



THE HOLIDAY

Boyfriend

RYE COX

THE HOLIDAY BOYFRIEND

A DOVES OF DESTINY NOVEL

RYE COX

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Proofreading: Charity VanHuss

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ONE

JIM

Joy made a breathy whinny sound as she gobbled the sugar cube from my hand. Her blunt teeth and saliva soaked my palm as she searched for more of the sugary goodness.

I patted her brown mane as I wiped my other slobber-covered hand on the towel I'd tucked into my back pocket for this very reason. "No more for today, girl. You know you can't have too many," I said, as I made long, rhythmic strokes down her neck and shoulder. Her hair was getting thicker as her winter coat slowly started to come in.

She snorted through her nose as if rejecting my words. I chuckled and slipped another sugar cube from my pocket as a peace offering, which Joy happily slurped down like it was the most delicious thing she'd ever eaten.

I could never say no to her. Besides, we all needed cheat days, and four cubes today wouldn't hurt her. Giving her one last pat, I finished cleaning out her stall before going to finish my other chores.

Being early October, the farm wasn't as busy as during our peak in the winter months. Snowfield Farm hosted visitors during our off season and also led tours and pick your own fruits events, but I usually didn't have to help out with those events or deal with the guests. The owners, Alice and Trish, liked the community aspect of owning a farm—it was one of the reasons they created Snowfield Farm—so they were usually in charge of taking care of visitors while I looked after our furry and feathered friends and made sure they were happy and healthy.

After collecting all the eggs from our hardworking hens, I protected today's plunder while I tried to escape Big Boss's pecks. It was our daily routine. I came to steal the eggs, and he chased me out of the chicken pen while taking shots at my poor ankles. His wings flapped as he chased me out of the pen area.

"Sorry, Big Boss. Another win for me today," I called over my shoulder after making sure I was out of his reach. The rooster made angry crowing noises and made sure to stomp his tiny feet so that everyone knew exactly how pissed off he was.

I laughed as I carried my spoils inside the farmhouse. Alice looked over from her desk. Her hand paused from what she was typing on her laptop. She looked up and grinned at my expression. "You fought with Big Boss again?" she asked with a raised brow. She didn't even have to ask. My tussles with the rooster were part of the daily routine at this point.

Get the eggs, tease the cock, and rinse and repeat.

Placing the large egg basket on the table to be inspected and packaged later, I turned to face Alice and gave her a shrug. "He's always had it out for me. If I don't come back one day, you'll know who did me in," I joked, but I had a feeling that the damn bird would celebrate if such a day ever came.

For whatever reason, Big Boss had hated me ever since he stepped foot onto this farm, which was strange since everyone usually loved me. But not Big Boss. He tolerated the others at the farm, but when he saw me, it was like he was staring at his life's greatest nemesis. He wouldn't be satisfied until I was pecked full of holes.

Alice smiled as she tucked a piece of her brown locks behind her ear. She'd had the same short bob hairstyle for as long as I'd known her. Despite being in her fifties, she had a youthfulness about her that had many others believing her to be younger than my twenty-eight years of age.

It had to be her signature bob giving her the youth. That or I just looked old, and I *refused* to believe that. I made a mental note to ask Austin when I got home. As my roommate and best

friend, he was legally required to tell me the truth, and I knew that he would be brutally honest too.

“I thought we had two groups coming in the afternoon?” I asked. We had a schedule of the daily events printed out and tabbed to our cork board. While the owners loved leading the groups, they could only do so much with the two of them, so the schedule system was set up to help plan our days accordingly in case someone needed to sub in.

Alice took a sip from her coffee mug, scrunching up her face as she stood and dumped out the contents. I understood. Lukewarm coffee was the worst. “Trish is taking care of one of them, and the other group’s flight was delayed until late tonight.”

I never understood why people would take a whole ass flight to visit a farm. It was good for business, but it wasn’t something that I would personally do. After being in Wintertown for over ten years, I’d learned to appreciate being surrounded by nature and fresh air, but as a teen, living in a small town that held no entertainment for an energetic youth had no appeal to me.

I liked being around people, but sometimes the small town life was a bit too much for me. Everyone was always in everyone’s business, and there was truly never any peace. As a teen, the only peace I knew was when I was in the presence of my best friend. While I’d learned to find peace in other things—like hanging out with Joy and the other farm animals—the peace Austin brought me still hadn’t changed.

She refilled her mug with fresh coffee, then turned to face me. “Actually, I wanted to ask for your opinion on something. The couple is worried about finding a ride since it’ll be the middle of the night. I told them I’d ask around, so I was wondering —”

“You want me to pick them up? Sure, no problem.” Asking me to pick up our visitors was a first, but whatever made the customers happy, right? I snatched an apple from the basket they had out for the staff at the farm. If I was going to have a late night, then I needed fuel to keep my energy up.

“Well, actually, I was wondering if you could ask Austin since he’s, you know, a taxi driver,” she said with a pointed look.

I stopped mid bite. The crispy, sweet piece of fruit hung in my mouth as I froze. It was true that Austin drove a taxi for a living and the extra work would be good for him, but he’d had a lot of late nights and long hours these past few days since tourists were coming for the fall harvest—apparently picking your own fruit was a trend these days on social media and the rich were willing to travel far to experience the true farm-to-table life.

Austin was a grown man and could make his own choices, but I couldn’t help but worry about him. He was my best friend, and after knowing him for over a decade, I knew he had a tendency to suffer in silence instead of saying something. From how little he’d been home these days and the deep dark circles that had marred his baby face, I sensed that he was close to his limit.

Still, it wasn’t my place to turn down potential income on his behalf. I could only relay the job offer to Austin and see what his thoughts were. Hopefully, he would confide in me if things were too much. I was unsure if he actually would, since Austin could be stubborn about certain things. He had his pride and if he wanted to handle things himself, then as his best friend, it was my job to support his decisions.

TWO

AUSTIN

“And then he just left me standing there in the rain. Can you believe that?”

I made a soft gasp to display the appropriate amount of shock to the story my current passenger was relaying about her last date. I peeked in the rearview mirror and saw her lips curl up in satisfaction at my reaction. She launched into the rest of the story of how she'd swore off men and found her way to our tiny town for, as she put it, a “soul-finding” trip.

I let her continue her monologue and made sounds of acknowledgment and comments every so often to show that I was paying attention to her story. After years of being a taxi driver, I'd come to learn that what most people wanted was someone to listen to them, and that happened to be my specialty.

I'd always been told that I was a good listener, but honestly, it was more the fact that most people only wanted to talk about themselves rather than get to know someone else. Most days on the job, I actually preferred it this way since it meant that I didn't have to use brain cells to think of topics of conversations with the passengers.

Some liked to stay silent during the entire ride while others preferred to have conversation—or more like talk about themselves—and that way, I could sit and let them talk while I focused on driving. And tonight, I was even more grateful for this fact.

This was my last passenger before I called it an early night, and after a couple weeks of early mornings and late nights, I wanted to focus on the road to get my passenger to their location before going home and passing the fuck out.

Fortunately, the lady happily chatted the entire way without needing much input from me, and ten minutes later, I was dropping her off at the B&B she booked on the outskirts of town. Getting out of the driver's seat, I helped her retrieve her luggage from the trunk. She accepted it with a smile and thanked me for being such a great listener.

As she waved goodbye and walked inside the building, I put on my professional smile that I'd learned from years of working in customer service. People tended to like those who smiled. As someone who didn't naturally smile, I had to learn this fact the hard way.

It wasn't that I had a resting bitch face, but was told on more than one occasion when I was younger that I had a gloomy disposition. Perhaps that was the reason why I'd been a loner as a kid. It wasn't that I *wanted* to be alone, but it was like the natural progression, like my presence was easily forgotten.

The only exception to this norm was Jim. While I usually went unnoticed in the crowd, Jim always noticed me and made an effort to include me in the group. He'd been like this from the start.

His family had moved to Wintertown during tenth grade. He was instantly in with the popular kids at school, with having an athletic build and infectious charisma and all.

Which was why I found it so strange at how close we'd become, considering how different we were from each other. I couldn't even recall how our friendship came to be, but now Jim was one of the most important people to me, and it'd been that way for the past ten or so years.

Honestly, I was a bit shocked to find out how much his personality contrasted with his appearance. If anyone had a resting bitch face, it was Jim. When he wasn't smiling, he looked like a completely different person, so much so that I'd once witnessed a kid burst out in tears upon seeing him. Of

course, the child was quickly coaxed into laughter by Jim's charm.

Jim had thick brows that bordered his hard eyes and dark facial hair that made him seem much older than he actually was. Objectively speaking, he was handsome, but looked a bit too serious at times. Those who didn't know him might judge him by his fierce appearance, but those who were close to him knew his true character.

As his best friend, I was proud to say that no one knew Jim better than I did. There was so much kindness behind those blue eyes.

He liked to pretend that he was tougher than he actually was—to match his appearance, he'd once told me—but in truth, he wouldn't hurt a fly. When those pesky bugs invaded our home, Jim refused to kill them and opted to let them free in the wild instead. "They deserve a chance as well," was what he'd always say. He was as sweet as those cherry-red lips of his tasted.

Images of being wrapped in Jim's arms as he took my breath away with his mouth filled my mind. The kiss turned frantic as heat licked my body, and the moment was so delicious that it starred in countless of my dreams.

Of course, that was all kissing Jim would ever be. A dream.

I'd only seen Jim dating women, and even if, by some miracle, he was bi, he would never see me in *that* way. I was his best friend and roommate and that was all he'd ever see me as.

But...sometimes when he looked at me, those glorious blue eyes lit up like *I* was the one who caused the beautiful sparkles that mesmerized me, and that only made me fall harder for him.

It was the same at this moment. As soon as I unlocked the door to our apartment and before I could even turn the knob, the door was opening from inside. Jim's broad figure filled my vision and those damn eyes fixed on me, locking me in place, both in body and heart.

How was I going to be able to move past this *little* crush if he kept looking at me like that?

I knew that I was delusional. This crush was nothing close to little. It was a cosmic longing that occupied most of my thoughts and all of my heart. Pretending like he was nothing more than a friend to me already took every ounce of effort, and there was none left to find a resolution to this one-sided crush.

Although some days, I didn't know if I even wanted to find a solution. I wanted Jim to keep looking at me like this. I wanted those eyes to only see me. And when I was deep in my fantasies, I sometimes feared I'd mix up dreams and real life. That I'd keep falling deeper into my feelings for Jim and never find my way back.

And I would fall happily too.

THREE

JIM

I sprang to my feet the moment I heard noise coming from outside the apartment. I flung the front door open with Austin's hand still on the knob.

The first thing I saw was the top of his shaggy brown hair, followed by his shocked blue eyes when he glanced up at me.

God, was he a sight for sore eyes.

Austin had the same coloring to me with brown hair and blue eyes, but that was where the similarities ended. His slim figure was the complete opposite of my bulk that I'd built up from playing sports, then working on the farm. His soft features starkly contrasted to my hard ones.

In high school, tourists who saw us hanging out after school would sometimes try to play the hero and save the frail-looking boy from the big bad bully—me. Austin would always put them in their place by standing up for me and berating them for judging people by their appearance.

It was so refreshing being the one being protected for once. With my size, I had always been expected to be the one to step up and take charge. I didn't mind it most of the time, but the expectation was honestly exhausting.

Perhaps that was why I enjoyed hanging out with Austin so much. With him, there were no expectations. Our hobbies didn't intersect, and sometimes there would only be silence between us, but still, being with him felt even more natural than if I was alone.

Austin had a calm energy surrounding him that was infectious. Plus, like I'd said, he was easy on the eyes, especially since it's been a hot minute since I'd last seen him in person. We'd video call occasionally when on break from work, but other than those calls, we hadn't hung out much with his late hours and my early mornings.

"Hey, Austin," I said as I walked closer to him.

My voice seemed to have shaken Austin out of whatever daze he was in, as he shook his head and dropped his hand from the door. The shock that had registered had transformed into a deep blue, but I couldn't help but think that the light in his eyes had dimmed a bit as well. It had to be the exhaustion of the week catching up to him, which made me worry even more about Alice's request. When he didn't respond, my worry increased.

"Austin?" I asked, placing a hand on his shoulder. He visibly jumped at my touch, which was a first. Physical touch wasn't exactly uncommon between us. We weren't touchy-touchy like many of the girlfriends I'd seen hanging together around town, but we'd shared countless hugs between us. That meant that something was definitely up with him.

"You okay?" I asked, and my worry must have shone through in my tone because the shock was back in Austin's eyes as he quickly tried to explain.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Sorry, been a long day, and I wasn't expecting you here," he said but didn't look at me. He ducked under my arm that was blocking his way into the apartment and shuffled to the kitchen to grab the pitcher of water and poured himself a cup.

I followed behind him and watched him gulp down the cool drink. I couldn't help but notice the way his Adam's apple bobbed as he took large gulps and downed the entire glass.

A drop of water clung to the corner of his lip, attracting my eyes. I involuntarily licked my lips at the sight. Some strange heat built in the pit of my stomach that I tried my best to ignore.

There were times that I thought Austin carried some sort of sensuality that I couldn't explain. I wasn't attracted to dudes—at least I didn't think so—but something about the man in front of me caught my attention in ways that usually women only had. It wasn't an issue most of the time, but after not being around him for a while, it felt like I'd lost my immunity to his charms.

Austin swiped the back of his hand over his mouth, breaking me out of my dangerous thoughts, for which I was very much grateful for. He gently placed the cup in the sink, turned around, and paused when he saw me right behind him.

“But I live here?” I said with a nervous chuckle. He looked confused for a second, but I saw the moment when the words finally clicked. Austin laughed and swept a quick pat against my chest.

The awkward tension in the air immediately evaporated, and the strangeness that had surrounded Austin seemed to disappear as well.

“I meant I didn't expect to see you up. You're usually in bed by the time I get home,” Austin said casually as he took out a portioned meal and popped it in the microwave.

Sitting on one of our dining chairs with my legs straddling the back of the chair and my chin resting on my arms, I watched him move around our small kitchen. Our apartment wasn't huge, but it was homey and more than enough for the both of us.

“I waited up for you,” I said, and he gave me an eyebrow raise. I cleared my throat to dislodge the uneasiness that suddenly overwhelmed me. I hadn't meant anything strange by my words, so why did it sound like I was the stay-at-home husband who was eagerly waiting for their partner to return to them?

Austin broke my gaze when the microwave beeped. He grabbed the food and a fork from the drawer before joining me at the table. I flipped around in my seat and folded my arms on the table in front of me as I watched him.

He had his head tilted down as he dug into his noodles, clearly starving. His long, thick lashes cast shadows on his upper cheek, but it couldn't hide the dark circles that had taken residence on his face for the past week.

Worry about Alice's request stirred up again, and I debated about not asking him and going to the airport myself, but that wouldn't be right. It wasn't my call to make, especially when it was related to his livelihood.

"We have some guests arriving in about five hours and Alice wanted to see if you were up to getting them from the airport."

Austin glanced up from his food, and I could see the contemplation in his eyes. The exhaustion was etched in his features, but he still wanted to accept the job. I knew this was going to happen.

Even when we were teens, Austin always had a strong sense of responsibility. I knew that he was unavailable to hang out during the first week of summer break because he was one of those kids who finished their summer homework before doing anything else. He was and always has been a hard worker.

The last thing I wanted was for him to feel obligated to take on this job when he didn't have the capacity to, so I tried to reassure him. "I already told Alice that you've had a busy week and that I can pick them up. You should—"

"I'll do it. It's good to have the extra business before tourism really picks up in the winter," he said as he stabbed another forkful of noodles and pushed it into his mouth. His eyes squinted in pleasure as he savored what I knew was a delicious meal.

Austin usually took Mondays off, and he liked to use that day to meal prep for the week. While I'd insisted that he didn't need to prepare my portion, he still always made extra food. I tried to help him with the cooking, but honestly, my food was barely edible, so I tried to help by getting the groceries and doing dishes.

"Are you sure you'll be okay? You've been doing long hours all week. I'm worried about you," I said. Austin paused from

eating to look at me. His eyes softened at my words, but I could see the stubbornness in them.

“I’ll be good as new after a quick nap,” he said as he waved a hand in the air like he was waving away my concerns. I furrowed my brows. His casual actions didn’t relieve my worries.

Austin peeked up at my expression, then burst into laughter. He stretched over the small dining table, and his smooth thumb rubbed at the space between my eyebrows.

“You’re gonna get wrinkles,” he teased, making me scrunch my nose in displeasure. I didn’t need yet another thing that would make me look older.

I was told that men shouldn’t worry about their appearance, but I had always been conscious of mine.

Groaning, I slumped my upper body over the table. Austin’s cool hand quickly swept through my short hair, sending tingles down my body. I liked the sense of comfort his easy touches gave me. Turning my head to press one cheek against the table, I glanced up at him. He’d returned to his food but was still watching me.

“Do I really look that old?” I moaned, and my pitiful expression must have been hilarious because Austin laughed again.

“Remember the time in the city when a stranger thought you were my dad? I think we were fifteen or something.”

He took another bite before placing the fork down and pushing the plastic container away from him. He was never good at finishing his food, but it was fine since I had a big appetite.

I picked up the fork and pointed it at him. “That’s ‘cuz of you. It’s not my fault you have a baby face,” I said in a fake grumble. Austin only laughed again, and the sound was like music to my ears. He had a soft, calm voice that wasn’t too shrill like some women’s and not too deep like my own.

“Who cares what others think, right? As long as you know I’m the older one, that’s all that matters.”

I rolled my eyes as I finished off the last of the food. Austin was born April 1st while my birthday was in October, and boy did he love reminding me of the fact that he was half a year older.

“All right, old-timer. Isn’t it way past your bedtime? Don’t forget to wear your nightcap to protect your ancient bones from the cold,” I said as I stood, taking the dirty dishes with me to the kitchen.

Austin’s laughter followed behind me for a minute before I heard a “thanks” being called out, then silence as he shuffled out of the room. I quickly loaded up the dishwasher and started the machine before returning to my room.

I waited for Austin to finish using the bathroom so that I could quickly brush my teeth and wash up for the night. Making sure to set the alarm, I was in bed and passed out within minutes. I needed my beauty sleep if I didn’t want to look older than I already did.

FOUR

AUSTIN

My eyes popped open at the first sound of the blaring alarm. My arms were heavy as I lifted them to shut off the annoying sound.

It felt like I'd only closed my eyes for a few seconds, but I guessed that was what I got for pushing myself too much.

Maybe I should have taken Jim up on his offer to pick up the guests from the airport, but my pride didn't let me. I didn't want to admit that I was doing more than I could handle.

It was embarrassing enough that I felt inadequate next to Jim, who'd found a career he loved. Me, on the other hand? The only skill I possessed was driving people around for a living.

Not that being a taxi driver was a bad job or anything—and some days I liked the aspect of traveling to all sorts of different places—but this wasn't exactly how I imagined my life at twenty-eight. I thought I'd find something I was passionate about by now, but that was obviously not the case.

I didn't have big dreams or something I wanted to pursue, and maybe that was part due to my lack of ambition. I didn't hope for a lavish life, and I wasn't like a lot of the younger residents of Wintertown who wanted out of this small town life with limited opportunities, but I had dreamed of having a family, or at least a partner, by now.

Perhaps I'd been a little too optimistic on that front, especially considering I lived in a small town and basically grew up with most of the people living here. And I was sure being in love

with my best friend and living with him didn't help matters either.

It was hard to meet someone when I wasn't even trying.

That was a problem for future Austin. Right now, the only thing I needed to focus on was finishing this job and maybe coming back for another much-needed nap.

Still lethargic from sleep, I slowly changed my clothes and dragged my body out of my room. A deep, grumbly voice had me jumping back and knocking the back of my head against my door frame.

"G'morning—whoa, you okay, there?" Jim said as he rushed toward me and wrapped his large hand around my head. He rubbed the spot that I'd bumped my head with slow, gentle strokes. The small hit didn't hurt, but I wasn't going to tell him that, not when I could bask in his care instead.

"You scared me. Wasn't expecting you here," I said, looking up at him. He had his hair slicked back in his usual hairstyle and was dressed in blue jeans and a tight black shirt that hugged his muscles so deliciously.

"I live here, remember?" At the sound of Jim's voice, I slowly moved my eyes from staring at his pec muscle to his smirking face. He'd totally caught me staring, but I was too tired to care right now. "Enjoying the view?" he asked in his teasing tone with a brow raised.

Rolling my eyes, I pushed him away. The pec muscle I was previously ogling felt hard under my palm, and for a split second, images of being pushed down by his solid form blessed my thoughts. I shook them away and escaped to the bathroom.

"Just wasn't expecting you up so early. Don't you have a few more hours till work?" I asked. He leaned against the bathroom door frame with his arms crossed against his chest as he watched me move around the sink and brush my teeth. His blue eyes looked dark under the yellow hue of the lightbulb. They bore into me, his gaze landing on my mouth as I made back and forth movements with my hand.

“I couldn’t really sleep, so I figured I’ll head to the airport with you and keep you company,” he said, shrugging one arm.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “You? Couldn’t sleep? Who are you and what have you done with Jim?”

Turning back to the sink, I rinsed my mouth and splashed my face with cold water to shock myself awake.

“You make me sound like I’m obsessed with sleep or something,” Jim grumbled from behind me. There was some rustling and a second later, his voice was closer. “Here,” Jim said, standing directly behind me to hand me a towel.

“Thanks,” I muttered, grabbing the offered towel from his hands and drying my face before hanging it up on the back of the door. “I specifically recall many pillows thrown at me when trying to wake you up from naps.”

“Well, who wouldn’t be grumpy when they’re disturbed from their nap?” Jim had his arms crossed on his chest again. The tight shirt was really doing him favors, making his arms look even more jacked than usual.

“You’re the one who asks for the wake-up call,” I deadpanned.

“Yeah ‘cuz waking up to you is always so much better than some annoying alarm,” Jim said casually. My heart thudded in my chest. It was things like this that had me confused and carrying hope that there could be something more with him one day in the future, even though I knew he wasn’t intentionally saying shit he didn’t mean in that way.

“Well, I didn’t wake you up today and I know it’s too early for your internal alarm clock to chime in. So what are you doing up, Jim?”

When my snappy words reached my own ears, I shocked even myself and glanced up at him with a guilty expression. It wasn’t his fault that I’d hurt my own feelings by reading too much into his words. I had to remember that straight guys sometimes said some not-so-straight sounding things that they didn’t actually mean. “Sorry,” I muttered.

“I’m just worried about you, and I know you won’t take my help, so I want to be with you. Is that not okay?” Jim’s voice

was soft and his eyes looked so innocent, like I was the bully who'd stolen away his candy.

Of course, it wasn't okay, because what if I got too used to being with him and forgot how to let him go? What would happen then?

We were best friends and did almost everything together, but we were at the cusp of thirty. A lot of our friends in town were already married and popping out kids, while we'd stayed single.

I knew the reason why *I* didn't date, but it wasn't the same for Jim. Maybe there weren't any women who caught his interest at this moment, but it wouldn't always be this way. I saw the way women looked at Jim. Their eyes filled with lust like they were imagining ripping off his clothes in the middle of the street, and they didn't keep it a secret. They openly flirted and made suggestions to Jim in ways that I could never, because to him, I was just his best friend, and that was something I had to remind myself so that I didn't foolishly get my hopes up.

Sighing, I tried to release all the pent-up frustrations that built up from years of dealing with this situation. This was a problem of my own making and could easily be resolved if only I'd give up on him, but how could one move past Jim Walker?

It was impossible.

"Of course it's okay. You know we'll always be best friends, or what do kids call it these days? BFFs, right?" I joked, trying to lighten up the mood, which earned me a chuckle from him.

"So you'll let me go with you?" he said with a smile that lit up his entire face. How the hell was I supposed to say no to that?

FIVE

JIM

The nice thing about driving to the airport in the middle of the damn night was that there was no traffic. Which meant that the vast majority of people were smart and asleep like they should be.

There wasn't much conversation on the drive there. Soft pop music played on the radio and Austin hummed along with it while tapping a finger on the steering wheel along with the beat. I watched his profile for most of the ride, keeping a close eye on him to make sure that he didn't fall asleep at the wheel or something, but fortunately he looked wide awake.

He glanced over a couple of times and caught me staring. I smiled at him in return. He didn't question my actions, so I figured he knew I was doing what a best friend would; keeping my eyes on him in a totally platonic and non-creepy way. And if I was enjoying the view a little too much, it was normal. Like I'd said, Austin was easy on the eyes, and I wasn't going to deprive myself when I was lucky enough to have the uninhibited view.

It didn't take us long to arrive at the small airport. The couple was waiting for us outside, looking a little worse for the wear but all in one piece. They were easy to spot as tourists as they were bundled up in full-on winter gear despite it only being early October. It got colder here earlier than other places, but the locals were used to it.

Austin and I both got out of the cab to greet the couple. "Laura and Joey?" I asked, offering my hand to them for a handshake.

They each accepted it and nodded, but looked weary at the appearance of two people coming to pick them up.

“I’m Jim from Snowfield Farm.” I gave them an easy smile that I hoped would reassure them that I wasn’t some random stranger hitching a ride in their taxi.

“We weren’t expecting someone from the farm to come all the way to pick us up, but this is a nice surprise,” Joey said. He sounded exhausted, but offered me a weak smile. Austin came up beside me and offered his hand to them as well.

“I’m Austin, your taxi driver. I’m sure you’re tired from the long trip. Let’s get you to your lodging so you two can get a proper rest,” Austin said as he took the suitcase closest to him. The couple sighed in what I assumed was relief.

Austin had worked his magic again. He had a way of making someone feel comfortable, like they could trust him. It was something that others never appreciated until our adult years, but I’d been drawn to him from our first encounter for this very reason.

As teens, the others never understood why I liked hanging out with Austin. He was the quiet, introverted one who was labeled a “weird and gloomy” kid. In truth, they never took the time to get to know him. He had layers that needed peeling back, and nobody besides me took the time to do it.

Austin opened the taxi’s back door for the couple, for which they shot him a grateful smile before climbing inside the car. I grabbed the other suitcase and stowed their luggage away in the trunk. Austin and I quickly returned to our seats and we made the drive back home.

Not even ten minutes later, I heard snoring coming from the back. I looked back to see the couple resting their heads against each other as they slept. Their hands were clasped together on the man’s lap. They looked so peaceful and so in love.

I turned back to the front and sank into my seat. Slightly twisting my head to look at Austin, I asked, “Do you think we’ll be like them one day?”

He shot a quick glance at me before turning back to focus on the road. “What do you mean? Like them?”

Images of slow and easy days with Austin passed through my mind. It wasn't much different from how we were living now, in fact, and I didn't want these comfortable days to end.

I knew that things couldn't stay the same forever. We were both heading into our thirties, and in small towns like ours, we were already considered old bachelors.

It wasn't that I'd planned to be single for this long, but none of my relationships ever stuck. The handful of actual relationships I'd been in all ended because they felt like I wasn't making them my priority. When we talked about it, I realized that it was true, and that was an issue when in a relationship.

Hanging out with whoever I was dating wasn't nearly as fun or comfortable as hanging out with Austin, and it wasn't fair to them if I didn't feel the same connection as they did, so why stay in the relationship at all?

Austin dated here and there but nothing lasted either, and maybe they never lasted for the same reasons as mine. We didn't keep secrets from each other, but talking about relationships was something we never did. All I knew was that the men he dated were never good enough for him.

At this point, it had been over a year since I'd had a girlfriend, and while it did suck for my ever-building sexual frustration, I wasn't as lonely as I thought I would be, nor did I feel like I was missing some special connection that many people said I would.

I had Austin, and honestly, he filled something inside me that nobody else ever has. And as the years passed with just the two of us, I couldn't comprehend those who told me that I would crave a real relationship one day.

Austin is the longest relationship I have had, and I didn't think I was missing anything. So what did I mean when I asked him that question? If we would separately find a partner for

ourselves, or did I mean if the two of us would become like them one day?

My mind told me the first choice was the logical one, but my mouth refused to make any noise to clarify anything. Instead, a deep humming noise that sounded vaguely like admission came from my throat.

Since I was still watching Austin, I saw the flick of confusion that passed over his face. He wasn't the only one confused, but my mouth still refused to listen to me and explain that to him myself.

All he offered me was a half-hearted shrug, effectively ending the conversation. The cab fell back into silence as we pulled up to the entrance of the farm. The first signs of daybreak hit the horizon as Austin parked the car.

The car stopping woke the couple up. "Welcome to your home for the next week," I said, turning my head to the back to give them a warm smile.

They looked around the place with wonder in their eyes. I couldn't blame them. Snowfield Farm was a sight to see. It was part of the reason why I was so drawn to working here.

During the winter, the entire farmland was blanketed in a layer of sparkling white snow. About twenty years ago, Alice and Trish wanted to open a farm in Wintertown and fell in love with this piece of mostly flat land. Whereas most of Wintertown was surrounded by trees, it was only this area that was clear enough to create their dream farm.

Since it was still October and much too early for the snow to start, the fruit orchard Alice and Trish had arranged along the rolling hills was the first sight one saw when they entered the farm.

It would be a beautiful sight in late fall when the tree leaves were dyed in oranges and yellows, but for now, vibrant reds and purples from the apple trees and grapevines were the focal point of the farm. The sight was made even more magical by the multi-colored rays of light from the dawn sun.

“Wow, it’s beautiful,” Laura said before opening the car door and taking a step out. The rest of us followed her, with her partner coming around the car to wrap an arm around her shoulders. They leaned into each other as they spared a few moments to enjoy the view.

I chuckled and followed Austin to unload their luggage. We waited to the side to give them some privacy.

“Let me call Trish really quickly to check them in and I’ll head back with you to pick up my truck,” I said, leaning against the trunk and closing my eyes. The workday was going to be brutal, but it was worth it knowing that Austin was safe. I knew this was far from his last time driving in the middle of the night, but hopefully he would be more rested for those trips in the future.

A cool touch under my eye had me blinking my eyes open to see Austin looking at me with his brows furrowed and lips flatted. “You should stay and take a nap before your shift. No offense, but you look like shit.”

I choked out a laugh and rubbed my stubbly chin. “Do I look older than usual now?” I teased, flashing him my pearly whites.

“Old enough to be my grandpa,” Austin deadpanned with a straight expression, which only made me laugh louder. The couple peeked back to cast a glance at us but quickly returned to admiring the view.

“But seriously, go take a nap. I’ll pick you up when your shift ends,” Austin said before turning to take the suitcase inside the farmhouse. He left no room for argument, not that I was going to argue in any case. I knew this was his way of showing his care for me, and I was loving every second of it.

SIX

JIM

It didn't take long to show the couple to their accommodations for the week. Austin helped me bring their luggage to their room before driving home to rest. Meanwhile, I plopped onto the small couch inside the employee rest area in the farmhouse. It wasn't the most comfortable, but that didn't matter when I was dead on my feet, and I was passed out in seconds.

"You alive?"

I was jolted awake by a hard jab in my stomach. Trish stood above me in her signature wife beater. Her arms crossed to enhance the muscles she'd earned from years of doing heavy work on the farm.

"Still alive," I grumbled as I dragged my hand over my face. "But kinda wish I wasn't right now."

A grin appeared on Trish's face at that, which was what I assumed, her enjoying my misery. "Partied hard last night?" she asked, giving me a knowing look.

I scoffed, sat up, and rolled my shoulders to work out the kinks that had built from scrunching my body to fit the tiny couch. "More like accompanying my roommate to make sure he makes it back safe."

"You sacrificed your precious sleep for your roommate, huh? He must be pretty special to you," Trish said. I didn't like the suggestive tone she was using.

Did everyone think I have an obsession with sleep or something?

“Of course, he’s my best friend,” I said. Her grin grew wider, making my guard go straight up. Trish loved giving me shit, and I gave back as hard as I got most days, but my brain wasn’t functioning enough for mind games right now.

As she opened her mouth to say something, Alice swooped in and saved me from her wife’s torment. “Stop teasing the boy,” Alice said as she pushed a cup of coffee into Trish’s hand.

“Thanks, honey,” Trish said, her tone turning warm and sweet in the presence of her wife. She gave Alice a quick peck on the cheek, which made her hum in approval.

Alice offered the other cup of coffee she held to me. I gratefully accepted it, muttered a thanks, and inhaled the dark liquid like it was my saving grace. Due to my lack of sleep and the uncomfortable couch that I’d used for my nap, I felt like hell. Coffee was the only thing that could save me right now.

Chuckling had me pulling the mug away from my face to look up and catch the two women watching me with amusement. Alice nudged Trish’s stomach when she saw my eyes on them.

“Come have some breakfast before you start. We can’t have you passing out and risking Big Boss finding you to finish you off,” Alice teased as she gestured for me to follow her.

Trish was right behind her wife, following her like a puppy. It was almost comical to see the way Trish practically danced to her wife’s side, her blonde ponytail swaying to an imaginary beat behind her. For someone who was portrayed as having a rough exterior, she turned as sweet as honey when it came to her shorter partner.

I slowly followed behind them and watched as Trish wrapped an arm around Alice’s waist. Whether it was intentional or subconscious, Alice leaned to rest her head on Trish’s shoulder.

From what they’d told me, their love story was one obtained through years of struggle and endurance, starting from when they were teens. Before settling in Wintertown, the town they lived in was one of those stereotypical closed-minded small towns that gave all small towns a bad rep. They didn’t let the

pressures of their family or the hate from their neighbors stop them from following their hearts and found their way to Wintertown instead.

I wondered what it was like to spend over forty years with someone, especially if it was the love of their lives. Did it feel like the decades that they were, or did they not even notice time flying by, like how it was with my time with Austin? Granted, Austin and I had only known each other for over a decade—nowhere near their *four*—so it was a tad bit different.

My thoughts lingered on Austin as I ate the warm breakfast Alice kindly provided and into my morning chores. Mucking stalls wasn't a fun task, but it was made better with my fond memories of Austin to keep me company.

Days of us hanging on the school bleachers, laughing and dreaming about an unknown future. Neither of us were good at school, but it was what was expected. Finish high school, go to college, find a stable job, get married, and have kids.

Apparently, that was the magic formula to a happy, fulfilled life.

I wouldn't know since the only thing I'd checked off that list was finishing high school. My family and everyone else I knew had been adamantly against me giving up my full-ride sports scholarship to a college in the next city to stay and work on a farm. They all said I was ruining my life.

Austin was the only one who supported my decision. Perhaps if I didn't have him with me then, I would have caved to the pressure of following a more traditional route. But I was so damn happy I hadn't, that I had Austin there with me, because working on the farm was everything I thought it would be and more.

Just like that, Austin stayed with me throughout the years and supported all my choices, and I hoped that, in return, I'd been a support to him as well.

I didn't know if I believed in soulmates or not, but if they were real, Austin had to be mine. Maybe not in the way lovers saw soulmates, but a platonic kind who would live life with me.

Someone I was able to depend on without feeling like a burden.

Despite the lack of sleep, my mood couldn't be dampened with that single thought in mind. Most people were never lucky enough to find someone who they could fully depend on.

Sure, there were friends who would help on occasion, but it was different from finding their *person*, and I had found my person. Not even Big Boss pecking at my ankles while I escaped with today's basket of eggs was able to ruin the rush of happiness that left my body feeling nice and warm.

I dropped the basket of eggs off on the counter, then walked to the fridge to find something for lunch. Alice and Trish prepared food for the staff at the farm, but I usually brought my own meals.

The reason for that was because Austin prepared enough meals for both of us. In the beginning, I'd tried to stop him, since it wasn't good to take advantage of someone's kindness like that, but he kept insisting, so I'd finally caved in. And honestly, Austin was a wizard in the kitchen—not that Alice and Trish's food was bad—but there was something about Austin's food that hit exactly the right spot.

Considering I hadn't brought a packed lunch to the farm today, I was quite shocked to find a container with a sticky note and my name on it. The note had Austin's handwriting on it, but it confused me how it got here. He should either be at home resting or driving his taxi around, looking for clients.

I picked up the container and read the tiny, loopy words under my name. "Hope you have a great day," it said with a smiley face at the end. It was such simple and generic well wishes, but it still caused butterflies in my stomach.

"Oh, right. Austin came by earlier to drop it off. Said you'd get grumpy without food," Trish said when she passed by while I held the food container and stared at the note.

At her words, the butterflies turned into a gentle warmth that settled in the pit of my stomach. I must have been making a

goofy face, because Trish laughed when she caught sight of my expression.

“Just your roommate, huh?” she asked, shooting me a smirk.

“And my best friend, don’t forget that,” I shot over my shoulder as I went to microwave my food. I counted down the seconds until the microwave beeped, announcing the food was ready.

I was expecting the noodles Austin had meal prepped earlier this week, but instead, there were four soft-shell tacos inside the container—my favorite.

I devoured the first one in seconds but slowed down to savor the second one. My lips stretched wider with each bite. The tacos were delectable, but even better than the food was the thought that Austin had prepared my favorite meal just for me. There was no better high than feeling the care of someone important to you.

“You’re awfully happy digging into your food. Is it from your girlfriend?” Lena slid into the seat beside me and asked. She rested her elbows on the table and propped her chin on her palms. The move highlighted her full breasts, pushing them up in her low tank top. Not that I was trying to look, but it was hard to miss when they were practically shoved into my face.

Lena joined the farm last year and didn’t make her interest in me a secret. She flirted with me every chance she got but never took it too far. She was a nice enough girl and quite a beauty with her large doll eyes and hourglass figure that all the single men in town lusted over, but I didn’t date coworkers.

A wise person once told me to never mix business with pleasure, and I took that to heart. I’d heard enough stories of the drama that ensued when coworkers dated and broke up. The headache wasn’t worth it.

“Not from a girlfriend but even better—my best friend.”

She leaned back on her chair and watched me for a second before saying, “He must be someone special to make you smile like that.”

I paused mid-bite into my taco and met her eyes. “Yeah, he is. He really is something special,” I said with sincerity. Austin was the best person I knew.

Lena sighed and flopped over the table. She turned her head to me. “I never had a chance, did I?” she said. There was disappointment in her voice, but she still shot me a soft smile.

The random comment surprised me, but it wasn’t unwelcome. The sooner she gave up, the better.

“You’ll find someone much better suited for you than me,” I said, which only made her snicker.

I looked at her with confusion. Were my words funny? I wasn’t trying to be.

She stood and patted my shoulder. “You’re a good man, Jim. I’m sure you’ll realize who truly makes you happy soon,” she said before leaving me with my food and more than a handful of questions at her words.

SEVEN

AUSTIN

Tapping my finger on the steering wheel, I worried over my actions. I wondered if making Jim's favorite tacos was overkill. Would he realize something from it?

The man had sacrificed sleep to make sure that I was safe on the road, so going through the extra effort to give him a nice little treat was completely reasonable, right?

I hoped.

Ever since dropping off Jim's lunch a few hours ago, I'd spent every second worrying about my actions. When I handed the food container to Trish, she gave me a shit-eating grin like she was aware of why I was really there.

Almost everyone in town knew that I was gay—I didn't hide that fact—but I made sure to hide my feelings for Jim. At least, I thought I had. However, the knowing eyes Trish shot me told me that I hadn't kept my secret hidden as well as I'd hoped. I couldn't help but blush under her gaze. If Trish could see my foolish crush, then had Jim figured it out as well?

The nice thing about working for myself was that I could make my own hours. Sometimes clients would call me to schedule a pickup, but fortunately there weren't any today. Instead, I used my time very productively by face planting myself on the couch and contemplating every single interaction I had with Jim last night, wondering if I'd acted out of character and leaked my secret.

The hours passed too quickly while immersed in my mini panic, and before I knew it, I was brought back to reality by

the alarm I'd set to pick up Jim from work. So here I was, frantically tapping the wheel as I drove toward the same person I'd been obsessing over all day. Scratch that—it was more like I'd been obsessing over Jim for years, and I didn't know how to stop.

I parked outside the farm and sent a text to Jim letting him know that I was here. Every second after felt like a countdown to my execution as I waited for Jim to come and deliver my sentence. Had he realized my true affections for him and found me disgusting?

My phone dinged with a text, and I opened it to find a message from my friend Levi inviting Jim and me out for a drink tonight. Levi was a few years younger than me, but we connected a couple years ago when Jim was on vacation with his then girlfriend. It was the only winter festival that we didn't spend together. I was feeling sorry for myself and was in the process of drinking away my sorrows at the Dove's Fountain—the local pub.

Fortunately, Levi joined me at my booth and stopped me before I got myself blackout drunk. He sat with me as I wailed about my unrequited love that was sure to only lead to disappointment.

In my haze of self-pity and dejection, I'd made a move on Levi and kissed him. I'd instantly regretted it, but fortunately, Levi wasn't one to hold grudges. He'd made sure I got home safe that night and continued to check up on me, and years later, we'd stayed friends.

I replied to Levi that I'd meet him there in an hour. Going out for a drink would be better than staying home alone with Jim and my thoughts. A night out would do me good.

It had been a while since I'd last hooked up with someone, so maybe that was what needed to go on the plan for tonight. Dating was out of the question, considering how no one could compare when I already had the man of my dreams by my side.

Speaking of...the next second, Jim strode out of the farmhouse. The bright afternoon sun shone behind him,

casting him in a halo that only made him look even more delectable than he already was. As he got closer to the car, I quickly wiped the back of my hand over my mouth in case I was drooling. If Jim caught me drooling over him, I would literally dig a hole and bury myself inside it.

The door opened, and I quickly flicked my gaze away. Suddenly, I was finding the stitching on my steering wheel very interesting.

“Hey, thanks for picking me up,” Jim said as he closed the door. I finally turned to him, hoping that I didn’t have a weird expression on my face. He held up the food container I’d put the tacos in early. It was empty and cleaned. “And thanks for lunch. It was delicious.”

“Glad you liked it. It’s the least I could do.” I said, trying to keep my tone casual instead of voicing the satisfaction I felt at knowing he enjoyed the food I made him. It wasn’t too hard considering I tended to sound a bit monotone, which was probably due to all the years of practice of suppressing my real emotions.

I pulled out of the farm and onto the dirt road that led into town. Our apartment was only about ten minutes away from the farm. Neither of us spoke during the short drive, but it didn’t feel awkward or forced. Jim once told me he didn’t like chatting in the car because he didn’t want the driver—either himself or someone else—to be distracted at the wheel.

It wasn’t long before I pulled into our apartment complex’s parking lot. Jim had the door open as soon as I turned off the engine. I followed behind him all the way into our home. He placed the food container on the counter before sinking onto the couch with his eyes closed and a heavy sigh. I watched as he found a comfortable position with both of his arms stretched onto the back of the couch. I stood by the kitchen counter, imagining myself joining him and snuggling into those beefy arms. Flicking my gaze away before I actually acted on those inappropriate thoughts, I crossed my arms to give them something to do.

“Levi invited us to the pub tonight. You joining?” I said, breaking the silence.

Jim opened his eyes to peek at me before shaking his head. “Nah, I’m wiped out. Think I’ll call it an early night. Go and have fun,” he said, waving his hand as he shut his eyes closed again.

I probably could have persuaded him to join us if I tried a bit harder, but honestly, I was relieved. I needed the distance to relearn how to put on the facade of indifference toward my friend that I’d mastered throughout the years.

Plus, finding someone to hook up with would be a lot easier without Jim there, and god knew I needed to find an outlet to release my frustrations.

EIGHT

AUSTIN

The Dove's Fountain was crowded for it being a Thursday evening. Though as the only alcoholic drinking establishment in town, there wasn't a single night that the pub wasn't full.

For tourists, Wintertown was a place full of magic and new experiences. The town worked hard on creating an image of a winter wonderland for the holidays. As for the rest of the year for the residents, there wasn't much to do here on a work night besides drink.

The Dove's Fountain was also a popular hookup spot to find someone to accompany them for the night. Countless paintings and wall decorations of two doves kissing hung around the pub to represent the legend that surrounded this town.

The Doves would bless two lovers with eternal love. I'd heard once that the owner of the pub wanted to bless the unions that were formed in their bar, and that was why they had so many Dove memorabilia decorating the place.

A nugget of thought flashed through my mind wondering if the Doves would bless Jim and me since we'd hung out here countless times together throughout the years. So far, it didn't seem so. Which shouldn't be shocking since Jim and I weren't together in the first place. There was simply nothing to bless.

I glanced around and saw the regulars scouting the room. Almost everybody knew everybody in Wintertown, so the only option for a no-strings-attached hookup was with the tourists that flowed through town.

Which was exactly my goal for tonight, but first, I needed a drink. Or maybe five if I wanted to get drunk enough to get Jim out of my thoughts.

Levi had managed to get a booth by the window. He stood and waved when he spotted me. As I weaved through the crowd to get to him, I spotted my ex sitting by the bar. We locked eyes, and he gave me a flirtatious smile that carried a sense of suggestiveness underneath it, or maybe that was all in my head.

Jared and I didn't end on bad terms, but we'd both known our relationship wouldn't last. We'd dated for half a year before mutually calling it quits. It had been a few years since then, and I'd occasionally seen him around town, but this was the first time since our breakup that he'd tried to initiate contact again.

He raised a hand to wave at me, and my eyes drew to his large palm and thick forearm that were so similar to Jim's. It was what had attracted me in the first place. I knew it was a messed up reason to get with someone, like I was using him as a replacement for Jim, but it had seemed like a good idea at the time. But it wasn't fair for either of us to stay in a relationship that I wasn't fully committed to.

I flicked my gaze away and continued through the crowd. Levi was waiting at the end of the booth with another man by his side.

"Hey, man. It's been a while," Levi said, pulling me into a tight hug. He was a few inches taller than me and had the body of a surfer—despite us being a couple of hours from the nearest beach. He was outgoing, and I'd never seen him without a smile on his face.

"It has. Thanks for inviting me out," I said, returning the hug just as tightly.

He was one of the few people in town that I was actually close with and related to on a personal level instead of the fake small-town politeness that most people here had with me. It was a shame that we didn't get to meet up much. Levi was

usually busy helping his dads out with their B&B at the edge of town, and I was busy getting too wrapped up in Jim...

Pulling back, I turned to the other man at the table and gave him a hug as well. "It's great to see you again, Felix."

The man was an inch shorter than me and even more petite than I was—and that was a feat considering my parents complained about me being "skin and bones" every time we met up. Though my lack of muscles only enhances my gloomy demeanor, Felix's slim frame fit him perfectly, giving his already angelic appearance an even more otherworldly feel.

"It's great to see you too!" Felix said with so much cheer that he was bouncing on his heels.

"I ran into Felix on the way here. I hope you don't mind me inviting him to join us," Levi said as we took our seats.

"Not at all. It's nice to see you before you move," I said to the younger man. There was already a pitcher of beer on the table, and Levi poured me a glass before I could even ask.

I shot him a grateful smile before chugging down the entire glass. I drove my taxi to the bar, but if tonight went as planned, I'd find someone to go home with.

The glass settled back on the table with a light clank, and I found my friends staring at me with wide eyes. "Rough day?" Levi asked as he filled my glass up again. I didn't chug it this time but played with the handle instead.

Rough didn't even begin to describe it. The problem was that it hadn't even been a bad day. On the contrary, Jim's thoughtful gesture had my entire body covered in sweet tingles. The issue lay in the fact that his actions were getting my hopes up, and I knew how that would end.

Heartbreak.

I didn't know how to explain my thoughts to Levi, so I gave him a one shoulder shrug as a reply before turning to Felix. "How's the packing going?" I asked, trying to change the topic off from me.

Felix seemed to take the hint and went into detail about all the random tasks he had to do before his move and the cute little cottage he rented that was to be his new home for the foreseeable future.

“Wait, let me get this straight. You’re moving from one small winter town to another?” Levi asked with an incredulous expression on his face.

I was giving Felix a similar look. Most folks who moved out of town went off to bigger and better cities, not a town that could have been a carbon copy of ours. What was even the point of moving, then?

Felix didn’t look phased. He took a sip from his glass and said with a shrug, “I like the small-town life, but I need a change and not much change comes to Wintertown.”

Ain’t that the truth?

The only thing that changed here was the season and different tourists that went through our town. Even though we had a lot of the same people coming round every year to enjoy the winter festival the town hosted.

“Plus, I don’t want to stay single forever, and there’s no chance of me finding someone here. All the men in town only see me as the town’s angel baby, and that’s not a good thing when I’m trying to get laid,” Felix groaned as his shoulders drooped. Levi and I gave him sympathetic smiles.

From what I heard through the rumor mill, his parents had struggled with getting pregnant for years before Felix came along. They considered him their miracle baby, and being born the day after Christmas, he truly became their Christmas miracle.

With Felix’s blond curls that framed his soft face and baby blue eyes, he was the vision of an angel, and somewhere along the lines, a rumor started that those blessed by the angelic baby would obtain happiness. The entire thing got blown out of proportion to the extent that Felix was dubbed “angel baby” and photos of him as a baby in a diaper and fake angel wings were used as promotion to draw people to town.

That was all years ago before any of us at the table even knew how to speak, and Felix had since then tried to erase all the images and rumors that circled around him, but as they said, the internet was forever. Pictures of him in a diaper still made their way on our town's newspaper every so often.

"That's why I need a fresh start, to reinvent myself," he said with sparkling eyes.

"Here's to that," Levi said and raised his glass.

"Cheers," Felix and I said as we raised our drinks. We clinked our glasses before draining the contents. Noticing that our pitcher was empty, I flagged down a waiter to order another one. Tonight was a night of celebration of new beginnings and to forget the troubles that had been haunting me all day.

"Speaking of men," Levi leaned into me and said, "your ex has had his eyes on you this entire time."

I peeked back to the bar where Jared was sitting earlier and found his eyes still on me. He smiled when he caught me looking, and I quickly moved my gaze back to our table.

Levi laughed and flung an arm around my shoulder. "You know what they say, the best way to get over someone is to get under someone else," he said.

I felt the tips of my ears burn. Felix snickered at his comment, which only made the heat travel down to my cheeks as well. It had to be the two beers I'd downed on an empty stomach. The goal tonight was to get drunk, not shitfaced.

I waved down our waiter again and ordered some appetizers for the table. Alcohol paired best with greasy foods.

Levi took my silence as me needing more encouragement, so he continued, "I heard Jared hasn't dated seriously since he broke up with you. Do you think he's hung up on you? Maybe you two could reconnect?"

I flung my head at Levi with surprise. While there was no such thing as secrets in town, I made it a point to not keep track of what my exes were up to. This was my first time hearing that Jared had stayed single all these years.

“No way,” I said, waving off his words. “It was a mutual separation. We both knew it was going nowhere. He probably stayed single ‘cuz there aren’t many options in town.”

“And to add on to your point, isn’t that exactly the same reason why it’s a good idea to give it another shot? You’ve been single for years, and I don’t see any *real* options beside you either,” Levi said with a pointed look.

I got his hint. He knew about my one-sided crush on Jim from me drunkenly admitting it the first time in the pub. Through the years, he witnessed the lack of progress I made with either confessing my feelings or moving on from them, so I knew this was his way of encouraging me to move on.

The problem was, how did one move on from the love of their life? All my troubles would be solved if I had the answer to that, but I didn’t. So instead, I poured myself a glass from the new pitcher of beer the waiter had dropped off and drained it in one gulp again.

Levi and Felix cast worried glances towards me, but I ignored them and refilled my glass before raising it. “We’re supposed to be celebrating Felix’s brand new start.” I turned to focus my attention on him. “We’re gonna miss you around here.”

Felix laughed and clinked his glass with mine again before taking a sip. Apparently, my plan of moderation went out the door since I once again chugged until the glass was empty.

“Whoa, there,” Felix said, snatching away the pitcher before I could get to it. “I’m all for having a good time, but maybe you should get some carbs inside you before you black out.” He pushed over the plate of fries the waiter had brought by a few minutes ago.

I obliged only because fries did sound good right now, and I was the one who ordered them. The crispy potato tasted like heaven in my mouth, which only reminded me of the fact that I’d skipped lunch since I was too busy wallowing over Jim.

Stuffing my mouth with more of the delicious carbs, I half listened as Levi and Felix chatted about the upcoming winter festivals. Apparently Felix’s new town also went all out on the

holiday cheer, but of course it wouldn't be the same as the one our town hosted. Jim wouldn't be there, for one.

I couldn't imagine enjoying a festival without him. Heck, I was a miserable drunk the one and only year he'd abandoned me for his girlfriend. I hadn't had to suffer the same fate since, but who knew how long that would last?

Jim would eventually find a girl he liked, settle down, and create a new life that didn't include me.

The thought had my stomach turning with knots that had nothing to do with all the alcohol that was currently sloshing around inside me. A sense of loss for something I'd never had came over me and all I could do to keep the despair at bay was to drink more.

NINE

I jolted awake at my phone's ringtone. It was dark out, and I groggily looked around to find that I'd passed out on the couch. "Austin?" I called out, and my foggy mind remembered that he'd gone to hang out at the pub.

Sitting up, I rubbed the back of my neck in hopes of loosening the stiff muscles that had developed. It was a reminder that I was getting old. Sleeping on two couches in less than twenty-four hours wouldn't have fazed me a few years ago, but now my body ached if I wasn't in a proper bed.

My phone continued to ring, shaking as it buzzed on the coffee table. The screen showed it was Levi calling, and fear that something had happened to Austin shot up my spine. They were out drinking together tonight, and Levi wouldn't have called unless something had happened.

I quickly swiped the phone and answered before he hung up. "Levi? Is everything okay?" I asked as soon as the call connected. Even I could hear the panic in my voice.

"Everything's fine," Levi said. He sounded calm, so I probably didn't have to worry, but I still didn't let go of the little nugget of worry.

"Is Austin still with you?" I asked as I stood and rushed to the entrance. I quickly slipped on my shoes and was out the door in seconds. Levi had said everything was fine, but the adrenaline from the fear my sleep-clouded mind conjured up didn't ease. I wanted, no, needed to see with my own eyes that Austin was okay.

“Yes, but he’s a bit out of it. Would you be able to come pick him up?”

“I’m on my way,” I said and hung up the phone. I was jogging down the stairs and had my truck started within minutes. The pub was only five minutes from the apartment. One of the perks of living in a small town was that everything was usually close by.

Once I parked, I strode into the pub, looking around for a familiar figure. Levi found me first and came up to me. His face was flushed, like he had a couple of drinks in him as well.

“Where is he?” I asked. It was rude to not give him a greeting first, but Levi didn’t seem to mind. He pointed to the back where the bar was located, and where I finally found the person I was looking for.

Austin was perched precariously on a stool with his elbow resting on the bar and his head was supported on his hand. His eyes were half-lidded as they stared in front of him. He looked like he would fall over at any second.

I rushed to him, worried that I wouldn’t make it in time before he face-planted onto the floor. “Austin, are you okay?”

Austin raised his gaze when I called out to him. When he saw me, he sat up straight, and his eyes sparkled with happiness. Or at least, that was what I hoped the look meant.

“Jim? Am I dreaming?” He sounded unsure and raised a hand to my face. I grabbed it and pressed it against my cheek. His burning hand released all the tension that had built up from the sudden phone call.

“I’m here. I’m real,” I said, but Austin’s expression contorted at my last word before he dazedly stared off into space.

Someone cleared their throat behind me, and I turned around to find Jared. I wasn’t successful at hiding my scowl if his snort was anything to go by.

“It’s a pleasure to see you too, Jim,” he said, but his tone hinted that the dislike was mutual.

I'd never liked the man, and it wasn't because he was Austin's ex and the person he'd dated the longest. That wasn't the reason at all. The guy just rubbed me the wrong way. At least that was the story I was going to stand by.

"I didn't see you there, but don't worry, we'll get out of your way soon," I said with my arms crossed. I knew I was antagonizing him for no good reason, but merely seeing his face irritated me.

Turning so I didn't have to look at him any longer, I helped Austin to his feet, keeping an arm around him so that he didn't fall. "C'mon, let's go home," I leaned down beside his ear and whispered. His eyelids flicked closed as he shivered under my breath.

"Actually, we were talking about heading back to my place. Isn't that right, Austin?" His annoying voice grated in my ears and, even worse, he stepped up to grab Austin's hand.

Austin didn't shake him off. I turned to look at him, feeling some kind of hurt that I had no right to feel. Austin could choose to go home with whoever he pleased, and I had no way to stop him.

As one last ditch effort, I asked, "Are you going home with *him* or me?" I spat out the word "him" like it physically hurt me to say it.

I tried to put confidence into the question, but worry and doubt crept through my blood like poison. What if Austin chose his ex? They had dated for a reason, but I had to remember that they didn't work and had broken up.

Austin dazedly looked between the two of us, his gaze stopping on Jared's. My heart stopped, and I turned, ready to leave with my tail between my legs at his choice, when I felt a tug at the corner of my shirt.

Austin looked up at me with round, watery eyes that were tinted red from his drunken state. My heart restarted, beating double time at his adorable appearance.

Fuck, how had I never noticed how cute Austin is?

And now that I had, I wanted to bring him into my arms and hide him from the world. I didn't want anyone to see him like this but me.

I couldn't do that, because that was a ridiculous thought, but I did gather Austin into my arms. His parents always complained about how skinny Austin was, and considering he felt a lot lighter than I was expecting, I saw they had a point. I made a mental note to make sure he was properly eating his meals later.

Austin sighed into my arms and closed his eyes. When he snuggled into my chest, something unlocked in my heart and melted at the sweet man in my embrace.

I knew it was petty, but I shot Jared a victorious smirk and basked in his sour expression as I carried my best friend out of the pub.

The metal wall décor by the door caught my eye. Two Doves kissing was a common decoration around town, but something about this one felt different. Maybe it was the way the dim pub lighting caught the beady eyes of the Dove facing me, but its eyes almost looked alive and followed me for a brief second before turning dull again.

I blamed seeing things on the lack of sleep from the past few days and walked out into the cool evening night.

Levi and Felix—who I hadn't known was drinking with them—were waiting for us outside. Their conversation stopped when we approached them.

"Is he okay?" Felix asked as he glanced at Austin with a worried look. Austin had his eyes closed and was softly snoring into my shirt.

"He'll be fine. I'll get him home and hydrate the hell out of him. You two need a ride home?" They looked steady on their feet, but they shouldn't be driving after drinking.

Levi shook his head. "My dad's running an errand in town. He'll get us home safely. You just take care of your man."

"I will," I said with a wide smile. I knew he didn't mean anything by that statement, so why did it sound so right?

Austin was mine, maybe not in the way that lovers claimed each other, but he was mine nevertheless.

“Call me if you need anything,” I said before nodding goodbye to them and heading to my truck. Austin wasn’t heavy, but carrying a grown man was still tiring. It didn’t take long to have him buckled in the passenger seat and five minutes later, I was parking in our small apartment complex.

Austin didn’t stir the entire time. I walked around to his side of the car, opened the door, and called out to him. “Austin, we’re home,” I said, lightly shaking him.

He groaned and peeled his eyes open. His black pupils were so blown they completely overtook his blues, but there was a dreamy expression on his face as he smiled up at me.

“Jim,” he whispered before closing his eyes again. Accepting my fate, I scooped him into my arms once again and carried him inside the building. Fortunately, the elevator was already waiting on the first floor.

Once inside our home, I gently placed Austin on the couch as I headed into the kitchen to fill a cup of water. I made sure to grab a plastic cup in case Austin dropped it. We didn’t need him around shattered glass in his drunken state.

“Austin, wake up,” I called as I helped him sit up. It seemed that he hadn’t fallen into a deep sleep yet as he quickly shook his head awake again. I knelt by the couch and handed him the cup. I kept my hand wrapped around his to help him hold the cup.

“This dream feels so real,” he said. I chuckled and brought the cup to his lips.

“This isn’t a dream. C’mon, drink your water. You need to hydrate,” I coaxed, and thankfully, he didn’t fight me. I slowly tipped the cup as he gulped down the liquid. The cup was quickly drained, and I stood to refill it, but Austin grabbed the end of my shirt again.

“Don’t leave,” he whined. His eyes rounded with sadness, and I quickly went back to my knees. A sad Austin was the last thing I wanted.

“I’m here. I won’t go anywhere,” I said softly. He was shivering slightly, so I took the seat beside him and wrapped an arm around him.

“You promise? You won’t leave me alone for the festival again? Like last time?” His voice sounded so small.

I wasn’t one hundred percent sure what he meant, but agreeing to stay with him wasn’t a hardship. Spending the holiday festival together had become a tradition of sorts for us, since neither of us tended to have a partner when winter came around.

The only exception was a few years ago when an ex-girlfriend nagged at me to spend the holidays with her somewhere warm. I had reluctantly agreed, since giving in to her seemed like the easiest solution at that time, but I missed home—and Austin—the entire trip. It didn’t come as a shock that we ended up breaking up not long after returning to town.

“I promise we’ll spend every winter holiday together. I’m all yours,” I said, tightening my hold around him.

He raised his head to look up at me. His eyes were still red, but they looked clearer than they had been earlier. Hopefully, the water would help sober him up more, though I had to admit that he was freaking cute acting all ditzzy like this. Austin didn’t get drunk often.

As I was watching him, his gaze moved from my eyes to my lips. His brows furrowed like he was conflicted about something, but his expression quickly turned into a goofy smile that had me smiling along with him.

He looked happy, and it was the most beautiful sight. It mesmerized me. I was caught in the daze of staring that my brain didn’t register him moving closer to me until our lips met.

A soft gasp escaped his mouth, and his eyes went wide but quickly closed shut as he fell onto my lap with his hands around my neck. His lips felt soft and cool against mine, and perhaps it was the shock of the situation that had me freezing and not pushing him away immediately.

Subconsciously, I wrapped my arms around him to keep him from falling off my lap. Austin shivered under my hands, but his lips remained in place, pressed hard against mine.

I'd never wanted, or even thought about kissing a man. I thought I would find it unpleasant, but was surprised to learn it was the opposite. Kissing Austin didn't feel strange or wrong. In fact, it stirred up something inside me that had me wanting to bathe in this feeling. This feeling of *him*.

There was a famous saying—*curiosity killed the cat*—and most people stopped there, but the true saying had the completely opposite meaning.

I flicked my tongue out, wanting more of the heat that boiled in my lower belly. My wet tongue seemed to have lit a fire inside both Austin and me as we both moved into action, pulling each other closer as our mouths moved in a beautiful tangle.

But satisfaction brought it back.

And I'd never felt more alive.

TEN

AUSTIN

I opened my mouth, letting in more of the pleasure this foreign object brought me.

I couldn't remember how I'd gotten here or where *here* even was, but considering I was kissing Jim, that meant that it had to be another one of my dreams.

Dream Jim would do things that real Jim would never do. Dream Jim was always lavishing me in sweet kisses that had me melting and waking up aching hard and confused.

In my drunken haze, I leaned into the kiss. I wondered when the dream would end, and at the same time, feared when it would. Because it would eventually.

It always did.

Nightmares always felt like they went on forever, while good dreams ended all too soon. And as expected, seconds later, Jim was pulling back from me. I let out a whimper that sounded both desperate and full of pleading. If begging worked to keep Jim with me, then I would beg him a thousand times over.

I waited for the dream to change to the typical scene of Jim pushing me away with betrayal and anger on his face. Because how could I want him when he was my best friend? I'd betrayed his trust and deserved the curses he spewed at me as he left the room.

Instead of that hated scene, I was met with a warm chuckle that sounded very close to my ears. Opening my eyes, I found Jim watching me. He didn't look disgusted or betrayed like his

dream self usually did after realizing what we'd done, but looked at me with bewilderment and not the negative kind.

He moved a hand from the back of my lower waist, and I grumbled in disapproval until I felt him tuck a piece of my wild hair behind my ear. He rested his hand against my cheek, and I leaned into the coolness.

"You're drunk," he said with another chuckle.

I hummed in reply, because there was no way to refute that. The last thing I remembered was thinking about how Jim would one day leave my side for a girl and wouldn't spend the holidays with me anymore. I'd tried to forget the negative emotions and join in Levi and Felix's conversation, but the only thing that cooled the bitter heat inside me was the cold alcohol. So I'd kept drinking until dream Jim appeared.

Dream Jim promised to stay with me for all the holidays, and considering I was still in the dream, I wanted to bask in the happiness his vow gave me.

"You promised," I said, snuggling into his neck and closing my eyes. Jim's hands were on me again as he rubbed slow and steady strokes up and down my back.

"Promised what?" Jim softly asked. I shot back up, glaring at him. This was my dream, and I wasn't going to let him forget the sweet words he'd pledged to me.

"You're mine! At least for the holidays...right?" I started off strong, confident, but the more I spoke, the less confident I felt. The doubts crept in, wondering if I was demanding too much, even if none of this was real.

Jim laughed. It sounded like music to my ears, and I couldn't help but lean in for another kiss. He didn't resist and met my mouth with the same amount of eagerness.

Soon, the kiss turned heated again, making my already tight jeans even tighter. Before I knew it, I was wantonly grinding into him. My body was hot with need for him, and I wanted to take everything before the sweet dream ended.

"Jim. More," I said in gasps, trying to suck back all the precious air that he'd stolen from me.

“Austin, you’re drunk. I don’t want to do something you’ll regret in the morning,” Jim said. He was still giving me long strokes up and down my back, seemingly unaffected, but I felt the hardness that pressed against my own.

Shaking my head until I almost went dizzy, I said, “Never. I could never regret you. Please. It’s uncomfortable.” I ground my hips down as I begged, hoping that my dreams would go the way I wanted for once.

Jim sucked in a breath through his teeth and tried to hold my hips still, but that didn’t stop me. I continued the slow rhythm, gyrating against his hard-on until I was sure I was leaking enough precum to soak through my jeans.

“Fuck,” Jim cursed under his breath. He rubbed his hand over his short hair before dropping it down to linger over our dicks. “I’m not sure if this is a good idea, but god I want you. Are you sure about this?” He held my gaze. His blue eyes were clear and his features were a lot more defined than they usually were in my dreams.

“Yes, yes. I want this—need this.” My head bobbed up and down in quick, successive nods. I was babbling but so terrified this would be over before I got what I wanted.

I couldn’t let that happen, so my uncoordinated hands reached between us to unbuckle his jeans. They fumbled a few times before finally getting the button loose and the zipper down.

Jim wore black briefs that did nothing to hide the raging boner he was donning. The sight was almost enough to make me drool, but I didn’t linger on that for too long. The main event was yet to come, and when I pulled down the last piece of fabric that separated me from what I’d fantasized about for years, a gasp escaped me.

It was normal for my dreams to feel real, but maybe because I’d imagined countless different ways of what Jim’s dick looked like, I’d never had a clear picture of it in my dreams. There always seemed to be a layer of haze preventing me from seeing what was in his pants, but not this time.

Jim's dick was red, angry, and curved a bit to the right. It matched Jim perfectly, leaving me staring at it with my mouth hung open.

"You're making me self-conscious," Jim said with a cough. I reluctantly pulled my gaze from the mouth-watering sight to meet his eyes.

"It's perfect. *You're* perfect," I said, and slight color tinted Jim's cheeks. Jim never blushed. He didn't get shy about anything. He was confident and self-assured in everything he did. But god did the blush look amazing on him.

I leaned in, indulging myself in another kiss. Jim's tongue felt so good against mine. I immersed myself in nothing but the feel of him, and in seconds, I had to pull away before I passed out from lack of air. There was something important I needed to do before I fell back into a dreamless sleep.

Feeling the boldness that only came from liquid courage and knowing that my actions would only haunt me in my dreams, I slowly reached down, only stopping an inch from his cock. "Can I?" I asked, peeking up at him through my eyelashes.

"Only if I'm allowed to as well," Jim replied, looking more confident now than minutes before. His smile dazed me, causing my drunk-hazed brain to not comprehend what he was asking for, but this was my Jim. He was allowed to do whatever he wanted.

"Yes, anything. I'm yours," I said. The last part slipped out of my mouth without my permission, but I didn't linger on the consequences of those words for long.

Jim pressed against my already straining dick, causing a shocked groan to emerge from my throat. He chuckled as he pulled my underwear down, releasing me.

My cock sprang out of its restraint, and like I'd thought, a messy trail of precum followed in its path as it bounced against my stomach. Jim didn't wait for more permission and directly grabbed hold of my excited member.

I wasn't going to lose to his enthusiasm and also took him in my hand. The searing heat felt almost too real, but it couldn't

have been. Never in a million years would Jim let me do this outside of my fantasies.

“And it’s a lot more realistic than my usual dreams,” I muttered under my breath.

Jim’s deep rumble filled my ears. “Do you often dream about me?”

I hummed in reply, not wanting to answer the question. It was too embarrassing to admit, even if it was only to the fake Jim that my mind had conjured up. Instead, I focused on the task at hand.

I gave him a slow rub, trying to memorize the bumps of his veins under my palm. It was hard to concentrate with Jim also stroking me. His hand moved like he knew all my sensitive parts. I was putty under his hand and was panting from his actions.

“Fuck,” I cursed and fell against his shoulder. The idea that Jim was touching me and the visual of it all was almost too much. I was going to spill at any second, but I didn’t want it to end so soon, so I closed my eyes to get rid of the visual stimulation.

However, I wasn’t prepared for Jim to pull me closer to him, causing our erections to press together. His soft flesh burned against mine. His large hand took the both of us as he fervently stroked us at a speed that had me crying out against the base of his neck as I came all over his hand.

Jim used his other hand to pull my head up and kissed me like he was having his last meal. His tongue would have reawakened my dick if only I wasn’t too drunk and tired from the orgasmic bliss from the release.

Exhaustion swept through my body now that I wasn’t feeling as frustrated as before. My eyelids were too heavy to keep open, but I continued to lean into the kiss, still wanting more of his flavor.

The last thing I felt before slipping into the dreamless state was the sting of my bottom lip being bitten and something wet hitting my t-shirt.

I fell into darkness with a smile on my lips, knowing that Jim found his release with me, even though it was only a dream.

But what a beautiful dream it was.

ELEVEN

AUSTIN

Everything hurt. My body was sore, and my head was pounding like someone was knocking a hammer against it. I tried to pry my eyes open, but the light had me shutting them close again.

God, was this what a hangover felt like at twenty-eight? I didn't remember them being this bad when I was younger, but of course I didn't drink nearly as much as I had back then. Alcohol was less appealing to me, especially now that I drove for a living. I still drank, obviously, but I guessed my tolerance had diminished more than I'd thought.

Keeping my eyes squeezed shut, I snuggled back into the soft, warm bed that I was lying in. I didn't know why my bed felt warm when I was the only one sleeping in it, but I wasn't going to question it. Especially when the warmth helped soothe the annoying drums that seemed to beat inside my skull.

I snuggled closer to the heat source, ready to fall back to sleep and call today a bust, when something tightened around my waist. The movement had me popping my eyelids open, despite the flash of pain the light tortured me with.

I was met with tan, smooth skin in front of me, which didn't make sense. I had to be dreaming still, so I closed my eyes again and waited a minute. But when I reopened them, nothing had changed. I pinched my thigh, and the pain confirmed that this wasn't a dream, but still, nothing changed.

This wasn't a dream!

I tried to recall what had happened last night for me to be in this situation. I'd gone to the pub with my friends and drank a little too much after thoughts of never being with Jim overwhelmed me with dread.

My ex had been there as well, and I remembered him mentioning something about going back to his place.

Oh, god. Did I sleep with Jared?

Falling back in bed with him wouldn't have been the worst thing in the world, but I would want to get out of there before he woke up. The morning after with a one night stand was the worst.

I tried to struggle out of the man's embrace, but my throbbing head had me groaning and collapsing back down. My movements caused the person holding me down to shift. I glanced up to take a look at his face, and to my horror, found Jim. Shirtless. Holding me while we slept.

My brain scrambled to work out how the hell we got here, and memories of a dream rushed to the forefront of my mind. Dream Jim kissing me, stroking the both of us until we came. Except, it was all too realistic, and now that my brain was cleared, I used every ounce of energy to analyze the probability of the dream's events actually happening.

The dream had happened on the couch, and looking around my surroundings, I finally noticed that we were still on said couch. I recalled the sting of a hard bite right before the dream ended, and the memory of it had me putting my massive headache aside to tune into the sharp throbbing that lingered on my bottom lip.

Fuck.

The dream that I thought was the best dream I'd ever had turned out to not be a dream. I squeezed my eyes shut as my heartbeat sped up, beating at the same annoying pace as my throbbing head.

I was on edge yesterday because I thought I'd slipped up and let Jim find out about my massive crush. Who knew that I'd jump straight into the lion's den and make a move on him?

This had to be a nightmare.

The years of effort of trying to hide my stupid, silly crush from him was now a waste. I was sure that he'd regret everything once he woke, and the awkwardness of the entire situation would lead to the end of our friendship. The possibility of not even having his friendship hurt more than the thought of him rejecting my feelings.

This *was* a nightmare.

Adding on to that was the raging headache that pounded with the full force of an earthquake. My head felt like it was going to split in half. The pain had me groaning and pressing my head against Jim's pec. The softness of his skin was a good distraction from the pressure that was building from my hangover and overuse of my brain.

"You okay?" Jim's sleep-filled, grumpy voice asked above me. The sound shocked me and had me flinging my head up to look at him. Unfortunately, I didn't take into account that I was tucked directly under him, and when I looked up, I smacked the crown of my head against his chin.

"Fuck," we both cursed at the same time. I sat up and covered the top of my head with my hands.

Tears stung my eyes as the already splitting pain worsened, now feeling like I'd been run over. I squeezed them shut in hope that I could keep them from falling. There had already been enough embarrassment for one day.

"Shit, are you hurt?" Jim asked. I felt the couch dip as a warm body settled beside me and a hand wiped away the tears that I hadn't known had shed.

Peeking open an eye, I found Jim right in front of me with a look of concern on his face. His chin looked swollen—probably from the bump—but he didn't seem to be paying it any concern, instead focusing all his attention on me. He removed my hand from my head and took over, rubbing it while muttering soothing words.

Some divine being needed to tell me how I was supposed to get over such a kind, caring man who looked so fucking sexy

trying to tend to me while he had his own injury.

It was impossible, even for a god.

“Are you okay?” I asked and rubbed his chin.

“Of course. I get worse at the farm. Big Boss does more damage than this to me on a daily basis,” he said with a chuckle. With one last rub on my head, he got up and headed into the kitchen. He returned with a pack of frozen peas and a cup, handing both to me.

“Your head must be killing you. Drink this for now and I’ll whip up some breakfast. We need to fill your stomach before you take any meds,” he threw over his shoulder and returned to the kitchen. Jim didn’t usually cook, mostly because he honestly sucked at it, but he could at least fry up some eggs.

Seeing him act so normally made me question if last night actually happened. All signs pointed to what I thought was a dream, in reality, wasn’t—plus the fact that I was sleeping on the couch in only my boxers and a shirt that I wasn’t wearing yesterday. But if that was the case, why was he acting so... unaffected?

Maybe I wasn’t the only one who’d gotten drunk. Perhaps he did as well, and everything we did was a drunken mistake that he’d promptly forgotten about in the light of day.

That thought left a sour taste in my mouth that had nothing to do with the fact that I probably had “morning after” alcohol breath. I sprung from the couch, making my head throb in a way that shook my entire body, but I ignored it and wobbled into the bathroom to brush away the sour taste.

I vigorously brushed the toothbrush back and forth, only stopping when my gums started to feel sore. I made sure to thoroughly scrub every inch of my tongue, and only then did the sour taste leave. If only I could brush the annoying pounding that was still throbbing at my temple away.

The savory scent of breakfast was lingering in the air when I left the bathroom. Jim had two plates of toast with fried eggs and bacon set at the kitchen bar. He looked up when he saw

me enter the kitchen, and the smile that lit up his face had me pausing at my spot.

“C’mon, let’s eat. The grease should do you some good,” he said, waving me over. I walked forward in a daze and was sitting facing him before my brain finally decided to come back online.

I grabbed the toast and took a bite. My gaze fixed on the beautiful man in front of me the entire time I chewed. Jim took one glance at my expression and laughed. “You still drunk? Or thinking about last night?”

The comment had me choking and trying to cough out the piece of bread that was restricting my airways. Jim shot off his bar stool to my side and gave me a few hard pats on the back.

“Whoa, slow down there. The food isn’t going anywhere,” he said, handing me my cup of water. I chugged the entire contents before planting the cup on the table and turning to him with wide eyes.

“You...you remember last night?” I didn’t know if I should be happy or sad that he remembered, but the bitter feeling from earlier finally disappeared completely.

“If anyone should be asking that question, it’s me. You were drunk off your ass.” He paused for a second before wrinkling his brows and asking, “Actually, *do* you remember last night?”

I slowly nodded, still trying to process what was happening.

“Okay, good. I was afraid you were blackout drunk,” he calmly said before returning to his seat and eating his breakfast like we were discussing our schedule for the day.

“So...” I started. Jim glanced up from his plate with a raised brow. Clearing my throat, I braced myself to ask the question that had been tugging my mind. “Are you okay with what happened? Last night, I mean.”

I was squirming on my stool by the time I finished asking the question. My hands anxiously wrung the hem of my shirt as I watched each of Jim’s micro-expressions to try to determine what he was thinking.

“Why wouldn’t I be? Besides, *I’m yours*, aren’t I?” he said with a teasing grin that almost had my heart drumming out of my chest.

Did his words mean what I thought they did? I sat up straight in my seat as the fluttering in my stomach went on full force. Did this mean Jim accepted my feelings for him and wanted the same thing as me? My head was light, like his words had cured all the pain that was previously ailing me.

Happiness swelled every single cell in my body as the images of my fantasies merged with reality, only to be cruelly shattered by his next words.

“Besides, it’s normal for friends to help each other out. I get it. You were pent up and so was I,” he said with a shrug, like kissing and jerking off your friend was something that happened on a daily basis.

“Right,” I grumbled as I slumped back down. I picked up my fork and moved the food around on my plate. It was stupid of me to get my hopes up.

Straight men didn’t fall in love with other men.

They only did gay shit while thinking it was commonplace locker room antics.

Even if Jim was my best friend and someone I knew who would never hurt me intentionally, I shouldn’t have gotten my hopes up that he would be different from all the other straight men out there. I angrily stabbed at the bacon, pissed at myself that I could ever be so foolish.

“You okay?” Jim asked, looking at me with a worried expression like I was acting strangely.

If anyone was strange here, it was him. What straight man kissed another man, even if he was their best friend? Didn’t he know he was playing with my feelings?

Of course he didn’t, because I’d made it a point to keep the actual depth of my affections from him. He thought he was just helping me out. I couldn’t blame him for trying to be a good friend.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I said without looking at him. The food on my plate suddenly became very interesting. I needed some space to collect my thoughts and remember that Jim only acted that way because he’d thought he was helping.

It was only a one-night stand, and I would be a fool to think anything more of it.

God, I wished I wasn’t a fool.

TWELVE

JIM

We ate the rest of our breakfast in silence. Austin was acting weird, but when I tried to ask what was wrong, he brushed it off by saying that he was exhausted from the hangover. I wanted to push, but the defeated look he carried while stabbing his bacon had me pausing.

After we finished eating, I insisted on cleaning up and pushed him to his room to rest. He must have been really exhausted, since he didn't resist as much as he usually would when I tried to do all the chores. Dropping off some pain meds and water for him, I returned to the kitchen to start coffee and clean up the mess I'd made from cooking.

The kitchen was never this messy when Austin cooked, but he was a lot more skilled in this area than I was. I poured myself a cup of the dark goodness, inhaling it to clear the fog that still lingered in my mind. With my cup drained, I rubbed the knots on my shoulders that had formed from yet another night on the couch.

I hadn't planned on sleeping on the damned thing again, but when I finished changing him into a shirt that wasn't wet from the combination of our pleasure, he looked so peaceful sleeping there. I didn't want to potentially wake him by carrying him to his room and something had kept my feet stuck from leaving that spot.

I'd somehow ended up lying on the couch with him. The last thing I remembered before I passed out was Austin snuggling into my arms and a deep sense of peace.

Sleeping on the couch sucked and had my bones aching, but I wasn't as tired as I thought I would be. In fact, I felt refreshed. Maybe I missed sleeping with someone, not in a sexual way, but having the comfort and warmth of another body beside you.

That was the one thing I missed about dating. Falling into a cold bed after a hard day didn't feel the same as having a warm body beside you, but that wasn't a good enough reason to deal with the headache of dating. I was too comfortable with my current life that I didn't want to add that stress.

Would it be weird if I asked Austin for a repeat of last night?

Maybe not a reenactment of the entire night since I was sure the only reason for our mutual orgasms was because he was drunk and frustrated and I was...well, I didn't know what I was thinking, but I knew I didn't hate it. If Austin wanted a repeat, I wouldn't be opposed, but that was unlikely. Maybe he would be willing to offer up some cuddles while we slept though.

Cleaning the kitchen went by quickly as I hummed a random tune. My good mood followed me to work, despite mucking stalls being the last thing my sore body wanted to do right now. But even after I finished my morning chores and victoriously escaped the evil pecker that ruled over the chicken coop, I was still humming the same tune.

"Finally got some good rest last night?" Trish said with a grin.

I dropped off the egg basket on the farm table, filled up a cup of coffee, and took a seat across from her. "Nope, slept on the couch again," I said as I took a sip of my drink.

"Then what's got you in such a good mood?" Trish asked as she nursed her own mug. Ever since I'd known her, she'd used the same pink mug that had the generic words "world's greatest wife" in loopy letters and a gazillion hearts painted on it. Apparently Alice had handmade the mug for her, and Trish was very proud of that fact, and always bragged to anyone and everyone who asked her about the mug.

“Who’s in a good mood?” Lena asked, sitting down beside me with her own cup of coffee.

“Nobody’s in a good mood. Trish is over-exaggerating because I’m not as grumpy as yesterday,” I muttered.

“More like you’ve been grumpy for the past week or so,” Trish teased.

“Is Jim finally telling us why he’s been a bit moody recently?” Alice leaned down to give her wife a peck on the cheek before sitting in the empty seat beside her. The three women all looked at me expectantly, and the happy mood I’d been in earlier was rudely cut off.

“Oh, shove it. Nobody’s been grumpy or moody. I’ve been acting like I always do,” I grumbled, which only earned me a snicker from Trish.

“We all know that’s bullshit. You’ve been acting on edge, like a puppy that’s been abandoned. Your mood was going from one extreme to another, so tell us, what’s changed?” Trish said.

I tried to remember what had happened these past few weeks for them to see my moods like this. I didn’t think I was acting moody, but if three people were telling me then...

The only thing I could think of was that I was overly worried that Austin was working a bit too hard and a bit depressed that we hadn’t been able to spend any time together.

As adults, we were usually busy during the week with work, but at least tried to hang out on the weekends. That hadn’t been the case the past few weeks since Austin had been working overtime. In fact, I’d probably hung out more with him these past few days than I had all month.

But it would be embarrassing to admit that I’d been moody because I missed my best friend. It would make me sound... clingy, and nobody liked clingy people.

“I haven’t been moody, okay? And can’t I be happy because it’s Friday, and the weather is nice out?” I said, but they all gave me skeptical looks. I glared right back, not backing down from my stance.

Lena was the first to break the silence. “By the way, I saw Austin at the pub last night. It looks like he’s getting back with his ex.”

“He is *not* getting back with Jared. They are over. Now and forever,” I gritted out with my arms crossed.

God, I hated that man. I wished he would get out of my life for good.

Lena grinned and rested her head on her hand. “You sure? They looked pretty chummy the last I saw them before I left. I heard people talking about them this morning too.”

I groaned and face planted on the table. I loved living in a small town for the most part. The people in Wintertown were some of the best people I knew, always willing to lend a helping hand to those in need. But the one thing I hated about small town life was the lack of personal space. Everyone was up in everyone else’s business, and it was basically impossible to keep a secret in these parts.

“Trust me, they’re not getting back together,” I turned in my seat to face her and said.

“How do you know?” she countered with a brow raised.

“Because he went home with me last night. Nothing happened between them.”

The only person he was getting it on with last night was me.

Of course, I couldn’t say that part out loud. I sensed that they already had some strange thoughts regarding my relationship with Austin, and I didn’t need to fan the flames.

Austin and I were just friends.

Friends that had jerked each other off, sure, but friends nevertheless.

I looked up at the sound of the chair scraping the floor. Alice stood up and clapped her hands. “All right, let’s stop hounding Jim and get back to work. There’s plenty to do today.”

Her words had us all falling into action as we went on about the rest of the workday. My morning chores were finished, so I

spent the rest of the morning fixing the fence on the edge of the property.

Lunchtime came, and I heated up another one of Austin's meals, which only made me think of him. I wondered if he'd gotten enough rest and if he was feeling better now. My hand was on my phone before I knew it, ready to text him, but I forced myself not to.

My chat with the three women this morning was still on my mind, and I wondered if maybe I was being too clingy? Sending a text just because I was worried might be too much, and I'd see him when I got home anyway.

It took everything I had to put my phone away and distract myself from thoughts of Austin. Fortunately, physical work helped and there was always something to do around the farm.

When my work was finally over, I didn't leave right away and found myself inside the barn with Joy. The horse neighed when she saw me. Her tail flicked excitedly when she caught sight of the sugar cube I took out of my pocket.

She ate it from my palm while I stroked her neck. She moved her mouth against my skin, trying to find more of the sweetness, but I pulled my hand back. My hand was covered in slobber when she was done, but who gave a fuck when Joy was happy with her little treat? She deserved it after working hard all afternoon.

We had horseback riding classes at the farm, and Joy was always paired with the children, being that she had the patience of a saint and was the gentlest animal I'd ever met. She was truly a sweetheart.

If it wasn't for her packed schedule today, I would have taken her out for a ride. Alice and Trish had developed most of the land on Snowfield Farm, but there was an area in the back that was left undeveloped. They said they wanted to continue seeing the beautiful field of snow they saw the first time they came here, and I was thankful that they had left it alone, since there was no better feeling than riding Joy through the fields at a sprint.

With the wind kissing my cheeks as we flew past the grounds, I'd never felt so unrestricted and free from all my burdens.

Today, I had to settle on weaving my fingers through her soft mane. Joy snorted a few times when she realized she wasn't getting anymore sugar cubes, but continued to let me stroke her. She really was the best girl.

An hour later, I parked outside my mom's house. I tried to tell myself it wasn't because I was avoiding home, but I was only fooling myself. What if Austin truly thought that I was too clingy, and that was what his strange mood was for this morning?

The house was a single story home that my grandparents had left her when they'd passed. Mom painted the exterior a baby blue when we moved here during my high school years. It was right after my parents' divorce, and Mom was going through a phase of doing everything herself instead of asking for help.

I'd insisted on helping, which ended up with us having a paint war to see who could cover the other in more color. It had been the first time after the divorce that Mom laughed, and I wanted nothing more to keep her laughing. Though it took a lot longer than planned, we did eventually get the entire house—and ourselves—covered in paint. Now the baby blue had faded and looked a grayish white in the strong afternoon sun.

"Mom, I'm here," I called out after entering with my key.

Mom never got with anyone else, so she lived alone in the baby blue house, but I still visited often. I'd moved out with Austin when I was twenty-five merely because I'd had a stable job and it seemed like the grown-up thing to do, but I sometimes wonder if I'd made the wrong choice. I loved living with Austin, but it worried me that Mom was always alone.

Mom poked her head out of the kitchen and called, "Just finished the dishes." A large dog followed her voice and jumped against me, almost knocking me over.

"I missed you too, Eddie," I said, giving the boxer mix a good rub behind the ears. The brown dog flicked his tongue, trying to get my face, but I dodged. Working at a farm, I was used to

being covered in saliva but not in the face. That was my hard limit.

“Eddie, down,” Mom called like she knew exactly what her furbaby was up to. Eddie obeyed her orders and plopped his ass to the ground as he watched me take off my shoes. Mom would kill me if I dirtied her floor.

“How are my favorite vampires doing?” I asked when I entered the kitchen. Mom wiped her hands with a hand towel and rolled her eyes, but still pulled me into a tight hug.

Mom should have predicted this running joke after she’d named her dog Edward when her name was Bella. She was hooked on the vampire romance when the books first came out. The day she adopted the boxer mix, she declared that he would be the only love of her life and named him Edward.

“I missed you, my little baby,” she said even though she had to go on her tiptoes to pull me into a hug.

I laughed and picked her up, spinning her around before setting her on the floor again. “I’m doing good. I just got back from next door. Edna and I finished planting her fall garden today. Go visit her before you leave and make sure you give the garden lots of compliments. She’s worried the flowers she picked don’t go together. Did you eat yet?” she said everything in one breath like breathing was merely a suggestion.

“Not yet, but I have food at home,” Chuckling, I said and sat at the kitchen table. Eddie followed and lay down by my feet.

“Perfect timing. I’m about to have my dinner as well,” she said, ignoring the second half of my words and pulled a baking dish out of the oven.

I made to get up to help but returned to my seat from her glare. “I may be old, but I’m at least capable enough to serve my baby food,” she scolded. She never really did get over the phase of trying to do everything herself, and only accepted my help when I forced her.

“How was your day?” she asked after handing me a plate and a cup of homemade sweet tea. She got her own much smaller

portion before finally settling down and staying still. I swore she had more energy than I did.

“It was good. Same as usual,” I said with a shrug. Mom looked at me with concern but I flicked my gaze to my plate and dug in. Austin’s cooking was good but nothing was better than Mom’s home-cooked food.

Mom didn’t try to push me into spilling all my secrets—knowing from experience that I wouldn’t talk unless I wanted to—and changed the topic to Edna’s garden. She told me the flowers they planted today and raved about the pressed flower trinkets Edna had turned last season’s flowers into.

This was exactly what I needed. Some quality time with someone I cared about without them grilling me about my moods or dabbling in false gossip.

“Oh, right. I heard through the grapevine. I’m happy that Austin is getting back out there, even if it is with his ex.”

I’d spoken too soon.

“They’re not getting back together,” I grumbled as I stabbed the fork a bit too hard against the plate. The loud clank rang out in the silent room, but I was getting tired of having to repeat the same thing over and over again.

Mom sat back in her seat and shot me an appraising glance. “You never did like Jared, though you never told me why.”

I shrugged, and Mom continued to study me. “Austin is really special to you, huh?”

“Of course, he’s my best friend.” I was confused by the sudden comment but still answered.

Mom sighed, got up, and came to my side. “Sometimes I wonder how my boy turned out to be so dense,” she said as she ruffled my short hair.

I scowled and ducked out of her hand. “I detest that remark. I am *not* dense,” I muttered, which only made my mom laugh. Loudly.

Tightening my arms across my chest, I grumbled about how a mom could laugh at her own son. She patted my shoulder, then

took our dirty dishes to the sink. I followed her, helping her dry the dishes.

“You should bring Austin by some time for dinner. It’s been a while since I’ve seen him,” she said.

“He’s been so busy recently that even I rarely get to have dinner with him,” I said with a sigh. I hated how little time we’d gotten to spend together, but then I remembered the entire reason why I was avoiding going home. I couldn’t be clingy. “But I’ll ask him.”

Mom only answered with a hum. We didn’t linger on the topic and retired to the living room. Eddie cuddled between us on the couch as we watched Mom’s favorite trashy dating shows. Even if she was done with the dating scene, she loved commenting on other people’s dating lives.

At the end of the season, where the newfound couple embraced in what appeared to be a loving hug, Mom turned to me and casually asked. “Have you been seeing anyone?”

I groaned and hung my head on the back of the couch. That was my cue to get the hell out of there. Mom laughed at my reaction, but didn’t try to stop me when I gave her a quick hug and scrambled out of there. She and Eddie stood at the doorway, waving at me as I back out. “Love you!” I heard Mom call through the open car window.

“Love you too,” I called before driving the short distance back to my apartment complex. It was a bit past eight when I got home.

Nerves at the thought of going inside rose inside me. It was a strange feeling, considering home should be my safe space, but I was nervous about seeing Austin again. My thoughts today had revolved completely around him, and I didn’t know how to act when I did see him.

However, the nerves were quickly overshadowed by the excitement of seeing him again. Things might have been left off at a strange place this morning, but that didn’t change the fact that Austin had always been my safe space. Whatever it was that was bothering him, we could work it out.

The apartment was dark when I entered, and there was no light streaming from under Austin's door either. Figuring that he called it an early night, I also got ready for bed.

I let out a loud groan when I fell on top of my mattress and quickly drifted into sleep, knowing that I was finally able to get some actual rest in a real bed. I'd see Austin tomorrow and maybe we could have a heart-to-heart like we used to all the time during high school.

Everything would be okay.

Except Austin didn't come home the next day. Or the day after that.

THIRTEEN

AUSTIN

“Children! Food!”

The shout only caused the sweet dream to shift into an empty whiteness, but the loud banging on the door had me sitting up in shock.

“Breakfast’s ready,” Gemma said, poking her head around the door and sticking her tongue at me before slamming my door shut and stomping down the stairs. Despite heading off to college next year, she still acted like a child around me. It must be the sibling bond we shared.

I groaned and ran a hand through my hair to get it at least semi under control and out of my face. My body felt sore from sleeping on my sister’s old twin-size bed, telling me that I was too used to the luxuries of a memory foam mattress and thick down comforters.

Not that I could complain, since I was the one who insisted on staying at my parents’ place for the past two weeks. I tried to tell myself that it was more convenient since my parents lived closer to the airport than our apartment, and I was making a lot of trips there lately to pick up the fall tourists, but I knew the truth. It was all an excuse to avoid Jim.

I dragged my body to the bathroom, washed up, and hobbled down the stairs. I’d been living in an apartment for so long that I’d forgotten how annoying stairs were, especially when you were half-awake and sleep deprived from a late airport pick-up.

Ma, Pop, and my little sister were already sitting around the table. “Finally decided to get up, huh?” Ma glanced up at me and said.

There was no point in replying since she would always get the final word in, so I plopped myself in the empty chair. Ma immediately started filling my plate with pancakes, muffins, bacon, and entirely too much food for one person. “Ma, I can’t eat all this.”

She tsked and continued to pile my plate with more scrambled eggs. “This is why you’re so skinny. You’re not eating enough.”

I grumbled and accepted my fate of sitting in this spot for the next couple hours until I finished the food, because Ma would absolutely murder me if I wasted food.

“Not that I don’t *love* having you here, but how long are you staying for? I miss having my own bathroom.” Of course, my dear little sister couldn’t wait to kick me out of the house.

“Stop that. This is his home too.” Ma chided her, then turned to me. “You can stay however long you want. Maybe then I can finally get some meat on those bones.”

“I don’t know about that. It looks like Gemma can’t wait for me to leave,” I said, sticking my tongue out at her as revenge for earlier.

“Untrue,” she said with an eye roll.

“Oh, please. You couldn’t wait for me to move out,” I teased, reaching over to tussle her hair. She glared at me and flattened the bangs I’d messed up.

“Well, it’s not my fault you had the bigger room,” she muttered, and I chuckled.

I’d moved out at twenty-five, mostly because I wanted to live with Jim. It seemed like a dream to be able to see him every day, eat together, and end the night with him. Little did I know that it was both a blessing and a curse.

“Well, you got the bigger room now, and the bigger bed,” I said, rubbing my still sore shoulders. The twin might have

worked for Gemma when she was fourteen, but definitely not for twenty-eight year old me.

Meanwhile, Pop silently sat there watching us with a smile on his face as he sipped his coffee. He was the quiet one in the family, and I'd always been told that I took after him in that regard.

Gemma snickered and stole a pancake from my plate. I shot her a grateful smile. "So, did you get into a fight with Jim or something?" she asked as she soaked the pancake with what was probably a pound of syrup. My stomach hurt just looking at it. It was diabetes waiting to happen.

"No," I muttered and crunched on a piece of bacon.

Jim had texted me the second day I hadn't returned to the apartment asking if I was okay. His text sounded more detached and reserved than they usually did, and that only confirmed that I'd made the right choice to put some distance between us.

He probably regretted ever having to take care of a drunken me and being pulled into a situation that he obviously wanted no part in.

"Well, whatever you did, apologize and make up," she said with another eye roll. She had recently become the queen of eye rolls, much to our Ma's annoyance. "I'd happily give in to him in any argument. He's so yummy."

I scowled at her. Jim *was* yummy, but I didn't need my little sister to be crushing on my crush. The situation was already complicated enough.

"Gemma, stop hitting on your brother's boyfriend," Ma said, but her eyes barely left the local newspaper she was reading.

"Ma, I told you, Jim isn't my boyfriend."

Such a good thing only happened in my dreams.

"Oh, he's not? Isn't that why you two moved in together?" Ma finally looked up from her newspaper and furrowed her brows at me.

I sighed at having to repeat the same conversation for the nth time. For someone who was so obsessed with local gossip, she had a way of only seeing reality through filtered lenses that suited her.

“No, we’re just...best friends,” I said and looked back down at my plate as I nibbled a muffin. It was easier to eat when that fact made me feel so empty inside.

Gemma nudged me in my stomach. “Ow!” I groaned and glared at her. She looked almost guilty, which was a first for her.

“You know, maybe he’s really sorry for whatever he’s done and wants you to go home,” she said, but her gaze refused to meet mine.

I narrowed my eyes at her. “What did you do?”

“What? Me? I didn’t do anything!” she said in a huff.

“Gemma,” I said in a warning tone. I let her get away with a lot since she was eleven years younger than me, but that didn’t mean I would let her get away with everything. I wouldn’t be a good older sibling if I didn’t have dirt on her, and she knew I wasn’t above spilling it to Ma.

“Ugh, fine. He texted me, okay? That’s all.” She said, reaching over to my plate and stealing the last pancake.

“What did he say? Why did he text you?” I asked in quick succession.

She shrugged and once again drenched the pancake in liquid sugar. “Just asked questions about you, how you were and if you were sad. Said he didn’t know what happened and that he’s sorry.”

I didn’t know if I should be happy or pissed that Jim was keeping tabs on me.

Seeing that I didn’t reply, Gemma let out a frustrated sigh and pointed her fork at me. “Look, I don’t know what’s up between you two, but you should talk to him. He deserves at least that.”

What did it say for me that I was taking advice from someone eleven years my junior? Looked like she wasn't the only one who still acted like a child.

I hated to admit it, but she was right. Running away from my problems wasn't going to solve anything, and it wasn't fair to him or me.

It was time to go home.

The first thing I heard when I opened the door to the apartment was the loud sounds of gunshots blaring from the TV. Next was the sound of scrambling as Jim shot up from the couch to stand in front of me.

"You're back," he said with a hand paused in mid-air like he didn't know if he should touch me or not.

I moved my gaze from his lonely hands to get a good look at him. It was clear that Jim hadn't shaved in a few days with his bushy beard longer than I'd seen it in years. He had dark circles that were clearly visible despite his tan complexion.

"Shit, are you okay?" I stepped up and closed the last distance between us and pressed my hand against his forehead to make sure that he didn't have a fever or something. His skin was warm, but nothing to worry about.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I-I just can't believe you're back," he said and pulled me to sit on the couch with him.

Gunshots still rang from the TV as one of Jim's favorite game anchors made commentary on the match. Jim didn't play games, but he loved replays of shooting game matches. It was so out of character for him, but I loved how excited he got as the fight progressed. He'd jump up from the couch and cheer at the TV, and I'd watch him from my seat next to him, fascinated because of how happy Jim was.

Jim turned off the TV, and I wondered if we'd ever get back to that point of enjoying his favorite matches together.

“Listen, I’ve been doing a lot of thinking while you were gone, and I know I’ve reflected. I’m sorry for the way I acted,” he said while looking at me with puppy dog eyes.

“No, I should be the one who’s sorry,” I said, shaking my head. “It’s not your fault that I couldn’t keep myself in check.”

“You shouldn’t have to. I shouldn’t have put you in that position in the first place.” Jim hung his head, looking like he was guilty for all the world’s crimes.

Something about this conversation didn’t feel right. I could understand if he was regretting that night’s actions, but why was he sorry and taking the blame like everything was his fault?

Jim looked up again and took my hand. “I promise I won’t be so clingy in the future, so don’t move out, okay?”

“Wait—what?”

“I said I promise I won’t be so clingy—”

I held up my free hand to stop him. “I heard you. Clingy? When have you been clingy?”

Jim frowned, and his expression made his dark circles even more apparent. “Isn’t that why you haven’t come home these past few weeks? Because I was being clingy and annoying?”

“What? No! You’re not annoying,” I firmly said. Who the hell even gave him those thoughts? If anyone was clingy in this relationship, it was me. Although his detached texts made sense now, knowing that he was trying not to be clingy. That thought warmed my skin.

Jim cursed under his breath something about annoying gossipers putting thoughts in his head.

“And I’m not moving anywhere, okay? You can’t get rid of me that easily,” I joked, but the joke fell flat even to my ears.

Jim didn’t seem to notice. “So why have you been so distant lately?”

I took a calming breath and braced myself. Running away wasn’t going to solve any problems. “Because I thought you

regretted *that* night and wanted some space.”

He wrinkled his brows, looking adorably confused. “What night?”

“You know, *that* night. The night I got drunk.” I pulled my hand out of Jim’s and started wringing the hem of my shirt.

Was it a good sign that he didn’t automatically know what I was talking about? Or should I be disappointed that the night that had become the main setting of my dreams for the last two weeks didn’t even linger in his thoughts?

“Oh! *That* night. But why would I be bothered by it? You’re my best friend, and you know I would do anything to help you,” Jim said, looking so earnest that it almost pissed me off.

To him, the act was just helping out a friend, but to me, it meant so much more.

This was what I wanted, wasn’t it? Back to square one, where we were nothing more than friends. He wasn’t mad at me for coming onto him, and I was able to stay by his side.

If only I could fill the emptiness that was creeping inside of me.

“So you’re not mad at me?” he asked.

I shook my head and peeked at him. “Are you mad at me for being so childish and running away?”

He laughed and pulled me into a hug. “Of course not! I’m glad you’re back,” he said as he pulled me tighter, almost squishing me into his pecs. I struggled for a second before returning the hug.

Jim didn’t seem like he had any intention of ending the hug, so I found a comfortable position in his lap. Being this close to him, his scent invaded my senses. He smelled like nature and clothes that had been air-dried in the sun. It was a nostalgic fragrance and one that had always reminded me of Jim.

It’d been so long since his scent filled my senses, and along with the fact that I hadn’t masturbated for a while either—it was hard to get in the mood when I knew how thin the walls at my parents’ place was—heat traveled south.

Being in his arms felt so good, and it only led me to fantasize that this was all for real, that we were dating and cuddling after a long day. That thought didn't help matters as the blood continued to rush south, engorging a certain part at this very inconvenient time.

I jerked back, hopping out of his lap before he felt the effects he had on my body. Unfortunately, luck wasn't with me.

Jim met my gaze before his eyes traveled down my body to the noticeable bulge that was trying to break through my jeans.

"S-sorry! It's been a while, you know, staying with my family and all," I rambled, hoping that he wouldn't be weirded out.

Jim chuckled and raised his gaze again back to mine. His eyes glowed with determination and a hint of teasing. "Should I help you?" he asked with a casual tone.

My mouth went dry by the offer. I'd been drunk the last time Jim jerked me off, so some details were foggy. To be able to see it happen again in person would be a literal dream come true, but was it wise?

Could love start with the body? They always said that love started with the stomach, maybe the same could be said about the dick. Okay, maybe *love* wasn't on the table, but I would be a fool to miss a chance that may never come again.

This time, I wouldn't be the fool.

"Okay."

FOURTEEN

JIM

I made the comment half as a joke, not expecting Austin to actually agree. He was drunk the last time it happened, after all. But I didn't hesitate when he gave his permission.

My hand fell to the crotch of his jeans. The feeling that pressed against my palm wasn't a foreign one since my hands were well used to jerking myself off, but the sensation was different when it was someone else's erection.

I was going with the flow last time, and I wasn't able to go as slow as I'd wanted. I would do things differently this time around. I wanted to explore his body that was biologically similar to mine, yet so different.

Unzipping his jeans, I released his cock through the slit of his boxers. I didn't know much about dicks, but I would say Austin's fit him perfectly. It was, well, proportional to the rest of his body, a sexy pink color, and leaking as much as it had when he was drunk.

Palming his cock, I gave it a small squeeze. Austin sucked in air between his teeth. His eyes were shining as he watched me. My skin burned under his gaze.

I'd never held another man's dick before, and I never thought I would in my entire life, but strangely, it didn't repel me. In fact, with the way Austin looked at me like he was really into this and his dick leaking proof of how turned on he was, my own erection pressed tightly against my pants.

I continued to stroke Austin, switching between going fast and slow, and twisting my hand the way I liked doing on myself. It

seemed to work if the way Austin was squirming in my lap was anything to go by.

His palms gripped my shoulders hard, and the slight pain had me moving my hand faster. Austin's breath came out in heavy pants. His eyes were glazed as he watched my movements. Squeezing his base one last time, he cried out as his cum spurted all over my hand.

I liked seeing my partner get off, and the twist in their expression as they experienced the height of ecstasy only fueled my own pleasure. But that made sense since women were sexy, their faces while orgasming would be sexy as well. I wasn't prepared for Austin's orgasm. His features became softer, and all the tension in his facial muscles relaxed as his eyes rolled back. The sight had my dick throbbing with want and need that I'd never felt for a man before.

I continued to stroke him through his orgasm until he stopped my hand from the overstimulation. He trembled through it and eventually fell against me in exhaustion. His hot breath tickled my neck, making my *hard* situation feel even more strained.

The back of my brain felt numb, and all I could do was hold Austin while he calmed down from his high. My hand stained with his pleasure was hot, and as I stared at it, the strange thought of tasting it passed through my mind. It was a ridiculous idea that I would *not* act upon.

Jerking a friend off was considered lending a helping hand, but tasting their cum? Austin would be so weirded out, so I flicked my gaze away and tried to ignore how hot my hand felt.

Austin's breathing calmed, and he pulled back. I reluctantly let him go. "That was...just wow," he said with a cute little blush forming up his neck.

"So good I left you speechless, huh?" I teased, and the blush spread to his cheeks.

He caught sight of my hand still covered in his sperm and pulled it to him. "Shit, sorry. I came all over you," he said. The words sent another wave of heat to my dick along with the

images of him actually shooting his cum all over me. The thought shouldn't have been as sexy as it was.

He looked around for something—probably a tissue to wipe my hand—but we didn't keep anything like that in our living room. Austin whipped his shirt over his head and used that to wipe my hand clean.

I'd seen him shirtless countless times. It was kinda unavoidable when living together, but I'd never been conscious of his naked torso like I was now. Austin was definitely a man, with his flat chest and the lean muscles that lay underneath his skin.

The more I looked at his body, the sexier his pink nipples and sensual curves seemed. His ma was right about him being too skinny. I bet I could wrap both my hands around his thin waist, though it did help that I had quite large hands.

I knew from experience that Austin wasn't weak, but his slim frame made him appear so fragile and roused the protective instincts inside of me to guard what was mine.

Austin wasn't mine, but I sure as hell wanted his body at this moment. What kind of person was I to be lusting after my best friend? But the dick wanted what it wanted, and nobody had to know as long as I didn't show it.

Once my hand was wiped, Austin threw his shirt to the floor. He still sat with my legs around him, and in this position, there was no hiding my erection.

The blush had reached his ears as Austin stared at the tent in my PJ pants. "C-can't I help you with that?" he asked in a soft voice that I had to strain to hear.

Was he uncomfortable but felt like he needed to reciprocate?

"You don't have to. I can take care of it myself," I said, moving to get up to take care of my business in the bathroom.

Austin pushed my shoulders down before I could move him from my lap and shook his head. "I, um, I want to," he said. He sounded determined but unsure at the same time, if that was even possible. His hand hovered inches from my cock. It

wasn't like this would be his first time touching my hard-on, but he was drunk the last time.

I chuckled and took his hand in mine, pressing it against my chest. "You don't have to force yourself."

"I'm not! I want to do this," he insisted. Before I could try to persuade him again, he went in for the kill and pulled down my pants. The slightly cool air tingled my burning dick, causing another drop of precum to slide down the side.

Austin gulped, the sound loud in the silent room. I wondered what he was thinking as he looked at my privates. He wasn't the first dude to see my dick since I'd been naked around plenty of guys in the high school locker room, but his gaze felt different. There was almost a fire in them that shook me to my core, making feelings that I shouldn't have for my best friend surge through me.

He tentatively gave me a stroke. His moves were clumsy and hesitant. I resisted the urge to buck my hips into his hand and to release the pressure that was building up. I didn't want to scare him off when he already seemed on edge, so I let him take the lead.

His strokes grew more confident as the seconds passed and his movements sped up. At this point, I was leaking so much that the entire scene looked like a mess. It was so fucking sexy.

"I'm close," I said with a grunt. Either Austin had to be a huge tease or a sadist because he pulled back his hand as soon as I'd said those words. A whimper crossed my lips that quickly turned into a deep moan when Austin scooted off my lap, bent over, and took me in his mouth.

"Fuck, what are you—"

I didn't get to finish my words as his tongue and lips worked my dick like it was the most delicious thing he'd ever tasted. Austin hummed around me and the vibrations had me bucking my hips. I'd tried so hard to be still and give him full rein, but this was above my limits of control.

My hips bounced off the couch and slammed deeper into his open mouth. He gagged but didn't pull back. The sound stirred

something feral inside me, like I was conquering the person under me, dominating what was mine.

Or was Austin the one claiming what was his? I didn't know, but what I did know was that this was the best bj I'd ever received. While I wanted it to last longer, to savor it, there was no way I was going to last when I'd already been sprinting toward my climax before he'd even put his mouth on me.

I threaded my hands through Austin's silky hair and gently tugged to get him off of me. "I'm gonna come." My voice was husky, and it took every last ounce of my control to warm him.

Austin didn't budge but took me deeper instead. "Fuck, Austin —" I tried pulling his hair harder, but he resisted and took me all the way down to the base. His eyes peeked up past his lashes to lock with mine. The desire I found in them was so intense that it shattered the last of my restraint. His throat muscles constricted around me as I came.

Spurt after spurt shot into his willing mouth as I shouted out my orgasm. My grip tightened on Austin's hair so much that his scalp must have stung, but he didn't seem affected. He continued to swallow until every last drop of my pleasure was sucked dry.

It was only after my cock softened that Austin pulled off. He gave me one last lick before sitting up and looked at me in a daze. His pupils were blown, and I couldn't see a speckle of the blue in his eyes. He looked like he'd been thoroughly fucked.

The white liquid dribbling from the corner of his mouth broke the last of my rationality as I pulled him in for a deep kiss. It was messy and uncoordinated, as were our hands roaming up and down each other's body.

Another groan escaped me at the taste of my bitter essence on his lips. I wanted more of it and pulled him closer to do just that. At the same time, I couldn't help but wish that it was his cum I was tasting instead of mine.

FIFTEEN

AUSTIN

It was like a dam had broken after the second night of mutual orgasms. Jim and I were on each other every chance we could get, and most nights, the evening ended with me cuddling against his sweaty chest as we fell asleep in his bed.

I was more reserved at first, wanting to return to my room after the deed, but Jim had insisted until he got me to stay the first night. One night turned into two until I was barely even sleeping in my bed anymore, not that I minded one bit.

We never did anything more than handjobs and blowjobs—and by blowjobs, I meant me giving him bjs. I didn't really mind, considering I liked giving them, and that Jim was straight to begin with. Jerking a man off was one thing, but sucking dick was probably toeing the line a bit too much for him. I was happy that he hadn't ended this thing between us yet, whatever *it* was that we were doing.

Tonight was no different from every single night over the past two weeks. Jim had pulled me inside the apartment as soon as I got home. He'd pushed me against the wall as he kissed me senseless and had me coming in his hand. I'd dropped to my knees and worked him with my mouth until I was swallowing his cum.

We'd cleaned up, had dinner, and lazed on the couch for a bit before retiring to his bedroom for our second orgasms of the night. Now, we were laying on our sides, Jim the big spoon, while I played on my phone. Never in my dreams would I have imagined that I'd be cuddling in bed with my best friend,

but it didn't faze me as much when I'd had the man's cock in my mouth hours before.

My phone dinged with a text message from Jared asking me out for drinks soon. Ever since the night I bumped into him at the bar, he'd started messaging me again. The texts were casual, and I saw no harm in replying. He wasn't a bad dude, and we'd ended things on good terms, but it wasn't like I wanted to make friends with him.

I opened the text thread and was about to turn his offer down when the phone was snatched out of my hand. I turned to find a grumpy looking Jim. "Hey, that's mine," I teased without any heat behind my words.

Jim dropped the phone on his bedside table and turned back to me. "Can we talk?"

My stomach dropped. Everyone knew that those were the worst words to hear in a relationship, even if Jim and I weren't really in a relationship. I thought I'd have a bit longer than two weeks, but good things never lasted long.

"Yeah, sure," I said, sitting up and wrapping the blanket around my shoulders. I wasn't going to be naked and vulnerable while he unknowingly broke my heart. Jim let me have it while he sat up crossed legged with his dick hanging out. It took everything in me to not stare at it longingly. This was probably the last time I'd get to see it, after all.

Jim cleared his throat, looking nervous as hell. Heck, I was nervous too. My hands were clammy and fidgeted with the hem of the blanket.

"So, are you going to see other people while this is going on? People like...Jared?" Jim asked. He gritted out Jared's name like it was poison on his tongue.

My shoulders relaxed, and I let the sweet air back into my lungs. This wasn't him asking for an out like I thought. The question was unexpected, but a whole lot better than the alternative.

"What? Are you asking if we're going to be exclusive fuck buddies?" I teased.

He scoffed. “Way to make it sound so dirty. We’re friends, and now we’ve added some benefits,” he said, leaning in to press a soft kiss to my cheek. My heartbeat increased at the gentle action. I could swoon right now.

“So are you going to answer my question?” He pried my hand from the hem of the blanket and started playing with my fingers.

It took me a while to remember what the question was. It wasn’t my fault that he’d turned my brain into mush, first from the kiss and now the hand holding. The immunity I’d built up over the years to stop myself from leaking any lust to him had been wholly obliterated over the last two weeks. Now, he took care of my needs when I voiced them, and it was amazing.

“Don’t you know it’s not nice to peek at other people’s messages?” I said, poking him in the stomach. He grabbed my hand and threaded our fingers together.

“I just happened to look over. It’s not my fault I saw that bastard’s name on your phone,” he grumbled but didn’t look the slightest bit guilty.

I laughed and lunged at him, pushing him on his back while I lay on top of him. He plopped down with an “oof” as he wrapped his large hands around my waist.

“Are you jealous?” I asked, staring down at him. His eyes widened at my question and his face transformed into a mask of confusion with his brow furrowed.

“What? No!” he quickly denied but added a second later, “maybe...”

I laughed and pressed a kiss on the wrinkles that formed in between his brows, smoothing them out. He pulled my head down until our lips met in a scorching kiss that felt a hell of a lot more intimate than the kind friends shared, even if we had added benefits.

“Now that we’ve confirmed how stupid I am for being jealous, shouldn’t you take pity on me and agree not to see anyone else?” Jim asked when the kiss ended. He jutted his lower lip out in a very non-manly pout, causing me to laugh again.

A growl came from Jim as he flipped us around so that I was on my back this time. He held my hands hostage and brought them over my head. He pinned me with a fiery look that had the laugh stopping in my throat.

I tried to clear it, but my voice sounded raspy when I spoke. “I won’t see anyone else. You’re the only one.”

It’s always been you. Only you. Why can’t you see that?

It was obvious he wasn’t aware when he’d never seen himself being with a man in *that* way, and I had to remember that. Jim and I would never truly happen. By some miracle, I was able to have him like this for a bit of time, but all good things had to come to an end.

I ignored the pang his shining smile gave my heart and focused on the task at hand. “But we should set a time limit. We’re not getting any younger. We don’t have time to fool around forever,” I said, even though these were the last words I wanted to come out of my mouth. However much it hurt to say, this was the only way to protect my heart.

Jim digested my words and slowly nodded. “That makes sense,” he said, and my insides were screaming, crying, for him to disagree with me, to tell me he wasn’t fooling around. It was a shame this wasn’t another one of my dreams.

“How about until the last dance? I promised that I’d spend every single one of them with you. We’ll be holiday boyfriends and go back to our normal in time for the new year,” he said, smiling like he’d come up with the most genius plan in the world.

My insides constricted at the finality of his words. Our time was on a countdown, and my breath stopped in my throat. I forced myself to take in the precious air.

“Holiday boyfriends. Sounds good,” I said, trying to keep my voice as level as possible. It was stupid of me to be hurt when I was the one who suggested having an end date in the first place.

Besides, this was the right thing to do. I couldn’t hope that Jim would stay mine forever. Having him belong to me during the

holidays would be enough. It had to be, and years in the future,
I would look back on all of this as a fond memory.

SIXTEEN

JIM

Being friends with benefits with your best friend was the best idea ever. I didn't know why more people didn't do it.

Because Austin and I have known each other for so long, we rarely fought. On the rare instances that we did, it was usually about trivial matters like me hogging the blanket or Austin taking forever in the shower which were all resolved pretty quickly.

It was so much different from my previous relationships where my girlfriend would nag at me over every little thing. Not to mention the explosive chemistry Austin and I had.

In all the years that I'd known him, I didn't know how I never realized how fucking sexy the man was. Or the fact that the man gave earth-shattering head. I tried not to think about who else he'd used those skills on, because I was sure Jared was one of the lucky recipients.

That fucktard.

Fortunately, Austin had replied to him and made it clear he wasn't interested in going down memory lane with him. I'd made sure to watch as he sent the text.

It made me feel better knowing that snake wasn't trying to get into Austin's pants while Austin was away. Every year for work, Austin stayed with a friend in the city for a week or two right before Thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving was one of those holidays where most people went home, which meant that there weren't many tourists coming to our small town or any work for Austin to find here.

A week had passed since Austin left, so here I was, laying on the grass and trying to miss Austin in peace but failing since there was a raging cock—and not the fun kind—crowing insistently in my ear.

“Shut up, Big Boss! I’m not even on your territory,” I yelled at the rooster, who had his chest and feathers puffed up like he was about to fight something, and if he didn’t stop his screaming soon, I would happily take him on as his opponent.

I got up and squatted beside the fence that separated me and my fowl arch-nemesis. “Let’s have a talk, man-to-man. Just *what* is your deal with me? You don’t act like this with the others. Is it my good looks? Or my charm? You jealous all your little ladies love me?” I rambled as I reached out to try to smooth out his head feathers. Of course, the little tyrant pecked a red spot on my hand.

Grumbling, I left the area and got back to work. It was better to keep myself busy rather than lie around, moping that I wouldn’t be able to cuddle Austin to sleep tonight.

That was another thing that surprised me. I’d cuddled with my exes but mostly because they nagged me to do so, but I *wanted* to stick to Austin all the time. Thank god he doesn’t find my clinginess annoying, ‘cuz I was enjoying every second with him while I could.

The rest of the day passed quickly when I put my thoughts back on my work. Physical labor really did help to keep the mind clear of distractions. There weren’t any guests at the farm this week, so it made doing my chores a lot easier without having to stop and answer questions every few minutes.

Alice had sent us home early, given that our chores were finished and tomorrow was the weekend. I didn’t want to go back to the empty apartment, so I drove to my mom’s instead.

She was in the middle of making dinner and refused to let me help her, as usual. So I sat at the dining table, petting Eddie as I told her all the trouble the animals at the farm got up to today.

I got a text from Austin after dinner was finished asking if I was free for a call. I said my goodbyes to Mom and sprinted it out of there so fast I left a trail of dust behind me.

The ten-minute drive home only took me five minutes before I was running up the stairs, unlocking my door, and calling Austin. He picked up as I plopped myself on the couch, and I tried not to think about the countless times we'd fooled around on it these past few weeks.

Austin's baby face appeared on the tiny screen. Water droplets clung to the tips of his hair, falling to his bare chest.

"You just showered?" I asked, clearing my throat to release the frog that had somehow gotten in there.

"Yeah, I finished work earlier today. Theo's taking me out later tonight," he said as he rubbed a towel over his wet hair. Theo was the friend he was staying with. They met during one of Austin's online classes for college. They were put into a group project together and apparently connected over an interest in arts.

"Oh, where, uh, are you guys going?" I asked, trying not to let the jealousy show in my tone. I wasn't successful.

Austin smirked but didn't call me out on me. "Just to the club. Theo says I need to get out there more or I'll end up alone."

"B-but you have me!" I sputtered. Did it sound like I was accusing him? But we did have an agreement. We were exclusive until the winter holidays ended, and now here Austin was, telling me he was going to the club to let other men put their hands all over him? I didn't like that one bit.

Laughter broke me out of the internal rage that was boiling up at the image of every Tom, Dick, and *Jared* grinding up against Austin.

"Then you better make sure I'm not...*tempted* to go home with someone else. Theo won't be back for a couple more hours," Austin said, and my mouth went dry.

Was he suggesting what I thought he was? I'd never had phone sex before. What was one even supposed to do—say—over the phone? My cock was already swelling in anticipation.

Austin must have taken my silence to mean something else, because his shoulders slumped as he muttered, “Never mind.”

“Wait! I want to! I want to so bad that my dick’s already leaking like a faucet.”

The smile returned to Austin’s face. “Show me,” he demanded.

The sound of my heart drumming overtime rushed through my ears as all the blood in my brain flowed south. I gulped as my hand slowly moved to unzip my jeans and pull my cock from my briefs. Austin’s face moved closer to the screen, like he was anticipating the sight.

“I can’t see. Move the screen lower,” he said. I immediately complied, bringing the screen down and angling up so my erection was captured while my face was also still on screen. Seeing myself from this angle felt so... dirty. I gave my dick a hard stroke that left more precum dribbling from the tip.

“God, that’s so fucking hot,” he said with a lick of his lips. The screen shifted as he moved to the bed. He lay against the pillow with one hand holding the screen and the other below him, off screen. “I miss your dick. I miss *you*.”

My heart sped up again, going so fast I wondered if this was how I’d meet my end. Someone would eventually find my body with my dick still standing hard and tall over my corpse.

“I miss you too,” I said. God, I missed him more than I thought was possible. Falling asleep alone was miserable now that I knew the comfort of having Austin’s warm body beside me.

Austin didn’t say anything, but there was a gleam of wetness in his eyes. His breaths came out in small pants, and the phone shook slightly. His arm fluttered in rhythmic movements that clued me in on exactly what he was doing.

“Hey, that’s not fair. I gave you what you wanted,” I said while squeezing the base of my cock. “Don’t you think I deserve a reward as well?”

Austin chuckled and moved again. The screen was black for a minute before being settled on something so that the camera

was pointed straight at him. Now that I was able to see his entire body, I realized that he'd been completely naked the whole time.

He put in some wireless headphones before settling himself down with his legs spread open so that they were on either side of the phone, meaning the camera was pointed directly at his most intimate area.

My mouth watered at the sight of his hard dick, and my eyes trailed down until it landed on his twitching hole.

I may not be a pro at all things gay sex, but I knew that men did it in the ass. Austin and I hadn't gone further than bjs, but it wasn't that I haven't been curious. I didn't know how these things went. Did friends with benefits get ass privileges? Did Austin even bottom?

Though I was almost certain that he did. The night before he left for the city, he'd straddled my lap and ground his hard dick against my abs. With each thrust down, my erection nestled between his ass cheeks and teased his hole. Austin looked glorious as he enjoyed himself with his eyes closed and thrust hard down on my dick. I felt his tightness squeezing the tip of my cock, and that had already felt amazing. How mind-shattering would it be to be completely inside of him?

He'd been loose and wet from my precum smearing all over his ass. I thought I'd slip right in if he'd kept up his movements, but to my disappointment, Austin had sat back and brought our dicks together. With a single stroke, he'd covered both of us in his cum.

Point being was that I was more than curious about his tight hole but didn't know the proper way to express my thoughts. But now that I was staring directly at his pink pucker, my brain decided it didn't want to think about anything else.

Austin pulled a bottle of lube from his bedside table and dribbled a healthy dose on his cock. We rarely used lube when jerking each other off since we were usually so turned on that our precum was more than enough to slick our glide. A little flutter passed my stomach at the thought that he needed some external help without me beside him.

He started with a long stroke up and down that had the lube dribbling down his taint and covering his hole. His pucker squeezed again, causing some of the lube to be sucked inside of him.

My cock twitched in my hand at the sight, wanting to be sucked inside his hole instead of the lube. Could someone be so obsessed with something that they act like a total fool?

The answer was yes.

“So, do you play with it?” The words were out of my mouth before I could stop myself. If I was clear-headed there was no way I would’ve asked something so personal. Austin and I may partake in sexual acts together, but we never talk about sex before. That was how it had been throughout our entire friendship.

Austin’s hand never paused as he curiously looked at me. “Play with what? My dick? ‘Cuz if you can’t tell...” he said, pointedly looking at where he was still stroking himself.

While the sight was taken straight from heaven, I had a one-tracked brain right now. Since I’d already thrown myself into the pit, I might as well continue on.

“No, I mean your asshole,” I said.

Is it me or is it getting stuffy in here?

Austin looked back at the camera, his gaze piercing me still through the phone. “Do you want to see?” He said it in almost a whisper, his voice sounding gruffer than it usually did.

My mouth went dry, the words not forming in my throat. I could only nod my head, shaking so much that I probably looked like a bobblehead.

His earphone mic picked up even the smallest sounds—like the hitch of his breath or the click of the lube cap opening and closing. I wondered if he could hear how heavy my own breaths had turned.

“Watch carefully,” he said before slipping a lubed finger inside his ass. His body opened willingly and before long, he was

adding a second digit. His hole greedily sucked them in as excess lube leaked out with each glide in.

Austin shifted the angle of his hand, causing his low moans to evolve into mouth-watering shouts. I watched intently, memorizing his actions and wishing that it was my fingers making him feel this good instead of his.

Even more precum spurted out of the head of my cock, making my glide even smoother. I held my hand still as my hips thrust up in time with his fingers. Tightening my hand, I could almost imagine that I was inside him.

“Fuck, you’re so fucking sexy. I wish you were here right now. I wish I was the one fucking you,” I said. The words came out in rambles as I continued to tell Austin how amazing he looked and how much I wished it was me making him feel this good.

Austin stayed silent. His gaze was locked on me as his breaths came out in pants. His hand moved fast, thrusting to hit the sweet spot inside of him as he buckled his hips in his pleasure.

“I want to see you come,” I breathed out. I was close, but I didn’t want this to end until I saw him completely unravel.

Tears were gathering at the corners of his eyes. Austin looked so fucked and so ready for a release as well. His other hand came into the frame as he grabbed his neglected dick. With one stroke, his hips shot up in the air as his seed spurted everywhere.

I watched with relish, taking everything in and wishing I was there with him to hold him, kiss him as I ran toward my own pleasure. I could only imagine the taste of his sweet lips on mine as I came into my hand. Loud groans echoed in the room as I milked my dick till every last drop of cum was released and my cock had softened.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I flopped back on the couch, taking the phone with me so that Austin was only able to see from my chest up. He whimpered in protest, and I peeked an eye open to find him with an out-of-character pout.

“I wish you were coming inside me,” he grumbled as he picked up the phone so that his face took up the entire screen.

His words stirred a chuckle out of me as I also brought my phone closer to get a better look at him.

“I miss you.”

I didn’t think I’d ever get tired of looking at him, especially at the way his eyes warmed when I said those words.

My head felt dizzy from how perfect this moment felt, *at how perfect Austin and I felt together.*

So how was I supposed to go back to being only friends and pretending that none of this ever happened?

SEVENTEEN

AUSTIN

I tried to delay the trip to the city as long as I could, but eventually had no choice when the tourists stopped visiting our town. Being away from Jim was the last thing I wanted, especially when my time with him was already limited.

The one good thing about the distance was that I got to see another side of Jim during our nightly calls and learned the fact that he seemed as interested in having penetrative sex as I'd been dying for.

“Did anybody catch your eye at the club?” he asked, sounding nervous. Jim had blown up my phone all night while I was hanging out in the club with Theo. It was a bit hilarious.

It was funny of him to think that anybody else could catch my eye when there was only one person I wanted, but I wasn't going to tell him that. I liked seeing him jealous for once, and that fact would probably freak him out.

We joked about being holiday boyfriends, but I knew that none of this was actually real. It was something to relieve our frustrations while being single. If I brought real emotion into this, Jim would cut me off immediately.

However, it was hard to remember that this was all pretend when Jim acted like the possessive boyfriend of my dreams.

I couldn't reveal how I truly felt, so I could only tease him. “There were some hotties there,” I said as I examined my fingernails. They were getting a bit too long for my liking.

A deep growl had me looking back at Jim, and I laughed at the expression he was making. It was fun teasing him, but I wasn't

someone who enjoyed seeing the person they loved miserable. “But nobody could compare to you,” I said with all sincerity.

Jim’s frown morphed into a brilliant smile that had me stunned in place. “It’s true. I leave all the others in the dust,” he said, puffing his chest out.

I snickered and turned the topic to something *safer*. Like chatting about his day at the farm or how Thanksgiving planning was going. He always went home to celebrate with his mom and her neighbor, Edna.

The conversation flowed easily, as it always did with Jim, but it seemed that neither of us wanted to hang up. That led to us chatting until I’d eventually fallen asleep with the phone propped on the pillow next to mine.

When I woke the next morning, the call was still connected and Jim’s sleeping face had taken up the entire screen. My heart constricted at the sight of his peaceful expression.

This was what I wanted every day for the rest of my life. For him to be the last person I saw before I went to sleep and to wake up to him in the morning. It was such a simple thing but so hard to actually achieve.

My hopes were already skyrocketing higher than I could manage, and I didn’t need to be any more delusional about this situation than I already was.

Before Jim could wake up, I ended the call. And every night for the rest of the week, I always made sure to get off the phone with him before drifting to sleep.

Driving my last client to their family’s house for Thanksgiving, I finally started making my drive back to Wintertown. I’d said my goodbyes to Theo this morning when he left for his parents and I’d gone to pick up my first client of the day. My bag was already packed and in the back of the trunk, so there was nothing else keeping me here in the city, but I was hesitant.

Jim must have sensed that something was up, because he'd asked me multiple times, and I could only insist that everything was okay for so long.

The rest of the drive home passed quickly as I thought of how I was going to act when I saw Jim again. By the time I entered the limits of Wintertown, I still hadn't figured it out, so instead of stopping home first, I went straight to my parents'.

"What are you doing here so early?" Ma said when I walked into the kitchen. Pops was helping her prep for the big meal.

"Just got back to town. Thought I could help you make dinner." I gave them both a kiss on the cheek before stealing some of the berries they used for the sauce. Ma tsked and slapped my hand away.

"Go to the living room and bother your sister. You're going to mess up our system," Ma said, waving me away. I laughed and stole another handful of berries, which earned me another glare from the woman in charge.

I left the room before Ma decided the wooden spoon in her hand would make a good whacking stick.

Gemma was cuddled on the couch, watching a movie. "What are you doing here?" she asked, looking up at me.

I plopped down beside her on the couch, pulling her into a hug with one arm and tousling her hair with another. "What? Am I not allowed in my own home?" I teased.

She pushed me away and flattened the hair that I'd messed up. "I thought you wouldn't come until later. Why aren't you with Jim? He said he was waiting for you at home."

I needed a little bit more time to sort out my feelings before seeing him again. Before I entered the house, I'd sent him a text letting him know that I was heading to my parents' early. He wouldn't get mad at me for that, but that didn't stop the guilt from eating at me.

"How do you even know that?" I asked instead of answering her question.

“He texted me,” she said with a shrug. Her words were casual like their texting was something that happened on a normal basis.

“Since when did you two become so buddy-buddy?” I asked, narrowing my eyes at her. She turned to me with a sly smile.

“Why? Jealous?” she asked. I crossed my arms and humphed in reply. She watched me for a second before turning her attention back to the movie.

We sat in silence for a couple minutes as the couple on the TV kissed in front of a Christmas tree. It was just like Gemma to watch a holiday movie before Thanksgiving even ended. She and I may be the complete opposites, but we were both romantics at heart. A memory of us at the breakfast table and of Gemma calling Jim “yummy” appeared in my mind, making my irritation rise up.

“You’re never gonna get with him, you know?” I bit out. I was able to endure Jim going out with other girls, but I didn’t think that would be possible if he got together with my sister.

“Huh?” she replied, looking at me like I’d grown an extra head.

“Jim. You and he will never be a thing,” I said with a bit more sass than necessary.

Gemma snorted and rolled her eyes at me. “Whatever,” she said and went back to having her eyes glued to the TV screen.

“Just because you two text, it doesn’t mean that he’s interested in you.” Her nonchalance made me feel childish and silly for trying to exert dominance over a teenage girl all because of a man.

Gemma finally stopped watching the damn movie with the lovey-dovey couple and turned to me. She took one look at my expression and busted out in laughter. I crossed my arms and grumbled in annoyance.

“Chill, bro. Nobody’s gonna steal your man away from you,” she said with a snicker.

I grumbled under my breath that he wasn't my man, but I knew I didn't mean it. I wanted him to be mine so desperately, and knowing that it would never happen had my shoulders slumping.

"Besides, all we ever talk about is you," she said, and I immediately sat up straight.

"R-really?" I asked, sounding a bit too excited than I should be.

"Why would I lie?" she said with a shrug. That was true. She had no reason to lie about something like this. Jim was texting my sister about me. That meant that he was thinking about me, at the least, and if I wanted to be even more delusional, that I meant more to him than just his best friend with temporary benefits.

That idea had me smiling so wide my face hurt. I was in such high spirits throughout the entire meal, living in my fantasies, that my family had asked if I'd knocked my head on something.

Maybe I had, and that was why the watchtowers that had always kept my guards on duty weren't working. With a simple sentence from my sister, the worries that had haunted me after waking up with Jim still on the video call all seemed so trivial and stupid.

So what if I was enjoying this pseudo-relationship more than I should? As long as I remembered that this was all going to end come January, then it didn't hurt to indulge myself in my dreams come true.

EIGHTEEN

JIM

“Dear, can you pass the gravy, please?”

I poked at the food on my plate with my fork, staring dazedly as the cranberry left a trail of red sauce as it rolled to the other side of the white plate.

“Jim?”

I looked up to find both my mom and Edna watching me with concern lining their faces.

Chuckling in hopes that it would be enough to fill the gaps of silence while in my daze, I picked up the bowl of gravy that was set on the folding tray table beside me and held it out for my mom. “Gravy, right? Dig right in.”

She doused her turkey with a spoonful and gestured to me that she was done. I placed it back on the tray table we were using because our dining table was currently sitting at full capacity with our Thanksgiving meal.

“Okay, what is going on with you tonight? You’ve barely touched your food, even though I made your favorite homemade stuffing,” she said with a huff. Eddie raised his head from where he was laying by her feet and whimpered.

That was the mental kick I needed to stop moping about the fact that Austin seemed to be avoiding me and actually be present at this nice meal that Mom had worked so hard to make. She’d especially made the stuffing from scratch—when she could have saved time and hassle by getting one of those instant ones—simply because homemade stuffing was my favorite.

“Sorry, Mom. I have a lot of my mind,” I said as I forked some stuffing into my mouth. “Mhmm, just as good as I remember, if not better!” I made a big show of it as I shoved down more stuffing.

Mom rolled her eyes while Edna chuckled as she watched us.

“You really outdid yourself this year, Bella. Everything is delicious,” she said.

“Thank you, dear. I can’t take all the credit, though. You had your hand in more than half the dishes,” Mom said, patting the younger woman on the hand.

Edna had stars in her eyes as she looked at Mom. Edna was about ten years younger than my mom and had moved into the house next door around the same time I’d moved out five years ago.

When Mom learned that Edna didn’t have any family to spend the holidays with, she invited her to join us, and since then, Edna has spent almost every holiday with us. And as the two of them grew closer throughout the years, I’d noticed how Edna’s eyes always followed Mom.

Mom had said I was dense, but I guessed the apple never fell far from the tree. I watched as the two of them were still in their position. Mom’s hand was still covering Edna’s, and their gazes were locked for much longer than was normal among friends.

I narrowed my eyes at them and gave them another ten seconds while I finished the rest of my stuffing. When neither of them seemed to have the intention of moving, I cleared my throat.

“Is there anything you two want to tell me?”

Both of them jumped at the sound of my voice, their hands retreating to their laps like I couldn’t see them.

Mom blew air through her lips and waved her hand in the air. “What? Of course not. I’m too old to be dating,” she said with a forced laugh.

“And I’m...I’m...” Edna’s voice was originally very soft, but this time it sounded barely above a whisper. Her words trailed off at the end, as if even she was unsure of what to say. She peeked at my mom, but seeing that Mom was eating like nothing had happened, she hung her head to look at her own plate.

My heart went out for Edna, but I didn’t know how to help her. Heck, I didn’t even know how to help myself.

I thought everything had been going well with my arrangement with Austin, but it felt like something changed while he was on his business trip in the city. I got the sense that he was drifting further away from me with every passing day.

The doubts had anxiety blooming inside me and I was eager to see him again so that I could prove everything was all in my head. It didn’t help that he’d texted me earlier saying that he was going directly to his parents’ place instead of dropping home first, like he normally would. All evidence pointed that he was avoiding me, and I didn’t know why.

“Besides, a sweet and talented young woman like Edna could have anyone she wanted, isn’t that right?” The words were said in a casual manner, but I caught the little tremble in Mom’s hand as she forked another mouthful of food.

“No, I—” Edna sat up and stared right at my mom, seeming as if she was ready to speak up her mind and make my mom eat her own words.

I watched them quietly, wondering if I should make up some bullshit reason to get out of there and give them some privacy. As I was about to excuse myself to get a drink refill in the kitchen, Edna’s shoulders slumped and I saw the courage leave her eyes.

Mom was looking everywhere but the younger woman, so she didn’t catch the sadness that appeared to be looming over her. I shook my head and tried to signal my mom with my eyes, but the dense woman only looked at me with confusion.

“Speaking of talent, did I tell you about the new project Edna’s been working on? She had this idea to take her dried flowers and arrange them into a mini bouquet inside a glass ball that can be used as hanging decorations or Christmas tree ornaments. The online folk have gone crazy over them. Edna, dear, you have to make sure to save us one to put on our tree this year.”

Mom’s eyes were shining as she told me every little detail about Edna’s new venture. Meanwhile, the woman in question stayed silent as she let Mom speak, looking bashful. A happy smile had replaced the gloom from earlier.

The rest of dinner went by much more smoothly than the start of it. Conversation stayed on Edna’s crafts and the online business she had selling said crafts as well as the garden Mom helped out with.

They chatted together so smoothly, almost finishing each other’s sentences. The chemistry between the two women was blatantly evident, so why did Mom seem so clueless about it?

I wondered if Mom was subconsciously ignoring the signs as a way to protect herself from opening up to someone else. The divorce with my dad had taken a hard hit on her heart, considering the reason for the split was because the man couldn’t keep his dick in his pants. Dad was decent enough to pay child support until I became an adult, but after that, I’d basically lost all contact with him.

I never understood why some people were never satisfied with what they had, especially when they already had the most amazing person by their side.

This was one of the reasons why I wanted to be exclusive with Austin even if we weren’t really dating. Maybe it was selfish to impose my own personal ethics onto him, but when I was seeing someone, that person was enough. Nobody else even entered my eyes. Of course, another major factor was that I didn’t want him to be with anyone else.

The idea of Austin dancing with some random person at the club had my chest tightening. He was *mine*, and I wasn’t going

to share him. Our agreement was till the last dance, and I was going to take advantage of every single moment of it.

With the three of us working together, the after dinner cleanup went by quickly. We crashed on the couch afterwards to watch a movie with Mom sitting between the two of us.

My belly felt ten pounds heavier from the meal, and I could feel a food coma settling in. As I was drifting off, my phone vibrated on the coffee table, but I was too sleepy and comfortable to answer it.

Mom leaned over to check on the ID and said, “It’s Austin.”

I immediately jumped up from my spot and grabbed the phone to take outside so that I didn’t disturb their movie. “Say hi to him for me!” Mom called as I walked out into the cool evening air.

“Hello?” I said when the call connected. My voice came out almost panting so I cleared my throat and tried again. “Hey, how’s it going?”

“Hey, sorry to interrupt while you’re having family time—”

“No, you’re not interrupting at all!” I said, cutting him off. I kicked a pebble by my feet, groaning internally at how eager I sounded. I hated feeling like I was some naive teenager with a crush. I was long past the age of insecurity.

“We were just relaxing after dinner. How was your Thanksgiving meal?” I said, proud of how casual-sounding I was able to keep my tone.

“It was good. Gemma was being a brat as always. Ma didn’t forget to nag at us about our table manners, and Pops hogged all the pineapple ham for himself,” he said with a chuckle, clear that he wasn’t actually bothered by their actions.

I laughed with him, used to Austin complaining about his family’s antics with warm affection in his tone. He may grumble about their shenanigans, but he loved them more fiercely than anything else.

“How was your dinner?” he asked when the laughter calmed down. I told him about dinner and Edna’s new projects, as well

as the awkward interaction that happened between Edna and my mom. Austin came to the same conclusion that I had about Edna's feelings towards my mom, and we chatted a bit about what we thought would happen between them in the future.

"Oh, my mom also says hi," I said when there was a lull in the conversation.

"Tell her I said hi too," he said and paused before hesitating, then saying, "I miss you."

My heartbeat sped up as blood rushed in my ears. All the doubts and insecurities I'd had about him avoiding me disappeared as want—*need*—bloomed inside of me. I needed to see him.

"I'll head home now," I said, turning to head inside to say goodbye to the two women.

"No, no. It's Thanksgiving. You should spend time with your family," he said quickly.

"*You* are my family. I want to spend time with *you*," I said, hoping to drill that point into him, but doubt of being too clingy resurfaced as my hand paused at the front door handle. "On second thought, you should spend more time with your family. I'll see you at home later—"

"No, they're all taking a nap. I want to spend time with you too," he said in a whisper, which had me rushing into action again.

"I'll be home in ten," I quickly said before hanging up and rushing to the living room to tell the ladies I was taking off. The living room exited from the back, with the TV screen being the first thing I saw when I entered the room.

The two of them were facing the front with the movie blaring in front of them, so they didn't see or hear me return. Their backs were to me, but I noticed that they were sitting a lot closer to each other than they had been earlier. Their heads were almost pressed together as they leaned into each other.

Mom may be dense or rejecting the idea of a new relationship, but deep down, she knew what she wanted. I smiled as I

watched them for a few seconds and decided I shouldn't interrupt their moment.

I slipped away and sent a text to mom letting her know I had to take off when I got into my car. They had things they needed to figure out, as did I. Maybe it was the optimist in me, but something inside told me that it would all be okay.

I kept that thought in mind as I drove home—to Austin.

NINETEEN

Austin was already waiting on the couch when I got home. He stood and looked at me with stars in his eyes. “Hey, I brought some pie back for—”

Before he could finish his sentence, I pulled him to me and sealed our lips together. Austin grunted in surprise, his arms flailing for a second before wrapping around me in a tight hold.

The kiss started off chaste but quickly turned hungry as I put all my longing for him from the week that he was gone into it. He didn’t passively take all the kisses but aggressively tangled our tongues together in a fierce dance.

We were panting by the time the kiss broke off. Austin’s eyes were glazed with lust, and the look only made the longing inside my heart intensify.

“God, I missed you,” I said, resting my head in the crook of his neck as I breathed in his familiar scent. He smelled like the soap we used. It was familiar and so comforting. The scent lingered in my nose, stirring up the lust that was already brewing.

“I can tell,” he deadpanned. “But you’re not the only one.”

His hands moved down and rested on my butt cheeks as he pulled our hips together. What greeted me was his hard erection pressing against mine. I groaned at the contact. I could just imagine him sopping wet and leaking precum with how turned on he was—like all the other times we’d jerked off together.

“Should we do some exercise to burn off dinner?” I whispered in his ear. Austin hummed in agreement, pulling back as he dragged me into his bedroom.

Whenever we fooled around, we usually did it in my bedroom. There wasn't any particular reason, but it was just how it happened. Seeing his plaid blanket on his bed hit differently. This was *his* space, and the idea of doing it here had me even more excited.

I gently pushed Austin onto the bed. I wanted to get naked with him as quickly as possible, so the first thing to go was my shirt.

Austin supported himself on his elbows as he watched me with burning eyes. I smirked and ran my hand down my body, putting on a show for him. He licked his lips as his eyes roamed down my hairy chest and hard abs to where my hand was resting on my bulge. I gave myself a squeeze and let out an exaggerated moan as my hips buckled.

“Fuck,” Austin cursed, his eyes almost burning a hole in through my pants before glancing up to meet my gaze. “I’m gonna finish all by myself here if you don’t hurry the fuck up.”

I laughed. “We can’t have that, now can we?”

I was too worked up to tease him any longer anyway, so I quickly kicked out of my pants. Austin did the same and lay on the bed in all his naked glory. His dick was dripping wet, just like I’d imagined earlier. His entire dick was almost soaked with his precum, and the urge to have a taste hit me like a deep ache.

He palmed his erection, stroking himself, but I strode forward and swatted his hand away. “This is mine,” I said with a growl. Austin brought out the wild, animalistic side out of me that nobody else ever had. I wanted to possess every single part of him and hide him away so that nobody else could steal what belonged to me.

Before I could delve too deeply into how twisted those thoughts were, I fell to my knees and took what I’d been

craving. I was too nervous to try blowing him before, but I let instinct guide me instead of my brain.

Austin's salty flavor overwhelmed my senses. We both moaned in sync as I took him in as far as I could. I didn't know how he'd made blowjobs look so easy, but I was barely able to suck down half his length. Wanting to make him feel good, I gripped the base with my hand, squeezing while I continued to suck and took him deeper, but I only managed to choke myself and had to pull back.

"Jim, you don't have to do this," Austin said through gritted teeth as he tried to tug on my short hair to pull me off of him. His words were heavy with lust, and that was more than enough encouragement for me to keep going.

Austin didn't try to dissuade me any longer, letting me have my way as he spread his legs even wider for me. His hand softly swept across my cheek, sending a shiver down my spine. Making sure to lick him clean, I finally pulled off to save my aching jaw and licked lower to his heavy balls.

Some precum had dribbled down, and I made to lap that up too. His taste was intoxicating, filling me with even more need than I thought was possible. This man was able to work me up so much that I thought I would burst without even touching myself.

Following the trail of precum, I licked lower down, past his taint, until his hole was throbbing against my tongue. Austin cried out, and his fingers dug into my shoulders. I took that as an indication that he was enjoying this as much as I was and swept my tongue over his hole again.

Austin's moans became louder, urging me on. I used my hands to spread his cheeks wider, flicking my tongue against his opening as I tried to get as close to him as physically possible. His heady flavor made me feel lightheaded and planted ideas in my head. I didn't know if the ideas were any good, but my body decided to listen to them anyway without consulting the rational part of my brain first.

Using the saliva that had thoroughly coated his greedy opening, I was able to easily slide a finger inside. Austin

jerked against my tongue, letting out a hum that sounded a lot like appreciation.

I didn't know what I was doing, but I'd heard of a magical spot inside the man's ass. I wiggled my finger around experimentally until Austin's loud scream had me grinning in victory against his hole.

"Yes! That feels so good." Austin's voice was hoarse and contained so much need. A hand moved to the back of my head, holding me in place so that I couldn't escape—not that I had any intention of doing so.

My tongue wasn't idle either. The tip slipped inside, stretching him alongside my finger. Austin's moan echoed in the room like a beautiful soundtrack as I slipped another finger inside and loosened him up even more until he was taking three digits and his moans had almost turned into sobs.

Only then did I pull out of him and sit back on my heels. I was met with Austin watching me with wonder. He looked like a vision with his legs spread wide on the bed and his most intimate parts exposed for my enjoyment.

"Fuck, what a sight. You're so beautiful," I breathed out. My head felt light, like I couldn't get enough air in my lungs to replace what Austin had stolen from me.

He smirked at me and lowered a hand to pull one of his butt cheeks wider, exposing his still gaping hole at me. "There're condoms and lube in the nightstand."

I sucked in a breath, forgetting how to operate my body. My mouth flapped open and closed but no words came out. Seeing my expression, Austin laughed and tugged me forward. We both fell onto the bed with me on top of him.

"Hurry," he whispered, leaning up to my ear, "I want you so bad."

My skin burned everywhere he touched me. My cock throbbed with the intense need to do exactly what he—what we both—wanted.

I reached over to grab the supplies from the nightstand. My fingers fumbled so much when I tried to tear open the condom

packet that Austin got impatient and tore it open with his teeth.

Seeing him as desperate for me as I was for him was so fucking hot. I sealed our lips in another gut-wrenching kiss as I readied myself, making sure to use plenty of lube. But when the tip of my cock pressed against his entrance, I paused.

Was I really going to do this? Have butt sex with my best friend? My best friend who was the same gender as me?

I was a straight man and social construct dictated that I shouldn't want to do this with another man.

But when Austin peeked up at me with his eyes blown with desire and a desperate, whispered *please*, my hips moved on their own.

We both groaned as I slammed deep inside of him. His ass gripped me so tightly—like it was welcoming me home. A sense of contentedness filled me, and when Austin pulled me down for a deep kiss, I couldn't shake off how *right* this all felt.

I guess I'm not so straight after all.

TWENTY

AUSTIN

Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes as I welcomed each punishing thrust Jim gave me. I clung to him, letting him take the lead and cried out in pleasure when he ground his hips at the exact angle to hit that sweet spot.

This may be Jim's first time with a man, but he knew what he was doing. It was like he had a map that guided him to where all the sensitive spots of my body were. Not that I needed much help feeling good with him.

I probably would have enjoyed this even if he did suck at it. This moment was teenage Austin's literal dream come true, and it was so much better than I'd imagined it to be.

My fingers dug into his bare back, my fingernails probably leaving scratches, but Jim didn't stop his rhythm.

"You feel so good. I love this," he muttered against my sweat-stained skin.

I closed my eyes and allowed myself the delusion of thinking he was proclaiming that it was *me* that he loved and not the act itself. The words were so sweet that I came unexpectedly, even though I had wanted to savor our first, and possibly only, time.

My ass squeezed hard, madly twitching against Jim's cock. He let out a delicious, low moan before falling on top of me, tangling our tongues as he reached his own finish.

He kissed me senseless as he calmed down, and only when his dick had softened did he pull out. I winced at the sudden loss of being filled by his dick. My ass squeezed, already missing

the feeling of fullness and intimacy of having him inside of me.

“Wow, that was just...*wow*.” Jim muttered against my damp skin, pressing soft kisses along my collarbone. I arched my back, trying to get closer to his lips.

“Is this how it feels every time with a man?” Jim asked when he fell to his side and propped himself up on his elbow to look at me.

I cast a glance at him and smirked. “Why? Are you thinking of coming to our side?” I teased. All my problems would disappear if only that was an actual possibility.

There was a twinkle in Jim’s eyes as he met mine, giving me a look that was full of mystery, though he didn’t say anything. He leaned closer to me and dragged a finger down my naked body and through the white fluid that covered my abs from my orgasm.

He scooped up the sticky essence with his finger, brought it to his mouth, and swallowed it. When he was done, he licked his lips and leaned in for a kiss that tasted of cum.

“Now that’s so much better than tasting myself on your lips,” he said, biting my bottom lip before pulling back. He pulled himself from my bed. His back faced me, revealing all the hard muscles that he’d gained through years of physical labor. My gaze trailed down the delicious sight and landed on his tight butt cheeks. Even his ass was as toned as a marble sculpture.

He turned his head back and smirked when he caught me staring. I flicked my gaze to his, pretending like nothing had happened, and fortunately, he didn’t press me on it either.

“Join me for a shower?” he asked with a suggestive eyebrow waggle. I scrambled off the bed so fast my legs tangled with the blankets, causing me to almost fall flat on my face. Jim caught me before I could make a huge fool of myself. I leaned against his bare chest while he supported me with firm hands around my waist.

“You okay?” His voice was full of concern, but I could see him trying to suppress his laughter.

“I’m fine. Thanks for the save.”

Jim continued to watch me with amusement. He bit his bottom lip in what I assumed was his attempt to keep him from busting out in laughter.

I narrowed my eyes on him, then muttered, “You can laugh.”

Before I could even finish the sentence, he’d raised his head to the ceiling and let out a loud guffaw that echoed inside the entire room.

I grumbled under my breath as I waited for him to get it all out of his system, but when he was still laughing a minute later, I pinched his left nipple. “Isn’t that enough?”

He winced but the pain didn’t distract him from his amusement. With his eyes still glittering with delight, he plopped a loud kiss on my lips before pulling back and dragging me into the bathroom.

“Let’s get you cleaned up,” he said while starting the shower. He then turned to me with a waggle of his eyebrow. “So that I can get you dirty again.”

I wasn’t going to say no to that and followed him under the hot spray. We made quick work of washing up. Our hands were all over each other with kisses sprinkled through the entire affair. It didn’t take long for my eager dick to harden again and the empty feeling of need to take over my senses.

Jim’s erection poked against my groin, just as needy as mine was, and I wasn’t going to deny what we both wanted.

I lifted a leg in invitation, not even caring that there was no condom at hand. I trusted Jim with my life, and I knew he would never put me at risk. Plus, I wanted it. Bare. With him. Because I wanted everything with this man.

He shot me a questioning look, but I only nodded and ground my already twitching hole against his hard length. That was all it took to force him into action.

Jim wasted no time in lifting my leg higher and wrapping it around his waist as he slid home. I was still loose and wet from earlier so there was no pain. Instead, an overwhelming sense of rightness drummed through my veins as he filled me to the brim. It was a perfect fit—like we were made for each other.

“Shit, it’s even better the second time around,” Jim said, humming his pleasure as he pulled out only to slam back inside. Hard.

The move turned my brain into a foggy mess, but I kept enough sense to tease him. “For you, maybe. Jury’s still out on how good your skills are.”

My words served only to stir him up. With a deep growl that twisted my insides, he slammed in hard once again, and at the same time, pushed me so that my back was against the shower’s tile wall.

His hand gripped my ass cheeks so tightly that I knew there would be bruises tomorrow. All the while, he didn’t slow his pace, even when he slid his hands under my upper thigh to lift my other leg to meet the one that was already wrapped around his waist.

Jim might be strong, but I was still a full-grown man. Afraid that he would slip and drop the both of us, leading to a horrific accident, I tried to protest. “Jim, wait—”

He cut me off by sealing his mouth to mine, effectively throwing out any other thoughts from my mind. I could only cling to him tightly, completely at his mercy to do whatever the fuck he wanted to me. And it seemed that his goal was to make me eat my words.

My moans echoed in the bathroom, sounding sexy even to my ears. Or perhaps that was the bathroom’s effect that had even made my tone deaf voice sound decent when I sang in the shower.

Either way, my naughty moans served to show exactly how wrong my earlier tease was, and not even a minute later, I bit

down on Jim's shoulder as I came for the second time that night.

Jim followed right behind me, his sexy groan vibrating near my ear as his hot essence spurted into my deepest depths. My hole greedily took in everything he gave. The hot sensation of his pleasure intensified my own orgasm as another spurt of cum drained from my spent dick.

"That was my first time going bare," Jim commented after he settled me safely to my feet, although his hands still lingered on my butt, keeping us locked together. I didn't have a thing for cock warming, but I couldn't deny how good it felt holding his soft dick with my ass after an intense orgasm instead of the startling feeling of emptiness that usually came with them pulling out right after.

"Me too," I replied, trying not to show the emotions that were surging through me. Our eyes locked. There was so much affection in his eyes that I swore I saw something akin to love in them. It wasn't the love one shared with their friends and family, but something only lovers experienced.

I told myself it had to be the adrenaline from our act of lovemaking, because that was all this was. An act. We were pretend lovers with a hard deadline. It was impossible for my happily ever after to come true the way I wanted it to.

This would end eventually and everything would go back to how it was before. Jim would leave me, like he was doing now after the shower. He padded out of the room without even glancing back, and I watched from my bed without stopping him.

My brain cooled from the heat of our shower as did my heart. I let the feeling sink in, hoping to become numb to it, sooner rather than later, as this was always inevitable. This was all temporary, and Jim wasn't mine to keep.

However, when he returned in his boxers with a glass of water for me, reminding me to stay hydrated, the cold melted until all I felt was warmth. Warmth for how caring this man was and how much I wanted all his care to belong completely to me.

I drained the cup and lay in bed, preparing for sleep. Jim slid under the covers with me and spooned me from behind. He whispered a quick “goodnight” and pressed a soft kiss on the back of my neck before going still.

The warmth continued to spread through me. My hand slowly moved down to where his large hand rested against my abs and covered them. A dull ache throbbed inside my heart, especially when Jim slid a hand over mine to sandwich it between his.

How was I supposed to keep believing that this was all an act when he kept acting like this?

TWENTY-ONE

AUSTIN

“Over here!”

Levi stood up from a booth in the back and waved toward us. Despite being a Monday night, Dove’s Fountain was packed full with the regulars and visitors to our little town.

The holiday tourist season was in full swing now that we were in December, which was good for the town since most of the residents—me included—relied heavily on the increased traffic during the holidays.

Winter was kinda a big deal around here, considering our town was literally named after it, but even the vibe of the entire place changed as soon as December hit.

The head of all winter activities organized events for almost every night, with the sole purpose of luring more visitors. And the plan worked. Business for everyone in town shot up after it had slowed during Thanksgiving. Jim and I were running around like a dove flapping its wings to escape a bird trap.

No matter how busy we were, it didn’t dampen the heat that still sizzled between Jim and me. Almost every free minute we had to ourselves were usually spent with his dick inside of me.

I hadn’t had this much sex since...well, ever, but I wasn’t complaining. We were almost halfway through December, which meant my time with Jim was slipping through my grasp.

I shook that thought out of my mind. There was no point in wasting energy and hurting my own feelings over something that I couldn’t control. I tried to tell myself to cherish the time I had now.

“It’s good to see you two again. It’s been a while,” Levi said, giving Jim and me a hug before sitting on one side of the booth.

“It really has. How’s business been going at the B&B? I heard Austin has been driving clients there all week,” Jim said as he followed me to sit on the other side of the booth.

Levi rolled his shoulders like the thought of all the work from the past week had left an ache in his body. “Don’t remind me. We’ve been at full capacity every single day since December started. It’s too much work for just the three of us. I keep telling my dads they need to hire someone, but you know how risky it is with fluctuating busy periods.”

I nodded in agreement. Hiring an employee was a huge risk especially when your business had periods of little customers throughout the year. “Maybe a seasonal worker?” I suggested.

“Yeah, maybe. I’ll have to talk to my dads about it,” he said with a shrug. “But we’re here to kick back and relax, not stress more about work.”

“That sounds like a grand plan. Looks like the wait staff are pretty busy tonight. I’ll go get us some drinks at the bar. Beer okay with you?” Jim asked, turning to me.

I nodded, giving my thanks. Jim leaned in like he was about to give me a kiss. I presented my cheek out of habit, but at the last minute, remembered where we were and pulled back, clapping Jim on the shoulder. “Thanks, bud,” I said with an awkward cough.

Jim wrinkled his nose at that name but took the hint and pulled back as well. “I’ll get us a pitcher?” he turned to Levi and asked. Levi studied us. His eyes shifted between me and Jim, and I shifted under his gaze, worried that he would say something. Thankfully, he didn’t and only nodded at Jim’s question.

“You’re totally fucking him,” Levi said when Jim left the booth.

“Shh,” I hissed as I looked around to see if anyone was paying attention to our conversation. One thing you learned quickly

about living in a small town was that even the walls had ears here. Secrets were a mythical creature that only existed outside of reality here if one wasn't careful.

Once I made sure that I didn't see any of the local gossipers, I sighed a breath of relief and turned back to Levi. He had his arms crossed and was shooting me a pointed look that said that he wasn't going to believe any bullshit I tried to spew.

"Fine, we're...*doing it*." I said the last part in a whisper. "But that's all. There's nothing more to it."

Could he hear how disappointed I was about that fact?

"There's no way you two are only fuck buddies," he said.

"That's because we're not fuck buddies. We're friends with benefits. A situationship, if you will. We have an agreement," I said, crossing my own arms. Jim had corrected me on that once before and now I had a mild distaste for the casual term, because what Jim and I had was so much more than casual. We were friends before anything else.

"Semantics," Levi said with a wave of his hand. "The point is that you're kidding yourself if you believe sex is all there is with no feelings involved."

I gave him a pointed look. He knew very well that there were, in fact, many feelings involved, except they were only one-sided. He rolled his eyes at my expression. "You know what I mean," he said, sounding exasperated.

The only one feeling frustration here should be me. This entire situation was frustrating, and I didn't want to sit here and dwell on how pathetic I'd become to settle for a taste of what was only a dream.

"He's straight. You know that. Heck, the entire town knows that, so whatever you're thinking in that head of yours isn't correct. Now can we drop it please," I said, looking around to see where Jim was with the beer. I could really use a drink right about now.

I spotted him with his hands full of the pitcher and cups as he tried to shimmy through the wall of people separating us. A pretty brunette said something to Jim, smiling as she pressed

closer to him. She was clearly trying to flirt with him. I couldn't blame her since Jim was the catch of a lifetime, but that didn't mean I had to like it.

Jealousy flared up inside me as I watched Jim shoot her a bright smile and didn't immediately reject her advances. I grumbled under my breath and turned back around to face Levi so that I didn't have to watch them together. He had a shit-eating grin on his face.

"It's not nice to take pleasure in other people's misery," I gritted through my teeth. He laughed, glancing behind me to where Jim and the pretty woman were probably flirting up a storm, then got up and slid into my side of the booth.

"What are you doing?" I asked, watching him with suspicion as he made himself comfortable in Jim's spot.

"You said you didn't believe that the feelings involved were mutual. I'll prove it to you." He took one last glance behind his shoulder before scooting closer to me until his leg was practically pasted against mine and saying, "Just play along with me."

As I opened my mouth to question him, he nudged me in the stomach, forcing the words that were at the tip of my tongue to come out as an "oof." He shot me glare, and when Jim appeared by the booth again, I shut my mouth.

Levi was out of his mind if he thought Jim had feelings—especially romantic ones—toward me. But it wouldn't hurt to let him do what he wanted so that he was proven wrong.

That was the only reason I was going along with this.

If only the little glimmer of hope that sparked inside my heart would chill the fuck out.

TWENTY-TWO

JIM

Levi had taken my spot beside Austin when I'd returned to the table. I gave him a questioning look, but he merely smiled back at me.

I didn't push the question since it wasn't really a big deal where we sat. Besides, sitting across from Austin gave me the best view. I wouldn't have to develop a kink in my neck turning to look at him all night.

I placed the pitcher and glasses down, then settled in the seat across from them. Levi filled the glasses and distributed the drinks for us. "We should cheers," he said, raising his glass.

"What are we cheering to?" Austin asked but raised his cup anyway. I followed suit.

"To us! To everlasting friendship," he said with a laugh.

I smiled as I clinked glasses with them. While Levi had started off as Austin's friend, I thought we'd gotten closer over the years, though he was still closer to Austin than me.

We all chugged our beers and poured the rest of the pitcher into our glasses. A waitress showed up then, looking more than a little frazzled by the crowd tonight. She took our order of more beer and some food before rushing off to her next task.

"So, who was that pretty lady who was chatting you up? Your target for tonight?" Levi asked as he nodded his head back toward the bar.

I noticed Austin was looking everywhere but at me when the question was asked, and him thinking that I was flirting with some rando when I'd promised there would be no one else while we were exclusive was the last thing I wanted.

"No," I said, and Austin finally looked at me. I locked eyes with him, trying to convey that I meant the words when I said, "I'm not interested in anyone else."

His gaze flicked to Levi before landing on his lap. Perhaps my words let on more than they should have, but I didn't care. The most important thing right now was making sure that Austin knew exactly what I wanted—and that was him and no one else.

Levi brought his glass to his lips, but I managed to catch the smile on his face. He wasn't stupid and must have caught something from when I tried to kiss Austin on the cheek earlier. Thankfully, Austin had saved the situation even if he had to call me *bud*.

I wrinkled my nose in distaste. Austin and I were friends, but *bud* was much too casual a term to be used between us, especially after all we'd experienced together in the past couple months.

Levi locked eyes with me and his smile grew wider, my guess proved true.

He knew.

The idea of someone knowing about my more-than-friends relationship with Austin should have had me panicking, but it strangely didn't. It was the opposite, in fact. I was relieved that someone else knew about us, that it was out into the world instead of this being something that only existed between the two of us.

A tiny voice inside of me screamed to claim Austin in front of the entire world so that nobody could steal him from me. He was mine, even if it was only until the holiday magic ended, and I wanted everyone to know that I was lucky enough to get this time with him.

Conversation moved on to the events our town was hosting this year. Our town's event planner had been preparing for the winter holidays for months, and he always made sure one year was never the same as another. Because of that, we got many repeat tourists.

"By the way, Ethan texted me their itinerary this morning. He said they booked with your B&B," Austin said.

Ethan and Kingsley had been stranded in town last year due to their plane being rerouted during a heavy storm. They'd stayed for the weekend of the last dance, and had fallen in love by the time they'd left, sharing a kiss that promised forever under the blessings of the Doves of Destiny.

During their stay here, we'd become friends and had kept in touch even when they returned home. They'd mentioned wanting to make a trip to Wintertown a yearly tradition, and it seemed they were serious about it.

"Yep, they booked in the same room as last year. Had even insisted on it." Levi took another sip of his drink. "Ethan even mentioned that the number nine represented longevity in Chinese, and that them being assigned to that room in the first place meant that their love was meant to last forever," he said with a chuckle.

"I didn't take him to be so superstitious," I said with a smile.

Austin smiled too. The expression on his face morphed into one full of longing and hope. "I think it's sweet. They obviously love each other and want to do everything to stay together, even if it is with the help of the supernatural, be it a number or a legend about doves."

His eyes had a faraway look, and I wondered if he was thinking about our town's legend. The Doves of Destiny were said to bless couples with a lifetime of happiness together, and I wondered if Austin was imagining a forever with someone. Someone other than me.

Jealousy for a man that didn't exist overcame my senses as I imagined Austin kissing them under the Doves of Destiny during the last dance. He deserved his happily ever after with

the man of his dreams, but I couldn't help but wish that the man of his dreams was me.

Which was a thought that had totally come out of left field. I'd never been with a guy before or even remotely wanted to have a relationship with one, but with Austin, I could imagine us together in the future. That has always been the plan, either as roommates or best friends who were as close as ever. I hadn't seen an alternative to that plan, or more like I'd never opened my eyes to what was right here in front of me.

Austin laughed at something Levi said. The lighting inside the pub was kept dim to create an intimate setting, but I could still see the way his eyes sparkled when he laughed. His lush lips flattened as they turned upwards in a smile, and a rush of need shot through my veins.

All I could think about was how those lips tasted and how much I wanted to feel them against mine again. My longing for him was so strong it resulted in us naked and making love basically whenever we were alone.

The realization shocked me from staring at Austin, because that was what we'd been doing for the last couple weeks.

Making love.

Us fooling around might have started on a whim of wanting to help my friend release his frustrations, but it had evolved into so much more during these past couple months.

Somewhere along the way, the love I'd always had for my best friend had changed and become something more. Something bigger.

I love Austin.

I was *in* love with Austin.

And perhaps I always had been but never realized it was possible. I thought back to how irritated I was whenever someone mentioned Austin getting back with his ex—that fucker—or how much I'd miss him when we were too busy to see each other, or how much I liked Levi knowing about us being together. The signs were so fucking obvious that I was a fool to have never realized.

Maybe my mom was right when she'd said I was dense.

I was in love with my best friend, and I didn't want to lose him to anyone else.

Blood rushed through my ears and my heart dropped at the impending end date I'd promised him. I could slap myself for being so stupid to have ever agreed to that.

Austin wanted this to end once the last dance finished. I needed to do everything in my power to prevent that from happening, and that meant proving to him that us being together made sense. I thought back to the hope and longing in his eyes when he mentioned the Doves of Destiny.

I'd show him that he didn't need to look any further because his fate was with me. Now the problem was how was I going to do this...

Lost in thought, I wasn't paying much attention to the conversation Austin and Levi were having, but it sounded like they were reminiscing about the past.

I'd been curious about the circumstances of how they connected, so I focused on the present and noticed that Levi was sitting so close to Austin that he was almost on his lap. His movements were wild and exaggerated, but his eyes were clear without a hint of drunkenness in them, so that obviously wasn't an excuse for his behavior.

Seeing that Austin made no moves to stop him and instead kept flicking his gaze back and forth between the two of us, I narrowed my eyes at him, feeling the familiar sense of jealousy at Austin being so close with another man.

I cleared my throat to get their attention. "Aren't you crowding Austin a bit too much? How about some personal space?" I said, trying to play it off as teasing, but even I could hear the hardness in my tone.

Levi waved off my comment with a laugh and hooked an arm around Austin. "He's fine. With our *history*, this amount of intimacy is nothing, right?" he said. His words were hinting at something that I didn't like at all. He then turned to Austin, probably to get him to agree with him.

No matter how dense of a person I was, there was no way I could miss the innuendo in his tone. Something had clearly happened between Austin and Levi and the past, and from the looks of what was currently happening in front of me, Levi was keen for a trip down memory lane.

Like hell I would let that happen. Not on my watch.

Austin's eyes widened so big that they were almost circles, but he didn't say anything. Noticing this, Levi pulled Austin even closer to him and prompted again, "Right?"

I glared so hard at him that Levi probably felt the heat of my gaze, but he merely glanced at me before turning back to face Austin.

"Austin," I said in a low tone that almost came out as a growl. Austin nearly jumped when he saw my expression, then quickly nudged Levi, telling him to cut it out. However, it was too late. I'd already heard more than enough.

"I don't care what you did with him in the past, but remember ___"

"Who says what we had was just in the past?" Levi cut me off and shot Austin a flirtatious wink.

This time, I couldn't suppress the growl of irritation that had been brewing since his earlier comments. I wasn't a caveman who growled and grunted at people when I was angry. I knew how to use my words, but there was no way I was capable of articulating anything through my current jealousy and rage.

I didn't want to show Austin my bad side, especially when I wanted to show him that I was the one who was meant for him. Growling at people certainly wasn't going to win me any points on that front.

So before I completely lost control of my temper, I shot up from my seat and excused myself.

Austin shouted at my back, telling me to wait, but I couldn't. The pub suddenly felt too tiny, and I couldn't stay seated, watching them flirt right in front of me. I had to leave before I said something I regretted and lost Austin forever.

TWENTY-THREE

JIM

The biting evening breeze hitting my face did wonders for cooling my hot head. I took in a deep lungful of breath, trying to freeze the anger that had welled up inside me.

It didn't take long for the frigid December wind to remind me that I'd run out without my coat, which was stupid of me considering we were in the middle of winter. As if to mock me for my foolishness, a snowflake landed on my nose. The weather had apparently decided that *now* was the best time to start snowing.

Grumbling, I turned to head back inside with my tail between my legs when the pub's door slammed open and Austin appeared with something in his hands, which I realized was the coat I'd forgotten inside.

He looked around the parking lot, and when he spotted me, he ran over. "Jim, you're going to freeze out here," he said, his voice full of concern. He rushed forward and held out my jacket, helping me put it on.

Shit, how was this man so good?

He was worried about me and taking care of me, even when I was acting like an asshole. I deflated, and all the anger disappeared from inside of me.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, giving him my best puppy dog eyes. I wasn't above acting pitiful if it meant that Austin would forgive me for my behavior.

He laughed, which was a good sign, right? He didn't look too mad either.

“There’s nothing to apologize for. Levi was just teasing, so don’t take his words to heart. Besides, I promised you that we wouldn’t see anyone else while we’re in this...whatever this is...”

His shoulders slumped for a second, but he perked back up almost immediately. I questioned if I’d imagined the hint of sadness in his expression.

“Anyway, we should get inside. It’s freezing out here.” Austin reached out his hands to cup my cheeks. “Shit, your face is ice cold. Let’s talk inside.” Before he could pull away, I placed my hands over his, locking him in place.

The women I’d dated in the past were all a lot shorter than me. I’d never minded, but after things started with Austin, I learned that there were many advantages to being with someone only a few inches shorter than me.

For one, we were the perfect height for doing the sixty-nine, and I’d come to learn that after *many* practice sessions with Austin.

For another, it made kissing him easier. I didn’t have to bend so far down that I had to strain my neck every time the urge to kiss my partner came. Like now, for instance.

I wasn’t going to deny what I wanted, so I leaned forward to steal a sweet kiss from him. Austin’s eyes widened in shock, but his eyes closed when our lips met. This was what I’d been looking for my entire life, and probably the reason why none of my past relationships ever worked out.

The kiss brought up a familiar feeling that I’d always sensed when I was with Austin.

This was *home*.

He was home.

This was exactly where I was supposed to be, where I needed to be. And once I’d had a taste of this, how was I supposed to let it go?

Austin sank into the kiss, almost slumping against me as his legs went soft, but he pulled back before I could get him in my

embrace. His cheeks were pink under the dim moonlight, making him look like a shy maiden that had never been kissed before.

I smirked at that imagery.

“What if someone sees?” Austin said in a hushed tone. He looked left and right and only after making sure there was no one else in the parking lot did he let out a sigh of relief.

He tried to pull back, but I grabbed his hand and held him in place. “Would that be so bad?” I asked as I looked at him with determination. Austin deserved only the best, and while I tried to prove to him how right our match was, I had to make sure that no one else tried anything with him.

I couldn’t give people like Jared or even Levi a chance to slip through to his heart before I’d successfully captured it.

Austin looked at me with confusion. “Would what be so bad?”

I flipped my hand to hold his palm and brought it up to my lips for a kiss. He watched me with what looked like nerves, but he didn’t stop me either. The blush that had colored his cheeks turned brighter as he stared intently where I’d kissed him on the back of his hand.

“Can I make an amendment to our arrangement?” I asked in a soft voice like I was scared of frightening him off.

The worry was back in his eyes. “What is it?”

“What if we don’t hide this from the others?”

His eyebrows raised in shock before furrowing. “This? You mean *us*?”

I nodded and threaded our fingers together and let our hands hang by our side. “Didn’t we agree to be boyfriends?” I asked, knowing perfectly well that I was leaving out a keyword.

Austin noticed as well and opened his mouth to speak. “Boyfriends for the holidays. After that—”

“Since you promised to spend the holidays with me, I’m assuming that means that includes being partners for the last

dance as well?" I asked, purposely cutting him off before he could even hint at us ending.

Austin was quiet for a minute, probably lost in thought, but he finally nodded. His agreement had my heart beating double time. Now I had to hope that he went along with the rest of my plan.

"If that's the case, aren't they going to see us together eventually anyway? What's the difference if they see us together earlier?" I tried to stick with logic so that he couldn't overthink this.

Austin pondered my words for a second, then said, "But it's not like the town doesn't know we're always together. Why should it matter if they know that we're together in *that* way?" he asked.

Fuck. He had a point, but it wasn't like I could tell him that I was jealous of seeing bugs flying around him, trying to take what was mine. I wanted to claim him in front of the entire town so that they'd know to back off.

If I'd said all that, I'd no doubt scare him senseless. So instead, I turned my charm to the max. "What? You don't want to be seen out in town with this old grandpa?" I teased, repeating the words he'd said to me when I asked him if I looked old months ago.

He rolled his eyes and used his free hand to push my chest, but I locked his hand against my body, so that he couldn't escape.

"If people see us and think we're...we're..."

"Boyfriends," I supplied when I saw him struggling to come up with words.

I couldn't suppress the smile that bloomed from those words. Being boyfriends with Austin sounded perfect, like it was exactly how it was supposed to be.

Austin and me. Together.

"Word spreads like wildfire in his town. *Everyone* would know, including our families. What are we going to tell

them?” Austin said. I didn’t hear any rejection in his voice, which meant I’d already won this battle.

“Don’t worry and let me take care of them,” I said, already planning to recruit Gemma to help me.

Now that I thought about it, Gemma had always been eager to talk to me about Austin, and most of the time, it felt like she was talking her brother up to me, not that he needed that. I already knew what an amazing person Austin was, which was why I hadn’t thought anything of it and had enjoyed hearing Gemma talk about him.

She had to have known something.

I groaned internally, thinking about how a seventeen-year-old was more in touch with my feelings than even I was. And not only her, but my mother too—and even my coworkers at the farm and their cryptic words.

That had me wondering if maybe the entire town knew that Austin and I were meant to be together, and the two of us were the last ones to realize it.

God, I hoped not. I didn’t want to be labeled the densest person in this entire town.

TWENTY-FOUR

AUSTIN

Jim sounded so sure that he could handle the questions and confusion from our families once they found out about us. Since he was so confident, I decided to believe him and let him take care of the aftermath.

It wasn't like I was going to say no to his proposal when it was exactly what I wanted. I had no clue why he'd suddenly brought this up, but I wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Neither of us were keen on staying at the pub any longer, which was just as well, since we both had to work early in the morning. We went back inside to say our goodbyes to Levi. He'd shot me a smug grin when he saw us holding hands. I flicked him off behind Jim's back, which had only earned me a loud laugh from him.

Jim turned around at the sound and looked back between me and Levi. His face looked scrunched like he'd bitten a sour lemon, and he looked—dare I hope?—jealous.

He tugged my hand as he pulled me through the crowd to the exit of the pub. I could almost feel the gaze of the locals as they zoned in on our connected hands. I was sure the town would be filled with exaggerated gossip by the morning.

We strode out of the pub. Jim's head was held high, looking like he wasn't affected by any of them. Meanwhile, I stared at his back and tried to pretend that the pub was filled with tourists without a single local out tonight.

To say that I was relieved when we stepped out into the cool night was an understatement. I let out a sigh so loud that Jim looked back at me with a raised brow.

The snow was coming down harder now, with the flurries blowing around us and quickly covering Jim's hair in a layer of white. I always teased Jim about being a grandpa, but he didn't actually look *that* old, older than me perhaps, but that was expected when I was still mistaken as under the legal drinking age at bars outside of town.

The snowflakes painting his hair white, and I could imagine what he would look like when we were my grandparents' age. His wrinkles would deepen and add more character to his already handsome face. Even in our old age, there wouldn't be a shortage of people trying to flirt with him, but none of them mattered, because in the end, the one by his side would be me.

That thought put a huge smile on my face as I brushed the snow off his hair, effectively ending the warm scene in my head. Jim smiled and did the same for me before pulling me to his car.

He held my hand the entire ride home. Even if the drive was only a few minutes, I wondered what was going through his head, but never worked up the nerve to ask. My palms started to sweat from nerves, but he didn't seem to mind and kept his hand clasped in mine.

As soon as the door of our apartment closed, Jim was on me, caging me against the wall and greedily attacking my mouth until it was bruised from his kisses. We tore at each other's clothes until both of us were in our birthday suits and aching hard with need. Fire burned behind Jim's eyes as he looked at me, causing me to burn until all the cold from the snow had dissipated.

I yelped when Jim slid his hands under my thighs and hoisted me up while maneuvering my legs around his waist. He held me tight, like I was a treasure that he'd found, and sprinted to his room to hide it.

My laughter rang out in his room as I flopped onto the bed, but it quickly turned into a deep moan as he went down on me.

His tongue worked the head of my dick and his fingers worked in tandem to loosen me up to take him.

It didn't take long until I was crying and begging him to hurry up, but he didn't heed my words, taking his time until I was a writhing mess, unable to form coherent words.

Only then did he finally pull off and lube up his bare dick. He locked his eyes on mine, watching me as he slowly slid inside. I tried to move my hips, needing him to hurry the fuck up, but he held me down. He took his time, and an eternity later, he'd finally filled me to the brim.

We both let out contented sighs, and the tenderness in Jim's eyes almost had my heart bursting. He brought his mouth to mine and kissed me as his hips started at a slow, but sensual pace.

Sex was usually intense with him—like exploding fireworks—but this time, it didn't seem like Jim was in any kind of rush. Unlike me.

“Hurry,” I begged, wanting to reach the release that he'd been teasing me with for who knew how long, but he didn't listen to my pleas.

He captured my hands over my head and continued to take his time. His mouth sprinkled kisses to every piece of skin he could reach, like he was trying to shower my entire body with love.

The little nugget of hope bloomed inside my heart at his actions, drowning me even further in my desperation. I captured his mouth with mine and channeled all the pent-up emotions that I didn't dare voice aloud.

The entire act was full of tenderness, and even after we'd both reached our release, Jim still treated me like I was something precious. He guided me into the shower and helped me clean his cum from my ass.

After we washed up, he carefully dried me, tucked me in bed, and pulled me into his arms for the night. I drifted off to sleep feeling like I was floating at the top of the world.

The rest of the week passed in a blur of endless work. Jim was busy at the farm taking care of the countless tourists that visited as well as helping with the yearly ice sculpture contest the farm hosted.

Meanwhile, I couldn't even catch my breath with how many taxi rides I was giving each day. The increased business was good for my wallet, but it took a toll on my body, especially my poor butt.

Even after a tiring day at the farm, Jim still had the energy to ravage me every night until my waist was aching and my ass sore. And having to sit all day long didn't help matters. Not that I was complaining. I enjoyed every second of being Jim's feast.

Saturday morning, I expected to sleep in after a long, tiring week, but Jim woke me up by peppering my entire face with kisses. The sensation started in my dreams, and I thought that was all it was, but when it didn't go away, I slowly came to consciousness.

"What are you doing?" I asked. Laughing, I tried to push his face away, but his attacks didn't stop. Eventually, the kisses turned into a tickle battle that had me squirming and laughing until I couldn't catch my breath.

"Good! You're awake," Jim said after plopping one last kiss on my cheek. "C'mon, we got plans today."

I checked the time on my phone and saw that it was only seven in the morning. Jim usually got up early for work, but that didn't mean I was an early bird as well. Worms weren't my thing anyway.

"The sun isn't even up yet," I grumbled and tried to pull the blanket over my head.

"Oh, no you don't," he said and pulled the only barrier between me and the start of the day off of me. I groaned my

protest, which only had Jim pulling me up to my feet. “C’mon, I have a whole day planned for us. I promise you’ll like it.”

“Does it have to be this early though?” I complained.

Jim pecked me on the nose, then pushed me into the bathroom. It was only then that I noticed Jim was already dressed in his “going out” jeans and a brand new dress shirt that I hadn’t seen before, which meant he was serious.

“Breakfast will be ready in a minute,” Jim called before leaving me to wash up in the bathroom.

I scrambled to think what day it was and if there was anything special about it, because Jim cooked, and he only cooked on very rare occasions, like when I was sick or feeling down.

Usually I cooked, or he’d order takeout for us. Breakfast was ready when I entered the kitchen. Jim was wearing my apron as he plated the rest of the food.

“Okay, what’s the special occasion?” I asked with suspicion. “Did you do something wrong?”

He placed the empty pan in the sink, then sat on his side of the table. “Can’t I do something nice for my boyfriend?” he said in a teasing tone.

I knew *boyfriend* was the title we’d agreed on for the holidays, and only for the holidays, but I couldn’t stop my foolish heart from skipping its happy beat. We ate breakfast mostly in silence, with Jim glancing at me with a strange smile every so often. I cast him questioning looks, which only made his smile grow wider.

“Did you bump your head in your sleep last night?” I asked as we cleaned up after dinner. Jim was scrubbing the pan he used to cook. Of course, he’d somehow burnt the pan while cooking bacon.

He chuckled as he scrubbed off the last of the pieces that were stuck on the bottom of the pan. “The only thing I bumped last night was my dick into your ass,” he said as he thrust his hips into the air.

I rolled my eyes at his vulgar words but felt my cheeks heat. I grumbled under my breath about how he didn't have to phrase it like that. Jim laughed and pressed a quick kiss on my hot cheeks. "Don't worry, nobody's gone and switched out your man. I just wanted to have a nice day out in town with you."

That had stunned me into silence.

Jim wants to go on a date with me.

I battled internally between being ecstatic and panicked. Going on a date—and a first date at that—sounded like the perfect way to spend the day, but going into town meant that we wouldn't be able to keep our relationship on the down-low anymore.

I heard some gossip after the night in town, but fortunately my parents either didn't hear the rumors or didn't believe them and hadn't questioned me. But there would be no denying anything if we went on this date.

"You don't want to?" Probably seeing that I didn't reply, Jim glanced over with a look full of expectation. He looked so excited about today, so what could I do but agree?

TWENTY-FIVE

AUSTIN

Jim drove us to Main Street. Every year around this time, it was bustling with people exploring our little town and enjoying the events we hosted all hours of the day.

The place was already crowded even despite it being so early in the morning. If Jim hadn't insisted on a date today, I would be driving around the streets, looking for fares. December weekends were the best time to make extra cash in Wintertown, but money was worth nothing compared to a date with Jim.

We parked on a less busy street about a five minute walk from the main square. Jim walked around to my side of the car and took my hand as soon as I got out.

As we entered the more crowded area, my eyes darted from side-to-side. I couldn't stop thinking about who would see us. It was normal for Jim and me to be seen around town together but never holding hands. We were close but not *that* close.

Jim must have seen my anxious look since he squeezed my hand and said, "Relax. Everything is going to be fine. Trust me."

I did trust Jim, so I tried to let go of the worry and enjoy the moment, but when we entered the main area and I spotted our town's worst gossip watching us from the stall he'd set up on the main square, I tensed up. His sharp eyes flickered between the two of us before moving down to our connected hands.

We were walking in the old man's direction, and I tried to pull Jim's hand to head somewhere else, but he didn't budge. We

walked into the main square and passed by Old Man Red's stall.

I braced myself for the questions that a huge gossip like him would crave the answers to. Instead, Old Man Red smiled so widely it only deepened the wrinkles on his face. "Good morning, boys. Nice weather we're having today."

Jim beamed back at him and turned up his charm. "It is, and looks like business has been going well too."

Old Man Red had lived in town since long before anyone could remember. Nobody really knew where the nickname came from, but everyone in town called him Old Man Red. For a man whose favorite pastime was spreading secrets, he sure had a shit ton of secrets himself.

During the holiday season, he lured poor, unsuspecting souls with our town's legend and sold them ridiculously priced trinkets featuring our town's famous Doves. Kingsley told me Ethan had also been one of his victims.

Looking at his half-empty table, it seemed that he had done well for himself today. Old Man Red shot us a toothy grin. "The Doves of Destiny basically sell themselves. This old man is just spreading their blessings."

I grinned. He had a way with words, but I was sure spreading blessings wasn't his only goal for selling his wares. Jim was so much better at social settings than I was and was composed as he complimented the man. "I'm sure your enchanting retelling of our town's legend also had something to do with it."

Old Man Red let out a full-bellied laugh and clapped Jim on the shoulder. "You're one smooth talker. I can see why the women love you," he commented.

I frowned. I didn't want to be reminded that Jim was straight and popular with women when this was supposed to be my day with him.

Jim lifted our locked fingers to show the older man. "If you'll excuse us, we're on a date," he said with a wink.

"Good, good! Youngsters should enjoy themselves," he said with a glint in his eyes.

We said our goodbyes and walked deeper into the square. “Are you sure it was wise to tell him this is a date?” I asked once we were out of earshot.

Jim’s steps didn’t falter as he brought me to the other side of the main square. “It’s fine,” he casually said before pointing up at the large Christmas tree that sat in the middle of the square.

The square was built around the Christmas tree that stood taller than any of the buildings on Main Street. Every year, they would decorate the tree with lights and ornaments. And, of course, the Doves of Destiny sat at the top, watching over the entire town.

I followed Jim’s finger to a pair of ornaments that were nestled together on one of the lower branches. They looked vaguely familiar, so I walked forward to take a closer look.

“Wait, are these...?” I asked as I studied the balls hanging on the tree. A faint memory surfaced in my mind.

It was a tradition of sorts for our town’s residents to contribute something to the tree, as a way to get the Doves’ blessing for another year. Jim and I usually bought something from a small business as our contribution, and we did the same this year as well. Or so I’d thought.

I looked at the painted ornaments that clearly weren’t the ones I remembered buying. During our junior year of high school, our art class decided it was a great idea to make handmade ones. I vaguely recalled painting mine to look like a snowman, but a kid had bumped into me after class and made me drop it.

The ornament shattered, but thankfully, nobody was hurt. I was a bit sad to see all my hard work going to waste, and that night, Jim surprised me with supplies to make new ones.

We’d made a night of it and had each painted a new snowman ornament that we used to decorate the giant Christmas tree that year. It had been a long time since I’d thought about them and didn’t remember what had even happened to them, but here they were.

“Yep! I found them in the back of the closet in Mom’s house. Thought we could maybe get double the blessing this year,” he said with a cheeky grin.

“I can’t believe I’m seeing them again,” I mused as I continued to look at them. We’d been fooling around while painting the glass, and Jim had accidentally gotten a spot of red paint on the bottom of my snowman. He’d laughed and said now he could always find my ornament from the red mole on its bum.

I smiled as the long ago memories played like an old VHS tape. The memory was fuzzy but still warming nevertheless.

“We have Mom’s hoarding tendencies to thank for that. She probably kept all the trinkets from when I was a kid, says ‘they’re memories’,” he said with mock exasperation, but I could still hear the affection in his voice. He loved his mom, and that was just another thing that made him even more endearing.

We walked around the tree for a bit, looking at all the different ornaments our fellow townsfolk had contributed. Jim pointed out the professional, clear glass ornaments with dried flowers inside that were Edna’s new project. She grew her own flowers to make crafts and sell online, and she was very skilled in her craft.

After about an hour of walking around the main square and checking out the stalls and their wares, Jim led me to a little alleyway that was tucked behind Main Street, where we used to hang out and chat when we wanted to be alone.

Yes, scary movies would advise people to *not* hang out in alleyways, but we were young and our little town had basically no major crime. It was the perfect place to get away from the crowd while still being able to people watch.

We used to sit here for hours talking about everything and anything. During our senior year, this was also the place Jim told me he didn’t plan to go to college and wanted to work at Snowfield Farm instead.

Sitting here now at twenty-eight, it really put into perspective how young and naive we were back then. And those two foolish teens had now become foolish adults, still trying to figure out life.

Next, he brought me to the fanciest restaurant in town. The waiter led us to a seat in the back by the windows that I realized was the same table as the last time we'd come here for Jim's twenty-first birthday.

Neither of us were the type of people who enjoyed fine dining—good food was delicious regardless of price point—but I'd saved to take him here for his twenty-first birthday. He was about half a year younger than me, so it was the first time we drank together in public.

We'd gotten drunk on red wine that was much too expensive and filled up on steak that cost an arm and a leg despite the portion being smaller than my fist, but we'd still enjoyed our time with good conversation and so much laughing that the other patrons had given us dirty looks.

Now that we were finally eating at the same place seven years later, not much had changed. The wine was still ridiculously priced and the steak portion seemed even smaller than it had back then. Jim joked that my steaks were better than the pigeon food they served us, which made me laugh a bit too loudly for this establishment.

Jim had insisted on paying for lunch despite me trying to persuade him to split the giant bill, but he wasn't having any of it. He quickly paid and dragged me off to the next activity he'd planned for us.

We walked around the park where we'd watched countless movies on the lawn, got dessert at the bakery we'd frequented, and stopped by the coffee shop I used to study at for my online college courses. Back then, Jim would sit with me to keep me company when he was free, even though he wasn't attending college.

The small town I'd lived in my entire life was filled with countless memories of Jim and I from the past ten years. Not much had changed, but at the same time, nothing felt the same

either. We'd aged and grown into adults with completely different mindsets and thoughts than our younger selves.

The one consistent through it all was Jim, the strong pillar of strength that always stayed by my side. Even before we'd started this "situationship", he had always been the person I came back to.

He was the rock that had stayed my safe place throughout all the years of change and growth.

We spent the entire day in town like Jim had planned, and we'd passed countless familiar faces. There were no strange looks pointed at Jim and me holding hands and nobody even commented when Jim snuck a kiss on my cheek in the middle of the square.

Everything was business as usual. So much so that I almost believed that this wasn't the same curious town that I'd been born in. I thought there would be dozens of questions to fill their gossip-hungry minds, but the townspeople merely greeted us, making small talk about the weather or how their business was going.

Jim was full of smiles all day, which only got brighter with each person that greeted us. I had a suspicious feeling that he was somehow involved in how strange they were all acting today.

As darkness fell onto the town, Main Street was still brightly lit from all the lights that were strung around the Christmas tree and the square. Even though this was a familiar scene that I'd experienced every year, it never stopped feeling magical.

We weren't the only couple that stood around the large Christmas tree, admiring the bright twinkling lights that chased away the darkness.

Jim tugged on my hand a few minutes later to get my attention. The reds and greens of the lights shone in his eyes as he looked straight at me. "C'mon, we have one last stop for dinner," Jim said.

"There's still more planned?" I asked with surprise. We'd already spent the entire day hanging around town. Now that it

was dark, I figured it was time to head home.

“Just one last stop. A proper date can’t end without dinner,” he said with a wink. My stomach fluttered with a deep ache of hope. I didn’t know what he was playing at with this date, but to have a taste of what it would be like to be in a relationship with Jim only made my longing deeper. I wished this was what life with Jim was like every day.

He led me to the horse-drawn carriage that gave rides around town and to some of the events. Instead of getting in line for a ride, Jim walked off to the side where a lone horse driver was waiting. Jim shook hands with the man before helping me on.

“Did you make a reservation or something?” I asked. I didn’t know they had those.

“Or something,” Jim replied with a mysterious grin. He typed something on his phone, but when I tried to grill him on what he was up to, he insisted it was a surprise.

The horse turned toward the direction of the farm, so I figured we were going to check out the ice sculpture contest, but when the driver guided the horse around to the back of the farm, off from the main area, I had questions.

There wasn’t anything back in this direction besides a wide field, and during this time of the year, the field was covered in a thick layer of snow.

It was a beautiful sight under the bright sun, but we wouldn’t be able to see anything in the dark. In fact, there was nothing but darkness around us now, and the lantern hanging from the carriage was the only light source nearby.

I shot Jim a questioning look, but he smiled and gripped my hand tighter. “We’re almost there.”

As he finished his sentence, the horse turned a corner, heading behind the trees to where the empty field was. What I wasn’t expecting to see was a field of twinkling stars on the ground with a picnic blanket in the middle.

I stepped off the carriage in a daze and took in everything in front of me. “Wow, what is all this?” I asked Jim when he came up beside me.

“Surprise! I bet you weren’t expecting this, huh?” he said. When I looked at him, there was a smug expression on his face.

“I really was not. How did you even set this up?” I asked, taking a step closer to the picnic blanket. The entire ground was covered in snow, a blank canvas that only served to make the twinkling lights shine brighter, as if they were real stars.

“I found battery-powered fairy lights and Alice and Trish helped me set it up while we were on our date,” Jim said and followed me to sit on the picnic blanket.

Despite the ground being covered in snow, the blanket felt warm, like someone had just taken it out of the dryer. I wondered if Jim had been messaging Alice and Trish before we got onto the horse carriage.

“You hungry?” Jim asked as he opened the picnic basket and pulled out a large thermos and some cups. He poured me a cup of soup and placed a steaming loaf of bread on a plate between us.

“Sorry, it’s not much. I couldn’t think of what other foods would keep us warm,” he said with a bashful smile.

“No, this is perfect,” I said, still dazzled by the magical lights and how much effort Jim had put into this surprise. “I still can’t believe you did all of this. For me.”

Nobody had put in this much effort for me before. Things like this only happened in fairy tales, not in real life, and especially not to *me*.

“It’s nothing less than you deserve,” Jim said softly. His eyes were earnest as he looked at me like he fully believed his words.

I felt tears prickling in the corner of my eyes, not only for the thoughtful act, but because of the surge of emotions this man pulled from me. He was everything I wanted and treated me like I was something precious.

This was the perfect ending to a perfect day, and I wanted countless more days like this.

I was resigned to the fact that I would never have this amazing man for myself, but really, I'd given up before I'd even tried. And regardless of what the end result was, Jim was worth fighting for.

I'd never get my happy ending if I never started my story to begin with, so maybe it was time to change that and put in the fight that Jim deserved.

TWENTY-SIX

JIM

“It’s great to see you two again,” I said, pulling the younger men into hugs. Ethan and Kingsley looked a little worn-out from the flight, but they had happy smiles on their faces.

Austin went in for hugs after I pulled away. “You two look tired. Let’s get you to the B&B,” he said, helping Ethan put his suitcase in the covered cargo bed of my truck. Austin didn’t want them to feel bad about offering a free ride, so he thought it was better not to take his taxi.

“I’m just glad we made it before all the events finished. We thought the weather wasn’t going to cooperate, and we’d have to make another emergency landing,” Ethan said. Kingsley wrapped an arm around his waist and pulled him close.

“And get stranded in another middle of nowhere town?” Kingsley teased, causing Ethan to roll his eyes. Kingsley plopped a loud smooch on Ethan’s cheek before helping him inside the back of the truck.

I smiled as I watched them. They looked so happy, even after a year of being together. Not all relationships lasted, with my previous track record and my mom’s failed marriage being proof, but something told me that their relationship would be one that lasted the test of time.

My gaze moved to Austin, who was walking to the passenger side door. Noticing that I hadn’t gone to the driver’s side yet, he turned his head and raised a brow in question. Shaking my head, I walked up to him and quickly pressed a kiss on his cheek before he could avoid it.

“What are you doing!” he hissed out while trying to slap me away. His eyes flicked to the back window, where Kingsley and Ethan were sitting.

“I’m giving my boyfriend a kiss. Didn’t they also do the same?” I said with a laugh and walked to the driver’s side of the truck.

Austin grumbled something under his breath, but I was already getting in the car and couldn’t hear him.

I knew without a single doubt that Austin and I would also stand the test of time. Five, ten, even fifty years in the future, it would still be the two of us.

“So, you two finally got together, huh?” Ethan commented when Austin sat down and shut the door. I assumed he’d seen us through the window. I turned to Austin and grabbed his hand.

“Yep, I’m the luckiest man in the world for him to want to be with someone like me,” I said.

Austin watched me with a curious look, like he was trying to see the sincerity of my words. I shot him a toothy grin. Soon, I’d prove to him that I meant every single one of my words.

“Hey, that’s my title!” Kingsley piped up from the back, causing Ethan to snicker. I laughed and threaded my fingers with Austin’s as I pulled out of the airport. Austin didn’t fight me and let me hold his hand hostage, for which I was a bit surprised, but I certainly wasn’t going to complain.

“I’m glad it all worked out,” Ethan said, clapping Austin on the shoulder.

With my eyes still focused on the road, I saw Austin look to the back out of the corner of my eye. He paused like they were sharing a secret look before saying, “Yeah, it will all work out.”

I tried not to overthink the tone of his voice, but it sounded like he was trying to convince himself of something. It wasn’t a convenient time to ask him since there were others here right now, but my thoughts kept turning back to it.

It reminded me of the date we went on last weekend. I'd planned an entire day for Austin. I even made sure that all the town's gossips didn't bother Austin with any questions until the last dance, telling them I wanted to give him a huge surprise.

I had my doubts when I asked them to spread the news, but to my delight, the gossips kept their mouths shut and their curious eyes from wandering, at least while in our line of sight.

Austin had been pleasantly surprised by the day I had planned as we reminisced, visiting spots that held memories for us throughout the years. He'd seemed to enjoy himself for the most part, and even looked touched by the field of lights I'd planned as the main event, but at times, a strange, weary expression appeared on his face when he looked at me and he'd sound more uncertain than he usually did.

I wanted to sit him down and beg him to spill everything that was on his mind, but honestly, I was a bit afraid. What if he decided to call this thing off early? Before I could even relay how much I loved him? How much I wanted to grow old with him, like the famous couple that had founded our town?

So I'd kept my mouth shut until now and tried every day to convey my love for him. It was only a few more days until our annual last dance, and I had a plan. I'd even taken that day off from work to make sure it would go smoothly.

My fingers gripped the steering wheel tightly as I thought of the big day. I was nervous that he'd reject me, but also hopeful that he wouldn't. If it all went well, then I'd go home with Austin as my boyfriend. For real this time.

I focused on the words Austin had said.

It will all work out.

The rest of the ride went by quickly as we caught up on what had happened in the past year. Ethan could barely keep his

eyes open by the time we arrived at the B&B, and Kingsley basically had to carry him out of the truck.

After rejecting our offer to help them get the suitcases inside, they thanked us for the ride and promised to treat us to dinner when we were free before heading inside.

Austin and I returned to the truck and made the quick drive home. He was quiet for the entire ride and even as we washed up for the night. Whenever I tried to ask him about it, he seemed to be in a daze and not really hear me.

I figured he had a lot on his mind or wanted some space—which I wasn't happy about but respected—so I didn't push and returned to my room for bed. We'd been sleeping together almost every night, so the bed felt colder and emptier than usual.

As I was about to resign myself to depressingly sleeping alone, the door creaked open. I lay still with my eyes closed, pretending to be asleep in case I scared him off or something.

The bed dipped as he crawled under the blanket and scooted up behind me. He flung his arm around my bare waist. I wanted to bring our hands together so badly, but I was supposed to be sleeping right now.

Austin's hot breath tickled the back of my neck. He pressed his soft lips on the nape, and I forced myself not to shiver under his touch.

"I know you're awake," he said, taking a hard bite of the spot he'd just kissed.

I hissed in pain and flipped over to face him. Austin chuckled at the pitiful expression I was giving him, then pressed a kiss to my lips. He could do whatever he wanted if he kept kissing me like that.

"How'd you know I was pretending?" I asked once he pulled back and made himself comfortable on the pillow, lying on his side to face me.

"You snore in your sleep," he replied.

I gasped with indignation. "I do not! You take that back!"

He laughed hard, and I tackled him, making him fall on his back with me looming over him. I tickled all his sensitive spots until he was gasping for air and calling “uncle.”

With one last taste of his sweet lips, I rolled us back to our sides and pulled him into me. “Goodnight.”

“Night,” Austin said, sighing contently in my arms and falling asleep.

The next morning was a rush of breakfast and leaving for work. I barely had a chance to kiss Austin goodbye before having to rush out the door. Tomorrow was the last Saturday before Christmas, meaning there would be a huge party, as well as the last dance that was always popular with couples.

Most years, I didn’t bother with the party, but this year was different. I had someone I wanted to share the dance with. I wanted the Doves to bless us. For that to happen, I needed to work extra hard so the farm wasn’t short staffed while I was away.

Trish was smug when I asked for the day off and was forced to tell her exactly why I needed it time. She had a good “I knew it” moment before Alice interrupted her and graciously approved my request.

I barely had time to think today as I ran around doing last-minute prep so that the farm would be all set for tomorrow. The farm was always busy on the last weekend of the festivities, and I was already feeling bad about leaving them to handle it themselves, so I made sure to do everything that could be done beforehand.

It was past dinnertime by the time I finished, but the others had waited for me. I quickly went home to shower and met them at the restaurant. Austin’s eyes lit up when he saw me, and he was halfway out of his seat by the time I reached the table.

I pulled him into a hug and pressed a quick kiss on his hot cheek. He peeked at the two younger men but wasn't as resistant to showing affection in front of them as he had been last night.

Kingsley and Ethan also stood to give me a quick hug. We sat down and ordered our dinner before chatting about our day. Austin and I had to work, but our two visitors had done the whole tourist thing of visiting all the sights and enjoying the events.

Kingsley teased Ethan about once again being tricked by Old Man Red into buying a handful of Dove trinkets that he didn't need. Ethan pouted, which only made all of us burst into laughter.

The dinner passed enjoyably with endless conversation, tons of laughter, and the best company.

I wanted more of this. More double dates and nights out with Austin as we enjoyed ourselves, because honestly, it didn't matter what we did. Everything was fun as long as I was with him.

If I had my way, this is how it would be for the rest of our lives.

TWENTY-SEVEN

AUSTIN

I was up bright and early Saturday morning, not because I needed to work, but because of the anxiety that had followed me through dinner and the rest of the night.

After the thoughtful date Jim had prepared for me, I knew it was time to stop the excuses and fight like hell to win Jim's heart. The problem was I'd come up blank on *how* I should actually go about doing that.

I could cook him his favorite meals, but I was already doing that on a daily basis. Maybe take the lead in bed and profess my love while he comes, but that didn't seem very romantic. Buy him flowers or a ring, perhaps?

The problem had haunted me all week and now time had run out. Today was the promised final day of our arrangement, and I still didn't know how to convince Jim that us being together was a good idea, the best idea.

"What are you doing?" Jim's voice stopped me in my tracks. I slowly turned around to find him leaning against the doorframe, watching me with amusement.

He was shirtless, revealing his hairy chest and defined abs. The stimulation to my already fried brain almost had me drooling.

Jim stalked toward me. His muscles rippled with every move, mesmerizing me. He stopped in front of me and brought his hand up. I thought he wanted to guide my head closer for a kiss, so I closed my eyes and waited for his lips. Instead, I felt his thumb swipe over the corner of my lips.

“Are you still half-asleep?” he asked with a chuckle.

My eyes popped open when I realized that I *had* drooled from ogling him. I scrambled away and turned my back to him in embarrassment as I quickly rubbed the back of my hand over my mouth.

This definitely wasn't the way to his heart.

Jim plastered his chest against my back and pulled me in a hug. He rested his chin on my shoulder. “Why are you awake so early, anyway? The party doesn't start until tonight. What do you say we spend the morning in bed?”

It was a tempting idea to sink in the pleasure of him, but that wouldn't solve anything. It wouldn't magically extend our time or give me an idea about how to make it happen.

“We don't want to waste the day away! Today's the last day, after all!” I said, not knowing if I meant the last day of the festival or our relationship. I hoped it was only the former.

I twisted out of his hug and scurried to the kitchen. “I'll make breakfast!”

Jim insisted on helping me in the kitchen despite fooling around more than actually helping. We eventually finished cooking and settled down to have a leisurely meal while chatting about our plans for the day.

Neither of us brought up our relationship or what it would be by the end of the night, as if we had a tacit agreement to enjoy the remainder of this time.

After we cleaned up from breakfast, we changed and headed to Main Street to join in the excitement. The main square was filled to the brim with people as they crowded by the makeshift stage on one side.

Our mayor was making a speech, thanking everyone for joining our little town for the holidays. At the end of it, he pulled a ticket from a glass container and called out a number. Loud screams ensued as someone rushed on stage and accepted the prize they won.

To my surprise, Ethan was the lucky winner. He grabbed the prize and jumped up and down on stage while waving toward everyone. I shared a smile with Jim before we made our way toward the front of the crowd. We found a free spot by the stage stairs to wait for Ethan and Kingsley, and not long after, the young man came bounding off the stage, hugging his prize like it was a treasure.

His eyes lit up when he saw us. “Hey, guys! Look, I won! This is my first time winning anything,” he said before turning to his left and waving. “Kingsley, over here!”

Our other friend wove his way through the crowd and over to us. He pulled Ethan into his arms and lifted the shorter man in a spin. Ethan laughed in his arms, his eyes squinting with joy as his boyfriend smothered his face in kisses.

Jim squeezed my hand as we watched them before turning to me. Feeling his gaze on me, I looked over and caught his eye. The smile he flashed me had the back of my spine tingling with want—and not even in a sexual way. I wanted this man always.

“What are we going to do with the present, though? Should we drop it off at the B&B?” Ethan asked when he was set back down on the solid ground.

“The B&B is out of the way. Just leave it in my truck for now. We parked a street away,” Jim said and led us back to his truck. Since we were already at the truck, we decided to check out Jim’s workplace, and to satisfy Ethan’s need to get some of the *world’s best hot chocolate*.

Jim beamed at that statement, obviously proud that his farm’s products were being complimented. The four of us walked toward the back, where most of the people were hanging out. There were small tables of food and drinks, as well as games set up in the open space.

There was a trail off to the side that led to the trail of lights they set up every year, and even though it was still bright outside, I saw countless couples heading into the trail hand-in-hand.

Ethan and Kingsley wandered off to get their hot chocolate while Jim and I went to see if the farm needed any help. Alice and Trish were standing by the cash register for the little shop where they sold local homemade products.

Trish grinned wide when she saw us holding hands while walking up to them. “Don’t you dare,” Jim warned, pointing a finger at her.

She chuckled. “What are you two lovebirds doing here anyway?” My face heated at her comment.

“Our friends insisted that they were dying for some of the world’s best hot chocolate,” Jim said in a teasing tone.

Trish let out another full-bellied laugh and wrapped an arm around Alice and pulled her close. “Damn straight. Nobody can beat my wife’s famous hot chocolate recipe.”

Alice rolled her eyes, feigning annoyance, but the tender look she sent her wife gave her away.

“Anyway, we wanted to see if you needed any help,” Jim said with a smile at their antics.

Trish released her wife and looked between Jim and me before breaking out in a smile and clapping Jim on the shoulder. “Nah, you kids go enjoy yourselves. We got it covered here,” she said and waved us off with a “*shoo*” gesture.

We said our goodbyes and left them to take care of the customers coming to pay for their items. We spent the rest of the day around the farm playing games, chatting with our friends and some of the locals, as well as enjoying time with just the two of us. We were also one of the couples who walked through the trail of lights despite it still being bright out.

By the time evening had rolled around, I’d long forgotten about the worries from this morning. I was having too much fun laughing and hanging out with people I cared about. But when it was time to return to the main square for the party, I found my mind going blank. There were only a few hours left in the day and I still hadn’t formulated a plan on how I was going to keep Jim.

The square was popping with loud live music and people already dancing around the twinkling Christmas tree. Everyone was laughing with abandon as they reveled in the night with their loved ones.

Ethan and Kingsley had already joined the crowd of dancers. Jim pulled me to follow them. I didn't know how to dance, but that didn't matter. Jim's large hands rested on my hips, pulling us close together as we swayed to the music. It was hard to think of anything else but this man when I was in his arms like this, and before I knew it, we'd danced through three songs.

The emcee announced a short break before the last dance, and my heart pounded in my chest. I followed behind the group to an empty bench. Ethan and I occupied it while the other two went to get drinks.

Ethan scooted close to my side and looked at me with stars in his eyes. He was bundled up in a thick winter coat and a red scarf, and his breath came out in cold puffs. "You two looked great out there. I'm so happy to see you and Jim together."

I offered a half-hearted smile and tried not to show the storm that was currently raging inside of me, but I failed. "What's wrong?" Ethan asked. The happiness that had lit up his face had turned into worry, making the guilt pile up inside of me even more.

"Sorry, it's nothing." I tried to bluff, but Ethan stared me down with a look that told me to spill my beans. "It's just, I love him, you know?" I said, waving to where Jim was waiting in line for drinks.

Ethan nodded in understanding. "Then what's the problem?"

The problem was that he didn't love me back. That this entire thing was a charade. It meant nothing to him...but it meant everything to me.

I couldn't tell any of this to Ethan, though. For all he knew, Jim and I were madly in love and I was overthinking everything.

"I don't know how to tell him. And what if he doesn't feel the same?" I said, rubbing a hand over my face. Laughter had me

looking up and shooting Ethan a questioning gaze.

“I don’t think you have to worry about that. I see the way he looks at you.”

Before I could ask him what his statement meant, we saw Jim and Kingsley walking back toward us. “Follow your heart and you won’t go wrong,” Ethan quickly said with a pat on my back before running up to Kingsley. I also stood to meet Jim and accepted the hot drink he handed me with a thanks.

The emcee called for all the couples to return to the dance floor just as we finished our drinks. Ethan shot me a wink as he pulled Kingsley to the dance floor. I turned to Jim with a shy smile. “Shall we go as well?”

He grinned at me, grabbed my hand, and led me to the dance area. We found a spot with relatively fewer people around. I saw my parents amongst the couples as well as who I thought were Jim’s mom and Edna swaying together off in the distance. That was a surprise that I hadn’t been expecting. I wanted to ask Jim about it, but with the slow music starting and Jim’s hands on me, I didn’t have the capacity to think about other people’s situations.

Our feet barely moved as we swayed with the music. His eyes were focused only on me. I thought back on what Ethan had said to me and wondered if it could be true. Would Jim accept my love despite me being a man?

“Austin, I want to talk about us and our—”

“Wait, can I say something first?” I asked, cutting him off before he could end our relationship and break my heart. If my heart was going to get broken anyway, then I may as well lay it all out there first.

Taking a huge breath, I readied myself to place everything on the table.

“I love you. I’ve loved you for years, and I don’t want to lose you after tonight. I want us to be together. For real this time. As a real couple. And I know you’re not into men, but I think there’s something special between us. Maybe this, *we*, could

work if we gave it a shot,” I said. The words came out in such a jumbled mess that I worried he didn’t hear me properly.

When Jim didn’t speak, I was prepared to say it all over again. I would say it a thousand times if it meant he’d agree to be with me. Instead, he chuckled.

My hands fell from his body. He could have rejected me and left me with my dignity instead of laughing at me. Humiliated, I started to turn away, but he pulled me back. “Wait. That’s not why I’m laughing.”

I grumbled and let him pull me back to my original position. He cupped my face with his hands and stared right at me with shining eyes. “I should have known you’d surprise me first.”

I stared at him in confusion. Seeing my expression, he pressed a quick kiss to my lips before pulling me to the side. “Look,” he said, pointing up at the giant Christmas tree.

My gaze slowly lifted to the bright lights and decorations that covered the tree. I didn’t know what I was looking at, but suddenly the lights on the tree flicked off, leaving only one section lit up that said: *I love you.*

Right underneath the words was a heart. I looked closer and saw that the Christmas ornaments we’d made in high school were nestled inside the heart.

Turning to Jim, I gaped at him. “Is this...for me? Did *you* do this for *me*?” I asked in disbelief. There was no way any of this was real. I must be confusing reality with my dreams again.

“Of course, I did this for you. It’s not every day I get to give the most epic love confession to my best friend,” he teased. He brought our hands together and looked at me with complete sincerity. “Austin, I want to be with you. I want us to grow old together and support each other like we do now.”

“But you’re straight,” I said in a daze, and I could almost punch myself for reminding him of that fact.

The love of my life was telling me he wanted to be with me, and here I was trying to talk him out of him.

He snorted. “I think we established I wasn’t the first time I sucked your dick,” he said.

I quickly covered his mouth and looked to see if anyone was paying attention to us. They were all looking at the tree and probably trying to figure out the secret behind it.

He pulled my hand from his lips and pressed a kiss on it. “So what do you say? Do I get upgraded from a holiday boyfriend to a full-time boyfriend?” he said with a twinkle in his eye.

I finally pulled out of my shock and beamed at him. “There’s only one answer to that,” I said before leaping into his arms and crashing our lips together. Jim hugged me tight, anchoring me in this moment and giving me a taste of what countless more moments like this in the future would be like.

The music ended when the kiss ended, but we didn’t pull apart. Our arms were still wrapped around each other as we looked around, not wanting this moment to end. I looked back at the tree to the message in the lights that conveyed Jim’s love. Above it all, at the very top of the tree, was the pair of Doves watching over this moment.

The Doves were said to bless couples with an eternity of happiness, but I didn’t need their blessing to know that Jim and I were forever.

EPILOGUE

Christmas Day

“Dear, what do you think about this dress?” Mom’s voice carried from the other room to where I sat on the couch.

“You look beautiful, Bella,” Edna replied. The love in her voice was so obvious. Loud giggling ensued as they continued to trade compliments back and forth.

I groaned and hung my head. “Lovebirds, can you two flirt later? Austin and his family are waiting for us.”

Mom walked out in a pretty red dress that was completely different from her usual style, but Edna was right. Mom did look beautiful and, more importantly, confident as she smiled brightly at her girlfriend.

Ugh. Did people my mom’s age still call their partners their girlfriend or boyfriend? That thought led down a dangerous rabbit hole of imagining what Mom and her girlfriend had been up to since the night of the last dance, and that was something I didn’t need to think about. My poor mind would be tainted.

“Alright, we’re ready. You’re so dramatic,” Mom said as she ruffled my hair as she passed by the couch. I let out another groan and stood to follow the two ladies out of the house.

Austin’s parents suggested having us over for Christmas dinner, and we’d readily agreed. Since Austin and I were best friends, our families had grown closer over the years, but we’d never had a reason to spend the holidays together. Until now...

The three of us carried out the presents we were contributing to the White Elephant gift giving, as well as the pumpkin pie Mom had insisted on making, loaded Eddie in the back seat, and made our way to Austin's parents' house. I could see Austin looking out through the front window, and my cheeks stretched at the thought that he was waiting for me.

I got out of the car as soon as I'd parked and turned off the car. Austin had seen us too and was running out the front door. I opened my arms, waiting to catch him, but Austin ran right past me.

Shocked, I turned around to find Austin on the ground playing with Eddie, telling him what a good boy he was in a high-pitched tone. I stared at him with my mouth hanging open, while Mom and Edna were standing close to each other, chuckling at my misery. I shot them a glare before turning to Austin.

"What? No welcome for your boyfriend?" I said with a pout. He looked up at me from his spot on the ground. His hand never stopped rubbing Eddie's short fur.

There was amusement in his eyes as he said, "I know my priorities." He then got up and went to the two ladies who were watching us and gave them hugs. "It's great to see you again, Bella, Edna."

Meanwhile, I narrowed my eyes at him and crossed my arms while I watched them laugh and greet each other with hugs and kisses on the cheek. It was a couple minutes later that he *finally* turned to acknowledge me.

With a teasing smile on his lips, he came up and kissed my pout away. There was no way I could stay mad at him when this was how he welcomed me. My arms involuntarily wrapped around him to pull him closer, but quickly dropped to my sides at a woman's voice.

"*Eww*, you two are worse than our parents," Gemma said from the doorway. Her nose wrinkled like she'd tasted something sour.

Austin turned to her and rolled his eyes. “Nobody said you had to watch.”

It was Gemma’s turn to roll her eyes. “Ma said to stop keeping our guests out in the cold and dinner’s about ready,” she threw over her shoulder before disappearing inside again.

Austin rubbed the back of his head and turned to the rest of us. “Should we head in?” he asked so shyly that it had me laughing and pressing a quick kiss on his cheek.

We carried our stuff inside and helped bring out the rest of the dishes to the large dining table. His parents sat at one end, my mom and Edna at the other, and Austin and I sat beside each other, with Gemma directly across from Austin.

It didn’t take long for us to start chowing down on the food. Compliments were thrown around the table as we cleaned our plates within minutes and went in for seconds.

“Your feet are in my way,” Gemma grumbled as her body swayed. A short yelp immediately followed.

“Ow!” Austin pulled back and shot a glare at his sister. “You’re heading off to college next year, so how can you still be so childish?” Austin said, which only earned him another eye roll.

“It’s okay. I know you love me deep, *deep* down inside,” Austin said with a hand to his heart. Gemma pretended to gag.

“Gemma! We have guests,” Austin’s mom admonished with a stern glare. Gemma’s expression immediately changed to one of innocence as she looked at her mom with puppy dog eyes.

The entire table burst into laughter and conversation resumed. The clatter of plates and forks rang out in the room as we continued eating the delicious food.

I looked around the table at Mom’s happy expression as Edna whispered something in her ear. They laughed and looked at each other tenderly before rejoining the conversation Austin’s Mom was having with Gemma about the college she got accepted to.

The entire room was filled with a warm atmosphere. I was surrounded by the people I loved, and the person who had my heart by my side.

Austin found my hand under the table and turned to beam a smile at me that was filled with happiness and contentedness. He was enjoying the family time as much as I was.

He quickly glanced around to make sure no one was paying attention to us before leaning in closer to me. “I love you,” he whispered.

“Even if I look like an old man?” I teased with a grin.

Austin rolled his eyes but the smile never left his face. “I think you look quite dreamy in your old age,” he said in a serious tone which had me laughing toward the ceiling.

Once I calmed out, I brought our foreheads together. The laughter and chatter from our family surrounded us, but the sounds seemed far away. The only thing that existed in this moment was Austin and all the big feelings that filled my heart for him.

“I love you too. Now and forever.” I squeezed his hand, knowing that there would be so many more moments like this in the future, filled with teasing, laughter, and, most importantly, love.

Our story was just beginning, and I was so excited to write what came next, page by page. With Austin by my side, life was a fun adventure that was only waiting to be enjoyed.

-Not ready to say goodbye to Jim and Austin? Join my [newsletter](#) to grab the bonus scene!

-If you're curious about our angel baby Felix, you can read his story in the multi-author Christmas Falls series. Check out his story in [Ready, Set, Glow!](#) Click the QR Code for a quick link.



LETTER FROM RYE

Hiya, Lovely Readers! Thank you so much for picking up this book and giving Jim and Austin a chance! This was my first time writing a situationship trope, and I absolutely loved every second of it! It was so much fun to write, so I hoped you enjoyed reading about it :)

The next book in this series is Levi's story, so make sure to sign up to my newsletter to get the latest updates. I hope to see you all next time!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rye is an M/M Romance author who is a romantic at heart. She believes that love conquers all, and that's why her stories are guaranteed to always have an HEA. When she's not writing, she escapes to the world of books or daydreams about becoming a future cat lady.



SCAN ME

