



We Could Do This

FOREVER

BOOK 1

EMERSON BECKETT

WE COULD DO THIS FOREVER

WE COULD DO THIS DUET

BOOK 1

EMERSON BECKETT



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PROLOGUE - NICK REED

FEBRUARY - EIGHT MONTHS AGO

“WHAT THE FUCK HAVE YOU DONE, MR. REED? YOU CAN’T serve that goddamn shit tonight!”

I looked down at the less-than-appetizing variety of children’s fare I’d plated for the dignitaries attending tonight’s dinner. My heart pounded in my chest as I stared at my culinary disaster. I was gonna fucking fail my final exam. I’d have to tend bar for the rest of my life. Ten years from now, I’d be living in my parents’ basement, drinking cheap beer, and playing video games with my online friends instead of traveling the world like I’d planned.

When I looked up into the dark brown eyes of my super hot culinary instructor, my dick gave a twitch. He leaned across the counter on his muscled arms and a faint hint of the cologne he wore assaulted all of my nerves. I closed my eyes to savor the woody fragrance before he scared the shit out of me when he slammed his hand down on the stainless steel counter, making me jump.

Holy fuck, what had I done? Macaroni and cheese, cut up weiner, and applesauce. That wasn’t Kobe beef on the plate.

My eyes snapped up at his harsh words. “Good to know you’re fucking prepared to work in a goddamn elementary school cafeteria. Step away from the counter and go to my office. Now.”

My eyes widened as embarrassment washed over me. I had to make some kind of excuse for my failure to cook the designated menu.

“I don’t know...”

I shut the fuck up when he once again leaned across the counter and fixed his eyes on me. His pupils were dilated and the tendons in his neck stretched up to his chiseled jaw and

gritted white teeth. “Get the fuck into my office. Right now,” he growled in a tone that sent shivers running across my body.

Nodding, I dropped my head and headed down the hallway. Stepping into his office, I stood with my head hung and my hands clasped behind my back. I’d successfully fucked up my entire life.

The hair on the back of my neck stood up to alert me when he quietly entered the room. The smell of his cologne wrapped around me like a warm blanket and did dirty things to my body. All I could do was close my eyes and wait for him to explode.

The chef closed the door and circled his desk to sit in the oversized leather chair. I couldn’t look at him because there was no fucking excuse for what I’d done. We didn’t even have a children’s menu.

“Mr. Reed.” The deeply seductive tone of his voice made me shiver.

I swallowed, still examining the tiles on the floor. “Yes, chef?” I managed to get out.

“Look at me when I speak to you. You’re not a fucking child, are you?”

I shook my head and met his gaze. “No, chef. I’m not a child.”

He studied me a little longer, holding my gaze like a snake eyes its prey. “There’s no excuse for what you’ve done tonight. You’ve completely destroyed your final exam and embarrassed me and the Culinary Institute.”

I had no idea what to say. “I don’t know what happened, chef. I guess I was confused. Is there anything I can do to make up for it?”

A low growl rumbled from what I imagined was a hairy, muscular chest. “For the dinner, no. But for me...”

His hesitation caused me to look up into the swirling brown irises that made my dick twitch when they were aimed

at me. There was something there, and I instinctively pushed down on my growing erection.

His eyes flared as he took in my hand.

“Have I made you hard, Mr. Reed?” His velvety delivery oozed over me while his eyes held me pinned in place. “Don’t lie to me, Nicholas.”

I stared into his eyes and slowly nodded my head. “Yes, chef. You do.”

A wicked smile stretched across his face. Pushing his chair back, he stood and held my gaze as he began to unbutton his chef’s whites, exposing the exact hard, muscled chest covered in dark brown hair I’d dreamed about, and abs I wanted to lick.

I watched in fascination as his hand went to the button of his pants and flicked it open. Like a moth to a flame, I watched him drag the zipper down, tooth by tooth, with every beat of my heart.

When his lower abs came into view, I whimpered at the absence of underwear and the hint of dark pubic hair slowly coming into view.

Swallowing thickly, my eyes widened and my breath hitched as his hard shaft pushed against the fabric, begging to escape from its woolen prison.

My heart pounded as he pulled his dick from his pants and began to stroke it. A single grunt drew my gaze back to his eyes. “Think you can take care of this and not fuck it up, Mr. Reed?”

“Ye-yes, chef.”

He smirked at me and sat down in his chair. Lifting his hand, he motioned for me to come to him with a combined wave of his index and middle finger.

My feet moved forward as I pressed down on my erection. Saliva pooled in my mouth as I took the last few steps around his desk.

“On your knees, Mr. Reed.” The low, husky tone made me harder.

I just might come in my pants.

“Yes, chef,” I answered, then tucked my bottom lip between my teeth to get to work. I placed my hands above his knees and lowered myself between his spread legs. When I was in place, I slid them up his thighs before stopping at his open fly. Curling my fingers around the fabric, his coarse pubic hair tickled my fingertips as I gently tugged at the fabric, making his cock bob. Eyeing him, I reached inside to free his balls, then gave them a slight tug.

His groan prompted me to look into his eyes again. The wicked smile I’d seen earlier had been replaced with a fiery lust. He trailed his index finger down my cheek to my puffy bottom lip to pull it free.

“Open for me,” he murmured. I obeyed as he slipped his index and middle finger onto my tongue. He pressed down, causing my saliva to pool.

“Suck,” he whispered. “Show me what you can do.”

I’d never been so turned on in all my life. So I closed my lips around his fingers and ran my tongue over them, memorizing the feel and taste of his skin. The heat that radiated from him warmed the chill his harsh words had left behind. I felt his cock bob, and when I glanced at it, pre-cum had pooled on the tip.

I whimpered as he removed his fingers, immediately missing them, but ready to swallow him down. I curled my hand around his thick shaft to take him into my mouth, but he wrapped his hand over mine.

“I want to see myself all over you.” With both our hands gripped around his cock, he painted my lips with his pre-cum. When they were covered, I looked up for his approval. He nodded and gave me another wicked grin.

I swallowed again, then licked my lips, savoring the taste of him. My heart hammered in my chest and all I wanted was

to please the sexiest man I'd ever had the pleasure of fucking with my mouth.

“Suck it,” he hissed, making my own cock pulse. “Suck me dry until there's no more cum left inside my balls.”

Lowering my head to his waiting dick, I tightened my hold on him as he fisted my hair. I growled as he worked my head up and down his shaft as I sucked with everything I had.

“So fucking good,” he groaned. “Take all of me. Swallow the head.”

I did as he asked, loving every second of it. My grip on his cock had my fingers aching.

“I'm gonna come so hard and fill your throat. Gonna mark you, then fuck you into next week with my giant co—”

His sexy promises were interrupted by a faint intermittent buzzing noise in the distance. Was that the fire alarm?

“Don't stop. Keep going. Take it all.”

I doubled my efforts and sucked harder while the alarm kept ringing. I couldn't disappoint him again. I had to finish the job.

When he released my hair and pounded his fist on the desk, it startled me and I sat straight up, gasping and panting for air.

Confused, I slipped my fingers from my mouth as I panted for air. My angry cock was red and leaking onto my skin.

I listened for a moment. The buzzing was familiar. It was the alarm on my phone and it must have fallen on the floor. No one was pounding on the door.

I collapsed back onto my bed and tried to catch my breath. Thoughts of the sexy man invaded my conscious mind and there was nothing left to do but finish the job.

I wrapped a hand around myself and used the sticky mess of pre-cum that, thanks to that dream, was now free-flowing down the side of my dick. It took only a couple of hard tugs

before I was coming all over myself at the thought of being on my knees for him.

“Holy fucking shit,” I moaned as rope after rope painted my chest. Covered in my release and panting, the face of Preston James imprinted itself further on my brain. I knew why the forty-five-year-old man with dark hair and perma-scruff lingered in my dreams. He was goddamn sexy and drew my attention every time he looked my way. No matter how much I tried to ignore him, all it took was one lingering glower my way to get my pulse hammering from carnal thoughts about him.

Ever since he made Alejandro’s a nightly stop six months ago, he’d found a spot in my permanent rotation of dreams. But I needed to shake this off and get my ass in the shower. I had coursework to do before going to work tonight, which meant I had no time to savor the memories of him. And no time for bed hopping with anyone.

* * *

“YOU DON’T LOOK SO GOOD.”

My head was pounding, and I swore I was going to hurl any minute. I took a deep breath and another sip of my ginger ale as I looked up at Ben with burning eyes.

“I don’t feel so good. Don’t think I’m gonna—”

My boss finished that sentence for me. “You’re not working tonight, Nick, or the next four. None of the Oregon teams are playing tonight, so we’ll be fine. March is a slow month, so stop worrying.”

I looked up into the kind eyes of my boss, Alejandro Sanchez. The thought of leaving him short-handed tonight made me feel worse.

My throbbing head felt like it weighed a hundred pounds, so I lowered it back into my hands. “I’m sorry, boss. I thought once I got here, I could make it through the night. But that hasn’t happened.”

He put his hand on my shoulder and squatted down in front of me. “Nick, you’ve probably got the flu. We’ll be fine. I’ll work behind the bar tonight. I’ll get James to help me if I get desperate. He owes me.”

James? I didn’t know a James. Had I missed a new hire?

When I rolled my head to the side to look at him with my confused expression, he laughed. “Preston. He can tend bar in a pinch. He’d be happy to help you out.”

I grunted in some kind of acknowledgment as a whole different flush of heat rolled through my body.

Preston James.

Alejandro’s best friend and college roommate.

Uncle Preston to his nineteen-year-old daughter, Anna.

The very man who’d been starring in more than one of my erotic dreams since he’d started coming in at least four nights a week after the crowds had thinned out. The sexy restaurant owner with thick dark hair and warm chocolate eyes who glowered at me to see if he could make me squirm.

If he only knew.

But I felt too bad to even think about anything like that. All I could manage to do was hold my head in my hands. I wanted to die.

“Ben, can you cover the bar while I take Nick home?”

“Sure, boss. Anything for you.” The smile in his voice was so obvious.

I tried to roll my eyes, but that hurt too much. So I just curled up and leaned over, willing myself to keep it together.

I don’t know how long I sat there, but I wished I’d just stayed home and saved Alejandro a lot of trouble. But I loved this job, and I hated to miss work. But when I got here, and the teeth-chattering chills set in, I knew I was done.

“Let’s go, buddy.” Alejandro curled his arm through mine to help me up. It was a good thing he did, because I was suddenly really weak. I could barely keep my eyes open.

“Ben,” Alejandro yelled over his shoulder. “Grab me some Gatorade out of the back cooler.”

I winced at the loud noise, making Alejandro curse. “Shit. Sorry, I wasn’t thinking. Can I have your keys?”

I dug them out of my pocket as we walked towards the back door.

When I was settled in his car, I closed my eyes as my head rolled around on the headrest. Thank god the ride was only three blocks.

I have no memory of how Alejandro got me up to my apartment. I was a weak mess. But somehow, he’d managed it.

The next morning, movement in my kitchen startled me, but I was too weak to even care. I had nothing of value to steal, and if anyone came in here and tried to rough me up, I’d just breathe on them. But as it turns out, that plan was unnecessary.

It didn’t take long for me to figure out that my mom was the one in the kitchen. The familiar lilt of her voice as she spoke quietly on the phone almost made me want to cry. I was so happy she was here, because I hated being alone when I was sick.

“He slept all night. Alejandro got some ibuprofen in him before he went back to the bar.”

She must have been talking to my dad. Or Nicole, my twin sister.

“Mom?” My voice was so weak that I wasn’t sure she heard me. But when the bed shifted, and the familiar fragrance of delicate rose hit my nose, I knew it was her.

“How are you feeling, sweetheart?” Her cool hands on my face always brought me comfort when I had a fever.

“Terrible.” I leaned into her touch. Didn’t matter how sick we were, mom always took care of us, even if whatever we had was contagious. Guess it’s just a mom thing. “How did you know?”

She chuckled and wiped my face with the cool cloth. “That sweet boss of yours called me last night. He told me you were sick, and that he’d brought you home. He even stayed until I got here. One of your co-workers brought some homemade soup and a bag filled with everything you could need to recover. I was just telling your dad how happy it makes me that your boss is so kind.”

I nodded, but my eyes were still closed. “He’s the best.”

“I agree,” she said as she ran her fingers through my damp hair. “It’s time for more medicine, sweetheart. Let me get it and some Gatorade.”

She got up and walked back into the kitchen while I went back to sleep.

With my mom here, I knew everything would be okay.

**PROLOGUE - PRESTON
JAMES**

APRIL - SIX MONTHS AGO

DAYS LIKE TODAY MADE ME WONDER WHY I EVER THOUGHT opening another restaurant was a good idea. Sure, the good things outweighed the bad ninety percent of the time, but that niggling ten percent was a kick in the balls.

And today was my ten percent day.

It wasn't bad enough that my liquor and wine supplier didn't get my order on today's truck. Most of the time, we could make it work with what we had. But today was not one of those days.

There were some dishes that required the real thing, like a very specific brand of Marsala wine. Sure, I could substitute with Madeira or port wine, but I refused to use substitutions for my grandmother's Chicken Marsala recipe. She only used a specific dry wine from northern Sicily, and no other deviations. Not happening on my watch.

So, in the middle of prepping my San Marzano tomatoes for my fresh marinara sauce, I had to leave it simmering to go to the only specialty wine store in Portland to purchase what we needed.

When I returned less than an hour later, we had no water because of a break in a water main outside. It only took three hours before the water was restored just in time for the servers and bartenders to arrive for setup.

I relieved some of my tension on some innocent cloves of garlic as I chopped it until it was basically a paste. A little salt, and we'd be in business.

"Preston, we have a problem."

I looked up into the worried gaze of my long-time friend and sous chef as she held a shot glass. That's how I knew it was bad.

Stella Martin was a fifty-two-year-old dynamo that should have been running her own restaurant. But she only wanted to create exquisite food and had no desire to worry about everything that came with ownership. We'd become fast friends at the Culinary Institute twenty-three years ago, and she was the closest thing I had to a sister. She was the female version of Alejandro and knew everything he did about me.

"What the fuck else can go wrong?" I whined. "I can't take much more today."

She sighed and put her hand on my shoulder. "Max and Emile are both sick and won't be in tonight. Max has a sinus infection, and Emile has a stomach bug."

Before my blood attempted to boil out of my veins, my friend handed me a shot of *Fireball Whiskey*. The strong cinnamon flavor calmed my nerves.

After I took a calming breath, she looked at me. "I know what you're going to say. And because it has been such a shit day, I visually verified their stories on FaceTime in the most disgusting display ever. Just for you, because I knew you'd ask."

I sighed. She really was the best. "Thank you," I murmured, rubbing my temples. "Now what are we going to do with a full house and down a server and a bartender?"

"We'll make it work with the fantastic staff we have. Maybe Alejandro could spare a bartender. It's April. Why would he be busy tonight?"

I let that idea simmer a minute. "That might work. Maybe he could send him over."

Stella looked at me with a knowing smirk. "*Him?* You mean the cute bartender you like?"

Yes.

I scoffed. "Pfft. I'm not a teenager."

"And I notice you didn't deny it."

She was gonna be a pain in the ass tonight. "I'm going to call him," I said, over my shoulder as I stalked toward my

office, taking the empty shot glass with me. Maybe there was a bottle in there.

“Who? The cute bartender?” Her laugh was irritating me.

I collapsed into my chair and sat back for a moment, thinking about our situation. We could divide the dining room into four stations tonight, and...

My thoughts were interrupted when the house phone rang. I wanted to pick it up and hurl it into the wall, but that wouldn't fix a goddamn thing. It would just make me feel better. So I answered it.

“Bernardo's,” I grunted.

“Hi, I'd like to make a reservation for twelve for dinner tonight, please.”

My head fell back against the back of the chair. There is no fucking way this is happening. Someone had to be playing a joke on me. “I'm sorry, sir, but we're booked up.”

The man on the other end sounded amused? This was a fucking prank. God damn Alejandro. I'd get him back.

“Hmm, that's unfortunate. Okay, I'll tell Alex Hayes it's a no go.”

Did he just say Alex Hayes? Did he mean *the* Alex Hayes? Alejandro knew those guys. Maybe he recommended us to them.

“Wait,” I said, “*the* Alex Hayes? The Pirates QB?”

I'd been an asshole, but the man sounded genuine. I was an expert at reading people, and this guy was serious.

“The very one. But it's okay. I understand. I'm sure either Monroe or Kincaid can find us a restaurant. Thanks anyway, man.”

There was no fucking way I was letting him hang up and missing the opportunity to have those three Portland Pirates in my restaurant.

“Wait! Wait! Let me check the book. See if we can move some things around.”

I tapped on my mouse and waited for my screen to come up. Clicking on the reservation pages on my computer, I scanned the page. Pressing the shuffle button, the dining room seating chart had been rearranged in the blink of an eye.

“We don’t want to put you out. It’s really okay.”

“No, no, it’s not a problem. Really. We’re short a server tonight, and it’s frustrating. It would be an honor to serve you. Is it a special occasion?”

The guy chuckled. “Yeah, our buddy’s birthday.”

Birthday? Yeah, we could make that work with some shuffling around. If it’s just a few of them, it would be fine.

“Oh, okay. Can I ask if anyone else from the team is coming?”

He didn’t reply as quickly as before, which concerned me. But when he did, he sounded surprised. “Did you find room for us?”

I sighed in relief. “Yes, sir. I can fit you in. Just need to make sure we can rearrange the seating area to accommodate a private party like that. How many players did you say were joining you?”

He chuckled. I could imagine what he was thinking. While I liked the Pirates, I wasn’t a fan boy. Those men were big, and they took up a lot of space that I was limited on to begin with.

“I didn’t. But there will be six with their husbands.”

Twelve? Holy fucking shit. We were going to have to get really fucking creative tonight.

“Okay, that means a big table area. What time would you like to reserve?” *Please say nine p.m.*

“Seven,” he replied.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. Prime dinner time.

“Will you be needing a cake or anything?”

“Do you have cheesecake?”

I smiled. That we had. “Yes, sir. It’s made in-house.”

“Perfect,” he said. “Can you reserve one for us?”

“Yes, sir! No problem at all. Can I get a name, please, for the reservation?”

“Sure. Commander Jesse Evans, U.S. Navy SEAL.”

I had the utmost respect for the men and women who served in the military. Several of my friends from culinary school were former service members. The stories they told of the bravery and heroism made me wish I’d served in the armed forces.

I replied as sincerely as I could. “Thank you for your service, sir. We’ll look forward to seeing you at seven.”

“Thank you,” he said, and ended the call.

This had been a clusterfuck of a day, but things just might turn around. I got up from my chair and went out to talk to Stella. We’d put our heads together and figure it out. We would make this work tonight.

As I walked back into the kitchen, I told her about the call and watched her eyes widen in surprise, then excitement. “The Portland Pirates quarterback and five other team members? Preston, that’s amazing. Do you think Alejandro recommended us?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I didn’t have time to ask him. But I’m afraid I was an asshole to the man who called. You know what kind of day we’ve had. I need to make sure their food is superior. I want them to remember us and come back.”

Stella smiled. “Preston, your food is always superior. You do everything to make it leaps and bounds above everyone else. That’s who you are, and our team excels at pulling together and making things work. We’ve got this.”

She was right. I’d pull everyone together, explain our situation tonight, and they’d bring their A-game. We could do this.

“Yeah, you’re right. Maybe some appetizer platters on the house would make up for my shitty attitude.”

Stella shook her head. “Take it a step further. Comp their meal on the house. What time are they coming?”

“Seven.”

She nodded. “Have Sophia come get you when they arrive. Go out, apologize to the man, and tell them we’re comping their dinner. It’ll go a long way with them. You’ll see.”

I nodded again. She was right. So I gathered everyone together and told them about our situation. “If we can pull this off tonight, being two people short, you’ll all go home with an extra hundred bucks in your hands for making it happen.”

I loved giving my staff incentives to work hard. Even if we fucked it all up, they’d get the money, anyway. That’s just the way I was.

After high fives and thankful hugs, my superior staff got to work, and I went back to work on my marinara sauce with a renewed spirit and vigor.

I WATCHED the clock until six-forty-five, then slipped into my office to change my chef’s whites. I wanted to make a good impression when I apologized for my rude behavior.

At seven p.m., Sophia stepped into the kitchen to alert me that our special guests had arrived.

“You’ve got this, Preston. Go dazzle them like you do everyone else.”

I chuckled, thankful for the tiny cheerleader who kept my head above water most of the time.

As I strode toward the front, my heart sped up at the sight of twelve men crammed into my tiny entryway. God, we had to do something about the space here. It was almost embarrassing.

When I reached them, I pasted on a smile.

“Commander Evans?”

The blond man turned with a smile. “Commander Jesse Evans, U.S. Navy.”

I extended my hand to shake his when I got a good look at him. Stunned was not a strong enough word for what I was feeling. The commander was too young to be *him*. There was no way. My eyes widened, and I studied him a moment before snapping out of it. And I needed to let go of his hand.

“I’m the owner, Preston James. I want to apologize for earlier. The day had been less-than-stellar, but it since rebounded. As an apology, your bill has been comped.”

Before I could smile, a younger man stepped around and effectively put me in my place for some reason.

“We appreciate that, but it won’t be necessary. I intend to pay the bill for my husband and all our friends.”

Strangled noises came from two of the players, and I immediately picked up on the man’s curt attitude. He thought I was hitting on his husband. Goddamn it. I had to end this shitshow, and when this night was over, I was getting drunk with Alejandro.

I nodded once. “Please enjoy your dinner. Sophia will show you to your table.”

Turning to return to the kitchen, I stopped at a table or two to make sure everyone was enjoying their dinner.

Before I walked into the kitchen, I turned and looked at the commander one more time. The resemblance was uncanny. Logically, I knew it wasn’t him, because he had been younger and I was one of the pallbearers at his funeral. But it still shook me and made me miss my friend.

When I got into the kitchen, Stella looked at me expectantly. “How’d it go?”

One look at my face told her something wasn’t right. “Preston, what happened out there?”

I ran my fingers over my mouth, wanting another shot of whiskey. After I relayed the exchange, she furrowed her brow. “Why did he get so upset?”

Sighing, I looked around at for the bottle of *Fireball*.

“Preston! Why did he get upset?”

I had to get this over with. “He thought I hit on his husband.” There. Now she knew.

Stella burst out laughing, and I wanted to crawl under the table. “Why the fuck are you laughing?”

I stood with my hands on my hips, waiting for her to get herself under control. It was difficult not to laugh at myself. But when she knew why, she wouldn’t laugh.

“Oh, Preston. It has been a shitty day. What made him think you were hitting on his man?”

I dropped my gaze to the floor. “I held his hand too long.”

Her eyes widened, and I could see the impending laughter brewing. “Why did you do that exactly?”

I looked her in the eyes, and without humor, I told her why. “The commander looks exactly like Seth. And it shocked the fuck out of me.”

Stella’s laughter fell away, and she leaned in to hug me. Even though she’d never met him, she knew how it had affected me when he died. “I’m so sorry, Preston. I know that had to be difficult.”

I nodded again, no words for how deeply the hurt cut me and Alejandro both when our friend and suite mate was killed our senior year of college. We were like brothers.

Allowing myself a moment to grieve for my friend, I stepped into my office and closed the door to let the grief wash over me.

CHAPTER 1

NICK

“HEY, NICK. I NEED TO TALK TO YOU AND BEN WHEN THINGS slow down.”

Normally those words would be cause for alarm. But the smile on Alejandro’s face had me curious about what was going on. I glanced at my friend and co-bartender, Ben, who smirked at me and shrugged.

“You firing us, boss?”

Alejandro scoffed when he walked back around to our side of the bar after delivering two burgers to the guys in a corner booth.

“You wish, Benjamin. Not likely, unless you fuck up really badly.”

I watched their interactions like a tennis match as I made an Old Fashioned for one of the servers. Now it was Ben’s turn to serve. “No problem then, Papi. When I fuck up, it’s really good.”

Alejandro rolled his eyes, then grabbed the damp towel on the bar as he walked by. “Smartass,” Alejandro growled without heat, then tossed the towel at him before walking back to the kitchen.

Alejandro Sanchez was the best boss I’d ever had. He was friendly to everyone until someone gave him a reason to lose his shit. And if he did, which happened rarely, you better get the heck out of the way and hope it isn’t aimed at you.

Standing six-foot-three, he was the forty-six-year-old, tall, dark, and handsome bar owner with mischievous Mediterranean-blue eyes. He made the time behind the bar fun for everyone. And he seemed to enjoy the ribbing he got from Ben, who loved to push Alejandro's buttons. It was quite entertaining for everyone around.

Like tonight.

No matter how often Ben tried to fluster him, he usually failed. Alejandro had a daughter and was well practiced at the art of smart ass comments. He knew how to dish it right back.

When he was out of earshot, I glared at Ben teasingly. "You are so getting fired for sexual harassment."

He barked out a laugh and grinned as he made a cocktail. "He wouldn't fire me, Nicholas. He loves me. And he knows I'm just pulling his chain because I can."

I snorted. "Yeah, okay. Just be careful how often you pull that chain, Benjamin."

His eyes widened playfully as he slid closer to me, so I was the only one to hear him. "A man can dream. And goddamn, he's a handsome devil."

I laughed at his assessment. He wasn't wrong.

Ben Williams was twenty-five years old, six-foot-two, and sported short dark hair that he kept longer on top, so he had to keep his hands in it. When we worked together behind the bar, we got lots of attention from the flirty customers. Ben was a good-looking dude, and many of our customers agreed. Strangely enough, Ben never took any of them up on it, and I had a feeling it might have something to do with our boss.

I loved working here, and applying after college had been the best thing I could have done for myself.

Baseball season was in full swing, and even though Portland didn't have a team yet, Seattle did. Most of the baseball fans who came in pulled for Seattle or San Francisco, so Alejandro made sure to tune two of the four 97-inch OLED televisions to those games. I was convinced the investment in those televisions had paid off because they were one of the

biggest draws for our bar. It was the closest thing to being there, and our customers loved it.

Tonight we had Seattle playing Colorado on one side of the bar, and San Francisco playing Atlanta on the other. All four teams were in contention to make the post-season, and we always drew a crowd when they played. Alejandro knew I was an Atlanta fan, and if they were playing in our time zone, he had it on for me.

I'd made the suggestion that we create a social media profile for the bar in order to post weekly games and events for customers. Alejandro loved the idea and put his daughter, Anna, in charge of it. She'd done a great job, and business was booming. He'd even gone so far as to buy the wait staff and bartenders' t-shirts for our favorite teams during baseball season. Like I said, best boss ever.

We were slammed from seven until almost eleven p.m. Miraculously, both games were exciting with the lead swinging back and forth until the ninth inning. Most of our customers were happy, and happy fans buy lots of beer. So to make sure everyone had a good time without getting too drunk, our genius boss ran some stadium favorites appetizers half-price to encourage more people to order them. He also bought a popcorn machine to offer unlimited bags of freshly popped popcorn on special game nights and put Anna in charge of that, too since she couldn't legally serve alcohol. He was savvy like that.

Anna had started working at the bar more and more, learning how things operated. And something told me she really enjoyed it even more when Ben was working behind the bar.

Sometime around the eighth inning of the Seattle-Colorado game, the hair on the back of my neck stood up, putting my *spidey sense* on alert. I knew where it was coming from, because I'd been experiencing that same reaction or sensation or whatever the fuck it was since last September.

It was Preston James, and he'd just walked in and took a seat at the end of the bar where he sat watching me.

When I finished pulling the last round of IPA's for one the waitresses, I grabbed one from the chiller and popped the lid off. Setting in front of him, I shook my head in disgust.

“We can never be friends as long as you keep wearing that shit right there.”

I motioned toward the blue and orange Met's t-shirt he wore, then to mine.

Preston's lingering stare slipped down my body with so much heat I could almost feel it. Then he looked down at the offending shirt and ran his hand over what had to be abs of steel. I bet he had one of those abdominal machine things from the 80s, just like my mom. And that made me smile.

When he caught me staring, I raised my brows and acted as if I were waiting for an answer. “Do you seriously like that team?” I didn't care if he did or not, but I needed to draw his attention away from my shameless gawking at him. I enjoyed the flirty banter we had going on.

One side of Preston's mouth turned up in a smile as he wordlessly brought the bottle to his lips, never taking his eyes off mine. I was distracted and mesmerized by the way his lips wrapped loosely around the top of the bottle. When he tipped his head back, exposing his Adam's Apple, I bit my lower lip as it bobbed when he swallowed. His chiseled jaw was covered in what I referred to as perma-scruff.

Preston James was intoxicating, and if I didn't stop staring and snap out of this erotic moment, I'd be drunk off my ass.

I glanced over my shoulder to see if anyone was waiting for a drink, but returned my now-irritated attention back to the gorgeous man in front of me.

“Well? Are you a fan?” I leaned down on the bar, moving closer to him.

He set his bottle down and rolled the neck between his fingers. I almost got lost in that, but managed to keep myself focused.

“That's complicated. They were my team when I was a kid at home, but not so much now.”

The words rolled off his tongue like condensation from a cold glass.

I scrunched up my nose. “Why?”

Preston chuckled, obviously amused by my reaction. He sat up and leaned forward to prop his chin in his right hand. Mesmerized again, I watched as he ran his long index finger over his lips. “Because they were the closest team to where I grew up.”

“And where would that be?” I asked, like it was my business to know.

This time, his beautiful smile took over his handsome face. “Connecticut.”

I nodded my head slowly. “That explains so much,” I teased, “but it still doesn’t change the fact that we can’t be friends.”

Preston’s dark brown eyes filled with playfulness, and then he leaned closer. “I could take it off if it offends you. Would you like that, Nicholas?”

Every time he said my name like that, my dick twitched. Now I wanted to punch him. Preston James knew exactly what he was doing to me.

“For the love of God, stop flirting with my bartender and keep your damn clothes on, James. No one wants to see all that.”

My startled reaction must have been funny, because Alejandro snickered and winked at me as he approached us.

My face heated as I grabbed a towel and began wiping down the bar.

“Killjoy. I was just talking to Nick.”

Alejandro stopped in front of his best friend and just shook his head. “Try to sell that story to someone who doesn’t know you quite as well as I do.”

I needed to go clean something, vigorously, but was relieved as fuck when Cooper and Callum walked in. I hadn’t

seen them since they returned from Key West and, hopefully, hearing all the vacation details would distract me until he caught my eye again.

The bar emptied out not long after both games were over. Since it was a weeknight, we closed at midnight, making it pretty easy for Ben and me to get out of there by right after closing.

After we'd restocked the bar with clean glassware and more Portland IPA, Ben and I stopped by the booth where Alejandro was in deep conversation with Preston. They had a couple legal pads and pens, and were taking notes for whatever they were working on. I hated to bother them, because I hated it when I was working on a draft project and someone interrupted me. I could sit for hours and work on a building design, much like Alejandro loved this place.

“Hey, sorry to interrupt, but you wanted to see us?”

Alejandro looked up and smiled. “Yeah, perfect timing. Have a seat.”

He slid over in the booth and Ben moved to sit next to him with the speed of a cartoon character. The fucker smiled up at me as a warm hand slipped around my wrist and tugged on my arm.

I looked at where Preston's hand was fusing our skin together as he tugged me down. “Take a load off, Nick,” he said as I tumbled into the booth. “I won't bite. Unless you want me to.”

A shiver rolled down my spine at the thought of him leaving little marks on my skin as he took... I sighed, releasing a deep breath and willing my cock to deflate before I got up from this table. I'd probably be adding to my erotic dream content starring Preston James tonight.

Thankfully, my boss was all business. “Okay, guys, here's what I wanted to talk to you about,” he said. “Greer Rowan called Preston and me about handling the Pirate's Draft Party at the end of June. I want the two of you to handle it. You're

not starstruck by the players anymore, and that's what we need."

My eyes were really wide now as he laid out the details surrounding Greer Rowan's party to be held in the owner's suite at the stadium. When he was finished, I glanced over at Preston.

"Will we be in charge of the food as well?"

It made me unbelievably happy that Alejandro immediately thought about me and Ben for this huge responsibility. I thrived on a challenge.

"No. I'll be there all night, along with at least two of my servers."

I furrowed my brow. "But what about Bernardo's?"

Preston relaxed into the booth and extended his arm along the back of it. "No, my best girl, Stella, will handle it all."

"She can do anything," Alejandro added with a laugh. "She's better in the kitchen than he is."

"You're really not one to talk about anyone's culinary skills," Preston joked.

Ben and I looked at each other with raised brows as they continued to bicker over who was the better chef.

"Is she your girlfriend?" Ben asked Preston.

"No," Preston chuckled, and looked at Alejandro. "She's my work wife."

Alejandro laughed. "She'd kill you in your sleep."

I didn't know what to do with that. If I asked questions, he'd think I was interested. Which I kinda was. But I didn't have time to get involved with anyone.

Preston nudged me with his forearm, his warmth concentrating on the point of contact. Leaning over, he set the record straight. "Relax, Nicholas. I'm not a cheater, if that's what you're thinking. Stella is my sous chef and other best friend. She's happily married *not* to me."

Alejandro laughed. “Oh god that would be a major shit show. Like I said, she’d kill you in your sleep.”

Some kind of something flooded my veins as relief washed over me. I didn’t know what was happening between us, but his thigh pressing along mine was causing things to stir in my pants.

This was going to be trouble. I could see my degree slipping away before my eyes and my recurring nightmare from months ago came strolling up to my subconscious.

And the forty-five-year-old hot as fuck instigator wearing the fucking Met’s t-shirt was to blame. There was only one thing to do. I was gonna have to stay as far away from Preston James as humanly possible.

CHAPTER 2

PRESTON

NOW I REMEMBER WHY I DIDN'T DO CATERING ANYMORE.

Stella and I rushed around the kitchen, making sure we had everything on the list for the party. Greer Rowan was paying me a pretty penny to do this job, and if I'd had to do it without Alejandro, I'd have said fuck no.

As she read off the list of things we were most likely to forget, I hurried around the kitchen, making sure it was packed.

“Serving utensils?”

“Check.”

“Chafing dishes?”

“Check.”

“Fuel Canisters?”

“Check.”

“Rolling warmer drawer?”

I looked around in the kitchen and hallway as if it were hiding from me. “Fuck no. Where the fuck is it? I can't get the fucking food inside the building without the fucking cart! And we can't carry each individual thing upstairs because we'll burn our fucking hands!”

I was losing it.

Stella walked over, pushed me onto the stool we kept in the kitchen, and handed me a shot of *Fireball*. “Take a deep

breath and calm all your fucks down.”

I grumbled. “Did you have this served up and ready to go? And I only swear when I’m stressed. You know that.”

“I know,” she said, as she massaged my shoulders while I threw it back. The cinnamon burn was comforting going down my throat. I was too old for this.

“Why did we say yes to this?” I whined like the big ole baby I was.

My work wife laughed since we both knew the answer to that stupid question. “*We* didn’t. *You* did because Alejandro asked you to.”

“Yeah, well, next time I’m saying no.”

She laughed and worked the tight muscles in my neck. “No you won’t Preston. You’ll do what you always do. You’d give the shirt off your back to help whenever someone asks. That’s who you are, sunshine.”

Stella clapped me hard on the back, and I knew she was finished catering to me. “But that’s the end of the pity party. Get up and let’s do this. We have people to impress.” She paused, then shook her head as she pointed to the back door. “There it is.”

I closed my eyes and shook my head. Of course it was.

“Go grab your sexy new black coat and let’s get moving.”

Stella was one of a few people who knew me best and could turn my mood around in a minute. She and the asshole who got me into this.

“Yes, ma’am.” I started for my office, then stopped. I grabbed her up in a hug. “Thanks for keeping me sane. And just for that, I’ll give you the night off.”

She laughed, then pinched my side. “Thanks, asshole—and I mean that with the most affection I can muster.”

I grinned as I made my way to my office, feeling a little bit lighter, and ready to see Nick. It was time to pursue some

changes, and he just might be the one to help me make that happen.

* * *

THE DRAFT PARTY was held in the Field Level Suite that stretched behind the north field goal. The open social area was enclosed with movable glass walls, making the view of the stadium and the field spectacular.

Earlier this afternoon, Alejandro had come over and set up the bar at the permanent island in the middle of the open area. There was no need for him to stay with Nick and Ben here, so he opted to be the bartender at his bar tonight. I'd offered to send him two of mine, but he turned me down.

"I appreciate it," he'd said, "but working the bar keeps me in touch with the customers. I like getting to know the people who spend a lot of time and money in my bar."

I understood that. Taking a stroll through the dining room to talk to people was something I enjoyed, too. I appreciated their compliments and complaints alike. It made all the work and sacrifice worth it.

The open space now held tables and chairs set behind the stadium seats where partygoers could look at the view. Round tables that seated twelve people were set with linen napkins and silverware. All my staff and I had to do was create an attractive buffet line and make sure we didn't run out of food.

When I agreed to cater this event, I'd planned to keep Bernardo's open with Stella running the show. But after all the work that went into prepping for over two hundred people away from the kitchen, I closed the restaurant and gave her a rare Saturday night off. To make sure my staff wasn't penalized, I brought along anyone that wanted to come work tonight. Just like Alejandro's, my employees liked to come to work.

"Preston, you've outdone yourself!" Greer Rowan said as he walked around both buffets prior to the party starting.

The fifty-eight-year-old owner of the Portland Pirates was an attractive man with thick salt and pepper hair. His expressive green eyes were showcased behind designer frames, but his square jaw and dazzling smile made him quite the catch.

“Thank you, Mr. Rowan,” I said, extending my hand to shake. “Thank you for choosing Bernardo’s—and Alejandro’s, for that matter.”

“Call me Greer. You both came highly recommended by my quarterback and my new kicker. Did you get a chance to see him kick last season?”

“Yes,” I lied, “he was phenomenal.” I wanted to forget that shitshow ever happened. “I’ll have to thank them. Are they here tonight?”

“Oh yes, Alex comes to every one of these. As the captain of the team, he takes his role seriously.”

“And Dominick? Will he be here?” *Please say no.*

Greer smiled. “Yes, all the players and staff should be here soon. Brad doesn’t require them to come, but they do anyway. They’ve built quite a family atmosphere here. It’s hard to trade them away.”

I nodded. “That’s impressive. I actually bought my apartment from a former player, Scott O’Neil. I guess your loss was my gain.”

He laughed. “Definitely. Scott was a good lineman, but he wanted to be closer to home in Texas. Hated to see him go, but I understood the reason why.”

Greer told me about the three players they’d drafted, and honestly, I wasn’t paying attention. I nodded and scanned the room until I found who I wanted to see.

Nick and Ben were behind the bar and dressed in athletic cut black suits with white shirts and thin black ties. Most of their job tonight would be to serve wine and beer, but Alejandro made sure to set them up for mixed drink service if they needed it.

“I don’t see Alejandro around anywhere,” he said, drawing my attention back to him.

“Oh, yes, he had to go back to the bar, but those two gentlemen over there,” I motioned toward Nick and Ben, “can make anything you want. They’re his two best bartenders.”

Greer looked at the bar. “That is a great idea. It’s been a busy day, and a glass of Pinot sounds fantastic. If I don’t see you again, thank you for doing this for us.” He extended his hand to shake.

I grasped his hand. “Anytime. Enjoy your evening.”

As Greer walked toward the bar, I turned to look at Nick. He was smiling at something Ben was saying, and the smile on his face put one on mine.

Before I could turn away, Nick caught me staring at him. I raised my hand to wave as one of my servers came over to get me. With a parting glance, I walked away as Nick served Greer Rowan the Pinot he’d wanted with a smile that I hoped was meant for me.

An hour later, the once-vacant space was filled with people. The players were easy to spot since most of them stood at least a head over everyone else. Not to mention their physiques gave them away.

I made sure to stay out of the way when someone I recognized came through. I busied myself with checking the entrees, and preparing fresh appetizer trays for the waiters to circulate with around the room. Alex Hayes would be the only one I’d speak to if the opportunity arose.

When dinner was over, a man I assumed was the coach began to introduce his staff to the audience. Draftees and their families were being introduced to a new life in professional football. When everyone got up to tour the stadium, my staff cleared away the buffet service while I plated slices of cheesecake with fruit compote on the side. We had prepared crème brûlée and chocolate mousse, along with a variety of fruit and cheese.

Resetting the buffet line for dessert and coffee, we began clearing away dinner plates and silverware. Another vendor would take care of them. All we had to do was stack them in the bins.

The area that had been crowded just a few minutes prior was now quiet, except for a handful of people who stayed behind. When everything was taken care of, I gave my staff the opportunity to eat dinner while I went to talk to Nick.

I'd watched on the sidelines for almost a year, and that was long enough. There was something about him that lingered in the back of my mind. I decided a while back to ask him out, but it never seemed like the right time. If I did it now, at least I wouldn't have Alejandro breathing down my neck.

Time was ticking by, and if I didn't act soon, I might lose my chance.

Striding over, I locked eyes with him and smiled. "Hey, how's it going over here?"

His blue eyes sparkled in the light when he smiled, making them even bluer. "Good, actually. Mr. Rowan stopped by a few minutes ago and offered both of us a job bartending in the VIP Suites."

The smile on my face slipped a bit. "What did you say? Alejandro will be..."

Ben chuckled and shook his head. "We couldn't leave him." His affectionate tone wasn't to be missed, and it was obvious that Ben was very loyal to my friend.

I looked at Nick. "You wouldn't want to work here?"

"Nah," he said, smiling. "I'm happy where I am. Alejandro works around my school schedule, and I love it there. He's a good boss."

I was proud of my friend. "That he is. What are you studying?"

I shifted closer to him to keep from missing a single word. Leaning against the bar, wearing my most interested expression, I leaned into find out some new intel on him. Just

as he started to speak, the voice of a woman I knew very well called my name.

“Preston James. I wondered when you were going to come out of hiding.”

With a smile on my face, I turned to find Eliana Sanchez making her way to me. Closing the distance, I walked up to the stunning beauty in front of me with my arms wide open.

“It’s been forever, Eliana. How are you?” I took her into my arms for a long hug.

Dr. Eliana Sanchez was an orthopedic surgeon at OHSU and Alejandro’s ex-wife. We’d met in our communications class at UC-Berkeley. When I decided I wasn’t ready to settle down, I’d introduced her to Alejandro after letting him beg for three days. That’s just how we rolled.

“I’m doing really well. Long hours at the hospital, and these guys have kept me pretty busy. So much so that Greer hired me on as the team’s orthopedic doctor.”

Dressed in a dark gray pantsuit with a vibrant red blouse that complimented her dark wavy hair, Eliana was a stunning woman.

“That’s impressive. I bet that’s really cutting into your social life.”

She smiled, but shrugged. I could still see the exhaustion in her eyes. “What social life? Goes with the territory, I suppose.”

I laughed. “Tell me about it. We workaholics have to stick together.”

“I know, right?” Eliana looked down at her vibrating phone and sighed. She lifted it into the air. “Duty calls. I’ve got to go. But it was great seeing you again. Maybe we can have dinner sometime and catch up.”

I smiled and hugged her again. “I’d love that. Give me your phone, and I’ll give you the number for the restaurant, just in case. You call me when you’re free, and we’ll definitely meet up for dinner. Maybe I’ll cook for you one night.”

She handed me the phone after opening the contacts. I typed in my number and name, then hit save before handing it back to her.

Eliana brought her soft hand up to graze my face, and I leaned down to kiss her cheek. She pulled back and smiled. "I'll call you."

I nodded. "You better. I'll be looking forward to it."

She turned and walked away with one last glance over her shoulder. She smiled and waved, and I waved back.

When she was gone, I turned my head to look at Nick, hoping we could have a few minutes to talk. But he and Ben were busy

I guess asking him out would have to wait.

CHAPTER 3

NICK

THE FOURTH OF JULY WAS ALWAYS BUSY AFTER THE fireworks display. Alejandro had brought Anna again to help around the bar. Tonight, if time permitted, I was going to teach her how to do inventory on our reserves. It wasn't hard, but Alejandro liked the recording done a certain way for his spreadsheets.

I didn't have to go into work until seven, so I was spending the first half of the day with my twin sister. Nicole had flown in from Southern California to see everyone, and I was eager to talk to her.

Our parents, Brian and Michelle Reed, were doing their regular summer holiday thing and grilling burgers. My mom went all out when both of us were home because it was becoming more and more difficult the older we got. There was a definite possibility I would get a job offer in another city when I graduated, so I took every opportunity I had to be with them.

It had been a week since the draft party, and I'd successfully avoided Preston. Throwing myself into my schoolwork was easy, but the dreams were driving me insane.

Me on my knees, him on his knees, on top of the bar, jerking each other off in the backseat of a car. They just wouldn't stop. Preston had invaded my subconscious and refused to move out. My cock had never been so hard, and I'd never jerked off so many times in my life—not even when I was a teenager. Hopefully, Nicole could tell me what to do to stop the dreams.

When I got out of my car, I could smell the burgers on the grill. My dad had mastered grilling when we were kids, and my mom was happy to turn that over to him.

The unmistakable aroma wafting from the backyard brought back fond memories of summers riding our bikes until the sun went down, then competing to see who could catch the most lightning bugs before we let them go. Popsicle stains decorated every t-shirt I had after I'd lost my two front teeth when I was six-years-old.

Pushing open the back gate, I walked around to the deck, where my mom had the picnic table overflowing with food. This was going to be great.

"I could smell those from the car," I told my dad as I jogged up the back steps.

"Well," he said proudly, "I know how much you love them. Made my special recipe, too." He winked, and I gave him a hug.

My dad had shared his top secret recipe with me a while back, but when I made them, they never tasted like his. But it did give me the idea to buy him a meat grinder attachment for my mom's *Kitchen Aid* mixer. Now he could grind up any combination of burgers he wanted.

"Where are mom and Nicole?" I swiped a piece of watermelon from the bowl on the table.

"Inside with Pop and Nanna. Go see them and tell them ten minutes."

"Sure thing, Dad."

He went back to his burger heaven as I opened the sliding glass door and found my mom in the kitchen.

"Need any help?" I asked, going over to hug her.

"Hey, sweetheart. No, I've got it. Your sister is dying to see you. She's in the living room."

I chuckled. "Okay. If you need something, let me know."

My mom smiled at me like I'd made her day. "I will, baby. Did your dad tell you your grandparents are here?"

I grinned. "Yeah, I'm headed in there to see them now."

I grabbed a baby carrot from the tray and dipped it in my mom's homemade ranch dressing. I popped it into my mouth and savored the flavors.

"What time do you have to go to work?"

"Six. It's gonna be cra-zy," I singsonged.

My mom laughed. "Just how you like it. I better feed you all the things before you leave."

I grinned and headed to say hello to my grandparents and to see my sister.

"There you are!" Nicole ran and jumped in my arms, making me wobble on my feet.

"Damn, girl. Have you put on weight?" She pinched my side as I put her down, making me yelp. Laughing, I slung my arm over her shoulder.

"We have some catching up to do," she whispered to me.

I nodded. "Yeah, after we eat. Dad said the burgers are almost ready."

"I want to hear all about the man."

I sighed. "Yeah, well...."

Nicole looked at me with a serious expression on her face. "What does that mean?"

I kissed her cheek. "I'll tell you after we eat. Let's get Nanna and Pop out to the table."

She snorted. "Good luck. They're watching baseball."

I grinned and dragged my sister along to see my grandparents.

After our late lunch, I was stuffed. Two burgers, potato salad, baked beans, watermelon, and my Nanna's fresh corn salad sat in my stomach like a rock. If I didn't get up and

move around, I'd never be able to eat the homemade ice cream my grandfather made. And I wasn't missing that.

"Let's go for a walk." I took Nicole's hand and pulled her up from the chair.

"You're supposed to love me and protect me. Not make me walk after having a food baby."

"Shut up," I laughed. "I have to work later, so if you want to talk, now's your chance."

Always eager to hear about my non-existent love life, she jumped to her feet. "I'm ready. Let's go."

She grabbed two bottles of water before we headed around the house to the sidewalk.

"So how's everything going? Still loving P.A. school?"

"Oh no," she said, "we're not starting with me. We're starting with you and the hottie."

I chuckled. "This is going to be an incredibly short story."

Nicole stopped on the sidewalk and turned to face me. "Why? You said there was flirting going on. What happened?"

I ran my hands through my hair. "There was. But I've been staying out of his way."

She frowned. "What does that mean?"

I started walking. "When Preston comes into the bar, I try to handle the things that don't require me to be out front. Like inventory, or going to get the glasses from the dishwasher. Things that keep me from looking at him."

"Wait." She grabbed my arm and stopped again. At this rate, we'd never make it around the block. "Why wouldn't you want to look at him?"

I sighed and started walking again. "Because when I look at him, I want him. And I don't have time for a relationship. You know how driven we are." I motioned back and forth from me to her. "I can't afford to be distracted, and when he's around, I can't take my eyes off him. Then I go home and dream about him. It's horrible!"

I blew out a deep breath and ran my fingers through my hair again.

“Nick, how long have you been into him?”

Walking on, I answered without looking at her. “About a year.”

“And he’s been looking at you like he could eat you with a spoon, too?”

I scrunched up my face at her analogy. “That’s gross.”

She punched me in the arm, making me laugh. “Stop trying to distract me. It’s impossible. You should know that by now.”

I laughed and sat down on the curb. Nicole followed me down.

“Nick, we’re twenty-eight years old. Are you willing to take a chance on possibly allowing the love of your life to pass you by? Don’t you think we deserve a chance to be happy? If you’re dreaming about him a year later, then your big brain is trying to tell you something.”

“But I’m so close to finishing.” I picked up a rock and rolled it through my fingers.

“What are you really afraid of?” she whispered. “You can say it.”

Turning, I looked at my twin sister. “He’s gonna keep me from focusing on my work, because I’m gonna want to be with him. And it would be really easy for him to hurt me, Nicole. He’ll have the power to tear me apart and won’t even know it.”

“How do you know that? You haven’t even been on a date with him.”

“True,” I sighed. “But I saw him talking with someone at the Draft Party and it hit me hard. Turns out she was Alejandro’s ex-wife. Ben had seen her before. Evidently, my brain already thinks he’s mine since I see him in my dreams.”

Nicole put her head on my shoulder. “I understand that, but he could be different.” She paused, making me consider her words. “Now, tell me about the dreams.”

I chuckled. “Oh, fuck no. They are NSFS.”

“What?” she laughed. “You tell me everything.”

“No, I don’t. And they are Not Safe For Sister.”

She bumped my shoulder with hers. “Just give me one little part. My sex life is non-existent right now.”

I snorted. “Same. But I am in a meaningful relationship with my hand.”

She laughed at my joke, and I knew if there was anyone in the world I could share this with, it was her. “But there was one particular dream about culinary school and macaroni and cheese that I can’t forget.”

Her eyes widened as I told her about the vivid dream, hoping she’d let it go. But that wasn’t going to happen.

“Your dreams are better than my sex life. Give that man a chance, big brother. He doesn’t even know you like him.”

“And he’s not going to. I have no guarantee he likes me, anyway. He glares at me and flirts. That’s about it.”

“Maybe you should pass him a note, like you did Cindy Matthews in fourth grade.”

Barking out a laugh at the memory, I had to admit I felt lighter about everything. I just needed to see where things went from here.

I stood up and reached for her hand. “Let’s go. I need ice cream.”

“Now you’re talking. Homemade ice cream fixes everything.”

We walked the rest of the way around the block and I thought about what she said. Nicole was right. My heart needed to be open to chances. Now I just needed to convince my head to get on board with the plan.

When I walked into work at ten to six, I'd decided I wouldn't hide from Preston any longer. I'd just act like he was any other customer. I'd focus on school while trying to find a renovation project.

An hour later, Preston walked in and I stuck to my guns for about half an hour. It was impossible to keep from looking at him, especially when he parked himself on the stool in the middle of the bar. No more end seat, apparently.

I was fucked. And not in the good way.

CHAPTER 4

PRESTON

THE FIRST THING WE DID EVERY DAY WAS TO SCROLL THROUGH the dinner reservations on the computer. Sophia had gotten very good with the software I used. I bought it immediately when the seating chart feature automatically populated the seating area as reservations were made, then gave us the ability to shuffle the seating to accommodate parties.

The only thing it couldn't do was give me more space. It was frustrating as hell, to say the least.

“How's it looking for tonight?”

Stella sat in the chair across from my desk, ready to put out any fires, or hand me a shot of *Fireball*. Cinnamon was my thing.

“So far, so good. Looks like we have...”

I stopped scrolling when Greer Rowan's name appeared on the list. He had reservations tonight.

“Hmmm...” My interest was piqued.

“What?” Stella asked.

“Nothing bad. Greer Rowan has reservations for two at eight-thirty tonight.”

Stella smiled. “That's good! He must have been happy with how the Draft Party turned out.”

“Uh-huh,” I added, nodding my head. No special occasion was listed, so it appeared to just be dinner.

I clicked on the reservation to add his photo from Google so Sophia would recognize him when he arrived. Making it VIP, I shuffled the seating chart until I came up with seating the farthest distance from the kitchen.

“I’m just curious to see who he’s bringing to dinner.”

She stared at me. “Why does it matter?”

“It doesn’t. Like I said, I’m just curious.”

She snorted. “Well, he *is* your type. Handsome, rich, and intelligent.”

I scoffed. “Very funny, but I’ve decided to ask Nick out on a date.”

The smile that crept across her face almost embarrassed me. “It’s about time, Preston. There’s more to life than building another culinary empire.”

She was right.

“I know, but let’s get back to tonight. Looks like we’re gonna have another full house. Do we have everything we need?”

Stella nodded. “We should after the last delivery. Hopefully, he’s got what we were out of.”

I lifted my head and shoved back from my chair. “Okay then. Let’s get started.

* * *

I’D BEEN RIGHT. We’d been packed without a single seat available, even at the bar. It took a lot of energy to work efficiently in a small space, so that’s why I liked to feed my staff before they started work. More energy meant better service. It also helped them to know what to suggest if a customer asked.

As I circulated through the restaurant, talking with my customers while answering their questions about food and wine, I remembered why I loved this. Seeing others enjoying

their food made me happy, and there were so many things I wanted my customers to experience.

Since moving to Portland, I'd found my love of cooking again. Buying this little place was a new adventure. I knew it was too small when I signed the papers, but I needed the intimate space to help me find out if I could regain my passion for it again. I didn't need the money. I had that covered. What I wanted was for my customers to be happy when they came in, like Alejandro had done with the bar. I wanted to add to the downtown culture of my new hometown.

Shortly after eight, I went to my office to change my coat. I'd bumped into a server earlier and now I had Alfredo sauce on my black jacket. Not to mention I smelled like Parmigiano-Reggiano.

Needing a quick refresher, I tossed my coat onto the pile of tablecloths and napkins to be laundered, and put on a white coat. When I was all buttoned up, I popped a cinnamon *Altoid* in my mouth and dabbed on some of my cologne. While I loved the taste of the cheese, I didn't care to wear it. And I didn't care for the visual of a messy uniform.

I was back in the kitchen when Sophia came looking for me. "Preston, the guests you were waiting for have arrived."

Smiling, I nodded. "Thank you, Sophia. I'll be out in just a few minutes."

"Okay," she said.

Turning for the sink, I washed and dried my hands after finishing up plating a salmon filet.

Stella was busy cooking a steak with clarified butter and fresh herbs. It was guaranteed to make the customer who ordered it very happy. The smell of browned butter made my stomach growl.

"I'll be right back. That smells fantastic, by the way."

She smiled, loving the compliment. "Take your time. I've got it under control."

"You could easily do this without me."

Stella nodded. “Yes, but do I want to? Who would hand you your shot when you needed it? I better stay here for now. I love my little kitchen.”

The satisfaction I felt simply because she loved it was indescribable. It was becoming more and more apparent that I was a people pleaser.

When I entered the dining room, I found Greer Rowan sitting with the last person on earth I expected. When I approached the table, they smiled up at me.

“Good evening. How are you Greer?” I extended my hand to shake.

“Doing well,” he beamed. “Do you know Dr. Sanchez?”

I smiled and looked at her. “Yes, I do. Very well, in fact. How are you Eliana?”

She smiled as I bent down to kiss her cheek. “I’m good, Preston. This place is so quaint,” she said, looking around.

I laughed and ran my fingers over my stubble. “Yeah, it is. But I have some plans for it.”

“I’m sure you do, and they’ll be spectacular.”

As I stood there making small talk, their server arrived with two glasses of wine. From the looks of it, I would venture Cabernet Sauvignon.

“I’ve got to get back in the kitchen. Enjoy your dinner. Mark can tell you the specials.” I clapped him gently on the shoulder. “You’re in good hands.”

“Thanks, Preston,” Greer said, then took a sip of his wine.

I couldn’t get back into the kitchen fast enough to tell Stella who was dining with the Pirates’ owner.

An hour later, Mark returned to the kitchen with a message. “The lady would like to know if you could join her for a nightcap. Mr. Rowan had to leave.”

I looked at the clock. Nine-forty p.m.

“Go ahead,” Stella urged. “We’ve got this. And I need details.”

I smirked. “You’re just so nosy. I won’t be gone long.”

She waved me off. “Write it down if you can’t remember.”

Laughing, I looked at Mark. “Tell her I’ll be right out.”

Washing my hands for the millionth time tonight, I dried them quickly and headed out to the table.

Eliana sat alone, scrolling on her phone and sipping her glass of wine. Anna looked so much like her. It was uncanny.

“Did you run your date off?”

Eliana looked up and laughed as I took the vacated seat. “No. Greer had to go take care of some business about a contract and salary cap. I have no idea what any of that means. Give me broken bones, though, and I’m all in.”

Motioning for Mark, I ordered before picking up our conversation. I needed to get the dirt for Stella. “Could you bring me a club soda with lime, please?”

“Coming right up.” Mark headed to the bar, and I relaxed into the chair.

“How was your dinner?”

She took a sip of her wine before replying. “Delicious as usual. I see you’re still a master at what you do. Alejandro was worried you wanted to give it up for good.”

I shrugged. “Stella makes me look good these days. She runs the kitchen and I run the chaos.”

“The lack of space is killing you, isn’t it?”

I nodded. “Every single minute. But I’ve been thinking about expansion. Maybe I’ll even buy a bigger place and renovate.”

Before I could elaborate any further, one of my servers approached the table. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but the private party would like *Macallan* after dinner. I thought we had it, but evidently we didn’t. What should I tell them?”

I sighed and nodded. “Okay, let me see if I can...” but Eliana finished my thought.

“You know he’ll have that, right?” That was true. He had everything.

“I know. I’ve got to find a new supplier. This is happening way too often and I don’t want customers to think they can’t get the items on the menu. It’s bad for business.”

I leaned to the side to pull out my phone. Alejandro’s number had been at the top of my favorites since we roomed together in college.

Even though the bar was probably hopping, I knew he’d still answer. He’d kept his phone on him 24/7 since Anna had been a baby.

After the third ring, he finally answered. “Hey, what are you out of now?”

I laughed humorously. “What makes you think I’m out of something?”

Alejandro said something to Ben, and immediately it made me wonder if Nick was working tonight.

I sighed and lowered my voice. “My fucking supplier didn’t deliver the *Macallan*. Can you send me a bottle? Every other place I could get it is closed, except for you.”

Alejandro laughed. “It’ll cost you, but sure. Happy to help you out, buddy.”

I released a pent up breath. “Thanks, I appreciate it. Just have them hurry.”

I heard him mumble, then he came back. “Yeah, okay. I’ll have it there in a few minutes.”

I released a weighted breath. “Thanks. Just drop it at the bar. I’ll get you two bottles tomorrow.”

“No problem. You coming by tonight?”

Nick’s face came to mind, and I knew the answer. “Sure. See you later.”

“Later.”

When I hung up and pocketed my phone, I turned to Eliana. “I’ll be back in a minute. Don’t leave. I have some questions.”

She laughed but didn’t reply.

I made it back to the table ten minutes later after talking to the bartender and checking on the kitchen. Stella had the kitchen staff doing some pre-cleaning, so I grabbed two pieces of tiramisu from the cooler and headed back to the table.

On the way, I asked Mark to bring us two cups of coffee.

Eliana groaned when I placed the dessert in front of her. “Coffee’s on the way.”

“Boy, you do want answers. You remembered your tiramisu is my weakness.”

I smirked and dug in for a bite of the coffee flavored dessert. “The recipe is my brother’s. He gave it to me when he found out I was opening this place.”

“Where is he now?” She moaned at the flavor.

Mark brought our coffee and placed it on the table, then headed back to the kitchen.

“Greyson’s in Colorado.”

Her eyebrows rose. “What’s he doing out there?”

“A couple of his buddies moved out there and convinced him to come out. He owns a little pastry shop, and he’s doing his thing.”

She nodded. “Have you seen Anna? She’s working some with her dad. She always was a daddy’s girl.” She was stalling.

“Not in a few days. I’m sure I’ll see her soon. And you’re right. She’s definitely a daddy’s girl.”

We finished our dessert and pushed the plates to the edge so Mark could pick them up. I leaned back and put my arm

around her chair, then crossed my right leg over my right knee.

Leaning into her, I whispered, “Stop stalling and spill it. What’s going on with you and Greer?”

Eliana laughed and leaned into me. “We’re taking things slow, just enjoying each other’s company. We’re really just good friends. I’m a little lonely without Anna around, and my hours at the hospital are crazy. Then there’s the whole working for him thing.”

I hugged her and placed a kiss on my friend’s cheek. “I’m sorry you’re lonely. I haven’t been a very good friend since I’ve been here. I’ll do better.”

She smiled. “You’ve always been so good to me, Preston. When Alejandro and I split, you never took sides. And I appreciate that.”

I tightened my arm around her. “It wasn’t my place to judge. Both of my friends made an incredibly difficult decision. I just want you to be happy. And if Greer is the one who does that for you, then I’m happy for you. Alejandro will be too.”

“Thank you. Now tell me about you. Anyone special?”

“There might be. I’m working on that. Might see him tonight after we close up.”

Eliana narrowed her gaze, and I knew she was putting the pieces together. “You’re going to the bar after you close. Is it Alejandro?”

I barked out a big laugh. “Fuck, no! But you’re right. I am going to the bar.”

She grinned and patted my cheek. “It’s one of his bartenders, isn’t it?”

I nodded. “Yes. I’m finally going to ask him out. We’ve only been flirting with each other for about a year.”

Her eyes went wide. “Which one? They’re both so handsome. And I think maybe one of them has a thing for Alejandro.”

Ben. Yeah, he did.

“It’s...”

“Him,” she said, motioning to the bar.

I looked over my shoulder in time to see Nick handing the *Macallan* to my bartender. He looked at me with his blue eyes and met my gaze.

I straightened and smiled, but Nick frowned.

Shocked that he was here, it took me a minute to realize what he was seeing.

And what he must be thinking.

There I was in a very intimate embrace. We looked like we were together.

Nick steeled his expression, and I watched as the light in his eyes faded. Every step forward we’d made evaporated as he walked out the door, taking my hope he’d say yes to a date with him.

CHAPTER 5

NICK

IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL OCTOBER AFTERNOON AND PERFECT weather for the Fall Pub Crawl. The temperature was in the low 60s and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. People who enjoyed bars and pubs loved the event since we offered reduced prices for a featured local product during the Crawl.

Walking down the street, I took in the vibe of the downtown area and all the lights the restaurants with bars had put up to draw in customers for tonight. I loved the aesthetic of the refurbished buildings. Giving old buildings a new purpose was my passion and why I was getting my masters in architecture and design.

When I finally made it to work, a small crowd had already started to form inside, either waiting for the Crawl to begin or for the baseball playoffs to start.

This time of year, the Portland Pirates were the hottest ticket in town. While it wasn't uncommon to see star players out and about in town, one group of players frequented our bar. They were regular guys who also happened to be married to men. As a bisexual man myself, I appreciated how open they were about their sexuality.

After clocking in, I stopped by the boss's office to check in with him.

“Hey, boss. Anything we need to know for tonight?”

Alejandro smiled up at me from his laptop. “Hey, Nick. Keep an eye on the Portland IPA in the coolers in the bar. I had

another beverage chiller brought in to stock more if we need them. It's in the storeroom."

I nodded. "Good. That one always sells out fast."

"Yeah, it does. But we're prepared this time."

I tapped the door frame with my hand. "Okay, I'm heading out to get started."

He smiled. "Thanks, Nick. Let me know if you need anything. I'm going to check in with the kitchen staff, then I'll be out there."

I returned his smile and gave him a nod. "Okay, sounds good."

Turning from the doorway, I met Ben as he finished clocking in.

"Hey," he called, giving me a big grin and our standard high five greeting. "Have you heard the latest?"

I furrowed my brow. "About what?"

"The latest Pirate to get married." He wiggled his eyebrows at me.

"No, don't think so?"

Ben wrapped his arm around my right shoulder to share his gossip as we walked toward the bar. "Rumor has it the kicker married Coop's older brother."

My eyes widened in surprise. "Dominick Rossi got married?"

"Yeah," he chuckled. "And Coop's big brother is a former SEAL."

I'd seen Jesse Evans in here several times with Cooper and Callum, but I had no idea he swung my way. Seems every one I knew was getting married. And for the first time in my life, I wasn't sure how I felt about that. Especially since what I thought was developing with Preston blew up in my face. He was the first person to catch my attention since I'd had a little crush on Coop a couple of years ago. But I knew that wasn't going anywhere as long as Greg Foster was in Portland.

“Daaammn,” I replied, drawing out the word. “Jesse’s smokin’ hot.”

Ben shook his head, dropping his arm so we could get behind the bar. “Yeah, I know.”

I was happy Dominick and Jesse had found love with one another. I’d almost given up on that pipe dream for myself. Seems like everyone I was attracted to after Evan ended up with someone else. It was probably better for me to focus on finishing my graduate degree, anyway.

Business picked up and didn’t let up until almost midnight. Alejandro came out to help for a while and even jumped in to serve customers who ordered food. Our servers were great, but when we were slammed like tonight, any extra help was greatly appreciated. People loved this place and hung out for a long time once they were here. The regulars were used to seeing Alex Hayes and his teammates come in, but they left them alone to enjoy their evening.

I was wiping down the bar a little after midnight when the man I’d been avoiding for the last month came walking in the door. I tried not to look his way, but sometimes I failed spectacularly.

Tonight, Preston was dressed in snug, dark denim jeans and an untucked royal blue dress shirt under his leather jacket. The top three buttons were unbuttoned to reveal a hint of the dark chest hair I still dreamed about.

My heart refused to accept that he was not interested in me. Every time he came by, my cheeks still heated at the physical reminder of how willingly I’d drop to my knees for him in most of my dreams.

Preston was a gorgeous man, and we used to talk if Alejandro was busy. It was always small talk about whatever game was on TV, except for the night last spring when he’d worn that Met’s t-shirt and we’d flirted with one another.

Even now, my eyes never failed to find him when he walked in, or to imagine what it could have been like to be

with him. The way he looked at me sometimes made me think he might still be interested.

But the reality of the situation was I had a job to do, and a degree to finish. So I tore my gaze away and put my hand on Ben's shoulder.

"I'm gonna go restock the IPA in the back. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Ben nodded as he made a Moscow Mule for a cute girl at the bar. "Yeah, okay. No problem."

Ben had seen the flirting between us for months, and how it had suddenly stopped. I never told him why. Just said it wasn't like that between us. Not sure he believed me.

Without sparing another glance at Preston, I tossed my bar towel into the bin under the bar to weave my way through the tables to the back. I ran my hand down the front of my favorite Fallen Angel t-shirt that fit me like a glove to make sure it wasn't damp from leaning over the bar. Right before I reached the hallway, the man I was avoiding called out to me.

"Hey, Nick."

His warm, velvety voice poured over me before I stopped and turned to find the sexy man looking me over.

I smiled, even though he still made my heart race. "Hey, Preston. What can I do for you?"

There were all kinds of answers I'd once hoped for, but I tried to push them away. He stepped closer.

"Do you know where Alejandro is?"

I wanted to say '*in his skin*' liked I'd done in middle school, but I stopped myself before I said something that stupid. I'd just go with snarky instead.

I gave him my standard non-flirty smile that I'd give any customer. "He's usually back in his office. And unless he moved it during the Pub Crawl, it's probably in the same place it was when you were back there last night."

I was tired, and he brought out my sarcastic, smartass side for some reason. My guess was it kept me from saying something I'd really regret, like '*why are you wasting my time again*'. It was either sarcasm, or punching him.

Preston narrowed his deep chocolate eyes as a smirk crossed his beautiful mouth. He was trying so hard to glare at me, but I just put my hands on my hips and smirked right back. There was no way in hell I'd let him know how his glaring affected me or my dick.

Nodding, he rubbed his fingers across his unshaven jaw as he sized me up. "Yeah, well, it never hurts to ask. Who knows where the asshole could have wandered off to?"

I nodded, then tipped my head toward the back hallway, even though he knew exactly where Alejandro's office was.

Before I could move away, Preston stepped into my personal space to close the distance between us. Placing his hands flat on the wall above my shoulders, the fucker leaned in, bringing his stubbled cheek millimeters from my face. I could feel the static current between his stubble and mine. When his right hand went to my hip, I fought an epic battle to stifle any reaction to his touch. In that moment, if he'd told me to come for him, my goddamn body would have complied.

My pulse sped up and my eyes closed as the smell of his woody cologne and warm cinnamon scented breath wreaked havoc on my senses as they danced along my nose, neck, and ear. "Maybe I just needed an excuse to talk to you again. It's been a while. And I've missed it."

Preston lingered for only a moment after dropping that bomb before pulling back. I opened my eyes and looked up into his dark brown irises as he stepped back, giving me room to breathe.

"Uhh..." I motioned over my shoulder to the stockroom. "I've gotta..." And that's all the fucking words that would come out. I just blinked at him as he turned his sexy scowl on me, like there was more to say. But there wasn't.

“We’ll talk later,” he murmured over his shoulder. There was no hint of a smirk or any teasing from him. He was serious. And I was conflicted. I wanted to tell him to fuck off, but that didn’t happen.

I stood there, in the middle of the floor, just blinking at him, trying to process the last ten seconds. Why would he want to talk to me? Was he done with her, and now he wanted my attention again?

Stunned, I didn’t know what to do with that new information, so I’d save that to overthink later. My brow furrowed as I made my way to the storeroom to do my job.

What I wanted and my reality were two different things. My life was full of work, my family, and school. I prided myself on being focused and didn’t have time to play games with Preston James, or to jerk off to thoughts of him in my dreams. No matter how much fun it might be.

So I pushed away my thoughts about the man who’d had my undivided attention until a month ago and focused on my job. I wasn’t going to think about how much I wished things could be different. No matter what I did, I just couldn’t turn off my attraction to him.

CHAPTER 6

PRESTON

“FUCKING SMOOTH, ASSHOLE.”

As I strode toward the office, I cursed myself for how I’d handled that little interaction with the man I couldn’t get out of my head. There was something about Nick that made me nervous and drove me fucking crazy like no other person ever had. He was like a goddamn siren singing a song only I could hear to lure me in. He was under my skin and I hadn’t even touched him. Yet.

But things weren’t going the way I planned. I’d fucked up by waiting too long, and then there was Eliana. Now he wasn’t interested in me. No matter how many times I came into this bar on the pretense of seeing my friend, Nick continued to treat me like every other customer. Like tonight.

I sighed as I flopped onto the love seat in Alejandro’s office. My friend just looked up at me with raised brows, then smirked at me as he sat back in his big office chair.

“Struck out again?” The asshole was laughing at me.

“Not exactly. And fuck you,” I huffed without heat, making him laugh even louder. “And *shhhh*. He might fuckin’ hear you.”

Alejandro shook his head at me. “There’s my best friend that cusses like a sailor.”

I leaned to the side and reached for the door to close it, just in case Nick happened to wander by. He was right. I did cuss like a sailor, but only when I was anxious. He’d figured me out

a long time ago. “Yeah, well, I am what I am, and you love me anyway.”

Alejandro pulled out a notepad and pen from inside his desk and started to write. I crossed my left ankle over my right knee and spread my left arm over the back of the small sofa. My insides were squirmy, just like every time Nick blew me off. And not in the good way.

Now I was ready to hear what he had to say. He was one of only a select group of people I gave one fuck about their opinion. And he knew it.

“Are you ignoring me, too?” I was feeling testy.

“No, just writing this down to make sure we have a record of the second time you’ve been rejected in your entire adult life.”

My eyes narrowed. “You’re an asshole.”

He just laughed and tossed the pen onto the paper. “Preston, what do you want me to say? You fucked up, and you’ve been pining for him for months. Have you considered telling him what he thought he saw between you and Eliana wasn’t what it appeared to be?”

I scoffed and rolled my eyes like a petulant teenager. “What’s the point? He’s not into me anymore.”

I looked at my nails, then back at him to vent my frustration.

“I almost kissed him out there in the hallway, and he just pulled back and looked at me like I was out of my fucking mind. Which I might be since I double dipped myself in cologne and ate half a container of cinnamon *Altoids* on the way over here.”

Alejandro rolled his lips in, trying to smother a grin at my situation. The fucker was enjoying this. “What, fucker? Just say it. Whatever you’re thinking, just say it.”

Chuckling, my best friend continued to shake his head at me. “I can’t remember a time I’ve ever seen you so worked up over a guy. This isn’t like you to drag your feet when you want

something. You usually jump in and solve the issue before it has a chance to become a problem. You feeling our age or something?”

We'd been best friends since we were college roommates at UC-Berkeley twenty-plus years ago. Both of us were bisexual and had felt an enormous relief that we had each other to talk to. Our preferences were not as widely accepted in the mid-90s when we were in college.

“No, asshole,” I muttered. “I just don't...I don't...” I couldn't remember the last time I was this off kilter.

He sighed. “You, my friend, are not used to having to work for it. Men and women have always fallen at your feet, and now when one doesn't, you're a fucking mess.”

I grunted and ran my hand over my hair on the back of my head. He was right. Finding a date had never been a problem for me. But this situation was different. It had taken a long time to get him to flirt with me, and I'd gone and blown it.

Again—not in the fun way.

Looking at him, I huffed. “I don't know what to do. As much as I love a challenge, he's got me second guessing myself. Maybe I need to lose a few pounds and hit the gym a couple more days a week.”

“Preston,” he said, rocking forward in his chair. He was clearly exasperated with me. “Have you ever thought you might need to have a genuine conversation with the man that isn't flirting or about what game is playing on the TV above the bar?”

My brows knitted as I considered it. “That's not as easy as it sounds when he doesn't want to talk to me. He avoids me at every turn. I think I've been fucking transparent about my interest in him.”

Alejandro sighed, then chuckled. “You're right. That sexy glare you wield like a sword is pretty obvious. And even more so when you do things he has no idea about.”

I flipped him the bird, but he just laughed.

“Keep in mind Nick’s plate is pretty full. He’s finishing the last year of his master’s degree in architecture and working full time. The guy is probably not on the hunt for a hookup. I’ve never known him to just do a one and done. Why don’t you just go sit at the bar and try to talk to him?”

I leaned forward and propped my elbows on my knees. I knew he was right, but I honestly didn’t think Nick was interested anymore.

Mulling over what he’d said, I ran my index finger back and forth over my lips as he watched me struggle with myself. But he was right. I needed to have a conversation with Nick and set the record straight.

I stood up and smoothed down my shirt.

“I’m gonna take your advice and go have a drink at the bar. Wanna come with me?”

My so-called best friend shook his head at me. “You’re forty-five-years-old and still need a wingman? Are you scared he’s going to reject you again?”

I scoffed. “No. He didn’t fucking reject me, he just doesn’t want to be around me. Just thought you and I might could have a drink. That’s why I came over tonight.”

He smiled at me. “You know as well as I do, that’s bullshit. You’re here to see him. Go on out, and I’ll check in on you after I’m finished. Go talk to him.”

I grinned when a great idea came to me. “Maybe I’ll offer him a job. I need another bartender. How much are you paying them? I wanna offer him more money.”

That got his attention. “You’re not taking one of my best bartenders, asshole.”

Now it was my turn to laugh at him. “Then I guess you better get your happy ass out there and have a drink with me.”

Alejandro ran his hand down his face. “Fine,” he grumbled. “It’s like having two kids. But I gotta finish payroll first.”

“Hurry up,” I said as I walked out, “or I’m definitely offering him a job.”

“You’re supposed to be my friend!” he exclaimed as he went back to work.

“Yeah, and you’re supposed to be my wingman. For life.”

I chuckled as I walked back out toward the bar, feeling lighter than I had in weeks. Alejandro was the best friend I’d ever had, and I trusted him with my life. So maybe I should take his advice. It wasn’t in my nature to hold back on anything that could fix a situation in business. And I wouldn’t let it happen now.

I wanted Nick.

Badly.

Straightening my spine, I looked around for him. Climbing onto the bar stool, Ben smiled at me. “Hey Preston. What can I get ya?”

“Nick,” I said without hesitation.

Ben laughed, not surprised by my blunt response. “Well okay. Let me go get him.”

I donned my most confident look. “Tell him Preston James wants him.”

Ben looked at me and smiled. He knew what I was saying. “Okay. I’ll be right back.”

I shifted on my barstool and glanced over at the European soccer game playing on the big screen. Alejandro really had done a great job renovating this place when he bought the building next door. Maybe it was time I did something like this. God knows I had the money. What was I waiting for?

Ben returned to his spot behind the bar as I contemplated the future of my restaurant.

And without Nick.

I furrowed my brows.

“The boss needed him for a minute. He’ll be right out. Said to tell you to hold your horses.”

I scowled at him. “Who said that?”

“I did.” The reply came from behind me as I watched the object of my desire round the bar. He was a beautiful man to look at.

Nick walked up to where I was seated, then leaned forward on his forearms. His bright blue eyes drew me in closer.

He studied me a moment, the hint of a smile inching up his face. “What do you want from me, Preston James?” He held my gaze captive, and I didn’t think I could look away if I wanted to.

I ran my index finger over my bottom lip and leaned a little closer. Looking him in the eyes, I answered his question. “I want you.”

Nick’s brows furrowed. I knew what he was thinking. But as we stood there looking at each other, he hadn’t pulled away.

Was that curiosity I saw in his eyes? If that was the case, I had him right where I wanted him. Well, not exactly, because I wanted him under me. A hot, sweaty mess as I drove him crazy with my cock.

“You’re going to have to be more specific, Mr. James.”

I growled. “I think you know what I’m talking about, Mr. Reed.”

He studied me a moment, then smiled. At least he was flirting with me again.

“Oh, you want me to make you a drink.”

“No. I don’t want a damn drink.”

He hummed, studying me with narrowed eyes. “Okay. The only other reason I could imagine you might want to talk to me is to offer me a job.”

“No.” This little game was annoying. “Well, maybe. But not tonight.”

Nick looked mildly amused with me. “I’ll ask you again. What do you want with me tonight, Preston?”

Did he really not understand how much I wanted him? Young guys like him liked blunt honesty, right? I’d just give it to him straight.

I leaned forward a little more, just inches from his mouth. “I want to take you to bed and make you feel things you’ve never felt before. I want you writhing under me and begging me to let you come while I worship your body.”

Nick stared at me, trying to size me up. I never broke our gaze as he pulled away. “As delightful as that sounds, I don’t sleep with the boss, Preston. I have a hard and fast rule about that. And if you intend to offer me a job, this,” he motioned between us, “will never happen. You and I obviously are not on the same page when it comes to carnal intent.”

Was he serious? Most guys would jump at the chance to bed an older rich guy. But not Nick. I looked at him. “Then you’re fired.”

Nick laughed, and the sound of it made me hopeful that maybe I hadn’t completely fucked this up.

“I appreciate the offer, Preston. I really do, because it’s been a long time. But what you’re offering is really not my style. I don’t do one-night stands, or players. If I need to get off, I’ve got a hand.”

I stared at him with my mouth hanging open. Nick was magnificent. He was strong and determined, and wasn’t taking any excuses, or any of my shit. He was perfect for me. Just like I thought.

“Look, after this semester, I only have my final project before I graduate. Something tells me working for you would be very distracting. And there’s not enough money in the world to make me want to leave Alejandro’s.”

Was he serious? Nah, he couldn’t be. No one had ever turned me down. But I wasn’t one to give up easily.

“We could make it work.”

Nick laughed humorlessly again and scrubbed his hands over his face. “You’re not listening. The only thing we can be right now is friends.” He studied my face, then added, “And I’m not sure I’ve got it in me to even be that.”

When he went to step back, I reacted like the out-of-control, desperate man I was and grabbed his hand. Nick looked at me as the current I was feeling seemingly transferred to him. He looked down at our connection and took a deep breath. But he didn’t pull away.

I held his hand a little tighter. “Alejandro mentioned you were finishing your master’s in architecture. What kind of project do you have to do?”

“I’ve got to design a building with all the schematics.”

I swallowed and spoke softly. “Have you decided on a project yet?”

He shook his head. “I have some ideas, but nothing concrete yet. I’m still thinking about it.”

I grinned. Without knowing it, he was making this so much easier for us. “Is the design supposed to be hypothetical, or can it be a real renovation?”

Nick tilted his head, never taking his eyes off mine. “Either one. Why?”

Fuck, this could really work.

He was trying to figure out if I was serious since it was a complete one-eighty from propositioning him. But the longer we talked, the closer we got to being on the same page.

I turned off flirty Preston and spoke sincerely. “I have something you might be interested in taking a look at. I’ve got to do something about the lack of space at Bernardo’s. Business is booming, and I’m out of dining space. And storage space. You need a project, and I need an architect. I think we might be able to help each other out.”

Nick’s eyes widened as he listened. “Are you serious?”

“Dead serious. If you could see what we’re working with over there, you’d understand why I have to do something.

Wouldn't it be better for you to actually have a real renovation to design?"

He nodded and leaned in. "Of course, but wait. You realize you won't be able to actually build anything from my designs, right? I'm not licensed. Another firm would need to develop your plans."

I shrugged. "If you create the plans for what I want in my building, I'll take care of the rest. Maybe we can get a licensed architect to mentor you along and sign off on it, so when it's time to build, we won't have wasted any time. My building will get you all the offers you want, because what I'm thinking about is not going to be small."

Nick looked to be running all this through his head, then nodded slowly. I could see the excitement growing in his eyes. "Yeah, okay. We'd have to run it all by my professor first. But I think she might go for it."

I nodded once. "This could work out for both of us, Nick. But before we get ahead of ourselves, you need to see what I'm dealing with over there."

He frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"I want you to see Bernardo's before you make a decision. It's going to be a big job and you need to know what I'm dealing with now, and what I'm looking for."

Nick looked at me like he was still trying to decide if I was serious or not. "But I've seen the restaurant. I don't need to see it again."

I leaned in closer across the bar and he met me halfway. "Yes, you do. There are specific things I want to address in the next place, and if you don't know what they are, how are you going to know how to address them?"

Nick looked back and forth in my eyes, and everything fell away. If I didn't know better, I'd swear we were the only two people in the room. He intoxicated me like no one ever had, and I was drunk on him.

He stood up, looked around the bar, and then back to me with a steely resolve. "I don't like games, Preston. If this is

just some way to get me into bed, it's going to piss me off. This is my career we're talking about. I've worked too hard to fuck it up now."

I got it. "I can assure you, this is no game. Ask Alejandro. He'll tell you."

Nick took a steadying breath and rubbed the back of his neck. I itched to do that for him.

"Okay. When?"

I painted a serious expression on my face and answered his question. "Right now."

CHAPTER 7

NICK

“RIGHT NOW?”

Preston relaxed back on the bar stool and draped his arm over the back of the one next to him. “Yes, now’s a perfect time. It’s closed and you can look around all you want. No customers or staff to worry about. I need an architect, and you need a project. No better time than the present.”

I looked around, trying to buy time to think about how this would work. The opportunity to complete a real design was very enticing, just like he was. He made it sound so simple.

“Why me?” I asked. “You could have any architect you wanted chomping at the bit to do this project.”

“You’re right, I could. But I don’t want just anyone. I want you. The way I see it, it’s killing two birds with one stone. We get to spend some personal time together and we both get what we need professionally. You’re busy, and I’m busy. What better way for us to get to know each other out of my bed?”

I tilted my head and narrowed my eyes. “Are you doing this to convince me to sleep with you? Because I don’t need to be baited with a project to fuck you.” I leaned back across the bar, unwilling to give him the upper hand. I couldn’t make this too easy for him. “If and when I’m ready, I’ll let you know. But mixing business and pleasure sounds risky for both of us.”

Preston quirked up one side of his mouth and brought those long fingers to rub over his lips. He knew I was watching him. “My business is my pleasure. And I’m a fucking grown up. I can separate the two.”

All I could think about was how grown up he was. I stood back up from the bar, needing a little distance, and studied him for a moment. This was dangerous on so many levels, but what was life without a little danger?

I nodded slowly and Preston smiled knowingly at me. He stood up and walked toward the back.

“Where are you going?”

He stopped and turned to look at me with the sexiest expression I think I’d ever seen on his handsome face. “I’m going to tell your boss you’re leaving.”

My body heated from head to toe, and I knew right then I was not going to be able to keep my hands off him. Now it was simply a question of how long I could hold out.

Did I want to sleep with him? Without a doubt. He was sexy as fuck, and we’d been flirting with each other, ramping up the attraction for a long time. But there was something else about him that drew me in like a duck to water.

I never imagined he’d want anything more than some playful banter with someone like me. I guess I was wrong, and that excited me more than it should have.

Case in point, my sexually charged dreams about him. My sister was right. I think my brain was telling me to get on with it and stop stalling.

Lost in my thoughts, I was startled when Ben nudged me. “Dude, he’s got it fucking bad for you. I wish you could have heard the way he asked for you, all possessive and demanding. It was hot.”

I chuckled nervously. “Yeah, well, it’s mutual.”

He grinned. “I thought so. He’s fucking hot. I heard him talking about the new thing. That sounds cool for you.”

“It does,” I replied. “And it’s exactly the type of project I’ve been looking for.”

Ben looked toward the employee only area. “Here they come. The two hottest men in Portland.”

I glanced over my shoulder. They were smiling, and it made my heart beat a little faster. Just looking at him did dirty things to me.

I went back to stacking glasses until Alejandro's hand landed on my shoulder. "Hey, I guess my asshole best friend talked to you about his expansion."

I nodded. "Yeah, he did."

"Good. For some reason, he really wants to show you Bernardo's tonight. So if you're game to go see it, you can knock off early."

I frowned and looked into his kind eyes. "You sure? I'm supposed to close."

He chuckled and glanced down the bar at Ben. "Yeah, I know. Benjamin and I will take care of it."

His stare lingered on Ben for a minute, and I had to look away.

"Are you sure? I can see it another time."

He smiled. "It's really okay. If Preston didn't honestly need more space, I'd tell him to fuck off. But he's been bitching about the lack of space since the first week he opened the place. If you can help each other, it would be a win for both of you. He won't do you wrong."

I stared at him with a furrowed brow. "What do you mean?"

"He's a man of his word. You can trust what he tells you is the truth."

I nodded, relieved. I knew Alejandro wouldn't steer me wrong. "Yeah, thanks, boss."

"No problem, Nick. He's a dumbass sometimes, but he's a good man. Very attentive when he likes someone. There's more to him than you think."

I had no idea how to respond to that. My heart was racing again with even more excitement. Alejandro had just verified what I'd been thinking. They were best friends, and he had to

know about our attraction to one another. Neither of us were doing a very good job hiding it.

And he was right. I needed to look at what he wanted to do. If it was feasible for me, this could be the opportunity of a lifetime. I'd be a fool to pass it up just because looking at him made my dick hard.

I wove through the now-empty high top tables to clock out. When I reached the break room, I grabbed my jacket, then stepped into the bathroom to wash my hands.

Glancing up at myself in the mirror, I ran my hands through my hair, leaving thick trails behind. I was tired, but that was nothing new.

After washing my hands, I left the bathroom to find Preston standing with his back to the wall, waiting for me. The smile that he wore at seeing me made me stupidly happy.

"Hey." I stopped in front of him, leaving several feet between us to try to calm my libido. My eyes immediately focused on his perfectly formed lips. I wanted him to take the lapels of my coat and pull me closer to his body so I could smell the cinnamon on his breath when he spoke.

I took a steadying breath as Preston assessed me from head to toe, then leveled me with a look that sent tingles down my spine. He had my undivided attention and he hadn't said a word.

I was so fucked.

He smiled like he knew what I was thinking. "Ready to go?"

I nodded, never taking my eyes off his. "Definitely."

Preston smiled, then reached down to lace our fingers together. He looked at our hands, then back up to me. "I've been told I can be very blunt and come on strong."

I smiled sardonically. "No. You? Blunt?"

He raised his brows and tilted his head. "Yeah, I don't know what they're talking about, but whatever. My point is that I realize this is a lot to throw at you this late, but just trust

me, okay? I wasn't feeding you a line about how attracted I am to you. I was being completely honest with you."

He gently squeezed my hand, and I tightened my hold on him. I still had one question lingering in my mind, and I needed to know if he'd be honest about it.

"Alright. But answer one thing for me."

"Sure. What is it?"

Preston looked at me expectantly. "Are you dating the woman from the party?"

Preston smiled and started laughing. "Uh, no. That was Eliana. She's Alejandro's ex-wife. She's like a sister to me."

Relief poured over me, and it must have shown on my face.

"I'm not a cheater, Nick, and I should have told you who she was a long time ago. You're the only person I've been attracted to in a long time."

I smiled and nodded. "Yeah, I'm kinda attracted to you, too."

He grinned at me. "I already knew that."

I rolled my eyes, and he chuckled. "Let's go. My car is parked out back."

"Do you always get your way?" I asked.

"Every time it matters."

CHAPTER 8

PRESTON

IT WAS A FUCKING RELIEF TO KNOW WE WERE ON THE SAME page. Insecurity was a new feeling for me, and I have to admit I didn't like it. But what I did like was kissing.

Once the door had closed behind us, I turned and caged Nick up against it, my body blanketing his.

My hands went to his face, and Nick leaned into my touch as I skated them through his soft hair to cup his cheeks. His arms wound their way around me to pull me closer.

"I don't know how much longer I can restrain myself from kissing you."

"Then don't," he whispered, inching closer.

When our lips met for the first time, the slow sensual glide of our tongues, tasting and devouring each other, became our world as everything else fell away. We could have been in the middle of the street and we wouldn't have cared.

Releasing a year's worth of sexual tension made me yearn for more, but I pulled back and placed an adoring kiss on his forehead and on each cheek. I never wanted to take my hands off him.

"Now I really wish I hadn't waited so long to do that."

"I didn't tell you to stop."

I laughed and looked at him. "What if I can't stop?"

"I hope you don't."

One kiss wasn't enough when I'd waited so long. I leaned back in with a sensual swipe of my tongue over his lips before diving in for another kiss to explore his beautiful mouth, beginning the journey to learn what he liked and what turned him on. Nick's moans and whimpers were a road map to pleasuring him.

Breaking the kiss, I laid my forehead against his and swiped my thumbs along his stubble. "For the record, I knew I was right."

Nick chuckled as he inhaled a shuddered breath. "About what?"

"That we were going to be good together."

"It's been less than five minutes. What makes you so sure?"

I looked into his light blue eyes that swirled with the same lust I was feeling. "You've had my full attention since the first time I met you. You've been camped out up here in my brain, and every time you looked at me or told me you didn't like my shirt, it just threw another log on the fire. And now that I've kissed you, it's like the world is on fire."

Nick grinned as I turned his head to the left and kissed down his neck. "And I'm sure because of the way you hold on to me like you're afraid I'll stop," I whispered into his ear. I placed more open-mouthed kisses along his neck and down to his shoulder.

Nick was lost in my sensual treatment as he shivered and moaned. When his hips bucked and his cock brushed mine, I almost lost it.

I dug down for the control to stop and pulled back. I watched his tongue snake out again to lick away the remnants of our kiss. And there he went again, throwing another log on my fire. We had to get out of the alley.

"Let's go, Nicholas," I whispered, running my hands down his arms to take his hands. I pulled him from the door. "We have work to do."

Entwining his fingers with mine, we strode down the alley where my black *Mercedes* was parallel parked. I dug out the keys from my pocket and clicked the FOB.

“Nice car.”

I gave his hand a playful squeeze. “I know. That’s why I bought it.”

Walking around the other cars, I came to a stop by the passenger door. Reaching for the handle, I pulled it open for him.

“Get in.” I settled my palm on the small of his back, and it felt so natural to touch him that way.

I closed his door and walked around to get in. Sliding onto the black leather seat, I buckled my seatbelt, then pushed the button to start the car. The soft purr of the engine was barely audible.

“Do you have class tomorrow?” I asked quietly.

He nodded. “Yeah, at nine. Why?”

“Just want to make sure I get you home at a decent time for school tomorrow.” I sounded like his father, but it didn’t seem to bother him.

“I’d appreciate that. I only need to see the kitchen and storage areas I haven’t seen, then we can go over your ideas and needs for the new building later.”

I rolled that around in my head. “Okay, our first date can be tomorrow night. I’ll make dinner for us at my place.”

Nick shook his head. “Can’t. I have to close tomorrow.”

I growled, making him laugh. “When do you *not* have to work for that Drill Sargent? If you come bar tend for me, you’ll get more time off and I pay more. I told him tonight I was going to offer you a job.”

Nick chuckled, making me smile. “What did he say?”

I shrugged, thinking back on our exchange. “Threatened my life. But I’m not scared of him.” I smirked at my overstatement of Alejandro’s response.

“How about this? Instead of taking me to Bernardo’s, why don’t we drive by the other buildings you’re considering? I need to see the size I’m working with.”

I snickered, and Nick groaned. “You know what I mean.”

“I’ll be happy to show you all the size you want.”

He groaned again. “I’m sure you would. And I’m going to need to see that at a later time.”

Reaching over, I took his hand in mine and laced our fingers together. I had to touch him. I’d agree to anything he wanted.

“That sounds like a good idea. I know you’re tired.”

Nick squeezed my hand in return. “I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t want to be, Preston. I just need you to be okay with riding shotgun to my degree.”

I smiled. “Yeah, I’m good with that. My restaurant consumes a lot of my time as well. I’ll take any time I can get with you.”

So we drove around downtown Portland, looking at the properties I’d been considering. Nick studied them and listened as I described the features that drew me to them.

After checking out the last one, I drove him home and pulled up in front of his building. Nick looked over at me in confusion.

“How do you know where I live?”

How do I tell him this without sounding like a stalker?

I rubbed my fingers over my stubble and partially covered my mouth. I reminded myself how much I hated bullshit. So I just told him.

“Remember when you were sick and Alejandro took you home?”

Nick studied me with slightly narrowed eyes. “Yes, why?”

I shifted to the right to look at his beautiful blue eyes. “You were out of it and he was worried getting you up the

stairs might be really difficult. So he called me to come help him, and to bring some meds in case you didn't have any."

Nick slowly nodded his head as if remembering that night. "I don't remember seeing you."

"You were out of it, but Alejandro managed to get you awake enough to take some ibuprofen after he called your mom. I left before she got there."

His blue eyes focused on me. "Did you work for me?"

I nodded and let out a laugh. "I tried. Thankfully, Ben did most of the mixed drinks."

Nick looked down at our hands. "My mom said soup was delivered. I just assumed it was Ben."

"It was," I said. "He delivered it to you from Alejandro. But I made the soup, because he can barely open a can."

Nick shifted on the leather seat to face me. "There wasn't just soup in the bag, Preston. My mom said it was filled with stuff."

I shrugged, holding his gaze. "You needed it. And I wasn't sure she'd be able to get anything for you. I never intended for you to know it was me."

Nick's eyes swept over my face and landed on my lips as he extended his left hand to curl around the back of my neck. I shivered and my breath hitched as his fingers left heated trails over my skin. Pulling me to him, his right hand joined the left to urge me closer and cup my face. His thumbs ghosted over my cheek as his lips found mine.

Every neuron in my brain fired as he slowly deepened the kiss. It was the Fourth of July and New Year's Eve all at once.

I raised my hands to cradle his face, wanting more of him, but knowing that we needed to take our time. He had me feeling things I'm not sure I've ever felt for anyone. And for the first time in a very long time, I might be able to let my walls down some if he would give us a chance.

When he was finished, he rested his forehead against mine. "You're going to ruin me, Preston James. I just know it."

I chuckled and caught his lips for another brief kiss. “I hope so,” I breathed. “Then you’ll be all mine.”

CHAPTER 9

NICK

BEN WAS ALREADY BEHIND THE BAR WHEN I WALKED IN THE next afternoon. Only a few customers were seated around the room, but it was going to be busy with the first game of the World Series starting at seven.

Just as I figured, Ben wasted no time with his questions as soon as I got behind the bar.

“How’d it go last night?”

I frowned and played dumb as I opened a couple packs of cocktail napkins. “Fine. Why?”

His brow furrowed as he leaned in to study my chin, then tapped it with his index finger. “Yeah, looks like you’ve got some beard burn up in here.”

I slapped his hand away, laughing. “I do not, you asshole. You’re the one with beard burn.”

“Yeah, I wish.” He glanced around before his eyes fixed on something.

I turned my head in the same direction to find Alejandro talking to three women sitting at a high top table in the corner. They were laughing at something he said. There was no doubt our boss was a charmer, and for some reason, that didn’t seem to sit well with my friend.

Turning back, I looked at Ben as he stared that way. When his eyes narrowed a bit, I chuckled.

“You okay over there, buddy?”

Ben shifted his eyes to me. “Yeah. I’m fine.”

He wasn’t fine. His spine had straightened, his jaw was tense, and the happy-go-lucky smile he wore all the time was nowhere in sight. He’d made it no secret that he was into our boss, and there were times when I thought maybe Alejandro returned his feelings. Their banter was confusing, but this spoke volumes.

“I’m gonna go grab some more napkins from the back,” he muttered.

I looked down at the pack of five hundred I’d just unloaded around the bar. Before I could say anything, Ben’s path to the back room lead him around the table where Alejandro would see him.

He looked up at Ben as he approached. Ben, who wasn’t smiling, never looked his way.

I’d never really paid attention to their dynamic until now, and it was fascinating. It was like watching a live soap opera.

As I stood there and watched, Alejandro’s demeanor changed completely. His smile slipped a little, and I’d bet he had no idea what they’d just said to him. What they didn’t know was all his attention had just walked into the back without even a side glance at him. Alejandro looked at them, pointed over his shoulder in the same direction Ben had gone.

As he stepped back from the table, one of the women slid a cocktail napkin across the table to him. He looked at it, smiled and nodded, then tucked it in his pocket. When he turned to walk away, he glanced over at the bar, catching my eye.

I tipped my head back to acknowledge him, then raised my brows.

Alejandro took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of his nose before disappearing into the back.

My attention was drawn away from whatever the fuck was going on when business started to pick up just as Anna came in the front door.

“Hey Nick, how are you?” she said, glancing around.

“I’m good. How about you?”

“Good.” She scanned the bar again, then looked a little disappointed. “Dad said he needed me tonight. Baseball requires popcorn, evidently.” She continued to look around as she leaned on the bar. “Is he in the back?”

Before I could come up with an excuse for her not to go back there, Ben came walking out carrying three bottles of vodka. I grinned and shook my head because, by some miracle, his smile had returned until he spotted Anna. Then his eyes went wide before he corrected his expression.

Oh fuck. There was a story behind that change-up. But I focused my attention back on Anna. “Yeah, I think so.”

Fortunately for me, a customer needed a drink. I’d be asking all kinds of nosy and invasive questions later. Payback was hell, and I was looking forward to it.

Things didn’t slow down until almost eleven. I had my mind on Preston when Ben started his questioning, but this time, I was ready for him with a boatload of my own.

“You never told me how things went last night?” he said, wiggling his eyebrows.

“I hate to disappoint you, but we talked about his plans and drove by some properties he’s considering.” And kissed the fuck out of each other.

Ben definitely looked disappointed. “Seriously? That’s it? Mr. Hot-As-Fuck demands your attention, and all you do is talk?”

I grinned at him. “You want details, then you’re gonna have to spill some, too. You went out of here all grumpy and came back wearing a smile. Wanna share with the class what that was all about?”

I’d never seen Ben turn that shade of red before, making me laugh.

“That’s *uh*,” he said, looking around, “a, uh, story for another time. Plus, you haven’t spilled your beans yet,” he

muttered under his breath as he continued to stack empty beer mugs in the dish tray under the bar.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought you’d say.”

Anna came out from the back with her dad by her side. She raised her hand to wave goodbye, then fixed her eyes on Ben. “Bye Ben. See you later.”

He looked up and smiled. “Bye, Anna.” Definitely not the smile he gave her dad.

Just when I thought he’d forgotten, he started again. “You guys left out the back door last night, right?”

I turned and looked at him. “Yeah, why?”

He looked up to where Alejandro was walking Anna out to her car, then smiled.

“When we went to leave last night, some trash cans had been knocked over, so Alejandro checked the security footage before we left. You know, in case he needed to call the police. Or the fire department,” he teased.

My face heated. “And I bet you made sure he wasn’t injured while picking up empty trash cans.”

Ben’s *Cheshire Cat* grin was back as he held his hands up. “Hey, I was just doing my job and helping the boss. I wasn’t the one out there in the alley getting all of *Harry Potter’s Dementors* sucked out of my face.”

I flipped him off while he guffawed at me. All I saw was Preston, and it put the smile right back on my face.

Ben might give me hell, but I knew he was a good friend. I’d never seen Ben without a smile on his face. And if he was doing what I thought he was doing, I hoped he didn’t get hurt. But if he did, I’d be here for him.

“You know I’ve got your back, right?”

He grinned and raised his hand for a high five. “Back at ya, man.”

* * *

THE FOLLOWING NIGHT, Preston was still perched on a bar stool after we closed, scrolling on his phone while I wiped down the tables and put up the chairs.

Alejandro took the stool next to him. “I guess I don’t have to ask why you’re still here.”

I smiled to myself, knowing he’d stayed for me.

“Well, it’s not to see you this time.”

Alejandro snorted. “Like you’ve been here all the other times to see me.”

“I like him more than you, asshole. And you don’t need a ride home.”

He laughed, and they started talking about liquor suppliers.

And that was it. No teasing, no ribbing, nothing.

When he pulled up to my apartment, I expected him to pin me to the seat and kiss the fuck out of me. But all I got was a kiss on the forehead.

“I’ll see you tomorrow night. Do you need me to pick you up?”

“No, I’ll get an *Uber*.” I shifted in the seat, waiting for him to kiss me.

But he only nodded with a smile. “Text me when you get there, and I’ll let you in.”

“Can’t wait,” I said, shifting closer.

Preston brought his hand up to cup my face, and my pulse picked up knowing what was coming. “Good. I’m looking forward to spending some private time with you.”

I stared at him as he gently swept his thumb over my lips, amping up my desire. Opening my mouth, I took his thumb inside and ran my tongue over the pad. Preston’s eyes swirled

with heat as I waited for my kiss. When he didn't initiate it, I took what I wanted.

Reaching over, I let his thumb drop from my lips, and wrapped my hand around his neck to pull him to me. Fusing my lips to his, the taste of cinnamon filled my mouth when he slipped his tongue in with a sigh. I guess he'd been waiting for me to make the first move. So I kissed the fuck out of him, then got out of the car.

"See you tomorrow." I said with a smile and a hard dick, then closed the door.

When I was inside the lobby, I turned to watch as he pulled away from the curb.

* * *

"WE'RE HERE, dude. Looks like the place is closed. You sure this is where you wanted to go?"

I looked up and smiled. "Yeah, positive, but thanks. I paid on the app."

Grabbing my things, I got out and texted Preston.

Me: I'm here.

Preston: Finally

Before I could put my phone away, the front door swung open, and he reached for my portfolio.

"I didn't think you'd ever get here."

Furrowing my brow, I pulled my phone back out and looked at the time. "Am I late?"

"No, of course not. That's not what I meant," he chuckled as he locked the door. He turned and swept his eyes over me. "I've been anxious for you to get here. Next time, I'm coming to get you."

There was no way to stop the smile that took over my face, so I didn't even try. Preston took my hand in his and laced our fingers together.

"Come with me," he whispered.

Leading me by the hand, we entered the kitchen and back area. Looking around, I could see what he was faced with.

"This is one reason we need to expand. There isn't enough storage space for the amount of food we need to bring in to meet our menu."

I nodded and took in the multiple sets of shelving that had been set up to hold their dry goods. Boxes were stacked along the walls and into the hallway.

"Yeah, I can see that. Adequate storage is a must. Alejandro struggled with that until he expanded the bar."

We went back through the kitchen and out into the dining room area.

"Look around. I'll be right back."

Preston disappeared into the kitchen as I stood in the middle of the room and looked the space over.

He had maybe a third of the seating area Alejandro did, and the tables were close together. If he was at capacity, it was a wonder how they could move.

When Preston returned, he handed me a glass of wine. I looked at it, then back at him as he stared at me.

"What do you think?" He sipped from his glass and waited for my reply, his dark eyes glued to me.

"It's a compact space, but it's warm and inviting."

"You're being nice. I need honesty."

I nodded. "Okay. It's small as fuck and I have no idea why you chose this building. It's a wonder the fire marshall doesn't come in nightly to shut you down for being over capacity."

We stared at each other for a moment, and I wondered if I'd done the wrong thing. But the smile that broke across those

sexy lips drew my attention.

“I agree. Taste your wine.” His eyes sparkled as I swirled the white wine in the glass before finally tasting it. I was no sommelier, but I knew letting it breathe was a good thing.

“What do you think?”

I nodded, never dropping my gaze. “It’s good. But I know nothing about wine.”

Preston nodded and seemed to file that information away for later. “Are you ready to eat?”

I was starving. “I’m okay. We can wait if you want.” My stomach growled in disapproval as it called me out on my lie.

“Your stomach doesn’t agree.”

I laughed and nodded as he led me back into the kitchen. Following, I looked at his ass the whole way.

I watched, eyes pulled to him like a magnet, as he strode over to a shelf and took down a new apron. Tossing it onto the stainless steel counter, he unbuttoned his sleeves and folded them up to mid forearm. The dark hair on his arms turned me on, and his muscled upper body tested the stitching of his shirt.

My gaze traveled up his body to his collar, where the first three buttons were undone, giving me a hint of what his chest must look like.

I’d never had time to fully take in how gorgeous Preston was, and I was taking advantage of it now.

I took another sip of wine as he picked up the apron, unfolded it, and snapped it to straighten it before tying it around his slim hips. How the fuck did he manage to make tying an apron into an erotic thing?

He caught me staring again and smirked. “Like what you see?”

I cleared my throat and looked down at my disappearing wine. “Yes. Too much, I’m afraid.” I didn’t usually drink wine, but it seemed like it might function as truth serum on me.

When his apron was tied low on his hips, Preston pulled out a stool from under the counter. He was close enough for me to smell his cologne. My eyes closed, and I groaned as he put his hand on my hip.

“Sit,” he chuckled.

I whimpered as thoughts of sitting on his cock filled my brain. Opening my eyes, I found him still in my personal space.

Reaching across me for the wine bottle, the tip of my nose skimmed along his exposed skin. It was all I could do not to lick him, but I would restrain myself.

Maybe.

Preston chuckled as he poured me more wine. “Do you like grilled cheese?”

I nodded, the wine beginning to go to my head. “Yeah, love it actually.”

“Good. I’m going to make my favorite sandwich for you.”

Preston leaned down and kissed the edge of my mouth before moving away. The asshole knew what he was doing to me—again.

He went to the refrigerator and pulled out a plate. “Snack on this,” he said, pushing a plate of cheese, apple slices, and crackers toward me.

I took a cracker and a piece of cheese, then followed it with a bite of apple. It was a delicious combination. “Tell me about your vision for the new place.”

He shrugged. “I know what I like, and what I want it to be, but no idea how to get there. And there’s no way to renovate this place.”

“Okay. What do you want it to be?”

Preston looked up at me from spreading butter on the bread. “More than just another restaurant. I have a lot of ideas coursing through my head, and I need help putting it all

together in a workable space. I want a fresh design, and I think I can get that with you.”

I nodded. “All right. Let’s start from the beginning. New construction or renovate?”

“Renovate. I want to take an existing building downtown and repurpose it into what I need,” he said as he put our food together.

“Single story? Multiple floors? Outdoor dining?”

Preston appeared to consider my question as he placed our sandwiches in a cast iron pan on the stove.

“Yes, to all of them. I want it to be something no one has ever seen before. It’s probably a crazy idea, but I want it anyway. It’s your job to put it together.” He flipped the bread in the pan, and the smell of browned butter was incredible.

“I love renovation. Whatever you want, I can design it. That’s the best part of architecture.”

I took another sip of wine as I watched the muscles in his back flex and contract under his shirt. He was a beautiful man, with wide shoulders and a narrow waist.

Plating up our food, he turned off the stove, then cut the sandwiches in half. Turning toward me, he walked to where I was sitting. “Let’s eat at the bar. Bring the wine.”

Preston carried both plates on his extended arm like a waiter and his wineglass in the other. I picked up my glass and the bottle, then followed him out into the dining room. He sat our plates down, then walked over to dim the lights. Making a stop behind the bar, he turned on some slow jazz.

The ambient lighting was intimate and relaxing, and the food smelled delicious. He slid onto the bar stool next to me, then picked up the bottle to top off our glasses.

“Are you trying to get me drunk?”

He chuckled. “No. I hope you don’t get smashed on two glasses of wine. I didn’t think you’d guzzle it while I cooked for you, but whatever.”

I bumped my shoulder into his, making him chuckle. “I didn’t guzzle it.”

“I know. I’m topping it off for the pairing. The flavor of the three cheeses is enhanced by the wine. When you combine them, it creates an incredible burst of flavor on the tongue. Taste the sandwich without the wine.”

Reaching for it, I took a bite as he watched for my reaction. The combination of warm, melted cheeses and tomato exploded over my tongue, making me moan.

Preston smiled and pushed the wineglass to me, then nodded toward it. “Now,” he purred, “take another bite, then a sip of wine.”

I did as he asked, and he was right. It was incredible. So much so that my eyes rolled back in my head as I let out a gravelly groan. I put the sandwich down and wiped my mouth.

“That might be the best thing I’ve ever had.”

“I’m happy you like it.” He took a bite of his sandwich and groaned. I watched intently as his Adam’s Apple bobbed when he swallowed. And that confirmed I was not going to make it through this.

“Is this on your menu?” I took another bite and quickly finished the first half.

He shook his head, then took a sip of his wine. Preston shifted his body toward me, bringing his knees next to my thigh. His warmth radiated to my skin and made me want more. I turned my head to look at him.

“Not yet. But it’s going to be if we can find a way to streamline everything I want to do. It’s just an example of how extraordinary simple foods can be if they’re prepared with high-quality ingredients. The hint of sweetness from the wine balances the sharpness of the cheese and the acidity of the tomato jam. This kind of experience is what I want to showcase in a separate wine bar.”

I swallowed as my heart hammered in my chest. Being part of this vision, whatever it was, was going to change my life. I

could just feel it.

“This is an incredible opportunity.”

Preston grinned. “I knew you were the perfect one for it.”

Then he kissed me.

And I was lost.

CHAPTER 10

PRESTON

I'D NEVER BEEN SO ENTHRALLED WITH SOMEONE LIKE I WAS with Nick.

There was something about him that drew me in the first time I walked into the bar. I couldn't take my eyes off him.

Early on, I thought there had to be something wrong with me. I was forty-five, and totally gone for him. Who falls head over heels for someone in such a short amount of time?

The only thing I could do was go to 'Doctor' *Google* for some answers. Turns out my subconscious knew way before I did that Nick was perfect for me. It was absolutely possible to know you've found *the one* after only 3 minutes. It went beyond pheromones and attraction, to a connection between us that I marveled at. I felt every exhilarating second of it and it showed.

Leaning in closer, I looked into his blue eyes with a smile on my face.

"Just so you know, for the record, I was right again."

Nick looked confused. "Right? What about this time?"

I smirked. "Us. If kissing you feels like this, imagine what it's gonna be like in bed."

"Yeah, well, just so you know, Alejandro caught our alleyway make-out session on the security tape."

Now it was my turn to frown. "How do you know? Did he say something to you?"

Nick shook his head. “No, but Ben sure did.”

I scoffed. “Don’t worry about that. Alejandro will be fine with us.”

“Do you think they’re messing around?”

I rolled my lips in. “I don’t know. If they are, he hasn’t said anything to me. It would definitely be a first for him. I’ve never known him to get involved with an employee.”

I knew I’d said the wrong thing when he sat back. Wiping his lips with the side of his finger, he peered at me with those eyes that were my kryptonite.

“Maybe it’s not a good idea for us to mix business and pleasure while we’re working together.”

“What? Why? I’m not paying you. And you’re not my employee.”

Nick looked at me with concern etched on his face. “Even though you’re right about that, I know all I’m going to want to think about is fucking the hell out of you. Bending you over the bar, and rimming your ass before I sink myself balls deep in you.”

Now I was the one blinking.

He didn’t smirk.

He was serious.

And that made me laugh. Out loud.

“Wait,” I guffawed. “What part of me says *bottom* to you?”

Nick looked me over and shrugged. “I don’t know. I thought you had to be vers. Probably looking for me to take charge and do the thinking for you. Take the decisions out of your hands and take control of your body. Control your orgasms, as I fuck the hell out of your mouth while you bounce on a dildo. Maybe tie you to the bed.”

I tilted my head to the side and narrowed my gaze as I studied the man who turned me on, both mentally and physically. The muscles in his face were straining from trying to contain what had to be a laugh.

Nick was fucking with me. And I loved it.

Leaning closer, I glared at him with my sexiest stare. “I guess we’ll have to flip fuck for it, because I plan to spread you out on top of that bar and feast on you. I’ll suck your cock right into the back of my throat and finger you until you beg me to stop. I’ll make your prostate so sensitive that you just might cum on demand. Fuck you so good that your balls will unload from just the sound of my voice.”

Nick’s eyes darkened as he studied me with yet another questioning look.

When he responded to my filthy suggestions, he could barely hold himself back from laughing. “I don’t think that last one is possible. I’ve read nothing about that type of subliminal orgasm control, but good luck trying.”

I threw my head back and laughed before grabbing his face and kissing his smart mouth. This was the most fun I’d had in a long time, and all I wanted to do was keep my lips on him.

Releasing my hold, I sat back on my stool and reached for my glass to take another big swallow of wine before telling him what I thought about this situation.

“No matter what we do, we’re gonna be drawn together. Life is short and connections like ours don’t come along often. So why torture ourselves like that?”

Nick sighed heavily as he seemed to consider what I’d said.

“We’ll never get anything done, and I will not let anything prevent me from finishing my degree. I have my sights set on one of the big firms across the country, and I need a project more than I need your dick right now. I don’t want to fuck this up for either of us.” He gestured to the restaurant.

“Is that it? The only thing stopping you from, what did you say, bending me over that bar?”

He shrugged and played it cool, like it didn’t matter one way or the other. “Pretty much. That and the health department.”

Damn. He was meant to be mine. Busting my balls whenever he could while protecting my license to serve food at the same time.

I shook my head, totally enamored with him. “I’ll take it under advisement. For now. But for the record, I don’t agree with you. So, let’s talk about what I’m looking to do here.”

Nick focused his attention on me at the mention of the project. He seemed to appreciate the change of topic back to business. “Yes, great idea. Tell me what you’re looking to do. You mentioned crazy ideas. I love that. Innovation is hot.”

I smiled as I watched his entire demeanor change before my eyes. He truly loved what he’d chosen for a career, and he might just be a workaholic like me. The challenge excited him. And that attracted me even more.

“As I said earlier, I want more than just a restaurant. I want a way to engage and educate people about wine, without just giving them a bar. I want a cutting edge design that encompasses all my ideas into one building.”

Nick’s eyes lit up as he listened, taking in every small detail. “You want Bernardo’s to be an experience.”

“Exactly.” I fucking knew he was the one for this. “And a one of a kind. I want to combine the best of all my favorite places, and create something original.”

I watched as all the passion and lust he was feeling a moment ago slipped from his consciousness. He was no longer thinking about fucking since I’d engaged his mind in what he loved. As he looked at me, unseeing, I could see the swirling of creative juices flowing for him. He was intrigued by my idea, and was designing my building in his mind. “Like multiple restaurants under one roof?”

I gave him a big smile, because he got it—without even seeing an image or a piece of paper. That kind of intellectual understanding turned me on more than ever.

“Something like that. I’ve been inspired by the pub crawls the city puts on. I want my new place to be an obvious choice for the planners to consider. I want to attract all kinds of new

customers. Not just the restaurant crowd, but the wine drinkers, the food enthusiasts who want to buy authentic Italian food in the bar as well as the restaurant, and enough space with a beautiful atmosphere for people who want to celebrate special occasions in an unforgettable place. And on top of that, I want to partner with the local Food Bank and school system to teach kids about cooking and growing their own food.”

Nick gazed at me dreamily as he listened to what I wanted. I didn’t think his eyes could get any bigger than they already were. But I was wrong. They darkened, and the excitement on his face made me smile. Maybe my ideas weren’t so crazy after all. Or maybe it was the age difference showing. I had him by seventeen years, but I wouldn’t tell him that.

“Even though I haven’t seen the first drawing or scribbling of what you want, I’m in, Preston. One hundred percent. Show me what you want, and I’ll work day and night to make it happen for you. This project is going to be amazing.”

Nick’s passion for it was infectious, and now all I could do was smile at him. “That’s why I chose you for this project. We’re going to need to look at some more properties in and around the city. I’m not in any hurry, but it would be good to already have the building.”

Out of the blue, something occurred to me that had my heart beating a little faster. “I want to show you the exact elements of the design I want.”

The unequivocal excitement rolling through him was palpable. It lit me up to know that my mismatched ideas had put that beautiful smile on his face. It was a powerful thing to know that I’d made him happy.

I couldn’t tell if the adoration in his eyes was for the project or for me. Either way, I’d take it. I’d try to make this as uncomplicated for him as possible.

“I can make that happen, Preston.”

I smiled at his beautiful face. “Good,” I replied, “let’s talk schedules. When does this semester end for you?”

Nick dug out his phone and opened an app. “Three weeks. I have to present my project idea to my mentor-advisor for approval by December 15th. That gives me plenty of time to get it all done.”

That would work. “How much do you have to submit?”

“Just the outline of the project and a list of what we’re planning to do. You and I will need to sign a contract to document the project. My professor will sign it as well.”

I smiled, running all this through my head. “Good. We’re going to need to take a field trip before that due date for you to see exactly what I want.”

Nick frowned. “But I have to work. Alejandro is counting on me during the holiday season.”

I shrugged. “I’ll work it out with him. Don’t you worry about that.”

“Like you did the other night?” he asked with one brow raised, questioning me on my tactics. But I knew how to get my way.

I extended my right hand to run my fingers through his thick hair, then used the left to cup his neck. I just couldn’t keep my hands or my lips off him. Five minutes in and I was already failing at this professional distance thing.

“Something like that,” I crooned as I looked into his eyes.

I reached over and pulled him to me. Nick came willingly into another kiss that I ached to take further. But he was right. The health department would frown upon it, and I didn’t need to lose my license.

He slipped his hands through my dark hair and held me to him. I could see us doing this forever, and I still don’t think even that long would be enough to satisfy the growing need I had for him.

Getting ahold of myself, I pulled back, respecting his wishes. I brought my forehead to his as we listened to the music create an intimate backdrop for our affection.

Nick sighed and held me to him with his hand around the back of my neck. His free hand slid up and down my thigh as he kept us planted in the moment. “I know this thing between us is going to be a monumental challenge, Preston. I feel it too. But you have to let me do this at my pace, and I don’t want to confuse our intentions or cause a problem with my professor. I have way more to lose than you, and I have to walk a very thin line.”

I slid my hands to his cheeks, then pulled back just enough to look at him. “I understand. I don’t like it, but I get it. And I can be patient.” I had some ideas about how we could have everything we wanted.

Nick released a heavy breath that told me he was as pent up as I was. “Yeah, okay. But we can still get to know each other without fucking.”

God, I hated this, but I was going to respect it. I was a man of my word and I’d give him what he wanted.

“Okay. No fucking.” A *Cheshire Cat* grin spread across my face at a sudden realization of the other things we could do other than that.

“Will you dance with me?” It was an excuse to hold him in my arms.

“To this music?” A playful glint in his eye suggested he was calling me old.

I raised one eyebrow. “Does the music really matter when the intent is clear?”

Nick seemed to understand what I was saying without crossing any lines. “I guess not.”

I stood from my stool and held out my hand for him. He took it and I pulled him close until our bodies were flush against one another. Nick slipped his arms around my neck and mine circled his waist. He rested the side of his head next to my stubbled jaw and we both released a weighted sigh. It was both a relief and torture to have him in my arms like this. For now, I’d take what I could get.

I lost track of time as we swayed in my dining room. When Nick pulled back and looked me in the eye, my heart beat erratically from his gaze. “This is happening really fast.”

“How so? We’ve known each other for over a year, and I talk to you at least three times a week.”

He shook his head as if I were dense. “That’s not the same thing, and you know it. I’m not a serial dater, Preston. You need to know up front I’m the guy that will want a committed relationship. Not a one and done. If I sleep with you, it’s because there’s potential for us to have something more together.”

“I understand. But if this project wasn’t between us, would you be in my bed tonight?”

The scorching heat in his gaze was answer enough. “No. You’d be in mine.”

Fuck, he was going to kill me with this waiting shit.

Our lips met in a claiming kiss that almost undid both of us right here. We had to stop before we couldn’t.

I pulled back and kissed his forehead. When I had my wits about me again, I could finally speak. “Just so you know, Mr. Reed, now that I’ve had my mouth on you, you’re mine.”

Nick smiled. “We’ll see about that, Mr. James.”

CHAPTER 11

NICK

MY EXCITEMENT OVER THE PROJECT, AND THIS THING WITH Preston, had consumed my thoughts the following week. He'd been super busy at Bernardo's and hadn't been back to the bar since our Saturday night grilled cheese date. I wanted the chance to design that building now more than ever, and was intrigued by what he envisioned for his restaurant.

I knew I was playing with fire every time I talked or texted with him. Now he wanted my attention in every way possible, and I really wanted to give it to him. We were both on the same page now, and I missed seeing him.

Every time I glanced toward the door, Ben snickered at me. "Looking for someone, Nick?"

I shot him the bird, making the two guys sitting at the bar snicker. "No. Not really. Maybe." I was a mess.

Ben sauntered over to me and threw his arm over my shoulder. He was grinning in his tight black Alejandro's Bar t-shirt that hugged his chest like cellophane. "If I had a hot older guy demanding my attention, I'd be looking too."

"You do," rumbled the voice of none other than our boss.

He was definitely a handsome man, but ever since Preston had come along, I'd never paid much attention to him. But Ben had definitely noticed.

"Yeah? Hi boss!" Ben dropped his arm and grinned at him.

Alejandro smirked. "Definitely, Benjamin. I'm looking at you and wondering why you're not working."

Ben moved closer to him. “I am, boss. But I was checking on Nick here, who has his head on swivel, looking at the front door. Wanted to make sure he didn’t hurt himself.”

Alejandro snickered. “Yeah, if that’s what you’re going with, can you help me bring out more IPA for tonight?”

“I’d be happy to. Nick here can keep an eye on the bar. And the door,” Ben teased.

I just nodded at the asshole. “Yeah, you go help the boss.”

Before he walked away, Alejandro stepped over to me, holding some papers in his hands. Looking up, his knowing expression made me wonder if this might have to do with Preston.

“I’ve adjusted the schedule for the week after Thanksgiving. We’ll be fine for a few days while you’re gone, so don’t worry.”

My brow furrowed, looking at him. “While I’m gone? Where am I going? I’m not going anywhere.”

Alejandro started to reply when the hair on the back of my neck stood up. “Way to blow a surprise, buddy.”

I closed my eyes for a second as a small shiver ran through my body at the sound of his low register. Fuck, he was voice porn.

Alejandro chuckled and threw up his hands. “Sorry, man. Thought you’d already...” he trailed off, and curled his lips in as if to stop himself. He put his hand on my shoulder. “I’ll let Pres take it from here. Come on, Benjamin, we have work to do in the storeroom.”

“Thanks, buddy,” he muttered sarcastically as Alejandro led Ben away.

I shifted my gaze to Preston, who sat on a stool, leaning toward me. “Hey.”

One word from him had my face heating up. Memories of our kisses made my pulse race as I looked down at his lips. When he caught me staring, his smirk snapped me out of it.

“Oh, hey.” I smiled as I leaned across the bar to be closer to him. “What are you doing here? Isn’t it almost time for you to open?”

Preston reached out and put his hand on mine, instantly making my breath hitch. I hated the walls I’d put up between us. Giving him a kiss right now felt like a good idea.

“Simmer down there, sexy barkeep.” His smirk was doing things to my pants. He might as well have shoved his hand down my jeans. Would he do that? Take me in hand and...

I released a heavy sigh as he chuckled at me. “Got a few minutes to talk?”

Glancing around at the nearly empty bar, and the two guys watching a rerun of a classic baseball game on the big screen television, I shrugged. “I don’t know if I can. I’m kinda busy right now.”

Preston burst out laughing as he kept his hand on my arm. I smiled and glanced down at where we were connected. God, I wanted those long fingers all over me. I bet he was amazing when he—

“What are you thinking about so hard over there?”

My eyes snapped up from my arm. His handsome face and the dimple in his chin stole my attention while his eyes held the promise of unending pleasure. It caused a wave of heat and need rise from deep in my belly.

And I had to stop before I lost control right here in the bar.

I cleared my throat as I stared at him. “You know exactly what I’m thinking about. How big it’s going to be.”

He laughed again, making his dark brown eyes sparkle. “I guess that’ll depend on you, and how good you are.”

It was my turn to laugh. “I’m very good. Don’t you worry one second about that.”

Somehow, we managed to inch closer to one another. Preston still had his hand on my arm, but now he was skating those long fingers over my exposed flesh. “I take it you’ve changed your mind about my proposal?”

My brow furrowed. “What? No. I haven’t changed my mind. I still want to design your building. What makes you think I changed my mind?”

Preston glowered at me and sat back. He looked around the still empty bar and lowered his voice. “You just said you were wondering how big it’s going to be, and that you’re very good.” He looked at me expectantly. “That’s why I thought you changed your mind.”

I shook my head. “No, I haven’t. I was wondering about how big the building was going to be.”

He stared at me with absolutely no expression, as if he were frozen. So I went on.

“And you said how big it was would depend on how good my designs were, and I promised you I was really good at drawing up plans for remodeling old buildings.”

Preston continued to stare at me.

“What did you think we were talking about?” I held his gaze as long as I could without cracking a smile. He didn’t know that I was the master of being deliberately evasive, so I’d known exactly how he’d take my double entendre. It was a little payback for staying away this week. God, I was such a mess.

Preston blinked at me before narrowing his eyes. Leaning forward, I matched his movements until we were only a few inches apart. “You asshole. You know exactly what we were talking about. And it wasn’t my building.”

I threw my head back and laughed. When I could look at him, I leaned back toward him. “You were building something down south, weren’t you? Thinking about what I said about the bar...”

Preston’s pupils swallowed up his now dark chocolate irises just the way I wanted to swallow him. But I had to remind myself that this was a job first and foremost, and I’d almost been successful until his big hand wrapped around my neck and pulled my lips to his.

Lost. I was just lost in his kiss as his tongue explored my mouth and sucked on my tongue. It might as well have been my cock, because if he kept it up, I'd make a mess in my jeans. *Untouched*.

Throats clearing and clapping broke the spell he'd used on me. Pulling away quickly, I wiped away the saliva Preston left behind as I looked over to find Alejandro and Ben grinning at us.

"Oh, fuck," I hissed. "Look what you made me do." I furiously began to wipe down the counter while willing my cock to deflate. I tried to remember what Christian said one night about how he deflated quickly when Alex's kids were around.

Preston laughed as Alejandro walked behind the bar to face him. "Why are you distracting my bartender like that?"

He smirked at his best friend as he reclined on the bar stool. "Because I can. And you fucked up my surprise."

Shit, I'd forgotten all about his surprise. I furrowed my brow and turned my attention back to him again. When I looked at him now, everyone and everything dropped away. All I saw was him. And that was going to be a problem for my pants.

"What surprise?"

Preston sat back and stretched his long arm over the back of the barstool as he leveled me with another smoldering gaze that re-inflated my cock. "I'm taking you to New York, Nick. I want you to see firsthand the places I was telling you about so you can figure out the design."

I stood with my mouth hanging open like some kind of fish out of water. When I was finally able to put words together, I replied as calmly as I could. "Preston, I don't have to see them in person to figure it out."

He stared into my eyes with some unspoken emotion as he spoke. "But it would be easier, wouldn't it? You can't see the flow of traffic and how the space is utilized from a photograph, Mr. Reed. You need to taste the food and

experience the wine pairings. You need to see how the servers move in and around the dining area. How the kitchen is adjacent to the serving area, but not too close for patrons to have their dinner disturbed by the noise. We can't do that from a picture. We need to experience that to make this work."

I swear the man could sell water to whales. Big honking oceans, not those little kiddie pools.

When I continued to gape at him, his smile was undeniable. "We can't see all that from Portland, Nicholas. We have to be in New York to see it."

"I'll go if he doesn't want to go," Ben added, suddenly making me aware that we were still in the bar.

"You can't go," Alejandro replied. "You have to stay here with me...and the bar."

New York City. The week after Thanksgiving. Romantically decorated for the holidays. He was doing this on purpose.

I narrowed my gaze at him. "Can't we wait until after Christmas to go? Seems like it wouldn't be as crowded then."

Preston sighed as he stared into my eyes, trying to look remorseful. "Sadly, no. Your proposal for your professor is due by the fifteenth of December, and I've closed the restaurant for the week to prepare for the holiday season. It's the only time I can get away. And we need time to compose a detailed list of properties and make a choice here in Portland before the end of the year. For tax reasons, of course. So the sooner the better."

He had me nailed left to right, and *not* in the good way.

I looked over at Alejandro, who stood marveling at my... my... whatever, as he shot down every obstacle I threw his way. The truth was, I was dying to go to New York City. I just didn't trust myself alone with him for five minutes during the most romantic time of the year. But it also looked like I didn't have a choice.

Resigned to my plight, I looked at the devastatingly handsome man who had single-handedly rocked my world.

“Fine. As long as the bar is covered.”

Preston glanced at his best friend, prompting me to check with him.

“Yeah, it’s fine, Nick. Like I said, I reworked the schedule. Ben here is going to be working long hours.”

Ben wagged his eyebrows at me and grinned. “You’re welcome.”

I dropped my head back and looked at the ceiling as the three of them ganged up on me. I appeared ungrateful for the opportunity I’d been given, and I needed to fix that immediately.

Looking over at where he was casually seated across the bar, I leaned in. Without taking his eyes off me, Preston wordlessly told Alejandro to go away with the wave of a hand. Thankfully, he took Ben with him. I didn’t want an audience for my apology.

“I apologize for appearing ungrateful for the opportunity. If I embarrassed you with my questions, I apologize. I’d love to go to New York with you. Just tell me when, so I can buy my ticket.”

The smile on Preston’s face was condescending.

“Sweetheart,” he said, leaning even closer, “it’s adorable that you think I needed an apology or that I’d allow you to pay for anything. This is business mixed with a whole lot of pleasure. And for the record, the only time you’ll be allowed to pay for anything is when you ask me out on a date. Then you can pay.”

I hummed at his nearness, and the scent of his cologne did things to me. We were only centimeters apart, and I was dying to kiss him again, but the familiar sound of Cooper’s voice broke the spell.

I leaned back to see my friend Cooper Evans come sauntering in with his husband, Greg. Callum and Declan followed them in and walked up to the bar.

“Hey, Nick. How’s it going?” Cooper asked, eyeing me and Preston. Then his eyes widened as he elbowed Greg.

“Babe, watch the elbow,” Greg grunted, holding his hand over what I knew had to be washboard abs.

Preston seemed to get the idea as he glanced at them. “I’ll let you get back to work. I’m going to go see Alejandro. Call you later.” He winked, making me blush.

“Good to see you again, gentlemen. Enjoy your evening,” he said to them with a smile, then looked back at me before turning away.

“You too,” Cooper called out.

I watched as he made his way back to Alejandro’s office. “Bye.”

Cooper whistled. “Oh, holy shit. It’s a good damn thing my brother is always late.”

Callum laughed and put his hand on Cooper’s shoulder. “Dominick would have been fine, Coop. He’s over all that.”

Cooper scoffed. “Yeah, okay. You keep thinking that, old man.”

“Asshole,” Callum chuckled as Declan put his arm over his shoulders.

Snapping out of the Preston-induced haze I’d been in, I greeted my friends with a smile. “Hey guys. What can I get you?”

Declan spoke up. “We’re celebrating my husband’s birthday. We thought we’d get here early since we all have kids now. The others are on the way. Can you set us up in the usual spot?”

I nodded. “Happy Birthday, Callum. Sure thing. Follow me.” I nodded toward the reserved section Alejandro kept for them.

The Portland Pirates were regular customers at the bar, and Alejandro kept a section closed off in case they showed up. Greg and Declan were both on the team, followed by their

other friends, who trailed in a few minutes later. Where you saw one or two, you usually found the rest of them. They were a tight group, and nice guys.

Alex and Christian Hayes walked in with Marcus and Aidan Monroe. As they made their way back to the table, I pulled out a notepad to take their order, just in case they ordered something different from the regular IPA.

Once I had their orders, I looked up to see Jackson and Simon Kincaid talking to Dominick Rossi and his new husband, Jesse Evans. I stood and waited for them to approach the group so I could get their orders as well.

“Hey, guys. What can I get you? And congratulations,” I said to Jesse and Dom. “I heard you guys got married.”

Dom nodded and looked at Jesse. “Yeah, we did. Thanks, man.”

I nodded with a smile and took their orders for PIPA, just like the rest of them. When I reached the bar, Ben was waiting.

“Twelve PIPA’s for the Pirates,” I laughed. They, like everyone else, loved the locally brewed Portland IPA that we called PIPA.

Ben chuckled and opened the bottles. We each picked up six bottles and took them to the tables where they were laughing about something. I could have put them on a tray, but I liked it when Ben helped out. He was getting to know them as well as I was.

Once we’d served them, we went back to the bar as customers began to trickle in. A short time later, Cooper came over to the bar.

“Hey, man. Need more beers?”

He smiled. “Nah, not yet. I just wanted to talk to you a minute.”

I nodded. “Sure. What’s up?”

Coop looked over his shoulder. “I know this is none of my business, but are you...going out with Preston James?”

I shook my head. “No. Well, kinda. I’m actually going to be working on a design project for his new restaurant. Why?”

He smiled at me. “We had dinner at his restaurant for Jesse’s birthday, and when he greeted us, he held onto Jesse’s handshake a little too long for Dominick’s liking.”

I tried to keep the strange feelings that were trying to surface from showing on my face. “Hmm. Okay. Hadn’t heard that.” I paused. “When did all that happen?”

“In April. It wasn’t a big deal. I guess he just found my big brother attractive. He obviously didn’t know about Dominick. The guy wanted to comp our food for giving Jesse a hard time making the reservation, but Dom was having none of it,” he laughed. “Now it’s all water under the bridge.”

I nodded and smiled, still not quite sure how to feel about it.

“I’m only telling you this in case there’s weirdness if they’re ever in the same place. Like Callum said, Dom is over it. Callum helped him with that.”

I remembered when Declan got in some deep shit with Callum here at the bar when a girl hit on Dec.

“Thanks for the heads up.”

“No problem, man. Good luck with it. He seems like a nice guy.”

I smiled and nodded.

Thankfully, more customers came in, and Coop went back to his table. Evidently, Preston wasn’t as in to me at that time as he claimed, and for some stupid reason, that kinda hurt.

CHAPTER 12

PRESTON

NICK WAS AVOIDING ME. I'D CALLED AND TEXTED HIM SEVERAL times since I'd stopped in at the bar last Thursday evening. His replies were short and not sexy at all. He said he was busy with school and work, but I wanted more of our flirty banter and he wasn't giving me that anymore.

I took my angst out on a defenseless onion in my kitchen Wednesday evening while making marinara sauce.

"You okay over there?"

I glanced up to see Stella looking at me with concern. Frowning down at the onion I'd minced, I put my knife down and sighed. "Yeah, I'm fine. Guess I better get another one."

Turning to the pile of onions we kept in baskets on the shelf, I reached for another one.

"How about you let me do that?" she chuckled, taking the onion from me. "We can use that minced pile for...*hmm*. I'm not sure yet, but we'll use it for something."

I sighed and looked at my longtime friend. "Sorry."

She put her hand on my arm and shook her head. "It's okay, don't worry about it. I'm just wondering what's gotten under your skin for you to do that. If I didn't know better, I'd say it was 'bartender troubles'." She motioned toward my minced onion.

I chuckled at myself, then released a heavy sigh and went to rub my eyes.

“Oh, fuck! Don’t do that!” Stella yelled, stopping me from putting my onion-infused fingers in my eyes. Good thing she was looking after me.

“Preston,” she said, giving me her stern, no-nonsense voice. “What’s up with you? You’ve been stomping around here, grumbling under your breath and biting everyone’s head off. Spill it.”

I braced my hands on the stainless steel counter and looked down at them. “Yeah, you could say I’ve got a *bartender problem*. Actually, no, not really a problem. Just a...situation.”

She released a heavy sigh. “Wow. Okay. I was joking, but lay it on me. What did you do?” She leaned her hip against the counter and folded her arms over her chest. She could be scary when she wanted to.

Looking around, we were set to open in half an hour, and we had more than enough marinara for tonight. It was just better when it had time to sit in the refrigerator overnight.

“Not here,” I grumbled. “My office.”

She nodded and turned to Marco, one of our cooks. “Keep an eye on things, hon. We’ll be right back.”

He nodded at her. “Yes, chef.”

Stella led me to my office, and when I followed her inside, she closed the door. It felt oddly like being in the principal’s office, and I was in trouble for something. I fully expected her to go sit in my chair, but she didn’t. She just sat down in the old desk chair I kept around for her.

“Alright. Spill it.” She looked at me expectantly.

“Well, you know about Nick.”

She nodded. “The cute bartender you’re moony-eyed over that’s half your age? Yes, at this point, I definitely know about Nick.”

I scowled at her as she laughed at me.

“I’m *not* moony-eyed. And he isn’t half my age. He’s older than that.” Not by much, but it counted.

“I’m teasing you, Preston. Lighten up.”

It was hard to stay mad at her. So I took a deep breath and told her everything from start to finish. When I’d run out of words, she looked at me with wide, thoughtful eyes.

“And the flirty stuff stopped that night after you left Alejandro’s.”

I nodded. “Yeah, pretty much. After I told him about the trip, Nick was stoked to go to New York. Now I’m not so sure. He’s ridiculously talented and his portfolio of designs is a mix of cutting edge and old world traditional. He’s the perfect choice for the expansion.”

“What do you want more, Preston? His affection or his design skills?”

I looked at her with the simple answer. “Both. I want both.”

Stella sighed and rubbed her eyes. “Is he the jealous type?”

“No, that’s me. He’s a workaholic. Also like me.”

She laughed. “Yes, I know.” Stella studied me with narrowed eyes. “Could he be upset about something? Did you do something to make him think you weren’t interested anymore?”

“No,” I muttered petulantly. “I got up when the tight end’s husband came in with the running back and his husband. They’re all friends. I winked at him before I walked back to talk to Alejandro.”

Stella looked up at me. “What does he say when you talk to him?”

I ran my hands through my hair. “That he’s busy and school is demanding right now. I guess he could be tired, but things just seem...off. We were so in-sync before.”

“I guess you better hope he doesn’t say ‘bye-bye-bye’.”

“I hate you,” I mumbled before we both broke down laughing.

“Preston, maybe he’s telling you the truth. He said he needs to be all business while you work together. Maybe he’s putting up the walls to protect himself from being hurt. People do that, you know.”

“But things are different. I’d never hurt him. There’s nothing I can think of...”

I looked at Stella, suddenly aware of the only possibility. “Do you think he knows about that night?”

“Anything is possible, I suppose.”

“That has to be it, Stella. There is nothing else, and I haven’t told him about Victoria. We aren’t there yet.”

I pushed up from my chair and paced the two feet of floor space I had. “I’ve got to go talk to him. I hope it’s my imagination, but it doesn’t make sense otherwise.”

She nodded. “Yeah, you do. But don’t be the bull in a china shop like you want to be. He obviously likes you, Preston. That hasn’t changed. And if he’s into you, try to remember how you react when you think someone has betrayed your trust.”

Yeah, I was a fucking bear. It took a mountain of ass kissing to get me to change my mind, and most of the time, that wasn’t enough.

But Nick was different. He was a lot nicer than me, even though he was suspicious as fuck.

I looked around my desk and rifled through the invoices that needed to be paid scattered across my desk. Jerking open my desk drawer, I rifled around in there too. “Have you seen my *Altoids*? And where is my cologne?”

Stella laughed. “You think that’s the key, don’t you?”

I looked at her. “He loves the way I smell. It makes him shiver. I’m just going in prepared.”

She laughed even harder. “You’re an idiot. He doesn’t care about your cologne or your cinnamon breath. Well, maybe he does care about that one with all the garlic, but it’s *you* he likes. Not those things. Be yourself, but the nice version.”

I glared at my sister from another mister, but Stella threw her hands in the air as she got up. “What do I know? I’ve only been married for the last eighteen years.”

“I’m not trying to marry him. At least not yet. I need him to go back to flirting with me first. I don’t like being off-kilter like this.”

Stella smiled. “I know, sweetheart. Just don’t go in there like you’re a caveman staking your claim. You might turn him off even more.”

I just looked at her. “You’re just like Alejandro. I’ve got to find new friends.”

She laughed even harder, then took the three steps across my tiny office to hug me. “No, you don’t. You know we love you.”

I grumbled under my breath, but hugged her back. Then I spotted my *Altoids* tin on the floor. That was the sign I needed.

“Can you handle this tonight? Or do you need me to stay? I can come back at closing.”

Stella shook her head. “No, get out of here. I’ve got it. I’ll see you tomorrow afternoon.”

I leaned down and kissed her cheek, then rescued my mints under my desk.

“Thanks babe. I owe you one,” I said as I popped in two of the super cinnamon-y disks.

“You own me more than that, running off to New York and leaving me here.”

She was teasing, and I grinned at her as I hurriedly made my way out the door.

FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, I used my key to the back door of the bar to let myself in. Every time I walked through that door, whether it be in or out, the kiss we shared there came charging back into my prefrontal cortex.

Striding into the space that was much larger than mine, I found my other best friend sitting at his desk talking to his daughter, Anna. She jumped up the moment she saw me, and bounded into my arms for a hug, just like she did when she was a little girl.

“Uncle Preston! What are you doing here?”

I picked her up off her feet and hugged her. “I came to see you, cupcake.” I winked at her father, who just raised an eyebrow at me as he shook his head in faux disgust. He knew the truth. I’d been whining to him for almost a week, but he refused to make Nick talk to me. Asshole.

“How did you know I was here?”

Anna Sanchez was a nineteen-year-old beauty and the spitting image of her mother, Eliana.

“I didn’t, but your dad said he was going to ask you to help out while Nick’s away.”

She beamed up at me with a smile that reached the silver eyes that matched her mother’s. “Yeah, it’s a bit more than I’ve been doing—and I still can’t serve—but I can take orders and help ring up the tabs. I’m hoping Dad will let me work through the holidays. Don’t you think that’s a good idea, Uncle Preston?”

Anna grinned at her dad.

“I think that sounds great. I’m sure Ben and the others can take care of serving if you take care of the money. And if he won’t keep you on, come see me. I pay more anyway.”

Anna laughed, knowing I was teasing, then looked over at her dad. “Is it okay for me to go out there?”

Alejandro smiled at her. “Sure, baby. Just stay out of the way so they don’t run you over.”

“Dad,” she grumbled, then propped her hands on her hips. “I’m not that short.”

He laughed. “I know, baby. When things get hopping, they’re going to be really busy. If the popcorn slows down,

you could help deliver food for them. That would help them a lot.”

She nodded excitedly. “Yeah, I can do that. Thanks, Dad. See you later, Uncle Preston.”

I smiled. “See you later, cupcake.” Then I kissed her on top of the head before she hurried out.

When Anna was out of earshot, I closed his door and sat down on his sofa. “I need you to let Nick off early.”

He stared at me like I’d lost my mind. “Are you fucking crazy? With game six starting in less than an hour, it’s gonna be all hands on deck out there tonight. What the hell is wrong with you?”

I frowned at him. “I’m not crazy, but I think I figured out why he’s not talking to me like before.”

Alejandro rolled his eyes at me and rested his head on the back of his chair to stare at his ceiling. When he didn’t say anything, I looked up to find nothing interesting up there.

“Asshole. I need your help.”

My so-called best friend lowered his gaze to meet mine. He was obviously exasperated with me when he folded his arms over his chest. I mirrored him and folded mine, too.

“Are you losing your touch? You read people like they’re a newspaper in giant print.”

I scoffed, but he was right. I rubbed the back of my neck as I looked away. “This is different.”

“How?” he laughed. “How exactly is this different? You two sucking face out there in front of my customers makes the difference?”

I laughed. “Yeah, both of them.” I held up two fingers in case he didn’t know what both meant. “All two of those guys sitting at the bar were scandalized. Especially when they probably went home together after we turned them on.”

“You’ve lost your mind, haven’t you? All that cinnamon has finally done you in. Does Stella know you’re here?”

I laughed. “Yes, asshole. I talked to her first. She gave me permission to come over here.”

When the laughter ebbed, I looked at my best friend.

“Can I at least talk to him on his break? I know you think I’m being ridiculous, but it just feels like something is off.” I gave him my most pitiful expression, causing him to roll his eyes again.

“Yes, asshole. When did you become this needy? And I can’t make him talk to you. You understand that, right?”

I sighed. “Yeah, I know. I just need to talk to him.”

Alejandro nodded, because he knew I’d never let this go. “Yeah, and I know how relentless you are, especially if you plan on working together.”

Standing from the love seat, I ran my hands over my jaw. “I plan to do more than *work* with him.”

He shook his head. “You’re hopeless. If I hadn’t seen him sucking face with you out there with my own eyes, I’d say you were nuts. But I did see it. And he was as into it and moony-eyed as you are.”

I grinned. “It’s okay, buddy. You’ll find your moony-eyed man or woman soon.”

Alejandro scoffed at me. “Get out of here.”

Before I rounded the corner, I looked at him. “I might have to steal your bartender.”

“You do, and I’ll hire Stella for twice what you pay her.” He grinned, because he knew he had me.

I flipped him the bird and walked out to the sounds of his laughter. I was on a mission to get my flirt back on track with the hottie bartender.

When I walked out onto the floor of the bar, things were already hopping. I found a place to stand out of the way and just watched him work.

Nick smiled and chatted with customers while pulling beers and making cocktails with the ease of a seasoned

professional. He could carry on a conversation and mix drinks with multiple liquors without missing a beat. He was professional, friendly, and laughed easily. The man was comfortable in his own skin.

I don't know how long I stood there and watched him, but when he looked up with narrowed eyes and looked around, I knew he was feeling my presence. Okay, maybe I didn't *know* it, but I hoped he did. It was either that, or someone told him I was here.

When his eyes landed on me, I smiled and raised a hand to say hello. His eyes lit up, then dimmed as he gave me a brief smile. What was he thinking?

Nick's body language said he was focused on his job. His spine stiffened and the smile on his face was a little strained. When he looked back over at me, I motioned him over.

He frowned and shook his head no.

I wasn't used to being blown off, but they *were* busy. When a spot at the end of the bar opened up, I took it.

Ben looked over at me and grinned, then elbowed Nick before saying, "Your boyfriend is here." Good thing I could read lips since he was at the other end of the bar.

Nick frowned, then finished mixing what looked like a Sex on the Beach for a cute girl who was flirting with him. He smiled and chatted, but didn't give her the attention he gave me. And I'd take that as a win.

When he finally made his way down to me, I looked into apprehensive eyes. "What are you doing here? Aren't you open tonight?"

I smiled. "Yeah, we're open. But Stella has it under control."

He looked at me a little longer. "Then why are you here? Alejandro isn't on the floor yet." His ice-blue eyes searched my face for an answer.

"You know why I'm here. Something is off between us, and I need to know what happened."

Nick stared at me a moment longer, then looked over his shoulder before looking back at me. “I don’t have time to discuss anything right now. I’ve got to get back to work.”

I shook my head no as I relaxed back onto my stool, settling in for the long haul.

He narrowed his eyes at me, trying to assess me with his x-ray vision. “Preston, I said I don’t have time for this right now. Whatever you’ve got up your sleeve, or whatever you’re thinking, I don’t have time for it.”

Nick turned and walked away to take another order. Ben glanced over at me, then grabbed a bottle of Portland IPA from the cooler. He popped the lid off, then brought it over to me. “Guess I’m going to be taking care of your beverage needs tonight. Let me know when you need another one.”

I nodded. “Okay. I’ll be here until closing, or he takes a break. So keep them coming.”

Ben chuckled and shook his head. “Okay. I’ll check on you in a bit.”

Nodding once, I picked up my bottle and took a healthy swallow of the delicious beverage. I could wait him out.

Four hours later, I was on the express train to shit-faced as I drank the bottle of water my buzzkill of a best friend forced on me. That and the greasy hamburger he’d made me eat was ever so slowly stealing my buzz. But my beautiful Nick kept on working and ignoring me.

“How long are you gonna do this? And when was the last time you ate? You’re not a lightweight.” Alejandro watched me lick the ketchup off my fingers.

“As long as it takes to make him talk to me or I get him in bed. And last night, I think. Some salad Stella made. It was good.”

Alejandro shook his head and laughed at my comment. “No wonder you’re off your ass.” I smiled. I was pretty damn clever.

“Well, it wasn’t enough, you idiot. And good luck with getting Nick in bed. This isn’t the way to get him to talk to you. Where are your keys?”

I frowned at him. “I don’t know. In my pocket next to my love rocket.”

My rhyme struck me as hilarious and I laughed my ass off. Alejandro was laughing too and just shook his head at me. But my Nick didn’t hear me, and I needed to tell him about my love rocket.

Because I loved him.

And he needed to know.

Right now.

I turned to Alejandro. “I love him. And I’ve got to tell him. Right now.” I stood, but wobbled a bit before Alejandro grabbed me by the arm.

“Settle down, Casanova. You don’t need to be shooting your mouth off right now in your state.”

I looked at him. “I know. I need to be shooting off my dick at him.”

My friend was trying not to laugh at me, but he was struggling. “Stay here. Don’t get up.”

Blinking slowly, my eyes followed him as he rounded the bar and muttered ‘*stay*’ at me like I was a dog. I was gonna tell him where he could stay until I saw him walk up and put his arm around my Nick. I don’t know what he said, but my sweetie looked over his shoulder at me.

I waved my fingers at him and tried to smile.

God, I loved him. He was so pretty.

And kissed like a god.

I needed to tell him that right now, too.

But before I could get up, he walked up to where I sat at the bar and looked at me.

I sighed. “You’re so pretty, and I love you.”

Nick rolled his perfect lips in to keep from smiling at me. He must need to hear it again.

“I love you. Do you know that? And I have a love rocket for you in my pants.” I smiled at him.

Nick became blurry for a minute as he dropped his head down to his chest and he shook.

Oh god! I’d made him cry.

“Don’t cry, baby. I’m sorry I love you. I mean, I’m not sorry, I just mean I’m sorry I made you cry. I’m an asshole. And I have one of those too with your name written all over it.”

When he collapsed on the bar, I panicked. I’d killed him.

“Alejandro! Get over here! I killed him!” I yelled, making my brain rattle.

Nick picked his head up and looked at me. “You didn’t kill me, you dumbass. I’m laughing at you.”

That was a relief.

“I didn’t kill him!” I yelled, as if Alejandro wasn’t standing behind the bar. I could see him shaking his head at me.

Warm hands that I knew belonged to my Nick cupped my face as he pulled my gaze away from my asshole best friend.

“Preston, I’m going to take you home. You’re drunk.” He looked at me so sweetly.

I grinned. “Are we gonna fuck now? I’ve been waiting so long.”

Nick curled in his lips and closed his eyes. He was laughing again. What was so funny about fucking? When he stopped, he looked at me with those eyes I loved. I needed to tell him. “I love your eyes.”

He smiled. “Thank you. And no, we’re not gonna fuck. You’re going to get in bed and go to sleep.”

“But...but...I’ll be lonely without you. And I gotta show you my love rocket.”

Everyone around us was laughing and drew my attention away from him. He let go of me and I missed him.

“Nick, where are you going?” I wailed.

“I’m right here, Preston. Come on,” he said, pulling me up. He wrapped his arm around my waist, and I slung my arm over his shoulders. “Give me your keys.”

I grinned at him. “No. You gotta go get them.” I patted my dick with my free hand.

“You keep them in your underwear?” he asked.

I grinned. “For you, I do.”

“I’ll do it!” I heard that other bartender say, making me frown.

Nick laughed. “I’ve got it, but thanks anyway, Ben.”

“Let me help you get him out of here,” Alejandro said, coming around to prop me up. “How many beers did he have?”

“Only five,” Ben replied.

“I’ve got him. It’s okay. If you can just open the door for me, I’ll get him home.”

I sucked in a breath and looked at him. “You know where *I* live?”

“No,” he chuckled. “I know where I live. I’m taking you home with me.”

I was going home with Nick.

“I’m so happy,” I said, then kissed his cheek. “I can’t take it when you don’t flirt with me. I love you, remember?”

“Uh-huh,” he replied as we walked out back.

“Preston, give me your keys, please.”

I chuckled. “That rhymes.”

“If you want to go home with me, you’re gonna have to give me the keys to your car.”

I nodded like a bobblehead and dug into my pocket to retrieve them. Handing them to him, I heard the beep of the doors, and before I knew it, I was sitting in my car with Nick in the driver’s seat. He looked good over there. I needed to tell him.

I reclined my head on the seat and snorted. “When we get married, I’ll buy you one of these as a wedding present.”

Nick looked at me and shook his head. “Yeah, okay. Sounds good.”

I think there was some sarcasm in his voice. But the joke was on him. We were getting married.

I closed my eyes just for a minute. Just to rest them.

The next time I opened my eyes, my head was killing me. I never understood how beer could put me under the table, but wine barely gave me the slightest buzz.

But it was going to be okay. I’d take the splitting headache if it meant I could keep my head on Nick’s chest while he held me in his arms.

CHAPTER 13

NICK

I WOKE UP THURSDAY MORNING TO FIND PRESTON STILL draped across me in the same position as last night, or this morning, depending on how you looked at it. It was work getting him up here, and I probably should have taken him home. But Alejandro had given me the night off since I agreed to babysit Preston last night.

I knew if we didn't talk this thing out now, he'd be following me around like a lost puppy again tonight. And why this puppy supposedly wanted me so much was a mystery to me.

I lifted my shoulders just enough to look at the clock on my bedside table, but that small movement was enough to make him stir. Preston tightened his hold on me.

"No," he mumbled against my t-shirt.

Burrowing his perma-stubble into my chest, he breathed deeply and sighed with contentment. I'd seen pictures of baby animals who clung to their mamas less stubbornly than he was clinging on to me. There was no way I could contain my smile when I thought about last night and all his drunk confessions. How in the hell did five beers toast him like that?

"Preston," I whispered, rubbing his back. "I've got to go to the bathroom."

He stirred, then opened one eye to look at me. "No. Can't move," he mumbled before pursing his lips to kiss my chest.

I gently turned him onto his back and watched as one dark chocolate eye opened again, just enough to peek at me. He

grabbed me and pulled me to him, making me laugh.

“I’ve got to go to the bathroom,” I chuckled, making him wince, then groan.

“Fine, but come back.” Preston loosened his hold on me and threw his arm over his eyes to block the light.

I headed to my bathroom, still sleep deprived, and took care of business. When I finally walked out and flipped off the light, I had brushed my teeth and my hair. I didn’t do messy.

Leaning on the door frame, looking at him on my bed, I debated how wise it would be to lie back down next to him. I could sit on the edge and talk to him, or I could have him back in my arms like he’d been all night. He’d sat at the bar through Game 6 of the World Series, waiting for a chance to talk to me. If I’d taken ten minutes to comply, maybe he wouldn’t be here like this.

No matter what I chose, I had to get him some ibuprofen and *Gatorade*. Padding quietly to my kitchen, I opened the refrigerator and pulled out the drink, then grabbed the bottle of pain medicine out of the cabinet.

It wasn’t lost on me that I had a gorgeous man spread out in my bed. No matter how I chose to handle the situation, Preston was going to reel me in like a fish on a hook. And if I were honest, I wanted that more than ever. But I knew I wasn’t good enough for him, and if I had to choose between him and the job, the job was the safest thing for my heart.

Preston James was the second person who I knew could break my heart, and I had to decide whether the risk was one I was willing to take.

Armed with ibuprofen and liquid hydration, I padded back into my bedroom to find him hugging my pillow. He was uninhibited when he was drunk, and I wondered if he’d been speaking with his heart when he spouted all that at me.

I made my choice and sat back down on the bed next to him. I studied him for a moment, taking in how classically handsome he was before I had to touch him. Running my fingers through his head of thick, dark brown hair and my

thumb over his super-stubbly chiseled jaw, Preston leaned into my touch.

The first time I met him, I thought he was a grumpy, rude asshole. But now I knew the real truth about Preston James. He was a sweet and attentive man who could kiss like it was his job. And evidently, I wanted him to hire me as his practice dummy.

I continued to massage his scalp with my fingers to wake him up. When he could hold his eyes open long enough to take in our state of dress, he frowned.

“Why aren’t we naked?”

I laughed at his absurd observation as I smoothed his furrowed brow with my thumb. “Do you remember anything from last night?”

Preston furrowed his brow again. “I remember being at the bar, waiting to talk to you.”

“That’s right. Anything else?”

He gazed at me as he tried to remember. “I could remember more if you were lying down here with me.”

Fuck, he was cute. “Really? You think that would help?”

He nodded like a little boy. “And it would help if we were naked. All these clothes are constricting the blood flow to my brain and giving me a headache.”

I curled my lips in to stifle my smile, but I gave up. I knew I was too far gone for him already, and depending on what he said about Jesse Evans, I’d be back in his arms in a heartbeat. His glowering stare did it for me.

“Why do you want to be naked so badly, Preston? I can give you something for the headache.”

His eyes widened painfully. “A blow job?” He started for the button on his pants.

“You wish,” I laughed as I put my hand over his to stop him from disrobing. “Ibuprofen and *Gatorade*.”

Preston rolled his eyes, and evidently that hurt if his groan was any indication. Shifting his body to sit up, his ease of movements was limited by the friction of my comforter. He was struggling, and I couldn't let that happen.

“Okay, take off your pants. I'll be back in a minute.” I stood from the bed and went to move to my bathroom. I looked back over at where he was laid out flat, trying to take his pants off. “Do you want some pajama pants to put on? I'm gonna change into shorts.”

“Nah,” he muttered. “I wear boxer briefs. That's almost like shorts.”

Normally, I would have agreed. But when I returned a few minutes later, he had removed all his clothes except for said boxer briefs. I swept my wide eyes over his sculpted body and released an unintended whimper.

Preston was stretched out over my light gray sheets with his eyes closed, messy hair on my pillow, and that unforgettable stubbled jaw flexing as he clenched his jaw from what I suspected was quite a headache. Both arms were tucked under his head, leaving his biceps there for the staring. His chest and all his ripped abdominal muscles were on display for me, and I wanted to straddle him and run my tongue over every dip and valley.

The snug black cotton fit him like a glove as it wrapped around his muscular thighs. And the package inside was evident through the thin material. Did he dress like this every day?

I looked down at myself in navy blue basketball shorts and a worn out Oregon State t-shirt. Feelings of inadequacy tried to wash over me, but I pushed them away when I looked up to find Preston staring at me with hooded eyes.

“You're beautiful,” he whispered and held his hand out to me.

I went willingly to him, but handed him the open bottle of *Gatorade* and two ibuprofen before I sat down. When he'd

taken the pills and drank half the bottle, I took it from him and screwed the lid back on.

“We need to talk,” I said, shifting to sit on the bed, facing him.

Preston nodded. “I need to explain about the SEAL.”

Shocked, I looked at him with widened eyes. I swear he had some telepathic ability to read minds.

“But I’m not saying anything until you’re back down here with me on this bed.”

I swallowed roughly and shifted to lie back. I intended to mirror his position with my arms under my head, but Preston had other ideas. The minute I turned my back to him, he wrapped one strong arm around me and pulled me back against his chest. When he had me where he wanted me while he spooned me, he told me about what happened with Jesse.

When he’d recounted the story to me, I thought about what he’d said for a minute. “Hadn’t you ever seen him in the bar? They came in all the time until they adopted their little girl.”

Preston tightened his hold, and I absentmindedly ran my fingertips over the dark hair on his arms.

“No. I’d never seen him until he walked into the restaurant. The boyfriend got very protective, which I can appreciate, and I had no choice but to walk away. I went to my office and called Alejandro while Stella made sure their food was perfect.”

I continued to run my fingers over his skin as he moved his head to nuzzle his beard against my hair. “I’m sorry that happened to you. Were you guys close?”

“Yes,” he said. “We were like brothers. He and Scott, his roommate, shared the suite in our dorm with us, and the three of us were thick as thieves.”

I’d never lost anyone like that, and I couldn’t imagine how painful that was for him. But the reality that Cooper was wrong about what happened lifted my hopes. “You need to tell

them why you reacted the way you did. Set the record straight. Then you don't ever have to worry about it again."

Preston kissed the side of my head and sighed. "I will. But you need to know I'm serious about us, Nick. I'm a passionate asshole who notices everything about the person I—"

I smiled and needed to tease him. "The person you *loovvee*?" I dragged out the syllables like I'd found funny in a movie I'd forgotten the title of.

Preston cleared his throat and pulled back enough for me to drop to my back. He stared at me with an expression I couldn't read. I returned his gaze.

"I was teasing you, Preston. Last night you said all this shit, and I knew they were just drunk ramblings. I don't have any expectations from your drunken, amorous confessions." I smiled and tried to put him at ease. It couldn't be easy to think with a hangover.

He squinted as if in pain and took my face in his left hand. "That's the thing, though, Nick. I was drunk, but I remember almost every word I said to you. Including when I thought I'd killed you."

I laughed. "That was funny as hell. You kept confessing all this shit, and we were all dying. But I couldn't laugh in your face like that. You seemed so serious when you declared how pretty I was and talked about your love rocket."

Preston was beginning to see the humor in it. His smile was sweet as he gazed down at me, looking into my eyes before making more confessions. "They weren't drunk ramblings, Nick." He ran his thumb over my cheekbone, then extended its reach down to my lips. I pursed them and kissed the pad of his thumb.

"What do you mean, Preston?"

He looked at me with such intensity. "I'm a straight shooter. I tell things the way I see them. I'm a jealous asshole who can be overly sensitive. I overthink every stressful situation, and I will lose my shit if someone lies to me. But at

the same time, I love the idea of love and honesty, and I crave a long-term relationship. Like forever.”

I reached up to cover his hand with mine. “You trying to scare me off? That’s quite a list.”

Preston pulled my hand to his mouth and kissed my palm.

“No, I’m just trying to be transparent with you. Everything I said last night was true. I’ve barely been able to eat or sleep since you stopped our flirty thing last week. I think that’s why the beers hit me so hard. I can’t let you slip away from me, Nick.”

My heart swelled at the thought of a dynamic man like Preston James loving me. I smiled and lifted my hand to his face.

“Turnabout is fair play. I’m a sarcastic asshole and workaholic who can easily get lost in my projects. I can’t handle disorder or messiness in my life, and I hate surprises. Well, most surprises. I’m obsessed with music and love my family more than I can say. I want commitment and unconditional love, and anyone I choose to involve myself with must understand how much my sister and my family mean to me.”

Preston grinned down at me. “I can do that.”

I smiled, but held up a finger. “There’s more. If we’re being transparent, I’ve been attracted to you for a long time. Maybe since the first time you glowered at me. I watched you with Alejandro and wondered how someone like you could be single. I’ve got some pretty intense feelings for you, too, Preston. But I’m fascinated by you and how you look at the world. I want to experience that with you.”

Preston’s smile was radiant as he leaned down and kissed my lips sweetly. “I want to devour you after my head stops pounding and I brush my teeth.”

I laughed. “So let’s take this thing growing between us slow, and see where we end up.”

He raised an eyebrow. “That thing growing is my dick, and there’s nothing slow about it. But I understand and agree with

what you're saying."

"Good," I replied with a smile. "And for the record, since we apparently record things now, I really was slammed with schoolwork, but I also needed some time. I was caught off guard."

Preston groaned and dropped his head to my shoulder. "You're gonna make me work for it, aren't you? Can't you take pity on me and my hangover? It was all for you."

I shook my head and grinned up at him. "Do you always get what you want?"

He shrugged. "Most of the time."

I smiled sardonically. "Well, too bad this isn't one of those times. Patience is a virtue, Casanova."

He groaned again. "I'm gonna kill him."

I laughed, and he settled back down to pull me into his arms. It was the best nap I'd ever had.

CHAPTER 14

PRESTON

I WAS WALKING ON CLOUD NINE FOR MAYBE THE FIRST TIME IN my life. Colors were brighter, food tasted better, and Alejandro didn't get on my nerves as much as usual. And it was all because of Nick. I never knew I could be this happy.

We'd had very little time to spend together between his work and school schedule, and the demands of my restaurant. I felt guilty for leaving Stella as often as I did, and since we were going to New York after Thanksgiving, I needed to be there and give her some time off.

"Wow," she marveled when I walked in whistling late Friday morning. "Look at you, Mr. Sexy Pants. I take it you and the bartender worked things out?"

The stupid grin that took over my face didn't even bother me. "Yeah, you could say that. We're crystal clear."

I told her all about my beer-induced confessions even though she laughed so hard she had to catch her breath.

"Well, that wasn't very supportive, but I guess it was funny. I wouldn't be surprised if Alejandro recorded me at my finest moment."

Stella wiped the tears away from her eyes. "Yeah, he did. Sent it to me yesterday. But it was so much better the way you told it."

"Motherfucker," I hissed and pulled out my phone to text the asshole.

ME: You recorded me!

I waited as he typed away. The dots bounced, stopped, then bounced again.

ASS: Yeah, and it was priceless. Now I have proof when you deny you did it.

ME: Paybacks are hell.

ASS: Preston, you know I'd never use it to embarrass you. But what kind of friend would I be if I didn't record it? Wasn't sure you'd remember it. And you NEED to see yourself.

ME: Send it to me, asshole.

ASS: LMAO

I waited for ASS, otherwise known as Alejandro Sandoval Sanchez, to send me my incriminating video. When it popped up, I pressed play. Stella came to stand beside me as we watched my most vulnerable moment play out before my eyes.

“Look at him,” she said, pointing to Nick. “I didn't notice him before. I was too busy laughing at you. But the look on his face says it all. He loves you, Preston.”

My heart swelled with love as I looked at him.

“Preston? Why did you think you'd killed him?” She was laughing at me again, and surprisingly, it didn't bother me.

“I don't know,” I mumbled. “It was the beer and lack of food and sleep.”

Stella wrapped her arms through mine and hugged me. “I'm so happy for you, Preston. Just don't fuck it up, okay?”

I laughed. “Yeah, okay. I'll try.”

We managed to get all the prep work done for the night, and by the afternoon, I was really missing Nick. Spending an entire day with him had spoiled me. I needed to keep my eyes on the prize. Nick designing my building, New York the week after Thanksgiving, and spoiling him as often as I could.

Stella and I reworked our schedules to correlate mine with his. Alejandro tried to give his bartenders a set schedule so they could have the same days off every week. Nick and Ben alternated the two slowest nights during the week, and tonight was Ben's night to cover the bar.

The Monday before Thanksgiving, we'd finally worked out a night for Nick to come over to my apartment. I told him to pack a bag just in case he wanted to stay. If he needed to work on his classwork, I had no problem with that as long as we were together.

I was also hoping he was ready to move our relationship along. As much as I loved kissing him, I craved more. My dick was an iron post these days, and I couldn't jerk off enough in the shower to sate Winchester.

Yes, I gave my dick a name. I called him Winchester because he was long, well-constructed, and ready for repeated action. Sometimes I had too much time on my hands.

Moving to Portland had been an easy decision, and I fell in love immediately with my tenth-floor apartment I'd purchased from a Portland Pirate who'd been traded. The three-bed, three-bath place was located along the waterfront and provided a stunning view of the Willamette River. I'd loved it so much the first time I saw it, I made a cash offer on the spot. He needed to sell, and I needed to buy, so it worked out.

I walked around and turned the lighting down low so the colorful lights from the bridges became an artistic backdrop. Candles flickered throughout the kitchen, family room, and my bedroom. I'd even lit a few in my bathroom in case Nick wanted to relax in the huge, oversized soaking tub. At six-foot-four, I could appreciate the extra legroom in the tub, not to mention it was big enough for two.

Nick was due in about fifteen minutes, so I turned on some old-school R&B love songs that played over the sound system all throughout the apartment. I hummed along to some Luther Vandross as I checked on the lasagna bubbling in the oven.

Two wine glasses sat on the island along with a bottle of red I knew he liked. After removing the cork, I left it to breathe, then put the homemade bread with olive oil and spices into the oven to warm.

Surveying the kitchen, I ventured back into the family room. A rainy, mid-November night was the perfect time to use the gas fireplace. I could see us tangled up on my oversized leather sectional sofa, kissing while our hands roamed and clothes came off. I wanted my mouth and hands all over his body, because I was beyond ready to move us along. But I'd promised to go at his pace, so I could only hope.

At six-thirty, the doorbell rang, elevating my pulse. I ran my hands through my hair and glanced at myself in the foyer mirror before opening the door. Nick had his back to me, looking at the intricate design of the hallway just like I'd known he would. When he turned around to find me leaning against the door frame with my arms crossed over my chest, his eyes made a quick sweep from head to toe.

I straightened and tucked my fingers into the neck of his shirt to pull him to me. "I've missed you," I murmured into his hair that smelled like coconut.

"I've missed you, too," he said, shifting for a sensual kiss.

Every time our lips came together, the world slipped away. The bag he held in his hands dropped to the floor as he leaned into our embrace. My hands roamed his back and slipped lower to his ass as I savored the feel of his mouth on mine.

The beeping from the oven interrupted the moment, making us both groan in displeasure. Even though we were yet to say it, love wasn't a strong enough word for the bond I felt with him.

"If I don't take the food out, it's gonna burn."

Nick chuckled as I shut the door and took his hand to lead him to the kitchen.

"I hope you're hungry."

"Famished. Haven't eaten since breakfast."

I let go long enough to turn off the timer and open the oven. “Why? Were you that busy today?”

Nick put his bag on the floor and took off his jacket. He draped it over the chair as he told me about his day.

“Yeah. I had class until one, then fell down a rabbit hole looking for inspiration for the restaurant. My professor stopped by and I told her what we’d discussed. Her eyes lit up when I told her the premise. She also said she knew the perfect mentor for me, and she was going to give him a call.”

I smiled. “Did she like it?” I pulled the lasagna out and placed it on the chopping block to cool.

“Yep, she loved it. Then she told me about some places in town that we might want to check out.”

“That would be great!” I said, watching as he came over to look at the lasagna.

“That smells amazing.” His stomach growled on demand, making us laugh.

“I guess your stomach agrees.” I poured us each a glass of wine and handed one to Nick. He took a sip, never breaking eye contact, before he put it down.

His blue eyes sparkled in the low light, and I craved to take him right here on the counter. “I’d love to see your place. Give me a tour?”

He ran his hand down my arm to my free hand. I put my glass next to his and nodded. “Follow me.”

As I walked him through the apartment, Nick studied every wall and art installation, along with the size of the rooms, and the view each one had of the city. When we walked into my bedroom, I stopped and let him wander around. He trailed his fingertips over the dark furniture and gazed at the big four-poster bed. He looked at me over his shoulder.

“King sized.”

I nodded and moved closer. “Yeah, California King, to be specific. I wanted the extra length.”

Nick held out his hand and curled his fingers through the belt loops in my jeans. When my arms were around him, and we were chest to chest, Nick reached up and pulled my mouth to his.

I moaned at the feel of this tongue moving with mine as we explored one another. My dick was hard and pressing along the zipper of my jeans. Nick's was right there with mine.

Skimming my hands down to his ass, I reached further and lifted him by his thighs. Nick wrapped his body around mine as I moved the short distance to my bed. I lowered him onto it and he fell back.

"I feel like I'm drunk. All I can see, and feel, and taste is you, Preston," he said as I splayed my body over his, pressing myself between his spread legs. I rutted against him, making him hiss as I ran my hands over his chest. Skating one under his shirt, I could feel his warm skin pebble against my palm and fingertips as I kissed my way from his collarbone.

"Baby, I need..." he moaned as I pulled up his shirt, placing open-mouthed kisses along his abs and sides. He hummed and squirmed under me as I tongued his belly button.

He arched his back, chasing the sensations. He was lost in pleasure.

Before I lost my self-control, I looked up at him. "Do you want me to stop?"

"No," he rasped, shaking his head from side to side. "I need it."

Placing another kiss to his belly, he put his fingers in my hair while I kept my eyes on him as I flicked open the button on his jeans. Ever so slowly, I carefully unzipped them as he reached in to palm his cock.

"That's mine," I murmured. He let go and lifted his hips to lower his jeans under his ass. His cock was pressing rudely against his underwear, and I ached to free it.

"Can I?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yes, fucking god, yes."

Pulling back the stretchy cotton fabric, his dick popped out, long and hard. “We match,” I said, then tongued the mushroom head, causing saliva to pool in my mouth.

I licked along the ridge that surrounded the glans and traced the big vein underneath with my tongue. Nick hissed every time my stubble grazed his sensitive skin.

“Preston,” he moaned, and bucked his hips. “It won’t take much...”

I smiled and swallowed him whole, all the way down to the root. Nick sucked in a breath and groaned as he continued to run his fingers through my hair before fisting his hands to hold me in place. I relinquished control and allowed him to fuck my throat. It was the sexiest thing I’d ever seen.

My own erection pressed painfully against my zipper. Reaching down, I unbuttoned my jeans with one hand and freed my cock. I gripped it in my fist as he continued to fuck into my throat.

I groaned, and the vibration brought on his orgasm. Nick filled my mouth with his cum as I spilled my load over my hand. I sucked and sucked until he pushed me away.

Breathing like I’d run a marathon, I rested my head on his stomach as he reached for me and pulled me to him.

I lowered my mouth to his and gave him a taste. Nick was drunk on the taste of himself on my tongue and began to rut against me.

I smiled into our kiss and pulled back to look at him. “You *are* a baby boy, aren’t you? Ready to go again in two seconds.”

He smiled at me with heavy-lidded eyes. “It’s been a while, so yeah.”

I smiled as I ran my clean hand over his face. “I need to feed you, then you can use me however you want—all night long.”

His eyes closed, then opened, swirling with blue fire. “You said my name was on your asshole. I’d like to check that out.”

I groaned and hid my face at my crude remark, making Nick laugh.

“But first, I want some of that lasagna. It’s driving me crazy.”

I nodded and smiled down at him. “Your wish is my command.”

As Nick looked at me, I could see the insecurity in his eyes. He wasn’t sure if he could trust me with his heart yet, even though he clearly wanted to.

I ran my fingers through his soft hair and over his cheek. “Let me feed you. It’s one of my love languages.”

Nick smiled and nodded. “Yeah, I’m starving.”

It was music to my ears.

We sat on the plush rug and ate dinner in front of the fire before we spread out on my sofa. I stretched out on my back across the buttery soft leather as Nick settled against me with his head on my chest. His legs entwined with mine as we talked and discovered things about one another that were mundane, but were now exciting. Even the smallest detail, like his favorite color, filled me with a warmth I couldn’t describe. It was the craziest thing and so foreign to me. I learned to savor the feel of him in my arms. And every day it became more and more clear to me: I was head over heels in love with him.

I ran my fingertips over his skin where I’d rucked up his t-shirt. “Are you from Portland? Or did you come here for school?”

“I’m from here. Grew in up in the suburbs with my parents and twin sister.”

I pulled back to look at him. “You’re a twin?”

He grinned. “Yeah. She’s my best friend. We’re four minutes apart.”

“Why haven’t I heard you talk about her?” I shifted, and he settled back onto my chest.

“She’s in California right now, going to school. She’s going to be a physician’s assistant. Smart as hell.”

I kissed his head. “Sounds like you’re proud of her.”

“I am. We’re really close. Talk every day. I can’t wait to see her this week. She’ll be home for Thanksgiving Wednesday night.”

“How long will she be home?”

“Just the weekend. She leaves Sunday, too.” I could hear the hint of sadness in his voice.

“Maybe I’ll meet her at the airport.” I wouldn’t tell him I wanted more.

Nick worked his way onto an elbow and looked at me. “What are you doing for Thanksgiving?”

My pulse sped up as he looked at me with all that love in his eyes. “Nothing. My family’s on the east coast, and my brother, Greyson, is in Colorado. We usually get together at Christmas.”

Nick smiled at me. “Come home with me for Thanksgiving. My mom fixes way too much food for everyone, but we’ll eat and watch football. I think the Pirates are playing that afternoon.”

I smiled and ran my fingertips over his clean-shaven face. “I’d love to. But you have to promise to meet mine as well.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I can do that.”

We looked at one another, just basking in the ease of the moment and the possibilities of what we could be. I was seventeen years older than him, but it didn’t matter. He was my person. I could feel it deep in my soul.

“Will you stay the night with me on Thanksgiving? Or are you spending the night at home?”

Nick ran his fingertips across my stubble. “I usually stay there, but I’d rather be with you, unless you’ll stay with us. I didn’t want to ask you to do something you wouldn’t be comfortable doing.”

I laughed. He really didn't know me well yet. "Baby, I'd sleep in a box on the street if it meant I could be with you."

A shy smile took over his face, and he lowered his head to kiss my chest over my heart. "Me too. "

Overcome with all the emotions I never thought I'd feel again, I wanted to love gush all over him, and it was taking sheer will not to spill all my feelings for him. Again. But he beat me to it this time.

"I'm falling, Preston. I can feel it. Please don't break my heart."

Cupping his face with one hand, I looked into the ice-blue eyes I loved. "Never."

Nick moved up to take my mouth in a sweet kiss. We melted into the sofa and made out for a while. If kissing him was a biblical experience, I couldn't imagine what making love to him would be like.

When he lowered his head to my chest and snuggled in, I knew he was tired. "Want to watch a movie, or maybe soak in my tub?"

He hummed, then made a decision. "The tub sounds amazing, but only if you'll join me." Nick paused, seemingly waiting for my reply. But before I could answer, he had another question I wasn't prepared for. "Are you gonna show it to me?"

I frowned. "Show you the tub? You saw it."

"No," he chuckled. "My name on your asshole. You said it was there."

I covered my eyes with my hand and groaned. "You're never going to let me forget that, are you?"

He chuckled again. "Not a chance. It's too funny."

"What if I want to forget it?"

He grinned. "You can try. But the video is a pretty great reminder. I hope it doesn't go viral."

The smile slipped from my face. “Tell me it’s not out on the internet.”

Nick climbed up from his spot where he was wedged between me and the sofa. Straddling me, he took my face in his hands. “If it is, I didn’t do it. But I’m almost positive the only people Alejandro sent it to were you and me.”

“And Stella. God, it will live on in infamy.”

Warm lips met mine, making me forget the damn video. I’d do it again if I needed to. But I knew my best friends, and they wouldn’t put that out there. They’d just save it to torture me with for eternity.

But right now, I didn’t care anymore.

CHAPTER 15

NICK

“DO YOUR PARENTS KNOW I’M COMING WITH YOU FOR Thanksgiving?”

I smiled and reached over to turn down the volume of the music in the car. Lowering my hand, I laid it on Preston’s right thigh as he drove us to Hillsboro. Teasing and joking were part of our love language, and I had to take this golden opportunity to tease him a bit.

“Are you kidding? They’d kill me if they knew I was in a relationship with an older man. Better to just let them be surprised.”

Preston glanced at me, then back to the road, then back to me.

“What’s wrong?” I was dying to smile.

“Nick, we can’t surprise them like that. It’s not fair to them. I’m not the thirty-something they might expect. That could ruin the holiday for everyone.”

I sighed. “I’m pretty sure it’ll be okay. The fact that you’re a man has nothing to do with it. Sure, they think I’m straight, but it’s okay. This is a great time to tell them I’m bi. You’ll protect me if it goes bad, right?”

Preston’s expression changed, and his eyes widened. “What the fuck? Protect you? From what?”

Before I could say anything else, he pulled into an empty parking lot and shifted into park. He ran his hand over his pale face before turning to me.

I did my best to look unaffected.

He narrowed his eyes as he studied me. I was trying not to crack under his gaze, but I sucked at this. The longer he looked at me, the more difficult it became to contain my smile.

“You’re fucking with me,” he grumbled.

I curled my lips in as the laughter bubbled up from deep inside me. Preston glared, but that just turned me on. And the smile he tried to hide said it all.

“It was too easy, boo. You just served it right up to me on a silver platter. And you should have seen your face!”

Reaching for me, he pulled me in for a blistering kiss. My cock took notice and wanted out to play. He ran his fingers into the back of my hair as he kissed me.

Preston pulled away and cupped my face as he looked deep into my eyes. “I love how relaxed you are about giving me shit. You may not have noticed, but some people find me intimidating.”

I ran my fingertip over his bottom lip as I exaggerated my response. “Noooo. You? Intimidating?”

He bit my finger playfully and pointed at me. “That, right there. That’s what brings me out of my head. Sometimes I overthink.”

“I didn’t think you were nervous, but just in case, I wanted to set your mind at ease.”

Preston glared at me with pride and affection. “So, wise guy, are you going to answer my question now that you’ve tried to kill me?”

I laughed, loving the lightness between us.

“Yes, they all know you’re coming and can’t wait to interrogate you.”

He sighed, but I knew he wasn’t nervous. “Oh good. Can’t wait.”

After he started the car, we drove the rest of the way, listening to his favorite playlist and discussing books we

wanted to read.

Preston was obsessed with traveling, even though he didn't get to do it as often as he'd like. He was anxious to show me all his favorite places in New York.

“So this trip really isn't just a way for you to get me into bed?”

He tilted his head from side to side. “I really think seeing the elements of these places will help you design our space, but as for the other, a man can hope. The romance of the city in holiday mode is indescribable. It's like a fairy tale at Christmas time. I want that feeling in the new place. And it's just the beginning of the things I want to show you.”

Preston reached over and laced his fingers with mine. I wanted to see the world through his eyes, but that was something that would have to wait. The precious time we spent together revealed we had more in common than we originally thought.

“Does that scare you?” he asked apprehensively.

I squeezed his hand. “Surprisingly, not at all.”

The depth of my feelings and the bond we shared were completely foreign to me. I'd never taken anyone home to intentionally meet my family, much less on a holiday. But everything was different with Preston. We hadn't slept together yet, and even though we both wanted it, I was the hold-up. Blow jobs were one thing, but the intimacy of making love put things on an entirely different level for me.

While I liked dating and meeting new people, I didn't fuck just for the sake of fucking anymore. I left all that behind in college. I'd made it a point not to get involved with anyone I couldn't see a future with. There was no point in wasting what little free time I had or invest my heart in something that was not going to work.

While I considered myself to be a hopeless romantic, I wasn't one to fall easily. But this pushy, compulsive, and sometimes obstinate man felt like he was the one for me.

“Don’t be nervous about meeting my family. They’re really chill. My mom will love having another mouth to feed, and will probably talk your head off with culinary questions. She loves to cook.”

Preston grinned. “I’d love that. But I wouldn’t be offended if they grilled me about my intentions with you. That just means they care.”

“Just be you, and you won’t have to work too hard.”

He squeezed my hand. “I can’t wait. Thanks for inviting me.”

I lifted our joined hands to my mouth and kissed his hand. “Thank you for wanting to come. They mean the world to me, and it would have been hell choosing between you and them today.”

When we pulled up in front of the two-storey house with tan siding, Preston looked at me with a serious expression on his face. “Babe, I promise you’ll never have to choose.”

I leaned over and kissed him quickly, then pulled away before I jumped him. “Let’s go before they all come storming out to meet you.”

Preston chuckled and opened the door. He reached into the backseat for the wine he’d brought. I should have known a chef couldn’t go without bringing food.

When he rounded the car, we walked up to the door, only to have it swing open and produce my kid sister.

“Nick!” she squealed and threw herself into my arms.

“Hey, Nickie. I’ve missed you!” I hugged my sister tightly and kissed her cheek. “Nic, this is Preston James. Babe, this is my sister, Nicole.”

He chuckled, obviously understanding the humor in our names. “It’s great to meet you, Nicole. Nick talks about you all the time.”

She beamed up at him. “You too, Preston. He talks about you, too. Come on,” she said, wrapping her arm through his. “The parents are waiting to meet you.”

Preston looked back at me with wide eyes as Nicole led him to the door. I took the bag from him and followed them into the kitchen, where my mom stood guard over a huge turkey. When she looked up, her face did that mom thing like she was going to cry because her precious baby was in love.

“Hey, mom,” I said as I placed the bag on the counter. I pulled her into my arms for a big hug.

“Hey, sweetheart,” she cooed excitedly as she hugged me back. “He’s so handsome,” she whispered in my ear.

I laughed and let her go. She looked at me with so much love. “Yeah, he is. Inside and out.”

Reaching my hand out for Preston, I pulled him closer to me. I wrapped my arm around his waist as he draped his over my shoulder. “Everyone, this is Preston James. Babe, this is my mom, Michelle, and my dad, Brian.”

Preston smiled and shook hands with my dad, then leaned in to kiss my mother on the cheek. “It’s great to meet you all. Thank you for having me.”

“We’re glad you could make it, Preston. Nick says you’re a chef?”

He smiled. “Yes, I own Bernardo’s in town.” Preston gestured to the bag. “I brought some wine from my personal collection for you.”

My mother’s eyes lit up. “Thank you so much. I can’t wait to try it.”

Even though he appeared as cool as a cucumber, I saw the relief wash over him when his shoulders relaxed.

“Would you like me to open it?”

“Oh, yes, please,” my mother replied. “The glasses are in the far cabinet by the refrigerator.”

Preston didn’t give me a second look as he followed my mother’s directions for retrieving her wine glasses.

My mom looked over at me. After a moment, tears formed in her eyes.

“Mom, stop,” I moaned quietly.

She cupped my cheeks in her hands. “Nicholas, don’t deny me my happiness at your happiness.”

Chuckling, I kissed her cheek, and moved on to my dad.

“Hey, Dad. How’s it going?”

“Good,” he said, meeting me for a hug.

I took a step back next to my sister as our mother engaged Preston about wine and his specialty dish. My dad contributed to the conversation by asking Preston if he was a Pirates fan.

Nicole leaned in to me. “Looks like you found a winner, big brother.”

I wrapped my arm around her. “You have no idea, Nic.”

She hugged me. “They like him. Think it’s because he’s closer to their age?”

I pinched her with my free hand, making her yelp. “Be nice. He’s only forty-five.”

When I looked back around, Preston approached with a knowing smile and two wine glasses of his favorite Sauvignon Blanc. “Here you go,” he murmured to me, then extended the first glass to Nicole, then handed me the other one.

I took the glass and tapped mine into my sisters. “Cheers baby sis.”

Nicole rolled her eyes. “He’s only four minutes older than me.”

Preston grinned and listened as she shared memories from our childhood. I wrapped my arm around his waist when his arm found its familiar place over my shoulders.

“There are snacks in the den. Go watch football and leave me to it,” my mother directed.

Preston looked over at my mother. “Can I help, Michelle? I’m a pretty good sous-chef.”

My mother smiled and her eyes lit up. “I’d be honored, Preston, if it’s okay with Nick.” She looked at me.

I nodded and lost my boyfriend to my mother's kitchen.

AFTER A DELICIOUS LATE lunch of roast turkey and every imaginable side dish, we all settled onto the sofas with dessert to watch the Pirates play. It was way more fun when you knew some of the players.

“Go, Declan. Go, go, go!” I yelled at the TV as Declan Miller took off down the sidelines, dodging defenders before he dragged the last one with him into the end zone.

“Yes! Fucking yes!!” I yelled again.

Everyone looked at me like I was crazy. I shrugged. “Hey, I know him. A lot of them, actually. They come into the bar all the time.”

“Any of them single?” Nicole asked.

I chuckled. “Not the ones I know.”

“Figures,” she muttered under her breath.

We watched as the kicking team took the field, and Dominick Rossi set up for the extra point. I didn't look at Preston, because it was a non-issue for me.

The announcers were relaying all his stats and how he became a kicker after playing soccer for most of his life. If he made this kick, he will have made every field goal and extra point attempt over the last two seasons.

“Do you know him?” Nicole asked. “He's cute.”

I chuckled and had to glance at Preston. “And *very* married to a former Navy SEAL. Sorry, sis.”

She pouted and made us laugh.

We watched intently as Dom kicked the ball and split the uprights. The Pirates fans went nuts. The TV coverage showed him jogging off toward the sideline to be congratulated by Jackson Kincaid.

“Is that his husband?”

I laughed. “No. That’s his mentor, of sorts. They’re really close. Jackson is the reason Dom is kicking now.”

My dad looked over at me. “Seriously? That’s really cool.”

“Damn,” my sister said, “I should be a bartender at Alejandro’s.”

Preston snorted, and I leaned in to kiss him on the cheek.

“Nick,” my mom called, “would you boys like to come to dinner on Sunday?”

I looked at Preston. “Sorry mom, but we’re flying out to New York on Sunday for a business thing.”

Preston leaned forward to look at my parents. “I’m taking him to see the architecture of the buildings I want him to emulate in my new restaurant.”

My mom looked surprised. “That sounds amazing. Can I go? Your dad can handle things around here. I’ve never seen New York City.”

“Mom!” Nicole scolded.

My eyes widened at her request before she started laughing. “I’m kidding. Relax, son. I wouldn’t dream of interrupting your *business trip*.”

Preston relaxed back into the sofa, then whispered to me. “I see where you get it from now.”

I grinned, because he was right.

* * *

“WHY DID you let me eat so much?”

I rolled my head over to look at Preston as we reclined on his leather sofa.

“Let you? You were like a beaver going after a new woodpile. I wasn’t getting between you and my mother’s cooking.”

Preston eyed me, then tackled me onto my back with his body weight pressing me into the sofa. He braced himself on his forearms and held my head in his hands, right where he wanted me. The heat in his eyes sent chills down my spine. Taunting him was the best.

“I’m going to have to teach your smart mouth a lesson.”

I bit my lip and closed my eyes and wrapped my arms around him as I waited for his mouth to descend upon mine. I opened my mouth, anticipating his tongue slipping inside and devouring me. Kissing him was a religious experience. But when his skin met mine, he missed my mouth.

Preston placed wet kisses on the corner of my mouth, my cheek, the end of my nose, everywhere but my mouth.

“Hey.” I whined and pointed. “Here buddy. You missed.”

The smug look on his face was sexy as hell. “I didn’t miss. You’ll just have to wait until I get there.”

He released all his delicious weight onto me and burrowed his bearded face between my shoulder and neck. The sensation sent chills over my body as he landed wet kisses and licks of his tongue under my ear, down the side of my neck, and along my collarbone before he took my Adam’s Apple into his mouth.

“Baby,” I moaned and thrust my hard dick up against his equally hard one. “I need to kiss you,” I moaned.

Preston continued to work my skin over, never quite giving me what I wanted.

Lifting his mouth from my skin, he turned my head. “I’m busy. Leave me alone.”

I laughed as he mirrored his kisses on the other side of my neck, making me impossibly hard. When he made the mistake of moving the fingers on his right hand up to gently rub my face, I sucked one into my mouth.

I worshiped it like I would his hard cock if he got it near my mouth. I sucked and rolled my tongue around it. I held his

digit between my teeth and flicked my tongue along the underside.

Preston's hips pressed down on mine, making me smile. If he kept doing that, I'd be making a mess in my jeans.

As if he could read my mind, he pulled away from my neck and withdrew his finger from my mouth. Now I was gonna get what I wanted all along. All I needed was his mouth on mine to make me cum like a freight train.

Preston didn't say a word, but reached for the hem of my t-shirt, and pulled it up enough for me to get the idea. I couldn't get it off with him laying on me, so I took it over my head, but left my arms inside.

When he had me where he wanted me, he took hold of my shirt and shoved it up to my elbows, effectively giving him a way to keep my hands off him. I squirmed and moaned as he flicked my nipples with his tongue, only to place a gentle bite on them before moving away.

I was on my back with my arms effectively bound over my head as Preston kissed down my chest and abs until he ran the tip of his nose over the erection straining to get out of my pants.

His dark brown eyes found me, now a panting, sweaty mess of need, and grinned. He slowly unzipped my jeans, each movement matching the pounding of my heart.

I was so turned on, and my dick was leaking all over my abs.

"No underwear," he growled, running the tip of his nose through my pubic hair before licking the pre-cum away from the tip of my dick.

I hissed at the contact. Without my hands to roam over him, I was forced to feel everything with my dick. And holy fucking shit, it was everything.

"Please, baby, please," I moaned and tried unsuccessfully to move.

My eyes rolled to the back of my head and I swear my body levitated off the sofa as he worked me over. I wanted him in every opening I had.

I writhed as he groaned, both of us lost to the erotic pleasure. The vibration from his groan, along with the rasp of his stubble along my skin, and the unbelievable suction sent me hurtling over the edge. I sucked in a lungful of air and thrust my dick down his throat.

When I had no more to give, Preston gave me what I wanted.

He pulled off my cock, then moved like a jungle cat up my body before taking my mouth with his. My own cum filled my mouth as he gave me the kiss I desperately needed.

The erotic moment was more than I could process. It was filthy and drugging. And I wanted it all with Preston James.

CHAPTER 16

PRESTON

OUR SIX A.M. FLIGHT FROM PDX TOUCHED DOWN AT *JFK International* at two forty-five p.m. We'd enjoyed breakfast in our first-class seats, but we were too excited to really sleep.

When he couldn't hold his eyes open any longer, Nick rested his head on the back of the seat until my shoulder became the better option. I had an itinerary all worked out for us, since he'd never been to New York. I was eager to show him everything the city had to offer. It was a one-of-a-kind place where you could find anything you were looking for.

After we deplaned and picked up our luggage, we went out to meet the black town car that I'd arranged to take us to the hotel. After stowing the luggage in the trunk, the driver headed for our first stop.

I'd prearranged for us to take a specific route, so when he circled the airport, Nick was confused.

"Where are we going?"

I pointed out the window at a very unusual building. "I want to show you something. It's the first stop on our '*Let's Show Nick New York*' tour, and it's right there."

Nick turned his head to look out the window and laughed. "What am I looking at?"

"It's the *TWA Hotel*. The terminal was originally designed like an art piece to look like a bird taking flight. When the airline filed for bankruptcy and was later purchased by *American Airlines*, that part of the terminal was no longer being used. So rather than tear it down, the Port Authority of

New York and New Jersey had the site listed as a New York City landmark. When *JetBlue* started using terminal 5, the airline's corporate partner was a hotel chain. Two more buildings were constructed, and they were made into a 512-room hotel honoring the design from the 60s."

"Would you like to stop and look, sir?" the driver asked.

"Yes, please. Just for a minute."

When the driver parked, Nick got out and studied it. I could imagine his brain working on whatever it was architects do to design a hotel.

When he got back into the car, the smile on his handsome face was priceless. Sliding over to me, Nick kissed my cheek. "In case I forget to tell you, this is the best trip I've ever been on. If we flew home tonight, it would still be amazing. Thank you."

My heart squeezed, knowing I'd made him happy with only one stop, and we hadn't even left the airport yet. I'd never felt so much joy in my life.

I caught the driver's eye in the rearview mirror and nodded. "We're ready."

The ride to the hotel took a little over an hour, but the city views from the car were spectacular. There was nothing in the world like New York City at Christmastime. Even in the early afternoon, it was a spectacular light parade that ignited the romantic in me. All I wanted to do was hold him close and take in the city.

When the driver pulled up to the hotel and got out to get our bags from the trunk, Nick turned to stare at me.

"Preston, are we staying here?" His eyes were like saucers as he took in the famous building.

"Yeah, babe. You don't want to stay at the *Plaza Hotel*?"

Nick took in the marquee lighting, the beautiful glasswork, and the holiday decorations, then looked back at me. "Are you *sure* we're staying here?"

I laughed and opened the door. “Yes. Come on, babe. Let’s go check in.”

A nervous laugh slipped from him as he opened his door and got out. I met him on the curb where the bellman had taken our bags. I took Nick’s hand and walked up the blue carpeted steps to enter through the revolving glass doors.

Nick looked up and stopped to marvel at the chandelier, turning to take in all the architectural features of the French Renaissance-inspired building.

“I have no words,” he murmured as his eyes lit up like a child at Christmas.

I chuckled. “Come on, babe. We can look around after we check in.”

Pulling him along, we entered the hotel lobby to the left and past the Champagne Bar to the reservations desk. We were greeted by a familiar face.

“Good afternoon, Mr. James. It’s nice to have you back.”

I smiled and nodded at the desk clerk. “Thank you, Theresa. Is our room available?”

She smiled enthusiastically. “Yes, sir. The King Room is ready. I’ll have the bellman bring up your bags.”

She placed a small white envelope on the desk in front of us.

“Thank you,” I replied, picking it up.

“Enjoy your stay, gentlemen,” she replied, smiling at Nick as he looked around. “Feel free to explore the hotel. It’s quite beautiful.”

“Thank you.” The wonder in his voice said he was blown away.

I smiled at her, then tilted my head toward him. “Architecture geek.”

Theresa looked at Nick. “Then you’ve come to the right place. Make sure to visit the Palm Court.”

I gave him a minute to take it all in, but I was anxious to get upstairs. There was so much more to see than the lobby.

“Ready, babe?” I squeezed his hand to get his attention.

Nick blinked a couple times, then turned his gaze to me. “Uh, yeah,” he mumbled, then straightened his spine and replied more resolutely. “Yes, I’m ready.”

I knew he had a million questions rolling through his head, and I’d answer every one of them once I got him to our room. This week was going to blow his mind.

Pulling him along, I led him to the bank of elevators. As we waited for the car to arrive, he started asking questions.

“Preston. How in the world...”

I cut him off with a kiss as the doors opened. “I’ll explain when we get upstairs.”

Nick looked at me suspiciously and nodded as we rode to the thirteenth floor. He studied me as if he’d never seen me before, and I knew all his questions were because I’d brought him to this opulent place. Thankfully, he didn’t let go of my hand.

When the doors opened, I strode out with his hand firmly in mine.

Stopping outside our door, I slid in the keycard from the envelope to open it. “Go ahead, babe.”

I watched Nick as he walked through the short corridor that led to the bedroom decorated with Louis XIV decor and the Christmas tree I’d requested for our room. I wanted him to be immersed in the unique feeling of the city during the holidays.

He immediately went to one of the two floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked the private courtyard and fountains only those staying in the hotel could see. When he turned from the windows, he looked at the king size bed that sat against the far wall, complete with a chaise lounge, sitting area, and butler’s pantry.

I braced myself for the myriad of questions that presented themselves. “Preston. How...why...fuck? This is *so* expensive.”

I sighed and walked to him. Cupping his face in my hands, I looked into his eyes. “It’s okay. Money is not an issue. Just trust me.”

Nick looked at me with furrowed brows. “What does that mean, exactly? And how did she know your name?”

“I’ve stayed here a few times,” I said, swiping my thumbs over his cheeks. “Theresa has checked me in almost every time I’ve been here.”

He looked away from me, his brow furrowed.

“Nick,” I said, drawing his eyes back to mine. “I have money. A lot of money, really. So don’t worry about this.”

His ice-blue eyes bored into me. “I’m gonna need you to give me something here. I figured you had money, especially with the apartment at home. But how does Bernardo’s do *this* well? It’s so small.”

“Let’s sit and talk.” I took his hand and led him to the chairs. He sat, and I followed, never letting go of him.

“I owned a group of high-end restaurants on the East Coast before I moved to Portland. The restaurants did really well, and I had lots of offers to buy me out. If I’m being honest, my life had changed, and I’d lost my passion for it. And I missed my best friend. So I sold them and moved to Portland. Stella and her husband followed, and we started looking for something new.”

Nick studied me again, so I waited for the next question.

“I want to ask, but I know it’s none of my business. This is just so...”

I smiled. “I know, and normally I wouldn’t disclose this information. But I trust you, because we have something special here. I guess anyone could find the information if they looked hard enough, but I never want you to feel blindsided or caught off guard for any reason.”

He looked down at where our hands were tangled together. From the look on his face, I'd say he was trying to figure out whether he could handle what I'd told him.

“But Bernardo's is so small...”

I nodded. “I know. It was my venture to see if I wanted to do this anymore. And as it turns out, I do. But in a bigger building. And only one location, in Portland.”

I cleared my throat and leaned in to kiss his cheek. “There's something about you that calls to me, Nick. If the money is a problem, we'll do the new building, and I'll donate the biggest part of it. Start over with you.”

Nick's brows crept toward his hairline. “You mean you have the cash to pay for a new restaurant, with more left over?”

I nodded. “Yeah, that's exactly what I mean. Two years ago, I sold my eight restaurants for seventy-five million dollars. I've set aside fifteen-million for a complete start-up for the new one, and then there's Bernardo's. It's doing really well, considering its size.”

He got up and paced the floor, then looked out the window.

I gave him some space before I needed to ask questions of my own. “What's wrong?”

Nick turned back to me. “People are going to think we're together because of the money.”

I stood and walked to him, taking him in my arms. “I give not one fuck about what anyone thinks about us. We started our relationship before you knew about any of this. Your opinion is the only one I care about. Money is just something I have. It's not who I am. I brought you here for the history and architecture of this hotel, not to flaunt anything. Please don't let the money be an issue between us.”

He swallowed and looked me in the eye, then nodded. “Okay. I'll try.”

I hugged him to me, and he released a nervous laugh. “I’m just Preston, baby. The same asshole who dumped all his feelings on you in a beer-induced ramble.”

His laughter settled my nerves. “Yeah, okay,” he breathed. “Show me New York, *just Preston.*”

“Smartass.” I smiled and took his face in my hands and kissed the fuck out of him, our tongues sliding together and exploring the growing feelings between us.

The knock on the door had me pulling back before I was ready. I kissed his forehead and walked to the door.

The bellman set our bags inside the room and I tipped him generously. “Thank you, sir.”

“Thank you,” I replied, then closed the door. I put the bags just inside the alcove to the bathroom where the closet was located.

Reaching into my carry-on, I took out the iPad and a phone charger. Striding back into the bedroom, I found Nick splayed out on his back on the bed, his eyes closed and a contented smile on his face. I placed the iPad and charger on the ottoman and made my way to him.

I gently sat on the bed as not to disturb him.

“I’m not asleep,” he murmured, then opened his eyes. “Just trying the bed out.”

We’d slept together in the same bed, but we’d yet to consummate our relationship.

“How is it?” I asked, my voice huskier than I realized.

He smiled. “It’s perfect.”

I leaned back on my forearm and ran my finger along his jaw. I wasn’t sure if he was telling me it was perfect for us to make love in, or it was perfect for sleeping. But it didn’t matter. It would happen when it was supposed to. And when we started, there would be no going back.

“Feel like exploring some?”

His eyes lit up, and then he was off the bed. “Yes, just let me change my shoes and get my heavier coat.”

His enthusiasm was infectious, and I waited for his reaction to the bathroom. I could see us traveling the world, taking in museums, art installations, and the architectural wonders of the world.

“Holy fuck. Is that real gold?” he yelled from the bathroom.

“Yes,” I said from my position on the bed. “24 carat gold plated. Just for you.”

He laughed. “Yeah, okay.”

When he came back into the room a few minutes later, he was wearing his wool coat and winter boots. “Let’s go, babe. The city awaits.”

I grabbed my coat and slipped it on. Picking up the mobile charger, I slid it into my coat pocket in case he needed to charge his phone. I knew he’d want to take a million pictures.

“Let’s go.”

Nick walked out, and I closed the door behind us.

“Where are we going first?”

I smiled. “I thought we’d walk a bit. *St. Patrick’s Cathedral* is down on 50th and Madison, so maybe we’ll start there. Then, when we’re ready, get some dinner.”

He smiled, then took my hand. “Sounds perfect.”

When we stepped out onto the sidewalk, Nick swiveled his head to take it all in. The city was a holiday spectacular all on its own. Now that the shock had worn off, he was ready to take it all in.

“Let’s head down Madison Avenue.”

We held hands as long as we could, but there were times when we had to walk single file. Every time Nick stopped to take a photo, his hand found mine again when he’d finished. The simple touch of his hand made my heart throb.

St. Patrick's Cathedral took up the entire block. We walked around it slowly to take in all the splendor of its American Gothic Revival style.

“This location was originally thought to be too far outside the city when it was built. Now it sits smack-dab in the middle of Manhattan,” Nick mused as he took photo after photo.

The inside was decorated for Christmas and was simply breathtaking. When he was ready, we continued walking. I steered us and pulled him along so he could look at all the unique buildings.

“Are you getting hungry?” I asked, hugging him close to me.

Nick snuggled into me and leaned into my neck. “Yeah, I am. Where are we going?”

I stopped and raised my hand to flag down a taxi. When one stopped at the curb, I opened the door and motioned for Nick to slide in. Once I was inside, I told the driver where I wanted to go.

“Little Italy, please.”

Nick grinned at me. “Just couldn’t wait, could you?”

“No. Tonight, I want you to experience Italian traditions. Tomorrow, I’ll take you on a food tour.”

Without saying a word, Nick leaned into me and cupped my face in his left hand. Pulling me closer, we kissed as we rode in the back of the cab amidst the city lights.

CHAPTER 17

NICK

I SAT IN THE BOOTH OF THE SMALL ITALIAN RESTAURANT, pinned to the seat as Preston ravaged my mouth. The wine had been delicious, and the pasta divine. But nothing compared to kissing him.

When the waiter approached and placed the bill on the table, Preston pulled away to retrieve his credit card. After handing it to the waiter, he stood. "I'm going to use the restroom. I'll be right back."

I nodded, drunk on his kisses. "Okay, I'll be here."

Preston grinned as he walked away. I looked around from where we sat alone in the far corner of the restaurant. The booth had a high back and was very private. He'd arranged all of this. For me.

This beautiful, affectionate man, who had more money than sense, seemed to love me for some reason. He didn't have to say it. It was evident every time he looked at me or put his hand in mine. I felt it in the way he said my name and the gentle way he touched my face, as if I were made of glass. The precious time he'd taken away from his own business to sit at the bar, just to be near me, reassured me I could take this chance with him.

Preston had more than proved how much he cared about me long before the first time we kissed. He'd taken care of me when I was sick, and somehow I'd still sized him up incorrectly. He was everything I'd ever wanted in a partner,

and it was time I put my insecurities behind me, and take a chance with him.

When he returned a few minutes later carrying a bag, I saw the real Preston through different eyes now.

“I got a bottle to take back to the hotel.”

“Sounds perfect.”

He picked up his credit card from the folder and sat down next to me. I slid my arm over his shoulders to whisper in his ear. “I’m ready to make you mine.” I took the lobe of his ear into my mouth, making him sigh.

“Thank fuck. Let’s go, baby.”

After a ten year-long ride to the Plaza, we finally made it up to our room. I plastered myself and my hard dick to Preston’s back as he tried to get the door open. My hands roamed over his hard chest, then skated down over his equally hard shaft.

Preston laughed. “Baby, you gotta stop and let me get the key in the door.”

I huffed and released him.

As soon as the door closed behind us, Preston pushed me up against the wall, just like he’d done that first night. I needed more than just his intoxicating kisses.

He leaned into me and took my face in his hands. “Just so we’re clear, when we do this, that’s it. You’re mine, and I’m yours. There’s no going back, Nick.”

I smiled as he cupped my face. “I’m gonna make you mine, baby,” I whispered to him.

Preston laughed and kissed me hard, making my head swim and my dick impossibly hard.

“What do you want? Do you want to top or do you want me to take you?”

Shivers ran up and down my spine at the mental picture he painted as he brought a hand down to rub his palm over my erection.

Every time he touched me with those magical hands and that sinful mouth, I melted for him. My dick was hard and pressing almost painfully against my zipper. “Yes.”

He chuckled. “Greedy boy. You can’t have both at one time.”

Oh, but he was wrong

“Yes, I can.”

He scoffed. “How, Houdini? We’re not fucking with a dildo tonight.”

Goddamn it. He was a fucking mind reader.

I fisted the lapels of his coat in my hands and shoved him back enough to strip it off before unbuttoning his shirt. Preston spread his legs to brace himself and just stood there, letting me take charge. I was ravenous for him, as the need I’d buried for so long rose to the surface and took over.

When I had him bare-chested, I pressed my tongue to the hollow of his throat, savoring the flavor of his skin. I was so gone for him.

Preston put his hands around my biceps and pushed me off him. When my eyes were on his, he kissed me softly on the forehead.

“Baby, I love this, but this is not how our first time is going to go. There’s no rush. I wanna savor you.”

I tried to swallow, but my mouth was dry. “I don’t think I can take edging right now. I...I love you so much, and I’m desperate to show you.”

Preston’s eyes widened in what looked like shock as he blinked at me. “Nick...”

At the realization of what I said, I dropped my head to his chest as he continued to hold on to me. Holy fuck. I’d just told him I loved him. Maybe *I* was drunk this time.

“I’m sorry...” I said into his chest. “But I do, and it’s all your fault. Your seductive grilled cheese sandwiches, making me soup, and cooking with my mother. Driving me home in

the rain, and dancing in the middle of your dining room. How do you expect a guy not to fall in love with you?”

Preston took my mouth as his hands found my face. He held me in place from head to toe, making it impossible to think clearly when he did that.

He broke our kiss and started laughing. “I love you so fucking much it hurts. All I want to do is spend every second of every day with you, and I’ll happily take all the blame for my seductive grilled cheese sandwiches.”

I blinked at him for a moment. “What was in that wine? I just love gushed all over you.”

“You’re so fucking adorable,” he said, looking at me with all the love I felt for him reflected back at me.

At one time, I’d loved Evan more than anything. But now I realized I’d never been *in* love like this, and tonight needed to be special.

When the humor died away, we quietly stood together, pressed against the wall. I brought my lips to the sensitive place right under his ear. “I love you, Preston James, and I want you to be mine.”

I felt him smile against my cheek. “I love you more than you know, Nicholas Reed. And I want nothing more than to be yours.”

Releasing a sigh, I smiled. “Good. Now get your sexy ass naked and on the bed.”

He chuckled, then pulled away. “I’m liking this bossy side of yours. But don’t get used to being in charge.”

I smirked. “I’ll be back.”

While he finished undressing, I went to my bag with the intention of getting the supplies. Looking up, the huge tiled shower drew my attention, as did the bathtub.

My imagination went wild with possibilities for that shower. But tonight, I needed something else. I had specific plans for where I wanted to be when he took me the first time.

Dropping the supplies on the marble countertop, I turned on the shower, then finished undressing.

Stepping into the shower under the warm water, I hummed in satisfaction. The hotel soap smelled unbelievably good as I washed away the airport and walking in the city. Soaping up my hands, I reached for my cock and then down to my balls to give them a thorough scrub. When they were clean, I reached around and washed my backside.

Brushing my fingers between my crack, I spread my cheeks open and allowed the soap to do its thing on my skin. My fingers brushed over the sensitive area and my cock twitched.

“Fuck,” I huffed as I slipped one soapy finger inside my hole. I leaned forward and braced my hand on the wall as I fingered myself with one, then two fingers. It had been a really long time, and I was already riding the edge.

I panted as I worked them in and out of myself, lost in the pleasure.

Warm hands slid around my body, and my head fell back on Preston’s shoulder.

“Starting without me?” he purred into my ear as he started stroking my cock. My eyes were closed as I took in the pleasure.

“No,” I rasped out. “Getting ready for you,” I murmured as I continued to finger myself.

Preston kissed my neck and bit down on my shoulder, making me shiver. “I have a better idea of how to do that.”

He let go of me, then stooped to run the tip of his slick cock along my taint. “Oh, fuck,” I gasped. A couple of thrusts in, and he pulled away.

“I’m riding the edge, baby,” I said to him as he began to massage my shoulder.

“I’ve got you, sweetheart. Spread your legs, and hold on to the wall.”

My heartbeat and need ramped up wondering what he was going to do to me. All I knew was that it wouldn't take much for him to get me off.

Preston's warm, soapy hands slid from my shoulders to my back, slowly making their way to my hip.

"Bend over, babe, and hold on to the wall."

I obeyed, drunk on his voice and his love, and all things Preston. My eyes slammed shut as my asshole was exposed. I felt so vulnerable until the tip of his finger trailed down my crack, sending live wire sensations over my asshole. I clenched as he continued to circle my hole, then tapped on it for a different sensation.

"*Pres-ton,*" I moaned. I'd never felt so turned on in my life.

He kissed the small of my back, where the bundle of nerves sent electric currents through my body and to my dick.

"I know, baby. Just relax and enjoy." I panted as he slowly trailed that finger all the way down over my taint and sac until he reached the tip of my dick.

I shivered, awash in sensation, as the pad of his finger circled the head, collecting my pre-cum on his finger.

"I'm...gonna..."

"...taste yourself," he said, slipping his finger into my mouth.

Memories of the dream I'd had about him so long ago flooded my mind as I sucked. When he pressed down on my tongue, I almost came.

He pulled his finger away, and his hands found my hips. The tip of his cock nudged my hole, making me gasp. Then the pressure was gone and replaced by his warm tongue as he continued to work me open.

"Holy fucking god," I panted. "Do it, fuck me, lick me, just don't stop."

Preston chuckled and continued to lick until I went weak in the knees.

Delirious with need, his mouth disappeared, and the water cut off shortly afterward.

I was so hard, I wanted to cry.

“Come on, baby,” he said, wrapping a towel around me.

“Why did you...” I started.

Preston said nothing, but took me by the hand and let me to the bed. He worked intently to remove my towel, then reached over to grab a condom off the bed. I watched in fascination as he sheathed himself, then applied more lube.

When he was finished, he reached out and stroked my cock twice.

I felt high from the pleasure, but wanton with a hard cock.

Preston looked at me, then kissed me. I grabbed hold of his arms to steady myself. When he pulled back, he murmured against my lips. “I want you to ride me, baby. I’m gonna make it so good for you.”

I whimpered. “Any ‘*gooder*’ and my balls might combust.”

Preston laughed and pulled me with him to the bed. The not-talking thing made it mysterious, with an edge of eroticism.

When he was settled on the bed, he gave me more instructions. “Straddle me, baby. I want to see your face as I make you mine.”

I did as he said and slowly lowered myself onto his waiting cock. I was loose and relaxed, but his cock was still huge.

“Fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck,” I muttered until he was fully seated.

“You feel so good on my cock. So perfect, so right,” he said, giving me time to adjust. When I tried to lean over to kiss him, Preston sat up and cradled my face as he kissed me.

Somehow we found a rhythm as I moved and he thrust up while jerking my cock. His abs flexed and the dark hair on his chest glistened with the dampness from the shower.

Just as I was about to blow, Preston looked me in the eye and followed me over as I marked his skin with my release. Exhausted, I collapsed onto his chest with his cock still inside me and sandwiching us together.

“Holy fuck,” I mumbled. “I want cheesecake.”

Preston laughed and wrapped his arms around me. “Let’s get cleaned up and order room service.”

I smiled against his skin. With my eyes slammed shut and my cheek on his chest, I listened to his heartbeat. “So, does this mean we’re official?”

He barked out a laugh, making my whole body jiggle. “Baby, the only way we’d be more official would be to get married.”

“Okay, boyfriend. I’ll take it under advisement.”

CHAPTER 18

PRESTON

NICK AND I SPENT THE NEXT FOUR DAYS ON OUR NEW YORK City Food and Architecture Tour. I had an extensive list of things for him to see, and even though I knew we'd never see all of them, we were going to give it our best shot.

“What’s this for?” he asked Monday morning when I handed him an iPad.

“It’s for you. I’ve bookmarked all the architectural places for you to reference when we get home. You can also store a million pictures with it as we go.”

He smiled at me. “You think of everything, don’t you?”

I shrugged. “I try. This should make recalling all these places easier when you work.”

“Well, thank you. I’m ready to put it to use.”

“Then let’s go.”

After breakfast, we headed up the Museum Mile on the Upper East Side to the Guggenheim before heading back to Little Italy. My future architect was excited to see the unusual building designed by Frank Lloyd Wright.

“This design is fucking genius,” Nick mused as we walked along 5th Avenue and Central Park. “Are you wanting something shaped like this? It took fifteen years to design and build. We’d need to get started.”

I chuckled. “Uh, I don’t think so, but thank you. This stop is purely for your enjoyment.”

We bought tickets and went inside to experience the helical ramp that swirled like a ribbon all the way to the skylight. Nick looked at the structure itself more than the art hanging on the walls. I stood back and watched him marvel at the way Wright had designed it. It had been renovated a couple of times, but the original design appeared to be intact.

After the Guggenheim, we took a cab back to Little Italy. It wasn't the most efficient way to go, but it gave Nick a better view of the city than the subway tunnels.

As we rode through midtown and down into Lower Manhattan, Nick stayed focused on the view outside the window, taking everything in. Even though it was cold as hell, I considered a red bus tour so he could see the city without worrying about running into someone.

“What are we looking at today?” he asked when we got out of the cab.

I took his hand, and we walked down Grand St. toward Mulberry. “Today is all about the artisanal elements I'm considering. Tomorrow and Wednesday, we'll do architectural features.”

The smile on his face warmed me from the inside out. I leaned over and kissed his red nose.

Our first stop in Little Italy was an Italian Bakery for cannoli and espresso. The store had been open since 1892, and while it didn't look like much from the outside, the inside was quite grand.

When we walked in, the smell of coffee and fresh baked goods wafting in the air was intoxicating. The left wall of the store held case after case of every possible Italian pastry, dessert, and savory bread. Gelato sat untouched in its case since it was so cold, but if we ever got back here in the warmer months, we'd be coming back for that.

The middle walkway of the narrow shop was filled with displays of holiday gift items and fresh baked goods. Stella would love the chocolate-dipped cannoli, but there was no

way it would survive the cross-country trip. I'd have to find something else to take home to her.

After being seated at a cafe table and our order taken, I reached out to lace his cold fingers with mine. Nick was busy studying the red and gold decor and the checkered pattern on the floor.

“I want to include an authentic Italian Bakery and Coffee Shop like this one in the new place. Not to this scale, of course, but a few really well-prepared items, and roasted coffee beans. We'd offer the same desserts in the restaurant plus a few exclusives to draw them upstairs. But I want ground access to the street where people walking by can't pass by without wanting to go in.”

Nick looked around and into the back of the shop. “That would be amazing. I wonder if we could design it so there was a glass wall inside that separated the lobby from the kitchen, but allowed customers to see everything being made.”

I smiled. “My younger brother is co-owner of a French bistro and a pastry chef in a little town in Colorado. Greyson would be the one to consult about that.”

Nick furrowed his brow. “Really? Where in Colorado?”

Our waiter delivered our espresso and both the traditional cannoli, and the chocolate covered one with a chocolate chip filling. When he left, we dug in, and the moan Nick released as his eyes rolled back in his head made me laugh.

“Fuck, that's good,” he said around a mouth full of pastry cream. He swept his tongue over his lips but missed a spot. I reached out and wiped away the cream, then brought it to my mouth.

Nick watched as I tasted the cream. His pupils dilated and swallowed some of the blue irises. He blinked slowly, and if we'd been alone, things would have gotten messy.

Shaking his head as if to break the spell, he looked away and wiped his mouth before taking a sip of his espresso.

“Where in Colorado did you say?”

I hadn't. "A ski town outside Denver. Amber Falls. Ever heard of it?"

He took another sip of his espresso and tilted his head to the side. "The name is familiar. I think Coop might have mentioned something about Simon and Jackson having a home in Colorado."

We both took a bite of the chocolate-dipped pastry and savored the delicate cream filling and chocolate shell. We were definitely putting in a bakery.

"According to my brother, the town is being redesigned. The old existing buildings are being renovated and made into high-end stores and restaurants. Their new ski resort has brought a lot of attention to the area."

Nick's eyes widened. "I bet they have a need for architects out there."

A knot formed in my gut at the thought of him moving away. Suddenly the cannoli didn't taste the same. "Are you willing to move if you get an offer someplace outside Portland?"

Nick looked at his empty plate and ran his finger through the crumbs. "Yes. That's always been an option if nothing is available in the Pacific Northwest. I'm willing to move for the right offer. That's why I've been working my ass off to be in the top of my class."

I forced myself to smile. "I'm sure you'll be successful, especially when my project is complete. Everyone is going to want you to work for them."

It was hard to find the enthusiasm for the project now, but maybe I could convince him to stay. Refusing to let it ruin our trip, I forced those thoughts to the back of my mind. I reached across the table and took his hand. "Are you ready to go? We have a couple more places to stop."

"I'm ready," he said. "But I'm going to need to walk a little bit if it's something else to eat?"

I laughed as we stood from the table. "Of course it is."

I left a tip for the waiter as we headed out to do some walking. The wind was more prevalent down in Lower Manhattan, so we needed to find a place to buy some scarves.

A short time later, we entered a store that looked like an old general store that made noodles and authentic sauces. They specialized in pasta made fresh daily and was a family favorite.

“My grandmother used to send me and Greyson here to get their fresh gorgonzola ravioli. When she stopped wanting to make it herself, this was the only place she’d buy it. It’s so good that a lot of restaurants in Manhattan buy their pasta right here.”

As we looked at the dozen or so varieties of ravioli, it brought back memories of cooking with my Nonna in the kitchen at home. Nick chose a few to try, and I purchased some of my favorites for us to taste. Nick groaned when he tasted the lobster ravioli.

“Please tell me you want to include this, too.”

I grinned and kissed his cheek. “Now you’re catching on.” We walked around the store while sharing our pasta for at least half an hour, taking in everything. Nick took picture after picture that I hoped would give him inspiration.

“How much of your family is Italian?” he asked, looking at all the varieties of pasta.

I nodded. “My Nonna and my mother. My father is from the States. They met at Columbia, and when I came along, they moved us to Connecticut.”

Nick smiled up at me. “That’s cool. Are you planning to see them while we’re here?”

I pulled him closer. “I’d planned to take you to meet them on Thursday, if that’s okay. My Nonna is eighty-three, and she’d be upset if I didn’t come to visit.”

Nick’s eyes widened. “I don’t blame her. I’d love to meet them. You know how I feel about my family, and I can’t imagine how you feel being on the west coast. There’s no way I could be this close and not at least visit.”

My heart swelled as I realized more and more each day how he was perfect for me. As we stood in the middle of the aisle, Nick looked at the iPad in his hands and flipped through all the photos he'd taken. "I think I have everything here, so we can go whenever you're ready."

"Then let's go," I said, taking his hand in mine.

We walked along the street, taking in the little shops and looking at the dated buildings. It made me feel some way to think about all the immigrants who'd left everything they knew for a life in America and flocked to the neighborhoods where people like them lived. It made remembering and preserving my Nonna's stories even more important.

Suddenly I felt incredibly lucky to have the things I did in this life, and it made me want to give back experiences to the people in Portland. I wanted the rustic and authentic looks to honor those who'd come before us.

"What are you thinking about?"

Nick looked over at me, waiting for my reply. "Just how I want all this—the culture and history of this neighborhood—reflected in the design."

He looked around at the neighborhood and took more pictures of the buildings on Grand and Mulberry St. Nodding to himself, I could see his mind working to piece it all together.

"You were right," he said, looking at me. "I did need to see it in person to feel it. The sense of community in this area is like nothing I've ever experienced."

Smiling, I kissed his cheek. "I knew you'd get it." I was so fucking proud, and we hadn't even put the first idea on paper yet.

Our last stop was a cheese shop that had been in business for over a hundred-and-thirty years. They made their own mozzarella and ricotta, and he had to taste it.

"Let me guess," he teased, "we're planning for a cheese shop, too."

“No. Well, maybe, but this is for the wine tastings in the wine bar we’ll be putting in. You know—what did you call it? My seductive grilled cheese?”

Nick laughed. “If the sandwich fits.”

I wrapped my arm around him and led him in to taste the best mozzarella cheese of his life.

CHAPTER 19

NICK

NEW YORK CITY WAS THE MOST BEAUTIFUL PLACE I'D EVER seen. The skyline was stunning, and when the snow flurries started, it was a freaking Christmas Card. The city was aglow with color, and it felt like every Christmas movie I'd ever seen all rolled into one. And the best part was that I was experiencing it with Preston.

When we returned to The Plaza after Little Italy, we decided to stay in and order room service since we'd already been out in the wind. But when the flurries started, Preston had other ideas.

"Where are we going?" I asked as he buttoned up my coat and tied my new cashmere scarf around my neck. It was hot how hands-on he was when it came to putting on or taking off my clothes. "It's starting to snow out there."

Preston smiled at me like a lovesick fool. I could relate. "We're going to do something romantic."

I chuckled. "Don't you realize everything you do is romantic, babe? You're like my very own—very hot—Prince Charming."

"Glad you think so, sweetheart. You bring it out in me." He kissed my cheek, purposefully avoiding my mouth because, well, he knew better. If we got started, we'd never leave this room. Kissing him was like that saying about eating a potato chip: it was impossible to stop with only one. Not to mention he was a master who could give classes on how to do it.

I had to remind myself we were here to see the city, so when we reached the lobby and he stopped at the front desk to pick up a blanket, he had my interest piqued. And when he led me out the glass doors and across the street, I shouldn't have been surprised at what was waiting.

At the entrance to Central Park, a horse-drawn carriage waited for us. I'd never once imagined, in all those months when he was coming into the bar, that Preston was this much of a romantic. I couldn't understand why he was still single.

"Good evening, gentlemen," the driver called.

Preston smiled at the man. "Good evening. Thank you for this."

"It's my pleasure, sir. Make yourselves comfortable. Looks like we're going to have snow flurries for the next couple of hours, so bundle up. Abigail and I will show you the best of Central Park at Christmas."

I sat down on the velvet-covered seat and snuggled into Preston after he spread the thick blanket over our legs. He wrapped his arm around me, and the driver climbed into his seat and coaxed the horse to move.

For the next hour, we rode through Central Park and took in the beauty of the park. When I had the chance, I looked at this man I was in love with and kissed him. What he didn't know was that I thought the nights he'd sat at the bar waiting for me were romantic. As was the night we danced after our grilled cheese. While I didn't need all this, I greatly appreciated it.

I'd find a way to show him.

When we returned an hour later, the driver stopped at the same place we'd started from. Preston pulled back the blanket and got out of the carriage. He held his hand out to me, and I took it.

"Merry Christmas, gentlemen," the driver called.

"Merry Christmas and thank you," Preston replied, handing the man cash.

With the blanket draped over his arm, he took my hand to cross the street back to the front doors of the Plaza.

Thirty minutes later, we were naked, and I had him writhing on the bed. I was balls deep in him as he moaned while I repeatedly grazed his prostate.

“Baby...oh, god...babe. I’m gonna...”

“No, you aren’t,” I panted at him as I pulled out. “Flip over.”

Preston rolled to his back and bent his knees with his bare feet flat on the bed. I dipped down and took his dick in my mouth. After a guttural groan and a thrust of his hips, I let him fall from my mouth so I could slide back inside him.

With hooded eyes, he watched as I grabbed his ankles and pushed his legs back, giving me a view as I sank back into him again.

He panted and groaned until I leaned down and kissed him, changing the angle and making him moan more. I pulled back and reached for his leaking shaft.

“Baby, I need to come,” he said.

“I’ve got you,” I replied, then jacked him at the same rapid-fire pace, causing his orgasm to overtake him. Two more pumps of my hips, and I followed him over, filling the condom with my release.

“Holy fuck,” he panted. “You’re good at this.”

I laughed breathlessly. “You doubted me?”

“No, not at all,” he said as I eased out and caught my breath.

After I disposed of the condom, I flopped onto the towel-covered bed next to him. Preston pulled me into his arms and I rested my head on his chest while he drew lazy circles on my skin.

I was so gone for him.

* * *

THE NEXT DAY, we headed out to catch a cab for a quick ride to Times Square. Thankfully, as much as I enjoyed the snow last night, we had blue skies today, which would make looking around much easier.

“Where are we headed?”

Preston looked a little sheepish. “We need to cover a lot of ground the next two days, so there’s one really good way to see what we need to see, and get to where we need to go.”

I looked around Times Square and quickly had an idea of what had him so hesitant to tell me.

“We’re going sightseeing, aren’t we?”

Preston rubbed the back of his neck and nodded. “It’s the best way to see everything quickly.”

I laughed, loving the idea. “Babe, this is awesome.”

“I’m glad you think so. We can get on and off after exploring the neighborhoods, or just stay on and ride. There are a couple of places I want to show you for the project.”

I was stoked. “Let’s do this!”

Once we were aboard the double decker red bus, we climbed the stairs to the top deck. When the bus pulled out into traffic, we could look at everything without worrying about being run over.

We got off and on several times so Preston could point out features of restaurants and buildings that he liked. During our tour around the city, I was amazed by the sheer number of different design styles that made up the city skyline. I took photos and made notes, then we hopped on the next bus that came along.

By the end of the two days aboard the red bus, we’d seen all the iconic sights that made the city what it was. He was right. New York was something you had to see in person. Photos would never do it justice. It just wasn’t the same.

At the end of another cold day, we went back to the room and climbed into the huge bathtub to soak in the hot water. He sat behind me in the tub as I relaxed with my back to his chest.

Preston massaged my shoulders with his strong hands as I did the same with his calves. It relaxed me as he worked out the tension in my body. With every pass of his soapy hands sliding over my skin, he ramped up my desire.

I was dying to have him in my mouth, so I sat forward and turned onto my knees. I'm sure if anyone could see me in the narrow tub, they would think I looked like a giraffe on roller skates.

Preston gazed at me with heavy eyes as I took him in hand. His cock was hard and long, the mushroom head an angry purple.

“I want to suck you off.”

He looked around as if he were searching for something, so I put my hand behind me to let the water out.

“Lay back, and close your eyes,” I murmured. “I just want you to feel.”

“Okay,” he rasped out, obviously excited for what might come.

As the tub slowly drained, I took his balls in the palm of my hand and tugged, making him moan. His hips lifted out of the water as I rolled them between my fingers.

I watched as his chest rose and fell more quickly to gauge his arousal. “Fuck, that feels good.”

I smiled. “Good,” I murmured.

Dropping my head down, I licked the head of his cock as I continued to roll his balls.

“Baby, you're killing me,” he groaned.

I was as hard as he was and decided I needed to move things along. So I took him deep into the back of my throat and swallowed around the head.

Pulling off him to breathe, the head of his cock produced a steady drip of pre-cum. This time, I gathered it into the palm of my hand and used it to slick up my dick.

I took myself in hand and jerked as I sucked him. This had always been a turn on for me. When I tugged on his balls with my free hand, Preston moaned and shot his load down my throat.

My orgasm rolled up quickly. I pulled off him and shot my load all over his dick and abs.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck.” My head had dropped back and my eyes closed as I jerked myself. When I was finished, I looked down at my man, covered in my cum.

“You’re really mine now,” I grated out at him.

The sexy grin that crossed his face did things to me. “It’s cute you think I wasn’t before.”

I laughed as he reached for me. Preston pulled me to him and took my mouth in a very suggestive kiss. I released my weight and groaned as we glued ourselves together.

When our kiss ended, I murmured against his lips. “We should probably shower and clean up.”

He nodded. “Yeah, and take a nap before dinner.”

“Sounds perfect.”

CHAPTER 20

PRESTON

THE DRIVE OUT TO CONNECTICUT ONLY TOOK NINETY MINUTES, thirty of which was getting out of the city. I'd called my mother to let her know I was coming, and bringing the architect who was designing my new restaurant. I explained to Nick why I left out the information that we were together, and he seemed to understand. I could correct that when we got there, but she didn't need to get all worked up about another partner just yet.

Nick's eyes went wide when we pulled up in front of the four-thousand-square-foot home I'd purchased for them after I sold my restaurant chain. Our two-storey home was not conducive where my eighty-three-year-old grandmother was concerned, so purchasing this one made the most sense. I'd missed them since moving to Portland, but it couldn't be helped. It was something I'd had to do.

"What's wrong, babe?"

Nick blinked at the house, then over to me. "It's huge."

I looked back at the Craftsman-style home and frowned. "It looks really big because it's all on one floor. It's just a house, babe. It's home to my parents and my grandmother. They needed the accessible space."

I rubbed my hands over my jeans and looked at him. "You ready to go in?"

Nick nodded and opened the door. "Okay, let's go, *friend that sticks his dick in me.*"

I smiled to myself and got out of the car. I loved how he whipped that sarcasm out.

God, I just loved him.

Rounding the front of the car where Nick waited, I wanted to take his hand, but fortunately he'd stuffed them in his coat pockets.

"Reaching for you is already a habit. "

He narrowed his eyes at me. "I don't understand. Why am I even here? I could have stayed at the hotel and worked while you came out here. I thought you wanted me to meet them. Not that I'm assuming this is a meet-the-parents type of moment, but since you met..."

"I do," I pleaded. "I promise I'll explain everything when we leave."

Nick peered into my eyes, then looked away. "I feel like you're not telling me something. I can handle anything as long as I'm not blindsided."

I wanted to reach for him right now. "I'm not keeping anything from you, I promise. We haven't had a chance to talk about our past relationships, and that's something I want to do when we're naked. That way, there's no running away."

Nick looked at the house and the yard, then at me. There was a hint of a smile on his face, and I knew we'd just crossed a hurdle.

"Hey," I called to him. "I love you."

He released a sigh, then nodded. "Love you, too."

I stepped closer without touching him. "I really want to kiss you right now."

"Later," he said, heading for the front door. "Time to do this."

Seeing Nick's stiff posture on the short walk to the door convinced me I'd made the wrong move. He'd told his parents about me so easily. I should come right out with it and the gossip train be damned.

The door swung open before I could reach for the doorknob. In the doorway stood my mother, wearing a big smile on her face.

“Preston, baby,” she said as I stepped inside the house. My mother threw her arms open and hugged me. “It’s so good to see you. I’ve missed you so much.”

I smiled and breathed in the scent of her familiar perfume. I closed my eyes and held her tightly. “I’ve missed you too, Mom.”

She finally let me go and looked at Nick. “Is this your ‘architect *friend*’?”

Time to set the record straight right now.

“Yes, he’s the architect for my new restaurant I was telling you about. And he’s also my boyfriend.”

I draped my arm over his shoulder and pulled him to my side. “Nick Reed, meet Bianca James.”

Nick smiled as my mother hugged him. “It’s nice to meet you, Nick. You must be something special if my son has chosen you.”

“Mom,” I groaned and ran a hand over my stubble.

He chuckled. “Thank you? It’s nice to meet you, too, Mrs. James.”

My mother loosened her hold on him. “Call me Bianca, or Mama.” Then she winked at him.

He laughed nervously this time and glanced at me. “Thank you, Bianca.”

I unbuttoned my coat and took it off, then motioned for Nick to hand me his. “Where’s everyone?”

“Your Dad is on the way home, and Nonna is in the sunroom. Go see her. She’s been waiting for you. I’ve got to check on the sauce. I’ll join you in a moment with some wine,” she said as she walked away.

I took our coats and hung them on the coat rack by the door.

“You’re giving me whiplash, Preston.”

I pulled him into my arms, and he came willingly. “I realize that now. It just occurred to me that you told your parents about me from the very beginning. Not telling her would have been discounting who you are to me, and that would be wrong.”

Nick looked into my eyes, not quite sure what to make of my words.

“Come meet Nonna. I promise we’ll talk about all this when we get back later.”

I leaned down to kiss him, and my world righted itself. As long as I had him in my arms, I could survive anything.

WE SPENT the afternoon with my family before heading back to the city. My Nonna had watched the two of us together, and asked all kinds of questions, just as I’d expected.

Before we left, she hugged me with tears in her eyes. “I’ll be back, Nonna. I promise not to stay away so long.”

“I love you, Preston. Don’t let him go. The way he looks at you is genuine, not like the other ones.”

I glanced at Nick as he talked with my parents. “I won’t, Nonna. I’m going to do everything I can to make him happy.”

She patted my face with her soft hand, and I wanted to cry. I never knew when the last time I saw her would be, and the thought alone made me sad. “I love you, Nonna. I’ll call you when I get back to Portland.”

She nodded, and I let her go.

After saying goodbye to my parents, we made the ninety-minute drive back to the hotel. I held Nick’s hand in mine as we rode back into the city. All the Christmas lights and decorations reminded me we’d be spending our first Christmas together this year, and I needed to do some shopping.

When we got back to our room, Nick took off his jacket and boots, then crawled onto the bed.

“I’m so tired,” he mumbled around the pillow as his eyes drifted shut. “I’m just gonna rest my eyes before we go back out.”

“It’s fine, baby. I think I might just do the same.”

I took off my coat and boots and crawled on the bed next to him. My head hit the pillow, and the exhaustion of the day took over. Turning to my side, I put my arm over his back and just looked at him. Without opening his eyes, he turned to face me and held open his arm. I moved closer until I had him wrapped in my arms, chest to chest. He rested his forehead against my neck as I ran my hand through his hair. His warm breath came and went across my skin, his heart beating with mine.

My heart and mind were at peace when I was with him like this, breathing the same air, and as close as possible. I always wanted him, but right now, I needed to feel him like this.

I couldn’t remember a time I’d ever felt this way with someone. Not even with Victoria before she ripped my heart out. She tore my soul apart, and now Nick was mending it back together.

Nick was all I needed.

We didn’t make it to the wine bar I wanted to show him. It had started to snow again, so we opted to spend the rest of the evening in the room. I called the concierge and got a recommendation for ordering pizza. We couldn’t leave the city without Nick experiencing an authentic New York pie.

When the pizza arrived, we turned off all the lights and pulled back the draperies. We moved the chairs out of the way and spread out towels on the floor for our picnic. Sitting with our backs against the bed, we ate dinner as the warm light from the Christmas Tree provided an idyllic setting for our last night in snowy New York.

As our conversation drifted toward our romantic pasts, I knew that as much as I didn’t want to, we had to talk about it. Nick deserved to know.

“Why didn’t you tell your mom about us when you called?”

I looked at him as he took a swallow of his beer. Stalling, I took one of my own to brace myself for the story.

“I’ve had a few lovers in the past, both male and female, but I was only compelled to take two of them home to meet my family. It was the second—and last until you—that almost destroyed me.”

Nick looked at me with empathy in his eyes. “I’m sorry. I understand that situation very well.”

“You’ve had a bad relationship?”

He nodded slowly. “The relationship wasn’t bad at all. It was more that the circumstances that were heartbreaking because they were out of our control.”

Now he had me curious. “What happened?”

After finishing the last bite of pizza, he wiped his mouth and took a swallow of his beer.

“We met my freshman year in college. Evan was my roommate. We became friends instantly and did everything together the first year. We both were trying to survive college, and he was a tight end who was trying to become a starter. Our second year, we moved out of the dorms and into an apartment. One night we were goofing around after one of his games, playing some *Xbox*, and he shoved me off the sofa. I reached up to grab onto something and got him. He landed on me, and as we laughed, something changed. It didn’t feel so much like friends anymore, and things progressed from there. We ended up in his bed, and we were inseparable from that point on until he transferred schools the next year.”

“Why did he transfer?”

Another swig of his beer, and he continued the story.

“He wanted to play in the NFL. He’s a tight end, like Greg Foster. Transferring to a Division I school would get him noticed by more scouts. Even his coach told him that. So he did what he had to do, and transferred. We stayed together as

long as we could, but the distance wasn't working. So we decided to break it off, and go back to being friends again."

I put my arm around him and pulled him close. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. I know that had to hurt."

"It did, but we're both very driven. We stayed in touch for a while, but that just made it hurt worse. So we stopped calling and texting so we both could heal. He was as torn up about it as I was. Evan is a good man, and I'll never hold it against him for doing what he had to in order to get what he wanted. He plays for Atlanta now."

My heart hurt for him. "When's the last time you talked to him?"

"The last time Atlanta played the Pirates. Two years ago, I think. But it's okay. Seven years gives you time to heal and lots of perspective. Work can't break your heart like that."

It was ironic. I felt the same way.

"I get that. I threw myself into my restaurants after my relationship with Victoria ended. I needed to not think about it, so I worked night and day to make them the best I could."

I stared, unblinking, at the Christmas Tree recalling all that shit for the first time in quite a while.

"You don't have to tell me what happened," he murmured.

I squeezed him to my side and kissed his forehead. "Yes, I do. But my story is very different. We didn't remain friends, and I could barely stand to be in the same state as her. So when I'd had enough, I sold out, and moved to Portland."

I leaned toward the ice bucket that held the last four beers. Grabbing two, I handed one to him, and I kept the other. Another long pull of the cold liquid allowed the story to come out a little easier.

"We'd been together for three years when Victoria told me she was pregnant. We were both ecstatic about it. We'd had some bumps in our relationship that should have been a warning to me, but I figured most people have shit like that happen. Her job took her away two to three weeks at a time,

and I was consumed with the business, so I didn't feel guilty about the separations. I looked at us as a modern-day couple making the most of our relationship. We were going to get married and buy an apartment together in Soho until I met her for her first appointment at the doctor's office, ready to hear the heartbeat. As it turns out, when the doctor examined her and did a sonogram, he told us the baby was further along than we'd thought. He calculated that she'd conceived the middle of February. She was in Paris for three weeks that month."

"Oh god," he replied.

I chuckled humorlessly. "I demanded a paternity test, and when it came back, I was *not* the father. I ended things with her immediately. She begged me to forgive her, said we could raise the baby together, and all that bullshit. My Mother and Nonna had been so excited. But once she'd betrayed me, it was over. Not only did she hurt me, but them as well. So I put the business up for sale and moved as far away as I could get. I hated leaving my family, but I had to have some distance. Alejandro suggested I come to Portland. So I did, and the rest is history."

I took a long pull of my beer and stared at the tree. Nick shifted at my side, took the bottle from my hands, and crawled into my lap and straddled me. He took my face in his hands the way I always did with him, and kissed me.

Opening for him, Nick threaded his fingers into my hair as the beer on our tongues mingled together. When he pulled back, he looked me in the eye. "I'm so sorry, baby. That was a cruel thing to do, and I'll never betray your trust like that."

I knew I could trust his words. He wasn't anything like her.

I pulled him back to me and took his mouth in a bruising kiss. My hands snaked around him and down the back of his jeans. I rubbed my fingers across the denim covering his crease and applied pressure.

Nick moaned into my mouth as he sat on my now-hard dick. I needed to be inside him and to feel him everywhere. He was the only one who could take away the pain of losing a child that wasn't mine to begin with.

I tore my head back and kissed down his neck. “I need inside you. I need to feel you.”

He nodded and rose to his knees to unbutton his jeans. “Stand up,” I rasped.

When he stood, he pulled his shirt over his head as I pulled in his denim covered crotch to nuzzle. His heat combined with the scent of musk made me desperate for him. I pulled back to unzip him and watched as his hard cock bounced from me tugging at his jeans.

Stopping, I reached for his pre-cum slicked cock and stuffed it in my mouth, sucking and moaning as we freed him from his jeans together.

“Fuck, that feels good,” he moaned, then began to thrust his hips.

It wasn’t enough. He’d lit my fire, and I had to finish this with him on my cock and me buried deep in his ass.

I reached down to unbutton and free my dick. Nick leaned over me, bracing himself on the bed with one hand, and pulled my shirt up. I didn’t pull off him until I had to.

We were both frantic to be together, but we needed lube and a condom.

“My wallet,” he panted. “Both are in there.”

I grinned up at him and handed him his pants. Nick fished out his wallet, and I took him back into my mouth while he looked for what we needed.

“You’re not making this easy, asshole,” he said, squirming as I continued to suck his cock and massage his balls.

I laughed around his cock, then pulled off. “That’s the whole point. I’m trying to make it easy on *your* asshole.”

“Finally,” he growled. He dropped the condom and travel lube on my lap as he tossed his wallet over his shoulder.

“Hurry up, babe.” Nick was vibrating in his skin as he lightly jerked himself while I worked him open. He was sexy

as fuck, standing over me with his cock in his hand, muscles flexing, and his dick dripping for me.

I stopped looking at him to focus on what I was doing. As soon as I was covered and lubed, I patted his hip. “Okay, come on.”

Nick lowered himself to his knees as I held my cock straight up for him. Slowly, he sunk down until my tip rested at his entrance. He wrapped his right arm around my shoulder and leaned into me as he lowered his tight ass onto my shaft.

I dropped my head back to the bed and moaned until he was fully seated on my lap, and his hard cock was leaking between us.

Nick was breathing hard as he began to slide his body up and down my slick cock, adjusting his hips for me to hit his prostate.

“Babe, gotta move,” I grunted through gritted teeth.

He brought his forehead to mine. “Do it,” he whispered into my mouth as he sunk his mouth down on mine. We kissed and fucked until he came untouched between us and I followed, unloading into the condom.

Sated, he sat on my lap as my cock stayed buried in his ass. One more passionate kiss, and he dropped his head to my shoulder. We stayed that way, breathing each other in, while he nuzzled into my stubble until I had to deal with the condom.

“Next time,” he mumbled as he pulled back, “I want you bare. I wanna feel all of you.”

I smiled at my exhausted man. “Yeah, babe. I want that, too.”

Nick pulled off me, and I dealt with the condom. We hopped into the shower and cleaned up, then crawled into bed and slept by the light of the Christmas Tree and the falling snow.

The weight of the world was waiting for us when we returned to Portland. His project and work, my restaurant and

the holiday rush. If I'd have known this was the last time we'd be this relaxed, we might not have left New York.

CHAPTER 21

NICK

“LET’S GO OVER THIS AGAIN,” I SAID AS PRESTON CRAWLED UP and down my body, leaving a trail of wet kisses down my torso. I wasn’t complaining, but I really needed for us to get this right.

When we returned to Portland ten days ago, I’d thrown myself into the pre- design and only stopped to work and sleep. Preston had given me the space and time without interruption to do what I needed to do. When I clocked out at work, he’d pick me up and hand me a takeout container of food he’d made for me. After a spine-tingling kiss, he’d send me to my apartment without coming up. It was clear to both of us that I couldn’t work on the proposal with him around, because this exact thing would happen and I wouldn’t get any work done.

All I wanted to think about right now was him, and enjoy the precious time we had together. We were both missing our time in New York, but hopefully, we’d have some of that back after the first design was complete. We’d become like horny teenagers since our time had been limited.

Preston popped his head up to look at me. “Go for it. But I’m busy.” Then he picked up where he left off.

I laughed, then took a shuddering breath, trying not to come as he swallowed me whole.

The minute I knocked on his door a little after midnight, he’d lifted me over his shoulder and carried me to his bed. Now here I was, naked as the day I was born, flat on my back,

trying to talk serious things while he tortured me with his mouth.

I ran my fingers through his hair and tightened them into a fist. Tugging gently, I pulled him off my dick so I could say what I needed to say.

“Baby, I’ve got to say this or it will eat at me all night,” I implored, as he gave me the sexiest look in his arsenal.

Crawling up my body to hover over my face, he gave me his attention. “Okay, I’m listening.”

I nodded. “When we go in there tomorrow to meet with my professor, you cannot look at me like you’re looking at me right now.”

Preston looked confused. “What do you mean?”

“You can’t look at me like you’d rather be swallowing my dick than talking about your building.”

He smiled. “But I would.”

I laughed. “I know you would, but you can’t look at me like that,” I cupped his cheek, “and I can’t look at you like the lovesick fool you’ve made me.”

Preston lowered his body and his hard cock wedged itself next to mine. “But I love when you look at me like that, and I know I have to look at you as any other architect I’d hire. But I’m not going to be able to hide how proud I am of you and that spectacular structure you’re about to design.”

“I think you should name it Preston’s Pasta Palace.”

He playfully bit my nipple. “That’s a terrible name.”

I laughed and ran my fingers through his sexily messy hair as he lit me up with his confidence in my ability and his tongue over the bite. “I know, but I just had to say it. And as long as we know our roles, I won’t stop you anymore.”

His mouth pulled up to one side. “Good, because I’ve missed you.” I hummed as he took my mouth with his, and I was lost to him again. And the next time he took me deep, I didn’t hold back.

My alarm buzzed the next morning before we were ready. We stayed in Preston's bed longer than we should have. The scent of his cologne, body wash, and sex covered me like a blanket. But I had to shower and get home.

"This would be so much easier if you just lived with me."

I looked over at Preston as he sat up in bed, his knees bent, tenting the sheet that hid his naked body. His hair was adorably messy from where I'd run my fingers through it early this morning.

I half-snorted, almost surprised at the suggestion, but not really. "What do you mean?"

I pulled on my jeans and searched for my shirt.

"This." He motioned to me getting dressed. "If you lived here, we could at least see each other twice a day and get more rest. I haven't really seen you for longer than fifteen minutes at any time since we got back. Now you have to rush back to your apartment to get ready when, if you lived here, we'd still be asleep."

I held my shirt in my hand, shocked that he'd want this so soon in our relationship. But he was right about the time, and I'd missed him just as much as he'd missed me. And the look of sadness on his face had me crawling back on the bed to him.

Preston wrapped his arms around me as I tackled him onto his back. I kissed his forehead and cheeks as I held his face in my hands. Settling my face into the side of his neck, I ran my fingers through his hair as I took a deep breath and breathed in the smell of him. When we were like this, the stress and pressure melted away, and I felt like I could breathe again.

"I'm sorry. This is just as difficult for me as it is for you. But it feels a little soon to live together when most people don't know we're together."

"I don't give a fuck what anyone else thinks, and I don't live my life to please other people. No one really knows about us because we haven't had time to tell anyone. Between our schedules and the holidays, I miss you. I got used to having

you in bed with me every night in New York, and I want that back. I don't sleep well without you.”

Pressing my lips to his neck, he leaned his head toward my touch. Preston tightened his hold on me and rolled us onto my back. His lips found mine in a passionate kiss that made my dick hard.

I spread my legs to give him room and felt his cock pushing at the crotch of my jeans. Little thrusts against my denim covered taint had me moaning as he devoured me with an urgency that felt like desperation.

If I didn't go soon, we'd be late, and that caused panic to rise in me.

Pushing back, he thought I wanted more, which I did, but time was an issue.

“Babe, I love you, but we don't have time to—”

“Let me suck you off,” he pleaded.

I looked into his warm brown eyes and couldn't say no. The way I was feeling, it wouldn't take long. But I needed him too.

Nodding, I pushed him back. “But not just me. I need your dick, too.”

Preston's eyes dilated, and a devilish smile crossed his lips. “My favorite number.”

I reached for my button, but he beat me to it. Resting on his haunches, he had them unbuttoned and my jeans tugged below my ass before I could blink, making me smile.

He fell backward on the bed, then held his arms out for me. “Give me that beautiful dick.”

Wasting no time, I struggled to position myself over his mouth while bound up in my pants, but managed to get there. Preston reached for my cock and licked the pre-cum away, making me hiss and moan at the same time.

Desperation set in and I had to have him in my mouth. I leaned forward to take his dick in hand, then took him as deep

as I could without gagging. Preston was big and had quite the girth, but I worked him over as he thrust into my mouth.

One finger pressed on my asshole, still slick with a trace of the silicone lube left from last night. When he applied the second one, I pulled off his cock to relish the feel of him there.

“Goddamn that feels so good,” I moaned.

Preston continued to rub my hole, then pushed inside me. Rubbing my prostate, I went back to ravenously sucking his dick, but added tugging his balls, just like he loved.

Our guttural groans and breathy moans produced the soundtrack of our sex life. The filthy sounds of our love made me arch my back and blow my load. The taste of my cum on his tongue set him off as I tugged his balls. Warm, salty release filled my mouth, and I swallowed it all down like the finest wine.

Sated and boneless, I wanted to lie in this bed and go back to sleep in his arms. But that wouldn't be possible. I was even more rushed now, and the anxiety of leaving him, knowing how he felt, and the excitement of presenting our proposal today set in and played tug of war in my brain.

I rolled off the bed and pulled up my jeans. Leaning down to Preston, who hadn't moved, I rubbed the extra stubbly jaw I loved and kissed him.

“Gotta go. I'll meet you in an hour and a half outside the building.”

Preston shook his head. “No. I'll pick you up and we'll go together.”

When I didn't answer, he added, “It'll be faster. Only one parking spot to find and you can look over the proposal.”

Giving in, I nodded and kissed him again. “Okay, see you soon.”

I grabbed my shirt off the floor, found my jacket and shoes, and left my sweet lover still lying where I left him in bed.

I wished I could go back inside, but I knew this was just the beginning of more time constraints on us, and I hoped we could weather them.

CHAPTER 22

PRESTON

I PULLED UP OUTSIDE NICK'S BUILDING TO FIND HIM WAITING for me. He looked hot as fuck in an athletic cut navy blue suit. The weather was relatively mild today with temps in the fifties and blue skies. I took that as a good sign.

Nick opened the back door and put his bag and rolled up plans on the seat, then slid in beside me. I leaned over and gave him a light kiss on the lips. I didn't want to stress him out before he made his presentation.

"You look great. Very professional and confident."

He smiled and looked me over. "Thanks. You do, too."

I pulled out onto the street and started the drive to the design building at Portland University.

"Let's go over this again," he said, making me smile.

"I know. 'Don't look at you like I want to fuck you on the table, and you won't look at me like you could eat me with a spoon. We know each other through your boss and my best friend. We met a couple times about what I want, and that's it."

Nick breathed out a chuckle. "That about covers it."

"I can't wait to see what you came up with."

He nodded. "I tried to incorporate everything you wanted. I hope you like it."

I pulled into the parking lot and found a space away from the other cars. I cut the engine and looked at him. "I want to

take you to lunch to celebrate after we're finished."

"Where are we going? Is it a real lunch or more fucking?"

I laughed. "I like where you're going with that, but I wanted someplace private, so I asked Stella to cook for us. She's there now, a little early, prepping for this evening so she can give us some privacy."

His smile filled the darkest places inside of me.

"That sounds amazing. I really want to meet her."

I looked out the front window and checked the time on my phone. "She wants to meet you, too. I guess we should go."

Nick released a shuddered breath. "I really hope you're happy with what I came up with."

"I'm sure I will be. It's all you and inspired by the six best days of my life."

He released a small laugh. "Let's go."

The short walk to the building gave me time to stow away my obvious affection for him. Nick appeared calm, but excited about the presentation.

When we walked into the conference room, a woman in her mid-fifties stood from the table where another man sat. He caught my attention immediately.

The guy looked to be in his late thirties, handsome, and wearing an expensive designer suit. I wasn't loving the way he looked at my boyfriend, either.

"Professor Gloria Anderson, this is Preston James. Preston, this is my supervising professor."

I smiled and extended my hand. "It's nice to meet you in person, Professor Anderson."

"You too, Mr. James." She gestured to the man, who stood from his seat at the table. "This is Michael Allen. As you suggested, we were able to get Michael's firm to agree to the mentorship and to sign off on the plans so you could proceed with building. He has a lot of experience with the renovation

of existing structures, like you're looking to do, Mr. James. We're lucky to have him."

I smiled and nodded while trying not to let my unease show.

The man smiled and extended his hand. "Nice to meet you too, Mr. James. Call me Mike."

I nodded as he turned to Nick. "Nice to meet you, Nick. Gloria has been telling me about your pre-proposal. It all sounds very interesting. I can't wait to see what you've come up with."

Nick smiled and shook his hand. "Nice to meet you. Mr. James and I did a lot of pre-design research, so I hope Preston is pleased with it."

He had no idea how pleased I was. They could have been drawn with a crayon, and I would have loved them.

"How do you know each other?" he asked, looking from me to Nick.

I knew I didn't like him.

Nick smiled and answered. "Through my boss, Alejandro Sanchez. He and Preston are best friends."

Michael smiled and nodded. "Oh, okay, that's great. He did a renovation downtown not too long ago, right?"

Nick lit up. "Yeah, he did. He purchased the building next door and reconfigured both into one. It's amazing. You should come see it sometime."

"Yeah, I definitely will."

Professor Anderson took her seat, and we followed. "Okay, before we get started, let me remind everyone that this meeting is for the design alone, and Nick will present the complete plans in late January. That includes heating and air, plumbing, electrical, and any structural changes. With that said, let's get started."

I shifted in my seat next to him and waited for the plans to be unrolled. We'd ultimately chosen a three-story factory

building from the 1950s that had the bones we needed to incorporate everything. Once we'd decided on it, I made a cash offer, and it was ours. The best part was that it was closer to both of our apartments and Alejandro's.

When Nick unrolled the plans, I got my first look at what he'd been creating over the last two weeks. And I was gobsmacked. No one said anything as I looked them over. The elevation plans were first and showed the exterior views from all sides of the building.

I looked at him as he stared at me with wide eyes. It was all I could do not to kiss the fuck out of him. He looked terrified, like he knew what I wanted to do. So I smiled instead. "You nailed it. This looks amazing. Can you take me through it?"

He nodded quickly. "Yeah, sure. Let's start from the top."

I stood close to him as he went through and explained every element he'd included. I got my rooftop dining with retractable glass and a greenhouse, my wine bar with a dedicated kitchen for the second floor, and both the bakery and another retail space for whatever I wanted to use it for.

He'd taken all these mismatched concepts and integrated them seamlessly into one design.

I sat back and watched him with unmitigated pride as he took the ball and ran with it. They hovered over the plans and asked technical questions that really didn't concern me. All I cared about was how he'd taken the places we visited on our trip and turned it into exactly what I asked for.

When they were ready to move on, we looked at the floor plans that showed the layout of the kitchens and bars. There were a few things that needed to be changed, but only because they were things that worked for me and my restaurant.

"What do you think, Preston?" He actually looked nervous.

I looked at the plans, then back up to him. "It's amazing, Nick. You've given me everything I wanted. I couldn't be happier."

He was struggling not to show too much emotion. “Good. I was worried that it might be too much.”

“No,” I said, looking him in the eye. “It’s perfect.” I wanted to finish that sentence with ‘*like you*’, but that would have to wait until I had him alone.

Nick held my gaze for a moment before we were interrupted.

“Well, I think you’ve done a tremendous job on these, Nick,” Michael said, then looked at his watch. “I’ve got an hour or so before my next meeting. Do you have time for us to spread everything out in here and go through some of the changes? Did you bring your computer?”

Nick lit up until he remembered. The smile wasn’t quite so bright when he looked over at me, suddenly remembering our lunch date. It was obvious he was torn about what to do, and I was the only one with the power to make it okay.

“Well,” I said, standing from my chair, “if we’re finished here, I’ll be heading out. I have to get to the restaurant.”

Nick looked at me and tried to disguise his panic. “You could stay and join us?” he asked, almost pleading.

I smiled at him. “I appreciate that, and thank you for the invitation, but I really need to get to the restaurant. I’ll look forward to our next meeting.” I shook hands with Michael, Gloria, and then my boyfriend.

“It’s okay,” I whispered and tried to reassure him. “We’ll talk later.”

He nodded, unable to find the right words for the situation. The sooner I left, the sooner they could get to work.

I headed out the door as Nick stared down at his phone. Pulling out mine, I sent him a quick text.

Me: It’s okay, sweetheart. This is how business works. Come when you’re finished.

Nick: I will. I’m so sorry.

Me: It's fine. See you soon.

Nick: Okay. I have to work at four.

Me: I figured. Love you.

Nick: I love you, too.

An hour and a half later, I sat at the bar of my closed restaurant, sipping a Club Soda with lime, when my phone sounded with a text.

Nick: Michael's appointment got cancelled. We're going to work for a while. Raincheck on lunch? He's a freaking genius, babe.

I stared at the message as a knot formed in my gut. I could be an asshole or a supportive partner. He was working on my project, after all.

Me: Learn all you can. You're going to be a huge success.

Nick: Okay, I'll see you later?

Me: Of course

When there were no more dots, I placed my phone on the bar as I downed the rest of my club soda. With a heavy heart, I blew out the candles, and took the steaks from the warming drawer and put them in a to-go container for later.

CHAPTER 23

NICK

“YOU’VE BEEN SMILING ALL NIGHT. GOT A HOT DATE AFTER work?” Ben asked as he pulled another draft beer for a guy at the end of the bar.

“Yep! With my AutoCAD and schematics.”

Ben grimaced. “No offense, but that sounds boring. You should call up a certain hot chef.”

I really wanted to go to Preston’s, especially after missing our lunch. But I hadn’t heard from him since I’d come in, and knew he’d be exhausted after the lack of sleep last night. I didn’t want to wake him again.

“What are you getting Preston for Christmas?”

I stopped restocking the glasses. “Fuck. I have no idea. Christmas hasn’t even registered with me. I’ve been so consumed with the pre-design proposal that I haven’t thought about it. What do you give someone who has everything?”

Ben sighed. “How about you?”

“He has me.”

He shook his head. “No, I mean like a few days of a staycation. Or go somewhere. Seattle or Cannon Beach. Maybe Napa since he’s a wine guy.”

I smiled as one of his ideas grew on me.

“Those are great ideas, man. You’re really good at this. You should write a blog.”

Ben laughed. “Thanks. I like personal things. For me, gifts from the heart are better than anything you can buy. Things that they’ll always remember, even if you can’t be with them.”

I looked at him as his words trailed off. Ben was always happy and upbeat, and this was new. It made me wonder if he was referring to someone in particular.

I was all up in my head when Ben called my name.

“Hey, Nick? He’s here.”

I looked up and met Preston’s soulful brown eyes as he walked toward his favorite stool at the end of the bar. My pulse never failed to pick up the pace when he was near.

I felt terrible about today, and I just wanted to hold him.

The closer he got, I could see his eyes were tired and not as bright as usual. But the way he looked at me couldn’t be mistaken for anything else. He loved me, and I felt the same way about him.

The guilt I felt for disappointing him bubbled up, and all I wanted to do was walk into his arms. So that’s what I did.

I set the tray aside and walked toward him.

Preston had just taken his leather jacket off and sat down on the stool. I closed the distance between us and watched as he swiveled to his left to face me. His loving gaze turned more apprehensive, and it hurt that I hadn’t claimed him as mine yet.

“Hey, babe.” Preston opened his arms, and I happily walked into them. His strong arms wrapped around me as I hugged him close. He always smelled so good.

“I’m so sorry about today. I should have told him I had an appointment. How can I make it up to you?” I refused to let go.

He chuckled softly and squeezed me tighter. “It’s okay, sweetheart. That’s the way business goes. You have to make the most of an opportunity like that, even if it disappoints me a little.”

I pulled back and looked at him. “I never want to disappoint you or make you feel like I’m choosing something over you.”

Preston gave me a tired smile and cupped my face with both hands. I ran my palms up his arms to cover them with mine.

“Nick, you were working for me. For us. It’s not like you went out on a date behind my back. I’d lose my shit if that happened. It’s okay.”

He pulled my face to his and took my mouth right there in the bar where everyone could see. And I didn’t care. The whole fucking world could look on while I kissed him back.

“Oh, god. They’re at it again. Benjamin, call the fire department or get the hose.”

Alejandro’s tone was teasing, but I thought I detected a hint of... something. Preston lifted his hand from my back and made his friend laugh. My guess is he shot him the bird.

We pulled apart, but he didn’t let go of me. Wrapped in his arms, I turned, only to be pulled onto his lap. I guess we were making a statement.

“You’re distracting my bartender again.” Alejandro walked around and leaned on the bar toward us. “I guess you two are finally gonna admit you’re together?”

Preston kissed my cheek. “Your guess would be correct. Right, babe?”

I nodded. “Very right.”

Alejandro grinned from ear to ear. “It’s about time. I’m happy for both of you.”

Ben walked up and slung his arm over Alejandro’s shoulder. “The last customers just left. Want me to close up?”

Alejandro turned his head to look at him. The look that passed between them was subtle, but Alejandro straightened and nodded. “Yeah, go ahead.”

Ben slipped his arm off his shoulders and winked at us. “About time.”

“Go ahead and clock out, Nick. I’ll help him close up.”

We both stared at Alejandro for a moment, wondering what all that was about. He finally sighed and shook his head, obviously frustrated.

“Don’t ask,” he said and stalked off toward his office.

We looked at each other. “Do you think…” I trailed off.

Preston knew what I was talking about. “Maybe. The attraction is definitely there, but I don’t think he’s acted on it.”

“How do you know?” I asked.

“I know him. He’s trying really hard not to cross the line, even though your friend makes it difficult for him. He’s struggling.”

I looked over at Ben. “Should I tell him to back off?”

“No,” he said. “Alejandro can take care of himself. He’s a big boy.”

I glanced back at Ben as he wiped down the tables. “I’ll keep an eye on them.”

Preston kissed my cheek. “Go clock out so we can leave, baby.”

Nodding, I got off his lap and went to the back. I was ready to get out of here and make it up to him for missing our lunch.

We said goodbye to them and walked out to his car. He parked out front tonight, which was unusual. Preston started the car and looked over at me. “Where do you want to go? I can take you home or you could come with me? Either way, I brought a late dinner.”

I reached up and ran my fingers over his face. “I don’t care as long as I’m with you.”

He reached for my hand and kissed my palm. “What are you doing tomorrow?”

“I need to work on the updates to the schematics in the morning, but I also need to do some shopping. Evidently it’s almost Christmas. Wanna go with me?”

His smile was beautiful. “I’d love to. Let’s go grab your things and your laptop. You can set up shop in my office, and I’ll make breakfast while you work.”

“That works. Do you have to work tomorrow, or is Stella covering it?”

Preston pulled out of the alley and headed toward my apartment. “I closed the restaurant on Sundays until January. My staff deserves some time off and to be with their families over the holidays.”

“Are you going back to Connecticut for Christmas?”

He glanced over at me. “I was hoping to spend it with you, or at least part of it.”

I grinned. “Good. You okay if we spend it with my family?”

Preston pulled our joined hands to his mouth and kissed my hand. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

* * *

PRESTON and I were like ships passing in the night in the days leading up to Christmas. I was consumed with my work, and he was busy at the restaurant. Whenever I had some free time, he was busy. Stella and her husband had gone to Arizona to be with her family for the holidays, so that left Preston doing it all at Bernardo’s. That was their deal since she’d covered for him while we were in New York.

I’d been meeting with Michael almost daily to work on the final schematic for the structural engineer. He’d been concerned about the weight load on the roof, so we had to go back and reconfigure some of it. The building code was very specific for a reason, especially in an existing structure.

Three days before Christmas, Preston and I finally had a day where we could spend some time together. I'd handed off the last set of plumbing and electrical plans to Michael, and went to Preston's as quickly as I could.

I knocked and waited for him to answer the door. When he didn't answer, I knocked again, a little more impatiently this time. But holy fuck, was the wait worth it.

Preston opened the door wearing only a towel. His hair was damp, and random drops of water beaded down his abs. The towel was slung so low, he should've just answered the door without it.

"Do I know you?" he asked playfully, a sexy grin on his handsome face.

"I don't know. Let's see if I can refresh your memory." I walked in, accidentally slammed the door behind me, and dropped to my knees.

"I'm opening my present," I said, making him whimper.

"You take it, baby. It's all for you."

I growled at his words as I took hold of his cock and licked the head, just the way he liked, before swallowing him whole.

"Oh, fuck," he groaned.

I sucked and licked and tortured him with my tongue until he had to pull me off. "I gotta sit before I fall," he rasped.

"Just get somewhere so I can finish you off," I panted, stripping out of my own clothes. We weren't making it far.

"Yes, bossy," he snarked, walking his naked ass to the sofa.

Flopping down in the middle, I followed him, spreading his legs to make room for me. I curled my arms under his thighs and pulled him toward me to bring his ass to the edge of the sofa.

"What's gotten into you?" Preston asked, laughing.

"Nothing, and that's the fucking problem. You come to the door like that, and this is what you can expect."

Never breaking eye contact, I stuck my thumb in my mouth and drenched it with my pooling saliva, making sure it was wet.

Preston watched with dilated pupils, gently stroking his cock, as I pressed it to his hole. His eyes closed as his back arched off the leather sofa. Knocking his hand away, I took his cock and swallowed him down as I gently pushed my thumb into his hole.

“Holy goddamn, fuck, fuck, fuck,” he panted, thrusting his hips into my mouth. My dick had become titanium while I pleased my man. Pressing my thumb in further, I twisted my wrist, and found his prostate.

I popped off and rubbed it, making him pant and squirm. “Remember me now?” I breathed.

He nodded his head rapidly as he watched me take his cock in my mouth and suck so hard it hurt my jaw. But I got what I wanted.

He bucked his hips and grunted as he unloaded into my mouth. I didn’t waste a drop and stayed latched on until he was too sensitive.

I stood, intending to jerk off on him, but he had other ideas. “Fuck me.”

My eyes flared. “Here?”

Preston nodded. “Lube’s in the drawer. And condoms.”

I nodded and reached for the supplies. As I took them from the drawer, I furrowed my brow, losing some of my desire. Preston put his hand on my face, forcing me to look at him. “I put them there for us, babe. Just in case.”

I suited up as fast as I could, and slathered on some lube. Lining up at his hole, I grabbed his legs and put them over my shoulders. He was open and ready, and I needed to finish us off.

“Do it, babe,” he groaned.

Working my way in, he squeezed the fuck out of my cock once I was fully seated deep inside him.

“This won’t take long,” I gritted out through clenched teeth, still holding his legs.

True to my word, I came in no time.

Lowering his legs to the floor, I fell forward onto his chest and soft dick. Preston wrapped his arms around me and held me close.

“I’ve missed us, so much,” he said, massaging my scalp with his long fingers.

“Me too,” I said, nuzzling against his skin.

We stayed like that for a few minutes, just enjoying being together. “Let’s go shower and climb in bed. We can nap and stay naked all day.”

I smiled against his belly. “That sounds fantastic.”

When we got up, and were halfway down the hall to his bathroom, my phone rang—the first time of what would be many—putting an end to our first day together in over a week.

CHAPTER 24

PRESTON

I STARED AT MY BEDROOM CEILING AS NICK TALKED TO *Michael the Menace* on the phone—again. Logically, I knew the conversation was about my building. But it still irritated the fuck out of me that the only day we'd carved out some time to see each other was being interrupted for the third time.

“Yeah, okay,” he said, then laughed at whatever the douche on the other end said to him. “I'll make those changes and get them over there this afternoon.”

He nodded, his eyes darting back and forth as he tried to pay attention.

“Okay, thanks Michael. Have a good trip.”

Well, there's a bright spot.

Nick ended the call and tossed his phone on the bed. He looked over at my naked body with the now-baggy condom still on my deflated dick.

Nick reached out and put his hand on my thigh. “I'm sorry, babe.”

I nodded and curled my lips in, still not taking my eyes off the ceiling.

“Preston, I don't know what you want me to do. I had no idea I was going to be assigned the Bob Vila of renovation architecture. I have to answer the call.”

I took a deep breath before I looked at him. I knew he felt stuck in the middle.

“I want him to stop fucking calling you. That’s what I want.” I got off the bed, stripped off the dry, unused condom, and went to put on sweats.

When I walked out of my closet, Nick was no longer in the room. I was being an asshole, but I couldn’t help it. It was all this pent-up sexual frustration, and I’d missed him. Our schedules were making me crazy.

The apartment was quiet except for the sound of rustling clothing. I walked into the living area where he was collecting his clothes from a couple of hours ago. Sitting down on the sofa, I reached up for him and pulled him to me. I hugged him around the waist and put my cheek against his stomach.

Nick dropped his clothes next to me on the sofa and ran his fingers through my hair. He knew that helped relax me when I was feeling stressed.

Breathing in the scent of him, I was pretty damn sure I’d never get enough of him.

“Where are you going?”

He continued to massage my scalp as I shifted to look up at him. I could see the regret in his eyes. “You heard the call. I’ve got to go home. New copies have to be delivered to the plumbing supervisor before the holidays. If I don’t, it puts us almost two weeks behind.”

“You know I don’t care about two weeks. That’s not going to make or break the opening. It’s almost Christmas, and I can guarantee you the plumbing contractor is not going to look at the plans until after the holidays. This is just a way for him to keep you under his thumb.”

Nick pulled away from me and sat on the sofa. He covered his face with his hands, then threaded them through his hair. I knew I was responsible for his frustration, and I hated it. The selfish asshole in me had ruined this for us.

“This is not about you. This timeline is about me and the very reason I didn’t want to get involved with you. I thought you understood my career had to come first right now. You

promised it wouldn't be an issue. Your career is established while I'm trying to get mine off the ground."

I sighed. "I know, but I think he just wants your fucking attention. I saw the way he looked at you at that first meeting. There was no reason for him to hide his interest, since they knew nothing about us. Then he invites you to lunch and ruins our day, again. It was all I could do to get through it without punching him in the goddamn face."

Nick laughed humorlessly. "Are you serious?" He sat back up and turned toward me to put his hands on my face. "Listen to me when I say to you that he's not looking at me in any way other than a mentee, you fucking asshole. He's got a girlfriend he's taking to Miami for Christmas and I have you."

I scoffed, still in his hands. "That doesn't mean anything and you know it. I'm bisexual. Maybe he is, too."

Nick dropped his hands from my face and shook his head. He leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and rubbed his temples. "I can't do this with you right now. I know you're upset we were interrupted, but I have to do this. It's the difference between whether I graduate or not. He's contacted a magazine about doing a story on all this. It could mean internship offers for me. This is a huge fucking deal."

"A big fucking deal for him. Don't think for a minute he's not getting something out of it."

While I seethed with all my irrational anger, Nick sat beside me and didn't move. I could feel him looking at me.

Neither of us spoke for a moment, both sitting there stewing in our anger. But when he spoke, mine quickly began to fade away.

"If you can't handle this, Preston, then maybe we should rethink what we're doing here. I love you, but I refuse to justify why I'm working with the mentor *you* requested to get the initial plans ready to build."

I looked into his eyes and saw the hurt and anger there. I reached for his hand and brought it to my lips for a kiss. Nick

held my hand tightly, and I knew he didn't want to let go of us.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled. "I know this is on me, and I'm being selfish. I just want my time with you—uninterrupted. We've had less than three nights together in the last three weeks. I miss you and I'm all out of sorts. I need my daily dose of you."

Nick's eyes softened, and his anger began to dissipate. He leaned his head on my shoulder as we laced our fingers together. "I need that too, but I don't know how to fix that right now. I told you it was going to be crazy, and there were going to be times when we wouldn't see each other."

My heart ached over just the thought of not seeing him. If I had to keep going to the bar and taking him food, I would.

I had the solution. I just needed to try harder to convince him. "Baby, we know exactly how to fix it. I've already asked you to move in here with me. It means that we could see each other every day, even with our crazy schedules."

Nick stood up and pushed my shoulders back until they reclined against the sofa. Climbing onto my lap to straddle me, he took my face in his hands and looked me in the eye. "That's not going to fix your jealousy, Preston. And if someone finds out that we're together and alerts the university, then this may have all been for nothing."

I shook my head. "Falling in love with you will never be for nothing. Just think about it and how the logistics could be so much easier for both of us. We could sleep together every night, and wake up together every morning. You can come home from the bar and crawl into bed with me. If you need me to okay changes, you'd have to go no further than the next room."

Why wasn't he jumping at the chance to live here and make this thing easier for us?

Nick looked at the clock on the wall. "You make it sound so simple. But I've got to go or I'm not going to make it. I'm

sorry, babe. Just hang on. Christmas is almost here, and we'll have some time off."

I nodded, disappointed that he didn't jump at my solution. "I know. And you'll stay with me all weekend, right?"

Nick looked at me and kissed my cheek. "Yeah, I'll do you one better. I'll stay for the week since you're closed. But Christmas Day we'll be with my family."

I sighed and kissed him one more time. "Okay, that would be good. But let me drive you home. It'll be faster."

"Okay," he said, climbing off my lap.

I hurried back to my bedroom and grabbed a t-shirt and Pirates hoodie. When I returned, he was standing by the door, his hands buried in his pockets. Nick gave me a sad smile.

I was such an idiot. If I wasn't careful, I was going to push him away.

Grabbing my keys and phone, he opened the door and went into the hallway. I held out my hand for his, and he took it without hesitation. I needed the connection.

"What are you going to do the rest of the afternoon?" he asked as we walked to the elevator.

"I'm coming back and making room for your stuff. That will keep me from going nuts until you come back to me."

He chuckled, but this time it was a happy one. "You just won't take no for an answer, will you?"

I looked at Nick in the mirrored doors of the elevator. "Not when it concerns the person I love most in the world, no. I'll stop at nothing to make you happy."

Nick gave me his normal love-drunk smile. "I love you."

I smirked at him. "And I love you more."

"Always gotta make a competition out of everything," he teased.

When we got in the car, I let it idle a few minutes to warm up. Nick was rubbing his hands together to keep warm. I

reached over and pulled him to me, and wrapped my arms around him.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I just miss you, and I can’t stand the distance between us. Now that I have you, I want all of you.”

Nick tilted his head back. “Me too. I guess that counts as our first fight.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, I guess it does. And I guess you won.”

“How do you figure that?”

I snorted. “If I’d won, you’d be tied to my bed.”

Nick burst out laughing. “In your dreams, buddy.”

“Hey, don’t knock it till you’ve tried it. I can take control of everything for you.” And that gave me the best idea for a Christmas present.

“That sounds awfully familiar.”

I kissed his forehead, then let him go so I could get him back to his apartment.

I pulled out of my parking space and glanced at him. Nick reached over to hold my hand, and my heart settled back into my chest.

The ride was relaxing as we listened to music. I parked in front of his building. “Will you come back over tonight after we close?”

“Yeah, babe. I will. We’ll have a do-over.”

I reached into the console between the seats and pulled out a key. “I had this made for you. Don’t forget to pack a bag, bring your computer, and whatever else you need. Clothing is optional.”

Nick took the key and looked at it in his hand.

“Don’t say it’s too fast. It’s the key to better time management for both of us.”

He didn’t want to smile, but he did anyway. “You’re so cheesy. But I’ve gotta go. Your plumbing needs some

attention.”

“That’s the fucking truth,” I grumbled. “Get out of here. The sooner you get done, the sooner you’ll get back to me.”

Nick smiled and got out of the car. He pocketed the key to the apartment as he walked in, leaving me longing for the next time I’d have him in my arms.

CHAPTER 25

NICK

I HAD TO ADMIT STAYING WITH PRESTON FOR THE WEEK HAD been perfect. He'd made room for my things in his closet, and set me up in his office. Fortunately, I didn't have to work on the plans, but I needed to work on my resume. It was time to start applying for internships, and I knew most of the ones I wanted were not in Portland.

I dreaded that conversation with him.

The day before Christmas Eve, we went to the grocery store and the local bakery. They'd sold out of his favorite cinnamon sugar croissants, so he called Greyson and asked him to overnight a huge box of whatever pastries he could send. And sure enough, their arrival on Christmas Eve was untimely.

We were on the sofa, making out and being handsy while *Home Alone 2* played on the TV. Preston had his hands down my sweats, edging me with his thumb and my pre-cum, when the delivery person rang the doorbell.

Preston broke our kiss. "God fucking bless America," he griped, as I moved off his lap for him to answer the door. "Hold that thought right there. And don't you dare finish yourself off."

I groaned and fell back onto the sofa. He had me trussed up like a Christmas turkey with my sweatpants tucked under my balls. I looked ridiculous, but all I wanted was for him to come back and take care of it. Maybe if I...

“Don’t touch it,” he yelled, just as I went to free my gonads. I sighed and fell back on the sofa, covering my eyes with my arm.

“Fine,” I groaned. He’d almost gotten me there with his touch alone, and that was a first for me. And this holiday was full of firsts.

The door opened and closed, a box hit the kitchen counter, and then he was back.

I moved my arm and opened one eye to see my sexy man standing naked with a can of whipped cream. I laughed. “What the fuck are you planning to do with that?”

Preston squirted some into his mouth, then answered my question. “Spray it up your ass, then eat it out.” My jaw dropped open in shock and he took that opportunity to squirt it into my mouth.

I swallowed and scowled at him. “You are not, N-O-T, *not* spraying that anywhere inside my body.” He looked disappointed for about two seconds.

“Then I’ll just eat it off you. How about that? You’re like a buffet for me.”

“You hate buffets,” I quipped.

“Not when they’re serving cock and balls with whipped cream.” I barked out a laugh as he shook the can. “You’re gonna need to lose the sweats, baby.”

He didn’t have to ask me twice. I lost them and my mind with his teasing. By the time it was over, we were both a sticky mess and in desperate need of a shower. But I’d never look at whipped cream the same way again.

* * *

CHRISTMAS MORNING WAS PRETTY GREAT. We’d slept in and he’d taken me from behind before we got out of bed, putting that morning wood to good use.

“Goddamn I love this,” he growled in my ear as he thrust lazily into me, torturously grazing my prostate just enough to make me gasp, but not hard enough to make me come.

As we showered together, I realized I was really happy, and this was what life with him could look like. Getting ready together every morning. Me heading into the office while he went off to the restaurant to get things started for the day. We’d meet up back at home for dinner, or go out to Alejandro’s for a beer. And every night, we’d go to bed together.

“Do you want kids?” he asked out of the blue on the way to my parents’ house.

I looked over at him. “Uh...not right this minute, but maybe eventually. Do you?”

He smiled, and his dimple popped. “Yeah, I think I might. Christmas always makes me think about it.”

I knew he was thinking about his ex and what happened. I reached for his hand and laced our fingers together.

“There are a lot of kids out there that need good homes. I’ve always wanted to give one or two of them a new life with a family. I could see myself cooking breakfast for them before school, heading to baseball practice or gymnastics or horseback riding.”

I just listened to him and tried to picture us doing that together. It wasn’t hard to do. He’d be a great dad.

“I think that’s a beautiful picture.”

Preston squeezed my hand and glanced toward me. “Can you see yourself in that picture with me and my seven kids?”

My pulse sped up, but could I see it? I grinned because there was no way in hell he’d want seven kids. “Yeah, I think I could.”

“Good, but you’ll have to propose to me. I’m batting 0% on that one.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, okay. I’ll think about it and take it under advisement.”

While I loved knowing he was thinking about a future, it also formed a knot in my stomach, knowing I would have a big decision to make soon.

Preston pulled up in the driveway of my parents' home and parked the car. We got out and went to the trunk to gather everything we'd brought. My dad came out to help.

"Merry Christmas boys!" my dad called. "What can I carry?"

My dad hugged me, then Preston. It warmed my heart how much they liked him and made him feel welcome. "Merry Christmas, Dad. Can you grab the boxes in the backseat?"

"Sure. Did you make these, Preston? I'll need to sample them first."

My boyfriend laughed. "Well, my brother actually made them. He sent them from Colorado yesterday."

Memories of that delivery made my cheeks heat.

"Simmer down there, hot stuff," he whispered in my ear. "We'll revisit the sofa when we get home."

I looked up at him. "How did you know..."

He grinned at me. "I can read you like a dirty book, sweetheart."

Well, that wasn't good.

* * *

AFTER LUNCH, we were about to exchange gifts when the doorbell rang. My grandparents were spending the holidays with my aunt and uncle in Vancouver, so I knew it wasn't them.

Preston and I were gathering our gifts for everyone when Nickie called my name.

"Uh, Nick. You have a visitor."

I looked up at her, and the huge man that had once owned my heart, standing beside her. He looked nervous as he stood there waiting for my shock to wear off, then gave me a sheepish smile.

“Hey, Nick.”

I stood immediately. “Evan. What are you doing here?”

I heard the happiness in my voice, and he visibly relaxed as I walked toward him. Evan gave me a hug, and his scent took me right back to college. When I pulled away, he looked up and around, evidently spotting Preston.

I turned and looked at my boyfriend. The green monster was rising in him, and I had to stop that shit right now.

“Evan, this is my boyfriend, Preston James. Babe, this is Evan Ellis, my friend from college. He’s a tight end for Atlanta.”

Preston held out his hand to shake Evan’s. “Nice to meet you. Nick’s told me about you.”

I rolled my eyes, and Nicole looked at me with wide eyes.

My look told her to shut the fuck up, making her laugh. The twin thing was real.

“Evan Ellis, is that you?” my mother called as she entered the room carrying the glass of wine Preston had poured her.

He grinned from ear to ear. “Yes, ma’am. How are you, Michelle?”

She hugged him and patted his back. “I’m wonderful, sweetheart. Are you hungry? We just ate, but have plenty of food and dessert.”

“No,” he laughed, “but thank you. I just had lunch with my Mom and stepfather. I thought I’d drop by and see if Nick was here.”

Evan looked at me and there was a little longing in his gaze that I’m sure Preston had picked up on if the way he held me in his vice grip was any indication.

“Evan, how are you, son?” my dad asked.

Turning, he shook my dad's hand. "I'm good. I'm here since we play the Pirates tomorrow, and thought I'd stop by to see everyone."

I furrowed my brow. "Aren't you playing for Atlanta?"

He shook his head. "No. I was traded to San Diego at the end of last season. I guess you've not been keeping up with me," he teased.

I laughed, a little embarrassed. "No, I've been kinda busy finishing my master's degree and working."

"And dating me," Mr. Jealous responded. I swear he was gonna pee on me to mark his territory.

I laughed and patted his chest. "Yes, baby. I've not forgotten you."

He grunted like a Neanderthal and sat back down.

Evan looked at me and then at Preston. He shook his head in understanding.

"Mom made her cheesecake. Want a piece?" I asked, hoping he said yes.

He nodded. "Yeah, that would be great. I could never say no to her cheesecake."

I nodded toward the kitchen. "Come on, I'll get you some."

Standing, I headed to the kitchen while my sister engaged Preston in conversation about New York.

"He's territorial, huh?" he asked, as I pulled the cheesecake out of the refrigerator. "I don't blame him."

That was an understatement. "Yeah, a little. He's a really good man."

Evan was quiet while I plated up his cheesecake. When I handed it to him, he studied me and nodded. "Thanks," he said, but only picked at the dessert. "I didn't think you'd stay single long."

I looked up at the man I used to love. “I was for a long time after you left, until about three months ago.”

Evan held my gaze for a minute before nodding. “I guess I waited too long. Are you guys serious?”

“Yeah. Pretty serious.” I waited as he took a bite of cheesecake. “Is that why you stopped by?” He knew what I was asking.

He smiled sadly. “A guy can hope. We were really good together. Probably the happiest I’ve ever been. I hate the way things ended between us. ”

“I know. I did, too. But we both knew we couldn’t keep up long distance like that.”

Out of the blue, I was hit with a metaphorical anvil about my internship. If I chose somewhere out of state, how would Preston and I make it work? Maybe we couldn’t, either.

I rubbed at the tightness in my chest, and looked at Evan. “If you could go back now, would you have stayed? Would you have given up your dream for me?”

Evan stared at me. “I don’t know how to answer that.”

I held up my hands and smiled. “Don’t answer that. I’m just wondering for my own curiosity. It’s okay to say no, because I understand making tough choices.”

He looked at me with concern in his eyes. “Are you okay, Nick? If you ever need to talk, you know I’m here for you. No matter what.”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “Yeah, thanks, Ev.”

Of course, Preston took that moment to walk into the kitchen. I looked at him as I stood propped against the counter. It was impossible for me to be upset with him, because if the tables were turned, I wouldn’t like it either.

I smiled at him and held my arm open for him. “Babe,” I said, “I was just about to tell Evan about our trip to New York and the building.”

I wasn't, but I was trying to assure him he was my number one now, and that wouldn't change.

Evan ate a bite of cheesecake. "How did you guys meet?"

I started to answer, but I let Preston take the question. "Nick works for my best friend. We met through him at the bar."

Evan smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "That's cool. You still working there?"

We continued to talk about his career and how he liked playing in San Diego. I made sure not to let go of Preston until he went to the refrigerator and brought Evan a bottle of water.

He smiled at Preston. "Thanks, man."

My man nodded. "You're welcome."

After Evan finished eating, he put the plate in the sink, then looked at his watch.

"I've gotta get back to the hotel. If you guys don't have plans tomorrow, I can leave tickets for you at Will Call. They're with my mom and stepdad."

I looked at Preston, who seemed interested, then back to Evan. "Do you have my number?"

He laughed. "Yep, unless you've changed it. And mine is the same too."

I nodded. "Okay, I'll text you later and let you know for sure."

Evan's smile was genuine, just like he was. I had a soft place in my heart for him. "Sounds good. If everyone wants to come, just let me know."

"You know I'll have to support the Pirates, right? A couple of my friends are married to them."

He grinned. "Yeah, which ones?"

"Cooper is married to their tight end, Greg Foster. And Christian is married to Alex Hayes."

Evan looked impressed. “Nice. I know Greg, but haven’t met Alex. Glad to see them representing.”

“Are you out?” I asked, wondering if he’d ever shared his sexuality.

He nodded. “Yeah, to my new team. They’re cool with me being bisexual.”

I smiled, genuinely happy for him. “The Pirates are like that too. A lot of them come into the bar. They’re just regular guys.”

“I’ve heard that,” he said. “If you come, just pull for me a little bit.” He pinched his fingers together a little.

I laughed. “Yeah, I can do that. But don’t tell Coop.”

Evan took the couple of steps separating us and held out his hand to Preston. “It’s nice to meet you, Preston. Take care of him. He’s the best.”

Preston shook his hand and nodded. “Thank you, Evan. I plan to. And good luck tomorrow.”

He looked at me, and I stepped out of Preston’s death grip on my hip and hugged my friend. “I’ll text you and let you know if we can make it. I’ve missed my friend.”

Evan stepped back and nodded.

“Yeah, me too, Nick.” He pointed to the living room. “I’m going to say goodbye to your parents and Nickie. It was good seeing you, Nick.”

“You too, Ev. Thanks for stopping by.”

Evan raised his hand to wave and left us in the kitchen. When he was out of earshot, I turned to Preston and shook my head. It was impossible to be mad at him.

“What?” he asked, shrugging his shoulders. “He’s a good-looking guy, and I wasn’t taking any chances.”

I slung my arms around his neck and leaned into him. “You’re ridiculous. Do you seriously think I have eyes for anyone but you?”

He pulled me closer and kissed me. “I hope not. But I’m not twenty-eight anymore.”

“No, you’re not. But you’re my perfect forty-five, and I love you.”

Preston relaxed and kissed me slow and deep until Nickie interrupted us. “Hey, come on. You can snog later.”

We both laughed at her Britishism and followed her to open presents.

CHAPTER 26

PRESTON

“RUN, RUN, RUN!”

I was thoroughly amused as I sat watching Nick get into the game, cheering and groaning like all the other fans. The amusing part was that we were sitting in the midst of the San Diego Sunrays fans section. And the Sunrays didn't have the ball—the Pirates did.

All his chants were brought on when Alex Hayes threw a lateral pass to Marcus Monroe, who then pulled up to launch it downfield to Greg Foster. To say the fans around us were not amused was an understatement.

I put my arm around his shoulder and whisper yelled into his ear. “You remember we're sitting in the middle of the Sunrays' section, right?”

Nick smiled and shrugged. “I told Evan I had to pull for my friends. But,” he said, enunciating the *‘but’*, “I *will* cheer every time Ev catches the ball, or makes a play.”

I just looked at him. “That won't be confusing at all,” I deadpanned.

Nick laughed, but kept his eyes on the field. The next eruption from him came when Alex Hayes scored a touchdown on a quarterback keeper.

“Watch this,” he said, elbowing me. “That's Dominick.”

The kicking team lined up for the extra point. The center snapped the ball to the holder and Dom moved forward to kick

it dead center between the uprights. The Pirates fans went nuts, and of course my cheerleader was right there with them.

The Pirates were up by ten, and the fans were going crazy. “Why is everyone going crazy after an extra point?”

Nick grinned. “He hasn’t missed one since he started playing. Almost two complete seasons, and he’s never missed a field goal or an extra point. He’s got the highest accuracy percentage in the NFL. There’s talk he may go to the Pro Bowl.”

Evan’s mom put her arm around Nick and drew his attention away. I watched as she said something that made him laugh. She was obviously fond of Nick, just like her son.

I stood with my arms folded across my chest like a bouncer outside a bar and scowled as I watched the kickoff. Looking around, we were close enough to the suites to see inside as the Pirates’ families celebrated. There were little kids and lots of moms, but I finally found the one I was looking for.

One suite contained all the husbands of the men that had come into Bernardo’s last April. Commander Jesse Evans held a little girl in his arms with blonde curls and a big gold bow in her hair. Her tiny jersey matched his, and when he shifted with her in his arms, it read *My Daddy* and the #2. She shook a purple and gold pom-pom during the kickoff.

Nick’s arm slid around my waist. “What are you looking at so intently?”

I pointed up to the suite where Jesse stood. “That must be their daughter.”

“Yeah,” he said with affection in his tone. “That’s Olivia. There’s a really good story about how they got her.”

My heart twinged at the thought of being a dad like that. Spending my days taking care of children, instead of behind the stove at Bernardo’s. Making lunches, waiting in the carpool drop-off and pick-up lines, and being a full-time dad.

Nick pointed back up. “That’s Aidan Hayes, Marcus Monroe’s husband. He and the lady beside him are holding their twin daughters, Alex and Maddie.”

I smiled and nodded. I could see it all so clearly in my head. Slipping my arm around his shoulders, I pulled him close. “That could be us one day.”

Nick tensed at my words. I looked at him, wondering if I’d said too much. Something in that statement hadn’t sat well with him. Just as I went to ask, his face brightened and he started cheering.

I looked down on the field to see who I had to suppose was Evan. The picture that flashed on the Jumbo Tron verified it. He stood six-foot-five and weighed in at 230 pounds. I could see why Nick would be drawn to him. His smile was infectious and almost dopey.

“You’re studying that awfully hard.”

I looked over at him as he peered at me with his blue eyes that reminded me of the water in the Caribbean.

“Just getting to know a little about him. His stats are impressive.” The math supported that conclusion.

He took me by the hand. “Let’s go get a beer.”

I nodded enthusiastically. “Yeah, a big one.”

Nick laughed. “We better get you a hot dog too, or we might get more confessions out of you.”

I glowered at him. “I’m not a fucking lightweight. I can easily handle my beer,” I said, following him out of the seats to the concessions area.

“Come on, I’ll buy you a beer.”

As we stood in line, Nick’s phone buzzed with an incoming text. Digging it out from his pocket, buried under layers of clothing, he clicked on it and read the message. When he started laughing and typing back furiously, I had to know what was going on.

“Who is it?” I asked with amusement in my tone.

“It’s Cooper. He wants to know what the hell is wrong with me for cheering for both teams.”

I smiled. “I told you people wouldn’t understand.”

“I told him I’d explain the next time I saw him, and he said they were all meeting up at Alejandro’s after the game. They invited us to come.”

Thoughts of being in the same place as all of them had me conflicted, but the happiness on his face made the decision. So I nodded. “Yeah, sounds good.”

Nick looked at me for a moment and smiled. “It might be a good time to clear the air with them. Tell them about Seth.”

He was right. This was the perfect time. “Yeah, let’s do it.”

After the game, we said goodbye to his parents and headed to Alejandro’s.

“It’s going to be crazy in there. I might need to help them out for a while,” he said, looking at me from the passenger seat of my car.

I glanced at him. “You wouldn’t mind?”

“No,” he laughed. “I love my job there. I’m really going to miss it once I get my internship.”

I frowned, staring out the front windshield at all the traffic leaving the stadium. “Do you have to quit? If you love it, maybe you could work a night or two.”

Some of his jovial tone was missing. “It will depend on where I get an internship. I could have long hours or a big workload. We can talk about it later. I just know if they’re slammed, I’m going to jump in.”

I smiled. “I can help too, ya know. I’ve tended bar a time or three.”

His beautiful smile and warm gaze were back on me. I didn’t have to look at him to know. I could feel it in my soul.

“Well, I wanna see that,” he laughed.

“Are you insinuating that I can’t make a mixed drink?” I asked, incredulously.

Nick laughed, and the sound filled my chest like the air I needed to breathe. “Not at all, Big Daddy. But I’m thinking we need to have a competition and place a wager.”

I grinned. He had no idea how good I was. “Okay, what did you have in mind?”

He thought about it for a moment. “The winner gets to choose whether to top or bottom and they can use anything in their personal toy box.”

My skin heated and my mind filled with all kinds of dirty things we could do. “You have no idea what you’ve started.”

Nick leaned over the console and sucked my earlobe into his mouth, making my dick twitch. “Don’t you play dirty, Nicholas.”

He grinned. “The way I see it, we’re both gonna win in the end. We just have to determine whose end is getting it.”

* * *

THE BAR WAS HOPPING JUST like we thought it would be, but Ben and Alejandro worked side by side, making drinks and pulling beers while Anna took care of the bar tabs. In another year, she’d be behind that bar and slinging drinks like her old man.

I slung my arm around Nick. “Doesn’t look like they need you, babe.”

He frowned. “I’m gonna check, anyway.”

I followed him to the bar, and when Alejandro looked up, I knew his smart mouth was going to slay me. “You a fanboy now, James?”

I looked down at the new Pirate’s jersey Nick insisted I needed from the stadium store. “Fuck you,” I said, flipping him the bird.

“Do you need some help? I can jump in,” Nick offered.

Alejandro looked around and over at Ben. I saw the barest hint of affection on his face when he looked at him. “I think we got it. I’ll tap you if we need more hands.”

Nick nodded. “Okay, the Pirates are coming in. Coop texted they were on the way.”

“Great! You wanna check over on the reserved side and see if they have space?”

“Sure,” he replied before turning to me. “I’ll be right back.”

I watched as he snaked his way through the crowd. There was a nagging feeling in the back of my mind that I was missing something.

“You want a beer?” Alejandro asked, opening the beer case.

I turned to look at him. “Yeah, make it two.”

Pulling out my wallet to pay, he waved me off. “I’ve got it,” he said, sliding them over to me. I pulled out a twenty and stuck it in the tip jar. Maybe everyone would get the hint to tip the bartenders.

A young woman approached Alejandro from behind the bar. “I’m here, boss. Want me to take over?”

His eyes lit up. “Regan, yes, please! Thanks for coming in early.”

I frowned at the young woman and looked at Alejandro. “New hire?”

He nodded and waved me toward the back of the bar. I got up from my stool and took our beers with me. When I met him at the backside by my favorite spot, he sighed. “Yeah, she’s new. She came highly recommended. I’m going to have to replace Nick soon.”

Alejandro grabbed a bottle of water from the chiller under the bar.

I looked out to see where he was and found him talking to Cooper and Christian. Turning back to my friend, I smiled. “He loves this job. I told him to stay on a night or two a week if he wanted to.”

Alejandro gave me a look that made my stomach roil. “What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

He took a sip of his water. “Have you guys talked about his internship?”

“Yeah, some.” I studied him a bit longer. “Why do I get the feeling there’s something I don’t know?”

“I just wondered if he’d told you about where he was applying. That’s all.”

I furrowed my brow. “Not specifically. Just that he’ll apply after he finishes the project.”

Alejandro nodded his head slowly, wondering if he should tell me something.

“What am I missing?”

His gaze shifted to the right as Nick approached. I watched his expression as Nick’s arms wrapped around me. “There you are.”

My attention shifted to him. “Yep, right here.” My beer had suddenly lost its appeal.

Alejandro put his hand on my shoulder, drawing my attention back to him. “Enjoy your time together,” he said, then turned and walked through the crowd.

What did that mean?

“Wanna go meet the guys? Jesse and Dom are on the way.”

I looked over his shoulder at where the crowd was growing. Cheers went up as the regulars greeted the players. Did I really want to get into all of that with everyone?

Hell no. It was embarrassing as fuck.

“Maybe you can get the two of them to come over here.”

He grinned. “Sure thing, babe. I can make that happen. I really think you’d like them all. They’re really great.”

“I’m sure they are, but I need to set the record straight first. I found a picture of Seth from college. Hopefully they’ll believe me.”

He kissed my cheek. “They will. I know it.”

It wasn't long before the chants of, ‘*Dom! Dom! Dom!*’ started up and we knew they'd arrived.

“I'll be back,” he said, winking at me.

I took a pull from my beer and unlocked my phone. I found the photo I wanted and darkened the screen.

Nick walked up with Jesse and Dominick behind him. They came to a stop a few feet across from me and looked confused.

“What's this about?” the kicker asked, his posture very stiff.

Nick put his hand on Dom's shoulder. “Preston and I are dating, and when he told me about what happened at Bernardo's, I said that he needed to explain his response to Jesse. You'll see why.”

They looked at me with apprehension.

I cleared my throat. “First, let me say congratulations on your marriage and that precious little girl. She's beautiful. I saw her at the game today.”

Dom's stance relaxed a little bit. “It's possible I overreacted,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck with his hand.

Jesse laughed and kissed his husband. “He's a hothead.”

Dom scowled at him, bringing some humor to the tense moment.

I looked at Jesse. “The reason I had such an intense reaction to seeing you was not to hit on you. I was actually shocked, and I'm still shocked now.”

“About what?” he asked, amused.

“You could be the identical twin to one of my friends from college. He was killed in a car accident twenty years ago.”

The humor slipped from his face, and his eyes widened. “Where did you go to school?”

I looked at him, confused. “UC-Berkeley.”

He dropped his gaze to the floor, then looked up at Dom. “Can you get Cooper, babe?”

Dominick looked at me, then back to him with confusion. “Okay, why?”

Jesse looked at me when he answered. “Because I think Preston is going to tell me he knew my Uncle Seth.”

Now my eyes bugged out as Nick and Dominick looked back and forth between the two of us.

“Uh, yeah. Give me a second to get Coop.” Dominick worked his way through the crowd and returned with his brother-in-law.

“What’s up?” he asked Jesse, looking from me to his brother.

“Coop, who does Mom say I look like?”

Cooper looked at him. “Uncle Seth. Why?”

“Holy fuck. What are the chances?” I muttered as Nick moved over to my side.

“Show them the photo, babe.”

I nodded and unlocked my phone. Pulling up the photo of Seth, Alejandro, and me taken in college, I handed it to Jesse.

They gasped in disbelief and I looked up at Nick. “Good call,” I whispered.

“Tell us how...where...” Cooper asked.

I smiled. “Your uncle was one of my best friends in college. He shared a suite with me and Alejandro, and we were closer than brothers. When he died in that accident, it took us to our knees for a long time.”

Alejandro walked up and leaned on the bar. “Did you show them?”

I nodded. “He’s their uncle.”

“What?” he asked, shocked.

Jesse spoke up as he handed my phone back. “He was our mother’s younger brother. I was ten when he died. And I’m shocked.”

“I understand. That was my predicament as well. When I walked away from you all, I went to my office and called him,” I said, motioning to Alejandro.

“I can confirm that. It was unreal.”

“Now I really feel like an asshole,” Dom muttered.

I held out my hand to shake his. “No, man. I would have reacted the same way. There are no hard feelings on my end.”

“Thank you,” he said.

Cooper broke in. “Can you guys come sit with us? We can talk more. The guys are going to be surprised.”

I looked at Nick, who smiled and motioned toward their tables with his head. “Sure, we’d love to.”

As we went to follow them, Alejandro put his hand on my shoulder. “What are the chances?”

I laughed. “I don’t know, but Nick is the reason I no longer feel like an idiot around them.”

My best friend nodded. “You’re both good for each other. Don’t let him go.”

“I don’t intend to,” I said. “Ever.”

Alejandro gave me a pensive smile. “If you can be flexible, you might just be able to hold on to him.”

I nodded. “We’ll talk later.”

My best friend smiled and went back to work while I went to hang out with my boyfriend and some of the Portland Pirates.

CHAPTER 27

NICK

PRESTON'S CHEST WAS PRESSED TO MY BACK AS HE STROKED my prostate with his dick. We were in the shower using my Christmas present, inspired by our first time in New York.

My genius of a boyfriend had gifted me with a new sex toy that would allow me to have all the pleasure I could take. Suctioned to the wall was a toy that looked like a *Fleshlight*, with a ribbed channel that, at the click of a remote, contracted and milked my dick while he took me from behind.

“So... fucking... good,” I gasped as he fucked me, and I fucked the toy. Within minutes, we were both shooting our releases.

“*Fuuucckk*,” he moaned into my shoulder as I milked his cock with my ass.

“God, that thing is...” I spluttered, pulling back to extract my dick from its jaws of pleasure.

Preston's back hit the other wall, taking me with him. I was still speared on his dick.

“Fuck,” he laughed as I gasped when he nudged my prostate one more time.

Spent, I rested my head back on his shoulder while he wrapped his arms around me to hold me to him. As he softened, he slowly slipped out of me.

I picked my head up to look at the toy as the inside continued to roll and contract. My cum dribbled out of it and onto the tiled shower floor.

“I’m going to call that thing *Jaws*,” I mused.

Preston laughed out loud, jiggling all our sensitive parts together again. Reaching around, he took my softening dick into his hand and massaged me. If he didn’t watch out, he’d have me hard again.

“You want a turn with *Jaws*, don’t you?”

The deep rumble of his laughter was a sound I never wanted to forget. “That thing is all for you, baby. It’s the gift that keeps on giving.”

“More like taking,” I teased.

I moved away and reached for the body wash. It smelled just like him.

“How do you feel about some takeout for dinner?”

I should offer to cook. “If you’re tired, I can cook for us. You got any Ramen Noodles?”

Preston released a heavy sigh, making me laugh. “That is not cooking. I was thinking more along the lines of pizza.”

I kissed his cheek. “That actually sounds perfect. We can watch Sunday Night Football.”

* * *

I’D GONE BACK to my apartment after the holidays three weeks ago, much to Preston’s dismay. Even though I tried to put some distance between us, I ended up in his bed six nights out of seven. It seriously had me thinking about why I was paying rent in an apartment I effectively no longer lived in.

When it came to Preston, my head and my heart were on two different pages. My head said to start preparing myself for the impending separation, but my heart wanted to be with him every second to soak up all his love and attention. Either way, I knew it would break me in the end. And just like with Evan, I’d throw myself into my work to smother the pain from missing him.

But for now, my heart was winning and in control.

Today I was meeting with Michael to go over the final drafts and to talk internships. Tomorrow I'd make the presentation to my professors and Preston.

My phone buzzed as I walked into Michael's office building. Juggling my plans and laptop, I pulled out my phone to find a text from Preston.

Preston: Can I take you to lunch? I miss you.

I smiled at his sweet text.

Me: I miss you, too. Even though it's only been nine hours since you last saw me.

Preston: But it feels longer. And it's causing me some pain.

I grinned.

Me: Really? How so? Do you need a doctor?

Preston: Yes. I need Dr. Reed to make a house call.

Me: What seems to be the ailment?

Preston: *photo*

I knew I looked like a dork, with the stupid grin on my face, but I couldn't help it.

Me: That is concerning. Does it swell like that every morning? Let me see if I can find his number and make you an appointment.

Preston: -_-

Me: LOL—I'll see if I can swing by before going to work. No promises, though.

Preston: You're a terrible doctor. I could die from this.

Me: Good thing I'm not one.

Me: Go jerk off, or find Jaws.

Me: Bye babe.

Preston: *sigh* *stomps off to shower with a shark*

I wanted to keep on texting with him, but I had to get in there. Pocketing my phone, I looked up to find Michael standing at the door, watching me. I hadn't even heard him.

"Hey," I said. "Were you waiting for me?"

He laughed. "Yeah. I was coming out to meet the delivery guy and saw you grinning from ear to ear. Must have been good."

My face heated thinking about Preston in the shower with the shark. "Uh, yeah. It was a friend."

Michael looked at me and grinned.

"Okay, my boyfriend." I blushed even more. I was a grown man blushing like a teenager.

"Must be someone very special." He pushed open the door and took the deli bag from the delivery guy. "Follow me. We're going to the conference room."

I nodded and followed him through the office.

"Jason Simmons from AW emailed me today. He's planning to come to your presentation to conduct the interview with us and Mr. James, then he'll write the article. It should get you a lot of offers for your internship."

Michael put the food down on one end of the table and took a seat. My stomach sank at the thought of what I hadn't had the balls to tell Preston. I dropped my stuff at the other end and went to sit with him.

“Have you thought about where you want to apply?” he asked as he unpacked our food.

“I’ve been thinking about it ever since I graduated from college.”

He slid one of the sandwiches over to me, then went to grab two bottles of water. When he came back, he sat down and unwrapped his sandwich.

“How was Miami?”

He smiled. “It was wonderful. Clear blue skies, warm temperatures, and crystal clear water. And it doesn’t hurt that I got engaged.”

My eyes flew open mid-bite. I chewed and swallowed quickly. “That’s great! Congratulations, man.”

“Thanks. Kristin wasn’t expecting it, so that made it even more special. We’d talked about what we wanted out of life, and when I thought about it, I realized no matter what I did in this field, it would mean nothing without her.”

He continued to eat as I just looked at my sandwich. My stomach roiled as anxiety overtook me. Michael must have noticed. “Are you okay?”

“Uh, um,” I nodded. “Yeah.” I wasn’t. I’d completely fucked up.

Michael put his sandwich down and frowned at me. “Are you sure, Nick? You’ve gone pale.”

I opened the bottle of water and took a drink, willing myself to get a grip. I’d tell him, soon.

“You can talk to me, Nick. I’m in your corner. Did I say something to upset you?”

I shook my head emphatically. “No, you didn’t. I’ve just, uh...” I didn’t even know how to word it.

“My boyfriend doesn’t know the internships I’m seeking aren’t in Portland. Everyone else around me knows except for him. I haven’t had the guts to tell him. Didn’t want to ruin Christmas.”

Michael got up and closed the door, then came back to sit in front of me. “Are you in love with him?”

I closed my eyes and nodded. “So much.”

“Can he go with you?”

Clasping my hands, I stared into my lap. “No. He’s older than me and has commitments here that he can’t walk away from.” *Fuck, I just wanted to tell him.*

When he said nothing, I looked up at him. “I don’t want to leave him behind. But it may not matter when he finds out. He’s going to lose his shit and dump me.”

My eyes welled and goddamn, I was gonna cry. Why the hell had I let all that out? I’d been pushing this down for months now, and now the dam had broken.

“How much older is he?”

My eyes were pleading with him not to ask me that. He’d know it was Preston as soon as I answered that question. “I can’t...”

He held his hands up. “It’s okay, Nick. You don’t have to say anything more. I thought that might be the case all along. But why hide it?”

“Protection,” I said. “I didn’t want any conflict that might keep me from graduating.”

Michael nodded. “Did he buy a five million dollar building in the heart of downtown Portland just so you could complete your degree requirements?”

“No, he honest to god plans to build this. That was his plan all along.”

I was saying too much. I knew I was, but I really needed someone to talk to.

He leaned forward. “Then what’s the conflict? My firm is being contracted by him, not you. My duty to him is to make sure the plans meet the building code. If Mr. James intends to build it, there’s nothing for you to be concerned about. This whole thing was a special case, initiated by him. The project

was a chance for you to practice everything you've learned, and it's quite impressive."

I smiled weakly and pushed my food away.

"Take my advice and just tell him. Be honest and lay it out there for him. You'll see. It will all work out."

I wasn't so sure about that. "Can I ask you a question?"

He smiled. "Sure."

"How did you know it was Preston?"

Michael's face pulled into a smile, and he threw his head back in laughter. "I knew the first time he scowled at me. Every time he looked at the plans, he moved a little closer to you. I doubt if Gloria noticed."

I groaned and put my face in my hands. "I told him to stop doing that, but he doesn't listen."

"I think it's sweet. And if he makes you that happy, you've got to hold on to that."

I was ready to panic. "Please promise me you won't say anything?"

"You've got my word, Nick. Just tell him."

He was right. I had to come clean and tell him everything. "You're right. I'll do it after the presentation tomorrow."

One thing I knew for sure was that Preston was going to lose his shit. Every possible explanation had me in the wrong. I was the one holding onto the secret. I just hoped he would give me a chance to explain.

CHAPTER 28

PRESTON

TODAY WAS THE BIG DAY. I'D GET TO SEE THE FINAL PLANS for the building he'd created for me. It was my own Taj Mahal, but in restaurant form. And with his commitments to school completed, I'd just have to compete with his work schedule at Alejandro's for his time and attention until he started his internship.

Nick had been nervous for some reason, so I'd fucked him silly until he could relax enough to go to sleep. It worked for a while until he woke up at 4 a.m. and tried to sneak out of my bed.

"Where are you going? It's still fucking dark out there." I said, flipping on my bedside lamp.

Nick froze and turned to blink at me. When he just stood there, I got out of bed in all my naked glory and took his hand to lead him back to bed. Once I had him back in my arms, he curled up with his cheek over my heart. He held onto me as if he were afraid I'd disappear while we slept.

"Go back to sleep, love. It's too early, even for you."

He nodded and fell back asleep.

When the alarm went off three hours later, we got up and showered separately. I let him have his space to get himself together.

"Baby, why are you so nervous? I'm going to love the plans. I've already seen them, remember?"

“Yes,” he sighed. “I know that. But you haven’t seen all the presentations, only the first set of blueprints. And the magazine interview has me on edge.”

“Why?” I asked, pouring him some coffee.

“It just makes me nervous. But when I talk about this design, I can’t seem to shut up. It wasn’t a normal run-of-the-mill project with four walls. It was so much more. I love it so much.”

I pulled him to me for a hug and a kiss. “I’m glad you love it. You’re going to have to look at it the rest of your life.”

Nick didn’t reply, and I chalked it up to his nerves being on edge.

“Go get ready. I’m going to jump in the shower.”

Nick nodded and gave me a smile. It wasn’t the lovesick fool smile I gave him, but I’d take it. It was understandable that he would be reserved. This was his final exam of sorts.

As I made my way to the bathroom, I smiled to myself. This would be our first night without worrying about plans or stressing over anything.

FORTY-FIVE MINUTES LATER, we were in the car and headed back to the same place we’d had our first meeting.

Nick kept glancing over at me, and it was creepy as fuck. “I knew I should have fucked you again this morning.”

A nervous laugh erupted from him. “No, three times was enough.”

“I don’t know about that. Did I miss something?” I rubbed my hand across my jaw as my *Mercedes* quietly hummed at a stoplight.

He cleared his throat, and I looked over at him. His beautiful blue eyes were cerulean this morning. “Did I tell you Michael knows about us?”

The grin on my face was uncontrollable. “Yeah? That’s great! Now that fucker knows to keep his hands off you.”

Nick laughed as I pulled away from the light. “Yeah, okay. You’re delusional with that, but that’s not the point. Wanna know how he figured it out?”

I bet I could guess.

“It was all your scowling at him. And evidently, every time you got up, you moved closer to me. That’s how he put it together. You gave us away.”

I laughed. “I knew that would come in handy one day.”

“You know your jealousy isn’t necessary, right? You’re all I see, Preston.” The light airiness from a second ago had faded, and it almost sounded like Nick was pleading with me.

Reaching over, I took his hand. “I know, baby. But why are you so nervous? I’ve never seen you like this before. Not even when the bar is three rows deep with people waiting during a Pub Crawl.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see him frown. “You were there?”

I nodded. “Every last one of them, just to see you in action.”

Nick seemed to settle down and relax a bit. He gripped my hand a little tighter, and I squeezed back. I’d take that as a win.

I pulled in and parked away from the other cars. I cut the engine and looked over at him as he gripped my hand. “I feel like I need to say something. This is a big moment for us. I never thought I’d find a new lease on life at forty-five, but you’ve given me a whole new world to consider. And I’m fucking proud of you. That was no easy task for you to accomplish. I feel so fucking lucky to have you.”

His eyes welled with unshed tears as his lips curled in. Nick hung his head and nodded. “After this is over, can we go home and just relax?”

I tried not to get overly excited that he referred to my apartment as home. “Sure, babe. Anything you want. This is your day.”

He smiled, and nodded, then reached for the car door. I don't think he realized he hadn't let go of my hand.

"Hey," I called, tugging him back. "Where's my kiss?"

The side of his mouth inched up and leaned back. "Always so needy."

I grinned. My Nick was back.

When we walked into the conference room, before I could say hello to anyone, my attention was drawn away. A large 3-D model of my building sat on the table, waiting to be inspected.

The exterior brick and stone work were from the original build, just like I'd wanted. He'd given the building the fire escapes that made buildings from that era ooze old world charm. It looked as if it belonged in the Little Italy my Nonna loved.

"What do you think?" he whispered to me. "It reminds me of the exterior of the bakery."

I nodded and tried to control my affection for him. "It's fucking perfect, ba—Nick."

He chuckled. "I kinda love it, too."

"What's all this?" I asked, motioning to the other models.

"You'll see. I'll explain it all when we get started."

He walked away to speak to his professors.

I had to stop looking at him. It was going to get us in trouble. This day was exciting. Not for the building, but because this was the first day of the rest of our lives. I planned to formally ask him to move in with me.

And maybe in a year or so, I'd ask him to marry me. I smiled to myself. Who was I kidding? I'd probably propose tonight. I didn't want to wait another second for the rest of our lives to start.

My attention was dragged from my happily ever after when Gloria Anderson welcomed everyone. She introduced me to the others and went around introducing everyone else. I

didn't care who was there. The only person to captivate me stood on the other side of the table next to Michael. It was probably good he'd put a table between us.

A man in khakis and a blue button-down walked in carrying a camera and a notepad. Michael stepped in at that point and made the rest of the introductions. "Everyone, this is Jason Simmons. He's with Architectural World Magazine. He's here to write an article about Nick's design. He'll be conducting the interview after the presentation."

"Hello everyone. Is it okay if I take photos?"

"Sure," Nick replied. "Thank you for coming."

The pride in me swelled to great heights as he stood in front of his five professors and professional contractors to present our building and all the changes I'd requested.

Nick went to a *PowerPoint* presentation that showed everyone my new building as it currently stood on Fourth Street. He talked about vision and showed some photos of Bernardo's and the needs we had to expand.

"When Preston approached me about the design, he had some very specific elements in mind. To make sure I fully understood what he was looking for, we flew to New York, where I took all these photos for inspiration."

My own images of the most romantic trip of my life briefly flipped before my eyes, taking me back to our room at The Plaza, and watching him take in all the things most people don't pay attention to. We needed to go back. Maybe we'd honeymoon there.

The artist's renderings on the screen caught my attention. They showed each floor exactly as I'd described them to him. He'd incorporated all the elements from the restaurants in New York. It was stunning.

I was suddenly overcome with emotion and had to push it down. Nick must have noticed, because he gave me a look of concern. I smiled and nodded. I felt an eternal bond with him. He was my person. I'd waded through so much shit in my life to get to him. And I'd never let him go.

He continued on for a few more minutes before going to the models. “Michael suggested we put together a model for everyone to see. This, of course, is the completed exterior, but these are the individual floors and the proposed rooftop dining area with retractable glass and a greenhouse as requested by Mr. James.”

Nick took the individual pieces and put them together to produce a replica of the one beside it. I was so fucking impressed and in love with him, and it had to show on my face. But I didn’t give one fuck who noticed.

When he was finished, he answered questions from his professors and some of his advisors on the electrical and plumbing. Our green initiative was very important to both of us, as well as the city. We could be a model for other businesses.

As the questions ended, Michael took over. “As you can see, Mr. Reed is very talented. His attention to his client’s wishes was remarkable. I wasn’t sure he’d be able to get them all in, but it appears he’s done it. Would you agree, Mr. James?”

I looked at the man who knew all about us and smiled. “He has more than met my expectations. Surpassed them really.”

“Mr. James,” Gloria called, “these gentlemen have expressed an interest in bidding for the project when you’re ready to begin. I’ll make sure you have all their information in an email.”

I smiled. “Thank you. I’d appreciate that.”

“If you’d like to stay for the interview, you are more than welcome,” Michael said to the others in the room. “If not, I believe we’re finished, right Nick?”

The love of my life nodded. “Yes, that’s it. Unless Preston has anything else?”

He looked at me and I tried not to look at him like I wanted to take him right here on this table. But I must have failed when he blushed a bit. Time for words. “No, I’m good. Thank you.”

Michael nodded. “Thank you for your time, gentlemen. It’s been a pleasure to work with all of you on this partnership, and I’m very grateful Gloria asked me to be his mentor. Nick will be a huge talent in the industry.”

Handshakes were given all around, and two of the five guests remained. Michael got the ball rolling again. I hoped this didn’t take long because I needed to get him alone. And naked. And under me.

“Okay, Jason, I think we’re ready to begin.”

Nick took his seat across the table from me and made me smirk. He’d seen the look on my face and had probably chosen wisely.

“Mr. James, how do you feel about the overall design?” he asked.

I answered honestly. “It’s stunning. It is the perfect blend of Bernardo’s and the places we visited in New York.”

After a few more stupid questions that seemed painfully obvious, he moved on to Michael, asking questions about the partnership between the university and the architectural firm. I just stared at Nick the whole time, trying not to give him fuck me eyes.

When Jason moved on to ask Nick some questions, I listened intently as he explained how we’d settled on the current property.

“It met all our needs for space and the architectural elements we wanted to incorporate. Preston has a strong desire to give back to the people of Portland, and building something that touches all socio-economic levels and a children’s program was easily available within the space that particular building provided.”

I loved when he said *our*. And this just further confirmed I was a goner for him.

I didn’t think there was anything that could wipe the smile from my face. But I was wrong.

“This design is quite impressive for a college graduate. You should have your pick of firms bidding for your three-year internship. However, the four front-runners specializing in your field are not located in the Pacific Northwest. Do you have a preference in the firms between New York, Chicago, Atlanta, or San Diego?”

What the fuck? What was he talking about? “Wait,” I asked. “What do you mean by the four front-runners in his field?”

Jason looked at me with surprise in his eyes, and he looked to Michael.

“Preston—” Nick mumbled.

I held up a hand and looked at Michael. “What is he talking about?”

My heart was hammering in my chest and began to tighten. This fucker knew about us, and I wanted answers.

“His best opportunity to continue doing what he did for you would either be in New York City, Chicago, Atlanta, or San Diego. Where he chooses to intern will be critical to his future success.”

My breathing was becoming more shallow the longer I sat there. Nick wouldn't look at me, and I became painfully aware that he'd known this all along. He was leaving me. Memories of long ago conversations came back. Conversations about moving to another city and how he knew it was going to be necessary to get what he wanted.

All my dreams for a life together crumbled before me. I'd opened up and let him in, only to be kicked in the gut again.

I rubbed at the pain in my chest as it morphed into anger. I had to get out of here before I exploded. I stood abruptly. “I need to go.”

I didn't look at Nick. My only goal was to get the fuck out of there before I lost my shit in front of everyone and spilled my guts all over the floor.

I walked out as quickly as I could while my gut churned and threatened to upend the coffee in my stomach.

I'd almost reached the door when I heard Nick calling out to me.

"Preston, wait. Please..." I knew he was falling apart, but right now I didn't give one solitary fuck. I rebuilt up the walls I'd let down with him and hardened my heart as best I could.

Stopping only to avoid a bigger scene, I turned to him. There were so many things I wanted to ask, but this was not the place.

"I'm sorry..." he gutted out, on the brink of tears.

I held my hand up and shook my head. "I don't want to hear it. I have to go."

"Please," he begged. "I love you."

Anger and pain fought for dominance as they surged through me, burning white hot. I knew I was going to say something I'd regret if I didn't get out of here, and I tried to hold it back, but it came out anyway.

"You love me?" I spat. "You love me so much that you didn't bother to tell me you were leaving Portland for three fucking years? You let me fall in love with you and lay all my wounds open for you. I spent the holidays with your family and fell in love with the dream of a life we'll never have."

He swallowed roughly. "I was going to tell you tonight..."

I cut him off. "Let me save you the trouble. You can have your precious career without worrying about me, because we're done. Don't call me. Don't text me. Have a nice fucking life wherever the fuck you end up."

"Preston, please! Just let me explain." Tears filled his eyes, but they came quicker than he could wipe them away.

I was gutted and tried to hold on to my anger. "Did you intentionally keep this from me?"

"No, but...I tried...and..." he sputtered, wiping furiously at his eyes and nose.

I gritted my teeth. “Keeping that from me is a lie of omission. Just like she did, and that makes you just like her. And I’m a fucking idiot for believing I could have that life with you.”

I turned away from him and pushed through the doors, heading for my car. I struggled to breathe as I counted the steps until I could fall apart in private. Our future flashed before my eyes in painful snapshots: our wedding, our children, holidays... making love.

When I was locked inside, I sat there in stunned silence until the pain was too much to bear. Then I pounded the steering wheel with my fists as the silent tears I’d battled to push down now burned permanent tracks onto my skin. Agony clawed its way up out of my chest and the realization I had nothing else in my life crept in.

I had to get out of here.

I had to yell and scream and cry.

I had to find a way to forget the man I loved.

And most importantly, I had to find a way to survive without Nick.

CHAPTER 29

NICK

I SHOOK AS I STOOD IN THE LOBBY WATCHING PRESTON WALK away, paralyzed by the pain of having my world explode in front of my eyes. Tears flooded my face as I bent over to clutch my knees to keep them from buckling and sending me to the floor.

The sobs escaping my chest threatened to rip me open. I felt dizzy, and I was shaking uncontrollably. He'd reacted even worse than I'd expected.

I'd lost him.

And it was my fault.

I'd done the one thing he couldn't forgive.

I registered the approaching footsteps, then suddenly I was in his arms. My eyes slammed shut as I breathed him in. But the scent was wrong, and the arms were wrong. It wasn't Preston's body I clung to.

"It's okay, Nick. You're going to be okay."

Michael tried to soothe me, but the torrent of emotions and tears ran unchecked down my face. I tried to quiet the agonized sounds coming from me, but it was no use. I couldn't stop. Might not ever be able to stop them.

Michael clutched me to him. "Let's sit down," he said, keeping his arm around my shoulders as he led me to an empty room.

I collapsed into a seat and put my head down on the table. Crying uncontrollably, I heard Michael speaking softly, then

closed the door.

I'd felt this gut-wrenching pain once before. After Evan and I broke up, I'd sworn off ever getting involved like this again. Why had he made me fall in love with him? Why had he relentlessly pursued me like he did?

“What can I do?”

Michael's hand gripped my shoulder as I cried into the table. My chest ached like my heart had been ripped out of it, leaving nothing but the pain behind.

I picked up my head enough to reply. “Nothing. There is nothing to do.”

Michael moved his chair closer and put his arm across my shoulders again. “Give him time to cool off. He's just shocked. And I am so fucking sorry Jason asked that question.”

I shook my head from side to side. “It's my fault. I should have been more specific from the beginning.”

More tears flooded my eyes, so I put my head back down on my folded arms as the memory of him stalking to the parking lot and his harsh words gutted me.

The door opened, and my heart leapt into my throat, hoping it was Preston. But it was Gloria, and my sobs came even harder.

As I continued to embarrass myself, I heard Michael talking to her. “I'll explain later,” he said quietly to Gloria. “I've got him from here. Thanks for bringing his things.”

“Is there anything I can do?” she asked him.

“Yeah,” he said. “Call my office and tell them I'm not coming back in today.”

She must have nodded, because all I registered was *‘thanks’*.

I don't know how long we stayed there, but when the tears finally slowed, I picked my head up and found him looking at me with grave concern.

“Do you want to come home with me? Kristin won’t mind. You can stay with us if you want, but I don’t think you should be alone.”

I didn’t know what to do, but I knew I couldn’t go back to my apartment. Everything there reminded me of Preston.

“Could you take me to Hillsboro? I just need to go home tonight.”

Michael nodded. “Yeah. That’s not a problem. And don’t worry about any of this today. You’ve more than passed.”

“What about the article? I’ve fucked that up, too.”

“No, you haven’t. Jason is a college buddy of mine, and he and his husband broke up more than once when they were dating. It will be fine.”

I nodded, suddenly exhausted and emotionally spent.

“Will he be okay?” he asked quietly.

I shrugged, the tears returning unchecked. “He’s really hurt. He’ll go to Alejandro or Stella. Probably not home. My things are there. I should probably warn Alejandro I’m gonna need some more time off.”

“Do you want me to call him?”

“No. I’ll just text him.”

I leaned to the side to get my phone, my body feeling like it weighed a thousand pounds. I opened my phone to send a text to my boss.

Me: I’m going to need a few days off.

Me: I know the timing is probably terrible.

Me: Just need some time.

The tears flooded my eyes as I typed.

Alejandro: Preston?

Me: We're over.

Alejandro: Take all the time you need.

Me: Thanks

I wiped my face on my sleeve, then picked up my things. "I'm ready to go," I said to Michael.

He stood and pulled out his keys. "Let's go."

I got to my feet and walked out beside him. The chill of the breezy January air reminded me of New York. Hugging my coat tighter around me, Michael slung his arm over my shoulders, and hugged me tighter.

I just wanted Preston. I wanted him to hold me and forgive me. But I knew he wouldn't. Not after the things he'd said.

"It's going to work out, Nick. I know it will."

I wished I could believe him. But I knew Preston. He didn't forgive and forget.

When we were in the car, I set my GPS for my parents' house, so I didn't have to talk. We rode the twenty minutes outside the city in silence while I replayed that ugly scene in my head. I'd never seen him so angry.

Michael let me sit with my thoughts, but when he pulled up outside my childhood home, he spoke for the first time.

"Please call me if you need me. I'll take all the models and plans to my office."

I thought about how I'd get them to Preston. But it didn't matter, because Micheal was his architect now. "Yeah, that's good. He can get in touch with you when he's ready to move forward."

He looked at me. "Are you sure you want to give up so quickly?"

No, I didn't. But maybe it was for the best.

"Doesn't matter what I want anymore."

Michael nodded. “Okay. I’ll take them with me.”

“Make sure he builds it, Michael. He may want some changes now. He might even want new plans.”

“Why would he want new ones?” he asked, confused.

“Because that building...” I had to stop and breathe. I swallowed down a lump so I could finish. “That building is him and me. It’s what brought us together.”

“Oh,” he said, understanding the gravity of the situation.

A fresh wave of tears were on the way, and I had to get out of the car.

“Thanks for everything. And for being my friend,” I gutted out.

“I’ll always be your friend,” he said. “I’ll check on you tomorrow.”

I nodded and got out.

When I got to the front door, I sent my mom a text to let her know I was outside.

It wasn’t long before she opened it and took one look at my face.

“Sweetheart, what happened?” she asked as she looked me over. “The last time you were this upset was...”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

“Oh honey. Do you want to talk about it?” She hugged me to her and held me while I cried. When I could get control of myself, I pulled away.

“I think I wanna go take a nap. We can talk later.”

She gave me a small smile. “Okay, sweetheart. I’ll be here when you’re ready to talk.”

I climbed the stairs to my childhood bedroom and quickly found some sweats and a t-shirt to change into. Tossing my clothes on the chair, I crawled onto my bed and cried myself to sleep.

* * *

I STAYED with my parents for three days before I went back to my apartment. Over those three days I'd talked to my parents until I was talked out. I couldn't talk about Preston any longer. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw him. Everywhere I went reminded me of him.

I desperately needed to get out of town, so I called Nicole.

"Can I come stay with you for a while?"

"Of course. When are you coming?"

I smiled. "I was thinking today."

"I was hoping you'd say that. Buy a ticket and let me know when to pick you up. You're going to love Southern California."

I nodded. "Yeah. I'll text you my flight information."

"Good. Do it now."

I chuckled. "I am, bossy."

I hung up and clicked over to my Delta App. After I'd chosen my flight and my seat, I threw a bag together along with some nice clothes, and headed to PDX to see my sister.

On the way, I texted Michael to let him know where I was going, and sent a quick message to my parents.

Me: Going to see Nicole for a few days. I'll let you know when I'm coming back.

Mom: Okay. Let us know when you get there.

Dad: It's gonna be okay, son. You boys will work it out.

As I sat at my gate an hour later, I thought about how it had been four days and I hadn't heard from Preston. I'd thrown myself into applying for internships and cleaning my apartment. Alejandro had told me to text him when I was

ready to come back. Preston was his best friend, and I wasn't sure I could ever go back, because seeing him would hurt too much.

I boarded my flight and buckled in for the two-and-a-half-hour flight. That god the plane had movies to distract me, because the last flight I was on was with *him*.

When I rounded exited the terminal to head to baggage claim, I found my sister waiting for me. She walked up and gave me a big hug.

“Hey, Nicole.” I kissed her on the cheek.

“Hey, big brother. Welcome to San Diego.”

CHAPTER 30

PRESTON

SITTING AT THE END OF THE BAR, I THREW BACK MY THIRD shot of *Fireball*, hoping it would numb me from the pain. Alejandro stood in front of me, drinking a bottle of water.

When I finished, he took the whiskey away and replaced the shot glass with a bottle of water. I should have been pissed at him, but I didn't have the energy right now.

"You finally ready to talk about it? It didn't take you four days last time."

I shook my head, spinning the bottle in circles between my fingers. "Not really. There's nothing to say except that it's over."

He waited me out and came to sit on the barstool beside me. When the daytime bartender came by to talk to Alejandro, I listened carefully to their conversation.

"Hey Regan, do you think you could work a double a couple of nights this coming week?"

She smiled. "Sure. When do you need me?"

"Tomorrow night, for sure. Go back and check the schedule. You'll be working for Nick."

"No problem, boss."

When she walked away, he looked over at me. "What happened? Don't tell me it's none of my business. You wiped out my bartender for another week, so you owe me an answer."

I scoffed. “You know what happened. It’s what always happens to me when I think I’ve found someone to love me.”

He didn’t comment right away, but sat there, clearly thinking about his next words. “I’m sorry, man, but that doesn’t sound like Nick. He must have told you about the internship.”

My gaze quickly met his as a frown took over my face. “You knew about it? Why didn’t you tell me? I knew you were holding back on something.”

He leaned forward. “It wasn’t my place to say anything, you asshole. Did you seriously split up because he’s got an opportunity to get a better job? I distinctly remember him telling you his job came first. And you were okay with that.”

“I thought he meant long hours, not potentially thousands of miles.”

He laughed humorlessly, like I was an idiot. “Didn’t you ever talk about anything that would come after the project? He told me and all his co-workers. How could you, of all people, not know that?”

I furrowed my brow. “What the fuck does that mean? Of course, we talked about after he finished. What kind of self-centered asshole do you take me for?”

“Why didn’t he tell you? What did he say?”

I stared at him, then looked down at the bar.

“You didn’t hear him out, did you?”

Alejandro put his hand on my arm. “Preston, I know Victoria did a number on you, but did you ever consider how hard it would be to tell someone you loved you were leaving for three years?”

I knew he was right.

“And why did you end it? Just go the fuck with him.”

I scoffed. “I have a restaurant to run. I can’t just walk away from it.”

“You can do any damn thing you want to do. You just gotta take a chance for once.”

Was he serious? “You’re one to talk about taking chances,” I replied with as much snark as I could muster.

Alejandro looked around nervously, then leaned forward. “I took a big chance and now I’m in a heap of shit and stuck between a rock and a hard place. I’m up the creek without a paddle, and all the other idioms that apply.”

I narrowed my gaze at him. “Did you fuck him?”

“Shhhh,” he said, waving his arms. “Don’t talk so loud.”

My eyes widened. “Oh wow! You don’t usually fuck up like that. What did you do?”

“We’re not talking about me. We’re talking about you. And one of my best bartenders.”

His tale of woe distracted me for about three seconds before my heart sank again, thinking about Nick.

“Yeah, well...” I didn’t know what to say. The pain that had taken up residence in my chest wasn’t leaving anytime soon.

I took out my wallet and threw a twenty on the bar. “I’m going home.”

Alejandro grabbed my arm. “Preston, he’s not Victoria. I know him very well. Maybe try looking at this from another perspective other than your own. Don’t be an idiot and just write him off. You two were good for each other. He brought you out of that funk you’ve been in for the last couple of years. Don’t give up so easily.”

I sighed and headed toward the door before I stopped in my tracks. I’d had three shots and not the hint of a buzz left.

I turned and looked at him. “What’s wrong with that whiskey? I don’t even have a buzz.”

Alejandro got up from his stool and walked behind the bar. He pulled out the bottle I’d been drinking from.

“This one? With the special label on it?”

I nodded and walked closer. “What special label?”

“This one.” He pointed to the yellow tape around the neck of the bottle. It was labeled ‘*Preston James ONLY*’.

I furrowed my brows. “What did you do?”

He laughed so hard it made me laugh and the fucker hadn’t even said anything. “You know how you make vodka sauce and cook it for a long time so most of the alcohol evaporates, but leaves the flavor behind? It’s kinda like that, with a shitload of liquid cinnamon flavoring.”

That was fucking genius. “You asshole,” I laughed. “You’ve been fucking me over on my alcohol.”

“But am I really? I choose to look at it as if I’m making sure you can drive home.”

I flipped him the bird. “Love you, asshole.”

“Back at ya, brother.”

* * *

LATER IN THE WEEK, I was pulverizing another innocent onion when Sophia walked into the back. I looked up at her with what had to be a menacing stare. Most of my employees had steered clear of me. I heard Stella tell them the beast had a thorn in his paw, and to go to her if they needed anything.

“Preston, I’m sorry to interrupt, but there’s a couple out at table seven who asked me to let you know he’d like to speak to you.”

“What’s the reservation name?” My heart was pounding. The only couple I could think of who might ask for me were Nick’s parents.

“Allen,” she said.

I furrowed my brow and put down my knife. Wiping my hands on the towel I kept over my shoulder, I walked over to look out into the dining room. Sure enough, Michael Allen sat

next to a beautiful young woman who looked at him like he'd hung the moon just for her.

It made me think about how Nick looked at me. Rubbing at the spot over my heart, I returned to my cutting board. "Tell him I'm unavailable right now, but I'll be out shortly."

She smiled and returned to the front of the house.

I went back to pulverizing the onion.

"Who's that?" Stella asked from across the kitchen.

"*His* mentor and my architect." I couldn't say his name, but she knew who I meant. Turning off the burner and plating up the Shrimp Scampi, Stella handed it off to David to deliver to the table. Then she made her way over to me after handing over the reins to Marco.

I let go of the knife and put both hands flat on the stainless steel counter. I dropped my head to my chest, willing the pain to go away.

Stella put her hand on my shoulder. "Come on," she said, heading back to my office.

When I stepped in, she pulled out a shot glass and a bottle of *Fireball* with the same yellow band around the top. Pouring me a shot, she motioned to it. "Drink up. It will settle your nerves."

Had Alejandro not told her I knew about their special bottle for me? I took the shot and looked at her. "I need another one."

She nodded and poured another one.

I tossed it back and slammed the glass down.

"One more," I said, eyeing the bottle.

"Don't get carried away here, buddy. We still have to work."

I grinned at her. "How long have you and Ale-asshole been serving me cinnamon extract?"

She sat down across from me. “I don’t know about him, but I’ve been doing it for almost a year.”

I gaped at her. “Why would you do that to me?”

She finally smiled. “Because you only do that in high-stress situations when you actually need to think clearly.”

I threw my head back and laughed. “Touché.”

“Why is his mentor here to talk to you? Do you think he’s okay? Or not okay?”

Panic rose, but I had to remind myself he wasn’t mine any longer.

“I don’t know. I guess I should go find out.”

Stella smiled. “I’d say so. Then figure out a way to fix things, Preston. You were so happy. And you deserve that with him, if he’ll take you back.”

I gave her a nod and headed out to the dining room. I looked around and was relieved that Sophia had seated them in a private corner.

Michael looked up at me as I approached, then stood to shake my hand. “Preston, this is my fiancée, Kristin.”

I smiled at the beautiful woman. “It’s nice to meet you.”

She smiled. “You too.”

“Do you have a moment to sit?” he asked.

“Sure. What can I do for you?”

Michael looked at me as I pulled a chair out to join them. “I wanted to let you know I have all the blueprints and models. I’m ready to take over the formal build plans when you’re ready.”

I took in a shallow breath and looked at my hands. “Thank you. I appreciate it. Just send the bill to my accountant.”

We sat there a moment before he spoke again. “I know this is none of my business, and if I hadn’t gotten to know Nick like I do, I would stay out of it. But if it were Kristin and I in your situation, I’d hope someone would give us a nudge. So

consider this your nudge. He'd been looking for internships in the Seattle area, but nothing was available for him. He planned to tell you after the presentation. We'd actually talked about it the day before."

If Michael knew all this, he probably knew how he was. It was okay to check on him, right? "Is he okay?"

He shrugged. "It was pretty bad the first day. And now, I guess he's as well as can be expected when your world implodes."

I rubbed my eyes. A headache was forming that would surely keep me up tonight. "I need to go talk to him."

"Yeah, you do. But you're gonna have to wait a while."

I frowned. "Why? Where is he?"

"San Diego."

I blinked at him as the sorrow set in. Did he turn to Evan when I broke us? I brought my closed fist to my mouth to stifle a sob from escaping. Clearing my throat, I took a deep breath and raised my head. "I guess that's it then."

"Not necessarily. I still think you need to talk to him." Michael wrapped his arm around his fiancée.

"Enjoy your dinner."

"Thank you," he said.

As I walked back to the kitchen, I stopped Mark and told him to comp their dinner at the end of the evening. It's the least I could do to thank him.

I had some thinking to do.

CHAPTER 31

NICK

I SAT ON THE BEACH IN OCEANSIDE, LOOKING AT THE LATE afternoon sun. It was beautiful here, and warmer than Portland in January. Living here would be easy to adjust to, and the sun on my face infused me with warmth I hadn't felt in well over a week.

My interview had gone well, considering I hadn't had much sleep. Every time I closed my eyes, Preston's face flooded my mind. Memories of everything we'd been through and the stupid mistake I'd made.

I forced a smile when Evan sat down beside me on the sand. His long legs were bent at the knees and his shaggy hair was a mess in the breeze.

"You need a haircut," I teased, reaching over to ruffle his light brown hair with golden highlights. They were natural from all the time he spent in the sun.

He leaned toward me and laughed. "Yeah, probably so." He raked his hand through them, then winked at me. "But it's good for picking up."

I smiled, but didn't want to talk about that, so I let it go and averted my gaze back to the water. My heart was heavy, and Evan would understand. We'd suffered through it together once, but maybe it wasn't fair of me to bring up another man to him.

"I'm surprised you called. I'm glad you did—but still surprised."

I ran my fingers through the soft sand and nodded. “Yeah, me too. We were always friends. And I guess I just needed...I know it’s not fair to you. I shouldn’t have bothered you.”

I released a weighted sigh.

“Talk to me, Nick. What’s going on?”

I turned to look at him as he waited for me to dump all my troubles on him. His green eyes were soft and the windows into a truly kind soul.

“I’m kinda sad.”

“Really? I hadn’t noticed.” He grinned at me, trying to lighten my mood. But my eyes had other ideas and pooled with unshed tears.

I wiped them away as Evan scooted closer to rest his big thigh next to mine. His muscled arm wrapped around me and pulled me into him. Tilting my head against his shoulder, he kissed my forehead.

“Tell me what happened. I’m under no illusion about the two of us. I can take it, so spill it. Maybe I can help.”

I opened my mouth, and the floodgates opened. Evan listened as I told him about the project and our trip to New York. How we’d fallen in love over the last four months, what happened, and how he’d ended things.

“I should have told him. Keeping it from him was wrong.”

“Did you tell him that?”

I laughed humorlessly and shook my head. “I tried, but he wouldn’t let me. He was so angry with me, Ev.”

He sighed. “I think you need to tell him how you feel. Say what you need to say and then leave it with him. If he can’t forgive you, then you’ll know you did everything to give your relationship a chance.”

I kept my eyes on the waves. “What if he doesn’t want me back?”

He sighed. “Then you go on with your life. Whether it’s here—and please let it be here—or another city, you go on

with your life.”

I knew Evan was right. At some point, I’d have to face the music with Preston. We’d either fix it, or be over for good.

“Wanna take a walk up the beach? There are some pretty cool things up there.”

I nodded. “Sure.”

Evan got to his feet, then held his hand out to pull me up. I took it, and he pulled me into a hug. “It’s all going to work out like it’s supposed to, Nick. Just give it some time.”

I nodded. “Yeah, okay.”

Evan took my hand, and we walked along the shore, the cold water rolling over our feet. It was comfortable, but my heart knew it wasn’t Preston. I knew I could turn to Evan, and if I moved here, maybe things could be different between us after a few years. But right now, Preston owned my heart, and would for a long time.

“How do you like it here?” I asked.

He smiled. “I love it here. The weather is unreal and there’s always something to do.”

“Have you met anyone?” I glanced up at him to gauge his reply.

“I’ve had a couple dates. But nothing serious.”

“You’re a good man, Ev. You’ll find your person.”

He laughed. “For a long time, I thought I already had. If things don’t work out between the two of you, would you ever consider us again?”

My heart couldn’t think about that right now. “I don’t know. I just need to figure my shit out and focus on work for a while.”

He nodded. “If you get the offer here, are you gonna take it?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know, probably. Nicole is here. You’re here. It just feels like the second best place to be.”

“The first being...” he waited for my reply.

“I’m not sure anymore. I’m too numb to think about it.”

Evan dropped my hand and wrapped his arm around my shoulder. “I’m always here for you, Nick, no matter what. If you need a place to stay, you’re welcome to stay with me—anytime.”

I nodded, knowing I could never take him up on it. But it was kind of him to offer.

We turned and headed back in the direction we’d come from. After a few minutes of silence, Evan gave me his opinion. “He’s gonna realize what he’s lost and come back to you. Just wait. You’ll see.”

I chuckled at him. “We’ll see. I’m not so sure, though.”

When we reached our starting point, Evan looked at me.

“Feel like getting something to eat? There’s a place around the corner I know you’d love.”

I was a little hungry. “Sure, let me text Nicole.”

My phone vibrated in my pocket with a text notification.

“This is probably her,” I said, pulling it from my pocket.

When I clicked on my screen to see the notification, my heart stuttered for a beat when I realized that the message wasn’t from my sister.

“Who is it?” Evan asked, noticing the shock that had frozen me in place.

“It’s Preston.”

I held my phone in my hand and stared at the screen, afraid to open it.

“You gonna read it?” he asked.

I nodded and swiped to open the message.

Preston: Hey. I left all your things from my place in Alejandro’s office. I think I got it all, but if I missed anything, let me know.

The tears started again, as uncontrollable sobs tore from my chest. I went to my knees on the sand and dropped my phone.

Evan followed me down, trying to comfort me. “Nick? What’s wrong? What did he say?”

When I couldn’t speak, he wrapped me up in his arms and waited for me to respond.

“We’re over,” I sobbed. “I’ve lost him.”

* * *

WE WERE STILL on the beach half an hour later. Evan sat behind me and encircled me in his arms. I watched mindlessly as one wave after another rolled in, only to be taken back out.

I was cried out, physically dried up. When I heard Nicole’s voice, Evan got up and let her take over.

“Nick, oh my god, honey. What can I do?”

“Nothing,” I croaked out. “I did this to us. I broke us.”

I saw Evan out of the corner of my eye talking on the phone. He was probably canceling our dinner plans.

“Can you just take me back to the apartment? I wanna take a nap. You guys can go eat and bring me something. I’m not very hungry.”

My sister looked at me. “I’m not leaving you.”

I sighed and looked at her. “Evan needs to eat. A lot. And you need to eat, too. Just go and let me have some time to let this all out, then I’ll be okay. I promise. And, hey, if I get that job offer now, I’m definitely moving here.”

She nodded and hugged me. “I’m so sorry, Nick. You know I’m here for you.”

I nodded, my eyes welling again. My teeth were clenched tight until I could speak. “I know. I just need some time.”

When Evan came back, he sat down facing me and handed my phone to Nickie.

“What can I do, Nick?”

I smiled. “Help me move to San Diego?”

His big, goofy smile made me laugh. “Hell yeah, I can do that.”

CHAPTER 32

PRESTON

“THIS MIGHT HAVE BEEN THE DUMBEST IDEA YOU’VE EVER had. No, I take that back. It *is* the dumbest idea you’ve ever had.”

Alejandro looked down at me, attempting to get comfortable on the tiny-ass love seat in his office. His arms were folded across his chest as he shook his head in... amusement? Or maybe it was frustration.

“What? When he comes to get his stuff, I’ll be here, ready to talk to him. He can’t miss me.”

My best friend let out a sigh. “I still think that was the dumbest text you could have ever sent him. He’s going to think you don’t want him.”

I knew him. “He knows I want him,” I replied, a little less confidently now that he’d pointed out my possible mistake.

Alejandro snatched my phone from my hand, then stuck his head out the door.

“Hey, Benjamin, come here a minute.”

I scrunched up my face. “Why do you call him that?” I hissed.

He looked at me. “Shut up, or I’m kicking you out.”

Ben sidled up to him with a sexy smile I didn’t want to know about. “Yeah, boss. What can I do to you?”

I covered my eyes just thinking about Alejandro’s rock and hard place. He was so fucked.

Alejandro chuckled, uncomfortably. “Funny. Tell me what you’d think if you got this text.”

“Okay,” he said, rubbing his hands together. “Lay it on me.”

I groaned. They were so obvious.

“Listen to this. And I quote: *‘I left all your things from my place in Alejandro’s office. I think I got it all, but if I missed anything, let me know’.*”

Ben winced. “Oh fuck. That’s cold, man. He’s gonna think it’s over.”

Alejandro tilted his head and looked at me. “You mean it doesn’t scream: *‘Hey. I’ll be waiting on you to come get your stuff even if it takes three days of sleeping on the sofa in my best friend’s office?’*”

Ben laughed. “Uh, no. I don’t get that at all.”

I huffed out a big breath and threw my hands in the air. “I thought it would be romantic! He’d come in all sad, then find me waiting to scoop him into my arms and tell him that I’m sorry! That’s not romantic?”

I thought they were both wrong. I hoped they were, anyway.

“You look like a hobo with that long, scruffy beard. What if it’s another week before he comes back? Am I gonna have to look at your ugly ass for that long? I told him to take his time.”

Oh fuck. “Then I’ll be right here waiting for him.” I patted the sofa that had been my bed for the last three nights.

“Oh, my fucking god! You’re an idiot. Why can’t you just call him or go meet him and tell him you’re sorry? Like a normal person would.”

I scoffed at his insult. “I could, but I wanted to make a grand gesture.”

Alejandro sighed and put his hands on his head. “Preston, this is *not* a grand gesture. It’s ridiculous. It’s going to

backfire.”

I scrubbed my hands over my face. Maybe he was right. Maybe I’d screwed this up. Again. “I know you think I’ve done the wrong thing, but I’m here now...”

The sharp intake of air had me turning my gaze to where Ale-asshole had been standing. But it wasn’t him and his boy toy. I found the love of my life looking at me like I was out of my mind. The other two were nowhere in sight.

Thank fuck.

I jumped to my feet and almost tripped over the box of stuff.

“You’re here. Thank god,” I muttered, then fell forward as Nick reached out to catch me. My arms flew out to balance me, but my weight was too much and took us both to the ground.

Luckily, I was fast and clutched him to me so I could take most of the fall. When we landed, I was on my back with Nick covering my body. His eyes were wide, but he still hadn’t said anything.

“Oh god, are you okay? Did I hurt you? Well, I mean, physically, not like I hurt you before, but like right now?”

Nick continued to blink at me, and I stared back.

I don’t know how long we stayed like that, just looking at each other, but I couldn’t let him go. Ever.

“Why are you here, Preston?” The sadness quickly changed to anger that was evident on his face and in his voice. I’d done that to him simply by not giving him a chance to explain.

I stared into his eyes. “Because I’ve been a fool. And I wanted to apologize and beg for your forgiveness.”

Nick tilted his head to the side, just like Alejandro had, making me think the asshole might have been right. “You ended us and packed all my—”

“I know,” I cut him off. “I was trying to make sure you’d talk to me. I figured if I waited here for you to come get it, you would see I was serious about us.”

Narrowing his eyes, he looked down at me from where he was still spread out on top of me. “That makes no fucking sense at all.”

He pushed himself away from me and got back on his feet. He looked down at a box and went to lift it, but I grabbed him around the waist. “Baby, please let me explain.”

“Fuck no. I’ve had enough of your stupid bullshit for the last ten days. Evan tried to convince me that I needed to see you and get closure.”

I gritted my teeth. “Evan, huh?”

Nick wrenched himself out of my grasp and turned on me. “Do not fucking dare say a single word about Evan. He is nowhere near the asshole you are. You were cruel and intentionally mean, and then, like a third grader, stomped off and wouldn’t let me explain anything to you.”

I hung my head and nodded. “You’re right, I was. I overreacted—”

Nick threw his hands in the air. “Ya think? You’re almost forty-six years old. When are you gonna grow up?”

“When you take me back. I swear I won’t ever do it again.”

Nick narrowed his gaze at me. “So not ever, huh?”

I took a step back like he’d just sucker punched me in the gut, because I couldn’t breathe.

“I’m not taking you back, Preston. I was wrong to wait to tell you, but I won’t live my life with someone who won’t even let me defend myself. You cut me to my core and left me like that. Walked away like I meant nothing to you. You compared me to someone that hurt you in ways I would have—could have—*never* done to you. That’s not how you love someone, Preston.”

I heard the hitch in his voice and it kicked me into gear. I took a chance and wrapped my arms around him from behind.

We were both crying, but luckily, he didn't pull away. He was stiff in my arms for a few minutes, then he relaxed and sagged back into me.

"I'm so sorry, baby. Please don't leave me. Please give me a chance to make it up to you."

Nick said nothing, just stood there with his back to me. I figured I better make my case, because I knew if he walked away right now, I'd never see him again.

"I'm sorry for the things I said. I was just so hurt and shocked. I sat at that table while you made your presentation, planning our future in my head. I was going to ask you to move in with me, and eventually ask you to marry me. And then I find out you're planning to leave me for three years, and I lost it. I panicked and had flashbacks to the last time I'd made plans like that. I'm so sorry, baby. Please forgive me. Please," I sobbed into his neck. My tears ran unchecked down my face and onto his skin.

Nick shifted in my arms to face me. He was as wrecked as I was. His beautiful blue eyes were red, and it was obvious neither of us had been sleeping worth a damn.

Nick let out a rough sigh. He looked around at Alejandro's office and frowned.

"How long have you been here?"

I licked my lips and looked into his eyes. "Three days. Ever since I sent the text. I didn't know you were still in San Diego until Evan called me."

Nick's brows shot up. "He called you?"

"Yes. He called to point out what a fucking idiot I was. And that if I didn't want you, he certainly did. He said he'd give me a week to make up my mind and if I didn't make this right with you, he was coming up here to help you move into his house the way it should have been from the beginning. For good."

Nick scoffed and shook his head. “So that’s why you did this. Because you didn’t want to lose me to Evan.”

“No! That’s not it at all. I did this because I love you and I can’t stand being away from you for another minute. I love you so much it hurts. I’ve been a fucking mess for ten days. Stella even threw me out of my own kitchen. I don’t want any of this if I can’t have it with you. And I know I behaved badly, but I swear it won’t happen again. Being without you all this time has been a punishment worse than death.”

“You’re an idiot. And a dramatic one at that.” His gaze still hadn’t left mine. I watched as his blue eyes began to swirl, giving me hope. But I had to act fast.

“I’m so sorry, baby. I was wrong to jump to conclusions. Please, please forgive me. I’ll do anything. I know I don’t deserve it, but I’ll do whatever you need me to.”

Nick sighed and dropped his head to my chest. I wrapped my arms around him and held on tight. He sighed heavily again, then gave up before he finally relaxed on my chest. Right where he belonged.

“Fine,” he sighed. “I’ll forgive you for all of that if you forgive me for not telling you. I won’t make that mistake again.”

“Deal,” I said, looking into his eyes. “I love you. Please come home with me and let me make this up to you.”

I saw the light in his eyes return, and he nodded. “Okay. But I need to get my stuff.”

I looked at the floor. “That’s not really your stuff. That’s just shit out of my closet.”

Nick laughed. “You are really messed up.”

I smiled. “I am. And you’re the only hope I have of getting me right.”

Ale-asshole looked into his office to find Nick was in my arms. I grinned. “See asshole. Told you it would work.”

He rolled his eyes all the way around in his head and pulled the door shut. “You two are something.”

Yeah, we were. And I intended to earn his forgiveness and to prove to the love of my life that we could do this forever.

CHAPTER 33

NICK

AN HOUR LATER, WE WERE PARKED ON HIS SOFA WITH A PIZZA and a bottle of wine. I could tell he had something on his mind, and I could almost guess what it was.

Even though we'd forgiven each other for the mistakes we'd made, we still hadn't settled anything about my internship. And if I had to guess, that was weighing heavily on his mind, because it was killing me.

When he stared at the TV unseeing after we'd finished eating, I knew it was time to hear him out. Shifting on the sofa, I opened the can of worms I wasn't sure I would know how to close.

“What are you thinking about?” I murmured.

He gave me a half smile and put his hand on my leg. “A lot of things.”

I covered his hand with mine and waited for Preston to say what was on his mind. Usually he told me straight out. But not this time, and it had me concerned.

“Like what?” My pulse had picked up anticipating what he might say.

Preston sighed and reclined his head on the back of the sofa. “Like how much I love having you here. How going to bed and waking up with you are so much better than doing it alone. And how afraid I am you're still going to walk away from me because I was an asshole.”

The blood in my veins raced through my body, making my heartbeat accelerate. I didn't know what to say. There was no way I could promise him anything with my internship hanging in the balance. But I had to be honest with him, because it was going to break my heart again if we had to say goodbye after all this.

"What do you mean?" I asked through the emotion welling in me.

He turned his head to look at me, emotions raw and on the surface. "Are you still in love with Evan?"

That was so not what I was expecting.

"Is that what you're worried about? Because if that's it, I can answer you with a definitive no. Part of me will always love him, but I'm not *in* love with him anymore. It hurt like a son-of-a-bitch when we broke up, but I also knew we weren't ready for that kind of commitment."

Preston turned to me a little more. "Then why did he stop by and ruin my first Christmas? And then he was with you in San Diego."

I sighed, but didn't take my eyes off him. "I'm glad he came by at Christmas. And spending time with him in San Diego helped me get some closure on our relationship. I've often wondered what would happen if we were ever in the same city again, with an opportunity to get back together. And now I have my answer."

Preston looked at me expectantly, and I smiled.

"Evan and I will always be friends, and I hope you can be okay with that. We were that long before we became anything more. But what I felt for him is different from what I feel for you."

Preston turned a little more into me, needing more information. "How so?"

I ran my fingertips over the top of his hand and he flipped it over to lace our fingers together. "I can't put it into words. I just feel it now that I have something to compare it to. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I think I knew the odds

were against he and I making it long term. There's no way I could have followed him and finished school. I think it was for the best."

He took in my words and gave me a look that almost broke my heart. "I don't want to lose you again. I don't think I'd live through it."

I let go of his hand and reached to hug him to me, kissing his forehead like he'd done to me so many times. "I don't want to lose you either. We've fought so hard to get here, but I told you from the beginning that my career had to come first right now."

"I know. And I'm fine with that."

I pushed him back to look him in the eyes. "I have to do this internship in San Diego, and I've already tried long distance before, and it doesn't work."

Preston looked at me, and I saw the minute his fierce determination took over. "But you haven't tried it with me. You were still a kid back then. Now you're an adult. The world is different on this side of 25."

I smiled sadly at him as I rubbed my fingertips across the stubble I loved. "We're talking three years, Preston. Do you really want to be tied to someone you see a couple times a year and over FaceTime? Is that what you want out of life?"

He scowled. "Fuck no. I want to go with you."

My heart lept at the idea. I leaned in and kissed him. "Would you really want to give up your life here to move again? You were going to open a new restaurant."

Preston took my face in his hands and I leaned into his touch. "I don't care about a life here without you. I don't want to spend one more night, much less one more hour away from you. All this shit here isn't important any longer. Being happy is important, and I can't be happy without you."

I couldn't believe he wanted to give up everything for some twenty-something. "People are going to think this is too fast."

“And I don’t give one flying fuck what anyone thinks. You know this. I know what I want, baby. And it’s you. Wherever you’re going, I’m going too.”

I nodded at his determination, then smiled. “I really want that. And you’ve shown me what real love is.”

Preston smiled as he ran his hands down my arms. “Yeah? What is it?”

I shifted and climbed into his lap, and he wrapped me in his arms. “It’s making soup when the person you love is sick. It’s planning a romantic week in the city. It’s carriage rides in Central Park in the snow. It’s coming to the bar at one a.m. to drive me the three blocks to my apartment because it’s raining. It’s bringing me dinner at the end of a long night. It’s being willing to do anything to stay together, no matter how far the distance may be.”

His warm brown irises swirled, and the gold flecks were like stars in the nighttime sky. Preston cupped my face in his hands. “You listen to me, Nick Reed, and listen good. No amount of time or distance is ever going to stop me from loving you or us being together. If you need to move to Greenland to learn how to make ice houses, I’m going to be there to support you and whatever else you need to make your dreams come true. I want you to live your life the way you planned. All I ask is you take me with you, because I’m not sure I can live without you now that I’ve found you.”

My fucking heart was gonna burst wide open. “I can do that.”

I crushed my mouth to his and sank into the kiss. Our tongues swirled around one another, and something deep inside me settled and a sense of peace calmed me.

I don’t know how, but I think I always knew he was the one for me. And I wouldn’t let him go again.

EPILOGUE - PRESTON

ONE MONTH LATER

I'D BECOME INTROSPECTIVE SINCE I'D CONVINCED NICK TO take me back. Memories of the worst two weeks of my life still haunted me. And when I think about how I could have lost him, I made sure I didn't let that happen again.

Nick was going to San Diego whether I went or not. He'd told me from the beginning that he would leave Portland if he had to in order to get the job he wanted, so my decision wasn't difficult to make.

"Are you sure about this?" Nick asked.

I smiled and looked at the 3-D model of my dream restaurant sitting in the middle of my kitchen table. It was spectacular, and Michael had signed off on all the schematics to make sure they met every building code possible.

But my life wasn't about that dream right now. It was about building a new life with the man standing in front of me. And it was time to take those steps.

"Yes, I'm positive. I want to be with you in San Diego. Living on the beach is going to be fantastic. You'll come home from work and I'll be in the kitchen making dinner. It's going to be perfect. Plus, we can fly home any time we want, and our apartment will be waiting on us."

The ice-blue eyes that had been my kryptonite from the moment I met him stared at me like I'd done something remarkable. I hadn't. I'd just chosen love over all else. "I think I can live with that."

I'd signed Bernardo's over to Stella to run for the next year. Then she and I would make a decision on what to do after that. If she wanted it, it would be hers. If not, we'd cross that bridge when we came to it.

I leaned down and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Good. But we need to go, or we're going to miss our flight."

“I still can’t believe you’re going to buy a house in San Diego.”

I looked over my shoulder as I picked up our weekend bags. “I’m not. *We* are. You and me. And it’s going to be a big fucking one if you leave the decision up to me.”

Nick chuckled, but his eyes were full of love. I knew what that really looked like now. “You have more money than sense, babe.”

“Maybe. But I know what I’m looking for. And if we don’t get down there soon, it’s going to be gone.”

“We can’t have that,” he deadpanned. “Preston James not getting his way?”

I shuffled him out the door and headed to the lobby to pick up the car. “You’ll see. It’s perfect for us.”

Five hours later, we pulled up in the driveway to the house that would become our home. The five-bedroom house sat oceanfront in Pacific Beach and had everything we needed. A large kitchen for me, and space we could share with our families.

Nick looked worried when he saw the realtor’s sign out front. “It’s sale pending. Are we too late?”

I smile over at Nick. “No, babe. It’s ours if you like it.”

Nick looked at the house, then back to me, shaking his head. “I’ve not even seen inside, and I love it. But why do we need something this big?”

I reached over and took his hand, then looked into his eyes. “If you’re okay with it, I’d like to bring my Nonna out to stay with us for a couple of months. The Connecticut winters are really tough on her, and I’d like to spend some time with her. Maybe write a family cookbook together with some of her memories. Something we can give our kids one day. Plus, we’d have room for family and friends.”

Nick’s face split into a big love-sick smile. “I’d fucking love that. We could have the best of both worlds.”

“Yeah, baby, we definitely could. We don’t have to miss our families. They can come whenever they want.”

“Let’s go see the beach. We might never want to leave.”

I didn’t care where we lived as long as we were together. But being here in Southern California was a new beginning for us. I’d give Nick whatever he needed to make him happy, because his happiness was my happiness. I wanted this perfectly imperfect life with him.

EPILOGUE - NICK

THE FOLLOWING DECEMBER

I STOOD WATCHING THE SNOW FALL FROM MY PLACE IN FRONT of the floor-to-ceiling windows next to the Christmas Tree. My boyfriend had more money than sense and, for some reason, he'd decided to buy an apartment in the Plaza Hotel as an early '*Christmas gift*' for me.

We'd flown into New York this afternoon for Christmas. Preston took me on a guided tour of the hotel this afternoon since we hadn't had a chance to see it all last December. He'd also made dinner reservations downstairs in the *Oak Room* and was the reason we were dressed up.

Tomorrow we'd go out to Connecticut to see his parents and brother. Since we spent Christmas with my family last year, this time it was his turn to be with his family. We'd be taking Nonna back with us when we went home to San Diego.

"Do you like it?" he asked, holding me close, my back to his chest. His arms encircled me and held me tight.

I laughed. "No, I love it. It reminds me of the room we stayed in last year. But I still don't understand why you bought it."

He placed kisses down the side of my neck, under my ear. "I told you why. It's an early Christmas gift. I'd planned to just book a room for us, but when Theresa told me this one was for sale on the residence side, I had to do it. We love it here, and our money is just sitting in a bank doing nothing, so why not? We have a place to stay when we come here, and we don't have to pack a bag. We can go shopping and buy the things we need to leave here. Then all we have to do is get on a flight."

Like I said, more money than sense is the theme here.

"How often are you planning to come here? And for the record, the money is yours, not ours, and certainly not mine."

He chuckled as we swayed to the music playing over the sound system. That was a nice addition. “As often as we can. I figured it was also a good place to honeymoon.”

My brow furrowed as I turned my head to look at him. “Honeymoon? What are you talking about?”

Just the thought of it had my pulse beating a new rhythm.

Preston gave me that sexy smile that never failed to do things to me. “The way I see it,” he said, letting go of me, “it’s time we make this thing official.”

He looked into my eyes and took my hand in his. Without taking his eyes off me, Preston got down on one knee in front of the window with the falling snow and Christmas tree as a backdrop.

“I fell in love with you the first time I walked into the bar. You’ve been the object of my desire and the love of my life for almost two years, and I want to travel the world with you, have kids with you, and grow old with you. I want to spend every waking moment making you happy. I almost lost you, and I never want you to doubt my love for you again. So would you please do me the honor of becoming my husband?”

Tears filled my eyes as I dropped to my knees to join him on the floor. “Yes, Preston James, I would love to be your husband.”

His smile was blinding as he cupped my face and kissed me. I wrapped my arms around him and he held me tight.

“I love you so much,” he whispered, “but we need to go.”

I pulled back and looked at him. “Why? We still have twenty-five minutes.”

“Yes, I know,” he said, rising back to his feet, “but there’s somewhere we need to be before dinner.”

He took my hand in his and pulled me up. “You’re full of surprises tonight. Next you’ll be telling me we’re getting married today.”

The smile on his face gave him away. “Are we...”

He shrugged. “Would you like that? To elope right here in our favorite city? The place we officially fell in love?”

I was speechless. I let out a weird little laugh and followed him out of our apartment.

Preston ushered me into the elevator and down to the Plaza Shops. When the doors opened, he took my hand and led me to the Fine Jeweler.

“Good evening, Mr. James. Your purchase is ready.”

I looked at the man behind the counter and then to my fiancé, and wondered how he’d done all this without me noticing. But with Preston James, I’d learned just to go with the flow.

When the man brought out the box containing two beautiful platinum bands, Preston opened it and took out the one I supposed was mine.

“Try it on, sweetheart.”

I held out my hand, and he slipped it on the third finger of my left hand. I looked down at it as my stupid eyes filled again. “It’s absolutely perfect, babe.”

“Do you like the color? You’re going to be wearing it for the next fifty years or so.”

I nodded, too choked up to say much.

He leaned in and kissed my forehead. “Good. Now take it off.”

I laughed. I was so thankful Preston knew me well enough to know I’d need a break in the emotional tidal wave that had been threatening to pull me under.

“Okay, bossy,” I muttered, making him smile.

“You love it when I’m bossy and you know it,” Preston murmured as he removed the ring, then placed it back in the box.

I smirked and looked into his warm, brown eyes. “I love you and you know it.”

Preston's adoring gaze lingered on my face as we got caught up looking at one another. If we'd been alone...

Preston quickly tried on his ring, then placed it back in the box before looking at the salesman.

"Thank you, Charles. I appreciate it." I held out his hand to shake.

"It was our pleasure, Mr. James. And congratulations."

"Thank you," we said simultaneously, as Preston picked up the box and put it in his jacket pocket.

Glancing at me with a look I couldn't place, he leaned down and kissed my lips softly. "Ready to go?"

"Yes," I replied with a grin.

As we walked back through the marbled hallway toward the elevator, Preston squeezed my hand and leaned into me.

"Sweetheart, we're about to have the world's shortest engagement."

My eyebrows launched into my hairline as we stepped into the elevator. "Are you serious?"

Preston glanced at the elevator panel and pressed the button, then turned his attention to me when the doors closed. He looked concerned. "You don't want to get married here in the Plaza?"

Oh fuck. He was serious. We were seriously about to get married.

"I do, of course, but..." How did I say I wanted to get married with our families present? Yes, this was romantic as hell, but still.

"What's wrong?" he asked, as the doors opened on yet another floor I hadn't seen before. "Would you rather do this in Portland?"

Preston held my hand as we walked down another hall, before we stopped outside a set of ornate doors.

"I wanted to do this with our families."

He nodded and curled in his lips. “Okay, sweetheart. I should have thought about that. Let’s go tell the minister we’re going to wait.”

Before I could say another word, he opened the door and ushered me into a beautiful ballroom filled with wall-to-wall flowers. As I looked around, I saw a massive table that was set for dinner.

I looked at him, then to my right. That’s when I noticed them and began to tear up. It was too much.

Our family and friends stood quietly, waiting for us to enter. My parents and grandparents, my sister, and Ben stood to the left of the officiant. Preston’s parents stood with Greyson and Nonna, while Stella and her husband stood flanked by Alejandro and Anna.

Preston pulled me closer and whispered in my ear. “Is this what you had in mind?”

I nodded and tried to stop the tears. “I love you so much, but you still have more money than sense.”

He laughed and pulled me into a hug. “I’ll take it under advisement. Good surprise?”

“You know I hate surprises, but this one,” I choked up. “This one is everything.”

Preston kissed my forehead and pulled me along. “Come on sweetheart, it’s time to make you a James.”

I pulled back on his hand, stopping his forward progress. “What if I want to make you a Reed?”

He laughed and shook his head. “I don’t care about the names as long as I have you forever.”

So, with our family and friends surrounding us, we stood in front of an officiant in one of the small ballrooms at the Plaza Hotel, and made vows to love one another for the rest of our lives. After we were pronounced husband and husband, we celebrated our wedding with a spectacular dinner and dancing with the people we loved most.

I watched as my husband dance with his mother, and then his Nonna. He held her small body in his strong arms as she beamed up at him. I took my own mother for a spin around the ballroom on a night neither of us would ever forget.

At the end of the evening, we went back to our new apartment while everyone else did as they pleased. I needed to be wrapped up in him and show him how much I loved him.

When the door closed behind us in our apartment, I pressed him to the door and kissed him just like he'd done to me that first night in the alleyway behind the bar. I'd never get tired of him or the things he did to me.

* * *

LOOK for more details about the upcoming November release of *We Could Do This Tonight* on any of my 3 social media platforms or [sign up for my newsletter](#) if you don't already get it.

**SNEAK PEEK - WE COULD
DO THIS TONIGHT**

BEN

I can't remember the last time I was this pissed off.

Maybe not ever.

I was a happy-go-lucky guy who went with the flow. I fully ascribed to the laid back California surfer dude/snow skier mentality to which I'd been born. And if you made me mad, you really had to be doing something.

And Alejandro Sanchez was definitely doing something. He was poking the sleeping bear without even knowing it.

I reclined in my seat at the table, following the surprise ceremony in one of the ballrooms of the Plaza Hotel.

When Preston strolled in one night after Thanksgiving to see us before he and Nick went home to San Diego, he laid the plan on us, and I was ready to go right then.

When he left, I looked at Alejandro, and he returned my scorching gaze. Yeah, we were gonna have three nights alone in New York to ourselves.

"You know what that means, don't you, Benjamin?" he'd whispered in my ear as he jerked me off against his office door.

"Mm-hmm," I moaned as he circled the head of my cock with his thumb.

He chuckled. "You're going to be mine for seventy-two hours to fuck into oblivion. I might not let you out of bed the whole time."

He was gonna make me cum just saying that shit.

"Mm-hmm," I moaned again, panting a little harder as he moved on to stroking me. My jeans were around my thighs and restricting my movements. I wanted to spread myself open for him and let him bottom out, balls deep. But he was intent on torturing me in the best way.

Alejandro bit the sensitive skin just below my collar bone, and jerked me hard as I palmed his cock over his dress pants. God, I wanted him.

When he finally pulled me from the door and ordered me to drop my pants, pre-cum was going everywhere like a faucet needing a washer. I watched, mesmerized by his tight ass, as he unbutton his pants on the way to his leather desk chair. And when he had that thing out and waiting for me, I almost came just looking at it.

But that was two weeks ago, and now I watched from my chair as he danced with his daughter Anna. The same daughter who has the hots for me. The same daughter that wasn't supposed to come this weekend because she was spending Christmas with her mother. The same daughter that now took my place in his room, because Nick's sister brought a date.

“Hey, you're Ben, right?”

I looked up, startled into the light caramel eyes of Preston's younger brother, Greyson. He was the younger version of the sexy beast who relentlessly pursued my friend for over a year.

“Uh, yeah,” I said. “You're Greyson, right?”

He smiled down at me and extended his hand. “Yeah, nice to meet you.”

I nodded and smiled, shaking maybe a minute too long. “Yeah, you too.”

“Mind if I sit?”

I shook my head and smiled. “Not at all. Have a seat.”

As Greyson sat down next to me in Alejandro's chair, I picked up the faint hint of something sweet, making me smile.

“Is this your first time in New York?” he asked.

I took a drink of my champagne. “Yeah. I'm a California boy. You're from here, right?”

“Yeah, Connecticut. But I live in Colorado now.” He sat back and leaned onto his elbow on the table and crossed his

left leg over his right knee.

“Cool. You’re a pastry chef, right?”

He grinned. “What gave me away?”

I chuckled. “You kinda smell like a bakery.”

Greyson groaned and ran his hand through his thick, dark hair. “I think it’s embedded in my skin. No matter what I do, I still smell like my work.”

“It could be worse,” I added.

“That is true,” he said, smiling at me.

Greyson James was a handsome man. But my stupid heart only had eyes for the dumbass man now glaring at us. Yeah, well, maybe he needs a little shaking up.

“So I think we’re rooming together. Is that okay with you?” he asked.

“Sure, absolutely. Maybe you can show me some of New York.”

“Yeah, that would be great. And maybe you can give me some pointers on skiing. Nick says you ski in Big Bear.” I watched as Greyson took out the envelope that held the electronic key cards, slid one out, and then over to me.

I grinned and took it from the table, then slipped it into my pocket.

“Yeah, that would be great. I love Big Bear. I’ve been skiing there since I was a kid.”

I knew what this was going to look like to Alejandro. And right now, I didn’t give a fuck because he refused to tell his daughter what we were to each other.

Greyson was smiling and looked over his shoulder, then back at me. “Looks like Alejandro is not too happy. My brother says he’s into you, and kinda dragging his feet.”

I smiled. “Preston told you that?”

He nodded. “Said I might could help move things along for you, if you want. Maybe hang out and let him think whatever

he thinks.”

I threw my head back and laughed. “I’m gonna owe him one. That would be great.”

“Good,” he said, grinning ear to ear. “What do you say we get this party started and head out to a bar that’s not here?”

I grinned, and stood, not glancing Alejandro’s way.

“Let’s go,” I said, “and thanks for this.”

“No worries,” Greyson said. “I might need the favor returned some time. It’s good to have hot new friends.” He swung his arm over my shoulders as we walked out.

I could feel Alejandro’s gaze burning into my skin. And for once, I didn’t care. I was going to hell, anyway. Now I could just take the express train.

* * *

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A NOTE FROM EMERSON

Thank you for spending some time with Preston and Nick. I hope you enjoyed them as much as I did. We received requests for Nick's story every time we released one of *The Package Deal Series* books, so his story needed to be told. And Preston was just a bonus.

My books tend to “teach” a little along the way. As a retired teacher, it's in my blood after thirty years of practice. I've learned so much about architecture and my favorite city in the world during my research for this book. New York City is truly amazing, and the neighborhoods, like Little Italy, are cultural gems. They still have stores that date back to the early 1900s. Check them out the next time you're in NYC.

A special heartfelt thank you goes out to my co-author and friend, Rheland Richmond, for everything. When she asked me to co-write with her, she changed my world. I never expected us to write and publish seven books in a year, but I'm so glad we did. I've learned so much from her about the publishing world, and will continue to learn even more as we continue to write more books together in our Portland Pirate Universe. Thank you for beta reading and offering your advice and kindness so freely. I don't know what I'd do without you.

My other partner in crime and Canadian confidant cannot be forgotten. Jennifer Green (aka Jenn_Reads_Books), thank you for reading and loving all our characters. Your words of encouragement, and accepting my five-minute calls that turn into two hours, and countless messages. Your editorial decrees of “we need more yelling and screaming in this scene” will forever be appreciated. Thank you for putting your mad skills to work on this book, especially since you had Covid while doing it. You are a true professional and gift to the book and indie author community. You are the BEST!

One last shout out to my family. My husband and kids have been so supportive of my new career. Love you guys to the moon and back.

Look for our next series with Aidan and Jesse's EHM Management and Security to be announced very soon!

I would love to hear from you. If you'd like to stay in the know about upcoming new releases or bonus scenes (when I have time to write them), follow me on your social media of choice.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emerson Beckett is new to the publishing world. As an avid sports fan and lover of well-written M/M romance books, Emerson loves her new career as an author of gay romance. It's even more fulfilling for her when she can combine the two.

Emerson is the co-author of The Package Deal Series, which includes *The Quarterback Keeper*, *Pass Interference*, *Unnecessary Roughness*, *Two-Point Conversion*, *Illegal Motion*, *Ineligible Receiver*, and *Roughing the Kicker*. Besides being a retired teacher and author, Emerson lives in North Carolina and has been married to the same man for 33 years. She is the mother of three beautiful adults, one of whom is proudly part of the LGBTQ Community and completely responsible for her addiction to MM Romance. Even though the kids no longer live at home, they filled the empty nest with an Australian Shepherd, three cats, and a cute bunny rabbit.

