

The image features a photograph of a person's legs in a high ball position, with the feet tucked up towards the groin. The background is a deep purple with a marbled, fibrous texture. The text is overlaid on the upper portion of the image.

Heat

A Torquere Press High Ball
From Cory Temple

High Ball: Heat

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Chapter One

June

“You going to grad, Chance?”

Chancellor Shanahan turned from wiping down the shining silver bumper of Engine One-Eleven to see his engineer, Alex Jenkins. Alex had his shirt off and a sheen of sweat covering his chest, a testament to his afternoon run on the treadmill.

Chance spared a discreet glance for the bead of perspiration making its slow way down Alex’s abdomen before looking back at the rig for any smudges. “Nah,” he shrugged. Fire department academy graduation wasn’t his thing. “Buncha rookies, don’t know any of ‘em.”

“You could find out who scored highest,” Alex offered, and Chancellor laughed.

“You just wanna know who’s coming here.”

“Don’t you?” Alex asked, unconcerned.

“Don’t care. He just better be a good medic.” Chance finished swiping at imaginary smears with the rag and sat back against the front of the engine. “Sick of those damn overtime assholes not giving a shit about working here. Ever since Cahill went downtown, they haven’t put the same guy twice in his spot. Makes it fucking hard to work with a partner when I have no idea who that partner’s gonna be from day to day, you know?”

Alex nodded in sympathy. “Yeah, I got that. At least they’re all lateral hires, so whoever it is has experience.”

Chance grunted in response. “Who’s cooking dinner?”

“Double,” Alex gestured, referring to the crew that rode on Engine Eleven. They differentiated the engines by either “Double” for Engine Eleven or “Triple” for Engine One-Eleven. The fire truck was just “the truck”.

Chance knew most civilians had no idea that fire engines and fire trucks were two different animals, but the fact that he and every other fireman knew it was one of the reasons Chancellor loved his job. Being a firefighter was like being a member of an exclusive club that had its own language and rules, and Chance had adored every second of his eight years with Oceanside Fire.

He had been hired full-time at twenty-eight, after three years as a reserve firefighter and interviewing like crazy with every department in the state. And some out of state, too, traveling to Nevada and Arizona and getting as far as being put on their A list for hiring,

but never actually securing a job. It was too competitive, this field, and being a white male in a sea of minorities and women, well ... it had taken a while.

A white *gay* male, he amended, although there were few in the department who knew it. It was much like the army, the fire service was, with their don't ask, don't tell policy. It grated on him sometimes, but he loved his job more than screaming from the rooftops that he liked to fuck guys, so don't ask, don't tell was okay with him. For now, at least.

The ones who knew had been all right with it. His battalion chief. Matt Perkins, the captain on his engine. And Erik Cahill, his old paramedic partner, who was now working for department headquarters as a fire investigator. Chance had held his proverbial breath when he told them all at separate times. The chief, Ross Stevens, had arched a brow and said, "Any particular reason you're telling me this, son?"

"It could come up in the future," was all Chance had said, and the chief nodded.

"Hopefully not."

And that had been it.

Matt and Erik had both looked warily at him until Chance assured them he wasn't after their hot bods. He was only telling them because they had to work closely together and he hated questions about his personal life. Erik had shrugged. "Whatever, man. You do what you do, yeah? No skin off my nose."

Chance had grinned at him. "It's cool?"

"It's cool."

Matt took longer to size Chance up, scrutinizing him until Chance shifted uncomfortably under his gaze. "This ever gonna be a problem on my shift?"

"No, sir."

"Off my shift?"

Chance didn't know what to say to that. "Um, I'll try not to let it be ... I guess." His personal life had never clashed with his professional life before, so he didn't see how it would be a problem for his captain if they weren't even at work.

Matt nodded. "You're a good fireman, that's all I give a shit about." And he had walked away to check the day's call printouts on the computer. Chance breathed a sigh of relief, and that was that.

He figured more of the guys at the station knew, and probably a lot of the ones who weren't even on his shift. "Tell a fireman, tell a friend" was the unspoken department

motto. Firemen gossiped worse than a bunch of women at a bridge party, which was one of the reasons Chance never discussed his personal life. It was also one of the reasons he rarely showed up at holiday functions and station gatherings, preferring to stay home rather than answer questions about why he didn't have a date. He'd tried bringing his best female friend, Bonnie, once or twice, but that caused even more issues with the matchmaking wives of his coworkers.

But he'd never been questioned directly, and never experienced any of the sort of weirdness that he'd assumed would occur when a bunch of straight, macho men discovered they had a queer living in their midst. It was high up on his list of reasons for making sure he was the best fireman he could be. Less for the others to discuss.

It helped that he lived where he did, Chance knew that much. California was a fairly liberal state, and beachside towns like Oceanside seemed to attract gays. He didn't live in any of the scattered gay neighborhoods, but he wasn't so far away that he didn't know where he could go on a Saturday night if he felt like some action. There was the Seagull on Beach Street and Temptations on Pacific Coast Highway, and as much as Chance really didn't like the bar scene, sometimes it was just fucking necessary if he wanted to get laid.

His own right hand got pretty damn boring, even if it did do the job.

"Chow!" came the shout out the back door, interrupting Chance's thoughts, and he threw the rag into the dirty laundry bin.

Yeah, he thought on his way in to dinner, at least he knew where his own hand had been, and it wouldn't fuck him over when he least expected it. Better that way.

Pretty damn boring, though.

He worked a regular fireman's schedule of twos and fours. Two days on, two days off, two days on, four days off. His next shift was two days later and he'd nearly forgotten about the rookie.

Chance caught sight of his own reflection in the mirrored window next to the door leading to the station kitchen. The sunburn he'd gotten on his neck and chest yesterday at the beach was starting to fade already, adding to the nice early tan he'd started for summer. It had been a good day for waves and he'd surfed longer than he'd intended, stopping only when he had to battle tourists for water space. Chance noticed his hair was already lightening, another side effect of the strong California sun and ocean saltwater.

He was forty minutes early for his eight o'clock shift and the kitchen was quiet, only the captain from last night standing at the sink. "Sutter," Chance greeted, and the man half-turned from washing his cereal dish.

“Hey, Chance. I borrowed some of you guys’ milk.”

“Why don’t you just take our fucking blood, too,” Chance joked, reaching for the door of the refrigerator marked with a blue “B”. Three fridges stood side by side in the alcove, each marked with the letter of the corresponding shift. Chance was on B shift, but occasionally they all would root through another shift’s refrigerator for food staples if they ran low.

Two other firefighters appeared in the large kitchen, hair tousled and blinking blearily. “Bad night?” Chance asked, and they glared at him.

“Double ran two calls and Triple ran three,” Sutter offered by way of explanation, and Chance winced. Some nights were like that. It came with the job.

Contrary to popular belief, most of their calls were not for fires. Chance had fought plenty of fires in his day, but most of their responses were for medical aid to the local retirement community or traffic collisions on the freeway. The occasional ocean accident came their way, if it was something the lifeguards couldn’t handle. Fighting actual fire was only about thirty percent of Chance’s job. He loved it, too, and sometimes considered moving further inland where there was more chance of brush or structure fire.

But one look out the window at the Pacific Ocean, blue and sparkling, and Chance would remember why he stayed at Station Eleven. High tide was a powerful motivator.

The kitchen got noisier as more of B shift arrived and C shift got ready to leave, shoving back chairs and thumping coffee mugs into the dishwasher. There was good-natured ribbing for C shift about their crappy night, complete with calls of “hero!” when it was discovered that one of the medics had revived an old man having a heart attack.

Chance was leaning against the fridge, contemplating putting more chocolate syrup in his coffee, when the back door opened. He noticed the lull in conversation more than the actual arrival of the newcomer.

Glancing up at the sudden quiet, he was greeted with the sight of one of the prettiest men he’d ever seen. *Oh, fuck*, was his first thought, then Chance stopped thinking at all.

The new hire strolled into the greatroom next to the kitchen and stopped beside one of the twelve recliners in front of the television. Leaning against it insolently, he sized up each and every man in the room before saying, with a slight drawl, “Tucker McBride.”

Matt rose from his chair, coming forward with hand extended. Chance watched as the rookie shook it firmly, knowing he had already met Matt at his academy graduation, and the two men seemed to have an easy accord. “Welcome to the Big House,” Matt said, and Tucker lifted his eyes to where the station’s nickname was carved in the wood beam above his head.

The other firemen called greetings to him and Tucker made his way to the table, shaking hands with his right while holding onto his gear bag with his left. Chance kept a surreptitious eye on Tucker while he went around the table, noting details he wished he hadn't seen.

Longish legs encased in regulation blue department pants. Strong muscles in his forearms that flexed every time he shook someone else's hand, and his skin was like nothing Chance had ever seen. Almost copper, it was tanned differently than Chance's own California glow. Smooth and burnished, it seemed to shimmer. Chance wanted to touch it, to see if it was as silky as it looked.

He wanted to do a hell of a lot more than that, his body began to tell him, and Chance shifted uncomfortably. Good thing he still had track pants on and hadn't changed into his uniform yet. His track pants were a little more roomy.

Chance continued his perusal of Tucker until the man had shaken hands with everyone in the room but him. Chance was just thinking it was fine if they never touched each other when the captain called out, "And that's Shanahan, lurking by the fridge. Don't let his glare scare you."

Tucker stopped in front of Chance, dropping his bag on the floor and meeting Chance's eyes. "You're the other paramedic," Tucker stated, extending his hand.

Chance nodded, taking in the dark eyes and even darker hair, praying to any God that would listen that Tucker did not look down and see evidence of Chance's arousal. "Chancellor," he managed to get out. "How's it going?"

"Last ten minutes've been fine," Tucker said seriously, and again Chance detected the slow drawl.

"How'd you get a name like Tucker," Chance asked, and heard several snorts from the table. His own name had been joked about enough, but it wasn't his fault his mother was pretentious and snobby.

But Tucker smiled easily, revealing a hint of dimple in his cheek – *oh, fucking hell*, Chance thought – and shrugged. "Momma named me after our home state. Said I made her think of Kentucky bluebells."

Chance had no time to wonder why the hell Tucker's mother would think he reminded her of flowers before Matt was clapping him on the shoulder. "Show him his dorm, Chance."

Dammit. Chance nodded and willed his body back to normal, jerking a thumb over his shoulder toward the sleeping area. "Back this way."

He was aware of Tucker following him silently, taking in all areas of the station as they walked. The computer room, the classroom, the chief's office, the workout room. Chance heard him grunt appreciatively as they passed the small gym. Instantly his mind was flooded with images of Tucker sweating, Tucker lifting weights, Tucker running on the treadmill – fuck! He felt his dick begin to push against the front of his boxers again and swore under his breath.

Chance stopped abruptly at the last dorm on his left, suddenly enough for Tucker to almost run right into him. “Yours,” Chance said.

“I get a phone?” Tucker brushed past him into the small room and Chance shrunk back, unwilling to let any part of his traitorous body touch Tucker’s.

“You’re the probie,” Chance laughed. “It’s only there because you’re the one who has to answer it.”

“Whatever,” Tucker shrugged. “Fine by me.”

Chance noted the way Tucker elongated his vowels in true southern fashion and decided he liked it. “So put your shit in your locker and come have breakfast,” he offered. “Then I’ll show you around.”

Tucker opened his gear bag and withdrew bed linens. “Lemme make up the bed. I’ll be in after.”

Chance couldn’t help darting a glance at Tucker’s light blue sheets and wondered if they smelled like him. Then he cursed himself, turned on his heel, and stalked back to the kitchen.

Chapter Two

July

Chance woke up with his hand on his cock and the sheets tangled around his ankles. He had obviously started jerking off while he was still asleep, because now he found himself more than halfway gone to a good orgasm, and he couldn't have stopped if he wanted to.

Glossy hair and smooth, copper skin teased him when Chance closed his eyes, stroking harder and clutching the bedsheets with the other hand. He imagined Tucker's mouth on him, hot and wet and doing talented things with that tongue, whispering nasty words in his ear that were only made hotter by that soft southern accent.

Chance fumbled blindly in the bedside drawer for lube, finding it and flipping the cap with one hand. He hissed through his teeth at the first touch of slickness, stroking himself harder and lifting his hips off the mattress. Chance strained toward release, flicking his thumb over the head of his dick and using his free hand to squeeze his balls, images of Tucker just behind his eyelids. It felt so fucking good to jerk off when he thought of Tucker these days, something Chance tried to completely ignore when he wasn't hard as a rock and in bed at home. He had to work with the man, after all, and sleep two doors away.

But right now, he was close enough to coming to not really care; Chance felt his balls grow tight and he was leaking pre-come all over himself. He thrust up into his hand twice more before drawing a deep breath and shooting over his fingers, squeezing his eyes shut and picturing Tucker.

This really had to stop.

Chance lay there for a while, ignoring the stickiness and staring at his ceiling. Damn, damn, *damn*. Tucker McBride had been at Station Eleven for three weeks and Chance found himself putting distance between them, despite the necessity of working as medic partners in close proximity. Chance did what was called for when it came to administering medical aid, brushing shoulders with Tucker while they took vitals or started an intravenous line. But he was constantly on edge, wondering if today his body would give him away or if Tucker – or any of the other guys, God forbid – would notice his reaction to Tucker reaching across him or peering over Chance's shoulder at a patient.

He was a good paramedic, Chance had to admit. The other guys had taken to him easily. He was an obedient rookie, too, answering the phone at all hours and getting to work well before his shift started. Plus, he could cook. Chance's mouth watered, remembering the other night's chicken pot pie with mashed potatoes. But Chance cursed Tucker silently for being those things, plus so damn hot to boot. It had made Chance's job hell. But if Tucker noticed Chance's reticence around him when they weren't running calls, he hadn't said a word.

Glancing at the clock and realizing he was about to be late for work, Chance groped under the bed for a towel. He received only an annoyed meow when his hand closed on soft fur. "Sorry, Smoke," he murmured, grabbing the towel next to the cat. Smokey darted from under the bed and out the door of the bedroom. Chance watched his twitching tail disappear. "Yeah, run while you can," he muttered. "I'm so hard up these days I might start thinking you look good."

He managed to avoid jerking off again in the shower.

"Shanahan!" Robert Lopez shouted at him. "Fuck, we need you to play, you asshole!"

Chance looked up from where he was polishing the engine again. He polished the engine a lot these days. The truck bay was the quietest place – away from Tucker – that he could find. "Fuck you, I'm doing work!"

"You're not doing work," Alex yelled disdainfully. "The rig's spotless. Come on, or the rookie's gonna take your place as point guard!"

Chance looked over at Tucker. He stood shirtless, his chest heaving with the exertion of playing basketball in the late afternoon heat. Chance swallowed tightly and Tucker grinned at him, wiping his forehead with his arm. "I'm just the probie," he shrugged. "I do what they tell me."

Alex laughed and slugged him in the shoulder, giving up on Chance and passing the ball to Robert. "Fine, screw you, Shanahan. McBride can do the job."

I bet he can, was Chance's automatic thought, as he watched the muscles cord and flex in Tucker's back when he reached over his head to shoot for the basket. Chance tortured himself by watching the game for another minute before turning back to the engine, steeling himself against his own arousal. Damn it all to hell.

He listened to the game go on behind him for another fifteen minutes before it dissolved into a good-natured argument about which team had how many points. "Fuck you all, I'm thirsty anyway," Chance heard his captain say, and then their voices faded as the back door slammed. The yard was quiet and Chance could breathe.

Which is why, Chance told himself later, he was so startled when he turned abruptly and found Tucker standing less than two feet away, his shirt in his hands. "Hey," Tucker said with a lift of his chin.

Chance noticed that their gazes were almost level, Tucker only a couple of inches shorter than Chance's own six foot two. Chance cleared his throat. "Hey." *God, you smell so fucking good*, was what he really wanted to say, but mercifully he held back. And it was true, the sharp, clean smell of sweat assaulting his senses and making his head spin.

“I wasn’t takin’ your place or nothin’,” Tucker said, motioning toward the small basketball court. “They just needed a fourth guy.”

“Huh?” Chance inwardly rolled his eyes at his own lack of finesse. “Oh, yeah. No, I know, it’s all good.” He swallowed a mouthful of saliva and concentrated hard on not staring at Tucker’s bare pecs, glistening with perspiration.

The corner of Tucker’s mouth turned up and he took a step closer. Chance was pinned in place by nothing but Tucker’s gaze, and somewhere in the corner of his mind he noticed a tiny, brown freckle right above the man’s left cheekbone. Chance wanted to suck on it. To his own credit, he didn’t look away, just stood where he was and willed his body to behave. It didn’t listen.

But then it didn’t matter, because Tucker reached out a tanned arm and squeezed Chance’s cock through his pants. There was no way Tucker could miss Chance’s erection, heavy and full, and Chance closed his eyes for a fraction of a second.

“Thought so,” Tucker murmured in the stillness of the bay, and when Chance opened his eyes, Tucker was gone.

He skulked around the dorm area for the rest of the day, avoiding anyone else and wishing like hell he was at the beach instead of trapped at work with the hottest fireman he’d ever seen. The one who’d felt him up like a teenager this afternoon.

Chance was hard again just thinking about it. He threw himself on his bunk with a disgusted sigh and buried his face in his pillow, willing his shift to be over so at least he could go home and jerk off. Again.

But no chance for that when he heard two dings of the alarm, so he lifted his head to listen for the announcement of which engines were to go into service.

His, naturally, and then he didn’t have time to think, only react. It was what made him a good firefighter and he knew it: the simple, easy reaction time in response to any emergency. Chance was down the hall and in the garage before most of his crew arrived, tugging on his yellow turnout gear and heavy boots. He swung into his seat behind the engineer and pointedly looked at his watch when Alex got in thirty seconds behind him, laughing and flipping him off at the same time.

Chance congratulated himself on not looking over at Tucker, who he could practically feel smirking at him.

The computer printout had said the call was a teenager with an asthma attack, and the radio confirmed it on the way there. They were at the small apartment complex in less

than five minutes. The hysterical mother pointed a shaking finger toward the bedroom and Chance raised his eyebrows at his captain to keep her out of the way. He followed Tucker into the room and both of them switched immediately into the easy patterns they'd come to know in the past weeks, Chance attaching a cardiac monitor and oxygen mask and Tucker preparing to administer Albuterol. Chance saw him wink at the wheezing girl.

"Hello, darlin'," he said to her softly, and Chance's stomach tightened at the low tone.

She turned desperate eyes on him and he grinned at her. "You'll be all right. 'Less my partner here screws up. You got yourself a name?"

"Candace," she managed, offering her arm to Chance so he could take her pulse.

"Well. I had me a horse named Candace at home. Called her Candy 'cause she was darn near the sweetest thing I'd ever ridden."

It was the first glimpse into Tucker's background that Chance had learned, other than where he came from, and he filed it away for future reference.

"My older brother calls me that," the girl gasped, still struggling for a deep breath.

"Does he, now?" Tucker murmured, checking her vital signs. "You live up to it?"

"No," she smiled, and Chance urged her to sit up so he could use his stethoscope on her back. Listening to her clearing lungs, he looked up and met Tucker's eyes. He motioned with his head toward the door and Tucker picked up on the signal easily.

"Gotta go to the hospital, hon," Tucker said to her. "Those big, handsome firemen out there talking to your mamma are gonna bring in a stretcher for me, all right?"

Chance almost laughed when she looked wistfully at Tucker. "You're gonna come too?"

"Sure thing. Back of the ambulance with ya and everything."

Chance went to the door and crooked a finger at Matt, who finished up his interview with Candace's mother and motioned to Alex for the stretcher.

Outside, the two young ambulance drivers opened the back doors for the patient to be loaded. Chance realized that Matt had talked the mother into taking her own car to the hospital instead of riding in the ambulance so she'd have a way to drive back home. Once again, Chance found himself trapped in a small space with Tucker and only the teenage girl for a buffer. Great.

“I’ll do radio,” he said shortly, reaching for it to tell the hospital they were coming. And goddamned if Tucker didn’t look up and *wink* at him over the girl’s head, smirking just enough so that his fucking dimple flashed at Chance. Bastard.

Chance kept his eyes either on his patient or his watch for the rest of the trip.

Dinner was pizza, since it was nearly seven when they got back from the hospital and no one wanted to cook. Chance took his slices to one of the recliners in front of the tv and wished for a cold Heineken and even colder shower. Tucker’s dimples were haunting him.

He got bored of tv and watched two of the guys play cards for a while, but his mind kept straying to the noticeable lack of Tucker and Chance kept wondering where he’d gone off to. It was irritating.

Finally, frustrated with himself and needing to blow off steam, he retreated to the workout room. He set a treadmill on high and ran for twenty minutes. It helped a little. The racked weights caught his eye and he figured he could lift for a while. If nothing else, he could at least exhaust himself so that maybe he wouldn’t dream tonight and wake up at four a.m. with a raging hard-on.

Chance was lying on the bench, staring up at the barbell and wondering if he should go ask Alex to spot him or just give up on working out altogether, when the door opened. If he had been blind and deaf he would have known it was Tucker, because wouldn’t that just be his goddamned luck?

A dark head appeared in his line of vision and Chance got an excellent view of Tucker’s t-shirt pulled tight across his chest. “Want a spotter?”

No, Chance thought. “Yes.”

“Gotcha. Go.”

Thankfully, it took most of Chance’s attention to focus on the weight, because he’d added eight more pounds than usual. His muscles were screaming and he could feel sweat standing out on his forehead when he was finished, Tucker helping him put the weights back on the bar above him. Chance let himself lie there and breathe for a minute.

He was about to get up with a mumbled “thanks,” but before Chance could even sit up, Tucker had come around to the front of the bench and straddled Chance’s legs. Tucker didn’t sit; merely stood above him and gazed down with a serious expression. Once again, Chance found himself frozen by only a stare.

“I do my job, yeah?”

Chance blinked, not expecting the question. “Yeah.”

“Then why the shitty attitude, man?” Tucker was as straight-faced as Chance had ever seen him, and it occurred to Chance that Tucker really wanted an answer.

Because I’d like to turn you around and nail you to the wall was probably not the answer Tucker was looking for. Chance opened his mouth and then closed it again, not willing to tell the truth and not wanting to lie. His eyes strayed to the front of Tucker’s shorts and then back up to his face.

Tucker cocked a dark brow and slowly lowered himself until he was sitting astride Chance’s hips. “This why?” he whispered, giving a slow, downward nudge. Chance felt Tucker’s cock through his shorts, full and solid.

He darted a panicked look at the door. “The guys,” he said, his voice sounding hoarse to his own ears.

“Watching a movie. Come on, Shanahan. You don’t waste your breath talking to me if we’re not on a call. I wanna know why not.” Tucker leaned forward, placing both hands on Chance’s chest and bringing their cocks into fuller contact. “You afraid?”

“Fuck you,” Chance growled, and grabbed a handful of Tucker’s hair, bringing Tucker down to him for a vicious kiss.

Chance felt Tucker grinning against his mouth before Chance shoved his tongue inside, sweeping and claiming and growling. He fisted a hand in the back of Tucker’s t-shirt and rocked up against him, trying like hell to release some of the pressure of the last few weeks. Tucker groaned into Chance’s kiss, pushing back against him, and before Chance could get his bearings, they were humping each other like kids.

“Been starin’ at your ass for weeks,” Tucker was muttering. “So fuckin’ cocky, the way you parade around here with your shirt off and your tan line peekin’ out over your shorts. You fuckin’ bastard, Chance.”

“Shut up,” Chance hissed, arching his neck so Tucker could bite at it. “Shut the fuck up or they’ll hear us.”

Tucker shut up, but only because his mouth was busy sucking a mark into Chance’s jawline. Chance strained upward, hips thrusting to meet Tucker’s downward rolls, wishing desperately that they didn’t have fabric between them. Then he realized it didn’t matter anyway, he was about to come from a little dry humping, and wasn’t *that* a nice memory of high school?

Chance tried desperately to shove Tucker away from him, trying to maintain some semblance of dignity despite the urgent need in his crotch. “No,” Chance moaned against Tucker’s shoulder. “Not gonna come like this, like a fucking horny teenager.”

Tucker lifted his head and grinned, giving Chance the full force of both dimples. “Oh, yeah, Shanahan,” he said softly, “you are.” And he reached down a hand between them, palming Chance through his shorts while still managing to rub his own cock against the back of his hand.

“Yeah, I am,” Chance gave up, and wrapped both hands securely around the bar over his head. He planted both feet firmly on the floor and pushed up into Tucker’s hand, sucking his bottom lip between his teeth to keep from groaning out loud again. Tucker buried his face in the hollow of Chance’s neck and Chance could hear his breathing grow harsh and ragged, the two of them straining for release together.

“Knew it,” Tucker was muttering between panting breaths. “Knew you were so damn hot, knew it from the first fuckin’ day I walked in here, with your whole stoic attitude and your goddamned cock gettin’ hard every time I looked at ya. I knew it.” He lifted his head and stared at Chance. “Do it, Chance, come on. You know you wanna come right now, right here in my hand.”

“Asshole,” Chance whispered, and threw back his head and came with a jerk of his hips, feeling the warmth soak into his shorts.

Tucker talked him through it, murmuring in the low voice he used to calm patients and drive Chance out of his mind. “You got it, baby. Come on, feels so good, don’t it? Nice and sweet and hot. Gimme a little more.”

By the time he finally finished coming, Chance could still feel Tucker thrusting against him, hard as stone. “You,” Chance whispered, leaning up to close his teeth around Tucker’s earlobe. “Go, McBride. Lemme hear you.” He pushed up hard, snaking an arm around Tucker’s back to hold him in place, and rubbed against the other man. “So fucking hot.”

“Christ,” Tucker groaned into Chance’s hair, jerking against him. “Oh, Christ.” And Chance could feel the faint pulsing, even between two layers of clothes, and the resulting damp warmth.

They lay panting together on the weight bench for a minute before Tucker raised his head. His face was close enough for Chance to see the tiny birthmark on his cheek and the eyelashes that were so long they curled on the ends. Chance studied him for a moment, taking in Tucker’s features greedily, using this stolen time to examine him in ways he hadn’t been able to before. Something drew his attention suddenly, and he blurted out, “Blue.”

Tucker raised an eyebrow in question, then understanding dawned. “Oh, yeah. My eyes.”

“They look black from far away.”

He shrugged, endearingly bashful. “I know. They’re not. Kentucky bluebells, remember?”

Chance thought back to their first meeting. “Your mom. I wondered what part of you reminded her of flowers.”

Tucker laughed and Chance could feel the low rumble in his own chest. “Yup. Momma called ‘em indigo. Most people just said they were dark blue, which was good ‘nuff for me.”

Chance had a moment to wonder who else had been close enough to discover the secret of Tucker’s eyes, but then Tucker was kissing him again and Chance felt his cock stir. The next time Tucker looked up, Chance studied him. “So pretty,” he murmured without thinking, using his thumb to brush against Tucker’s thick lashes. “Your eyes, and those dimples. Pretty as a fucking girl.”

And then Tucker was up, moving away from him, and Chance blinked at the loss of warmth. “Hey,” Chance said, and Tucker wheeled on him.

“Fuck off,” he said curtly, and Chance watched with astonishment as the door closed behind Tucker.

Chapter Three

Chance started a four-day break the next day and was glad for it.

He hadn't spoken to Tucker since the man had left him alone in the weight room, and Tucker had hightailed it out of the station when his relief showed up early the next morning. Chance didn't care.

That's what he told himself, anyway.

He spent Wednesday surfing, glad it was a weekday and there were few people on the beach. He stopped at lunch to eat a Power Bar and gulp down a Gatorade, then he returned to the water and didn't have to think about much except keeping his balance. He stopped at four, resting on the sand for a while and watching the sea lions sun themselves on the large rock next to the pier.

Chance grilled himself a steak for dinner on his back patio, lifting a hand in greeting to the young couple next door when they came out to have a drink on their porch. He sat at his kitchen table, one eye on the six o'clock news, and washed down his supper with two Heinekens.

He only woke up once during the night with a vague recollection of dreaming about indigo eyes and wicked dimples. Chance didn't remember most of it in the morning.

Thursday was housework, a necessary evil.

Chance did laundry in the morning, changing sheets on his bed and washing loads of work uniforms and underwear. He cleaned Smokey's litterbox, the cat sitting a safe distance away and pretending to not care by washing his paws. "You stink," Chance told him as he dumped the dirty litter in the trash. Smokey blinked green eyes at him.

He took a look around his roomy condo in the afternoon, decided the real cleaning – floors, countertops, bathroom – could wait til next week, and contemplated calling Bonnie to see if she wanted to go eat.

Chance was still thinking about it when the phone rang at seven. Figuring it to be her, since it was her usual day and time to call him, he answered on the second ring. "S'up, Bon?"

"Shanahan?"

Not Bonnie, *definitely* not Bonnie, and Chance was instantly alert. "Yeah."

"It's McBride."

“Hey,” Chance said carefully. He didn’t wonder how Tucker had gotten his number. All of the crew’s phone numbers were up on the bulletin board at work. Chance did wonder why he was calling, however.

“Um. You busy?” Tucker sounded unsure of himself, the first time Chance had ever heard that tone in his voice.

“Nah. Was thinking about dinner.”

“Yeah, um. You wanna go grab something with me?”

Chance glanced down at his ratty fire department t-shirt and swim trunks. The last thing he wanted to do was put on a good shirt and try to look nice for someone who had told him to fuck off two days ago. “Don’t wanna change clothes, man.” He knew it was a shitty thing to say, but maybe he was more irritated with Tucker than he’d thought.

Tucker laughed, a sharp, hollow sound that echoed on the line. “Right, okay. See you Sunday.”

It made Chance feel even shittier. “No, hey. Don’t wanna change but I still gotta eat. You feel like coming over here?” The invitation was out before he knew what he was saying and Chance waited, sure Tucker would turn him down.

“Come over there? Yeah, I guess. You want, uh. You want me to bring food?”

“Hell, yes.”

Tucker laughed again, the sound more genuine. “Got it. There’s a little Italian place near me. That okay?”

Chance’s stomach growled at the thought. “Sure, whatever. You got a pen to take directions?” He gave them quickly, learning that Tucker was renting a small place not far away, and hung up the phone.

He tried to pretend he wasn’t looking forward to seeing him.

Tucker dropped his fork and pushed his chair away from the table. “Oh, fuck me, I’m done,” he groaned.

Chance shoveled in one more bite of pasta and let his own fork clatter to his plate. “God. Same.”

Tucker looked at the heaping pile of leftover food. “We didn’t make a dent.”

“Save it,” Chance shrugged. “I’m king of leftovers. Cook so much at work that I don’t wanna do it at home.”

“You can have it,” Tucker offered. “Little old lady who lives behind me is always handin’ food over the fence. ‘Just til you get yourself a girl,’ she says.” His wry tone made Chance snort.

“Yeah, the couple next door tried to set me up with her girlfriends for the first year I lived here. They figured it out soon enough when D – uh. My old boyfriend came out on the back patio with a cup of coffee one morning. Naked.” He’d almost said Derek’s name, but stopped himself in time. Chance wasn’t sure he wanted Derek intruding right now.

Tucker looked amused. “Yeah, that’d do it.”

They grinned at each other in the silence of the kitchen. “M’gonna have a beer,” Chance sighed. “You want one, or another diet Coke instead?”

“Beer,” Tucker said without hesitation, getting up from the table. Chance handed him one. They clinked bottle-necks and wandered into the living room, settling themselves on Chance’s overstuffed couch and propping their feet on the coffee table. Chance had time to notice that Tucker’s dark blue t-shirt matched his eyes. Chance shifted and adjusted his shorts, not willing to show Tucker that just sitting close was making him hard.

Smokey jumped up to examine the visitor. “Oh, hey,” Tucker said, surprised. Chance watched as Smokey rubbed his whiskers along Tucker’s bare leg.

“You can shove him off. He’s a pest.”

“Nah, s’all right,” Tucker replied, holding out a hand for the cat to sniff. “I always forget people keep cats as pets.”

“Why?”

Tucker shrugged apologetically. “Didn’t have no house cats on the farm. Cats lived in the barn to catch mice. We had dogs for pets.”

“Yeah, I had a dog growing up. But the job doesn’t lend itself to keeping one now, you know? Smoke’s way more independent.” Chance mulled over the fact that Tucker lived on a farm and figured that explained how he’d had a horse. Tucker nodded in agreement and Smokey lost interest, stepping delicately over Tucker’s lap to sit next to Chance. Chance stroked his head absently. “Farm, huh?” he asked.

“Yep. Tobacco. And a little corn, but mostly tobacco.” He sounded bored.

“Farming wasn’t for you, I take it,” Chance laughed, and was rewarded with dimples.

“Nope. Was supposed to take over, o’course. I even thought I would, too, til Daddy died. Dropped dead right there in the fuckin’ fields. Had a heart problem, we found out later, and wasn’t takin’ the meds the doc prescribed. Momma didn’t even know he was seeing a doctor at all.” He glanced over at Chance, probably gauging his reaction, Chance thought, so he kept his expression carefully neutral.

“Sorry to hear it,” Chance said, and Tucker sighed.

“Thanks. Was a long time ago, though. I was fourteen.”

Chance tried to picture a fourteen-year-old Tucker and could only come up with midnight-blue eyes under a mop of silky black curls. “Musta sucked for you. And your family.”

The look on his face grew darker. “I’m an only kid. It was hard on Momma, which was why she – ah, fuck it, you don’t wanna hear my tales of woe.”

But Chance did. “Nah, come on. Tell me. Unless you don’t wanna talk about it, which is cool.”

Tucker laid his dark head on the back of the couch and looked over at Chance. He appeared suddenly very young, although Chance knew Tucker was only a couple of years behind him in age. Chance felt a twinge of protectiveness that he shoved back down where it belonged. “Yeah, I kinda wanna talk about it,” Tucker said quietly. “It’s the reason I wanted to see you, actually.” His eyes darted away and back.

“Do I need a refill for this?” Chance asked, indicating his empty bottle on the table.

“We both do.”

Chance retrieved four more bottles from the fridge, effectively depleting his supply, and brought them back to the living room. He lined them up on the table. “M’not gettin’ off the couch again except to piss,” he explained, and Tucker flashed a dimple.

“Fair enough.” He reached for a bottle and took a long pull. “Okay, yeah. So Daddy died, and it sucked, and Momma sort of went a little bit haywire for a while. I tried to do what I knew how to do, but at fourteen, you don’t know shit.” Tucker paused, laughed without humor. “Thought I could order the hands around like Daddy did and they’d actually listen to me. Assholes just stole money, mine and Momma’s, and then one night I started cryin’ at the dinner table.”

Tucker paused, his eyes on the wall in front of them, but Chance knew he wasn’t looking at it. He was tempted to reach out, to lay a hand on Tucker’s leg or shoulder or somewhere he could offer comfort, but this thing between them – whatever it was – was still too unfamiliar. Chance just nodded and fiddled with the label of his beer.

“So Momma sorta woke up, I guess, and figured she had to get someone to at least oversee the crop haulin’. The tobacco was just sittin’ ripe in the fields. She called my uncle Tim, Daddy’s brother.” He paused there and Chance saw a muscle jump in his jaw. “It was good at first. Tim took care of that season’s crop, at least. There was food on the table and the bank stopped lookin’ to foreclose.”

“I’m assuming it didn’t stay that way,” Chance said, more to assure Tucker he was listening than to actually have something to say.

“Nope,” Tucker said flatly. “But not the way you’re thinkin’. I mean, we still had dinner to eat and the farmhands didn’t quit and Momma stopped cryin’ all hours of the day. But things got ... shittier. For me, anyway.”

He stopped again, taking a deep breath and meeting Chance’s eyes. Chance was caught beneath that gaze, no different tonight than the first time Tucker had ever looked at him. “He caught me in the barn a lot,” Tucker said, and his expression was closed, shuttered. “Would come up behind me when I was cleaning stalls or somethin’ and back me into the corner.”

Chance’s stomach rolled, knowing where this was going and not wanting to hear it. But Tucker was here, in his house, trusting him with information that he obviously didn’t share easily. “Motherfucker,” he whispered, wishing he could have done something to protect the boy Tucker used to be.

“Yeah,” Tucker agreed, and gave him a half-smile. “He never got away with much, though. I was smaller and faster. Couple of gropes here and there, nothin’ too damaging. Except...” he trailed off and took a deep breath, blowing it out between puffed cheeks. “He would grab my face. Used to tell me how pretty I was. Pretty as a girl, he used to say, and it just made me feel so fuckin’ sick, you know? Aside from the fact that I was startin’ to think I preferred guys anyway, it just really fucked me all up.”

Chance wanted to die, despite the rational voice in his head that told him he couldn’t have known. All he could hear was himself saying those words to Tucker, brushing his thumb over Tucker’s eyelashes.

Pretty as a fucking girl.

Chance opened his mouth to say something, anything, then closed it again. There was nothing to say. There was nothing to do, either, except just look miserably at Tucker and wonder how to fix it.

“Oh, hey,” Tucker said gently. “No, come on. I just wanted to tell you so you would know why I freaked out the other night, not to make you all guilty or nothin’. My fault, not yours. It was so long ago, I was just surprised to hear it, is all.”

It made him feel worse, not better, and Chance hung his head. "I'm so sorry," he said softly. "I'm an idiot."

"Yeah," Tucker agreed, "but not 'cause of that." The teasing tone made Chance look up. "You're an idiot, Shanahan, for tryin' to deny the inevitable." And then Tucker leaned over to kiss him, threading his fingers through Chance's hair and moving closer on the couch.

It was the last thing Chance had expected to spend the night doing, but he wasn't about to complain. The freedom of not being at work, of being in his own place with the luxury of no prying eyes or listening ears was a huge turn-on in itself.

The fact that Tucker was a co-worker was an issue he'd work out later.

Chance brought up both hands to hold Tucker's head and was rewarded with a small sigh. Tucker turned on the couch and sort of nestled into Chance, fitting the hard planes of his abdomen along Chance's. Chance felt his own cock stir and swell and he moved also, seeking some pressure.

Tucker pushed him back against the arm of the couch and straddled him, reminiscent of the position in the workout room at the station the other night. Chance drew a deep breath when their erections rubbed against each other and saw heat flare in Tucker's eyes. "How come I'm always findin' you underneath me?" Tucker asked, and Chance narrowed his gaze.

"Not always," he replied, and flipped them both until he was sitting atop the other man, grinding down suggestively.

Tucker just grinned up at him. "Knew you were a top. So fuckin' bossy all the time."

"You don't know the half of it."

"Show me, then," Tucker challenged. "Been waitin' a fuckin' month, man."

Chance had never been one to back down from a challenge. He nudged Tucker's legs apart, fitting a thigh in between and thrusting, making Tucker roll his head back on the arm of the couch and groan. "Yeah, do it."

But then a moment later Tucker was gasping and pushing against Chance's chest, tugging at Chance's hair. Chance lifted his mouth from the hickey he was making along Tucker's collarbone and looked at him. "S'matter?"

"You gotta slow down a little, else 'm gonna come in my shorts," Tucker panted, belying his own words by thrusting upwards anyway. Chance bit back a moan.

"You mean like the other night?" he reminded, and Tucker laughed.

“Yeah, I know, you owe me. And I probably should just shoot right now to take the edge off ... but damn, Chance, I’d rather feel your hands on me than the inside of my clothes.”

It was the best invitation Chance could have asked for. “Off,” he demanded, tugging at Tucker’s shirt. He drank in the ridges of muscle greedily when Tucker divested himself of the t-shirt, dipping his head to circle one copper nipple with his tongue. Chance listened to Tucker’s breathing increase for a minute before saying “Off,” again, this time hooking a finger in the man’s waistband and dragging it downward.

Tucker managed to kick his shorts off over his straining cock and breathed a sigh of relief when he was naked, taking hold of his dick and giving himself two short, hard strokes before Chance knocked his hand away. “Quit that.”

“See?” Tucker murmured, closing his eyes and arching up into Chancellor. “So fuckin’ bossy.”

Tucker’s cock just begged to be tasted. Standing up and proud away from his body, one clear drop of pre-come glistened at the tip. Chance slid down on the couch and flicked out his tongue, tasting bittersweetness. Tucker stopped breathing. “Again,” he moaned, so Chance complied, this time opening his mouth around the head, letting his tongue dance briefly over the slit.

He could feel Tucker straining beneath him, muscles trembling as Tucker tried not to buck up into Chance’s mouth. Chance relented and took more of him in. Sliding his lips down, teeth carefully covered, he used the flat of his tongue to make long strokes and put his hands under Tucker’s ass, urging the man to move if he wanted to.

Given permission, Tucker arched up with a hiss and put both hands on Chance’s head. “How are you so fuckin’ good at that,” he asked, then, “No, I don’t wanna know, just go, don’t stop, my god.”

He kept up a litany of mumbled words while Chance sucked on him and Chance loved it all: the small, needy sounds Tucker would make when Chance licked him, the little jerks of his hips when he tried to push deeper, the urgent fingers in Chance’s hair that tugged but didn’t pull. It was hot, all of it, and Chance couldn’t help dropping a palm to his own crotch and rubbing himself while he got Tucker off.

It didn’t take too long until Tucker was whimpering above him and twisting his hips on the cushions. Chance put the hand that wasn’t on his own erection on Tucker’s balls and squeezed gently, feeling them draw up at the same time Tucker gasped and arched his back. “Move,” Tucker managed to say, and as soon as Chance drew his mouth away, Tucker was coming with a series of shudders and jerks, his come falling hotly over both of them.

The instant Tucker was done, Chance ripped at the velcro fly of his swim trunks and shoved them to his knees. Still curled against the warmth of Tucker's body and the stickiness of his come, Chance wrapped a hand around his own cock and stroked, squeezing his eyes shut tight. Once, twice, and then he felt another hand, pushing his out of the way and taking over where he'd left off.

Chance didn't know how he'd lasted this long when he felt Tucker jerking him, he just grabbed onto Tucker's wrist, feeling his nails bite into Tucker's skin. "Harder," he heard himself grunt, "hurry up, McBride, harder, goddammit."

"Bossy," Tucker whispered in his ear, and then Chance was coming, finally, thank God, the orgasm being wrung out of him while he gritted his teeth together and rode it.

"Wow," Chance said a long time later. Tucker grunted in agreement but didn't move from where he was nestled into Chance's side.

The ocean air coming in through the window brought goosebumps to their skin. They retreated to Chance's room, Tucker raising his eyebrows appreciatively at the king-sized bed. "You like your space."

Chance shrugged. "Most things are sized too small for me. Figured I might as well sleep comfortably. When I'm at home, anyway," he amended, referring to the twin beds they slept in at work.

Tucker sat on the edge of the bed, looking unsure of himself as he glanced around the room. "S'pretty nice. How long you been here?"

"Eight years. Since I got on with Oceanside. I needed something that had space but was affordable, so I went for a condo." Chance didn't know what exactly prompted him to share more information than was asked for, but maybe Tucker's confession from earlier was part of it.

"I rented a place in Kentucky," Tucker said vaguely, but didn't offer more. It occurred to Chance that he wasn't sure what exactly had happened to Tucker between the ages of fourteen and thirty-three. It also occurred to him that he wanted to know, which was unsettling.

Tucker's gaze had fallen on the framed picture over his bed. "Cool," he said softly. "Where'd you get that?"

It was a picture titled "Ready to Go". A firefighter's turnout coat hung on a hook, and assorted other gear, like helmets, boots, and a toolbox were scattered on the floor. The thing that made the picture stand out, though, was Chance's last name printed across the bottom of the turnout coat in an exact duplicate of his real one. The yellow helmet off to the side had an "11" on it, representing the station where he worked, and the wooden

beam from which the turnout coat hung had a Maltese cross painted on it. Next to the cross was a small blue caduceus, the paramedic symbol.

“Bonnie,” Chance explained, then remembered Tucker hadn’t met her. “Best friend from high school. Fire academy graduation present. The only thing she didn’t have the artist personalize was the toolbox.”

Tucker looked at him. “Personalize it with what?”

Chance grinned sheepishly. “Usually he’ll paint the name of the firefighter’s spouse and kids on it. Bonnie said that he offered to fill it in later. She actually took it from me and sent the picture back to him after I finished medic school so he could paint the caduceus on, but I don’t think he’ll be putting anything on the toolbox.”

Tucker snorted. “Guess not. Still a cool piece, though.” He studied it for a while until Chance saw him yawn.

“It’s late,” Chance said with studied casualness. “You can, uh. Stay. If you want.”

It was a stupid thing to say, since Chance didn’t even know if he really wanted Tucker to stay in the first place, but the invitation was already out there and he couldn’t call it back. But Tucker saved him.

“Ain’t it a little early to be spendin’ the night?” he grinned, standing up and stretching.

It was at the same time a relief and a disappointment. “Just offering. Since you brought dinner and everything.”

“You paid me back,” Tucker winked, and Chance’s cock showed interest.

They walked to the front door and suddenly the two days before their next shift loomed large and lonely. Chance wanted to see Tucker before Sunday, wanted to touch him and be with him before work necessitated formal behavior. And yet ... he couldn’t ask, he still didn’t know what this thing with them was or if he wanted it at all. Easing some sexual tension was one thing; enjoying each other’s company was totally another.

But once again, Tucker saved him. “You work out when you’re not on shift?”

Chance blinked, startled. “I run.”

“Me too. One of the paths by the beach. Wanna go with me tomorrow? I’ll cook ya dinner after.”

“Ooh, just like a real date,” Chance laughed, but Tucker’s eyes narrowed.

“I don’t date. You wanna go or not? And fuck you, you’re not gettin’ a five-course meal or nothin’. Momma’s macaroni and cheese.” He folded his arms and looked mutinous and it occurred to Chance that Tucker might have thought he was being laughed at.

Chance stepped closer, bringing up a hand to brush a thumb over the tiny mole on Tucker’s cheek. “Yeah,” he said softly, right before he kissed Tucker, “I wanna go.”

Chapter Four

Tucker was renting a place right on the beach, Chance discovered the next afternoon. “And you don’t even surf,” he said disgustedly as soon as Tucker opened the door. “What a waste.”

Tucker grinned at him. “I still like the water.”

Chance hadn’t taken two steps inside before finding himself pinned against the wall, a hard, horny Tucker rubbing up on him and kissing him breathless. “Hello to you too,” Chance managed, his own cock suddenly standing at attention as well.

“Dreamed about you all damn night,” Tucker murmured against his neck, fitting a leg in between Chance’s thighs and grinding into him. “Was jerking off at four this morning just so I could sleep.”

The pictures *that* image brought to mind would be fuel for Chance’s own fantasies for weeks to come, and he groaned inwardly. He had a feeling he was in trouble.

Chance had just managed to drag Tucker’s head up for a deep, wet kiss when Tucker shoved away and shook his head. “Damn it all to hell. Sorry. Told myself I wasn’t gonna do that.” He ran a hand through his hair and looked sheepish. “Til after dinner, anyway.”

Chance was still letting the wall support him, his legs spread and heart pounding. “Right. After dinner. Are we running, or what?”

“We’re running.”

They jogged for forty minutes along the beach path before Tucker waved at him and turned to go back. Chance kept it up for another fifteen minutes or so, liking the difference from his early-morning runs. He had never realized the sun made different colors on the water when it was setting rather than when it was rising.

He made his way back a while later, toeing off his shoes before entering the house. He followed the smell of baking cheese toward the kitchen and stopped short in the doorway.

Tucker had showered. He stood at the stove, clad only in a pair of black shorts that hung low on his hips. His hair was wet but combed, and as Chance watched, the dark curls at his nape dripped miniscule droplets of water on his neck. Chance wanted to pin him against the counter and suck the drops from his skin.

Tucker held out a bottle of water without turning from the casserole on the stovetop. “Dinner’s ready, but you can shower first, if you want.”

Chance took the offered bottle and drank a long, cold swallow. “Starving. Is it bad manners if I eat first?”

“Nope. Sit.”

He did, and Tucker put a plate of home-baked mac and cheese in front of him, along with a basket of crescent rolls and a bowl of peas. “Damn, McBride, you’re gonna make someone a good wife some day.” Chance’s mouth watered and he tore off a piece of roll.

Tucker laughed. “Only way I get good country grub’s if I make it myself. Don’t get to make it that much, really, since all Momma’s recipes were for like fifteen people. Eat up, there’s plenty more.”

Chance had two and a half helpings before shaking his head and throwing his napkin on his plate. “God. No more. M’gonna explode.”

“Amateur,” Tucker said easily, reaching over and gathering both of their plates. Chance watched him walk to the sink, admiring the way his ass looked in his shorts. “You can shower,” he offered over his shoulder. “There’s a clean towel in there.”

Chance was becoming aware of how tight and sticky his dried sweat was getting and he grimaced at himself. “Yeah. Shoulda done it before dinner.”

“Peach cobbler when you get out,” Tucker said over the running water in the sink, and Chance groaned.

He found the bathroom easily and closed the door only partway so the steam could escape. Chance was under the spray in seconds, relishing the hot water on his skin, turning his face into it and letting it soak his hair.

He had no idea he’d been expecting the sure hands at his waist until he felt them. Half turning, Chance met Tucker’s gaze and his stomach clenched. Tucker was staring at him, eyes an even darker blue than usual, dick hard and nudging for attention against Chance’s thigh. “You want help?” Tucker murmured. “You know, with washing your back or somethin’.”

Chance grinned at Tucker. “Help would be good,” he said. “But not with washing.”

He caught Tucker’s smile right before Tucker leaned in to kiss him, fingers tightening at Chance’s waistline. They moved together easily, already knowing how the other liked to be touched. Chance had to break the hungry kiss to draw a deep breath. “What is this,” he asked softly, his lips moving against Tucker’s neck, but the words were drowned out by the shower and his own blood in his ears. Chance guessed it didn’t matter, his cock was throbbing and Tucker was sliding against him eagerly, and there would be plenty of time to puzzle it out later.

Their panting mingled with the spray and the steam. Chance listened to Tucker’s words roll over them, loving how he liked to talk during sex, letting the melodic southern drawl

make Chance even harder. He started to thrust against Tucker's hip, the water creating delicious slickness as he listened.

"Need you," Tucker was murmuring, his hand dropping to Chance's erection. "Need you so bad, you made me wait for a fuckin' month, Jesus Christ, never waited that long for no one. Forget all my goddamned good manners when you're around, Shanahan. So hot."

Tucker had both of their dicks in his hand, jerking them both slowly, one hand scrabbling above Chance's head for the soap. He found it and used it to lather them up, their cocks sliding and soapy, and Chance leaned his head back against the wall. "God," he muttered into the steam, "can't wait, won't last, Tucker. Don't bother taking time, just get me off before I go out of my fucking mind."

Tucker's free hand slipped down to cup Chance's ass and Chance tensed, wondering how far he should let things progress, but when Tucker teased his entrance with one soapy finger, Chance found himself moaning and spreading his legs.

"Yeah, that's it. Knew you'd like it," Tucker whispered, pushing that finger in farther. Chance relished the slight burn, savored it, wanted more. Spreading his legs even more, he slid both hands to Tucker's ass and hauled Tucker up against him, trapping their pricks between them. Tucker's finger brushed over Chance's prostate and he bucked involuntarily.

"Do it again," he demanded, and saw Tucker's mouth form a word.

Bossy.

Again, a small brush against his prostate that made him want to slide down the wall. And then Tucker's hand was gone, making Chance almost whimper with the emptiness of it, until he saw Tucker reach for a small bottle in the soap tray. "Soap's not so good for ya," Tucker grinned, flipping the cap on the lube and coating his fingers. He brought his hand back down immediately, sliding the same finger back inside Chance's hole, but this time it was cool and slick and Chance thought he might come just from that.

Chance started pumping his hips and Tucker moved his finger, still pulling on their cocks, for what seemed like forever. Chance was helpless against it, holding tight to Tucker's ass while he ground against Tucker's hand on his dick and thrusting back against the finger in his ass, until Tucker withdrew again and urged Chance to turn around and face the wall.

At once, Chance was alert, though the urgency in his cock almost overpowered him. He watched warily as Tucker reached up to the soap dish again and retrieved a condom. When Tucker ripped the wrapper with his teeth and started to roll it down over himself, Chance grabbed his wrist. "Put it on me," he said firmly.

Tucker stopped, their eyes meeting, and for a minute Chance thought he was going to refuse. Then he shrugged and his dimples were back in full force. "Told ya I knew you were a top." He handed the condom and the lube to Chance and turned, putting himself against the wall and offering his nicely muscled ass.

Chance couldn't resist the gorgeous invitation, and he slicked his shaking fingers liberally with lube. One hand on Tucker's hip, he slid in two careful fingers and watched Tucker arch his neck. "Yeah, you got it, baby," Tucker murmured, one hand going to his own cock and pulling at it lazily. "Gimme one more."

So Chance complied, feeling Tucker contract around his fingers and marveling at the tightness. Managing to get the condom on with one hand, thankful he'd had years of practice, Chance replaced his fingers with the blunt head of his cock. "Okay?" he asked, leaning over to suckle at the water pooling in the hollow of Tucker's neck.

"Fuck, yes," Tucker groaned, thrusting his hips backward. "Do it."

An inch, then another, until Chance was buried to the hilt and they were both gasping and shuddering against each other. "Damn, damn, damn," Tucker was whispering, his hips making short, shallow jerks as he stroked himself.

Chance tried to stay still and let Tucker adjust, but he couldn't, not when Tucker was whimpering and thrusting back so gorgeously, his head on Chance's shoulder and his neck beautifully exposed. Chance tried a small push and was rewarded with a moan from Tucker, so he tried it again.

"Quit playin'," Tucker said, his voice harsh in the small shower.

"Not playing," Chance growled against his neck, and pulled out almost all the way before thrusting back in with a grunt.

They started a rhythm of pushing and pulling that soon had Chance gasping and clutching at Tucker's hips with urgent fingers. "Good," Tucker was moaning. "You feel so good."

It was like being in a storm of want and hunger. The shower poured down like rain and all of Chance's sensation became focused on his cock. He drove into Tucker again and again, panting for release, and managed to slide one hand around Tucker's waist and grasp his dick. "Come on," he whispered in Tucker's ear, his hips jerking. "Come for me, McBride. You waited this long, lemme see you do it."

The words were magic. Tucker slammed both hands onto the tile above his head and cried out, his cock pulsing. Chance could see long strands of spunk hitting the shower wall in front of them, and then he couldn't see anything at all except the white-hot flashes behind his eyes as he came too, shuddering uncontrollably against Tucker's back.

They came down slowly. Chance pulled out, one hand carefully on the condom, and cracked open the shower door to toss it into the trash. He and Tucker spent several minutes kissing and cleaning under the spray, letting the water soothe and quiet them. When the water turned cool, they shut it off and reached for towels.

Unable to stop touching each other, they made it out of the bathroom and collapsed together on Tucker's bed. Tucker looked as if he wanted to say something, so Chance asked, "What?"

"You don't let guys fuck you?" Tucker asked, and Chance blinked. Not what he had expected.

"No, I have," he said slowly, unsure of what Tucker was really asking. "Just not usually."

"Me either," Tucker said. "Not usually."

Chance didn't know what to say to that, so he settled on dropping a kiss on Tucker's bare shoulder before they slept.

Chance woke up an hour later to an empty bed and the sound of Tucker humming in the kitchen. He went searching.

"Hey," he said in the doorway of the kitchen. "Where's mine?"

Tucker spooned a bite of cobbler and ice cream and nodded at the table. There was another bowl of dessert sitting there, the ice cream melting. "Was about to put it in the freezer. You sleep heavy."

"When I'm not at work, yeah." Chance crossed the floor and sat at the table, eagerly pulling his dish toward him. He took a bite and sighed happily, looking over to where Tucker was perched on the counter. "Momma's recipe?"

Tucker nodded, his mouth full. Chance wanted to lick at the drip of ice cream in the corner. Tucker heaved himself off the counter and took a chair next to Chance, turning it around to straddle. "Reckon we should talk."

"Yep."

"This gonna be weird for you? You and me?"

Chance thought about it. "Is there a you and me?" Tucker raised a brow at that and Chance looked down at his bowl. "Or are we just getting off, or what?"

Tucker didn't answer for a while and Chance fiddled with his spoon, waiting. "I don't know," Tucker finally said. "But regardless, whatthehell ever's going on, you all right with it at work?"

Chance met his eyes. "We'll handle it."

Chapter Five

August

Chance discovered their way of “handling it” at work was not to discuss it, mention it, refer to it, or come within ten feet of each other while in the presence of the rest of the crew. It was okay with him, actually, since he really had no idea at all how else to deal with a situation he’d always been smart enough to avoid in the past.

Tucker was another matter. Although they had agreed that it would stay private, Tucker found it difficult to keep his hands to himself. Chance found himself being groped and nuzzled at every opportunity. He was getting used to walking around with a hard-on, but it was getting more and more difficult to hide it from the guys.

Chance woke up one night not to the sound of the alarm, but to Tucker’s hand over his mouth. “Shh,” Tucker whispered, his eyes gleaming.

Chance knew that look. “Are you crazy,” he hissed, motioning with his hand toward the other dorms. They weren’t really even in a different room; all the dorms were just separated by partitions. Sound easily drifted over the tops of the walls.

“Yup,” Tucker confirmed, throwing off Chance’s light blanket and stretching out on top of him. “Crazy as a loon. You got lube in here?”

Chance knew he was done for when Tucker started grinding against him and he could feel Tucker’s erection through their gym shorts they both slept in. “Oh, Christ. Bottom of my locker.”

“You’re so easy, Shanahan.”

“Fuck you.”

“Yes, please,” Tucker whispered, already shucking Chance’s shorts and rolling a condom down, slicking it with lube and kissing Chance with a hot, wet mouth. “And hurry the fuck up. If we get a call like last time, I’ll lose my shit.”

Chance grinned, remembering how he’d been giving Tucker some pretty sensational head in one of the bathroom stalls when their engine had been called into service. Chance didn’t think he’d ever heard anyone swear quite like that.

Quickly, he flipped them so Tucker was lying on his back. Chance urged Tucker’s legs back and rested the head of his cock at Tucker’s opening, hesitating there for a minute. “Didn’t prep you,” he said, not willing to hurt Tucker.

“Don’t matter,” Tucker whispered, “the condom’s all lubed. Can’t wait, Chance, just go slow for a second.”

Chance looked down at Tucker's cock, straining and hard against his stomach, and didn't think he'd be able to stand prepping Tucker anyway. Taking a deep breath, he nudged inside and felt Tucker open even wider. "Christ," he murmured. "You kill me."

Tucker wasn't listening. He had his prick in his hand and was stroking himself, his eyes squeezed shut and his nostrils flared. It was one of the sexiest things Chance had ever seen. His eyes were pinned to the sight of it while he thrust shallowly, trying not to groan or gasp or breathe for fear of waking up their crew. The fear of discovery was hot in itself.

Chance's orgasm snuck up on him from behind, his balls tightening and his arms shuddering as he held himself over Tucker. When he stopped shaking, he opened his eyes to find Tucker looking at him with a half-smile, one dimple peeking out. "Watch," Tucker whispered, and when he was sure he had Chance's full attention, he stroked his full length twice before shooting over both of them. Chance could feel him trembling with the effort to not cry out.

It was fucking hot, and Tucker knew it. Chance had discovered Tucker loved baiting him, pushing him to his limits and beyond, making him lose what Tucker called his 'uppitiness' and just give in to the pure pleasure they found together.

Even now, having just come, Chance felt himself stir inside the other man, his cock filling once again. Chance thought it might be a good idea to find another condom.

Until the alarm made two soft dings and twelve pagers started beeping frantically in the stillness.

"Fuck," Tucker swore, pulling off of Chance with a wince and searching frantically for a towel. Chance got up and threw one at him from across the room.

"You got lucky," he said with a grin, and Tucker scowled.

"Looks like you're the one who got lucky," Tucker pointed out, before dashing past him out the door. Chance watched Tucker make it across the hall to his own room right before Matt opened his door and strode down the hall to the bay.

"Go wake up McBride," Matt barked at Chance. "Fucker'll sleep through anything."

Chance had to bite back a grin. "Sure thing, Cap."

It was a structure fire in a small building right outside Chance's own neighborhood, and he could feel the hum of excitement through the crew, himself included. Firefighters liked serving the public and helping in medical emergencies, but when it came down to it, fighting fire was their passion, what they lived for.

Engine One-Eleven went screaming out of the garage, breaking the quietness of the night, followed by Truck Eleven. Chance heard Matt through his headphones. “Shanahan, help the truck drop hose as soon as we get there. I’ll take McBride with me while Jenkins goes through the front, if it’s not fully involved yet.”

Chance and Tucker both gave a thumbs up and grinned at each other. Fire was good.

They were the only engine company that had been called out since the fire was small and looked easily containable. It burned on the second floor of a narrow, two-story building. The truck had beaten them there and was already laying hose; Chance leaped out of his seat as soon as they stopped and obeyed captain’s orders by going to help. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Tucker follow Matt to the front door.

Hose got laid and a line was formed to do search and rescue, although Chance was pretty sure there was no one inside the business at this hour. Still, you never knew. More than once a homeless person had broken into a place, seeking shelter.

Chance knew by now that Matt and Tucker had gone inside to ventilate and he itched to be in there too. Alex motioned toward the front door, so with a couple of guys from the truck, he picked up some hose and headed that way.

They dragged it into the building and up the smoke-filled stairs, Chance’s breathing sounding loud and ragged through his helmet and hood. He felt Alex behind him on the hose and suddenly the temperature spiked incredibly as they found the seat of the fire on the second floor. He was covered in sweat and the clothes under his turnouts were sticking to him. Chance forced himself to breathe easily and conserve the air in the tanks he knew he’d need.

Alex had told him on the ground that the ceilings in the place were a concern. “Cement-based plaster,” he’d said with a grimace. Matt had nodded too. “Yeah. Everyone be careful, they could come down.”

Chance glanced upward now, but there was no sign to tell him if the ceiling would hold. Watching Tucker and Matt ahead of him, he signaled over his shoulder to Alex and they lifted the hose together. He was about to pull the lever to let the water loose when it happened.

The ceiling directly over Matt and Tucker caved in with no warning at all. It fell silently, knocking both of them to the ground, and Chance felt Alex duck reflexively behind him.

“Tucker!” Chance shouted, knowing he wouldn’t be able to hear him. *No*, Chance screamed in his head, *no, goddammit, get the fuck up, get up right now!* And then off to his left, two more firefighters crashed through the window in a rain of glass. They had a chainsaw and axes, and it spurred Chance into action. He and Alex lifted the hose again and let the spray loose, soaking the walls and dousing the flames that licked in the

doorway from the next room over. He kept his head turned toward Tucker, though, praying for him to move, to get up out of the plaster covering him. He saw one of the guys go to work with the axe, hacking at the fallen ceiling, trying to free both men, and he felt a surge of relief when Matt scrambled out. If Matt could get out, then Tucker could too ... except he wasn't, he was just lying there, even though the firemen surrounding him had lifted the fallen ceiling from his body.

Chance made himself remain calm, because it was either that or scream his fool head off, and he still had fire to put out. He watched as two of the guys lifted Tucker and passed him to the window where Chance knew the truck's ladder was waiting. Once Tucker was out, Chance was able to concentrate on the flames in the next room.

It was the first time in his career he had ever wanted to get the fuck out of a burning building.

It seemed an eternity until Chance knew there was no danger of the flames reigniting. Leaving the hotspot check to Alex and one of the firefighters from the truck, Chance turned and headed back down the hazy stairs. He reached fresh air at the door and tore off his helmet, searching wildly for Tucker.

He finally spotted him sitting in the back of the ambulance. Heading toward him at a run, Chance was halfway across the parking lot when Tucker looked up. The relief on Tucker's face was unmistakable.

Chance reached Tucker, oblivious to anyone else who stood nearby. "Tuck," he murmured, "Tucker, oh my god, say you're all right." He leaned his forehead to Tucker's and stood that way for a moment, closing his eyes and feeling Tucker bring his arms up to encircle Chance's neck.

"I'm good," Tucker assured him, his voice hoarse. "S'all good, baby, don't worry."

Chancellor took a deep breath, smelling smoke and sweat and the unique scent that was Tucker. He swallowed hard and willed his eyes to stop stinging. "You stupid fuck. You scare me like that again and I'll wring your fucking country boy neck."

Tucker chuckled, one of his hands squeezing the back of Chance's head. "Got it."

When Chance finally raised his head to look around, he wished instantly he was back inside the burning building. Six firefighters stood at varying distances from the ambulance, and all of them had helmets in their hands. They were all staring at Tucker's arms looped around Chance's neck.

Matt at least had the decency to wait until Tucker was released from the emergency room and the sun came up before calling both Chance and Tucker into his office.

It wasn't as nice as the battalion chief's office, but Chance still felt slightly intimidated as he stood before the man he'd worked side by side with for the past eight years. Matt sat in his padded chair and regarded them both.

"Shanahan," he said carefully, "I believe a circumstance like this was already discussed. I also believe you told me it wouldn't be a problem."

"Matt –" he started, then thought better of the form of address when Matt cleared his throat. "Cap. With all due respect ... I don't think it's been a problem."

Matt narrowed his eyes and Chance could feel Tucker shifting uncomfortably next to him. "I take it this isn't new."

"No, sir."

"How long?"

"'Bout a month," Tucker piped up, despite Chance's attempts to mentally will him to keep his mouth shut.

Matt considered Tucker thoughtfully. "You've only been here two months. You're a fast mover."

Tucker grinned and Chance groaned. "That's not a compliment," he murmured, and Tucker just grinned wider, his dimples teasing Chance. Matt looked like he was trying not to laugh.

"So ... whatever you've got going on here," Matt waved his hand vaguely and looked uncomfortable, "should stop immediately, you know that, right?"

"Yes, sir," they both mumbled.

"But," and here Matt paused, studying the ballpoint pen between his fingers, "if there's nothing going on, then there's nothing to stop. I mean, if I don't see anything, then there's clearly nothing going on." He pinned both of them in place with a stare. "And if no one else comes to me, complaining about something they've seen that bothers them, then that's a sure sign that nothing's going on."

Chance figured it out. "Yes, sir." He knew Tucker was eyeing him.

Matt blew out a breath and threw his pen down on the desk. "McBride, you feeling all right?"

"Sore." Tucker rolled his shoulders as he said it and Chance winced in sympathy. "Chest hurts from the smoke. But I'll be all right, Cap."

Matt nodded. "You did well. Go home. Call in sick tomorrow." Tucker opened his mouth to protest but Matt pinned him with a stare. "Call in sick. That'll give you four days before your next shift and I expect you healthy."

Tucker nodded, subdued. "See you Saturday." He left the room and Chance turned to follow, but Matt stopped him.

"Shanahan. Wait a minute."

Chance inwardly rolled his eyes. Here it came. "S'up, Cap?"

"Sit."

Chance sat.

Matt watched him for a while, long enough to make Chance squirm in his chair like a kid. "Chancellor. You've been at Eleven for eight years."

He nodded, not sure if he should speak.

"I don't give two shits where you stick your dick, long as it doesn't interfere with work." Matt was measuring his words carefully, holding Chance's gaze. "This thing you got going with McBride. Just for fun, or what?"

Now there was a question.

"Um. Yeah, it is. Mostly," he added, not even sure if he knew the answer.

"Mostly. What's that mean?"

Chance took a deep breath and tried not to raise his voice. He was tired and grimy and wanted to sleep for a hundred years. His stomach growled for its breakfast and he couldn't get the picture of Tucker pinned under the fallen ceiling out of his head. "It means," he said loudly, "that I have no fucking idea what it is, but as soon as I do, I'll update you."

To his surprise, Matt laughed. "That tells me what I need to know." He sobered slightly and asked, "What happens if it ends?"

Chance had thought about it. "I'll leave. Transfer out."

Matt shook his head. "He should go. Not you."

"Well ... I'm thinking about taking the captain's test in January, actually." Chance hadn't been ready to admit it yet, but he also hadn't been ready to let anyone know about the

thing with Tucker. Funny how things had a way of getting out. “If I pass, I’ll have to transfer to wherever there’s an open captain’s spot anyway.”

Matt broke into a broad grin. “Good for you,” he said, and Chance nearly blushed under the praise of the older man. “Department could use more decent captains.”

“Thanks.”

“Now you get your ass home too. You’re *not* calling in sick tomorrow.”

Chance smiled ruefully and turned to go, then remembered something. “Hey, Matt. The guys ... they saw.”

“Yep, they did. You think they’ll give you shit?”

He considered for a minute. “Alex won’t. And I think Robert knew I liked guys. But the rest, I dunno.” Chance sighed, not ready for any of this. Life had been peaceful before Tucker. Celibate, but peaceful.

“I won’t fight your battles for you,” Matt said, “but if you need my support, you’ve got it. And McBride too.”

Chance gave him a half-hearted smile. “Might need it. Thanks, Matt.”

Chapter Six

Chance drove straight to Tucker's and found the front door unlocked and cracked open for him. Entering the quiet house, he made his way toward the bedroom.

Tucker lay face down on the bed, his shirt off. The room smelled very faintly of smoke and he still had streaks of dirt on his cheek. He obviously hadn't showered yet and Chance was pondering how to get Tucker into the water without it looking like Chance just wanted to fuck, when he saw it.

The bruise spanned the entire length of Tucker's back, from shoulder to waist, and was almost perfectly cylindrical. Chance knew it was from the air tank, but that didn't stop the sickening feeling he got when he looked at it. It was still mostly red, but the edges were already turning blue and the center of it had darkening patches. He sucked in a breath between his teeth before he could stop himself.

Tucker lifted his head from the pillow, blinking sleepily. "Hey."

"Sorry," Chance murmured, moving to the bed. "Didn't mean to wake you."

"Was waiting for you," Tucker yawned, curling into Chance's side and flinching when the muscles across his back were stretched. "Need a shower."

"Me too. Need help getting up?"

"Nah." He shrugged off Chance's help but faltered when he tried to push himself off the bed, so Chance sighed and looped an arm around his waist.

"If you let me help you, I'll blow you in the shower."

"What are you waiting for?"

Chance sucked him off until Tucker was gasping and clutching at Chance's shoulders, his legs shaking. Afterwards, when Tucker looked as if he was going to pass out, Chance got him out of the shower, dried him off, and collapsed into bed with him.

They slept heavily.

Chance woke up to late afternoon sun slanting in the west window and the sound of his cell phone vibrating angrily from his pants, which were across the floor. He glanced over at Tucker, still sleeping soundly, and climbed out of bed.

Throwing on a pair of Tucker's shorts, he wandered to the living room to check his voice mail and found a message from Bonnie. He punched in her number and waited for her to pick up.

“Were you in that fire,” she demanded, in lieu of a hello.

“My day was great, thanks for asking,” he prodded her, sinking into the couch.

“Sorry. But were you? It was on the news this morning.” She sounded worried, not the norm for her. She was used to Chance’s job by now.

“Yeah, yeah. It’s fine, it was small.” He looked toward the bedroom and swallowed tightly, remembering the actual danger, but didn’t feel like going into it. Because that would mean explaining Tucker, and Chance still didn’t know how, exactly, to explain Tucker McBride to anyone. Even Bonnie.

“... want to come over tonight?” she was asking, and Chance realized they hadn’t spent any time together since Tucker had arrived. He owed her.

“Not tonight,” he said, “and I work tomorrow. How about Thursday? I’ll even cook,” he offered, and she laughed.

“You’re just feeling guilty, Chancey. Where the hell’ve you been for the past month? You got yourself a date?”

He snorted, hoping that was enough of a response to appease her. “Just come over around seven. Bring a DVD if you want. And booze.”

“I always bring booze,” she said. “Silly.” And she hung up, leaving Chance grinning at the dial tone.

He wondered if he should wake Tucker up for dinner or just let the man sleep through, but one look into the bedroom told him Tucker was awake and trying gingerly to sit up.

“Hey, easy,” Chance said, kneeling on the bed and helping him into a sitting position.

“I hurt,” Tucker said simply, and Chance knew he wouldn’t admit it unless it was really, really true.

“I know,” Chance said, sitting back against the headboard with him and letting Tucker drop his head to Chance’s shoulder. “You want one of the painkillers from the hospital?”

Tucker made a face. “No sense in feelin’ all hung over if I ain’t got the empty beer bottles to show for it. I’ll take some Tylenol later.”

“Okay. Anything I can do?”

“Well,” Tucker sighed, “now that you mention it ...” he trailed off and dropped a hand into Chance’s lap.

Chance shifted, already growing under Tucker's touch. "Maybe not. How bad do you hurt?"

"Never bad enough to not want it," Tucker leered, and Chance had to laugh. It turned into a groan when Tucker squeezed him, hefting the weight of Chance's shaft through his shorts.

"You drive me crazy," Chance whispered, turning to thread his fingers through Tucker's hair. "Outta my goddamned mind." He kissed Tucker then, hungrily, need unfurling low in his belly.

Tucker growled into his mouth. "Same here. Ain't never wanted no one so bad all the fuckin' time."

It was an admission of sorts, but Chance was already too hard to think about it for long. Tucker was still squeezing and rubbing him through his shorts, which were suddenly a hindrance and Chance pulled at the waistband impatiently.

Tucker knelt over him, pushing him back into the pillows and stripping Chance of his shorts. "Mm, yeah." Tucker was staring at Chance's stiff cock, his tongue coming out to wet his bottom lip. "Like it, don'tcha."

Chance just grinned up at him, knowing Tucker would start a steady stream of chatter from here on out. He loved to talk in bed, and Chance loved to listen to him. But Tucker didn't follow his usual pattern this time. He opened his mouth to say something else, but closed it again and met Chance's eyes, his fingers stroking Chance's dick lightly. "S'matter?" Chance asked, bringing up a hand to Tucker's jaw.

Tucker shrugged. "Stupid."

"C'mon. It's just us. What?"

"I was – " he stopped, licked his lips again, still stroking Chance absently. "I was scared. Last night, when I went down. I ain't never been scared like that."

"I was too."

They looked at each other in the fading light of the bedroom and something passed between them, something Chance didn't know how to name. He only knew he wanted Tucker, wanted them to wrap around each other until the scared feeling went away and they couldn't tell where one ended and the other began.

He sat up, Tucker still straddling his lap, and kissed Tucker again. They thrust up against each other, seeking friction, until Tucker whispered, "Hold on," against his mouth. Chance watched Tucker get up and go to the top drawer of the dresser, retrieving a

condom and lube. He couldn't help tracing the lines of Tucker's bruise with his eyes, noting it was already darker than this morning, but then Tucker was back on the bed with him, mouth hot on Chance's chest.

"Want you," Chance mumbled into his hair, seeking out Tucker's cock with hungry fingers. "Want to feel you inside me."

Tucker looked up, eyes glowing dark, dark blue in the last light of evening. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. Want it now."

And then Chance was on his back, his feet planted flat on the bed and his legs spread, feeling wanton and slutty and not caring because Tucker was pushing in one slick finger and brushing up against his prostate. "Oh, *God*," he groaned out loud, "do that again."

"You're damn tight," Tucker whispered. "You sure you been fucked, Shanahan?"

Chance was pretty sure, all right. It had just been a while. Since Derek. "Believe me."

Then there were two fingers working their magic and Chance couldn't help bucking his hips up, his hand automatically going to his dick and pulling hard. "Gonna go slow," Tucker told him. "You're so tight."

"Don't care, just do it, Tucker, don't care," Chance panted, trying not to sob out loud when Tucker's fingers pushed hard on his prostate again.

Tucker withdrew his fingers and rolled on the condom with a shaking hand while Chance watched. He pushed Chance's legs back and Chance felt Tucker nudge right at his entrance, right where he'd been dying to feel him. "Ready?" Tucker asked, and Chance just thrust his hips forward in answer.

Tucker gasped and pushed in, pausing to see if Chance was all right, but Chance just threw his head back on the pillows and tried to open his legs wider. "Don't wait," he begged, not even knowing he needed this until now.

He felt Tucker's abdomen flex and tighten against his stomach. "Quit talkin'," he murmured, "or I'll just pound you into the fuckin' bed."

"Now you're getting the idea," Chance whispered back, and started stroking himself.

Tucker groaned and pushed all the way in, both of them sighing with relief. He withdrew just a little and then buried himself to the hilt again, as if he couldn't bear to pull all the way out. Chance wanted to tell Tucker again to hurry, but he couldn't talk anymore, all he could do was jerk upwards in an attempt to get Tucker to hit his prostate.

“Oh, fuck me,” Tucker swore. “I’m never gonna fuckin’ make it, you’re too tight, Chance, you’re gonna make me shoot in about five seconds.” He started thrusting in earnest, muttering to himself in the way Chance loved, losing any pretense of rhythm.

Chance stopped bucking up and just let Tucker pound into him while Chance stroked himself, his own pre-come lubing him enough for his cock to slide easily in his palm. It was almost over, he could feel it, his balls growing tighter with each thrust Tucker made. But he wasn’t doing this alone. Reaching up to draw Tucker’s head down, Chance tongued the edge of Tucker’s ear before whispering, “Gonna come right *now*.”

It was all Tucker needed. With a groan, he said, “Oh, fuck,” and Chance could feel Tucker’s cock jerking and pulsing in his ass. Then Tucker was pushing Chance’s hand off his prick and stroking firmly, bringing Chance with him. Chance slammed one hand down on the bed and threw the other arm over his eyes, his whole body shuddering with the force of his orgasm, his come spreading over both of them.

They kissed lazily for what seemed like hours after that, stopping only to let Tucker slide out and dispose of the rubber. Then they curled around each other while the dusk slipped into dark and they whispered.

“What’d you do after your father died?” Chance asked, idly tracing the Maltese cross tattoo on Tucker’s bicep.

He was quiet for a long time and Chance wasn’t sure he was going to answer, until he did. “I couldn’t leave Momma and the farm, even with Uncle Tim makin’ grabs at me every chance he got. Momma still wasn’t doin’ so good.”

Chance wondered if Tucker knew his accent got thicker when he was tired or upset; he tended to drop more word endings and draw out his vowels. Chance realized he used it for indication on Tucker’s mood. “So you stayed,” he said, feeling the anger well up in him again.

“Had to. Til I was eighteen, anyway, and I was smart enough to finish high school and go to junior college. Knew by then I sure as shit wasn’t no farmer.”

“When did you figure out you liked guys?”

“Hell, I knew that when I was fifteen,” Tucker laughed. “Right after I kissed Carol Sue Harper down by the old riverbed. She got her hand down my jeans and jerked me off, and the whole time I was picturin’ her older brother Joey.” He shook his head, smiling. “Eventually I got Joey to stick his hand down my jeans, too. He was a hundred times better than Carol Sue.”

“Being gay in the south must’ve sucked,” Chance said quietly. “Although I guess Kentucky’s not really south.”

"It's redneck country," Tucker said with a snort. "Even worse. Had my share of fights. Guess I ain't never gonna be done fightin', you know?"

"I know."

"So after high school, I took off. Never told Momma about likin' cock, it would have 'bout killed her anyway. Never told her about Tim, neither. What would have been the point? Headed up to Louisville where we had family. Had a little cash from Daddy's will, used it to get a cheap place and start Jefferson Community College." He paused, closing his eyes and sighing.

Chance nuzzled into his hair. "You need to sleep."

"I ain't the one who's gotta work tomorrow."

"Don't remind me," Chance groaned.

Tucker opened his eyes and turned his head on the pillow. "Might as well finish tellin' ya. Not much more to it."

"I'm listening."

"Wrote to Momma on and off. Told her where I was workin', that I was takin' classes. Asked if she needed money and she always said no. I never asked about Tim, but she always told me what a great job he was doin' anyway. She was lyin', which I didn't know til I got a letter from him tellin' me she died." His voice was flat.

"Oh, man. Tuck, I'm sorry."

"I was three classes from gettin' my AA in Fire Science."

Chance nodded, he'd done the same program himself.

"Went home for her funeral to find the farm completely gone to shit. Hadn't even had a decent crop that year, Tim was just livin' off what Daddy had left Momma. She finally just died of the broken heart she'd had for six years." He lay perfectly still, staring at the ceiling, and Chance realized this was not a story that many others had heard.

"Did you stay?"

"Nope. Took off again after the funeral, even though Tim asked me to stay and help. Fucker even apologized, can you believe it? Got all drunk and fucked up and cried to me. 'Stay, Tucker,' he begged. 'It's what yer momma woulda wanted.' I told him to go fuck himself. I left the next morning, went back to Louisville, finished school, worked some shit jobs just to make money. Got on with Louisville Fire when I turned twenty-three."

He sat up in bed and put his hands to his waist, twisting to release pressure in his sore muscles.

Wordlessly, Chance got out of bed and headed to the bathroom. Finding the unopened bottle of painkillers on the counter, he shook one out and filled the cup on the sink with water. He brought both back to the bed and handed them to Tucker.

Tucker made a face. “Hate that shit.”

“I know. But you can sleep late tomorrow, and it’ll be good for you to get some rest tonight.”

“You just don’t want me mauling you while you sleep,” Tucker grumbled, and swallowed the pill.

“Maybe I’ll maul you.”

“A boy can hope.”

Chance climbed back into bed and let Tucker drape himself over his chest. “So how’d you make it out to the west coast?” he asked, drawing designs on Tucker’s back.

Tucker yawned, the pill already taking effect and making him drowsy. “Was with Louisville Fire for seven years. Thinkin’ about making lieutenant. Didn’t tell **none’a** my crew I was queer; didn’t need that kind of shit. S’different out there. Not as easy as here.”

Chance knew it wasn’t exactly easy here either, but kept his mouth shut, unwilling to interrupt.

“So if I wanted to get laid, had to drive over the border to a gay club in Indiana. Wasn’t gonna risk goin’ anywhere in the city. Didn’t go that much, just when I had an itch to scratch, but obviously it wasn’t far enough away.” His voice was getting softer, but not as a result of the pill. “Some of the department’s guys were waitin’ around outside one night, all piss-drunk. Recognized my truck on their way back from some concert.”

“I can guess,” Chance said, smoothing Tucker’s hair away from his forehead. “Fight.”

“They beat the shit outta me,” Tucker said matter-of-factly. “Broke ribs, kicked my head in, the whole deal. Spent the night in the hospital and missed my shift the next day, and when I went back, didn’t have a job no more, easy as that. ‘You’re not the kind of example the Louisville Fire Department wishes to set,’ my lieutenant said. They made up some bullshit reason for firing me – something about responsibility issues ‘cause I missed one fuckin’ shift in seven years – and sent me packin’.”

“So you came to California?”

“Not yet. Spent almost a year being drunk and ornery and basically a mess. It’s damn near a miracle I didn’t get picked up by the cops for all the bar fights I got in. Woulda ruined my chances forever with any other fire department. Then, when I finally sobered up, I called a friend from school who lived out here. He let me stay for a couple months, long enough for me to know I liked it, so I went back to Kentucky and packed up my shit. Been here for a year before I got brave enough to test with Oceanside.”

Chance couldn’t do anything but continue to run his fingers through Tucker’s already tousled hair. It wasn’t the story he’d been anticipating – Tucker’s general attitude seemed way too good to have such a crappy past behind it.

But everyone was good at hiding one thing or another, Chance knew.

Chapter Seven

Chance dragged himself out of bed at six. Tucker didn't stir and Chance snuck a peak under the sheet at his bruise. It was dark and angry, as was to be expected, and it would grow worse before it got better.

He made it home to shower and grab clean clothes before hopping back in his SUV. Getting to the station, he automatically scanned the parking lot for Tucker's truck before remembering he'd left Tucker in bed. Chance realized it would be his first shift since June without Tucker there, and it felt odd.

Chance didn't realize he was being ambushed until he walked into the kitchen through the back door.

All of B shift was there before him, either sitting at the table or standing around by the counter. They all turned and faced the door when Chance came in. The sinking feeling in his gut made him want to turn tail and run, but he wasn't a coward.

"You got something to say to me?" he asked, and went to the refrigerator for something to drink. He wanted a nice shot of bourbon, really, but he settled on milk. Chance didn't miss how two of the guys who rode on Double shifted away from him.

Shit.

There was silence for about ten seconds and Chance was just going to shake his head and walk away when Alex spoke up. "You queer, Shanahan?"

He steeled himself. "Yup."

"You and McBride?"

For the first time, Chance was thankful Tucker was at home. On top of everything else, the last thing he needed was to be here getting grilled. "Yeah, Tucker too."

Alex eyed him for a long minute. "Don't guess I really give a shit," he shrugged. "Long as you and McBride don't go fucking around at work."

Chance swallowed, thinking of all the times they'd done exactly that, but what Alex didn't know wouldn't hurt him. "Look," he said, addressing all of them. The only sound other than his voice was the slow drip of the coffeepot. "If you didn't know before today, then obviously it's not gonna make any fucking difference in how I do my job." He paused and glanced at Matt, who watched him from over the rim of his coffee cup. Not going to fight Chance's battles, he had said. Okay.

"If you got a problem with it – with me – let me know now. 'Cause I've been here for eight years. I put my head down, I do my job, and I'm sure as fuck not gonna leave

because one of you has a problem with fags.” He thought he saw Matt grin into his coffee.

There was only silence in the kitchen and Chance didn’t know if that was good or bad. Finally, someone spoke up.

“Shanahan?” It was Jack, from the truck.

Chance rounded on him. “What.”

“My uncle’s a New York City police officer.”

Chance blinked. “And?”

“And he’s gay.” Jack shrugged. “Doesn’t stop him from being a good cop. I’m gonna go get on the treadmill before we get a call.” And he left the room.

A couple of the others gave tentative grins at Chance and followed Jack. They’d be okay, clearly. He looked at the remaining guys in the kitchen. “Anyone else got something to say?”

Robert got up from his chair and faced Chance in the middle of the kitchen. “Lemme ask you a question.”

Chance looked him in the eye as best he could, considering Robert was an inch taller and outweighed him by twenty pounds. “Yeah.”

“You really prefer McBride’s scrawny ass over this fine specimen?” he leered, running his hands over his chest, and the kitchen exploded with laughter.

Chance grinned. “You’re a close second.”

“That’s right,” Robert nodded, looking pleased.

They all dispersed after that, wandering off to do morning chores. Chance took note of the two guys that gave him a wide berth and sighed. Despite them, it had gone better than he’d anticipated.

Head down, do the job. It’s all he’d ask from anybody else.

“So you’re really not going to tell me?”

“Just ... busy,” he said to Bonnie the next night, dodging her question again about where he’d been lately.

“Hmm,” she said, waving her empty wineglass at him. “You were ‘busy’ with Derek too.”

Chance tipped the bottle and poured the rest of the wine into her glass. It was so tempting to tell her about Tucker, about the third degree he’d gotten at work yesterday, about how the fear had climbed into the back of his throat when Tucker had gone down in the middle of the fire.

About how Chance hadn’t even known he was lonely until he wasn’t any more.

But telling her would lead to the inevitable questions that women always asked. She would want to know about hearts and flowers and *feelings* and all the ridiculous shit that women got into their heads. Chance didn’t want to deal with it. “There’s more food,” he said instead, indicating the stir-fried chicken and vegetables on the stove, but she shook her head.

“No thanks, I’m stuffed. And I’m not a moron, Chancellor Shanahan, so it’s okay to just tell me you don’t want to talk about it.” She took a swallow of wine and raised her eyebrows at him.

He felt the usual flash of affection for her. No, she was anything but stupid. Bonnie White had a sharp wit and sharper intelligence, well disguised by her pretty face. They had dated in high school, had even slept together twice before discovering they were both really in love with Scott Logan, their school’s star pitcher on the baseball team.

“You’re gay?” Bonnie had said on prom night, after both of them were drunk on Bartles and Jaymes strawberry wine coolers. They were watching Scott be crowned Prom King or something equally as stupid.

“I guess,” Chance had shrugged. “Do you hate me?”

“Yes,” she replied dryly, “because I could have been chasing him this whole time.” She nodded her head at Scott, who had a blinding smile.

“Me too,” Chance said sadly, and both of them had laughed til they cried.

He looked at her now. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Fair enough,” she said, never one to dwell on a subject. “I brought movies.”

Two hours later found them lying together on the couch, her head on his chest while he slouched down and propped his feet on the coffee table. Chance never thought anything of their physical contact with each other, it was as natural as breathing for Bonnie to snuggle up to him while they watched tv or for him to tangle a hand in her hair.

So when Bonnie looked up at him to make a catty remark about Angelina Jolie prancing across the screen, Chance didn't think twice about laughing and dropping a chaste kiss to her temple.

"Well," Tucker drawled from the doorway, "you shoulda told me you bat for both teams, Shanahan."

Chance nearly dropped Bonnie to the floor in his scramble to get off the couch, but by the time he got to his feet, Tucker was gone.

"Who was *that*?" Bonnie asked in the following silence.

"That," Chance sighed, "was what I didn't want to talk about."

Chance did his level best to explain why he hadn't told her about Tucker until she was rolling her eyes and waving him out the door. "Just go," she finally said, exasperated. "Trust me, he looked more mad than I am."

He had kissed her forehead and promised to buy her dinner.

Now he stood on Tucker's front steps, wondering if his knock would even be answered, when the door was jerked open. "The fuck do you want?"

Chance eyed the bottle of Jack Daniels in his hand. "You drunk?"

"Jus' about."

"You drove that way?"

"Christ, I thought my fuckin' momma died already. No. Didn't start drinkin' til I got back home. The fuck do you want?" he asked again, his tone belligerent.

"To come in." Chance didn't usually have to explain himself to anyone, this was new territory.

Tucker didn't answer, just turned and walked back into the house, leaving the door open. Chance took it as consent and followed.

It was dark, the only light in the house coming from the kitchen, so that's where he went. The kitchen was illuminated by the little light over the stove, throwing shadows into corners. Tucker sat stiffly on the counter with his bottle and made no move to invite Chance to sit.

Chance lingered in the doorway “I wasn’t expecting you,” he ventured, trying to gauge how much whiskey Tucker had drunk.

“Clearly,” Tucker laughed, and took a long swallow. “Jesus, Chance, you coulda just told me. Didn’t need to make me think I was the only one you were fuckin’.”

Chance didn’t recall having any kind of conversation about exclusivity – not that it mattered, since there was no one else anyway – but the only thing that was important at the moment was that Tucker was apparently jealous.

Huh. Chance thought probably he shouldn’t be that pleased by it, but couldn’t help it.

He approached Tucker cautiously, taking the bottle from Tucker’s hand and fitting himself in between Tucker’s legs. “You jealous?” he asked, ducking his head to nuzzle at the soft skin below Tucker’s ear.

Tucker cleared his throat and tried to shift away. “So the fuck what. Pissed off’s more like it. Not gonna compete with a woman, they always win. Done that shit before.” He sounded disgusted with himself.

“You don’t have to compete,” Chance answered, a laugh threatening to make its way out. If he’d known it would be this cute, he would have baited Tucker long before now. He wrapped both arms around Tucker’s waist and hauled the man forward to bring their bodies in contact. Just like he’d thought – Tucker was hard.

“That’s right, I don’t,” Tucker scowled, arching up in spite of himself.

Chance pulled back to look at him. Tucker’s hair looked as if he’d been running an angry hand through it, his cheeks flushed with liquor. His shirt smelled like whiskey and aftershave and faintly of the fabric softener Chance knew he preferred, and it all combined to make the heady scent that Chance had grown used to over the past month.

“You idiot,” Chance said softly. “If you’d stuck around, I could’ve introduced you to Bonnie.”

“Why the shit would I wanna meet – oh. Bonnie, Bonnie? Like, your ...” he brought up a hand and nibbled at the side of his thumbnail.

“Like my.”

A furrow appeared between Tucker’s brows. “Damn. You pissed?”

“Do I look pissed?” Chance went back to nuzzling Tucker’s neck and started grinding slowly against him, since Tucker seemed to be finished protesting.

“Either I’m really loaded, or you look like you wanna fuck.”

“Both right. How’s the back?”

“Hurts.”

“Sorry. I’ll stop.” Chance made as if to pull away.

“The hell you will.” Tucker grabbed Chance’s head with two hands and kissed him with an open mouth and hot tongue, his legs coming up to wrap around the backs of Chance’s thighs.

Chance moaned and pushed back, feeling Tucker’s cock hard against his hipbone and wanting him badly. He nibbled at Tucker’s lower lip and dropped a hand to Tucker’s waistband, pulling ineffectually at his shorts.

They were on the floor of the kitchen almost before Chance realized it, Tucker having practically leapt off the counter at him. Shimmying out of shorts and t-shirts was getting easier and easier the more they did it. Then they were naked, cocks hard and leaking and pressed together as they rocked and kissed and panted.

Tucker’s mouth tasted like whiskey and need, but then it was gone as he slithered down to wrap his tongue around Chance’s aching cock. “Oh, Jesus,” Chance said, not expecting the sudden warmth around his dick, and bucked up. He could feel Tucker grin against him before getting down to business, alternating between sucking and licking.

Chance arched his back on the hard floor and let him go to it, absorbing the feeling of getting well and truly blown. The man knew what he was doing, that was for damn sure, because Chance’s toes were curling with every suck and Tucker was doing something with his tongue that made Chance’s eyes roll back in his head. “More,” Chance moaned, and knew he had about five seconds before he came.

Tucker gave him more. He swallowed him nearly to the root, making Chance moan and fist a hand in Tucker’s hair. “God, *please*,” he begged, not ashamed of it, not as long as Tucker gave it to him. Then he felt it – one of Tucker’s fingers teasing at his hole, not slipping in, just circling the outside and pressing on the soft skin right behind his balls.

“Fuck,” he hissed, and tried to pull away before he came, but Tucker latched onto his hips and held him in place.

Chance shuddered and clenched his muscles, pouring gushes into Tucker’s mouth. Tucker swallowed it like a pro, taking it all and licking Chance clean with easy swipes of his tongue while Chance lay limply, trying to come down.

“We ain’t done,” Tucker murmured to him after a minute, stretching out across Chance’s body, and Chance could feel just how ‘not done’ they were against his stomach.

“Hmm,” he said, licking at Tucker’s mouth. “Surprised a drunk like you could get it up.”

Tucker reached down and stuck a finger in Chance’s ribs, making him yelp in surprise and try to wriggle away. “Flip over. I’ll show you just how up this drunk can get it.”

Chance grinned in anticipation and turned over, wriggling his ass in the air. Tucker smacked it, then turned to dig behind him in a drawer. When Chance heard the rip of a condom and the cap being flipped on a bottle of lube, he asked, “You keep that shit in the kitchen?”

“For emergencies,” Tucker said, as if that explained everything, and then Chance really didn’t care why Tucker kept that shit in the kitchen because there were two fingers in his ass, stretching him.

Chance lifted himself slightly on his elbows, trying to push back onto Tucker’s fingers, doing his best to make Tucker hit his prostate.

“Eager, ain’t ya?” Tucker was leaning over him, cock brushing against one of Chance’s ass cheeks, fingers still working.

“For you.” It was the truth, Chance realized, glancing down at his own cock. He was hard again already, seemingly a common occurrence whenever he and Tucker were fooling around.

The thick head of Tucker’s cock pushed at Chance’s hole, searching gently. “Okay?” Tucker asked, his voice hoarse.

In answer, Chance rocked backward, forcing Tucker inside. They groaned in unison. “Go,” Chance ground out, needing to feel him.

Tucker went. Grasping Chance’s hips, he thrust in all the way, angling himself to brush the spot where Chance wanted him most. Again he did it, and again, until both of them were moaning in unison and Chance’s head was hanging so low his forehead nearly touched the floor. “Can’t ever last with you,” Tucker gasped. “You make me come like a goddamn kid.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Chance panted, a bead of sweat rolling off his side and dropping onto the linoleum. “Oh, shit, this is about to be over.” He could feel his balls draw up tightly and watched a drop of his pre-come land a few inches from the sweat.

Tucker started slamming into him, urgent fingers clutching at Chance’s skin, muttering profanities to himself.

“You before me,” Tucker gasped out, and since Chance’s hand was already jerking at his dick, it was only a matter of seconds before his second orgasm was sneaking up on him.

It rolled over him with even more power than the first, and Chance cried out with the force of it. His come hit the floor with a splatter while he tried to hold himself up on trembling arms.

Ten seconds later, Tucker froze behind him and sucked in a breath. Chance felt Tucker's cock pulsing and jerking, even though his body stayed perfectly still, and then the two of them were on the floor, tangled about each other.

"See?" Tucker said, after a while. "Not so drunk."

Chance smirked at him, amused. "We'll see how your head feels in the morning."

Chapter Eight

October

Fall came but the cool weather didn't, although the ocean dropped in temperature enough for Chance to start wearing his wetsuit. More often than not, Tucker was in bed with him when the alarm would go off at five-thirty in the morning.

"Christ," he would mumble, and pull the sheet over his head. "Can think of lotsa reasons to be awake at this hour and none of 'em involve you gettin' outta bed."

"You heard the surf report last night. Good swell coming in off the Mexican coast."

"*You* heard the surf report last night. I was just sittin' in here gettin' lonely." Then he would throw the sheet off and bat those lashes.

A lot of times Chance ended up not making it to the beach.

They settled into a routine. Work, play, eat, fuck. Spending nights at whoever's house was closest. Chance liked it – and most of the time he thought he more than liked it, but wasn't sure what to call it. Or maybe he did know, and didn't want to admit it.

They found new, creative ways to fool around at work, though the fear of being caught was always there. If they were, Chance knew not only would one of them get transferred to another station – probably Tucker, but Chance was on the line too – but they'd also get written reprimands in their files. Not good for being promoted to captain.

But it was awfully hard to resist when gleaming blue eyes woke him up in the middle of the night with Tucker's finger over his lips and a hand on his dick. The latest escapade could have gotten them both fired, come to think of it, and Chance shook his head.

Fucking on top of the fire engine. Jesus Christ.

It had been hot, though. The feel of the hose rough against his back while Tucker rode his cock from above, being so high off the garage floor, the anticipation of knowing they could get a call at any minute. It had made Chance come like lightning, and Tucker too. Then both of them a second time, sucking each other off.

Chance was hard now just remembering it. It seemed to be his permanent state these days, not that he minded, and he wondered briefly where Tucker was. The open books on the table mocked him. Chance was trying to use the relative quiet time between calls to study for his test in the station's small classroom, but his thoughts kept turning to sex. Specifically, sex with Tucker. Chance was just wondering if he could find Tucker for a quick grope in the bathroom when the door to the classroom opened.

“You hidin’?” Tucker’s dark head poked around the door.

Chance grinned, absurdly pleased to see him. “Not from you. Just studying. Can’t seem to concentrate on it, though.”

“Got somethin’ to show ya.” Tucker came in and let the door close behind him, perching on the edge of a desk. He held a white envelope in his hand and Chance knew exactly what it was.

They had taken their fitness tests the week before. The entire department was required to be tested once a year in a complete physical exam. They were hooked up to heart monitors while they ran, their body fat was tested, and nearly four vials of blood and a sample of urine were taken from each firefighter. Last year, Chance’s cholesterol had been high enough to surprise him, so he appreciated the yearly reminder.

And also the proof that he was clean, though there hadn’t been worry over that in eighteen months.

So when Tucker twinkled at him and waved his envelope, Chance knew what he was going to say. “Results,” Tucker announced, unnecessarily.

Dread curled in his stomach. “Yeah?” he said, clearing his throat.

“You get yours?”

“You know I did,” Chance answered. They had all gotten them in their office mailboxes this morning.

“Saw it on your bunk.” Tucker was practically wriggling with glee, dimples flashing. “Did you check?”

“No,” Chance lied. Of course he had checked. He always checked, after what had happened.

“Come on, then!” Tucker jumped off the desk and headed toward the door, anxious as a pup.

“Tuck, I’m studying.”

Tucker stopped, his hand on the door. “You want me to bring it here?”

“No. I’ll look in a little bit, after I’m done.”

“Aw, come on,” he wheedled. “It’ll take two seconds.”

“No,” Chance snapped. “Damn, leave it be. I’ll check later.”

Tucker narrowed his eyes. “Right,” he replied, and left the room.

Chance made a sound of frustration and shoved his books to the floor.

Tucker had avoided him for the rest of their shift, although Chance woke up around two a.m., thinking he had heard his door whisper open. Turned out to be his imagination. Tucker hadn’t even looked his way at breakfast this morning.

The boy knew how to pout, that was for sure.

Chance lay on his bed now, yesterday’s envelope in his hands. A check of the clock showed it to be six-thirty, ninety minutes later than usual for Tucker to show up at his house. Chance guessed he wouldn’t be coming, and ignored the voice in his head that told him he wasn’t exactly rushing to Tucker’s place either.

He propped his head up with a pillow and took the folded sheets of paper out again, bypassing the page that detailed heart rate and body fat and turning right to his blood work. Cholesterol looked good. Less ice cream and cheese had helped with that. There was a full liver and kidney panel, both of which were functioning normally. All internal organs were doing what they were supposed to do. Iron level was good.

Chance skimmed down to the bottom. Hepatitis B: negative. Hepatitis C: negative. Human Immunodeficiency Virus: negative. Thank God.

Crumpling up the paperwork and lobbing it toward the trashcan, Chance picked up the phone.

Tucker appeared an hour later, still mutinous and quiet.

Chance greeted him at the door with a kiss that had enough tongue to melt his stubborn exterior and soon had Tucker panting and clutching Chance’s hips. “I’m sorry,” Chance murmured against his lips, “I should have just told you.”

Tucker pulled back far enough for Chance to marvel once again at the length of his lashes. “Told me what? Are you dyin’?”

Chance laughed. “No. The opposite.”

They sat on the couch, some distance apart. Tucker folded his arms across his chest and waited patiently, though Chance knew it went against his nature to do it. “Go,” Tucker finally said with a fidget, and Chance was sure he was imagining the worst.

“So our tests came back,” he started, then faltered. This had sounded much easier in his head.

Tucker watched him for a minute before sighing and moving closer on the couch. Nudging Chance’s knee with his own, he said quietly, “I ain’t one for judgin’ people.”

It was what Chance needed to hear, so he picked up again. “I was in a relationship for a while. Three years or so.”

Tucker nodded, he knew that much. Chance had mentioned Derek by name, but that was all.

“So we were careful, right? Used condoms.” He stopped, licked his lips. “Cept for once or twice. Times when one or both of us was too drunk to care. But most of the time we were safe. I kept pushing him to go get tested with me so we could throw out the goddamn rubbers once and for all, but he always shrugged it off. So finally I went to the clinic myself.”

Tucker was listening intently, a hand on his leg. “And? You were clean?”

Chance nodded. “I was, yeah. So I brought Derek my results that night, thinking he’d be happy, and maybe it would make him want to go get it done.”

“What stupid fuck wouldn’t want to?” Tucker asked.

“Turned out, he’d already been. Two months earlier.”

“Why didn’t he tell you?”

Chance chewed on his bottom lip for a while before looking up and meeting Tucker’s eyes. “Because he was positive.”

“Positive.” Tucker looked momentarily confused before understanding what Chance was getting at. “Like ... HIV positive?”

“Yes.” Chance’s voice was low, dreading Tucker’s reaction.

“What the fuck!” he exploded, pushing off the couch and pacing to the center of the room. Turning, he faced Chance with his hands on his hips. “You’re tellin’ me he endangered you for two fuckin’ months? What the *fuck*!”

“We didn’t have unprotected sex during that time,” Chance sighed, “but we’d had it sometime during the last year. So the fact that my test was negative was meaningless, since you know HIV can take up to six months to show on a blood test.” He paused to judge Tucker’s reaction, but since Tucker was staring at a point over his head, it was hard

to tell. “Anyway,” Chance continued, “I left him. I got a lot of shit from his friends for leaving him because of the HIV, but that wasn’t it at all. It was the dishonesty, you know?”

Tucker still didn’t look at him, but nodded curtly.

“I got tested twice more, six months apart. Clean both times. I passed the eighteen-month mark this year. I don’t worry about it any more, but I also don’t ever go without a condom. I was just ... I dunno. I knew why you wanted to see my results. I figured you would want to ... you know. And I’m just not ready for that, not yet. I might not ever be.” He stopped, aware of talking too much, but the following silence was painful to hear.

Tucker finally dragged his gaze from the wall and looked directly at Chance. He walked forward and dropped to the floor, pushing Chance’s legs apart so he could kneel in between. “Hurts that you didn’t tell me,” he said, and Chance nodded. “But hurts more to think of you in that situation. To think he was such a fuckin’ coward that he wouldn’t warn you.”

To his absolute horror, Chance felt the sudden sting of tears. He didn’t know if it was from Tucker’s soft words or from having to relive the whole Derek situation, but he swallowed tightly in an effort to shove them away before he embarrassed himself.

Tucker, who was always more perceptive than Chance wanted him to be, put his forehead to Chance’s and slid one hand around to cup the back of Chance’s head. “None’a that,” he murmured, his voice warm. “Asshole ain’t worth it.”

Chance shook his head and said hoarsely, “Not ‘cause of him.”

“What, then?”

“He’s not worth it,” Chance whispered, “but you are.” And he kissed Tucker, plunging his tongue in deep and clutching at the front of Tucker’s t-shirt desperately.

Tucker met him kiss for kiss, sliding his mouth up to the corner of Chance’s eye and kissing away tears Chance hadn’t even known were leaking out. He kept a hand on the back of Chance’s head, grounding him, giving him support. “S’all right, baby,” he said between kisses, and suddenly Chance couldn’t get enough of him.

Chance tugged at Tucker’s t-shirt impatiently, making Tucker laugh and lift it over his head. Reaching over to shove the coffee table out of their way, Chance sank to the floor with him. They knelt facing each other, hands roaming, mouths joined, Tucker alternating between giving Chance gentle kisses and then trying to swallow him whole.

Clothes were shed. Still kneeling, Chance lowered his mouth to Tucker’s shoulder, nipping and sucking a small red-purple mark into his skin. Their cocks brushed, sending goosebumps up his arms and over his back. Chance lifted his gaze to see Tucker’s head

fall back, offering Chance a sweet expanse of skin on his neck, and he licked a long stripe up to Tucker's chin. "Want you," Tucker whispered into the quiet. "Always want you."

"How?" Chance asked, bringing a hand down to lightly trace the head of Tucker's dick.

Tucker shuddered and glanced around. "Table," he said, turning and bracing his hands on it, offering up his ass. "Like this." He dropped his head between his arms and waited quietly, though Chance could hear his breathing quicken.

Chance leaned over Tucker, taking his cock in hand and using it to tease up and down Tucker's crack until both of their breathing was coming in gasps. It would be so easy to lick his palm, coat himself, and slide into Tucker's ass with no protection, no barriers in the way. His dick twitched at the mere thought, but what he had said earlier still held true. Chance knew he wasn't ready for it, Derek had taken that freedom away from him, even if it was only temporary.

Tucker was looking over his shoulder, eyes dark with heat. "Go get it. Hurry the fuck up, I'm wantin', here."

Chance smiled his thanks and went to the bathroom, tearing apart his medicine cabinet in search of the condoms and lube. He didn't waste time rolling one on as he walked back, and when he got to the living room he froze in the doorway. Tucker had taken matters into his own hands and was stroking himself, dick hard and leaking, one hand leaning on the table. Chance was mesmerized by the sight of it, especially when Tucker's tongue darted out to wet his lower lip. "Better hurry up, Shanahan," he muttered. "Else I'm gonna finish your job."

Chance crossed the room and knelt down behind him, already using a lube-coated finger to probe at his hole. "If you come," Chance whispered in Tucker's ear, "I won't blow you for a month."

Tucker stopped abruptly, chest heaving.

"Oh, no," Chance grinned, "I want you to keep going. Just don't come. Understand?"

Tucker nodded, his breath hitching, his hand already going back to his cock and regaining its rhythm. "Don't know if I can do it," he gritted out.

"Try." And with that, Chance withdrew the finger and pushed inside.

Tucker cried out and squeezed his prick just below the tip, shaking his head. "Oh God oh God," he mumbled to himself, "please Mary mother of Joseph don't come, don't come."

Chance would have laughed if he weren't so close to spilling as well. He pulled out and then eased his way back in, torturing them both with slow, measured strokes. He felt

rather than saw Tucker start jerking off again and gave him another warning. “You don’t shoot until I say so.”

Tucker’s only answer was a whimper.

Chance managed to keep it up for a while longer, gritting his teeth against the waves of sensation that rolled over him with increasing strength, watching the muscles flex in Tucker’s arm as he jacked himself. Chance drove in at an angle, knowing when he hit Tucker’s prostate because Tucker’s arm would freeze for a fraction of a second before continuing.

It was only when Tucker was practically holding back sobs of frustration that Chance gave up the power Tucker had allowed him. Feeling the telltale tightening in his balls, unable to hold off any longer, he leaned over and murmured one word in Tucker’s ear.

“Go.”

Tucker came instantly with a body-wrenching shudder and a stream of profanity.

Chance followed almost immediately, pulling Tucker up tight against him and gasping hard against Tucker’s shoulder. His cock throbbed as he filled the condom, and Chance felt a tiny twinge of regret that they weren’t skin to skin.

“Jesus,” Tucker was gasping, both hands braced on the table, though his arms were trembling. “Jesus fuckin’ Christ.”

Chance’s knees were killing him so he pulled out carefully and collapsed to the floor, hauling Tucker down with him. They kissed lazily, sleepy and sated.

Tucker nuzzled Chance’s cheek, his eyelashes tickling. Chance could feel him grin. “What,” Chance yawned, wondering if he’d be able to get up and make it to bed.

Tucker nipped at his ear. “So fuckin’ bossy.”

Chapter Nine

October wore on and the cold weather finally made its appearance toward the end of the month. Fire season officially ended but Station Eleven was still busy with traffic accidents and medical calls, and Chance figured he'd better get his ass in gear if he was serious about the captain's test. The fucking books wouldn't open by themselves.

Tucker was his biggest supporter, leaving him alone to study at work, or sitting quietly next to him on the couch on their nights off while Chance pored over his test material. After he was done for the night, however, was another story; Tucker pouncing on him as soon as he closed his books.

Not that he minded.

Oftentimes he'd go back to his books after they'd messed around and Tucker was asleep. Chance had picked up some of the old captain's tests in the station's files and he studied these the most, afraid of how many multiple-choice questions there were and how similar the answers all seemed.

A lot of times he thought he was insane for trying. He'd only been on the department for eight years, and most guys who tested for captain had been there for twelve or more. There were no captains in the department with less than ten years' experience. What was he thinking? These thoughts usually came on the rare nights when he was alone, Tucker either working overtime or spending the occasional night in his own bed.

But he persevered, soaking up as much information as he could.

So when he woke up one morning at work with no appetite and his head slightly aching, he attributed it to nothing more than exhaustion.

Tucker offered him a cup of coffee when Chance finally stumbled into the station's kitchen, blinking against the fluorescent lights. "I'm on an eight-hour holdover," Tucker said, frowning when Chance made a face and pushed the cup away. "Whassamatter, you gettin' too spoiled on Starbucks?"

"Nah. Just don't want it. You coming over later?"

"Yup. Kirby's got some Little League game he wants to watch his kid play in, so I'm stayin' for him til four." He scrutinized Chance's face. "You feel okay?"

"I'm fine," Chance dismissed, sitting down and forcing himself to take a bite of the peanut butter and jelly toast on the table.

Tucker stood behind him and kneaded his shoulders, which felt like heaven. "Don't spend all day with those fuckin' books," he said.

Before Chance could answer, Robert appeared in the kitchen. “Hey, I wanna get me some of that, McBride,” he said. “Shanahan ain’t the only one who’s tense around here.”

Tucker shrugged nonchalantly. “Don’t come without a price, Diaz. Shanahan gives me sugar.” And he bent down for a kiss, his tongue darting out to swipe at Chance’s upper lip.

Robert pretended to gag.

“Whoa, hey, my eyes,” Alex said from behind them. “Warn a guy, can’tcha.”

Chance’s relief on C shift showed up a blessed twenty minutes early and clapped him on the shoulder. “You’re outta here, buddy,” he said, and Chance was grateful.

Tucker walked him out to his car and watched as Chance slid behind the wheel. “You sure you’re all right?” Tucker asked again.

“Headache,” Chance admitted. “Need a nap.” They’d been up twice during the night, once for a traffic accident on the freeway and once for a respiratory distress in the retirement community.

“Yeah, okay.” He seemed doubtful, but didn’t press it. Tucker leaned in for a hard kiss and a wink. “Be over later.”

Chance drove home in a half-daze, and by the time he finally got there, his lack of appetite had turned into full-fledged queasiness.

Head pounding, he collapsed into bed and tried to remember what they ate at work last night. Oh, right – Double’s crew had made a Thai chicken pasta that was better than anything Chance had eaten in a restaurant. He’d had two helpings.

Two too many, obviously, his stomach told him, and he wondered if the chicken had been bad. Steeling himself against the nausea, he turned over and tried to sleep.

Chance woke up abruptly three hours later and bolted for the bathroom.

Skidding to a stop in front of the toilet, he dropped to his knees and threw up the half piece of toast he’d eaten, as well as the little bit of water he’d drunk when he got home.

Panting, sweat breaking out on his forehead, he sat back on the floor and felt marginally better. Dinner from last night apparently wasn’t agreeing with him. He looked up at the corner of the sink and reached up a hand to drag himself off the floor, swaying when he was finally standing.

His sheets were cool when he slid between them. It felt soothing to his head, which still ached fiercely, and he wished he had one of the bottles of water in his refrigerator. The kitchen was so far away, though.

Chance slept again.

He came wide-awake once more around two and made a second dash for the bathroom, this time barely making it before throwing up a little more water. Dry heaves followed after that, his whole body shuddering. Sinking back down to the floor, he reached up and managed to get down the bath towels hanging on the rack above his head. Chance folded them together for a pillow and stretched out on the bathroom floor, absorbing the feel of the cool tile beneath him.

The third time he woke up was to Tucker shaking him, a worried look on his face. “You’re off?” Chance asked hoarsely, having no idea of the time.

“It’s nearly five. How long you been lyin’ here?”

“Dunno.” He lifted his head and felt his stomach roll again. “You better move,” he managed, before sitting up and pushing Tucker out of the way of the toilet.

He had nothing left to throw up, but his body unfortunately didn’t know it. He dry-heaved a couple of times before bringing up yellow bile, wincing when it burned the back of his throat. He could feel Tucker’s hand on his back, moving in slow circles, waiting til he was finished.

Dropping back down, he leaned his head against the wall and closed his eyes. “Thought it was from dinner last night,” he said.

Tucker snorted. “Ain’t from dinner. That flu’s goin’ around, remember? Think you can walk back to bed?”

Chance wanted to stay on the cool bathroom floor, but nodded. Using the wall to brace himself, he stood up on shaky legs. Tucker slid a strong arm around his waist and walked with him until he could sink onto the bed by himself, lying back with his legs still on the floor. “I feel like shit,” he whispered to the ceiling.

“I know, baby,” Tucker answered, pushing at his legs with an insistent hand until Chance groaned and swung them up on the bed. He closed his eyes and heard Tucker leave the room, then return.

“Here,” he said, and Chance opened his eyes to see Tucker holding out a bottled water.

Chance grimaced. “Don’t want it. Where were you at eleven when I was dying for water?”

Tucker grinned. “Was out protectin’ lives and property, now wasn’t I? You gotta drink some of this. If nothin’ else, at least it’ll give you somethin’ to throw up.”

“That’s no incentive.”

“Neither is bringin’ you to the emergency room because you’re dehydrated. Think of the embarrassment.” Tucker sounded way too happy about that and Chance opened one eye again to scowl at him.

“Gimme the fucking water.” He took the bottle and drank two swallows, ignoring his stomach’s protest but receiving a satisfied nod from Tucker.

“You take your temp today?”

“I don’t think I even own a thermometer.” Chance felt drowsy again and prayed the water would stay down long enough for him to sleep for a while.

“Christ. I’ll try to steal one from work tomorrow.” Chance felt a cool hand against his cheek. “You’re pretty hot.”

He turned into his pillow with a yawn. “Thanks. But I can’t have sex with you right now, I’d probably puke on you.”

Tucker snorted. “That would deserve a smack on the ass if you weren’t sick. But you are, so I won’t. You sleepin’?”

“Mmm,” Chance mumbled in response, and then didn’t hear anything for a long time.

Tucker woke him sometime after dark and insisted he drink more water, which promptly came back up with no warning. Tucker managed to dodge as Chance groped for the trashcan next to the bed.

“Sorry,” Chance croaked, looking at the dark spot soaking into Tucker’s long-sleeved t-shirt.

Tucker shrugged and pulled it over his head. “Jus’ water.”

Chance watched Tucker move to the dresser and hunt through Chance’s shirts, and wished he could appreciate the sight of Tucker’s bare back. His eyes traced the design of the tattoo on Tucker’s right bicep and he reminded himself to think about it again when he was better.

“You don’t have to,” he said softly, when Tucker returned from dumping out the trashcan. “I mean. Been sick by myself before, you know?”

Tucker looked at him. “Well, now you ain’t by yourself.”

“But why?” Chance insisted, not liking the vulnerability he knew he was showing.

“Why what?”

“Why are you ...” he gestured vaguely at the bed, the trashcan.

Tucker huffed out an impatient breath. “Because I love you, you fuckin’ idiot. God. Wouldya shut up and go to sleep?”

Chance did.

He slept through til morning, and when the alarm woke him up, his stomach had settled enough for him to think about going to work.

Chance changed his mind, however, when he ventured to the kitchen. Tucker glared at him and steered him right back to bed, threatening to call in sick for him “like your momma used to do when you were a kid” if Chance didn’t do it himself.

He guessed his still-pounding head was enough reason to call in, anyway.

Tucker went off to work, muttering something about stupid surfers who didn’t know when to stay in bed, and Chance slept most of the day. He tried a drink of Gatorade at noon and felt relieved when it stayed down. Chance guessed he probably still had a fever, judging from the glassiness of his eyes when he looked in the mirror and the chills that racked him every hour or so, but the nausea had receded. He figured he could handle everything else but the nausea.

Tucker had unearthed Chance’s box of saltines from the cupboard and left them by the bed that morning. Chance gingerly ate a couple of them around dinnertime, ready to make his millionth dash to the bathroom, but they didn’t make an appearance again.

He dropped back into bed at nine with some of his exam materials, but his head throbbed after only a few minutes, so he abandoned it in favor of sleep.

Chance didn’t wake up til Tucker was crawling into bed with him the next morning.

The first thing he noticed was his stomach growling for food and his lack of headache. The second thing he noticed was the paleness of Tucker’s face. “You all right?” he asked, voice scratchy from sleep.

Tucker gave a quick shake of his head. “Better get the trashcan.”

It hit Tucker harder than it had Chance. He puked through the first thirty-six hours of it, sometimes so violently that his vomit was tinged with blood. Chance didn't start worrying until hour twenty-four, when neither of them had slept for more than a few minutes at a time.

"Goddamn," Chance said finally, easing Tucker back into bed after making their tenth trip to the bathroom in as many hours. "You want me to call one of the nurse educators for some Compazine?" The traveling nurses that taught the firefighter continuing education classes always had the anti-nausea meds at home.

"Couldn't keep it down," Tucker demurred.

"Oh, I don't know," Chance sighed. "They do make it in suppository form."

That earned Chance a weak middle finger. "The only thing I'm puttin' up my ass is you. Don' worry, baby, I ain't gonna die from a little pukin'. Done worse from booze." He managed a pale imitation of his usual grin, dimples barely making an appearance.

He kept it up for another twelve hours, throwing up any liquids Chance was able to coax down. By that time, Chance was worried enough to want to ignore Tucker's protests and throw him into the car, blankets and all, and drive his butt to the hospital for an intravenous line.

But as quickly as it had started, it stopped. Tucker drank nearly a full bottle of water around eight o' clock and kept it down before falling into an exhausted sleep. Chance breathed a sigh of relief and burrowed into the pillows next to him.

It had been three days since both of them had shaken off the last remains of the sudden flu and Tucker had yet to go home. Not that Chance cared – he found that he liked having Tucker there all the time. It was so easy to just reach out and touch him while they watched television or ate dinner. Having a warm, willing body in bed with him didn't hurt either, and Tucker was *always* willing.

So on the third straight day of having Tucker there, Chance said casually over breakfast, "You wanna move in?"

Tucker stopped chewing his cereal and looked up from where he'd been laughing at the comics in the newspaper. "Huh?"

"Do you want to move in," Chance repeated, enunciating sarcastically.

“I heard you.”

“Well?” He shifted in his chair, already rethinking it.

“Why?”

“Because I love you, you fucking idiot,” Chance said, repeating Tucker’s exact words to him and already knowing it was true before he’d even spoken.

“Oh,” Tucker said, and grinned hugely. “Yeah, I do.”

Chapter Ten

December

The months wore on and winter finally arrived, bringing with it California's rainy season and putting Chance in a foul mood.

"Fucking rain," he said morosely, and returned to waxing his neglected surfboard.

Tucker watched him with a wry expression. "I think you got that seasonal affective disorder thing. You bitch and moan every time the sun ain't shinin'. Some day you oughta come back to Kentucky with me and see what real seasons are."

Chance's witty retort was to flip Tucker off.

The weather did afford him more time to study, however. Chance spent long hours at night with his test materials, cramming for the exam that was only six weeks away. He narrowly avoided having to spend the holidays with his mother and stepfather in Arizona by using the captain's test for an excuse.

"I'm sorry, Mom," he sighed into the phone one evening while Tucker was in the kitchen making tacos. "I really can't make it. I gotta study for this thing."

"Chancellor," his mother said in her haughtiest tone, "you did not come for Thanksgiving either. If I didn't know better, I would think you were avoiding spending time with your family."

He marveled at how she always knew. "That ain't it, Mom."

"*Ain't*?" she spat. "Since when do you use such hillbilly language?"

Chance winced. Seemed he'd been spending too much time with a certain hillbilly. "Sorry. There's a guy I, uh - " he paused there, knowing her reaction if he told the truth. "A guy I work with talks like that. Guess it's rubbing off." He ignored Tucker's derisive snort from the kitchen.

"Chancellor," she continued, "might it be too much to hope that you are not still ... fraternizing with men?"

"Yes, Mother," he ground out, "it would be too much to hope."

"Well. Perhaps if you moved to a less liberal area." She sounded as if she was sucking on lemons.

"Maybe if I register Republican," Chance said cheerfully. "Then the government could just beat the gay out of me."

“Chance, *really*,” she said in a horrified tone. “It’s only because I love you.”

“How about Easter,” he sighed finally, just wanting to get off the phone.

“We won’t be here for Easter. Your brother has invited us to Colorado to spend the holiday with him and his girlfriend.” She was switching from annoyed to hurt, going through the entire gamut of false emotion in hopes of eliciting some response.

“He invites you every year and you always make him come to you instead. How is Casey, anyway,” he asked, trying to sound uninterested.

“He’s been offered a partnership in the firm,” she glowed. “He’ll probably propose to Allison by Christmas.”

Chance sighed inwardly. His brother was clearly going to be crowned “Best Child” at the next family get-together. He looked up as Tucker’s head poked out of the kitchen.

“Chow,” Tucker mouthed, thumbing over his shoulder, and Chance nodded.

“Mom, I hate to end this loving conversation we’re having, but I’m eating dinner. Say hello to Frank for me, I’ll call you in a few weeks.” And he hung up on her.

“Wow,” Tucker said when Chance entered the kitchen.

“You’re telling me.”

The rain continued, making things miserable for Chance at work as well.

“Fuck,” he swore, stepping off the engine one day after a call and nearly slipping in the puddles of water all over the garage floor. His hair was drenched from the ride back, as his seat behind the engineer was completely exposed to the weather. And water had found its way under the collar of his jacket and had soaked the t-shirt under his gear. “I need a hot shower,” he grouched to no one in particular.

He received grunts of agreement from his crew and a smirk from Tucker. “You need more’n that,” Tucker whispered on his way by, carrying his helmet in his hand. “A good blow’ll cure what ails ya.”

“Too bad I’m working, I can’t go out and get one.” Chance winked at him and watched Tucker’s eyes get impossibly darker.

Tucker paused at the door to the greatroom and waited til the garage slowly emptied of wet, grumbling firemen. Putting his mouth close to Chance’s ear, he whispered, “I’ve

been so hard for you all fuckin' day. You think about teasin' me and your balls'll be blue for a goddamned month, Shanahan."

The fine hairs on Chance's arm rose at the whispered words in his ear. "Shower," he growled, pulling Tucker in for a kiss and using his other hand to grope Tucker's crotch. Yup – hard as steel beneath the yellow turnout pants, not unlike Chance's own cock.

The thing Chance loved best about their showers at work was the privacy. Each stall had its own floor to ceiling frosted glass door, impossible to tell who was showering behind each one. Their bathroom was big enough for each of the six showers to have significant room between them; voices did not often carry from stall to stall.

He reminded himself to write a letter someday to whoever saw fit to create their showers, but decided to leave out the part where it allowed his partner to suck his dick so beautifully with the relative security of not being discovered.

Tucker had snuck in about five minutes after Chance's water had started to warm him up, prick still hard. Chance could feel it now against the crack of his ass while Tucker slid two hands around his waist and down his hips, enfolding his cock with both hands and making Chance hiss against the steam and spray.

Tucker jacked him slowly from behind while Chance leaned his forehead against the tile and spread his legs and tried not to groan out loud. The other guys were calling to each other over the tops of their stalls, their voices loud and echoing in the bathroom, and Chance knew there were five more men waiting their turns for showers too. "Better hurry," Tucker whispered, and Chance could hear the grin in his voice. "Guys waitin'."

Embarrassingly enough, Chance didn't think it was going to be a problem. He was tingling already, his breath coming faster, and he began thrusting into Tucker's sure grip. But almost as soon as Tucker started, he stopped, and Chance whimpered out loud before he could catch himself.

And then Tucker was turning him, sliding down the front of Chance's body and Chance slammed back against the wall as Tucker took his dick in his mouth in one smooth swallow. Chance gritted his teeth together and pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes, feeling his cock slide down the back of Tucker's throat.

"Oh God oh God," he heard himself mutter when Tucker started doing things with his tongue that Chance had only seen in porn flicks.

Tucker pulled off his dick long enough to say, "You ain't gonna scream in here like you did last night, are ya?" and Chance almost came on the spot, remembering it.

He glared and pushed Tucker's head back where it was supposed to be, ignoring Tucker's barely suppressed chuckle. "Get busy, McBride."

Chance needn't have ordered it; Tucker began sucking him in earnest, flicking a talented tongue over the slit until Chance's knees were trembling and threatened not to hold him for much longer. He curled urgent fingers in Tucker's wet hair and sent him a silent signal, which Tucker picked up on immediately.

Tucker deep-throated Chance, pressing up on the underside of Chance's cock with his tongue, and then Chance was biting the inside of his cheek in an effort not to groan out loud as he came down Tucker's throat in heavy pulses.

Before Tucker could even get off his knees, Chance was sliding down the wall and fisting Tucker's prick, pulling him off fast and hard. Tucker didn't have much time to steady himself before he was biting at Chance's shoulder to muffle his whimpers, hands roaming over Chance's chest.

Tucker came with a soft cry that was lost among the other voices in the bathroom, his come falling hotly over Chance's hand and getting rinsed down the drain almost immediately.

Chance kissed him while Tucker was still coming down. "Could handle the rain if I got more of that," he mused, making Tucker laugh.

"Jus' have to ask, baby."

The weather cleared for a week and then started up again. Chance thought he might be getting used to being soaking wet for most of his twenty-four hour shift, but prayed for winter to be over anyway. Tucker just laughed at him and threatened again to take him to Kentucky to see what real winter was like.

It was drizzling, naturally, when the call came through about the small car fire on the busiest street in the neighborhood. Chance swore viciously as he stabbed the 'stop' button on the treadmill and Tucker threw him a sympathetic look.

Rain started falling in earnest as they pulled up to the scene, blocking a lane of traffic. Ignoring the horns from other drivers, firefighters leaped off the engine and began dropping orange caution cones in front of and behind the rig.

Chance hesitated, knowing he should be with Alex, who was examining the flames coming from under the hood and trying to determine if they should use dry powder or foam. The rain was doing nothing to lessen the fire's intensity. Tucker had already jumped down and was talking to the frightened-looking elderly man who stood to one side, clutching his wife's elbow.

If only it wasn't so fucking wet and miserable.

That thought in mind, wondering if he could corner Tucker in the shower again after they got back, Chance stepped off the engine without looking into the street first.

Matt would tell him later that he hadn't actually stepped into oncoming traffic; he'd been behind the relative safety of the cones. But it didn't stop visibility from being poor, or the street from being slick, or the woman on her cell phone from being too distracted to notice that her lane was being cut off due to the large fire engine blocking it.

Chance stepped down with his left leg and before his right foot touched the ground, he was hit with something that had enough force to throw him back against the engine before sending him sprawling onto the wet pavement. He dimly registered screeching tires and the shouts of his crew, but they took a backseat to the pain blossoming in his leg. His upper thigh was one big mass of excruciating agony.

Before he could decide exactly what the hell had just happened to him, Chance figured he'd better get his ass out of the street. But attempting to push himself up on his elbows sent a fresh wave of torture through his leg and made things go dizzily gray. His head swam and his stomach rolled over and Chance was afraid he was going to be sick right there on the rain-covered road, so he lay back down and closed his eyes.

He wasn't sure if he'd blacked out or not, but nothing much had changed the next time he opened his eyes, except for the fact that Tucker was bending over his leg and Matt was prying open one of his eyelids and shining a penlight in it. Chance batted his hand away weakly.

"Hey!" Matt said, startled by Chance's movement. "Look who's with us. Stay awake for a little bit, all right?" His voice was perfectly calm and soothing, which Chance took to mean that something was seriously wrong. The calmer Matt was, usually the more dire the situation.

Tucker had jerked his head around to look at Chance, and Chance was startled by the whiteness of his face. Tucker's expression was nothing like Chance had ever seen: a combination of fear and horror.

"What's wrong," Chance asked, but it came out as only a hoarse whisper.

Tucker and Matt exchanged a look and Tucker gave Chance a weak version of his usual grin. "Got yourself hit by a car, dumbass," Tucker told him. "Called for backup and a medic van. You hurt anywhere else?"

"Hit by a car," Chance repeated, trying to make the words sink in. Hit by a car? Huh. That was weird.

"Chancellor," Matt said firmly, "does your head hurt?"

“Yeah,” he mumbled, realizing it. His head hurt like a bitch. “But my leg is killing me,” he continued, raising his head from where it was pillowed on someone’s turnout coat – probably Tucker’s, since he seemed to have on just a t-shirt and suspenders – to look down at where the pain was centered.

“Chance, don’t,” Tucker said sharply, but the warning came too late.

White, glistening bone peeked at him through the ripped flesh in his leg. Chance stared at it impassively, feeling the pain and seeing the bone but not connecting the two events. *Compound fracture of the left femur*, his paramedic’s mind thought, and then there was nothing.

Chapter Eleven

Ten days in the hospital passed in a haze of surgeries, doctors, and pain.

Tucker rarely left his bedside, calling in sick for three shifts. When Chance was conscious enough, he protested. “You should work,” he said half-heartedly, but he didn’t really want him to go.

“Shut up,” Tucker said, and Chance didn’t argue.

He’d had two surgeries on his leg, only one of which he remembered. The first one had been three hours after his arrival to the hospital, when he was still blessedly unconscious. The second had been four days later. He now had a steel rod with eight screws holding his fracture together. The doctor claimed he also had forty-eight stitches where the bone had pierced his skin and the surgery site was, but Chance had yet to see them as the wound was covered by a thick bandage.

Sleep and pain medication were his best friends.

His mother and stepfather visited, much to Chance’s chagrin and Tucker’s amusement. It was an uncomfortable two days. Tucker sat in the chair in the corner and smirked at Chance behind their backs, turning the full force of his dimples on Chance’s mother whenever she looked directly at him. Which wasn’t often.

She correctly deduced the nature of their relationship not ten minutes after arriving at the hospital and refused to speak to Tucker directly. Chance finally got annoyed at her obvious slights. “Mother,” he said, “you can quit calling Tucker my ‘friend’, ‘coworker’, or ‘acquaintance’. He’s my partner, both at work and home, and if you can’t even make the goddamned effort to be polite, then you can go back to Arizona and tell all your canasta-playing friends how rude I was.”

He thought he heard Frank snort behind his newspaper and Tucker threw him a wink from the door before stepping out into the hall, presumably to not laugh in front of Chance’s speechless mother.

She found her tongue soon enough, unfortunately, and Chance braced himself for a good verbal lashing. But when she did open her mouth to speak, it was not what he expected at all.

“Your partner,” she said quietly, and looked at the chair Tucker had vacated. “Does he – do you – are you both –” She stopped and examined the enormous diamond on her finger before looking up to meet Chance’s eyes. “Do you have strong feelings for him?”

She wouldn’t say the word ‘love’, it wasn’t in her vocabulary. Chance nodded. “Yeah, Mom. I do. Sorry if it’s not what you planned for me.” And he was sorry, sorry for

turning out to be everything she was against, but at thirty-six years old, he couldn't change it now. Didn't want to.

"Well," she said in a tone that brooked no nonsense, "then I expect both of you at Easter. Frank, let's go. Our flight out is in less than two hours."

Chance grinned at her as she leaned down to press a perfunctory kiss to his cheek. "See you in the spring."

Tucker took him home on a Tuesday night, settled him in bed, and made a general nuisance of himself by hovering until Chance barked at the man to back off. When Tucker looked at him, startled, Chance was instantly contrite.

"Sorry," he sighed, and lifted his arm in an invitation for Tucker to join him in bed.

Tucker gingerly lay down on Chance's right side, away from the bad leg, and snaked a careful arm over Chance's stomach. "Just wanna make sure you're okay," he said, and Chance heard the exhaustion in his voice. Apparently Chance wasn't the only one who hadn't slept well since the accident.

He turned his face into Tucker's hair and breathed deeply, reveling in the clean scent and so fucking glad he couldn't smell hospital antiseptic anymore. "M' better now," he murmured, and Tucker's arm tightened over his stomach.

Being bedridden was harder than it looked.

Tucker had to resort to bribery to keep him in bed. It usually entailed something of a sexual nature, not that Chance minded, but he itched to get up anyway, if only to walk into the living room. But Tucker held firm, reminding Chance of doctor's orders to put absolutely no weight on the leg for a week.

"That's what the crutches are for!" he protested, glaring when Tucker pushed him back into the pillows for the third time that day.

"The fuckin' crutches are for when you gotta take a piss. Christ, Chance, you're the worst goddamned patient on the planet." Tucker ran an impatient hand through his hair and shook his head.

Chance knew he wasn't making it easier on either of them, but he resented watching Tucker walk around the room on two good legs. The fact that they were having a run of nice weather didn't help either; Chance's mind kept turning to his abandoned surfboard in the garage.

To Chance's frustration, Tucker was smart enough not to go back to work until the doctor cleared Chance to hobble around on his crutches, keeping most of his weight off his leg. The first day Tucker returned to the station, Chance spent most of the morning limping from his patio to the living room and back again, just thankful for some sort of movement.

It exhausted him enough to sleep for three hours in the afternoon, and he woke up to the phone ringing shrilly. His caller I.D. showed it to be the station, so thinking it was Tucker, he answered accordingly. "Don't tell me you can't find anyone to blow you in the shower."

"I suppose I could," Matt drawled, "if it wouldn't get my ass fired."

Chance chuckled nervously. "Right. It was a joke. Hey, Matt."

"How's the leg?"

"Sucks. How's the shift?"

"The usual. Just thought I'd check on you, make sure you got your disability and workman's comp all taken care of."

Chance appreciated the gesture. Matt was only older than he was by ten years, but Chance liked the feeling of being looked out for. "Yeah, it's all fine. Tucker did most of it while I was in the hospital. He making trouble without me?"

Matt laughed. "Robert kept him busy all morning to distract him. Surprised he's not lurking over my shoulder right now, waiting to use the phone. You need anything?"

Two good legs, he almost said, then figured feeling sorry for himself was a waste of everyone's time. "Nah. Go save lives and property. I start physical therapy next week, so hopefully I'll be back before you've missed me."

It was wishful thinking, Chance knew, since the doctor had made noises about sixteen weeks being normal recovery time, but Matt played along. "Keep that attitude," he said gruffly. "And get your ass back to Eleven."

Tucker called that night around nine, sounding for all the world like he hadn't given Chance a second thought all day. "You okay?" he asked casually, but Chance wasn't fooled.

"No," he said, trying to sound as pitiful as possible. "My leg gave out while I was trying to cook dinner and I've been laying on the floor for two hours."

“What!” Tucker shouted into the phone. “Jesus fuckin’ Christ, you shoulda called me as soon as you fell! Goddammit, I’m hangin’ up and callin’ Bonnie right now – ” he stopped abruptly as soon as he heard Chance laughing.

“Easy,” Chance said, still chuckling. “I’m messing with you. I’m sitting on the couch with Smokey.”

“Ass,” Tucker snapped, and hung up.

Chance waited until he had his laughter under control and called back, knowing Tucker was still in his probation year and would have to answer.

“Station Eleven,” Tucker growled.

“You mad?”

Chance was greeted with silence.

“Aw, Tuck, c’mon. I was just playing.” He felt slightly guilty now.

“You think leavin’ you this morning was easy?” Tucker asked, sounding tired. “It wasn’t. Been worryin’ about you all day.”

“I know,” Chance admitted, and all of a sudden, he missed Tucker fiercely. “I’m sorry.”

“You should be.”

“Wish you were home,” he said in the low voice that Chance knew made Tucker hard.

“Don’t start,” Tucker warned, his voice going husky. “Been runnin’ calls all night. You make me start jerkin’ off and sure as shit the alarm’ll go.”

“Maybe I’ll jerk off instead.”

Tucker groaned. “Man, I gotta go. This ain’t gonna end well.” And he hung up, leaving Chance harder than he’d been since the accident.

He was awakened in the morning by a warm hand and mouth on his cock and Chance smiled sleepily. “Morning,” he yawned, then arched his back as Tucker flicked a tongue over the head.

“Dreamed about you,” Tucker said, sliding up Chance’s body as carefully as he could, keeping one hand on Chance’s dick.

“Yeah? Like what?” Chance murmured, curling his fingers into the bed sheets and thrusting into Tucker’s hand.

“Like how I haven’t felt you inside me for goin’ on three weeks. Like how I had to jack off last night after just hearin’ your voice. Like how suckin’ and jerkin’ is okay, but it can’t compare to havin’ you in me.”

“Oh, God,” Chance groaned, feeling his cock pulse at the words. “You know I would if I could.”

“Been thinkin’ ‘bout that too,” Tucker continued, and now Chance could feel Tucker’s erection pressing insistently against his thigh. “All you gotta do is lay on your right side.”

Chance considered it, trying to use any brainpower that wasn’t occupied with thoughts of his cock and how well it was being stroked. “I guess,” he finally said, and Tucker’s answering grin was satisfied.

He turned gingerly to his side, using two hands to draw up his injured leg and place it carefully on top of his good one. Tucker handed Chance the lube and a condom before turning around and fitting his back to Chance’s chest, bringing Chance’s cock in direct line with his ass.

They both moaned softly at the contact and Chance couldn’t help nudging into Tucker’s crack, loving the friction and not realizing until now just how long it had been since they’d done this. Tucker pushed back impatiently, his left hand already pulling himself off. “God, yes,” he was muttering. “Do it.”

Chance slicked down the condom and lubed one finger, prepping Tucker but finding him more open than usual. “You been playing around without me?” Chance asked, putting in another finger.

Tucker glanced back over his shoulder and Chance was amused to see a flush color his neck. “Been usin’ a dildo sometimes,” he admitted, and then he laughed when he felt Chance’s cock throb against him. “Like the idea o’ that? Gonna have to introduce you to the finer points of it,” he teased, and Chance gave him a gentle bite on the shoulder. “Hold still, now. Lemme do the work.”

“Hurry up,” Chance demanded, and then couldn’t help pushing forward despite the protest from his leg. He slid in like silk, easier than ever before, and he gasped against Tucker’s skin. “So good,” he ground out, and Tucker whimpered agreement, hand moving faster on his cock.

He held himself as still as he could. The warning twinges from his healing leg wouldn’t let him thrust, despite his cock’s insistence in that area. Tucker took care of it, however, easing back cautiously and then pulling forward, fucking himself on Chance’s dick with agonizing slowness. Chance thought he might go out of his mind.

“Too long, “ Tucker was murmuring, “oh my God, don’t ever make me go that long again, I’ll shrivel up.” He clenched tight ass muscles around Chance’s cock and Chance sucked in a breath, willing it to go on forever.

Except his body was reminding him it’d been nearly three weeks, and who did he think he was kidding with trying to maintain some stamina? To his chagrin, Chance felt his balls draw up and knew he was going to shoot. “Damn,” he whispered against Tucker’s neck, his fingers clutching Tucker’s thigh.

But he wasn’t the only one. With a groan, Tucker’s head fell back and Chance felt his whole body tense. Thankful he wasn’t going to embarrass himself alone, he squeezed his eyes shut and drove into Tucker deeply.

It happened about three seconds before Chance came. Tucker, forgetting everything else when he felt his climax, jerked back his elbow and connected solidly with the bandage on Chance’s leg. Pain blossomed immediately, white-hot, blocking out anything else.

“Fuck!” Chance shouted, pulling out and throwing himself on his back, pressing his hands to his eyes. His head swam and he gritted his teeth, willing himself not to throw up.

Tucker, who had frozen the instant he’d hit Chance, was now on his knees next to him. “Oh, crap. Oh, fuck, I’m sorry,” he babbled. “Christ, I’m an idiot. What the fuck was I thinkin’, I’m sorry,” he kept on. “You okay? Hey, say somethin’, you want some ice? Oh, dammit all to hell, you’re bleedin’.”

Chance opened his eyes at that and glanced down. The pain was fading slightly but Tucker’s words were true: there was a small crimson stain spreading across the wrapping on the inside of his leg. “Great,” he said bitterly. “Wonder how many stitches you busted open.”

“Let me check,” Tucker said, already going to fetch the scissors and gauze they used when changing the bandage.

Chance lay with an arm thrown over his eyes and let Tucker clip away the dressing, wincing when he got close to the wound. “Fuck, be careful,” he bit out, knowing he was acting like an asshole but in too much pain to care.

“It’s okay,” Tucker said after a minute. “None broke.”

“Thank God for small mercies,” Chance muttered, and made no move to help Tucker re-wrap his leg except for lifting it when necessary.

When Tucker was done, Chance kept his eyes closed and heard Tucker cleaning up the mess. It was silent for a while and he peeked out from under his arm to see Tucker standing by the bed, chewing on his lower lip. “You need anything?” Tucker asked cautiously.

Chance took a deep breath and let it out with a sigh. “To start this day over, apparently. Or pancakes, one of the two.”

“Pancakes,” Tucker nodded. “Got it.”

Chapter Twelve

January

Physical therapy was slowly becoming the bane of Chance's existence.

"More weight on the leg!" his therapist Michelle would command, watching him limp as best he could up and down the stairs.

"Fuck you," was his usual retort, having learned early on that it took a lot more than profanity to offend her.

"Yeah, yeah. Don't think that cute fireman you live with would like that. *Put more weight on the leg!*"

Chance would grit his teeth and do as she asked and tried not to think about the cute fireman he lived with.

The frequency of their sexual activity had been steadily waning for the past month. Tucker had attempted fewer and fewer moves on him and Chance had just let it go, more often than not his leg bothering him enough to override any desire he might feel. The temperature of their bedroom hovered just above frigid.

He thought sometimes, *if only*. If only therapy didn't tire him out so much. If only he had a little more energy. If only he could smooth out the crease that seemed to crop up more and more between Tucker's brows.

If only he hadn't been hit by a fucking car.

Bonnie picked him up from therapy on Thursday, although he hadn't been expecting her. "Tucker called me," she explained, opening the passenger door so he could struggle in. "Went to the store for stuff for dinner." Chance grunted at that and Bonnie slanted him a sideways look. "You guys okay?"

"I guess," he shrugged, and turned up the radio.

Bonnie turned it back down. "What's 'I guess' mean?"

"It means yes, things are great. Okay?" He didn't like questions he had already asked himself and not found an answer for.

"Your attitude sort of sucks right now." She said it matter-of-factly. It pissed him off.

"Yeah, well, my life sort of sucks right now," he retorted, and turned the radio back up.

She didn't say anything else the rest of the way home and when they pulled up in front of his condo, she didn't bother opening his door for him. "Out you go," she said cheerfully, and gave him her 'I'm annoyed at you' smile.

Chance glared back and shoved open his door, managing to get out and reach into the back seat for his crutches. "Thanks," he said shortly.

"Count your blessings, Chancellor," Bonnie said, just before he slammed the door.

The semi-argument made his bad mood worse. He limped into the house and lowered himself into a kitchen chair. Tucker walked in not long after, arms full of groceries.

"How was therapy," he asked, yanking open the fridge and putting food away.

Chance reached out and snagged a beer from the open door before answering.

"Inhumane. She made me go up the stairs four times."

"Good for her. Am I workin' for your next one?" He threw ingredients for spaghetti on the counter and nodded toward the shift calendar on the table.

Chance sighed and pulled it closer, not really caring who picked his useless ass up from the hospital. He couldn't fucking wait til he was cleared to drive. Idly he flicked through the calendar pages until he found January, and froze.

"Well?" Tucker asked, his back to Chance as he worked at the stove. When he got no answer, he turned around to look. "Hey. Do I work or not?"

Chance was staring at the date, circled in red pen. January twenty-fifth. His captain's exam. He'd forgotten, his regular life having been pre-empted by things such as learning how to get up and down the goddamned stairs.

In a fit of anger, Chance heaved the calendar across the kitchen and sent his beer bottle flying after it. The bottle crashed against the wall and Chance saw Tucker duck reflexively as the glass shattered.

A stunned silence filled the room.

"The fuck was that?" Tucker finally said, eyeing the glass on the floor.

"The goddamned test was today," Chance said, feeling a muscle twitch in his jaw. "That fucking goddamned test that I studied my ass off for. And for what!" he finished with a shout. "For fucking what? So I could be idiotic enough to get myself mowed down by a goddamned car. Jesus Christ." He clenched and unclenched his fists on the table, wishing like hell he could get up and storm out, but his leg was too sore from therapy.

Tucker leaned against the counter and studied him. "You got next year," he offered quietly.

“Great,” Chance laughed. “That’s exactly what I want to hear. I can wait another damn year.”

Tucker narrowed his eyes. “Quit yelpin’ at me. I ain’t the one who put you where you are.”

“Oh, so it’s my own fucking fault?” Chance asked, deliberately misunderstanding him, itching for a fight.

“Christ on the cross. I ain’t gonna fight with you, Chance. All I wanna do is cook dinner and go to bed, all right?” Tucker sounded more weary than Chance had ever heard the man, but somehow he couldn’t make himself stop.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Am I interrupting your comfortable life? Fucking sue me.” He pushed back his chair and struggled to his feet, wincing when his leg protested fiercely.

Tucker slammed the wooden spoon he was holding into the pot of sauce, sending splashes of it onto the counter. “Jesus. I ain’t gonna stay here and take this shit. Either you adjust your fuckin’ attitude or I’m out.” His eyes were dark and angry.

Chance opened his mouth to keep pushing, but as he did, a look at the furious expression on Tucker’s face made all the fight go out of him. He heaved an enormous sigh and leaned one shoulder against the refrigerator. “Don’t go,” he mumbled, studying the floor.

Tucker didn’t answer right away and Chance looked up, nibbling on the side of his thumbnail. “I get that you’re pissed,” Tucker finally said. “Shit. I’d be the same way, if it was me.”

Chance bit back his response: *But it isn’t you.*

“I get it,” Tucker continued. “But goddamn, Chance. I ain’t the enemy, you know?”

“I know.” An apology hovered on the tip of his tongue, Tucker deserved to hear it, and yet Chance couldn’t bring himself to say he was sorry. It seemed he couldn’t bring himself to say a lot of shit these days.

Tucker either heard the unspoken apology or pretended he did. “Are you hungry?”

“Yeah.”

“Then sit your sorry ass down and keep your mouth shut unless you’re chewin’.” He turned back to the spaghetti and Chance did as he was told.

More than anything else, Chance mourned the beach.

He made Tucker carry his surfboard in from the garage and he rested it on the coffee table, waxing and polishing it until it shone.

“That board’s getting more action than me,” Tucker commented one afternoon, watching Chance rub it down with a soft cloth.

“Hardly,” Chance replied, ignoring the sexual reference. “Hasn’t been in the water for over a month.”

“Neither have you,” Tucker pointed out. “Doctor said you could swim after four to six weeks. S’been almost seven.”

“He meant the pool, not the ocean.”

“What’s the fuckin’ difference?” Tucker picked up the remote to the tv and started flipping channels restlessly. Chance could tell he didn’t really give a damn about what was on television.

“The difference is – ” he stopped, not sure how to explain it to someone who didn’t feel the same strong attachment to the water. Tucker looked over, obviously waiting for an answer. Chance sighed and scrubbed a hand over his face. “The difference is that I don’t want to be in the ocean if I can’t surf.”

“So basically you’re punishin’ yourself.”

Chance laughed without humor. “If you want to look at it that way.” He turned back to his board and gave it one last swipe.

“What if I said I was goin’ to the beach tomorrow and I want you to go?” he said, with studied casualness.

“I’d laugh my ass off. It’s the end of January, the water’s freezing. And you’ve been to the beach exactly twice since we’ve been together.” Not for lack of trying, though. Chance had tried to wheedle him into going during the summer, but Tucker hadn’t shown interest.

“Don’t wanna go in the water. Just wanna go hang out.”

Chance threw him a suspicious look, but he was focused on the tv. “Fine. We’ll go hang out.”

Tucker got him up early the next morning and they drove the four miles to the ocean, easily finding a close parking space due to the cold weather. Chance closed his eyes and

took a deep breath of the tangy air, unwilling to admit to Tucker how much he'd missed it.

Tucker stayed close to him as they made their way down the small set of stairs to the sand, but Chance growled at him that he was fine. Tucker just shrugged and stuck close anyway. "You fall and break your fool neck and I'm the one who's gotta drag your ass back up the stairs."

They reached the sand and Chance kicked off his flip-flops immediately, curling his toes into the cool grains. Tucker did the same, albeit more tentatively. Chance headed toward the water while Tucker hung back, wary. "Thought you said it was freezin'," Tucker said, eyeing the ocean.

The waves washed over his feet and Chance gritted his teeth. "Holy crap. It is." But it still felt fucking amazing.

Tucker ventured to where the sand turned damp, but no closer. "Just don't fall. If I have to get wet, I ain't gonna be so nice to you."

Chance laughed, real happiness spreading through him. He balanced on his good leg and used his other one to kick water at Tucker. "Baby."

Tucker shrugged but didn't budge. "Like I told you. You come back east with me for one winter and we'll see who's callin' names then."

Chance shuddered when another low curl snuck up and covered his feet, licking at his calves. "Fuck, this is cold." But he didn't move, letting the tide cover his toes with wet sand when it snuck back out to sea.

He stood for at least ten minutes, watching the seagulls dart and dive over the ocean, missing the sea lions that sunned themselves on their rock during the summer. He dug his toes into the wet sand under his feet and breathed ocean air, letting it fill his lungs. He stood until his hair and sweatshirt were damp with spray and his teeth were chattering, and he still didn't want to leave.

Chance figured that since he couldn't feel his feet anymore, it was probably time to at least get out of the water and go sit on the sand for a while. Turning, looking behind him for Tucker, he meant to carefully extricate himself from where his feet were buried with sand. It was at that minute that a wave broke, not any higher than the rest, but still high enough to send him off balance.

Normally, he would have caught himself. All that had to happen was to get his leg under him for balance, but normally he didn't have a fucking steel rod implanted in it. Chance knew he was going to fall at least five seconds before it happened. "Shit," he got out, and then he was gasping as the freezing water soaked his shorts and shirt.

Almost before his brain could even register the shock, Tucker was hauling him to his feet and toward dry sand. “You okay?” he asked. “Damn, didn’t think to bring a towel.”

The water was chilling him, his clothes clinging and uncomfortable. His momentary joy was gone, replaced by the familiar bitter anger he’d felt for the past month. “Quit it,” he snapped, yanking away from Tucker and scanning the sand for his flip-flops. “Not a fucking invalid.”

“I know that.” Tucker tried to keep the hurt out of his voice, which was worse than if he’d just let it through. He picked up Chance’s shoes and handed them to him before stripping off his own dry sweatshirt and passing it over. “Put that on.”

Chance didn’t argue, peeling off his own wet one and slipping Tucker’s on. It was warm and smelled of something vaguely spicy. He wanted to burrow into it, to just close his eyes and rub the worn fleece against his cheek and not be so helpless anymore. He cleared his throat and glanced down at his wet shorts, grimacing at the thought of driving back home. “Let’s go,” he said resignedly. “Don’t know what in hell made me think this was a good idea.”

Tucker’s mouth tightened. “Right. Me either.”

At home, he declined Tucker’s offer of help and took a shower alone. He stayed in for nearly half an hour, not caring if he used all the hot water.

Chapter Thirteen

February

Things were inexplicably better for a couple of weeks. Chance made a concerted effort to be less of a dick and Tucker picked up an overtime shift or two, resulting in him being out of the house for two or three days at a time.

They still weren't having sex.

Chance's sex drive had barely reared its head since the accident. He knew it was because of the overwhelming fatigue he felt most of the time, not to mention the constant pain in his leg. The pain itself was lessening, but by very slow degrees. Sex crossed his mind on occasion, but not often enough for him to want to do something about it.

He wondered if Tucker was doing something about it, though. There'd been plenty of days when Chance had seen Tucker's morning wood tenting the sheets before he'd rolled out of bed and hit the shower. Once or twice, Chance wanted to tell Tucker to just go out and get blown, but the thought of that made him sick to his stomach. If Tucker was getting anything on the side, Chance didn't want to know.

Chance figured Tucker pretty much deserved it anyway.

He thought he'd managed to successfully put it out of his mind – after all, he was a healthy male in his thirties, his sex drive had to make a reappearance sometime – until one night when he awoke from a sound sleep.

The digital clock told him it was just past midnight and Chance had no idea why he was awake. Smokey lay sleeping peacefully at the foot of the bed, so it hadn't been a noise that startled him. Turning his head to see if Tucker was still asleep, he discovered only a vacant space. That was it, then – despite their strained relationship, Chance's subconscious still knew when Tucker was supposed to be there.

The light shining from under the bathroom door drew his attention and he listened for a minute. No discernible sound came from there, however, and he wondered if Tucker was all right. He thought briefly of their bout with the stomach flu two months ago and made a face. "Tuck?" he called out, but his voice was husky with sleep and didn't carry far.

Sighing, Chance threw back the covers and got to his feet, ignoring his crutches in favor of hopping the short distance to the bathroom door. He knocked once before turning the knob, shouldering the door open. "Tucker?" he started, then trailed off.

Tucker stood at the sink, one hand braced on the countertop and the other around his cock. His dick glistened with lube and he had obviously been close to coming. Chance watched as a single, crystal drop of pre-come fell from the tip, leaving a long strand behind. "Um," Tucker said, clearing his throat.

“Yeah. Don’t let me interrupt,” Chance said, and slammed the door shut again.

He managed to get out to the living room and deposit himself on the couch, not knowing why he was suddenly angry. It wasn’t like Tucker was looking for relief outside the relationship – not that Chance knew, anyway – and jerking off was certainly something both of them had done countless times, together and alone.

But Christ, he hated martyrs.

Chance didn’t wait long.

Tucker appeared in the doorway after only a minute or two, an unsure expression on his face. “Yeah, so ...” he started, and then didn’t know how to finish.

Chance just looked at him, wondering how, after six months of laughing and talking and fucking and loving, they were here at this point of not really knowing what to say to each other.

“Don’t have to explain it,” Chance shrugged finally. “Not like I was offended or anything.”

“It’s just – I was – I dunno. I woke up and was hard and ... yeah.” Tucker sounded apologetic, which made Chance even madder.

“Yup. And Christ forbid you should ask for a helping hand,” Chance replied, slowly figuring out the root of his anger.

“Aw, Chance, c’mon. Didn’t mean nothin’. Didn’t want to wake you up, and besides, it’s been – ” he stopped abruptly and Chance knew he wanted to say ‘a long time.’

“Well. Remind me to get you a new crown of fucking thorns.” And there he was again, provoking Tucker, stirring the pot and looking for an argument.

He got one.

“Look,” Tucker said in a low, dangerous tone. “I told you already that I know things suck for you. You can’t work, you can’t drive, your leg hurts like a motherfuck.”

“Don’t forget the part where I don’t want to have sex,” he offered, making it worse on purpose. “Oh! And the part where the opportunity to advance my career was put on hold for a year.”

A muscle jumped in Tucker’s jaw and Chance saw him clench and unclench a fist. “Yeah, I fuckin’ know all that, Shanahan. And just like I told you before, I ain’t the one that made all that shit happen. It’s crappy, and I don’t wish it for anyone, but you’re makin’ life hell for both of us.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Must be hell to be able to run on the beach. Must be hell to have to get in the car and drive somewhere. Obviously, I wasn’t taking your feelings into consideration.” The words bubbled up before he could check them and he spat them out at his nearest target.

“How about the fact that you’re just bein’ a complete jackass?” Tucker finally shouted, and Chance had a flash of triumph from getting a rise out of him. “Fuck this shit. No fuckin’ way I’m stayin’ here to get crapped on every day.”

“Fine,” Chance replied bitterly. “Go spend the night at the station. Maybe you can finish jacking off there. Least you won’t have the guilt of me laying in bed next to you while you do it. Actually,” and here he paused, pretending to think about it, “maybe someone there’ll be happy to finish it off for you. I think Brandon on A shift’s been checking you out.”

“Fuck you,” Tucker said, his voice quiet. “Fuck you, Chance. I ain’t spendin’ the night at the goddamned firehouse. If I walk out, I’m goin’ to a hotel and then findin’ a new place to live. Because you didn’t fuckin’ die, you just broke your goddamn leg, and almost two months of this is enough. I figured out when I was fourteen years old that I don’t have to get shit on by people who claim to love me.”

It was almost enough to make an apology come out, almost enough to make Chance bite back any remaining words and raise a hand to Tucker in supplication.

But his anger and hurt – however irrational – were still too close to the surface. “I don’t need you,” Chance bit out, and Tucker’s expression closed.

“Right,” he said, and turned back to the bedroom.

Chance watched a small spider crawl along the air conditioning vent and did not look toward the front door until after it had closed with a soft click.

Chapter Fourteen

April

“Good, Chancellor! Your best yet. One more set, and we’ll quit for the day.” Michelle gave him a proud smile that Chance was too exhausted to return.

His thighs ached from the squats he’d done for the past hour, not to mention the half-mile she’d made him do at a brisk walk on the treadmill. But the fatigue was good, even welcome. He’d worked harder at therapy over the past nine weeks than he’d worked at anything in his life.

It was the only time when he didn’t think about Tucker.

His doctor was cautiously optimistic about his return to work sometime in May, and Chance intended to see it through. He’d never been so bored.

In some maudlin way, he liked to think about Tucker’s and his day at the beach in January. He forced himself to go, though surfing was far from being on his list of approved activities. So he sat. He watched the other surfers in the water, lifting his hand in greeting sometimes, watching intently as the tide came and went and the waves made foamy blankets on the sand.

It was soothing, and brought him closer to the peace he was looking for.

The phone had turned into something hated. He shied away from it when it rang, more thankful than ever for the caller ID that let him avoid pretty much everyone. He only picked it up on the rare occasion that someone at work needed to talk to him, and oddly enough, he answered it for his mother too.

He made his excuses about not coming to her for Easter, though, when she brought it up during her usual weekly call.

“It’d be hard on the leg, Mom,” he lied, and it sounded lame even to his own ears.

She sighed. “Chancellor. You could at least give a believable excuse. I might even pretend to accept it.”

His mother was anything but stupid, and he considered telling her about Tucker. But he held back at the last second, unwilling or unable to explain something that had spiraled out of his control so quickly. “Maybe Christmas, Mom,” he mumbled.

“Call your brother,” she said in answer. “He’d like to hear from you.”

It was a lie and Chance knew it, but he muttered an assent anyway and hung up.

He'd gotten used to the quiet of the house, and was even sleeping better at night, although five or six hours wasn't much of an improvement over three or four. But it was something.

On the nights when sleep was just impossible, Chance would prowls the rooms under the guise of exercising his leg, and think. It was only during the dark that he seemed to allow himself to do it; it was just too painful and real during the day.

He knew that Tucker leaving was completely, entirely his fault. He knew it the instant Tucker walked out the door, and he knew it with every day that went by that they didn't see or speak to each other. And now here they were, two months later.

Chance guessed he could find out things like where Tucker was living easily enough, but something whispered that he wasn't allowed to do that anymore. He'd been the one to drive Tucker away, it wasn't within his rights these days to know anything about him.

He was sort of holding out hope for when he returned to work. There was no way they'd be able to work together and not speak to each other, and then maybe Chance would find a way to say he was sorry. He had no illusions about the relationship part. They were finished, he'd done a fucking fantastic job of that, but Chance knew Tucker deserved an apology.

The fact that Chance was too much of a goddamned coward to pick up the phone and call the man really spoke volumes. Chance had had no idea he was that much of a chickenshit.

Chance kept in touch with Matt, who made the effort to call him once every couple of weeks and update him on firehouse gossip. When Chance was cleared to drive, they went for a beer once or twice, and it was nice to have someone to talk to.

Chance never said a word about Tucker, and Matt never asked.

So when Matt called one night toward the end of April, Chance was glad to hear from him. "Hey!" Chance said, putting his feet up on his patio railing.

"How you feeling?" Matt asked.

"Pretty good," Chance mused. "Today was a good day." And it had been, too. He'd sat on his surfboard in the water, paddling out and then laying flat on his stomach to ride back in. Just being in the ocean made things better. Sort of.

"Glad to hear it. Still planning on coming back in May?"

"Hell, yes. Don't replace me yet."

Matt chuckled. “No way, man. Be glad to have you.” He cleared his throat and paused for a second. “You, uh. Talked to McBride?”

The way he said it so cautiously, Chance could tell he knew. Probably had known for a while. “Nope.”

“It’s over?”

“Yep. What did he tell you?” Although it was well within Tucker’s rights to tell anyone who’d listen about what a piece of shit Chance had been, Chance sort of hoped he hadn’t.

“That it was over.” Matt didn’t sound partial one way or the other.

“He say it was because of me?” Chance swallowed, realizing that talking about it to someone other than Bonnie was sort of painful. Bonnie just told him he was a complete asshole, not to mention an idiot, and Chance would agree and go back to watching tv.

“Nope. Said you guys weren’t getting along and he’d moved out. That true?”

“True enough,” Chance said. “But it’s cool as far as work goes. As soon as I get back, I’ll put in for a transfer. There’s a medic spot open at Station Nineteen, I think.” It pained him to say, but he’d already promised this wouldn’t be anyone else’s issue but his.

“Not anymore,” Matt sighed. “Been filled.”

“Oh. Well, there’s always C shift over at Station Six, I think they’re looking for a guy.” He supposed it didn’t matter where he went, nothing would be like Eleven. Wouldn’t make a difference anyway; Tucker wouldn’t be there.

“Chance ... you don’t have to transfer. Tucker took the spot at Nineteen.” Matt sounded remorseful.

Oh. Well that took care of that, didn’t it.

“Yeah?” Chance said, trying not to sound ... well, however he felt. He didn’t know what that was, exactly. Upset? Disappointed? Pissed off? Betrayed? Damn, Tucker hadn’t even bothered to call and tell him.

The absurdity of that thought hit him, and he wanted to laugh. Like he was entitled to know anything Tucker was doing.

“Couple of weeks ago,” Matt was saying. “Had to get my approval for it, otherwise I wouldn’t have known until he left. I asked him why, he told me about you guys, I signed his paperwork.”

“Okay,” Chance replied, still trying to formulate an appropriate response other than throwing something against the wall.

“But that’s not the only reason I called,” Matt continued. “Got a letter from downtown today.”

Chance was only half-listening, still trying to wrap his mind around the fact that Tucker had managed to extricate himself completely from Chance’s life. “’Bout what?”

“They’re doing a second captain’s test.”

That got his attention. “No shit. Really?”

“Really. Apparently they only filled thirteen out of fifteen spots this time around. There were a lot of failed tests. They’re offering it mid-July. Should I put your name in?”

Chance considered. It was three months away, he’d have ample time to prepare. And it would occupy his sleepless nights. What the hell, it wasn’t like he had anything else going on. And if he failed? At least he’d know what the exam was like for next time. “Yeah, do it,” he said. Why the fuck not.

“Good decision. It’s what you need,” Matt said, sounding happier than he’d been until now.

Not exactly, Chance thought, but made a noise of agreement anyway.

It was some sort of great cosmic joke that his sex drive returned with a vengeance. Chance hoped someone somewhere was laughing, because he sure as hell wasn’t.

He woke up at three in the morning almost two months to the day after Tucker had walked out, sheets a sweaty mess and his cock so hard it ached.

He couldn’t be bothered with lube, it was too urgent. A lick to his palm and he was bringing himself off, holding tight to the last vestiges of the dream that had managed to rouse him out of a sound sleep.

Tucker, mouth open and wet and hot on Chance’s dick. Midnight-blue eyes glinting in the darkness. Flash of dimple. Sucking fast and hard, then slow and gentle, alternating until Chance wants to weep or beg or come or all three. And then he doesn’t have to do the first two because he’s trembling and gasping and pulsing in Tucker’s mouth. Tucker swallows all of it and Chance looks down to watch, meeting Tucker’s eyes and getting a wink in return.

He came in about five seconds. It would have been embarrassing if it didn't feel so fucking good. Chance let it wash over him like water, his mind going blessedly blank at the point of climax, just feeling and trembling until he lay spent.

The burn behind his eyes didn't register until after he'd stopped shaking.

After a week and a half of jerking off pretty much every day, Chance figured it was probably time to pay a visit to the Seagull. It was only a measure of relief he was after, he told himself, it had nothing to do with wanting the comfort of another warm body. Might as well stop being a monk, and maybe it would make him feel slightly more normal.

His leg was taking most of his weight now. It had been four months, his doctor had proclaimed the break healed, and now all that was left was strengthening the muscles that had torn. Therapy was down from three times a week to just once, on Wednesdays. He had felt a personal sense of triumph when his therapy was reduced and his mind automatically turned to Tucker, wanting to tell the man, to share it.

It was time to start curbing those impulses.

So he found himself putting on a decent shirt and his most comfortable jeans, but not bothering to shave his three-day-old stubble. He hadn't been to the bar in nearly a year, but from what he knew of the place, the patrons of the Seagull wouldn't give much of a shit anyway.

Before he left, he considered calling Bonnie. She'd gone with him a couple of times, pre-Tucker. They'd sit at a table together and share a pitcher of beer and watch the asses of the guys playing pool. Except he hadn't returned her calls over the past month, and the last message she'd left on his machine told him in no uncertain terms exactly which part of a horse's anatomy she thought he was being. He figured Bonnie wasn't his best bet at the moment.

He sat in his car for a while in the parking lot, telling himself that yes, he really did want to do this, and no, he didn't really want to go back home and put porn in the DVD player instead. Even if he just found someone to talk to for a while, it would be okay.

The fact that he wasn't coping well with loneliness didn't escape his notice.

Cursing himself, he finally got out of the car and limped to the door, thankful that the doctor had, at last, given him the okay to ditch his crutches.

The place hadn't changed much. Small, understated room with music that was just loud enough to dance to but not loud enough to make conversation impossible. Full bar that poured generous shots and made decent margaritas. Chairs, tables, barstools, the usual. Nothing much to differentiate it from straight bars except for the fact that its patrons were

almost exclusively men. Nothing like the club scene in Los Angeles, either, thank God. Chance couldn't keep up with the frenetic pace there. He much preferred quiet places like this.

He made his way to the bar and leaned one hip on a barstool, taking weight off his bad leg and putting both elbows on the polished wood. "Jack and Coke," he answered, when the bartender pointed at him.

Chance nursed it for a while, not even looking up until he was halfway through his drink and the ice had started watering it down. Someone took a seat two stools away and he thought, *Here we go.*

Looking up, bracing himself to start the inane small talk that would hopefully lead to him not going home alone, he saw a fairly good-looking guy smiling at him. And it would have been okay, Chance thought, if only his gaze hadn't traveled past the guy to the people sitting at the small tables.

And if only he hadn't picked up on the low, smooth chuckle he knew so well; a laugh he knew would be accompanied by a flash of dimples under eyes that looked black but weren't.

If only.

If only you'd said you were sorry, you dumb fuck, then you wouldn't be here now, would you?

He sat frozen, only dimly aware when the man sitting near him shook his head and moved away. Chance couldn't tear his gaze away from Tucker, and in that moment, two things registered.

This first was that Tucker was drunk. Chance could see it in the glassiness of his eyes and the way he sprawled in his chair, limbs all loose and easy. The second thing was that Tucker was sitting with some kid who couldn't have been more than twenty-five, laughing and flirting and turning the full force of his smile on the smitten guy.

It frightened Chance a little bit, how much he wanted to put his hands around the other guy's neck and squeeze.

Get out, his inner voice warned, and Chance knew it was right. Better leave, just get out now, because any second, Tucker could turn just a fraction to his left and –

Damn it.

Tucker's eyes widened and everything stopped, or at least it seemed to. Chance couldn't hear music or other people, just his own blood thundering in his ears and his increased breathing.

Damn it all to fucking hell.

Chance knew he had to get out. Couldn't deal with this now, his heart was pounding too hard and his breathing was coming fast and loud, felt like he was having a goddamned panic attack.

He meant to slide off the barstool carefully, but in his anxiety, Chance stepped down with his bad leg first. Pain shot up his thigh in a tight blaze and his knee buckled, threatening to send him to the floor. At the last second he caught the edge of the bar with both hands. He managed to save himself from collapsing in a pathetic heap, but not before Tucker had seen his near miss.

Chance looked over to see Tucker half-out of his chair, the kid sitting with him forgotten. "No," Chance blurted out before he could stop himself, shaking his head abruptly at Tucker, his voice hoarse. If Tucker touched him, he wouldn't be able to handle it.

Tucker sank back down but perched on the very edge of his seat, every muscle in his body tense. Chance let his eyes rest on Tucker's face for another five seconds before gathering his strength and moving toward the door.

At home, in the shower, he got shampoo in his eyes. It was a good excuse for the tears.

Chapter Fifteen

June

Summer, and Chance cautiously started finding his balance on his surfboard. It was like coming home, the first time he managed to take a small curl all the way into the shallows, and he hopped off his board with an enormously silly grin on his face. It had only taken six damn months.

Returning to work had been both easier and more difficult than he'd expected.

The first painful reminder was the fact that Chance came back almost a year to the day that Tucker McBride had first walked into Station Eleven. Twelve months made a hell of a difference, Chance had learned. The second jolt was that there was a new medic in Tucker's spot, but it was someone Chance had known for a while. His name was Jason Talbot, and he was a decent paramedic, so that part was okay.

Also okay was the warm welcome he received from the rest of his crew. They cooked him his favorite dinner his first shift back – medium-rare filet and red potatoes – and seemed genuinely glad to see him. None of them mentioned Tucker, with the exception of Robert, who cornered him after dinner and demanded to know what had happened.

"I was an ass," Chance said, hoping that would end it. No such luck.

"Of course you were," Robert said reasonably. "But why? And are you sure it's done?"

"Pretty sure," Chance sighed. "Haven't seen or talked to him since he left in February." His mind touched on their brief encounter at the Seagull, but Chance figured that didn't count for much.

"Why were you an ass," Robert persisted.

It made him think. "Um. Because my leg hurt like a sonofabitch. And I couldn't do stuff I loved, like work or surf or -" he stopped there, not sure how Robert would take "or fuck my boyfriend."

"And McBride couldn't handle it?"

"No, he was good. He handled it really well for a while." Chance felt the familiar guilt tighten his chest. "Then it turned sort of bad after I started therapy, but he hung in there. And one night it just ... wasn't a good scene."

Robert studied him. "You give him any kind of apology?"

"No. I wanted to. But I didn't." He wouldn't make excuses for it because there weren't any to make.

“He give you one?”

“Not really his fault for anything, is it?” Chance frowned, not sure where this was going.

Robert shrugged. “What’d he do when you started pissing and moaning?”

Chance thought. “He just let me do it.”

“Seems to me like that was his fault right there. Why didn’t he beat the shit out of you?”

“What the hell was he supposed to do, Rob? I was sort of a bastard.”

“No argument here. But if’n you were living with me? I woulda let you feel sorry for yourself for about a week. Then I woulda gotten you drunk, gotten you laid, and told you to shut the fuck up. And if *that* didn’t work? I woulda kicked the living shit out of you.” He nodded with satisfaction.

“He sort of made an effort. Once.” He hadn’t thought about that day at the beach for a while and was surprised to find that it still stung.

“Once?” Robert said dryly.

Chance stared at him. For the first time in four months he wondered if this could possibly be both of their faults. Not that Tucker was to blame for Chance’s completely dickish behavior ... but maybe the way Tucker had reacted to it was part of the problem.

He thought back to that last difficult night, when he’d caught Tucker in the bathroom, and the anger that had washed over him. Why had he gotten so pissed off? He’d never dwelled on it before.

If he was honest with himself, really truthful, he knew the answer. Tucker had – however unintentionally – enabled his uselessness. And Chance had let him, had played along, and it had been a self-fulfilling prophecy. Finding Tucker jerking off alone in the bathroom instead of using what he had laying next to him – well. It went back to the whole martyr complex thing.

But now who was the martyr, taking complete blame for their breakup?

He opened his mouth to ask Robert who the hell he thought he was, making Chance think this hard on his first shift back, but was interrupted by two soft dings of the alarm.

“Duty calls,” Robert said cheerfully, and walked away whistling.

He picked up as many overtime shifts as he could when he wasn't studying for the upcoming exam. It occupied his time, kept his mind off the test, and gave him the opportunity to see what other crews at other stations were like. He would need the information if, by some chance, he passed his test. He'd be reassigned within the month, and Chance would want to know what kind of station he'd be coming into or what sort of guys he'd be working with.

So it happened that he found himself working overtime at Station Four with Tucker McBride.

They both arrived in the parking lot at the same time, ten minutes before their eight o'clock shift. Tucker saw him as soon as he opened his truck door and stood with one leg on the pavement and one still in the cab. "Hey," he said cautiously.

"Hey," Chance answered, and grabbed his gear out of the back of his car.

It had really never occurred to him that he might run into Tucker. Chance knew that the open spot that Tucker had filled at Nineteen was on B shift, so the days when Chance was at work, Tucker was too. No real danger of their paths crossing.

Unless, of course, they both picked up some overtime at the same place. Damn.

They stood in the parking lot together, loaded down with helmets, boots, and turnouts, and just looked at each other. Chance finally broke the silence. "Seems like we could get through one shift without killing each other."

"Reckon," Tucker said slowly, watching another car pull into the lot. "Quiet station, anyway. Won't have to go out much."

Chance wanted to answer in an intelligent fashion, but all he could think about was the last time he'd seen Tucker. And from there, his mind went to the bad place of what had happened between Tucker and the other guy after Chance had made his not-so-graceful exit.

This was clearly not a good start to getting through a shift together.

"I'm going in," he said abruptly, and left Tucker standing by his truck.

Chance found the captain on duty drinking coffee in the kitchen. Station Four was small and fairly mellow, running just two or three calls a day. They used one engine, so the shift was comprised of only five guys. Not really conducive to ignoring somebody.

It was only twenty-four hours. He could do it.

"First one on the right," the captain said in response to Chance's question about which dorm he should use. "Or the one next to it, actually. Both empty today."

Great. That only meant that one was his and one was Tucker's.

He took the first room and dumped out his linens, busying himself with making the bed. A minute later he heard Tucker doing the same thing next door and Chance wondered if Tucker still favored the blue sheets.

He was emptying some stuff into his locker when Tucker poked his head in. "The leg been okay?" Tucker asked.

"Hurts when the weather's cold," Chance said truthfully. "And sometimes I get muscle cramps in the middle of the night."

"Doc say that was normal?" He cocked his head.

"Yup. Gotta deal with it." It felt weird, having a regular, quiet conversation, but Chance figured they'd have to come to terms sometime. He guessed this was sometime.

Tucker nodded. "Okay. Good. Been wonderin'." And then he was gone, presumably off to see what was for breakfast.

The day passed slowly. Chance was careful to be in areas of the station where Tucker was not. He used the weight room and watched some television. The shift captain wanted ice cream after dinner, so they took the engine to the grocery store and wandered the aisles. Chance snorted at Tucker when he showed up in the checkout line with two pints of peanut butter cup.

"What," Tucker said defensively, clutching the cartons to his chest. "It's on sale."

"Better do some extra laps on the track," Chance said, his eyebrows raised. "I'm just saying."

Tucker scowled at him and went to put one pint back.

They got a call on the way back to the station. Tucker grouched that his ice cream was going to melt, but luckily they were cancelled by dispatch before they'd gotten halfway there. Chance hoped that if he passed his test, he wouldn't get placed at such a slow station. Guy could get lazy this way.

The rest of the evening was uneventful enough for Chance to be exhausted by ten. "Bed," he said to the others, who were laughing hysterically at Johnny Knoxville on tv.

"Night," one or two of them said, but Tucker just looked up at him with an unreadable expression.

His leg was giving him warning twinges that meant he wouldn't be able to actually sleep, so Chance read for a while until he heard Tucker moving around in the dorm next to him. Putting down his book and flipping the light off, he listened.

Even after four months, he could still see it as clearly as if he were in the same room. Tucker stripping his shirt off, muscles flexing in his back. The tattoo on his bicep that Chance had traced with both fingers and tongue. Smooth chest. Flat, tight stomach that ran down to his narrow hips. Chance closed his eyes and thought of the groove between Tucker's waist and thigh, the one that led straight to his groin and made Tucker laugh and twist away when Chance tried to suckle there. He wondered if Tucker had let anyone else discover that he was ticklish.

He knew Tucker wasn't sleeping naked, none of them did at work, but Chance pictured it anyway. Perfect, firm ass. Long cock that always seemed half-hard.

And speaking of hard. Fuck. Chance jerked his hand away from his own dick and flipped onto his stomach. Not gonna go there.

He didn't know he'd fallen asleep until he awakened with a soft yelp, the muscles in his leg twisting and knotting on themselves. The leg cramps he'd mentioned to Tucker were asserting themselves, but it was unusual because it had been such a low-activity day.

The best way to get rid of them, he'd found, was to walk. Chance got out of bed and stood gingerly on the leg, testing to make sure it wasn't going to spasm before padding quietly down the hall to the kitchen. Rooting through the freezer, he made himself an ice pack and bound it to his thigh with some of the ace bandages under the sink.

Chance made a lap or two around the kitchen and television room before noticing he wasn't alone anymore.

Tucker stood in the doorway to the hall, blinking sleepily. "You all right? Heard you get up."

Chance shrugged. "Cramp. No big deal." But his muscle chose that moment to remind him who was boss, and he winced involuntarily.

"You want me to ... um. I could stretch it out for you?" Tucker sounded like he wanted to retract the offer as soon as he'd made it.

Chance opened his mouth to say no and found himself nodding instead. "That'd be good." He dropped onto the couch and eased his leg up, releasing the bandage and letting the ice pack fall to the floor.

Tucker sat down facing him, in line with Chance's thigh, and placed two hands just below his knee. Lifting gently, Tucker pulled Chance's leg toward the opposite end of the couch until Chance dropped his head back on the arm of the sofa and hissed in pain.

"Sorry," Tucker said instantly, lowering Chance's leg but not moving those hands.

"No, it's good. Do it once more." Chance gritted his teeth and closed his eyes, bracing himself. Tucker obeyed, pulling until Chance felt the knotted muscle suddenly loosen and relax. Breathing a sigh of relief, he opened his eyes and grinned. "Got it. Thanks."

Tucker smiled back. "You bet, baby."

The endearment, said without thinking but with a caress in his voice, hit Chance with a painful wrench. He lifted his gaze to meet Tucker's troubled expression. Tucker still had both hands on Chance's leg and Chance realized wryly that he was hard again.

Tucker was too, clearly indicated through his nylon gym shorts. "Tucker," Chance whispered in the stillness, "Tuck, I want ... I can't ..."

He wanted to finish, to find his way into the apology that had been too long in coming, but then Tucker was kissing him, stretching himself out over Chance, pressing their erections together and Chance could only groan and kiss him back.

Chance wrapped one arm around Tucker's back and fisted the other hand in his hair, angling Tucker's head so Chance could invade his mouth with an eager tongue. He tasted so good, and the little whimpers he was making drove any rational thought out of Chance's mind.

He was just wondering how he could get them down the hall to his bed without breaking contact when Tucker suddenly shoved himself upward with both hands, scrambling off the couch. Chance blinked at Tucker, confused. "Hey," he protested.

Tucker licked his lips nervously and jammed a hand through his hair. "Can't," he whispered, pleading. "Can't do it again. I'm sorry, Chance, I thought for a minute about just gettin' off and not carin' about anythin' else, but it's you and that's different."

It stung that Tucker thought he'd just wanted to get off. "I didn't -" he started to say, but Tucker shook his head and held up a hand.

"It's different," Tucker said again, and the look on his face was miserable. "Been waitin' for you to say somethin' or call me or even leave me a fuckin' email or somethin'. But you let me walk out, just like I let you treat me like shit, and I ain't goin' back there now. It's been four months – *four fuckin' months, Chance!* – and I didn't hear a peep outta you."

Chance drew a shaky breath. Now was when he should say it, his conscience told him, when Tucker was standing there looking hurt and forlorn and pretty much breaking his heart. But even as he opened his mouth, Tucker was shaking his head again. "I don't wanna hear it now. Ain't worth much if I gotta force it, now is it?"

It was true, so Chance just looked at him. "You deserve better," was what finally came out of his mouth.

"Yeah," Tucker said sadly. "But so do you."

Chance watched him turn and disappear back down the hall. Sliding even further down on the couch, he contemplated the ceiling tiles until morning.

Chapter Sixteen

July

Chance woke up at five-thirty on the morning of his exam and couldn't go back to sleep. Scenarios for the essays and options for the multiple-choice questions kept running through his head, things that might or might not be on the test. It was maddening, but he sure as hell was awake, so he got up and showered.

He wolfed down a bowl of cereal and then regretted it when his nerves threatened to send it back up again. Smokey jumped on the counter and looked interested in the last remnants of milk, so Chance let him lick the bowl clean before leaving it in the sink and giving the cat a chuck under the chin. "Wish me luck," he said, and then snorted when Smokey lifted his leg to wash his crotch. "Thanks."

He dressed in his usual t-shirt and shorts and left the house with time to spare, arriving at battalion headquarters fifteen minutes before nine. Chance briefly considered opening up one of the study guides he'd thrown in the back seat, then figured it wasn't worth it. He either knew his shit or he didn't.

That thought in mind, he left the car and crossed the shady parking lot, already feeling the warmth of the day. Through the double doors, smiling at the woman who'd sat behind the front desk for more years than he'd been alive, and down the hall to Conference Room Twelve. Six guys were already there, looking either nervous or confident depending on how many times they'd done this, and Chance nodded at the ones he knew.

The room filled up with almost fifty other men before nine o'clock and Chance knew he'd be fighting both their seniority and experience. A captain Chance knew from Station Two came in with the bundle of exams and grinned at all of them. "Quit looking like you're going before a firing squad, take a deep breath, and just write what you know. Bring me your booklet when you're done." He paused for a minute, then said, "The department wants you to pass. No one's here to purposely fail you, so keep that in mind. Ready?"

There were mumbled assents. Tests were distributed, pencils were tapped nervously against desks, and then the room fell silent.

Chance scrawled his name across the front, set his jaw, and opened his booklet.

His leg was protesting the inactivity by the time he was done. It took him an hour and a half to complete the entire thing, which was exactly half the allotted time. He wasn't the first to be finished, but there were still a fair number of guys left when he handed in his test and walked out into the sunshine.

He drove straight to the beach and surfed for the rest of the day.

Two and a half weeks later he received two identical letters, one at work and one at home.

Dear Chancellor,

Thank you for your interest in becoming a captain for the Oceanside Fire Authority.

We are pleased to inform you that your score on the captaincy exam was 192 out of a possible 200. This places you as the second-highest scoring test during the round. Should you wish to pursue this opportunity, your promotion will be effective on the fifteenth of August and you will be assigned to one of the two open captain positions in the department. Please inform us of your decision as soon as possible.

The badge-pinning ceremony will take place on August the fifteenth at five o'clock p.m.

He read it twice, his gaze lingering on his score, then a third time to make sure he hadn't misunderstood.

He'd passed?

He'd passed. And was going to be promoted.

Chance's thoughts turned instantly to Tucker, wanting to share his joy and relief, before he remembered. Funny how after this long Tucker was still the one he thought of first.

He called Bonnie instead before he did something stupid.

Chance hadn't worn his dress uniform in over a year, not since the funeral he'd attended for a firefighter who'd died off-duty in a skiing accident in the mountains.

He picked one of Smokey's hairs off the sleeve of the dark blue shirt and leaned in to study his reflection more carefully. He straightened his tie, wishing he'd thought to break in his new boots. He could already feel a blister forming on his heel and he hadn't even left the house.

Bonnie came up behind him and turned him around so she could remove the badge that was pinned over his heart. "Don't need this," she smiled at him. "They'll give you a new one."

He took it from her and fingered the black elastic band that encircled it, a tribute to all firefighters who had lost their lives on September eleventh. "Thanks," he said simply. "You know. For volunteering to pin, and all."

She brushed his thanks away. “Like I’d let anyone else stand up there to pin your badge. I pinned you the first time, didn’t I?”

Chance grinned at her. “Yeah, you did. Surprised I didn’t pass out from blood loss.”

She blushed. “I was nervous! I didn’t mean to stab you with it.”

“Just be careful tonight.” He set his old badge down on his dresser and reached for his hat, holding it carefully by the brim while he used his sleeve to polish the silver Maltese cross on the front.

“You look good,” Bonnie said softly. “Tucker would be -”

“Don’t, Bon,” Chance said, his tone sharp. “Not now.”

She gave him an inscrutable look and nodded, brushing a speck of lint from his tie. “We better go.”

They decided that Bonnie would drive her car so she could leave if the after-ceremony party went too long, so Chance slid into the passenger seat.

“Oh, you’re fine,” she snapped as they pulled up to the City Hall building and Chance tried to check his uniform one more time in the visor mirror. “Pretty enough to eat.”

They made their way through the center of the building, following the signs to an outdoor courtyard where rows of chairs were set up before a small stage and podium. The first two rows were marked with a small ‘reserved’ sign. Chance knew that this was to be the only badge ceremony for the year. The original had been postponed when the quota hadn’t been filled, so the guys who had passed the previous test were also attending with their families.

He took a seat in the second reserved row so Bonnie could sit directly behind him.

It was still sort of not-real, and Chance shook his head. He felt Bonnie put a supporting hand on his arm and squeeze. He was glad to have her there, to at least have one person stand up for him. The other guys getting their badges had several family members in attendance, and Chance was grateful he wasn’t alone.

“They’re gonna do it in alphabetical order,” he said over his shoulder to Bonnie. “But they have all the badge-pinner come up at once. So you might have to stand for a while until they get to S.”

“I’ve done this before,” she said, glancing around the courtyard. “Hey, isn’t that your captain?”

Chance turned in surprise to see Matt coming up the aisle toward him, dressed in the same uniform as Chance and grinning broadly. “Hey!” Chance said, pleased. It was a B shift day, and Chance had had to take a vacation day to attend the ceremony. He hadn’t expected to see anyone from work.

“Hey yourself,” Matt said easily, dropping into the chair next to Bonnie. “You got a badge-pinner?”

“Yes,” Bonnie said, eyeing Matt. “He does.”

Matt grinned at her. “Just checking. Matthew Perkins, ma’am.” Chance watched with amusement as Matt took off his hat and gave her a nod of acknowledgement.

Bonnie narrowed her eyes. “Bonnie White. And if you call me ma’am again, I’ll hit you with my cane.”

Matt laughed out loud and sat back in his chair. “Noted.”

It started shortly after that. Three city councilmen gave boring speeches on how noble a job firefighting was, to which no one listened but everyone pretended. Then they went on to praise the fifteen candidates for the captains’ positions, noting their excellent work in the department as well as their outstanding results on the two previous exams.

Finally, the candidates were asked to rise from their seats and the badge-pinner was invited to come forward and stand in a small group on the stage. Mothers, fathers, wives, sons, and friends were among them, pride shining in their eyes. Chance stood where he was and watched Bonnie lose herself in the group onstage while she waited for his name to be called.

He was tenth on the list, stepping onto the stage and shaking the hands of the city council members. The department chief handed him his badge and Chance moved over to the small crowd of people, waiting for Bonnie to make her way to the front so he could give it to her to pin.

Except when the crowd parted slightly, it wasn’t for Bonnie.

Chance’s throat went dry as Tucker stepped forward, holding his hand out for Chance’s badge. Their eyes locked and Chance’s arm came up of its own accord, placing his badge into Tucker’s waiting fingers.

Tucker looked gorgeous, and Chance greedily drank in the sight of him. His dress uniform was just a shade lighter than his eyes, his boots polished til they shone. He’d had a haircut, Chance could see under his hat, and his cheeks were baby smooth from a fresh shave. When Tucker took the final step forward to put his badge in place, Chance could smell his cologne and shampoo.

He stood motionless while Tucker pinned him, hands fisted at his sides. “Why?” he murmured, low enough for Tucker’s ears alone.

“Proud of you,” Tucker answered, his voice husky and rich.

Tucker’s hands lingered for a fraction of a second after he was finished – or Chance could have imagined it, he was too overwhelmed to know – before he stepped back, allowing the next person to come forward.

Numbly, Chance returned to his seat, refusing to let Tucker out of his sight. He craned his neck to watch him come off the side of the stage and stand near the door that led back inside. He was sort of aware of Bonnie sitting down behind him, a huge smile nearly splitting her face in two.

It ended ten minutes later, the rest of the candidates proudly displaying their new badges on their chests while they were all sworn in as captains. Chance barely heard the oath he was supposed to be taking and it was a struggle to keep his eyes forward, sure that the instant he took his gaze off Tucker, he would disappear.

It was finally over. Turning abruptly, Chance’s heart stopped in his chest when he saw the empty space where Tucker had been standing.

But then it was all right, thank God, because Bonnie was nudging him and gesturing toward the back of the courtyard and Chance almost sobbed in relief. Tucker sat in the last chair in the last row, his hat on his lap and one arm flung casually over the back of his seat.

He stood up as Chance approached, fiddling with his hat brim. “Hey, Cap,” he greeted.

Chance smiled slightly. “Sounds weird.”

“Sounds good.”

He nodded in agreement and couldn’t think of anything else to say that didn’t start with either “why” or “kiss me”, so he stayed quiet.

“So I was thinkin’,” Tucker started, and then stopped. “Shit. Don’t know what I’m supposed to say.”

“I’m sorry,” Chance said suddenly, and then it was a rush of words that tumbled out before he even knew what was coming next. “Tuck, I was an asshole, and you didn’t deserve any of it. I should have said sorry right from the beginning, but I was so wrapped up in my own stupid head, I couldn’t see how bad I was hurting us by being such a dick. And then you were gone and I didn’t think you wanted anything to do with me so I didn’t call, and it got harder and harder the longer it was, and then - ”

“Whoa,” Tucker finally interrupted, stepping in close and putting a finger over Chance’s lips. Chance wanted to lick it. “Wasn’t just you. I jus’ let it all build up and then exploded, when I shoulda been talkin’ to you all along and not lettin’ you feel so damn sorry for yourself all the time. Wasn’t much of a supportive partner, was I?”

Chance arched a brow. “You been talking to Robert?”

Tucker shrugged gracefully. “Maybe. When he found out I transferred, he dragged me out to have a drink and find out what happened. Nosy bastard.”

Chance sighed and closed his eyes, leaning in just a fraction so their foreheads touched, not caring who was looking. “Come home with me,” he whispered. “Been so long, Tuck, I need you.” He swallowed and added one final word. “Please.”

Tucker brought up a hand to rest at his waist. “Let’s go.”

Chance didn’t remember the ride home in Tucker’s truck, his hands and mind too full of lean, rangy fireman. Tucker had pushed him back against the wall as soon as they’d gotten through the door, mouths meeting with an urgency Chance hadn’t felt for months.

“Missed you,” Tucker was murmuring against his cheek while those fingers worked the buttons on Chance’s uniform. “Missed you so fuckin’ much, God, you don’t know.”

“I do know,” Chance answered, fisting Tucker’s shirt in one hand and dragging him down the short hallway to his bedroom. “Need you.”

Tucker stopped him in the doorway again, struggling to get their clothes off, and Chance cursed all the buttons and zippers that were making things difficult. He finally managed to toe off his boots and shoved Tucker to the bed to do the same. When they were at last naked on top of the sheets together, Chance found himself suddenly shy and unable to meet Tucker’s eyes.

“Hey,” Tucker said, his tone sweet and questioning. “Backin’ out on me?”

“No! God, no.” He punctuated this with a kiss that left Tucker gasping against his mouth. “It’s just been a long time. Didn’t think we’d get here.”

“Yeah,” Tucker replied, his eyes growing impossibly darker. “Missed you, all the time. Wondered if I’d done the right thing, wanted to come back the next day.” The words caught and he looked down, playing distractedly with the fine hairs on Chance’s forearm.

Chance reached out a hand and curved it around Tucker’s jaw, bringing his head back up and catching the wetness clinging to his lashes. “Love you,” Chance breathed, kissing him, pushing him back into the pillows and stretching out on top. “Love you. So sorry,” Chance whispered between gentle kisses, “so fucking sorry.”

“Me too,” Tucker confessed, his voice breaking, though Chance could tell he was struggling to hold back his emotion. “Love you too.”

There were no more words for a while after that, just the sound of their breathing growing harsher as they touched and savored and groped, hands moving with urgency. Chance gasped when Tucker rolled his hips upward, putting pressure where he needed it. It had been so long. “More,” Chance managed, and Tucker complied, doing it again and again until Chance was afraid he’d come just from that.

Shaking his head, firmly telling himself that there’d been too many times Tucker had made him come just from a little grinding, Chance levered himself upward and pointed toward the nightstand. “Drawer,” he ground out.

Tucker offered up dimples before reaching over his head to the drawer and extracting the lube. “No condoms in here,” he said, craning his neck to see.

Chance took a deep breath. “It’s okay.”

Tucker’s eyes widened. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. But ...” Chance paused, mind going back to the night he’d seen Tucker in the Seagull, laughing and flirting with someone else. “Just need to know. You been safe?”

Tucker frowned. “That would imply I’d have been with someone other than you.”

“Um. Yeah, but that night? When I saw you?” His cheeks grew hot. He hadn’t considered the possibility that nothing had happened.

The corner of Tucker’s mouth turned up. “Oh. That was just Chris. Rookie at Nineteen. Found out he liked guys, just took the kid out for a drink is all. Wasn’t nothin’.” His eyes glittered up at Chance. “Not my type. I kinda like ‘em tall and bossy.”

Chance couldn’t not kiss Tucker then, biting at that soft upper lip and thrusting his tongue inside, sweeping and growling low in his throat until Tucker was laughing and kissing him back. “Want you,” Chance said again, so softly he wasn’t sure if Tucker heard.

“Then do it.” Tucker pressed the lube into his hand and spread his legs a little, offering.

“Wait,” Chance said, setting the lube aside and sliding down Tucker’s body, licking at his cock when he passed but not settling there. Tucker raised his head to see where Chance was.

“What’re you – oh, *holy hell*.” He arched up off the bed when Chance tongued him. “Christ, Chance!”

Chance smiled to himself and did it again, tongue brushing over the sensitive hole before darting inside for a taste. "Oh, sorry," he murmured mischievously. "I'll stop."

"Don't you fuckin' *dare*." The tone was strained and needy and Tucker was trembling with the effort to not buck up again.

Chance decided Tucker needed to lose a little bit of that tenuous control.

Getting down to business, he made his tongue into a point and shoved it as deep as he could, inhaling the sharp, unique scent that was Tucker. Twice more he did it until Tucker's restraint broke and he shoved himself upward to meet the small thrusts, one hand on Chance's head and the other on his own cock. "Oh God oh God oh God," Tucker started chanting to himself. "Chance. More, God, gonna come in a second, hurry."

Chance looked up. "No," he said sharply, stilling the hard jerks Tucker was making on his dick. "Not before I'm in you."

Tucker inhaled and froze, eyes pleading. "Then do it. Can't wait, please."

Chance figured he better obey, considering he himself was leaking pre-come everywhere and his hands were shaking. Quickly he slicked two fingers and then his cock, easing one finger at a time into Tucker until the other man was writhing beneath him. Drawing his hand out and pushing Tucker's knees back, Chance swallowed and positioned himself at Tucker's entrance.

Oh, Christ. Just touching Tucker like this, with no latex between them, threatened to kill Chance before he'd even started. Better do it all at once.

So he did, having coated himself with enough lubrication that he just slid in like butter, causing both of them to gasp at the same time.

"Did you think about this?" he asked, leaning down to pass his tongue over the corner of Tucker's mouth. "Did you want me like this?"

"Oh fuck yes," Tucker bit out. "Jus' about every damn time I jerked off. It was you, it was always you."

He tried not to move, to savor the feeling of being skin to skin, but it was damn near impossible when Tucker started to clench around him. "Don't," Chance whimpered, which of course encouraged Tucker to do it again, and then it was all hopeless. Chance managed four good thrusts before he felt the edges of his fingers start to tingle and his balls grow tight. "Now," he growled.

Tucker squeezed his eyes shut and cried out, coming without ever touching himself, painting Chance's abdomen with hot streaks.

Chance thrust in one more time, reveling in the feel of no barriers. With a wrench and a shudder, he let it go, coming harder than he ever had in his life.

They lay tangled up in sheets and each other for a long time afterward. Chance just didn't see the necessity in getting up when Tucker was kissing him, drawing patterns on Chance's arm, dimpling at him. "'Bout killed me," Tucker said lazily, his eyes dark. "Could feel you. It was amazing."

"You're amazing," Chance said truthfully, then blushed. Wasn't like him to make romantic declarations.

But Tucker just grinned and nuzzled his cheek.

"Want you back here," Chance said. "Ain't right without you."

"Better not let your momma hear you say 'ain't'," Tucker teased.

"I'm not kidding," Chance insisted. It was suddenly imperative Tucker believe him. "Want you with me, Tuck."

Tucker looked at him, indigo eyes glittering in the dark. "Wanna be with you."

"Say you'll do it," Chance pressed. "Say you'll move back." He took Tucker's hand in his, threading their fingers together and clenching tightly.

Tucker leaned up to offer a kiss, his lips barely brushing Chance's. "Yeah. I'll do it."

Chance let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding. "Tomorrow."

Tucker laughed, a sound Chance knew he'd never get tired of. "Okay, okay. Tomorrow." He paused, let a grin curve the corner of his mouth. "So fuckin' bossy."

End