corner, four of them in a row, but they were empty, so it was just the two of us.

We sat down, and I immediately began to work. “I think...”

“You think what?” Marcus asked.

“I have a boyfriend. We said we’re dating and exclusive. I haven’t figured out exactly what that means for me. Do you see why it’s easier to focus on the spectacular sex?”

“Maybe you should talk to him.”

“You say that as if you would do the same if the situation were reversed.”

He cocked a brow, and I could tell he knew I had him there, but then he went and added, “That was before Kai.”

“Before you went a million years wanting him and then hooking up with him before *talking* to him about how you felt.” I sped up slightly on the machine.

“Don’t call me on my own shit,” Marcus grumbled.

“Yes, Daddy M. Can we get back to the subject of me and Spencer now? So...I’m bringing him home with me on Christmas Eve, then going with him to his parents’ the next day. Fucking weird, isn’t it?” I tried to play it off like I wasn’t freaking the hell out inside. My parents were...hard to explain. It was always stressful for me to go there, and bringing home a guy would make it even worse, but then the fact that it was Spencer made me feel better. He made everything better. How was that for confusing?

“Hey,” Marcus said, reaching over and stopping my frantic rowing. I didn’t realize how fast I was pushing it until he intervened. “You good?” Christ, my arms were hurting.

“Yeah, why wouldn’t I be?”

“Because you’ve nearly burned the damn rowing machine.”

“Can’t help it if I don’t know my own strength.” I winked.

Marcus sighed. “Are you sure it’s a good idea to bring him home? You seem nervous.”

“Yeah. Maybe it’ll help keep the attention off me.”

Marcus cursed. “You know you don’t have to go there, right? And if you do, I can go with you.”

“So you’re not going to spend time with your boyfriend?” The thing was, I knew Marcus would find a way to make it work if he had to, and be what both Kai and I needed without hurting either of us, but why should he have to?

*When would I be able to be there for myself?*

Predictably, Marcus said, “I’ll figure it out.” He was incredible like that.

“No.” I shook my head. “I’ll be fine with Spencer. I want him there. He makes things...easier.”

Marcus cocked his head slightly, studying me. “You like this guy a lot.”

I did, and that scared the fuck out of me. “I’ve literally only been hanging out with him a few weeks.”

“So? It’s so funny to me that people put a timeline on everything. And who gets to make the decision about what’s an appropriate amount of time to fall for someone? Or hell, for anything. And why do they get to make those rules for other people?”

He had a point. “When did you get so smart?”

“Be serious.”

“I am being serious. You just jumped up like ten knowledge points out of nowhere. I’m impressed.” Marcus rolled his eyes, so I continued, “Yes. Fuck yes. I do. I like the way he talks to me. We literally sat in bed for hours after fucking, just naked and cuddling and talking while he fed me.”

“He fed you?”

“Yeah, it’s ridiculous. He’s like you about that, always trying to feed me. I eat.”

“You do, but neither of us can pretend you don’t have food concerns, kid. I love you too much to bullshit you about that. It’s a big deal, and it scares me.”

I frowned. “Why would it scare you?”

“Because I love you and I want you healthy.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m in excellent shape.”

“What about up here?” He tapped his temple.

“We’re getting off track. Shouldn’t you be happy for me? I’m dating a man who calls me beautiful and makes me feel it. Who feeds me and is going to meet my parents and who loves to cuddle me as much as I love to cuddle him. Plus, he’s great in the sack. Perfect package.”

Marcus seemed to think this over. “Then I’m happy for you. Always. But I want him at the house.”

Yeah, I knew he did, and I couldn't say I didn't want Spencer there too, not only because I liked spending time with him, but because then it would be even. I would have someone too. On the other hand, I wanted to settle into this more first. I wanted to get used to this before bringing everyone in. "After the holidays. You can throw me a birthday party at your house. I know how everyone loves celebrating me."

He chuckled. "Deal." And then he wrapped a hand around the back of my neck, tugged me close, and kissed my sweaty temple. "Love you."

"I love you too."

We cut our workout short since we'd spent so much time talking. Part of it was also because Marcus tried to keep me from exercising too much. He thought I didn't know that, but I did.

I just got out of the shower at the gym and was standing by my locker with a towel wrapped around my waist when I checked my phone.

**CB: Dinner and cuddle session at my place tonight?**

I grinned, a big, stupid, goofy grin.

**Me: Obviously. I wouldn't deny you the pleasure of my company.**

I knew he would shake his head when he saw that.

I exited out of my texts and automatically went to Instagram. The notifications on my pre-gym selfie were already out of control.

**So fucking hot.**

**Sit on my face.**

**Start an OnlyFans!**

**Show us your hole!**

**Why are you so beautiful?**

My eyes snagged on the other comments.

Gross.

Fake.

#Conceited

He's so full of himself.

He's not even that good-looking.

I heard he used to be fat as a kid.

My chest tightened as my cell tumbled out of my hand, and I knew those comments were all I would hear in my head all day.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### *Spencer*

“DID YOU GIVE Corbin the book?” Gael asked me when I stopped by the library to see him.

“I did. He said he’s going to start it tonight when we get home.”

Gael cocked a brow, and at first, I wasn’t sure why, but then realized my mistake. “He lives next door in the same apartment complex.” Yes, yes he did, but he was also in my bed every night.

“Is he your boyfriend?”

I didn’t want to get into too much detail because it wasn’t professional, but I also didn’t want to lie to Gael. Plus, it was good for queer kids to have queer people they could go to and talk about things, or to see and hear about healthy queer relationships. “I’m not sure if that’s the exact word I’d use, but we’re dating.”

“Wasn’t it like thirty seconds ago that you said you were just friends?”

Leave it to Gael to call me on my shit. “You’re a brat, do you know that?”

“So you’ve said.” He looked down at his book again.

“Bet it’s nice to be out of school for a couple of weeks. Just a few months left, and you graduate.”

“I can’t fucking wait.”

“I know.” I squeezed his shoulder. “I’ll let you get back to your book before you get too grumpy with me. Once I get some work done, I’ll come say goodbye.”

He nodded. “Thanks, Spencer.”

“No problem.”

Back in my office, I lost myself in my work, not realizing how much time passed until there was a knock on my open office door.

“Hey, Spencer.” Eve, one of our volunteers, poked her head in. “Sorry to bother you. There’s a guy named Corbin here, looking for you. He said he’ll be waiting in the library.”

I looked at the clock to see it was five thirty. “You didn’t bother me. Thanks for letting me know. How is everything? You good?”

“Yeah, everything’s great. Thanks for always asking.”

Eve returned to the front desk, while I shut my computer down and grabbed my cell, trying to pretend that buzz of excitement running laps in my body wasn’t because Corbin was here. Basically, I was a liar because I knew it was.

He was sitting beside Gael when I got into the library, the two of them discussing something.

“How are you guys thick as thieves so quickly?”

“I know cool people when I see them,” Corbin replied, but something was off in how he said it. There was no real reason I should be able to tell that, since I couldn’t put my finger on why I thought it, but I knew I was right.

“Gross. I’m not cool,” Gael answered, making Corbin chuckle.

“My mistake,” Corbin replied, then turned to me. “You’re often late after work, so I thought I’d just come here.”

Yeah, I did tend to stay later than five. There was always so much to do, and even if I had a slower day, I liked spending time at the center.

When our eyes met, I saw the playfulness that was Corbin trying to sneak through, but it was blocked by something else. His gaze darted away quickly, as if he didn’t want me to find

what I was looking for. Well, that wouldn't do at all, so I walked over, tilted his head up, and pressed a kiss to his lips.

“Oh,” sneaked out of his mouth as soon as we pulled away.

I grinned.

“I can't believe you guys are boyfriends. I better find a man in college,” Gael grumbled.

“I'm in my midthirties,” Corbin told him, “and Spencer is my first...dating thing.”

I raised a brow. “Dating thing?”

“We said we were dating, but I wasn't sure what that meant.”

“Do you want to be my boyfriend?” I asked, and why was I holding my breath?

He smiled, and despite his fake one moments ago, this one was real. That truth helped me mask some of my own fears and insecurities.

“Yeah...” he said. “As long as it doesn't mess up our friendship.”

“We already discussed that. Nothing will mess up our friendship. So we're boyfriends,” I told him.

“Deal.” He grinned.

Gael was looking at us and frowning slightly. “Why do I feel like I just watched two sixteen-year-olds instead of old guys?”

Corbin gasped. “I'm not old! Take it back!”

“Relationships are hard,” I told Gael. “You'll see one day.”

Gael looked down, fingering the edge of the book he was reading. Just as I was about to say something, Corbin beat me to it.

“You will. I know it. Believe me, I never thought I'd have a boyfriend. Hell, my first kiss was with my best friend because he felt sorry for me.”



Gael scoffed. "I doubt that. You're hot."

"Looks aren't everything, but you wouldn't recognize me if you saw me as a kid."

Corbin said looks weren't everything, but I wondered if he got the irony of his statement because I knew he believed that when it came to everyone but himself.

"You were always beautiful, baby. I don't know why people like to hurt others so much, but they do. They're more willing to share things they hate than things they like, or tell someone something negative instead of something positive. You're gorgeous and a great person." I turned to Gael. "And you're one of my favorite people in the world. Definitely one of the smartest."

Gael playfully rolled his eyes at me. "How do you do that? I swear you're the most confident person I know."

"That's not true, and I wasn't always the way I am now. It took me a long time to get to the point where I'm happy with myself and don't give a fuck what anyone thinks." And I wanted that for them. Both of them.

Neither replied right away. Corbin was looking at me. Nothing would have made me turn away from him.

"Are you guys about to kiss again?" Gael asked. "And you totally called him baby."

Corbin and I burst into laughter. I *had* called him baby. Sure, I'd done it last night too, but I was still getting used to it. This thing was progressing faster than I would've ever imagined.

"Tell me about the book you're reading," Corbin said to Gael, and the kid immediately launched into a story.

I mostly let the two of them do their thing, only chiming in every once in a while. On the surface Corbin seemed like himself, but I had this weird, persistent feeling that something was off.

Corbin must have dropped his car at home and then gotten a ride here, because when we left an hour or so later, he went straight to the passenger seat of my vehicle.

“I need to go grocery shopping,” I told him, “so looks like you’re going with me.” I wanted to make sure we had stuff at the apartment to eat.

“Works for me.”

Corbin was still quieter than usual. Every now and again he would look at his phone, scroll, then put it away again. A few minutes later he’d do the same thing. I had a sneaking suspicion what he was focusing on. If I could delete that app from his phone, I would.

“What do you want for dinner tonight? We can get something to cook together,” I said when we got into the grocery store.

“I’m not really hungry tonight. I had a big lunch.”

I bit my tongue not to respond. Figuring out what to do in this situation was tough. Corbin was an adult. I couldn’t control him. Plus, it wasn’t as if I’d never had a big lunch and not eaten dinner. Also, I didn’t know the ins and outs of this, and for all I knew, if I pushed too hard, it could actually be harmful for him. On the other hand, I wanted nothing more than to protect him, to take care of him and make sure he always knew how incredible he was.

“Okay...well, what are some of your favorite foods? I’ll just get them so I have them around.”

“I’m not an idiot. Jesus, I don’t need you to fucking coddle me. You’re my boyfriend, not my dad,” he snapped.

A woman walking by stared at us, clearly having heard what he’d said. The last thing I wanted was to fight with him, but also, I was pissed. I hadn’t done anything to deserve that. “Noted.”

Corbin continued to walk with me around the store but didn’t speak. I got the kinds of foods I liked, and some stuff

I'd seen him eat as well. He helped me put the reusable bags in the trunk when we were finished, still not talking. The second we were in the car, he was back on his phone.

I thought maybe he was going to go to his apartment, but he still went with me into mine. When I started to put the groceries away, he said, "I'm going to take a shower. Do you have anything I can wear?"

"Yep. Take anything you want out of my drawers. Plus, you have a few things you left here that I washed. They're folded in my closet."

He gave me a slow nod, watched me for a moment, then disappeared down the hallway. I made chicken breasts and white rice with broccoli and zucchini for dinner, knowing it was a meal he'd liked in the past.

He was in there a long time. Enough for dinner to be done and me to make two plates, putting them both on the table just in case. Worry weighed me down the whole time. Had I done something wrong? It was something I'd often wondered when it came to DJ. I just hoped Corbin didn't leave me behind as easily as DJ had.

When he came out, he was wearing a pair of his underwear and one of my T-shirts, which was too large for him. He had his own shirts here, and that one had been on the top of the laundry basket, so I knew he was wearing it to be close to me...to smell me, and damned if that didn't make me feel incredible.

Corbin set his phone on the table beside my plate. I looked down, seeing negative comments on a post. Red-hot anger eviscerated my insides.

"Fuck these people. They're keyboard warriors who have nothing better to do with their time than to put others down. Don't pay attention to a word they say."

"Don't you think I would if I could? It's all I've thought about all day. And I know it's my own fault because I keep fucking posting, but I can't make myself stop doing that

either.” He tried to walk away, but I grabbed his wrist and pulled him to my lap.

Corbin came easily, sitting on my thighs, arms wrapped around my shoulders. “I can’t control it...how I feel. You can’t push me into changing.”

“I know, but I can’t not try to help you either. I care about you. I really think you need to see a therapist.” My hand made circles on his back. Corbin nuzzled into me even more.

The room was quiet, both of us just breathing and me touching him while I waited for his reply. “Don’t give up on me,” Corbin said rather than responding about the therapist. “I’m sorry I was an asshole. Just don’t give up on me.”

His voice wrapped a lasso around my heart, pulling me in. “I won’t. Jesus, I won’t.” It wasn’t as if Corbin hadn’t already hooked me before that, but hearing him being so fucking real was my undoing.

I held him there for a little while before we made our way to the couch. I brought my plate, setting it on the coffee table. We both picked at it while we cuddled and watched a show. Eventually, he ended up with his head in my lap, my fingers carding through his soft hair.

“I really like yogurt,” he said softly.

I smiled. “Then I guess we’ll have to stock up, won’t we?”

Still, I knew that wasn’t enough...but for now it was a start.



I’D MET THE families of men I’d been dating before, but I’d never been nervous the way I was with Corbin’s. Part of it was because it was him and I liked him so damn much. I wanted to make a good impression because of how I felt about him. But most of my nerves came from him and the fact that Corbin was so anxious.

He’d been edgy in the days leading up to Christmas Eve, and that had been multiplied by a hundred last night before we

went to bed, and it carried over into this morning.

“Are you sure you want me to go with you? It’s okay if you changed your mind,” I told him on the way over. We took my car, and I was driving. I’d put on a bow tie and button-up shirt like I did when I worked at the center. Corbin wore a nice black button-up shirt and slacks.

“Are you kidding me? I don’t want to go alone. I’m bringing CB backup,” he said playfully, clearly trying to relax and be himself.

“Will it be that bad that you’d need backup? I mean, I’m game. Just want to know what I should prepare myself for.” My hands tightened on the steering wheel. The world could be such a shitty place. No one should need support to visit their own family, even though I knew that was the case for a lot of people.

“No, I shouldn’t say that. It’s not fair to them. Seriously, my family doesn’t even curse. They’re the definition of sweet and wholesome, which, ya know, means I stick out like a sore thumb.”

Yikes. That was hard. “Do they listen to your podcast?”

“Christ, no. They already think I’m going to burn in hell for all eternity.”

And yep, my anger skyrocketed at that. I knew it. He’d told me before, but it would never not infuriate me. “Do you believe that?”

“No, but that doesn’t make it easier to have your parents think it.”

“I’m sorry, baby.” I reached over and squeezed his thigh.

“Eh, it is what it is. I’m a great fuck. I guess you can’t have everything.”

“You’re more than a great fuck.”

“A pretty face?”

“I’m serious, Corbin.”

“I know.”

But did he? Did he really know?

“What did you tell them about me?”

“I’d already told them you’re coming, but I texted this morning and said you’re my boyfriend. I’m claiming that shit. You’re my first one ever!”

I laughed because Jesus, how could I not? He had the most electrifying personality, one I couldn’t get enough of.

I was fighting with my instincts not to hate his parents based on what I knew about them, but it wasn’t easy. The second we got to the house, I relaxed some. Corbin’s parents, plus a brother and a sister, their spouses and their children, were all waiting to greet us and introduce themselves, so maybe it wouldn’t be so bad.

When we got to his brother, though, he said, “It’s good to meet a new *friend* of Corbin’s.” Then turned to the kids and said, “Come meet Uncle Corbin’s *friend*.”

Ah, so they were going to play it like we were friends because it was so wrong for kids to know queer people could live happily ever after?

Corbin glanced my way and rolled his eyes before swooping in to pick up the kids and play with them.

We made our way into the living room, Corbin getting right down on the floor to play with his nieces and nephews. It was a modest home, without a lot of upgrades, but looked comfortable and lived in.

“So what do you do, Spencer?” his mom asked.

They seemed nice and were at least trying to make conversation, so maybe I’d misjudged them. “I’m the outreach coordinator for the LGBTQ center in Santa Monica,” I said, unwilling to leave out where I worked.

Gazes darted to the kids, who weren’t paying us any attention. It was clear they loved their uncle Corbin and Corb

adored them. I hated that he didn't spend much time with them because of his family.

"That's nice," his mom replied. "Did you grow up here?"

Well, there went the subject change, steering it to topics they considered safe, when there was nothing wrong with Corbin and me at all.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### *Corbin*

I LOVED SPENDING time with the kids, probably because most of the time, I was just a big kid myself. But there was no stress with them, no worry about what they thought. At this age, they didn't judge me or anyone the way others did. They were too young to learn from the world how to do that yet. They were just...fun.

My family talked Spencer's ear off, asking him questions and learning about his family. I hated that they were skirting around who Spencer was to me, though. I wasn't lying when I told him I was claiming that shit, wanted to tell everyone how lucky I was that he wanted me. But I would never go behind their back when it came to the kids.

"Do you or your family go to a church?" Dad asked Spencer, and I immediately tensed up.

*Fuck my life. Here we go.*

"My parents do, my siblings do sometimes, but I don't actively practice a religion."

I hadn't known that about his family. Would tomorrow at his place be the same as it was here?

"That's too bad," Dad said. "We would love to have you. It's a disappointment for us that Corbin doesn't attend."

"I don't think anyone should attend if they don't want to," Spencer said. "You can be a good person and put good into the world without attending church, and Corbin does that. There's no reason to be disappointed in him."

My heart nearly beat its way out of my chest. My parents hadn't meant anything bad by that, but still...Spencer was defending me.



“Oh, that’s not what we meant,” Mom said. “We love Corbin so much. We just worry about him.”

Spencer bit his lip, and I could tell he was trying not to say something.

“I’m fine, Mom. Did I tell you Spencer and I went hiking the other day? We did the Solstice Canyon Loop.” Both my parents liked hiking, and Spencer and I did too. We’d talked about going some other places this summer, as if he thought he would still want to be with me by then.

My change of subject worked. Everyone chatted for a while, talking about hiking, our jobs, and things my siblings had done with their families. I didn’t share much of my life with them, which sucked, but I figured it was easier on all of us that way.

When it was time to eat, everyone headed to the table, the kids at a separate, smaller one.

They said their prayer, and when I peeked at Spencer, he hadn’t closed his eyes and was watching me. He winked, which automatically made me smile.

I was happy today—happy I got to see the kids and that my family got to meet Spencer, even if it was different from how it was when they met my siblings’ significant others. I loved being around Spencer, and it was a cool experience seeing him in my childhood home, so I wasn’t paying much attention to what I was doing as I made my plate. I got turkey, mashed potatoes and gravy, rolls, cranberries, and green beans.

“You should be careful how much you’re eating, sweetheart. You’ve worked so hard to get into shape.” Mom patted my hand. “We’re all so proud of you.”

I froze, looking at my plate. Jesus, she was right. Why had I gotten that much food? I never ate that much.

“Corbin was an adorable little butterball,” my sister, Emma, said.

Everyone chuckled, including me as I rolled my eyes at them. “I’m not sure *adorable* is the word for it.” And I definitely didn’t need to eat all this food.

“Don’t say that to him,” Spencer’s voice broke through the chuckling.

“They didn’t mean anything by it,” I told him.

“That doesn’t matter. There’s nothing wrong with your plate. You hardly got a full serving of any of it, and if you had, that wouldn’t be a problem either.” He looked around the table at my family. “He should be safe in this house and not have to worry about people commenting on him eating too much or reminding him of something he’s insecure about.”

“He is safe in this house,” my brother, Blaine, said. “We love him and just want what’s best for him. You don’t have the right to come in here and judge us for it.”

But then, they judged *me* for things, didn’t they? They’d judged both me and Spencer.

“The way you judge us and our *friendship*?” Spencer asked, as if he’d plucked the thought from my head.

“We didn’t...” Mom started. “That’s not... Please, let’s just have a nice dinner.”

No one said much, but they began to eat. My family weren’t the type to make a scene. Sometimes I wondered how I was related to them because we were so different. I’d always been a big personality, which none of them was.

Tension lay thick in the air as everyone ate. I picked at the food but had lost my appetite, my brain going to what my mom had said...and to what my sister had said too. It made me think of when I’d turned eighteen and we’d gone out for ice cream for my birthday, how I’d said I wanted two scoops but my dad had only ordered me one. Or when I was a kid and Declan came over for the first time, Mom made cookies and Dec had taken three, but she had only allowed me one. Or the diets they had put me on, and when they’d made me get on the treadmill every night... Situation after situation kept popping

into my head, creating a picture I had never allowed myself to see before.

There was nothing wrong with eating healthy or walking or limiting your snacks. But there had been hundreds of comments, all directed at me and not at anyone else in my family. They'd been disappointed I'd been overweight and disappointed I was gay. Disappointed I didn't go to church, and maybe a hundred other reasons I'd never thought of before. How could I have missed that?

But Spencer didn't. Spencer saw it...saw me. And he liked what he saw.

"Spencer's right," I found myself saying. I nearly turned around to make sure someone else hadn't used my voice. "You've always made comments to me like that...about my weight, about my sexuality, all of it under the guise of loving me and wanting what's best for me, but that's not what it feels like inside. It hurts."

"Come on, Corb. You know Mom and Dad don't—"

"Let him speak," Spencer cut Blaine off.

"Listen, buddy—"

I didn't allow my brother to continue. "I know none of you wanted to hurt me, but you did. And you still do. Why can't you ever accept me for who I am instead of trying to change me, or fix me, or put your beliefs on me, telling me that how I live my life hurts *you*."

I couldn't believe I was saying all this, couldn't believe I'd kept this truth locked inside me because it made life easier for them. It had affected my whole life, hadn't it? How I ate, how I saw myself. The way they showed their love had hurt me. I didn't think people talked enough about that. It was always about people who did things hatefully, but sometimes how people chose to love could hurt too.

"Corbin, we didn't mean to do that. We love you so much. We just want what's best for you," Mom said, tears in her eyes.

“Then love me how I am. Do you know that if Marcus or Spencer aren’t there, I try to only allow myself a meal a day? That I have such a complicated relationship with food because of the things people have hammered into my head? Kids at school called me fat, and then when I came home, you would allow my friends to have more cookies than me, or you’d hang out as a family while I was on the treadmill.”

I was shaking, and it took me a moment to realize Spencer was rubbing my back. Supporting me, giving me strength. I was already so used to receiving it from him.

“That’s not fair to us. You’re putting your struggles on our shoulders,” Dad said.

“No, I’m not. I’m telling you how I feel, about the things I experienced. I...I love you guys, but...but I have to go.” I stood, Spencer doing the same beside me.

No one said a word as Spencer and I walked out. The second we were on the porch, Spencer held my face in his hands, his eyes gazing at me in a way I couldn’t even put into words.

“Jesus, baby. I’m so fucking proud of you,” he said, before dropping his mouth to mine.

I was scared...confused...sad...but I was proud of me too.

On the drive home, I tried not to think about what just happened. I shouldn’t feel guilty, but I did, and yet that didn’t take away from the pride coursing through my body. It was strange as fuck to feel so many conflicting emotions at the same time. All I knew was, those comments hurt. They’d been in my head my whole life, telling me to watch what I ate, only I hadn’t let myself acknowledge them. Or I did, and yet I didn’t see the connection because they were in my voice. But my voice had learned it from my family, and also, hell, a million other voices—people on the internet, on TV, in school, everywhere.

I didn’t know what had made it all click tonight, but then, that was a lie, wasn’t it? I glanced over at Spencer as he drove.

At his adorable fucking bow tie and those big, beefy arms he held me with. The way his tongue sneaked out and he licked his lips, and his soft, round belly, and how good it felt to rest my cheek on it. How he didn't let that define who he was. He was...really fucking beautiful. So damn handsome and sexy, so why did the thought of even putting one pound on myself make me feel like no one would want me?

I might not have that figured out tonight, but I'd still taken one step forward.

Because of him.

"I feel like I can fly. Like I just accomplished this amazing fucking feat. It's killing me not to crawl into your lap and ride your cock right now."

"Jesus," Spencer hissed, just before I reached over and cupped his massive bulge.

"Can I have this tonight? I want to feel you deep inside me, and since we both know how great my hole is, clearly it's a treat for you too."

Spencer let out one of my favorite laughs, one that showed he really enjoyed something I'd said. "There's no chance I'll turn you down. It *is* a really great hole."

"Fucking fantastic."

"Exquisite," he added.

"You said exquisite," I teased. "I feel like we're on *Bridgerton*."

He chuckled. "Because I said exquisite?"

"Come on. You can't pretend we hear that word often in everyday life. Now will you hurry up and get home so you can fuck me?"

"Yes, sir!" he replied, and stepped on the gas.

We were laughing as he drove over the speed limit to get us back to the apartment. The second we were inside, our shoes came off, and I basically attacked his mouth with mine,

like I wasn't sure if I wanted to kiss him or suck his face off. I was feeling very needy.

Spencer's hands went to my ass, cupping it and tugging me closer to him, kissing me just as messily and hungrily as I did him.

We tugged at each other's clothes, at our own clothes, all wild hands and frantic movements as we worked to get naked.

I dropped to my knees, pressed my lips against his belly before nuzzling his groin, his balls, rubbing my cheeks all over him, wanting to be imprinted with Spencer's scent. "I don't think anyone's ever turned me on as much as you," I admitted.

"Fuck...I feel the same." He threaded his fingers through my hair just as I took his cock into my mouth. I sucked him deep, bobbing on him, taking him to the back of my throat. Every now and again, I'd gag, but I kept going, needing more of Spencer, wanting to taste him and suck him and be fucked by him as much as I could...because while I knew he was physically attracted to me, Spencer *cared* about me too, in ways no one but the Beach Bums ever had. I felt accepted with him even though I was a mess, and it was that acceptance that had helped me take one small step forward tonight.

I sucked him, playing with his balls, then cupping his ass. The weight of his dick on my tongue was addictive, the taste of his skin mouthwatering, and the scent of him...well, I wanted to find a way to bathe in that shit. My cock was throbbing, but right then, all I needed was to keep pleasuring him.

Spencer tilted my head up. My gaze caught his, and I opened my mouth, not moving, just letting him slowly fuck in and out of me. "Christ, baby. You're so fucking beautiful. Look at how well you take my cock. I can't wait to watch it sliding in and out of your hole."

My dick twitched, the thought of that so hot.

Spencer pulled out of my mouth. I whined, leaning in and trying to taste him again. He chuckled, pulling me to my feet,

his mouth slamming down on mine. He kissed me like he would die without his tongue in my mouth, like he'd never wanted anyone more than he wanted me, and that was the best kind of high.

He walked me backward until I hit the wall, and then it was Spencer on his knees for me, taking me into the hot suction of his mouth, kissing and licking my balls, then going back to swallowing around my cock when it hit the back of his throat.

For the second time, I whined when he took away what I wanted, but then he said, "Turn around," and, well, if he was planning on eating my ass, I was game.

I did as Spencer said, then spread my legs, hands flat against the wall. He was clearly hungry from missing dinner and dived right in, spreading my cheeks and lapping at my hole.

"Fuuuuuck yes. So good. Love your tongue." Like... couldn't I just sit on his face and he could do this all night? I would enjoy that. But then I wouldn't get his dick, and I sooo wanted that too.

I pushed back against him while Spencer went to town on me, kissing my cheeks, licking my hole, making a meal out of me, and then pushing his tongue inside. My cock was really aching now. I stroked it, felt how slick it was with precum. I could orgasm just like this, with a hand on my shaft and Spencer's tongue up my ass.

"Don't do that. Don't touch yourself. You can't come until you come riding my cock."

I cried out when he pushed a finger inside me.

"That was...so fucking hot."

He fingered me with one digit, then two, fucking me with them, stretching me and working me open. He sucked hard on my left cheek while he did, and I knew he was marking me there the way he'd done on my chest before.

“Fuck yes. More. Do the other side too.”

Spencer didn't need to be told twice. He bruised me with his mouth in the way I craved, still taking me with his spit-slick fingers, sometimes kissing me or licking me. My whole body was sensitive, like the littlest thing would send me over the edge.

“Please, CB. Fuck me,” I begged. “Need to come. Need your cock. Need...*you*.”

Spencer growled in response and shoved to his feet. He waited until he stood to pull out of me, and the second he did, I felt empty...alone.

“Don't move,” he warned, and damned if my dick didn't twitch.

“You have a bossy streak. It's hot.”

“Noted.”

I watched him over my shoulder as he put a condom on, then slicked it with lube. He walked back toward me, cock hard and pointing at me. Spencer slicked his fingers, dropped the bottle to the floor, then pushed them inside me. I nearly melted into the wall, savoring having a part of him inside me again.

“Look at you. You want it, don't you?” He slid his fingers out.

“Yes, you asshole,” I teased.

“What do you want?”

“Please insert your penis into my exquisite asshole, good sir!”

A laugh jumped out of his mouth, hot breath against my skin, making me tremble. “I think you need to work on your Regency England speak.”

“Fuck me with your large member, Lord Spencer.”

He kissed my nape. “Why are you so fun?”



My heart swelled. Oh, I liked that. It was so simple but so perfect. I wanted to be fun for him, wanted to have fun with him. “You’re fun too,” I admitted. But we were more than just fun with each other.

Spencer got closer to me, his warm body running the length of mine. He wrapped one arm around my waist, slowly stroking my cock as the tip of his erection nudged my hole. This time it was him I melted into, eyes rolling back as he breached me, so fucking slowly, sinking inside. “Yes...so good.”

His teeth bit into my shoulder, sending a spark of pain through me before he licked the sting away and began sucking. And then he thrust the rest of the way inside me, making my eyes roll back and pleasure overtake my whole body. I’d been fucked too many times to count, and had taken my fair share of ass too, but nothing felt as good as having sex with Spencer.

He grabbed my chin, turning me to face him, taking my mouth as he pumped into me. Every stroke of his cock, in, then out, nearly shot me to the moon. Every brush of his tongue against mine, each moan he fed me, just made me go higher and higher, feel more and more, until I thought I could burst with the feeling of Spencer.

My knees went weak when he wrapped a hand around my dick, stroking and fucking and kissing like I was the center of his world and he needed to touch me and be inside me in any way he could. It went straight to my already sensitive balls, making them draw tight against me, bliss washing over me as I shot, painting the wall, my stomach, and Spencer’s hand with cum.

He kept pounding me through my orgasm, fucking me hard until his body tensed too and his dick jerked inside me, Spencer filling the condom with his own load.

“That was...”

“Intense,” Spencer finished for me when I couldn’t seem to find the right word.

“Exactly.”

He kissed me again, slowly easing into me and pulling back until he went soft and couldn't anymore. I immediately missed the feeling of Spencer inside me when he pulled out. When he kissed my shoulder again and said, “Don't move,” I couldn't help smiling. I liked this...liked being Spencer's boyfriend.

He came back with a wet rag and wiped me off. We held hands to the bed, and I collapsed onto it. When my stomach growled, he said, “I'll go get us something to eat.”

And like we'd done before, we ate naked in his bed, sandwiches and yogurt for Christmas Eve dinner.

It was perfect.

Tucked away in his arms, the last thing I said to him before I fell asleep was, “Hey, you can still be my CB...just replace buddy with boyfriend.”

Spencer chuckled, kissed the tip of my nose, and then everything went black.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### *Spencer*

“HEY LOOK. I can use my dick as a phone stand,” Corbin said as I got out of the shower. He must have gotten back from his run while I was in there. He’d insisted on going since the gym wasn’t open. I had a feeling it was because of what had happened with his family.

Sure enough, he was lying on his back in my bed, his dick hard, leaning his cell against it.

How could I do anything other than laugh? “Creative.”

“We should watch a show on my phone tonight like this. You know, just for fun.”

I leaned over and lashed my tongue up his shaft. “But then it will be harder for me to play with you.”

“Good point. Your hand or mouth is way better. I’ll do the phone-stand thing when I’m alone.”

This time, we both chuckled before I tugged him out of bed and swatted his ass. “Go get ready. We have to leave soon.”

“Ugh. Fine. So pushy,” he teased, but did as I said.

I frowned when Corbin first put on a jockstrap and posted a Merry Christmas selfie. I didn’t know what I’d expected—that after his breakthrough with his family and how they made him feel, he would automatically cut off posting on social media because he would realize it was toxic for him? That he would magically be able to put his health and mental health first? That’s not how things like that worked. He was making progress, and that’s what I needed to focus on.

Last night had been...so fucking incredible. I wasn't sure sex had ever been like that for me, but then, of course Corbin would be special. Everything about him was, and no matter how often he pretended he knew it, the truth was, he didn't.

"Your parents are going to fucking love me," he said after getting dressed.

Translation: he was nervous as shit.

"Obviously."

He glanced over at me through a veil of dark lashes. "Do you really think so?"

My heart softened even more for this man. He had so many layers I never would have expected. I walked over to him. "Yes. I know they will. You're so fucking sweet, Cuddle Boyfriend."

When he grinned, I pressed a kiss to his lips.

"I like it when you call me that."

"It's what you are. We'll do lots of snuggling tonight."

"Naked snuggling?" he asked.

"Is there any other way? Now come on. We should head out. The traffic shouldn't be that bad today, but it will still take us a while to get to Temecula."

The drive was about an hour and forty minutes to get to my parents' house. Corbin wasn't nearly as nervous as he had been yesterday when he was seeing his own family, but the tension was still there. My family would love him, and I couldn't wait for him to see that.

My parents lived in a Spanish-style, beige stucco home not far from the Temecula hills. We'd moved to this house when I'd turned fifteen, my parents having spent most of their lives saving for a down payment.

"We good?" I asked Corbin when we pulled up in front. When he nodded, I put my hand on his nape, tugged him

closer, and gave him another kiss. “Of course you are. You’re Corbin fucking Erickson.”

“Good point.”

“That’s what I want to hear.” I winked at him, and we got out of the car. It was sunny out, a perfect seventy-three degrees on Christmas. I loved Southern California weather, not that I knew much else.

I could hear laughter and music coming from inside. The front door was open, the screen door closed. It would be locked because people always locked their doors here, but I could see my brother Nick in the hallway. “Open up, butthead,” I said, and he looked over and smiled.

“Spence is here! Good thing I had to take a shit. Now I get to be the first one to meet your boyfriend!”

I rolled my eyes.

“Okay, I already like him,” Corbin said because of course he would.

Nick unlocked the screen and gave me a big hug. We were an affectionate family, which I figured Corb would love.

“Good to see you, dork,” Nick said, then gave Corbin his attention. “I’m Nick, Spencer’s younger, more attractive brother. I’m funnier too.”

“You wish,” I replied.

“I’m Corbin.” I could tell he was about to put his hand out for Nick to shake, but my brother spoke before he could.

“We like to hug. Are hugs okay with you?”

“Hugs are the best.” Corbin looked at me with smiling eyes.

“Well,” Nick said, “he’s won me over. He seems nicer than the last one. We didn’t like DJ.” Because of course Nick would mention the fact that my family had known DJ. “I still don’t get why you liked that guy so much.”

“*Nick*,” I said pointedly, and his eyes went wide as he realized that bringing up my ex in front of my boyfriend was a dick move.

“Did Spencer tell you I’m the idiot brother? Because I am. Clearly. I’m the baby of the family, so I basically just think about myself.”

“Well, I’m an idiot too, so we’ll get along great,” Corbin told him.

“See! I knew I liked you.” Nick put an arm around my boyfriend. “I wish Misty were here. She’s my wife. You’ll love her too. She’s a nurse and had to work, though. Come on. Let’s go out back and meet everyone so I can brag about how we’re already friends.”

Corbin started walking with Nick, the two of them chatting up a storm like long-lost friends. I fucking loved it. While I’d known it would all be okay, I still let out a relieved breath. I wanted today to be perfect for him.

A rock station played in the background, everyone outside because we always smoked a turkey on Christmas, and as I’d mentioned, the weather was great.

“Meet my new best friend, Corbin!” Nick said the second he went through the sliding door. They were immediately mobbed by the rest of my family, which included my other brother, Ken, his wife, both brothers’ kids, and my parents.

Introductions were made, and of course everyone was jealous that Nick got to meet Corbin first. My family gave him all the attention and started talking his ear off, which Corbin loved. It was perfect for him. I kept to the background and let him soak up the spotlight as he told them about what he did for a living, *The Vers* podcast, and his group of friends.

“Oh my goodness, you’re gorgeous,” Mom told him. “Isn’t he gorgeous, Layla?” she asked my sister-in-law.

“You really are,” Layla agreed.

“I think so,” Corbin teased, making everyone laugh.

“Um...I’m supposed to be the charming one around here. Stay in your lane, buddy.” Nick winked.

Ken smacked Nick on the back of his head. “Shut up, buttface.”

“That’s what we all call him,” I told Corbin, just as Dad said, “I promise, we’re a nice, normal family who despite the hitting and name-calling isn’t abusive at all.”

“You’re perfect,” Corbin said, and I could tell he meant it.

He was perfect, and I was determined to do everything in my power to make sure he knew it.

We spent the next couple of hours outside, talking and laughing. Mom would pop into the kitchen sometimes to check on the food, and usually one or two of us would go in and help.

When we ate, Corbin didn’t put much on his plate, his portions much smaller than I would have liked. He just had turkey, the sautéed carrots my family loved, and a small salad.

Like Corbin had been, I was the only one in my family who had a larger body, but our experiences were so different in every way. My family had never made me feel bad about it.

We all sat in chairs, plates on our laps. Corbin picked at his food from time to time, but mostly talked and laughed with the others.

“When Spencer was a kid,” Mom said, “he used to always do some kind of holiday dance number for us. I don’t know if he told you, but he took hip-hop and ballet classes.”

“I’ve seen him dance! There was a party at the LGBTQ center. I was a little sad he’s better than me, but mostly just impressed,” Corbin teased, earning a chuckle from the group. He turned to me. “Are you going to perform for us today?”

“Hell no. I haven’t done that since I was a kid.”

“Please...for me, CB?” He fluttered his lashes dramatically. I rolled my eyes.

“Absolutely not.”

“You’re no fun.” Corbin pouted.

“I am the absolute most amount of fun.”

“Is no one planning on asking what CB is? Because I totally am.”

I pointed my fork at Nick. “None of your business.”

“Aw, sex stuff. I get it.”

“Dad! Gross!” my nephew said, which was followed by more laughter. We did that a lot when we were together.

“Nicholas Chase!” Mom scolded. “Watch your mouth in front of the kids.”

*My family, ladies and gentlemen.*

“I still want Spencer to dance for me.” Corbin crossed his arms and pouted playfully.

“I’ll dance for you later, baby.” I winked.

“Aww!” Layla said. “You guys are so cute. Why don’t you dance for me?” she asked Ken.

“Because I don’t know how? I used to play football in high school. I can do that for you if you want.”

“Straight guys are boring,” my sister-in-law joked.

I turned to Corbin. “I’m sorry we’re like this.”

“I’m not sorry. I love it.”

“What about your family? Do they live close?” Dad asked.

Fuck. I wished I’d thought to warn them not to bring up Corbin’s family. I wasn’t sure how it would make him feel.

“We’re definitely not like this. It’s difficult.”

I could see the wheels spinning in everyone’s head. Mom was the one who spoke first. “Well, you have a family in us, Corbin.”



“Oh, no. They accept my sexuality. I mean, they wish I wasn’t gay and think I’m going to burn in hell, but—Okay, yes, I’m hearing it now. I guess they don’t accept me.” It was the first time I’d heard him say something like that. Corbin always defended them and believed what they gave him was acceptance, but it wasn’t.

I put my hand on Corbin’s nape again, pulled him closer, and kissed him. I left my arm around him, and he scooted closer to me, cuddling into me the way he did.

“Well...” Mom said, “I’m not the type to bad-talk anyone, so I’ll just say you’re perfect the way you are, and no one in this house will ever want to change you.”

“Also, you’re not going to burn in hell,” Ken added.

“Thank you,” Corbin replied, and I kissed him again.

We got off sad topics after that. Corbin didn’t eat much, and I didn’t push it. What I did plan was to do as much research as I could and maybe talk to some therapists I knew from the center—without divulging his personal information, of course—to figure out the best ways to help him and be there for him.

We stayed late, and just as we were about to leave, Mom and I ended up alone in the kitchen. We’d always been close, and I knew she would corner me at some point.

“I love him, Spencer. He’s so sweet and playful, but you can tell there’s so much going on beneath the surface that he doesn’t show easily.”

Jesus. My mom was good. “True. He’s...”

“You love him?”

“I could. I’m not sure if I do, but I could.”

She wrapped me in a tight hug. “I’m so happy for you. You deserve it.”

I just needed to make sure Corbin knew he deserved happiness too.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### *Corbin*

I COULDN'T STOP obsessing about Christmas at Spencer's...how different it was from spending time with my own family. They didn't make Spencer feel guilty about things he had no reason to feel guilty for. They didn't just say they loved him, they *showed* how much they loved him by completely accepting him the way he was.

And they had extended that to me. It was so damn refreshing and made me realize how unlike myself I was around my family. I had to stifle who I was, tone myself down, because I was scared if I didn't, they would stop loving me.

It was a lot to unpack, and a few days after New Year's, while at work, I was still trying to sort through all my fucked-up shit.

"The flexibility and mobility in your shoulder have increased a lot, even since last week," I told my patient as we worked through some exercises.

"Thank you. And I hardly feel any pain. I've worked with three PTs, and you're by far the best. I feel like you listen and take the time to come up with creative solutions."

Well, that was good to hear. "That's what I'm here for. I feel so lucky that I get to do this. The human body really is incredible."

"I agree," she said. "For me it's emotional stuff. I'm a therapist."

*Therapist, therapist, therapist.* For whatever reason, the word echoed through my head. Okay, so I knew the reason. Spencer thought I should talk to someone, and he wasn't the first one to say that. The Beach Bums had been telling me the

same for years, and no matter how much I denied it, deep down I always knew it was true. And ever since all the stuff with Spencer had started going down, I'd been thinking about it more. I was seeing things I'd never allowed myself to see, like how my family treated me...

“Do you like it? What you do?” I found myself asking.

“Yes. It's incredibly fulfilling. Not a day goes by that I don't feel blessed that I'm able to support people the way I do.”

I nodded, done with the questions, but all fucking day I kept thinking about her, Spencer, family, social media, and all sorts of shit. It wasn't fun. I missed pretending everything was fine all the time. Honestly, that was a whole lot easier than what I was doing now.

It was still on my mind when I walked out of work at the end of the day, which was why I almost missed Gael sitting on the sidewalk, leaning against the building. He had his eyes closed, and even the set of his small body seemed heavy.

“Hey, you...is everything okay?” I asked, casting a shadow on him.

He looked up at me. “Of course,” he snapped. “Why wouldn't it be?”

“Yikes. So not okay. Is there anything I can help with?” I didn't know how Gael knew where I worked. Maybe I'd mentioned it at some point or maybe Spencer had? Or hell, maybe he'd asked Spencer, but if he had, I knew my CB would have texted me to let me know he was coming.

“That's not what I said.”

“But it's what you meant. I read denial because I speak it.”

Something in his gaze changed, his eyes going soft. He nodded toward the book in my hand. “You're still reading it.”

“Yeah, I'm loving it. I read on my lunchbreak. I would have finished it earlier, but the holidays set me back some.”

He sat there, looking up at me, me down at him. His eyes seemed to say *ask me*, and I wondered if mine ever did that. If so, I thought it would be when I was looking at Spencer...and he would always ask.

“Are you hungry?”

“I could eat something sweet,” Gael said.

“I know the perfect place. Let’s go.”

Parker owned a bakery that wasn’t far from my work—close enough that we could walk. I held my hand out for Gael, who took it and let me tug him to his feet, before I let go. I was nervous as shit. I had never done this before, helped a kid, but I thought Gael needed it, even if it was only to talk, and he’d chosen to come to me. I wouldn’t let myself mess this up.

We headed to Beach Buns. Gael gave a small smile when he saw the sign. “I’ve never actually been here before. He named it for your group, right?”

“Yeah, we call ourselves the Beach Bums, though I have to admit, I’m nervous over the fact that you listen to our podcast.”

“I’m *eighteen*,” Gael argued again.

“Yeah, but probably only for like five minutes, and that’s still young. We talk about...stuff.”

Gael laughed. “Why do I actually feel older than you? You can’t even say the word.”

I could definitely say the word *sex*, I just wasn’t saying it to him. “Let’s go stock up on treats.”

I held the door open for him, and he went inside.

“Hey, Corbin!” Laurie, one of the girls behind the counter, greeted me. “Parker’s not in right now.”

“That’s okay. We just came to get some stuff.” I turned to Gael. “Pick whatever you want.”

“That might be a mistake on your part. I might be small, but I can eat.” He flinched, like he hadn’t meant to say what he had. The part about being small, or about eating?

“Whatever you want,” I confirmed.

He got a cinnamon roll, three cookies, and a drink, before turning to me. “Don’t you want anything?”

“Just a water,” I said.

Gael tried to give me some money to help pay, but I didn’t let him.

We took our haul to one of the tables outside. It was slightly chilly, especially the air coming off the ocean, but it wasn’t too bad. There was more privacy than staying inside.

“So…”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he cut me off.

“Okay, I understand that. I don’t want to push you. There’s a lot I don’t talk about either.” But I wished Gael would tell me what he was going through, open up to me and let me help, the same way people like Spencer or the Beach Bums wanted me to open up to them…the same way they thought they could help me. Why was it that I simultaneously thought I could help Gael but that my best friends couldn’t help me?

Gael was quiet for a moment. He picked a piece off his cinnamon roll and ate it. “Like what?” he asked softly. “You’re hot, you have a million friends, a successful career, a podcast, a boyfriend, and even if you didn’t have Spencer, every queer guy in the world likely wants you. I bet you’ve never been teased a day in your life.”

“That’s not true.” I tried to ignore the thudding in my ears. “I had a terrible time growing up.” I took a deep breath, trying to slow down my heart. I could do this. I needed to do this, to share with Gael, because how could I expect him to open up to me if I didn’t open up to him? “I told you before that I didn’t have a lot of friends when I was young. The only people I had were Parker, Declan, and Marcus. I was teased daily—for my

weight because I was bigger then, for my skin because I had acne, for my looks in general. Boys played tricks on me, pretending they liked me, only to then make fun of me. I had mean notes stuffed in my locker and shit written about me on the bathroom walls. It was torture...so no, my life wasn't always like it is now, but it did get better." I still had a long way to go, though, didn't I?

Gael took another bite and ate it, watching his plate as he spoke. "That explains Spencer's comment in the library that one time about you always being beautiful and people hurting others. I don't have any friends...not one. They make fun of me because I'm so small...so skinny and short...because I wear glasses and like to read. Even at the center I don't fit in except with you and Spencer. I go to a school for the arts, and I *still* get bullied. That tells you how big of a loser I am."

"No," I rushed out. "It doesn't. There's nothing wrong with you. Fuck them. They're the ones with the issue. They're the ones with the problem."

"Why doesn't it feel that way, then?" Gael asked, and damned if my eyes didn't begin to sting.

Why didn't it feel that way? Life would be a whole lot easier if it did.

"Because we're human and we're so fucking hard on ourselves." I was hard on myself, wasn't I? The way I worked out and ate, trying to be perfect. The photos I posted and then the way I scrutinized every extra bit of skin, or the way I stood and how it made my muscles look smaller or my body look bigger. The way I thought Spencer's body was perfect and sexy but hated myself if I put on a pound. "It seems there's two ways to be—really fucking hard on others, or really fucking hard on ourselves. People like you and me...we choose ourselves."

Finally, he looked up at me. "But you're better now. How did you do it? How did you get past it? I hate myself, and I hate everyone else. I'm so sad and angry all the time. I pretend I'm okay, but I'm not."

Gael's words nearly stole my breath. He could have been talking about me just as easily as he was himself. I pretended I was okay...but I wasn't. I hadn't dealt with my past. I had major self-esteem, self-worth, food, and body image issues. I told myself it was just disordered eating, as if that wasn't bad enough, but maybe it was more. "We have that in common too."

Gael frowned.

"I love cookies." I pointed to the one on his plate with chocolate chunks. "That's my favorite, but it would have to be a special occasion for me to allow myself to eat it. And I'd feel bad about myself the entire time. I would double my workout routine because I ate a cookie. I spend most of the time trying to pretend I'm fine and that it's not as bad as it is, but I obsess about social media and what people think of me. I'm so afraid of being the boy I used to be, but...but maybe there wasn't anything wrong with him." Maybe it was time I let myself see that.

I swiped at my eye when a tear leaked free.

"Sorry, Gael, I was supposed to be helping you, and I'm talking about my own shit."

He shook his head quickly, making his glasses go crooked. "Don't apologize. What you just did...you talked to me like I'm your equal, like we're the same. I never would have thought someone like you would be dealing with all that. It helps me to feel less alone."

That's what most of us wanted out of life, right? Not to feel alone. I'd felt alone before the Beach Bums. Sometimes I felt alone now that they all had someone to love...but then, I had Spencer now, and I didn't feel alone with him. I felt like...more...more than I'd ever thought I could be or feel or have.

"You don't want to hurt yourself, do you?" I asked softly.

"No. I don't. I wouldn't. And my mom is great. I could never do that to her."

"That's good. Have you told her how bad it's getting?"

He shrugged. “Some of it. She wants me to see a therapist, but that feels so fucking dumb. Like, how in the hell is that going to help? Just talking to a stranger.”

“You won’t know unless you try.”

“Do you see a therapist?” Gael asked.

The question was so simple, so innocent, but it nearly knocked me off my seat. I didn’t know what it was about hearing Gael ask that, but it made everything click into place inside me. Wanting him to get better made me realize it was time for me to deal with my struggles too.

“I don’t. I’ve been spending most of my life fighting it, and it hasn’t gotten me anywhere. I think...I think maybe it’s time for that to change. Maybe it’s something we can do together? Not together-together, obviously, but maybe it’s something we can both try. I don’t want you to get to my age and still be dealing with the traumas of your past.”

He stared at me for a moment, his brown eyes taking me in. The silence stretched between us, making my nerves kick into high gear. Maybe he was going to say no. Maybe he wasn’t ready. Maybe I was pushing too hard and—

“Okay,” Gael replied, and I breathed out.

“Okay.” I stood then, and walked over and hugged him.

We sat there talking afterward, and I even ate part of one of his cookies. When Gael said he needed to take the bus back to LA to go home, I offered to give him a ride. I told him I could help him talk to his mom if he wanted, and Gael agreed.

It was nearly nine in the evening when I left their house, and I wasn’t sure I’d ever been hugged as tightly as I had been by Gael’s mom as she’d whispered a soft thank-you. It was the most amazing thing I’d ever felt.

I didn’t know what it was about me that made Gael open up, willing to get help... Maybe I really was The Charmer after all.



I texted Spencer when I was on my way home. I'd told him something had come up, that I would tell him about it later. He was likely worried, but I hadn't wanted to get into too much detail when I was still with Gael.

Spencer was sitting on the couch, wearing... "Oh my God!" I said, taking in his shirt. He smiled, which made my heart beat faster and expand in ways I never would have thought possible.

I walked right over to him as he stood and opened his arms.

"*Chubby Boys Cuddle Better*," I read. "I like it. How come you've never worn it before?"

"I ordered it special." He winked, and I went straight into his arms.

"It's true, though for me, I think it has something to do with it being you. *Spencer cuddles better*."

"I like that, baby." He kissed the top of my head, then tugged me down to the couch with him. He lay down and pulled me on top of him, arms around me. "Is everything okay?"

"Everything is...better. I was with Gael. He was waiting for me outside my work. I took him to Beach Buns, and we talked. He's having a hard time. I talked to him about therapy, and he agreed to start. We even went and talked to his mom about it."

Spencer cocked a brow. "No shit?"

"No shit."

"Jesus, that is...thank you." He cupped my cheek. "You're so fucking amazing. So good. Such a huge fucking heart. I don't even have the words to describe how incredible you are."

"You can keep trying later," I teased. "There's more." Worry creased Spencer's brow, and he leaned in and pressed a soft kiss to my lips.

“Go on.”

“Talking to him made me realize what I need to do for myself, helped me see that I can’t keep going this way. And how can I expect Gael to get help at eighteen if I won’t at my age?”

His face completely transformed, taken over by that knockout smile of his I liked so much, his green eyes so bright and happy, but also, strangely unreadable.

“Are you kidding me?” he asked.

“No. I thought maybe you’d want to help me? Find someone and—oh shit!” I said when Spencer sat up, then *stood* with me still in his arms. I wasn’t a small guy. I had muscles I was proud of, damn it! But he held me and basically bounced with me in his big, beefy arms like I’d just made him the happiness man in the world.

How could hearing what I’d said make him *that* happy? How could he care *that* much?

“Put. Me. Down,” I said as he was still shaking me and squeezing me just a little too tightly.

“Shit. Sorry. I’m just so proud of you.” He set me on my feet, held my face in his hands, and pressed a loud kiss to my lips. “I love you so fucking much,” he said—and we both stilled.

Wait. Had I just heard what I thought I heard?

“Did you...”

“I did...wow...it just came out.”

My heart dropped because...holy fuck, I *wanted* Spencer to love me. “Oh. It’s okay if it was a heat-of-the-moment thing. Though I thought those happened during sex. But I won’t hold you to it if you don’t mean it.”

“I do, Corb. I think I really do.”

“Yeah?” I asked, cheesy-smiling because Spencer loved me, and Gael trusted me, and I had the best friends in the

world. Sure, I hadn't talked to my family since Christmas Eve, and my mom had only called twice, both times leaving messages where she made excuses and put the blame on Spencer. But everything else was going so fucking well.

“Yes. You're...fuck, Corbin. You've charmed me. I'm fucking crazy about you.”

“I'm crazy about you too. I love you too. That's a lot of *toos*, but I don't even care.”

And clearly, Spencer didn't either because instead of responding, his mouth slammed down on mine, and it was the perfect response.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

### *Spencer*

HE TASTED LIKE every dream I didn't know I had, like all those things I never would have thought I wanted before Corbin. After the way DJ left me, I hadn't thought I would ever let myself fall in love again. Date, yes. Hook up, yes. But putting my heart on the line? Nah, I was good, but then Corbin came into my life again, and how could I not fall for him? How could anyone?

"Fuck me...please," Corbin begged as he eased back and began to pull my shirt over my head. The second it was gone, he shoved my arm up and buried his face in my pit the way he liked to do.

He licked me there, likely tasting the soap from my shower and my sweat, making hungry little sounds that went straight to my head. A wave of dizziness swept over me, my arms wrapping around him so I could grip his perfect ass.

Corbin went from one arm to the other, kissing and licking and nuzzling, like he loved my body in a way he would never allow himself to love his own if it looked the same.

He wasn't a small guy, he was tall and muscular, but still I lifted him, making Corbin laugh as I carried him to my room.

"My super-hot boyfriend who is totally in love with me and a grade A cuddler must be dying for my ass."

I both loved and hated when he said things like that. Loved it because it made me feel wanted. It showed me how much Corbin wanted to be wanted by me. But I also hated it because part of me worried he was trying to make himself believe it could be true.

“I do.” I let him slide down my body until he was on his feet. “Love you, and I’m dying for your ass. Always, Corb. Because you’re so fucking *wantable*. Is that a word?”

He chuckled. “It’s our word.”

“I like that. And you’re so fucking beautiful, inside and out. Tell me.”

“I’m beautiful inside and out,” he said playfully, pumping his brows.

“Be serious, baby.” I nuzzled his throat and kissed him there. “Please? I want to hear you say it.”

“I’m beautiful inside and out—*oh God*,” he moaned when I shoved a hand down his pants and stroked his cock.

“That’s it. Say it again.” I kept stroking and kissing him.

“I’m beautiful inside and out.”

I pulled back and ripped his shirt off, going straight for his pec. “Again,” I said, then sucked his skin into my mouth.

“I’m beautiful inside and out.”

I kept sucking, marking him, giving him the hickeys and love bites I knew he loved so much.

Without my prompting, he said, “I’m beautiful inside and out...I’m beautiful inside and out...I’m beautiful inside and out.”

“That’s it, baby. Get on the bed for me.”

I pulled back, and Corbin sat on the edge of the mattress. Bending down, I took his shoes off, then watched as he leaned back so I could unbutton and unzip his jeans. Corbin raised his hips so I could tug those and his underwear down. His dick pointed at me, veins throbbing in his shaft, his pubes newly trimmed that morning. A pearl of precum leaked from the slit, so I leaned forward and swiped it with my tongue. “Such a pretty cock. Goddamn, you taste good.”

“Suck me,” he ordered, but I just looked at him and cocked a brow. Corbin knew what I wanted because he said, “I’m beautiful inside and out. You’re going to make me even more conceited than I already am.”

That was mostly an act and we both knew it, but still I said, “I’m okay with that,” before swallowing his dick like the deep-throating champ I was.

I loved the feel of his hot, hard cock against my tongue. Loved the way he stretched my lips and how his body gave an extra jerk when he made me gag, showing me how much he liked doing it.

I was throbbing, still dressed from the waist down. In that moment I’d do just about anything for the ability to blink my clothes away. Where was magic power when I needed it?

Taking Corbin to the back of my throat, I buried my nose in his pubes, inhaled his musky scent that was like a drug for me, one I was already addicted to.

His fingers dived into my hair, holding on, and his soft mumbling noises, mixed with sharp breaths, filled the room.

“Christ, this feels good. I want to fill your mouth with my cum,” he said, fingers tightening into a fist in my strands.

I pulled off. “Do it.”

“I want to come with you in my ass too.”

I grinned. “Good thing we have all night. Do it, baby. Feed me your load.”

Desire flared in his eyes, and once I was back on him, sucking him, Corbin’s movements became jerky and urgent for just a few more moments before his balls contracted and he shot spurt after spurt of salty cum in my mouth.

I swallowed it all down like it was my last meal. It was certainly my favorite. I wanted to just nurse Corbin’s cock and be rewarded a steady stream of cum to fill my belly.

He was gasping as he pulled me to him so our mouths met. His tongue pushed between my lips as Corbin tugged down my sweats.

“Fuck. Gray sweats. Why didn’t I take the time to enjoy these.”

“Later,” I laughed before kissing him again.

We managed to work my clothes off, and Corbin said, “I wanna try something,” then lay down, head hanging over the side of the mattress. “Fuck my mouth.”

My dick bounced against my belly, a rush of blood making it even harder. “You’re gonna let me use your mouth like it’s your hole?” I asked, pushing two fingers between his lips. Corbin blew them while nodding. “This is what we’re gonna do. I’m going to fuck your pretty face, and then I’m going to hold you, kiss on you, love on you, so you know you’re more than just sex for me. And when we get hard again, I’m gonna make love to that sexy ass of yours. Does that sound good?”

“Yessss,” he said around my fingers. “Fuck yes.”

I stood over Corbin, angling my cock forward. He opened for me, and I watched my dick disappear between his lips. I almost came then and there. It took everything in me to hold off.

The wet suction of his mouth was to die for as I kept going, watching his throat bulge with my prick. “You’re so pretty like this. Taking my cock so well. Christ, I’m so fucking lucky to have you.”

I pulled back and then slid between his lips over and over and over again. I made love to his mouth, fucked in as I leaned over him, palming and rubbing his cock, his stomach, pressing into the purple mark on his chest where I’d claimed him. It didn’t take long for my control to snap, for me to give in to my orgasm and let it sweep me under, eyes rolling back while I filled his mouth with my release.

“Come here,” I said, crawling onto the bed with him. We lay side by side, holding each other, hands exploring each

other's bodies, giving in to lazy, sensual kisses.

"I love your belly." Corbin kissed his way down my body. "It's perfect for cuddling."

"Mmm. So glad you like chubby boys." I pulled him up for another make-out session.

I didn't know how long we kissed. It could have been thirty minutes or three hours for all I knew. I just never wanted to stop kissing him, but eventually our dicks started to perk up again. Blood rushed to my groin, while my tongue made a home in his mouth, and we stroked each other.

"I didn't know it could be like this," Corbin said when I rolled him to his belly and started kissing each knob of his spine, working my way down. "Sex with someone, I mean. I've always been a sexual person, always loved it, but this... *this*...there is nothing like being with you."

My heart slammed against my chest, each beat saying his name. "Christ, I love you."

When I got to his ass, I spread his cheeks. Eating Corbin's hole was one of my favorite things. My tongue fit so well inside him. I wanted to bury my face there and eat him morning, noon, and night.

"The best hole," I said, watching it tighten before loosening again.

"He says you should say hello with your tongue."

I grinned. "Does he now?"

"Abso-fucking-lutely."

I did exactly as Corbin said I should, flicking it with my tongue, softening his rim before pressing into him. He squirmed and panted beneath me, saying my name and fucking against the mattress.

I nibbled at his cheeks, enjoyed every sound he made and every time he said my name, knowing how good I was making



him feel. I worked my tongue inside him, thrusting it in and out, while Corbin pushed back against me, riding my face.

Pain burst in my head when something hit it. “Ouch.” I looked over to see the bottle of lube beside me.

“Sorry. Feels so fucking good, but need your dick.”

“So you thought you’d throw a bottle at my skull?”

“I was in a hurry. It’s a testament to both your ass-eating and fucking abilities that I’m losing my damn mind here.”

I chuckled. “I like the sound of that.” I grabbed the bottle, slicked my fingers, and went straight for pressing two inside him. “This is so hot, watching your ass suck me in, your tight little hole stretch for my fingers, while it gets ready for my dick.”

“Yes. God yes. I’m beautiful inside and out. Now fuck me, CB!”

“So impatient today.”

“Um, sorry for wanting my boyfriend’s dick.”

I would never get tired of hearing him say things like that. “You definitely don’t have to apologize for that.”

I pushed up to my knees and grabbed a condom, opening it and sliding it down. Once I was slicked up, I moved him so he was partly on his side and partly on his stomach, top leg bent, the other out straight. I straddled the straight leg, holding his ass open with one hand while I worked my cock into him, watching the tight skin stretch open and his body take me inside.

“Mmm, you’re taking my big, fat cock so well. Does it feel good?”

“Yesssss.”

It felt good for me too. Better than good. Indescribable. His hole was so tight and hot and made for my cock.

I snapped my hips forward, burying myself inside. Corbin said my name as I pumped my hips, filling him over and over with my cock. Every time I pressed in, he sucked in a breath, out he released one, matching my movements and fisting his hand in the pillow.

I could drown in the sensation of his body and never want to emerge again.

I stayed inside him while wrapping an arm around Corbin's waist and pulling him up so he knelt, his back flush against my chest. My arms were around him, one hand stroking his cock, the other pinching his pebbled nipples.

"Don't stop. Don't ever stop," Corbin begged.

Could we stay here like this forever? I could find a way to make it work.

I railed into him, this mixture of fucking and making love—hell, fucking *was* making love when you felt the way we did. I could sense when Corbin was close, felt when his body tightened, heard when his breathing changed.

"Fuck, I'm gonna shoot!" he said, right before his hole squeezed me and hot, slick cum slid through my fingers. He emptied his balls just as mine drew up and drained into the condom.

"Hold me, CB," Corbin said, working his way into my arms.

I threw the condom on the floor, not giving a fuck about the mess, then did exactly as he said.

"You asked me once not to give up on you, and I have something to ask you too. Don't just walk away from me. If things start to change for you, talk to me. I don't know what I would do if you just walked away."

"Never. I would never." Corbin pressed his lips to mine.

I would never ever stop holding Corbin if I could.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### *Corbin*

“WE SHOULD PLAY murder, fuck, kill about each other,” I teased the next Sunday as we were recording *The Vers* in Marcus’s studio. Afterward, Spencer would be coming over to get to know the guys, and they’d all celebrate me for my birthday. I *loved* to be celebrated, so I was down with that plan. Plus, Spencer was *in love with me*, so there wasn’t much of anything that could dim my mood lately. It wasn’t always easy for me to believe he loved me, but that was my brain and nothing he did.

“Murder and killing are the same thing.” Declan swatted the back of my head playfully.

“Shit. Is that what I said?” I laughed. “I didn’t even notice. Marry, fuck, kill, then.”

“We’re not playing that about each other, kid,” Marcus complained.

“Do you ever get tired of being so boring? Or are you so boring and lack the ability to have any fun to such an extent that you don’t even realize it?”

Parker and Declan both busted into laughter at my antics. Marcus flipped me off and then smacked me on the back of the head.

“Why is everyone so violent today?” I pouted. “Or... what’s a spin we can play on this game about your significant others? No murder because I don’t want to kill any of them.”

“Oh, but you’d want to kill us?” Parker asked.

“I mean, only sometimes.” Now all four of us laughed. God, I loved them, and now...now I loved someone who wasn’t them too. Yes, I was obsessing about this whole love-

and-boyfriend thing, but could you blame me? I'd not only thought I'd never want this, but I hadn't thought anyone would ever want it with me, and now I had a man who knew all my secrets, who held me each night, and researched therapists with me, and offered to take time off to bring me to my first appointment. He'd even said he was going to look for someone he could talk to as well because he wanted to be as supportive as possible and didn't want to accidentally do something that would be counterproductive for me. Talk about fucking swoon.

"How about we answer questions instead?" Marcus said, and I shrugged.

"If you have no problem being boring, then I guess it shouldn't bother me that you are either." I winked, and Marcus tugged me closer and kissed my temple.

I cuddled into him, and it was great because it was Marcus, my best friend. My strictly platonic person, but I was now used to the softness of being against Spencer's body. The way it felt like I could be completely wrapped up in him and never ever have to come out. Would he care if Marcus and I were like this? I couldn't make a relationship work with someone who was jealous of what I had with the men in this room. So many fears tried to steal my happiness, but I pushed them away. I knew Spencer. He wasn't the jealous type. He was too confident in who he was. He would never try to deny me these men or what we gave each other.

"Fine, we can answer questions." I grabbed the tablet. "'What are your thoughts on top privilege and bottom shaming?'" I read out loud, then answered before anyone else had the chance to speak. "It's rampant in the community. I used to see it all the time when I was on hookup apps."

One look at Marcus and how he cocked a brow told me he noticed I said when I *used to be* on hookup apps. He knew Spencer and I were together, of course, but I was sure it was interesting for him to hear things like that from me.

Parker answered next. “The other day, I saw this asshole online complaining he had a date and ended up with a messy dick. He said he stopped fucking the guy, and it basically sounded like he’d scolded him on how to clean out and accused him of not caring about his tops!”

Declan said, “That guy is a fucking dick and doesn’t deserve that bottom.”

“Shit happens,” Marcus said. “If a guy can’t understand that, he has no right expecting to stick his dick in someone’s ass.”

“That part,” I agreed.

“Tops do need to realize there’s a lot bottoms have to do, and should appreciate them for it,” Declan added.

“Plus,” Parker said, “it’s not healthy to use too many products or to douche too much. It can cause all sorts of issues. And the shaming and fear of accidents transfers into many bottoms restricting their food.” As soon as Parker finished speaking, they all looked at me, not because my food issues were due to bottoming, but because they all knew I had them.

Marcus, as always, brought us back on track. “Just like any other community, ours can be toxic sometimes. We have to call it out as we see it and try to do better. Bottom shaming is definitely a discussion that needs to be had, and not just that, but also some people’s idea of what it means if you’re a bottom and how all twinks must be bottoms and bears are likely tops. That’s the case sometimes, and others it isn’t. I guess the point is, there’s a lot of stereotyping, putting people into specific boxes.”

“You can say that again.” Declan nodded.

“We love you, bottoms! We see you, and some of us are more you than we are not.” Parker winked.

“Dude,” I said, “for real. I fucking love bottoming for my boyfriend. He turns me into a needy little hole for him.” I fanned myself.

“Um...are we admitting on the show that you have a boyfriend now?” Declan asked.

“Are we forgetting the fact that I don’t even know him yet?” Marcus cut in.

“Did you want to date him too?” I teased, and Marcus rolled his eyes. “We’ll discuss that later. Let’s finish this episode.” Because honestly, I was dying to tell them about all the new developments. And, okay, maybe brag a little too because Spencer and I together were really fucking hot.

We answered a few more questions, had a quick “Mimosas and Man-Talk” segment where Parker raved about a new movie he and Elliott had seen, and Declan updated everyone on Sebastian’s upcoming show.

From there, Marcus shared a Queer Historical Fact before going through our sponsors. When he stopped recording, three sets of eyes turned my way.

“What? Did you guys want to talk about something?” I teased. “Oh, I’ll have to RSVP with a plus-one for the wedding, Park.”

“I feel like things have changed. You told us you had a boyfriend, but you didn’t say anything on the show and now you did. Plus, holy shit, do you realize your smile is trying to swallow your face right now?” Parker grinned too.

“I mean...I might have one thing to share...” I planned to enjoy this, so sue me.

“You’re in love with him,” Marcus said before anyone could ask what happened or play my little game.

“What the fuck, Daddy M!” I punched him in the arm. “You ruin all the fun. How did you guess so quickly? I didn’t think any of you had me falling in love as something that would happen anytime soon.”

“I can see it in your face, kid. Come’ere.” Marcus stood, tugged me to my feet, and pulled me into his arms. I went easily because *duh*, and hugged him back. I knew he was

worried, knew he wanted to protect me and take care of me and didn't know Spencer well enough to trust him yet. Part of that was my fault for waiting to bring him around, but then... hell, the fundraiser for World AIDS Day had barely been two months ago. How could everything change that dramatically that quickly? Regardless of the worry I knew Marcus felt, it meant the world to me that he was showing his support this way, that he would quiet the voice inside him that loved us all so fucking much, the daddy who just wanted to take care of us, and let me have this. "I love you." Marcus ran his hands up and down my back.

"I love you too."

"Usually it's a hug orgy, but this is just a twosome. Do we get in on this?" Parker asked.

"Yeah, even I'm feeling left out," Declan admitted.

We opened our arms and pulled the two of them in.

So much had changed the past couple of years. We'd all fallen in love, and Parker was married, but this, the core of us, would never ever change. So many people over the years had asked us which of us were fucking and which were secretly in love with each other, not believing us when we said that wasn't the case, but it wasn't. We were a different kind of unit, something that would never go away, something that went beyond relationships, dating, or sex. A relationship between any of us would fuck up the dynamic and would never work. We were the Beach Bums, and always would be.

"So...I'm assuming, because we're all so happy, that you know he feels the same?" Declan asked.

"He said it *first*," I bragged, before getting serious. "He makes me feel...I don't know...*more*, if that makes sense. Like I'm more than I thought I could be. Yesterday I saw this negative comment on social media about me, and I just...I thought about how Spencer looks at me, the things he says to me, how he makes me feel. That didn't take away all my negative thoughts, but it helped some." And the rest I had to

do myself. It was why I was going to start seeing a therapist, but it was okay that someone I loved helped.

On cue, Marcus said, “You know you can’t completely depend on him for that shit, right? You need—”

“I *know*,” I cut Marcus off. “I do.” Just as I was about to tell them that I’d decided to start therapy, that Spencer and I had found someone we liked and my first appointment was coming up, my phone buzzed, and I knew it was him. “Spencer’s here.” I looked at Marcus. “Be nice.”

He held his hands up. “I’m always nice.” When I cocked a brow, he said, “Okay, I’m always nice to people who treat well the three of you, my man, and your men.”

“That’s better. Let’s go celebrate me now!” I rushed out of the room and into the living room, planning on going to grab Spencer from outside. Apparently, I didn’t need to because he was standing in the living room with Kai, Sebastian, and Elliott...and the space looked totally different from how it had looked before I went into the studio.

“Surprise!” Kai jumped in the air as my gaze journeyed around the room. There were balloons and streamers and a banner on the wall that said *Happy Birthday, Corbin*. The table was set with all of my favorite foods and...

“Are those dick decorations?” I asked.

“They are. My idea.” Kai curtsied. “As was this surprise party that’s not totally a surprise party, but I wanted to have one, so we’re going to pretend you didn’t know everyone would be here today.”

It *was* a shock. At least all the decorations and how much thought they had put into it...for me.

“You knew?” I asked Spencer.

“Marcus came to talk to me a couple of days ago. I’ve been here since right after you went into the studio. Marcus was going to tackle you if you tried to leave the room.”



My eyes stung, then immediately welled with tears. I turned toward Marcus, who gave me a small shrug as if to say it wasn't a big deal, but it was. It so fucking was. He didn't want credit for anything he did for us. No one loved like Marcus, so completely and thoroughly.

I couldn't move, overwhelmed by the moment. That all the people in this room loved me for me, even when I was cocky or annoying, or when I was sad and didn't want to eat, or when I felt bad about myself. They were here for me, totally and unconditionally, loving me for me.

Marcus up-nodded toward Spencer. "Go hug your man, kid."

Kai threaded his fingers through Marcus's, holding his hand, and I went to Spencer, right where I was supposed to be.

I swear I tried to crawl inside him, wanted to be as close to him as I could, savoring the feel of Spencer's beefy arms around me and his soft belly against my more muscular one. "I totally have the best boyfriend."

"I didn't do anything."

But he had. More than he knew.

"Okay, well, *you* have the best boyfriend in me, but still. Thank you." Kai had planned the decorating and surprise portion of the party, and Marcus had invited Spencer, so it wasn't just today I was thanking him for. It was everything. And somehow, I knew he realized that.

"Always," Spencer replied, and in that moment, I believed him.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

### *Spencer*

“YOU PRETENDED YOU still didn’t know Spencer or that we’re in love when I was talking to you earlier,” Corbin told Marcus while still holding my hand.

I said, “It wasn’t like we hung out or I said *hey...did you know I love your best friend.*” But I had to admit, I was curious about what had gone down in the studio. “He basically showed up at the center and grumbled something about a surprise party, and I told him you already know we’re hanging out for your birthday, and then he grumbled something about it being Kai’s idea that I should come earlier, and got my phone number for Kai.”

There was no doubt in my mind that Marcus still had concerns about me, and that didn’t bother me at all. I liked that protecting Corbin meant so much to him, but I also wasn’t going to back down or not give him shit.

“Baby...” Kai said to him.

“What? I did what you asked and he’s here, isn’t he? Everything worked out,” Marcus countered, and everyone laughed.

“So, there was a discussion about Corbin being in love?” Sebastian asked. “We miss all the good stuff being banished to the living room.”

“We want all the Beach Bum secrets! Poddies unite!” Kai cheered.

“I still think it sounds like someone is going to the bathroom,” Elliott said.

All three of them had been great to me since I arrived. They made me feel at home, and again, it was nice to be

around people who cared about Corbin so much. I loved the family they'd created, and now, despite the strong bond between the Beach Bums, their significant others were completely accepted as well.

"Shut up, Elliott," Kai said, then looked at me. "You're a Poddy now too."

"Um...thank you?" Elliott was right. It did sound like someone was going to the bathroom.

"I don't think I like your tone." Kai let go of Marcus's hand and crossed his arms.

I chuckled. I could see why Corbin loved these people so much. They were great.

"Can we get to the celebrating-me part now?" Corbin asked.

"Yes, baby. We can." I nuzzled his throat, and he moaned.

"Wow...this is so weird," Declan said.

"Good weird," Parker added.

Marcus turned on music, songs I recognized as ones Corbin listened to, so I assumed it was some kind of Corbin playlist.

Everyone mingled, talking and joking, telling stories about each other and laughing. While I wasn't a part of their tales, I didn't feel left out. Corbin couldn't have surrounded himself with a better group of guys. At one point, he got me and Parker talking about the romance-books drive we'd discussed the first time he came to the center, so Parker and I made plans to organize that.

"I'll get us a plate." I kissed Corbin's cheek while he was telling Sebastian all the things he hoped would happen in Sebastian's upcoming show.

I made a plate for myself and one for Corbin, not putting a ton on his but making sure to select the things I knew he ate

the most. While I got some of the pork in the crockpot, Corbin's was a wrap and mostly fruit.

I felt Marcus's gaze on me the whole time, studying me, and I couldn't help wondering if I was passing whatever test he had for me.

When I got back to Corbin, I gave him his plate. He thanked me, then continued talking, without eating. Mine was finished when Sebastian excused himself, and I picked up a strawberry and held it up to him. He took a bite of it out of my fingertips, then said, "Mmm, this is kinda hot."

It was Corbin who picked up the next strawberry, holding part of it in his mouth. I leaned forward and bit a chunk, then licked the juice that ran down his skin.

"Get a room, you two," Declan teased.

Corbin finished the rest of his food without me.

"Did you make everything?" Corbin asked Kai.

"Of course."

"Kai loves to cook. He started culinary school this month." Corbin gave his attention to me as we all discussed Kai's plans.

"Are you excited for the wedding?" I asked Parker and Elliott.

"Oh my God, yes. You're invited," Parker said. "I know we're already married, but I've been looking forward to this day my whole life. We have so many plans!"

"And my perfect boy always gets what he wants," Elliott said before kissing Parker.

"My husband is the best," Parker added.

He told me a little about the ceremony in June and how they were planning a honeymoon in Hawaii afterward.

We hung out for a while before Kai brought out a projector. "I've been collecting photos with the help of Elliott

and Sebastian, and we made this for you guys.”

They turned the lights down, and the slideshow began to play. It was the Beach Bums when they were kids, photos before school dances, and playing in the water, laughing and wrestling, and just being happy. There was one where Marcus carried Corbin on his back, and one where they'd buried Parker in the sand. They went up through the ages, middle school, high school, young adulthood, until recently. The last one was a photo of all four of them, along with Elliott, Sebastian, Kai, and...me.

“We photoshopped you in,” Elliott said. “We'll have to take a photo of all of us today.”

I was stunned quiet for a moment. That had been really thoughtful of them. Corbin squeezed my hand, and the smile he sent my way told me how much this moment meant to him too.

“Yeah,” I said, “we'll have to do that.”

Everyone got busy chatting and hanging out again, before we decided to go into the hot tub. Marcus apparently had two of them, one downstairs and one upstairs.

We all changed into swim trunks or boxers. For just a moment, I had a flash of fear that Corbin would be embarrassed of me. Again, I had no issues with my body, but because of his struggles, would he be ashamed for others to see me shirtless? Would it be something else Corbin beat himself up over? I fought to keep those thoughts at bay.

“I'm actually going to head back in and go to the restroom real quick,” I said when we were all outside.

“I'll show you where it is,” Kai said.

“I'll do it.” Marcus's words stopped everyone in their tracks.

“Be good,” Kai told him.

“Baby boy, I'm always good.” Marcus winked, and everyone watched us as we went inside. They all knew what

this was about—Marcus wanting to speak to me.

“I love him,” I said, as soon as we were out of view. “I get that you might not trust me, but he’s mine and I love him. I won’t let you or anyone else scare me off.”

Marcus crossed his arms and cocked a dark brow as if I’d amused him. “Is that what I’m doing? Scaring you off?”

“I don’t know, but I’m letting you know it won’t work. I fucked up. I get it. I judged him. I said terrible things to him, but I’ve apologized. I can’t go back in time and change it, but there’s not a damn thing I wouldn’t do for him now. His happiness is my happiness. Jesus, when he told me he would see a therapist, I—”

“He’s seeing a therapist?” Marcus cut me off.

Shit. I should have kept my mouth shut. I had no right to share Corbin’s business. “I assumed he told you. Fuck. I can’t talk to you about that. It’s not my—humpf.” The last word fell out of my mouth when Marcus basically lunged at me, pulling me into a hug and squeezing me so tight, I could hardly breathe. “Um...I thought you didn’t do this?”

“I don’t. It’s weird. I can’t believe I did, so don’t tell anyone.” But still, he didn’t let go. “He’s starting therapy for his eating?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you...thank you,” Marcus said over and over again.

“You don’t have to thank me. He did it all on his own.”

Marcus nodded but still had his arms around me. “This is getting awkward now. I’m gonna let go.”

I chuckled. “I think that’s a good idea.”

He did, and we stood there staring at each other.

Marcus broke the standoff. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to. I understand who you are to Corbin. I would never come between you. But you need to know he has me now too. And whatever happens, I’ll be there for him.”

A beat of silence stretched from one, to two, to three, Marcus just standing there and staring at me before he held out his hand. “Friends?”

I shook it. “Friends.”

He pointed me toward the restroom, and I went. Once I took care of my business, I made my way back outside. They were all in the hot tub, laughing at something Corbin said. He gave me a smile that felt better than a million bucks, like this beautiful man thought I hung the moon, and there was nothing like that feeling.

“I’m reminding them how awesome I am, and that this day is about celebrating me.”

“Just today?” I walked over.

“You’re right. Every day should be Corbin Erickson Day.”

I sat on the edge of the hot tub, with Corbin between my legs. “I agree.”

“See? My CB is fucking great.”

“But you’re boyfriends. I thought CB stood for cuddle buddies?” Parker asked.

“Cuddle Boyfriends,” Corbin corrected. “We’re cuddle boyfriends now.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

*Corbin*

“DO WE HAVE to get out of bed today? Can’t we just stay here all day? As you’ve seen, I’m an excellent cuddler, so this is an opportunity you don’t want to miss. Going once...going twice...”

Spencer chuckled, then bit my pec. “I thought I was the excellent cuddler?”

He had me there. “Well, that too. All the more reason we should stay in bed and never leave. We can have food delivered. I don’t have a plan for the work situation, but we’re two smart guys. We can figure something out.” I started kissing my way down his body. “I’ll suck you off...”

Spencer held on to me and didn’t let me disappear beneath the blanket. Damn it. I had a feeling he was onto my plan.

“This wouldn’t happen to have anything to do with your therapist appointment today, would it?”

“Oh, I have a therapist appointment? I totally forgot!” Clearly, I was a liar. It had taken me three weeks to get in with someone, and it was maybe the fastest three weeks of my life.

He ran his fingers through my hair, basically petting me. “Are you sure you don’t want me to take the day off? I can’t go in with you, but I’ll drive you there and wait in the car. Afterward, we can go do something fun, or if you’re worn out, then we can just come home, get naked, and do your stay-in-bed-cuddling idea.”

“Can we skip the appointment and do the rest?” I asked, even though it wasn’t really what I wanted. This was something I had to do, *wanted* to do, because it was so damn exhausting when my mind didn’t consistently match up with



what I knew my body was...when I worried about what I ate and obsessed about how much attention I got online. I didn't know how long I could keep pretending I was okay.

"Baby," he said softly, now gently scratching my scalp with his blunt nails.

I sighed. "No. Don't go with me. This is something I have to do on my own." Because as much as I loved Spencer, I couldn't always depend on him, and for this to work, I had to do it for myself, not because he was tagging along to make sure it happened.

I tried to get out of bed, but Spencer pulled me on top of him. "I'm so fucking proud of you. We'll get through it together, and I'll be prepared to give you all the snuggles tonight."

A grin tugged at my lips. I liked making Spencer proud. "Naked snuggles?"

He laughed. "Always."

I pressed a quick kiss to his lips. This time Spencer let me go when I got out of bed.

We showered together while I thought about the fact that basically all my day-to-day items had made their way to Spencer's apartment. All my toiletries were here, and the clothes I wore were here. I couldn't remember the last time I slept in my own apartment that was just next door. We hadn't discussed officially moving in together, probably because it was too soon for that, but I couldn't quiet the voice in my head that wondered if maybe Spencer just didn't want to live with me...like maybe he knew this would be too much and he'd eventually get tired of a boyfriend who had the issues I did.

"You okay?" he asked, and I realized I was just standing there, spacing out.

"Yeah, fine. Sorry."

When we got out, I grabbed my phone and took a photo of myself in a towel to post. It was ridiculous that I hoped people

saying nice things about me would help me make it through today, but that was just how I worked.

“Do you want to drop me off at work on your way?” Spencer asked. Even though I had an early appointment, I’d taken the day off because I wasn’t sure I would feel like working after whatever torture I was likely in for.

“But then I have to pick your punk ass up later,” I teased.

“You love my punk ass.”

I really fucking did. “Ugh. Fine. Whatever you say.”

Spencer tried to make me a smoothie before we left, but I wasn’t having it. There was no way I could put anything in my stomach before I went to spill my guts to a stranger about all my insecurities.

Despite traffic, it didn’t take me long to get to the center. I pulled into the lot, and seconds after I had the car in park, Spencer’s hands were on my face, pulling me in for a kiss, and that...fuck, that did help calm the storm inside me. “You got this, and I love you.”

“I love you too.” *Go with me. I changed my mind. Take the day off and go with me.*

I didn’t let those words slip out, not because we weren’t learning to communicate with each other, but again, because I needed to do this on my own.

“Call me if you need me, okay?”

“Okay.”

I was pretty sure the universe worked against me as the traffic just...parted to let me through. Okay, maybe not, but it sure seemed to be less busy than it should be on a weekday in Southern California.

My appointment was in fifteen minutes, so I decided to wait in the car as long as I could. It was only moments later when the first text came through.

*Marcus: I love you, kid. I’m proud of you. I’m here if you need me.*

*Parker:* Hey, you. We're all with you today! We love you, Corb. Always. No matter what.

*Declan:* I'd say drinks would be on me tonight, but drinks are regularly on me at my bar. I'm just giving you shit. You got this today. We're all in your corner.

My eyes began to blur, filling with moisture, and the messages kept coming.

*Gael:* It's not as bad as I thought it would be. It's kinda cool to have someone to talk to you. I have a new book for you to read! I put it in Spencer's office. You'll be awesome today!

*Sebastian:* I hope you truly realize how special you are. There's nothing you can't do.

*Kai:* Hey, son.

A laugh burst from my lips, mingling with my tears. He'd called me that because I'd joked about him being my stepdaddy when he first got with Marcus.

*Kai:* Sending you good thoughts today. If you need to, come over. And if you need time with just Marcus, that's cool too.

*Elliott:* Let's plan on another hug orgy next time we see you. Proud of you, man.

I was...Jesus, I was the luckiest person in the world. Every single guy who had messaged me loved me. Spencer, who had offered to take the day off and would be ready to cheer me up later, loved me. To them, it didn't matter that I wasn't perfect, and I was going to work my ass off so that the only opinions that would matter would be from people like them.

I got out of the car and made my way into the building. The paperwork had all been done online, but I still had to give the receptionist my ID and insurance card.

My leg bounced as I waited for my name to be called. I only sat there for three minutes, which I knew because I was watching the time obsessively, when a Black woman with a

buzzed head and a kind smile opened the door and asked, “Corbin?”

“Yep. That’s me.” I plastered on a fake, probably overdramatic smile.

“Hi. I’m Imani. It’s so nice to meet you.”

We shook hands before she led me down the hallway to her office. There was a couch and two armchairs inside, along with her desk and chair. Photos of the ocean hung on the walls, and a soft scent wafted from a dispenser.

“Have a seat. You can choose any one.” I pretended to head over to her desk chair, and Imani laughed. “Oh, I see I’m going to have my hands full with you,” she joked.

“I can’t say you’re the first person to tell me that.” I chose the corner cushion on the couch, and she sat in one of the armchairs.

“You’ll keep me on my toes, then. We’ll start with me telling you a little about myself. I know how difficult it can be to talk to a stranger. I’ve been in your seat.”

“This exact one?” I teased, because that was just what I did. Deflect.

“Well, that too.” She snickered. “But really, I think it’s important to share that even therapists benefit from therapy. You might decide you don’t connect with me, and that’s okay. It’s important to find the person you feel comfortable with. Just to share a small amount about myself, I’m in recovery from ED and have worked with this population for about twenty years. It’s all I’ve ever wanted to do.”

Wow...so she had been where I was? And she’d gotten in a healthier mindset?

“I’m married. I have a lovely wife, and we’ve adopted one child together. I love the ocean, as you can tell from the photos. I call myself a bit of a photographer, but really, it’s just something I do to unwind. What do you do?”

“To unwind? Honestly? I work out, or I used to hook up a lot.”

“Used to?”

“I have a boyfriend now.” I looked down. “It’s partly because of him that I’m here. He’s helped me want to be healthy.”

“Do you want to tell me more about him?” Imani asked, and I grinned.

“I do.” I started talking about Spencer, which then led to telling her about the Beach Bums and our podcast. I ended up rambling about sex too, and how being with all those men had made me feel wanted. Somehow that turned into a discussion about my family, how they loved me in a way that sometimes hurt, made me feel as if I wasn’t good enough or letting them down. I told her about my insecurities as a child, which I guessed were also my insecurities as an adult. How social media made me feel wanted and sexy, but could also make me feel ugly and hated. How I was afraid of looking like I had when I was young, and the shame I felt in that because it felt fatphobic and wrong. Sometimes when I looked in the mirror, I would see what I truly looked like. Other times, I would only see every imperfection and often exaggerated them. I just... spilled it all. Once I started, I couldn’t stop. Eventually, tears were streaming down my face, and I’d gone through most of the box of tissues she gave me.

“So, am I fixed now?” I joked, making Imani chuckle.

“No, but thank you for sharing that with me. Every feeling you have is completely valid.”

“What do you think is wrong with me?”

“Nothing,” she replied. “Do you have some things to work through? Yes. But you’re not broken. Some of what you’ve explained is self-esteem related. There’s definitely some disordered eating, toxic diet and exercise culture, social factors impacting your relationship with food, and possibly some

body dysmorphia. If you'd like to continue seeing me, I think we can tackle these things together.”

I did want that. I wanted it maybe more than I'd wanted anything in my life. “Let's do it.”

Imani smiled. “Let's do it.”

I walked out of the office with a smile on my face. I sent a group text to all my people, just saying: I did it. And then I went straight for the center and my man.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

### *Spencer*

“HOW YOU BEEN, man?” Morgan asked when he arrived at the restaurant. Corbin was having lunch with Marcus today, so I took the opportunity to message Morgan and touch base. I’d been a bit of an absent friend since Corbin and I started dating. Not that Morgan wasn’t busy with his own life and boyfriend, but I missed hanging out with him more.

“Good. How about you?”

It had been a hectic few weeks. Corbin had weekly sessions with Imani, the day before having been his fourth. I’d gone with him once, something he and Imani had discussed when he told her I was looking for someone to talk to about the best ways to be supportive to him. It was a conflict of interest for Imani to see me without him, but it had been productive when the three of us spoke because we could sort things out with Corbin’s thoughts and Imani’s knowledge.

Apparently, Corbin was struggling with the thought that I would eventually get tired of him and leave him, something that would never happen. And there were also times when he felt I pushed too hard, or he worried he was letting me down if he skipped a meal or posted to social media. I couldn’t pretend that was easy to hear, but the last thing I’d ever want was to make Corbin feel bad, so knowing that helped me catch myself when I was about to do those things.

“Eh. It’s been better, but it’s been worse too. Things are hectic with my family back home, and we’re dealing with a PR nightmare at work. I need a vacation,” Morgan replied, and I frowned. We talked about his life, of course—work, men, day-to-day stuff, but I couldn’t pretend I wasn’t curious about his life back home and why he was so private about it.

“Anything you want to talk about?”

“Don’t you know me better than to ask that?” When I gave him a frustrated look, he added, “Family relationships are complicated...mine even worse because I left in the middle of the night and never returned home.” Morgan shrugged.

“Um...do I get anything more than that?”

He grinned. “You’re lucky you got that much. I’d rather talk about you. It feels like you have a lot going on. You and Corbin are doing well?”

“We are.” I couldn’t stop the stupid, cheesy, ridiculous smile from spreading across my face. My feelings for him were indescribable. I thought I’d been in love with DJ, and maybe I had, but it was still not even close to how I felt about Corbin. Nothing and no one could ever feel as good as him.

“I would say so, if that smile is any indication.”

“I’m not even embarrassed about it either. It feels different from any relationship I’ve had before. Like we’re on the same page, working toward something together.”

“I’m happy for ya, man,” Morgan said, his deep voice full of sincerity.

“Thank you.” We finally looked at our menus then, and when the waitress came over, we ordered.

“How’s work?” Morgan asked.

“Busy. Things are really kicking into high gear for the center’s annual gala in April. It’s our biggest event every year and brings in a lot of much needed money.”

“Is Corbin going with you?”

“Yeah. I had my plus-one, of course, but I worked my ass off to get tickets for his friends and their partners so last-minute. You know how these things are—the guest list is usually finalized in advance.” It was silly, but that made me proud. I wanted to get to know them better, wanted to be involved and wanted them involved in my life with Corbin,



because I did want that—a life with him. “I’m bummed you and Rob can’t go.”

“I know, but I kinda need to limit my social events. I often find them overwhelming.”

I could understand that.

The waitress showed up with our food just as we finished our conversation about the gala. “I’d really love for you to meet Corbin. I don’t want this to be something we say and don’t make time to do.”

“I know. I’ve just been keeping busy lately. I know I haven’t been an active friend, but I’ll do better.”

“I haven’t been the best friend either.”

Morgan shrugged. “I get it, though, ya know? That’s life. We get busy with work and partners, and things like that happen. I know who you are to me, and I hope you know the same.”

I did. Even if Morgan didn’t open up to me, I knew I meant something to him. “Always, man...though I can’t pretend I didn’t wish I knew a little more about you.”

“I’m a man of mystery.” He winked.

Once we finished eating, I gave Morgan a hug, and we said our goodbyes.

As if he was on the same schedule as me, Corbin texted when I got into the car.

*Corbin:* We’re done. Do you have plans for the rest of the day?

*Me:* I’m spending it with my boyfriend.

*Corbin:* Wow...lucky you.

I chuckled.

*Me:* Meet me at home, and then we’ll go do something fun.

He deserved it. He’d been working so damn hard and had some rough days after therapy.

Corbin agreed, so I headed to the apartment. We pulled up at the same time, and he jogged over to my car and got in.

“Hey, CB. What are we doing?”

I looked down to make sure both of us were dressed appropriately. “Hike?”

“Sounds good to me.”

We went to Will Rogers State Park. They had eight trails there, and we chose the Inspiration Point Trail, which was an easy trail, since we weren’t there to get a tough workout. I just wanted to enjoy the outdoors with him.

We grabbed water bottles from my trunk, tossed them in a backpack I kept in my car, and headed out.

“Have you talked to anyone in your family?” I asked. He hadn’t spoken much about it—maybe to Imani, but not to me. He hadn’t mentioned them, and I knew this was something else weighing him down, something I would take the weight of if I could.

“No. No one has tried except Mom. I don’t even know what I would say to her or how I feel.”

I threaded my fingers through his, lifted his hand, and kissed it. “I’m sorry, baby.”

“It’s not your fault.”

No, but his family thought it was.

“I’m still sorry.”

“You make it better. Also, when your mom calls, she loves talking to me, so that helps too.”

I snickered. He was so silly.

We chatted while we hiked, then sat at the top for a while, simply enjoying the scenery. I loved simple days like this, and I had to admit, I was impressed that Corbin hadn’t pulled his phone out the whole time. No posts on social media or anything.

That made me think about the fact that he hadn't posted us on there either, which I was fine with. If it wasn't for the center, I wouldn't be on social media at all. But a quiet voice in my head wondered if there was a reason Corbin didn't share me there, one that wouldn't feel so great.

"Do you want to go anywhere else?" I asked when we got back to the car.

"Just home."

So we went back to my apartment, cooked stir-fry together, and ate while we watched a true-crime docuseries.

"Oooh! I have an idea. Let's do a skin-care routine together."

"I don't do skin-care routines."

"Yes...I know."

"Hey!" That didn't sound good.

"I didn't mean like there's something wrong with your face. I love it. But skin care is important for everyone. Let's go." He stood, took my hand, and forced me to my room.

My bathroom counter was full of skin treatments I'd never even seen before Corbin started staying with me.

"Sit." He pointed to the toilet.

"Wow. You take this very seriously."

"Skin care is serious." Corbin winked, which did funny things to my gut. It was silly, really, how the simplest thing from him could make me react.

He put a headband on to hold my hair back, ignoring me when I quirked a brow. He was too busy and in his element.

"First, we cleanse." Corbin turned on the water, got a washcloth, and pulled a couple of bottles forward. "Close your eyes, CB."

"You're lucky I love you," I teased, but then closed them. He wet my face, then lathered it with the cleanser.

“You have really good skin.”

“Can’t say I’ve heard that one before.”

I sat still while Corbin worked. He rinsed my face, then pulled out another bottle. “Toner.”

I nodded and let him do his thing. Corbin concentrated, biting his bottom lip as he worked, which was ridiculously adorable.

“I used to do this with my mom,” he said softly. “It was a little too gay for Dad and Blaine, but Mom would always let me join her. It was our time, and I loved it. Like...I don’t know. It made me feel special. Now that I’ve clicked in on the diet stuff from when I was a kid, I second-guess everything. Did she do that with me because it was a special time for us? Because she enjoyed it? Or was it because my skin was something else about me she thought needed to be fixed?” He rubbed a cotton ball soaked with toner over my face as he spoke.

“Baby...I’m sorry.”

“Me too. It helps to talk about these things now, though. Imani seems to think spending my life holding it all in wasn’t healthy.”

“Imagine that.” I smiled. “You miss them?” I asked, more seriously.

“Yes and no. They’re my family, so I do, but I’ve spent less and less time with them the older I got, so it’s also hard to miss something you didn’t really have.”

My heart hurt for him. I grabbed his waist, holding on to him and pulling him forward. Corbin came easily, straddling my lap. “I’m sorry they aren’t who you deserve. Maybe if you talked to them?” When he shook his head, I changed direction. “I’m glad you have the Beach Bums. And now you have the Poddies and me.”

Corbin wrapped his arms around me and answered with a kiss. My hands traveled up and down his back, while Corbin’s

tongue took possession of my mouth. "I love you." He pressed his forehead to mine.

"I love you too."

"Good. Now let's moisturize, then it's my turn for you to clean my face, and then I want you naked in bed."

"There's nowhere else I'd rather be."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

### *Corbin*

“SO NOW YOU’RE ordained?” Imani asked after I told her about getting ready for Parker and Elliott’s wedding.

“Yep!” I beamed. It didn’t matter to me that they were already married. If I was performing this ceremony, I was doing it right. Plus, maybe this would be something I did now. It could be fun.

“Good for you,” she replied, and then we chatted a bit before getting into the hard stuff. “How do you feel your progress with food is coming along?”

I shrugged. “Better, I think. Spencer and I are making weekly meal plans like you suggested. We go shopping together every Sunday morning before I go to Marcus’s to record *The Vers*. Keeping it real...sometimes I do skip meals, and I’ve also tried to forget a few times, but Spencer doesn’t fall for that.” I chuckled, but then it melted into appreciation. He was so fucking supportive. I’d been lucky enough to be blessed with the best friends in the world, and now I had the best boyfriend. Maybe that said something about me too. Maybe I was doing something right. If I really were so bad, I wouldn’t have those incredible people who loved me. “I’m also trying to come up with a schedule on social media so I post less. I turned off comments too. I still scrutinize every aspect of the photo and wonder what people think, but I’m trying.” As small as the steps felt, I was moving forward. I felt better than I had in a long time, maybe ever.

“It’s a process. Nothing changes overnight. It takes consistent work, which you’re putting in. You should be proud of yourself, Corbin. Slow and steady. You got this.”

I grinned. “I mean...is it really a surprise? I’m pretty awesome.”

“You are.”

From there, Imani went a little deeper into how my struggles with food and body image were tied to my self-esteem and connected to my family. This wasn’t the first time we were discussing it, and even before she and I had started working through my complicated feelings about my family, I’d known that was true.

“Have you talked to them?”

“My mom has tried. My siblings and I haven’t spoken at all, but that’s nothing new. We live in the same town, but for as long as I can remember, I only talk to them when we’re with our parents. My brother and sister are close, but I...I just always had the Beach Bums.”

“How does that make you feel?”

“Like shit,” I replied, then shrugged. “But it is what it is. Mom calls. I ignore her most of the time, but when we do talk, it’s brief and like nothing happened. We’re good at ignoring important topics in my family...or only bringing up what I do wrong.”

“Do you want to tell them how you feel? Do you want more from your relationship with them?”

I thought for a moment. The answer wasn’t clear right away. Things were confusing and complicated. What I wanted was a relationship like Spencer had with his family, like I had with them too. We’d gone over for a barbecue a week ago, and it was perfect and fun and ridiculous, three of my favorite things. That wasn’t something I could ever have with my family. We were different. I flashed back to an evening with Spencer a couple of weeks back, of telling him about sharing a skin routine with my mom and how I missed that.

“I’d like to have the best relationship with them that I can, but only if they can treat me the way I’m learning I deserve to be treated. Spencer makes me feel so good inside, that I realize

how bad it was before. I want to hold on to the good stuff. I want my smiles to be real. I don't want anyone to make me feel bad about how I am."

"Do you want to tell them?" she asked again.

Again, I thought for a moment, but this one was quick. I wanted to tell them, but I also needed to. One step in front of the other, every pace necessary for me to be as healthy as I could be. "I do," I admitted.

"You got this," Imani said again.

More and more each day, I was beginning to see that she was right.



"SO...REMEMBER THAT TIME I thought it was a good idea for my whole family to meet me at my parents' house so I could tell them all sorts of personal shit and basically give them an ultimatum?" I asked Spencer, my leg bouncing in the passenger seat of his car. "Not so sure that was a good idea."

"I remember that time you asked your family to meet you so you could discuss ways you've been hurting and how they have contributed to that, so that you can work on mending your relationship if they're willing to treat you the way you deserve...and if not, so you can continue healing yourself because no one fucking deserves it more than you."

My heart tried to break down my chest wall with powerful, passionate beats.

Because of him.

"Wow...that was good. How'd you learn to do that?"

"They taught it in my advanced-placement, world's-best-boyfriend class. Clearly, I killed it."

A chuckle sneaked past my fear. "No shit. I'd be jealous if I wasn't the one receiving said world's best boyfriend's behavior. Usually, I want to be the best at everything, but



when it's my man who's captured the honor, I can't say there aren't some perks in it for me."

Spencer reached over, placed a hand on my thigh, and squeezed. "I think we're both killing it."

"Must be meant to be," I replied, and damned if this back-and-forth with him didn't ease some of my nerves. "Thank you for coming with me."

Spencer pulled up to the curb in front of my childhood home. "There's nowhere I won't go with you, Corb. There's nothing I wouldn't do for you."

"Including hiding the body?" I teased.

"I'd burn the whole world down for you if I had to."

*Thump, thump, thump.* Okay, what happened if one's heart actually beat out of their chest? Mine was dangerously close. "Oh."

"Basically speechless? That's a first."

"Give me a minute. I'm trying to come up with something to say."

We chuckled before we were leaning over to kiss each other, words not needed.

"Lots of snuggles tonight, no matter what happens," Spencer whispered in my ear.

"Lots of snuggles every night. Always."

"Sounds like a plan to me."

We got out of the car. I made sure to take Spencer's hand. The kids wouldn't be here, of course, and everyone inside knew who Spencer was to me, but it was important that we walked into that house in a way they couldn't deny us.

I knocked, and it was my dad who answered, which meant they were putting up a strong front. They felt attacked despite the fact that I wasn't the one who had spent his life telling

them they weren't good enough, but hey, at least we love you anyway!

"Dad," I said.

"Corbin." His eyes shot to Spencer. "I thought this was a family thing."

"Spencer is my family. He's my partner and I love him."

Dad sighed but stepped aside and let us in.

Spencer squeezed my hand in support.

Mom, Blaine, and Emma were waiting in the living room.

"Corbin. It's so good to see you!" Mom stood and pulled me into a hug, my hand disconnecting from Spencer's. "It's been too long. You can't stay away so long." Her voice was filled with sincerity, and that's what made this so hard—I knew my mom loved me. I believed they all did, but they couldn't get past their beliefs, and that kind of love wasn't healthy for me.

"I know, Mom."

Spencer and I sat on the love seat. It felt like a standoff, the four of them on one side of the room, us on the other.

"Are you here to tell us how terrible we are again?" Blaine asked. "Because we're doing our best with the situation. We love you, Corbin. We've always loved you."

"The situation?" I asked. "Is my sexuality a situation? Or was my weight a situation? Who I am isn't something for you guys to handle...or accept...or manage. Do you know how hard it was for me growing up? To know that I was something my family considered wrong? To be tortured at school every fucking day of my life, only to come home and have my food managed when no one else's was or to be forced on the treadmill. To constantly hear comments about being careful so I don't put on more weight, when this should have been my safe place from all the shit I heard out there?"

“We didn’t know you were bullied at school! You didn’t tell us!” Mom defended.

“Because I didn’t feel like I could. Because to me, I was bullied here too.” My eyes stung, but I did my best to fight back the tears, did my best to speak around the knot in my throat and to hear past the blood rushing through my ears.

“I think that’s going a little too far,” Dad said. “We didn’t bully you. We love you, and we want what’s best for you. There’s nothing wrong with wanting you to be healthy.”

What they had done to me wasn’t healthy, though.

“Maybe that’s what it felt like to you, but that’s not how it felt to me.” No one spoke for a moment. Spencer’s hand was on my back, massaging soft circles. I felt their eyes on me. Their disappointment in me because I wasn’t like Emma and Blaine. How they wished I were someone else.

But I didn’t feel that from the man beside me. He loved me for who I was.

“I hated myself,” I admitted softly. “Sometimes I still do, but I cover it up with jokes and smiles, trying to be the most charming guy around. I tell myself I don’t feel that way if people are paying attention to me online or men want to sleep with me. I skip meals and obsess about my body, scared to put on a single pound. I defend how you make me feel because of your beliefs, and I try to pretend it doesn’t hurt because you love me, *but...* Love shouldn’t have a *but*, or an *even though*. Love isn’t supposed to make you feel bad about who you are, or like you’re a disappointment. Love is supposed to build you up.”

Love was Marcus telling me I was beautiful when I needed to hear it. Love was him running his fingers through my hair, while my head rested on his lap, because I was safe there. Love was Parker finding me that day when I’d tripped in marching band, and befriending the boy everyone else made fun of. It was him searching for new recipes for healthier treats just for me. Love was Declan splitting his extra cookie with

me that day when Mom let him have more than me, and him trying to beat up any boy in high school who gave me shit. Love was Beach Bum hugs and hours spent laughing.

Love was Gael bringing me new books to read and asking how therapy went and sharing his journey with me.

It was Elliott praising Parker, and his willingness to stick by my friend when in the beginning, Parker didn't feel he was worthy of Elliott's love. It was Kai encouraging my relationship with Marcus and loving him more because of it. It was Sebastian taking Declan to Idaho and giving him a family and never expecting Dec to be anything other than who he was.

And most of all, love was Spencer holding me every single night, even before he understood why I needed it. It was him changing how he shopped to do what was good for me, and adding meal planning because it was best for me, and the fact that when I asked him to come with me today, he said yes, but also told me it was okay if I needed it to be Marcus.

Love was people who made you feel beautiful when you couldn't see it. It wasn't acceptance. Love was affirmation.

No one wanted to accept that the people who were supposed to love you unconditionally could be the same people who made you feel emotionally unsafe, but unless they changed, that was my truth. I wasn't emotionally safe with them, and I had to do what was best for me.

“If we're going to have a relationship, I need you to stop commenting on what I eat...and no jokes about chubby Corbin.”

“Okay,” Emma said. “We can do that. I didn't realize...I'm sorry. I didn't—”

“That's not all,” I interrupted. “You have to accept Spencer as my partner and call him that, even to the kids. He has to be treated like family. And no asking me to go to church or telling me you're disappointed that I don't. I don't want to hear how

you want to spend eternity with me, but if I don't change my ways, I'm going to hell."

"That's not fair, Corbin. You're asking us to change our belief system."

And maybe it wasn't fair, and maybe I was asking that, but... "I have to put me first. I deserve that. It's what I need."

The look on their faces said it all, the way they wouldn't look me in the eyes and didn't speak. Tears threatened to come, but I fought them off. I had love in my life, with or without them, if they couldn't give it to me. Maybe one day, but not yet. As much as that hurt, I would deal with it.

For the second time, I left their house with my head held high, Spencer's hand in mine. But this time, I was free.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

### *Spencer*

“**H**OLY SHIT, CORB. I forgot how sexy you look in a tux. What if I keep having to sneak you away throughout the night just so I can have my hands on you?”

We were standing in front of the full-length mirror in my room, in matching black, shawl-collar tuxes with bow ties. Corbin’s dark hair was a little longer than mine on top, his sides shorter.

I playfully dusted my shoulder off. “Damn, I look good too.”

Corb chuckled. “So. Fucking. Good. I was going to say the same thing. I’ll be the one pulling you into bathroom stalls and closets so I can get my hands on you.”

“Gonna be quite the busy night for us.” I winked.

“Don’t move,” Corbin said, then walked over to grab his cell off the dresser. He came back to stand beside me, opened his phone app, and said, “Smile.” We both did so, and he took a mirror photo of us. The next one we posed in, before he added, “And now one back to back, like secret service agents.”

I cocked a brow. “That’s how secret service agents stand? Where did you get this info?”

“I’ve had a dream about it, but then, they were naked... maybe they were FBI.”

I laughed. “How did you know they were either considering it was a dream?”

“Because it was my dream. *Duh*. Shut up and pose with me.”

“Your wish is my command,” I teased.

“Fucking swoon.”

We did Corbin’s silly photo idea, which really was fun. That was one of my favorite things about Corbin. How fun he was.

For the last one he said, “Now kiss me.”

It wasn’t as if I was going to argue, so I did as he said, and he snapped one more photo. I watched as he pulled up his social media. He posted less than he used to, which I considered progress. Nothing changed overnight, but Corbin was doing better.

But despite talking about us on *The Vers*, he hadn’t posted photos of us together, so this would be a first. “You don’t have to,” I told him.

His forehead wrinkled cutely. “Why wouldn’t I want to?”

I shrugged. “Like I told you before, I’m happy with who I am and how I look. I know you love me, and you said my weight doesn’t bother you and you’re attracted to me, but people fucking suck. And even if you’re okay with it, I still wasn’t sure if it might be something that would bother you when people saw us together.”

His whole expression changed. Gone was the smile from a moment before, and small wrinkles formed around his eyes, which were dimmer. “Do you think I’m ashamed of you?”

“No.” I shook my head, then amended, “Not consciously. Sometimes I wonder, though, but not because of what’s in here.” I touched his chest. “Because of what’s out there and what it does to what’s in here.” This time, I kept one hand on his heart and the other on his temple. “I don’t want to be the reason something hurts you or makes you feel bad.”

“Jesus, Spence. You’re not. You’re so fucking not. I’m proud to be your man. You make me feel better than I ever knew was possible.”

Oh. Well, shit. That was... “Christ, I love you. So fucking much.” I held his face in my hands and pressed my lips to his.

Corbin let me sweep my tongue inside, every little piece of my plan for tonight clicking into place. This was right. We were right. There was nothing in this fucking world I wanted more than to make this man happy. “You’re very good,” I teased, nuzzling his throat. “You can get anything you want out of me.”

“That’s why they call me The Charmer.” Corbin winked, and then I watched as he posted the photos to social media, with the caption: *My CB*, then heart-eye emojis. Then he edited his bio to *Taken by this sexy man*, and tagged me. I pulled my phone out, adjusted my bio to *My baby*, and tagged him too.

“We’re so fucking cute,” he said, looking at our photos. “Real happiness feels good.”

“It’s a good look on you.” I took his hand. “Now come on. The party doesn’t really start until we arrive.”

“Obviously,” Corbin replied.



THE GALA WAS always held at the Monica, which was on the ocean, not far from the beach where I’d met Corbin for the first time.

We took a car service to keep up appearances, but what Corbin didn’t know was that Morgan would be dropping my car off later for a surprise I had in store for Corbin.

The driver opened the door when we pulled up in front of the Monica. I got out first and held my hand out for Corbin. He smiled, then took it, the two of us not letting go as we headed inside. I wanted him to feel so fucking loved and happy tonight. While things were going okay, he’d been down since the night we’d met with his family. I couldn’t imagine how he felt, and I, along with the Beach Bums, had been doing our best to make sure he felt how loved he was.

The ballroom was gorgeous, decorated in gold and white. Music drifted from the grand piano, where a woman sat playing.



People approached me almost immediately, thanking me for the night, asking me questions or just saying hello. To each and every one of them, I introduced Corbin as my boyfriend, and I swear, he smiled every time the word left my lips.

“Hey, kid,” we eventually heard from behind us, and turned to see Marcus, Kai, Parker, Elliott, Declan, and Sebastian.

“Hey, Daddy.” Corbin winked before Marcus hugged him, kissing Corbin’s temple. “Hey, Stepdaddy.” He gave the same treatment to Kai, making everyone chuckle.

“This is incredible,” Sebastian told me. “I read up a lot about this event. You do really amazing work for the queer community, Spencer.”

“Thanks. It’s what I’ve always wanted, but it’s still never enough. We’ve come so far, but there’s still so far to go.”

Especially when you considered people like Gael, who were still teased, and Corbin’s family, who still held on to their hurtful beliefs. To pretend things were perfect did a disservice to queer people.

“The money raised goes to the center?” Declan asked.

“Most of it, yes. But we’re also involved in a lot of programs, like trying to make sure PrEP is more accessible to everyone, scholarship programs for queer youth, job training, mental health access.”

“My man is fucking awesome,” Corbin said.

“No, you are.”

We laughed and kissed.

“Gross,” Marcus joked.

We were gross and I loved it.

Elliott said, “My parents are out of town, otherwise they would have been here. Mom asked me to remind you to contact her if you need anything, but I want to offer myself too.”

“Me too,” Sebastian added. “This is the kind of stuff that matters, what I’d like my legacy to be.”

Everyone else agreed as well, and I knew it wasn’t just lip service with these guys.

“Thank you. Really, that means a lot to me.”

One of the waiters came by and offered us champagne, which we took. We talked for a while, and occasionally I’d have to excuse myself to go help with something. When I got back to the group, Corbin had a plate and was eating, which made me smile.

When he saw me, his mouth automatically pulled into a grin like just being in the same space as me made him happy. How the fuck I’d ever been lucky enough to earn this man’s love, I didn’t know, but I wasn’t ever going to fuck it up.

“Can we do that sneak-away thing now?” Corbin said when I approached. “Because you’re really hot and I want my hands on you.”

“Be good,” Marcus told him.

“You have sex with Kai in Declan’s office at Driftwood all the time.” Corbin pouted.

“Shh!” Sebastian looked around, clearly nervous people heard him.

“Can you not remind me?” Declan asked.

“If we find a closet, who will watch the door for us?” Corb asked.

“I’m game.” Elliott raised his hand.

Parker swatted his arm. “Don’t encourage him.”

“You mean to tell me that if I said I wanted to see my pretty boy on his knees for me, you wouldn’t find a closet with me?” Elliott cocked a brow.

“Point taken.” Parker turned to Corb. “You watch the door for us, and we’ll watch it for you.”

“What am I going to do with you guys?” Marcus asked.

“Wait. I want to have kinky gala sex too, baby.” Kai grinned.

“I mean, it’s not a bad idea.” Marcus placed a possessive hand on Kai’s neck.

“Um, so...we can’t be left out, Dec.” Sebastian pumped his brows.

“Lord help me,” Dec answered, and everyone laughed. “We’re idiots.”

“The best thing to be.” Corb smiled, took the last bite of his food, handed Marcus his plate, and said, “Let’s go.”

“Are you really going to hook up?” Parker asked.

I took Corbin’s hand and let him lead me. Each step we took was faster than the one before it as we slipped from the room and down the hallway. There were people everywhere, and no place we could discreetly disappear.

“Your gala is a cock block,” Corbin teased, and we laughed and sped up, rushing like we would die if we didn’t get our hands on each other. I was so fucking hungry for him and loved that he felt the same about me.

When we turned into another room, we saw French doors leading onto a balcony. Corbin’s gaze caught mine, and we both rushed toward it.

The door was ajar, and just before my hand touched the knob, a voice drifted from outside.

“Did you see Corbin Erickson’s dating Spencer from the center? I follow Corbin online and listen to *The Vers*. I have a friend who hooked up with him. He said he’s cocky and superficial, so I don’t know what the fuck is going on now.”

“Yeah, all I know is he needs to whip his boyfriend into shape.”

“More like he’ll end up putting on weight himself. That always happens when people get together.”

They laughed as anger scorched my insides—not for me, but for Corbin. Fuck them. Why did people care so fucking much about what others did or how they looked? Did no one have anything better to do than put down others?

Fear wrestled with my fury. There was nothing I wanted more than to shut these guys up, to tell them where they could stick their opinions, but my first priority was Corbin and getting him out of here so he didn't have to hear this, so we didn't risk him spiraling.

I tried to pull him away, but he tugged his arm out of my hold and opened the door. The two men were smoking, and looked at us with wide, panicked eyes.

“It's sad, ya know,” Corb said, “that you don't have anything better to do with your time than to put down others, to hurt others.”

“We didn't mean—shit,” one of them said.

“You *did* mean it, though...or you just don't care. You build yourself up by putting others down. I've spent my life dealing with people like you, hating myself and trying to change myself so I could be your idea of beauty, and I don't... I don't care about that anymore. Spencer is perfect to me, and I know I'm perfect to him too. That's what I choose to focus on. That's what's important. People like you...you're just sad. I have too much love in my life to care what you think.”

He turned to me and smiled. My eyes stung with unshed tears. I'd never been so fucking proud of anyone in my life.

I'd never loved anyone more either.

Corbin held his hand out to me. He was so beautiful, he stole my breath. “Let's go dance, CB.”

“That I can do.” Our fingers laced together, and we left the two men there, mouths agape. They didn't matter.

The second we were out of the room, Corbin's face was in my hands, my lips smashing against his. We kissed slowly and sweetly, foreheads pressed together. “Are you okay?”

He nodded. “I can’t pretend there wasn’t a second where I flashed back to when I was a kid, to the things I heard. There was a second where I almost thought they were right, but then it just...went away. I feel too good to let them drag me down.”

It might not always be that easy for him, but tonight it was, and that was all we could ask for.

“I love you, Corb.”

“I love you too.”

We made our way back to the ballroom. The piano music still drifted through the room as our arms automatically encircled each other. Corbin nuzzled his body so close to mine that it felt like he was trying to crawl inside me. “Your arms are my favorite place to be.”

“Jesus,” I whispered, running my hands up and down his back.

“Earlier, when I looked in the mirror at us together, I liked what I saw. I saw myself for who I am, not what other people might see, and not that little boy I used to be.”

I opened my mouth to respond, to tell him I was proud of him, but there had been nothing wrong with that boy either. Before I could, Corbin spoke again.

“Imani and I have been working on my bridging the gap between young Corbin and who I am now and realizing that little boy was perfect how he was too. He was a good kid.”

“He was.” My heart thumped against my chest, and damned if I didn’t hope he felt it against his own.

“I wish I hadn’t been so hard on him.”

“You can’t change the past. What matters is that you’re not so hard on yourself now...because that little boy is you and he’s still inside you, Corb.”

We danced close through three songs, until there was a tap on my shoulder, and I stopped to see Marcus there.

“Can I cut in?”

I smiled at him. “Yeah, yeah you can. I’m going to deal with a few things, and then we’ll bail early.”

“Okay,” Corbin replied.

I kissed his cheek, then left him in the best hands he could be in, other than mine.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

### *Corbin*

MARCUS'S ARMS WENT around me, my cheek resting against his pec. "Wow...you're not as comfy as I used to think you were. Too hard. Spencer is way softer and cozier."

Marcus gave me his deep laugh. "He's good for you."

"He is."

"You're good for him too. He's crazy about you."

"He is," I answered, not trying to be funny or cocky. Spencer *was* crazy about me. He loved me. And I was worthy of that love.

Marcus said, "Who would have thought, huh? A few years ago, I never would have seen the four of us here, but it's right. It's the way it's supposed to be. Kai is..."

"Kai is good for you. And you're good for him. Same with Parker and Elliott, and Dec and Sebastian. Poor guys, getting stuck with friends like us."

"Holy shit, right?" Marcus said as we continued to dance. "They have their work cut out for them, but they can handle it. No one would be able to do it except them."

No, they wouldn't. The same way the Beach Bums were meant to be best friends, those men were meant to be with us. We were a family of eight, who would do anything for each other.

"We're fucking lucky," I said.

"We are." Marcus kissed my temple. "Love you, kid."

"Love you too, Daddy M."

He chuckled, and then we were quiet as we danced.

A few minutes later, we returned to the group, Marcus's arms immediately going around Kai. We hung out for a little while, until Spencer found me again.

"You wanna get out of here?" he asked.

"Sure. Hopefully sex is involved." I pumped my brows. "Are you sure you can leave early?"

"I arranged it ahead of time. They can handle it without me."

"Well, then I'm not going to argue. Do you need to call for a car?"

"Nope. Mine is here."

I frowned. "How..."

"I have my ways."

Excitement skittered down my spine. "Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

It was a short drive. When he parked, I frowned, recognizing we were at the beach where we had met. "This is a private beach, remember? I mean, I'm game for anything, but you know we might get arrested if we're caught here, right?" I pressed my lips together to keep from smiling because this was incredible. Whatever was happening, I already loved it.

"This night won't end in being arrested. Morgan helped me get in touch with the owner. Apparently, she's a romantic."

"You could have talked me into going even if that wasn't the case."

"You say that like I don't know it."

"I need to meet Morgan."

But Morgan seemed to have a lot going on. He hadn't seen Spencer much lately either.

"We'll make it happen soon."



We got out of the car, Spencer going for the trunk. He handed bags to me, before grabbing another and a basket himself.

“Wow. This definitely took a lot of planning.” Planning he had done for me. I was so excited to spend my life with this man.

“It did. I’m clearly an incredible boyfriend. I’m fairly certain there’s no one out there who’s better than me.”

“I mean, I think I run a close second, and depending on the day, could be in first.”

“That’s why we belong together.”

We so totally did.

We bypassed the many signs stating that this was a private beach, since we had the owner’s permission. We took the stairs up from the road and then down to the beach, where we took our shoes off as soon as we got to the sand. Spencer didn’t stop where the party had been, making his way down the beach toward that spot where we’d sat and talked, where he’d almost kissed me for the first time all those years ago.

“Are you going to propose?” I asked.

“Um...I didn’t take into consideration that you might wonder about that, and now I’m afraid this is going to be a disappointment.”

I chuckled. “It’s okay. I probably would have been jealous you got to be the one to ask, so we’re okay. We have time for that.”

He grinned.

I grinned.

We were ridiculous.

“I fucking love us,” I said.

“I love us too.”

It wasn't long before I saw fairy lights in the distance. As we got closer, I noticed the tent, and a wooden platform that hadn't been there years ago. The lights were strung over it, attached to beams. There was a firepit there too, a portable one, so I figured he'd done that part for me.

"It's not the exact spot, but what a coincidence that they installed this so close."

I dropped the bags onto the sand, nearly unable to hear over the blood rushing through my ears.

"You did all this for me?"

"There is nothing I wouldn't do for you. I wanted tonight to be special. You deserve for every night to be special, baby."

"Totally not going to argue with you," I teased.

We removed our tux jackets, but when I went for my shirt, Spencer said, "Don't take that off yet. You're so fucking hot in it."

I curtsied. "Thank you."

We started a fire. No one had ever done something like this for me. I didn't know what to say, what to feel, other than so fucking blessed.

We rolled up our pant legs and walked in the surf, just talking and being. When we got back to our little campsite, Spencer produced bottles to clean the sand from our feet, which we did on the platform. He used his phone to play music, then took my hand, the two of us dancing, with nothing but the ocean keeping us company.

I nestled my face into his chest. "This is where I want to be."

"Good. It's where I want you."

I didn't know how long we danced, sometimes talking, sometimes quiet, just enjoying being together.

"It's hard for me to trust," Spencer said after a while. "It might not seem like it, but it is. I expect the worst, which is

likely why I judged you so harshly...but then after DJ...I think a part of me wondered if there was something about me that chased men away. Or maybe not that, but like I wasn't worth holding on to. That I was easy to replace or forget. I don't ever feel that way with you."

Spencer brushed his fingers through my hair while I tried to breathe. "You're not easy to forget. You're not replaceable. You're everything."

"Move in with me," Spencer said softly. "Move all your stuff into my apartment, or we can stay at yours. I want the address on our licenses to be the same. I want our mail in the same mailbox. I want to know that we'll be in the same bed every night. Move in with me and let me spend my life showing you how fucking loved you are."

I paused for a moment, trying to figure out if my brain was playing tricks on me or if I'd really heard what I thought I had. Maybe it was silly to be so surprised. Spencer and I had basically lived with each other since the start of our friendship turned relationship, but I'd also wondered why he'd never mentioned making it official. Now he was, and that was very real. This sounded like two names on one lease and...forever. It sounded like forever.

He must have taken my hesitation as me not wanting this because he said, "It's okay if you're not ready. I've never lived with a partner before, and I want you to know how serious I am about you."

"Not even DJ?" I asked because, well, because I didn't have it in me not to ask.

"No. Not even him. And I would choose you over him any day, baby. Always."

"Yes. Fuck yes. Let's do it."

Spencer wrapped his thick, beefy arms around me, lifting me up and spinning us around. I mean, seriously, we were fucking romantic. Parker and Elliott didn't have shit on us.

He hadn't let go of me or set me down when his lips crashed down on mine. My tongue immediately pushed into Spencer's mouth, and my hand tangled in his hair. We kissed like we were starving for each other, as if keeping fused together was the only way we could stay alive.

He walked toward our tent with me still in his arms. Spencer was chubby. There was no denying that, and I would never want to, but he also had muscle beneath. He was strong and masculine and I loved it when he held me, squeezed me in his arms so air couldn't even fit between us.

We tried to get into the tent while kissing, which didn't work out so well. We were laughing and fumbling with the zipper, Spencer nearly dropping me before we decided he was going to have to put me down so we could go inside.

"Take your clothes off out here. It'll be easier," Spencer said, and we began frantically stripping each other. It didn't matter to me how expensive this tux was, I would die if I didn't get him inside me soon.

Spencer opened the tent, and we spilled inside. It was full of blankets and pillows, and in the corner he'd placed some of my favorite treats and... "Gatorade."

"I plan on riding you hard tonight...more than once. I figured we could use the hydration."

He smirked, and I kissed it, falling onto my back, Spencer on top of me. We were going to live together, and he wanted to show me how much he loved me, and damned if that wasn't the most amazing thing.

"I want to fuck you bare," Spencer said, rubbing his cheek against mine. "Want to empty my balls inside you, fill you up with my cum."

"Yes...God yes. I got checked a few weeks ago." One could never be too safe, and since we were serious, we'd lose the rubbers soon.

Spencer grinned.

“What? I like to plan ahead.”

“Me too. I did the same. Negative.”

“Me as well.” Plus, we were both on PrEP.

“No one has ever come inside me before,” I admitted.

“Me neither. I know you like riding my dick, but one of these days, if you’re down, I’d like you to fuck me too.”

“Deal. But right now, I just need you inside me.” I slid my hand between our bodies, over his soft, rounder belly, until I got to his cock. I palmed it, stroking up his shaft. “You know what would be awesome? Self-lubing hands...like Spiderman with his web, only lube would squirt out. It would make sex so much easier.”

Spencer laughed, and I did the same, our bodies vibrating together. “God, you’re an idiot and I love you.”

“I aim to please.”

He shut me up with his mouth, our teeth clanking, tongues exploring each other’s mouths as if for the first time. I palmed his meaty ass, gave it a sexy smack. We rutted against each other, body against body, cock against cock, in a way that made me dizzy. If I weren’t already lying down, I would have passed out. Spencer affected me like no one ever had.

“Jesus, I need inside you.”

“What are you waiting for?” I asked. Spencer gave me a flirty smirk before grabbing the lube he’d hidden under some pillows. “Private beach or not, you’re lucky someone didn’t end up camping out here or taking our stuff.”

“Morgan watched it for me. He’s a good friend.” Spencer pushed up onto his knees, slicking his fingers. “Hands and knees,” he said, making me hurry to turn over, into position, my ass in the air, waiting for him.

Spencer pressed the tip of his finger against my opening, slowly pushing it inside.

“Fuck...God yes.” Why was sex so different with him? Why was it so much more? “I swear I’ve never been such a slut for dick in my life. How did you turn me into such a needy little bottom?”

“Because none of those other cocks were mine. Your hole was waiting for me to fill it. Deep down, you’ve always been mine.” A second finger joined his first, opening me up.

“Always yours,” I confirmed.

Spencer fucked me with two, then three fingers, twisting and stretching me, lips sometimes on my ass, kissing me, nibbling, marking me up the way we both liked. Every time his fingers brushed over my prostate, a jolt of pleasure shot through me. I rocked back to meet him, needing more, feeling frenzied with my desire for him.

“Get your dick inside me!” I cried out.

Spencer chuckled. “Ask me nicely.”

“No.” I fucked myself on his hand. “Just give it to me. You love me, remember? You’ll do anything for me.”

Another laugh. “That’s not exactly what I meant.”

Still, he pulled out of me, leaving me feeling open and empty.

We didn’t have to take the time for a condom, so Spencer just pumped some lube onto his shaft, stroked it a few times, and then his thick erection breached me. He slammed his hips forward, filling me just the way I liked, immediately pulling back before snapping his hips again.

Over and over and over again, Spencer railed into me, strong hands digging into my hips, soft gasps on his tongue. My dick bobbed with each slam into me, my whole body shaking. I was so fucking full with so much pressure, stretched the perfect amount, that I didn’t know how long I could last. I wanted this moment to go on forever, to spend my life connected to Spencer. I mean, we could do that, right? Just walk around with his dick in my ass.

“Shit. Don’t laugh, Corb. You’re gonna make me shoot. It’s like heaven being inside you raw. I’ve never felt something so good.”

“Sorry. I was imagining spending my life like this, going everywhere attached to you. There are certain people it would be awkward around, but we could do it.”

It was his turn to laugh, and I loved that I was the one who could so easily make him do it.

“Are you going to make me come or what?” I teased.

“You’re getting mouthy now that we’re moving in together.”

God, I loved this. Loved us.

Spencer’s hand snaked around me and wrapped around my cock. He jerked me off while fucking into me, our bodies slapping together.

My balls ached, they were so full, but even more than that, I wanted Spencer to lose his mind, I wanted him to careen into his orgasm so he could fill me with his load.

“Come...please. If you do, I’ll shoot too. Just feeling your release spurt inside me is gonna make me lose it. Need to feel you. Need you filling me up.”

“Fuuuuuck...baby.” The speed of Spencer’s thrusts increased, his hold on me tightening, the hand on my dick stroking faster. He basically growled my name, his dick twitching inside me. I felt him come, felt him pump his load into me, over and over. My balls drew up, the tingle at the base of my spine shooting upward as my own orgasm hit me. I felt like I would never stop coming, like my brain would leak out of my dick, but eventually he milked everything out of me.

Spencer fell to the side, pulling me on top of him, before pushing two fingers inside me. “Fuck, I feel it in there, feel my jizz inside you.”

He languidly played with my hole, fingering me just to feel his cum there.

I fell asleep with a smile on my face...happy and loved.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

### *Spencer*

CORBIN HAD COME down to the center today, for the last hour before I got off work. He was meeting with Gael to get a new book to read. They tried to meet up when they could, both of them also talking about their progress with therapy.

Corbin had become such a positive role model for Gael, and he didn't even see it. To him, they were just friends, and that made me love him more.

I was about to close the Excel file on my computer when Morgan's, "Hey, man," came from the doorway. He'd been even more absent lately, and every time I messaged him to see if we could hang out, or to invite him over so he and Corbin could meet, he was busy.

Morgan looked exhausted, his dark hair messy and his eyes weary.

"Hey, what's going on? I've been worried about you."

Morgan came inside and closed the door behind him. He sat down in the chair across from me. "I'm sorry I've been absent lately. Shit's been..." Morgan ran a hand through his hair, clearly frustrated. "I have to go back to Michigan, and it's the last thing I want. Fuck. I hate it there."

My heart thudded against my chest. That was the most Morgan talked about his past or where he came from, and he still hadn't given me much of anything.

"For good?" I asked.

"I hope not. Family shit, ya know?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I know. Is there anything I can do to help? You know you can always come to me." Morgan and I

might not be the kind of close friends who hung out the way the Beach Bums did, but we were there for each other. There wasn't anything I wouldn't do for him.

“Nah, thanks. I appreciate the offer, though. I just wanted to come say goodbye and let you know what's going on.”

“What about Rob?” I asked, wondering what this meant for Morgan and his boyfriend.

“Time will tell, I guess. We're still together for now, and it's nice to know someone's there.” Morgan looked away like he wasn't proud of what he'd said, but there was no shame in it. We all needed people. It was hard to be alone. I wished he had someone who treated him better than Rob did. But then, maybe that was all Morgan thought he deserved. We chatted for a few minutes before my friend stood and said, “I should head out.”

I nodded, went over to him, and gave him a hug. “Call me, day or night, anytime, okay? Whether it's just to talk or if you need someone. I got your back.”

“I know, man. Thank you.”

We pulled away. “Corbin's here. Got a second to meet him before you go? I know he'd like that.”

Morgan gave me a sad smile. “Yeah, for sure. I'd like that too.”

He followed me to the library, where I introduced him to Gael and Corbin. Morgan stayed for about twenty minutes, and I could tell he liked Corbin and Corbin liked him.

“I'll be right back.” I kissed Corbin before walking out with Morgan.

Outside, I hugged him again. “Love you, man. Keep in touch, or at least answer my calls. I don't want to have to go to Michigan and hunt down your ass.”

He chuckled. “I will. Love you too.”

I watched him walk away, hoping everything was going to be okay.



MARCUS'S HOUSE LOOKED incredible.

It had been a madhouse for days in preparation for Parker and Elliott's wedding. Corbin had been a ball of excitement and nerves. He'd fake-married me to myself about a million times the past couple of months, wanting everything to be perfect.

And everything had been—not just with wedding plans, but life as a whole. Corbin had moved into my apartment, which was now *our* apartment. Both our names were on the lease, and all our mail came to our unit, and I'd had to buy a cabinet for all his beauty products, which I liked to give him shit about when really, I wouldn't have it any other way.

I loved living together. We made a commitment to cook dinner together at least four times a week, which we always stuck to. Those were some of my favorite times with him—trying new recipes, finding things we loved, and unfortunately, there was also some gross stuff out there. No matter what you did with Brussels sprouts, they were never good.

But Corbin was doing well, still working through his struggles and seeing Imani. Every day he made me proud with his progress.

“You ready?” I asked Corbin, straightening his collar. The grooms, the best men, and Corbin were all wearing white button-up shirts and beige slacks with suspenders. The Poddies and I were wearing similar shirts and slacks, but with bow ties and no suspenders.

“Fuck yes. This will be the best wedding any of these people have ever been to.” Corbin grinned, leaned in, and kissed me.

“Break a leg, baby.” I winked at him.

“Or, you know, you could just wish me good luck.”

“You don’t need luck. You’re Corbin Erickson...my CB. There’s nothing you can’t do.”

“Fucking swoon,” he said, which seemed to be two of his favorite words.

“See you out there.”

The ceremony was about to start, so I made my way to Kai and Sebastian. We stayed clear of the white-cloth walkway laid down on the sand. There were bamboo chairs on each side. Arches were evenly placed down the aisle, lights and lanterns strung between them for the perfect evening ceremony. Calla lilies were everywhere, on the chairs, the arches, the tables, making the decor both elegant and beachy. It all went perfectly with the small string orchestra playing soft music in the background.

People were already filling the chairs, the front rows left open for Elliott’s and Parker’s families, and the three of us.

From everything I’d heard, this was Parker’s dream come true, and I couldn’t be happier for him.

“I can’t believe the day is finally here,” Kai said as we took our seats.

“It’s beautiful,” Sebastian added. “Declan has been beside himself, afraid something would go wrong on Parker and Elliott’s day.”

“It won’t,” I promised.

“It’s beautiful, but I’m so never doing this,” Kai teased.

“No? I’d marry Corbin in a second.” But then, everyone’s idea of a happily ever after was different. I didn’t subscribe to the notion that marriage made people’s love more real or forever.

“Marcus and I have talked about it, but we’re not sure it’s what we want. If we do, it would just be us somewhere... We’d throw a big party afterward, but the ceremony and all this, it wouldn’t be what we wanted. I guess time will tell. I’m

gonna spend the rest of my life with him regardless.” Kai turned to Sebastian. “What about you guys?”

“We’ve talked about it. We wouldn’t do something this big,” Sebastian replied. The ceremony wasn’t huge. It was definitely intimate, but even so, I could see it being too much for Declan. “We’re actually talking about doing it next year at my parents’ farm in Idaho. We have time to figure it out.”

It didn’t surprise me that they had already had the conversation, but like they said, there was no rush. We were all in it for the long haul.

Once everyone was settled, the music changed, and not to traditional wedding music. I was pretty sure it was a Taylor Swift song. Corbin walked over and stood at the front, a smile on his face that still stole my breath. How was this beautiful man all mine?

He signaled for everyone to stand, which we did, turning to watch as Elliott, flanked by his parents, walked down the aisle. His mom was already crying. She kissed Elliott, then took a seat with her husband.

Declan and Vaughn, Elliott’s best friend, followed. Vaughn went to stand beside Elliott, Declan on Parker’s side. Behind them were Marcus and another friend of Elliott’s, each getting into their place.

I watched Elliott when the smile took over his face. I swear I heard his breath hitch and saw his eyes well up. When I turned, it was to see Parker coming to join him, his dad walking beside him. Love crackled in the air, the two of them watching each other, a world of happiness in Parker’s gaze.

Parker’s dad took a seat, and Elliott immediately reached out to cup Parker’s face, before leaning in and kissing him. “Sorry. I couldn’t help myself,” Elliott said.

“Fucking swoon,” Corbin replied, before his eyes bugged out, like he hadn’t meant to speak. Everyone laughed, including the grooms.

“See? I knew we made the right call having Corb perform the ceremony.” Parker grinned.

Corbin cleared his throat, then charmed us all as he married his best friend to the man of his dreams.

The whole time, I couldn’t take my eyes off the man of mine.



IT WAS AFTER midnight. Everyone except the Beach Bums and the Poddies had left a little over an hour before. We’d danced and partied for hours, celebrating Elliott and Parker’s day, but as planned, all of us were staying at Marcus and Kai’s house tonight. Parker wanted all his people together before he and Elliott left for their honeymoon the next day.

We were sitting around the firepit, all of us still in our wedding attire.

Kai was on Marcus’s lap. Sebastian held Declan’s hand. Corbin was tucked beneath my arm, similarly to how Parker was tucked beneath Elliott’s.

“This was the best day of my life,” Parker said softly during a lull in the conversation. “I’m so happy. I know I’ve been married for over a year, but tonight...I can’t believe Elliott is mine. And I can’t believe all of you are mine too.” He swiped at his eyes.

“Aww, beautiful. Did you drink too much and now you’re emotional?” Elliott teased him.

“Yes. I can’t help it. You’re not allowed to make fun of me on our wedding night.”

Elliott kissed him. “I can tease you a little, just because I love you and you’re so fucking adorable and perfect, even when you’re drunk.”

“Are you guys going to start in with the praising stuff now? Because it’s hot and it will probably get me horny.” Corbin smirked.

“You’re always horny,” Marcus and I said at the same time, earning a round of laughter.

“I mean, I’d be down to do the orgy thing if you guys were,” Kai joked.

“Baby boy, you belong to me and me alone,” Marcus told him.

“Yes, I do. I just wanted to hear you get growly and possessive,” Kai countered.

“Sometimes I feel like I’m the only adult around here,” Declan said.

“Mmm...we can’t let them show us up. Let’s make out.” Sebastian nuzzled his throat.

“Are you going to let them all one-up us like that?” Corbin asked me.

“Never.” I started unbuttoning my shirt, which prompted Corbin to cheer and everyone else to laugh.

I was...so happy. I’d never considered myself unhappy before, but having Corbin changed everything, made everything better, and as I sat there with them, I realized I really did want to do exactly as Parker and Elliott had done today. I wanted to marry Corbin.

Declan cleared his throat. “I know I gave my speech at the wedding, but before everyone starts getting naked and disappearing to have sex all over Marcus and Kai’s house, I just wanted to say a couple of things. First, thank you, Elliott, for loving Parker the way he deserves.”

“Always, brother,” Elliott replied.

Declan continued. “I didn’t know what it was like to have family before Parker, and because of him, I eventually got Corb and Marcus too. I thought that was more than I deserved. How could I ask for more than that? But then I fell in love with Bastian, and my world grew even more. Now there’s Elliott, Kai, Spencer...and I just... We’re really fucking lucky.

That's all I have to say. Jesus, why did you guys let me word-vomit all that? I must be drunk too."

Parker was openly crying now, unable to swipe the tears away. "I love you, Declan. So much."

"Love you too," Dec replied.

I felt honored to be there with all of them, to be able to call Corbin mine and to have inherited his chosen family.

"I know I'm the newbie, but thank you for including me."

"There's nothing to thank us for, Spencer. You love Corbin, and that automatically makes you family. Good thing I like you too." Marcus winked. "You're good people. We really are fucking lucky." Marcus raised his drink. "To family."

Corbin raised his next. "To Beach Bums and Poddies." Everyone repeated the toast, leaning in and clinking our drinks together. Corbin stood, signaling for everyone to do the same. "Come on, guys, we gotta do it."

"Do we have to?" Marcus asked, but I knew it was playfully.

"Yes." Corbin grabbed his hand and tugged. "Get up, Daddy M."

Kai laughed, nearly falling off Marcus's lap.

I stood, followed by Kai and Marcus, Elliott and Parker, Declan and Sebastian. And even though today wasn't Corbin's day, somehow, it was him who was in the middle of the hug, reminding everyone it was okay to feel this, to need this, silently giving everyone permission to soak up the love.

We stayed up most of the night, laughing and talking outside.

Sometime after three, Corbin and I stumbled into one of the beds in a room upstairs and got naked, him immediately nuzzling into me, breathing me in, letting me hold him, and damn near trying to melt into me.



“I want to marry you,” I whispered close to his ear, running my fingers through his hair.

Corbin tensed on top of me.

“You heard me right, baby,” I said, knowing it wasn’t that he didn’t feel the same; he just couldn’t believe me. “I want to marry you. I want to give you a day like today, where everyone is there to celebrate you.”

“Us,” he replied, looking down at me. “Celebrate us. Fuck yes. I want to marry you too.” His mouth slammed down on mine before I could respond. We kissed and laughed, rolling around together on the mattress before Corbin pulled back and shouted, “I’m going to get married!” at the top of his lungs.

“Shut up, Corbin!” drifted through the wall on one side.

“Some of us are trying to have sex over here!” came from the other direction.

“Sorry you apparently suck at it!” Corb shouted back.

“Shut up, Corbin!” numerous voices answered, and somehow, it was fucking perfect.

“God, I love you,” Corbin said before kissing me. “Let’s show them how we do it.”

I grinned. We weren’t quiet as we did exactly that.

## EPILOGUE

### *Corbin*

*Three years later*

“HELLO AND WELCOME to *The Vers*, where four best friends who rarely agree on anything share their versatile opinions on everything. I’m Corbin Chase, The Charmer.”

“Marcus Alston, The Realist.”

“Parker Hansley-Weaver, The Romantic.”

“And Declan Burns, The Loner,” Dec chimed in last.

I’d taken Spencer’s last name when we’d gotten married two years ago. While things were better with my mom, who had come around and was working to have a positive, affirming relationship with me, the rest of my family was different. We still didn’t speak. But even if that hadn’t been the case, I would have wanted Spencer’s last name. I felt more connected to it than I did my own. Plus, his family had loved me from the start. They were my family now too.

“I’m hungry,” I said out of the blue. “What’s Kai making for lunch?” He was working as a chef now and loved it. He was damn good and made a meal for us all every Sunday after we recorded.

“No idea. Said it’s a surprise,” Marcus replied.

Kai didn’t have to make special meals for me anymore. I ate whatever he cooked. The past couple of years I’d made a shit ton of strides when it came to my self-esteem and food struggles. Was it perfect? No, but I was the healthiest I’d ever been. I didn’t obsess the way I used to, and when I looked in the mirror, I saw the real me and liked what I saw. While I still used social media, it was only sporadically now, and I didn’t

pay as much attention or care about what anyone had to say about me.

“I hope it’s pasta,” I replied. “In fact, maybe he should just hit me up before each meal so I can tell him what I’m craving.”

“Because the whole world revolves around you?” Declan questioned.

“Not the world. Just our friends. I mean, let’s not pretend you don’t all know I’m the most important one in our group.”

“You’re the most ridiculous one in our group,” Parker countered.

“Someone is being a naughty boy. Be good, or I’ll tell your husband you need to be punished,” I teased.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” Parker replied, and we all laughed.

“We’re almost forty,” Declan said, “and nearly every conversation we have leads back to sex.”

“Um...never say my age again.” I’d never believe we were almost forty. “We should do ‘Mimosas and Man-Talk.’ I want to talk about the latest episode of *Loud & Queer*.” Sebastian’s show was wrapping up the newest season and had been renewed for another. It was the queerest show streaming and got accolades for—and I quote—“diverse and authentic queer experiences”—because like in real life, no one in his show had the same journey. It wasn’t about being perfect. It was about being real.

“Oh my God!” Parker chimed in. “The threesome scene surprised me, but now that I think about it, becoming poly fits those characters. It makes sense.”

“Agreed,” I replied. The show had poly characters and married couples. Some characters were spending their life dating, and there was the coolest, healthiest relationship between an ace woman and her longtime girlfriend who wasn’t ace.

We rambled on about *Loud & Queer* for a while, then answered listeners' questions. Marcus wrapped up the episode with a Queer Historical Fact, and then thanked our sponsors.

Afterward, we made our way into the living room, where our men were hanging out. I smelled tomatoes and basil, which made me pump my eyebrows at Kai. "You made pasta for me?"

"Sure, we'll go with that." Kai winked.

"Hey, I wanted to talk to you about the scholarship program at the center," Spencer told Marcus. "If you have time later, let's chat."

Marcus and Spencer had gotten closer over the years. Since our Daddy M liked to take care of people so much, he ended up working with Spencer on a college scholarship program. Gael was the first recipient, and Marcus had sponsored someone each year since.

"Yeah, sure. I have some new ideas for how we can expand it," Marcus replied, and the two of them went off on the subject now instead of later. I didn't mind. Watching them together made me happy.

Gael was doing great. He went to school in San Francisco but visited often. The last two times, he'd brought his boyfriend, Max, whom Spencer and I really liked. Gael still gave me book recommendations, and I read every one.

We spent the next few hours laughing and eating. We saw each other all the time, but it still felt like none of us ever ran out of things to say, and in those moments that were quiet, it was comfortable, the eight of us fitting together like it was meant to be.

When it was time to head home, Marcus kissed my temple the way he always did. "Love you, kid."

"Love you too."

I hugged everyone, then headed out to the car with Spencer. We'd moved from the apartment last summer,

Marcus helping us find a small house in Santa Monica that we could actually afford.

Our cat greeted us when we got home, and I picked him up and gave him cuddles. “Hey, Ranger. We missed you.” He was named after *Power Rangers*, of course, and was the best cuddler when Spencer wasn’t around. He was also a little possessive over me, and we’d had to train him so he knew Spencer was allowed to love up on me too.

We showered, then did our skin-care routine, which Spencer pretended not to love when he really did. Afterward, we cuddled on the couch to watch a show. These were still my favorite times, surrounded by Spencer’s heat and softness, where I would always be loved, with this man who thought I was perfect.

And because of him, I couldn’t say he was wrong.

“I love you, CB.”

Spencer kissed the top of my head. “I love you too, baby.”



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## About the Author

Riley Hart's love of all things romance shines brightly in everything she writes. Her primary focus is Male/Male romance but under various pen names, her prose has touched practically every part of the spectrum of love and relationships. The common theme that ties them all together is stories told from the heart.

A hopeless romantic herself, Riley is a lover of character-driven plots, many with flawed and relatable characters. She strives to create stories that readers can not only fall in love with, but also see themselves in. Real characters and real love blended together equal the ultimate Riley Hart experience.

When Riley isn't creating her next story, you can find her reading, traveling, or dreaming about reading or traveling, spending time with her two snarky kids, and swoony husband.

Riley Hart is represented by Jane Dystel at Dystel, Goderich & Bourret Literary Management. She's a 2019 Lambda Literary Award Finalist for *Of Sunlight and Stardust*.