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A Tender Rough

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# A TENDER ROUGH

Fae Sutherland

## Dedication

For the Idjits, AJ and Angel. Who inspire me, entertain me and whose love for each other makes even this cynical bitch believe in happily ever after. Until the end of the world, burn with me.

# Acknowledgements

With a special thank-you to Laura, for giving my sweet Southern boy his name.

### Trademark Acknowledgement

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# **Chapter One**

Beau Gaines hummed along with Phil Vassar on the radio, tapping his foot in time to the music as he worked under Mrs. Miller's old Cadillac. He concentrated as he worked to repair her faulty brakes. When Beau worked on a car, it was like sinking into his own world, his mind wandered when he got into the zone and it wasn't even a conscious thing as he went about fixing whatever ailed his metal babies.

So, when a car pulled up in front of the garage, it wasn't any surprise to anyone who'd been in Dixon, Alabama longer than an hour that Beau didn't hear it. He did, however, hear someone laying on the horn. Beau cursed as his hand slipped off the handle of the wrench and a spray of brake fluid coated his chest and neck.

"Goddamn motherfuckin' son of a monkey!"

"Beau Gaines, your momma would wash your mouth out with soap." Lillian Mackey poked her head through the open window from the office into the garage to give him a pursed-lip look from over top of her glasses as he slid out from under the car.

Beau swiped at his t-shirt with a rag, though it did no good, scowling. His tone was respectful when he spoke, though. "You're not my momma, though, are you, Lillian darlin'?" He gave her a wink and the older woman blushed, tutting under her breath as she and her beehive ducked back into the office.

Beau chuckled to himself and tucked the useless rag in his back pocket. He turned, hands on hips, to face the jackass who had started the whole mess.

It was a sleek convertible Audi, full detail package, not a scratch on it and a gleaming smoky gray-blue color that had to be custom. He shook his head and approached, his steps faltering slightly when the driver's side door opened and a man slid out.

And he did slide too. With a natural kind of grace, the kind that you couldn't learn, but were born with. From the looks of it, this man had been born with everything. He had dark, impeccably smooth hair and a pair of round sunglasses that probably cost more than Beau made in a month shielded the man's eyes. His suit was like something right off the covers of those magazines the ladies down at the beauty parlor loved so much.

Beau wiped his hands on his coveralls, not that they were on right, the top portion bunched around his waist. So he just wiped his hands on the pant legs as he approached. "Help you?"

The man hadn't even glanced at Beau until he spoke, like he wasn't significant enough to register. Beau squirmed inwardly, knowing the second the man's eyes landed on him, even though he couldn't see them through the sunglasses. But he could feel them, slowly moving down and then back up before a single slim brow lifted almost imperceptibly. Despite the disdain, there was an awareness that sizzled and set Beau's heart racing.

"I doubt it, can you direct me to the owner of this garage?" The guy's voice was smooth as honey fresh from the comb, slippery and slick. Beau had a feeling the words that dripped from those full, strawberry lips weren't nearly as sweet as honeycomb, though. Wait...strawberry lips? What the hell was he thinking? Clearly he wasn't, shaking off the feeling of inferiority he always felt when leveled with some city slicker's cool, dismissive gaze.

Beau shrugged and glanced behind him. "Mackey isn't here. I'm his best mechanic, though, he don't do much but tinker anymore. What do you need?"

A quiet, impossibly put-out sigh and the man reached up to slip his sunglasses off. Beau wished he hadn't, being pinned by ocean blue eyes was more disconcerting than knowing he was being looked down on from behind fancy shades. "I need my car to not break down in Podunk, Alabama."

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It was Beau's turn to arch his brows. They shot right up into his hair, actually, and his eyes narrowed. "Well, then maybe you ought to buy yourself a car that isn't put together with spit and wishes."

"Excuse me?" There was an infinite amount of ice in those two words and Beau cringed inwardly. Mackey would kill him if he let a customer like this one get away.

"Um...sorry. What's wrong with it? We aren't licensed for imports, but I've been studying." Beau wanted to own his own garage someday, maybe take over for Mackey when he retired, even. And he wanted to play with the spit and wishes cars. They might not last for shit, but they had bits and workings that fascinated him.

The other man seemed to come to the decision that Beau was the best he was going to get at the moment and sighed, shrugging and gesturing with his sunglasses at the car. "I have no idea. It's been making this rattling sound since Jacksonville, and a mile or so down the road it got worse. Much worse. I think something might have fallen off."

Beau couldn't help it, he started laughing. "Something fell off?"

His humor was clearly not appreciated, and when the man's eyes narrowed in cool anger, Beau was close enough now to notice that they really were ocean blue, with green flecks rimming the blue. Christ, pretty eyes. For a pretty man. Men weren't supposed to be pretty, but this one was.

"I haven't the faintest idea why you find this amusing, nor do I care to find out. I just need my car to not sound like it's going to come apart around me at any moment so I can be on my way." The man glanced around with a disdainful curl of his full upper lip. "As soon as possible, if you please."

Beau shrugged. "Sure, I can take a look. Um...but if something fell off your car? Man, that's gonna take some time. Like I said, we aren't licensed for imports and we sure as hell don't stock parts for them."

The look of horror that crossed Mr. Bigshot's face was priceless. Beau's lips twitched.

"You cannot be serious."

Beau nodded, clearing his throat to squash the urge to snicker. "Yup. Afraid so." He turned away before he broke his resolve and laughed right in the guy's face, leaning in to pop the hood before coming around and lifting it up to peer into the inner workings. Beau took this part seriously. He looked at it like lifting a woman's skirts. You did it real easy, with respect, least the first time. Gotta get to know a lady, and a car, before you could just toss them up over her head.

It wasn't until he felt a presence beside him that he realized Mr. Bigshot was peering over his shoulder. For all the good that was gonna do, the guy couldn't probably tell a piston ring from an air filter. Beau turned his head and gave the other man a scathing look. "You mind?"

Mr. Bigshot blinked. Clearly, he wasn't used to having his own disdainful tone used on himself. He actually did back up, apparently so startled by the turnaround that he didn't think to bristle and argue.

After a couple of minutes, Beau located the problem. He lifted his head, letting the hood drop down gently to close, shaking his head. The other man came closer, looking amusingly anxious.

"What is it? Can you fix it?"

Beau nodded. "I can. But not for least a week, maybe more. Nothing fell off, but your cam chain tensi—never mind, I'm guessing you haven't got a clue what I'm talking about. I'm gonna have to order something special unless you want me to call a tow truck and see if Bobby Jim will tow you to Montgomery. Course, that's assuming he's willing to go that far and not charge you your first born for the privilege."

He tilted his head, arms crossing over his chest as he waited for that information to sink in. It was slow to do so and he tried not to snicker as the light of understanding dawned in the other man's unusual eyes. He shook his head sharply to cut off the deluge of protests he could sense coming.

"And no, I'm not trying to shaft you, I'm being honest. Ya'll city folk might not know nothing about that, but I do. Them's your choices."

There was a heavy pause, the silence stretching thick and uncomfortable as the other man's jaw worked. Finally Mr. Bigshot exhaled sharply.

"I would *appreciate it* if you would call Mr. Bobby Jim and ask if he would be willing to tow me."

Beau pressed his lips together against the grin and nodded. Bobby Jim would laugh his ass off to be referred to as mister anything. Even in that snide tone. "Sure. No problem. You can wait here or in the office with Lillian."

"Lillian?"

"Mackey's missus. She'll keep you company." He gestured to the office and watched with twitching lips as the man nodded shortly and strode stiffly inside. Once the door swung shut, he burst into laughter. He shook his head, still laughing as he walked back into the garage and picked up the phone on the wall to make the call.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mason Palmer clenched his jaw until he thought it was going to crack as he listened to the mechanic laugh through the closed door. He shook his head, reaching up to tuck his sunglasses into his jacket pocket and smoothing his hair back, though it wasn't mussed in the least.

"You in town for long, honey?"

Mason's head turned at the sound of a woman's voice, thick with a deep accent and was met with a cheery smile and faded blue eyes behind horn-rimmed glasses. He shook his head once in answer to her question. "I sincerely hope not."

She tutted under her breath, coming around from behind the counter. "Too bad, the girls 'round here would surely go wild for a man what looks like you do, honey." There was a little gleam in her eyes that made Mason think if she were a couple of decades younger, she might have thought about taking those girls on in challenge. Oh lord, he'd tumbled into a nightmare of epic proportions.

He gave her a tight smile and would have chosen to sit, but he was sure the cracked vinyl of the chairs in the tiny office probably harbored more than one fatal disease. God, of all the bad luck. He could have flown, like everyone else in the world, but no, he'd decided that he would avoid the panic flying induced and instead road trip it to Lansing. What had he been thinking, anyway? Who drove all the way from Tampa to Michigan, for god's sake?

He turned quickly at the sound of the office door opening, stomach pitching at the look on the young mechanic's face. Their eyes met and for a moment something seemed to ripple between them, getting his nerves humming. He recognized it for what it was, desire, but pushed it aside. What he cared about was getting his car fixed, not getting turned on by some hick, and even before the other man spoke, Mason knew the news wasn't good.

"Well..." The young man's drawl dragged the single syllable out for several and Mason clenched his jaw again.

"Well, what?" Mason narrowed his eyes impatiently.

"I'm afraid Bobby Jim can't be taking you to Montgomery. His little lady's due any day and he's not too keen on leaving her right now."

Mason sagged a bit, rubbing a hand over his face. "How long?"

The mechanic pondered that for a second. "Well, let's see, Laurie's due end of the month, but she hasn't been feeling too good, so any day now, I'd imagine."

Mason glared. "I meant my car." He bit off the words between gritted teeth.

The young man laughed. "Oh. Probably a week at least, longer depending on whether or not they have it in stock in Montgomery and we don't end up having to order from the manufacturer."

"Beau, you sure there isn't anything else that can be done for the nice gentleman?" Lillian flashed Mason a smile that he half-heartedly returned. He wasn't exactly feeling friendly.

The young mechanic, Beau was his name apparently, shook his head. "Nope. Best we can do is set you up at the Olson's inn. Of course, you could always get a rental and maybe come back to pick up yer car when it's fixed. Dunno how important this place you have to get to is."

Mason sighed, shaking his head. "No. I have no intentions of being back this way anytime soon. I live in Tampa." He ignored the little voice that said he should take the option of leaving his car behind. His mother's wedding was important. Or at least the first three had been. This one was...he shook his head. "I don't have much of a choice."

Besides, the wedding wasn't for another week. He'd given himself extra time to drive, so if the car could be fixed, he could drive to Montgomery and leave it in long term at the airport and just suck it up and fly. It'd been a stupid idea to try to drive anyway.

Lillian clucked her tongue sympathetically and slid back behind the counter to fill out the paperwork. Mason pulled out his credit card and handed it to her, not even bothering to ask for an estimate. It wasn't like he had a choice but to pay what they asked, he couldn't exactly go comparison shopping right now.

Beau came around to peer at the paperwork, then up at Mason. "Mason. Nice name."

Mason's eyes lifted, surprise evident, he was sure. The last thing he expected was a compliment and a dash of kindness in the young man's eyes. He had kind eyes, when they weren't mocking him. A deep, warm silvery gray and fringed with wicked long lashes. Mason nodded. "Thanks. So. Where is this inn?" Please sweet God, let it not be infested and have a real bathroom and not an outhouse.

Beau opened his mouth, but before he could speak, Lillian cut in.

"Beau, why don't you be a good boy and drive the gentleman over? It's nearly closing time anyway, Mackey'll be fine with shutting down shop a bit ahead of schedule." Lillian gave Mason a beaming smile.

Beau, however, was far from beaming. But he grudgingly nodded, sighing and leaning over to brush a kiss to Lillian's cheek before coming around the counter and snagging a set of keys off a ring by the door. He glanced back over his shoulder.

"Well, c'mon. Sooner I get you settled, the sooner I can get home and shower."

Mason followed, his lips pressed tightly together to avoid saying anything snarky. The last thing he needed was to antagonize the man who held his ability to get out of this place in his hands. Still, it burned to be looked at as an inconvenience.

Once out in the garage, Mason's eyes widened when Beau began to tug at his coveralls. "Hey!"

Beau glanced over him, a smirk on his face as he shucked down the coveralls to reveal a pair of faded jeans, kicking the grease and oil stained material into a corner. "Relax, City. We might not have all those fancy doodads you all do, but we do have pants."

Mason barely managed to not roll his eyes. "Pardon me. Country."

That got a true laugh out of the man and Mason was shocked to find himself noticing how his eyes lit up and the little dimple in his left cheek when he grinned like that. He cleared his throat, disconcerted. "I...I need to get my bags."

Beau just nodded and waved toward Mason's car. After unloading the two suitcases and a garment bag out of the backseat, along with his laptop bag, he followed Beau around to the side of the building. His steps faltered and his brows shot up as Beau pulled open the door of a Chevy pickup that appeared to be mostly constructed of rust. Oh lord. He cringed as he came around and gingerly opened the passenger side door. It was fairly clean inside, but he still tread carefully as he climbed up in and settled his bags on the wide bench seat beside him and at his feet.

He glanced over at the young man. "And you claim *my* car is held together with spit and wishes?"

Beau just grinned and turned the key, the engine roaring to life with the kind of power that was only manufactured in Detroit. "Don't judge a book by its cover, Mason. Haven't you ever heard that before?"

He had. And Mason admitted to feeling a flash of guilt. Other than a couple of mildly snide comments, the other man had been polite, and he couldn't exactly say the same about himself. He sighed and turned toward him, reaching out a hand.

"Truce. I apologize for being rude before. And, um, just now. I'm a bit out of my element, as you can probably guess."

Beau shrugged and took the offered hand. His grip was firm and Mason remembered with a start his grandfather telling him how everything you ever needed to know about a man could be found in his eyes and his handshake. If that was true, he thought he might have sorely misjudged Beau.

"No problem, man. Sorry for making fun of your car." His gray eyes sparkled mischievously and Mason shook his head with a soft chuckle.

"Somehow, I don't think you are really sorry for that, but I'll take the apology as intended."

They fell silent as Beau pulled out onto the dusty road. Mason didn't think he'd ever actually been anywhere without paved roads. It was bizarre, like being thrown into an alternate universe where everything was the same, but skewed just enough to be faulty.

After a few moments of silence, Beau glanced over at him out of the corner of his eye, his look considering. Mason arched his brows in question and Beau shrugged with a boyish grin.

"Just wondering what a big city boy like you was doing down around these parts. You get lost, Mason?"

Mason considered that question. If taken literally, then no. He hadn't been lost. But in another, more deep-seated way, he supposed he was lost. Twenty-nine, no roots to speak of, a job he couldn't care less about despite the amount of money he made at it and a family that was the definition of dysfunctional and estranged. But rather than say all of that, he just shook his head.

"No. Just bad luck."

Beau nodded silently, pursing his lips and turning back to the road. After a moment, he glanced back over. "You know, my grandma says ain't no such thing as luck. Just fate. And fate isn't bad or good, it just is. I don't know, seems to kind of make sense to me."

Mason could not have been more surprised if Beau had suddenly told him he was a brain surgeon. His lips curved in a little half-smile and he nodded. "Maybe. It sounds nice, anyway."

Beau grinned over at him. Mason had the thought that he'd like to put smiles like that on someone's face all the time. "Far as I can see, there's no harm in believing nice things."

So simple. If only the world worked that way. Mason just gave Beau a cynical smile and shook his head, turning his head to stare out the window without replying. The other man seemed to take the hint and didn't try to make conversation anymore. He turned on the radio and began singing along with the kind of country music Mason hated with a passion. But he had a sweet voice and the twang in it did nice things to the notes and tune.

Mason decided then and there that he was obviously losing his mind after only half an hour in the backwoods. That was the only reason he could find for why he was sitting there in a rusted out Chevy thinking the man beside him sang like an angel with a halo just a little crooked. Madness. Some kind of hillbilly madness. The sooner he got out of there, the better.

# **Chapter Two**

Beau flopped down on his sagging couch, staring at his shoes. Not for any particular reason but that he was thinking and needed something to focus on. Lord only knew he hadn't really been able to focus ever since that afternoon. And here he was three hours later and he'd caught himself wondering if Mason knew where to go to get some dinner. If he had gotten settled. If he was asleep yet or lying awake cursing whatever forces had shoved him off the highway into Dixon.

He scowled and pushed to his feet, pacing and glaring at nothing. After a few minutes, he was back to flopping on the couch and it was at that point that he decided he had a problem. A problem with ocean-blue eyes and strawberry lips and a too-good-for-you attitude. Lord.

All right, Gaines. He's sexy. Sexier than sexy. But he's way too city. Is that what you want? To be a little country fling for Mr. Bigshot before he goes flying off to his big house in Florida and forgets your redneck ass even exists?

Beau scowled. Lord, sometimes he wished his inner voice would go snipe at someone else. He hadn't ever said he intended to be that man's anything, let alone his country fling.

But you thought it.

Beau raked his hands through his hair, the unruly curls tumbling around his face. This was ridiculous.

*Yes it is. Stop thinking about him.* 

"Christ, shut up!"

"Beau? What're you going on about?"

Beau cringed. Great. Now his sister was going to think he was crazy, in here talking to himself. "Nothing, just listening to the ball game, Mandy."

He sighed again. Okay. So he'd just go make sure Mason had gotten fed. That was all. That was just a little Southern hospitality. Nothing strange about that at all. He grabbed his hoodie and his keys, slipping out of the private entrance to his over the garage apartment. He hurried down the rickety steps and jumped the last three over the rail, jogging to his truck and climbing in. He would probably have to explain to his nosy sister, who occupied the other half of the garage apartment, where he'd gone running off to, but he'd make something up.

Beau did his best to not think about why he was even bothering with Mr. Bigshot. He'd just stop in, see that Mason had eaten and probably get glared at some, then go home. He wanted to study the handful of books and magazines he'd pulled out of the library and see if anything in them would help with fixing Mason's car. It was his first time getting his hands on a real live foreign import, so he wanted to make the most of the chance.

He pulled into the inn, which was really just an old campground that got converted so the three individual cabins were now "rooms". Probably pretty far from what Mason was used to. Two of the cabins had cars in front of them, so Beau figured the third one with the empty parking space was Mason's. He pulled into that vacant space and shut the truck off, sliding out and for a second looking at the cabin.

Faint light spilled from the front window around the curtains, the light outside by the front door flickered and Beau shook his head. So it wasn't the Hilton. Wasn't shit either, he knew the Olsons worked real hard to fix the place up after they'd bought it, and they kept it up good, he heard.

Beau tucked his keys in his pocket, taking the front steps all three in one go, bouncing on his heels nervously as he lifted his hand and knocked. He didn't hear anything inside, frowning and knocking again. He heard footsteps and sighed in relief, though what he thought might have happened, he didn't know. Nor did he know why he cared enough to be breathing that sigh of relief.

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The door opened and Beau was sighing for a completely different reason. Naked chest. Broad shoulders and narrow waist, a dusting of fine dark hair trailing down to someplace hidden by low-slung, black pajama pants. Wet dark hair falling across Mason's forehead. Oh wow.

Beau swallowed hard, realizing belatedly that Mason was looking at him expectantly. "Oh. Oh hey, um, I just came by to make sure you got settled and all." He gestured to the wet nakedness, giving Mason a sheepish look. "Guess so." Okay then, he was so done here before he made a bigger fool of himself, turning on his heel to go.

"Beau."

Mason's voice stopped him and Beau glanced back over his shoulder. "Yeah?"

There was a brief pause of silence and then Mason's lips curved a bit. "Where can a man get something to eat in this hick town of yours?"

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Mason pushed aside his plate with a low groan, leaning back in the booth. "I think I just felt ten pounds settle on my hips."

Beau chortled, a sound of amusement bubbling out of him that made Mason grin in response.

"You sound like my sister. Always worrying about her figure." Beau shook his head with a grin and Mason sighed inwardly at the way his golden curls fell around his face. The look could almost be called cherubic if it weren't for the fact that there wasn't a damn thing angelic about this man with the possible exception of his voice when he sang.

Mason shook his head, telling himself yet again that he should not be noticing things like that. "So tell me about yourself, Beau. Are you in grad school or college?"

Beau shrugged, popping a French fry into his mouth. "I'm done with school, no use for college really. I want to have my own garage. Cars are what I love best."

"Done with school? Did you drop out?"

"Nope. Got my diploma and everything, Momma was real proud. Why?"

Mason squirmed in his seat. He didn't want to say that he'd assumed Beau to be a dropout because, well, that was the stereotype, wasn't it? He should know better than to deal in stereotypes. Besides, it wasn't like the idea of Beau being uneducated had deterred his attraction any. He'd spent the evening trying to convince himself he shouldn't be remembering the way Beau's t-shirt had clung to his chest and the way those faded jeans had hung so temptingly low on lean hips.

"No reason. I was just curious." He looked up and smiled at Beau. "So you don't want to leave this little town and see the world? There's a lot out there, Beau, things I'm sure you must want to see."

Beau seemed to ponder that, then shrugged and shook his head. "Not really. Me and big cities never did get along. I went to New York once in high school, 'cause my momma had always wanted to see a play on Broadway, so my daddy took her for their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. I hated it. Dirty and loud and crowded enough to make me feel sick and not able to breathe." He gestured with another French fry around them and shrugged again. "This is home. This feels right to me. I don't want to be nowhere else."

Mason shook his head with a wondering smile. He didn't think he had ever been that sure of anything. "Well, then. Wow."

Beau's look was curious, his head tilted in that way that Mason was already coming to realize meant he was thinking. "What?"

Mason shrugged one shoulder, taking a sip of his sweet tea. "Nothing. Just it's unusual, I guess, for someone to know exactly what they want out of life. I still don't know what I want out of my life."

"You haven't got any dreams? I mean, everybody does, don't they? Something they always wanted ever since they could remember? For me it was building cars, fixing them, raising a family right here in Dixon where I don't never have to worry about them getting shot in some gang thing."

Mason smiled wryly, shaking his head. "No. No dreams." The lie tasted bitter on his tongue and suddenly the comfortable companionship of their meal was gone. "I should get back. I have to find someplace with an internet connection tomorrow and handle this crisis."

Beau looked surprised, but then nodded and pushed his plate away. "Sure. C'mon, I'll take you back."

Mason did his very best to avoid meeting Beau's gaze, knowing he'd confused him and maybe offended him with his abrupt withdrawal. He regretted it, the man seemed kind and genuine, something unusual in Mason's world. But he knew firsthand that it was best if he didn't let himself get too close. He'd only be here for a week, at most, and then he'd go back to his condo and his office job and Beau would stay here and raise babies with some lucky country girl.

The silence wasn't the comfortable, easy silence of earlier as they drove back to the inn. Mason was grateful when Beau pulled into the parking space and slid the truck into park. Mason cast him a sideways half-smile.

"Thank you for the company and the ride, Beau. That was very kind of you. But I'm sure you have better things to do than playing babysitter to the newly arrived city slicker." He put his hand on the door handle. "Go on home, Beau. You can just let me know when my car is ready."

He slid out and was halfway up the steps when he heard the truck door open behind him. He turned on the middle step, brows furrowing as Beau climbed out of the driver's seat, leaving the truck running as he approached. "Yes?"

There was confusion in those clear gray eyes. Confusion and a bit of hurt that made Mason feel tremendously guilty.

"Did I piss you off?"

Mason smiled a little and shook his head. "No, Beau. I'm just tired, that's all. It's been a long day, I'm sure you'll agree."

"You're going to bed?"

Mason blinked. He frowned and tilted his head. "That was the plan."

Beau seemed to consider that information and Mason wondered what on earth there was to consider.

"Want company?"

Oh. Oh my.

# **Chapter Three**

Beau didn't have to read minds to know exactly what Mason was thinking. Thinking Beau was crazy is what. Beau had to agree. He shook his head with a halfsmile. "Look, I've never been one for beating around the bush."

Mason's look was incredulous. "I see that."

Beau chuckled and stepped up onto the bottom step. He shook his hair back from his face and looked up at the other man. "You feel it too." It wasn't a question, because he knew the answer. He could see it in Mason's unusual eyes. Lingering under the surprise and hesitation was a smoldering desire that he couldn't hide nor deny. Beau dared him to try.

"Beau. This is not a good idea. I apologize if I gave you the wrong impression at some point..."

Beau shook his head. "No wrong impression. You gave me the right one." He could see that Mason was going to argue with him and Beau was a bit nervous and didn't want to be talked out of something he wanted as much as he'd realized he wanted this. He'd come to the conclusion during dinner, when he'd watched Mason's slick façade lower and reveal the warm, funny man beneath. He was already the most gorgeous man Beau had ever seen, but to find out he was also a good man? That was Beau's undoing.

So he didn't let Mason argue it away. He reached up to curl a hand at the nape of Mason's neck and pulled him down to claim his lips. The other man was stiff and resisting at first, but those lips were soft as anything, warm beneath his own and Beau's tongue slid across them, silently demanding entrance.

Mason gave it after a long moment of wordless battle. And when his lips parted, Beau groaned and took possession swiftly. It was a foolish thing, he knew, doing this on the front steps where anyone could see them. But he couldn't bring himself to care.

Mason must have had the same thought, because he began to move backward, up the last step toward the door, and Beau followed. The kiss didn't break and Mason made sweet little sounds in the back of his throat as he fumbled with the door for a second before getting it open.

They tumbled through in a stumble of tangled limbs and fused lips. Beau slid his arm around Mason's waist, kicking the door shut with the heel of his boot before propelling Mason forward to press against the wall. Oh damn, he felt good against him, warm and squirming. Mason's arms had twined around Beau's neck and despite Beau being a bit shorter, it was very clear who was holding the reins on this ride.

Beau broke the kiss, smoothing his tongue across that full upper lip and the slight pout to the lower, nipping gently before pulling back. His breath came heavy and Mason's was no easier. Their eyes met and Beau thought for a second that Mason was going to say this was a mistake.

But he didn't. Instead he brought his hands between them to grip Beau's hoodie, unzipping it swiftly and jerking it down his arms. And just like that it became a race to get each other's clothes off as fast as possible, naked skin aching to be pressed to more naked skin.

Their lips met over and over in the flurry of fabric flying and buttons popping and frustrated grunts as zippers defied their dominance over them. Finally, after what seemed like forever, there was nothing between them but air, and even that was too much. Beau turned Mason away from the wall and began walking him back toward the bedroom, his mouth making a damp, passionate trail along Mason's neck. He savored every wicked moan and breathless whimper from his lover.

After an eternity and several stops to press against a wall and grind, they reached the bed and tumbled down onto it, Beau over Mason, and his cock ached as they rubbed together, hips rolling in unison to get the friction they both desired.

"Beau..." Mason said his name in this breathless way that sent shiver bumps skittering along Beau's skin. He trembled and nodded, nipping Mason's collarbone.

"Yes, baby," he breathed, not sure what Mason wanted to say or even if he wanted to say anything at all. Maybe he just wanted to breathe Beau's name in that sexy way. That was fine by him.

"Beau, my bag..."

Beau lifted his head, brows furrowing as his desire-fogged mind tried to figure out what on earth Mason was talking about. "What?"

Mason grinned, chuckling a little, and the sound of it while he lay naked and tangled with Beau was a beautiful thing, making something bubble up inside Beau that he thought he might like to feel a lot more of. He gestured to his bags against the wall. "My bag. Unless you carry condoms and lube on you?"

Beau laughed, bending his head to rub his lips against Mason's. "Nah, not usually. Stay."

Mason pressed his lips together and smiled, nodding. Beau slid off him and padded over to the bags, glancing back at Mason and then rummaging in the one he indicated with a nod of his head.

Good lord, he had a ton of clothes. Fancy ones. Beau could just imagine how all that soft fabric would look draped on Mason's lean, elegant body, smooth golden skin peeking out. Beau shook his head and grabbed the condoms and lube he found in a zipper pocket, turning back to the bed.

He froze for a moment, just staring. Mason had shifted, half on his side, propped up on one elbow. He looked...breathtaking. That wasn't even a strong enough word. He was long and lean and golden, muscles clearly defined under velvet skin, but not all bulky, just lean and powerful and pure grace. He looked like a dark panther lounging there and looking at Beau like he was going to have him for dinner. Beau thought he'd be okay with that.

And then Mason lifted a hand and crooked one long finger at him and Beau followed the summons without any thought but that heaven was calling. He climbed back up into the bed and slid beside Mason, breath hitching when the other man slid one long leg between Beau's and his soft hands ran over Beau's chest.

He had soft hands, not rough and calloused like Beau's. His tan was smooth and uniform, not the farmer's tan Beau sported from his hours of time spent outdoors. He had the image of Mason naked and slick with oil, lying in the sunshine down there on the beach in Florida. His mouth went dry at the visual.

"You're beautiful, Beau," Mason murmured, his eyes following the path his hands took on Beau's chest and stomach and down over the side of his hip.

Beau chuckled, shaking his head. "Nah...beautiful's for prize stallions and prom queens and men like you." It was true. Mason was the epitome of beautiful, not a flaw to be seen. Beau was more than a little intimidated, he had to admit.

Mason just smiled wryly. "Wrapping can hide even the ugliest packages, Beau."

Beau frowned, pushing Mason onto his back and rising up to his knees to let his eyes drag the full, naked length of his lover. When their eyes met again, Beau's were incredulous. "Mason, you're as unwrapped as you can be. And the package inside makes the wrapping look like plain brown paper."

He didn't say anything else, deciding words weren't his forte and he'd show Mason how beautiful he found him instead. That would hardly be a hardship. The man made Beau's fingers itch to touch and caress and his lips ached to taste every inch of that smooth, flawless skin.

He set aside the condoms and lube, shifting to straddle Mason's lean hips. His cock twitched against Mason's stomach and when he leaned down to press his open lips to the other man's collarbone, his hips shifted and their cocks rubbed together. The friction

was sensual and delicious and Beau rocked his hips a bit harder to get more of the same.

Mason moaned beneath him and Beau grinned at the way he squirmed. He reacted so beautifully, uninhibitedly. Not at all like he had imagined Mason might. Beau could feel the edges of wildness tugging at him, and it wouldn't be long before the urge to explore was overtaken by the urge to claim and take him hard and fast.

Knowing that, Beau took the chance to get to know his lover's body while he could. His mouth followed the slow, lazy path of his hands. Over Mason's chest, lingering on one small, flat nipple, loving the way it peaked under his tongue before he slid over to give the other the same treatment.

"Oh god..." Mason breathed, shifting impatiently against the cool sheets. Beau slid down his body, worshipping as he went. He nudged Mason's legs apart and settled between them as his tongue drew lazy circles around the other man's tightly drawn navel. He could smell Mason's arousal and it was dizzying, intoxicating him. Beau dipped his head and dragged his tongue across the head of his lover's cock, chuckling when Mason's hips bucked with a wild cry. Oh that was gorgeous. He eagerly took the length of him into his mouth, sinking down until his nose nestled in silky dark curls and he swallowed around Mason's cock.

"Beau...Beau..."

He lifted his head after a moment, placing a soft, wet kiss to the slick tip of Mason's shaft. "Yes, baby?"

Hooded, ocean blue eyes met his, needy and dilated. The intensity of the look stole Beau's breath. "Fuck me."

Beau might be country, but he wasn't stupid and only a certified idiot would turn down a request like that. He nodded shortly, rising up to his knees and reaching for the condoms, but Mason got there first. Beau trembled inside as he watched his lover sit up and tear open one of the packets, wicked eyes flashing up at him.

"Let me."

Beau couldn't speak, just nodded, and he didn't even really need to do that, because before he managed to respond, Mason had Beau's cock in his hand and was rolling the condom into place, stroking a few times. It was enough to have Beau crawling out of his skin. Then Mason grabbed the lube and the urge was even stronger, nearly afraid he might not last more than half a minute as slick, elegant fingers closed around his cock and began to stroke expertly.

After only a few passes of Mason's hand, Beau reached down and caught his wrist, tugging his hand away with a sharp shake of his head. "Too much...hold on." He struggled to draw breath for a moment. When he thought he had his desire under control, he flashed Mason a feral grin and gave him a light shove to tumble him back on the mattress, following him down. Mason's legs spread readily for him, hooking loosely around his hips and Beau shuddered.

He paused, fingers probing, not wanting to hurt Mason, but he'd barely gotten one finger inside that clutching tight heat before Mason was the one shaking his head and stopping Beau's hand.

"Now, Beau. I'm okay, just, god, fuck me!" His eyes were wild, his voice edged with frantic need and Beau groaned.

He couldn't say no if he'd tried, which he didn't. He gave a little nod and instead moved his hand to grasp the base of his cock, guiding it into position and another bonedeep shudder racked him as his cock slid against Mason's entrance. He was so hot there, hot and Beau could feel him contracting as his lover moved restlessly beneath him.

Beau gritted his teeth to keep from just driving inside, instead beginning to gently push within as slowly as he could, though, Christ, it was the hardest thing he'd ever had to do when Mason whimpered and arched toward him. His mouth came down on his lover's, tongue sliding deep, swallowing all those sweet, sexy sounds and giving Mason his own in return.

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Their bodies moved in unison, Mason's lifting to take him in as Beau pushed forward until he was balls-deep and, without even a second to adjust, Mason was rocking his hips in encouragement. Beau took it, breaking the kiss and staring down into half-lidded eyes as he began to thrust. Deep and hard, and he swore he was going to lose his mind.

Mason was tight, the heat scorching him and his lover clenched repeatedly, as if trying to draw him even deeper. Impossible, since Beau was as deep inside Mason as he'd ever been inside anyone. But nonetheless he tried and Mason tried and when Mason shifted his leg up over Beau's shoulder, they achieved the deeper penetration both craved.

Beau's growls were met with short sharp cries, Mason's whimpers echoed by ragged moans torn from Beau with every movement. It was wild and sweat slicked them and Beau never wanted it to end.

Too soon, though, far too soon for either of them, it crashed toward its climax. Beau's hips snapped hard, Mason's bucked equally as forcefully and the sound of skin meeting skin echoed in the room along with their breathless pants and grunts. Beau groaned and slammed his mouth down onto Mason's swollen lips, tongue thrusting in rhythm with his hips and tangling with Mason's. He wanted to never get the taste of him out of his mouth.

Mason tore his mouth free with a ragged cry. "Beau!"

Beau knew just what he was shouting about, because his own body was clamoring toward orgasm whether he wanted it to or not. He growled an encouragement and with a mingled mutual cry they came, bucking and slipping messily against each other in a tangle of limbs and come and sweat.

Beau panted hard, collapsing after a long, stiff moment, his face burying in Mason's neck as he struggled to catch his breath. Good God. He'd never in his life felt anything that even resembled what they'd just experienced together. He couldn't move, couldn't breathe, and didn't give a flying fuck, either. This was as good as it got.

Mason lay there for what felt like forever, but was probably no more than ten minutes. Finally, he rolled to his side, eyes closing when Beau shifted to press against his back, spooned snugly behind him. Oh god. He wanted to melt against that warm body, let Beau's strong arms slide around him and hold him all night. And because he wanted it as bad as he did, he forced himself to move. He slid out of the bed and grabbed his robe, tying the silk around him like a suit of armor before he turned.

When he did, his breath caught in his throat. Beau in his bed, tawny curls a muss around his face, gray eyes hooded and a smile on his lips...it was a beautiful sight. One Mason could get very used to. He shook his head slightly, his voice cool when he spoke.

"You should probably go before anyone notices your truck still running out front."

Beau's expression changed instantly, and Mason tilted his chin, ruthlessly shoving aside the guilt and hurt when the young man frowned in confusion at him. This was not a good idea, and even though Beau didn't know it, Mason did. Best it end now. "You didn't think this changed anything, did you, Country?"

His heart wailed, as abruptly, Beau's demeanor hardened, though hurt gleamed brightly in those soft eyes. Mason ignored the way his heart pounded and the burning urge to fling himself back into Beau's arms.

Beau shook his head, shoving to his feet beside the bed and beginning to dress with jerky, angry motions. "No, I didn't, Mason. Maybe just for a second I might have been..."

He cut off and Mason flinched inwardly, wondering what he'd been about to say. It didn't matter, he didn't have a chance to find out and probably never would, as Beau grabbed his hoodie and stalked toward the door.

Beau paused with his hand on the door, glancing back over his shoulder. Mason gave him what he hoped was an implacable, dismissive look. He prayed the conflict roiling inside him wasn't visible.

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"You..." Beau paused, then shook his head sharply. "Never mind. I won't be bothering you again."

The sound of the door slamming behind Beau made Mason flinch hard. His breath rushed out in a broken gasp, arms wrapping around his waist as he sank down to sit on the edge of the bed before his trembling knees gave out on him. He closed his eyes, shaking his head and drawing several steadying breaths.

After several moments, he had himself under control and lifted his head. It was for the best. Beau ought to thank him. Because if he'd had his way, he might have stayed in those arms forever. And that would have been the tragedy.

The scent of Beau and sex permeated the sheets, and though he knew he should, Mason didn't change them before he curled up to sleep. He breathed the mingled scents in, telling himself with every breath that he wouldn't remember the way it smelled a week from now.

It was a lie and even his subconscious knew it.

# **Chapter Four**

Mason frowned as he peered at the little blinking computer in his taskbar. It swore that there was an internet connection, but damn if Mason could access it. The four-ohfour error page mocked him. He sighed. Dammit. His mother was going to have his hide if he didn't get in contact with her, but he'd hoped to email her and avoid an argument. He didn't want to call and hear the lecture that was sure to be coming.

Mason leaned back in the chair, glancing out of the window. For such a small town, Dixon had a lovely library. Neat and small, but well stocked in the given space. Mason liked it. It was quiet. And there was no angry mechanic glaring daggers at him.

It'd been two days, and Mason might have thought that he could avoid Beau until his car was done, but his belief had been disabused swiftly. In a town the size of Dixon, avoiding anyone was a feat of impossibility. Thus far he'd run into Beau on the street outside the diner, in the aisle at the market and once in the bathroom at the McDonald's.

It seemed the man was everywhere. And Mason was getting to the point that he might begin to hole up in his cabin at the inn and avoid him that way. Somehow, he didn't think that was the way it worked. Beau would find a way to torment him even in that case, Mason was sure.

As if on cue, Mason saw the door across the street to the hardware store swing open and Beau stepped out into the sunshine. Mason sighed softly, propping his chin in his hand as he watched him unbeknownst.

The sunlight played off Beau's golden curls, and he laughed at something someone inside the store said before letting the door swing shut behind him. As Mason watched, Beau stood on the sidewalk, peered at a list in his hand and then looked up, eyes

scanning the street as if trying to remember where else in his errands he was supposed to go. Instead, his eyes landed on Mason through the library window.

Mason froze, breath catching in his chest. The impact of those startling gray eyes even from this distance was shocking, stealing his breath and his strength. Mason stared back, unable to look away. He hadn't slept more than an hour at a time since that night. All he could think about was the beautiful man whose gaze currently seemed locked on him.

Mason swallowed hard, setting his laptop on the table beside him and rising slowly on shaky legs. Beau tensed, then his jaw firmed and he gave Mason a slow nod before turning away.

The loss of his eyes on him was almost painful and Mason gasped, pressing a hand to his stomach. He had the sudden feeling that if he let Beau walk away, he would never get more than an emotionless look from those eyes again, and when he was gone Beau would forget him without another thought. Even though that had been Mason's plan, the reality made everything in him reject it violently.

He left his laptop where it was and bolted for the door, dodging bookshelves. He jerked the door open and froze when Beau wasn't where he'd been. Then he spotted him halfway down the street. His breath caught and he jogged down the sidewalk.

"Beau!" He called, breathless.

Mason's heart tripped when Beau turned and the surprise evident in his face spurred Mason on. He hurried across the street to skid to a halt in front of Beau, pausing to catch his breath, cringing inwardly under the wary gaze Beau had leveled on him.

"Beau...I'm..."

Beau cut him off. "Your car isn't done yet. Part hasn't come in."

Mason shook his head, wincing at the icy tone of Beau's voice. He was an ass. He'd put that cold note there. God, he was a heel. "No. I know. That's not what...Beau,

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please, can I speak with you?" He glanced around, then back at Beau with an entreating look. "Privately?"

Beau seemed to consider it and Mason held his breath, not knowing if Beau would throw his offer back in his face. It would serve him right. And then Beau nodded. And Mason breathed a sigh of relief so strong it made him a bit dizzy.

"Yeah. There's nobody at the garage. I got some stuff to do still, meet me there in an hour?"

Mason nodded immediately, taking a step back, not willing to let Beau change his mind. "Sure. Sure. I'll be there in an hour. Okay." He nodded sharply and turned to jog back toward the library before Beau could take the offer back.

He leaned heavily against the door as it shut behind him, eyes closed. He had no idea what he was going to say, exactly, just that he didn't want Beau to hate him. He didn't want Beau to remember him with bad feelings. Mason knew nothing could ever come of their encounter, but for reasons he couldn't explain, the thought of the brighteyed young man thinking of him with animosity and regret made Mason want to curl up and cry.

Mason took a heavy breath and opened his eyes, pushing away from the door. He had a chance, though. Maybe he could fix the mess he'd created two nights ago.

\* \* \* \* \*

Beau frowned, pacing the garage as he waited for Mason to show. Why he was bothering, he didn't know. He should have listened to that inner voice and never gone to Mason's cabin that night. Should have just let him fend for himself. Mason certainly had no qualms about letting Beau fend for himself. His jaw clenched. Like he needed Mr. City for anything. Beau Gaines could take care of himself. Didn't need no big shot coming through messing up his life.

So why'd your heart start pounding right through your chest when he came up to you today? What'd you expect him to say? What d'you think he's gonna say now? That he loves you?

Beau scowled. That was stupid. He didn't want Mason to love him. They barely knew each other. Love didn't work that way. It took time and effort and grew over time. It didn't burst out full-blown from nothing. Just because a pair of big ocean-blue eyes had told him things very different from what had come out of Mason's mouth the other night?

Then why're you even agreeing to talk to him? He probably just wants another good fuck. You gonna be his easy country lay?

*Shut the fuck up*. Beau ignored the mocking in his head and turned with a start at the sound of steps crunching the gravel in the garage parking lot. He held his breath and let it out in a shaky rush as Mason came around the corner.

"Hi."

Beau nodded shortly, clearing his throat and pretending to fiddle with some tools on the shelf. "Hey. What'd you need?"

He glanced over and his gaze skittered away and back again as Mason moved closer. He was too beautiful. Dangerously so. Everything about him had warning bells going off inside Beau from the beginning. Now they were beyond warning bells and had moved on to full-blown nuclear meltdown sirens blaring inside his mind.

But there was something in Mason's eyes, a hint of vulnerability that called to him. He'd never been able to tolerate people hurting. It went against everything in him. It was in his nature to want to help, make it better. His momma used to think he was going to grow up to be a doctor or something, with the way he'd tried to always fix everybody.

"I needed to apologize." Shame laced Mason's tone and his ocean eyes were wary and guilty. "I'm sorry, Beau. I behaved like an ass and I'm sorry. I should never have treated you that way."

Beau pursed his lips, feeling again the sharp knife of hurt and embarrassment he'd felt the other night. Because even though he'd told Mason he hadn't expected what happened to change anything, the truth was he had been lying there thinking it'd be nice to hold onto Mason for a while longer. Maybe a long while.

"Then why did you?"

Mason flushed, shifting a bit and looking as though he'd hoped Beau wouldn't ask that. And like he'd rather get his teeth pulled than answer.

"Beau..."

Beau shook his head. "No. You can't apologize unless you know what your apologizing for. Why'd you kick me outta your bed, Mason, without so much as 'Thanks for the fun'?"

Mason sighed and ran a hand through his hair, mussing the neatly smoothed dark locks, sending a few unruly strands tumbling across his forehead. Beau remembered vividly how that hair had looked rumpled and tumbling from his hands in it, from their loving.

"I don't know. Beau, I'm not...I don't do well with people. I don't deal with them well. That's pretty clear, I think." He met Beau's eyes and seemed to be hoping for a reprieve from saying any more. Beau wasn't of a mind to give him one and Mason sighed again.

"I don't do things like that. Sleep with men I barely know, let alone ones who make me feel like I'm out of control. I don't do out of control, Beau. I can't."

Beau tilted his head. He thought about that. Mason was afraid. He wouldn't say so in as many words, but that was what it was, Beau was sure. What was he afraid of, though, exactly? Beau didn't quite know, but had a sudden insatiable need to find out. He nodded. "All right. You can make it up to me by buying me dinner." Beau ignored the incredulous look on Mason's face, turning away to begin to organize the toolbox. "I'll pick you up at seven and we'll drive over to Dothan."

Beau glanced at Mason out of the corner of his eye. The other man looked shellshocked, but he nodded after a second.

"All right. I'll...I'll see you then."

Beau grinned to himself as Mason tucked tail and all but bolted from the garage. He had a plan. Tonight was just step one.

Beau had been thinking the past couple of days about what Mason had said in the diner that first night. Beau had asked him if he didn't have any dreams, and he was willing to bet Mason's assertion that he didn't, was a lie. There was something that man wanted, something he craved, and Beau was either going to find out what it was or drive them both nuts trying.

He had given up wondering why he was so fascinated with Mason. It was just one of those things. It just was. There was simply something about Mason that got under Beau's skin and their night together had only strengthened the insatiable curiosity about him. And when Beau got curious? He was tenacious in his quest to figure out the puzzle.

Mason was the most confusing puzzle he'd encountered in a long time. Which only made Beau that much more intent on figuring him out. That there might be more to it than mere curiosity was a possibility, one he didn't discount. But he'd cross that bridge when he needed to blow it up.

## **Chapter Five**

Mason stared at his reflection in the mirror. He looked fine, he thought. So why was he still standing there staring at himself like he'd never seen his own face before? His hair was neat and in place, his deep eggplant colored shirt was crisp and unwrinkled, the black suit jacket over it just as crisply smooth. His shoes shone and his Rolex glinted at his wrist. And yet he stood there staring at himself as if he were clad in rags and unbathed, worrying what Beau would think.

You're being foolish. The brat will probably laugh at your fancy clothes. Loosen up, he'll say. And maybe he'll muss your hair with his fingers. Mason's inner voice gave a soft sigh at the idea. Mason had to agree. He could have changed into something more casual, but suddenly he was hoping maybe Beau would do just that, laugh that free laugh of his and tousle Mason's hair before taking him to some greasy spoon in the next town.

*He's dangerous*. Mason sighed. Beau was very dangerous, despite being endearingly untainted and full of life and bright smiles. He was dangerous for just those reasons. Oh how Mason craved that. How long had it been since he'd had a glimmer of a light like that in his life?

## Never.

Mason sighed and shook his head. Innocence paired with mischievous silver eyes and the passion of a succubus. Beau was as dangerous as they came. And Mason was as helpless as a moth drawn to the deadly flame; knowing he was flying right toward his destruction, but unwilling to avoid the beauty of it.

The sound of tires crunching outside set every nerve in Mason on edge. His hands trembled as he lifted them to smooth his already smooth hair. He wet his lips nervously, some part of him amused that a backwoods laborer was able to unwittingly send him into a tailspin. He wondered if Beau knew what he did.

Before he could ponder that question any longer, there was a honk and Mason chuckled despite himself. How very like the brat. He shook his head and tucked his wallet into his back pocket and his room key before stepping outside.

He couldn't see Beau, the headlights making the cab of the truck impossible to decipher within. Mason locked the door behind him and came around to the passenger side. He climbed up into the cab before he actually looked at Beau.

His breath ceased completely.

Beau had done something to tame his curls, they were less unruly and framed his strong-jawed face. He wore what Mason suspected might be his best suit. Maybe his Sunday suit. Charcoal gray with a vivid blue shirt that made his silvery eyes gleam with a blue tint, like the full moon on a clear night. And he smelled like soap and spice, the scent of him achingly familiar despite the short time Mason had known he even existed.

"Oh," he breathed, and his soft exhaled word broke the tension, a smile spreading across Beau's face.

"Oh yourself. Wow."

Wow, was right. Mason wanted to touch him, smooth a hand over his hair to see if it was as soft as it looked, to run a hand down the center of his chest and feel the heat of his skin through the fabric of that wildly blue shirt. He wanted to lean over and taste those smiling lips. Would that he had the right to do just that. But he didn't, so he stayed where he was, drinking Beau in with his eyes instead.

"You look beautiful." It was something meant more for women than for a man as masculinely breathtaking as Beau, but it was all his suddenly dumb tongue could come up with.

Beau ducked his head and gave him a sideways smile as he slid the truck into gear and began to back out of the drive. "You're gonna give me a swelled head if you keep that up."

Mason's mind took a wicked turn and he nearly blurted that he hoped he did just that later on, when he would strip that pretty suit from Beau and taste him. He cleared

his throat, telling himself firmly to forget thoughts like that. He'd made a mistake with Beau the first night, he certainly was not going to compound it by repeating the same error in judgment. This was merely a white flag of sorts, his way of apologizing for being an ass. Not an invitation to start being a fool again.

He glanced over at Beau as they pulled onto the highway a moment or two later. "So where are we going? Or, shall I say, where am I taking you, since I do believe this was supposed to be me making it up to you for my behavior?"

Beau flashed him a smile and a wink. "You'll see."

Mason nodded, for once making himself not fret about things. He wanted to spend this time with Beau, despite the dangerous currents between them. Surely he was mature enough by now to be able to resist temptation and simply enjoy Beau's company on a friendly level.

The silence was companionable, not heavy and suffocating. That was a first for Mason. He hadn't ever known anyone that made silence feel like something to be savored, not to be filled. Beau did that, though. It was nice. More than nice, actually.

"I heard from the parts shop today. They said..."

Mason shook his head, cutting Beau off. "Don't. No business tonight. I'll stop by tomorrow morning and you can tell me as a client. Not tonight?" He didn't know why that was important, but from the way Beau looked over at him and the warm smile he gave him, it had been the right thing to say.

"Okay, Mason."

Mason smiled and leaned back on the seat. He rolled the window down a bit, not even caring about the fact that his neatly groomed hair was being wind-tossed now. It felt good and he closed his eyes, tipping his face back a bit as the breeze washed over him. The air smelled different here. The whole world felt different here. Fresh, new, unspoiled. Instead of smog and exhaust, he smelled freshly cut clover and new tilled dirt. Flowers and the sharp odor of livestock that wasn't unpleasant, but simply real. He inhaled deeply and sighed the breath out with a smile.

When his eyes opened, it was to find Beau watching him. Mason's brows arched and he glanced at the road. "Shouldn't you be watching where you're going?" His voice was quiet in the dark of the cab, feeling like anything louder would break some unseen spell.

Beau shook his head, as if breaking free of a trance and did as Mason suggested. The loss of his gaze was like having his breath ripped from his lungs. Mason craved to have it back and didn't take his eyes from Beau's profile.

"Do you like it here?"

Beau's question startled Mason and he blinked several times as he processed it and then gave it some thought. "I don't know. It's very different. Serene. I don't know how well I'd handle serenity."

Beau glanced over at him and Mason drank in the heavy brush of his silver gaze. "You like chaos instead?"

Mason shook his head, swallowing hard. "No. But it's what I'm used to."

Beau nodded, silent for a moment before he offered Mason a tiny smile. "Being used to something isn't the same as wanting it."

Oh how true that was. Mason nodded, throat tightening. "No, it's not. It's safe, though, isn't it? The familiar?" His cynical inner voice quailed at the revealing statement, but it seemed Mason's censor failed when faced with Beau's wide-open easy nature.

Beau hummed in agreement. "I s'pose. Familiar can be good. Can be bad too, though, I think." His eyes flicked over to meet Mason's through the shadows lit only by the dashboard clock. "Which is yours?"

Mason squirmed inwardly and shook his head, shifting on the seat. He shrugged noncommittally. "I don't know. I've never thought about it." Yet another lie that burned his throat with bile. He'd lived those lies for so long, why did he have such trouble telling them to Beau? What was it about this man that tipped his entire existence on its ear without him even trying?

Beau stared at him for a moment, his eyes shrewd and knowing in a way Mason would never have suspected. Don't judge a book by its cover, Beau had told him the first day. How true that was becoming.

"Do you like fried chicken?"

The abrupt change of topic jolted Mason and it took his skittering mind several beats to catch up. "I...Yes. Why?"

Beau gestured with his thumb to the bed of the truck as he turned the truck off the highway and down a dirt-packed access road.

Mason turned in the seat to peer through the back window into the bed and his eyes widened at the sight of a pile of blankets and a heavy-looking wicker basket. He laughed abruptly, too shocked to think about censoring himself. "You brought us a picnic dinner, Country?"

Beau chuckled and nodded. "Sure did, City. Haven't you ever had a picnic before?"

Mason settled back on the seat and shook his head. "No, not that I recall."

Beau tsked as he slowed, the truck bumping over the unpaved road. "That's a shame. Good thing you found me, huh?"

Mason bit his lip as he turned his head to stare out the window. Was it a good thing? Their eyes met in the glass and he smiled slightly. Yes. He thought maybe it was a good thing he had found Beau. His stomach lurched suddenly. *Please God, don't let me fuck this up. Don't let me hurt him.* 

\* \* \* \* \*

Beau slowed the truck to a stop and shut it off, flipping the key forward for the auxiliary power and flipped on the radio, rolling down his window before hopping out and leaving the door ajar. He peeked into the cab, where Mason still sat, and grinned. "Well, c'mon, roll down your window and reach back to unlatch the rear one, would you?"

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He didn't wait for an answer, moving around to the rear of the truck and lowering the tailgate. He had the blankets spread out in the bed by the time Mason climbed out of the cab and came around to peer at him warily.

Beau just smiled and reached a hand down, arching his brows when Mason hesitated. "It's just dinner, Mason."

Mason seemed to gather himself and nodded. A tingle of awareness shivered through Beau as Mason took his hand and climbed awkwardly up into the bed, giving Beau a narrow-eyed look that said he maybe ought to have warned him to not overdress. Beau just grinned. He'd overdressed himself. For reasons he hadn't examined too closely, but he thought had a lot to do with wanting Mason to see that even a country boy with mud in his veins could clean up pretty darn good.

He kicked off his shoes, though, grateful when his bare toes were free of the confines and sat down cross-legged on the blankets. He gestured to the spot beside him. "Sit. I ain't gonna bite." He laughed at the loaded arch look Mason gave him. "Maybe."

He snickered as Mason settled himself down beside him. Beau reached into the basket and pulled out the meal he'd nicked in bits and pieces from his momma's fridge, Lillian's pantry and the diner all combined. It was quite a spread, though, and worth the effort. The sultry notes of Lonestar filtered through the darkness from the cab. It was, he had to say, a damn appealing scene.

Mason took the beer Beau offered him, his blue eyes dark and uncertain. "Beau...what's going on?"

Beau gave him his best innocent look. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, aren't I supposed to be taking you out to dinner? You do remember demanding I do that, right?"

Beau shrugged, biting into a piece of crusty fresh bread. "I don't like fancy restaurants. Never enough food and it always looks like it ought to not be eaten. Like those fancy couches people have that you aren't allowed to sit on."

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"Like my mother's house." Mason's voice was soft and Beau tilted his head curiously.

"Tell me about your family."

Mason's head shot up and his eyes widened, then shook his head with a cynical, hard laugh. Beau didn't like that laugh. "Oh no. Trust me, you want to know nothing about them."

Beau kept his gaze steady on Mason. He didn't say anything, just looked at him expectantly. After several long seconds, Mason huffed.

"Beau. They're not exactly pleasant dinner conversation."

Beau leaned back against the tire well, tipping his own beer back. "So? They're your family. They made you what you are. I'm curious."

Mason's jaw clenched and Beau almost took back the question. But he didn't. There was so much to this man, so many layers hidden and Beau was determined to peel them all back one by one. All he knew was that it was important, even if he didn't quite grasp why yet. He'd learned to go with his gut, it never failed him.

Oh how he hated the jaded, cool tone of Mason's husky voice when he spoke, though. "Let's see. My father died when I was twelve. Not that I really noticed; he was home less than a month or two a year total. I barely knew him."

Beau's heart tugged, feeling for that little boy who hadn't ever gotten the chance to know his father and then it was too late. He didn't interrupt, though, chewing a piece of bread slowly bit by bit and let Mason continue.

"My mother...well, now my mother is a story all her own. She married my father for his money. I know this because she told me often enough when I was little. How she'd never wanted children, but it was the only way to secure her 'share' of my father's money. Yes, my mother is a warm woman, really." The sarcasm was heavy. "She's been married three times since, none of them lasting more than a couple of years. In fact, that's where I was heading when I broke down. Wedding number four. Five, I suppose if you count my father." Mason gave a cynical laugh and took a long swig of the beer. "I wonder if she'll wear white again."

Beau tilted his head, listening, hearing the words Mason wasn't saying. "That had to hurt. Still does, I bet. Mommas aren't supposed to be that way, are they?"

Mason's eyes, narrowed and filled with turbulent emotions, met Beau's and the force of the other man's look stole Beau's breath. How long had Mason kept this bottled up inside? Didn't he have anyone to let it out to? It made Beau inexpressibly sad to think he might not.

"It doesn't hurt anymore. I don't let it."

Beau wanted to reach out and touch his cheek, maybe slip an arm around him, but he had the feeling that if he did it'd be rejected and Mason would stop talking altogether. And he felt like Mason needed to talk about this. So he nodded. "All right."

Mason's eyes narrowed. "You don't believe me."

Beau shook his head. "It's not that. I think you believe it. I just don't think hurting is something you can stop or start when you want. It don't just go away 'cause you want it to."

Mason's jaw clenched and he looked away. "No, it doesn't. It takes practice and years of being shown and told that you are nothing but a meal ticket and an inconvenience."

Beau's insides melted, sadness filling him. "Mason..."

"Don't." Mason shook his head sharply. "Don't pity me."

"I don't." It was true too. Mason gave him a doubtful glare and Beau clarified. "I pity your family. They're missing out on knowing a good man. That's a shame."

Mason shook his head again, and Beau could almost see the walls climbing into place. He wanted to knock them all down, but he knew better than to try that moment. Mason had bared more of himself than he'd expected, that was clear, and to push him now was just stupid. Beau wasn't stupid. So he changed the subject. "What do you do, Mason? You like your job?"

Mason didn't relax and Beau realized too late that he'd chosen a bad subject. Damn. Was there no joy in this man's life? Beau decided then and there that Mason breaking down definitely hadn't been bad luck or chance. It'd been fate. Beau was going to give Mason something to smile about. Even if Mason did walk away when their time together was over, Beau was determined he'd walk away having had something good for once in his life.

Of course, he was going to do his best to make sure that walking away from Beau and Dixon was not going to be something that Mason found easy to do. And when Beau Gaines put his mind to something? It got done.

# **Chapter Six**

Mason turned in a slow circle, head tipped back, amazed. "I don't think I've ever seen so many stars. Is it always like this?"

He felt Beau move to stand behind him, without even looking. That was how strong the young man's presence was.

"A lot, yeah. They're extra bright tonight. Look like you could just reach up and take one to keep in your pocket, don't they?"

Mason nodded. He might like that, a star to keep in his pocket, to bring back to his dull, gray life and pull out every now and then to admire the sparkle. But he didn't think it worked that way. A star taken from the sky would die out. He glanced back at Beau, his silvery eyes resembling the shade of those stars. Would he die out too, if taken from his sky? Mason never wanted to find out. He'd sooner cut his heart from his chest before see the light in Beau's eyes go out.

"You're very lucky, Beau. You have no idea how lucky." Bitterness and a tinge of envy laced his voice. What he wouldn't have given, all his life, to have even a fraction of the life Beau had. Simple, loved, warm, full of people who cared and he cared about.

"You know what I think about luck, Mason. Fate put me here. That's all. Fate put you here too, you know."

Mason turned to face him fully, frowning. "What does that mean?" They were a dozen or so yards from the truck, but the faint strains of music reached them. The only light was that of the stars and moon, bright enough to illuminate Beau with a gilded glow.

Beau shrugged. "I don't know. Just facts, is all. Don't you think everything happens for a reason? I don't know what the reason is, but you're here and you weren't a week ago, so there's a reason for it. You gotta figure out what that is, not me." Mason was suddenly irrationally angry at that. He made it seem so simple. As if Fate were handing him Dixon, Alabama, and Beau on a platter and all he had to do was reach out and take them. Simple. Only it wasn't and it made him angry that Beau didn't seem to realize that.

"Lord save me, Beau, you are so disgustingly naïve. You don't get it, do you? This is not a fork in my road. This is not a set of road signs and some turning point. This is a mistake."

Beau's eyes narrowed, but his voice was just as irritatingly calm. "Seems to me your road damn sure did take a turn here. Not to make a bad pun, but your road pretty much kicked you right off the blacktop and into my dirt."

Mason let out a rough, cynical laugh, pacing away a few steps before spinning back to face Beau. "Why am I even listening to this? You don't know anything about my life, Beau, nothing at all. And I am certainly not going to enlighten you any further. Me and my road will be on our way as soon as that car is fixed, so don't get any delusional hillbilly ideas about love after ever in the trailer park, mmkay?"

Beau snarled, stalking forward so quickly that Mason was too startled to make a getaway, before Beau caught him. He flinched, not because he was afraid Beau might hit him, but because the warmth of the young man's rough, calloused hands on his arms, even through his shirt, was enough to make him weak. Strong hands. Hands that had worked harder than Mason's ever had. Hands that he knew could be both infinitely gentle and arousingly hard.

He felt dizzy as he stared at Beau, quailing inwardly at the stormy expression on his face. So beautiful; he was so beautiful. It was a testament to Mason's clear break with reality that he was furious, but still noticing how goddamn gorgeous the man was.

Mason's heart pounded as he stared into flashing silver-gray eyes and squirmed inwardly because what he'd said had been deliberately cruel. God, why did he keep lashing out? Why couldn't he just once be normal and embrace something, someone, like Beau?

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Before Beau could speak, before Mason could think and talk himself out of it, he wrapped his arms around the other man's neck and kissed him. Hard, deep, desperate. Beau's arms came around him immediately, fingers fisting in Mason's shirt, and he held his breath, expecting it to be torn from him.

Mason broke the kiss, panting in sobbing little breaths against Beau's lips. "Make me believe. Just once, Beau. Please," he pleaded, shaking. If Beau had been about to say something, Mason would never know what, because the other man groaned and bore him swiftly to the ground.

He gasped, arching and clinging to Beau. He didn't know what it was, why it was this man who should never have been thrown into Mason's path, but he needed and his every instinct screamed that Beau was the one who could give whatever it was. Beau could show him, teach him.

Mason's hands moved frantically over Beau's shoulders and back, under his shirt and splaying greedily over the smooth, warm skin that tempted him so greatly. He couldn't get enough, like a starving man offered sustenance for the first time in years. He'd been waiting for this, for this man. Mason didn't know how he knew, just that he did. With a certainty that even his cynicism couldn't deny.

Beau must have sensed it and Mason let out a grateful cry when his clothes began to fly from his body. He didn't care about the small stones that dug into his back and ass, he needed this and he needed it now.

Beau, however, had other ideas and Mason gasped, eyes flying open and hurt shafting through him when Beau rose off him. He felt cold and so naked lying there on the ground in the moonlight for all of half a second, and then Beau bent and helped him to his feet and kissed him breathless. Mason latched onto him and the next thing he knew they were at the truck and he gasped again when Beau lifted him onto the tailgate.

Seconds later, Beau was beside him and they were stretched on the blankets, limbs tangling and mouths eager, hands even more so. Mason cried out at the first brush of

Beau's blunt fingertips against his entrance. His legs spread eagerly, hips jerking upward.

"Beau!" he cried, eyes burning as he writhed in supplication.

Beau gave him what he wanted, thrusting two fingers deep inside him, but he also bent low over Mason and nuzzled his cheek, murmuring soft, soothing tones that Mason didn't quite understand, but might have been endearments, might have been the words to some unknown song. All he knew was he reacted to that gentling tone and the frantic need that burned through him, though still present, was banked. He wound his arms around Beau, burying his face in his neck and just feeling. Something he hadn't done in as long as he could remember.

No control, no reservations, he was terrified, but Beau made it seem perfectly safe to fling his very soul at the young man's feet. So he did. And prayed Beau would catch it.

\* \* \* \* \*

There was a certain smell to a high school football game. Popcorn, dust that clung to the air, kicked up by the battle going on down on the field. Too many people in one place and the overwhelming zing of excitement. Mason couldn't recall the last time he went to a sporting event, and certainly never one the likes of this football game.

"See, now, that's Joey Nichols. His dad runs the hardware store and he's our best running back. Carried for one hundred fifty yards last game alone."

Beau was sitting beside him, chewing a hot dog as he gestured animatedly to the field with his soda cup. Mason couldn't help but smile, paying attention, but far more interested in the way Beau's silvery eyes lit up as he explained the rivalry between the two teams.

"Did you play? When you were in school?" Mason could see that Beau looked the type to have been on teams and probably the most popular boy in school. All the girls must have gone wild for him. He wondered who Beau had gone wild for.

"Yup! Football, baseball and wrestling. I'm too short to be a receiver, even though I wanted to be. Instead I found a niche as a tailback. Sometimes running the ball, sometimes protecting the guy who got it instead." Beau glanced over and Mason felt the impact of those bright eyes. "What about you? You play in school?"

Mason shook his head, setting the greasy slice of pizza Beau had bought him down on the bleacher beside him. "No. I was too busy studying, getting ready for SATs and ACTs and prepping college applications." He'd never really been the athletic type, though he would admit that he kind of wished he could have been, at least at the time. No one harassed the captain of the basketball team. They sure did the captain of the debate team, though.

It drove home yet again how very different he and Beau were. Beau had been the type other students swarmed to, just wanting a moment in the glow of his aura. Mason had been the type other students only approached when they needed the answers to a test. And yet sitting there beside Beau, with the crowd going insane around them due to something that had happened down on the field, Mason didn't feel like that nerdy kid. Instead, he felt privileged to be allowed to bask in Beau's presence, as if the air of him might rub off and transfer just a little of that lust for life to Mason.

They hadn't discussed what had happened the night before, for which Mason was grateful. He wasn't exactly ready to face up to what he'd done. He wasn't even ready to put a name to it. So he didn't bother to try to push the thoughts aside, focusing instead on the here and now.

That was his new mantra. Don't worry, just enjoy. Too soon the time would come when he would have to face reality, but for now, and for as long as he could, Mason intended to bury his head in the sand and not think. It was easier than he would have suspected. It had a lot to do with Beau, he thought. Beau made it very easy to forget anything but being with him.

"Do you want to go out after and grab some food? Everybody usually congregates down on the main drag."

Beau's voice broke through Mason's reverie and he scrambled to focus. Mason's lower lip drew into his mouth as he considered the invitation. He didn't want the night to be over, but he wasn't sure he wanted to be around a bunch of people, either. People who would wonder what the big city out-of-towner was doing hanging out with their local golden boy. But when he opened his mouth to refuse, Beau chose that moment to smile imploringly at him.

"All right." Mason sighed inwardly. The man had a lethal weapon on his hands with that smile. Mason would probably agree to anything just to have Beau look at him like that. It was a dangerous idea, and Mason quickly pushed the thought aside before his internal cynic could start quailing and bitching.

Mason was grateful he'd agreed when Beau's smile turned into a bright, boyish grin. Oh yes, lethal. Mason smiled and shook his head, turning back to the game. He didn't quite understand what was going on, but it wasn't hard to catch on as the game progressed. It was close and heated, the rivalry obviously intense. To his surprise, Mason found himself beginning to get involved and invested in the battle, cheering along with Beau and the rest of the crowd and before he knew it he was flinging curses at the refs and heckling the visiting team's squad.

By the time the Dixon Bulldogs eked out a narrow twenty-six to twenty-four win, Mason's voice was raspy from yelling and he was breathless from the excitement he'd gotten caught up in. He grinned and turned to Beau as they rose from their seats.

"Wow! I should have been watching football a lot sooner! It's fascinating, much more strategy to it than I expected. That double eagle flex defense you explained is brilliant, it's really what won the game for you." Mason paused at the way Beau was grinning at him. "What?"

Beau just shook his head, chuckling as they slid their way through the slowly moving crowd down the bleachers. "Nothing. I just like seeing you all excited like that. I'm glad you had fun, Mason. We have another game next Fri…" Beau cut off suddenly, clamping his mouth shut.

Mason's stomach sank, his excitement fizzling like a campfire in the rain. "Yeah."

Beau looked back over his shoulder at him and then reached back to squeeze his shoulder. "It's all right. Promise you'll go see a game or two down there in Florida. The Gators are real good."

Mason nodded mutely, knowing full well that he would never do any such thing. He had no desire to go sit in a crowded stadium feeling entirely alone because Beau wasn't there beside him deconstructing the offense with visual aid of a pile of cold French fries.

They were silent all the way to the parking lot. They'd gotten there a bit late, as it'd been a last-minute decision to go to the game at all, so the truck was parked in the back, away from the rest of the crowded lot. Beau didn't open the door right away, instead standing there beside the driver's side for a few seconds, long enough for Mason to look through the cab from the passenger side, wondering what he was waiting for.

His brows furrowed as Beau came around the truck toward him, heart pounding and glancing around. There were so many people, so Beau wasn't planning on kissing him or anything, he didn't think. He still instinctively took a step back. He immediately regretted it when Beau's eyes filled with a wordless hurt.

## "What?"

Beau shook his head. "I don't know. I just...you're gonna go home and nothing's gonna be different, is it? You're not gonna remember me or Dixon and you'll be just as unhappy as you were before you came, aren't you?"

Mason pushed away the stirring of guilt, shaking his head. "No. No, Beau, I won't forget you. You or this place."

"But it'll be the same miserable, empty life, won't it?"

Mason wanted to lie to him, tell Beau that he'd change his life and be happy, but he knew that just wasn't true. So he shrugged. "My life is fine. I'm hardly miserable. I'm...content."

Beau's eyes narrowed thoughtfully and then a slow smile spread across his face. Lord, the man was stunning when he smiled. Mason had learned last night that Beau had a habit of smiling his way through sex too.

Just the mere remembrance of the night before as well as the first night was enough to make Mason shiver and wonder if Beau would want to come inside when he brought him home.

After a moment of Beau just smiling at him like that, Mason squirmed. "What? Stop staring at me."

Beau chuckled and shook his head. "Get in the truck, Mason. I got someplace I want to show you."

Mason frowned when Beau said nothing more. However, it only took a few seconds of debate, about as long as it took for Beau to circle around to the driver's side, for Mason to decide he was going to stick by his decision. He'd made it last night in the midst of Beau driving him out of his mind. That might be an indication it was a crazy decision, but Mason didn't care.

He was going to live. If just for this week, for these too-short days with Beau, Mason was going to live and have something, just for once, to look back on and remember in a good way. A lifetime crammed into one week.

He clambered up into the truck. Which meant he wasn't wasting a second of it worrying about what-ifs and tomorrows. Today was all that mattered.

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## **Chapter Seven**

"Who lives here?"

Beau glanced over his shoulder at Mason, then back toward the huge, empty house. "No one. Yet."

He could sense Mason approaching, even if he hadn't been able to hear his footsteps crunching on the dirt and grass clods.

"I don't understand."

Beau smiled, reaching out and taking Mason's hand. "Come on." He led his lover toward the house, looming up out of the darkness and shadows like a monolith. The local kids claimed it was haunted, but Beau didn't believe it. Ever since he could remember, he'd been fascinated by this house.

The porch stairs creaked and groaned under their weight and Mason's hand tightened on Beau's. He liked that, the subtle way Mason sought reassurance, or maybe it was protection. Beau's insides clamored, stomach fluttering. He wanted to turn and pull Mason into his arms and promise to protect him from everything, not just a creaky old house. He couldn't, though. Mason would huff and bluster about not needing him and Beau didn't think he could handle that. Not now, in this place.

Beau bent, still holding Mason's hand, and tossed back the faded, dirty welcome rug. For a second he was afraid someone had moved the key or taken it altogether, but no, there it was. His fingers closed on the cool metal and he straightened.

Mason gave a tug on his hand, shaking his head. "Beau, I don't think it's safe. It looks like it's about to fall down around our ears."

Beau peered up at the house, then back at Mason. "Nope. It's old, but it's sound. Trust me." That was the key. Did Mason trust him? Beau didn't think so, but he hoped.

It was his biggest weakness. Hoping. And also his greatest strength, or so his momma said.

Mason might not trust him, but he didn't protest and followed closely behind Beau as he unlocked the door and stepped inside. Something sizzled along Beau's skin, a sort of awareness. Home. This felt like home. It always had, from the first time he'd snuck in when he was seven years old. It felt even more like home now, with Mason beside him.

"What are we doing here?"

Beau pressed a finger to his lips. "Shhh. Don't want to disturb the ghosts." Through the shadows in the entryway, Beau could see the arched brows and incredulous look Mason was giving him and chuckled. "All right, so there's not any ghosts. Just don't tell the local kids that or else they might start getting ideas about this place being a good make out, party spot."

Mason snorted softly as Beau removed his finger. "I don't believe you're allowed to be crotchety just yet."

Beau dug out a lighter from his pocket and lit it. That quickly, Mason's teasing was silenced. Beau's heart jumped. Did he feel it too? The sense of coming home? He held his breath, watching Mason. Hoping.

Mason released Beau's hand, doing a slow turn and taking in the entryway. It was huge and the ceilings rose a good twenty feet, the second floor visible from where they stood. A massive staircase led up to it, the finish faded and peeling, but even in the faint light of the flame and the moon slicing through the great windows, it was clear the workmanship on the carved banister and the matching balustrade that moved around the circumference of the open second level was high quality. Beau ran a hand lovingly over the wood. One day.

"Oh Beau..." Quiet reverence filled Mason's whispered voice, the same voice one might use in a church or other holy sanctuary. This was no church and Beau was no priest, but he understood the feeling.

"I know. It's beautiful, isn't it?"

Mason nodded, still turning in slow circles to take it all in. "How old is it?"

Beau grinned. He'd thought the history of the place, if nothing else, might draw Mason's interest. It looked like he'd been right. "Civil War era. It was used as a hospital during the war after the family who lived here had left for someplace safer. They never came back and it's been empty since the fifties." Beau climbed the first few steps of the staircase. Not a single squeak. "The historical society kept it fixed up real nice for a while, until the eighties when it was disbanded and ever since then...nothing."

Mason cast him a disbelieving glance. "Twenty-five years this place has been empty? Why? It's beautiful."

Beau shrugged. "Real estate isn't exactly booming, Mason. In case you hadn't noticed. Not down here anyway. Dixon got hit hard when the plant over in Harrison closed in '87. Never quite been the same." He was secretly a little selfishly glad for that, because it meant he'd never had to worry, really, that his dream house would be sold out from under him before he was able to buy it.

"Wow. Beau..." Mason smiled and took the first step, looking up at Beau. He looked as if he was seeing Beau for the first time. Beau couldn't help but hope that he liked what he saw better this time than he had that first impression at the garage.

"What? Now you're the one staring." He wasn't exactly uncomfortable with it, Beau had decided he liked Mason's eyes on him. Big and ocean blue, making Beau think of places he'd never seen, white-sand beaches and sunsets over the water. Beau would like to go there with Mason someday, when they were long past these awkward first steps and when Mason might let him lay him on the beautiful sand and love him under the stars.

"I was just thinking. You're not exactly what you appear, Beau." A small smile curved Mason's lips and Beau grinned in response. "I like it."

That was probably the best compliment Beau had ever gotten. And it was sincere, he could tell. Mason wasn't just saying it to make him feel better or to get something.

He truly was looking at Beau and thinking he liked what he saw. That made Beau's insides do jumpy, flippy things.

"Come on, wanna see upstairs?"

Mason's smile softened and he nodded. "Yeah, Country, I do." He slipped his hand into Beau's, and the way he said it and the smile he said it with made it more of a teasing endearment, him calling Beau "Country". Beau grinned and turned to head up the staircase. Mason held lightly to his hand and followed closely behind him.

There were half a dozen bedrooms and only one bathroom on both floors. Beau chuckled a little. "I'm gonna have to make at least one of these bedrooms into another bathroom. Still, plenty of room for a big family and lots of love, huh?"

That quickly, the smile faded from Mason's face and Beau could see the shutters slide down over his eyes. His hand slipped from Beau's and he turned away, nodded. "Yeah. It's perfect for a growing family."

Beau hesitated, then moved forward, slipping his arms around Mason's shoulders and squeezing him lightly from behind. "Hey. What's wrong?"

Mason let out a humorless laugh and Beau flinched. "Nothing, Beau. It's a beautiful house. You'll probably do a wonderful job fixing it up and make some woman very happy."

Beau realized at least part of what the problem was then. "You're a bad liar, Mason. Or you might be a good one, but I'm better at seeing right through them."

Mason turned his head, meeting Beau's eyes over his shoulder. "I'm not lying. I mean it, you're probably going to have a life just as charmed as the one you've had so far."

Beau shook his head, leaning in and nuzzling Mason's jaw, placing soft, nibbling kisses along the sharp, elegant angle. "I meant you were lying when you said nothing was wrong. It bothers you to think about me living here with some nameless, faceless girl." He grinned and gave Mason's jaw a nip. "Which is fine, 'cause I'm not real fond of the idea either. This house, yes. Some sweet girl who's never set foot outside this town?

No thanks." He grinned teasingly. "I'm coming to realize that I kinda like worldly, jaded, ocean-eyed men. I think maybe I'd like..." He cut off when Mason pulled slowly out of his arms, the look on his face enough to reach in and grab those newly budded hopes and crush them.

"Beau..."

Beau shook his head, cutting Mason off and pulling him back into his arms. "I know. You remember what I said about there being nothing wrong with believing nice things? That's a nice thing I'd like to believe in for a while. If you don't mind. You don't have to believe it too. You believe whatever makes you happy. That makes me happy."

He didn't let Mason say anything. He was honestly afraid of what Mason might say if he did. Something practical and designed to kill Beau's little dream. Except he didn't want it killed just yet. He wasn't even convinced it would be dying at all. He was a stubborn bastard and keeping Mason was quickly becoming the thing he wanted most.

Mason lost himself in the kiss Beau devoured him with. He wished the brat would stop doing that, kissing him senseless when he was planning on arguing about something. It had the effect of making Mason forget constantly what on earth he had been about to protest at all. He had the feeling that might be a part of Beau's plan.

But when those soft, sinful lips rubbed against his own and Beau's tongue swept sultry and wet into his mouth, Mason didn't care what he'd been about to say...had he been about to say anything? He couldn't remember. Instead he wound his arms around Beau's neck and kissed him back, moaning.

He forgot everything but Beau's taste, the feel of him wrapped so completely around him. He vaguely heard the lighter Beau had been holding clatter to the floor as Beau fisted his hands in his jacket. And then the jacket was being tugged down his arms and dropping to the floor as well.

That was the catalyst Mason needed, his hands becoming greedy on Beau and within less than the space of a breath, they went from just kissing to frantically pulling

clothes off to form a makeshift pallet on the floor where Beau lowered him. Mason gasped, the kiss breaking and his head tipped back to accommodate Beau's mouth as it slipped down to press hot, open-mouthed kisses down to nip at his collarbone.

No words came and Mason was grateful for it, preferring instead to speak with his body, his hands, telling Beau everything he couldn't seem to make come out of his mouth. Passion flared bright enough to light up the night and Mason moaned, twisting under the sweet assault of Beau's rough, blunt-fingered hands and wicked, hot mouth.

Skin was bared and warmed before the chill of the night air could settle in. Mason swore he could feel Beau digging his way into his heart and the fear of it was dulled by the absolute sense of rightness. He couldn't help falling right into his hands and somehow knew with utter confidence that Beau would catch him.

Mason slid one leg up to hook against Beau's lean hip, trembling when he felt the heat of his bare skin. Smooth and golden, warm against his own. Beau burned him up like a furnace and Mason was convinced he'd never be cold again as long as this man was holding him. He prayed he could keep that warmth with him long after he was gone from this place.

But that was for another time, not right now. Right now he wanted to know everything there was to know about Beau, to get under his skin in the same way Beau had to him. He wanted to carve himself there like a heart knifed into a tree trunk. Forever marking his place.

Beau seemed intent on doing the same thing, his hands firm as they moved over Mason, tweaking his nipples, stroking over the planes of his stomach, the curve of his hip. Mason had never felt more completely consumed by anyone or anything as he did by Beau Gaines. He had the brief, unwelcome thought that he could feel this way forever if he wanted. On some unspoken level, he knew exactly what Beau's "nice things" were. It was a sweet ache inside him and he let himself imagine what it might be like.

To be with Beau. To rebuild this elegant old house with him. To create a home and a family together. To wake up every morning and see those silvery eyes watching him from the next pillow. And instead of being frightened by it, by what kind of havoc he might wreak on such a beautiful dream, Mason found himself warming inside at the idea. He clung to Beau and moved beneath him, a part of his heart and mind crying out to Beau to make it so, make it real and more than just a nice thing to temporarily dream about.

Mason opened his eyes, staring up through the shadows to meet Beau's eyes. Eyes he could imagine always would look at him just this way. Like he was beautiful and special and worthy of it all. It was a foolish dream, but oh-so beautiful even still.

And then Beau smiled. Open, warm, not an ounce of shadow in it. It took Mason's breath away and his heart thudded in his chest as he reached up to place on hand against Beau's cheek. He stared up at him in awe and wonder.

"How do you do that?" he wondered aloud, voice breathless.

"Do what?"

Mason shook his head with a rueful smile of his own. "Smile that way. Feel so much. How do you not be crushed under it all? Doesn't anything frighten you?"

Beau nodded, turning his head to brush a kiss to Mason's palm, the tender gesture ripping open his heart even more. "I'm afraid too. But not so afraid that it makes me not want to reach for what I want. There ain't enough time in life to waste a second of it." He lowered himself over Mason and cupped his face in both hands. "Live with me, Mason. Every breath and every second you can give me. Live it with me."

Mason blinked, staring up at him, and he actually felt his insides melt. He had never had anyone want that from him. Nothing but for him to live and experience things with them. Love them. Beau hadn't said the words, but Mason could sense them hovering in the air between them.

How could he do anything but say yes to a request like that? How could he, when deep inside that little voice was reminding him that he wanted it too. He just wasn't

brave enough to say so. But Beau was. Mason thought Beau just might be the bravest person he had ever known. And he determined he could be that brave. At least a little brave.

Mason's eyes burned as he reached up and cupped Beau's face in the same manner, swallowing hard. "You don't even know me. I don't know you." He shook his head with a breathless laugh. "And I don't care. Show me how, Beau. How to live the way you do."

Beau laughed in a great rush of breath exhaled, as if he'd been holding it and Mason thought maybe he had been. It was a relief to know that brave he may be, but Beau was still afraid. It made Mason feel less weak.

"It's not that hard, Mason. You just hold on and dream like you're gonna live forever."

Mason burst into laughter. "And live as if you'll die today. A James Dean fan. I'm not surprised." Mason brushed a tender finger down the strong line of Beau's jaw, smiling softly. "You have that same fire inside."

The tense energy of the moment changed between them and Mason sighed softly in pleasure as Beau settled his warm weight over him. He spread his legs to cradle his lover with his body, knowing something clicked into place and recognizing that whatever happened between them, he was changed forever. There would never be another moment like this, another man like Beau pressed so sweetly against him. With his open, earnest silver eyes and the smile that was a cross between angelic and sinful. Mason felt the instant he allowed himself to do what his heart had been trying to do from that first moment. He fell in love with Beau lying there in the dark in an abandoned house with nothing between them but the air.

"Make love to me, Beau." Mason watched the slow smile curve Beau's lips and knew Beau realized his choice of words hadn't been thoughtless.

"As long as you'll let me, Mason."

That was really what it came down to, Mason thought as Beau's lips lowered to his neck and he began to love him. However long Mason would allow it, this amazing man would love him and want him near.

And how long will that be? The rest of the week? A few more beyond that? Maybe you'll let him come visit you in your fancy condo with your stuffy friends who'd look down their noses at him? Is that it? Maybe you'll ask him to come with you and put him into the dirty, big city and watch him wither and fade.

Mason's insides twisted. He wouldn't think about that right now. Later.

Whatever you say, Scarlett.

He blocked the taunting, cynical voice out and refocused his entire mind, body and soul on Beau. He wanted his touch again and again, wanted to hold onto him and dream. Maybe it could be more than a dream. Maybe there could be some middle ground. He'd wonder about that another time, when Beau wasn't loving him with such tenderness that it brought tears to burn behind Mason's lids.

They moved together with gentle motions, Beau's strong hands skimming with infinite gentleness over Mason's skin, reverently almost. It was a humbling experience. One he relished with the hunger of a man starved for an eternity. Starved for affection, for love. And here was Beau, like a mirage in the vast emptiness of the desert that was his life. Beau, who offered him shelter and warmth and a love that Mason instinctively knew would endure if he could just be brave enough to reach out and take it.

*Love him.* The little voice was no longer mocking. It was quiet and small, pleading almost. Too late. He already did. It was now just a matter of how brave could Mason be?

His heart caught and his mind skittered away from too-deep thoughts when Beau's mouth ventured lower, from his neck across his chest before pausing to linger over his stomach. Mason spent a decent amount of time in the gym, his body was hard and defined, skin smooth thanks to biweekly waxing save for a thin trail from chest to

stomach. And yet he wondered idly if Beau found him nearly as beautiful as he did Beau.

Beau's body was built like a linebacker, broad and barrel-chested, his stomach flat and hard, but not defined the way Mason's was from hours of crunches. Beau's muscle was from hard work and hard play. And it was so incredibly beautiful. Golden skin and paler bits where his clothes blocked the sun. No tanning beds and all-over oiled bronzing for his country boy. No, Beau was everything nature intended male beauty to be, with none of the glam or glitz of the world's definition.

Rough palms and broken fingernails, stained a bit darker from his work with cars, despite the fact that they were clean. It spoke of hard work and how dedicated Beau was to making his own way. It shamed Mason a bit for the hours he spent in his office, complaining about a faulty computer program. The hours wasted in his living room watching mindless TV and never once stepping outside of his rat's cage into the real world. Mason wondered what it would be like to wake up every morning and put in a long day's hard work before coming home to the warmth of a family and forgoing bad evening TV in exchange for catching lightning bugs and fishing in the twilight, football games on the weekends, barbecues on Sunday afternoon.

And oddly, it sounded like absolute heaven. So he let himself imagine that was what they were doing. Making love in their home. The dark room became a vision of light and warmth in his mind and he moaned, arching toward Beau, imagining their clothes under him was a huge bed covered in a quilt bought at a county fair, handmade with love and bought amidst laughter and too much cotton candy.

Mason wanted it so bad his whole body ached with it, even as he arched toward Beau and ached for something far less wholesome. What if Beau could give him both? Everything? Could he take it? Yes. God, yes. He didn't hesitate in the answer and wound himself entirely around Beau, loving him with every breath he took.

He shivered as Beau's mouth moved past his stomach, lower to his hips and thighs, and Mason eagerly spread them, no shame in his desire. He wanted Beau's mouth on him, hot and wet, sucking him deep and laying claim to him completely.

"Beau, please..." He moaned, hips twisting. *Love me, love me until the sun comes up. I pray it never does.* He'd happily live in eternal night for the chance to never leave Beau's arms and the magic of this place where he felt like all of his dreams were within reach. Dreams he hadn't acknowledged in years. Dreams where he had a family. Where he would do everything the exact opposite of what his had done. He might have no experience with what healthy family love was like, but he figured if he just did everything the opposite of his, he'd be on the right track.

Beau's voice was a soothing, warm murmur against his hipbone, calming and arousing at the same time. "Yes, Mason love. Anything you need, baby, anything..."

Anything. There was only one thing he wanted and that was this. Beau loving him and close enough to touch. Mason smiled and reached down to run a hand over Beau's messy golden curls, tangling his fingers in them and loving the way the silky strands threaded through his splayed fingers. "You're doing it already. You're what I need. Maybe what I've always needed."

Beau lifted his head and his silvery eyes, made even more so by the shadows and moonlight, were bright, gleaming up at him. He just smiled, a beautiful smile of pure joy, and Mason's heart trembled with the force of so much emotion after years of drought. Like it couldn't quite handle the strain of so much so soon. Mason dared it to give out now. There was no way he was going to miss this.

"Well then, lucky me. Hardly no work at all. Loving you is as easy as breathin', Mason."

Mason's eyes widened, heart thudding in his chest and he pushed up onto his elbows. "What did you say?"

Beau seemed to rewind his words in his head and flinched, cursing softly. "Sorry. I didn't mean to..."

Mason sat up suddenly, pressing his fingers against Beau's lips, shaking his head frantically. His breath was rapid and thready and he felt dizzy. "You love me?"

Mason didn't remove his fingers, so Beau just nodded mutely, staring at him with wary silver eyes. Mason's breath caught on a sob and he shook his head. "Don't. Don't look at me like that...please, say it, tell me, I need to hear it. Don't look at me like you think I don't need that from you." He removed his fingers from Beau's lips, pressing his hand against his stomach and his eyes burning. "I need it most."

Beau tilted his head, reaching out to pull Mason astride his thighs, arms wrapping around his waist and holding him close. His eyes were so close to Mason's, he could see the faint blue flecks picked up by the moonbeams slicing through boarded-up windows. Mason couldn't breathe, waiting for Beau to say it. For real this time. And God help him, Mason was going to say it back.

"I love you, Mason. I love your broken heart and your shielded soul and your big blue eyes so full of emotion that'd break most people." Beau's voice was thick. "I don't know what you've been through, Mason. I don't know who made you hurt so much that you stopped living. But I wanna love you until you learn to breathe again. You can breathe now, Mason. I swear."

Mason sobbed then, huge gulping breaths he hadn't even known he was holding. As well as a different kind of breathing that he knew Beau somehow understood. For the first time in God knew how long, Mason took a breath. And breathed Beau in, filling his senses with him, every hollow crevice inside flooding with this young man who had so much in him to give and chose to give it to Mason.

Tears shimmered in Mason's eyes, stinging and burning, and his breath was shuddering gasps. "I love you. I do. I love you, Beau." There weren't any other words for what he felt, like he was alive finally. He laughed, covering his mouth and then wrapping both arms around Beau's neck. "I love you, Beau. Now love me. Love me until I can't stand up."

# **Chapter Eight**

Beau couldn't breathe right, this strange thumping in his chest that made him dizzy and a little weak. He figured that was the love. He liked the way it felt, even if it was strange and unfamiliar. He'd never felt this way about anyone but Mason, and if he had his way, he'd never feel it again.

Mason was looking at him with smiling ocean eyes and naked in his lap. Thinking was not high on Beau's list of priorities. Making love to Mason just the way he had asked, however, was. He smiled and his hands splayed on Mason's back, the skin warm and smooth. His beautiful love had such a presence about him. Beau wasn't sure what it was, but it made him want to gather Mason into his arms and shelter him from whatever stormed and raged around him. Protect him and keep him safe. He wondered if Mason would let him do that and decided that he wasn't going to give Mason a choice on that. Beau would do whatever it took to keep Mason safe, even if it was safe from his own fears and doubts.

"Do you know what I thought when I first saw you?" Beau asked as he laid Mason back onto the little pallet of their clothes. It was an undignified and not very romantic spot for ever after love confessions, but it was what they had and Beau wasn't willing to wait or wish for something else that might not come along before time ran out.

Mason flushed a little and shook his head, a self-deprecating smile curving his lush lips. "I don't know that I want to know. I wasn't very...polite."

Beau laughed, stretching out beside him and tangling one leg over Mason's. "That's a bit of an understatement, don't you think?" He shook his head and reached a finger up to trace the soft curve of Mason's mouth. "I noticed your mouth first. I've never seen a mouth like yours. The way your upper lip is fuller than the bottom one, the way you look like you're pouting even when you're not. It's damn sexy."

Mason gave him a sheepish, uncertain look. "You didn't think I was a pompous jackass?"

"Oh well, yeah, that too. After the lips, though."

Beau laughed when Mason shoved his shoulder. "What did you think? When you first saw me?" He was curious. He still didn't know exactly what Mason thought about him, not even a little. He wondered what the first impression had been.

Mason's ears went red and Beau's eyes widened, wondering what on earth was causing that. "What? Tell me."

Mason cringed a little, one hand coming up to cover his face and it was so damned cute, not to mention incongruous to the image of composed man Mason projected. "I...well, I thought you needed a shower."

Beau frowned. "That's it?" The raging blush, visible even in the shadows, told him that no, that wasn't it. He grinned wider and nudged Mason's shoulder. "Come on, tell."

"Oh for goodness..." Mason's sigh could be heard all the way to Mobile, he bet. "I thought you needed a shower and that I wouldn't mind helping you wash all that oil and grease off." Both hands covered Mason's face now and narrowed blue eyes glaring at him through slender fingers as Beau laughed. "It's not funny."

Beau begged to differ. He thought it was fuckin' hilarious. "Oh hell yes it is. Dirty, Mason. I like it."

Mason rolled his eyes and heaved a disgusted sigh that Beau didn't buy for one second. Mason might be embarrassed, but he wasn't mad. Beau just grinned and tugged him closer, one hand sliding down to curve on his sleek hip. "Don't worry, baby. I knew before I dropped you off that I was going to seduce you."

Mason laughed quietly. "Aren't I supposed to seduce you? I'm older. Supposedly more experienced and worldly."

Beau shook his head. "Nope. Seduction is for the unwilling or hesitant. I'm none of that. You, however, are way too hesitant for either of our own good. I'm gonna change that though. You're gonna go wild for me and not once think about consequences tonight, Mason."

Mason's breath caught and he wet his lips. Beau's eyes followed the path of that tongue, wet and pink and so soft looking. He slid a hand under Mason's head, lifting him so he could take those now damp lips in a kiss and taste Mason's sweet tongue. He tasted like heaven, or what Beau imagined heaven might taste like. Sweet, soft, warm. And so willing, Mason's mouth opening for him, his lips pliant and softening beneath Beau's.

He groaned, leg slipping between Mason's to nudge his inner thigh, urging his long legs to spread a bit, lean thighs falling open. It was such a deliciously blatant invitation and Beau was far too human to even pretend to resist the call of Mason's body to his own.

He broke the kiss, lifting his head and lowering Mason's back to the floor. "You make me crazy, Mason. Everything about you gets right under my skin. Damn, where ya been? I feel like I've been waiting forever for you." Maybe he had. He firmly believed in soul mates and there was no denying that Mason called to him, tugged places inside his heart that no one else had ever touched, places Beau hadn't even known existed.

Mason exhaled in a soft rush, smiling sadly. "I don't know where I've been. Nowhere. Until now."

Oh yes, that was exactly what Beau wanted to be. He wanted to be Mason's somewhere, the only place that mattered to him. The place that called him home no matter where he went. If Beau had his way, Mason wouldn't be going anywhere, but on the off chance he did? Beau wanted to know that his heart would know where it was supposed to be, until Mason couldn't ignore it and followed it back home. Here. With Beau.

It was a beautiful thing, Beau discovered, making love when you were actually in love. He'd expected there to be a difference, but he'd never expected this. This feeling of complete possessiveness and the burning urge to cherish and hold and whisper those things he had always kind of snickered at. Now he wanted to lie with Mason and touch him with reverent hands and talk about the future, the life they would build and the family they would raise.

Mason wasn't ready for that, though, Beau knew, so he held his tongue. Soon. Soon Mason would accept the reality no matter how much it scared him. Beau hated him scared and his arms slid firmly around Mason, rubbing his hands up and down his back as they lay facing each other. He leaned in to brush a kiss across his lover's lips. "And I like you right here."

He rolled Mason to his back and settled himself over his long, lean body. Mason was taller by a few inches, but Beau had the brawn. He caught Mason's hands and drew them gently above his head. Mason's breath quickened and his lips parted on soft, panting breaths that made Beau's insides tremble. Mason liked that, he could tell, the feeling of being taken. Beau was more than willing to indulge that completely.

With one hand holding Mason's wrists in place, his free hand slid down to caress the silky skin of Mason's side and hip, fingers dancing along the sleek outside of one thigh. "You're so beautiful, Mason. You take my breath away."

Mason chuckled, shaking his head with a shiver. "Then we're even, because you drive me out of my mind. Just looking at you, let alone when you touch me."

Beau grinned wickedly, his traveling fingers skimming up the inside of Mason's thigh now. "Like this?" Mason trembled and nodded wordlessly. Beau's fingers shifted, past his lover's cock despite the way Mason's hips lifted in silent offering. Instead Beau slipped his hand under Mason's thigh and lifted it, stroking down under his ass and cupping his palm there. "And like this?" he asked as his fingers lightly teased the warm cleft there.

"God yes," Mason whispered, his head tilting back with a gasp. His ocean eyes fell closed, his lush lips parting. They were so beautiful, his lips, wet and pink and soft. Beau couldn't resist leaning in and taking them in a slow, thorough kiss as one finger slid between Mason's firm ass cheeks to rub against his entrance. Mason whimpered into the kiss and arched, twisting under Beau.

Beau's heart thudded in his chest, breaking the kiss and releasing Mason's hands as he pushed up to his knees. Mason looked up at him with dazed, questioning eyes and Beau felt a tug of tenderness, stroking a hand over Mason's hip soothingly. "Roll over, Mason."

A flare of heat in blue eyes before Mason obeyed, shifting over onto his hands and knees before he lowered to rest his cheek against his folded arms, leaving that sweet ass lifted and long legs spread to expose himself completely to Beau.

It was a sight Beau would never forget. Creamy golden skin washed pale in the moonlight, the lush curve of Mason's ass, the slim lean line of his thighs; he was more beautiful than any man had a right to be. Beau reached between his thighs to wrap his fingers around the warm, heavy weight of Mason's cock, squeezing gently and savoring the shaky moan his lover let out.

Beau leaned over him, both arms wrapping around his waist and pressing his cheek to Mason's back, just holding him for a second. Part of him wanted to take Mason, hard and fast and rough. But more of him wanted something different. More of him wanted to cradle Mason close and love him right out of his mind. Mason had been with other men, but Beau was willing to bet with a certainty that his lover had never been loved the way Beau wanted to love him.

That appealed to Beau far more than any rough, fast fuck. He slid his open hands up over Mason's chest, fingers lightly brushing his nipples, savoring the way Mason's breath hitched and his body trembled lightly. Beau pressed a gentle kiss between his shoulder blades, then slid his mouth up to nuzzle the soft skin at his nape, tongue slipping out to taste him.

"I love you, Mason. I love you so damn much." And Beau vowed that when the night was over, Mason wouldn't have a single doubt in his mind that loving Beau and being loved in return was the way things were supposed to be. Mason would know there was nothing to fear in that.

Mason turned his head and Beau met hooded ocean blue eyes. "I love you too, Beau. I didn't mean to, but..."

Beau shook his head, turning Mason around to face him, both of them kneeling on their makeshift pallet. Beau cupped Mason's face in his hands, thumbs brushing his elegant cheekbones.

"Don't you dare apologize, Mason. Love me, I want you to love me all you can." He leaned in and pressed his forehead to Mason's, their eyes locked. "You hear me, Mason? Promise me you won't regret this. I couldn't stand it if you did."

Mason blinked, looking like he was considering Beau's words carefully. Beau held his breath, so afraid Mason was going to take it all back, retreat into his shell and Beau would lose any of the progress he'd earned tonight. Then Mason smiled and Beau felt dizzy with relief.

"I won't ever regret it, Beau. I swear. No matter what happens, loving you is going to always be the best thing I've ever done."

Beau wasn't sure that was a good answer or not. He could hear the temporary in it, that Mason wasn't thinking of this as a long-term thing, let alone as anything permanent. Beau was, he was already planning on spending the rest of his life with this man. So he leaned in and kissed Mason before he could say anything to confirm what Beau thought he was thinking. Beau would rather have the fantasy for a little while longer. He'd just have to work hard and make sure that when Mason's time in Dixon was done, his lover wouldn't be able to leave. Beau would chain him to his side if he had to.

Slowly, the urgency faded into a softer kind of need. Their hands began to move of their own volition, gentle and worshipful. Beau broke the kiss, eyes closing and

exhaling softly. The feel of Mason touching him, loving him, was so profoundly moving. He felt like he was coming out of his skin.

"Mason..." he breathed.

"Yes, love. I'm right here."

Beau opened his eyes slowly, swallowing hard at the look in Mason's eyes. Gentle, tender and a little bit sad. Beau had promised Mason wouldn't think about any consequences tonight, and from the looks of it, he had his work cut out for him.

"Close your eyes, Mason."

Mason's brows lifted slightly and his head tilted. "What?"

Beau smiled gently, bringing his hand up to brush over Mason's eyes and urge his lids to lower over those confused, beautiful eyes. "Close your eyes. I don't want you to look at me, I want you to feel me. Try for me, Mason. Just feel."

Mason's breath was shaky, but he nodded. Beau knew what kind of trust that gesture took and he didn't take it lightly. He'd earn Mason's trust, until his lover never questioned whether Beau would always do what was right for him. He might never have felt this way before, but he knew somehow that he would know what to do and how to do it right to make Mason secure, make him feel safe.

Beau suddenly had only the urge to cherish him. Not fuck him or take him or anything even sexual. For reasons beyond Beau, Mason was broken inside and Beau instinctively knew that sex was not the way to heal him.

So he gently urged Mason onto his back and stretched out beside him. He didn't say anything, no words would suffice. Instead he slid close against his side, one leg moving to drape over both of Mason's, his arms coming around him to hold him close, enveloping his lover completely with his body.

He pressed his lips to Mason's temple as his fingers began a slow, soothing caress of his skin. His shoulders, his side, the lean frame of his rib cage and sleek waist. Beau's hands were as worshipful as he felt. He made a soft, humming noise when Mason

shifted restlessly. He had the feeling Mason hadn't ever just been held. That made Beau so sad and even more determined to show Mason just how he felt. Without words, just gentle, loving touches until whatever poison was inside his lover was exorcised.

Finally, he did speak. "Relax, Mason. Please."

Mason made a quiet, distressed sound. "Beau. I want..."

Beau nodded, his voice a mere whisper. "I know what you want, Mason. But this is what you need."

The denial was deafening, even though Mason said nothing. Beau didn't listen to it, the silent shouting of his lover's body tense against his own, the way his jaw worked and his eyes were clenched tightly closed. Beau just continued to hold him, his hands gentle and soothing. Like his momma used to do when he was little and had so much frustrated energy in him that he wanted to scream his lungs out. Beau could feel the same tension in Mason.

Then Beau began to speak. Softly, in whispered tones.

"Wasn't just your momma, was it, Mason? Wasn't just your momma who made you feel like you couldn't have love. Who else did that to you, baby?"

Mason made a quiet sound and shook his head. "Leave it alone."

Beau brushed a tender kiss along Mason's jaw. "No. That'd mean leaving you alone and I can't do that. Talk to me. Tell me. Who hurt you so bad, Mason?"

For several long moments, Beau was sure Mason was going to refuse and clam up even more, so that Beau could never get past his guards.

"It's stupid." There was such shame in that simple phrase and Beau's eyes closed, squeezing Mason gently.

"No, it isn't. I love you, Mason, and you're gonna let me do it. Who hurt you?"

"Everyone."

Oh his voice was so small and broke a little. Beau's eyes burned and he nodded. He didn't say anything for a moment. Neither did Mason.

"How'd they hurt you, Mason? What'd they make you believe?" He couldn't counter those peoples' arguments if he didn't know what he was fighting against.

"That I don't exist. That it doesn't matter if I do or not."

Beau ran a hand over Mason's arm before sliding it to rest on his bare chest, right over Mason's pounding heart. "You believe that?"

Mason didn't speak, just nodded. His eyes were tightly screwed shut and his jaw clenched so hard Beau worried it would shatter.

"You exist to me. You're all that exists anymore, feels like. It matters to me that you exist."

Mason shook his head and Beau's heart pounded to see the glimmer of moisture on Mason's thick, dark lashes. "Don't."

"Oh Mason, my love. I have to. It's too much feeling to keep to myself. I have to give it to you. I need you to help me hold it all, Mason. Will you?"

"Will I what?" There was vague confusion and a painfully sharp note of hope in Mason's voice.

"Help me hold all that love? Don't you know? The only way to handle love is to give it to someone else. I'm givin' mine to you. I'll help you hold yours too. I'll take good care of it, I promise."

Beau leaned in and kissed a single tear that streaked down over Mason's temple into his hair.

"I...Beau, I don't know how..." Mason's voice broke and his chest heaved silently with held in tears.

"Yes, you do, baby. You do. Open your eyes." Beau held his breath as Mason took a moment to do as Beau asked.

The second their eyes met, Mason's tears spilled over and Beau's heart broke for the pain he was in, for the pain other people had given him without probably even realizing the damage they were causing.

Beau shifted to rise up on his elbow over Mason, never taking his eyes from him. "You said you love me, Mason. I know you meant it. Now you gotta do something with all that love. What are you gonna do with it?"

Mason shook his head. "I don't...I don't understand."

Beau brushed a hand across Mason's damp cheek, smiling gently. "Well, you can hold onto it, hoard it and try to keep it all to yourself. 'Cause yer scared. Or you can give it away. One way means that love you got don't never get any bigger. Eventually starts to disappear and die. Giving it away is like planting a field of sunflowers. You can keep those seeds and never have more than those until they're all gone, or you can plant them and get a hundred times more than what you started with. Over and over until you fill up your whole world with it."

Mason just stared up at him, shaking and his eyes damp and unsure. "I don't know if I can."

Beau nodded. "I know. Scary stuff. Might be those seeds don't grow none. Course, might be they grow more'n you ever thought possible." Beau smiled, leaning down and rubbing his nose against Mason's. "I'm a hell of a farmer, though, Mason. Never lost a crop yet."

Mason tried not to laugh, Beau could tell he did, but the laugh came out anyway. Rough and like it hadn't been used in a long time, but so beautiful. "Can I sue if you lose my investment?"

Beau chuckled and nodded. "You sure can. Take me right to court and make me keep my promises. You don't have to worry about that, though. I keep my promises, Mason. I'll keep this one too."

Mason bit his lower lip, sucking in a shaky breath. Beau was shaking inside, praying Mason would be able to do what Beau felt sure he could. After a long moment, Mason nodded.

"It's yours. Don't..." Mason paused and looked away, then back. "Don't let me down, Country."

Beau could seriously feel his heart swell, hoping Mason could feel the same thing. "I swear to you. Not gonna."

They didn't speak after that. Beau lay down next to him, drew Mason into his arms and that was how they stayed for the rest of the night. Sometime around dawn, they untangled themselves and got dressed and went home. Leaving Mason on his doorstep in the early morning glow and mist, Beau felt more confident than he had all week. Mason would be strong enough to take what they had been offered. When the time came, Beau just knew it.

# **Chapter Nine**

"I coulda sworn I told you to dress casual."

Mason glanced down at his clothes, then back to Beau's smiling silver eyes where he leaned out of the driver's side window smirking at him. "This is casual." Beau hadn't said where they were going, so dressing casual had taken some effort on Mason's part. He'd finally settled on a pair of dark gray pants and a blue striped button-down shirt. He'd even forgone dress shoes and wore a pair of loafers.

Beau chuckled, shaking his head and slid out of the truck after shutting it off. "You gotta have something more casual than that. Jeans?"

Mason arched his brows. "I was on my way to my mother's wedding. No, I don't have any jeans with me." He owned some. Not many, but despite the incredulous look Beau was giving him, he did have some jeans back in Florida.

"Lord. You look gorgeous, baby, but that's not going to cut it. Come on, get in. We're gonna stop and get you some country gear."

Mason wasn't sure he liked the sound of that, but gamely slid into the cab of the truck. Beau kept glancing over at him and chuckling and frankly it was starting to make Mason self-conscious. And when he got self-conscious, he got pissy.

The next chuckle from Beau was met with a narrow-eyed glare. "You know, if you'd been more specific about where we were going, I might have had a better chance to dress appropriately. There's no need to be a jackass about it, Country."

Beau wasn't quelled, his grin wide as ever. "Aw, you're peeved at me. It's cute." He reached over to ruffle Mason's hair and Mason scowled and batted his hands away.

"See how cute you think it is when my fist is meeting your pretty chin."

Beau laughed out loud now, and batted his lashes at Mason. "You wouldn't do that. You like my face just like it is."

It just made Mason's ire bristle more to admit to himself how true that was. The brat might deserve it for laughing at him, but Mason was not going to punch him. "You're an ass."

Beau grinned and reached over to grab Mason's hand, giving his knuckles a light nip. "It's part of my charm."

Mason couldn't stay mad when faced with laughing silver eyes and charm oozing from his lover's every pore. Lord help him, he was lost and the man knew it too. Mason shook his head. "So where are we going to find appropriate clothes at three in the afternoon on a Sunday, hmm?" Every store in town shut down on Sundays, and every other day by seven except for a few places, like the diner and the gas station.

Beau waggled his brows. "My place. You can borrow one of my shirts and I'm pretty sure my dad's jeans will fit you."

Mason squirmed inside at the idea of wearing someone else's clothes, let alone Beau's father's. It just went against everything in him, all of his mother's lessons in etiquette and manners. He gave Beau a questioning look. "I don't know, Beau..."

Beau didn't pay any attention to his protesting. "Yeah, well, I do. You're gonna be uncomfortable and then kick my ass if your pretty clothes get messed up. Besides, you can meet my sister and brother. Momma and Daddy aren't home, they went down the road to my grandma's, but you can meet them another time."

Mason's eyes went wide and he officially began to panic. He shook his head, hands coming up to smooth his hair. "Oh no. Beau, no. I'm not prepared to meet anyone. I don't...no, that's not a good idea. Maybe another time." His family? Wasn't it a little soon for that?

Beau arched his brows, glancing over at him as he drove. "Now why're you having fits over there? It's just Mandy and Roy. They're not exactly royalty, baby. Most likely

Mandy'll think you're pretty and giggle a lot and Roy'll grunt at us 'cause he's watching the game."

Mason couldn't stop the nervous flutters in his stomach. It was all moving so fast and he seemed to be the only one who noticed or cared. God, Southern people were crazy. That was all there was to it.

"But..."

Beau cut him off. "But nothing. You can't wear what you got on, and besides, it's about time you met the family. Least some of them." Beau hummed along with the radio, completely disregarding Mason's minor panic attack.

He didn't try to protest any further, though, he was fairly certain the brat wouldn't listen and what was he going to do? Climb out of the moving truck and refuse to budge? It was a testament to how nervous he was that the option actually sounded appealing for a few seconds before common sense kicked in.

Mason had promised Beau, the night before, that he was going to be a little brave. He loved Beau and he was going to trust him. Even if he was terrified of the idea of being presented to Beau's family already.

In an attempt to distract himself, he reached over and turned the radio up, brows furrowing as he listened to the lyrics of this particular country song. "What's a duck blind?"

Beau grinned. "It's a setup where the hunter can crouch down inside or behind to not spook the ducks he's hunting."

Mason's brows shot up. "Do you hunt?"

Beau nodded, looking perplexed by the question. "Yeah. Why?"

Mason squirmed a little, wrinkling his nose. "I don't know. It's just...it seems cruel."

Beau chuckled and Mason was a bit offended by his amusement. "How's hunting more offensive than going into the grocery and picking up a frozen duck for dinner? I don't hunt for sport, darlin'. I eat what I kill."

Logically, Mason knew there was nothing inherently cruel about hunting for food. Beau was right, it was no more cruel than purchasing the meat already cleaned and cut. It was just so...he shook his head, shrugging. "I don't know, I guess I've just never known anyone who actually did hunt."

Beau smiled. "I could take you sometime?"

Mason's eyes widened and he let out a nervous laugh, shaking his head. "Oh no. No, thanks anyway. I've never held a gun and never killed anything, I'd like to keep it that way."

Beau didn't seem offended, shrugging and turning his focus back on the road. Within a few minutes, Beau was slowing the truck and turning down a dirt access road, and Mason began to worry about hyperventilating. He hoped against hope that Beau's siblings had gone out and he and Beau could be gone before they returned.

No such luck, Mason thought, as they drove up to the rambling two-story house, a pair of cars in the drive that Mason assumed belonged to Beau's sister and brother. It just drove home to Mason how different he and Beau really were. Beau was still living at home, for goodness sake. His mother still did his laundry. Mason ran a hand over his hair, swallowing hard. He felt so completely out of his element. Beau was so much more sure of what he wanted than Mason was. More mature in a lot of ways.

When Beau shut the truck off, Mason didn't move to get out. When Beau climbed out and shut the driver's side door behind him, Mason stayed put. He was being childish, he knew, but he swore he was going to be sick. He didn't do well with strangers, let alone strangers who would look at him and wonder if he was good enough for their little brother.

Oh god. A thought occurred to Mason and he turned suddenly to fling the door open, nearly knocking Beau over as he did. "Beau!"

Beau snickered, steadying Mason as he slid out of the truck. "Mason!"

Mason pursed his lips in annoyance, shaking his head. "Stop teasing. You didn't tell me, do they know? About me? About...you?"

Beau tilted his head and then realization lit in his eyes. "Oh you mean do they know I'm gay and head over heels in love with you?"

Mason's cheeks heated and he narrowed his eyes in reprimand at Beau, silently telling him that now was really not the time to be flippant.

"Sorry," Beau chuckled, sliding his arm around Mason's waist. "The answer is yes and yes. Well, Roy knows I'm gay, but doesn't know about you. Mandy knows both, so do my mom and dad. Roy would, but he works late and I haven't seen him since night before last."

Mason swallowed hard. So Beau was out of the closet. Why did that not surprise him? Beau didn't seem ashamed of anything. Nor did he appear afraid of anything, which was so foreign to Mason, who felt like he'd spent his whole life worrying and afraid about something or another. It just proved, yet again, that it was Beau who had the advantage in the maturity department.

Mason squared his shoulders. Well, if Beau wasn't going to be ashamed, then neither was Mason. At least not here. When his interlude in Dixon was over, Mason didn't know what would happen, but for now he was going to take a page from Beau's book and try this whole "not being repressed and ashamed" thing on for size.

Beau grinned. "You ready?"

Mason looked up at the house. It was big and rambling and looked like it could use a new coat of paint and some repairs to the porch where it sagged on one corner, but in all it was a nice house, looked like a home and looked...welcoming. He nodded. "Yes."

Beau gave him a squeeze before releasing his arm around Mason's waist and taking his hand instead as he led him up to the porch steps. Mason could hear the sound of football on TV coming from inside and his stomach flipped, realizing it'd be Beau's brother he met first.

He followed Beau inside, lingering back a step or two behind Beau. So much for brave, but he told himself he'd have to ease into it a bit at a time, like sliding into a cold swimming pool. One toe at a time, he'd get there.

Beau blew that plan to hell, tugging Mason forward and slinging his arm around Mason's shoulders. "Roy! Get off your lazy ass and come say hello to my guest."

Mason squirmed inwardly, but outwardly he held his own as Beau's brother looked up and then stood up. Good lord. He was huge. Mason tried his best not to gape. Beau had clearly not gotten the height in the family. Roy had to be six foot five if he was an inch, though he was lean and lanky whereas Beau was stocky and solid. He also had dark brown shaggy hair as opposed to Beau's golden curls. Mason would never have pegged them as brothers.

Then Roy grinned and held his hand out and Mason finally saw the resemblance. It was the mischief in their open, friendly smiles. Mason couldn't help grinning back, reaching out to shake his hand.

"Pleased to meet you."

Roy chuckled. "Well, ain't you a fancy one? How you doing, you guys wanna watch the game with me? C'mon, Brenda Jo bailed on me for some girl thing with her sisters."

Beau laughed and shook his head, his arm sliding around Mason to steer him through the living room toward the stairs. "No thanks, Roy. I know better, and Mason here don't know enough to not let you get started with your 'friendly wagers'. Besides, we've got plans."

Roy made some teasing whistles as they disappeared up the stairs, but oddly, Mason wasn't offended or embarrassed about it. Instead he laughed and let Beau take his hand and took the stairs two at a time upstairs.

He waited while Beau ducked into one of the bedrooms, blushing when he emerged with a pair of faded jeans. Oh this was just weird. Mason was definitely sure that

wearing Beau's father's jeans was not the best first impression to make, should he get found out.

"Beau, are you sure..." He was cut off by the jeans being shoved into his hands.

"Positive. And before you get all weirded out, my dad hasn't ever even worn those jeans. Mandy bought them for him 'cause she thought he needed at least one pair of something brand name and he hated them on sight. Never touched 'em."

Mason let out a relieved sigh. That was much better. He glanced subtly at the tag and was amused to find the price tag still attached. They were the right size too, just like Beau had thought. His cheeks heated a little knowing that his lover knew his body that well already. That he'd know his size without asking.

Beau didn't give him a chance to blush too much, grabbing his hand and tugging him along behind him to a short hall leading to two separate doors. Beau tugged him into the first one. The sheer mess and clutter of car parts and magazines and clothes told Mason that this was definitely Beau's rooms.

It was a little apartment, sharing a mutual wall with a second set of rooms that Beau had told him his sister occupied. Beau had made sure to tell him that he paid his parents rent, and had ever since he was seventeen and had moved into the second overgarage apartment. Mason smiled, looking around.

"It's nice. Messy, but cozy." Mason gave Beau an indulgent smile. "Don't you ever straighten up?"

Beau shrugged and shook his head. "Not often. No point, to my way of thinking. It just gets messy again half a second later." He rummaged in the overflowing dresser drawer, then tossed Mason a t-shirt.

Mason couldn't help thinking about his own spotless, personality-less condominium back in Florida. Pristine furniture and walls and floors, everything neatly in place. It lacked even an ounce of soul and Mason thought he would be ashamed to bring Beau there. Despite his itching urge to clean, Mason much preferred Beau's living space to his own.

Mason gestured to the bathroom. "I'll just be a minute, then." He blushed when Beau grinned wickedly at him and ducked into the small bathroom before Beau could try to tempt him into changing in front of him. It wasn't that he minded Beau seeing him naked, but there was no way in hell he was going to have sex in Beau's house, and if his lover decided to try, Mason would be hard-pressed to resist.

So he removed himself from the temptation for them both, stripping out of his own clothes quickly once the door was shut behind him. He tugged the jeans on first, tossing the price tag into the trashcan. They fit him perfectly, hugging his hips and thighs, but not tight or obscene. The faded bits landed on his thighs and a glance in the mirror showed the ass was also faded nearly white. Lord, he could just imagine Beau's reaction to him in these jeans and it made his breath quicken.

To distract himself, he took off his button-down shirt and hung it on the back of the door before pulling Beau's t-shirt over his head. It was baggy a bit around the shoulders and chest, but Mason barely noticed. He was too distracted by the scent of Beau that clung to it and he had the feeling Beau hadn't washed it since last wearing it. Mason indulged a bit and lifted the collar up over his nose to inhale deeply, eyes closing and suffused with memories of that scent surrounding him naked in the dark.

He forced himself to stop, tugging the shirt into place and belatedly realizing his loafers didn't exactly go with this new, casual outfit. He frowned, pondering that, then noticed a pair of tennis shoes tucked against the tub and grabbed them, ignoring his inner neatnik, and toed his loafers off to replace them with Beau's shoes. They fit, a bit loose, but not too bad. And they definitely suited the outfit better than his shiny leather loafers.

Mason glanced at his reflection in the streaked mirror, pursing his lips. He then couldn't help himself and turned to the sink, reaching up to quietly open the medicine cabinet. He knew he shouldn't snoop, it was rude, but he was curious. His head tilted as he looked over the overflowing shelves.

Two toothbrushes, one in the packaging still, and Mason smiled, thinking that was cute, Beau had a spare to replace the one he was using when it got old. Prepared. Mason liked that. A barely used bottle of cologne stood on one shelf and Mason lifted it down, sniffing it before putting it back. It was nice, but he much preferred Beau's natural scent. Beau must too, because it'd hardly been touched.

Medicine of varying kinds, soap, razors, Band-Aids, the average medicine cabinet fare. Mason supposed he could be grateful he hadn't found anything like pills for some kind of fungus or something.

His eyes fell on a box of condoms and he paused. He glanced toward the door, as if Beau might be watching him through it, then reached up to pick the box up. He peered inside and his brows lifted. Magnums, which made sense because his lover was rather, um, blessed, but that wasn't made his brows lift. What surprised him, and maybe shouldn't have, was how empty the box was. Just two condoms left in it. He slid the box hurriedly back on the shelf, shaking his head.

That was stupid. He'd never thought Beau was virginal or celibate, for god's sake. But still, the proof of it right in his face was something Mason hadn't been prepared for. Who was it Beau had used those condoms with? How long ago? Had Beau loved that person? Oh it was ridiculous, but just the thought of Beau naked and intimate with anyone else made Mason sick to his stomach.

It was his own fault for snooping. He knew better than that. What was he, twelve? Disgusted with himself and his reaction to what he'd found, Mason closed the cabinet quietly and stepped out of the bathroom. Beau's reaction was enough to convince Mason that whoever those condoms had been used with, they weren't being used with that person anymore.

Beau's gaze raked over Mason from head to toe. Then he came over, moving like a hunter stalking prey, and Mason's heart skipped. He didn't move, eyes fluttering closed when Beau moved around behind him and stepped so close that Mason could feel his body heat, the scent of him stronger than ever. "Um...Beau?"

"Shush. Damn, Mason. You loosen up nice."

Mason smiled, turning his head to meet Beau's molten silver eyes. "Is that so, Country?"

"It definitely is, City. Makes me rethink our outing, matter of fact."

Mason flushed with pleasure and the beginnings of desire pooling in his belly. "Now Beau, I did not put on other peoples' clothes just for you to tear them off without my sacrifice serving any purpose." He licked his lips, a surge of power racing through him when Beau groaned low. "You promised me a day out. I do believe you said I'd never forget the experience."

Beau's growl shivered across Mason's soul and his breath caught when Beau's hands gripped his hips and pulled him back against his lover. Oh god. He melted, heart racing and trembling lightly as he leaned his head back on Beau's strong shoulder.

"I promise you wouldn't forget this neither, Mason," Beau growled low against Mason's ear, making him shiver hard.

Mason managed to protest a bit more, though they both knew it was just for show. Besides, he liked the way Beau held him so tightly, how rough his voice was and the barely leashed lust burning in him. "You're crazy. I am not having sex right here, with your brother downstairs and your sister..."

A sharp rapping on the door broke the heated mood and Mason's head lifted, heart pounding even harder.

"Shit."

Mason glanced back at Beau, scrambling away from him and nervously smoothing his hair. "Your sister?"

Beau nodded sharply, groaning and clenching his jaw as he appeared to gather himself. Mason struggled to do the same as Beau stalked toward the door. His hands trembled and he prayed to God he did not look as thoroughly flushed and turned on as

he was. God, Beau was a wicked power, held over him like nothing else. Mason hadn't ever experienced anyone as compelling as Beau. His lover made Mason want to melt in his hands and surrender it all.

Beau opened the door and immediately the tension eased out of him before Mason's eyes, and he realized why when his sister pushed past him into the room. Mandy was a tiny little thing, all shiny blonde hair and big blue eyes and a startlingly pretty face wreathed in smiles.

"About time ya'll opened up, jeez!" Mandy beamed as she approached Mason. "Hey there, I'm Mandy. Heard a lot about you, from my no-good brother over there and folks around town."

"Mandy, it's rude to listen to gossip."

Mandy just grinned, hands on her slim hips as she looked Mason up and down. Lord, these Gaines people were a bold bunch. Not an ounce of reservation in them, Mason decided. He rather liked it.

"I don't know, seems to me the gossip was true in this case. Miss Sandy said you were prettier than me. I think she might be right."

Mason blushed right to the tips of his ears, clearing his throat and throwing a "help!" glance at Beau. "Pleased to meet you, Amanda."

She laughed and slid her arm around his waist. Mason decided the Gaines clan also had no concept of personal space. "He called me Amanda, Beau. Gosh, makes me feel like I'm in trouble, only time Momma or Daddy ever call me that!"

Beau rolled his eyes as he approached. "Keep groping my man and you *will* be in trouble, little bit."

Mason couldn't help the smile as the two bantered easily, another twinge of envy stirring in him. It was clear that Beau absolutely adored his sister and the feeling was mutual. Their teasing was laced with humor and warmth and Mason felt amazingly included in that. He shook his head inwardly. There was just something special about

the whole town, he thought. He felt more at home in Dixon in four days than he ever had anywhere else in his whole life.

Mandy rolled her eyes and reached up to pat Mason's cheek with a grin. "Don't let him walk all over you. He likes to think he's the center of the universe and I'm counting on you to give him a good sense of humility. 'Kay?"

Mason chuckled. "Okay."

Beau's eyes narrowed and Mason had to laugh at how affronted he looked. He grabbed Beau's hand before his lover could get huffy and drew him toward the door. "Come on, Country. You promised me an outing and you're going to follow through. Pull your sister's hair later."

Beau tsked and tossed a smirk over his shoulder at Mandy. "I will too! You just wait, brat!"

"Yeah, yeah, shakin' in my boots, butthead!"

Mason laughed and shook his head as he pulled Beau down the stairs and waved at Roy as they passed. "Hope your team wins, Roy!"

Roy waved back distractedly as he stared at the TV, hunched forward intently. "They better, I got twenty bucks riding on them!"

Beau snickered and Mason felt absolutely bouncy as the door shut behind them. He made a short jump of the three porch steps, grinning wide as he turned to face Beau, walking backward toward the truck and crooking his finger invitingly with a waggle of his brows. "C'mon, cowboy. Yer all mine now."

# **Chapter Ten**

Mason's imitation of a drawl was badly executed, but damned if Beau cared. His baby's eyes were sparkling like glittering sapphires at him and there was wickedness in that smile aimed in his direction. He'd be a fool to ignore that beckoning finger. Beau was no fool.

He leapt off the porch and jogged toward Mason, grinning and catching him around the waist. "I like you talking hickspeak, baby. Sexy."

Mason grinned and leaned against him, reaching up to pluck Beau's cowboy hat off his head and plunk it down onto his own normally impeccably smooth dark hair. Beau's cock leapt to attention at the sight of Mason in his hat, in those clothes, beaming at him and not a single shadow in those ocean eyes. God damn, he loved the man with a madness.

"If you think that's sexy, just you wait until you get a look at me riding you wearing nothing but this hat of yours."

Beau was still trying to catch his breath from that provocative statement by the time Mason had climbed into the truck. Finally, a second or two later, Beau shook off the haze of lust that had hit him hard and jogged around to clamber up behind the wheel. He shot Mason a heated look as he started the truck.

"I'm holding you to that, Mason. Just so you know."

Mason's smile was pure wanton sin and he tipped the hat in acknowledgement. "I'm counting on it, Country."

Lord help him, Mason was going to be the death of him, Beau thought. Death by lust. What a way to go.

Mason leaned back in the seat, more relaxed than Beau could remember him ever being, one long leg bent and foot propped on the dash. "So are you going to tell me

where we're going or am I supposed to just sit back and enjoy the ride?" There was a knowing sparkle in Mason's eyes when he glanced over at Beau from under the brim of the hat. Beau's cock jumped at the promise in that look.

"Oh I do believe you'll be enjoying the ride."

Mason laughed, a carefree sound that warmed Beau's heart. "I don't doubt that at all." Mason leaned forward then, arms crossed on the open window and peering out as they drove, one hand coming up to hold the hat in place as the wind threatened to lift it off his head.

"What is it about this place? Is there magic in the water?"

Beau smiled, glancing over and catching the wistful look on Mason's face. "Maybe. Or maybe it just feels that way when you come home."

Mason turned his head to look at him, his eyes serious. "Maybe."

That one word, a simple confirmation that Mason felt the connection too, not just to Beau, but to Dixon itself, was enough to knock the wind out of Beau's lungs. He smiled and reached over to lace his fingers with Mason's and tug him across the bench seat to tuck against his side.

"Ever been stump-jumping, Mason?" He knew the answer to that. Mason was as likely to have once been a woman as he was to have ever gone stump-jumping. As suspected, Mason's brows furrowed sharply and he gave Beau a confused look.

"If I knew what that was, I might be able to answer. I think it's safe to say no."

Beau chuckled. "They got a version of it everywhere. Offroading, boondocking, mudbogging? Same thing. 'Cept down here we do it in jacked up pickups in the backwoods."

Mason's brows arched, disappearing into the hat. "You're taking me driving around the backwoods? Why?"

Beau laughed. "That's like asking why go swimming in the crick, why catch lightning bugs on a summer night. Because it's fun, that's why."

Mason didn't look convinced and Beau shook his head with a snicker. "Trust me." He turned off onto an access road leading to his favorite spot. "Just hang on and go with it, baby."

Mason smiled, and Beau had to smile back when his lover cuddled closer and wrapped both arms around Beau's waist. "Mmm, that's an easy directive to follow."

Beau chuckled. Only Mason used words like "directive". He looked fucking adorable in Beau's hat and sexy as hell in those jeans and the snug white t-shirt. Beau hoped that white shirt wouldn't be so white by the time they were done.

Beau turned the truck off the access road abruptly, tires spinning in the dirt and kicking up the dust and gravel with a whoop. Mason gasped and held on tighter and Beau grinned, spinning the steering wheel so the truck fishtailed hard and bounced over the rough ground hard enough to get some good airtime before coming down with jarring jolts.

"Beau!" Mason shouted over the radio and the revving of the engine and Beau's laughter. "This is crazy!"

"I know! Ain't it great?" Beau whooped again, flooring it toward a small creek and lifting out of his seat as the truck barreled through the water and spun, kicking up mud and rocks in its wake.

He glanced over at Mason, who had turned slightly toward him and had one hand braced on the ceiling, probably to keep from hitting his head, and though he looked startled, Beau could see the gleam in his eyes and the slow growing smile that became a grin as Beau watched. It was a beautiful thing to see, carefree, and then the grin became laughing and before either of them knew it, Mason was whooping right along with him as they bounced and jolted through the backwoods.

The trees were sparse at first, dodging them was easy, but gradually as they moved further in, the trees thickened and Beau had to slow down to maneuver roughly around them, a couple of times clipping the truck with branches. He was glad his truck's paint job was questionable as it was.

Halfway across another creek pass, Beau cursed as the truck slammed to a halt. He scowled and floored the gas pedal, but nothing, the tires spinning.

"We're stuck?" Mason laughed uproariously at that and dodged the *thwap* Beau aimed at him. "Good job, Country."

Beau chuckled and glanced through the back window, then met Mason's eyes. "Well, go on, give us a push."

His lover's brows shot up and Mason blinked. "I'm sorry?"

Beau laughed. "Me too. Go on. Unless you know how to work four-wheel drive and want to take over here while I push us out?"

Mason frowned, then heaved a sigh, shaking his head. "You owe me, brat." Beau watched as his lover slid out of the truck, snickering inwardly at the wrinkling of his nose Mason did when he stepped ankle deep into the cold creek water.

A couple of tries netted no results and then...oh, the wickedest idea hit Beau. He really shouldn't. He knew that. But Mason was back there, hat askew on his head, damp already and scowling like nobody's business. Beau's foot twitched on the gas pedal and sent a spray of icy water and mud flying up from the rear wheels.

Oh lord, the cursing could be heard a mile away, he bet, and Beau jerked open the truck door and leapt out, taking off just as Mason came around chasing after him. He laughed and glanced back, getting his hat smack in his face. Mason must have thrown it. Oh that was fucking cute. He had to rile his baby up more often.

He dodged around the small saplings along the creek bed, glancing back once more to find Mason right there, tackling him to the ground, and as the breath whooshed from his lungs, Beau had to admire the speed. Not many could catch him.

But he was too busy wrestling with Mason on the slippery, muddy ground, still laughing and Mason was too. Beau shouted a curse his momma would wash his mouth out for as Mason managed to wrestle him onto his stomach and pinned him there. The first slap on his ass startled Beau and his eyes flew wide, head snapping around to stare at Mason.

His baby was covered in mud splatters, soaked to the skin, his hair a dripping tangle over his forehead and hanging slightly into his eyes. And the wicked gleam in his ocean blue eyes made Beau instantly hard even as he wriggled to get free. Mason kept spanking until Beau managed to get away and grab him, jerking him close and arms locking around him to hold him immobile.

The two of them on their knees facing each other in the mud, wet and dirty and panting for breath. Beau didn't even think about it, his mouth coming down hard on Mason's, turning with him to pin him to the ground and kissing him breathless.

Mason whimpered and moaned into Beau's mouth, arching close, and Beau released his grip on Mason's arms in order for his lover to wrap his arms around him. Mason did just that, clinging to him and kissing him back just as feverishly.

Beau growled and broke the kiss, his mouth moving hot and rough down over Mason's neck, one hand sliding under him to arch his baby toward him before abruptly breaking the kiss and flipping Mason onto his stomach, groaning when his lover eagerly scrambled onto all fours and rocked back toward him with a whimpering plea.

No words were exchanged, just gasping, breathless groans and whimpers, moans and panting growls. Beau hissed softly, shoving Mason's drenched, muddy t-shirt up to bare his smooth back, streaked with dirt now, and brought his mouth down on it, tongue and teeth and lips moving over the exposed flesh as his hands slid around under Mason to unfasten his jeans and jerk them roughly down over the curve of his ass to bunch around his thighs.

"Beau...Beau please..." Mason gasped, rocking his hips back harder, trembling beneath the erotic assault. Oh he was so beautiful, Beau could devour him.

But first he was going to fuck him, because his mind was lost and all he had was instinct. And instinct said to claim what was his.

"Yes. Relax, Mason." It was the best he could offer him, with no lube and both of them too frantic to even consider extended foreplay to ease the way for Beau's cock.

Mason nodded sharply and Beau saw his jaw tighten as he lowered his shoulders some, tilted his ass up further and braced himself.

Beau tried to go as slow as he could, jerking open his jeans and freeing his cock. He lined the slick head up with Mason's entrance and rubbed a couple of times before beginning to press forward. He could feel Mason bearing down slightly and it helped ease him inside, slowly but steadily, and by the time he was fully inside, he and Mason were both panting and sweaty and gritting their teeth to maintain restraint.

Beau held still for a minute, trying to catch his breath, bent low over Mason and mouth open against his neck. Finally he spoke, his voice raspy and rough with pent up desire he needed to let go. "Mason...I gotta..."

Mason nodded sharply, rocking his hips hard once. "Yes. Fuck me, Beau."

Oh that was all Beau needed to hear. His hips drew back, withdrawing almost completely before gripping Mason's lean hips in hard hands and thrusting deep into him. Mason cried out sharply, his shout of pleasure and need echoing through the open air. Soon those cries were joined by the obscene sound of flesh slapping against flesh, panting breaths and sweat slick movements.

Mason clenched over and over, whether purposely or purely in reaction, Beau didn't know. All he knew was it was driving him crazy and he wrapped one arm around Mason's waist, the other braced on the ground beside Mason's hand and they moved together like they were in heat and this was their only chance to scratch that itch.

Beau's hips snapped, his heart pounded and every cry from Mason, every sobbing whimper of ultimate base pleasure cut right through to twist almost painfully in his stomach. Beau slid his hand from Mason's waist up over his bunched up t-shirt to sink into his damp hair, fisting and tugging his head back. Mason gasped and their eyes met as the thrusts got harder, the pace kicked up another level and Beau could hardly breathe with the intensity of it.

"You're mine," he growled, eyes blazing, daring Mason to disagree.

But his lover didn't. Instead he seemed to melt, his eyes going hooded, his body going pliant and supple beneath Beau and Mason nodded, his breath gasping out. "Yes. Yes, Beau, I'm yours. Keep me forever..."

Beau felt a feral, instinctual satisfaction at that, leaning over him a bit more to claim his lips in a devouring, possessing kiss. His, this man was his and Beau would keep him forever. Mason had just given his permission and damned if Beau was ever going to let him back out on it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mason wrapped the blanket tighter around himself as he watched Beau. His lover was beautiful, naked in the sunshine, unashamed as he stirred up the fire he'd gotten going and pausing to turn their clothes on the log where he'd laid them to dry.

When Beau turned his head and their eyes met, a shiver lanced through Mason that had nothing to do with being damp and chilly and everything to do with how absolutely lost he was over this man. With his wild curls and silvery eyes and freedom of spirit...Mason had never in his entire life imagined he would be sitting in the middle of nowhere, naked and wrapped in a blanket, head over heels in love.

He was stirred from his thoughts when Beau came back over and settled down beside him, burrowing under the blanket with him. It wasn't very cold out, mostly it was the damp from the cold stream water that made cuddling under the blanket so appealing.

"What're you thinking about, Mason?"

Mason smiled, shaking his head and glancing at Beau out of the corner of his eye. "Just thinking how far from my reality this entire experience has been." He laughed and nudged Beau with his shoulder lightly. "I'll have you know I've never made love like that in the open before."

Beau chuckled and slipped his arm around Mason's waist, squeezing. "Well then, you missed out, huh?"

Mason nodded vaguely. Yes, he'd missed out. On a lot of things. And now here was Beau, showing him with startling clarity exactly everything he'd missed and showing him everything he could now have.

Mason took a deep breath and tried to calm his quaking heart as he slowly turned to face Beau. It took a moment for his voice to work properly and he cleared his throat. "Did you mean it?"

Beau tilted his head questioningly and Mason hurried to continue, before he lost his nerve. "Did you mean it when you said I was yours, that you wanted to keep me, wanted me to stay?"

Beau's eyes warmed and hope burned in them as he nodded. "Yeah, Mason, I did. Stay with me. Stay here."

Mason felt dizzy as he, for the first time, seriously considered that offer. To stay in Dixon...what would he do? He was a stockbroker and he doubted Dixon had much call for that kind of thing. He could day-trade, he supposed, online, but it was riskier and Mason hated risks, especially ones involving money.

"How?" He didn't think Beau had the answer to that, but he hoped. Beau made him hope and believe where before he never would have.

Beau seemed to think about it a moment before answering. "We'll buy that house. I'm gonna end up taking over for Mackey running the garage when he retires and everyone knows it, in fact, Lillian's made several hints that the old man's planning to cut out fully soon and plans to give me first option on buying the place. I've saved up a good bit and still have my college money my folks set aside that I never used, so I've been hanging onto it to buy that house when the time came."

Mason could feel the stirrings of excitement. "Beau, I have money. Hell, I don't spend it on much of anything, most of my paycheck goes right into investments and retirement funds. It's not the money I'm worried about, it's...Beau, are you sure? It's so quick, you might regret it, change your mind and..." he was cut off with a gentle finger

pressed to his lips. Beau's eyes were understanding and fierce with love and determination.

"Mason, stop. If that's what you're worried about, if that's the only thing keeping you from deciding to stay, then stop it right now."

"But..." The word was muffled against Beau's finger and then cut off completely when Beau shook his head sharply.

"No buts. You love me?" Mason nodded silently. "And I love you. More than anything, Mason. We can stay here, we can go somewhere new, we can go back to Florida, I don't care. But I want to be with you. I need to. It might not make any logical kinda sense, but what about love ever does, right? I gotta be with you, Mason. And if you gotta be with me, then that's that. We'll figure the rest out as we go."

Beau made it seem so simple. They loved and so the rest would work out. Mason's cynical side told him that was foolish and idealistic and would end in a mess they might not make it out alive from. At least their hearts might not. But the hopeful part of him, the part Beau had brought to life and the part that grew larger and more vocal every day here, clamored to say yes. *Say yes*, it said, *stay with him and live in that house and raise a family with him. Love and laugh and grow old.* 

Mason was scared to death, and he could see in Beau's eyes that his lover knew it. Beau seemed to be holding his breath, waiting for Mason to make the decision that would change both their lives, for the better or for the worse. If only Mason could know for sure which it would be.

But he didn't. It was a leap he'd never allowed himself to take, had never wanted to take before. But for Beau, Mason would do anything, he thought. So he reached up and gently pulled Beau's finger away from his lips and gave him a shaky smile.

"I should probably meet your parents then."

Beau's smile was blinding and Mason felt weak with the surge of love that swept through him. God, he loved this man. And if he could, if he really could, he would love him forever.

"Well then. Come on and get back into those wet clothes, Mason. We gotta get us changed and get over to my grandfolks' house."

Mason's brows lifted, blinking in confusion as Beau tossed off the blanket and began to gather up their still damp clothes off the log. "What? Why?"

His lover glanced over his shoulder at him with a smile. "Barbecue. Didn't figure you'd be comfortable going, so I skipped out. Started at two, so we're already a couple of hours late."

Mason pushed to his feet, his heart pounding nervously as he took his clothes from Beau and began mechanically putting them on. "Wait...barbecue? At your grandparents' house?"

Beau nodded, frowning as he fumbled with the button of his jeans. "Yep. Momma and Daddy are already over there helping get everything set up, cooking and whatnot." Beau chuckled. "Well, Momma and Granny are cooking, Grandpa and Daddy are probably watching the same game Roy is. Drinking beer and pretending they know better than the coaches."

Mason felt lightheaded. Oh dear. Oh dear. He bit his lower lip. "Who else is going to be there?"

Beau tilted his head up toward the sky as he thought and Mason became more and more nervous with every passing second. "Let's see...Mandy was getting ready to head over when we left the house. Roy's waitin' for his girl to get back from her sister's baby shower and then they'll be by, my cousins Charlie and Charlene and their families. Uncle Jerry said he'd make it by with his new lady friend he wants us to meet. All the little-uns, which adds up to a good dozen or more last count. And, you know, whatever neighbors and church folk and anyone else who wants to come by."

Mason swallowed hard, staring at him. "Is...is this a special occasion? Someone's birthday?"

Beau shook his head, finishing tugging on his boots and grinned when he glanced over at Mason. "Nope. Just a little weekend get-together. Aw, come on now, Mason, don't look like the deer in the headlights. They're gonna love you and best to get it all done with on one go, right? Like jumping into the pool instead of easing a toe at a time in."

Mason scowled tightly. "I'll have you know I prefer the toe method."

Beau laughed and came over to wrap his arms around him. It was hard to stay panicked when Beau was holding him and his smile was so sweetly warm. "Yeah, well, baby, you're trying a lot of new things lately. Count this as one of them. Trust me. They'll love you and it'll be fun."

And then Beau turned Mason toward him and cupped his face gently in both hands. His eyes went serious and Mason's breath caught as he stared at him.

"I'm gonna spend the rest of my life with you, Mason. We're gonna buy that house and raise us a family and there's gonna be folks around these parts who don't like it much, but too bad for them. The people who matter are gonna love you and they're gonna love us together. I promise."

Mason sighed softly, the tension seeping out of him and wrapped his arms around Beau. "I do love you, Beau. You could make me believe the sky was pink if you wanted to." He nodded and took a deep breath. "All right then. My very first redneck barbecue." His tone was teasing and Beau chuckled. "There's not going to be roadkill stew or anything, is there?"

Beau grinned and cast him an amused look as he folded up the blanket in preparation to leave. "Only if we're lucky."

Mason laughed and shook his head, helping Beau put out the fire safely and between the two of them, minus Beau's childish antics from earlier, they got the truck boosted free of the creek bed and started back toward town.

This...was going to be interesting.

# **Chapter Eleven**

Beau tugged open the dryer door, peering inside and reaching in to test the dryness of Mason's jeans. Not quite, so he shut the door again, setting it to another ten minutes before turning and going back upstairs to his apartment. He grinned at the sight of Mason in his bathrobe sitting on the couch flipping through one of Beau's car magazines. Anxious blue eyes lifted to meet Beau's as he shut the door behind him.

"They're not ready yet?"

Beau shook his head, dropping down on the couch beside him and reaching out to take the magazine out of his hands. His baby was so nervous, Beau hoped once they got to the barbecue and he saw how welcoming everyone would be, he'd relax. He had no doubt that his family would love Mason. Who couldn't? He was smart and gentle and a good man.

"Baby, try to relax. It's not gonna be anywhere near as scary as you're thinking it'll be. It'll be fun."

Mason looked uncertain, but nodded with a hesitant smile. "I'll try. I just...Beau, you might not realize quite how crazy this is going to sound to other people. Four days and we're talking forever, me moving here, buying houses and garages and...they're going to worry about you. I would if I were them."

Beau nodded. "I'm not saying they're not gonna worry. But they're gonna come around quick. I know they will. You think they don't know me, baby? They know how I work, they know that when I make a decision it's gonna be for good and they either need to accept it or keep their doubting to themselves." He smiled and wrapped his arms around Mason, tugging him close. He smelled good, like shampoo and soap from his quick shower, but Beau was sure his Ivory soap and plain ol' Head & Shoulders had never smelled so good on himself.

"Besides. There's gonna be you there loving me and they're gonna see that, and Mason, if there's one thing that makes a difference in my family, it's love. I'm willing to lay money that by the end of the day, my granny's gonna be planning to make you a stocking for Christmas time and my momma's gonna be planning what to give us for a housewarming present."

Mason looked slightly doubtful still, but Beau could hardly blame him. His lover hadn't come from the kind of family Beau had. He hadn't ever known what it was like for people to love you and want you happy and if this was what was going to make Beau happy, his family was going to embrace the man who made him that way.

The sound of the buzzer on the dryer going off broke the silence and Beau grinned. "Be right back!" He gave Mason a light squeeze before releasing him and jogging out to grab the now-dry jeans from the dryer. He came back and tossed them into Mason's lap, chuckling at his arched brows. "Come on, time's wasting."

Beau bounced slightly on his heels, eager to get going. He couldn't wait to introduce Mason to everyone. Roy and Mandy were already gone when he and Mason had come back, Roy probably to go pick up his girlfriend and Mandy was likely currently helping Momma and Granny in the kitchen down the road.

Mason dressed, fussing with his hair, but Beau grabbed his hand and grinned, shaking his head. "You look gorgeous, baby. They're not gonna notice your hair's a little out of place." In fact, Beau was convinced Mason had never looked more beautiful. He was wearing another of Beau's shirts, a deep blue t-shirt that emphasized Mason's startlingly blue eyes. He knew his cousins and all the little girls were gonna go crazy crushing on his lover.

Minutes later, they were on their way. Mason was still fussing with his hair in the rearview mirror, reminding Beau of his sister when she'd have a big date. It was cute, but he finally reached up and tugged the mirror back into its proper position, shaking his head in amusement at the disgruntled look Mason gave him. Mason sat back in the seat, his hands knotting and unknotting in his lap, and Beau reached over to cover them

with one of his own. He didn't tell Mason to calm down or relax, he'd already come to the conclusion that wasn't going to work. The only thing that would calm Mason was for Beau's prediction about his family's reaction to be true. Time would tell.

A couple of minutes later, Beau turned into the drive of his grandparents' house. It was smaller than his folks', but had a massive backyard that backed up to the river, with a small pier that Beau could remember fishing from and diving off of ever since he could walk. He had dreams of his kids doing the same thing, growing up cocooned with the safety and love of a dozen relatives around at all times.

He parked his truck behind his sister's little Toyota and shut it off, leaning over to press a reassuring kiss to Mason's cheek when suddenly Mason gasped and his eyes went wide.

"We should have brought something! I should have brought something. A bottle of wine or a..."

Beau cut him off with a chuckle. "Baby, you didn't even know we were coming. Trust me, there'll be more food than any of us can eat and beer is more appreciated than wine. Come on, let's get you inside before you can invent something else to fret about."

He could hear the laughter from the backyard and led Mason up the front steps. He swung the front door open and the first people he saw were, as expected, his grandpa and his dad sitting in La-Z-Boys in the living room watching the football game with beer in hand and chips in a bowl on the TV tray between them.

"Beau, come here and tell your father he's a jackass to be thinkin' the Chargers are gonna beat Dallas. C'mere." Beau's grandfather, Jack, waved him over. Beau grinned and tugged lightly on Mason's hand. His lover was clinging to him like a lifeline and it made Beau's heart turn over in his chest with a surge of tenderness. Lord, he loved him.

Beau leaned down and pressed a kiss to his grandfather's leathery cheek, grinning at his dad. "You giving Grandpa a hard time? What's Granny say about that?"

His father shrugged with a grin. "Hey, if the old man gives himself a fit over it, ain't my fault."

Beau laughed. "Yeah, you get to tell that to Granny when she's taking her flyswatter to you." His grandmother was a little thing, but everyone in the family knew not to cross her, she was tough. Beau pulled Mason closer, out from behind him with a smile. "Daddy, Grandpa, this is Mason. Mason, my grandpa, Jack and my dad, JD."

His dad got up, holding his hand out with a friendly smile. "JD 'cause I refuse to be confused with this old geezer, here. Nice to meet you, Mason, you're the one whose car broke down last week, right? Beau's fixing you up good?"

Beau grinned at the blush that started when Mason nodded with a murmur of assent. His grandpa didn't get up, he was getting on in years and didn't get around as well as he used to, but his smile was just as friendly when he shook Mason's hand as well.

"How long you in town for, son? Just getting that car fixed, then probably gonna shake the dust off yer feet, huh?"

Beau drew Mason closer by his side, shaking his head. "Actually, Grandpa..."

Mason cut him off. "Beau, can I talk to you for a minute?" To Beau's dad and grandpa he said, "Excuse us, just for a moment."

Beau's brows furrowed as Mason drew him across the room by the front door. "What's wrong?"

Mason shook his head. "Nothing. I just...can we wait just a little bit before announcing everything? At least until I've met everyone else?"

Beau frowned, tilting his head. He didn't see what waiting would do, but he didn't want Mason to be uncomfortable, so he nodded. "Sure, baby. They're gonna know we're together though, mostly 'cause I can't keep my hands or eyes off you."

Mason smiled at that. "I know. Just the whole me staying and us being forever, I'd kind of like them to get to know me a bit before we drop that on them. Is that all right?"

Beau gave him a soft smile, nodding. "Yeah, Mason, that's all right. Makes sense." He squeezed his hand and then turned back to his dad and grandpa. "Keep it civil, you two, I'm gonna go introduce Mason to the ladies."

They waved him off absently and Beau chuckled under his breath as he drew Mason through the living room toward the kitchen where the most delicious smells were flooding the house. On the way they were nearly taken out by a pair of identical towheaded three-year-olds racing through the hall. Beau laughed.

"Andy, Angela, you two be careful!"

Mason smiled after the two and Beau caught the wistful look on his face. Beau melted a little inside. Someday soon it'd be their little ones running around underfoot. He could hardly wait.

\* \* \* \* \*

The introductions were a blur, Mason trying his best to remember names and faces and make a good impression. His biggest impression of Beau's family was that they were the type to love out loud. They joked and laughed and hugged and were all so welcoming and open, curious about him, but not a surface interest, Mason could see in the way they looked right at him as he answered their questions that they genuinely were interested. It was so different from his world, where people asked how you were, but didn't really care about the answer. These people did care and it was refreshing.

By the time they'd migrated out to the backyard with piles of food on several long tables and the barrel barbecue blazing, Mason honestly felt like he'd been a part of this community for far longer than four days. And it was a community, not just a family. Neighbors and the preacher from the local church, teenagers passing by saw the cars and stopped in to get something to eat on the way down to the quarry where they hung out. Everyone was welcome and there was more laughter and easy companionship than Mason had ever known.

Mandy flirted with him and purposely riled up Beau with her teasing, Beau's mother kept asking if he was hungry and giving him little smiles that told him she probably already knew what was going on between himself and her son. And, oddly, she seemed to approve. Or, if she didn't, was too polite to say so.

He had managed to even separate himself from Beau's side, where he'd been glued since they'd arrived. Beau was currently playing with a group of the little ones on the trampoline, squeals of giggles ringing through the air as Beau made the surface bounce and fling their little bodies around. Mason averted his eyes, just because it made him nervous. But he understood that there was a sort of surety about this family, this community, the knowledge that the little ones were safe, the old ones would be taken care of long after their monetarily productive days were gone, the marriages were forever and the friendships and bonds of God and family so tight Mason doubted anything could loosen them.

It was amazing. He smiled and turned to see if Martha, Beau's mother, needed any help, but found himself face to face with JD instead. His heart thudded at the serious look on Beau's father's face. Not angry or unkind, but serious and Mason knew deep down that he was going to have the talk with him. The one all parents had with potential life partners of their children. Mason had been waiting for it, but now that it was here, he was terrified he wouldn't measure up.

"Mind taking a bit of a walk with me, Mason?" JD gestured to the gravel path leading around the side of the house.

Mason shook his head. "Not at all, sir."

They fell into step beside each other and JD smiled. "No need for the formality, son. I'd have to be blind to not know what my son has on his mind when it comes to you." JD glanced over at Mason, and his eyes, a darker gray than Beau's, were paternally concerned. "Beau's a hothead. He's never been one to be afraid and frankly his momma and I never tried to clip his wings. He's a free spirit, that one."

Mason smiled, looking down and then back up, a surge of tenderness washing through him at that description of his lover. He nodded. "He is. It amazes me how...easy he makes it all seem."

JD's eyes were gentle and knowing. "You and I know it's not that simple, though, don't we?"

Mason swallowed, nodding again. "Yes, sir...JD. We do." He paused, glancing up at the house as they circled around to the front, then back at Beau's father. "I love him."

JD pursed his lips thoughtfully. "I believe you do. I know Beau loves you. It's written all over him. He's a good boy, never given me and his momma a lick of real trouble. Works hard and he's got dreams for the future that I think he's bound to accomplish. I also think he's recently included you in all of those dreams."

Mason held his breath internally, waiting for the death blow, for JD to tell him that he wasn't what Beau needed. His heart would break, but he didn't know if he could ask Beau to defy his family if they disapproved of him.

JD met his eyes steadily, assessing almost, before he gave a short nod finally. "You gonna stay, then?"

Mason swallowed and nodded. "Beau asked me to. I said yes."

JD nodded, squinting a bit as he peered down the drive, then back at Mason. "You hurt my boy and I'll break yer neck." Then he smiled, a wide, genuine smile. "I think that's not gonna be a problem, though, is it?"

Mason exhaled heavily with a relieved laugh, shaking his head. "No, sir, that isn't going to be a problem." His throat tightened a bit and he cleared his throat, his voice serious. "I'm going to do my best to take good care of him, JD. He's the best the world's got to offer and I'm not going to let anything damage that."

JD nodded silently, and as their eyes met, they shared a silent understanding. They both had Beau's best interests at heart and would do anything to ensure his happiness and safety. A kindred spirit and Mason had never felt more free than he did at that moment, as if he had found his purpose. Beau was it. Loving him, building dreams with him and living in the aura of his endless joy for life. Making sure his love was never disillusioned by the world he found such amazement in.

When they went back to the barbecue, JD slung an arm around Mason's shoulders and brought him over to the group of other men, Beau's uncles and cousins and the church folk, introducing him to the newcomers. No one came right out and said "Nice to meet Beau's lover," but small towns were small towns and he suspected some, if not all, knew who and what he was to Beau. It made Mason's stomach flip-flop, and while a few of the eyes in the crowd were slightly uncomfortable, he didn't feel any true hostility. He would have expected it, honestly. But maybe he had judged Dixon, Alabama the same as he had judged Beau at the beginning. There was more under the surface than the Southern clichés would lead one to believe.

And then Beau was there, taking his hand and smiling that beaming smile at him as he pulled him away from the crowd. Mason went willingly, heart swelling with so much love he could hardly contain it. He smiled to himself, pausing behind the shield of the bushes to tug Beau close and kiss him, doing exactly what Beau had told him to do with all that overwhelming love. He gave it away.

# **Chapter Twelve**

"I have to, Beau. She's still my mother."

Beau gave him a baleful look and Mason squirmed inwardly, rolling over and draping an arm across his lover's bare chest. They were lying in bed, not quite ready for sleep, and Mason had decided it was time to tell Beau his plan to tell his mother what was going on.

"It'll only be for two days. Then I'll be coming home. Here. To you. Remember?" His tone was cajoling and he smiled up at Beau, propping his chin on the other man's shoulder.

Beau sighed and conceded, wrapping his arms around Mason. "I remember. It ain't that I think you won't come back. I know you will. It's that I don't like you going up there to face her alone. She's not a nice person, from what all you've told me. I don't want you hurt by her no more."

Mason sighed and snuggled closer against him. To tell the truth, he was scared of that himself. His mother was not a nice person, least of all to him, and he could just imagine what her reaction was going to be when he told her he was quitting his job, selling his condo and most of his belongings and moving to the middle of nowhere in Alabama to marry a mechanic he'd known for a week. She was going to think he'd lost his mind and surely rip him a new one. Mason honestly couldn't say he'd blame her for thinking he was having some kind of early midlife crisis.

Except he knew, as always, his mother would take the criticizing to a whole new level of cruelty. She had always known what buttons to push, how to get her digs in the deepest, and Mason was afraid of what she would say, what she would do.

He took a deep breath and tilted his head back to look up at Beau in the dim light filtering through the windows of his cabin's bedroom, lit from outside by the parking

area lights. "It's not going to be pleasant, that's a certainty, but it's something I have to do. I can't do it over the phone and I already promised to be there for the wedding. Despite everything, there are still certain responsibilities I take seriously and this is one of them." He turned onto his stomach, half draped across Beau under the sheets and blanket. He smiled at him, reaching up to touch his handsome face, fingers toying with his soft curls. "But then I'll be back and I'll be all yours, Beau. I just have to shut this door before I can walk through the new one fully. Do you understand?"

Beau ran gentle fingers through Mason's hair and he sighed in contentment at the loving touch. Beau nodded. "I understand. I do. I love you, baby. You just remember that, no matter what she says to you, okay?"

Mason nodded and leaned up to brush a kiss across his lips. "Okay." Then, as he'd come to expect over the past week, the kiss that began as gentle and soft deepened, his lover cupping his face and tilting his head to slant those wicked lips across Mason's and take possession of his mouth so completely it took Mason's breath away. Oh god, he loved the way Beau did that, with such confidence and surety, reached in and wrapped those strong hands around his soul and owned him completely.

It was so beautiful and Mason surrendered completely to him. Beau was so easily able to grasp control of any situation, including lovemaking, and Mason was glad to let him. He'd spent his whole life controlling everything he could, in the effort to feel like he wasn't that useless afterthought from his childhood, that it was a relief and a joy to give that control up and put himself entirely into his lover's hands. He knew he was safe. In one short week, Beau Gaines had changed his entire life and given Mason everything he had never believed existed.

With an easy, gentle grace, Beau rolled him to his back, hands still cupping his face, and shifted over Mason to settle easily between his thighs. It was as if they'd been making love forever, the way their bodies moved together and the rhythm that existed so naturally between them. It was as if he could sense Beau's desire before he expressed it. He knew right now that Beau wanted to love him long and slow, to give him

something to wrap himself in for the coming days they'd be apart, love him until he could feel it around him like a coat of armor to protect him from whatever hatefulness Mason's mother threw at him.

Mason moaned, one leg coming up to graze Beau's hip with his knee, their tongues tangling slowly and sensually. Mason's hands moved lovingly over Beau's broad back, savoring the way the muscles flowed under his skin, strong and fluid, a natural grace that could never be taught, only born with. Beau had been born with it in spades.

Beau broke the kiss slowly, lingering with sipping nips of teeth and mouth and finally moving down to brush along Mason's chin and jawline, causing him to tilt his head back and encourage the tingling scrape of stubble and the soothing silk of tongue on his throat.

His hands wandered up into Beau's abundance of silky curls as his lover moved lower, along his chest, pausing to linger at his nipples briefly before moving ever lower. Mason's breath sped up, cock hardening in anticipation and his hips lifted to rub his erection against the hard, muscled plane of Beau's stomach.

Beau's big hands, strong and rough, were infinitely gentle, worshipping as they moved over him. First tracing the curve of his side, the length of one thigh, the tender, sensitive spot just behind his knee. Then they became more daring, bolder and wicked as those same hands urged his legs wider apart, sliding under him to cup and squeeze his ass, one shifting to wrap without preamble around his cock and making Mason's hips buck hard and a strangled gasp tear from his lips.

He was enveloped, surrounded by Beau's love, Beau's desire, and it was so beautiful, so powerful, he could feel it cloaking him and drawing him in until he could suffocate from it in the most beautiful way. Only it didn't suffocate. It was instead warm and loose, tangible and yet fluid enough to not encumber him. Mason would maybe never understand how it was that Beau gave of himself so perfectly, so attuned to what Mason needed and craved. But he would always be grateful for it.

It became impossible for him to think then, not about anything but the overwhelming pleasure of Beau's mouth nipping the taut skin of his lower abdomen and the subtle stroking he'd begun of Mason's cock. Within no time, Mason was writhing, legs falling apart in eager surrender and offering, silently and not-so-silently willing Beau to take that offer and make love to him, come inside now.

Beau didn't, though, he only continued to kiss and nip Mason's sensitized flesh, stroking him with one hand and the other – oh, the other became pure evil as he shifted it and one blunt fingertip began to circle and rub erotically against Mason's entrance.

He whimpered, clenching, body contracting, feeling so empty inside and craving penetration, any penetration. Finger, tongue, cock, anything that Beau wanted to give him Mason would take. But Beau gave him none of that, simply rubbed and stroked and kissed him senseless. Oh god, he loved the brat.

"Beau, please," he moaned softly, propping himself up on his elbows. "If you're going to torment me, at least come here so I can indulge in some tormenting of my own." A teasing tone entered his voice and he smiled down at his lover with an arched brow. "Or can you only dish it out, Country? Can't take your own medicine?"

That got him exactly what he was after. Mental note for future reference, the country boy cannot resist a challenge. Good to know. Right then it got him Beau turning, one powerfully muscled leg swinging over to straddle Mason's shoulders. His mouth literally watered at the sight of Beau's cock, flushed and the tip slick, hovering so close and he lifted his head eagerly to close his mouth around that glistening head. His hands came up to Beau's firm, spectacularly round ass and urged him down further until his cock tapped against the back of his throat. Mason held there for a moment before drawing back and beginning a slow, sensual bobbing, tongue dragging the full length and swirling around the tip before he lifted his head to take him deep again. Beau's wicked groans told Mason his lover was anything but immune to Mason's version of torment.

Mason's breath caught sharply as Beau's finger ceased teasing and sank abruptly inside him, the penetration he'd been craving sending a shock wave of pleasure through Mason and his hips bucked involuntarily, sinking his cock deeper into Beau's mouth. His lover took it easily, swallowing around his length and humming in approval.

Mason focused on giving Beau back the pleasure he was receiving, tongue and lips and throat all coming into play as he bobbed and his hands squeezed the firm cheeks of Beau's ass. An idea came to him and he hesitated because he wasn't sure if Beau would be okay with it, it wasn't something they'd discussed or had come up before now. But he went with instinct and shifted one hand, a fingertip lightly skimming the warm cleft of Beau's ass and gently brushing over his entrance. Just to see what he would do, ready to back off if it wasn't something Beau would like.

Instead, his lover moaned deeply and rocked his hips in seeming encouragement. Mason's heart pounded heavily in his chest and he drew off Beau's cock and laid his head back on the pillow so he could watch what he was doing.

He circled his fingertip there lightly at first, just enjoying the warmth and silky feel of Beau, then he lifted his head and extended his tongue, lapping once across the contracting spot and his lover jolted hard with a ragged groan. Mason's heart flipped as he did it again, then again, his hands gripping Beau's hips after a moment and settling to his erotic task.

His taste was sharp and earthy, but not unpleasant and Mason lay back after a moment, cock throbbing hard at the sight of Beau's entrance slick and wet, before reaching one finger over to slowly, gently penetrate him. Beau's concentration on Mason's cock and his own thrusting finger was lost and Mason smiled in satisfaction, loving knowing how much he could affect Beau. He gently moved his finger, slow and easy, not sure if he'd ever done this before or, if he had, how long it had been since. He was so tight, heat surrounding Mason's finger and it made him a little lightheaded imagining what that might feel like around his cock.

After a moment, he withdrew his finger and gave Beau's hip a nudge. His lover took the direction and eased to the side, sitting up and then stretching out beside him, stormy gray eyes hot and hooded when they met Mason's.

"I want to make love to you, Beau. If you're not comfortable with that, it's fine, I just —" He was cut off with a deep, scorching kiss and the next thing he knew, Beau had them rolled so Mason was atop him, Beau's strong legs spread and Mason's heart pounded harder. That was a yes, then.

He shuddered in reaction and broke the kiss breathlessly. "Have you ever...?"

Beau nodded. "Couple times. Not in a while, though."

Tenderness swamped Mason and he smiled, touching Beau's cheek and dropping a lingering kiss to his lips. He cherished this beautiful man so much it ached inside him. Just when he thought he couldn't possibly love Beau more, he found that he could and he did. He'd given up wondering what the limit might be and was beginning to understand that there was no limit. He fell in love with him all over again every day, more than once a day, it seemed.

Beau had made love to him, fucked him, and now it was Mason's turn. He was going to love his baby until he couldn't move. That thought in mind, he broke the kiss slowly and reached over for the lube that now resided permanently on his nightstand. He knelt up between Beau's thighs and opened the small bottle, squeezing a generous amount onto trembling fingers.

When he set the bottle aside and looked down at Beau sprawled so beautifully against rumpled sheets, warm golden curls tumbling on crisp white pillowcases and hooded gray eyes burning up at him, he went weak inside. His. Beau was his and the knowledge humbled him. He swore then and there that he would do anything it took to always, always make sure that Beau was as content and happy as he looked right then.

He leaned down and pressed a kiss to the inside of one of his lover's thighs, bringing his lubed finger under him. Beau bent his legs and lifted his hips slightly to assist and Mason's heart leapt into his throat at the gesture. If he doubted that Beau

really wanted this, he didn't anymore. He circled one finger reverently at Beau's entrance and then slowly eased it in. He was tight, but relaxed, and easily accepted the smooth invasion. A second finger followed and Mason began to thrust them slowly. He shifted over Beau and claimed his lips in a slow, easy kiss as he carefully and lovingly prepared him and when he withdrew his fingers and shifted into position, the kiss eased and their lips separated, eyes meeting.

Mason loved that visual connection, wanting to look into his baby's beautiful eyes as he made love to him for the first time. There was something powerful in the air between them, far beyond physical gratification, this was making love in its truest sense.

Beau's legs came loosely around Mason's hips and the smooth, easy thrust inside him was like nothing Mason had ever experienced before. Beau's body accepted him in without a whimper of protest, snug and hot and slick with the lube. And, oh god, Beau's eyes when he pressed deep inside...there were no words to describe that look. Mason didn't even try, only knew that it moved him right down to his soul.

Like a moth to the flame, their lips met and their kiss was as sensual and slow as the movements of their hips. Hands roamed and caressed, tongues rubbed and twined, coming together in a perfect rhythm. Oh it wasn't perfect, really, an awkwardly timed thrust here, and bumping of noses there, but what was perfect was the feelings behind the actions. That was flawless as anything either of them had ever known.

Slowly, the movements became more needy, groans and whimpers mingled in their kisses and those roaming hands grew rougher and greedy. Mason broke the kiss with a gasping inhale of much needed oxygen, head spinning as Beau clenched and rocked his hips eagerly up toward him.

"Beau..." He breathed his lover's name and Beau moaned his in return. Mason slid one hand between them to grasp Beau's cock and began to stroke, knowing the climax was close and he wanted, no, needed, Beau right there with him. It turned out that wasn't meant to be, because the moment he began to stroke Beau, his lover cried out, eyes flying wide as he bucked up and Mason groaned at the rhythmic clenching around his cock as Beau came, hot and hard.

The pleasure of Beau's orgasm, and god, the erotic punch of watching his beautiful lover come apart for him, sped Mason's orgasm right to the brink and his hips sped up, driving into Beau and dragging frantic cries from his parted lips as Mason thrust hard into his over-sensitized body. Within seconds, Mason was at the edge and he clung to Beau, burying his face in his sweat-damp neck as he came, hard enough that he saw stars.

Panted breaths and racing hearts and tangled limbs were all that remained in the aftermath of their coupling. Mason reluctantly rolled to one side and immediately found himself dragged back into Beau's arms and curled tight against his side. He smiled to himself, too dazed yet to speak, but he didn't really think words were necessary. If Beau had been looking to give him a memory to last until he returned, well then, he had certainly accomplished it.

# **Chapter Thirteen**

The goodbye at the airport had been short and not at all what Mason had expected. Beau had kissed him, given him a long, steady look, then told him, "Be here when you get back." Mason smiled to himself as he drove through the darkened streets of Lansing toward his childhood home. Normally, he would have gotten a hotel room. He didn't like staying with his mother and it was likely to be less pleasant than normal this visit, what with the madness of the upcoming wedding tomorrow. But Michelle Palmer had insisted and Mason had learned early on that it was often just easier to give her what she wanted and let it go.

The rental smelled like stale French fries and he, for a moment, missed Beau's rusted out truck and its cinnamon tree air freshener so much his throat clogged with it. *Only until tomorrow night, Mason. You can handle that in exchange for a lifetime with him.* He could, but damned if he didn't wish he could turn around and head right back to the warmth and comfort of Dixon. It amazed him still how quickly the small town had become home. And how quickly Beau had become the center of his whole world.

As he turned down the street where he'd grown up, Mason pondered how best to tell his mother. He finally decided that it'd be best to wait until after the wedding. She and her new husband, Troy was this one's name, weren't going on a honeymoon, instead opting to save the trip for two months later when they'd apparently be spending the holiday season in Switzerland on the ski slopes. So Mason would wait, be the good son and let his mother have her "special day" and then he'd tell her before he left again. He cringed inwardly, anticipating the reaction his news was going to elicit.

He didn't have any further time to worry about it, however, turning into the winding, circular drive and parking behind a pair of Mercedes LS's. Both his mother's,

one in powder blue and one in stately black. Because heaven forbid his mother drive the same car every day.

Mason climbed out of his rental and shut the door quietly, gazing up at the stately, innocuous looking home. Two stories, columns and manicured gardens and marble steps, it didn't at all look like the hateful place he had come to think of it as. He still remembered the day he'd left, his eighteenth birthday when he'd been given the account book of a trust fund his father had set up for him before he'd died and his mother's cold goodbye ringing in his ears as he'd driven away without looking back.

He'd eventually stopped avoiding returning home completely, and when he'd graduated college, had given in to his mother's pleadings for a visit. The hopeful little boy in him had wanted to believe she might want to repair their relationship, make up for the past. It had turned out she'd only wanted him there as a prop for her in her quest to snag a new husband. To show herself as a loving mother and the perfect candidate for a senator's wife. It'd worked, and it'd also driven home with painful clarity that where Mason was concerned, his mother would never see him as anything more than in turn both an inconvenience and a means to an end.

Still, she was his mother and that was something Mason couldn't ignore, even if he wished he could. So he dutifully came the two or three times a year she'd call him home for some "duty" or another, often another stint as a foil to her elaborate public image as mother of the year and domestic goddess.

Mason shook his head to himself, grabbing his suitcase from the trunk and heading up the front walk. He knocked, because unlike Beau's family, Mason's mother would be both shocked and offended if he presumed to simply open the door and walk into her home. A servant, one he didn't recognize, opened the door and showed him inside, informing him that his mother was out for the evening at a dinner held in her and her fiancé's honor. It didn't surprise Mason that his mother wasn't there to greet him, nor that he didn't recognize this new maid, though he'd just been home in the spring. His mother went through help like she did designer shoes, never keeping one for long before exchanging them for something new and shinier. Similar to her parade of husbands and boyfriends.

Mason smiled blandly at the middle-aged woman, turning down her offer to take his bag. "I'll show myself upstairs, thank you, I think I just want to rest. It was a long flight." He headed upstairs, taking the left hallway to the room he'd occupied as a child and the one his mother still gave him every time she requested he stay with her when he was in town.

He didn't bother to unpack anything but his suit for the next day's "festivities", leaving the rest packed away and sitting heavily on the perfectly made bed. He glared at the hapless top-of-the-line mattress and eight-hundred-thread-count Egyptian cotton sheets, longing desperately for the sagging mattress and Wal-Mart sheets of his room back in Dixon. And most of all, longing for Beau in that bed with him.

He bit his lip, glancing at the phone on the nightstand and then at the clock, wondering if Beau would still be awake. It was an hour earlier in Dixon, but Mason knew truthfully that it could be three in the morning and Beau would want him to call if he needed to hear his voice. And oh, how Mason needed it.

So he toed off his shoes and shifted up onto the bed, leaning back against the headboard before reaching over and setting the phone beside him on the bed. He dialed Beau's number and chewed on his thumbnail as it rang, hoping he would be home, hoping he would answer.

"Missing me already, baby?" Beau's familiar, honeyed drawl came through the line as clear as if he was lying beside Mason and his heart caught in his throat.

"More than I can even say, Country."

Beau's sigh was longing and Mason heard some rustling that had him wondering if his lover was in bed as well, which led to thoughts not so pure and made him miss him even more.

"Aw, City, I miss you too. You at your mom's?"

"Yeah. She's not here, of course, because bothering to greet her son when he gets into town after eight months of absence is a little too motherly of a thing to do for her." Mason hated the bitterness in his voice. That was what this place did to him, what his mother did to him. It, and she, made him bitter and unhappy. He tried to remind himself why he was there again, but none of the reasons seemed to be very good ones when faced with the separation from Beau and the place he'd come to think of as home.

"It's only until tomorrow night. Then you'll be back here and I promise you, the next time you gotta keep one of these family obligations, you're not going alone."

Mason smiled at the vehemence in Beau's tone. His brash cowboy, it seemed sometimes he could read Mason's mind and know exactly the right thing to say at exactly the right time. "I love you."

There was a soft, happy sounding sigh on the other end of the line. "I love you too, Mason." Those three words made every bit of tension seep from Mason in a steady rush and he smiled.

Mason propped the phone against his shoulder and slipped out of his pants, reaching over to shut the lamp off before sliding under the covers on his side, sighing heavily. "Will you talk to me for a while?" He just wanted Beau's voice in his ear, reminding him that after this trip, he wouldn't be alone again, that he had a real home to return to this time.

Beau's voice was quiet and there was a bit of rustling that told Mason his lover was settling into his bed as well. "Yeah, Mason, I will. Long as you need."

Mason chuckled. "Forever, then?"

"Yeah, baby. Forever."

Mason sighed softly at the promise in Beau's voice. He truly believed that and it was so comforting. He closed his eyes and smiled, cradling the phone. "Do you know I never really thought about having kids before. Will there be babies, Beau?"

Beau paused before replying. "Oh yes, Mason, there'll be babies. As many as we can fit into that big house of ours. Can you see them, Mason? Curled in their little beds, runnin' barefoot in the front yard and asking you to play hide-and-seek with them?"

Mason could. "Yes. I see them. Our family, Beau." His throat tightened imagining it. He smiled, his heart swelling.

"Yep, our family. We're going to fix that house up into a real home and fill it up with all the love we can create. You just wait, baby, it's gonna be better than anything you ever imagined."

Mason laughed softly. "I don't have any doubt of that, Country. I never imagined it at all before."

"Never?" Beau's voice was quiet and knowing and Mason's heart kicked up.

"That was a lie. I did imagine it. I wanted a family, Beau. I've wanted one ever since I was old enough to realize mine wasn't a real one in any sense of the word." He'd never told anyone about his childish hopes and dreams. But he told Beau without thought. "I never dreamed of anything else. I never wanted to be rich or famous or have a certain job. I just wanted...a family."

"I know, baby. I knew when you told me you didn't have any dreams it wasn't true. Oh Mason, darlin', you're gonna have that family. You already do." He chuckled softly and the sound was so beautiful in Mason's ear. "Granny told me to ask you whether you wanted a green or red stocking for Christmas."

Mason laughed, turning onto his back and adjusting the phone. "Green." It was such a silly, small thing, but he'd never had a Christmas stocking. His mother had hired decorators to design trees for their house when he was growing up, but always for show. He'd been scolded against touching them and there'd never been anything as tacky as stockings on the mantle. So, of course, he could hardly wait for the holidays to arrive, just to see how it was that real people celebrated. Somehow he doubted it was catered meals in cold formal dining rooms and an envelope of cash next to his plate at breakfast on Christmas day.

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He tried to push away the morose thoughts and memories. It was hard to do, being here, but he closed his eyes again and let himself pretend he was back in Dixon, lying in bed with Beau talking. Just like last night. Minus the sex, he smiled to himself.

"So what does the country boy who has everything want for Christmas?"

Beau chuckled. "Well damn, I got you this year, I don't think anything a store could have would compare. What about you? Maybe a pair of coveralls so you won't have to borrow my dad's jeans anymore."

Mason laughed softly at the teasing. "God damn, I miss you."

"I miss you too." Beau's voice was as longing as Mason's was, and in an odd way, the shared loneliness made it a bit easier to handle. Knowing Beau wanted him back home as much as Mason did was a comforting thought. "Your eyes closed, Mason?"

He nodded, then realized Beau couldn't see him. "Yes," he whispered.

"Keep them closed. Pretend I'm there?"

Mason shook his head. "No."

Beau chuckled softly. "No?"

"Nope. I want to pretend I'm there, instead. You don't belong in a place like this, Beau. Neither do I, anymore."

"All right, baby. Keep your eyes closed and pretend you're here. Laying in bed with me, wrapped up in my arms. Loving you."

Mason sighed softly, doing exactly that, and he swore he could actually feel his lover against him, his strong hands on his back, rubbing soothingly, his lips pressing warm against his temple, the comforting sound of Beau's heartbeat against his ear as Mason laid his head on that broad, strong chest.

It was like that, that he fell asleep. The sound of Beau's breath in his ear and Beau's love wrapped around him like a blanket. Even from a thousand miles away, Beau saved him.

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The next morning, Mason woke and for a long few moments he was thoroughly confused about where he was and why Beau wasn't beside him. Then his eyes fell on the phone lying on the pillow and he smiled. He picked it up and put it to his ear, but it was dead air. He must have rolled on it at some point and disconnected the line unwittingly.

Mason took a deep breath and slid out of bed. That was all right. He had Beau wrapped all around him like a suit of armor. For the first time, he didn't feel like a small boy in this house. He was a grown man and it was long past time he started acting like one where his mother was concerned. He was going to tell her this morning. No longer was he going to sacrifice his happiness for hers when she'd never in his life done anything to earn his loyalty.

No, he would tell her and then he would get on a plane and go home. She could have her wedding without her prop of a son, and if she cut him out of her life for it...well, then he would be sad but not surprised. And it'd be all right.

He dressed carefully, not for her sake, but because it made him feel better to be neat and put together. However, when he reached into his suitcase to find a pair of socks, he instead found Beau's blue t-shirt and the jeans and he paused. For a moment he ran his fingers over the soft fabric of Beau's shirt and then he smiled, stripping out of his suit and tie and tugging on the t-shirt and faded jeans. He didn't have a pair of tennis shoes or boots to wear, but that was all right.

Stopping in front of the mirror, Mason grinned at himself, reaching up to muss his hair and laughing a bit to himself, thinking Beau would love the whole thing. His mother was going to have a stroke. Good.

Sliding his feet into a pair of loafers, Mason slipped out of the bedroom and headed down the hall to the stairs. If his mother kept to her usual schedule, she should be having brunch in the solar, picking at her food that she'd end up not eating and sipping a Bloody Mary to recover from the night before's excess. It never changed. She never changed. Mason, however, had.

When he entered the solar, Mason was unsurprised to find that his prediction had been correct. Dressed in a powder blue linen lounging outfit, her hair and makeup perfectly done, Michelle Palmer didn't look her fifty-two years or anything close. The miracle of plastic surgery and the makeup she took great care with worked wonders. She could, and often did, pass for a decade younger.

She lifted her gaze when he entered and the look that crossed her face was pure horror. Cool blue eyes raked over him and one flawlessly shaped brow lifted. "Did your luggage get lost?"

Mason shook his head, crossing to the small table and dropping into the spindly little chair, reaching out and piling a little plate with fresh scones and a croissant, spooning jam onto the lot of it. His mother just stared at him speechless, the same sort of offended, coolly disgusted look she might have if a gardener deigned to speak to her.

"Mason, is there some reason you're behaving like a Neanderthal? Go change, you know we dress for meals in this house."

Mason grinned and shook his head. He wasn't even worried anymore. He felt like he had Beau's bold confidence inside him, as if his lover was there beside him egging him on to shake up the pristine dollhouse he'd occupied for his whole life. "Nope. I just came down to get something to eat and to tell you I'm not going to be attending your wedding, Mother. I apologize, but I have someplace more important to be."

Her eyes widened, brows furrowing before she carefully smoothed them. Her Botox specialist frowned on frowning. The absurdity of it made Mason chuckle.

"What are you talking about? You have to be there. You're here!"

Mason shook his head again, taking a deep breath and setting aside the food, facing her across the small table. "Not for long. I'm leaving this morning. I'm going home."

Michelle's brows shot up again. "What's so important in Florida that you flew out here only to turn around and go right back?"

Mason let a faint smile curve his lips, shaking his head. "Not Florida. I'm selling my house there. I'm moving to Alabama, a little town called Dixon. And I'm going to get married there, to a wonderful young man who's going to raise babies with me and take me fishing and clutter up our house with car parts and grease stains. And it's going to be the most beautiful life anyone has ever imagined."

And that was when no amount of makeup or plastic surgery could cover or hide the ugliness that lived inside his mother. Her face twisted, though he thought it was just his perception, not actually her expression changing.

Her laugh was edged in cruelty and mocking and it grated along Mason's nerves, making him for a moment feel very much the young boy he'd once been. "You're going to marry some country bumpkin?"

"He's not a country bumpkin. He's amazing and smart and caring."

Her eyes were angry and skeptical. "Is that so? And where did you meet this paragon of Southern culture, hmm?"

Mason's temper rose, not because she mocked him, but because she disparaged Beau. "I met him when my car broke down on my way here." He immediately wished he hadn't said that when she laughed again, the sound like nails on a chalkboard.

"You've known him a week? Have you lost your mind? Stop this foolishness, Mason, it's unattractive and rude. Go get changed, there's a lot to be done before the ceremony."

Mason shook his head sharply. "No. Mother, I'm leaving. I…" He paused and swallowed hard. "I hope you're happy with your new husband, finally. But I'm not playing your games anymore and I'm not playing the role you want me to play. I'm my own person and that person is in love with Beau Gaines. I'm going home to him."

The crash of fine china hitting the floor jarred Mason and he winced, staring at his mother in shock. The brunch dishes lay in shards on the floor and pure fury burned in her normally icy eyes.

"You will not! My god, you are such an ungrateful bastard! After everything I've done for you, this is how you repay me? Abandoning me on my wedding day to go tumble some hillbilly from the backwoods? He loves you? Ha, I doubt that, darling. He doesn't know you. I do." His mother pushed to her feet, avoiding the broken dishes on the floor as she crossed the room to flip open a small box and pull out a cigarette. It was a sign of her discomfiture, she had given up smoking years before, but still kept them hidden about the house in case of emergency. Apparently, Mason growing a spine was an emergency to her.

She spun to face him, waving the unlit cigarette in his direction. "I always knew you'd turn out this way. Alternative lifestyle, that is such a pile of shit, you do it just to hurt me. To embarrass me when everyone whispers about my fruity son."

Mason clenched his jaw, trying not to let her cruel words get to him, but it hurt and his eyes burned. He rose as well, shaking his head. "That's not true. I don't do anything to hurt you, I never have. Dammit, I have never done anything but try to be what you wanted me to be, as if somehow you'd miraculously love me!"

She laughed harshly, perfectly painted lips curling in a sneer. "Love you? What is there to love? You're weak, Mason, weak and spineless and good for absolutely nothing! My god, I have to make up things to tell my friends about you, important things you're not doing and important people you don't know."

Mason's eyes closed briefly, shaking his head before opening them again. His voice was quiet. "I'm sorry you feel that way. I tried to make you proud, but now I know I never will. So I'm done trying, Mother. I'm going to make myself proud, make myself happy. Beau is what makes me happy and I'm going to spend the rest of my life loving him and giving him and our family everything you could never give to me." He dropped his napkin to the floor with the ruined brunch. "Goodbye, Mother. I won't be darkening your doorstep again."

He stalked past her, ignoring her screeching at him to stop, hurling curses at him. He steeled himself as he climbed the stairs to get his suitcase and headed back

downstairs. When he passed the solar, it was empty save for the maid cleaning up the mess. She looked up at him as he paused, giving him a sympathetic look, and he smiled tightly before moving on past, out the front door to his rental.

He was shaking, inside and out. He had known she would react badly, but he'd never imagined that scene. He tried to steady himself as he tossed his suitcase in the back seat and climbed behind the wheel. He didn't look back this time as he drove away, knowing deep down that he would never set foot in that house again. If, by some miracle, his mother ever came around, she'd have to come to him and he wouldn't be holding his breath.

Mason turned the car toward the airport, hands trembling. He needed to talk to Beau, just hear his voice and he would be all right. He needed to hear Beau say he loved him. He only took his eyes off the road for a second as he reached back to dig for his cell phone in the front pocket of his suitcase.

It was one second too long and the sound of tires screeching and a horn blaring made Mason's head jerk up an instant before the world exploded around him and blackness encompassed him, his last thought Beau's name screamed inside his head.

# **Chapter Fourteen**

"When's his plane get in?"

Beau sighed, pausing in his pacing and glancing over at his sister. Mandy had insisted on coming with him to pick Mason up from the airport, and frankly he was glad she had. He had missed Mason like crazy and then the worry had started. He had no basis for it, but ever since midmorning he'd been battling a soul-deep kind of fear that he couldn't name. Mason hadn't called from the airport like he'd said he would, but there was nothing in that to really cause worry. He probably had been exhausted after the wedding and talking with his mother. He could have just forgotten or been running late and had no chance...but none of those logical reasons eased the fear clawing at his gut.

"Nine thirteen according to the schedule." He glanced up for the hundredth time at the clock, heart kicking up as the minute hand slowly ticked closer and closer. Just then the flight arrival was announced and Beau's heart leapt into his throat. He grabbed Mandy's hand. "C'mon. We'll meet him right up front..."

They moved to a spot just in front of the gate, and Beau held his breath as the passengers of the plane began to file off. *Come on, Mason. Hurry. Hurry.* He wouldn't feel right until he could wrap his arms around his baby and reassure himself that whatever had caused the knot of fear, it wasn't something to do with Mason.

It seemed forever, and then the passengers began to dwindle, the steady stream slowing and still no sign of Mason. Beau felt dizzy, squeezing Mandy's hand probably too tight, but his sister said nothing, letting him cling to her. It wasn't until the stewardesses and then the captain filed out and the gate attendant closed the door that he had to admit that Mason wasn't on that plane.

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Mandy gave him a worried look, tugging on his hand. "Beau. Beau, dammit, look at me."

He did, knowing his confusion and hurt and worry were clearly apparent.

Mandy shook her head, hands coming up to cup his face. "Don't. He's fine. He's coming home. You got a number for him? He might have just missed this flight, you said there was a wedding, maybe the reception ran long or he went out with old friends after and hasn't had a chance to call yet."

Beau shook his head, stomach twisting. "I tried to call his cell, but there wasn't any answer..." It didn't make sense. Where was he? A hundred scenarios ran through his head and although many of them were mundane, perfectly nice scenarios, like Mandy's suggestion, it didn't ease the ever-tightening knot and the burning knowledge that something was very wrong.

"What about his mom's number? Did he leave it, Beau?"

He nodded finally. "Yeah, yeah he did. C'mon." He turned for the bank of phones against the wall and dug in his pocket for quarters with trembling hands. Mandy shook her head.

"Hang on, it'll take a hundred quarters to call all the way to Michigan on a pay phone. Gimme a sec..." She moved away from him, and Beau watched with a frown of confusion as she approached a good-looking man in his thirties wearing a fancy suit. A second later she came back with the man's cell phone. "There you go. Call."

Beau felt a twinge of amusement even through the worry. Only Mandy could talk a total stranger out of their fancy cell phone. At the moment, though, he was thrilled for her abilities and dug the scrap of paper with the numbers Mason had left on it out of his back pocket.

He dialed with shaking fingers, pacing shortly back and forth as it rang and rang, heart thudding. Oh god, please pick up. Please. Finally someone did and Beau froze with a sharp breath of relief.

"Hello?" The voice was cool and cultured, a female voice.

"Um, hi, I'm trying to reach Mason Palmer? This is his mom's house?"

There was a significant pause before finally the woman spoke again. "Well, well, let me guess. You must be his little country fling, yes? Beau, is it?"

Beau bristled, trying to keep from taking that snide tone personally. This was Mason's mom and she could tell him where Mason was. "Yes ma'am, that's my name. Can I speak to him, please? It's important."

"Yes, I'm sure it is, dear. But I'm afraid he's not available. I suppose you're wondering why he isn't there, aren't you?" She tsked in a nasty sort of way and Beau glanced over at Mandy, who had a frown on her face, probably wondering why he looked angry suddenly. "Well, Beau, I do hate to be the bearer of bad news, but I'm afraid my son is just a bit too cowardly to tell you himself. He never got on that plane, dear, and won't be coming back to Alabama."

Beau's breath left him as if someone had slammed him in the stomach. His knees went weak and he shook his head in denial. "No, no, there must be some mistake. Please let me talk to him, I don't understand..."

Another snide tsking sound and Beau gritted his teeth. "There's no mistake. I'm sorry, did you really believe my son would give up his entire life to live in squalor in the middle of nowhere?" She laughed. "No, dear, I'm afraid not. He's going to be staying here for a bit, but then he'll be going back to his job and his life. I'd suggest you do the same."

Before Beau could respond, the phone clicked and he blinked, lowering it from his ear in a daze. Mandy rushed forward and took it from his hand, then grabbed his arm, shaking him.

"Beau. Beau, Jesus Christ, what the hell is going on? What'd she say? Where's Mason?"

Beau was grateful she'd taken the guy's cell phone, because he might have thrown it. Fury rose in him. Bullshit! Bullshit, he didn't believe that bitch for a second. His jaw clenched and he grabbed Mandy's hand, pulling her with him over to give the

businessman back his phone. "Thank you," he said tightly before starting toward the airport doors.

Mandy huffed in annoyance, hurrying after him. "Jeez, Beau, are you gonna tell me what's going on?"

"What's going on is Mason's not on that plane and I don't know where he is. His mother does. I'm..." He froze, making Mandy nearly collide with his back. "I'm going to Michigan."

Mandy's blue eyes popped wide open. "What?"

Beau nodded shortly, stalking toward the ticket counters now, digging out his wallet. "Mason's there. Or if he ain't, his momma is and she knows where he is. Something's wrong, something happened. I gotta know what and find him. She's lying, I know she is." He scowled at the cash in his hand, shaking his head. "Gimme some money, Mandy, I don't got enough for a ticket."

Mandy jerked on his arm, her small face fierce as she glared up at him. "You tell me what's happening, then we'll talk about you doing something crazy like flying to Michigan, for god's sake!"

Beau's eyes burned, his voice anguished. "She said he wasn't coming back, Mandy. Said he never intended to. Called me a fling. I gotta talk to him, Mandy. It ain't true, I know it's not. He loves me." He blinked hard to keep the tears from falling, but couldn't stop his voice from breaking. "He loves me, Mandy, he does."

Mandy wasn't anywhere near as good at keeping emotions in as he was and tears filled her eyes as she flung her arms around his neck and hugged him tight on tiptoes. "Oh baby, of course he does. Anybody who saw you two together would have seen it." She shook her head, pulling back and swiping at her wet cheeks as she dug into her purse and shoved her wallet into his hands. "Here. Get the damn ticket and get your ass out there. Bring him home, Beau."

\* \* \* \* \*

Beau stared up at the house. It was dark and the lights inside spilling through the windows didn't give the place the kind of homey warmth it should have. It looked...cold. Empty. It frankly gave Beau the creeps. But inside was the one person who could give him the answers he needed, so he straightened his spine and slid out of the cab, slamming the door shut behind him.

He knocked, then rang the doorbell, then knocked again, all within about five seconds time, just in case the house might be asleep despite the lights being on. When the door opened, it wasn't Beau's mother, but a maid, looking at him with worry.

## "Yes?"

Beau shook his head, pushing past her into the house. "I'm here to see Mason. Or his mom. They here?"

The plump older woman stared at him with wide eyes. "Is Miss Michelle expecting you, sir?"

Beau laughed shortly, no humor in the sound. "I highly doubt it. Michelle, is it? Tell her the country fling is here and isn't leaving until she comes and talks to me."

The maid seemed grateful to have the issue out of her hands and nodded, shutting the front door and scurrying off. Beau paced the entryway, trying his best to gather himself and not freak the fuck out. It was hard as hell, his baby was in this city somewhere, maybe in this house even, and Beau needed to see him.

"You must be joking."

The mocking feminine voice startled him out of his thoughts and Beau looked up to see a middle-aged woman descending the stairs. She was attractive, in a hard-edged sort of way, but when she got closer, he decided her eyes, cruel and icy, made her anything but attractive. He could see Mason in her, though, the curve of her lips and the elegant cheekbones.

"Mrs. Palmer."

She glared. "Not anymore. In case my son didn't inform you, I was married today. I do hope you have a very good reason for interrupting my wedding night."

Beau nodded. "I came to see Mason."

She laughed, arching her brows. "You flew all the way from Alabama, did you? First time on an airplane, dear? How sweet. Touching, but it won't do you any good. He's not here, as I told you on the phone. And I certainly have no intention of telling you where he is so that you can harass him further." She waved her hand dismissively. "He wants nothing to do with you. Go home."

Beau clenched his jaw and crossed his arms over his chest. "No. I'm not leaving until I talk to him or you tell me where I can find him."

Her disdainful amusement changed to irritation, eyes narrowing dangerously at him. Beau wasn't intimidated in the least, but all he could think was how a look like that must have cut through a young Mason who only wanted his mother's love.

"You will leave, young man. Or I will have you forcibly removed. My son has no place with your kind. Do us all a kindness and leave without making me call the police."

Beau glared, shaking his head. "I'm not leaving! I don't believe you, he loves me. He would have come home. Where is he? Dammit!"

Mason's mother spun on him angrily. "You do not curse at me in my home, young man. I am telling you nothing and you will leave." She stalked over to the entry table and the phone there, lifting the receiver and arching a threatening brow at him. "Do I need to call the police?"

Beau's hands clenched into fists, wanting to throttle the uppity bitch. He shook his head finally. He'd get his answers, but not from jail. He had no doubt she'd follow through and have him arrested. He'd never find Mason that way. "No. I'll go." He gritted the words out.

She smiled triumphantly and dropped the receiver back down into place. "You're not as simple as you look. Don't come back, you're not welcome here."

Beau watched her glide up the stairs, shaking with anger. The worry was stronger than ever and he didn't know what to do now. Where was Mason? How was he going to find him?

"Sir?"

Beau's head turned to see the maid hovering warily a few yards away.

"You look for Miss Michelle's boy? Her son?"

Beau nodded, hope springing up in him and casting a glance at the stairs to be sure Mason's mom wasn't coming back before he moved closer to the wary maid. "Yes. Yes, please do you know where he is?"

She bit her lip nervously, her eyes flicking between him and the spot where Michelle had disappeared. "*Si*. He was here, early, they had big fight. Very big. He left angry before the wedding."

Beau's breath came quicker, heart pounding. "Where is he now?" His fingernails dug into his palms to suppress the urge to shake the woman when she hesitated. He imagined it must be a hellish thing to work for that woman. "Please, please tell me."

The woman sighed. "There was accident. Miss Michelle said the boy crashed, I heard her say he was at St. Joseph's."

Beau's heart froze, swaying a bit as the fear he'd felt all day finally had a name. Oh god. He nodded sharply, forcing a tight smile. "Thank you. Thank you so much." Then he spun on his heel and bolted from the house. He was halfway down the street when luck was with him and the same cab he'd taken to the house passed and stopped for him.

"St. Joseph's hospital, please. As fast as you can."

## \* \* \* \* \*

Mason's eyes fluttered, his lids feeling like sandpaper and he whimpered, wincing. He wanted to go back to sleep. It didn't hurt when he slept. But something tugged at him, keeping him from doing so. Some sense that he needed to wake up now. He

peeled one eye open, flinching at the overhead lights. For a moment he couldn't make out anything but vague shapes, and then gradually the world came into focus. And with it...Beau.

He let out a broken sob, one hand reaching out and the instant Beau's encompassed it, Mason felt a hundred times stronger. "Beau..."

Beau shook his head, his beautiful silvery eyes glimmering with unshed tears and worry. "Shh, baby. You're okay. Docs say you'll be fine, baby. You've got a hard head."

Mason let out a rough laugh, wincing when he did as his head throbbed. He took a moment to make a mental inventory of his body. His head throbbed painfully, but he didn't feel any bandages, so he hadn't hit it too hard. He shuddered, having a flash of memory of that instant frozen like a Polaroid, the other car and the look of terror on the other driver's face. Pushing it away, he continued his assessment. He could move his limbs, his left wrist hurt like a bitch, but wasn't casted. After a moment, he concluded that, amazingly, he was in one piece.

He turned his head slowly and met Beau's worried gaze, smiling a little. "Hey...you're here."

Beau nodded, with a gentle squeeze of Mason's hand. "Of course I am. You're here and you had some trouble coming home, so...I came to help."

Mason sighed happily at that, despite the aches and pains. "Impatient..." he teased, grateful that when Beau smiled, it actually reaching his eyes.

"Yeah, well, Mandy helped. We owe her three hundred and twenty two bucks, by the way."

Mason grinned despite that it hurt to do so. "We do? Greedy wench."

Beau shifted his chair closer, leaning in, and Mason smiled up at him, touching his cheek lightly. He looked so tired, his sweet love, tired and afraid and so young. Mason loved him so much. "I'm sorry."

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Beau shook his head. "No. Don't be. You can tell me all about it when you're better and we're home."

Mason was suddenly aching desperately to be home, giving Beau a hopeful look. "When? When can we go home?" He wanted, no, needed, to be there. Away from here and, if he had his way, never come back.

"Soon. They wanna keep you tonight, make sure you don't got a concussion or anything, and then they'll release you. We can be home by supper tomorrow."

Relief flooded Mason, giving a weak tug on Beau's hand holding his own. "Come to bed with me, Country. I need you to hold me."

Beau laughed a little, glancing around. "I do believe that's against the rules, darlin'."

Mason smiled softly, tugging again. "I don't care. No rules. You taught me that."

It seemed Beau couldn't argue with that and his lover's eyes were suspiciously damp as he nodded and gently eased into the tiny bed beside Mason, gathering him carefully close. Mason felt like the whole world clicked into place as Beau's arms closed around him. This was home. Not Florida, not Lansing, not even Dixon. Beau's arms. That was his home. Mason smiled as his heavy lids sank closed. *Welcome home, Mason. You're gonna like it here.* 

## About the Author

Fae Sutherland has always dreamed of being a published author, starting her writing career off at age 11 with a horrific "Monkees" fan fiction that will, luckily for all, never see the light of day. At age 33, she has since progressed to more serious writing, though always keeping that dash of irreverence and fun.

Fae tells the stories that the muses give her, but though she is multi-published both solo and joint, she truly does prefer writing with her co-author Margeurite Labbe best. When she's not working hard on writing new stories to make her readers sweat or slaving over edits for completed work, she spends her time on website and graphic design, being with her closest friends and playing The Sims 2 until the wee hours of the morning.

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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